

Guardian gods 601

Chapter 601:

Kaelen simply nodded.

That single motion sent the entire room into a frenzy. Their reaction was understandable. The great chasm between the ogre generals and the mages was a simple, brutal truth: the mages had a path to the higher tiers, while the ogres believed their own power had a hard ceiling. This was why they had swallowed their pride and become servants to a race they once saw as their equals.

The one exception to this rule was Kaelen, their king, who had found a way to the sixth tier. A stage so powerful it made the mages see him as their equal. He commanded enough influence to give them orders. Now, after all this time, after his fall from grace, Kaelen was offering this power to them.

An unsaid question hung in the air, a silent plea from every ogre in the room: "What has changed?"

"What has changed," he began, his voice dropping to a low, intimate tone, "is that I have seen the true face of power. I learned a truth the mages will never understand."

He walked down the length of the table, his gaze intense as he looked at each general. "They believe power is something to be hoarded, to be locked away in towers and guarded by secrets. They see our path as a dead end, a ceiling they built to keep us from ever reaching their height. They gave me power, yes, but only enough to make me their strongest pawn."

Kaelen stopped and placed a hand on Grull's shoulder. "My journey through the abyss did not just make me stronger; it taught me that true power is not held alone. It is shared with your brothers, with your people. It is the strength of a united army, not just one man at the top. I bring you this knowledge now because I am no longer their pawn. I am your king, and I will not let our race be held in chains a moment longer."

He then looked at the crystals resting on the trays. "This is not merely a gift. It is a choice. You can take this and use it to reclaim your honor, to stand as equals and make the mages see that our path is not a dead end, but a new road. Or you can leave it here, and continue to serve as their pawns until they decide you are no longer useful."

The ogres looked down at the glowing crystals, their hearts and minds now ablaze with a fierce, renewed hope. The choice was clear.

The ogre generals, as one, immediately rose from their seats and dropped to a knee, their heads bowed low toward Kaelen. Rattan's soul was alight with a wild, triumphant joy. He watched them with a calculating eye, already seeing a larger picture. Soon, it would not just be ogres kneeling before him, but his own people, the ratfolk, and then the goblins. A chilling thought ran through his mind: Oh, how will they look when they see the true face behind the one they are bowing to?

"Now rise, my brothers," Kaelen said, his voice a low, solemn command.

The ogres stood, their hands tightening around the glowing crystals. Their eyes, once filled with doubt, now burned with fierce resolve.

"Go back this very night and take back the power that belongs to you," Kaelen commanded. "Have no fear in front of the mages. They won't say it out loud, but you are the backbone of this empire. Know your value, and let them know you hold the key to the sixth-tier stage in your hands. Let them know you hold the key to change your fate in your hands."

With a final, sharp gesture toward the door, he added, "I wish you all a happy and blessed evening."

The ogres nodded in unison, their backs now straighter and their steps lighter as they walked out of the hall. The air they carried was no longer heavy with resentment but charged with a fierce, newfound hope. Once the last ogre was gone and Kaelen sensed he was truly alone, he could hardly contain his laughter.

He clapped his hands together, and the mansion responded. The air filled with a hauntingly beautiful classical note, a melody composed by the goblin nobles he'd once known. He felt an overwhelming urge to do something Kaelen would never do, so he began to dance around the hall, his movements wild and free, even grabbing one of his tech servants to accompany him in his strange, silent waltz.

Phantom, who had been observing from the shadows of Rattan's mind, watched with a strange expression. Rattan's actions were something he himself would do, or rather, a part of himself would like—the part that thrived on being in the spotlight. Right now, there was no better spotlight for the

ambitious Rattan than this one. His soul, a vibrant beacon of ambition, was exuding such a tempting scent that Phantom wanted to reach out and grab it, but he held back. It was not yet time.

For the next few weeks, a new wave of chaos swept through the empire, a direct consequence of Kaelen's actions. The meticulously balanced power structure, which had seemed so stable before his return, was now a house of cards in a hurricane.

The Emperor's palace became a constant source of pleas and complaints. Military commanders, their faces pale with frustration, reported that ogre battalions were simply refusing orders that came from anyone other than their generals. Supply lines were cut, battle plans were ignored, and the once-reliable brute force of the ogre army was now a wild, unpredictable entity. Ministers, their voices filled with panic, warned of a complete breakdown of the military command structure.

Worst of all, the mages began to feel a deep sense of dread. Their privileged position, once unassailable, was now under threat. They convened in secret meetings within their towers, their hushed voices filled with outrage and fear. The ogres, a race they had long considered their inferiors, now carried a terrifying secret. The knowledge of the six-tier stage, a power they believed was their exclusive domain, was now in the hands of the very people they had worked so hard to keep subservient. The ogre's sudden change was no longer a matter of simple disobedience; it was a revolution in the making, and the mages knew that their status, and their lives, were on the line.

Far from the palace and the mages' councils, Kaelen sat on his throne, observing the turmoil with a deep sense of satisfaction. The reports of chaos were a soothing symphony to him, each report a sign that the old order was unraveling. He was the master puppeteer, and the strings he had pulled were causing the entire imperial theater to collapse.

Amidst all this political chaos, Rattan had finally consolidated his newly promoted fifth stage peak. He fully became qualified for the stage as he comprehended a unique Domain which solidified around his core, a semi conceptual power perfectly suited to his nature: "The Architect."

This domain was a refraction to what he sees as his new role as a master builder and grand designer. It wasn't a magic of brute force, but of construction and remote manipulation. At its core, the domain centered on a new form of "weaving." Instead of manipulating traditional magical threads, Rattan used his magi-tech constructs to create a metaphysical web he called the Aetherium Weave. This web was an invisible, ethereal network that extended his influence across his domain.

With his new domain fully consolidated, Rattan's Cube artifact began to shift. It contorted and expanded from its simple shape, transforming into an elaborate, ornate chair that served as his central command hub. From this Nexus, Rattan's consciousness reached out, anchoring him to the very fabric of his domain. He could now see, hear, and feel the world through the constructs he created.

He began to populate his with his creations, devices that were less like puppets and more like extensions of himself. Sensory Orbs the size of his fist flew out, acting as his eyes and ears, that would feed him real-time information once the domain was deployed. He created Automated Turrets, stationary or mobile weapons platforms that he could activate and target remotely, and powerful Golems and Automatons that could be directly controlled to fight on the front lines. He could even partially "upload" his consciousness into these larger constructs, allowing for intricate maneuvers no one else could replicate. To maintain his growing army, he created small, nimble Repair Drones that would fix and maintain his creations, ensuring the Weave remained intact and effective.

All these commands were sent through his Aetherium Weave, the web that now extended from his throne. With subtle hand movements or a simple mental command, he could direct his constructs. He was so connected to them that he could sense the moment they were damaged or destroyed, a faint echo of pain that served as a warning.

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Rattan was ecstatic. This domain was the perfect representation of his true nature an unwillingness to be on the front lines when he could use his creations and magic to keep his enemies at bay. He could now build new, powerful weapons to strengthen his ogre allies, all while maintaining full control over them to maximize their usage. The Architect domain was his ultimate tool, a physical manifestation of his ambition to control his life and other's life.

With the ogres now firmly in his corner, Rattan's focus shifted to the next part of his grand plan. The ogres were the brawn, but he needed more. He needed the ratfolk, his own people, a faction the empire had long discarded yet still found plenty of use for in war. They were a necessary, but ultimately disposable, pawn. Rattan knew that by using his current influence and fame as a hero to bring the ratfolk to his side, he would not only gain valuable allies but also deal another devastating blow to the empire's ability to wage war.

Meanwhile, in the imperial palace, the Emperor and Vellok were not faring well. The demons, led by the enigmatic Lord Zarvok, were making alarming advancements. Their progress was directly proportional to the empire's internal strife. The more the ogres defied orders and fought amongst themselves, the faster the demonic legions marched.

The Emperor and Vellok watched their carefully crafted plans unravel. Their initial strategy—to send all their remaining sixth-tier mages to a single point of attack—now looked bleak with each passing day. The very foundation of their power was crumbling, and the internal conflict they had hoped to manage was now a far greater threat than the enemy at their gates.

Despite all that had happened, the Emperor and Vellok still couldn't comprehend how Kaelen, even after his fall from grace, had managed to regain his footing so completely. They were forced to face their own hubris. For centuries, they had seen his power and ambition firsthand, yet they had still somehow managed to underestimate him.

The plan they had meticulously crafted to defeat the demon lord without him now lay in tatters. A crucial aspect they needed to win the war—the unified narrative and morale of the army—was now completely under Kaelen's control. In just a few short weeks, he had done what they could not, bending the soldiers' loyalty to his will.

Whether they liked it or not, they were now forced to inform him of their plans and seek his help. The very brother they had planned to discard was now the only piece that could save them from their own crumbling empire.

