

Guardian gods 371

Chapter 371:

Ikenga's gaze shifted to the demons. Their savagery was as brutal as it was efficient. Yet, what disturbed him most was their apparent disregard for their own lives. The lower-tier demons hurled themselves into the ratmen's traps and blades without hesitation, their bodies piling up but never retreating.

He turned his head slightly to look at Vaegur, who was tossing in a handful of herbs with a flourish. "Vaegur," Ikenga called, "why do they throw themselves to their deaths like that? It's not strategy; it's senseless."

Vaegur's crimson eyes glinted as he glanced up, a sinister grin spreading across his face. "Senseless? No, no, my dear god of nature. It's contempt."

Ikenga raised an eyebrow, urging the demon to continue.

"The lower demons hate their higher-ups," Vaegur explained, leaning casually against his cooking pot. "They only follow orders because they must. So when told to sacrifice themselves, they don't see it as death. They see it as a way to spite those who command them. Why obey perfectly when they can rot the land and make the higher-tier demons' jobs harder? Even though this rot is helpful for invasion but like my lord Zarvok, many demo lord would like their invaded world as pristine as they could as the benefit is much higher"

"But they die," Ikenga countered.

"They don't die," Vaegur corrected with a sly grin. "Not truly. Their souls return to the Abyss, to the River Styx, where they're reborn. It's a cycle, see? They're content to burn their bodies, knowing they'll live again. To truly kill one of us, you'd need to destroy our soul before it escapes. Otherwise, we're just borrowing time until we return."

Ikenga frowned, the weight of the revelation settling over him. "So... war with the Abyss isn't just a battle of flesh and steel. It's a war against an unending cycle."

"Precisely," Vaegur said, stirring his pot. "And a messy one at that. Best avoided if you value peace and sanity."

Ikenga's jaw tightened as he mulled over Vaegur's words. The demons were more dangerous than he had initially thought, not because of their strength or numbers, but because of their nature. Fighting an enemy that saw death as inconsequential was a nightmare scenario, one that could drag entire worlds into ruin.

"We should avoid war with the Abyss at all costs," Ikenga said finally, his voice firm.

Keles tilted her head, her crimson eyes gleaming with curiosity. "A rare moment of caution from you."

"I'm not reckless," Ikenga replied with a small smile. "Just pragmatic."

Keles smirked again but said nothing, her attention returning to the battlefield. Below, the war raged on, the endless tide of ratmen clashing against the abyssal demons in a grotesque ballet of blood and fire. Above it all, the gods watched, detached but not unaffected, their thoughts turning toward the precarious balance of the worlds they presided over.

As Vaegur served the first bowl of his concoction to Lavderh, Ikenga sat up, a strange resolve in his eyes. "Let's not forget, Keles," he said softly, "what happens here is not just a battle for survival. It's a lesson. One we must remember, for when the Abyss looks toward our world."

The current battlefield was under the command of Phanthom and Malzor. After Phanthom's orchestration of the ogre general's defeat and subsequent death, his interest in the war was rekindled.

With this newfound enthusiasm, Malzor, who had initially lost hope for advancement, also found renewed vigor. Together, he and Phanthom devised strategies that significantly shifted the tide of the war in their favor.

The goblins, having learned their lesson from the ogre general's downfall, refrained from sending anyone of significance to the battlefield. They were wary of the mysterious spell that had caused the ogre general and his troops to abandon formation and recklessly charge into the demon army.

Instead, Phanthom and Malzor observed a new force being deployed: the ratmen. Their appearance piqued Phanthom's interest, prompting him to employ similar tactics as before.

Capitalizing on the ratmen's desperation to prove themselves and seek change through success in the war, Phanthom manipulated their perception of the battlefield. Their vision became consumed with ambitious goals and expectations, much like what had happened with the ogre general's forces. This unsettled the goblin mages observing the battle, as the ratmen spiraled out of control, recklessly driving themselves to their deaths.

This chaotic frenzy turned the battle in the demons' favor. The vast number of ratmen casualties became a source of power for the demons. The souls of the dead ratmen were consumed by the demon soldiers, who viewed this as an opportunity to gain strength and advance in rank.

It was now a common sight to see demons fighting among themselves to claim the souls of fallen ratmen. The talent of the abyss demons became increasingly evident, as the more souls they devoured, the stronger they grew, further overwhelming the already disoriented ratmen forces.

However, Phanthom's interest in the war began to wane. The initial allure of exploiting the ratmen's ambitions no longer brought him satisfaction. As the war progressed, he noticed a significant change: the ratmen had lost their sense of purpose and drive, reduced to fighting solely for survival.

The ratmen began to realize that their aspirations might never be fulfilled. The army they faced was far beyond their ability to overcome, and it became painfully clear that the goblins cared little for their losses, driving them relentlessly to the front lines.

The technological advancements they relied on were no longer enough to match the demons' innate, otherworldly knowledge. This turning point began with the introduction of the mana energy disruptor bomb.

When the disruptor first appeared on the battlefield, it gave the ratmen a glimmer of hope. The sudden disruption of mana left the demons disoriented and unable to access their magical abilities.

Balrogs, accustomed to wielding flames in combat, found themselves unable to summon even a flicker of fire. Similarly, other abyssal demons struggled without their powers. Seizing this confusion, the ratmen launched a ferocious assault, managing to take down a significant number of demons that day.

Encouraged by their success, the ratmen attempted the same strategy the following day. However, this time, the demons were neither surprised nor incapacitated by their loss of magical abilities. Instead, they responded in a way that stunned the ratmen.

Deprived of magic, the demons discovered a new joy in unleashing their raw physical strength. They abandoned any sense of efficiency, taking a sadistic pleasure in the pain they inflicted. Rather than simply killing their enemies, they relished in the screams of ratmen whose limbs were torn off one by one.

The firearms and long-range weapons that had initially worked well after the energy disruption were rendered ineffective. The demons adapted quickly, taking ratmen hostages to shield themselves as they closed the distance.

Faced with this new tactic, the ratmen hesitated to fire, torn by the fear of harming their own. Observing this hesitation, the goblin mages began their own insidious manipulations from behind the scenes.

Phantom, watching the carnage unfold from above, was reminded of a fellow cursed being, The Despairing Virtuoso. He mused about how much the Virtuoso would delight in the overwhelming despair radiating from the ratmen as they, with tears streaming down their faces, were forced to shoot through their own comrades used as shields.

The demons, vile and unrelenting, were not discouraged by the diminishing effectiveness of their tactics. Instead, they noticed something peculiar: the souls of ratmen consumed after experiencing utter despair were far more flavorful and potent, granting greater power to their devourers.

Driven by this discovery, the demons devised increasingly cruel methods to inflict pain and suffering, ensuring that every ratman they killed added to their strength in the most agonizing and despair-filled way possible.

The despair of the ratmen grew palpable, a sickening aura that permeated the battlefield. The demons thrived on it, finding new joy in tormenting their enemies. Phantom watched with detached amusement as demons donned trophies made from ratmen—skin, skulls, and severed limbs—taunting their prey with grotesque displays.

It was a strategy born of malice, but it was undeniably effective. The despair-ridden souls of the ratmen, consumed by the demons, provided far greater sustenance and power than mere death alone.

Phantom turned to Malzor, who stood nearby, his crimson eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he directed units with sharp, precise gestures. "They've become predictable," Phantom remarked, his voice carrying a note of disdain.

Malzor raised an eyebrow. "Predictable? They've adapted far more than most mortals would under these conditions."

"Adaptation is only interesting when it leads somewhere," Phantom said, his tone flat. "The ratmen have lost their edge. Their hope is gone. They fight because they are forced to, not because they believe in victory."

Malzor considered this for a moment before nodding. "And yet, their despair feeds our soldiers. Perhaps predictability has its own uses."

"Perhaps," Phantom said to Malzor, a bit absentmindedly.

Malzor smirked. "You sound like you're already done with this war."

Chapter 372:

"I am," Phantom admitted, a flicker of frustration crossing his face. "Victory is assured. There's no longer a challenge, no art to it. Even their desperate gambits lack creativity. This is mere slaughter, and slaughter bores me."

Phantom turned away from the battlefield, his dark cloak billowing in the wind. "Malzor," he said, his tone carrying a hint of finality, "continue as you see fit. The ratmen are broken; there's no need for me here."

Malzor nodded, his gaze lingering on Phantom. "And where will you go?"

"To find something... stimulating," Phantom replied. "Perhaps a battlefield with a worthy opponent. Or a realm where the game is not so rigged in our favor."

As Phantom began to fade into the shadows, he glanced back at the field of despair one last time. The ratmen's cries, the demons' laughter, the endless cycle of pain and torment—it was a masterpiece of suffering. Yet to Phantom, it was nothing more than a canvas already filled.

Malzor watched him disappear, then turned his attention back to the battlefield. "A shame," he muttered to himself. "But predictable, coming from him."

With renewed vigor, Malzor continued to command the demons, ensuring that the ratmen's despair would remain an endless well of power for their forces.

Phantom appeared at the portal in the abyss that led to the other side of the world. He already knew his creator was nearby, waiting for him.

Still in his gargoyle form, Phantom stepped through the portal and emerged into a battlefield where the roars of demons clashed with the screeches of ratmen. The higher-tier demons in the vicinity bowed as he passed, acknowledging his presence.

With their forces gaining ground, Phantom now had the freedom to move as he pleased. His steps carried him into the chaos of the battlefield, a mayhem of bloodshed and destruction.

As he walked, sprays of blood from the carnage around him seemed to part and fall away, never touching him. Neither the demons nor the ratmen took notice of his presence; it was as though he was invisible, a ghost among the massacre.

