

New Eden 411

Chapter 411 The Throne Room

Seeing the young king walk, the man in the cloak proceeded forward, walking a few steps in front of Astaroth. The latter was eyeing him with caution, trying to figure out his intentions and abilities.

He didn't want to scan the man, as it would be rude and give away his intentions. But the lack of mana around him was disturbing.

"Can I know who you are, since you know me?" he asked the cloaked man.

Without turning around, the man responded.

"Ahh yes. Where are my manners? I am the new court mage. I am not an Ash Elf, and my name is foreign, and is a mouthful for people of your race, so you can just call me Court Mage."

The answer was so deflective that it couldn't be more of a brush-off.

"If you are the court mage, then why can't I sense a shred of mana coming from you? It's like the mana around you withers away before even reaching you."

The mage brushed his hand on the hood of his cloak.

"This cloak suppresses all forms of mana around it. I do it so my magic does not crush people, as I have very little control over how I exert it."

"A court mage who lacks control over his own magic? That is a rare situation..."

"Yes. King Uuthli'vlos is quite the generous ruler, to allow someone like me to become a court mage. I believe he sees the potential in my power instead of the lack of control I have."

'Hah! Generous my ass,' Astaroth thought.

"Yes. Quite generous indeed."

"Did you have other questions for me, your highness?"

Astaroth had a myriad of things he wanted to ask, but he considered he had already overplayed the interrogation card. Any more than this, and the mysterious man might lash out.

"No. I am satisfied."

"Very well."

They walked in silence for the rest of the way, quickly reaching the side palace next to the military wing of the castle. No one stopped the pair at the door.

Once inside, the royal guards outside started whispering amongst themselves.

"Hey did you see that man? Doesn't he look familiar?"

"Yeah. Wasn't that the guy that escaped prison a decade ago? The one the king wanted for stealing from him?"

"Man. He's got balls showing up here, alone like this. Plus, he's with the new court mage. He's done for."

"That new mage gives me the creeps. We can't see his face and I've never seen him use magic, aside from when he teleports. And that creepy familiar of his. Urgh. I don't know why the king hired him instead of another mage."

"His Highness was probably hurt at Gelum'vire's treason. Leaving with his banished son was not the smart thing to do."

A hissing sound snapped them out of their conversation. Looking up, they could see a giant purple spider hanging overhead from a ledge, looking at them with its multiple eyes.

The mage's voice came from the massive insect.

"I can hear your conversations. Talk about the king in this manner again, and I'll have you executed in the worst fashion."

The spider rubbed its front legs together, producing the hissing sound again, before skittering away on the side of the wall.

Both men stood there, livid.

"I hate that spider. It's so sneaky. It could creep up on us and kill us without us ever noticing."

"Let's just keep guard and not talk."

"Agreed."

From inside the palace, Astaroth was oblivious to this interaction, as the mage talked through his pet with telepathy, and his voice never left his throat.

Astaroth was also too busy watching every guard he passed by to see if they were exhibiting hostile behaviours. He hadn't forgotten his last stint in this palace, and he was sure some guards were still the same after ten years.

On more than one occasion, he thought he recognized a face. But they never stopped walking, so he couldn't look at the traits for too long.

After walking for almost fifteen minutes inside the palace, turning way too many times in what was probably an attempt at disorienting him, they came to a stop before the massive throne room doors.

Astaroth recognized the doors and had a second of nostalgia. Last he'd been here, his friends were all in good shape.

He still wondered what had happened to Chris and I'dril, since he hadn't gotten the chance to see them or ask where they were. But it was a thought for a later time.

The court mage didn't even announce himself, simply walking into the throne room. And what was inside made even Astaroth queasy.

About forty human women, tied in unique positions, with chains; manacles; ropes; and drapes, who were drugged off their rockers, were getting violated by many men, one of them who he recognized.

He instantly felt the urge to torch the room, and everyone in it, but refrained from doing so.

The court mage announced his arrival once inside the room.

"Sire, I bring to you, King Astaroth, of the Kingdom of Stellar Woods."

Two men stopped what they were doing to turn toward the door, while the others continued with their sins, uncaring of the newcomer and his rank.

Their actions disgusted Astaroth. But he had come for only one person, and one reason.

Seeing the two people stop, he recognized the king, although older by a decade. The other man, Astaroth had no idea who they were.

"King Uuthli'vlos. I have come for some answers."

But to Astaroth's surprise, it wasn't the old man that spoke up.

"And why would you come from a faraway kingdom, demanding answers, when I don't know you? I don't owe you anything. Leave before I declare you an enemy and have you executed."

The younger one of the two men was the one who answered Astaroth.

Frowning, Astaroth looked at the man.

"I came demanding answers from the king. Who are you?"

"Watch your tone with me, king from far away. I am the king of this kingdom."

Astaroth turned his head to the old man, then back to the younger man, questions clear in his eyes. But when he focused on the older man, who was the king he remembered from before, he looked... out of touch.

His eyes seemed foggy from afar, and his demeanour was nonchalant. The king he remembered would have exploded in anger already, just at the sight of him.

'Something is off. Everything is off, actually. I need to get away from this place ASAP.'

Chapter 412 The Court Mage's True Visage

The questions he came to ask King Uuthli'vlos were addressed to Vhol'drokk, not whoever this younger king was. But that was beside the point, now.

His anger was still roiling under the surface, because he had a feeling this new king was just like the old one, if not worse. But he didn't want to take risks.

The court mage was an unknown factor. This new king was another.

And wherever was fogging the old king's mind was a third one.

With all these questions and no answers, Astaroth didn't feel like he should poke the bear. Maybe if he still had access to Royal Protection, he would try prying answers out of them.

But right now, he was still at risk of getting overpowered by the wild card that was the court mage.

Astaroth wondered what question he should ask, to not seem suspicious for coming to demand answers and just suddenly leaving.

"Speak up, distant King. I don't have all day to indulge you," the young king growled, his tone full of impatience.

"Ahh, yes. I wanted to know why your forests and countryside are infested with corrupted beasts, and I have crossed no patrol or military action to protect your citizens. Is it not your duty as king to protect your citizens?"

"Tch! Another meddler."

'Another?' Astaroth thought.

He wondered for a second who the first one might have been.

"Why would I have to waste my precious military power, that I need to conquer the other kingdoms around mine, just to protect peasants and farmers? Only a weak king cares for the rabble in his kingdom."

Astaroth gritted his teeth at the answer.

'What a dirtbag. He's worse than his father before him. Why is Lady Anulo not intervening?'

