

Guardian gods 541

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Rattan felt his mind reel, struggling to grasp the enormity of what he was hearing. His brain went blank for a moment before he managed to articulate the thought that crashed through his shock. "Do you mean... that such an object can be handed to any mage, as long as their interests align with its purpose?"

"That's precisely it, Rattan," Vellok confirmed, a grim nod emphasizing his words. "This colossal, planet-sized vessel, this 'impossible' construct, isn't some unique, divine artifact. It's a tool, a research station, a mobile laboratory for those mages powerful and reckless enough to wield it. It functions like a vast, cosmic canvas for their experiments, a place where they can conduct research that would impact lesser worlds."

He paused, a chilling realization dawning on Rattan's face. "Imagine the kind of power that conceives of such a thing, Rattan. Not just to move a planet, but to build one and then bestow it upon their chosen. It demonstrates a level of magical mastery that utterly dwarfs anything our gods, or even the ratfolk gods, could ever dream of."

"And the purpose, you ask? The alignment of interests?" Vellok scoffed, a bitter laugh escaping him. "For us, trapped within its mechanisms, it meant we were nothing more than test subjects. Our world, our history, our very existence, was merely a contained environment for their observations. They didn't care about our gods, our struggles, or our civilizations. We were, in their eyes, simply a variable in their grand cosmic equation."

At the precipice of the Abyss, three powerful beings observed the history lesson unfolding before them. Ikenga, who always was paying attention, noticed Vellok's growing interest in Rattan and his willingness to reveal their world's hidden truths.

Ikenga conveyed this insight to Keles, who immediately saw an opportunity. The idea of inviting Zarvok to partake in this secret was proposed, with the promise of a more larger share of the world's knowledge and mysteries as his reward.

And so, the current scene played out. The unfolding history was projected through phantoms sight for the immortal beings to witness. Zarvok, a wide, unsettling smile on his face, even rose to serve, ensuring Ikenga and Keles's chalices were meticulously filled with his finest wine.

"Your Highnesses truly surprised me with your accomplishments with your chess pieces," Zarvok purred, settling back onto his elaborate throne.

Ikenga's laughter echoed softly. "I believe more surprises await us, Zarvok. Why don't we continue listening?"

Rattan, still reeling from Vellok's words, hadn't anticipated such a stark revelation about their world's origins, nor the surprising history of cooperation between his people and the goblins. With a parched mouth, he managed to ask, "What was the test carried out by these mages?"

Vellok, who seemed momentarily lost in thought, shook his head. "This was knowledge typically reserved for those who reached the Sixth Stage, but current circumstances make it essential you understand it now."

"Do you recall," Vellok continued, "when I mentioned the ratfolk's unique position as the first children of this world?"

Rattan nodded slowly.

"The mages' experiment involved something precisely tied to that," Vellok explained. "The mages themselves never explicitly stated what test they were conducting; they rarely spoke to us at all. It was through our own desperate deduction, piecing together fragments of observation over decades, that we eventually came to a horrifying conclusion about the nature of their experiment."

The Sixth Stage represents the absolute pinnacle of power that a mortal—one not born a god—can achieve through sheer will, intellect, and mastery over arcane forces. At this stage, the being in question wields powers on par with divinities: manipulating reality, commanding elemental forces, and bending the laws of nature to their will. Though they lack the innate divinity of true gods, they have mastered divine-like abilities through relentless study, cultivation, and sacrifice.

However, this is where the divergence begins.

For gods, the path forward is relatively straightforward—though not without challenge. They ascend by expanding their domains, increasing their following, and harvesting the collective belief and faith of

mortals. As faith energy accumulates, it fuels their divinity, allowing them to grow stronger, evolve, and even redefine the scope of their influence.

But for those at the Sixth Stage who are not gods, the journey beyond this threshold becomes exponentially more complex and perilous. Lacking divine infrastructure, they must rely on something far more elusive: an understanding of the true workings of the universe. The deeper laws, the hidden mechanisms, the primordial truths that predate the gods themselves—these are the keys to transcending mortality without faith.

This realization has driven many of the most powerful mages, warlocks, sages, and arcane scholars into a state of obsessive pursuit. They seek knowledge not found in books, nor whispered in mortal tongues. Instead, they cast their gaze toward beings whose very existence defies common logic and understanding: gods, demons, angels, ancient elementals, and timeless immortals—entities who operate on planes so far removed from normal reality that they are seen as cosmic anomalies.

To learn from these beings—to dissect, replicate, or even consume their essence—is seen as the only path forward.

And so, the Quest for the Seventh Stage is often written in blood and conquest. To gain access to lost histories, forbidden relics, hidden ley lines, or the bodies of celestial beings themselves, many mages turn to warfare and domination. Entire worlds are seized, not for territory or power in the mundane sense, but as laboratories—realms transformed into staging grounds for experiments of unimaginable scale and consequence.

Some mages become philosopher-kings, using their vast intellect to guide civilizations as living experiments. Others become tyrants, stripping entire populations of autonomy in the name of transcendent progress. And a rare few—those most desperate or visionary—attempt to merge with or become the very beings they once sought to study.

But there is always a persistent obstacle in the path of transcendence—the difficulty of conquest, particularly when it comes to high-level worlds. These are not simple backwaters of creation. They are realms steeped in ancient energies, hidden legacies, and evolved civilizations—each a potential treasure trove of resources, knowledge, and experimental ground for the mage's ambition.

Yet these very qualities make them fiercely resistant.

Most high-level worlds are not isolated in their existence. At some point in their histories, their inhabitants—or even the world-soul itself—have made contact with other worlds or unearthed higher truths. These truths often grant them a rudimentary grasp of cosmic workings, awakening their innate potential. Even the average denizen might begin to sense the limits of their existence and question what lies beyond. In such worlds, even the peasants are touched by ancient myths, and the ruling classes often hold fragments of power inherited from gods, titans, or forgotten ages.

One of the most dangerous secrets that these advanced worlds possess is knowledge of the "First Children". These beings, deeply bonded with the world-spirit, have the singular ability to unify their consciousness and, through sheer collective will, submit their world to a higher power.

This submission is not metaphorical—it is a literal, metaphysical surrender of the world's resistances. Normally, when an outsider attempts to exert their power in a foreign realm, the world itself—sentient or not—pushes back, suppressing their strength like a body rejecting a foreign entity. But when the First Children give their unified consent, this defense vanishes. The world opens its gates, granting the foreign power full access—no suppression, no interference.

Vellok suddenly laughed, a sharp, cynical sound. "It's easier said than done, Rattan. How many living souls would willingly surrender their right to freedom and their living space? Some are ready to die on their home ground, and that's precisely what these mages despise. War and a stubborn race makes their potential loss not worth it, as war means much will be destroyed, even that which they are looking for."

"That, Rattan, is where the experiment turned. Our world, in its own right, is both a high-level and a low-level world. High, because of its incredibly concentrated mana and rich inherent magical properties. Low, because the races within it had simply not had the time to grow and fully match its status."

"For the mages, our world was a rare treat." Vellok's gaze bore directly into Rattan, who suddenly felt an immense, suffocating pressure descend upon him.

"The hundred years we spent in darkness were a hundred years of the mages taking our goblin race and the ratfolk, and carrying out different, horrific experiments on each."

"For the ratfolk, the mages focused on creating a spell that would suppress their inherent position as the world's first child. And as for us, the goblins, that time was spent genetically engineering us into better versions of ourselves, preparing us to take over the next position of first child."

Hearing that last sentence felt like an explosion in Rattan's head. The disparate dots of information began to connect, forming a terrifying picture. Now, the Empire's actions towards the ratfolk—his people—all made sickening sense.

Looking at the utterly shocked Rattan, Vellok let out a self-mocking chuckle. "You're smart enough to understand what that truly means, aren't you?"

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Without waiting for Rattan to recover from the crushing weight of this revelation, he continued. "To doom us even further, these mages altered our very biology, making it impossible for our race to procreate the normal way. That's where 'Mother' comes in."

Vellok gestured towards the fleshy organ embedded into the ground like a tumor grown from the planet itself. Tubes snaked from it into the walls. Arcane sigils glowed faintly around it, and with each slow, wet heartbeat, it breathed out magic.

It took a while before Rattan found his voice. His mind reeled, heart pounding under the weight of all he'd heard. He stood still, his thoughts trying to outrun the implications.

Finally, in a voice both cautious and heavy with realization, he said:

"Then from the current state of the world... the mages must have succeeded. We—Goblins—are now the First Child. If what you're saying is true, then everything the Empire is now doing—the suppression of the Ratfolk, the silencing of dissent, the manipulation of public thought is all meaningless so why continue."

There was no triumph in his tone. Only a dawning horror with slight anger..

Vellok's eyes narrowed, a flicker of amusement and disappointment crossing his face.

"Rattan... you are a mage. I thought you, of all people, would understand that magic rarely does exactly what we command. Especially when it concerns the vast and untamed things—worlds, souls, time, will. The moment we reach outside of ourselves, we step into uncertainty."

He folded his arms, his voice growing sharper. "Yes, the mages' plan worked—and didn't. The Ratfolk's status as First Child was sealed, suppressed like a memory buried in the bones of the world."

"But we? The Goblins? We did not inherit that title. Not fully. Not immediately. Not by right. We are like seeds planted in sacred soil—waiting, not yet accepted."

Rattan frowned. "What do you mean... 'waiting'?"

Vellok turned, pacing slightly as if choosing his words with care.

"The mages assumed that once the original First Child was silenced, the world would simply transfer its blessing—like handing over a crown. But the truth is far more complex."

