

New Eden 461

Chapter 461 Getting To Know The Council, Part 1

Behind Phoenix, taking notes on a large piece of scroll, was the kingdom's notary/accountant, Brienne. She was here to jot down any suggestion that might turn into eventual laws, projects, or edicts, to make sure everything was recorded.

As the council Leon had amassed was larger than this one, Brienne's note-taking skills had been honed to an expert level, and her scrawling on the paper was almost at an inhuman level.

She was ready, feather in hand, with a large container of ink.

Phoenix turned her head over to Declan first.

"Have you gone over the notes and archives of your predecessor yet, Declan?"

"Aye. It was a messy compilation, to say the least. But everything he did was in order with his role. He may have been a pretentious prick, but he was diligent in his duties."

"Good. From what you gleaned, is there anything that needs to be hanged or remedied at all?"

Declan scratched his chin for a bit, his head currently located on his shoulders, to not scare away the other council members. After a few seconds of thought, he brought his hand back down.

"I believe nothing is of immediate concern. The security around Bastion City may not be the tightest, but it is adequate.

"The patrol runs are well structured, to the point I wonder if the councilman was the one to plan them. But I have yet to meet all his subordinates, so I cannot comment on this yet.

"He had some engravers and enchanters look at the rune barrier we had on the inner wall, and had it reproduced for the outer wall, so the city is defensible in case of a large-scale attack. But I don't know how well the transcription was done, I have yet to examine it with the original engraver."

Phoenix nodded at him.

"I'll have Malador summoned, so he can inspect it with you. Although this might make him grumpy."

Declan waved his hand in dismissal.

"Not a problem. I have dealt with grumpy old men before. Now for the other defences measures that were put in place, I believe there are quite a few things that need fine-tuning, but nothing too major."

Phoenix nodded in approval. Declan only had a few days to go over mountains of paperwork for the last years that the previous councilman was in place, and the progress he had made was already impressive.

She couldn't fault him for not being completely on top of the matter yet.

"One thing does make me curious, though. How did he plan on powering up the outer barrier? Hell, we barely got the inner one to power up last time, and it was thanks to Astaroth's massive mana pool."

Leon opened his mouth to answer, but the old mage from the mages' guild cut him off.

"Lady Phoenix—"

"It's Queen Phoenix," Phoenix cut him off.

Her stern gaze on the old man did not offer him a chance to slither out of this one. Even if he disliked calling an Abnormal royalty, he would have to come to terms with it, and fast.

"My apologies, Queen Phoenix. As I was about to say, the mages' guild has taken the barriers, both inner and outer, in charge.

"The Mages' guild has access to many large mana crystals, a few of which were traded with the kingdom, in exchange for my position here. The crystals are already in place to power up the barrier at a moment's notice."

Phoenix hadn't seen that in Leon's notes, and when she turned at him with a questioning gaze, his shamed head scratching gave her the answers she wanted. He had forgotten.

It was surprising that Brienne hadn't been in on that loop, but it seemed the matter was another problem altogether. Brienne leaned in next to Phoenix, whispering into her ear.

"My Queen. Leon asked me to wait before jotting that matter down because he wanted to tell you himself. It seems he was taken short by the mages' guild representative here."

Phoenix sighed, giving a curt nod to Brienne, before giving a disapproving look to Leon.

Leon lowered his head apologetically, before giving a stink eye to the old mage.

'He ruined my surprise...' he thought.

But the old mage seemed unfazed by the dirty look and kept eye contact with the queen.

Phoenix jogged her memory, trying to remember the old man's name, and it came to her.

"Lord Argos Thornwood, I think you shouldn't flaunt around that you got here by purchasing your place. It reflects poorly on your motives."

"Please, my queen. Argos is fine. I am no noble. As for your wise words, I shall remember them. But I was not flaunting, only stating facts. Facts are all that matter to me."

"Very well, Argos. I am pleased to see that your guild has taken charge of them, but one thing troubles me. What if the mages' guild told you not to activate them as we are attacked? Would you obey them?"

Phoenix's words were cutting. Closer to being interrogative, than simply questioning.

The old mage caught on to the general feeling in them.

"I think there is a misunderstanding at play here, your highness. The guild's duty is not to activate or not the barrier. We simply furnished the crystals and do maintenance on them, for a fee, of course. We do not hold any more power over them or the barrier they maintain. Does that reassure you?"

Phoenix looked at him inquisitively, but she sensed no malice from him. It seemed he was telling the truth.

She turned her head slightly behind herself, looking at Brienne, who nodded once, and then at Leon, who did the same. Their confirmation eased her worries a bit.

Even with this large of a city, Phoenix couldn't consider things safe. She doubted the Native adventurers would sacrifice themselves if another guild siege ever happened, and she was fearful that the barrier wouldn't activate due to bribes or such things.

But the reassurance that the mages' guild held no sway over the defences of the city relaxed her a bit. She locked her gaze on the mage once more.

"Then, if I may ask, what purpose do you have in the council, Argos?"

The smile that flashed on the old man's lips told her he had been waiting for this question.

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"That question is quite simple to answer, my liege. We are inside it."

Phoenix frowned at his vagueness.

"What do you mean, inside it?"

"My queen. The reason the mages' guild wanted to tie itself up to your budding kingdom is very simple. This tree in which your palace is built. This tree is our reason."

His answer made no sense to Phoenix, and she kept her frown up.

"Perhaps it is a discussion we should have in private, my queen. When fewer ears are present? It is a sensitive matter for my guild, and we wish to keep some things closer to ourselves."

Phoenix was suddenly suspicious about the man. But his intent still showed no malice, so she indulged him.

"Very well. I shall arrange a private meeting between you and me later on today, with only Leon and Brienne present with us. Does that satisfy you?"

The old man smiled widely, nodding his head once slowly.

Phoenix felt the old man was creepy, almost like he was trying to act like everyone's grandfather. It made her flesh crawl a bit.

But she knew she would be fine with him, as long as Leon was there. Returning to the matters at hand, she then turned her head toward the Fey woman on the other side of the table.

"I would like to know what is in it for you as well, Lady Grove. What does the adventurers' guild gain to be part of our ruling council?"

When the Fey woman locked her eyes into Phoenix's, the latter felt a small sense of vertigo overcoming her, but it quickly subsided. The iris-less eyes of the woman felt like looking into a bottomless pool, or like looking at the ground from so high up it was no longer perceptible.

