

## **New Eden 471**

### Chapter 471 Sent Off

Taking his loss with disappointment, Astaroth walked over to the group of villagers who were standing in front of the tree's entrance. The villagers were fearful of the entrance since they had yet to go inside this massive tree.

Ever since their arrival, Teraria and Arborea had sent them underground, where it was easier for them to maintain the barrier hiding them. No one had gone up the tree to inspect it, not even Kloud or Aberon.

Flanking the group of about twenty refugees was Silent Light, as well as Genie and the newly formed Luna, in her Elven body.

Genie was sniffing at her curiously, eliciting giggles from the little girl, and Silent Light was slightly distraught by her new appearance. Having her suddenly look like a cute little girl, instead of a doe, was making him feel weird.

He glanced over at Astaroth, wondering if he had asked for this appearance change.

'Is he secretly a furry?'

Astaroth didn't like the look the teen was sending him, so he gave him a light punch on the shoulder when he arrived near him.

On the other side of the group of refugees was the small party of five that had escorted Silent Light here, and they looked thrilled to be making the trip back with their guild leader.

As Astaroth glanced over at them again, he noticed something he hadn't yet.

Around the little girl with the book, her wings pointing her to be of the Fey race, was a wisp of moving mana. But the wisp was moving in such an esoteric fashion, he doubted it was just mana particles reacting to her.

He walked over to the girl, his eyes locked on the wisp the entire time. The closer he got, the more he could feel a familiar pulse from the wisp of mana.

The pulse resembled closely a heartbeat. That's when he connected the dots.

'A spirit! Is she a spirit user?'

Stopping in front of the girl, who was suddenly in shock at being so close to their intimidating guild leader, he looked into her eyes.

"That wisp floating around you. It's a spirit, right?"

The little girl looked at him, wide-eyed, unsure how he had even spotted the spirit, which was currently hiding its presence from the people around. Even for her, the spirit, or pixie in this case, was only a semi-transparent form of itself, floating around her, being annoying.

Even the pixie stopped floating around, surprised someone was seeing it while it was concealed.

It floated its way in front of the Ash Elf, looking into his eyes, and suddenly looked delighted, flying back to the little girl's side, whispering into her ear.

Novel "No! Ele, I can't say that to him!" the girl hissed.

But Astaroth was right before her, and he could hear her, as opposed to hearing the spirit.

"Say what?"

The girl looked at him nervously.

"I really can't repeat it, sir. It's very uncouth of her."

Astaroth frowned.

"Please. I want to know. Worry not about trivialities like being civilized. I know full well spiritual beings tend to be less inclined to them."

The girl twirled her hands together, nervousness overtaking her. She looked reticent for a moment before sighing loudly.

"She said she likes the colour of your soul. And that she would like to taste it..."

Astaroth raised an eyebrow for a second.

"Taste it? What is she, a dementor?"

"No! No, she is not something so repugnant, sir—"

"Drop the sir. Just call me Astaroth."

"I... I couldn't, sir. You are the guild leader. I need to uphold that decorum."

Astaroth clicked his tongue audibly, disappointed in the girl's lack of spine. But he was more curious about her spirit, and what others she might have.

"Then why would she taste my soul?"

"Ahh. Well, she is a pixie. And pixies link themselves to people by binding their souls together. Usually by consuming a part of it."

"Hmm. I assume even if she wanted to taste mine, she is already bound to yours. So where, might I ask, did you find this pixie of yours?"

Astaroth's curiosity was piqued deeply. If he could gather spirits for himself, without having to use souls of dead monsters or the such, he could possibly boost his power rapidly.

But the little girl frowned.

"They can't be found willingly, sir. I stumbled upon the spirits under my control. It is more likely they found me than the other way around."

A look of disappointment found its way onto Astaroth's face.

'It was worth a try, I guess.'

No longer interested, he thanked the girl for her time and headed toward the head of the group. He could only hope he would cross paths with one someday.

Until then, he had other things to take care of.

Reaching the head of the group, and standing on a tree stump, Astaroth gathered everyone's attention.

"Thank you for all making your way here quickly. Now, the path to the top of the tree is very direct, and as long as you don't wander off into any room or side paths, it will be a quick march. Once you reach the top, if you can just wait for me there, we shall depart shortly after. Questions?"

Seeing no one raise their hand or speak up, Astaroth nodded to Aberon, who started walking up into the tree, shouting to those behind him.

"Alright, people. Keep up!"

The group of refugees marched behind Aberon, following his lead upward in a spiralling motion, as the party of five players followed behind them, Silent Light following behind, with Astaroth and his little posse.

The march upward was not as fast as it could have been, with some refugees being elderly people, and their gait being much slower, but it was still an eventless trip.

Once they reached the large open room at the top, most of them stopped advancing, their mouths opening in awe. But Aberon snapped back to attention, barking at them to keep up as they walked into the center of the room.

Astaroth immediately went around the group once he reached the floor, and stepped toward Nemus.

The goddess looked at him; her smile still present.

"Are these the people that will accompany you?"

Nodding his head, Astaroth replied.

"Yes. Also, once we are gone, a few of the villagers have decided to stay. I would like for them to be kept safe, at least until I can send someone here that ensures the continuity of security. I also will be sending someone with the Property Deed in hand, and he will be taking possession of the lands instead of me. Will that do?"

Nemus looked thoughtful for a second, before slowly nodding her head.

"I will acknowledge whoever holds the deed. I trust you know what you are doing. Now, let us proceed to send you home with them."

Astaroth thanked her, walking back toward the group, and asking them to cluster together as much as possible. Once everyone was squeezed together, the goddess waved her hand, a wave of Aether leaving her body and washing over the crowd.

In a mere moment, they were gone.

"Good luck to you in the future, Alexander. You will need it now that we are separated. He will surely find out soon enough," Nemus whispered to herself, looking at the skies.

Chapter 472 Unannounced Arrival

In Bastion City's main plaza, which was situated just outside the inner walls, the flow of people coming in and out was constant. The teleporter, being located right in that plaza, was bringing people of every race in and out of Bastion City, like a river that never ended.

But the cubic structure with its purple stone columns suddenly turned to a bright red, sending the citizens into panic and the guards into a frenzy.

To the side, a squad captain was currently explaining the security measures in place on the teleporter to the new military councilman when the alarms started ringing in the plaza.

Declan looked at the captain, frowning from his underarm hold.

"What is happening, captain?"

The man swivelled his head, grabbing a passing guard.

"You! Tell me what's going on! Why are the alarms ringing?!"

From where the men were, it was hard to see the teleporter structure, due to the many mercantile stalls in the way. But Declan was already bypassing all of them by raising his head at the top of his arm.

From there, he could see the portal structure flashing red, just as the soldier responded.

"Sir! There is an unregistered portal use! The mages estimate it will arrive in ten seconds!"

"Unregistered?! How is that even possible?! Wouldn't our allies have told us if their portals were under attack?!"

