

Guardian gods 421

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Captain Rohen gritted his teeth as he and his men rushed toward the main square, weapons drawn. But the moment they arrived, dread settled deep in his gut.

The shadows moved, making them think their eyes were seeing wrong. Not like ordinary darkness but like something alive—flickering, writhing, stretching unnaturally across the cobblestones. And the people...

Some lay collapsed, bodies convulsing as inky tendrils slithered beneath their skin. Others had already risen, their eyes vacant, their movements unnatural—jerking, twitching, as if guided by unseen strings.

The captain found himself stumped as he didn't know where to start helping from. The enemy could even be hardly seen.

Captain Rohen stood frozen for a fraction too long, his mind racing. Where could he even begin? The enemy was barely visible, shifting between shadow and flesh, striking from nowhere.

"Shields up!" he barked, his voice cutting through the chaos. "Form up! We hold the square!"

The guards obeyed without hesitation, shields locking together in a desperate wall of steel between the advancing darkness and the remaining civilians.

Then the Zealots stepped forward.

Emerging from alleys, temple doorways, and beneath archways, they came—not in a charge, but with slow, deliberate steps. Their inhuman, feathered forms stretched unnatural shadows across the cobblestones. Hollow eyes gleamed with eerie devotion, and when they spoke, their voices layered and distorted into one.

"You resist in vain."

The first Zealot moved faster than thought.

One moment, he stood still; the next, he was within the guards' ranks. A clawed hand pierced a soldier's chest before the man could react. He gasped, lifted into the air, his body twisting as the Zealot whispered something unheard into his ear.

The soldier convulsed. His eyes blackened, when he was dropped, he did not rise as himself.

Then the battle truly began.

Steel flashed. Swords cut deep into the Zealots—yet their bodies did not break like mortal flesh. Blades met resistance, then slid through, wounds closing as though untouched. Arrows struck true, only for the creatures to turn, their heads snapping toward the archers with grotesque grins.

Rohen cursed. "Focus on the possessed! Cut them down before they turn!"

A soldier swung his halberd at a fallen civilian—one who had begun to rise, jerking, wrong. But before the blade could land, a Zealot slipped between them, stopping the strike with nothing but an outstretched hand.

A flick of the wrist.

The soldier was sent flying, his body crumpling against the stone wall with a sickening crack.

More Zealots surged forward, weaving through the battle like phantoms. They did not fight as warriors. They were overwhelmed. They whispered. They were touched. And with each touch, another soldier was lost.

The shield line broke.

One by one, men were pulled into the dark embrace. Their screams were brief, choked by shadow. The city guards were no longer protecting.

They were surviving and they were losing.

Rohen barely parried a strike, his sword clashing against the Zealot's claws. His breath came heavy, his arms numbed by the force of each blow. Around him, his men fell. Their bodies twitched, darkness slithering into their veins.

The weight in his gut sank like a stone, the city was already lost.

It didn't take long for the captain to be overwhelmed. The city, once engulfed in pandemonium, soon fell into an eerie silence. Buildings burned, their skeletal remains casting flickering shadows, and the city looked completely different from how it had been before the attack.

A new, unsettling sight had emerged—the once-empty streets were now filled with people staring blankly into the void before them. Meanwhile, deep underground, where the pulsing flesh had been placed in a cavity, a feathered Zealot carefully extracted it as the statue above crumbled to dust.

Carrying the pulsing flesh with purpose, the Zealot strode through the streets. The vacant-eyed humans instinctively cleared a path until he reached the now-possessed captain. Unlike the other possessed, whose faces were devoid of thought, the captain's eyes gleamed with intelligence. He turned his gaze toward the approaching Zealot, his expression unreadable.

As soon as the Zealot knelt before him, the captain seized the flesh, his mouth opening unnaturally wide before swallowing it whole. Dark, flaming wings erupted from his back, unfurling violently before wrapping around his body in a cocoon-like formation.

It didn't take long. The dark shell burst apart, sending waves of black fire cascading outward, consuming everything nearby. The captain's new form was grotesquely transformed—his body now resembled that of a harpy, his gaping maw lined with needle-sharp teeth. The dark flames continued to spread, latching onto the possessed humans. As the fire devoured them, their human forms twisted and reshaped, taking on the appearance of the Zealots.

Above, the crimson dome in the sky dissipated, revealing the starlit night once more. The captain spread his wings wide and let out a thunderous roar before launching himself into the sky, vanishing in an instant.

One by one, the transformed figures followed suit, their newly formed wings carrying them upward in a flurry of feathers. Soon, they too disappeared into the heavens.

Back in Nwadiebeube's capital city, the king and his council members remained oblivious to the horrors that had unfolded. Their focus remained on the strategic map spread before them, unaware of the darkness that had just taken flight.

Suddenly, a section of the map blinked red, then flared into a consuming blaze. Nwadiebeube recoiled, startled, and gestured sharply for the map to be brought closer. The image zoomed in, providing a bird's-eye view of the affected city, now engulfed in dark flames.

The scene was horrifyingly clear. The map showed no signs of life within the burning city. It was as if the inhabitants had been instantly and utterly obliterated.

Nwadiebeube sank back into his chair, his face a mask of shock and disbelief. "How... how did this happen under our watch?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "Why was there no warning? I thought we were prepared."

Princess Nwadimma, usually composed and collected, was visibly shaken. "Was this... was this the enemy the demigods were facing?" she murmured, more to herself than anyone else. "Was the gap between their power and ours... that vast?"

Okeke, the general, stepped forward, his face grim. "Your Majesty, we had patrols in the area. They reported nothing unusual until... until the fire. It was as if it appeared out of thin air."

"Out of thin air?" Nwadiebeube repeated, a chill running down his spine. "That's impossible."

"Yet," Okeke said, gesturing to the map, "it is what we see. This... this is beyond anything we have ever encountered. Our weapons, our defenses... they are meaningless against something like this."

Nwadimma rose, her expression determined. "We need to know more. We need to understand what we are facing. Send messengers to the other kingdoms. Tell them what we have seen. Tell them... tell them that we are facing a threat unlike any other."

Before she could finish her order, the map in front of them erupted in a flurry of flashing red. Multiple locations across their territory, and beyond, began to signal danger. Nwadiebeube reacted instantly, gesturing sharply to bring up visual feeds from these affected areas.

This time, the images were clearer, more revealing than the previous city's mysterious destruction. Unlike the last city, which had been shrouded in a red dome, these locations offered a brief, terrifying glimpse of what was happening. The hidden zealots, their true forms now visible, shed their disguises and ascended into the sky with unnerving speed, disappearing as if they were never there.

The sight was chilling. There was no attack, no battle, no visible force of destruction. The zealots simply left. Their departure was abrupt, almost casual, leaving behind only the lingering sense of dread and the unsettling implication that they could have caused similar devastation to the first city, but chose not to.

As they watched the zealots vanish, a chilling realization dawned on Nwadiebeube and his council. The enemy was no longer interested in them. Whatever had happened in the first city, the one consumed by dark flames, seemed to be a unique event, something special. The other locations were merely... abandoned.

"They're leaving," Nwadimma whispered, her voice filled with a mixture of confusion and dread. "They're all leaving."

Okeke nodded slowly. "It's as if... as if they've accomplished what they came here to do. Or perhaps," he added, a frown creasing his brow, "they've simply moved on to something else."

Nwadiebeube felt a cold dread creeping into his heart. The zealots' departure wasn't a relief; it was a terrifying unknown. What were they planning? What was so important that they would abandon their hidden positions and reveal themselves so openly? And what was so unique about the first city that it warranted such a devastating display of power?

Then, a chilling thought struck him, a memory surfacing from the apelings' message. "The apelings... they must be their new target," he whispered, the realization hitting him like a physical blow.

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As if to punctuate his words, a heavy, dramatic thud reverberated through the building, shaking its foundations. Nwadiebeube and the others exchanged startled glances, thinking it was some kind of illusion or aftershock. But then, another thud followed, closer this time, more forceful.

Nwadiebeube, followed closely by his council members and the princess, rushed to the balcony. What they saw there stole their breath away.

In the distance, yet undeniably massive, was the largest apeling Nwadiebeube had ever seen. Its size was staggering, dwarfing anything he had previously witnessed. The apeling was clad in gleaming armor, and it carried an enormous pillar.

A closer look at the pillar revealed strange, never-before-seen runes etched into its surface. Ikem, the apeling, seemed to sense their observation. He turned his gaze towards them, and upon recognizing Nwadiebeube, he looked away dismissively, continuing his deliberate, earth-shaking stride. Each step was accompanied by another resounding thud, a testament to the apeling's immense size and power.

The sight was both awe-inspiring and terrifying. This was no ordinary apeling. This was something... more. The sheer scale of the creature, the strange runes, and the casual dismissal of their presence sent a clear message: They were witnessing something far beyond their comprehension, something that dwarfed their own concerns and struggles. The zealots' departure, the destruction of the city, the arrival of this colossal apeling—it all pointed to a larger conflict, a cosmic drama unfolding before their very eyes. And they, the kings and rulers of men, were merely insignificant spectators.

And so they watched in silence as Ikem continued his walk as he went past their city and heading off into the distance. Looking at the giant back and the dismissive gaze, Nwadiebeube clenched his fist "Someday, the will also rise to such a position"

The same horrifying spectacle was playing out across the globe, each continent bearing witness to a unique form of devastation. A chosen city would be isolated beneath a crimson dome, only to reappear moments later, transformed and devoid of its inhabitants.

The Zealots unleashed upon Ursula were those influenced by the God of Sea and Storms—shark-like figures with exaggerated features, their razor-sharp teeth dripping with a dark, watery venom. The city targeted by these Zealots had become a flooded ruin. Dark, brackish water surged through the streets, spreading outward and contaminating the surrounding lands. The red dome had vanished, leaving behind a scene of aquatic horror.