But the feeling was fleeting, so Phoenix paid it no mind. The first time this had happened, she had looked at her mental status, believing this was some kind of magic effect, but nothing was there.

She assumed it was just her body's reaction to something unusual. Waiting for the woman to answer, Phoenix observed her mannerism.

The woman was gentle in every movement she made, almost like watching a glass figure move around, afraid to collide with other surfaces, by fear of breaking. But Phoenix knew better.

She had met other adventures' guild masters, and they were never pushovers. They wouldn't have made it to their positions if they were.

And just like every other master she had met, their power was practically unnoticeable. She could have used the system scan, possibly, to glean more detail, but she was sure they would notice.

The woman finally opened her mouth to speak, after many seconds of uncomfortable silence. She made even the old mage uncomfortable with the silence.

"We have only one purpose here, your majesty. It is to ensure the perrenity of the adventurers we serve. Nothing more."

Phoenix had expected this answer since it was the same one the Fey woman had given her when they met in private. But she would have preferred for her to be a bit more clear as to what that entailed.

"Lady Grove. All I wish for, when asking you this, is complete transparency between council members. Could you be clear about what that entails exactly?"

The slow and gentle nod from the Fey seemed almost out of place.

"Of course, your majesty. The adventurers' guild only wants to have someone at the higher decisions making level, to ensure they make no decision that negatively affects their clients and members. That is all. I will not be getting in anyone's way unless they affect said perrenity."

Everyone at the table nodded in approval. But Phoenix sighed inwardly.

'Seems like she doesn't want to mix up with us more than necessary. I'll have to find a way to get her to open up with me, at the very least.'

"Thank you for clarifying, Lady Grove. Next up, Mr. Grit Herman. I would like to know what it is exactly that you do for the kingdom as of now."

The gruff man smiled, revealing a bit more of his short tusks, before clearing his throat.

"Ahem. Yes, my queen. My job is to form, sign and enforce major trade contracts between our kingdom and the others, or the smaller trade associations. As of yet, I have not failed to enforce a single one of them, and our economy is still flourishing. I think I'm doing a good job."

Phoenix chuckled at his self-appraisal. The Half-Orc was a merchant, with clear interpersonal skills, but he also came off as slightly awkward.

She wrote it off as nervousness to be suddenly questioned by his newly met sovereign, who he had only met a few days prior.

"Thank you, Mr. Herman. From what Brienne tells me, you are doing excellent work, and the fees and taxes you have set in place on trade inside the city all fit what she would have made herself.

Grit eyed the small human woman writing behind the queen, and slightly blushed.

"Ah... Thank you, your highness. Her praise touches me."

Phoenix raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

She instead turned her head to Morticia. The Fey player was currently gaze-locked on Singing Grove, almost like she was mentally dissecting her quiet demeanour.

It didn't surprise Phoenix, as she knew Morticia to be an inquisitive person.

"Ahem! Morticia. How are things on your end? Can you explain to the other council members what your duties are?"

Morticia snapped her head in Phoenix's direction, with an almost displeased look, but went back to her signature psychiatrist fake smile.

"Of course Queen Phoenix."

Her tone went almost acidic for a moment, before going back to normal as she proceeded.

"My task is to make sure the players, or Abnormals, as the Natives call them, are heard and listened to, just as much as the natives in the kingdom. For now, we are still setting up the office, which will be complete by tomorrow, and I can get to work then.

"But we have a booth set up in the outer ring, and it already seems to have made the few new players quite happy to have some input into the kingdom."

Phoenix was happy that the players wanted to help out, but she also knew most of the requests were stupid and would never happen. It was the thought that counted, right?

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Morticia explained a bit more of her goals and purpose, and the council nodded in silence. Most of them knew the Abnormals would be a large part of the kingdom, going forward, and had already accepted this truth.

But it made one person curious. A person who had never had to deal with this many Abnormals getting a right to positions no one would have ever given them.

The structure did not alienate Prince Nalafein at all, but he was curious. Curious how people with no knowledge of how things functioned in this world were suddenly learning and adapting so fast.

When he raised his hand to ask a question, Phoenix almost burst out into laughter.

"Prince Nalafein, you are allowed to speak without raising your hand. You may not be a part of the council, but I'm sure the king wouldn't allow anyone to talk you down, either."

The prince lowered his hand, slightly embarrassed, before opening his mouth to talk.

"I would only like to know how your people are adapting so fast. You were gone for a decade and had only been present in our world for a few months. How did you learn all these skills and all this knowledge in such a short period?"

His question was legitimate, and it arose the interest of all the other Natives in the room. But Phoenix was not going to answer this before all of them.

"I think this is a question you should ask the king when he gets back. Would that be alright with you?"

Nalafein nodded his head, a bit disappointed he had to wait. But he understood her reserves, too.

But one person wanted to know something else, as they spoke up shyly.

"Speaking of the king, when do we get to meet him? Most of us here have never even seen him. To us, the king is Leon."

This was the young teenager whose age was close to Silent Light's. His name, if Phoenix recalled correctly, was Edmond Finnigan.

Phoenix looked at him with a warm smile.

"I would love to know as well, dear Edmond. But the king has the bad habit of not planning anything much further than his immediate future. A habit that I intend to break out of him, by any means necessary. But for now, we can only patiently await his return."

The edge of coldness with which she uttered that threat put a bar in the kid's throat as he swallowed nervously. He immediately found her scary.

"My apologies for overstepping, your majesty. I was simply curious."

Phoenix shook her head, still smiling warmly.

"Don't worry about it. I took no offence to it."

The kid nodded his head, feeling a bit more relaxed. But he mentally noted never to make her angry.

He could already tell she wouldn't be as merciful, then.

"While you have everyone's attention, Edmond. Would you care to explain to them what your duties are?"

"Ah. Yes, my queen."

Turning his head to look at everyone in turn, Edmond could feel a tinge of nervousness. But he tided through and cleared his throat, rising from his seat.

"Ahem. Most of you already know, but for the newer members of the council, I shall explain my function. I was raised as royalty in my kingdom before monsters erased it off the map, and I received training in rank bestowal.

"This makes me a suitable candidate to find and eke out ranks for acts of valour, or valuable service to the kingdom. My function in this council will be exactly that."

Declan and Morticia nodded their heads in understanding, while Phoenix simply kept her smile about her. Seeing he they had acknowledged him, Edmond sat back down, exhaling softly in relief.