The soldier broke from the captain's grip, resuming his sprint toward the plaza center, where he joined his unit and prepared to intercept whoever, or whatever, left the portal in a few seconds.

When the portal finally flashed in repetition, and people walked out of it, they were immediately met with spears and swords, sending the refugees exiting the portal into a state of fear. From the small group, an old man pulled forward, standing in between the soldiers surrounding them and the refugees, his face a mask of anger.

"What is the meaning of this, boy?! Is this how you greet your visitors?"

"Identify yourselves!" The soldier at the front replied, keeping a straight face.

Aberon looked at him, half tempted to burn him to a crisp. But this was a soldier under Astaroth, and the fault should lie on him.

Turning around to scold the young man, Aberon noticed that Astaroth hadn't come out of the portal yet. An eyebrow raised on Aberon's face, as he wondered what had happened.

Hearing heavy footsteps come his way, Aberon turned to face the soldier again. That was when he saw the mountain-sized Undead, in full-plated armour.

Declan had just reached the portal, and he was looking at the newcomers. He instantly recognized their tattered clothes and scarred demeanour as that of refugees fleeing something.

So he stepped forward, waving at the soldiers to stand down.

Aberon, seeing this towering figure move forward with a more civilized approach, calmed down a bit.

Declan, with his head still under his arm, talked first.

"Sir. We mean no offence in our actions, but you used an unregistered portal to link to ours. If you can please identify yourselves, we can sort this out without any further roughness."

Aberon looked at the towering Undead and could recognize a pressure not dissimilar to Kloud's. But the words he spoke were words of peaceful resolution, not a threat, so Aberon had no reason to further provoke them.

He was also still weakened from going all out against Teraria, and couldn't suddenly start fighting a city worth of soldiers.

"We came here from the Ash Elf kingdom. Your king was with us, but he has yet to pop out of the portal. I assume he was held back for a bit. We can wait here, under your supervision, for as long as you wish."

Declan squinted from inside his helmet. The answer was not the one he had asked, and he disliked people beating around the bush.

παΠδσNovel "I will ask again. Please identify yourselves."

This time, his tone was a lot firmer, taking Aberon back a bit.

Had he not made himself clear that he was with their king? But just as he was about to rebuke, and revert to his angry demeanour, the portal flashed another time, before going back to its normal purple colour.

Walking out from it, a confused Astaroth noticed all the soldiers around him and his friends. When he saw Declan at the forefront, he walked over to him.

"Declan! Glad you're here. Listen, man, I know we are unannounced and all, but I didn't think she would send us straight to the portal. I thought we would land somewhere inside the palace or in the room under it. Phoenix told me you were in charge of the military portion now, so can you have them stand down?"

Seeing the man step toward Councilman Declan, the soldiers stepped forward, spears raised, the edges of the spearheads gleaming in the sunlight under Astaroth's chin.

"Stop right there, sir! One step closer, and we will not hesitate to impale you!" the captain at Declan's right barked out.

Astaroth's face shifted to an ice-cold facade as he stared down at the man. But before he could open his mouth to speak, a resounding clap echoed on the plaza.

Declan's hand had just struck the captain's back of the head, and the captain was tumbling to the ground, unconscious.

"I'm sorry, Astaroth. You haven't been here yet, so none of them know your face. Otherwise, how couldn't they recognize their king?!"

Speaking that last phrase as loud as he could, Declan put his head back in place, before smacking his fist on his chest and doing a short curtsy, to push the point across even more.

"Greetings, Your Highness Astaroth!"

When the soldiers saw Declan act, they finally realized their wrongdoing. The ones at the forefront, whose spears were up against the Ash Elf, had their faces pale as they retracted their spears.

In a united motion, all the soldiers in the plaza suddenly kneeled, shouting out, "Greetings, Your Highness Astaroth!"

Astaroth's face went back to normal, as he saw everyone kneeling. He felt butterflies in his stomach, as he had never been given this much respect at once.

Getting closer to Declan, he whispered from the side.

"Please, make them stand up again. This is making me uncomfortable."

Declan snorted before standing straight.

"Alright, you maggots! Get everything back to normal! People are waiting to use the portal!"

A resounding, "Yes, Sir!" echoed in the plaza, before the soldiers scattered, getting the populace circulating again.

Meanwhile, Declan motioned for Astaroth to follow him.

Astaroth did the same to the refugees, and the delegation strolled out of there quickly, reaching the inner city in minutes, before making their way to the palace.

Soon enough, all of them were in a large room on the outskirts of the palace tree interior.

Chapter 473 A Connection Into Lizardman Country

Settling down in a small meeting room on the opposite side of the official one, but not unlike it, Declan smiled his ghastly smile at Astaroth through his helmet openings.

"I see you bring back people from your little adventure. Are these all of them?"

Astaroth sat down in front of him around the large table, while most of the refugees took to the sofas at the sides, taking a moment to rest their tired feet, breathing in the luxury of the room.

If any of them had doubted Astaroth's words before about being connected to the palace, those doubts were gone now. The mass salute in the plaza had blown them away.

Most of the villagers now had no idea how they should address Astaroth anymore.

"This is all of those that wanted to follow me. The rest of them stayed back, but they are safe now."

Declan nodded in acknowledgement, taking a brief moment to look at each of them. He didn't scan them, but he didn't need to.

His time in the military had made him an excellent judge of strength, and he could discern these were all civilians, aside from one old man. The old man seemed innocuous, at first glance, but a sense of dread washed over Declan every time they locked eyes.

'He's more powerful than he lets on,' Declan thought, taking mental note of the old man.

Aberon could feel the inquisitive gaze of the Undead man and only smirked.

'Astaroth has a few capable people surrounding him now. Good,' Aberon thought.

Astaroth quickly brought the conversation back on track.

"Is Phoenix busy at the moment? I think she should know of this matter."

Declan shook his head.

"She's in a meeting with other members of the council regarding the adventurers' guild. She won't be available until later today. For now, I will take care of whatever it is you need."

Astaroth nodded his head.

"Okay. Then these people need to be tended to. They need lodgings, as well as funds for retirement if they wish so, or help to find a job if they wish to keep working. These people have been through enough in the last decade. They deserve to rest."

Declan raised his hand, and a manservant walked in from a side door that had previously been unseen.

The tall Lizardman slinked next to Declan, bowing slightly.

"Chele. Please make sure all these people are taken care of properly. Anything they need should be furnished to them. The funds can come from the treasury."

"Asss you wisssssh, Counsssilman," the Lizardman named Chele replied.

With a snap of his scaly fingers, a throng of maids and servants walked into the room, taking the refugees by their hands and elbows, and bringing them away. Once the last one had been pulled away, Chele bowed again and exited through the door he had come in through.

The only one that hadn't left was Aberon. The servants had tried taking him away, but he practically low-growled at them, saying, "Hands off."

