

## Guardian gods 311

Chapter 311:

The robed figure nodded slowly, considering Vellok's words. "And what of the emperor's decree? Do you believe conscripting the ratmen is a mistake?"

"No, there's truth in how you plan to use the ratmen, but after what I've just told you, you must see why so many things can go wrong," the figure nodded as light flickered back on the tower.

"I understand what you're saying, brother, but what you're suggesting is impossible, especially in times like these."

"You expect the goblins to suddenly show leniency and kindness to the ratmen after all these years? We've ingrained in every goblin the belief that we are above the ratmen. Changing that now, and having them dine at the same table as us, is unthinkable when we need all goblins united to protect our world."

"Even with the threat of the gods, who may take this opportunity to show kindness to the ratmen, it's still impossible. But nonetheless, with your warning, I'll ensure that our control over the ratmen is tighter, and nothing they do will escape us."

The figure turned, his glowing yellow eyes fixing on Vahlok. "Is that agreeable to you, brother?"

Vahlok's eyes narrowed as he met his brother's glowing gaze. He crossed his arms, the weight of centuries of careful manipulation and planning pressing heavily on his shoulders. The room fell into a tense silence, broken only by the faint hum of magic vibrating through the stone walls of the tower.

"It's a start," Vahlok replied, his voice measured but firm. "But I would caution you against underestimating the ratmen's desperation. Control may seem within our grasp, but too much control breeds desperation—and that is what the gods feast upon."

He stepped forward, his silhouette illuminated by the flickering light, his dark robes brushing the floor. "You and I both know the gods are not waiting to show kindness; they are waiting for a crack in the foundation—a slip, a moment of weakness. And once they exploit that, no matter how tightly we hold the ratmen, it will be too late."

The robed figure exhaled softly, his yellow eyes dimming slightly as he weighed Vahlok's words. "Then what do you propose?"

Vahlok stepped closer, his voice lowering, a hint of urgency breaking through his usual calm. "We need to do more than control the ratmen. We must ensure their loyalty, not through fear, but through dependency. Make them believe their survival depends on our mercy—that we are their only hope against the gods. If they see us as their sole protection from oblivion, their allegiance will be unshakable."

The robed figure tilted his head, considering the shift in strategy. "Dependency... It's a fine line we walk, Vahlok. Too much leniency, and they grow bold. Too much control, and they rebel."

Vahlok's lips curled into a thin smile. "It's not leniency. It's manipulation, brother. We don't have to let them sit at the same table—we only need to make them believe they are almost worthy of it."

The figure's glowing eyes flickered brighter, a glint of understanding passing between them. "I see... Keep them in line but offer the illusion of progress. Enough hope to prevent rebellion, but not enough to threaten our order."

"Exactly," Vahlok said, his voice soft but filled with conviction. "And as for the gods... we must be ready for their meddling. They won't act directly, but they will whisper in the ears of those desperate for change."

The robed figure turned back toward the window, gazing out over the shadowy expanse below. "I will adjust our strategy. The ratmen will have just enough to keep them in line... and no more."

He glanced back at Vahlok, his yellow eyes piercing through the dim light. "But remember this, brother: if this plan fails, the empire will fall into disarray. And should that happen, no amount of manipulation will save us from the wrath of every living being in this world."

Vahlok remained silent, deep in thought. When he raised his head, the figure had vanished.

On the other side of this invaded planet, a portal opened not far from Vorenza's home, the Spider Queen. Like Zarvok, she sent out weak cannon fodder, whose deaths further eroded the land, allowing them to walk freely without being suppressed.

She faced little resistance until she reached a town with a mage tower at its center. This mage tower had halted their progress for a week now.

Vorenza watched as the town was slowly transforming into a fortress, preparing to hold her forces down and prevent further advancement. When she realized the town had mages, her confidence waned.

It became clear to her that this world was no stranger to invasion, as she saw the infrastructure being rapidly fortified. Knowing the capabilities of mages, Vorenza understood that the worst mistake she could make was allowing a mage or wizard to complete their preparations.

It was nighttime on this side of the planet. Vorenza sent out a fifth-stage spider demon, capable of withstanding the suppression brought on by the lands that hadn't been eroded.

Unlike the guards in the town where Ikenga and Keles were, these guards were well-equipped—each one of them suited in armor enchanted by mages to boost their abilities.

The fifth-stage spider demon emerged from the portal from the Abyss and continued her walk undisturbed until she passed the eroded land. As soon as she stepped into the un-eroded territory, her expression changed. She could feel the suppression, and gritting her teeth, her body began to shift. Her spider-demon form morphed into that of a tall, beautiful female goblin in tattered clothes.

She was supposed to act weak to attract the guards' attention, but the suppression she was feeling made her weakness all too real as her powers were being stifled.

The guards on the wall, once the spider demon crossed a certain distance, all homed in on her figure, gripping their weapons tightly. When they saw it was a female goblin, hesitation flashed across the faces of the burly ogre guards.

The ogre guards, well-trained and battle-hardened, shifted uneasily. Their weapons remained in hand, but their gazes softened slightly as they saw what appeared to be a fragile, tattered female goblin

staggering under the weight of the world's suppression. One particularly tall and broad ogre leaned over to his companion.

"A goblin? Out here?" the ogre rumbled, suspicion in his voice. "Strange. She should be in the confines of the tower or the mage's keep."

Another ogre chimed in, "Look at her. She might be a mage sent on a mission that went wrong." The other ogre nodded at the speculation.

The female demon picked up on the conversation. Her transformation into a goblin wasn't random; it was based on observations of this world. Goblins typically held higher positions, either as nobles or mages.

The ogres weren't wrong to think as they did. She then overheard a conversation, that made her brows twitched.

A shorter, heavily armored ogre with glowing runes etched into his bracers nodded but didn't relax. "It could be a trick. The mages warned us about shapeshifters sent by the invaders. We should—"

The taller ogre interrupted, "But look at her. She's barely standing. No threat, not like the demons we've fought. Could be a survivor, you know? We've got orders to report any possible allies or civilians."

The shorter one hesitated, his grip tightening on his weapon. "And if it's not? What if it's one of them, wearing a disguise? You remember what the mages said—demons can cloak themselves, lure us in."

Sensing that the conversation was turning against her, the female demon collapsed face-forward. From her mouth came a wave of pink mist, carried by a sudden gust of wind toward the guards.

The enchanted armor the guards wore protected them initially, but the gust of wind caught them off guard. The mist, almost as if it had a mind of its own, was inhaled by several guards.

Some guards weren't affected by the mist, but they rushed over to check on their companions. As they removed their comrades' helmets, they were met with glowing pink eyes that drew them in. Like a virus, the effect spread quickly. Once they were ensnared by the pink glow, their eyes also turned pink.

This continued until a number of guards were affected. After a while, they returned to their posts, resuming their watch as if nothing had happened.

The wall surrounding the town was tall and long, with fifty guards stationed on it. Of the fifty, twenty had been affected by the pink mist. The unaffected guards, alarmed by the commotion, were shocked to find that the female goblin had disappeared.

Nevertheless, they didn't hesitate to report the incident. Inside the mage tower, tensions were already high. The mages, sensing the growing threat from Vorenza's forces, had been tirelessly reinforcing the town's defenses. The enchantments on the walls, the magical wards surrounding key structures, and the spells woven into the guards' weapons were all meant to fend off external attacks. But internal sabotage, especially through subtle means like the mist, was far more difficult to counter.

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The lead mage, a stern figure draped in robes of deep indigo, looked up as the report came in. His eyes narrowed at the description of the strange mist and the disappearance of the female goblin.

"Bring me those guards," he ordered. "All of them. Now."

As the guards were rounded up and brought to the tower, those infected with the mist maintained their calm façades, standing perfectly still, their eyes no longer glowing outwardly. The magic of the mist had woven deep into their minds, allowing them to appear normal to anyone who did not probe too closely.

The mage, suspicious but thorough, began inspecting the guards. His eyes flickered with blue light as he used his magic to scan them for traces of corruption. He sensed something was off but couldn't pinpoint the exact nature of the disturbance. The enchantments on the guards' armor were designed to resist external magical influences, but the mist had bypassed those protections by targeting their minds.

Frustrated but without clear evidence, the mage dismissed the guards. As they left the tower, the infected ones quietly shared a glance, a silent communication that the spider demon observed from afar. The time was not yet right to strike, but soon—very soon—they would act.

The goblin mage would have taken the time to investigate the affected guards further, but all his attention was needed on the demons in the distance. So, while he let the guards go, he had someone secretly keeping an eye on their movements.

Meanwhile, the affected guards, who had been released from their duties, were grouped in a building where they were kept under watch. Unknown to the guards and those observing them, as the pink mist settled into their lungs, it did more than just exert control over their minds. It carried within it the essence of the fifth-stage spider demon—twisted ingenuity designed to spawn new life in a world hostile to her kind. The mist was a talent unique to higher-tier spider demons, not just for mental manipulation, but one that had evolved over time to bypass the suppression that the invaders faced in different worlds.

