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"To be clear," Rattan continued, his voice softening slightly, though his resolve remained iron-clad, "this is not an act of blind defiance. This is a strategic necessity. The empire has proven, time and again, their unwillingness to protect their own, to truly equip those on the front lines. They sacrifice the ratmen, and in doing so, they endanger us all. The Abyss cares nothing for their petty politics or their hierarchical arrogance. It simply consumes."

He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper, yet carrying immense weight. "When the citizens of the empire witness the true scale of the demonic threat, not through sanitized reports, but through the raw, unfiltered images of battle, and see it being fought by those they've been taught to scorn, their perception will shift. And when they see the Abyss pushed back, not by the empire's might, but by the very mages they've suppressed... that, my friends, is when true change begins."

He paused, allowing his words to settle. "The risk is immense, yes. But the alternative is far graver: a slow, agonizing slide into oblivion, ruled by an indifferent empire, and consumed by an ever-advancing darkness. Which future do you choose?"

Rattan let his words hang in the air, the weight of their implications pressing down on every mage in the room. He could see the calculations in their eyes, the rapid weighing of risk against reward, fear against conviction. The silence stretched, thick with unspoken questions and burgeoning resolves.

Finally, a goblin with intricate magical tattoos swirling around his arms, known for his meticulous spell-crafting, stepped forward. His voice was steady, though a tremor of raw emotion underscored it. "Arch-Mage, I've seen what the Abyss does to the borderlands. My family... they're still there. If this gamble offers even a chance to push back that tide, to show the empire what true defense looks like, then I'm in. We can't sit by and watch them fall."

Nods of agreement rippled through a significant portion of the room. The lanky mage with spectacles adjusted them on his nose, a determined glint in his eye. "The empire takes our research, suppresses our findings, and squanders our potential," he stated, his voice ringing with newfound confidence. "Let them see what that 'squandered potential' can truly achieve when wielded with purpose."

Yet, the dissenters remained. The stocky, scarred goblin mage spoke again, his voice strained. "But what about our families within the imperial capital? They'll be vulnerable. The empire's reach is long, and

their retribution... it's legendary." His gaze was fixed on Rattan, pleading for reassurance, for a plan that accounted for the inevitable fallout.

Rattan acknowledged their fear with a solemn nod. "I understand your concerns, and they are valid. But you all seem to forget, we are not fighting alone. We have some truly significant backing from the capital city. The safety of your families is nothing to worry about with this figure watching closely."

A ripple of renewed curiosity, mixed with a hint of awe, spread through the room. One of the mages, his eyes flickering with an ambitious light, stepped forward. "Rattan," he said, his voice firm, "I think it's time you tell us about this important sponsor we've been hearing about for years. We've come this far; we deserve to know."

Rattan's gaze held the young mage's, unwavering. A faint, almost imperceptible smile played on his lips, a knowing glint in his eyes. He had anticipated this question, for it was the natural progression of their trust and commitment.

"Patience, my friends," Rattan replied, his voice calm but firm. "Some truths are best revealed not through words, but through action. The identity of our patron is a powerful card, one that must be played at the precise moment to achieve its maximum effect. Revealing it prematurely would only put them, and by extension, all of us, at unnecessary risk."

He paused, letting his words sink in. "What I can tell you is this: this individual holds a position of immense influence within the very heart of the empire. Their resources are vast, their reach extensive, and their dedication to our cause is absolute. They are playing a long game, a dangerous game, one that requires absolute discretion."

Rattan's gaze swept across the room, meeting the eyes of each mage. "Trust in this: the protection afforded to your families is genuine. This sponsor has already demonstrated their capability in ensuring our work has remained at its full capacity for so long. When the time is right, when their involvement will yield the greatest impact against the empire's complacency and the encroaching Abyss, then, and only then, will their identity be unveiled." He left them with that, a mixture of reassurance and tantalizing mystery, knowing it would fuel their resolve even further.

A scattering of hushed conversations filled the room as the mages, their faces alight with a mixture of apprehension and renewed determination, began to file out. A few clapped Rattan on the shoulder, their eyes burning with quiet resolve. "For a better empire," one murmured, a mantra of their shared

purpose. Another simply offered a firm nod before vanishing through the doorway. They had places to be, preparations to make, for the monumental event awaiting them under tomorrow's morning light.

Soon, the room was empty, save for Rattan. The lingering scent of ozone and old parchment hung in the air, a familiar comfort. The silence, however, was short-lived.

"That was a great speech," a deep, resonant voice broke the stillness, carrying a familiar cadence that sent a shiver, not of fear, but of profound recognition, down Rattan's spine. "It's hard to imagine you were once an indecisive child, unsure of his path."

A section of the stone wall near the back of the room shimmered, then peeled away like a discarded skin, revealing a figure stepping out from the shadows. It was the same goblin mage who, years ago, had first brought a hesitant, lost Rattan into the service of his "New Lord." His eyes, ancient and knowing, held a subtle amusement.

Rattan turned, his posture relaxed, devoid of the deference or apprehension that might have once marked their previous encounters. There was no power dynamic, no lingering fear from his past. Instead, a subtle, knowing smile touched his lips. "All this," Rattan said, his voice imbued with a quiet confidence, "would not have been possible if not for the grace of his highness."

The old mage chuckled, a dry, raspy sound that held no malice. "And a better boot licker at that." Rattan's eyes flickered, a momentary spark of something unreadable, but he held his tongue, his subtle smile remaining in place.

The mage settled into a nearby chair, his gaze fixed on Rattan. "One of your friends brought up an important point that is very likely to happen. The empire will not give your live broadcast much lifespan; it will be swiftly interfered with." He leaned forward, his voice dropping slightly. "I hope you know that and have planned for it?"

Rattan's subtle smile widened, a flicker of genuine amusement now in his eyes. He met the older mage's gaze evenly, a silent acknowledgment of the wisdom that had guided him for so long. "Did you truly think I haven't considered the empire's immediate reaction?" Rattan replied, his voice laced with quiet confidence. "Their first instinct will be to shut down the magical frequencies, to sever the visual links, to plunge their citizens back into blissful ignorance."

He pushed off the workbench, walking slowly towards a map of the empire spread across a nearby table, illuminated by a faint magical glow. "But that is precisely what we anticipate. The initial shockwave of imagery will be enough. The first few minutes, perhaps even moments, of raw, unedited footage of the Abyss tearing at their doorstep, and the ratmen, once despised, fighting valiantly with our weapons... that's all we need."

Rattan traced a finger along the map, from the capital outwards. "Even if they cut the broadcast within minutes, the seeds of doubt, of fear, and of revelation will have been planted. Rumors will spread like wildfire, twisting and growing with each retelling. The empire's carefully constructed narrative of control and supreme power will be fractured." He looked back at the older mage, a triumphant glint in his eye. "And once fractured, it is far easier to shatter."

The old mage simply watched him, a slow, knowing smile spreading across his own face. "Indeed," he murmured. "The truth, once glimpsed, is a persistent thing. But you are too confident, boy. What makes you think you can hold on for a few minutes? A few seconds is the best you can hope for."

Rattan, still smiling, made a delicate teacup and kettle appear in his hand, which he placed in front of the older mage. He poured the mage a steaming cup. "My confidence comes not from myself, but from His Grace himself," Rattan replied, his voice soft but resonant. "I know with him, anything is possible."

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A flash of recognition flickered in the eyes of the old mage. He picked up the cup, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. "Hmm, cheeky boy. But you are, indeed, right. My Lord has plans for holding off the empire's interference for some time. This broadcast serves a far greater goal for his future plans."

Before Rattan could respond, the old mage's voice cut through the air, sharp and direct. "Why did you lie to your friends?"

Rattan's smile remained fixed, an unreadable mask as he looked at the old man, but he said nothing. The older mage, undeterred, continued, "You know my Lord can't guarantee the safety of your friends' families and those they know if the empire decides on retaliating." He leaned forward, his gaze piercing. "You know of this, yet you promised them safety. Even I, who was listening, was convinced you had plans. If I didn't know what I knew, I would have been like those friends of yours who are now heading for their demise and horror with a promised conviction on everything being alright."

Rattan's smile finally faltered, replaced by a subtle hardening of his features. He didn't deny the accusation, nor did he offer an immediate defense. He simply met the older mage's unflinching stare, a silent acknowledgment of the truth in his words. The air in the room, once thick with strategic planning and ambition, now crackled with a different kind of tension – one born of hard choices and moral compromises.

He took a slow breath, his gaze drifting from the old mage to the discarded scrolls on the workbench, as if searching for answers in their complex runes. "Hope," Rattan began, his voice low and deliberate, "is a powerful motivator. Fear, on the other hand, is a crippling one. If I had laid bare the full extent of the risks, if I had spoken of the very real possibility of imperial retribution against their loved ones... how many would have truly walked out that door tonight?"

He turned back to the older mage, his expression now resolute. "They needed conviction. They needed to believe in a tangible safety net, a shield against the empire's wrath, even if that shield is, for now, more concept than concrete. Their belief in our cause, in His Grace's influence, is what will drive them forward. It is what will give them the courage to face the Abyss, and in doing so, expose the empire's failures."

Rattan paused, his gaze darkening slightly. "Sometimes, the truth, unvarnished, paralyzes. A carefully constructed hope, however, empowers. They are heading into a storm, yes, but they go with purpose, believing their sacrifice is meaningful and their loved ones are protected. That belief, even if subtly manipulated, is what will make this 'broadcast' a success. The alternative was inaction, and that, my friend, is a far greater horror than any potential retribution."

The old mage listened, his head slowly nodding, a flicker of something unreadable in his ancient eyes. He took a sip from the tea Rattan had poured, the steam momentarily clouding his gaze. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, tinged with a melancholic curiosity.

