

## Guardian gods 401

Chapter 401:

Rattan waved his hand dismissively. "It was nothing," he mumbled, his cheeks flushing slightly. "You would have done the same for me."

Chief's smile widened. He looked at the gauntlet on the crate, then back at Rattan. "I saw you studying that. It seems you have an interest in our technology."

Rattan's eyes lit up. "It's... amazing," he breathed, his voice filled with awe. "I've never seen anything like it. I was just wondering where to even begin to understand how it works."

Chief rose to his feet, though he still moved with a slight limp. He walked over to the crate and picked up the gauntlet, turning it over in his large hands. "It's not as complicated as it looks," he said, his voice warm and encouraging. "Though it does take some getting used to."

He began to explain the basic principles of the steam tech, pointing out the different components of the gauntlet and explaining their functions. He showed Rattan how the internal mechanisms worked, how the steam generated by the small furnace was channeled through pipes and valves to power the device. Rattan listened intently, his eyes wide with fascination, absorbing every word.

As Chief spoke, Rattan began to see the logic behind the intricate design. He started to understand how the different parts worked together, how the steam provided the power, how the gears translated that power into movement. It was like a puzzle, and with Chief's guidance, the pieces were starting to fall into place.

"The key," Chief explained, pointing to a small valve on the gauntlet's forearm, "is the pressure. Too much, and it could explode. Too little, and it won't function properly. It requires careful balance and precise control."

Rattan reached out and tentatively touched the valve, his fingers tracing its delicate curves. He felt a surge of excitement. He was actually beginning to understand. This wasn't just some magical artifact; it was a machine, built on principles he could grasp.

"Thank you, Chief," he said, his voice filled with gratitude. "For showing me this."

Chief placed a large hand on Rattan's shoulder, a gesture of camaraderie. "You have a good eye, Rattan," he said. "And a quick mind. I think you'll learn quickly." He paused, his expression turning serious. "This technology... it's more than just machines and steam. It's the future of our people. It's what will allow us to break free from our chains."

Rattan was about to reply, a spark of hope igniting within him, when a sharp pain shot through his shoulder where Chief's hand rested. He winced, momentarily distracted.

"Or so I thought," Chief said, his voice suddenly laced with bitterness, the warmth in his eyes replaced by a cold, hard glint. "Our proud work, our tech... it's nothing but toys and tools to those above." The shift in his demeanor was so abrupt that it left Rattan reeling.

Rattan's face creased with confusion. Just moments ago, Chief had been encouraging, hopeful. Now, he seemed consumed by a deep resentment. Before Rattan could ask what had caused this sudden change, Chief asked, "Have you heard news of the happenings in the city of Gurnak?"

Rattan, his mind still trying to catch up with Chief's sudden mood swing, decided to answer the question first. "There have been words spread by the new residents," he replied, "that the city may have fallen to the great enemy of the empire."

A flicker of pride touched Rattan's features as he added, "Rumors from the servants in my lord's mansion say that our people in that city helped, and bravely fought against the empire's enemy." But the pride quickly faded, replaced by a deep sadness. "Sadly," he continued, his voice dropping, "the rumors also state that a large number of our people sided with the enemy to fight against the empire, discrediting the hard work of those who chose to fight."

Upon hearing this, Chief's body began to convulse with laughter. He doubled over, the movement tearing at his wounds, causing fresh blood to seep through the bandages. He didn't seem to notice, or perhaps didn't care, as he continued to laugh, the sound harsh and unsettling.

Rattan, startled and alarmed, instinctively placed his hand over Chief's mouth, trying to muffle the loud laughter. "Chief! Please!" he whispered urgently, his voice filled with panic. "You'll hurt yourself! You need to stay calm!"

But then, Rattan's eyes widened in shock. Tears were streaming down Chief's face, a stark contrast to his loud, almost manic laughter. The sight was deeply unsettling, a bizarre mixture of joy and sorrow.

"How... how great of them," Chief choked out between gasps of laughter, the tears continuing to flow, "to put in the... the good words of our people's bravery." He looked at Rattan, his eyes filled with a strange, feverish intensity. "I am guessing the underground ratmen of this city are also... bravely fighting against the empire's enemy?"

Rattan nodded hesitantly, unsure of how to respond to Chief's erratic behavior. Chief's laughter erupted again, even louder this time. "Preaching of our bravery," he managed to say through his laughter, "yet... easily discrediting it at the same time... is a great play, won't you say, boy? A great... distraction from one questioning their own hands in things."

Rattan, thoroughly confused and increasingly worried, finally asked the question that had been burning in his mind. "What are you talking about, Chief?"

But Chief didn't answer. He simply lay back down on his hay bed, his gaze fixed on the ceiling, the tears still streaming down his face, a twisted smile plastered across his lips. The laughter had subsided, leaving only the unsettling image of a broken man lost in his own private torment.

The initial excitement of Chief's awakening quickly dissipated, replaced by a heavy silence. Rattan sat quietly, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts. He felt lost, adrift in a sea of uncertainty. He couldn't quite grasp the full meaning of Chief's cryptic words, but he understood one thing: he had been naive. He had viewed the world through a simplistic lens, and now that lens was shattering.

It was a strange and unsettling feeling, this burgeoning doubt. He had always accepted the word of his masters as truth. They were powerful, they were in control, and they were the only source of information he had ever known. To suddenly question their authority, to consider the possibility that they might be lying, was a radical shift in his thinking.

"But why lie?" he thought, his brow furrowed in confusion. "They already control everything. They have the goblin mages, the ogres. What need do they have to lie about... about oppressed people?" The question echoed in his mind, unanswered and unsettling.

For the rest of the week, these questions plagued him. He tried to discuss his confusion with Chief, but the larger ratman remained unresponsive, locked in his own world of silent contemplation. The only time Chief showed any sign of life was during meals, when a faint, almost feverish glow would appear in his eyes as he ate.

Frustrated by Chief's silence, Rattan decided to take matters into his own hands. He began to subtly question the information he received from the lord's servants and within the manor. He was careful, of course, phrasing his questions in a way that wouldn't arouse suspicion. To his surprise, he discovered that most of the general information was accurate. The servants spoke truthfully about the lord's affairs, the state of the city, and even events happening in other parts of the empire. But whenever the topic shifted to ratmen, the information became vague, contradictory, or outright dismissive.

He even noticed subtle changes in the way the servants interacted with him. There were furtive glances, hushed whispers, and a general air of unease whenever he brought up the subject of his own people. The subtle shift in their behavior was enough to frighten Rattan. He quickly realized that his inquiries had not gone unnoticed. Fearful of the consequences, he ceased his questioning and returned to his usual, unassuming demeanor.

But the seed of doubt had been planted, and it continued to grow within him. He had confirmed, at least to his own satisfaction, that the information he had received about his people was, at best, incomplete and, at worst, deliberately misleading. This realization brought with it a new, even more troubling question: "Why should I care about the wrongdoings done to other ratmen?" he asked himself, his voice barely a whisper. "I have a decent life, compared to most. I don't have to hide in the shadows, to live underground. My life... it should be the envy of most ratmen. So why should I care?" The question hung in the air, heavy with the weight of self-preservation and the burgeoning stirrings of a conscience he had never known he possessed.

Rattan's internal struggle, his self-doubt and the agonizing question of whether he should even care about the plight of other ratmen, did not go unnoticed. Deep within his core, Phantom observed the change. The unraveling of the seals that bound him, which had been accelerating rapidly, abruptly halted. The energy that had been steadily dissipating now held steady, as if a switch had been flipped.

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Phantom recognized the cause: Rattan's internal conflict was acting as a kind of anchor, preventing the final release. He felt a surge of need and desire to reach out and offer guidance, a push in the right direction. But the explicit instructions of his creator held him back. He was to observe, not interfere. Besides, a part of him, a nascent understanding of narrative and consequence, whispered that this struggle was necessary.

If Rattan was to become the hero his creator envisioned, this was a trial he had to face alone. This moment of doubt, this internal conflict, was a crucible in which his character would be forged. Phantom, bound by his creator's decree, could only watch.

A new question, however, began to form in Phantom's own consciousness. "Was this fate?" he wondered, his thoughts echoing in the silent space within Rattan. "Was it Rattan's destiny to become the hero of his people? Or was it merely a random act, a capricious whim of my creator, who just happened to choose this particular ratman to mark?"

"It just so happened that the ratman chosen was Rattan," he mused, the thought lingering in the quiet space. Suddenly, he shook his head, a wry smile forming on his non-existent lips. He could almost hear his creator's booming laughter at such a question.

His creator wouldn't answer with words. He was a being of action, not philosophical debate. He would likely unmark Rattan, mark another random ratman, and then turn to Phantom with a knowing grin, asking, "Was that also done by fate?"

The thought brought a flicker of understanding. Phantom began to grasp the true nature of his assignment. He wasn't just an observer; he was a catalyst, a facilitator. "I am the spotlight," he realized. Before, on the battlefield, he had been able to manipulate the perception of the general and his men, making them the center of attention, but only within their own minds. To the outside world, they were just a group of confused soldiers.

But now, with Rattan, the spotlight he could create was different. It was no longer confined to the internal world of a few individuals. It was a spotlight that could be seen by others, a stage on which Rattan could emerge. He was there to create the conditions for Rattan to step into that light, to become the figure his creator intended.

