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Chapter 391:

He decided to speak with the general one last time. After all, it was Gurnak himself who bore the Empire’s punishment. There was no need to drag these determined warriors to their deaths alongside him.

Gurnak descended slowly, the air shimmering around him, a subtle distortion of gravity betraying his power. He landed lightly before the Ogre general, the impact barely disturbing the churned earth. The Rune Ogres surrounding their leader stood firm, clad in dark, rune-etched plate armor that gleamed dully in the firelight. Each carried a weapon similarly adorned with glowing runes, pulsing with contained power. These were the elite of the Empire, their loyalty bought not with coin but with the promise of battle and the enhancement of their already formidable strength. The general himself, a mountain of muscle and bone encased in intricately carved armor, met Gurnak’s gaze without flinching. He held a massive, Spear shaped like a halberd, the runes carved along its length blazing with a cold blue light.

"General," Gurnak began, his voice resonating with power, "I thank you for your... steadfastness." He paused, searching for the right word. "It is clear you are bound by the same oaths as I, though our paths have diverged. Yet you remain."

The general grunted, a sound that held a hint of respect. He gestured with his axe towards the encroaching horde of demons, their screeches and howls growing louder with each passing moment. "They come. Duty."

Gurnak nodded grimly. "Indeed. But this is not merely a fight. This is a... reckoning. The Empire has forsaken me, branded me as a failure, a scapegoat. They believe I deserve this fate." He swept his hand across the ruined city, the gesture encompassing the devastation. "They believe we deserve this fate. But I will not let their judgment be the final word."

He looked directly into the general’s eyes, his own burning with an almost feverish intensity. "You and your warriors have shown me more honor than the Emperor himself. You have chosen to stand with me, despite the... circumstances." He knew these ogres held him in high regard, respecting his power and his past service to the Empire. He wasn’t dragging them to their deaths; they were choosing this path alongside him.

The roars of the demons were almost upon them now. Gurnak could see their grotesque forms surging through the breach, a tide of claws, teeth, and malice. He had to be quick.

"This battle is lost," Gurnak continued, his voice low and urgent. "We cannot win here. But we can choose how we fall. We can die here, overwhelmed by this horde, or we can make them pay for every inch of ground they take. We can make them remember this day, remember the defiance of the Rune Ogres and the... failure."

He paused, letting his words sink in. "I offer you a chance to etch your names into legend. Not as mere soldiers, but as heroes who stood against the darkness itself. Will you stand with me, General, and make this a battle they will never forget?" He extended a hand towards the Ogre general, a gesture of respect and a call to arms. The fate of the remaining Rune Ogres, and perhaps a small measure of Gurnak's own redemption, hung in the balance.

He paused, letting his words sink in. "I offer you a chance to etch your names into legend. Not as mere soldiers, but as heroes who stood against the darkness itself." He looked at the general, then at the assembled ogres. "My tower provides me with near-unlimited energy. I can enhance you, grant you power beyond your current limits."

"I can make you... Gravity Knights."

The general and his men nodded as turned his attention to them. He began by subtly manipulating the gravitational field around the warriors. First, he reduced the effective weight of the ogre's armor. The immense plates, normally a burden even to an ogre, felt as light as a second skin, allowing for previously impossible agility. The ogres felt a surge of newfound speed and maneuverability. Then, Gurnak subtly altered the direction of gravity's pull, creating a constant downward force centered on the ogre's feet. This provided an incredible sense of stability and grounding, allowing them to maintain balance even under extreme duress or when delivering powerful blows. It was as if invisible anchors rooted them to the earth.

Next, Gurnak focused on enhancing the ogres' offensive capabilities. He conjured small, localized gravity wells around their weapons. As the ogres swung their massive hammers, these wells amplified the force of each blow, increasing its impact exponentially. The weapons became instruments of devastating power, capable of shattering stone and bone with ease. The ogres felt their hammers become extensions of their own will, guided by the subtle tugs and pulls of Gurnak's magic.

Finally, Gurnak wove a protective layer of compressed gravity around the ogres. This acted as an invisible armor, deflecting blows and dampening the impact of incoming attacks. The ogres experienced a strange pressure against their skin—a comforting weight that offered unparalleled protection. This

gravitational shield was not a static barrier; it shifted and flowed, reacting dynamically to incoming threats, making it incredibly difficult to breach.

The transformation was complete. The ogres, now dubbed Gravity Knights, stood taller, imbued with enhanced speed, stability, power, and protection. They moved with a newfound grace and purpose, living embodiments of Gurnak's mastery over gravity.

Gurnak turned to the general and asked, "Will you stand with me and make this a battle they will never forget?"

The general said nothing. Instead, a broad grin spread across his face. He turned to his men, a roar rumbling deep in his chest. "With me!"

He leaped forward, his eyes widening in surprise as he effortlessly cleared the ruined city walls, landing lightly on the other side. His men, similarly empowered, followed close behind. Their enhanced agility allowed them to traverse the rubble with astonishing ease.

Gurnak smiled, a grim satisfaction settling over him. He looked to the sky and offered a slight bow. He knew they were watching. The Emperor, the Imperial mages, all of them observed, documented, and learned. They dissected his methods, analyzing the transformation of the Rune Ogres into Gravity Knights, absorbing every detail of his unique application of gravity magic.

Once, he would have been among them—a detached observer, safe in the shadow of the Empire, scribbling notes and formulating theories. But his... indiscretions had changed everything. Now, it was another goblin mage's turn to sit comfortably while he, Gurnak, stood in the fray.

But if he was to be cast out, he would give them a show. He knew his innovations would be meticulously recorded and inevitably integrated into the Empire's war machine. The Gravity Knights, his utilization of the world's passive gravitational forces—everything he had created—would serve their ambitions.

Yet, they would also serve his vengeance.

Gurnak ascended into the sky, his mage tower humming with barely contained power behind him. He wasn't finished. He would make the Empire rue the day they cast him aside, leaving him vulnerable.

A mocking laugh escaped his lips. His imagination wandered for a moment. The ogre general was only at the fifth stage of power, his men at the fourth. Glancing at the army of demons surging toward them, he wondered how many such stages the Demon Queen commanded.

Vorenza, meanwhile, was laughing heavily at the abyss, taken aback by the sudden influx of souls numbering in the millions. Among them, only a few caught her interest—those of the priests and the Alpha.

For the rest, Vorenza was in such high spirits that her army experienced a rain of souls. In a short span of time, her forces grew in power, with cannon fodder suddenly ascending to the third stage.

Gazing at the city, Vorenza knew it was hers. The hologram in front of her zoomed in, displaying the Ogre general and his men. She shook her head at their desperate efforts, but her mood had been unusually light of late.

An order was issued, and her army swiftly complied. A detachment composed of two fifth-stage demons and 100 fourth-stage demons was dispatched to confront the general. Meanwhile, the first- and second-stage demons were ordered to stay clear, focusing instead on expanding the abyss's claim over the conquered land.

The hologram shifted to show the floating Gurnak. He noticed the surveillance and locked eyes with Vorenza, who offered a radiant smile as he moved closer to the display.

"The soul of a sixth-stage mage will make a delightful dessert," she mused before vanishing from the room. Moments later, she reappeared before the abyss portal, walking through it undisturbed by the flood of demons pouring forth.

Vorenza's presence was immediately felt, but all attention was soon drawn to the battlefield. Two armies were preparing to clash. The Ogre general and his enhanced men tore through the demon forces with brutal efficiency, suffering no losses of their own.

Gravity played a pivotal role in their advantage. The first- and second-stage demons struggled, losing traction with the ground and floating helplessly, making them easy targets for the Ogres' weapons. At

times, the Ogres increased the gravitational pull, rendering their enemies immobile and sealing their fate.

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The massacre was short-lived, however, as the general noticed the lesser demons actively avoiding direct confrontation. The momentum of the Ogre army faltered as their enemies' evasive maneuvers left them disoriented. This confusion deepened as the demons seemed to ignore their attackers, refusing to engage.

For the Ogres, nothing was more disheartening than being disregarded on the battlefield. Yet, they pressed on, their sense of duty compelling them to continue—even if killing enemies who wouldn't fight back felt dishonorable.

Then, the general and his army noticed an approaching force of demons moving directly toward them. For the first time, the general smiled, pleased to face a worthy challenge. He let out a roar as he and his men charged to meet the oncoming enemy.

As the distance closed, the general's expression grew serious. This was no ordinary demon force. Leading them were two figures—one male, the other female—whose power was on par with his own.

The sight made him realize that the hybrids they had fought before were pale imitations of the real thing. The three fifth-stage powerhouses locked eyes as their armies collided in a cacophony of chaos, the battlefield trembling under the weight of their clash.

The battle begins with Gorgar the ogre general raising his halberd high, slamming it into the ground. His Titan's Crucible erupts into being, as the space around twisted into a battlefield of shifting stone and jagged rock. Massive pillars rise and fall at his will, while deep chasms open randomly, threatening to swallow anything unlucky enough to step on unstable ground.

Drakthar the male demon snarls, activating his Dread Labyrinth. Shadows engulf the terrain as webs spread across the battlefield, providing him with anchoring points and hidden paths. Zythera completes the environment by summoning her Ethereal Web, overlaying an invisible lattice of magical threads that hum with latent power.

Gorgar charges forward, each step sending tremors rippling through the ground. He hurls his halberd, the spearhead glowing with gravitational energy. The weapon arcs toward Zythera, but she deflects it with a fiery shield. Drakthar uses the distraction to leap toward Gorgar, aiming for a direct strike with his venomous claws.