Phoenix now only had one more person to go by, and that was Elwin. Looking at him directly on her left, she smiled at him brightly.

"This leaves you for last, Elwin. I trust the last decade has taught you many things, and your son as well, from what I was told. How was the role of ambassador?"

Elwin responded to her smile with one of his own. It looked like a genuine smile, even though she could feel the years of training in diplomatic smiling behind it.

His body and demeanour breathed of refinement, like his time away from the kingdom, fighting to make relations with other rulers and dignitaries had forged him into the noble his bloodline remembered to be.

"I have learned many things in the last decade, my queen. The experience was quite eye-opening, I must say. The world is so much larger than I knew it to be.

"I was able to travel to places I knew not even existed, one of them being the dark continent. Regardless of its name, it is a much brighter place than we credit it to be.

"The races of the dark continent are hard workers, and make for fine warriors as well, and getting them to come here, and join our forces, has been one of my biggest achievements."

Leon nodded in approval. Getting the Orcs, various Undead, and the Demonoids to come here and train some of their warriors had been a blessing. The conditions were harsh on the dark continent, from what he heard, and it made for much hardier warriors.

Leon couldn't praise Elwin enough for pulling that off.

Phoenix looked at Leon's enormous grin and knew he had been very proud of that.

"By Leon's face, I take it he also thinks it was your greatest achievement. But I disagree. It was certainly one of your greatest, no doubt about it, but I don't consider it your greatest."

Pulling out a scroll from a pile of documents near her, Phoenix unrolled it for all to see.

"This scroll here, your latest treaty, is what I think is the greatest. It may not have improved our military standing or trading prowess, but what it gives us far surpasses it."

Elwin smiled cockily, looking at the document he had brought back on his last trip. He knew all too well what it was.

Phoenix held the document in a visible position for the council members to see.

"This document, which I am most proud of in your work, Elwin, is as precious as the kingdom itself. It is a treaty that acknowledges us as the sixth great city in the alliance, a spot many kingdoms have been vying for, for a long time, I was told."

Gasps came out of the mouths of the Natives around the table. It impressed even Prince Nalafein.

This treaty was worth more than anyone could imagine. It meant your political standing was virtually incontestable anymore.

'This Ambassador is most impressive. Given, the kingdom's growth was his greatest leverage, this is still no minor feat. Astaroth has garnered himself such capable allies...'

Chapter 464 Formally Meeting Her

On the Eastern board of the continent, Astaroth was regaining consciousness, after spending almost half a day knocked out. His head was ringing like a bell during a wedding, and his body felt like it had gone through a stone crusher.

Propping himself up on his elbows, he looked around to see where he was. The room was unfamiliar to him, but at the same time, looked like some room he had already seen.

The walls of wood, seemingly a complete plank from one side of the room to the other, and from floor to ceiling, reminded him of the interior of the guest rooms in the tree palace in Bastion City. But he knew he couldn't be back there already.

So he stood to his feet, looking around, making sure there was no immediate threat. Once he felt the room was safe, he noticed all his equipment was at the foot of the bed he had been lying on, on the top of a wooden chest.

Re-equipping everything, he walked out of the room cautiously. As he stalked his way down the hall, trying to be as discreet as he could, he heard the floor creak behind him.

With no hesitation whatsoever, Astaroth spun around, swinging the Ad Astra in sword form at his unknown follower. Stopping the blade a centimetre short of the person, Astaroth sighed.

Standing in front of him now, Silent Light was looking at him with a pale face.

"You're... *Gulp* You're awake. Good. Lady Nemus wants to see you."

Astaroth stowed his weapon away. If he had been in enemy territory, Silent Light wouldn't have been roaming around.

"I'm sorry I attacked you. I didn't know where I was, and I thought you were an enemy."

Silent shook his head.

"I snuck up on you. It's my fault. Do you not remember where you are?"

Astaroth hadn't even stopped to think of what he remembered last. He had been stuck in combat mode so much in the last week, he automatically assumed.

But now that he thought about it, it made sense, since his gear wouldn't have been left there for him if he had been in enemy territory. Jogging his mind a bit, he remembered what had happened before he crashed to the ground.

"Ahh. That's right. Something incredible happened, and then I collapsed outside the wall. Where are we now?"

"We are inside the top part of the shelter. Lady Nemus made some rooms for us, while she waited for you to wake up. She asked to notify her when you did, or bring you to her directly."

Astaroth jogged his memory again, trying to remember who the heck this Lady Nemus was. When he did, he also remembered he had used something important to him when forming her soul and body.

Looking inwards, a pang of sadness hit him as he confirmed his fear. Luna was no longer attached to him.

He wanted to cry, but there was still hope. If this being used Luna as fuel to make herself, she might be able to give her back to him.

"Well, I have a reason to speak to her, too. You say she wants to see me? Lead the way."

Silent Light nodded his head, turning a hundred-and-eighty degrees, before walking whence he had come from. Astaroth followed behind him, looking around as he did.

The architecture was similar to the tree palace, but the layout was different. Whoever had turned the inside of this tree into an abode was not the same person.

Come to think of it, Astaroth wondered why Aberon and the others had gone underground, when choosing their shelter, instead of coming in here, if it was an option. He took a mental note to ask them later.

After taking many winding corridors, in an upward trend, Astaroth and Silent Light arrived in a large open room, which seemed to span the entirety of the hollowed-out trunk of the tree. The hundred-meter-wide room was astounding to be in.

But even more impressive was the lack of a roof over their heads. It was like the bough of the tree ended here, and all its branches left from its sides, covering the sky overhead.

Astaroth sucked in the cold air of the high altitude and turned his head toward the back end of the open room. At the opposite of where he and Silent Light came in, a small dais was raised, and on it, a woman was lounging on a comfortable-looking sofa.

The pair walked their way toward the dais, and while they did, Astaroth asked a question that had been on his mind for a few minutes.

"Where is the party that came with you here? Did they already leave?"

Silent Light sighed, remembering they were still waiting to speak with Astaroth outside the tree.

"I wish. But they insist on meeting you and speaking with you. I tried telling them to wait at the base, but they refused."

"Hmm. That's okay. They'll be disappointed to meet me, though. I'm not a god or anything. Just a regular player, striving to be stronger, like all the others."

Silent Light chuckled, even though his mind wasn't laughing.

'You are already leagues above the rest of us. If you become any stronger, no one will even be able to hope of catching up...'

But he kept his thoughts to himself. He would have to work harder from now on.

