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"Lucky," Malzor finally conceded, his voice a low, gravelly rumble. "Because you delivered what you promised, even if the path was... circuitous. I achieved what I sought. But unlucky," he added, his gaze becoming distant, as if looking through Phantom and into the vast expanse of the Abyss itself, "because you revealed how much more there is beyond that ambition. The ceiling I fought so hard to reach is just another floor to beings like your creator, and to the Abyss itself."

He brought one massive clawed hand to his chest. "The fire I felt, the desperate need to rise... it's still here, but it's different now. Quieter. The chase was the essence, perhaps. Now that I've caught it, I see the endlessness of it all." He paused, a long, thoughtful silence stretching between them. "So, you are preparing a stage for your new host. What role do I play in this new act, Phantom?"

Phantom shook his head, Rattan's face betraying no emotion. "I can't tell you what role to play. Be you, Malzor. Follow the words of your new lord, Zarvok."

"All things will fall into place after that." With those cryptic words, Phantom took control of Rattan's new body, launching it into the air. The frozen landscape trailed right behind as he plunged into the abyss portal they came through.

Malzor, left alone in the vast, frozen expanse of the Abyss, let out a deep, rumbling laugh that echoed across the ice. Meeting Phantom had brought a strange sense of peace to his mind, settling the simmering questions of his past ambition and igniting a new, clear purpose. The world looked different from the perspective of a sixth-tier being. He hadn't yet fully consolidated his newfound strength or sifted through the vast inherited knowledge that came with his current stage, but he understood one fundamental truth: this stage meant power.

For now, he accepted his place under a new lord, because he simply couldn't yet picture himself as more. But Malzor knew he possessed the ultimate luxury: time, eternity itself. There would come a time for change, for a new ascension. For now, he was keenly interested in this "stage" Phantom had spoken of, curious about the roles destined to be played.

As Malzor slowly floated down towards the silent, frozen ground, a thought drifted through his ancient mind. "It seems my stage with Phantom is complete," he mused, a faint, almost wistful note in his thought. "I wonder what the ending would have looked like."

He thought as he looked back into the distance where his army was now approaching, his current mission was to secure this area and set up a new frontier to surprise the empire and prevent them from moving recklessly.

As they plunged into the portal, Phantom swapped consciousness, and Rattan instantly took over. His body, which moments ago had soared with newfound power, now felt strangely battered and weakened. A wave of confusion washed over him, but before he could voice it, a message from Phantom resonated within his mind: his current appearance was needed for his next role.

Rattan didn't need it spelled out. He understood. His recent gains, his transformation into a fifth-stage being, the artifact cube—all of it needed to be hidden, camouflaged beneath the guise of a survivor. He stumbled as he pushed himself forward, making his way back towards the Empire. He just needed to pretend long enough, to project the image of a broken but victorious hero, to capture the Empire's attention. He knew they wouldn't be far behind; they would be eagerly awaiting news, desperate for any indication of the battle's outcome. And Rattan, the humble craftsman, now bearing the skin of a war hero, was ready to deliver.

Deep within the stolen memories of Kaelen, now laid bare by Phantom's extraction, Ikenga and Keles found themselves immersed in a past that held the answers to their pressing questions. Ikenga had demanded these memories, desperate to understand: "How did the goblins become free folk? Where did the mages go? Why was everyone watchful and scared of Vellok?" These weren't questions an enemy would willingly answer; the truth had to be taken by force, as it was with Kaelen.

The memories revealed Kaelen as the eldest among his siblings, part of the very first generation of goblins born from "Mother." In their earliest days, they were all treated identically: as lab rats. A strong, primal bond formed among them, forged in shared hardship and the constant need to have each other's backs. Yet, their existence was brutal. Blood was shed, and many were taken, never to return, their absences a stark reminder of the dangers lurking within their confined world. Each time one of them was "pointed at and picked out," a wave of terror washed over the rest, knowing it could easily be their turn tomorrow.

This grim routine persisted until they reached an age where the inherited seed from Mother began to activate. With this awakening came a profound and brutal division that shattered any semblance of equal treatment. Those who awakened their arcane seed were immediately elevated, receiving preferential treatment from the mages. They became squires and apprentices, granted access and privileges previously unimaginable, creating a stark chasm between those with magical potential and those without.

While the magically inclined ascended, individuals like Kaelen, who awakened as knights, found their treatment unchanged—or, in many ways, even worsened. Their newly acquired stronger bodies and regenerative capabilities weren't seen as gifts but as tools for further exploitation. The mages, recognizing this enhanced durability, simply pushed them harder, making good use of their resilience for increasingly dangerous and grueling tasks.

This disparity in treatment fostered a profound shift within the goblin community. Those who awakened as mages, once fellow lab rats and slaves, quickly adopted the cruel ways of their masters. Enamored by their newfound status and power, they seemed to forget their shared history of suffering. Their loyalty shifted entirely towards the mages, and in a perverse display of devotion, they began to choose their own people, fellow goblins as subjects for their experiments. This was their twisted way of showcasing what they had learned and pleasing their masters.

Among this very first batch of magically awakened goblins were two exceptional individuals, both siblings of Kaelen: Vellok and Kairos. Kairos, in particular, would go on to become known as the Emperor.

Vellok and Kairos, due to their exceptional elemental affinities, quickly became favorites among the mages. This was both a blessing and a curse. While it afforded them a degree of protection and privilege, it also drew the obsessive attention of certain high-ranking mages who saw in the goblin siblings a potential shortcut for their own stagnant paths. Ikenga, deeply invested in understanding Vellok's trajectory, focused keenly on the memories detailing the experiments conducted upon him.

The mage who took Vellok under his wing was a sixth-tier light elemental mage. This was a truly rare and potent element, but its very rarity also presented a formidable challenge for the mage's advancement. This particular mage was ancient, around 10,000 years old, yet in all those millennia, his progress had stalled. He'd grown frustrated, his path forward seemingly blocked. Desperate for a breakthrough, he had turned his attention to creatures exhibiting the light element.

For thousands of years, this mage had scoured planet after planet, a relentless quest for such beings. However, finding true light elemental creatures was exceedingly rare, and even when he did, the results were consistently disappointing. The creatures he found offered no discernible value to his research, leaving him no closer to his breakthrough.

It was at this critical juncture, while the ancient light elemental mage was at his wit's end, that the mages collectively made a groundbreaking discovery: the existence of "Angels." These beings of pure light belonged to a civilization as ancient and profound as the very Abyss itself. Unlike demons, who could be lured and trapped with specific rituals and artifacts, angels were elusive, rarely seen or even

rumored. Their appearances were almost exclusively limited to summonings performed by devout followers whose religions centered around them or who worshipped "GOD." Just as demons were intrinsically linked to the Abyss, angels were bound to this entity.

Angels could also be contacted by other beings or elements with strong light affinities, due to their inherent connection to the element. However, their extreme sensitivity to light meant they could discern when a being's light was no longer pure. Angels, diametrically opposed to demons, embodied kindness and goodness as their sole purpose.

Upon learning of such a civilization, the old light elemental mage was filled with immense joy and eagerness to study them. He immediately attempted to summon an angel, but to his utter dismay, he made no contact and failed each time. Worse, he felt an unmistakable repulsion from the angels, followed by a chilling warning echoing in his mind: "Disturb them again, and your light will be taken away." This direct threat from beings of pure light underscored the mage's profound impurity and shattered his hopes of easily exploiting angelic power for his own advancement.

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Perplexed by the angelic warning, the ancient mage temporarily ceased his attempts at direct contact. But then, he encountered Vellok. In Vellok, the mage recognized an elemental talent that almost close to his own and a purity of light he had only ever sensed in his fleeting, repulsed attempts to contact angels. From his millennia of research and those brief, chilling angelic encounters, the mage understood one crucial thing: beings like Vellok, with their untainted light, were considered the "most beloved souls" by the angels.

This revelation ignited a new, sinister plan within the mage. He lavished Vellok with attention, showering him with what appeared to be genuine love and guidance. He even stooped to actions far beneath his usual disdain for lesser beings, taking the time to teach Vellok concepts of morality and kindness. All of this was a calculated charade, a meticulous waiting game for the opportune moment.

Vellok, innocent and unaware of the sinister machinations at play, readily absorbed this unexpected affection. He embraced the lessons, believing in the sincerity of his master's care. His world, once a brutal existence as a lab rat, now seemed to hold a glimmer of warmth and acceptance.

This lasted until the day his master taught him his first spell. Vellok was naturally ecstatic, brimming with the excitement of a new power. Yet, even in his youthful naivety, a flicker of unease should have warned him. The spell was not taught in any conventional way, hinting at the profound and unsettling nature of

the magic Vellok was about to wield, and the true, horrifying purpose behind the mage's twisted affection.

The ancient mage, meticulous in his manipulation, knew that for his sinister plan to succeed, Vellok's first spell had to be cast under extreme duress. To increase Vellok's chances of "succeeding" in the mage's twisted definition, he introduced a terrifying element: a low-tier demon. The creature's sudden appearance instantly terrified young Vellok, but his master quickly reassured him, claiming it was merely a necessary component for a more successful summoning.

