

New Eden 451

Chapter 451 Testing Out New Spells

Reaching the child demon, Astaroth slashed his weapon at the demon, who looked to the left. But as it looked away, starting to teleport, a flash of light caught its attention.

From the corner of its eye, the demon noticed the weapon in the Ash Elf's hand had changed from a short sword to a bow. And the grin on the Elf's face was unmistakable.

As it disappeared, it felt something was wrong.

Reappearing where it had just looked, it spun around to look at the Ash Elf chasing him, only to be met with an arrow glowing with magic power, whose tip was shining even brighter.

The arrow hit the demon child right in the chest, taking little to no damage, but the subsequent explosion that occurred wasn't as benign.

Astaroth smiled as the damage number popped on his screen.

3,075

Calculating his attack's normal damage, against what went through this time, he ascertained one thing.

'This demon is at least over the two-hundred and fifty constitution point mark.'

Depending on its level and grade, this could either be big or extremely small. But looking at the health bar of the demon, he erred on the side of extremely small.

It hadn't even budged.

This discouraged him a bit, but he smiled anyway.

'Now I can hit it, at least.'

But he forgot a minor detail. The demon had been toying with him up to now.

Blasting out of the smoke cloud the explosion created, the demon dashed at Astaroth. On its face, the smirk from earlier was gone.

When it neared him, a wide kick came in from the left, and he had barely enough time to contort his body out of harm's way, as another attack, a punch this time, came in from the other side, smacking him in the jaw.

-27,324!

"Now it's my turn," the demon stated.

Astaroth took the attack, feeling like a missile had just used his face as target practice, sending him flying like a cannonball.

-5,792

He rammed into the ground, taking a second instance of damage, and bouncing off of it like a rubber ball. After bouncing a few more times, and sliding on the ground for a short distance, Astaroth finally stopped his flight.

His face was numb from the impact, and his body ached all over from being treated like a pinball. But this one attack gave him a ton more info on his enemy.

The speed at which it moved and attacked wasn't so much higher that he couldn't react, even though he couldn't entirely keep up, either. But the power behind the attack itself was no joke.

'I just had to not get hit, right?' he thought.

But it was all wishful thinking.

The demon seemed pissed that it received even a single instance of damage, and it wasn't letting Astaroth off with just one hit of retribution.

Astaroth felt his senses alert him to the demon's presence to his left, and he quickly pulled out his Ironbark Shield, blocking the attack as best he could.

Although he mitigated a part of the damage with the shield, he hadn't had time to enhance it, yet, and he hadn't activated his Mana Skin, either. So the attack still hurt him quite a lot.

-7,786

He couldn't attack with his bow when he had a shield equipped, so he transformed the Ad Astra into its spell-slinger mode, using only one hand to fire spells.

As the impact on his shield knocked him away, Astaroth fired a few Magnetic Bullets, hoping he could try out one of his newly learned spells.

It took him a while to land his first Magnetic Bullet, as the pissed demon was teleporting more often now, and repositioning in angles either hard to hit or in positions to attack him. But once he did, his troubles lessened.

With one Magnetic bullet inside its body, the demon began losing his ability to dodge the attacks launched at him, and couldn't understand why. And soon enough, it was riddled with small puncture wounds.

Contrary to most demons, Astaroth noticed this one's wounds weren't closing as they appeared. He wasn't sure if the demon was regenerating or not, since he still couldn't see the health bar ticking down.

But one thing was for sure. Hitting him was now child's play.

With all the magnetic bullets inside the demon's body, even when it teleported, the shots Astaroth fired still tried homing on him. Once he judged he had shot enough, he used his Magnet Stone Storm spell to buy himself some time.

The demon's eyes widened when the two-hundred projectiles suddenly arced up from Astaroth, before circling back down and targeting him. He didn't know what trick the mortal was using to control them, but it irked it.

As it ran around the village, trying to ditch their pursuit, Astaroth focused on the ground beneath him. Throughout his week-long wait for Silent's arrival, Astaroth had practiced many things.

One of them was an earth spell. Although his affinity for Earth magic wasn't very high, his practical experience on low-scale modification of Stone Bullet gave him a moderate understanding of its functioning.

Through this, he was able, with much practice, to develop a new spell for himself.

Shape Stone.

Although the name was quite underwhelming, its uses were plenty. This spell allowed him to model stone in any way he wanted, on a wider range, and change its shape, composition and even density.

Which led him to create a mastery spell barely a day after.

After changing the ground under him to iron, on a radius of around a hundred meters, Astaroth smirked. Lifting his hand toward it, he murmured an incantation.

"Magnetic Platform; Synthetic Gravity."

The demon, still running around in the village, making the bullets chasing him hit objects as much as he could, to stop them, suddenly felt his body slow down. In a matter of moments, it went from slowing down to completely stopping before jerking back toward the center of town.

As it was pulled through buildings and chariots, amongst other obstacles, he slammed into the ground before Astaroth. It felt like its body mass had suddenly quintupled, and the demon couldn't budge.

"What have you done?! Release me!"

Astaroth smirked.

"How about no? Wait there for a moment."

Astaroth wasn't done. His spell testing was only starting.

Chapter 452 Rod Of God

Changing his meld from Luna to Morpheus, Astaroth launched into the skies. After reaching about a hundred meters up, he stopped his ascent.

His Synthetic Gravity spell had a range from which he couldn't leave, lest it deactivate, and he wasn't done using it yet. But he would have to hurry, though.

The mana pull on that spell was insane, even when considering his mana regen. At a thousand MP per second drain, his meagre approximately two-hundred and fifty regen per second wouldn't last long.

Even what he was attempting now would send him teetering on the edge of his mana pool, if he didn't have access to mana siphon. Sending his shield back into his inventory, Astaroth brought his both hands forward, aiming at the demon below him.

Concentrating acutely, a stone bullet came into existence before his fingers and started changing. In a few seconds, the stone bullet had elongated to around two meters long, about ten centimetres in diameter.

The end toward Astaroth was flat-topped, but on the other end, it was pointy, like a stake, and looked menacing. But the transformation wasn't over.

The composition rapidly started changing, going from a brownish-gray stone to a shiny grey metal, with blue-ish sheens. This metal was called osmium.

Astaroth had used his time outside the game to study the chemical compositions of many things, as well as the periodic table, and many other science materials.

Since he figured magic was just applied sciences, with a force that allowed miracles to come true, he broadened his knowledge base and thus came upon this material.

Osmium was the densest metal on Earth that held magnetic capabilities. With this knowledge, he could create his next spell.

He had read online once, a theory about orbital weapons, one such project being called 'Project Thor', which could launch tungsten rods from orbit onto land, at incredible velocities.

Since he couldn't fly into space, he found the next best thing. Instead of gravity, he would use Magnetic Force to accelerate his projectile faster. So Osmium was his best bet.

And he had succeeded. At a distance of a hundred meters, he could accelerate his metal rod to Mach 5 and deal tremendous damage over a small area.

