

Guardian gods 381

Chapter 381:

On this particular day, nothing unusual seemed to be happening. The priests were gathered in worship before a statue of Vorenza, as they often did. They were accustomed to their goddess remaining silent. But today, Vorenza paid them heed.

In a brief, fleeting connection, Vorenza imparted a simple directive: the bustling city above. It was her desire.

The connection severed as abruptly as it began, leaving the priests in stunned disbelief. Their shock soon gave way to jubilation. For the first time, they had received a sign—an answer—from their goddess. Without delay, they rushed to inform the Chief.

The Chief was an anomaly within the current ratman society. A survivor of the mist's corruptive influence, he had gained its so-called gifts. He had also consumed the flesh of the hybrids, enduring their corrupting effects. Yet, unlike most others, he had fought tooth and claw against the violent and unethical impulses the corruption provoked within him.

This inner struggle set him apart, earning him a rare mixture of respect and fear from the council. His resilience in resisting the overwhelming temptations that others had long succumbed to was enough to solidify his position as leader.

Inside his office, the rhythmic thuds of fists against a hardened surface echoed through the air—a sound like a relentless drumbeat. It was his way of channeling his rage and suppressing the impulses threatening to consume him.

The door to his office burst open, and a group of priests clattered into the room, their mechanical legs clicking against the floor. Steam rose from the Chief's heated body as he glared at them, his imposing presence enough to make the intruders hesitate.

The leading priest recoiled slightly, but the clinking of his spider legs steadied him as he gathered his resolve.

"We have received a word from the goddess," the priest said, his voice trembling with excitement.

The Chief's skeptical gaze hardened further. He knew all too well of the priests' fervent relationship with their so-called goddess. He had little trust in their proclamations, often suspecting them of twisting their own desires into divine mandates.

"Out with it," the Chief growled, his voice low and dangerous. "What twisted purpose have you priests concocted this time, disguising it as the goddess's word?"

The priest, undeterred by the Chief's skepticism, raised his voice with fervor. "She has spoken! She has revealed the path to a new era—a world where we, the downtrodden and scorned, will rise and claim our rightful place!"

The Chief's eyes narrowed, his expression hardening. He knew all too well the dangerous allure of divine promises. He had seen how belief in such mandates could consume individuals, reducing them to little more than mindless zealots.

"And what is this divine purpose, pray tell?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The priest, either oblivious to or ignoring the mockery, pressed on. "She has shown us the city above—a land of abundance, power, and opportunity. A world that is ours for the taking!"

The hiss of steam from the mechanical gauntlet on the Chief's arm filled the air as he stepped closer to the priest. The priest, lost in his thoughts of conquest, barely registered the looming figure until it was too late.

With a swift motion, the Chief leaped forward, his hand clamping around the priest's throat and yanking him down to his level. The Chief's bloodshot eyes bore into the priest's, his voice a low growl filled with restrained fury.

"Have you forgotten the hybrids breathing down our necks in these tunnels?" he snarled. "Have you forgotten your so-called goddess's connection to those creatures? Or the empire above, with its goblin mages and ogre warriors?"

He tightened his grip slightly, his voice rising. "Are you so far gone that you can't comprehend any of this? That you can't see we're nothing but pawns in someone else's twisted game?"

The priest gasped for air, his wide eyes brimming with terror as he struggled against the Chief's iron grip. "We... we must follow her, Chief. She is our salvation!"

The Chief abruptly released him, letting the priest collapse to the ground in a heap. He stepped back, his breathing heavy and uneven as he tried to regain control over his anger.

"Salvation?" he spat. "From what? From ourselves? From the hybrids? From the empire above?"

He began pacing, the weight of his thoughts pressing down on him. "You think a few ratmen, no matter how devout, can conquer a city full of soldiers and magic? You think we stand a chance against the might of the empire?"

Sensing a flicker of doubt in the Chief's tone, the priest scrambled to his feet, emboldened. "We have the blessing of the goddess, Chief. She will guide us to victory!"

The Chief turned to face him, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. "The blessing of a goddess who has done nothing but watch us suffer? A goddess who has allowed us to be preyed upon by hybrids and goblins alike?"

His voice dropped, filled with scorn and fatigue. "Tell me, priest—how do you expect to win a war with nothing but faith and the broken bodies of your followers?"

The Chief turned to the priest, his piercing gaze burning with unyielding intensity. "We will not be pawns in someone else's game. We will forge our own destiny—one not dictated by some unseen force."

The priest faltered under the weight of the Chief's words, his fervor momentarily silenced. But as the Chief's resolve solidified, a flicker of something dangerous flashed in the priest's eyes—a glint of defiance, quickly concealed.

Behind his silence, the priest's thoughts churned. The Chief was an obstacle, a threat to their sacred mission and their devotion to the goddess. Something must be done about him, the priest thought, the seed of a dark resolve taking root. He cannot be allowed to stand in the way of her will.

The priest masked his anger with a deferential nod, bowing to the Chief before retreating. The other priests who had accompanied him cast cold, resentful glares at the Chief as they followed suit, their mechanical legs clicking rhythmically against the floor.

Once the door shut behind them, the Chief slammed it shut with force. His heavy breathing filled the room as he leaned his head against the door, only to slowly sink to the ground. A low groan escaped him, his expression twisting with a mix of pain and strange, twisted pleasure.

The impulses had returned. The fiery anger he had felt moments ago seemed to stoke the cravings lurking within him, sending waves of euphoric sensations through his body. Drenched in sweat, the Chief sat there until the storm of emotions subsided.

As clarity returned, his thoughts turned to the priests' ominous words. If the goddess truly spoke to those mad zealots, then we are all in greater danger than ever before. His stomach churned—not from hunger but from unease. He realized that their influence could threaten his authority. If the priests convinced the other ratmen of their divine message, his position and even his life could be at risk.

Pushing himself to his feet, the Chief moved to his desk, where a bowl of hybrid meat soup awaited him. He stared into the swirling broth, the faint scent of the corrupted flesh turning his thoughts darker. With a resigned sigh, he scooped a handful and began to eat. For now, he decided, he would wait. He needed to observe the priests' next moves carefully.

Meanwhile, in the dimly lit corridors outside, the priests huddled together, their whispered words tinged with venom.

"He's a fool," one hissed, his mechanical limbs clinking as he shifted in agitation. "Blind to the truth."

The first priest nodded, his eyes glinting with a fanatical fervor. "He will learn," he replied, his voice low and menacing. "Or he will be removed."

The group paused in the corridor, the flickering lights casting jagged shadows across their altered forms. The first priest leaned in, his voice a hushed but fervent command. "We must hasten our plans. We must rally the people and show them the true path. The Chief cannot be allowed to stand in the way."

The other priest nodded solemnly, his expression lined with concern. "But how? The Chief is not just a figurehead. He commands both respect and fear. The people won't turn against him easily."

The first priest's lips curled into a cold, unsettling smile that made his companion shiver. "We have a weapon—a divine weapon," he said, his voice dripping with conviction.

"The goddess."

He let the word hang in the air, the weight of it sinking in. "We will wield her name as our blade. We'll turn her voice into our rallying cry, paint the Chief as a heretic and a traitor. The people will follow us, not him."

One of the priests, who had been silent until now, shook his head. Unlike the others, he carried no staff. Instead, he held a carved book emblazoned with the intricate symbol of a spider.

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"That won't work," the book-holding priest said, his tone calm but firm. "Our past actions have already tarnished our reputation. The people trust us as little as the Chief does. If we are to undermine him, we need someone above reproach—someone respected, admired, and ambitious."

The first priest tilted his head, intrigued. "You have someone in mind?"

The book-holding priest fixed his gaze on him, his meaning clear without needing to say a word.

"Sknull," the first priest said slowly, his voice almost reverent. "Skag second-in-command."

The other priest nodded. "Sknull is perfect. He's ambitious, He wasted no time laying his claim once it was confirmed that Skag was dead, a hero to the people, and he doesn't hesitate to challenge the

Chief's authority. He's always been at odds with the Chief's leadership, and unlike the fear the people feel for the Chief, Sknull has earned their love."

The first priest waved the others away, signaling that only the book-holding priest should remain. As the others filed out, he turned his full attention to their new plan.

Sknull, the war hero, had a history of returning from battles with hybrid corpses in tow. On one occasion, he had even captured a hybrid alive, claiming he intended to keep it as a pet. His daring exploits and contributions to advancing the ratmen's technology had cemented his place in their hearts. His use of resources to aid engineers in experimenting with hybrids, even against the Chief's objections, had made him a symbol of progress and innovation.

The first priest smirked, the wheels of his plan turning. Sknull's hunger for power and his discontent with the Chief's rule made him the ideal candidate to tip the scales.

"We'll approach him carefully," the first priest said, his tone measured. "Sknull is ambitious, but he's also cunning. He won't trust us easily."

"But we'll offer him something irresistible," the book-holding priest replied, his voice filled with anticipation.

The first priest nodded, his chilling smile returning. "Yes, the Chief's position and Life. His authority will be our gift to Sknull—packaged neatly as a divine mandate. In exchange, Sknull will serve our goddess's purpose."

While the priests were talking, they seemed to forget that the walls had ears. Hidden in the shadows, a ratman watched them intently, his keen eyes fixed on their every movement as he listened to their conversation.

As soon as the priests departed, the hidden ratman carefully retreated, his movements slow and deliberate. Once he was far enough, he broke into a full sprint, racing to report what he had heard to his leader.

The cavernous chamber he entered was dimly lit by the eerie glow of bioluminescent fungi, their pale light casting flickering shadows on the twisted walls. At its center sat Sknull, a hulking figure of muscle and sinew, perched upon a throne fashioned from twisted metal and bones. His yellow eyes gleamed with a predatory intensity as he regarded the breathless messenger.

