

## Guardian gods 521

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"We have humans who claim the same title," she continued, her tone sharpening. "But most merely imitate what they don't fully understand. Still, I wonder—do you think they would follow the same path, if given the same conditions? Or would our presence —our very interference—limit the natural arc of their evolution?"

Ikenga folded his arms, his tone deliberate. "If you had asked me that before we knew other worlds existed, I'd have proudly said their growth would never meet the expectation. I would have told you their limitations were carved in stone, a result of their nature, their blood, their narrow view of reality."

He paused, looking up to the room ceiling which depicted a picture of a war between demons.

"But now," he continued, "now that we know other realms intersect—now that knowledge bleeds across worlds like ink on parchment—I can't say that anymore. The exposure to what lies beyond their stars... that alone changes everything."

"It's only a matter of time," Ikenga said, his voice softer. "Before they truly understand how far the path they've set upon can lead. How vast the horizon really is. And when they do..." He smiled—not kindly. "The power they might grasp, the status they could command... it could shake the very bones of the world we come from."

"It's not such a huge secret as we already knew about it, yet seeing it applied in such an experimental way still is surprising" Keles said to which Ikenga nodded.

"It's time I tell you how my dinner with Zarvok went," Ikenga said, his voice casual, though his eyes—always too calm when he was troubled—betrayed a trace of thought still lingering on the conversation.

Keles looked up from the array of soul fragments spread across her worktable, her hands pausing mid-incantation. Alone with Ikenga, the veil that obscured her face in public was absent, revealing her features—elegant, precise, and unsettling in their beauty. Her eyes shimmered like still pools of dusklight, cool and unreadable. But Ikenga had learned to read the small tells: the way her gaze narrowed, how she tilted her chin just slightly when her interest deepened.

"So he needs the souls in my hand," she said, skipping pleasantries as she always did when work or politics took precedence. She already knew where this was going.

"Yes," Ikenga said, settling into the chair across from her. He reached for the obsidian goblet she always left for him, pouring himself wine from a bottle she hadn't touched. "Either we hand them to him—or we keep them and make absolutely sure they never fall into the gargoyle's grasp."

Keles exhaled slowly, the faintest twitch of amusement at the corner of her mouth.

"I suppose Zervok made some grand offer as part of the bargain. Future loyalty, influence?" she asked, turning a soul orb slowly between her fingers. The trapped energy within pulsed strongly, like a heartbeat.

Ikenga gave a single nod. "He offered friendship. And a future where he sits on the Abyssal Throne."

Keles smiled now, fully, but it wasn't a kind expression—it was the kind that might accompany someone calculating the odds of survival in a death game. "Charming. The imp plays at lordship."

"An imp who already commands the second largest army in this layer and has hardly suffered any loss in this war," Ikenga reminded her. "And he's not wrong—if things go the way he hopes, he may just ascend. And he has every reason to fear the gargoyle reaching the next stage."

"I wouldn't hand those souls to him just to make him feel safe," Keles said, rising slowly. She moved like a drifting shadow. "What we hold here is not just power, Ikenga. It is balance. The Abyss is watching what we do with these."

"I know," Ikenga said. "But the question remains—do we let the wingless one rise and become a third force again? Or do we use these souls ourselves to tilt things in a direction we control?"

She turned her gaze to the soul rotating in her hands. "four sixth-stage souls... he's right to want them. They'd be a kingmaker for his next generation."

"But they're not our stepping stone," Ikenga said.

"Exactly." Keles tilted her head slightly. "We don't play the abyss's games. Zarvok and Vorenza can kill each other for the throne. I want something lasting."

Ikenga chuckled. "So do I. And if Zarvok wants to rise, let him. We won't stop him. But we will sell him the ladder."

Keles smiled at that, faint and cold. "The price?"

"That's what I want us to decide." Ikenga leaned forward. "What's worth trading power we don't intend to use, for a future favor we will?"

Keles thought for a moment before speaking. "Information. Access. Artifacts—anything tied to the invaded world. If Zarvok intends to reach for the core, then he'll come across secrets that may prove useful to our world"

Ikenga's eyes gleamed. "You want first claim to anything that doesn't shine with raw power."

"Power is fleeting," Keles replied. "But knowledge... and relics... can be refined, broken down, studied. There's potential hidden in these things."

"Then we propose a bargain," Ikenga said. "We give him the souls—three, not all four. He gets what he needs to secure his place. In return, everything he finds in this invasion—every extraordinary text, artifact, eve mage towers—we get first pick."

Keles nodded. "And the last soul?"

"We keep it," Ikenga said, smiling. "As insurance. Or as bait."

Zarvok on the other side of the abyss didn't know what he needed for his ascension is being used a trade tactics, if phanthom was close by he might have been able to convince Ikeng and Keles to get him one.

With the souls decided, Kelse waved her hand, and they transformed into glowing orbs that settled on the table. She then turned her attention back to Ikenga.

"Have you missed me?" she purred, a teasing lilt in her voice that danced in the dimly lit chamber.

A low rumble vibrated in Ikenga's chest as he buried his face in the curve of her neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of starlight and something uniquely hers. His lips pressed a lingering kiss against her skin, a silent hum of agreement resonating deep within him.

Kelse's fingers traced the strong line of his jaw, a smile playing on her lips. "Indeed," she murmured, her voice laced with anticipation. "We have a great deal of catching up to do."

In one swift, fluid motion, Ikenga scooped her into his arms, lifting her effortlessly from the carved stool. He turned, his eyes locked with hers, and began to carry her towards the inviting expanse of the bed, its silken sheets promising a haven of intimacy. "Yes," he breathed, his voice thick with longing, "we do."

Yet, even in this moment of reunion, a familiar thought flickered in his mind. Almost as an afterthought, he managed to slip in the question, "Shouldn't Xylia join us?"

Kelse's playful mood shifted in an instant. Her fingers, moments before caressing, now found a patch of skin on his side and pinched, twisting with a delightful yet firm reprimand. "She will have to wait, my love," Kelse said, her eyes sparkling with possessiveness. "This moment, this time... it is just for you and me."

The forest floor blurred beneath Chief's makeshift, steam-powered roller skates, a frantic whirring the only response to the pounding that echoed through the trees. He risked a glance over his shoulder, the sight enough to send a fresh jolt of adrenaline through his rat-like frame. Two hulking figures, clad in dark, intricately runed armor, crashed through the trees with terrifying speed. Ogres. Not the brutish kind of folklore, but the Empire's elite, their movements fluid and purposeful, each step imbued with a subtle hum of elemental power.

Weeks had bled into years since his escape from the Rattan place, a lifetime compressed into a desperate flight across the Empire's sprawling territories. It was during these harrowing weeks that the unsettling transformation had begun. Like Rattan before him, a veil had lifted from Chief's senses,

revealing the vibrant tapestry of mana that pulsed through the world. A breathtaking, terrifying revelation for a race seemingly blind to its existence.

This newfound perception, however, had come at a terrible cost. The unseen demonic spider, a constant tormentor since... he couldn't even recall when it had begun, now tightened its grip. The mana, a source of potential power, was also a conduit, amplifying the spider's insidious influence, its whispers growing louder, its phantom limbs feeling increasingly real. Physical changes were now undeniable. He'd stretched unnaturally taller, and two additional limbs sprouted from his torso, twitching and instinctively flexing. From the tips of these new appendages, sticky, shimmering strands of web could now be launched. A grotesque mutation, a desperate adaptation for survival.

His altered form hadn't gone unnoticed. The Ogres, already relentless in their pursuit, had become even more aggressive, their rune-etched armor glowing with focused intent. They'd even deployed a mage, a fact that sent a shiver of dread down Chief's spine. Thankfully, the mage seemed to share a profound dislike for strenuous activity, only materializing when Chief appeared cornered, a silent, looming threat that cut off all path of escape.

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But Chief was not entirely without his own defenses. Scrabbling through his satchel as he careened through the trees, his nimble fingers found purchase on a familiar piece of cobbled-together machinery. Another steampunk marvel, salvaged and repurposed during his flight. With a grunt of effort, he activated the device. A burst of steam propelled a small, weighted net backward, designed to momentarily ensnare his pursuers. It wouldn't hold them for long, but every second counted.

The Ogres roared as the net unfurled, momentarily tangling their massive forms. Chief seized the opportunity, his new limbs instinctively firing sticky webs that snagged onto low-hanging branches. He swung through the air, a blur of fur and frantic energy, the wind whistling past his ears.

He could feel the spider's skittering presence within him, its growing strength a chilling counterpoint to his desperate flight. The mana, once a tantalizing mystery, now felt like a double-edged sword, granting him new, horrifying abilities while simultaneously strengthening his inner tormentor.

Below, the Ogres were already tearing free of the net, their elemental warrior arts crackling to life. One slammed a gauntleted fist into the ground, and a fissure of earth snaked through the forest floor, forcing Chief to adjust his trajectory. The other drew a long, wickedly curved blade that shimmered with an icy aura.

The forest floor became a treacherous obstacle course, littered with the debris of Chief's desperate flight. His steam-powered skates, once a symbol of escape, now spat sparks as they struggled to maintain purchase on the uneven terrain. The Ogres, relentless in their pursuit, were closing in. One, with a roar that shook the very trees, unleashed a torrent of earth, forcing Chief to swerve violently, the skates screeching in protest. A jagged rock tore into his side, a searing pain blooming amidst the adrenaline, and a crimson trail began to paint the forest floor.

His new limbs, grotesque but functional, lashed out, firing webs that snagged on branches, allowing him to swing through the canopy. But the Ogres were too fast, too skilled. The second Ogre, his blade shimmering with frost, cleaved through the web, sending Chief crashing to the ground. He scrambled back, his enhanced senses screaming a warning as the blade descended again. He rolled, narrowly avoiding the blow, but the frost kissed his fur, leaving a patch of agonizing cold.

