

New Eden 501

Chapter 501 Getting An Earful

Astaroth made record time running back toward Bastion city, using spells left like Wind Walking, Propel, Sky Steps, and many more to manoeuvre inside the dense forest. When he reached the city, he was let right inside by the guards and jumped onto the rooftops.

Among the people that saw him suddenly jump on the rooftops, the natives looked at him with uncertainty, since he was passing by too fast to be recognizable. But the players looked at him go, and thought it was suddenly ok to do the same, and some agility-based players suddenly tried following behind.

But as soon as their feet hit the tiles of a roof, guards on patrol suddenly swarmed them, forcing them back to the ground, some of them even getting fined for disturbing the peace, when they became obstinate toward the guards.

Being on the rooftops itself wasn't illegal in Bastion city. But going around, stepping on everyone's house, like they owned the place, certainly was.

Astaroth, though, was above this rule, and zoomed across the rooftops, making his way toward the inner city. Once he reached the original walls, he vaulted over them, not even bothering about taking the gates.

Every guard in the city had been circulated a picture of Astaroth, so they now knew who he was and what he looked like. So when he jumped over the inner walls, the guards saluted toward him as he flew overhead.

It only took Astaroth a few minutes to be back in the palace, at this pace, and he rushed over to the throne room. He half expected the meeting to have been called off by Phoenix when he arrived there, but everyone seemed to still be present.

Phoenix was directing some servants to put the room back in order, and when she saw him get back, she flew off the handle.

Stomping her feet in his direction, she started shouting.

"What in the hell is wrong with you?! You could have hurt people with your Aether blast alone! Why did you even go that far before trying to understand the situation?!"

Astaroth lifted his hands in peace, opening his mouth to answer. But before he could, the air was blown out of his lungs a bit, as Phoenix delivered a quick punch to his stomach.

"Oof! Hey! I was just defending someone I consider family... I would do the same for anyone else I consider the same way, and that includes you."

Phoenix looked at him with anger in her eyes.

"You need to stop acting like this. You are the king of this kingdom. Think about the political implications of attacking a member of the mages' guild. What if they decide to take away their support? Who will maintain the magic shields on the city then? You?"

Astaroth's heart dropped. Having to maintain the shields would take all his time, and he would no longer be able to go out and explore, or level up.

This was the worst possible scenario in his mind.

"Aberon will fix this, I swear," he promised, his tone going a tone whiter.

"No! YOU need to fix this. This is YOUR problem. After this meeting, you better make sure Lord Argos is still in top shape, and that he is satisfied with your apologies or whatever you do to make him happy."

Astaroth's face dropped. He dreaded being forced to apologize, especially to someone who he thought had deserved what had happened.

But thinking back on his actions, he could tell he had put Stellar Woodlands in a tough spot. He needed to ensure he fixed his own mistake, and not make trouble for others.

From the corner of the room, Prince Nalafein and ex-court mage Gelum'vire were watching this unfold, with a mix of emotions.

On one hand, Gelum'vire was floored by the power level Astaroth had shown, given he had been present when the young man had been given his coming of age by Lady Anulo. The level difference between then and now was like night and day.

On the other hand, Nalafein was impressed by how Queen Phoenix ruled with a grip tighter than a mechanical vice. He was most certain Astaroth could overpower her at any moment, but instead, the king didn't seem like he dared go against her words.

This could be a terrible thing if the queen's intentions had been bad. But given the situation, and how prone to making mistakes Astaroth was, this situation was ideal.

Their dynamic would seem like a weakness to any other ruler that saw it, given how patriarchal this world was, but not to Nalafein. In his eyes, Queen Phoenix was like the brain of the kingdom, while Astaroth was the representation of its strength.

The young prince had seen Leon fight. Leon was a mythical grade powerhouse, that he hadn't seen in a rough position ever. But he had also learned of how Astaroth was the one to make him this powerful, and that he had also beaten him when the Beastman was still a semi-legendary grade.

If one were to evaluate the true value of Astaroth to this kingdom, aside from his title of king, they would easily understand that he was the hammer that could drop on his enemies at a moment's notice. Astaroth was the face of their might.

He was excited about what such a person wanted to discuss concerning the Ash Elf kingdom, since power held sway everywhere across the continent. A flicker of hope reignited inside Nalafein, his hopes of taking back his lands coming back to life.

After getting scolded by Phoenix, Astaroth helped set the room right, since he felt guilty for blasting it aside in the first place. The servants all around him tried to make him take a seat, such menial work being underneath a king's station, but he ignored them.

Once the table chairs and people were all back in their original positions, minus Argos Thornwood, who was god knows where, with Aberon, the meeting was good to resume. Phoenix cleared her throat, getting everyone's attention.

"Ahem! We can now go back to why you were all called here. Since everyone is now present, let us begin the discussion on who to send over in the Ash Elf kingdom, to help Prince Nalafein retake his kingdom."

Chapter 502 Inviting *Them*

Murmurs rapidly spread amongst the few Natives present, as well as the players who had no idea who Prince Nalafein was. The person concerned walked a few steps forward, giving a slight bow to everyone in the room, before presenting himself.

"Good morning to all of you, ruling force of Stellar Woodlands. I am Prince Nalafein Uuthli'vlos, rightful heir to the Ash Elf kingdom and its crown. I am grateful for being allowed to be present in your meetings, and being treated with a deference I haven't had in a long time."

Heads nodded, and whispers abounded, as some officers started trying to guess why Prince Nalafein wasn't in his kingdom anymore. But Astaroth raised a hand and silence came back almost instantly.

"Prince Nalafein. I am happy to see you are still in good health and good spirits, after all this time that has passed for you. I was apprised of the situation and have come into possession of something that can be the start of your return home if you want it."

The prince looked at Astaroth with anticipation.

"But," Astaroth started speaking again, "Before I give it to you, we must discuss what kind of support I can give to you so that you don't go back with just this, and no way to advance your cause any further."

Prince Nalafein's brow rose, wondering what he meant.

But Astaroth wasn't going to keep him waiting, as he kept talking immediately after.

"Phoenix and I have thought about many ways we could support you from this end of the continent. Our own forces are limited, and we can't send either Native troops or Abnormals either.

