

Guardian gods 301

Chapter 301:

Björn stared at the barrel in his hand, his expression unreadable as Mahu's words echoed in the desolate realm around them. "Ah, the Upside Down," he murmured, turning the barrel in his hands as if contemplating something.

"And why should I care about that cursed place?" Björn asked, locking eyes with Mahu.

Mahu leaned forward slightly, her smirk never fading. "Because the expansion of the hole threatens more than just your people. It will consume everything, even the remnants of what you once held dear. You may not care now, but if the Upside Down breaches further into this world, your precious kingdom, your war, and all that you've built will be swallowed whole. You'll lose everything—again."

Björn's grip on the barrel tightened, the wood creaking under the force. "Unfortunately, I don't have much knowledge of the Upside Down."

"That cursed place is one of the mysteries that has plagued existence since the beginning of time. Even we demons of the abyss have no such knowledge of what happens there. Every bit of information about that world is held personally by those who've dealt with it."

"As for the expansion of the hole, I might have some ways to deal with that. Either you step into the Upside Down itself and fight back your counterpart or opposite selves, or you create a big seal to stop the hole from expanding further," Björn said, looking at Mahu, whose frown deepened.

"My brothers are asking," Mahu said, communicating with Crepuscular and Jaws, "what are the chances we come back unharmed from the Upside Down?"

"The chances are pretty high, as your counterparts were only recently born. If not for the absence of Ikeng and Keles opening the hole, they would still be biding their time, growing before making a move like they are now," Björn answered.

A silver portal opened behind Mahu. Before stepping through, she turned to Björn. "You should deal with Murmur quickly—for the sake of everyone, and yourself."

As Mahu emerged from the silver portal into her realm, the familiar cool air wrapped around her like a cloak. Crepuscular and Jaws were already seated, waiting for her.

Crepuscular's voice was the first to break the silence, his deep, gravelly tone reverberating through the air. "So, which one do we choose—the seal or going there ourselves?" His sharp eyes gleamed with curiosity and a hint of unease.

Jaws, who had remained quiet until now, shifted restlessly. His massive frame bristled with tension, his gaping maw stretching slightly as if considering the taste of the battle to come. "I don't like the idea of sealing something like that," he growled. "Feels too temporary. If the hole's already expanding, it's just a matter of time before it breaks through again."

Mahu crossed her arms, her gaze thoughtful as she considered their options. Björn had given them two choices: step into the Upside Down and confront their counterparts, or create a seal that would temporarily halt the expansion of the breach. Neither option was without risk.

"The seal might buy us time," Mahu said slowly, her voice steady, "but I agree with Jaws. It's a patch, not a solution. Sooner or later, the Upside Down will push through. We could find ourselves in a worse situation, dealing with a larger breach, stronger counterparts, and more chaos."

Crepuscular nodded but remained cautious. "But entering the Upside Down is no small matter either. You heard Björn—the counterparts are newly born, yes, but they are still dangerous. Stepping into that realm... it's their home, their ground. We'll be at a disadvantage. There are three of us, but five of them."

Jaws let out a low snarl. "I don't care if it's their home. If we strike now, while they're still young, we can finish them before they have a chance to become a real threat. The longer we wait, the more powerful they become. And I'd rather face them head-on than spend eternity watching a seal slowly crumble."

Crepuscular shook his head. "Time is a double-edged blade for us at this very moment. Buying ourselves time means there's a slight chance for our two other siblings to return, and things could go back to normal. You're right that the longer we wait, the harder it will be, but we should also try to buy time for our siblings."

Mahu nodded at Crepuscular's words before asking him, "Do you have any idea how to build a seal, and what type of seal we should use to close the breach?"

Crepuscular tapped the table between them, where an image of the godling race appeared. "Our children and their people have come far in things like rune-building, which I think is necessary for a seal. We could have them work on it, explain the situation, and see if they can create a miracle."

Mahu took in Crepuscular's words, her sharp gaze flickering over the image of the godling race floating between them. The thought of relying on their children's ingenuity was both a risk and a necessity. Their offspring had evolved in ways even the three siblings couldn't have anticipated, though Mahu was hesitant to put faith in them for something as critical as sealing the breach.

"We would need to move quickly," Mahu said, her voice steady but tinged with urgency. "If the Upside Down keeps expanding, we might not have the luxury of time for them to figure this out. But if they are as advanced as you say, then perhaps we can buy ourselves a window."

Jaws folded his arms, his expression still skeptical. "You're suggesting we sit and wait for our children to come up with a miracle while that hole keeps growing? I'm not thrilled about placing our fate in their hands."

Crepuscular looked unfazed by Jaws' objection. "True, but their understanding of runes has surpassed ours. Our innate talent for doing things without training or understanding how it works limits us in some ways."

To demonstrate, Crepuscular drew a rune in midair. Mahu and Jaws stared at the glowing symbol before Crepuscular spoke again. "You both can do what I just did. You've just never bothered because it's been of no use to you, or you never needed to."

Pointing at the rune, Crepuscular added, "When I wanted to create this rune, I had something in mind for shielding, and this was the result. I succeeded, yet I have no idea why it worked."

Mahu's eyes narrowed as she studied the rune, her fingers twitching slightly, as if tempted to dispel it. Jaws gave it a disinterested glance, still skeptical.

"So, you're saying we're powerful enough to create without truly understanding," Mahu mused, her tone thoughtful. "But that lack of understanding is also our limitation."

Crepuscular nodded. "Exactly. The three of us, as origin gods, can create runes instinctively, but it's more like... brute force. Our power shapes the world around us, yes, but we do so without fully comprehending the deeper mechanics at play. That's where the godlings and our offspring excel."

Jaws huffed in annoyance. "So what? Power is power. I could crush that rune with a thought. What good is their precision if they can't match our strength?"

Crepuscular remained calm. "It's not about strength, Jaws. It's about control. Yes, we can create runes and seals, but our methods are raw—almost chaotic. Think about it: if we were to create a seal to stop the breach, how stable would it be? How long before our lack of understanding leads to its collapse?"

Mahu's brow furrowed as she processed the idea. "You're suggesting that while we may have the raw power, they have the knowledge to create something far more sustainable."

"Exactly," Crepuscular continued. "The godlings have spent generations studying the laws that govern rune crafting and magic. They don't just wield power—they've built intricate systems of knowledge around it. Every rune they create has a purpose and structure. They can control outcomes with precision because they understand how and why these things work."

Jaws frowned, still doubtful. "But we've lived for ages—what's stopping us from learning that too?"

Crepuscular shook his head. "It's not that simple. We are beings of raw force. Our power is innate—woven into our very essence. It's why we don't need to learn. When we desire something, it happens. You've all noticed it too—as we get stronger, our capabilities grow, and certain things that once seemed impossible now come naturally."

"But the godlings and our offspring are closer to the mortal world. They've developed not just power, but mastery over that power. Their abilities might seem weaker, but they're far more refined."

Jaws nodded slowly. "So even though we could create a seal, it would be a temporary fix at best—because we'd be doing it without understanding the full implications. Our seal might hold for a while, but it would eventually fail."

"Exactly," Crepuscular replied. "With our guidance, they can create a seal that may not only stop the breach but prevent further expansion. We can provide the power they need, but they'll provide the precision."

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"I already have an idea for the rune seal," Crepuscular continued. "Something like a tower, and we'll need a skilled craftsman. Ikenga's grandson, Ember, is more than capable of handling it."

Jaws nodded. "The sea is rich with minerals. Tide will be more than happy to provide those. As for the Harpies, their achievements in their power system show their talent in rune crafting. We can leave that part to them, and they can collaborate with other experts to complete the task."

Mahu nodded. "In the meantime, we'll focus all our power on keeping the breach under control and buying our children more time to finish their work."

Once the gods reached an agreement, they began to move quickly, informing their children of the situation. The demigods, who had been hesitant about their ascension, began to take the matter more seriously.

They understood how powerful their parents were, and the fact that the gods were acting this way—and even seeking their help—made them realize the severity of the situation.

Ikem immediately had Zephyr inform Ember of the new mission, and he also sent messages to the scholars in the shrine. Those who had studied runes would be leaving their continent and heading to the western continent, where they would meet the Harpies to work together.

While Ikem was busy handling this, Zephyr brought him more news from Osita. For some reason, Ikem didn't react heavily to the bad news.

He had begun to see the allure of ascension. Even though things seemed chaotic above the stars where the gods resided, he believed it would be better than dealing with all the human mess and demons.

It might also have been due to how the apelings had handled recent issues that he didn't feel the need to react much. Instead, he left the news to Zephyr for him to handle.

Turning to Zephyr, Ikem offered a rare moment of trust. "You handle this. I'm sure you'll make the right call."

Zephyr blinked, surprised by his father's uncharacteristic delegation. But he nodded, grateful for the responsibility. The gods were evolving, and their children were following suit.

Meanwhile, deep in the southern continent at Murmur's underground lair, his face had already healed after devouring a number of souls. At the moment, he wore a frown as he stared at his palm, where a red circular dot was revolving.