"Does the kingdom spirit agree with your sentiment, new King?" Astaroth asked, his body trembling slightly in rage.

"I don't see how that is any of your business, foreigner. We may share race, but you are no longer a citizen of this proud nation."

"Hah! Proud nation. What a joke."

Astaroth clamped his mouth shut after his outburst. He just couldn't contain it anymore.

This shitbag was not fit to be king. What could have happened to the young prince he remembered?

If King Vhol'drokk stepped down, he should have become king in his stead. Yet this assbat was there instead.

"What did you say?! Are you mocking my kingdom?!"

"I've had enough. I'm leaving."

Astaroth spun around to walk out the doors, but ended up face-to-face with the court mage again. Only this time, he could see his eyes under the cloak.

And what was looking at him was not from this world.

Two Black orbs, with ember-like irises, like the eyes were a deep shaft to an active volcano. Astaroth could feel his brain go foggy just by staring into those eyes, and he immediately closed his eyes.

'That's a demon! That's why he felt familiar!'

Astaroth slashed forward with Ad Astra, which he had just pulled out again, but was met with nothing. Since his target was no longer in front of him, he re-opened his eyes and dashed forward.

Blasting through the throne room doors, he heard a shrill scream from behind him.

"Guards! Stop him! I want his head!"

The two guards outside the door immediately tried to block his path.

But just as he was about to swat them aside, the hair on his neck stood up, and his instinct told him to move aside.

Stepping to the side swiftly, Astaroth looked on in horror as a gout of black fire engulfed the corridor, coming out of the throne room. The two guards that had been standing there to block his path were turned to cinder instantly.

'I need to buck out. Asmodeus! You're up!' he shouted in his head, reaching out to the demon.

Feeling his body changing slightly, and the horns sprouting from his head, Astaroth heard the demon in his mind.

'What can I do for you, Master Astaroth?'

"Get me out of here!" Astaroth shouted, not even in his mind.

The gout of flames had ended, and the stone wall of the hallway was halfway melted through. Astaroth did not want to test out how strong this new court mage was.

Turning around to escape the palace, there was the mage again, his hood off this time. The horrendous face the mage had was pale compared to his magic aura.

The mana halo around the mage was engulfing the hallway entirely, and he could guess it was also reaching much past it, given he was already feeling heavier from its pressure.

Astaroth reflexively scanned the court mage, wondering what he was up against.

Ogranak, The Infiltrator

Level: 75

Grade: Rare (Boss)

HP: 68,206,000

MP: 864,450

Astaroth's jaw almost dropped, and his moment of stupor also almost cost him dearly. The court mage was already charging up another gout of black flames in his hand.

Snapping out of his stupor, just as the fire began releasing, Astaroth activated Thousand Thoughts. With his time perception slowing down, he hurriedly used his spatial awareness and locked on a spot over the castle, teleporting promptly.

Once he was outside, and Thousand Thoughts ended, a large blast echoed under him. The blast of flames blasted through the walls of the palace, blasting off into the distance, scorching everything on its path.

'There is no way I can beat that right now, or on my own, at all. We're leaving.'

Focusing his mind on the underground cave, where the survivors of his starting village were, Astaroth used the teleportation skill again. He felt his mana reserves dip drastically, but it was much less than last time.

What Astaroth did not take into consideration was which part of the cave he focused on. Appearing back into the cave, Astaroth looked around him, only to notice he was looking at roots.

He suddenly felt his body fall and realized what he had done.

Try as he may, he couldn't lock down on the ground's position before actually reaching it.

Crash!

Astaroth lay there, cratered into the hard soil and stone floor, his head ringing and his lungs desperately trying to regain the air they had just expelled.

When he finally gasped a breath of air, only one word escaped his mouth amidst the panting.

"Owwwww."

Chapter 413 Revealing The Culprit

Some residents of the settlement were already gathering around where he had landed, wondering what had just crashed into the ground like this. A few of them feared an enemy attack.

But once the first of the militiamen arrived, he saw Astaroth, embedded into the ground, and stood by. The young man, no older than sixteen, felt like the man before him was familiar, but the demonic traits about him kept the man from getting closer.

The younger militiamen waited for someone with more authority to arrive, standing close to Astaroth, weapons at the ready. When Astaroth got up to his feet, after catching his breath, he laughed at their attempt to project strength.

"No offence, kids. But you are shaking in your boots."

Un-melding with Asmodeus, Astaroth regained his normal appearance, which already assuaged the young men a bit, but they stayed put around him.

Aj'axx was the one to come and see who the intruder was first. When he saw Astaroth, he hollered at the young men.

"Alright! The show's over! Get back to your training, you little maggots!"

"Yes, Sir!"

The young men shouted in unison.

Leaving Astaroth alone with Aj'axx, the two men looked at each other for a moment.

Astaroth was the first to speak up.

"I'm sorry for being inconsiderate earlier today. I was just trying to find out what happened, and didn't stop to think it might still be a sensible subject."

Aj'axx sighed deeply.

"It's okay, Astaroth. I understand how you felt. You'll get your answers soon enough, though they won't come from me."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Kloud woke up. He'll be the one to tell you what happened. He's the best placed to do so."

"He has already recovered? I thought he would be out for days... In that case, I will let you rest, or whatever you were doing, and I'll go talk to him. Where can I find him?"

Aj'axx chuckled softly.

"I was watching the trainees from afar. I train them once in a while. You can find Kloud at the outskirts of the cave, where his tent was."

Astaroth nodded at the man, before walking in that direction. But he stopped next to Aj'axx.

He spun around and hugged him tightly.

"I swear I'll find a way to fix you. I know it's not my responsibility, but I will try. I wasn't here to help when this happened to you, and I share the burden."

Aj'axx pushed Astaroth away lightly, smiling warmly.

"I'm sure you will. Now, go."

Taking off in a quick gait, Astaroth walked away from Aj'axx, intent on finding out what had happened.

He rapidly reached the collapsed tent, where Aberon and Kloud were seated in front of each other, talking in a low voice. When they heard him arrive, they went quiet.

Kloud seemed tired and aggrieved, sitting on a crate, his shoulders slumped. He looked like his world had collapsed around him, and was pushing his body on itself.

Aberon looked at Astaroth, motioning him to take a seat on a nearby stool.

"Kloud. I'm so glad—"

Before Astaroth could finish his phrase, Aberon lifted his hand to silence him.

"Now is not the time. He is still fragile. I will explain what happened while you listen."

Astaroth nodded his head, confused.