"Our next option was to bind some small Abnormal guilds to your cause, through contracts of mutual interests. But the possible dissidence of multiple forces working together made us reticent to go through with this.

"Our next thought is to have a larger force of Abnormals join your cause, but that also comes with inherent risks, if not implanted correctly. But we still both think it is the safest bet."

Phoenix nodded her head in agreement at his words. Prince Nalafein let Astaroth keep his flow, keeping the many questions that were rising inside him for after he had finished speaking.

"And so we are here to discuss which guild we can send to your side that would both help you, and keep in line with our interests as well. Now, I have no clue who Phoenix thinks about, when she imagines such a group, but I have only one person in mind that can fulfill this, and I would like to call them here, if you don't mind."

Phoenix frowned. This wasn't what they had discussed.

She rapidly sent a private message to Astaroth.

I thought we were going to discuss potential candidates with everyone here before making any other move. Why are you suddenly changing your pace?

Astaroth was quick to respond.

I think we can't wait much longer to put this in motion, and I am also sure my choice will align with some of your thoughts. I have already messaged him, and he is on his way here right now, with a small delegation.

Phoenix wasn't sure she agreed with him suddenly deciding things on his own, but she was also curious who Astaroth called, that he thought would fit the mould so perfectly that he superseded her thoughts.

"While we wait for them to arrive, which could take up to an hour, given I contacted them out of the blue, let us talk about what Stellar Woodlands can concretely do for you, Prince Nalafein."

Astaroth gestured to the prince to sit at the other end of the table. Nalafein nodded, taking a seat, with Gelum'vire walking to his side, flanking him as he always did.

With him seated, they started talking about how their alliance could help each other, in the short, medium, and long term. Talks of economic help, military assistance when possible, and even political backing ensued, taking the better part of a half hour.

Astaroth made sure Brienne, their notary, took notes of everything they discussed, so they could draft a legitimate contract later, when the discussion was over. Astaroth insisted on being present when they assaulted the palace.

He didn't mind not being present for the rest, and leaving all the glory to the prince, but on that last part, he vehemently insisted. He wanted to get his revenge on the damned infiltrator.

Prince Nalafein wondered why Astaroth was being so obstinate on that point, but he didn't press for answers. He would take any help at that step anyway, since he knew that would be the toughest moment of his takeover.

As they spoke of economic help that Stellar Woodlands could offer, Mr. Herman leading this portion of the discussion, Astaroth received a message from the person he invited.

I have arrived in your kingdom. I should be there soon. By the way, was the escort really necessary?

Astaroth chuckled internally.

Yes. You'll understand once you get here. Not everyone gets to come inside the palace these days. Consider yourself lucky.

No response came back, and he knew the person was most likely denigrating him in his mind. Even if they both respected each other, they stayed rivals, in a technical sense.

Near the teleporter, the person Astaroth had exchanged messages with, was looking at the four guards flanking him and his delegation of two players, feeling like it was unnecessary to take these precautions.

Even if he wanted to cause chaos here, he doubted he would do much with just him and two other players. As for them getting attacked, he also doubted this would happen if they travelled alone.

But it wasn't his call to make, as he was just a guest.

He looked up at the gigantic tree over the walls of the inner city, walls he had seen not so long ago, and sighed.

'This place has already grown to this point. How are we supposed to become the biggest guild if every step he takes is the step of a giant?' the man thought, glancing at the outer city around him, which extended farther than his eyes could see in every direction.

He only hoped Astaroth had invited him over with more than just 'a good offer', as he had said in his message. His time was valuable since the update had hit, after all.

Chapter 503 The Candidate

Astaroth brought his attention back to the discussion in front of him, as Grit Herman was finishing his spiel of commercial equality between the two future sibling kingdoms. The Half-Orc was a good salesperson at heart, and it impressed Nalafein.

It was rare for Orcish descent people to go in other branches than fighting. It was citizens of other races that had handled the trade in their countries, usually, that either descended from freed slaves or migrants.

But Mr. Herman put a lot of them to shame, selling his plan to Nalafein like there was no better option. Grit had played a lot on the fact that their king was giving him the resources necessary for him to start his takeover, and the possibility of even having a beachfront from which to launch said takeover.

Of course, Nalafein was well aware of this point. But Mr. Herman did not once take advantage of his powerlessness. The deals were fair, if slightly slanted, in favour of Stellar Woodlands.

Once this was agreed to, and Brienne had noted it, Phoenix took charge of the political aspect of the discussion, largely aided by Elwin, to reassure Nalafein that they would attest to his right to the throne, should other kingdoms decide to butt in after the takeover.

It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for other kingdoms to try to disprove a new ruler's right to the throne, in hopes of usurping their lands, to expand their own kingdoms. So having a bigger kingdom back him politically, at least, gave him a certain level of security.

And this was only possible since Astaroth was from there, to begin with. Otherwise, their words would only be viewed as words by the other rulers, and most likely dismissed.

As this discussion neared its end, a guard walked up to Astaroth's side, whispering in his ear.

"My king. Your guest has arrived and is waiting outside the room."

Astaroth nodded, replying, "Tell him it'll only be a few minutes. I will have someone inside announce his entry when we are ready for him."

The guard nodded before going back out of the room.

As Astaroth had said, it was only a couple of minutes before they closed the political aspect of their discussion. Now, the only thing that was left was for the guest to come in, and Astaroth to finally reveal what he had for Prince Nalafein, that could allow all this to begin with.

He would also use this to negotiate with his candidate as a massive bargaining chip.

Nodding his head to a guard next to the door, the guard did a short bow before clearing his throat. The guest had already specified how he wanted to be addressed and presented, so the guard only had to repeat those words.

"Ahem! The court welcomes in the leader of a rising guild on the continent, the guild of Abnormals 'Knights of the Sun', Guild Leader Killi!"

As he finished saying this, the massive main doors to the room ground open, with a low rumble, until three people came inside, with at their head, Killi.

He strode inside with a confident gait, recognizing many of the people present since he had fought against them not so long ago. But many others he didn't recognize either.

Most of them were Natives, and he stayed polite by not scanning all of them on the spot. Most players were learning, either by word or by fist, that scanning every individual they crossed was bad manners and could result in injury when targeting the wrong people.

