

Guardian gods 511

Chapter 511:

If his former master could see him now, he would bow.

So why should he care about the empire's cruelty? About the lies they fed his people, about the yoke they had borne for generations?

He doesn't even know them that well, Rattan told himself. So why would he risk everything—his safety, his future—for their sake?

"Right, my guardian?" he murmured aloud, half-expecting the familiar whisper of reassurance, that subtle warmth that sometimes stirred at the edge of his thoughts.

But this time, there was nothing.

No answer. No nudge. No presence. Just silence.

And yet, that silence spoke volumes. It was the kind that made doubt louder, the kind that left space for dangerous thoughts to grow.

He frowned, the idea creeping in uninvited: What if this was all part of the guardian's plan from the start? What if the purpose of this newfound power, this change of identity, wasn't for his own gain—but to save the people he'd long since stopped thinking of as his?

The thought made his stomach twist.

"You should have chosen Chief instead," he said softly, his voice laced with bitterness and guilt. "He would've died for them without thinking twice. He actually cared. Me?"

Rattan looked around at the empty room, speaking to no one and everyone.

"My current position—my strength, my place in this world—it's everything I could've dreamed of."

His words echoed faintly off the walls, unanswered.

No sign from the guardian. No sign at all.

And still, deep down, a part of him wasn't sure if he was just justifying cowardice... or resisting a destiny he hadn't asked for.

Rattan suddenly leapt to his feet, eyes wide with relief as his mage staff pulsed with light. A voice echoed through it—it was one of the teachers, calling for the students to gather.

He didn't hesitate. Practically throwing himself at the staff, Rattan darted out of his room like something was chasing him. In a way, something was—his own thoughts, clawing and spiraling inside his head. The teacher's timely call felt like a lifeline. Anything to escape the weight of what had been gnawing at his mind.

Bursting into the corridor, he hurried down the familiar path until the walls gave way to the large, open training grounds. As he stepped into the clearing, he came to a slow halt, eyes widening in awe.

There, in the center of the grounds, stood the construct they had spent the past week helping to prepare. It was now fully assembled—an immense, circular platform that spanned the size of a small building. Runes shimmered faintly across its surface like veins of light, pulsing with quiet energy.

Before Rattan could take it all in, a sudden shimmer in the air caught his attention.

He blinked—and a goblin mage appeared midair, suspended effortlessly, arms folded behind his back.

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Without hesitation, the teachers dropped to their knees in reverence. The students, unsure but obedient, quickly followed.

This was no ordinary mage. The aura radiating from him made it impossible to think otherwise. A fifth-stage caster.

The mage didn't acknowledge the crowd. His sharp eyes swept over them briefly before shifting forward. Then, with a flick of his fingers, a glowing magic circle sprang to life in front of him.

Without a word, he began weaving spellwork into the circle. His hands moved like a blur—fluid, precise, and impossibly fast. The teachers leaned forward, their eyes locked in silent study. The students tried to follow, but the complexity and speed of the gestures left them lost.

Even so, none dared look away.

Something profound was being done before them—something most mages would never witness in their lifetime.

And for the first time in days, Rattan's mind fell silent.

Within seconds, the spell was complete. The fifth-stage mage now held a condensed sphere of light, its surface warping the air around it as if reality itself bent under its weight.

Without hesitation, he hurled it toward the center of the massive circular construct.

As the glowing orb approached, the runes painstakingly carved and infused by the students and teachers lit up in response, one by one, like a chain of igniting stars. A deep, resonant hum rose from the platform—steady and mechanical, yet almost alive.

The ball of light slowed as it reached the center, expanding gradually until it filled the once-empty circle.

And then—

The light solidified into an image. A shimmering, stable portal.

Gasps filled the training grounds.

What unfolded before their eyes was something most had only read about in texts or heard in hushed rumors.

Through the gate, at a staggering distance, hung a thick, dark red cloud churning ominously above the battlefield. From the depths of that crimson storm came the unmistakable roar of two armies locked in brutal conflict.

The students squinted, trying to make out what lay so far beyond, but the distance was too great for unaided eyes. The teachers, however, had come prepared—each casting a vision-enhancing spell, their irises shimmering as their focus snapped forward with supernatural clarity.

What they saw made some of them recoil in horror.

One teacher stumbled backward, hand over their mouth. Another let out a strangled cry.

Through the magnified view, they saw a demon—towering and grotesque—gripping a ratman soldier by the torso. The ratman thrashed helplessly as the demon opened its maw and vomited molten lava onto him.

The screaming figure writhed as the lava consumed his body.

Then, with terrifying indifference, the demon raised what remained and swallowed the ratman whole.

And that was only one small moment in the hellish chaos unfolding beyond the gate.

Someone else saw it too.

Unlike the other students, Rattan's vision suddenly sharpened, unbidden. It was as if something within him had awakened, granting him the same clarity as the teachers—whether he wanted it or not.

And he didn't.

As the scene through the portal expanded in his sight, the sheer brutality of the war unfolded in raw, merciless detail.

He didn't want to see this.

"Please... stop. I don't want to see this."

The words echoed through his mind, again and again, each repetition more desperate than the last. But the vision didn't fade. If anything, it grew clearer.

Tears welled in Rattan's eyes and slipped down his face.

There, in the thick of the chaos, he saw a young ratling—no older than ten—clutching a steam-powered rifle that looked far too heavy for his small arms. The child's hands trembled as he tried to aim at a demon lumbering toward him.

But he was frozen.

Terrified.

The demon drew closer, its hulking body casting a shadow over the trembling ratling. Around them, the battlefield raged on—ratmen and monsters locked in a desperate fight for survival—but none of them noticed the child.

None of them could afford to.

And then—

The demon reached out, smiling like a predator savoring the kill. With a swift motion, it snatched the ratling from the ground.

Snap.

The child's scream pierced Rattan's soul as one of his arms was torn clean off.

Rattan's knees buckled. He gripped his robe so tightly his knuckles turned pale, yet the image persisted.

The demon was laughing. Laughing as it ripped away the child's leg, feeding off the agony like it was the sweetest wine.

The ratling's body twisted in torment, his cries shrill, ragged, and unending—until, finally, a shot rang out.

A precise, well-timed bullet struck the demon through the head.

It crumpled to the ground, releasing the bloodied, half-conscious child.

Relief surged through Rattan, but it was short-lived.

Another demon turned its gaze. It had heard the cries. It had seen the wounded prey.

It was coming. This demon—larger, crueler, and far more twisted than the last—approached the child.

Without hesitation, it conjured a glowing thread of fire, thin and impossibly sharp, a string of abyss fire. With a flick of its clawed hand, the thread pierced the child's torso.

The boy convulsed violently.

The thread glowed from within him, illuminating his tiny frame like a lantern of agony. His scream, once sharp and full of life, was now cracked and strained—more a broken song of terror than a cry for help.

The demon smiled as if admiring its handiwork. Then, with grotesque care, it slung the child over its shoulder, the fiery thread keeping him suspended—alive, conscious, screaming.

Like a grim ornament.

Like a music box that wailed instead of sang.

And still, the demon marched forward, dragging death in its wake, the child's tormented cries echoing above the roar of battle.

Then, suddenly—

Rattan's vision snapped back to the present.

The world around him returned, the sounds of magic humming through the portal, the awe of his peers, the presence of the fifth-stage mage.

But Rattan was no longer standing.

He had collapsed to his knees, his face wet with tears, his chest heaving. His whole body trembled—not from pain, but from the weight of what he had just witnessed.

The students and teachers turned at the sound of his fall.

Their gazes lingered, curious. Concerned.

But then Rattan lifted his head, forcing a smile to his face—a grotesque, broken parody of joy.

"It's... such a beautiful sight," he said softly, voice trembling.

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The others, hearing only his words and not the meaning behind them, nodded.

They turned away, some murmuring their agreement, admiring the scale and clarity of the portal. To them, it was beautiful. A marvel of magical engineering.

None of them saw what Rattan saw.

None of them felt what he felt.

And no one noticed the way his smile faltered the moment their backs were turned.

And just like that, the wait was over.

It was time to return to the academy.

The students moved with excitement and chatter, but Rattan felt none of it. Ever since witnessing the horrors through the portal, he had been adrift—quiet, hollow, moving through the days like a ghost wrapped in flesh. He barely remembered packing, barely registered the moments between then and now.

Now, as he stood on the magical platform that carried them upward—rising steadily toward the open space above—his gaze drifted downward.

And what he saw made his breath catch.

Below them, lined up like cattle, were his people—ratmen in ragged clothes and rusted armor. Some held weapons far too large for their shaking hands. Others simply stared forward, eyes vacant. Children

stood among them, clutching onto trembling parents or clinging to scraps of cloth like they were talismans against death.

All of them were being readied.

Ready to be sent into the portal.

Ready to die.

Rattan's heart seized in his chest.

Had fate not twisted the course of his life... had the guardian not intervened... he would be standing down there now. Among them. Marching toward that hell.

And then his eyes landed on the construct—the vast, intricate portal that had taken a week to assemble.

The one he helped build.

His hands clenched into fists, knuckles pale, shaking. He didn't notice when his nails bit into his skin, didn't flinch as blood trickled from between his fingers. He only felt the crushing weight of guilt sinking deeper into his chest.

He had helped build the machine that would devour his own people.

He had drawn the runes. Aligned the channels. Channeled the mana.

He had made it easier for them to die.

The platform rose higher, carrying him farther away from the blood-soaked truth below—but the weight of it only grew heavier, anchoring itself deep in his soul. The higher he climbed, the more it hurt.

Rattan did not look away. He couldn't.