In a horrifying way, the mage wasn't entirely lying. He skillfully faked a look of surprise, feigning a loss of control as the demon, playing its pre-assigned role, lunged and "chased" the young goblin. Vellok, utterly clueless, missed all the subtle cues that indicated the demon wasn't genuinely after him. He stumbled, fell repeatedly, his legs growing numb with fear. He'd find temporary hiding places, but the demon, a masterful actor in this cruel charade, ensured it felt like an inescapable nightmare.

It was in this moment of pure terror, when Vellok was at his most vulnerable, that he heard the "saving grace" of his mentor's voice echoing in his mind, implanting the summoning spell. The mentor's voice was deliberately weak and fractured, selling the deception perfectly. "My mind is fractured and I have lost control," the mage whispered telepathically, "use the spell. Your summon will help eradicate this demon."

Shuddering in his hiding place, Vellok clung to the weak, desperate voice of his master. The kindness he'd been shown since the mage's sudden shift in demeanor fueled a brave, if naive, resolve within the young goblin. He had to be brave.

The summoning spell, surprisingly, flowed with an effortless ease for him. Just as the magic began to coalesce, the demon, playing its part to perfection, "discovered" Vellok's hiding spot and lunged forward, feigning an attempt to grab him. In a surge of pure panic, Vellok unleashed the summoning spell.

Mid-air, a shimmering magic circle materialized. From it emanated a heavenly sound, followed by a blinding flash of light that forced both Vellok and the demon to shut their eyes. As the intense glow subsided and Vellok dared to open his, his eyes widened in astonishment.

Standing before him was a tiny, ethereal being: a baby with small white wings, radiating an innocent charm. It offered Vellok a sweet, trusting smile. "A cherub," the memory resonated with Ikenga as he briefly remembered a religion from his past life.

The cherub, its innocent gaze still fixed on Vellok, turned its attention to the low-tier demon. "You," it chirped, its voice a surprising blend of cuteness and indignation, "how dare you go after such a pure child!"

The demon, however, saw only opportunity. A look of cautious hunger spread across its face. "I get to eat an angel and a pure soul of light," it snarled, lunging towards both of them. "What a delicacy!"

Without hesitation, the cherub positioned itself protectively in front of Vellok. It raised a small hand, and from its palm, a ball of pure, incandescent light shot forth. The demon had barely any time to react before the light made contact, exploding outward. With a guttural roar of agony, the demon was engulfed, dissolving into a pile of ash as if it had never been there.

A frown creased the cherub's innocent brow. "Something is wrong," it mused, its tone now laced with a hint of confusion. "I know my strength, and that shouldn't have been enough to do that. It was more like the demon was reverse-summoned."

The cherub, its tiny brow furrowed in confusion over the anomalous "reverse-summon," turned to where the demon had vanished. It was about to voice its concern, to perhaps seek answers from Vellok, when abruptly, its world went black. The stolen memory shifted, plunging Ikenga and Keles into Vellok's horrified perspective.

Vellok's eyes were wide with shock, not at the cherub's sudden disappearance, but at the abrupt, terrifying appearance of his master. What was truly disturbing was the crazy, triumphant smile plastered across the ancient mage's face—a smile Vellok had never seen before, utterly devoid of the feigned kindness.

Powerless and terrified, Vellok could only watch as his master swiftly seized the unmoving cherub. The mage then placed a hand on Vellok's head, and once again, darkness consumed everything. The last words Vellok heard, chilling and sinister, echoed in the void: "You did well, child."

The cherub's disappearance and the mage's chilling words marked the brutal turn in Vellok's reality. The facade of kindness crumbled, revealing the mage's true, indifferent nature. Vellok woke to find himself back in his assigned room, the mage's once-constant presence gone. There were no more check-ins, no more feigned concern.

Worst of all, the mage's lab was now locked down, explicitly denying Vellok access. In the eyes of the other goblins, Vellok could see undisguised glee at his sudden fall from grace. This shift in his fellow goblins' demeanor forced Vellok to see things in a stark, new light. The preferential treatment, the whispered admiration—it had all been a lie, and now he was back among those he had unknowingly, yet painfully, lorded over.

It was during this period of profound disillusionment that Vellok once again began to try and make contact with Kaelen, his older brother, whom he had previously ignored in his elevated state. He desperately recounted his traumatic experience, seeking solace. Kaelen, having lived through far worse and understanding the depths of their harsh world, knew exactly how to console his younger sibling, offering the comfort and perspective Vellok so desperately needed.

The familiar rhythm of mutual support returned between Vellok and Kaelen. It was like their early days, a return to the solace of shared hardship. Kairos, however, remained conspicuously absent, always with the mage who had claimed him. Both brothers understood what this meant: Kairos still held some value for his master. It was the reason they no longer truly saw him as one of their own. Sometimes, they'd catch a fleeting glimpse of him, trailing his master, his face a chilling replica of the naive, trusting expression Vellok himself had once worn before his own traumatic experience.

Years bled into one another, marked by the grinding routine of their existence. Then, one day, a servant appeared and pointed directly at Vellok, gesturing for him to follow. A knot of nervousness tightened in Vellok's stomach, and he couldn't even utter a goodbye, for Kaelen too was called out for his own task.

Vellok followed the servant, his apprehension growing with each step. Soon, a chilling realization dawned on him as he recognized the familiar hallway and the imposing door they now stood before. "This was his master's room and lab."

The heavy door swung inward, revealing his master's face. A frown initially creased the mage's brow, but upon seeing Vellok, it melted into a chilling smile. Vellok's heart hammered in his chest, and he instinctively recoiled a step, fear overriding any control he had over his body.

The mage, seemingly oblivious to Vellok's terror, spoke, "It's been a while, my young apprentice. Come, I have something to show you."

Vellok's mind screamed at him to flee, but his body moved on its own, compelled to follow. The mage led him into a vast, cavernous space. The air hummed with an unseen energy, and all around them, strange, intricate equipment glinted in the dim light. But it was the center of the enormous room that truly seized Vellok's gaze. There, tethered and confined, was the small, innocent angel child he had summoned. Tears welled in Vellok's eyes, hot and stinging, as he took in the cherub's pained and vulnerable state.

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Vellok's heart shattered at the sight. The cherub, once a beacon of pure light and innocent smiles, was now suspended in the center of the vast, cold chamber. Its tiny white wings, once fluttering freely, were splayed out and pinned, translucent membranes stretched taut over intricate, glowing runes etched onto the floor beneath it. Tubes, thin as spider silk but humming with a sickly energy, seemed to siphon the very light from its form, channeling it into crystalline conduits that snaked across the floor towards a series of arcane devices humming faintly in the periphery.

The cherub's eyes, once bright and full of life, were now dulled, gazing blankly upwards. Its tiny body trembled with a subtle, continuous tremor, and a faint, almost inaudible whimper escaped its lips. It was a creature of utter misery, a living sacrifice on the altar of the mage's ambition. The heavenly sound that had accompanied its summoning was now replaced by the low thrum of the machinery, a grotesque parody of life.

Yet, even with this horrific display, the mage was far from satisfied. His face was contorted not with triumph, but with a simmering anger and jealousy. He pointed a trembling finger at the cherub. "This creature," he snarled, his voice laced with venom, "reminds me of the origin gods, demons, and the children of Kaos!"

His gaze swept over Vellok, filled with a long-held resentment. "Their very existence seems to be a mockery to us mages. Beings of immense power, yet creations we can, for some reason, not study or even begin to understand how they are made." The cherub, for all its suffering, was merely a symbol of this infuriating, unbreachable mystery.

The mage's true obsession was not just power, but ultimate knowledge and control over the very forces that seemed to defy his understanding.

The mage's voice was heavy with a defeat born of millennia of unfulfilled ambition, and a weariness that seeped into the very air of the lab. He gestured for Vellok to come closer, his gaze fixed on the suffering cherub. "You will be the new host of this angel, my naive apprentice," the mage declared, his voice a

low, chilling pronouncement. "It will live and grow with you, and I will observe both your growth. I hope you don't disappoint me."

At this, Keles interjected, his voice sharp with confusion, "Why doesn't the mage merge with it instead? It's more beneficial and easier to achieve his goal that way."

Ikenga took a moment to formulate his answer, drawing from his own recent observation of others dealing with incomprehensible powers. "Just as during Kaelen's research on the Abyss, he found himself unable to truly understand it, I believe it's the same for the mage," Ikenga explained.

"From his own words, our kind "Origin gods" share certain traits, certain inherent qualities that the mage clearly cannot fathom. Out of caution, I doubt he would risk his own self when he has a subject like Vellok before him. Vellok is a perfect guinea pig, allowing the mage to observe and take a closer look, even to create countermeasures or find a way to achieve this himself in the future. The blueprint for his own ascension."

Ikenga and Keles watched as Vellok helpless and horrified endured the agonizing process of merging. The cherub, once a separate entity, was now forcibly bound to him, a new, agonizing reality. From that moment on, the three brothers were once again separated, their paths diverging more profoundly than ever. Vellok fell completely under the watchful, possessive gaze of the mage, his every moment dictated by the sinister experiments.

Paradoxically, Kaelen could be said to have "benefited" from this grim turn of events. Other mages, observing the extraordinary nature of his siblings, Vellok and Kairos, began to believe that Kaelen, too, must possess some hidden, extraordinary quality they had overlooked. And so, a different mage took Kaelen under his wing, initiating a new series of experiments on him.