This was the red dot of light representing Björn. Murmur frowned because the instability and lack of control he had sensed from Björn had vanished. Somehow, Björn had regained his senses.

"Too hasty," Murmur said aloud to himself. The whispers of the gods' counterparts echoed in his mind. He knew of the Upside Down, and he had hoped it would occupy the Origin gods while he carried out his plans.

It seemed the Origin gods were not too prideful to seek help and understanding from those who were once their enemies. Murmur had not anticipated this, and now his plans were disrupted by an unintended move from an Origin god.

Nonetheless, he was thankful, as the movement of the Upside Down had him a bit disturbed. He wasn't happy that his game was interrupted, but if the Upside Down issue could be handled, the loss would be worth it.

Things were already in his favor. Hastiness wouldn't give him what he wanted; instead, it would leave him open to mistakes. Murmur, with a distant look on his face, thought of Ikenga and Keles, a smirk playing at the edge of his lips. "I wonder how those two are doing?" he mused.

Down in the northern continent, out in the snowy plains, two figures could be seen moving in the snowy wind. One was a wolf, but instead of fur, its body was covered in bark-like plants. The wood that made up the wolf's body was white, blending with the snow, but upon closer inspection, red vine-like veins could be seen running throughout its form.

The wolf was easily the size of a car, and on its back sat a teenage-looking girl dressed in regal royal clothing. The young girl had the head of a wolf with horns resembling those of a dragon. This was Princess Lunara, of the Werewolf Kingdom.

Contrary to her childish face, there was a predatory look in her eyes as she sniffed the icy cold wind, the wolf beneath her doing the same.

They both caught a scent immediately, and the wolf sprang into motion, disappearing into the snow. Right after they left, a heavily armored werewolf figure manifested where they had been. It looked in the direction of the two disappearing figures, shook its head, and vanished once again.

The prey the young werewolf princess had found was one of the top predators on the continent: the snowy bears. Individually, they were strong, but together they were a nightmare.

Princess Lunara had caught the scent of a snow bear. Her ears and the wolf's ears twitched as they picked up the sounds of something eating and bones snapping.

The wolf slowed its pace, walking carefully as Lunara lowered her body, moving closer to their target. Soon, the massive figure of the snow bear came into view, munching on the corpse of another wolf.

The bear was even larger than the wolf the girl was riding. An icy dagger appeared in her hand as she slowly stood up, when suddenly a snowball struck the bear, catching its attention.

The bear sniffed the air and immediately turned its bloody maw towards Lunara and her wolf. A roar, followed by a chilling icy wind, was directed at them.

Taken aback by the sudden snowball, Lunara caught sight of a large upright figure disappearing into the snow. Her wolf began moving as a huge icy spike shot up from the ground beneath them.

The bear abandoned its meal and charged toward them. Lunara, with her icy dagger in hand, jumped off the wolf. "You know what to do, Nova," she called to the wolf as she rolled on the ground.

The clothing on her back, torn by two openings, was replaced by white wings that grew from her shoulders. With a flap of her wings, she took to the sky.

Nova charged at the bear, which swung its ice-covered claws at him. Nova narrowly dodged the attack and opened his jaws, revealing red-stained teeth, as he bit down on the bear's swinging claw.

The bear, seeing this, grabbed Nova's neck with its other paw and flung him away. Mid-air, Nova caught himself as white roots grew from the ground, holding the bear in place just as it was about to charge again.

Seizing the opportunity, Lunara dove from the sky with her dagger, which grew in size, turning into a massive icy sword. She swung it at the bear's neck, but the bear roared, and the icy wind solidified around its body as if it were freezing in place.

As her sword made contact with the ice, the sound of metal clashing rang out, sending a shockwave that scattered the snow. The bear's body began to grow an icy armor, which even encased the roots that held it down. With a slight shake, the frozen roots broke free.

Realizing she hadn't succeeded, Lunara immediately took to the sky again.

As Princess Lunara soared back into the air, her eyes narrowed in frustration. The snow bear had managed to reinforce itself with icy armor, much tougher than she anticipated. She flapped her wings, ascending higher, watching as the enormous beast below let out a bellow that shook the snowy landscape. The bear's cold, crystalline eyes locked onto hers, challenging her authority as the predator of the northern continent.

Nova, still circling the bear, snarled through gritted teeth. His wooden body creaked under the strain of the earlier throw, but his red vines pulsed with new energy, regenerating the damaged areas. He darted around the bear, looking for an opening, but the thick ice that coated the beast's body made it difficult to find a vulnerable spot.

Lunara's mind raced. She needed a new strategy. The snowy bear's defense was formidable, but it wasn't invulnerable. Every creature has a weakness, she thought. Her eyes darted across the battlefield, taking in the terrain. They were on the snowy plains—flat, open space with little cover. But the cold... the biting, unforgiving cold of the north was something she and Nova could use to their advantage.

"Nova! Don't attack directly!" she called out as she descended slightly. "Wear it down. Make it move, tire it out. Its armor is strong, but the more it moves, the more energy it will burn maintaining that ice."

Nova growled in acknowledgment, changing his tactics. Instead of charging the bear head-on, he began a series of quick feints, darting in and out of the bear's reach, forcing it to twist and turn to keep up. The bear roared in irritation, swinging its massive, icy-clad paws at the swift wolf, but Nova was too fast, ducking under the swings and staying just out of reach.

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From above, Lunara observed the bear's growing frustration. "Good... let it waste its energy". The bear's icy armor glistened in the weak northern sunlight, but she noticed cracks starting to form along the edges. It wasn't a creature meant for agility; its strength lay in brute force, and Lunara and Nova could use that to their advantage.

The bear, sensing the shift in tactics, bellowed again, and this time, it slammed its fists into the ground. The impact sent shockwaves through the earth, and massive spikes of ice shot up in all directions, aiming to trap Nova and force him into a confrontation. The wolf dodged with nimble grace, but one of the spikes grazed his side, leaving a deep gash. Red vines pulsed rapidly, healing the wound almost immediately, but Lunara knew they couldn't afford many more close calls like that.

Lunara dove from the sky, her wings tucked tight against her body for speed. As she neared the bear, she imbued more mana magic into her sword. Just as the bear prepared another swipe at Nova, she struck from above, slashing at its back where the armor had begun to weaken.

This time, her blade cut through the thick ice, sending shards flying in all directions. The bear roared in pain, the icy barrier on its back shattering under her assault. But it wasn't over yet. The beast swung around with terrifying speed, catching Lunara off guard and batting her aside with one powerful swing of its paw.

She crashed into the snow, the impact knocking the wind out of her. Her wings trembled, and she felt a sharp pain shoot up her side where the bear's claws had grazed her. Nova howled in alarm, rushing to her side, but Lunara gritted her teeth and waved him off.

"I'm fine," she hissed, struggling to stand. "We're close. We just need one more opening."

The bear, now enraged and wounded, charged toward them with reckless abandon. Its icy armor had begun to crack in several places, and the bloodlust in its eyes made it clear that it was willing to risk everything to end this fight.

Lunara glanced at Nova. "One more time. On my signal."

Nova nodded, his red vines glowing with renewed energy. He darted forward, drawing the bear's attention once again. This time, however, he wasn't dodging; he was leading the beast, forcing it to follow him toward a section of the plain where the snow was deep and treacherous.

Lunara, despite the pain, took to the air again. She watched as Nova lured the bear into the snowdrifts, its massive body starting to sink slightly into the deeper snow. With each step, the bear's movements became slower, more labored.

"Nova! Hold it!"

At her command, Nova leaped onto the bear's back, his wooden jaws sinking into the exposed cracks in its icy armor. His red vines snaked out, wrapping around the bear's limbs, trying to immobilize it. The bear howled in fury, thrashing wildly, but the deep snow and Nova's grip were slowing it down.

Lunara swooped in for the final blow. Her wings beat furiously as she summoned all the icy magic she could muster, channeling it into her blade. She dived toward the bear's head, aiming for the exposed spot at the base of its neck.

With a fierce battle cry, she brought the icy sword down in a final, decisive strike.

The blade pierced through the bear's thick hide, sinking deep into its flesh. The beast roared one last time, a sound that echoed through the snowy plains, before it collapsed, its body convulsing as the icy armor shattered completely. The ground around them rumbled as the snow settled, and then, silence.

Lunara landed beside the fallen bear, breathing heavily. Nova padded over to her, his glowing vines slowly retracting back into his body. The wolf nuzzled her gently, and Lunara smiled weakly, resting a hand on his head.

"We did it," she whispered, though her eyes were already scanning the horizon. "But something tells me this isn't over yet."

True to the princess's word, right after the bear fell, Nova immediately bit the neck of the princess, pulling back, only for a white shadow to flash by, followed by the disappearance of the bear's corpse.

Lunara, seeing that her prize was taken, roared out loud. Unlike the roar of a wolf, hers was more like a dragon's. Nova let go of the princess, who fell on all fours as her body began to change.

The princess's clothing disappeared with her transformation as she turned into a full wolf, smaller than Nova, but the dragon wings behind her bridged the height difference.

The princess roared once again, and the snowy wind came to a halt, pushing apart to reveal a figure in the eyes of the princess and Nova.

