

Guardian gods 561

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Kaelen remained calm. "Indeed," he confirmed. "Which is why I've called on you to act as my assistant. Together, with our magi-tech system, we must figure out a countermeasure for everyone." He paused, his gaze hardening. "The shield put up by the Sixth-Tier Mage won't hold on for long, and we can't depend on them to continue helping. We have to figure something out fast, or we'll meet our end before even taking a foot into the abyss."

On the other side of the abyss, Vorenza's subordinates reveled in a grim satisfaction. They watched with glee as the Empire's army descended into a chaotic period of madness. A surge of temptation ran through their ranks – to strike now, to capitalize on the disarray. Yet, they hesitated, their predatory instincts tempered by caution. They were keenly aware of the three powerful mages, each no less formidable than Vorenza himself, hovering ominously in the clouds above.

Their caution was immediately validated. One of the formidable mages descended, her power rippling outwards, seemingly quelling the most overt psychic assault. The demons, however, were not truly disappointed. This minor setback was merely a ripple in the grand scheme. They knew, with absolute certainty, that this was just the beginning of the Empire army's descent into a living hell.

This night's psychic attack was but a brief, introductory wave. From this point onward, the true nightmare would begin. Each fallen demon, each slain Empire soldier, would fuel the next, stronger wave of psychic assault. The battlefield, once a strategic ground, would soon transform into a dance of madness, a spectacle the demons eagerly anticipated. They understood that the true war was not just one of blades and spells, but of minds and sanity.

Back in the Empire, a new and unsettling problem was brewing. For the first time since the invasion began, another Demon King, one who had previously remained aloof and seemingly uninterested in the conflict, had begun to make his move. Before this, his actions, and the Empire's responses, felt more like a cautious dance, a play-fight where neither side truly pushed for victory.

This Demon King, now identified as Zarvok, surprised the Empire with his first official maneuver. After his recent discussions with Ikenga and Keles, Zarvok's objective had become crystal clear. He gathered his forces to strategize on how to seize control of the territory where the "Goblin's Mother" was located.

Zarvok's overarching goal had always been to conquer this world without inflicting irreparable damage. This objective remained unchanged even as he initiated this new, aggressive offensive. He understood

that the "Mother is the goblin empire's weakness," a leverage point that would ultimately force them to concede their world. Gaining possession of it was now his singular focus, before the war escalated beyond control.

It so happens that Ikenga and Keles had provided Zarvok with the very means to achieve his new objective. He immediately bestowed the two Sixth-Tier souls he received from them upon two of his most trusted subordinates. These two demons had lingered at the peak of the Fifth Stage for over five centuries, awaiting precisely such an opportunity to ascend. Zarvok's calculated move provided just that.

With this, his power grew exponentially, as he now commanded two Sixth-Tier demons. While their newfound strength elevated them to a status of near-equals rather than mere servants, their deep respect and obedience to Zarvok remained unwavering, a testament to his pivotal role in their transformation.

Zarvok's initial offensive was swift and unexpected. He deployed one of his newly promoted Sixth-Tier demons to demolish the fortifications the Empire had painstakingly built to keep his army at bay. This audacious move caught the Empire completely off guard, as no one anticipated a high-level Sixth-Stage power to suddenly enter the fray with such decisive action.

On the long, imposing wall built by the Empire, today began like any other. The routine was set: open the gates, unleash the ratmen to harry the low-tier Imp demons of the Abyss on the battlefield. Mages and Ogre Knights, even the gamblers, passed the time by picking out specific ratfolk, placing bets on whether they'd make it back alive.

But today, just before the gates could swing open, an inexplicable dread settled upon everyone on and beyond the wall. A cold sweat broke out universally, a chilling premonition no one could articulate.

Then, in the sky above, a figure materialized. It was a newly promoted Demon King, eyes closed, seemingly taking a deep, almost reverent breath, as if savoring the air of this new world. This was the quintessential demon, complete with leathery wings, menacing horns, and a whip-like tail.

Despite the immense pressure exerted by this foreign world, the Demon King remained poised. Slowly, deliberately, it drew a long, red sword from its back. Immediately, the air around the blade began to warp and shimmer, twisting with the intense heat radiating from the weapon. The casual betting and bored routines of the Empire's soldiers were about to be violently interrupted.

The new Demon King, eager to witness its "Law of Scorch" in action, wasted no time. There was no need for excessive force when a Sixth-Tier being intervened. With a swift, deliberate motion, the Demon King drew a line across the sky with its long red sword, then sheathed the weapon.

The line tore open the very fabric of the heavens. The Demon King's chest visibly swelled as its unique law filled it, and then, with a thunderous exhalation, it breathed scorching hot air into the newly formed rift.

To those facing the attack, the small line on the horizon transformed into a gaping wound in the sky. The mages and Ogre Knights on the wall watched, horrified, as the sky darkened ominously.

Through the torn heavens, a colossal maw, bristling with teeth, materialized. It, too, exhaled a torrent of scorching wind onto the lands below. The effect was instantaneous. One moment, a gentle breeze; the next, everything caught in its path was obliterated, reduced to nothing but ash. The formidable wall, the houses, the trees, the plants—everything swept by the inferno vanished. Just like that, the Empire's meticulously built fortifications were utterly erased.

The Demon King immediately felt the severe backlash of unleashing such power on the uncorrupted land. An overwhelming malice from the surrounding world assailed it, heavily suppressing its Sixth-Tier stage. Without hesitation, it turned and flew back into the Abyss, the victory coming at a significant personal cost.

The sudden surge of malice from the world itself rippled through the Empire, a chilling wave felt by most of its Sixth-Tier Mages. However, those few, like the mages with Kaelen and others holding critical positions, were taken back but could not move. The remaining mages, those who did feel the earth's fury, reacted in a way most would consider crude and unsophisticated, a rookie mistake rather than a display of mastery.

In a desperate, instantaneous move, these mages forcefully tore open the space around them, appearing on the scorched battlefield just moments after the high-tier demon's devastating strike. This raw, unrefined method of teleportation came with an immediate and jarring consequence: upon arrival, each mage was flung forward for a brief, disorienting period before finally grinding to a halt.

In mere seconds, in what felt like a blink of an eye, three Sixth-Tier Mages now hovered in the sky above the desolate, ash-covered land. Their collective gaze, grim and determined, immediately fixed on the retreating form of the demon, now rapidly making its way back towards the Abyss.

One of the mages, fueled by a searing rage, summoned their magical staff and struck the open air. The sound of crashing waves immediately filled the entire area, and a gaping void ripped open behind the mage. From this swirling chasm, a colossal water giant could be seen, its immense, translucent hand rising in a silent wave.

Through the rift, an enormous amount of water, easily the size of a mountain, surged forth like a monstrous tidal wave. It roared across the scorched landscape, hurtling towards the unsuspecting demons. None of them could react in time; the sudden, overwhelming deluge swallowed them whole, tearing their bodies apart with its sheer, unstoppable force.

The Demon King, meanwhile, had reached the portal leading back to the Abyss and plunged through it just as the monstrous wave descended. No sooner had the Demon King vanished than a new figure emerged from the shimmering portal. This individual was bare-chested, covered in intricate markings, and stepped into the world with an air of unsettling calm.

This new arrival was Ikenga. Witnessing the colossal wave surging towards them, he immediately established a profound connection with the very nature of the corrupted land.

As the water bore down, Ikenga gestured with his hand, and the earth below responded. The corrupted ground ripped open, forming a vast, gaping maw. A powerful, unseen force emanated from this abyss, drawing the immense body of water towards its hungry depths. The colossal wave didn't just flow into the chasm; it was sucked in with a thunderous roar, a frantic gurgle accompanying the earth's rapid consumption.

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The air shimmered violently from the sudden displacement, a vacuum created by the land's insatiable hunger. Once devoured, the churning water underwent a horrifying transformation, solidifying into a thick, viscous body of black sludge.

From within this malevolent sludge, the demons who managed to survive and was not crushed by the wave began to reform, their grotesque bodies slowly emerging from the murky, black mass.

As for the three Sixth-Tier Mages, the sight of Ikenga immediately quelled their rage. It wasn't fear that gripped them, but a profound unease. Ikenga had proven himself to be an enigma, a force beyond their

current comprehension, and the grim reality was that three top-level mages had already fallen by his hand.

By this point, the viscous black sludge had mostly dissipated, its last demon climbing out as the corrupted land below reverted to its previous, albeit scorched, state. The mages exchanged a final, hard glare with Ikenga, then cast their eyes over the devastation below. A portal shimmered open behind them, and without a word, they retreated through it, leaving Ikenga alone on the transformed battlefield.

Ikenga stood amidst the remnants of the scorched earth, a thoughtful expression on his face. His appearance wasn't solely to aid Zervok; he had a deeper, more personal agenda. He'd come out this time because he wanted to experiment with something new.

Ikenga's last battle against the mages was a brutal awakening. While he barely survived, he emerged with a crucial insight into their greatest vulnerability: ignorance. The mages, so confident in their arcane might, were utterly reliant on comprehensive knowledge of their foes. If they knew nothing of their opponent's abilities, weaknesses, or even their very nature, they couldn't formulate countermeasures or strategic plans. This meant that, despite their power, they could be caught completely off guard. Their rigid adherence to preparation became their Achilles' heel when faced with the unknown.

Ikenga also confronted his own critical weakness during that battle: a limited well of divine power and a crippling lack of ambient nature to draw upon. This was a dire situation for a god whose essence was intertwined with the natural world.