By his calculation, it was like detonating around two hundred and fifty kilos of TNT in a very concentrated spot. His only worry about doing this was its impact on Silent Light, who was currently underground.

But he estimated the iron sheet he had produced, which was a foot thick, would absorb most of the downward force. But just in case, he still messaged Silent.

You might want to use a defensive spell again if you can. I'm about to nuke this motherfucker up here.

Silent Light received the message and wondered what he meant by nuke. But he still activated a defensive spell, which was much weaker than Solaris' Sanctum but assumed it would do the job, whatever Astaroth was throwing at the demon on the surface.

Astaroth focused his mind on his projectile, sending electricity in it to magnetize it, and then aimed the tip toward the pinned-down demon.

"Stone Bullet; Rod of God."

The rod hovering at the tip of his fingers launched downward, accelerating blazingly fast, as it boomed, breaching the sound wall, and reaching hypersonic speeds. Astaroth quickly used Mana Siphon to replenish his now almost empty mana reserves and watched as the projectile collided with the demon.

He half expected a blast to go off, to make it look cool, like in the movies, but no such thing happened. What did happen, though, was the immense force of the rod carved directly through the demon, caving in the iron plate under him in a waved pattern from the point of impact.

A shock wave blasted from the impact, travelling in every direction, crumbling the shoddily built houses in a hundred-meter radius, and exploding the windows on the others for another hundred meters.

Astaroth, who was still flying at a little under a hundred-meter height, received a part of the blast wave, shaking his clothes violently, and wringing his eardrums a bit.

But he was too focused on the damage number in his sight to care.

1,972,500!

Even as a critical strike, this amount of damage was an ungodly amount of damage. He was too astounded to even look at the demon below him, who was writhing in pain, its body slammed open by this massive metal stake.

The hole in the demon's guts was almost the size of its entire chest, leaving little to no material holding his neck and head to his upper body. An expression of pain and fear glared on the demon child's face, and anyone with a conscience might feel bad if it didn't represent absolute evil.

Under the ground, Silent Light felt the earth and stone around him shake as if an earthquake level six on Richter's scale had just hit the area, and he had to stabilize himself on the walls nearby.

Dust and smaller stones got loose from the shaking, and fell to the surrounding ground, some even striking the small shield he had around his form. But it did no serious damage to him.

Silent Light waited for the shaking to stop before looking above him to make sure he wasn't suddenly caved in. But he could still see the top of the well, so he sighed in relief.

Sending a message to Astaroth, he started climbing out of the well.

What happened up there? Did a meteorite suddenly strike the ground?

Astaroth read the message with a chuckle as he was flying down to land next to the demon, who was no longer pinned to the iron-plated ground. The impact of the Rod of God had vaporized the Magnetic Bullets in his body, causing the force to lose its traction on his body.

But his state was far from good.

Cracks spread everywhere on its body, starting from the massive hole in its chest, and its form looked like it was about to shatter. Black smoke was leaking from the gap in its body, and Astaroth had a feeling it wasn't the demon's healing.

Because its health bar was still full. Which brought up so many questions to his mind.

Questions he would have time to have answered, as the demon suddenly smiled, before speaking these words.

"It seems this plane still has some capable mortals in it. I'll have to report this to the higher-ups. I had fun playing with you, Ash Elf. Next time we meet, let me treat you back."

Before Astaroth could ask what he meant, the demon's body shattered, smoke exploding outward, before dissipating into nothingness.

'Shit. He's gone. I'll never understand why his health wasn't budging.'

Chapter 453 Bad News

Astaroth felt disappointed at his lack of answers, but a notification washed away his gloomy mood.

You have killed Miasma Manifestation Demon (Lvl???). 27 million Exp awarded.

Looking through his status screen and those of his companions, an enormous grin found its way onto his face. White Death was close to levelling up, he was halfway there, as was Luna, and Morpheus was now Lvl forty-seven!

This was a gigantic windfall!

Silent Light crawled out of the well as he was jumping in joy and looked upon the devastation in the small Ash Elf town. He didn't know what Astaroth was rejoicing about until he looked at his own notifications.

This made Silent Light jump in joy as well, as levelling up seemed increasingly impossible as the levels went. But the thirty-six million Exp he received certainly helped.

It was more than double what he had made just reaching this place, and that was with constant fighting. This was reason enough to rejoice.

He could only pity the five new members they left at the fortress to defend from the horde of corrupted monsters.

Thinking of them, Silent Light remembered he had received a message from them while he was sealing the portal. Opening it, his smile vanished instantly.

"Astaroth! We need to go back to your shelter! Now!"

Astaroth spun around, facing Silent, whose face was back to being serious, and he nodded. He didn't know what the matter was, but Silent wasn't one to overreact lightly.

And since he couldn't feel any more portals, even after stretching his senses to the maximum, whatever the issue was became the priority.

Since Astaroth still had a few minutes left on Morpheus' meld, he quickly grabbed Silent Light and blasted off into the sky. They would be making a quicker pace from there than on foot.

The bowl-like valley wasn't far away from their current location, as they hadn't travelled very far in the first place. Astaroth could already perceive the top of the tall tree that stood in its center, from where they were.

The height at which he travelled helped a lot in getting a better view of the distance, but it was also the reason he saw what the problem was at the shelter before Silent even told him.

A gigantic dust cloud rose from the forest near the valley, and above its trees, Astaroth caught sight of something that he seldom wanted to see.

"This is the worst outcome possible. How could this even happen?"

While Astaroth was gone with Silent Light, closing the nearby portals and dealing with the demons guarding them, the small group of five players, new to Paragons, had held their end admirably

during the horde defence, only needing the help of Kloud once more than half the horde had been mowed down.

This was quite the feat for them, as they had never fought against such a large swarm of enemies. Rather, they doubted anyone had at all since this would crush even the most prepared full parties.

The reason they had held this long at all was thanks to their leader's companion wolf, who was the equivalent of a boss monster in combat, with her armoured form, covered in stone and vines. Her power had astounded every one of them, and they envied their leader for having such a strong pet.

But at some point, her transformation had ended, and the tables had rapidly turned. Enough so that Genie judged Kloud was no longer an option, but a necessity.

After howling loudly, sending some monsters reeling in fear, it had taken Kloud mere moments to join the fray. His restored power had once again shocked the newbies, as he cleaned up the battlefield in minutes, making quick work of the larger monsters like beating up kids.

The small party had then collapsed to their asses, panting heavily, battered and bruised, sweating like fat men in a sauna, and laughed at their own pathetic states. Kloud had returned inside the shelter shortly after the last monster died, after making sure the abnormals were fine on their own.

The five players had wanted to follow suit, but Genie growled at them, making them step back and shudder.

Astaroth hadn't specified if the players were allowed inside the shelter, and Genie preferred not to take a chance at displeasing her master. She could have asked him, but she knew her master was busy.