At night, when sleeping, the infected guards lay paralyzed, unable to rest, their eyes faintly glowing. However, deep inside their bodies, the mist was working, spreading its seed. It embedded the essence of the spider demons into the very fabric of the guards' flesh.

The mist, acting as both a subtle poison and a seed of demonic birth, began to affect the guards physically. As days passed, the guards began to feel odd sensations in their bodies—a growing heat in their bellies, slight discomfort under their skin, which they could not explain. Some of the guards chalked it up to fatigue from being unable to sleep, while others dismissed it as a passing illness.

What they didn't know was that small egg sacs were forming within them. These sacs held the embryonic forms of hybrid creatures. The gestation period was swift, sped up by demonic biology.

One guard, a burly figure who had inhaled the mist earlier, began to sweat profusely, a strange pulsing beneath his skin. He doubled over in pain but managed to regain his posture, gritting his teeth. The magic of the mist kept him in a docile state, but internally, his body was undergoing a violent transformation.

Soon, he and the other infected guards could no longer bear it. The sound of hurried footsteps echoed through the narrow hallway as, one by one, the infected guards stumbled into the toilets, their expressions twisted with pain and confusion. Each guard who made it inside quickly locked the door behind them, their labored breathing the only sign of life in the eerily quiet building.

Inside the toilets, the guards sat, gripping the edges of the stone seats, their bodies shaking uncontrollably. The discomfort beneath their skin had grown into excruciating agony. A grotesque sensation of something alive moving within them began to spread through their limbs and torsos. Their minds, fogged by the mist's magic, couldn't fully comprehend what was happening, but the instinctual terror of their bodies being overtaken was unmistakable.

Inside their bodies, the egg sacs that had formed over the last few days were now fully grown. The embryonic hybrids, a mix of ogre flesh and demonic essence, were ready to emerge. With a sickening tearing sound, the eggs ruptured, and the guards' bodies convulsed. Their minds screamed, but the control of the mist was so absolute that they could do little more than tremble as the birth took place.

The guards placed under watch were being monitored from a nearby observation room by a group of officials and the mage's apprentice. They had noticed the change in the guards' behavior—sweat-drenched, pale-faced, and rushing to the toilets—but attributed it to some illness or physical ailment.

One of the guards, visibly shaken, stepped out of the bathroom, his face a mask of terror. He took a few staggering steps before collapsing, his body crumbling to the ground with an unnatural dryness. His once muscular form had shriveled, his skin stretched tight across his bones, as if every drop of moisture had been sucked from his body. His eyes, wide with panic, were sunken deep into his skull, staring blankly at the floor.

The apprentice gasped. "What in the emperor's name...?"

One by one, the other guards began to follow the same pattern—emerging from the bathrooms only to collapse in horrifying states of mummified decay. Each of their bodies dried out, drained of life and blood, leaving behind withered husks that had once been living, breathing men. The guards who survived long enough to make it out of the bathrooms fell to the ground in twisted, unnatural positions, their faces frozen in expressions of sheer terror.

For the guards, the horror was internal and deeply visceral. As they sat in the toilets, they could feel the insides of their bodies being torn apart as the spider demon hybrids burst forth from the egg sacs. Yet, to their utter confusion, nothing visible was left behind—just the sickening sensation of something huge, something unnatural leaving their bodies, hollowing them out. They stared in disbelief at the blood splattered beneath them, feeling their life slowly drain away, unsure of what had just happened.

Back in the abyss, the fifth-stage demon was in the same chamber as the demon queen, Vorenza. He felt the moment the hybrids were born, and he bowed, saying, "It's already done, my queen."

Vorenza, the spider demon, was no longer in her demon form. Instead, she took the form of a human female, though unnaturally tall, as she sat cross-legged on her throne.

"Good. Have them stay low and grow to their limit. I will inform you when it's time for them to be of use," Vorenza said to the fifth-stage demon, who bowed before leaving the chamber.

Now left alone, Vorenza had a bright smile on her face. The successful birth of the hybrids meant that taking over the town would be much easier. The hybrids were expendable resources for spider demons of a certain level, as they were not truly demons and lacked the innate uniqueness that comes with being a full demon or half demon.

Their growth, unlike that of normal demons or half-demons, was limited by the race they were spawned from. What Vorenza appreciated the most was that the hybrids weren't suppressed by this world. Because of their heritage, they were recognized as part of it.

The city's sewer system extended all the way to the underground networks where the Ratmen race lived. Due to their enslaved status, they were responsible for disposing of the waste or using it for whatever purpose they could find.

In the early stages of their enslavement, the Ratmen had managed to find food sources through this waste. Occasionally, they also found seeds that hadn't been broken down, which they planted to grow their own food. Nonetheless, the sight of waste falling into their underground network was not unusual for the Ratmen.

Today wasn't any different as a group of Ratmen were disposing of the waste, while others sifted through it in search of something valuable.

As the Ratmen worked through the familiar stench of the city's waste, their ears perked at the strange sound of something heavy falling into the muck. One of the older Ratmen, his fur matted and grayed with age, twitched his nose, sniffing the air. "Something's off," he muttered, his voice low and raspy, worn by years of harsh conditions.

The younger Ratmen, busily sifting through the refuse for anything they could use, paused and glanced at the elder with puzzled expressions. They had grown accustomed to all sorts of strange things falling

into the sewers, from discarded trinkets to rotting food, but this was different. The repeated thud of heavy objects had an unsettling weight to it.

"Could be some broken armor," one of the Ratmen said dismissively, turning back to his task. "Or maybe some old bones—"

Another thud interrupted him, louder this time. Then several more, quick and rhythmic, like something with intent. The Ratmen looked around, their whiskers twitching in unison.

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"Check it out," one of the bolder Ratmen said, grabbing a rusted dagger from his belt. He crept cautiously toward the source of the noise, his senses heightened as he moved through the shadowed tunnels of the underground. His claws scraped the damp stone floor as he approached a large pile of waste, his eyes squinting to peer through the thick, murky air.

Suddenly, something moved.

It was subtle at first—just a ripple in the waste, as though something beneath the surface had shifted. The Ratman froze, his heart racing. A moment later, the surface of the waste seemed to swell, and without warning, something emerged from the filth.

A small, spindly leg, sleek and black like polished onyx, shot out from beneath the waste. The ratman staggered backward, eyes wide in terror, as more legs began to crawl out—thin, sharp, and disturbingly long. The creature that rose from the sludge was a twisted amalgamation of ogre and spider, its body drenched in filth but unmistakably powerful.

The hybrid's eight eyes stared at the ratman before a web shot out, entrapping him. Having captured its prey, the hybrid moved forward to devour him.

The other ratmen, seeing this, roared out in alarm as they grabbed their tools to chase away the spiders. However, their courage was soon diminished when four more hybrids emerged from the waste, each shooting out webs that ensnared them in place.

The old ratman, who hadn't picked up a weapon, slowly took a step back, watching in terror as his brethren were devoured by the hybrids, which grew larger the more they ate.

"What kind of abomination have those goblins cooked up this time?" the old ratman thought in terror. His eyes widened as his foot kicked a pebble, the sound echoing in the waste dump.

The hybrids, still munching on their half-eaten meals, turned toward the noise. Their attention locked onto the old ratman, who was now scrambling on all fours, trying to escape.

The hybrids, abandoning their unfinished prey, rushed toward him, their spider legs covering the distance quickly. One of the spiders at the forefront shot out a web that transformed into a spear. It grabbed the spear and hurled it at the fleeing ratman.

The old ratman tried to dodge, but as the spear got close, it dispersed into a net, wrapping tightly around him.

The old ratman watched in horror as the hybrids descended from the ceiling, one of its spider legs easily impaling his body. In the abyss, this scene was observed by Vorenza, who was taken aback by the appearance of the ratmen.

She had thought this world only contained goblins, but now it seemed she was wrong. Nonetheless, this discovery caused her to change her plans. One of the reasons hybrids were often dismissed was their inability to reason—mere mindless killing beasts.

For them to work together and efficiently, a higher power was needed to lead them, which was exactly what Vorenza was providing. Previously, she had planned for the hybrids to lie low, grow to their full potential, and then attack the city from within, creating chaos.

Chaos she would use to her advantage to quickly erode the lands around the city, granting her more freedom to deal with the mages.

But with the appearance of the ratmen, her thoughts shifted. If planned well, she could take over the city in one decisive push. The structure of the underground network indicated that these ratmen had spent considerable time developing it.

Development meant there were likely a significant number of them in the underground—perfect for the growth and expansion of the hybrids. Before, the hybrids had been limited in their expansion due to the lack of food, but with the ratmen, sustenance was no longer a concern.

Vorenza rose from her throne, her unnaturally tall, human-like form casting a long shadow across the chamber. She walked to the edge of a glowing pool, one of her many conduits in the abyss, and gazed into its depths, watching the ratmen's futile struggle against the hybrids.

"The ratmen... such fragile creatures," she mused. "Yet their numbers could serve a greater purpose."