Killi had been told so by his officers after a group of their players had been arrested for scanning a noble in one of the minor kingdoms of the continent. So he stuck to etiquette, waiting on each one of them to present themselves, if the opportunity arose.

Killi stopped at the tip of the table, next to a young man sitting in a chair, and the old man in white mage robes standing next to him. He offered them the most political smile he could, before bowing slightly to everyone in the room.

"It is a pleasure to meet all of you formally. I am Killi, guild leader to the Knights of the Sun. I was told a golden opportunity was awaiting me here, so here I am."

Phoenix looked at Astaroth, dumbfounded. She had thought of getting Killi here, since his guild was the largest, and would greatly benefit the three parties in this situation. But she had thought getting here would require a lot more than just saying, 'a golden opportunity is here for you.'

Only Astaroth could offer such pitiful words and still attract people. Most players were already calling the man a golden finger on the internet, saying luck followed him everywhere he went.

Astaroth clapped his hands together, a wide smile on his face.

"Ahh, yes! Welcome to my humble abode, Killi. I hope the trip wasn't too eventful."

Turning his head to the side, Astaroth looked at a servant standing next to the wall.

"Please bring the man a chair, and set him up next to Prince Nalafein. We have much to discuss."

The servant he looked at nodded and bowed, before leaving the room in a rushed step. The gnome man came back soon after, with a wooden chair in his arms that looked larger than him.

He brought the chair next to Prince Nalafein, the apparent size of the chair not bothering him in the least, before setting it down. He then turned to Astaroth, bowed again, and walked back to his spot near the wall.

Killi watched all this happen and envied the other player a bit. Who wouldn't want to be suddenly treated like royalty?

And that was coming from a man who grew up in an estate with many servants, tending to his daily needs. But he wasn't there just to gawk.

After taking a seat, Killi saluted the Prince to his right, wondering why he was being seated next to such a prominent figure.

Next to him, Prince Nalafein was eyeing him with a curious gaze, wondering what type of man this was, that Astaroth trusted him enough to bring him into this transaction. He would soon find out, he guessed.

Chapter 504 Dropping The Bomb

Astaroth pulled something from his inventory, the light of the appearing item bringing the attention back to him. As the white light faded away, he took the scroll in his hands and tossed it to Gelum'vire.

He knew the old mage would want to read it before the prince, to make sure it wasn't anything dangerous, so he went with tossing it to him, directly.

As Gelum'vire caught the scroll, he carefully opened it, starting to read its contents. It took him no longer than ten seconds to have his jaw suddenly go slack, his eyes widening, as his gaze went from the paper in his hands, to Astaroth, and back to the scroll.

He rapidly gave the precious scroll to Nalafein before looking at Astaroth with a deep look of respect and appreciation. Not everyone would give away such a precious item, without making demands much more restraining than he had asked of them up to now.

Killi, who sat next to Nalafein, suddenly became extremely curious as to what the scroll contained. But when Nalafein deposited the scroll on the table before him, his face suddenly grave, he could glance at its contents.

Even Killi's eyes widened in surprise.

'He got his hands on a second piece of land! How fucking lucky is this guy? I guess the rumours about him being a golden goose aren't just lies.'

Nalafein was dead serious as he stared into Astaroth's eyes.

"Are you truly giving this to me, King Astaroth? With no more attachments than the ones you have already asked?"

He was a little wary. It wasn't anyone that would give away something of such value.

Not at such a cheap price.

But Astaroth's smile widened a little, before nodding his head.

"Prince Nalafein. I believe it should rightfully be yours. I also consider this not just a fair transaction, but also me repaying a long overdue favour. If you hadn't freed me from those shackles, a little over ten years ago, I wouldn't have been able to stand where I stand right now.

"That simple action you took, even if at the behest of Lady Anulo, led to me meeting so many great people, and shaped my path from then on into what it has become. I believe it is only fair I give this to you, as a long-awaited thank you."

Astaroth's words echoed inside the room, with not many people having the context behind them. But to Nalafein and Gelum'vire, those words were the sweetest of melodies.

Gelum'vire had long known that the prince was the one that liberated Astaroth from their jail many years ago. He had never said a word about it, since he also believed it was the right thing to do, in retrospect.

Nalafein had tears forming in his eyes that he had to focus on keeping in, lest he show weakness in front of all these people. But to him, this meant much more than just thank you.

Most people in this world believed in Karma and fate, Nalafein being one of them. He had firmly believed that day, a decade ago, as he freed Astaroth, that he was sowing good karma, and that fate would reward him later on.

But given how his life had turned after that incident, he had sometimes wondered if he made the right move. But as the wheel of fate came back up to him now, with much more than what he had put on it, he was ever so grateful.

Astaroth wasn't just offering him a chance to redeem his lost position. Astaroth was offering him a fresh start, with so much help, it almost assured him success.

Killi looked at the young prince with question marks on his face.

'What happened between them, before the update?' he wondered.

But it wasn't his place to ask. He only wondered why he was here if this only concerned the prince and Astaroth.

But just as he was about to ask, Astaroth locked his gaze on him.

"That brings me to your presence here, Killi. I have heard through the branches that you wished to form the largest guild in New Eden, and have the feeling you are already well on your way to success on this wish."

Killi chuckled.

"For how long, though? With this place under your name, how long will it be before every player flocks to your side? I'm only holding the torch for you later, in my opinion. And this meeting only reinforces that feeling for me. Why bring me here at all?"

Astaroth grinned at him.

"Because I'm offering you a chance to stay ahead. Tie yourself to Prince Nalafein, swear that your guild will always work under him, and form an alliance with me.

"Under those conditions, Prince Nalafein should be more than willing to give you a large role in building up his forces and kingdom, as he retakes the Ash Elf kingdom. And who knows, once he has succeeded in taking back his throne, maybe he will agree to leave the land I just gifted him to your care entirely, leaving you with the same starting point as I did."

Killi's eyes widened, as he finally caught on to what Astaroth was insinuating. He wasn't just asking him to become formal allies or to tie himself to a kingdom.

He was giving him the chance to keep up with Paragon's potential, with as much as a chance he had. This was a tremendous opportunity.

Or, as Astaroth had said in his message, a golden opportunity.

Turning his head to Nalafein, Killi stood from his chair. He glanced at his two accompanying officers, to see if they had something to add, but they both shook their heads, an enormous smile on their faces.