His creator had said, "The ratmen's fate was already set in stone; they would always be oppressed. But with our intervention, that fate will change." Ambition and fate... was this what he was meant to comprehend? The interplay between the two, the delicate balance between destiny and free will?

He was at the boundary of divinity, a threshold he had been striving to cross for eons. Laying low within Rattan, observing the small ratman's struggles, was not merely obedience to his creator; it was a necessary period of introspection, a time to understand his changing nature, to grasp the true meaning

of divinity. He was absorbing the raw, untainted emotions of Rattan, feeling the weight of his doubt, the flicker of hope, the nascent stirrings of courage. It was a stark contrast to the hollow, manufactured emotions he usually dealt with, the inflated egos and desperate desires for fame that fueled his curse.

He could see the faint flicker of ambition beginning to ignite within Rattan, a small spark struggling to grow amidst the overwhelming doubt. It was a fragile flame, easily extinguished, but Phantom knew it had the potential to become a roaring fire. He felt the pull of his curse, the urge to amplify that spark, to create a grand illusion of triumph, to give Rattan a taste of the fame he so desperately craved.

But he resisted. This was not his story to write. He was not there to create a false hero, a puppet dancing to the tune of his curse. He was there to provide the stage, to illuminate the path, but it was Rattan who had to take the first step.

As for Chief, Phantom watched Chief with a detached curiosity. The vibrant flames of ambition that had once surrounded the larger ratman were now flickering weakly, on the verge of being extinguished. As the flames died down, the ethereal spider that clung to Chief became more compact, its translucent form condensing into a tighter, almost solid mass. Phantom theorized that the spider was somehow feeding on Chief's fading ambition, drawing strength from his dwindling will.

For Chief himself, the whispers of the goddess his people revered had become clearer, more insistent. But he was beyond caring. He was weary, broken, his spirit crushed by the weight of his experiences. He refused to give the goddess the satisfaction of seeing him struggle, of witnessing his pain. His only solace in these dark days was the simple act of eating. The bland bread and watery soup that Rattan provided were a stark contrast to the corrupted, tainted flesh he had been forced to consume for months. The simple, unadulterated taste of normal food was a small pleasure, a reminder of a life he had almost forgotten. He felt a strange sense of peace, a quiet acceptance of his impending demise. He had achieved one of his last remaining goals – to taste untainted food again – and he was content to let the end come.

Meanwhile, Rattan, lost in his internal turmoil, had been in a daze for the entire week. But something had shifted within him. He suddenly sat up, a newfound determination in his eyes. He reached for the gauntlet, the heavy piece of steam tech that had sparked his initial curiosity, and began to dismantle it. The quiet barn was soon filled with the sounds of small tools clicking, scraping, and clanging against metal. He worked with a focused intensity, driven by an unknown force.

The dismantling continued for some time, until finally, the sounds ceased. Rattan stared at the scattered pieces of the gauntlet, a look of dismay on his face. He had taken it apart, but now he was struggling to

put it back together. The intricate mechanisms, which had seemed so logical when Chief had explained them, were now a confusing jumble of gears, pipes, and valves.

His struggles did not go unnoticed. Chief, who had been lying on his hay bed, his gaze lost in the emptiness of the barn's ceiling, had been watching Rattan with a strange, almost unsettling intensity. He didn't know what compelled him to move, but he found himself slowly rising to his feet, his injured leg protesting with a dull ache. He walked over to Rattan, his large shadow falling over the smaller ratman.

"What are you doing?" Chief's voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper, but it startled Rattan nonetheless.

Rattan jumped, whirling around to face Chief. His eyes widened in panic as he looked at the disassembled gauntlet, realizing the extent of what he had done to something that didn't belong to him. He stammered, his voice filled with fear, "I... I was just... trying to..." He couldn't find the words to explain his actions. He simply stood there, his small body trembling, waiting for Chief's reaction.

"Trying to what?" Chief's voice was low and gravelly, laced with a weariness that seemed to seep into the very air around them. He gestured towards the disassembled gauntlet with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Learn its usage and workings? Haven't you heard my previous words? These are nothing but toys and tools to those above. What worth does it still have for you to learn?"

Rattan lowered his gaze to the scattered components, a wave of shame washing over him. He had been so caught up in his fascination with the technology, so eager to understand its secrets, that he had completely disregarded Chief's words, his despair. He felt a pang of guilt for disturbing Chief's rest, for reminding him of the harsh realities of their situation.

"I... I just thought..." Rattan stammered, searching for the right words. "I thought if I could understand how these things work, maybe... maybe we could use them. To... to help our people." He looked up at Chief, his eyes pleading for understanding. "To fight back."

A bitter laugh escaped Chief's lips. "Fight back?" he repeated, the sound hollow and devoid of any real mirth. "Against what? Against the mages who wield magic that can tear mountains apart? Against the ogres whose strength can shatter stone? Against the goblins who control everything, who see us as nothing more than vermin?" He shook his head slowly, his gaze fixed on the disassembled gauntlet. "These 'toys and tools' are nothing compared to their power. They are a distraction, a false hope."

He stepped closer to Rattan, his shadow looming over the smaller ratman. "Don't waste your time on these trinkets," he said, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "There is no escape. There is no hope. We are trapped, Rattan. All of us."

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Rattan felt a chill run down his spine. Chief's words were heavy with despair, a complete surrender to their fate. But something within Rattan refused to accept that. He looked at the scattered pieces of the gauntlet, then back at Chief, a spark of defiance igniting within him.

"But... if we don't try," he said, his voice small but firm, "then what's the point? If we just give up, then they've already won." He picked up a small gear, turning it over in his fingers. "Even if these are just toys, maybe... maybe we can find a way to make them more than that. Maybe we can find a way to use them in a way they never intended."

He looked up at Chief, his eyes filled with a newfound determination. "I know it seems hopeless," he said, "but I have to try. I have to believe that there's something we can do." He paused, then added in a softer tone, "Even if it's just to prove them wrong."

Chief, seeing the innocent, almost naive look on Rattan's face, shook his head sadly. If he were the ratman he once was, he would have been heartened by the boy's motivation, eager to nurture his enthusiasm and share his knowledge. But the experiences he had endured had hardened him, leaving him fearful of leading another down the same path of destruction. No matter how difficult Rattan's current life was, it was far preferable to the fate that had befallen his people.

"Quite arrogant of you, boy," Chief said, his voice laced with a deep weariness, "to think we haven't already considered all of this."

Rattan's eyes widened in surprise. He had expected resistance, perhaps even dismissal, but not this direct confrontation. "Then... what happened?" he asked, his curiosity outweighing his apprehension.

To his surprise, Chief actually answered. "I happened, boy," he said, his gaze distant, lost in the memories of the past. "And that should be enough of an answer for you." He watched as the light dimmed in Rattan's eyes, the spark of hope flickering and threatening to extinguish.

Chief continued, his voice heavy with regret. "I don't know about the other ratman underground caverns, but in my part of the world, we did everything you're talking about. We dedicated ourselves to improving our tech, to proving the empire wrong. But it all amounted to nothing. All we learned, in the end, was that we should have accepted the empire's 'grace.' But by then, it was too late."

He paused, a dark shadow passing over his face. "In our fervor to increase our power, our standing, the so-called 'enemy' of the empire managed to get their hands on us. It pains me to admit this, but with the help of the empire's enemy, we indeed advanced our technology to a level where it was no longer seen as mere toys or tools."

Chief's gaze shifted to Rattan, a chilling intensity entering his eyes. "But it all came at a price, boy. A terrible price. The purity our tech once held was lost, corrupted. Replacing lost flesh with mechanical parts wasn't new for us, not when it was due to an accident, but this new path... it embraced it. Flesh and machine became one, a twisted amalgamation."

He leaned closer to Rattan, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "I'm sure you know nothing of the enemy the empire is facing. They go by the name... 'Demons.'"

A shudder ran through Chief's large frame. "Fearsome creatures they are. A corrupted race, twisted and unnatural. And my people... we had the ingenious idea of using their corruption to enhance our tech. It was a brilliant idea, in theory, but the cost was devastating. Not only was the tech corrupted, but so were the minds of my people. Every last one of them."

"In a short time," he continued, his voice filled with a haunting sadness, "our tech became something truly fearsome. For a brief moment, we even bridged the gap with the ogres. Our weapons could finally deal them a significant blow. But then came the mages. From the sky, they rained down destruction, dealing with our weapons and our people as they saw fit."

He looked directly at Rattan, his eyes filled with a desperate plea for understanding. "What can you hope to do against an enemy that moves freely in the sky, that hurls chains of lightning at you from above? You see, boy," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "all this tech is nothing without magic, a gift our people do not possess. As long as we lack that gift, no matter how much we tinker with these machines, it will amount to nothing against the mages, or even the stronger ogres."

Chief slumped back against the wall, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The exertion of reliving those horrific memories had clearly taken its toll. He closed his eyes, his face etched with pain and regret. The silence in the barn was heavy, broken only by the faint rustling of straw and Chief's shallow breathing.