Vorenza raised her hand, and a dark, swirling mist formed in her palm. The hybrids below were doing well enough, but she needed something more—an alpha, a leader for the hybrid pack. Her gaze shifted to the writhing form of the old ratman, still impaled by one of the hybrids.

"Yes, you'll do nicely," she whispered with a wicked grin.

With a flick of her wrist, the mist snaked out from her hand, passing through the abyss and into the underground sewer network. The magic wrapped itself around the dying ratman, pulling at his soul, manipulating it, and twisting it to suit her needs. His body convulsed as Vorenza's power took hold, reshaping his form, merging his ratman essence with the dark, arachnid power of the hybrids.

The old ratman's body bulged and contorted, his fur falling away to reveal hardened, chitinous plating. His eyes turned black as midnight, his limbs elongating into sharp, spindly legs like the hybrids. But unlike the others, he retained a cruel intelligence, his mind fully intact yet loyal to Vorenza's will.

"Rise, my lieutenant," Vorenza commanded, her voice echoing through the abyss and into the newly transformed creature's mind. "You will lead the hybrids, expand their numbers, and bring me this city."

The creature that had once been a simple ratman slowly stood, its new spider-like form towering over the remaining ratmen. It gazed around with newfound purpose and hunger, its mind connected to Vorenza's. The hybrids responded instantly to his presence, gathering around him, awaiting his command.

"Bring me the Ratmen," Vorenza instructed. "Feed the hybrids. Expand their ranks. And when the time comes... we will strike at the heart of the city."

Vorenza's grin deepened as she turned away from the glowing pool, already envisioning the city's downfall. "Soon," she whispered to herself, "very soon."

Above ground, the bodies of the dead guards were being carried away to the mage tower, where the tower master and his apprentice immediately began their work.

The master's expression changed as he examined the ogre guard's corpse and discovered something resembling a placenta. Without hesitation, he ordered his apprentice to inspect the other dead guards for similar anomalies. Soon, he had his answer, and his face darkened with concern.

All this time, their attention had been focused on the pink mist that controlled the guards and disrupted the city's defenses. It had never occurred to the tower master that the mist's true purpose might be something far more sinister—a way to turn the guards into breeding grounds for monsters.

"But why?" the tower master muttered, pacing the room. Suddenly, realization dawned on him. "World suppression," he whispered. The truth hit him like a blow, and he immediately teleported to the calling room, summoning Vellok and the head mage who served beside the Emperor.

In the dimly lit chamber, the air shimmered with residual teleportation energy as the goblin tower master appeared. His green skin, dulled with age, pulsed with anxiety as he hurriedly prepared the arcane circle to summon Vellok and the head mage.

Muttering incantations, he traced glowing symbols in the air, his fingers trembling. The discovery of placenta-like structures in the corpses of the city's dead guards had disturbed him deeply. Something was growing inside them, something unnatural. The pink mist was just a distraction, its true purpose far darker.

"Why didn't I see it sooner?" Gurnak muttered, frustration clear in his voice. He stopped pacing, taking a deep breath. Now wasn't the time for self-blame—he had to act.

The symbols flared to life, and the air thickened as the calling spell took hold. Moments later, the images of Vellok and the Emperor's head mage materialized within the circle.

"Master Gurnak," Vellok greeted coolly, his deep voice resonating through the room. "This had better be worth the disruption. The Emperor does not appreciate—"

"It's not the mist!" Gurnak interrupted, his voice sharp with urgency. "The pink mist was just a ploy! We were so focused on it controlling the guards that we missed the real threat."

Vellok's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

Gurnak hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I examined the bodies of the ogre guards... Inside, I found something—something akin to a placenta. Whatever it is, it's gestating within them. And it's not just one, Vellok. All the dead guards have it."

The head mage's eyes flickered with concern. "Are you saying they weren't just controlled, but turned into vessels?"

"Exactly," Gurnak confirmed in a low hiss. "The mist was meant to weaken our defenses, but that wasn't its endgame. These guards were being used to grow something else. And I suspect... whatever is gestating inside them isn't being suppressed by the world's natural defenses, unlike the demons."

Vellok's face darkened as the severity of the situation dawned on him. "World suppression... It makes sense. The demon invasion has been held back due to the world's suppression of foreign entities. They needed something that could bypass that, and these abominations... they're it."

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The head mage's regal eyes glowed as she silently relayed the news to the Emperor through a magical link. Meanwhile, Vellok's brow furrowed in thought before he spoke again.

"Where did the creatures that emerged from these... placentas... go?"

Gurnak's expression turned grim. "The guards collapsed and died shortly after complaining of stomach pains. They were in the bathroom when it happened."

"Which means..." Vellok's voice trailed off, realization hitting him like a hammer. "The creatures are now in the underground network—with the Ratmen. Gurnak, what have you done?"

The chamber fell into an uneasy silence, the weight of Vellok's words pressing down on Gurnak. The goblin tower master stood frozen, his mind racing. He had been so focused on studying the guards' bodies that he hadn't fully considered the consequences of what might have already emerged from them.

Vellok, still holding his head, let out a deep sigh. "You let them go to the sewers... where the ratmen nest. If those abominations have found their way down there, it won't be long before they begin to grow unchecked. The ratmen are... adaptable. And if these creatures can exploit that, they will multiply at an alarming rate."

The regal head mage's voice echoed through the chamber, her connection with the Emperor still active as she relayed every word. Her glowing eyes narrowed as she spoke, "The Emperor is displeased. We were already dealing with the demon suppression, and now we may have a new enemy growing beneath our feet."

Gurnak clenched his fists, his green skin paling. "We didn't know... I didn't know. We thought the guards were just... infected by the mist's control. No one expected this."

"The Emperor expects competence," the head mage said coldly. "This mistake will not be forgotten, but we must focus on rectifying it. Vellok, we need a plan. The Emperor commands it."

Vellok stopped pacing and met her glowing eyes, his mind racing. "The underground network is vast. If these creatures are already down there, they'll be difficult to track, especially if they've taken refuge with the ratmen. We can't afford to send a full battalion—there's too much risk of causing a city-wide panic."

"What we need to do now is ensure none of those abominations manage to sneak into other cities through the underground network."

Looking over to the regal mage, Vellok said, "I would like for the Emperor to order a group of mages to seal off all underground passages connecting with the ones in this city."

"That way, we can be sure we have our target in one place," Vellok added as the regal mage's eyes glowed, relaying the plan.

The regal head mage's eyes glowed brighter as she conveyed Vellok's plan to the Emperor. The room remained tense, every second feeling like a lifetime as they awaited a response. Vellok stood firm, his mind already racing ahead, planning the next steps to ensure the containment of the creatures. Gurnak, still pale, shifted uneasily, hoping this drastic measure would prevent the situation from spiraling further out of control.

After what felt like an eternity, the head mage's eyes dimmed, signaling the Emperor's response. Her lips tightened into a grim line before she spoke. "The Emperor approves of the plan. A contingent of elite sealing mages will be dispatched immediately. They will begin sealing off the underground passages leading to other cities. The Emperor also commands that no expense be spared in ensuring this operation succeeds. We cannot afford a widespread outbreak."

Vellok gave a sharp nod. "Good. That will buy us time. We need to contain this mess before it spreads any further."

Gurnak, sensing the gravity of the situation, hesitated before speaking. "What about the ratmen? If they sense danger, they might try to flee through any unsealed routes."

Vellok's gaze turned sharp. "That's why we need to act fast. Once we isolate the creatures to this city's underground network, we'll root them out before they have a chance to adapt. As for the ratmen..." He paused, considering the challenge. "This will be a good time to carry out the Emperor's order of conscripting the ratmen."

"Having them leave the underground network will help corner our target even more, forcing them to the surface where they'll expose themselves."

The regal head mage's eyes flickered with renewed intensity as she processed Vellok's additional suggestion. The room seemed to tighten with the weight of his words. "The Emperor conscripting the

ratmen... That will certainly cause an upheaval," she said, her voice steady but wary. "It could force them into open rebellion. However, given the circumstances, it may be a necessary risk."

"I doubt they'll cause any commotion once they realize there's an abomination among them, ready to devour their kind. The Emperor's orders will be seen as a saving grace for them."

Gurnak and the regal mage nodded as the image in the calling room flickered off. Now alone, Gurnak teleported to the core of the mage tower.

The core reacted to his thoughts as an image began mapping itself mid-air in front of it. Once the image was complete, Gurnak took hold of the drawn map and teleported out of the tower.

High in the clouds, the city below appeared as nothing more than a small dot. Gurnak didn't wait long as the mana around him began to fluctuate.

Soon, a huge portal opened, and a massive ship floated out. The portal closed behind the ship as it drifted in the sky.

The air above the sky crackled with energy as portal closed while Gurnak descended onto the deck of the massive airship, the Emperor's floating fortress of magic. High Mage Serephine, her robes fluttering in the arcane winds, stood at the helm. Around her, a contingent of mages was gathered, their faces a mix of focus and tension. Gurnak landed softly, the magical barrier around the ship parting seamlessly to allow him through.