So Killi did what he thought was the right thing to do.

Kneeling on one knee, Killi brought his right fist to his chest, lowering his head.

"Prince Nalafein. My guild might not be the most powerful yet, but I swear it is all you will ever need if you give me this chance. I hereby swear fealty to you and promise to help you regain your rightful title!"

Nalafein looked at him with a solemn expression. He then stood up and grabbed his sword, pulling it from its sheath.

Placing on Killi's shoulder, Nalafein spoke these words.

"I, Prince Nalafein Uuthli'vlos of the Ash Elves, hereby knight you, Sir Killi, commander of my future forces, and future lord of the mage tower. Rise, Sir Killi."

As Killi rose to his feet, a notification sounded in his ears, at the same time as one for all the players to hear.

Player Killi, leader of the guild Knights of the Sun, has officially bound himself and his guild to a royal party of New Eden. By doing so, he is granted the title of knight and a rank upgrade. Congratulations, player Killi!

The forums immediately erupted.

Chapter 505 Cementing The Alliance

As the forums erupted with chatter about this news, the meeting in the throne room wasn't over.

Astaroth smiled at the development, but it was only the beginning.

"Killi. I'm glad you so readily agreed to help out Prince Nalafein. But there is another part to this deal that I hadn't told you yet."

Killi got back up before sitting in his chair once more. He frowned slightly, wondering what Astaroth had been hiding from him.

"You see," Astaroth kept talking, "Prince Nalafein has agreed to a political alliance once he reintegrates his position. This means that since you are now part of his kingdom and forces, it will also tie you to us, Paragons. So, for the sake of cementing this, I wanted to ask you something."

Killi had an inkling of an idea of what Astaroth was about to ask.

"I want Paragons and Knights of the Sun to make a formal alliance. A complete one, legitimized by the system. Not just a verbal promise of non-aggression."

Phoenix had been the one to suggest this to Astaroth when they had discussed how they should completely bind their potential allies to them.

A formal alliance was much more than just a promise between two forces. The system had a whole tab for this, where the pros and cons were explained for getting into an alliance, but also for breaking one.

It went much further than just truces and basic help. The formal alliance function bound the two entities together on a core level, where they were almost considered the same in the eyes of the world.

When bad things were done by one part of the alliance, it would also reflect on the other. It could have positive and negative repercussions for both parties concerned.

If one half of the alliance considered the actions of the others to be detrimental to it, measures were in place to correct the situation. Sometimes being as drastic as severing the alliance and imposing penalties on the party at fault.

These penalties could range anywhere from monetary compensation to severe loss of reputation for the entire guild.

Killi had already read that tab when he founded the Knights of the Sun and knew what it entailed. He was not quite convinced this was a good idea just yet.

But one thing was certain. Paragons were much more at risk, were they to go against this alliance.

Which brought him to think, 'Why do they want to put themselves in that position?'

But Phoenix was the one to explain it to him.

"I know the offer sounds weird to you, since our side is the one risking to lose the most, should something happen that severs this alliance. But you need to look on a deeper level.

"Accepting this alliance will put your guild in a position where you are practically a subsidiary to ours, since we are the larger party. You would not be in an egalitarian alliance. I know it's a lot to ask since you want to become the largest guild, but it is what we want to ask of you.

"Of course, we would not dare take away your agency or freedom. You would still be free to grow as your own entity. Only, you would ultimately answer to us, should the need for your help arise."

Killi's face became incredibly serious. Had he known this beforehand, he would have taken time to think about it, before swearing loyalty to the prince.

He had basically sold himself to the Paragons guild unwittingly. His accompanying officers were grimacing in the back, realizing what they had stepped into.

Killi was usually good at politics, and he had still not seen this coming. This could quickly turn into their end if they didn't manoeuvre carefully.

But Killi's face went back to a smile, suddenly throwing off his officers.

"This was a nice honey trap you set up, Astaroth, Phoenix. I am impressed. But I would like to point out something you might have forgotten in this transaction."

Phoenix smiled back at him.

'He caught on. As expected of the son of a politician,' she thought.

"As the weaker party in this alliance, I would also be entitled to aid, be it economic, military, or political. Are you ready to give out such help?"

Killi thought he had served a good enough counterpoint to dissuade them from this. But Prince Nalafein intervened, breaking his legs under him, before he could even run, metaphorically.

"All of which they have already promised me, Sir Killi. All before you arrived. Which means you will have to ask me, for all these boons, when I get my throne back."

The smile on Killi's face wavered for a moment.

'Shit. They thought this through more than I thought.'

Looking at Phoenix as he thought that, he now understood why her smile never shifted. Tying himself to the prince meant all the help he could have asked for, that had already been promised to him, would go through him.

If Prince Nalafein wanted to choke his guild to death, he could do so without affecting the alliance position of Paragons, since they would still have fulfilled their part of the deal. The young prince didn't look the type to do this, but you never knew with royals.

Astaroth lifted his hand to get Killi's attention.

"Listen, man. We don't want to put you in a position where you can't grow. On the contrary. The more you grow, the better it is for both of us. A terrible enemy is starting to point its ugly face, and we need as many powerful allies as we can get. This deal isn't bad for anyone concerned. Take it."

Killi looked at Astaroth, wondering what the man knew, that he didn't. But his words still contained the truth.

Even as he mulled over it, the alliance was not inherently bad for him. As long as Paragons didn't insist they become their serf guild, he would benefit in the short and long term.

Glancing at his officers, who looked confused by all this, Killi mentally berated himself for acting too quickly.

'The bait was well positioned, and I walked right into it. I guess I should commit since I'm already this deep.'

Making up his mind, Killi stood up again. He did a small curtsy toward Astaroth, before standing back straight.

"I guess we will be in your care, then. Do right by my guild, and we will do right by yours, Paragons."

A world announcement echoed across the world, that changed the power dynamic for the future.

The guild Knights of the Sun have entered a formal alliance under the guild Paragons. Who knows what their combination might usher in, going forward? Long live their alliance!

As the announcement resounded, a change occurred in the guild leaderboards. Paragons, which had been fourth in the guild leaderboards, suddenly jumped to first, overtaking Knights of the Sun, as their name suddenly became tied under them in the first place.