The ogre meets Drakthar mid-air, summoning a stone pillar that launches the spider demon upward. As Drakthar tumbles, Gorgar recalls his halberd with a gravitational pull, spinning it in a wide arc to repel any follow-up attacks.

From the safety of her webs, Zythera conjures a series of fire-laced shadow bolts, each homing in on Gorgar. He blocks with a hastily raised stone wall, but the bolts explode on impact, forcing him to retreat.

Drakthar reappears behind Gorgar, teleporting through his webs. His claws rake across Gorgar's back, venom sizzling against the ogre's thick hide. Gorgar roars in pain but retaliates by stomping the ground, creating a localized gravity well that pins Drakthar.

Seeing her team mate in danger, Zythera casts an illusionary duplicate of Drakthar. The false image rushes Gorgar, drawing his attention long enough for the real Drakthar to escape and reposition.

The ogre slams his halberd into the ground, summoning a fissure that snakes toward Zythera. She leaps onto an ethereal thread, narrowly avoiding the collapsing ground.

Realizing the pair's synergy is a significant threat, Gorgar expands his domain's influence. Massive boulders rise and orbit him like planets around a star. He hurls these projectiles with devastating force, disrupting both Dread Labyrinth and Ethereal Web.

Drakthar leaps between falling rocks, using explosive webbing to redirect their trajectory back at Gorgar. One boulder strikes the ogre's shoulder, staggering him momentarily.

The female demon conjures a fiery construct—a massive spider engulfed in flames. It charges at Gorgar, forcing him to focus on defense as Drakthar closes in again.

The fiery spider shrieked, its burning legs scraping against the shifting stone of Gorgar's Titan's Crucible. The ogre roared, swinging his halberd in a wide arc, the gravitational force pulling chunks of rock from the battlefield into the path of the flaming arachnid. The construct exploded in a shower of embers and molten rock, momentarily blinding Gorgar.

Taking advantage of the chaos, Drakthar, now perched on a high, jagged rock created by Gorgar's own domain, launched a volley of venomous spines. They hissed through the air, several finding their mark on Gorgar's thick hide. The ogre bellowed in pain, his movements becoming sluggish as the venom began to take effect. He swiped blindly with his halberd, creating a shockwave that cleared the immediate area but left him vulnerable.

Zythera, sensing an opening, wove a complex spell within her Ethereal Web. The air shimmered, and a series of shimmering portals opened around Gorgar. From each portal emerged a spectral hand, each grasping at a different part of his body. They tugged and pulled, hindering his movements and further disorienting him.

Gorgar, enraged and hampered, slammed his halberd into the ground with all his might. The Titan's Crucible bucked and shuddered, the orbiting boulders accelerating and crashing into each other, creating a chaotic storm of debris. The spectral hands dissipated under the immense energy surge, and the portals winked out of existence. However, the ground beneath Drakthar and Zythera began to crack and crumble, threatening to send them tumbling into the chasms below.

Drakthar, nimble as ever, leaped from one crumbling rock to another, using his webs to swing to safety. Zythera, however, was less fortunate. A large section of her Ethereal Web was severed by the tremors, causing her to lose her footing. She cried out as she began to fall into a deep fissure.

Drakthar, seeing his ally in peril, made a daring move. He launched a thick strand of webbing towards a falling boulder, using it as a makeshift swing to propel himself towards the chasm. He managed to grab Zythera just as she was about to fall into the darkness, pulling her back to safety.

Gorgar, seeing his enemies momentarily disorganized, seized the opportunity. He focused his power, and the remaining orbiting boulders began to glow with intense heat. With a mighty roar, he unleashed them in a concentrated barrage towards Drakthar and Zythera's position. The rocks streaked through the air like meteors, leaving trails of fire in their wake. The two demons knew they had to act quickly, or they would be consumed by the fiery onslaught.

Drakthar, with Zythera clinging to his back, spun a rapid series of webs, creating a makeshift shield just as the first burning boulder slammed into it. The webbing held for a fleeting moment, absorbing some of the impact, before disintegrating in a shower of molten rock and burning silk. The force of the blast sent Drakthar and Zythera tumbling backwards, slamming into a jagged outcropping. Zythera cried out in pain, her legs twisted at an unnatural angle.

Drakthar, his mandibles clicking in irritation, quickly assessed the situation. Zythera was crippled, their position was compromised, and Gorgar was pressing his advantage. She was now a liability. A bitter taste rose in his throat, a mix of frustration and a primal hunger. He glanced at her, her face contorted in pain, and a cruel glint entered his multifaceted eyes.

He considered his options. Devouring her now would provide a temporary boost of energy, but it would be a messy affair, and the scent of her essence would attract unwanted attention, especially with the battlefield collapsing around them. No, a swift end would be more efficient.

He shifted his weight, preparing to discard her, when a flicker of an idea sparked in his cunning mind. Perhaps she could still be of some use, a distraction, a sacrifice to buy him time. He could exploit her remaining magical power, then discard her when she was spent.

He did not gently help her to a more stable position. Instead, he roughly shoved her against the rock face, ignoring her renewed cry of pain. "Your magic," he hissed, his voice like scraping chitin, "use it. Now. Or I'll tear out your throat myself." He began weaving a complex web, not for defense, but for offense, as before. However, now he forced Zythera, through threats and painful prods, to channel her remaining magical energy into it, augmenting its power with her own.

Meanwhile, Gorgar, sensing victory was within his grasp, continued his bombardment. He roared, summoning more boulders from the depths of his Titan's Crucible, each one glowing with increasing intensity. He hurled them with pinpoint accuracy, targeting the shattered remains of Drakthar's makeshift shield, unaware of the desperate calculus being performed by the demon.

Just as another volley of flaming rocks hurtled towards them, Drakthar unleashed his creation. The intricately woven web, now pulsating with raw power fueled by both his and Zythera's energy, shot forward like a living projectile. It snaked through the air, dodging the incoming boulders with surprising agility, before wrapping itself around Gorgar's halberd.

The ogre roared in surprise as the web tightened, the volatile energy surging through the metal of his weapon and into his very being. The halberd began to glow an ominous red, the gravitational forces it

commanded fluctuating wildly. Gorgar struggled to maintain control, but the energy was too much. The halberd bucked and sparked, before finally exploding in a devastating burst of gravitational force and heat.

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The explosion ripped through the battlefield, sending shockwaves rippling outwards. Gorgar was thrown backwards, his thick hide scorched and smoking. The Titan's Crucible itself began to destabilize, massive chunks of rock breaking away and falling into the chasms below.

Drakthar, using the chaos as cover, didn't grab Zythera. Instead, he kicked her towards a particularly unstable section of the collapsing ground, a cruel parting gift. "A fitting end," he muttered, before leaping from one crumbling rock to another, prioritizing his own escape. He would use the chaos and the ogre's rage as a distraction, leaving Zythera to her fate. The explosion had bought him time, and that was all that mattered.

Gorgar, though severely wounded and disarmed, was far from defeated. He staggered to his feet, his eyes burning with rage. The loss of his halberd and the destabilization of his domain had pushed him to his limits. He roared, a sound that echoed through the collapsing battlefield, a promise of brutal retribution. The very air around him began to crackle with energy, a sign that he was about to unleash the full extent of his power, a desperate, final act of defiance.

Zythera, abandoned and injured, scrabbled desperately at the crumbling rock face. Her broken leg screamed in protest with every movement, but the ground beneath her was giving way. With a final, agonizing lurch, the section she clung to broke free, sending her tumbling towards the darkness of the chasm below. A shriek tore from her throat, a mix of pain and terror, quickly swallowed by the roar of the collapsing battlefield and Gorgar's enraged bellow.

Drakthar, meanwhile, was making good his escape. He bounded across the crumbling terrain with practiced ease, his multiple limbs providing exceptional balance and agility. He paid no heed to Zythera's fate; she was no longer his concern. His only focus was survival. He could sense the raw power radiating from Gorgar, a wave of destructive energy that threatened to engulf everything in its path. He needed to get clear, and quickly.

Gorgar, oblivious to Zythera's demise, his rage focused solely on the remaining demon, gathered the remnants of his power. The air around him crackled with raw energy, the very stones trembling beneath his feet. The chaotic vortex of debris that had once been his Titan's Crucible was now gone, replaced by

a dense sphere of pure, destructive force. It pulsed with an inner light, a miniature sun of contained rage and despair.

Drakthar, glancing back, saw the horrifying spectacle. The sphere was expanding rapidly, consuming everything in its path. He knew he couldn't outrun it. He had to find a way to escape its blast radius, or he would be obliterated.

Desperation fueled his actions. He spotted a narrow crack in the space created by their combined domain, barely wide enough for him to squeeze through. It was a risky move; the fissure could collapse at any moment, trapping him inside. But it was his only chance.

He lunged towards the fissure, forcing his way through the narrow opening. Jagged rocks scraped against his chitinous armor, tearing at his flesh, but he pushed onward, driven by the primal instinct to survive. He squeezed through just as the sphere of energy reached the opening, the intense heat searing his back.

On the other side of the fissure, Drakthar collapsed, panting heavily. He was battered, bruised, and bleeding, but he was alive. He had escaped the worst of Gorgar's final attack. He could still feel the shockwave reverberating through the rock, a testament to the devastating power that had been unleashed.

Behind him, the world was consumed by white light and a deafening roar. The collapsing battlefield, already scarred and broken, was completely obliterated, leaving behind a crater of unimaginable size. Gorgar, in his final act of defiance, had taken his own life, and very nearly taken Drakthar with him.