Reaching the dais, the woman on it smiled delicately at the two men. For Silent Light, this was an awkward place to be.

Having to set his eyes on what was essentially a female version of his guild leader was already tough on him. But when he remembered looking down at her chest, his face flushed red and he took his leave.

The woman giggled as he walked away, setting her eyes on Astaroth.

"I have been waiting for you to wake up. We have much to discuss."

Astaroth nodded his head.

"We do. But before we talk about anything. I want something back that you took from me."

The woman tilted her head.

"I want Luna back. I couldn't care less about the piece of my soul you took. But Luna was very dear to me, and a precious friend and ally. I want her back."

Nemus looked at him, astounded. She couldn't remember when was the last time someone was so blunt with her, aside from her previous captor.

But she giggled slightly and waved her hand in front of her.

In a flash of bright pearly white, a silhouette appeared, that Astaroth had to shield his eyes from. When the light subsided, he turned his head, his jaw slacking.

"Luna?!"

Chapter 465 Revelations

Standing before him, on two legs, was not the Luna he had expected to see. Her soul's essence was clear as day to him, and he knew it was her.

But she was in human form!

Standing on her two frail legs, Luna was looking around in a frightened manner, until her gaze landed on her master. Trying to take a step forward, unknowing her form wasn't what it used to be, Luna stumbled on her feet and started falling.

Astaroth rushed forward, catching her before she could hit the ground and injure herself.

"Luna!" Astaroth yelped, catching her in his arms. "Are you alright?"

The little girl, around the same size and height as Violette, looked at herself in awe, noticing the changes in her body. Looking at her hands, where hooves used to be, she spun them around, clasping her fingers open and closed.

She then ran her hands across this new body, feeling the smooth skin where a short-haired pelt used to be. Her amazement never faded.

Astaroth watched her go, as he held her shoulders, waiting for her to acclimatize. He was also in shock since this change was so abrupt.

Her silver hair was sprinkled with wicks of green and brown hair, and the proximity it had to his face let him smell a scent of petrichor coming from it, like a freshly fallen rain.

Luna's small body was fortunately covered in a silky white gown, not unlike a nightgown, so he wasn't clasping a naked little girl. Nemus watched the scene with a loving smile.

Once Luna was done examining herself, her head snapped toward the man holding her shoulders, her master, Astaroth. With a beaming smile, Luna exclaimed, "Master!"

She slammed herself against his chest, wrapping her arms around his torso, and giggled as she could now hug him. Her reaction took aback Astaroth, and so did her ability to speak.

Luna had yet to develop the ability to talk, and her suddenly getting a voice made this even more surprising.

He returned her hug, as their souls once again connected, although with less proximity this time, as she now had a physical body, and sighed in relief.

Astaroth was so used to his soul being neighbored by his companions that suddenly losing one had left a loneliness inside him, which was now complete once more.

When Luna backed away, Astaroth could finally look at her face, and her eyes stood out to him.

Where the small doe had once been adorned with milky white, iris-less and pupil-less eyes, she now had two distinct coloured irises around her still white irises. One of them was a deep green, like the leaves of a yucca tree, adorned with vein-like patterns, and the other was an earthy brown, with stone texture-like patterns of grey.

Sharp, pointy ears extended from the side of her head, and her skin's peachy colour exuded healthiness. Her soft, roundish features almost glowed in happiness as Luna enjoyed her newfound ability to express herself.

Astaroth looked at Nemus.

"Alright, you gave me back Luna. But why is she suddenly in elven form?"

Nemus brought her hand to her mouth, barely containing her soft giggle.

"Fusing her with me has fundamentally changed her nature, and she gained that form. It wasn't intentional. But I also needed her essence to be complete. If it disturbs you, I can try to revert her back."

But Luna snapped toward her, her face pouty.

"No! I like my new body!"

Astaroth looked astounded at the little being's sudden feistiness, but he wasn't going to go against her wishes.

"I don't think she wants that, so I'll respect her will. But it will take some getting used to. But why did you need her soul, too?"

Nemus waved at him to come up to the dais, where she conjured a table and two chairs, as well as a complete tea set, still steaming at the spout.

"Have some tea with me. I will explain everything."

Astaroth nodded his head slowly, raising to his feet to climb the dais. He reached the top, which was just a few stairs up, and sat in one chair across from Nemus.

He looked next to him, Luna looking at him expectantly, and he turned to Nemus.

"What about Luna, can she—"

Before he could finish his phrase, Luna climbed onto his lap, making herself comfortable, before starting to dangle her little legs joyfully.

"Never mind, I guess?"

Looking at the table, there were three teacups, and two of them were before Astaroth. He glanced at Nemus, and she smiled back at him.

'She already knew what Luna would do.'

Grabbing his teacup, he brought it around the little girl on his lap and took a sip. The tea tasted of honeydew and rose, and the soft sweet taste agreed with his taste buds. It was a change from Solomon's more citrusy-flavoured tea.

He let the liquid go down his throat with a soft sigh before focusing back on Nemus.

"Before I ask why you helped me, I want to ask this. Who are you, really? Not the name you give yourself now. I want to know your real name."

Nemus glanced at him, her smile stretching at the corner of her mouth in a smirky fashion.

"Quite the inquisitive man, are you? I would expect no less from a man whose curiosity rivals mine. My name previous to this one doesn't matter, and also shouldn't be named, for the sake of your security and mine. Let us just say my presence here is in great part thanks to you."

"That doesn't answer my question. Who are you?"

"I am you. Or rather, you are me."

Astaroth looked at her with a frown.

"That not only makes no sense but also feels like a fallacy"

"And yet it is the truth, young Alexander."

Astaroth gasped at the mention of his real name.

"How do you know that name?"

His demeanour immediately changed to a guarded one, as he hadn't told any native his true name. Her knowing this was all kinds of red flags to him.

"Of course, I know your real name. I was linked to your soul, not your avatar in this world. You are Alexander Leduc, and your true world is a planet called Earth, which is millions of light-years away from this world."

This stumped Astaroth. Her knowledge of him was not something anyone in this world should know.

At least, that's what he thought.

Chapter 466 Target For Anger

When Astaroth had helped form the body and soul of Nemus, outside of New Eden, in the pod's display panel, his vitals had briefly split in two, unbeknownst to him, before returning to normal.

This information had been transmitted to EG's headquarters, as all abnormal notifications from the pods were instantly filed in a report and sent to them. This was the second time his pod spiked this way, and the system flagged his pod to the administrators.