Desperate, he unleashed a volley of webs, not to ensnare, but to distract. The sticky strands exploded around the Ogres, momentarily obscuring their vision. He seized the opportunity, his mutated body contorting in a way that would have been impossible weeks ago. He launched himself forward, a blur of motion, his claws, now sharper and stronger, raking across the Ogre's armored leg. A spark flew as metal met flesh, and a guttural roar of pain echoed through the trees.

But the advantage was short-lived. The wounded Ogre, enraged, unleashed a wave of elemental fire, forcing Chief to retreat. His fur singed, the stench of burning flesh filled his nostrils. He could feel the spider's presence within him, a dark, pulsing energy that both terrified and empowered him. It whispered of strength, of survival, but also of a terrible hunger.

He knew he couldn't win a direct confrontation. His only hope was to use his agility, his webs, and his animalistic intuition of the forest to outmaneuver them. He fired a web, anchoring it to a distant tree, and swung across a ravine, the wind whipping through his fur. Below, the Ogres roared in frustration, their elemental powers unable to reach him across the chasm.

The respite was fast and small. The Ogres, driven by whatever determination, found a way around the ravine, their heavy footsteps echoing through the trees once more. Chief, his body screaming in protest, pushed himself onward, his breath ragged, his vision blurring. The spider's whispers intensified, a chorus of dark promises that resonated with his desperation.

"Give in," it hissed, its voice a chilling counterpoint to his own ragged breaths. "Let me show you power. Let me protect you."

He resisted, his will a fragile shield against the encroaching darkness. But the pain, the fear, the sheer exhaustion, were eroding his defenses. The Ogres were gaining, their elemental powers crackling around them, the air thick with the scent of ozone and the certain promise of death.

In a moment of weakness, a moment born of pure, unadulterated terror, he yielded. He let go of the fragile control he had been clinging to, and the spider surged forth, its presence overwhelming, its power intoxicating.

A wave of dark energy erupted from him, a tangible manifestation of the entity that had tormented him for so long. The forest floor trembled, the trees swayed, and a colossal spider phantom materialized beside him, its eight eyes burning with malevolent light.

The colossal spider phantom, a nightmarish extension of Chief's desperate gamble, unfolded its immense, hairy limbs, each tipped with claws that could rend steel. Its eight eyes, glowing with an inner, malevolent light, fixed on the two Ogre warriors who stood their ground, their runed armor radiating power.

The first Ogre lunged, his greatsword a blur of motion. The runes on its surface pulsed, and the air around it shimmered with contained force. The spider phantom met the charge with terrifying speed, its own limbs a chaotic flurry. Razor-sharp claws clashed against the Ogre's blade, sending sparks flying and the clang of metal echoing through the ancient trees. The phantom's sheer size and reach were overwhelming, forcing the Ogre onto the defensive, each parry a desperate effort against the relentless assault.

The second Ogre moved with practiced coordination, flanking the phantom. Runes on his gauntlets flared, and the very ground beneath his feet seemed to respond, sending jagged spikes of earth erupting towards the monstrous apparition. The spider phantom, surprisingly agile for its size, scuttled sideways, its many legs moving with unnerving speed, leaving deep gouges in the forest floor.

The first Ogre pressed his attack, his sword whistling through the air. The phantom countered with a stream of thick, black webbing that shot from its spinnerets with incredible force. The sticky strands, strong as iron cables, wrapped around the Ogre's sword arm, momentarily hindering his movements. Seizing the opportunity, the phantom lunged, its fangs, dripping with a viscous, dark fluid, snapping inches from the Ogre's face.

The second Ogre unleashed a wave of focused energy from his gauntlets. The air crackled, and a concussive force slammed into the spider phantom's side, staggering the massive creature. It hissed, a sound like scraping stone, and its many eyes narrowed in fury.

The Ogre ensnared in the webbing struggled to break free, his roars of exertion echoing through the trees. The phantom, its attention divided, lashed out with its claws, tearing through the Ogre's armor, drawing dark, viscous blood. The wounded Ogre staggered back, but his comrade pressed the attack, his movements fluid and deadly. He ducked under a sweeping claw and delivered a powerful blow to the phantom's leg, the runed metal of his gauntlet impacting with a sickening crunch.

The spider phantom recoiled, its movements momentarily faltering. The second Ogre pressed his advantage, leaping onto the phantom's back, his gauntlets glowing intensely. He rained down a series of powerful blows, each impact sending tremors through the phantom's massive body.

But the spider phantom was far from defeated. With a violent lurch, it threw the Ogre from its back, sending him crashing into a tree. Then, turning its attention back to the first Ogre, still struggling in its webbing, it moved with terrifying speed. Its claws ripped through the remaining restraints, and with a swift, brutal strike, it silenced the warrior forever.

The last Ogre warrior, fueled by grief and a warrior's ingrained refusal to yield, moved with a ferocity born of desperation. He ducked and weaved under the spider phantom's massive limbs, his attacks precise and targeted, aiming for the ethereal essence of the apparition. His runed gauntlets slammed into the phantom's form, each blow causing ripples in its shadowy substance, momentarily disrupting its movements.

The spider phantom, enraged by the persistent attacks of the smaller foe, lashed out with increasing speed and power. Its claws tore through the air, leaving trails of dark energy that seemed to dissipate moments later. Webs, thick and shadowy, shot out, attempting to ensnare the agile warrior, passing harmlessly through solid objects when they missed. But the Ogre was too quick, his movements fluid and unpredictable, honed by years of rigorous training.

He managed to leap onto the phantom's back once more, his runed gauntlets glowing with intense energy. He rained down a series of powerful blows, each impact causing the phantom to shriek and flicker. The apparition bucked violently, trying to dislodge its attacker, its shadowy form distorting under the relentless assault.

The Ogre held on with grim determination, his grip like iron on the phantom's insubstantial form. He focused his energy, and the runes on his gauntlets blazed. With a final, desperate surge of power, he slammed his fists into the back of the phantom's head, right where its many eyes converged.

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The effect was immediate and devastating. The spider phantom shrieked again, a sound of pure agony that seemed to tear at the very fabric of the forest. Its movements became erratic and uncontrolled, its shadowy form flickering violently. The Ogre, sensing his victory, prepared to disengage.

But the effort of maintaining the phantom had taken its toll on Chief. A surge of his own will, fueled by a primal need to reclaim his body and horrified by the carnage, began to push back against the entity. The spider phantom, having expended a significant amount of its shadowy energy in the fight, began to waver, its form becoming translucent.

Just as the Ogre landed back on the ground, the spider phantom roared, a sound filled with pure, unadulterated fury. The sound wasn't physical, but it resonated directly within Chief's mind, a psychic backlash of pure rage. Clutching his head, Chief stumbled forward, his own will now peaking. The spider phantom, unable to maintain its hold against Chief's awakening consciousness and weakened by the Ogre's assault, began to dissipate, its phantomy form dissolving into nothingness.

The Ogre, stunned by the phantom's sudden disintegration and the raw mental force that emanated from Chief, hesitated for only a moment. But a warrior's instinct took over. He lunged towards the weakened Chief, his runed weapon raised for the final blow.

The Ogre lunged, his runed weapon a descending arc of lethal force aimed at Chief's unprotected head. His focus was absolute, his victory seemingly assured against the disoriented and weakened prey. He hadn't accounted for the grotesque, yet now instinctively weaponized, appendages that sprouted from Chief's torso.

In a blur of unexpected motion, one of Chief's newly grown arms, tipped with surprisingly sharp claws, lashed out. The movement was swift, almost serpentine, betraying a primal instinct honed in the heat of survival. The Ogre, his attack committed, had no time to react. The unexpected appendage, guided by a desperate surge of Chief's will and the lingering echoes of the spider's predatory instincts, pierced through the gap in the Ogre's helmet, directly into his eye.

A guttural cry of shock and agony erupted from the Ogre. His weapon clattered to the forest floor, his massive body convulsing. He staggered backward, his hand clutching at his ruined eye, dark blood seeping between his armored fingers. The surprise attack had been swift, brutal, and utterly unexpected.

Chief, still reeling from the mental backlash of banishing the phantom, stared in horrified disbelief at his own appendage, now slick with the Ogre's blood. The act had been instinctive, a desperate flailing of a body pushed beyond its limits. The lingering predatory instincts of the spider, coupled with his own will to survive, had combined to deliver the fatal blow.

The Ogre stumbled again, his breathing ragged, before collapsing to the forest floor with a heavy thud. Silence descended once more, thick with the stench of blood and the weight of the brutal encounter.

Chief stood there, trembling, his body a canvas of wounds and blood. He had survived, against all odds, but the cost was mounting.

A deep unease settled over Chief, even stronger than the shock of the Ogre's death. He trembled, not just from being worn out and hurt, but from a strange feeling of being disconnected. He stared at his bloody hand, a gruesome reminder of how desperate he'd been, when a cold feeling washed over him. His eyes widened in horror as he felt himself losing control of his body.

His mouth fell open wider than it should, and sounds started coming from his throat – rough clicks and hisses that formed words he didn't understand. The air around him felt thick, and the bright flow of magic he could now see was swirling faster and getting stronger, reacting to the weird sounds coming from him. Even the forest seemed to be holding its breath, the leaves still in an unnatural way. Whatever his body was doing, it was powerful, pulling on unseen energy.

As the last hissing sounds left his strange mouth, his body went limp, falling like a puppet with cut strings. Right then, a strange feeling of lightness came over him. His awareness, his spirit, separated from his body, floating upwards. He hung in the air, watching from above like a detached observer.

