

Guardian gods 621

Chapter 621:

He looked around frantically, searching for the terrifying hallucination that had just tormented him. It was gone. "A hallucination," he whispered to himself, the truth a cold splash of water on his panicked mind.

Beside him, Malzor, the one who was about to "strike", looked down with a sneer. The demon's face was a mask of disdain as he took in Rattan's pathetic, trembling form. He couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment. The host of the great Phantom was nothing more than a coward, a pathetic sight unworthy of the power he held.

Malzor had no time for judgment. He pulled Rattan to his feet, his grip surprisingly firm. "You won," was all he said.

Rattan, still disoriented, blinked. "Huh?"

"You won," Malzor repeated, his voice strained with impatience. "The Empire's pillars are gone. Their power is all yours now."

Rattan could barely process the words, but the gravity of the statement slowly sank in. He stood on shaky legs, stumbling past the demons pouring out of the abyssal portal and heading back through the shimmering archway.

He was back in the abyss layer, but this side was different. It wasn't cold. He pushed off the ground, taking flight to gain a better vantage point. Below him, demons swarmed, a sea of monstrous forms stretching to the horizon. There was no sign of the Empire army, no Vellok, no mages, nothing.

Rattan flew back out of the portal, his eyes fixed on the distant demon army as they marched into the unknown. Malzor floated beside him, his gaze intense. "My orders are to obey your commands. The demon army is yours now."

A grin stretched across Rattan's face, a thing that he could no longer contain. His heart hammered in his chest as he took in Malzor's words. "Do you mean," he stammered, his voice filled with a giddy disbelief, "this world is now mine to own and command?"

Malzor's gaze was sharp, but he gave a slight nod. "It's indeed yours to command." He ignored the second half of Rattan's question, the part about "owning," but Rattan was too lost in his own fantasy to notice. He threw his head back and began to laugh, a wild, hysterical sound that echoed across the blasted landscape.

Still laughing, he pointed a trembling finger at the advancing demon army. "Where are they going?"

Malzor looked out over the monstrous horde, his expression unreadable. "There are many lands yet untouched by us. There are things to be received and recovered." He didn't elaborate, leaving Rattan to imagine what "things" the demons were seeking.

Rattan's laughter died down, a more somber question finally crossing his mind. He'd been dreading it, but he had to know. "What happens to my people? What happens to the goblins?" He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for the worst.

To his complete surprise, Malzor's response was not what he expected. "No lifeforms on this world would be harmed or brought to death by us demons," he said, "except for the uncorrupted lands which have yet to be corrupted by us."

Rattan couldn't help but turn to Malzor, a wide, incredulous smile spreading across his face. He saw the serious look in the demon's eyes and the grin only grew. "My guardian," he said with a laugh, "truly knows what's best for me."

Malzor rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, indeed he does. Which is why you're needed."

"Needed for what?" Rattan asked, his laughter dying down to a low chuckle.

Malzor took a deep breath, his patience clearly wearing thin. "As I said before, this world is now yours to command. You are its new emperor, and its people are yours to lead. You are needed back at the empire to calm and lead its people, to present yourself as its new leader."

The more Malzor spoke, the wider Rattan's grin became. A wave of giddiness washed over him as he considered the possibilities. He posed a question that he believed was of utmost importance. "Should I present myself as I am, or as I was before?"

Malzor simply smiled. "The choice is yours," he said, and with that, his form began to dissipate into thin air, leaving Rattan alone with his thoughts and his ever-widening grin. The weight of his new title settled upon him, a crown of both power and expectation.

A new reality dawned on Rattan. He was no longer the rat man who had been a pawn in a war he didn't understand. He was an ogre, a new emperor. With a purpose and a new identity, he chose to assume

the form of the ogre he was in, to truly show his power. He began his journey back to the goblin capital, the City of Whispering Spires.

His old life was a distant memory. He had justified all his actions to himself. He had endured a lot and survived. The empire that had tormented his people was now his to command. He smiled as he pictured himself walking through the streets, the goblins and ogres bowing down to him. It was a new beginning for him and his people.

He took flight, his massive ogre body soaring through the air. Below him, the shattered remnants of the battlefield gave way to lush, green forests and rolling hills. The journey was long, but Rattan's anticipation grew with every mile. He was returning not as a broken rat man, but as a conqueror, a king, a god in his own right.

With the spires of the capital city now in sight, Rattan halted his flight, a surge of power coursing through him. The City of Whispering Spires, once a symbol of his oppression, was about to become his throne. But a decision still lingered in his mind: should he enter the city as the powerful ogre or in his true form as a rat-man?

He considered the demon's words, that the throne was his no matter what. Yet, Rattan was a pragmatist. He knew appearing as a rat-man would be met with suspicion and, most likely, rebellion from the goblin and ogre nobility. The empire's military was in shambles after its defeat against the demons, and though Rattan, in his current fifth stage, could easily crush any opposition, he preferred a more subtle path.

He wanted to have both. He wanted to maintain his identity as the ogre royalty Kaelen, a known hero throughout the empire, while also holding onto his true rat-man identity. This wasn't about security or power; it was about satisfaction. Rattan reveled in the thought of the goblins and ogres, who had always viewed his people as lesser, bowing their heads to him without ever knowing their new emperor was one of the very beings they had disdained. The game of toying with them, of playing them for fools, was far more gratifying than any simple conquest.

A sense of unease settled over Rattan. The prospect of the rat-folk, his own people, seeing him as a hero brought him no joy. It felt... basic. In his mind, it was simply a given that they would see him that way. He was the one who had led them this far, after all. Their adoration felt less like a reward and more like a foregone conclusion.

Phantom, in Rattan's consciousness, shook his head at the unspoken thoughts. He saw how deeply Rattan had absorbed the goblin mage society's values and views. Unknowingly, Rattan had begun to see his own people through the same prejudiced lens that the goblins had for so long. The very idea of the rat-folk celebrating him felt cheapened by this new perspective; their praise was hollow because, in his mind, they were a lesser people.

The true satisfaction lay not in being a hero to his own kind, but in receiving the adulation of the powerful goblins and ogres. He craved the recognition of a society he now saw as superior, a society that had once looked down on him. This internal conflict, this subtle self-loathing masked as ambition, was the true reason for his hesitation. He wanted their grace, their respect, because it was a validation he felt his own people couldn't truly provide.

He decided. He would return as Kaelen, the ogre hero. The feeling of superiority that came with the decision was intoxicating. He landed just outside the city gates, his heavy footsteps shaking the ground. The ogre guards, armed with enchanted spears, stared at him in awe and fear. They bowed, their faces showing their confusion at his sudden return.

As he walked through the City of Whispering Spires, the people watched in a mixture of awe and fear. They had heard of the great war and how the empire's army was going to fight the demons, seeing Kaelen, they thought they had won. Whispers began to spread.

His journey to the main palace was a procession of stunned silence. He walked past the magical structures and arcane monuments that he once could only dream of seeing. Now, he was their master.

As he entered the palace, the nobles and officials of the goblin empire who heard of his return swarmed him, their faces a mixture of confusion and disbelief.

Chapter 622:

"Lord Kaelen, what has happened?" a goblin noble with a finely embroidered tunic stammered, his eyes wide. "Where is the Emperor? The Arch-Mage Vellok? The armies?"

Rattan, still with a smile on his face, simply walked past them, not deigning to answer. He sat on the throne, the once-sacred seat of the goblin emperor, and leaned back, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest.

An ogre general, his armor dented and scraped, stepped forward, his knuckles white. "Sir, with all due respect, what are you doing? That is the Emperor's throne!"

Rattan looked at him, his smile widening. "The Emperor is no more," he said, his voice a low growl that filled the great hall. "The armies are defeated. The war is over. I am your new leader. I am your new Emperor."

The hall fell into a stunned silence. The nobles and generals looked at each other, their faces a mix of confusion, shock, and dawning fear. They had sent their best warriors to a war they had already lost, and now, a new ruler sat on their throne.

The ogre general, a mountain of muscle and doubt, was the first to find his voice. "The Emperor? Defeated by demons or you, sir? That is impossible. He was a master of the arcane, a tier-six mage!, he had all the empire full power behind him"

Rattan slid from the throne, his new ogre form a towering presence. He strolled toward the general, a chilling smile on his face. "Indeed. But a master of the arcane is nothing against the might of the abyss. The Emperor, your generals, and your armies they are all gone. I, Kaelen, am the one who returned." He paused, his gaze sweeping over the shocked faces of the nobles. "I am the one who returned victorious."

A nervous goblin noble, his hands wringing his robes, spoke up. "But... but you are one of the Emperor's knights, a hero of the empire. You fought for us. Why... why would you do this?"

Rattan's smile widened. He was enjoying this far too much. "Do you think I fought for you? I have always advertised my disdain for the emperor rule. I fought for my people, who you have oppressed for centuries. I fought for a world where my kind is not seen as lesser."

A collective gasp filled the hall. The nobles, once confident in their power, now looked at each other, their faces pale with shock. They had indeed at one point always seen Kaelen as lesser than them but that opinion changed recently as they saw him as one of their own, a hero who fought for their cause. Now, they were faced with a truth they could not comprehend.