Serephine caught sight of him and nodded, her demeanor all business. She turned back to the assembled mages, her voice ringing out with authority. "The Emperor's orders are clear," she began, her voice cutting through the ambient hum of the ship's engines. "We are to seal every passage connecting this city's underground network to the others. We cannot allow the abominations to escape or spread. This is a containment mission."

Gurnak stepped forward and with a flick of his wrist, a detailed map of the city's subterranean network materialized, glowing faintly as it hovered midair. The mages gathered closer, eyes fixed on the intricate web of tunnels, passageways, and conduits snaking beneath the city. Gurnak spoke, his voice low and measured. "Our priority is sealing the primary conduits that connect this city to the others."

Serephine waved her hand, and the glowing map expanded, highlighting key points of interest. "We will work in teams. Each of you will be responsible for stationing the sealing rod at each junction"

The airship buzzed with focused activity. The mages, each gripping the dark rods covered in intricate runes, stepped through the shimmering portals that opened across the deck. One by one, they vanished into the labyrinth beneath the city, tasked with stationing the sealing rods at crucial junctions within the underground network.

Gurnak, assured that everything was proceeding smoothly, gave a final nod to Serephine before departing on his own mission. He had to calm the citizens and negotiate with the ratmen tribes who lived beneath the city. The abominations threatening the city were only part of the problem; managing the political and social landscape was equally critical.

Serephine, however, remained utterly focused on the task at hand. She paid no attention to Gurnak's departure, her mind entirely absorbed in the sealing ritual. Standing tall at the ship's helm, she waved her hand once more, and the shimmering map of the underground network floated before her, the lines of tunnels now overlaid with dark runes. Two phantom hands, summoned from her magic, extended from her shoulders, working in tandem with her real ones as she rapidly sketched the intricate runes needed for the sealing array. Her hands moved with practiced ease, drawing glowing symbols into the air, each pulse of magic adding power to the spell.

After several moments, the mages returned from the portals, their work complete. They moved silently to form a circle around Serephine, each murmuring in unison as they began the final incantation. Their voices blended, a rhythmic cadence of arcane syllables, and the air around them thrummed with power.

Serephine dispelled the phantom arms and took hold of the glowing map. It was now marked with dark runes at each key junction, a network of sealing points ready to be activated. With a final gesture, the array she had drawn in the air coalesced into a single, brilliant magic circle. She pressed it into the map, her fingers glowing as the circle sank into the paper, merging with the runes and amplifying their power.

The moment she completed the spell, a colossal beam of light shot down from the airship, piercing the sky as it descended toward the city. The beam cut through the clouds like a blade of pure energy, illuminating the city below in a radiant, ethereal glow.

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On the streets, the residents of the city were startled, many panicking at first as the blinding light engulfed them. But when they realized the beam wasn't causing any harm, they hesitated, their fear turning to awe. They stood frozen, eyes wide, marveling at the majestic sight above them. The light show was mesmerizing, casting long shadows and bathing the city in otherworldly brilliance.

Their admiration was quickly interrupted by Gurnak's voice, amplified by magic and echoing through the air. "Grab something sturdy close by and brace yourselves," he commanded, his tone leaving no room for doubt or hesitation.

Without question, the citizens scrambled, clutching onto anything nearby—a pillar, a railing, the walls of their homes. Then it began. The ground shuddered violently, a deep rumble rising from beneath the city like the growl of a waking beast. The shaking intensified, the tremors rattling buildings and sending loose stones tumbling from rooftops.

Deep underground, in the darkness of the forgotten tunnels, the black rods placed at each junction responded to the light. As the beam reached them, the rods began to absorb its energy, growing in size and stature. What had been small, unobtrusive objects now swelled, towering upward as they broke through the ground. The rods extended toward the surface, their dark metal gleaming as they shot upward, stretching skyward until they stood as massive pillars.

Each rod grew until it pierced the skyline, visible from every corner of the city. Once they reached their full height, the runes etched into their surface began to glow, first faintly, then with increasing intensity. A web of energy sparked between them, and a shimmering dome formed, connecting the pillars in a protective barrier. For a brief moment, the dome was visible—an immense shield of light that enveloped the entire city. Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the dome vanished, becoming invisible to the naked eye. The only sign of its existence was the faint glow still emanating from the now towering pillars.

Serephine lowered her hands, her expression calm and satisfied. The sealing was complete.

Up in the sky, the mages on the airship nodded to one another. Their task was finished. Serephine cast one last glance at the city below before turning toward the front of the ship. A massive portal opened in the sky, its swirling vortex shimmering with arcane light. Without a word, the ship began to ascend, passing through the portal and disappearing into the horizon, heading back to the capital.

Back in the abyss, Vorenza frowned as she watched what was unfolding. She truly detested the existence of mages and their tactics.

She had considered being subtle in her takeover of this world, still believing she had a chance of reaching the world's core first and ascending to demon lord.

Like Zarvok, she didn't want too much damage done to this world, especially to its mage inheritance, which would turn into strength after being absorbed.

But the actions of the world's mages were now making her question her decision. For the past month, she hadn't let her cannon fodder troops move to erode the land or wear down the shield protecting the city.

Vorenza had the advantage of numbers on her side, but because she was focused on a bigger prize, she hadn't used this advantage. Now, the mages were forcing her hand.

She relayed a message to her general as she pointed at the city, giving only one order: "Attack."

Vorenza, watching from her throne room as her army once again began to deploy, turned her attention back to the hybrids. "I hope this will buy you enough time to grow and achieve your purpose."

The mages' movements showed they were trying to corner and take out the hybrids, but with her sending out near-endless waves of troops, their attention would be divided, buying time for the hybrids.

At the same time down in the underground network of the city and the surrounding. The ratmen were panicking from the sudden vibration and shaking.

Those Unlucky even had the stone caving in on them, the whole community were in panic. Those close to the junction were taking back by the huge pillar suddenly in place.

The tremors shook the ratmen's underground city violently, sending tools, gears, and half-built steam contraptions crashing to the floor. Panicked voices echoed through the tunnels, their normally orderly society descending into chaos. The ratmen, highly intelligent but with no natural affinity for magic, relied on their steam-powered technology and quick-thinking to survive in the harsh environments beneath the city. But nothing could have prepared them for the seismic shift that had just erupted from above.

In the depths of the sprawling labyrinth of tunnels, Ratkin leaders and engineers scrambled to assess the damage. The tremors had caused several cave-ins, crushing smaller tunnels and cutting off vital routes to different sections of their society. Sparks flew from broken steam engines, and pipes burst as pressurized steam hissed into the air, further disorienting the already panicking population.

Down near the primary junctions, where some of their most advanced engineering lay hidden, a group of ratmen had gathered to inspect the sudden appearance of the rune-marked pillar. It rose impossibly tall, pulsing with dark, unfamiliar symbols that flickered with an unnatural glow. Those brave enough to approach cautiously poked at the structure, sniffing the air and inspecting its surface for any sign of familiar tech. But this wasn't a construct of metal or steam. This was something else entirely—something far beyond their understanding.

"We've seen nothin' like this before," grumbled Togg, an older ratman with wiry whiskers and a mechanical arm that whirred softly as he adjusted a pair of copper-rimmed goggles. "It reeks of surface magic. Ain't no good for us down 'ere."

"Have the goblin mages had enough of us and plan to wipe us out?" a young female ratman with glasses asked, stepping back in fear while staring at the rune pillar.

Togg patted a young ratman next to him and ordered, "See if we have an available drill car left from this disaster. Try to make a hole here," he said, pointing at the stone wall near the pillar.

The ratman nodded, and after a few seconds, he drove up a small vehicle with a huge drill attached to the front. The gathered engineers all took a step back as the drill began spinning and humming.

The drill moved closer to where Togg had pointed, but the pillar began to hum the moment the drill made contact with the stone wall. The gathered ratmen frowned, and the ratman driving the vehicle couldn't seem to accept what was happening as he increased the drill's speed.

The pillar responded by absorbing the energy from the drill. As the humming intensified, Togg and the others noticed the change and tried to shout and stop the ratman driving the vehicle. However, he didn't seem to hear them, focused entirely on breaking through the wall.

A flash of light followed by the sound of something impacting hard left the gathered ratmen in shock. Their minds struggled to comprehend what had just happened. The vehicle and its driver were no longer in front of them.

Their heads slowly turned where the impact sound came from only for them to cover their mouth in horror at sight. The rune-marked pillar had absorbed the drill's energy, and the resulting explosion had torn the vehicle apart, leaving behind nothing but a mangled, blood-stained wreck. The driver's head was the only thing that remained intact, staring vacantly as blood dripped down the metal.

Togg, the grizzled ratman leader, clenched his mechanical fist. "Damn it," he growled, his voice laced with both fear and frustration. "Whatever that thing is, it's not just surface magic. It's worse. Far worse."

One of the younger engineers, the one who had questioned whether the goblin mages were responsible, was now shaking uncontrollably. "W-We can't fight that. What do we do now, Togg?"

