

Guardian gods 321

Chapter 321:

The female goblin's gaze lingered on the disruptor, her sharp eyes narrowing as she studied it in the engineer's hands. The room remained eerily silent, every ratman too afraid to speak or even shift under the weight of her presence. Even though the ratfolk were no strangers to dealing with goblins, this was different. This was Vellok's apprentice—a force of authority and arcane power.

"You've been busy," the goblin mage finally said, her voice cold and cutting as she floated effortlessly above the floor. The contempt in her tone was unmistakable, as if the very idea of the ratmen tampering with magic was beneath her.

The chief, still kneeling, raised his head slightly. "Apprentice Tahlia," he began carefully, "we—"

"Spare me your explanations," Tahlia interrupted, her eyes now fixed on the disruptor. "I'm aware of what transpired on the surface. Vellok himself is intrigued by this... invention of yours." Her lip curled slightly. "However, curiosity can quickly turn to suspicion."

The room seemed to grow colder with her words, the tension mounting once more. Por, standing at the edge of the group, felt her heart quicken. She had faced danger on the surface before, but this was different. At least on the surface, she could fight back. Here, the thought of resisting was no longer an option.

Tahlia's floating eye drifted toward the disruptor, the small orb glowing faintly as it focused on the device. "Tell me," she said, her voice now directed at the engineer, "how exactly did you come by this technology?"

The engineer's hands trembled slightly as he held the disruptor, his mind racing for a response. He knew that the truth—a truth that tied the ratmen to stolen scraps of magical knowledge—could condemn them. But lying to a mage of Tahlia's caliber could be worse. He took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully.

Before he could speak, the chief cut him off. "Your majesty, this was conceived by us, and the creation of such technology was nothing but a mistake."

"For our own safety, and to better hunt for food, we were forced to think of a way to deal with the magical beasts that hunt us. It took many years before this device was created."

Tahlia's eyes narrowed, her gaze flicking from the chief to the trembling engineer. "A mistake, you say?" Her voice was cold, devoid of any warmth or sympathy.

During Vellok's research on the device, he noticed it bore a striking resemblance to one of the technological knowledge left behind by the mages who birthed them; also the process of creation shows that while the material is different from the original, it was created to achieve the same purpose. This finding raised many questions—how had the ratmen acquired such knowledge, and who had given it to them? Initially, they believed the ratmen had come up with this technology on their own, but it now appeared they had received help.

The floating eye beside Tahlia glowed more brightly, intensifying its scrutiny of the disruptor. "Interesting, considering this 'mistake' bears a striking similarity to classified goblin technology."

The room grew even heavier, the pressure of her words pressing down on everyone present. The chief's tail twitched in agitation, but he kept his voice steady.

"Your majesty," the chief began again, his tone more measured this time, "I assure you, we did not steal this from the Tower or any goblin mage. We understand the dangers of meddling in affairs beyond our means. This was born purely out of necessity, from our need to survive the harsh conditions we face on the surface."

Tahlia's lips curled into a thin, dangerous smile. "Necessity, yes. Survival." She floated closer, her eyes boring into the chief's. "Do you realize the position you've put yourself in? The Tower is not lenient when it comes to such 'mistakes,' especially when they concern devices that can interfere with magic. Your disruptor may not affect those at my level," she said, casting a dismissive glance at the device, "but it still has the potential to destabilize things far greater than your survival."

Por, still standing at the edge of the room, felt the tension mounting and knew they had to tread carefully. She stepped forward, her voice firm but respectful. "We understand the gravity of our actions, Apprentice Tahlia. But we had no intention of threatening the Tower or its authority. The disruptor was created as a last resort, a tool to defend ourselves. We wouldn't dare challenge the balance."

Tahlia's eyes flicked to Por, her expression unreadable for a moment before she spoke again. "Whether you intended to or not is irrelevant. What matters is that this device exists, and the Tower is very interested in how it came to be."

The floating eye shifted its focus, hovering now between the engineer and the disruptor, as if considering its next move. Tahlia's voice dropped to a near-whisper, though it carried enough menace for the entire room to hear. "Vellok himself has taken an interest in this. Do you know what that means? His curiosity is not a privilege; it's a danger. If he deems your little experiment too risky, there will be consequences."

The chief's throat tightened, his eyes shifting nervously to the others in the room. He knew the danger they were in now, teetering on the edge of something far worse than just scrutiny.

Por's fists clenched, but she kept her tone steady. "What must we do to prove we are no threat?"

Meanwhile, in his tower, Vellok smiled as he watched the scene unfold. After learning about the device, the Empire had already developed a countermeasure for it, and this knowledge had been transmitted to all mages. They were now prepared for encounters like this.

What Vellok found most delightful was that for the true power of this technology to work, it requires those who are mana friendly and can use mana. It just so happens that the ratfolk are neither of those so their threat level to him has diminished.

His student Tahlia whole behavior and attitude was so that the ratfolk can say the word Por just said. It now makes it easier to achieve their original goal with the ratmen.

Vellok's delight grew as he continued watching from his tower. The true brilliance of the situation was that the ratfolk, despite their ingenuity, were powerless to wield the full potential of the disruptor. For the device to truly be effective, it required users who were attuned to mana and could manipulate its flow. The ratfolk, who lacked both the ability and affinity for magic, were simply incapable of unlocking its true destructive power. As far as Vellok was concerned, their threat had already been neutralized.

Tahlia, his student, had played her role perfectly. Her cold demeanor, the tension she skillfully escalated, all served to manipulate the ratmen into a corner. Por's desperate question had been the moment they

were waiting for—the final surrender of control, veiled in a plea for survival. Now, Vellok's original plan for the ratmen could be fully realized.

Back underground, the atmosphere was suffocating. After Por's words, Tahlia floated back a few paces, her expression unreadable. With a flick of her wrist, she summoned a scroll from the staff she carried. The scroll glowed faintly, its insignia unmistakable. The moment Por recognized it, she dropped back down to her knees, her heart sinking even further.

"The Tower Master Vellok isn't the only one with a vested interest in you ratfolk," Tahlia began, her voice steady but laced with authority. "The Emperor himself has heard of your ingenuity and is... pleased with how far you have come."

With deliberate slowness, Tahlia unfurled the scroll, holding it in front of her as she read aloud. The message was formal and almost identical to the one Gurnak had delivered to another group of ratmen, though the key difference now was the lack of any bargaining power on their end. They were cornered, vulnerable, and had lost the ability to negotiate for their survival.

The room fell into a heavy silence. The ratmen stood motionless, the weight of the words pressing down on them like a lead blanket. It wasn't just the threat of invasion that terrified them, though that alone was enough to make their hearts race. The concept of demons—unknown, monstrous beings they had never encountered—added another layer of dread. But the worst part, the part that made Por's stomach churn, was the Emperor's "request" for them to take up arms. The ratmen, whose only advantage had been their technological advancements, were now being asked to fight back the demonic invaders on behalf of the Empire.

Por's face, once determined and hopeful, was now blank. Her eyes had lost their spark, staring at the ground as despair filled her heart. She realized, painfully, that they had been manipulated from the start. Every choice, every decision, had led them to this moment. And she had been the one to deliver them—her people, her entire settlement—into the hands of the mages.

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The Emperor knew of their technology. He knew what they had developed, yet instead of condemning them or seeing them as a threat, he had decided to "help" them. The truth behind his offer was clear: they were to be tools in his war against the demons, expendable assets to be used for their technological prowess, and discarded once their usefulness had run out.

This should have been cause for celebration. The Emperor himself acknowledging their work, offering resources and assistance to further their progress into technology. But Por, and every other ratman in the room, understood the chilling reality beneath it all. They were pawns. They would be sent to die in a war they had no part in starting. And if they survived, it wouldn't be on their own terms.

Tahlia rolled the scroll back up, her gaze drifting over the kneeling figures before her. "Your future is no longer your own," she said softly, almost as if in pity. "But you will serve a purpose."

A badge appeared on Tahlia's hand which she threw at the chief "You have few weeks to settle things down here and gather capable ratfolks that will be good and helpful to your new relocation, if you don't do it we will and you won't like the way it will end"

A portal opened up behind Thalia as she took one last look at the despairing ratmen, a look of pity flashed in her eyes followed by a look of conviction.

The ratmen's current fate was a good example of what could happen to them if the demons won this invasion and such fate is something she doesn't want for herself and her people, walking into the portal it closed behind her.

The whole room still was silent even with Thalia gone, the chief looking at the badge thrown to him had tears dropping from his face, the gauntlet on his hand hissed as he punched a hole in the ground while roaring out loud.

Sniffing he said "Our ancestor's dreams, their fight and will that has been passed down for generations, how terrible is it that with all they had done to get us to where we are today, we will be the one to end their hard work with our own hands"

"What face do we have to face them in death knowing that we picked up arms to fighting for the goblins, who has been our oppressors for generation. We care not for what happens to this world yet here we are forced to fight"

The chief's voice cracked as he spoke, his tears mixing with the dust from the hole he had just punched into the ground. His shoulders trembled with a mixture of anger, grief, and helplessness. He knew the weight of what had just been asked of them—no, demanded of them. To fight for their oppressors, the very ones who had looked down on them for generations, using the tools they had developed out of

sheer necessity, was a bitter fate. It was a betrayal to their ancestors, a perversion of everything the ratmen had fought to achieve.