As for Maul, the Zealot he faced was a fusion of two kinds—Feathered Zealots and undead Zealots. The latter came in various forms, ranging from skeletal beings to rotting zombies and wraith-like figures. When the red dome lifted, an eerie silence settled over the city. The observatories remained strangely intact, but the people were gone. An unsettling stillness hung in the air, an overwhelming sense of emptiness. Those who dared to look closer would witness the walls and buildings crumbling into dust, as if the very life had been drained from the city. The night wind carried away the remnants, whispering through the desolation.

The city chosen for sacrifice belonged to the Silver Kingdom, though hidden Zealots—those who had forsaken their original forms—emerged from other nations, including the Björn Kingdom and several smaller realms.

On the southern continent, one of the Empire's cities was chosen. The Zealots that arose there were the Feathered Zealots of the God of Sun and Sky. The city selected for Roth's torment was a sprawling metropolis built within a deep canyon, perpetually shrouded in darkness. When the red dome disappeared, the city was bathed in an unnatural, blinding light. The shadows that once defined it had vanished, replaced by an oppressive radiance that burned the very air. The inhabitants were gone, leaving behind only empty streets and buildings, now exposed to the harsh, unforgiving brilliance that stood out in the night sky.

As for the remaining two demigods, their divine counterparts lacked human cities where they could implant their zealots to initiate a sacrifice.

Deep beneath the sea, within the vast underwater kingdom, two colossal figures moved across the ocean floor. On one side, Tide, in his towering giant form, carried his rune pillar, heading toward his designated location. On the other side, Flowua, in her full giant mermaid form, dragged her rune pillar, bound by chains of water, as she made her way through the depths.

Far from both demigods, a demon leviathan lay coiled around a rune pillar in an underground cavern, surrounded by the chaos of war. Above this subterranean battlefield stood a bustling city of murlocs. Once a struggling settlement, the murlocs had made significant advancements, their kingdom now resembling, though not quite equaling, the grand structures built by the two demigods.

In the depths below, the leviathan—leader of the murlocs—opened his eyes. At this moment, Aska's gaze had turned completely dark, a clear sign that he had fully succumbed to corruption.

His downfall began after his humiliating retreat from the battle between Jaus and his divine counterpart. With nowhere else to go, Aska had returned to the murloc kingdom he had founded.

Back in his domain, regret gnawed at him. Every choice he had made since arriving in this world now seemed like a mistake. Unlucky enough to be part of a consciousness that found itself trapped in the sea ruled by two demigods, Aska had initially thrived but had failed to outpace them. His impatience had led to a critical misstep, one that now haunted him.

Merging with the leviathan for strength had been his gravest mistake. He had understood the nature of leviathans—their instincts, their behaviors—and had believed himself capable of handling the consequences. What he had not foreseen was being ensnared by the gods' counterpart in his reckless pursuit of power, throwing his plans into disarray.

Leviathans, ancient and dominant creatures of the sea, possessed an unusual physiology. As apex predators, they had developed the habit of falling into deep, centuries-long slumbers, only stirring when attacked or driven by hunger—an event that was rare.

To normal mortal eyes, the leviathan sleeps is something normal with no urpose behind it but to the leviathan their sleeps was something different. The Leviathan's sleep isn't mere dormancy; it's a form of deep meditation, a state of profound connection to the ocean's currents and rhythms. During these extended periods, their consciousness doesn't entirely shut down. Instead, it expands, intertwining with the very fabric of the deep sea. They become aware of subtle shifts in temperature, pressure, and the migratory patterns of creatures across vast distances. It's a sensory input on a scale unimaginable to shorter-lived beings.

To the Leviathan, these "sleeps" are periods of profound learning and growth. They are not just physical beings; they are living libraries of the ocean's history. Within their slumbering minds reside echoes of ancient ecosystems, forgotten migrations.

Leviathana perceives its sleep as a vital part of its existence. It's a time of introspection, allowing it to process the vast amount of sensory information it gathers throughout its long life. They might even communicate with each other during these deep sleeps, sharing knowledge and experiences across vast distances through some form of underwater telepathy. Their sleep is not just necessary for survival; they are essential for maintaining their unique role in the ocean's ecosystem. Even the oldest and most powerful Leviathan are granted access to the elemental realm, a place most primordial beings aren't even allowed to step into.

Merging with the leviathan meant that Aska had taken on its burdens, responsibilities he was forced to manage even in his sleep. This was why, despite his extensive knowledge as a former demon consciousness, he could barely oversee the development of his kingdom, leaving it to fend for itself.

Becoming entangled with the gods' counterpart disrupted his natural sleep cycle, gradually wearing him down. The interference put him in a state of constant irritation, something utterly foreign to a leviathan. In a desperate attempt to escape the whispers invading his mind, he did the unthinkable—he fled from the sea. No leviathan had ever done such a thing before.

Yet, fate was cruel. He was found again, hunted down, and forced to retreat back into the very ocean he had tried to escape.

Aska, once a demon who prided himself on his power and independence, now found his pride in tatters. He had never imagined a predicament like this—trapped, tormented, and restless.

"HE NEEDED TO SLEEP" This simple statement speaks volumes. Aska's desperation has driven him to make a deal with the very entity that's tormenting him. He's sacrificing his autonomy, his freedom, and potentially his long-term plans for the immediate relief of sleep. This decision highlights the severity of his situation and the toll the disrupted sleep has taken on his mental and physical state.

It's a Faustian bargain, and the long-term consequences are likely to be dire.

The weight of months of stillness finally lifted from Aska's massive form. Though his physical self remained dormant, a thrill, a spark of anticipation, coursed through his very cells. Peace, true peace, was within reach, a concept he hadn't known in what felt like an eternity. He had been in a state of quiet readiness, awaiting the summons from the god's counterpart, a being of the mirrored world.

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This acceptance, this pact with the deity of the inverted realm, had irrevocably changed him. His eyes, once ordinary, now held the unsettling ability to pierce the veil between worlds, granting him full vision of the upside-down reality where the god's counterpart held sway. As a creature of immense power, now bound as a zealot, Aska felt the precise moment his purpose would be revealed, the task laid before him.

The colossal serpent uncoiled from the pillar that had served as his resting place. His serpentine body, thick as a ship's mast, surged upwards through the water, emerging from the grand palace built for him by his devoted followers: the amphibious Dorsaken and the surprisingly loyal Murlocs.

A deafening roar erupted from Aska's maw, resonating through the underwater kingdom. The command, a vibrational pulse in the water, echoed across the realm. He settled back down, patiently waiting. Soon, the expanse outside his palace teemed with hundreds of thousands of Murlocs, their eyes wide with a mixture of awe and fervent devotion.

Aska's immense form rose once more, his dark eyes, now shimmering with an otherworldly light, sending shivers down the spines of his assembled followers. Before they could react, thick, dark tears streamed from Aska's eyes, tainting the clear water around him, enveloping every Murloc in their inky embrace.

With this grim task completed, Aska willed the transition. A wave of nausea washed over him, a sensation he loathed. He opened his eyes to the mirrored world. His Murloc army stood (or rather, floated) beside him, their expressions a mixture of fear and confusion.

The water here was a stark, unsettling black. Visibility was near zero; the forms of their companions were mere shadows in the oppressive gloom. But worse than the darkness was the palpable sense of being watched, the chilling certainty that unseen eyes were upon them.

Aska, his own eyes squeezed shut in disgust, refused to witness the horror that was about to unfold. From the inky depths, shadowy figures emerged, immaterial and swift. They flowed into the bodies of the Murlocs, possessing them without resistance, like phantoms slipping into empty shells. The takeover was swift and silent, leaving the Murlocs' forms as puppets in the hands of an unknown, terrifying power.

The transformation was complete in chilling silence. The Murlocs, moments before a mass of anxious, chattering creatures, now stood unnervingly still. Their eyes, once bright and curious, were now dull and lifeless, reflecting only the oppressive darkness of the mirrored world. An unnatural stillness permeated the group, a stark contrast to their usual fidgety nature. It was as if their very essence had been replaced, leaving behind only empty husks.

Aska finally opened his eyes, the revulsion twisting his features. He gazed upon his transformed army, a wave of cold satisfaction washing over him, mingled with a deep, unsettling unease. They were no

longer his Murlocs, not truly. They were vessels, extensions of the god's counterpart, their loyalty now absolute, unquestioning, and terrifying.

He extended a clawed hand, the gesture hesitant, almost reluctant. The possessed Murlocs responded instantly, their movements jerky and unnatural, like puppets on invisible strings. They turned towards him, their vacant eyes fixed on his form with an unnerving intensity. There was no recognition in their gaze, no warmth, only a chilling emptiness.

Aska suppressed a shudder. This was the price of his pact, the cost of the power he now wielded. He had sacrificed his people, their individuality, their very souls, to serve a being he barely understood. The thought gnawed at him, a constant reminder of the darkness he had embraced.

He turned, his massive body shifting through the water, the possessed Murlocs following in his wake, a silent, spectral procession. He could feel the god's counterpart's presence, a cold, whispering voice in the back of his mind, guiding him, directing him towards his task. He knew what he had to do. He was a zealot now, a servant of the mirrored world, and he would carry out his master's will, no matter the cost.

The journey through the dark waters was unsettling. The silence of his army was unnerving, the lack of their usual chatter and playful jostling creating an atmosphere of oppressive dread. Aska could feel the weight of their vacant stares, their unblinking focus on his every move.

He was leading an army of ghosts, a legion of empty shells controlled by a force beyond his comprehension.

