

Guardian gods 581

Chapter 581:

Kaelen, ever the tactician, had been observing. His abyssal-infused armor flared, and from his gauntlets, a swarm of shimmering, black iron drones poured forth. These were no ordinary constructs; each was a miniature engine of the Law of Recursive Self-Replication. As they flew towards Vorenza, they copied themselves mid-air, an exponential explosion of metallic insects that sought to overwhelm the demon queen.

Vorenza snarled. Her Law of Concept Weaving engaged furiously. The drones, by the dozens, began to flicker and distort, their 'mechanical nature' being re-woven into 'swarms of harmless abyssal moths' that simply fluttered away, or 'shards of decaying shadow' that dissipated into nothingness.

But Kaelen's Law was not so easily dismissed. Even as the drones transformed, the core of their programming – to replicate, to adapt, to overcome – remained. The 'harmless abyssal moths' still carried the recursive replication code, and they began to replicate as moths, then subtly redefine their 'harmlessness' into 'irritating distraction', buzzing around Vorenza's many eyes. The 'shards of decaying shadow' reformed into new, albeit ephemeral, drones, constantly reforming and adapting to Vorenza's conceptual attacks. Kaelen's armor pulsed, his internal systems working overtime, constantly generating new counter-concepts.

Seeing Kaelen gain a foothold, Lyra pressed her advantage. She raised her hands, and the very air around Vorenza began to thicken, not with mist, but with a palpable conceptual 'stillness'. This was the Law of Chilling Nullification working on a deeper level, not just freezing physical objects, but nullifying the rate at which Vorenza could weave concepts. The chaotic flow of Vorenza's reality began to congeal, her rapid shifts slowing down, becoming clunky and predictable. She found it harder to redefine things on the fly.

Using this opportune moment, Korvin encased himself in compressed, hard rock. He then compressed the air around him, instantly releasing it to boost his speed, closing in on the now sluggish Vorenza in the blink of an eye. His arm, a boulder-hard projectile, punched Vorenza, who could only manage to throw up a hastily woven shield of web. Upon contact, Korvin unleashed the compressed strength of his punch. Vorenza, hampered by Lyra's interference, could hardly react as she was sent flying off into the distance, a black blur against the abyssal backdrop.

In Ikenga's eyes, it was as if the titanic figure of rock and ore had suddenly vanished and reappeared, closing the immense space between itself and Vorenza before delivering a devastating blow.

Sent flying by Korvin's immense blow, Vorenza reacted on instinct. Her multiple limbs shot out webs, lashing onto the fabric of space itself to catch her plummeting form. But the sheer force of the punch transferred into these webs, stretching them taut, testing their limits.

The webs held, incredibly strong, and Vorenza, using the accumulated momentum and an added burst of conceptual force, flung herself forward. As she rocketed back towards her attackers, she cast an illusion, creating a multitude of identical Vorenzas rushing at them.

Lyra's conceptual stillness, while potent, could hardly contain Vorenza with this added momentum. In a display of terrifying power, Vorenza essentially took the force from Korvin's attack and weaponized it, forcefully breaking through Lyra's dampening field.

Korvin and Lyra were visibly taken aback by the swarm of Vorenzas hurtling towards them. Only Kaelen's eyes darted, calculating furiously. He raised a hand, and from it, a long, intricate rifle of shimmering, black iron materialized. From the muzzle of the rifle, a focused energy beam shot out, striking one of the multiple Vorenzas. To Kaelen's surprise, it was just an illusion. His hand didn't stop, however, as he continued to fire, striking multiple phantom Vorenzas, none of them were the real one.

Kaelen's internal systems whirred, processing the rapid-fire data from his shots. His initial surprise quickly gave way to a cold, logical understanding. Vorenza wasn't just creating simple illusions; she was using her Law of Concept Weaving to re-conceptualize 'presence' itself, making multiple instances of herself equally 'real' in the conceptual sense, even if only one held her physical form. This was a direct counter to his own Law of Recursive Self-Replication, where the copy was inherently tied to the original.

Lyra, seeing Kaelen's struggle, narrowed her eyes. Her domain pulsed, and the conceptual 'stillness' around the many Vorenzas intensified, aiming to freeze the very notion of their multiplicity. It was a desperate attempt to pin down the true Vorenza by nullifying the rate at which her illusions could be maintained or shifted.

Meanwhile, Korvin, still enraged by the collateral damage from his earlier attack, slammed his fist into the ground. Spikes of hyper-compressed earth, imbued with crushing inertia, erupted in a wide arc around the approaching Vorenzas, hoping to catch the real one in a physical trap. The ground shuddered with the immense force of his attack, sending tremors through the very fabric of the Abyss.

Vorenza, however, was already adapting. The 'stillness' around her fragmented forms indeed made it harder to shift them, but the sheer momentum from Korvin's punch, which she had weaponized, still carried her forward. As Korvin's earthen spikes rose, the multiple Vorenzas seemed to flow around

them, their 'solidity' subtly altering to avoid the crushing impact, even as Lyra's conceptual 'stillness' tried to hold them in place.

Then, from the center of the approaching swarm, a single, clear, malevolent sound echoed – Vorenza's true voice, tinged with a chilling delight. "Clever, little toys," she rasped, "but you forget... this is my home."

Suddenly, the very ground beneath Ikenga and the other sixth-tier observers began to ripple. Not from Korvin's tremors, but from an insidious, deeper resonance. From within the abyssal rock itself, grotesque, spider-like constructs of solidified shadow and abyssal chitin began to tear themselves free, hundreds of them, each with glowing red eyes, pouring forth from the ground to join the fray. Vorenza was not just defending; she was summoning.

Kaelen's rifle hummed, now tracking not just individual Vorenza projections, but the subtle energy fluctuations within them. He began firing a rapid, sustained beam that didn't aim to destroy, but to disrupt. Each shot was a burst of recursive code designed to destabilize Vorenza's conceptual weaving, trying to unravel the 'illusion' of her multiple forms back into a singular, tangible target. The air crackled with the computational feedback, as Kaelen's own Law battled Vorenza's.

Lyra, seeing the influx of Vorenza's summoned shadow-spiders, expanded her domain. The air around the grotesque constructs solidified into a conceptual 'immobility', attempting to freeze their very creation. The newly formed spiders moved with agonizing slowness, some even cracking and crumbling as the Law of Chilling Nullification worked to halt their intrinsic motion and cohesion.

Korvin, however, was no longer thinking purely tactically. The sight of his own power inflicting friendly fire on the armies below had enraged him, and Vorenza's taunt had found its mark. With a roar that echoed through the Abyss, he focused his Law of Compressed Creation not on offense, but on defense and raw power. He stomped his foot, and the ground around him, Lyra, and Kaelen surged upward, forming a colossal, hyper-dense barrier of abyssal rock and iron. This wasn't just a shield; it was a fortress of unyielding inertia, designed to withstand Vorenza's conceptual attacks by sheer, overwhelming physical presence.

Vorenza, still surrounded by her flickering illusions and the struggling swarm of Kaelen's drones, observed Korvin's emotional outburst. A cruel smile stretched across her arachnid face. While Kaelen's disruption and Lyra's chilling hold were proving effective on her lesser constructs, Korvin's rage provided an opening. He was focusing his immense power, yes, but also allowing his emotions to cloud his conceptual clarity.

She abandoned the full force of her multi-form illusion, collapsing it into a single, devastating conceptual strike aimed directly at the now-fortified Korvin. With a chilling shriek, Vorenza's Law of Concept Weaving didn't attack the rock fortress, nor did it try to pass through it. Instead, she targeted the 'resolve' of the one who created it.

A wave of pure, conceptual despair washed over Korvin. His rage, so potent moments before, suddenly twisted inward. The weight of the collateral damage, the futility of his efforts, the sheer, oppressive despair of the Abyss itself—all of it magnified a thousandfold. The hyper-compressed rock barrier he had just manifested began to shudder, not from external force, but from an internal conceptual collapse. Korvin staggered, clutching his head, a guttural groan escaping his lips as the sheer weight of self-doubt and cosmic futility bore down on him, threatening to unravel his very being. The unyielding fortress of stone began to crack and splinter around him, mirroring the break in his will.

As the compressed rock fortress crumbled under the weight of Korvin's despair, Kaelen and Lyra watched, aghast, as Vorenza vanished from their sight. Their eyes widened moments later when she reappeared from the swirling rubble, already terrifyingly close to the reeling Korvin.

One of Vorenza's wicked spider legs shot out, a glistening obsidian spear aimed directly at the back of Korvin's head. Trapped within the confines of his own shattered mind, Korvin was utterly defenseless. Kaelen, seeing the imminent strike, reacted with lightning speed. His legs morphed into powerful boosters, propelling him forward in a desperate lunge to intercept and grab Korvin.

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He managed to reach his comrade, but not without a terrible cost. Half of Korvin's head was torn away in a horrific spray of rock and essence, a testament to the speed and power of Vorenza's strike. Kaelen himself wasn't spared; a limb was ripped from his body as Vorenza seized the opportunity to inflict further damage.

The searing pain of his grievous wound jolted Korvin from his mental prison. As a sixth-tier being, he wasn't instantly annihilated. His titanic body, intertwined with the abyssal armor, immediately began the arduous process of mending itself, rebuilding the shattered rock and regrowing the essence of his form.

Similarly, Kaelen's lost limb was swiftly replenished, a new, intricate construct of black iron and shimmering conduits extending from his body. He turned to Korvin, his voice grave, the cold logic of his

being cutting through the lingering chaos. "Keep your mind calm, when facing her," he warned, the message clear: Vorenza preyed on more than just physical vulnerabilities.

Lyra made a move to deal with the spawned shadow spiders as she with a surge of her will, colossal golems of living black ice erupted from the abyssal floor, each radiating an absolute zero chill that numbed mana and froze kinetic energy. These constructs lumbered towards Vorenza and her struggling shadow-spiders, their massive fists imbued with the power to nullify momentum, aiming to physically pin Vorenza down and crush her lesser summons into inert frost.

Kaelen, meanwhile, was a storm of computational fury. His black iron drones, though still occasionally dissolving or reforming as moths, now moved with an unsettling purpose. He had found a conceptual vulnerability in Vorenza's 'multiplicity'. His Law of Recursive Self-Replication wasn't trying to destroy the illusions; it was trying to flood the conceptual space with counter-definitions.