He could see the man that had trained him in the past tremble ever so slightly.

Sighing loudly, Aberon repositioned himself to face Astaroth.

"There was a reason I wanted to explain this to you alone. It was dangerous to discuss this while Kloud was still under the influence of that fiend. But now, the danger is gone. And he must hear this, to atone."

"Atoning? What does Kloud have to atone for?"

Kloud started sobbing quietly, tears rolling down his face. Aberon responded in his stead.

"All of this."

Astaroth's confusion deepened.

"You wondered why Aj'axx was missing an arm. Or why Korin could no longer see or run. You also asked where I'dril and Chris were. That is what Kloud has to atone for."

Gazing from Aberon, to Kloud, and back, Astaroth tried to understand what Kloud could have to do with all of this.

"I don't get it. Isn't the demon the one that did all this?"

"Partly, yes. But the demon didn't do this on its own."

"Was there another demon?"

"Stop interrupting me, young man!"

Lowering his head, Astaroth apologized.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Good. Now be quiet. Let me talk, and you can ask your questions after."

"Yes, sir."

"This all happened months ago. We were already getting attacked by all the corrupted monsters by then, but we were holding on. Your wolf was a big help to us, beating back the toughest opponents while we took care of the weaker ones.

"But, one day, with the wave of corrupted monsters, came a much stronger being. The demon. We were originally ill-prepared to fight it off. It took a lot out of us to beat it back, to the point we had almost defeated it.

"But in a desperate attempt to break away from us, the demon critically injured Christopher. That is when things started going sideways. Kloud left after the demon, trying to cut its path of retreat, while I'dril attended to Christopher's wounds.

"It took Kloud half an hour to come back, so we don't know exactly what happened in the forest, since we still had some monsters to fight back. But when he came back, he felt... different.

"It was only after he walked over to Christopher and I'dril that the former realized the man standing before him was no longer his friend. When I saw Kloud raise his sword in the air, I was too slow to react.

"We lost I'dril in an instant, his head hitting the ground faster than most of us could realize what was happening. Christopher went berserk, trying to take down the imposter posing as his friend. He died doing so.

"Whatever the demon did to Kloud, it unlocked his former strength, and most of the weakened men under him were no longer a match. The demon controlling Kloud tortured and killed Christopher before tormenting the other warriors.

"Koring lost his eyes, with which he always tracked prey down, before also losing a leg. Then the demon moved on to Aj'axx, not even finishing Korin, taking off his shield arm, the man's pride.

"It took much effort, and almost my entire strength, to pin the demon down. After knocking it out, most of the villagers wanted to kill it outright. But I knew Kloud was still in there. I could sense him.

"We brought him down here, where the mana from the tree acted as a damper on the demon. I figured that as long as nothing roused Kloud's emotions, I could find a solution with time.

"This is what Kloud has to atone for."

Astaroth was stunned, unable to speak or even move.

Chapter 414 Rough Awakening

Next to him, Kloud was still slouched over, crying in silence. Astaroth was having a hard time understanding the situation.

"This is all my fault," Kloud uttered, his voice hoarse.

"Don't you pity yourself, muscle brain. Atone for what you did, instead of crumbling like a shattered mirror."

Astaroth stood to his feet. Looking at him, Aberon liked the look in his eyes.

"I agree with old man Aberon. Stop your self-loathing already. I've seen what demonic possession does to someone. Instead of crying here alone, you should be over there, apologizing to the survivors."

Astaroth pointed to the center of the settlement, where the fire was still blazing.

Kloud lifted his tear-filled face, seeing where Astaroth was pointing.

"I can't. I killed my friends. Their friends. I took away from the surviving ones the means to feel fulfilled at the end of the day. I can never face them again."

Astaroth's face morphed into a mask of anger.

"Where is the proud warrior who raved on and on about honour?! Get a grip on yourself, teacher! Do the honourable thing!"

Kloud looked at him, despair filling his eyes. He then looked to Aberon, who was acting like a bystander.

"Don't look at me. Look at him. Your student is right."

Kloud gazed back at Astaroth, his eyes still streaming with tears.

"I can't do it. I can't face them. Not after what I did to them."

Astaroth growled in anger. He scanned Kloud, verifying if what Aberon had said was still true.

Kloud Stryph

Level: 80

Grade: Rare

Health: 249,000

Mana: 7,800

'Looks like he still has his extra power. Good.'

"Fine. You want to act like a wounded dog? Let's see how long you stay that way."

Astaroth melded with Luna, reaching what was approximately the same level of strength he could gauge from Kloud at this moment.

Aberon had already caught on to what Astaroth was about to do, and only gave him fair warning.

"Don't hurt anyone or break anything. If you do, I'll punish you myself."

Kloud looked at Aberon, confused, until he felt a hand grab him by his collar. Looking at Astaroth, who was now up his face, with a crown of antlers on his head, and an air of authority to him, he gulped.

The next thing he saw was the settlement pass under him at an extremely fast pace, as he slammed into the opposite wall of the cavern to his tent. Falling to the ground, he coughed up a bit of blood.

'He's gotten so powerful.'

But looking up, Astaroth was already in his face again.

"I'm not done, old man. Get a grip, or I'll really kill you."

Astaroth, of course, wasn't intending to go through with that threat. But he was going to bring the man to the brink, if that was what it took to snap him out of his pitying mindset.

With a kick to his stomach, Kloud felt the air leave his lungs before he went flying up, hitting the ceiling. The commotion had roused everyone in the settlement from their daily activities, and they watched in horror as Astaroth pummeled Kloud to a pulp.

Kloud wasn't even defending himself. He just let Astaroth batter him like a living punching bag without resisting.

Once Astaroth had brought his health down to ten percent, Kloud already looking like someone had shoved into a blender with dull blades and pressed burst a few times, he brought the battered man into the center of the settlement.

Dropping him next to the bonfire, Astaroth looked around, seeing some looks of anger on the older men, most of whom had served with or under Kloud, back in their younger days.

"Look at them, teacher. Look at their angry faces."

Kloud sat up, looking through his swollen eyes, and noticing the stares. He looked down at his hands, thinking they were aimed toward him.

"I can't make it up to them. I'll never make it up to them. Not after what I did."

Astaroth spat on the ground.

"You idiot. Can't you see?"

Astaroth grabbed Kloud's collar again, rearing his fist for a punch, before someone intervened.

Aj'axx was holding his arm back, and lodged right against Astaroth's throat, a very sharp dagger. Astaroth looked at the one holding the dagger and smiled.