The origin gods, finally freed from the immediate pressure of the rift, turned their attention back to the conflict below. Their expressions were grim. The respite was temporary; they knew the demigods were vulnerable, pinned down while they worked to secure the rune pillars.

Jaus watched the ghostly legion advance, his brow furrowed. "They have only just been recently born," he echoed, his voice heavy with concern, "yet they know us too well." The way the Zealots had transformed, each one a twisted reflection designed to exploit a specific demigod's weakness, was a clear indication of a cunning, perhaps even familiar, mind at work.

Crepuscular nodded, a flicker of unease in his ancient eyes. "I can't help but think of our brother Ikenga and his quirky thoughts," he murmured. "If his counterpart happens to inherit any of his quirks...it will be a problem for both us and the demigods." Ikenga, even among the origin gods, had possessed a unique, often unpredictable way of thinking. The possibility of that chaotic energy being replicated in their newly emerged counterparts was a worrying prospect.

Mahu's eyes, usually filled with a quiet strength, flickered with a distant longing as Ikenga's name was spoken. "I wonder how they are doing," she said softly, almost to herself. "Have they gotten closer to the goal yet?" Her gaze drifted towards the horizon, as if she could pierce the veil of reality and see the progress of her other brethren.

Each of the origin gods understood the precariousness of the situation. The demigods, though powerful in their own right, were still young, untested in the face of such a calculated and insidious assault. They were now on their own, the origin gods unable to directly intervene while the rune pillars were being placed.

This was the unfairness of the whole situation. Their counterparts, it seemed, possessed a clear advantage, able to observe and strategize with a complete picture of the battlefield, while the origin gods remained blind to the enemy's machinations. This disparity left them feeling vulnerable, forced to react hastily to whatever new threat was unleashed upon their progeny. They were fighting a war with one hand tied behind their backs, their movements hampered by their inability to perceive the full scope of the conflict.

This very imbalance underscored the critical importance of the rune pillars. "It will equalize the play," Jaus rumbled, his voice echoing with a newfound urgency. "With each side no longer being aware of the other's plans, we will no longer be fighting at a disadvantage." The placement of the pillars wasn't just about sealing the breach; it was about leveling the playing field. It was about breaking the unseen connection that allowed their counterparts to anticipate their every move.

Crepuscular nodded, his expression grim. "Indeed," he agreed. "The enemy has used our sight against us, turning our awareness into a weapon. By severing that connection, we reclaim our strategic advantage."

He clarified, a hint of bitterness in his voice, "It's not that we are blind to the other world entirely. We can see it, but it is a desolate, barren place. Watching it yields nothing of strategic value. It's a static canvas, offering no insights, no tactical advantage. Their world, however," he gestured with a sweeping hand, "is vibrant, dynamic. Every move we make, every subtle shift in our defenses, every flicker of our power – they see it all. They have turned our very awareness against us, using it to anticipate our actions

and counter our strategies." The unfairness of it stung. They were forced to fight blind, while their counterparts enjoyed a clear, unobstructed view of their every move. It was like playing a game where the opponent could see your hand while you were forced to play in the dark.

Down on the eastern continent, Ikem felt the nearness of his goal. But the sensation was abruptly cut short. He froze, a prickling unease crawling across his skin. His senses, usually stretched for miles, could detect nothing concrete, no physical presence to explain the sudden threat that loomed over him. It was as if the danger was an illusion, a phantom sensation.

Yet, the chill that permeated his body, coupled with Bara's urgent warning echoing in his mind, confirmed the reality of the threat. A jolt of memory shot through Ikem – the same chilling dread he'd felt in his youth, at the very beginning of his journey, when he first encountered the panther. This feeling, however, was magnitudes stronger, more terrifying.

A wave of urgency washed over him. Ikem's voice boomed outwards, reaching his grandchildren who trailed behind him, guarding his path. "The enemy is here! Remember the training for Upside Do—"

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His warning was cut short. With no preamble, the figure of the possessed captain materialized directly in front of him. The captain's mouth gaped open, filled with writhing black flames, aimed directly at Ikem. There was no time to react, no time to dodge. Instinctively, Ikem dropped the rune pillar he carried, thrusting it forward as a makeshift shield. The unnatural heat radiating from the black flames, the sheer wrongness of their nature, warned him of the immense danger they posed. The pillar, a conduit of divine power, was his only hope.

His giant body at the same time shrunk to avoid being touched by the flames.

A few moments back, Myrrha, Ash, Brook and Tula who stayed hidden suddenly went into a state of alert once they saw Ikem their grandfather stop.

Unlike Ikem, they could sense nothing as they had never faced anything similar before but it was enough seeing their grandfather stop.

Acting quickly, they made a sign for the small elite army following behind them to stop. Suddenly everyone heard the urgent voice of Ikem who couldn't finish his word before being attacked out of nowhere.

Here the word "Training for the upside" Even if it wasn't finished, everyone already got an idea of what they were about to face. Something Ikem made sure they understand the severity of facing with the most important part not to let the enemy touch and grab you to the other world.

Sadly some of them were too late to react as feathered Zealots seem to materialize from thin air, their thin feathered hand being the last thing seen covering their face before being dragged away into the other world.

Still the apelinggs proved why they were Elite as training kicked in with a mana construct replica of each guard appearing on the surface of their body which the Zealots made contact with in an attempt to pull them into the other world.

Only to grab to be surprised when their target was not with them back at the upside down world.

But even the elite apeling forces, skilled as they were, were now facing overwhelming odds. Hundreds of thousands of feathered Zealots seemed to materialize from thin air, their numbers growing with each passing moment. The initial surprise attack had claimed some, but the bulk of the apeling force was ready now, their mana constructs flickering and shimmering as they braced for the onslaught.

Myrrha, Ash, Brook, and Tula exchanged grim glances. The sheer number of feathered Zealots surrounding them was daunting, but their gazes kept drifting back to Ikem, who remained halted, engaged with a threat of his own. The decision weighed heavily on them. Who to assist? Their grandfather, or the elite guard?

The answer, though difficult, was clear. Their mission objective was paramount. Ikem had to continue his progress. The rune pillars had to be activated simultaneously. If they left Ikem to deal with the Zealots alone, the uncertainty of the situation could jeopardize everything. He might be delayed, or worse, fail entirely to reach his destination in time.

It was an ironclad rule: once the crusade began, it could not be stopped, regardless of the obstacles. They had to trust in the elite guards' training. Superficial observation suggested the Zealots, while

stronger than ordinary foes, were not exceptionally powerful individually. Their true strength lay in their numbers and their ability to slip into the Upside Down, only to reappear unexpectedly.

That was the real danger. As their training had emphasized, their senses couldn't predict where the Zealots would rematerialize. The only reliable tactic was swift and decisive action: kill them immediately, before they had a chance to vanish. Delay was a death sentence.

The elite guard were made up of the Cursed apelings clans and numbered in the thousand. The four cursed apeling clans, Ember, Zephyr, Terra, and Ripple, moved as a single, cohesive unit, their individual strengths complementing each other.

The forest, cloaked in the inky blackness of night, Moonlight, filtered through the dense canopy, cast long, dancing shadows that played tricks on the eye, making it difficult to distinguish friend from foe.

The forest, cloaked in the inky blackness of night, was illuminated by moonlight filtering through the dense canopy. Shadows danced across the ground, playing tricks on the eye and making it difficult to distinguish friend from foe.

The battle began with a powerful gust of wind as the Zephyr Clan took to the trees, their movement stirring the air. At the same time, the Ember Clan used the wind to propel themselves forward, stomping the ground with a resounding force as they got into position.

A wave of searing flames erupted, devouring the forest and forcing the Zealots back. Some managed to escape into the upside-down world, while others were caught in the inferno, their bodies reduced to ash in an instant.

The Ripple Clan quickly intervened, summoning a downpour to extinguish the spreading fire. Though the flames were doused, the Ember Clan's strategy had been effective—the Zealots had vanished, unable to regroup.

This was the intended outcome. The surprise ambush had denied them time to form a proper defense and get into their formations. Victory hinged on the Zephyr Clan, whose unmatched speed allowed them to hunt down the Zealots before they could disappear again. Meanwhile, the Ember Clan's role was to keep the enemy at bay with relentless bursts of flame. The Terra Clan served as protectors, prepared to intercept should the Zealots unexpectedly materialize within their formation.

The Ripple Clan's task was to halt or freeze the Zealots in place, giving each clan the perfect opportunity to strike.

The rain, summoned by the Ripple clan, hissed and sizzled as it met the lingering embers of the Ember clan's attack. A thick fog began to roll in, further obscuring the already treacherous battlefield. The Zephyr clan, perched high in the trees, became near-invisible silhouettes against the dark foliage. Their movements were a whisper of rustling leaves, a flash of movement too quick for the eye to follow. They were hunting shadows, their targets the elusive Zealots.

A guttural cry echoed through the forest. A Zealot, caught off guard by a Zephyr assassin, materialized partially into the physical world, only to be met with a swift strike. The Zealot dissolved back into the upside-down world, but not before a dark, viscous ichor dripped onto the forest floor, a testament to the Zephyr's deadly accuracy. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

Suddenly, the ground trembled. A massive root, thick as a man's torso, erupted from the earth, lashing out like a living whip. A Terra clan member, his skin the color of granite, stood at its base, his eyes glowing with an earthy power. He had anticipated a Zealot flanking maneuver. The root slammed into the spot where the Zealot was attempting to materialize, disrupting the process and sending the creature reeling back into its shadowy realm.

The Ember clan, reformed and ready, unleashed another controlled burst of flame, this time directed towards the edges of the forest. Their objective was not to incinerate, but to create a wall of fire, forcing the Zealots to remain within the smaller, more manageable area. The flames crackled, casting an eerie glow on the scene, illuminating the swirling fog and the tense faces of the allied clans.