Below, his lifeless body lay among the dead Ogres. The blood on his new hand started to flow, not out, but in, tracing invisible paths across his skin. It dripped onto the forest floor, pooling and swirling, guided by something unseen. The red liquid came together, forming complicated lines and symbols that glowed with a faint, evil light. A magic circle, clearly like a spiderweb in its design, appeared around the fallen Ogres.

A heavy feeling came down, a real weight in the air that pressed on his spirit. A sudden dread washed over him, a basic warning that screamed he shouldn't be experiencing this in his current state. Without thinking, his spirit recoiled, snapping back into his body with a jolt.

He gasped, his eyes flying open, his view back on the ground. He watched in horror as the blood drained from the Ogres' bodies, flowing along the glowing lines of the magic circle, feeding its dark energy. A tremor ran through his own body, a gut reaction to the draining life force.

Then, a new feeling overwhelmed him. The unseen demonic spider that had been in his thoughts all the time, the constant whisper in the back of his mind, started to shiver. It wasn't a physical shaking, but a mental one, a wave of terrified recognition that went deep within Chief.

His own senses twisted, changed by a strange awareness. The tall trees around him seemed to shrink, the whole world seeming to warp. In his mind, a huge spider leg appeared, so big that the Ogres' bodies looked like tiny bugs caught in its hairs. A crushing wave of dread washed over him.

Somehow, without being told, he knew. This was the creature his people, in their ignorance and fear, had worshipped. This was the power that had enjoyed his suffering, the silent watcher of his pain. The sheer size of its presence was overwhelming, a terrifying horror that made his own existence seem tiny. He was a toy, a speck of dust in the presence of a very old being. The chanting, the blood magic – it had been a summoning, started by something within him, something connected to this terrifying god.

A voice, huge and with a cold amusement in it, echoed not in the air, but right inside Chief's head. "Well done, my little rat," it murmured, the words dripping with a possessive joy that made his skin crawl, even though he couldn't move. "For that, you'll get a great reward."

Chief's jaw moved uselessly, his throat tight, his mind a mess of terror and disgust. He wanted to scream, to fight this monster, but his voice wouldn't work. He was stuck in his own body, forced to watch the horror unfold.

The giant spider leg in his mind seemed to shift, and the heavy feeling got stronger. Then, in a flash, the ghostly shape of Vorenza, the spider goddess, seemed to appear above the bloody clearing. Her form kept changing, a mix of shadows and sharp lines, her many eyes shining with cold amusement as she watched Chief's silent struggle.

Thin, shadowy threads, impossibly fine but feeling incredibly powerful, stretched out from her, hooking onto something unseen above the dead Ogres. Chief's confused senses felt a faint tug, a pulling feeling as if something invisible was being taken from the lifeless bodies. Souls. She was taking the souls of those who had chased him.

Then, as quickly as she had appeared, Vorenza's ghost-like form vanished, leaving behind a lingering sense of dread and something real that pulsed with dark energy. It floated in the air in front of Chief, a blood-red crystal, its sides catching the dim light from above, giving off a clear feeling of power and corruption.

A feeling deep within his changed body, a basic craving he couldn't ignore, longed for the crystal. It promised strength, power, a twisted kind of food. But Chief's mind recoiled in horror. He knew where it came from, the price that would surely come with it. A wave of sickness, both in his body and spirit, washed over him.

But his disgust didn't matter. His will wasn't his own anymore. The crystal shot forward with unnatural speed, a red blur against the green of the forest. It hit him in the center of his chest, going through skin and bone as if they weren't even there. A burning heat exploded inside him, followed by an overwhelming feeling of being invaded as the crystal dissolved, its energy flooding his veins, becoming part of him.

Chief gasped, his body shaking as the energy flowed through him. The spider inside him stirred, no longer afraid, but excited, its presence growing bolder, stronger, mixed with the power of the goddess's gift. He had been rewarded, yes, but the reward felt like another twist of the knife in his horrifying change, tying him even more to the monstrous being that watched him with such chilling amusement.

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The moment the crystal was absorbed felt like being caught in a violent storm inside his own body. Chief's veins burned as if filled with hot metal, his muscles jerked and twitched uncontrollably. His bones felt like they were being reshaped from the inside, a horrible symphony of cracking and reforming. He cried out, a choked sound that was part human, part something completely different.

Then, just as suddenly as it started, the violent change calmed down. A heavy stillness settled over his body, a feeling of profound transformation. He pushed himself up, his limbs feeling heavier, yet strangely more powerful. His vision blurred for a moment before focusing, showing a world subtly

changed. The magic around him pulsed even stronger, its flows and swirls now clearer and more complex.

He looked down at himself, and a fresh wave of horror hit him. His skin now had a faint, hard shine, darker in places, with fine, almost invisible hairs that prickled when he touched them. His two new arms were longer, thicker, their claws sharper and more defined, able to flex with unsettling strength. His chest seemed broader, his posture more hunched, his balance slightly different.

His face, too, had gone through a disturbing change. His features were sharper, more angular, his eyes larger and with many facets, reflecting the light in a creepy, insect-like way. He knew without looking that his mouth now had sharper, more numerous teeth. He could feel a faint twitching around his jaw, as if new mouthparts were trying to come out.

The strength that flowed through him was undeniable. He felt a raw, basic power thrumming beneath his skin, a sense of physical ability he had never imagined. He flexed his new limbs, and a ripple of dark energy ran through them. The urge to test this new power was almost impossible to resist.

He looked at the lifeless bodies of the Ogres, the empty shells now just remains. A cold, detached indifference washed over him, a stark contrast to the horror he had felt moments before. The goddess's gift had not only changed his body but seemed to be altering his very emotions, dulling his empathy, sharpening his killer instincts.

The demonic spider within him stirred again, no longer a fearful presence, but an eager partner. Its whispers were stronger now, mixed with the thrumming energy inside him, urging him to embrace this change, to enjoy his new power.

Chief clenched his fists, his new claws digging into his palm. He was stronger, yes, but he was also becoming something... else. Something monstrous. The goddess's reward felt like a curse, tying him further to her will, twisting him into a tool for her unknown plans.

Chief let out a weary sigh, a sound that was now raspier, more guttural than before. His new appendages, twitching with a life of their own, extended outwards. With an almost instinctive grace, they began to extrude shimmering strands of web, the sticky filaments weaving together with surprising speed and precision. In moments, a large, silken robe formed around him, a grotesque yet functional garment that concealed his altered form. The web-silk was surprisingly strong, clinging to him like a second skin, hiding the chitinous patches and extra limbs from casual observation.

He glanced down at the empty husks of the Ogres, a reminder of the power that now resided within him, a power he hadn't asked for and barely understood. The Empire's pursuit would intensify. His transformation wouldn't go unnoticed for long, especially with the demise of two of their elite warriors. Their methods would undoubtedly become more sophisticated, their tactics more ruthless. Mages, specialized hunters, perhaps even more formidable ogres – the thought sent a shiver down his spine, despite the strange dulling of his fear.

Yet, a sliver of grim satisfaction flickered within him. The Empire's inevitable reassessment of his threat level bought him time. Time to disappear deeper into the wilds, time to understand the changes wracking his body, time to perhaps even learn to control the terrifying power that now coursed through his veins.

With a flicker of his old habits, Chief reached down, expecting to feel the familiar straps of his roller skate boots. His hand grasped empty air. A wave of disappointment washed over him as he remembered. His legs had changed too drastically; his ingenious contraptions were now useless relics, likely scattered in pieces where his transformation had taken hold.

He shook his head, a gesture of weary resignation. Stepping closer to a towering oak, one of his new appendages shot out a thick strand of web, anchoring itself high in the branches. With a powerful, almost effortless pull, he launched himself into the air, swinging away from the clearing, deeper into the shadowed embrace of the old forest.

Hours went by fast since chief was gone, it was at this time a group made an appearance at the place the battle took place.

A figure cloaked in deep indigo robes stood surveying the scene, his hands moving in slow, deliberate gestures as if reading the very air. Runes shimmered faintly around his fingertips, and his eyes, a piercing violet, scanned the carnage with an unnerving intensity. This was the mage.

Behind him lumbered a group of Ogres, larger and more heavily armored than any Chief had encountered before. Their faces were grim, their movements radiating a cold, professional fury. They moved with a disciplined efficiency, their gazes sweeping the area, taking in the drained corpses of their comrades and the faint traces of web-silk clinging to the undergrowth. The lack of any report from the initial pursuit team had clearly prompted a more significant response.

The mage knelt beside one of the fallen Ogres, his brow furrowed in concentration. He ran a hand over the empty husk, his lips moving in a silent incantation. The air around the corpse shimmered, and a faint, spectral echo of the Ogre's last moments seemed to flicker into existence for a fleeting second before vanishing.

"Something... unnatural," the mage's voice was low, resonant, carrying an air of authority that brooked no argument. He rose, his violet eyes locking onto the direction Chief had fled. "The energy signature is... chaotic, yet focused. And there's a residue of something... ancient. Something dark. Our initial team has clearly met with something far beyond their capabilities."

One of the lead Ogres, his face distinct with blood red eyes and his golden armor, grunted, his voice rough. "The rat. It did this."

"The rat has become something else," the mage corrected, his gaze still fixed on the deeper woods. "This wasn't just brute force. There's... magic here. Twisted, visceral magic. And something else... something that fed on their life force." He gestured to the drained bodies. "We are dealing with something far more dangerous than we initially anticipated."

He turned to the Ogres. "The tower masters will need to know of this. Their little pet has become a viper. Spread out. Track any sign, any trace. But be cautious. Whatever did this is powerful, and not something we should recklessly follow."

The Ogres moved with swift obedience, their heavy footfalls barely disturbing the forest floor as they fanned out, their senses alert. The mage remained standing in the center of the clearing, his violet eyes scanning the trees, a thoughtful, almost troubled expression on his face. He could sense the lingering echoes of the dark magic, a faint, tantalizing thread leading deeper into the woods.