This mage's work, unlike the physical enhancements on other knight-seeded goblins, or "Ogres" as they were called, subtly yet profoundly altered Kaelen. Whatever the mage did to him, it made his mind sharper, smarter, and more cunning. He was no longer like his brethren, whose approach to problems was brute force and violence. Kaelen began to think, to strategize, to perceive solutions beyond mere physical might.

Meanwhile, for Vellok, the torment was ceaseless. Every day, every week, every month, a new test was carried out. New adjustments were made to the arcane seal binding the cherub within him. It was painfully clear that the mage was making rapid improvements in his sealing capabilities, each new seal

stronger and more intricate than the last, trapping the cherub's essence and Vellok's fate more firmly held.

Vellok matured into a young adult under the mage's cruel regimen. The angel sealed within him, no longer a mere cherub, had also grown, transforming into a Herald that eerily mirrored Vellok's own young adult appearance.

A few years later, a subtle shift began to ripple through the planetary-sized lab. Whispers grew louder, rumors that the project was taking too long, that exploration of new avenues must continue. The oppressive silence of constant experimentation was slowly being replaced by the murmurs of discontent.

Just as these whispers started, Kairos, who had been absent for so long, made an unexpected reappearance. He was strikingly different from how he was last seen. Now, a dark robe obscured most of his features, and an unsettling calmness emanated from him. The only discernible feature was his eyes, which glowed with an ethereal blue light.

Whatever Kairos's new talents were, they had made him elusive. He somehow managed to make contact with both Vellok and Kaelen. Because Ikenga and Keles were reliving a memory, they couldn't fully observe or experience this clandestine reunion in detail, sensing only the faint impression of their brothers' reunion through the veil of Kaelen's past.

To Ikenga and Keles, observing through Kaelen's memory, Kairos's movements were ghost-like, he would suddenly appear, then vanish. This elusive talent made him incredibly effective at gathering intelligence on the vast, intricate workings of the planetary-sized lab. He even uncovered the power source that fueled the entire ship. His only remaining hurdle was devising a way for himself and the other goblins to get off the vessel and down to the planet below.

Kairos's reappearance was a beacon of hope for Vellok and countless other goblins, a light piercing through their oppressive darkness. Even Vellok's tormentor, the ancient mage, seemed less focused on him. Vellok's movements and actions were no longer as restrained, as if his mentor's attention was now preoccupied elsewhere.

Indeed, most of the mages seemed consumed by some new, pressing concern. This shift in focus, combined with the gradual loss of the mages' "grace" over the past years, allowed the goblins to see their captors' true, cold nature with chilling clarity.

They were cast aside like toys the mages had grown tired of, their worth diminished in the eyes of their former masters. In their hearts, a potent mixture of yearning for freedom and bitter resentment against the mages for their cruel actions began to fester.

Meanwhile, Ikenga and Keles watched this part of the memory unfold with growing frowns. Something felt fundamentally wrong; everything was playing out far too perfectly for the goblins. This was a ship housing at least a dozen sixth-tier mages—beings of immense power and perception. How could none of them recognize or react to Kairos, moving freely behind their backs, gathering information, and learning their secrets?

The unfolding events in Kaelen's memory, so suddenly convenient, seemed utterly unreal to both Ikenga and Keles, who had personally witnessed the brutal, unforgiving reality of the goblins' prior existence and treatment.

Kairos's actions, for all their brilliance, felt...off. It was as if everything was being meticulously laid out for him to find, every piece of the puzzle precisely placed. Yet, Kairos, seemingly blinded by the intoxicating taste of impending freedom, appeared to ignore these unsettling coincidences, convinced it was all his own doing.

Then, a sudden realization struck Ikenga. He recalled Rattan's discussion with Vellok, specifically how the mages had grown impatient with their experiments, no longer willing to dedicate vast amounts of time to a single planet. The memories Ikenga was now witnessing clicked into place, revealing a far more sinister truth. "The mages never truly left this world," Ikenga declared, his voice cutting through the memory's illusion. "They made it seem like they did. They had already planted their seeds; all they needed was time for them to grow so they could harvest."

The truth settled upon Ikenga and Keles. The mages, driven by their vast ambitions, needed to constantly expand their reach, unable to remain tethered to a single world. Yet, they were equally unwilling to abandon the immense progress they had already achieved on this one.

The goblins, unknowingly, were being primed to fulfill the mages' long-term plan: to be "accepted as the first children of a world," a world the mages had essentially purged and cultivated. Their very characters had been meticulously shaped over generations. Arrogance had seeped into the bones of those with arcane seeds, fostering disdain for their knight brethren. And while a superficial camaraderie seemed to have formed among the various goblin factions, it was built solely on their shared hatred for the mages, a hatred subtly stoked and managed by their puppet masters.

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Witnessing this, Ikenga's perspective on the current memory shifted profoundly. It was like watching the illusory work of a phantom. Every goblin, from Vellok to Kaelen and Kairos, was ensnared in an elaborate illusion they wholeheartedly believed was reality. Kairos, convinced of his own unique talents, was perceived through Vellok's memory as a heroic figure, a visionary accomplishing the impossible by accessing areas that should have been utterly impenetrable.

They were all drawn deeper into this intricate deception for years, maturing within its confines, until one pivotal day when Kairos "discovered" the core of the ship.

Kairos's triumphant "discovery" sent ripples of hope through the enslaved goblin population. He materialized among them, a shadow slipping through unseen pathways, his blue eyes alight with what they believed was genuine victory. He proclaimed that he had not only located the ship's core, the very heart of their captors' immense vessel, but had also found accessible ships within the massive structure – vessels large enough to carry them all, goblins and their brutish brethren, the Ogres, to safety.

The plan, as Kairos laid it out, was simple in its audacious scope: destroy the core, cripple the mages' colossal craft, and escape in the newly found ships before it plummeted back down to their homeworld. Freedom, a tangible, exhilarating concept, was now within their grasp.

The news spread like wildfire, igniting a fervent hope that had been brutally suppressed for generations. Goblins whispered, then openly rejoiced, sharing the impossible dream with the Ogres. The heavy, dull resignation that had clung to them for so long began to crack, replaced by a fierce, almost desperate determination. Kairos, with his elusive movements and impossible discoveries, had cemented his image as their savior, the harbinger of their liberation.

However, the final, daunting hurdle remained: how to destroy the core itself. The power source of a sixth-tier mage ship would be immensely protected, designed to withstand any assault. Kairos, for all his cunning, had found the path to the cage door, but the lock remained stubbornly impenetrable.

Kairos shared his monumental problem with his brothers during their "secret meetings." How could they possibly destroy the core, bypass the powerful mages' watchful eyes, or even reach the escape ships? No one had an answer.

Then, the memory shifted, showcasing the escape ship. It was no surprise to Ikenga and Keles, whose understanding of the mages' long game now solidified: the escape vessel was what was now commonly known as a "Mage Tower." This very ship, a symbol of the goblin empire's current sixth-tier power, was the vehicle they used to flee the mages' vast vessel. The irony was palpable.

It was at this crucial juncture that a new voice echoed within the memory. Something that had been watching all along, observing their plight, spoke up. It had remained silent until now, held back by a potent mix of pride and shame, unwilling to reveal itself given its current humiliating position.

The voice that cut through the silence of the memory belonged to the angel hosted within Vellok's body. Since this wasn't Vellok's direct memory, Ikenga and Keles experienced it as Kaelen did, hearing Vellok recount the angel's words.

"All your problems can be solved with my help," the angel had told Vellok, its voice resonating within him. "All I need from you is, you release me from my imprisonment within you."

Kairos, desperate and seizing onto this unexpected hope, eagerly pressed Vellok to ask how the angel could solve all their problems. From Kaelen's memory, it took months before the angel responded again.

When it finally did, the angel explained that due to Vellok's master catching it off guard and imprisoning it so swiftly, it hadn't been able to use a specific gift accessible to young angels like itself. Kaelen and the others couldn't comprehend the name of this gift at the time. It was only after Kaelen himself became a sixth-tier figure, much later in his life, that he recalled this memory and understood the angel's words: the gift was "The Rapture."

According to the young angel, the gift of "The Rapture" manifested as a trumpet whose devastating sound would spread across all planes, universes, and timelines. Nowhere, it claimed, would be safe from its reach. This sound, the angel explained, would be sought out by its fellow angels, for it represented a cry for help.

The angel spoke these words with a palpable mix of hatred and shame directed at the mages. It longed to summon the full wrath of the angels, to unleash their fury upon the mage's vessel and, specifically, upon Vellok's master, who had so cruelly imprisoned and defiled it. The "Rapture" was not merely a call for rescue, but a summons for divine vengeance.

In the memory, Vellok's voice echoed with desperate confusion. "How can I release you," he asked the angel, "when I have no idea what the mage has done to us both?"

The angel's response was chillingly clear: "I do. I understand what he has done to me and to you. He cursed you, boy. He cursed you with me... he made it so that the seal could be accessed by your will. All that is needed for the seal to break is your willingness to break it and free me."

When this part of Kaelen's memory reached its climax, there was an abrupt period of blankness. Ikenga and Keles understood immediately: this momentary void represented the mages' sudden panic. The very notion of the young angel's potential, of The Rapture, must have sent shivers through their ancient ranks. The vengeance of the angelic civilization wouldn't end with just the mages on the ship; it could very well turn its devastating gaze upon their main world, threatening everything they had built.