The Zealots, seeing as they couldn't get close and were being picked off slowly took a Kamikaze route as a wave of them materialized with their wings spread apart with small traces of black flame burning on it.

The dove down covered in flames only to be met with a chilling gust of wind as frost began climbing up their body. The other clans, seeing this, momentarily left their position as each manifested a weapon on their hand, tearing apart the frozen Zealots in pieces.

With quickness, hundreds of Zealots were dealt. But at the same time a gap appeared in the formation which the Zealots took advantage of. The Zealots, sensing their opportunity, pressed their attack. They materialized in short bursts, attacking and retreating before the flames could fully engulf them. The

heat, while still a deterrent, was no longer the impenetrable barrier it had been. Small black flames began to spring up within the allied clans' formation, threatening to engulf them in a chaotic inferno.

The Ripple clan, sensing the shift in momentum, attempted to reinforce the Ember clan's defense with a wave of freezing mist. But the Zealots were adapting. They began to materialize within the mist itself, using its obscuring nature to their advantage. Icy tendrils snapped and broke as the Zealots, now partially anchored in the physical world, slashed and tore at the frozen constructs.

A chilling realization spread through the allied clans. They were being overwhelmed. Their initial strategy, while effective against smaller numbers, was proving insufficient against the larger tide of the Zealot army.

The cries of fallen allies echoed through the trees. A Zephyr, too slow to retreat, was dragged halfway into the upside-down world, his screams abruptly cut short. A Terra clan member, his focus broken by a surprise attack, was consumed by a swirling mass of shadowy tendrils.

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Amidst the chaos, the elite guards of the allied clans gathered, their expressions grim yet resolute. These warriors were the best among their ranks—hardened by battle, unshaken by fear. They watched as their comrades fell, their strategy crumbling under the relentless onslaught of the Zealots. The battlefield was no longer in their favor.

One of them, a Zephyr captain, clenched his jaw. "If we stay, we'll be slaughtered one by one," he said, his voice carrying over the din of battle. "They strike from the shadows, dragging us into their world. If we wait for them to come... we're already dead."

A Terra warrior, his armor cracked and smeared with the blood of fallen allies, exhaled slowly. "Then we take the fight to them."

Silence hung in the air for a brief moment. It was a mad idea. Reckless. No one who had been pulled into the upside-down world had ever returned. But was waiting for death any wiser?

The Ember Clan's commander, his gauntlets still smoldering from his last attack, let out a low, dry chuckle. "Better to burn out in battle than waste away like cowards." He looked around at the gathered warriors. "Who's coming?"

One by one, they stepped forward. Zephyr assassins who had spent their lives in the shadows, Terra warriors who had stood as immovable shields, Ember combatants whose flames had always burned brightest in the darkest times, and Ripple sorcerers who had mastered the art of flowing between realms. Together, they would forge their own path into the unknown.

The Zephyr captain turned his gaze to the battlefield, watching the Zealots as they materialized and vanished like phantoms. He exhaled, steadying his heart. "Then let's make our move."

They had no magic to force themselves into the upside-down world. But they didn't need it. All they had to do was become irresistible prey.

Forming a tight circle, they began their advance, cutting through lesser Zealots with ruthless precision. They did not retreat, did not defend. They let themselves be surrounded, baiting the enemy with reckless aggression. The Zealots, sensing the shift, grew bold—no longer striking from the edges but closing in, their shadowy forms flickering with anticipation.

Then it happened.

One by one, the elite guards felt the pull. Clawed hands reached from the void, tendrils of darkness wrapped around their limbs, yanking them from the physical world. Their bodies flickered—half here, half somewhere else.

And then, in an instant, they were gone.

The Other Side

A suffocating silence greeted them. The upside-down world stretched before them—a twisted reflection of their own battlefield. The forest existed here, but warped beyond recognition. Trees hung upside down, their roots curling toward an empty sky. The air was thick, heavy, as if pressing against their lungs. The ground beneath their feet was neither solid nor liquid, shifting like blackened glass.

The Zealots were here. Countless eyes glowed in the darkness, watching them with predatory glee. The elite guards had entered their domain—a place where the rules of battle were different, where time and space twisted in unnatural ways.

The Ember commander cracked his neck. "No turning back now." His gauntlets ignited, but the fire flickered strangely, as if struggling to burn in this realm.

The Zephyr captain narrowed his eyes. "Then we fight."

With a battle cry that echoed through the abyss, they charged.

The moment their feet touched the shifting ground of the upside-down world, formation became meaningless. The battlefield was no longer a structured engagement.

The elite warriors, once bound by tactics and discipline, became individual storms of destruction, tearing into the Zealots with unrestrained fury.

A Zephyr assassin struck first. His form flickered, blurring between the shadows, his twin daggers gleaming in the eerie light. He danced between the creatures, slicing through their incorporeal bodies before they could fully materialize. Black ichor sprayed into the air, hissing as it hit the twisted ground. One Zealot lunged at him from behind—he spun, his blade severing its head in a single, fluid motion. Another latched onto his arm, its claws sinking into his flesh. He gritted his teeth and rammed his dagger into its throat, twisting until it collapsed into a writhing mass before dissolving into the abyss.

Nearby, a Terra warrior roared, his voice like thunder in the suffocating silence. His fists, hard as stone, slammed into the ground, sending jagged spikes of rock erupting upward. Zealots shrieked as the earth impaled them, their shadowy forms writhing before dissipating. One managed to slip through his defenses, materializing behind him and raking its claws across his back. He staggered, blood dripping onto the foreign soil. With a grunt of pain, he spun and grabbed the creature by the skull, squeezing until its form shattered like fragile glass.

The Ember commander was a raging inferno. His entire body pulsed with heat, flames trailing his every movement. He caught a Zealot mid-lunge, his fingers digging into its chest before he incinerated it from the inside out. The black fire that clung to the Zealots tried to burn him in return, but he roared in defiance, his own flames flaring brighter, overpowering the cursed embers. He kicked another Zealot

away, sending it crashing into a jagged rock formation that hadn't been there moments ago. But for every Zealot he destroyed, more replaced them, their numbers seemingly infinite.

A Ripple sorcerer fought with a different rhythm, his power flowing like water. He moved with ghostly grace, summoning spears of ice that impaled the Zealots before shattering into shards that skewered the ones behind them. He spun, his staff sweeping in an arc, summoning a wave of freezing mist that crystallized several enemies in place. With a flick of his wrist, the ice cracked, and the Zealots shattered into pieces. But the mist that had always been his greatest weapon betrayed him here. The Zealots moved within it, using its obscurity to ambush him from all angles.

Then, the tide began to turn.

A Zephyr assassin, too slow to retreat, screamed as shadowy hands erupted from the ground, dragging him waist-deep into the abyss. He slashed wildly, but the claws only multiplied, pulling him further down. His final cry was cut short as his head vanished beneath the blackened earth.

A Terra warrior bellowed as multiple Zealots swarmed him at once, their claws tearing into his rocky flesh. He staggered, his limbs heavy as the weight of the upside-down world pressed down upon him. He drove a fist into the ground, trying to summon another defensive wall, but his strength was failing. One Zealot leaped onto his shoulders, wrapping tendrils around his throat. With a gurgled snarl, he managed to crush one last Zealot's skull before the rest consumed him in a writhing mass of darkness.

The Ember commander's flames flickered. His power, once so absolute, wavered as the unnatural air of this world smothered his fire. The black flames of the Zealots burned hotter, licking at his skin. He grit his teeth, refusing to falter. But his movements slowed. A Zealot materialized behind him, its talons raking deep into his side. Another followed, and another, until he was surrounded, his fire struggling against the void.

The Ripple sorcerer gasped as shadowy tendrils coiled around his arms, draining the warmth from his body. His breath came in ragged gasps, frost forming on his skin. He tried to summon one last spell, but his limbs were too heavy. The Zealots did not kill him immediately. They relished in their victory, dragging him down inch by inch, savoring his struggle.

The Zealots were no longer simply defending their realm. They were devouring the intruders.

The battlefield that had once been filled with defiant warriors was now a scene of desperation. The elite guards, so powerful in their own world, were being consumed by the abyss, their strength fading against the relentless tide of shadows.

For the first time since stepping into the upside-down world, true fear gripped them.

And yet, even as they fell, even as their bodies were torn apart or pulled into the depths of an endless void, their resolve did not waver. They had chosen this path, not for victory, but to take the battle to the enemy—to carve their names into the dark, even if no one would remember them.

On the outside, the four Apeling leaders quickly noticed the sudden disappearance of several of their troops. Surprise flickered in their eyes, but it did not last long—Ikem had already warned them that one of the best ways to handle enemies like these was to take the fight directly to their domain and eliminate them swiftly.

However, Ikem had shared this knowledge only as a tactical insight, not as a strategy meant to be carried out. There were grave risks in taking such an approach. Entering the other world was not a guaranteed return trip. Some might never find their way back. Worse still, stepping into that cursed plane meant exposing oneself to the unknown horrors lurking beyond the Zealots—beings who would not hesitate to devour intruders.

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Yet, the appeal of the tactic was undeniable. The Zealots' numbers were dwindling. Their usual overwhelming assault had weakened, their movements growing more frantic and desperate. It was clear that the elite warriors who had been taken into the other realm were making significant progress.

The watching Apelings saw the opportunity and did not hesitate. If their comrades were turning the tide in the upside-down world, then reinforcements would only hasten victory. One by one, they deliberately left themselves vulnerable, presenting easy targets for the Zealots. The creatures, driven by their instincts, lunged at them, dragging them into the warped reality where the battle raged on.

More warriors vanished from sight. More fighters entered the other world.

