

Guardian gods 551

Chapter 551:

He had followed Kaelen. Trusted him. Believed in his strength.

But now... now, he saw a shadow stretching behind every noble act. A quiet manipulation behind every alliance. Kaelen wasn't wrong—that's what made it worse.

He was winning.

And somewhere deep in Rattan's chest, a voice began to whisper:

It should be you.

Rattan hated himself in this moment. He had sacrificed so much, played dangerous games, walked moral tightropes, and yet... it still wasn't enough. Despite all his cunning and compromise, despite the blood on his hands and the burdens on his soul, everything he wanted was slipping through his fingers.

Someone else was going to win. Someone else would hold the prize. And all he could do was watch smile through clenched teeth and play the part of the loyal pawn because he was weak.

But Rattan was not someone who accepted defeat easily.

Not when he saw the triumphant gleam in Kaelen's eyes, the smug curve of his lips. That smile was a dagger, not just because Kaelen had succeeded, but because it reminded Rattan of what he lacked. Power. Influence. The ability to shape the world rather than be shaped by it.

His thoughts drifted to Vellok. Should he tell him what he had just witnessed? Would it matter? Perhaps Vellok already knew the true aim, the endgame Kaelen had been building toward in silence. If that was the case, then he himself was just another piece and a disposable one at that. He had to act. Do something. Anything to keep Kaelen's victory from becoming absolute.

Even as envy coiled tight in his chest, he wore his mask flawlessly. With a reverent bow of his head, he spoke with just enough tremble in his voice to sell sincerity:

"I am ashamed, Your Highness," Rattan said, his tone honeyed and contrite, "ashamed that I failed to see the full scope of your vision and worse still, that I ever doubted your path to it."

He dropped to one knee, head bowed low in a perfect show of deference. "I kneel before you today in total submission. I know I have lost your trust once... and I cannot ask to regain it. But I can prove my loyalty. If you allow me."

There was a pause, heavy before he continued, quieter now, as if revealing a dangerous secret.

"Vellok believes me to be entirely his. He has no suspicion, no inkling that I would ever betray him. And it would be... unwise of me to confess such to you of my betrayal. But..."

Rattan looked up, locking eyes with Kaelen.

"I have seen how the Empire's grip tightens around your plans. I may have a way, ways the Empire would never allow or imagine."

Kaelen regarded him coldly. There was no warmth in his voice as he spoke:

"Then stand tall — and speak aloud. Tell me, Rattan: what do you possess that I or the Empire cannot seize on our own?"

"This pertains to the recent rumors circulating through the Empire," Rattan began carefully, every word weighed with caution. "I may have uncovered a thread... a figure Your Highness would no doubt recognize and someone the Empire is actively hunting."

He glanced up briefly, testing Kaelen's interest before continuing.

"This figure is the only known survivor of what truly happened in the city overseen by the Sixth Tier Mage... Gurnak."

The name dropped like a stone in still water.

Kaelen said nothing at first. Instead, he leaned forward, the silence was oppressive, stretching long enough that Rattan nearly second-guessed speaking at all.

Then Kaelen spoke, voice low.

"It seems your arrival today was no coincidence, Rattan. You've been holding onto this. Waiting, calculating. Hoping to make your play when I was at my most desperate."

He stood slowly, eyes boring into Rattan's bowed form. "And now here you are. A subordinate I once trusted, betrayed me, and now crawls back bearing gifts. Not out of loyalty — but survival. Because you believe you possess something I might need enough... not to kill you."

Rattan's composure cracked slightly. His head bowed lower still, voice trembling but determined.

"I... I am sincere, Your Grace. I won't insult you by pretending I was not selfish, I was. I've made choices to ensure I lived long enough to matter in this game. But I am not without conviction."

He dared to lift his eyes, just slightly. "I do not want to die, not before I see the Empire brought to its knees. And if this knowledge I hold serves your purpose, I give it willingly."

Kaelen's expression did not soften. If anything, it grew colder, more calculating.

"Then speak, Rattan," he said at last, his voice now a chilling whisper. "You've danced around it long enough. Tell me of this survivor."

Rattan, blinded by envy and frustration, could no longer think clearly. His emotions swirled into something reckless. And in a moment of impulsive defiance, he brought out what was meant to remain hidden.

The cube floated above his palm, softly humming, faint lines of light pulsing across its surface.

Kaelen's eyes shifted immediately, recognizing the object. He didn't ask what it was, he knew what it was as someone who took the magi tech path. The only question was how Rattan had used it.

Rattan pointed to the cube, voice steady despite the weight of what he was revealing. "I played some hands in the armor given to the ratfolk. One of those hands involved enchantments that allowed me to listen in on their words. It wasn't meant to be anything major just passive surveillance."

He paused, gauging Kaelen's reaction.

"Through that," he continued, "I caught mention of a figure. The same figure the Empire is after, the fugitive no one's supposed to know about. His name isn't spoken, but the rumors around him is real."

"They say he's like a myth. No official sightings, no verified reports. But too many of the ratfolk have claimed to see him, hiding in the battlefield, appearing in moments where death seemed certain, sometimes saving them, then disappearing again."

Rattan lowered his hand. The cube floated beside him, still active.

"There's one thing they all say about him. A feature they can't forget."

He looked Kaelen in the eye.

"'He looked like a spider.' That's what they keep saying."

Rattan, for his own selfish reasons, pushed Chief out, using the cube and its function as justification. He masked his move as strategy, but deep down, he knew it was envy that fueled him. If Kaelen's plan was to crumble, he needed to be at the center of it

Kaelen, meanwhile, had stopped listening to Rattan's motivations the moment he heard the words "spider-like feature." That description alone triggered a deeper recognition. One of his subordinates had mentioned a similar figure before, strange reports from the field, unexplained losses, ghost-like interventions in battle.

The Empire had been chasing this shadow for some time. But Kaelen had never cared. Not until now.

Now he understood.

This fugitive, this "spider" If Rattan's words were true, then this was someone tied to the past the Empire had buried. Someone who survived.

Someone who could drag their secrets into the light.

Kaelen's eyes lit up with purpose. The opportunity ahead of him was too great to ignore. If he could get his hands on this fugitive, the veil the Empire had so carefully pulled over recent events would rip apart. He would control the story. He would reclaim the narrative. And the hypocrisy of the Empire, its quiet manipulations and hidden sins would burn under his spotlight.

He leaned forward, excitement building, about to demand more details from Rattan but then, his expression shifted.

The runes etched across the walls, binding, and protective began to glow.

But they weren't pulsing with steady power. They flickered, faltered and cracked.

Kaelen's head turned sharply. The atmosphere in the room dropped. Power and forceful pressure pressed in from above.

Then, in front of both Rattan and Kaelen, the roof itself tore apart. It didn't shatter, it peeled. Chunks of it floated midair, suspended unnaturally, like weightless debris.

Kaelen rose into the air, his body surrounded by a faint, aura. His expression twisted in fury.

"What is this?" he shouted, voice echoing unnaturally as he levitated higher. His eyes scanned the fractured space above.

Kaelen stopped halfway, his words caught in his throat as his eyes locked onto the figures rising above him — five of them, all levitating, cloaked in the familiar robes of sixth-tier imperial mages. The light of the fractured runes below reflected off their enchanted garb, and they ascended higher, gazing down with cold detachment.

Kaelen's blood chilled.

His home, his bastion was surrounded.

Looking down, he saw imperial forces flooding the perimeter. His men, the ones sworn to him, were being forced to the ground. Magic wards pinned them down, sealing their limbs and mouths. Even Gorok, his second-in-command, the one he trusted with his life, was bound and struggling under layers of suppressive magic. There was no warning, no battle cry, no signs of struggle it had all been executed in silence, swift and surgical.

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He clenched his fists. How long had they been planning this? How had he not seen it coming?

He levitated further to meet the mages at eye level, voice sharp with restrained fury.

"What is this all about? Do you even realize who I am? You're trespassing in my home!"

One of them floated forward — Master Korza. His eyes showing no sympathy. In his hands, he held a scroll. The imperial sigil, unmistakable, was stamped at the top. The weight of the emperor's will.

With no emotion, Korza unfurled the scroll and began to read:

"Master Kaelen, sixth-tier knight of the realm, stands charged with insubordination. Furthermore, there exists credible evidence suggesting deliberate endangerment of imperial citizens and potential collaboration with enemy forces currently invading our lands."

His voice rang clear — not just for Kaelen, but for the soldiers below. For the people drawn to the commotion. For the ears of Kaelen's loyal men now caught in doubt.

That was the real sting.

Kaelen's gaze dropped briefly, just enough to see his men's faces. Confusion. Hesitation. A flicker of disbelief. The trust they once had in him now hanging by a thread, trembling under the weight of a formal decree.

"What is this nonsense?" Kaelen roared, his voice crackling with raw power as mana surged wildly around his body. The air twisted, crackled, and grew heavy. The surrounding around him shuddered as unstable magical energy began to pulse outwards, distorting the very space around him. His aura once regal and restrained now flared like a dying star, unpredictable and dangerous.

Master Korza didn't flinch.

He floated closer, just enough so that only Kaelen could hear him. His voice, calm but laced with venom, cut through the thickening storm of magic:

"Come with us quietly, and you might live to see another day. Resist — which I and most of the others here are hoping you'll do — and you won't live to see the sun rise."

His tone dipped colder.

"Whether you're related to the Emperor or not, we've all grown tired of your games, Kaelen."

Kaelen's eyes twitched, the glowing veins of mana across his arms flaring for a moment longer before settling. He said nothing in return — but the tension in his stance betrayed the battle raging inside him. Pride, fury, fear. He knew this wasn't a bluff. Not this time.

Meanwhile, below, Rattan stood frozen.

Blank-faced. Numb. He could barely comprehend what was happening.