The figure resembled the princess's distant cousin, the apelings, though this one was much bigger and covered in snow-white hair.

The snow yeti had a mischievous look on its face as it dined on the torn-off leg of the bear. It pointed at the angry princess and Nova, followed by a mocking laugh.

While laughing, it grabbed a handful of snow, forming it into a snowball, which it then threw at the princess. Lunara's expression grew angrier as the snowball transformed into a ball of ice just before reaching her.

The ice ball hovered in front of the princess, its shape shifting into an ice spike as long as a hand. The spike shot toward the yeti, which immediately became enraged, raising a wall of ice to block the projectile.

As soon as the spike was deflected, the yeti vaulted over the ice wall. Simultaneously, the ice formed into a massive staff, which it slammed into the ground.

A path of ice spikes grew from the ground, heading toward the princess and Nova. Lunara quickly took to the sky but soon found herself covered by a large shadow.

The yeti had boosted itself into the air, with an ice pillar growing beneath it as it lunged at the princess. Lunara's eyes widened as she folded her wings to protect herself from the staff swinging toward her.

The pain she anticipated never came. Unfolding her wings, she saw the yeti with a panicked expression, looking down.

Nova was no longer in his wolf form, now appearing as a werewolf. A white vine had grown from Nova's hand, wrapping around the yeti's feet and pulling it down before it could strike the princess.

The yeti, in a panic, fell from the sky toward the ground. Sharp ice claws grew from the princess's paws as she rushed toward the descending yeti.

At the same time, Nova stomped the ground, causing white wooden spikes to grow from where the yeti would land. The yeti's eyes flashed as it threw its staff toward the wooden spikes below.

The falling staff was followed by an explosion of cold air that froze the wooden spikes, blowing them away. Simultaneously, the staff began absorbing the snow around it, growing larger.

The yeti stretched out its claws, grabbing hold of the massive, growing staff. At the same time, using its feet like hands, it gripped the vine that held it and pulled Nova up into the sky.

Nova let go of the vine as the princess was upon the yeti, Lunara's claws scraped against the Yeti's icy fur as it spun around the massive staff, blood briefly splattering before freezing in the cold air. The

creature's let out a snarl of frustration as it reached the ground, using the enormous staff to steady itself. The ground beneath the Yeti cracked with a frigid tremor as the air grew colder, snow swirling faster around them, obscuring the battlefield in a thick white haze.

Nova, still mid-air, twisted his body and landed with a thud, quickly regaining his footing. His werewolf form towered, white vines pulsing with energy as they wove through the snow beneath his feet, creeping toward the Yeti. His eyes glowed red with focus, and with a sharp growl, he stretched out his arm, summoning more vines to trap the beast. The Yeti, sensing the attack, slammed the now shrunken staff into the ground once again, causing a shockwave of frost that shattered the approaching vines into splinters of ice.

Lunara, high above, let out another dragon-like roar, her wings propelling her faster through the sky as the icy wind bent to her will. She circled around for another dive, her eyes glowing with a furious intensity.

"Now, Nova!" she shouted, her voice cutting through the howling wind.

Nova bared his fangs and charged, his claws digging deep into the frozen ground as he closed the distance between him and the Yeti. White roots erupted from the earth, coiling like serpents around the Yeti's limbs, momentarily pinning it in place.

Lunara, her wings shimmering with icy light, folded them back and dove straight at the trapped Yeti, her claws extending into long, razor-sharp icicles. As she descended, she focused all her power into the tip of her claws, intending to pierce the Yeti's chest and end its mockery once and for all.

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But the Yeti was far from defeated. With a guttural roar, it flexed its muscular arms, shattering the vines that held it in place. It swung its enormous staff upwards, aiming for Lunara mid-dive. At the last moment, Lunara twisted her body, narrowly avoiding the full brunt of the swing, but the staff grazed her wing, sending a shock of pain down her side.

She hissed in pain but didn't falter. Her claws still glowing with icy energy, she slashed across the Yeti's chest, leaving a deep, freezing wound that spread frost over the creature's fur. The Yeti howled in agony, staggering back as ice encased the wound, slowing its movements.

Nova took advantage of the Yeti's vulnerability, leaping into the air with a mighty howl. His form shifted again, his body becoming even larger, his claws sharper. He landed on the Yeti's back, sinking his fangs into its thick fur, and vines erupted from the ground once more, ensnaring the Yeti's arms and legs with unrelenting force.

Lunara, hovering in the air, prepared for the final blow. She raised her claw, now glowing with the full power of her ice magic, ready to strike down and end the battle. But just as she was about to descend, the ground beneath the Yeti exploded in a burst of cold energy, sending shockwaves through the snow.

The Yeti, in its act of defiance triggered a massive ice eruption, launching shards of frozen earth and snow into the air. Lunara and Nova were caught off guard, both thrown back by the force of the explosion.

The frozen shard grazed both the skin of the princess and Nova. As the snow settled, the Yeti, bloodied, stood tall, its breath a bit ragged, but its eyes still burning with anger.

Lunara landed hard on the ground, her wings tattered but still functional. She gritted her teeth and stood up, her body trembling from exhaustion. Nova, also battered, growled slowly, his eyes fixed on the staggering Yeti.

The yeti once again smirked at both of them as it drummed its chest followed by a loud roar. The huge yeti fell on all four and began rushing towards them.

Getting close, the Yeti raised its huge hand to fall on both the princess and Nova who was now in front of her protecting her. The air above the Yeti head twisted as the werewolf general who had been following behind appeared at the head of the Yeti.

As the general landed on the Yeti head, the monster's whole body sank like a huge weight was dropped on it. The yeti fell face forwards as its head busted like tomatoes followed by a blood spray that froze into red mist once it touched the air.

The Yeti's blood sprayed into the cold air, freezing into a fine red mist. The beast collapsed, its body twitching one last time before falling completely still. The ground shuddered under the weight of its massive form

Nova stood up slowly, his eyes narrowing as he shifted back to his wolf form, the tension in his muscles easing slightly. Lunara, still trembling with exhaustion, tried to shake off the pain from the frozen shards that had grazed her skin. Her dragon-like wings flickered slightly, though clearly weakened.

The general leapt from the Yeti's corpse, landing gracefully before Lunara and Nova. His sharp eyes were fixed on the princess, and despite the cold surrounding them, there was a warmth in his gaze that spoke of experience and authority. He folded his arms over his broad chest, his expression unreadable at first.

"Princess Lunara," he began, his voice calm but laced with a subtle undertone of reprimand. "You were reckless."

Lunara's eyes flashed in defiance, her body tensing despite her exhaustion. "Reckless?" she spat, her wings flaring slightly as she stood to her full height. "That beast dared to mock us. I acted to put it in its place."

The general's expression didn't change, but his tone grew firmer. "And in doing so, you left yourself vulnerable. That last explosion of ice should never have caught you off guard."

Lunara clenched her fists, her claws digging into her palms. "I handled it," she snapped, her voice tight with anger. "I wounded the Yeti, didn't I? I was ready to finish it."

The general raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed by her outburst. "Wounding the enemy is not enough, Princess. You may have power, but power alone won't win every battle." He glanced briefly at Nova, who had remained silent, his eyes still locked on the general. "You relied too much on your strength in that form."

Lunara glared at him, her breath heavy from both the fight and her barely restrained anger. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice still sharp, though there was a hint of curiosity beneath it.

The general stepped closer, his gaze softening slightly as he spoke. "You chose the wrong form for this fight. As powerful as your dragon-wolf hybrid is, it's too large and too slow for an opponent like the Yeti. Speed and agility were what you needed to counter its brute strength and ice magic. Had you taken a more nimble form, perhaps the werewolf Form, you could have outmaneuvered it, rather than facing it head-on."

Lunara's eyes flickered with frustration, but she didn't immediately respond. The general continued, his tone still firm but with a touch of understanding. "You are a skilled warrior, Princess. But you must learn to adapt. Your raw power is not always the answer. Choosing the right form, the right strategy, is just as important as strength."

For a moment, the cold wind was the only sound between them. Lunara's wings lowered slightly as the weight of the general's words sank in. She hated being called out, especially in front of Nova, but she knew the general was right. Her pride kept her silent for a moment longer before she muttered, "I... I'll keep that in mind."

The general nodded approvingly. "Good. This battle is a lesson. Don't forget it."

Nova, who had remained stoic throughout the exchange, finally spoke, his voice deep and gravelly. "Next time, we'll make sure the Yeti doesn't even have the chance to smirk."

The general gave a small, approving smile. "Indeed. Now, rest and recover."

The princess shifted into her werewolf form, her clothing magically reappearing on her. She pointed at the bear she had killed, now a bloodstained mess from the battle's casualties.

"I can't feed Nova with my prey. Can I please have yours?" she asked, giving the general a cute look.

Amused, the general replied, "That wasn't the deal, Your Majesty. Nova's growth is your responsibility alone." He stopped suddenly, catching sight of the princess's puppy-dog eyes.

The air around him shifted as he slowly disappeared. "You can have my prey, but don't let your father know."