In a stroke of desperate genius, Ikenga expended a significant portion of his divine power to manifest his own localized pocket of nature on the barren world. A fundamental act of creation. The artificial environment, brimming with his divine essence, immediately began to replenish his spent power, creating a vital feedback loop. This self-sustaining nature not only revitalized him but also leveled the playing field, transforming a losing battle into a desperate struggle for survival for the mages.

Crucially, this audacious maneuver was only possible because of the barren nature of the planet they fought on. Devoid of any existing flora or fauna, it offered no conflicting natural energies for Ikenga to contend with, allowing his self-created nature to flourish unopposed. Had there been a vibrant ecosystem, his efforts might have been diluted or even actively resisted by the existing natural order as an instinctive act to preserve itself which Ikenga understood as his action ruined the world itself.

Ikenga knows that the mages are meticulous analysts. Once they dissect the remnants of their last clash, they will undoubtedly pinpoint his dependency on nature and the critical role of the barren environment. Their next move is predictable: they will deny him any access to a planet. Instead, they will force the inevitable final confrontation into the empty void of space, where no nature exists for him to connect with or create. This strategic move will aim to cripple him before the battle even begins, turning his strength into a fatal liability.

As the origin god of nature and curses, Ikenga has always understood that he was never destined to be a conventional "fighting god." His power lies not in raw destructive force, but in adaptation and growth, mirroring the very essence of nature itself. This innate adaptability is his greatest asset.

Now, facing the prospect of a battle in the absolute void, Ikenga is not despairing; he is curious. He is keenly interested to observe how his divinity will inherently react to being forced to fight in the barren, lifeless expanse of space. This isn't just about survival; it's about the evolution of his own divine essence, pushing the boundaries of what the origin god of nature can achieve when stripped of his most fundamental connection.

While curiosity is a driving force for Ikenga, he understands that unchecked inquisitiveness against an equal opponent would be a fatal flaw. His previous encounter with the mages, where he barely survived, cemented this understanding. Ikenga is not one to let his curiosity lead him to a self-inflicted defeat. That's why his departure from the Abyss today is not a whim, but a calculated act of preparation and exploration. He's not simply wondering; he's actively seeking to bridge the gap in his own power before the inevitable final confrontation.

Ikenga's cursed divinity is overwhelmingly strong, capable of insidious and devastating effects. However, its efficacy is deeply tied to his access to his original world or divine domain's vast power pool. Curses, by their very nature, are more passive and less confrontational than overt displays of power. They are slow-burning poisons, effective over time, but vulnerable to immediate depletion.

This means that while a curse might be devastating in the long run, if Ikenga's current divine energy pool cannot sustain it, the curse becomes meaningless. It simply fizzles out, leaving him exposed.

Yet, in the crucible of his last battle, Ikenga gained another profound understanding: the synergistic potential of his dual nature. He discovered that by weaving curses into his nature-based attacks, he could create something far more potent and immediate. His decisive attack against the three mages, "The Curse of Entropic Bloom," is the prime example of this breakthrough. This ability to infuse his adaptable nature with the insidious power of curses transforms them from passive afflictions into active, devastating forces.

This new understanding is the true wellspring of Ikenga's current journey. His curiosity now is a focused drive to explore the full extent of this combined power. He wants to know how far he can push the boundaries of this synergy, how potent he can make his nature-infused curses, and how quickly he can deploy them. This is why he has left the isolation of the Abyss: to actively experiment, train, and expand his capabilities in preparation for the ultimate clash with the mages.

Ikenga sought Keles's companionship on his journey of exploration. However, when he urged her to prepare for the unexpected, Keles's response was a stark reminder of her domain: "Death needs no preparation for its arrival; it will arrive when it's needed."

Her words were but a declaration of absolute certainty. As the embodiment of Death, her power isn't about preemptive strikes or contingency plans; it's about the inevitable. This unwavering conviction, spoken as Ikenga glanced at her slightly bulging stomach, underscored the profound, unchangeable nature of her divinity, and perhaps hinted at the unique future of their offspring. Her power simply is, making mortal concepts of "preparation" irrelevant to her.

Ikenga smiled. It was a genuine smile, a mix of appreciation for Keles's resolute nature. With that subtle acknowledgment, he performed an act he hadn't undertaken in decades: with a mere flex of his will, a shimmering green portal tore open before him.

As he stepped through, his cursed markings glowed faintly, a brief flash of power as he wove a curse of self-concealment around his presence. This was a preemptive measure, a move to ensure his movement isn't under watchful eyes and is on the empire radar.

The moment he emerged from the portal, Ikenga was met with the blinding, unfiltered light of the sun, immediately followed by the bone-chilling vacuum of space. The portal winked shut behind him, sealing his connection to his previous location. He didn't float aimlessly; with precise control, Ikenga landed on the Moon.

This act of teleportation was a feat Ikenga was utterly incapable of when he first arrived in this new world. His ability to perform such far-reaching jump now showcases the profound and unique evolutionary potential of an Origin God.

Despite the vast cosmic distance separating them from their original world, Ikenga and Keles have never ceased to grow. While their connection to their primeval source of power might be diminished, their

individual divinities, rooted in their very essence as Origin Gods, continue to expand and evolve. This inherent capacity for growth is a defining characteristic of their unique existence.

Recently, Ikenga has begun to notice a subtle yet significant limitation: he can't simply "touch" all the space around him as he could in his original domain. Unlike his home world, where his presence was ubiquitous, his influence here is more constrained. He's discovering that his divine reach in this new cosmos is primarily limited to areas where a connection has already been established with him. This means his power doesn't inherently permeate everything, but rather extends to places he has actively shaped or bonded with.

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This became evident as Ikenga observed the enormous, grotesque plant he had created, which now bore one of his very eyes as a grotesque fruit. The plant, a testament to his power, remained oblivious to his presence, thanks to the applied curse that perfectly concealed him. He can perceive and interact with his creations hence why he could teleport here easily.

This limitation on his direct spatial influence also explains his restricted teleportation. He found he could not teleport from the Abyss or the goblin world. His unique form of traversal is confined to the corrupted land, a place that holds no inherent attachment to either the Abyss or the goblin world. This corrupted land is, in essence, a nature of its own being formed, not complete yet hence why Ikenga can easily influence or act on it.

Ikenga continued his solitary walk across the barren lunar surface, his bare feet making no sound as they "mapped" the ground beneath him. Suddenly, he paused. A subtle fluctuation in space, not far away, caught his attention. Directing his focused gaze, his divine sight pierced the veil, revealing a hidden truth.

There, in the void, was a small, inconspicuous station. Within it, a mage was meticulously engaged in what appeared to be research. Yet, every so often, her gaze would drift, landing squarely on the moon and the grotesque plant that now bore one of Ikenga's eyes. A faint smile touched Ikenga's lips. It seemed the mages hadn't forgotten his unspoken threat to unleash the moon itself upon them. Unperturbed by her observation, Ikenga resumed his walk.

As Ikenga continued his silent promenade, a strange and profound transformation began to occur. With every step, pieces of his very being began to fall away, dissolving into shimmering spores of light. These luminous particles didn't dissipate; instead, they were gently absorbed by the moon itself. The process was gradual but relentless. Soon, there was no longer a visible Ikenga on the lunar surface, only the

subtle, growing luminescence within the moon. He hadn't vanished; he had become one with the celestial body, seeding it with his divine essence.

The spores of light, now fully integrated into the moon's core, began to pulse with a faint, internal rhythm. Ikenga, no longer a physical presence but an essence woven into the very fabric of the celestial body, felt a familiar stirring within him. It was the echo of his previous act of creation on the barren planet, but this time, the scale was far grander, the potential far more immense.

Before he was in a hurry and the process was rushed, he could not fully observe how the seed needed for the last planet was formed. This time he planned to watch closely.

Due to the scale of his new project, Ikenga invited a few friends usually ignored by him and other origin gods. He reached out, his divine consciousness a vast, intricate network extending beyond the lunar surface, into the deep currents of the void. This time, he sought not to merely create, but to collaborate. He called upon the fundamental elemental forces that sculpted the universe itself: the unyielding strength of Earth, the furious dance of Fire, the caressing, yet carving, breath of Wind, and the life-giving flow of Water.

These weren't entities to be commanded, but ancient, titanic powers he would entreat, offering the moon as a canvas for their raw, untamed expression. He would provide the vessel, the nascent framework for life, and in return, they would pour their elemental might into shaping a nature with him.

As Ikenga forged this cosmic pact, the moon began to respond. With the subtle, deep hum. First, from deep within the lunar crust, an Earth-infused will began to manifest. Jagged, obsidian spires, veined with unknown metallic glows, slowly pierced the dusty surface, drawing nourishment from cosmic dust and the moon's own dense core. They twisted and turned, forming cavernous structures and soaring peaks that defied the vacuum.

Then came the whispers of Wind. Ethereal, shimmering currents of cosmic gas, energized by distant solar flares, began to sweep across the nascent landscape. They sculpted the obsidian peaks, eroding them into elegant, impossible formations, and carried luminous spores that way breathed out from the huge plant hosting Ikenga's eye, from one nascent crater to another, seeding new growth.

Next, the Fires of Creation ignited. Not destructive flames, but the cool, luminous infernos of stellar nurseries. Veins of pure, incandescent plasma, like rivers of solidified starlight, began to flow beneath the moon's newly formed crust, providing warmth and energy to the burgeoning ecosystem. On the surface, strange, phosphorescent flora, born from the interaction of solar radiation and lunar dust,

pulsed with internal light, their blossoms unfurling slowly in the silent void, drawing sustenance from cosmic rays.

After the fire, Ikenga felt the land was ready for plants to grow in it, as so began days, week and months of plants growing and dying.

Reason why it was taking so long even after Ikenga already had a template of plant needed to survive in this moon was because he wanted more than planting growing. He wanted to create an atmosphere on this moon.