His silence was not from pride, or strength, or detachment.

It was grief and shame.

And the slow-burning fury of someone beginning to realize that maybe, just maybe... his new position didn't free him.

It chained him.

While Rattan writhed in silent torment, tears streaming down his face as he watched the brutal massacre of his people, another conversation took place deep within the unseen corridors of his mind.

A space that did not feel like flesh or spirit—just a quiet void suspended between worlds.

Phantom stood within it, untouched by the horror Rattan was witnessing, his essence radiating stillness like the eye of a storm. A flicker of divine presence shimmered nearby—Ikenga, the being who had created him, observing without judgment.

The silence between them broke as Ikenga's voice echoed softly, like distant thunder:

"Was that necessary?"

Phantom, still watching through Rattan's eyes as the second demon played with the mutilated child like a toy, did not turn.

"Are you questioning the right or wrongs of my actions, milord?" he asked, a subtle amusement threading his voice.

There was a pause before Ikenga answered.

"Right and wrong mean nothing to me. I am only curious..."

"Why did you do it?"

Phanthom's gaze narrowed as he watched Rattan's fist clench hard enough to bleed.

"You taught me that emotion sharpens ambition. That pain tempers resolve. He has fire—but it's unfocused. He still clings to the illusion of safety. I only peeled his eyelids open."

Ikenga's tone remained unshaken.

"Weren't you meant to fan the flames of ambition... not drown him in despair?"

Phanthom chuckled, low and hollow.

"A fire must burn its roots to grow. You say fan—I say purge."

There was no reply for a long moment. Just the sound of battle echoing through the portal, and Rattan's soft, broken sobs.

Then, softly, Ikenga spoke again.

"Very well. But be sure he does not turn the fire on you."

Phanthom said nothing. But a faint, wry smile formed across his unseen face.

Fast forward to the present...

In the upper levels of a towering mage spire that pierced the clouds like a spear of knowledge and ambition, a quiet stillness permeated the alchemical chambers. Flickering blue fire from suspended sconces cast soft light across rows of glass vials, brass instruments, and ancient tomes bound in strange leathers. The air smelled of ozone, dried herbs, and faint traces of brimstone.

A young goblin stood at the center of it all, dwarfed by the sheer size of the chamber but commanding its attention nonetheless. His green skin was flecked with specks of dried powder and faint scorch marks from prior mishaps. Despite the mess that surrounded him, there was precision in his movement—a deliberate care that revealed both discipline and obsession.

His name was Nixbolt (Rattan), though few used it now. Not out of disrespect, but because few dared to speak too casually around the prodigy cloaked in mystery.

Before him, a thin copper coil hovered above a distillation basin, steam rising in rhythmic puffs as he adjusted the flow of heat beneath it. His amber eyes reflected the bubbling liquid, narrowed in intense concentration. Every drop that fell into the receiving vial was timed, every shift in temperature anticipated.

He barely blinked.

There was no room for error. Not here. Not now.

On the edge of the table, a slender staff pulsed faintly with light—his connection to his "guardian," Phantom, dormant but always present. The staff occasionally shimmered, as if aware of the silent storm that brewed inside him.

A knock came at the chamber door, light and hesitant.

"Nixbolt? The Tower's Council requested your presence. Something... about the warfront again." The voice belonged to a peer, though the deference in their tone spoke volumes about how others viewed him now.

Rattan didn't answer immediately. He didn't even look up.

Instead, he carefully turned off the heat under the basin, watching the last drop of golden liquid fall into the flask. Only then did he speak—his voice calm, but cold.

"Tell them I'll come. After this is done with"

The assistant lingered a moment longer before quietly retreating.

Alone again, Rattan finally leaned back, exhaling a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. The room returned to silence, but his mind did not.

Though years had passed since that day by the portal, the memory of the demon and the child lingered like an imprint behind his eyes. No amount of knowledge, no height of magical prestige, no new title the empire offered could burn it away.

His people were still dying.

And he was still pretending to be someone who no longer cared.

The vial glowed faintly in his hand. Opening it, he swung his head back as he drank the portion with its effect showing immediately as things around him levitating, he opened his eyes as he let out a breath.

"The peak of mage apprenticeship" He thought to himself, the council couldn't not have chosen a better time to call for a meeting.

"One day soon," he whispered to the empty room, "you'll all see what it means to truly fear the ones you tried to erase."

The door to the alchemical lab clicked shut behind him.

Rattan walked through the winding halls of the mage tower, his staff now firmly in his grasp. He moved like a phantom himself—his steps measured, soundless. Students parted for him. Teachers gave a nod, but their eyes lingered a moment too long, not out of admiration—but calculations.

As he ascended the marble stairs to the topmost floor, the runes etched into the walls pulsed with a gentle hum, resonating with his presence. The council chamber was ahead.

Two heavy doors creaked open of their own accord as he approached.

Inside, a circle of robed figures awaited him—each seated on a floating obsidian platform arranged like spokes around a central dais. The room itself was bathed in pale light from a chandelier of suspended mana crystals that drifted like stars overhead. Magic buzzed faintly in the air, layered, complex, ancient.

At the center stood an old goblin with a snow-white beard, his eyes sharp behind thin lenses—Archmage Kroza, the current head of the academy.

"Apprentice Nixbolt," Kroza said, voice smooth yet heavy, like velvet stretched over iron. "You've proven to be quite the interesting goblin. No exceptional talent early on, but something changed after your return from the expedition to the Underdelve."

Rattan stood at attention, his expression neutral, hands behind his back. He said nothing. He didn't need to. Kroza wasn't done.

"Spiritual awakenings aren't uncommon among mages. A moment of clarity, a brush with the unknown, a sharpening of one's path... happens more often than you might think. What gives us pause, however, is the direction of your clarity."

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Kroza's gaze sharpened behind his crystalline lenses, scrutinizing every flicker in Rattan's body language.

"We have observed your recent focus. Your research proposals. Your requisitions. Your questions. There is... a sudden and rather intense interest in the war."

A murmur swept across the chamber. "In steampunk warfare technology. In ratman engineering. Even in the battlefield salvage we've retrieved."

A beat of silence. Then Kroza leaned forward slightly.

"So tell us, Apprentice—why?"

Rattan did not answer right away. Silence was his ally. He had learned that well during his time among the mages and high goblins. Measured breaths. Controlled gaze. Words weighed like ingredients in alchemy.

"Because they built it," he said at last. His voice was calm, focused. "The ratmen. They built it under fire, under pressure, in desperation. And it worked."

More murmurs, but Kroza raised a hand to silence them.

Rattan continued.

"I am not interested in sentiment or politics. I am interested in effectiveness. There is a brutality to their engineering, yes—but also brilliance. I believe their fusion of necessity and invention produced insights we, for all our resources, have yet to understand."

"You believe our own war-forged artificers have missed something?" asked Magister Vael coldly.

"No," Rattan replied. "I believe they weren't desperate enough."

Silence. Sharp, heavy. Rattan let it sit for a heartbeat longer.

"My path is clear," he said. "Magitech integration. Weaponry. Fortification. Efficiency. War is a crucible. I seek to understand its fire."

Kroza tapped a finger on the armrest of his seat.

"A path of destruction, then?"

"A path of understanding," Rattan corrected, without heat. "What others do with it... is not mine to decide."

Kroza tilted his head slightly. There was curiosity there, and something else—doubt? Intrigue?

Finally, the archmage gave a slow nod.

"Then you will be granted conditional approval to proceed. A space in the Vault of Integration will be assigned to you. Supervision will be light... but not absent. The College does not ignore potential. Nor does it ignore danger."

Rattan bowed. "Understood."

As he turned to leave, the murmurs resumed, faint but charged. The apprentice with a sudden interest in war. The goblin with no magical pedigree now walking the path of a battle-forged.

He walked calmly out of the chamber, each step calculated.

But inside, Phantom chuckled. "He played that well. Not too eager. Not too afraid. Just enough mystery to let their own minds do the work."

"You know... they'd turn him to ash if they found out what he really is."

"But that's what makes this fun."

"Indeed" Ikenga's voice echoed in Rattan's mind as his presence withdrew.

Meanwhile Rattan was sweating as he walked out of the room, his back sweating but for the first time in years, he left other emotions apart from grief "Joy" something that was beginning to become a rarity for him.

"Maybe, just maybe he will finally be able to close his eyes and sleep" for the first time in years. Rattan thought to himself as he walked to his room.

Rattan soon reached his room, its walls lined with faintly glowing glyphs and shelves cluttered with alchemical tools, scrap tech, and thick tomes in multiple languages. He let himself fall onto the bed, body stiff and unyielding, like something only vaguely remembering how to rest.

He closed his eyes. Nothing came. No sleep. No dreams. Only a buzzing hum behind his eyelids and the echo of too many thoughts.

His mind wasn't quiet.

It hadn't been since that day beneath the earth.

And so, like a statue pretending to breathe, Rattan lay still for the next four hours, eyes wide open, staring blankly at the ceiling. Watching faint magical motes drift in and out of focus in the lanternlight. Breathing. Blinking. Waiting for a calm that refused to come.

Then— A knock.

His eyes flickered. A pause.

He stood slowly, crossing the floor with mechanical precision, and opened the door.

Standing there was a female goblin courier, her green skin dusted with chalk powder and potion fumes. She held a modestly sized box in both hands. Her expression was unreadable, but her stance suggested formality, expectation.

"From the Council," she said.

Rattan nodded, silently accepting the box. Without another word, he closed the door in her face.

The latch clicked. He walked back to his workstation—half alchemy bench, half mechanical forge—and sat down, the weight of the box heavy in his lap, not just physically but symbolically.