The ratman, panting and trembling with fear, knelt before him. "Sknull! You must hear this!" he stammered.

Sknull motioned for the ratman to approach, his voice low and commanding. "Speak, creature. What news do you bring?"

The ratman relayed the overheard conversation, his voice trembling as he spoke. "The priests... they claim to have contacted a goddess—a higher power. They say she has chosen us, destined us to rule."

Sknull's eyes gleamed as a flicker of greed kindled within him. A goddess? A higher power? He thought to himself, his mind racing with possibilities. He had tasted power before—true power—and he hungered for more. The thought of standing above all others, even the goblin mages who had long looked down on his kind, was intoxicating.

But alongside the greed, a flicker of anger flared within him. Did those fools truly believe I was so predictable? So easily manipulated?

A guttural laugh rumbled from Sknull's chest as he reached for a skull-shaped cup, crafted from the head of another ratman. Thick, purple liquid swirled inside. He downed it in one long gulp, savoring the taste as he prepared for the priests' inevitable visit.

It didn't take long for one of his servants to announce the arrival of the priests.

The two priests approached the throne cautiously. The first priest, his demeanor friendly, greeted him. "It's always a pleasure to see you, Sknull," he said, his voice smooth and disarming.

Sknull chuckled, his deep laugh echoing in the chamber. "Indeed. But knowing you, Priest, you never visit without an agenda."

The priest smiled faintly, accepting a skull-shaped cup handed to him by one of Sknull's servants. He downed the drink casually, locking eyes with Sknull. "No need for pretense, my friend. I know you have ears everywhere, so I'll get to the point. You've already heard why we're here."

Sknull's laugh was sharper this time, a sound laced with mockery. "Oh, I've heard. Whispers of divine purpose, a goddess's grand design. Tell me, Priest, what does this so-called goddess want from me?"

The first priest hesitated for only a moment before responding, his tone serious. "A higher power has chosen us, Sknull. She promises to elevate us beyond imagination—to make us rulers, conquerors."

Sknull leaned forward, his mechanical legs creaking ominously. "And what does she demand in return?"

"Devotion," the priest said carefully. "Obedience. A willingness to sacrifice."

Sknull threw his head back and laughed, the sound booming through the chamber. "Sacrifice? I've already sacrificed. My body—" he gestured to his mechanical limbs, partially fused with grotesque hybrid flesh—"was given to the machine. My mind embraced what we now call the 'dark practices.' And still, you ask for more?"

The priest pressed on, undeterred. "The goddess demands loyalty, Sknull. She promises you unimaginable power and glory in return."

Sknull's expression darkened, his yellow eyes narrowing. "And what of the Chief? Does he know of this divine plan of yours?"

The priest hesitated, but the answer was inevitable. "The Chief is a hindrance, a relic of the past. He must be removed."

At this, Sknull's lips curled into a predatory grin. "Removed?"

Before the priest could respond, Sknull stood, the full extent of his modified body revealed. His legs, grotesquely fused with hybrid flesh and mechanical parts, moved with an eerie fluidity. His hands, similarly altered, glinted with sharp, metallic claws.

The priests took an instinctive step back, but Sknull kept his gaze locked on them.

"You called my spies 'ears,' so let's go with that," Sknull said, his voice low and dangerous. "It didn't escape my notice that you visited the Chief first. Now, when he doesn't agree, you come to me. Tell me, Priest, if I'm so important to your goddess, why wasn't I the one she visited first?"

The first priest, sensing the danger, spoke cautiously. "Sknull, we... we believe you are destined for greatness. You are the only one who can truly understand and carry out the goddess's plan."

Sknull scoffed, taking a step closer to the priest. "Destiny? What nonsense. The only destiny I care for is one where I hold power in my hands and control over all I see."

He leaned forward, his mechanical hand flexing menacingly. "Now, Priest, let's talk about this goddess of yours. What can she offer me that I can't already take for myself?"

The priest, trembling with fear, stammered out a response, but Sknull wasn't listening. His mind was already at work, crafting a plan to elevate himself to the pinnacle of ratman society.

"You'll be useful to me, priest," Sknull said, his voice dripping with menace. "But remember, I'm the one pulling the strings here."

The priest nodded nervously, beads of sweat forming on his brow. Sknull took a step back, a cruel smile curling across his lips. "Now, as my first order—and the beginning of a new era for our people—you will spread the word that the goddess demands a change of leadership through combat."

He jabbed a clawed finger toward the priest, his voice thunderous. "It's up to you to convince our people that this decree comes directly from her divine will. Make them believe."

The priest's face turned ashen, but he nodded. "Yes, Sknull. It will be done."

Sknull's smirk widened, a twisted expression of triumph. "Good. Now, get out of my sight."

As the priest hurried out of the chamber, Sknull turned his gaze to the shadows, his eyes glinting with cold calculation. He had just taken the first decisive step toward absolute power. Soon, the ratmen would bow to his will, and the so-called goddess would become nothing more than a tool for his ambition.

The priest's mind raced as he left Sknull's chamber. The plan was clear: incite chaos, sow discord, and claim dominance. But convincing the ratmen to embrace this radical upheaval would require cunning and zeal.

Summoning his fellow priests, he spoke with fervor. "The goddess has spoken!" he proclaimed, his eyes alight with fanaticism. "She demands a test of strength—a battle to determine the true leader of our people!"

The other priests exchanged uneasy glances. A battle? Why would the goddess demand such a thing?

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"The goddess believes that only through combat can the strongest and most worthy emerge," the priest explained. "While the Chief has long been respected, perhaps he is not the one chosen by the divine."

Though hesitant, the priests were gradually swayed by his passionate conviction. The idea of a grand challenge, a test of strength and destiny, was intoxicating.

News of the impending battle spread like wildfire through the ratmen's tunnels. Their once-peaceful society, now fraying under the strain of ambition and deceit, was gripped by equal measures of fear and excitement. The Chief, alerted to the unrest, summoned the priest, his tone brimming with barely restrained fury.

"A divine test?" the Chief scoffed, his voice heavy with disdain. "What nonsense is this? It's nothing more than a blatant power grab."

The priest maintained his air of piety, his voice calm yet resolute. "The goddess has commanded it, Chief. We must honor her will."

Realizing the futility of arguing with a zealot, the Chief sighed. "Very well. Let the battle commence. But if this chaos leads to our ruin, you'll bear the blame."

As he stormed out, the Chief caught whispers of his people's excitement. Their voices buzzed with anticipation for the combat. A pang of sorrow filled his heart as he reflected on the state of their society.

"How far we've fallen," the Chief muttered to himself. "Perhaps we should have accepted the Empire's offer when we had the chance. This madness could have been avoided."

He shook his head, banishing the regret. "No use dwelling on the past. This battle could be the turning point I've been waiting for."

The Chief knew all too well how he was perceived by his people. If he could prove himself worthy in combat—against Sknull, the priests, and even the goddess herself—they would have no choice but to follow his lead. His victory would leave them no room for doubt.

With a grim resolve, the Chief prepared himself. He would become a living nightmare to his people, a reminder of their folly. If they truly had no fear left, he would give them reason to reconsider their deranged path.

Meanwhile, deep within the Abyss, Vorenza observed the unfolding drama with growing interest. Her gaze lingered on Sknull, a smirk playing on her lips. His type was always a favorite among demons like herself—those who believed they were in control, unaware of how deeply entangled they were in her web.

Vorenza chuckled, her voice a mix of amusement and malice. "Sknull believes himself the master, but he dances to my tune without even realizing it. How delicious."

She turned her thoughts to the priests. On one point, she and Sknull agreed: the ratmen needed convincing. But Vorenza knew exactly how to deliver it. Her laughter echoed through the Abyss, a sound of wicked glee.

"The hybrids," she mused, "are proving to be far more entertaining than I ever expected. Let's see how far they'll climb before they inevitably fall."

The day before the decisive battle, the ratman priests knelt in solemn reverence before a vague, crude statue of their goddess, Vorenza. Their whiskers trembled as they chanted fervent prayers, desperate to gain her favor. The dimly lit chamber was heavy with the scent of incense and damp earth, but no divine sign came.

As their voices faltered and hope wavered, the lead priest stood, his eyes narrowing in resolve. "Our devotion must be proven," he declared, motioning to the bound ratmen trembling in the shadows.

The captives, fellow ratmen, whimpered in terror, their eyes darting to the priests who now approached with ceremonial blades. The priests, their faces alight with fanatical determination, were unshaken. In one swift, practiced motion, the lead priest's blade cut clean through the first captive's neck. Blood splattered across the statue, pooling at its base, and the other priests followed suit with similar zeal.

The room grew silent, save for the steady drip of blood. Then, the statue began to glow faintly, an ominous light pulsating from its base. The air thickened, vibrating with an unholy energy. The priests froze as a whisper slithered into their minds, each word dripping with malice and dark amusement.

"The sacrifice is complete. The hybrids are yours to command," Vorenza's voice echoed, chilling yet intoxicating.

The lead priest's eyes widened in awe, but his reverie was abruptly broken by a strange sensation—a wet drop falling onto his face. He instinctively reached up, wiping away what felt like... drool?

Confused, the priest glanced up, only to stagger back in alarm. Clinging to the ceiling above them, a hybrid—a grotesque fusion of rat and demon—stared down with cold, unblinking eyes. Its sharp claws glinted in the flickering torchlight, and its elongated, sinewy body exuded a menacing power.