"To create a new First Child... is to replicate what is fundamentally organic—the birth of identity, culture, connection. It's not something that can be forced or summoned by spellcraft alone."

"The world must come to accept us. Slowly. Subtly. Through generations of presence, action, and resonance. Through integration. And there is no guarantee of when—or even if—that will happen."

Rattan's eyes widened. "So... we're imposters? Waiting to be legitimized?"

Vellok's chuckle was dry and hollow.

"That's one way to put it. We are like a body growing into a borrowed soul—the fit is not yet right. And the world knows it."

"That's why the mages grew desperate. Their expectations were time-bound, their ambition impatient. When they realized the transformation would not be instant, they turned to eradication. If the Ratfolk were gone completely—civilization, memory, spirit—then the world would have no choice but to make room for a new First Child."

Rattan felt a chill coil down his spine.

"But they stopped," he whispered. "Why?"

"Because even they underestimated the world's will," Vellok said gravely. "To kill a First Child is no simple matter. The title may be suppressed, but the bond with the world remains. It is ancient, primal, and woven into the very roots of this realm. Destroying such a race would be like cutting out a heart still beating in the ground."

He pointed downward, as if to the soil itself.

"The world would have retaliated. Not with fire or storms—but with consequence. Mana decay. Reality folds. Time instability. Something terrible. Something unmaking."

"And so, the mages stepped back. Not out of mercy, but fear. The cost outweighed the benefit."

A long silence followed. Rattan could feel the pulse of the great organ below them—Mother—like the heartbeat of a question the world had not yet answered.

"Then what now?" Rattan asked, voice barely a whisper. "Are we just... waiting? Hoping the world eventually accepts the Goblins? And if not—what happens to our people?"

He got no answer instead Vellok laughed—not the hollow, bitter kind Rattan had heard before, but a full-bodied, almost joyous cackle. There was something unsettling about how pleased he sounded.

"That... that was the moment we realized something profound about these proud mages. Or rather—about the Sixth Stage itself."

He gestured broadly, his voice rising with each word.

"You see, beings in the Sixth Stage... they are not gods. Some gain immortality—yes. But many do not. They can reach the pinnacle of power that mortal life allows, but they are still bound by time, by flesh, by decay."

He turned, eyes gleaming with cruel delight.

"And that is where their grand experiment failed. They couldn't wait. Couldn't afford to spend centuries—millennia—waiting for their fabricated First Child to be accepted. Their lives, their ambitions, their legacies... too short, too fragile."

His hand swept toward the massive pulsing organ beneath them—Mother.

"So they created her. Mother. Our womb, our god, our directive. They began to engineer the process of integration. Not just biologically—but psychologically. They didn't just give us strength—they gave us purpose, instincts, desires tailored to quicken the world's acceptance."

"Talents were hard-coded into our blood. Behavioral patterns etched into our minds. We were designed not just to thrive—but to dominate."

Rattan's stomach twisted. It was a dark mirror of everything he knew about free will.

"And so it became an accepted truth," Vellok continued, his voice now low and dangerous, "that the Ratfolk could not be wiped out—not until the world truly, fully accepted us as its First Child. Not until the transition was complete."

"Hence the Empire's current shape—its subtle tyranny, its twisted ideology. For the plan to work, the Goblins had to be seen as superior. Treated as superior. Believe—down to our marrow—that we are superior."

His lip curled into a sneer.

"And the Ratfolk... your people... they had to be crushed. Spiritually, intellectually, culturally. The weight of inferiority had to be carved into them until it became their truth."

"Only then would the world begin to reweave its loyalty, to accept the new child and let the old one fade."

Rattan's hands balled into fists, his breathing shallow. So many pieces of history, of policy, of unspoken rules now made sense. And yet, it was all so grotesquely calculated.

Then Vellok's tone shifted. The joy drained from his voice, replaced by frustration—and something close to fear.

"But then... the Abyssal Invasion happened."

His words hung like a curse in the air.

"Somehow, amidst the chaos, the seal on the Ratfolk broke. By what we suspect to be gods working with the demons. And now, their old essence is stirring."

"The strength that once made them the First Child—their talents, their connection to the world, their resilience—it's all waking up. Slowly. Like a sleeping beast, stretching after centuries of silence."

Vellok's voice dropped low—flat and cold as steel.

"Action had to be taken. We were so close, Rattan. So painfully close after centuries of waiting, scheming, and bleeding in the dark. The final threads of integration were nearly woven."

He began pacing, slowly, deliberately.

"But then the seal on the Ratfolk began to crack. And we knew—we knew—that once they fully awakened, everything we'd built would unravel like rotten cloth. We're outnumbered. We always have been. And the moment they remember what they were... the moment the world remembers... it's over."

He turned, eyes flashing with grim resolve.

"So we used the invasion. It was a curse—but also an opportunity. All we've done since it began is stall, delay, buy ourselves more time. And the Ratfolk, in their masses, were the perfect answer. They were brave, capable, disposable. We sent them wave after wave into the jaws of the Abyss."

His lip twitched bitterly.

"The world thinks it's a war for survival. For us, it was a countdown. A buffer. The longer the war drags on, the more we inch toward final integration."

Vellok's footsteps stopped just in front of Rattan. The air between them crackled with tension. His voice, once steady, now carried a harsh undercurrent of fury.

"Do you understand now, boy?"

He jabbed a finger toward the massive, heaving mass of flesh beneath them—Mother.

"That thing... that womb, that blessing, that curse—is the crucible of our kind. She gives us life, she sustains us, she made us what we are now. But to the world itself, she is a disease. An infection. Something it tolerates only because of our tenuous hold as First Child."

Vellok's voice trembled—not with fear, but with something deeper. Rage... and a terrible sorrow.

"But the moment—the very instant—the Ratfolk reclaim their rightful place, this world will turn on us. It will snuff out Mother without mercy. And then it will come for us—every last one of us born from her flesh."

He took a deep breath, his eyes burning into Rattan's.

"And now, because of you and Kaelen—because of your reckless meddling, your naive ideals, and your inability to see the scope of what's at stake—you are accelerating that future."

Vellok's words came slow and heavy, each syllable like a blow.

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"Do you understand now, Rattan? You are not just endangering the Goblins. You are putting the entire foundation of this world's balance at risk. And you are placing your own people—your kin, your blood—in the path of extinction."

Vellok's voice grew quieter, almost reverent, as he gestured again toward the pulsating mass beneath them—Mother. The light in his eyes dimmed, but his words carried the weight of history carved in blood and secrecy.

"Mother is the continuation of our race... and our most sacred, most preserved secret. It is because of her—because of the lie we buried in silence—that we are able to maintain the illusion of a normal, functioning society."

He looked at Rattan, his expression unreadable.

"Our people—our entire race—no longer understands the concept of bloodlines. Of mother or father. Those words exist in stories, in formality, but not in meaning. They were erased—surgically removed—from the soul of the goblin identity."

He walked toward one of the conduits connected to Mother's flesh, its dull green glow illuminating his grim features.

"Through subtle manipulation, cultural redirection, and magical suggestion, we made it so that procreation between male and female goblins is seen as natural, even expected. But it is a lie. A beautiful, necessary lie."

Vellok's tone darkened as he recounted the origin of their new race.

"We were not born—we were grown. Bred in containment vats, stabilized by arcane filtration systems. The prototypes of a new era. And when we were deemed stable—our minds sharpened, our bodies perfected—the rest of our kin were declared obsolete."

He let the words hang in the air.

"They were condemned."

"All of them."

"The mages wiped out the old goblins, down to the last screaming child. Not out of hatred, but out of cold necessity. There could be no coexistence. No split evolution. Only us, the improved ones—the engineered vessels of a new destiny."

He turned toward Rattan, his gaze now heavy with something that felt like shame.

"But even our birth was not what it seemed. You see, the mages didn't just change our minds and bodies—they rewrote the source of our reproduction itself."

Vellok took a breath, as if steeling himself to say the next part aloud.

"Every female goblin born after that—every last one—carries a latent magical seed embedded within her womb. It is inert, lifeless... unless it is awakened."

He pointed down to Mother.

"That... is her role."

"The Mother Organ doesn't birth us directly. She doesn't swell with children like some goddess of fertility. No. She emits a subtle magical frequency, a fertility aura that flows unseen through the environment. It is like pollen on the wind, like static in the air. It drifts through the underground, through the rivers, through the dreams of our people..."

He stepped back from the conduit, voice tightening with intensity.

"And when a goblin female—unknowing, innocent—lives near Mother long enough, that aura activates the seed inside her. Her body begins to change. She grows heavy, as if naturally pregnant. She believes it is from her partner, from love, from chance. But it is a lie. The child was never theirs. It was grown by design, shaped by our buried programming."

Vellok's voice dropped into something softer, more intimate—like a priest sharing a sacred truth too heavy for the common mind.

"Over time, we wove a tradition... a beautiful, quiet rite. A goblin male, when planning to start a family, performs the secret blood offering. It is seen as a gesture of love, of commitment to one's partner. A symbolic ritual to bless the union and usher in a healthy child."

He gave a humorless smile.

"But it is not love he feeds. It is not a family he empowers."

He looked directly at Rattan.

"That blood is for Mother. That offering, drawn with reverence and poured in secrecy, becomes fuel. It nourishes her. It sharpens her pulse. With every offering, a channel opens—and from her vast, unseen body, a wave of activation energy flows."

He stepped closer, the pulsating light of the hidden organ behind him casting shadows on the walls like veins.

"That energy then reaches out... unseen, unfelt... and it selects."

"It selects a female goblin—one who lives close enough to Mother's aura, whose latent seed is ready. And then the spark ignites."