The Emperor and Vellok stood before the massive war map, its glowing lines now a chaotic mess of red and blue. The silence between them was heavy with the weight of their failure. Their carefully laid plans lay in tatters, a direct result of their own arrogance. The man they had sought to eliminate was now the only one who could save them.

"We have no choice," the Emperor finally said, his voice a low rumble. "We must invite him."

Vellok's expression was grim. "He won't come without a show of respect, brother. He knows the position he holds. A simple summons will be seen as an insult."

"Then we will show him respect," the Emperor retorted, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. "Draft a formal invitation. Address him as 'King Kaelen, Hero of the Empire.' Tell him we require his counsel on matters of great importance. We must make it seem as though we are seeking his wisdom, not begging for his help."

Vellok nodded, a flicker of cold calculation in his eyes. They were inviting a wolf into the fold, and they had no idea what he would demand in return. They decided to send the invitation with a high-ranking, trusted official, a man who could convey the gravitas of the situation without betraying their desperation.

As the official departed, carrying the sealed scroll, the two brothers were left alone once more. They had tried to build a new empire, free of Kaelen's shadow, but they had only succeeded in handing him the stage he needed to grow.

The invitation arrived not with a flutter of dove's wings, but with the heavy, reluctant steps of a high-ranking official. He was a distinguished man, a seasoned diplomat known for his unwavering composure, yet he stood at the foot of Kaelen's throne with a visible tremor in his hands.

Rattan, in the guise of Kaelen, remained on his throne. He watched the man's discomfort with silent, cruel pleasure. This was a pawn he had never even met.

"An invitation from His Majesty, the Emperor," the official said, his voice strained as he presented a rolled scroll with a golden seal. "He and Chancellor Vellok request your presence for a matter of great importance."

Kaelen took the scroll, his immense hand dwarfing the delicate parchment. He didn't open it. Instead, he let it rest on his palm for a long moment, the silence of the hall stretching until it was unbearable. The official shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting to the motionless tech puppets that lined the walls.

Finally, with a subtle smirk, Kaelen broke the seal. His eyes scanned the formal script, and a flicker of genuine amusement crossed his face as he saw the words: "King Kaelen, Hero of the Empire." They were humbling themselves. They were desperate.

"Tell my brother and Vellok that I will consider their request," Kaelen rumbled, his voice dripping with mock solemnity. "I will grace them with my presence once I have finished with my own matters. There is much to be done to ensure the health and well-being of the ogre army, after all."

He handed the scroll back to the official. "You may return to your masters with this message. And do tell them I am quite well. The return to my home has been most... refreshing."

The official bowed deeply, a bead of sweat tracing a line down his temple, and left as quickly as his dignity would allow. Kaelen was left alone, a triumphant, wicked grin spreading across his face.

Some time later, Rattan blinked, and standing before him, as if conjured from thin air, were the Emperor and Vellok. Rattan froze in shock, a wave of cold dread washing over him. A new, terrifying clarity hit him, and he cursed himself inwardly, "I might have gone too far this time." He struggled to regain his composure, Kaelen's memories flickering through his mind, confirming that while such an unannounced appearance from these two was rare, it wasn't entirely unprecedented.

Vellok, his eyes blazing with a fierce golden light, stared directly at Rattan. The immense pressure of a sixth-tier stage descended upon the ogre king, a palpable force that sought to freeze Rattan to his very core. Outwardly, however, Rattan maintained a facade of complete calm, as if everything were entirely under his control.

Thankfully, the Emperor stepped forward, placing a hand on Vellok's shoulder. Vellok took a moment, visibly gathering his composure, and in that brief reprieve, Rattan finally found his voice.

Rattan, maintaining Kaelen's stoic demeanor despite the internal tremor, spoke with an even tone. "My brothers, I believe I was the one supposed to pay you a visit for your summons."

The Emperor's blue eyes, a startling glimpse through the shadow of his hood, fixed on Kaelen. "Indeed, but we cannot afford to wait. Each moment we spend on senseless politics brings the enemy closer to our motherland."

"How may I be of help then, brother?" Kaelen asked, his voice carefully conveying a hint of weariness. "As you can see, I am not in my best health and need time to recuperate."

Vellok's voice, though no longer backed by the crushing pressure, was sharp. "Your actions these past weeks haven't been those of someone recuperating."

To be even more convincing, Rattan pushed himself to his feet, a subtle frown etching his face as if he were enduring a hidden pain. He spread his arms slightly, a gesture of weary openness. "I lost my people in my last war, my brothers, and my home is quite vast, so it gets lonely at times. I merely invited some friends and shared a few things." His gaze held a feigned vulnerability. "I was merely trying to gain back what was once rightfully mine."

"Merely invited some friends?" Vellok scoffed, his golden eyes narrowing, though his power remained reined in. "Your 'invitation' has paralyzed our military command structure, Kaelen. Ogre legions defy imperial mandates, supply lines are in disarray, and the Mage Council is in an uproar over this... 'knowledge' you've so generously shared."

Rattan maintained his pained expression, his feigned weariness impeccable. "The generals simply need a firm hand, brother. They have grown accustomed to... less direct leadership in my absence. As for the knowledge," he added, a subtle, cold glint entering his eyes, "it is not my fault if the mages find a glimmer of hope among their allies threatening. Perhaps they should reflect on why their 'authority' is so easily challenged."

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The Emperor raised a hand, cutting off Vellok's sharp retort. His voice, though still calm, held an edge of urgency. "Enough, Vellok. Kaelen, we did not come here to dissect your recent actions. The demon lord Zrvok presses forward, his army unchecked while our own forces are consumed by internal conflict. Our previous strategies, while well-intended, have proven insufficient against his peculiar advance."

He stepped closer, his veiled face radiating an undeniable gravity. "We need your unique insights, Kaelen. Your unparalleled experience on the front lines, and yes, your recent, shall we say, re-engagement with the ogre generals. This war cannot be won if our own house is divided. How do you propose we rectify this, brother? How do we unify our forces and turn the tide?"

"We are unified," Kaelen began, his voice soft, almost a whisper, yet it commanded attention in the hushed hall. "But if we want this bond to be stronger, I will need full authority over the Ogre forces and their people. That means my name as the King of Ogres will finally mean something; it would be recognized as a position of power within the Empire."

Vellok shifted, a protest forming on his lips, but Kaelen continued smoothly, his gaze unwavering. "Another thing I would like is full command over the Ratfolk and their people." He paused just long enough for Vellok to clench his jaw, then pressed on. "I know of your plans to bring down the number of the Ratfolk, and I will no longer stand against you on that. But as a warrior, and out of respect for the Ratfolk that fought with me, if they are to meet their end, they should meet it with a sense of recognition and fulfillment, of having accomplished something. A sense of accomplishment which you two cannot provide for them, and I can."

Kaelen leaned forward slightly, his eyes gleaming. "If you need further conviction, you should have noticed the instability within our army and the soldiers donning the abyssal armor. I have a simple and effective way of solving that." With that, Kaelen sat back down, giving both the Emperor and Vellok time to consider his words and proposal.

Vellok's jaw was clenched so tight his teeth might shatter. "Full authority?" he rasped, his voice barely a whisper, yet laced with venom. "Over the Ratfolk? You speak of respect while dismantling the very chain of command we rely on for the war effort!"

Kaelen merely held his gaze, a subtle, almost imperceptible smirk playing on his lips. He let Vellok's words hang in the air, allowing the Emperor to feel the full weight of their desperate situation.

The Emperor raised a hand, silencing Vellok's simmering protest. His veiled face was unreadable, but his shoulders seemed to slump with the burden of his decision. "The lives of our people, the very fate of the Empire, hang by a thread, Vellok," he stated, his voice devoid of its usual power, reduced to a weary admission. He turned back to Kaelen. "Your proposal for the abyssal armor... explain it"

"I take it you agree to my terms then, brother?" Kaelen said, a happy, almost gleeful note in his voice.

"The abyssal armor issue can be solved in a simple, but truly barbaric way. You made the mistake of seeing our current soldiers as normal, reasonable men, which they are now far from, due to the corrosive taint of the Abyss."

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial, almost chilling whisper. "You have to learn from the demons, brothers. My way is to have warriors under you go free and battle as they want, to their heart's desire. Give them time to fall fully into their state of madness. Let the Abyss consume their individual will. That is when you interfere – not when they are merely struggling, but when their minds are completely fractured, when they are nothing but raw, undirected rage."

Kaelen paused, letting the implications sink in. "Then, in a swift and overwhelming show of absolute control, you don't merely kill a few. You shatter them".

"You demonstrate a greater, colder will than the Abyss itself. You force the very armor to acknowledge your dominance. Their ravaged minds, stripped bare of all other thought, will then latch onto that

singular, terrifying image. From that point of sheer, primal terror, and the armor's own instinct for preservation, they will fear and obey you"

"That is impressive, brother," Vellok spoke, his tone holding a genuine note of interest this time. The sheer, brutal pragmatism of Kaelen's solution seemed to resonate with him.