"I understand the necessity, boy. I've seen enough of this world to know that grand visions often demand... difficult truths." He set the teacup down with a soft clink. "But it makes me wonder, Rattan. What kind of person have you become? I remember the innocent child, the one who saw the injustices and burned with a quiet, undeniable compassion. The young mage who worried over every stray and every slight."

His gaze sharpened, but it was not accusatory; rather, it was deeply contemplative. "Most mages, once they gain power, they shed such sentiments. They become cold, calculating. You, however, were an exception. Your compassion was a rare, surprising thing among those I've seen rise. And now... now it's a disappointment to see that you, too, are beginning to lose it, aren't you?"

Rattan met the older mage's gaze, the subtle smile that had graced his lips moments before now completely gone. The question hung in the air, a stark mirror reflecting the choices he had made. He ran a hand over his shaven head, a gesture of quiet contemplation.

"Compassion," Rattan finally said, his voice devoid of its earlier confidence, replaced by a weary honesty, "is a luxury. A luxury I cannot afford if I am to achieve what is necessary. The child who burned with injustice, yes, he existed. But that child also watched, helpless, as the empire crushed those who showed any weakness, any sentiment that didn't serve its purpose."

He picked up the discarded teacup, turning it slowly in his fingers. "The 'compassion' you speak of, Master Gorok," Rattan continued, using the old mage's given name, a rare gesture of intimacy. "It nearly got me killed. It nearly got us all killed. It made me hesitate when swift action was required. It made me mourn for individuals when the fate of a multitude hung in the balance."

His eyes, when they met Gorok's again, were filled with a cold, clear resolve. "I have not lost my compassion, Master Gorok. I have simply learned to direct it, to focus it on the greater good, on the ultimate liberation of our people. If a few innocent hearts must be weighed down by a temporary deception, if their families must face a perceived threat in the short term, so that thousands, millions, might truly be free from the empire's tyranny and the Abyss's hunger... then it is a price I am willing to pay."

He set the cup down with a soft clink. "The child you knew, Master Gorok, he learned. He adapted. He understood that to win this war, one must sometimes sacrifice a part of oneself on the altar of strategy. The question is not whether I have changed, but whether that change is ultimately for the benefit of all we fight for."

Rattan finished speaking, his gaze firm, expecting a retort, a challenge, perhaps even an acknowledgment of his cold logic. Instead, the old mage said nothing. His old eyes held Rattan's for a long, unsettling moment, their depth unreadable. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, he set his teacup down. As it met the table, the mana in the room began to fluctuate, a faint, almost imperceptible shimmer in the air around him. Shadows in the corners of the room deepened, stretching and twisting as if drawn to the mage's presence.

A profound stillness fell, broken only by the faint, distant hum of the city beyond the walls. The mage's form seemed to grow indistinct, swallowed by the encroaching darkness. His last words, laced with an

unnerving calm, spread through the room, echoing the very question Rattan has always posed to himself. "Is that truly the truth, or words you say to yourself to hide from what you are becoming?"

Then, the shadows consumed him entirely, and he was gone, leaving Rattan utterly alone in the silent, now truly empty room, the question hanging heavy, demanding an answer.

Rattan sat in silence once again, the echo of the old mage's words reverberating in the quiet room. He looked down at the teacup, its dark liquid offering a distorted reflection. A goblin face stared back at him. There was no recoil, no flicker of the initial shock or disgust that had accompanied his first glimpse of this new visage in a mirror. That raw emotional turmoil had long since faded, replaced by a cold, unsettling familiarity.

The memory of past whispers, those mocking questions that had once been distant, now clawed at him from within the depths of his own mind: "Was he wearing a skin, or was the skin wearing him?"

Hearing those last words from those he had so carefully, so secretly, marked as his adversaries, truly wounded him more deeply than he had ever anticipated.

When Rattan spoke of "our people," he meant his own, the ratfolk. To outsiders, to the empire, he presented "our people" as the goblins and ogres, the other subjugated races he championed. His entire intricate plan had been built on this deception, on the secure knowledge that watching the goblin empire turn against itself, fuelled by internal strife, would divert their attention. It would allow his own kin, the ratfolk, to escape the empire's watchful, oppressive eye.

But now, his secret enemy, had made a comment that stripped away all his carefully constructed layers of self-deception. It had made Rattan feel like one of them, a manipulative, cold-blooded puppet master. The worst part was, Rattan could not deny any of it. The chilling truth was, Gorok was right. He had become precisely what he had sought to defeat.

Rattan gasped, his hand flying to his mouth, a sudden wave of nausea churning in his stomach. The carefully constructed calm shattered, replaced by a visceral horror. In a brutal flash, his mind replayed the cold calculations from just a few hours prior—the chilling realization that he had, by his own design, doomed hundreds of thousands of his own people, the ratfolk, to die on the battlefield tomorrow. All of it, a gruesome sacrifice to secure his future plans, his grand vision of a liberated race.

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And now, again. The lie to the goblin mages, the promise of safety for their families that he knew he could not guarantee. He was dooming his so-called friends, their futures, and their loved ones, once more to further his own goals.

The metallic taste of bile filled his mouth. His fingers trembled against his lips, stained with the invisible blood of those he'd condemned. The meticulous order of the room, moments ago a testament to his control, now seemed to mock him. The bubbling beakers, the glowing runes, the scattered scrolls – every element of his arcane mastery felt tainted, a monument to his ruthless ambition.

He pushed himself away from the workbench, his chair scraping loudly across the stone floor, the harsh sound jarring in the profound silence. He paced, a caged animal, each step heavy with the weight of his decisions. The 'greater good,' the 'ultimate liberation' – the noble words he'd used to justify his actions now sounded hollow, self-serving lies whispered into the abyss of his own soul.

His gaze fell upon the miniature cube, the crystalline object he'd placed so carefully into his hidden pocket. The very symbol of his ultimate plan, now felt like a stone in his gut, heavy with the lives it demanded. Had he truly become so detached? So consumed by the end goal that the means, however horrific, no longer registered as anything more than necessary steps?

The goblin face in the teacup seemed to sneer, no longer a stranger's visage, but a grotesque reflection of his own corrupted soul. He had worn their skin, yes, but in doing so, had he shed his own? Had the mask truly become the man? Gorok's final question, laced with sorrow more than accusation, twisted in the raw wound of his conscience: "Is that truly the truth or words you say to yourself to hide from what you are becoming?"

Rattan stopped pacing, his eyes closed, the battlefield of tomorrow already playing out in his mind – the screams of the ratfolk, the defiant magic of the goblin mages, all orchestrated by his hand, all for a future that suddenly felt terribly, agonizingly distant and perhaps, no longer worth the cost.

Inside of Rattan's consciousness, Phantom, the arch curse, shifted. His awareness that typically was attuned to the subtle currents of ambition and power, was drawn now to Rattan's overt agony. A new scent, sharp and intoxicating, now emanated from Rattan's soul, mingling with the familiar metallic tang of his ambition. And with it, a new, vibrant color pulsed within the flame that defined Rattan's ambitious spirit.

If before, what blossomed in Rattan's soul was the pure, fierce flame of ambition—a fire Phantom had helped painstakingly ignite—this new conflagration was something else entirely. It was the brutal, beautiful, terrifying reflection of ambition's true cost, its ultimate destination. Rattan's sudden, raw richness of emotion, the churning despair, the gnawing fear, the agonizing uncertainty, the crushing burden of his own actions—these were not merely fleeting feelings. They were like potent spices added to the flame, representing the consequences of ambition, the harsh reality of being in the spotlight, and the immense toll that spotlight exacted.

It was precisely these consequences, these raw, unfiltered human experiences, that Phantom, as an arch-curse, was meant to embody and feast upon. In this moment of Rattan's profound brokenness, Phantom finally understood Ikenga's words on being and acting like a true curse-being. The golden thread of hope, lit by the flame of ambition, had been good, yes; it had nourished Phantom, making him stronger. But it was not until now, until Rattan's soul became a crucible of profound despair and questioning, that Phantom realized how truly lacking that hope-fed power had been.

It was not until this moment, witnessing Rattan's soul engulfed in the despair, fear, uncertainty, and profound questioning of his own actions, that Phantom truly began to grasp the depths of his own existence. These raw, potent emotions weren't just sustenance; they were the very essence, the true nutrient, needed to finally comprehend what he was, and more importantly, what he could become.

The current state of Rattan soul was his final goal and reward, he was tempted to grab hold of it but stopped himself as it was too early, the flame of ambition in Rattan soul was still too strong and could burn out this new richness of emotion.

For now it was stable, but there is potential to grow. The path to sixth stage was suddenly so clear to Phantom.

Thinking of that, a cold, exhilarating clarity washed over Phantom. This was it. This raw, undiluted emotional turmoil blooming within Rattan was not just sustenance, but revelation.

This newfound depth in understanding, this profound connection to the consequences of ambition, ignited a realization within Phantom. He wasn't merely a passive consumer of ambition's glow; he was intricately linked to its aftermath, its full, devastating cycle. It meant choice. He bore the power not just to subtly guide, to fan flames and collect his golden rewards, but to truly influence the nature of the fire itself.

Was this truly all his creator had in mind when creating him? Was he merely a mechanism for observing ambition, or was he meant to be a more active participant in its terrifying unfolding? The pure, unadulterated experience of Rattan's agony, of the bitter fruit of his choices, cracked open a door in Phantom's consciousness, revealing a universe of potential he had never conceived of. The implications were vast, unsettling, and strangely, profoundly exciting.

Deep within the Abyss, Ikenga felt a tremor ripple through the intricate web of his influence. His gaze, of pure, cursed perception, honed in on Phantom. This change, this sudden, burgeoning complexity in his creation, was unexpected. When he had first forged the cursed spirits, it had been out of a desperate, primal need to awaken his own cursed divinity, to give form and consequence to the volatile, untamed energies of resentment and ill will that permeated the mortal world. He hadn't truly considered what would come after that initial, explosive act of creation.