Each drone, each pulse from his armor, was now broadcasting a recursive concept of 'singularity' and 'truth', attempting to force Vorenza's many forms back into one by overwhelming her Law of Concept Weaving with an inescapable deluge of its antithesis.

The illusions flickered more violently, occasionally revealing glimpses of the single, malevolent form beneath.

Korvin, his wounds visibly mending but his rage still a cold fire, lunged forward, no longer just punching, but becoming a living, breathing weapon of geological force. He channeled the Law of Compressed Creation into his entire being, turning himself into a hyper-dense missile of rock and iron. He moved in jarring bursts, compressing and releasing localized air to propel himself, aiming to pin down Vorenza with an onslaught of unyielding physical strikes, hoping to force her into a corner where her conceptual weaving couldn't keep up with the raw, crushing inertia of his attacks. Massive, transient fists of bedrock erupted from his form, each carrying the weight of a mountain.

Vorenza, caught between Lyra's conceptual paralysis and physical ice constructs, and Kaelen's relentless conceptual erosion and proliferating energy attacks, began to snarl with genuine frustration. Her multi-faceted eyes darted between them, calculating. The constant conceptual pressure from Kaelen was making her maintain her illusions with far more effort, and Lyra's stillness made every conceptual shift a struggle. Korvin's brute force was a blunt instrument, but its sheer weight threatened to overwhelm her if she couldn't weave fast enough.

Then, she moved. Her many legs scuttled with terrifying speed, dodging Korvin's latest, ground-shaking strike. As she did so, a chillingly subtle conceptual shift rippled from her. She didn't try to negate Korvin's power; instead, she wove a new, ephemeral conceptual thread: 'escalation'. This wasn't a direct attack, but a conceptual feedback loop. Any force she received, any conceptual pressure applied, would now subtly 'escalate' within her, waiting for a trigger.

Seeing Kaelen's recursive 'singularity' concept beginning to truly break down her illusions, and Lyra's ice golems closing in, Vorenza let out a piercing shriek. She didn't fight the conceptual collapse; she embraced it. All her flickering, myriad forms snapped back into one single, terrifyingly solid Vorenza. This was the moment, the opening they had been fighting for!

Lyra pushed her Law of Chilling Nullification to its absolute limit, a wave of palpable 'absolute stillness' radiating from her, seeking to utterly freeze Vorenza's 'action' and 'motion'. Her ice golems surged forward, aiming for a final, crushing embrace. Kaelen's energy cannon array glowed, focusing its replicating beams onto Vorenza's now singular form, ready to flood her with destabilizing algorithms from every angle.

Korvin, seeing Vorenza consolidate, roared in triumph. This was his chance! With every fiber of his being, he manifested the ultimate expression of his power. His arm swelled to grotesque proportions, becoming a mountain of hyper-compressed abyssal rock, imbued with an impossible density and momentum. This was a direct, crushing blow, designed to end the fight. He lunged, unleashing the full, unbridled force of his Law of Compressed Creation.

His attack connected. There was no conceptual resistance, no re-weaving of 'solidity'. Vorenza simply took the punch.

But in that initial moment of impact, the conceptual 'escalation' she had woven into herself, the 'vulnerability' she had temporarily adopted, triggered. Korvin's immense, world-shattering force, rather than crushing her, was absorbed and conceptually amplified within her own form. It was a perfect, horrifying conceptual counter-transfer. The force he unleashed became her own, multiplied.

Vorenza's massive, segmented head snapped forward. Her multi-faceted eyes, burning with abyssal malice, locked onto Korvin. In an instant that defied the conceptual 'stillness' Lyra was desperately trying to impose, Vorenza's entire being became a single, focused weapon. Her primary spider leg, now imbued with the amplified, reflected force of Korvin's own power, shot out. It wasn't just a physical strike; it was a conceptual severing.

With a sickening, wet tear, Korvin's head was ripped from his shoulders. There was no time for his sixth-tier regeneration to kick in. The very concept of 'life' and 'being' was conceptually 'severed' from his body. Before Lyra or Kaelen could even scream, Vorenza's cavernous maw opened, and with a single, dreadful gulp, she swallowed Korvin's head whole, followed by the sickening crunch of his body and the armor he wore.

The silence that followed was more deafening than any scream. Korvin's massive, headless body, now inert, began to crumble, the unyielding rock returning to mundane dust. Vorenza stood amidst the remnants, her multi-faceted eyes gleaming with cold satisfaction.

The chilling silence after Korvin's demise was thick with horror, but Vorenza was putting on a calculated front. What she'd just accomplished wasn't as effortless as it appeared. While Korvin's final, devastating attack had been absorbed and amplified, the sheer strain of it was immense. Her demonic spider form, though now crackling with borrowed power, was taxed, a subtle tremor running through her segmented limbs.

In her palm, the ethereal form of Korvin's soul shimmered—a potent, swirling vortex of compressed creation. Devouring it would undoubtedly restore her to full health, instantly mending the deep-seated strain. Yet, she hesitated, a flicker of ambition overriding immediate need. She had partially achieved one of her primary goals, a step closer to something far greater.

She didn't need to fight with such intensity anymore. Her new strategy was simple: a prolonged conflict that would slowly wear down Lyra and Kaelen. But a slow, draining fight wouldn't help her achieve her ultimate objective: "The Abyss's Grace." To earn that, the Abyss itself demanded more than just a single death; it craved a true spectacle of blood and utter destruction. She highly doubted Korvin's brutal end was enough.

Her multifaceted eyes, now gleaming with newfound vigor, turned to the two remaining foes. Lyra's face was a mask of shock and burgeoning fury, her gaze fixed on Vorenza with an intensity that promised unrelenting vengeance. Lyra was a direct, passionate threat.

Kaelen, however, was a different problem. He moved with cold, calculating precision, reading her like an open book. This forced Vorenza to expend far more energy and cunning than she preferred. If she prolonged the fight, Kaelen wouldn't miss an opportunity to deliver a decisive, perhaps fatal, blow.

With this thought solidifying, Vorenza made her choice. She opened her maw once more, and Korvin's soul, still swirling with his essence, was drawn into her. It transformed into a powerful current of pure

energy that coursed through her being, healing her strained body instantly, purging the lingering pain and fatigue.

Lyra looked on the verge of shattering, her face contorted in a silent scream of grief and rage. But then, a palpable surge of her domain emanated outward, pressing down on her own form. Her turbulent emotions were abruptly quenched, her thoughts becoming cool and calm, like the absolute chill of her Law of Chilling Nullification. The raw pain remained, but it was now encased, frozen beneath a veneer of icy, strategic resolve.

Kaelen, seeing her regain such composure, let out a silent breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He truly didn't want to be the sole rational mind facing Vorenza. The demon queen was too smart, too strong, and far too cunning.

Her actions proved she'd been observing them as closely as they observed her. She knew he was a being of pure calculation, and she was already planning for that. Her conceptual weaves, once decipherable with intense focus, were now becoming maddeningly vague, her shifts in reality no longer easily predictable.

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Kaelen felt himself increasingly in the blind, unable to anticipate Vorenza's next move until the very last moment. Every calculation screamed that she should have focused on Lyra, whose domain had been heavily restricting her. Yet, she had done the opposite, eliminating Korvin with a brutal, unexpected cunning.

The grim reality of Korvin's demise settled heavy in the abyssal air. With the Earth-Shaper gone, Kaelen knew their strategy had to pivot. Someone needed to engage Vorenza directly, physically pressing her, denying her the precious seconds she needed to react, to plan, to unleash her devastating conceptual weaves. That task, he now realized, fell to him.

Kaelen understood the immense personal cost this new approach would demand. He had to begin applying his Law of Recursive Self-Replication not just to external constructs, but to himself. This would be no ordinary replication. His previous drones, while numerous, hadn't drained his mana core significantly. But to manifest a truly potent construct clone of himself, one capable of matching Vorenza's terrifying speed and power in close combat, would put a substantial, constant strain on his already finite mana reserves.

Furthermore, he couldn't afford to leave his main body vulnerable. It needed to retain enough mana to continuously run the complex, rapid-fire calculations required to even begin to keep pace with Vorenza's increasingly opaque and unpredictable conceptual weaving. This wasn't just about mana; it was about protection. If Vorenza located the vulnerability of his core self amidst the chaos of battle, it would be an opening she wouldn't miss, and one they would be hard-pressed to stop. The stakes had never been higher.

The air around Kaelen rippled with pure, self-replicating computational energy, his mana core humming under immense strain. He initiated the full power of his Law of Recursive Self-Replication. With a visible surge of power, a duplicate of Kaelen, fully armored in black iron and radiating immense physical might, detached from his main body.

This wasn't a clone; it was a Self-Replicated Combat Unit, a perfect, independent duplicate designed for brutal close-quarters engagement. Its Ogre-like frame was dense, its every muscle imbued with the same recursive power that defined Kaelen's Law. As this unit surged forward, Kaelen's primary body seemed to contract slightly, growing leaner and denser, its armor hardening, allowing it to transition into a more energy-efficient state for pure calculation.

"Lyra, focus on containment!" Kaelen's primary form, its voice now colder and more precise, echoed with urgent clarity. "Don't let her break free!"

The Self-Replicated Combat Unit roared, a sound of synthesized fury, and charged Vorenza. It moved with startling speed, closing in on Vorenza.

Lyra's face remained a mask of cold resolve. She pointed to the churning abyssal sky, and dark clouds coalesced with terrifying speed. From them, a relentless storm of thick ice hails began to plummet. These weren't mere frozen water; each hailstone hummed with the Law of Chilling Nullification, designed to nullify kinetic energy and movement. As the hails rained down upon Vorenza, they momentarily froze her in place, binding her limbs with a conceptual 'stillness'.

In the very next moment, Vorenza shattered the temporary bonds, but her freedom was short-lived as another volley of hails made immediate contact, forcing her back into that agonizing, nullified state. Trapped in this cycle, Vorenza could only watch, snarling, as Kaelen's formidable Self-Replicated Combat Unit's black iron fist slammed into her across the face.