Phantom suddenly halted when a faint yellow light caught his eye. It was dim but unmistakable—a ratman with the fire of hope burning inside him. Phantom observed the way the ratman fought, his curiosity piqued.

The ratman had managed to rally a capable team around him, their efforts keeping the demons at bay. Yet, his ruthlessness was evident; he showed no hesitation in using the deaths of his comrades to gain an advantage over his enemies.

Phantom noticed that the composition of the ratman's team constantly changed—comrades died, yet the leader remained steadfast, quickly replenishing his ranks. Phantom was intrigued by the ratman's cunning methods.

"Truly ruthless," Phantom thought. The ratman had a sharp eye, able to pinpoint when one of his fellows was on the brink of death. If the ratman deemed it useful, he would swoop in at the last moment, saving them and turning them into loyal teammates.

Phantom considered walking away. He knew that sooner or later, the ratman would meet his end. But then, a thought crossed his mind: What if?

His form shifted, transforming into that of a ratman. He began scavenging among the fallen, equipping himself with their steam-powered technology. He retrieved a steam pistol and watched as an imp demon prepared to lunge at his new favorite ratman.

Without hesitation, Phantom aimed and fired. The shot was precise, piercing through the imp's eye and dropping it instantly.

Phantom's precise shot startled the group. The imp demon, mid-leap, let out a shrill screech before collapsing lifelessly at the feet of the yellow-lit ratman. For a brief moment, the battlefield chaos seemed to fade as the ratman's sharp eyes locked onto Phantom, now disguised as one of their own.

The ratman leader nodded in acknowledgment, perhaps mistaking Phantom for a rare ally with excellent marksmanship. Without hesitation, the leader waved him over, his team temporarily regrouping behind the remnants of a shattered steam tank.

Phantom joined the ragged group, now just another ratman with soot-streaked fur and a steam pistol clutched in his clawed hands. The leader barked quick orders, his voice steady despite the cacophony of screams and clashes around them.

Phantom, ever the observer, quickly adjusted to the ratmen's tactics. A towering abyss demon barreled toward their position, its claws carving deep grooves into the earth. The leader shouted for cover, and the team scattered, steam-powered rifles hissing as they unleashed rounds of concentrated shrapnel.

Phantom, however, stood his ground. Calculating the demon's trajectory, he aimed the steam pistol at a weak point in the demon's armor-like hide—the joint of its knee. The shot hit true, and with a mechanical hiss, the steam-powered projectile embedded itself, causing the demon to stumble.

"Move in!" the leader yelled, and the ratmen swarmed the faltering demon. Phantom was among them, moving with precision and unnatural fluidity. He jammed a steam grenade into the demon's open wound and leapt back just as the device detonated, reducing the creature to a smoldering heap.

A towering abyss demon raised its clawed hand, channeling a sphere of dark energy. The air around it shimmered with malevolent force. As it hurled the orb into the fray, the blast consumed dozens of ratmen, leaving behind only scorched earth and the echo of screams.

The ratmen fought back with their steam-powered weapons, but their projectiles often disintegrated against magical shields or failed to penetrate the thick hides of their foes. Hope waned until a desperate shout rang out:

"Activate the disruptor!"

A ratman engineer hurriedly fumbled with a mana disruptor bomb, its cylindrical body hissing as it powered up. Phantom watched with feigned interest, his keen eyes noting how the device worked: it emitted a pulse of anti-magic energy, nullifying spells and disrupting demonic enchantments.

As the disruptor detonated, an invisible wave rippled through the battlefield. Demonic flames flickered out, and magical auras faded. The demons faltered, momentarily stripped of their overwhelming advantage.

"Now! Push forward!" the yellow-lit leader bellowed.

The ratmen surged, their steam-powered rifles and cannons roaring to life. Phantom, wielding a salvaged steam pistol, moved with the group. His shot found its mark—a hellhound mid-charge, its head snapping back as the bullet pierced its skull.

Another demon lunged forward, only to be intercepted by a team of ratmen with steam lances. Pressurized jets of boiling steam erupted from the weapons, scalding the demon's flesh and forcing it to retreat.

The demons, stripped of their magic, didn't retreat. Instead, they adapted with terrifying ruthlessness.

A balrog, unable to summon its signature flames, roared in frustration and charged forward with brute strength. It crushed a ratman beneath its massive claw, then hurled another into the air, impaling him on jagged debris.

Phanthom watched as a group of imps, using their agility, swarmed a ratman squad. Though unable to fly, they leapt from body to body, tearing flesh with claws and teeth. One imp grabbed a steam-powered grenade, pulling its pin and diving into a crowd of ratmen. The explosion sent blood and shrapnel flying.

Phanthom moved with the ratmen, ensuring his disguise remained intact. When another mana disruptor was activated, he seized the opportunity to push back a demon brute. Using a steam-powered lance, he drove the weapon into its abdomen, releasing a burst of scalding steam that left the creature writhing in agony.

The yellow-lit ratman leader seemed emboldened by Phanthom's precision. "You, with me!" he ordered, gesturing toward Phanthom. Together, they led an assault on a pack of abyss demons attempting to regroup.

As the demons fell, the ratmen's morale surged. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, they pushed the enemy back, reclaiming ground lost to despair. Phanthom, however, remained detached.

His gaze often drifted to the leader, still illuminated by the faint yellow glow of hope. The ratman's ruthlessness fascinated him—how he balanced survival with leadership, how he used the lives around him as both shield and weapon.

But Phanthom wasn't here to inspire victory. He sought to understand. What drove these creatures to cling to hope in the face of such overwhelming odds?

The tide shifted again when the demons regained their magical abilities. A hellhound, now wreathed in flames, burst through the ratman ranks, igniting dozens with a single swipe.

Phantom, noting the demons' renewed strength, observed the ratmen's mounting despair. Their steam technology, impressive as it was, couldn't withstand the full force of the demons' magic. The disruptors were too few, their effects too temporary.

The yellow-lit ratman hesitated, his fire of hope dimming. Phantom, ever the opportunist, stepped forward. He fired his pistol into a demon's eye, then turned to the leader. "Don't falter now! Push them back!"

The leader rallied, but Phantom knew it was a losing battle. He stayed close, fascinated by how hope flickered and faded in the face of inevitable defeat.

A loud horn suddenly echoed from the ratmen's side, signaling a retreat. Phantom, noticing that the ratman leader had survived, smiled faintly as his figure melded into the ranks of the retreating demons.

Chapter 373:

The ratman leader, also pulling back with his forces, abruptly stopped. He scanned the retreating crowd, searching for Phantom, though there was no trace of him. Determined, the leader occasionally grabbed a fellow ratman, scrutinizing their features in his search.

Unaware of this, Phantom had already moved far from the battlefield. He now felt the full weight of the world pressing against him, no longer shielded by the corrupted lands' influence.

The oppressive sensation didn't last long. Not far from where he stood, Ikenga's carriage materialized. Phantom shifted back into his true form—his face a constantly shifting mosaic of features—as he stepped inside the carriage. Instantly, the crushing pressure dissipated.

Ikenga greeted him with a warm smile. Phantom, like a child caught in mischief, dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "I apologize, my lord. I let myself get carried away."

Ikenga stepped forward, placing a firm but gentle hand on Phantom's shoulder and lifting him to his feet. "No, my son, you did well. Your gift was given to you so you could learn and forge your own path. Watching how you chose to use it brings me joy."

One of the many faces flickering across Phantom's form briefly displayed surprise before disappearing. Phantom turned to bow toward Keles, who acknowledged him with a nod. Taking his seat as directed, Phantom waited attentively.

Ikenga studied him thoughtfully before asking, "Keles and I watched your actions with the ratmen. Tell me, was it worth it?"

Phantom sat in the carriage, his ever-shifting face momentarily settling into a blank, neutral expression as he considered Ikenga's question. The steady rhythm of the carriage wheels and the eerie, hushed calm within the protected space offered stark contrast to the chaos he'd just left behind.

He finally spoke, his voice carrying a tone of reflection and curiosity. "Worth it? That depends on what you mean, my lord. The ratman leader intrigued me. His fire burned brighter than most, even in the face of despair. I wanted to see how far he would go... how long that light could last before it was extinguished. In the end, he survived, but at what cost? His hope now walks a knife's edge."

Ikenga leaned back, his eyes keen and probing. "And you? Did you find satisfaction in watching their struggle? Or were you seeking something else entirely?"

Phantom hesitated. For a moment, one of the faces on his head shifted into an expression of unease, only to fade back into a calm mask. "I sought understanding, my lord. They are so fragile, yet they cling to their purpose with such fervor. I thought perhaps I could learn something from them... something about myself."

Keles, silent until now, leaned forward, her voice soft but edged with critique. "And did you, Phantom? Did their desperate attempts to survive teach you anything, or was it merely a fleeting amusement?"

Phantom's form shifted slightly, the faces on his body flickering in a kaleidoscope of emotions before settling once again. "Perhaps a bit of both," he admitted. "But their resilience was... admirable, in its way. Even knowing they stood against impossible odds, they fought. Even as despair consumed them,

they pressed on. It made me question whether their hope is truly a strength—or merely a distraction from inevitable ruin."

Ikenga chuckled, a deep, resonant sound that filled the space. "I have a question for you, son. When did the flames of ambition become hope to you? Or are they so similar that you've blurred the line?"

Phantom's expression shifted into one of confusion at Ikenga's words. It wasn't that he didn't understand the question, but rather that he couldn't answer when, exactly, he had begun to call it hope.

His talent allowed him to see ambition in most beings—the drive that pushed them to act as they did. If that was true, then surely the light he had seen in the ratmen was ambition.

"Ambition for what?" Phantom thought to himself. Their situation had been utterly hopeless without outside intervention. How could ambition spark in one of them?