Seeing the silent, reluctant agreement from both Vellok and the Emperor, the Emperor himself spoke, reiterating their war plan. This time, however, Kaelen's name was seamlessly woven into the strategy, his new authority over the ogre and ratfolk forces clearly outlined. The core of their strategy, which once excluded him, now hinged upon his participation.

Finally, before they prepared to leave, the Emperor's veiled face turned back to Kaelen, his piercing blue eyes hidden beneath the hood. "Since you desire command of the army, you won't mind then going to the front lines and taking full control back yourself?"

Kaelen's brow furrowed, a flicker of genuine displeasure crossing Rattan's face. "I still am not yet in full health, Your Majesty," he began to argue, a protest forming on his lips. But as his gaze met the Emperor's unwavering blue eyes, and he saw Vellok calmly walking towards the exit, an unspoken challenge hung in the air. Rattan swallowed the rest of his words, realizing he had no choice. With a curt nod, he stated, "Understood, Your Majesty."

"Good," the Emperor replied, the single word carrying the weight of a decree. He then turned and walked out, Vellok beside him, both emerging from the mansion's grand front doors. Outside, plenty hidden eyes stared at the gate where the emperor and Vellok came from before flying off.

Many were eager to know what had transpired, but with Kaelen's home now devoid of any living servants, there was no way of finding out. Noblemen and officials, smelling an opportunity, began to send their own people to Kaelen's mansion as "thoughtful gifts" of maids and servants. They hoped to place spies and curry favor with the now influential ogre king.

Inside his grand, silent hall, Rattan was fuming. The thought of going back to the front lines filled him with dread. He was a puppeteer, not a soldier. He despised the idea of being forced to perform in front of thousands, if not millions, of people, putting his own life at risk. His carefully crafted persona as a grand manipulator was at odds with the role of a front-line general.

His only saving grace was that the Emperor and Vellok's greatest hope for him wasn't to fight the biggest battles. They needed him to lead the army, to command the chaotic empire forces, while they themselves would deal with the "bigger fish" Zarvok and the two divine figures. Rattan's specific task was to manage the army's cohesion and, most terrifyingly, to handle any of the unknown sixth-tier figures who might show themselves.

Alone on his throne, he desperately wanted a word from his guardian, a guarantee that he would be safe. He was so close to having everything he ever wanted, and the thought of losing it all on a battlefield, fighting someone else's war, was almost unbearable. He should be a master of control, but in this moment, he felt utterly powerless.

Phantom, his silent observer, had relayed the Emperor's plan to Ikenga, who in turn shared it with the demon lord Zarvok. The news of the impending sixth-tier mage assault landed with the weight of a thunderclap. Zarvok's initial reaction was one of surprise, followed by a surge of pure, unwarranted protective instinct. He was about to give the command to recall his demons, to pull them back to safety before they met their ends in the Emperor's gambit.

But he hesitated. He was a general, and generals do not squander their pawns, yet he was about to be more than a king, and he was supposed to look at the bigger picture. He was conflicted, but a cold, hard logic won out. The Emperor and Vellok's plan, while designed to destroy his forces, was actually working in his favor. A battle fought in the deep Abyss, far from the world that was to be his prize, was a battle he had already half-won.

He also weighed the value of his forces against the value of his spy. Recalling his army now would make the Emperor and Vellok suspicious. They would realize someone was leaking intel, and Zarvok would lose a valuable chess piece in Phantom and Ikenga. So, he bit his teeth and looked away, allowing the inevitable to unfold. However, he was not completely done. Following his decision, he stopped the deployment of all fourth and fifth-stage demons, a grim compromise to preserve his most valuable troops. He would accept the casualties, but only for a greater, more crucial victory.

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Ikenga, watching the demons continue their advance toward the Emperor's trap, couldn't contain his curiosity. "Why?" he asked, his voice echoing in the vast, abyssal chamber. "We both know demons do not truly die. Why were you so conflicted about losing a few battalions to draw the Empire into this fight? The casualties are a negligible price to pay for such a strategic victory."

Zarvok didn't elaborate. His only response was a simple, chilling truth. "You will understand when all this ends." With that, he immediately got to work.

Knowing the Empire's plan, Zarvok was ready to meet it head-on. Since both sides had decided that this conflict must end now, he intended to play his part well. The matchups had already been decided in their minds. The Emperor and Vellok for the gods, himself for the sixth-tier left in the empire. Zarvok's focus was now on how to ensure those matchups happened at the same time, all while preserving the integrity of this abyss layer so it didn't collapse on itself.

While the abyss itself wouldn't mind if eight sixth-tier beings were about to clash inside of it, leading to the collapse of this entire layer, Zarvok did. He was the only one who cared about its stability, so his planning included setting up a hidden magic circle and spell. This spell would randomize teleportation points, as long as they weren't this abyss layer or the world. His intent was to move the entire conflict away from his layer and the world he desired.

He shared this plan with Ikenga, who had no problem with it but instead added his own idea. According to Ikenga, Zarvok should make sure the spell or magic circle had two people in control of it: Zarvok himself and Keles. Due to the spell using intention as its anchor, once they were locked in on their target, they would be teleported together. This would ensure that the key players were removed from the battlefield at the same time.

As for Ikenga himself, he was certain he would be targeted by Vellok. He knew Vellok should have plans in place to deal with him, and he wasn't wrong. Vellok had every reason to attack him, and since Ikenga had already shown his capabilities, it was only right that Vellok, as a grand mage, would have a counter-plan ready for him. Ikenga was looking forward to this as he also has his own plans.

Even if Vellok never choose to engage him, Ikenga will force him to. He has to end this and make sure their goal was met for his unborn child. Ikenga won't like it if the child was born in a world that isn't theirs.

"It is a sound plan, Lord Zarvok," Ikenga began, his brow furrowed in thought. "But the probability of success is a thin line. You cannot forcefully teleport away beings of that stage if they are even remotely aware of your intention. Their auras, their very presence, can disrupt a spell of that magnitude before it even forms. How do we guarantee that the Emperor, Vellok, and the three other sixth-tier figures on their side are caught unaware?"

Zarvok showing his strategist side, gestured to a ghostly projection of the abyss layer before them. "You are correct. The spell must be a secondary action, hidden within a more obvious trap/spectacle. The mages will be focused on this trap and spectacle, not the subtle disruption in the background. My army will then launch a full-scale assault, a powerful, multi-directional attack that forces them to commit their magic and attention to a single purpose: defense."

"A distraction," Ikenga murmured, stroking his chin. "But a distraction of that scale will still raise an alarm."

"An alarm that will occur too late," Zarvok countered, "because by then, we will have them exactly where we need them. I have enough confidence that the appearance of my army will have all the sixth-tier mages frozen in horror once they recognize what they are looking at. That will be enough time for us to drive them away."

"Your army?" Ikenga asked, his confusion evident. "Do you have another army on your side that I don't know of?"

Zarvok shook his head slowly. "It's the same army you know, but one blessed with the law and blessing of my domain."

Ikenga's mouth opened to ask what Zarvok's domain was, but he held back. He knew Zarvok would never tell him, and Zarvok had every right not to. Still, his curiosity was a burning fire in his mind.

"I look forward to seeing your army's new sight once you are done," Ikenga said, but Zarvok shook his head again. "You won't be able to see any difference. They would look like the same demon army to you."

"But to the goblins, the ogres, and the ratfolk, my army will look terrifying," Zarvok said, his voice dropping to a deep, resonant tone as his eyes had a bright, molten-red glow.

Seeing Ikenga's burning curiosity, Zarvok finally gave a small concession. "All I can tell you is the name of the law which I command. It is the 'Law and Domain of the Infernal Crucible.'" With that, Zarvok turned and left, leaving Ikenga alone in the room with a deep thought of his own.

Ikenga was left alone, but his mind was anything but calm. Zarvok's domain "The Infernal Crucible" was a riddle he couldn't solve. His only clues were fire and forging, but since meeting the demon lord, he had never seen him in a forge or attempt to create anything. The name felt like a piece of a puzzle he didn't have all the parts for.

He moved to a sofa in his room and sat down, his gaze settling on Keles sleeping peacefully on a bed nearby. Since the invasion began, Ikenga had never stopped learning, constantly correcting his own thoughts. The more he learned, the more he began to detest the idea of invading a world. There was too much at play when an invasion happened, a reality far deeper than the simple clash of swords and magic shown on the surface.

Ikenga's detestation came from his own actions. His plannings, which had risked destabilizing a standing empire from within, was a cold, brutal thing. Something his own world is also susceptible of, he couldn't help but wonder if his own world, during a future invasion, would come across someone just like himself, but perhaps even more cunning and insidious in their planning. The thought was a cold dread that settled deep in his soul.

This was why Ikenga was so greedy for knowledge to know more than his enemies, to strip away the terrifying unknown. He was disturbed by not having an idea of what Zarvok was truly capable of, just as the thought of Vorenza's power had disturbed him long ago. And ever since he knew what she was capable of, he had been subconsciously planning for a hypothetical encounter, always preparing for a confrontation he hoped would never come.