With a sudden, fluid motion, the hybrid dropped to the ground, landing silently before the priests. Its towering figure loomed over them for a moment before it began to shift. Its muscles shrank, and its body folded into a mockery of a bow, its head lowering in submission.

The lead priest swallowed hard, his fear warring with exhilaration. "What... what are you?" he asked, voice trembling yet filled with dark curiosity.

The hybrid's voice, a low and hollow rasp, answered, "I am yours to command, priest. The goddess has spoken."

A stunned silence gripped the chamber as the priests exchanged glances, their disbelief quickly replaced by an intoxicating sense of power. The lead priest stepped forward, his expression hardening into one of resolute authority.

"The goddess has blessed us," he proclaimed, his voice rising with fervor. "She has delivered unto us a weapon—proof of her dominion and favor! With this hybrid, none can stand against us. Let the world know the goddess's will!"

The other priests nodded, their mechanical limbs clicking softly as they moved. A sudden, collective understanding washed over them, an unseen force guiding their thoughts. They turned as one toward the tunnels leading deeper into their lair. The lead priest, sensing this shared purpose, gave a sharp nod of approval.

"Go," he commanded. "Claim the gifts the goddess has left for us. Bring her favor to the battlefield."

Without hesitation, the priests, now filled with unshakable zeal, sprinted into the tunnels. Their mechanical legs clicked and whirred as they descended into the depths, eager to seize the power Vorenza had promised.

Behind them, the hybrid remained, a silent sentinel radiating lethal potential. The chamber echoed with the fading sounds of the priests' departure, leaving only the flickering torchlight and the faint, malevolent glow of Vorenza's statue.

The day of the battle arrived. In a slightly vast clearing underground, the ratmen gathered in silent anticipation. Thousands of glowing eyes dotted the crowd, their gazes filled with eager tension. There were no cheers, no screams of encouragement—only the low hum of murmurs rippling through the horde like an ominous tide.

They waited. The clearing felt alive with their restlessness, their whispers silencing each time a shadow moved. All eyes were fixed on the center, where the two figures who would decide their fate were about to face off.

The first to appear was the Chief. He stepped into view, his mechanical armor hissing with steam as he moved. His face was set in stoic determination, but the reaction from the crowd was far from welcoming. Scornful glares and muted sneers greeted him, their disdain evident.

The Chief's armor, though reliable and time-tested, symbolized a past the ratmen had long abandoned. The old steampunk design of gears, pistons, and valves was a glaring contrast to the grotesque fusion of hybrid flesh and corrupted technology that the ratmen now revered. The sleek, biomechanical implants of the new era gleamed menacingly in the faint light, a testament to their superiority over the Chief's outdated ideals.

He bore the weight of their judgment silently, the hiss and click of his gauntlet punctuating the stillness as he moved to his position in the center of the clearing. The Chief stood tall, scanning the crowd, his gaze hardening with resolve as he waited.

Then, a hush fell over the clearing, heavier than before. A collective shudder rippled through the ratmen as a figure emerged from the opposite side.

Sknul.

The abomination's appearance drew audible gasps from the crowd. Ratmen scrambled back, tripping over one another in terror as their murmurs turned to panicked cries. Claws pointed, trembling, at the monstrous figure advancing toward the Chief.

The Chief's usually unshakable expression faltered. His eyes narrowed, his lips pressing into a thin line as he instinctively took a step back. This was no longer the Sknul he had faced before. The figure before him was something wholly unnatural.

The rumors had spoken of Sknul dragging a live hybrid back to the colony weeks ago, boasting that he would tame it, turn it into a servant. Whispers in the tunnels claimed the experiment had failed—but the sight before them told another story entirely.

"How far have you gone, Sknul?" the Chief muttered, his voice lost beneath the murmurs of the crowd. His gauntleted hand tightened into a fist, steam hissing from its joints as he braced himself.

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Sknull's new form was a grotesque fusion of flesh and machine. His frame had swollen grotesquely, his height now rivaling the hybrids themselves. Jagged mechanical limbs jutted from his body at unnatural angles, clicking and twitching with every step. His rodent features were still clear, his muzzle partially replaced with chitinous plating, his glowing, hybrid-like eyes burning with a purple light.

Chitin and fur melded seamlessly with steel and wires, forming an abominable armor of living and artificial material. His limbs were reinforced with spindly, jointed appendages, spider-like in their articulation, each step accompanied by a sickening metallic scrape.

The crowd recoiled as Sknull entered the clearing's center. The faint, unholy light emanating from his fused form cast long, jagged shadows that seemed to stretch hungrily toward the ratmen.

The Chief's gaze never wavered, though his breathing quickened. He had seen monstrosities before—he had fought hybrids—but Sknull was something else entirely. This was not just a weapon. This was the embodiment of the new path the ratmen had chosen: one of corruption, chaos, and unrestrained ambition.

As the crowd's fearful murmurs swelled around him, the Chief straightened his stance. Steam hissed from his gauntlet, and the faint click of gears filled the air as his old steampunk armor hummed to life. His voice cut through the chaos, steady and unyielding.

"You've lost yourself, Sknull," he said, loud enough for the crowd to hear. "But I'll show you that the old ways still have strength."

As Sknull entered the circle, a grotesque mechanical abdomen extended from his lower half, pulsating with an unsettling rhythm. The crowd watched in horrified fascination as, with a wet, squelching sound, Sknull partially emerged from the writhing machinery. Raising his hybridized arms high, he exuded a terrifying aura of power.

"My people!" he bellowed, his voice an uncanny blend of organic resonance and metallic distortion. "Behold the heights we have reached! Witness the strength that now courses through us!"

The crowd, once silent with fear, began murmuring with curiosity, their unease slowly giving way to reluctant admiration. Sknull's glowing, otherworldly eyes swept over them before narrowing on the Chief. His lips twisted into a sneer as he pointed a razor-tipped, metallic finger at the leader.

"This rodent here," Sknull spat, his voice dripping with contempt, "clings to weakness. He fears progress, shackling us to outdated ways. But today, I will end his resistance and show you the path forward!"

To punctuate his declaration, the mechanical construct behind him shifted ominously. The massive abdomen opened like a gaping maw, its chitinous plates expanding and writhing as it enveloped him. In one seamless motion, Sknull's body sank back into the monstrous machinery, the union between flesh and technology complete.

The crowd erupted into cheers, their initial terror now transformed into zealous fervor. They chanted his name, their voices echoing like a tidal wave through the cavern. The Chief's heart sank as he saw the adoration in their eyes, a worship of something twisted and wrong.

Sknull sneered, his hybridized voice a guttural rasp. "Look at you, Chief. A relic of the past, clinging to scraps of irrelevance. Today, I will show you the price of defiance."

The Chief's face remained a mask of grim determination. Without a word, he let his gauntlets hiss a violent discharge of steam, signaling the fight's start. With a burst of speed, his boots propelled him forward, brass pistons whirring. His first strike landed with a deafening clang against Sknull's chest, sending the abomination staggering back. The hybrid's grotesque frame groaned under the force, and patches of his exposed flesh began to bleed.

The crowd gasped, their fervor momentarily broken, as Sknull straightened. He roared, his mechanical appendages lashing out in a whirlwind of sharp, spider-like legs. One struck the Chief's shoulder, sending him skidding across the ground. Sparks flew as his steampunk armor scraped against the stone, but the Chief quickly rose, his movements precise and measured.

Sknull lunged, his spider legs slamming into the ground with bone-shaking force. A single strike missed the Chief by inches, leaving a jagged crater in the stone. Dust and debris flew in all directions.

The Chief seized the opening, his boots' hydraulics launching him high into the air. He aimed a gauntleted fist at Sknull's chest, but the hybrid's legs moved with lightning speed. A spiked limb swiped

sideways, forcing the Chief to release a burst of steam mid-air to alter his trajectory. He landed hard on one of Sknull's limbs, his weight making the appendage buckle.

Snarling, Sknull swung wildly, but the Chief leaped higher, using the momentum to aim a brutal punch at Sknull's face. His brass gauntlet connected with a sickening crunch, shattering part of Sknull's mechanical jaw.

Sknull roared, reeling backward as sparks and blood sprayed from the damage. The Chief dropped to the ground, rolling away as razor-sharp spider legs stabbed down in retaliation. One scraped against his armor, leaving a deep gash but failing to penetrate.

"You fight like the old days, Chief," Sknull snarled, venom dripping from his malformed mouth. "Let me show you what true evolution looks like."

With a sudden burst of speed, Sknull surged forward, his legs a blur of metallic precision. The Chief barely had time to brace before one of the massive legs swept under him, sending him sprawling. Sknull loomed over him, his grotesque mandibles snapping dangerously close to the Chief's head.

The Chief rolled away just in time, shoving himself clear with the pistons in his gauntlets. But Sknull's clawed hand lashed out, tearing through one of the steam tubes on his side. A violent hiss escaped as the system vented, and the Chief felt his power reserves draining rapidly.

The Chief grunted but pressed on, knowing that hesitation meant death. He ducked under another stabbing mechanical leg and countered with a powerful uppercut to the joint. The whirring gears in his gauntlet amplified the blow, crumpling the limb. Sknull shrieked in pain, stumbling briefly.

"You talk too much," the Chief muttered, his voice strained but unwavering.

Sknull's response was a chattering laugh. "And you move too slow."

The abomination shifted tactics. His spider-like legs spread wide, encircling the Chief and cutting off all avenues of escape. From above, Sknull's torso reared back, his mouth yawning open to spew a thick, corrosive webbing. The Chief sprang into the air, pistons in his boots hissing as they fired. The webbing missed, splattering across the ground where it sizzled and smoked, eating through the surface like acid.