Was the line between ambition and hope so easily blurred? Phantom found himself lost in deep confusion, unable to answer Ikenga's question.

Ikenga observed Phantom's silence with a knowing smile, his eyes glinting with an almost playful wisdom. "You see, my son," he began, pacing slowly within the carriage's dimly lit interior, "ambition and hope are not opposites, nor are they identical. They are threads from the same cloth, often tangled, sometimes indistinguishable. But there is a difference—a subtle one, yet profound."

Phantom's ever-shifting face flickered between expressions of frustration and curiosity, his voice uncertain. "Then tell me, my lord. How do I discern between them? What separates one from the other?"

Ikenga paused, his towering frame casting long shadows as he gestured with open hands. "Ambition seeks to achieve, to grasp what lies ahead, often for oneself. It is fueled by desire and a vision of what could be. Hope, however, clings to what is, fragile yet unyielding. It does not demand control but instead whispers, 'Perhaps... perhaps all is not lost.'"

Phantom mulled over the words, his form momentarily still as his thoughts churned. "Then the ratman... his fire was ambition, wasn't it? A drive to change his fate, to conquer the despair that surrounded him?"

Ikenga's smile widened, his voice gentle but firm. "Indeed, his was ambition. A fierce, desperate blaze that burned because he believed he could shape his destiny. But here's where the line blurs: to his companions, to those who followed his lead, his ambition became hope. It gave them purpose, even if fleeting, in the face of annihilation."

Phantom's face shifted again, a mask of realization forming for a brief moment before melting into a neutral expression. "So, the distinction is not in the flame itself, but in how it is perceived... by the one who carries it and by those who witness it."

Ikenga nodded. "Precisely. And it is a lesson worth remembering. For what you saw on the battlefield was not merely a struggle of flesh and steel, but of ideals—ambition feeding hope, hope fueling resilience. Even the demons you so disdain play this game, though their flames often burn with cruelty and self-interest."

Phantom's gaze dropped to his hands, which flickered with the faint glow of his own power. "Then what of me, my lord? Do I carry ambition, or do I offer hope?"

The carriage fell silent for a moment as Ikenga studied Phantom, his expression softening. "That, my son, is for you to decide. But know this: the one who understands the balance between ambition and hope wields a power few can rival. For in that balance lies the ability to inspire or destroy."

Keles, who had been quietly listening, finally spoke, her voice calm and deliberate. "And if you find that answer, Phantom, remember that it is not fixed. It will change, as all things do. What matters is that you remain vigilant, aware of the flame you carry and its impact on the world around you."

Phantom looked up, his face cycling through a mix of determination and gratitude. "I will, my lord. And you, Keles. Thank you."

Ikenga's eyes gleamed with knowing amusement as Phantom wrestled with his thoughts. He leaned forward, resting his chin on interlaced fingers. "You see, Phantom, ambition and hope are but two sides

of the same flame. One burns to achieve, the other to endure. Perhaps the real question isn't when you began to see hope—but why you couldn't see it before."

Phantom's faces flickered again, reflecting his turmoil. "Perhaps... I was too focused on outcomes," he murmured, almost to himself. "Ambition drives towards a goal, an end. But hope... hope seems to exist purely in the act of striving, regardless of the result."

Keles tilted her head, her sharp eyes piercing. "So, you've observed their resilience, their ability to cling to hope even when all logic dictates surrender. Yet here you sit, unable to comprehend the roots of their flame. Tell me, Phantom, is it understanding you lack—or is it something more fundamental? Have you ever had hope yourself?"

Her question struck deeper than Phantom expected. For all his ability to observe and mimic the emotions of others, he realized hope had always been a distant concept. Ambition, yes—that he understood. It was tangible, something he could grasp and dissect. But hope? Hope was an intangible force, elusive and maddening.

"I... do not know," Phantom admitted. "Hope feels like an abstraction, a refusal to accept what is inevitable. And yet, when I see it in others, it stirs something within me. Something... unsettling."

Ikenga chuckled again, his voice like rolling thunder. "Unsettling, is it? That's the weight of possibility, son. It's easier to dismiss hope as folly than to reckon with its power. The question remains, though: does witnessing their hope change you, or does it merely amuse you? If you claim to seek understanding, what are you prepared to sacrifice to gain it?"

Phantom's shifting faces froze for a moment as the weight of the question settled over him. "Sacrifice?" he echoed. "What could I sacrifice that would bring me closer to an answer?"

Chapter 374:

Keles leaned back, her gaze steady. "Perhaps it's not about what you can give, but what you're willing to face. Understanding hope means confronting the void—the fear of failure, the pain of striving for something you may never achieve. Are you willing to bear that?"

Silence fell over the carriage as Phantom processed her words. His faces began to flicker once more, a chaotic dance of contemplation.

Phantom looked up, his ever-shifting face briefly revealing curiosity. "If I may ask, what do you think of the ratmen and their struggle?"

Ikenga's smile deepened, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction at the question. "They are a reflection of all mortal things—fragile, determined, and full of contradictions. But their story is not yet finished, because you are about to play a major part in it."

Ikenga seemed intoxicated by his own power as he extended his hand to Keles. She accepted it, and together they danced across the carriage. "As I mentioned before, if the ratmen are left alone, their fate would not change. They will remain slaves and cannon fodder, expendable in wars."

"I may not know much about your siblings, the other cursed beings, but I know enough about you. You stand close—closer than ever—to touching a boundary even your predecessors, Osi and Boros, have not yet reached."

"Which is why you find yourself in a state of confusion, with so many questions," Ikenga continued, his voice a mixture of persuasion and certainty. "The path I have planned for you will answer those questions and dissolve your doubts, leading you to the divine throne. You will perform and orchestrate a grand design befitting your name—the Spotlight Phantom."

Phantom's shifting faces briefly revealed an expression of astonishment, followed by one of contemplation. "The divine throne..." he murmured, his voice barely audible over the rhythmic creaking of the carriage. His form seemed to ripple with uncertainty, the multitude of faces reflecting his inner conflict. "A design fitting for my name, yet I wonder—what will I become once I ascend? What will remain of me, the one who questions and observes?"

Ikenga and Keles continued their graceful, almost surreal dance, their movements harmonizing with the pulsing energy that emanated from the carriage itself. Ikenga's voice boomed with conviction, his power undeniable. "You will become what you were always meant to be: a master of the ephemeral, a conductor of ambition and despair, a beacon that draws all eyes to your spectacle. But you must first learn to embrace every aspect of yourself—your curiosity, your doubts, your cruelty, and your compassion. Only then will you be ready to claim the stage that awaits you."

Keles chimed in, her voice lilting and serene. "The divine throne is not a place for the faint of heart, Phantom. It is a crucible that will forge you into something greater—or shatter you entirely. Your

questions are not weaknesses; they are the seeds of your strength. Nurture them, and they will guide you."

Phantom tilted his head, his form briefly flickering as he absorbed their words. "And the ratmen? Will their story be merely another performance in my rise, or do they hold a greater purpose in this design?"

Ikenga's smile turned enigmatic, and he gestured toward the ever-shifting landscape beyond the carriage windows. "The ratmen are players in this grand symphony, their struggles a vital part of the composition. Whether they rise to greatness or fall to despair depends on how you choose to guide them—or exploit them. Remember, every performer on the stage has their role to play, but the conductor decides how the music flows."

Phantom's gaze lingered on the swirling abyss outside, his many faces settling into an expression of determination. "If I am to be a conductor, then I will ensure the symphony is one worth remembering. I will learn from their ambition and despair, shaping it into something... transcendent."

Ikenga clapped his hands, the booming sound reverberating through the carriage. "Spoken like one who is ready to begin their true journey."

With a snap of his fingers, something unexpected happened. Keles remained unfazed, as if she had anticipated it, but Vaegur and Phantom were visibly surprised. Before the carriage, a portal shimmered into existence, swirling with energy and opening the way to their destination: the city where the marked ratman resided.

"My lord, how?" Phantom asked, his many faces shifting in astonishment as he stared out of the carriage.

Ikenga sighed, rubbing his temples with a look of annoyance. "This is one of the perks of being a divine being," he muttered.

It had been only a few weeks since Ikenga first noticed the change. The weight of this world's pressure on him had lessened considerably, and the restrictions on his power had eased. He didn't have to search long to uncover the cause—it was as he had suspected.

The marked ratman.

The hand Ikenga had played in helping with the seal at the ratman's core had produced an unintended consequence. Occasionally, in his dreams, the ratman saw Ikenga, and through some twist of fate, the constructs of Osi and Boros had begun whispering Ikenga's name to him. This revelation led the ratman to become aware of Ikenga's existence—and, worse, to begin worshipping him.

Ikenga's initial reaction wasn't joy at gaining a new worshipper. Quite the opposite: he found it irritating beyond words. Were it not for the intricate plans he had for the ratman, he would have ended the creature's life without hesitation.

Ikenga had no idea how far he and Keles were from their original world, or even if they were in the same universe. Yet the fact that he was receiving faith energy without an altar nearby was unsettling.

It was during this time that Ikenga fully understood Nana's words about the differences between origin gods and ascended gods. Origin gods relied on altars to refine and harness faith energy, while ascended gods did not have that luxury.

If Ikenga were to describe the experience, it was like a never-ending whisper in his ear, persistent and grating. The whispering only ceased when the faith energy was refined, but that was impossible because the ratman had made it a routine to pray to Ikenga at every opportunity.

The ratman found solace in his prayers, but Ikenga cared nothing for that. He only wanted the whispers to stop.

Still, even amidst his irritation, Ikenga couldn't deny the benefits. The faith energy, though unrefined and invasive, provided him with insight and possibilities. He drew his own conclusions, weighing the costs and advantages of this unforeseen connection.