The indigo-robed mage stood in the clearing, his violet eyes narrowed in frustration. The magical residue left behind was potent, almost suffocating, yet frustratingly vague. It was spread out over a considerable area, offering no clear direction, no easy path to follow. He frowned, a vein throbbing in his temple. This was becoming far more complicated than a simple retrieval.

As a fourth-stage mage, his sensitivity to magical energies was considerable. The raw power he felt lingering in the air, the echoes of something ancient and dark, sent a prickle of unease down his spine. It was a feeling akin to standing too close to a volatile magical nexus, a sense of barely contained danger that belied the creature's initial classification.

The brief he had received had been infuriatingly inadequate: an escaped rat-man from a low-priority experimental site. A wave of anger washed over him, directed at his oblivious superiors. Whatever reckless experiments they had been conducting had clearly gone catastrophically wrong, unleashing something capable of wielding power that felt... wrong, fundamentally twisted. The sheer audacity of their incompetence was staggering. He clenched his fists, the runes on his fingers flaring momentarily. This wasn't just about retrieving an escaped subject anymore. This was about containing a potential catastrophe that his own Empire had carelessly unleashed.

The scattered Ogres returned to the clearing one by one, their massive forms casting long shadows in the fading light. Each shook their heads, their expressions conveying a mixture of frustration and a hint of relief. They had found nothing. The rat-man, or whatever it had become, had vanished without a trace.

Chapter 525:

The mage wasn't surprised. In fact, a small part of him felt a perverse sense of satisfaction. They were clearly outmatched, unprepared to face whatever had wrought such devastation. Delaying the confrontation was the wisest course of action, at least until reinforcements arrived.

He had already dispatched a message via a scrying stone back to the Obsidian Tower, his urgent report directed to Tower Master Vellok himself. Vellok's arrival was imminent, a force to be reckoned with. But the mage had no intention of waiting around to be subjected to Vellok's directives.

"Let's go back and wait for further orders," he commanded the assembled Ogres, his voice firm and decisive. He didn't meet their gazes, already focusing his mana.

With a swift, intricate gesture, he cast a potent haste spell upon himself. The air around him shimmered, and in the blink of an eye, he took two long strides and vanished in a burst of displaced air.

The Ogres hesitated, their gazes flicking between the spot where the mage had stood and the lifeless forms of their fallen comrades. A moment of silent respect, a warrior's acknowledgment of loss, hung in the air.

Then, a shared resolve hardened their features. With a series of curt nods, they turned and lumbered after their vanished leader, their heavy footsteps echoing through the trees. However, four of the Ogres, their eyes burning with a grim determination, remained behind.

The four Ogres stood in silent contemplation for a long moment, their massive forms radiating a quiet intensity.

"He took two of ours," the largest of the four finally rumbled, his voice a low growl that seemed to vibrate through the forest floor. His hand instinctively clenched around the haft of his massive axe.

"The mage is right," another Ogre, his face bearing a network of old scars, countered, his voice surprisingly level. "This is beyond us. We should follow."

A third Ogre, younger but with a fierce glint in his eyes, shook his head. "They were our brothers. We don't leave them like this. Not for some jumped-up mage and his 'further orders'."

The fourth Ogre, who had remained silent until now, finally spoke, his voice deep and resonant. "Vellok will be here soon. He will decide."

As if summoned by his name, the air in the clearing shimmered violently. A swirling vortex of blue energy tore open the fabric of reality, crackling with raw power. From the heart of this newly formed portal stepped a figure radiating an aura of cold authority. Tower Master Vellok.

His gaze swept across the clearing, taking in the carnage, the drained corpses, and the four Ogres who stood their ground.

"What is the meaning of this delay?" Vellok's voice was a low, menacing growl, laced with impatience. "The mage reported a significant threat. Why are you still here?"

The four Ogres immediately dropped to their massive knees, their heads bowed in a display of absolute deference. The largest of them spoke, his voice a low rumble filled with a mixture of grief and defiance. "Tower Master Vellok," he began, "these fallen are our brothers. We stayed behind, hoping to track down the one responsible... to seek revenge for their deaths."

Vellok's gaze remained fixed on the kneeling Ogres for a long. Then, his attention shifted, drawn by an invisible pull to the residue of the spider-like magic circle etched in blood on the forest floor. His skin tingled as he took in the lingering traces of demonic energy.

The demonic taint did not surprise him. The rat-man's past entanglement with the Spider Demon Queen, Vorenza, was already documented. What concerned Vellok was the clear evidence of mana sensitivity. The swirling patterns in the air, the way the demonic energy clung to the ambient mana – it painted a dangerous picture. A mana-sensitive host meant Vorenza's influence would be amplified, her grip strengthened. Another unpredictable variable the Empire could ill afford, especially now.

This rat-man was not an isolated incident. A disturbing trend was emerging on the battlefields – an increasing number of ratman individuals were developing this sensitivity to mana. The Empire was dealing with it, in its own... efficient way. But this case was different. This rat-man was empowered by a demonic entity.

Reaching out with a focus that surpassed even the fourth-stage mage's capabilities, Vellok extended his senses into the intricate web of mana threads. He sought the unique signature, the lingering resonance of the transformed rat-man. It took a moment, a subtle sifting through the chaotic energies, before he found it – a distinct, erratic strand that pulsed with a volatile mix of mana and demonic power.

Without hesitation, Vellok plunged a sliver of his consciousness into that thread, following its pull. His vision swam, the familiar forest dissolving into a kaleidoscope of colors and sensations before solidifying into a place utterly alien.

The forest clearing vanished, replaced by a nightmarish landscape that made Vellok's skin crawl. It wasn't a forest anymore. It was a twisted, subterranean place, a labyrinth of thorny vines coated in thick, glistening spiderwebs. Holes of varying sizes dotted the walls and floor, any one of them looking like it could spew out a monstrous spider at any moment. The air thrummed with a sickly, organic energy, and the stench of damp earth and something acrid filled his nostrils.

A presence slammed into his mind – vast, ancient, and hostile. It was like being plunged into a freezing darkness filled with skittering things. Vorenza. He had stumbled into her lair.

Intruder! Get out! Her thoughts were a psychic scream, full of rage and possessiveness.

Vellok didn't back down. "The rat-man is mine, demon. Release him" His mental voice was cold and hard.

"Mine! He belongs to me now!" Her psychic grip tightened, trying to crush him.

A brief, brutal mental clash ensued. Vellok, drawing on years of disciplined control, parried her attacks, his will took the form of a fortress against her chaotic power. At the same time sought to pierce through her defenses, to glean the rat-man's location, but Vorenza's presence was overwhelming as this place was her playground.

"You are weak, mage! You cannot comprehend the power that flows through him now!" Her mental laughter was a chilling sound, echoing in the strange, subterranean space.

With a final, violent psychic shove, Vorenza expelled him. The alien landscape dissolved, replaced by the familiar, albeit blood-soaked, clearing in the Emperor's forest. Vellok staggered back as if physically struck, his brow furrowed in a mixture of frustration and a grudging respect for the demon's power.

He could no longer sense the rat-man's thread. It had been severed, pulled back into the abyss from whence it came. The connection was broken. Vellok, for the first time in a long time, did not know where his quarry was.

He turned his gaze to the kneeling Ogres, his expression hardening. Reaching into a pouch at his belt, he produced a heavy, obsidian badge etched with the Imperial sigil and imbued with a potent aura of authority. He tossed it to the largest of the four Ogres.

"You," Vellok's voice was sharp, leaving no room for argument. "This badge grants you the authority to deploy search parties throughout this sector. You can even command mages at the fourth stage if necessary." He paused, his gaze piercing. "Search for the target. Observe, track, but under no circumstances are you to engage. If you locate the rat-man, relay a message back to the Tower immediately. Do you understand?"

The Ogre caught the heavy badge, its weight solid in his massive hand. He nodded once, his eyes filled with grim determination. "Understood, Tower Master."

Without another word, Vellok turned back towards the swirling portal, the dark energy crackling around him. With a final, dismissive glance at the remaining Ogres, he stepped back into the abyss, and the portal snapped shut behind him, leaving the four warriors alone in the silent, blood-soaked clearing.

Far away on the front line.

The air crackled with ozone and the fetid breath of the abyss, a metallic tang followed by the cloying sweetness of otherworldly decay. Below, the battlefield was a jagged sight to twisted rock formations reaching outward at the bruised two coloured sky. From the side of the demons, the path they treaded made on question their reality as the earth is darkened and polluted filled with quickly cancerous flesh growing with each step taken.

Against this backdrop surged a wave of fur and polished brass. The ratmen, driven by the primal imperative to survive another dawn, were clad in surprisingly better advanced steampunk armor. Riveted plates of blackened steel, reinforced with intricate networks of gears and powered by small, hissing steam cylinders, enhanced their natural agility and strength. Many wielded well-crafted rifles with intricate clockwork mechanisms, capable of spitting volleys of lead shot with alarming regularity. Others carried customized melee weapons – swords with integrated spinning blades, or gauntlets that delivered concussive bursts of steam.

Amidst this desperate fray moved Vex "Springheel", a ratman whose modified leg armor allowed for extraordinary bursts of speed and agility. Powered by a complex system of coiled springs and miniature pistons, his movements were a blur of motion. He darted through the chaotic ranks, his custom-built, lever-action rifle barking repeatedly, each shot finding a weak point in the demonic hordes.

Chapter 526:

He didn't aim for glory, but for vital organs, for the quickest path to survival. A hulking shadow demon lunged, its claws tearing through the air, but Springheel was already a step ahead, propelled by a sudden release of steam, leaving the creature grasping at empty space. He vaulted over fallen comrades and mangled demonic limbs, his eyes constantly scanning for the next threat, his movements economical and brutally efficient.