He removed the lid. Inside was a single, exquisitely cut memory crystal, its facets pulsing faintly with captured light. Its color was not the usual clear blue, but a deep violet, like a bruise in glass.

His breath slowed. Hands steady, he picked up the crystal, inspecting it only briefly before pressing it to his forehead.

The crystal did not just rest against his skin—it sank into it, phasing through his flesh like water.

A shimmer of arcane light rippled from the point of contact.

His eyes rolled back, now showing only the whites, as his body went rigid in the chair.

Then—darkness.

Then—light.

The world around him melted away.

In his mind, a new world began to take shape. A vision pulled from memory and magic. A message not in words, but in experience.

Somewhere beyond the crystal's light, the Council was about to show him something very important.

It took some time before Rattan's eyes returned to normal.

When they did, he began to laugh.

It wasn't the laugh of triumph, nor relief. It was ragged—choked and sharp—like a cracked mirror trying to reflect something whole. His shoulders trembled with each breathless chuckle, the sound teetering on the edge of hysteria.

Anyone listening closely would know:

There was no joy in that laugh.

Tears streamed down his face. Not from the intensity of the memory crystal's integration—no, that part was expected. It was what came after that hollowed him out.

The crystal had delivered exactly what was promised: advanced knowledge, the foundation for his next step into the arcane arts. Intricate models of magical circuitry, detailed schematics of spell-conduction through steampunk arrays, and theories on mana fusion with machinery—beautiful, elegant, dangerous.

But it didn't stop there.

What came next shattered him more than he cared to admit.

The crystal had also shown him a clear and comprehensive map—one that traced his so-called "unique" path. Every turn he thought he'd discovered on his own had already been charted. Every breakthrough, anticipated. Every invention, already outdated.

Magitech, it seemed, was not a new frontier. It was a hidden road the empire had walked long before he was even born.

His pride, so carefully built on the belief that he was forging something new, was now drowning beneath the weight of bitter truth. The Council hadn't been surprised by his path—they'd expected it.

He felt like a child pretending to be a giant.

Worse, he felt like a clown, standing proudly before those mages, speaking boldly about his direction... not knowing he had walked into a play they'd already written.

How was he ever going to fight an enemy who had mastered the game before he ever learned the rules?

He pressed a hand to his face, wiping the tears away with a trembling palm.

But the shaking wouldn't stop.

Not yet.

Not when everything he believed in had been turned into a cruel joke.

The excitement Rattan once felt for his new path had long since faded.

It had been washed away—drowned beneath the crushing weight of truth.

Now, he sat at his desk, his eyes empty and unfocused, as though staring through the world instead of at it. For two long weeks, he moved through the days like a ghost, following routines without thought. He made no progress on his research, no sketches, no experiments. The once-burning spark inside him had dimmed to a flicker.

And then, without warning, that stillness shattered.

A knock echoed against his door.

Slowly, Rattan stood and opened it. A figure stood outside—another goblin, clad in formal robes, but there was nothing ordinary about him.

Before Rattan could utter a word, the figure spoke.

"Freshen up. My lord asks for your presence."

The words were curt, almost dismissive—but it wasn't just the tone that silenced Rattan. It was the aura leaking from the mage. Cold, oppressive, ancient. It pressed against Rattan's lungs like an invisible weight. Instinctively, his mouth snapped shut. He stepped aside wordlessly, leaving the door open as the mage walked in, casual yet commanding.

Rattan turned away and hurried to the bathroom.

There was no time to question. No room for hesitation.

A quick wash. A comb through his tangled hair. A fresh robe. When he returned, the figure sat beside his desk, tapping a gnarled staff against the floor in a slow, rhythmic beat.

"I am ready, sir," Rattan said, trying to keep his voice steady.

The figure didn't reply. He merely gave a small nod—and then tapped his staff once more, sharply this time.

Crack.

A ripple tore through the air.

A portal bloomed open in the center of Rattan's room, warping the very space around it. The air buzzed with arcane pressure. Rattan's eyes widened in disbelief.

Opening a portal inside a mage tower was supposed to be impossible—at least without explicit permission from the tower master. Every stone of this place was saturated with enchantments designed to prevent such distortions.

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Yet here it was.

And here was this goblin mage, unfazed.

The portal pulsed softly, beckoning.

Whoever awaited him on the other side, Rattan knew they were no ordinary figure. A deep breath steadied his nerves, though his heart was racing.

Without another word, Rattan stepped into the portal.

The goblin mage followed, and the portal sealed behind them like a door slamming shut on everything Rattan had ever known.

In the quiet stillness of his grand study, Archmage Kroza stood before a floating crystal, its surface shimmering with arcane energy. With a sigh, he extended his hand and sent out a silent call.

Moments later, the image of Vellok—stern-faced and robed in deep crimson—flickered into existence before him.

"I call to inform you," Kroza began, his voice calm but heavy with intent, "that the one in the palace has taken an interest in another goblin student—one who walks the path of magitech."

Vellok's expression remained unreadable. He gave a slow nod, already turning slightly to end the transmission.

But Kroza's voice sharpened. "Wait."

The archmage's tone stopped Vellok mid-motion.

"I know how it appears—a mere repetition of past patterns. That figure always had a habit of choosing strange protégés. But this time... this student is different. Mark my words, Vellok."

Vellok raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"It wouldn't be surprising," Kroza continued, his eyes narrowing, "if this child were to ascend to greatness under that man's tutelage. I dare say, we could be watching the birth of a sixth-stage mage... one aligned with him."

That did it.

Vellok turned back fully, no longer in a hurry to end the call. The weight of Kroza's words lingered in the air like incense after a ritual—impossible to ignore.

Kroza saw the shift and pressed forward.

"You understand what that means, don't you? We may be nurturing a future problem. No... two problems. And we've let that ticking bomb in the palace walk freely for far too long."

He leaned in slightly, voice dropping lower, more conspiratorial.

"Why not use this opportunity to finally deal with him? We have reason, motive, and leverage. A promising student with an unstable past... all eyes will be on him. If anything happens, well... unfortunate things do occur when power is mishandled."

Vellok said nothing for a long moment. But the glint in his eyes was answer enough.

The call ended.

And in the stillness that followed, Kroza allowed himself the faintest smile.

In the heart of the capital, not far from the gleaming spires of the imperial palace, a ripple tore open in the air above a secluded building. From within the swirling portal, Rattan and the mysterious goblin mage stepped out.

"Follow me," the mage said, his tone brisk and unyielding.

Rattan complied, masking his unease behind an expression of quiet composure. Yet inwardly, he struggled to contain the awe swelling within him. The capital's architecture was staggering—ornate bridges of aethersteel, enchanted lanterns suspended midair, and towering buildings engraved with runes older than memory. And above them all, casting a long shadow of power and majesty, loomed the castle proper.

It was no less magnificent than the mage towers he'd grown used to—perhaps even more so. This was a place where decisions shook empires.

Eventually, they reached a vast door of blackwood and silver inlay, etched with ancient sigils that pulsed faintly at their approach.

"You go on without me," the mage said without looking back.

And then, like smoke dispersing in the wind, he was gone.

Rattan stood alone before the door. He looked down at his robes, straightened them, exhaled deeply, and prepared himself.

With a deep rumble, the door began to open of its own accord, creaking wide with slow, deliberate weight. What lay beyond was a circular chamber, dimly lit by floating crystals, with a single throne of obsidian and bone at its center.

Seated upon the throne was a figure.

Rattan's eyes instinctively went to the figure's face—but what he saw defied comprehension. He knew there were facial features there, but every time he tried to grasp them, his mind slipped away as if rejecting the image. It wasn't cloaked or hidden—his perception simply refused to process it.

So instead, he looked to the silhouette. Broad-shouldered, massive, layered with muscle beneath elegant robes far too refined for any soldier or brute.

An ogre.

His breath caught in his throat.

"But how could it be?" Rattan thought, his mind racing.

There was one fundamental truth within the Empire—goblins stood above ogres.

Goblins were the scholars, the mages, the architects of civilization. Ogres were brutes—useful in battle, yes, but crude, barely above beasts, and incapable of even the simplest magic. Their place had always been below.

And yet here he knelt, in the throne room of a figure whose presence radiated more power than most archmages, and that figure was clearly an ogre.

Rattan dropped to one knee, head bowed low. Whatever rules he thought he understood... no longer applied here.

Whatever this being was, it shattered every known order of the Empire.

Rattan found himself frozen, the words he meant to speak caught in his throat. A colossal hand, heavy and warm, settled on his shoulder, accompanied by a deep, soothing voice that seemed to resonate from the very depths of the chamber. "I could guess what occupies your thoughts at this very moment?"

Slowly, hesitantly, Rattan raised his gaze. An ogre, clad in surprisingly ornate royal attire, stood impossibly close. Yet, despite the proximity, the ogre's features remained veiled in shadow, an enigma that amplified Rattan's unease. The immense figure seemed unfazed by Rattan's stunned silence, continuing in that low, rumbling tone. "It's a familiar refrain. When goblins of your ilk first stand before me, their minds invariably echo the same arrogant question: 'How dare an ogre command a throne and be served by mages of such caliber?' Initially, such blatant disbelief held a certain amusement, but the novelty has long since worn thin."

With a fluid grace that belied his size, the ogre was suddenly seated upon the elevated throne, leaving Rattan slightly disoriented by the swift change in proximity. "Your presence was requested today not out of mere curiosity, but because your inherent talent and the path you currently tread resonate with ambitions I myself once held."