The administrative department received this ping, amongst many others, and started doing a remote-trouble-shooting, to find the issue. But before he could find anything, the report disappeared from his files and he lost access.

"What in the... Where is it gone?"

The guy looked everywhere in his withstanding files, but couldn't find it.

"Ah, whatever. Next."

Up in the top office of EG's headquarters, Constantine was looking at the file she had just received. The system had pulled access to anyone other than her on it and pulled it out of the general system.

Constantine was looking at the data before her, a frown finding its way across her face.

'This young man is going to be a thorn in my side, isn't he? Just as much as this Khalor person.'

She thought about seeking an audience with Gaius right away to warn him, but decided against it.

'He would certainly be mad for taking his time for possibly nothing. I'll wait for the matter to proceed further...'

Putting this matter aside, she looked at another report, inside which received long-awaited information. She smiled deviously.

'I finally found you, David Magnus.'

On top of the towering tree, in the land of the Ash Elves, Astaroth was staring at Nemus warily. He was still unsure how she had gotten all the information about his true identity.

Khalor had said the two worlds would be kept separate, at least for now. She shouldn't be able to gather this info at all.

Unless she was from the other world and was brought into New Eden, just like them.

Nemus looked at him, working his mind with a worried look on his face, and kept up her warm smile. She could have simply told him the truth, but she liked seeing him panic-think like this.

Luna swivelled her head between Nemus and Astaroth, not quite understanding what was going on. To the newly formed little girl, both of them were like parents, and she felt unthreatened by the deity.

Pulling on Astaroth's sleeve, Luna looked at him with a tilted head.

Astaroth locked his eyes on hers.

"What is it, Luna?"

His tone still oozed wariness and uncertainty.

"Why are worried, master? Is something wrong?"

The innocence of Luna was refreshing, but did not change the situation. But before Astaroth could reply to her, Nemus decided she had let the suspense float long enough.

"Your master is worried that I might be the enemy. But it is quite the opposite. I will be your greatest ally in this coming future, young man. But I need you to trust me. And for that, I am ready to tell you everything you want to know. Would that suffice?"

Astaroth looked at the woman once more, his eyes squinted.

"Everything?"

"Yes. Everything you want to know that I can reveal at this time."

Luna kept spinning her head toward both adults, her eyes filled with curiosity.

"Fine. Start talking then. And start with your identity."

Nemus' smile stretched a little further, her eyes almost closing. She raised her left hand and with the snap of a finger, a dome appeared around the dais, cutting out all exterior sounds.

"I should not reveal this to you yet, but since you insist, I will at least make sure no... unwanted... ears hear us. The reason I know everything about you is that I am you. Or rather, you are me. We are one."

Astaroth was tired of hearing her repeat that phrase, as if saying it again would suddenly make it the truth, or clearer to him. But before he could snap at her, she raised a hand toward him, anticipating his reaction.

"Let me finish before you get all snappy on me. Your soul. That is where our connection spans. Your soul and mine are identical, like twins.

"It is a rare phenomenon, given souls are usually what make people individuals. But in this case, it is what let me escape that dreaded prison, if only partially. And when my soul escaped that prison, instead of roaming free, to hide somewhere, it was sucked into someone's body. Yours."Th.ê most Astaroth looked at her incredulously. Her tale made no sense.

He could tell Nemus was a deity by the aura she gave off alone. How could she say their soul was identical?

But she continued talking, cutting off his train of thought.

"Now I know what you are thinking. You wonder how we can be so different in power if your soul and mine are identical. I do not have the answer to that yet. But I will find it in time.

"For now, I cannot speak my old name, as it would bring down on us powers I wish not to provoke yet, since I can't fight him at my current power level. Just know that I am on your side, and the side of survival, for both this world and yours."

Astaroth still looked at the deity with a frown. The information she gave him barely met his wants for clarity.

But the fact alone she claimed to be on the side of survival meant she knew what was going on. And that made him curious.

"What do you know of the events that are to come?"

Nemus smiled.

'His perceptiveness is sharp.'

"This isn't the first time Gaius does this. Last time, only the world we are currently in was affected. He likes to create worlds and have them fight against each other, to see which side is strongest. His mind is twisted beyond recognition of whom he was at the beginning of all."

"Wait. Hold on. Who the heck is Gaius?"

Giggling softly, Nemus took a sip of her tea.

"That's right. Your world knows him through a different name. In this world, he is called Gaius, the god of creation. In yours, he has simply called himself God. Which is why he ordered all the other gods to stay away from your world. Of course, some still sneaked in, but he's trying to find out what happens when a world grows, knowing only one god."

Astaroth was confused with all this talk of gods and the creation of worlds. But his brain did register one tidbit of information.

"You said it isn't the first time he does this. Is he the cause of the chaos to come?"

Nodding her head, Nemus' face suddenly became grave.

"Gaius is the one who will bring death and destruction to your world and this one. He is the one that causes the deaths of billions of innocents."

Astaroth's traits hardened. He now had someone to point his anger at.

Chapter 467 Precious Item

Nemus kept answering Astaroth's questions for a while, satisfying his curiosity as much as she could. When his questions ran dry, she finally undid the surrounding barrier, and the sounds of crickets' stridulation reached his ears.

That's when he looked up and realized what time it was. The room he was in seemed as bright as day, but he noticed why pretty quickly.

All this light emanated from Nemus. She was glowing in a soft white, but bright enough radiance to keep the entire open room lit up like daytime.

He turned to her.

"Talking to you was very... informative. But I have things to get back to. I need to get back to my kingdom and catch up with things there before heading back out to become stronger. So I will take my leave."

As he turned around, ready to leave, he heard Nemus' voice.

"Wait. I can get you to your kingdom faster. Gather the people you want to go with you and come back here. Also, I want you to have this."

Turning to face her again, a scroll slowly floated toward Astaroth. Catching it with his right hand, he unrolled it to check its contents.

Property Deed: Agnar's Mage Tower

This document gives you ownership of Agnar's Mage Tower when consumed. All the land attached to it, part of its estate, will be put under your name, or the name of the entity of your wish.

Astaroth looked at her, confused.

"What is this? Why would I need a mage's tower?"

Nemus brought her hand to her mouth, stifling a giggle.

"Silly. You are standing in the mage's tower. The land ascribed to his estate is this entire valley. Agnar has long since passed, and I doubt he would mind me giving you this deed. Do with it as you see fit. Now go, gather the ones you wish to have brought back home with you."