"But... but what about the demon army?" a goblin official whimpered. "What about the uncorrupted lands? What about us?"

Rattan's smile vanished, replaced by a cold, calculating look. "The demon army now marches on my command. The uncorrupted lands will be corrupted, and their people will be brought under my rule. And as for you," he said, his voice dropping to a low growl, "you will obey me. You will serve me. Or you will be the next to face the wrath of my army."

The air in the great hall was thick with a silence born of fear and dread. The ogre general, the goblin nobles, and the officials all bowed their heads, their spirits shattered under the weight of Rattan's

revelation. They had been masters of their world, and now they were subjects to a being they had always considered beneath them.

Rattan's voice, now a low, commanding growl, broke the silence once more. "If you doubt my words or my rule, you can take up arms and go fight against the approaching demon army." His gaze was a challenge, a cold, calculating fire. "That is if you dare." He let the words hang in the air, knowing full well they wouldn't. "But if not, I need your silence and your obedience. You are now under my rule, and with that comes a promise: protection for your lives."

He paused, letting the fear and dawning hope flicker across their faces. The threat was clear, but so was the offer. He was not a tyrant who would slaughter them all. He was a conqueror who sought to rule.

"Help me lead our new empire," he continued, his voice softer, more persuasive. "And you may be lucky enough to preserve your amassed riches and status."

The unspoken bargain was laid bare: survival in exchange for loyalty. The nobles looked up, their eyes meeting his. They were faced with a choice between certain death at the hands of the demon army and a life of servitude under a rat-man they despised. In their broken state, there was no choice at all. They bowed once more, deeper this time, a silent pledge of their newfound allegiance.

With a unified, silent reverence, the nobles, both ogre and goblin retreated from the throne room. Their heads were bowed, their spirits broken. The shock of what they had just witnessed was a heavy weight on their shoulders, but even more unsettling was the realization that they were utterly powerless against their new ruler.

Meanwhile, in the deepest recesses of Rattan's consciousness, something profound was happening. As he accepted the nobles' allegiances and settled onto the throne, the flickering flame of ambition within

him flared to life. It didn't grow larger; instead, its form became more compact, its essence condensed and strengthened into a more potent form.

Within this potent flame, Phantom saw his own path to ascension. All he needed to do was reach out and claim the flame, and his journey to godhood would be complete. But he held back. He knew that this was not the flame's final form. It was still growing, still feeding on Rattan's ambition. He knew that if he was patient, the final prize would be far greater. He would wait.

Back in the palace, with the nobles subdued, Rattan's focus shifted. He deployed his domain power not for battle, but for a new, grand deception. From the very laws of his domain, he willed into being a life-like construct. It was a perfect replica of himself, but in his true form: a rat-man, made of flesh and blood.

Rattan's reign over the goblin empire had begun, and now it was time for his own people to taste a new kind of freedom. He would deliver it to them through this construct, a vessel for his will. His every word was now law, and with that power, he could command his people to leave their underground caverns and emerge into the light of the outside world. He would have them live openly among the goblins and ogres, their presence an unquestionable reality.

Above all, Rattan intended to use this new reality to forge a new identity for his people, one that was no longer defined by oppression but by their place in the new world order.

The first few weeks of Rattan's rule were a whirlwind of dizzying power. He found himself drowning in the lavish excesses of the goblin and ogre nobility, a lifestyle he had once only dreamed of. Goblin women, with their sharp features and elegant robes, flocked to his side. Ogre attendants, with their immense size and strength, catered to his every whim. He reveled in the fact that these beings, who had once looked down on his kind, now humbled themselves before him.

He spent his days in the palace's grand hall, lounging on his throne as a parade of nobles and officials came to pledge their loyalty. Rattan found a cruel satisfaction in their fear and obedience. He had them perform demeaning tasks, simply to remind them of their new place. He would have a goblin minister fetch him a goblet of wine or an ogre general fan him with a palm frond. The more they complied, the more his sense of power grew.

As for his rat-folk people, the construct he had created was doing its job. It had emerged from the underground caverns, a beacon of a new era. The rat-folk, once confined to the shadows, were now walking freely through the streets of the capital. The goblin and ogre populace, still reeling from the war and their new ruler, watched in stunned silence. They didn't dare question the new order. There was dissatisfaction but they were afraid to voice or act on it.

Yet, a powerful fear kept their dissent in check. The demons. They had seen the terrifying horde up close and had narrowly escaped. The new emperor had promised them protection from the very beings who had shattered their military and their pride. He had kept his word; none of the demons had laid a hand on them. This incomprehensible power, this ability to command such terrifying forces, was a shackle on their will. How could a mere ogre, a knight of their own empire, wield such authority over creatures of the abyss? This question, left unanswered, was the source of their obedience.

Chapter 623:

From his palace balcony, Rattan watched it all unfold with a chilling smile. He had it all, the throne, the power, and the fear of his subjects. He was a conqueror, a king, a god.

But Rattan believed he could be more. He knew of worlds beyond his own, of the vast, unexplored cosmos. He saw this world not as his final prize, but as the foundation of an empire that would one day reach for the stars. Under his rule, his people would not just survive, they would expand, conquer, and thrive beyond the confines of their world.

Rattan was brimming with ideas on how to transform and expand his world, but he held himself in check, waiting for the demons to finish their work. After a few weeks of wielding absolute power, his mind began to clear. A chilling question arose: were the demons truly obeying his words, or were they

simply a force of chaos using him as a temporary vessel? Would they leave his world once their task was complete? He had so many unanswered questions.

The answers came abruptly. One day, the world's moon suddenly vanished, as if erased from the sky. If not for the swift action of a sixth-tier demon, who shielded their world with its own domain, the cataclysmic fallout could have been far worse.

During those tense days without a moon, Rattan demonstrated his true capability. He proposed innovative ideas for new structures and protective enchantments. With his subjects working together, his concepts were brought to life at an unprecedented speed. He brought them safety and stability in the face of a cosmic threat, earning their grudging respect and solidifying his position as their new emperor.

With the world plunged into an unnatural, moonless darkness, Rattan's first command was to create a network of Solar Lanterns. He instructed his subjects to quickly construct a series of massive, crystal-based magical devices.

They were intricate arcane engines designed to siphon and concentrate ambient solar energy from the day and release it as a soft, continuous glow throughout the night. Their purpose was twofold: to prevent the sheer terror of eternal night and to provide enough light for his subjects to continue working and living, showing that even without their celestial guide, life could persist under his rule.

The moon's disappearance also caused an immediate and violent disruption to the world's tides and tectonic stability. Mountains groaned, and coastal cities were threatened by rogue tsunamis. Rattan's second decree was to establish a network of Geomantic Stabilizers.

He commanded his best earth-shapers and mages to channel their power into the planet's ley lines. They would act as living anchors, using concentrated magic to forcibly stabilize the land and sea,

redirecting the colossal gravitational strain and preventing catastrophic earthquakes and floods. He truly showed his intelligence in this short few days the moon was gone.

But after a few days, the moon was back to where it was like it was never moved.

Two days before the moon came back, Zarvok was thrown out of the portal he summoned and launched straight towards his castle. The sound brought everyone's attention and with a quick brush of mental wave they understood who it was making the commotion.

Zarvok, not minding his destroyed castle floated up, his subjects were already there waiting for him, most were kneeling on two were standing who gave him a brief bow.

Zarvok was not as relaxed as he looked, he was on guard against these two as even though they were his men, their realm was the same as his and he was no longer in his full capacity after dealing with the mages.

But after a while seeing as they did nothing, he said "How far have we come?"

The demons dispersed leaving only his butler and the two six tier demons "90% of their world is now corrupted has now been touched by the abyss, in a matter of few days, that world would become ours"

Zarvok, putting on the robe, offered to him, "How about mother, did you recover it uncorrupted?"

This time Malzor spoke out "Indeed we did" He raised his, in which an orb appeared looking inside the orb was the giant womb mother" Malzor did a good job, it was like he cut out part of the earth where mother was and sealed it inside the orb.

Malzor threw the orb to Zarvok who caught it, "There should be the three of you, where is he?"

The other demon said "The moon disappeared not too long ago, creating a catastrophe that hindered our progress, Gorum took it upon himself to hold shield the planet from this disaster until we are done"

Zarvok hearing the news of the moon's disappearance, nodded as he already knew has an idea on what happened. He simply nodded and gestured for his legion to march. Their destination: an abyss portal, pulsating with dark energy. The air was thick with anticipation. It had been decades since the invasion began, and for the first time, Zarvok was finally setting foot on this world, a world that would soon be his.

Stepping through the portal, Zarvok inhaled deeply, a sense of familiarity washing over him. The air was heavy with the scent of the Abyss, a stench of corruption and decay left by his demons. The once blue sky was gone, replaced by a suffocating purple hue and ominous, swirling clouds.

"How is the new emperor doing?" Zarvok asked, his voice low and commanding, the words echoing through the landscape.

"He has been quite helpful and effective," Malzor replied, his voice a low rumble. "He holds our new subjects in place. He is both ambitious and intelligent, but his actions on the day of the fall will determine if he can be considered a companion or merely a weed to be rooted out."