As Genie was about to lie down to rest, a strong sense of foreboding washed over her, like the universe was telling her something terrible was going to happen. She whimpered as the pressure from the feeling hurt her mind.

It soon subsided, though, and she went back to normal.

But the players had heard her whimper and wondered if she was maybe wounded. Their healer, the druid woman, whose name was Flowing Creak, stepped near the wolf, hands raised in a show of peace, and inspected her with the system inspect function.

Seeing that the wolf had a full HP pool, she frowned, wondering if her wounds were mental, rather than physical, and decided to cast a calming spell.

She preferred helping without needing to, then doing nothing and letting the animal suffer.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on her mana, and cast her spell.

"Soothing Mist."

A soft blue mist started appearing in the air around Genie, who looked at it warily, before sensing no threat coming from the druid girl, and letting the mist land on her.

The calming effect was immediate, as Genie suddenly felt the stress of her duty lessen, closing her eyes in satisfaction. But her calmness wouldn't last.

A loud rumble echoed next to the mounting tree line as a humongous stag appeared next to the trees, collapsing to its side.

Genie bounded up, recognizing the stag.

As she ran up to the forest guardian Arborea, the guardian locked her gaze on her.

Her soft chiming voice echoed in the clearing, surprising the players who had run closer, too.

"You need to warn your master, Genie. Teraria is no longer himself. He has succumbed to what plagues the land and is on his way here."

Genie panicked as the thought of fighting the stone buck terrified her. Teraria might have been an excellent teacher to her, but he was also terrifyingly powerful.

She immediately contacted Astaroth through their shared mind link.

'Master! Grave news! A guardian has turned!'

The response was immediate.

"I know. I can see him. Hang tight, I'm almost there.'

Chapter 454 Desperation At The Shelter

From his spot in the sky, what Astaroth saw was nothing short of the worst scenario possible.

Walking toward the shelter, oozing demonic miasma, size bigger than usual with its head towering over the forest's trees, Teraria, second guardian of the forest.

Silent Light's face had already changed to one of absolute horror.

"What the heck is that?!"

"That is the worst possible thing that could have happened..."

Silent frowned at Astaroth's response.

"Can you beat it?"

"Hah! I doubt anything can. That is one of the two forest guardians. They are mythical grade, and I can assure you their level isn't under one hundred, at a bare minimum."

Silent Light gulped as he looked back at the monster. A mythical monster...

He hadn't met one yet, and he wasn't sure any player could even think of fighting one. Especially not one twice their level.

Astaroth was having similar thoughts, thinking the shelter was doomed. He thought about diving into it and just teleporting everyone away with Ipos' power.

The problem was that Ipos could only swap things on the same plane, so he would end up sacrificing the same amount of people to make the trade.

A couple of players flashed in his mind that he wouldn't mind exchanging against the lives of the Natives in the shelter. But when he thought of the death penalty for dying to a mythical grade monster of this level, he would condemn these players to a fresh start.

And that was not ideal, in the grander scheme of things. So he shook the thought from his head.

Even though he would love nothing more than to take a few of those players down a peg or two, killing any chance they had at being useful later on was a waste. He had to think of something else.

His next thought went to the ring on his finger. He knew of at least one demon with sealing abilities and other spells that could lock in place a foe of this might.

But it would require Solomon to unlock their full power, and he wasn't on the greatest terms with that demon, either. Which meant the chances of that happening were next to nil.

From the images Genie had sent him on Arborea's state, she was unfit to fight her brother to a stalemate, let alone a win. His options were getting shorter and shorter.

He thought of getting Leon through teleportation, but that wasn't much better. Leon would probably exercise no control, and he didn't want to kill the guardian.

He thought of using all his spells and abilities, which would maybe boost him enough to fight the guardian, if only temporarily, but he was also afraid the whiplash would knock him out of the game for a while. And he couldn't afford that.

His list of options was growing thinner and thinner, and desperation was slowly creeping in. Astaroth was still a minute out from the shelter, because he had to detour around Teraria, and he was about to lose his wings.

At this pace, he would reach the shelter at the same time as Teraria, and by then, it would be too late.

'Think me, think!'

A thought suddenly popped into the back of his mind.

'What about Lady Anulo?'

They were theoretically on her turf, and Astaroth had plenty of access to her powers through proxies. He might be able to call on her, if only so she could save the residents of the shelter.

It was worth a try, that much was sure. But would he be able to reach her in time?

Astaroth quickly landed, using the last few seconds of his meld to Morpheus to stop their descent into the forest, so the duo didn't crash. He then immediately melded with White, since his options were either a demon or waiting.

Silent Light pushed him away from himself, shouting at him.

"Go! You'll be faster alone. I'll catch up! Go!"

Astaroth nodded his head, grateful for his understanding, and pivoted around. With all the power in his legs, when he took his first step, the ground caved in under his feet.

He was running at his full speed in a couple of steps, his acceleration putting drag-race cars to shame, dashing through the forest, barely dodging the trees and stones in his path.

The remainder of the distance was covered by him in about thirty seconds, and he reached the shelter a bit before Teraria would. But he still didn't have a guaranteed solution.

Since he had no time to think much more, he closed his eyes and prayed to Lady Anulo.

'Lady Alantha Anulo, Goddess of the Stars, protector of the Ash Elves. I call to you for help. Lives are at stake and we cannot win without your help. Please answer my call.'

The players that saw him arrive like a bullet train wondered what he was suddenly doing, closing his eyes so tightly, but they had no time to ask him. The ground started reverberating with the footsteps of the giant stag approaching them.

They could already see its complete body at the top of the valley's hills, and they started shaking without control.

"How the fuck are we supposed to beat that?!" The Orc barbarian, Bjorn Greenskin, cried out.

The rest of his party didn't even bother answering, since they knew not.

Two people appeared next to Astaroth, as he was opening his eyes. When he saw them, his eyes widened.

"Kloud! Aberon! What are you doing here? You should be helping the others evacuate. Aberon, don't you have a teleportation spell you can use?"

Kloud pulled out his sword, walking toward the guardian.

"I can't sit by while you youngsters fight this threat on your own. I will help as much as I can, slow it down as much as I can."

Aberon, in the meantime, looked at Astaroth.

"It's too late for me to use any teleportation spell I can use. I may be called the omni-mage, but that doesn't mean I am well-versed in all magics.

"Spacial magic takes decades of studying and practice to become fluent in. Any spell I can use would require me to chant for at least ten minutes. So unless you can buy me ten minutes, I might as well be here, fighting the guardian to a stalemate."

Astaroth cried inwardly, cursing fate for screwing them like this.

Chapter 455 Dark Reality

"Wait. You can fight it to a standstill?"

Astaroth looked at Aberon incredulously. He knew he was powerful, but wasn't he overestimating himself?

Aberon could see the question marks in Astaroth eyes, and he clicked his tongue.

"Kid. Did you just think I'm talking a bigger game than I play? When have you ever seen me use my full power?"