It was only in the wake of his genesis, as his cursed spirits began to manifest, that Ikenga truly began to understand how intrinsically tied they were to emotion, whether pure in its origin or twisted by malice. The reason they seemed so predominantly linked with the negative spectrum of human feeling, with the dark undertones of the soul, was because of his own definition of what curses inherently were.

To Ikenga, a curse was the dark whisper, the secret resentment, the venomous thought hidden deep within one's heart, only daring to be voiced in the darkest, most private moments. In the human world, for example, the common folk often harbored profound hatred for their oppressive nobles, yet were utterly powerless to act. So, in the quiet corners of their minds, or in hushed, furtive exchanges, they would whisper their curses: "I hope you drown in your money," or "I hope you die." These silent, unacknowledged desires, these collective whispers of malice, had no outlet, no visible consequence, until Ikenga breathed life into the cursed spirits.

Now, because of him, because of the existence of his creations, a greedy noble might suddenly find themselves transformed into a grotesque, gluttonous monster, a living embodiment of the countless, unspoken desires for their ruin. The cursed spirits, through their existence, gave tangible form to the invisible, toxic currents of human resentment.

Arch-curses like Phantom and his siblings were not mere manifestations; they were the total representation of the very nature of cursed spirits, each bearing an eerie resemblance to the seven deadly sins. The phenomenon of the golden thread was a direct consequence of an arch-curse defying their inherent nature, twisting a negative emotion and transforming it into something akin to good.

Ikenga had observed this capacity with a complex mixture of emotions. He was happy, certainly, to see them capable of such a feat, a glimmer of unexpected light in his dark creations. Yet, he was also

disappointed. It might have been the lingering echo of human nature within the arch-curses, this inexplicable urge to seek good even when all seemed bleak. But their actions, these subtle deviations from their intended purpose, were not part of the grand design Ikenga had meticulously crafted. Still, as the origin god of nature, he chose to let things play out, observing the nature of cause and consequence.

Until today. The profound change in Phantom, who was now beginning to truly grasp the multifaceted purpose of his existence, brought a sharper focus to Ikenga's old, often blurred memories. His past human lives were now a blur, but one undeniable truth remained etched in his core: he hated action without consequences. He had witnessed firsthand the corrosive rot that set in when humans, especially the elites realized they could act with impunity, when their hidden malevolence had no visible repercussions. His subconscious will in creating the cursed spirits, therefore, had been utterly clear: they were meant to be a constant, undeniable reminder to the beings of his new world that for every action, for every whispered curse, for every buried resentment, there were consequences.

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Ikenga felt the shift in Phantom ripple through his being, a tangible alteration in the very nature of his divinity. This change manifested not just in his awareness, but physically, in the network of cursed tattoos that covered his body.

But the most striking change occurred on Ikenga's back. There, where the story of his cursed creation began, it seemed as if a new Chapter was unfolding.

The swirling patterns, normally a chaotic marking of dark purple ink, were now coalescing into a deliberate, evolving image. It began with a central vortex, a miniature maelstrom of purple energy that seemed to draw in the surrounding tattoos. From this vortex, new lines of ink snaked outwards, thick and pulsing, like veins of raw power spreading across his skin.

These lines weren't random; they formed complex, geometric patterns, reminiscent of ancient glyphs, yet utterly alien in their design. They pulsed with a faint, internal light, a deep purple glow that hinted at the potent, volatile energy contained within. Interspersed between these glyphs were depictions of stylized flames, a contained, almost artistic representation of the flame of ambition. Behind this flame, a deeper shadow unfurled. It was the distinct, ethereal outline of Phantom, subtly integrated into the new design.

Keles, who had been lying on the bed, shifted, her gaze fixed on Ikenga's back. She had watched the entire transformation, mesmerized by the living art appearing on his skin. Now, she sat up, a quiet intensity in her eyes, and slowly reached out, tracing a hand over the newly formed patterns.

Meanwhile, Ikenga looked down at his open palm. From its center, a swirl of deep-colored purple flame bloomed, devoid of heat, strangely cold to the touch. For a fleeting moment, one of Ikenga's eyes went pure white, a quick, blinding flash, and in that instant, he glimpsed their original world before he was pulled back, the vision snapping away.

"Interesting," Ikenga murmured to himself, his voice a low hum. At the same precise moment, a bell, clear and resonant, chimed somewhere within the Abyss. Ikenga and Keles sat in silence, waiting.

The heavy door to the chamber creaked open, and two imp demons shuffled into the room. They both bowed low, their forms subservient. "We heard your bells, Milord," one rasped, its voice a gravelly whisper. "How can we be of service?"

Ikenga rose, the deep purple flame still dancing in his open palm. The two imp demons, who had just entered, were immediately drawn to it. A slow, hungry grin spread across their faces, as if they were witnessing the manifestation of their deepest, most primal desires.

Ikenga extended his hand, pointing the flame towards the two demons. Without a sound, the purple fire leaped from his palm, instantly latching onto their forms. There was no roar of pain, no thrashing. Ikenga and Keles watched in silence as the flame consumed them, burning without heat, without smoke, until it simply winked out.

Then, with a sudden, guttural cry, one of the demons screamed, "Nooo!" Its hands clawed forward, grasping at empty air as if trying to reclaim something vital, before it crumpled to the floor, motionless. The other demon, however, slowly opened its eyes. They glowed with an unnerving inner light, and a serene, almost beatific smile stretched its lips. To Ikenga and Keles, this demon seemed utterly, terrifyingly certain of things, its essence transformed. The one on the floor, while technically still alive, was an empty husk.

Ikenga finally spoke, his voice low and contemplative. "It seems like ambition is truly tied to one's very life force. Losing it leaves one an empty husk."

The demon with the glowing eyes pushed itself up, its movements fluid and deliberate, utterly unlike the frantic scuttling of its former self. It knelt before Ikenga, its smile unwavering, radiating a profound, almost chilling gratitude.

"Thank you, Milord," the demon rasped, its voice no longer gravelly but clear, imbued with an eerie calm. "You have... illuminated my path. I now understand." Its gaze drifted to the inert form of its companion, then back to Ikenga, the light in its eyes intensifying. "I see the way forward with perfect clarity. The whispers, the chaos, the raw hunger... they were merely noise. Now, there is purpose."

The transformed demon stood, its serene smile never wavering, and with surprising strength, it dragged the inert form of its companion towards the door. The sound of the body scraping across the stone floor was the only disturbance in the chamber's newfound quiet.

"Curious," Ikenga murmured, watching the demon. He was intrigued by its newfound clarity, this "purpose" it spoke of, but he didn't press. Instead, he simply waved a hand, a dismissive gesture. The demon bowed once more, then pulled its companion's body out of the room, the heavy door thudding shut behind them.

The predawn chill was usually Bolthrower's least favorite part of the day, a constant reminder of the crushing weight of his armor and the even heavier burden of the war. But this morning, something was different. He stirred, eyes fluttering open, moments before the insistent clang of the morning bell ripped through the camp. A strange lightness permeated his limbs. He sat up, flexing his shoulders, and a jolt of surprise shot through him. The new armor, donned only yesterday, that had pressed down on him like a weight, now felt like nothing at all. It was as if he wore a second skin, or perhaps, no skin at all. The metal plates, the reinforced gauntlets, the heavy helm—all were there, visible to his eyes, yet utterly without weight.

He shook his head, pushing the thought aside. There was no time for contemplation. The bell's second, more urgent peal, signaled the start of the daily routine. Rattan, the scent of stale sweat and fear, filled the air as the warriors of his company began to stir. Bolthrower fell into the familiar, shuffling line, his mind already drifting to the battlefield. Today felt different, yet there was something familiar which is his frequent thought to himself before heading for the battlefield "Maybe this would be my last meal"

The line shuffled forward, agonizingly slow. Whispers of fresh casualties from the night's skirmishes snaked through the ranks, adding to the grim atmosphere. When it was finally his turn, Bolthrower presented his standard, dented bowl. The ratman serving the rations, usually a scowling, efficient blur, paused. Bolthrower watched, bewildered, as the ratman ladled out a portion that was significantly larger than anything he'd ever received. The bowl, too, seemed to have grown, accommodating a veritable mountain of gruel. He looked up, meeting the ratman's beady eyes, expecting a rebuke or a cruel jest. Instead, he received only a slight, unsettling smile and a quick nod.

A flicker of something—recognition? approval?—passed between them. Bolthrower's jaw tightened. He nodded back, a silent acknowledgment, and quickly grabbed the overflowing bowl. He turned, seeking the most secluded corner he could find, the strange weightlessness of his armor, the generous portion, and the ratman's enigmatic smile swirling in his mind. He needed to eat, to gather his strength. Whatever today held, he would face it.

The effect of the meal was immediate and profound. As the green paste slid down his throat, the usual hunger pangs, a dull ache that had become a constant companion, vanished instantly. But that was only the beginning. A warmth, not unlike a gentle massage, spread through his muscles, easing the knots of tension that had resided there for months. It wasn't just warmth; it was a surge of invigorating energy, a feeling of his very cells expanding and tightening. Bolthrower even had the startling illusion that he was getting stronger, his limbs feeling denser, more powerful.

This routine—eat, fall into line, march to the battlefield—had been performed over a hundred times. Yet, this morning, the silent procession felt different. No words were exchanged, but a subtle shift rippled through the ranks. Bolthrower, always observant, noticed it first in the ratmen around him. Their usually dull, resigned eyes now held a faint, almost imperceptible glow. Not the wild gleam of madness or desperation, but something else entirely. "Hope," he thought, a potent realization blooming in his chest. There was a newfound will in their gaze, and their steps, once shuffling and weary, now bore a heavier, more purposeful tread.