Zarvok seemed to anticipate this development, indicating that such occurrences were common for gods who found themselves in new worlds that resisted their presence.

In these situations, all that was needed was the devout worship of a living being native to the new world. This worship gradually allowed the world to accept the foreign god's presence. For Ikenga, the

marked ratman—his sole believer—served this purpose. As someone imbued with a trace of Ikenga's power, the ratman's faith created a tether strong enough for Ikenga to open portals, though not freely or without limitation.

Phantom's eyes widened as he stared at the swirling portal that had materialized in front of the carriage. The connection between Ikenga and the marked ratman became clearer to him. "So... his belief in you strengthened your connection to this world?" he asked, his tone a mix of awe and suspicion.

Ikenga sighed deeply, rubbing his temples. "Belief is a double-edged blade. While it grants me certain privileges—like bypassing this world's rejection of my presence—it also binds me to the incessant noise of his prayers. His constant faith... it's like having someone tap on your shoulder every second of the day."

Keles smirked knowingly. "And yet, here you are, wielding that annoyance like a tool to further your plans. A true divine pragmatist, my lord."

Phantom tilted his head, one of his faces showing curiosity. "If it's so irritating, why not sever the connection? Surely, you could crush his belief as easily as you fostered it."

Ikenga's gaze darkened, the faint glow of his divine aura flickering. "His belief in me plays another role in determining how long we remain in this world. The sealed core that holds his race back is weakening faster as his faith in me grows. What should have taken years will now take only months, perhaps less."

Keles stepped forward, gesturing toward the portal. "Shall we proceed? Or do you intend to linger here, complaining about whispers in your divine ear?"

Ikenga chuckled, his annoyance fading. "You're right. Enough chatter. We have work to do." He motioned for Phantom to step forward. "This journey will test you further. The marked ratman may be drawn to me, but it's you who will shape his path. Observe him. Guide him. Use him."

Phantom nodded, his form solidifying into a determined shape. "I will not fail, my lord. What lies ahead?"

Ikenga's expression turned contemplative as he gazed into the portal. "Keles and I will not accompany you. We're returning to the Abyss. In a few months, when the seal wears off, I will sever my connection to his core entirely. If I don't, I might kill him in my sleep and ruin everything."

Chapter 375:

Phantom nodded, and Ikenga laid a hand on his head. Phantom's eyes took on a faint purple glow as Ikenga's voice echoed with authority. "When the seal is broken, the mages will know. They will come for you. This is what you must do to avoid your death."

Ikenga removed his hand, and Phantom stared at him in surprise. "Is that even possible, my lord?"

Ikenga laughed, shaking his head. "You still don't know enough about yourself or your power—especially how you came to be."

Leaning slightly closer, Ikenga's tone turned sharp, laced with finality. "You are no longer an ordinary being, child. You are a curse. A higher-tier one. Act like it."

Phantom's faces flickered rapidly, shifting through a spectrum of emotions—confusion, realization, and then a flicker of pride. The glow in his eyes dimmed slightly as he lowered his head in acknowledgment. "I understand, my lord. I will act as befits my nature."

Ikenga's smile returned, sharp and satisfied. "Good. Remember, Phantom, you are not bound by mortal limitations. Your existence is shaped by their fears, ambitions, and sins, given form. Use that. Twist their perceptions. Bend their wills. If they hunt you, let them chase shadows and ghosts."

Phantom nodded once more, stepping into the portal as it closed behind him. He emerged in a dimly lit storage room, the air heavy and oppressive as he felt the world's pressure weigh upon him again, now that he was no longer in his lord's presence.

In the corner of the room, the marked ratman lay on a pile of hay, fast asleep. Phantom moved with deliberate quiet, each step calculated to avoid waking him. As he approached, he squatted down, placing a hand gently on the ratman's shoulder. The ratman stirred but did not wake.

Phantom's expression grew serious as he focused inward, searching for what Ikenga had spoken of. After a few moments, he found it—a small, faintly glowing flame deep within the ratman.

Trusting his lord's advice, Phantom willed himself closer to the flame. His body began to shift, turning incorporeal, drawn toward the faint light. Soon, his physical presence dissolved entirely, leaving the room empty.

Phantom found himself in a vast, dark space, an expanse of shadow and silence. The small yellow flame flickered gently, its light casting long shadows across the void. Phantom's ever-shifting face stared intently at the flame, his thoughts a whirlwind of purpose and curiosity.

Suddenly, a new source of light appeared, its glow far more intense and piercing than the small flame.

As the second light emerged, revealing the towering tree construct with the serpent coiled around it, Phantom felt a sense of purpose ripple through him. The tree's branches stretched infinitely into the void, and the serpent's eyes glowed with intelligence, watching Phantom with a steady, unblinking gaze.

Phantom approached the tree with reverence, his movements slow and deliberate. When he reached the roots, he knelt and placed his hand against the smooth bark. The tree pulsed faintly, a rhythm that resonated with the flickering flame. He closed his eyes, allowing his consciousness to sink deeper into this shared space, where the boundaries of self and other blurred.

The serpent shifted, its scales rustling like whispers in the dark. Its head lowered, coming close to Phantom acknowledging his presence before it continued with its work eating away the ever-growing roots of the tree.

The serpent shifted, its scales rustling like whispers in the dark, a sound that seemed to echo through the void. It lowered its head toward Phantom, its glowing eyes briefly acknowledging his presence. But it did not speak. Instead, it returned to its task, its sharp fangs biting into the ever-growing roots of the tree with a deliberate rhythm. Each bite sent faint ripples through the space, the tree's subtle glow dimming and flaring in response.

Phantom watched silently, his many faces calm, though his curiosity flickered for a moment. He could sense the serpent's ancient purpose in this realm—a force that thrived on dismantling what sought to grow unchecked. It was a methodical erosion laid out by his lord.

Back in the storage room, the ratman stirred slightly but did not wake. His breaths were slow and steady, his form relaxed in deep, untroubled sleep. He remained blissfully unaware of the profound changes unfolding within him. Unaware of the cursed being now residing in his soul. Unaware that this very curse was the thread connecting him to something far greater—and far more dangerous—than he could comprehend.

Phantom leaned back against the tree's roots, his form blending into the shadows. The flame at the center of this dark space flared slightly, a tiny surge of vitality that promised more to come. Phantom smiled faintly, resting his head against the roots as he prepared to wait for the inevitable moment when the ratman's fate would collide with the world beyond.

Back at the carriage, Ikenga still was in his mood. Keeles said nothing as she continued her dance with him.

She too feels what Ikenga was feeling at the moment but unlike Ikenga, she tends not to be so expressive about it but since Ikenga was so expressive and was willing to pull in her into it, she doesn't mind.

Keles observed Ikenga has been having a lot of mood swing lately, this started after the Ratman prayer, Worried she brought it up and after some conversation, it all downed to one thing "Reality of their situation"

The conversation opened Keles eyes to many things which was why she understood Ikenga's feeling. According to Ikenga, this world and things happening to it with their role on things happening.

All this cements the fact they really are gods, of course this was understood before as they were born gods but in their original world, with the rule and everything, staying away from the mortal world.

It made them seem like an observer, a god but not the type of god they were content with. They were too powerful in their world, ever present of things happening in every part of the world, nothing escapes their eyes if they will it.

Even the faith energy and prayer didn't mean that much to them as unlike other gods, they have not much need for faith energy. While Ikenga hated the ratman prayer to him, it showed him a new side of being a god.

He first hand experience what prayer of a worshipper was like, made him remember a game quote from his last world, from a worshipped god to one who never have been worshipped before "Can you imagine that type of love?"

The worshipped god sees faith as different type of love that can only be experienced by the worship of mortal. Keles twirled gracefully, her movements fluid and deliberate, as if weaving a thread through Ikenga's turbulent emotions. She could feel his frustration bleeding into her, his thoughts rippling like an unsteady current. Yet, she remained calm, her steady presence anchoring him even as she matched his steps in their silent dance.

"It must be exhausting," she said finally, breaking the quiet. Her voice was soft, yet it carried the weight of her understanding.

Ikenga looked up, his golden eyes flickering like embers. "What must be exhausting?"

"This... realization," she replied, her gaze steady. "To feel the kind of love you described, to truly comprehend it, and yet... to know it changes what it means to be what we are."

Ikenga exhaled sharply, his expression softening, though the turmoil in his eyes remained. "It's not just the love," he muttered, his voice tinged with an unfamiliar vulnerability. "It's what it demands. I was fine being a god who observed, who acted only when necessary. But this... this prayer, Keles, it was raw. It asked something of me I didn't know how to give. It showed me that being seen as a god—being felt as a god—isn't just a title or a function. It's... an exchange."

Keles tilted her head, her dark hair cascading over her shoulder as she regarded him thoughtfully. "An exchange of power?"

"An exchange of intimacy," Ikenga corrected. "The Ratman didn't just pray. He bared his soul, surrendered his hope, his trust, his fear—to me. And in that moment, I wasn't just a god. I was his answer. His salvation."

Her steps faltered briefly, the weight of his words settling on her like a tangible thing. She resumed her rhythm, though her movements were slower now, more reflective. "And that terrifies you."

Ikenga's laugh was short and bitter. "It doesn't terrify you?"

She hesitated, her expression pensive. "Perhaps it does. But I think it fascinates me more. We've always been so removed, Ikenga. Even here, we're careful, distant. But now we're in a world that demands something different of us. It's a place where gods don't just exist—they live through the eyes and faith of those who believe in them."

Ikenga clenched his fists, the memory of the Ratman's prayer still vivid in his mind. "It's dangerous, Keles. To let mortals have that kind of power over us. To need them in a way we never did before."

Chapter 376:

"And yet," Keles said, her tone gentle but firm, "you answered. You gave him what he sought. You didn't turn away."