Drakthar, recovering his breath, slowly rose to his feet. He looked back at the devastated landscape, a desolate wasteland where once a battlefield had stood. There was no sign of Zythera, no sign of Gorgar, only the gaping wound in the earth. He clicked his mandibles, a sound that echoed in the silence, a grim acknowledgment of the cost of survival. He had lived, but at the expense of his ally, a sacrifice he would not dwell on. Such was the way of demons.

His attention meanwhile was turned to the soul of the general angrily staring at him and Zythera's own soul who seemed to know what was waiting for her. Drakthar, with blood all over his body, opened his mouth as both souls flew into it.

The taste of the souls was... satisfying. Gorgar's essence was a raw, burning rage, a volatile energy that crackled in Drakthar's core. Zythera's, however, was different. It was laced with fear, resignation, and a faint hint of bitterness. He savored it nonetheless, the power surging through him, knitting his wounds closed and bolstering his strength. He could feel the shift, the almost tangible push towards the sixth stage of demonic evolution, but it was as if an invisible barrier held him back. Frustration flickered within him, quickly suppressed. Patience was a virtue he rarely practiced, but he understood the necessity of it now.

His attention, drawn by the residual tremors in the air, snapped upwards. Vorenza, his mistress, stood poised against Gurnak, the two titans locked in a silent confrontation. The air around them shimmered with barely contained power, a storm waiting to break. Drakthar's multifaceted eyes narrowed, a predatory gleam returning to them. Gurnak was a prize, a source of power that could catapult him far beyond his current limitations. The thought ignited a burning desire within him, a hunger that overshadowed even the recent battle.

But then, something shifted. Vorenza's head snapped back, her face rotating a full 180 degrees, her eyes, now facing directly behind her, locking onto Drakthar. The sight was unnatural, horrifying, a grotesque display of power that sent a chill down Drakthar's spine despite his demonic nature. He flinched, instinctively recoiling, a primal fear gripping him. It was a clear warning, a reminder of his place in the hierarchy. He was a tool, a pawn in Vorenza's grand game, and any ambition that overstepped his station would be met with swift and brutal punishment.

He immediately bowed his head, lowering his gaze, acknowledging his subservience. The grotesque image of Vorenza's inverted face lingered in his mind, a chilling reminder of her absolute authority. He dared not look up again.

Vorenza's face snapped back to Gurnak, who did his best to hide the surprise on his face. He truly hadn't expected Vorenza, the Demon Queen, to confront him face-to-face.

He had imagined his end would come after fighting through her endless army, with Vorenza herself delivering the final blow. Yet here she was, standing before him, defying all his expectations.

His heart raced as he struggled to maintain composure. This was his chance—a rare opportunity to strike at one of the invasion's leaders and prove his worth to the empire. But as he looked at the easygoing smile on the Demon Queen's face, he couldn't shake the sense of unease. Something about it felt utterly wrong.

Then, realization struck him. Gurnak glanced down from their vantage point in the sky, surveying the uncorrupted land below and the still-approaching demon army. They were clearly in untainted territory, so why wasn’t the world’s pressure targeting Vorenza as it should?

He shook his head. "No, the pressure is there... but not as strong as it should be."

Vorenza seemed to read his thoughts, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. "Such a late reaction. I was expecting more."

"How?" Gurnak demanded.

Before he could say more, the sky darkened, and a massive eye appeared, its gaze fixed on both of them.

He wasn’t the only one taken aback. The empire’s forces were equally confused by the sudden phenomenon.

Vorenza frowned as she stared at the ominous eye in the sky before shifting her gaze back to Gurnak. "Don’t be so serious," she said with a smirk. "The rodents you just exterminated left me a wonderful gift."

"They worshipped me as a goddess. They accepted and embraced me..." Her voice trailed off as a flicker of confusion crossed her face. Her attention shifted to the goblin mage standing behind Gurnak and then to the towering mage tower beyond him.

She licked her lips, a glint of curiosity in her eyes. "Your world holds secrets that now greatly interest me."

Even as she spoke, Vorenza was inwardly sighing. If her suspicions were correct, the two gods allied with Zarvok were doing an exceptional job. Her progress in breaching this stronghold might not be something to celebrate after all, especially if her fellow Demon King was making similar strides.

Her words were met with a wave of heavy pressure emanating from Gurnak. Meanwhile, the giant eye in the sky slowly retreated, and the heavens returned to normal.

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Far away, in another city, Vellok paced restlessly. His agitation was palpable as he muttered to himself, "The seal... Were those gods targeting the seal?"

"But there's been no sign of it being touched or weakened," he continued, frowning. "So her claim about the ratmen's worship shouldn't be possible."

Vellok's frustration grew until his eyes glowed with a golden light. He cast his gaze toward the empire, seeking the emperor. The emperor, sensing Vellok's scrutiny, raised a hand and revealed the seal.

At first glance, the seal appeared intact, but upon closer inspection, a faint crack was visible. The golden light in Vellok's eyes dimmed as he stumbled backward in shock.

"No wonder," he whispered. "Even a crack was enough to provoke the world's response."

Back on the battlefield, Gurnak and Vorenza stood locked in a tense standoff. The Demon Queen, skilled at reading the hearts and minds of others, seemed to know exactly what Gurnak was about to do.

Gurnak no longer carried himself with any sense of grandeur. His plans to use the mage tower against the demon invasion had taken an unexpected turn, complicated by Vorenza's growing curiosity. He clenched his fists, his thoughts resolute. "The tower can't stay here any longer."

A phantom chain materialized in Gurnak's hands. Their eyes clashed like duelists preparing for battle. Vorenza reached out toward the portal from a distance, summoning a massive, clawed hand that lunged to seize the tower.

Gurnak tightened his grip, and the sound of shattering glass echoed across the battlefield as he severed his connection to the tower. Simultaneously, a portal opened beneath the structure, preparing to swallow it whole.

Vorenza’s roar of rage shook the air. "That is mine!"

Gurnak shook his head firmly. "No, it’s not."

The scaled claw latched onto the tower, gripping it tightly and pulling with immense force to drag it out of the portal.

The hand strained, its muscles bulging as it fought against the tower’s unyielding mass. The ancient structure refused to budge, its stone walls remaining steadfast.

"Enough," Gurnak murmured, raising his free hand.

"Stubborn creature," he muttered, raising his hand. The phantom chain in his grasp shimmered, extending towards the scaled hand. It wrapped around the monstrous appendage, tightening like a constrictor.

The phantom chain remained taut around Vorenza’s monstrous limb, but now his focus shifted to the tower itself. The air around it shimmered and warped as Gurnak manipulated gravity itself. The tower began to lose its gravitational pull—not in weight, but in its connection to the world. It became weightless, like a feather caught in a gentle breeze.

Vorenza roared again, her frustration mounting as the tower, now defying the laws of physics, began to rise effortlessly. The portal, unable to stabilize the shifting mass, flickered violently, its edges writhing in chaos. With a final, furious shriek, Vorenza was forced to release her grip.

The tower ascended smoothly, as if freed from an underwater current, soaring above the battlefield.

Gurnak then turned his attention to the portal. Instead of closing it, he reversed its flow. The swirling vortex began to spin in the opposite direction, its pull becoming a powerful outward force. The scaled hand, still bound by the phantom chain, was violently repelled, flung backward with tremendous force.

Vorenza shrieked in surprise, canceling her clawed projection to avoid being dragged further by the vortex’s relentless push.

With a final surge of energy, Gurnak gently guided the floating tower through the reversed portal. It vanished in a flash of light, transported to its new location. The portal then collapsed in on itself, leaving no trace of its presence or the tower's original position.

Vorenza staggered, reeling from the loss of her prize and the sudden reversal of power. Her burning eyes locked onto Gurnak, fury radiating from her very being. "You dare, filthy creature?" she snarled, her voice dripping with venom.

Gurnak simply shrugged, allowing the phantom chain to dissolve into the air. "Filthy creature? No. I merely retrieved what was mine."

He met her glare with calm defiance, though a simmering anger flickered beneath his exterior. "Consider this a lesson. Some things are simply beyond your reach."

Nothing was said as Energy began twisting the air around Vorenza, done was the human figure she took in place was a huge spider demon. Her eight legs shifted rhythmically, and her multifaceted eyes gleamed with malevolence.

Gurnak responded equally, The goblins of this world are unlike the normal goblins as they are easily the size of a normal human. The mage robe on Gurnak's body was carried away by the wind.

Energy began rising from his body, shredding the top he had on, showing his thin muscular body that was growing in size. Behind him appeared a huge magic circle like a Halo hanging behind him. The gravitational force from him made the rubble left of the city began floating to the sky where they were.

Gurnak stands on a floating chunk of rock, his squat, muscular goblin frame outlined by shimmering gravitational distortions. He raises one clawed hand, and the battlefield bends to his will. Chunks of rock levitate, orbiting him like moons. The pull of gravity shifts erratically, making the ground beneath them unstable.

Gurnak moved first, his hand flicking downward. A wave of intense gravitational force crushed the floating rock beneath Vorenza, sending cracks spiderwebbing through the rock. Vorenza leaped, her movements unnaturally swift, and spun a cascade of webs infused with the threads of concept. The

webs didn’t just ensnare matter—they disrupted gravity’s flow, creating pockets where Gurnak’s pull became chaotic.

"You fight gravity itself," Gurnak growled, raising his hand again. The air warped as he conjured a localized black hole, dragging Vorenza’s web into its event horizon. The apperance of the black hole had a devastating effect on the surrounding as thing were being pulled into it.

Vorenza hissed, anchoring herself with her web to an unseen space. Her silk shimmered with ethereal light as it resisted the black hole’s pull, and she launched herself at Gurnak with terrifying speed.