A moment of silence hung in the air before the ogre's voice, now carrying the weight of authority from his seat, cut through it. "Tell me, fledgling magitech artisan, what was your experience upon first grasping the intricate knowledge of magitech?"

Rattan hesitated for a moment, still kneeling, his thoughts racing to catch up with the surreal reality he was standing in. The warmth of the ogre's massive hand still lingered on his shoulder—a gesture surprisingly gentle despite its size. But what disturbed him even more than the impossibility of the ogre's position, or the mystery of his obscured face, was the truth in his words.

He had thought it. How dare an ogre...?

And now, that thought tasted bitter.

"I..." Rattan finally spoke, his voice low and uncertain. "I felt pride... and then shame."

The ogre, sitting again on the throne as if he had never moved, let out a deep, rumbling chuckle. "Good. You're not lying to yourself. That means your mind hasn't yet become useless."

Rattan rose slightly from his knee, not standing but no longer prostrate, as the ogre continued.

"When you first learned about magitech—true magitech, not that watered-down parody they let apprentices play with—what did you feel?"

Rattan's eyes lowered.

"Despair," he admitted. "I thought I had discovered something new. I thought... I was walking a path no one else dared to. That it was mine. But when I saw how well documented it already was—how the Empire had studied and discarded it like a solved puzzle—I felt like a fool. Like a clown dancing on a stage that was built centuries before I was born."

The ogre leaned back, elbows resting on the arms of his throne. "So you met the truth, and it stripped you bare. That's how you know your path is real."

Rattan blinked, unsure if he had misheard. "...What?"

"The road worth walking," the ogre said, his tone slow and deliberate, "always begins with disillusionment. If you felt pride after receiving that memory crystal, I'd have sent someone else. But the fact that you cried, that you sat frozen in that little room of yours for two weeks, means you're ready. You've lost the illusion that you are special. Which means you're now capable of becoming something more."

Rattan was silent. It was as though the ogre could see the thoughts he hadn't dared say aloud.

"There was a time when magitech was more than a footnote in the Empire's history," the ogre continued. "It was my time. It was a revolution—until it wasn't. Until the council decided it was too egalitarian."

Rattan's lips parted slightly, but no words came out.

"I see myself in you, Nixbolt. Not because of your origin," the ogre said, voice suddenly low and sharp. "But because you saw something broken in the world and dared to think you could fix it. That is not arrogance—it is the seed of rebellion."

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He leaned forward, and though his face remained a void, Rattan felt the full weight of his presence.

"I intend to finish what I started. And if you still have the courage to walk the path you chose—then I'll show you how deep it truly goes."

Rattan stood frozen, the silence stretching. Then, slowly, his back—once bent under the weight of fear—straightened. His voice trembled at first, but conviction quickly took root.

"If I may be bold... your grace."

The ogre stirred, the corners of his mouth twitching with something close to amusement or curiosity. He tilted his head. "Go on."

Rattan drew in a breath—sharp, shaky, but full. And then, in a rush, the words spilled out, faster than he meant them to.

"I—I didn't study magitech out of ambition or glory. I wanted to help the ratmen... in their war against the demons. I thought—maybe—if I could understand it, if I could harness it, I could protect them. Give them a chance."

A long beat of silence followed. Rattan felt the seconds stretch, expecting punishment—condemnation. But instead, he remained alive. And more than that: he felt the ogre's gaze settle on him with genuine interest.

Encouraged, breathless, he continued—his voice growing stronger with every word.

Rattan took another breath, his voice steadier now, though the emotion behind it was raw and unfiltered.

"Your grace must've looked into my background... and the sudden shift in my behavior. Truthfully, it wasn't planned. It happened the moment I saw what was really going on at the frontlines."

He paused, his gaze distant now—seeing it all again in his mind.

"My sight—somehow—it let me see the battlefield more clearly than I ever had before. And what I saw... it changed me."

The ogre remained silent, watching.

"At first, it was just shock," Rattan continued. "But then came disappointment. Not just in the chaos of war, but in the Empire's attitude toward it. Toward the people actually fighting it."

His hands clenched slightly at his sides.

"That disappointment became something worse when I uncovered the truth—the Empire's extensive knowledge of magitech. The tools. The advancements. The solutions... just sitting there, locked away, while the ratmen were being slaughtered by the demons like animals."

He looked up at the ogre now, eyes shining not with tears, but with barely contained fury.

"They could have been equipped. They could have stood a chance. But instead—what I saw was a senseless massacre. And we—those who knew better—were complicit in our silence."

The ogre let Rattan's words hang in the air for a moment, his silence thoughtful, almost heavy. Then he leaned back on the throne and posed a quiet question—simple, but loaded.

"Tell me, Rattan... do you know how the ratmen first came into contact with magitech? Even the diluted version?"

Rattan's eyes widened. His heart skipped, then picked up speed. The question wasn't accusatory—it was revealing. For the first time, he felt like he might not be alone. Perhaps, just perhaps, someone else had been trying to pull the same thread he had followed in isolation.

"I had a feeling you'd seen it," the ogre said, voice low and measured. "The similarities. The strange but familiar patterns in their devices. You're not wrong—they are rooted in magitech."

He paused, as if weighing the gravity of what he was about to admit.

"I gave it to them. A watered-down version, yes—but still enough. I had hope, Rattan. Real hope. That a race so often dismissed, so belittled, could rise. That they could be a symbol. A spark. Proof that greatness doesn't have to wear a noble name or be born with a mana-rich soul."

Rattan listened, transfixed.

"But the truth is cruel," the ogre went on, his tone darkening. "The ratmen are a cursed race, not by birth—but by the world's refusal to see them. For centuries, they've struggled with magic. Mana rejects them, or perhaps they reject it. Either way, the Empire labeled them defective."

He let out a breath—not tired, but bitter.

"What they built instead, with iron and steam, was something remarkable. Crude in some ways, yes—but beautiful in its own right. A technology that bloomed in the shadows, without the Empire's blessing."

Rattan felt a mix of awe and rage twisting in his chest.

"And just when they began to crawl toward something greater," the ogre said, his voice now laced with quiet fury, "the demons invaded. And the Empire—ever so righteous—sent them to the slaughter. A people barely on the cusp of hope... sacrificed to a war they should never have been forced to fight."

He turned his unseen gaze toward Rattan once more.

"They weren't soldiers. They were a message. A test. And the Empire made sure that message bled before anyone could read it."

Rattan's heart had been pounding moments ago—wild and uncontrolled—but as the ogre spoke, a strange calm began to settle over him. The kind of calm that comes before a storm—not of fear, but of calculation.

There was something almost seductive in the ogre's words. The conviction. The passion. The weight of his regrets and hopes. If Rattan truly had been what he appeared to be—a young goblin with a bleeding heart and a hunger for justice—those words would have been enough. More than enough.

But Rattan wasn't what he appeared to be.

He wasn't a goblin. He had never been one.

He was a ratman—born and scarred as one—and his current form, the greenish skin, the sharper teeth, the stouter frame, was a disguise granted by his guardian's power. A protection he had never dared shed. Not here. Not in the heart of the Empire.

The truth of his race was his alone, and he guarded it fiercely. Because he knew, better than anyone, what the Empire truly thought of his kind.

The ogre had spoken of the ratmen with sympathy. Of lost potential. Of crushed hope. He painted them as victims of circumstance, not of hate. And yet... he never mentioned the animosity. The centuries of scorn. The systemic, carefully engineered erasure. That silence rang louder than any proclamation of hope.

Rattan's eyes narrowed slightly, just enough to be missed by anyone not paying attention. But inwardly, his thoughts sharpened like a blade.

Why skip over that part? Why avoid naming the Empire's hatred for what it truly is?

Was it an omission? Or a manipulation strategy?

Rattan's breathing slowed. His pulse, once frantic, now ticked with focused precision. He was no longer just listening—he was studying.

And though a part of him still ached to believe the ogre might be an ally in his lonely rebellion... another part, deeper and older, whispered that the most dangerous lies were the ones laced with just enough truth.

Now better at controlling his expression, Rattan gazed at the ogre with what appeared to be pure admiration, his tone soft but sincere.

"I'm truly honored," he said. "To be in the presence of someone so great—someone who shares the same dream I do."

Carefully choosing his words, Rattan continued, "My goal with magitech was always to develop it to a point where it could be deployed to aid the ratmen in the war. But from what you've said, Your Grace... it sounds like the Empire might not support such an idea. So—what part do you see me playing in your vision?"

The ogre nodded slowly, appearing thoughtful, though his mask-like face betrayed no emotion.

But inwardly, his mind stirred.

Indeed... the Empire's true aim is the slow, methodical erasure of the ratmen. Their existence has always been a thorn in the Empire's side—a reminder of what it can't control. I never cared for them, not truly... but that thorn, that irritation, made them useful. Worth protecting.

Before the invasion, I had to tread carefully. Any outward support for the ratmen would have cost me everything. But now, with the world on fire... the rules have changed. I am no longer just a scholar or relic of a bygone age. I am a weapon. A necessity.

The Empire needs me now. And that gives me the room to move... to act.

Finally, the ogre leaned forward slightly, and his voice, when it came, was deep and deliberate.

"The role you play, Nixbolt," the ogre said, his voice low and resonant, "depends entirely on your resolve. If you're ready to walk further down this path, I'll give you the means to do so."

He paused, the weight of his next words hanging in the air like a blade.

"But first... your strength isn't enough. Breakthrough. Become an official First-Level Mage. Only then will you have the foundation you need."

The ogre leaned back into his massive throne, the shadows pooling around him as he continued.