Kaelen... being taken?

No, that wasn't possible. That wasn't how this was supposed to go.

What would happen to him, then?

What if Kaelen was killed? He himself would be discarded and could possibly be killed.

He still hadn't achieved his goal.

This couldn't be happening. Not now.

Not like this.

He took a shaky step forward, about to speak, to scream, to beg—when the world around him swayed. His vision split. The sky, the floating debris, the glowing mages — it all twisted and stretched, growing faint and distant.

He fell forward, hard.

Everything went black.

Rattan didn't know how much time had passed. Minutes? Hours? Days?

His eyes fluttered open, vision still blurry, and the first thing he registered was the dull ache in his limbs and the biting cold of stone beneath his skin. He was lying on the floor — cold, uneven, damp — the unmistakable floor of a cell. No windows. Just stone and silence.

He groaned as he pushed himself up, his joints stiff and his body heavy, as if weighed down by more than just fatigue. The iron bars across from him confirmed what he already feared.

Imprisoned.

It took time — longer than it should have — for the memories to catch up with him.

Kaelen, the floating mages, the decree, the collapse and the fall.

Last night's events slammed into his mind like a crashing wave, and with it came a creeping sense of dread. He blinked hard, trying to force clarity into his thoughts.

The empire's action had been swift, brutal, and decisive — something neither he nor Kaelen had ever expected.

There had been a reason they had always felt untouchable. A reason the empire had held back, even when Kaelen's actions became too bold, too reckless. The silence of the empire had always been a firm delicate balance of power and fear.

Kaelen wasn't just any Ogre.

To the ogres, he was more than a leader. He was a symbol. A god in flesh. The pinnacle of what they aspired to become. Every ogre even those not under his command spoke of Kaelen with reverence. He was strength, pride, and vision incarnate. To harm him would be to shake the very soul of ogrekind.

The empire knew this.

They always knew.

While ogres were largely dismissed by goblin nobles as crude brutes, the truth was more inconvenient — the ogres were the military might of the empire. Next to the mage corps, they were the beating heart of conquest and defense. And Kaelen? He held the heartstrings.

That was the problem.

He had too much power. Not just physical, but ideological. Political. A figure like that couldn't be simply reprimanded or sidelined. There would be fallout. Riots. Maybe worse.

That's why the empire had done nothing for so long and that's exactly why Kaelen had grown bold — unhinged, even.

He knew they wouldn't dare. Until last night, until they did.

Rattan's jaw clenched as he leaned back against the wall, every breath echoing in the hollow cell.

Now with a calm mind, Rattan understood.

This—all of this—was his doing.

In his desperation to gain Vellok's trust, he had spoken too much. He had been so focused on proving his worth, on weaving himself into the fabric of Vellok's plans, that he never once paused to think about what those words could become when reshaped in the hands of the empire.

He had whispered truths. Half-truths. Just enough to gain favor.

But the empire didn't need much—only a thread. And Rattan had given them more than that.

From the way things played out, they had taken those pieces and built a weapon out of them. The charges against Kaelen hadn't appeared out of thin air. No, they were crafted—stitched with just enough truth to seem undeniable, just enough fiction to strike down even someone like him.

The empire was skilled in such things. Twisting narratives. Painting criminals out of challengers. And when backed with legality, even the proudest heads had no choice but to bow.

Even the ogres.

Especially the ogres.

Though they might fume and rage at the injustice, when confronted with official decrees, sealed with imperial authority, they would sit in silence. Swallow their pride. Their pain.

Because what else could they do?

Kaelen hadn't even been given a proper fight.

And Rattan, watching it all happen, had felt nothing like victory.

No joy. No satisfaction. No relief.

Only the hollow ache of someone who had pushed over a monument before it was finished.

Maybe if he weren't the one sitting in this cold, damp cell, waiting to hear what would become of him, things would feel different. Maybe he could've justified it.

Phantom, in silence, had been watching.

He'd watched as Rattan sat alone in that cell, in stillness. A stillness that came from realization, from regret—not the loud, dramatic kind, but the kind that settles deep, cold, and quiet in the bones.

If it had been before his growth, before he truly understood what he was, Phantom would have interfered. Subtly, but deliberately. A whisper in the dark, a fleeting nudge in thought. He would have turned Rattan's heart toward the path of righteousness, molded him into an ideal, an upright, moral hero. The kind of hero that the world always demanded, even when it had no place for them.

But that was before.

Now, Phantom no longer saw the world through the eyes of a man clinging to ideals. Now he saw it through the lens of something more colder and truer. The lens of a cursed being not bound by morality, but by observation.

And as he observed, he learnt and understood more.

Was Rattan a bad person for being selfish? For wanting recognition after all he had done? For desiring to be the one in the spotlight, hailed as a savior?

Was he wrong to look at Kaelen—with his power, his presence, his fearlessness—and wish for his fall?

These questions once would have offended Phantom's old self. The righteous part of him still left would have condemned Rattan. Judged him, even raised the thought of abandoning him.

But now?

Now, he only watched.

Rattan was not evil. He was not good. He was a mortal being, no matter how much he tried to transcend that. And mortal creatures were rarely pure.

Phanthom had witnessed the slow burn of Rattan's transformation. From a boy who believed in causes to a man who bent truth to fit his purpose. From someone who once dreamed of freedom for his people to someone who was ready to discard friends and family anyone who stood in the way of that dream.

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Rattan's only justification had always been the same: liberation.

And while the world may not agree with his choices, while others may call him traitor, coward, opportunist Phanthom no longer did.

He saw the truth: Rattan was merely a man chasing a light, and in the darkness, he had done what he thought necessary to reach it.

The old Phanthom would have tried to change him.

But now, there was no judgment.

"Mortal creatures are interesting, aren't they?" Ikenga's voice drifted, a calm observation that seemed to hang in the air between them.

"Do you always view things with such a detached view, my lord?" Phanthom asked, a hint of curiosity and respect to his tone.

"To witness their intricate struggles, their ambitions, the tapestry of good and ill woven by such fleeting lives... and remain so unburdened by judgment? It's a perspective I find both fascinating and, if I'm honest, a little unnerving."

Ikenga turned, a subtle smile playing on his lips. "Detachment, Phanthom, is merely a different kind of engagement. If one is too deeply immersed in the immediate currents of their joys and sorrows, how can one truly perceive the river's course?"

"But we are Immortal, Phanthom. When you live long enough, you realize the difference between patterns and anomalies. Mortals like him... they believe they're unique in their fall, in their rise. But I've

seen thousands like Rattan—burning with purpose, torn by contradiction. They call it growth. I call it motion."

Phanthom closed his eyes for a moment, letting the words linger. He wasn't sure if he agreed. Not fully.

"You speak as though the shape of a soul is predetermined," he said. "That choice is nothing more than ornament."

"And yet you watch him as if he might do something new," Ikenga said, with a note of curiosity. "You speak of choice, but you no longer interfere. Why is that, Phanthom?"

Phanthom turned slightly, enough to face the intangible shape of the god that lingered in the room like a heatless flame. His form was indistinct—half-man, half-force—but the weight of his presence was undeniable.

"I used to believe I was meant to shape them," Phanthom said. "That my task was to sculpt righteousness into mortals who teetered near the edge. But the more I tried, the more I saw how shallow my understanding was."

He looked back to Rattan. "Now I simply try to understand. It's not detachment. It's restraint."

A recognition that perhaps their struggles, their perceived imperfections, are not flaws to be corrected, but inherent aspects of their existence. A necessary chaos that allows for genuine transformation, if it is to occur at all."

Ikenga remained silent for a moment, simply observing Phanthom. "A profound shift, Phanthom," he finally said. "To move from the sculptor to the observer. To allow the clay to shape itself. And what have you learned from this newfound restraint?"

Phanthom looked away from Ikenga, his gaze sweeping towards Rattan. The question hung in the air, vast and unanswerable. He had anticipated the quiet acceptance, perhaps even the subtle nod of understanding from Ikenga, but not a direct challenge to articulate what he was still living through.

"Learned?" Phanthom echoed, the word feeling too definitive, too complete for the swirling uncertainty within him. He found himself grappling with the very act of defining this new path. "I... I don't know that I've 'learned' anything yet, my lord. Not in the way one learns a truth or masters a skill."

He clenched a fist, then relaxed it. "It's more like... a continuous unlearning. Unlearning the impulse to judge, to fix, to intervene. Unlearning the comfortable certainty that I knew what was best for them. Every flicker of doubt, every contradiction I see in their actions, every unexpected turn in their brief lives—it all strips away another layer of what I thought I understood."

Ikenga's form seemed to ripple, the very air around him shifting as he spoke. "Clarity of sight and understanding is ample reward," he mused, his voice carrying an echo of distant prophecy. "The final act approaches. When it unfolds, I'll be eager to hear your thoughts."

Meanwhile, Kaelen found himself brought low, shackled and forced to his knees within a grand, imposing courtroom. He was encircled by the Empire's most formidable mages, each one a silent, gleeful witness to his perceived downfall. A goblin mage, not far off, meticulously adjusted a peculiar device, ready to capture every moment of the proceedings. Yet, Kaelen, the accused, offered no reaction. He remained utterly silent, his eyes closed as if in deep meditation, a picture of serene resignation in the face of his impending judgment.

Yet, a palpable tension hung in the air. The higher-ups, those who orchestrated this spectacle, weren't pleased with Kaelen's stoic silence. This wasn't how their plan was supposed to unfold. They had expected him to be riled up, demanding evidence, protesting his innocence, or anything that would allow them to unleash their meticulously crafted accusations. Their goal was to produce a damning array of evidence, painting Kaelen as a truly despicable figure, and then broadcast that narrative across the entire Empire via the recorded session.