Astaroth gulped at Aberon's words, wondering if he had suddenly learned how to read minds.

"Far from me that thought, sir. It's just... Aren't you a rare grade? Even if you are the same level as the guardian, you won't be as strong as it."

Aberon sighed angrily.

"What you saw was what I let you see, young man. But rejoice. Today you get to see me exert all my effort into saving the people I care about."

Astaroth almost wanted to laugh at the grand words, but before he could take even a single breath to do so, a crushing pressure slammed into his body, sending him directly to his knees, hardly capable of breathing.

When he lifted his head, with great difficulty, Aberon suddenly looked forty years younger, and his body was pulsing with mana. Astaroth didn't even dare activate his mana vision, as he could already see mana particles manifesting, visible to the naked eye.

'So powerful!'

He dared scan the old man, even though Aberon had told him more than once how rude he thought the act to be. He simply had to know what his true power was like.

Aberon, The Omni-Mage

Level: 100

Grade: Legendary

Race: Ash Elf

Class: Archmage

Health: 2,024,000

Mana: 10,311,810

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'Holy Fuck!'

Astaroth had many times before tried speculating how powerful Aberon was, judging by the occasional mana mishaps he did when casting spells. But even when releasing mana for spells, the control the old man exerted was practically flawless.

Seeing him now, full-powered, and looking almost the same age as him, set a contradicting image in his mind, which would take a while to consolidate.

Aberon felt the scan wash over him and didn't even try to stop it. He instead smirked.

"Satisfied now, little peeper? More inclined to believe me now?"

Astaroth nodded his head vigorously, any doubt about the old man's capabilities gone from his mind. But he noticed something else, too.

Aberon's attitude differed slightly from usual. Instead of being angry and impatient, he sounded more cocky and sarcastic.

The personality change was strange, but he remembered one time when Aberon had acted this way before. When they were stopped by a guard at Tel'narel's gates.

This couldn't be a coincidence.

But now was no time to ask the old man if he had a personality disorder. Teraria was now a few hundred meters from them, already at the bottom of the valley, and he was glaring at them.

Astaroth only glanced at him before swivelling his head in search of Arborea.

Since Lady Anulo wasn't responding to his call, he had no other choice than to battle Teraria with every able-body available to him here. And that meant the guardian twin as well.

Spotting her further away, her body slumped against the stone barrier, Astaroth ran toward her.

"Arborea! Are you alright?"

He inspected every visible inch of the stag's body, trying to find wounds, but there were none to see. Which made him wonder why she collapsed like this.

"I am alright, child of the stars. Only weak, not dying. But this could rapidly change if my brother is not stopped."

Astaroth figured he could help the guardian if he channelled some of his Aether into her, so he tried. After converting half his mana into Aether, he slowly pushed it into the stag's body.

Arborea sighed in relief, the energy supplementing her body's natural recovery, but it was far from enough to get her on her feet.

"Thank you for the Aether, young one. But it will shortly go to Teraria. Our bodies are interconnected, and he is the one sapping my strength."

"Dammit! How did this happen? I would have thought beings of your power wouldn't be susceptible to corruption as weak as this. What affected Teraria?"

A flash of hatred passed in Arborea's eyes as she recalled something unpleasant, but she rapidly went back to her normal self.

"A creature dressed in a black cloak that masked its presence attacked us while we were holding the barrier around your shelter up. It did something to Teraria, and he started changing.

"The corruption in the land slowly leaked into him through means unknown until he became like this. I tried holding him back, at the cost of no longer maintaining the barrier, but it was in vain. Teraria siphoned away most of my strength."

Astaroth immediately knew who the person she was talking about was. The demon court mage.

He had most likely tried killing the guardians, to speed up the corruption of the forest. But something didn't add up for him.

"Wait. If Teraria overpowered you, why didn't he kill you? The corrupted monsters I fought all lost their sense of reason. Is he different?"

A small nod from the stag was his response.

"But why didn't he kill you? Certainly, it wasn't because you are siblings. What held him back?"

"Teraria can't kill me. If he does, he also dies."

"Huh? How so?"

"I said earlier, our bodies are interconnected. They are so, in the deepest of ways. If one of us dies, both of us shall perish. So is the way our creator formed us to be. Teraria did not kill me because he didn't want to die. Instead, he drains all my power from me constantly, rendering me weak and useless."

This was also a problem for Astaroth and his allies. He didn't want to kill Arborea, but what if they had to kill Teraria?

What if there was no other way? Could he resolve himself to kill both of them for the survival of his brethren, Ash Elves?

Was he mentally ready to doom the forest to corruption, for the lives of a few dozen of people? To possibly doom thousands, to save a few?

'Shit. What are we supposed to do, then?'

Chapter 456 Reaching Out For Help

The sound of fighting started echoing all around the valley floor as Aberon, Kloud, and Teraria went at each other's throats. Teraria's might, being boosted by Arborea's power, was nothing to laugh at, and although Kloud's fighting prowess was back to his normal power, he wasn't a match.

But what really impressed Astaroth was Aberon's rapidity of casting, even on large-scale spells, but also his battle instincts. The number of times he saved Kloud from getting crushed to death by Teraria was already in the double digits, in barely a minute of combat.

Astaroth had never seen Aberon fight. Not really.

The altercation at the entrance of Tel'narel, he considered a skirmish, at most. But this was an actual combat situation.

One mistake could cascade into premature death. Of course, Aberon's health pool was high enough to prevent him from suddenly dying from a single blow.

But the risk wasn't zero. Astaroth wanted to join in, but even when melded, he feared he would just end up being cannon fodder for a beast of Teraria's calibre.

He gritted his teeth, feeling helpless for the first time in a long time, ever since he started playing New Eden. Images of himself, level one player, starting in the small village not far from here, relying on everyone else to level up, flashed in his mind.

'Fifty levels further, so much stronger than before, and I'm still unable to help when it counts. It's like I'm running in place.'

Astaroth's hands balled up into fists, clenching hard enough for his nails to dig into his palms. He hated this feeling of helplessness.

'Isn't there anything I can do? Am I just going to stay here, watching as they fight a losing battle?'

Astaroth thought of using Asmodeus' teleportation ability to get everyone out of the shelter to somewhere safe. But that would take too much mana from him, and he would end up in an extreme fatigue state.

He had hoped Lady Anulo could lend a hand, by bestowing him so power, or something. But she was a no-show.

Astaroth found himself thinking something he would have never thought before.

'What would Khalor do?'

He knew that Khalor frequently put himself in dangerous situations, to either level up faster, or gain some new undead. But he had an army with him.

In his state of thought, Astaroth did not notice himself fall into hyper-focus, reaching a trance-like state. He only noticed once all the surrounding noise was gone, and the sound of someone clearing his throat snapped him out of focus.

Looking around himself, Astaroth noticed he was now inside Solomon's Signet, sitting across from him. The old man had a warm smile on his face, like he had been waiting for him.

"I knew you would come to me. I could feel your angst all the way in here. What troubles you, young man?"

