

## **New Eden 621**

### Chapter 621 Strange White Space

When Astaroth reopened his eyes, he lay on his back, in a white space so bright that he could barely keep them open. And he wasn't alone.

Waking at the same time as him, all eleven players of his party grumbled in pain.

"Urgh... My head hurts like a motherfucker... What happened?" Galtion asked, taking his head in his hands.

The last thing he remembered, he was diving towards an enemy as a wave of something passed through him. Then a searing pain in the head, followed by nothing.

And now he woke up here, his head still hurting, but surrounded by his friends.

"Did we all die to that wave?" he asked.

But some of them shook their heads.

"Not me. I died to a certain someone nuking the shit out of the whole battlefield... Burning alive is much more painful than I had ever thought..." Jaxx complained, his skin still crawling.

He had felt his skin melt, his blood boil, and the flesh sear off his bones in an instant before the pain shut down his brain. It was a very unpleasant feeling.

Astaroth rose to his feet.

"You're lucky you died from that. I felt the whole thing, and it didn't kill me..." he added, giving a wink toward Phoenix.

She shrugged with a half smile, with a 'Not my fault' face.

"Wait, if we all died at distinct moments, then why did we all wake up here at the same time?" RedWing asked.

"We are in a time stop," Chronos stated, looking around.

He couldn't access the time web, which was strange, but he could see that the flow was interrupted.

Phoenix spun around, trying to see an exit of some sort. But her action yielded no result.

Everyone started looking around, wondering what the next step from there would be. But every time they separated, more than fifty meters apart, they reappeared in their initial spot.

After half an hour of pointless searching, most of the party had already given up, sitting in place, their faces masks of boredom. Even Chronos had given up.

Astaroth sat in the middle of the space they were trapped in, his eyes fixed on a single spot.

Every time someone flashed back to their place, that exact point flared up in mana. It was either the activator of their teleportation shenanigans or it was the source of the magic effect.

In either case, he guessed observing it couldn't do him any wrong.

Phoenix was still trying to see if there was a place from which they could keep going further, so she kept walking away from the group, each time in a slightly different direction.

Violette had been walking at the edge of the teleportation range, her eyes closed, trying to sense a change in the mana near her.

Just as Phoenix reached the fiftieth step, Violette tripped on her feet, walking over the edge of the distance in the other direction.

Astaroth suddenly frowned, as both of them teleported back to their positions.

Chronos was now looking at the center of the room as well.

Astaroth noticed the Fey player had turned his head and looked at him.

"Did you see something too?"

Chronos looked at Astaroth, his face exhibiting little emotion.

"I did. The ebb of time. It moved ever so slightly, right there..." he said, pointing at the spot Astaroth had been staring at.

Astaroth grinned.

Phoenix looked at both of them, wondering what they were talking about.

"Phoenix. Walk to the edge again."

...

"I've been doing this... For half an hour..."

"Just do it," he replied, getting up from his butt.

As she walked to the fifty-meter mark, so did he, in the opposite direction. Astaroth spun around to look at the spot as he backed up over the fifty-meter mark.

And as he crossed it, perfectly timed with Phoenix, he saw it again.

The flash. It was bigger.

"Violette, you go that way. Let's cross it all at the same time."

Violette nodded her head, leaving in the direction Astaroth pointed. He and Phoenix walked away again.

Once all three were in position, Astaroth nodded his head, signalling them to walk over, and he did too, looking at the center of the room.

As he reappeared in his original position, he grinned even wider.

The flash had been even bigger this time.

Phoenix was now looking at the center of the room as well, her eyes wide.

"I felt something... Like a jolt of mana."

Astaroth smiled at her.

"I think we just found our exit point."

He gazed over at everyone and walked back toward the center of the room.

"Let's do it all at the same time, this time," he said, inviting them to join him.

Everyone got up, wondering what they were raving about. They did as asked, and walked to the fifty-meter mark, before looking at Astaroth.

When Astaroth gave the signal, they stepped forward again and vanished.

But this time, they didn't reappear in the white room. Instead, they teleported directly outside at the entrance of the dungeon.

Notifications assaulted their ears, catching up for all the skills, spells, or changes to their bodies they had gained during the dungeon. And one notification, above all the others, caught their attention.