Por, still kneeling, couldn't bring herself to look up. The hollow echo of the chief's words settled over her like a suffocating blanket. She had delivered them into this nightmare. Her desperation to find a solution had only tightened the chains around their necks. The badge Tahlia had thrown at the chief now seemed like a cursed relic, a symbol of their submission, their doom.

"We've been used," Por muttered, her voice barely audible. "From the start, they played us. And I handed them the key."

The chief's bloodshot eyes turned to her, filled with a deep, primal rage. But he didn't lash out. He couldn't. They were all in this together now, trapped by forces far beyond their control.

"They don't care about our survival," another voice broke the silence. It was the engineer, still trembling from his earlier confrontation with Tahlia. "We're tools. The disruptor, our ingenuity—none of it matters to them except as a means to an end. We're just another weapon in their arsenal now."

The words hit hard, cutting deeper into the despair that had already taken root. For generations, the ratmen had fought for autonomy, for a place in this world that didn't involve serving the whims of others. And now, after years of clawing their way to survival, they were back at square one—forced to fight a war they had no stake in.

Por clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms until they drew blood. The pain was a small relief from the crushing reality of their situation.

"What do we do now?" one of the younger ratmen asked, his voice barely a whisper. He looked around at the older members of the group, hoping for guidance, for a glimmer of hope in the darkness that now surrounded them.

The chief, still kneeling, lifted his head slowly. His face was a twisted mask of sorrow, but beneath it, there was something else—something more dangerous. His fists clenched at his sides as he spoke through gritted teeth. "We do what we must," he growled. "For our people. For our survival. We take up arms not for the goblins, but for ourselves. We fight because it's the only option left to us".

His words, though bitter, stirred something in the room. A flicker of defiance, faint but real. They had been beaten down, yes, but they were not broken. Not yet.

Por raised her head slowly, her eyes meeting the chief's. There was no forgiveness in them, but there was a shared understanding—a grim acknowledgment of the road ahead. "We'll gather our strongest, our best minds," she said, her voice steadier now. "If we're going to be used as weapons, then we'll make sure it's on our terms. And maybe... maybe we can find a way out of this".

The ratwoman in charge of plants among the now agitated ratmen leaders had a calm look in her eyes even though she was still shaken by everything.

She spoke as her calm, slightly shaky voice drew the attention of the other ratmen "I wish I can share the same sentiment as you all do at this very moment but I am not so keen on warfare. Nonetheless, I can act as a voice of reason seeing you all so agitated"

The room grew quiet again as the ratwoman, her voice soft yet steady, commanded the attention of the others. Her calm demeanor was in stark contrast to the roiling emotions of those around her, and in that moment, her words seemed to cut through the thick air of anger and despair.

"I do not deny the anger you all feel," she continued, her eyes moving from face to face, lingering briefly on Por and the chief. "But we must see the larger picture here. This is not just about us or our settlement. Whatever these demons are, they've forced the emperor's hand—he wouldn't turn to us if the situation wasn't dire. We are, by some twisted luck, seen as valuable to him. Our skills, our technology... he needs us."

The others listened intently, some nodding in agreement, while others still fumed quietly.

"War was coming for us, one way or another," she said with a heavy sigh. "Whether we fought for our own freedom or for the emperor's ambitions, the difference is now that we've lost the choice of when and how. But that does not mean we've lost everything."

The chief, still gripping the badge in his hand, looked up at her, his fury cooling into something more deliberate. "What are you suggesting then?" he asked, his voice rough with exhaustion and grief.

To everyone's surprise, the rat woman shook her head. "I have nothing to suggest. There's no denying how bad and desperate our situation is. My whole reason for speaking is to ask you all to approach this with a calm mind."

The plantkeeper's unexpected words sent a ripple of confusion through the gathered leaders. The chief narrowed his eyes, his grip on the badge tightening as he processed her response. "You don't have a plan?" he asked, his voice tinged with disbelief.

She shook her head again, her expression calm. "No," she replied softly. "I don't. This isn't a problem we can solve with clever schemes or bold plans. I'm not here to offer a way out. I'm here to remind you that desperation will get us killed faster than the emperor or his war."

The room fell silent again, but this time it wasn't from shock—it was the silence of harsh truth sinking in.

"We have no easy choices left," she continued, her voice trembling slightly now as the weight of reality pressed on her. "We're outmatched, outmanoeuvred, and the future we fought for is no longer in our hands. But how we face this... it still matters. If we lash out blindly, if we fall apart in fear or anger, we'll lose everything. But if we move forward with clear heads, we might find something worth saving. Even if it's just our dignity."

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Por's eyes, still hollow from the betrayal she had realized, met the plantkeeper's. Slowly, she nodded in understanding. There was no hope in her gaze, only quiet resignation.

Ikenga and Keles, meanwhile, had been observing the entire situation. The mage's sudden movements and plans for the ratfolk were something they hadn't anticipated.

Looking at the downcast and dejected ratmen, Ikenga knew this could be a good opportunity to reveal himself and act as a saving grace for them. But thinking long-term, Ikenga wasn't a fan of working hard only for others to benefit. If this world was conquered by the demons, the ratfolk would fall into the abyss along with it, and they wouldn't be a prize he could claim simply because he helped them.

So, Ikenga remained still, raising his palm for Keles to see. An image of the marked ratman's consciousness appeared, with the tree and snake working to break the seal.

Ikenga had planned on letting things take their natural course, not forcing anything, but the mage's movements made him reconsider.

Watching the ratman leaders leave the room with their shoulders slumped, an idea formed in Ikenga's mind. If it worked, the seal would be broken sooner, and the ratmen would get the king they were in dire need of.

Keles, noticing Ikenga lost in thought, called for Vaegur, who entered the carriage as Keles began a new game of chess. Being a demon, Vaegur recognized the human game and stole a glance at Keles and Ikenga before shaking his head.

At the moment, Ikenga sat with his eyes closed, his mind racing with multiple thoughts. One idea surfaced that caused his divinity to react, warning him of the risks involved.

Ikenga had considered interfering with the dreams of the marked ratman, presenting himself within the dream to subtly influence the outcome. But he was quickly reminded of his divine nature and past experiences.

When he had attempted to whisper or contact the former king and queen of the Silver Kingdom, he had nearly killed them. To present himself to the conscious ratman might have the opposite effect of what he intended.

From experience and observation, Ikenga had learned that the more a mortal mind tries to comprehend a divine presence, the more damage it sustains—unless the mortal is of considerable strength. He and Keles could tour the ratman find simply because he was asleep, if he was awake it would be a different outcome.

A figure Ikenga had almost forgotten about flashed into his mind, and he chuckled. "If my divine presence prevents me from doing what I want, then I'll just find someone who can do it for me—someone who can do I need without the burden of divinity."

Glancing at Keles and Vaegur, deeply engrossed in their game, Ikenga cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to interrupt your game, but we need to pick up a companion. Vaegur, if you don't mind?" An image of the

destination flashed in Vaegur's mind, raising a brow in surprise, he nodded, left the carriage, and mounted Lavderh as they made their way out from the underground toward their new destination.

"Are we going back for Phantom?" Keles asked, intrigued by Ikenga's sudden decision. Ikenga nodded, though his eyes sparkled with a different curiosity. He posed a question that had been lingering in his mind.

"I've realized something recently," Ikenga began thoughtfully. "Most of the beings we encounter and talk to, have only seen our physical form. No doubt those with certain heritage and strength can bear our true presence but what about the mortals who worship us?"

Keles tilted her head in confusion, pondering Ikenga's question. It wasn't something she had ever considered before. The more she thought about it, the more curious she became. However, instead of answering, she threw a question back at him. "Why does it matter how they see us?"

Ikenga leaned back, a faint smile playing on his lips. He had expected this response—his sister, though sharp in many ways, rarely delved into the subtleties of perception, especially when it came to the powerless. Still, he could see her curiosity spark as she mulled over the question.

"Why does it matter?" Keles asked again, raising an eyebrow with skepticism. "They are beneath us. What significance is there in how we appear to them?"

Ikenga chuckled softly. "Ah, that's precisely why it matters, dear sister. We are gods to them—forces beyond comprehension. But have you ever wondered what that does to them?"

"They already know we are gods," Ikenga said. "They've carved us into images—stone, metal, symbols they can understand and worship. It gives them comfort, something they can kneel before, something familiar. But if we were to appear before them in our true forms, beyond their carved images and crafted idols... what would happen then?"

Keles uncrossed her arms, curiosity flickering in her gaze. "They've already accepted us as gods. But their acceptance is indeed shallow, based on their own constructs, their own limitations. If their minds can't fully grasp what stands before them it usually ends up shattering?"

Ikenga nodded. "That's exactly it. It's one thing to worship an idea of a god, to bow before a statue or a story passed down through generations. But to see the real thing—something they cannot comprehend or translate—would break them. The mind can only bend so far before it snaps. Worse still, the divine strength we exude without being reigned in would overwhelm them, leading to their death."

Keles looked intrigued. "And you're thinking... what? That we should appear to them as something more familiar?"