Astaroth was taken aback. He hadn't tried to come here.

It had been an unconscious action.

But reaching Solomon wasn't a bad thing. The old man might have answers to his questions.

Or better yet, he may know how to help.

"Old man Solomon. I need your help."

"Hm. What is it?"

"People I consider my family are in danger. A monster far beyond what I or my friends can handle has appeared, and we can't escape from it now. But fighting it back is also not a viable option. Can you help me find a solution?"

Solomon scratched his long beard, looking thoughtful for a moment, before gazing back at Astaroth.

"Would killing the monster solve your problem?"

Astaroth smiled wryly.

"It might. But the situation is a little more complicated than that. Killing this monster in particular would be just as bad as letting it roam free. It is an important part of its ecosystem."

"Hm. I see. What have you tried yet to contain it?"

Astaroth clenched his fists.

"I tried nothing. This being is far beyond my current capabilities. If I were to join the fight, I would be nothing more than a nuisance to my allies already fighting it. I would need to go all out, just to get a chance at fighting it, and then I would become a burden afterwards."

The old man frowned at him.

"You tried nothing? Then how do you know you are no match for it?"

"The power level of that being far surpasses mine. It would be like a fly trying to fight a bear. What else can I do but stay on the sidelines?"

Solomon looked slightly disappointed.

"Young Astaroth. You never struck me as the cowardly type. I thought you to be the rash type that rushes face first into danger, even if it is a lost cause. You are brave enough to use the powers of a prince of hell, but not fight a creature stronger than yourself? Where has your courage gone?"

"Master Solomon. The situation isn't as easy as just fighting and killing this creature. If I kill it, I doom another being to death, as well as unsettle the balance of an entire region. How could I dare do this, for the sake of a few people, even if I consider them my family? Wouldn't that make me a monster?"

"Young man. I will tell you something. Something of great value. Sometimes, the monster was the one on the right. If saving your family comes at the cost of the greater good, does it make you evil?"

Astaroth buried his face inside his hands, exhaling. He didn't think Solomon was wrong, but his sense of right or wrong urged him not to kill Teraria.

"I even prayed to a god, hoping she could help. But I've had no answers."

Solomon scoffed.

"Hah! The gods. A bunch of stuck-up figureheads, if you ask me. They wouldn't deign to raise a finger to resolve matters for mortals. Which one of those fools did you ask for help from?"

Solomon's dislike of the gods surprised Astaroth, but then again, he was in control of an army of powerful demons. Something must have pushed him into using one side of the power-scale, instead of the other.

"I called out to Alantha Anulo, goddess of the stars."

"Never heard of her. She must be a younger deity that didn't exist in my time. It doesn't matter, though. I doubt Gaius would let her intervene, anyway."

"Gaius? Who is that?"

Astaroth looked at Solomon with curiosity, as the man spat the name out with distaste.

"It's irrelevant to your current predicament. A subject of discussion for another day. I doubt you staying here too long is a good thing, so I will offer you my help. But it will come at a significant cost for you, young Astaroth."

Perking up, Astaroth finally saw a sliver of hope.

"I'll pay any price if it means I can save my friends and family!"

Solomon nodded.

"Very well. Then get ready. This will hurt."

"Wha—AARRGGHH!!!!"

Chapter 457 Releasing Something

A searing pain assaulted Astaroth at two places simultaneously. His head and his chest.

A feeling of pressure suddenly assaulted his mind, like someone suddenly jammed it into a vise, with someone slowly turning the handle. The pressure on his head constantly mounting was almost making him froth at the mouth already.

As for the pain in his chest, he took it as karmic payback, for every time he melded with a new demon. Solomon's hand was jabbed deep inside his chest, and he could feel the old man taking hold of his soul in his hand like it had actual physical properties.

But no blood was coming from the edges of the wound, and it almost made Astaroth panic, until he remembered they were technically inside a mind-space.

Astaroth had no idea why Solomon was man-handling his soul, but the pain it caused was excruciating.

He kept screaming and wailing in pain, his voice slowly turning hoarse from all the yelling. But Solomon seemed unperturbed by this and had his gaze locked on his own actions.

He could see inside Astaroth and was looking at the soul through preternatural means. Solomon was currently looking at the golden cage he had seen once when invading Astaroth's mind.

This cage, made of pure golden energy, was laced with runic inscriptions, in a tongue no one could read in the mortal realm. This was the written language of the gods.

Of course, Solomon had long since learned this language, as it was the same one he used to inscribe on his signet, to trap and bend demons to his will. He was currently trying to break the inscriptions, to free all the locked soul power away inside Astaroth's soul, but it was proving to be very complicated.

'This Aether signature... There's no mistaking it. This was Gaius' doing. But why did he lock away this child's soul? What does he gain by doing so?'

These were all questions for later, though. He needed to focus on his task.

Focusing his mind on the cage, Solomon found himself diving into Astaroth's soul-space, where he stood before the massive golden cage and its imprisoned soul power.

The strength of Astaroth's soul, which was far from being in mortal proportions, once again astounded him, but he focused on the cage.

Grabbing at the bars, he injected his Aether inside, lighting the runes, one by one, in a specific order. As the runes lit up, until the bar looked like a metal rod with Christmas lights on it, Solomon started sweating.

'This seal is abnormally strong for a mortal's soul. What was Gaius thinking? This could have crippled the boy...'

Once all the runes on this one bar were lit up, it suddenly shattered, creating a small gap in the seal. Solomon smiled, as he felt proud of foiling the obnoxious god's plans.

But something happened that Solomon hadn't expected. The soul behind the bars suddenly pushed against the cage, violently rocking it.

A sliver of its power escaped through the crack, pushing Solomon outside the soul-space on its way out. Solomon's body was sent flying away from Astaroth, alerting Amon, who was on standby next to them.

But as Amon tried reacting, pulling out his sword, the snap of fingers resounded in the area, as he vanished from his place. Solomon raised his head, glancing at Astaroth, who was glowing like a miniature sun.

His silhouette showed two wings of light behind his back, closely resembling the wings of a fairy, as the young man's traits also suddenly looked more delicate.

The aura he was projecting right now was far beyond anything that Astaroth could, and Solomon was bewildered.

Astaroth, or rather the entity that stood in his place, looked at Solomon, smiling warmly, before evanescing out of the mental-space.

'What in the nine hells was that?!

In the outside world, Astaroth, who had been zoned out, eyes closed, standing near Arborea, suddenly opened his eyes. Arborea, who had been worried about his sudden lack of responsiveness, felt relieved to see him move again.

But the feeling of relief was fleeting, as she sensed the soul inside the boy was not that of Astaroth. The stag looked sternly at Astaroth's body.

"Who are you?"

Astaroth's voice, which was normally more in the Tenor range, suddenly sounded like a Soprano woman's voice.

"Worry not, child of the trees. The boy is safe and sound. I will only be using his body temporarily. In exchange, I will then solve your predicament."