But the cost came swiftly.

A bone-chilling shriek tore through the air, an unnatural sound that clawed into the very essence of those who heard it. The guards, locked in combat with the Zealots, felt their hearts lurch at the sound. It was not the wail of the Zealots—it was something worse.

In the distance, through the distorted horizon of the upside-down world, shadows began to stir. Silhouettes darker than night itself slithered forward, their movements both fluid and jagged, as if they were flickering between realities. Their forms were twisted, their limbs unnaturally long, their hollow faces shifting with unreadable expressions.

These were not possessed Zealots. These were the true denizens of this world.

And they were coming fast.

The warriors still locked in battle with the Zealots faltered, their blades hesitating for the briefest moment. The fear was primal, instinctual—the kind of fear that sank into bones and made survival feel like a fragile hope.

The Apelings had stepped into the enemy's world. And now, the world itself was answering.

Ikem, towering in his giant form, carried the rune pillar steadily as he advanced. Despite the chaos behind him, he did not falter—his senses, sharp as ever, tracked every moment of the battle. The desperate struggles of his warriors, their courage in taking the fight to the enemy's domain, weighed heavily on his heart. But their willingness, their unwavering spirit, was a sign that he too should not stop. He pressed on.

Then, he paused. For the briefest moment, he stood still, his massive form casting an imposing shadow over the land.

And then, he smiled.

A wide, knowing grin spread across his face, his eyes reflecting a newfound certainty. His people would not meet their end today. The temperature beneath the night sky had begun to rise sharply—a clear, unmistakable sign of what was coming.

Far from the battlefield, the city stirred. Though the battle's roars were distant, they still reached the ears of the people huddled in their homes. Curiosity brewed, but strict orders had been given—none were to leave. Safety was paramount.

Then, something else caught their attention.

The air grew warmer. At first, it was subtle, like the first hints of a summer morning. Then it became undeniable, the temperature rising as though a new sun had taken to the sky.

And when they looked up, they saw it.

A colossal figure cut across the heavens, its immense form blotting out the stars. A shadow, vast and terrible, raced over the ground. Red had arrived.

The battlefield trembled as the red dragon descended. With a single, mighty beat of his wings, he sent hurricane-force winds roaring through the trees, scattering fog and ash alike. His golden eyes burned with an intense, knowing intelligence as he surveyed the battlefield below.

And then, he opened his maw.

A deep, guttural rumble built in his throat, the sound of power incarnate, of ancient fury given form. Then came the roar, an ear-splitting, earth-shaking cry that sent shockwaves across the land.

A blinding torrent of dragon fire erupted from his jaws.

The flames consumed everything in their path. Zealots, caught mid-movement, shrieked as their bodies ignited instantly, their dark forms reduced to screaming cinders. The firestorm raced along the battlefield, engulfing entire sections in a wave of destruction, incinerating everything tainted by the enemy's presence.

The Zealots, realizing the overwhelming force now against them, desperately adapted. They turned their ethereal powers upon the dragon himself, their unnatural shadows stretching upwards, trying to drag him into their realm.

For a moment, it seemed to work.

Red's massive head lurched forward, the unnatural pull yanking him partially into the upside-down world. His form wavered between realms—his horned head, his piercing gaze, his snarling maw now visible in the Zealots' home plane.

But they had miscalculated.

If Red had only his head in their world... then that was all he needed.

He exhaled.

A second inferno, hotter and more concentrated, erupted from his mouth, setting the very air ablaze in the upside-down world. The flames did not just burn—they devoured, turning the distorted shadows of the Zealots into screeching, writhing pyres.

Panic erupted among them.

In their desperation, they triggered their own abilities, dragging him back into the real world before he could destroy them completely. But Red was ready.

As his form snapped back, he twisted his head slightly—enough to catch the surviving Zealots still attached to him. And then, with a mighty gulp, he swallowed them whole.

But they would not escape so easily.

The Zealots, struggling within the depths of the dragon's iron-lined throat, triggered their powers again, trying to pull themselves back into their realm. But as they activated their unnatural escape, Red turned his mouth into an oven.

Inside him, the heat multiplied tenfold.

The Zealots, trapped, screamed soundlessly as they were reduced to ash before they could slip away. Their own talents had betrayed them, sealing their fate within the dragon's fiery belly.

Red landed heavily on the battlefield, his wings folding with a mighty sweep. His molten gaze flicked over the stunned warriors who remained, his presence alone radiating absolute dominance.

To the surviving elite guards still in the upside-down world, his deep, resonant voice boomed like rolling thunder: "Hold on to me. Or die here."

There was no hesitation.

The surviving warriors, battered and weary but still clinging to life, latched onto him, scrambling onto the thick, ridged scales of his neck and back. Some barely had the strength left to move, but it did not matter—Red took flight, tearing through the veil between worlds, ripping the warriors back to the real plane with him.

As his massive form re-emerged, the battlefield stood still. The remaining Zealots, those too slow to escape, turned their twisted gazes to the dragon.

Red turned toward them, his lips curling in a wicked grin.

"Your turn." And with that, the dragon unleashed hell.

Though Red's flames burned wild and untamed, consuming everything in their path, they did not harm the Apeling guards. Instead, the fire curved around them, a barrier of searing light that shielded them from further harm. Not only did the flames protect, but they also healed, sealing wounds and restoring strength to those who had been on the verge of collapse.

With the battlefield now ablaze in his spiritual fire, the tide of war shifted.

The Apelings, their injuries mended and their spirits reignited, fought with renewed ferocity. The Zealots, who once slipped between worlds with ease, found themselves trapped—the flames had anchored them to the mortal realm. No longer could they escape into the shadows. They had to fight.

And in a true fight, without their tricks and fleeting escapes, they stood no chance.

The Apelings cut through them with practiced ease, their movements swift, their attacks precise. The battlefield, once overrun by darkness and despair, was now a furnace of divine judgment.

Red, reveling in the chaos and carnage, turned his attention elsewhere. His molten eyes flicked to where Ikem's grandchildren still battled against the transformed captain. His massive form tensed, and he began to move, his excitement clear—he would personally end this foe.

But then—

A golden light shimmered before him, invisible to all but him, "A warning"

He froze mid-step, his pupils constricting.

A voice, deep and friendly, echoed in his mind.

"Do not get too excited, brother. We have helped enough. Any more than this breaks the rule and interferes with his path of ascension."

Annoyance flashed in Red's eyes. His nostrils flared, and for a brief moment, his claws dug into the ground. How bothersome.

But he did not argue.

Instead, with a guttural huff, he turned his gaze to the sky. He parted his jaws once more, this time releasing a final wave of flame—one unlike any before.

The fire that erupted from his mouth was not meant to destroy.

It was a sea of pure, burning light, brightening the battlefield like a second sun. The air shimmered under its radiance, and the very fabric of reality seemed to tremble at its presence. The flames did not fall—they lingered, suspended in the night sky, an ethereal storm that refused to go out.

Even the area where the captain fought was bathed in its glow. Then, without another word, Red spread his wings.

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Then, without another word, Red spread his wings.

With a single, mighty beat, he lifted off the ground. Another beat, and he was already ascending. His colossal form blurred as he picked up speed, and within seconds—

He was gone. Yet his presence remained, the aftermath of his fire followed immediately, its effects still unraveling.

As Red vanished into the night sky, the lingering sea of flame began to take effect.

At first, the battlefield stood eerily still. The Zealots, still heavily numbered, suddenly stopped. Their bodies twitched and shuddered, their instinct screaming for them to get to the other world, sadly their connection to the other world was severed by the fire's divine will.

Then, the flames sank into the ground, spreading like veins of molten gold.

A sudden pressure gripped the battlefield. The Zealots screamed.

The spiritual fire did not burn them like ordinary flames—it attacked their very essence. The shadowy marks on their bodies, once pulsating with eerie light, began to crack. The cursed inscriptions they bore—the very thing that allowed them to slip between dimensions—shattered like broken glass.

One by one, the Zealots began to collapse, their bodies spasming, their faces twisted in agony. Some clawed at their own skin, as if trying to peel away the burning force that now clung to them. Others, eyes wide with horror, tried to run—but there was nowhere to go.

The Apeling guards, still standing within the protective glow of the fire, watched in silent awe.

Then, without warning—

The first Zealot turned to ash. It happened instantly, his body collapsing into embers that floated into the air before vanishing completely.

Then another and another. Like falling dominos, the Zealots were erased—not merely burned, but purged from existence itself.

Their screams grew fainter. Their bodies disintegrated faster.

And soon—There was nothing left of them but dust.

The battlefield fell deathly silent.

Only the quiet crackling of the spiritual embers remained, floating through the air like fireflies in the dark. The Apeling guards, still breathing heavily, lowered their weapons. Their enemies were gone. Utterly gone.

Yet, despite their victory, none cheered.

They had seen the cost of this battle.

The bodies of their fallen still lay scattered across the field, the scent of blood mingling with the lingering warmth in the air. Those who had been dragged into the other world and never returned—they were truly lost.

And then— A voice, weak yet defiant, broke the silence.

"The captain..."

The remaining warriors turned, their eyes falling upon the place where Ikem's grandchildren still fought.

The origin gods and their counterpart who were playing tug of war stopped for a second, their expression filled with surprise.

A factor they didn't consider just interfered in the play, the dragons existence has been so hidden and out of development that their presence is easily forgotten.

It had never occurred to the origin gods to ask the dragons for help and for their counterpart. The existence of the dragons were forgotten but now it seems even though they have forgotten them, the dragons haven't forgotten them.