He snapped his fingers sharply.

"The 'pregnancy' begins. So ordinary. So natural. A swelling belly. The tender joy of expectation. A child on the way, born of love, nurtured by hope..."

"But the truth is far colder."

His voice hardened.

"The true father of the child is not the male who offered his blood. Not truly. The child's blueprint comes from Mother—from the essence she was imbued with by the mages. It is she who shapes the child. It is she who determines its strength, its talents, its loyalty."

Vellok circled Rattan now, slowly, deliberately.

"We let our people believe it was their will that shaped their children. We let them believe in ancestry, in lineages, in affection."

"But there are no bloodlines. No parents. Only hosts. Only vessels."

He stopped in front of Rattan, face twisted in quiet fury.

"You are able to stand in front of me today because of that process. You exist because of a blood-offering made in ignorance. Because a mother believed in a child that wasn't hers."

His voice sharpened into a warning.

"And yet—that same process... that ancient, hidden lifeline of our race... is what you are now on the path to rendering useless."

He thrust a finger at Rattan's chest, eyes aflame with intensity.

"You and Kaelen. Your actions are unsealing old truths. Stirring old blood. If the Ratfolk rise again, the world will remember who its first children truly are. The seal will break. And Mother—this sacred, infected god-organ—will be recognized for what she is."

"And then the world will purge her."

"And with her death... will come the extinction of us all."

Rattan could hardly describe the surge of emotion coursing through him. It was a cruel mix of ecstasy and terror—ecstasy from witnessing the downfall of a force once thought untouchable, and sheer dread at the uncertain path that lay ahead.

The information Vellok had just revealed left him breathless. A truth too heavy to ignore.

He understood, in that moment, that he stood at a precipice. One wrong move, one moment of hesitation, and Vellok would turn him into ash without a second thought. And the Ogre King—once his shield, his patron—would not lift a finger to save him now. His worth had plummeted since the recent events with the Empire. In the eyes of power, he was expendable.

But Rattan's ambition would not die here. If anything, it flared hotter. What he had just heard validated his path, confirmed that his cause—his dream of liberation for the ratfolk—was just. He had to live. He must continue. Even if survival now meant swallowing his pride.

Questions lingered on his tongue—bitter, burning questions for Vellok—but he knew better. Silence would serve him more than curiosity. He forced himself into character, his face transforming, like an actor on stage slipping into a role he'd rehearsed a hundred times.

He let his eyes widen with fear, his posture slump with guilt. He dropped to one knee, head bowed low.

"Your Grace," he began, voice cracking, "I had no idea the consequences of my actions. It was never my intention for things to spiral like this. I merely sought to push the Empire—to awaken it, to force it to fight for its people. To give them a reason to believe in themselves again."

He hesitated, eyes darting to the floor as if seeking forgiveness there.

"Lord Kaelen was the only one who offered support. He claimed to want the same thing—a better Empire. I thought... I thought we were allies. But clearly, I was deceived. He had his own agenda, and I see now that I was a pawn in it."

His voice quivered as tears welled in his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. There was sincerity in it—perhaps not for the reasons he claimed, but the shame, the regret, the fear... all real.

"I feel such deep shame for what I've done. For the thought that I may have doomed the very people I meant to save. Please, Your Grace..."

He raised his eyes, shimmering with desperation.

"Give me the chance to make it right."

Vellok's presence was suffocating—like a mountain pressing down on Rattan's shoulders. The older being's shadow loomed over him, thick with power and authority. Then, slowly, deliberately, Vellok placed a heavy hand upon Rattan's bowed head. It was not a gesture of comfort—it was a reminder. A warning.

"I don't need your loyalty, boy," Vellok said, his voice deep and steady, like the rumble of distant thunder. "What I need is for you to understand the reality of your position... as a goblin. And how dangerously close you are to dragging your people into ruin."

Each word struck like a hammer. Rattan dared not move.

"Kaelen believes he can achieve what even the Archmages failed to do. That's why he didn't bother to explain the dangers of the path he set you on—he thinks he's above them. He thinks you are expendable."

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Vellok's grip did not tighten, but it might as well have. The weight of his words alone was crushing.

"All living things want to survive. You want to survive. That instinct, that will to live—that's all the loyalty I require. I don't need vows or declarations. Just obedience. Just action."

There was a moment of silence, thick with tension. Then Vellok continued, his tone sharp and final:

"Kaelen's next moves, after what he's just pulled, will be reckless. Desperate. Watch him. Monitor every step he takes. Report everything. His ambitions must be measured... and if necessary, curtailed."

"The Empire cannot afford to falter now. If it fails to respond properly to Kaelen's provocations, we risk losing everything we've built."

And with that, the world around Rattan shifted. In the blink of an eye, he was no longer kneeling in that cold, vast chamber.

He was back. Back in his office. But something was different. The space felt hollow, the air heavier than before. Vellok was gone—but his presence still lingered like a scent in the walls, a pressure behind the eyes.

Rattan exhaled slowly. He was alone... yet he knew that from this moment on, he would never truly be alone again.

He was under constant watch. Every breath, every move.

The game had changed and the stakes had never been higher.

Back in the Abyss, in the dark, towering hall of Zarvok, silence gripped the room. The three figures sat still, the weight of what had just been revealed pressing heavily on their minds. Zarvok had finished speaking, and though his voice had gone quiet, the implications of his words echoed in the air like a lingering storm.

A slow, satisfied smile spread wider across Zarvok's face. His eyes gleamed with amusement, but more than that—calculation. The value of this world had just risen. The spell created by the mages, and its unexpected result, had changed everything.

Such knowledge... it could become a defining feature of his domain, a power that would set his layer of the Abyss apart once he took the throne as demon lord. "Mother"—what a fascinating concept. Entire civilizations, especially those grappling with population crises or survival dilemmas, would covet it. They would need it. And Zarvok intended to be the one to control its distribution.

His gaze drifted lazily across the chamber toward Ikenga and Keles, who sat opposite him in tense silence. He couldn't help but reflect on the nature of the Abyss's favor—the grace bestowed upon the chosen. How strange, how deeply unfair, that those selected by the Abyss were so often burdened with more than those who were not. There was a twisted elegance to it, a cosmic irony that never failed to amuse him.

Ikenga and Keles, however, were not sharing in that amusement. Frowns etched deep into their faces, their thoughts running parallel as they processed everything they'd just heard. The realization was as clear as it was uncomfortable:

The humans in their world—those they had long underestimated or simply endured—held far more value than they'd believed. And at the same time, these same humans were also the greatest point of fragility, the weakest link.

In silence, both came to the same conclusion, unspoken but deeply felt:

"The strength of the humans must be raised. They should not remain a weakness."

Both had tasted firsthand the terrifying potential of what the First Children were capable of. And Murmur, who possessed deep knowledge of this power, had used it shrewdly—manipulating it in just the right moment to protect himself when he had been within arm's reach of them.

They remembered clearly the thin, golden, impenetrable shield that had surrounded them. As the humans knelt in a perfect circle, drawing upon something ancient and sacred, Murmur had guided them. And together, they summoned a force strong enough to hold back even the two of them—Ikenga and Keles.

It was a sobering moment.

Now, with time to reflect, both understood the deeper truth: a world could be taken over through many methods—not just brute force. There were other, subtler ways to bring a world to its knees. Influence. Belief. Unity. Knowledge.

Ikenga, in particular, found his mind racing. He was already considering the consequences of such power being accessible to the humans in their own world. A power like that, left unchecked or misunderstood, could become a weapon against them.

He could already imagine the nightmare scenario—one the Origin Gods likely hadn't prepared for. A battle where they fought with all their might to protect their world, pouring their strength into every front, only to find that the enemy had already reached the humans. Had persuaded them. Had convinced them to surrender.

All that struggle, all that sacrifice, rendered meaningless in a single moment of human compliance.

No... That could not be allowed to happen.

Ikenga pushed the thought aside. It was a concern worth revisiting, but not something that could be acted upon right now. Both he and Keles were far from their world, and worrying over what couldn't be changed in the moment would do them no good.

Instead, his focus shifted to another lingering statement—something Vellok had said earlier.

"Zarvok," Ikenga spoke, his voice steady but curious, "do the mage's words hold any truth? That not all sixth-stage beings are immortal?"

Zarvok took a slow sip from his wine cup, letting the silence linger for just a moment longer than expected. Then he gave a faint, knowing smile.

"Immortality..." he began, "is something most mortals crave. Many would give everything they have—soul, body, lineage—just for a chance at it. And yet, there are beings like you and I, born into it. It's not something we earned. It's simply what we are."

He leaned back slightly, eyes half-lidded with thought.

"Mortals, with their power systems, their endless quests for strength... they do sometimes brush against the threshold of immortality. But only a few ever manage to truly cross it."

He held up a finger, as if to guide the lesson. "The path begins at the Fifth Stage. That's where most mortals first make contact with what we call the 'laws'—abstract forces that begin to shape their very existence. These laws often manifest as domains, giving them power beyond the physical, and with that comes an initial taste of longevity."

Zarvok's tone became more contemplative.

"Then comes the Sixth Stage. This is where mortals enter full communion with the laws. They no longer merely touch them—they command them. And it is at this point that their understanding, their 'comprehension' of a law, begins to define the strength and length of their existence."

"The normal lifespan for a being at this stage, "the Sixth Stage" is around 10,000 years," Zarvok continued, his tone now adopting the calm certainty of someone who had observed such truths unfold countless times. "But this number isn't fixed. It can grow. The more a mortal deepens their understanding of the law they've touched, the more that knowledge stretches and expands the boundaries of their existence. In essence, the deeper their comprehension, the longer they live."