This subtle transformation, coupled with his own inexplicable surge of strength and the bizarre lightness of his armor, solidified a growing conviction within Bolthrower. The voice he had heard, the one promising a way out, was real. There was indeed someone in the empire looking out for them, someone powerful enough to touch them even here, in this desolate, war-torn world.

The battlefield was closer this time, this was no surprise to him as he knew this was how it was battling the demons. Each battle whether won or lost meant more ground gained for the demons, also meaning their camp may be moved very soon.

As they reached the chaotic perimeter, a wave of exhaustion-etched faces met them. The warriors who had endured the night's relentless fighting were falling back, their movements sluggish, their eyes hollow. Yet, amidst their weary retreat, a flicker of raw surprise ignited in their gaze.

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Their eyes, though bloodshot and rimmed with fatigue, widened as they took in their approaching comrades. The sight of fellow ratfolk in new armor was an anomaly, a stark contrast to their own

battered, stained hides. If only the ceaseless roar of battle allowed for conversation, questions would have erupted: What happened? Where did that armor come from?

But there was no time, no space for words. The overwhelming need to survive, to simply fall back and rest, drove them onward. They retreated, carrying with them the silent hope that one day they would get answers, or perhaps, that a similar, miraculous surprise awaited them back at the camp.

Meanwhile, on a rugged hill overlooking the chaotic ballet of battle, a solitary goblin mage, Snivel, moved with a surprising blend of frantic energy and precise calculation. He wasn't equipped for direct combat, his frame slight beneath robes embroidered with arcane symbols, but his role was just as crucial. Occasionally, a quick, almost imperceptible flick of his wrist would send a minor ward shimmering into existence around a sensitive piece of equipment, or a gust of wind would subtly clear the dust from a lens. He was setting up a series of intricate arcane devices: polished brass focusing arrays, glowing crystal resonators, and delicate runic matrices that hummed with latent power.

Snivel paused, his pointed ears swiveling, before he reached for a slim, brass-bound telescopic scope. His single, unblinking eye, a milky white contrast to his green skin, peered through the lens. The image resolved: amidst the swirling dust and clashing forms, he saw them – the Ratmen, transformed and empowered, tearing through the demonic ranks. A grim satisfaction touched his lips. They had arrived.

He pulled back from the scope, scanning his meticulous setup. Every crystal aligned, every rune energized. Placing a three-fingered hand to his ear, where a small, glowing earpiece was nestled, he spoke into it, his voice a low, gravelly whisper. "I am ready and set to go."

Back in his makeshift command center, a spartan room devoid of comforts, Rattan paced. Sleep has long been something foreign to him. The cube, now restored to its original, luminous form, floated in the center of the room. It projected a detailed hologram of their world, a miniature, swirling orb of familiar landscapes and territories.

Tiny pinpricks of light flickered across the holographic map, appearing and disappearing with calculated precision. Each light represented a hidden unit, a prepared position, a ready signal from his people. They were in place, their silent affirmation echoing through the room.

"For the greater good," Rattan murmured, the words a low, guttural promise spoken to no one but himself. His eyes, usually filled with weary calculation, now held a fierce, unwavering resolve. With a decisive gesture, he uttered the command: "Activate the cams."

Across the empire, in hidden rooftops and concealed tunnels, the individual lights on Rattan's holographic map flared into a steady glow. Each marked a goblin mage, hands poised over intricate arcane arrays. On the windswept hill, the lanky mage with spectacles focused, his fingers dancing over the activation runes of his own setup. A barely perceptible shimmer of energy pulsed outwards from his station, followed by similar pulses from hundreds of other hidden locations.

Suddenly, within countless homes, taverns, and town squares across the Imperial lands, the scrying pools and magical mirrors that normally hummed with trivial gossip or flickering entertainment erupted into a chaotic frenzy. Static danced across their surfaces, images warped and stretched, then snapped into stark, terrifying clarity.

It was still early morning, and many goblins, just beginning their day, had idly glanced at these ubiquitous magical mirrors, typically used for Imperial propaganda or local news. Now, they found themselves rooted in place, their breath catching in their throats. What was displayed before them was something never seen in all their lives, a nightmare brought to their very doorsteps.

They had heard whispers, of course—faint rumors of the Empire being at war with some unknown, distant enemy. Refugees, gaunt and silent, had occasionally trickled into their cities, carrying stories of ravaged lands. But these whispers, like dust motes in the wind, would settle quickly, forgotten within a day or two. The war had always felt so impossibly far away, a problem for someone else, in another corner of the vast Empire.

Today, for whatever reason, that war, that distant nightmare, was not only brought to their faces but projected in such a raw, unvarnished way that they physically could not look away.

They were confronted with the terrifying, raw reality of the Abyss itself. The screens roared with the unholy cacophony of battle, but it wasn't just noise; it was the sickening crunch of bone, the wet tear of flesh, the guttural shrieks of pure, unbridled malice. Monstrous, chitinous demons with eyes that burned like embers in the perpetual twilight of their forms tore through desolate, ravaged landscapes.

One monstrous behemoth, all segmented plates and razor claws, ripped a downed foe in half, a sickening geyser of blackened blood erupting against the scorched earth. Another, a lesser demon, gaunt and needle-toothed, immediately descended upon the twitching remains, its snuffling muzzle rooting for softer tissues, its mandibles audibly gnawing at the exposed viscera. Limbs were torn asunder, entrails spilled like grim garlands, and the ground was slick with a glistening sheen of gore. These were not mere monsters; they were embodiments of hunger and destruction, their ferocity a

visceral, unholy spectacle. They didn't just kill; they savored the rending, their twisted forms writhing with a horrifying glee as they literally attempted to consume the flesh of downed foes, their shadowed faces contorting in silent, hungry ecstasy.

Then, the focus shifted, and a collective gasp rippled through the towns. The cameras zoomed in on the ratmen—but these weren't the savage, unequipped skirmishers the Empire's propaganda had always painted them as. These were desperate, valiant fighters, now clad in unfamiliar, gleaming armor, their weapons crackling with an inner light that seemed to repel the encroaching darkness. They fought with a ferocity born of sheer desperation, pushing back against the demonic tide with an unexpected, almost miraculous strength, their desperate struggles illuminated against the backdrop of an unimaginable horror.

The images were jarring, unedited, utterly devoid of the Empire's usual heroic narratives. Fear turned to bewilderment, then to a dawning, terrible realization. This wasn't a series of distant skirmishes; this was a true, brutal invasion, a war on their doorstep that, for reasons unknown, was being horrifyingly underplayed by the very Empire sworn to protect them.

A cold wave of anger and shame washed over the stunned goblin onlookers. They watched, transfixed, as the very ratmen they despised, the creatures deemed lowly and expendable by Imperial decree, fought with a desperate, visceral courage. They saw them, battered and bleeding, pushing back against the encroaching Abyss, defending homes that, in the grand scheme, were also their homes. Meanwhile, they, the supposedly superior goblins, had been lounging in their taverns and city squares, utterly oblivious to the true horror unfolding just beyond their pampered lives.

A ripple of murmurs began, a question that started as a hesitant whisper and quickly swelled into an indignant roar. "Where are our mages?" someone cried out, the frustration clear in their voice. "Why is it only the ratfolk fighting? Where is the Empire's army?" The contradiction was stark, infuriating. The Empire had always claimed their legions were invincible, their mages unparalleled. Yet, here were the despised ratmen, holding the line.

Then came the most damning question, cutting through the growing outrage: "Ratfolk are not blessed with mana, so how come they are able to fight with such monsters?" The common knowledge was that mana, the lifeblood of magic, flowed only through the 'blessed' races—goblins, elves, dwarves, and humans. Ratfolk were considered too primitive, too base. Yet, on the screens, they wielded glowing weapons, their movements charged with an impossible power. "If the ratmen can, why can't we also fight to protect our homes?" The question hung in the air, a challenge not just to the Empire's authority, but to their own ingrained beliefs about themselves and their place in the world. The illusion of safety had shattered, replaced by a searing realization of their vulnerability and the Empire's betrayal.

Just as the shouts of anger and shame reached a fever pitch, the very sky above the battlefield tore open. Not with demonic portals, but with the sudden, breathtaking appearance of huge ships—Imperial vessels, gleaming like predatory fish in the dim, ash-choked air. A collective gasp rose from the goblin onlookers. Imperial ships! Here!

Then, from the gaping maw of the largest vessel, huge, burly armored figures began to descend. They didn't lower; they jumped from the ships high in the sky, plummeting like meteors towards the embattled earth. Each impact sent up an enormous cloud of dust and debris, momentarily obscuring the view as the ground shuddered under the force.

From the dissipating smoke, emerged Ogre Knights, their hulking forms encased in ancient, runic armor that hummed with a low, potent energy. Their presence was felt instantaneously, a seismic shift in the flow of battle. They tore through ranks of low-level demons in what seemed like the blink of an eye, their massive weapons cleaving through chitin and sinew with terrifying efficiency.

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To observant eyes, those still reeling from the shock and the sudden surge of hope, it looked as if they were deliberately helping the ratmen, carving out pockets of safety, giving the exhausted fighters a crucial moment to breathe. It was at this precise moment, as if in direct response to this sudden, overwhelming intervention, that the Abyss itself responded. The chaotic swarms of lesser fiends recoiled, and a chilling, deliberate shift occurred: higher-tier demons began to take the front line.

A surge of unexpected pride swelled through the goblin onlookers. These were Ogres, their formidable, sometimes troublesome, siblings. Despite the occasional racial tensions and historical skirmishes that colored their shared past, seeing these massive figures, these powerful kin, descend from the heavens to battle the Abyss filled them with a raw, undeniable kinship. The shame they had felt just moments before, watching the despised ratmen fight alone, was utterly eclipsed by the awe-inspiring display of strength from their own kind.