Another standout was Clank "Ironhide", a heavily armored ratman whose suit was a marvel of interlocking plates and pressurized cylinders. While lacking Springheel's speed, his augmented strength was immense. He wielded a massive, steam-powered hammer that could crush stone and shatter bone with equal ease. He moved through the press of bodies like a walking fortress, ignoring glancing blows that would cripple others. When a grotesque, multi-limbed fiend attempted to overwhelm a group of his

brethren, Ironhide roared – a guttural sound amplified by his helmet’s resonators – and swung his hammer in a wide arc. The impact was devastating, the demon’s form momentarily collapsing in on itself before turning into essence that further corroded the lands.

The demonic entities they faced were as varied and terrifying as before. A Gloom Weaver, a creature of living shadow that could manipulate darkness and drain the life force of its victims, moved with an unnerving fluidity. Its attacks were subtle, tendrils of shadow lashing out to ensnare and wither. A Horned Maw, a hulking brute with razor-sharp teeth and thick, chitinous armor, relied on brute force, smashing through the ratmen ranks with terrifying momentum.

Despite their technological advancements, the ratmen remained wary of direct contact with the demons’ essence. They employed specialized gauntlets with containment chambers to handle any necessary demonic remnants from a distance, and those who were exposed to the corrupting energies were quickly and brutally isolated by their own, a grim necessity for the survival of the collective.

The battlefield was a symphony of clunking gears, hissing steam, the sharp crack of ratmen rifles, and the guttural roars of the abyss. Individual ratmen, like Springheel and Ironhide, carved fleeting paths of efficiency through the chaos, their enhanced abilities allowing them moments of dominance in the otherwise overwhelming tide. They were not heroes, but highly specialized survivors, their skills honed by the constant pressure of annihilation.

Amidst this chaos, Krik "Boltthrower" was a whirlwind of lethal efficiency. His custom-built, rapid-fire rifle spat a continuous stream of lead, each shot meticulously aimed at joints, eyes, and other vulnerable points of the demonic anatomy. His movements were fluid and practiced, years of survival in this hellscape honed into instinct. He slid behind shattered rock formations, reloaded with practiced speed, and unleashed another barrage, his face a mask of grim determination.

His current target was a Shadow Skirmisher, a lithe demon that moved with unnerving speed, its shadowy form flickering in and out of visibility. This shadowy form also hides the demon real body making it seem incorporeal.

It relied on swift strikes and disorienting movements, its claws leaving trails of chilling darkness where they passed. Boltthrower had been tracking it for several minutes, his augmented vision compensating for the demon’s trickery. He anticipated its movements, the subtle shifts in the distorted air betraying its position.

The Shadow Skirmisher lunged, its claws extended, but Boltthrower was already in motion, propelled by a burst of steam from his leg augmentations. He sidestepped the attack and fired a concentrated burst at the demon's shimmering form. The impact caused the creature to shriek, its shadowy substance momentarily solidifying as the lead rounds tore through it.

Enraged, the Shadow Skirmisher retaliated with a flurry of rapid strikes. Boltthrower parried some with his reinforced rifle stock, the impact jarring his arms. He knew he couldn't sustain a prolonged melee. He needed distance. With another burst of steam, he propelled himself backwards, creating space to bring his rifle to bear again.

As the battle intensified, a strange sensation began to creep into Boltthrower's awareness. It started subtly, a faint tingling at the edges of his senses, like static electricity in the air. But as the Shadow Skirmisher pressed its attack, its shadowy form swirling with greater intensity, the feeling grew stronger. It wasn't a sound, or a smell, or anything he had ever experienced in the mechanical world of gears and steam.

It felt... like a pull. A subtle pressure against his very being. He noticed the air around the demon seemed to shimmer in a way that wasn't just visual distortion. There was an underlying thrum, a vibration that resonated deep within him, bypassing his ears.

He dodged another swipe of the Shadow Skirmisher's claws, his mind momentarily distracted by this bizarre phenomenon. He stumbled slightly, a rare misstep in his usually flawless movements. The demon pressed its advantage, its shadowy claws raking across his armored shoulder, sending sparks flying.

Pain shot through Boltthrower's arm, but his focus was now partly consumed by this alien sensation. It was as if the demon wasn't just a physical threat, but a conduit for something else entirely. He could almost... sense it. A raw, chaotic energy emanating from it, a swirling vortex of... something he couldn't name.

He fired another volley, hitting the Shadow Skirmisher again, but the demon seemed less affected now, its form flickering more erratically. The strange energy around it seemed to intensify, almost as if it were drawing strength from this unseen source.

Boltthrower felt a growing unease. There was something else at play, something beyond the realm of gears and gunpowder. He had never experienced anything like it, this strange, pervasive energy that seemed to cling to the demon, to the very air around them.

Boltthrower, fueled by a desperate surge of adrenaline, roared a guttural challenge. He knew he couldn't afford to be distracted by the unsettling sensation. The Shadow Skirmisher was upon him again, its shadowy claws aimed for his throat. Reacting purely on instinct and honed skill, Boltthrower twisted his body, narrowly avoiding the lethal strike. He brought the butt of his rifle down hard on the demon's arm, a sickening crack sounded out.

The Shadow Skirmisher shrieked, its shadowy form flickering erratically. Boltthrower pressed his advantage. He unleashed a point-blank volley from his rifle, the concentrated burst tearing through the demon's substance. The creature recoiled, its form dissolving at the edges. Boltthrower didn't relent, firing again and again until the Shadow Skirmisher finally fell, its real body appearing.

He stood panting, his chest heaving, the metallic tang of blood filling his mouth from a gash on his cheek. His shoulder throbbed, and his armor was scored and dented, but he had survived. He had won.

As the adrenaline began to recede, the strange sensation returned, stronger now that the immediate threat was gone. It wasn't tied to the Shadow Skirmisher. It was still there, that faint pressure, that subtle vibration in the air, the almost imperceptible hum that seemed to emanate from the very fabric of this surrounding world.

He looked around, his augmented vision scanning the chaotic battlefield. Other demons writhed and lunged, their forms shifting and grotesque, and he could sense it around them too, this... presence. It wasn't uniform, some seemed to pulse with it more intensely than others, but it was undeniably there.

He focused on a hulking, armored demon locked in combat with another group of ratmen. The air around it shimmered not just with heat distortion, but with this same subtle energy. It felt... raw, untamed, chaotic.

He even focused on the mangled remains of the Shadow Skirmisher. There was only its body left that was soon melting into pool of flesh eroding the land. He could now sense a faint echo of that strange energy, in the pool of flesh and the land was further eroded.

Boltthrower lowered his rifle, a profound unease settling in his gut. His initial thought had been that the sensation was a by product of this particular demon, some strange aura or effect it projected. But now, with the creature vanquished, the feeling persisted, seemingly woven into the very fabric of this world.

He touched his temple, his brow furrowed in confusion. What was this? What was he sensing? It was beyond the realm of steam and gears, beyond the physics he understood. At the same time, he felt like this energy has always been here, he just now was noticing it's existence.

A chilling wave of fear and memory pierced through his confusion. He remembered the whispers, the hushed and fearful tones surrounding the "afflicted" among his kin. Other ratmen, their eyes glazed with an unsettling light, muttering about unseen energy, their grasp on reality seemingly unraveling.

The mages of the Empire, with their pronouncements delivered in lofty tone, had declared that it was the inevitability of being near the demons, a corruption that twisted minds and shattered perceptions after prolonged exposure to their malevolent influence. There was no cure, they'd decreed, only the swift, brutal mercy of the blade to prevent further contamination.

Chapter 527:

Boltthrower vividly recalled the sting of pity he'd felt then, witnessing his brethren descend into what he'd believed to be madness. He'd stood amongst the crowd, a knot of fear tightening his gut, as the afflicted were dragged away, their desperate pleas echoing in the cavernous halls. Now, a horrifying realization dawned within him: he was experiencing that same unsettling shift. Was he, too, succumbing to the dreaded "demon-taint"?

But a fierce, instinctive denial clawed its way through his despair. This wasn't madness. The energy he sensed felt undeniably real, a tangible presence vibrating in the very air. And then, a horrifying confirmation. He saw it coalesce, a swirling vortex of the same strange energy gathering at the maw of a hulking daemon. A guttural roar ripped through the air, and a searing torrent of fire erupted, washing over the ranks of nearby ratmen. Their armor, forged in the heat of the forges, buckled and melted like tallow in the inferno.

Boltthrower recoiled, the stench of burning flesh and superheated metal stinging his nostrils. This was no delusion. This raw, destructive power, this energy he now perceived, was real and is a weapon wielded with terrifying efficacy. Was this truly the psychosis the mages spoke of?

A grim understanding settled upon Boltthrower. The fate of those who had spoken of such things was a stark lesson etched in his memory. Silence, a cloak of normalcy, was now his only shield. The mages, cloistered in their arcane towers, remained blissfully unaware of this creeping "taint," this subtle shift in perception, until some desperate soul, driven by fear and a naive hope for salvation, foolishly confessed

their experience. Their pleas, Boltthrower recalled with a shiver, had been met not with understanding, but with swift and brutal termination.

Under the cloak of night, as the relentless tide of daemons continued their advance, Boltthrower deliberately lagged behind the main body of the retreating ratmen army. This ebb and flow was a grimly efficient tactic, a silent acknowledgment of their limitations. Unlike the daemons, fueled by some unholy and inexhaustible power, the skaven knew fatigue. As one wave of their warriors, bloodied and weary, fell back, a fresh horde surged forward, their numbers seemingly endless, many bearing strange, newly devised contraptions designed to exploit the darkness.