Rattan stood frozen, his mind reeling from Chief's revelations. The picture he had painted was bleak, a horrifying depiction of ambition gone horribly wrong. The idea that his people had not only failed in their attempt to rise above their oppression but had also become corrupted in the process was a devastating blow. The spark of hope that had ignited within him moments before was now flickering precariously, threatened by the cold winds of despair.

He looked at the scattered pieces of the gauntlet, his earlier enthusiasm replaced by a profound sense of futility. Chief's words echoed in his mind: "All this tech is nothing without magic." It was a stark truth, a harsh reality that Rattan had never considered. He had been so focused on the tangible, the mechanical, that he had overlooked the fundamental difference between his people and their oppressors. They lacked magic, the very power that allowed the goblins and their allies to maintain their dominance.

A question formed in his mind, a desperate plea for some semblance of hope. He looked at Chief, his voice barely a whisper. "But... what about the spider?" he asked, referring to the ethereal creature that constantly hovered near Chief.

Chief turned slowly, a look of confusion etched on his face. "How... how did you know about the spiders?" he asked, his voice laced with disbelief. "I'm sure I never said anything about them."

Rattan, equally confused, pointed towards the space beside Chief. "You have a huge spider hovering right there," he said, his voice matter-of-fact. "And it's currently staring at me."

Chief looked around, his gaze sweeping over the area Rattan indicated. He saw nothing. Now it was Chief's turn to stare at Rattan in bewilderment. He couldn't comprehend what was happening. A fleeting thought crossed his mind – the possibility of some kind of supernatural ability – but he quickly dismissed it. The chances of such a thing were infinitesimally small. Even the priests who devoted their lives to worshipping the goddess of their people had never displayed any such powers. "But how do we explain the boy's seemingly supernatural sight?" he wondered silently.

Wanting to test something, Chief said to Rattan, "Listen closely, boy. Describe the spider you see around me."

Rattan nodded, his gaze fixed on the creature he thought was a common sight. Now, realizing from Chief's reaction that it wasn't, he began to pay closer attention. He started to notice details he hadn't seen before. The spider was larger than any he had ever encountered, its form almost translucent,

shimmering in the dim light of the barn. What was truly unnerving, however, was the sense that the spider was observing him just as intently. He could feel its gaze upon him, intelligent and calculating.

The intelligence in those eyes... Suddenly, Rattan took a step back, a shiver running down his spine. "What is it?" Chief asked, gripping Rattan's shoulder with a strong hand, sensing the boy's sudden fear.

Rattan tore his gaze away from the spider and turned to Chief, his voice trembling. "There's... there's a woman's face on the spider," he whispered, his eyes wide with terror. "And... she was smiling at me."

Hearing this, Chief released his grip, stepping back in a mixture of fear and dawning excitement. He looked at Rattan with a newfound intensity. With a shaky, expectant voice, he asked, "Boy... have you ever noticed anything... different about yourself? Anything that seems... out of place?"

Rattan, still reeling from the vision of the spider's face, was momentarily thrown by Chief's question. But as he thought back over his life, he could recall very little that stood out. He was just a normal ratman, as far as he knew. Then, a memory surfaced: the frantic escape from the guards, the sudden appearance of the mist that had shielded them.

Looking at Chief hesitantly, he explained what he remembered. Chief listened intently, his eyes widening with each word. When Rattan finished, Chief let out a joyous laugh, placing a heavy hand on Rattan's shoulder. "I don't understand anything about magic," he said, his voice filled with awe, "but what you just told me... there's no other explanation."

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Rattan had been constantly surprised and stunned since meeting Chief, but nothing compared to the feeling that washed over him at these words. "He had... magic?" The thought echoed in his mind, incredulous. Was he somehow one of those powerful beings from the tower, beings to whom even his masters bowed their heads? Did he possess the same talents as them?

Rattan's mind raced, trying to reconcile the idea of himself wielding magic. It seemed impossible, absurd. He was just Rattan, a slave, a ratman. Magic was something reserved for the elite, for the mages in their towering spires, for the powerful beings his masters feared.

"But... the spider," Rattan stammered, his voice barely a whisper. "What about the spider? What is it?" He looked towards the space beside Chief, but he no longer saw the creature. It had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Chief's expression turned grim, the joy replaced by a deep-seated fear. "The spider..." he repeated, his voice low and ominous. "It's... one of them."

"One of who?" Rattan asked, his confusion deepening.

Chief took a deep breath, steeling himself to reveal the truth he recently found out. "One of the empire's enemies," he said, his voice heavy with dread. "The ones my people sought out in our desperation for power." He paused, his gaze fixed on some unseen point in the distance. "The demons."

The word hung in the air, chilling Rattan to the bone. Being capable of posing such a problem to the empire and their mages, the idea that such a creature had been... There, watching him, was deeply unsettling.

"But... why?" Rattan asked, his voice trembling. "Why would a demon... be with you?"

Chief shook his head slowly, his eyes filled with a mixture of fear and resignation. "I don't know for certain," he admitted. "But... it might have something to do with my stubbornness, my refusal to succumb to her will. It seems to please her. Watching me writhe in pain, watching me struggle... It brings her great joy. Her chuckle at those moments has been a constant source of nightmares for me."

He looked at Rattan, a warning etched on his weathered face. "I know nothing of magic, nor of your abilities," he said, his voice firm, "but I can tell you one thing: never, not even for a moment, let the thought of that spider cross your mind. Never stare too closely at her. Never even think about her." He paused, his gaze hardening. "That is the only way to keep her at bay."

Chief began to pace restlessly around the small dwelling, his brow furrowed in deep thought. He ran a hand through his coarse fur, his movements agitated. Finally, he stopped, his gaze settling on Rattan. A look of grim determination had settled on his face.

"I thank you for your hospitality, boy," he said, his voice heavy with regret. "But for your safety, and for the future of our race... I have to ensure I'm not anywhere near you. She has already shown a slight interest in you, and that... that can be nipped in the bud before it turns into something else."

Rattan's heart sank. He had finally found someone who understood him, someone who could teach him about his people's history, about their technology. And now, that person was leaving, driven away by fear of a creature Rattan couldn't even fully comprehend.

"But... Chief..." Rattan began, his voice pleading. "Where will you go? You're still injured. You can't..."

Chief held up a hand, silencing him. "I'll manage," he said, his voice firm. "I've survived worse. What matters now is your safety. And the safety of any other ratman who might cross your path." He looked at Rattan, his eyes filled with a mixture of sadness and resolve. "She is a predator, boy. And you... you have caught her attention. I cannot risk being the bait that draws her closer."

He turned to leave, his large frame filling the doorway. He paused, looking back at Rattan one last time. "Remember my words," he said, his voice low and urgent. "Never think of her. Never speak of her. Never... invite her in."

Seeing the Chief's determined figure ready to depart, Rattan felt a profound sense of urgency. It was as if the most important moment of his life was unfolding before him, and any choice he made now would irrevocably shape his destiny. He looked at the older ratman's lonely back, a figure burdened by regret, responsibility, and a rising sense of pride. Then, his gaze shifted to the scattered rubble of steam tech left behind, seemingly entrusted to him for study.

Rattan found himself taking a step forward. It was a small step, almost hesitant, but as his foot touched the ground, he heard a faint, shattering sound, like glass breaking. His vision flickered, and for a fleeting moment, the world around him transformed. The barn, previously dull and drab, was now bathed in vibrant colors, teeming with small, luminous lifeforms that danced and swirled in the air. It was a breathtaking, almost overwhelming sight, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving him blinking in the familiar dimness.

The experience, however brief, had propelled him forward. His steps led him directly to Chief, who was peering through the open doorway, waiting for the opportune moment to slip away unnoticed. Chief felt a light touch on his shoulder and turned to find Rattan standing behind him, his eyes now glowing with a soft, yellow light.

Chief's eyes widened in surprise, his breath catching in his throat. He opened his mouth to speak, to perhaps reiterate his warning or question the strange glow in Rattan's eyes, but the young ratman's words stopped him in place.

"I'm not afraid," Rattan said, his voice clear and steady, a newfound confidence resonating within it. The yellow light in his eyes pulsed softly as he continued. "And I won't let you face this alone."

Meanwhile, deep within Rattan's core, where Phantom resided, the intricate construct of a tree entwined by a serpent was dissolving. In its place, Rattan's core now shone with an intense, almost blinding light, as bright as the sun. Phantom smiled, a genuine expression of joy, as he witnessed the complete unraveling of the seals.

A few moments prior, he too had been surprised that Rattan could perceive the spider. The boy's nonchalant attitude, assuming it was a normal occurrence associated with Chief, had initially baffled Phantom. It then dawned on him that his own presence within Rattan was influencing the young ratman's perception, allowing him to see things beyond the normal creature spectrum.

The appearance of the spider and the woman's face had been a brief, but significant, interaction between Phantom and Vorenza. The demon queen had been observing him, and he had been doing the same. Her smile had been a knowing acknowledgment of his apprehension. Phantom had sensed her immense power, a force he could not yet contend with. Thankfully, the dissolving construct within Rattan had reacted to Vorenza's attention, briefly flaring and revealing Ikenga's presence, which was enough to make the demon queen turn her gaze away.

Phantom now focused his attention on the outside world, where he could see the brightly lit flames of ambition burning around both Chief and Rattan. He eagerly anticipated their next move, the choices they would make, the path they would forge together.