\*\*

Time Capsule Dungeon complete! Congratulations, players! Your rewards will now be calculated following your performances. Please wait.

\*\*

Astaroth looked at the timer that appeared and frowned lightly.

\*59:59\*

'An hour to calculate the rewards? Since when is it not instant?'

It was a strange occurrence, but he didn't mind the wait. This would give them time to go rest a bit.

The dungeon had played them dirty, by not allowing them a full night's rest on either stage three or four. They were tired, and an hour to wind down didn't sound so bad.

"Alright, people. Log off, and let's come back here in an hour. Whoever is late gets no reward. Got it?" Astaroth said, clapping his hands together to get their attention.

No one needed to be told twice, and they immediately logged out of the game as the sun rose above the forest in New Eden.

Astaroth logged, glancing at the timer one last time, his excitement rising.

'I wonder what we will get for lasting till the end, like that?'

Chapter 622 Rewards Well Earned

As his eyes reopened in his pod, Alexander yawned. He pushed open the top of the pod, rising to his feet, as Kary did the same not too far from him.

He turned his head toward the window, noticing the sun had just set.

"God... I'm so tired. And we can't even rest yet... I hope the rewards are worth it..." he complained, stretching himself, before jumping out of the pod.

As he stretched, he caught a whiff of his sweaty smell, and his nose wrinkled.

"Yikes. I guess rushing over here earlier really made me work. I feel like I came back from the gym, and forgot to wash. I'm all sticky..."

Kary passed next to him and giggled.

"You smell sticky. Let's go take a shower real quick and eat a bite before we jump back in."

He acquiesced and walked in the bathroom's direction. And against all his heightened hormones of watching Kary's naked form wiggling before him, he did nothing improper.

After washing up, the two of them went downstairs to grab some leftovers from the fridge and ate ravenously.

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Across the world from them, many other players were doing the same, some easily, some less so.

Christine, known by the others as Twinxie, got scolded for faking sickness to skip school and had a hard time liberating from her parents' chiding before she could jump into a shower and eat some snacks.

George, or Food Goblin, who had left work like a spooked kitten, had to listen to five angry messages from his boss, as well as a warning email from HR, telling him he shouldn't do this again, or he would risk getting fired.

As for Edvin, or Meat-Shield, he wasn't as lucky. His phone was filled to the brim with angry voice messages, as well as texts, and emails, from his boss.

All of them were more berating and derivative than the last, and in the last few, he heard what he didn't want to hear or read.

'You're Fired!'

His stomach dropped, realizing he might have committed a terrible mistake.

The other players in the party had it easier, for various reasons, and enjoyed a nice relaxing hour break, before logging back in feeling refreshed.

As everyone started reappearing in the forest, next to the large, holed tree trunk, Astaroth smiled.

Not a single one of them arrived late. He expected as much, given that their rewards would be plentiful without a doubt.

Some looked dejected, others irate, but all of them were present. Astaroth wouldn't bother asking why their moods had shifted, as their personal lives were none of his business.

He watched as the timer ticked down the last seconds, his heart thumping in his chest, the beating getting faster and faster.

\*Ding!\*

Rewards compiled. Personal rewards have been rewarded, and group rewards are being put in a chest. Congratulations again, players!

\*\*

A chest popped up in front of the tree in a flash of white light, as notifications rang in everyone's ears.

Astaroth checked his personal rewards first, before opening the chest. His curiosity was thoroughly piqued, now that he saw they had two-tiered rewards.

\*\*

Personal rewards for dungeon performance granted.

- 1) Gold x 100,000
- 2) Exp x 100,000,000
- 3) World Reputation points x 10,000

\*\*

Astaroth immediately levelled up, as he received the Exp, as did all his companions, who had just opened their personal rewards.

All the glum faces suddenly cheered up as they saw the fruits of their labour. But greed flashed in their eyes, as they tried imagining what could be in the group chest.

Astaroth saw their looks, shared their enthusiasm, but coughed lightly to bring them back to order. Some of them immediately coughed as well, acting like nothing had just transpired.

But Astaroth wasn't going to keep them waiting much longer.

He walked over to the chest, lifting the lid, as white light flashed in his eyes, soon replaced by a list.