The origin gods could feel their counterpart retreating, Crepuscular counterpart spoke up "It seems this round will be handed to you guys, it was a very teachable moment"

Jaws, Mahu and Crepuscular frowned "This was something they hated, their counterpart willingness to learn from loss, their weakness. For the gods who has had an easy going life till now, it was an annoyance knowing that their immortal lives will be spent under the watchful gaze of such opponent"

They already proved how capable they are, if the dragons hadn't intervened. The protectors deployed for the demigods would be overwhelmed by the Zealots' numbers, as for calling for reinforcement. That was unlikely to happen as who knows what plans they have in store once the kingdom guard is weakened.

Across the divide, their counterparts were sharing a moment of insight, Crepuscular's counterpart spoke up "We weren't looking deep enough and was instead focused on the gods and their children"

Ikenga's counterpart whose attention is divided elsewhere spoke up "Indeed, the dragons would have made such a great ally. We need their knowledge. The leviathan demon was supposed to fill in our knowledge gap but he has been proving to be useless and would rather sleep his time away"

Keles counterpart spoke up "How do we get our hands on the dargons, from what we have seen it seems they can move and leave from our realm as they want to"

Mahu's counterpart offered a crucial observation, "Not entirely. They were hasty in their departure, distinctly uncomfortable in our world. Their stay was brief, and I sensed... fear. That's why they were so quick to leave." A subtle shift in the balance of power, a vulnerability revealed. The dragons, despite their power, were not entirely at ease in their realm. This information, however small, was a potential lever.

A thoughtful silence descended upon the counterparts. The revelation of the dragons' discomfort was a significant development, a chink in their otherwise impenetrable armor. It wasn't just about their knowledge or power; it was about understanding their limitations, their fears.

Ikenga's counterpart spoke first. "Fear... intriguing. What could possibly frighten such powerful beings?"

"Perhaps it's not fear in the conventional sense," Keles' counterpart mused. "Perhaps it's... incompatibility. Our realm, our energies, might be... hostile to them. Like oil and water."

Crepuscular's counterpart nodded slowly. "A plausible theory. If they are uncomfortable here, it explains their reluctance to engage. It also suggests a vulnerability we can exploit."

Jaws' counterpart, always direct, cut to the chase. "Exploit how? We can't exactly invite them over for tea and biscuits. They'd likely ignore us and go back into hiding before we could offer the first crumpet."

"Subtlety, Jaws," Crepuscular's counterpart replied, a hint of amusement in their voice. "We don't need to force them. We need to understand them. Their motivations, their weaknesses... their needs."

Mahu's counterpart, their gaze distant, added, "And their history. Why have they remained hidden for so long? What caused them to resurface now? These are questions we must answer."

"Indeed," Ikenga's counterpart agreed. "Information is key. We need to delve deeper into their past, uncover their secrets. The leviathan demon might be useless for magical knowledge, but perhaps he has some thoughts to share on the dragons"

He then continued, "The question now is, how do we get hold of one? Unlike the demon, there aren't many ways we can get hold of them. And since they seem to be aware of our existence, I doubt they would fall easily into our hands."

Mahu's counterpart gave an eerie smile as she opened her hand, revealing a small figure. "As it happens, one of these dragons has a weakness we can exploit. But it will come at a price."

"And that price is?" her counterpart asked.

"We must accept that this time, we have lost. But in doing so, we pave the way to capturing a much bigger prize in the future."

The other counterpart remained silent for a moment before nodding. Then, with a low chuckle, they added, "Even though we've lost, that doesn't mean we can't make it harder for them to enjoy their victory."

With that said, the counterparts simultaneously sliced their fingers with their nails, squeezing out tiny drops of dark blood. They flicked the droplets into the air, where they dissipated instantly.

Meanwhile, in the real world, the gods watched as the dragons dealt with the Zealots, each in their own way.

Western Continent, moments earlier.

The Zealots unleashed upon Ursula and her protectors were proving far more difficult to handle than those sent after Ikem.

The battle began with the Zealots stripping the harpies of their greatest advantage—the sky. Thunder rumbled across the night as dark-colored rain poured from the heavens, crackling with an eerie energy. The rain wasn't just water—it was acidic, eating away at everything it touched.

Forced to the ground, the harpies struggled to fight while constantly expanding mana to shield themselves from the corrosive downpour. But the Zealots' assault did not stop there. They reached into the otherworld, pulling unsuspecting harpies into the abyss and drowning them in its dark waters.

To make matters worse, others wielded that very same water, summoning waves of darkness that surged across the battlefield, swallowing everything in their path.

One Zealot lunged forward with terrifying speed, his blade slicing downward. A harpy barely dodged in time, his feathers sizzling as acidic rain grazed his wings. Before the Zealot could follow up, another harpy thrust her talons into the ground, channeling raw lightning through her arms. A blinding bolt surged forward, striking the Zealot square in the chest.

He convulsed violently, his body crackling with energy—but he did not fall.

Instead, he let out a guttural growl and lunged again. His arms twisted and morphed into liquid tendrils, snaking around the harpy's legs. A sharp yank—

She was dragged toward the dark waters pooling beneath his feet.

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She barely had time to scream before the abyss swallowed her whole.

"Burn the waters!" one of the harpies screeched.

A group of them raised their hands, wings trembling with exertion as they wove together flames. One harpy hurled the first ember into the spreading pools of darkness.

For a brief second—nothing. Then followed by the sound similar to when something is lit aflame.

The battlefield erupted in spectral fire, gold and blue, clashing against the storm's oppressive darkness. The creeping waters boiled and recoiled, writhing like living shadows before slithering back into the Zealots themselves.

The creatures howled in agony, their forms twisting as the spectral flames devoured them. These were no ordinary fires—their essence burned differently, searing not just flesh but something deeper.

Seizing the moment, the harpies attacked with renewed vigor.

A harpy clad in crackling light surged forward, his talons wreathed in arcs of thunder. In a single swift motion, he carved through two Zealots before they could even react. Another harpy, her body half-obscured in a shifting veil of mist, vanished and reappeared unpredictably, slicing through enemies with razor-sharp wind blades.

Despite losing their aerial advantage, the harpies adapted. A chain lightning spell they unleashed not only shocked the Zealots but also disrupted their ability to retreat into the otherworld.

The harpies spread their lightning like roots, snaking across the battlefield, locking the Zealots in place with surging currents. The immobilized enemies became easy targets, and the harpies struck them down without hesitation. But just like on Ikem's side, they were outnumbered. The strain was beginning to show.

And then, as with Ikem's battle, one Zealot stood apart.

A single, monstrous figure among them—marked by his unnatural presence—had drawn the attention of the harpy commanders. Unlike the others, this Zealot fought recklessly, forcing the battle deeper into the heart of the harpy ranks, showing no regard for allies or foes alike. The harpy army leaders meanwhile are doing their best to push the battle away.

With jagged rows of teeth stretching into a cruel grin, the Zealot slammed his hands together.

The storm above pulsed violently. Thunder cracked, and the wind screamed through the battlefield.

Then—he opened his mouth.

A vortex of black water and lightning erupted forth, a concentrated maelstrom of destruction. It tore through the harpies' ranks, shredding those caught in its direct path. Some were ripped apart instantly—others barely managed to resist, their forms battered by the relentless, merciless onslaught.

As the battle raged on, harpies and Zealots clashed in relentless combat, their struggle painting the battlefield with chaos. Above them, the storm churned with unnatural fury. The acidic rain, once pouring in deadly sheets, began to change. Its dark hue faded, its relentless downpour easing.

Then, the clouds twisted. For a fleeting moment, the battlefield fell eerily silent.

Then—A roar.

It was not the crack of thunder.

Nor the wailing fury of the Zealots' storm.

It was something deeper. A sound that rumbled through the very bones of those who heard it, shaking the battlefield to its core. A sound that sent the Zealots staggering in primal fear, while the harpies turned skyward, eyes filled with renewed hope.

Something massive moved within the storm, its form concealed by the swirling clouds.

Then—a flash of emerald light. A colossal shape burst forth, cutting through the storm with effortless grace. Its scales gleamed like cut jade, its vast wings unfurling, each powerful beat sending hurricane-force winds surging across the battlefield, parting the storm as though it were nothing but mist.

Viridrigon.

The green dragon's presence dominated the sky, so vast and commanding that even the harpies—beings born of the wind and sky—felt dwarfed beneath him.

But it was not just his arrival that changed the battle.

Viridrigon opened his mouth.

From his maw poured a wave of thick, vibrant green energy—not fire, but something more insidious. A tempest of emerald wind, twisting unnaturally as it spread across the battlefield. It carried the scent of wild earth, of ancient forests, of untamed nature reclaiming what had been lost.

Where it touched—The dark rain began to evaporate, purged by Viridrigon's influence.

The shark-like warriors roared in fury, their connection to their god wounded by Viridrigon's presence. Some of the more powerful Zealots, clad in storm-forged armor, gathered their energy, hurling massive spears of lightning toward the dragon.

Viridrigon barely flinched.

With a casual swipe of his tail, the lightning was scattered, redirected into the sky with a crackling explosion.

The Zealots refused to yield.

Pooling their powers together, a group of them plunged their hands into the ground, summoning forth a massive wave of black water, twisting with raw elemental fury, aiming to engulf the dragon in a prison of their god's making.

But Viridrigon—laughed.

A deep, guttural rumble that echoed through the battlefield. Then, with a single beat of his wings, the wave of dark water collapsed.

He inhaled deeply, his massive chest expanding, the emerald glow of his scales pulsating with barely contained power. The air around him warped, thickening with an unnatural pressure, as though the very world held its breath in anticipation.

Then—he exhaled. A thick, virulent green gas flooded the battlefield like a creeping tide, rolling forward in an unstoppable wave. It clung to the ground, curling around the feet of the Zealots, filling every crevice and choking every open space. The moment it touched their flesh, the effects began.

