

Guardian gods 501

Chapter 501:

The flaming goblin mage spoke first, his voice crackling with heat and ritual authority.

"By the rules that bind us, battle here is forbidden."

With those words, he and the two other mages vanished, their forms flickering out like candles snuffed in the wind. It was not a retreat. No, far from it. Their magic flared as they blinked away, not concealing their trail, but broadcasting it—like beacons flaring in the dark, daring Ikenga to follow.

And he intended to.

A smile tugged at the corner of Ikenga's lips. He prepared to vanish in turn, to simply blink after them. But as he gathered his will, he felt it—the pressure of this world resisting him. A thick, unseen weight wrapped around his existence, slowing his thoughts, constricting his being. It was no surprise.

After all, Ikenga had severed his connection to this world long ago.

Not just a detachment, but a decisive, sundering. He had shattered the bond between himself and this world resident that once recognized him as a god in turning making this world accept his presence. With that break came a price: rejection. The world no longer welcomed his presence. It suppressed him, pushed back against every breath he took, every movement he made.

But Ikenga learned something from observing Gurnak and Vorenza fight.

It was something he had applied in his confrontation with the old mage—an innovation born from necessity. Since the world sought to suppress him, all he needed was to forge a sanctuary within it. A boundary. A personal space in which the world's rules no longer applied.

A domain.

It was within this controlled sliver of space that he had dismantled the old man with such eerie ease. And now, as he prepared to leave, he remembered it again. The very earth beneath him recognized his defiance. The ground groaned, not in protest, but in awe, as if peeling back its skin to reveal his presence.

He set that thought aside.

Crouching low, Ikenga let his power coil within him. Then, with a single, fluid motion, he launched himself skyward. The world howled in protest as he broke free, a shockwave bursting from the point of his departure. Trees bent. Mountains shuddered. Clouds swirled in spirals from the vacuum left behind.

In the blink of an eye, he was in the void of space.

Suspended in the silence between worlds, he looked to the moon—the resting place of his other eyes. Orbiting it, he saw the great plant he had once seeded there, its roots winding through moonrock, designed to merge with the eyes and extend his perception.

Through those eyes, he watched the goblin mages—not fleeing, but transitioning—leaping from their origin world to another, farther planet. They moved with purpose, threading their path through the stars.

Ikenga did not rush. He simply became. His form dissolved into a point of golden radiance, compacted and pure, then shot forward like a spear of divine light.

By the time the goblin mages touched down on the barren, dust-ridden surface of the new planet, Ikenga was already behind them. Silent. Waiting.

And this time, there were no rules to stop what came next.

The flaming mage spoke first, his voice steady but edged with restrained fury, the fire wreathed around his form flaring in response to his emotion.

"We had previously approached Your Highness to talk, to understand. To learn why a being like you—revered, once aligned with balance—would choose to consort with demons. We sought discourse. But your choice... your audacity in taking one of our own has made that impossible."

Ikenga didn't respond right away.

He stood in silence, his figure outlined by the soft, fading glow of his arrival. Though he appeared solid, his form flickered faintly—more suggestion than substance, like he was present and absent all at once.

He was repeating something he had done before, a technique he first used on the moon, hoping it would give him a better chance here. He had assumed that being on neutral ground, a planet unfamiliar to all of them, would put him and the three mages on equal footing.

But the moment he set foot on the soil, he realized just how wrong he was.

Despite the distance between their worlds, his godly vision picked up on the faint but unmistakable tether connecting the three mages to a structure that pulsed with quiet power. In his eyes, it was no simple building—it was the Mage Towers.

Those towers, rooted deep in their homeland, was still feeding them. Still sustaining them. Their strength wasn't waning—it was being maintained.

Ikenga, on the other hand, was far from his own world and domain. His divine energy was limited here, his influence restrained.

Now he understood their confidence—their boldness, even beyond the safety of their world.

Too bad they didn't understand him.

Not really, not yet.

He was quietly grateful they wanted to talk. It gave him more time.

More time to understand the planet they had landed on.

His incorporeal state wasn't just for show—it was part of an ongoing process, a way to attune himself to the essence of this dead world. A world stripped of life. No water. No animals. Not a single living organism is found on this barren planet.

From the outside, his form seemed ghostlike, but it was hiding something far more deliberate.

He was using his body to mirror the condition of the planet itself. A slow, careful imitation. At the same time, within his form, different plants flickered into existence—growing, withering, fading away—none of them able to adapt to the harsh, lifeless terrain. Not yet.

But he was getting closer.

The longer they talked, the longer they postured and delayed, the more time he had to search. To experiment. To find something—anything—that could take root here.

And when he did, this barren world would no longer be theirs to stand on.

With that in mind he responded voice deep and measured, resonating across the empty plains.

"You approached me not to understand, but to verify your fears. You came bearing veiled suspicion and smiling hypocrisy. You asked questions not with open minds, but with judgments already cast.

And as for the one you speak of..."He raised a hand, a curl of memory unfolding like smoke. "He offered himself in arrogance. He believed his power alone would unveil me, define me. He left me no choice but to show him the truth of what he stood upon. I did not take him. I merely revealed his weakness. The rest... he did to himself."

There was silence for a beat. The flames around the goblin mage roared higher, lashing at the sky. The second mage—a figure cloaked in wind and lightning—stepped forward.

"He was our kin," she said coldly. "We cannot let that go unanswered."

Ikenga tilted his head slightly, the faintest glint in his eye.

"Then answer it. But know this—your pursuit of vengeance will not lead to justice. It will only drag you closer to the abyss that took him."

The flame mage annoyed with Ikenga's tone attacked as he roared "Then let's find out"

The fire mage raised a hand, and the sky cracked open with a bloom of searing light. A huge hand of flame moved toward Ikenga, twisting in the air like it had a mind of its own. The others followed in step—the wind-and-lightning mage unleashing a wind storm that was surrounded with lightning, and the starlight mage lifting his staff, drawing threads of radiant power from the void itself.

Ikenga didn't flinch.

He was already moving—no, being moved. His curse had taken hold, one of most used. "Isolation" he had whispered minutes earlier, and now that whisper had become law.

As the attacks closed in, his form bent and twisted in ways that weren't natural. His body veered from strikes just before they landed, as if some unseen force guided his every movement. A tendril of fire grazed his shoulder—missed. A bolt of lightning split the ground beneath his feet—too slow. Even the precise, slicing light of the starlight mage failed to land. Their power met empty air and shifting shadows.

He raised a hand, and the ground beneath him shifted.

The dead earth cracked.

From it, wooden roots twisted upward, sharp and barbed, blooming into massive constructs of wood that pulsed with unnatural life. Some glowed with embers, borrowing the nature of fire. Others

shimmered with a wet sheen, bending toward water. A few sparked faintly—raw energy dancing along their length like they'd tasted lightning.

The roots shot forward—burning, slashing, entangling—each one aimed with precision.

The fire mage, recognizing the inherent danger of his own element turned against him, didn't try to simply incinerate the flaming root. Instead, with a subtle flick of his wrist, he inverted its heat. The burning wood sputtered, then frosted over, brittle ice cracking along its length as it continued its trajectory. He then unleashed a precise jet of superheated air, not at the root itself, but at the ground behind it, the sudden expansion of the air propelling him backward with surprising speed, putting distance between himself and the encroaching vegetation.

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The wind-and-lightning mage, seeing the wooden walls erupt around him, didn't panic. He gathered the swirling winds, not into a destructive cyclone, but into a tightly compressed vortex around his body. Then, with a focused mental command, he unleashed the built-up pressure outward in a series of concussive blasts. The wooden walls didn't just splinter; they were ripped apart at the molecular level where the compressed air met their structure, creating gaping holes and momentarily disrupting their rapid growth. Simultaneously, he channeled lightning not for brute force, but for sensory input, the electric currents dancing along the wooden surfaces, mapping their structure and the speed of their growth in his mind.

The starlight mage, as the initial wooden strikes slammed against her hastily erected dome of radiance, didn't just reinforce it. She polarized the light, creating a field that actively repelled the organic material. The wooden tendrils that struck the dome recoiled as if hitting an invisible, charged barrier, some even twisting away as if in pain. Seeing the earth shift beneath her, she didn't simply leap. Instead, she focused her starlight downward, creating a temporary platform of solidified light just a hair's breadth above the rising stone spikes, allowing her to maintain her position and keep her staff trained on Ikenga. Threads of pure starlight began to weave around her, razor-edged whips, ready to intercept any further attacks.

Ikenga watched their calculated responses, the near-effortless way they turned his own attack against him and adapted to his tactics. A faint smile touched his lips – a predator appreciating the cunning of its prey. "Ingenious," he murmured, his voice carrying a strange resonance despite the distance. The cursed markings on his body pulsing like a heart beat.

The ground beneath the mages rippled again, but this time, no wood erupted. Instead, the very concept of stability seemed to waver. The perfectly solid stone floor beneath their feet shimmered, becoming momentarily fluid, then viscous, then solid again in unpredictable patterns. The fire mage stumbled, his stance faltering just as he was about to unleash another torrent of flame. The wind-and-lightning mage, who relied on precise footwork for his agile movements, found his footing constantly betraying him. The starlight mage, her platform of solidified light flickering erratically as the ground's nature shifted, had to constantly refocus her energy to maintain her balance.

This was a curse woven into the very fabric of their immediate reality – "Unsteady Ground." It didn't directly harm them, but it eroded their precision and control. Ikenga found their vigilance and control troublesome.

Simultaneously, Ikenga shifted his gaze towards the fire mage. The air around the mage seemed to thicken, not with heat, but with a palpable pressure. It wasn't a physical constriction, but a curse of "Suffocation of Will." The mage found his thoughts becoming sluggish, the crisp, clear mental commands he usually issued to his flames now feeling heavy and difficult to formulate. The intricate patterns he wove with fire became clumsy, the vibrant intensity dimming as his focus wavered.