He paused to swirl the wine in his cup before taking another sip.

"So yes," he said with a nod, "the mage's words are true. At the Sixth Stage, some mortals do indeed begin to brush up against immortality. Their paths—depending on the law they've chosen and how they interpret it—can serve as gateways to eternal life."

"Take the Flame Path, for instance," Zarvok continued, eyes glinting with memory or perhaps amusement. "It is one of the more commonly chosen domains—accessible, powerful, and feared. But its meaning is not fixed. For some, flame represents destruction, raw firepower, the ability to annihilate. Those who see it this way often gain terrifying strength but little time. They burn bright... and burn out fast."

He leaned forward slightly, voice growing heavier.

"But others," he said, "see flame as something else—a symbol of endurance, purification, renewal, even divine rebirth. If a mortal walks the Flame Path with that kind of insight... they might find a way to keep up time. To merge their essence with the eternal nature of fire itself. To become something that burns... forever."

He let the words linger.

"That's the danger and the wonder of mortal paths," he concluded. "Two individuals may walk the same path, but only one might glimpse eternity—while the other races against time, desperately seeking some other way to extend their fleeting life."

"Interesting," Ikenga murmured to himself, his eyes narrowing with curiosity as the heavy door creaked open. The hinges groaned like old bones, giving way to a small figure who stepped confidently into the chamber.

It was an Imp — but not just any Imp.

The creature was sharply dressed in a crisply tailored butler's uniform, the dark fabric offset by a silver chain and immaculate gloves. Polished, clawed feet clicked against the obsidian floor. The air shimmered faintly around him, as if it still remembered fire.

Ikenga and Keles exchanged a glance. Recognition struck them both at once. This was the same Imp who had once trembled and burned beneath Ikenga's new flames — the only one who had not lost his mind to the flames new effect. Somehow, this lowly demon had survived. Not only survived — endured. Changed.

Chapter 545:

In the few short weeks since that harrowing ordeal, the Imp had undergone a remarkable transformation. Before he harbored jittering nerves and smoldering fear, there was now a measured composure. Pride tempered by discipline. And something else, something flickering behind his black eyes — clarity.

The Imp approached and bowed with the solemn grace of a veteran courtier, a massive folded map held carefully in both hands. The cloth-bound scroll was nearly as tall as he was.

"Lord Ikenga. Lord Keles," he said, his voice smoother than they remembered — controlled, yet still carrying a flicker of reverence, of awe.

Zarvok, reclining on his throne observed the exchange with a crooked smile curling beneath his mask. He leaned forward slightly, his fingers steepled.

"I would like to thank you, Ikenga," Zarvok said, the hint of genuine respect in his usually sardonic tone catching even Keles's attention. "I don't know precisely what you did to him... but you've changed the structure of how my castle — my home — now runs."

He gestured toward the Imp.

"For a formal introduction: meet Stitch. My new head of servants. A humble title, yes. One often spat on by our kind. But now? It has become one of the most coveted positions in this entire abyssal layer."

Zarvok chuckled darkly, eyes gleaming. "You see, Stitch's story spreads like wildfire. The Imp who survived the flames of a god and emerged... refined. Controlled. Awakened. Lesser demons whisper his name in envy. Higher demons look twice when he walks past. And now, demons who once slaughtered their own kin to avoid servitude petition him for placement beneath his command."

Ikenga raised a brow, intrigued. "And what story is that?"

Stitch bowed slightly to Zarvok before speaking. "Allow me, milord."

He turned to Ikenga and Keles, eyes gleaming faintly with the memory of his transformation.

"When I was bathed in your Grace Flame," Stitch began, "I was drawn — or rather pulled — into a mindscape where all my ambitions were laid bare."

He spoke calmly, but there was a subtle tremor beneath the words, like echoes of something vast and incomprehensible.

"The flame didn't just burn. It showed. It revealed countless paths... ways in which those ambitions could be fulfilled. The more I fed them, the deeper I was drawn into the vision. I was consumed by it — chasing, climbing, grasping at that elusive summit."

He paused, letting the memory settle.

"But then I noticed... the further I went, the dimmer the flame became. Its light no longer guided — only the hunger remained."

"I stopped," Stitch said, voice firmer now. "I pulled back before I lost myself. And in doing so, I awoke with the clarity of someone who had lived those paths — every success, every mistake. Like glimpses of a life unlived, a version of me making choices, learning, falling, rising again."

He straightened his back as he continued, no longer just speaking — confessing.

"When the flame finally died out and I was returned to reality... those paths remained. Burned into my mind. I saw what I had to do. And it began that very night."

He looked directly at Ikenga, no longer trembling, but certain.

"I dragged out my partner — the one who shared the flame with me — and I killed him. I fed on his soul. That act brought me closer to the third stage."

Zarvok leaned back, the bones of his throne groaning beneath him as Stitch's words settled over the room like smoke. For a moment, silence reigned.

Then, a slow grin crept across the demon king's face.

"You see now why his story spreads," Zarvok said. "But words alone do not capture the full weight of it. Let me show you what he's done."

What followed over the next few weeks was not immediate — but it was undeniable.

At first, Stitch resumed what appeared to be a humble role. Head of servants. An insignificant title to most demons, a position reserved for the broken or the expendable. But Stitch did not wear it like a burden. He wore it like a crown.

He started small: reorganizing patrol routes, optimizing storage, ensuring each wing of Zarvok's vast fortress was assigned its own team of watchful attendants. Demons scoffed, of course. They hissed, mocked, and threatened. Few wanted to obey a mere Imp — especially not one who had crawled his way out of divine flame. But Stitch did not demand respect — he earned it.

When a butcher-beast rampaged through the west kitchens, Stitch personally subdued it using a binding rune crafted from blood, bone dust, and calm words. When a squad of lesser demons refused to follow orders, he challenged their leader, tore out one of its tongues mid-sentence, and offered it back as a "reminder to listen first."

Within days, the snarling chaos of Zarvok's castle began to... breathe. The halls, once filled with screeches and infighting, grew quiet. Tasks were completed before being commanded. Fights broke out less — or when they did, Stitch made examples swift and lasting. Even the architecture seemed to shift in harmony, as if the castle itself appreciated the newfound rhythm.

Then came the real surprise.

Zarvok had always ruled through fear and indulgence — a chaotic king in a kingdom of madness. But when he returned to his war room one night and found a freshly drawn battle map, cleaned armor arranged by enchantment type, and a list of updated supply chains with suggestions for strategic siphoning from rival territories — he stopped.

Stitch stood silently in the corner, not boasting, not begging for approval. Just watching.

Zarvok turned to him slowly. "What... is all this?"

"My duty," Stitch replied. "It is not glory I seek. Only to fulfill the ambition I saw in the flame."

Zarvok let out a short laugh. "And here I thought order would be the death of me. But I must admit... this suits me."

And so, the Imp who was once nothing — now walked the halls with demons bowing in silence. The role of servant had become a position of influence and power.

"He's a lucky fella," Ikenga muttered, almost to himself, as his gaze shifted toward the large map now being unfolded across the stone table.

Zarvok leaned in, the bones of his spine cracking audibly as he hunched forward, eyes glinting with anticipation. His fingers twitched against the armrest — it had been too long since he moved in earnest, too long since he fought. This invasion, this slow crawl of conflict, had kept him caged.

But now, perhaps, the tide was shifting.

The map laid bare the fractured lands of the invaded world. Markings and etchings crisscrossed the terrain — strongholds, corrupted plains, siege lines.

Ikenga's eyes narrowed. There it is.

Once Vellok had dragged Rattan to that underground, Ikenga had reached out through his phantom senses. He had seen the place through the place through phanthom. He'd already pinpointed it just in case.

This meant they had another card to play, a strategic thread to pull. A way to break the goblins, turn the war on its head, and perhaps bring this invasion to a premature end.

He and Keles had been away from home too long. The thought lingered at the edge of his mind like a bitter taste.

Ikenga placed a finger on the map, tapping a specific spot near the edge of a cracked mountain range.

"That right there," he said, voice steady, "is where Mother is."

Zarvok's eyes widened slightly. Keles straightened.

And as for how he knew?

Ikenga's other eye — the one planted on the moon like a watcher in the sky — gave him clarity beyond mortal vision. From its perch, it gazed down into the cracks of this world, and it had seen the overview of the underground cave and where it was located.

Zarvok, who moments ago bore a sharp grin, now seemed calmer, more composed — a sovereign slipping into the skin of command. When it was time to act, he knew how to act.

He turned toward Stitch with quiet authority.

"Have my generals assemble in the war room," he said. "The action they've been itching for has arrived."

Stitch bowed low, wordlessly, and swept out of the room with the silent precision that had become his signature.

Ikenga and Keles stood.

There was something in Ikenga's posture, in the way he moved around her — a silent protectiveness, a steadying presence. Zarkov noticed it as he turned his gaze to Keles. Their eyes met briefly, and for the first time in a while, the demon king's smile was gentle — a rare glimpse of civility beneath his usual chaos.

"Humble congratulations to you, milady," he said with a nod.

Keles returned the nod. She said nothing, but the acknowledgment in her eyes was clear.

Ikenga's hand remained on her back as the two of them left the chamber, their steps echoing down the quiet, empty hallway — a lull before the storm.

As they walked, Keles gently rested her hand on her stomach. Her face was partially hidden in veil covering her face, but her voice broke through the silence, soft and certain.

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"He came at the wrong time," she murmured. "It seems... things are reaching their end."

Ikenga glanced sideways at her, a faint smile curving his lips. His arm pressed more firmly around her.