Ikenga hooked her chin as he looked into her eyes "I did but i will be forsaking him soon as he unseals, I don't like the codependency i share with the mortal creature"

Ikenga hooked his chin as he looked into her eyes. "I did, but I will be forsaking him as soon as he unseals. I don't like the codependency I share with the mortal creature."

"Will our children share the same situation as ascended gods? Will their source of power and strength depend solely on the worship of their worshippers?" Keles asked Ikenga.

Ikenga sat back down on the bed. "That's a question we have to ask Nana, but it likely will not be the case."

Keles joined him, sitting beside him with her head on his shoulder. In front of them was the sight of the marked ratman. They now had to keep a constant eye on the ratman for any changes as they headed back to the abyss.

On the other side of the invaded world, the demon queen Vorenza was planning a significant move against the city. The opportunity for this attack arose from the stubbornness of the ratmen living beneath the city.

After the goblin mages successfully sealed the city and other underground passages, Vorenza realized her plan to use the hybrid would not succeed. Instead, she had to utilize her powerhouses to launch an offensive against the city to move past this obstacle.

The head mage, Gurnak, after sealing the city, made an offer to the ratmen. The same offer was extended to most major ratmen strongholds and places of residence.

With the empire's power, they could impose conditions on the ratmen, but they preferred to avoid this to prevent giving the gods an advantage. The goblins suspected that the gods were part of the invasion and believed that the gods would take advantage of their treatment to the ratmen and gain followers in turn power.

To counter this, the empire decided to show some grace to the ratmen to avoid pushing them further into the enemy's hands. Gurnak, after making the offer, did not receive the response he had hoped for.

Following orders, he gave the ratmen two weeks to consider their decision before responding. When the two weeks passed, Gurnak received their answer again and was indeed disappointed.

The ratmen made it clear they could handle the threat of the hybrid on their own. Not all ratmen agreed with this decision, which is why Gurnak received an insider's perspective on why they refused the empire's offer.

Their reason was valid and reasonable, but they underestimated their race's situation, according to the ratman insider. The official ratmen decided that if they could handle the hybrid threat alone, they could negotiate a better offer with the empire.

They knew that once they agreed to the empire's help, they would be turned into cannon fodder for the war against the demons with no say over their lives. Their confidence stemmed from the fact that the empire did not force war conscription on them.

To the council, this demonstrated to the ratmen that the goblins truly needed their service, increasing the chances of successful negotiations with the empire.

Gurnak, upon receiving this message, was furious at the ratmen's stubbornness and arrogance. However, he did not act against them. Instead, he reported back to his fellow mages and Vellok, who advised him to leave the ratmen alone but increase vigilance on the city. They could not allow the demons to progress further, especially after reports of demon advantages on Malzor's side.

After giving their answer to Gurnak, the ratmen spent the entire week in silence and fear—not from the hybrids, but from the empire. They expected retaliation from the empire for not accepting its help.

However, nothing happened, which boosted their confidence even more and further confirmed their belief that the goblins truly needed their service.

The entire underground network of the city buzzed with new vigor. For the first time in many years, the ratmen felt they had control over the direction of their race.

With renewed energy, the ratmen began actively seeking out the hybrids to find their hiding places. The hybrids became the ratmen's hope of fighting back.

The ratmen's new vigor meant nothing to the hybrids, who were biding their time and growing in numbers. From the mess pit where they were dropped, the whole area looked completely different from before.

Every area was covered with thick white spider webs, and large eggs could be seen scattered across the nest. The ratmen ensured that the hybrids were not lacking in food sources.

The hybrids dug tunnels, making them even larger. Normally, such a scene should be impossible for hybrids, but Vorenza had initially taken steps to counter this issue.

Vorenza's countermeasure was the now larger Ratman-Spider hybrid, whom she had made an alpha while retaining his intelligence to better serve her. This larger hybrid could now be seen hanging from the ceilings, his multiple eyes watching the different tunnels as hybrids emerged with piles of dead ratmen to serve as meals.

The area occupied by the alpha hybrid had once been a bustling ratman settlement, caught completely off guard by the hybrid attack. The ratmen were unable to mount a significant defense and were swiftly massacred. A few survivors managed to escape, spreading word of the hybrids' presence to other settlements.

The alpha, understanding the hybrids were still vastly outnumbered by the ratmen, devised a strategy. Under its command, the hybrids transformed the captured settlement into a fortified nest designed to maximize their advantage. The plan was to hold the area, using the resources gained from the attack to grow stronger and increase their numbers.

This methodical approach was part of a larger plan: to gradually attack and assimilate one settlement after another until the hybrids gained full control of the city's entire underground network.

Steam-powered contraptions whirred, crude machinery forged in the dim glow of fungal lamps. Ratmen engineers worked tirelessly, building weapons, scouting devices, and rudimentary exosuits powered by steam and coal. They believed that with these tools, they could confront the growing hybrid menace and reclaim dominance in their labyrinthine city.

Their plan was simple: locate the hybrids' lair, gather intelligence, and strike with overwhelming force. A team of the ratmen's best—a mix of scouts, engineers, and warriors clad in steam-powered armor—was sent to survey the conquered settlement. They did not realize they were walking into a nightmare.

The tunnels grew colder and more silent as the ratmen team ventured deeper into the conquered sector. The air became heavy with an acrid, metallic tang. The faint skittering of claws echoed in the distance, but when the team stopped to listen, the noise vanished as if the darkness itself was playing tricks on them.

The first sign of something amiss was the spider webs. Thin strands at first, clinging to the tunnel walls like strands of mist, but as the team progressed, they thickened. Soon the walls, floor, and ceiling were coated in a dense, sticky lattice of white webbing.

"Keep moving," grunted the leader, a grizzled ratman named Skrag, his steam-powered gauntlet hissing with pressure. "The hybrids need to know who runs these tunnels."

But the hybrids already knew.

From his perch on the cavern ceiling, the Alpha hybrid watched the intruders with cold, calculating eyes. His eight legs clung to the rock as effortlessly as a shadow, his massive, arachnid form blending into the web-covered darkness. Beneath him, hybrids scuttled through side passages, dragging fresh carcasses to the nest.

The Alpha had anticipated this. The ratmen were creatures of arrogance and pride, their newfound confidence making them blind to the dangers lurking in their home. Vorenza's influence had made him more than a predator; he was a tactician.

He gave the silent signal. The hunt began.

The ratmen team froze as the sound of chittering grew louder, coming from all directions. Shadows moved along the edges of their lamplight, too fast to be seen clearly.

"Form up!" Skrag barked, his gauntlet's flamethrower sputtering to life. The hiss of steam and the glow of fire momentarily illuminated the tunnel. Dozens of reflective eyes gleamed back at them.

The first hybrid struck with terrifying speed, a blur of legs and fangs tearing into the rearmost ratman. His scream was cut short as he was dragged into the darkness. The others opened fire, the tunnel filling with the cacophony of hissing steam rifles and screeching hybrids.

"Fall back! Regroup!" Skrag shouted, but the hybrids were everywhere. They came from above, from side tunnels, even bursting through the ground itself. The ratmen's steam-powered weapons proved ineffective against the hybrids' speed and numbers.

Those who survived the initial ambush fled, their retreat turning into a desperate, chaotic scramble through the tunnels. The hybrids pursued relentlessly, their chittering echoing through the labyrinth. Traps laid by the ratmen were turned against them as hybrids herded them into dead ends or ambushes.

Chapter 377:

The tunnels became a claustrophobic nightmare. The thick webbing caught at the ratmen's feet, slowing them down. Fungal lamps were snuffed out by hybrid scouts, plunging the tunnels into near-total darkness. The ratmen's heavy breathing and the relentless skittering of claws were the only sounds.

One by one, the ratmen fell.

The ratmen team regrouped in a narrow junction of the tunnels, their backs against the rough, web-coated walls. Steam hissed from their rifles as the whirring of gears echoed in the confined space. Skrag barked orders, his gauntlet's pilot flame illuminating the determined faces of his comrades.

"Hold this ground! Make them pay for every step!"

The hybrids came in a wave, their chattering claws and glistening fangs a nightmarish blur. The ratmen fired, the steam rifles releasing sharp bursts of superheated mist that seared through the air. The first wave of hybrids fell, their carapaces hissing and cracking under the scalding onslaught.

"Push them back!" shouted one of the engineers, cranking the lever of his shoulder-mounted steam cannon. A jet of boiling steam shot out, enveloping the tunnel in a thick, scalding cloud. Screeches of pain echoed as the hybrids retreated momentarily, their momentum slowed by the brutal defense.

But the hybrids were cunning. From the ceiling, one dropped silently onto a ratman who was reloading, its fangs sinking deep into his neck. He screamed, flailing as the creature dragged him upward into the darkness.

"Focus fire on the walls and ceiling!" Skrag roared.

Steam-powered exosuits hissed as ratmen shifted their aim, their rifles and flamethrowers spraying streams of heat and flame across the tunnel. The hybrids responded with ferocity, darting in and out of the steam cloud, using the terrain to their advantage.

One hybrid lunged at Skrag, its claws aimed for his chest. With a snarl, Skrag activated his gauntlet's flamethrower, engulfing the creature in a torrent of fire. It screeched, thrashing wildly before collapsing in a smoldering heap.

"Cover me!" shouted a scout carrying a bulky contraption—a makeshift steam bomb. He dashed forward, ducking under a hybrid's swipe, and slammed the device onto the tunnel floor. The bomb hissed and sputtered, releasing a pressurized blast of steam that filled the tunnel with scalding heat.

The explosion sent hybrids reeling, their exoskeletons blistering under the heat. For a moment, the ratmen cheered, believing they had turned the tide.

But then, another hybrid descended. This one was one of the first to descend to the underground.