And he wanted to do this with the help of unique plants, His process w began with the deliberate cultivation of pioneer flora. These aren't just any oxygen-producing plants; they are specially designed, through his inherent nature divinity. These plants would be incredibly efficient photosynthesizers, rapidly converting the moon's surface minerals and solar energy or reflected light from a nearby planet into vast quantities of oxygen. But beyond just oxygen, these specialized botanical lifeforms could also exhale other trace gases crucial for atmospheric stability—gases that contribute to a protective ozone layer, help regulate temperature, or even bind with existing lunar dust to prevent atmospheric escape.

This was where the elemental forces become indispensable partners. Air elementals, for instance, aren't just passive dispersers; they become active sculptors of the burgeoning atmosphere. Imagine them as living currents, guiding the newly released gases across the moon's surface, ensuring even distribution and preventing pockets of inert or toxic air from forming. They could actively churn the nascent atmosphere, creating the first rudimentary wind patterns, aiding in the dispersal of spores from the pioneer plants, and mixing the different gas components into a homogenous blend.

Furthermore, these elementals were guided by Ikenga to stabilize the atmosphere against solar winds and cosmic radiation. They began to form a subtle, ethereal barrier, a shimmering shield woven from concentrated air and magic, deflecting harmful particles. Over time, as the atmosphere thickens, this elemental intervention began to shift from active shielding to more subtle guidance, maintaining equilibrium and fostering the conditions for a stable water cycle to eventually emerge.

Finally, the essence of Water trickled forth. Not liquid water, for that would freeze instantly in the vacuum, but an ethereal, almost gaseous form of condensed water energy – a "spiritual water" that flowed through the internal channels of the moon. This energy sustained the newly formed plants, allowing the bizarre, resilient flora to thrive and grow, defying the harsh realities of space. It became the lifeblood of this alien, yet profoundly natural, domain.

It was at this time that Ikenga began to toy with his cursed divinity, He poured his cursed essence into the obsidian growths, giving birth to what he mentally named "The Blight of Stone Silence." He hoped this curse would drain the life-force and even the will to act from any mage or intruder who dared to stand upon these growths, slowly petrifying them from the feet up, or perhaps even rendering them utterly immobile, unable to cast spells or move.

Into the currents of the cosmic wind, he wove the "Whispers of Misdirection." His ambition for this curse was to subtly manipulate the very perceptions of those exposed to it, causing spells to go awry, targeting to fail, and even allies to turn against each other in confusion. He imagined it as an invisible fog of despair and discord, carried on the elemental breeze.

The luminous plasma flows became vessels for the "Flame of Diminishment." He hoped this curse would slowly leach the magical energy from any mages drawing too close, turning their potent spells into sputtering sparks, and eventually leaving them powerless, their arcane wellsprings utterly dry.

Finally, the ethereal spiritual water became the conduit for the "Tide of Entropy." This was his most ambitious curse, intended to accelerate the decay and dissolution of magical constructs, protective wards, and even the very bodies of his enemies. He envisioned it as an invisible rot, gradually unraveling the fabric of their being and their creations.

With the cosmic garden thriving and his experimental curses weaving through the very fabric of the moon, Ikenga moved to his final, most audacious act. His physical form might be dissolved, but his will, now intrinsically bound to the moon, was absolute. He intended to turn this celestial body into a temporary, accessible anchor for his power, a strategic point he could reach whenever the ultimate confrontation with the mages arrived.

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Before his current, more subtle machinations, Ikenga harbored an even more audacious plan. During his time in Zarvok Library, a repository of forbidden and obscure knowledge, he stumbled upon a fascinating grimoire. This ancient tome detailed a concept known as "space pocketing": the creation of self-contained spatial constructs through specific spells or a profound understanding of spatial mechanics.

The book described space as a "self-healing cake." Imagine cutting a large chunk from this cosmic confection. With the aid of certain rare materials, this excised piece of space could then be "stuffed" into the material itself, forming a miniature, isolated dimension.

Ikenga, ever the unconventional thinker, conceived of a far stranger, grander application. He realized that his own divine body, as an Origin God, was the ultimate material. His idea was to sever a massive chunk of space that could fit the moon and stuff it into his other empty eye socket. This would transform his very being into a living, portable pocket dimension, a cosmic terrarium for his power.

His plan further evolved that once he began to establish the moon's new, alien nature. Once complete, he intended to shrink the entire moon into its new ecosystem, its elemental energies, and all the curses he was weaving into its core and put it into his eye alongside the captured space. He envisioned carrying an entire, fully functioning celestial body within his own being, a weapon and a sanctuary literally at his blink.

However, the sheer scale of such an act would generate an unfathomable magical disturbance, an anomaly so profound it would undoubtedly alert the mages even with his current curse meant to hide his presence.

His current plan involved a planetary sized curse, a grand, intricate working designed to bend the very fabric of space to his will. Ikenga began to pour the entirety of his focused divine essence into the lunar core. He wove a complex matrix of all his cursed knowledge into the moon's nascent ley lines, linking its new, alien nature with his own profound cursed divinity.

He dubbed this ultimate working "The Tether of the Origin's Reach."

His goal was that this curse would transcend conventional spatial limitations. It wouldn't just be a teleportation point; it would be a permanent, self-sustaining conduit directly to his essence. Once activated, any location within this system would become directly accessible and vice-versa. It would bypass the mages' attempts to isolate him in the void, creating an invisible, unbreakable bridge between his newly forged domain and any battleground where he finds himself.

The curse was designed to be insidious and persistent. It would subtly warp the local spacetime around the moon, creating a constant, low-level resonance that only an Origin God could exploit. For the mages, it would merely appear as a strange, unreadable energy signature, if they even detected it at all. They would perceive the moon as just another celestial body, unaware that it was now a colossal, dormant spell waiting to be triggered.

As the last tendrils of his concentrated will infused the moon, the ethereal glow within its core pulsed once, then settled into a steady, almost imperceptible hum. The entire celestial body felt different, not just alive, but imbued with a latent, potent power. Ikenga had transformed a barren rock into his

ultimate weapon and his personal gateway, ensuring that when the last clash came, the mages' attempts to corner him would be futile. The moon, now his ultimate curse, awaited his call.

Ikenga's physical form slowly rematerialized from the glowing moon, now a world transformed. He stepped onto a landscape vibrant with beautiful, luminescent plants and breathable, fresh air – a testament to his monumental act of creation. He felt utterly weary and drained, the deep exhaustion of channeling his essence into an entire celestial body weighing heavily on him. Yet, beneath the fatigue, he could already feel the gentle hum of his divine power revitalizing within him, the moon's newly formed nature serving as a potent wellspring.

The exhaustion was too profound to fight. Ikenga performed an act he hadn't indulged in for what felt like an eternity: he simply let himself fall backward, giving in to sleep. The planet, now imbued with his will and his very essence, responded. Before he even touched the ground, roots began to form and rise, weaving together with phosphorescent flora to gently cradle his falling figure. A makeshift, comfortable bed of living earth and soft, glowing leaves formed beneath him.

The land itself seemed to stir in sympathy. The ground subtly moved and shifted, conforming perfectly to his body. The newly established wind currents redirected themselves, not to buffet him, but to create a gentle, steady flow of air, cooling and comforting him as he lay there. Ikenga, aware yet on the very precipice of unconsciousness, simply surrendered to the profound rest, his eyes finally closing in a deep, well-deserved slumber.

While Ikenga surrendered to a well-deserved deep slumber, someone else was far from resting. In her hidden observatory, the mage had been increasingly troubled over the past few months. Her new posting, initially deemed dull and uneventful, had taken an alarming turn. She first noticed it as a subtle but undeniable surge in elemental forces emanating from the moon, an anomaly that sent a prickle of unease down her spine.

Her initial disquiet soon spiraled into a gnawing panic as she desperately searched for a cause, yet found absolutely nothing. This was the insidious power of Ikenga's self-concealing curse at work, which, once his essence was absorbed, now cloaked the entire moon. To her trained magical sight, the moon looked precisely as it had months ago—a barren, inert celestial body. This was the curse's true genius: if you didn't know what you were looking for, it would expertly reinforce that ignorance. It subtly shifted perceptions, making the extraordinary appear mundane.

Even more unsettling was the curse's secondary effect: should someone somehow know what they were seeking, the curse would then subtly manipulate their mind, causing them to forget what it was they were supposed to be looking for. It was a maddening, self-perpetuating illusion.

The mage's only tangible lead, the abnormal elemental fluctuations, was something beyond Ikenga's direct control, forces he had merely entreated rather than created. This raw, untamed energy was the only thread she could grasp in a tapestry of perfectly woven deception, and it was slowly but surely driving her to the brink of insanity. The moon, outwardly inert, was silently mocking her.

The mage, Elara, paced the confined space of her observatory, the rhythmic tap-tap-tap of her boots on the metal floor the only constant in a world that felt increasingly askew. For months, the subtle elemental surges from the moon had been a nagging unease, a discordant note in the otherwise predictable cosmic harmony. Now, it was a screeching cacophony in her mind.

She'd spent countless hours hunched over her arcane consoles, adjusting scrying lenses, running diagnostic spells, and poring over ancient lunar charts. Each analysis yielded the same maddening result: nothing. The moon remained, outwardly, a barren rock, precisely as the Empire's records indicated. Yet, her sensitive instruments, tuned to the raw fabric of magic, screamed otherwise. The energy was real, undeniable, but its source was perfectly cloaked.