Astaroth was impressed with the efficiency level the palace had gone up to in the time he was away. He sure as hell didn't remember ever having servants.

Nonetheless, this wasn't the only matter to settle. Looking back toward Declan, he smiled.

"Man, I'm glad everything seems to be going well now. But I still have a few things to discuss, this time with everyone present."

Declan looked unsure of who everyone was.

"Everyone? What does that entail?"

"Whatever structure of power in place here, and also all the officers of Paragon. Oh, and also, the prince and his pocket wizard."

Aberon chuckled at the nickname Astaroth gave Gelum'vire.

Declan nodded his head slowly. If Astaroth needed the presence of so many people, this would be a big decision.

"I will start contacting everyone right away. Since Phoenix is currently in a meeting, when do you wish to have this meeting?"

Astaroth scratched his chin a bit, getting a whiff of how his clothes and person smelled, and his nose wrinkled. He hadn't noticed until now, since he had been in an almost constant state of battle-readiness.

"Schedule it for this afternoon, if you can. I need to go change my clothes, wash up, and rest a bit."

Declan laughed at his self-consciousness.

"Battlefields get messy, don't they?" he asked his guild leader, knowingly.

"Urgh. I haven't taken a proper bath in this body for days. And my clothes reek of monster innards and dry blood. I doubt presenting myself like this to the council would make me look like a king."

Declan laughed again, waving his hand once more, Chele re-entered the room.

"Chele, can you bring the king to his chambers? He needs a makeover and some rest."

The Lizardman nodded his head before bowing to Astaroth.

"Ssssovereign, if you follow me?"

Astaroth rose from his chair, giving a brief salute to Declan, before following the dignified Lizardman manservant out of the meeting room.

As he followed him upstairs to a room that had been renovated to suit Phoenix's tastes, Astaroth asked the retainer a question that had been on his mind since he saw him.

"Chele. If you don't mind my asking, does your kind have an established kingdom or some such thing?"

The manservant turned his head slightly, keeping one eye on his direction, and putting the other on Astaroth.

"Of coursssse, Sssssire. We have a kingdom down ssssoouth, in the marchlandsssss. Why do you asssssk?"

"Out of simple curiosity. I rarely saw anyone of your kind since now," Astaroth responded, a smile on his face.

Of course, he wasn't going to tell him he slaughtered a bunch of them in a dungeon before the update. That would only put him in an awkward position.

He had nothing against the race, after all. But the quest that Qwon had given him still lingered in his mind, as well as his promise to find Kela'ra's remains and give them a proper burial.

He now had a clue for the first of these lingering requests.

"Perhaps you could point it out to me on a map. I would love to have allies in your brethren. I heard your kingdom was home to some of the strongest warriors on this continent."

παΙδαNovel The retainer's scales became a shade lighter of green as he responded.



"You honour my kind with your wordssss, Sssssire. It would be my pleassssure to ssssshow you where it isssss and form a bridge between our nationsssss."

'Bullseye,' Astaroth thought to himself.

Flattery was always a good way to get information out of someone. And now, he had a way into an unknown part of this world he wished to explore so much.

The fact he had so much to do, and so little time to do it, only dampened his mood. Exploration would come second to his goals.

#### Chapter 474 Pre-Chosen Outfit

After Chele brought him to his room, Astaroth was left alone to attend to himself. After pouring himself a hot bath, and shoving his armour into a basket that would be sent for cleaning later in the day, he submerged himself in the hot water.

Exhaling a long slow breath of relief, Astaroth let the tension of the last week leave his avatar's body. It wasn't much different from what he did these days, outside of New Eden, but it somehow felt good, anyway.

He let all the stress and excitement of combat leave his body, melting into the steaming hot water, as he lay there, almost falling asleep. Feeling himself slip into sleep's embrace, he caught himself slapping the sides of his face a bit.

"I still have stuff to do after this. Can't relax too much yet."

Washing himself up, Astaroth left the bathroom adjacent bathroom to his room and walked into his room, buck naked. He had thought of using some clothes he had bought when doing a shopping spree with Violette the last time, but on his bed, a set of fresh clothes were already present.

Walking up to the bed, he looked at the outfit. It was nothing too exuberant, contrary to what he would have thought servants would have prepared him, but it was still very nice clothes.

The pants were nice silken pants, dyed oaken brown, with trims of red and gold on them. The shirt, on the other hand, was a two-piece set that screamed opulence in his eyes.

The underpart of the shirt was a white silk shirt with a frilly collar and sleeve hems. It resembled a Victorian ruffle shirt that you would see in pirate movies and whatnot.

The waistcoat that went over it was in tones of red and gold, and Astaroth just knew that wearing this would get him laughed at by his guild mates.

But he didn't want to hurt the feelings of the person who had prepared this outfit for him. So he started dressing.

His ashy grey skin held such a contrast to the white shirt and red waistcoat, that even he found it a bit glaring. But when he stepped in front of a mirror to the side, he looked himself up and down and was quite pleasantly surprised.

'I kinda look like a rich noble from a manga. It's not too bad.'

He felt like something was missing from this ensemble, though. If he was to look the part, might as well go all out.

Looking at the dresser to his left, his eyes caught exactly what that was.

Hanging from a necklace stand, a golden chain with a very recognizable tree adorned with small gleaming white jewels was displayed. Whoever had prepared his outfit had thought of everything.

Grabbing the necklace, he looked at the carefully fabricated golden tree and its multiple small jewels. The darned thing took up almost all his palm, and the sheer size was impressive.

But the details of it were also incredibly beautiful. Sliding his thumb across the tree, he could feel the rough engraving made to resemble bark, and he smiled faintly.

'Whoever did this, did it with love. You can almost feel it residing in the gold.'

Sliding the long chain over his head, he let the pendant drop onto his grey skin and looked at himself in the mirror once again.

The contrast of white, red, gold, and his grey skin was very eye-catching, but he could guess this had been the goal here. He took a quick spin, making sure everything fit well, and grinned.

Looking at his system clock, Astaroth knew he had a few hours to kill, still, before the meeting time. He wondered what he could do in the meantime.

He thought of going on a tour in the city, to see for himself how it had grown since he had last been here, which was theoretically ten years ago. But as he exited his room, a young woman in a maid outfit intercepted him.

"Good afternoon, Sire. Is the outfit to your liking?"

Her bowed figure made him uncomfortable, and he put his hand on her shoulder.

"Please, you can be at ease with me. I may be king, but that is barely in title. Treat me like you would a rich friend."

The maid took a step back from him, breaking contact between his hand and her shoulder, staying bent forward.

"I could never, your majesty. I am just a servant."

\*Sigh\*

His shoulders dropping, Astaroth opted to answer her question instead of arguing.

"Was it you that prepared the outfit?"

"Indeed, Sire. Is anything wrong with it? Does it displease you?"

A certain nervousness trembled her voice a bit, and Astaroth was distraught.

'What kind of person do they think I am?'

Leaning forward, to put his head next to the servant's head, he could see her shake.