Turning his attention to the wind-and-lightning mage, Ikenga extended a hand, palm open. A silent curse, "Echoing Vulnerability," washed over the mage. Suddenly, the sounds of his own movements – the rustle of his robes, the crackle of his lightning, even his own breathing – seemed amplified tenfold, echoing back at him with disorienting intensity. It was as if his senses had turned traitor, overwhelming him with internal noise, making it harder to track Ikenga's movements or anticipate his attacks.

Finally, he focused on the starlight mage, her radiant whips lashing out with precision despite the shifting ground. He whispered a curse that was almost a sigh: "Borrowed Misfortune." A subtle distortion appeared in the air around her, and a moment later, one of her own starlight whips, perfectly aimed at Ikenga, flickered and curved inward at the last instant, narrowly grazing her own arm. It wasn't a direct manipulation of her power, but a subtle nudge of fate, a momentary lapse in its otherwise flawless trajectory, sowing a seed of doubt and hesitation.

Ikenga watched as his layered curses began to take hold, a grim satisfaction flickering in his eyes. The mages, initially so confident, were now visibly struggling against the insidious erosion of their control and senses. However, even as he savored this shift in the battle, the familiar gnawing began within him.

The curse of "Isolation," while rendering him untouchable, was a double-edged sword. The very separation that protected him began to fray at his connection to the world. Sounds became muted and distant, as if heard through thick layers of cotton. The vibrant colors of the mages' attacks and the

environment dulled, losing their sharp definition. A creeping sense of detachment washed over him, making the urgency of the fight feel strangely abstract.

More disturbingly, the craving had begun. A deep, primal yearning to feel something, anything, beyond the numbing void of his self-imposed isolation. It manifested as phantom sensations – the ghost of a searing heat on his skin, the prickle of phantom lightning, the faint pressure of an unseen hand. These spectral sensations were unsettling, a constant reminder of what he was sacrificing for this untouchable state. The longer he maintained "Isolation," the more intense this craving would become, threatening to overwhelm his focus and potentially shatter the very protection it afforded.

Ikenga found such feeling annoying to enjoy his first real battle, with a silent act of will, Ikenga cancelled the curse of "Isolation" upon himself. The numbing detachment vanished, replaced by a sudden, overwhelming rush of sensation. The vibrant colors of the battlefield snapped back into focus, the sounds of crackling energy and strained breathing assaulting his ears. The craving, momentarily roared back with renewed ferocity.

Ikenga found himself smiling as he stretched his body. He should have used the opportunity to attack but the plants evolving inside his body were coming closer to completion and needed more time and focus.

Meanwhile, the god-level mages, reeling from Ikenga's unexpected and multifaceted assault, began to adapt with their formidable intellect.

They didn't understand the nature of the attack but understood its purpose and with that understanding they acted. Instead of summoning their domain to expand across this planet, they shrunk it around their body, creating a different space for Ikenga's curses not to work.

The moment they got rid of his curse effect, he noticed immediately. With a flex of his will, the ground he was standing on opened up swallowing him whole.

His action was proven right because as soon as he was swallowed up, a huge arm made of flame holding a flaming sword fell from the sky piercing through where he stood.

Ikenga underground, safe from the attack, soon noticed the flames going rampant underground heading towards him, Like a root breaking through the ground, Ikenga surrounded by a huge petal broke through the ground heading for the sky.

The wind and lightning mage acted with blinding speed. "Chain Lightning!" she declared, her voice sharp as the air crackled with raw energy. Forked bolts of lightning erupted from her outstretched hands, not just striking but branching out like incandescent roots, forming a cage of pure electrical force around Ikenga, leaving no obvious avenue of escape.

In a display of his own growing battle instinct, two golden construct hands materialized from Ikenga's back, their movements swift and precise. From each palm, a large lotus flower bloomed, the petals a luminous gold. These two blossoms superimposed upon each other, creating a mesmerizing, layered defense. As the chain lightning lashed out, the golden petals pulsed with an inner light, acting as conduits, drawing the destructive energy inwards, the complex structure of the overlapping petals somehow dissipating and redirecting the immense electrical charge.

Simultaneously, Ikenga's two free hands began to manipulate the very earth around him. Jagged rocks sprouted and fused together, rapidly forming a crude but effective spear, the tip hardening to a sharp point. With a powerful thrust, he hurled the stone spear at the lightning mage, forcing her to momentarily break her concentration on the lightning cage to defend herself.

Instinctively, the lightning mage conjured a swirling vortex of wind, a shimmering emerald shield that intercepted the incoming spear. The stone shattered upon impact, but to the mages' collective surprise, several small, dark seeds, almost invisible against the grey rock, had been embedded in its surface. Upon impact, these seeds instantly sprouted, rapidly unfurling into vibrant purple plants that began to spray a dense, green mist into the air.

The mist carried a deceptively sweet scent, an aroma that the lightning mage subconsciously inhaled. Almost immediately, a wave of dizziness washed over her, her vision blurring, her stance faltering. Ikenga, sensing her vulnerability, didn't hesitate. A rough-hewn rock axe grew in his hand, the mineral structure shifting and solidifying, transmuting into gleaming iron with a flex of his will. He surged forward, intent on cleaving her in two.

But just as the iron axe began its deadly descent, a blinding flash of light erupted. The starlight mage, moving with ethereal speed, swooped in like a celestial comet, her form shimmering with incandescent energy. She intercepted Ikenga's attack with a shield of pure starlight, a radiant barrier that pulsed with cosmic power, saving her fellow mage from certain death. The force of the impact sent a shockwave rippling through the air, pushing Ikenga back and creating a momentary separation between the

combatants. The starlight mage then gently guided the disoriented lightning mage away from Ikenga's immediate reach, her eyes fixed on him with a focused intensity.

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The flame mage, seizing the opportune moment, hurled a concentrated ball of pure flame towards the still-disoriented lightning mage. The fire engulfed her, but instead of causing further harm, it blazed intensely for a moment before subsiding, leaving behind a wisp of smoke. The heat had effectively burned away the lingering toxins from Ikenga's mist, and the lightning mage gasped, her head clearing.

Standing tall once more, her eyes locked onto Ikenga with a burning fury that matched the lingering scent of ozone and burnt petals. Ikenga, in response, let out a quiet sigh as the iron axe in his hand crumbled into dust, the magical transmutation fading with the shift in his focus. A palpable increase in his aura sent a ripple of tension through the gathered mages, putting them further on guard.

Then, the transformation began. Ikenga's form stretched and contorted, bones cracking and reforming. His human shape dissolved, replaced by his imposing godly form the size of a mountain. Horns like jagged branches erupted from his head, framing a face now more akin to a powerful ape, his muscles bulging beneath a thick hide. His single, intense eye fixed on the starlight and lightning mages. "They are too fast," he thought to himself.

He knew a direct contest of speed was not his strength. To overcome their agility, he needed to control the battlefield itself. Rather than a broad, draining curse, Ikenga whispered a more nuanced curse law to himself: "Curse of Reactive Gravity." The air around him shimmered subtly as the unseen law took hold. This curse wouldn't continuously weigh down his opponents, but instead, his immediate surroundings would become momentarily, intensely heavier in direct response to their sudden bursts of speed. The faster they moved, the more resistance they would encounter, forcing them to expend more energy and potentially disrupting their fluid movements.

At the same time, Ikenga was surprised with his current height, he knew he was growing but not to this size, he was about to shrink when he noticed the mages' response.

Witnessing Ikenga's dramatic shift, the mages acted in concert. Their personal domains, which had been tight shields, now expanded slightly, the edges shimmering with raw power. Their astral bodies, extensions of their will and magic, were already manifesting, ready to engage. The flame-wielding goblin mage vanished, replaced by a colossal figure wreathed in roaring flames, a sword of pure fire held aloft. The wind and lightning mage now resembled a classic elemental, her body crackling with arcs of

lightning and gusts of wind swirling around her. The starlight mage simply grew taller, her form radiating a cool, celestial light, with motes of starlight dancing in the air around her like miniature galaxies.

To any mundane observer, the three mages now appeared as titans—gods the size of mountains reshaping the very fabric of the world. But to Ikenga and the mages themselves, the perception was even more profound: the planet was no longer the same. It had become a metaphysical battlefield where the rules of reality bent to the wills of its combatants. The mages' domains had fully unfolded, each becoming a microcosm of their innermost essence—terrains of fire, storm, and stars crashing against one another in chaotic beauty.

At the epicenter of this upheaval stood Ikenga, encased within his own compact domain—a bastion against the overwhelming power of the mages. Though smaller in size, his domain pulsed with intentionality and balance. Every inch of it served a purpose.

Flora within his realm had adapted instantaneously. Verdant, fire-resistant vines unfurled and drew in the intense heat from the flame titan's domain, converting it into living fire. These flaming plants lashed outward, their roots seeking to burrow into the encroaching inferno and repurpose it, turning destruction into counter-force.

Other flora began to shimmer with electrical luminescence, having absorbed the ambient static and gusts from the storm mage's tempest. Their branches became whips of wind and bolts of natural lightning. Some plants spun like turbines, generating currents that not only diffused the invading gales but also fanned the fire plants, bolstering their growth and reach.

As for the starlight—a subtler, more refined threat—it was drawn into crystalline blossoms that bloomed along the edges of Ikenga's domain. These radiant flowers drank in the celestial energy and transformed it into a luminous field, forming a radiant veil that both protected and extended the boundary of his domain. The starlit energy, once overwhelming, now fed the domain like sunlight nourishes the earth, stabilizing its core and expanding its reach.