The first to succumb were the weaker Zealots—those whose bodies had already been strained by the battle. Their skin blistered instantly, the venom eating through their flesh like an unseen parasite. Their screams were muffled as their throats closed, their lungs filling with poison. They dropped to the ground, convulsing, foam bubbling from their lips before their bodies went still—their once-proud forms now rotting husks.

The stronger Zealots resisted, their divine-touched bodies struggling against the poison, but even they could not fully withstand it.

Their movements became sluggish, their limbs numb as the toxins ate away at their nerves. Some fell to their knees, gripping their throats as they choked on the invisible fire burning inside them.

Even those who thought themselves immune, those who had bathed in the darkest depths of their god's abyssal waters, found their minds clouded, their vision warping as hallucinations began to take hold.

To them, the battlefield twisted.

The harpies no longer appeared as warriors but as monstrous entities—their wings became blades, their talons gaping maws, their eyes endless pits of horror.

Panic set in.

The Zealots turned on each other.

Blinded by poison-induced visions, they struck at their own kin, their weapons tearing through flesh, their battle formations crumbling as chaos consumed them.

The harpies, so taken back by the effect of the green gas, failed to realize they weren't affected as they flapped their wings taking to the sky, where they immediately began to counterattack.

Some summoned whips of lightning, weaving through the thick poison clouds and electrocuting Zealots where they stood.

Others called upon the flames of the sun, their fireballs streaking through the green mist, igniting the gas into roaring infernos that turned Zealots into charred remains.

A select few, gifted with the blessing of the storm, gathered the remnants of the Zealots' own tainted waters, purifying them before turning them into deadly spears of condensed rain, impaling their enemies where they stood.

Virridigon unlike Red who was excited for more seeing the turn around, flapped his wings as he took off once again.

On the southern continent, Roth stood apart from other demigods. While they focused solely on reaching their goal, he actively interfered in the battle—ensuring he lost no ground while doing so.

Unlike other demigods whose followers numbered in the millions, Roth's people had yet to reach such numbers. Every single citizen under his rule was precious and had to be protected at all costs.

His interference made things far more difficult for the Zealots, despite their overwhelming numbers. With each step Roth took, thick, billowing mist poured from the robes draped over his colossal form.

For his people—the vampires—the mist was like water to fish. They moved effortlessly within it, cutting through the Zealots with deadly precision. But for the Zealots, the smoke was an impenetrable veil. Their vision was obscured, their perception distorted, leaving them unable to fight effectively.

Yet, the Zealots remained a formidable threat. Their warped forms had been blessed by their Crepuscular counterpart, granting them access to a twisted form of light—unfortunate for the vampires, as light was their greatest weakness.

This only reinforced Roth's resolve to take action. No matter how effective the mist was at suppressing the Zealots' use of light, his people would eventually be overwhelmed if left to fight alone.

Even when the Zealots attempted to slip into the otherworld and reappear elsewhere, they found themselves emerging once more into the dense fog—with a vampire waiting to strike.

Unlike many other demigods, Roth had no intention of ascending. His priorities were entirely his own; he didn't concern himself with ensuring the rune pillar reached its destination on time.

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The well-being and survival of his people were what mattered most. He had even entertained the idea of gaining stronger vampires through this battle. Unfortunately, that hope was quickly dashed—the Zealots' blood was tainted, repulsive to his kind, and unfit for consumption.

High above the battlefield, a massive creature blended seamlessly with the night, its piercing gaze fixed on the clash below. The enormous figure of Roth stood amidst the chaos, but unlike the other demigods, he seemed to require no assistance.

Ebonwrath, the black dragon, watched with growing interest. The longer he observed Roth, the more he liked him. His selfishness, his decisiveness—these were qualities that resonated deeply with the dragon.

Unfortunately, duty called. He had to assist the demigods, for the safety of billions—and for the safety of the dragons themselves. If the pillar was not placed soon, the wrath of the gods' counterparts would inevitably turn toward them. Their actions had already drawn divine attention, and the consequences would be severe.

Yet, Roth faced a dilemma. If he was to focus on the goal, he needed someone strong to safeguard his people. And Ebonwrath just so happened to be that someone.

With that thought, the dragon let out a thunderous roar, its echo rolling across the battlefield.

To his intrigue, the demigod was not surprised by his presence. Instead, Roth simply nodded in acknowledgment before decisively pulling back the thick smoke. Lifting the heavy Rune Pillar onto his shoulders, he turned away, striding toward his objective.

His actions made one thing clear—he was leaving the rest to Ebonwrath.

Ebonwrath, his scales shimmering like obsidian in the dim light of the battlefield, descended with a thunderous beat of his massive wings. The air crackled with raw power as he landed amidst the disorganized Zealots, the force of his landing sending tremors through the ground and scattering the already disoriented cultists. He didn't bother with a breath weapon, not at first. Instead, he moved with a surprising agility for his size, his claws raking through the Zealot ranks, each swipe leaving behind shattered bones and torn flesh. The Zealots, still reeling from the disorienting mist and the sudden appearance of the colossal dragon, could offer little resistance. Their distorted light, so potent against vampires, was useless against Ebonwrath's thick scales.

One Zealot, larger than the rest and radiating a particularly intense distorted light, attempted to challenge the dragon. It lunged forward, its form flickering and warping, trying to bite at Ebonwrath's leg. The dragon, however, simply sidestepped the clumsy attack and with a swift flick of his tail, sent the Zealot crashing into a nearby rock formation. The impact shattered the rock and left the Zealot groaning, its distorted light flickering erratically.

Ebonwrath then unleashed his breath weapon, a torrent of pure acid. The acid engulfed the remaining Zealots, chilling them to the bone and further disrupting their already fractured perception. Their cries of terror echoed through the battlefield as the acid constricted around them, crushing the air from their lungs. The distorted light that emanated from them was snuffed out, leaving only the faintest glimmer within the oppressive thick acid.

The vampires, witnessing the dragon's devastating power, surged forward, emboldened by the sudden shift in the battle. They moved through the lingering wisps of mist, their fangs bared, and finished off any Zealots who managed to survive Ebonwrath's initial onslaught. The battle, which had seemed so precarious moments before, was now decisively in their favor.

Ethan, the current leader of the vampires, along with three other vampire leaders, had surrounded an exceptional Zealot—one marked by dark wings and a halo hovering behind its head.

As the dragon's presence loomed over the battlefield and the vampires steadily gained the upper hand, the Zealot's form flickered before it abruptly vanished into the otherworld. There, a single drop of blood awaited it—one it swallowed without hesitation.

A similar scene was unfolding on Ikem's side. By now, Ikem had long departed from the battlefield, leaving only his five grandchildren and the transformed captain still engaged in combat. Like the other Zealot, the captain's flickering form disappeared into the otherworld, where a drop of blood awaited, which it, too, consumed.

Meanwhile, on the northern continent, the situation was taking an even stranger turn. Like the other demigods, Maul strode across the land in his giant form, carrying his own Rune Pillar while a small army of his people protected his steps. However, unlike the others, Maul showed no concern—his wife was a dragon, and he had long anticipated their possible intervention.

When the Zealots appeared, Maul's expression remained unchanged. He continued along his path, soon disappearing into the distance, leaving his people behind to engage the enemy.

At first, the battle seemed more like a training exercise for his warriors. From above, Amethyst—soaring in her dragon form—occasionally lent her aid where needed. Unlike the grand entrance of the other dragon, her presence was expected; the werewolves already knew their queen was a dragon.

Even with the Zealots' overwhelming numbers, the werewolves fought with ease—until something changed.

At first, the shift was subtle, almost unnoticeable. The werewolves assumed they were simply overpowering their enemies. But as the battle raged on, the truth became clear.

The Zealots weren't just fighting—they were throwing themselves to their deaths. Blows that should have merely knocked them back instead landed in fatal spots, as if the Zealots were deliberately positioning themselves to be killed.

Something was deeply wrong. What should have been a straightforward battle—where heroes clashed against villains—had twisted into something else entirely. The werewolves, once clear protagonists in this struggle, now felt like the villains, while the Zealots, in their unnatural desperation, seemed like the true victims.

To make matters worse, some of the Zealots appeared to have regained their consciousness. Tears streamed down their faces, their eyes filled with fear and sorrow as they rushed toward the werewolves.

The seasoned warriors of the pack felt an unsettling unease creeping into their bones. The Zealots' suicidal attacks were disturbing—not because of their ferocity, but because of their lack of it. Their movements were jerky, uncoordinated, as though they were mere puppets being forced into battle by unseen hands. The way they flung themselves to their deaths, their faces twisted in terror, turned what should have been combat into something far worse. It was no longer a battle—it was a massacre.

"What in the name of the moon is going on?" growled an elder werewolf, his fur bristling with confusion and an ever-growing sense of dread.

He had just witnessed a young Zealot, no older than a pup, throw himself headfirst into the outstretched claws of a werewolf warrior. A sickening crunch echoed through the battlefield as the Zealot's skull shattered. The werewolf—normally a fierce and unshaken fighter—staggered back, horror flashing across his face.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the werewolves had surrounded their own exceptional opponent—a Zealot unlike any other.

It was a skeleton with darkened bones, wings sprouting from its back, and a sinister presence that sent a chill through even the most hardened warriors. Its strength was undeniable, and the strange aura surrounding it made the werewolf leaders hesitate to get too close.

The weight of death clung to the creature, thick and suffocating.

Then, just as before, the skeletal Zealot vanished.

The werewolf leaders instantly went back-to-back, their claws tensed, their eyes darting in every direction. They had faced this sight before.

And they knew—it would return.

At that moment, the skeleton reappeared—this time above them.