Landing on one of Sknull's legs, the Chief gripped the jagged plating for balance. Sknull thrashed violently, trying to dislodge him, but the Chief held firm. With a roar, he activated a mechanism in his gauntlet. A glowing blade shot forth from his wrist, superheated by steam. He drove it into the limb, severing it in a burst of sparks and dark ichor.

Sknull roared, staggering as the severed appendage collapsed beneath him.

But the abomination's fury only deepened.

"You think you can outlast me?" he snarled. His remaining legs moved in a blur, forcing the Chief off balance. One struck the Chief's shoulder, tearing through his brass-plated armor and drawing blood. Another swept low, hooking his ankle and sending him sprawling.

Before the Chief could rise, Sknull pounced. His massive form loomed above the fallen fighter, and with terrifying precision, his legs pinned the Chief to the ground.

The Chief gritted his teeth, straining against the crushing weight. Steam hissed violently as he activated the last reserves in his gauntlets. With a surge of power, he broke free and delivered a devastating punch to Sknull's chest. The blow sent the hybrid staggering back, but the Chief's gauntlet sputtered and failed, its energy spent.

Sknull laughed, a grating, metallic sound that filled the arena. "You've fought well, Chief. But you're outmatched."

Moving with brutal precision, Sknull's spider leg lashed out, piercing the Chief's armor and pinning him to the ground. Blood seeped from the wound, staining the brass plating. The crowd gasped, their roars of approval mixing with murmurs of awe.

The Chief's fists pounded weakly against the leg holding him, his strength fading. Sknull leaned in, his mandibles clicking inches from the Chief's face.

"Your ways are dead," Sknull hissed. "And so are you."

With a triumphant sneer, Sknull reached for the Chief, intending to lift and display his broken enemy for all to see. But as his claws closed around the Chief, a loud hiss erupted from the battered armor, filling the air with scalding steam.

Sknull recoiled with a snarl, stepping back as the hot vapor obscured the arena. By the time it cleared, the Chief was gone. A shadow of anger crossed Sknull's face before he raised his mechanical arms high. "Behold your future! Behold me!"

The ratmen roared their approval, their cheers echoing through the cavernous settlement as they worshipped their monstrous leader.

Meanwhile, in the shadowed tunnels beneath the arena, a figure in a tattered cloak stumbled through the darkness, leaving a trail of blood behind. It was the Chief. Broken, wounded, and defeated, he fled the settlement. Though death loomed over him, he pressed on, his resolve unbroken.

Chapter 385:

This is not the end. The thought burned in his mind as he stumbled forward. His people could still be saved. He would not die until he saw it through. Death would be the last thing to claim him.

Suddenly, he collapsed, clutching his head in agony as laughter echoed within his mind—a woman's laughter.

Vorenza, the demon of temptation, watched him through unseen eyes, a sly grin curling her lips. She had not expected these ratmen to produce such a strong-willed soul, and her interest was piqued. The Chief's defiance made him all the more enticing—a soul worth breaking.

"Ah, such stubbornness," Vorenza murmured to herself, her gaze alight with wicked delight. "I'll enjoy watching him fall."

Her thoughts danced with depraved anticipation, imagining the transformation and corruption of a man so determined. The Chief's story was far from over, and Vorenza intended to play a starring role.

Back in the clearing, the underground cavern echoed with the frenzied chants of "Sknull! Sknull!" The ratmen roared their approval, their collective voice shaking the very air. Sknull stood tall, savoring the adoration, his bloodied form a triumphant figure against the dim torchlight.

But then, like a blade slicing through the noise, silence fell. One by one, the voices died out, replaced by an uneasy hush that swept through the crowd. Sknull stiffened, his sharp ears twitching as he scanned the cavern. Something—or someone—had disrupted his moment of glory.

One of his is glowing, mechanical eyes locked onto a group emerging from the shadows. At first, the sight made his lip curl into a scowl, irritation flashing across his face. The priests. Their solemn, hooded figures moved with eerie precision, their mechanical spider legs scittering across the floor. But as they came closer, Sknull's scorn shifted into confusion. These were not the usual emissaries of the goddess. The lead priest was conspicuously absent, replaced by one clutching an ornate book that gleamed unnaturally in the dim light.

Sknull raised a clawed hand, his voice low and gravelly. "What is this? Where is your leader?"

The book-bearing priest did not answer immediately. Instead, he halted, his head bowing in mock reverence as the shadows behind him shifted. The faint clinking of metal reached Sknull's ears—a sound he knew all too well. His breath hitched, and his claws tensed as the noise grew louder, joined by an ominous, rhythmic clatter.

Chains.

The crowd murmured nervously as the source of the sound became clear. Emerging from the darkness behind the priests were figures bound in thick chains. Hybrids.

Sknull's mechanical limbs locked momentarily, his instincts screaming at him to retreat. These weren't ordinary hybrids. Their hulking frames, twisted with grotesque ogre-like features, radiated raw power. They were an elite breed, creatures of destruction whose very presence could tip the tide of battle.

"How..." Sknull muttered under his breath, taking a cautious step back. His earlier confidence crumbled as the reality of the scene set in. "How did you subdue them?"

The priest with the book stepped forward, his voice smooth and dripping with menace. "The goddess has her ways, Sknull. There are loyalties even your brute strength cannot command."

The hybrids moved in unison, their glowing eyes locked onto Sknull, their movements fluid yet restrained by the enchanted chains. The ratmen in the crowd shrank back, their earlier cheers now replaced by whispers of fear.

Sknull's voice cracked as he blurted, "Where is the lead priest? Why is he not here for something as important as this?"

The book-bearing priest tilted his head, a faint, chilling smile curling his lips. "Our brother is now with the goddess. He sought atonement for his... failures. His devotion demanded no less than the ultimate sacrifice." The priest's tone carried no pity, only a cold, merciless finality.

Sknull's claws twitched as his gaze darted between the hybrids and the priest. The weight of the situation bore down on him like a vice. He had been outmaneuvered. The priest's machinations, subtle and insidious, had robbed him of his moment and replaced it with a nightmare.

The priest's smile deepened as he strode forward, his book glowing faintly with an otherworldly light. He reached out, grasping Sknull's massive hand. The abomination flinched at the contact but didn't pull away. The priest raised Sknull's hand high into the air, his voice resonating with unyielding authority.

"Behold your champion!" he declared, his words both a proclamation and a veiled mockery. "Behold the will of the goddess, who sees all and spares none!"

The hybrids snarled, their chains rattling as they leaned forward, barely restrained. Sknull, for the first time in recent memory, felt true fear. The crowd looked on, their loyalty wavering as they sensed the tides turning.

Sknull's heart thundered in his chest. This was no victory—it was a prelude to something far darker, a reminder that even he, in all his monstrous glory, was a pawn in the goddess's game.

The priest's voice reverberated through the cavern, his tone laden with reverence and cunning authority. "The goddess does not err," he began, his grip on Sknull's raised hand tightening as though

sealing a pact. "It is her divine will that you, Sknull, stand at the forefront of her blessed army. Your strength, your ferocity, your triumphs—they are not your own but gifts bestowed by her grace."

Sknull's lips twitched, his teeth gritting as he fought the instinct to snarl at the priest. He wanted to rip his hand free, to lash out, but the hybrids' unwavering stares held him in check. Their chains clinked softly, a grim reminder of his vulnerability. He had no allies here, not among the ratmen, not among the hybrids, and certainly not among the priests. The goddess's shadow loomed over all.

The priest continued, his words weaving a narrative of inevitability. "It was the goddess who guided you to this victory, Sknull. The goddess who gave you the cunning to outmaneuver your foes. And it is the goddess who, even now, reveals the path forward. Through you, her will shall be done."

The ratmen, sensing a shift in power, began to murmur once more. Their fear of the hybrids was now mingled with awe for the priest's proclamation. Sknull could feel their eyes on him, their fragile loyalty teetering between reverence and trepidation.

The priest turned to the crowd, releasing Sknull's hand and gesturing with open arms. "Behold your chosen leader! Sknull, the instrument of her might, the one who shall bring her vision to fruition!" His voice swelled with fervor, his words calculated to stir the masses. "Through his strength, we shall conquer! Through his leadership, we shall rise! But know this: it is not by Sknull's hand alone. It is by the will of the goddess, eternal and unyielding!"

The crowd erupted into a new chant, their voices ringing out with renewed vigor. "Sknull! Sknull! For the goddess! For the goddess!"

Sknull's clawed hand twitched as the chant filled the cavern once more, this time with a reverence that felt foreign, suffocating. His victory, his hard-won moment of glory, had been repurposed into a testament to a goddess he neither served nor trusted. Yet he could see the tides of power shifting, the ratmen looking to him not as their conqueror but as the goddess's chosen one.

The priest turned back to Sknull, his expression serene yet edged with authority. "Do you see now, Sknull? You are not merely a leader. You are her chosen, her weapon against the world that defies her."

Sknull's chest heaved, anger and frustration bubbling beneath the surface. But he had no leverage, no allies, and no choice. He could not defy the priest or the hybrids; doing so would mean his death, or worse. The goddess's will, whether he believed it or not, was a force too great to resist.

Reluctantly, he inclined his head, his voice rough and low. "If it is the goddess's will... then I am her chosen."

The priest's smile widened, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. "You have taken the first step, Sknull. Accept her guidance, and your power will know no bounds."

The hybrids, their chains rattling ominously, remained silent but watchful. They too were pawns in this grand game, but their presence was a constant reminder of Sknull's precarious position. As the chants of the crowd grew louder, Sknull felt the weight of the role thrust upon him.

The priest leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a whisper meant only for Sknull. "Remember, chosen one, you may lead them, but you lead them for her. Do not forget your place."