Togg shook his head, his wiry whiskers twitching as he studied the ominous rune-marked pillar. "There's nothing we can do. Magic and mana—those things are beyond us. Our technology, as advanced as it is, won't make a dent against something like this."

The younger ratman opened their mouth to protest, but Togg raised a hand to silence them. "We need to go to the chief. He's the one who's been in contact with the goblins. If anyone knows what's going on, it's him."

As they hurried through the damaged tunnels, the tension among the ratmen was palpable. When they reached the chief's quarters, they found the room in shambles, debris scattered everywhere. The chief, a stocky ratman with graying fur, was already sifting through the rubble, muttering under his breath. Finally, he uncovered what he had been searching for—a small, glowing stone.

He carefully placed the stone into a strange device. It hummed faintly, but nothing else happened. A flicker of panic crossed the chief's face as he frantically checked the device for any signs of damage, his hands trembling. Just as his frustration began to mount, a soft throat-clearing sound filled the room.

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Startled, the chief looked up as an image materialized above the device. It was Gurnak, a goblin mage with a weathered face and piercing eyes. Without giving the ratman chief a chance to speak, Gurnak spoke first.

"I'll be coming over soon to brief you and your people about the current situation. I believe you have some questions," Gurnak said in his gruff voice before the image flickered and disappeared.

The chief sighed in relief, sinking onto a piece of rubble, clutching the device to his chest. He took a deep breath, then sprang up, realization dawning on him. "We need to make ourselves presentable," he barked, quickly smoothing his fur and brushing off the dust from his coat.

"Gather everyone. If the tower master Gurnak's coming here, it means the situation's worse than we thought."

The ratmen engineers gathered in the partially ruined chambers of their underground city, murmurs of uncertainty filling the air. The rune-marked pillar and the destruction above had left them unnerved, and speculation began to spread like wildfire.

"It must be a curse," one ratman engineer said, his beady eyes wide with fear. "Something old and powerful. Maybe the surface dwellers have unleashed something they can't control."

Another ratman, a technician with grease-stained fur, shook his head. "No, no. It has to be a weapon. I've seen the goblins experiment with all sorts of strange things. Maybe this is some kind of magic-weapon hybrid they've been working on. And now it's malfunctioned."

The younger female ratman who had first suspected the goblins shifted nervously, adjusting her glasses. "Could they be testing it on us? Or worse... what if it's the mages? Maybe they're targeting us because of our proximity to the city. We could be collateral in whatever war they're waging."

Togg, standing off to the side, listened to their speculations with a thoughtful expression, his mechanical arm whirring as he scratched his chin. "This ain't no accident," he finally muttered, loud enough for the others to hear. "The timing's too precise. First the tremors, then that pillar. And now, Gurnak's on his way down here. Whatever's going on up there—it's big, and it's gonna involve us whether we like it or not."

Before anyone could respond, the air around them hummed with energy as a blue portal appeared before them, and Gurnak stepped through. Behind him were two hulking bodyguards, each wearing ornate magical armor. Gurnak's sharp eyes swept over the ratmen gathered in front of him, his expression unreadable.

Gurnak's nose twitched as an unfamiliar smell filled the air. He couldn't hide his disgust as he glared at the ratmen. The robe he wore hummed, and a small wave of light washed over him, masking the smell.

The chief walked forward as formally as he could, presenting a seat where Gurnak was meant to sit. Gurnak ignored the gesture as a staff appeared in his hand. He tapped the ground with it, and a seat made of earth formed before him.

Gurnak sat down, regarding the gathered ratmen. From the number present, he could guess they were the leaders of their community.

"To make the matter short, our world is being invaded by foreign existence called demons. One of these demon managed to birth a creature that somehow made its way into the underground network. In a Way you guys are currently in a grave danger"

"Yor number is huge which is why you haven't yet noticed a drop in your population but if left alone, it will be too late by that time the creature may have multiplied"

Togg spoke up "So the huge pillar was meant to keep this creatures locked in around us rather than letting them expand and reaching out to other underground communities"

Gurnak turned to him while nodding "A smart rat, how about to come work for me after this crisis is resolved"

It took everything in Togg to not react; instead he modestly bowed, the chief stuttered as he was nervous before asking Gurnak "What about my people? What are we to do now you have looked our path to escape"

Gurnak stared at him before standing up, the seat he built collapsing. The chief gulped as his heart thumped, one of the guard who came with Gurnaak pulled out a scroll dressed in gold.

Gurnak stared at the ratmen around as he said "You are about to receive the emperor's words and order" Hearing Gurnak words, the ratmen around stood wide eyed but soon reacted as they got on their knees with their head bowed.

The guard opened the scroll, his voice steady and authoritative as he began to read.

"By the command of the Emperor, supreme ruler of the land, protector of all beneath the heavens, a decree is hereby issued to the ratmen of the underground."

The ratmen shifted uneasily, their eyes flicking between the guard and Gurnak, who remained standing, his gaze sharp and unwavering.

"The Emperor, in his infinite wisdom, recognizes the strength and resilience of your people. Though you have long remained in the shadows of the underground, you have thrived, enduring the harshest conditions and proving your worth. Now, as our world faces a grave threat, the time has come for you to rise above. You will be conscripted to join the imperial forces in our war against the demons."

There were murmurs among the gathered ratmen, but none dared speak aloud.

"The Emperor offers you an honorable path," the guard continued, "not only to defend your own lives, but to escape the dangers of the underground. The creature that lurks beneath is a growing threat, one that will soon overwhelm you if left unchecked. The magical pillar was placed not to trap you, but to protect you, keeping the demon's spawn contained. However, it cannot hold forever."

The chief trembled but managed to keep his head bowed. The weight of the words felt both threatening and hopeful.

"The Emperor knows that your numbers are great, and your kind possesses untapped potential. The emperor has heard of your technological advancement and believes it will help a lot in our fight with the demons. You are no longer bound to these dark tunnels. You will fight alongside the Emperor's army, defend your people, and in return, you will be granted a place in the world above. The Empire will give you new homes, new lives, far from the creatures that now haunt your domain. Those who serve faithfully will be rewarded."

The guard paused, allowing the weight of the decree to sink in.

"You are not being abandoned. You are being given the chance to prove your strength and loyalty. In this time of crisis, the Emperor calls upon all his subjects, and you, the ratmen, are now among them. Fight, and your future will no longer be one of hiding underground but of standing tall as equals in the world above."

The ratmen whispered among themselves, the tone of the order both commanding and filled with opportunity. They weren't being left to die—they were being called to battle, to prove their worth and perhaps gain a new life.

Gurnak stepped forward, his eyes scanning the crowd. "You have been given a choice, though it may not seem so. Fight for your people, fight for the Empire, and be free of the dangers that lurk below. Or do nothing and watch as the creatures devour you from within."

He turned his gaze to Togg and the chief. "The Emperor's army will provide you with the tools, weapons, and support you need. Your role in this war is crucial. This is your way out of the underground—your path to survival."

The chief swallowed hard, glancing nervously at his people. "It is truly a blessing to be graced with the Emperor's words and favor in our lifetime."

He hesitated before continuing. "We are so overwhelmed that we feel undeserving of such grace, as this is quite sudden. Might we be allowed to discuss this among ourselves before giving a final answer in two weeks time?" The chief kept his head bowed, clearly nervous.

Gurnak's brows twitched, and one of the guards placed a hand on his sword, the tension in the air thickening. The silence was deafening, but then Gurnak's wand flashed.

A portal opened behind him, and without another word, Gurnak stepped through it with his two guards in tow. Before disappearing completely, he spoke in a cold tone. "You are spared from your insubordination this time, but there won't be a next time. You have two weeks to make your decision, or we will make it for you."

As the portal closed behind Gurnak, the tension in the room seemed to break like a dam. The gathered ratmen began murmuring amongst themselves, fear and uncertainty clear in their whispers. The chief stood frozen, still staring at the spot where Gurnak had been, his heart racing.

Togg stepped forward, his voice low but firm. "Chief, we don't have much time. Two weeks... and we're trapped down here with whatever thing lurking in the dark."

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The chief, wiping sweat from his brow, finally straightened himself, though his hands were still trembling. "We need to gather the council and decide quickly. This isn't a simple matter. If we refuse, we could be wiped out by the Emperor's forces, but if we accept... we're marching our people into a war we barely understand, if we are to do that at least they should have a say in it"

Togg nodded. "But if what Gurnak said is true, we're already at war. That creature is just the beginning. We've lost ratmen to it already without knowing it." His eyes flicked to the rest of the gathered leaders. "We can't let that continue."

One of the older ratmen, his whiskers gray and eyes weary, spoke up. "A war above or a slow death below... those are the choices we're left with. If we fight with the Emperor's army, maybe we'll have a chance to save our people. At least they offer us a way out."

The chief sighed deeply, his eyes scanning the room, seeking answers. "And what if we're used as fodder? What if our people are sent to the frontlines, only to be sacrificed?"

The Chief's words paused everyone as that was a fear they all had deep in their mind once they heard the order, they just didn't want to entertain the thought but it was now brought up by the chief.