The goblin cancelled the skill and dodged with a burst of altered gravity, soaring higher into the air. A staff appeared in his hand that emitted a pulse, bending space itself. Vorenza was caught mid-leap, her trajectory diverted into a nearby rock spire. She collided hard, the impact sending cracks through her carapace.

But Vorenza retaliated, unleashing a burst of webbing infused with threads of time. The strands struck Gurnak, freezing his motion for a fleeting second. In that moment, Vorenza pounced, her fangs aiming for his chest.

Gurnak raised a clawed hand, as Vorenza buckled while an invisible force attempted to drag her down. The air groaned as gravity itself rebelled against natural order. Vorenza countered with a flick of her front legs, shooting silken strands infused with metaphysical energy. These webs didn’t merely bind—they halted the concept of "falling," rendering Gurnak’s manipulation of gravity inert around her.

Gurnak scowled, leaping high into the air and altering his personal gravity mid-jump. His body zipped in erratic arcs, avoiding Vorenza’s attempts to ensnare him.

Gurnak broke free with a gravitational shockwave, hurling Vorenza backward. She hissed in frustration as blood seeped from her wounds. Gurnak pressed his advantage, manipulating the battlefield to his will. Floating boulders crashed down were Vorenza was, pulled by enhanced gravity, while celestial chains formed from the ether wrapped around Vorenza.

Vorenza screamed, her webs surging outward like a tidal wave, ensnaring the chains and snapping them. She chanted in an unearthly language, summoning a colossal spider-like avatar composed of her own life force and the World Law of Dominion. The construct was so big it’s head penetrated the clouds and

towered over Gurnak, who summoned his own astral manifestation—a celestial chain, glowing like a fragment of the night sky.

The two constructs clashed, the shockwaves tearing the valley apart. Gurnak poured his strength into his chains, binding the spider avatar and dragging it down. Vorenza howled, her form flickering, but she refused to relent, weaving a final web that pierced through Gurnak's celestial construct, unraveling it.

With the appearance of their avatar came the manifestation of a judge-like symbol, which immediately caught the attention of the two combatants. Gurnak wore a cautious expression, while Vorenza's face lit up with glee.

Recalling the laws governing Six-Stage beings, Gurnak surveyed the battlefield and noticed how drastically it had changed. The remnants of what should have marked the presence of a city were now completely erased.

Even the advancing demon army had halted, maintaining a wary distance to avoid becoming collateral damage in this escalating conflict.

Vorenza, though grinning outwardly, was silently hesitating. Mages were always troublesome, and she had assumed this goblin mage would be an easy target. Yet, here he was, proving to be a far greater challenge than she anticipated.

If there was one thing they both agreed on in this battle, it was that they needed the world intact. This meant taking their fight elsewhere. Eyeing the judge-like symbol, Vorenza considered her options. Abyssal demons might not answer to such symbols, but their appearance could still serve as a useful diversion to relocate the fight.

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Gurnak grimaced, understanding the same necessity. Summoning his remaining strength, he reversed gravity, propelling both himself and Vorenza into the upper atmosphere. Their new battleground stretched across the vast expanse of stars.

Vorenza clung to a thread anchored to nothingness, her body flashing with ethereal light as the wounds across her form slowly healed. Before her, Gurnak floated, his aura blazing brighter than ever.

"You’re strong, Vorenza, but this ends now," he declared.

Raising his hand, he conjured a massive singularity—a black hole so dense it distorted light and time itself. Though not a true singularity, it operated under the logic of one, its pull intensifying with each passing second. Vorenza screamed as the force dragged her closer to oblivion. Yet, as the event horizon loomed ever nearer, a chilling chuckle echoed across the void.

The singularity’s pull faltered, then shuddered. Gurnak’s eyes widened as shimmering strands of web, thinner than starlight, began to encase the black hole—not physically, but conceptually. She was ensnaring the very essence of spacetime that defined his creation, weaving a metaphysical cage around it. The singularity, its immense power contained, shrank rapidly, dissipating into harmless cosmic dust.

Vorenza’s form, flickering like a dying ember, reconstituted before him. A cruel smile spread across her face.

"You thought to trap me in nothingness? Fool. Nothingness is my domain."

Vorenza, a demon who had ascended to the prestigious sixth stage of a uniqu power, a practitioner of what she calls "concept-weaving." Before embarking on her current path, she followed the more traditional route of a mage, relying on spells and incantations built upon the innate magical knowledge of her demon race. Her journey was marked by dedication to the arcane arts and a deep curiosity about the limits of magical theory.

It was during her advancement to the fifth stage that Vorenza experienced a profound revelation. While experimenting with complex spellwork, she began to see the limitations of traditional casting compared to the potential of her race’s innate gifts. Demons of her lineage were born with a peculiar and often underappreciated talent: the ability to produce enchanted webs. These webs, usually used for physical ensnarement or protection, intrigued Vorenza. She saw a deeper potential in them—an ability to entangle more than just physical objects.

Abandoning conventional spells was not an easy choice. The structured path of spellcasting was familiar and reliable, and breaking away from it to pioneer her web magic required years of experimentation and failure. Despite the challenges, Vorenza persisted, honing her craft until she could use her webs as conduits for magic.

By the time she perfected her art, Vorenza had transformed her webs into a medium for ensnaring concepts—abstract ideas and forces of reality. This ability, though not infinite in duration, allowed her to temporarily bind a concept within her enchanted webs, manipulating it to her advantage.

Vorenza's magic didn't just stop at manipulation. The very act of weaving magic into her webs allowed her to bypass the rigid structures of traditional spellcasting. She could achieve effects that would normally require extensive rituals with a flick of her wrist and a strand of her enchanted silk.

While her abilities were formidable, they were not without limits. Vorenza could not ensnare concepts indefinitely. The larger or more complex the concept, the shorter the duration she could hold it. Additionally, the process of weaving and maintaining such webs required immense concentration and magical energy. Over Reliance on this power could leave her vulnerable, especially in prolonged battles.

Furthermore, Vorenza had to balance her creativity with the constraints of the natural laws. Attempting to ensnare concepts too vast or abstract—like time or death—risked severe backlash, as these forces resisted being bound even for a moment.

Gurnak grimaced. His brute force approach had failed. He shifted his stance, realizing he needed a different tactic. Rather than summoning more energy, he focused on observation. He studied the subtle, rhythmic pulses of the web-like patterns surrounding her, noting how they resonated with the very fabric of reality.

Vorenza, sensing his change in demeanor, tilted her head mockingly. "Intrigued, are you? It's far too late for observation, Gurnak."

She extended her hand, and shimmering strands of web shot toward him—not to bind him physically, but to ensnare his perception. As the threads brushed against his senses, Gurnak felt a strange disorientation. The stars swirled, his balance wavered, and for a fleeting moment, he perceived himself as a minuscule, insignificant speck adrift in an endless void.

But Gurnak was no stranger to mental assaults. Closing his eyes, he anchored himself within his own consciousness. He visualized an unyielding core, a fixed point of clarity amid the chaos. The disorientation lessened, but mere resistance wouldn't suffice. He needed to counter her assault.

Though he couldn't directly combat her metaphysical weaving with raw gravity, he could disrupt its effectiveness. Gurnak began manipulating the gravitational fields around them with surgical precision. Rather than destructive force, he introduced subtle fluctuations and localized distortions, destabilizing the fabric of reality itself.

Vorenza's eyes narrowed as she sensed the shift. Her webs, designed to latch onto stable concepts, began to waver. The shifting gravitational fields created a state of constant flux, making it nearly impossible for her to anchor her threads to the metaphysical structures she sought to control. It was like trying to tie knots in a rope that constantly unraveled.

She retaliated, directing strands of web toward Gurnak to bind him to a fixed point in spacetime. But Gurnak anticipated this, creating localized gravity wells—small, intense points of attraction that diverted the webs from their trajectory. He wasn't destroying the threads, merely redirecting them, ensuring they missed their mark.

As Vorenza expended more energy readjusting her weaving, frustration flickered across her face. She realized Gurnak wasn't trying to overpower her webs but was instead creating an environment where they were fundamentally ineffective. Her greatest strength was becoming a liability.

In a desperate bid, she shifted tactics, attempting to weave a web to ensnare the very concept of gravity itself. It was an intricate and ambitious move, requiring immense concentration. But as she focused on this monumental task, Gurnak seized the opportunity.

He didn't interfere with her attempt to trap gravity. Instead, he amplified the gravitational fluctuations he had already introduced. The subtle distortions escalated into a chaotic storm of gravitational waves, a cascade effect that rippled through the void.

Vorenza's control faltered, and for the first time, doubt flickered in her eyes. Gurnak smirked. This battle was far from over.

This sudden surge of gravitational instability completely disrupted Vorenza's delicate weaving. The strands of her web, meant to ensnare gravity, were now being tossed about by the very force they were trying to control. The concept of gravity, bombarded by Gurnak's manipulations, became too volatile for her webs to hold. The attempt to ensnare gravity backfired spectacularly, creating a feedback loop that further destabilized her other webs.

Vorenza cried out as her carefully constructed webs began to unravel. She was not defeated, but she was severely hampered. Gurnak, by using his mastery of gravity not to directly counter her webs but to create an environment hostile to them, had gained a significant advantage. He had shown that even a specialized metaphysical weaver could be outmaneuvered by a master of a fundamental force of the universe, not by brute force, but by clever manipulation of the battlefield itself.