Still, amongst all these strategic thoughts, what Ikenga had learned the most was a profound lesson: never to engage with the abyss in an invasion. There was simply too much to lose and not enough to gain. Even the current empire, to win this war, had sacrificed its population and its people, leaving it vulnerable and open to threats for centuries to come. And that was assuming their sacrifice ever led them to a victory at all.

Keles's soothing voice broke his thoughts. "You are back," she said, rising from the bed. Ikenga stood up and walked toward her.

"Yes, I am," he replied, his gaze falling to her stomach with a worried look. "Now we wait for them to attack."

Keles placed both of her palms on his cheeks, her touch warm and reassuring. "You have nothing to worry about. Both me and the child will be okay."

"I know, but it's hard not to worry when you both are not in my sight," Ikenga said.

Keles gave him a deep kiss. "Then we should hurry and get this done so you can have us in your sight at all times."

Ikenga got into bed as he began to kiss Keles, but halfway through, he stopped with a weird look on his face, his gaze fixed on her stomach. "Do you think he knows what's happening when we get busy?"

Keles's cheeks flushed crimson. She let out a small gasp and pushed him off of her, a mix of embarrassment and laughter in her eyes.

Ikenga looked at her with an aggrieved expression, then pointed a finger at her stomach. "Hey, little man," he said in a playfully frustrated tone. "Hurry up and get out of there!"

Keles could hardly hold in her laughter as she felt a small, distinct flutter within her. It was a kick, a clear reaction from the child to its father's words. Ikenga's own eyes widened in surprise and wonder. He lowered his head and gently pressed his ear to her stomach, his anger and frustration completely replaced by a soft, loving smile.

Chapter 605:

While the three families of god were having their own moment, the empire was busy preparing for the end. Words about the end of the war were spreading, leaving everyone in a state of tense anticipation. The mages, the goblins, and all the other factions put aside their differences and ambitions, knowing that their survival depended on a united front.

The mage council and the ogre generals, who once held a deep-seated disdain for one another, were now discussing tactics together. Their animosity was still there, but it was hidden well beneath a veneer of professional necessity. The Emperor, in the absence of Vellok, was a silent witness to this unexpected unity.

He couldn't help but wonder: what if they had started this way from the beginning? What if they had abandoned the mages' singular path and forged a new, more inclusive way forward for themselves and the empire?

He quickly pushed the thought away. It was a luxury he could not afford. At the edge of his vision, the percentage of their imminent takeover, once at a terrifying 80%, had now fallen to 75%, and a trend line showed that it was still falling. Their current unity was not a sign of victory, but a desperate and necessary measure against an overwhelming and ever-present threat.

The empire, though still wary of the ratfolk who were a constant reminder of the type of problem they were for their people, had to put their internal conflicts aside for now. The demons were pressing into their homelands, leaving them no space to live and breathe. All their citizens had been moved to safe borders, but the space wasn't much and was forced to be shared, leading to predictable conflicts. This forced cohabitation was the worst thing that could happen to their society, and the nobles were loud in their complaints.

Meanwhile, Vellok was deep in the solar system, a solitary figure searching for a preferable battlefield. His opponent, the unknown god known as Ikenga, had shown a terrifying ability to sow a planet, using its power as a driving force for his own strength. From all observations, this was something possible with any celestial body.

Therefore, Vellok's target was a star. His strategy was simple and brilliant: his opponent's seeds could not take hold in such an inferno and would be burned away. Most importantly, a star was in Vellok's favor. As a light elemental mage, his powers would be at their absolute zenith near a sun, giving him a massive advantage in the final, decisive confrontation. He hopefully might not need to tap deeply into the angel power to end this.

He passed countless celestial bodies, each a potential trap for the coming confrontation. He was searching for not just any star, but a specific one a beacon of pure, unadulterated light that resonated with his very soul.

He found it, a magnificent star burning with a steady, intense brilliance. Its presence was a silent, overwhelming force, its light a tangible, almost holy energy that washed over him. Vellok, as a light mage, felt no fear of its incredible heat or destructive fire. Instead, he felt a profound connection, as if he had come home.

He knew this star was the perfect counter to Ikenga. His seeds, which could seeds and weaponize entire planets, would be instantly annihilated by the star's radiant energy. ellok began his final preparations, his arms spread wide as he reached out with his will, calling for his mage tower, his ultimate station of power.

Vellok, despite his immense strength, recognized his own limitations. A force of nature on this scale was not so easily controlled, even by a sixth-tier mage. He could tap into his angel power, but that was a path he was determined to avoid, its cost far too high. So he needed his mage tower. The colossal construct, his magnum opus of magi-tech, was designed to harness, channel, and regulate the most volatile energies. It was a conduit for his will, and a shield against the star's raw, untamed power.

The space above the star cracked and shattered as the tower's appearance was seen. As the mage tower began to materialize from the depths of space, its stone-like spires and intricate carvings glinting in the star's blinding light, Vellok knew his plan was falling into place.

Once the tower was fully in place, Vellok quickly made his way to its core. This was his command center, the heart of the tower, and from here he would be able to control the volatile energy of the star. With his hands on the core, Vellok began to channel his power into the tower, and the tower in turn began to stabilize the star's energy, making it easier for him to harvest its light. With the tower now his, the star was his to command, and he was ready for Ikenga.

Vellok flew out of the spire, wings of pure light beating behind him as he re-entered the vacuum of space. He paused, gazing at a distant star, its light a stark contrast to the brilliant energy now radiating from his own form. With a final, lingering look, he turned, his wings dissolving into a single point of light that shot away from the star, accelerating toward his home.

The journey was a blur, lasting only a few minutes before his vibrant planet came into view. A swirling portal of shimmering energy opened directly in his path, and he passed through it without hesitation. In a flash, he was back in the familiar grandeur of the palace.

"You are back," his brother's voice, the Emperor, echoed from behind him. Vellok stiffened momentarily, then a soft sigh escaped his lips. He'd forgotten his brother's unique talent—a foresight that always seemed to put him in the right place at the right time. Vellok knew if they were just a bit stronger, a bit more powerful, his brother's gift might have been enough to prevent the impending catastrophe.

He turned to face him. "Yes, I am," Vellok said simply. As he spoke, his simple robes shimmered and shifted, reforming into a magnificent suit of golden armor. The wings of light reformed behind him, their radiance illuminating his features. His long, golden hair flowed freely, as if caught in a gentle breeze.

"Beautiful," the Emperor breathed, his eyes wide with admiration for his brother's transformation.

Vellok's face, now radiant with a luminous glow, held a hint of sorrow beneath its splendor. "A beauty that comes with a price," he replied, the weight of his words hanging in the air between them.

"Let's get these demons away from our home," the Emperor's voice was cold and resolute. By the time Vellok blinked, his brother was gone, a phantom of resolve now charging toward the front lines.

Vellok sighed, a golden portal swirling open before him. He stepped through, his form rematerializing high above the battlefield. His presence was a beacon, a brilliant light that cascaded down onto the Imperial army below, bathing them in a warm, protective glow. In the distance, the demonic forces recoiled, their forms momentarily illuminated before the corrupted, perpetual twilight of the battlefield swallowed them once more.

An unspoken challenge passed between them as two of the demons' Sixth-tier mages surged forward. The sky began to rumble, a deep, guttural sound that shook the very foundations of the world. Lightning, impossibly loud and deafening, began to crackle and flash across the heavens.

It started with a single drop of rain, a drop that fell everywhere at once. A storm unlike any other was born, one that blanketed the entire planet in its fury. Lightning and torrential rain lashed down without mercy. For a single, terrifying second, the entire world went black. All that remained was Vellok, a lone figure glowing brilliantly in the heart of the storm.

In the deafening darkness, the demons were met with the ominous rumble of the ground beneath them, followed by a blinding flash of lightning.

The lightning didn't strike anything. Its purpose was far more terrifying: to illuminate what was coming. The demons' eyes were met with a sight of impossible scale—a colossal wave of water, reaching toward the sky, now descending upon them.

No corner of the world was safe; the wave was everywhere at once. One of the Sixth-tier mages made a simple, falling gesture with his hand, and the wave rushed forward, its sound like a million horses stampeding across the plains.

Panic seized the demons. Their only escape was back through their Abyss portal, but they had advanced too far, and it was now a distant point on the horizon. The few demons who could fly took to the air, only to be struck down by lightning bolts that incinerated them into ash upon contact. The lightning mage was relentless, ensuring no one escaped.

With the demons trapped, the immense wall of water descended, swallowing the entire army whole. The wave never stopped, filling every crevice and nook of the land.

Chapter 606:

As the enormous wave crashed over the demons, lightning descended from the heavens like a furious rain, electrifying the water and the millions of demons trapped within it. In a matter of minutes, the horde was completely annihilated.

Slowly, the sky began to clear, its oppressive darkness giving way to the sun. The vast body of water that had flooded the land began to evaporate, dissipating into clouds and steam.