"After that, focus on your magitech studies—but don't stop there. Seek out others like yourself: ambitious, daring, and disillusioned. Recruit them. You'll need allies, not just for your cause, but to make the Empire take notice. To make them reconsider their actions."

"Whatever you build for the ratmen—whatever hope you manage to forge—I will see it delivered. You have my word."

Then, with a casual flick of his fingers, he gestured toward the dark space beside Rattan.

"You are dismissed."

Rattan's lips parted, an unspoken question trembling on his tongue—but before the words could form, the mage from earlier reappeared in a ripple of dark energy. Without a word, he gripped Rattan's shoulder and dragged him into the shimmering portal.

Chapter 516:

The last thing Rattan saw before the world twisted around him was the silent, watchful form of the ogre, seated on his throne.

At the same time, the Ogre King spoke to the open air, his voice calm and steady.

"Prepare the dining hall. We will soon have visitors."

He sat in silence, eyes closed, letting his thoughts churn. His mind circled back to Rattan—a young goblin, still a student, but unlike any he had seen in years. Talented, yes, but more importantly, compassionate. That was rare. And in the role he was meant to play, it was exactly the trait that mattered most.

That compassion, that stubborn need to do the right thing—that was what made Rattan perfect. He could influence, guide, and shift things from the inside. And the fact he was still a student? That only made it better. It placed him in a position that could sway the young, the curious, the undecided. A subtle power, but one that could stretch far.

The Ogre King had not had a win like this in centuries. For a long time now, he'd been on the edge of surrender. The Empire was everywhere, tightening its grip, and even he had started to consider giving in. There was no glory in fighting a slow defeat.

But with Rattan... there was something again. A sliver of hope. A move to play.

He didn't open his eyes when the presence revealed itself. He felt it—familiar, cold, unwanted. He only opened his eyes when Vellok and the Emperor stepped out from the shadows.

No words were exchanged at first. The room felt heavy with the silence between them.

Then, the Ogre King stood. His face was fully visible now—he made no attempt to hide it. Let them see what age and waiting had done. Let them see he was still standing.

He walked down from his throne slowly, arms spreading just slightly.

"Well," he said, voice deep and even. "You're right on time."

"It brings me much joy that my two little brothers decided to pay me a visit today," the Ogre King said, a smile creeping onto his face.

Strangely, neither of the goblin royals reacted to being called brothers. No surprise, no denial. Just silence. An Ogre, related to the Emperor and his advisor—that wasn't something most would believe, but here, no one denied it.

Vellok scoffed. "We know what you're playing at, but this isn't the time for it. There's an invasion at hand— possible ratmen rising if we don't do something about it. We don't need your games right now."

The Ogre King didn't respond. He turned and began walking toward the heavy doors. "Let's go eat. It's been a while since we've all been together. Centuries, in fact."

As he reached for the door, a fluctuation of energy rippled through the room—cold, sharp, unnatural. The Emperor's aura pressed outward like a blade unsheathed. But before it could deepen, a massive hand clamped down on his shoulder.

The Ogre King leaned in, voice low and firm. "I said, let's go eat."

The Emperor looked down at the hand, then slowly up at the Ogre's face. At this distance, the Ogre could see the faint glow now pulsing behind the Emperor's eyes. Whatever he had become, it was more than flesh and bone.

The Emperor's voice came out cold. "Get your hand off me."

For a brief moment, neither moved. The air felt thick. But then, the Ogre King let go, stepping back.

"Follow me," he said simply.

Without waiting, he left the chamber.

Vellok glanced at the Emperor, who said nothing. The advisor followed close behind the Ogre King, and the Emperor treaded behind them in silence.

They came to a massive doorway that creaked open at their approach, revealing a vast dining hall. A long stone table stretched across the room, lit by fire sconces on every wall. At the head and ends were three large chairs—ancient, carved, and clearly meant only for them.

They ate in silence for a long while. The only sounds were the clinking of cutlery and the occasional crackle from the fire.

Then the Ogre King spoke, his voice calm but firm.

"Your goal with the ratmen... was something I never agreed with. And I still don't."

The Emperor's reply came cold and measured. "Their extinction should serve you even better. So why resist? They need to be gone for your role to be fulfilled."

The Ogre King let out a low laugh.

"No. My goal has changed. And as it turns out, they're needed to complete it. You two green grunts are the ones who need them gone—not me."

Vellok's voice finally cut in, sharp and pointed. "Related or not, you should watch your mouth. You can be dealt with."

The Ogre King laughed harder, full-bodied and unbothered.

"You were hesitant to deal with me before the invasion," he said, wiping his mouth with a thick cloth. "And you definitely can't now—not with a threat so big that our entire race is hanging by a thread."

The Emperor spoke up, his tone calm but suggestive. "You could rule another world... after you help us get through this."

The Ogre King's smile finally cracked. His hand slammed down on the table, rattling the plates.

"I don't want to rule another world. I want this one. I want the position that rightfully belongs to me."

Vellok scoffed, voice dripping with mockery "It was never your s to begin with. You're nothing but a brute."

The table split with a loud crack as the Ogre King rose to his feet. His body lit up with glowing markings that pulsed with power, immediately drawing the attention of both the Emperor and Vellok.

The Ogre King's voice deepened, filled with heat.

"Could a brute achieve what you see before you? We've been free folk for over two centuries, yet you still cling to the old doctrines. Still bound by what the mages taught you—what should or shouldn't be."

There was a moment of silence.

The once-lively dining hall, now bearing the remnants of a fierce argument or perhaps a subtle confrontation, seemed to hold its breath. The light of the chandeliers reflected in goblets of untouched wine.

Then, in a voice edged with solemnity, the emperor spoke.

"Congratulations, brother, on your sixth-stage advancement."

His words rang out with a calm finality, but behind them was something else—admiration laced with unease.

With a casual wave of his hand, the shattered remains of the ornate dining table began to reassemble themselves. Splinters of polished mahogany and shards of fine porcelain lifted into the air, reforming into their original elegance as if the destruction had never occurred.

Vellok, seated at the far end of the hall, his fingers lightly tapping the restored wood, leaned forward and spoke again.

"But your advancement," he said with a quiet intensity, "only makes it clearer why you are unsuited to claim the throne of this world."

The Ogre King remained silent, his massive frame still as stone. There was no outrage, no retort—only a steady gaze that revealed nothing and everything at once.

Vellok continued, voice rising slightly as if challenging the silence itself. "The mage circles will be stunned by your achievement. A knight reaching the sixth stage was already unheard of in our world. But to forge a new path entirely? A path that bypasses traditional limits?" He shook his head, a small, wry smile touching his lips. "Brilliant. Dangerous. Impossible to replicate."

He paused, letting the words sink in before speaking again, his tone more somber now.

"And that is the crux of it, isn't it? Your path forward is no longer lit by precedent or guided by legacy. You have become a pioneer—and pioneers walk alone. This new road you've carved, this strange evolution of the knightly art... it may take decades to master. Centuries, even. You walk into a wilderness where no map exists."

He leaned back, folding his arms.

"And what this world needs, what its throne demands, is not a king lost in the maze of personal transcendence."

"You've taken a step," Vellok said, his voice calm and devoid of malice, "from brute to a merely decent powerhouse."

It wasn't an insult—just a statement of fact, cold and clinical, like a physician diagnosing a wound. The words hung heavy in the air, their truth undeniable.

The Ogre King, now seated with deliberate stillness, fixed both Vellok and the Emperor with a gaze like ice—sharp, unmoving, impenetrable.

"I would not have chosen this path," he said at last, his voice low and gravelly, "had either of you allowed me to follow the original path of advancement."

His words carried not just accusation, but a quiet grief—of a path denied, a destiny stolen.

The Emperor's expression did not change, but his voice was steely. "That was impossible," he replied. "The title your path would have bestowed upon you... would have torn at the very foundations of the empire. We have no place for a god among us."

Vellok scoffed, the sound short and sharp. "A god?" he repeated. "You flatter yourself, brother. You wouldn't have become a god. You would've become a symbol. A tool. A servant—enshrined, yes, but shackled all the

Chapter 517:

He leaned forward, his dark eyes gleaming with bitter knowledge.

"The ancient records don't lie. The mage-gods of old? Every one of them revered—then revered less. Praised—then controlled. Each one bowed beneath the will of the Arcanum, reduced to relics, their divinity bent to fuel the ambitions of mortal spellcasters."

He gestured broadly, almost mockingly.

"And that would have been you. A divine puppet paraded before the masses. Glorified... and then used. Your godhead would not have freed you. It would've become your prison."

The Ogre King said nothing at first. His jaw tightened slightly, eyes dark with memories of betrayals, of secrets and decisions made behind closed doors.

Vellok's tone softened slightly—not out of sympathy, but conviction. "You should be grateful to us," he said. "We spared you that fate. This new path—uncertain, uncharted—it is yours. Painful, yes. But at least it is not a leash forged in gold and praise."

The Ogre King gritted his teeth. As much as he loathed to admit it, there was truth buried in Vellok's words—hard, cold, undeniable.

The silence between them cracked under the weight of unspoken history. His fists clenched, not from anger alone, but from the sting of knowing that his struggle had been written centuries ago, by others who faced the same ceiling.

In the ancient records of the mage scholars, there were classifications—distinctions made not just by power, but by affinity. Some were born with a natural sensitivity to mana and its elements, capable of weaving spells with the ease of breath. And then there were those—like him—who felt mana not as a flowing stream, but as a distant pulse beneath the skin, ever-present but untouchable.

It was from this second group that the path of the knight was born.