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Seeing Vorenza falter, Gurnak pressed his advantage. He continued to manipulate the gravitational field with increasing complexity, creating swirling vortexes that further disrupted her concentration. Vorenza, forced into a defensive posture, wove smaller, localized webs, creating shields of solidified energy.

Gurnak then created the gravitational pulse, a shockwave of gravitational force that shattered Vorenza's shields and disrupted her connection to the metaphysical realm. However, this time, instead of launching her away, the pulse served a different purpose. It was a distraction, a way to create a momentary opening.

As Vorenza reeled from the impact, Gurnak, knowing he was nearing his limit, prepared his final attack. He gathered the remaining gravitational energy around himself, compressing it into a dense sphere. This wasn't a singularity, but a highly compressed mass of gravitational energy, a miniature gravity bomb. He intended to detonate it at close range, a desperate, all-or-nothing attack.

But Vorenza, despite being weakened and disoriented, was thinking of ways to counter this . Even as the gravitational pulse hit her, she had begun to weave a new web, a web not of defense or control, but of manipulation. This web, far simpler than her previous constructs, targeted a single, crucial concept: momentum.

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As Gurnak charged forward, the gravity bomb in his hands glowing intensely, Vorenza unleashed her web. It didn't ensnare him physically, but instead subtly altered the momentum of his attack. The web didn't stop him, but it changed the trajectory of his charge, ever so slightly. Instead of a direct hit, Gurnak's attack would now pass just beside her.

Gurnak, realizing the shift at the last moment, tried to correct his course, but it was too late. The momentum of his attack, now subtly altered, carried him past Vorenza. The gravity bomb detonated, not on her, but in the empty space behind her. The explosion, though powerful, missed its primary target.

However, Vorenza had used the explosion to her advantage. The concussive force, combined with the gravitational distortions caused by the blast, created a momentary window of absolute chaos. It was in this chaotic moment that she struck.

She had been weaving another web during the brief exchange, a web of causality. This web was far more intricate, targeting the very link between cause and effect. As Gurnak was still reeling from the explosion, Vorenza unleashed her web.

The effect was subtle, but devastating. The web didn't directly harm Gurnak, but it altered the immediate consequences of his actions. The residual energy of the exploding gravity bomb, instead of dissipating harmlessly into space, was now redirected, focused back upon Gurnak himself.

The redirected energy slammed into Gurnak, amplified by the altered causality. He cried out in pain as the force of his own attack rebounded upon him. The combination of the explosion and the redirected energy was too much. His form began to crack, his energy dissipating into the void.

Vorenza, weakened but victorious, watched as Gurnak's form dissolved, his essence fading into the cosmic dust.

Vorenza had paid a steep price for her last move in the battle. Her once-pristine form now bore cracks, like shattered porcelain barely held together. Her magic flickered, and her ethereal webs, usually vibrant and strong, shimmered faintly, showing her dwindling strength. But the most pressing issue wasn't her injuries—it was the overwhelming presence of multiple powerful beings, their senses locked onto her. Among them, none were weaker than Gurnak, the goblin mage she had just bested.

The empire had no intention of allowing a weakened demon lord to retreat unscathed.

As Vorenza hovered near the void, the retreating shield surrounding the planet vanished. From the planet's surface, a colossal, flaming arm erupted into the void. Its size was unimaginable, its heat so

intense that Vorenza's ethereal web, her greatest weapon, began to fray and weaken. The oppressive energy radiating from the hand threatened to crush her entirely.

Time was running out.

Despite her dire circumstances, Vorenza's sharp eyes caught sight of a glimmer in the void—the soul of Gurnak, floating amidst the chaos. The ogre general's soul, vibrant and potent, was a rare prize. Grabbing hold of it could restore her strength and allow her to escape the looming threat.

But Vorenza was not one to settle for mere survival. She saw the potential for something greater. Souls like Gurnak's, brimming with raw power, could do more than heal her wounds—they could push her closer to transcending her current limits. The temptation was too great to ignore.

With a calculated motion, she extended a thread of her ethereal web toward the soul. The web latched onto it, and with a decisive tug, she began reeling it in, her weakened body glowing faintly as the soul's energy surged toward her.

The flaming hand continued its relentless approach, its immense heat intensifying with every passing moment. Vorenza felt the oppressive force bearing down on her, threatening to reduce her to nothingness. But she had planned for this.

With a deft tug on another web, she activated a pre-prepared escape mechanism. In an instant, her surroundings shifted, the fiery arm's overwhelming heat replaced by the cold, familiar red sky of the Abyss.

Vorenza allowed herself a brief moment of satisfaction. She had not only escaped but secured Gurnak's soul, a resource that would ensure her recovery and potentially elevate her power. But she knew the empire would not give up so easily. This was just the beginning.

Far from Vorenza's escape, Drakthar, a spider demon who had recently grown stronger after defeating the ogre general, was reveling in his newfound might. He was in the midst of telling his tale of the fight when, without warning, his surroundings shifted.

One moment, Drakthar stood in the abyss, triumphant. The next, he was floating in the void, utterly disoriented.

Before he could comprehend what had happened, his eyes caught the same flaming hand that had threatened Vorenza. Unlike her, Drakthar had no means of escape. The fiery appendage reached him, its heat so intense that his body disintegrated almost instantly. His soul, too, was incinerated, erased from existence with no hope of resurrection.

From the void, a goblin mage emerged, his presence marked by an aura of intense heat. His flaming hair blazed like a living inferno, and his fiery eyes glowed as he surveyed his surroundings. He was no ordinary mage; his mastery of flame magic and his sharp intellect had earned him a reputation as one of the empire's most formidable trackers.

As his gaze swept across the desolate expanse, he searched for traces of the disturbance that had drawn him here. His brow furrowed in frustration—until his eyes settled on something unusual.

High above, perched on the surface of the moon, was a massive, otherworldly plant. Its sprawling vines wrapped around the lunar surface like a predatory embrace, and at its center, a single, grotesque eye stared back at him. The mage froze, his fiery aura dimming slightly as he locked eyes with the unsettling entity.

The air grew thick with tension, and then, suddenly, a voice echoed in his mind.

The voice was calm but carried an undeniable weight of authority. It spoke in the language of the gods—a language that few mortals could understand, let alone hear.

"Touch this plant, and this moon will fall upon your world. Should you somehow stop it, your world will face an unrelenting hunger that will devour everything in its path."

The mage's fiery eyes widened, and his fists clenched tightly. The implications of the message were clear: one of the gods, long sought after by the empire, was already interfering in this world. The empire's mission to locate and control divine entities had just grown far more complicated.

The goblin mage stared at the moon, his mind racing. The threat was not to be taken lightly, and the presence of a god's influence here was an ominous development. He knew he couldn't act recklessly—not with stakes this high.

With a final glance at the massive, watchful eye, the mage took a deep breath. Sparks of ember flared around him as he disappeared into the void, leaving behind the eerie, foreboding presence of the moon-bound plant.

As the mage vanished, his thoughts burned like the fire within him. He now carried vital information—knowledge of a god's involvement, a potential threat to his world, and a dangerous choice that could have far-reaching consequences. His return to the empire would bring more questions than answers, and the path forward would demand both caution and boldness.

In the dimly lit office adorned with ancient tomes and glowing sigils, Vellok sat at his desk, a faint smile curling his lips. The flame mage's report lay before him, and though it carried a mix of promising news and ominous foreboding, it was a revelation he had long awaited. The gods were no longer hidden.

The invasion had left the empire questioning whether divine figures were truly involved, but now there was no doubt. The discovery came at a price—disruption to their plans and a dire warning from a godly entity—but the certainty was worth it. A divine figure had set its gaze upon their world.

Vellok's attention then shifted to the weakened Vorenza. Her escape had been a loss, but it was also an opportunity. For now, she would retreat to the abyss, gathering her powerhouses to protect her during her recovery. That left the corrupted lands she'd claimed vulnerable, and Vellok intended to capitalize on the moment.

"If we move swiftly," he mused, "we can reclaim the territory and force her to start over once she heals."

His thoughts turned to the experiments left behind by the empire's mages—unproven, dangerous tools meant to cleanse corruption and reshape the land. Until now, there had been no opportunity to test their effectiveness, but the current situation was the perfect proving ground.

Standing, Vellok released a pulse of energy through his city, his presence brushing over every living thing within its bounds. His expression darkened as he failed to detect an anomaly.

"A ratman?" he muttered, his smile fading. It was strange. A single ratman had slipped into the city amidst the civilians fleeing from Gurnak's destruction, but it had evaded his detection for far too long.

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For someone as meticulous as Vellok, such an oversight was troubling.

Elsewhere, on a secluded path winding through an untouched forest, a massive carriage moved steadily forward. Its wheels creaked softly, pulled by a strange creature with multiple legs and an almost reptilian appearance. A goblin in pristine butler attire sat on the creature, his expression stoic and unreadable.

Inside the carriage, Ikenga and Keles lay on their respective beds, recovering from their earlier ordeal. The clash between Gurnak and Vorenza had been a sight to behold, one that resonated across the entire world. Every being at the sixth stage or higher had felt it, their attention drawn to the battle like moths to a flame.

For Ikenga, it was the first time witnessing such a fight at that level.

The uniqueness of the sixth stage had been laid bare for both watching gods. Keles had whispered to Ikenga when the clash began, her tone a mix of reverence and curiosity:

"So this is the path taken by those who do not ascend."

Ikenga had nodded, his gaze fixed on the distant echoes of power. What struck him most was that these beings' domains—the usual limits of their influence—had expanded far beyond the norm. It wasn't just a clash of powers within isolated territories. Their influence now spanned the entire world.