Sknull's claws flexed, but he said nothing. He couldn't. For now, he had to play the part of the goddess chosen. But in the back of his mind, the seeds of resentment began to take root.

At the surface, Gurnak, so occupied with quietly moving the citizens in his city, had no time to pay attention to what was happening underground.

The words and news of his punishment have spread among the mages who share his tower with him, some decided to stay back while many packed up their things ready to be teleported away.

Chapter 386:

Anyone with a clear mind, can understand that the empire no longer deems Gurnak service as something needed and has left him alone to fend for himself.

Gurnak was angry seeing how many mages who he lent his tower to leave him, clenching his fist Gurnak said nothing, he was going to defend this city and land, he will show the empire his value and all these mages who left him will pay the price.

Gathering of the civilians took a whole week, Gurnak hovering in the air, seeing everyone ready nodded as a huge portal opened up at the city square.

Civilians seeing the portal all began walking into it, Gurnak stayed for a while and saw the process was going well, he teleported back to his tower.

Sitting in his chair, Gurnak sighed as he flicked his hand. In Front of him opened up a sight that got him to slowly widen his eyes. He jumped back as he saw multiple eyes staring at him before it went all black.

Gurnak recoiled from the severed connection, stumbling back in his tower. His mind raced as he processed what he had just witnessed. They noticed me... and they changed. What kind of power are they drawing from?

Gurnak stood up from his seat as he walked to the window as he looked at a certain part of his city. Gurnak wasn't even thinking when with a thought he made a huge magic circle above the part he was staring at.

A loud sound followed by an explosion that caught the attention of the civilians going through the portal. The explosion caused a dust wave that blocked the view but once it cleared.

The civilians saw how that part of the city cleared, leaving an empty space where a huge magic circle was floating just above the ground.

Gurnak stood above his city, his frustration mounting as he surveyed the uneasy progress. The explosion had rattled not just the civilians but his own confidence. Something was stirring, something beyond his control, and the sense of foreboding clung to him like a shroud. The empire had abandoned him, his fellow mages had deserted him, and now his city teetered on the edge of collapse—both figuratively and literally.

His booming command had spurred the civilians into action, but the sight of the scorched ground and the floating magic circle left a palpable fear in their hearts. Even as they shuffled into the portal, whispers of doubt and dread spread among them. Gurnak clenched his jaw and turned his focus beyond the city wall to see if the demons had begun moving, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

At his command, his ogre army began to mobilize, their thunderous steps echoing through the city as they took up defensive positions. His remaining mages, though few, gathered in the tower's grand hall, awaiting his orders with expressions ranging from resolute to fearful.

"We have one task," Gurnak growled, his voice resonating with determination. "To protect this land and city until every soul is safely evacuated. Then, we will show those who underestimated us the true cost of their folly."

The mages nodded, though Gurnak could sense the underlying tension. He knew some doubted him, just as he doubted himself in fleeting moments of weakness. But there was no room for hesitation now.

Meanwhile, Sknull's rise to power was accelerating underground. The platform and road stretching toward the cavern ceiling were nearing completion, the ratmen working tirelessly under the priests' watchful eyes. The green acidic liquid carved through the rock with ruthless efficiency, softening the earth for the grotesquely modified drill-bearers to break through.

The priests, now elevated in prestige, moved among the laboring ratmen like shepherds among their flock, their every word imbued with the authority of the goddess. Sknull, though nominally their leader, felt their presence pressing down on him like an invisible chain. He had power, but it was power loaned to him under the pretense of divine favor—a favor he knew could be revoked at any moment.

One of the priests approached Sknull, their book clasped tightly in hand. "The goddess smiles upon our progress," they intoned, their voice echoing with reverence. "Soon, we shall breach the surface and bring her will to the world above."

Sknull nodded, though his expression remained tense. He looked up at the cavern ceiling, where the green liquid continued its relentless work. He didn't need to see what lay above to know it was dangerous. He had been a fighter for long enough to sense when something was amiss.

"How long?" he asked, his voice gruff.

"Another day, perhaps two," the priest replied. "The drilling has been efficient, and the goddess's blessings ensure our success."

Sknull grunted, his eyes narrowing as he watched the modified ratmen burrow through the softened earth. His gut told him that whatever waited above was prepared to meet them with force. He didn't trust the priests, nor their unwavering faith in the goddess's protection. Yet he also knew he had no choice but to press forward.

Today, the ratmen population stood armored up, filling up the spaces of the cavern. The cavern buzzed with anticipation, the ratmen's collective energy palpable as the drilling continued. The hybrids stood as living fortresses, their grotesque forms armored and ready for war, while the mounted ratmen tightened their grips on makeshift reins. The atmosphere was thick with tension, every ratman holding their breath for the moment the ceiling would yield to their relentless efforts.

And then, a ripple of unease spread through the crowd.

It began subtly—a shared, instinctive glance among the ratmen. Their movements stilled, their chittering fell silent, and all eyes turned toward a singular figure among them.

A ratman small leader, clad in rudimentary armor and standing near the drilling machines, shifted uncomfortably under their collective gaze. He froze, realizing he was no longer the focus of his own will. The presence of another mind—a foreign, prying force—had latched onto him.

Back a few moments ago when Gurnak in his tower tried to see the progress of the ratmen. From his tower above, Gurnak's presence flowed through the magical conduit, his vision tethered to the ratman leader. His spell had granted him a direct view of the cavern below, his mind observing the preparations with clinical detachment. He frowned, noting the sheer size of the ratmen's gathered forces. An army. And hybrids... They've been preparing for war.

But as Gurnak probed deeper into the scene, something unexpected occurred.

The ratmen's newfound connection through Vorenza flared to life like a blazing beacon. What had been a quiet, almost subconscious link among them suddenly expanded, snapping into sharp clarity. The presence of Gurnak's mind stood out like an intruder in a sacred space, an anomaly in their shared network of faith.

The ratman leader's body trembled, his limbs seizing as the connection overwhelmed him. Before Gurnak could react, the ratmen turned on their own, swarming the leader in a frenzied attack.

Flesh and bone tore under their claws and teeth as the leader was ripped apart, his essence consumed by his comrades. Blood soaked the cavern floor, and a primal energy surged through the ratmen, their devotion to Vorenza transforming them further.

Their eyes glowed a fierce, unholy red, their movements now synchronized as though guided by a single, unified will.

The priests, standing at the center of the chaos, raised their arms in triumph. "Behold the goddess's power!" they cried, their voices reverberating through the cavern. "Her blessing flows through us all! Forward, children of Vorenza—our time has come!"

Below, the drilling ratmen broke through at last, a beam of sunlight piercing the cavern's darkness. A deafening cheer erupted from the ratmen forces as the hybrids surged forward, their mounted riders urging them toward the breach.

The hole got wider as the ratmen soon noticed the large glowing magic circle blocking them from advancing.

Vorenza in the abyss through the eyes of the priest saw that as he laughed, the mage certainly reacted fast enough but it still was too late. "Today this city will be hers"

With a mental command, she gave order to her own army. The guards at the city wall who have been having it easy for the past weeks all tensed up as they heard the roar of the demon from the distance.

A message was quickly relayed to Gurnak, who looked at the magic circle he had blocked the hole before, Gurnak immediately relayed out quick order as he had the mages and some ogre soldiers take hold of guarding the hole while he focused on the advancing demon army.

At the same time he looked at the panicking civilians, he truly had the mind to abandon them but the empire made it clear that he was to make sure the civilians were brought to safety.

More portals opened up around the gathered civilians, as soon as they saw the portal, he could hardly speak as they broke the orderly line as they began sprinting towards the opened portal.

Chapter 387:

Seeing that Gurnak shook his head, appearing at the city wall and looking at the advancing demon army. There was still a large uncorrupted land before they could reach the city.

The land is to their advantage if they are to hold off this army while dealing with the ratmen who will be making an appearance in his city. Gurnak was a mage who specialised in gravity and seeing their world response to the demon made him make some connection to his gravity magic.

The world responded to the demon by squashing them into meat paste by exuding a heavy amount of pressure on them, too bad their world response was only passive as the crushed meat paste of the demon are scattered around, leading to their land being corrupted and giving other incoming demons advantage of not bearing the same pressure.

A magic circle appeared behind Gurnak like a halo as his figure slowly took to the sky, with his eyes closed. He was making contact with the pressure passively released from the world against the demons.

The demon army was quickly approaching the edge of the corrupted land and uncorrupted land when Gurnak made a connection, his figure completely gone still.

The unseen pressure became visible to all who were paying attention to the battlefield. It appeared as a curtain of light purple rain that stretched out in a straight line between the corrupted and uncorrupted land.

The purple rain intensified, each drop now looking like a miniature black hole, devouring the demons that dared to cross. The screams of the demon horde echoed, a cacophony of pain and fear.

But the demons were relentless. They clawed at the curtain, their sheer numbers slowly eroding its strength. Gurnak, his face contorted in concentration, pushed harder, drawing more and more of the world's pressure into his own magic.

The purple rain began to twist and writhe, forming a chaotic vortex that sucked the demons in. The ground trembled as the vortex grew, threatening to consume the approaching demon army.

Gurnak underestimated the concentration this would require, as the magic circle he had deployed around the city slowly dimmed. Vorenza noticed this and immediately gave the order. The third-stage demon fell back while countless first- and second-stage demons surged forward into the gravity well created by Gurnak.

Back at the city, the soldiers and mages guarding the breach saw the magic circle dimming. The mages immediately cast levitation spells and took to the sky.

The ogre soldiers, shields at the ready, braced themselves as their general roared, "Hold!"