"It is lovely. I only wish it wasn't so screaming in wealth. I am used to more practical clothes. But this is fine. I have to make a good impression on the council for our first meeting, don't I?"

He heard the servant breathe in relief, only then noticing the king's face was so close to hers. As she backed away, she brought her back straight up but kept her head hung low.

"I shall keep this in mind next time, your highness. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Astaroth still hadn't decided on what to do next, but he figured he might as well tour the palace first, and acclimate to the changes here first. So he looked at the maid.

"Can you perhaps show me around the palace? It has been quite a while since I've been here, and I would like to see what has changed."

The maid, still looking at her feet, bowed a bit, motioning behind herself.

"It would be my honour, Sire. Please, right this way. We can start by the upper floors since we are already on the third floor."

Astaroth nodded, walking up to her. Once he had slightly passed her, she followed a few feet behind, guiding him with her voice for where to turn.

They visited the third floor in its entirety, aside from the rooms that were occupied, before going up the stairs to the next floor.

#### Chapter 475 Breaking Etiquette

Making their way up to the fourth floor, the servant was still walking a pace behind Astaroth, who was basically walking forward blindly, with her voice like a GPS, telling him when to turn and what way. Whenever he stopped walking, so did she, and if he pivoted to face her, she suddenly bowed, keeping her eyes lower than his at all times.

Astaroth disliked this type of behaviour, and it didn't sit well with him to be treated like some posh noble. His world had long since gotten rid of such division, except in countries that insisted on keeping nobility up.

He stopped walking at the top of the stairs, waiting for her to stop behind him. Once he couldn't hear her steps anymore, he pivoted around again.

The maid bowed immediately.

"Alright, enough."

His abruptness made the young maid skip a heartbeat, as she thought she was in trouble.

"Have you seen enough of the palace, sire?" she asked, trying to figure out her mistake.

"No. I still want to see it. But I'm tired of your acting like this."

"My apologies, your highness. Is there anything I did to displease you?"

Her eyes were already filling with tears, thinking she was going to be punished. She had no idea what she did to offend the king, and she feared it might have been an unconscious thing.

"You did."

Stepping forward, he saw her hands twitch at the side, and Astaroth understood she expected punishment. But that wasn't his intention.

He grabbed her shoulders, forcing her straight up, and looked into her eyes. Tears were streaming down her fearful face, as she tried averting her gaze.

"No no no. Look me in the eye."

Begrudgingly, the maid turned her eyes toward the king's gaze.

"Good. Now I need you to understand something about me, and all my kind. We don't come from a world where customs like these are held, and it irks me.

"Please, by the gods, treat me like a normal person. I can understand the higher degree of respect since I am your superior. But you need to stop treating me like some kind of half-divinity or something.

"When you walk with me, you walk at my side. When you face me, you stand straight. And most of all, when you talk to me, you look me in the eye. Understood?"

The maid looked at Astaroth, unsure how to react, and her brain took a moment to process the event. She had been expecting punishment and admonishment, yes, but not this kind.

She was thrown off completely.

And it only worsened when Astaroth suddenly smiled warmly, letting go of her shoulders and brushing out the wrinkles on her uniform he had made.

"Now. Can we resume the tour without all this nonsensical charade?"

The maid took a moment to wipe her tears, trying to recenter herself, as she started bowing to the king again.

"Yes, S—"

"Tut tut. Up. Stand straight, dear lord."

The maid interrupted her bow, slowly standing back up straight. She tried smiling at the man, but it only came by as a half grimace.

"This way please, Sire."

As they resumed their tour, she had to focus on walking beside him, breaking every training she had undergone to become a maid, if only to please him and keep him happy. Her duty was first and foremost to serve him to the best of her ability.

If that meant being unconventional with him, to follow his orders, then so be it.

Guiding him around the fourth floor, she slowly explained every room they came by, this floor being mainly a military planning floor. They crossed many rooms where mages were showing illusory maps of the area, pointing out patrol routes, or hotspots for monster activity.

King Astaroth seemed a lot more interested in this floor than he had been with the previous one, where it was mainly a residential floor, with rooms for officers, councilmen, and such top representatives or respected guests.

His interested nods and rapt attention to her explanation of what little she knew about the operations finally got her to calm down and regain full composure. She also rapidly understood why the queen was in meetings instead of him, and why his attitude was so casual.

She had heard from other servants, who served the councilmen, that the king was apparently a great warrior, who was often out fighting, rather than leading his nation. Even though he and his kind had only been back for a little over a week, they hadn't seen a shadow of him till this morning.

She had already noticed from her brief interactions with the other Abnormals who occasionally wandered the palace's halls, that they were less rapt of respecting proper noble etiquette. But she hadn't assumed they were all like this.

After all, the queen seemed so elegant and breathed nobility with her every move. She wondered why the difference between her and the king was so big.

After showing him around every room on the fourth floor, the maid offered to visit the fifth floor to the monarch, telling him it was mostly a floor where the sentinels had their living quarters. He still showed interest, so they ascended the staircase.

"Do the sentinels have passages from the fifth floor up to the branches? We are still quite a ways away from the first of the lower branches."

Astaroth was curious how they made their way quickly up to their posts in case of attack. It wasn't common for vigils to be so far away from their posts, even when resting.

The maid next to him nodded.

"They indeed have a path. A Druid is on duty at all times in the center of the floor, ready to send them up at a moment's notice."

This struck Astaroth's curiosity even more. How would a druid send them up outside from the middle of the tree?

As they finished ascending the staircase to the fifth floor, he rapidly understood his misconception of the area.

'Wow. This floor differs so much from the others!'

#### Chapter 476 The Fifth Floor

Taking in the sights, Astaroth almost went slack-jawed.

The entire floor seemed bigger than the ones under it, by double the area. Matter of fact, it looked bigger than it should, at all.

This entire floor looked like they had expanded it from the inside, even though the tree still looked the same from the outside when he arrived. He could already guess this was the work of a very potent mage.

But turning his head to his extreme right, he noticed runes on the wall next to him. Touching the rune, he immediately understood what it did, when it gave him an immediate sense of vertigo, like his surroundings suddenly expanded fourfold.

Drawing his hand away from the rune, he gasped for air a few times, shaking his head to recover from the vertigo.

"Well, that was... educational. I'll have to remind myself not to put my hands on unknown runes in the future."

From the side, a soft chuckle escaped the maid's lips as her eyes widened in surprise. She slammed her two hands over her mouth, bowing immediately.

"I'm sorry for laughing at you, your majesty! I swear it was an accident!"

Astaroth's hand landed on her shoulder.

"What did I say about bowing? And laugh all you want. I did something stupid and deserved to be laughed at for it. Don't be scared to express your genuine emotions around me."

The maid snapped back upright, her hands still covering her mouth. She tried containing her laughter, the king still looking a little haggard, but she finally let herself go.