The chief, realizing he had brought everyone's mood down, let out a breath before speaking. "I gave us two weeks because that's enough time to confirm whether Gurnak's words are true or not. We've only heard about these creatures from him and haven't seen them with our own eyes."

"What if we can deal with this threat on our own, without the goblins' help? The emperor's offer may seem like a saving grace, but our history with the goblins should be enough for us to question the emperor's sudden interest in our people."

Togg nodded slowly, absorbing the chief's words. The room remained silent, the weight of the chief's concerns settling heavily on everyone's shoulders. The fear of being used as mere cannon fodder was now out in the open, a thought they had all been avoiding.

One of the younger council members, a wiry ratman with sharp eyes, spoke up, his voice hesitant but clear. "But Chief, if Gurnak's warning is true, and these creatures are already in our tunnels, we might be running out of time. Can we afford to risk waiting just to confirm his words?"

The chief met his gaze. "I understand your concern, but we cannot rush into this without knowing all the facts. Two weeks is all I ask—enough time to send out scouts and gather information. If we can handle this threat ourselves, we may avoid the need for outside help altogether."

An older ratwoman, who had been quietly listening, suddenly chimed in, her voice raspy with age but filled with wisdom. "The chief is right. We've survived for generations down here, away from the surface. Trusting the goblins has never been in our best interest, and I doubt the emperor's intentions are any more noble. If we can handle this on our own, it would be best to stay out of the surface dwellers' war."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the room, though a few still looked unsure.

Togg glanced around, noticing the uncertainty still lingering. "We should prepare for both outcomes. If we find we can't handle this threat alone, we must be ready to accept the emperor's offer. The creatures Gurnak mentioned could already be multiplying, and if they're as dangerous as he claims, we won't stand a chance unprepared."

The chief rubbed his temples, the pressure of leadership clearly weighing on him. "Agreed. We will send out scouts immediately to confirm Gurnak's story. In the meantime, we'll begin bolstering our defenses. If the worst comes to pass, we'll need to be ready to protect our people, whether we fight these creatures alone or alongside the emperor's forces."

The younger ratman spoke again, his tone a bit hesitant this time. "In the slim chance that we are able to deal with this threat, what are we to do about the emperor's order?"

Everyone turned to look at the chief, who sighed. "No need to focus on that for now, but I want you all to know this: I believe dealing with this threat on our own will grant us more freedom than we ever thought possible with the goblins."

The ratmen were confused at the chief's word who shook his head "I won't explain much but I will be leaving you all with a question, why would the ever produdful goblins specifically a tower master make his way to the underground to negotiate with ratmen, with all the power they have over us and how they have been using their power, why didn't they do the same this time around?"

The room fell silent as the chief's question hung in the air. The ratmen exchanged glances, trying to make sense of his words. The younger ratman, still standing, furrowed his brow in thought. "You mean... they could have forced us into this? Like they always do?"

The chief nodded. "Exactly. The goblins have never shown us any mercy, yet this time, they're offering us tools, weapons, and a chance to leave the underground. It's not out of the goodness of their hearts. There's more at play here."

An older ratman, scarred from years of survival in the tunnels, grunted. "You think they need us. That's why they came down here with their fancy speeches and emperor's orders. They're afraid of whatever this threat is."

The chief smiled grimly. "Precisely. The goblins are powerful, but something has them on edge, enough that they're seeking our help instead of forcing us. That means we have leverage. If we deal with this threat on our own, we might be able to negotiate from a position of strength for the first time in our history."

A ripple of realization spread through the group. The ratmen, used to being at the mercy of the goblins, had never considered the possibility that they could hold any power over their oppressors.

"But Chief," another council member spoke, voice cautious, "what if we can't handle it? What if Gurnak is right, and these creatures are too strong for us?"

The chief's expression hardened. "Then we make a choice. Either we fight alongside the emperor's forces and risk being used as fodder, or we gamble on our own strength and survival. But I'll tell you this: the goblins fear these creatures, and if they fear them, that means they're desperate. And desperation makes them vulnerable."

The room filled with quiet murmurs as the council members processed the chief's words. For the first time in a long while, a spark of hope and determination flickered in their eyes.

Togg stepped forward, his voice steady. "I say we take the chance. Let's send out the scouts and find out what we're up against. If we can deal with this ourselves, we might be able to change our future."

The chief nodded approvingly. "That's the spirit. We have two weeks, and in that time, we'll gather as much information as we can. Whether we face this threat alone or with the emperor's army, we'll be ready."

To his amazement, Lavderh sank into the earth as if it were water. Vaegur, taken aback by this, was even more surprised when the carriage "swam" underground, only to emerge in a well-dug tunnel.

The carriage was enormous for the tunnel, but the two gods made sure that was no longer a problem. The tunnel would always expand just enough for the carriage to pass through, then shrink back to its original size once they had passed.

Inside the carriage, Ikenga and Keles were playing a game of chess, which Ikenga had introduced to Keles. Initially, Keles played to kill her boredom, but soon she found herself enjoying it.

As Keles made her move, she said, "I sense a lot of souls. We are getting close to meeting the ratmen."

Ikenga nodded absentmindedly, his focus still on the chessboard. "Have you blessed Lavderh with your gift yet? It'll be a problem if there's a commotion with the ratmen."

"Already ahead of you, brother," Keles replied, watching as Ikenga made his move.

Through the sight of a marked ratman, Keles and Ikenga had become aware of the civilization of ratmen living right beneath their feet.

The existence of these ratmen coincided with their goal in this world, making them their next destination. Soon, the carriage brought them near the settlement, where ratmen could now be seen going about their daily activities.

The tunnel stretched endlessly before them, dark and damp, yet the carriage moved silently, invisible to the eyes of the ratmen and any creatures lurking in the underground. Keles's blessing had veiled it, like a wisp of a soul, passing through without stirring the air.

"Their civilization is intriguing, isn't it?" Ikenga said "They are Just beginning to touch the surface of a system different from that of Mana. I wonder if they realize the potential of what they've discovered."

#### Chapter 318:

Outside, the faint traces of ratmen civilization started to emerge from the darkness. The air was thicker here, musty and heavy with the weight of stone and earth pressing down from above. The ratmen had carved out small, makeshift homes and workshops into the tunnel walls. Pipes, made from metal scraps, weaved through the stone like veins, carrying heated steam to warm their living spaces and power their crude inventions.

These rudimentary technologies were the earliest signs of a steampunk society beginning to take shape. The ratmen, though ingenious in their adaptation to the underground, had only just begun to harness the power of steam. Their forges were small and isolated, hidden deep within their burrows to avoid filling their narrow homes with smoke and fumes. Small, sputtering engines powered crude mechanical tools, but it seems they understood the risk of contamination and illness so they kept their experiments on a modest scale. They relied on natural ventilation systems, carefully crafted by the more forward-thinking engineers among them, to keep the air breathable in their subterranean cities.

While there were no vast factories, small workstations could be found nestled into the walls, dimly lit by flickering lanterns fueled by whatever resources they had managed to extract from the earth. The ratmen were builders, scavengers, and survivors. Their resourcefulness allowed them to create crude steam-powered carts for transporting goods through the tunnels, and in some places, simple mechanical elevators moved between levels in their underground network.

The glowing eyes of ratmen scurried in the darkness, their wiry frames moving swiftly from one tunnel to the next. Despite the harsh conditions, there was an undeniable sense of progress. They tinkered with gears and pipes, always seeking to improve, but their work was limited by their environment.

Inside the carriage, Keles studied Ikenga as he moved his piece across the board. "It's truly fascinating" she said softly, her eyes glinting. "They're on the verge of something greater, but they're held back by their own limitations. If they continue like this, it's only a matter of time before their experiments put them in real danger."

Keles leaned back in her seat, her focus shifting from the chessboard to the flickering lanterns outside. "They've managed to survive this long, though it's more out of necessity than innovation. If they keep pushing steam power without refining their methods, their entire society might suffocate under its own fumes."

Ikenga didn't look up from the chessboard, but his voice was thoughtful. "True. But necessity breeds innovation. They're reaching a crossroads. Steam may be their escape from the limitations of mana in these tunnels—or it may be their undoing." He made his move, capturing one of Keles's knights. "Our presence will influence that choice."

Keles smirked. "You sound as if you care for their future."

He looked up at her, his eyes calm. "It's not about caring. It's about granting them a way out from their doomed existence and at the same time having their goal align with our own purpose"

The carriage continued to glide soundlessly through the underground, invisible to the ratmen who toiled away, unaware of the gods passing so close to them. As they drew closer to their destination, the tunnel began to widen, revealing more of the ratmen's hidden society. Small outposts and crude guard stations lined the walls, though the ratmen there stood relaxed, unaware of the invisible visitors approaching.

The carriage moved silently as Keles gestured toward a nearby patch of small, pale plants growing from a mound of refuse. Their fragile, translucent leaves seemed to glow faintly in the dim light. Ikenga's gaze followed her gesture, his divinity allowing him to discern that these plants did not naturally belong in this environment but had been intentionally planted. Despite that, they had adapted well, thriving without the need for sunlight.