The general signaled, and they slowly stepped back. The only sounds were the screams of civilians pushing toward the portals and the roars of the demons beyond the city walls.

The magic circle vanished, leaving a small, steadily widening hole. A heavy silence fell, punctuated by the soldiers' nervous gulps as they awaited the enemy.

A white thread shot from the hole. The soldiers raised their shields, but the thread expanded upon contact, adhering to several soldiers before retracting and pulling them screaming into the void.

The general's roar cut through the chaos, demanding focus. "Shields up! Brace yourselves!" His voice, a mix of urgency and determination, attempted to steady the soldiers' trembling hearts.

The white threads continued to snake from the expanding hole, their unnatural movements almost hypnotic. Each thread glistened eerily in the dimming light, its sharp whistling a warning of deadly precision. They darted between shields, snagging soldiers with uncanny accuracy and dragging them into the void.

The mages seeing the chaos conjured stream of flames directed at hole, followed by squealing and screeches of the ratmen, the ratmen who were taking their time had to move immediately as the flames seemed to have a mind of its own as it drills through the hole eating away at them.

Sknull seeing the flames coming from the hole, immediately roared out "Attack, for goddess" The ratmen immediately began pushing towards the flames as they rushed out of the hole.

The mages immediately stopped the flames as the ratmen rushed out of the hole to meet with the ogre army in wait so as to not affect one of their own.

The city became now the battlefield was a maelstrom of fear and chaos. Civilians surged through the streets, desperate to reach the portals. Cries of panic and despair echoed off the stone walls of the narrow alleys, blending with the distant roar of combat at the breach. The city guard struggled to maintain order, forming hasty barricades to prevent stampedes while redirecting the flow of terrified citizens.

At the breach, the ogre soldiers held their ground with grim resolve. Their shields, reinforced with heavy iron and wards, formed a nearly impenetrable wall. Behind them, archers and spearmen lined the battlements, their weapons trained on the growing horde of ratmen and their grotesque hybrid monstrosities.

The hybrids were a nightmare given form—hulking creatures with the skittering legs of demon-spiders and the sinewy, muscular torsos of ratmen. Their multifaceted eyes gleamed with malicious intelligence, and their chittering voices formed an eerie counterpoint to the battle cries of the advancing ratmen.

The general's voice boomed again. "Hold the line! Do not falter!" He brandished a massive halberd, its blade etched with runes that glowed faintly in the gloom.

Suddenly, a deafening crack split the air as one of the hybrids leaped over the shield wall, its spindly legs piercing the ground with enough force to send shockwaves rippling through the ranks. The creature's fanged maw opened wide, releasing a venomous spray that hissed as it struck shields and armor. Soldiers scrambled to counter, their weapons clanging against the creature's chitinous exoskeleton.

Above, the mages circling above unleashed a barrage of spells. Arcs of lightning, shards of ice, and searing bursts of fire rained down upon the ratmen. For every spell that struck true, dozens of ratmen fell, their bodies consumed by the magical onslaught. But the tide of the horde was relentless, pushing forward with manic fervor, their grotesque war chants growing louder.

"Incoming!" a soldier shouted as one of the hybrids reared back and expelled a dense webbing toward the battlements. The sticky mass engulfed several archers, pulling them down to the frenzied ratmen below.

The general snarled, "Focus fire on the hybrids! Bring them down!" His halberd swung in a deadly arc, severing one of the hybrid's legs. The creature screeched, collapsing as soldiers swarmed it, stabbing with spears and blades until it ceased moving.

The priest who also emerged seeing how the ogre's army was taking care of them, set their gaze at the screaming civilians not too far away. From the depths, more hybrids clawed their way to the surface, their emergence accompanied by bursts of foul-smelling smoke.

The ogre, occupied by the rushing ratman horde, could do nothing as the hybrid rushed towards the civilians.

Captain Aldric of the city guard rallied his troops. "To me! Protect the civilians! Use the enchanted pikes!" The guardsmen formed tight phalanxes, their weapons glowing faintly with imbued magic. They met the advancing hybrids head-on, thrusting their pikes into vulnerable joints and eyes.

Overhead, Archmage Elinor extended her staff, channeling a massive spell. "Everyone, clear the square!" she commanded. A glowing sigil formed in the air, pulsing with power. The apprentices abandoned their efforts at the portals and joined her, feeding their energy into the growing spell.

The sigil detonated, releasing a dome of light that engulfed the hybrids and ratmen near the square. When the light faded, only scorched ground remained where the invaders had stood. The crowd erupted into a mix of cheers and sobs, but Elinor's grim expression silenced any celebration.

"This is only the first wave," she muttered to her apprentices. "Prepare for more. We'll hold the city or die trying."

Back at the breach, the general surveyed the battlefield. The ratmen had begun erecting crude siege engines, their corrupted biological tech forming grotesque catapults and battering rams from the carcasses of their own fallen.

Back underground as more ratmen were grouping up for the next stage of attack as the priest discuss on what strategy to use. A ratman stood inconspicuous, hidden as most other ratmen ignored his existence.

This ratman managed to make his way to the next group to attack, with a wave of a priest staff. The next group rushed out of the hole with this ratman following close behind.

Once this ratman got to the surface he was attracted by a glowing portal off in the distance from the breach. The wind blew moving the cloak covering the ratman to show it was chief, still battered up but he still was able to move.

Unlike other ratman, the chief had a new goal once he saw the portal. He had planned on escaping from the city but now this portal worked best for him.

Chief, ignoring the shrieks and skittering of his brethren as they surged towards the city walls, veered sharply to the west. The portal, shimmering with an otherworldly luminescence, pulsed like a beacon in his vision.

Chapter 388:

It was an escape, not just from the battle, but from the war itself, from the squalor and the endless, mindless conflict. He had seen enough carnage to last several lifetimes, and the sight of that swirling vortex offered a tantalizing promise of something... else.

He moved with a surprising agility, weaving through the chaos. Ratmen, driven by their primal instincts, clawed and scrambled past him, oblivious to his change of direction. Their single-minded focus on destruction was his greatest advantage. He was a ghost among them, a shadow slipping through the cracks of their frenzied advance. The remnants of his once-proud armor clinked softly beneath his tattered cloak, a faint counterpoint to the cacophony of war.

He reached the edge of the battlefield, the ground littered with the charred remains of the first wave. The air still crackled with residual energy from the sigil's detonation. The portal shimmered just beyond, a swirling kaleidoscope of colors that seemed to shift and change with every blink. It was close enough to touch, yet felt impossibly distant, a mirage in the heat of battle.

Suddenly, a guttural shriek pierced the air. A hulking ratman, its muscles bulging with unnatural strength, turned its bloodshot eyes towards Chief, recognizing him. It had been separated from the main

horde, perhaps disoriented by the earlier explosion. Now, it spotted Chief, a solitary figure moving away from the fight. A low growl rumbled in its throat, a sound that promised violence.

Chief froze. He was battered, bruised, and exhausted. A direct confrontation with the ratman would be suicidal. He had to think fast. He glanced back at the portal and noticed that most of the portals were closing as civilians were quickly thinning in number, its beckoning light now a desperate lifeline. He took a deep breath, steeling his resolve. He couldn't afford to be caught here.

With a burst of speed he didn't know he possessed, Chief darted behind a ruined cart, the ratman enraged roar echoing behind him. He scrambled over the wreckage, ignoring the sharp edges that tore at his already damaged armor. The ogre, clumsy but powerful, smashed through the cart with a swipe of its massive claw, sending splinters of wood flying.

Chief sprinted towards the portal, the ratman hot on his heels. He could feel the heat radiating from the swirling vortex, the pull of its otherworldly energy. He was almost there. Just a few more steps. The ogre lunged, its massive hand reaching out to grab him. Chief ducked, narrowly avoiding the grasp, and stumbled forward, throwing himself headfirst into the swirling colors of the portal.

The hulking ratman was about to follow behind when a lightning coursed through its body as it fell down dead.

A mage with a frown on its face looked at where the portal closed, a ratman got away. he could only hope that those on the other end can take care of it.

The last portal closed menaing that the civiliinas were gone, now they could solely focus on the ratmen and hybrids.

Back at the breach, the general surveyed the battlefield. The ratmen had begun erecting crude siege engines, their corrupted biological tech forming grotesque catapults and battering rams from the carcasses of their own fallen. These abominations were neither mechanical nor entirely organic—a twisted amalgam of bone, sinew, and corrupted metal that pulsed with a sickly green light. The siege engines emitted an unsettling hum, as if alive, their movements jerky yet purposeful. From their warped structures, they launched projectiles made of writhing flesh that exploded on impact, spewing corrosive bile over the defenders.

"Mages, target those engines!" the general bellowed.

One of the mages, a younger prodigy named Seraphis, took the lead. Hovering above the battlefield, he extended both hands, conjuring an intricate array of spinning glyphs. With a sharp gesture, he unleashed a torrent of crystalline spears that rained down upon the siege engines. The corrupted constructs shuddered and groaned as the spears pierced their vile forms, causing eruptions of green ichor.

Seeing the damaged siege tech, the ratmen leaders barked orders "We need more bodies" The ratmen moved around grabbing onto any dead corpse they found and threw them at the machines which was slowly healing itself.

Seraphis' eyes narrowed. "Then we'll change tactics." He raised his staff and began weaving a complex spell, combining elements of fire and lightning. The resulting storm crackled with raw power, striking the engines with relentless intensity. The protective plates melted under the sustained assault, and the engines collapsed into twitching heaps of gore and slag.