They were warriors who refused to be left behind by the mage-dominated world. They turned inward, honing their bodies into vessels of power, aligning flesh and spirit with the elemental forces they could not command in spellcraft. Through rigorous discipline, they advanced—each stage a ritual of endurance and transformation. First by pushing past mortal limits. Then by bringing their bodies ever closer to the resonance of their chosen element—fire, stone, wind, steel.

By the fifth stage, their physical forms were near-miraculous. A knight of that level could cleave through armies, move with elemental speed, or endure blows that would fell monsters. But that was where the road ended.

Because the sixth stage—the threshold of true transcendence—was no longer physical. It was metaphysical. It was the domain of laws.

At that level, advancement required communion with the abstract principles that governed each element: the law of destruction in fire, the law of flow in water, the law of permanence in earth. These laws were not material—they could not be touched or shaped with muscle or will alone.

And therein lay the great limitation.

The physical body, no matter how perfected, was not meant to contain such truths. The very nature of the knight's path became a cage—ironically crafted by their own strength. Unlike mages who used spells and runes as buffers to wield such forces, knights had no such luxuries. They became conduits, living vessels—but unstable ones.

Some few had found a breakthrough, anchoring fragments of law within themselves. But their power was volatile. Conditional. Their strength fluctuated with the environment they found themselves in. A knight aligned with fire would be unmatched on a battlefield of flame—but powerless in a dead zone, far from their element. They were mighty, yes—but never absolute.

The Ogre King knew all of this. He lived it. And yet, even knowing it, he had pressed forward. Had dared to go further.

And now, he sat at a crossroads—his old path sealed, his new one uncertain. Vellok's scorn was not without merit. But the sting of truth did not extinguish the ember of defiance smoldering in his heart.

There was another path. The original path. A path not carved by isolated ascetics or war-forged brutes, but by visionaries—knights who sought not just strength, but meaning. Not just power, but recognition.

It began not on the battlefield, but within halls of stone and spirit: a school, an academy, a sanctum. A place where one did not merely teach techniques, but passed on a way of being. The knight would become a founder, a teacher, a leader—gathering students, disciples, and in time, followers. Their ideals, their code, their path would be transmitted like flame from torch to torch.

And as this following grew, so too did the belief in the founder. Not the blind worship of mages toward arcane principle, but a reverent belief in a person, a path, a way to live and fight.

This accumulation of belief—slow, subtle, but potent—would eventually coalesce into something greater: a recognition of one's path by the very laws of the world.

It was at that point that the threshold to the sixth stage revealed itself: the realm of the God Knight.

A god of will, body, and belief. The knight's power would become divine in scope, their influence bound not to mana's abstraction but to the living hearts and convictions of their followers. Their physical form

could then touch the abstract. Their laws would not be borrowed—they would become law, made manifest by faith and living practice.

But this path was delicate.

In worlds untouched by higher magical hierarchies, such ascension was pure and direct. The God Knight stood unchallenged, a pillar of their own truth. But in mage-dominated empires like this one...

Faith became a battleground.

Mages had ways—too many ways—to manipulate, corrupt, or sever that belief. They could discredit a rising knight, isolate them, spread arcane philosophies to weaken faith, or worse—bind them in soul contracts and magical oaths, turning living gods into weapons, puppets, or martyrs. The moment a God Knight's faith was tainted or taken, their divine path would crumble beneath them.

The Ogre King's thoughts burned with memory and rage. That had been his path. His future. Not just to be strong, but to be followed. Not just feared, but believed in.

But the Emperor and Vellok had cut that path off before it could bloom.

His fingers tightened until the thick wood of the restored dining table groaned under his grip. His voice, when it came, was low and deadly.

"If this world was mine," he growled, "your words would mean nothing."

The room fell into silence again, the weight of his statement lingering like a blade in the air.

Because the truth was clear—he hadn't given up on that path. Not truly. He had only paused, diverted, forced into an alternate route. But the dream remained, coiled and simmering within him like a forge not yet lit.

And if ever the world changed—if the mages faltered, or the people turned—then the Ogre King would rise.

The Ogre King's knuckles slowly uncurled from the dented table as his thoughts turned inward. His voice softened, almost reflective.

"You speak of what I lost," he said quietly, "but neither of you know what I built."

His gaze grew distant, the fire in his eyes now tempered by memory. "When you denied me the path of belief... I searched. I studied old records, I learned from the desperate. From the broken. From those who had nothing left but invention."

What he found was crude at first—scraps of theories, relics of old wars, forgotten blueprints etched into rusted steel. The art of magitech—the fusion of mana and machinery— an art that came from one of the mages owned world"

"But the mages discarded it, after all, what use were mages in a world where power could be forged and not held by one's own hand?"

But the Ogre King was no mage. He had nothing to lose from heresy. It was then he came across a record of an exoskeletal frame designed to withstand high-density mana exposure—something no living body could endure. It had once belonged to a failed project meant to create "arcane soldiers" immune to magical feedback.

Where others saw failure, the Ogre King saw potential.

He took the frame, reforged it, and began the grueling process of adaptation. Day by day, week by week, he modified the device not just to withstand mana—but to infuse it directly into his own nervous system, merging machine with flesh, and converting pure elemental energy into something his body could absorb.

He called it the Manifold Core—a pulsing, runed engine embedded beneath his heart, regulating and redirecting mana to simulate the resonance of abstract laws. Not through belief. Not through faith. But through raw, engineered harmony.

It was not graceful. It was not elegant. It scarred him, burned him, bent him into something between knight and conduit. But it worked.

Against all precedent, he advanced.

The Sixth Stage opened—not in a temple or a battlefield, but inside a lab, drenched in smoke and failure, lit only by the flickering hum of the Core he had built with his own hands.

"I carved a path where none should exist," he said, his voice harder now. "A brute no longer. A decent powerhouse, yes... but one forged in defiance of your rules, your limits."

Chapter 518:

Vellok's eyes narrowed, the weight behind his gaze sharpening as he studied the king with a new intensity. No longer was he merely sizing up an ally—he was gauging a threat. Across the grand hall, the Emperor, who had remained silent until now, slowly leaned forward, the folds of his crimson robe pooling like blood around his throne.

"It seems you are steadfast on your path," he said, his voice cold and deliberate, "and we cannot come to an agreement."

The Ogre King said nothing. His thick jaw was clenched, expression unreadable.

The Emperor continued, his tone tightening with veiled menace. "Your presence holds a... significant place within the Empire's structure. That is the only reason why no direct action will be taken against you. For now."

He let the silence stretch, then spoke again—this time, with a name.

"But Kaelen—"

The name struck like a lash. The ogre king flinched, despite himself. His eyes lifted, locking with the Emperor's. There was a flicker of something in his gaze—pain, perhaps, or buried fear—but it was quickly swallowed beneath a stoic mask.

"Anything can happen in war," the Emperor said, voice now low and serrated. "We may not strike at you openly... but the battlefield is chaos. And chaos always finds a way. There are many within the Empire—many beyond it—who would be all too glad to see a powerhouse like you brought to ruin. Especially one with such a... complicated loyalty."

Kaelen said nothing, but the flicker of tension in his shoulders betrayed him.

"Tread carefully with your new student," the Emperor warned. "But understand this—the extinction of the Ratmen is absolute. Any who stand in the way of that, regardless of their blood, name, or past ties..."

He paused, letting the words hang like a blade over the ogre's head.

"...is an enemy."

With that both him left just as they came, silent with no trace. The ogre king now alone took some time to respond before he said with a slight smirk "Trust me, I will play it carefully this time"

Back at the Abyss, within Zervok's territory, Ikenga walked the long hall of the demon lord's castle. Beside him, holding his arm, was a woman of astonishing beauty—elegant, confident, and unmistakably not from this layer. A succubus from another layer of the Abyss, she had been offered to him by Zervok himself. The demon lord, known for his extravagance and hospitality, had made sure Ikenga was well cared for during his stay.

Tonight, a dinner was arranged. Zervok wanted to speak with him—about what, Ikenga could only guess. But it wasn't lost on him that everything had been carefully curated, from the meal to the woman at his side.

As for Keles, she had been wholly consumed by the souls he brought her. Whatever her purpose with them was, Ikenga didn't ask—he trusted her to handle her affairs, even if her silence left him restless. In

truth, her absence had worn on him more than he expected. The quiet was too loud without her sharp presence.

Zarvok's offer of companionship was one Ikenga first declined, but Keles had noticed the shift in him. She surprised him—paused her work, met his gaze, and without ceremony, proposed a bold idea: the three of them, together.

It had been... exhilarating. A rare, intimate chaos that lingered in Ikenga's mind longer than he wanted to admit. Keles rarely had the time for such things, but in that moment, her message was clear—she didn't mind him taking a temporary companion, so long as he understood who held the deeper bond.

And so, Ikenga walked the grand hall with the succubus on his arm, presentable, calm, and sharp-eyed. But his thoughts, as always, drifted toward Keles—and what Zarvok truly wanted from him tonight.

As they approached the towering doors of the grand dining hall, the succubus leaned in slightly, her voice smooth like silk soaked in smoke.

"You walk like you're going to war, not dinner," she teased, eyes glinting with amusement. "Relax, Ikenga. Zarvok may be many things, but tonight he's your host—not your enemy."

Ikenga glanced sideways at her, expression unreadable. "With Zarvok, the two aren't always separate."

She chuckled softly, the sound low and alluring. "True enough. Still... you haven't said much since we left your quarters. Thinking about her again?"

Ikenga didn't answer immediately. His gaze stayed ahead, fixed on the heavy doors drawing closer. "She's been quiet. Focused. I've gotten used to her presence. When it's gone, I feel it."

The succubus tilted her head slightly, not quite smiling. "You two are strange. Not lovers, not bound. But there's a weight between you... heavier than most chains I've seen down here."