During this period of erased memory, the mages, who had so meticulously orchestrated the goblins' illusion from behind the scenes, now had all their attention focused solely on Vellok and the angel. They were no longer merely observing; they were on high alert. Apart from the mages directly on the ship, Vellok and the others had been caught in a carefully constructed illusion, one constantly monitored by the mages. As long as Vellok and the angel showed any sign of instability, any deviation from their controlled path, they would be "taken care of".

The illusion, meticulously maintained by the mages, continued to play out. Kaelen's memory resumed, a warped reality unfolding for Ikenga and Keles, even as they now understood the puppet strings pulling every goblin's action. The "secret meetings" between the brothers, Kairos's "impossible discoveries," the growing resentment towards the mages—it all continued, perfectly orchestrated. Vellok, burdened with the angel's secret and the terrifying power of his own will, moved through this carefully constructed world, his internal struggle hidden from his brothers, and from the mages who watched his every flicker of emotion.

Years continued to pass within this carefully controlled environment, until the day finally arrived – the day of the escapade.

The moment Kairos set their calculated plan into motion, the subtle shifts in the mage ship's energy matrix, which Kairos believed only he could detect, were perfectly aligned. He led the charge, a figure of heroic conviction, toward the core and the "escape" Mage Towers.

It was then, in the controlled chaos of the supposed rebellion, that the angel "used" The Rapture. No trumpet visibly appeared, but within Vellok's mind, the angelic will surged forth. A sound, not audible to

the physical ears of the goblins, but a resonant call vibrating across planes and dimensions, erupted from the cherub-turned-herald within Vellok.

And that was precisely what the mages wanted.

Suddenly, the illusion intensified. The very fabric of the ship seemed to ripple, but not from an external invasion. Instead, within the perceived reality of the goblins, blinding light coalesced into forms that were unmistakably angelic. They weren't real angels, but meticulously crafted illusions, manifestations of pure light tailored to the angelic forms. These illusory angels "tore" through the outer layers of the ship, appearing from nowhere, their forms radiating righteous fury. They "clashed" with equally illusory mages in brilliant, controlled explosions of light and arcane energy.

The spectacle was terrifyingly convincing. The mages, far from being surprised, had anticipated this. Their carefully managed illusion had accounted for the "angelic distraction" from the moment they understood the Rapture's true nature. They were merely facilitating the perfect, controlled chaos, giving the goblins the illusion of a genuine struggle. This grand, fabricated battle, triggered by Vellok's unwitting release of the "Rapture," was merely the next, critical stage in the mages' elaborate plan.

To the angel's utter horror, as it "used" the Rapture, the illusory angels swarming the mage ship seemed utterly oblivious to its existence. They overlooked it, never sought it out, their every movement a choreographed distraction. Vellok and the others, believing the chaos to be real, seized the opportunity to escape the immense vessel.

The "Mage Towers," now understood by Ikenga and Keles to be the goblins' own future symbols of power, descended through the atmosphere. Vellok, Kaelen, and the other goblins finally touched down on the familiar soil of their home planet.

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The moment their feet met the ground, it was as if a switch was violently flipped. Their eyes, previously filled with the triumphant glow of escape, widened with dawning horror and fear. All heads instinctively snapped upwards, searching the sky. But like a terrible dream dissipating, the colossal mage vessel was no longer there, darkening their world. There was no trace of it ever being there.

Ikenga and Keles keenly felt the moment this "switch" happened. To them, it was palpable—the deceptive memory had ended, and the harsh, unvarnished truth of Kaelen's reality snapped into focus. And that was precisely what had occurred.

The instant they touched down, the crushing reality of having lived under a profound, years-long illusion became agonizingly clear. With that understanding came another, more immediate memory, and a crucial, terrifying truth that Kairos, for all his perceived brilliance, never found out until this very moment.

The shocking truth slammed into them the moment their feet touched their homeworld: the mages had somehow managed to bring "Mother" down to the planet. With this information, a terrifying knowledge of what Mother truly was, and what her presence meant for them, flooded their minds.

Even the angel, hosted within Vellok, was taken aback by this revelation. In a desperate, urgent tone, it spoke directly to Vellok, urging him to release it now that they were "free."

Vellok, his expression a mixture of profound shock and a hardening resolve, shared this with his three brothers, who were still reeling from the sudden, brutal unveiling of their years-long illusion. But before any discussion could begin, Vellok made his own stance clear: whatever decision they reached as a group, he was not letting go of the angel.

Vellok was no longer the innocent, naive boy the mages had thought they created. While he had been trapped within their illusion, believing he was taking his fate into his own hands, the mages had never truly stopped teaching and influencing him. They had subtly instilled in him knowledge about power, talents, and limitations. And most crucially, Vellok had been meticulously taught about the nature of the angelic being residing in his body, and how much power and how clear his future would be by maintaining his hold on the angel.

Vellok was not alone in his hardened stance. To the angel's utter dismay, Kaelen and Kairos were also in full agreement, their faces grim but resolute. Even the other goblins who had escaped with them vehemently denied the angel's plea to be let go.

The angel, hearing Vellok's words and the silent, collective refusal of the others, was filled with a profound despair. Yet, strangely, its eyes remained calm, almost resigned. It had expected this. It knew what type of being it was—a creature of absolute purity—and it understood the nature of beings driven by emotions, how easily they could be swayed and corrupted. This was precisely why angels cherished children above all others; it was when most mortal creatures were at their purest and brightest, a state Vellok no longer possessed compared to the innocent boy who had first summoned it for help.

It was through this chilling perception of Vellok's current soul, now tainted by the mages' insidious influence, that the angel repeated its earlier, haunting pronouncement: "The mages have cursed Vellok with me." The angel now truly understood that the mage, in his vile experiments, had indeed comprehended the true, vulnerable nature of angels, weaponizing their purity against them.

Kaelen's memory, now stark and unyielding, laid bare the genesis of their profound brotherly division and the deep-seated hatred that would define their future. It took several decades for the goblins to even begin to accustom to their newfound "freedom," a period steeped in the constant, gnawing fear that the mages would inevitably return to reclaim them.

During these anxious decades, they meticulously explored the Mage Towers—the very ships that had brought them to their homeworld. They delved into the knowledge contained within them, a vast trove of information that was, strangely, incomplete. However, the fundamental basics of the mage and knight system were clear and comprehensible. With these foundational principles, they began to learn, to study, to internalize the very systems of power their former captors wielded.

With the knowledge gleaned from the Mage Towers, a surge in power rippled through the goblin and Ogre populations. As their numbers swelled and their collective strength grew, the gnawing fear and caution that had defined their early decades of "freedom" began to recede.

A full century passed, and still, the mages made no appearance. This prolonged absence sparked a dangerous new thought among the now long-lived goblins and Ogres who had descended from the vessel: Perhaps the mages had lost interest in them. Whatever plans they had, maybe they were no longer important. Yet, deep down, they all knew this was a lie, a comfortable self-deception. The undeniable proof lay in the existence of the Ratfolk, a species they were supposedly meant to supersede and dominate. The Ratfolk remained stunted, never flourishing as the goblins had over this past century, a clear sign of the mages' lingering, unseen influence.

But knowing the truth could not halt the deep-seated arrogance that had been so meticulously nurtured inside them. Slowly but surely, the very environment of the burgeoning goblin society began to mirror the oppressive structure of the mages' vessel. Goblin mages ascended to the position of an elite, while the knights, once again, found themselves relegated to the role of servants within their own growing communities. The cycle, subtly guided by the mages' long-term cultivation, was already beginning to repeat itself.

In this growing horror, the only ones who remained clear-sighted were Kaelen and the other knights. They were, after all, on the receiving end of this burgeoning, oppressive system. As the years passed and

the goblin society expanded, the very culture promoted by the mages among themselves became increasingly prevalent within their new "free" world.

After a few more decades, a gnawing unease drove Kaelen to seek out his two brothers. He desperately needed to know if they understood what was happening, if they recognized the insidious trap they were falling into. To his profound horror, they did. And worse still, they promoted it.

It turned out that Kairos and Vellok had held a meeting without him, specifically because of Kaelen's resistance to the currently flourishing culture. Both Kairos and Vellok seemed to have lost the fiery will and the illusion of true freedom they once chased after their harrowing experience with the mages. Instead, they had come to a chilling conclusion: it was better to simply follow the path already laid out for them by the mages. Their goal was now to actively complete the project the mages had started in the first place—the "First Child" Project.

Both Vellok and Kairos knew the mages would inevitably return. Kaelen, too, harbored no illusions about their eventual reappearance. But here, their paths diverged irrevocably. Kaelen, observing their burgeoning power system and growing strength, believed they now possessed the means to fight back. They had a whole world and its resources at their disposal, a world they had supposedly claimed as their own. He envisioned a future where they would stand as a unified, formidable force against their former captors.

Vellok and Kairos, however, held no such thoughts of resistance. Their minds, warped by the prolonged illusion and the insidious lessons of their former masters, had reached a different, far more chilling conclusion. Both simply wanted to complete the mages' original goal, the "First Child" Project. Their ultimate hope was to gain the mages' favor, to appease them, and if possible, to be spared along with their new, "improved" goblin race. Their freedom was an illusion; their survival, a desperate plea for clemency.