He extended his senses toward the plant, noting with curiosity how it seemed to respond, shifting slightly as if acknowledging his presence. Ikenga nodded, brushing it with his essence, learning the secrets of its growth. He sensed the faint but steady flow of mana that seeped through the cavern, which had allowed the plant to survive and evolve in these hostile conditions.

Turning his attention away, Ikenga's one golden-green eye glowed softly as he gazed out toward the settlement. In the distance, ratmen rummaged through piles of waste, occasionally uncovering a seed, which they handled with great care, preserving it as though it were a treasure. His senses extended further, reaching out to all the plants within the settlement. He could feel countless seeds lying dormant in the soil, their potential stifled even in the presence of mana.

"This won't sustain them for generations," Ikenga murmured, his eyes closed as he concentrated. "The changes in these plants are random, chaotic, not controlled. I see no organized farming, no methodical cultivation of these crops beyond the fungi they tend to. There's no way they've survived this long on such meager resources."

Opening his eyes, Ikenga's brows raised slightly as his senses picked up familiar figures. He relayed a silent message to Vaegur, who, alongside Lavderh, moved toward the group Ikenga had detected. The scent of blood grew heavier as they approached.

In the distance, Ikenga could make out the figures of the ratmen who had saved the one he had marked from the massive boar. The group known as Scraps and Flint. Their woman leader had eluded Ikenga's attention previously, but now she stood among them, overseeing their haul. Ikenga observed that this group, like many others, carried prey, freshly killed.

It clicked into place for Ikenga then: their survival wasn't reliant solely on the plants. They had burrowed tunnels that led to the surface, where they hunted. And conveniently, there was a forest not far from their hidden city. The ratmen must have been surviving on the spoils of the surface for generations.

Their hunting prowess had only grown with their technological advancements. Ikenga recalled the steam-powered weapons and tools they had used to fell the magical boar—steam-powered boots, gauntlets, rifles, and even a mana disruptor bomb. True to his earlier thoughts, other hunting groups were equipped with similar devices, their weapons refined to face the dangerous creatures of the surface.

Ikenga smiled faintly. "It seems they've found a balance between scavenging and hunting. But the strain is evident. Their technology may give them an edge, but it's only a matter of time before the demands of

survival outstrip their resources." He leaned back, watching with keen interest as the ratmen carried their hard-earned prey, completely unaware of how closely they were being observed.

Keles, like Ikenga, was looking through the settlement in her own way "I sense souls in the millions, in just this settlement. If they continue their growth, sooner or later it will weigh heavily on them"

The cut-up prey can be seen carried away to what seems to be a kitchen. A look into the kitchen reveals huge pots, the size of a room, boiling and being filled with meat and fungi.

The teamwork displayed shows how long they have been doing this, as ratmen can be seen filling up plates, which are then carried to what appears to be a delivery vehicle, distributing food throughout the entire settlement.

Vaegur had long since parked the carriage, and like Keles and Ikenga, he, too, was captivated by the sight of the ratmen moving and working together. It was truly a beautiful scene, seeing an entire race united with one purpose: survival.

Occasionally, explosions could be heard from the distant workshop, but none of the common ratmen seemed to react strongly. Instead, they all went about their tasks as if it were entirely normal.

The female leader began to move, drawing the attention of Ikenga and Keles as they watched her carry a plate of food. She was soon joined by ratmen who weren't part of her group but seemed to hold positions of power, just like her.

They all had the same destination—a building on the outskirts of the settlement. When they arrived, the door was opened by a ratman who appeared to have been waiting for them.

Inside the dimly lit chamber, the ratmen in positions of authority gathered around a large stone table. The female leader, still holding her plate of food, was the first to take a seat. Her presence commanded respect—her calm and steady demeanor, combined with the scars and trophies that adorned her body, marked her as a veteran of countless hunts and skirmishes. The other ratmen, representing various factions within the settlement, trickled in behind her, each with their own plates, each taking their places around the table in a practiced, silent ritual.

The room itself was stark, carved from the stone of the cavern, illuminated only by the dim, flickering light of lanterns hanging from the ceiling. The walls were lined with crude maps of the settlement, marking the hunting grounds above and the deeper tunnels that extended beneath the earth. There were diagrams of their steam-powered contraptions, lists of resources, and pinned reports of previous hunts.

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The ratman who had opened the door stood at attention, giving a quick nod before taking his own place at the table. He was younger than the rest, his fur cleaner, and his eyes sharper, but his posture was rigid with the weight of responsibility.

The female leader, Por, gestured for them to begin. Her eyes flicked toward the oldest of the ratmen, a grizzled elder whose fur had turned almost completely white with age. He cleared his throat before speaking, his voice rasping from years spent in the tunnels.

"The hunts today were successful," he began, tapping his claws against the stone table. "Four teams went topside. Three returned with prey—boar, deer, and even a bear. The fourth team encountered a pack of dire wolves. They managed to kill two, but we lost two of our own in the process. The rest of the team is being treated in the infirmary."

Murmurs rippled around the table, but there was no surprise in their eyes. Losses during the hunt were expected, even in the best of times.

"The meat will sustain us for the next few weeks, as it all came from mana filled creatures. Mana filled meat tends to take longer for us to process but because of that we can stay filled for days off one meal, but it's becoming clear that the prey is starting to dwindle. Our increased rate of hunting has left the usual prey no time to grow and expand." He paused, his expression grim. "We could aim for the larger, stronger prey, but that would increase our casualty rate, and we risk endangering our settlement if we anger one with enough weird magical talent to destroy our home."

To emphasize his point, he pulled out a snake fang hanging from his neck. "I don't need to remind everyone what happened the last time we angered one of those beasts. We lost thousands before we could defeat it."

The room fell into a tense silence, the weight of the elder's words hanging over them. Por's eyes flicked to the fang, a grim reminder of the dangers lurking beyond their underground sanctuary. She remained

silent for a moment, her sharp gaze sweeping over the gathered leaders. Each of them had witnessed the devastation firsthand, had seen comrades fall to creatures far beyond their ability to understand, let alone control. The memory of that beast—a serpent with strange magical abilities that allowed it to swim through the earth—was burned into their collective minds. It had taken everything they had: every piece of their steam-powered technology, every ounce of cunning, just to bring it down. But the cost had been nearly catastrophic. Their underground home, once thought to be safe, had felt like a prison that day.

The ratman seated closest to her, dressed in soot-stained garb and representing the steam engineers, spoke next. "Our steam rifles and gauntlets give us an edge over the smaller prey, but against creatures with mana, we're as blind as ever. We can't sense it. We can't fight it on equal terms. Our only defense is our technology, but even that's not enough against the more powerful creatures." He glanced around the table. "We need more than just weapons—we need a plan to secure resources without risking another disaster."

Another ratman, bulkier and wearing soot-stained overalls, representing the settlement's steam engineers, spoke up next. "The workshops are pushing the limits of what we can build with the materials we've scavenged. Our steam rifles and gauntlets are holding up, but we've had three explosions today alone. If we keep pushing the machines like this, it's only a matter of time before one of the workshops goes up in flames." He leaned forward, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "And we've had no new supply runs from the deeper tunnels. Without more metal and fuel, we're scraping the bottom of the barrel."

Por's eyes narrowed at the mention of the explosions. "I've heard the booms. The workers don't even flinch anymore. They're becoming numb to the dangers."

The soot-covered engineer grunted. "We can train them better, sure, but the problem isn't them. It's the equipment. We're stretching it too thin. If we don't start replacing parts, we're going to lose more than just a few workshops."

Another ratman, this one slender and dressed in tattered robes, representing the farmers who oversaw the settlement's plant reserves, leaned in. "The plants we've been cultivating are struggling," she said, her voice soft but urgent. "They feed off the mana that seeps into the caverns, but the supply is inconsistent. We've tried growing more, but it's clear that without an understanding of mana or sunlight, the plants are mutating unpredictably." She glanced around, her eyes darting nervously. "There's no telling when the mutations might turn dangerous and breed something not good for us. The fungi are stable for now, but it's not enough to sustain our population. We need to find a more reliable source of food."

Por's sharp eyes scanned the room. "We cannot afford to remain complacent," she said, her voice cutting through the silence. "The forest above is not endless. We may avoid conflict with the goblins for now, but we need to start thinking beyond what we've done before".

The older ratman shifted in his seat. "And what do you suggest, Por? We've stretched our hunters thin, our workshops are on the edge, What do we turn to next?"

Por didn't answer right away, her gaze thoughtful as she tapped a claw against the table. "We need more than just survival. We need better communication with other ratmen settlements.

"Surely they are going through the same things as us, if not worse, but we are too divided as a race. It is well known that each settlement specializes in something, but they are held back by the resources of their specific settlement, making it hard for them to grow.

"I propose we call another official meeting so that this issue can be brought up and discussed. We ratfolk need a leader to unite us under one banner so we can grow as a race. We could create our own underground world, not falling behind what the goblins on the surface have built, but we need everyone working together."