"I knew you still had some fight left in you. Kloud. If Korin can still find the strength to fight, how dare you sit on your ass and cry? How dare you pity yourself?"

Kloud was looking at his two ex-subordinates, who were currently holding back Astaroth, and tears streamed down his face again.

"Why are you stopping him? I hurt you so much. Let him kill me. I deserve it"

Astaroth could have broken away from Aj'axx's grip, or knocked the shaky Korin to the ground. But that wasn't his intention.

The dagger lowered from Astaroth's throat, and the latter used his free arm to support Korin. The blind man spoke up.

"Why are you crying, Kloud? None of this is your fault. The demon could have possessed anyone of us, and rampaged like you did. Yet, I know you would have held onto us until we were back to normal. Just like we did."

Kloud didn't know how to respond to his friend.

"But... I killed our friends. Slaughtered them. And I injured you so much... How can you still think of me as the same man?"

Aj'axx let go of Astaroth's arm when he felt the young man would not do anything, and he saw him go back to normal. He walked around Astaroth, extending his arm backward.

Slap!

"Snap out of it, General. We are at war with the demons. What happened was regrettable, but it wasn't your fault. The true enemy is still the demons. We still need you to fight off the threat. Our young ones are not ready or strong enough to do so."

Kloud looked at his two friends, crying like a baby.

Aberon stepped into the tent circle and looked at the scene. He could already sense from Kloud's mental state that he was reconnecting with his normal self.

"Alright, that's enough. Night is about to fall. Let us all rest and revisit this discussion tomorrow."

Walking up to the group of four, Aberon lifted Kloud to his feet, and Aj'axx grabbed Korin. Aberon started walking his old friend to his own tent, stopping next to Astaroth.

Whack!

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"That was for being so ridiculously rough with him. I'm sure you could have stopped before almost killing him and gotten the same result. Now, go to sleep. We'll finish talking tomorrow."

Rubbing the back of his head, Astaroth walked toward where he had left Genie earlier that day. She was laying there, waiting for him to come back.

He laid down next to her, resting on her belly, as she covered him with her puffy tail.

"I guess I could have stopped before that. I think melding with demons so often has made me slightly more violence-prone. I'll have to be careful."

Turning his head slightly, Astaroth closed his eyes and fell asleep almost immediately. He hadn't realized how tired he was until he stopped and relaxed.

Chapter 415 No Rest

Astaroth didn't rest long, as Genie started growling only a few hours after he fell asleep. The low growl of such a massive wolf, especially since he was leaning on her, was enough to pull him from sleep.

"What's wrong, girl?"

'A new batch of monsters is coming our way. They will be at the walls in a few minutes.'

Astaroth was slowly getting used to hearing her voice in his head. Her voice was almost similar to that of Phoenix, which made him wonder how she got her voice.

Did she choose it? Did she decide how it would sound herself?

Or was it a natural process that happened on its own?

Astaroth stood up while thinking of this, letting the giant wolf do the same. When she howled, he almost skipped up in surprise.

"The heck was that for?! I almost had a heart attack"

'I apologize for startling you. I was warning the warriors about the threat.'

"Don't worry about it. I was merely surprised, is all. Speaking of which, you were fighting alone last time, aside from the monsters, of course. Why is that? Shouldn't the capable warriors help?"

Speaking that phrase, Astaroth's mind flashed to the recruits he had seen training. He remembered seeing them, and a few wounded other fighters, but not a single able-bodied warrior.

Were there none left?

Confirming this sad thought, Genie looked sad.

'They have all either been gravely wounded, or are dead. The warriors of this village are few, and most of them cannot fight anymore. As for the young ones, they are not ready...'

It made sense, now that he thought about it. He did not know how long the corruption had been affecting the local monsters, but it couldn't have been just a short time.

Demons wouldn't have been already roaming about if it did. And with what he saw in Tel'narel, it had been a while.

It made sense that some warriors had perished over this long period, or been wounded severely enough to make them unable to fight any longer, just like Aj'axx and Korin.

"Well, I guess it's just you and me, then. Let's get moving."

Genie nodded, lowering her posture a bit, so Astaroth could climb on her back. Jumping up, he mounted her like he would a horse, and grabbed onto the only thing he could: her fur.

When she launched forward, his brain hit the back of his head, and his heart skipped a beat. He was not prepared for the sudden acceleration, even going at this speed wasn't much for him.

He was used to running at this speed, or flying. But being mounted had a different feel to it.

It was almost like he had been riding a bus all his life, which he had, and now he was driving a Ferrari down the highway. The exhilarating feeling brought him back to the memories of his earlier days in New Eden, when running at a normal speed was, well, normal.

His thoughts were interrupted by blinding light, as they had already reached the surface.

Genie curved left, heading straight for the wall up ahead. Astaroth could see a cloud of dust and ash rise in the distance, and knew what caused it.

"Are you alright alone on the ground to start? I will try to fight from the air, kill all the flying targets first, to ease our load."

'We won't be alone for very long. Our reinforcements are already arriving.'

As soon as she said this, Astaroth heard a howl coming from over the wall. He looked puzzled until Genie explained how the monsters were already there.

'Arborea and Teraria have set up a ward around the forest, at a distance from the walls. When corruption crosses over the ward, it alerts all the forest's monsters and sends them this way.'

"That's pretty neat. But why don't they come here too? Wouldn't it be faster if they fight too?"

'Setting up the ward, as well as keeping the tree fed in Aether, which protects from detection of the part underground, has taken a lot from them. They rest most of the time these days.'

"Hmm. That's unfortunate. It doesn't matter though. Since I'm here, we can do this ourselves."

Genie surged in excitement, her mind already thinking of the battle coming their way. She hopped over the wall soon after, landing in the middle of the monster horde, here to help her.

Astaroth looked around and found what he was looking for. A large gray wolf, further away, about the same size as Genie, was standing in the middle of a large pack of dire wolves.

He scanned the beast.

Dire Wolf Alpha

Level: 40

Grade: Elite

He didn't scan fully, uncaring of its health and mana, since he wasn't fighting against it. But once he had read its info, he realized the wolf was staring at him.

Nodding his head at it, it nodded back.

'So it's sentient enough to realize what I did... Interesting.'

Looking back forward, the cloud of dust was now so close in the distance, he could almost see the monsters. Unfortunately, they were on the lower part of the basin, so they would see the monsters only once they crossed the ridge up top.

It didn't take long before this happened, and he gazed upon the charging monsters. He could already see the same composition as before, if only different in numbers per monster type.