Kaelen, however, seemed to grasp their insidious strategy. He remained utterly silent, his eyes closed as if in deep meditation, a picture of serene resignation as he awaited the final verdict. Internally, his blood was boiling. Every fiber of his being screamed to rise, to strike out at the smug old men and women who surrounded him. But he knew that was precisely what they craved, the outburst that would further condemn him.

The Empire wouldn't have gone to such lengths to get him in this position if they weren't prepared for anything he might throw at them. Nothing he could do here would break him free. Yet, while direct action was impossible, he wouldn't make their job easy. They might have him, but they wouldn't have a clean victory.

A old goblin woman, her robes adorned with more arcane symbols than Kaelen cared to count, stepped forward. Her voice, sharp as a freshly honed blade, cut through the silence. "Kaelen of the Ogres, you stand accused of treason against the glorious Empire, of consorting with forbidden powers, and of crimes against the very fabric of our society!"

Kaelen didn't stir. His eyelids remained stubbornly shut.

Another mage, a burly goblin with a burning scalp, grunted. "Speak, dog! Do you deny these charges?"

Still, Kaelen offered nothing. The only sound was the faint whirring of the goblin mage's recording device.

The old woman's patience thinned. "Your silence will not serve you, Kaelen. It will only condemn you further. We have witnesses. We have proof beyond any doubt. Confess your transgressions, and perhaps, perhaps, the Empire will show a modicum of mercy."

A faint, almost imperceptible tremor passed through Kaelen's shackled hands, quickly suppressed. He imagined the detailed, fabricated evidence they were so eager to present. He could almost hear the grand pronouncements, the staged gasps from the carefully selected audience.

"So be it," the old woman declared, her voice ringing with false disappointment, though a flicker of cold satisfaction gleamed in her eyes. "Since the accused refuses to engage, we shall proceed."

At her words, Kaelen's eyelids finally parted, revealing eyes that held neither fear nor desperation, but a quiet, calculating intensity. He didn't flinch, didn't shift. He simply waited for the inevitable decree.

"Due to your status, under the normal workings of our law," she continued, her voice shifting to a formal, pronouncement, "your practice of power to your current stage would be abolished, stripped from your very being, and you would then be cast into prison for life, or in the gravest of cases, be sentenced to death." A murmur rippled through the surrounding mages, a silent agreement with the harshness of the traditional judgment.

"However," the old woman's voice sharpened, "as the Empire is currently under a dire state of war, the Emperor, in his boundless, benevolent grace, has seen fit to offer an alternative. You, Sir Kaelen, are hereby ordered to head directly to the front lines. Your mission is to bring back the severed head of a prominent figure amongst the invading demons."

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the faint whir of the goblin's recording device. Kaelen's gaze remained steady, fixed on the old woman.

a silent question in his eyes: Is that all you've got?

"You have a period of four months to achieve this impossible feat," she concluded, a hint of a sneer now evident, the pretense of mercy finally dropping away. "Succeed, and this act will serve as undeniable proof of your enduring loyalty to the Empire and demonstrate to its people that even the most corrupted soul can be redeemed through service." Her words trailed off, the unspoken threat clear: Fail, and your reputation, and your life, will be utterly destroyed. But Kaelen sensed another, more insidious layer: Succeed, and you'll merely be a convenient tool, used and discarded.

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Kaelen stayed quiet for a bit, the metallic tang of fear a subtle but growing presence on his tongue. He weighed his words carefully, the hum of the air-circulators the only sound in the sterile chamber. Finally, he spoke, his voice betraying a hint of desperation he immediately regretted. "Will doing these... these tasks... absolve me of my supposed crimes against the empire?"

In response, a heavy pressure descended upon him, not just in the air, but in his very bones, threatening to crush him. He buckled, gasping as if the oxygen had been sucked from the room. The air grew thick, charged with an unseen energy, and the eyes of the higher-ups — glowing pinpricks of light from within their shadowed cowls — flared with an icy, merciless brilliance.

One of them, a figure whose presence alone seemed to leach warmth from the environment, spoke, their voice a low, resonant thrum that vibrated in Kaelen's chest. "Quite presumptuous of you to think that would be the case, dog." The word was spat, laced with contempt, and each syllable landed like a physical blow.

Kaelen struggled to push himself upright, his muscles screaming in protest, but the invisible weight held him fast. He could feel the cold, unyielding gaze of the others, like predatory beasts assessing their trapped prey.

"You are now the Empire's dog," another voice chimed in, equally devoid of warmth, "and you shall do as you are requested. Since you have offered no defense, no denial of the charges levied against you, the Empire has deemed it so: you are to work for us until you take your dying breath." The final words hung in the air, a chilling, absolute decree that sealed his fate. There was no appeal, no negotiation, only a grim, eternal servitude.

The words hung in the air, a death knell thinly veiled as a reprieve. Four months. Severed head of a prominent demon. Impossible feat. The calculated cruelty of it finally snapped the last thread of Kaelen's composure. A muscle in his jaw twitched, then his entire body tensed, the shackles biting deeper into his wrists, unnoticed. His gaze, which had been so steady, now narrowed, a sudden inferno kindling in their depths. The quiet intensity transformed into something raw and dangerous.

"An impossible feat?" Kaelen's voice, when it came, was a harsh rasp, strained from the sudden surge of adrenaline. It was louder than anyone expected, cutting through the whirring device and the stifling courtroom air. "And you call this 'benevolent grace'?" A bitter, incredulous laugh escaped him, devoid of humor. "You condemn me to eternal servitude in a shadowed room, then parade me here only to send me on a suicide mission! For the Emperor's grace? Or is it merely to clean up your own mess on the front lines, hoping I'll die gloriously for your propaganda?"

His eyes swept over the impassive, cowed figures, lingering on the old goblin woman. "You want a show, old hag? Here it is! I'm Kaelen of the Ogres, falsely accused, stripped of dignity, and now ordered to deliver my own head on a platter!" His voice was rising, echoing off the high ceilings. "Do you truly think a 'severed head' will prove my loyalty? Or just how easily you can dispose of anyone who becomes inconvenient?"

A collective gasp rippled through the mages, a mix of shock and the perverse satisfaction of finally getting the reaction they craved. The burly goblin mage grunted, a wide, predatory smile spreading across his face, his burning scalp seeming to glow brighter. The recording device whirred faster, capturing every syllable of Kaelen's outburst, the perfect damning evidence.

The old goblin woman, however, simply allowed a slow, chilling smile to ghost across her lips. "Ah, so the dog finally barks," she murmured, her voice laced with triumph. "Good. Let the Empire hear it all. Let them see what happens to those who defy us, even in their last, pathetic throes."

Her gaze hardened, losing any last pretense of feigned kindness. "Your words are recorded, Kaelen. Your defiance is noted. It will only serve to further justify the Empire's judgment."

Kaelen scoffed, a raw, guttural sound that seemed to tear at his own throat. "Justify? You think you need justification for anything you do?" His eyes, still burning with a cold fury, dared them to meet his gaze. "You don't want loyalty. You want obedience. And a corpse to hang your false victory on." He finally sagged slightly, the fury still simmering, but the futility of his protest crashing down on him. His muscles ached, his head swam, but a spark, cold and resolute, remained. "Fine. You want a head? I'll bring you one. But don't expect it to be the one you think."

The old woman's smile vanished, replaced by a flicker of irritation. The burly mage's grin also tightened, recognizing the nuanced threat.

"Enough," she snapped, a sharp gesture cutting Kaelen off. "The terms are set. Guards, prepare the prisoner. His journey to the front lines begins at dawn." She turned her back to him, a dismissal as absolute as the sentence itself. The other mages began to stir, their silent delight now more overt, a low buzz of conversation starting to fill the grand chamber as the recording device finally clicked off.

Kaelen felt rough hands seize him, hauling him to his feet. He didn't resist, didn't fight. His outburst was done. His fate was sealed.

He wasn't taken to a cell, or even a typical prison block. No cold iron bars, no stern guards barking orders. Instead, the soldiers who escorted him down the silent corridors led him to a small, nondescript room tucked behind a rarely used loading bay. The walls were bare stone, dimly lit by a single flickering overhead light. There were no windows. The only furniture was a long steel table bolted to the floor and a single chair.

The door shut behind him with a heavy thud. And then... nothing. Silence.

No guards remained. No orders were given. No chains, no restraints. Just the low hum of old wiring and the stale scent of dust and oil. Kaelen sat still, unmoved by the theatrics. He knew this wasn't the punishment most expected.

Minutes passed, maybe longer.

Then, without a sound of approach, two figures emerged from the far shadows of the room, as though they had been waiting there all along.

The Emperor stepped forward first, draped in his heavy crimson robes, golden sigils softly glowing across the hem. Beside him walked Vellok, The air grew heavier with their presence.

Kaelen didn't flinch. He wasn't surprised. He never was, not anymore.

Vellok's face was tight with restrained anger, his voice calm but cold.

"You gave us no choice, brother. You should've stopped when we first warned you."

Kaelen let out a scoff and looked away, biting back the sharp reply forming in his throat. He didn't need to say anything. The fact that they were here, speaking in private, said enough about the truth behind his so-called 'arrest.'

The Emperor, didn't waste time. He stepped forward and tossed a small, metallic device onto the floor between them. With a soft hum, it activated, casting a blue-tinted hologram above the floora battlefield, unfolding in real-time.

"Your target is the demon king Vorenza," the Emperor said without emotion, his eyes fixed on the projection. "She is still recovering from her battle with Gurnak. Vellok had brief contact with her, he noticed then she was injured, weakened. This is our best chance."

Kaelen's eyes narrowed at the image. He didn't look at the Emperor.

He didn't have to. He knew the real reason they were offering this.