The trek back to the relative safety of the fortified camp felt like an eternity, each step heavy with the weight of his secret. Finally, the rough-hewn walls loomed into view. But instead of relief, a fresh wave of chilling horror washed over Boltthrower. Standing guard atop the ramparts, their silhouettes stark against the flickering torchlight, were the mages. And surrounding each of them, swirling like an invisible aura, was the same energy he now perceived. Yet, unlike the raw, chaotic emanations that clung to the daemons, the energy around the mages felt structured, disciplined, almost... cultivated.

A profound unease settled deep within Boltthrower's gut. "What secret was the Empire hiding?" The unspoken question hung heavy in the night air. He now saw the truth that had been invisible before. This energy was not alien to his people; it was a constant presence, woven into the fabric of their world. But they remained untouched, oblivious, their bodies somehow rejecting or ignoring its subtle influence. He, however, was different. His very being now resonated with this strange power, divergence from his kin. The implications were staggering, hinting at a hidden layer of reality, a secret the Empire guarded jealously, and his place within it was now terrifyingly uncertain.

Finding a secluded spot, Boltthrower settled down to await his meager meal, his thoughts turning inward, focusing on the strange lot of his people.

Despite the undeniable coercion, a sliver of gratitude flickered within the ratmen. They were, at least, permitted to wage this brutal war on their own terms.

This necessity, this constant pressure to survive, had become a potent catalyst, forging a rapid advancement in their peculiar arts of war. Their crude yet effective technology was a testament to this desperate ingenuity.

The true nature of their enemy was now brutally clear: an inexhaustible, overwhelming force. An unspoken consensus had formed – outright victory was an illusion. Survival, by any means necessary, had become the new, grim objective.

The very ground beneath their feet was a shifting battlefield. The corrupting essence of the daemons seeped into the land with each of their foul deaths, solidifying their claim.

Viewed from above, the grand strategy of this agonizing war painted a stark picture: the ratmen steadily yielding ground, while the demonic tide relentlessly pushed forward.

This grim realization had once sparked a daring, almost suicidal notion among the ratmen: to cede more territory to the daemons, hoping to finally provoke the distant Empire into decisive action.

But this audacious strategy survived only a few fleeting days before the keen eyes of the Empire's goblin mages discerned the pattern. Swift and brutal countermeasures were enacted, crushing this nascent rebellion of despair.

Now, even as the demonic legions pressed relentlessly forward, the ratmen were forced to hold their ground, each inch of territory fiercely contested under the threat of the Empire's iron fist. Their choice was no longer victory or defeat, but a grim dance with inevitable death.

Occasionally, when the demonic tide threatened to overwhelm their lines, the Empire would reluctantly unleash its power: mages wielding arcane energies and hulking ogres smashing through the demonic ranks, creating temporary breaches. But the abyss responded in kind, sending forth more formidable horrors that could match the mages and ogres, sometimes even overwhelming them completely.

These interventions, so few and far between, only solidified the ratmen's bleak understanding of their fate. The Empire would not squander its precious resources, its elite forces, unless absolutely necessary. They were nothing more than expendable pawns.

A bowl of bland mush paste was thrust into Boltthrower's grasp. This was their sustenance, a meager portion that, strangely, seemed to stave off hunger for an entire day.

Lifting his crude spoon, Boltthrower prepared to eat. As he scooped up a mouthful, he noticed it – the same faint energy he now perceived permeating the very paste. A moment of hesitation flickered within him before he swallowed, the familiar taste a stark reminder of countless past meals.

Soon, the bowl was empty, scraped clean with ingrained habit. To his surprise, a gnawing emptiness remained. Boltthrower glanced around surreptitiously, noticing that he seemed to be the only one left wanting more.

At the same moment, a peculiar tingling sensation drew his attention to the wounds he had sustained in battle. Focusing on a deep gash along his forearm, Boltthrower's eyes widened in disbelief. The edges of the wound were drawing closer, a slow but undeniable process of healing.

He could feel the same subtle pull at his other injuries, a faint tingling that spoke of accelerated healing. Yet, a horrifying correlation emerged: the stronger the tingling, the more voracious his hunger became, his very being craving to absorb the ambient energy.

Boltthrower risked a furtive glance towards the mages in the distance, every fiber of his being straining to suppress this newfound, primal instinct. His nascent sensitivity to this energy revealed a stark truth: he was a novice. The Empire, through its mages, had clearly been interacting with this force for far longer. If this insatiable hunger and energy absorption were a common occurrence, any unusual fluctuations would be immediately apparent.

Rising from his spot, Boltthrower moved towards the distribution point for the mush paste. He dared to approach only because it was his own kind who served this meager fare. The goblins and ogres of the Empire considered such menial tasks beneath their station, leaving it to the skaven.

Boltthrower approached the skaven server, a wiry ratman with perpetually twitching whiskers and nervous darting eyes. The server ladled out the paste with a grudging efficiency, barely making eye contact.

"More," Boltthrower rasped, his voice low and urgent, glancing around to ensure no overseers were nearby.

The server's ears twitched. "More? You had your ration."

"Still hungry," Boltthrower insisted, his gaze fixed on the vat of greyish paste. "Battle takes much energy." He subtly gestured to his bandaged arm.

The server hesitated, his gaze flicking nervously towards the periphery. "The quotas... the overseers..."

"Just a little more," Boltthrower pressed, a hint of desperation creeping into his tone. "No one will notice." He reached a clawed hand towards a smaller, discarded bowl hidden beneath a stack of empty platters. "Just enough to... settle my stomach."

The server, a flicker of understanding or perhaps just fear in his eyes, quickly spooned a small amount of the paste into the hidden bowl. "Eat fast. And be gone."

Boltthrower snatched the bowl, offering a curt nod of thanks before retreating to a more secluded corner, his senses on high alert for any sign of unwanted attention. The extra portion was small, but even as he consumed it, the gnawing hunger persisted, a terrifying testament to his changing nature.

The urge to return, to brazenly demand more of the unsatisfying paste, gnawed at Boltthrower. Yet, the ingrained instinct for self-preservation, amplified by his newfound awareness, held him back.

Chapter 528:

He huddled in the shadows, trying to appear inconspicuous. Just as his hunger began to feel unbearable, another ratman approached. His movements were deliberately casual, as if he were simply passing by, yet he subtly placed a larger bowl, brimming with the greyish paste, directly in front of Boltthrower.

Boltthrower stared at the unexpected bounty, then at the ratman who offered it. Confusion warred with a surge of desperate gratitude. He hesitated, unsure how to react, his mind racing. Then, almost involuntarily, his enhanced senses reached out, probing the energy that clung to this fellow ratman. It was... normal. It mirrored the passive interaction he had observed in others of their kind.

The ratman leaned closer, his whiskers twitching slightly, and whispered, his voice barely audible above the din of the camp, "You shouldn't do that."

Boltthrower's heart hammered against his ribs. "Do what?" he managed, his voice a low croak.

"You can see it, can't you?" the ratman replied, his own eyes, surprisingly steady, meeting Boltthrower's.

Boltthrower's eyes widened further, a dawning comprehension mixing with a fresh wave of apprehension. He remained silent, his mind reeling.

The ratman continued, a hint of grim amusement in his tone, "You are lucky those pompous goblins have their noses so high in the air they haven't bothered to conceal how they react with... mana." He used the unfamiliar word with a subtle emphasis, as if it held a deeper significance.

"Otherwise," the ratman continued, his voice a low murmur, "your... probing... would have had you caught instantly. You can't perceive how it interacts with me because I consciously refuse to engage with it, a necessary measure to keep us hidden. You must have been the one casting those quick, curious glances at everyone."

The word "everybody" sent a tremor of fear through Boltthrower's small frame. He had believed himself to be a shadow, unnoticed in the teeming masses of ratmen. To realize he had been so transparent, so easily observed, was a chilling revelation. He had been a beacon, not a shadow.

A wave of self-reproach washed over him. Where had his arrogance stemmed from? Of course, he wouldn't be the only one experiencing this strange awakening. And naturally, others would have learned the vital lesson of concealment, the same lesson he had tried to follow, to avoid the dreaded label of "tainted" and the swift, lethal judgment of the Empire's mages.

Swallowing hard, Boltthrower finally found his voice, a hushed whisper, "How... how long?"

The other ratman gave a small, knowing smile. "Long enough. Long enough to see many like you... disappear." A shadow flickered across his face as he spoke the last word. "The Empire is blind, in its own way. They see only the obvious, the blatant displays of... this." He subtly gestured with his head, encompassing the unseen energy. "Those of us who learn to control it, to mask it... we survive."

Boltthrower's mind raced. Control? Mask it? The implications were staggering. He had only just become aware of this energy, a raw, overwhelming sensation. The idea of manipulating it, of hiding it, seemed impossible. "But... how?" he stammered. "I... I only just noticed it."

"The hunger... the healing..." the other ratman murmured, his gaze understanding. "It starts that way. A change. A... quickening. You are new, yes. But you are not alone." He glanced around again, his movements swift and cautious. "There isn't time now. But stay aware. Watch. Listen. There are others. We know each other. We have ways..." He trailed off, his eyes flicking towards a group of passing goblin overseers. "Be silent now. Act normal." He gave Boltthrower a final, significant look before melting back into the throng of ratmen, leaving Boltthrower clutching the bowl of paste, his mind buzzing with a mixture of fear and a fragile spark of hope. He wasn't alone. And perhaps... perhaps survival was possible after all.

Without hesitation, Boltthrower devoured the bowl of paste. A satisfying fullness finally settled in his stomach, the persistent gnawing receding. He could feel the subtle thrum of accelerated healing throughout his body, and his mind felt strangely sharp, the fog of confusion lifting. Heeding the whispered advice, he began the arduous process of consciously denying access to the pervasive energy. It was a struggle, like trying to hold back a powerful tide, but slowly, painstakingly, he gained a measure of control, his energetic signature receding until he felt... normal, like the other ratmen around him.