Ikenga stood rooted at the heart of it all, calm in the eye of the storm. His eyes glinted with layered intent, watching how each piece of his ecosystem reacted, adapted, and fought. Though his domain was dwarfed in size by the grandiose spectacles of the mages, it was not one to be underestimated.

Witnessing the scene of his domain, Ikenga smiled as he said to himself maybe the surprised mages "Nature always adapt"

The colossal flame giant bellowed—a guttural roar forged from the sound of burning forests and collapsing volcanoes. Its massive, living inferno of a sword swung with apocalyptic force, cleaving through the air and releasing an immense arc of searing flame. The crescent-shaped blaze screamed through the sky toward Ikenga's domain, the heat alone igniting the clouds in its path.

But just before impact, the starshield surrounding Ikenga shimmered. A sudden ripple of cosmic energy pulsed outward, and in an instant, the surface of the shield twisted—not to absorb, but to reflect. The moment the flame met the starshield, a projection appeared across its surface: a sweeping aerial view from the heavens, the perspective of the lightning mage herself. What she saw was terrifying—the flame giant's own attack, redirected mid-flight, now hurtling directly toward her position.

She had no time to think. Instinct and raw power surged. In a burst of motion, the wind and lightning elemental blurred out of sight. A cyclone of shrieking wind exploded from where she once stood, narrowly avoiding the redirected inferno. The firestorm scorched across her prior location, exploding in the distance in a burst of white-hot fury. The shockwave flattened everything in a wide radius, leaving behind only glassed earth and rising embers.

Now fully enraged, the lightning mage surged back into the fray. A vortex of howling winds and crackling arcs of lightning propelled her forward with dazzling speed. Ionized trails hissed behind her as she moved, her entire form charged with volatile, storm-born energy. Her body shimmered with lightning—wild and barely-contained, a living thunderhead given form. Every bolt she unleashed split the battlefield, shaking the very foundations of the terrain.

She was not just attacking—she was retaliating. Lashing out at Ikenga not only for the danger, but for the insult of turning her ally's attack back on her.

High above, the starlight mage moved in quiet contrast. Towering and serene, she glided through the air, flickering between points like a shifting constellation. With a calm, deadly poise, she raised her arms and channeled the brightness of stars into focused beams of searing light. Each lance of starlight struck Ikenga's barrier with celestial fury, melting away layers of defensive magic and scarifying the land around him with glowing craters that radiated otherworldly energy.

Ikenga, in his ape-like godly form, stood his ground, his single eye tracking their movements with intense focus. As the wind and lightning mage accelerated towards his flank, the "Curse of Reactive Gravity" took hold. The air around her shimmered violently, becoming thick and resistant. Her lightning-fast movements suddenly felt sluggish, her momentum momentarily checked as if she were trying to run

through thick mud. The bolts of lightning she unleashed seemed to lose some of their initial velocity, their strikes less precise.

He didn't attempt to match her speed directly. Instead, his massive arms swung, each blow carrying the weight of mountains. Jagged constructs of rock and iron erupted from the ground, intercepting the lightning strikes and forcing the wind elemental to weave and dodge.

The lightning mage had no choice but to shift her momentum, weaving between the rising mountainous barricades, her movements sharper, more erratic. The terrain itself was becoming a weapon—alive, hostile, and unpredictable. Every dodge chipped away at her rhythm.

High above, the starlight mage reappeared—her tall, glowing form emerging in a blink atop a new vantage point far above Ikenga. In her cupped hands, energy bloomed, a newborn star condensed into a spear of radiant force. It grew in intensity with each passing second, humming with the promise of cataclysm.

But Ikenga moved before the attack could be unleashed.

He roared. The branch-like horns that curled from his head pulsed, veins of greenish-gold light surging through them like sap. Responding to the primal cry, an enormous petal unfurled from the canopy of his domain. Its surface shimmered like glass, yet carried the density and resilience of diamond, catching the beam of light just as it fired.

The impact was strong. The starlight beam slammed into the petal and fractured into thousands of piercing rays. But none passed through. The petal held, shining weakly with a serene defiance as it deflected the wrath of the stars.

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Above them, the flame giant seethed. Its entire frame roared with fury, the heat distorting space around it. Unwilling to be overshadowed, it raised its sword once more. The blade, now radiating with intensified ferocity, was brought down in a sweeping arc—another planetary-scale slash, wide enough to carve the sky.

The starshield surrounding Ikenga flickered again, reacting not with force but with vision. It didn't just block—it reframed reality. The surface of the shield shimmered like water, rippling outward to reveal an

entire different world—another realm mirrored in place of their own. Through this conjured reflection, the path of the fire giant’s sword extended not into the present battlefield, but through the void beyond.

A moment later, somewhere in the vast black of space, the consequences were made visible.

A small, uninhabited planet—its rocky surface gleaming faintly in the starlight—caught the edge of the redirected slash. The result was catastrophic. The planet buckled, cracked, and then erupted in a shower of molten rock and fire. Chunks of superheated debris scattered into the cosmos like fireworks from a dying world.

The mages saw it happen. Even the flame giant paused for a heartbeat, its burning chest rising slowly, perhaps in awe... or silent fury.

Below, Ikenga’s feet sank slightly deeper into the cratered earth. His breath steamed from his nostrils. His eye locked onto all three of them.

The brilliant shimmer of the starlight shield—Ikenga’s final mirror against destruction—dimmed at last, its fractured surface rippling once before vanishing entirely. The celestial light that once guarded him was gone, scattered like dust among the stars.

The mages saw it instantly.

Their moment had come.

The wind and lightning elemental surged forward in a blur of speed, lightning wrapping around her form like a shroud. No longer slowed by the reactive gravity field, she cut through the battlefield like a divine spear. Her hands crackled with condensed bolts—thunderhead-shaped projectiles so dense with voltage they made the sky scream as they passed.

At the same time, the flame giant raised both hands, abandoning swordplay for pure destruction. Something similar to a small formed between its palms—an unstable, roiling mass of nuclear flame that pulsed like a heart, radiating heat so intense that even the dirt beneath it turned to liquid glass. With a furious bellow, it hurled the star-core directly at Ikenga.

From above, the starlight mage descended slowly, serene yet inexorable. The sky around her dimmed as she gathered a final beam of absolute light—a thin spear, narrow as a reed but forged from concentrated stellar mass. It didn't explode. It pierced. A silent executioner's tool.

The three forces converged, each chosen to overwhelm, pierce, and disintegrate.

Ikenga, facing a coordinated assault from three god-level mages, smiled.

The evolving seed was done. Just as the combined attacks of the mages converged upon him, Ikenga made a startling move. Instead of attempting to evade or counter, he seemed to embrace their devastating power. Shielding the planet that was sure to die from the attack, His colossal form began to crumble and fall apart, the damage from their attack tearing a large chunk of the planet away even disintegrating some.

To the utter surprise of the god-level mages, Ikenga's physical body dissolved into a cloud of shimmering spores, like motes of light scattering across the desolate and damaged surface of the barren planet.

The mages, in their immense elemental forms, watched in stunned silence as the radiant spores settled onto the cracked ground. They had expected resistance, a final, desperate counter-attack, but this... this was unexpected. It was then that they felt it – a deep, resonant heartbeat, growing stronger with each passing second.

Focusing their senses, they traced the sound to the very core of the planet. Through layers of rock and dust, they perceived an image that sent a chill down their astral spines. Ikenga, or what remained of him, was curled in a fetal position at the planet's core, surrounded by a faint, pulsating light.

Then, the change began. The barren landscape, moments before devoid of any life, erupted in a frenzy of growth. The spores, having merged with the soil, sprouted with impossible speed. Vines snaked across the ground, trees with luminous leaves shot skyward, and strange, bioluminescent flowers bloomed in vibrant colors. The once-dead world was now teeming with an alien, rapidly expanding ecosystem.

Horror dawned in the eyes of the mages as they witnessed this impossible transformation. They understood now. Ikenga hadn't been defeated; he had become the planet itself. The loud heartbeat

they felt was the pulse of this burgeoning world, with Ikenga at its core, his consciousness now intertwined with the very fabric of this rapidly evolving biosphere.

The air, once dry and thin, turned sweet and rich. Oxygen flowed. Life sang.

The elemental forms of the mages stood in stunned silence as the realization dawned: Ikenga had found a way to grow something on this forsaken world. And not just something—everything.

Panic flickered behind their glowing eyes. The starlight mage turned first, preparing to retreat into the void. The flame colossus followed, wings of fire unfolding. But the wind-wielder froze mid-flight.

A vine, thick as a pole wrapped around her ankle.

Dozens more followed. The planet itself seemed to resist their escape, entangling them in roots and branches, cradling them in greenery that pulsed with the same steady heartbeat.

Then, they saw him.

Ikenga rose from the core. No longer a brute of muscle and fury—but something gentler. Grander. His form still massive, but now sculpted with the elegance of nature itself. Bark traced his limbs like armor. Leaves bloomed from his shoulders. His hair was a cascade of flowering vines. His eyes glowed green with life—and loss.

The mages, once awestruck, now panicked. Their towering forms—born of ancient disciplines and elemental mastery—began to tear at the vines, burn through roots, and lash at the sky in desperation. They refused to be undone by this... this transformation.

They rallied. The flame colossus let out a roar that split the sky, cleaving a swath of inferno across the newly formed forest. Trees wilted under the heat, and the air shimmered with scorching waves. The wind-lightning elemental surged skyward, conjuring a cyclone laced with crackling thunder, determined to rip the planet's green crown from its roots. And the starlight mage summoned something that looked like a nova, its pulse enough to collapse mountains and boil oceans.

But the planet did not bend.

Ikenga stood in the heart of it all, unmoved. Calm. Changed.

Then came the "Curse of Entropic Bloom".

He whispered the name of the curse— but in a mourning tone.

The ground pulsed once more, but this time it was not a heartbeat. It was a death knell.