Far away, within the heart of the empire, in the towering structures where most sixth-stage powerhouses resided, the change in Rattan, the breaking of the seals, was detected. At the empire's capital, within the grand palace, a robed figure sat upon a massive throne. In his open palm, he held a large, intricately carved orb, a prison of seals. On one side of the orb, a crack had appeared, spreading like roots throughout its surface.

The robed figure sighed, a deep, resonant sound that echoed through the vast chamber. "It seems the ratman race must be dealt with," he said, his voice imbued with ancient power. "Ensure their demise serves a great purpose, a significant blow against the demons." Hazy, phantom-like figures, beings of immense power at the sixth stage of cultivation, materialized around the throne. They bowed their heads in silent acknowledgment before vanishing as quickly as they had appeared, tasked with carrying out the emperor's decree.

The robed figure sighed again, his gaze fixed on the cracked orb. "Just a century left for the results to bear fruit," he murmured, a hint of weariness in his voice. "It can still be redeemed."

Ikenga who led to the breaking of the seal noticed the moment it broke so he didn't react much to it. He was looking forward to the actions the mages will take, if they went this far to make the seal it must mean something and he was ready to find out what that is.

Back in the world of Nana, changes were taking place. Ikenga's absence was becoming increasingly noticeable. Farmers, accustomed to the predictable growth cycles of their crops and the expected harvest times, were beginning to observe unsettling discrepancies.

Chapter 405:

Lately, many farmers had noticed their crops were taking longer to mature. The difference wasn't drastic, but it was significant enough to be noticed by those accustomed to harvesting at a specific time.

If Ikenga's absence were to persist, this could become a serious issue. For now, however, it was just a slight setback. This was the general sentiment among the mortals.

Another pressing issue affecting the entire world was the occasional disappearance of people. Someone seen one day might be gone the next.

This was a common problem throughout the human kingdom of Nana. This issue, however, did not affect the godlings. Only the demigods could explain why this was the case.

Guards patrolled the streets with serious demeanors, their eyes like hawks, scanning for any detail. Their heightened vigilance stemmed from the fear of becoming the next to disappear.

Whatever was causing these disappearances seemed undeterred by the power of the rulers.

Right now in a city under the leadership of the Omadi kingdom in the eastern continent. As night fell, the patrols intensified. The flickering torchlight cast long, dancing shadows that played tricks on the eyes, amplifying the tension. The guards moved in tight formations, their hands gripping their weapons, the silence broken only by the rhythmic clang of their armor and the echoing of their footsteps on the cobblestones. The usual nighttime sounds of the city—the distant laughter from taverns, the murmur of late-night conversations—were muted, replaced by an unsettling quiet. Fear had cast a pall over the city, silencing its usual nocturnal vibrancy.

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream pierced the night. It came from a narrow alleyway just ahead. The guards surged forward, their torches illuminating the dark passage. They found no one, but the air was thick with a strange, metallic scent, and a single, crimson stain marked the cobblestones. It was fresh.

"Spread out! Search the alleyways!" the captain commanded, his voice sharp and urgent.

Two guards moved deeper into the alley, their torches casting wavering beams of light. They moved cautiously, their senses on high alert. Then, a soft scraping sound from above made them freeze. They tilted their heads back, their torchlight revealing...nothing. But the sound came again, closer this time.

Just as they were about to dismiss it as rats, a figure dropped silently from the rooftop, landing between them. It was dressed in commoner's clothes, indistinguishable from any other citizen. But the speed and silence of its descent, the unnatural stillness of its posture, sent a chill down the guards' spines. Before they could react, the figure moved with blinding speed. One guard felt a sharp pain in his side as a blade flashed in the torchlight. He staggered back, clutching his wound, his eyes wide with shock and terror. The other guard raised his sword, but the figure was already gone, melting back into the shadows as quickly as it had appeared.

The wounded guard slumped to the ground, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The other guard knelt beside him, checking the wound. It was deep, but not immediately fatal. As he looked up, scanning the surrounding rooftops and alleyways, he noticed something glinting in the moonlight – a small, crudely carved wooden idol, depicting a grotesque, humanoid bird like creature. It was a symbol he had only ever heard in whispered rumors, a symbol of the dark gods and their hidden followers. The realization hit him like a blow: these weren't random disappearances. They were being hunted and the most hard to swallow truth was that their world really has evil gods in it.

The attack wasn't done. As the other guards stood vigilant, searching for the figure that had attacked, a guttural shriek echoed from the rooftops. It wasn't human. From the shadows above, two more figures descended, not by leaping, but by gliding. They had large, leathery wings that unfurled as they dropped, catching the air and allowing them to land silently behind the remaining guards. Their faces were obscured by dark cowls, but their eyes glowed with an eerie red light.

One of the creatures raised a hand, and the air around it shimmered. The torch held by one of the guards suddenly burst into a shower of sparks, plunging a section of the alley into darkness. Before the guards could react, the creature lunged, its hand transforming into a claw tipped with wickedly sharp talons. It slashed at the guard's arm, tearing through his armor as if it were paper.

The guards, though shaken, were not untrained. They drew their swords, forming a tight defensive formation. The first creature, the one who had initially attacked, reappeared from the shadows, moving with an unnatural fluidity. It seemed to anticipate their every move, dodging their blows with ease. One guard swung his sword, aiming for the creature's head, but it ducked under the blow and retaliated with a swift kick to the guard's knee, buckling him to the ground.

The fallen guard gritted his teeth, his injured knee trembling as he struggled to stand. Despite the pain, he thrust his sword upward in a desperate attempt to fend off the figure looming over him. The blade met resistance, grazing the side of the assailant's torso. A hiss of pain escaped the creature, its glowing red eyes narrowing as it darted back into the shadows.

The other guards closed ranks, their magical armor beginning to hum softly with a faint blue light. They invoked their training, summoning protective wards that shimmered faintly in the air around them. The captain, a seasoned knight named Ewan, barked commands to his comrades.

"Hold the line! Focus on the gliders. Watch the rooftops!" His voice was firm, a lifeline of stability in the chaos.

Above them, the two winged figures circled like vultures, their glowing eyes scanning for an opening. One let out another ear-splitting shriek, its wings creating powerful gusts of wind that extinguished the remaining torches. The alley plunged into near-total darkness, save for the faint glow of the magical wards and the eerie red light of their attackers' eyes.

Ewan raised his shield, his other hand gripping his sword tightly. With a

grunt, his blade ignited in brilliant white flame, casting flickering light over the grim scene. The other guards followed suit, their weapons now glowing with enchantments designed to combat supernatural foes.

From the shadows, the first attacker lunged again, its blade aimed at Ewan. He parried the strike with precision, the clash of metal ringing through the alley. The creature's strength was otherworldly, forcing Ewan back a step, but he held firm.

The winged attackers chose this moment to dive, their claws aimed at the exposed backs of the other guards. But the knights were ready. One of them, a younger recruit named Kael, stepped forward and unleashed a burst of light magic from his gauntlet. The radiant energy struck one of the creatures mid-flight, sending it crashing to the ground with a guttural snarl.

The other glider veered away at the last second, landing on a nearby rooftop with an inhuman screech of rage.

The grounded creature writhed, its leathery wings twitching as it tried to rise. Kael approached cautiously, his glowing sword held steady. Before he could strike, the creature's eyes flared brightly, and a wave of dark energy rippled out from its body. Kael was thrown backward, slamming into the alley wall with a pained cry.

"Kael!" Ewan shouted, but he couldn't move to help. The first attacker was pressing him hard, their blade a blur of motion as it struck again and again. Ewan's shield absorbed most of the blows, but the relentless assault was beginning to wear him down.

Ewan held for a while until he saw an opening, lunged at the winged creatures, his sword aimed at its heart. The creature, however, was too quick. It twisted its body, avoiding the blow, and then grabbed the his arm with its powerful talons, squeezing tightly. The captain cried out in pain as he felt the bones in his arm begin to crack.

Ewan whose arm was crushed cried out, his sword clattering to the cobblestones. The winged creature tightened its grip, a sickening crunch echoing through the alley. The other guards, struggling against the disorienting mist and the swift attacks of the first creature, could only watch in horror. One managed to land a blow on the first attacker, a shallow cut across its shoulder, but the creature barely reacted, its eyes burning with malevolent glee.

The dark mist intensified, making it almost impossible for the guards to see. They stumbled blindly, their swords slashing at empty air. The winged creatures, taking advantage of their confusion, swooped in, their talons tearing at the guards' armor and flesh. One by one, the guards fell, their strength failing against the relentless assault.

Finally, only the guard who had initially discovered the idol remained standing. He was battered and bruised, his armor torn, but he refused to yield. He gripped his sword tightly, his eyes darting from shadow to shadow, trying to anticipate the next attack.

#### Chapter 406:

The first creature emerged from the mist, its eyes fixed on him. It moved with a speed that defied human comprehension, striking with a series of lightning-fast blows. The guard managed to parry some of them, but he was no match for the creature's unnatural speed and strength. A sharp pain shot through his leg as the creature's claw raked across his thigh, sending him crashing to the ground.