Just as a semblance of calm returned, a piercing ringing bell shattered the night air, echoing across the sprawling camp. A booming voice followed, amplified by some unseen contraption, "Gather and stand in line!"

Boltthrower's head snapped up, his gaze scanning the inky sky. This was not the usual muster call. Had the demonic onslaught overwhelmed the current fighting force so quickly that a further retreat was necessary? A knot of unease tightened in his gut.

Nevertheless, he rose and moved out into the open, his eyes scanning the faces of the other ratmen as he walked. A silent question lingered in his mind: who else among them carried the same secret? He found his place in the rapidly forming lines, the press of bodies familiar and yet now viewed through a different lens.

Then, a low, resonant hum began to emanate from the large circular platform at the center of the camp. A familiar vibration resonated through Boltthrower's very bones. He recognized this hum. It was the sound that had brought him and countless others to this bloody battlefield. A grim certainty settled upon him: the Empire was preparing to deploy more of them.

The resonant hum of the massive circular platform abruptly ceased, replaced by a swirling vortex of energy as a colossal portal tore open in the air above. The assembled ratmen craned their necks, their

eyes wide with anticipation and apprehension, wondering what horrors or reinforcements would emerge from the shimmering gateway.

Instead of troops, a series of large, metallic containers floated silently out of the portal, numbering in the dozens. They hung suspended in the air for a moment before gently descending to the ground. With a final flicker, the portal winked out of existence.

A mage, levitating imperiously above the platform, addressed the assembled ranks. "The Emperor and the Empire have observed and acknowledge your... efforts in this ongoing conflict. Within these containers lies a gift from the Emperor himself." His tone dripped with condescension, barely concealed beneath a veneer of official pronouncements. "An improved iteration of the protective gear you currently utilize. Designed for enhanced resilience and safety as you continue to serve the Emperor and your... people." With a dismissive flick of his wrist and a disdainful gaze that swept across the assembled ratmen, the mage turned and glided away.

Then, the hulking forms of Ogre knights began to emerge from the surrounding shadows, their massive frames forming a silent, intimidating cordon around the containers. They stood in rigid lines, their immense weapons held loosely but menacingly. No words were spoken, but the unspoken command was palpable: order would be maintained.

With a series of loud metallic clangs, the containers began to automatically open, revealing their contents. Clearly marked, some held stacks of newly forged armor, while others contained an array of weapons. The unspoken procedure was evident: select a suit of armor, then choose a weapon, and move swiftly away to allow others their turn. The ratmen shuffled forward, a silent mass driven by the ingrained obedience of cannon fodder.

Boltthrower's turn arrived. He reached out, his clawed fingers brushing against a piece of the new armor. It felt strangely weightless in his grasp, yet a faint, almost imperceptible thrumming resonated beneath his touch – the energy, the "mana," he was beginning to recognize.

Wasting no time, he moved to the weapon cache and selected a crude but familiar-feeling weapon, similar to the one he had carried into countless battles. Finding a relatively secluded corner, he quickly divested himself of his old, battle-worn armor, the metal scarred and dented from countless encounters.

He examined the new armor with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Would it even fit his particular build? Hesitantly, he began to put it on. To his astonishment, the plates seemed to shift and mold themselves to his body, adjusting to his size and height with an almost fluid grace.

There were no instructions, no explanations offered by the disdainful mages. The workings of this new equipment were left for the ratmen themselves to decipher.

A hush fell over the camp as the ratmen began to tinker with their new acquisitions. To their collective surprise, the armor felt strangely familiar, almost as if it had been conceived and built by one of their own kind. It adhered to the same principles, the same intuitive understanding of interlocking plates and pressure points that guided their own crude but effective steampunk contraptions. A flicker of something akin to understanding, a shared sense of ingenuity, rippled through the silent ranks.

Far from the chaotic din of the battlefield, within the oppressive stillness of a vast, darkened chamber, a robed figure broke the silence, a taut undercurrent detectable beneath the seemingly neutral tone. "Begin."

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The gloom receded, revealing a small, intricate tech cube suspended in the air. It began to rotate slowly, gradually increasing its speed until its form blurred into a shimmering vortex of motion, thrumming with an unseen energy.

A synthesized voice emanated from the rapidly spinning cube. "Connection established."

The robed figure inhaled deeply, the fabric of their garment rustling softly in the stillness. "Make contact."

Across the planet, a subtle shift began to unfold. Boltthrower's camp was not an isolated recipient of the "Emperor's gift." Numerous other ratmen encampments, scattered across various battlefields and hidden strongholds, had also received the mysterious containers. The instant the order to "make contact" was given, a silent, invisible wave began to spread.

Deep in slumber, shielded by his new armor, Boltthrower felt a faint, fleeting tingle, like an errant itch. He scratched at the spot absently, dismissing it as a minor irritation before drifting back into unconsciousness.

Across the sprawling network of ratmen camps, every skaven clad in the Emperor's "gift" experienced the same subtle prickle, an almost imperceptible itch that was readily ignored in their exhaustion. Unbeknownst to them, this sensation was the work of minuscule needles embedded within the armor's lining, silently drawing minute samples of their blood.

Inside the armor's intricate framework, a newly activated mechanism analyzed the collected blood. It searched for a specific biological marker, a unique substance that, once identified, would transmit its signature back to the orbiting cube.

In the darkened chamber, the robed figure watched intently as a holographic projection materialized from the humming cube. A vast network of red lights bloomed across the display. A slow, satisfied smile spread across the figure's hidden face. "Finally," they murmured, their voice laced with a chilling triumph. "Found you all."

Simultaneously, the robed figure issued another command, their voice carrying a note of cold precision. "Administer dosage to the marked targets."

This order was executed with immediate effect. However, this time, the subtle intrusion was not uniform. While the majority of the ratmen wearing the new armor earlier had experienced the ignorable itch, those designated as "marked targets" were subjected to a different, far more debilitating sensation. A familiar prickle returned, but this time, it was swiftly followed by a terrifying paralysis. Their muscles locked, their bodies rendered completely immobile.

Their minds jolted awake, trapped within their frozen shells. Panic flared as they realized their utter helplessness, unable to scream, unable to twitch a single whisker. Boltthrower, still lying in his makeshift bed within the bustling camp, was one of these marked targets, his consciousness a frantic prisoner in his body.

A voice, smooth and calming as a subterranean stream, echoed directly within the minds of the paralyzed ratmen. The unexpected intrusion, though unsettling, possessed a soothing quality that managed to quell some of the raw panic seizing their thoughts.

"My brethren," the voice resonated, devoid of any harshness, "I sincerely apologize for this... unorthodox method of introduction. This marks our first true contact, and I hold the fervent hope that it will not be our last."

A profound revelation followed, one that sent a fresh wave of disquiet rippling through the captive minds. "Many of our kind are unable to perceive this message, as you now do. This is because they have not yet undergone their awakening. They have not yet sensed and interacted with the mana that permeates our surroundings." The confirmation of their long-held secret, the very ability that set them apart and necessitated their careful concealment for survival, now broadcast into their minds, ignited a surge of fear and vulnerability. Had their hidden truth been exposed?

The voice, seemingly attuned to their mental turmoil, interjected with reassuring tones. "You have no reason to fear for your lives. I assure you, I am not affiliated with the Empire and their fear-mongering propaganda of 'Demonic taint'." The disavowal, though direct, hung in the silent spaces of their minds, leaving a residue of uncertainty. Could they truly trust this disembodied voice that had so invasively breached their thoughts?

"I understand that my words alone may not be enough to quell the apprehension that now grips you. I wish I could reveal my identity to further ease your minds, but alas, circumstances prevent me from doing so at this juncture. I can only implore you to trust that my intentions align with your own survival."

The voice continued, its tone earnest. "This armor you now wear, these weapons you now wield – they were not conceived in the Emperor's forges. They came from my hands. Their delivery under the guise of an imperial gift was a necessary deception, a means to introduce them without suspicion, bolstering the Emperor's image while secretly providing you with the means to endure this brutal conflict."

A ting of sorrow entered the voice. "Too many of our kin, both the seasoned and the innocent, have perished in this senseless war, a war we should never have been forced to fight. Though I am not present on the battlefield and cannot stand alongside you in the fray, believe me when I say that I see it all. I understand the relentless pressure, the constant losses."

"The mana you now sense, the awakening you have experienced, it is not a curse, not a taint. It is a part of us, a latent potential that the Empire, in its ignorance and fear, seeks to suppress or exploit. This armor, it is designed to help you harness this potential, to protect you in ways their crude steel never could. The connection you feel now, the paralysis – it is temporary. It is the means by which I can speak to you directly, bypassing the ears of those who would silence us."

A pause hung in the mental air, allowing the weight of the words to settle. "Soon, this paralysis will pass. When it does, you will have a choice. You can continue to hide your awakening, to live in fear of discovery. Or... you can choose to understand more, to learn how to wield this gift, to perhaps even change the course of this devastating war."

"I will reach out again. Be ready to listen. Be ready to question everything you have been told." The soothing voice began to fade, the mental connection slowly dissolving, leaving Boltthrower and the other marked ratmen trapped in their immobile bodies, their minds now a whirlwind of confusion, fear, and a nascent flicker of hope.

In the secluded sanctuary, the robed figure approached the now quiescent cube and gently placed a hand upon its smooth surface. "Please, Guardian," they murmured, their voice imbued with a quiet reverence.

A surge of power emanated from the figure, flowing into the cube. The connection established, the so-called Guardian processed the data regarding the marked targets, presenting an overview within its intricate matrix. To the Guardian's perception, many of these individuals were now touched by an inner spark, a nascent flame flickering within their being.