Elara's gaze repeatedly drifted to the hologram displaying the moon's surface, lingering on the peculiar, grotesque plant with its single, unblinking eye. Was that it? Could that strange flora be the root of the anomalies? It defied all known botanical classifications, and its very presence on the moon was an enigma. A lesser mage might have immediately jumped to that conclusion, but Elara was a scholar of the arcane, trained in the Empire's rigorous methodology. She needed proof, something tangible and credible to present to the Arch-Mages if she were to report such an outlandish claim. Without it, her career, perhaps even her life, could be forfeit. Accusations of "seeing things" or "losing one's mind" were common dismissals for those who brought back unsubstantiated reports of cosmic oddities.

The thought of leaving her observatory, of venturing out into the cold, silent void for a closer look, sparked a tremor of apprehension within her. The moon was a desolate place, even if her instruments weren't screaming about it. And if the energy surges were indeed tied to that thing on the surface, what dangers might await her there? Her training emphasized caution, observation from a safe distance, especially when dealing with unknown magical phenomena.

To just jump out there, without a clearer understanding, felt reckless. She needed a theory, a shred of evidence beyond maddening fluctuations, before risking direct confrontation. The spectral energies continued to surge, subtly, relentlessly, driving Elara closer to her breaking point, trapped between her professional caution and the unsettling truth her instruments screamed at her.

Seven days later, Ikenga stirred. His long, profound rest had fully revitalized him, his divine power replenished by the unique nature of the moon he now embodied. He rose from the soft, luminous bed of roots and glowing flora, his form pristine once more, every ounce of his power restored. The moon pulsed gently around him.

Chapter 565:

He stretched, feeling the immense energy coursing through his veins, the cosmic hum of his new domain resonating within him. Then, he sensed her. A faint ripple in the ambient magic, distinct from the moon's own energies, indicated a foreign presence. His sight unimpeded easily pierced the remaining veils of the curse. He saw Elara, the mage from the observatory, finally taking a tentative step onto the lunar surface.

She moved with an almost comical caution, her specialized boots crunching softly on what still appeared to her as barren dust. Her instruments were clutched tightly in her gloved hands, their soft hum barely audible in the vacuum. She was headed directly for the massive, obsidian spire that housed one of his eyes, her focus narrowed, a mix of apprehension and scientific curiosity etched on her face.

To her, the spire was an anomaly, an alien rock formation. The vibrant, glowing flora she was stepping past, the fresh, breathable air she was inhaling – all of it remained perfectly invisible, a testament to the curse's maddening efficacy. Even his own towering presence, now that he had re-materialized, was nothing more than a distortion in her peripheral vision, a trick of the light, if she saw it at all.

A playful glint entered Ikenga's ancient eyes. Messing with mortals was a rare pleasure, and this one, so utterly disoriented by his silent magic, presented a unique opportunity. He didn't want to harm her, not yet. He simply wanted to mess with her.

With a subtle flex of his will, a patch of the obsidian ground directly in front of Elara suddenly undulated. The seemingly solid rock rippled like water, then briefly bubbled into a grotesque, eye-like bulge before settling back into its inert state. Then, a soft, almost imperceptible whisper, carried on the newly created lunar winds, brushed past her ear, speaking a single, guttural word in her people tongue: "Beware."

Elara froze. Her head snapped towards the shimmering ground, then whipped around wildly, her eyes wide with terror. The whisper, though faint, had been undeniable, and the ground... it had moved. Her breath hitched, ragged in her rebreather. Every instinct screamed at her. This wasn't just elemental fluctuation; this was conscious, malevolent, unseen power.

Without another thought for her mission or her instruments, she scrambled backward, tripping once before regaining her footing. Her caution abandoned, she ran, propelled by raw, primal fear, back towards the distant, illuminated safety of her observatory. Ikenga watched her retreating figure, a soft, satisfied smile playing on his lips. The game had just begun.

Elara scrambled back towards the distant gleam of her observatory, panic thrumming in her veins. Her initial run became a desperate sprint, but the moon, seemingly inert moments before, now conspired against her. Just as her hand reached for the airlock hatch, the solid metal seemed to ripple and distort, shimmering like heat haze on a desert road. Her fingers phased through it, finding no purchase. She slammed her palm against it again, harder, but it remained stubbornly intangible.

Frantic, she backed away, spinning around to face the moonscape, her eyes wide. The familiar, barren surface now seemed to shift in her peripheral vision. The towering plant previously hundreds of meters away, suddenly seemed impossibly close, its unblinking pupil looming over her. She spun again, and it was gone, replaced by a smooth, featureless plain. The whispers returned, a cacophony of unintelligible sounds that seemed to emanate from the very air she breathed, pressing in on her, echoing the growing madness in her mind.

Elara shrieked, a raw, terrified sound muffled by her helmet. She tried to re-engage her comms, but the signal was nothing but static, laced with those maddening whispers. Her instruments, usually reliable, flickered wildly, displaying nonsense readings. The elemental surges she'd been detecting now felt like palpable waves, washing over her, freezing her one moment, burning her the next, despite the regulated temperature of her suit. She stumbled, falling to her knees, clutching her head, as if she could physically block out the overwhelming sensory assault.

Ikenga watched from his unseen vantage, a faint, almost imperceptible chuckle rippling through the moon's core. He reveled in the mage's disarray, pushing the boundaries of his curse. He made the ground beneath her feet feel like shifting sand, then solid ice, then scalding coals. He twisted her perception of distance, making the observatory seem miles away one moment, inches the next. He allowed her fleeting glimpses of the moon's true, vibrant nature – a flash of an energy vine, the shimmer of crystalline flora – only for them to vanish the instant she tried to focus on them, convinced she was hallucinating.

He played with her for what felt like an eternity, though in reality, only minutes passed. He watched as her terror slowly gave way to a desperate, unhinged defiance, then finally, to a profound, broken despair. Her body began to tremble uncontrollably, tears streaming down her face within her helmet. She was no longer trying to reach the observatory; she was simply trying to comprehend a reality that had shattered around her.

Having sated his amusement, Ikenga withdrew his direct influence. The moon's distortions immediately ceased. The airlock materialized, solid and unyielding. The whispers faded, and her instruments, though still slightly erratic, began to return coherent readings. Elara, collapsing against the cold metal of the hatch, hyperventilated, her mind reeling from the impossible assault. She clawed at the airlock, fumbling with the controls, desperate to escape the place that had so thoroughly broken her sanity.

Ikenga, now fully content, felt the profound satisfaction of a god having completed a monumental task. The moon, his grand creation, had settled into a steady, harmonious rhythm. Its bizarre, beautiful nature, infused with elemental energies and subtle curses, was now self-sustaining, its conditions destined to improve with each orbital circulation.

As a soft hum resonated from the lunar surface, a portal shimmered into existence behind Ikenga, its edges swirling with familiar green light. Without hesitation, he allowed himself to fall backward into its depths, surrendering to the instantaneous transport.

He landed with his feet firmly on the corrupted ground of the goblin world, the portal having opened directly in the sky above the Abyss. He took a deep breath, the familiar stench of ozone and flesh and blood filling his senses, a stark contrast to the sterile freshness of his newly cultivated moon.

He surveyed his surroundings. Low-tier demons still poured from the gaping maw of the Abyss portal in endless streams, a grim river of chaos. But something was distinctly different. The corruption, the very taint of the Abyss, had spread as far as the eye could see, consuming the landscape. It was clear that Zarvok hadn't been idle in Ikenga's absence; he had pressed relentlessly, tightening his chokehold on the Empire's neck. And by the pervasive signs of recent, furious magical conflict scarring the land, it seemed the Empire, in turn, was pressing back with equal ferocity.

Almost immediately, Ikenga felt three powerful consciousnesses lock onto him. These weren't the aimless, panicked probes of the mage on the moon. These were the sharp, deliberate focuses of high-tier mages, their attention immediate and precise. A faint smile touched Ikenga's lips. It seemed the Empire had learned its lesson; they wouldn't make the same mistake again, leaving one critical flank of their battlefield unchecked. His presence had been detected, and he was now officially a variable in their brutal equation.

Ignoring the looming threat, Ikenga turned and walked towards the swirling depths of the Abyss portal. His mind was already elsewhere, focused on a more personal reunion. He was eager to see Keles and, more importantly, to check on their unborn child. He had promised to be deeply involved in the growth

of this new life, a commitment he fully intended to fulfill. The battles outside could wait; his family came first.

Across the brutal expanse of the battlefield, on Vorenza's side, the past few months had wrought dramatic changes. The lands that Kaelen and his army had valiantly reclaimed from the corruption were now far more extensive.

However, the sight of Kaelen's forces was starkly different from their brisk, resolute appearance months prior. Now, they looked profoundly worn out, an almost insane glint in their eyes, mirroring the endless grind of combat. Their armor, once meticulously maintained, was neglected, stained with layers of fresh and dried blood. Their numbers had dwindled significantly, a grim indicator of the fierce resistance they faced. Yet, the Empire, recognizing the crucial progress being made, had been steadily sending reinforcements, pouring more lives into the meat grinder.

Even the formidable Sixth-Tier Mages were no longer content to observe from aloof positions amongst the clouds. The intelligence, or perhaps sheer terror, from what had transpired on Zarvok's side of the front had instilled a newfound caution within the Empire's command. Direct involvement was deemed necessary. The presence of these high-tier mages on the front lines brought a much-needed boost to morale and courage among the beleaguered troops.

Chapter 566:

They didn't cast a spell or anything, as doing that once, opens a gate no one wanted to see.

On the demon side of the battle, a palpable caution had descended upon the endless hordes. No low-tier demon or high tier fifth stage demons, no matter how feral, wished to be the first to get caught in the terrifying crossfire of a Sixth-Tier Mage's attack. Their sheer power and destructive capabilities were a well-known, and deeply feared, deterrent.