"He couldn't have come at a better time," he said, his voice warm with quiet conviction. "With how things are unfolding... we may not even need to stand at the frontlines."

He looked ahead, eyes narrowing with resolve.

"We now know our enemy's weakness — and all we have to do is keep our pawns alive long enough to keep pressing on those soft spots."

Keles gave a quiet hum of agreement as her fingers moved in slow circles over her growing belly — a gesture of both worry and hope.

"Have you got a name for him yet?" Keles asked, a teasing lilt in her voice as they walked slowly side by side.

Ikenga scratched his head with a sheepish grin. "I think I'll leave that to you," he replied.

By now, they had reached the door to their chambers — quieter and more still than usual. There was no Agatha waiting for them, no mention of her lingering in the air. Ikenga felt the absence but said nothing. Some Chapters end in silence, and he had learned to respect that.

Keles stepped in first, pulling back the veil from her head. The moment she did, the coldness that often marked her features softened into something far gentler. Her eyes, once hollow with divine distance, now shimmered faintly — like something was blooming behind them.

Pregnancy was not new to her. She had brought Xerosis and Roth into the world through her own means, forged of her essence — as the goddess of death and darkness. But this time... this child was different.

This child carried his blood.

Ikenga — god of nature and curses — had added something new to the cycle she embodied. A disruptive harmony. An unfamiliar sensation.

Her previous children were born of undeath, living paradoxes sustained by the shadows and silence of her realm. But now, for the first time, she felt it — the stirring of life. A warmth not her own. An echo of breath within her — pulsing in tandem with the chill of her own dominion.

It was... disorienting.

And deeply grounding.

"I never thought I'd feel something like this," she admitted quietly, her fingers brushing her stomach again. "This... conflict of forces inside me."

Ikenga stepped closer, placing his hand atop hers — earth to grave, life to death.

"It's not a conflict," he said softly. "It's a balance. You hold the dark... and I, the wild. What grows from us might just be what this world needs — something not yet written in prophecy or bound by fate."

Keles didn't answer immediately. She simply leaned into him, her head resting gently against his chest, eyes closed.

Ikenga held Keles gently, but the quiet beat of her heart against his chest only amplified the noise in his own.

He wasn't as calm as he looked.

In the stillness of that chamber — in the warmth and weight of the life growing inside her — another presence pressed itself into his thoughts.

Mahu.

The name alone carried weight. History. Complication.

Their relationship had always been... different. Not bound by mortal norms, not shaped by declarations or ceremonies, but a dance of forces and fates that intertwined over centuries. They were gods. They understood each other through instinct and essence more than spoken promises. And still... Ikenga had drawn a line once.

He had denied Mahu a child.

Not out of cruelty, but because he knew — he wouldn't be present. He wouldn't stand beside her through the ache of growth or the danger of birthing something divine. He respected her too much to give her half of what she deserved.

And yet here he stood.

Keles, carrying his child. Not through careful decision, but through the chaos of war and proximity and shared purpose. And she, the Lady of Death, was nurturing a new life.

Ikenga wasn't blind to what this meant. Not just for Keles. Not just for the child.

But for Mahu.

He had hurt her in a way only immortals could hurt each other — across centuries, through choices that will last in time. He hadn't spoken to her since, but he could feel the potential of her judgment like a sword still in its sheath — quiet, patient, but real.

She was the goddess of motherhood, She could whisper a curse upon a bloodline and it would cling for eons. If she wished to wound, she could do it through silence, or worse — through the unborn.

And that thought — that particular thought — planted a chill deep in Ikenga's chest.

He was preparing himself, even now.

Not for an apology. That was already forming in his soul.

But for whatever action she chose.

He would not hide from it. He couldn't. He was in the wrong, and he would bear the consequences — not as a god, but as a man who had made a choice with ripple effects he could not yet fully grasp.

Thankfully, they were not in their world. Here, on this foreign battlefield of corrupted soil and under distant moons, Mahu's reach was thinner. Not broken — never that — but distant. For now.

Still, Ikenga found himself instinctively placing his hand again on Keles's stomach — as if shielding what had not yet been born, from a wrath that had not yet arrived.

He breathed in deeply, One war outside.

Another one brewing inside and he would have to fight both. To think him Ikenga would one day fall into the routine and clichés that comes with a being a god.

Months passed by in the goblin world with a lot of changes taken place, first was the increase in chaos in the previously orderly cities under the empire.

Since catching their first glimpse of the battlefield, the goblins had been shaken. At first, they were repulsed—horrified by the brutal scenes of twisted bodies, scorched earth, and the unnatural silence that came in the wake of violence. Yet, that horror soon gave way to a deeper, more consuming curiosity. What was happening at the front line? Who was truly behind this conflict, and why had it begun?

Among the common folk, the goblins were perhaps the most reactive. Long used to being on the periphery of power, they were now drawn into the center of a mystery. They hungered for answers, and that hunger grew with each whispered rumor and half-seen image smuggled from the front. But the goblins weren't the only ones watching.

For the nobles, life had become stagnant. Their wealth and titles protected them from hardship, but also left them yearning for excitement, for meaning. The chaos of the front line, distant and bloody, became a thrilling drama. In secret, they activated their personal informants and spy networks, dispatching daring scouts and mercenaries to the front lines—not to fight, but to observe. They sought not victory, but spectacle. Many even competed among themselves to see who could obtain the most vivid, uncensored image of the truth.

The Empire, sensing the danger in this growing attention, began to scramble. With all its might and resources, it worked overtime behind the scenes—muddying reports, intercepting messages, and planting disinformation to distort the reality of what was happening at the border. They shut down public channels, accused truth-bringers of treason, and attempted to redirect the people's focus to festivals, political distractions, and state-sponsored narratives.

But theirs was not the only agenda at play.

Kaelen, the shadow behind the veil, was moving swiftly on his end. Somehow—no one knew exactly how—uncensored videos from the front lines began to leak into the public. Gruesome, haunting, and yet undeniably authentic, they showed not only the intensity of the battle but the unlikely alliances forming in its crucible. The empire tried to discredit the footage, calling it doctored or staged. But it was too late. The flame of curiosity had been lit, and Kaelen continued to fan it with precise, surgical strikes of information.

What made matters worse for the Empire was the revelation of who had facilitated the spread of these battlefield leaks: the Ogre merchants.

This insult did not go unnoticed by the goblins. Proud of their history in being above the Ogre, they took it as a direct challenge. How had the ogres—a race long considered brutish and slow—succeeded in a field the goblins believed was their birthright? Tensions rose. The goblins began to mobilize, not just out of curiosity now, but out of pride.

And yet, the implications were greater than a mere rivalry. The footage revealed a shocking truth: ogres fighting alongside the Ratfolk—another marginalized group often dismissed by the imperial narrative as cowardly scavengers or pests. This revelation struck at the heart of the Empire's propaganda. Hadn't the Empire claimed the ogres were hostile, disloyal, and too dangerous to trust? Hadn't they declared the Ratfolk as enemies of the state?

Now, the people began to ask difficult questions. Whispers of conspiracy grew louder: Was the Empire lying about the war? Were the ogres victims of a greater manipulation? Why would the Empire hide these alliances, if not to control the narrative?

Chapter 547:

Doubt crept into the hearts of the citizens. The Empire's image once unshakable now stood on trembling ground. And through it all, Kaelen watched with quiet satisfaction. His battle wasn't only fought with sword or magic it was fought in minds, in perception, in belief.

And in that battle, the first cracks in the Empire's armor had begun to show.

Once the Ratfolk entered the spotlight, public opinion began to shift in an unexpected direction. Once dismissed as scavengers, they were now seen in a new light as resilient, loyal, and fiercely united on the battlefield. The leaked videos of Ratfolk fighting alongside ogres stirred something in the people: empathy, curiosity, and most dangerous of all, doubt. Doubt in the Empire's narrative. Doubt in its intentions. Doubt in its truth.

The Empire, always watchful, acted swiftly.

In the shadows, under false identities and through obscure channels, they reached out to the very groups now stirring with newfound influence and unrest: the goblin merchants and the thrill-seeking nobles. Cloaked in discretion, they came bearing what few could resist a long-buried secret that had floated about for years.

They unveiled a tale many had once been desperate to uncover, only to eventually abandon in the face of imperial silence: the death of the Sixth-Tier Mage, Gurnak, and the mysterious fall of the fortified city he had sworn to protect.

The Empire's version of the story was carefully crafted. They didn't simply state the facts—they designed them. They manipulated old images and altered video footage, all while seeding whispers into the ears of nobles hungry for secrets and meaning. The official narrative was replaced with something far more incendiary, and it spread like fire through the upper echelons of society before trickling down to the masses.

According to this new account, Gurnak hadn't died in a noble stand against overwhelming odds. No—he had fallen due to a betrayal from within. The traitors? The very Ratfolk now gaining the people's sympathy.

The manipulated footage showed them twisted and contorted, corrupted by the demonic influence of Vorenza, the infamous Demon Queen. Their features—once timid and meek—were now snarling, fanged, and wild. Eyes glowing with madness. Flesh warped by chaos. They were no longer seen as a misunderstood people, but as beasts driven by bloodlust, puppets of infernal forces.

And to further drive the nail into the heart of sympathy, the Empire unveiled something even more grotesque: the fate of the Ogres who had fallen into Vorenza's hands.

In grim, grainy footage, the people saw ogres—hulking warriors once celebrated for their strength and stoicism—mutated into monstrous hybrids. Horns, scales, unnatural limbs; grotesque symbols of corruption etched into their skin. These twisted beings were shown attacking their former comrades, driven by a rage that no longer resembled anything human or ogre. Their transformation served as a warning, a visual horror that blurred the lines between victim and monster.