"Appearing before them in flesh isn't the issue," Ikenga replied. "You've taught me quite a bit about souls since our journey. If they were to see this flesh and blood form," he said, raising his arm in front of him, "I believe nothing would happen."

"But our conversation now lies in the realm of consciousness and souls. The sight of a soul is different from that of mortal eyes. Awakening the ratman's consciousness while we are present in it is where my question is, whether he can see beyond the physical form and get a glimpse of our divine essence."

Keles leaned back, her eyes narrowing in thought. "Ah, I see now," she said, her tone more measured. "You're not worried about how they perceive us in flesh—what concerns you is their perception of our divine essence, the truth of what we are when their consciousness touches ours."

Ikenga nodded, raising his arm slightly as if examining it through new eyes. "Exactly. Mortal eyes can process this form, even if they recognize it as divine. But the soul... it can't lie to itself like the mind can. Once their consciousness brushes against the true nature of divinity, they're no longer dealing with just a physical presence. The soul sees us as we truly are."

Keles nodded in understanding. "So, when we awaken the ratman's consciousness and come into contact with his soul... you fear he might see beyond what his mind can comprehend?"

Ikenga sighed, the weight of the dilemma evident in his expression. "Yes. I almost destroyed the minds of the Silver Kingdom's rulers because their souls were forced to look upon a power far greater than their fragile existence could bear. They couldn't cope with the divine force—not just in form, but in essence. Their souls recoiled, trying to protect themselves."

Keles tapped her chin thoughtfully. "And that's why you're considering Phantom. His lack of divinity allows him to interact with the ratman's soul without overwhelming it. He's a bridge, not a god. He can approach them on a level they can handle."

Ikenga smiled slightly. "Exactly. Phantom can do what we cannot. He can awaken the ratman consciousness and dreams without causing a problem to his soul. It's the subtlety we need—guidance without destruction."

Keles gave a slow nod. The two gods continued their discussion about mortal perception as they left the underground. Back in the abyss, Phantom still posing as a gargoyle already got Ikenga's message.

The situation of the gargoyle was truly bad as they have made no progress since seeing the mage tower and goblins using spells. Not too long ago like other places invaded by demons.

The goblin empire began building walls and deploying soldiers who will take guard on the wall. The only difference here compared to the rest was how the goblins were moving.

They seem to understand that the portal on this side was the weak part of this invasion, so they are actively trying to push their way into the portal.

Malzor had been in a state of unrest since the beginning of the invasion. Nonetheless, his tension spiked when he saw the goblins rallying their troops, preparing to push back.

Immediately, Malzor deployed a fourth-stage gargoyle demon to the other world. Once there, the gargoyle took command of the gathered troops, keeping a close watch on the goblins' movements.

Phantom continued serving as an advisor, but he wasn't as enthusiastic as before. It saddened him deeply that he had not been able to help Malzor fully realize his ambitions and goals.

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As a cursed spirit, Phantom's instincts told him that he would be greatly rewarded if he helped Malzor achieve his ambition. Yet the reality of the situation made the goal seem close to impossible.

Currently, Phantom was in the abyss, floating and sitting cross-legged in front of a portal. His yellow eyes glowed as he looked beyond the portal and the walls the goblins had built.

In his glowing eyes, he could see the flames of ambition. Having spent enough time among demons, wielding and getting used of his own powers, Phantom had learned to predict bold moves based on the flickers in those flames.

Right now, he noticed multiple flames flickering beyond the walls built by the goblins. Phantom stretched out his hand, grasping a yellow light only he could see.

Through his connection with the light, he faintly heard whispers. The words were difficult to make out due to the distance from the abyss, but he caught phrases like, "I wonder how much my rank will rise if I perform well in this push."

The glow in Phantom's eyes faded as he flew off, his wings beating softly as he made his way to Malzor's quarters. When he arrived, he didn't bother to knock, entering to find Malzor deep in thought, his hand resting on his chin.

"The goblin army is preparing to attack," Phantom said, breaking Malzor's concentration. Malzor immediately stood up, waving his hand to summon a view of the goblin world, yet he saw no signs of movement.

Malzor's eyes narrowed as he gazed at the image. He trusted Phantom's instincts—Phantom had never been wrong before. The fourth-stage gargoyle had already taken command of the demonic forces, but despite this preparation, unease lingered in the air.

"Ready your forces," Malzor growled into the communication link. "The goblins are planning something bold. We can't afford to be caught off guard."

The gargoyle's voice, deep and gravelly, echoed back, "We are prepared, my lord. Their movements remain silent, but we will strike as soon as they reveal themselves."

Malzor cut the link and turned to Phantom, whose wings beat softly behind him.

"They're waiting for something," Malzor muttered, pacing the room. "But what? An opportunity? A weakness? Do they know we're ready for them?"

Phantom was quiet for a moment, his gaze distant. "The flames of ambition flicker, but they don't burn with certainty," he finally said. "It's as if they are conflicted. Some of the goblins are eager, ready to climb the ranks, but others hesitate."

"Internal division," Malzor mused, a cruel smile curling his lips. "It seems their ranks aren't as unified as they'd like us to believe."

Phantom tilted his head thoughtfully. "If we strike before their unity solidifies, we could break their resolve before their attack even begins."

Malzor's eyes gleamed with malice. "Yes. A preemptive strike."

"Perhaps..." Phantom began slowly, "but since our troops cannot move freely beyond the eroded lands, I propose we use the cannon fodder with third-stage demons for this move."

"The cannon fodder will provide a distraction and allow the third-stage demons to engage the goblins freely before pulling back, their death will allow the needed freedom of movement for the third stage demons. The eroded land is our advantage. If we can pull the goblins into it, we may stand a better chance."

Malzor hesitated. "Your plan sounds simple, but what makes you think the goblins and ogres will fall for it? Once we make a move, they'll realize it, and all they have to do is fall back."

"Leave that to me," Phantom replied, flying out through the open roof. Malzor watched Phantom's retreating form as he disappeared into the dark sky. Unease gnawed at the demon lord's mind. There was something in Phantom's words, something hidden beneath the surface.

"What is he planning?" Malzor muttered, resuming his pacing.

The older demon had always been valuable for his foresight and tactical acumen, but this time there was a different edge to his confidence—an unsettling calm that left Malzor wary. Phantom's abilities were vast and often shrouded in mystery. Though Malzor trusted him as much as he trusted anyone, he couldn't shake the feeling that Phantom was operating with motives yet to be revealed.

Malzor shook his head, dismissing the thought for the moment. There was no time for doubt. The plan itself had merit. Sacrificing the cannon fodder to mask the third-stage demons' movements and luring the goblins and ogres into the eroded land—it was a solid strategy.

"Whatever you're up to, Phantom," Malzor whispered under his breath, "it had better work." He immediately relayed the strategy to the fourth-stage demon.

The fourth-stage demon began reshuffling the army immediately upon receiving the command. Malzor's army was a blend of demon races from their abyss. Unlike the other two demon kings, he hadn't had time to grow his own army; nonetheless, his strength and that of the other gargoyles helped subdue other races.

Down on the goblin side, an ogre on the newly built wall stood with a telescope, observing the sudden movement of the demons. Activating the communication hub built into his armor, he relayed an image of the movement to the goblins in the tower.

The goblins, meanwhile, were arguing with what seemed to be a higher-ranking ogre. An ogre with flames leaking from his eyes slammed his hand on the table. "Why should I hand command over to you when it's my army that will be spearheading the attack?"

The goblin tower master, equally annoyed, pointed his staff at the ogre. "You brutes know nothing of warfare except for brute force. The army we're dealing with isn't one we can overwhelm by sheer strength."

The ogre with flaming eyes rolled his eyes. "If you're so smart, then why did you request our help from the emperor instead of using your wits to solve the enemy problem?"

The tower master, confused by the ogre general's words, was about to respond when the image was relayed to both of them. The ogre general immediately stood up and rushed toward the wall in the room they were in.

The goblin mage raised his hand to stop him but thought better of it. Instead, once the general approached the wall, it opened up, and the ogre fell from the tower with a predatory smile on his face.

The tower master looked back at the image, frowning. The demons hadn't made any moves in months since their last encounter, during which his tower shield had seemingly scared them off.

The pullback by the demon army had led the goblin master to think he was fortunate enough to be facing a weaker side of the invasion, as past knowledge indicated this was normal.

Now, with the demons on the move, it showed they had some kind of confidence or plan. The tower master's staff appeared in his hand as he relayed a message to all the mages around the tower.

The mages, receiving the message, began moving, leaving their rooms and heading toward the wall to join the ogre general. The ogre general was already on the wall, shielding his eyes with his hand as he squinted to observe the demons' movements.

A roar came from the demons as they began advancing. The sight made the general and the ogres frown as they watched the demons push past the eroded land, only to be killed by the world's repulsion.

Yet, that didn't stop the demons as they stepped over their companions' bodies, further eroding the land in their favor. Seeing the demonic horde moving toward them, the general knew he couldn't allow that to continue. He roared out, "Open the gates!" The gates creaked open as the general jumped from the wall, landing beside an ogre who held a massive scaled warhorse for him to mount.