Then, just as the collective emotion reached its peak, the screens flickered wildly, the vibrant, horrific spectacle dissolving into static and then back to the mundane, trivial images of everyday life. The

goblins, still reeling, blinked, their minds struggling to process the sudden shift. It felt like an elaborate illusion, a collective nightmare from which they had just woken. But as they looked at the stunned, pale faces of their fellow goblins, the wide, unblinking eyes mirroring their own shock, the realization solidified: what they had just witnessed was undeniably real. The war, the demons, the fighting ratmen, the arriving Ogre Knights—it had all truly happened.

The whole spectacle lasted for "5 minutes".

A few minutes back before Rattan gave the go. Bolthrower, his silhouette now subtly streamlined by the mana-weave plating of his new armor, felt a hum of barely contained power thrumming beneath his paws. Around him, the other Ratmen, similarly adorned, fidgeted with anticipation. Their old steampunk contraptions, once symbols of their technological prowess, lay discarded like rusting husks. This new gear, shimmering with faint, internal light, felt alive.

"They're falling back!" a younger Ratman squeaked, pointing a gauntleted paw towards the ragged edges of the Night Army's retreat. A guttural roar, deep and primal, echoed across the plains, not from the Ratmen, but from the mass of demons that surged forward to fill the void left by the fleeing humanoids. Claws scraped, wings flapped, and eyes glowed with malevolent intent.

Bolthrower didn't wait for orders. A wild grin, all sharp teeth and battle lust, split his muzzle. With a surge of exhilaration, he launched himself forward. The ground blurred beneath him, his new armor absorbing the shock of his immense speed with ease. He was a dark, furred missile, a blur against the chaos, leaving his bewildered comrades in his dust.

The first demon, a hulking brute with leathery wings and wickedly curved horns, barely registered his approach. Bolthrower's new mana-infused gauntlet slammed into its chest with the force of a battering ram, the impact rippling outwards in a wave of blue energy. The demon roared, a sound cut short as its sternum caved inward with a sickening crunch. Bolthrower didn't break stride, pivoting instantly.

His new weapon, a sleek, staff-like construct that resembled his old bolter, hummed with contained energy. It wasn't kinetic anymore; it was pure, condensed mana. He swung it in a wide arc, a shimmering arc of azure energy erupting from its tip, cleaving through two smaller, scuttling imps that had tried to flank him. They tore in half, their desperate shrieks abruptly silenced.

"Bloody fangs, he's off!" chittered Grimsnap, a veteran Ratman whose whiskers twitched with a mix of awe and competitive spirit. His own new mana-pistol, a sleek, compact weapon that felt far lighter than

his old steam-powered repeater, glowed faintly in his grip. "Alright lads, let's not let the big lug have all the fun!"

Inspired by Bolthrower's headlong charge, the other Ratmen surged forward. They didn't possess his sheer, raw power, but their new gear had transformed them from cumbersome, clanking warriors into agile, deadly combatants. Skitter, normally a cautious scout, found his mana-infused boots lending him an unnatural spring, allowing him to leap over fallen debris and sprint with astonishing speed. His twin mana-daggers, crackling with faint blue energy, felt like extensions of his claws. He darted around a lumbering demon, a blur of grey fur, and struck its exposed flank with both blades, the mana discharge burning through hide and muscle with a sizzling sound. The demon roared in pain and fury, turning to swat at the agile Ratman, but Skitter was already gone, a shadow flitting through the chaos.

Grimsnap, meanwhile, unleashed a volley from his mana-pistol. Unlike the smoky, explosive shots of his old weapon, these were focused bolts of pure energy, silent and deadly. A pack of smaller, dog-like demons yelped as the glowing projectiles tore through their ranks, leaving smoking holes where their bodies had been. The pistol, unlike its predecessor, seemed to draw energy directly from the ambient mana, allowing for a sustained barrage without the need for constant reloading. Grimsnap actually chuckled, a rasping sound, as he watched a particularly ugly imp simply vanish in a shower of sparks. "Now this is fighting!" he growled.

Further back, the heavier Ratmen, those who once wielded bulky gatling guns, now hefted mana-cannons. These weren't the rapid-fire monstrosities of old, but rather focused energy projectors. Ratfang, a stocky warrior with scars crisscrossing his muzzle, braced his mana-cannon against his shoulder. He took a moment to aim, the barrel glowing with an ominous crimson light. With a guttural grunt, he unleashed a concentrated beam of destructive energy. The beam tore through the demonic horde, incinerating several hulking abominations in a single, terrifying blast. The air around the impact shimmered from the sheer force of the discharged mana. "Less noise, more death!" Ratfang roared over the din, a satisfied glint in his eye.

Bolthrower, a hurricane of fur and empowered might, continued to carve a path through the very heart of the demonic surge. His mana-infused gauntlet slammed into a winged horror, the impact rippling outwards in a wave of blue energy. The demon roared, a sound cut short as its sternum caved inward with a sickening crunch. Bolthrower didn't break stride, pivoting instantly. His staff-like mana-weapon hummed with contained energy, a shimmering arc of azure erupting from its tip to cleave through two smaller, scuttling imps, disintegrating them into puffs of smoking ash.

A chorus of snarls rose around him as the demons finally reacted to his singular charge. A towering fiend, clouded in green fire, lunged. Bolthrower met its attack head-on. The mana-armor flared, deflecting the fiery blows as if they were mere embers. He twisted, his movements impossibly fluid, and

plunged the tip of his staff into the fiend's glowing chest. There was a desperate, gurgling shriek as the mana weapon pulsed, as Bolthrower pulled the trigger as a hole opened up on the body of the demon as it fell forward.

Back to when Rattan gave the signal to activate the cameras, he immediately informed Master Gorok, hoping their side would now carry out their plan to hold off the Empire's inevitable interference.

Master Gorok, at that very moment, stood beside his master, Kaelen, the self-proclaimed Ogre King. "Self-proclaimed" might have been the official term, but it was an undeniable fact that Kaelen commanded the unwavering loyalty of his formidable people.

Gorok's hand instinctively went to his ear as Rattan's urgent message came through. He nodded grimly. "Master, it's done."

Kaelen let out a booming laugh, a sound filled with joy and anticipation. "Don't keep the boy waiting!"

Gorok simply nodded again. In the next instant, his massive figure blurred and then disappeared from Kaelen's side.

His next appearance was in a chamber humming with arcane energy, filled with cloaked mages. In front of each mage, a portal shimmered, open to the cold, distant expanse of stars. Beside each mage stood an unknown cylinder topped with a single, prominent button. Seeing Gorok's sudden materialization, they knew it was time. With synchronized movements, each mage pressed the button atop their cylinder. A low hum resonated through the room as the cylindrical objects were swiftly thrown through their respective portals, which winked shut immediately after.

The objects now drifting silently in the vast, inky blackness of space were one of the ratfolk's most ingenious and closely guarded creations: mana disruptors. Kaelen, with his shrewd intellect and unparalleled access to resources, had acquired and reprogrammed these devices. Their new, singular purpose was to wreak havoc on the Imperial mages' surveillance networks and make it incredibly difficult to locate the source of the unauthorized broadcasts.

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These reprogrammed mana disruptors were now floating in various strategic positions around their world, their silent emanations weaving an invisible shield. This mana-dampening field covered their

entire planet, a disruptive blanket designed to scramble magical detection and obscure any incoming scrying attempts. It wouldn't take long, perhaps a few hours at most, before the Empire's mages would discover the interference. But hopefully, by then, what needed to be done would already be accomplished.

Even before the terrifying broadcast ripped through the Imperial lands, a different kind of tension hummed in the hallowed halls of the mages' towers. Vellok stood alongside a dozen other tower masters, their gazes fixed on a series of scrying screens. They weren't watching for entertainment; they were scrutinizing. Their collective focus was on the armor's performance, observing every shimmer, every defensive deflection, every enhancement it seemed to grant the ratfolk.

"The initial reports were... minimal," one of the tower masters murmured, his voice tight. "A 'new batch of experimental gear,' they said."

Vellok grunted, his gaze never leaving a ratman deflecting a demon's claw with an almost impossible ease. "Minimal, indeed. This is no mere 'experimental gear.' Look at the kinetic transference. The resilience against lesser demonic energy. It's too effective."

"Far too effective," another master chimed in, a tremor of unease in his voice. "They're fighting with an... unnatural cohesion. A strength they shouldn't possess."

A heavy silence descended as the implications settled like a cold stone in the pit of their stomachs. The Empire's strategic doctrine concerning the ratfolk was clear: they were a disposable shield, meant to bleed and delay, to soften the enemy for the 'superior' Imperial legions. They were never meant to be effective in their own right, never meant to inspire anything but pity or contempt.

"If the armor proves too effective for the ratfolk," Vellok finally spoke, his voice low and deliberate, "then actions will need to be taken. This is the opposite of what the Empire has planned for." He gestured to a screen showing a ratman warrior, now almost radiant in his new gear, carving a path through a swarm of fiends. "An empowered ratfolk is a complication. An empowered, aware ratfolk is a liability."

The other tower masters nodded, grim expressions on their faces. The thought of the ratfolk becoming genuinely capable, genuinely powerful, was anathema to their carefully constructed racial hierarchies and strategic manipulations.

Vellok and the tower masters continued their grim assessment of the battlefield feeds, the flickering images of the empowered ratfolk solidifying their unease. The air in the chamber was thick with unspoken tension, a cold realization settling amongst them: this was a problem far greater than a mere anomaly. Their plans for the ratfolk, for the entire war effort, were being undermined.