Kaelen utterly lost his mind at this revelation. He stared at his brothers, his face a mask of disbelief and incandescent fury. He could not comprehend, could not accept, that his two siblings, his only true family in this cruel world were condemning him and their entire race to a life of perpetual servitude, all for the sake of some distant, manipulative mages.

Ikenga abruptly severed the memory. He had gleaned the answer he needed: the chilling truth of how the current goblin empire had "escaped" the mages. As the illusion dissolved, both he and Keles were welcomed back to the familiar, comforting presence of their room, the phantom horrors of Kaelen's past fading into the background.

Ikenga gently lowered his head onto Keles's lap, his ear pressed against her subtly bulging stomach. He listened, utterly absorbed, to the faint stirrings of their growing child. The gestation was slow, stretched out over years, a tell-tale sign that their offspring would be born a god.

He estimated it would take a few more years for the child to fully mature within the womb. This was no surprise to him; he and his own siblings had also undergone similarly prolonged gestations, emerging at birth as fully grown adults.

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A frown creased Ikenga's brow at the thought. He yearned for his child to be born as a baby, small and vulnerable, so he could experience the joys and trials of true fatherhood. He knew it was perhaps a selfish thought, especially when he considered Ikem, his first son, and Maul, his stepson. They had grown too fast, burdened with immense goals and destinies from the moment of their birth, denying him the chance to be a "normal" father.

Ikenga traced patterns on Keles's stomach, a new hope stirring within him for this child to be different, to allow him the fatherhood he yearned for. Keles, noticing the crease in his forehead, softly asked, "What are you thinking, my dear?"

He raised his head, planting a light kiss on her lips. "I was thinking on whether our child would be born like us, fully grown, or as a baby."

"From your creasing brow, I'm guessing you don't want him to come out grown," Keles said with a knowing smile.

"You don't agree?" Ikenga asked, raising a brow playfully. Keles chuckled, shaking her head. "In fact, I do agree with you. I want him to grow slow and spend lots of time with me. It gets boring in my realm."

With a grin, Ikenga gently pinned her to the bed, beginning to pepper kisses across her skin. "I could pay you more visits from mine, or perhaps you could spend some time in mine."

They shared a long, lingering kiss before finally separating. A thoughtful silence settled between them, broken abruptly by Keles. "Why did those mages take such a long route to get the goblins off of their ship?" she mused, the earlier horrors of the memory still lingering in her mind.

Ikenga sighed, the warmth of Keles's skin a stark contrast to the cold calculation he now understood. He sat up, leaning back against the headboard, his gaze distant as he pieced together the mages' grand, terrifying design.

"It's about the 'First Child' Project," Ikenga began, his voice low, tinged with a fresh layer of disgust. "The mages' main goal was to replace a world's existing first intelligent life form, its true 'first child,' with another. And in doing so, to gain all the immense privileges and natural authority that a world bestows upon its original inhabitants. They've spent eons on this, Keles, on long years of research and expeditions, and they finally found a way to do it. But it takes a very long time."

He paused, a grim understanding settling over his features. "For this project to be completed, the very behaviors they subtly ingrained in the goblins were not just side effects, they were absolutely essential. The goblins needed to be arrogant, filled with pride, and possess an absolute, unshakeable belief that they were the genuine first children of their world. At the same time, they needed to be conditioned to instinctively oppress the true firstborn, the Ratfolk. The mages had already sealed away the Ratfolk's capabilities, ensuring they couldn't gain power, couldn't fight back, couldn't challenge the usurpation."

Ikenga met Keles's eyes, the horror in his own reflecting hers. "With this in mind, their long, convoluted route makes perfect, chilling sense. They had to keep playing their role, maintaining the illusion of freedom, of the goblins achieving something themselves. Even at the end, when the grand deception was ultimately revealed and the goblins realized they'd been played, the mages still achieved the critical effect they wanted: to bolster the confidence of the goblins to an unprecedented degree. They're not just a new race; they're a convinced race, full of the very hubris needed to fully step into the role of a world's dominant, 'first' species, completely unaware they are merely another carefully cultivated harvest."

"I have to talk with Zarvok about this," Ikenga said, his face etched with a new, urgent resolve as he walked toward the door. The memory of Kaelen's past had provided an answer, but it had also unearthed a terrifying new variable. "This Angel is a variable we don't want out of our control. It could possibly prevent us from our original goal." Keles simply nodded, her expression grim.

Zarvok, meanwhile, was in his war room, surrounded by his generals. The massive door swung open, and all the demons around him turned their gazes to see Ikenga walk in, his presence radiating a serious, heavy energy that silenced the room. Ikenga met the eyes of each demon, a moment of silent

acknowledgment passing between them, before his gaze settled on Zarvok. The two exchanged a single glance, and Zarvok, understanding the unspoken weight of the moment, dismissed everyone, leaving him and Ikenga alone.

"You usually don't come around unless it was something crucial," Zarvok said, a hint of a raised brow in his voice.

An orb of crystalline energy appeared in Ikenga's hand, which he flung toward Zarvok. Zarvok, with a practiced flick of his tail, caught it effortlessly before giving it a slight squeeze. The crystal shattered into countless motes of light that rushed toward his head, a silent, instantaneous transfer of knowledge. Zarvok's eyes glazed over for a moment as he absorbed the entirety of Kaelen's memory and Ikenga's deductions. By the time his gaze returned to normal, Ikenga had already found a place to sit.

"This is not good," Zarvok said, a deep frown creasing his face.

"Hence why I came to you. Before we discuss countermeasures, is the Rapture still available to this angel? That would determine if all this was for nothing," Ikenga asked, his tone serious.

Zarvok sighed, waving a dismissive hand. "That shouldn't be an issue anymore. The Rapture was only meant to protect young angels before they are fully grown."

"From the memory, the angel has grown with the mage," Ikenga stated, a chilling certainty in his voice. "Vellok is a sixth-tier being, and the angel within him would be as well. The Rapture should no longer be a skill available to it."

Ikenga nodded, moving on to another crucial question. "Is negotiation possible?"

Zarvok stood, the movement showing a deep stress as he considered the implications. "If this were a normal angel, I would say yes," he began. He stopped, a heavy tone settling over his next words. "But this is a vengeful and angry one. A possible fallen angel."

Ikenga frowned at this, a new understanding dawning on him. This explained everything. It explained why the goblin empire, despite holding such a powerful ace, was terrified to use it. From his last observation of Vellok, the angel's strong origin was already eroding and overpowering him. The more

Vellok was pushed to his limit and forced to use more power, the faster this erosion would happen. Each seal unlocked might be difficult or even impossible to close. Now, with the final battle approaching, Vellok's chances of having to take action increased, and with it, the chance of the vengeful angel getting free.

Ikenga and Zarvok's original goal was the same: acquiring this world. But with the unpredictable and dangerous angel now a factor, that goal seemed nearly impossible to achieve. It was no longer a simple matter of strength; it was a matter of delicate, dangerous power dynamics that threatened to spiral out of control.

Ikenga and Zarvok's original goal was the same: acquiring this world. But with the volatile angel added to the equation, that goal seemed nearly impossible. It was no longer a matter of strength, for if the angel decided to destroy the world in an act of revenge, there was nothing Ikenga or Zarvok could do to stop it.

Thinking of this, Ikenga raised his head, his tone grave. "Can the Judges take action if the angel destroys this world, or would the other side prevent it?"

The air in the war room grew thick with a sudden, oppressive weight. Zarvok turned slowly to Ikenga, his eyes narrowed with a dangerous intensity. "How do you know of the other side?"

Ikenga, seeing Zarvok's reaction, narrowed his own eyes in return. "I know not much of the other side or its true name, but I was lucky enough to catch the attention of Lady Tiamat, who briefly told me there were ways to live beyond the rules and the Judges."

A heavy silence followed, broken only by the low hum of the war room's arcane machinery. Finally, Zarvok spoke again, his voice barely a whisper. "If the angel has truly fallen, then indeed, it would be protected by the other side."

"You don't seem happy with me mentioning the other side," Ikenga said, his tone inquiring, but his gaze remained sharp, testing the new boundaries that had just been erected between them.

"I am not," Zarvok said, his voice grave and unyielding. The easy camaraderie had vanished, replaced by a cold, strategic distance. "At the moment, you being on the side of order, with the Judges and the Law, serves me better. The other side tends to be unhinged and not see the bigger picture."

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Ikenga's lips curled into a dry, knowing smile. "A demon preaching about order isn't a normal sight," he said, his voice laced with a subtle sarcasm. "It should be scorned if heard."

Zarvok scoffed, the sound a low, rumbling growl. "I never said I liked order, only that order serves me best at times like this. We demons have the luxury of choice, meaning we can follow order if necessary and the other side if necessary."

Zarvok's smirk deepened. "Lady Tiamat, huh? Your world must be better than I thought, having dragons in it."

The comment was met with a sharp glare from Ikenga, who immediately shifted the topic back to the pressing matter at hand. "It's time we hasten our approach to taking this world."

Zarvok sighed, a long, weary exhalation. "I was discussing the same with my generals before you came in. You know 'Mother' is our goal, but we have to do it in a way that isn't too obvious. That's been easy up until now, but as we've gotten closer, it's gotten harder."