Meanwhile, the ratmen horde facing the army themselves revealed their own corrupted enhancements. Their bodies bore grotesque amalgamations of steampunk and demonic flesh. One ratman, its arm replaced by a grotesque piston-driven claw, let out a mechanical hiss as it tore through an ogre soldier's shield. Another, its chest hollowed to house a demonic furnace, spewed streams of molten bile, melting through armor and stone alike. The corrupted tech pulsed with eerie life, the fusion of abyss and machinery granting them inhuman resilience and power.

Some ratmen wielded grafted weapons: cannons forged from fused bone and brass, firing shards of jagged flesh-metal that ricocheted unpredictably. Others carried grotesque backpacks with spindly legs that injected bursts of green liquid into their veins, making them faster and stronger at the cost of their own lives. These warped creations moved with an unnatural rhythm, their very existence an affront to nature.

Elinor, observing the chaos, adapted her strategies. "Group spells! Focus your efforts!" she ordered. Teams of mages combined their energy to summon massive glyphs that unleashed waves of freezing wind, immobilizing the augmented ratmen. Others created gravity wells, pulling enemies together into tightly packed clusters that were obliterated by explosive blasts.

A group of mages began conjuring arcane golems, constructs of pure energy and stone, to counter the ratmen's siege engines. The golems waded into the fray, their massive fists smashing the corrupted

technology with brute force. When one golem was ensnared by a hybrid's acidic threads, it self-destructed in a burst of magic, taking its foe with it.

The mages from the sky were a huge obstacle to the ratmen and their advancement and there was no way for the ratmen to counter them as they have no mages of their own.

Vorenza seeing this from the abyss knew she had to do something before the advantage she has is quickly lost. An order was sent out which was received by a huge creature underneath the city tunnels.

Sknul and the priest, meanwhile, did their best to remain hidden underground while barking orders for their men to push forward. Their eyes were filled with fear as they watched the mages handle their forces with ease.

Sknul was filled with regret as he realized he had let the small power his people had gained go to his head, forgetting the horror of the goblin mages.

He now understood the chief's fear and concern about the empire. From what he was seeing, they would have been better off facing the hybrids than the mages; at least the hybrids didn't spit fire or freeze them out of nowhere.

Even the ogres, for example, were monsters in their own right, combined with their rune equipment even with their own enhancements it took too many ratmen to inflict significant damage. If it were only the ogres, Sknul would have had no problem, as they could overwhelm them with their numerical advantage.

Now, he was doing his best to call out orders of advancement so the priest would still see him as useful and not order him to make a suicidal move in the name of the goddess.

He couldn't help but think back on the chief, wondering if he had died somewhere in the tunnels or if perhaps he was still alive. Nonetheless, anything was certainly better than his current position.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn back by a loud, monstrous roar that echoed from the tunnels into the cavern. "What the hell was that?" Sknul thought in fear, looking towards the tunnels.

His fear increased when he noticed the walls shaking, with rocks falling from the ceiling, and heavy, fast footsteps heading towards their location.

He was about to ask the priest when he noticed a look of fervor, rather than fear, on their face. He could hear the priest screaming with joy: "The goddess's angel is here!"

The priest, clutching the book, turned his attention to Sknull, who took a step back in fear. "Get ready to accompany the goddess's angel," the priest commanded.

Sknull was about to refuse, but the intense look the priest gave him silenced him. Sknull waited in silence as an army of hybrids began pouring out from the tunnels.

The space, already filled with ratmen, became even more crowded as the hybrids surged forward, some hanging on the ceiling and standing there silently.

Sknull's ears twitched as he heard heavy footsteps. From one of the tunnels emerged a being taller than any two-legged creature Sknull had ever seen.

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The being's appearance was clearly hybrid, but only its head—a scaled ratman's head without fur and with eight eyes—made that immediately obvious.

The being had two scaled hands, and behind its back, multiple spider legs moved constantly. Sknull held his breath as the being walked forward, with ratmen clearing its path.

It glanced at the priest and spoke, "I will keep the mages occupied. Deal with the ogres and ensure the city is taken for our goddess."

It didn't wait for a response before leaping, easily reaching the city and passing through the breach.

The monstrous Alpha, a grotesque fusion of rat and spider blessed by Vorenza, landed with a resounding thud, scattering rubble and sending tremors through the already damaged street. Below, the ratmen and hybrids surged through the opening, a tide of clawing limbs and chittering mandibles.

But the true threat, the reason for this desperate gambit, stood arrayed against the hybrid: ten archmages, their robes shimmering with arcane energy.

The presence of the creature got the attention of the mages but what made them take it seriously was the heavy abyss breath released by the creature.

The mages in vigilance, got up higher to the sky. The Alpha eyes took in the appearance of the ten mages as it took a squatting position before it took to the sky with a jump.

As the hybrid roared and launched itself forward, the mages responded with coordinated precision. Two mages, chanting in unison, raised shimmering shields of force, deflecting the initial charge. The hybrid slammed into the shields, the impact creating a shockwave that rippled through the air, but the shields held.

Simultaneously, three other mages unleashed a torrent of elemental attacks. A wave of searing flames washed over the hybrid, followed by a barrage of razor-sharp ice shards and a howling gale of wind that tried to knock it off balance. The hybrid roared in pain as the flames licked its scales, leaving scorch marks, but the ice and wind had little effect, glancing off its tough hide. The mages noted with concern that their spells were significantly weakened, but they pressed on.

The Alpha lost its momentum as it began to fall. Seizing this opportunity, one mage pressed on, following closely behind the descending creature.

He waved his staff, conjuring spikes of earth. The Alpha, seemingly oblivious, didn't react as the spikes approached. Suddenly, one of the spider legs behind it shot out a string of web, latching onto a nearby rock and pulling the Alpha away from the oncoming spikes.

Simultaneously, another web was shot out latching on to a building, propelling the Alpha upwards like a slingshot. The pursuing mage, startled by this sudden maneuver, was too slow to react.

The Alpha, with terrifying speed, launched itself at him. The mage frantically attempted to summon a shield, but it was torn apart by the Alpha's powerful jaws. The Alpha's hand, armed with razor-sharp claws, clamped down on the goblin mage's face.

The Alpha's mandibles opened wide, engulfing the goblin mage's head in a single, horrifying bite. It then dropped the body and stood atop the web string, using it as a foothold in the air.

The Alpha flashed a chilling smile at the remaining mages, who frowned in disbelief at the creature's intelligence. It had clearly exploited their arrogance and paid the price.

The remaining mages exchanged grim glances. Their initial confidence had been shattered by the Alpha's unexpected agility and cunning. This was no mindless beast; it was a predator—intelligent and ruthless.

Elinor, her face stern and her eyes glowing with arcane fire, stepped forward. "We cannot afford to underestimate it," she declared, her voice resonating with a chilling calm. "This creature possesses unnatural intelligence. We must adapt."

She raised her hands, and the air around her shimmered with an intense emerald-green light. "Form a defensive circle," she commanded. "Concentrate your energies, and I shall weave a barrier around us."

The remaining mages quickly complied, their eyes fixed on the monstrous Alpha. Elinor, her face contorted in concentration, began weaving intricate patterns in the air, chanting in an ancient tongue. The emerald light intensified, coalescing into a shimmering shield that enveloped the group.

Sensing the shift in the mages' tactics, the Alpha let out a chilling shriek. It leaped forward, raising its forelegs, and unleashed a torrent of thick, viscous black liquid that rained down upon the shield. The barrier shuddered violently under the assault but held firm. The black liquid sizzled and foamed upon contact, its corrosive nature evident as it sought to erode the magical defenses.

The shield endured through the combined efforts of the mages, but Elinor realized their current strategy was too passive. "Do not let it dictate the battle!" she called out. "Attack!"

The mages launched a coordinated barrage of probing spells. Streams of fire spiraled downward in serpentine patterns, interspersed with crackling lightning and cascades of freezing rain. Each attack was precise, testing the Alpha's defenses and reactions.

The Alpha, sensing danger, dispersed the web holding it aloft and plummeted to the ground. The spells followed, striking the earth with devastating force and forming a crater around the beast.

Snarling, the Alpha deflected smaller spells with its spider legs while its thick, scaled hide absorbed the heavier ones. The ground around it was scorched and cracked, yet the creature emerged unscathed.

Elinor's eyes flashed as she gauged the Alpha's reactions. With a commanding tone that resonated like a choir, she summoned a massive spear of ice. "Strike true!" she shouted, hurling the weapon with precision.

The Alpha twisted its body mid-leap with shocking agility. The spear grazed its side, leaving a deep gash that oozed black ichor. It snarled in pain but remained unfazed, retaliating with calculated aggression.

Rearing back, the Alpha's mandibles released a hissing cloud of venom that rose toward the mages. Recognizing the threat, one mage quickly chanted an incantation, summoning a massive barrier of shimmering blue light that neutralized the poisonous mist.

The Alpha was far from finished. Using the cover of its own venom, it shot out webbing that latched onto a rocky outcropping. With a tremendous pull, it tore the structure free and hurled it upward toward the mages. The projectile splintered mid-air as a mage unleashed a powerful blast of force magic, but the distraction allowed the Alpha to close the distance.

The beast leaped again, this time higher and with terrifying speed. At the apex of its jump, it spun, its spider legs extending outward to fling a spray of hardened web shards in all directions. The mages scattered, but one was ensnared, the sticky substance wrapping around his arm and staff.

"Help him!" Elinor barked orders. Two mages dove to assist, their blades of enchanted wind slicing through the webs. But the brief chaos gave the Alpha its opening.

It turned abruptly, its mandibles snapping open to spew a torrent of acidic venom.

The venom struck one mage unprepared, coating his legs. A bloodcurdling scream echoed as the acid ate through his robes and flesh. His flight spell faltered, and he plummeted to the ground with a sickening crunch.