Astaroth took a moment to realize the worth of the scroll in his hands. But once he did, he reverently rolled it back up before setting it inside his inventory.

Luna saw him get ready to leave and jumped off the chair she had seated herself in when Astaroth got up. She waddled her way over to Nemus, hugging her.

"Bye Mama Nemus. I'll come to visit, I promise!"

After saying her bit, she released her arms from around Nemus and skipped her way joyfully to Astaroth. The latter stood there slack-jawed.

"Mama? That's what you are going to call a deity?"

"Is it wrong, master?" Luna asked, her head tilting to the side.

'Gagh! She's so cute.'

Scratching the back of his head, Astaroth looked at Nemus, who seemed unbothered by the fact, and he dropped the matter.

"Of course not, as long as she doesn't mind. But we need to do something about how you call me. I'm not sure how well it would look if we went around with you calling me master. I would pass for the most devious guy in town."

"Then how should I call you, master?"

"You can just call me Astaroth. I think that would be fine."

"Ok, Papa Astaroth!"

Astaroth almost immediately coughed blood. She had skipped from one bad appellation to another.

What would people think if they heard him getting called Papa?

"Ahem. Just Astaroth is fine."

"Ok, Papa Astaroth!"

The look of pure innocence on her face made him dread. From the corner of his eye, he could see Nemus giggling to herself, and he shot her a death glare.

She responded to his glare with a wave goodbye, and mouthed out 'Papa' to him, before turning around to laugh to herself.

'I hate my life...'

Walking away, with Luna grabbing his hand, he travelled down the spinning hallway that led back down outside. Once down there, he quickly spotted a group of five who were lounging near the entrance.

When they saw him come out, they hurriedly jumped up and ran toward him.

'I forgot they were here... 'Astaroth thought to himself.

"Guild Leader Astaroth! Please, a moment of your time!"

Astaroth sighed silently, wanting nothing more than to relax.

"Yes, Tusk. What can I do for you?"

The Orc player was glad the guild leader had remembered his name and smiled toothily.

"I would like to discuss something with you concerning our position in the guild. Now I know this may sound presumptuous, but I think our deeds here in the last days have earned us a higher station in the guild."

Astaroth could already see where he was going, and his face hardened.

"What did you have in mind?"

The change of tone didn't go unnoticed, and SharpTusk suddenly calmed his enthusiasm.

"Ahh. Yes, well... My friends and I thought that the mission to bring the officer Silent Light to you, as well as defending the shelter afterwards, would at least be worth a small promotion. I wouldn't ask for something as ridiculous as getting an officer's title, but I think we deserve a little recognition."

Astaroth stared at him, his face cold as ice, and SharpTusk's forehead started sweating.

'Such pressure.'

But loosening his demeanour, Astaroth smiled at him.

"Of course. I wouldn't let you stagnate at the bottom after helping me out. But I will not be the one to decide what your actions are worth. Phoenix will be the one to deliberate on it. Come back with me to the base, and we can bring the matter to her."

SharpTusk and his crew sighed in relief. For a moment, with Astaroth's intensity, they thought he would kick them out of the guild for stepping out of line.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

Astaroth nodded at them before asking Silent's whereabouts, and they responded he was in the underground shelter. Astaroth thanked them and descended into the underground shelter to go find him.

After travelling the tunnels downward for fifteen minutes, he reached the shelter. There was activity around the perpetual bonfire, and he headed that way.

When he arrived at the edges of its lighted blaze, he saw something that brought tears to his eyes.

As a soft golden glow dimmed down, Astaroth lunged at Silent Light, grabbing him in his arms into a tight hug.

"Silent Light, you beautiful bastard!"

Chapter 468 Offering Refuge

Astaroth's sudden arrival surprised Silent Light, but even more so his reaction.

"Whoa, dude, calm down!"

"I'd kiss you on the mouth if I didn't think Phoenix would incinerate the both of us! Thank you! Thank you a million times!"

Standing next to them was an emotional Korin, whose eyes could see for the first time in months, tears streaming down them. Standing on his own two feet, he looked down at his regrown limb, with his brand-new eyes, and he couldn't believe it.

Next to him, Aj'axx was stretching out a regrown arm, flexing a limb he hadn't seen in months. His eyes were also foggy with tears, as he held back the urge to join in on Astaroth's hug.

Astaroth was still holding Silent Light tightly, the latter beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Astaroth, let me go. You're embarrassing me."

"Oh! Sorry! I'm just so happy! I didn't know you could regrow limbs. When did you learn such a spell?"

Silent Light backed out of Astaroth's embrace, straightening out his clothes and clearing his throat.

"It's a spell I got with my class change. It's called Regenerate. At the cost of quite a bit of mana, I can regrow any body impairment as long as my target is still alive. It's a quick channel spell, which means I can also use it in combat, if undisturbed, for about five seconds."

Astaroth was amazed at all the goodies Silent had gotten from his class change. But right now, he was simply happy his family had their bodies returned to normal.

He noticed Kloud was in a corner of the camp, tears streaming down his face. His face looked like a huge part of his mental burden had just been lifted from him.

Giving a slight nod to him, Kloud smiled back, wiping away his tears.

But Astaroth had a reason for looking for Silent Light.

"Right! I came here to get you. Nemus offered to get us back home rapidly, so I came to get you. Did you have anything to get before we leave?"

Silent shook his head. All his stuff was already in his inventory, and he couldn't see anyone else who needed his attention in the shelter.

He had heard about the comrade these men had lost, and he cursed himself for not having a spell that could bring back the dead yet. He had yet to see online any mention of such a spell being discovered.

Astaroth turned to the rest of the refugees and decided he was going to offer them shelter, too.

Climbing on a nearby crate, he clapped his hands loudly to gather their attention. Most of them were already nearby, having been brought to attention by the cheering when Silent had started healing Aj'axx.

"I would like everyone's attention, please! Kloud, you too. Come nearer."

The ex-general walked up to the edges of the bonfire's lighting.

"I know all of you have been through a rough past ten years. And I know you all want to go back to the village, to resume your quiet lives there. But the village is no more, and I don't know how safe you would be there."

Aberon, who looked more tired than his usual self, knocked his staff on the ground once.

"What is your point, aside from discouraging us, young man?"