The creatures, their task complete, let out a series of guttural shrieks. They grabbed the unconscious guards, their talons digging into their armor, and began to drag them towards a section of the alley wall that seemed perfectly solid. As they approached, however, the wall shimmered and dissolved, revealing a dark, gaping maw that led into the earth. It was as if a hidden door had opened into the very bowels of the city.

One by one, the creatures pulled the unconscious guards through the opening. The last to be dragged through was the guard who had discovered the idol. As he was pulled into the darkness, he briefly regained consciousness. He looked back at the alleyway, his eyes wide with terror, before the wall shimmered again, sealing the entrance behind them. The alley was once again silent, the only evidence of the struggle the scattered weapons and the lingering scent of blood and dark magic.

Deep beneath the city, in a place the guards never knew existed, a vast cavern opened up. Torches flickered on the walls, casting long, dancing shadows that revealed a disturbing scene. The cavern was filled with grotesque statues depicting the bird-like creatures and other monstrous figures. In the center of the cavern, a crude altar stood, stained with what looked like dried blood. The unconscious guards were unceremoniously dumped onto the cold stone floor. Their captors, now fully revealed in the torchlight, were even more disturbing than they had appeared in the alley. Their faces were avian, with sharp beaks and glowing red eyes. Their bodies were lean and muscular, covered in dark feathers. They were not human, not entirely, but something far more sinister.

These were the zealots and listeners of the gods counterpart. From the appearance of these believers, it can be seen that Crepuscular counterpart has the most influence on them.

For the gods watching, this was a sight all too familiar and sadly they could do nothing but watch as the zealots act. Jaws counterpart seemed to have shared his experience as the gods counterpart now steer clear of what could prove them to act.

As for why they haven't been found yet, the captain and guards are about to find out for themselves.

The cavern air hung heavy with the stench of damp earth and something else, something acrid and unsettling. The bird-like creatures, their task completed, began to undergo a disturbing transformation. Their feathered forms rippled and shifted, the beaks receding, the talons retracting, and the feathers melting away to reveal human skin. In moments, the monstrous creatures had become ordinary men and women, dressed in simple clothing.

The change was not merely physical. A subtle shift in their demeanor also occurred. The feral gleam in their eyes softened, replaced by a chillingly serene expression. These were no longer ravenous beasts; they were calm, composed, almost... pious.

the transformation complete, the former creatures moved among the unconscious guards. A low murmur rippled through the cavern as they began to recognize the faces before them.

"Father...?" a young woman whispered, her voice trembling as she looked at one of the transformed human.

"Sister..." a man groaned, his face contorted in disbelief.

The murmurs escalated into cries of shock and horror. Among the fallen guards were not strangers, but people they knew intimately: fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, friends, even respected leaders. The realization struck them like a physical blow. These weren't random disappearances; their own loved ones had been actively hunting them.

Sadly, their cries for answers were met with only cold, emotionless stares as they were dragged before the crude stone altar. No words were spoken as their armor and clothing were stripped away, leaving them naked and vulnerable.

From the shadows emerged more zealots, each holding a wickedly sharp sacrificial knife. They knelt before the captured guards and their captain, their faces set in an almost pious expression. Without hesitation, they began to carve into the bodies of the screaming guards.

The knives, honed to razor sharpness, sliced through flesh with terrifying ease. As more cuts were made, a horrifying pattern emerged: the zealots were meticulously carving the flesh and blood of the sacrifices into the shape of a crude, avian-like creature, mimicking the forms they themselves had briefly taken.

From where the beak of the crude sculpture would be, a pulsing, raw opening of flesh emerged. This grotesque orifice hungrily absorbed the pieces of flesh and blood offered to it. Slowly, painstakingly, the mass of flesh began to take shape, forming a rough square with jagged, uneven edges. It was clearly incomplete, a grotesque mockery of a true form.

But the zealots saw something different. They knelt before the bloody effigy with fervent devotion, their eyes shining with religious ecstasy.

One of them, seemingly their leader, spoke in a low, reverent tone, "Our part has been done. Share the good news with our brethren as we await their good news." A chilling smile spread across their face.

The other zealots nodded in unison, their gaze fixed on the pulsing, bloody square. They seemed to believe that this crude offering, this horrifying act of mutilation and sacrifice, was enough. Enough to appease their dark gods, enough to solidify their twisted faith, enough to herald some unknown, but undoubtedly terrible, event.

The silence that followed was broken only by the dripping of blood and the ragged breathing of the soon-to-be-dead, sacrificed guards. The night gave way to dawn with unnatural speed, as if the darkness itself was eager to flee the scene of such horror. It didn't take long for the disappearance of the patrol to be noticed. The absence of the guards at their posts, the lack of any report, sent ripples of unease through the city.

A search party was quickly organized, a grim and hurried affair. Ironically, the search party was led by one of the very figures who had orchestrated the attack on the guards. This individual, now cloaked in an air of concern and urgency, expertly guided the search. Familiar faces could be seen amongst the searchers, each wearing a look of fear of the unknown, as if they, too, were genuinely terrified by the disappearances. This facade of fear was expertly crafted, the truth remained hidden, buried beneath layers of deception and carefully constructed lies.

The leader of the search party, the zealot who had participated in the ambush, spoke with a grave tone, his voice laced with false concern. "We must be thorough," he instructed, his eyes scanning the faces of the searchers. "These disappearances are becoming far too frequent. We must find them, for the safety of our city."

The search party fanned out, their footsteps echoing through the empty streets. They searched alleyways, questioned late-night tavern keepers, and even checked the homes of the missing guards, all to no avail. The trail had gone cold, seemingly vanishing into thin air.

While the humans, remained oblivious to the happenings around them, the godlings meanwhile were secretly gearing up for a fight as the gods relayed the news to the demigods. From the observed actions of the counterpart, the gods can say with certainty that the demigods were being targeted and their time of ascension was the moment their counterpart will choose to strike. As for how they will do that, they don't know but it was enough that they know how to prepare.

Somewhere above the sea some distance away from the eastern continent. A never seen before craft can be seen moving so high up in the sky that it looks like a black dot.

A closer look at the craft will show a huge airship, covered by a magical shield where nothing can be seen from the outside.

Beyond the magic shield, a scene that respects the nightmare of most mortals can be seen with the ship filled with inexplicable fog.

Walking on the deck of this ship were the incorporeal figures of women holding on to chains with tall men in armour following right behind with a resentful and lustful look on their faces.

They know the ship quite well as each figure went ahead to do their part. While doing their part, they sometimes steal glances at a female figure not far away with light that penetrated through the magical shield casting itself upon her like a spotlight.

Incorporeal like them but she has no chain and she was taller than most of the women around. Nothing exceptional except for her figure and distinct facial figure that most would find ugly.

This female figure was with a smile on her face as he spoke to the empty air around her like someone was there with her.

Chapter 407:

Of course someone was there as the first time this happened, out of concern for their queen, the women got closer in concern to see what was wrong with her, only to start burning up. If not for quickly backing out, the woman would have experienced her second real death.

For Xerosis, the sight she sees is different from the sight of everyone around her. Holding her in his embrace was a tall golden man with flaming hair. The warmth from his embrace was everything she needed at the moment, as for the man holding her it was none other than her uncle Crepuscular.

As for how this started, we have to take a few steps back when Xerosis left the forest and home built by her and her brother as she journeyed to the eastern continent where a guide for her ascension was waiting for her.

For the first week, she missed the presence of her brother as this was the longest she has gone without him close to her. With her servants worried for her, they asked her to take a step out from her room and take a look around at the world from the sky and birds flying by them.

Xerosis and her brother shared a common distaste for sunlight and did their best to avoid it if possible, which was why the ship was surrounded with a magical shield to prevent light from coming through, nonetheless she didn't like the idea of going out and staring at the blue sky with sun hanging above.

One day Xerosis finally decided to stop wallowing as she stepped out from her room and went to the deck. To say that the sight made her swallow back her words was no exaggeration as for the first time in her long life she saw the world with the sun shining down on it. Rather than the sight she was used to

where it was the moon and night sky with stars which had its own beauty too but this was something else.

The world shimmered. Not with the cool, ethereal glow of moonlight she knew so well, but with a vibrant, almost painful brilliance. The ocean, instead of a dark, mysterious expanse, stretched out in an endless sheet of sapphire, reflecting the blinding light above. Tiny, white-capped waves danced and sparkled like a million scattered diamonds. The huge flying creature staring curiously at their ship before flying off with occasional squeak.

She guided to shield to weaken a bit as light penetrated through, she shielded her eyes with a hand, her dark pupils struggling to adjust. The light seemed to penetrate even her closed eyelids, painting the inside of her vision a fiery orange. It was overwhelming, disorienting, and yet... undeniably captivating.

Her servants, who had followed her out, watched with a mixture of concern and relief. They had never seen their mistress react to anything with such visible emotion. One of them, a kind-faced woman named Lyra, approached cautiously. "My Lady," she said softly, "are you alright?"

Xerosis slowly lowered her hand, her gaze fixed on the horizon where the sky met the sea in a hazy, shimmering line. "... I had no idea," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's... beautiful."

The word felt foreign on her tongue. Beauty, to Xerosis, had always been synonymous with the night: the velvet darkness, the silent stars, the pale, watchful moon. This was something entirely different. This was a raw, untamed energy, a force of nature that pulsed with life.