Paragons, which had been fourth up to now, due to their powerful players but smaller player base, now stood at the apex of the guild leaderboards.

Chapter 506 Ripples In The Gaming Community

The forums had barely started raving about how to tie their guilds to a royal faction, that already another enormous piece of news broke out. Paragons shooting to the top of the guild leaderboards like this was not something so easily accomplished.

Especially since no one knew what the metrics were for the calculations on that specific leaderboard. But having them suddenly overtake two well-established guilds, as well as one that was rising meteorically, was astounding.

Knights of the Sun had been at the top position ever since it started, since their loose hiring policy made them the largest guild out there. Of course, they also filled the core of the guild with pro players, whose power level and skill level were a head above the rest.

This had shown that the number of players might be one of the metrics for calculations. But some other guilds had tried bolstering their numbers without reaching this high on the leaderboards. So it was hard to tell.

The guild, in second place, had been Sins of Sloth, who had been second before the update, with their location on the dark continent making for fast levelling and powerful players. Ever since the update, they had also been getting an influx of new players, who didn't want to play solo anymore, ever since walking outside of cities became so hazardous.

People had estimated that at their pace, Sins of Sloth might overtake the Knights of the Sun within a month of the update.

The guild in third place was one that rose so fast, it was strange. Especially since, right before the update, their base had been sieged by so many small guilds, people thought they would crumble.

But Azamus, leader of the Aces High guild, had bent all those guilds to their knees, and taken them over by force, suddenly gaining players by the dozens, bolstering his forces and climbing from eighth to third in a single day.

He had also recruited some Natives, a thing which many guild leaders were still trying to figure out how, which had helped him gain some of those ranks.

But Azamus, who was currently sitting outside a dungeon entrance, resting from his third dungeon grind of the day, heard the notifications and quickly opened the rankings. When he saw them change so abruptly, he flew off the handle.

"This motherfucker! Sinclair! Get over here!"

The man named Sinclair, one of his officers, rushed to Azamus' side.

"Yes, guild leader?"

"You mongrel! You are in charge of intelligence in this guild. How did you not know Killi was tying his guild to these dumb fucks Paragons?! Should I just replace you with someone smarter?"

As Azamus was popping his lid off, a rogue-like player rushed to Sinclair's side, whispering something in his ear. Sinclair's face dropped.

Azamus looked at him with deep-rooted anger.

"Spit it out!"

Sinclair nodded his head, his tone ghastly.

"I just got news from our moles inside the Knights of the Sun. The reason I didn't find out before, was that Killi had his guild convene in their base, and put it on lockdown. No message or player could get out. That was a few hours ago..."

Azamus looked at Sinclair, his skin tone going from the angry, dark red tone to a furious burgundy.

His voice became glacial as he responded to Sinclair.

"You get me the names of the incompetents, who didn't think it was important to tell us a meeting was being convened in the first place, and you put them on the bounty list. Every confirmed death on them, by video or screenshot, you will set at fifty gold. Understood?"

Sinclair lightly frowned.

"But, sir... That will be a massive drain on our funds, for just players who couldn't react at the time..."

Azamus jumped up, grabbing Sinclair's collar, and bringing him to his knees.

"One more word out of you, and you will be joining them on that list, priced at a thousand gold. Understand me, you dumb shit?"

Sinclair gulped loudly, nodding his head in response.

Azamus was not someone to be messed with. He was the type of man that only threatened once, before putting to execution.

And money was not an issue. His skills had brought him far enough in the gaming world that getting funds from his sponsors was as easy as breathing.

Especially since he was quite good at making that money multiply itself, most of the time. Their guild treasury was probably one of the most furnished, right now, with over ten million gold coins.

Sinclair bolted away from the dungeon entrance, making his way back to their guild base as fast as he could, to make the arrangements. They kept the names of his moles on paper over there since they weren't part of their guild officially.

And they kept all of it inside New Eden, where no one could access it unless they conquered their guild base, which they had proved was not a simple task. It took him thirty minutes to reach the base, where he mad-dashed upstairs to his small office.

Once he had done his business, the four players in question received silent notifications about landing a bounty on their heads, and fear overtook them. They didn't know what they had done wrong, but they knew they were in deep shit.

And they couldn't even go up to their immediate officers to confess, since this would land them out of the Knights of the Sun, and most likely on another bounty list. So they did the only thing they could do.

They immediately left Knights of the Sun's base, leaving the guild, and logged off. They couldn't play until this bounty was taken off their heads.

The officers to these four players saw them leave and didn't even wonder what it was, only grinning to themselves as they relayed the information up the chain of command. Once it made its way to the vice guild leader, Killi's best friend and long-time ally; Grimjaw, he chuckled in his office, proud that they had gotten rid of a few spies.

Grimjaw wasn't present with Killi at the Paragons base, since he was tasked with keeping the guild running while their leader was busy. He had learned with the others that Killi had tied their guild under Paragons, but was the only one that didn't panic.

'Killi doesn't take losing bets. Even if he got tricked, this will still pan out greatly for us, I'm sure,' he had thought.

But only time would tell.

Chapter 507 The Ripples Extend

Across the world of New Eden, many small groups of guild leaders convened together. They intended to learn more about the formal alliance function, and if they could find someone willing to go through with this deep-bond move.

But finding an ally whose goals and mentality aligned was not a simple task, which made everyone wonder how two prominent guilds like Paragons and Knights of the Sun had achieved the synergy. No one knew that the situation differed from their thoughts.

But amongst the top guilds, which had now gone from ten to nine, the guild leaders kept to themselves largely. Of course, that didn't preclude them from having internal meetings to discuss the situation.

One such meeting was currently happening in the dark offices of Kurai Ran, the guild led by Blue Peacock. The Kurai Ran, or Dark Orchids, for anyone reading the name with the translator on, were a guild that Blue Peacock had set at the disposal of anyone with the means to pay.

Blue Peacock made sure they filled the guild with skilled thieves, assassins, spies, and whatever dark job she could think of. Her connections in the underground of the world on Earth made her the perfect suitor to lead this bunch of outlaws.

And she was already spreading her roots on this side, as well, getting ready to integrate the underbelly of one of the major cities in New Eden.

But the meeting she convened was to discuss something something that brought her away from this goal, and closer to another, that she had initially made for later.