This inner flame spoke of a potential they themselves were yet unaware of. In some, this spark was faint, barely discernible. These individuals were noted by the Guardian before the connection with the cube was severed.

A silent message passed from the Guardian to the figure, who now sighed softly as they reached up and slowly lowered the hood that had concealed their features.

The figure was indeed a goblin in appearance, its old but youthful features known to many as "Nixbolt," a seemingly unremarkable member of the Empire's underlings. But beneath the illusion, a different truth resided. This was Rattan, a ratman who had infiltrated the ranks of his enemies, a shadow walking in plain sight.

The message from the weakened Guardian struck Rattan like a physical blow, a fleeting spasm of pain contorting his features as he clenched his fist. The moment he had anticipated, the moment of decisive action, was upon him, yet a tremor of hesitation ran through him. He fought it down, taking a deep, steadying breath before issuing his command to the silent cube. "Administer countermeasures."

Across the battlefield camps, among the ratmen who had received the enigmatic message, a hidden undercurrent of thought stirred within some. A familiar itch resurfaced on their slowly awakening bodies, but this time, a terrifying anomaly accompanied it: their mouths refused to obey their

commands. Other limbs remained responsive, but their vocal cords were inexplicably paralyzed, trapping their burgeoning thoughts within.

Rattan's trust in the Guardian was absolute. It had never steered him wrong, its subtle power allowing him to discern the treacherous intentions of those who would betray him for their own gain. This contingency, the "countermeasure," had been carefully considered. Today, it would silence their voices. Tomorrow, as they faced the horrors of the battlefield, their entire bodies would succumb, ensuring their silence became permanent.

Phantom, the "Guardian," looked rough. His body was now in a smoke like state, with big chunks of him just gone. It was clear he'd been through a lot. But oddly, his eyes sparkled with excitement. He knew the big price he'd paid was about to pay off.

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Phantom's messed-up state happened because of the special collection of weapons, the armory, that was sent out. Rattan has been working on these weapons for years. The last five years has been full of tricky politics and secret plans, and Rattan was right in the middle of it.

Everyone important was watching Rattan. With years passing by, it was hard for them to hide their distaste for Rattan's plan to help the Ratmen so there was no way they would have let the weapons he crafted get to the ratmen, especially with all the secret tricks Rattan had built into them.

This is where Phantom, whose very essence was cursed with the ironically revealing moniker "Spotlight Phantom," proved invaluable. His unparalleled ability to remain hidden, to vanish into the periphery, was his greatest asset. To ensure Rattan's grand design came to fruition, Phantom had unhesitatingly offered himself, sacrificing portions of his own being.

These fragments were then woven into the armor and weapons' hidden mechanisms. This was how Rattan managed to get his products approved despite the intense surveillance. No one suspected the true power hidden within.

Even now, Phantom was feeling the rewards of his sacrifice. Golden threads, shimmering with energy, were already lacing through the empty spaces into his smoky body, slowly but surely healing him.

Phantom eagerly awaited the full benefits once the ratmen charged into battle. He envisioned countless ambitions igniting and more performers for the stage he has planned for Rattan.

Rattan's fingers brushed the shimmering surface of the crystalline cube, and with a faint hum, it seemed to melt into his touch, shrinking until it was no larger than a pebble. He slipped the now miniature object into a hidden pocket within the folds of his dark, unassuming robe. Outside, the muffled murmurs of a waiting crowd hinted at the anticipation building for his appearance, for the words and confirmation only he could provide.

In a swift, almost imperceptible motion, the plain robe he wore dissolved, replaced by the rich, embroidered fabrics of a master mage's vestments. It was a transformation Rattan had perfected over years, a seamless shift into the persona expected of him. A faint, almost unconscious smile touched his lips—a familiar expression he'd adopted, a mask of calm confidence that settled comfortably upon his features.

He laid a hand on the cool, polished wood of the door, pushing it open to reveal a long, torch-lit corridor. His footsteps echoed softly as he walked, the silence of the hallway a stark contrast to the lively sounds that drew him onward. He paused at another door, from behind which spilled the unmistakable sounds of laughter and playful teasing. A genuine warmth spread across Rattan's face, his practiced smile giving way to an honest one.

Pushing open the door, he stepped into the room, his eyes twinkling. "What's the joke I'm missing out on?" he asked, his voice light.

"Nixbolt!" A chorus of voices, rich with the tones of young adulthood, erupted, a mix of genuine surprise and delighted recognition. The room, a comfortable space filled with well-worn textbooks, glowing magical apparatus, and empty teacups, was indeed bustling with imperial goblin mages. Their expressions, ranging from studious concentration to lively debate, instantly brightened at his presence.

A particularly lanky goblin, with spectacles perched on his nose and ink smudged on his cheek, grinned. "Just trying to decipher the true meaning of 'mana depletion,'" he quipped, a twinkle in his eye. A smaller, energetic female goblin with bright green eyes and a braid woven with silver charms elbowed him playfully. "He means he tried to turn my tea into a newt again, and failed spectacularly!" she announced, to a fresh burst of laughter.

Rattan chuckled, stepping further into the room. This was it—the heart of his quiet rebellion, the vibrant proof of years spent cultivating loyalty and ambition among the empire's brightest, yet often

overlooked, minds. These were not just students; they were his burgeoning army of change, each one a testament to his vision. He moved among them, his gaze sweeping over their eager faces, a sense of deep satisfaction settling in his chest.

"Well, now," he said, his voice warm and resonant, "I'd say a newt in a teacup sounds like a fascinating magical experiment. Perhaps we can refine the spell later." He paused, his smile becoming a little more serious, a hint of the weight he carried returning to his eyes. "But for now, I have news that might be even more interesting than transforming beverages." He glanced around the room, making eye contact with each of them. "It's time we talked about our next steps."

Rattan found a spot on the edge of a sturdy, enchanted workbench, perching himself amidst bubbling beakers and discarded scrolls. The playful atmosphere in the room had vanished, replaced by an immediate, almost palpable shift to serious, focused attention as his gaze met theirs. The young mages, who moments ago had been jesting about transfiguration failures, now leaned forward, their expressions etched with a shared concern.

"The ratmen," Rattan began, his voice dropping to a low, grave tone that commanded absolute silence, "have finally gotten their hands on the project we've been cultivating these past years." A ripple of controlled excited emotions went through the room, murmurs of "Finally!" and sharp intakes of breath. He let the news sink in, letting their reactions fuel the fire he was about to stoke.

He pushed off the workbench, his form now radiating a quiet intensity. "We've been scorned for our ambitions and dismissed for our 'pitiful' goals," he continued, his voice gaining a hard edge. "But tomorrow, that changes. Tomorrow is the time we show everyone, from the lowliest street vendor to the highest-seated Archons, that we are not to be underestimated." He swept his gaze across each face, seeing the flickering embers of their own suppressed frustrations and hopes. "It's time to light the fire of ambition under our fellow mages, those whose flames have been cruelly suppressed under the crushing weight of this empire."

Rattan's gaze, sharp and strong, swept across the faces of the mages. He didn't need to ask for their attention; he already had it. "How many of you," he continued, his voice dropping to a low, challenging whisper, "are willing to leave this room under the cloak of the night sky, to head into the battlefield, and wait for tomorrow's first light?"

A tense silence filled the space, broken only by the faint hum of a nearby arcane device. Each mage met his gaze, their expressions a mixture of apprehension and unwavering resolve. They understood the unspoken weight of his words: this wasn't merely a tactical maneuver, but a profound commitment, a step into the unknown.

"Tomorrow," Rattan articulated, his voice gaining a steely edge, "those ratmen, whom the empire carelessly throws against the abyss demons, will finally be equipped. They'll make use of the very armor and weapons we have built — weaponry designed not for internal conflict, but to turn the tide against the demonic invasion itself."

He paused, letting the full gravity of his declaration settle. "Through your hands, through your amplified magic, the images of what is happening will be transmitted throughout every corner of the empire. The common folk, safe in their homes, will witness firsthand the horrors of the invasion in their own backyards. And they will see, with undeniable clarity, the ones who have truly been fighting to keep them safe, the ones the empire cast aside." He paused, a grim satisfaction playing on his lips. "This is not just a battle; it's a broadcast. A declaration that the age of the suppressed is over, and we are the ones who truly protect."

A wave of murmurs swept through the room as Rattan's challenging words hung in the air. A few of the mages, their eyes burning with defiance, immediately straightened, a silent nod of unwavering commitment passing between them and Rattan. Among them was the lanky goblin from before, his hand instinctively gripping a staff propped beside him, and the energetic female mage, her gaze sharp and resolute.

But others shifted uneasily, their initial resolve faltering under the weight of his declaration. "Nixbolt," one goblin mage, his usually confident posture now slightly hunched, spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "The empire... they'll know it's us. They'll know we intervened. The reprisals... they could be catastrophic."

Another, a stocky goblin with scars crisscrossing his forehead, added, "What if the broadcast fails? What if the empire interferes with higher level mages, and our work will be for nothing? The empire's wrath... it's well-known for being indiscriminate." A few more heads nodded in agreement, the fear of imperial retribution a cold, undeniable presence in the room.

Rattan let their fears linger for a moment, his expression unreadable. He had anticipated this. It was the natural response of those who had lived under the empire's shadow for so long. "And what," he finally asked, his voice cutting through the apprehension, "is the alternative? To continue to watch as the abyss consumes all, while the empire idly lets our people perish? To remain unseen, unheard, and ultimately, powerless?" He swept his gaze around the room, making eye contact with every single mage, challenging their fear with his conviction. "Tell me, my friends, is that truly a future you are willing to embrace?"