Laughing a hearty laugh, she let her emotions burst out momentarily before regaining her composure after a few moments. She hadn't laughed like this in a while, and it was therapeutic.

Brushing away the tears of laughter at the corner of her eyes, she looked at the monarch before apologizing for her outburst.

Astaroth looked a bit distraught.

"Did I look that ridiculous?" he asked, scratching the back of his head.

"Not at all, my king. It must have been pent-up emotions coming out together with the laughter. I apologize."

Waving his hand dismissively, Astaroth smiled at her.

"Let us resume the tour, shall we?"

Nodding her head with a big smile, the maid beckoned him forward.

"This entire floor has been expanded magically, as you have experienced, to have the sentinels on hand at any moment necessary. The sentinels are also a large part of our ranged forces and act as our first line of defence. In case of attack, the druid over there teleports them to their posts through the large wooden pillars across the area."

Pointing at the druid that sat in the center of the room, at what looked like a worktable, patiently growing some kind of apparatus from the wood of the table itself, the maid explained the room's function.

"The chambers all around the room are sleeping rooms, where the sentinels go to, well, sleep. Over there is a canteen where they can enjoy a warm meal, cooks being ready to serve them at any moment. In this corner is a shooting range, if they wish to keep their aim true while off-duty."

The maid explained the room's layout in great detail, not missing even an inch of its area, to a frightening degree.

"You seem to know a great deal about this floor. Is there a particular reason for this?"

"Ah... No reason in particular, Sire. I just know som—"

"Coral! My love! What are you doing on this floor? I thought you were going to be busy with the king today?"

A tall Elven man ran up to Astaroth and the maid, embracing her tightly as he got to her. The maid started punching him with her small, frail arms, whispering something to him.

Astaroth just stood to the side, smiling at the scene.

'That explains it.'

After the maid whispered in the man's ear, he went pale, dropping her to the ground and spinning around, before bowing at a ninety-degree angle.

"I'm sorry, your highness, I didn't know she was accompanying you! I will take any punishment you deem adequate for my rudeness!"

\*Sigh\*

"What is it with everyone treating me like I'm some sort of tyrant? I swear, it's getting tiresome. Stand up, soldier."

"Yes, Sire!" the soldier barked, getting back up, straight like an iron pole, his head lifted high to keep his eyes from meeting the sovereign's.

The maid, Coral, elbowed him in the side, whispering at him again. Astaroth saw the man's face change from a serious look of fear to one of confusion, before he lowered his gaze to meet Astaroth's.

"Good. Know that I have your attention. What is your name?"

"Castien, Sire. I am sorry for my impudence. I did not know you were coming up here."

The man was about to bow again, but Astaroth gripped his shoulder. The Elven man was almost a head taller than Astaroth and built like an athlete, but that didn't stop Astaroth from interrupting his motion with a single hand.

Feeling the powerful grip on his shoulder, the soldier was surprised. Although he could see a clear muscle definition under the monarch's shirt, he didn't look as strong as he needed to be, to grip him in place like this.

"Stay upright. This unnecessary bowing needs to stop when we are in an unofficial setting. Castien, I take it you are a sentinel. I thank you for your service, and hope you keep defending this kingdom with pride."

The soldier didn't know how to react. He got his back straight again, before nodding wordlessly.

"Oh, and one more thing," Astaroth said, leaning closer to him. "Nice catch."

Tapping lightly on the man's arm, Astaroth walked away, looking around the fifth floor. From the corner of his eye, he could see the big dumb grin on the Elf's face as he looked at Coral, the maid's face completely flushed red.

She punched Castien, before hurrying back to Astaroth's side, her face still red like a ripe tomato.

Astaroth chuckled.

"Is there a sixth floor we can visit?" he asked, trying to get back to his tour.

Clearing her throat, the maid, Coral, regained her previous composure, her cheeks still slightly rosy.

"The sixth floor is being renovated for now. The interim king, Leon, asked for a training room inside the palace, and he designated the sixth floor as its location.

"The Elven builders are currently rearranging the room to his specifications and strengthening the surfaces. Mages will then also come and enchant the floor, ceiling, and walls to be practically indestructible. This process is time-consuming, though."

Astaroth listened to her explanations, nodding slowly. He also liked the idea of a training room directly inside his new home. Looking at the time, he saw he still had an hour before the meeting.

"I find myself in want of a breath of fresh air. Have you ever visited the canopy of the tree palace, Coral?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Before she could react further, Astaroth grabbed her hand, pulled on it, and picked her up, before dashing into an open pathway in one pillar that the druid had just opened for a sentinel. Before long, he reappeared on one of the top branches, the maid in his arms, suddenly shrieking in horror.

"Eeek! Please don't drop me! I'm terrified of heights!"

Chapter 477 City Overview

Astaroth tried letting the maid back to her feet, but she clung to his neck like a frightened animal, her eyes closed tight, as the wind from this elevation ruffled her hair loose. He hadn't expected such a reaction from her, and now he felt slightly bad for forcing her here.

"Uh... I'm sorry? I didn't know you were scared of heights. But you are safe as long as I'm next to you, so would you mind letting go? There is plenty of room to walk on the branches without danger of falling."

Astaroth worked hard, convincing her to get back to her own two feet, and she still vehemently refused to open her eyes.

"Fine, don't open your eyes. But I'm moving, so either you hold my hand, or you open your eyes to follow me."

"Sire! I wouldn't dare hold your hand. Can't we go back inside instead?" the woman whimpered.

Hearing no response, Coral's stomach dropped.

'Did he already leave me here?'

She had no choice but to open her eyes. Opening them slowly, taking a peek straight ahead of herself, she could see Astaroth's back, steadily walking away, in a relaxed gait.

Astaroth advanced, not a care in the world. He kept his senses on the girl, in case anything happened to her, but he was also looking around himself with a smile.

In the last ten years since he'd been up here, a few branches had grown out from the main ones, and he was brushing his hands against their leaves. The crisp cold air at this altitude was refreshing, and it washed away whatever weariness was left of his stress-filled week since the update launch.



He heard the clapping of the maid's shoes against the wood behind him and turned to watch her waddle with uncertainty to reach him.

Slowly walking backwards, he watched her terrified expression as she looked at her feet.

"Don't look at your feet. Look ahead. The more you look down, the worse it will be."

She was shaking hard, and her head rose slowly, as she fought against every instinct of hers to watch where she was putting her feet. Once she locked her gaze forward on Astaroth's confident form, her shaking reduced a bit.

She inched her way forward, noticing Astaroth was also walking backward, not even looking where he was going. After a few unsure steps, she was able to accelerate her pace a bit and finally caught up to her monarch.

"I hate you, Sire."

"Been told that a few times. Now, will you hold my hand, or can you keep going on your own?"

He heard her swallow nervously and had to hold back a chuckle, lest he sound like he was making fun of her.

"I... I think I can walk alone... Will you stay nearby?"