From the soil, from the sky, from the very breath of this new world, the curse unfolded. Flowers bloomed with unnatural speed—petals wide as shields, glowing with colors no eye had ever seen. Their scent was sweetness and sorrow, memory and rot. Wherever these blossoms appeared, the world began to unravel—not with life, but with quiet, inevitable decay.

The flame colossus raised his sword of fire—only to find the blade crumbling into pollen. His skin split open as delicate vines pushed through his muscles, rooting into his bones, devouring him from the inside out. With every flame he conjured, another bloom opened in his chest, drawing power from his own magic. He burned, not with fire—but with flowering death.

The wind-lightning mage fared no better. Her form, once a storm made flesh, began to fracture. The wind she summoned turned against her—scattering her like seeds across the sky. Her lightning arced wildly, grounding into the soil, feeding the ever-growing entropic garden. Her body split into a thousand motes of charged pollen, each one sinking into the ground with a fading scream.

The starlight mage, last to fall, tried to ascend—her light growing brighter, reaching beyond the atmosphere. She sought to become a star, to escape this cursed ground. But the bloom followed. A single flower, white and impossibly still, bloomed on her palm. She stared at it in horror—then awe—as her light dimmed. Galaxies look alike in his eyes blinked out, one by one. He collapsed like a dying constellation, his body swallowed by roots that drank the stars themselves.

Silence returned. In the silence, Ikenga felt like he had to say something to the dying mages "You brought your elements to end me. But I am not a flame to be extinguished. Not wind to be scattered. Not light to be bent. I am the soil, I am the seed, I am the cycle"

The Curse of Entropic Bloom was inevitable. This curse, enacted as he dissolved into spores and integrated with the planet, caused the rapid growth of the alien ecosystem to be inherently unstable for beings not native to it. The overwhelming surge of life energy, while beneficial to the planet and Ikenga, acted as a hyper-accelerated form of entropy for the mages. Their elemental forms, reliant on a stable connection to their respective domains, were disrupted by the alien biosphere's chaotic and rapid expansion, causing their internal energies to unravel and their physical forms to destabilize.

Chapter 505:

Ikenga emerged from the planet's core with the slow, deliberate grace of something ancient and wounded. His body had returned to its human form, though it bore the deep, glistening scars inflicted not just on him—but on the world itself. They criss crossed his skin like molten veins, seeping golden blood that shimmered faintly in the dim planetary light.

Yet, ever cautious, ever disciplined, not a single drop touched the ground. Each droplet of his luminous blood hovered mid-air before reversing its descent, flying back into his body like birds returning to a wounded nest. Flesh reknit. Muscle wove back into sinew. His skin, a tapestry of divine resilience, mended silently.

Without fanfare, Ikenga lifted from the scorched surface. His ascent was smooth, effortless, yet heavy with loss. He broke through the fractured sky and hovered in the cold silence of space, suspended between stars, looking down at the planet he had once been bound to.

It was dying.

Where once its crust had thrummed with life, now fault lines bled magma into oceans that boiled away. Forests shriveled into ash. Storms no longer raged—they simply collapsed under their own weight. The mages' law, the corruption they had embedded into the ley lines and lifeblood of the world, held firm. It had taken everything from the planet to resist them. It had survived only because Ikenga had fused with it, sustained it with his own essence. But now he was no longer part of it.

And the rot had begun to show.

From his vantage point, he saw them—the mages. Their astral bodies loomed like eldritch gods above the stratosphere, colossal silhouettes pulsing with twisted sorcery. They were no longer whole, their forms shimmering with instability. They had sacrificed too much to run from him.

Ikenga slowly opened his palm.

Within it danced fragmented soul-embers—remnants of the mages' spirits, incomplete and writhing. They spun and twisted in his grasp, drawn to the golden warmth of his divine blood, yet unable to escape his will.

A tired breath escaped his lips, and he spoke—not in anger, not in triumph, but in sheer, exhausted acceptance.

"It seems... you have more toys to play with, Keles."

His voice carried into the void, meant for ears far away. Perhaps for Keles. Perhaps only for himself.

Then, he sat. Legs crossed, arms resting on his knees, he floated in the cold cradle of the universe, a meditative god beneath the fading glow of the sun.

The planet below cracked and groaned. It was unraveling—its beauty, its scars, its history—all collapsing into cosmic silence. And Ikenga watched. He had seen this in stories, in films, in his past life, sitting on a couch with popcorn in hand, marveling at the end of worlds on a screen.

But this was real. This was up close.

And so, despite the ache in his bones and the cry of the plants on the planet, he allowed himself a moment of peace.

While Ikenga sat in silent reverie, basking in the cold majesty of a dying world, far above and away, in the crystal chambers of the Imperial Spire, chaos had taken a more insidious shape—disbelief.

Only moments earlier, the top-tier mages of the Empire, gathered in their viewing sanctums, had been euphoric. The energy in the room had crackled with premature celebration as they watched their collective might—an arcane symphony centuries in refinement—culminate in a strike so devastating it split the land and shattered the skies. Ikenga’s body, once towering and divine, had crumbled before their eyes. They had seen it fall. They had seen him die.

Or so they believed.

When the planet itself had begun to pulse with strange vitality, when roots surged from the cracks like veins beneath skin, when the ground reformed into a womb and birthed that colossus of bleeding gold and wrath—panic set in.

And then, their sight was taken.

Their scrying pools turned to black. Their viewing mirrors cracked. Their tethered spirits recoiled like burned nerves. His resurgence did not merely blind them—it denied them. As though existence itself had deemed them unworthy to bear witness to what followed.

And so, there had been silence. Agonizing, uncertain silence.

Until the vision returned, and with it, dread.

There he was.

Floating above the Sundered Planet, bathed in the starlight of oblivion, Ikenga sat with terrifying stillness. Not wounded. Not weakened. But alive. Watching the world below decay, not with remorse—but with the distant curiosity of a being who had outgrown it.

Within the imperial chamber, the joy from before curdled into fear.

The Emperor, seated upon a throne of obsidian carved with the runes, leaned forward with unreadable expression. Long seconds passed. Then, with a voice like thunder muffled behind heavy doors, he spoke:

"Every hidden archive we possess on gods—scour them. Dust, decode, and unseal them all. Leave nothing untouched. What we face are not mere relics of myth. These are not simple gods."

A murmur of assent followed, but he was far from finished.

"Effective immediately—the extermination of all ratmen must be seen to completion. No cavern, no buried city, no forest warren is to be spared. The nobles will need new servants. The frontline will be their new home. If they breathe, they fight."

He paused, eyes narrowing. His tone deepened, more grave than before.

"Whatever these gods are, whatever root they have planted among the ratmen—we will tear it out. Burn it. Salt the memory of it. We will not allow their influence to fester under our feet."

A hush fell over the mages. Some glanced at one another, as if seeking reassurance that this wasn't spiraling beyond even their comprehension.

And then came the final order—cold and surgical.

"Study this battle. Every frame. Every echo. Learn from it. Build your countermeasures. Forge new wards, rewrite the laws of defense if you must. Because this is not the last time we will cross paths with them."

His gaze swept across the room like a blade.

"When we meet them again—we will be ready."

The chamber dimmed as the last of the mages bowed and vanished, their retreat silent, burdened with shame and fear. The room, once filled with echoing arcane discussions and hurried decisions, was now quiet—save for the pulsing golden light that lingered in the far corner.

Two eyes. Burning. Watching.

The Emperor did not flinch. He had grown used to the weight of Vellok's gaze, though never fully comfortable. That radiant fury—those ancient, searing eyes—were not merely intimidating. They were a mirror to something primal, something barely contained.

He exhaled slowly, running a hand over his brow.

"It might have ended differently if you were there," the Emperor said quietly, his voice low, heavy with the burden of hindsight. "But at what price?"

The golden glow narrowed, emotion flickering within it—anger, perhaps... or restraint.

"You know what I mean," the Emperor continued, still not meeting the gaze directly. "Your power... it's not like the others. Even the mages, with all their arrogance, knew better than to unleash you fully. This god we faced today—Ikenga—he would have drawn it out of you. Pushed you past your edge. And none of us... not even you... want to see what lies beyond that."

The chamber pulsed once, briefly bathed in gold. The glow in the corner shimmered, then shifted subtly—like eyes narrowing not in rage, but in thought.

Then came the voice. Cold. Controlled. Dangerous.

"The demons must be retaliated against for today's transgression," Vellok said, his words as sharp as a drawn blade. "They were watching. Measuring. Our loss, however slight, will embolden them. They will see it as a victory."

He stepped forward from the shadows, his golden eyes still blazing, though dimmer now—no longer wrathful, but calculating.

"I believe we should act swiftly. Decisively. Snuff the flame before it rises into wildfire."

The Emperor studied him for a long moment. This was Vellok at his most dangerous—not roaring, not rampaging—but reasoning. Cold, strategic, and unflinching.

"It would snuff the flame," the Emperor agreed at last, his voice tired. "But to the higher-tier demons, the scent of smoke would be an invitation. The more we strike, the more they will hunger. Our world, our hidden wonders—our secrets—they will not resist the temptation."

Vellok scoffed, turning away.

"The moment they breached our realm, that secrecy was doomed. You know it as well as I do. This illusion of control—it died the day the rift opened. We are living in the twilight of hidden things."

Silence fell between them once more. The tension was not combative, but heavy with the weight of decisions neither wanted to make.

Then, without further word, the golden eyes dimmed, shrinking to twin stars before vanishing completely. Vellok was gone.

The Emperor remained.

Alone.

He sat back upon his throne, his expression unreadable, his thoughts circling like carrion birds.

Demons, Gods. What had once been the Empire's stage was now crowded with forces that could not be reasoned with, only survived.