Vorenza's face crumpled in a grimace of pain, a rare sight, yet a flicker of satisfaction ignited in her multifaceted eyes. The force of the punch threw her out of Lyra's concentrated cloud zone. Or so she

thought. To her frustration, the dark clouds, a relentless extension of Lyra's will, relentlessly followed her figure, still raining down their agonizing, nullifying hails.

Kaelen's primary body, in its energy-conserving state, whirred with relentless calculations. Its sophisticated internal systems, linked with his Self-Replicated Combat Unit, precisely tracked Vorenza's movements, the rhythm of Lyra's hailstorm, and the subtle flex of Vorenza's conceptual weaving. Time and again, Kaelen found the exact, infinitesimally small window when Vorenza was frozen and conceptually 'stuck' by Lyra's Law of Chilling Nullification.

It was a brutal, relentless rhythm. Lyra's chilling hails would descend, momentarily binding Vorenza, and in that precise instant, Kaelen's combat unit would strike—a heavy, crushing blow delivered with the full force of its Ogre-like might. Vorenza, roaring in pain and frustration, would break free, only to be caught again by the pervasive, pursuing clouds and the next volley of nullifying ice. This same tactic continued for a grueling stretch, as Vorenza struggled to adjust her conceptual defenses against such a perfectly synchronized, multi-pronged assault.

Her body, a canvas of obsidian chitin, was now streaked with luminous, abyssal blood from the accumulated damage. Each strike, though not conceptually 'fatal' on its own, was chipping away at her physical form. Unknown to Kaelen and Lyra, however, Vorenza was playing a deeper game within this agonizing rhythm. With each forced 'repulsion' from a blow, with every desperate re-positioning to escape Lyra's storm, she had been subtly, incrementally, closing the distance. And now, she was close enough to Lyra.

Suddenly, with a guttural roar of pure, unleashed fury, Vorenza changed tactics. She didn't try to evade Lyra's next hailstorm. Instead, as the nullifying ice descended, she briefly, infinitesimally, re-conceptualized her 'vulnerability' into 'immense kinetic potential'. The force of Lyra's chilling hails, rather than pinning her, became a coiled spring of explosive, outward momentum. She then used her Law of Concept Weaving with lightning speed to redefine her 'position' to 'proximity to Lyra'.

In a blink, faster than Lyra could react or Kaelen's calculations could predict, Vorenza ceased being a target and became a blur. She rocketed through the air, propelled by the recoiled force of Lyra's own attack, and appeared directly in front of Lyra, her monstrous form filling the mage's vision.

Lyra's eyes widened in dawning horror. She instinctively threw up a shield of shimmering black ice, a last-ditch effort powered by her Law of Chilling Nullification. But Vorenza was already there, her primary spider leg, now a blur of obsidian, lashing out. The shield, infused with the concept of 'nullification', should have frozen Vorenza's strike, but Vorenza's conceptual attack was swifter and more insidious.

Vorenza didn't physically shatter the shield. Instead, her strike, imbued with the Law of Concept Weaving, specifically targeted the very 'concept' of Lyra's Law, Vorenza herself paid a heavy price for such bold move as cracks can be seen in her domain. With a chilling, almost silent snap, Vorenza conceptually 'severed' Lyra's connection to the Law of Chilling Nullification. The shield around Lyra flickered, losing its defining conceptual property, becoming merely brittle ice. It shattered into a thousand useless fragments.

Before Lyra could even register the profound, terrifying loss of her core power, Vorenza's leg continued its arc. It plunged directly into Lyra's chest, not tearing flesh, but rather, her form seemed to implode inward, as if the 'concept' of her very being was suddenly 'nullified'. There was no scream, no final plea. Lyra, the embodiment of chilling nullification, was herself nullified.

In the ensuing silence, Lyra's astral form, the titanic figure of ice, flickered violently, then began to disintegrate into fine, conceptual dust. But Vorenza's brutal conceptual strike did more than destroy Lyra's form; it shattered the suppressive hold her Law of Chilling Nullification had maintained over her own emotions. All the grief, the fury, and the raw pain Lyra had so diligently contained erupted in a torrent. The agonizing loss of her mate, the Crystal Mage, who had met his end by Vorenza's hand, surged forth. Then came the fresh, searing wound of her friend Korvin's brutal demise.

From the dissolving remnants of her astral form, a voice, imbued with a chilling cold that far surpassed her Law, resonated through the Abyss. "You have taken enough from me," Lyra's spectral voice declared, devoid of warmth, filled only with absolute resolve. "It's time you pay for it."

Lyra forcefully ignited her very soul. The raw power of her being flared, and with it, she regained control of her Law, wrenching it back from Vorenza's conceptual severing. Her dissolving form solidified, albeit flickering, and with a desperate, iron grip, she seized hold of the very spider leg that had pierced her. Vorenza's multi-faceted eyes widened in dawning comprehension as she sensed Lyra's horrific intent.

Vorenza struggled, thrashing violently, attempting to rip her limb free, but Lyra held fast, her grip imbued with the absolute, unyielding stillness of her revived domain. A decisive, almost desperate look flashed across Vorenza's face. A sword woven from the sheer concept of 'severance' materialized in her free hand, and without hesitation, she severed her own impaled leg to retreat.

But it was too late. Lyra, her spectral form burning brighter than ever, unleashed her final, devastating act. She didn't just expand her domain; she imploded it. Her entire being, her Law of Chilling

Nullification, her very essence, manifested as a howling, all-consuming wind of absolute zero ice that ripped through the Abyss, spreading outwards in an unstoppable wave of utter nullification.

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Kaelen's combat unit froze, its strike aimed at where Vorenza had been, now hanging uselessly in the air. His primary body's calculations spiraled into chaos, processing what happened. Lyra, the anchor, the one who controlled the very concept of stillness and nullification, was gone.

Lyra's final, desperate act had fundamentally changed the very landscape of the Abyss. The howling winds of chilling ice, the manifestation of her imploded domain, had swept across the entire layer, leaving behind a scene of profound, frozen desolation. Only Zarvok's side of the battle, seemingly protected by an unknown influence, remained unaffected by the cataclysmic chill. As for Vorenza's demon legions and the Empire's forces below, they had long since been utterly annihilated, caught in the crossfire or crushed by the collateral damage wrought by the six-tier beings' earlier, unrestrained attacks. Nothing but frozen, fragmented remnants remained of their conflict.

In Lyra's place now stood a colossal mountain of jagged black ice, towering over the transformed landscape. Embedded within its icy peak was the frozen figure of Vorenza, her multi-faceted eyes wide with a look of pure, unadulterated rage. The ice around her crackled and groaned, spiderwebbing outwards as she exerted immense force. With a furious roar, she shattered the crystalline prison, shards of absolute zero ice exploding outwards.

Vorenza's face was a hideous mask of anger as she broke free. That weak woman had played her. She had never anticipated such a suicidal, yet utterly devastating, move from the mage, and now she had paid a heavy price. The loss of her leg, though quickly regenerating with the power left of Korvin's absorbed soul, was a deep, infuriating wound to her pride.

"But that leaves one," Vorenza thought, her multi-faceted eyes snapping to where Lyra had been. She reached out, a predatory instinct guiding her, to seize Lyra's soul—a potent source of energy, a vital key to fully mending the strain of Korvin's amplified attack and the sting of losing her leg. Her shadowy limb extended, grasping... and found nothing.

Her eyes, usually beacons of cold calculation, widened in genuine panic. There was no soul. Nothing. Lyra's essence was utterly gone, consumed by her own ultimate sacrifice. Vorenza needed that soul. She needed it to complete her healing, to solidify her dominance, to recover the power lost in that audacious conceptual trick.

"NO. NONO!" The guttural cry tore from Vorenza's throat, raw and uncharacteristic. This couldn't be. This couldn't have happened. She frantically spread her ethereal webs, casting them far and wide across the devastated landscape, desperately searching for even a wisp of Lyra's essence, a lingering echo. But she was met with only an emptiness, a profound, absolute void where a soul should have been. Instead, a peculiar sensation began to seep into her: a coldness.

A strange, deeply disturbing coldness, not just physical, but conceptual, began to permeate Vorenza's very being. It felt familiar, yet utterly foreign. Vorenza looked at Kaelen, who seemed to be stuck, his form motionless amidst the chilling air. She moved, testing her limbs, only to be welcomed by that same insidious sensation – a pervasive 'stillness' that should have vanished with Lyra's death. So why was it still happening? Why was the chilling nullification still binding her, however subtly?

"You wrench!" Vorenza's voice, now a guttural roar of dawning horror and incandescent rage, ripped through the abyssal layer. In that moment of searing fury, she realized the terrible truth. Lyra, upon her death, had performed one last, ultimate act of vengeance. She had conceptually cursed Vorenza with her own Law, an eternal, insidious chill that would forever hamper the demon queen's ability to weave, to move, to exist in absolute freedom.

Kaelen, his primary body's computational systems whirring at a frantic pace, rapidly analyzed the horrifying sequence of events. The conclusion was stark and unforgiving: their own emotions and ego had gotten the best of them. Cornering Vorenza, pounding her into submission, the euphoria of winning against such a formidable foe had led them astray. They had gotten carried away, unable to accurately judge the battlefield, blind to the deeper currents of Vorenza's cunning. Korvin's death, Lyra's desperate sacrifice – it was all due to their collective oversight.

Suddenly, Kaelen's attention snapped back to the present. He noticed Vorenza's multi-faceted eyes, now burning with renewed malevolence, locked onto his primary body. Without a second thought, the Self-Replicated Combat Unit immediately fell back, instinctively moving to interpose itself between Vorenza and Kaelen's more vulnerable, calculating form.

Vorenza moved. As she burst forward, she didn't just physically accelerate; she conceptually took the 'momentum' of her movement and folded it into her speed. Her form shimmered, and she became a blur, almost a pure streak of light, hurtling across the devastated landscape, rapidly closing the distance on Kaelen's main body, intent on delivering a final, annihilating strike. The lingering chill of Lyra's curse still clung to her, but her rage and the raw conceptual power of her target seemed to briefly override its dampening effect.

The Self-Replicated Combat Unit, an Ogre-like blur of black iron, was already moving, hurtling back towards Kaelen's main body. Yet, despite its formidable speed, Vorenza, now a streak of pure, horrifying light, was closing in with terrifying rapidity.