The message was clear: association with the Ratfolk and Vorenza would lead only to destruction.

The psychological impact was devastating. The sympathy that had begun to blossom among the common people now curled into unease. The nobles, once delighted by their exclusive knowledge, now became more cautious, unwilling to risk aligning with what the Empire now branded as "corrupted races." Goblin merchants, who had begun investing in their own networks to rival the ogres, now hesitated. The images had served their purpose. The Empire had regained control—at least for the moment.

But beneath the surface, not everyone believed the new tale. Some questioned how the Empire had obtained such perfectly timed footage. Others noted inconsistencies in the story—subtle details that didn't align with earlier reports. And Kaelen, always lurking at the edge of the truth, saw the deception for what it was. He knew the Empire had just played a dangerous card, one that might backfire if handled incorrectly.

Deep within the cold marble halls of the Imperial Citadel, far from the watchful eyes of the public, the Empire's highest echelon convened in shadow. The air was thick with incense and veiled intentions.

At the head of the chamber sat Kaelen, who was responsible for the unrest the empire was currently facing, previously he was filled with laughter and joy, today he was just quiet.

He had just received the report—or rather, the performance—about the fall of Gurnak's city. The Empire's carefully staged reveal had landed like a hammer, swinging the tide of public sentiment back in their favor. It had worked—brilliantly. The people were shaken, the nobles were subdued, and the goblins were back in line.

And yet, Kaelen could do nothing but sit in silence, his clawed fingers curled against the armrest of his chair.

The problem wasn't that he disagreed with the action.

The problem was that he hadn't seen it coming.

Despite his position, despite his influence, the orchestration of Gurnak's story had hit his blindspot—a place in the Empire's web where even his reach couldn't extend. He had no real evidence linking the imperial hand to the released footage. No signature, no source, no trail. Just a carefully polished lie presented as truth—and everyone had swallowed it whole.

He'd always suspected something was wrong when he was not considered or invited when it came to the experiment carried out by the empire and Gurnak.

Today him not participating was biting back at him and he could do nothing but sit and let it happen.

For the first time in years, Kaelen felt outmaneuvered.

Still, he was no fool. He understood the message hidden beneath the surface of this elegant manipulation. It wasn't just meant for the people—it was meant for him.

He thought back on his recent decisions—reckless, emotionally charged, even borderline insubordinate. His frustration with the Empire's passivity, his private criticisms, and subtle defiance had not gone unnoticed. He had believed himself untouchable, too important to sideline.

But now, watching the Empire twist public perception with such surgical precision, he realized the truth:

If he pushed further, they would act.

Not with assassination—no, that would be too messy. But they could isolate him, discredit him, erase his authority piece by piece until he was nothing more than a ceremonial seat at the table. And Vellok feared irrelevance more than death.

So, he calmed himself.

He adopted a new mask of calculated neutrality. His outbursts ceased. His movements became deliberate. The storm in his heart, though not gone, was now tethered by the chilling realization that he was not the only wolf among the sheep.

Meanwhile, in the heart of the Empire's intelligence branch, the true architects of the Gurnak deception were gathering.

It was a closed session—no aides, no external recorders. Only the core of the inner council, cloaked in shadow. Figures with no names, only titles. The Chronicler, the Minister of Veils, the Architect, and others whose influence extended beyond public knowledge.

"This move bought us time," said the Chronicler, voice sharp as a razor, "but not forever. Kaelen may have retreated, but he'll return with sharper tools."

"The goblins have quieted," noted the Minister of Veils. "And Vellok has finally stopped breathing fire down our necks. That alone is a victory."

There was a long pause.

Then, the Architect leaned forward, tapping fingers against the cold surface of the table. "We've established the illusion of control. Now it's time we make it real. Begin preparations for the next operation. We'll need something... conclusive."

"And Kaelen?" someone asked.

The Architect smiled. "Let him rest. We want him watching when the next piece falls into place."

The Imperial Palace was quiet. Too quiet.

Within the innermost sanctum—far beneath the gilded halls and towering spires—the Emperor and Vellok stood before an arcane scrying mirror, its surface rippling with the distorted images of the recent high council meeting.

The Emperor, his form still hidden beneath an opulent dark robe laced with runes, broke the silence. His voice was distant, muffled by age and power.

"What about the boy?"

Vellok didn't answer immediately. He was absorbed into a brief memory of Rattan—a seemingly loyal operative, an obedient tool. A puppet dancing to the Empire's tune.

"He's behaved," Vellok replied at last, voice calm but clipped. "Since our last...conversation, he's been useful. Already gave us everything we need to legally act against Kaelen. More than enough, in fact."

He turned slightly, folding his hands behind his back. "But his usefulness is near its end. Once we move, he becomes a liability."

There was a pause, almost tender.

"I feel bad he'll have to be discarded soon."

The Emperor remained still, but there was something heavy in the air, an emotion too tangled to be named. He finally whispered:

"Once we do this... our brother will likely meet his end."

But Vellok didn't allow him to finish.

"It has to be done." His tone sharpened like a blade drawn from a sheath. "If we hesitate now, everything we've built will fall. The lies, the blood, the entire veil we've pulled over the Empire—all for nothing."

Silence. For a long, cold moment.

Then the Emperor asked, almost as though speaking to something that once existed inside Vellok:

"Is there still some part of you left in there, brother?"

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Vellok said nothing.

Behind him, a portal shimmered into existence, its swirling energy whispering of far-off places and sealed intentions. He stepped toward it with a calm that bordered on eerie.

"I understand your worries. But this is no time for hesitation." He vanished into the portal as it closed with a hollow pulse of magic.

The Emperor was left alone in the vast chamber, the flickering torches casting long shadows against the walls. Silence returned.

Then, from under his hood, a faint blue light blinked in his eye—a magical interface only he could see. In quiet pulsing digits, it read:

[Stability: 87%]

And even as he watched, the number flickered, dipped for the briefest moment—a sign of decline.

The Emperor's hands, hidden beneath the robe, slowly clenched.

87% was still high... but the trajectory was clear. Things were unraveling. The people were no longer unified. Doubts were spreading. Loyalties were shifting.

Just like that, the final fragment of doubt in the Emperor's heart vanished. Something had to be done now.

Rattan had grown used to the stillness of his room.

Since his last encounter with Vellok, the world outside had become a blur—distant, muffled, almost unreal. The stone walls of his chamber, once a symbol of status and comfort, now felt more like the quiet bindings of a gilded cage. He rarely left, only emerging when Kaelen summoned him—never too soon, never too late.

He was careful. Always careful.

Even when Vellok's trusted eyes and ears were absent, Rattan never gave anything away. No words, no gestures, no stray glances that could be turned against him. He maintained his role flawlessly: the loyal subordinate, the quiet observer, the ghost hidden in plain sight.

But today was different.

The moment he received word of the new information spreading across the Empire, something in him shifted.

He sat on the edge of his bed, the parchment still open in his hand, eyes scanning every word. He didn't need to read it twice.

He knew this was fabricated. A masterful lie, crafted with enough truth to root it, but twisted by the Empire's agenda. He could already hear the whispers in noble courts, the fearful mutterings of soldiers and merchants alike. The image of Gurnak's downfall, the "corrupted Ratfolk," and the Ogre hybrids—all part of a carefully orchestrated illusion.

Rattan almost laughed, a bitter chuckle rising in his throat—but he stopped himself. He stared at the parchment again, and the smile faded before it ever reached his lips.

The people... they would believe it. Of course they would. The Empire had trained them well—fed them obedience, conditioned them to accept only what the Empire allowed. Curiosity was dangerous. Independent thought, treasonous. Truth, a weapon only wielded by those in power.

So no—Rattan did not laugh.

He simply sighed and leaned back against the cold wall. His mind drifted, unbidden, into a past he rarely visited.

A memory surfaced.

It was a time long before this—when he wasn't buried in plots and politics, when he still had someone he trusted. Someone who believed in something beyond survival.

"Hope Chief..." the name passed through his mind like a whisper.

Rattan stared at the ceiling, vision unfocused. How long had it been since he thought of him? Since he left that old camp and disappeared into the Empire's machinery? The years had swallowed so much—names, faces, warmth.

"I hope he's still alive," Rattan murmured under his breath. "Still... himself."

A flicker of guilt passed through him, barely acknowledged. He stood, walked over to the stand, and retrieved his robe. The deep crimson fabric flowed over his arms, settling over his frame like a second skin.

It was time to leave the room.

The world outside was already shifting again. The Empire had made its move.

It was the signal Rattan had been waiting for—confirmation that the game was entering its final phase. The lies had spread, the illusions had taken hold, and the people, once docile, were beginning to murmur. It was the perfect storm.

And in the eye of it stood Kaelen.

Rattan had made his choice long ago. He had sold Kaelen out—subtly, carefully, without remorse. It was a necessary betrayal, one that bought him leverage and security. Still, he knew full well: if Kaelen ever uncovered the full extent of his treachery, he would not survive the encounter.

But Kaelen was cornered now.

The Empire's latest campaign of propaganda had pushed even him to the brink. His usual composure was likely cracking, and cracks were where Rattan thrived. What better time to strike than now? Not with a dagger or spell, but with information, with positioning, with manipulation.

Rattan adjusted the folds of his robe as he approached the grand halls of Kaelen's palace. Kaelen's presence loomed large here, as always.

Rattan moved with precision, his steps deliberate but not hurried. He knew the guards. Knew which halls were watched and which weren't. He walked under painted glass that bled twilight onto the polished stone, until finally, he reached the heavy, rune-bound door of the Ogre King's chamber.