As she continued to observe, a peculiar phenomenon began to occur. While the world around her basked in the golden light of the sun, Xerosis perceived something entirely different. The sun's harsh glare softened in her eyes, transforming into a warm, golden aura.

She grew frightened when the aura seemed to single her out, enveloping her wholly and creating a sensation of warmth on her skin. In her fear, she immediately strengthened her shield, but it did nothing to repel the golden aura. It lingered, clinging to her.

Xerosis couldn't understand her sudden and extreme reaction, but she found herself fleeing back to her room. Thankfully, once there, the golden aura disappeared, no longer following her.

Far above the mortal world, Crepuscular sat cross-legged in his humanoid form, his great wings stretched out behind him.

The landscape of his realm was a vision of fire and brilliance. Rivers of molten gold flowed through valleys of flame, and forests of giant, glowing mushrooms reached toward the heavens. The ground was cracked and broken, revealing the molten rock beneath, and the ever-present sun bathed everything in an intense, blinding light.

He was not alone in his realm. Creatures that seemed to be formed entirely of flames roamed the fiery expanse. Even the plants appeared to be made of fire, their blazing forms swaying in the heated air. At the center of this luminous realm stood the palace of the sun and sky god—a masterpiece of heat and light. Constructed of white marble that reflected the sun's rays, it glittered with gold and jewels, a beacon of divine majesty.

Crepuscular's attention, however, was fixed elsewhere. His gaze lingered on the place where Xerosis had fled. Specifically, he focused on the golden aura that had shrouded her. Watching her flustered figure retreat to the cabin, Crepuscular was struck by an unexpected sense of loss.

Initially, he had paid no special attention to her. What drew his notice was her pure and heartfelt admiration for the blue sky and the sun. His little brother had once remarked that he and Mahu should find a way for mortals to truly understand the significance of the sun he represented and the moon Mahu embodied.

Mortals took his "ball of fire" for granted, knowing only that it existed and would always be there. While they offered admiration, it was rarely enough for Crepuscular. His brother had suggested teaching the mortals to appreciate their celestial gifts, but Crepuscular had been stumped as to how to achieve this.

But how? How could he, a being of blinding light and incomprehensible power, bridge the gap between his divine essence and the fleeting, fragile awareness of mortals? How could he teach them to see the sun not as a simple source of heat and light but as the heart of their existence, a force that nourished life and held the world in balance? For centuries, he had been stumped, unable to devise a way to make mortals comprehend the magnitude of his gift.

And then came Xerosis. A being born of darkness, unacquainted with the splendor of light, yet utterly enchanted when she encountered it. Her awe was unpretentious and genuine, free from the burdens of entitlement or routine. She did not simply see the sun; she experienced it. Her admiration felt like a bridge—a small, fragile thread connecting Crepuscular to the understanding he had sought for so long.

It was a rare and welcome praise that warmed Crepuscular's heart. In his haste, he had acted impulsively, wrapping her in his warm embrace and inadvertently frightening her.

It was a fleeting moment, but Crepuscular etched into his memory the image of Xerosis smiling with pure joy as she discovered light.

The sight of her retreating form, the brief flicker of fear in her eyes before she vanished back into the ship's interior, caused a pang in Crepuscular's ancient heart. He hadn't meant to frighten her. He had simply wanted to share a moment, a connection, a fleeting echo of the joy he felt watching her discover the world anew. It was a clumsy, impulsive act, born of a desperate longing for connection.

He sighed, a gust of hot air that stirred the flames around him. His realm reflected his own tumultuous emotions. The rivers of molten gold seemed to flow faster, the flames burned brighter.

The memory of Ursula, his daughter, flickered in his mind, a painful reminder of the unintended consequences of his power. Born from his very essence, from the heart of his flames, she had paradoxically been burned by them. He had loved her fiercely, but his love, like his light, was too intense for her semi mortal form. The memory served as a stark warning, a constant reminder of the delicate balance he had to maintain when interacting with those less powerful than himself.

Down below, Xerosis stepped back into the familiar embrace of darkness, the cool, quiet solitude of her cabin. The initial fear began to recede, replaced by a strange mix of confusion and... curiosity. She chided herself for her panicked reaction. It was likely her uncle, as she suspected, and if he had truly meant her harm, she would have been powerless to stop him. The thought brought a shiver, not of fear, but of a strange anticipation. The sensation, the warmth, the overwhelming sense of presence, was unlike anything she had ever experienced.

Days turned into weeks, and a restlessness began to stir within Xerosis. The memory of the golden aura, the fleeting warmth, lingered in her mind, a phantom sensation on her skin. She found herself craving it, yearning for that connection, that intense, almost overwhelming feeling. It was a foreign sensation, this longing for something she had previously feared, but it grew stronger with each passing day.

Chapter 408:

Finally, unable to bear it any longer, she took a deep breath and stepped out onto the deck once more. With a mental command, she lowered the magical shield that protected the ship from the sun's rays. The world opened up before her, a vast expanse of blue sky and shimmering ocean. The sun beat down, bathing everything in its golden light.

But it wasn't the same.

The sky was blue, the sun was bright, but the sensation she craved was absent. The warmth was there, the physical warmth of the sun, but it lacked the... something she had experienced before. It was like a melody without its key, a painting without its color. Disappointment washed over her.

From that day forward, Xerosis began a daily ritual. She would venture out onto the deck, hoping, searching, for that elusive feeling. She would stand beneath the sun, willing it to happen, but it never did. The ordinary warmth of the sun was a constant reminder of what she was missing, a pale imitation of the intense, almost spiritual experience she had briefly encountered.

Crepuscular watched her from his fiery realm, his gaze fixed on the tiny ship sailing across the vast sky. He saw her repeated trips to the deck, the subtle shifts in her posture, the faint flicker of hope and disappointment that played across her face. He understood her yearning, her desperate search for something she couldn't quite define.

He hesitated to intervene. He was accustomed to such reactions. Fear, awe, even revulsion – he had seen them all reflected in the faces of mortals, and even in the faces of some of his own kin. His very presence was overwhelming, his power too vast for most to comprehend. His daughter's fate served as a constant reminder of the potential for unintended harm.

Weeks went by with Xerosis not giving up to where she triggered her innate protection from the sun which was the mist, that still didn't deter her as she had a look of challenge while staring at the sun.

Seeing Xerosis's unwavering persistence, her daily pilgrimage to the deck despite the repeated disappointment, stirred something within Crepuscular. He recognized that drive, that relentless pursuit of something just beyond reach. It was a trait he himself possessed, a burning desire that fueled his own existence. He had initially retreated, hesitant to inflict further discomfort, but her refusal to give up sparked a renewed resolve within him. He couldn't simply stand by and watch her chase a phantom sensation. He had to try again, but this time, he would be more careful, more measured.

He focused his attention on the ship, not on Xerosis directly, but on the very air around her. He wouldn't manifest as a blinding aura this time. Instead, he would weave a subtle warmth into the sunlight itself, a gentle caress that would barely register as anything out of the ordinary. It would be a whisper of his presence, a hint of the connection he longed to share.

Down on the deck, Xerosis stood as usual, her face turned towards the sun. She had almost resigned herself to the fact that the sensation was a one-time occurrence, a fleeting dream. Yet, she continued to come out, driven by an inexplicable hope.

Then, it happened.

It wasn't a sudden, overwhelming surge of warmth like before. It was a gradual, almost imperceptible shift. The sunlight, which had previously felt ordinary, now seemed to possess a deeper, richer quality. It wasn't just warm; it was... comforting. It felt like a gentle hand resting on her shoulder, a silent reassurance.

Xerosis's breath hitched. She felt a subtle tingling sensation on her skin, a warmth that spread through her body like a gentle wave. It was faint, almost ephemeral, but it was undeniably there. It was the echo of what she had felt before, a muted version of the intense embrace that had startled her.

She closed her eyes, savoring the sensation. It was as if the sun itself was reaching out to her, offering a silent greeting. A small smile played on her lips. She didn't understand what was happening, but she knew, deep down, that this was what she had been searching for.

Up in his fiery realm, Crepuscular watched with bated breath. He saw the subtle shift in Xerosis's expression, the gentle curve of her lips. A wave of relief washed over him. He had done it. He had managed to connect with her without causing her distress.

He maintained the gentle warmth, a constant, subtle presence in the sunlight that bathed her. He didn't want to overwhelm her, to frighten her away again. He wanted her to become accustomed to it, to recognize it as a comforting presence, a silent connection between them.

The gentle warmth became a constant in Xerosis's daily life. It was no longer a fleeting sensation, but a consistent presence that accompanied her whenever she ventured onto the deck. She grew accustomed

to it, recognizing it as something more than just the sun's natural warmth. It was a subtle, almost imperceptible caress, a silent reassurance that she wasn't alone.

As the days turned into weeks, Xerosis began to notice subtle variations in the warmth. Sometimes it would be a steady, even sensation, a comforting embrace. Other times, it would fluctuate, pulsing with a faint rhythm, like a heartbeat. She began to wonder if there was more to it than just a simple feeling.