Seeing the inevitable, Kaelen's primary body made a critical decision. It immediately ceased all complex calculations, redirecting every last computational resource and ounce of mana. Its sole focus now was to breach the gap between itself and the combat unit, to merge and become whole once more, the only conceivable way to face Vorenza's onslaught.

With a surge of repurposed energy, the legs of Kaelen's primary body coalesced and merged, forming a powerful, singular booster that ignited with a focused burst of light. It shot forward, accelerating towards the retreating Ogre construct. To the naked eye, it appeared as if three brilliant dots of light were rapidly converging, two fleeing, one pursuing, amidst the desolate Abyss.

With the Ogre construct's head start and the main body's desperate surge, it didn't take long for the two forms to collide and merge. They flowed into each other, black iron and intricate conduits weaving seamlessly, consolidating into a single, more robust Kaelen. As they became whole, they allowed their combined form to free-fall, the momentum carrying them downward. Vorenza was scarily close, her favorite attack already launched a piercing stab with her obsidian leg, aimed to impale.

The free fall was a desperate gamble, but it saved Kaelen. He plummeted, creating crucial distance from Vorenza, who now found herself momentarily frozen by the relentless, conceptual grip of Lyra's final curse. Kaelen, his form now whole and consolidated, noted the precise duration of her paralysis, already beginning to calculate the interval. But before he could fully ascertain the pattern, Vorenza snapped out of it, her multi-faceted eyes blazing with renewed anger.

Kaelen, abandoning the complex energy arrays, focused his immense mana and the Law of Recursive Self-Replication inward. With a surge of power, a massive, long energy sword and a glowing, equally vast energy shield materialized in his hands. It had been ages, millennia perhaps, since Kaelen, the techno-mage, had been forced to fight as a knight. This battle, despite its crushing losses, had been profoundly insightful for him. For someone whose future on the magi-tech path had seemed bleak, stagnated by a lack of novel data, Vorenza's reality-bending abilities had provided an invaluable, brutal lesson.

Sadly, he had no time to convert this raw knowledge into refined strength, not with Vorenza still a threat. Taking a deep, calculated breath, Kaelen knew it was time to end this.)

He burst forward, the boosters on his legs flaring to life, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat. He swung his massive energy sword low, aiming to cleave Vorenza in half. Vorenza, seeing the powerful strike, instinctively flew backward, her many legs scuttling in a rapid retreat to dodge. But as she pulled away, Kaelen followed up immediately, his energy shield detaching from his arm and hurtling after her, a glowing, spinning disc of pure force.

Vorenza, reacting with practiced speed, shot a thick strand of web, strong enough to intercept the hurled energy shield. But Kaelen was too quick. He closed the distance in a flash, snatching his shield from the web with a powerful tug. Without breaking stride, he lunged at Vorenza again, his massive energy sword sweeping in a wide, lethal arc.

Vorenza tried to dodge, her instincts screaming, but she was met by a terrifying sight: a perfect replica of Kaelen, shimmering into existence directly in her path. This construct, born of his Law of Recursive Self-Replication, had perfectly read her evasive movement and was waiting, its own energy sword thrust out, aiming to impale her.

Like playing a guitar string, Vorenza's multi-limbed hand moved with impossible speed, weaving her web with desperate precision. She simultaneously wove the concept of 'Incorporeal' into her immediate form. Kaelen's replica's sword, glowing fiercely, passed clean through her, a mere ghost of a hit as she shifted her body away, barely avoiding a solid strike.

Regaining her full, solid form, Vorenza noticed it: a jagged gash, surprisingly deep, oozing abyssal blood from her chitinous side. It seemed Kaelen's replica's stab, even through her quick conceptual shift, had found its mark more effectively than it had appeared.

Chapter 585:

Vorenza flared her mana, and with a ripple of conceptual weaving, five web-construct circular shields materialized, shimmering with arcane energy, and hovered around her. These weren't mere physical barriers; each was imbued with a subtle conceptual 'deflection', designed to turn aside not just physical force but also the intent of an attack.

She wasted no time. With one of her powerful legs stabbing out, Vorenza rushed towards Kaelen. Kaelen, reading her immediate trajectory, dodged the direct thrust, aiming to counter-attack with a swift energy punch. But as his fist shot out, one of Vorenza's shimmering shields instinctively moved, intercepting his strike. It didn't just block; it seemed to absorb the kinetic force, dampening it with its conceptual 'deflection' before harmlessly dissipating it.

Vorenza didn't pause. She pointed a finger at Kaelen, and a single, thin web shot from her digit. Kaelen's retreating figure brought his energy shield up in front of him, expecting a simple physical projectile. But as the web got close, it didn't impact the shield. Instead, it splintered and expanded quickly, gaining alarming speed, its tendrils seeming to ripple with unseen purpose. Kaelen had no time to react. The web exploded outwards, entrapping him in a complex, constricting net that pulsed with a disorienting conceptual 'binding'. He hadn't expected such an insidious attack, and now he was caught.

Kaelen's figure, now ensnared by the expanding web, shot towards Vorenza, who now held a spear crafted from pure abyssal chitin in her hand. She stabbed out with terrifying precision at his quickly approaching, entrapped form.

Kaelen, held by the constricting web, found it incredibly hard to move. The sticky, conceptually 'binding' tendrils held him with immense strength. His form, however, began to shimmer, and with a rapid surge of mana, he initiated a desperate maneuver of his Law of Recursive Self-Replication. His primary body rapidly reduced its size and density, allowing a perfect, full-sized replica of himself to form outside the web, shedding the entrapped, smaller portion.

The entrapped portion, now a mere decoy, was quickly stabbed through by Vorenza's spear. The weapon seemed to hold a concept of 'annihilation', as upon contact, the replica exploded and turned to dust, a burst of inert black iron particles.

Kaelen, now free and whole, having anticipated merging with what was left of his replica, instead sighed with a mix of relief and grim determination. He rushed towards Vorenza, his eyes narrowing as he noticed her figure suddenly frozen and stuck, caught by the lingering, insidious grip of Lyra's curse.

Exercising caution, Kaelen's massive energy sword in his hand shimmered and reformed, changing into a long, piercing energy spear. He hurled it with all his might. Vorenza, unable to move, was stabbed through with the spear, which embedded itself deep within her chitinous form. Kaelen closed in, his energy shield simultaneously changing shape, forming into a massive, glowing axe as he attempted to cleave Vorenza in half.

Kaelen halted halfway, attempting to retreat, but it was too late. The five web-construct shields that hovered around Vorenza, with a ripple of her Law of Concept Weaving, shimmered and merged, forming into a single, colossal scissors crafted from concentrated conceptual 'severance'. They snapped shut, slicing through Kaelen's rapidly receding figure, cleaving him in half.

His upper torso, severed from his lower, revealed where his manifold core was for a horrifying, brief moment, exposed and vulnerable. In a flash of desperate panic, the energy shield he had prepared for an axe immediately merged into his upper form, transforming into a powerful booster that propelled his bisected figure away from Vorenza.

His lower half was about to follow suit and transform into boosters. But Vorenza was now able to move, her eyes burning with fierce satisfaction. With brutal precision, she thrust her spear into the lower half. The weapon, still imbued with its concept of 'annihilation', caused an even bigger explosion as Kaelen's lower body turned to dust.

Kaelen gritted his teeth, a raw sound of pain and frustration. He expended a colossal amount of mana, flooding his core to compensate for his missing mass. His body pulsed, the recursive replication working furiously, as his form knitted back together, becoming whole again in a painful, mana-draining surge.

Vorenza had sustained a spear wound, a tactical sacrifice, but it had worked. She had trapped him, lowered his guard, dealt a devastating blow that exposed his vulnerable core, and forced him to expend far more mana than he could afford, pushing him closer to his limit.

Kaelen wanted to get angry, Roar at Vorenza for playing him but he stayed calm.

His calculation shows that he was going to lose to her. His survival so far has been because of Lyra's lingering curse that limited Vorenza movement.

He should be taking advantage of that instead rushing head on into her and to deal a decisive and winning blow, he has to put himself in danger.

Vorenza stepped forward, unfazed by the gaping wound in her abdomen. Threads of silver filament began sewing her flesh back together Concept Weaving in action. Each step she took echoed with authority, her spear crackling with annihilative force, humming in resonance with the ambient Laws that bent subtly around her will.

"You're fraying," she said calmly, her voice like a blade wrapped in silk. "Your core is overclocking its recovery schema. You'll come apart before you reach me again."

To her subtle annoyance, Kaelen didn't take the bait. He remained composed, his calculated silence a stark contrast to her intended provocation.

Vorenza felt the invisible tick of a timer. That accursed bitch had inflicted more damage than initially perceived. This "bomb" within her, Lyra's lingering curse, was a growing threat. She could feel the time she remained "stuck" increasing with each passing moment. While her Concept Weaving should have been sufficient to unravel the curse, its insidious nature lay in its imprint on her soul. It demanded time, a closer, deeper look to dismantle, time she simply didn't have while locked in combat.

Vorenza needed to end this quickly. Kaelen was no mage, not even a true knight—just a stubborn machine in her eyes. His limited thought and imagination were precisely why she held such an advantage over him. Yet, she couldn't deny his inquisitiveness, which was why she maintained her facade. She had no doubt that once the machine knew she was on a timer, he would prolong the fight unnecessarily.

Kaelen became a blur, a silver streak against the scorched earth, his retreat not a flight, but a calculated maneuver. He constantly scanned Vorenza, his enhanced optical sensors picking up what a lesser combatant would miss: the subtle stutters in her otherwise flawless movements, the fractional hesitations in her stride, the almost imperceptible wavers in the silver threads of her Concept Weaving. These weren't mistakes; they were ripples in the fabric of her control, direct symptoms of the unseen pressure within her—Lyra's insidious curse.

It was in these fleeting windows—when the curse momentarily seized her, a phantom hand twisting her very soul—that Kaelen would strike. He wasn't relying on brute force. Instead, energy spears shimmered into existence around him, not held, but rather orbiting his retreating figure, each one charged to detonate upon contact. With every stutter in Vorenza's movements, a spear would launch, not for a killing blow, but to pepper her, to force her to expend energy. Each detonation, a brilliant flash and concussive shockwave, was a drain on Kaelen's own mana pool, a calculated expenditure for a greater strategic gain.