On the battlefield, Rattan, disguised as Kaelen, found himself trembling. The terrifying display of power brought back memories he had long tried to suppress. He was a Fifth-tier mage, and facing one of these Sixth-tier mages was a nightmare. He couldn't believe he had survived a confrontation with one.

Despite his fear, he knew it was his time to act. He stood tall on the field, pulling his sword and pointing it forward toward the distant Abyss portal. His voice, amplified by mana, bellowed, "Attack!"

In response, the army and generals roared back with a thunderous cry of courage. Rattan could feel the surge of power and bravery from their unified shout, and his head swelled with the pride of a leader. His mount, a warhorse eager for battle, tried to join the charge, but he held it back, waiting for the right moment to lead the final push.

Meanwhile, back at the abyss, the Zarvok army was now fully assembled. Arranged in a disciplined formation, they waited as their leader, Zarvok, emerged. The impish figure floated out, followed closely by the castle's butler and the towering forms of Ikenga and Keles.

Seeing the quartet, the army, clad in their dark uniforms, dropped to one knee and bowed their heads. Zarvok, small but powerful, began to speak, his voice echoing across the silent ranks.

"The time for harvest has come," he announced, his voice gaining a chilling resonance. "Our targets, with their so-called bravery, are making their way toward us even now. It is a fool's bravery, for they have no idea what is to come."

His voice grew deeper and louder with each word. "They know not of the nightmare they are about to face."

As if in response to his proclamation, the space behind him tore open, revealing a gate to his domain. Beyond it lay a vast, fiery landscape. It was a forge of immense scale, with rivers of magma and a sky of embers. At its center, a massive, molten-red crucible pulsed with an ominous light, ready to receive its next offering.

Zarvok raised his hand, and three terrified figures appeared. Ikenga watched as a chained goblin, an ogre, and a rat-man, all shaking with fear, hovered above the crucible. With a simple gesture from Zarvok, they fell with a scream into the molten depths.

Zarvok then regarded his army once more. "Let the enemy know they have faced nothing but a glimpse of my army's true might. Teach them my name."

His voice grew louder, echoing with a terrible finality. "Make my name a core memory for them. Let them know the name of the one they dare to face, and remind them why I am called Zarvok 'The Race Killer'."

The army began to stir, a low chant building as they stomped their feet and slammed their weapons against the ground. The sound grew into a thunderous roar: "Race Killer! Race Killer! Race Killer!"

As the chant began, three colored lights rose from the crucible. One of them, a ball of light, appeared in Zarvok's hand. He crushed it, and the sky above the abyss and his army took on the light's color before raining down upon them.

As the rain fell, the chant became even louder. One by one, the other balls of light were crushed by Zarvok, each one raining down a different color like a terrible blessing upon his army.

"A blessing," Ikenga thought to himself as he watched the demon army receive Zarvok's grace. He looked at the Imp, and it so happened that Zarvok was also looking at him with a smirk.

"The Race Killer," Ikenga murmured to himself, the name a chilling weight on his tongue. The chant continued as the army moved as one, turning their attention to the portal, waiting for their prey to appear.

Zarvok turned back toward his army, a smirk on his face and his blood boiling with the excitement of the coming bloodshed. He was an imp demon, a race considered one of the abyss's best cannon fodder. Imp demons had a weak starting point and low strength. Even if they managed to grow stronger, it would be too late; they would still end up being used as cannon fodder by greater, more powerful demons. But Zarvok... Zarvok was different.

Zarvok saw himself as an anomaly among his kind. He was never content with his destiny as cannon fodder. So, he began early to tap into the inherent knowledge all demons were blessed with.

An act most demons found pointless, as what good is knowledge when you lack the strength to use it? Zarvok agreed with this sentiment, but his use of knowledge wasn't a blind hope to defeat those stronger and bigger than him. Instead, it was to defeat himself and those weaker than him.

For a decade in the abyss, Zarvok's enemies were himself and demons weaker than him. He first began by learning his own race's weaknesses, which he then used to kill his fellow imp demons, all while feeding on their souls.

Before long, killing his own kind was as easy as breathing, for he understood all their vulnerabilities. He then applied this deadly knowledge to other demonic races, and so began his bloody ascent to his current power and position.

Zarvok spoke no lie when he named his domain "The Infernal Crucible," but he never told Ikenga what his forge was made of or what fueled its flames.

The forge was Knowledge a vast, living forge of conceptual refinement. Its flames were fueled by knowledge and observation. Zarvok understood that true power wasn't about strength; it was about knowing your enemy better than they knew themselves and using that knowledge to become their perfect counter.

Throughout the war, he had been watching and learning about the empire, the goblins, the ogres, and the ratfolk. He had been preparing for them. To make matters even better, he acquired members of each race and threw them into his crucible. There, their essence was broken down and perfectly understood.

He was now ready or rather his army is ready to become their perfect counter. The balls of light were blessing meant to manifest as a counter to the very existence of the races thrown into his crucible, turning the dynamic between his army and the empire's into that of predator and prey.

The blessing made his army the predators. To a normal observer, they were still demons, but in the eyes of their designated prey, they were a living nightmare come to life.

The best part about this, the race necessary doesn't have to have a counter, it can be an idea of what one consider as a weakness and the blessing will manifest as that.

The ogre generals came through first, barking orders for their people to get into position. By the time the entire empire army was stationed and ready, there was barely a sound from them.

It was a strange sight. Ikenga, who was now watching from the sky, saw the demon army seem to toy with the empire's forces. The demons would take a step forward, and the empire's soldiers would take a step back, as if looking at something horrifying.

It was at this moment that Vellok's figure flew in, followed by the emperor and other sixth-tier figures.

Like their army, as soon as they noticed Zarvok's forces, the same effect took hold. Even one of the sixth-tier mages roared, "Impossible!" before everyone became completely stuck, frozen in place.

The empire army wasn't seeing demons anymore. They were seeing a reflection of their deepest, most primal fears. The "blessing" was a parasitic form of perfect knowledge, warping the perception of the prey to see their predators not as they are, but as something that would be the absolute, inescapable end of their existence.

To the ogres, the demons were no longer ugly figures with sharp teeth and claws. They saw hulking, grotesque parodies of their own kind—monsters with limbs too long and jaws too wide, their movements a caricature of ogre combat. Each movement of the demons was like an, unnatural grace that perfectly exploited the ogres' slow, deliberate style of fighting.

Every step the demons took was a threat, a calculated move to get into the exact position to sever a tendon or pierce a vital point. The air itself grew thick with a scent that spoke of imminent death, a smell like burnt hair and freshly spilled blood that overwhelmed the ogres' senses and triggered their most basic survival instincts to run. But their feet were glued to the ground, a biological shutdown as their minds screamed that there was no escape.

Chapter 607:

The goblins saw a different thing. The demons appeared as the warped reflections of the human mages who had once experimented on their ancestors. Even goblins mages who knew nothing of their race past for some reason were overwhelmed with dread from the appearance of the mages. They saw the disdain and smirk at the mages lips, looking down on them like toys to play.

They felt naked under this gaze, as the mages "Demons" got closer, they took a step back in fear. They felt like their thought was no longer their own. The overwhelming feeling was one of being outwitted and outmatched on a fundamental, genetic level by the very beings who had once enslaved them and made them what they were.

For the ratfolk, it was like their hidden thoughts about what the empire had in mind for them came through. The demons to them appeared as the empire army ready to kill and erase their race.

Zarvok blessing was so strong that the empire soldiers who's mind are eroded by the abyssal armor can still comprehend fear. It was a biological shutdown. The soldiers part of the brain responsible for logical thought and strategy had gone completely offline, replaced by the primitive, lizard-brain response of a hunted animal facing its predator. The empire's soldiers no longer saw themselves as soldiers. They were prey, and their bodies knew it, even if their minds couldn't fully comprehend the horrifying reality of what they were facing.

And when Vellok and the other sixth-tier figures arrived, the effect took hold of them just as it had the rank-and-file. The sixth-tier mage's cry of "Impossible!" was not just about the demons' might; it was the gut-wrenching realization that their fear might have come through and the mages were back.

A magic circle suddenly appeared from the void, locking into their frozen figure.

Keles's figure became a wisp of smoke, giving Ikenga a quick peck before vanishing with the emperor's figure. The same happened with Zarvok and three of the sixth-tier figures.

Vellok caught himself seeing the disappearance of everyone, but he was greeted by Ikenga's fist, which punched him back through the abyss portal he had just emerged from.

This was the signal for battle. The demon army rushed toward the empire's forces. The empire's soldiers, seeing the charge, roared out, but it was not a sound of bravery. It was a roar of irrational fear, as if they were trying to convince themselves they could do something against the nightmares they saw coming for them.

Zarvok and the three sixth-tier figures were spat out from the space crack, falling like meteors toward a planet in the solar system where the goblin world were.