He leaned forward, fingers steepled, eyes fixed on the dark horizon outside his chamber's great window.

"They are already here," he murmured to himself. "And we were never ready."

Chapter 506:

On the other side of the planet, chaos reigned beneath a blackened sky. The ground was scorched with magic and fresh blood as Vorenza's abyssal legions advanced through broken terrain. Her path had once been blocked by a formidable sixth-tier mage—an obstacle she had removed with sheer overwhelming force, though at a steep and bitter cost.

The battle had left Vorenza grievously wounded, her once-formidable aura now tattered and dim. With her power critically depleted, she was forced to retreat deep into the Abyss to recover—a realm that fed on her will, yet allowed her to slowly reweave herself in silence.

For now, she could no longer speak directly, no longer command the battlefield with her overwhelming presence.

And yet, her absence did not halt the march of her army.

She had cultivated loyalty through fear and devotion in equal measure. Powerful demons under her banner—hardened generals of nightmare and bone—still carried out her will as though she whispered in their ears. Under their command, the demon horde spread like a tainted flood across the continent. Each day, swaths of blighted land were claimed. Villages were razed. Small towns crumbled, their defenders torn apart or twisted into servitude.

Only the ratmen stood firm.

Not because of strength—but because of desperation.

Their vast numbers clogged the battlefield, turning each advance into a war of attrition. Though enslaved and discarded by the very powers that summoned them, the ratmen fought with a wild and bitter rage. They had been forced into this war—pawns flung at the frontlines—but they resisted with everything they had. Every inch of ground cost blood, screams, and the acrid stench of burned flesh.

Today was no different.

Explosions rocked the charred soil. Shattered limbs flew through the smoke. The shrill laughter of demons echoed through the air—delighting in the carnage—while the ratmen roared with fury, their eyes red with exhaustion and hate.

But then, it began.

Amid the chaos, something changed.

The fifth-stage demons—veterans of countless campaigns, forged in the deepest pits of the Abyss—froze mid-charge. Their laughter died. Their expressions twisted into wary confusion. Something had shifted. No enemy had appeared. No spell had been cast.

But the air... it had changed.

Something unseen now clung to it like cold breath before a blizzard.

They looked around with twitching eyes, scanning the skies, the mountains, even their own troops—yet saw nothing. But their instincts screamed. Danger. Immense, unknowable danger.

They took a cautious step back. The sensation dimmed.

Another step back—it lessened further.

And then, without a single word exchanged, without so much as a howl or grunt, all the fifth-stage demons turned as one and ran.

They did not look back.

They moved as dark blurs through the blood-soaked battlefield, ignoring comrades and enemy alike. They sprinted toward the portal to the Abyss—far in the distance, pulsing with malignant light—yet even the great distance was meaningless to them when they tapped into their full, terrifying speed.

Only once they passed through the threshold did the choking sense of dread vanish. There, back within the raw chaos of the Abyss, they finally slowed—panting, confused, alert.

They looked to one another. Not in fear—but in uncertainty. What had happened? What force, what presence, had stirred such primal alarm in them? None of them knew. And that unsettled them even more.

But one did know.

Deep within the Abyss, hidden in shadow and flame, the Demon Lord Vorenza stirred from her meditative trance. Her wounds still bled ichor, but her mind—her awareness—had stretched far beyond the veil of the portal. She watched the field. Not the army. Not the ratmen.

She was focused on a point.

A single, empty point in the open air.

There was something there. Not visible, not yet revealed—but something that shook even her loyal fifth-stage demons to the bone.

A presence.

The space above the blood-soaked battlefield began to twist and distort, the air itself groaning as reality bent unnaturally. The tearing of the sky was not just visual—it was a soundless scream that echoed deep into the soul. All eyes turned skyward as a great rift opened like a wound in the world.

It was then that the fourth- and third-stage demons, who had been reveling in the slaughter, suddenly felt the same creeping dread that had overtaken the now-vanquished fifth-stage demon. Their instincts, dulled by bloodlust, were too slow to react in time. But that didn't stop them from trying—they turned tail, some screeching in panic as they fled toward the dark portal that led back to the Abyss.

Then, as suddenly as it had opened, the twisting in the sky stopped. The rift sealed itself with a whispering hiss, and in its place floated a figure—Vellok.

But Vellok was not as he had been.

Gone was the goblin-like form known to those who knew him. What now stood suspended in the sky looked like an escaped patient from a divine asylum. He wore a tattered white robe that fluttered around him, stained with symbols no mortal mind could comprehend. His limbs were bound by ethereal, glowing chains that pulsed with divine restraint, each link humming with power.

Behind him stretched multiple wings, vast and majestic, but most of them were chained down—each shackle forged not of metal but of law, curse, and oath. Only two of his wings were free, unfurled like banners of judgment and wrath.

His face, too, had changed—no longer goblinoid but hauntingly human, beautiful in a way that unsettled. His golden eyes still burned, but now they were different: the left eye glowed with calm recognition as it gazed upon the demons below, while the right flickered with wariness and unease. The cautious eye... that one was Vellok himself, the part that remained sane, restrained.

With care, Vellok moved—his cautious eye narrowed as he broke a single chain around his right wrist. The sound was soft, like glass cracking in an empty cathedral, but the effect was immediate. His freed hand was pale, impossibly smooth, and radiated a beauty so profound it hurt to look at. Light clung to it like perfume, and from it emanated a scent—sweet, otherworldly, maddening.

The battlefield froze.

The ratmen, the demons, even the very wind stilled. All motion ceased as the scent descended like a divine mist. It seeped into the lungs of the demons below, igniting a hunger deeper than bloodlust—a hunger etched into the marrow of their being. Mouths fell open. Tongues lolled. Eyes dilated.

Even the retreating demons—those who had nearly reached the portal—paused. Some stepped through and vanished. Others, halfway in, hesitated as their nostrils flared. Their instincts screamed at them. That scent—it was ambrosia for demonkind. The flesh of that arm promised power beyond comprehension. One bite... just one bite, and they would transcend.

Several demons turned back.

But before the frenzy could begin, a finger snap was heard followed by the chain that snapped taut again with a thunderclap of shimmering light. The freed hand was yanked back, bound once more in glowing

restraints. Vellok's form shimmered, his wings folding inward like closing gates. Without a word, without even a ripple, he vanished, leaving behind only silence... and chaos about to erupt.

As the celestial sphere groaned under an unbearable strain, a spectacle of cosmic destruction unfolded before Ikenga's very eyes. Veins of incandescent light fractured the planet's surface, like molten rivers carving paths across a dying giant. The air around Ikenga crackled with an unseen energy, a prelude to the cataclysm about to erupt.

Then, it happened. A blinding flash tore through the void, painting the black canvas of space with hues of furious orange, searing white, and violent crimson. The planet, pushed beyond its breaking point, detonated in a magnificent yet terrifying display of raw power. Chunks of its shattered form, colossal mountains ripped asunder, were flung outwards in a chaotic ballet of destruction.

Amidst this celestial debris, one immense shard, a jagged rock larger than any earthly mountain, hurtled directly towards Ikenga. It was as if the dying planet had launched its final, desperate projectile. Without hesitation, Ikenga extended his hand, and a shimmering aura enveloped the approaching behemoth. With a surge of his will, he merged with the rock, his essence intertwining with its old, mineral heart.

The immediate aftermath of the explosion was a shockwave that rippled through space, and its after effect felt by closer planets. But within this turbulent wake, the asteroid, now a vessel for Ikenga's consciousness, moved with a focused intent. Guided by his will, it accelerated through the darkness, an unstoppable projectile aimed directly at the goblin's world.

Drawn inexorably by the gravity of its target, the asteroid plunged into the atmosphere of the goblin's world. Streaks of fire painted the sky as the immense rock succumbed to the planet's pull. Just moments before impact, as the ground rushed up to meet his speeding vessel, Ikenga seamlessly withdrew himself from the asteroid. His form materialized in the air, the echoes of the cosmic explosion still resonating within him as he began his descent towards his intended location on the unsuspecting world below.

Chapter 507:

But even as he plummeted, his senses—broad and far-reaching—stretched beyond the limits of ordinary perception. And there... he felt it.

Vellok.

A presence so alien, so commanding, it was like a beacon in the cosmic sea. It pulled at something deep within Ikenga, not in body, but in memory.

He guided his attention upward—toward his other eye, the one affixed to the moon—and with a subtle command, it turned its gaze downward. Through this celestial lens, he beheld the full, dreadful beauty of Vellok's true form: chained in radiance, wings like broken divinity, and that hand—freed only briefly—glowing with impossible allure.

And then came the sound.

That bell tone—soft, sacred, enduring—reached him even as he fell, weaving through space like a hymn. Upon hearing it, Ikenga closed his eyes, caught not in fear, but in memory.

It came to him like incense drifting into a dream: Sunday mornings, when he was still a boy. Walking past the rusted iron gates of a modest church. The sound of the bell then was not unlike this—gentle, rhythmic, filled with something both ancient and intimate. It had marked the beginning of worship, of quiet awe.

The echo of that sacred chime mingled now with the distant howl of the wind against his falling form.

"Demons... and now angels. What else does this world have to offer?"

Ikenga mused inwardly, his voice quiet amid the roar of reentry.

He opened his eyes, the heat of descent glowing across his face. And there, just before him, loomed the massive Abyssal Portal—a gaping wound in the world's fabric, leading to Zarkov's domain.

Still carrying the gift he got for Keles, and with the weight of past and present pressing upon him, Ikenga stepped forward into the portal, leaving behind a sky that still rang with the memory of heaven's broken bell.

The sound of the bell continued to ring—soft, divine, and unnaturally resonant. But it was not merely a sound; it was judgment, a wave of power that swept across the battlefield like a silent decree from a forgotten god.