The relentless dance of Kaelen's new strategy, a frustrating hit-and-run, combined with the escalating internal pressure of Lyra's curse, began to gnaw at Vorenza. Her calm, almost serene facade, usually unyielding, started to crack. A flicker of raw frustration, then outright desperation, bled into her eyes. She surged forward, a whirlwind of furious intent, faster than Kaelen, her spear blurring through the air.

She was always just an arm's reach away, her fingers brushing the edge of his personal space, only for Lyra's curse to seize her, freezing her mid-stride. And in response, like a coiled viper, one of Kaelen's orbiting energy spears would invariably dart out, precisely aimed, forcing her to react, to shield, to

expend. The cycle was maddening, each near miss amplifying the internal timer ticking relentlessly within her.

The five circular shield constructs around Vorenza, summoned with a fraction of her remaining focus, did their best to absorb the kinetic energy from Kaelen's detonating spears. They shuddered, light fracturing across their surfaces, but without her focused Concept Weaving to guide and exploit the Laws of force and absorption, they couldn't hold. With a final crack, they shattered, dissolving into shimmering motes of light and leaving her exposed to the relentless barrage.

Vorenza's body, once pristine, was now riddled with holes from the concentrated explosions. To any observer, the battle looked less like a clash of titans and more like a macabre game of tag, Kaelen darting in and out, Vorenza desperately trying to close the distance.

Chapter 586:

Kaelen's initial burst of energy and speed was noticeably flagging. His figure, previously a swift blur, was becoming slower, his movements more labored. His very form seemed to be falling apart with each energy expenditure, bits of his outer casing flaking away, internal components sparking visibly. Yet, Vorenza herself was nothing short of a nightmare. Pieces of her skin and clothing hung precariously, her silver-threaded repairs struggling to keep pace with the damage. Only her enraged roar at Kaelen's retreating figure spoke of her fading power and rising desperation.

She was truly desperate. What had begun as a mere inconvenience, a few seconds of suppressed movement, had now escalated into a full-blown minute of being actively hampered by Lyra's curse. The more she was attacked, the weaker she became, and agonizingly, the stronger the curse's grip on her grew.

Vorenza shattered through the latest stillness imposed by the curse, her eyes locking onto Kaelen's retreating form. She saw it then—the subtle falter in his movements, the diminishing shimmer of energy around him. He wasn't attacking anymore, wasn't even attempting to deploy another spear. He was just running, a desperate, fading shadow, buying time for the curse to do its work.

A grim smile, more a baring of teeth than genuine amusement, stretched across Vorenza's bloodied face. This was it. Her internal clock was screaming, the "bomb" of Lyra's curse threatening to detonate and tear her apart from the inside out. But Kaelen was also at his limit, a broken machine running on fumes. She had one last chance.

Vorenza decided to take a gamble.

Vorenza's eyes, though wild with desperation, held a flicker of cold, strategic cunning. Kaelen was retreating, his energy all but spent. An energy blast, a simple concussive force, would be wasted. He was a machine, yes, but one that could endure direct damage. She needed something more insidious, something that would strip him of his last, vital resource: motion.

"You think to hide in the sky, machine?" she rasped, a new, chilling resolve hardening her voice.

She began to weave. No grand, flashy display this time, but a series of interconnected, almost imperceptible manipulations of the Laws around her. First, a subtle distortion of the Law of Buoyancy. Not to make Kaelen fall, but to subtly negate his ability to maintain his airborne position, causing an almost imperceptible drag, a whisper of a pull downwards. On top of this, she wove a concentrated application of the Law of Friction, not against his body, but against the very air particles around him, making his movements exponentially more difficult, as if he were trying to swim through treacle.

Then came the final, brutal layer. As Kaelen, now visibly struggling against the invisible resistance, fought to maintain his altitude, Vorenza imposed a localized Law of Inertia. She didn't increase his mass, but rather, made it exponentially harder for him to change his state of motion. Every twitch of a limb, every attempted correction, became a titanic effort, draining what little energy he had left. It was like trying to stop a charging bull with a single thread, yet magnified to the scale of his entire being.

Kaelen, already running on empty, felt it immediately. The air turned thick, cloying, then impossibly heavy. His internal gyros shrieked, struggling against an unseen force that pressed down on him, dragging him, holding him. He tried to ascend, but his thrusters flared uselessly against the overwhelming, invisible resistance. He tried to move laterally, but it was like attempting to push through solid stone. His systems, already critically low on mana, spiked into the red, then flatlined. The curse's grip was the final, deciding factor, preventing Vorenza from being able to maintain this complex weave for long, but she held it just long enough.

With a last, futile surge, Kaelen's struggling figure simply stopped. And then, gravity, amplified by Vorenza's brutal imposition of Laws, asserted its dominion. He fell. Not a controlled descent, but a lifeless plummet from the sky, a broken puppet whose strings had been cut. He outputted and focused most of his remaining mana to reinforce himself and protect what he could as he hit the ground with a sickening thud, raising a cloud of dust. He lay there, motionless, his systems mostly drained, his body incapable of even twitching. Vorenza had done it.

Vorenza, her gamble paid off, now plummeting from the sky. Her remaining good leg hardened, a single, devastating point aimed directly at Kaelen's inert core. It was the killing blow, a desperate finality.

Below, Ikenga held his breath, his eyes wide. "Will Keles words come to pass? Will the inevitable still occur?" he murmured, a tremor in his voice.

Vorenza's foot made contact with the frozen abyss floor, a silent trigger. The bomb inside her detonated. Just as her hardened leg touched the very tip of Kaelen's Chest, she froze. This time, the chill was absolute, originating not from the external cold, but from her very soul. freewebnovel.com

Only a guttural, despairing roar of "No!" resounded through the abyss, a final, futile protest. Then, in an instant, Vorenza, the terrifying wielder of Concept Weaving, was transformed into a frozen ice sculpture, her last attack forever suspended, inches from its target.

Kaelen lay on the cold ice floor, his eyes wide, fixed on the frozen foot hovering mere inches from his chest. A ragged, almost disbelieving whisper escaped him. "I survived."

The whisper swelled into a choked laugh, then full-blown, joyous cackles that echoed in the chilling silence of the abyss. "Hahahaha, I survived!" He couldn't stop. He was utterly drained, his core screaming in protest, his body a shattered mess, but he was alive. He, a mere Ogre, had done the impossible. He was going to take the demon queen's head back with him.

A wave of debilitating weakness washed over him. He needed sustenance, some form of quick energy conversion to even stand. The abyss armor clinging to him was usually perfect for siphoning energy from defeated demons, but there wasn't a demon, or even a scrap of flesh, in sight.

With immense effort, Kaelen began to crawl, dragging himself away from Vorenza's frozen foot. He pulled his ruined body across the slick, icy floor, inch by agonizing inch, toward where the abyss portal should be. Along the way, all he saw was the devastating aftermath of Lyra's final, desperate act: the entire landscape was an icy graveyard, everything frozen solid, a testament to her dying curse.

Any body he thought might just be frozen was, in fact, a complete ice sculpture, utterly transformed by the influence of Lyra's Law. Kaelen continued his agonizing crawl, hoping against hope that something, anything, might have survived the devastating aftermath. freewebnovel.com

He considered the ice around him. Ordinarily, he could process such a substance, convert it into the vital energy he desperately needed. But this was no ordinary ice; it was infused with Lyra's Law. In a normal state, his own inherent Laws would counteract the influence, allowing him to safely consume it. Now, however, he was too depleted to even call forth his own Laws. Eating the ice would mean sharing the same fate as everything else in sight: permanent, soul-deep freezing.

Kaelen didn't know how long he'd been crawling when the faint sound of footsteps reached him. They were close, too close. He instinctively sought cover, his ruined body dragging him towards a jagged ice formation. But before he could fully conceal himself, the footsteps quickened. Whoever it was, they knew he was there. Hiding was useless.

Kaelen painfully rolled onto his back, his damaged optical sensors struggling to focus. Walking over to him was a Ratman, an impossibility given the context of this battle. His eyes narrowed, trying to make sense of the sight. The Ratman wore the ornate, flowing robes of a mage. Did he steal them from a fallen soldier? Kaelen wondered, a thought that seemed almost ludicrous in his current state.

Then he noticed something else, something even more out of place, floating silently beside the Ratman: a cube. As the figure drew closer, Kaelen's fractured vision sharpened. It was a cube he'd seen before, one often associated with certain enigmatic young goblin he has worked with.

So many questions flooded his mind, but for Kaelen, bleeding energy and utterly spent, only one thing truly mattered. With a hoarse, crackling voice, he managed to croak, "Are there other survivors like you? Do you happen to have some food on you?"

The Ratman remained silent, his gaze unreadable. Instead, a voice, calm and metallic, emanated directly from the floating cube. "This should be considered a safe distance." The words instantly raised a red flag in Kaelen's mind, a jolt of caution overriding his desperate need for sustenance.

The Ratman figure halted, raising a staff Kaelen recognized instantly. The muzzle at its tip was rapidly condensing energy, aimed directly at him.

Kaelen reacted in a flash. His hand briefly glowed with a faint blue light as he slammed it against the icy abyss floor. In the blink of an eye, he closed the distance. The Ratman, clearly not expecting such strength and a rapid counter from a seemingly broken opponent, barely had time to react before Kaelen's hand plunged through its stomach. They both collapsed to the icy ground.

Chapter 587:

A voice, one Kaelen knew well, then spoke "Nixbolt," he said, his tone laced with a detached analytical note, "I still underestimate how strong a Six-Tier figure is."

Kaelen's eyes widened in confusion. Before he could even form a question, a searing wave of energy shot through him. A sickening crack echoed, the sound of an eye, or perhaps a core, shattering. Kaelen looked down. A gaping hole now bore through his stomach and chest, his core within crumbling into irreparable fragments. His gaze, clouded by pain and imminent shutdown, lifted to the familiar yet utterly unfamiliar Ratman before him.