One day, while basking in the familiar warmth, a thought struck her. What if these variations weren't random? What if they were... messages? The idea was outlandish, but it resonated with a strange certainty within her. She focused her attention on the warmth, trying to discern a pattern, a meaning behind the subtle shifts.

She noticed that when she thought of her brother, the warmth would intensify slightly, becoming a comforting surge. When she thought of her journey, it would become a steady, unwavering presence, a silent encouragement. And when she thought of the initial, overwhelming experience, it would flicker briefly, a gentle reminder of the intense power behind it.

Slowly, tentatively, Xerosis began to experiment. She would focus on a specific thought or memory, and then observe the corresponding change in the warmth. She discovered that she could elicit different responses, different patterns, simply by focusing her mind. It was a crude form of communication, a language of feeling, but it was undeniably there.

Up in his fiery realm, Crepuscular watched with a mixture of awe and trepidation. He had intended the warmth as a simple connection, a way to reassure Xerosis of his presence. He hadn't expected her to decipher it, to turn it into a form of communication.

He felt a surge of pride at her ingenuity, her ability to perceive the subtle nuances of his power. But he also felt a pang of worry.

He decided to test her. He focused his attention on a specific image: a single, blazing star, burning brightly in the vast expanse of the cosmos. He then amplified the warmth, making it pulse with a distinct rhythm, a slow, deliberate beat.

Down on the deck, Xerosis felt the shift immediately. The warmth intensified, pulsing with a distinct pattern. She closed her eyes, focusing her mind on the sensation. And then, an image flashed into her mind: a brilliant, solitary star, shining against the backdrop of an endless night.

Her eyes snapped open. She gasped, a mixture of surprise and wonder filling her. The image was so vivid, so clear, it was as if she had seen it with her own eyes. She realized then that her theory was correct. The warmth wasn't just a feeling; it was a language, a way for her uncle to communicate with her.

He had found a way to speak to her, not with words, but with the language of the heart, the language of feeling. And as Xerosis began to explore this new form of communication, a unique and extraordinary bond began to form between them.

The establishment of this unique form of communication opened a new Chapter in their relationship. What began as a simple reassurance evolved into a complex and intimate exchange. Xerosis, with her sharp mind and keen perception, quickly became adept at deciphering the nuances of the warmth. She learned to distinguish between different rhythms, intensities, and patterns, each conveying a specific meaning.

Crepuscular, in turn, found himself becoming more attuned to her thoughts and emotions. He learned to modulate the warmth with increasing precision, crafting intricate messages that conveyed not only images and concepts, but also feelings.

One day, while Xerosis was on deck, she focused on a memory of her childhood with her brother. She felt a surge of warmth, not just the usual comforting presence, but a warmth that resonated with a deep sense of longing. It was as if Crepuscular was sharing her own nostalgia, her own bittersweet memories of the past.

She then focused on the image of Crepuscular himself, the figure she had briefly glimpsed during her initial experience with the sun. The warmth intensified, becoming almost overwhelming for a moment, then softened into a gentle, steady pulse. In her mind, she saw an image of his face, not the imposing, godlike visage she had initially perceived, but a softer, more gentle expression.

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A thought formed in her mind, a question she had never dared to ask before. She focused on the feeling of gratitude, of appreciation for his presence in her life. She then focused on the image of a heart, hoping he would understand the sentiment.

Up in his realm, Crepuscular felt the shift in the warmth, the sudden influx of emotion. He perceived the image of a heart, and a wave of surprise washed over him. He understood. She was expressing... affection.

He hesitated for a moment, unsure how to respond. He focused on the feeling of warmth, of comfort, and amplified it, sending a wave of gentle heat towards her. In his mind, he projected an image of a protective embrace, a silent reassurance of his care.

Down on the deck, Xerosis felt the warmth intensify, enveloping her in a comforting embrace. The image of the embrace solidified in her mind, and a feeling of warmth spread through her chest. It was a feeling she couldn't quite define, but it was pleasant, comforting, and... strangely intimate.

"Thank you," she whispered to the sky, knowing, somehow, that he could hear her.

In his realm, Crepuscular felt the sincerity in her voice, the genuine gratitude in her heart. A small smile touched his lips. He had never imagined that such a connection was possible, that he could share such intimate moments with someone.

With her mother, both were just curious to explore their bodies and after that the initial excitement wore off, but now it was different.

One day, while Xerosis was contemplating the vastness of the ocean, a new pattern emerged in the warmth. It was a slow, rhythmic pulse, a gentle ebb and flow that felt strangely... intimate. She focused on it, trying to decipher its meaning.

Then, a clear image formed in her mind: two hands, reaching out and gently touching. The image was accompanied by a feeling of tenderness, of deep affection.

Xerosis's breath caught in her throat. She understood. He was expressing... love.

A blush crept up her neck and onto her cheeks. She had never considered such a possibility. He was her uncle, a god, a being of immense power. And yet, he was expressing a feeling that was deeply human, deeply personal.

She closed her eyes, trying to process this revelation. She thought of him, not as a distant, powerful deity, but as a being who cared for her, who shared his thoughts and feelings with her, who offered her comfort and support.

She then focused on a new image: two figures, standing side by side, bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun. She amplified the warmth, sending a wave of affection back towards him.

Crepuscular felt the shift, the new image, the wave of emotion that washed over him. He understood. She was reciprocating.

He projected an image of himself, standing beside her, the setting sun casting long shadows behind them. He then focused on a feeling of deep contentment, of peace, of... happiness.

While Crepuscular and Xerosis cultivated their unique form of communication, their interactions was seen by the other two gods.

They both noticed Crepuscular's occasional absences, the subtle shifts in the sun's intensity, the fleeting moments when his attention seemed to drift elsewhere. They exchanged knowing glances, a silent communication passing between them.

"He's been... preoccupied," Mahu observed, her voice a soft whisper that carried a hint of happiness to it and a want like she was missing something.

Jaws grumbled, a sound like distant thunder. "Indeed. The sun's warmth has been... erratic. A strange gentleness to it at times."

They had never seen him act in such a way. It was a side of him they had never witnessed before, a tenderness, a vulnerability that was quite unlike his usual proud and fiery demeanor.

Jaws let out a low rumble, "It seems our brother has found... something to hold his attention."

Mahu's expression softened. A hint of a smile touched her lips. "Indeed. It's... rather touching, in a way. He seems... at peace."

"He's neglecting his duties," Jaws observed, though there was no real accusation in his voice.

Mahu shook her head gently. "Let him be, Jaws. He deserves this... connection. It brings him joy."

Jaws said nothing to that as he kept quiet and soon both his and Mahu's attention was drawn.

Mahu specifically was the one being called. Mahu responding to the calling found herself before her step son Ikem, who was now at an altar built for breaching communication with them.

Mahu's voice came from the Altar "What is it son?"

Ikem who got a response with a heavy and serious look on his face answered "I have got words from Ember that he is done building the seals"

Mahu looked at Jaws beside her who nodded "Proceed with the plan, each godling race is to get a hand on one of these seals. With the instruction and help given to Ember, each godling will have an intuitive sense on where the seal towers are to be planted"

"Understood mother," Ikem responded.

He was about to turn and leave when he heard Mahu's voice "This is a very important moment, make sure each godling's race is ready to deal with any misshapen that may arise. If the towers works as it was planned, our counterparts won't stay quiet and easily let things play out"

"Understood, Mother," Ikem responded. This time, he felt her presence fading, and the treasure offered at the altar crumbled into dust. The sight made Ikem sigh.

Each communication with the gods came at a great cost. Recently, they had been spending heavily to maintain contact, underscoring the seriousness of the issue.

Leaving the room with the altar, Ikem made his way to his throne room. He settled onto his throne and waved his hand, causing fragments of mirrors to float from the throne and assemble into six massive mirrors before him.

From the mirrors appeared the figures of the other six demigods.

Maul, his brother, was visible alongside his daughter, who was pouting at him and pointing curiously at the mirrors.

Ikem smiled at the sight and greeted, "Hello, nephew. You were still sucking your thumb the last time I saw you."

The young princess flushed with embarrassment at Ikem's words and quipped, "If you'd visited me more often, you'd have noticed how much I've grown."

Ikem laughed warmly. "True, and I apologize for that. How about the wolf I gave you? Has he been a good companion?"

The princess beamed and moved closer to the mirror. "Forget about that hungry wolf! Uncle, I was wondering if you could make me a unicorn, too."

Ikem raised an eyebrow at her request, while Maul coughed and grabbed one of the horns on his daughter's head, pulling her gently away. "Never mind her. I don't understand why she's so obsessed with unicorns."

Ikem chuckled. "I don't mind. I'm unfamiliar with this 'unicorn,' but I'll talk to her later and find out what it is so I can make one for her."

Before Maul could reply, a voice interrupted.

"Ursula, how about it? Are you ready to have a child? Ikem seems to be great with kids."

Tide's teasing voice drew everyone's attention. Ursula rolled her eyes at him but said nothing. Instead, her gaze rested on Xerosis, who seemed to be avoiding her eyes.

Ursula's expression sharpened as she squinted at Xerosis, then turned her attention to Roth, who was laughing at Tide's joke.

"Xerosis has a look I recognize—the look of someone in love. Who might that be, Roth?" Ursula asked, breaking the silence.