"Of course. I want to climb a bit higher. Normally I would just jump my way up, but we can use the stairs a bit further ahead, for your sake."

"Higher?!" she blurted out.

"Just a bit. I know a delightful spot from which to look at the city. You can also probably come here with your lover next time, and have a nice romantic picnic or something."

Her face blushed, bringing some colour back to her pale cheeks.

"Does the queen know you like teasing other women?"

"Hah! She knows I tease everyone. It's not a sexual thing, rather just I'm an immature little brat. Think nothing of it."

He stuck his tongue out at her before pivoting around and resuming his walk toward the staircase further.

Although, calling it a staircase was a stretch.

The structure resembled stairs, but there was no solid attachment to them. It was closer to being a rope bridge, with tilted planks to make stairs instead of a pathway.

But he cared little for technicalities, and he trusted the construction since he assumed a lot of sentinels used it regularly. Reaching the stairs, he turned around to make sure she knew he was waiting for her.

He hadn't taken his senses off of her, but she didn't seem to have enough mana to even notice he was locked on her like an eagle. Coral trudged her way forward, reaching him a few seconds later.

She looked at the stairs in horror, now realizing what she had to go up, and her eyes became glossy again.

"Do I really have to climb this, sire? Can't we go back inside now?"

"We're almost there, Coral. Give it just another bit of courage."

Gulping down her now dry mouth, she gripped the ropes on each side tightly as she took her first step on the unstable structure.

She almost reflexively closed her eyes when she felt the planks move under her feet, but resisted the urge. As her second foot left the solidity of the branch, she felt her body sway lightly from left to right on the rope staircase and whined to herself.

"Come on, you got this. Just a few steps to go!" Astaroth cheered from behind her.

After a painful climb of the twenty steps up, Astaroth was already waiting for her at the top, as he had decided jumping up would be faster. He looked at her with a gentle smile and reached his hand out.

"The offer still stands."

Coral shook her head, trying to feign bravery, regardless of her ghastly white face.

"Are we almost there?"

Astaroth nodded, retracting his hand.

"The passage led us very close, by chance. Only a few hundred feet to traverse on this main branch, and we'll be there."

She nodded her head reluctantly.

After travelling forward for what seemed an eternity for the woman, she gasped when they arrived at the edge of an opening in the canopy. Astaroth stood there, his hands on his hips, smiling at the breathtaking view.

Even Coral, who was still shivering in fear, opened her mouth, contemplating the city from this high up. Her fear of height took a rear seat as a sense of awe overcame her.

She suddenly felt like the world belonged to her, and she could do whatever she wanted with it. The feeling was fleeting, though, as she was reminded of the very lethal fall she would take if she were to misstep.

Astaroth spoke, breaking her out of her cycle of fear and amazement.

"Last time I came up here, the city down below didn't exist. It was just ruins and forest, more so after the siege. Phoenix and I came up here together and slept under the starry skies. Those were more peaceful times, regardless of the events."

Coral looked at him, seeing a facet she doubted many people knew of the king. He was sentimental and romantic.

'Lucky woman,' she briefly thought, before shaking that thought away from her mind.

"I thank you for showing me this spot. But I would much like to go down now. I also think the time for your meeting is nearing."

"That is true. Let us be on our way, then."

But before they could turn around and leave, a loud shout resounded behind them.

"Coral! By the gods! Why are you up here?!"

Astaroth pivoted on his feet, noticing the maid's boyfriend, with a worried sick look on his face.

But as the woman turned to face the man, she tripped on her feet and lost balance. The next thing she saw was the terror-filled face of her lover, as well as the surprised face of Astaroth, slowly getting further away, as the branch she had been standing on shrank in her vision.

'Shit!' Astaroth thought.

"CORAAAALLLLL!!!!!" Castien screamed.

#### Chapter 478 A Deserved Hit

The sentinel burst into action immediately after shouting, lunging toward the ground, turning around mid-fall. He hooked something up to an arrow and shot it at the underside of the main branch, hooking his bow back to his torso.

Astaroth looked at this take place and rapidly calculated something in his mind. He was looking at the bundle of rope at the man's waist and his speed of descent.

'He's not going to make it fast enough.'

He didn't hesitate either, melding with Morpheus instantly, feeling the wings grow out of his back. The entire process took almost three seconds, and he cursed himself for not finding a way to make it faster yet.

Once he was melded, he pulled out the Ad Astra, changing its form to claws, and slid his way under the branch. He was going to need for than fall velocity to make it to her in time.

Arcing his body up, he slammed his feet into the branch and focused all his strength on his legs. The feeling of power welled up inside them, and he launched like a rocket.

Castien was almost caught up to Coral, but he already felt he wouldn't make it. His rope bundle was getting smaller and smaller, faster than he was closing the gap.

'Come on! Come on! Please reach!'

His hand was out in full extension, trying to catch Coral's extended hand; her eyes filled with a feeling of impending death. Just as his fingers grazed Coral's, he suddenly lurched to a complete stop, recoiling upward with the rope's tension.

"No!" he screamed, his fears coming to fruition.

But as he shouted that, a shadow shot by him, going much faster than he was, and colliding with Coral's falling form. Wings extended out of the form, and for a moment, Castien thought the bad had just turned to worst.

'A monster?! How did it slip by our vigils and defences?!'

But as the winged creature glided its way down, sticking close to the side of the tree palace, he saw it slow down and finally land in front of the palace entrance. Then it transformed, and thanks to his Elven eyesight, he was able to recognize the face of the one that saved his dear Coral.

Castien quickly climbed back up his rope, in a hurry to go see if she was ok. In the meantime, the scared-to-death young maid was currently gasping for air, on her knees, reeling from almost dying.

Astaroth felt bad about what had happened since it was theoretically his fault. He crouched down, putting his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Deep breaths. In, hold it, then out slowly. In, hold it, then out slowly."

After following his instructions a few times, her breathing stabilized, and she started sobbing. No one would react well to a near-death experience, after all.

Astaroth stayed by her side, knowing her Elven boyfriend was already on his way. Guards rushed to their position since he was about fifty meters away from the palace entrance.

They hadn't seen what had happened, aside from the winged form land and disappear, and when they reached near, they recognized the man.

"King Astaroth! Where is the monster?! Stay behind us!"

The four guards surrounded the king and the maid, their heads spinning, on the lookout for the winged monster. Astaroth looked at their backs like they were fools, but said nothing.

The palace door suddenly burst open, Castien rushing through, his eyes already locked on the group of guards and what they were surrounding. He kept running, closing the distance in moments.

The guards stopped him, as they looked at him with anger.

"Halt! Sentinel, you should be up on your perch, not here on the ground! How could your people let a monster through your watch and assault the king in the middle of the afternoon?! Shame!"

Castien barely listened to the rebuke, his eyes locked on Coral, who was slowly grasping the surrounding situation.

"Move out of my way, you buffoon! That is my fiancée with the king!"