He stopped before it, letting his fingers hover just a moment over the carved surface.

This was it.

The moment he had to become someone else.

He inhaled slowly. And then, like donning a mask, he slipped into the role. He could feel it settle over him like armor—not steel, but emotion. Fear. Shame. A hint of desperation. The perfect cocktail for a man who had just betrayed his leader but was too afraid to run.

This—this—was Rattan's truest talent. Not stealth. Not espionage. But the art of becoming whoever he needed to be.

He was now the trembling, loyal subordinate who had broken ranks not out of malice but necessity. The one who had nowhere else to go, who still clung to Kaelen for purpose, for protection.

His hand tightened into a fist, and he knocked—three sharp raps that echoed down the marble corridor.

The door creaked open without a sound.

Inside, the room was dim, lit only by a few floating embers that hovered like watchful eyes. The scent of scorched incense clung to the air—charred herbs, iron, and something older. Rattan stepped in slowly, his shoulders hunched just enough to sell the role of a worn, guilty man.

At the far end of the room, Kaelen stood with his back turned, staring at a wall-length map pulsing faintly with magical threads. Territories flickered with sigils—factions, troop movements, controlled rumors. It was a war not just of blades but of perception.

Kaelen didn't look up. He spoke as if Rattan's presence had been expected.

"The Empire moved faster than I anticipated."

His voice was steady. Deceptively calm. But Rattan could hear the underlying crackle—tension coiled like a whip.

"Yes, my lord," Rattan said softly. He dropped to one knee. "They've released images of the corrupted Ratfolk and Ogres. The people are beginning to turn."

Kaelen finally turned, his eyes dimmed, but focused sharply on Rattan. He studied him—no anger yet.

"And where were you when the story broke?"

"Buried," Rattan replied, head still bowed. "Under the weight of my own failure."

Kaelen walked toward him, each step echoing with quiet menace. His boots ground softly against the stone floor, the sound a slow, ominous rhythm. The torchlight flickered against his frame, casting long

shadows behind him. There was no haste in his movement—only the steady, deliberate weight of someone who had no need to rush, because power was always on his side.

His voice, when he spoke, was low and cold.

"What is this failure that you speak of?"

Rattan stood still, the tension in his shoulders barely hidden under his trembling cloak. He took a shallow breath, as if bracing for what was to come.

"Master Vellok paid me a visit."

There was a blur—a sudden flash of movement.

Before Rattan could even blink, he was airborne, his back crashing against the stone wall with a brutal thud. Dust rained from the ceiling with the force. Kaelen's massive hand closed around his throat like an iron vice, lifting him off the ground. The pressure increased slowly, deliberately. Kaelen didn't scream or rage—he didn't have to. His fury was silent and far more dangerous for it.

Rattan gasped, fingers clawing at Kaelen's arm. Tears welled at the corners of his reddening eyes as he choked out,

"He told me... of our people's real history..."

The words froze Kaelen in place. The grip held for a second longer before his fingers twitched, loosened, and then finally released. Rattan crumpled to the floor, coughing violently, one hand gripping his throat, the other catching his weight.

Kaelen took a single step back, eyes narrowing as he regarded the crumpled figure. He wasn't just seeing Rattan now—he was evaluating him. Recalculating. Something had changed.

"I need a word to prove it," Kaelen demanded, voice quieter now but laced with suspicion.

Rattan coughed hard, his voice barely a whisper through the pain.

"Mother."

The word hung in the air like a curse.

Kaelen's breath caught.

A long, still silence followed.

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Then Kaelen turned his head slowly, eyes scanning the room with icy precision. He expanded his senses, reaching into every corner of the chamber. The wards he had etched into the stone with his own blood still held—no ripples, no intrusions, no eavesdroppers. He exhaled quietly.

Safe.

But that didn't settle the unease that had begun to gnaw at the edges of his mind.

He looked down at Rattan again—really looked at him. For so long, he had seen this man as a tool. A pawn. Something useful, but ultimately replaceable. But now...

Kaelen's jaw tensed.

He had underestimated him.

"You were supposed to follow orders," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"To play your role in the grand design. Not... grow."

Rattan wiped blood from the corner of his mouth, still kneeling, still catching his breath.

"I did follow orders," he said, his voice steadier now. "But I also listened. And I saw. You shaped me into something you never expected."

Kaelen's eyes darkened, the glow behind them dimming with calculation.

"Why would Vellok speak to you?"

There was no insult in the question, only genuine confusion—because until now, Kaelen had believed no one of true power would see Rattan as anything but a shadow at his side.

Rattan bowed his head, his voice carrying weight even in its quietness.

"He believes that once I learned the truth... I would no longer help you lead our people to ruin. Or to extinction."

Kaelen was silent for a long moment. His face betrayed nothing, but his mind raced behind still eyes.

Still on his knees, hands trembling at his sides, Rattan raised his eyes—with aching honesty. His voice shook, not from fear, but from the weight of what he had to confess.

"I was so taken back by all the secrets I had been exposed to," he began, the words heavy on his tongue. "At the same time... I feared for my life. Because I realized... the price for learning that truth was steep."

He paused, breathing in the silence, his chest rising and falling with the burden of memory.

"Vellok offered me knowledge... but demanded my loyalty to the Empire in return. I was told if I refused—if I even hesitated—they would kill me before I could leave the chamber."

Kaelen remained quiet, now seated on his throne like a statue of shadow and authority. Yet his gaze had changed—sharpened, searching. He studied Rattan not as a failure, nor a traitor, but as something more uncertain... something human.

"And in that moment," Rattan continued, lowering his head again, "I chose safety over honor. I disgraced Your Grace by wavering. By doubting the path we walk. Because if what Vellok said was true..."

His throat tightened.

"Then we are leading our people to ruin."

The words rang out with bitter finality.

Kaelen leaned forward slightly, one elbow resting on the throne's carved armrest, his voice low and distant.

"Then why now?" he asked. "Why tell me this at all? Was this... another of Vellok's commands?"

The accusation stung like a whip, and Rattan's body jerked from the pain of hearing it. A choked, grief-stricken sound tore from his throat.

"No!" he roared, tears now falling freely down his cheeks. His fists clenched against the stone floor, his whole body shaking.

"No, Your Highness!"

His voice cracked, but his heart poured through it.

"It was news of the Empire's recent actions that broke through my fear. That made me come before you, not as a pawn or spy—but as your servant begging for forgiveness."

He wiped at his face, struggling for breath, voice raw.

"They fabricated a lie... about the death of a sixth-stage powerhouse. I saw the evidence myself, the contradictions. The body never surfaced. The eyewitnesses were silenced. That shook me. If they can lie about something so grand, then... who's to say everything Vellok told me wasn't crafted from the same deceit?"

Kaelen's expression hardened again, but not in anger. It was something more guarded—pain masked by poise. A flicker of regret.

Rattan continued, his voice quiet now, pleading:

"Your Highness... I understand now. Your goal was never the annihilation of our people."

He looked up, eyes bloodshot, desperate. "You've been fighting not for their destruction—but for their liberation. For freedom from the Empire's yoke."

Rattan bowed low, his forehead touching the cold stone floor.

"I was a fool to ever doubt it. A blind, frightened fool. But now... I see. And I offer myself to Your Grace—fully, completely, as the man you made me into. Not as a tool, but as a believer. A soldier. A brother in arms."

Kaelen said nothing in response.

The silence stretched, coiling tighter with each passing second. Rattan remained still, knees pressed to the cold stone floor, head bowed in a posture of submission—but his mind was racing.

Then, finally, Kaelen spoke. His voice was even, but there was something unreadable in it, like a blade wrapped in silk.

"Tell me everything Vellok told you."

There was no flare of anger. No suspicion. Just a calm command.

And that, more than anything, made Rattan's skin crawl.

Still, inside his mind, he chuckled—quiet and victorious.

So I passed... for now.

He let his breath tremble a little for effect, the tears still streaking his cheeks, mixing truth with theater. Raising his head just enough to speak clearly, Rattan began his recounting.

He spoke of the ancient history Vellok had shown him—tales buried beneath Empire propaganda.

Rattan didn't embellish. He didn't need to. The truth, as Vellok had laid it out, was already damning enough.

It took time. A long time.

Kaelen said nothing throughout.

And when Rattan finished, he did not dare move or speak. He simply lowered his head again and waited. But his heartbeat was picking up. Despite himself, despite the role he played, anxiety began to gnaw at his gut. He had no idea what Kaelen would do next.

Then—finally—the silence cracked.

Kaelen's voice returned, soft... but with something new in it. Not anger. Not suspicion.

Surprise.

"Vellok told no lie," Kaelen murmured. "Which is a surprise."

The words hit Rattan like a blade to the chest. His breath caught.

That wasn't the response he expected. Not at all.

For a moment, he forgot to pretend. His body tensed. He raised his head instinctively, eyes wide, searching Kaelen's face for meaning.

Kaelen's eyes were already on him—sharp and calm, studying him not with rage or betrayal, but with the unsettling patience of someone who had expected to hear a lie... and instead had a long-buried truth confirmed.

Rattan quickly looked away, casting his gaze down again, but the damage was done. His slip had exposed his inner thoughts.

Kaelen noticed everything.

There was a long pause before Kaelen leaned back on his throne, lacing his fingers together, elbows resting on the carved arms.

"You didn't expect that, did you?" he said, voice almost amused. "You thought I'd deny it. Maybe lash out. Claim it was all a fabrication."

Rattan said nothing, still bowed low, the weight of Kaelen's gaze pressing down on him like a mountain.

Kaelen let out a breath, low and almost reflective.