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Group reward Chest

- 1) Gold x 10,000,000
- 2) Bonus Gold x 1,000,000,000
- 3) Exp x 50,000,000
- 4) Bonus Exp x 10,000,000,000
- 5) World Reputation (Guild) x 100,000

You have reached the last moments of the bonus stage. Extra reward granted.

\*Meet Your Maker\* awarded.

\*\*

Astaroth salivated at the rewards, but the last one made him curious.

'Meet your maker? What could that mean? Did I win a reward with New Eden's creator? Am I going to meet with Chairwoman Constantine Levesque?'

The name was vague, but foreboding.

But when he thought about it, he remembered he was already supposed to meet him, but then she had cancelled their appointment. This all made him dizzy just thinking about it.

'Does she want to meet me, or not? Eh. Whatever.'

He shared the notification with the group, allowing them to see the results of their hard work. All of them became slack-jawed and wide-eyed, even Phoenix, at the sheer amount of rewards.

'So much gold!' they all thought.

Phoenix immediately coughed to get everyone's attention.

"The guild will take ten percent off of this reward, both gold and Exp, for our future growth, and we can share the rest amongst ourselves."

No one objected, since with the sheer volume of both rewards, ten percent off wouldn't make a dent in their gained reward.

Astaroth did as she instructed, sending ten percent of the gold and Exp to the guild treasury through the interface, before divvying up the rest.

All the party members received their loot with a notification sound and showed various levels of excitement as level-ups happened to all of them.

\*Ding\*

Dungeon Rewards received.

1) Gold x 75,750,000

2) Exp x 750,375,000

\*\*

Astaroth, who had already just levelled up once, levelled up again, this time twice, making him level fifty-three.

His ranking rose again, shooting him in third place, behind Phoenix, who probably had a bit more Exp than him, but overshooting the dicks from Aces High guild.

This made him happy. And in the first place, was another member of his guild, Khalor.

Khalor had reached level fifty-four, only being one level above them. But he doubted the gap was that small.

With how exponential the Exp required to level up was, Khalor's levelling speed impressed Astaroth, as always.

But he had no plans to stay behind for very long.

'Let's dominate this dumb ranking, and leave all the other guilds in the dust,' Astaroth thought, smiling to himself.

Everyone was too busy jumping in joy at their rewards to notice his smirk.

Things were looking good for Paragon.

Chapter 623 Stray Cat

After the rewards were distributed, the party disbanded, and the players started going their own way, most heading towards Bastion City, and others deeper into the jungle.

Astaroth didn't want to go back right away, since he knew he still had things to deal with over there, but he also didn't have much choice. When Astaroth looked deeper into the forest, Phoenix stared at him before grabbing his arm.

"Nope. You have business to take care of. I'm still waiting for the response from the mage guild. You are not leaving until that is fixed, and we are in their good book again. Understood?"

Astaroth sighed deeply, before turning back towards Bastion City.

There was no denying that he had work to do.

As everyone left the clearing, a single player stood there, eyes upward. This was Chronos.

His gaze was locked on something up in the tree branches. What most would see was simply an odd-coloured cat, taking a nap on some tree branch.

But to Chronos, it looked much different.

The cat in the tree wasn't simply lying on the branch in his vision. It was lying directly on the many threads of the time web, pulsing with it rhythmically, almost as if part of it.

"What manner of creature are you, little kitten?" he mumbled to himself.

Looking at the tree, Chronos let go of the fleeting idea of climbing up to join it. His skill for climbing trees hadn't been tested since he was a child, and it wasn't as simple as grabbing the nearest branch, which was twenty feet off the ground.

And he wasn't sure his wings could even carry his weight. Some players had tried flying with their Fey wings, with varying levels of success.

But he was never much of a testing kind.

So instead, he did something else that might catch the cat's attention.

Chronos reached out his hand, grasping one of the time threads that passed under the sleeping cat, and gave it a gentle tug, sending a pulse in it that was off beat with the rest of the web.

The cat felt the pulse and opened its eyes.

Looking down lazily at the winged man below, the cat yawned wide, getting up and stretching thoroughly before jumping down the tree.

Chronos looked at it gracefully land in front of him, like it hadn't just dropped from thirty feet high, and sashay around him, seemingly observing him. This showed a level of intelligence superior to a simple cat.

Chronos followed its circling path with his eyes, wondering what the cat was looking at.