The ogre army stood in position, lined up and waiting for the general to make his move. Meanwhile, the goblin mages were chanting a spell that washed over the ogre troops.

As the goblin mages' chanting filled the air, a soft glow enveloped the ogre army. The magic was a reinforcement spell designed to augment the ogres' already formidable strength and offer some protection against the demons' cursed terrain. The flames in the general's eyes blazed brighter, and his muscles bulged beneath the weight of his armor as he mounted the massive, scaled warhorse.

The gates groaned open, and the ogre general led the charge out of the fortress walls. His army of ogres, emboldened by the spell and their natural battle frenzy, followed closely behind, their heavy footfalls shaking the ground as they advanced. Each ogre was equipped with massive weapons—war hammers, clubs, and spiked shields—while the warhorses they rode were clad in heavy armor, their scales gleaming under the pale sky.

From the fortress walls, the goblin mages maintained their support, their chants shifting to offensive magic. Bolts of fire and electricity arced from their staffs, crashing into the advancing demon horde. But the demons, undeterred by the mages' bombardment, continued their relentless push forward, stepping over the bodies of their fallen comrades as they crossed the eroded lands.

Chapter 325:

The demon horde, unfazed by the losses they were suffering from both the repulsive nature of the land and the goblin mages' bombardment, pressed on with a grim determination. The fourth-stage gargoyle demon, watching from a distance, seemed pleased. The bodies of the fallen demons were now creating a path, gradually pushing deeper into the goblins territory and eroding the lands that normally repelled their presence. This was the key part of Phanthom's plan: sacrifice the lower-tier demons to erode the land enough for the stronger ones to move forward freely.

The ogre general, now at the head of his army, saw the advancing horde with a mixture of confusion and rage. Despite his previous confidence, the sight of the demons relentlessly sacrificing their own to create a path was unsettling. But he was not one to hesitate in battle.

"Charge!" the general roared, spurring his warhorse forward. His troops followed, surging toward the demon army with deafening roars of their own. The earth trembled beneath their charge, and the sheer force of the ogre cavalry crashing into the first wave of demons was catastrophic. Bodies were flung into the air as war hammers and clubs smashed into demonic flesh. The demons fought back, their monstrous forms twisting and contorting, but they were no match for the sheer strength of the ogres in close combat. What was even more frustrating was that each demon killed by the ogre further erodes the lands once their dead corpse touch the land.

However, this was only the beginning. The third-stage demons were yet to fully reveal themselves.

Back at the fortress, the goblin tower master remained deep in thought, watching the battle unfold through the magical projection. His staff clutched tightly in his hand, he could sense something was off. The demons weren't just mindlessly charging; there was a strategy here.

The tower master frowned and quickly barked orders to his mages, "Prepare the shielding spells! We must anticipate their next move."

On the battlefield, the ogres continued to push back the demon horde, crushing wave after wave. Unknowingly they push into the eroded lands where they held of the demons.

But then, a shift in the air occurred. The ground beneath the ogre army began to rumble violently. Cracks formed in the earth, and from the depths emerged the third-stage demons, massive creatures with hulking, grotesque bodies, their forms flickering with dark energy. These demons had been waiting, hidden beneath the surface.

The ogre general's warhorse reared up as the ground shifted, and he barely managed to regain control. His eyes, burning with fiery rage, locked onto the new threat.

"Form up!" he roared to his troops, but it was too late. The third-stage demons launched their attack, tearing into the ogres with savage fury. Their sheer size and strength rivaled that of the ogres, and their sharp claws and teeth tore through armor and flesh alike.

At the same time, the goblin mages on the wall began to chant their shielding spells, sending protective barriers down to the ogres. But the third-stage demons were relentless, their dark energy corrupting the shields and weakening them with each blow.

The tower master, watching this, ordered the mages on the wall, "Cover and protect yourselves, let the shadows go and help those brutes."

From the shadows of the goblin mages on the wall, as they released spells, goblin figures with daggers, their heads covered, emerged from the darkness.

Knowing what to do, they immediately jumped off the wall, disappearing mid-air. Phantom, now hovering above the battlefield, noticed hundreds of flames moving towards the battleground, yet no one was visible.

The figures moved fast, soon reaching the demons that were trying to break the shields protecting the ogres. They flickered in and out of sight, and each time a demon was struck down.

The third-stage demons, noticing this, backed away and spread out while the cannon fodder pushed past the ogre army, throwing themselves to their deaths to further erode the land.

A third-stage hellhound demon sniffed the air, trying to sense where the figures were. Its nose twitched as it caught a scent, and it turned just in time to see a goblin holding a dagger in mid-air, poised to stab through a balrog's head.

The hellhound opened its mouth to form a fireball, but stopped and sidestepped as a slash narrowly missed it. As for the balrog, it seemed to have anticipated the goblin's attack; its massive hand wrapped around the goblin.

A grin spread across the balrog's face as flames rose from the hand that had caught the goblin. With a roar of pain, the goblin was burned to ash as the balrog sucked in its soul.

Similar scenes played out across the battlefield, as the third-stage demons began dealing with the shadow goblins in their own ways. The tower master, seeing this, wasted no time and ordered, "Retreat!"

The order was also sent to the ogre general, who now had steam rising from his body in anger. He felt underestimated and played by both the tower master and the demons. Even though they were called Ogres because of their fighting path, they were also goblins themselves. So why were they being underestimated by everyone?

The general himself was in the fourth stage, and most of his men were in the third stage. Looking back from his horse, he saw that he still had a large number of troops left. Ogres had impressive healing abilities, where only decapitation could fully confirm a kill.

"We were only taken by surprise. I just have to regroup my men," the ogre general thought to himself as he roared out to his soldiers, "Gather yourselves, we are ogres, and we do not retreat!"

Meanwhile, in the air, Phantom hadn't heard the tower master's retreat order, but he could see the flames of the invisible figures falling back, and he noticed flickers of flames on the ogres too, as if they were about to do the same.

One flame of ambition caught his attention. Unlike the others, which flickered, this one burned brighter. For some reason, some part of Phanthom took over as he gazed at the ogre general rallying his men.

His mouth moved, and down on the battlefield, the ogre general, after rallying his men, heard a whisper: "Will you do me the honor of letting me create the perfect stage of performance for you?" For some reason, the general found this whisper enticing, and he nodded. His eyes and those of his men took on a yellow glow after he nodded.

In the eyes of the general, everything changed. He was still on the battlefield with his men, but now the battlefield had turned into a massive colosseum. He saw goblins, tower masters of all ranks, and, most importantly, the figure he couldn't see but knew to be the emperor.

A grin spread across the general's face as he roared out, "Rage, men, for the emperor!" His body ignited with flames as a fiery phantom of himself appeared behind him—a sign of his fourth-stage power.

Phanthom's influence had woven itself deep into the ogre general's mind. The whispered offer had triggered something primal within him, a lust for battle and glory that far surpassed even the ogres' natural savagery. As the fiery phantom of himself blazed behind him, the general's resolve solidified, and his men, emboldened by their leader's newfound fury, rallied with renewed vigor.

The battlefield was a chaotic storm of violence. Ogres, bathed in a golden glow, clashed with the demons who surged forward relentlessly. The hellhound demon that had dodged the shadow goblins now found itself facing the flaming ogre general, whose presence seemed larger than life.

"Forward! For the emperor!" the general roared again, his voice echoing through the battlefield, as if amplified by some unseen force.

Phanthom, still watching from above, smirked. The show had begun. He could feel the energy crackling through the air as the general's delusions fueled the battle. The more the ogres pushed forward, the deeper they were drawn into the third-stage demons' trap. Phanthom's eyes glowed as he saw the battlefield shift according to his design. Every movement of the demons and ogres became part of a twisted symphony—a dance of blood and destruction.

The tower master, now standing on the wall, noticed something was wrong. He could see the ogre general and his troops fighting with an intensity that surpassed reason, ignoring the strategic retreat. But what troubled him even more was the yellow glow in their eyes. It wasn't natural. It wasn't right.

From within the walls of the fortress, the goblin mages began a desperate counterspell, their chants growing louder as they tried to sever the demonic influence. Tendrils of magic reached out, winding through the air like shimmering vines, seeking to latch onto the minds of the ogres and pull them back from the edge. Yet it was like throwing a stone into an ocean nothing changed.

The tower master seeing that sighed as he ordered "Since we can't do nothing, throw every support spell you can"

Chapter 326:

The battlefield roared with the sounds of combat as the ogre general's rally cry echoed in the ears of his troops. His warhammer, ablaze with the spectral flames of his inner power, swung through the air like a burning comet. Behind him, the ogre warriors surged forward, their eyes glowing with the same yellow fire as their leader. The third-stage demons that had been tearing through the ogre ranks now found themselves on the defensive, their initial advantage slipping away under the relentless assault.

The goblins on the wall, now with little choice but to follow orders, shifted their focus to support. The goblin mages hurled spells of protection and enhancement down onto the ogres, their magic blending with the fierce strength of the warriors on the field. Below them, the shadow-cloaked goblin assassins flickered in and out of existence, carving a path of chaos through the demons' ranks.