Days passed, and the moon, once a void in the night sky, slowly reappeared. Gorum holding the world together, felt the presence of the moon return, sensing the two beings now inhabiting it. He hesitated for a moment, then, he turned, his form dissolving into a wisp of darkness, and raced back to the Abyss to report to Zarvok.

Meanwhile, high above the corrupted world, Ikenga and Zadkiel sat upon the moon's surface. They gazed down at the planet below, their eyes scanning the desolate landscape. From their vantage point, they could see a small, pristine part of the world that had not yet been tainted by the Abyss. It was a small beacon of hope in a sea of decay.

With a flick of his hand, Zadkiel summoned Vellok. The goblin mage appeared before them, still as a golden statue, his face frozen in a look of abject horror and shock. He had joined these mighty beings, and now, he watched the slow, agonizing destruction of his world.

He had lost everything, even his power. He couldn't see if his people were alive or dead, or what had become of his brothers. Tears, gleaming like liquid gold, streamed from the statue's eyes, yet Ikenga and Zadkiel remained unmoved. Ikenga's mind was elsewhere, grappling with the unexpected sight before him.

The demons were organized, a stark contrast to their usual chaotic invasions. They weren't just rampaging and destroying everything in sight. Instead, they were subduing the people and magical beasts without harming them. The destruction of this world wasn't a frenzy; it was a slow, methodical process.

He saw Rattan, sitting on the throne and began to piece together what was happening. But a critical question remained: Why would the demons need mortal creatures alive? Was it a calculated strategy for ruling a fallen world, or did these mortals serve a more sinister purpose?

It was then that both Ikenga and Zadkiel sensed a presence closing in on them from the void. Ikenga's eyes narrowed as he caught sight of the approaching figure. Without a moment's hesitation, he shot forward from his perch on the moon, disappearing into the darkness of space to intercept what was coming.

Ikenga shot through the void, closing the distance between him and the approaching figure in an instant. He pulled her into a tight embrace. Keles, bathed in the soft, otherworldly light, smiled up at him.

"I told you we would be alright," she said, her voice a soothing melody. Ikenga gently lifted her veil and kissed her, a moment of profound peace in the chaos of the void.

"I never doubted you," he replied, "but I can't help but worry." His eyes drifted down to her belly. "How is he?"

Keles's smile widened, her face glowing with maternal joy. "He's finally resting and growing as he should."

Ikenga's smile mirrored hers. He nodded and guided her toward his moon-bound garden. "You came at the right time. From here, we get a perfect view of what happens to a world taken by the Abyss."

Keles's gaze fell upon the lush greenery. "It seems we aren't alone," she noted as they walked deeper into the garden.

Beyond the clearing, Zadkiel sat in a relaxed position, a cup in his hand, his eyes fixed on the fallen world below. He looked up at them and smiled.

Chapter 624:

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"Indeed we aren't. His name is Zadkiel." "He's told me much about you, Lady Keles," Zadkiel said, rising to his feet. He took her hand and lifted it, placing a gentle kiss on her knuckles.

"Charming," Keles replied, a hint of a smile playing on her lips, while Ikenga simply rolled his eyes in mock exasperation.

"You seem happy," Keles observed, her tone soft. Zadkiel was momentarily taken aback before he understood her meaning.

"Maybe so," he conceded, his gaze thoughtful. "Your man helped me see things differently." Both Keles and Zadkiel looked toward Ikenga, who was now preparing tea.

"You give me too much credit, Zadkiel," Ikenga called out, a smile in his voice. Laughter filled the garden, a warm, shared moment between them.

As Keles walked toward the golden statue, she brushed her arm against its surface, a solemn expression returning to her face. "His soul is now bound to this statue," she said to Zadkiel. "He'll feel piercing pain every moment he spends here. And each new day, his body will forget the pain, but his mind won't. It will continue until his soul dissipates completely."

Zadkiel's smile was bright as he turned to Ikenga. "You are lucky to be blessed with such a lady. With your brain, it's a wonder you got her at all."

Ikenga raised a brow at the jab. "What? Why should I be the one to come up with your punishment?"

Zadkiel scoffed. "It's only right you do. You've experienced life more than I have. I was looking forward to the ideas you could bring forth, but you offered nothing. Thankfully, Lady Keles saved the day."

Keles watched the two bicker, shaking her head with a faint smile. Ikenga had a unique talent: he could peel away the layers of a person's facade and expose the foolery hidden beneath. Even the arrogant Crepuscular had found himself joining in the playful nonsense when Ikenga was around.

Days bled into a slow, creeping transformation on the planet below. The oceans, once a vibrant blue, had turned a deep, unsettling purple. The marine life within them began to mutate, their forms twisting into grotesque parodies of their former selves. Even the sun, cloaked by the ominous purple clouds, had taken on a sickly, bruised hue.

The closer the demons got to their goal, the more the world's unconscious will fought back, a desperate, fading attempt to save itself. But the demons were relentless, their advance a methodical, unstoppable plague.

On the Abyss layer, Zarvok was not idle. He spread the word of his impending victory and ascension throughout the layer, demanding that all demons surrender to him. They did so without resistance, knowing the immense power he was about to acquire.

Another strange sight in the Abyss was the way Zarvok had his men stationed at the edge of every pathway of the River Styx. There, demons' eggs were pushed out by the millions each day, a seemingly endless tide of new life, all under Zarvok's watchful control.

It was a common sight in the Abyss to see newborn demons pushed out by the millions from the River Styx. What wasn't common, though, was what happened next. Zarvok's men, a specialized force, were deployed to halt the newborns from acting on their first instincts to attack and devour each other. The new demons hissed and tried to attack as one, but the difference in strength was too great. They were suppressed, unable to act on their chaotic nature.

Finally, the day came. On their moon-bound garden, Ikenga, Keles, and Zadkiel found themselves weeping uncontrollably. They weren't alone; across the corrupted planet, the final piece of land had been tainted by the Abyss. The world let out a silent cry, a deep resonance of agony felt by many but heard by only a few.

The goblins, ogres, and Ratmen, who had submitted to the new order, all found themselves tearing up without knowing why. Their hearts ached, a primal grief for something profound that was now lost. Rattan, in his throne room, felt it the most. He began to bawl, crawling out of the palace in a desperate attempt to understand what was happening to him and his world.

As the world's final cry faded, Zarvok stepped out of the Abyss portal. His generals marched in a silent, disciplined formation behind him. The ground quaked with his every step, a final, desperate resistance from the dying world. But with each stride Zarvok took, the tremors grew weaker, the world's fight fading into submission.

Then, just as suddenly as he appeared, Zarvok vanished. The generals stood motionless, his army spread across the conquered land. Even Ikenga and Keles, their focus fixed on him, were taken aback by his disappearance. Only Zadkiel remained calm.

"He's at the world's core," Zadkiel stated, his voice a low, steady hum.

He was right. Zarvok had found his way to the heart of the planet, a place accessible only to those who had completely taken over a world. His army was now stationed in every corner, securing his conquest.

At the center of this sacred space, a transparent egg floated, a growing consciousness swirling within it. The figure inside, a grotesque fusion of a Ratman and a goblin, writhed and shifted, its form constantly changing as if it were uncertain of its own existence.

Zarvok floated upward, raising his hand and drawing blood from it. Before the crimson droplet could fall, he felt the desperate, unconscious plea of the world's core. But he said nothing. His ascension was too close, his path to absolute power too clear. He would not let a plea, no matter how profound, halt his progress.

A single drop of his blood, a perfect, dark bead of power fell into the world's core, the shifting Ratman-goblin consciousness within the egg, pleaded with a silent scream, a final, desperate plea that vibrated through the very fabric of existence.

The drop of blood fell, a crimson meteor streaking toward the core. The instant it made contact, a wave of power dark, corruptive, and absolute shot through the world.

The purple skies above them began to tear like old cloth, revealing a swirling, chaotic vortex of black and red. The ground shuddered violently, not in resistance, but in a final, agonizing surrender. The oceans boiled, and the land cracked, revealing not magma but the pulsating, blood-red glow of the Abyss.

Rattan finally pulled himself together, staring up at the sky in disbelief. The world was being consumed, and he couldn't comprehend it. Driven by a desperate need for answers, he shot into the air, an act visible to all beings at the sixth stage. Some watched with mockery, while others, like Ikenga, watched with keen interest.

As he ascended higher, Rattan's desperation grew. This time, Phantom didn't remain silent.

"What's happening to my world?" Rattan cried out, his voice filled with distress.

"Your world is falling into the Abyss," Phantom's clear voice responded.

"This shouldn't be happening," Rattan stammered, his voice trembling. "We have so much left to do, so much growth to come. I've finally beaten the fate laid upon my race. We haven't even had time to taste the richness of life." He watched in horror as the world dissolved around him.

Meanwhile, Phantom gazed at the ball of light representing Rattan's ambition. It was a seed he had nurtured ever since he crossed paths with Rattan, a process that made him finally understand his true nature as the Arch Curse of Envy.

Before this transformation, he viewed things through mortal eyes, seeing envy as a base flaw of mortal creatures. Yet, his own mortal life had been a testament to this very emotion. He had always craved fame and recognition, but his talents never matched his ambition. He became a phantom, a being ignored by everyone, his existence meaningless.