But after a single pass around him, the cat sat directly in front of him, before licking its paw and scratching its ear.

\*Mrow\*

Chronos leaned down, making himself almost the same height as the cat, and tentatively outstretched his hand.

The cat let him touch it, and Chronos scratched the top of its head.

"You're a strange one, little guy. What are you doing all the way down here, walking the mortal realm?"

Chronos had already assumed this cat came from beyond the mortal realm, since it pulsed with temporal energy. To him, the cat was like a beacon tying to the time web.

He wondered if this was a familiar to Tyr or another god under him.

The cat lightly purred from the head scratches and stepped a bit closer, its tail swooshing under Chronos' face. Then it sat down and pawed at the air in front of Chronos.

Or at least, that is what it would look like to others. But to Chronos, it was pawing directly at his fate thread, the one that connected him to Astaroth.

\*Mrow\*

It meowed again, turning its head toward Bastion City.

"You want to go to the city? Why didn't you go there directly, instead of waiting here?"

The cat turned its head back, looking deep into Chronos' gaze, and images flitted into his mind.

It showed him the world through its gaze, finding the dungeon entrance, and watching all the fate threads leading into it. Chronos noticed the thread that glowed brighter than the others.

"You're looking for the one this thread connects to?" he asked, blinking the images away from his mind.

The cat blinked its eyes in response.

'What does it want with Astaroth?' he wondered.

Chronos knew who the thread belonged to because he had also noticed Astaroth's fate thread glowed more than the others. He wondered if it was a result of all the other threads winding into him, and linking to his soul, or if his fate was simply stronger within the time web.

But he hadn't looked into it much yet, since they had only met.

Regardless, if the cat wanted to meet him, he would guide it to him. He wasn't one to stop time from taking its course.

"Alright, then. I will take you to him if I can. I should be able to get you into the city without trouble."

The cat chirped happily before stepping closer to Chronos. It then nudged his arm.

"What?"

The cat pawed at his arm, looking at him insistently.

"You want me to carry you? Can't you walk on your legs beside me?"

The cat looked at him expectantly, pawing at his arm again.

With a sigh, Chronos grabbed the cat carefully, nesting him in his arms. The cat was surprisingly lighter than he had expected, but was still an added weight.

As he cradled his arms, the cat repositioned a few times, making it hard for Chronos to hold on to it, until it felt it was comfortable enough, and closed its eyes to nap.

Chronos, feeling the purring on his chest, couldn't muster the energy to get angry at the cat for using him as a taxi service. He simply carried it in his arms, cradled like a fur baby, and walked toward the city.

'I hope the guards don't give me trouble because I'm bringing back a stray...' Chronos sighed in his mind.



He also hoped that the proprietress of the Singing Boar wouldn't make a fuss about him bringing a cat into her establishment. He still had nowhere else to stay, for now.

'I wonder if Tyr knows a being from his domain is down here?'

#### Chapter 624 Misinterpreted Orders

The walk back didn't take too long, as the dungeon hadn't been very far from Bastion City.

And much to his delight, the guards at the outer wall couldn't care less about the stray cat he was carrying in his arms, even if the fur on said cat was an ever-changing surface of pink, purple, and green.

Now, he only had to walk to the inner wall and hope the guards there would let him through.

Chronos hadn't gone into the inner city yet, even though he was technically allowed access, ever since he joined Paragon. He was content with staying in the more bustling outer ring, where life was vibrant and the flow of time pulsed with activity.

He met a few other players from the guild as he walked toward the inner circle, and nodded his head at them in salute, being respectful. Most of them nodded back, but some just huffed in response.

Chronos ignored them, as he had more urgent business to attend to than get into disagreements with nobodies. The ones that acted this way would most likely never meet the guild leader, and he had just dungeon'd with him.

So he couldn't care less.

Reaching the inner wall gate, Chronos stopped at the guardhouse for identification.

The guards there threw one look at him and signalled him to proceed inward, not even taking the time to ask his name or reason for going inside.

Chronos looked at them deadpan, his eyes reflecting his confusion, but not his face.

One guard saw this and stepped up to him.

"Sir. The king passed here earlier and gave us a list of names to let through without the usual checkups. Your name figures on this list. You no longer need to stop for identification from now on."

Chronos looked at him and smiled as best he could.