He rapidly shoved the guard before him, seemingly with no effort, as the three other guards kept watch over the surroundings and skies.

Throwing himself to his knees, he grabbed Coral by her shoulders, looking her up and down, checking if she was wounded. Seeing not a scratch on her, he turned his rage-filled gaze on Astaroth, who was already back on his feet, arms behind his back.

Castien jumped to his feet, his fists clenched tight. He wanted to punch this man so badly, for having brought his fiancée to such a dangerous place, especially when she was terrified of heights.

Astaroth rose a hand up in front of him, a single finger raised.

"You get one. I deserve it. I won't retaliate."

Astaroth then brought his arm back behind his back, closing his eyes.

This angered Castien even more, feeling like he was being looked down on. He finally snapped.

\*Whack!\*

With an impact noise that would have been worrisome, if targeted towards a regular person, his fist smacked into Astaroth's jaw to the left, sending him to his ass.

'Ouch. He has quite the sting,' Astaroth thought, caressing his jaw.

The four guards immediately went into a frenzy, turning to face Castien, her swords suddenly aimed at him.

"What do you think you are doing, you idiot? That is the king you just struck!" one of them shouted.

Another one was already raising his blade to strike at the Elf, but Astaroth stopped the blade barehanded.

"Enough! I deserved that hit, and you will not penalize him for it! Now stand down. There is no monster, you dolts. That was me landing."

The men looked flustered for a moment, unsure what he meant.

But someone landed near them and rapidly defused the situation.

A tall Elven woman, with traits that seemed familiar to Astaroth, pulled a small curtsy, before looking at the five armoured men around with an icy glare.

She fixed her gaze on Castien.

"I don't approve of your actions against the king, but he has allowed it, so I will let this one slide. Go back to your quarters, for now, Castien."

With a grumble, the Elven man nodded his head, leaving, but not before throwing a worried look at his fiancée, and a death glare at Astaroth.

'Yikes, he's mad.'

"As for you four morons, I heard you say we failed our duty. Do you honestly think my men would miss a large winged creature flying into our city?"

The four guards stood at attention, making Astaroth understand she held some sort of authority.

One of them stepped forth.

"Commander Alena, we only reacted without thinking. We apologize if we have spoken out of place."

"Hmph. You better stick to minding your own duties, instead of slandering mine. Now go back to your posts. I will see to the king and the young woman."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

All four of them broke formation, jogging back to their positions, not looking back.

'Alena. Why does this name sound familiar?' Astaroth thought.

"My king, if you would come with me, please?"

Snapping back to attention, Astaroth picked Coral up, asking her how she felt, before following behind the tall woman.

'I guess I'll find out soon enough.'

#### Chapter 479 The Angry In-Law

Following the tall Elven woman, she led them to the side of the tree palace, where a root the size of a train sunk into the ground. Touching the root, she mumbled something under her breath and the root opened up like a sideways eye, before lighting up in bright green.

"After you," the woman said, turning toward the king and maid.

Nodding his head, Astaroth gestured the maid to go first, before following immediately after. Stepping in the bright light, his body felt sucked inside the root, travelling at high speeds, not unlike when he used Luna's Travelling Roots spell.

They soon exited through the wooden surface, inside a brightly lit room filled with luxurious wooden furniture and plants in every corner. By the massive desk in the middle of the room, he could guess this was the woman's office, if he went solely by her title of commander.

As the woman came out of the wall last, the opening-closing behind her, she walked over to the desk and sat behind it.

She motioned to the seat across from her.

"Sit."

Astaroth suddenly felt like he was back in high school, meeting the director after pulling a prank on his teachers. He swallowed nervously.

"I would prefer to remain standing, if you don't mind."

"Sit," she repeated, her tone final.

"You know I'm the king, ri—"

"At the moment, I couldn't care if you were the king of the world. I said sit."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

Astaroth swallowed his arguments and sat his ass in the chair. Something about the way this woman was talking to him reminded him of his mother.

The calm exterior, with a steady tone, did nothing to hide the boiling anger beneath her surface. From experience, he knew best to listen than argue against these women.

'Women truly are the scariest thing in existence,' he thought to himself, suddenly feeling under pressure.

His palms were already sweating up in nervousness, as the woman stared at him in silence.

Meanwhile, the maid stood behind him, her head bowed toward the Elf.

The commander, Alena, rose her eyes to look at the maid.

"Coral, my dear, sit down as well, please."

The tone used for the maid differed so much from the one employed toward Astaroth that he almost whined in protest. But he held back the urge, feeling like it would be a bad idea.

"As you wish, Commander Alena."

The maid pulled up a small chair from the side and sat a bit in retreat to Astaroth, her head still lowered, while the commander looked at her with a tinge of sadness.

"When will you stop calling me that? I thought we were well past that stage of our relationship."

"I'm sorry, Commander. But in light of the king's presence, I don't think we should be as much at ease as in private."

The maid kept her head down low as she replied. She knew the king didn't mind more casualness, but in the presence of both the king and the commander, it was best to remain cordial and well-mannered.

Alena turned her head toward Astaroth.

"Do you even care about such protocols and etiquette?"

"Oh, dear gods, no. Do as you please. I have already told her to be casual around me."

Smiling at Astaroth, Alena turned her head back to Coral.

"You heard him. We can drop the pretenses and act normal. Who cares if my son isn't present right now?"

"If you wish, mother."

'Wait... Mother?' Astaroth thought.

He looked at Coral, and she was clearly Human, whilst Alena was an Elf. Then another point clicked.

"Wait a minute. Coral, is this woman your in-law?"

The maid nodded as the commander cleared her throat loudly.

"This woman, as you say, would prefer you keep up proper etiquette with her, at least until you apologize. It's Commander Alena, for you."

Astaroth was again confused at the stern attitude she held toward him. He wondered what she wanted apologies for as well.

"I'm sorry, what? Apologize for what?"

Scoffing at his cluelessness, Alena stood up and walked in front of him, staring deeply into his eyes.

"For many things. But first, how about you apologize to my dear daughter-in-law for scaring the life out of her? From there, I can tell you what to apologize for in plenty of detail."

Coral hurriedly waved her hands in front of her.

"No! Please, Mother. He doesn't need to apologize. He has done nothing wrong."

"Nonsense, dear! He brought you to a dangerous place, putting you at risk, and caused you to fall to your death. That alone would make me arrest him and have him whipped if he wasn't the king."

Coral looked at the woman pleadingly.

"I assure you, Mother. He wasn't the reason I fell. If something, Castien is the one that startled me, and he is to blame for that fall. The king is the one that saved me."

"That is yet another reason he needs to apologize," Alena said, turning her head to Astaroth.

"The way he gripped you to carry you to the ground was highly inappropriate and too handsy to my tastes."

"To my defence, there weren't many ways to catch her as she was falling and flailing about..." Astaroth tried pleading.

To which, the Elven woman promptly delivered him a small smack to the back of his head.