The third-stage demons fought back, their sheer size and strength still formidable. Their claws tore into ogres, while their dark energy attempted to corrupt the land beneath them. Yet, for every ogre that fell, two more seemed to rise, the fury of their general driving them forward. They fought like creatures possessed, but not by Phantom's direct hand; they were driven by their own burning ambition—amplified and stoked to new heights by the demon watching from above.

Phantom's eyes gleamed with interest, savoring the spectacle unfolding below. The general and his men fought not just for survival but for something deeper—glory, recognition, and power. Phantom haven't altered their desires; he had simply lit the flames that already smoldered within them. Now, those flames burned uncontrollably. This was the stage he had created, a perfect battleground for ambition to take center stage, with both demons and ogres locked in a deadly dance of violence.

"Magnificent," Phantom whispered to himself, watching as the ogre general swung his hammer, sending one of the third-stage demons crashing into the ground with a sickening thud. Blood splattered across the battlefield, but the general paid it no mind. His mind was elsewhere, lost in the fiery vision Phantom had conjured. He saw the grand colosseum, the emperor, and the endless adulation of his people.

With every blow, the ogre army pushed further into the demon ranks. The third-stage demons, though formidable, found themselves outmatched by the ogres' newfound strength and ferocity. One demon after another fell beneath the warhammers and axes of the ogres. Their bodies littered the ground, staining it with dark blood, but the ogres marched on, unstoppable.

It wasn't long before the balance of power shifted dramatically in favor of the ogres. The battlefield, once dominated by the chaos of the demons, now began to tilt toward the forces of the general. The goblin assassins darted through the shadows, cutting down demon after demon, while the ogre warriors crushed their enemies with raw strength.

Then, the air shifted.

A dark shadow loomed over the battlefield, and the ground trembled beneath an overwhelming presence. It wasn't another wave of third-stage demons. It was something far worse. Phantom's eyes narrowed in anticipation.

From the depths of the demon horde, a massive figure emerged. Its wings unfurled, casting a dark shadow over the field. Its body was made of jagged stone, covered in cracks where molten lava pulsed like veins of fire. A fourth-stage gargoyle demon had entered the fray.

The ogre general, locked in his fiery delusion, saw this creature not as a threat, but as the ultimate challenge. His eyes burned brighter, and the phantom behind him blazed even fiercer. This was what he had been waiting for—the ultimate test of his strength and will.

The gargoyle demon roared, shaking the earth with its voice, and launched itself into the air. It crashed down in front of the general with the force of a boulder, sending a shockwave that threw both ogres and demons off balance. The creature's wings spread wide as its molten eyes locked onto the general.

"Come!" the general roared, brandishing his warhammer. "I will show you the strength of an ogre!"

The fourth-stage gargoyle demon towered over the ogre general, its wings flexing wide as molten veins coursed beneath its cracked stone skin. The demon's eyes burned with malevolent intelligence, assessing its opponent, calculating every movement.

The ogre general snarled, gripping his warhammer tighter, the weapon pulsing with the fury of his burning aura. His own fiery power, enhanced by his fourth-stage transformation, rippled through his body, making the air around him shimmer with heat. The battlefield was littered with the bodies of fallen ogres and demons, and the air stank of blood, sulfur, and ash.

With a powerful swing, the general charged forward. His "Flamebreaker Hammer" glowed brightly as he brought it down with immense force, aiming for the gargoyle's chest. The ground cracked beneath his feet, leaving scorched imprints with each step.

But the demon was quick. Instead of meeting the attack head-on, it feinted left, allowing the ogre to overcommit. At the last moment, the gargoyle twisted its massive body and countered with a lightning-fast swipe of its molten claws, aiming for the general's exposed flank.

The claws ripped into the ogre's side, carving through flesh and armor alike. Blood sprayed from the wound, sizzling as it hit the demon's molten skin. The general roared in pain but didn't slow his assault. He pivoted mid-motion, using the momentum from the strike to swing his hammer in a wide arc, aiming for the gargoyle's legs.

The warhammer struck with a sickening crack, smashing into the gargoyle's stone limb. Chips of rock flew in all directions as the demon stumbled back, momentarily off-balance. But the gargoyle, not minding that

did not let the damage slow it. Instead, it launched itself into the air, wings flapping with a powerful gust that sent the general skidding back across the scorched earth.

Hovering above, the gargoyle let loose a guttural laugh, the sound echoing like grinding stones. Its molten eyes locked onto the general as it unleashed "Infernal Sear"—a stream of molten lava from its gaping maw. The lava splashed across the battlefield, turning the ground into bubbling pools of molten rock, cutting off the ogre's path of retreat.

The general dove to the side, barely avoiding the cascade of fire, but some of the molten lava splashed across his arm. His skin bubbled and hissed as the heat burned deep, but the ogre's battle instincts kicked in. With a roar, he slammed his warhammer into the ground, activating "Flamebreaker Shield"—a barrier of raw fire that erupted from the earth, surrounding him in a protective inferno.

The molten stream hit the barrier and evaporated into a cloud of steam, but the gargoyle was already in motion, swooping down low to follow up its attack. Its claws, glowing with demonic energy, tore through the smoke, aiming for the general's head. The ogre barely raised his hammer in time to block the attack, but the force of the blow drove him to one knee.

The gargoyle pressed its advantage. It landed with a thunderous crash, sending shockwaves through the ground, and followed up with a flurry of rapid strikes, claws slashing at the general from multiple angles. Each blow was precise, aimed to exploit any gaps in the ogre's defense.

The ogre general gritted his teeth, blocking and parrying as best he could, but the demon's speed and ferocity were overwhelming. Its claws raked across his armor, tearing through metal and flesh alike. Blood flowed freely from the general's wounds, but each time he took a hit, the flames of his "Ogre's Wrath" burned hotter. His anger fueled his power.

With a roar of defiance, the general activated "Titan's Fury," his warhammer glowing with an intense orange light. He swung the massive weapon in a wide arc, and this time, the gargoyle could not avoid the blow. The hammer connected with the demon's chest, the impact sending a shockwave through its body, causing cracks to spread across its stone skin.

But the gargoyle did not flinch. Instead, it smirked, It had been waiting for this.

As the general's hammer rebounded, the gargoyle caught it mid-swing, using its stone claws to grip the weapon. The molten energy from the demon's body surged into the warhammer, corrupting it with demonic fire. The general's eyes widened as his own weapon began to heat up, glowing an unnatural red. The handle burned his hands, forcing him to release it.

In a swift motion, the gargoyle yanked the warhammer from the general's grasp and tossed it aside, sending it flying across the battlefield. Now disarmed, the ogre was vulnerable.

The gargoyle struck. With a powerful backhand, it sent the general flying through the air. The ogre slammed into a jagged outcrop of rock, the impact cracking stone and ribs alike. He gasped for breath, blood trickling from his mouth. The pain was overwhelming, but he could not afford to give in.

The gargoyle advanced, its molten claws dripping with lava as it prepared to finish the job. But the general wasn't done yet.

Chapter 327:

Summoning every ounce of his strength, the general slammed his fists into the ground, activating "Rage of the Colossus." The ground beneath the gargoyle erupted in a geyser of molten lava, catching the demon off guard. The force of the explosion sent the gargoyle reeling, molten stone dripping from its body as it stumbled back.

The general pushed himself to his feet, every muscle screaming in agony. His body was battered and broken, but his will remain unshaken. Without his hammer, he resorted to his raw power. The phantom of "Ogre's Wrath" surged behind him, its fiery presence empowering him further.

With a primal scream, the general charged. His fists, now glowing with fiery energy, slammed into the gargoyle's chest with the force of a battering ram. Each punch cracked the demon's stone skin, sending shockwaves through the battlefield.

But the gargoyle, even in its damaged state, fought back. It lashed out with its claws, tearing into the general's flesh, ripping deep gashes across his chest. Blood poured from the wounds, but the general did not stop. He kept punching, each blow more powerful than the last, each one driving the gargoyle further back.

Finally, with a final roar of defiance, the general activated "Final Inferno"—his most devastating ability. His entire body ignited in flames, transforming him into a living inferno. He tackled the gargoyle, slamming into the demon with enough force to send both of them crashing to the ground.

The flames could no longer be ignored by the gargoyle as he roared out loud in fear before turning his whole body into a stone. The ogre general in his rage ignored that as he threw heavy fire punches at the gargoyle.

At first, it did nothing but a crack soon appeared which prompted the gargoyle to roar out in fear and rage as he took off the stone skin. The ogre general seeing this as an opening punched down only for the gargoyle to put its arm out tanking the damage but with a heavy price as its hands were blown away.

The ogre general closed his eyes in instinct to avoid hurting his eyes from the bones that blew off the demon's hand. The demon meanwhile was ready as he took the opportunity to stomp the ground, throwing him and the general up to the sky.

The gargoyle flapped his wings as he took to the sky, getting high enough it let go of the general who was now falling. The general falling from the sky had a chance to take a look down at the battlefield.

Confusion flashed on his eyes as . His mind, still lost in the vision Phantom had created, began to waver. The perfect colosseum, the adoring crowd, the emperor—all of it seemed to blur, distort.

He blinked. Once. Twice.

Reality seeped back in.