"You wanted to prove to the citizens that the ogres are not the brutes they are made out to be," the Emperor continued. "That they have honor, loyalty... intelligence. Here is your chance. You'll have an army of ogres under your command. The ratfolk will march beside you, and our empire mages will lend their strength."

He turned to Kaelen finally "This mission is important—not just to you, but to the Empire."

Vellok stepped closer, his tone harder than before "We must show the citizens that the Empire was never idle. That when we move, we move with strength. With precision. And with purpose."

He gestured toward the image "This will be our statement. We are not weak. We never were."

Kaelen stood slowly, stepping toward the hologram. The image of the battlefield loomed before him, a terror to behold.

"And what happens if I succeed?" he asked, finally speaking, voice low.

The Emperor's expression didn't change "Then they'll finally see what you've seen all along."

Kaelen's lip curled, half amusement, half contempt "And if I fail?"

Vellok didn't blink "Then you die a traitor. Silently. And we disavow it all."

Kaelen gave a bitter laugh, shaking his head.

"Of course. A win-win for the Empire."

The Emperor raised a hand "You wanted to matter, Kaelen. Here's your war."

Vellok squatted down beside the kneeling Kaelen, his robe creaking softly as he shifted his weight. The faint scent of incense and iron still hung in the air from the Emperor's arrival, but all Kaelen could focus on now was the condescension in his brother's voice.

Chapter 555:

"You could have stood beside us when this moment came," Vellok said, voice low and sharp. "But you wouldn't listen. And now—now your grand ideas, your noble little crusade, it's all turned against you."

Instead of shaping the war, you'll be its instrument. A pawn, dancing across the battlefield for the glory of others."

He tapped the iron shackle clasped around Kaelen's wrist. A small clang echoed through the room. Reflexively, Kaelen tensed, his muscles coiling but instinct took over immediately as he calmed down. Sweat clung to his back, cold and sudden, as his gaze locked with Vellok's.

Golden light pulsed from Vellok's eyes—unblinking, alien, and full of quiet fury. Kaelen held the gaze for only a moment before looking away. He hated himself for that.

The Emperor stepped forward, resting a hand gently on Vellok's shoulder as if to steady a weapon not yet unsheathed. His expression was composed, almost weary, as he regarded Kaelen.

"We were never the brothers we should have been," the Emperor said softly. "But part of me hoped... perhaps foolishly... that someday, we would stand side by side. If you had waited just a little longer, Kaelen, that future might have been real."

A low, bitter laugh escaped Kaelen's throat. It wasn't joy. It wasn't even mockery—it was disappointment, wrapped in exhaustion.

"If either of you had listened to me—if you had just considered what I said—we wouldn't be scrabbling to salvage what's left of our legacy." He looked between them. "The ogres, the ratfolk... they were willing to stand with us. But you—your pride couldn't make room for the idea that anyone outside your bloodline deserved a seat at the table."

Vellok snorted, rising to his feet with slow contempt.

"We are the superior race," he said, each word deliberate, etched with conviction. "This world is our rightful claim. Why should we beg for favors from rodents when we have the power to take what we want? You think they'd have simply handed it over? You're a fool, Kaelen. Kindness doesn't forge empires—strength does."

The Emperor turned without another word. His robes whispered across the stone floor, the faint shimmer of power that had clung to the room dissipating with each step he took. And just like that, his

presence was gone—like a shadow retreating with the dawn. The weight he left behind, however, remained like a storm cloud pressed against Kaelen’s chest.

Only Vellok lingered now.

The silence between them was sharp, oppressive. Vellok stared down at his brother, eyes no longer glowing, but no less intense. Disappointment carved deep lines into his face, and for a moment, something else flickered behind his gaze—regret, perhaps. Or contempt.

"Your little apprentice, Nixbolt," Vellok said flatly, as if the name left a sour taste on his tongue. "He'll be there with you. Do with him as you will."

There was no affection in the way he said it. No recognition of the bond Kaelen and the young "goblin" shared. Just a dismissive offering, like throwing scraps to a beast.

Without waiting for a response, Vellok turned and raised his hand. A shimmer split the air beside him, folding open into a jagged portal of pale, shifting light. He stepped through without a glance back, and the portal sealed behind him with a sound like tearing silk.

Kaelen was left alone in the silence.

Meanwhile, far beneath the palace walls, in the quiet dark of the imperial cells, Rattan waited.

Days—or perhaps weeks—had passed. He wasn't sure anymore. Time blurred in a place like this. The guards brought food. Clean water. Sometimes a new set of clothes. But no questions, no interrogations. No words at all.

It was like he didn't exist.

Until today.

The door to his cell slammed open without warning, iron clattering against stone. Before he could speak, rough hands seized him, dragging him up from the cold floor. Chains clamped around his wrists and ankles with mechanical precision. He tried to protest, but no words escaped him—whether from fear, confusion, or some spell laid over his tongue, he couldn't tell.

They didn't speak to him. Didn't look him in the eyes. They just moved.

Through corridors he barely remembered, past shadowed halls and descending stairs, deeper and deeper underground. With every step, a knot tightened in his stomach. He knew this place.

He remembered the stone, the strange hum in the walls, the air tinged with arcane pressure. It clawed at his mind with memories he would rather forget.

Not again.

They reached a vast underground chamber. A circular platform, ancient and massive, dominated the center. Strange runes—half worn, half recently re-etched—glowed faintly beneath a layer of dust. The magic pulsing through the floor was old and patient, like a heartbeat slowed by centuries.

The portal platform.

It had been upgraded since the last time he saw it. Smoother edges. Stabilizing crystals arranged in precise symmetry. Guards and mages moved along the edges in disciplined silence, eyes averted, expressions unreadable. But none of that mattered.

Because the meaning hadn't changed.

This place was still a gateway to war.

Rattan stood at the threshold of the portal, the swirling energy crackling softly before him. It cast long shadows across his face, illuminating the lines of unease etched deep into his features.

He knew this place.

Not just the stone underfoot, or the scent of ozone that clung to the magic—but the very scene waiting beyond the portal. He had dreamed of it. He had bled because of it. It was the moment that had set him on the path that changed everything—the betrayal, the desperation, the endless years of pretending.

Even now, the skin he wore—a well-crafted goblin guise designed to avoid detection—felt tight and unnatural, like an old costume he had long since outgrown. That disguise, which had once kept him safe, now felt useless against the tides of fate.

Even this form couldn't save him now.

There was no turning away. No illusion strong enough to hide from what waited on the other side. As if some cosmic thread had been tied long ago, pulling him forward, dragging him toward a fate he'd tried to outrun.

Then, without ceremony, they unchained him. His wrists burned where the metal had bit into them, but no one met his eyes. A mage wordlessly handed him his staff—old wood, worn smooth by time and use. The moment his fingers curled around it, a spark returned to his posture. Not strength. Not confidence. Just... presence.

He stepped forward.

Crossed the threshold.

And emerged into a world just familiar enough to haunt him.

The light here was muted, the air thick with tension and the scent of wet earth and blood. The platform beneath his feet hummed with residual magic, the echo of the portal still fading behind him. He looked up.

There standing some distance away—was the figure they told him would be waiting.

An ogre, armored from head to toe, the intricate runes etched into the plating glowing faintly with stored energy. His massive frame was still as stone, the breeze rustling the edges of his cloak but drawing no response.

Kaelen.

Once, Rattan would have dropped to one knee before him. He had followed him. Trusted him. Believed in what they could have built together. But the man before him now—this wasn't the Kaelen he remembered.

The fire was gone from his eyes. His shoulders sagged under the weight of something heavier than armor. There was no commanding aura, no regal posture. Just a towering figure hollowed out by time and disappointment.

Kaelen's eyes met his. There was no recognition of rank. No anger. No warmth.

Only his voice, flat and distant, like frost forming on a blade.

"Let's go."

It wasn't an order.

It was a statement of inevitability.

To Rattan, the station was a paradox. It was a war machine, preparing for a brutal conflict, yet it hummed with an almost serene efficiency. The distant echoes of the battlefield—demons clashing with ratfolk, glimpses caught through a scope or a conjured spell—were a constant, jarring reminder of the violence unfolding elsewhere. But within the station's reinforced walls, it was as if that chaos had never been their destination, even though Rattan knew it was.

He'd initially been bewildered by the disconnect. There were no frantic calls for strategic discussions, no maps unfurled with animated debates. Instead, he was simply assigned his own room, given a suit of armor, and left to his own devices. The message was clear: stay low, and wait.

It took time, but Rattan eventually understood the chilling logic behind the station's calm. This wasn't a temporary staging ground. Once fully mobilized, there would be no looking back, no retreat until their objective was achieved. The station's quiet wasn't indifference; it was the focused, unyielding resolve of a force committed to a singular, irreversible path.

In the background, the signs of their impending deployment were subtle but undeniable. Rune-armored ogres assembled with an imposing, methodical silence, their massive forms dwarfing the surrounding architecture. Occasionally, a goblin mage would flit past, their presence a fleeting whisper of arcane power amidst the metallic sheen of the ogres' armor. Yet, even with these preparations, the station maintained its unnerving tranquility.

Chapter 556:

Even amidst the quiet hum of the station, a rare opportunity arose for Rattan. He was granted access to a training area, a vast, cavernous space where some of the more advanced ratfolk units were undergoing drills. This was his chance to see his creations in action: the magi-tech armor and weapons he had painstakingly designed and forged.

As the ratfolk soldiers moved through their exercises, Rattan's eyes, normally sharp with a perpetual engineering glint, narrowed in an almost predatory focus. He watched as a squad, clad in the sleek, composite plating of his armor, darted through an obstacle course. The embedded rune-circuits glowed faintly, a testament to the internal energy matrices he'd woven into their very structure. He noted the way the armor articulated, allowing for surprising agility despite its robust appearance. One rat-soldier, particularly adept, rolled under a simulated laser grid, the armored plates shifting with an almost fluid grace.