It was at this critical juncture that a Fifth-Tier Mage burst into the gathering, his usual composure utterly shattered. His robes were disheveled, his breathing ragged, a clear sign of extreme haste and agitation. The assembled tower masters, powerful in their own right, turned as one, their collective gaze falling on the newcomer.

The Fifth-Tier Mage immediately bowed, a rushed, almost frantic gesture. "Masters, forgive my intrusion, but there is an urgent matter!" he stammered, his voice laced with barely suppressed panic. "There is an unauthorized viewing of the battlefield now spread across the entire Empire! The citizens are having a first-sight view of what is going on right now in the battlefield!"

A chilling silence descended upon the chamber, broken only by the faint hum of the scrying screens. Vellok's eyes, previously sharp with analytical eyes, narrowed into slits of cold fury.

The others exchanged shocked glances, their faces paling. This wasn't just a breach; it was an act of profound defiance, a direct challenge to the Empire's meticulously crafted narrative and control. The very war they had kept distant, abstract, and sanitized, was now being laid bare before the masses.

"Containment!" Vellok roared, his voice cutting through the sudden stunned silence. "Every scrying pool, every mirror, every projection matrix across all provinces! Shut them down! Now!"

The tower masters, jolted from their shock, sprang into action. A flurry of commands erupted, crackling through the arcane communication lines that linked the mages' towers across the Empire. Junior mages, their faces grim, bent over complex rune circles, chanting spells of disruption and suppression.

"Fourth-tier Diviners, focus on the source!" Vellok commanded, pointing a trembling finger at the Fifth-Tier Mage. "Where is this signal coming from? Trace it! Locate it!"

"We're trying, Master Vellok!" the Fifth-Tier Mage replied, sweat beading on his brow. "But there's... there's an interference! A chaotic mana signature. It's like trying to find a needle in a hurricane of static!"

A collective groan went through the room. Mana interference on such a scale was unheard of, a direct assault on their divinatorial arts.

Even as he spoke, shimmering anti-magic wards began to ripple out from the central towers, attempting to blanket city districts in a silencing field. Specialized runic circles, usually reserved for large-scale magical warfare, were activated, their purpose to overload and disable any rogue scrying connection. Messengers, their mounts already saddled, burst from the tower gates, carrying urgent directives to local garrisons and magical enforcement squads.

But the interference, that baffling chaotic mana signature, persisted. It wasn't just a shield; it felt... deliberate, almost taunting. And for every scrying pool that flickered back to mundane static, another seemed to hold the raw, brutal image just a moment longer, burned into the minds of the horrified citizens.

The chamber remained a maelstrom of frantic activity, mages chanting, runes flaring, and the air crackling with raw magical effort. Yet, the persistent mana interference continued to baffle their attempts to shut down the rogue broadcasts completely. While some screens across the Empire had flickered back to mundane static, far too many stubbornly clung to the horrific images of the battlefield. Vellok paced, his jaw clenched, demanding updates, each one more frustrating than the last.

Then, after several agonizing minutes, a different tower master, his face pale and etched with disbelief, called out, "Master Vellok! We have a new anomaly!" He pointed to a complex, shimmering map projected onto the central floor, usually used for tracking ley lines and major magical conduits. "Minutes ago, a large number of portals opened simultaneously at multiple high orbital points around our world."

Vellok spun, his eyes narrowing to pinpricks. "Portals? What kind of portals? To where?"

"Unknown origin, your grace" the mage replied, tracing lines on the map. "But our divinatorial tracking managed to get a brief lock before the mana interference intensified around those specific points. There are unidentified objects now floating at the locations where those portals appeared."

A cold, biting anger surged through Vellok's mind, mirroring the growing fury on the faces of the other tower masters. The implication of simultaneous, high-orbital portals, followed by the appearance of unknown objects and a planet-wide mana disruption, was stark and damning. There was only one entity

they knew with the audacious power, the sheer magical audacity, to conceive and execute such a maneuver against the Empire's vaunted magical defenses.

"Kaelen," Vellok snarled, his voice a low, dangerous growl. The name hung in the air like a curse. The self-proclaimed Ogre King, known for his eccentric brilliance and an unnerving ability to weaponize arcane knowledge. This wasn't some petty rogue mage; this was a calculated strike from a singular, powerful mind. A mind they had underestimated, dismissed, but one that now stood poised to shatter the Imperial narrative.

"He's been working with the ratfolk," one tower master muttered, the pieces clicking into place with a horrifying clarity. "The new armor... the sudden effectiveness... It all makes sense."

"It does not matter who," Vellok snapped, his gaze sweeping across the anxious faces. "For now, we contain the damage. The broadcast must be stopped. Whatever these 'disruptors' are, they have a limited capacity, or they will eventually fail. Focus all available resources on pinpointing the source of the broadcast, not just the general interference."

With the source of the interference identified, it was only a matter of time. The Empire's magical might, once fully focused, was relentless. The mana disruptors, floating silently in orbit, were quickly pinpointed despite the chaotic emissions. Simultaneously, the desperate, hidden locations transmitting the broadcast were discovered, one by one.

For the brave mages who had dared to collude with Rattan, their hearts plummeted. In their hidden positions, portals shimmered into existence. From them stepped grim-faced Imperial mages, their eyes cold and efficient. Without a word, they moved with ruthless precision, their own spells tearing apart the rebel mages' meticulously set-up equipment. Before any of the defiant mages could utter a sound, their limbs and mouths were bound by crackling magical restraints, their rebellion swiftly and brutally quashed.

Yet, a stark contrast emerged. Rattan, the orchestrator of this daring plan, remained safe. He was shielded by the powerful backing of Kaelen, the Ogre King, whose strategic genius and sudden, invaluable intervention on the battlefield had clearly shifted the balance of power. The Empire, still reeling from the public exposure and the unprecedented orbital attack, suddenly found itself in a precarious position. For now, it seemed, they were far more interested in being in Kaelen's good graces than in pursuing Rattan, who had proven himself to be an unexpectedly powerful piece in a much larger, more dangerous game.

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As for the battling ratmen and Bolthrower, they knew nothing of the dramatic events unfolding across the Empire. Their world remained the visceral, blood-soaked chaos of the front lines. A new nightmare, however, was about to unfold. The armor, designed to be so helpful, was proving too effective. Casualties among the ratmen were significantly lower than usual, an unforeseen consequence of the rogue intervention.

The sudden appearance of the Ogres had taken them by surprise. There was no strategic reason for the imposing warriors to descend at this moment; the Abyss had not yet pushed its higher-tier demons to the forefront. But nonetheless, seeing the Ogre Knights cleave through the swarms of lower-tier demons, momentarily clearing a path and giving the exhausted ratmen a brief moment of respite, was a welcome, if baffling, sight.

It was in this brief lull that the Abyss responded, a guttural roar from the depths signaling the shift. Higher-tier demons began to surge forward, their monstrous forms eclipsing the lesser fiends. The Ogre Knights, true to their unexpected role, briefly engaged these new, more formidable threats, their runic armor glowing as they clashed with ancient horrors.

"Briefly" was the key word here. After only a few minutes, the Ogre Knights began to fall back, their retreat disciplined but swift. The massive ship that had brought them descended lower, almost inviting attack, and the higher-tier demons, sensing an easier target, redirected their assault towards it. In response, the Ogre Knights seemed to have a perfect, undeniable reason to pull away, which they did. And just like that, the ratmen were left to face the newly unleashed nightmare of the higher-tier demons, alone once more.

The gnawing terror that had briefly subsided with the Ogre Knights' intervention now returned with a vengeance, colder and sharper than before. Even with their miraculously improved and powerful new armor and weapons, the ratmen quickly learned the terrifying limits of their newfound strength. The early third-tier demons, were the absolute apex of what they could consistently handle.

Against anything beyond that, anything truly higher on the abyssal hierarchy, it was no longer a fight to win, but a brutal, agonizing struggle merely to stay alive. A fourth-tier demon could sweep aside a dozen armored ratmen with a single, contemptuous gesture, their enhanced weapons sparking impotently against its infernal hide.

The mana-charged blades that had scythed through lesser fiends now merely scratched the surface, or were parried with casual ease by claws that dwarfed their wielders. The ratmen found themselves

dodging, weaving, and desperately sacrificing their brethren to buy precious seconds, their new armor providing only a thin veneer of protection against overwhelming power.

The illusion of invincibility, fleeting as it was, had shattered, replaced by the grim reality that even with their miraculous gifts, they were still just ratmen facing an enemy of cosmic, terrifying scale.

The earlier surprise intervention of the Ogre Knights now felt like a cruel jest, their retreat leaving the ratmen to face an unleashed horror. Hours bled into one another, a relentless, grinding struggle against overwhelming odds, until the first shadows of night began to stretch across the ravaged land.

Worst of all, with no Imperial forces to halt their relentless push, vast swathes of land were consumed. Entire valleys and strategic passes fell silent under the encroaching darkness as the higher-tier demons solidified their gains, their monstrous forms casting long, terrifying shadows across the newly conquered territories.

As night finally fell, a profound weariness settled over the world, but for Rattan, it was a different kind of darkness. He sat in his office, the glow of the holographic world map casting an eerie light on his face, a half-empty bottle of some potent, fiery liquid clutched in his hand. Guilt and shame were an overwhelming, suffocating sensation. He had long since received word of what had happened to his fellow mages, his "friends" who had dared to risk everything for the broadcast. He knew of their capture, their swift and brutal silencing. The cost of his gamble was now starkly, terribly apparent. The success of the broadcast, the awakening of the goblin populace, felt like cold comfort against the backdrop of betrayal and the desperate fight for survival on the front lines.