Each reverberation in the air carried with it a distinct consequence, as if reality itself responded to the rhythm of Vellok's awakening.

The first wave struck the battlefield.

All at once, the demons—those snarling beasts of the abyss, reveling in the slaughter—froze. For the briefest moment, silence fell over them. Then came the consequence.

Countless demons exploded into ash.

No time for screams. No time for escape. They crumbled, their forms disintegrating into pale dust, carried away by the rising breeze. Even those who had begun retreating through the abyssal portal were dragged back, caught mid-escape and undone. The sound had no borders, no mercy.

The lands they had defiled and scorched black—lands soaked in despair and rot—began to shimmer. As if time reversed itself, a green flush swept outward in the sound's wake. Purification. Grass emerged from dead soil. Flowers bloomed where blood had once pooled. The taint of the abyss was scrubbed clean.

From her hidden vantage beyond the battlefield, Vorenza—commander of the invasion, high demoness of cruel strategy—watched in growing anger. Her senses, sharp and attuned, mapped the battlefield in real-time.

She frowned deeply as her vision swam with loss.

"Years... of progress..." she hissed.

Years of careful maneuvering, of corruption, of slow conquest—all of it was gone in mere heartbeats. The regions they had claimed were now greener than before, as though mocking her. She watched her campaign collapse in silence, returned not to ruin—but worse—to renewal.

The ratmen, who had been clawing and dying beneath the demons' cruelty, felt the bell differently.

The first wave made them pause—alert, uncertain.

The second wave washed over them like a balm. Their broken limbs knit together, their festering wounds sealed, strength returning to their shaking legs. They looked up in awe, their sunken eyes reflecting something they had not felt in years: hope.

The third wave came, and with it, a miracle. Every demon still locked in battle with them vanished into ash before their eyes. The claws that had struck them were no longer there. The snarls they had feared were silenced. The battlefield was quiet... for a moment.

And then came the fourth wave.

The sound changed.

What had been heavenly now twisted into something piercing, maddening. What was once a balm became a blade. The ratmen screamed and clutched their oversized ears, trying to block out the agony. But it was inside them, thrumming in their skulls like a thousand needles.

Blood poured from their noses, then their eyes, and finally from their ears as the pressure mounted.

Brains leaked through their fingers as they clawed at their own heads, driven mad by the crescendo of divine sound.

The fifth and final wave was the death knell.

It came like a final strike of a cosmic gong, and in its wake—

Silence.

Not a ratman remained standing.

Their bodies fell lifeless to the ground, heads detonated in a grotesque burst, like candles snuffed out. The field was littered not with corpses, but headless husks, still twitching as if confused by the sudden end.

Zarvok felt it the moment Vellok's presence rippled across the veil of the world. He saw the strange form the being had taken—a bizarre fusion of radiant divinity and lowly flesh—and his curiosity ignited into ambition. A high-tier angel, bound within the crude frame of a goblin? It was madness. Brilliant, terrifying madness. The mages who found this world had tampered with powers far beyond their station, and Zarvok was determined to unravel their secrets.

To bind such a celestial force within such a pitiful vessel—it spoke of new unknown rites, forbidden knowledge, and a world brimming with untapped power and benefit. If he could seize this world, claim its secrets for himself, then his status in the Abyss would rise beyond imagination. His conquest wouldn't just be another layer swallowed in the chaos—it would become legend. His dominion would be one of the most renowned abyssal layers across all the planes.

And so, word of Vellok spread like wildfire. The very sight of him sent tremors through the demonic ranks. The moment he appeared, everything changed.

Gone were the reckless charges of demons eager to die in the fires of battle. Now, there was hesitation—fear. They moved with uncharacteristic caution, heads tilting skyward as if expecting holy wrath to descend at any moment. Whispers of an angel walking the world had made them uneasy.

For demons, death is usually a minor inconvenience. When slain, their essence is drawn back to the Abyss, reborn in the river Styx—perhaps altered, perhaps diminished, but never truly gone. Death has never been a thing to fear for them.

But angels are different.

Angels bring true death. The kind that severs a soul from existence entirely, erasing it from the cosmic cycle. A demon slain by an angel doesn't return. There is no rebirth, no redemption—only oblivion.

This is why, for all their hate, demons fear angels. And the feeling is mutual. For just as angels can destroy demons utterly, so too can demons annihilate angels in return. Their mutual hatred is as old as the Abyss itself—a war written into the bones of the universe.

Fifth-stage demons had become a rare sight in the ongoing war, their presence dwindling as the conflict dragged on and casualties mounted. Amidst this shifting landscape, one figure steadily rose through the ranks—Malzor, the stone-skinned commander of the gargoyles.

He had long been overlooked by the empire and even by the goblin mages. Not a demon king, not cloaked in grand titles or noticable bloodlines, Malzor was dismissed as nothing more than a brute—a powerful creature who had carved out a sliver of influence through raw strength and sheer tenacity. To them, he was just a warlord clinging to the edge of chaos, suppressing rival factions in his corner of the Abyss and leeching whatever gains the war could offer.

And in fairness, the empire's assumptions weren't entirely wrong. A sixth-tier imperial mage, deployed with intent, could likely end Malzor's rise in a single strike. But so far, they hadn't bothered. With the more urgent and dangerous conflicts unfolding on the other side of the world, Malzor's progress seemed insignificant—a spark too small to warrant attention.

Ironically, that negligence worked in his favor.

Rather than crushing him, the empire found another use for Malzor. They began deploying more and more of their expendable ratmen troops to his region—not to support him, but in the hope that the demons under his command and the swarming atmen would annihilate each other. A slow grind of attrition, a quiet purge by proxy.

But the plan backfired.

Instead of weakening him, the constant skirmishes with the ratmen only served to bolster Malzor's standing among his kind. His forces grew fiercer, more organized, more united. Every slain ratman meant another soul to consume, another chance to evolve. While the ratmen's spirits were weak—

lacking the supernatural potency of magical creatures—the sheer volume of them was enough to help many demons under Malzor ascend to the third stage.

Chapter 508:

Whispers began to circulate in the Abyss. The once-ignored warlord now commanded a disciplined army, hardened by constant battle and glutted on soul energy. His stronghold—once a crumbling fortress half-buried in ash and bone—had been reforged into a towering obsidian citadel, its spires lined with gargoyles that watched with tireless vigilance.

Malzor himself stood on the cusp of greatness. Having reached the upper limits of the fifth stage, he felt the stirrings of something greater—yet also something missing. He had power, territory, and growing influence... but the path forward had grown unclear.

Malzor knew the truth in his bones: without some stroke of luck—some extraordinary encounter or divine twist—he would go no further. Fifth stage would be his ceiling in this invasion. He had clawed his way here through blood, grit, and clever maneuvering, but now the path ahead was shrouded in shadow, and brute strength alone would not carry him any higher.

That was why he had hoped to turn to Phanthom.

From the very beginning, Malzor had harbored suspicions. Phanthom didn't move like a demon. Didn't feel like one. There was something about him—something that whispered of otherworldly origins. A being outside the twisted hierarchies of the Abyss. But Malzor didn't care. He had long since stopped seeking truth for its own sake. Whatever Phanthom truly was, the guidance he offered had been invaluable. The blessings, the insights, the whispered paths to power—all of it had elevated Malzor from a mere deformed gargoyle without wings to a formidable force whose name carried weight even beyond his domain.

It was Phanthom's hand, unseen yet ever-present, that had shaped much of Malzor's rise.

But now, when Malzor needed him most—when the threshold between fifth and sixth stage loomed like a chasm with no bridge—Phanthom had vanished.

Gone without warning. Without a trace.

And Malzor knew: if Phanthom didn't want to be found, he would not be found. No force in the Abyss, no spell or summoning rite, could drag him into the light. His silence was deliberate, his absence purposeful. Perhaps it was a test. Perhaps it was abandonment.

Either way, Malzor stood alone now.

As for Phanthom—elusive, ever-smiling Phanthom—he wasn't concerned with Malzor's desperation. No, his attention had shifted elsewhere. He was far too entertained, caught in what he called a delightful game of hide and seek with his new host.

The game began the moment the chosen ratman, marked by Ikenga, had his inner sight unlocked—when his eyes were opened to the supernatural layers of the world. At first, it had felt like a gift. Then came the terror.

Rattan remembered it clearly. Just another day in the servant quarters of Rattan, performing his duties, trying once again to commune with the mana around him. As always, it resisted him—slippery, distant. The most he'd ever accomplished was summoning a faint breeze, barely enough to stir the dust.

But that day, something changed.

Chief was sleeping on the old straw mattress in the corner, twisted in his dreams, his face drawn tight with pain. Nightmares had become a familiar part of their days—visions that left him trembling, screaming, or silent for hours. Rattan had grown used to it, though never comfortable with it.

Then it happened. Chief suddenly bolted upright with unnatural speed, his body moving like a marionette yanked by invisible strings. Without a word, he swept across the room, bypassing scattered bits of salvaged tech, and dove into the underground shelter they had built together in secret. Not a glance, not a sound—just instinct and fear, as if something had awakened in him.

Rattan, stunned, barely had time to react before he heard the sound. The sliding door creaked open behind him.

Still dazed, he turned, expecting perhaps a goblin butler with some menial command. What greeted him instead made his blood freeze.

A dozen ogre soldiers filled the doorway, their armored forms blotting out the light behind them. Towering and grim, they stood shoulder to shoulder, weapons drawn.

And behind them, half-hidden in the shadows, stood the goblin butler. The one who had always smiled a little too widely, spoken a little too sweetly. Now his finger extended toward Rattan like a dagger.

"There he is, my lords," the butler said, his voice smooth and satisfied. "The one you're looking for."