However, the demons' fears of collateral damage were, for now, somewhat misplaced. The Sixth-Tier Mages, formidable as they were, were currently grappling with their own escalating crisis.

Kaelen, the tireless commander, along with mages of all tiers from the lowest initiates to the most powerful Sixth-Tier adepts and even the hulking Fifth-Stage Ogre Knights, were feeling the immense pressure. These people, renowned for their mental fortitude, who once shrugged off the Abyss's psychic assaults, were now visibly struggling. It was as if with every step, every inch of progress made towards the Abyss, its psychic attack grew exponentially stronger.

What was once an insidious, invisible mental assault now manifested with terrifying physicality. These were no longer mere whispers in the mind; they were tangible entities, tormenting and relentless. These spectral attackers ensured the soldiers had no respite, no peace, no sleep, knowing that such a horror was just an arm's reach away, waiting to breach their defenses.

Tonight was a stark example of this nightly torment. Every eye in the fortress was turned towards the sky. The shimmering, translucent dome of the psychic shield, conjured by a Sixth-Tier Mage, covered the entire fortress and its walls.

But behind this shield, a chilling spectacle unfolded: smoke-like entities, swirling masses of dread and despair, continuously crashed against the psychic barrier. Sometimes they remained ethereal, formless wisps of terror, yet at other times, they would momentarily coalesce into compact, solid forms, slamming into the shield with a deafening, percussive Thum sound. Each resonant impact echoed through the fortress, a physical manifestation of the mental warfare, ensuring that sleep was a luxury no one could afford.

Inside one of the larger, reinforced tents within the fortress, a scene of immense concentration unfolded. Three figures floated effortlessly in the air, legs crossed in a meditative posture. One occupied the center, while the other two formed a protective, symmetrical arc around him. These were the very Sixth-Tier Mages who had joined the war, their vast power now dedicated to the grim reality of the front lines.

For the past month, they had been forced into a grueling rotation, taking turns maintaining the psychic shield. What was once a task for a single mage, even a powerful one, was now a shared burden, a stark indicator of the Abyss's escalating assault. The sheer mental fortitude required to hold the shimmering barrier against the relentless, corporeal psychic attacks was immense. It wasn't even a matter of mana drain – their enormous pools of arcane energy remained largely untouched. Instead, it was the unbearable mental strain, the constant push against the corrosive despair and chaotic malice of the attacking entities, that wore them down.

Compounding their plight was the utter lack of respite. There was no time to recover, no lull in the nightly onslaught. The attacks were relentlessly persistent, growing stronger with each inch of ground the Empire reclaimed, each step closer they drew to the Abyss itself. Their minds were being frayed, stretched to their limits, with no end in sight.

There was, however, one desperate solution, one method to cleanse the very source of this torment: Holy Spells. These divine incantations, infused with purity and light, held the power to wash away the insidious corruption seeded into the very ground that the Empire had already taken back, and the lands they still sought to reclaim. It was the only known way to truly push back the Abyss's pervasive psychic influence and grant them a moment's peace.

The grim reality for the Sixth-Tier Mages was that the Empire possessed only one individual truly versed in the intricacies of these vital Holy Spells: Vellok. And for those who understood the profound secret Vellok harbored, making such a request was an unthinkable act.

This presented a crushing dilemma. Inside Vellok resided a literal being of pure holiness, an entity capable of solving their immediate problem with a single, effortless snap of its will. This celestial presence could, undoubtedly, purge the abyssal corruption from the land, granting them the desperately needed respite from the psychic onslaught.

However, the mages knew the complex, volatile relationship both they and Vellok shared with this being. Unleashing it, allowing it to act so directly, would not solve their problems, but instead add a new, potentially catastrophic issue to the Empire's already precarious situation. The consequences of drawing upon such power were too dire, too unpredictable.

As Sixth-Tier beings, they certainly possessed the means to individually deal with the smoky creatures relentlessly hammering their psychic shield. They could banish them, destroy them outright. But that would be like pouring water into an ocean – a futile, short-term solution. They could clear the immediate threat for one night, perhaps. But what about the next night? And the night after that? The sheer, inexhaustible nature of the Abyss's psychic assault made individual intervention pointless.

The thought alone sent shivers down their spines. They now shuddered at the very idea of what prolonged exposure to the Abyss itself would entail, once they finally managed to push through these relentless defenses. The battle for the land was already mentally crippling; what horrors awaited them in the heart of the enemy's domain?

Across the embattled front, within the relative sanctuary of a command tent, Rattan couldn't recall the last time he'd actually witnessed the battlefield firsthand. His days, stretching into weeks, had blurred into an endless cycle of confinement with Kaelen, both relentlessly grappling with the insidious psychic attacks emanating from the Abyss.

Right now, Kaelen stood with a deep frown etched onto his face, one hand thoughtfully stroking his chin. Rattan, by contrast, lay sprawled on the tent floor, his gaze fixed blankly on the artificial light illuminating their workspace. The veneer of formality between them had long since dissolved, stripped away by the crushing weight of their shared dilemma.

"How can such a thing even exist?" Rattan mused aloud, his voice flat, devoid of its usual academic precision. "How can something have so much corruption ingrained into it?"

Since the very first night of the psychic onslaught, early in the war, Kaelen had immediately sought out Rattan. Both practiced the Magitech System, a fusion of arcane principles and technological innovation. While Kaelen had, by necessity, forcefully adopted the mage's path to adapt. Rattan was unequivocally the more deeply versed expert in the system. Now, their combined expertise was being pushed to its absolute limits by an enemy that defied all known magical or technological logic.

A grim, bewildering new world opened up for Rattan and Kaelen the moment they officially began their research into the psychic attacks. Their laboratory was the very battlefield, their materials the very ground they fought to reclaim. They had an abundance of samples, for the source of their insurmountable problem was the land itself, saturated with the Abyss's pervasive influence.

What greeted both seasoned researchers was a single, all-encompassing phenomenon: Corruption. Nothing more, nothing less, just this stark, simple word. It was as if a fundamental law of the Abyss had been irrevocably engraved into every particle touched by its dark influence, and that law was ceaseless decay, abundancy and distortion. They quickly lost count of how many meticulously prepared materials had been irrevocably destroyed or grotesquely altered by the subtle, yet potent, influence of the abyssal corruption.

Rattan, in particular, was horrified by the sheer unnaturalness of it. He'd never conceived that iron could spontaneously grow flesh, that stone could pulse with a sickening, organic beat. He did, however, inadvertently gain something from this harrowing exposure: the constant, intense interaction with such profound corruption had paradoxically pushed him to Fourth-Tier Mage status. But the promotion brought him no joy. It was a hollow achievement, a testament to the sheer scale of the problem, a problem that remained utterly unsolved.

Kaelen finally broke the tense silence, his voice heavy with a weariness that even his Sixth-Tier power couldn't fully mask. "Another night, another barrage. And no closer to understanding why a rock grows flesh." He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "We've thrown every diagnostic spell, every material analysis, every theoretical model we have at this 'corruption,' and it just... laughs."

Rattan pushed himself up from the floor, leaning against a crate of discarded, warped sensors. His eyes, still holding that distant, haunted look, met Kaelen's. "Laughs is an understatement. It mocks us, Kaelen. Every failed experiment, every ruined sample... it's like a perverse lesson in how little we truly understand about fundamental existence." He gestured vaguely towards the tent flap, where the faint, rhythmic THUMMM! of the psychic entities against the shield echoed. "How do you fight something that redefines reality on a molecular level? We can't even purify a single shard of corrupted stone, let alone an entire battlefield."

Chapter 567:

Kaelen paced, his brow furrowed in concentration. "And the mages out there... they're nearing their breaking point. Even Sixth-Tiers can't withstand this mental assault indefinitely. We buy them a few hours of uneasy rest each day, only for it to escalate the next night." He stopped, turning sharply to Rattan. "But have you noticed, Nixbolt? The demons out there. They don't suffer this. They wade through that psychic miasma as if it's the air they breathe. No mental fatigue, no shattered minds. Why?"

Rattan, still leaning against the crate, offered a weary shrug. "It stands to reason, doesn't it? They're from the Abyss. Perhaps they're immune, or perhaps they're simply... too far gone to be affected."

"Too far gone, or perhaps perfectly attuned," Kaelen countered, a new light entering his eyes. "Think about it. We're fighting a 'corruption' that changes iron into flesh. It fundamentally alters reality. But it only seems to harm us. To the demons, it's just... home. This psychic onslaught, the very 'corruption' we're fighting, it's likely just the Abyss's way of preparing the land for assimilation."

He began to gesticulate, his pacing quickening. "We've observed how the corrupted ground shifts, how it almost welcomes the abyssal energies. It doesn't fight back; it absorbs. It's like the Abyss is a living, cancerous entity, and this psychic attack isn't just a weapon, but a digestive process. It softens up the reality, breaks down our resistance, makes the land, and perhaps even its inhabitants, ready to be subsumed."

Rattan's blank expression finally began to shift, a flicker of his old intellectual fire replacing the despair. "You're saying... it's not trying to destroy us, not entirely. It's trying to convert us? To merge with us, and everything around us?"

"Precisely," Kaelen affirmed, a grim determination setting his jaw. "If the Abyss is ready to welcome anything into its fold, ready to merge, ready to corrupt to its very essence... then perhaps the answer isn't to fight it. Perhaps the answer is to partially become it ourselves."

Rattan pushed off the crate, his eyes widening in disbelief. "What? Kaelen, are you insane? 'Partially become it'? That's not a solution, that's surrender! That's succumbing to the very corruption we're fighting to stop!"