"Yes, my apologies. I wish to offer you all refuge in my kingdom, away from all this danger, where you will be treated well. I know this is your home, but you could make your home there, too. But the decision lies with you all."

A woman walked forward, her eyes filled with worry.

"What would wait for us there? We have nothing. We left behind all we had in our village. How would we survive with nothing to our name?"

Astaroth understood her fears. Of course, he wouldn't bring them there to be stranded.

"I will make sure you are lodged, fed, clothed, and given enough money to retire peacefully if you so wish. If you want to work, I will make sure you can have any job you want to do and are qualified for."

The woman looked at him with a frown. She was one of those that had seen him when he first appeared in their village.

She was wondering how the young man would do so, with no influence. Astaroth could see the questions on her face.

"I can guarantee that you will not go lacking in anything. But if you wish to stay here, where you feel safe, I can also arrange that you stay safe and are furnished with anything you need to restart anew."

The woman's face changed to that of thought as she backed away into the crowd. Astaroth could see that many people were murmuring amongst each other, discussing if they should trust him or not.

Aberon and Kloud stepped forward, knowing the villagers would trust them more than him. Kloud spoke up first.

"I wish to remain here. I think my skills can and will be of use to rebuilding what we have lost."

Astaroth nodded to him, respecting his choice. Already, a few of the villagers started getting closer to Kloud, their intentions clear.

Aberon then walked next to Astaroth.

"As for myself, I see no reason to stay in this shit-hole. If the young man says he can get us settled, then I believe him."

Turning his eyes toward Astaroth, the old man gave a tired nod.

The village rapidly split up into two groups. The separation was clear, and the groups had two very different demographics.

Around Kloud, all the warriors of the village, that had worked with him for so long, as well as their families, agglomerated, followed by the young militia-men, who wanted to prove themselves brave.

The rest of them, the farmers and widowed women, grouped up around Astaroth and Aberon. Astaroth was a bit disappointed he couldn't bring back more fighters, but he understood their decisions and reasons.

Nodding his head to Kloud, he urged the surrounding people to gather their stuff and start walking up to the tree above. As they left to gather their meagre belongings, Astaroth walked over to Kloud's group.

"I have something I want to discuss with you and Aberon in private, if possible."

Chapter 469 Private Talk

Separating from everyone present, Astaroth followed Aberon and Kloud back to the latter's tent at the edge of the cave. Once they entered the tent, Astaroth sat down on a stool Kloud had carved out of roots.

Watching the two elders sit down, Astaroth clasped his hands together, interlacing his fingers.

"The truth is, even after leaving here, you will be safe from any further attacks from corrupted monsters. Nemus has agreed to veil the place from them, so they won't be able to come in at all. But I wanted to discuss another matter altogether."

Aberon's tired traits showed annoyance.

"Speak up, Astaroth. No one is getting younger here."

Kloud nodded in agreement.

"Yes, yes, I know. Nemus gave me something precious, and with this, I intend to help a certain someone. I was hoping that those who stayed do so, as well."

Kloud raised an eyebrow, curious, as Aberon frowned.

"What did she give you?" the old mage asked.

Pulling out the Property Deed, Astaroth handed it over to Aberon, so he could look at it himself.

When the old man unrolled the scroll, his eyes went wide. He looked around himself, seemingly looking for something.

Kloud and Astaroth watched him suddenly careen his head all over the place and wondered what was up.

After looking everywhere around him, Aberon went back to looking at the scroll, before briskly rolling it back up and handing it to Astaroth.

"If this scroll says what I think it does, then this location Teraria and Arborea brought us to is way more valuable than just a simple shelter. You should not give this to anyone willy-nilly, Astaroth."

Astaroth smiled at the old man.

"I don't intend to give it to just anyone. The person I have in mind is someone who deserves this, and who could most definitely use your help, Kloud."

Saying this, Astaroth turned to face the swordsman.

"You have once, very long ago, pledged yourself to protecting the Ash Elf kingdom and its inhabitants. Would you retake that oath if a new king were to take the mantle?"

Kloud squinted his eyes, leaning in closer.

"What do you mean, kid? Speak plainly."

Astaroth had been talking with Phoenix outside of New Eden when they managed to cross paths through the week, and he finally got her to spill the beans on who was waiting for him in Bastion City. And this information would not be wasted anymore, now that he had a way to use it.

"I mean I have a high-value person in my kingdom, right now, who not only has a right to that darned throne but who I also believe would do right by that crown."

Kloud and Aberon were hanging on his lips by now.

"Prince Nalafein."

Kloud smiled widely. As for Aberon, he only looked surprised.

"Accompanying him is the last person I thought would side with him, Gelum'vire. The king apparently banished the two of them, and they made their way to Stellar Woodlands only recently, finding out about the kingdom's ties to me. Now they await my return."

Kloud raised his hand.

"Wait. The king banished Prince Nalafein? How is that possible? Lady Anulo would never allow that unless he did something unforgivable."

Aberon nodded his head, scratching his chin in contemplation.

Astaroth looked hesitant as well, as he opened his mind to respond.

"I'm also uncertain how this would happen. I can barely feel any connection to Lady Anulo, even through my royal markings. Something abnormal has happened over the past decade, and I think she might no longer be present in the Kingdom of the Ash Elves."

Aberon's forehead creased as a deep frown settled on his face.

"How would that even be possible? She is the kingdom's spirit. Its guardian. To forcefully remove her from that position would almost certainly end her life."

Astaroth shook his head.

"I think her connection to my kingdom's guardian, as well as the establishment of churches in her name, would have held her up. But I'm no expert in the matter."

Aberon got up, starting to pace around the tent anxiously.

"This is bad. Very bad. Something would have needed to replace her. But what, or who, took up her mantle?"

Astaroth let the old man ramble, as he turned his head back to Kloud.

"As I was saying, would you take your oath back? I think Prince Nalafein would very much appreciate your wisdom and strength in his quest to reclaim his lost heritage."

Kloud looked stumped at the request. He had thought many times about this exact matter.

He firmly believed that once King Vhol'drokk relinquished the throne, the new king would have them reinstated. But he never thought about taking his oath back.

This was a very delicate issue.

As he fell into thought about this, Aberon stopped pacing momentarily.

"What is there to think about, you meathead? You always wanted to protect your kin, anyway. Might as well put all those muscles back to use, and serve someone with a righteous purpose."

Then he went back to pacing about the issue of Alantha Anulo.

Kloud looked at him with the widest 'That was uncalled for' eyes ever and lowered his head to look at his hands.