Rattan stood frozen as an ogre knight—easily twice his height—stepped forward and seized him without a word. The creature's massive hand wrapped around his waist like an iron clamp, lifting him off the ground with terrifying ease. Rattan didn't even struggle. He couldn't. His limbs refused to move, paralyzed by fear.

The ogres said nothing as they began to drag him away, their heavy steps echoing through the quiet den. But before they could cross the boundary of the dwelling, one of the knights suddenly stopped. With a thunderous stomp, he drove his armored foot into the ground. The floor cracked open, revealing a hidden compartment beneath—the underground bunker Rattan and Chief had carefully constructed over the past few weeks.

Rattan's heart leapt into his throat.

His breath caught. His limbs tensed. A tremor ran down his spine.

The ogre holding him noticed. He glanced down at Rattan, eyes narrowing as he studied the boy's sudden panic. The knight who had stomped examined the exposed bunker carefully. Empty.

Rattan's shoulders sagged with visible relief.

But that moment of weakness gave him away.

"Call a mage. Now," the ogre holding him growled, his voice low and edged with suspicion. His eyes never left Rattan's face. The boy's reaction had spoken louder than any words ever could.

Rattan stiffened again, his breath coming in short, shallow bursts. He didn't know how to mask fear. He didn't know how to lie under pressure. And under the crushing gaze of the ogres, his body betrayed him again and again.

As for Chief—he was long gone.

Rattan, young and idealistic, couldn't see the full shape of the danger. But Chief had always known. The empire never stopped hunting. It never forgot. It only waited.

He had known they would come eventually. That it was only a matter of time before someone knocked on the wrong door or stomped the wrong patch of ground. So while he and Rattan built the bunker together, Chief had been quietly digging deeper—his own escape route, concealed beneath layers of earth and misdirection.

He hadn't told Rattan. Not because he didn't trust him, but because he wanted to preserve what little innocence the boy still had.

In Rattan, Chief saw something rare: hope. A flicker of something untainted by war, betrayal, or bloodshed. That spark was worth protecting. Worth lying for. Worth disappearing for.

So when the day came—as he knew it would—Chief made sure he wasn't the one who doomed their last, fragile piece of hope.

He vanished into the dark, leaving behind only a memory and a chance.

The summoning of the mage was swift. Within minutes, a fourth-stage sorcerer arrived, his dark robes whispering as he descended into the den. He barely glanced at the ogres before addressing the one who had summoned him.

"I was told this ratman may be hiding something—or someone," the knight said, his grip tightening on Rattan. "I thought a mage would be best suited to uncover the truth."

The mage raised a brow and turned his gaze to the trembling Rattan. His lips twitched in faint amusement before he nodded and lifted his hands. Arcane sigils spiraled around his fingers as a spell was woven. A moment later, a mental image of the den bloomed in the mage's mind, laid bare in perfect clarity. Every crack, every object, every disturbed grain of dirt—nothing was hidden.

And yet, nothing was found.

Undeterred, the mage murmured a second incantation. This spell sought more than objects—it traced presence itself. Breath. Essence. Residue of the living.

In his mind's eye, glowing threads unraveled from every soul present, even from himself. But one thread stood out. It stretched—not upward or sideways—but downward, threading its way into the hidden tunnel, slithering far into the distance like a serpent's trail.

The mage narrowed his eyes and grasped the strand, which coiled around his finger like living silk.

Turning back to Rattan, he whispered another spell, this one more invasive. Rattan's eyes glazed over, his body going still under the enchantment's weight.

"Was there someone else here with you?" the mage asked softly.

"Yes," Rattan replied, his voice flat.

"Do you know where they went?"

"No."

"Was it another ratman? How many were there?"

"Only one."

The mage flicked his hand, and a shimmering image formed above his palm—a faded photograph of a weathered, injured ratman. Chief.

"Was this the one?"

Rattan's lips parted. The answer was about to slip out—until something intervened.

Phantom, silent and watching from the shadows of the unseen world, whispered into the boy's mind. A small twist of thought. A nudge.

"No," Rattan said instead.

The mage hesitated. The denial was unexpected. He stared at Rattan for a moment longer, then asked, "Did they have any unusual devices or gadgets?"

"No."

With a snap of his fingers, the spell broke, and Rattan stumbled back to full awareness, breath ragged and eyes wide.

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The mage's face curled in distaste. "Take him away," he ordered coldly.

Then, turning to the knights, he lifted the tether of presence still wrapped around his finger. "The rest of you—come with me. We're following this."

And with that, the hunt for Chief began.

As for Rattan, he remained in a daze—until the darkness gave way to a vast underground chamber. The moment his eyes adjusted, his breath caught in his throat.

Ratmen.

Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. All huddled in silence beneath the heavy gloom of flickering mana-lamps. Before he could process the sight, the ogre holding him gave a grunt and, with no care, hurled Rattan forward into the space like a sack of grain.

He hit the ground hard but scrambled to his feet almost immediately, the fear in his chest replaced by something close to elation. Ratmen—his own kind! After what Chief had told him of the Empire, he had expected cages, fire, experiments. But instead, he was surrounded by familiar faces. His tail twitched with excitement as he stepped forward, eager to speak, to connect.

Then he paused.

Something was wrong.

As he took a closer look, the flicker of joy drained from his face. The other ratmen... they weren't talking. They weren't doing anything at all. Their eyes were hollow, unfocused—like they'd seen something terrible and never come back from it. Each face was gaunt, each breath shallow. They sat still, backs slumped, as though waiting for something inevitable and dreadful.

Rattan's steps slowed. A chill crept down his spine.

From the shadows of his soul, Phantom watched in silence. The despair here... it's suffocating.

These weren't just frightened prisoners. No, in the world of Phantom's creator, such a concentration of broken spirits was like blood in water—bait for cursed entities. Each ratman here would have been morphed into monstrous cursed beings.

Phantom's gaze sharpened. Whatever this place is, it's poison. If Rattan stays too long...

A gentle nudge of thought, subtle and soft, brushed against Rattan's mind.

And like a leaf drifting on the current, Rattan turned—his eyes landing on a single ratman seated in a corner, half-shrouded in shadow. Her posture was different. Upright. Not broken, not yet.

Something told Rattan to go to her.

A young ratgirl.

Rattan had barely taken a step before he was abruptly swept off his feet—quite literally—by a swift strike of her tail. He hit the ground with a soft grunt, and before he could react, the girl was already on top of him, eyes burning with hostility.

"What do you want?" she snapped, her snout close enough for him to feel her breath.

Rattan let out a nervous chuckle, raising his hands in surrender. "I just wanted to ask... if you knew what was going on."

The sharp edge in her gaze faltered slightly, and she blinked in disbelief. "Have you been living under a rock?"

Rattan, still pinned, blinked innocently. "No. I've been living in the servant's den. Who's your goblin master? Maybe he knows mine. They could be friends."

The look of disgust that twisted her face was immediate and deep.

She stood, brushing herself off, and muttered, "I guess I'm not as unlucky as I thought—at least I get to meet the legendary ratman who serves his goblin master."

Rattan slowly picked himself up, patting dust from his clothes. "Wait... can you at least tell me what's happening?"

The girl glanced back at him, eyes now unreadable.

"We're being conscripted for war," she said flatly.

Then she turned and walked away, disappearing into the hunched crowd of broken-eyed ratmen.

Rattan stood there, frozen. Her words echoed in his head, distorting, looping, sinking into the pit of his stomach.

Conscripted... to war.

His legs trembled, and his heartbeat became a drum inside his chest. The stories Chief had told him—about the Empire's warfront, about cursed beasts and burning skies, about ratmen torn apart by things with too many limbs and no eyes—came rushing back.

"I'm going to die," he whispered, voice cracking.

Somewhere deep inside him, Phantom stirred, watching in silence. Something had to be done, Rattan hasn't fully grown yet, Ikenga has more plan for the boy and Rattan was not going sit by and watch him meet his end before he ripens.

And so, only a day after his arrival, Rattan began to change.

The hope and nervous energy that had once defined him faded quickly, replaced by the same dull, sunken stare that haunted the eyes of the other ratmen. Despair had seeped into his bones. Each passing hour brought more captured ratmen thrown into the pit, and with each new arrival, an ogre knight would appear—dragging massive, rune-inscribed equipment into the space. The purpose was unclear at first, but the smell of metal, oil, and blood that clung to the machines was unmistakable.

By the end of the first week, Rattan was unrecognizable.

His fur matted, his back hunched, and his eyes dimmed. The fear had given way to numb acceptance. Even Phantom, buried deep within his thoughts, remained still—watching. Rattan had stopped training his magic entirely. Something primal warned him not to touch the mana around him. It clung thick in the air, strange and sharp. It felt like breathing would reveal him.

During the second week, the ogres vanished—replaced by something worse.

Goblin mages and their students arrived, inspecting the strange machines that had been brought in. Rattan observed them carefully from the shadows. The students were young and cruel, their laughter always louder when a ratman flinched. The mages paid them no mind, seemingly content to let their apprentices "play."

A scream broke the stale air, snapping Rattan from his thoughts.

He turned just in time to see a massive snake—scales black and glistening—wrapped around a ratman. Bones cracked. The scream turned to a wet gasp before the snake began swallowing its prey whole, jaw distending unnaturally.

Then it slithered forward, unfazed, toward the next.

Rattan shuddered.

The goblin students laughed, watching with sadistic glee. One of them, eyes glowing faintly with magic, stepped into view and began to shift. Flesh twisted. Limbs collapsed. In a blink, he became another serpent—smaller, this one. It slithered silently into the crowd. A ratman shrieked and stumbled as the snake bit him, venom coursing into his veins. And then, as if feeding off the suffering, the snake grew—twice its size, then more. The poisoned ratman struggled, twitching, as the serpent slowly consumed him alive.

This was not an isolated incident. It happened daily.

The message was clear: fear was the tool, death the lesson.