They took no damage from the fall, and as soon as they landed, the mages began to assess the situation. What was that they saw? How did they fall so easily into a trap? Most importantly, how far were they from their world?

Meanwhile, Zarvok wore a bright smile on his face and began to laugh. He turned toward the troubled mages. "Your world is mine. Your army is now nothing but meat on a chopping board for my army."

The mages found themselves unable to deny what Zarvok said. He made a gesture for them to come at him. "If you want to save your world and your people, you must defeat me, for I am the source of your nightmare."

Seeing the look on the mages face, Zarvok thought to himself "Now it's a race for how long i can survive" He unfolded his realm fully as his form began to shift, his impish figure expanding and hardening. His skin cracked and glowed with the inner fire of his domain, and his small wings elongated into leathery, bat-like appendages.

The mages responded in turn as they unfolded their own realm, soon the barren planet was filled with a landscape of fire, lightning, ocean and fierce blowing wind.

Zarvok domain is strong but has a strong flaw when it's used for himself. Once his domain is unfolded it became a sprint for his survival. He engages his opponent not to win, but to survive and learn. He is the ultimate opportunist, dodging attacks, taking calculated risks, and using his cunning Imp nature to gather as much data on his foe as possible. He becomes a living scout, a battlefield researcher trying to understand the principles of his opponent's power what makes their law work, what its conceptual limitations are.

Once he has gathered sufficient knowledge (or is on the verge of defeat), he strategically retreats and plunges himself into the heart of his forge. Using the knowledge of his opponent as a catalyst, the forge melts down his current form. It purges him of his inherent weaknesses, burns away the "Impurities" of his Imp nature, and re-forges him into a new, temporary form that is a perfect counter to the law he just faced.

That was why he was able to hold his own even with Vorenza strength. Moments like this where he has to run reminds him of his past, this in turn makes his victory very satisfying when all this mage will become his meal and their soul his.

Having sent Vellok hurtling into the portal with a punch, Ikenga followed close behind. But Vellok, recovering in an instant, was already in the vacuum of space.

Ikenga had to react in a split second as a laser-like beam of light descended from the sky, slicing through the corrupted earth around him as if it were butter. Thinking fast, Ikenga altered the properties of the ground beneath his feet, making it bouncy. He bounced twice, his form tearing through the air and launching him toward Vellok.

Vellok, however, seemed intent on keeping his distance. A barrage of homing lasers locked onto Ikenga's flying form. In response, Ikenga swiftly opened a portal before him and flew into it, disappearing from sight.

A portal ripped open directly behind Vellok, who was patiently waiting in the vacuum of space. Ikenga shot out, his body already coiled for a devastating kick. Vellok, a master of light and speed, reacted in a flash, moving just as the kick was about to connect.

Ikenga's eyes, now fixated on the distant moon, shifted in perfect sync with Vellok's movement. Though the kick missed its target, a golden arm construct manifested instantly where Vellok had moved. It landed a solid punch, sending Vellok hurtling deeper into space.

Ikenga's form followed, pursuing him. Vellok, taking advantage of his superior speed, created distance between them. But Ikenga didn't try to keep up. Instead, he dissolved into a brilliant golden-green ball of light, following close behind Vellok as they flew past planets and nebulae.

He understood Vellok's strategy immediately. They were heading toward a place where Vellok believed his opponent would be at a disadvantage. Ikenga didn't mind. Nature always adapts, and he was eager to see how his own divinity would react to the chosen environment. Such moments were rare in his immortal life, and he intended to savor it, just as long as it didn't kill him in the process.

After a few minutes of hurtling through the cosmos, they arrived at Vellok's chosen battlefield. The first thing Ikenga noticed was the unsettling lack of planets; the only celestial body in sight was a massive star, with a colossal tower anchored to its surface.

Ikenga stopped at a safe distance, his form coalescing back to normal from the ball of light. Vellok, however, flew right up to the star, positioning himself with his back to its fiery surface and his tower. His arms spread wide, his wings of light unfurling like a supernova behind him.

"This is where you fall," Vellok's voice resonated through the vacuum of space, a chilling sound without an atmosphere to carry it. Before Ikenga could react, a massive sword of pure light appeared and sliced through the space where he had just been.

"Damn it," Ikenga muttered, quickly cursing himself with the ability Untouchable as the attack narrowly missed him. Vellok, it seemed, was even faster here than he was before.

For a moment, the battle transformed into a dazzling light show. Constructs of light, moving at incredible speeds, shot toward Ikenga. He had applied the Untouchable curse to himself, so at the last possible second, his body was forced to move, dodging each attack.

Vellok saw this and simply snapped his fingers. The star behind him pulsed once, like a massive heartbeat, and a wave of pure, concentrated light washed over the battlefield. There was no space to

dodge, and Ikenga felt the holy power of the wave wash over him, completely nullifying the curse he had placed on himself.

"No large usage of curses in this fight, then," Ikenga thought to himself. He realized it would be futile and a waste of his divine energy to keep applying curses against an opponent whose element was so strongly opposed to them. He would have to face Vellok head-on.

Chapter 608:

A slow smile spread across Ikenga's face. The pressure of fighting without his curses was a challenge he hadn't felt in ages. He stretched his neck, his knuckles cracking with a sound that, impossibly, echoed through the vacuum.

"So, no tricks, just pure concepts and clash of domains?" Ikenga's voice was a low rumble. "I can work with that."

Vellok remained silent, the star behind him flaring in response to his will. His hands came together, and between them, a sphere of pure, compressed light formed. To Ikenga this wasn't a physical object, but a conceptual blade of light, designed to sever. Its purpose was to cut the very thread of Ikenga's connection to the natural world to conceptually quarantine him.

Ikenga understood the attack's nature instantly. He looked at the star behind Vellok, the ultimate source of light and order, and then at the pulsing sphere.

Instead of dodging, Ikenga closed his eyes. The golden-green light of his divinity flared as he began to draw upon the chaotic energy of space for creation. A single, perfect rose blossomed in the vacuum, its petals unfurling in slow motion.

Vellok launched his attack. The conceptual blade shot forward, its target Ikenga to engulf him whole.

As the light-blade approached, Ikenga's rose began to grow, its vines wrapping around the destructive light once it got close. The petals, now turning into golden leaves, began to absorb the light, feeding on the star energy. The rose bloomed into a massive tree, its branches stretching across the battlefield. Its roots, glowing with golden-green energy, dug into the fabric of reality itself.

Ikenga's eyes, opened as he regarded the surprised Vellok. "My brother is a sun," Ikenga's voice reach Vellok across the void. "And to draw light into my realm, one of my first creations was a plant that absorbs the heat, fire, and light from the sun."

Vellok's initial surprise was now replaced by a flicker of annoyance. A shimmering sword of solidified light appeared in his hand, humming with potential energy. Ikenga responded by shedding his human form as he took his humanoid godly form, which was now the bigger than the size of a mountain. Vellok, not to be outdone, grew to match his scale, his form a brilliant, luminous silhouette against the star-dusted blackness of space.

Ikenga blinked, and in that instant, Vellok was gone. Ikenga managed to raise a massive arm just in time, but instead of flesh and wood, a forest of razor-sharp diamonds erupted from his skin, forming an impromptu shield. The sword of light, a star given form, slammed into the diamond forest, shattering a million facets into glittering dust but failing to penetrate.

This, however, was just a feint. The real Vellok materialized from behind, a second sword of light already stabbing out, aiming for Ikenga's head.

The tree, rooted in the very fabric of the void behind Ikenga, reacted instinctively. Its roots shot forth like spears, snaring Vellok's luminous wings and yanking him back with immense force. The diversion gave Ikenga the precious seconds he needed to retreat, narrowly avoiding the light mage's second strike.

Vellok's flicker of annoyance flared into outright rage. With a furious slash of his sword of light, he cleaved the tree in two. But instead of falling, the tree dissolved into a cascade of glittering motes, a constellation of green light that winked out of existence.

As the last remnants of the tree faded, Ikenga stood ready. In his hand, he now held a massive shield, its surface a mosaic of perfectly cut diamonds, reflecting the distant stars in a blinding array of prismatic light.

Ikenga has noticed something quite unsettling about Vellok. The human mage doesn't fight like others of his kind. To Ikenga, clashing with Vellok feels less like battling a mortal and more like facing a weaker, incomplete version of himself. This feeling stems from a fundamental difference in how they wield power.

A normal sixth-stage mage, even a powerful light mage, should have their power rooted in a comprehended law. Their magic would be a precise, intellectual application of concepts like the Law of Refraction or the Law of Intensity. They would understand light as a principle and manipulate it accordingly.

Ikenga, however, has no need for such laws. As an Origin God, he is a concept. His power is an innate expression of his will. He can turn stone to diamond with a thought, not because he understands the Law of Crystalline Structure, but because he embodies the very nature of what stone eventually would be.