Por's words were followed by silence as they looked uneasily at her. This topic was always something she managed to bring up at each meeting. Some leaders supported her idea, but others still refused to entertain the thought of merging with other settlements.

The silence that followed Por's proposal was thick with unease. The ratmen around the table shifted uncomfortably, their eyes avoiding her piercing gaze. Many had heard this before—this call for unity, for merging their scattered settlements under a single banner. It was an ambitious idea, one that both inspired and unsettled them.

The elder ratman, Arrat, let out a weary sigh, leaning back in his chair. "You always bring this up, Por. Unity, cooperation—it all sounds good, but you know as well as I do that the other settlements are stubborn. Each one thinks they can survive on their own, and none of them want to give up control."

Por's eyes narrowed, her patience visibly thinning. "And where has that pride gotten us? A few more years of struggling to keep the lights on? Scraping by with mutated plants and outdated machines? We

can't keep pretending that what worked before will keep working now. We are losing, Arrat. Every explosion, every failed crop, every hunt that brings back less than the last. Our newborn generation can't even read or write or know anything about our past.

"We've managed to survive this long, but sooner or later, we will lose the essence of civilization and become something akin to beasts—only without the useful magical talents."

A younger ratman seated further down the table, dressed in the armor of the hunters, leaned forward. "But how do we make them listen?" he asked, his voice quiet but firm. "The other settlements see us as rivals. They're just as proud as we are. If we send word asking for another meeting, they might see it as a challenge."

Por was about to respond when the stone table shook. All eyes turned to the one who had caused it—the young ratman who had opened the meeting. His arm was now replaced by a gauntlet, which he had slammed against the table to get their attention.

Looking at Por, the young man said, "We can discuss your ideas and ambitions at a later time. Since everyone has given their reports, it's time to get down to business."

Por scoffed as she turned to her meal, while the others nodded in agreement and fell silent. The younger ratman stood up from his seat, placing his hand behind him as he addressed the room.

"A few hours ago, before this meeting began, I received a call from Tower Master Vellok. He will be sending one of his apprentices to deliver a message to us. At the same time, he asked if any ratmen have recently gone to the surface."

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Por, hearing the last part, had a look of panic on her face as she dropped her spoon. The sound of it hitting the table caught everyone's attention, and they all turned to her.

Seeing their eyes on her, Por stood up and took a step back before bowing. "I would like to apologize for forgetting something as important as this and getting carried away. I didn't mean to hide it, but as we talked about our development, it slipped my mind."

Turning to the young ratman who was their chief, she said, "I believe my group and I are the ones the Tower Master was asking about."

Hearing Por's confirmation, everyone began whispering among themselves. The chief raised his hand, silencing the room before asking, "What did you do on the surface that got the mages' attention?"

Ikenga and Keles, who had been listening in the entire time, exchanged glances. Por took a deep breath and began to explain, "Earlier today, during our last hunt in the forest, we came across a dozen huge, magical boar piglets.

"We successfully captured the piglets, but somehow, the mother boar managed to track us down. Following our hunting rules of preservation, we didn't engage it and made our way back underground.

"On our way back, one of my group members, Scraps, noticed that the mother boar had somehow breached the city walls and changed its target to a surface ratman.

"The boar must have mistaken him for us, as it targeted the young ratman. We couldn't let that happen, so we had to intervene." Turning to the settlement engineer, Por pulled out a cylindrical device from her belt—the magnetic disruptor that interferes with magical energy. Tossing it to him, she said with a smile, "I don't know how you did it, but it worked. We brought the boar down with ease."

The room was tense as Por recounted the day's events. The chief's eyes narrowed when she tossed the device to the engineer, who caught it mid-air with his clawed hand. He inspected it briefly, the soot and grime from his fingers smearing the metal, before looking back at Por.

Whispers rose again among the ratfolk. They understood the danger of dealing with surface creatures, especially magical ones. The chief raised his hand once more, quieting them.

"So, let me get this straight," the chief said, his tone measured. "You and your group not only went to the surface but also interfered with a magical beast inside the city walls?" His voice hardened. "And now we're on the radar of the mages because of it?"

Por swallowed hard but remained firm. "Yes, Chief. We couldn't stand by and watch one of our own be killed. The boar was ready to tear that ratman apart. Our only choice was to act quickly. The disruptor helped us turn the tide and save lives."

The tension in the room intensified. Ikenga and Keles exchanged another look, sensing how serious the situation had become. They had seen the boar's takedown through the eyes of a marked ratman and didn't know the disruptor had been involved.

For an oppressed race like the ratmen, showing such a weapon could attract unwanted attention from their oppressors—the goblins. Ikenga and Keles cared little for politics, but this development could complicate their business dealings with the ratmen if the mages began keeping a closer watch.

The engineer, still holding the disruptor, glanced between the chief and Por. "I built this as an experiment," he muttered, almost to himself. "I didn't think it would be used so... carelessly."

"Carelessly?" Por's voice flared with indignation, but she quickly regained control. "We were careful. We followed protocol. We didn't engage the boar until there was no other choice, and we made sure not to reveal anything to the surface ratman."

The chief's tail twitched, his frustration barely contained. "And now we're waiting for a message from Vellok's apprentice. Do you have any idea what that means, Por?"

Por stayed silent as the chief pressed on. "You couldn't have picked a worse time for this. My eyes on the surface tell me something big recently happened in the city. It was serious enough to draw out numerous mages, and now the walls are heavily guarded and every movement is being watched."

Por clenched her fists, but said nothing, her gaze locked with the chief's. She could feel the weight of her actions pressing down on her, but she wasn't about to back down from defending them. What she had done was necessary, even if the consequences were starting to unfold in ways she hadn't anticipated.

"While I didn't make the situation clear to you all, I still warned you to be careful of what's happening on the surface," the chief said as he took a deep breath and sighed.

"The mages watch the surface closely. If they think we're meddling in their affairs, it won't just be a message. It could mean trouble for all of us. Whatever is happening on the surface already has them on edge."

"If they see us as a threat—or worse, a nuisance—they won't hesitate to shut us down. We don't have the luxury of provoking them, especially not in times like these and certainly not with our current state."

Por's ears flattened slightly as the weight of the chief's words sank in. She knew they were in a precarious position, but the gravity of the situation was becoming all too clear. The mages were powerful, and the ratfolk, already struggling with limited resources and internal divisions, couldn't afford to draw their ire.

"I understand the risk," Por said, her voice quieter but still firm. "But what were we supposed to do? Stand by and watch one of our own get torn apart? We acted because we had to, and we made sure not to reveal anything about our settlement."

The chief stared at her for a long moment, his sharp gaze searching her face. "That may be so," he said slowly, "but it's not just about what you did. It's about what they perceive. The mages don't care about our intentions, only about control. If they think we're challenging their authority, even by accident, they'll make an example of us."

The room fell into a heavy silence, the air thick with tension. Everyone knew the precarious balance they lived under. The surface wasn't just dangerous because of the creatures and harsh conditions—it was dangerous because of those who held power above ground: the mages and the goblins.

The silence lingered before the room they were in began humming with energy. Immediately, they all rose from their seats and took a knee, heads bowed.

A portal opened in the room, and a female goblin mage stepped out, accompanied by a small floating eye. Ikenga and Keles frowned as the eye swept over them.

Ikenga's furrowed brow relaxed once he noticed the lack of divine energy. Whatever the small eye was, it wasn't as strong as the one that had opened up in the sky.

Looking at the goblin who emerged from the portal, Ikenga recognized her as the one who had met the cursed ratmen and interviewed him shortly after he was saved by Por and the others.

The female goblin wore a look of disdain as she floated, not bothering to touch the ground as if she found it filthy. "Rise," she said, and the ratmen finally looked up to see Vellok's apprentice.

The goblin scanned them thoroughly. The gauntlets on the chief's hands caught her attention as she stared at them. Finally, she focused on the magic disruptor held by the ratman engineer.

This wasn't the first time she had seen it. Her teacher, Vellok, had somehow gotten hold of the blueprints and conducted thorough research, which she had been a part of.

Taken aback by the equipment's usage, Vellok was curious about its workings and, most importantly, whether it could be used against them. Many goblin mages at the tower applied to participate in the tests.

The results showed that while the equipment worked on mages, it only strongly affected those at the apprentice stage. For an adept, it had a stunning effect, causing them to lose control of their mana for five minutes.

As for higher-ranked mages like herself, it had no effect. However, the equipment was still classified as an "A" level threat with the potential to become "S."

The reason for this was that Vellok discovered the disruptor had no effect on official mages and those of higher rank because their focus and concentration couldn't easily be disturbed. But in battle, if a mage were concentrating on casting a spell or caught by surprise, the equipment could work, leaving even an official mage stunned for 20 seconds, severing all contact with mana.

Twenty seconds might seem small, but for mages, they knew well that all it took was a moment for an opponent of equal strength to exploit that gap and deal a life-threatening blow.