Even after he became a curse, he remained this way until he met his fellow Arch Curses, brought forth by their creator, Ikenga. His fellow Arch Curse was also a being of envy, but unlike Phantom, this envy

didn't come from a personal lack. Instead, it stemmed from the envy of others directed at his immense talent. This other Arch Curse was known as Spotlight.

Spotlight never shied away from his immense talent and thrived on the attention it brought him as he ascended through the ranks of the world. Yet, after a decisive battle, Phantom found himself the improbable victor. It was a reality he had once believed was impossible.

From that moment on, he emerged in a new state: The Spotlight Phantom.

Spending time with Rattan and fostering his growth, Phantom finally understood that envy was not inherently good or bad. For mortals, envy was the very flame that ignited ambition. In that moment, envy transformed into a dream, a goal. Some dreamed of being a good parent, while others wanted to be seen as a savior.

Some dreams are small, and some are grand. The grand dreams, Phantom knew, were where the real problems began.

Chapter 625:

"When a man's dream is too grand, the line between ambition and obsession blurs," Phantom said, his voice echoing in Rattan's mind. "His desire to reach that goal at all costs becomes the only thing that matters, and the world, everyone and everything in it, becomes nothing more than tools to be used."

In the relentless pursuit of a grand dream, one might take any path necessary to reach it. They may find themselves consumed by a hunger for more, even before their initial dream is achieved. This is when ambition blinds a person, and they become "the spotlight."

Before understanding his true nature, Phantom had acted on his human instincts, reaching out to guide ambition, hoping to keep it pure and good. But once he let go and simply observed, he saw both the beauty and the ugliness of it.

He realized that some ambitions are so vast and complex that they require deviations from the conventional path. These deviations might be condemned by others, yet in their own way, they possess a strange, captivating beauty.

Phantom knew he could intervene, preventing these "deviations" from ever happening. But that was his mortal perspective, a limited view. When he considered things on a planetary scale, on the scale of an entire world's fate, he couldn't possibly guide the ambition of every single being. He couldn't be a personal guide for everyone.

The true nature of an Arch Curse was not to guide but to watch. It was to see one's own nature reflected in the grand ambitions of a world and understand that you can't be everywhere at once. One person is left to fulfill their goal, and in their journey, they may create a masterpiece of deviance and ambition, something both beautiful and terrifying.

In Rattan's case, his masterpiece was both beautiful and terrifying. He had achieved his goal, his ambition still burned brightly, but the reality was that it had been fulfilled in a way he had never imagined.

He was now facing that hard truth. The golden ball of fruit, which represented Rattan's ambition, was now being coated in a dark purple skin. To most, this would seem like a taint, a corruption. But to Phantom, it was the most beautiful state the fruit could ever achieve.

Phantom had spent a lifetime viewing envy through the narrow lens of mortal good and evil. He saw the golden light of ambition as the "good" side of his curse the pure, noble flame that drove people to greatness. But that alone, he now realized, was an incomplete picture.

It was only when Rattan's ambition reached its terrible, full conclusion when he felt the weight of what his pursuit had truly cost that the dark purple skin began to form. This was the other, essential half of envy. It represented the beautiful, brutal methods and the unforeseen, devastating consequences of a dream pursued at all costs.

To Phantom, this was the moment of completion. The golden light of ambition, coupled with the dark purple of its harsh reality, represented the true and whole nature of his curse. It was a masterpiece, a perfect and terrifying balance of what a mortal could achieve and what they had to sacrifice to get there.

Rattan closed his eyes in agony, tears streaming down his face as he cried out, "This isn't happening, Guardian! This wasn't how this was supposed to be. You were supposed to be the good one. How can you condemn me and my people to a fate worse than the empire could give us?"

Phantom reached out and plucked the dark purple fruit, his mouth watering with an ancient, primal hunger. But he paused, holding the fruit in his hand as he gazed into Rattan's consciousness—a place he had resided for what felt like an eternity.

With a final flicker, his form blurred and he manifested in the physical world. The moment Phantom's presence left his mind, a wave of panic washed over Rattan. He looked up at the giant before him, whose face was a constant, swirling mosaic of emotion.

"Please, don't leave me! I need you!" Rattan pleaded, grabbing the hem of Phantom's immense, flowing robe.

It was a pitiful sight, yet Phantom did not judge him. "You believe you need me, but you don't," he said, his voice a gentle, knowing hum. "You got to where you are today because of your own handiwork, not mine. I merely made the impossible possible for you. The rest was your doing."

A voice boomed across the entire world, amplified a thousand times over by the planet's new connection to the Abyss. It was Zarvok. "Hear me!" he bellowed. "The time has come! I call upon the Abyss to draw this fallen world into its layer! This is my ascension! This is your new home!"

With his voice, a massive tear ripped open in the void above. Everyone, no matter where they were, could see the sight clearly: a swirling vortex that revealed Zarvok's Abyss layer in all its terrifying glory.

Then, a slow, inexorable pull began. The planet started to tear apart, huge chunks of land and sea being pulled toward the void. Rattan watched in horror, reaching for Phantom, but his grasp met only empty air. Phantom was gone. Only his voice remained, a final, echoing whisper in Rattan's mind.

"You are a smart man, Rattan. It should be clear to you what fate has in store for you. Your world now answers to a new master. It is up to you to decide what part you will play in his world."

Rattan's head hung low, his jaw clenched, and his teeth ground together in a furious, silent rage. "Position marked," the robotic voice of his artifact and domain core sounded in his ear.

He raised his arm to the sky and made a sharp, pulling gesture.

Meanwhile, high in the cloud layers, Phantom felt a strange disturbance. He was on his way to the moon to join his creator, but before he could react, an energy bubble formed around him, a powerful, pulling force dragging him back down toward the corrupted world below.

In an instant, Phantom was ripped from the cloud layer, plummeting toward the earth. From the sky, he saw Rattan, whose face was now a mask of both fury and greed. "I said I need you!" Rattan bellowed.

Phantom tilted his head in confusion, but his face, which was always in flux, settled on one particular form: Kaelen's. His eyes took on a bright blue hue, just as Kaelen's did when his power was active, transforming him into a living computer with an astonishing rate of calculation.

He observed the energy bubble holding him captive, his mind instantly pinpointing a point of weakness. He poked the spot and applied his mana precisely as his calculations dictated, shattering the bubble in a flash.

But his freedom was short-lived. A cube, larger than Phantom himself, appeared before him. It undulated like a living organism, opened up, swallowed him whole, and then sealed itself shut.

From the moon where they stood, Ikenga and Keles watched as Zarvok stretched out his arms and called upon the abyss. The heavens themselves seemed to recoil, the stars dimming as if in fear. To mortals below it may have appeared like a black rift in the void, but to Ikenga and Keles it was something far more dreadful—a colossal, gaping maw, wide enough to swallow a world whole. Its edges writhed like living flesh, dripping with shadows that slithered outward like veins across the firmament.

From its depths came a pull so immense it bent the laws of earth and sky. They watched as whole swathes of land began to lift, torn from the surface with terrible groans. Towers and citadels cracked as their foundations shattered, people and beasts alike screaming as they were wrenched upward. The sky

itself became an ocean of debris cities crumbling midair, rivers streaming upward like silver threads, forests ripped from the ground with their roots dangling helplessly.

The screaming of thousands filled the void men, women, children, and the dying wails of magical beasts. But as each soul reached the maw, their cries were silenced, erased from existence the moment they crossed its jagged threshold. All that remained was a dreadful, echoing quiet broken only by the low, endless rumble of the abyss's hunger.

Zadkiel stood transfixed, his expression torn between disgust and delight. His lip curled at the demons' profane methods, at their disregard for all things sacred. And yet, beneath his disdain, a cruel smile stretched across his face. The unraveling of worlds was a symphony to him; the cries of the innocent rose like a chorus, a hymn of despair sweet to his ears. Every fragment devoured, every voice extinguished, was another note in a song he alone seemed to appreciate.

Turning, he cast a glance at his companion. Ikenga stood silent, his face carved in grim resolve. Zadkiel had known him only briefly, but never once had he seen such severity in Ikenga's gaze. The mirth and lighthearted strength that usually radiated from him were gone, replaced by a dark shadow. His eyes did not flinch from the devastation, nor did he turn away from the despair pouring across the world. He watched it all unblinking, unshaken, as though weighing every scream and every life vanishing into the void.

Chapter 626

He could not help but ask, his curiosity pressing against the silence "What are you thinking?"

For a time, Ikenga gave no answer. The void pulled and devoured below them, and only the abyss's low rumble filled the space between them. Then, at last, Ikenga's voice came low, steady, yet heavy with a depth Zadkiel had not expected.

"I played a major hand in the scene before us," he said. "My actions condemned this world and its people to a fate none of them would ever have chosen, had they been given a voice. I watch them now, not to save them, but to witness their end. I should feel guilt, I should feel sorrow... yet I feel nothing."

He paused, eyes fixed on the gaping maw as another continent fractured and drifted skyward like ash.

"So I wait," he continued, "I wait for someone, anyone to appear before me, to judge me. To question what I have done. For then I could stand tall, unflinching, and cry out how right my decision was... for the ones I loved, for the world I was birthed to protect."