"She doesn't need to be bound to me," he said simply. "And I don't need to explain her to anyone."

There was no sharpness in his tone—just certainty. The succubus accepted it with a graceful nod, her arm still looped through his.

"I'm not here to replace her, Ikenga," she murmured, more serious now. "Zarvok offered, and I came because I was curious. You're not like the others."

He finally turned to meet her gaze. "No, I'm not. And neither is she."

A moment passed. Then she smiled again, softer this time. "Good. I prefer things with bite."

The guards at the door moved, pulling them open with a dull groan of stone and metal. Warm light and the scent of roasted flesh spilled out from within. Ikenga stepped forward, composed and cold once more, but the succubus noticed the faint twitch at the corner of his mouth—something between amusement and anticipation.

Zarvok was still small—an imp barely the height of a child—but Ikenga never stopped being impressed whenever he saw him. It wasn't the size that mattered. It was the way Zarvok carried himself. The confidence, the poise, the sheer weight of presence that made others forget they were looking at something so deceptively unimposing. His power didn't need to be loud; it simply was.

The dining table stretched far across the dark hall, lined with flickering candles that cast long, dancing shadows. As Ikenga entered, Zarvok spotted him and raised a slender, clawed hand holding a black-glass bottle.

"It seems," Zarvok said, voice smooth, "like Lady Keles won't be joining us tonight."

Ikenga offered a brief smile as he slid into his seat. "She's at a critical juncture in her experiments. I'm not surprised she's chosen to remain focused."

Zarvok's eyes shimmered for a brief moment—just a flicker of something unreadable—before the usual charm returned. "Of course. Her devotion is admirable."

There was a pause as wine was poured, the clink of glass the only sound between them.

Then Zarvok spoke again, tone casual but measured. "So... how has this invasion been for you? Was it what you expected? Or was it—perhaps—disappointing?"

Ikenga took a slow sip from his cup, letting the silence linger before responding. "It wasn't what I expected, no. But it's been revealing. I've begun to see why things are unfolding the way they are."

He set the cup down gently, then added with a faint grin, "Though I certainly wasn't expecting one of the invasion's leaders to not be on the battlefield, and still have enough time to entertain guests."

Zarvok barked a laugh, raising his cup in return. "I appreciate your light-filled honesty, Ikenga."

He leaned back, swirling his wine. "And at the same time, I should thank both you and Keles. Were it not for your presence here, I'd likely be out there, leading the charge myself, rushing headlong into the fray. Instead, I've been afforded the luxury of time."

His sharp eyes met Ikenga's, gleaming with a mixture of amusement and calculation. "And you know how I treasure that."

Ikenga nodded slowly, swirling the wine in his cup. "I do. And I can't help but envy your luck. This world... it's been more than I expected. The secrets buried in it have drawn my attention—I find myself wanting to uncover them all."

Zarvok's laughter rang out, sharp and genuine, the kind that made the candles flicker as if they shared in his amusement. "Indeed! And thanks to you two gods walking in mortal skin, I'll be getting this world without it being war-ridden and ruined."

He leaned forward then, fingers tented on the table, voice dropping into something more curious, more pointed. "If you don't mind me asking, you've been back in the Abyss for quite a while now. I have no doubts about what you and Lady Keles have accomplished... but being so far removed, not having eyes on your chess piece—well, that can prove... costly."

Ikenga chuckled, not unkindly, but with a tone of amused certainty. "Trust me when I say—my eyes are always on my chess piece."

He didn't elaborate. He didn't need to.

The air between them thickened for a moment, not with hostility, but with something more like mutual awareness, perhaps. Two players, both keenly aware that even behind friendly words and shared wine, the game was always in motion.

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Zarvok raised his glass again, grinning. "Spoken like a man who's sure of the board. Let's hope the pieces agree."

"You seem confident," Zarvok said, swirling his glass.

Ikenga nodded without hesitation. "Indeed I am. The pieces are already in motion. Give it a few more years, and a crack will appear in the Empire's foundation. I believe that crack is exactly the opportunity you've been waiting for."

Zarvok leaned back slightly, eyes gleaming with amusement as he casually uttered, "The ratmen."

Ikenga's gaze flicked toward him, sharp and brief. Their eyes locked, silence hanging heavy between them for a moment.

"It seems," Ikenga said evenly, "you have some idea of the broader layout."

"I wouldn't say I know," Zarvok replied, flashing a sly smile, "but I have my guesses. And if they're right, then Your Highness may have unknowingly nudged the Empire onto a path of self-destruction."

Ikenga didn't respond immediately. He looked down at the wine in his hand, the reflection of candlelight flickering in the dark liquid. The silence that followed wasn't defensive—it was thoughtful, calculating. He realized then that there were gaps in his knowledge, blind spots even he hadn't accounted for.

It seems I should spend more time in Zarvok's library, he thought to himself, lips pressing into a faint line.

Zarvok watched him closely but said nothing, letting the moment simmer. It was enough to know he'd struck something real—if not a nerve, then at least a point of intrigue.

Zarvok spoke up, his tone shifting with an unusual blend of respect and hesitation. "I have a few personal matters I would like to bring before Your Grace."

Ikenga raised a brow, his interest piqued. "And what would those be?"

A flicker of something passed through Zarvok's eyes—recognition, respect, and perhaps a glimmer of calculated ambition. "Your Highness battled three of the Empire's top mages... and returned with nothing but a few scars—and a handful of trophies."

He leaned forward slightly, fingers tapping lightly against the table's polished surface. "I happen to have a particular interest in those trophies. I believe they could serve a significant role in the hand I'm preparing."

He fell quiet then, watching Ikenga closely.

Ikenga, hearing the word trophies, thought back to the battle—specifically, to the severed head and the three sixth-tier souls he had claimed and passed to Keles. Souls of that caliber were exceedingly rare, even in their original world. For the goddess of death herself, such specimens were priceless. In this world, though... there were cracks, exploits—ways to capture that which should not be captured.

"You do know," Ikenga said slowly, his voice calm but firm, "that those trophies now rest in Lady Keles' care?"

Zarvok offered a knowing nod, his smile thin. "I had assumed as much. Which is why I bring it up to you first."

Ikenga studied him, swirling his wine once more. "If it were anything else, I might have indulged you. But those particular items... are not so easily reclaimed."

Zarvok's grin didn't falter. "I never said reclaimed, my lord. Only... negotiated."

Zarvok continued, his tone more pointed now. "No matter what Lady Keles intends to do with those souls, I doubt they'll translate into direct power for her. Meanwhile, for demons like us... souls are sustenance. And one so rare could bring about enormous growth."

He leaned back, folding his hands in front of him. "I have a few trusted followers on the cusp of advancement. With even a fraction of those souls, they could break through into the next tier."

Ikenga gave a slow, understanding nod, then asked with cool curiosity, "I see. But tell me, Zarvok—why would you expect Keles or I to simply hand you something that would only increase your strength and status?"

Zarvok let out a low sigh and lifted his drink, taking a slow sip before answering. "To tell you the truth, Your Grace... I don't. This request is less about desire and more about necessity. I'm forced to bring it up—because of what I anticipate your next move will be."

Ikenga's brow rose at that, an edge of amusement flickering in his eyes. "Oh?"

Zarvok gave a knowing smile, a hint of sharpness behind it. "You hid your movements well before the invasion began. The Abyss is vast, yes—but it speaks to those who listen. And if one pays enough attention, patterns emerge."

He tapped a claw lightly against the rim of his cup. "You may have cloaked your motives, but your silence was louder than most. The timing. The choice of battlefield. The way the Empire bent—not broke. It told me enough about you."

Ikenga said nothing at first, merely staring at the smaller demon, who even in his impish form exuded the poise of something much greater. A flicker of interest sparked in his eyes.

"So, tell me then," Ikenga said smoothly. "What is it you believe I'm planning?"

Zarvok smiled, toothy and deliberate. "That... depends. Would you prefer I ask my question now—or after we've poured another round?"

Ikenga stayed silent, his expression unreadable.

Zarvok pressed on, voice calm but weighted "Your Highness has shown a vested interest in the growth of a particular wingless gargoyle. I've been watching... as has Lady Vorenza. It came as a surprise to us both when you made the calculated decision to publicly abandon your investment."

He let the words settle, then leaned forward slightly "Still, someone of your stature rarely moves without reason. Your earlier interest... your subtle interventions... they made his ascent far too smooth to be coincidence. And now, that gargoyle stands as the third powerhouse in this abyssal layer. A force—unwinged or not—backed by disciplined demons whose strength has only grown thanks to the opportunities this invasion brought."

Zarvok's voice dropped lower "Which is why I cannot allow the souls you acquired to fall into his hands. Especially not now."

Ikenga's gaze sharpened, but he remained composed.

"The balance here is delicate," Zarvok continued. "Power is finely distributed—just enough tension to hold us in check, but not enough to tip us into chaos. Giving that gargoyle what he needs to breach the sixth tier would shatter that balance. And that, Your Grace, serves none of us."

He sat back, wine glass untouched now, his tone steady but edged with finality "This is not a plea for charity. It is a warning... and a request for prudence."

Ikenga finally spoke, his tone low and thoughtful "I see. So the request isn't truly for you—it's to prevent him from rising."

Zarvok offered a nod. "Exactly. We both know the cost of letting the wrong creature ascend at the wrong time. And whatever your reasons for stepping back from him... I trust you've not lost your foresight."

Ikenga swirled his wine, glancing at the deep crimson liquid before murmuring "You've been watching closely, Zarvok."