"No, hear me out," Kaelen pressed, undeterred by Rattan's outrage. "Not full assimilation. We can't become demons. But what if we focus on protecting our minds, our very essences of being, from the corruption, while allowing our physical forms, or perhaps specialized constructs, to adapt to its influence? If the Abyss wants to merge, perhaps we can merge just enough to navigate its internal logic, to move through its psychic attacks unimpeded, while safeguarding what truly makes us us."

Rattan threw his hands up in exasperation. "Safeguarding our essence while letting our bodies become... whatever that iron-flesh monstrosity was? That's a pact with madness, Kaelen! That's walking the line to becoming the very thing we despise! There's no coming back from that, no 'partial' corruption!"

Kaelen held his gaze, his expression grimly resolute. "We're already walking the line of total defeat, Rattan. If we can't fight it head-on, if we can't purify it... then what other choice do we have but to understand it, and use its own nature against it? We don't need to defeat the Abyss entirely; we just need to survive its embrace long enough to cut its influence."

Rattan looked from Kaelen's intense gaze back to the glowing light above. The idea was abhorrent, a betrayal of everything they stood for. Yet, the relentless THUMMM! from outside the tent was a constant, terrifying reminder of their dwindling options.

Rattan pushed away from the crate, the desperate fanaticism in Kaelen's eyes unsettling him. He had no power to stop this, not here, not now. His expertise lay in Magitech, not in navigating the treacherous currents of extreme magical theory or the Empire's rigid hierarchy.

"Take it up with them, Kaelen," Rattan said, his voice laced with a bitter resignation. "Go propose your 'partial merge' to Vellok and the emperor, to the Arch-Mages. See if they accept transforming their soldiers, their very essence, into something that walks the line of abyssal corruption. See if they accept turning our forces into... hybrids." He gestured vaguely towards the fort walls, the rhythmic THUMMM! from the psychic attacks a constant reminder of their dire straits. "It's your idea. You convince them."

Kaelen wasn't at all surprised by Rattan's explosive reaction. Proposing such a radical shift, especially one that bordered on the abhorrent, would naturally elicit a strong response. He didn't mind; he himself

had undergone a similar, transformative process to achieve his current Sixth-Tier status, pushing beyond conventional limits.

As for proposing the idea to Vellok and the other Sixth-Tier Mages, Kaelen held a grim certainty: they would accept. The relentless, escalating pressure from the Abyss, the visible toll on their most powerful mages, the unyielding psychic attacks—all pointed to an inevitable, crushing defeat if they continued on their current path. The Empire, facing such a critical juncture, could not afford a loss, and its leaders were desperate enough to countenance almost any means to secure a win. They needed a victory, and they were prepared to do whatever it took to achieve it.

With that conviction firm in his mind, Kaelen immediately set about writing his report. He meticulously detailed his research into the Abyss's corruption, explaining its unique nature as an assimilative force rather than purely destructive. He laid out his controversial new proposition: a partial adaptation to the Abyss's energies, focusing on protecting their minds and essences while allowing some physical or magitech integration.

He included a crucial point for the Empire to consider: their previous experience with the Ratfolk, who had famously devoured demon flesh to gain monstrous strength. While different in scale and nature, that historical precedent offered a potential framework. He hoped their institutional knowledge could provide insights, helping him refine his ideas and identify any overlooked pitfalls.

Once the missive was complete, Kaelen immediately summoned Gorok, a trusted messenger, entrusting him with the urgent delivery. Alone in the tent once more, Kaelen turned his attention back to the flickering light, waiting for Rattan to return. While they awaited the Empire's answer, they had to focus all their intellectual might on the most critical problem: devising a method to preserve their own minds and the very essence of their being, should the unthinkable proposal be accepted. This was a gamble, but for Kaelen, it was the only path forward.

On Vorenza's side of the Abyss, the demons were undeniably gaining ground. The constant psychic assault emanating from their domain was a significant boon, relentlessly eroding the enemy's resolve, leaving them weaker, their minds unfocused, and their battle formations ragged.

However, despite their clear advantage, the demons weren't achieving victory as swiftly or decisively as their generals desired. Their primary frustration stemmed from the Empire's relentless adaptability. Every time the demonic strategists devised a countermeasure to the Empire's current tactics, the enemy would frustratingly change their approach, often coming up with something entirely new and unexpected. This constant shifting of strategies forced the demons into a perpetual state of reaction, hindering a swift, overwhelming victory.

This volatile tactical dance came with a steep cost. Even a Fifth-Tier Demon had recently been lost to one of these unpredictable shifts. While it was certainly "fun" for the demon generals to devise new countermeasures and engage in this complex game of strategy, suffering such significant losses, especially when the enemy was, maddeningly, still drawing closer to the Abyss's maw, was anything but enjoyable.

A chilling, resonant voice echoed directly into the minds of the demon generals: "Prepare to carry out an attack tomorrow night." Just as abruptly as it arrived, Vorenza's presence vanished, leaving behind a profound apprehension. The generals exchanged uneasy glances, but they knew better than to question their Overlord's commands.

Meanwhile, cloistered within her shadowy chambers, Vorenza herself appeared more composed than she had in months. The lingering backlash from manipulating multiple concepts was still a dull throb in her essence, but a newfound resolve hardened her features. She believed she could now contend with a single Sixth-Tier Mage, perhaps one not as formidable as Gurnak, whom she had battled previously. Not all Sixth-Tier beings possessed the unique conceptual strengths that Gurnak wielded, a fact that bolstered her confidence.

Her true assurance, however, stemmed from a carefully positioned chess piece a pawn she intended to bring into contact with a potential "ally." She hoped it would indeed be an ally, as so far, their interests seemed to align against a common foe. Vorenza was not so naive as to expect formal cooperation; she wasn't planning on politely asking for assistance. Desperation was a potent fuel, and she was ready to employ any means necessary to bend the unfolding conflict to her will.

First thing, Rattan did after leaving Kaelen's tent was to head for his own, seeking a well-needed rest. He'd had enough of the abyss and war for now. His life had no trajectory; he was lost, seemingly just getting by day to day. His guardian, who he expected to have done something to change his circumstances, hadn't moved yet. Every day was torture for Rattan as he had to face his own mind and consciousness, with nothing to do and no goal in sight.

Chapter 568:

His sleep must have been deep and long because when he woke, the sun was already setting. The familiar smell of fresh blood overwhelmed his nose as he saw the whole fortress being dismantled and moved further into the lands won in today's battlefield exchange.

Still not wanting to stay with Kaelen and his crazy ideas, Rattan found a reason to help move the camp and contribute. He even worked alongside the mages to build the wall for the new fortress.

As usual, after the fortress was built, one of the sixth-tier mages appeared and erected a psychic barrier around it. Everyone held their breath, clutching their nightly rations, as they looked at the shimmering wall of energy. This was Rattan's first time witnessing the onset of a psychic attack; it was a truly weird and unsettling feeling, like waiting for a nightmare to unfold.

It had become the norm for soldiers to expect such harassment every night. In Rattan's observant eyes, it was as if the very land outside the barrier began to move, as if something was stirring beneath it. Then, a dark, smoke-like substance released itself from the corrupted soil. Soon, the entire view was usurped by the black smoke, and from within it, ghost-like entities began to appear, launching their constant assault on the barrier.

Almost like a relief, the soldiers began to eat their rations. Rattan was no general, but it wasn't hard for him to understand the grim reality from their reactions. The soldiers were relieved yet tense, occasionally glancing at the thin shield to see how it was holding up. It pained Rattan to admit it, but Kaelen might be right. For his own survival and the future of his people, Rattan had to believe Kaelen's words, as they offered a slim chance of survival.

Sighing, Rattan tore his gaze from the shield and headed toward Kaelen's tent. Along the way, he was so deep in thought that he didn't notice when he collided with another mage.

The mage figure was shrouded in robes, their face obscured by the hood. Rattan, jolted back to his senses, immediately began to apologize for his carelessness. "I apologize, I was lost in thought." He quickly scanned the ground to ensure he hadn't made the mage drop anything.

Finding nothing, and to his surprise, the mage said nothing in return, instead standing as still as a tree. It was then that Rattan noticed how remarkably tall this mage was, especially for a goblin mage. Might be because of the path chosen by the mage, Rattan thought to himself. Seeing no response, Rattan shifted slightly out of the way, about to continue his walk. Just as he moved past the mage, he felt a hand, surprisingly strong, grip him. Rattan halted mid-step, a frown creasing his face.

He turned to the figure, anger ready on his tongue, but stopped instead as his eyes widened. The figure briefly shifted their cloak, revealing a glimpse of something before concealing it just as quickly. It was Rattan's turn now; he grabbed hold of the figure and began to look around with caution. "Follow me,"

he said, pulling on the figure, but then, remembering something, he let go. Instead, he started to walk normally, keeping a watchful eye, with a new destination in mind: his tent.

Along the way, Rattan tried to put on a smile, hoping to avoid drawing attention, but his heart was restless and far from calm. Thankfully, the cloaked figure seemed to understand the need for discretion; to the casual observer, it didn't look like they were heading for the same place.

Rattan walked into his tent, taking a quick, shaky breath. His cube was already in his hand. After a moment, the cloaked figure followed him inside. A flash of light erupted from the cube, momentarily enveloping the tent before disappearing just as swiftly.

Rattan turned to the figure, his voice cold, his eyes steely. "Who are you?"

The cloaked figure slowly lowered their hood, revealing their face. Standing before Rattan was a ratman with spider-like features: four eyes, no hair, but covered in scales.

"It's been a long time, boy," a deep, familiar voice rumbled from the ratman.