"Even more so now that the empire has promoted the abyssal armor across their army," Zarvok added, his tone tinged with frustration.

Ikenga looked down at the map, his hand moving a piece that scattered the markers representing the empire's army. "My chess piece has now secured an important position in the empire's hierarchy, with a strong name and a history of honor and accomplishment."

"His influence will prove vital in destabilizing the empire's current army, particularly the Ogres and Ratfolk, which are their main fighting forces. As for the goblin mages, your demons can overwhelm them when the time comes."

Ikenga continued, his gaze intense. "Our focus must be on the remaining sixth-tier mages. Vorenza has thinned their numbers, and we now have more than they do. However, your two sixth-tier men should not be counted. They can't offer much help in a fight against mages who have been at that stage longer than them."

Zarvok nodded in agreement. "That leaves only me, you, and Lady Keles."

Ikenga nodded in confirmation.

"I would count Keles out," Ikenga stated, his voice firm and final. "I would rather not have her put herself and our child in danger."

In response to his words, Keles's voice, clear and resonant, filled the open space of the war room. "You don't get to decide that. I will fight when the time comes."

Ikenga's surprise was palpable, while Zarvok's brow simply raised in an amused, knowing arch.

"NO," Ikenga roared, his voice growing louder, taking on the booming resonance of a giant. "I will not let you put yourself and the child in danger when these mages have shown they are ready to do whatever it takes to win, or to drag you down if they can't."

Keles's voice remained silent for a beat before speaking again, softer but no less resolute. "I will fight. I am the child's mother, and our son jumps with excitement when he feels my need to act. As a mother, I would do well to see my baby happy, and I think you would do the same as the father." Her voice then went silent, a clear indication that the conversation, for her, was over.

Zarvok glanced at Ikenga, his expression unreadable, and said nothing. Ikenga took a moment to gather his thoughts, knowing he had much to say to Keles, but that conversation would have to wait.

"Like I was saying before I was interrupted," Ikenga began, his tone now heavy with resignation. "I can handle the Angel and Vellok. The Emperor should be yours to handle. And in Keles's case, she should take care of the three sixth-tier mages left."

This time, Keles's voice didn't echo through the room. Instead, it spoke directly into Ikenga's mind through their connection, her words laced with an slight undertone. "The Emperor is mine. His soul calls for rest, which I should deliver."

Ikenga clenched his fist, then slowly released it, the tension evident in his movements. "The three sixth-tier mages will be yours to handle," he said, the words heavy, "and the Emperor belongs to Keles."

Zarvok watched Ikenga, a mix of concern and respect on his face. He had a few things to say, but he held back, seeing the emotional turmoil his new ally was in. Zarvok was truly beginning to like and respect Ikenga. As a god, Ikenga's gaze had never changed from the way it was in the beginning, before he learned about demons and their true nature.

Zarvok wasn't sure if this was just how origin gods were, but in his long years of life, he had met many ascended gods. Their gazes had always changed to disgust and distrust after learning of demons. Even talking for long with demons seemed like torture to them.

Ikenga's plan was good, but it had some flaws that could have been sorted out if Keles had never spoken up. Now, with her declaration, the flaws were unfixable.

"You have matters to handle. I will leave you to that," Zarvok said to Ikenga. "We can continue to flesh out your plan once you are done."

Ikenga looked at him for a while in silence before walking off. As the door closed, Ikenga's cold voice reached Zarvok's ear. "Thank you."

Ikenga walked into his room, the door closing behind him with a soft click that sealed him away from the war council and its strained dynamics. He found Keles sitting on the bed, her expression serene despite the storm her words had unleashed. He approached her, his own turmoil a tangible presence in the room.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said, his voice quiet but firm. "This isn't just about us. It's about our child. The mages are dangerous. They will use any weakness they find."

Keles looked at him, her calm gaze unwavering. "Do you take me as a mere weak mortal woman to be protected?"

"No," Ikenga said with a resolute tone. Keles stood up and walked closer to him with her bulging stomach. "I am a goddess, something you seem to often forget."

Keles took Ikenga's hand and placed it on her stomach. "Our child is not fully conscious yet, but his uniqueness before his birth is already shown. As the one bearing him and closest to him, I feel and understand this more."

"I know not of his divinity yet, but through him I can see the end of a dynasty," she continued, her voice full of an eerie certainty. "He should be present to bring about this change, but he is not yet born. So I have to take his place instead."

Ikenga hearing this was stumped, he found himself lacking words to rebute Keles words.

Keles looked at him, her gaze held a strong love in it. "And what do you think would happen if I stayed behind? What do you think would happen to our child if he saw his mother, a goddess, simply stand by and watch while his father and his allies fight?"

"He would be safe!" Ikenga insisted.

"He would be safe, but he would also be weak," she countered. "He would learn that safety is more important than purpose, that hiding is better than fighting. Our son is a god. He is meant for great things, not for a life of fear."

Ikenga fell silent, her words striking a painful chord. He thought of Ikem and Maul, both born into a life of purpose and conflict, without a moment of peace. Was his desire for a "normal" life for his new child a betrayal of his nature?

"His happiness is my happiness," Keles continued, "and he is happy when he feels my need to act. He is a part of this world, Ikenga. He is a part of our story, and we cannot erase him from it just because we are afraid. You want to be a good father, I know. Then let us teach him what it means to be a god, what it means to be a parent, and what it means to protect the ones you love."

Ikenga looked at her, his anger and fear slowly giving way to a understanding. He wasn't just a father; he was a god, and his child was meant to be one as well. Their life was not meant to be "normal." He sat down beside her and took her hand. "Alright," he said, his voice filled with a new resolve.

While Ikenga and Keles worked through their own struggles, the tale of a once-great warrior was reaching its sorrowful conclusion a few days earlier. After his last, humiliating meeting with Rattan, Chief walked out of the war fortress with no destination in mind. Vorenza's final act of using him as a pawn to get closer to Rattan had delivered a devastating blow to the confidence he had spent years rebuilding.

It was the final straw for a stubborn man like himself. As he walked away, he couldn't shake the thought that his very path was now a result of Vorenza's insidious influence. Moving deeper into the forest, he was consumed by the idea that this too, might be another part of her design. Chief, a warrior who had always faced death head-on, unknowingly began to seek it out, but death wouldn't come. His new, hybrid body, a horrifying merge of spider and ratman was proving impossible to kill.

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The worst part was the agonizing uncertainty. Was his will to survive his own, or was it the instinct of a body corrupted by Vorenza? Falling from a cliff, he would find himself instinctively shooting out webs to catch himself, an action born of a physical instinct that warred with his emotional despair. He was no longer a man; he was a tool, a puppet, forever bound to a life he no longer wanted.

Walking into the territory of a stronger beast, Chief found himself, almost on autopilot, killing it. His mind was a haze of madness, and he wandered aimlessly, a creature without purpose, until one night, everything changed.

He continued his walk under the cold gaze of the moon, just like any other day. All of a sudden, the anguished roar of Vorenza ripped through his mind. A wave of calm relief washed over his body and soul, and for a brief, joyous moment, the idea that he was finally free took hold.

But his joy was short-lived. He began to shudder uncontrollably. "It's so cold," he thought to himself, a terrifying realization dawning on him. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt cold. He found himself unable to move, his feet somehow turning into a frozen sculpture that was rapidly climbing up his body.

Chief knew his time had come, and he welcomed it. It had been a long time coming. He had no regrets, only the sorrow of not being able to see his people stand tall and free. He shook his head, his thoughts turning to Rattan. Perhaps he should have done more for the boy. Rattan seemed destined for greatness, but he had lost his way.

The cold, unforgiving moonlight seemed to bless his final moments. His vision, already blurring from the encroaching ice, fixed on the moon, a cold orb in a sky he had once found solace in. The icy sculpture, which had begun at his feet, now encased his entire being, turning him into a grotesque monument of despair.

The forest, a place of life and death, would now be his tomb, a cold tomb to a warrior who had lost his way. The moonlight reflected off the icy sculpture, making it glow with a faint blue light in the night. The stillness of his death was a stark contrast to the life he had lived, a life of endless fighting and suffering. He had found his end, not in a blaze of glory, but in a silent, icy stillness, a tragic end to a warrior who had lost everything he held dear.

Rattan now acting as Kaelen took to the sky. With the capital of the empire sprawled beneath him, he summoned the frozen demon head of Vorenza, a grotesque trophy held aloft in his hand.

A profound silence fell over the city as Kaelen's booming voice, amplified by magic, echoed through every street and alley. People stopped in their tracks, their gazes drawn upward to the figure of a colossal ogre floating in the sky.

"Your majesty, the Emperor!" Kaelen's roar shook the very stones of the palace. "I, Kaelen, King of the Ogres, am proud to announce that I have completed your mission and brought back the head of the demon queen who terrorized our people!"

By the time the last word faded into the stunned silence, Kaelen had already descended. He knelt on the steps of the imperial palace, his massive form a testament to his power, and presented his prize: the gruesome, frozen head of the demon queen Vorenza, still held in his outstretched hand.

The remaining sixth-tier figures of the empire, their faces a mask of shock and disbelief, appeared in the sky. Their surprise was palpable, a mixture of awe and disgust as they looked upon the returning ogre king and his macabre offering.