The general, plummeting through the air, felt his thoughts grow clearer, the haze of Phantom's illusion slipping away. His heart, once aflame with ambition, now beat with the cold realization of his circumstances. He was not the triumphant warrior of a grand colosseum, nor the champion admired by an emperor. He was an ogre general, falling from the heavens, watching the battlefield below—strewn with the bodies of his soldiers and enemies alike.

The flames burning around him flickered and dimmed. For the first time since the battle began, doubt crept into his heart.

Phantom, still watching from above, smiled. He could see the shift. The flames of ambition, once roaring brightly, had started to die. The general was coming to his senses, but it was too late.

Up above, the gargoyle demon's roar echoed, filled with fury and a dark satisfaction. The ball of fire rotating at its fingertip quickly swelled into a blinding, searing beam of molten energy. The demon's eyes gleamed with malice as it pointed at the general, releasing the devastating attack.

The beam shot down like lightning, a torrent of molten fury. It cleaved through the sky with terrifying speed, the air sizzling from the intense heat. The general barely had time to brace himself, his body still smoldering from his own "Final Inferno."

He roared in defiance, raising his arms to shield himself as best he could. But the beam was unstoppable. It struck him with terrifying precision, cleaving through his flesh, armor, and bone like a blade through butter. The pain was unimaginable—burning, tearing, ripping him apart. His scream was swallowed by the deafening roar of the beam as it continued its path downward.

The battlefield, once chaotic with the clash of forces, fell eerily silent for a moment as the beam of fire carved its way across the ground. Like a divine judgment, it consumed everything in its path—friend, foe, beast, and soldier. The ground quaked, splitting open into a deep, molten ravine, the beam transforming the earth into flowing magma.

Ogres and demons alike were caught in the onslaught, their bodies disintegrated by the sheer heat of the attack. The gargoyle demon, still hovering in the sky, watched with a sinister grin, knowing that no one—ogre, demon, or human—was spared from its wrath.

As the beam finally dimmed, the battlefield was forever scarred. A massive ravine now stretched from where the gargoyle had fired its attack, filled with bubbling lava. The general's body, or what remained of it, fell from the sky and landed with a heavy thud, half of it missing, the other half smoldering and charred.

Phantom, still watching from his vantage point, tilted his head in amusement. The gargoyle had delivered more destruction than he had anticipated. The vision he had woven for the general was gone, the ogre's ambitions reduced to ash.

The battlefield, now marked by that ravine of magma, stood as a grim reminder of the demon's power. But Phantom knew this was just the beginning. The ogre general's downfall would ripple through his forces, sowing doubt and confusion, making them easier prey for what was to come.

The gargoyle demon, wings still flapping, landed heavily on the ground, surveying the destruction it had wrought. Its molten eyes turned to the remaining ogres, who stared in shock and horror at the sight of their fallen general.

With a low growl, the gargoyle cracked its neck, its bloodlust far from sated. The battle wasn't over yet, and the demon had no intention of stopping until all that remained was ash.

As the gargoyle demon landed with a thud, the atmosphere around it shifted. The soul of the fallen ogre general shimmered above the charred remains, its energy pulsing with the echoes of battle, ambition, and the intense emotions that had consumed the general in his final moments. The raw essence of the soul carried a potency that could not be ignored.

The gargoyle demon's molten eyes locked onto it immediately. The scent of the soul was intoxicating, thick with the essence of war, desperation, and unfulfilled dreams. The demon licked its lips, savoring the aroma as it took a step closer. It was not alone in its desire. Other demons on the battlefield, lesser in power but equally drawn to the appetizing essence, began to stir. However, a single glare from the gargoyle sent them cowering back. None dared challenge a fourth-stage demon for such a feast.

With a deep inhale, the gargoyle sucked in the shimmering soul, feeling it slide down into the depths of its being. The effect was immediate. A rush of energy surged through the demon's body, restoring the strength it had lost during the brutal fight. The wounds and cracks that had marred its stone-like body healed rapidly, and as the energy coursed through it, the demon felt something far more tantalizing—a tug at the edge of its power, an approach to the elusive fifth stage.

From the Abyss, Malzor, also a fourth stage demon himself and one of the realm's feared leaders, watched the scene unfold. His eyes, burning with both envy and caution, narrowed as he saw the gargoyle devour the soul. Malzor had sensed the immense energy within that soul, its rarity akin to a delicacy only a demon of great power could appreciate. A soul like that, tainted by ambition, regret, and the primal drive for dominance, could potentially propel a demon to the next stage of power.

If this gargoyle were to ascend to the fifth stage, it could become a direct threat to Malzor's position. The abyssal leader clenched his fist in irritation, but he knew there was nothing he could do now but watch.

Back on the battlefield, the gargoyle's body trembled as the power within it continued to swell. A dark, gleeful smile spread across its grotesque face as it felt the gap between the fourth and fifth stages closing. It was tantalizingly close.

But just as the demon neared the precipice of its ascension, the energy flow abruptly shifted. The soul's remaining essence diverted away from empowering the demon's core, channeling instead into the limb it had lost. The gargoyle watched in dismay as the potential for ascension slipped through its claws. With

a hiss, the demon's lost arm began to reform, bones knitting together, muscles stretching and expanding, skin hardening once more into its stone-like exterior.

Chapter 328:

A new, fully regenerated arm replaced the one it had sacrificed during the battle with the general. Though its body had been restored to full strength, the energy required to regrow the limb had consumed the remainder of the soul's power.

The gargoyle stared at its hand, clenching and unclenching its fist, a mixture of fury and despair washing over it. The power to ascend had been so close, yet now it was beyond its grasp. A primal roar of frustration tore from its throat, echoing across the battlefield as its wings unfurled.

But the frenzy that had consumed it moments before faded as quickly as it had come. Though enraged, the gargoyle knew better than to let its emotions cloud its judgment. Its newfound strength would still make it a more formidable opponent, and it had a commanding position to return to.

With a low growl, the demon soared back to its vantage point, casting a final, lingering glance at the battlefield below. The soul of the ogre general had given it a taste of what could have been, but for now, it would have to bide its time.

Malzor's eyes followed the gargoyle from the Abyss. He knew that demons like this one, so close to the next stage of power, were the most dangerous. A thin smile crossed his face. The gargoyle had been denied its ascension today, but the hunger for more power would only grow.

In the demon hierarchy, desire was the ultimate driver, and Malzor knew all too well how dangerous a demon on the brink of evolution could become.

Malzor's gaze lingered on the battlefield, his thoughts swirling with ambition and hunger. The fallen ogre general's soul had been an unexpected windfall for the gargoyle, but Malzor was already strategizing for the next opportunity. He anticipated the goblins' response to this crushing defeat. They wouldn't allow such a significant loss to go unanswered, and when they sent another champion or leader, Malzor would be ready. This time, he would claim the soul himself, and it would be the fuel to propel him further into his dominion over the Abyss.

He allowed himself a brief smile. The soul of a general had given the gargoyle a taste of ascension, but Malzor knew that with patience and cunning, it would be he who devoured the next one. A demon of his stature had no need to rush. His position as leader was stable for now, but if he could personally deliver the next crushing blow, the respect and fear of the other demons would solidify his rule over them, leaving no room for challengers. The thought of it filled him with dark anticipation.

Meanwhile, on the battlefield, chaos had overtaken the ogre forces. With the death of their general, their organized ranks crumbled into disarray. Panic set in among the remaining ogres, who had been hardened by the battle but now faced overwhelming odds without their leader's guiding presence. In their desperation, they attempted to retreat, but their flight from the eroded, demon-infested land only led to disaster.

The ogres broke formation, abandoning the disciplined ranks that had kept them alive thus far. Their retreat was panicked, and as they fell back haphazardly, they exposed their vulnerable flanks and backs to the pursuing demons. The horde, sensing weakness, descended upon them with ravenous hunger. Lesser demons, driven by their insatiable desire for strength, surged forward and tore into the fleeing ogres.

The battlefield became a slaughterhouse, with demons feasting on both the flesh and the souls of the fallen. Each kill, each devoured soul, granted them strength, causing the demons to grow stronger and more frenzied with every bite. The ogres' ranks thinned rapidly as their warriors were torn apart, their essence consumed by the fiends in pursuit.

The sky darkened as the land was bathed in chaos and bloodshed, but just as the demons pressed their advantage, they reached the edge of the battlefield where the Tower Master's barrier awaited. In an instant, the shimmering shield of magic erected by the Tower Master once again flared to life, encasing the remaining ogres within its protective dome.

The demons, already familiar with this magic, snarled in frustration but wisely backed off. Though the shield was a nuisance, they understood its power well enough not to challenge it directly. The shimmering arc of light protected the retreating ogres, but it also sealed the battlefield in a state of grim stasis.

The Tower Master stood atop the tower, his eyes narrowed as he assessed the situation. His magical barrier had saved the remaining forces, but the toll had been severe. The ogres that survived were scattered, demoralized, and diminished. They had faced the full force of the Abyss, and while the demons had retreated for now, the cost had been devastating.

Most importantly was how he was to relay the news of his defeat to the emperor, he had been confident before when he requested for reinforcement from the emperor as he was guaranteed to secure a victory for the goblins even possibly push into the open abyss portal. He had believed that the demons on his side were weak which gave him this confidence.