"Alright then. Good day to you, fine gentlemen."

He walked through the gate; the guards giving him a salute, before going directly toward the tree palace.

Chronos wondered why Astaroth would do that, but then again, he wouldn't complain. Even if he preferred to live in the outer ring, having easy access to the inner ring was a boon.

The checkups to enter weren't always the shortest, after all.

He wondered if it would be the same for the palace, though. The guard around the palace was much tighter.

After walking for a while, and reaching the palace plaza, a squad of royal guards stopped him.

"Please hold, sir," the one up front said.

'Makes sense that they would stop me here,' Chronos thought.

"What are your reasons for visiting the palace today, Sir Chronos?" the guard asked, using a scanning tool to identify him.

"I wanted to meet the guild leader. Would that be possible?" Chronos stated, remaining calm.

The soldier smiled at him, putting away the scanning tool.

"We have orders to bring you to the secondary meeting rooms if you come seeking an audience, Sir Chronos. Please follow us. We will guide you to them."

Chronos nodded his head, walking behind them as they spun around toward the palace.

Two of the guards walked ahead, while the other two flanked him, making him feel like an important person.

'Why did Astaroth order them to do this? Did he know I would come to seek him?'

In the meantime, the cat in Chronos' arms had woken up and was looking around with rapt attention, his tail swishing from left to right. He took in the details, seemingly looking for something.

Reaching the palace doors, the guards there saluted the squad and their escort, opening the doors for them. Chronos looked at everything around him with curiosity.

He hadn't visited the palace yet and wondered how it was on the inside. He was impressed when he came into view of the slick wooden architecture, as well as the ornamental statuettes and paintings that adorned the halls and walls.

This was far fancier than he envisioned, for a palace ruled over by Astaroth. This felt like it was more of a facade than his genuine expression of decor.

He wasn't far off the mark, given Astaroth loathed all this presentation. But he couldn't order the staff to take it down, since Phoenix wanted the visitors to feel the wealth in the halls of the palace.

She understood the importance of portrayal when receiving ambassadors, political figures, and other monarchs.

Even though she had yet to meet any of these people, since they had only recently come back from the update, she wanted the decor to state their superior status. If only to ensure a more levelled playing field when discussing with them.

Chronos walked with the guards until they arrived at an open door, which led into a study of some kind, with library-adorned walls and fancy sofas. The guards motioned for him to go in, and two of them left immediately, probably to fetch Astaroth, while the two others stood outside the door.

He wasn't sure it was to keep him in or to keep others out. But he felt a bit trapped.

Not long after, he heard footsteps from outside the room, followed by some grumbling.

"You didn't need to stand guard outside the room.... Jesus. Now he'll think he's a prisoner... Come on. Off you go."

"Yes, my lord! Our apologies, my lord!"

Chronos heard a deep sigh, as the metallic boots clanked on the wooden floor, getting further.

This drew a brief smile to his lips before his face became emotionless again.

Astaroth walked into the room, already out of his armour, and into some fancier clothes. His bloodied figure was now clean, his long hair still wet and falling slightly on his shoulders.

"I'm sorry if you felt inconvenienced, Chronos. Everyone is so... uptight here. I just wanted to be sure you were tended to, not guarded like a criminal."

Chronos shook his head in response.

"It's fine. They were only doing what they thought their job was. I take no offence to it."

"Good," Astaroth said with a sigh.

"You wanted to see me?" he added.

Chronos shook his head. As he did, the cat in his arms jumped off of him and sauntered over to Astaroth.

"Not me. Him. Or her? I haven't checked if it's a male or female..."

Astaroth watched the cat on the ground as it walked to him and passed in between his legs.

"The cat? The cat wanted to see me?"

Astaroth frowned, as he thought it was a joke. But Chronos looked dead serious.

Chapter 625 Special Feline

Seeing as Chronos wasn't denying it, or even remotely trying to laugh at his own joke, Astaroth understood he wasn't kidding.

Looking down at the cat, he frowned a bit.

The cat was passing through his legs affectionately, seemingly more excited to see Astaroth than Chronos.

Astaroth kneeled, looking at the little feline. The strange pelt's moving colours and the deep black eyes of the cat gave him slight vertigo, as their eyes locked.