The princess hugged Nova's neck and said, "Go ahead, Nova. With this, you can become even stronger."

Nova nodded as red, root-like tendrils emerged from his body, reaching toward the fallen Yeti corpse. The tendrils pulsed as they drained the Yeti of its blood, causing the creature's body to shrivel.

As the Yeti's body shriveled under the influence of Nova's red tendrils, the once-mighty creature was reduced to a hollow shell. Nova's eyes gleamed with power as he absorbed the blood, the crimson energy coursing through his veins, enhancing his already formidable strength. His body seemed to ripple with new life, his fur bristling with the infusion of power.

The princess, still clinging to Nova's neck, smiled warmly as she felt the bond between them grow stronger. "That's it, Nova," she whispered affectionately. "With each victory, you become more unstoppable."

Nova gave a low growl of acknowledgment, his eyes glowing faintly as he savored the newfound energy. The tendrils retracted back into his body, leaving the drained Yeti lying lifeless in the snow.

The princess glanced toward where the general had vanished, a smirk playing on her lips. "You know," she mused aloud to Nova, "for someone who likes to lecture me on responsibility, the general can be rather softhearted."

Nova snorted in agreement, though his eyes remained on the Yeti's remains, his predatory instincts still lingering.

The princess straightened, her werewolf form towering with newfound confidence. "Come on, Nova. Let's head back before the general changes his mind. We don't want to risk losing his favor, especially after all that."

Nova padded beside her, his gait more powerful, his steps heavier with the strength gained from the Yeti. He glanced at the princess, sensing her satisfaction with the way the battle had turned out, despite the lecture.

As they walked through the snow-covered field, Lunara's thoughts drifted to what the general had said. She knew there was truth in his words, and though it stung to admit it, her pride wouldn't let her dwell on it for long. Instead, she focused on Nova's growth, knowing that every battle and every kill was another step toward their shared goal: becoming unbeatable.

"I'll learn," she muttered under her breath, more to herself than anyone else. "But I won't give up my way." Nova gave her a sideways glance but remained silent.

Chapter 305:

Deep below the ocean, in the world of Nana, deeper than where Tide and Flowus built their kingdom, a demon they believed they had purged still lingered in the depths.

At this very moment, the demon Aska was grappling with its own existential problems. During the last battle with Tide and Flowua, it had managed to secure the blessing of Jaws' counterpart, which it believed would be useful in boosting its strength.

Aska's research had mostly succeeded, largely due to its new body. The form of a leviathan was more suitable for receiving the blessing of a sea god, even if it was from a counterpart.

Aska coiled his massive form in the deepest trench of the ocean, his scales gleaming faintly in the abyssal dark. The pressure of the water was a familiar comfort, one of the few sensations that grounded him. The cold currents swirled lazily around his body as they always had, but now they felt different—tainted. The blessing that he had believed would make him invincible in the deep was slowly turning against him.

The whispers were louder here, far beneath the surface, where the boundary between the real world and the upside-down thinned. It was a place of power, where he once felt the pulse of the sea in his veins, commanding its flow and strength. But now, the gods from the upside-down had found him. His mind had become a battlefield, the voices worming their way into his thoughts.

He tried to close his eyes, to rest, but the moment he did, the whispers intensified. They filled his mind with half-formed words, promises of deeper knowledge, of ruling all seas—not just his own. At first, Aska had been intrigued. The power of a leviathan was vast, but the idea of unlocking even more secrets of the ocean had tempted him. When the whispers began, he had listened, straining to understand them, hoping to gain more control over his strength.

That was his mistake.

When he focused on the words, they seized him, yanking him from his watery throne and dragging him into the dark waters of the upside-down. It had been a terrifying experience—one moment, he had been surrounded by the familiar depths of his domain, and the next, he was sinking into the black sea of the upside-down, the waters corroding his powerful scales. The sting of that corrosive water had been unbearable, but it had saved him. It shocked him awake just before the massive jaws of Jaws' counterpart could swallow him whole.

Since then, he had been haunted by the experience. Now, every time he heard the whispers, his body instinctively wanted to return to that cursed place. It was like a call he couldn't ignore, an instinct imprinted on his very being. But he knew that going back meant certain death.

In the deepest trench, far away from the surface and the light of the sun, Aska lay coiled and sleepless. For most leviathans, sleep was a time of restoration, a crucial process that allowed their immense bodies to heal and grow stronger. But for Aska, sleep had become a dangerous proposition. Every time he let himself drift off, the whispers grew louder, more insistent, pulling him back to the upside-down. It was getting harder to resist.

His once-proud form was showing signs of strain. His scales, tougher than any armor, now seemed to pulse with an odd energy, a byproduct of the blessing's integration into his being. The power that he had believed would make him invincible now carried the risk of consuming him from within.

"You belong to me," the gods' voices hissed, cutting through the silence of the deep.

Aska's eyes flared open, glowing faintly in the pitch-black. He could feel the pull growing stronger with every passing moment. But Aska was not a creature to be controlled easily.

His muscles tensed as he unfurled from his resting position, massive tendrils of his body curling and uncoiling with deliberate force. If the gods' counterpart thought they could claim him, they were wrong.

But something had to be done. He couldn't continue like this—caught between two worlds, unable to rest, his mind constantly under siege.

How could he sever the connection?

Aska growled softly, the sound reverberating through the water, sending ripples out from his massive form. He had to find a way to break free from the blessing's influence.

"The sea," Aska's deep voice rippled across the trench. His body shook as if struck by a revelation.

Aska's mind raced as the revelation settled deep within him. The sea. His voice had echoed through the dark, still waters, and now his body trembled with the understanding that followed. The blessing, tied to the sea god's counterpart, had been useful to him but now it was also the chain that bound him to the upside down. If the blessing had come from the sea, perhaps it was the very water around him that amplified its grip on his mind.

Aska considered the unthinkable—leaving the sea. Every fiber of his being resisted the idea. He was a leviathan, a creature of the deep, born and molded by the crushing pressure of the ocean's abyss. His strength, his very identity, was tied to the vast expanse of water that surrounded him. Yet, now it felt like a cage.

"Could it be that simple?" Aska thought, his deep voice reverberating through the water. "The blessing, its whispers, all tied to this domain? To the god of the sea's counterpart?"

He knew the answer already. The whispers grew louder when he was submerged in the deepest trenches, where the boundary between his world and the upside down was thin. The gods of the upside down reached for him through the currents, and the sea amplified their voices. If he could escape the water's grasp, maybe he could break their influence—at least long enough to rest, long enough to think clearly once more.

The thought brought a bitter taste to his mind. It was humiliating to even consider abandoning his domain, but Aska was no fool. If staying meant losing himself, becoming a mindless puppet of the gods, then what choice did he have? Pride was worthless if it meant succumbing to their control.

He shook his massive form, sending a shockwave through the water as he resolved to act. There was one place where the sea could not follow him, a place where the ocean's influence would fade—the surface. He had not been there in centuries. His kind rarely ventured to the world above, for it was a place of lesser beings, of chaos and weakness. But now, it was his only hope.

With a sudden surge, Aska propelled himself upward, his body cutting through the dark waters with effortless power. The pressure lessened as he ascended, and the familiar darkness of the trench began to give way to faint light filtering from the surface. His mind roared with anticipation and resistance, the voices in his head growing frantic as they sensed his intention.

"You cannot escape us, Aska," the whispers hissed. "The sea is ours. You belong to us."

But Aska only growled in defiance. His instincts screamed at him to stop, to turn back to the safety of the depths, but his mind was set. He would not be a pawn of the upside down. The sea no longer felt like home—it felt like a prison.

As he broke the surface of the water, the sudden rush of air stung his senses, the unfamiliar light of the sky overwhelming his sight for a moment. Aska hovered there, his massive form rippling with strength as he adjusted to the new environment. The world above felt different—alien and exposed—but for the first time in days, the whispers began to fade. The chaotic pressure in his mind lifted, if only slightly.

The relief was immediate. He could think clearly again, without the constant pull of the upside down. It was working. The connection to the sea had been severed, at least for now. But Aska knew this was only a temporary solution. The gods would find him again, and the whispers would return the moment he set foot back into the water.

Still, this was a start. But for now, he needed a place to sleep and close his eyes for rest. Aska's huge body soared into the sky as he rode the wind, searching for the nearest land where he could lie down to rest.

The sight of a massive creature leaving the sea and taking to the sky was noticed by a ship not too far away. The humans aboard, unable to clearly discern what it was, began claiming that the dragons had returned from their long rest.

Meanwhile, Ikenga and Keles had been exploring the Ratman's dream. This was their first time traversing the very mindspace of another conscious being.

They were unprepared for the surprises that came with it, such as time differences. To Ikenga and Keles, they had been wandering through the Ratman's mindspace for days, but since they weren't forced out, they realized the Ratman was still asleep.

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Another surprise was the presence of strange entities that neither Ikenga nor Keles had encountered before. Within the Ratman's consciousness were bizarre creatures, which they called "dream creatures."

These beings appeared both real and unreal at the same time, yet they paid the gods no mind and simply roamed the dreamspace. Ikenga was tempted to investigate them further but held back,

remembering from stories of his past world that venturing into someone's mindscape without fully understanding it could be dangerous.