For a brief moment, Ikenga let go of his resistance and allowed himself to be drawn into the spectacle. His perspective shifted, and what he saw left him in awe.

The world seemed overlaid with another layer of reality, a realm where the fundamental laws of existence bent and twisted under the wills of the two combatants.

In this space, Gurnak's domain appeared as a gravitational nexus, a swirling vortex that pulled everything into its dense, inescapable core. Vorenza's domain, in contrast, was a labyrinth of webs that extended endlessly in all directions, ensnaring concepts and warping them to her advantage.

Ikenga's attention briefly shifted to the goblin mage who had witnessed one of his eyes. Ikenga frowned, realizing the oversight. He had neglected to place a curse to conceal the eye's presence, deeming it unnecessary at the time.

But now, he understood his mistake. The mage had seen too much, and that knowledge would inevitably complicate matters.

Still, what better way to make an entrance to a gathering of mages than having a massive eye watching from one of their moons?

Ikenga's attention shifted to an intriguing figure discovered by his marked ratmen.

Having spent considerable time among demons, Ikenga had grown attuned to their energy signatures. This particular ratman was enveloped by a distinct demonic presence—one bearing the mark of a spider. Within the ratman, a seed-like structure was gestating, its essence unmistakably demonic.

Ikenga observed how the energy sought to corrupt the ratman, who, against all odds, clung desperately to his will. Yet Ikenga knew it was only a matter of time before the ratman's resolve weakened.

The spider's mark immediately brought to mind Vorenza, the spider demon queen. Was this her doing? Perhaps a contingency plan if she hadn't survived her encounter with the mages?

A flicker of respect and irritation crossed Ikenga's eyes. Demons truly are tenacious creatures, he mused. The more he studied them, the more their resilience impressed—and annoyed—him.

The mages seemed aware of this as well. The fire mages, in particular, had been thorough in incinerating every trace of the fifth-stage demon they had slain.

Keles, lying beside him, stirred. Ikenga noticed the look of annoyance clouding her face.

"What is it, Kel?" he asked.

"A waste," Keles replied, her voice tinged with disgust.

"What's a waste?" Ikenga asked, sitting up to face her.

"The gravity mage's soul," Keles sighed as she rose to a sitting position. Her bare upper body was a sight that momentarily distracted Ikenga.

"I feel like I've lost an opportunity to learn something about my divinity," she continued. "This world has no realm of death, no underworld where souls go after they perish. Here, souls—depending on their strength before death—wander aimlessly, fragmented and incomplete, until they dissolve into energy to nourish the world."

She paused, her tone shifting to one of frustration. "I am the goddess of darkness and death. In our world, the underworld manages souls without my interference, though it remains under my domain. This is the first time my divinity has spurred me to take direct action."

Intrigued, Ikenga leaned closer. "We've witnessed countless deaths since arriving in this world, yet your divinity never reacted before. Do you think it's connected to his strength?"

Keles frowned, a thoughtful expression overtaking her features. "That could be it. I've never had the chance to claim the soul of someone beyond the fifth stage."

"What feelings did your divinity convey to you?" Ikenga pressed.

"A deep hunger," Keles murmured, her brow furrowed. "Not a physical hunger, but a... yearning. A void that recognized a kindred spirit, a power that resonated with my own. It was as if a piece of myself was just out of reach, a potential that slipped through my fingers." She looked at Ikenga, her eyes filled with a strange mixture of frustration and fascination. "It was almost... painful."

Ikenga considered this. "So, your divinity recognized a connection to the gravity mage's soul, specifically because of its power level?"

Keles nodded slowly. "It seems so. Souls of lesser beings simply dissipate, their energy returning to the world without a trace. But this... this was different. It was a soul of immense power, a soul that held a fragment of something... more. Something akin to divinity itself. And it was... wasted."

She rose to her feet, pacing restlessly. "My own domain is order within death. The natural cycle, the balance. To shepherd souls to their proper rest, to guide them through the transition. It is a sacred duty, a fundamental law of existence. But this world... it denies that. It leaves these powerful souls adrift, fragmented, denying them the natural progression, the peace that should be their due." She stopped, her gaze fixed on the smoldering remains of the battlefield. "It's an insult, Ikenga. An insult to the very concept of death itself."

She turned back to him, her expression hardening. "Vorenza... she would have devoured it. Consumed that immense power, twisting it to her own ends. It's a grotesque perversion of the natural order." A shudder ran through her. "But even worse... even if it had simply dissipated into the world... it would have been a tragedy. Such a potent soul, denied the experience of the afterlife, denied the embrace of true death. It's like denying a king his rightful burial, leaving his spirit to wander the earth in torment."

Ikenga understood now. It wasn't about Vorenza gaining power, or even about Keles's own power being diminished. It was about the fundamental injustice of denying such a powerful soul its rightful passage. "So, it's not about preventing Vorenza from gaining strength, but about... ensuring the natural order is upheld?"

Keles met his gaze, her eyes filled with a deep sorrow. "It is about more than just preventing Vorenza from getting stronger. It is about the soul itself. Such a powerful being, denied the natural cycle, the journey beyond. It is an affront to my very nature. My divinity aches for it, not to possess it, but to guide it, to offer it the peace it deserves." She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "In our world, every soul, regardless of their station in life, experiences the afterlife. It is a fundamental right. But here... here, that right is denied to the most powerful of them all. It's a profound loss."

Ikenga placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I understand," he said softly. "It's not about power, but about principle. About respecting the natural order of things."

"But," Ikenga's tone turned serious, causing Keles to look at him, her brow furrowed. "You should never let it drive you out of your character. This is what makes us different from normal ascended gods who

are driven by their divinity. We are origin gods, and divinity is a right born with us; we command our divinity."

"I am happy that you got to experience such feelings and emotions," he continued, his voice hardening, "but seeing as you are so deeply affected by these emotions, I have to interfere, sister."

The shift in address, the absence of the familiar 'Kel,' made Keles frown, a chill creeping down her spine. Ikenga's stoic, almost cold eyes staring into hers showed he didn't care for her discomfort. "I had a similar experience in the abyssal layer we found ourselves in. My divinity resonated with it, feeling it lacking in the natural order which I could provide."

"It was quite the novel feeling and experience," he admitted, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes, "but unlike you, I didn't let those feelings consume me. I observed and communicated instead, which made me learn that if I had acted on my divinity's impulses, my connection to our world would have been severed, and I would have become the nature of the abyss itself."

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He paused, his gaze unwavering. "The experience made me understand the fear our mother, Nana, has for our safety and our decisions. It made me understand how... coveted we are. Outside of our world, we are a delectable prize, a piece of pie most things want to grab a slice of."

"This world lacks a place for the dead. Your divinity's feeling wasn't wrong; what is wrong is your response to its prompting. The Keles I know represent death—cold, yet with an alluring embrace to welcome those who pass. But right now," he stated, his voice flat and unforgiving, "the one standing in front of me is not her." His hand dropped from her shoulder as if it had suddenly turned to ice. "You are allowing an alien world to dictate your actions rather than you dictating what you will do. You are Keles goddess of death, not a puppet of some world's lack of order."

Keles stood there, stunned. Ikenga's words hung in the air, sharp and cutting. The casual dismissal of her emotions, the cold assessment of her character, the stark reminder of their unique status as origin gods—it all hit her with the force of a physical blow. She felt a strange mix of anger, hurt, and a chilling sense of self-doubt. Had she truly strayed so far from herself?

She opened her mouth to speak, to defend herself, but no words came. Ikenga's gaze held her captive, his eyes like chips of obsidian, reflecting nothing but stern judgment. She felt exposed, stripped bare, her vulnerability laid out for him to dissect.

Finally, she managed a weak whisper. "I... I just felt... responsible. For that soul. For its... fate."

Ikenga remained unmoved. "Responsibility is not about succumbing to sentiment," he said, his voice devoid of warmth. "It's about understanding the consequences of your actions and acting accordingly. You felt a pull, a connection. That is understandable. But you allowed that feeling to dictate your reaction, rather than analyzing the situation with the cold logic that is expected of one who embodies death."

He gestured to the ravaged battlefield. "This world is not ours. Its rules are not ours. We are guests here, observers. We can learn from it, adapt to it, but we cannot allow it to change us. We are the origin gods, Keles. We are the architects of our own destinies, not pawns in some cosmic game."

He turned away, his back to her. "Consider this a lesson, sister. A reminder of who we are, and what we represent. Do not let your emotions cloud your judgment again. Or I will be forced to intervene more directly." The threat hung unspoken in the air, heavy and ominous.

Keles was left standing there, her heart pounding in her chest. She felt a tear prickling at the corner of her eye, but she blinked it back fiercely. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She would not let him see her weakness.

She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. He was right, she knew, deep down. She had let her emotions get the better of her. She had allowed the strangeness of this world to affect her more than she should have. And Ikenga, ever the pragmatist, had called her out on it.

A spark of defiance ignited within her. She would not be lectured like a child. She would not be dictated to. She was Keles, goddess of death. She was not some sentimental fool.

She would learn from this experience, as Ikenga had advised. But she would not be cowed. She turned to look at Ikenga retreating back, a newfound resolve burning in her eyes. The conversation was not over. Not by a long shot.

Ikenga continued his stride away from Keles, his inner turmoil a stark contrast to his outward composure. A torrent of self-reproach washed over him. He clenched his fists, cursing himself for the harshness of his words, the condescending tone he had adopted. He hadn't meant to make her feel

small, to belittle her experience. He had simply wanted to... protect her, to remind her of their unique position. But he had clearly failed, miserably.