His attention then shifted to the weapons. A team of ratfolk, equipped with the arc-rifles he'd designed, laid down suppressive fire on holographic targets. The crackle of energy, bright and resonant, was music to his ears. He observed the recoil absorption, the energy consumption per shot, the effective range. He saw a rat-marksman take a precise shot, the beam lancing out to vaporize a distant projection, and a flicker of pride warmed him.

But pride quickly gave way to the relentless drive of the inventor. He wasn't just observing; he was dissecting.

"The leg servo on that third one," he muttered to himself, leaning closer to a holographic display that tracked the soldiers' vitals. "A slight drag on the return cycle. We could re-route the secondary power conduit for a fraction more torque on the upswing."

He watched another rat-soldier struggling to maintain a stable firing platform while moving. "The grip on the arc-rifle," he thought aloud, his fingers twitching as if to redesign it in the air. "It's adequate, yes, but for sustained fire on the move, a more ergonomic, perhaps even adaptive, grip surface would distribute the recoil better across the paw."

His eyes darted from one detail to another. The subtle flicker of an energy shield on one armored rat-soldier seemed to dissipate a hair too quickly under heavy simulated fire. "The resonant frequency of the shield matrix," he mentally scribbled, "needs a slight recalibration to better disperse kinetic impact. Perhaps a tertiary harmonic oscillation point to create a more resilient bubble."

He even noted the ambient temperature within the armor. "Heat sinks," he concluded, "effective, but for extended engagements, particularly in warmer climates, we might need to explore a more aggressive thermal regulation system, perhaps even a micro-fluidic cooling array integrated into the under-suit."

Rattan was utterly oblivious to the world around him, lost in a whirlwind of schematics and calculations. The war, the waiting, the silent station—all faded into the background. Here, surrounded by the tangible proof of his ingenuity, his mind was a forge, already hammering out improvements, perfecting what was already impressive.

Today began like any other, but for Rattan, it was different. He'd finally decided: he'd request a dedicated station, a personal forge where he could tirelessly work on the improvements for his beloved armor. The designs were already swirling in his mind, the refinements almost tangible.

However, fate had other plans. A sharp, thunderous knock rattled his door. When he opened it, he was met by a towering rune-armored ogre, its imposing frame filling the doorway. The ogre's voice was a low rumble, uttering only two words: "It's time. Meet up in the assembly." Before Rattan could fully register the command, the ogre was gone, its heavy footsteps already fading down the corridor.

In an almost absentminded daze, Rattan began to gear up. He moved mechanically, his thoughts still caught between the sudden pressure to face his nightmare, the battlefield. He didn't even remember leaving his room; his awareness returned only when he felt the immense, compressed aura of the ogre army gathering in the main assembly hall.

With a soft incantation, Rattan cast a float spell on himself, rising effortlessly into the air. He joined the other mages already hovering above the assembly. They subtly shifted, putting more distance between themselves and him, a familiar reaction that Rattan barely noticed. It was nothing new.

The vast opening was enveloped in a tense silence. Then, Kaelen stepped forward, a figure of authority moving with grim purpose. A thunderous thud echoed through the chamber as the ogres, already disciplined, straightened further, their collective movement a ripple of armored might. Kaelen's eyes, usually dead and unreadable, flashed with a fleeting, unidentifiable emotion, quickly veiled.

The mages hovering near Rattan scoffed at the disciplined ogres and Kaelen, their disdain palpable even without words. Far above them, hidden within the swirling clouds of arcane energy, the higher-tier mages remained utterly disengaged from the immediate proceedings. Their interest lay solely in Kaelen's goal and action, observing how far he could push the boundaries and contemplating the most effective ways to aid him in achieving their goal.

Kaelen surveyed the silent, imposing ranks of the ogre army, a sea of rune-armored might. The expectant hush of the hall, the unwavering gaze of thousands, pressed in on him. He found himself utterly stumped, the grand, morale-boosting words he instinctively knew he should utter lost somewhere in the recent turmoil of his mind. The past few weeks had twisted away something deep within him, unnoticed but profoundly impactful.

He raised a hand, pointing towards the distant, war-torn landscape visible through the station's massive viewing ports. "We..." he began, then caught himself, correcting his words with a grim resolve. "I have been assigned to bring the head of the Demon King, in charge of this part of the battlefield. It's a nigh impossible goal."

His voice, though lacking the usual fire, carried a chilling honesty. "The enemy won't just let us walk into their home and take their head. Our fight won't even start here. Our main fight begins once we go beyond the Abyss Portal and step into the lands of our enemy. Before that, we have to go through their army, spread out over the corrupted land."

Kaelen's gaze swept over the ogres, then briefly flickered towards the hovering mages. "This means," he stated, his voice devoid of emotion, "a lot of us will die before we even reach the portal. And many more will die even after we go beyond the portal, as we step into the enemy's backyard."

Kaelen's gaze intensified, sweeping across the assembled forces. His voice, though still lacking its former fire, now carried a raw sincerity. "I know you all have heard things about me, this last few weeks. True or bad, my only promise to you is that I will stand with you all till the end. We are to set aside our differences from now on and make sure to have each other's back as we will need it."

Not far from the main assembly, in their own designated ready zones, the Ratfolk heard Kaelen's words amplified through the station's comms. A collective frowning of brows rippled through their ranks. "Someone else having their back except for them themselves" was a concept so alien it bordered on the absurd. Their entire existence, particularly their role in this endless war, had conditioned them to expect nothing less than being sent out as the very definition of cannon fodder. They were expendable, a fact they had long ago internalized.

This new general, Kaelen, was indeed truly weird. Just two days prior, an unprecedented order had reached them: no longer engage the demons. Instead, they were instructed to take time to rest, heal up, and feed. It had been a bizarre command, utterly contrary to every expectation, but they weren't about to refuse such an unexpected offering of respite. They had immediately, almost instinctively, seized the opportunity for rest, their weary bodies craving it.

It was only now, hearing Kaelen's stark address and his unexpected pledge of solidarity, that the pieces began to click into place. The sudden rest, the unexpected concern for their well-being, and now this commitment to mutual support—it all pointed to a strategy far more intricate and demanding than simple attrition. They understood now why they had been given time to recuperate, and what the true, perilous goal of this general was. It wasn't about wasting lives; it was about preparing every single soldier for a seemingly impossible objective where every life, even theirs, held a crucial, if temporary, value.

Across the corrupted lands, a subtle disquiet rippled through the demonic legions. At first, the sudden, uncharacteristic retreat of the ratfolk had caught them off guard. Demons, driven by instinct and endless hunger for conquest, initially tightened their defenses, bracing for a cunning trap or perhaps the re-emergence of the dreaded "Angel". minutes bled into a day, then more, and still, nothing materialized.

A creeping hesitation began to temper their relentless drive. Their corruption of the land continued, expanding their vile dominion, but the usual fervor was tinged with a nagging uncertainty.

Chapter 557:

Deep within her grotesque chamber, Vorenza, still wrapped in shimmering healing webs, keenly sensed that something was amiss. Her prophetic foresight, usually a sharp, cutting edge, was blunted by her fractured state. She couldn't pinpoint the threat, only a deep-seated wrongness. Unable to move, she could only issue urgent orders: her generals and their men were to be on high alert, ready to respond to any unforeseen assault.

Vorenza had consumed Gurnak's soul, a desperate, brutal act that had indeed healed most of the grievous wounds inflicted by their clash. Yet, a more profound injury remained. Her final, desperate spell during that brutal fight had pushed her beyond her established demonic laws, an act of sheer will that had saved her life but exacted a terrifying toll. The backlash was immense, far more than a mere sixth-tier soul could ever hope to mend.

Her very domain was fractured, a profound spiritual wound that would require considerable time to heal. A deep, gnawing worry gnawed at Vorenza. She desperately hoped this unease was merely a byproduct of her vulnerability, a hypersensitivity born from her shattered domain. She truly hoped nothing catastrophic would happen, that her unease were just an illusion.

From the sky, Rattan was able to see a familiar figure "Gorok" he led a tall mount the size of a carriage that looks like a blend of a horse and a Lizard.

Getting the mount closer, Gorok took a knee and gestured for Kaelen to get on, such sight caused the mages who were in the sky to murmur.

Kaelen looking at Gorok who was still loyal to him even after their current situation sighed "There is no need for this, my friend. Survival is now our greatest cause"

In response to Kaelen word, Gorok said or did nothing as he stayed bowed.

Kaelen shook his head as he once again turned towards the assembly, "This is not a glorious charge," Kaelen stated, his voice now a low, resonant rumble that carried to every corner of the hall. "This is an extermination. We are taking the fight to their heart, to their very genesis of corruption. There will be no retreat, no quarter. Only the end of this stain."

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the ogres, then flickered to the mages hovering above. "Those of you who stand here today," he continued, a flicker of something akin to grim respect in his dead eyes, "you

are the spearhead. The last hope. Fight as if your very soul depends on it, for in the Abyss, it most certainly will."

With that, Kaelen turned. The massive, six-legged mount, its scales a deep, shimmering obsidian, stamped impatiently. Its eyes, glowing with an internal, malevolent light, fixed on Kaelen. Without another word, Kaelen vaulted onto its back, the powerful beast shifting beneath his weight.

Unlike any traditional army, Kaelen did not take the lead. Instead, the ratfolk surged forward, a wave of nimble, armored forms, their eyes gleaming with a newfound, unsettling resolve. They poured out of the station's massive gates, their small bodies surprisingly swift, forming the unlikely vanguard of this brutal crusade.

Behind them, the earth began to tremble with the rhythmic thud of the ogres. Some were mounted on their own fearsome beasts, their sheer mass a terrifying spectacle, while others marched on foot, their heavy, rune-etched armor clanking with each stride. A formidable, unyielding tide of muscle and steel.