The tower master clenched his fist as he remembered the fallen ogre general, this defeat would not have happened had he listened to him. Nonetheless the defeat helped gather new information which was that the demons somehow are able to control others, having them act beyond reason and disobey orders and spells seems to do nothing to it.

His thoughts turned to the emperor. How could he explain this failure? He had been so confident before, when he had made his bold request for reinforcements, certain that with his strategic prowess and the strength of the ogre general, they could not only hold the demons back but push forward into the Abyss portal itself. Now, the very idea seemed like a distant dream, crushed under the weight of the losses they had suffered.

The Tower Master clenched his fists in frustration as he recalled the stubbornness of the fallen ogre general. If only the general had heeded his warnings, this defeat might have been avoided. But now, all he had was information—information that, while valuable, came at a heavy cost. The demons, somehow, had the power to manipulate others, driving them beyond reason, turning them into tools of destruction, and worst of all, spells seemed to have little effect in breaking this sinister influence.

Back on the battlefield, as the general's body lay lifeless and the last echoes of the battle died down, Phantom remained a silent observer. While the gargoyle demon had gorged itself on the fallen soul, something far more intriguing had caught Phantom's attention. It wasn't the soul of the general that interested him—Phantom, as a cursed being, had no need to feed on such things. His hunger had long since evolved into something more complex, more refined.

What drew Phantom in was something unique, something only visible to him—a faint, shimmering yellow gas that emanated from the fallen ogre general and his soldiers. The gas, wispy and ethereal, drifted through the air, as if searching for a destination, and Phantom, with a gleam in his eye, opened his mouth and inhaled deeply, drawing the mysterious substance into himself.

Phantom's lips curled into a smile as the light approached him. This was not the raw ambition he had once devoured with hunger before his ascension by his creator. It was something purer—a reward, a merit for his role in fulfilling the general's deepest desire. Though the general had perished, Phantom

had allowed him to die with his ambition realized, albeit through an illusion. The golden light was a reflection of that—rewarding Phantom for guiding the fallen general toward his final moment of fulfillment.

Opening his mouth, Phantom inhaled the light. It entered him gently, nourishing his essence without the savage hunger he once knew. This was no longer about consumption. This was about playing a part in the role of ambition, of desire, of lives fulfilled or transformed. He had provided the general with the spotlight he so desperately craved, and in return, he had been rewarded with this golden essence.

Phantom's thoughts drifted to his sibling, the "Despairing Virtuoso," who had evolved in a similar way. No longer did his sibling feed off raw despair. Instead, he took the despair of others and turned it into hope, guiding lost souls toward redemption. In doing so, he too was rewarded with this radiant light—a sign of the balance he helped restore.

A satisfied sigh escaped Phantom's lips as he felt the golden light settle within him, bringing with it a new sense of purpose. He had followed in his creators' shadow hoping to find this purpose and here he did. Now, his role was to guide those emotions, to help others reach their peaks or find hope in their darkest hours. And in return, he would receive this golden merit, each piece pushing him closer to the next stage of his evolution. At the same time, a new question arose in him, was this part of the reason his creator helped them to their current stage?

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Phantom savored the experience, but even as the joy of the moment faded, a pang of regret entered his thoughts. Perhaps he had ended the general's journey too soon. Had he allowed the general more time to bask in the false adoration of the crowd, to believe in his greatness until the very last moment, the reward might have been even sweeter.

"I should have let him indulge in his spotlight until his death," Phantom mused to himself. "His ambition would have been so much more... appetizing."

He glanced toward the portal leading to the Abyss, where Malzor, the fourth-stage gargoyle demon, commanded the demons. Malzor had ambition of his own—raw and unchecked—and Phantom couldn't help but wonder what might happen if he played a role in helping Malzor fulfill that ambition. How much more satisfying would the reward be? How much more radiant would the golden light become?

For now, the battlefield had quieted. The ogres had fallen back, protected by the Tower Master's shield, and the demons had retreated for the time being. But Phantom wasn't concerned with the immediate battle. His gaze was now set on the grander game—the ambitions yet unfulfilled, the stories yet to be told.

Meanwhile, Far away from the battlefield, Ikenga and Keles watched the scene unfold with silent interest. Ikenga wore a bright smile, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. Phantom was making remarkable progress, far more than Ikenga had anticipated. It was clear to him now that the use of power—true power—depended not on the strength of a curse but on how the individual wielded it. And Phantom was beginning to understand this.

Ikenga knew that Phantom didn't yet comprehend the full significance of the golden essence he had just absorbed. The cursed being likely saw it as little more than a curious energy, a fleeting reward for his involvement in the fallen ogre general's final moments. But Ikenga understood its deeper value. He considered stepping in, educating Phantom on what he had just gained, on how this golden essence differentiated him from other cursed beings. Yet he held back, deciding against it. It would be more intriguing to see what Phantom could achieve through discovery and instinct alone.

The Golden Essence, as Ikenga knew, was far more than a mere reward—it was a transformative force. It represented the purity of a fulfilled desire, an ambition brought to its natural, positive conclusion. For most cursed beings, the feeding process was primal and brutish. They devoured negative emotions—ambition steeped in greed, despair soaked in hopelessness—without truly understanding the cost. They consumed without thought, like beasts, and in doing so, they became trapped in the cycle of their own darkness. Their growth was chaotic, their power stained by the very emotions they absorbed.

But Phantom and his siblings were different. Phantom's golden essence wasn't born from basic ambition tainted by frustration or unfulfilled desire. No, it was something more refined, more complete. It was still ambition, yes, but ambition that had been guided, nurtured, and ultimately fulfilled in a positive, purposeful way. Ikenga mused on the analogy: it was like comparing an uncooked meal to a finely prepared dish. The raw ingredients of ambition were there, but it was through Phantom's actions—helping the Ogre General realize his goal, even in death—that the ambition had been "cooked," transformed into something nourishing, something far more potent than the raw hunger of negative emotions.

This distinction was crucial. The golden essence didn't just feed Phantom's power; it also refined him, elevating him beyond the mindless consumption of base emotions. It wasn't just about strength—it was about balance, about understanding the emotions he touched and shaping them into something greater. In this way, Phantom was not only absorbing ambition but also embodying a more profound connection to the very emotions that fueled his curse.

Ikenga's observation continued as he watched Phanthom survey the battlefield, perhaps unaware of the deeper shift happening within him. Most cursed creatures never realized the danger of constantly feeding on unchecked emotions. The more they consumed despair, rage, or greed in its raw form, the more those same emotions twisted and corroded their essence. It was a vicious cycle that ultimately led many cursed beings to spiral into madness, trapped by the very forces they sought to harness.

But the golden essence represented an escape from that fate—a way to channel emotions without becoming enslaved by them. It was as if Phanthom had been given the ability to cook with fire, rather than let the fire consume him. It was a higher form of sustenance, one that allowed for growth without the destructive side effects that plagued lesser cursed beings.

Ikenga's smile widened as he reflected on Phanthom's unwitting progress. There was a reason why most cursed beings saw their state of being as miserable—they were too preoccupied with feeding on negativity, unable to see the value in guiding emotions toward resolution and fulfillment. But here was Phanthom, unknowingly stepping into the realm of higher understanding.

Keles, who had been silently watching alongside Ikenga, finally spoke, her voice calm and thoughtful. "He doesn't realize it, does he?"

Ikenga chuckled softly. "No, not yet. But that's the beauty of it. Let him discover it on his own. The golden essence will teach him more than any lesson I could give."

Keles nodded. "It's ironic. Cursed beings are supposed to be trapped in their emotions, yet here he is... breaking free without even knowing."

Ikenga's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Yes, the irony is delightful, isn't it? Power is a tool, but how it's used... that's what truly matters."

Meanwhile, back on the main world, it had been months since the gods informed the demigods about the looming crisis on the other world. Acting swiftly, the demigods gathered the rare materials required for their plan and sent them to Ember, the finest blacksmith and forger among the apeling clans.

For months, the sound of hammer meeting metal rang day and night across the territory of the Cured Apeling clan, where Ember worked tirelessly in his forge. The rhythmic clang of the hammer was often

followed by Ember's deep, booming laughter. This project—the one bestowed by the gods themselves—was the pinnacle of his career. It was rare for mortals to be trusted with divine tasks, and Ember took great pride in knowing that he was crafting something of immense importance.

What made the experience even more exhilarating was the flame he now worked with. The sun god Crepuscular had gifted Ember a sacred flame from his divine realm, one that burned hotter and purer than any Ember had ever encountered. With this flame, the forge became more than just a place of creation—it became a sacred space, a conduit between the mortal world and the divine.

So deeply was Ember engrossed in his craft that he lost track of time. He forgot that the annual apeling competition was approaching—an event that united all the apeling clans, both cursed and normal, to test their progress and showcase their skills. It was a time of great pride for his people, and as one of the leader of the Cursed Apeling clan, Ember's absence would be notable. But Ikem, a wise elder, understood the significance of Ember's work and didn't pressure him to participate this year.

While Ember worked tirelessly on the flaming mountain, the apeling capital was alive with excitement. The streets were filled with the buzz of anticipation, and every apeling, from the youngest to the oldest, had an extra bounce in their step. Preparations had taken a full week, and now the day of the competition had arrived. This year's event was promised to be unlike any other—there was a mystery, a grand surprise that had been hinted at by the king himself.