There seemed to be more blood bats than before, which wasn't much of an issue, considering their lower levels and health pool. But another thing was a bit more worrying.

The number of bears in the horde was double that of the last time, and their levels seemed higher, too.

"Are the hordes getting harder over time? Or is it just a coincidence?"

'They are progressively stronger. At first, there were only a dozen monsters per attack. But now, the biggest horde we fought back, I needed the help of Aberon. They numbered over two hundred corrupted monsters.'

Astaroth pondered on this phenomenon. He wasn't sure if the tear in the village was the only one fueling the corruption in the forest, but he was sure that closing it would at least help to lessen the burden on the settlement.

He quickly sent a message to Phoenix before closing and locking his interface so he wouldn't get distracted during combat. This was something new he had found out from Gale, back before the siege on the Bastion.

The corrupted horde finally reached the bottom of the basin, now only a few hundred meters away from them.

"Alright! Let's kick some monster ass!"

Melding with Morpheus, he launched into the air, pulling out Ad Astra and changing its form to a bow.

"Let the hunt begin!"

Chapter 416 Another Mastery

Astaroth started aiming at all the blood bats that were flying in his direction, his weapon already enhanced at a hundred percent, dealing maximum damage on regular attacks.

Loosing another arrow, he watched as the charged magic projectile hit his target. He caught something in his mana vision he had never seen before while using Ad Astra in bow mode.

A small flicker of mana came back to him after every shot, melting back into his bow. This happened so fast that he could hardly see what that flicker was.

So, using his already back off cooldown Thousand Thoughts skill, he slowed down his perception of time after firing another arrow. Once the arrow pierced a bat, the flicker appeared again, zooming back toward him.

As it got closer, he could see it clearly this time. It was a tiny sliver of metal that fused back into the bow.

'I wondered how the arrows conjured. I guess it makes sense.'

But this opened up a new realm of possibilities for him. His brain was still churning at a thousand percent speed, ideas flashed through his mind.

As the skill went back into cooldown, a grin appeared on his face.

'Let's try this out.'

He had already enhanced his weapon to the maximum value of one hundred percent that the skill allowed, but he wanted to try something else. The Ad Astra's arrows were conjured out of condensed mana, giving it a shape.

Since he could enhance it more, up to catastrophic levels, as he had done in his combat against Leon, it made him wonder. What part of the arrow contains the enhancement?

Focusing his mana vision on the arrow, he noticed most of the mana originally came from the sliver of the bow that formed the arrowhead's tip. But once the shaft formed, the energy to create it all came from the sliver, and almost emptied it.

'What happens if I charge the tip again?'

Wanting to test it out, he poured a hefty amount of mana into the sliver of metal. But instead of supercharging the arrow, and making it unstable as it had done the last time he tried this, since he was focusing on one point specifically, only the sliver charged up.

And just as it started becoming unstable, Astaroth loosed the arrow at an incoming enemy. The arrow penetrated the blood bat, just like any other arrow, dealing its enhanced damage.

6,445

Astaroth was disappointed that this didn't work. But then he noticed something strange.

Not even a second after the arrow pierced into the bat, it suddenly ballooned up, shining blue through its skin, before bursting like a party popper.

31,500!

A bit of blood splattered over Astaroth, who hovered there, surprised.

He saw a notification light slowly start flashing at the corner of his vision, but he temporarily ignored it. He didn't need to check it to know what it was, since he felt the bow in his hand grow slightly stronger.

'I gained a mastery level.'

His face stretched into a grin once more.

Fighting was the perfect moment to learn different masteries. Of course, his basic abilities made it easier for him to learn new masteries on them, since they weren't anything complicated to start with.

He couldn't imagine how a spell like a flame tornado or icicle rain would be difficult to find masteries to them. But that wasn't his problem, since he couldn't cast those spells to begin with.

His affinity for these elements was too weak for the mana to obey him on such a large scale.

But what skills and spells he had were plentiful, and that made them a treasure trove of possibilities.

Over the next few minutes, while his meld with Morpheus lasted, he determined that his new skill had a ten-second cooldown. With this information, he could time his attacks perfectly, and became more effective.

The four minutes left to him were enough to get rid of all the flying pests that Genie couldn't deal with, and freed the non-corrupted bats from the dogfight they were losing. This allowed them to go into a tactic they were used to, air-to-ground harassment.

Seeing this tactic from an allied perspective showed Astaroth how a number advantage easily overpowered larger foes.

'And to think the villagers fought these things back for years. No wonder a more powerful version of them suddenly became troublesome to deal with, causing casualties.'

Of course, he didn't delude himself into thinking the corrupted bats were the only culprits. The corrupted wolves and bears were very much a threat, too.

With the power the bears brought to bear, a single swipe was enough to take out an Ash Elf who wasn't prepared. Or even one that wasn't tanky enough.

There was no wondering why they had been pushed underground and into a defensive fight. This had turned into a siege, and the endless waves of enemies would eventually corrode all their fighting power, leading to a gruesome end.

Shaking the gloomy thought out of his head, Astaroth landed on the ground, melding with White Death. He swapped the Ad Astra's form from a bow to metallic claws, re-enhancing them, since the timer had run out.

Dashing into the fray, Astaroth looked around him, rapidly spotting Genie. The wolf was dealing with two bears on her own, holding them at bay.

The uncorrupted blood bats were swooping in on the other bears, harassing them with their numbers and speed, making sure they were too busy to gang up on weaker enemies.

But the monsters could barely kill their corrupted counterparts on their own. And since the numbers advantage was still on the corrupted side, this fight would eventually end badly.

That was where Astaroth came in.

Seeing as Genie had her side well in hand, he looked over at the other giant wolf on his side. Rapidly spotting the massive grey wolf, he dashed to its side.

Arriving next to it, he stopped at its side. He raised his hand, looking the wolf in the eye, before motioning that he wanted to touch his head.

The grey wolf looked reluctant to put his most vulnerable point so close to the dangerous-looking metallic claw, but the mental messages coming from Teraria and Arborea reassured it, and it lowered its head.

Astaroth opposed his hand to the wolf's head, using the same method he had used with Genie, and communicating through simple emotions and images.

When he pulled back his hand, the wolf opened its eyes and nodded at him.

"Good. Then let's get to it."

Chapter 417 Asking For Some Time

Astaroth and the grey alpha dashed into the fray, crisscrossing each other's paths, changing targets as they went. They aimed to get rid of the weakest link in the corrupted wolves, and to reduce numbers as fast as they could.