With no interference from the dream creatures, Ikenga and Keles continued their search through the Ratman's memories. Their journey led them to a glowing magical chain wrapped around an orb. Ikenga refrained from probing it, aware of the potential consequences, but he could sense the mana radiating from the chains.

"Do you think all Ratmen have similar chains deep in their consciousness?" Ikenga asked Keles, who was circling the chained orb.

"This is our first encounter with a Ratman, so we can't draw conclusions yet. But I do think they all might have similar chains," Keles replied, glancing at Ikenga.

Ikenga could guess why she believed that, but he wanted to hear her full reasoning.

"Our exploration of this creature's memories shows that he's still a recently-turned adult Ratman. His memories reveal that, for as long as he's been able to think, their race has been oppressed by the goblins," Keles explained.

"To this point, we've yet to see any memory of him interacting with or even being near a mage who might have placed this chain on him. This leaves us with two options: either his memory was wiped, or the chain is a curse that's passed down from generation to generation."

Ikenga nodded thoughtfully at Keles' conclusion, his eyes narrowing as he processed her words. "A curse passed down through generations," he mused. "That would explain why the chain feels so deeply embedded, almost as if it's woven into his very being."

Keles stepped closer to the glowing, chained orb, her brow furrowed in contemplation. "Exactly. If this chain is part of every Ratman's mindscape, then their entire race might have been cursed for as long as they've existed."

Ikenga crossed his arms, his gaze fixed on the orb. "But why? What purpose does this curse serve? Is it purely to keep the Ratmen oppressed, or is there something more we're missing?"

Keles exhaled, shaking her head. "It's impossible to know for sure without more information. But it seems like this chain binds more than just their bodies. It shackles their potential, their ability to rise against their oppressors. If it's truly passed down from generation to generation, they're born into bondage without ever realizing it."

Ikenga's cursed tattoo pulsed as he examined the chain. "I could erode the curse," he said, "but the magical signature embedded within it is what I find troubling."

Suddenly, an idea struck him, though his expression remained grim. "It seems we'll be spending a lot of time in this world, sister," Ikenga said as he walked closer to the chained orb.

"Why is that?" Keles asked, confused.

"I have a way to break—or rather, slowly erode—the curse and chain without alarming anyone. But it will take time before the effects are noticeable," Ikenga explained as he raised his hand.

A small tree, resembling Osis, slowly took shape above Ikenga's palm. Simultaneously, his cursed tattoo glowed, and a snake-like phantom, similar to Boros, emerged from it.

The snake slithered across Ikenga's hand and up to the small tree. Gently, Ikenga placed the tree above the chained core, where it floated mid-air. Once the tree settled into position, its roots began extending, merging with the chains.

The snake coiled around the roots, wrapping itself around the tree with its head resting near the base. It opened its mouth, filled with sharp teeth, and began eating away at the roots—only for them to regenerate as the snake continued its relentless consumption.

Keles watched the scene unfold in awe, her eyes fixated on the small tree that resembled Osis and the phantom snake coiling around it. She could sense the energy radiating from both—the tree exuding a slow, regenerative power while the snake's gnawing presence steadily wore down the chains with a quiet, methodical persistence.

"Ikenga... this is impressive," Keles murmured, stepping closer. "But I have to ask—what is the purpose of this tree? How will it break the curse?"

Ikenga's eyes remained locked on the chained orb as he answered. "The tree is a symbol of life and growth, but more importantly, it's my connection to Osis' essence as a cursed tree who feeds off cursed energy. Its roots will gradually intertwine with the curse embedded in the chain, slowly sapping away its strength without alerting whatever force placed it here. It's a subtle erosion, rather than a direct attack. The tree will grow, bit by bit, and the curse will weaken."

Keles nodded, her gaze moving to the phantom snake that was tirelessly gnawing at the roots. "And the snake?"

"The snake is Boros," Ikenga explained, his tone steady. "Or rather, a fragment of her essence. It consumes the remnants of the curse as the roots regenerate. It's a cycle—one that will continue until the chain weakens enough to break, but without drawing attention to our interference."

Keles raised an eyebrow. "Ingenious. But how long do you think it will take?"

Ikenga frowned, clearly considering the complexity of the process. "I can't say for certain. years? Weeks? Months? It depends on how deeply ingrained the curse is within the ratman's essence. But we have to be patient. If we rush this, we could risk triggering a violent reaction."

Keles watched as the dream creatures dispersed, their forms turning into specks of light that slowly dissolved into the void. The sudden shift in the dreamscape's atmosphere confirmed Ikenga's warning. The consciousness was stirring, signaling it was time to leave.

With a wave of his hand, Ikenga summoned the portal that had brought them into the ratman's mind. "We should go," he said, stepping through without hesitation. Keles followed closely behind.

In an instant, they were back in the physical world, the cool air of the waking realm greeting them as they reappeared inside the moving carriage. The dim light of dawn streamed through a small crack in the carriage window, indicating that the sun was beginning to rise.

Ikenga grabbed the portal, now a small shimmering disc, and placed it back on the table. The ratman's mindspace was still visible through it, showing the creature stirring from its slumber. "It's waking up," Ikenga noted, watching the ratman shift in its bedroll, oblivious to the gods' brief intrusion into its subconscious.

"For now, we have no destination," Keles said, leaning back in her seat. "We'll keep moving, at least until something more pressing reveals itself. Perhaps the ratman will provide some entertainment in the meantime."

Ikenga smirked at her suggestion, though his mind was still on the chain and the curse. "Let's hope Zarkov and Phantom shift things on their end," he said, thinking of their allies who has their own mission set out for them.

Meanwhile, back in the city where Ikenga and Keles had left, a massive mansion sat quietly under the early morning light. In the stables, a ratman lay sprawled out, his thin body exhausted after a long night of labor. A huge, crocodile-like monster was nudging him awake, its large snout prodding at his side.

The ratman groaned but didn't seem startled by the creature. "Alright, alright, I'm up," he muttered, patting the beast's snout before getting to his feet. The monster, a creature he had tended to for years, lumbered toward the nearby well to drink while the ratman, still weary, went to fetch its morning meal.

He followed the scent of fresh meat to a large circular tub filled with blood and raw flesh. Thick ropes were tied around the tub, meant for pulling it back to the stable. With considerable effort, the ratman, despite his scrawny frame, hoisted the ropes over his shoulder and began dragging the heavy tub toward the waiting creature.

The crocodile, sensing its food approaching, moved with surprising quickness, devouring the contents of the tub the moment the ratman brought it within reach. The ratman collapsed to the ground, his arms splayed out as he stared up at the sky, breathing heavily from the exertion.

His body ached, but this was routine. As the sun continued to rise, he let his mind wander. The ratman lay sprawled out in the stable, catching his breath as the morning sun climbed higher into the sky. His thin chest rose and fell as he stared blankly into the blue, watching wisps of clouds drift lazily overhead. The massive crocodile-like beast continued tearing into its meal behind him, the wet sounds of flesh being ripped and chewed filling the otherwise peaceful silence.

This was how his mornings usually began—exhaustion from tending to the monster’s needs, followed by a brief moment of stillness before the day’s tasks pulled him back into the cycle of servitude.

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His ears twitched suddenly, catching the faint sound of someone approaching. The ratman turned his head slightly, spotting one of the stable goblin boys entering the enclosure, dragging a small cart filled with tools and supplies.

"Hey," the goblin boy called out, his voice rough from sleep. "Boss said you need to help reinforce the northern gate today. Heard some of the boards came loose."

The ratman sighed, pushing himself up from the ground. His muscles ached, still tired from the morning’s labor, but there was no choice. He nodded in response, slowly getting to his feet.

"After that, you’ll need to clean the pens. The nobles are having a feast tonight, so they’ll be checking the stables. You know how it is—everything has to be spotless," the boy added, giving him a half-smirk before turning away.

The ratman grumbled under his breath but said nothing. This was his life—a constant cycle of labor and exhaustion, all to keep the mansion’s animals fed, the stables clean, and the nobles satisfied. He grabbed a long, rusted rake from the cart and made his way toward the northern gate.

In the carriage, Ikenga and Keles watched through the small portal, their eyes fixed on the ratman’s daily routine.

"This one seems to have adapted well to his role," Keles remarked, a hint of amusement in her voice. "Or perhaps he’s simply given up hope of anything changing."

Ikenga, leaning forward slightly, observed the ratman’s movements. "It’s not adaptation—it’s survival," he said. "But there’s a difference between enduring and breaking. I wonder which one he’ll choose."

Just as he spoke, something strange caught their attention. As the ratman approached the northern gate with the rake in hand, a low, growling sound echoed from beyond the wooden fence. The ratman

paused, his ears perking up as he turned toward the noise. It wasn't one of the stable beasts—that much was clear. This was something different.

The gate rattled violently, as though something was trying to force its way through from the other side.

Ikenga's eyes narrowed. "That's unusual."