"Guild leader. I'm not sure going with this idea of yours is advisable. There is no guarantee they will accept to play along, should we bring the idea to them. We are enemies, after all."

The one who spoke was the vice leader, Takeo, her manservant, both inside and outside of New Eden. He was sporting an uncertain look, in the face of the words his leader had just uttered to all the officers in the guild.

"Takeo, although I respect your input, on this matter, I have already made my mind. We can only bring the proposal to them and hope they see that the pros far outweigh the cons.

"You know as much as I do that their guild will eventually herald the charts in every aspect. We can only think of tying ourselves to them now before another entity like ours beats us to it."

Takeo looked down, his face a mask of pondering. He knew his lady was right, but he also thought it was a bad idea to tie themselves to them.

They should go with their original plan and get into the underbelly of a well-established kingdom. Not this newborn one, who could still die at any moment, if a larger kingdom decided they didn't want them to expand anymore.

No one knew yet that Bastion City had become the sixth major city in New Eden since there was no announcement done for this, at least after they came back. This was because the decision had happened just before the players came back.

But Blue Peacock was a stubborn woman. When her mind was made up, it wouldn't change.

He could only nod his head and go along with her will.

Seeing him give up his rebuttal, Blue nodded her head, scanning the other officers one by one with her eyes. No other player objected to her plans, so it was time to put it into motion.

In another guild hall, on the dark continent, Dark Panda was lazing about on his enormous sofa, slowly reading reports on his guild's progress, when the notification resounded.

He read it, his eyes showing no interest. But his words said something else.

"Urgh! Why do people keep trying to get over me? Now I will have to work even harder to bring Sins of Sloth to the top. My dad is going to tear me a new one... Damn you, Paragons..."

He turned around on his sofa, whining a bit longer, before sending his assistant to fetch the officers. He had to convene a meeting to push up their plans a bit.

The thought of getting more work to do made the kid annoyed and slightly depressed. But he still had to do it, regardless.

His father would cut him off from everything if he didn't bring in results.

Back in Bastion City, the general meeting had just ended, and they had asked only a few people to stay, to flesh out the specifics. Killi, his two officers, Nalafein, Grit, Elwin, Astaroth, and Phoenix, all went from the throne room to a side meeting hall, where they would be more comfortable.

As they all took a seat, Killi couldn't wait to hear what they had promised, as well as maybe give his input into it, and gain more help right off the bat for the little prince. Looking at the Ash Elf prince, Killi gauged the young man couldn't be in his twenties yet.

Of course, this was a treacherous slope, since Elves, of all sorts, stopped aging at a certain point until they reached a few hundred years. But that was his estimate.

The meeting started with economic promises, as Grit Herman had many duties to go back to, and he was more pressed for time. As soon as he started talking about trade routes, goods, and financial aid, Killi was already hounding him to get more out of the deal.

Prince Nalafein wanted to lead this discussion, at first, but when Killi started pressing for more stuff, Gelum'vire put his hand on the young prince's shoulder, shaking his head slightly.

It was easy to see that Killi would be a better negotiator than Nalafein, and the old mage decided it was better advised to let him talk. Grit was slightly stunned when Killi negotiated him almost to a standstill.

The Half-Orc didn't know that Killi came from a long line of rich merchants himself, and had trained all his life for this kind of negotiating. It put both men to the test, as they entered a haggling war, with a numerical battlefield most others in the room got lost in.

But after an hour of back and forth, both parties seemed satisfied. The next steps, though, would be much more complicated.

Chapter 508 Using The Free Build

With Mr. Herman leaving the room, the ambience also calmed down a little, as his boisterousness left with him.

The remainder of the conversations would also be much tamer, as the military and political aspects of this transaction were much simpler.

But Killi was still very satisfied with how things went up to now. He had, after all, managed to get some goodies for the prince and himself during his negotiations.

Nothing came free, though.

After their back and forth, Astaroth had allowed Mr. Herman to promise a monthly allowance of ten thousand gold, to both Prince Nalafein and Killi, at the cost of erased taxes on future mercantile exchanges, and a part of their tax profit.

Of course, the allowance was never to be counted in the profit return and could be used however they deemed fit.

Now, ten thousand gold pieces might look like nothing. But having such a sum every month that could be used to invest in their own economy was no joke.

The profit return would still bring back more gold in the long term, but in the first year, Mr. Herman predicted they would be bleeding the gold before breaking even.

But it wasn't a loss, in the greater scheme of things.

Killi had also negotiated that the fee on inter-kingdom teleportation waved between the two of them, since they would soon be interconnected. To which Astaroth had gladly accepted.

Mr. Herman, on the other hand, saw it as a massive loss of money once more. But he kept reminding himself that in the long term, the relationship between the two countries would bring in much more gold than they would lose.

There was prosperity in sharing resources, after all.

Killi couldn't wait to start the next part of the discussions. But this time, Prince Nalafein insisted he take a back seat.

"If you don't mind, Sir Killi. You may be an excellent negotiator, but this concerns politics, and I would much prefer doing this my way."

Killi was slightly disappointed that he wouldn't get to argue again, but it wasn't his call to make. So he nodded and sat back, instead enjoying the luxury of the room to its fullest.

Over the next three hours, Astaroth, Phoenix, Nalafein and Gelum'vire went back and forth, discussing promises of edicts for their future relationship. Talks of political alliances were much slower and more careful since you didn't want to give either side free rein in your country, regardless of the side.

But Prince Nalafein was ready to give much, in exchange for getting rid of the scourge that now plagued his country and its leading cast.

Such promises entailed the leaders of Paragons and Stellar Woodlands to have total political immunity in the Ash Elf Kingdom. This was a big one, considering it meant Astaroth could barge in, commit murder, and leave scot-free of consequences.

Not that Astaroth would ever do such a thing, but the concession was still a colossal risk. If their relationship ever became precarious, it would be difficult to lock them out of the country.

But they offered the same courtesy to Nalafein in return.

In terms of military promises, Astaroth promised his kingdom would be there for any crucial battles if the need ever arose. He doubted it would happen since he had the feeling Killi would want to keep all the fighting for himself.

But with what Astaroth knew, there might come a time. And he had already gotten Nalafein to assure him he would be called for the last siege.