Arborea's face seemed to frown, as far as a stag could frown, as Astaroth disappeared from before her.

Astaroth's body reappeared in a starless void, surrounded by the cold vacuum of space. A pearly white energy radiated out of his skin, protecting him from the cold and pressure before he turned around.

Behind him, there was a massive door, on which runes, not so unsimilar as the ones Solomon had just seen, scrawled on every inch of the material the door was made of.

Astaroth, or whoever was controlling his body, laid hands on the door, releasing a pulse of Aether into it, as the symbols lit up instantly, before vanishing. The door slammed open, and behind it, a gigantic woman, with fairy wings, dressed in a white robe, floated, rolled on herself, seemingly asleep.

The woman's enormous body suddenly shrank to the size of a bead, before zooming into Astaroth's body, where it melted into his soul.

With a snide smile, Astaroth reformed the door and the seal that had been on it, before vanishing from there. But the repercussions to this action would soon be found out by the one that had sealed the woman there in the first place.

Gaius, who was lazing about, while watching a pool of water, where both the world of New Eden and Earth were displayed, was yawning in boredom.

That was, until a pulse of Aether, followed by a sense of dread, overcame him.

He snapped up to his feet, his eyes going wide on his otherwise featureless face.

"No. It can't be."

He opened up a glowing gold portal before him, stepped through it, and reappeared before the same large door. Aposing his hand on it, he could peer behind the sealed door.

"No... No! Noooooo!!!!!!!!!"

The universe shook in response to his shout, as natural disasters hit both worlds, in every corner of them, on various scales.

"She can't be free. She mustn't!"

Back in New Eden, Astaroth reappeared before Arborea. But this time, Arborea could feel Astaroth inside his body.

As he opened his eyes in a daze, feeling like he was missing something, or like some time had passed without him noticing. He looked at the worried Arborea before him, before realizing he was glowing in a pearly white glow.

"What the heck?"

Opening his status window, Astaroth's jaw dropped.

"What the fuck?!" he exclaimed.

Chapter 458 Four Parts Into One Whole

*Astaroth (Currently melded to #&%?!@ / 1:54)

Level: 50 (44,260,313/98,209,950)

Grade: Special (???)

Stats:

HP: ???

MP: ???

Even when looking down in his status window, everything that usually showed numbers was currently riddled with question marks. He couldn't even see his own stats!

Strangely enough, he didn't feel like he wasn't in control. He felt fine, aside from the fact he suddenly felt like he could rend a planet in two.

Arborea was looking at him strangely. But he didn't have time to appease her.

The timer next to whatever name that was rapidly ticking down.

Snapping his head toward Teraria, Astaroth could feel the guardian's soul, as clearly as if he was looking through a window. And he felt its anguish and pain.

He stepped forward, intrigued by this new development, and without realizing it, this single step blinked him in front of Teraria.

Kloud and Aberon both panicked, seeing the young man facing the guardian so brazenly like this, and just as Kloud was about to dash in and pull Astaroth away, Aberon appeared next to him and held him by the shoulder.

"Let me go, old fool! Can't you see him? The beast will crush him!"

Aberon slapped across Kloud's face, pointing at Astaroth immediately after.

"That is not Astaroth. I don't know how, or why it happened, but Astaroth is in a state of godly bestowal! If you touch him, you'll disintegrate!"

In Aberon's eyes, Astaroth, who normally had an enormous amount of mana, by any standards, when melded with his soul companions, was right now way past that point. Aberon couldn't see where Astaroth's mana aura stopped.

It was as amazing, as it was terrifying, to see the young man radiating power equal to Lady Anulo's. That was how he knew Astaroth was not in danger.

But this wasn't Alantha Anulo's essence radiating from him, and this brought Aberon a serious question. Which god suddenly decided to meddle in mortal affairs?

Meanwhile, Teraria, who had been thrashing about, attacking his two assailants relentlessly, was suddenly rooted in place. Ingrained fear of a higher power locking every limb, paralyzing it.

Astaroth floated up to Teraria's chest, where he could sense the soul, and looked at it with intrigued eyes. His movements were almost automatic, like he knew what to do, even though he had no idea what he was doing.

He pressed his right hand to Teraria's torso, and the stag vaporized instantly, revealing the soul inside, shining a dull white, with a shroud of black and red encapsulating it. As Astaroth grabbed the soul, he gently blew on it, the shroud of demonic mana disappearing.

He turned his head, almost on autopilot, and looked at Arborea, whose eyes were locked in an expression of fear at seeing her twin brother vanish so quickly. She could already sense her essence fading as well.

But in the blink of an eye, Astaroth was next to her again, his hand raised toward her side.

"Don't worry. I can save you, too. Do you trust me?"

Astaroth unconsciously imprinted Aether into his words, as easily as breathing it out, and Arborea felt herself relax, like Astaroth's voice was a balm on a burn, soothing her deeply. She instantly calmed down, before nodding her head once.

Astaroth smiled softly and touched her side, Arborea's body slowly dissipating, revealing the soul inside, which was glowing in a more vivid white than Teraria's but rapidly fading.

As he grabbed the soul with his left hand, he suddenly brought them together, and they melted into one, almost like they had always been two parts of a whole. But as Astaroth thought it was over, he heard a soft crystalline voice in his mind.

'There are two more elements to add to this. Let me guide you.'

He could feel the good intent in the voice, and assumed whatever gave him this power in the first place was the one speaking with him. So he let it guide his actions.

His now free right hand slowly brushed against his chest, as he felt Luna's soul fragment be pulled out delicately from his body, along with a small sliver of his own soul. The process, which he expected to be painful, was far from so.

As the two new ingredients mixed into the forming amalgam, blending seamlessly into each other, before a body started forming around it.

Astaroth watched on in awe, as well as Kloud and Aberon, further away, as a new being was birthing right before their eyes, made from the very essence of life. The body shone in a bright pearly white before dimming down.

As the light receded, it revealed a svelte woman, slightly shorter than Astaroth himself, with smooth curves, in a fashion that could only be described as godly. Her hair of silver was adorned with a crown of antlers that extended slightly out the side of her head.

Soft, fragile-looking wings fluttered behind her back, looking like the wings of a fairy from children's books. Her eyes, glowing like a bright full moon, in a soft white and blue glow, seemed to contain all the wisdom in the universe.

Her presence was neither overbearing nor erased, but inviting and soothing, like a parent's loving embrace. She smiled at Astaroth, and he felt his heart skip a beat.

He felt smitten, of not love, but absolute reverence. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Who are you?"

"My real name should not be spoken, but you can call me Nemus. I will be the new guardian of this forest, in replacement to the two stags, Teraria and Arborea."

Aberon flew in next to him, slamming his forehead to the ground, soon followed by Kloud. Astaroth looked at them incredulously.

Aberon didn't raise his head, knowing the young man hadn't bowed, before saying, "Bow down. Can't you tell you are before divinity?!"