The ratman cautiously approached the gate, his heart pounding in his chest. He pressed his thin body against the wooden boards, peering through a small gap between them. For a moment, he saw nothing—just the empty space beyond the fence. But then, with a sudden crash, something massive slammed against the gate, sending splinters flying.

The ratman jumped back, his thin frame trembling as the gate shook again. The growling grew louder, more aggressive. Whatever was on the other side was strong—and getting more agitated by the second.

Keles tilted her head, intrigued. "This could get interesting."

Before the ratman could react further, the gate exploded open, and a hulking, shadowy figure emerged, its eyes glowing with a feral intensity. It wasn't one of the usual stable beasts—this was something wild, something that had wandered in from the outskirts of the estate.

The ratman froze, terror washing over him. His legs felt like they were made of stone as the creature slowly advanced, its heavy breathing sending plumes of mist into the morning air.

From the carriage, Ikenga watched the scene unfold with quiet intensity. "He's going to have to make a choice now."

Keles leaned forward, her expression curious. "Fight or flee?"

The ratman's mind raced as the beast drew closer, its teeth bared in a snarl. He could hear the voices of the nobles in his head, their expectations weighing on him. He knew that running would only result in punishment later—they would call him a coward. But fighting? He had no weapons, no strength to stand against such a creature.

His hand clenched around the handle of the rake. It was all he had, though it felt pathetically inadequate. The ratman's grip tightened on the rake, his thoughts swirling in panic as the monstrous boar loomed closer. Its eyes were wild, filled with rage, and it seemed as though it recognized him. It snorted aggressively, lowering its tusks in preparation to charge.

Memories flashed through the ratman's mind, recalling the strange events from the previous day—the appearance of the massive eye above the city, an omen that had sent ripples of fear and confusion through the town. The guards, usually diligent in protecting the perimeter, had been scattered, their focus elsewhere. That must have been why this section of the wall was left unguarded, and now, he was the unlucky soul left to face this beast alone.

His heart raced as he quickly evaluated his situation. Running meant certain punishment from the nobles, who would see his cowardice as a sign of weakness. But fighting this enormous boar with only a rake seemed like madness. He glanced around, hoping for some kind of escape, but the path was blocked.

Underground, the five figures walking in the tunnel below halted, their conversation interrupted by the rumble of the boar's hooves above. One of them, a wiry ratman with sharp eyes, crouched down, feeling the vibrations in the earth.

"Did you hear that?" one of them whispered.

The wiry ratman didn't respond immediately. Instead, he set down the bundle of squealing baby boars and pulled out a piece of equipment from his pack. It was a small, hand-cranked drill, and he quickly set to work, boring a tiny hole through the earth above them. Once the drill had done its job, he stowed it away and pulled out a compact telescope, extending it through the newly created hole to peer up at the surface.

Through the lens, he saw the massive boar, its huge bulk towering over a lone ratman, who looked pitifully small in comparison, clutching a flimsy rake. His eyes widened, and he let out a low curse.

"Oh shit."

His companions, also ratmen and women, gathered around him, their curiosity piqued by his reaction. One of them, a tall ratwoman with scarred arms, hissed in frustration. "What now? We can't afford to be seen!"

The wiry ratman pulled the telescope away from the hole, his expression grim. "It's one of ours—up there, facing down that monster boar."

Another ratman, shorter but has a heroic look to him, peered through the telescope. "We should help him," he suggested, his voice eager. "He's one of us!"

The rat woman, however, shook her head firmly. "No. We stick to the plan. If we interfere, we'll draw too much attention. We can't afford that right now." She glanced at the squealing baby boars they had captured. "We've got what we came for. Let's get moving before someone notices the hole."

The ratwoman sighed, dropping the baby boar she was holding with a thud. She knew that if they didn't intervene, the lone ratman would be as good as dead. The boar wasn't just some feral animal; there was something unnatural about it, its eyes glowing faintly with a magical aura that unnerved even the most battle-hardened among them.

"Fine," she relented, glaring at her companions, "but something's going on up there, and it'll do us no good if we're seen by those damn mages. So here's the deal: we take down the boar, and then we vanish. No talking to him. No explanations. Understood?"

Her tone left no room for argument. The other ratmen, still hesitant but bound by their loyalty to one another, nodded in agreement.

The wiry ratman with the telescope, named Scraps, spoke first. "We got no magic, no reinforcements. But we've got tech. I've got a few ideas."

The heroic-looking ratman, Flint, grinned eagerly, his muscles flexing beneath his leather gear. "Whatever it is, make it quick. That boar's going to turn our comrade into mince meat if we don't act soon."

Above ground, the lone ratman swung the rake desperately, his blows weak against the thick hide of the magical boar, his nimble body does well enough against the huge beast as he manages to dodge but he was getting tired. The beast, annoyed by the subtle hits, snorted in fury, preparing for another charge. The ratman stumbled backward, his legs giving out and quivering, heart pounding in his chest.

Just as the boar lowered its tusks to gore him, the ground beneath them began to rumble. A sharp metallic screech filled the air as the ratpeople from below surfaced with their steampunk tech, emerging from the tunnel with steam-powered pistols and mechanical devices strapped to their backs.

The ratwoman, their leader, quickly assessed the situation. "Scraps, on the flanks. Flint, keep it distracted. We hit it hard and fast. No mistakes!"

Flint was the first to move, sprinting forward with an explosive burst of speed. His boots, fitted with steam-powered pistons, propelled him across the battlefield. He landed in front of the boar, his gauntlets hissing as gears whirred to life. The ratman punched forward, striking the beast square in the snout with a thunderous crack. The boar stumbled, more in surprise than pain, but it was enough to get its attention off the lone ratman.

"Over here, ugly!" Flint taunted, slamming his fists together. The gauntlets hissed with pressurized steam, readying for another blow.

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The boar, enraged, charged at Flint with terrifying speed. Flint's enhanced boots let him dodge to the side, narrowly avoiding the tusks. As the beast whirled to face him again, the ratwoman gave the signal.

"Now, Scraps!"

Scraps, crouched at the edge of the battlefield, pulled out a strange, long-barreled device with copper tubes and intricate gears running along its length. He attached a canister to the weapon, and with a sharp twist, steam hissed out as it powered up.

The weapon was a steam-bolt rifle, one of their more advanced pieces of tech, designed to pierce even the toughest hide. Scraps took aim at the boar's vulnerable underbelly, waiting for the perfect moment. As the boar reared up on its hind legs, preparing to crush Flint beneath its hooves, Scraps fired.

The bolt shot through the air with a high-pitched whine, its tip glowing red-hot from the compressed steam. It struck true, embedding deep into the boar's soft underbelly. The creature let out a deafening squeal, its body convulsing as the bolt delivered a shock of high-voltage electricity.

The boar staggered, its movements jerky and disoriented. But it wasn't down yet. In its fury, the beast turned its gaze on Scraps, charging toward him with murderous intent.

"Time for the big guns," the ratwoman muttered. She reached into her belt and pulled out a cylindrical device, about the size of her fist. Flicking a switch, the cylinder began to hum, small vents on its surface releasing bursts of steam.

It was a magnetic disruptor, one of their secret weapons against magical creatures. Designed to interfere with the magical energy flowing through a target's body, it could cripple even the most resilient beasts.

As the boar charged, the ratwoman threw the device with deadly accuracy. It stuck to the side of the boar's flank, magnetizing instantly to the metal fragments embedded in the creature's skin. With a loud crack, the disruptor activated, sending waves of energy coursing through the boar's body.

The boar's legs gave out as the disruptor scrambled its internal magic, turning its furious charge into a desperate stumble. It collapsed to the ground, twitching violently as its magical energy was torn apart by the device.

"Flint! Finish it!" the ratwoman barked.

Without hesitation, Flint leaped onto the boar's back, his gauntlets roaring with steam as he slammed both fists down onto its skull with all his might. The boar let out one final, pitiful squeal before its body went limp, steam rising from its wounds.

The ratmen stood in silence for a moment, panting heavily as the adrenaline of the fight began to wear off. The air was thick with the smell of burnt flesh and the acrid scent of steam and oil.

The lone ratman, still clutching his rake, stared in disbelief at the fallen boar. He had been certain that his life was over, but now, thanks to his comrades, he was still breathing.

But before he could speak, the ratwoman raised a hand, silencing him.

"We're not here to chat," she said curtly, her eyes narrowing. "We saved your tail, but that's all. You never saw us. Understand?"

The lone ratman blinked in confusion but nodded quickly. He knew better than to argue with the woman who had just taken down a magical boar.

Without another word, the ratpeople gathered their equipment, reloaded their weapons, and disappeared back into the tunnel from which they had come. Within moments, the ground closed behind them, leaving no trace of their presence.

As the dust settled, the lone ratman stood alone once more, staring at the lifeless body of the boar. He had survived, but the encounter left him with more questions than answers.

In the distance, hidden from view, Ikenga and Keles watched the scene unfold. The gods exchanged knowing glances.

"These ratpeople," Keles mused, "they may not have magic, but their ingenuity is... remarkable."