The silence between his words was vast, filled only by the soundless screaming of those swallowed by the abyss.

"And yet," Ikenga said at last, his gaze hardening, "this moment has made something clear to me. I now walk among a hierarchy of beings whose actions stand beyond mortal judgment beyond even the hope of being questioned. That is the truth of what we are becoming. And so I watch, not as one broken by this sight, but as one who imprints it upon his soul. A reminder: to remain always among those who can bear witness to such ruin, and never among those who must suffer it."

His words lingered like an oath, heavy and unshakable.

Zadkiel broke the heavy air with a grin, his tone light and teasing "You know, as an angel, I could judge you."

Ikenga flicked him a sidelong glance, then chuckled low and amused

"Are all angels humorous like you?"

With a shrug, Zadkiel replied, "Nah. Last I remember, we're all 'holier-than-thou' grim faces and glowing halos."

That earned a laugh from Ikenga, a rare, genuine sound that cut through the weight of destruction before them. The two shared the moment, brief as it was, like comrades standing above an ocean of ruin.

Then Ikenga stretched out his hand into the empty air before him. The space resisted faintly, like taut fabric, but with the world below unraveling and its laws collapsing, the barrier gave way easily beneath his will. The void bent around his fingers as he pierced through it.

His voice lowered, carrying a grave certainty "While I cannot be judged for my actions, the same cannot be said for my creation who now faces the consequences of his own."

The fabric of space rippled as his hand vanished into another realm.

Far below, amidst the wreckage of the world, Rattan hovered before the cube that imprisoned Phantom. The air around the artifact shimmered with power as he pressed his hand against its surface. In that instant, his consciousness was drawn inward, pulled into the strange, shadowed domain that was the cube's inner world.

Phantom stood within, his body still writhing faintly from the sealing, yet his eyes locked on the intrusion with sudden intensity. His gaze shifted when a hand appeared in the space a hand he knew all too well. Recognition flared in his face, followed swiftly by expectation. He waited, believing salvation or purpose was about to be granted.

But his hope twisted to betrayal. The hand reached not for him, but for the prize he had bled to claim. With effortless precision, it plucked the fruit he had harvested from Rattan's struggle. Then, without a word, the hand withdrew, leaving Phantom empty-handed and alone in the cube's suffocating silence.

His look of anticipation curdled into shock, then fury. In that moment, he felt as though something far greater had been taken from him something only he believed he had earned.

Rattan caught sight of the hand as it withdrew, and his body began to tremble. Whatever that presence was, it was beyond him far, far beyond. The sheer weight of it made his soul want to collapse in on itself. But when he saw what it had done, when he saw the shock on Phantom's face, his fear twisted into exhilaration.

He threw back his head and laughed.

"How does it feel getting played?" he said gleefully, his voice echoing through the hollow space.

Phantom did not answer. His gaze remained locked on the emptiness where the hand had been, his face unreadable.

Rattan leaned forward with cruel delight. "What's the matter? Expecting your master to lift you up? To reward you? Hah. Seems even your precious creator finds better use in mocking you."

Still, Phantom gave no reply. He stood motionless, though his silence weighed heavier than any threat.

Because he knew Ikenga. He had been with him long enough to learn the contours of his will the cold logic that shaped his choices. At times, Phantom thought he understood his creator. At other times, he questioned whether he ever had. But one truth was constant: Ikenga never acted without purpose. Never.

If the hand had taken the fruit, then it was not cruelty. Not mockery. Not chance. It was intent.

Phantom turned his head slowly, his eyes narrowing on Rattan. A strange familiarity stirred within him. This scene this humiliation, this stripping away of pride it was not new. He had been here before, long ago, before rising to the rank of arch-curse. This was the pattern of his existence. The cycle that bound him.

The cube stirred, its inner space reshaping itself. Shadows bent and warped, pulling into form. A domain unfurled, Rattan's domain, woven by the artifact's will. At its centre a throne of black stone surged upward, jagged and heavy. Rattan strode toward it and sat with arrogant ease, his laughter still carrying.

The throne rose high above, placing him on a perch from which he could look down upon Phantom. The posture of a victor. The posture of a judge.

Phantom's lips twitched into the faintest shadow of a smile.

Rattan leaned forward on his throne, eyes burning with hunger "I realize now... no matter what fate befalls my world, it can still be saved by my hands. As long as I hold your gift, the gift to be anyone I choose, then nothing is beyond me." His voice dripped with greed, each word trembling with ambition.

Phantom only shook his head, his expression almost pitying.

"You have forgotten one of the oldest principles of a mage: never engage an enemy you do not yet fully understand."

Rattan sneered, but Phantom's tone sharpened, cutting through his arrogance "You think you understand me. You think this cube has me bound, that you have me cornered. But from your very posture, from your very state... it is clear you have no idea what I am."

The world inside the cube groaned, reality twisting on itself. In the blink of an eye, their places reversed.

Now Phantom sat upon the throne, cloaked in Rattan's likeness, every detail stolen down to the smirk. And there stood Rattan below, forced into the place Phantom had been. His breath caught as he stared upward, disbelief crawling over his face.

Phantom looked down upon him with eyes that were no longer human. His voice echoed with a resonance that shook the cube itself.

"If you truly understood me, you would know this: to face me, you must be absolved of emotion. No pride. No fear. No desire. Only then might you stand against what I am."

The throne pulsed with dark energy beneath him, each word binding itself to the fabric of the cube.

Rattan's greed faltered, a tremor running through him. Rattan's trembling gave way to a defiant grin as the cube's simulated domain pulsed around him. Threads of light and circuitry spread across the floor like veins, weaving into glowing constructs gears, pillars, lattices of shifting arcane design. His Aetherium Weave flared to life, magi-tech scaffolding erupting behind him like the framework of a god's machine.

"You speak of emotion," Rattan said, regaining his composure, "but my strength lies not in my heart, it lies in the web I weave. My constructs don't tire, don't envy, don't doubt. They only obey. And through them, I am everywhere at once."

The throne dissolved beneath Phantom as glowing chains, spun from Rattan's Weave, lashed upward to bind him. Constructs took form skeletal machines with glowing eyes, all linked to Rattan's will.

Phantom, however, only smirked. His shape flickered, the outline of his form becoming hazy, like an image from a cracked mirror. One moment he looked like Rattan, the next like a demon, the next like nameless admirers with faces twisted by jealousy. Each new face whispered with venom: "Fraud, Manipulator, A thief of glory."

Chapter 627

The whispers spread like a contagion through the cube.

"Your Weave is intricate," Phanthom said, his voice echoing as though a thousand mouths spoke in unison, "but every web is meant to be seen. And I am the shadow on the spotlight, the scandal in the applause"

At his words, some of Rattan's constructs faltered. Their glowing eyes dimmed, their frames trembling as whispers of scorn echoed through them. The more elaborate the construct, the quicker it buckled, vanity feeding into collapse.

Rattan's jaw tightened. His Aetherium Weave was strong, but he realized Phantom was not attacking his machines directly. He was targeting pieces of himself left in the construct to give them life.

Phantom leaned forward on the throne that had reformed beneath him, his eyes glinting with cruel mirth "Weaving makes you a strategist, yes. But I..." His face shifted again, momentarily wearing Rattan's likeness twisted in mocking grandeur. "...I am the lie your Weave cannot defend against."

The cube's inner world trembled as the Aetherium Weave spread wider, constructs rising higher, their designs growing ever more intricate cathedrals of magi-tech gears and luminous threads controlled them, Rattan learned his lesson as he no longer put his will on the construct.

Rattan's laughter echoed as his machines advanced, overwhelming Phantom's ghostly form with fire power. Phantom flickered, splintered, distorted as if unraveling beneath the pressure. Chains wrapped tighter, pinning him, while machines stomped forward, their cores blazing with raw power.

"Yes!" Rattan roared, his eyes wild with triumph. "Do you see it now? The Weave answers me, me! With this gift, I can build and unbuild empires! Even you cannot stand against my design!"

Phantom sagged against the chains, his voice faint, almost breaking.

"So strong... so unstoppable..."

The words only fanned the flames of Rattan's ambition. His constructs grew more as they began to tear Phantom to pieces with each construct swallowing and breaking down the part of phantom they swallowed.

But he didn't notice the cracks. Not in the constructs. In himself.

The whispers began subtly, echoes behind his triumph.

"A thief of glory, Pretender, Your machines are hollow."

Rattan gritted his teeth, ignoring them, driving his Weave harder. Phantom's form shattered again, pieces scattering like broken glass. Victory was his, he could feel it. He was winning. He had won.

Phantom gift and recent clash gave him a greater idea if he could merge his construct with Phantom's gift, his construct could taken on the form of warriors.

Until the moment the last of Phantom's fragments was swallowed up at the foot of the throne.

Chains crumbled into smoke. The grand constructs flickered, their light sputtering as though smothered by unseen hands. And there, seated once more on high, was Phantom. Whole. Untouched.

Rattan staggered. His hands trembled. The glow of the Weave dimmed, the threads retreating like dying embers. He tried to summon them again but nothing came. His reserves were gone, siphoned dry.