Weeks passed by, it was at this time that Rattan had a visitor, though he was entirely unaware of it. Due to the vast disparity in strength and magical prowess, Rattan, lost in his self-pity and guilt, couldn't sense the figure standing silently in the corner of his office, watching him drink himself into oblivion.

This silent observer was Vellok, who was now looking at the very mage who had thrown the entire Empire's magical surveillance network into a frantic scramble. Even with the unexpected, borrowed help from Kaelen's mana disruptors, Rattan's broadcast had been an undeniably impressive feat. As Vellok watched the young mage drown his sorrows, he remembered his previous conversation with Kroza, the Arch-Librarian, about Rattan's potential future.

In truth, Vellok hadn't found Rattan particularly impressive before today. He was just another ambitious, if somewhat naive, young mage. But what had happened today—the widespread broadcast, the public outcry, the sheer audacity of it all—had irrevocably proven him wrong. And now, Vellok stood before

him, about to embark on a desperate mission: to inform the young mage of their people's true history, to unravel the complex web of reasons behind the Empire's actions, and to hopefully make Rattan understand. He wanted Rattan to see why they were doing all this, and in doing so, to cease aiding their brother, Kaelen, who, in Vellok's eyes, had become too resentful and blind to the larger, darker truths at play.

Vellok materialized silently in the armchair opposite Rattan, his sudden appearance causing not even a ripple in the young mage's drunken stupor. Rattan, eyes bleary and unfocused, lifted his head slightly.

"Is that you, Gorok?" he slurred, fumbling with the bottle.

Vellok's eyebrow arched, a flicker of surprise in his normally impassive gaze. "You must be more impressive than I thought if Gorok himself lets you use his name in such a manner as you do." His voice was low, resonating with a quiet authority that cut through the haze of alcohol.

Rattan simply downed another cup, liquid sloshing over his chin. He squinted at Vellok as if the older mage were profoundly stupid. "Of course, Master Gorok is a good friend of mine. If you're not Gorok, then who are you?"

Vellok waved a hand, and a subtle, restorative spell washed over Rattan. The younger mage gasped, the fog in his mind clearing with startling speed, the metallic taste of alcohol replaced by a crisp clarity. At the same time, Vellok himself felt a jolt. The subtle, almost imperceptible thing residing deep within him, that ancient, silent observer, made a distinct, almost curious movement the moment his mana brushed against Rattan.

Within Rattan's very being, Phantom, the mysterious entity nested deep within him, recoiled sharply the instant Vellok's mana made contact. Something about the unique nature of Vellok's arcane energy sent Phantom's instincts screaming, immediately putting him on high alert. Simultaneously, he reached out, a desperate ethereal summons to Ikenga.

In the vast, verdant expanse of Rattan's spiritual world, represented by the colossal, intertwining trees of Osisi and Boros, two enormous golden eyes slowly began to open. These were not Ikenga's eyes; Ikenga's gaze was singular and a deep, mesmerizing purple. Instead, these golden eyes belonged to the being that Vellok carried within him.

Ikenga who was called for didn't hesitate. His colossal, singular, deep purple consciousness surged forward, his immense eye appearing within the spiritual realm, now fully facing the new, penetrating golden gaze.

The golden eyes, which had, just moments before, held a flicker of amusement when they had first settled on Phantom, now became deadly serious, their initial curiosity replaced by a chilling look of recognition. The two ethereal beings' gazes clashed, a silent, cosmic confrontation within Rattan's own essence. After a tense, drawn-out moment, the immense golden eyes retreated, pulling back from the piercing scrutiny of Ikenga's deep purple gaze.

Ikenga also pulled back, his deep purple gaze receding into the depths of Rattan's spiritual core. As he withdrew, a wave of calm assurance flowed from him to Phantom, communicating that everything was alright, despite the unsettling encounter.

Back in the Abyss, within his Zarvok domain, Ikenga brought a hand to his chin. A low chuckle rumbled from his chest. "My first interaction with an angel didn't go so bad," he mused, an amused tone in his voice, echoing through the room he was in.

Yet, a deeper curiosity now stirred within him. How had such a powerful entity, an angel of all beings, managed to get sealed inside a mere goblin like Vellok? The thought lingered, a puzzle to be solved.

For now, he was curious on Vellok next step, why had he suddenly seek out Rattan, it seems like his chess piece is at the risk of being exposed.

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Meanwhile, back with Rattan, Vellok could hardly control the tremor in his hand. The fleeting moment of recognition between the angel within him and Ikenga had been unmistakable, yet bewilderingly brief. He sent out another, more forceful wave of his mana towards Rattan, expecting some kind of reaction from the young mage, some flicker of awareness or resonance with the power he carried. But, contrary to all expectation, nothing happened. Rattan merely blinked, the effects of the earlier clarity spell holding. It made Vellok question if the previous happening had been an illusion, a trick of his own fatigued mind.

As for Rattan, the immediate effect of Vellok's mana had been a jolt, followed by a surge of overwhelming power that made him break out in a heavy sweat. He had sensed strength from the Ogre

King and Master Gorok, but it paled in comparison to the figure now calmly seated before him. This mage's mana seemed to have no discernible limit, an endless, swirling vortex of arcane energy.

A chilling realization clawed its way into Rattan's mind. He knew immediately this figure was from the Empire, a pillar of its magical might. "Were these," he thought, his stomach churning, "the type of beings he and the Ogre King had been going against?" The sheer disparity in power made his previous actions feel utterly reckless, almost suicidal.

Rattan felt a cold dread settle in his stomach, a certainty that he wouldn't be surprised if the Ogre King had sold him out for his own safety. He would understand. But contrary to his thought, the figure across from him spoke first, his voice calm, resonating with a quiet authority.

"Mage Nixbolt," he began, "you might have heard of my name before, but for formal purposes, I will introduce myself as Grand Mage Vellok."

The name hit Rattan like a physical blow. He immediately scrambled from his seat, dropping to one knee, head bowed in deep deference. There were too many histories, too many whispered stories about this figure, especially the most prominent one: his unparalleled position and direct relation to the Emperor himself. Rattan found himself utterly unable to speak, his tongue tied by a mix of fear and overwhelming respect.

A moment of silence stretched between them before Vellok spoke again, his voice softer, almost reflective. "Do you hate the Empire, boy?"

Rattan remained on one knee, his head bowed, the words of the Grand Mage echoing in his mind. The question hung in the air, a silent challenge. His mind raced, a frantic war between self-preservation and the burning indignation that had fueled his actions. Should he lie, offer the expected sycophantic reverence? Or should he speak the truth, risk everything, and lay bare the resentment that had festered within him and his people for generations?

He knew the power of the man before him. A single word from Vellok could end his life, erase him from existence. Yet, in that moment, something shifted. Perhaps it was the lingering clarity from Vellok's spell, or the raw memories of the battlefield and his betrayed mages, but a stubborn resolve hardened within him. A lie felt hollow, meaningless, a betrayal of the very defiance he had just unleashed upon the Empire.

Taking a shaky breath, Rattan slowly raised his head, his gaze, though still wary, now met Vellok's. "Hate?" he rasped, his voice rough. "No, Grand Mage. Hate is too simple a word for what I feel. I feel... confusion. Betrayal. And anger that we let strangers—'Demons' in this case—play in our backyard while the Empire sits back and watches."

His voice gained strength with each word, the suppressed frustrations bubbling to the surface. "We are told we are protected, that the Empire is supreme. Yet, when the true Abyss came, we do nothing. And those who are doing something, their deaths are deemed a strategic necessity while the citizens lounge in blissful ignorance. If that is the Empire's protection, then I do not understand it."

Rattan's voice rose, a bitter edge entering his tone. "This war has gone nowhere since the beginning, no achievement on the Empire's side. The Empire forces us to sit and wait for our deaths, meanwhile villages and lands are taken over. Only cities seem to be protected, yet even with that, we lost one city and a high-tier mage at that."

Vellok listened, his expression unreadable, allowing Rattan to vent the torrent of his accumulated frustration. The Grand Mage offered no interruption, no flicker of anger at the young mage's audacity. He simply observed, a deep knowing in his eyes.

"And when we finally get a chance to push back," Rattan continued, his voice trembling with a raw, desperate indignation, "when we find a way to fight these horrors, when we show the people what is truly happening, what do you do? You shut it down. You silence the truth, just as you silence those who dared to speak it! You let the ratfolk fight and die for a secret war while the Empire feasts on lies!" He gestured wildly around the room, as if encompassing the entirety of the vast, oblivious Imperial lands. "You speak of protection, Grand Mage, but all I see is control. Control over knowledge, control over lives, and ultimately, control over our people choice on deaths!"

Rattan finally slumped forward, spent, the raw emotion leaving him breathless. He kept his gaze fixed on Vellok, daring the Grand Mage to deny it, to justify the betrayal he felt so keenly. The silence that followed was heavy, pregnant with the weight of Rattan's accusations and the unspoken truths they both carried.

Vellok's expression remained impassive as Rattan's impassioned outburst died down. The Grand Mage leaned back slightly in the armchair, studying the younger goblin with an unnerving intensity. When he finally spoke, his voice was calm, almost conversational.

"It seems the Empire's hard work to manipulate propaganda hasn't been doing so well," Vellok remarked, a hint of dry amusement in his tone. "You are a goblin, Mage Nixbolt, a goblin mage at that, yet you somehow feel heavily for the ratfolk." He paused, letting the implication hang in the air, a direct challenge to Rattan's ingrained biases and the carefully constructed racial hierarchies of the Empire. "Tell me, where did this newfound empathy for a despised, lesser race truly come from?"

Rattan flinched, the subtle jab hitting its mark. He knew the ingrained prejudices, the constant disdain goblins held for ratfolk. His own mind had been filled with it for years. Yet, the images he had seen, the raw desperation on the battlefield, had burned through the propaganda.