Everyone froze, their eyes wide. Even Roth looked startled as he glanced at his sister, who now had a shy expression and was covering her mouth.

Flowua, who had been lounging with a bored expression moments earlier, perked up with sudden interest. "Who is it?" she asked eagerly.

Xerosis said nothing, prompting her brother to press, "Is it a mortal, Sister? Did you fall for a mortal?"

Ikem couldn't deny his curiosity. A wine cup appeared in his hand, and he took a slow sip. He wasn't the only one intrigued; Tide and Maul tried to appear indifferent, but their perked ears betrayed their interest.

Still, Xerosis remained silent. It was Ursula who finally answered.

"It's no mortal," she said, her tone firm.

All eyes turned to Tide, whose expression shifted to one of alarm. "It's certainly not me!" he blurted defensively.

"Xerosis seeing her cousins get even more wild in their assumptions said 'Enough, it was no mortal or Tide either. It was our uncle Crepuscular.'

Jaws dropped. Ikem nearly choked on his wine, sputtering a bit before regaining his composure. Maul's usual stoic expression cracked into something resembling disbelief. Even Roth, normally unfazed, stared at Xerosis with wide eyes.

Silence descended, thick and heavy. Then, Flowua, Ikem's glare bouncing off her like rain off a rock, muttered, 'Another bloodline coupling. You know among mortals, that is considered forbidden, everyone is now taken except for me, Tide and Roth.' Still muttering to herself she continued 'I don't even want to think of Tide that way so Roth then.' She said as he turned to Roth who responded with 'Huh' In confusion.

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Getting closer to the mirror with a mischievous smile on her face, she asked the Roth who was now flustered, taking a hasty step back, nearly tripping over his own feet. 'Uh... what?' he stammered. Leaning closer to the mirror, a predatory gleam in her eyes, she purred, 'What do you think of me, Roth?'"

Roth's eyes darted around the room, as if searching for an escape route. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. 'I... I think you're... uh... very... present,' he stammered, wincing internally at his own awkward phrasing.

Flowua's smile widened, a hint of amusement in her eyes. 'Present? Is that all? I was hoping for something a little more... evocative.' She reached out a hand, tracing a finger along the cool surface of the mirror, her gaze never leaving Roth's. 'Perhaps... captivating? Alluring? Irresistible?'

Ikem chuckled, taking another sip of his wine. 'Careful, Roth. You might find yourself entangled in a web you can't escape.'

Tide, still looking slightly green around the gills from the earlier revelation, mumbled, 'I'd rather face a kraken than that.'

Roth just stood there, speechless, his face a mixture of confusion and panic. He felt like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a carriage, unable to move."

Ursula and Xerosis were the only ones not laughing as they stared at each other. Finally, Ursula spoke. "Congratulations, cousin, but we need to talk privately after this." Xerosis nodded in agreement.

Sensing the tension and noting that everyone was already familiar with one another, Ikem decided to shift the conversation. "Ember has completed work on the seal towers," he announced.

The demigods immediately turned serious at his words. Ikem continued, "I've already informed Mother, and she confirmed that we are to proceed with the original plan. We should also prepare for possible attacks from their counterparts."

Maul was the first to respond. "So, we've finally reached this point."

Everyone understood the weight of his words, except for Roth, whose unique circumstances left him excluded from certain aspects of the plan. Nonetheless, his role remained vital.

Ikem nodded at Maul's comment. "You're right, brother. If everything goes according to plan, our next meeting will be among the stars."

The demigods had long been ready to initiate their ascension, but it had been delayed due to the seals and the significant role they played.

The godlings couldn't be entrusted with the seals, as they were too critical to their world. Thus, the task had fallen to the demigods. After placing the seals, they would initiate their ascension, killing two birds with one stone.

Five seals had been crafted for Ikem, Tide, Flowua, Roth, and Maul. Xerosis, however, was exempted. She had her own path to follow, one that would lead her to the realm of Ikenga, where her ascension could be fully realized.

"When do we start?" Tide asked.

Ursula spoke up. "I believe we all need time to say our goodbyes and spend time with our children before we begin. Perhaps in a month's time."

The other demigods nodded in agreement. "A month it is, then."

As the group prepared to disperse, Ikem couldn't resist asking, "Xerosis, how were you able to contact Uncle? As we all know, it costs a great deal to communicate with our parents."

The demigods, who were about to leave, suddenly paused. They feigned indifference but were clearly eager to hear her answer.

Xerosis sighed, seeing through their behavior. She finally explained how she had managed to establish communication.

Maul's expression shifted as realization dawned. "So that's why it felt like things on my side had gotten much warmer," he remarked.

The other demigods nodded in agreement. "If it's as you say, then that method can't be replicated," Tide said. "Too much commotion for a simple communication."

Ursula chimed in, her tone tinged with amusement. "Your communication was practically a spectacle for the entire realm. The temperature shifts, the lights flickering—it was hard to ignore."

Xerosis sighed, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "I wasn't expecting it to cause such a ruckus. But Uncle wasn't exactly subtle in his response. The god of sun rarely is."

Ikem chuckled softly, swirling the wine in his cup. "Subtlety has never been his strong suit. Still, it sounds like the effort was worth it."

Xerosis nodded, her expression growing serious. "It was. Uncle shared insights about my path and what I'll face in Ikenga's realm. There's... a trial awaiting me, one that will test my resolve and worthiness to ascend."

The room fell silent for a moment as the weight of her words sank in.

"Then you'll need to prepare," Maul said, his deep voice steady. "We can't afford for any of us to falter now—not with everything at stake."

"I'll be ready," Xerosis assured him. Her gaze swept across the others. "And I trust the same goes for all of you. Each of our tasks carries its own burdens, but together, we'll see this through."

Flowua, who had been quiet until now, raised an eyebrow. "Bold words. I hope you've thought about what happens if one of us fails. The seals can't be compromised."

"We won't fail," Ikem said firmly, his voice carrying a commanding authority. "We've come too far and sacrificed too much to falter now. The seals will be placed, and our ascension will secure the balance of this world."

Tide leaned back, crossing his arms. "Let's not forget, though—our parents counterparts won't just stand by. If they suspect what we're planning, they'll come for us."

"They're welcome to try," Roth said with a grin, his sharp teeth glinting. "It's been too long since I've had a proper fight."

Ursula rolled her eyes at his bravado but smiled faintly. "Let's not court trouble unnecessarily. For now, we prepare. In a month, we execute the plan—no distractions, no mistakes."

The demigods exchanged solemn nods, each retreating into their thoughts. The mirror shattered retreating back into the throne as Ikem sat in silence with thoughts swirling in his head.

Meanwhile among the demigods, two were having a separate conversation. Ursula and Xerosis, both sat in silence as they looked at each other, one with a look of guilt while the other kept on a stoic face.

"Was he gentle to you?" Ursula asked, to which Xerosis nodded as she said "That gentleness was what attracted me to him"

Ursula's gaze softened as she spoke, though her tone remained measured. "His warmth is inviting from afar, isn't it? It feels comforting, like the embrace of a gentle sunrise." She paused, her eyes distant as if recalling a memory. "But up close... it's a different story entirely. Scorching. Overwhelming. Dreadful."

Xerosis tilted her head, her confusion evident. "Are you speaking of him as your father or something more?"

Ursula's lips pressed into a thin line, and for a moment, silence stretched between them. When she finally spoke, her voice carried a faint tremor. "Both, perhaps. He's my father, but I've never truly been able to stand beside him. His flames—his very presence—are too powerful. No matter how much I wanted to reach out, it was impossible without being burned."

Xerosis's expression softened as understanding dawned. "That must have been... lonely."

"It was." Ursula's stoic mask cracked for just a moment, her vulnerability shining through. She quickly composed herself. "But this isn't about me. You're not a child reaching for something unattainable. You're making a choice—knowing the risks."

"I am," Xerosis replied, her tone resolute. "I won't deny the danger of being close to him. His flames are fierce, but they're also his nature. I... I admire his strength, even if it comes with that heat."

Ursula regarded her cousin carefully, searching her face for any hint of doubt. "It's admirable that you have such conviction—something I wish I had at the time," she said, her voice carrying a tinge of regret. "But I must sadly inform you that conviction alone won't be enough to help you in your situation."

Raising her hand, golden flames ignited in Ursula's palm. She watched the fire dance, her expression unreadable. "I look forward to my ascension," she continued, her tone soft yet resolute. "Perhaps then, I'll finally have the strength to stand by his side and welcome his embrace."

She clenched her flaming hand briefly before letting the fire fade. "My weakness back then hurt not only me but also him. And I don't want him to endure that pain again—feeling distant from someone he loves."

Her gaze locked onto Xerosis, her eyes earnest and steady. "That's why I'm telling you, cousin: you'll need strength if you're to stay beside him. Conviction is a start, but it's not enough. Promise me you'll find that strength, for both your sakes."

Xerosis remained silent for a moment, her gaze dropping to her hands. She flexed her fingers, as if testing an invisible strength within them. "I understand what you're saying, Ursula. Strength... it's not something I've ever thought I lacked until now."

She looked back up, her violet eyes gleaming with determination. "But I've already made my choice. I will stand by him, no matter what it takes. If I need to become stronger, then I