They already knew of the mages' demise. The mages' towers, once beacons of arcane power, had shown signs of losing their masters, a silent testament to the devastating battle. But what truly sickened them was Kaelen's boastful return.

Kaelen, a warrior with no tower to tether his life force to, was an unknown variable. While the mages' fate was clear, Kaelen's was not. They had hoped he too had perished. But now, here he was, back with the very prize he had been assigned to retrieve.

The mages' eyes fixed on the frozen head, confirming its authenticity. The subtle, yet unmistakable trace of their fallen comrade Lyra's magic lingered on it, a stark reminder of her final act. Their attention was quickly diverted by a growing murmur from the streets below. A crowd was gathering at the palace, their curiosity piqued by the sudden spectacle.

Exchanging a look of shared displeasure, the mages' frowns deepened. The palace gates swung open, and the emperor emerged in his royal regalia, his face, as always, obscured by a mysterious veil. Behind him was Vellok, the grand chancellor, his expression a carefully constructed mask of neutrality, though a flicker of disdain betrayed his true feelings toward the returning ogre king.

The conflict was a physical weight on both the Emperor and Vellok. Kaelen was supposed to be dead. His demise was meant to be the cornerstone of a new era for the empire, an era where power was consolidated and controlled. They had sent him to face Vorenza with a silent, terrible hope that he would meet his end by her hand. The plan had been for one of the three mages—or at least one of them—to return with the demon queen's head, cementing the mages' power and influence over the military.

The reality was far worse than their worst fears. Not only had Kaelen survived, but his presence on the warfront had transformed the empire's army. He had taken a stagnant force and molded it into a disciplined, potent fighting machine, making victory against the demonic hordes seem not just possible, but within reach.

Now, he knelt on the palace steps, the monstrous head of Vorenza held aloft, a clear and undeniable symbol of his success. The army knew of his accomplishments, and a tangible wave of admiration emanated from the rapidly growing crowd. As the Emperor and Vellok descended the steps, they could feel the people's respect and awe for the kneeling ogre.

Kaelen should have been branded a traitor for his defiance and insubordination. But with this ultimate victory, he had flipped the script. Now, both the Emperor and Vellok were forced to swallow their pride and acknowledge the ogre's achievements. They were trapped, forced to honor a man they wanted to see dead, all while the people celebrated their "hero."

Vellok, his face a mask of practiced calm, stepped forward. "Kaelen," he began, his voice surprisingly warm, "you have done what many believed to be impossible. You have brought a new hope to our people." He gestured to the frozen head. "This is a victory for all of us."

Rattan, in the guise of Kaelen, raised his massive head. His eyes, cold and calculating, met Vellok's. He offered a small, grateful nod, a theatrical grin spreading across his face. It was a perfect imitation of the old Kaelen, the ogre king who had always looked down upon the mages with a mixture of amusement and disdain.

The subtle act was a jab, a reminder of the dynamic they once shared, and a clear signal that Kaelen, or the man playing him, was far from the pliable tool they had hoped for. The crowd roared in approval, mistaking the gesture for a sign of humility. Vellok's smile tightened just a fraction, a barely perceptible crack in his carefully constructed facade.

The Emperor seized the moment, placing a hand on Kaelen's shoulder and helping him to his feet. "Kaelen, King of the Ogres," he announced, his voice carrying across the silent plaza, "you have proven your loyalty to the empire and washed away your previous shame of betraying the empire."

He let the last words hang in the air for a moment, a subtle reminder of Kaelen's past transgressions, before continuing, "You have secured our first important victory against our enemy. Now, with your help, we have hope of taking down the rest of the enemy and sending them back from wherever they came from."

Kaelen nodded with a fierce conviction. "Indeed, your majesty. Once I recover, I will continue to serve the empire."

The Emperor turned away from Kaelen to face the cheering crowd. "Now go and celebrate, my people! Share the news of King Kaelen's return and his victory!" he bellowed. The crowd erupted in a thunderous roar, their admiration for their new hero now fully cemented by the Emperor's words.

With a carefully feigned limp, Kaelen walked away from the palace steps, his pace slow and deliberate. The path led him toward the home that had been so unjustly stripped from him. This time, no one dared to stop him. The mages, Vellok, and even the Emperor himself all swallowed their protests, watching in silence as the ogre king made his way home.

Chapter 599:

Rattan maintained his facade of the weary hero until he reached the privacy of what was once Kaelen's personal chamber. A deep, shuddering breath escaped him as the weight of the performance lifted. He was so consumed by relief that he failed to notice the room was no longer the ransacked ruin he remembered.

Deep in exhaustion, Rattan fell into a profound sleep. It was then that the Phantom seized the opportunity, subtly weaving more of Kaelen's memories and mannerisms into Rattan's mind, perfecting his mimicry.

A week later, Rattan awoke, and the first things he did were a series of unconscious movements. His body moved on its own, checking the seals and wards he now instinctively knew protected his home. Kaelen had been no mage, but his understanding of magic far surpassed most. Drawing on these new memories, Rattan began to inspect his chambers, then the entire mansion. He meticulously checked every magic circle, ensuring each was intact and untouched.

A fleeting memory surfaced, a vision of a figure who might have done such a thing: his brother, the Emperor. A chilling question formed in Kaelen's mind, "Was he missing me, or was he just mourning me?"

He walked into the throne room, the central node for all the magic circles protecting the estate. As he sat on the throne, a subtle thrum of power washed over him. With a quick, instinctive connection, Kaelen's mind linked with the entire mansion, feeling its pulse and confirming his control over its defenses.

As Rattan sat upon the throne, his eyes glazed over with a deep, unsettling memory. It wasn't long ago he had knelt below this very seat in servitude, and now, he was its master. The irony wasn't lost on him. The only thing missing was a loyal retinue; Kaelen's men had followed their king to war, and none had returned.

Rattan didn't mind the solitude. He knew it wouldn't last. Soon, this place would be bustling with people bringing him gifts. Nobles from every land would kneel before him, offering their finest treasures to appease the empire's new hero.

He was looking forward to it. He knew his role, and he intended to play it to perfection. His purpose was to sow the seeds of chaos and desperation throughout the empire, and all he had to do was act as the old Kaelen once did.

The first step was clear. It was time to call a meeting or perhaps, a party with all the ogre generals of the empire. He had a tasty cake to hand over to them, and he was eager to see how they'd react to his little gift.

From his throne, Kaelen's mind, now Rattan's, set the machinations in motion. Invitations were dispatched to all his targets with a speed only the arcane could grant. He had to set up the party himself, as his mansion remained eerily silent, devoid of the maids and servants he needed. He was no longer the old Rattan, however.

His Cube, now an artifact, emerged from within his robes and merged with the throne. Kaelen's memories of his resources and crafting rooms surfaced, providing the means to build his own servants. He handed the task of creating humanoid magical puppets to the Cube, then settled back into the throne to meticulously plan his next moves.

Meanwhile, in the depths of the palace, the Emperor and Vellok were also planning, but Kaelen was no longer the sole topic of their discussion. They had decided that while they could not act directly against Kaelen, their best move was to ignore him. This was why no new staff had been assigned to his home. He was a hero and a king, but only in name. The current Kaelen was a one-man show, his power limited to the fame he had earned. They believed that without a network of support, he would be powerless.

The immediate and more pressing concern for the Emperor and Vellok was the demon lord Zarvok. He remained a ghost, yet his army advanced with terrifying efficiency. Their most urgent problem was deciphering his ultimate goal. It might have been a coincidence, but Zarvok's forces were steadily pushing toward a location of critical importance to the empire.

Whether by chance or design, they couldn't allow this to happen. They had to force the demon king out and deal with him before his army came too close. Their main obstacles were the two gods on the demon king's side and the unknown number of sixth-tier demons he commanded. However, they were less concerned about these six tier demons; the mages who had a brief skirmish with them had dismissed them as weak or newly promoted to the stage.

An idea began to take hold—a strategy mirroring Zarvok's own initial tactics: sending a high-tier powerhouse to deal with the lower-level threats. This time, however, they wouldn't send just one. They

would send all their remaining sixth-tier powerhouses. The more they discussed it, the more tempting the idea became.

"Even one of our sixth-tier mages is more than capable of undoing all the demons have achieved, save for the corrupted lands themselves," Vellok stated, his tone firm.

The Emperor nodded slowly. "But we must not allow them to recover. We should have the entire army stationed to follow up immediately, giving the demons no time to recoup or regroup. Kaelen's abyssal armor means we have no issues battling in the abyss itself. We must not give them time to prepare." He turned from the glowing war map to face Vellok, his veiled form a silhouette in the dim light. "From what we've gathered, countermeasures have already been set up for the god with the cursed divinity." He paused, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "I trust you can handle him, correct?"

Vellok's usual composure faltered. He was calm, but hesitant. "He is strong, brother," he said quietly. "I have no confidence in handling him in my normal state. I will need the angel's power if I am to win."

The Emperor was silent for a long moment. "Has he ever spoken with you since?" he asked.

Vellok shook his head slowly. "I can't help but wonder if we made the right choice, trapping him for our own ends," he murmured, his gaze distant. "Now, that angel's rage is a blade hanging over our entire empire, ready to fall at any moment."