Vellok, a mere mortal, seems to possess this same innate understanding. He changes the fundamental nature of light with a thought, a feat that should be impossible for a mage. This power, though, feels "off and forced." It's a facade, a mimicry of divine will. Ikenga's mind immediately turns to the angel sealed within Vellok, a being of pure light-concept.

The cracks in Vellok's power become glaringly obvious when Ikenga easily handles his attacks. A light attack from a true master should have temporarily severed Ikenga's connection to the natural world. Instead, the light attack was easily absorbed by Ikenga and repurposed into a tree of light. This shouldn't have been possible. The light was Vellok's, yet it seemed to have no identity, no master's will behind it, allowing Ikenga to effortlessly claim it.

The most damning evidence is Vellok's complete lack of control once his light leaves his body. The very tree Ikenga created from Vellok's power should have been felt and resisted by Vellok. Yet, as the tree attacked him, Vellok was powerless to stop it. He has no connection to the light once it's no longer physically touching him.

This is the key: Vellok's greatest strength is in close combat, where the light is an extension of himself. The moment that light is unmoored, the connection is broken. The power is not his to command; it belongs to the angel, and Vellok is merely a conduit.

"You are weak," Ikenga's voice was heavy with disdain as the shimmering diamond shield he had conjured dispersed into dust. He looked at Vellok not with anger, but with profound disappointment. "Weaker than your fellow mages."

Without waiting for a response, Ikenga's body began to transform. Earth seeped from his pores, hardening into a brilliant, crystalline shell that encased him in diamond armor. "I was expecting a

challenge, not this," he continued, the words now muffled and echoing from within his new shell. "Your speed is a problem, but now that I understand your limitations, it is no longer a problem."

Beneath the diamond skin, a new curse took hold. It was a subtle and hidden, a Curse of Stolen Momentum. Ikenga would now pay a price, becoming sluggish and slow, but with every bit of stolen momentum, his speed would be greatly boosted.

Vellok's expression tightened the moment the curse took root. Just as before, The brilliant star pulsed like a heartbeat, unleashing a sweeping wave of light that washed over them. This time, however, Ikenga was prepared. His new curse was not on the surface; it was shielded, buried deep beneath the diamond armor. As the wave of light struck him, it didn't disrupt his curse. Instead, it fractured against the crystalline surface, scattering into a breathtaking but ultimately harmless rainbow of light.

Vellok took a deep, shuddering breath. The sound was a low whistle as he released another part of the seal. With a tearing sound, a third wing of pure light sprouted from his back, growing from a point just below the others. He was now faster than ever before.

To his heightened senses, Ikenga was moving in slow motion. The diamond armor, once a threat, now seemed like a heavy cage. He darted in, intending to use his blinding speed to overwhelm the Origin God. As he closed the distance, however, he saw something impossible: Ikenga's head, encased in its crystalline helmet, was slowly, deliberately turning to face him. The moment Vellok crossed an invisible threshold, a diamond-encased fist shot out with the speed of light.

The punch was impossibly fast, a blur of motion that defied his perception. At the last moment, the light on his face shifted, becoming a mirror to reflect the attack. But Ikenga's fist didn't land. It stopped inches from the reflective surface. The curse's power had given Ikenga a heightened perception, a momentary omniscience that allowed him to see Vellok's plan: had the fist landed, the reflected force would have been devastating.

Vellok's shock at the failed trap was fleeting. He used Ikenga's paused attack to his advantage, striking out with his sword of light. Ikenga raised a hand to block, but to his surprise, the diamond of his armor didn't hold. It instantly melted into a puddle of molten crystal on contact. Vellok had changed the nature of his light sword, imbuing it not with concussive force, but with a ferocious, extreme heat that no material could withstand.

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Ikenga didn't hesitate. With a contemptuous flick of his wrist, he swatted the burning sword aside. A new, more insidious weapon formed on his lips: his mouth opened, and he exhaled a shimmering poison mist that glittered like a cloud of distant stars. The cloud drifted menacingly toward Vellok.

Vellok, seeing the threat, quickly distanced himself. While in retreat, he raised a hand and conjured a thousand smaller swords of light, each one a star-bright needle humming with destructive force. He flung them at Ikenga in a single, devastating volley. They arced around Ikenga, a brilliant storm of lances seeking any chink in the nature god's defenses.

But Ikenga wasn't going to sit still. The moment the constructs got close, he stole the momentum from all of them at once. His body, which had been slow and ponderous from the curse, suddenly gained light speed. He transformed from a static target into a blur of motion, closing the distance to Vellok in an instant.

The sudden acceleration was a shock, a reversal of power that took Vellok completely by surprise. Ikenga's fist, a blur of diamond and stolen momentum, was now inches from his face. The force was immeasurable, a strike that could shatter worlds.

Vellok had no time to react, no time to conjure a mirror or a shield. His only choice was survival. With a pained cry, he tore away another layer of the seal. A new, blinding light exploded from his back as a fourth wing, more magnificent and powerful than the others, burst into being.

The resulting shockwave was enough to throw Ikenga back, nullifying his attack and giving Vellok a moment of reprieve. He now hovered in vacuum, his four wings beating in perfect rhythm, his body radiating a blinding, divine light.

Ikenga who was pushed off stole the momentum and he stopped himself. His eyes, now able to perceive the newfound power, narrowed. The presence of the angel was no longer a subtle whisper; it was a deafening roar. Vellok was becoming less a man and more a vessel for the entity he held within.

Vellok's internal turmoil was now laid bare for all to see. His face wasn't in a constant state; it flickered between an expression of raw fear and one of extreme, almost feral anger. He was panicking. This wasn't how the fight was supposed to go, or perhaps it was exactly what he had feared all along but had refused to believe.

His plan to simply contain the god wasn't working. He knew the true course of action he should have taken from the very beginning, but when the time came, he found himself unable to do it. Now, he was trapped, a terrified spectator watching himself slowly disappear with each layer of the seal he unlocked. He could feel the angel's bubbling rage inside him, a palpable fire with every new wing he sprouted.

Vellok was terrified for himself, for his people. Would there be any future for them if he completely lost his hold on this angel? Yet, he had no choice. The strange god he was fighting seemed to be toying with him, deliberately provoking him to release the seal. It was like an illusion that this god wasn't taking him seriously, an illusion that was, in fact, a grim reality.

Vellok was right. The moment Ikenga had figured him out, he stopped being a legitimate threat. Ikenga's sole focus was now on releasing the angel. The Origin God had a trump card, and he was patiently waiting for the perfect moment to play it.

The angel, not Vellok, was the pressing issue for Ikenga. Vellok's tower, a floating bastion above the star, was a problem with a simple solution. With a contemptuous flick of his wrist, Ikenga made a pulling gesture.

Vellok had chosen a good battlefield, a void where no planets were in sight. But he had forgotten the asteroid belt nearby. Ikenga simply pulled a handful of them from their orbits, setting them on a collision course with the floating tower.

Vellok noticed Ikenga's actions and immediately flapped his wings, flying toward the star to protect his tower. But the moment he moved, Ikenga expanded the area of effect for his curse. Suddenly, Vellok's momentum was gone. He struggled, his mighty wings useless, unable to move forward.

Ikenga seized the opportunity, taking hold of one of Vellok's wings and spinning him like a top before throwing him a great distance away from the star. Ikenga then deactivated the curse, his normal speed returning as he sped after the bewildered mage.

Vellok, spinning uncontrollably through the void, saw the asteroids closing in on his tower, his sanctuary and the only reason he wasn't using much of the angel's power. He had to think fast.

He couldn't fly with Ikenga closing in on him, but he could still command his light especially now with his four wing. With a desperate effort, he focused his will, and a massive, blinding flash erupted from the

star his tower was on creating a burst of energy to mimic supernova. The intense light pushed against the asteroids, halting their trajectory and even vaporizing the smaller ones.

Ikenga, however, was already on him. He appeared right in front of Vellok, his fist once again cocked and ready. "Clever," Ikenga sneered. "But there's more where that came from." True to his words, more asteroids were already on their way, summoned from the vast expanse of the belt.

In response, Vellok's body shimmered and split into multiple clones of himself. The duplicates, each a perfect replica, scattered in different directions. Some rushed toward Ikenga, their wings a blur of motion, while others sped toward the incoming asteroids, ready to intercept them.

Ikenga met the challenge with a sneer. "You multiply your weakness." He didn't bother to distinguish the real Vellok from the clones. Instead, he simply expanded his curse, creating a massive field that stole momentum from everything within its radius. The clones charging toward him all slowed to a crawl.

With their stolen momentum, Ikenga shot backward. Vellok was already at the star, having flown past it to intercept the incoming asteroids. Ikenga closed the distance, his eyes locked on Vellok as the mage dealt with the rock barrage. It was time for a drastic measure, one that drained a significant portion of Ikenga's divine energy.

He changed the very nature of the approaching asteroids, transforming them from rock into shimmering diamonds. Simultaneously, he placed two curses upon them: the Curse of Attraction and the Curse of Hunger. The curse wasn't a simple pull; it was an insatiable hunger for light. The diamonds now sought light as a predator seeks prey.