Astaroth was scanning the creatures as he went, hitting every one of them, marking them for the alpha to command his underlings to focus on them. He also attacked the marked targets to maximize the damage output.

This hit-and-run resulted in many casualties on the corrupted side, as a combination of Astaroth's high damage, and the other monsters' focus, rapidly dispatched all the weaker corrupted monsters.

Astaroth thought about his skills as he marked the weakest creatures in the bunch, still trying to find other ways to boost his damage. With how the grades of every corrupted monster were higher than their normal counterpart, their health was also higher.

It made killing them much harder than it should have been, and their passive regen also did not help.

'I need higher damage if I want to take care of them faster. Is there anything else I can do with Enhance Weapon?'

He was confident in his ability to manipulate mana, inside him, on himself, and even around himself. But he still wondered what he could do that would boost his damage.

Casting Ignite on a nearby giant bear, to aid the weaker monsters in containing it, Astaroth noticed something. Although the bear was regenerating the paltry damage he was doing, something else happened that made him smile.

The upticks of health on the burning monster were suddenly lower!

To confirm the budding theory in his head, Astaroth spun around and ignited another enemy. Just as he had hoped, that monster's health also started regenerating at a slower pace.

It was half of the amount from before, which still was around five percent, but anything that made their health stagger was good. If he could ignite every monster in the corrupted monster horde, he would give a tremendous advantage to his allies.

'But targeting them one by one would take way too much time. I have to find a better solution.'

Astaroth kept on slashing at the corrupted wolves, aiding in taking those creatures down as fast as possible. They had already taken out half the horde, which was not a small feat, but some monsters on his side had also perished.

All in all, the numbers advantage had been reduced on the corrupted side, but they still hadn't entirely flipped the situation around fully. He needed to take more drastic actions.

He was half tempted to set the entire forest ablaze, and let the regular monsters deal with it on their own, but he had a feeling that would upset the forest guardians.

Astaroth's mind rushed through many different ideas, all as worse as the next.

That was until he thought of something.

'When I use my mana to cast a fire spell, am I turning the mana to fire mana? Or am I igniting the regular mana, turning it into fire mana after?'

He had only one way to find out. Astaroth rarely focused on the spells he already knew from his early days in New Eden, since they were more of an automatism at this point.

But masteries opened up a whole new realm of magic, that would require him to learn the functioning of every individual spell he learned.

Raising his hand toward another bear, Astaroth squinted his eyes to look at the mana particles floating around the monster. He cast Ignite and watched closely what happened.

He had half expected his mana to turn into fire mana through his will, and light the fur on fire, but that was not what happened. The mana that left his body surrounded the area he was targeting, before suddenly agitating all the lingering mana around itself.

Once all the mana particles in the targeted zone started vibrating, faster and faster, under the coaxing of his mana, the air sparked, and the fur caught fire.

'Oh my god! We call it magic, but it's really just science! Mana is only our mystical way to affect physics on a deeper level than what humans can!'

What his mana had done, was exactly what they taught you in science class, in high school. Heat was generated by the friction of the molecules, a phenomenon also known as thermal energy.

By this logic, the mana he pushed out forced the mana in the air itself to react in a way that caused it to heat up. To most people, this meant nothing, other than an explanation to a known theory.

But to Astaroth, who had perfect mana sense, and could discern every kind of mana around him clearly, this was an epiphany.

Turning his head toward the wolf he was tag-teaming with, Astaroth shouted.

"Can you keep the corrupted monsters busy for a while by yourself?! I think I found a solution to our problem!"

Although the wolf couldn't understand his words, the grin on his face was practically enough to convey his feelings. The giant grey wolf dashed toward him, brushing against Astaroth, as he sent his emotions and intentions in a pulse of mana, directly to the wolf's brain.

The information now much clearer in the animal's head, it ground to a halt, before raising its head to the skies.

AAAWWWOOOOOOO!!!

Its howl resounded through the basin like a nuclear alarm in the Nevada desert. The dozens of dire wolves still alive responded to the call, howling out briefly themselves, causing a wave of fear in the hearts of the corrupted monsters.

But this wave of fear was rapidly overridden by their madness, as they howled or growled in response, redoubling their rage and efforts to tear down the resistance.

But the wolves rapidly retreated from whatever combat they were engaged in, sometimes at the risk of getting attacked, and suddenly surrounded Astaroth and the grey alpha.

Astaroth grinned at the move. He nodded at the alpha, before closing his eyes and focusing intensely.

'Let's hope this works as I think. Otherwise, this defensive stance will turn into a deathtrap.'

Chapter 418 One Last Plea

Pulsing a wave of mana outward, Astaroth focused on every particle of mana in a five-hundred-meter radius, extending his focus as far out as he could, without losing his attention to detail.

From that point, he could sense everything. Whether it be the mana in the air, flowing to the wind, or the earth mana particles, rising with the dust of combat, he felt it all.

Falling into a hyper-focused trance, all the sound stopped reaching his brain, as his mind cut out any stimuli that didn't come from mana. With this, his brain started analyzing every particle it could sense, finding their differences.

In a matter of seconds, he was able to lock onto the essence of the corruption. He already knew it stemmed from demonic mana, leaking into their plane, but there was something else to it.

The demonic mana was acting as an inhibitor on the monsters' brains, keeping them in a state of permanent confusion. It was also making the monster stronger, acting like a steroid on their bodies.

This explained how they gained the extra levels and grades, and why they were all acting so brazenly. The fog on their minds was keeping them from feeling danger, even when they were dying.

But Astaroth frowned.

Those particles of demonic mana were so deeply ingrained into the brains and bodies of these monsters, he couldn't possibly affect it from the outside. He needed something that would affect deep inside their bodies.

But he thought of something that might go around this.

'Aether is naturally purer than mana. What if I used Aether to excite the demonic mana into combusting itself?'

He knew this would inherently be harder to accomplish than it sounded. Controlling Aether was still hard for him.

Up to now, the most he could manage was to make Aether, or gather it, and immediately consume it into spells. That didn't require as much control as what he needed here.

Astaroth compressed some of his mana into Aether particles, only making two for his test. Once they were compressed, he tried controlling the Aether, to send it into agitation, so he could recreate the earlier phenomenon of ignition.

But try as he may, the Aether particles refused to follow his instructions, simply floating around in front of him, waiting to be consumed or dissipated.

After a minute of fruitless coaxing, Astaroth was on the verge of screaming in anger at the two little particles of pure white floating in his sight.

"Come on, stupid Aether! Do what I'm asking!"

But nothing changed.