The cat stopped sauntering around him and suddenly jumped up toward Astaroth's face, its own maw splitting into four, as a bottomless chasm appeared instead of his mouth.

Astaroth reacted immediately, catching the little monster before it reached him, and throwing it at the opposite side of the room. The cat landed on all fours, face returning to normal, before licking its front paw and grooming its face.

"What the ACTUAL fuck?! Are you trying to murder me?! What kind of fucking monster did you bring to see me, Chronos?!" Astaroth shouted, keeping his eyes set on the beast.

But Chronos was just as confused as he was. He hadn't known the cat could do such a thing, and was at a loss for words.

"I didn't even know it could do that... If I had, I would have left it in the woods, instead of carrying it here in my arms, so close to my body..."

Astaroth kept a healthy distance from the cat as he moved toward the door, trying to signal for someone to fetch Aberon. But a voice interrupted his train of thought.

"I apologize for my uncouth behaviour, friend. Far from me the intention of assaulting you. My instincts to restore the time web just kicked in momentarily. It will not happen again, I assure you."

The suave, masculine voice made both Astaroth and Chronos jump up in surprise as they realized who had spoken.

"You can talk?!" both of them asked simultaneously.

"Why, of course, gentlemen. Just as eloquently as either of you. Or even more, if I believe my ears until now..."

Astaroth wasn't sure if he should feel insulted by the words given their source.

Chronos, though, felt wronged.

"If you could talk all this time, why did you meow at me instead of using words? Were you making fun of me?"

The cat turned its head toward Chronos, a smile stretching on its lips as its eyes squinted closed.

"I assumed you would find it easier for your feeble mind to bring with you a simple cat instead of a highly intelligent being. Was I wrong?"

Chronos clicked his tongue at the insult.

"I am not feeble-minded..."

The cat tilted its head to the side.

"Then why did you jump up in fright when I spoke?" it asked.

Chronos looked at it, aggrieved.

"You are a talking cat. How else was I supposed to react... You know what? Nevermind..."

"Back up, here. Back up, back up, back up! What the fuck?!"

The cat turned back to look at Astaroth's confused face.

"Is that all you can say? Your level of volubility is disappointingly low..." the cat said, shaking its little head.

Astaroth couldn't care less that the cat was implying he was stupid or uneducated, though. He was still mind-blown that the animal could talk so well.

It was not the first talking animal he talked to, so it shouldn't affect him so much. But the same animal had just acted so innocent and simple.

The difference was shocking.

"Whatever! Why are you here? And why did you try eating my face off?!"

The cat sauntered a few steps forward, watching as Astaroth took a step back for every step forward he took. Until he jumped on the small table between the sofas in the room.

"May we have a civilized conversation, gentlemen? I promise I won't bite again."

Astaroth glared at the creature, unsure he wanted to trust it.

But Chronos saw no reason not to. So he sat down.

The cat nodded at Chronos before gazing at Astaroth.

The Ash Elf took a few moments of staring before stepping forth, an enormous sigh escaping his lips.

"If you try anything funny again, I'm having my companions eat you. Capice?!"

The cat smiled again, its cute face disconcerting to Astaroth, who had seen its maw open a foot and a half wide just moments earlier.

"I will be most careful containing my instincts," it replied.

Astaroth sat down, pulling the sofa back slightly as a precaution.

"Good. Now, before we continue. I would rather you call me something else than 'cat', or 'you', if possible."

Astaroth winced in response. He knew what he wanted to call it.

Monster.

But he kept the words for himself.

"Do you have a name, my feline friend?" Chronos asked, respecting its wishes.

The cat looked at him pensively.

"I do not. I believe our common friend would have wanted you to name me. So you can call me whatever you wish, as long as it suits my tastes."

Chronos didn't need to wrack his brain for long before blurting out a name.

"How about Nebulae? Your fur reminds me of the gas clouds in space, so I think it's fitting."

The cat pondered for a moment, before grinning widely.

"I shall accept the name you have given me. Please call me Nebulae from here on out."

Chronos smiled back, a forced smile since he still had trouble showing genuine emotions. But it was enough for the cat to accept it.

"You still haven't answered my question, Neb," Astaroth spat.

Nebulae looked at Astaroth, hissing lightly through its teeth.

"I'll accept Nebulae. But not Neb. It sounds so uneducated and unrefined."