Astaroth's eyes widened as he turned his head back to Nemus. But as he was about to bow down, he felt her hands on his shoulders as she held him upright.

"There is no need for such formalities," she said, before looking at the two kowtowing men and said, "Please, rise to your feet. I need no such prostration. Let us be like old friends, and speak face to face."

Aberon had never met a divinity before, but he knew someone who had. And the portrayal he had painted of it was nothing as soft and welcoming as this woman.

But he was not going to offend her. He would try to keep her happy for as long as they graced their presence with hers.

Getting back to his feet, He helped Kloud up, and they looked at the woman with a tinge of attraction.

"Now. Astaroth. I believe you are about to lose the power I bestowed on you. So we shall talk when you come back to consciousness."

Astaroth was about to say he felt fine, but as soon as the melding came undone, he immediately felt weak and dizzy and collapsed on himself.

His last thought as he did was, 'Who was that woman? And why did she feel so familiar?'

Chapter 459 Gaius' Rage

Just as Astaroth fainted, Kloud stepped behind him, catching him so he wouldn't fall to the ground. Aberon was still looking at the deity in awe.

Aberon had a similar thought to Astaroth. He was finding her traits to be extremely familiar.

Looking at her closely, he figured out why, as she kept smiling warmly. Looking at Astaroth in Kloud's arms, and looking back at Nemus, he made the connection.

The goddess looked exactly like Astaroth if he had been a woman—same facial features, only more delicate.

Silent Light reached the clearing at this moment, walking up to Nemus, thinking it was one of Astaroth's new forms. Given the crown of thorns on her head, he thought it might be a new form of Luna.

He couldn't see the giant stag that had been threatening the shelter anywhere and wondered if Astaroth had already taken care of it. Not far from him, the five other players were currently slack-jawed, watching the situation like watching a movie.

Silent grabbed Nemus' shoulders, still thinking it was his friend, and acting all chummy.

"Man, you already cleared out the enemy? You just keep getting stronger, don't you?"

Nemus had retracted her divine glow, which, in normal circumstances, would have instantly dealt an insane amount of damage to the mortal grabbing her shoulders. But her smile never abated.

Silent Light looked around, seeing the five players from his guild, looking at him like he was an idiot, while the two Natives were standing there, gazing at him, stunned.

But when he saw who Kloud had in his arms, the realization hit him. Looking at Astaroth's unconscious body, and then at the person he was holding in his arms, Silent Light had a 'What the fuck?' moment, before unhanding the woman.

When he glanced at Nemus, he saw two things that Astaroth never had, even when melded with Luna.

'That is a woman. A very attractive, Astaroth-looking woman.'

His mind went into shock, the virgin nerves inside him kicking into overdrive, and he fainted.

As he crumpled to the ground; his mouth frothing, Aberon, who had gone back to his old man appearance, after locking his powers away once more, shook his head in annoyance.

Turning his head toward the five Abnormals, he hollered annoyingly, "You! He's your friend, is he not? Grab him and bring him inside the shelter."

The five players looked at the old man, remembering how he had fought just a few minutes prior and dared not go against his words. The Orc party leader almost sprinted up to Silent Light's crumpled body and grabbed him in his arms.

The human in dragon plate mail tried grabbing Astaroth from Kloud, to get some brownie points from their guild leader, but the stare of death Kloud gave him in exchange made him piss himself. He gave up on the thought, his shame overcoming his greed.

As all of them walked into the shelter, Nemus looked at the skies. Her soft smile turned to a smirk for a moment, and she waved her hand at the natural barrier of rocks, a golden-blue shield forming over it.

'I'm not letting you lock me up again.'

Somewhere in space, Gaius was wrecking everything in his domain, throwing stuff around, letting his rage out at the turn of events.

"Ten million years! Ten million years since I locked her away, and she still finds ways to mess with me! RRAAGGHH!!"

Gaius teleported out of his domain. He needed something more purging than throwing his furniture around.

Reappearing in a faraway region of space, in a galaxy not visible from Earth, Gaius looked down on a world he had created a few million years ago, where a life form had just started thriving.

He appeared in his giant form, going down on the planet as he had many times before to them when he asserted himself as their only god. Chants and praise could be heard everywhere around him, as his power radiated outward.

It wasn't until he made his way close to the planet's surface, and his energy started devouring everything it touched, that the chants and praises turned into panic and cries of pain.

On that day, galaxies away from the milky way, Gaius committed his first mass genocide, of his own means.

The race of humanoids, resembling Gaius very closely, was torn to pieces as the raging god tore their world asunder. After a few hours of ripping everything to shreds, he finally cooled down, the anger in his heart subsiding to manageable levels.

A soft voice echoed in his ear. The voice had this reverberating effect, making it sound like two voices were overlapping and Gaius squinted in displeasure.

"Oh, Gaius. My sweet, sweet angry god. What caused you to go to such lengths as to commit an act of destruction so blatant? You are giving me butterflies in my stomach."

Appearing next to him, a woman of skin dark as the vacuum of space itself, with horns piercing her head, and hair of crimson red matching her irises.

Gaius made the sound of his tongue clicking, regardless of his mouthless face, and turned to face her.

"What do you want from me, demoness? You are much too far from your realm of influence to have felt all these deaths. Are you keeping tabs on me?"

A sliver of anger resounded in Gaius' voice as his energy flared up slightly once more.

The demon woman floated closer to Gaius, sliding her hands across his golden, peerless skin.

"Nothing of the sort, my lovely golden divinity."

She floated around the god, eyeing him with lust, and stopped again in front of him, her arms around his neck. If any other god were to see this scene, they would assuredly brand Gaius as a traitor.

"My lovely golden god, I was just wandering around space, to pass time, and your arousing anger reached my soul. The call was just too great for me to resist. Seeing you like this, massacring mortals like cattle, put me in such a good mood. Now I want to do so many... things... to you."

Pushing her away, Gaius' eyes squinted once again.

"Don't lay your dirty demon hands on me, you sacrilegious being. Speak. What did you want?"

The demoness sighed sadly before materializing a replica of the world of New Eden.

"All work and no play. You're no fun, my love. One day, I will get you to bed with me. Until then, I came with some information you might want."

Gaius looked at her hand, recognizing the world floating above it.

"And what is the price?"

The demoness turned her head to the broken pieces of the planet with the floating corpses and smiled.

"I will take the souls of these poor mortals. Consider it a favour."

Gaius snorted. He couldn't care less about the souls of such inconsequential beings. Waving his hand at her, giving her free rein, she obliged.

He watched her as she sucked in the souls of millions of mortals, whose souls had yet to pass over to the next phase of life, and devoured them with glee. Once she was done, Gaius looked at her with impatience.

"Now, you talk. What information do you have for me?"

Chapter 460 Stellar Council

On the east side of the continent, in Bastion City, Phoenix was finally caught up to all her duties as queen regent. Since Astaroth was not present, all the burden fell on her, which annoyed her a bit, but she also knew it was for the best.