"The truth, Rattan, is rarely a threat to men like me. It is just... another layer of the war we fight."

A pause. Then, colder: "But him telling no lie doesn't mean he didn't leave out some things to convince you," Kaelen said after a long, uneasy silence, his eyes narrowing. "Haven't you wondered why the ogres were never mentioned in his story?"

Rattan blinked, momentarily thrown. The question hit him like a stone to the head.

"You're right... why weren't the ogres mentioned?" he muttered, frowning. "And why didn't I question Vellok about it back then?"

A strange discomfort crept into his chest. He tried to push it away.

"Was he... influenced by Vellok?" Rattan asked himself, though his own voice lacked conviction. He shook his head firmly. "No, no—my guardian would've never let such a thing happen."

Yet the doubt lingered.

Why hadn't he asked? Why hadn't it occurred to him that the ogres were strangely absent from a story that was supposed to be about the war between their kind and the mages?

Had he been too caught up in the weight of learning "the truth"? Too proud of finally having the goblin council cornered, finally holding them in check? Had his arrogance blinded him?

His silence said more than any excuse ever could.

Kaelen sighed, disappointment softening his voice. "You still don't see it. You were too focused on the goblins... but the ogres? We're just as entangled in this mess. We always have been."

"Ogres and goblins," Kaelen said, "are not enemies. Not rivals. We are kin. Two halves of the same root. This is a part of the truth Vellok did not give you—a truth 'Mother' holds, and one he chose not to speak."

Rattan looked up slowly, stunned.

Kaelen continued, his tone now edged with grim revelation.

"When the mages created Mother, she was infused with two seeds—two strains buried deep within her blood. One, the Arcane Strain. That gave rise to the goblin mages—your kind. Scholars. Tricksters. Wielders of will and magic."

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A pause.

"The other," Kaelen said, tapping a heavy finger against the throne's arm, "was the Brute Strain. That is the strain we ogres inherited. Strength. Rage. Instinct. We were meant to be the guardians... or the weapons. Depending on who held the leash."

Rattan's mouth went dry.

Kaelen's voice dropped low, tinged with bitterness. "Ogres are not born as ogres, Rattan. We're born... as goblins. Just like you."

Rattan's eyes widened, but Kaelen pressed on before he could speak.

"But our fate is sealed from the very beginning. Since the day we enter this world, it's already been decided who we'll become."

He took a deep breath, the weight of memory heavy in his chest.

"It all starts with the talent test, doesn't it? Every goblin child is subjected to it at the age of five. They call it a tradition—a sacred ceremony to 'discover potential.' But that's a lie. A clever mask."

"The empire uses that ceremony to hide the truth of what's really happening to us."

Kaelen turned to Rattan, who looked stricken with confusion.

"Do you know why that is?" he asked quietly.

Rattan slowly shook his head.

Kaelen's eyes grew distant, as if staring into a memory he wished he could forget. "Because that's when the change begins," he said. "Right after the test. Under the pretext of assigning 'professions'—Mage or Knight—the empire justifies what they do to us."

Rattan's brow furrowed. "Professions...?"

"Lies," Kaelen snapped. "They claim those who show magical aptitude become mages, and those who don't become knights. But in truth, it's not just a title—it's for a transformation that is to come"

He stood taller now, shoulders squared in grim defiance.

"Those called Knights... they're the ones destined to become ogres. The ones chosen for strength over intellect. Brute over craft. And the Mages? They remain goblins, unchanged, pure, the so-called 'gifted.'"

Kaelen's lips curled into a bitter smile. "You see? The mages, the very ones who doomed us to this fate—still rule us, even now. Even long after they are gone."

He looked straight at Rattan, voice trembling with restrained anger.

"They taught us, over generations, that Knights were nothing but tools. That our purpose was to serve the Mages—to protect them while they 'grow.' And once they no longer needed us, we were discarded. Turned into laborers, guards, or worse... forgotten."

Kaelen continued, his voice low but intense. "This is why goblins look down on us. Why they call us ogres. Because we were made to be beneath them. Conditioned to be obedient, stupid, violent. Even our names—our language—was stolen."

He glanced down at his large, calloused hands.

"We didn't become monsters, Rattan. We were turned into them. By design."

Silence fell between them, thick and heavy.

Then Kaelen looked up. "You were never meant to learn this. Vellok didn't want you to ask. Because the moment you begin to question the foundation of your beliefs... everything begins to fall apart."

Rattan took a long moment to gather himself. His breath trembled in his throat, and his heart beat loudly in his chest as the weight of Kaelen's words settled over him like a suffocating fog.

Finally, with a voice barely above a whisper, he spoke.

"If... if you confirm Vellok's words to be true... then you're leading us to extinction, my lord."

Kaelen's eyes narrowed slightly. Then, without warning, he threw his head back and laughed—a loud, deep laugh that echoed across the cold stone walls around them. The sound was not mocking, but rather... mournful. Pained.

"You're still so pure, Rattan," Kaelen said as the laughter faded, replaced by a bittersweet smile. "You genuinely care about our people. I envy that. But no... I'm not leading us into extinction. I've simply chosen a different path for our survival."

He stepped forward, hands loosely at his sides, no hostility in his stance—only conviction.

"The empire chose tyranny," he said. "They chained us to a system of control, of division and manipulation, of rewriting what we are and making us believe that was all we could ever be."

He paused, voice tightening with resolve.

"I chose the opposite path. One of rebirth."

Rattan stared at him, uncertain.

"The key to this game," Kaelen continued, "is the Ratfolk."

Rattan blinked, confused. "The ratfolk...?"

"To the empire, the suppression of the ratfolk is critical. Their extinction would bring the empire closer to its goal. But to me?" He smiled again, this time with a flicker of something dangerous in his eyes.

"Their survival is the beginning of mine."

Kaelen leaned in, his tone quieter now, but charged with intensity. "You wonder why I pushed so hard to see you help them, why I spared no effort, no cost. It wasn't just sympathy, Rattan."

He stepped closer. Rattan didn't move, didn't breathe.

Kaelen bent slightly, his lips just beside Rattan's ear, his voice now a whisper of thunder.

"If I present myself to the now broken, hunted ratfolk as their salvation... what do you think the first children of this world will do?"

Rattan froze.

"They were once the earliest children of this land—before the goblins, before even the ogres. Now scattered, hunted, scorned. But if I become their light, their hope..."

Kaelen slowly drew back, eyes burning with a strange fire.

"...then I become the center of a new truth. One not built by mages but by the will of those abandoned by both. I will accomplish that the mages with eye above their head couldn't"

He let the silence stretch, letting the weight of his vision sink in.

"I'm not destroying our people, Rattan. I'm freeing them. Even if they don't know it yet."

Rattan's eyes widened as the pieces fell into place. He turned his gaze toward the Ogre King—Kaelen—and for the first time, he saw him not as the half-mad revolutionary the empire had painted him to be, but as something far more dangerous: a visionary.

This was why the empire feared him.

Not for his strength, but because Kaelen understood the system better than anyone... and had found a way to turn it against itself.

Rattan's mind raced, Kaelen's words echoing within him like a mantra. "If I present myself to the ratfolk as their salvation..."

He thought back to Kaelen's recent actions, at first it seemed rabid and made no sense. Ogre knights, once thought to be nothing more than berserkers, now fighting with calculated discipline at the side of ratfolk militia against demons. He also heard of one shielding a wounded ratfolk child, another repairing crude ratfolk gear with a smith's precision.

It hadn't seemed important at the time. Just strange acts of mercy.

But now he understood.

It was intentional.

Kaelen hadn't just allied with the ratfolk—he had invested in them. He had embedded himself into their struggle, made his people essential to their survival.

And Rattan now realized the subtler moves Kaelen had been making.

Mentions of his name. Whispers. Praise. Always spoken by others—never Kaelen himself. But carefully planted. Repeated enough to grow.

It wouldn't be long before the ratfolk began to see Kaelen not just as a powerful ally... but as a savior. And if that image took root in their collective hearts?

He'd be unstoppable.

Rattan's breath caught in his throat.

This was something of a myth, a new legend being born, not by accident but by design. And Kaelen, for all his talk of liberation, was guiding it with a careful hand.

And yet... Rattan couldn't bring himself to fully accept it.

Because Kaelen hadn't lied. His vision wasn't built on fear or domination like the empire's had been. He had chosen the path of mercy, of unity with the broken and discarded.

But that didn't make it safe.

Rattan clenched his fists, heart pounding. If left alone... Kaelen could actually succeed.

Rattan didn't even realize he was gritting his teeth until the tension in his jaw began to ache. His arms were clenched tight at his sides, nails digging into his palms.

A storm was brewing inside him—one he couldn't name at first.

But it was there.

His flame of ambition, once flickering with uncertainty, now blazed with renewed vigor. Yet with it came something darker... heavier.

Envy.

It burned cold, not hot—a hollow ache in his chest that made it hard to breathe.

He didn't understand it. Not fully. Not yet.

But it whispered to him, in the silence between Kaelen's words. In the awe-struck eyes of those who spoke the Ogre King's name with reverence. In the image of ratfolk survivors someday singing praises... not of him, not of Rattan—but of Kaelen.

Why?

Why should Kaelen be the one to rise from the ashes of this cursed world?

Why should he be the one remembered?

Why not me?

Rattan's thoughts grew louder, more bitter with every passing moment. It wasn't just about power. It wasn't just about the empire, or freedom, or truth anymore.

It was about legacy.

About who would shape the new world when the old one burned away.

And suddenly, the image of Kaelen hailed as the savior of the ratfolk of ogres, even of goblins felt like a dagger twisting in Rattan's heart.