"It came from seeing them fight, Grand Mage," Rattan said, his voice firm despite the shame that still pricked at him. "It came from watching them stand against something that would have utterly destroyed us without a second thought. It came from realizing that if we were in their place, the Empire would likely do the same to us. Their 'lesser' status, as you put it, doesn't make them less alive, less capable of fear, or less deserving of protection when faced with an existential threat."

He paused, a new thought solidifying in his mind. "And it came from the armor, Grand Mage. The armor that made them fight like true warriors. An armor that allowed them to hold their ground, even if just for a moment, against the Abyss. The armor that you and the Empire clearly did not provide. My empathy, as you call it, came from seeing the truth, not the lies we are fed."

"Do you know of our people's history?" Vellok asked, his gaze unwavering.

Rattan opened his mouth to speak, a standard Imperial education's recitation of glorious victories and benevolent governance ready on his tongue. But then he hesitated, the recent revelations about the war, the propaganda, and the surprising depth of Vellok's knowledge stopping him. He looked at the Grand Mage, a newfound wariness in his eyes. "I have a feeling the history you speak of isn't one I'm familiar with."

Vellok's lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smile. "Smart boy."

"Take a walk with me?"

Rattan, still reeling from the unspoken implications of the Grand Mage's words, nodded slowly. Vellok stood up and turned, his crimson robes rustling softly, and led the way towards the door to Rattan

office. Vellok opened the door to Rattan surprise he was not welcomed with the familiar passage he was used to, instead his door in Vellok's hands seemed to have changed and what emerged was a cave.

Beyond lay a narrow, torch-lit passage that descended steeply into the earth. The air grew cooler, heavier, carrying a faint, earthy scent mixed with something metallic, almost ferrous. Rattan followed, his hand instinctively summoning his staff, a gesture for comfort.

The passage opened into a vast, cavernous space. It was not a natural cave, but clearly shaped by someone's hands, smoothed and yet devoid of the usual Imperial grandeur. Instead, it felt... old. In the center, almost obscured by the shadows, was a colossal, pulsating mass.

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It was impossibly large, filling a significant portion of the chamber. Flesh-toned, but with veins that pulsed with a faint, internal light, like slow-moving lava. It breathed, a shallow, rhythmic expansion and contraction that created the heavy, metallic scent in the air. Tendrils, thick as tree trunks, extended from its bulk, disappearing into the surrounding rock. It was utterly, sickeningly alien.

Rattan stumbled to a halt, his breath catching in his throat. His mind, trained in neat categories of flora and fauna, struggled to process the monstrous entity before him. This wasn't a creature; it was... something else. It looked like an organ, magnified to grotesque proportions, yet alive with a disturbing, slow vitality.

"This is the 'Mother'," Vellok said, his voice quiet, devoid of his usual dry amusement. "The source of all goblins, our sign of existence."

Rattan tore his gaze from the pulsating horror to Vellok, his face pale. "The... the Mother? What... what is it?"

Vellok stepped closer to the grotesque organ, placing a hand lightly on one of its pulsing tendrils. "It is the fruit of our ancestors' desperate ambition. The engine of our people's grand deception." He turned to face Rattan, his eyes, usually sharp and knowing, now held a deep, ancient sorrow. "You asked about our history, Rattan. It begins here. With theft. And a lie so profound, it has reshaped an entire world."

Rattan could hardly keep his mouth opened as he tried to take in what he was hearing, fear overtook him as he realized how much danger he was in if his real identity was exposed.

"Why are you showing me this, Your Grace?" Rattan's voice, though hushed, carried a tremor of unease as he looked at Vellok.

Vellok turned, his expression grave. "Your noble actions, Rattan, and the very reasons behind them, have been twisted by Kaelen. They are now being used to tear down everything we have painstakingly built, to undermine the very existence of our race."

Before Rattan could formulate a response, Vellok raised a hand, a silent command for patience. "I will tell you the true history of our people. Only then will you truly understand the depth of the Empire's care for each and every one of its citizens, and the profound reasons behind our every action."

"Our history, Rattan, begins not with us, but with the ratfolk. They hold a unique position in this world: they were its first intelligent species, the world's first true 'children.' This bestowed upon them certain inherent benefits, a natural advantage, if you will. Our goblin race, in those ancient times, could only be described as semi-intelligent in comparison to the ratfolk. We were crude, tribal, and driven by instinct, while they crafted, reasoned, and built."

"While the ratfolk were busy innovating, creating, and building the foundations of their civilization, our ancestors, the goblins, were little more than beasts. We slept on the cold forest floor, our minds solely consumed by the immediate need for the next meal. You could even say we were semi-monsters in those days. We would launch desperate raids on the ratfolk's homes, driven by hunger, hoping to steal their provisions. And when those raids failed, when starvation truly set in, we turned on each other, resorting to cannibalism to survive."

"There was no inherent drive within our race to evolve, to take that next step. We simply existed, watching, almost as if through a haze, as the ratfolk continued their relentless march of progress. Then, a profound shift occurred: the emergence of gods."

"The goblins observed that the ratfolk had their own deities, born from their collective belief in specific concepts – perhaps the enduring strength of stone, or the life-giving warmth of fire. After years of unwavering devotion, these beliefs would coalesce, and a god would manifest, bringing about tangible change in their world. And so, the goblins, in their untamed, impatient way, decided to follow suit. But unlike the patient, intellectual ratfolk, we sought shortcuts. We looked for ways to accelerate the birth of our own gods, driven by our inherent impulsiveness and a desperate desire for power."

"The reason for this desperate urgency, Rattan, was brutally simple: the gods were proving to be an incredibly potent force for the ratfolk. They were now able to display supernatural powers, abilities that made their homes impenetrable. This meant our goblin ancestors could no longer raid them for food, and facing starvation, their very survival was at stake."

"Of course, there were other ways to find sustenance, like hunting. But the magical beasts of that world were terrifyingly powerful. Even the ratfolk, with their advanced intellect, were helpless against these creatures until their gods and divine blessings became a reality. Our ancestors, lacking any such boons, were utterly outmatched."

"This stark reality solidified the goblin race's need for their own gods as the single most critical objective. They were willing to do anything to ensure they acquired one, and this included something truly horrific: blood sacrifice of their own people. Horrifying as it sounds, it somehow worked. The birth of their gods came faster, but these deities, born of such grim devotion, demanded far more than just faith to sustain them."

"The advent of their own gods brought about a profound shift in goblin development, Rattan. They were no longer ignorant savages. At the insistence of their demanding deities, they were forced to innovate. Their gods required constant blood sacrifice, and the source of that sacrifice initially didn't matter. The goblins, in their newfound zeal, didn't mind sacrificing their own until they began to notice a terrifying trend: their numbers were dwindling at an alarming rate."

"This stark realization forced a difficult but necessary decision: they had to turn their attention elsewhere for sacrifices. Their gaze, inevitably, fell upon the ratfolk."

"By this point, the ratfolk were incredibly numerous and widespread, offering a vast pool of potential victims. However, these ratfolk also enjoyed the blessings of their own gods, making them far from easy targets. The only advantage the goblins possessed was the efficiency of their own gods' blessings compared to those of the ratfolk. Goblin divine favor leaned heavily towards warfare and brute strength, whereas the ratfolk's blessings were geared more towards healing, societal progress, and the preservation of life. This crucial difference allowed the goblins to still get their hands on the ratfolk, albeit with great effort."

"This continued for centuries, Rattan, until our world was sharply divided between two dominant races: the ratfolk and the goblins, both vastly different from their savage ancestors. This bitter rivalry, fueled by the relentless battle for faith and dominance, raged on for countless generations."

Vellok paused, a dark, deeply etched look flashing in his eyes. "Then, one day, their world—" he stopped, correcting himself, "Our nightmare began when our world caught the attention of a passing mage colony." He spoke with the chilling conviction of someone who had witnessed the events firsthand.

"The day our nightmare began was an undeniable sight for both our races. All we saw were pillars of blinding light descending from the sky. Our gods, in their sacred domains and temples, could hardly put up a fight before they were utterly wiped away, eradicated as if they were mere whispers."

"For the next hundred years, it was an age of suffocating darkness for both races. We found ourselves clinging to each other, dependent and terrified, too sacred to even cast a glance towards the heavens."

"Do you think it's possible to create a construct the size of a planet and have it move?" Vellok abruptly turned to Rattan, his voice low and intense.

Rattan, who had never conceived of such a colossal feat, could only stare. "That's... that's utterly impossible, Your Grace! The sheer scale of power and resources required would be astronomical. It defies every known law of magic and engineering! Even with all the Empire's might, our greatest minds couldn't even begin to fathom such a creation, let alone move it across the cosmos!"

Vellok's laughter echoed, a chilling, mirthless sound that sent shivers down Rattan's spine. Yet, behind the forced amusement, Rattan saw a profound, ancient terror flicker in the elder mage's eyes. "This impossible object, Rattan, this monstrous, world-sized construct, hung above our world for fifty agonizing years. Its very existence was a constant, horrifying reminder. And to reinforce that nightmare, once in a while, a colossal beam of blinding light would plummet from its underbelly onto a random spot on our world, indiscriminately vacuuming up countless goblins and ratfolk alike."

Vellok's gaze intensified as he locked eyes with Rattan, the phantom fear palpable. "I, along with many of the Empire's current Sixth Stage mages, happened to be among those born and grown in that object. After countless years spent living inside that monstrous object, can you possibly imagine what we discovered about it?"

Rattan swallowed hard, his voice barely a whisper. "What?"

"That impossible object," Vellok continued, his voice now a chilling monotone, "is something handed out to mages who dedicate themselves to exploring planes and universes, hoping to uncover their deepest secrets. At the same time, it serves as an experimental site for mages who dare not carry out their more audacious plans on their own home worlds."