His meld with White was about to end, so he undid the fusion, summoning White through Soul Manifestation, consuming the two Aether points and some. When he saw the Aether reacting to the spell consuming them, he clicked his tongue.

Opening his eyes momentarily, he noticed the circle around him had shrunk quite some distance, and the grey alpha had some wounds on him that looked like they would need treating.

'I need to make this work now, or start slaughtering monsters again.'

Astaroth believed melding with Luna would raise his chances of success, so he did so.

Feeling his body chance once more, he directed his thoughts to the doe now fused with him.

'Luna. Do you know how to control Aether directly?'

Luna was still young, and hadn't learned how to communicate with words, yet. But she was able to communicate through images, like sharing her thoughts.

Astaroth had an image of her being confused, flash in his mind, so rephrased his question.

'Can you manipulate Aether, other than just accumulating it? I need to control Aether to perform something that could save us a lot of trouble. Can you help me?'

A series of images and emotions scrambled inside his head in response, and Astaroth almost passed out as a result. Whatever Luna had tried passing on, it was too much for Astaroth in that short of a message.

Once he caught hold of his footing again, He tried processing what images he remembered.

It wasn't easy. It was like he was trying to solve a riddle that needed words, with only images meaning those words.

And Astaroth sucked at riddles.

After piecing together a few images for about thirty seconds, he felt a nudge on his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he noticed the tired and worried look of the grey alpha.

The circle around them was now nearly gone, and the corrupted monsters were about to reach them.

'I have to make an attempt, right now.'

Focusing his mana into itself, forming some Aether, Astaroth practically emptied his mana reserves. Once the Aether was formed, floating around his head, he did the only thing he could think of.

He pleaded.

'Please, Aether. I need to do this, or I'll have wasted the lives of these wolves for nothing.'

Keeping in his head the image of his mana exciting the ambient mana into combusting, he kept his eyes closed, hands clasped together like a prayer.

Because of this, he didn't notice when the Aether particles started spreading out over the basin, landing on each corrupted monster.

It wasn't only once he started hearing shrieks of pain that he opened his eyes.

On the ground, covering the basin's lower part, all the corrupted monsters were writhing in pain, screeching out unnaturally. Coming out of their bodies was black steam, which was accumulating around thirty meters above the ground, forming a ball.

Once this black steam stopped coming out of the monsters, silence covered the area, with the normal monsters sniffing at the motionless creatures.

Astaroth scanned some of them, wondering if he had killed them. But the result was even better.

After scanning a few of them, he was able to confirm that they had been cleansed. The black demonic mana that had been everywhere in them was gone, and their bodies seemed in shock.

But Genie started growling at the ball of black steam over their heads.

The black orb was slowly spinning, its surface in constant motion, like someone had blown black smoke into a transparent balloon.

Astaroth tried scanning it, but nothing appeared. But when he looked at it with his mana sense, his face paled.

This was all the demonic mana that had corrupted the monsters, and it was still active!

Astaroth did not want the mana to suddenly reintegrate the vulnerable monsters on the ground, so he tried shooting an Aether-boosted Moonbeam at the orb, to destroy it.

But when the beam passed through the orb, it scattered, before reforming into a ball, and suddenly lunging at him.

'Shit!'

Chapter 419 A Talk With Leon

Astaroth knew he didn't have time to dodge, so he instead did the next best thing. He raised his arms, crossing them in front of him, hoping to block a part of the impact.

But he didn't expect what happened next.

As the massive orb of demonic mana reached him, he clenched his teeth, expecting the impact to send him flying back. But no impact came.

When the orb reached him, a powerful suction suddenly appeared, originating from his ring. The ring absorbed the entire orb of demonic mana in a matter of seconds, leaving Astaroth standing there, speechless.

He felt the ring pulse a few times before settling down to normal.

"What the fuck?"

Astaroth did not know what had happened, and how the ring manifested power of its own, but he would not spit on a win. But he took a mental note to go speak to Solomon as soon as possible.

Just to be sure nothing had changed with him, he sent his consciousness inward, inspecting every inch of his body and soul. But nothing seemed amiss or different.

'Why did it absorb the mana, and what will it use it for?'

Looking around himself, Astaroth searched for any remaining corrupted beasts. But he couldn't find any.

All the monsters that had originally been against him were now on the ground, either passed out or dying.

Some wounds on their bodies were grievous, and the bleeding effects that came with them were enough to deplete their suddenly reduced health pools.

It seemed that as soon as the corruption was gone, the monsters' grades went back to normal. Only the extra levels remained.

Astaroth wondered why the strength stayed, if the monsters were being propped up with a steroid-like effect, but he guessed some of it might have just stayed as a permanent gain.

'I won't complain. If these monsters are on our side for the next time we get attacked by another wave of corruption, we'll have better chances.'

Astaroth walked over to where Genie was, before climbing on her back. It was still the middle of the night, and Astaroth felt completely drained, because he converted almost all his mana into Aether.

He undid his meld with Luna, calling back White Death and Morpheus, before collapsing on the wolf's back.

"Can you carry me back inside? I'm beat."

Genie nodded her head gently before walking her way back to the walls. Astaroth only needed to hang on to her once, as she climbed over the walls in three quick jumps.

While they walked back into the tunnel that led to the underground refuge, Astaroth opened up his notification screen.

Spell Learned

Your deepening knowledge of the functioning of mana has taught you how to manage mana overload. Enhance Weapon mastery level 1 gained. Spell learned; Mana Shatter. Congratulations, player Astaroth!

Passive Learned

You have touched upon the realm of purity, and experienced how to control its energy. Passive Learned; Aether Control. Congratulations, player Astaroth!

Spell Learned

Upon finding how to guide Aether into your spells, you have taken a minor spell and changed its function entirely, learning a new spell in the process. Ignite mastery level 1 gained. Spell Learned; Flaming Cleanse. Congratulations, player Astaroth!

He smiled tiredly while reading all the notifications.

'My list of mastery spells is getting thicker. I bet a lot of players are doing the same as me, and finding new ways to use spells as they go. I wonder how everyone in Paragon is doing?'

Astaroth fell asleep, rocked by the side-to-side movement of Genie's shoulders.

In the Bastion's throne room, Phoenix was reacquainting herself with all the work she now had on her plate. Leon guided her through all the new personnel he had recruited during their ten-year disappearance, and she felt proud that he hadn't slacked.

"I have to say, Leon, I'm impressed. I had expected you to take it easy while we were gone, and have everyone do the work for you. But with how all the new court members seem to respect you, I assume you have been diligent."