Hearing the voice, Rattan was shaken, but that did nothing to quell his suspicion. He waved a hand, and chains erupted from the tent floor, wrapping around the ratman and pinning him to the ground. "I have no idea who you are, and why you're impersonating someone I may have known from the past." Squatting down close to the figure's ear, Rattan whispered, "Even a sixth-tier mage can't see through my current disguise."

Hearing Rattan's words, the figure, still calm, raised a brow and said, "No wonder, but with your words, I can really confirm that it's you, boy."

The figure chuckled, a low, rumbling sound. "In my eyes, I see a goblin, but my soul—or rather, the spider—is screaming at me that you are the rat-boy who was so naive and eager to learn about our people's tech workings from me."

Hearing the figure's words, Rattan's eyes glowed with a faint blue light. From within the depths of his vision, he saw a colossal spider staring directly at him, its monstrous maw opening to utter a single, chilling phrase: "Found you." For some reason, Rattan knew the words weren't meant for him. True to

his intuition, in the very next moment, the figure, who Rattan had tied down and whose face had been blank, stood up. The chains binding him dissolved into shimmering dots of light.

Before Rattan could react, the figure placed a hand on his forehead and pushed. Just like that, Rattan lost consciousness and fell onto the bed.

Meanwhile, Phantom, who had been watching the entire ordeal, could only sigh as a female figure materialized in Rattan's consciousness, the space where he had been residing.

For Rattan, even at the peak of the fifth stage, it was difficult to remain composed when facing a sixth-tier being, especially one as ancient as Vorenza.

Vorenza gazed at the arch-curse before her. "Your talent is great. Most beings would have been deceived by your perfect disguise, but it's lacking slightly when faced with a demon of a higher hierarchy like me."

"I'd say it's more impressive that he's managed to survive under the watch of dozens of sixth-tier powerhouses," a deep voice rumbled from behind Vorenza, startling her. With a flirting smile, she turned around.

Ikenga stood before her, a bored look on his face. Vorenza dared to walk closer, her hands tracing his bare chest and chin. "This is our first time meeting, the rumored Origin God. I bet you're even more impressive in your physical form."

Ikenga took hold of her hand. "What are you doing here?"

Vorenza gave the hand holding hers a blissful look, which prompted Ikenga to let go and subtly distance himself. "I came to ask for your help."

Ikenga's frown deepened. "I have no obligation to help you, and what gave you the confidence to ask?"

Vorenza sighed before directing a cold look at Ikenga. "I truly wish we had met under different circumstances, but we can't all have what we want."

"The Abyss is fair to those who dare challenge it, but it's truly hard to win against the Abyss at its own game." Ikenga briefly raised a brow at her words, a flicker of past actions in his memory, but Vorenza continued.

"I was doubtful at first, what a few outsiders could do to change the outcome of the battle to claim the Abyss layer throne. But right now, as I stand wounded and my progress made thus far is being undone while Zarvok is making braver moves and greater progress, I slowly understood."

Looking directly at Ikenga, Vorenza stated, "I have no confidence that you will help me, but I am ready to do anything to make sure you will. And with that said, the life of your pawn is in my hand."

Before Vorenza's words were even finished, her feet were off the ground, a hand clamped around her throat, tightening its squeeze. Ikenga's one eye glowed with a furious purple light as he spoke in a voice that sounded overlapped with multiple voices: "I don't like being threatened."

Vorenza gripped the hand at her throat, her calm, cold expression unchanged. "I don't like being choked either, but I let you do as you please because right now I'm in a desperate position and my life is at risk."

"The rat-boy is important for your deal with Zarvok and the Abyss. It's only right for me to use him to get you to help me," Vorenza stated, yet the immense pressure from the two powerful beings threatened to shatter Rattan's consciousness.

Phantom, who had wanted to remain hidden from this confrontation, had no choice but to speak up. "My lord, look around you." Hearing Phantom's words, Ikenga snapped from his trance and released Vorenza.

He looked at her and said in a slow, calm tone, "I won't be offering my help to you, but he can." With that, he fell silent, and with a wave of his hand, Rattan's space of consciousness returned to normal.

Chapter 569:

Vorenza looked at Phantom, the being Ikenga had indicated could offer help. She fell silent, her mind racing as she considered how useful he might truly be. She then glanced at Ikenga, who remained quiet, observing them both. If it were possible, she would have preferred Ikenga's direct assistance, but their

brief exchange had taught her not to push him further, lest he do something undesirable purely out of spite.

"I am outnumbered," she stated, speaking to Phantom. "At my peak, these three mages wouldn't have been an issue. Sure, I might struggle, but a complete loss is far from the truth."

Vorenza continued, a hint of desperation in her voice, "I need to pick them off one by one, but that's impossible to achieve without some help." She looked expectantly at Phantom, hoping he would offer some ideas.

Phantom glanced at Ikenga, who remained impassive. "I can't directly help against a sixth-tier being, nor am I of much help in a direct confrontation," Phantom stated. "But I can create the necessary chaos for a diversion. It won't affect the sixth-tier mages or the army leader, but the rest of the camp will fall into disarray."

Vorenza nodded, a plan quickly forming in her mind. She waved a hand, drawing memories from Rattan's mind about how the fortress was maintained. Turning back to Phantom, she said, "When the time to act comes, I believe you'll know. And I trust you'll provide the chaos you spoke of."

Turning to Ikenga, whose form was now shimmering and fading, Vorenza offered a rare, apologetic tone. She felt a prickle of unease, a slight regret for her earlier brinksmanship, but it was overshadowed by the sheer desperation that had driven her. "I ask you to excuse my recent actions," she began, her voice softer than before, "but I've simply come too far to die at the hands of some mere mages. My entire lineage, my very being, depends on this."

To her surprise, Ikenga paused his departure, a faint, almost imperceptible shift in his expression. "I do not mind," he responded, his voice still layered but now with a hint of detached interest. "Besides, my sister is curious how you plan on overcoming something she deems 'inevitable.'"

With that cryptic remark, he was truly gone, his shimmering form dissolving into nothingness. Vorenza stood rooted, his words echoing in her mind. Inevitable? The word hung heavy, carrying a weight she couldn't quite decipher, a chilling prophecy she hadn't anticipated. The implication that an entity as powerful as Ikenga's "sister" had already judged her efforts was unnerving. It took a long moment for her to process the statement, the full weight of its meaning slowly settling in. Finally, with a sigh that seemed to deflate her very essence, her own figure began to fade, drawn back to her physical form.

A short while later, Rattán stirred, his eyelids fluttering open. He was met instantly by Chief's familiar, weathered face, etched with a mixture of concern and a subtle, almost paternal disappointment in his gaze. Rattán could feel the unspoken question in those eyes: What have you gotten yourself into now, boy? The awareness of his guardian's presence, so often a source of quiet exasperation, now brought a strange, complicated comfort.

"I once hoped your path and growth was pure, with no hands at play behind it," Chief said, his tone heavy with disappointment.

Rattán, still reeling from the surreal encounter he'd just encountered, took a moment to fully process Chief's words. He wasn't a child anymore; he understood that Chief was referring to "His guardian"—the unseen force that had shaped so much of his life. A sour retort spilled from his lips. "What do you know? Even the great goblins couldn't have gotten to where they are today if a greater hand wasn't at play in their fate."

His voice grew sharper, fueled by a sudden, frustrated defiance. "Who are you to look at me with such eyes when you can't even come to terms with the fact that you're also a pawn for a greater power?" Rattán challenged, watching as Chief let out a low, bitter chuckle.

"You are indeed right Rattán, who am I?" Chief's voice was low, tinged with a deep weariness that Rattán had rarely heard. "For the last few years, I thought I had finally wrestled control of my fate from the goddess. I believed I could now control my abilities, truly help many of our people escape certain death."

His gaze drifted, unfocused, as if seeing beyond the tent walls. "I thought I finally was in control, but today showed me how blind and ignorant I was." Without waiting for Rattán to interject, Chief continued, a bitter edge entering his tone. "Do you know, after I escaped from the Empire and began to understand the changes happening to me, I somehow found myself on this side of the battlefield?"

He looked back at Rattán, a haunted intensity in his eyes. "I was face to face with the very demons who brought down my home, yet all I did was question how strange a coincidence it was before I solely focused on helping our people as much as I could in this war." Chief's voice grew colder, laced with self-loathing. "It was only now I understood that I was just a well-placed piece, kept close by the goddess to serve a purpose, just like I did with you. I somehow have become her vessel—something my people sacrificed their whole lives to be, yet she ignored them." Madness began to creep into his eyes, a dangerous glint of resentment and despair.

Rattan, listening to Chief's words, was filled with a strange mix of fear and anger. Chief's revelations were prying open a floodgate Rattan desperately wanted to keep sealed—the very reason he had never sought to uncover his guardian's ultimate goal or grand design for him. Hearing Chief's confession, he couldn't help but picture the same fate befalling him. He was about to spiral down this dark rabbit hole of thought when a memory, unbidden, poured into his mind.

This unexpected memory initially startled him, but after a moment, it filled him with an overwhelming sense of joy and pride. He might not have noticed it, but his voice came off as condescending to Chief as he declared, "Well, unlike your great master who toys with you, mine is a partner and doesn't leave me hanging in its plans."

Chief stood up as he placed a hand on Chief's shoulder "Your goddess and my guardian will be in a brief alliance as we all have a common enemy which are the empire and their mages"

Rattan had no time to dwell on his recent, jarring interaction with Chief, a figure he once admired for his bravery. Perhaps it was the elevated status he now held, or perhaps Chief's current fractured state of mind, but Rattan found himself believing that Chief held no value for him anymore.