"Drop your excuses. Who brings a young maiden up to such a place, if not to try to flirt with her?"

"You have my intentions wrong. I only wanted to show her the view. I was there to reminisce, myself, and nothing more."

Even Coral vehemently protested there.

"Mother, the king has done nothing of the such. He stayed a gentleman and only ever spoke that way of the queen."

The Commander eyed Astaroth with daggers in her eyes.

"Very well, I retract the need to apologize for this matter. But that isn't all. There is still the matter of making all my sentinels look like idiots, by transforming into a monster. Or yet again, the lack of permission to go up into the canopy unaccompanied."

Astaroth was starting to get frustrated at the stubborn woman.

"I doubt I need permission to go anywhere in this kingdom, and I also don't need an escort. You are being unreasonable..."

Commander Alena suddenly became furious, her not being used to being talked back to, and as she was about to clench Astaroth's collar to give him a good talking to, Coral jumped up.

"No! Don't you ruffle the clothes I so carefully prepared for him! This farce has gone far enough, Commander Alena. Please contain yourself in front of our monarch!"

The sudden spunk she showed took both the woman and Astaroth by surprise, as Coral's beet-red face scrunched up angrily. But then she immediately shrunk back on herself.

"My apologies for losing my temper. But maybe we please move past this dead-lock of attitudes? It is getting tiresome."

Astaroth only nodded, calming down immediately, as the Elven woman centred herself back, straightening out the wrinkles in her outfit.

"Very well. In this case, let us get to the reason I brought you up here, King Astaroth."

"I am all ears."



## Chapter 480 The Hidden Room

Alena walked back around her desk, sitting back in her chair. She clasped her hands together, locking her gaze on the only man in the room.

"Queen Phoenix asked for you to be fetched, and since you were last seen in my sector of the palace, the duty fell on me. But before I bring you there, I wanted to talk to you in private."

"Well, I'm here now. I'm listening."

"Good of you to be so casual. In that case, I will be as well. I wanted to know your intentions with the kingdom. I know you are the legitimate king, and I owe fealty to you. But I was old enough to recognize a battle-maniac when you came into power, and I swore my loyalty to Sir Leon, not you."

Astaroth looked at her, squinting. She spoke like she had been present when he was appointed king, but he failed to remember her.

After a bit of digging into his memories, he finally realized who this was. She had been an archer under Elwin when they defended the Bastion from the sieging guilds.

He remembered one of them having an adolescent boy, and now it all fell into place.

"I remember you. You were here during the siege. You were in charge of defending the southern front from up in the canopy. That's why you felt familiar earlier. Then that means you saw me fighting with front-row seats. So I struck you as a battle maniac, huh?"

Alena nodded her head. She was half glad he recognized her, but she was also worried that he seemed to think her calling him a battle maniac was a compliment.

"Please answer my question, King Astaroth."

"I don't have an answer for you. I do not intend to lead this kingdom very much, as will probably be a king in title only. My first duty lies in getting stronger, and I can't do that from here. Phoenix will be taking most of the decisions, as well as Leon, who has been doing a great job, from what I was told."

Alena looked confused.

"Then why even come back? If you intended to be a roaming fighter, why come back here and assert your position as ruler?"

Astaroth took a moment to think, before smiling widely and answering.

"Because this is my home now. I wanted to at least see it a bit before I become busy again, and have to leave. If you were worried that I would become a war-mongering fool of a king, then you can rest easy. I don't intend to start any wars, aside from the one against the looming threat above the whole world's head, the demons."

An inaudible sigh of relief escaped her lips before she relaxed in her chair.

"I will be fighting a lot, and most likely in many wars, but I will not be dragging the name of our kingdom into it, unless necessary. Now reassure me, you haven't been thinking about this for the past decade, have you?"

The woman shook her head.

"Only the last week, since your kind has come back. For the last decade, I thought your kind wouldn't come back at all, and Leon would remain king."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint. But our job in this world isn't done, yet."

Alena leaned back into her chair, massaging her knotted shoulders. She felt a weight lift from them, now that she knew their king wouldn't suddenly start waging war on the continent, in a craze for dominance.

"In that case, I should escort you down to the throne room. I believe the meeting is soon to begin. I will take care of disciplining Castien for striking you later."

Astaroth waved his hand dismissively.

"Don't bother. I understand his feelings and reaction all too well. I deserved that hit, and I also told him to take the shot. The only thing he needs disciplining about is to not startle people who are standing on the edge of a three hundred meter fall."

Coral coughed lightly at the comment, making Alena and Astaroth laugh it off.

"Very well. Let us proceed back down, then."

Astaroth nodded, getting up from his seat, followed by Coral and Alena, and they followed the latter to the throne room. Astaroth was glad this was out of the air.

He much-rathered face issues directly than let them stew in the dark. The woman's straightforwardness was a welcome thing, in his opinion.

They entertained idle chit-chat on their way there, acting like they hadn't argued and been close to fighting merely minutes ago. Their trip wasn't very long, as Commander Alena's office was on the third floor, and they only had two flights of stairs to walk down.

As they approached the throne room's entrance, they noticed the traffic entering it was quite dense, and Alena motioned for Astaroth and Coral to stop.

"Let's go through the back room. I believe it is what you would prefer, anyway. Follow me."

Astaroth smiled at her.

"You sound like you know me so much already. It was indeed my intention."

"Hah! Your kind isn't hard to grasp, intention-wise, my king. Queen Phoenix had the throne room rearranged to accommodate the two thrones, and the amount of cover they offer over the hidden door is enough to hide much bigger men than you."

"Good. I wanted to make a sly entrance, anyway. Lead the way."

Alena pivoted a hundred and eighty degrees, backtracking her steps for a while, before stopping before a large painting that rose from the floor to twenty meters up the wall.

She slid her hand on the side of the painting's frame, and Astaroth heard a faint \*Click\*, before the painting separated from the wall slightly, revealing a small room behind it. As they entered the room, they found Leon waiting, with his back to a nearby wall, smiling snidely at Astaroth.

"I knew you would want to come in this way. How have you been, King Astaroth?"

"Leon! It's good to see you again. I was told many good things about how you helmed the kingdom while we were gone. I'm glad you didn't drive it into the ground like I thought you would! Hah!"

The two men walked toward each other, clasping their hands in a firm grip, as Alena felt the level of testosterone in the room rise five levels.

"Alright, you cocks. Settle down."

Astaroth and Leon laughed at the comment before letting go of each other's hands.

Astaroth could see a small tunnel next to Leon, and he assumed this was his way inside the throne room. He resisted the urge to peek into the room, and simply sat himself on one of the chairs in the room.

"So! Tell me, Leon. How many people are going to be present?"

"More than I would have wished, my king. Every official in the city wished to meet their true king and put aside important matters just to attend this meeting. It might be a bit rowdy."

Astaroth grinned like a shark, a plan forming in his head.

"Good. Then let's make a lasting impression, shall we?"