Rattan, now pressed against a cold stone wall, clutched his knees and tried not to breathe. Around him, the ratmen had become more like prey than people. The pit was silent save for the sound of laughter and the occasional scream.

Following the pattern that had kept him alive so far, Rattan slipped away from the group when the laughter began again, retreating into one of the many cracks in the ruined walls. It wasn't much—just a gap between rusted debris and broken stone—but it gave him a moment's illusion of safety.

Unfortunately, he had already been marked.

A small snake slithered toward him, its movement unnaturally smooth, eyes gleaming with amusement. Rattan didn't have time to react. With a sudden strike, the snake sank its fangs into his leg.

The paralysis came quickly. He could only lie there, his muscles frozen, as his heart pounded in his chest. The snake didn't eat him. Not yet. It coiled in front of him, savoring the way his eyes widened in fear, basking in the rising horror that radiated from him like heat.

But then—something changed.

The fear in Rattan's eyes flickered... and vanished.

The snake, confused, leaned in. Its tongue flicked the air, tasting for the panic it could no longer find. Rattan's gaze was calm now—cold, detached, and oddly knowing.

In an instant, the snake's world turned upside down.

A ratman's hand—his hand—snatched the small serpent from the ground. With unnatural precision, he brought it to his mouth and swallowed it whole, the creature still writhing inside him.

The paralysis faded.

Rattan didn't move at first. He sat silently, staring at the dirt and the rusted metal, thoughts unraveling. He could feel it now—an unsettling truth, crawling beneath the surface.

Too many times... too many close calls.

He had survived things no one else did.

The ogres. The den. The mages. The snake.

Each time, death should have taken him. And each time, it didn't.

He remembered Chief's spider—the dark, looming thing always just behind him, whispering madness and feeding on guilt. But Rattan had no nightmares. No whispers. No crawling presence. And yet... he had survived all the same.

Maybe, just maybe, he wasn't alone.

Maybe something was watching over him, too.

But then—why did it protect him in silence?

Rattan stood up—but something was off.

He felt... taller.

His limbs, once thin and rat-like, had stretched, filled with strength and poise he didn't recognize as his own. His ragged clothing had vanished, replaced by fine robes embroidered with arcane threads, humming with restrained magic—far grander than anything his old goblin master ever wore.

In his right hand, he held a staff—gilded and smooth, pulsing faintly with stored spells.

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He stared at it, confusion mounting... until the memories came.

They crept into his mind like a slow tide—techniques, phrases, the postures and pride of a goblin mage student. His back straightened. His eyes sharpened. And slowly, his expression changed. Fear dissolved into something colder. Wiser. Controlled.

Somewhere deep within him, Phantom stirred.

It had taken time. Time to observe, time to understand, time to wait for the perfect moment. Phantom had used his power subtly—his ability to steal appearances and shape perception, working through the connection he shared with Rattan. And now, he had gifted Rattan the ultimate disguise: the identity of a goblin mage student.

No one questioned the student who now walked among the others. Not even the true mages. After all, who would suspect one of their own?

Rattan—no, the student—glanced once more at the pit of despair behind him. He had escaped it. For now.

With this disguise, he had bought time—time to grow, to learn, to prepare.

Because something was coming. And Rattan wouldn't just survive it.

He would have to rise above it.

Rattan took his first step—nervous, unsure—but something inside him shifted.

The posture, the arrogance stitched into the very bones of the identity he now wore, surfaced instinctively. His shoulders straightened. His gaze turned sharp. He scanned the frightened ratmen huddled in corners, making sure none had caught a glimpse of what he truly was.

For a flicker of a moment, a disturbing thought slid across his mind—Should I kill them, just to be sure?

It wasn't his thought. Or maybe it was. The line blurred now, between Rattan and the persona Phantom had sewn into him.

But the ratmen were too busy cowering, too paralyzed by fear to notice anything. Another was tossed in beside them with a thud. No one looked up.

So Rattan walked on.

He moved smoothly toward the other students, adopting their rhythm, their confidence. He didn't speak—just observed, melting into the group like he had always belonged. Around him, goblin students laughed as they hunted. Some played with their prey, others struck without hesitation. It was all a game to them.

Then a voice, sharp and aged, cut through the chaos.

"Enough playing. We have a quota to meet."

Instantly, the laughter ceased. The students shifted form, the snakes unraveling into goblins again with practiced ease. No one questioned the command.

Neither did Rattan.

He mimicked their movement. Through the memories now housed in him, he understood what was happening: each student had been trained to inscribe specific runes. None of them knew what the runes did. They weren't told.

They were just told to memorize them. To replicate them precisely. And now, they would begin.

Stationed among the other students, Rattan stood before the massive construct—an amalgam of dark stone, magic metal, and pulsing veins of mana that hummed like a restrained beast. Its sheer presence made the air feel heavier, as if the structure itself was breathing.

From the depths of his borrowed memories, the runes rose like echoes—lines, curves, strokes—all etched into his mind. Alongside them came something far more elusive: the method, the silent instruction on how to move the mana around him.

Rattan extended a finger, hesitant but determined. He mimicked the pattern embedded in his memory, trying to guide the invisible threads of power into motion.

But nothing responded.

Panic flickered in his chest. The mana didn't flow. It wriggled, resisted. It was like trying to pull threads out of water, only to watch them dissolve the moment he touched them.

Watching through Rattan's senses, Phantom wasn't surprised. This was expected—after all, it was Rattan's first genuine attempt to manipulate mana, not just mimic the mannerisms of those who could.

Still, the panic made Rattan sweat. He stole a glance at the others.

To his surprise—and slight relief—he wasn't alone. Many students fumbled just like he did, brows furrowed in frustration, hands trembling with effort. Only a few had begun tracing runes into the air or onto the construct's surface, their mana flowing with shaky confidence.

The air was charged, not just with mana, but with quiet pressure. The students were being watched.

Judged.

Rattan swallowed hard and turned back to the structure. He would try again. He had to. Not just to blend in—this was something more now.

It took Rattan a few more tries before he finally began to grasp the flow of mana. The movements were awkward at first, almost like trying to walk with someone else's legs. When it came time to draw mana into himself, his hands trembled slightly and his focus wavered. But time has a way of shaping even the clumsiest efforts. After spending another week underground, immersed in training and isolation, his control gradually sharpened. What once felt foreign and elusive began to feel familiar—like a muscle he hadn't used in years slowly remembering its purpose.

Phantom, however, was less impressed.

He frowned as he studied the way this world approached magic. From what he observed among the students, they didn't harmonize with mana so much as dominate it. Rather than allowing mana to flow freely and guiding it with intention, they suppressed it—forcing it to conform to the patterns and structures they imposed.

What set the mages of this world apart from others wasn't raw power or arcane knowledge. It was their extraordinary sensitivity of consciousness. Their awareness wasn't just sharp; it was honed to the point that it allowed them to sense and engage with the currents of mana around them. That sensitivity formed the foundation of their entire magical practice.

To cultivate it further, they subjected their minds to a unique kind of stress. They would deliberately push mana through their consciousness, knowing full well that mana here was not cooperative. It resisted, fought back—like trying to push against a strong tide with your bare hands. And yet, that resistance was exactly what they sought. The struggle created pressure, and the pressure forced growth.

In enduring that resistance day after day, their consciousness became more resilient, more precise—capable of eventually shaping mana with ease.

Phantom had no insight into what came after that stage. The student whose body he now inhabited hadn't yet reached the threshold where the next step was revealed. Whatever lay beyond was still hidden, wrapped in the same secrecy that cloaked much of this world's true nature.

A week passed.

Training ended. The students and mages were expected to disperse and return to their routines. But instead of dismissing them, one of the instructors made them stay, citing a rare opportunity—one not to

be missed. A fifth-stage mage, a figure of almost mythical skill, was set to demonstrate a spell. Such events were uncommon, and the chance to witness one in person was rarer still.

By now, Rattan had settled more comfortably into his new identity. The unfamiliar thoughts and sensations that had once jostled against his mind like jagged stones had begun to smooth out, sinking into him like sediment. He spent much of his time in quiet reflection, sifting through the fragments of memory he had inherited.

And with each passing day, with each memory that surfaced, something within him shifted. The wide-eyed wonder and naivety he once held were slowly eroding. In their place grew a cold understanding—a dawning realization of the truths that had long been buried beneath the surface of his world.

The truth had been slowly creeping in through the cracks—unwelcome at first, but impossible to ignore. The empire had never been the noble force it claimed to be. The life he once led, the rules he followed without question, the pride he took in serving the goblins—it was all a lie. What had been taught to him and countless other goblin children wasn't tradition or wisdom. It was indoctrination. Conditioning. A carefully constructed cage for the mind.

Though Rattan hadn't had much contact with his kind in recent years, he knew enough. The ratmen were not warriors, not conquerors. They could never stand against the empire's might, not through force. And yet, the empire still poured energy into suppressing them—relentlessly painting them as pests, as creatures to be controlled or exterminated. If the ratmen were truly so weak, why bother?

He used to believe, without hesitation, that ratmen existed to serve the goblins. That it was simply the natural order—one race born superior, the other inferior. But now, with his new memories seeping deeper into his bones, Rattan began to wonder.

What if the empire wasn't acting out of dominance, but out of fear?

The thought came uninvited, unsettling. What could they possibly be afraid of?

Then, just as suddenly, another thought surged to the surface—cold, detached, and bitterly practical.

"But why should I care?"

He sat with the question for a moment, and the silence that followed was telling. The truth was, he had risen higher than any ratman could ever dream. His new identity had placed him among the elite, gifted him a seat at the table where power was traded like a coin. He was no longer a servant, no longer scurrying through the shadows. He now belonged to a class of beings so far removed from the plight of his people that their suffering seemed like a distant storm—heard, but not felt.