There was no way Astaroth was letting Killi and his Knights get the full glory of killing the demon infiltrator. That fight was one he would never pass on.

They made many more promises and concessions until they judged they had covered every aspect they could and notes were taken about everything. Now, Brienne only needed to pull out a complete draft, and for all parties concerned to sign, and Prince Nalafein could be on his way home.

The question remained on how to send him there, though. A question that some fooling around with his still unused construction of a special teleporter answered.

Astaroth went into the underground part of the palace, where they had closed the tear before the update, and started fiddling in the interface.

Phoenix was with him, just as curious as he to know what it did, and when he started the construction process, their curiosity was sated.

A large interface opened up to Astaroth, which was also visible to Phoenix, due to her queen status, and the amount of special teleporters they could choose from was insane.

Choices ranged from two-way teleporters, that could connect to the pre-existing network, and teleport a small amount of people covertly, to a mass teleportation device, that could teleport the entire kingdom, to a different location in a matter of seconds.

From the number on the top of the list, Astaroth could choose between close to fifty different teleportation devices, and when he scrolled through the entire list, he saw something that filled all the boxes he needed in this case.

One teleporter was a one-way teleporter, with a small amount of capacity, but could teleport you anywhere as long as you entered the coordinates inside it, and didn't cost too much mana, or make a big magic ripple when working.

The last part was good, since, this way, he could send Nalafein back to his new home without catching the infiltrator's senses. But Killi's guild would have to either come here, little by little, and pass through it, or travel the old-fashioned way.

Which would be terrible for stealth, since his guild already had close to a thousand players.

Astaroth didn't hesitate and used the instant build function on his selected portal, and a bright purple light flashed in the underground room. Once the light faded, he and Phoenix stood in front of something they felt was reminiscent of a portal they had seen on an old TV show.

Appearing on the same dais where the tear had been, a large loop, covered in strange runes, was now lying dormant. From this loop, Astaroth could feel a gentle pulse of mana, but it was otherwise undetectable.

Astaroth couldn't even scan it to see what its name was, not that it mattered.

Sliding his hand on it, the teleporter's interface appeared in his view. From there, he could enter coordinates and launch the portal whenever he wanted. This was exactly what he needed for Nalafein.

Silent, stealthy and efficient. An enormous grin formed on his face.

"This is perfect. We will even be able to go anywhere we want instantly, to help out members if need be, or even to make an ambush."

He couldn't wait to use this to its fullest.

Chapter 509 Eating In The Canteen

After building the teleporter in the basement, Astaroth and Phoenix decided their day had been long enough. They still hadn't eaten actual food, and their stomachs were rumbling a bit.

They had been sustaining on tea, water, and biscuits. This was no way to live.

Phoenix wanted to go back to their room, where they could ask a servant to bring them whatever food they wanted. But Astaroth had something different in mind.

"What if, instead of acting like recluse royalty, we acted like normal people? I'm sure the food in the canteen over our heads, the one the Sentinels have, is very good. Want to go eat there, where there will be people around, instead of walls and ceilings?"

The idea wasn't such a bad one, and Phoenix agreed to it. They wouldn't get to eat whatever they wanted, but not eating on their own would have a more realistic feel to it, as well.

But she corrected Astaroth's misconception.

"It's not just the Sentinels that eat in that canteen. Every part of our troops eat there, on shifts. It might be the Sentinels part of the base, but there is only one canteen. So everyone shares it."

Astaroth frowned. He wasn't against everyone eating in the same canteen.

What he was wondering was, why on shifts.

Wouldn't it be better to bond all the factions together if they ate together? He took a mental note to look into it.

He might have to convene a small meeting with all the commanders and hear their opinions on the matter.

But for now, his mind focused on getting some food.

As he and Phoenix climbed the stairs that led to the fifth floor, they encountered a few soldiers, who were on their way down, most likely from having their own meal, since they weren't Sentinels.

It was awkward to watch them bow while on the stairs, and Astaroth kept having to say it wasn't necessary to salute them every time they crossed paths. But he doubted his asking would change their behaviour.

As he and Phoenix finally reached the fifth floor, he noticed the canteen was boisterous with people, most of them being palace guards, mixed with the occasional table of off-duty Sentinels.

But Astaroth noticed a table where only three people were sitting and knew he wanted to sit there after grabbing their food. As both royals reached the line waiting for food, the soldiers all suddenly became self-conscious, insisting their king and queen pass before them.

"Please, Milord, Milady, go before this humble soldier. I would never keep you from getting a meal."

"Don't worry about it, soldier. We aren't on a time crunch. I'm sure you have limited time to eat before going back on duty, so keep your spot. We can wait."

The soldiers insisted, but Astaroth insisted harder, and they eventually relented, as the line suddenly started going forth much faster. The soldiers in the front suddenly all knew what they wanted, and there was no more time wasted on choosing.

Astaroth sighed dejectedly, feeling like he was forcing these men and women along, but Phoenix only chuckled in response.

"Let them be, Astaroth. They only want to serve their monarchs well. There is nothing wrong with that."

Sighing loudly again, Astaroth turned his head toward her.

"I know. But I feel like all this attention and special treatment won't do us any good in the long term. I would much rather they treat me like a comrade than a semi-deity."

Phoenix hugged his arm, pecking his cheek with a kiss, trying to cheer him up.

"Maybe in time, dear. For now, let them treat you like they feel. Maybe once you've fought with them in the dirt, they'll start treating you more like a brother in arms. Only time will tell."

As the queue advanced at record speed, Astaroth and Phoenix rapidly reached the counter. The cooks behind it all stopped what they were doing to salute the monarchs.

"Your majesties!"

Astaroth was about to grumble, but Phoenix tugged at his shirt, keeping him quiet. Instead, she was the one to answer.

"Please, at ease. Treat us like any other hungry mouth. What is on the menu today, good sir?"

The head cook took off his chef hat, grasping it with both hands as he bowed, before righting himself once more.

"Anything your stomach so desires, my queen, we shall make."

Astaroth clicked his tongue silently, his annoyance almost visible on his face. The cook twitched at the sound, wondering what he had done to anger the king.

"She meant what do you have going for the soldiers. Please, as she asked, treat us like any other hungry mouth. We are only here to eat while enjoying the atmosphere of a full room. We'll take whatever is on the menu."