Phanthom's eyes met his, cold and utterly unimpressed "All that noise, all that spectacle... and yet you never noticed I was only feeding you rope."

He leaned forward, his voice a whisper that filled the cube "You drowned yourself in your own ambition. Every ounce of strength you thought was cutting me down, was mine from the start. You never overwhelmed me, Rattan."

A cruel smile curved across his lips "You only exhausted yourself for my amusement."

But as the last word faded, Phanthom's figure blurred, unraveling like mist. Rattan's eyes widened, realization dawning at him. The throne was empty. The whispers gone. The battlefield around him, silent.

He was alone.

He had always been alone. Every blow, every triumph, every desperate surge of ambition... all of it had been nothing more than him lashing against shadows of his own making. Phanthom had never truly been there.

Meanwhile, moments earlier...

After Ikenga's hand withdrew with the fruit, Zadkiel had stared at it quietly. He said nothing, though the weight of his gaze lingered. It was then that Zervok's impish figure emerged from the void, his presence a distortion that bent the air. He cast the angel a brief, dismissive glance before addressing Ikenga.

"You are not going to help your creation?"

Ikenga studied the fruit in his palm, its surface glowing faintly as he answered "If his path ends here, then so be it."

Zervok smirked, but said no more.

Not long after, Phantom materialized once more. His ghostly presence drifted into view, and every gaze turned upon him. To the shock of some, he did not gloat, nor strut in triumph. He sank to his knees before Ikenga.

Without a word, Ikenga tossed him the fruit. Phantom caught it, his hands trembling faintly as his eyes flicked upward to meet his creator's. No words were exchanged, none were needed. He pressed the fruit close, then quietly melted back into Ikenga's shadow, vanishing into the darkness that had birthed him.

Zadkiel and Zervok now stood across from one another, their eyes locked, glares sharp as blades. It was the old, endless rivalry of angel and demon, played out yet again in this strange theater. Neither moved, neither yielded, both waiting for the other to break first.

It was Zadkiel who finally turned away. His wings unfurled with a sudden brilliance, feathers of light casting their glow upon the ruined moon surface. He looked over to Ikenga and Keles, who sat nearby, the air around them still trembling faintly from the abyssal maw.

With a calmness that belied the tension just moments before, Zadkiel spoke.

"It's about time I take my leave," Zadkiel said, his tone light yet carrying the weight of finality. "There is much to be done... and many yet to punish and judge."

Ikenga inclined his head in acknowledgment. "It has been good, for the short while that I have known you." He extended his arm, an uncommon gesture from one such as him.

Zadkiel hesitated, his gaze lingering on the hand offered to him. After a brief pause, he smiled and clasped it firmly. As their hands met, a single feather of purest light loosened from his wing and drifted down. Zadkiel caught it and, with deliberate care, placed it into Ikenga's palm.

"If you do not mind," Zadkiel said, "I would like to keep in contact with you. In our long immortal lives, it is rare to find one worth meeting. I believe you are such."

Ikenga looked at the feather, its glow soft yet eternal, then closed his hand over it with a silent nod.

Zadkiel's steps carried him next to Keles. Her smile greeted him before he reached out, his hand resting gently upon her stomach. His voice softened "My blessing to the young god within you. May his path be illuminated by light and his grace"

At his touch, Keles felt her son stir and kick, a ripple of life moving within her. She rose, overcome, and wrapped Zadkiel in a warm embrace. He returned it briefly, his eyes softening.

His eyes flicked once toward Zarvok, the faintest glint of challenge in them, before his wings unfurled in full brilliance. With a single motion, he launched skyward. His wings unfurled with a radiant sweep, light spilling across the desolate moon. He beat them once, and as he ascended, reality itself trembled.

For a brief heartbeat, a golden gate manifested high above towering, resplendent, flanked by cherubic figures of light whose faces shone without features. The gate opened with silent grace. Zadkiel rose into its brilliance, his form fading as he passed through.

In the blink of an eye, it was gone. Gate, cherubs, and angel alike. Only the faint shimmer of feathers drifting down lingered, leaving those who had witnessed it to wonder if it had been real at all or merely a vision meant to remind them that heaven's eyes still watched.

Zarvok turned toward him, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips "You sure know how to leave an impression."

Ikenga gave a small shrug, the corner of his mouth quirking upward.

"I have a likable face, maybe."

Zarvok snorted softly but said nothing more. His gaze shifted downward, to the dying planet below. The abyss had nearly completed its work; what remained of mountains, seas, and cities drifted like scattered ash into the gaping void.

After a moment, his eyes flicked to the moon beneath their feet, the place Ikenga had claimed and shaped with his presence "What do you plan to do with this moon?" Zarvok asked. "With its world gone, it's nothing more than a floating rock."

Ikenga's expression grew thoughtful, his gaze lingering on the barren expanse.

It was then that the plant, the one that had his missing eye, detached itself from where it was and fluttered toward him. Its tiny leaves trembled as though carried by an unseen wind, and the little eye embedded within its stem blinked at him fondly.

Ikenga's face softened, a rare smile curving his lips. He raised his hand, letting the plant drift into his palm. It bent toward him as if in greeting.

Carefully, he plucked the eye and guided it back into place, pressing it into the hollow where it belonged. The eye blinked once, twice, as Ikenga adjusted from the plant's vantage to his own.

Chapter 628:

He patted it gently, "Thank you."

In response, a reluctant thought pushed against his mind, warm but sulking, like a child grumbling though it had done the right thing.

Ikenga chuckled quietly, his voice lowering to a murmur.

"I know. You don't like it. But still... I am grateful."

The plant pulsed faintly, its leaves quivering as if in embarrassed protest, before going still again.

The plant's thought pressed into Ikenga's mind, hesitant, yet insistent.

"We want to do more for you."

Ikenga arched a brow, amused at its boldness "Quite selfish of you," he murmured. "What can you do that I do not already know?"

At his words, the plant stirred with sudden resolve. It slipped free from his hand, streaking upward beyond the moon's thin atmosphere.

Zarvok's eyes narrowed as the small sprout began to change. Its body swelled, drinking hungrily from the void, its leaves stretching and thickening into vast, cosmic fronds. At its crown, the flower once small and delicate unfurled, revealing where it held the eye it had once gotten from Ikenga.

The petals peeled open like the maw of a great beast, and with a slow, dreadful grace, it descended upon the moon. Vines wrapped across craters and ridges, digging deep, and then the flower's head swallowed the entire body whole.

In an instant, the moon was gone.

Where once hung a barren rock, now there was only the massive plant, glowing faintly with the stolen mass. But just as swiftly, it began to contract, shrinking down until it was once more a small, fluttering thing.

It returned to Ikenga, nestling gently into his palm.

Ikenga gazed into the open flower at its crown and there within, suspended like a marble in dew, he saw the moon shrunken and sealed, its essence folded neatly inside the plant's bloom.

Zarvok leaned close, studying the sight with a mixture of fascination and disbelief. Then he shook his head and chuckled "What a lucky fellow."

Ikenga glanced at him, brow slightly furrowed.

"Tainted by the divinity in your eye," Zarvok continued, his voice low. "It gained a conscience... and a gift for space itself. To devour and preserve the heavens? A talent most of the vacuum creatures would envy."

Ikenga turned his gaze back to the little plant, the weight of Zarvok's words lingering in the silence. The flower shook as if proud of what it had done.

Ikenga turned the plant over in his palm, feeling its weight. It was heavier now, but still manageable. He thought of his works, the rare few that stood out among the expanse of his creations.

First were the twin treants, Brix and Aqua, then Bara, who had merged inseparably with his son, flesh and spirit woven into one. Then the great solar vine, the plant that drew light from his brother sun and brought radiance to his realm. And now... this little fellow, born of accident.

He would need to give it a name worthy of its odd gift. For now, he only spoke "Find your place."

The plant stirred, as though considering, before fluttering upward. It circled him once, twice, then came to rest upon his ear. Its small body anchored itself like a living ornament, its flower dangling as a curious earring. Ikenga smiled faintly at the new look, one that seemed both regal and strange.

By now the abyss had finished its feast, the last fragments of the world swallowed into its eternal dark. The gaping maw lingered a moment longer, vast and unspeakably silent, before beginning to close.

Ikenga, Keles, and Zarvok drifted upward together, their forms cutting through the void. They passed through the abyss's black lips just as they sealed shut behind them, and with that final snap, an entire world was gone, Forgotten, unwritten, another story erased from the cosmos.

Far away, in another universe...

A world so massive it dwarfed suns, with countless smaller worlds locked in its orbit, drifted in the vast dark. Within its depths, in a secluded chamber hidden from mortal eyes, an old man sat cross-legged in meditation. His frail body trembled violently, blood leaking from his eyes, ears, and nose.

His breath hitched as the vision consumed him. His eyelids snapped open two scarlet streaks trailing down his face and a ragged scream tore itself from his throat. Reaching desperately into his robes, he produced a small, unassuming bell and shook it.

No sound came.

But in an instant, his body was no longer in the chamber. Space folded around him, and he now hovered in a vast void spangled with endless stars. Before him, eight colossal eyes, each a different hue, blinked open in unison. They gazed at him with impossible weight.