The monstrous hybrid dropped from the ceiling, its massive form crashing down with a bone-rattling impact. Its many eyes glowed faintly in the dim light, and its mandibles clicked menacingly.

The ratmen opened fire, their weapons focusing on the hulking creature. Steam jets and flame licked its carapace, but the Alpha advanced, seemingly unfazed. With a swipe of its massive claw, it shattered one ratman's exosuit, sending him flying into the wall with a sickening crunch.

"Fall back!" Skrag ordered, his voice desperate.

The ratmen retreated, leaving behind their fallen comrades and broken machinery.

The few survivors staggered into an unfamiliar cavern, its walls pulsating with a sickly glow from the hybrids' nest. Cocooned ratmen corpses hung from the ceiling, and the ground was littered with eggs and carcasses.

At the center of it all was the Alpha, descending slowly from the ceiling on a thick strand of silk. His grotesque, arachnid form towered over the trembling ratmen, his multifaceted eyes gleaming with cruel intelligence.

"Welcome," he rasped, his voice a guttural, mocking echo. "Your service to the nest begins now."

The hybrids descended upon the remaining ratmen. Screams echoed through the tunnels, but they were soon drowned out by the sounds of feeding and the wet, tearing noises of construction as the hybrids expanded their nest.

Back in the bustling ratmen city, life continued as usual. The loss of the scouting team was noted but dismissed as mere bad luck. "More teams will be sent," they thought, "better equipped and more prepared."

But the hybrids were patient. There was no need for haste. With each skirmish, their numbers grew, and their nest expanded.

It wasn't until several teams failed to return that the ratmen began to notice something was truly amiss. The hybrids weren't as simple or mindless as they had initially assumed.

For more than two weeks, no team sent out to locate the hybrids had returned. No reports or insight into the enemy had been obtained. Even when a specialized group was dispatched to recover the bodies or retrieve the steam-powered technology left behind after the attacks, they found nothing—only the steadily spreading white spider webs that marked the hybrids' territory.

Meetings were held in hushed tones, with nervous glances exchanged among the council of engineers and warriors.

"They're not coming back," Skrag's second-in-command muttered during one such meeting, his voice low but firm. "None of them. We sent our best, and the tunnels swallowed them whole."

"But where are the bodies? The tech?" an engineer piped up, slamming his spanner on the table. "Hybrids are beasts! That's what the mages said. They don't have the brains to wipe out entire teams without leaving a trace!"

"Then these aren't just hybrids," Skrag's second-in-command growled, his eyes dark with dread. "They've adapted—or worse, something else is controlling them."

The room fell silent, the weight of his words sinking in. Finally, one ratman managed to muster the courage to speak. "Maybe we should contact the mages again. This has gone beyond what we can handle."

His suggestion was met with scornful gazes, but beneath the contempt was a flicker of caution. Others had likely entertained the same thought but were too afraid to voice it.

Chief, the ratmen leader, slammed his fist on the table, silencing the room. His sharp glare bore down on the one who had spoken.

"I want to make one thing clear to everyone here," Chief growled, his tone resolute. "We can't go crawling back to the mages. Calling them after rejecting their initial offer would ensure we're treated as less than slaves by the Empire. We already declined their help once. To ask again would strip away what little power we have left."

He leaned forward, his voice low and threatening. "Our only option is to deal with these hybrids ourselves. No in-between."

Looking directly at the ratman who had suggested contacting the mages, Chief added, "This will be the last I hear of such talk. Anyone sowing fear among us will face the consequences. Instead of dwelling on the impossible, we should be discussing how to eliminate the hybrids."

The council room fell into a heavy silence, the weight of Chief's words pressing down on everyone. The ratmen seated around the table avoided each other's gazes. The flickering light from the steam-powered lantern cast long, twitching shadows on the walls, amplifying the tense atmosphere. Chief's authority was absolute, though the growing fear in the room was palpable.

"Fine," the second-in-command muttered, breaking the silence. "But we can't keep sending teams to their deaths. We need a real strategy—a way to flush them out or hit them where it hurts."

Unbeknownst to the council, their meeting was being observed by Gurnak, the mage, through the eyes of an informant. Chief was absolutely correct—if the ratmen called for help now, the Empire's response would be far less lenient than their first offer.

But what troubled Gurnak wasn't just the hybrids' growing strength. His city now felt like a mine on the verge of collapse, and he could do little about it. He could divert his forces to confront the hybrids, but he knew that was exactly what the demon king—or queen—on the other side of the Abyss portal was waiting for.

If Gurnak divided his attention, a full-scale Abyss attack could overwhelm his city, making its fall all but certain. He had no idea how many high-tier demons the enemy commanded, and the Empire's high-tier personnel were already stretched thin, preoccupied with the strange attacks from another Abyss portal.

What made this particular demon king's assault so unnerving was its predictability. He attacked twice a week, leaving the battlefield eerily quiet in between. Yet, despite the apparent simplicity of this strategy, the mages remained deeply uneasy. They had even deployed most of their high-tier forces to monitor this portal, fearing the demon king's unknown plans.

Rumors circulated that the Empire was preparing to push through the Abyss portal to confront the demon king directly. Whatever he was planning, they feared it would cause catastrophic damage if left unchecked.

Gurnak rose from his seat and appeared in a secluded chamber within his tower. The room was a grim spectacle, strewn with the dissected bodies of ratmen, each meticulously cut for the purposes of deeper research.

His attention turned to a glowing green liquid, contained within a large, transparent tank.

The Empire had long studied the ratmen and their contributions to the war. While their technology showed promise, its overall impact on the battlefield had been underwhelming. Though there was interest in how ratman engineering might evolve, the Empire had grown impatient for results. They sought a decisive solution, one that could turn the tide of battle.

Chapter 378:

With the collective intellect of the mages, a plan was devised. The only challenge was how to implement this "solution" among the ratmen without causing dissent. Observing the current crisis with the hybrids, Gurnak saw an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: test the Empire's solution on the ratmen while simultaneously addressing the hybrid threat.

The Empire was no longer interested in nurturing a technological route; they needed a relentless, rampaging force capable of tearing through demon ranks.

Gurnak placed his green, clawed hand on the tank, initiating its draining process. Once the liquid was gone, he muttered a spell under his breath.

Deep underground, the ratmen noticed an unsettling phenomenon. A faint green mist began to seep into their cavernous city, subtle at first but gradually growing in density and spreading throughout the tunnels.

The mist lingered for two days before dissipating, leaving the ratmen uneasy. Whispers of hybrid involvement spread like wildfire, but the true origins of the mist were known only to the goblin mages, who watched the events unfold with bated breath.

This experiment, if successful, would pave the way for large-scale deployment of the solution on the Empire's ratmen forces, bolstering their effectiveness in battle.

However, the goblin mages had overlooked one critical factor: the hybrids. This oversight was not entirely their fault, as they had yet to capture or study a hybrid specimen to fully understand their biology and mechanics.

Unbeknownst to the mages, someone else was well aware of the unintended consequences.

In the shadowy halls of her castle, Demon Queen Vorenza's laughter echoed, startling her spider-demon underlings. It had been ages since their queen had laughed with such genuine delight.

She and the fifth-stage demon spider overseeing the hybrid breeding watched with glee as the situation unfolded. The initial hybrids had been born from demon spiders and ogres, but now, after they were thrown into the cavern, new hybrids were emerging—this time from ratmen and demon spiders.

This mist wasn't designed to unlock potential but to forcibly enhance the ratmen's physical attributes. The Empire, aware of the ratmen's naturally sealed mana cores, had devised a chemical solution that would saturate the air with mana. This was intended to bypass the limitations of their cores and forcefully trigger physical evolution, creating a stronger, more resilient force capable of direct confrontation with demons.

Vorenza was thrilled by the unexpected development. In her excitement, she issued a rare order: no attacks on the goblins today. Her forces would rest and prepare, eagerly awaiting the transformations to come.

Back in the ratmen council chambers, decisions were finally made. Before launching any further offensives, they agreed on one priority: understanding the enemy. Blind charges into the tunnels had cost them dearly; information and reconnaissance were now paramount.

Thanks to the Empire's influence, the ratmen were no longer shackled to hiding their talent on steam technology. With renewed determination, they began experimenting with new devices and strategies. A team was assembled, not to fight the hybrids, but to observe, gather intel, and return with answers.

The ratman reconnaissance team, although inexperienced in warfare against the demons or the Empire, relied on their ingenuity and resourcefulness. Their equipment was a patchwork of steampunk creations—compact steam-powered gadgets, clockwork mechanisms, and crude but effective tools designed to aid their mission.

The team consisted of Krelth, a cautious and sharp-witted leader; Skirrek, a scout with an uncanny ability to move unseen; Vrix, the group's tinker, who carried an assortment of gadgets designed to analyze and record; and Lokar, a miner-turned-soldier with a knack for improvising in dangerous situations. While none of them had faced enemies as fearsome as the hybrids, they understood their tunnels better than anyone.

The team set out from the council chambers, equipped with steam-powered lanterns, spring-loaded crossbows, and small devices crafted by Vrix to detect vibrations and gather samples.

Krelth addressed the team as they prepared to leave. "We don't need to fight. We need to think. Stay hidden, observe, and learn. If we're caught, we don't stand a chance."

The tunnels grew darker and more oppressive as they ventured deeper into contested territory. The air was thick with the faint metallic tang left by the green mist. Along the way, Lokar examined claw marks and strange web-like structures, muttering, "These things have been here longer than we thought."

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After hours of careful exploration, they reached a cavern lit by a faint bioluminescent glow emanating from strange fungal growths. The scene before them was unlike anything they had ever imagined. The hybrids moved with an eerie precision, their bodies grotesque blends of ratmen and spider-like features. They were larger, faster, and stronger than anything the team had seen before.