"Always," Zarvok said with a polite smile. "As any proper host should."

Ikenga leaned back into his seat, the faintest smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"I have no reason to hide my previous intentions with the gargoyle."

Zarvok raised a brow, intrigued.

"This was a plan born from our first meeting," Ikenga continued. "You left quite the impression, Zarvok—enough to make me reevaluate my understanding of the abyss. You said something then... something that stuck with me: 'The abyss rewards those who defy its will.' That idea—bold, almost heretical—lingered."

He paused, swirling his wine.

"I saw the lay of the land. The abyss had positioned you and Vorenza as its two favored contenders for dominion. So I thought to myself... why not introduce a third? A piece the abyss hadn't accounted for. Someone cut from another cloth. The gargoyle—wingless, scorned, but hungry—fit the role perfectly."

Zarvok's voice came gently, though not without edge "Then why did you stop?"

Ikenga chuckled softly, eyes half-lidded with reflection "I won't bore you with the details. But the truth is... I realized I may have overreached. I fancied myself clever—clever enough to outmaneuver the abyss itself. But the deeper I looked, the more I understood just how ancient, how unfathomable it truly is."

He took a slow sip of wine before continuing.

"And I detest being a piece in someone else's game. If the abyss was already playing me, then backing out was the only intelligent move left."

Zarvok gave a long, contemplative nod "You chose restraint. That's rare among your kind."

Ikenga smirked "No, I chose survival."

Zarvok leaned forward, placing his cup down with deliberate calm "Then you understand why I can't sit idle while those souls remain with Lady Keles. Regardless of your retreat from that gambit, the gargoyle still stands... and grows."

Ikenga's smile didn't falter, but his eyes hardened slightly "You assume Keles and I intends to hand them over to him."

"I assume nothing," Zarvok replied smoothly. "But I prepare for every possibility. She is the goddess of death. Her curiosity may blind her to implications that don't concern her experiments."

Ikenga tilted his head. "So you'd rather they serve your consolidation of power?"

Zarvok didn't flinch. "Better that than destabilize a delicate balance."

Chapter 520:

Silence hung for a beat, thick and watchful.

"I don't mind lady Keles keeping the souls," Zarvok continued, "as long as they remain inert—unfed to your former pawn or anyone else. But if I see movement, I will act... and not with words."

Ikenga leaned in now, elbows on the table, fingers steepled beneath his chin.

"You speak as though you have leverage. I suggest caution, Zarvok. I tolerate many things, but threats—however veiled—are not among them."

Zarvok's impish face remained composed, but his eyes shimmered with the cold cunning that had made him a force in the abyss.

"Not a threat," he said, voice low. "A reality. You and Keles—gods or not—have shaken this layer more than the invasion ever could. If I sense the balance tipping, I will act to correct it. Just as you would."

Ikenga exhaled slowly, his stare unwavering.

"I'll speak to Keles," he said at last. "She will decide what is done with the souls."

"That's all I ask," Zarvok replied, reaching for his cup once more.

Ikenga stood slowly, eyes still on Zarvok "And should those souls remain with her... untouched?"

"Then we remain at peace," Zarvok said, raising his cup in mock salute.

Ikenga nodded once and turned, the matter settled—at least for now.

"I hope things never get to that level between us, I would like for our friendship to continue even after we both get what we want from this invasion"

"I am sure you won't mind befriending a future demon lord, my power in the future can be yours to use when needed"

Ikenga paused mid-step, glancing back over his shoulder with a faint, unreadable smile.

"You speak as though the title of Demon Lord is already etched into the abyss."

Zarvok grinned, sipping from his cup. "I wouldn't say etched—but the stone has been chosen, and the chisel is in hand."

Ikenga turned fully now, his expression composed but edged with quiet sharpness. "You're ambitious, Zarvok. That ambition is what made me take interest in you from the beginning"

Ikenga nodded slowly, stepping back toward the table. He picked up his own cup, raising it in return. "If you reach that throne with yourself intact... then perhaps we'll drink again, not as allies of convenience—but equals."

Zarvok raised his glass as well, something darker passing in his eyes—neither fear nor submission, but a flash of resolve sharpened by respect.

"To the invasion," he said.

"To what comes after," Ikenga replied, finishing his wine in one smooth motion.

Before Ikenga left the dining hall, Zarvok spoke up once again. His tone was filled with amusement "If you think how this invasion is weird, I wonder what you would think when your world carries out it's first invasion"

Ikenga said nothing as he walked out with the door closing behind him. Once again he was met with Zarvok long hall, this time around he was alone with thoughts running through his mind.

Ikenga went back to the room given to him and Keles, opening the door, he was met with a sight he hasn't seen for month. Keles was no longer preoccupied.

In her hand were the souls now turned into a ball of light revolving around her open palm like planets, with each spin a wave of energy that brought deep comfort to the soul will be released.

Ikenga smiled as he closed the door, behind him and sat down "It seems you have found what you are looking for"

Keles glanced at the souls in her hand "Indeed, i couldn't have asked for a better gift"

Ikenga smirked "I know a few ways, you could thank me"

Keles appeared beside Ikenga sitting on his laps with her pale hand tracing all over his chest "You do?"

"Mhmm but we could take that up later, I am curious on what you found from these souls" Ikenga said while sliding his hands under keles gown and feeling the heat emanating from her thighs.

"My divinity was drawn to souls of this level," Keles stated, her gaze lingering on the captive god-level beings, "because they are the missing ingredient, the catalyst my realm needed for true growth and profound change." She turned, her expression thoughtful. "My realm... it is the most vast, the most singular of all our domains. A boundless expanse dedicated solely to the echoes of existence. And its growth," a subtle hint of pride touched her voice, "is intrinsically tied to the influx of new souls. The more that arrive, the faster it evolves."

She gestured vaguely. "But the mortal souls... they are like grains of sand, numerous but individually weak. Even those who possessed strength in life, upon shedding their mortal coil, arrive here diminished, their awareness flickering like a dying flame."

Her attention sharpened slightly. "It is these few, the stronger among the newly arrived, those who retain a sliver of their former selves, who unknowingly shape my realm. Their subconscious yearnings, their ingrained expectations of what an afterlife should be, they ripple through the nascent consciousness of my domain, like whispers carried on the wind. They desire peace, and pockets of tranquility bloom. They fear judgment, and shadowy echoes of consequence begin to form."

A pause, a hint of the vast timescales she perceives. "But these changes are glacial, drawn out by the inherent weakness and limited energy of these fledgling souls. The shifts they bring are subtle, requiring the slow accumulation of countless mortal lives and their faint impressions."

Then, her gaze returned to the god-level souls, a spark of intense curiosity in her eyes. "But these," she emphasized, gesturing with a deliberate motion, "these are different. They are not mere grains of sand; they are boulders, imbued with power that still resonates even in their disembodied state."

She leaned forward slightly, her voice gaining a note of scientific fascination. "They have brushed against the abstract laws that govern existence, danced on the edges of creation and destruction. Their very being is interwoven with the fundamental energies of the cosmos. And here," she tilted her head, a hint of wonder in her tone, "is the truly intriguing aspect. Even now, stripped of their physical forms, they are not truly... dead. Their souls possess a tenacity, a profound connection to life that mere mortals lack."

Her gaze intensified. "They do not simply fade. They lie dormant, requiring only a vessel, an anchor to the living world, to reignite their power. Their potent souls, once tethered to a suitable body, would not merely inhabit it; they would assert themselves, overwhelming the existing consciousness. And as they re-establish their connection to the physical realm, their memories, the vast tapestry of their experiences and knowledge, would slowly resurface, bringing with them the weight of their path."

Ikenga gave a closer to the souls, his head tilted in contemplation. "You seek growth and change, Keles. The mortal souls provide the volume, the raw potential. But what you truly need, I believe, are not just strong souls, but souls imbued with the knowledge and experience of structure, of governance, of the very principles that underpin a complex reality."

"By understanding how their inherent structure can interact with your realm's consciousness, you can guide its growth with intention, rather than relying on the slow, undirected influence of the masses." Ikenga said to which keles nodded.

"I now wish we were in our original world and I had access to my realm," Keles said with a wistful sigh, her eyes fixed on the horizon. "I looked forward to the changes these souls would bring to the others in my domain. The ripples they would cause... the evolution they might inspire."

Ikenga gave her a sideways glance, his expression unreadable. "So I am to take it, you're done with these souls? You've found what you needed?"

Keles leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper, brushing against his ear like silk. "Yes. And their memories... they've shown me the hidden truths of the empire—secrets buried so deep even its architects likely feared them."

Ikenga's brow furrowed slightly, but before he could respond, a shimmering field of silence bloomed around them, isolating their conversation from any eavesdropping ears—mundane or divine. Keles

continued whispering, the cadence of her words slow and deliberate. With each sentence, Ikenga's eyes widened, and then, gradually, a slow, knowing grin curved his lips.

When the field dissipated, the atmosphere around them seemed changed, heavier with implication.

Ikenga exhaled softly and murmured, "Zarvok may already suspect what you just told me. But until now, he wasn't certain."

Keles gave a small, thoughtful nod, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "These beings they call Mages... they truly are a fascinating kind. There's a poetry to how they've structured their power, a lineage of thought we haven't seen in centuries. The way they bind theory with intuition, control with chaos—it's almost... elegant." She let her gaze drift momentarily, as if seeing echoes of their magic in the air itself.

"We have humans who claim the same title," she continued, her tone sharpening. "But most merely imitate what they don't yet fully understand. Still, I wonder—do you think they would follow the same path, if given the same conditions? Or would our presence—our very interference—limit the natural arc of their evolution?"