"What did you see, Fate-Mage?" a voice boomed, its depth shaking even the emptiness. At the same time, an unseen force coiled around the old man, stopping the collapse of his body, barely holding his being together.

Through cracked lips, with blood bubbling in his throat, he whispered the only words left in him:

"Extinction... in all planes."

The power holding him together was swept away at the declaration. His body could no longer endure. With a final shudder, the old man burst apart into a cloud of dust.

But the dust did not scatter.

Instead, it gathered, forming a luminous tableau in the star-dotted void a vision etched by the old man's last breath. Shapes and silhouettes of realms collapsing, suns devoured, moons swallowed by flowers, abysses snapping shut like jaws... and beings of light.

The eight eyes regarded the vision in silence and then, one by one, they began to blink.

The eight eyes became six as a figure stepped forth a human male, middle-aged, ordinary only at a glance. The dust of the dead fate-mage gathered into his pupils; motes of sight flickered, orbiting his head like fireflies caught in gravity.

He exhaled, a weary sigh "Another misfortune caused by another smart, ambitious young one," he said, voice even, "only this time he's been found out and now he puts everything at risk."

"How do we deal with this?" another presence asked from the dark.

"As we always have," the man replied. "We make our stance known, and then we see what happens after that." He lifted his hand, and the dust dispersed back into the void yet a single string of light remained, trailing from his fingers like a captured timeline.

"I will go deal with this," he said, and with that he vanished.

The six eyes that remained gazed at one another in solemn silence. In the fading echoes of the vision they had glimpsed wings and radiant forms, beings of light and many others besides. None spoke. All understood.

Meanwhile, the man who held the light-string walked a mountain road that climbed into clouds and stars. Each step was deliberate, slow, eyes kept shut by discipline more than fear. Even with his power, he did not dare claim he could withstand what he would see once he opened them.

Higher. Colder. Quieter.

The figure continued his ascent until at last he reached the mountain's crown. Nothing stood upon it save for a single door, a door suspended midair, without wall, frame, or hinge, held aloft by nothing. Its wooden surface was unmarked, its iron handle floating in perfect balance, as if time itself respected its existence.

Reverence flickered across the man's face. He knew well what it was.

One of the treasures left behind by the First Mage, the first mind to weave order from the chaos.

The Door of All Planes.

A threshold said to grant passage anywhere, to any plane, to any universe. It could be wielded in countless ways, but its true nature was far greater: a reminder that no boundary was ever absolute.

The figure exhaled a quiet sigh, lifted his hand, and knocked.

Silence answered. A silence so deep that even the stars seemed to hold their breath.

Then, after what felt like ages, came the sound of tumblers shifting, an ancient lock yielding, click by click. The man released the breath he had been holding.

His hand touched the floating handle, and as he opened the door, he also let slip the string of light. It drifted gently forward, as though it had been waiting for this, and the moment it crossed the threshold it unraveled into brilliance, expanding, stretching, until within the door's frame hung the vast image of a galaxy, alive and burning in another plane entirely.

The figure's eyes hardened, their reverence gone, replaced by cold resolve. Slowly, deliberately, he reached out his hand, fingers extending into the very heart of that galaxy.

Far from the now-swallowed world, in the universe where the goblin empire was, drifted the planet-sized vessel that had terrorized them for generations. Once pristine and awe-inspiring, it now floated battered and tattered, its hull scarred from centuries of use and battle.

Inside, only a handful of mages remained. Many had fallen, claimed by age, rival powers, or experiments gone awry but their absence had not diminished the resolve of those still alive. The vessel itself hummed faintly as it moved, a living testament to the relentless ambition of its inhabitants. Research and experiments continued unabated, large-scale projects unfolding across its corridors as if the world outside were irrelevant.

Chapter 629:

At this moment, five sixth-tier mages gathered in a chamber that seemed to hum with quiet energy. Before them floated what at first glance appeared to be a cluster of glowing orbs, but a closer look revealed them to be planets, each marked and cataloged by these mages over the course of their long journeys.

Their attention was drawn to one orb in particular, its light extinguished. Silence fell, thick and oppressive.

One of the mages reached forward, hand hovering over the dead world. With a practiced motion, he grasped it, feeling the absence of warmth, gravity, and energy that had once defined it. A subtle shiver ran through the room, as if the vessel itself recognized the significance of this void.

The orb expanded before them, revealing the planet in full, accompanied by a stream of data flowing alongside it. Charts, records, and the results of countless experiments appeared in the air, giving the mages a complete view of the world's history and its failures.

Yet none of them flinched, nor did they look saddened. Failure was something they were accustomed to. Worlds rose and fell under their scrutiny; civilizations crumbled and experiments ended in ashes.

But this planet drew their attention. Two figures within it stood out among the ruins, marked by the streams of information that highlighted their presence.

"Kairos and Vellok," one mage murmured, eyes narrowing as the other scanned the data. Their focus lingered mostly on Vellok.

A sudden awareness swept the group: one of the mages, the one who had carried out the experiment on Vellok, was missing.

Envy and resentment twisted their expressions. This absent mage, he who had found a path to progress further than any of them was no longer among them at this current moment because of his accomplishments. Because of this, they were once again reminded of their own stagnation.

"What went wrong with this world?" one of the mages finally asked, addressing the ship itself.

The vessel was silent. Then a single response came, slow and deliberate "The Abyss... and Origin Gods."

A shiver ran through the mages at the words. The mention of those names carried a weight, a history of destruction and absolute divinity.

"It escaped... and it is not fallen."

The mages collectively exhaled, a mixture of irritation and resignation. One of them waved a hand, and a table materialized, complete with a large, pristine wine bottle and crystal glasses. Each mage poured themselves a glass, the clinking of crystal a strange punctuation to the dread in the chamber.

Now, all they could do was wait.

"How sad for Theron," one of the mages murmured, their gaze drifting elsewhere along the vessel. "He finally found his path."

Their eyes fell upon him somewhere in the vessel. Theron the very mage who had captured an angel and sealed it inside Vellok floated in the air, cocooned by wings that wrapped around him like a protective shell. His body, once marked by age and toil, now appeared youthful, suspended in a state of slumber. He looked serene, untouched by the struggles of the world below, yet the aura surrounding him hummed with untapped power.

Then, as if drawn by unseen authority, a hand appeared, vast beyond comprehension larger than the vessel itself. The mages, all watching, raised their wine glasses in silent acknowledgment before downing them in unison, a ritual marking the arrival of forces greater than themselves.

The hand moved with precision. It destroyed nothing as it passed through the ship, leaving halls, walls, and experiments untouched. Its sole purpose was singular: Theron.

The giant hand grasped him. The cocoon of wings collapsed slightly as Theron's eyes snapped open. Confusion and panic surged through him. He found himself surrounded by titanic pillars, impossibly massive, stretching beyond sight.

Rising higher, he caught a glimpse of the vessel below and the other mages, standing in ritual formation with wine cups in hand, their gazes fixed upon him. Theron recognized the custom at once: a gesture of acknowledgment, reserved only for the rarest of moments when a mage's ascent or failure was witnessed in full.

Panic overtook him. He slammed his fists against the surrounding pillars, flailing desperately, his voice cracking with fear and pleading:

"No! No! No!!! Please! Just give me one century! One century, and our civilization will gain yet another seventh-tier figure!"

The hand did not relent. It held him firm, unwavering, indifferent to his pleas. The mages below remained silent, their ritual complete, observing without interference.

Theron's cries echoed through the void-like space, swallowed by the enormity of the pillars, the hand, and the judgment looming over him. In that moment, he understood: he was no longer in control. His path, no matter how brilliant, had already been assessed and the verdict had been rendered.

A single voice, impossibly deep and resonant, responded to him:

"This is where your path ends. Your actions will be erased from our history but your path will be preserved, for any young, brave soul who dares to thread it. Our civilization must endure for your path to carry forward."

With that, the hand, and Theron within it, vanished from this universe entirely.

Back in the previous world, the figure's gaze lingered on his hand for a moment, noting the struggling mage still suspended within it. He said nothing. Calmly, he closed the door.

Then he knocked again.

Another long silence followed. Finally, the lock turned with a slow click, and the door swung open once more. What greeted him this time was unmistakable: a gate, gleaming faintly, flanked by cherubs whose faces were serene and unreadable.

The figure extended his hand, making a precise throwing gesture. Theron was hurled through the threshold, landing just before the gate. His wings folded awkwardly around him, and his young, exhausted form hit the ground with a thud.

The figure's eyes darkened with unease, sensing something approaching, a force unfamiliar, swift, and unstoppable.

With a snap of his fingers, the door slammed shut. He fell to the ground, muscles trembling, sweat dripping from his brow.

"Hope this saves us... and buys us time," he muttered, voice low, almost to himself.

The void around him remained still for a heartbeat, then pulsed with distant, unseen motion, as if the universe itself had taken note of what had just transpired.

A Seventh-Tier being, reduced to trembling on the floor, his breath ragged and body slick with sweat, such a sight should have inspired awe or sorrow. Yet the figure only sighed. Compared to the old man who had just met his end, his current condition mattered little.

Fate mages were not mere scholars of chance. They were the compass of their civilization, the reason it still clung to existence even after centuries of atrocities, betrayals, and sins committed against countless races. Their threads of foresight had preserved the mages time and time again, navigating calamities that should have long since wiped them from the stars.