Kaelen, his vision dimming, managed a weak, rasping chuckle. "It seems you've been playing us this whole while." His eyes, once vibrant, flickered once more before the light within them finally extinguished.

The Ratman, or rather, Rattan, heaved, his body wracked with pain from Kaelen's final, desperate strike. With a grunt, he pushed Kaelen's lifeless form off him. The Cube, floating steadily beside him, pulsed with a bright flash of mana, confirming it was the true source of the finishing blow.

A complex magic circle shimmered into existence on Rattan's palm. He pressed it against the gaping wound in his stomach, and at the expenditure of his mana, the flesh began to knit together with unnatural speed, the gruesome injury closing inch by agonizing inch.

He stared up at the desolate abyss sky, a slow, ragged chuckle building in his chest, quickly escalating into a hysterical, echoing laugh. He had survived. He had manipulated, strategized, and endured. He, Rattan, had emerged as the undisputed victor. The greatest winner of all.

"Guardian, proceed as planned," Rattan commanded, his voice raw but resolute. As he spoke, his shadow stretched out, expanding rapidly to swallow Kaelen's lifeless figure whole. A familiar, satisfying sensation washed over Rattan.

In the now desolate, cold abyss plain, with Rattan's figure the only one left standing, a profound shift took place. In a sickening cascade of tearing flesh and reforming bone, the Ratman's form twisted, expanded, and solidified. Where the Ratman once stood, now loomed an Ogre—or, more accurately, the resurrected Kaelen.

Rattan, now inhabiting his new, colossal body, stretched, testing the limits of his stolen form. The mage's robes that had adorned him moments before rippled, shedding their illusionary form to reveal their true nature: Abyssal Armor. The dark, living metal writhed and adjusted, conforming perfectly to the Ogre-like scale of Kaelen's body, taking on the same menacing, powerful aesthetic as his original armor.

Hours earlier, when the Imperial army first breached the Abyss, it was a familiar sight of steel and screams. The earth trembled underfoot as legions clashed, a symphony of destruction resembling the countless battles that had come before. Yet, this time, a new, dissonant note joined the chorus. High above, beyond that of mortal eyes, Sixth-tier figures waged a war of their own, their immense power ripping at the very fabric of reality.

To Rattan and his demon brethren, the true nature of this celestial conflict was incomprehensible. Their senses, attuned to the immediate, the tangible, could not grasp the scale of the power being unleashed. All they registered was the sudden, horrifying shift in their world. A shadow, vast and impossibly swift, plunged from the heavens. Then, the ground convulsed as a mountain-sized rock or what felt like it obliterated a section of the battlefield, turning warriors, both Imperial and Abyssal, into paste.

Panic, cold and visceral, seized the demonic ranks. To such selfish being, this was no longer a battle; it was an annihilation. The Imperial invasion, brutal as it was, had always presented a clear objective: fight or die. But this? This was different. This was a force that didn't care about their struggle, their goals, or their very existence. Survival, in its purest, most desperate form, became the only law. Each demon, in that moment, was striving only to escape the impossible, unseen threat.

Unfortunately for the demons, the Empire's army was driven by a different, chilling resolve. They had come to the Abyss not merely to conquer, but to sacrifice, their lives already forfeit for the glory of the Empire. As the demonic lines fractured and began to fall back, a desperate, chaotic retreat, the Imperial legions, surprisingly intact and unyielding, pressed their advantage. They became the hunters, their disciplined pursuit turning the rout into a massacre.

But the sixth-tier figures, high above, remained utterly indifferent to the petty squabbles unfolding on the ground. Their attacks were not precision strikes; they were an overflowing of power, a careless expenditure of force that paid no mind to friend or foe. Sometimes, it was not only a mountain of stone that plummeted from the sky, but a colossal, iceberg-sized shard of pure, frozen energy, shattering landscapes and lives with equal, detached ease. To Rattan and the others, this was not war; it was the world itself, casually and inexplicably, trying to unmake them.

The mountain-sized rock, then the iceberg of ice, these were tangible horrors. But then came an attack far more insidious, one that defied perception. Without warning, an unseen force descended, a sudden, crushing increase in pressure. It wasn't a physical impact, but as if the very air had solidified and tightened. Around Rattan, demons and Imperial soldiers alike buckled. Their armor groaned, then warped. Flesh bulged, eyes bulged, and within seconds, those caught in the immediate area were squeezed into pulp, a sickening mess of meat and shattered bone. There were no screams, only the wet, grotesque sounds of bodies collapsing inward.

Witnessing this, any lingering spark of arrogance within Rattan, his confidence in his own survival, was utterly extinguished. The thought that he could safely navigate this war, seemed ludicrous. He understood, with a chilling clarity, that compared to the beings in the sky, his continued existence or his demise held absolutely no meaning. He was an ant, caught in the wake of gods.

Rattan found himself in this churning, meat-strewn mess, thrown left and right by unseen forces, by the concussive echoes of distant impacts, and by the desperate scramble of others. Sometimes, he lashed out with his own attacks, a reflex to defend against a perceived threat, a desperate attempt to create space in the chaos. Other times, it was simply to push himself further from the epicenters of the invisible annihilation.

Amidst the pandemonium, the sheer overwhelming numbers of the demonic horde began to take their toll on the Imperial army. Though disciplined, they were finite, and the Abyss, it seemed, was limitless in its monstrous inhabitants. Slowly, brutally, the Imperial lines buckled and broke. The demons, despite the unseen horrors, now turned their full, desperate might on their earthly invaders, and one by one, the Empire's soldiers were taken care of their final cries swallowed by the monstrous roar of the Abyssal host.

By this time, Rattan, his spirit broken and his instincts screaming for survival, had hidden himself beneath a pile of corpses. He lay motionless, praying to whatever powers might listen that he would remain unseen, especially by the victorious demons now swarming over the fallen Imperial troops.

Unknown to Rattan, a primal shift occurred within the demonic ranks once the Imperial army, which had been holding them back, was fully dealt with. The immediate threat gone, their bloodlust gave way to a deeper, more profound terror. They forsaked the ritualistic pulling out of souls, the leisurely feeding on flesh. All that mattered was escape from this battlefield. The unseen attacks from above, the crushing pressure, the random, landscape-altering impacts these were not the signs of a war they could win, but a place where existence itself was a precarious gamble.

The demons, for all their savagery, understood they were under heavy risk staying around. The Abyss, their home, had become a death trap. It was at this precise moment of frantic, uncharacteristic retreat that Lyra, a figure whose presence suggested a connection beyond the immediate conflict, felt a deep, bone-chilling wave of cold spread throughout this entire Abyss layer, an ominous ripple from the impossible conflict raging in the heavens. The casual destruction had intensified, and this layer itself was beginning to feel its chill.

The chill began subtly, a creeping sensation that Rattan, huddled beneath the gruesome blanket of corpses, initially dismissed as a natural consequence of the Abyss's oppressive atmosphere. But it intensified, an unnatural, gnawing cold that sank into his bones, far beyond the ordinary bite of the void. He shivered, trying to burrow deeper, yet the frigid embrace only tightened until it became utterly unbearable. With a desperate heave, he pushed himself up from under the corpses, gasping, his breath clouding in the sudden, profound cold.

What he saw next rooted him to the spot, his body locked in a violent tremor. The head of the corpse he'd just been hiding beneath began to freeze over, frost blooming like a macabre flower across its lifeless features. He tore his gaze away, scanning the chaotic landscape. The retreating backs of the demons, previously a tide of terrified flight, were now frozen in their steps, grotesque statues mid-stride, their desperate cries silenced, their forms encased in glittering ice.

Chapter 588:

Rattan tried to move, to flee, but his feet were already stuck, bound to the ground by rapidly forming ice. A chilling numbness crept up his legs, and as his vision blurred, he saw, with dawning horror, that his own eyes were slowly turning into complete ice, the world fading into a frosted pane. Panic, raw and unbridled, finally consumed him. His composure shattered, he screamed into the frozen air, a desperate, guttural cry for his guardian: "Guardian! Help!"

Observing the unfolding catastrophe, Phantom made no move. He was no sixth-tier being, no master of cosmic laws. He held no authority, no inherent power to counter Lyra's dominion, no way to shield Rattan from the inexorable spread of her chilling influence. He watched, a silent, helpless witness to his Rattan agonizing transformation.

Phantom reached out, a desperate mental plea, to Ikenga, but received no answer. Yet, Phantom knew. He knew Ikenga was watching, a silent observer of the casual, catastrophic consequences of a higher-tier war.

Seeing Rattan's rapid succumb to the chilling onslaught, Phantom made a desperate gamble. He sent a wave of thought, a final, fervent message to his ward. Rattan, whose lower half was now a crystalline sculpture of ice, felt the surge of communication and, even in his terror, a flicker of joy ignited within him.

At that very moment, both Phantom and Rattan spoke, their voices, one a mental plea and the other a desperate rasp, overlapping in a synchronous invocation:

"Great Ikenga, Lord of the untamed wild and master of the spoken word. I humble myself before your boundless power."

"From the rustling leaves to the deepest roots, you are the breath and bone of nature's heart. I seek your favor to walk safely within your green embrace, to be shielded from nature's hidden fangs, and guided through paths where shadows might lurk. Protect me from the storm's fury and the land's vengeful tremor."

"Grant me your fierce guardianship, that I may thrive amidst the wild's beauty and remain untouched by the venom of my foes. I offer my respect to your primal strength, and trust in your unwavering protection."

In direct response to their united prayer, a radiant golden dome shimmered into existence around Rattan. The dome pulsed with an immediate, profound warmth, pushing back the encroaching cold. Safety enveloped Rattan, and slowly, miraculously, the ice receded from his legs, his flesh regaining its normal hue and sensation. The golden light hummed with a primal energy, a clear, unmistakable sign of Ikenga's unwavering protection.

From the ground within the golden dome, an impossible bloom began. Lush, vibrant flowers and plants unfurled with breathtaking speed, their petals and leaves a riot of greens and deep earth tones against the stark, frozen wasteland outside. Rattan, his body now fully restored from the icy grip, felt himself softly enveloped by their burgeoning forms, cradled by the sudden eruption of life. His mind, however, was filled with a sensation far more profound than the tactile comfort. A presence, immense and ancient, settled within his consciousness, a power no less, and perhaps even more, than that of the sixth-tier beings tearing apart the sky.