"Idiot," he muttered under his breath. He hadn't intended to make Keles look like a fool. He had wanted to instill in her the importance of their self-control, their inherent power as origin gods. But his delivery had been abysmal. He had done the same thing to Mahu, dismissing his concerns with a similar air of superiority. It was a pattern, a deeply ingrained flaw in his interactions with his siblings.

A bitter realization dawned on him. The only reason he seemed to possess this seemingly superior understanding of their situation, of the dangers lurking beyond their world, was because of the memories of his past life. Without that knowledge, he would likely be making the same mistakes as his siblings, stumbling blindly through this unfamiliar reality. It was a sobering thought.

He was the one with the advantage, the one who should be guiding them, protecting them. But instead of offering support and understanding, he was delivering lectures, making them feel inadequate. He was supposed to be a brother, not a stern, unforgiving patriarch.

His mind drifted, a stray thought surfacing from the depths of his past life. He recalled the insignificant mortal rhetoric that women were inherently more emotional than men. A ridiculous generalization, he had always thought, even in his previous existence. But the thought lingered, worming its way into his consciousness. Did that concept, that flawed and simplistic categorization, somehow apply to beings like them?

He entertained the notion with a growing sense of unease. Not that he had never felt the need to speak to Crepuscular or Jaus in the same way, but rather, the situation had never arisen where such a response from him seemed necessary. Crepuscular was stoic and prideful, his emotions rarely visible. Jaus, while more outwardly expressive, possessed a remarkable self-awareness and control. They simply didn't react in ways that triggered this... condescending response from him. Their emotional landscapes were different, more stable, requiring no such intervention. But with Mahu and now Keles, it was different. Their reactions, their vulnerability, triggered something within him, a deeply ingrained, almost automatic response that he now was recognizing. He found himself adopting this condescending, almost paternalistic tone, as if they were incapable of handling their own emotions or making sound decisions.

The realization was like a slap in the face. He had unconsciously fallen into the trap of those prejudices, even though he knew they were baseless. He had let the echoes of a past mortal life influence his interactions with his divine siblings. The irony was almost unbearable. He, who prided himself on his logic and objectivity, had been blinded by a simple, deeply ingrained bias.

He had to change. He had to do better. For his siblings, and for himself. But how? The realization of his bias was only the first step. Unraveling the deeply ingrained patterns of thought and behavior that had led him to this point would be a far more arduous task.

He sat down, watching the retreating background, his mind churning. He replayed his interactions with Keles and Mahu in his mind, dissecting each word, each inflection, searching for the root of his condescension. He realized it wasn't simply about the mortal rhetoric of emotional differences between genders. There was something deeper, something more at play.

His thoughts drifted to the sin he bore: greed. Not the simple desire for material possessions, but a deeper, more fundamental greed for control, for certainty. He craved order, balance, and a predictable universe. And when he perceived a threat to that order, whether real or imagined, his greed manifested as a need to control the situation, to impose his own understanding upon it.

He had seen Keles's emotional response to the loss of the soul as a threat, a deviation from the cold, detached persona he associated with her role as the goddess of death. It was a disruption of the order he expected, and his greed for control had driven him to correct it, to force her back into the mold he had created for her. He had done the same with Mahu, dismissing their anxieties about the unknown as irrational, imposing his own confidence in their ability to handle any challenge.

The connection was chillingly clear. His greed wasn't only about hoarding possessions; it was also about hoarding understanding, about believing he alone possessed the correct perspective, the right way of dealing with any situation. It was a form of intellectual and emotional arrogance, disguised as concern. He had not trusted his siblings to navigate their own emotions, to learn from their own experiences. He had, in essence, tried to steal their growth, to control their development.

A wave of shame washed over him. He had been so focused on protecting them from external threats that he had become a threat himself, stifling their individuality, undermining their confidence. He had justified his actions as necessary, as a burden he had to bear as the knowledgeable one. But it was a lie, a self-serving rationalization designed to mask his own flaws.

Chapter 399:

A dry, almost mirthless chuckle escaped Ikenga's lips. "It's rare something surprises me as thoroughly as this," he murmured to himself, the sound barely audible in the carriage. "And quite... interesting. To think I could entertain such... mortal thoughts." The idea that he, an origin god, could be so easily swayed by the echoes of a past life, by biases he had consciously rejected, was humbling.

The chuckle turned into a low, rumbling laugh, tinged with self-deprecation. "Perhaps this is the true curse of greed," he muttered, "not the desire for material wealth, but the insatiable hunger for certainty, for control. A hunger that blinds you to your own flaws, that convinces you of your own infallibility." He shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. "It seems we may have taken to lightly of these sin we bore as Origin gods"

Shaking his head, dismissing the aimless thoughts that had plagued him, Ikenga considered apologizing to Keles. A part of him yearned to mend the rift he had created, but another, more pragmatic part hesitated. He worried that a direct apology might undermine the lesson he was trying to impart. It could be perceived as weakness, as a retraction of his stance. He didn't want to invalidate her experience, but he also didn't want her to misinterpret his regret as a license to disregard the importance of self-control.

Suddenly, a better idea struck him. A more nuanced approach, one that would acknowledge his own failings while still reinforcing the core message. It would take time and careful planning to execute, but he felt a spark of hope that it could bridge the gap between them without compromising his principles. For now, however, that would have to wait. There were more pressing matters at hand.

His focus shifted to the marked ratman. He had a premonition, a subtle tremor in the threads of fate, that the ratman's life was about to undergo a significant change. It was a change that would have ripples, affecting not only the ratman himself but the world around him. Ikenga decided to observe, to watch as this new Chapter unfolded.

Meanwhile, in a small, cramped dwelling nestled within the barn, the marked ratman, Rattan, watched over a wounded companion. His eyes, usually filled with a weary resignation, now held a flicker of fascination. The ratman lying on the makeshift bed was unlike any he had ever seen. He was larger, more powerfully built, a veritable giant among their kind. Muscles rippled beneath his coarse fur, and his features, though still rat-like, possessed a rugged strength that was both intimidating and strangely inspiring. Beside the bed lay the strange, intricate steam-powered contraptions that had accompanied the newcomer.

Rattan had taken a considerable risk to rescue this ratman, a risk that could have cost him his own life. Yet, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction. It was a small victory against their oppressors, a defiant act of rebellion in a world that sought to crush them. And it was also a way of repaying the debt he owed to the fellow ratman who had once saved him from a similar fate.

Looking at the burly ratman, whom he had learned was called Chief, Rattan's mind drifted back to their brief, chaotic escape. It had been a whirlwind of frantic running, narrow escapes, and desperate acts of courage. Chief, even in his injured state, had been a force of nature, tearing through their pursuers with a ferocity that Rattan had never witnessed before. The memory brought a small smile to Rattan's face. He had found a kindred spirit, a beacon of hope in the darkness that had enveloped their lives. He hoped that Chief would recover soon, so they could continue their journey, whatever it might be.

This had all happened a few days prior. After completing his chores, Rattan had ventured towards the town square. He'd overheard whispers among the mansion's servants that the mages were preparing for a significant undertaking, that their city would soon be welcoming new residents. As a ratman, and a slave to the goblin nobles, he wasn't permitted to be in the town square unaccompanied. So, he had found a discreet hiding place, observing the unfolding events from the shadows.

From his vantage point, he witnessed the opening of several shimmering portals. Goblins from other cities began pouring through, a steady stream of new arrivals. Initially, the process was orderly, even slow. The city guards efficiently managed the influx, directing the newcomers and their belongings.

But the scene soon devolved into chaos. The orderly flow of goblins turned into a panicked surge. The expected goods and baggage dwindled, replaced by goblins fleeing through the portals in disarray. The sudden influx of panicked individuals overwhelmed the guards, who struggled to maintain control. Even the city's residents, who had gathered to witness the spectacle, began to retreat, fearing being swept up in the pandemonium.

For Rattan, the sight was mesmerizing. Such events were rare occurrences, and he couldn't resist the urge to move closer, despite the potential danger. He watched as the situation spiraled further out of control, until finally, the mages from the tower intervened. A wave of calming magic washed over the square, instantly soothing the panicked crowd. The guards, seizing the opportunity, quickly regained control, and the portals began to close, one by one. It was from one of these final, rapidly shrinking portals that Chief had suddenly emerged, as if flung out by some unseen force.

Chief's unexpected arrival had drawn the attention of the surrounding guards. With practiced professionalism, they immediately moved to apprehend him. Rattan, startled by Chief's sudden appearance and the guards' swift reaction, instinctively closed his eyes, bracing himself for the inevitable brutality. He had witnessed such scenes before, and the memory was enough to fill him with dread.

Then, he heard a distinct thump as something hit the ground, followed by a loud hissing sound. Rattan's eyes snapped open. Through the dissipating wisps of steam that now billowed around Chief, he saw that

Chief had dropped something—something that had instantly created a dense cloud of vapor, obscuring everything from view. The guards hesitated, momentarily blinded and disoriented. It was in that moment of confusion that Rattan knew he had to act.

The steam erupted, a thick, white cloud that billowed outwards, momentarily blinding the guards and creating a chaotic scene. Rattan, seizing the opportunity, darted forward, disappearing into the swirling vapor. The guards, though momentarily disoriented, were not easily deterred. These were elite city guards, enhanced with magical augmentations and trained for swift, decisive action. They quickly regained their bearings, their eyes glowing with faint magical light that pierced through the dissipating steam.

"He’s getting away!" one of them yelled, his voice amplified by a magical enchantment. "After him!"

Chief, using the cover of the steam, had already bolted, his large frame surprisingly agile. He moved with a speed and grace that belied his size, leaping over overturned carts and weaving through the panicked remnants of the crowd. The steam-powered devices strapped to his back hissed and whirred, adding to the cacophony of the scene.