Ikenga smirked. "Indeed. It seems they have their own ways of tipping the scales. It seems our new destination has been determined"

The ratman meanwhile was staring wide-eyed at the dead huge boar, his ear twitched as he heard footsteps quickly closing in from a distance. With quickness, he fell to the ground closing his eyes acting like he passed out.

The ratman lay motionless, his heart racing beneath his chest as he pretended to be unconscious. His keen ears twitched at the sound of approaching footsteps—several of them, hurried and growing louder with each passing second. The ratpeople's fight with the boar had clearly drawn unwanted attention. His

pulse quickened, but he remained still, limbs limp and eyes shut tight, playing the role of a hapless victim.

Through slitted eyes, he caught a glimpse of the figures approaching—a group of city guards, armed with spears and clad in their gleaming armor. At the forefront was a tall, imposing goblin mage, her long robes billowing as she strode forward. Her eyes were cold and calculating, glowing faintly with the residual magic she was ready to call upon at a moment's notice.

The guards fanned out, surrounding the massive carcass of the magical boar. One of them, a grizzled veteran with a scar running across his face, knelt beside the ratman, his brow furrowing.

"Is he dead?" another guard asked, eyeing the ratman with suspicion.

The scarred guard leaned down, placing two fingers against the ratman's neck to check for a pulse. After a moment, he grunted. "No, just passed out. Poor thing must've been scared unconscious by the boar."

The mage stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the area. She seemed unconvinced by the guard's assessment. "Something doesn't add up," she muttered. "A boar of this size wouldn't have fallen so easily. And I can feel traces of... something unnatural." Her gaze settled on the fallen boar, her expression darkening.

She raised a hand, muttering a low incantation under her breath. A soft glow surrounded her fingers as she directed the spell at the boar's body. For a moment, nothing happened—but then, faint, glowing traces of energy appeared, radiating from the boar's wounds.

"Steam residue?" she muttered, her eyes narrowing in confusion. "There's no magic here, just... technology."

One of the guards shifted nervously. "But that's impossible, right? The city folk don't have anything that advanced."

The mage straightened, her expression hardening. "Which means someone else was here. Someone who didn't want to be seen." as she said that she looked down into the ground like she could see the tunnel below.

The scarred guard nodded toward the unconscious ratman. "What about him? Think he saw anything?"

The mage crouched beside the ratman, her eyes studying his limp form. She held a hand over him, the air around her fingers shimmering as she prepared to cast a spell of truth-seeking.

The ratman's heart pounded in his chest. He could feel the tingle of magic around him, not wanting to find out what the mage was about to do, he had to force himself to open his eyes as he sat up in panic acting like he was scared awake.

The ratman bolted upright with a gasp, his eyes wide and darting in every direction as if he had just awoken from a nightmare. He let out a panicked squeak, scrambling backward on his hands and feet until his back hit the strong sturdy body of the ogre guard. His entire body trembled, his breath coming in short, frantic bursts.

The mage, startled by his sudden movement, withdrew her hand, the shimmering magic fading from the air around her. She narrowed her eyes, clearly skeptical of his dramatic reaction but intrigued nonetheless. The guards, too, stepped back, unsure of what to make of the ratman's behavior.

"Easy there," the scarred guard said, holding up his hands in a calming gesture. "You're safe now. The boar's been taken care of."

The ratman blinked rapidly, forcing himself to breathe slower as he clutched his chest, still playing the role of a frightened, disoriented survivor. "Th-th-the boar..." he stammered, his voice shaking. "I thought it was going to... to kill me!"

The mage remained silent, her piercing gaze never leaving him. She stepped closer, her presence commanding and unnerving. "You were lucky," she said coolly, though her eyes were still full of suspicion. "That beast was far beyond anything a simple ratman should be able to survive."

The ratman gulped, his ears twitching as he tried to maintain his composure under her scrutiny. "I-I don't know what happened," he stuttered, avoiding her gaze. "I was just cleaning near the wall when it charged out of nowhere. I tried to run, but... but I tripped and blacked out." He glanced at the boar's body and then at the guards, putting on his best look of confusion. "I didn't see anyone else."

The scarred guard exchanged a glance with the mage, clearly buying the story for the moment. But the mage wasn't so easily fooled. She crouched again, staring directly into the ratman's eyes as though trying to peer into his very soul.

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"Is that so?" she asked, her voice soft but laced with the weight of her power. "Because I find it strange that this boar—one imbued with magic—was felled by something that left no trace of magical interference. Only steam residue." Her eyes flashed as she emphasized the last two words.

The ratman felt a cold sweat form on his fur as the mage's stare bore into him. His mind raced. He had to say something—anything—to divert her suspicion without giving himself away.

"I... I don't know about any steam or magic," he replied, his voice shaking just enough to sound convincing. "I'm just a worker. All I had was this," he added, lifting the now-broken rake beside him as proof of his helplessness. "I couldn't have done anything to that beast."

The mage stared at him for what felt like an eternity, her eyes narrowing as if she could sense there was more to the story. Then, after a tense pause, she slowly stood up.

"Perhaps you're telling the truth," she said, though her tone suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. Her gaze flickered back to the ground, as if she could still feel the presence of something—or someone—below.

The mage waved her hand, gesturing for the Ratman to walk away. Watching his retreating back, she whispered to the guard captain, "Keep him under watch. I want to know where he goes and who he speaks to."

The captain, who had been smiling, adopted a cold expression as he stared at the Ratman before responding, "Understood."

Now alone, the female mage placed her green hand on the boar and smiled. "It seems those rodents have made some improvements." At the same time, a cold look appeared in her eyes. "To be able to disrupt the mana flow is a dangerous thing to possess, especially at this moment."

She released her staff, letting it float beside her as she sent a wave of light toward the boar, effortlessly lifting it. She then began walking away.

At a mage tower in the town, the female mage could be seen bowing and reporting to a mage who appeared the same age as her. It was the male goblin who had appeared after the commotion with Ikenga and Keles.

"I see," the male goblin said before ordering the female goblin, "Establish contact with the other mage towers. We need to discuss your findings."

The female goblin mage bowed deeply, her green skin gleaming in the faint light of the tower's arcane torches. "As you command, Master Vellok," she replied, her voice steady yet laced with an undercurrent of tension. She straightened and turned, her cloak billowing as she left the room.

Vellok watched her go, his sharp, goblin eyes narrowing as he leaned back in his ornate chair. His fingers drummed against the table in thought. The news was troubling—these ratpeople, once insignificant scavengers and tinkerers, had evidently developed technology capable of disrupting mana flow. That, combined with the steam residue found at the scene, indicated a dangerous escalation. If left unchecked, this could threaten not only their immediate control over the town but potentially unravel the delicate balance of power in the region.

He stood up, walking to the window of his chamber, which overlooked the sprawling city below. The citizens moved about, unaware of the subtle shift in the wind—of the undercurrents that now swirled with danger. Vellok knew what this meant: the ratpeople were no longer content to merely survive in the shadows. They are making moves of their own.

They see the current recurring chaos as their chance to act, or perhaps they were forced to act to save one of their own. Nonetheless, given our history with them, the fact that they possess such technology is unacceptable.

Vellok was brought out of his thoughts when the tower informed him that the call was ready. He teleported from where he was into a dark room, with mirrors floating all around.

From the mirrors, the other goblin tower masters began to appear. "You've all received the message. What do you have in mind?" Vellok asked.

Before anyone could respond, a familiar figure spoke up. Unlike the other mages, she had an air of regality about her. She was the one who had first observed Ikenga and Keles through her orb, only to be cut off shortly after.

"The emperor has also received news of the recent events. He views the rodents' advancements as a good thing, as he has been troubled by how to deal with the invading demons and their endless armies."

"We have granted the rodents limited freedom to choose how they live underground. We are well aware of their ability to reproduce and expand, which we have allowed them to do all these years."

"Our planet's underground network is now mostly occupied by them. His majesty believes it will be an honor for them to be conscripted into the war immediately. It would provide a good opportunity to observe their technological advancements and learn from them, to be better utilized in the prolonged war with the demons."

Vellok narrowed his eyes as the regal mage spoke, her words carrying the weight of the emperor's decree. He stood silently for a moment, the dim light of the mirrored chamber reflecting off his contemplative expression. The other goblin tower masters watched him, some nodding in agreement with the mage's proposal, while others seemed hesitant.

Finally, Vellok broke his silence. "The emperor's will is, of course, absolute," he began, his tone carefully measured. "But we cannot overlook the risk that comes with allowing the ratpeople to develop unchecked. Their ability to reproduce and expand is unmatched, but so is their resourcefulness. If we conscript them into the war against the demons, we are arming a faction that, until recently, has been nothing more than scavengers."

The regal mage's eyes gleamed with confidence. "We are not 'arming' them. They have already armed themselves, Vellok. This is an opportunity for us to harness their ingenuity for our cause, to turn their tools into weapons we control. And should they prove too ambitious, we will remind them who holds true power. The emperor is not naive—he will not allow them to grow beyond his grasp."

Vellok's gaze flicked from one mirror to another, the faces of the other goblin masters reflected in the floating glass. He could see that some were swayed by the regal mage's argument, drawn to the potential advantage of using the ratpeople's technology in the war. But he was less convinced.