"Wouldn't that mean I would have to fight my brethren and march on the palace I once swore to defend?"

He looked torn from the inside. On one hand, he would love nothing more than to fight for his people again.

But on the other hand, he loathed the idea itself of having to kill more of his kin. The incident with Chris and I'dril recently, and the incident before that, with Konnor, had scarred him deeply.

Astaroth could almost hear his mental musings, accompanied by Aberon mumbling, and he knew he had put them in a delicate position. He didn't want to rush their decisions, but he was also on a tight schedule.

But he didn't have to say anything.

A look of determination made its way to Kloud's face, and he clenched his hands into fists. When his face rose to meet Astaroth's gaze, the hesitation was gone.

"I'll do it. Get the prince here, and I will pledge my eternal loyalty to him and the crown once more."

Astaroth smiled at his resolve. He nodded in reply, turning his head toward Aberon.

The old man stopped pacing, feeling the stare on him, and turned to face Astaroth.

"I assume your guardian is directly linked to Lady Anulo?"

Astaroth nodded.

"Good. Then going with you might be for the best. I will find a way to come into communication with her, from your kingdom, and get down to the bottom of this. And if my help is needed to get her back to her rightful position, then I will gladly employ my magic for her."

Astaroth grinned as wide as he physically could.

'Great! Now we can move things in the right direction for this kingdom, while I get strong enough to save this world and mine. I wonder how Khalor will feel about this?'

Chapter 470 Farewells And Promises

Finalizing this talk with both men, Astaroth walked back out of the tent, the two of them in tow, and headed back to the center of the cave. Next to the bonfire, the group that had chosen to stay with Kloud awaited their return.

Astaroth didn't like splitting the villagers up after they had endured so much together over so many years. But this place was soon to become the center of a war, and he didn't want all of them to be swept up in it.

Only the warrior and trainees, who wished to stay and fight, would stay here like this. The rest of the villagers, he garnered, had already said their farewells and made their way to the surface.

Reaching the group, Astaroth started bidding farewell to all of them, amongst which Korin and Aj'axx, who were smiling the widest, treated him like the little brother that had grown up so much.

"Now that I can look at you, I see you barely changed in ten years. Which is strange, given it seems like you grew up a bit, mentally at least."

Korin smiled at him, happy he could lay his eyes on Astaroth after so long.

"A lot happened since I left the village with Violette, to go on our own adventures, and keep you safe from the retribution of King Vhol'drokk. Someday, I'll come back and tell you all about it."

"I would love that. Say hello to the little miss for me, as well. We all miss her cute little shy face."

"He he. I will. I'm sure she will be happy to know you guys are alright."

Moving over to Aj'axx, the man was all smiles.

"Get in here!" he shouted, clamping both arms on Astaroth, finally able to hug people again.

"Your return to us was short, and I don't know when you'll be back, but know that you are always welcome, and it was great to see you again. Whatever you do across the world from us, you make us proud!"

Astaroth hugged the man back, clutching him tightly.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to help you in your time of need. But I will make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Bah! Don't worry about it, Astaroth. We can't change the past, but we sure as hell can do better for the future!"

Astaroth had missed his enthusiastic view, more than he thought, and strived to look at life with such a positive attitude. But it wouldn't be a small task.

He saluted all the youngsters, instructing them to follow orders, and always trust in their mentors and trainers, eliciting a few side-eyes from his old hunting buddies. He ignored the irony of his own words and kept a straight face.

Reaching Kloud, He grabbed his forearm in a knightly grip and looked into his eyes.

"I know you still have some qualms deep inside you. But know that you are atoning for your actions every moment you keep on living and protecting everyone you can. So make sure you stay alive."

Kloud looked at him, teary-eyed.

"I never thought the day would come where you lectured me about staying alive, you little reckless turd. But I will do my best to stay amidst the living for as long as I can."

Once the goodbyes were done, Astaroth stepped back toward Aberon. The old man dispensed no words, only nodding to the warriors before turning to leave.

As the pair were leaving to go back to the surface, they heard Kloud shout.

"And Aberon! Thank you! For everything! Take care, you grumpy old fart!"

Aberon didn't even turn around, grinning to himself as he flipped them the bird. A loud round of laughter echoed behind the pair as they made their way into the rising tunnel.

Astaroth looked at Aberon, who was smiling to himself, and kept his mouth shut, a smile creeping up on his face too.

'I guess he wasn't hated after all. Surprising, given his foul attitude sometimes.'

They walked in silence for a few minutes before Astaroth looked at Aberon with a mischievous smile.

Astaroth quietly activated Wind Walking, suddenly bursting forward with incredible speed. He wanted to give Aberon a taste of his increased magic abilities.

But as he turned his head to look behind him, expecting Aberon to look surprised, he found Aberon following directly behind him, a devilish grin on his face. His body was parallel to the ground, and he was flying at the same speed as him, effortlessly.

"You are going to have to do better, to win a contest of speed, young man."

Saying this, Aberon suddenly accelerated forward, darting past him with a wind current almost strong enough to send Astaroth flying into the walls of the tunnel.

"Like hell I'm losing!"

Astaroth was half tempted to use long-cooldown skills to catch up, but he decided against it. He could also have melded with any of his soul companions, but his goal was to prove to the old man his magic had gotten better.

So he used a spell he had learned in his week-long combat.

"Vacuum Pull!"

This was a spell he had developed when playing with Propel. He had managed to use Propel, in a way that sucked air instead of pushing it, and it had created this spell.

But an interesting effect came to pass when he used it in front of himself when running. The vacuum zone it created, if he made it large enough, reduced the friction of the wind on himself as he moved, making him almost weightless, and capable of accelerating much more than without.

With this spell kicking up, the air in front of him suddenly siphoned forward, reducing his friction to almost nil, and he felt himself accelerate greatly. In a matter of seconds, he caught up to Aberon, passing next to him like a bullet train next to a car, smiling cockily.

He knew the end of the tunnel was coming up soon, and he couldn't see Aberon behind him anymore.

'Hah! I beat him there.'

Bursting out on the surface, Astaroth stopped his spells, grinding to a halt with his feet. But when he looked up again, his smug expression vanished.

"Took you long enough," Aberon said.

Flipping around, a smug look on his face, he walked toward the base of the tree where the entrance to it was.

'But... but... I was in front of him. He must have teleported. Aww, mannn, that's cheating,' he thought, a downcast look on his face.