The Emperor opened his mouth to speak, but Vellok raised a hand to stop him. "There's no use regretting my past choices now," Vellok admitted, his voice a low confession. "I've been blind, brother, consumed by my own arrogance. This fight is a price I have to pay. There will be no coming back for me. My goal isn't victory; it's to ensure that angel falls with me, and his shadow never touches our people again."

Vellok placed a hand on his brother's shoulder, a gesture of shared burden. "I'll do my best to grant us a final win and make sure the angel falls with me, never to turn his gaze toward our people again. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have lands reclaimed by our brother Kaelen to purify."

A shimmering portal of swirling arcane energy opened behind Vellok. He stepped through, leaving the Emperor alone in the cavernous chamber. As the portal collapsed with a soft whisper, the Emperor's facade of control shattered. He fell to his knees, his eyes—hidden behind the veil—holding a chaotic mix

of hope and despair. The mana in the room began to fluctuate wildly, mirroring the storm raging within him.

A soft, rhythmic clicking sound started, growing faster and faster until the Emperor's surroundings dissolved entirely. He found himself not in his familiar chamber, but in a boundless space of swirling stars and a flowing, cosmic river. He was accustomed to this vision, a place where he often went to seek solace and power. He took a step into the river, intending to move forward, but was stopped cold when he saw a figure fishing from its banks.

The figure turned its gaze toward the Emperor, a silent command that froze him in his tracks. In a voice that echoed only in his mind, the figure spoke, "You are not yet ready for what lies beyond this point. Many like yourself are not ready." With a simple wave of a hand, the Emperor was thrust back into the cold reality of his chamber.

He landed hard on the floor, the memory of that voice fueling a surge of pure, unadulterated rage. He roared into the empty room, his voice raw with fury and frustration. "What use is this power of mine when I can't even save my own people? What use is all this for?" His words hung in the air, a desperate plea to a power that seemed to toy with him, offering glimpses of what he could be but denying him the means to get there.

A portal shimmered into existence high above the war-torn lands where Kaelen had fought. Vellok stepped through, his gaze sweeping over the ravaged, corrupted ground below. A grim sort of joy filled him, knowing that the ritual he was about to perform would cleanse these lands, securing them for his people to thrive once more.

Chapter 600:

But before he began, he spoke to the open air, a silent address to the being he carried within. "I know you heard my words with my brother, and I plan on keeping my promise. I will drag you down with me before I let you unleash your rage upon us."

He paused, a flicker of something akin to awe crossing his face. "I was too young back then to understand what my mentor meant by 'cursing' me with you. But I cannot deny the help you've been all these years."

"Imagine my surprise when mana and magic, things so simple to me, were a struggle for all my peers and comrades. At first, I thought it was my talent, my genius. But it was only when I tried to diversify into elements that were not my own that I knew the truth—it was all your doing."

Vellok reached out, and the very light in the air seemed to coalesce into a brilliant orb in his palm. "Comprehending the light element was as simple as breathing for me," he confessed, the orb pulsing in time with his words.

"Magic spells about light were so easy to understand, I could create more powerful ones with a single thought. It truly is unfair that beings like you exist. While mortals like us suffer to grasp and grow with each step, all you need to do is breathe and exist to reach a height unimaginable to most." He tightened his grip on the light, his knuckles pale. "Even now, when it seems like I have you in my palm, your existence makes a mockery of mine, where even your cage is too hot to hold." Vellok said this to get a response but he got none.

Vellok's eyes, glazed with a cold anger from the silence, narrowed. He let out a deep, controlled breath, and a massive, pure white wing unfurled from his back.

This was no theatrical display meant to intimidate this time; it was an expression of power focused with a singular purpose. With a sharp snap of his fingers, a sound like a cracking whip echoed through the sky. From him, a wave of pure light erupted and began to spread. The corrupted lands below, bathed in the cleansing light, instantly turned to ash, a testament to the divine power being wielded. In a flash, he was gone, his work complete.

Meanwhile, back at what was once Kaelen's somber mansion, the estate had been completely transformed. It was now a lavish, festive spectacle. The tech puppets Rattan had built were dressed in exquisite outfits, positioned perfectly in their designated places, their polished forms waiting silently for the guests to arrive.

The grand doors of the mansion swung open to reveal the first of the ogre generals. Each one was a hulking mass of muscle and armor, their scarred faces and grim expressions a stark contrast to the festive décor. They grunted and eyed the silently standing puppets with suspicion, their heavy footsteps echoing on the polished marble floors as they moved into the great hall.

As they took their places, Kaelen emerged from a side chamber, still moving with a slight, theatrical limp. His presence silenced the low murmurs, all eyes turning to their king. He looked out at his generals, a subtle, almost condescending grin playing on his lips.

"My brothers," he began, his voice a deep rumble that filled the hall. "I see your loyalty has not wavered, even in my long absence. I thank you for coming." He gestured to the surrounding room. "This is not a meeting to discuss strategy or war, but a celebration. A celebration of a great victory, and of the unity that will secure many more."

With a final, meaningful nod, Kaelen raised a glass. "Eat, drink, and be merry. For tonight, we are heroes."

The tech puppets, moving with an eerie, synchronized grace, began to serve food and pour drinks. The ogre generals, initially hesitant, soon gave in to the feast. The air filled with the sounds of hearty laughter and clinking glasses, a surreal tableau of brute strength and automated grace. Rattan, watching from his seat at the head of the long table, simply smiled. The first step of his plan was complete. The generals were gathered, their guards lowered, and the real festivities were about to begin.

Deep into the party, Kaelen knew it was time. He raised his wine glass and tapped it with his knife, the sharp metallic sound cutting through the boisterous laughter and revelry. The ogre generals, previously lost in their celebration, fell silent, sneaking glances at each other. The party was over; the real reason for their summons was finally at hand.

Kaelen cleared his throat, his gaze sweeping across the tense faces of his brothers. "I have betrayed you, my brothers, in the past," he began, his voice a low, somber rumble. "My status and my power made me no better than those I detest, until that same power I thought I held was taken away from me by the very ones who granted it."

He paused, letting his confession hang in the air. "I will not stand here and beg for your forgiveness, nor will I shame you for bowing before those we swore to stand against. How can I, when I, your king, was the first to bow?" Kaelen's eyes lingered on each general, his stare holding a perfect mix of solemn regret and steely resolve.

"We have all been to the battlefield and seen the true face of horror," Kaelen continued, his voice now a low, captivating rumble. "There, your status doesn't matter, but the comrades fighting at your side determine if you see the next day. Even the ratfolk in my last war became my greatest ally and one of the reasons I can stand here today."

He paused, letting his gaze sweep over the faces of the ogre generals, their expressions a mix of confusion and dawning recognition.

"My fall from glory gave those who wanted us in their grasp a good hold on our necks," he said, his voice rising in volume and passion. "It was my weakness that cracked the thin hope you all once held. You saw your king, humbled and subservient, and your own will to resist was broken."

Kaelen's voice boomed through the silent hall, a powerful crescendo. "Now, I stand before you to regain that hope, to once again act and lead as your true king! What do you say, brothers? Will you stand with me?"

A heavy silence fell over the hall. It was not the silence of awe, but of profound skepticism. The ogre generals stared at Kaelen, their massive arms crossed, their expressions unreadable. They had followed him into countless battles, but the man before them now felt like a stranger, and his words, while stirring, rang hollow.

Finally, a hulking figure with a jagged scar across his brow stepped forward. It was General Grull, one of the oldest and most respected of the ogre commanders. His voice was a low, gravelly rumble that carried the weight of experience.

"It is too late, Kaelen," Grull said, not with anger, but with a weary finality. "The Empire did not sit idle while you were gone. Vellok and his mages used your absence to tighten their grip on our forces. They have placed their own people in our command structure, cut off our supply lines, and made sure that every order we give is first filtered through their damn mages' council."

Grull gestured to the other generals, who nodded in solemn agreement. "We are no longer your army, Kaelen. We are just an arm of the Empire, with a mage's hand guiding our every move. The hope you speak of is long gone."

He met Kaelen's gaze directly. "Unless you can find a way to boost our status to match that of the mages, to give us the power to truly challenge their influence, then things might change. Otherwise, your words are just that words."

Rattan chuckled to himself, but his outward expression remained calm and collected. He snapped his fingers in a sharp, clear motion, and in response, his tech servants began to walk out from the back of

the hall. Each puppet carried a tray, and on each tray rested a single, thick, glowing crystal. They moved with an eerie, perfect precision, laying a tray in front of each ogre general before retreating to their positions.

Kaelen gestured with his hands toward the crystals. "What is laid before you is hope," he said, his voice a captivating low rumble. "Hope for a better future, where you can stare the mages eye to eye and tell them to back off."

One of the generals, a younger, more impulsive one, picked up the glowing crystal. "What is this?" he asked, his voice filled with suspicion and curiosity.

Kaelen waited for a tense moment, letting the anticipation fill the room. "What you hold in your hand," he declared, his voice rising, "is my knowledge and journey to the six-tier stage."

The hall fell into a stunned silence, quickly giving way to a frantic energy. Ogres stared wide-eyed at the glowing crystals, then at Kaelen, and back again. One general stood so fast his chair toppled behind him with a crash. "Are your words true, my lord?" he asked, his voice trembling with a mix of disbelief and desperate hope.