High above, following the advancing army, the mages drifted through the air, their forms like dark constellations against the somber sky. Rattan, still floating amongst them, watched the unprecedented formation. The usual hierarchy was inverted, the expendable now leading the charge, the powerful maintaining a watchful distance. It was a strategy born of desperation, perhaps, but one that spoke volumes about the scale of the threat and the grim determination to meet it head-on.

The demon forces, usually consumed by their methodical corruption of the land, suddenly bristled with awareness. An almost inhuman speed propelled the approaching army, a swiftness that defied the sheer mass of the ogres. A low, guttural roar, starting as a murmur and swelling into a thunderous crescendo, rippled through the demonic ranks. Their eyes, once focused on the slow spread of decay, now glinted with a savage eagerness.

For demons, growing weary of the meager souls offered by the endless ratfolk skirmishes, this was an unexpected, delectable feast. Powerful, vibrant souls, promising rapid growth in strength, presented themselves on the horizon.

The approaching army accelerated, their disciplined stride transforming into a full-blown sprint. A unified roar, a guttural sound of challenge and intent, erupted from the charging force. High above, the mages, including Rattan, surged forward, outpacing the ground forces. On each mage's head, a small, intricate construct-like crown pulsed faintly, a silent, telepathic link to Kaelen, the leader of this formidable, converging storm.

The incredible acceleration of the army was Kaelen's silent command, channeled through the crowns that linked him to his mages. As the two forces hurtled towards collision, a colossal magic circle bloomed in the sky above the mages, a swirling vortex of arcane power that stretched across the heavens. From this immense construct, smaller, glowing replicas detached themselves, drifting down into the outstretched hands of each mage. With these mini-circles pulsing in their palms, the mages gestured in unison towards the distant demonic horde.

Like a chorus of master crafters, every mage moved as one. Their free hands rose, their expressions straining as if burdened by an invisible, crushing weight. The first to feel the profound effect of their combined will were the demons. The very ground beneath them began to tremble violently, a deep, resonant rumble that shook their monstrous forms.

Then, with a deafening roar of grinding stone, a massive wall of rock erupted from the earth, stretching for miles across the landscape. It rose swiftly, obscuring the demons' view of the charging army, a colossal barrier of raw geological power. The mages, already pushed to their limits, ascended even higher into the sky. With agonizing effort, they continued their grand gestures, and more walls ripped from the corrupted land, branching out, intersecting, and rapidly dissecting the demon lines.

In what felt like mere moments, a sprawling, intricate maze of towering stone walls had been carved from the corrupted plains. The sheer scale of the spell was immense, and its toll on the mages was evident. They hovered precariously, their bodies trembling, barely able to maintain their float spells, their collective power almost entirely spent. This unprecedented maneuver had fundamentally reshaped the battlefield, trapping the demonic forces within a labyrinth.

The sudden emergence of the stone maze threw the low-tier demons into disarray. Their primitive minds, accustomed to open-field brawls and overwhelming numbers, were baffled by the towering walls that abruptly consumed their view. Before they could even process the impossible, sections of those very walls slid apart with a grinding roar, revealing a horrifying sight: the glinting weapons of the ratfolk, already leveled and waiting.

The ratfolk, utilizing the maze with a chilling, almost predatory efficiency, unleashed a torrent of fire and steel. Their smaller forms darted through the shifting passages, appearing suddenly from unexpected angles, their magi-tech weapons spitting concentrated bursts of energy and razor-sharp projectiles into the bewildered demonic ranks. Trapped within the confines of the labyrinth, the demons' numerical advantage became a fatal liability. Their clumsy charges met impenetrable rock or were funneled into deadly bottlenecks where the ratfolk's coordinated attacks ripped them apart.

Behind the ratfolk, the ogres moved with ponderous, unstoppable force, battering down any walls that dared to impede their advance, crushing demons beneath their massive boots, and cleaving through resilient demonic hide with their enormous weapons. The mages, though depleted, still managed to occasionally shift walls or create small, localized barriers to further disorient and divide the enemy.

Though there were losses – the brutal nature of the fight ensured that even with tactical superiority, blood would be shed – the strategic brilliance of the maze was undeniable. It fragmented the overwhelming demon horde, turning their numbers against them. Kaelen’s army, though a fraction of the demonic force, moved like a perfectly synchronized machine.

By the time the last low-tier demon in this sector fell, a significant portion of the corrupted lands had been overtaken. Without pause, the army immediately began to transform their hard-won ground. The very stone walls that had formed the maze were swiftly repurposed, shifted and fortified into a series of interconnected makeshift fortresses. Banners, bearing Kaelen’s stark sigil, were raised amidst the still-smoking ruins.

This wasn’t a permanent victory, merely a vital first step. Kaelen knew there were many more lands to take over and recover before they even reached the Abyss Portal. But here, amidst the newly erected defenses, his army would take a desperately needed, albeit brief, respite, preparing for the next brutal push into the heart of the demonic domain.

The instant the enemy army began its charge, reports flooded Vorenxa’s chamber. A long, weary sigh escaped her lips as the chilling confirmation of her unease settled deep within her. It wasn’t just a premonition; it was a tangible threat. She immediately extended her senses beyond the Abyss, piercing the veil between dimensions. What she saw on the battlefield brought a grimace to her face: a twisting labyrinth of stone was dissecting her demonic legions.

Chapter 558:

Further still, her senses brushed against three distinct, immensely powerful existences high above the fray – beings no less formidable than she was in her prime. They, too, noticed her probing presence. There was no direct confrontation, no clash of wills, only a cautious mutual withdrawal. Vorenxa pulled back, knowing her current fractured state made any engagement suicidal, and sensing that her adversaries were equally wary of facing a Sixth-Tier Archdemon, even a wounded one.

With her weakened state a critical vulnerability, Vorenxa redirected her full attention to her demons. A profound shift was needed. Their long-standing modus operandi of vast, dispersed forces, each pursuing its own chaotic machinations, was no longer viable. They needed to work together, a concept

almost alien to their inherently individualistic nature, especially when facing an elite army of such coordinated precision.

With this urgent realization, Vorenxa immediately began to gather the fifth-tier powerhouses under her command. These were the demons whose inherited knowledge and sheer destructive might should, in theory, allow them to grasp the complexities of the enemy's tactics. They were the ones who could, and now must, learn to fight as a cohesive unit.

Normally, if she weren't so gravely injured, Vorenxa might have been filled with a perverse sense of excitement, even happiness. The Abyss rarely encountered an opponent that necessitated genuine cooperation among its forces, rather than simply overwhelming the enemy with brute, mindless numbers. This was a challenge of intellect as much as might, a rare and intriguing puzzle. But the cold dread of her own vulnerability overshadowed any such morbid pleasure. The stakes were too high, her own existence too precarious.

As dusk settled over the newly fortified sector of corrupted land, Kaelen's forces, having secured their brutal first victory, took a moment's respite. The air, though still heavy with the lingering scent of ozone and demonic ichor, now held a different rhythm. Guards, their rune-etched armor gleaming faintly in the dim light, took up their positions on the makeshift fortress walls, their eyes scanning the desolate, maze-carved landscape.

Fires flickered to life in controlled areas, and the aroma of prepared rations, hearty and sustaining, began to waft through the camps. Groups of ogres, their massive forms relaxed but vigilant, devoured their meals with efficient gusto. Among the ratfolk, a rare sense of satisfaction permeated the air as they tended to their weapons and shared hushed conversations. Medics, both mundane and arcane, moved among the wounded, the soft glow of healing spells mixing with the grim efficiency of battlefield triage. It was a fragile peace, a stolen breath before the next inevitable storm.

Meanwhile, deep within the Abyss, far from the newly erected human strongholds, a tense gathering of fifth-tier demons had convened in Vorenxa's audience chamber. The air crackled not with the usual chaotic energy of the lower ranks, but with a palpable, frustrated tension. These were beings of immense power, each accustomed to commanding legions, to breaking enemy lines with overwhelming force or singular, devastating spells. Strategy, in their minds, often amounted to "more, faster, harder."

"This group are bolder than we anticipated," growled a hulking Pit Fiend, its multiple eyes narrowed to slits, addressing a council that included a cunning Succubus Lord, a stoic Balorg, and a grotesque Nalfeshnee, among others were those like Vorenxa. "To reshape the very ground... it's a nuisance. An annoyance."

"A costly nuisance, Z'tarr," retorted the Succubus Lord, her voice a silken hiss that nonetheless carried an edge of cold fury. "Hundreds of lesser kin lost in moments. And the rat-scourge, they were... precise. Like maddened wasps in a jar."

The Nalfeshnee, its porcine face usually placid, snorted, a plume of acrid smoke rising from its nostrils. "Vorenxa's directive is clear. This 'maze' tactic, this 'elite army'... it means we cannot simply send forth more waves. Our inherent knowledge, as she put it, must be brought to bear."

A low rumble emanated from the Balorg, its flame-wreathed whip coiling idly. "And how do we counter a battlefield that shifts? They manipulate the earth itself. Our brute force is blunted by their trickery."

The discussion grew more heated, verging on the usual squabbling that characterized demonic councils. They were powerful, yes, but their individual pride and inherent disdain for cooperation were deep-seated.

Suddenly, Vorenxa's voice, though faint, resonated in their minds, carried by a powerful telepathic link she'd established. "Enough. You squabble while they consolidate. Listen closely. Their strength is in their cohesion, their weakness is their numbers. They cannot sustain this magical exertion indefinitely. Your task is to dissect their formation. The mages... they are their lynchpin. They will be spent. Exploit that. Your objective is not just to kill, but to disrupt. Break their lines. Separate the ogres from the ratfolk. Force their mages to overextend. For every wall they raise, you must find a way to make it a cage for them, not us. Think. Adapt. Or this sector will be lost."