The sense of danger it exuded was magnified tenfold, sending a chilling pulse through the battlefield. The werewolf leaders, reacting on instinct, shouted in unison, "Your Highness, Amethyst!"

But they were too late.

For some unknown reason, the skeleton's form began distorting, emanating a chaotic, unstable energy. Then—without warning—a deafening explosion tore through the night, lighting up the sky above the northern continent like a second sun.

When the dust settled, the devastation was clear. Craters scarred the land, and bodies lay strewn across the battlefield. But the true horror had only just begun.

Without warning, rain began to fall.

A bewildered werewolf reached out, letting the droplets land on his outstretched claws—only to realize that this was no ordinary rain. A thick, viscous liquid slid off his fur, carrying a strange, unsettling energy.

The rain coated both the living and the dead Zealots, drenching their bodies. And as the substance seeped into them, an all-too-familiar sensation filled the air—the same dreadful aura that the skeleton had given off just before it detonated.

Realization struck instantly. The werewolves didn't need words.

They ran.

But the horror unfolded too quickly.

One by one, the Zealots began to explode, their bodies bursting apart like unstable bombs. What had once been an easy, almost one-sided battle had turned into a nightmare. The werewolves, caught off guard, found themselves engulfed in the cascading chain of explosions.

Thankfully, Amethyst was there.

With a roar, the dragon queen summoned a massive crystal shield, encasing the nearest werewolves within its protective barrier. The survivors huddled beneath it, their hearts pounding as the sounds of screams, rupturing flesh, and the sickening squelch of bodies being torn apart filled the air.

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The battlefield had become a slaughterhouse.

And for the first time that night, the werewolves—fierce warriors of the north—felt fear creep into their bones.

As the rain of blood and gore finally subsided, Amethyst slowly lowered the shimmering crystal shield.

The surviving werewolves, shaken and wounded, stepped forward—only to be met with a scene of utter devastation.

The once-pristine expanse of ice had become a charnel house, stained deep crimson with the remains of their comrades and enemies alike. Chunks of flesh and shattered bone were strewn across the battlefield, while a thick, dark mist, heavy with the stench of blood and decay, curled low over the frozen wasteland, obscuring the distant horizon.

"By the Moon..." a werewolf warrior whispered, his voice hoarse with shock.

The sight before them was unlike anything they had ever witnessed.

The Zealots—once a relentless force—were now nothing more than mangled corpses, their twisted, unnatural light extinguished. Their contorted remains lay scattered amidst the wreckage, remnants of

their tragic, cursed existence. But what truly unsettled the werewolves was not the carnage itself, but the way it had happened—sudden, unnatural, and horrifying in its brutality.

Even hardened warriors, accustomed to war and bloodshed, felt a creeping unease settle in their chests. This was no mere battle.

This was annihilation.

A silence stretched over the battlefield, thick with grief and an unspoken fear of the magic they had just witnessed.

Then, Amethyst stepped forward, her expression grim.

"Tend to the wounded," she commanded, her voice firm despite the weight pressing against her chest. "We need to assess the situation—and determine our next move."

Elsewhere, unseen, their enemies watched.

The counterparts of the gods stood beyond mortal perception, grinning as their plan unfolded.

Earlier, Mahu's counterpart had remarked that she had found a dragon that in theory, could be influenced by them.

Using their previous successes with the Zealots and Aska, they had devised their approach. Direct interference was impossible; they could not manifest their true forms in the physical world. Instead, their influence had to come through offerings, stolen power, or indirect blessings—as Aska had unknowingly accepted Jwa's counterpart's blessing, gradually becoming ensnared in their grasp.

And now, the dark blood mist was their instrument.

They watched with undisguised glee as the werewolves unknowingly breathed it in, careful not to trigger suspicion. The gods above would surely be watching, but as long as nothing seemed immediate or unnatural, their scheme would remain hidden.

Yet, there was one problem.

The Dragon Queen.

Amethyst, the one they had hoped to compromise, remained untouched. The dark mist swirled around her, unable to penetrate her being. Instead, it was repelled, pushed away by the sheer power of her bloodline.

The counterparts exchanged glances, their amusement dimming.

"If the mist won't take hold of the dragon, then all our planning is for nothing."

Mahu's counterpart let out a hiss of frustration, gesturing toward Amethyst, who was tending to a wounded werewolf, her brow furrowed in concern.

"What do we do about her?"

Jaw's counterpart scowled, his voice a low growl. "She's the linchpin. If we can't control her, we can't control the werewolves. And if we can't control the werewolves, this whole debacle is a waste."

"But how?" Keles's counterpart interjected, frustration creeping into her tone. "We've tried everything. The mist, the subtle influence... nothing works. She's like a beacon of light in this darkness."

For a long moment, silence settled over them—until Ikenga's counterpart, who had been silently observing, finally spoke.

"There is no need for frustration or anger," he said, his voice measured. "We should have expected this. Dragons possess an unusual lineage, perhaps no less than that of the gods themselves."

The others frowned but said nothing.

Crepuscular's counterpart stared at Ikenga's counterpart, his voice sharp with curiosity. "Do you have a plan?"

Ikenga's counterpart sighed. Their actions today had opened his eyes to possibilities he had never considered before. But it was too late to apply this newfound knowledge—Ikem's path to ascension was already set in stone.

For so long, he had coveted Ikem, scheming in vain for a way to claim him. Yet, until today, he had been stumped.

Now, however, a new path had revealed itself.

"She has a daughter, doesn't she?" he asked aloud.

Mahu's counterpart waved a hand, and the scenery shifted.

They now stood within Maul's palace, their sight fixed on the balcony where the princess stood, gazing into the distance. Tears glistened on her cheeks—a daughter longing for her father.

Ikenga's counterpart pointed at the girl. "The Dragon Queen may be difficult to influence, but she has a weakness. A few werewolves have already been planted. Gaining control over her will take time, and once that accursed rune pillar is activated, we will lose our view of the mortal world—only able to see through the eyes of our Zealots or within areas tainted by our influence."

Mahu's counterpart brought the princess's face closer into focus, her sorrow plain to see. "As it happens, the princess seeks closure... and a tale of adventure."

Jaw's counterpart let out a gleeful chuckle.

"And what better companions than our newly planted Zealots?"

Crepuscular's counterpart nodded slowly, a hint of admiration in his voice. "Brilliant planning. Especially considering we're about to lose our direct line of sight. Who knows how long it will be before our Zealots manage to re-establish a clear connection? Until then, the princess will be... gently guided closer and closer to the fold."

"Until then," she purred, watching the new vision unfold, "let us savor the battles before the demigods fully ascend."

Down Under the Sea. The zealot forces led by Aska had been divided into two groups. Aska himself led the charge against Flowua and her forces of mermaids and Murlocs, while the other group, commanded by an equally formidable zealot, focused on battling the Tide Sharkmen.

Due to Aska's overwhelming strength, his zealots were putting immense pressure on Flowua's forces. Meanwhile, on Tide's side, the battle was more evenly matched, with the Sharkmen even gaining a slight advantage over the zealots.

On Flowua's side, the situation was dire. Aska was cutting through her forces with relentless efficiency. In desperation, the mermaids began to sing—a song Aska recognized immediately, one that sent a chill down his spine. His demon, which had been attacking fiercely, suddenly faltered, its posture shifting to one of hesitation, even fear, as if contemplating retreat.

This was no ordinary song. It was a sacred melody, a calling meant for the legendary creatures of the sea—the Kraken, the Leviathan, and other powerful beings lurking in the abyss. A gift left by the Sea God for his offspring, the song was to be used only when their very survival was at stake. However, summoning these creatures and controlling them were entirely different matters, which was why the song was rarely invoked.

For the zealots, the melody was mesmerizing. They ceased their attacks, their expressions vacant, as if lost in a trance. Aska, seeing the state of his warriors, grew increasingly alarmed. Just when it seemed that Flowua's forces might turn the tide of battle, salvation arrived from an unexpected source.

Among the dragons, there was one who had made his home on the ocean floor—the blue dragon, Ceruleanor. Like other dragons, he was meant to assist the demigods allied with his side, but with two demigods requiring aid in separate battles, he could not be in two places at once.

The moment Ceruleanor heard the song, he knew its meaning. It was a call of distress, a signal that one side needed his intervention far more than the other. The decision was made for him.

Aska watched as the battle took a sudden, dramatic turn. The zealots remained frozen, ensnared by the song's magic. Then, from the ocean's depths, a blinding flash of lightning erupted, its brilliance branching out like the roots of a colossal tree. Bolts of electricity snaked across the battlefield, striking the entranced zealots, reducing them to nothing but ash.

From the darkness, Ceruleanor emerged, his majestic presence alone enough to silence the mermaids' song. The tides of war had shifted once more.

The lightning that heralded Ceruleanor's arrival hadn't struck at random—it was a precise, calculated assault. Each tendril of light, emanating from the dragon's powerful form, sought out and obliterated a specific zealot. One moment, they were entranced by the mermaids' song; the next, they were nothing but dust, their weapons clattering uselessly to the seafloor. The sheer speed of the attack was breathtaking—brutal efficiency leaving no room for defense. Just moments ago, Aska's forces had been pressing their advantage. Now, they were reeling, their ranks decimated in the blink of an eye.

But Ceruleanor didn't stop there. He unleashed a torrent of pressurized water, a jet so powerful it carved a deep trench into the seabed, sweeping away any remaining zealots who had somehow survived the lightning. The force of the blast sent shockwaves rippling through the ocean, disorienting mermaids and Murlocs alike. The battlefield, once a chaotic melee, was now a scene of sudden, stark devastation. The water crackled with residual energy from the dragon's attack, and strangely, even in the depths of the sea, the scent of ozone hung heavy in the currents.