Skirrek crouched low, his sharp eyes scanning the area. "There's a structure deeper in. Looks like... webs? They're using it like a nest."

Vrix adjusted his goggles, which had a series of magnifying lenses that clicked into place. He began sketching the hybrids' movements on a pad. "They're too organized," he said, his voice trembling. "Almost like they're following orders."

Lokar scanned the area for weak points, muttering to himself. "Whatever made these things, it's turning them into killers. If they come for us, we'll need more than gadgets to survive."

As the team observed, they noticed small hybrid ratlings emerging from a tangled mass of webs deeper in the cavern. These juvenile hybrids were grotesque, their transformations incomplete, but they were already adapting to their environment.

Krelth whispered, "That's what they're doing to our kind. Those poor souls never had a chance."

The team's observations were interrupted when a hybrid screeched nearby. The sound was ear-piercing, echoing through the tunnels. One of Vrix's vibration detectors began clicking furiously, signaling approaching movement.

"We've been spotted," Krelth hissed. "Skirrek, lead them off. Lokar, prepare a distraction. Vrix, grab what you can and follow me."

Skirrek darted into the shadows, tossing a spring-loaded flare that hissed and sparked. The hybrid charged after him, its many legs skittering across the rocky floor. Lokar pulled out a small explosive device he had rigged—a crude combination of gunpowder and shrapnel encased in a copper shell—and hurled it into the tunnel behind them. The resulting blast collapsed part of the passage, buying them time to escape.

When the team returned to the council chambers, they brought vital information. Vrix displayed the air samples and sketches.

Skirrek recounted the hybrids' alarming speed and coordination. Lokar described the terrain and possible ways to collapse tunnels to slow their advance.

The council getting all this report understood one thing "The hybrids need to be handled outside their marked turf, they need to draw out the hybrids in groups to take care of them. Right now they have the advantage of number, if the tactics works they might draw out the one controlling them"

"The problem now is the mist," Chief said as he held the device that contained the mist.

"Changes have been seen in a lot of our people, strength never seen before, speed and agility that catches up to the our previous performance with the help of our tech"

"It clearly is now obvious that the mist has nothing to do with the hybrids, leaving us with only one option "The mages"

Everyone hearing that tensed up "is this their retaliation against us after declining their offer" One ratman said.

Skrag, second in command shook his head "How can this be a retaliation, our people are evolving and getting stronger. It should be seen more as a gift"

Chief eyed Skrag second in command "It can really be considered a gift when the side effect has been shown clearly"

"Our people because of years of suppression always have a mellow and weaker mentality but that helped us in our path to technology, whatever the mist did it came with a great price"

"Those changed by it are easily irritable and confrontational, a behavior rare for us. Ratmen now have the strength to lift a boulder with ease, many now see no use in using the tools that have helped them before"

The council chamber fell into a heavy silence as the weight of the chief's words sank in. The ratmen, a race known for their ingenuity and reliance on technology, were now experiencing a shift that threatened the very foundation of their society.

Skrag's second-in-command stood firm, his voice cutting through the quiet. "Chief, with respect, perhaps this is the evolution we've been waiting for. For too long, we've been dismissed, overshadowed by others in the world above. If the mist gives us the strength to rise, then maybe it's time we embrace this change."

Chapter 379:

But the chief's sharp glare silenced him.

"Strength without wisdom is a path to ruin. What you call evolution may well be a calculated curse."

The chief continued "We no longer are the only one in these underground cavern, they hybrids are at our border slowly picking us apart one by one. We can observe the mist changes on ourselves but can't do the same for the hybrids"

"What made you all think that we are the only one possibly affected by the mist, what if the hybrids are too? What if this was the mages goal? They don't want the hybrids getting out of this caverns and we have gotten on their bad side, what if this mist was for both parties involved to clash with each other, no matter who wins the mages can easily take care of the rest achieving their goal"

The council chamber grew even more tense as the chief's words echoed through the room. His grim analysis left a heavy silence in its wake, each ratman present grappling with the implications.

Skrag's second-in-command shifted uneasily but didn't back down.

"You assume too much, Chief. The hybrids may be affected by the mist, but there's no proof this is the mages' doing. If it were, why wouldn't they have approached us with terms or demands?"

"Because they don't need to," the chief retorted, his voice firm. "Their silence is the strategy. We declined their offer, so they've set the board to force a collision. Whether it's us or the hybrids, the victor will be weakened, making it easier for the mages to assert control."

A younger council member, nervous but determined, spoke up.

"What if we're wrong? What if the mist isn't from the mages? What if it's something natural to the caverns, a phenomenon we've only now uncovered?"

The elder councilor shook her head. "Too coincidental. The mist appeared after tensions with the mages escalated. It's targeted, deliberate."

"Enough!" the chief barked, his patience waning. "What matters is not the 'what ifs.' What matters is action."

He gestured to the mist-containing device on the table. "This mist has already begun changing our people. We can't afford to wait and see how far it spreads. If the hybrids are affected, we need answers now before we face an enemy as enhanced as we are—or worse."

After making their decision, the ratmen began implementing their tactics while simultaneously keeping a close watch on the changes occurring among themselves.

The hybrids soon noticed the impact of the ratmen's strategies, as they were heavily outnumbered and the ratmen took full advantage of this. However, the ratmen themselves failed to notice just how much they had changed in such a short time. The tactics they employed now felt so routine and natural, whereas their past selves would have been appalled by such methods.

One such tactic involved tying up a group of ratmen and sending them into the tunnels to lure the hybrids out. Once the hybrids were drawn in, the waiting ratmen would seal off the hybrids' escape routes using explosive traps before swarming and overwhelming them.

This approach didn't come without losses, but overall, the hybrids suffered more due to their limited numbers. Meanwhile, the ratman society began undergoing changes of its own.

The effects of the mist's transformation were already apparent, but it came with an unexpected cost: an increased need for food. Before the mist's influence, a small piece of meat from a magical animal could sustain a ratman for days. However, the council leaders noticed their rations were depleting far more quickly than anticipated. As more ratmen underwent the transformation, their appetite grew exponentially.

The council soon proposed a solution: using the bodies of slain hybrids as food. For a time, this seemed to stabilize the situation, and many ratmen began to believe they could win the war against the hybrids.

But within a few weeks, the ratmen realized the grave mistake they had made by consuming hybrid meat. Hybrids were the creation of demonic influence, and it was widely known that eating the flesh of anything touched by a demon could lead to dire consequences unless one possessed extraordinary resistance or preparation.

With this realization came another alarming observation: the hybrids were also becoming stronger. Unlike the ratmen, who were undergoing primarily psychological changes, the hybrids appeared unaffected in any negative way. Their intelligence seemed to increase, their scales grew tougher, and the tactics that had once worked against them were now easily countered.

The ratmen's reliance on consuming hybrid flesh to sustain their enhanced physical capabilities had unforeseen consequences. At first, it seemed like a pragmatic solution to their escalating hunger. But as more ratmen partook, the changes within their society became more pronounced—and darker. The aggression already stoked by the mist's disappearance was now compounded by an insidious madness. Infighting among the ratmen increased, and even the council began to fracture under the strain.

The ratmen's technological ingenuity, once a beacon of their resilience, began to take on a darker, more grotesque nature. The consumption of hybrid flesh, laced with demonic energy, warped not only their bodies but also their minds. Ideas that once would have been deemed abhorrent or insane were now celebrated as brilliance.

Engineers and tinkerers, driven by desperation and the unrelenting hunger for a win, began incorporating hybrid flesh and bone into their machinery. The boundaries between organic and

mechanical blurred as they melded living tissue with cold metal. Their once-proud steam-powered inventions became abominations that hissed, growled, and pulsed with unnatural vitality.

The ratmen developed machines that ran not on coal or steam but on the pulsing hybrid organs fused into their cores. These engines emitted a sickly glow and a nauseating stench, their pistons throbbing in time with grotesque heartbeats. They powered everything from war machines to forges, but the cost was steep—the engines demanded constant feeding, often with fresh hybrid flesh or, in desperate times, ratmen themselves.

Meat-Tank Abominations: These crude vehicles were crafted from the flayed carcasses of hybrids, their hollowed-out bodies reinforced with metal plating and crude rivets. Spines and ribs jutted from their exteriors, and their wheels were often fused with hybrid claws for better traction. Some even retained remnants of hybrid nervous systems, their twitching forms enhancing their erratic, terrifying movement.

Living Turrets: Hybrid heads, severed yet somehow still alive, were mounted atop automated turrets. The ratmen discovered that the hybrids' demonic essence made their severed heads excellent sensors, detecting movement and heat with terrifying accuracy. These heads emitted guttural screams as they locked onto their targets, adding to the psychological torment of their victims.

The consumption of hybrid flesh and the embrace of these depraved technologies began to unravel the ratmen society. The council, fractured and paranoid, devolved into infighting as leaders accused one another of hoarding resources or sabotaging efforts. Engineers, once respected for their contributions, became feared as madmen, their workshops filled with nightmarish creations that seemed to writhe and breathe of their own accord.

Even ordinary ratmen were not spared. Those who worked too closely with the hybrid-fueled machines often succumbed to sickness or madness. Their skin grew pallid and thin, their eyes bloodshot and twitching. Some developed grotesque mutations—extra limbs, warped spines, or patches of scaly skin—transforming them into pitiable husks of their former selves. These unfortunates were often thrown into the flesh engines to keep the machines running, their screams echoing through the tunnels.

The ratmen's once-ingenious focus on survival had become an obsession with destruction, fueled by the corrupted remnants of the hybrids they fought. Their weapons grew deadlier, their methods crueler, and their disregard for their own kind more absolute. The line between enemy and ally blurred as ratmen turned on each other, their paranoia stoked by the demonic taint in the hybrid flesh.