"Tsk. I wanted to take it easy, at first. But the contract you had me sign kept me on my toes. And when the invasion started, I ended up taking the job seriously, lest the kingdom turn to ash before your return. I didn't want to die, just because I couldn't keep my word."

Phoenix eyed him with curiosity.

"So you only worked so hard because of the looming threat?"

"At first, yes. But I realized after a few years that ruling like this isn't much different from what I had done with the beasts. Of course, the load is a lot heavier, and the enemies are a lot different. But I still ended up enjoying it."

Phoenix smiled at his answer.

"What threats did you face while we were gone?"

"The biggest one was when the elves tried saying we had to go under their banner, since we were in their territory. They refused to acknowledge our right to rule, at first. I wanted to go on a rampage in their kingdoms, and show them we had a right to be independent.

"But after many negotiations with Elwin, and a few forced altercations, the Elves finally left us alone. They were especially happy they had left us alone, once the corruption started spreading. Now we have an allied relationship, and we help them fight off the monsters when we can."

Phoenix internalized the information. She had guessed the Elves would be a problem, but she hadn't thought that they would go as far as wanting to subjugate them, or even fight, just for a small plot of land in their forests.

She would have to look closely into the matter, and have a talk with Elwin about his negotiations. What had he promised them, for them to back off?

But for now, this was on the back burner.

"So the corruption started before we came back. How bad is it?"

Leon looked grave for a moment.

"It's bad. The return of the abnormals is timely, but could either spell our salvation or our doom."

Phoenix became glum.

"Tell me everything."

Chapter 420 Concessions And Earnings

Leon leaned back in his chair, rocking it back onto its hind legs, looking slightly depressed. After uttering a long sigh, he explained his reasoning.

"In the last ten years, we had many discussions between rulers of the many kingdoms of the continent. The consensus is that, regardless of how powerful an ally the abnormals can be, your kind is a wild card.

"No one knows what side you will ultimately decide to fight for. You could be the end of this world, just as much as its saviour. There is just no telling. Although many rulers were impressed by your previous actions, in a good way, other kingdoms have established a strict ban on abnormals because of the actions of the few.

"Even I have had to bend to some of their unreasonable demands."

Phoenix so far agreed with the thoughts of the rulers of New Eden. Players had their own agendas, varying from simply levelling up to ruling kingdoms, or sowing chaos everywhere and anywhere.

"What demands are we talking about here?"

Waving his hand dismissively, he answered.

"Nothing too big or undermining. Most of them were just about cutting any ties to them, be it commercial or from the teleportation network. Speaking of which, I took the liberty of having a teleporter installed in the main plaza, while you guys were gone.

"It's connected to all the cities with one, the only exception being the ones who refused to associate with a kingdom ruled by abnormals."

Phoenix nodded her head.

She had yet to open the guild interface, to see what new buildings or edicts Leon had put into place. She doubted he had done anything harmful, given the city was apparently prospering.

"How expensive was that to set up? I hope you didn't burn through all our funds. We will need them to keep fortifying and growing."

Leon laughed lightly.

"My queen, the original funds you left behind are long gone."

"What?!"

Phoenix stood up abruptly, slapping her hands on the table.

Leon raised his hands in a motion of peace.

"Relax. The original five million gold is gone. But it wasn't wasted. The treasury isn't empty."

Phoenix opened up her interface, wanting to pull her hair out from the anxiety. If he had burned through all their funds, how were they going to grow now?

But she gasped as she opened the treasury interface.

Guild Funds

Gold: 64,495,215

Silver: 7,709,058

Copper: 588,043,528

'So rich!'

She snapped her head in Leon's direction, who was sporting a victorious grin.

"Where did you get all this money?!"

"In a few places. Taxes, transactions, military aid, and a few other things."

"Taxes? Taxes on what?"

Leon brought his chair back on its four legs before snapping his fingers.

Phoenix looked at him curiously.

When a human woman came out from a side door, next to the throne, she wondered who she was, and what she was doing there. She was dragging behind her a trolley, with piles of scrolls, as well as ledgers.

The woman stopped a few meters from the table, bowing down ninety degrees.

"My queen!"

Phoenix looked at Leon with a puzzled look.

"This is Brienne. She is the kingdom's bookkeeper. The trolley behind her is a paper trail of all the transactions made in the last ten years, on which we made a profit or loss. There is not much loss, though."

Phoenix looked at the woman, who was still bowed down.

"You can stand at ease, Brienne. I am not much for formalities, currently. What is it you do, aside from bookkeeping?"

The woman straightened up, brushing the creases out of her dress with her hands, before smiling widely.

"I am a trained royal notary and accountant. I was educated in one of the greatest schools on the continent, and taught how to redact or notarize any transactions between a kingdom and any secondary party."

She looked proud of her education. Phoenix could tell from her posture that she didn't come from a rich upbringing, though.

She was standing too rigidly, and lacked the ease a noble would have around royalty.

"How long have you been working for our kingdom, Brienne?"

Leon raised his hand, answering the question for her.

"She was gifted to us by the very school she was educated in. A few years after you all left, when the invasion started breaking out across the continent, I accepted a protection contract to defend the Mathematic Academy of Themisca.

"After defeating the corrupted waves, and sealing the crack from which they were coming, the Academy insisted we take one of their newly graduated student, as a bonus on our payment. They

said it would be their honour to have one of their brightest work for us, and ensure our continued prosperity."

Phoenix knew about the kingdom of Themisca, since their capital was one of the five greater cities on the continent, and the biggest and most prosperous one, too. But she had never heard of that academy.

'The players still have so much to learn about this world,' she thought to herself.

Bringing her attention back to the matter at hand, she turned her gaze to the ledgers and scrolls behind the woman. She wasn't a fan of bookkeeping, and did not want to go through this.

"I don't need to look through all of it. I trust you did a good job. But I will want a rundown of our current financial situation. Current costs and income, and such."

"Yes, my queen. I will get to it right away. I should have a report ready by the end of the day."

Phoenix nodded her head. Her thoughts wandered to Astaroth, who had told her he was accepting the task given by Prince Nalafein a few hours prior.

'I wonder how it went. He still hasn't contacted me back.'

But she still had many things to discuss with Leon, so it would have to wait.

"Let us get back to our discussion. You still haven't told me all the concessions and opinions of the other rulers. I would like to know that."

Leon nodded, waving at Brienne, dismissing her.

After bowing swiftly, the woman grabbed the handle on her trolley and carted it out through the same door she came through. There would be a long conversation, and Leon didn't think the woman needed to be part of it.