The head cook looked at the king with a wry smile, putting back on his hat, before walking to the counter.

"If you insist, Milord. On the menu today, roasted roc-bird, with a balsamic glaze, and greens fresh from the farms in the outskirts. It may not suit the refined palate of royalty, but the soldiers seem quite satisfied with it."

Astaroth glared at him when he mentioned refined palate, and the cook coughed nervously.

"Two platters of that, and whatever you have to drink, that'll make me forget no one is listening to me when I tell them to treat us like normal people."

The cook served them the two platters himself, while the other returned to their knives and pots, and he also poured them each a cup of the finest wine he had on hand. He stayed afraid this wouldn't be good enough for them, but kept his mouth shut as he noticed Astaroth's sharp stare.

Once the pair had their food, Astaroth pulled Phoenix along to a table where two commanders were seated, as well as Declan.

Declan had noticed his and her arrival in the room the moment they stepped into the waiting line, as the hubbub of chatter spread rapidly amongst the troops, and already knew they would come to join him.

As Astaroth sat down, with Phoenix at his side, the Commanders both lowered their heads in a salute but remained seated.

"Your majesties," they echoed simultaneously.

Astaroth smiled.

"Finally! Someone who doesn't treat me like an attention-seeking king. Thank the gods."

Chapter 510 Canteen Banter

It took aback the commanders for a moment before they chuckled together. Declan ignored the rant entirely.

He could hardly correct him, since he had also watched as the attitude of the surrounding Natives changed when he became the councilman in charge of the military. At least, it wasn't as bad as for him as for Astaroth and Phoenix.

Waiting for Astaroth and Phoenix to take their first bites, he then introduced the two commanders. Phoenix had met them already, but to Astaroth, they were only still faces in a crowd.

"Astaroth, these are the commanders in charge of the Royal Guard and the scout regiments. Their names are Rodney Levine, commander of the Royal Guard, and Mary Kadmus, commander of the Griffon Scouts."

Astaroth looked at them, taking in their traits.

Rodney was a human man, with a stocky build and squarish visage. He looked like a strongman competitor and was currently wearing casual leather armour.

But it was easy to guess that he would look colossal in his armour, given that he had stood out like the nose in the middle of the face when standing amongst the crowd during his introduction.

His hair was a dark brown, and his eyes were hazelnut in colour. A few scars crossed his face that he had most likely garnered in combat.

And although healers could erase scars, he seemed to wear his with pride. His face was slightly scary, given the size of it, but the smile that adorned him breathed of welcoming warmth.

"When my daughter heard that the king had forced down my magic with his own, she was almost scared to meet you, Your Majesty. Your power leaves me wondering if you still need a royal guard."

Astaroth chuckled at the statement. It was true he didn't particularly need guards.

But he wouldn't abolish their use. That would be unfair of him.

And who knows, maybe someday they would be of great use, if someone tried to infiltrate the palace to harm him or Phoenix.

"Your position is not at risk at all, Sir Rodney. Royal guards will always have use in the palace, even if not directly to protect me. As for your daughter, I would love to meet her someday, and prove to her I'm not a bad person."

A warm smile spread on Astaroth's face, as he answered, to echo Rodney's.

Turning his head toward Commander Mary, he kept up his smile.

"So we have Griffons? That is news to me. How many do we have, and how good of a scout force do they make?" he asked.

Mary Kadmus was an Elven woman, which he noticed now, Elves were a majoritarian race in Bastion City. He attributed it to the proximity of their kingdoms.

Her traits were sharp, as most Elves, and her hair a golden blond, almost like wheat shining in the sun. Her emerald green eyes clashed with this, making them pop out.

She was wearing a silken tunic, with leather pants and a cotton undershirt, which made her look like any other soldier in the room. What set her apart from them, though, was the intense air of authority about her.

Looking at her felt like looking at an old matron in an orphanage. You could easily tell she wasn't to be trifled with.

"My king, the Griffon Scouts are only a budding force. One which I intend to grow into a strike force in the future. But for now, we only have a dozen of them. As for your second question, Griffons make excellent scouts. Nothing much in the sky flies as fast as a griffon, aside from dragons and drakes."

Her tone was formal, even cold a bit. But Astaroth was unbothered by it.

At least, she wasn't treating him with the reverence of a god. That alone made him respect her.

"Well, I would love to fly on one someday. I have wings of my own, but I don't know how I would compare in terms of speed."

The woman's mouth curled into a snide smirk.

"We could arrange a race if you'd wish, Your Majesty. I'm sure my men would love to see if their companions fly as fast as the mighty king."

The prospect enticed Astaroth, and he wanted to say yes immediately. But he then remembered he still had a busy schedule for the meantime, and it wouldn't be before a few weeks.

"Maybe when my schedule becomes less crowded. I would love to. Until then, they can consider themselves the fastest in the sky."

His humble words garnered him some respect from the woman, who seemed to become less uptight.

Declan butt in, wondering why Astaroth sat next to them.

"Did you have something to discuss? Or did you sit with us to enjoy your meal?"

He wouldn't mind idle chatter, since they had already been doing so. But if Astaroth had something he wanted to talk about, his word would take priority.

"Oh, no no no! Nothing of the sort. I just sat here because I assumed sitting with the others would cause a ruckus. No, please, resume whatever your conversation was before we sat down."

Phoenix giggled to herself.

She was already eating, uncaring of her surroundings. She had already met Mary and Rodney, and her food seemed more interesting than exchanging platitudes.

And as soon as she had taken her first bite, she had ignored the people around.

"This food is divine!" she thought, as she almost stuffed her mouth full.

She only slowed down when she remembered she had to act dignified. But that didn't stop her from eating at a quick pace, only being careful not to make a mess or look like an ogre.

As Astaroth joined her, exchanging words with the other three at the table while scarfing down food, the canteen started slowly emptying. Most people's dinner time was over, and they returned to their duties.

Astaroth chatted with Declan, Rodney, Mary, and Phoenix until it was time for them to part ways. He was glad he got to talk to the two commanders in a more casual setting first, since he found all those formal meetings dreadful.

The day was already ending, and Astaroth decided logging out now wasn't a bad idea. So he and Phoenix made their way to their room and logged out.