Another mage narrowly avoided the venom, but the Alpha had anticipated this. With a flick of its spider legs, it shot a thick strand of webbing at the mage, yanking him from the air like a fish on a line. The creature's claws slashed through the mage's torso before he could react, spilling blood onto the scorched earth.

"Keep your distance!" Elinor shouted, rallying the surviving mages. They tightened their formation, wary of the Alpha's reach.

The Alpha roared, this time with a distinct, guttural rhythm. A pulse of dark energy radiated outward, and a colossal phantom of a spider appeared in the sky. The spectral arachnid loomed over the battlefield, its presence transforming the area into something akin to a field.

The mages in the air felt their spells falter as a powerful force pulled them downward. One by one, they descended lower to stabilize their flight magic.

"Disrupt it!" shouted one of the mages.

Two mages conjured illusions, creating multiple copies of themselves that darted around the battlefield, confusing the hybrid. Meanwhile, two others began weaving a powerful binding spell, intricate strands of arcane energy swirling around their hands. The final mage, the most experienced among them, focused on channelling a potent disruption spell aimed at destabilizing the hybrid's magical defences.

Momentarily disoriented by the illusions, the hybrid lashed out blindly, its scaled limbs slicing through the air. The illusory mages vanished one by one as they were struck, but they had served their purpose, buying the others precious time.

The binding spell neared completion as glowing runes materialized in the air around the hybrid. The strands of arcane energy wrapped around its legs, restricting its movements. The hybrid roared in frustration, thrashing wildly, but the spell held firm.

Panic flashed in the Alpha's eyes as its abdomen expanded unnaturally. With its jaws gaping wide, it expelled a volley of eggs that cracked midair, releasing swarms of small, venomous spiders.

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The unexpected onslaught momentarily stunned the mages. The spiders surged toward them, forcing the group to scatter and redirect their focus. Simultaneously, the phantom spider looming in the sky began to destabilize the binding spell. By the time the mages dispatched the smaller spiders, the Alpha broke free.

A red-haired goblin mage, a specialist in earth magic, slammed his staff into the ground, conjuring a wall of jagged stone spikes. The Alpha smirked—a terrifyingly human expression—and leapt, using its webbing to anchor itself to the wall and propel upward.

Weaving through a hail of ice shards and energy blasts, the Alpha closed the distance. It lunged at the goblin mage, its claws raking across his chest in a blur of motion. Blood sprayed into the air as the mage collapsed, lifeless before his body hit the ground.

"We need to regroup!" shouted Elinor, her voice cutting through the chaos.

The Alpha allowed no such reprieve, unleashing a barrage of webbing that ensnared the legs of two descending mages. One mage frantically tried to burn through the webbing with fire magic, but the Alpha was upon him in seconds. Its mandibles clamped onto his shoulder, tearing through flesh and bone. His agonized screams echoed through the canyon.

The second trapped mage managed to slice through the webbing with a blade of pure energy, but not before the Alpha's tail-like appendage speared him through the abdomen. Blood dripped from its claws as it flung the limp body aside.

The eldest mage glanced at the phantom spider in the sky, his eyes narrowing with determination. Conjuring a cyclone of wind, he ascended rapidly. The closer he got to the phantom, the more his spell faltered, but he pushed forward. When he reached his limit, a faint smile graced his lips.

He detonated his mana core.

The battlefield went silent for a moment as a brilliant flash of light engulfed the area, followed by a deafening explosion. The phantom spider shattered, its oppressive field vanishing with it.

Tears streaked down Elinor's face as she seized the opportunity created by the sacrifice. Raising her staff high, she bellowed, "Focus your attacks! We cannot let the sacrifice be in vain!"

The remaining mages regrouped, forming a tight triangle. Their casting synchronized perfectly as they combined their elemental powers. A torrent of fire, ice, and lightning merged into a singular, devastating beam that surged toward the Alpha.

The hybrid roared in defiance, its spider legs anchoring it firmly to the ground. As the beam struck, its scaled hide cracked under the immense pressure. Black ichor spilled from its wounds, yet it held its ground. With a desperate leap, it evaded the beam's direct path, though it emerged heavily wounded.

Bloodied and battered, the Alpha resorted to cunning. It lunged toward a nearby rock formation, tearing chunks of stone free and hurling them at the mages. One boulder struck a younger mage, shattering his protective barrier and crushing him instantly.

The survivors adapted, abandoning large-scale elemental assaults in favor of concentrated attacks. Smaller, more potent projectiles of ice and lightning targeted the Alpha's weak points. Ice spikes, sharp as daggers, streaked through the air alongside crackling bolts of concentrated lightning.

One ice spike pierced the Alpha's leg, causing it to stumble. A bolt of lightning followed, searing the wound and eliciting an agonized shriek. Its movements became erratic as it swiped futilely at the relentless barrage.

Weakened and cornered, the Alpha's defiance began to falter as the mages pressed their advantage. The battle was far from over, but the tide had finally turned.

Elinor, her face streaked with tears and grime, directed the attack. "Focus on the joints! The gaps in its armor!" she cried, her voice hoarse. The mages adjusted their aim, targeting the vulnerable areas where the Alpha's thick plates met: the joints of its legs, the gaps beneath its armored carapace, the soft flesh around its eyes.

A well-aimed ice spike struck the Alpha's knee joint, causing it to buckle. The creature roared in pain, its weight shifting awkwardly. Taking advantage of this momentary weakness, Elinor channeled a surge of energy into her staff. A blinding flash of light erupted from its tip, followed by a concentrated beam of pure force. The beam struck the Alpha squarely in the chest, sending it staggering backward.

The other mages seized the opportunity, launching a volley of ice spikes and lightning bolts at the exposed wound. Several found their mark, piercing deep into the creature's flesh. The Alpha thrashed wildly, its legs scrambling for purchase as it began to lose its balance. With a final, agonizing roar, it collapsed to the ground, its massive body shaking the earth.

But the battle was not yet over. As the dust settled, a low, guttural growl emanated from the fallen beast. Its legs twitched, and its body began to tremble. Suddenly, with a burst of unnatural strength, the Alpha reared its head, its mandibles snapping. It lunged forward, its massive weight shifting towards two of the mages. Before Elinor could react, the Alpha's powerful jaws closed around one mage, crushing him instantly. The other mage, too slow to evade, was impaled by a massive spike that erupted from the Alpha's back as a final, desperate attack.

Elinor cried out in horror, her heart sinking as she witnessed the sacrifice of her comrades. But the Alpha's final act had sealed its own fate. The effort of the sudden attack, coupled with the accumulated injuries, proved too much. Its body shuddered one last time, and then went still. A final tremor ran through its massive form, and then silence.

Elinor stood alone amidst the carnage, the wind whipping around her. The silence was deafening, broken only by the crackling of dying embers and the distant cries of other creatures. The Alpha was dead, but the victory was pyrrhic. Two of her companions lay lifeless beside the monstrous corpse, a grim reminder of the cost of victory. She knelt beside them, tears streaming down her face. Their sacrifice had not been in vain, but the weight of their loss settled heavily upon her shoulders.

Meanwhile, Vorenza watched from the abyss, her laughter echoing as she observed the aftermath. Though the Alpha had fallen, it had decimated the mage forces, leaving the city vulnerable. Her gaze shifted to the struggling ratmen and ogre army. Without the mages, their resistance was crumbling—it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed.

However, Vorenza's amusement increased when her attention turned to Gurnak. The mage had sensed the mages' life signs fading and wore a grim expression. Yet, before he could fully process the loss, the demons began shifting their tactics. The first-tier demons, previously rushing headlong into Gurnak's gravity rain, spread out. They found weak points where the gravity magic was less intense, exploiting these openings.

Gurnak's worst fears unfolded before his eyes. Demons breached the uncorrupted land, their deaths triggering explosions of corrupted flesh that tainted the surroundings. Like a hive mind, the demons

quickly shared this information, spreading further and pressing through the weakened defenses. Gurnak gritted his teeth as the halo-like magic circle behind him dissipated, canceling the gravity rain.

High above the city, Gurnak reappeared, his piercing gaze sweeping the battlefield. He saw the lifeless bodies of the mages who had bought him time and the grieving Elinor amidst the chaos. The ratmen were pouring through the breach, their overwhelming numbers threatening to consume the city.

With a roar of pure rage, Gurnak activated the magic tower. Its ancient mechanisms hummed to life, and a brilliant pillar of light shot skyward. The battlefield darkened as an uncountable ominous spark appeared in the sky, descending rapidly.

On the ground, Sknull—the ratmen leader—squinted at the descending light. His enhanced vision revealed its true nature, and panic overtook him. Dropping his massive spear, he fled without warning his kin. But it was too late.

A colossal arrows of pure energy slammed into the battlefield, impaling countless ratmen and hybrids while sparing the ogres. The devastation didn't end there; the multiple radiant arrows pierced into the breach, moving through the underground tunnels and annihilating, and seeking out the ratmen and hybrids hiding within, no one was spared.

Gurnak floated above the battlefield, his eyes blazing with fury as he surveyed the destruction. The ratmen and hybrid were defeated, but his city was no more. Everything had been reduced to rubble. Yet, even this devastation would not halt the advancing demons.

He drifted toward the Ogre general and the remaining 99 Rune Ogres. A flicker of respect crossed Gurnak's face as he regarded his fellow green kin. Though their paths had diverged, leading to the ogres being regarded as lesser by others and the empire, Gurnak now happen to be the few who knows their strength and resolve were undeniable.

The general had the option to retreat with his men, yet he chose to stay. Gurnak's attention was drawn to the distant roars of the approaching demons, their ominous cries growing louder with each passing moment.