"And what of their loyalty?" Vellok pressed, folding his arms across his chest. "They've kept to the shadows for so long, living in their subterranean cities, out of sight and out of mind. Now, they suddenly emerge with steam-powered technology capable of disrupting mana flows. They are not fools. They will know they are being used as expendable soldiers against the demon horde. What happens when they decide that they no longer wish to be pawns in our war?"

One of the other tower masters, a thin goblin with spectacles perched on his crooked nose, spoke up. "Vellok raises a valid concern. If we give them too much autonomy, they could become a threat after the war is over. We've kept them contained for a reason."

The regal mage's gaze hardened. "Do not mistake containment for control. The emperor has no intention of letting the ratpeople rise unchecked. They will be conscripted, but under strict oversight. They will fight the demons because they have no other choice—either they contribute to the defense of this world, or they face annihilation from the demons themselves. And if they refuse, we will crush them before they can become a threat."

A murmur of agreement spread through the mirrored chamber, but Vellok still felt unease creeping into his thoughts. The regal mage was right about one thing—the ratpeople had no choice but to fight. But he couldn't shake the feeling that their ingenuity, their sheer resourcefulness, would eventually become a problem. Technology was unpredictable, especially when wielded by a race that had nothing to lose.

"And what of the steam technology?" Vellok asked, his voice cutting through the murmurs. "If it can disrupt mana, it poses a danger not only to the demons but to us as well. We need to understand it before we use it. Has anyone been able to secure samples or schematics of what the ratpeople are working on?"

The regal mage smiled faintly, as though anticipating the question. "We are already working on it. I have agents embedded among their ranks, gathering intelligence as we speak. The emperor will not go into this blindly. We will know their technology inside and out before it is ever put to use."

Vellok nodded, though the unease still lingered in his gut. "Very well. I trust the emperor's judgment, but we must remain vigilant. We are dealing with more than just simple creatures—these ratpeople are adapting faster than we expected."

The regal mage raised her chin slightly, her regal demeanor unshaken. "You worry too much, Vellok. The emperor has seen this coming for a long time. He will use their advancements to his advantage, and when the time comes, he will take what is needed and discard the rest."

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The mirrored chamber began to flicker as the discussion came to an end, the reflections of the other goblin masters disappearing one by one. Vellok stood alone for a moment, the dark room feeling colder now.

As he teleported back to his own tower, his mind still raced with doubts. The ratpeople were clever, but they were also unpredictable. The emperor might see them as pawns, but Vellok suspected that the ratpeople saw themselves differently.

And pawns who believed they were kings could be the most dangerous of all.

Vellok was pacing back and forth when, all of a sudden, he stopped and took a knee. The air in front of him shimmered as a robed figure appeared, their hood pulled low over their face, hiding their features. Only the glint of yellow eyes could be seen beneath the hood, watching him intently.

"It's been a long time, little brother," the figure's deep voice spoke to Vellok, who remained silent.

Receiving no reaction from Vellok, the figure walked past him and moved toward the window. "How can I be of service to your majesty?" Vellok asked as he stood up and watched the figure.

"I told you, when we're alone, you can refer to me as brother," the figure said.

Vellok still chose silence as his answer. Shaking his head, the figure said, "I see you're hesitant and skeptical about my decision regarding the ratmen. You're right to be, but I want to know where your concerns lie, brother."

Vellok stared at the figure before snapping his fingers, causing the room to turn dark. In front of Vellok appeared a hologram—an image captured by the regal female mage, showing Ikenga and Keles in their carriage with the imp demon posing as a goblin.

Pointing at the image, Vellok said, "They are where my concerns lie. I have every reason to believe the gods who made an appearance in this town are in that carriage, and somehow, they have one of our own working for them."

"I am still unsure about the goblin, but nonetheless, my point stands." He looked at the robed figure. "We have built and created something great for our people, something most goblins in most multiverses have never accomplished or will ever hope to accomplish."

"Yet, in our greatness, we still have a weakness, which I believe is the target of these gods. For centuries, I've watched you try to create a society that could cover these weaknesses, yet they remain—and will continue to remain."

"There can never be a perfect society or community. This is something even the mechanical beings have never been able to achieve, despite their oneness. Except for the one who cannot be named, no civilization has ever been perfect."

"Our history with the rodents and the flaws in our society are what I believe these gods are looking to exploit. And now, with your decision, I can see them taking advantage of that."

The robed figure slowly turned to the hologram, the glint of his yellow eyes narrowing as they focused on the image Vellok had conjured. Silence hung heavy in the darkened room, the weight of the conversation settling between the two brothers like a physical presence.

"You believe these gods pose a greater threat than the ratmen, or even the demons?" the robed figure asked, his voice laced with curiosity and something more elusive—perhaps doubt or concern.

Vellok's expression remained impassive, but there was a spark of conviction in his eyes. "I believe their sudden appearance is no coincidence. They are not merely passing through, nor do they act without intent. They see our flaws, our weaknesses, as opportunities."

"Our world is suddenly being invaded, and now, all of a sudden, gods have appeared. You should have guessed it too, brother—the gods are somehow working with the demons, particularly an ambitious demon king."

The robed figure remained still, the glint of his yellow eyes fixed on Vellok. The weight of his brother's words seemed to settle heavily in the air, casting a shadow over the conversation.

"You think the gods and demons are working together?" the figure asked, his voice sharp and questioning. "It's a bold assumption, little brother. Gods and demons have been at odds since time immemorial. What makes you believe they would conspire now?"

Vellok hesitated for a moment, his mind racing through the memories of their shared past—the experiments that birthed their society, the countless battles, and the ever-present threat of their enemies. "The mages taught us that worlds can be conquered in ways far beyond brute force. They believed in subversion, in manipulating the hearts and minds of entire civilizations before moving in for the kill. We were created from that very experiment, and we flourished because of it."

He paused again, his expression hardening as if recalling something dark. "But this... what's happening now? It's different. The demons' sudden invasion, the gods appearing soon after—it's too well-timed. They aren't acting out of pure chaos or divine intervention. They're following a plan, one that aims to weaken us from within. And what better way to do that than by using the gods to gain our trust while the demons chip away at our defenses?"

The robed figure slowly turned back to the window, looking out over the vast city. "So, you believe the gods are merely puppets of a demon king—an ambitious one, at that."

Vellok nodded. "Yes, brother. The demon kings have always craved power, and this one is no different. He knows that a direct confrontation would be costly, leaving him a damaged world from war. By sending the gods ahead to soften our resolve, to manipulate our people and distract us with false promises, the demon king can ensure that when he makes his move, we will already be fractured, weakened, and ready to fall."

A heavy silence fell between them, the gravity of Vellok's words settling like a shroud over the chamber.

"You have always been cautious, Vellok," the robed figure finally said, his voice low and contemplative. "Perhaps too cautious at times. But this theory of yours... it holds merit. If the gods and demons are indeed working together, then we face a far more insidious threat than we realized. One that cannot be fought with armies alone."

Vellok crossed his arms, his gaze never leaving the hologram of the carriage. "That's why we must act now. We can't afford to wait until they've already taken root. The ratmen are part of this, whether they know it or not".

The figure in the robe stepped closer to the hologram, studying the image of the carriage with the imp disguised as a goblin. His yellow eyes flickered briefly with recognition. "I see... so it is not just the ratmen that concern you. You believe these gods are orchestrating something larger—perhaps even manipulating the ratmen's rise."

Vellok nodded sharply. "Exactly. The gods have always moved unseen, threading their influence through mortals and creatures alike. Their goals are beyond our understanding, but one thing remains constant: they exploit weakness. Whether it's the flaws in our society or the ambitions of the ratpeople, they will twist it to their advantage. You and I both know that no matter how much we fortify our empire, no matter how much we try to cover our weaknesses, they remain. And the gods are well aware of it."

The robed figure exhaled slowly, his breath an eerie hiss in the still air. "I won't deny that there are cracks in the foundation, but the flaws of our society are no greater than those of others. Even the gods are not perfect. They make mistakes. They are just as capable of overreach."

"Perhaps," Vellok said, his voice low and steady. "But our flaw is unique, brother. You've spent centuries trying to fix it, to make us invincible, but the truth is, our very nature as goblins is what holds us back. Our brilliance, our adaptability—it all comes with a cost. We can never truly trust one another, not fully. And that's what these gods are counting on."

The robed figure fell silent for a long moment, his gaze returning to the window overlooking the vast city. The empire they had built together, a testament to goblin ingenuity and resilience, stretched out before them like a glittering tapestry. Yet Vellok's words echoed in his mind—there can never be a perfect society.

"You speak of trust," the figure said at last, his voice thoughtful. "Trust is a rare commodity, especially among our kind. But I have placed my trust in you, little brother. You have always been my eyes and ears, my voice in the shadows. So tell me—if you were in my place, how would you act?"

Vellok straightened, his gaze unwavering. "I would be cautious. The ratmen are dangerous, yes, but they are a distraction. The true threat lies with the gods, demons and whatever game they are playing. If they have already managed to turn one of our own against us, as this image suggests, then the effect of their influence is deeper than we realized."