The massive colosseum, where the competition would be held, was packed with apelings from every corner of their lands. Yet, despite the enormous crowd, many seats remained mysteriously unoccupied, leaving the attendees to wonder what was to come. The air hummed with the energy of anticipation.

Suddenly, fireworks exploded in the sky, bathing the colosseum in bright, colorful light. All eyes were drawn to the center of the arena as a lone figure appeared. An apeling, dressed flamboyantly in a striking pink suit, stood at the heart of the colosseum, a broad smile on his face. In his hand, he held a device that resembled a microphone, something rarely seen among the apelings.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The apeling's voice boomed through the arena, amplified by the strange device in his hand. Instantly, the crowd fell silent, every apeling's attention fixed on him.

He paused for a moment, relishing the tension in the air. "Today's event is unlike anything you've ever witnessed before. Our king has promised you something grand, something you will remember for generations. And believe me, you will not be disappointed."

The crowd murmured in excitement, but the flamboyant apeling announcer raised his hand once more, signaling for silence. With a theatrical flourish, he pointed to the grand, empty throne at the highest point in the colosseum.

"Let us first welcome our king, our father, the lord of the Bleeding Trees, and the first son of our great god Ikenga—Ikem!!"

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At once, the entire colosseum, packed with apelings, dropped to one knee. The air buzzed with reverence as the imposing figure of Ikem stepped out. Dressed in resplendent royal attire, Ikem walked with regal grace, his hand holding a golden cup brimming with wine. A bright smile adorned his face as he took his seat upon the throne, surveying his people.

Once Ikem was seated, the flamboyant announcer spoke again, his voice dripping with playful mischief. "And following beside our great king, the one whose beauty makes even the most elegant harpies jealous—your majesty, the golden maiden, the burning guardian of flames, first daughter of the sun god, Ursula!"

At the mention of Ursula, the crowd raised their brows in shock before erupting into loud cheers. The entire colosseum seemed to grow warmer—not uncomfortably so, but with a soothing, welcoming heat. The air buzzed with excitement as the golden light descended.

Like a radiant angel, Ursula descended from the sky, her magnificent golden wings spread wide. The sunlight reflected off her feathers, casting shimmering patterns across the colosseum. Ikem stood, offering his hand to her as she landed gracefully beside him. With a soft smile, she took his hand, and a golden throne materialized next to his. Guiding her to her seat, Ikem returned to his own, their regal presence dominating the arena.

The crowd's excitement reached a fever pitch, but the flamboyant announcer, even the showman, placed a hand on his ear, as if listening for something. With a playful smirk, he whispered into the microphone, "It's time. Open the gates!"

Far from the colosseum, in a remote territory guarded by the apelings, stood an ancient gate—massive, dragon-built, and now guarded with the utmost vigilance. Apeling soldiers in shining armor stood at

attention, their eyes sharp and watchful. At the center of the gate, a single apeling mage, draped in ceremonial robes, approached. Placing his hand on the gate's surface, he began to channel mana into it.

The gate responded immediately, glowing brightly as it shifted and adjusted its position, pointing toward the sky. Moments later, a brilliant pillar of light shot upward, piercing the heavens before vanishing. The mage stepped back and nodded to his fellow guardians. "That's the first batch."

Back at the colosseum, after the awe-inspiring entrance of Ursula, who now sat chatting comfortably with Ikem, the flamboyant announcer turned back to the crowd. With an exaggerated gesture, he called for their attention.

"Apelings! All eyes to the sky!"

The crowd obeyed, turning their gaze upward just in time to witness something truly extraordinary. The very fabric of the sky above the colosseum began to tear apart, the atmosphere cracking and shimmering as if the heavens themselves were opening. In the blink of an eye, a wave of creatures emerged from the rift in the sky—the godling race of Ursula: the majestic harpies.

With their vast wings and striking forms, the harpies soared down toward the colosseum, filling the air with awe-inspiring grace. Their feathers shimmered with different vibrant hues, and as they descended, the apelings in the crowd erupted into cheers, their excitement now at its peak.

The apeling announcer raised his mic, his voice brimming with excitement as he addressed the roaring crowd. "This, my fellow apelings, is the Emperor's grand surprise! This year's competition will not only be among ourselves but will include all the godling races!" The atmosphere exploded with anticipation and shock. Some in the crowd cheered loudly, while others grumbled.

"Why weren't we told earlier? I would've worn my best outfit!" one shouted, prompting laughter from others.

All eyes turned to the sky as the harpies descended, their dark, feathered wings slicing through the air. Their faces had an ethereal, fierce beauty, with sharp features and hawk-like eyes that gleamed with joy and an absent look on their face. Their legs ended in powerful talons, which they folded elegantly beneath their feathered skirts as they landed. Each harpy bowed deeply to Ikenga and Ursula before moving to the seats that had been reserved for them. The crowd hushed, waiting for the next spectacle.

Back in the town square, the apeling received the signal for the second group. He placed his hands on the portal, which pulsed with energy before erupting in a pillar of blinding light. The crowd gasped in awe as the flamboyant announcer soared into the air, the wind carrying him effortlessly toward the sky.

"And now, my friends, prepare yourselves for a rare sight—the Mermen!" The announcer's voice boomed over the audience, making heads snap toward the stage. "A race so few have seen, yet boasting some of the most beautiful beings in existence. I would know—I've met them myself."

The apeling men whistled and shouted in eager anticipation, while the women rolled their eyes or elbowed their partners in annoyance.

A massive, swirling portal opened at the center of the coliseum floor. A torrent of water burst forth, filling the arena as a shimmering barrier rose to protect the audience from the deluge. The noise of rushing water was deafening as it swirled around, gradually filling the arena like a vast underwater world.

Emerging first from the waters were the sharkmen. Towering and imposing, their bodies were covered in thick, leathery skin, with powerful jaws and rows of razor-sharp teeth that glinted in the coliseum's light. Their muscular arms ended in clawed hands, and their eyes gleamed with a curious look as they surveyed the crowd.

Following them came the mermaids, their beauty utterly captivating. Their long, shimmering tails transformed into slender, scaled legs as they emerged from the water. Their skin was pale, and their flowing hair gleamed in various shades of blue and silver, cascading down their backs. As their bare feet touched the ground, delicate skirts made of pearlescent fabric wrapped around them, adding to their otherworldly charm. The crowd gasped at their appearance, especially the men, who were momentarily dumbstruck by their beauty.

Finally, the murlocs appeared—small, fish-like humanoids with gills on their necks, bulging eyes, and webbed limbs. They lacked the imposing presence of the sharkmen or the beauty of the mermaids, but their quirky appearance and gleeful energy earned them cheers and applause from the crowd. Each murloc carried a bubble of water around its head, allowing it to breathe on land.

The water in the coliseum began to drain, and the mermen gracefully stepped forward, their heads held high. Together, the mermen and murlocs bowed respectfully to Ikenga and Ursula.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer continued, "allow me to present the godling race of the Sea King, Tide, and her highness Flowua, though she will not be joining us today." The mermen were led to their seats, but one sharkman diverged from the group, making his way toward the throne. This was Drowz, Tide's first son. He exchanged nods with Ikenga and Ursula, his massive form looming over the others as he prepared to watch the competition.

"And now," the announcer said, his voice lowering mischievously, "our next group needs no introduction. You all know them well. Rumor has it our Princess Ripple may be entangled in a situationship with their prince!" The crowd erupted into laughter and teasing as the announcer gestured dramatically toward the sky.

The clear blue above darkened as stars twinkled into existence. From the heavens, a glittering rainbow path descended toward the coliseum, stretching out as though the stars themselves were opening the way. Out of the shimmering light emerged the werewolves.

Leading them was Wulv, the fierce son of Vinter King Maul. His eyes blazed with silent fury as he glared at the announcer, who was laughing along with Ikenga and Ursula. The werewolves that followed were clad in armor as dark as the night sky, their hulking forms decorated with patterns that resembled constellations. Their fur bristled beneath their heavy helmets, and their glowing eyes scanned the audience with suspicion.

The crowd's cheers became scattered and mocking. "Hey, find yourselves a set already!" one apeling called out. "I've seen armor cooler than yours!"

The werewolves, unfazed by the jabs, exchanged taunts of their own, but their discipline and stoic demeanor remained intact as they made their way to their seats.

As the werewolves made their way to their seats, the playful tension in the air intensified, but it was clear that this was more of an old, friendly rivalry than actual hostility.

One werewolf, a large brute with scruffy brown fur poking out from under his armor, gave a mock snarl as he passed the crowd. "Still running your mouths, huh? Careful, or we'll have to remind you which godling race howls the loudest around here!" His yellow eyes glinted with amusement.

An apeling in the front row, wearing a ridiculous feathered hat, grinned back as he recognized the fugure, crossing his arms. "Please, Korak, the only thing you'll be howling about is losing in the first round—again. I bet my grandma could take you down with one paw tied behind her back!"

Korak's ears twitched, and he let out a barking laugh, nudging the werewolf beside him. "Hear that, Mala? The apelings still think they can fight. Must be all that time swinging in trees, makes them forget what a real battle looks like."