The weight of Vorenxa's words, amplified by her Archdemon authority, momentarily silenced the bickering. "Disrupt... dissect..." muttered the Pit Fiend, a flicker of something akin to strategic thought entering its multi-faceted gaze. The concept was alien, yet undeniably intriguing.

The demonic council fell silent, the weight of Vorenxa's command pressing down on them. "Disrupt... dissect..." The words echoed in their chaotic minds, slowly beginning to take root. They were creatures of destruction, of overwhelming force, but the concept of targeted, strategic disruption was... novel.

The Pit Fiend, Z'tarr, was the first to speak, its usual bellow reduced to a thoughtful growl. "If their strength is in their mages' earth-shaping... then we must ensure those mages cannot shape. If they are spent, they are vulnerable. We lure them to overextend."

"Indeed," the Succubus Lord purred, her eyes gleaming with a malicious intelligence. "Those rat-things, swift as they are, are small. The ogres, powerful, but ponderous. They rely on the maze to separate us, to channel us. What if we use their own channels against them?"

The Nalfeshnee, surprisingly, offered the first concrete, if still crude, idea. "We send in the lower tier demons," it grunted, its heavy brow furrowing. "Not to engage directly as it clear the current situation is something they can't handle, we can have them serve a different purpose. They will burrow beneath the walls, beyond the maze. They emerge behind the rat-scourge, directly in the path of the following ogres. A simultaneous ambush. It would sow chaos."

A low, collective murmur spread through the council. Low tier demons were usually expendable used to corrupt lands, due to their overwhelming number, Usage of low tier demons was also for some lucky ones to grow in strength, not for complex battlefield maneuvers. But the idea had merit. It bypassed the maze entirely.

"And when they emerge," the Balor added, a flicker of wicked insight in its fiery eyes, "they are not to engage fully. Their purpose is disruption. To create panic. To force the mages to react defensively, to spend what little power they have left protecting their rear, rather than shaping our front."

"So, the proposal stands," Z'tarr announced, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "We send our low tier demons capable of breaking ground quickly and without immediate detection due to their lower strength level. Their objective: breach the enemy's formation from the rear. Create a secondary chaos. Force them to split their forces, to react on multiple fronts. And if we are truly fortunate, the mages will bleed themselves dry trying to contain it."

A new kind of hunger sparked in the demons' eyes, a hunger not just for souls, but for the intellectual challenge. It was a novel sensation, and they were eager to test this grim, new stratagem.

"Vorenza," Z'tarr broadcast, directing his thought towards his injured Archdemon leader. "We have a proposal. A new approach to their 'maze.' We propose to send the low tier demons to flank their formation from beneath the earth, emerging behind their vanguard, to force disruption and expend their mages' remaining energy."

A moment of silence. Then, Vorenxa's faint, weary mental voice resonated: "Proceed. Report results. Do not fail."

The war council, still buzzing with the tactical shift, was interrupted by a new, insidious voice. From the shadowy corners of the chamber, a fifth-tier Spider Demon emerged, its eight gleaming eyes fixed on the others. Its chitinous carapace shimmered, and a faint, sickly-sweet aroma, like corrupted honeysuckle, emanated from its form. This was Arachnae, a master of psychological warfare and insidious poisons.

"The low tier demons offer a fine distraction," Arachnae rasped, its voice like dry leaves skittering across stone. "But what if we strike at their minds, even as we strike at their rear?"

The other demons, accustomed to brute force or overt sorcery, looked intrigued, if a little confused.

"The corrupted lands," Arachnae continued, gesturing with one of its many spindly legs. "They are not merely dead soil and vile energy. They are saturated with our essence, a psychic residue that gnaws at the uninitiated. For us, it is as natural as breathing. For them... for those fragile mortals and their kin... it is a slow poison to the mind."

A low murmur rippled through the council as understanding dawned.

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"Since the beginning of this war," Arachnae explained, "the Empire's forces have never dared to spend a full night on ground we have truly claimed. They push, they fall back, they fortify in their clean-dug trenches. But the 'Angel's' elite, they now sleep on the very ground we have sown with despair and madness."

"They have built their fortresses on our territory," the Succubus Lord purred, a chilling smile spreading across her lips. "They believe themselves safe. But their very sanctuary is a weapon against them."

"Precisely," Arachnae affirmed. "The corruption of the land subtly, inexorably, preys upon their minds. It gnaws at their resolve, whispers doubts, magnifies fears. It turns comrade against comrade, blurs the line between reality and nightmare. They won't anticipate this, for it is not a direct attack, but a lingering malaise. And it is already at work."

Arachnae's idea resonated with a sinister elegance that appealed to the more cunning demons. While the Tunneling Beasts would create physical chaos, this subtle, mental assault would erode the enemy's cohesion from within.

"My proposal," Arachnae stated, its voice gaining a chilling confidence, "is to amplify this natural effect. We will focus our innate psychic essence, infuse the ground around their new 'fortresses' with a more concentrated psychic poison. We will seed their dreams with terror, twist their thoughts to paranoia. It will weaken their resolve, slow their reactions, and make them question their leader, their comrades, even their own sanity, long before our main assault."

The Pit Fiend, initially skeptical of anything that wasn't a direct charge, now nodded slowly. "A war of attrition, then. Not of bodies, but of minds. While the Low tier demons strike their rear, this... this mental erosion will soften their core."

"It requires no great movement, no massive energy expenditure right now," Arachnae emphasized. "Just a focused, continuous permeation of the adjacent land. It is a siege, not of walls, but of the very will."

The demons came to agreement to immediately act on this, this tactic was something that would be continuously applied as long as the elite army of the army made their home on the corrupted lands, they would slowly wear them out.

The other demons exchanged glances. This was a form of warfare they understood, one that played to their inherent strengths of manipulation and corruption. It could be enacted immediately, subtly, without drawing undue attention or risking their own forces.

As night fell over the hastily erected fortresses, a chilling, almost imperceptible shift began to ripple through Kaelen's forces. The moon, partially obscured by the lingering, acrid haze of the corrupted lands, cast long, distorted shadows that seemed to writhe with a life of their own. It started subtly, a pervasive sense of unease that settled in the pit of the stomach, an instinctive shiver that had nothing to do with the cool night air.

For the ratfolk, nestled within their cramped quarters, they were in a deep sleep resting their body and mind, it was at this time that their nightmares began.

They were suddenly drawn into a dream land, and this weren't the usual terrors of battle, but insidious, whispering horrors. Visions of comrades turning into grotesque demons, of their own fur sloughing off to reveal skeletal forms, of the very ground beneath them dissolving into an endless, suffocating void.

Sleep no longer offered no solace; it became a conduit for terror. Soon, the whimpers turned to startled cries, then desperate shouts. But they were stuck unable to even open their eyes.

The next to be affected were the Guards, as they went on a rampart, reporting about seeing phantom figures flitting in their peripheral vision, hearing voices carried on the wind that promised betrayal and gruesome fates.

Among the ogres, they were trained and more disciplined than the Ratfolk so they were not asleep, but they weren't safe either from the psychic attack, the effects manifested differently.

Their immense physical fortitude offered little shield against the psychic assault. A deep-seated paranoia began to fester. Minor disagreements escalated into snarling accusations. Suspicion bloomed where camaraderie had been.

A long-buried grievance, a point of contention often swept under the rug, was brought to the forefront of their minds: the Empire's current treatment of their king, Kaelen. Some ogres held firm to the belief that the Empire's actions were justified, while others, equally strong-willed, defended Kaelen's unique perspective and actions. What had been a small, easily glanced-over debate in the past became a focal point of their escalating paranoia. The psychic attack amplified these internal divisions, twisting reasoned arguments into vehement accusations and simmering resentments. It started as heated words, quickly escalated to aggressive gestures, and soon, the small debate that had once been dismissed as trivial now bled into physical confrontations, threatening to tear apart the very fabric of their formidable unity.

The psychic assault spared no one, not even the mages, individuals whose minds were their greatest weapons and tools. Rattan found himself entangled in the same insidious web of mental disarray. The familiar, comforting hum of his magi-tech systems—a symphony of arcane energies and intricate mechanisms—began to war with a new, discordant buzzing static within his mind.

His attempts at meditation, usually a sanctuary of clarity and focus, were now fractured and chaotic. Impossible geometries spun wildly behind his closed eyelids, twisting and contorting into grotesque shapes. A chilling sensation crept over him, the horrifying realization that his own brilliant designs, his carefully crafted spells and enchantments, were turning against him, morphing into instruments of

torture within his mind's eye. He saw his energy conduits becoming chains, his protective wards transforming into crushing walls.

Rattan awoke with a throbbing headache that resonated deep behind his eyes, accompanied by a persistent, high-pitched ringing in his ears. He initially dismissed it as mere fatigue, an expected toll from the day's exertions and the constant mental strain of his work. Yet, a cold, creeping dread began to take hold—a feeling that something was profoundly wrong, something far beyond the physical toll of battle or the weariness of magical practice.

The higher-ups, insulated by their authority and perhaps possessing a greater resilience to such mental intrusions, noticed the attack. However, it hardly posed a problem for them initially. They lay in their tents, eyes closed in what should have been peaceful rest, their minds only subtly aware of a pervasive, unsettling pressure. But their tranquility was short-lived.

Their rest was abruptly shattered by the growing cacophony outside: the piercing screams of the ratfolk, the frantic shouts and increasingly agitated reports from the guards, and the ominous sounds of the ogres reaching the brink of drawing their formidable weapons. The psychic attack, though not directly crippling them, had successfully created a chaotic storm that demanded their immediate attention. The true threat wasn't to their own minds, but to the cohesion and discipline of their entire force, now teetering on the edge of internal collapse.