The chase was on. The guards, their movements enhanced by magic, pursued Chief with relentless speed. They vaulted over obstacles with superhuman agility, their footsteps barely making a sound on the cobblestones. The city square, with its intricate network of stalls, fountains, and statues, became a dynamic obstacle course.

Chief, however, was no stranger to navigating tight spaces and treacherous terrain. He leaped from a fruit cart to a nearby awning, using the momentum to swing himself across a narrow alleyway. He landed gracefully on the roof of a small stall, sending tiles cascading to the ground below. The steam tech on his back hissed and sputtered, providing bursts of acceleration that propelled him forward.

The guards, though powerful, were less adept at such acrobatic maneuvers. They were trained for combat, not parkour. One guard, attempting to replicate Chief’s awning jump, misjudged the distance and crashed into a pile of crates, sending apples scattering across the street. Another, attempting to vault over a fountain, stumbled and landed awkwardly, momentarily slowing his pursuit.

Chief took advantage of their momentary setbacks. He sprinted across the rooftops, leaping from one building to another with breathtaking agility. He slid down sloping roofs, using the momentum to propel himself across wider gaps. He even used the steam tech to create short bursts of upward thrust, allowing him to briefly hover in the air before landing gracefully on a distant rooftop.

The chase weaved through the city, from the bustling square to the narrow, winding alleyways. Chief used every element of the urban landscape to his advantage: scaling walls, sliding under carts, and leaping across rooftops. The guards, though still in pursuit, were struggling to keep up with his unconventional movements.

Rattan, despite his smaller stature and lack of enhanced abilities, was determined to keep up. He scrambled through the crowd, dodging panicked citizens and discarded merchandise. He couldn't match Chief's impressive leaps and bounds, but he knew the city's back alleys and hidden pathways like the back of his hand. He used this knowledge to his advantage, cutting through narrow passages and emerging in unexpected places, always trying to keep Chief within sight.

Chapter 400:

He watched in growing alarm as the guards began to close in. Chief, having reached a dead-end alleyway, was surrounded. Three guards, their faces grim and determined, blocked his escape. One of them raised a hand, and a shimmering net of magical energy materialized, ready to ensnare the fleeing ratman. Rattan's heart pounded in his chest. He had to do something.

Without thinking, he darted out of the shadows, letting out a high-pitched squeak that drew the attention of both Chief and the guards. "This way!" he yelled, pointing to a narrow opening between two buildings, a passage barely wide enough for a single person to squeeze through.

The guards, momentarily distracted by Rattan's sudden appearance, hesitated. It was just the opening Chief needed. With a powerful roar, he charged forward, smashing into the guard holding the energy net. The magical construct dissipated, and Chief, using his momentum, pushed past the stunned guard, creating a narrow gap.

Rattan, already halfway through the narrow passage, urged Chief on. "Hurry!" he cried, squeezing further into the tight space. Chief, despite his size, managed to force his way through, scraping his shoulders against the rough brick walls. The guards, realizing their quarry was escaping, gave chase, but the narrow passage slowed them down considerably.

However, some of the guards, seeing themselves being held back by the narrow passage, took a different approach. They vaulted over walls, their magically enhanced strength allowing them to easily scale the buildings, gaining access to the rooftops. From their elevated position, they had a clear view of the two ratmen fleeing across the rooftops. The lead guard, a stern-faced captain with a distinctive scar across his cheek, pointed towards Chief and Rattan. "There they are! Cut them off!"

Rattan and Chief burst out into a small, secluded courtyard, thinking they had finally escaped. But as they prepared to leap over a low wall, Rattan noticed the captain and two other guards landing gracefully on the rooftop overlooking the courtyard. They were trapped.

Panic flared in Rattan's chest, the black robe he wore did well to hide his figure. He looked at Chief, who was also looking up at the guards with a grim expression. There was nowhere left to run. But just as the captain raised his hand to cast another restraining spell, a strange sensation washed over Rattan. It was as if a cold wind swept through his mind, a foreign presence asserting itself within him. His vision blurred for a moment. For the captain and other guards, a thick swirling mist erupted from seemingly nowhere, completely obscuring the courtyard and the surrounding rooftops. The captain and the other guards on the roof gasped in surprise, their vision completely blocked.

The mist wasn't natural; it was too dense, too sudden, too localized. It clung to the courtyard like a shroud, refusing to dissipate. It was as if the very air itself had thickened, becoming an impenetrable barrier.

Rattan was taken back seeing the guards frozen in place with a yellow glow on their eyes. Taking advantage of this sudden and unexpected situation, Rattan grabbed Chief's arm. "Come on!" he yelled, pulling him towards a hidden door in the back of the courtyard.

Rattan, panting heavily, pointed to a low wall. "Over there! It leads to the backstreets!"

Chief, still breathing hard from the exertion, nodded gratefully. He vaulted over the wall with ease, landing gracefully on the other side. Rattan, using a small crate as a boost, managed to clamber over as well. They then made their way through the backstreets, using Rattan's knowledge of the city's hidden pathways to evade any further pursuit. Eventually, they arrived back at the barn, exhausted but safe. Rattan quickly ushered Chief into his small dwelling, closing the door behind them and leaning against it, his breath coming in ragged gasps. They had escaped, for now.

Back to the present, Phantom deep inside Rattan's core felt the pulse of energy sent out from the mage tower looking for them. He was shielding Rattan so he won't be found.

He wasn't shield Chief but somehow the ratman hasn't been found yet, Phantom could draw some conclusion on why that is so looking at the etheral spider hanging around the ratman.

Taking his attention from real world, Phantom set his gaze at Rattan core where he is residing. It might have been his action of ddefiance against the empire and mages but the seal was quickly crumbling away.

Phantom knew that within a few days, perhaps even sooner, the situation would drastically change. Until then, he would remain hidden, an unseen observer. The flames of ambition flickering within Chief were certainly a sight he anticipated with keen interest.

Rattan, oblivious to the entity residing within him and the magical search sweeping the city, turned his attention from the sleeping Chief to the strange steam-powered technology scattered around the small dwelling. He was fascinated by the intricate workings of these devices. He instinctively understood that they represented a source of strength for his people, a symbol of ingenuity and resilience in the face of oppression. A sense of pride, unfamiliar yet powerful, swelled within him.

He reached out towards a gauntlet, a heavy piece of metal adorned with pipes, gears, and valves. It took all his strength to lift it, the weight surprising him. The gauntlet felt cold and metallic in his small, calloused hands. He turned it over, examining the intricate details. He could see small scorch marks and dents on its surface, evidence of its use in battle.

"Where should he begin to learn from?" he muttered to himself, his voice barely a whisper. He moved to the side, placing the gauntlet on a rickety wooden crate. He circled the device, his eyes scanning every pipe, every valve, every gear. He had no formal training, no understanding of the complex mechanics at play. But he was driven by an insatiable curiosity, a burning desire to understand the secrets of this technology.

The day passed with Rattan making little progress in understanding the intricacies of the steam tech. He spent hours turning the gauntlet over in his hands, tracing the lines of its intricate design, but the complex mechanics remained a mystery. Eventually, exhaustion overtook him, and he fell asleep, still clutching the heavy gauntlet.

The next morning, the sunlight streamed through the cracks in the barn walls, rousing Rattan without the need for a waking call. He rose stiffly, his small body aching from the previous day’s exertions and the uncomfortable position in which he had slept. He headed out of the barn to begin his daily chores: cleaning the excrement from the Lord’s mount’s carriage carrier, feeding the beast, and, if the creature was in a particularly foul mood, giving it a reluctant bath. After that unpleasant task, he would make his way to the kitchen, where a meager breakfast would be handed to him.

Lately, Rattan had been sharing his breakfast with the wounded Chief. Initially, he had noticed that Chief, even while seemingly unconscious, would resist the food Rattan tried to feed him. It was a subtle resistance, a tightening of his jaw or a turning of his head, but it was clear that Chief's body was rejecting the nourishment. However, that resistance had quickly vanished after Chief first tasted the food Rattan offered. A faint smile had touched his lips, a sign of unexpected pleasure.

That smile had become Rattan's only tangible proof that Chief was healing, that he was slowly returning to consciousness. It was a small thing, but it gave Rattan hope. Today, his routine was the same. He finished his chores, collected his breakfast – a small portion of gruel and a piece of stale bread – and returned to the barn. He sat beside Chief, carefully offering him small bites. The familiar smile appeared on Chief's face after the first taste, reassuring Rattan that he was on the mend.

After feeding Chief, Rattan's gaze returned to the gauntlet resting on the crate. He stared at it with intense focus, his brow furrowed in concentration, trying to decipher its inner workings. He was so absorbed in his contemplation that he didn't hear Chief stir.

"Are you interested in learning?" a deep voice rumbled from behind him.

Rattan whirled around in a panic, his heart leaping into his throat. He stumbled back, nearly tripping over a loose piece of wood. His fear quickly subsided, however, as he saw Chief sitting up on the bed, a warm smile gracing his features. Chief was awake.

Rattan stared, speechless for a moment. He had grown so accustomed to seeing Chief lying still and unresponsive that the sight of him awake and alert was almost jarring. A wide grin spread across his face. "Chief! You're awake!" he exclaimed, his voice filled with relief.

Chief chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound that echoed through the small barn. "Indeed," he said, his voice still a bit rough from disuse. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, wincing slightly as he put weight on his injured leg. "And it seems I have you to thank for my... hospitality." He gestured around the small dwelling with a nod of his head.