"So that's who my guardian answers to," Rattan murmured, taking a deep, shuddering breath. He looked beyond the shimmering golden shield, his gaze sweeping across the transformed Abyssal layer. What had moments ago been a realm of searing heat and sulfurous air was now being systematically

frozen over, a vast, glacial landscape expanding with terrifying speed. Every living thing caught in the advance was being turned into a delicate, horrifying ice sculpture, perfectly preserved in their last moments of terror or flight.

Phantom, meanwhile, stood before the materialized figure of Ikenga. Phantom said nothing, but his intense gaze, a silent question, clearly asked why Ikenga had remained unresponsive, why he had been so terribly silent during Rattan's near-demise. Ikenga, however, offered no immediate answer, his gaze seemingly fixed on something else.

"I wanted you to surprise me," Ikenga admitted, his voice a calm murmur.

Phantom wasn't surprised by the answer, his expression stoic as he responded, "That was a move from a sixth-tier being."

"I created you," Ikenga stated simply, the words hanging in the frigid air, a quiet assertion of his profound power and connection to Phantom.

Phantom remained silent for a moment, then, his gaze unwavering, he asked, "Were you disappointed with my response and the way I handled it?"

Ikenga chuckled. He closed the distance between them, effortlessly bringing Phantom into a headlock. "No," he mused, his voice laced with a strange pride. "That was the first time since your change into an Arch-Curse you prayed to me." He released his grip. "I am proud. You can admit when you are weaker."

As Ikenga spoke, Phantom's ever-shifting, ethereal face subtly began to coalesce, reforming into his true, original visage before return back to its ever-shifting state. He himself might not have noticed the subtle change, but Ikenga certainly had.

Ikenga released his grip, and it took a moment for Phantom to fully gather himself "What are the next steps for Rattan?" he asked, his gaze still holding a hint of the concern that had prompted his desperate prayer.

Phantom continued, laying out the difficult reality. "If he somehow survives this war, there will be many questions about why only he survived, considering his strength. Or do you plan on him returning to his original identity as a Ratman? That way he can be hidden from the Empire's sight."

"Is that where your host or main character ambition ends?" Ikenga countered, posing a question to Phantom rather than providing an answer.

Phantom remained silent, a long moment passing before he slowly shook his head.

"You have your answer then," Ikenga observed, a knowing glint in his eyes. He then placed a hand on Phantom's shoulder, a gesture of connection and subtle empowerment. "I don't like interfering and prefer things to progress in their natural way. You are at the edge of becoming something greater; it's time you stop asking for what I think and start dictating how things should move in your way."

Ikenga's form began to dissipate, shimmering like a mirage until he was almost gone. "Your previous pawn, Malzor, is now a sixth-tier being," his voice echoed, calm and resonant even as he faded. "And he believes you are the one to bring him to such a position. He will make his appearance to you at the opportune time." With that, Ikenga vanished completely, leaving Phantom to ponder his words. To phantom, the message was clear: proceed as he would, for Ikenga would always be watching, ever one step ahead, ensuring his path was clear.

Outside the golden dome, Rattan stood at its very edge, gazing up into the tumultuous sky. His trusty cube floated beside him, its shape fluidly morphing, then solidifying into a pair of goggles, designed to cut through the chaotic energies of the higher-tier conflict.

Yet, even with enhanced vision, he could barely discern the true nature of the battle raging above. The sheer scale and speed of their movements blurred into incomprehensible streaks of light and shadow. The only things he could clearly differentiate were the figures of Kaelen and the Demon Queen, their forms sometimes a blur and some times distinct amidst the maelstrom.

Witnessing a fight of this magnitude, Rattan couldn't help but feel a profound sense of awe, coupled with a deep, personal reflection. His thoughts drifted to his own future, to the laws he would one day embody. His current path as a mage wasn't focused on raw power or destructive might, but rather on production through learning. He pondered how his chosen path would ever align with the god-like beings who tore apart reality with casual ease. The vastness of their power both intimidated and inspired him, shaping his burgeoning ambitions.

Rattan was a craftsman, through and through. That was where his true talent lay. He couldn't envision himself as someone who would simply wave a hand and tear the sky apart. In fact, he hated fighting, finding absolutely no joy in it.

Mana was endlessly fascinating to him, so much so that Rattan couldn't comprehend why most mages seemed so fixated on increasing their firepower—leveling mountains and all that destructive nonsense.

This was precisely why he was so drawn to the magi-tech path. It offered the potential to produce incredible magi-tech devices and equip an entire army, rather than putting oneself in constant danger on the battlefield.

Rattan felt held a grasp about his unique path when he suddenly heard a voice, seemingly from nowhere, remark, "I don't think watching six-tier fights is that interesting."

Rattan spun around, his heart pounding. No one should be inside the golden dome with him. He was met with a truly bizarre sight: an enormous being, the largest he had ever seen. Even though it was sitting cross-legged on the newly grown grass, Rattan had to crane his neck to get a full glimpse of the figure.

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As his eyes scanned its face, Rattan instinctively took a step back. The being's features weren't static; they were in constant flux, shifting with every blink of an eye. In one unsettling moment, Rattan even caught a fleeting reflection of his own face among the myriad of changing visages.

He was about to blurt out "Who are you?" but stopped himself. A profound sense of familiarity washed over him, a recognition deep in his soul. "Guardian... is that you?" Rattan asked, his voice barely a whisper. The colossal figure nodded.

Rattan started to drop to his knees, a deferential reflex to such an immense and familiar presence, but found he couldn't. Instead, he saw Phantom extend a hand, a clear invitation for Rattan to simply sit so they could talk.

Rattan took several deep breaths, trying to calm the frantic beating of his heart. This was the first time he was truly coming face-to-face with his guardian, not just as an unseen presence or a distant voice, but as a giant, ever-shifting entity within the confines of his sanctuary.

Phantom, getting straight to the point, asked, "What do you plan on doing after you survive this war?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and vast. Rattan took his time, trying to formulate a response. But as he opened his mouth, he found he could not find an answer. It truly seemed as though his path had reached its end here. The moment he stepped outside the Abyss and into the Empire's sight, he would be a dead man, his unique talents as a craftsman utterly irrelevant in the grand schemes of empires and gods.

Rattan wanted to ask Phantom what he should do, to seek guidance as he always had. But the words wouldn't form. A glance at Phantom's ever-changing face was like looking into a mirror that reflected not just his physical self, but his deepest thoughts, his fears, and his unspoken desires.

No longer in a hurry to provide an answer, Rattan instead looked at Phantom, or rather, at this profound, mirroring reflection of himself. He shifted his own internal question, turning it back on his himself: "What is his next step after his battle?"

"He and his people still need time to survive and watch as the Empire collapses on itself, so they can take their rightful place. But that's hard to do with his lost status and influence in the Empire."

"He came so far because he was living with the enemy, knowing their plans and movements. He was even able to strengthen his people with the Empire's resources because he was so close to them."

"His current 'skin' as a genius goblin mage no longer serves a purpose. This skin has to be forsaken and a new one taken. One with enough influence and power that his position would be hard to question."

Seemingly able to read Rattan's mind, his guardian spoke again, a single, potent suggestion: "You could be him." With those words, Phantom fell silent.

For some inexplicable reason, as Phantom spoke, a specific individual appeared in Rattan's mind's eye. He raised his head sharply, glancing at his guardian whose ever-shifting face now undeniably resembled

the very person Rattan had just thought of. "Kaelen," Rattan breathed, the name a realization rather than a question.

Yes, Kaelen was the only figure Rattan could think of who fit his next step, but the how remained a monumental question. How was he, a relatively mundane craftsman, to become Kaelen, a sixth-tier being? The only time he'd even come so close to Kaelen was when they'd worked together, an alliance born of necessity, not parity.

Rattan raised his head, his gaze sweeping the tumultuous sky where Kaelen was locked in a brutal duel with the Demon Queen. What better opportune time than this? The chaos, the sheer power on display—it felt like a crucible.

He looked at his guardian, who simply shook his head. Rattan immediately understood. He couldn't directly interfere, couldn't simply "become" Kaelen through some act of will or craft. All he could do now was pray that both figures, Kaelen and the Demon Queen, somehow annihilated each other.

With a heavy sigh, Rattan placed a hand on his face and, with a decisive pull, tore off the skin he had worn for years. His form stretched, bones realigning, as he welcomed the familiar twitching of his own tail and the undeniable shift back to his true self. His fur, however, was no longer dark as it had been the last time; it was now a striking pale white. He paid no attention to this new change in himself. Instead, his sole focus was now fixed on the sky, on the distant, devastating battle where his potential new identity was fighting for its life.

Rattan, now in his true, white-furred form, was consumed by a singular, fierce determination: to get his hands on Kaelen, one way or another. If Kaelen somehow emerged victorious from this impossible battle, which was a strong "maybe" at best, he would surely be weakened enough for Rattan to make his move.

What seemed even more opportune to Rattan now was the possibility of the Demon Queen winning. Through their potential alliance, he might then get his hands on Kaelen's body. However, Rattan deeply wished to avoid meeting the Demon Queen. The Chief's current state served as a chilling testament to her insidious nature and immense power. Even though Rattan could barely discern the details of the sixth-tier struggle, he had noticed a distinct pattern: Kaelen was constantly on the defensive, always on the run, while the Demon Queen relentlessly pressed her offensive.

The ambition within Rattan's soul overflowed, a powerful current of intent. Phantom, witnessing this surge of resolve, smiled. His colossal form then dissipated, vanishing as subtly as he had appeared. Rattan, utterly engrossed in his new, audacious goal, remained unaware of his guardian's departure.

That was how Rattan spent his time, waiting and watching for the battle's conclusion. His patience was finally rewarded in the last moments of the clash when he saw Kaelen's weakened body fall from the sky like a puppet, plummeting towards the frozen ground. Not far behind, the Demon Queen followed, a predatory shadow.

It took a few moments for them to drop out of sight, and Rattan could no longer see them. But then, he heard it: the last, unwilling roar of the Demon Queen, a sound of raw agony and ultimate defeat.