And now, one had been sacrificed, not for vengeance, not for punishment, but for survival. His end was a payment to the ledger of fate, a necessary severing of threads to keep the greater weave intact.

Meanwhile, back in the goblin universe, silence reigned within the vast, battered vessel. The gathered mages looked at one another without words, their gazes steady, cold, resigned. None were surprised by what had transpired. They had all boarded this ship knowing the contract etched into their very beings.

Every action they took was theirs alone to bear. The price of discovery, of ambition, of meddling in forbidden laws was written into the marrow of their pact. Yet there were moments when one mage's actions grew so catastrophic, so egregious, that the balance of their entire race hung in the void.

When that happened, there could be no forgiveness. A scapegoat had to be chosen.

And the scapegoat was always one of their own.

The glasses they had raised earlier had not been a toast, it was a funeral rite, a mark of finality. The gesture was old as their exodus, passed down from mage to mage, a reminder that survival outweighed sentiment.

They stood in silence still, for there was nothing left to say.

One of the mages let out a heavy sigh "We should find a world to settle on... and live out the rest of our lives."

The others nodded in agreement, their faces thoughtful "Preferably one with civilized people," another added. "At least then we can leave something behind, a mark of our existence that won't vanish with the void."

Yet even as they spoke, the vision of Theron's fate lingered in their minds. The spark of ambition, the small fire that had driven them through centuries of hardship, flickered and dimmed.

The cosmos was merciless to beings such as themselves. Every step forward had to be fought for, carved from uncertainty, and claimed through tireless effort. They had learned this the hard way: no path was guaranteed, no plan absolute.

And yet, somewhere out there, there were beings who slept for a bit only to wake up surpassing all they could ever hope to achieve in a single lifetime. One step ahead, always, unconcerned with the conventions and contracts that bound others, showing how unfair the cosmos was.

Chapter 630:

The mages exchanged glances, understanding in silence that no amount of planning, no amount of effort, could prepare them for such a force. For now, all they could do was endure, and hope that their existence, fragile as it was, could somehow leave a trace long after they were gone.

Meanwhile, back at the abyss, Ikenga and Keles knew nothing of what was unfolding elsewhere. Their minds were fixed only on the nearing end of their long, harrowing journey.

Once they plunged through the gaping maw and into the abyss, the entire layer shuddered violently as though the world itself convulsed. The moment of passage was disorienting like being pulled through the breath of a living thing. In the chaos, Zarvok, who had flown beside them like a steady shadow, was gone before either of them could register his absence.

From above, Ikenga and Keles tried to take in their bearings. He had expected the familiar sight of mountains turned upon their heads, rubble scattered across an endless void, debris from conquered world swallowed and broken apart. That was what the abyss always was to him a graveyard of collapse.

But the sight that greeted him instead made his eyes curl up in a frown. The abyss had... grown. The space itself had expanded, stretching outward into impossible breadth. And all the wreckage, all the mountains, cities, forests, and nameless fragments swallowed by the maw had been woven seamlessly into the fabric of this layer. It was as if they had always been here, planted and rooted since the beginning of time. Not chaotic, not discarded, but absorbed into a larger design.

The goblins stared wide-eyed, their shrill voices catching in their throats. The ratmen squeaked nervously, huddling together. Even Rattan, who had carried himself with bitter certainty, found his jaw slack. For them, plunging into the maw had meant death, obliteration, an end to fear. Yet now they found themselves standing where they had been before, as though no passage had occurred at all.

One moment they were swallowed whole by darkness.

The next, they were back again, their surroundings eerily unchanged except for the undeniable sense that the world around them was larger.

Something had taken them in. Something had claimed them. The streets looked the same. The buildings looked the same. But the air once calm, humming with a soothing presence of mana that seeped into

their very bones was long gone, only a pervasive energy that seems to want to drill into them forcefully. And when their eyes turned skyward, the celestial body of the world, the sun they had always known, that reassuring marker of time was gone.

In its place stretched the abyss-layer's sky: vast, formless, and endless, as if no boundary could hold it. It was a ceiling without light, yet not without weight, pressing down on them with the reminder that they were far from the world they once belonged to.

Confusion gnawed at their minds. Whispers spread among goblins and ratmen alike, a rising storm of questions without answers. How could the streets remain, the buildings remain, when the sky had been stolen? Had they been returned, or had their world been rewritten?

Desperate for guidance, they turned their gaze toward the palace, hoping their newly crowned emperor might explain the unfathomable.

But Rattan was no longer among them.

Deep within the core of this abyssal layer, hidden from sight, Zarvok slumbered inside a vast egg of shifting black stone and glowing veins of crimson light. His small impish body had dissolved, unmade, as the blessing of ascension wrapped him in silence. Within that cocoon, he was left to shape his future self crafting a body worthy of his throne. The past was behind him: impish weakness, the sneers of others, the scraps of survival. Now he dreamed of grandeur, and could at will sculp his flesh into something divine.

With the transformation came memories and knowledge not his own, fragments of truths whispered by the abyss itself. Each vision drew him deeper into the design of his new form, each secret strengthening the foundations of his status.

For Zarvok, it was but a sleep a long, tranquil dreaming.

But for those left outside, it was a prison of time. Months passed in his absence. Months of silence. Months where the emperor gave no command, save one: the demons were bound by his will to restrain themselves, forced to obey his final order before he withdrew.

It was an unnatural law. Demons, who thrived in cruelty and bloodlust, were made to stay in their claws and hold back their fangs. The repression gnawed at them like rot beneath the skin.

The goblins, ratfolk, and ogres were quick to sense it. Fear, once their leash, was gone. They tested the limits, at first timidly, then boldly striking, jeering, provoking. And the demons, bound by Zarvok's will, did not answer. No matter what insult or wound was given, not a blade nor claw was raised in retaliation.

What began as confusion soon twisted into aggression. Without the demons to keep them in check, the conquered creatures spiraled out of control. Violence turned inward, tribe against tribe, clan against clan, as the fragile order Rattan had imposed began to unravel.

The most they ever drew from the demons was a glare or a guttural snarl. No more, no less. That was the extent of their menace, bound and muzzled by Zarvok's last command.

The breaking point came when the goblins, ratfolk, and ogres all gathered at the palace gates, desperate for order. They sought out Rattan, their old anchor, but he was nowhere to be found. In his absence, something else filled the void.

Greed.

Whispers turned to shouts, shouts to accusations, and accusations to bloodshed. Each race claimed the throne, each proclaimed their right to lead in this new world. The palace steps became a battlefield.

The irony was cruel. Once, each had wielded mana, or unnatural gifts that set them apart. Now, all of that was gone. The abyss had sealed away their strength, leaving them stripped bare, reduced to nothing but flesh, bone, and what meager experience they carried. For the first time, they were equals forced back to the same starting line. The throne they fought for was nothing but a seat in a broken hall, yet it was enough to drive them into frenzy.

Meanwhile, Rattan the very one they had sought—was rotting in a dungeon below the new obsidian castle raised by the demons for Zarvok. Shackled in the dark, he waited, unwilling and uncertain, for his own fate.

Months bled into one another, until the day the air itself changed.

A suffocating weight rolled across the abyss-layer like a black tide. Every creature, goblin, ratman, ogre, demon felt it press against their skulls and spines. None could resist. One by one, they collapsed to their knees, foreheads pressed into the earth. Fear, reverence, and instinct bound them in place.

From the depths of the ground, the egg rose.

Vast, luminous veins of crimson energy pulsed across its surface as it floated upward, towering above the trembling masses. It climbed higher and higher until it hung in the abyssal sky like a second sun, a world unto itself.

Then it cracked.

Fragments fell away in shards of burning light. And from within, Zarvok emerged. He looked unchanged, still the same impish frame, the crooked horns, the too-small body that seemed almost pitiful before. But none dared laugh. None dared scoff. His very presence was an ocean pressing down upon them, drowning thought, crushing will.

Zarvok's eyes slid open. A meaningless gesture now, for he no longer required them. The layer itself was his gaze, his hearing, his touch. Every stone, every ripple of air, every trembling figure pressed to the ground was known to him as if they were etched into his very being. There was no corner of this abyss hidden from his sight.

A slow smile curved across his lips. After all the scorn, all the clawing and crawling, he had finally reached the height he had dreamt of. He was no longer the runt of the pit, he was its sovereign.

In an instant, his form dissolved from the sky and reappeared before Ikenga and Keles. Unlike the others, they had not bent their knees. Their divinity was sealed, their power smothered, and yet they stood defiant.

The figure that greeted them was not the impish demon they remembered. Zarvok now wore the guise of a man, dressed immaculately in a white suit that gleamed unnaturally against the abyss's dim light. His smile lingered, sharp and knowing, as he regarded them.

"It is no disgrace," he said softly, his voice both velvet and steel, "to bow before a Demon Lord."

But Ikenga's and Keles's expressions did not change. No awe. No fear. Only a cold, unyielding glare that cut through his words.

Zarvok's smile did not falter. With a flicker of will, he loosened the binds that chained their strength. Power rushed back into their veins, not as full as before, but enough to remind them their current position.