Kaelen emerged from his tent, Gorok at his side, his gaze sweeping over the escalating chaos. The whimpers from the ratfolk warrens, the frantic shouts of the guards, and the ominous rumblings from the ogre encampment painted a grim picture. He grasped the situation with a single, sharp glance. "Gorok," he commanded, his voice cutting through the rising din, "lead the fifth-tier mages. Produce a counter-spell against this attack and locate its source. Quickly."

Gorok nodded, already turning to leave, but paused. "My lord," he stated, his voice grim, "I believe the source is the very land we're standing on." With that chilling pronouncement, he was gone, leaving Kaelen to a moment of stunned silence.

A single brow raised in a mixture of disbelief and dawning understanding, Kaelen knelt, pressing his palm against the corrupted earth. He extended his senses, delving into the unseen currents beneath the surface. Instantly, he was met with a wave of malevolent energy, a surge of pure, psychic venom that recoiled from his touch.

He withdrew his hand, a deep frown creasing his brow. Without a word, he pulled his arm back. His gaze shifted beyond their newly won territory, deep into the demon-held lands.

Leaving was not an option. To abandon the ground they had fought so hard to secure would be to hand a strategic victory to the demons, entirely counter to their original plan. This wasn't just a battle; it was a test of endurance, a forced hardening. Kaelen knew then that they couldn't just weather this storm—they needed to toughen it out and increase their attack output, pushing deeper and faster to minimize their exposure to this blighted land.

Gorok, having swiftly gathered the fifth-tier mages, directed their combined efforts. A complex, shimmering spell began to weave itself into existence, expanding rapidly until it enveloped the entire expanse of the recently captured territory. As the spell settled, its effects were immediate and profound. A palpable wave of clarity washed over the army, and sanity, like a returning tide, flowed back into their minds. The ratfolk, who moments before had been trapped in their waking nightmares, gasped as their eyes snapped open.

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They sat up, heaving and drenched in sweat, blinking in the dim light of their warrens, the lingering shadows of their terror slowly receding. Meanwhile, the guards on the ramparts, their faces pale with recent fear, blinked rapidly, their gazes sweeping over the empty spaces where phantom figures had danced. They realized, with a profound sense of relief and lingering unease, that nothing had been there at all.

Among the ogres, the tension that had bristled between them evaporated as if by magic. Their raised weapons slowly lowered, and a deep flush of embarrassment spread across their rugged faces. They averted their gazes, unable to meet each other's eyes, the echoes of their harsh words and suspicions hanging heavy in the air.

It was at this precise moment, cutting through the lingering silence of realization and the murmurs of recovery, that Kaelen's voice resonated, clear and accurate, in the ears of every soldier, every mage, every ogre, and every ratfolk.

"Listen closely!" Kaelen's voice boomed, imbued with a magical resonance that carried it across the entire encampment. "You were not imagining things. You were not weak. We have been under a direct, psychic assault from the demons. This land, corrupted by their presence, amplified their vile influence, turning our own minds against us. This was an enemy attack, as real as any blade or claw."

"Stay calm, and don't fret. The mages have already taken action; the enemy's attack has come to naught," Kaelen's voice boomed, attempting to project unwavering confidence. "Just stay calm, keep your guard up, and trust in me and your comrades. The enemy's goal is to sow division."

As Kaelen spoke, a deep frown creased his face. The atmosphere, which had momentarily cleared, was subtly returning to its previous oppressive state. He glanced towards Gorok and the fifth-tier mages. They, too, wore grim expressions, their brows furrowed as they instinctively began to recast their protective spell.

Clarity washed over the camp once more, but the mages weren't relieved. Their frowns deepened, a silent understanding passing between them. The attack hadn't gone away; it was merely pestering. The spell they'd woven, powerful as it was, only offered a fleeting respite, lasting mere minutes before needing to be cast again.

This dire news was relayed back to Kaelen, leaving him in a profound dilemma. He couldn't tell his army they were facing a situation beyond their immediate control, that their sanity hung by a thread, contingent on constant magical intervention.

Yet, Kaelen didn't have to say a word. The army felt the truth of their predicament with chilling immediacy. They were caught in a horrifying cycle, a constant oscillation between clarity and muddiness. One moment, they were perfectly fine, minds clear and focused. The next, they found themselves face-to-face with a comrade, eyes bloodshot and veins bulging, on the verge of succumbing to another terrifying hallucination or a fit of rage.

The entire camp spiraled into a state of disorder. Trust, so recently reaffirmed, began to fray. Soldiers instinctively recoiled from one another, suspicion lurking in their eyes, unsure if the person beside them was truly themselves or a monstrous figment of their twisted minds.

High above, veiled by the clouds, one of the sixth-tier mages had been observing. While the others maintained their aloof detachment, this particular Arch-Mage, attuned to the subtle flows of magical corruption, felt the disturbance. It wasn't an overt spell, but a pervasive psychic resonance, an infection of the very ether. The growing chaos below, the sporadic cries, the tangible aura of fear and distrust rising from the fortress, confirmed the Arch-Mage's suspicions.

With a silent sigh that echoed through the arcane layers of reality, the sixth-tier mage descended. Her form, usually a blur of distant power, became sharply defined as she plunged towards the afflicted

fortress. Landing with a barely perceptible shimmer within the fortified perimeter, the mage wasted no time.

With a complex, flowing series of gestures, Her hands weaving intricate patterns in the air, a profound wave of energy emanated from them. This wasn't an attack, but a cleansing. A shimmering, almost invisible barrier began to expand outwards from the mage, encompassing the entire fortress. This was a field of psychic inhibition, a powerful ward designed to cut off the fortress from the corrupting influence of the surrounding land. The air within the barrier immediately felt lighter, the oppressive psychic weight lifting. The ringing in Rattan's ears subsided, the ogres' paranoia seemed to recede, and the ratfolk's frantic twitching lessened.

Kaelen, now a mere speck against the vast sky, locked eyes with the formidable Sixth-Tier Mage who quickly took to the sky, vanishing into the clouds once more. From his vantage point high above the fortress, he observed the immediate and potent activation of the magical shield. It shimmered with an intensity far surpassing the defensive spell conjured by Fifth-Tier Mages.

Ordinarily, such a robust defense would bring a surge of relief, but Kaelen's heightened senses told a different story. The psychic assault, a relentless, unseen torrent, had not ceased. Despite the shield's impressive display and the apparent calm it brought to the fortress below, the insidious attack continued to pound against it without mercy. The presence of a Sixth-Tier Mage at the helm instilled a false sense of security, leading many to believe that all was well.

Kaelen, however, felt the constant, unyielding pressure of the psychic force. He knew that even this powerful shield, born of high-tier magic, had its limits. His instincts screamed a grim truth: they had, at most, a week—perhaps even less—before the shield's integrity would be compromised and it would inevitably fail. While the Sixth-Tier Mage could potentially prolong its effectiveness by frequently recharging it, doing so would directly contradict the very mission they had been assigned by the Empire. Their mandate was clear, and sacrificing it for constant shield maintenance was not an option.

The Sixth-Tier Mage's dedication to maintaining the shield, while seemingly heroic, would inevitably leave her vulnerable to a surprise attack. This constant focus on defense also threatened her carefully cultivated image. While some might hail her as a savior for her efforts, to the mage herself, this was merely a fleeting act of kindness, a necessary action to ensure her ultimate objective was met. She harbored no illusions of being a servant to those she considered expendable pawns sent to their deaths.

Kaelen descended, landing softly on one knee. His hand instinctively reached out, gripping the corrupted earth. It pulsed ominously, filled with grotesque, dark-energy-infused flesh. A construct of pure energy

shimmered into existence around his hand, encasing the vile sample. Time was of the essence; he had to decipher this enigma before it was too late.

"Gorok," Kaelen gestured, beckoning his companion closer. "Send word to War Councilor Vellok. I require some of my equipment back, vital for researching something that could be crucial to achieving our final goal." He paused, then added, "You can explain what transpired tonight if he questions my request." Gorok nodded, a dark, smoke-like energy swirling around him as he leaped into the air, transforming into a crow that quickly vanished into the gloom.

Kaelen was mid-sentence when a figure flashed through his mind. He looked down at the pulsating construct in his hand. Using his connection with the mages, he sent a message to Rattan: "Meet me in my tent. I have something that requires your presence."

Rattan, still reeling from the shock of the psychic assault, stared at the shimmering energy dome encasing the fortress. Kaelen's words filled him with apprehension; this was their first official contact since his arrest. Yet, for some reason, the fear he expected wasn't there. Perhaps it was because he couldn't imagine how Kaelen could possibly make his life any more miserable than it already was, short of killing him.

As he walked toward Kaelen's tent, Rattan straightened his attire. He felt conflicted: should he bow and kneel as he once had, or stand and await Kaelen's purpose? Ultimately, he knelt, head bowed. "You requested for me, milord," he said, addressing Kaelen's back. Kaelen was looking intently at something on a table.

"You still know how to bow before me," Kaelen's voice was slightly cold. "I thought you might have forgotten that by now."

Rattan, calm within but feigning panic, replied, "This should be the least I can do for you, milord. It was I who put us in this position because I doubted you."

Kaelen's hand clenched at Rattan's words, and a heavy pressure momentarily filled the tent before vanishing as quickly as Kaelen exhaled. He then gestured for Rattan to approach. As Rattan drew closer, he saw a disturbing sight: a piece of moving soil intertwined with flesh. He recoiled, looking away sharply as the sheer malice emanating from it impacted his mind.

Kaelen pointed at the abhorrent sample. "This," he stated, "is the source of the trouble the fortress is facing right now."

Rattan's eyes widened in horror. "But milord," he stammered, "the very land the fortress is built on, and the land we step on, is filled with this corrupted soil!"