This new perspective might have been the core of it all. Rattan now possessed a grand, all-consuming goal, and he was beginning to view everything and everyone through the lens of utility—whether they could be useful to him or not. Reminiscing about his past relationship with Chief served no purpose; his focus had entirely shifted to how dramatically things would change if the demon queen's plan succeeded.

His own survival was no longer a pressing concern. His subconscious mind, whether through newfound arrogance or a deeper, ingrained power, now held an unwavering belief that nothing truly detrimental could ever befall him on this battlefield. Instead, his thoughts turned to how he could best leverage this unfolding chaos for his own benefit and that of his people. The Empire was already on an undeniable path to collapse; his new purpose was to strategically contribute to that downfall while securing a future for himself and his kin.

Meanwhile, beyond the fortress's shield, under the oppressive night sky, the Abyss demons began to move. They merged into a grim formation, advancing steadily towards the fortress. Only minutes earlier, they'd received Vorenza's direct order to advance. They continued their march until a voice, echoing directly in their minds, commanded them to halt. Every demon froze, their advance suspended.

Some distance from the fortress and its shimmering shield, a gaping tear in space materialized. Beyond this rift, a realm of swirling webs was visible, and from its depths, a single, thick spider string shot forth, latching onto the psychic barrier.

The moment the web made contact, the three sixth-tier mages inside the fortress noticed. But before they could react, a pulse emanated from the web, rippling outwards and spreading through the entire shield. What was far worse was that this pulse carried a concept with it: "Disunity." It struck like a roaring wave, an unseen force. It was as if the web unleashed a series of focused, high-frequency sonic screams that did nothing to physically shatter the shield. Instead, their purpose was to create intense, localized vibrational resonance within its structure—imagine striking a tuning fork against a glass, not to break it, but to agitate its very molecules.

Chapter 570:

In normal circumstances, this conceptual assault would have been a mere annoyance to the shielded minds of the mages. But nothing about their current situation was normal; their minds were already stretched thin, barely protected as they desperately held the psychic barrier in place.

The ceaseless, high-frequency assault forced the mages to funnel immense magical energy and mental fortitude into shoring up the shield's integrity against the unnerving, internal vibrations. Yet, this was merely the prelude. The insidious high-frequency nature of the Demon Queen's attack birthed a vicious psychic feedback loop within the very core of the barrier. This generated an escalating torrent of mental static, like a screeching feedback from an overloaded amplifier, making telepathic communication a torturous effort and splintering their collective focus.

The male mage at the heart of their formation bore the crushing weight of this onslaught. The moment the loop ignited, the dark, misty psychic creatures swirling beyond the barrier surged, striking with renewed, frenzied intensity. This left the central mage terrifyingly vulnerable. His mind, already stretched taut, snapped. He was forced to abandon her hold on the failing barrier, but not before shoving a desperate, urgent order into the minds of the fifth-tier mages and Kaelen: they were under attack.

A heartbeat later, Kaelen's booming, guttural roar ripped across the fortress, cutting through the growing panic. "Get in position, now!"

The fifth-tier mages, having abandoned their tents, now ascended into the night sky, a massive magic circle shimmering above each of their heads. This was an experimental magic they had been developing, designed to alleviate the immense mental strain on the sixth-tier mages upholding the primary barrier.

As that grand shield flickered and fell, the newly formed circles from the fifth-tier mages seamlessly took its place. The exhausted male sixth-tier mage was left behind, slumping to recover, while her two counterparts flashed outside the new barrier. There, they were met with the disquieting sight of the torn space and the unsettling, web-filled realm beyond it.

Instantly, a shield woven from their own domains encased them, a protective shimmer against the unknown. They glared cautiously at the gaping rift. The enemy was clearly visible before them, and there were only two of them. All that remained was to surge forward, to jump into the fray. Yet, an invisible force held them back; they were hesitating.

The enemy's actions were entirely unforeseen, a move they hadn't accounted for or planned. Vorenza's maneuver was abnormal and seemed to serve no logical purpose. Intelligence reports had clearly stated she was injured, yet here she was, brazenly taunting them to come.

There was a high chance she was bluffing, but an equally unsettling chance she wasn't. Faced with such an unfamiliar situation, the true test of their loyalty to the Empire now hung in the balance. There was a high probability that if both of them charged in, only one would emerge. But who would it be? They were sixth-tier powerhouses, reaching a realm most beings could only dream of glimpsing in their lifetime. Could such power, such existence, be so easily thrown away at a moment like this?

Meanwhile, back in Rattan's tent, the instant the fortress's primary shield shattered, Rattan's eyes went blank, his consciousness receding as Phantom took over. Chief watched, mouth agape in silent astonishment, as a shimmering, ethereal construct of Phantom's true figure materialized behind Rattan, standing like a silent, ghostly sentinel.

Phantom didn't risk spreading his senses to encompass the entire fortress; his massive consciousness would certainly draw immediate attention. Instead, he employed a unique form of sight, one that only he possessed.

In Phantom's perception, the fortress was suddenly awash with a massive, intricate web of threads. Each thread, unseen by mortal eyes, extended from the very flame of ambition burning within every creature in the fortress. Whether that ambition was hidden deep within a soldier's heart or openly displayed by a commander, it was utterly transparent to him.

With one incorporeal hand, Phantom reached out and delicately grasped these countless threads. His other hand flipped open, revealing a perfect, miniature replica of the fortress, glowing faintly as if

carved from starlight. With a smooth, decisive motion, Phantom brought his hands together, merging the threads of ambition with the glowing replica, beginning to create a stage of dreams.

Kaelen was the only one who experienced the sheer weirdness of the situation firsthand. One moment, he was barking orders, his voice echoing across the camp. The next, his entire army and even the mages each developed a subtle yellow glow in their eyes, staring off into the open space with a blissful, unsettling smile plastered across their faces.

They looked far too serene, too lost in their own worlds. To make matters worse, the fifth-tier mages, who had just taken over the crucial shield, abruptly dropped it. It was in this precise moment that Vorenza's waiting demon army surged forward, charging into the now unprotected fortress.

Kaelen watched in bewildered horror as his seemingly blissful army, still smiling, began to clash with the invading demons. He found himself instinctively retreating, his eyes fixated on the surreal scene unfolding before him. They weren't losing against the invaders; in fact, they were holding their ground remarkably well for an army caught in an ambush. Yet, it was precisely this unnatural effectiveness that rubbed Kaelen the wrong way.

Anyone with clear sight could see his army wasn't in their right mind, utterly devoid of control over their own actions. Yet, paradoxically, their teamwork and formations remained as crisp and effective as ever. If Kaelen could best describe it, it was as if his army and mages had been pulled into a dreamland, where they were battling an army of demons, their every action within that dream reflecting perfectly in reality.

An unnerving example of this played out before him: the psychic smoke creatures, now with free reign to unleash terror upon the soldiers, were inexplicably being stopped. A fifth-tier mage, still wearing that unsettling, blissful smile, cast a shield spell over the soldiers at the precise, perfect moment.

There was no order given, yet there was order.

Kaelen roared with a profound anger at this bizarre, infuriating display, his eyes flaring with a fierce, blue glow. Immediately, his magi tech core hummed to life, a torrent of real-time battlefield analysis, enemy weak points, and optimal combat strategies flooding directly into his mind, each datum sharp and undeniable.

From his body, two spectral constructs, identical to Kaelen himself, burst forth, shimmering outlines of his own furious will. These constructs immediately dissolved into pure light as they sprinted across the chaotic, dream-tinged battlefield, their singular purpose to pinpoint whatever insidious force was influencing his men. The initial analysis from his tech core showed that whatever this entity was, it had to be weaker than him, and it knew that, which explained why it remained hidden while leaving him untouched.

The analysis also indicated that the target's ability had nothing to do with mana. There were vague fluctuations of psychic energy, like distant echoes in a vast cavern, but these were far too indistinct and difficult to pinpoint, especially considering they were in corrupted lands teeming with psychic creatures. His constructs were designed to run intricate diagnostics on the ground, tightening their search in an ever-decreasing circle to precisely locate the hidden enemy, closing in like silent, glowing hunters.

Meanwhile, Vorenza watched the two mages hesitate, their caution a tangible thing, almost a physical barrier between them and her trap. Remaining utterly still, a serene, predatory focus in her four eyes, she began to weave a new concept: "Reflection." This concept didn't manifest as webs extending beyond the torn space; instead, it spread like intricate, living roots of shadow and light, gripping and stabilizing the very edges of the rift in reality, making the tear a part of her domain.

Then, four more magic circles, crafted from her ethereal web, erupted from her. These expanded rapidly, dissolving into the open air around the tear, like spectral ripples. These were the four accompanying concepts she had meticulously woven: Mimicry, Illusory Boundary, Perplexity, and Futility. Each hummed with a subtle, insidious energy, destined to distort the perceptions of any who entered.

Having meticulously set her trap, Vorenza no longer concealed her form. She stepped out fully into the open, a clear, beckoning challenge. The two hesitating mages, the moment their eyes landed on Vorenza, their faces hardened with resolve, their internal debate silenced by the lure of direct confrontation. Without further delay, they stepped into the inviting, yet perilous, realm she had so carefully constructed.

Vorenza's figure curved into a chilling, knowing smile as a colossal spider leg, thick as a tree trunk and gleaming with a predatory sheen, slammed down from the inky, oppressive sky of the web-realm, shaking the very air. The two mages, seasoned in the dance of danger, parted like water, dodging the crushing impact with practiced grace. As one mage swept past, their hand brushed the descending limb. Instantly, the leg began to scream with the sounds of freezing ice, a frost-white blight spreading like a plague, until with a splintering crack, it shattered into countless icy shards, raining down like glittering, frozen dust.