Vellok, still dealing with the initial asteroids, was surprised when their form suddenly changed. One of the smaller diamonds shot forward with an immense acceleration. To Vellok, its movement was slow, a simple thing to dodge. But as the diamond got closer, its speed increased exponentially, its cursed hunger for his light growing with every passing moment. The diamond, now a blur, latched onto him, its surface greedily absorbing the light from his skin.

Vellok's stunned silence was short-lived. The asteroids, previously on a collision course with his tower, now swerved as a single entity, their course unerringly set on him. They moved not with the blind trajectory of rock, but with the predatory focus of a pack of wolves. Within a matter of moments, Vellok was sealed inside a shimmering, island-sized diamond orb.

Ikenga, panting with exertion, watched the trap's completion. This curse was his most draining, and he felt the immense strain on his divine energy. He knew this prison would hold. The orb could only be broken if Vellok released more of his seals, but in his current state, his power would do nothing to the cursed diamonds. With every moment Vellok spent inside, the diamonds grew stronger, greedily absorbing his light. He might generate enough heat to melt them, but the sheer mass was too much. By the time he got through one layer, the next would have grown stronger, requiring even greater heat to melt.

Ikenga turned his gaze toward the tower, his expression hardening. He had created this moment for one purpose: to get the tower away from the star. It was the only thing preventing Vellok from unleashing the final seals. The heat radiating from the star was immense, a searing force that would undoubtedly burn him. He hesitated for a brief moment, but the resolve in his eyes never wavered. It was going to hurt, but it had to be done.

Ikenga, his body a walking mountain of cursed diamond, stepped onto the star's surface. The heat was a tangible, crushing force, but he endured. He had applied the same hunger curse to his own diamond skin. The crystals on his body greedily absorbed the star's immense light, a desperate attempt to mitigate the searing heat. But even with their insatiable hunger, the light was too vast, too pure to be consumed. It was like trying to drink an ocean. Each step was a battle against the fundamental forces of the universe, the heat and pressure a relentless assault on his divine form.

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With a monumental effort, he reached the tower. His hands, burning and cracking under the strain, wrapped around its base. With a roar, he pulled, but there was some resistance and the tower was resisting being moved.

Ikenga was having none of that as from behind his back two golden arm constructs emerged latching on to the tower and he pulled again. The entire structure from its orbit and with a mighty heave, threw it away from the star and into the cold, silent vacuum of deep space. Ikenga would come back for it but now it needs to keep drifting.

His work done, Ikenga turned back to the diamond orb containing Vellok. The orb was now a terrifyingly brilliant prison, glowing with the light it had stolen. The light inside was a furious storm, a silent testament to the trapped angel's rage. Ikenga knew what was coming next. The angel, stripped of its host's containment would have no choice but to break free.

The angel would not be in a good mood when it finally broke free. Ikenga looked at the star, shaking his head. Vellok's use of its power was negligible, but the same could not be said for the angel.

With that in mind, Ikenga flew to the diamond orb and began to push it. He pushed it away from the star until the star was nothing more than a glowing dot in the distance.

He could feel the rising heat from the orb, a sign of Vellok's internal struggle, yet the mage was still hesitating to let go of the seal. Ikenga shrank, his humanoid form and diamond armor dissolving as he returned to his human form.

"Come to me," Ikenga commanded. The curse tattoos on his skin glowed for a moment, then calmed.

The space behind him shattered, and from the fractured void, a familiar object slowly emerged. From its depths, a celestial body, once a barren moon, now emerged with the slow and deliberate grace. Its appearance, gradually unfolding. First came the faintest glow of an atmosphere, a thin, shimmering veil of cobalt blue that caught the light of distant stars. Then, the outlines of continents became visible, not as jagged masses of rock, but as verdant landscapes painted in a thousand shades of green and brown.

It was a world fully formed. Great, swirling storms, like brushstrokes, moved across the surface of vast body of water, and colossal mountain ranges pierced through the cloud cover.

The fractured space behind Ikenga healed, and his body, dispersing into countless motes of light, fell into his summoned planet. He was no longer just Ikenga; he was now the world itself, his consciousness spread across its core. He could feel his divine energy refilling, drawn from the very life he had created.

Meanwhile, the diamond orb, containing the furious Vellok and the angel, was pulled by the planet's gravity. A large clearing appeared on the world's surface, made by the living planet itself. The island-sized diamond sphere descended and settled into the open space. The clearing, after the diamond landed, began to fill with glowing, bioluminescent plants, drawn to the intense energy radiating from the orb.

Ikenga, now at the planet's core, saw the orb and was intrigued by a new idea: sealing the angel within this new world before it could break free. He entertained the thought for a moment before letting it go. He saw no practical use in doing so, and more importantly, he had yet to present himself as an enemy. For now, Ikenga was content to be viewed as a neutral presence.

While his divine energy refilled, Ikenga's attention was divided. He was also monitoring the goblin world through a glowing plant with his eye. The plant hadn't come with the planet; it had been left behind. The sight that met his gaze made him pause. He shook his head with a bitter smile.

The moment Ikenga's curse tattooed glowed, and the moon was torn from its orbit, the goblin world began to die. It didn't happen in a flash of fire or a cosmic explosion. Instead, it was a slow, creeping terror that began with the planet's very breath.

The oceans, once a predictable cycle of ebb and flow, began to recoil. The tides, which had been a constant for millennia, were slowly being pushed away, leaving miles of glistening, barren seabed exposed. Coastal cities that once thrived on the shoreline were left stranded, their harbors now vast stretches of mud and people panicking.

The loss of this fundamental rhythm didn't just affect the water; it threw the world's entire climate into chaos. The winds grew erratic, storms changed their courses, and the gentle cycles of seasons began to unravel.

But the most profound horror was in the sky. The moon, a familiar and comforting presence, was simply gone. The night was now a suffocating void, a cold and terrifying darkness that swallowed the stars. The goblins didn't need to understand the complex physics of what was happening. They felt it in the shuddering of their world, the collapse of their way of life, and the emptiness in the night sky.

Ikenga, now one with his newly-formed planet, felt a summons a deep, resonant pull that was slowly getting closer "The Judges" for some reason his mind went to them. The call should be a signal of cosmic imbalance, a demand for him to answer for his actions. But as quickly as it came, it faded.

He watched the goblin world through the plant he had left behind. Zarvok's armies were pushing aggressively, having dealt with the empire forces that had appeared from the Abyss. Time felt different here in the void; from what Ikenga saw a few days may have passed yet for him it was like a few hours has passed.

The source of the Judges calling fading became clear when a sixth-tier demon from Zarvok's army noticed the slow-motion destruction of the world they were meant to conquer. The demon quickly accessing the situation ascended into the sky, its body expanding to a colossal size. It was not as large as the planet, but it was massive enough to matter. The demon unfolded its domain, a shimmering veil that

covered the entire world. It began to mitigate the damage, holding the unraveling world together with its power.

The demon had taken on the impossible task of sustaining the dying planet. The call of the Judges vanished. Ikenga let out a deep breath, the tension leaving his form as the immediate crisis passed.

Ikenga's attention returned to the orb. He had to get his planet back to its proper place, back to the goblins who depended on it. So what was taking so long? Why hadn't the angel broken free yet?

Meanwhile, inside the increasingly powerful diamond orb, Vellok was in a living nightmare he had ignored for centuries. Deep within his mental space, he knelt, tears streaming down his face as he looked up at the being sealed within him.

The angel hung upside down in midair, its face cold and impassive. Thick, glowing chains held it in place, some loose and dangling, but others still holding strong. Vellok had finally found himself face-to-face with the being his people had betrayed, the being whose freedom he had stolen. For centuries, he had tried to connect with the angel, to make amends, but it had always ignored him. Until now.

Now he was suddenly face to face with the angel, and it wasn't going how he had imagined. In his foresight, he had always seen himself standing tall and proud, knowing that he held the key to the angel's freedom. He would be the one to decide when and how to release it, an act of mercy that would also secure his people's future.

But now, he had nothing. The four seals he had unlocked were enough to strip him of every ounce of power he thought he wielded. He had centered his entire power system around the sealed angel, believing for centuries that the strength he cultivated was his own. He now knew the truth: it was never his to begin with.

Vellok, on his knees, looked up at the unblinking, cold gaze of the angel. He could feel his very essence slipping away, absorbed by the diamond prison that fed on the angel's light. Desperation clawed at his throat.

"Please," he pleaded, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Let us go. Let me and my people be free."

The angel remained silent, its form chained and upside down, its eyes a blank void of light. It did not move. It did not blink. It simply hung there, a monument to a betrayal it had never forgiven.

Vellok's voice cracked. "I know what we did was wrong! We took your freedom, and in return, we built our world under the safety of your power. But we didn't know! We didn't understand the price." Tears streamed down his face, a river of regret. "We've had centuries of peace, centuries of life, because of you. Please, don't let it all be for nothing."