Hearing that roar, Rattan knew it was his cue to move. But he hesitated. Was he truly capable enough to do what he planned? A wave of doubt washed over him, a cold counterpoint to the ambition burning in his soul. Yet, even as his mind wavered, his legs moved, carrying him forward before he could second-guess himself.

He could only imagine the immense power he would wield from his new position, the far-reaching influence he would gain from claiming what Kaelen had achieved. With that, he would be able to look both Vellok and the Emperor in the eyes without fear, to finally stand toe-to-toe with them as an equal even without the firepower but with status and influence alone.

Rattan pressed on, his determined walk bringing him to the colossal, frozen body of the Demon Queen. With a grunt of effort, he wrenched off her icy head, saving it in his spatial ring – a gruesome trophy, or perhaps, a crucial component for future crafts. He then began to search for Kaelen, quickly finding traces of him crawling away from the immediate impact site.

This pursuit led to the current situation. Rattan had sustained some damage, but his goal was achieved: Kaelen's body was his. His memories, his status, his very identity—all were now Rattan's to inherit.

Rattan was admiring his newly acquired, powerful form when he suddenly felt a calling, an undeniable will asking him what he desired. It was as if a sentient force recognized him as the last victor of the conflict. This will resonated with a strange sense of satisfaction and joy, a peculiar emotional response that Rattan found utterly bizarre.

This was the Abyss's will, thoroughly entertained by the dramatic turn of events. Such a theatrical ending was, to its ancient mind, well worth the wait. When Vorenza, the Demon Queen, had fallen and Kaelen had emerged as the victor, the price for that victory should have been Kaelen's to inherit. But it was precisely at that moment that Rattan had stepped out of the protective dome, heading towards Kaelen with a palpable malice in his stride, changing the very course of Kaelen fate.

Kaelen, who should have been granted grace, was not. The Abyss had waited, an ancient observer, to see how events would unfold after Kaelen and Rattan's fateful encounter. Now, with Rattan as the victor, he deserved the winning grace and the ultimate prize.

Within Rattan's consciousness, Phantom received words from Ikenga and relayed them: "State what you need at the moment."

Rattan found himself stumped. Right now, he held what he desired most: Kaelen's very essence. The Abyss's will, receiving no answer, acted on its own. It imposed its grace on Rattan, a wave of raw power that manifested as a sudden surge in his magical strength. With a slight internal shackle breaking, Rattan shot through to the fifth stage of power, a profound leap even before he had fully comprehended a domain.

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The grace kept pushing, elevating Rattan until he reached the peak of the fifth stage, with even more power left to bestow. However, seeing that this was the limit Rattan could currently withstand, the Abyss's will shifted its attention to Rattan's cube. It blessed the remaining grace upon the artifact.

The cube began to swell, rapidly increasing in size until it was the size of a boulder. Its material purified, its internal functions strengthened far beyond anything Rattan could have accomplished in his current state. The cube was soon upgraded, transforming from a mere tool into a genuine artifact.

The Abyss hummed with a weird satisfaction. Even as parts of its very nature had been irrevocably altered, rendered into vast, shimmering icescapes by Lyra's relentless assault, it found a strange delight in the unfolding drama.

It was a satisfaction born not of harmony, but of transformation and the brutal, intricate dance of power. The freezing touch of Lyra's law was an intrusion, certainly, a force antithetical to this Abyss layer inherent heat and chaos. Yet, it was also a catalyst.

This inherent capacity for transformation is precisely why the Abyss, despite the immense destruction, doesn't mind sixth-tier beings battling on its different layers. To a lesser entity, such conflicts would represent catastrophic devastation, an existential threat to their very being. But to the Abyss, it's something akin to a vigorous pruning or a forced evolution.

Each clash of these cosmic powers doesn't merely level mountains or freeze lakes; it fundamentally alters the very essence of the layer upon which they fight. The raw energy, the clashing laws, the very reality-bending power unleashed, all seep into the Abyss's fabric. The result is always a new outlook and nature of its own for that specific layer. A fiery layer might become a tempestuous maelstrom of raw lightning after an elementalists' battle. A desolate plain could burst forth with pulsating, sentient flora following a clash between nature deities.

The Abyss views these battles not as invasions, but as grand, albeit chaotic, acts of genesis. The casual indifference of sixth-tier beings in their struggles is mirrored by the Abyss's own detached satisfaction. It's a forge, a crucible where its own limitless, monstrous potential is constantly reshaped and expanded. Every scar on its surface, every frozen waste or charred crater, is simply a new canvas for the birth of something novel, something uniquely terrifying, ensuring the Abyss remains an ever-changing, endlessly resourceful realm of dark wonder.

Rattan reeled, utterly taken aback by the newfound power surging through him, but even more so by the dramatic transformation of his cube. He watched, mesmerized, as the now boulder-sized cube moved with a will of its own, merging seamlessly with the Abyss Armor Kaelen had worn. The armor's inherent chaotic will was swiftly and decisively overridden by the cube's new artifact soul. Its formidable functions were entirely taken over and then fully handed to Rattan, its rightful owner.

A joyous, uncontrollable laughter bubbled up from Rattan's stomach and heart. He hadn't even begun to truly leverage Kaelen's skin, yet it was already bringing him such immense benefits.

Driven by an eagerness to experience the raw power of a fifth-stage being, Rattan didn't bother with a spell. With a mere flex of his will, his feet left the ground. There was a silent burst of displaced air, and Rattan shot into the sky.

He floated there, arms spread wide, feeling an exhilarating mix of power and freedom. He couldn't hold back any longer. Laughter erupted from him, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. Soon, he vowed, he would bring this feeling to his people. They would look upon him as a savior, a king. He would rebuild

the greatness his people once knew in this world. For whatever subconscious reason, Rattan prevented himself from asking the inevitable question: what was the price for gaining all of this?

Rattan's euphoria was absolute, blinding him to the complexities of his situation. Even his guardian's strange alliance with demons, and the possibility that their world was Phantom's ultimate goal, faded from his awareness. Instead, he was fixated solely on what more he could gain.

Meanwhile, within Rattan's consciousness, Phantom was diligently working to fulfill Ikenga's request. Just as all of Nixbolt's knowledge was absorbed when his identity was taken over by Rattan, the same applied to Kaelen. Now, deep within Rattan's mind, lay a memory crucial to Ikenga. Phantom carefully extracted this memory, which solidified into a luminous crystal. An arm briefly materialized in Rattan's consciousness, gently taking the crystal before vanishing.

It was at this precise moment, while Rattan revelled in his newfound power high in the sky, that the situation drastically changed. He blinked, and suddenly, directly in front of him, hovered a demon far larger and more imposing than even Kaelen.

Rattan's body stiffened with pure terror. The power radiating from the large figure screamed sixth stage. "A gargoyle," was Rattan's last conscious thought before his eyes rolled back and Phantom seamlessly took over.

Malzor, the newly ascended sixth-tier gargoyle, hung suspended in the frozen sky, his colossal form dwarfing the ogre body Phantom now inhabited. His gaze, sharp and piercing, bore into Rattan's borrowed features, seeking the presence he knew lay beneath. There was no immediate greeting, only the heavy silence of two figures one familiar, one now equal sizing each other up.

"I received your... gift," Malzor finally rumbled, his voice a grinding stone, devoid of warmth. His massive, clawed hands, each digit thick as a tree trunk, flexed slowly, and the frozen air around them visibly warped.

Phantom, speaking through Rattan's mouth, offered a slight, almost imperceptible nod. "You've done the impossible, Malzor. Reached a stage that was once a dream, in a mere matter of decades." His voice, usually detached, held a hint of something that could be pride, or perhaps satisfaction.

Malzor's gaze drifted to his own powerful limbs, then back to Phantom. "It would have been better," he growled, his voice dropping, "if I'd received this gift personally. From you. Not as a distant, unsolicited blessing." A tremor ran through the colossal gargoyle, a subtle ripple of long-held resentment. "How long have you been in contact with Zarvok? Was I always just a part of his plan to control the Abyss, and you, Phantom, merely his agent for the change?" The accusation hung heavy, sharper than the frigid air.

Phantom's borrowed face settled into a slight frown. "I do not serve Zarvok." His voice hardened, a faint, ethereal echo accompanying the words. "I serve my creator. And he was the one who deemed you necessary... until you weren't."

Malzor's expression remained impassive, though the tension in his massive shoulders lessened ever so slightly. "Gods, then." His gaze swept across the newly frozen, glittering landscape of the Abyss layer. "I recall whispers of gods appearing here. So, your creator is one of them, and conveniently in league with Zarvok?"

"It wasn't so long ago that my creator began to give his full support to Zarvok," Phantom admitted, the statement a subtle shift. "He previously had plans to make you a third challenger for the throne. A perfect wedge."

Malzor's hands clenched once more, the sound of popping air around his fists louder this time. A flicker of raw, frustrated fury crossed his features. "Then why? Why abandon me after pushing me so far? What changed, Phantom?"

Phantom didn't hesitate. His gaze flickered upwards, as if piercing through the very fabric of the Abyss to something far grander and more ancient. "The Abyss."

Malzor paused, his anger visibly deflating, replaced by a slow dawning of understanding. He unclenched his fists, the sound of his breathing a deep, rasping hiss in the frigid air. "The Abyss..."

"My creator realized it was not his place, currently, to tangle with a being as old and profound as the Abyss itself," Phantom explained, his voice returning to its cool, measured tone. "He realized early on that in his attempt to match with it, he might end up being nothing more than a pawn, just like those he sought to move."

A look of reluctant recognition, almost respect, solidified on Malzor's face. "Then why am I suddenly back in your line of sight?" he asked, the question less of an accusation and more of a complex curiosity. He turned, his gaze sweeping over the endless expanse of frozen demons.

Phantom, through Rattan's form, spread his arms wide, a gesture that seemed to encompass the entire transformed layer. A note of profound satisfaction, almost theatrical pride, resonated in his voice. "Because, Malzor, you are needed now. You are needed for the stage I am preparing for my new host."

Malzor stood silent, the question hanging heavy in the air between them. His vast, stone-like features, usually a mask of fierce determination, now held a complex mix of contemplation and a subtle, almost imperceptible weariness. He looked down at his powerful, newly acquired sixth-tier form, then back at the smaller figure of Rattan, inhabited by Phantom.