Astaroth was not as much a rational thinker as he liked to believe, and most of his decisions were based on instinct and emotion. Even though he kept saying he had learned to keep his emotions in check, that was a load of BS and everyone around him knew it.

He had learned not to let his emotions spill into his soul melding, at best. So it was better for a more down-to-earth person like her to take long-lasting decisions for a kingdom.

Of course, she was also able to unload a part of the job to Leon, who had already been doing a great job, with the help of a council. She had taken time over the last week to meet every single one of its members, taking the pulse on them and weeding out the ones she couldn't find in herself to trust.

A bit of grumbling and displeasure had ensued, all of which was quelled almost instantly by Leon, who didn't take well the lack of respect for the actual ruler of Stellar Woodlands.

His threatening gazes, combined with low guttural growls, had a calming effect on everyone that was bringing discourse, and it immediately restored order. Of course, Phoenix already had found replacements for the ones she pushed out.

On the council, she currently had in place a member of all the management branches she could think of.

Leon's councilman for economy was a somewhat trustable merchant, from the mercantile association, who had been forced to give up his membership when he was accused of favouring some kingdoms over others in his transactions.

The mercantile association was reputable for the sanctity of neutrality, which gave them a protected status in all kingdoms. But this merchant, a Half-Orc man called Grit Herman, had been caught giving better deals to his homeland country on the dark continent.

This made him a pariah in the association and had him banned. Leon met him when he went on a defence contract in the Orc kingdoms and had offered him the position.

Grit had been the merchant in charge of their supply line while they hunted into the corrupted lands, and his diligence and principles had impressed the Beastman. So he offered him a contracted position in the council, which he eventually voided and gave him full time, welcoming him as a full citizen of Stellar Woodlands.

Grit was a hunk of a man, his Orcish tusks smaller than true-blooded Orcs' tusks, but not any less menacing. But getting to know him, Phoenix found him to be a happy-go-lucky man, with a wildly inappropriate sense of humour, which made him easy to talk to.

Currently, at the table in the throne room, Leon was to her right, with Grit to his right. To Grit's right, Declan had been appointed as replacement to the clown Leon had put in charge of military matters.

The man wasn't bad at his job, or anything of the sort, but Phoenix despised his haughty attitude and arrogance. It was hardly good behaviour to have for someone in charge of a kingdom's military.

When she had offered the position to Declan, who she knew had been in the army in his country, he had refused at first. He seldom wanted to return to this type of position.

But when she explained what his tasks would be, and how he wouldn't have to make any actual war decisions on his own, he finally gave in. And now he sat at the table.

Some of the other council members weren't happy about an Abnormal being at the table with them, but Phoenix had frowned at them before replacing them as well. How would they behave in the future, if they couldn't tolerate having an Abnormal as an equal if they had one as superior?

It augured badly. So she took no chances there.

Sitting to Declan's right, at the end of the table, was the representative of the adventurer's guild appointed to their kingdom. Apparently, Leon had fought back against that decision, but the threat of barring the adventurers' guild from Bastion City had tamed him.

This was supposedly a common practice for all kingdoms to respect. But when Phoenix had gone over the terms of that obligation, she chuckled and glossed over it.

The representative was basically unpowered in the council and was only there to make sure they did not take the rights and regency of the adventurers from them. She was really just that, a representative.

The woman, on the older side of the Fey age scale, which barely showed on her traits, if at all, was called Singing Grove. She was a mature woman, with pinkish translucent wings and hair of a greenish hue.

Her iris-less eyes were a tad unsettling for Phoenix, but her soft-spoken nature agreed with Phoenix's needs here. She barely ever spoke, unless it concerned the adventurers' guild and its members.

To her left, Phoenix had seated another person she trusted, Elwin, whom she had just a day prior promoted to council man of foreign affairs. He had passed his role of ambassador down to his son, who had followed alongside him for the last decade, learning the ways.

Elwin, regardless of his Elven heritage, who were fabled to live for centuries, had visibly aged over the last decade, the pressure of his role taking its toll. But he was still fit as a fiddle, and his mind was still sharp as a sword's edge.

Next to him was a young man of noble birth, the only one at the table, who was in charge of the future nobility in the growing kingdom. Leon had appointed him when they reached the point where he had to find better rewards for loyalty than simply giving money to his followers.

This was a recent development and had only happened in the last year. The young man in question was a human boy, from a kingdom that the ceaseless corruption waves had recently wiped off the map.

His father had been a brother to the king, and his noble descent meant he had learned the ways of royalty and nobility at a young age. Leon had found him running for his life in a monster-infested region, with his last guardsman dying from sustained wounds.

He had taken him under his wing and brought the boy back to his feet within a year. Now he was tasked with selecting appropriate ranks and rewards for future loyal members of the kingdom who deserved it.

Phoenix wasn't against the boy's presence and felt like he was still easily moldable to her needs, so he kept his place.

To the left of this teenager was an old man. This old man was the picturesque copy of an old sage, taken right out of old fantasy books.

His long, white beard, combined with his brightly coloured robes, depicted him as a priority target in combat if Phoenix had ever seen one. But his old sage appearance was a front, to an incredibly dangerous foe.

This old man was the representative of the mage's guild, which had recently taken root in Bastion City, and their mother-guild had insisted they were assigned a place in the council as well. But Leon was no fool.

He had assigned him no power, making him just as superficial as the representative of the adventurers' guild. This had elicited some displeasure with the mages' guild headquarters, but Leon threatened to wipe them out if they didn't take their complaints elsewhere.

And the Mages' guild wasn't equipped to deal with a raging mythical entity. So they grumbled in silence, in their tall ivory towers.

Phoenix had wanted nothing more than to kick him out of the council since he was an unnecessary addition, but Leon advised against it. The mages' guild had its uses, and keeping them on their side could bear fruit, eventually.

And lastly, the last member on her left was a woman who Phoenix had elected herself. She hated herself for giving the woman a place on the council, but she was also the most qualified for the position.

This woman was Morticia. Her role in the council would be as representative of the player community that chose to live within their borders.

She would have her office built in the outer ring of the city, where the players could go to give suggestions for the kingdom, or bring complaints to. In all its glorious sounding name, she had basically been elected as the human resources department for the players.

Morticia had not wanted the role, but Phoenix gave her no choice. As the vice leader of the guild, she had ordered Morticia into office.

But Morticia was already setting herself up and had eventually taken well to her role over the last few days. She realized being close to the new player community inside the kingdom would do her much good to garner notes for her studies into the human mind.

At the other end of the long table, another person was seated, who wasn't part of the council itself, but was currently an honorary guest. Prince Nalafein Uuthli'vlos.

He had been invited, because Phoenix wished to discuss a matter that concerned him, in an extended fashion.

Glancing at each person present, Phoenix nodded in approval, before clasping her hands together on the table.

"Good. Now that we are all here and ready, let us start this first official meeting of the new Stellar Council."