Despite their advancements, the ratmen found themselves at a stalemate—or worse. The hybrids had adapted. Their scales grew harder, their strategies more cunning. The bio-bombs and flesh-engines that had once devastated them seemed less effective, as if the hybrids had developed an immunity to their own corrupted flesh.

The hybrids launched counterattacks deeper into ratmen territory, targeting the twisted machines and slaughtering the engineers who created them. They moved with unnerving precision, their once-animalistic savagery replaced by a cold, calculating intelligence. The ratmen, now as fractured and corrupted as their creations, struggled to mount a coordinated defense.

The tunnels became a macabre battlefield. Steam hissed from the flesh-engines, mixing with the acrid stench of burnt hybrid meat. Bio-bombs detonated, coating walls in gore and filling the air with toxic mist. The hybrids, relentless and seemingly unkillable, tore through ranks of exosuiting ratmen, leaving trails of shattered metal and twisted corpses.

As the war dragged on, it became clear that the ratmen's greatest enemy was no longer the hybrids but themselves. Their reliance on hybrid flesh and corrupted technology had transformed them into something monstrous—parodies of their former selves.

In their pursuit of victory, the ratmen had lost everything: their unity, their identity, and their future.

The one more horrified by all this was Gurnak, at first he was filled with pride at the attention he got from releasing the mist into the ratmen home.

Chapter 380:

The mages, along with Gurnak, watched as the mist fulfilled its intended purpose. They paid little attention to the side effects, as these were a necessary consequence aligned with their ultimate goal. The more irritable the ratmen became, the easier they would be to control.

Satisfied with the mist's success, the mages turned their focus elsewhere, already plotting how to use it on other ratmen under their dominion. Gurnak, however, remained behind, observing the ratmen with growing unease. He noticed their newfound bravery as they launched reckless attacks against the hybrid.

Initially, he had been eager to see the end result of their experiments. Yet things took a dark and unexpected turn when the ratmen began feeding on the hybrid demon's corpse. Gurnak could have intervened early on, but he had underestimated the significance of their actions.

Now, as he observed their grotesque transformations, he realized the mist had sown seeds of corruption, and the hybrid flesh had nurtured those seeds into a monstrous reality. He had overlooked their desperation, hunger, and capacity for self-destruction.

The signs of their societal collapse were unmistakable. The ratmen, once skittish but resourceful, had devolved into reckless, cruel beings. Their twisted machines, powered by hybrid flesh, were horrific constructs—groaning, hissing abominations that seemed almost alive. Infighting, paranoia, and grotesque mutations were no longer mere setbacks but hallmarks of a crumbling order.

The more Gurnak observed, the more he doubted whether the mages still controlled the situation. The ratmen had ceased to be tools; they were becoming something far more dangerous. He had seen them graft hybrid flesh onto their bodies in crude attempts to mimic the hybrids' resilience. Their patchwork forms—sinew, scales, and fur grotesquely stitched together—were horrifying. He had witnessed their flesh-engines devour faltering ratmen, their screams drowned out by the rhythmic thudding of pulsating hybrid hearts powering the machines.

Gurnak knew he had to act. The underground had become a twisted pit of nightmares, and if he remained silent, things would spiral further out of control. Yet fear of repercussions weighed heavily on him. Among the empire's elite, he couldn't imagine anyone reacting favorably to the news he was about to relay. What should have been a success story, elevating his status as a Tower Master, now threatened to strip him of that title—or worse.

After pacing with his hands behind his back, Gurnak made a decision. Reluctantly, he called Vellok. The choice pained him; he disliked Vellok, a fellow Tower Master who always made him feel inadequate. Yet Gurnak had no other option.

The call connected, revealing Vellok's youthful face framed by clear glasses. On his desk, a map lay open, marked with several strategic locations.

Vellok's sharp gaze locked onto Gurnak. "What happened?" he asked, his tone serious.

Gurnak sighed and waved his hand, projecting a holographic view of the underground network in his city. Vellok immediately stood, enlarging the display and scrutinizing the chaotic scene.

"How did it come to this?" Vellok demanded.

"The mist succeeded in its purpose," Gurnak began. "The issue arose when the subjects came into contact with an unforeseen material—"

"The hybrid demon flesh," Vellok interjected, cutting him off. Gurnak's frown flickered briefly before he composed himself, knowing he was now in a precarious position.

To his surprise, Vellok didn't chastise him. Instead, he said, "This is valuable information. It's good we caught this early—this could have been catastrophic if these changes occurred on the battlefield."

Vellok straightened, his tone commanding. "I'll relay this to the Emperor. In the meantime, you must evacuate the citizens in your city quietly and efficiently. The situation has escalated beyond containment, and drastic measures are required."

Gurnak nodded, his heart sinking under the weight of his failure.

"You'll need to take control of this situation yourself," Vellok continued. "While your report was insightful, your negligence has let this spiral far beyond acceptable limits. As the designated War Officer for this invasion, it's your duty to defend your city. Losing it would mean losing everything—including your position."

The call ended, leaving Gurnak with a deep sense of dread. He had to act swiftly. The ratmen's grotesque frenzy posed a direct threat to the empire, and the consequences of failure were unimaginable.

Meanwhile, Vellok leaned back in his chair, spinning it slowly as he studied the hologram. His gaze drifted toward the direction of the empire.

"Is this the outcome you were expecting?" Vellok murmured, as though addressing someone unseen.

Back in the capital city of the empire, in a grand mansion that stood out amidst the bustling metropolis, a burly figure resembling an ogre sat on an ornate throne. Dressed in royal garb, he rested his chin on one hand as he stared at the kneeling goblin mage before him.

Such a sight would spark panic if revealed to the goblin empire. Goblin mages held unparalleled status, ranking even above the nobles, and their subservience was unheard of. Yet here one was, kneeling and presenting a projection of Gurnak's underground cavern, showcasing the current state of the ratmen.

The burly figure's expression darkened with disappointment. With a dismissive wave of his hand, he sent the mage away.

"Was I wrong in my choice?" His deep, booming voice filled the hall. However, he paused mid-thought, sensing an intense gaze upon him.

Turning his head, he frowned, his piercing eyes seeming to penetrate the walls of his mansion. His gaze fixed on the palace not far away, where he could feel the stoic, unyielding eyes of the cloaked king watching him. The burly figure scoffed and turned away, closing his eyes in resignation.

Meanwhile, in Gurnak's city, he struggled to devise a plan to evacuate the civilians without alerting the demon queen Vorenza, whose watchful eye never wavered.

Since Gurnak had unleashed the mist, Vorenza had not stopped smiling. Everything had unfolded in her favor.

The hybrids, initially a wild card she had introduced to sow chaos, were evolving into vital tools for securing her first victory in the invasion. Her smile never faltered, even as the ratmen began to push back and kill the hybrids. Though the mist's effects on the hybrids were weaker than on the ratmen, every encounter with the mist-afflicted ratmen further strengthened the hybrids.

The Alpha hybrid had adapted, sending smaller hybrids whose sole mission was to retrieve the corpses of mist-corrupted ratmen. Consumed by their victories, the ratmen paid little attention to the disappearance of their dead.

These corpses proved to be a boon for the hybrids, triggering profound changes and significantly bolstering their strength. But Vorenza's delight reached its peak when the ratmen began consuming the hybrid corpses.

Ordinarily, the hybrids' flesh should not have caused such drastic transformations in the ratmen; the hybrids, after all, were only partially creatures of the abyss. But Vorenza had intervened. In a single, devastating strike, she killed a fifth-stage demon spider that had birthed the hybrids. Using its essence, she cast a spell that heightened the hybrids' affinity with the abyss, allowing their flesh to corrupt far more effectively.

This was the horror Gurnak now witnessed. Near the city he presided over, an abyssal portal opened, and a tall, alluring woman stepped through. With a single stride, she traversed great distances, her feet landing on uncorrupted soil. A feral smile stretched across her face, her gleaming teeth bared. Though the pressure of the mortal realm weighed heavily on her, Vorenza noted a slight change—something had shifted in her favor.

She laughed, her voice ringing out with cruel delight as she gazed at the distant city. Licking her lips, her body dissolved into countless tiny spiders, scattering and reassembling in the abyss.

Vorenza had achieved what Ikenga, a divine being, had managed—but through her own demonic means. The more the ratmen interacted with hybrid flesh, the deeper they fell into her web.

Gradually, the ratmen began to glimpse her colossal figure in their minds. They worshipped her, carving crude images of her likeness onto their equipment. Soon, they created small statues in her honor.

Though Vorenza was a demon and had no need for their faith or prayers, she saw their burgeoning devotion as yet another step toward her ultimate goal. She cared little for their depravity—her sights were set on the throne of the Demon Lord, a position rivaling that of the Origin God.

To Vorenza, the deranged, corrupted ratmen were merely pawns in her grand design. Slowly but surely, they were becoming the very tools that would elevate her to that exalted position.

This brings us to Vorenza's latest move, as she prepared to initiate an attack. Whether it was the ratmen or hybrids, both groups had become her pawns—an army entirely under her control.

The ratmen, who had begun worshipping Vorenza, developed a new profession among their ranks: the priests. These individuals bore no true power or blessings from their deity but were driven by an unwavering, devout belief in her and their self-proclaimed ability to interpret her will.

The priests were a grotesque and bizarre sight. In their fanatical efforts to emulate their vision of Vorenza, they did not hesitate to alter their own bodies. Over time, a standardized appearance for priests emerged: their lower halves were replaced by mechanical spider legs, while their upper bodies retained a twisted semblance of their former selves. Each priest carried a staff adorned with the skull of a hybrid, eerily pulsating with a faint, unexplainable life.