Astaroth waved his hand dismissively.

"Whatever you say, Neb. Just answer the question. Did you come here just to eat my face? Or did you have a goal?"

The cat was already learning to dislike this temporal anomaly called Astaroth. The lack of respect it showed for a superior entity such as itself rubbed him the wrong way.

"I do indeed have a goal. But maybe I should just eat your face and be done with it. This young Fey can help me do my job. I don't need you."

Astaroth smirked back in response.

"You can try, fur ball."

Nebulae's tail swished in anger before he breathed in deeply and calmed down. He turned his back on Astaroth, looking solely at Chronos.

"I have come here to verify the extent of the temporal shift of the time web, and start making fixes, before it tears. I believe you can help me, so long as the fool behind me doesn't keep making bigger changes to it."

Chronos now understood why he had found the creature. It wasn't looking for him, but for the biggest change in the timeline.

He just happened to be in the same dungeon.

He just found the cat first, as it was napping, when they left the dungeon.

Eyeing Astaroth with curiosity, Chronos leaned in closer to Nebulae.

"Do you know where, or who, is the root cause of these changes?" he asked.

Nebulae nodded slowly in response.

"I know the who. Not the where. I intended to follow the fate threads tied to this one, here, to find out the where. But I don't feel like staying near him any longer."

Chronos chuckled a bit, his first bit of natural laughter ever since he came out of his coma.

"I understand how you feel. He seems to infuriate people around him, from what I saw."

"Hey!" Astaroth cried.

"I'm right here. I'm not that infuriating!" he rebuked.

Nebulae glared at him for a second before ignoring him again.

"I am sure we can cooperate and find the person I am looking for. Your talent will most definitely benefit from allying with me. I am from the root of them, after all."

Chronos smiled.

He pushed his hand forward for a handshake. Nebulae looked at his hand before smiling.

Chronos looked at his own hand and coughed.

'He's a cat. Of course he won't shake my hand...'

Astaroth looked at their interaction, slightly insulted that he was being ignored.

"I can help," he claimed, trying to feel useful.

"I doubt you can, pointy ears," Nebulae responded, jumping down the table and walking towards the door.

"What? You have pointy ears too — What the f—I can help. I know who you are looking for!" he shouted at the cat, as it was about to leave the room.

Nebulae halted his steps before slowly turning toward Astaroth.

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you do. I know who you are looking for. I can tell you where he is. Or better yet. I can force him to come here. That way, you could laze around here while you wait, and not have to chase him around. After all, Khalor is quite the traveller."

Hearing the name, Nebulae's gaze sharpened.

"How do you know this?"

Astaroth grinned.

'Bingo.'

He had guessed it right on his first try. Now he had the damned feline's attention.

"Doesn't matter how I know. I do. That's all that matters. And I can get him here."

Chapter 626 Following Door

Nebulae's gaze sharpened, doubt filling his mind. But the conviction in the elf's words was undeniable.

"Fine. If you can get him here, then do it," Nebulae scoffed, sitting at the entrance to the room.

But Astaroth's grin widened.

"What do I get for helping you?" he asked.

This had become a negotiation. Why would he give orders to Khalor on behalf of this cat?

He wouldn't force Khalor into something without something in it for both of them.

But the cat clicked his tongue, his tail swishing madly.

"My eternal recognition. That should be enough for a mortal."

Astaroth burst into laughter.

"I could hardly care less about a cat's recognition. You'll have to make it worth both my time and his if you want me to force him into coming here, fluffy paws."

Nebulae was starting to get aggravated at the nicknames this mortal was giving it. It was of divine essence!

How dare a mortal not pay it its due respect?!

"To hell with you, arrogant mortal. I am done playing your games. I will find the undead anomaly myself, and I'm sure this one will help me willingly."

Nebulae turned his head to Chronos, who shrugged in response.

He had nothing better to do. Tagging along with Nebulae could prove useful to grasp more of his time powers, Chronos thought.

As the cat angrily tippy-toed out of the room, Astaroth chuckled to himself.

"Like I'm going to let you get this that easily, you chuckle-fuck of a cat," he whispered to himself.

Opening the guild interface, Astaroth made Khalor's location invisible to anyone but him and Phoenix.

"Good luck finding him now, hehe," he laughed.

Chronos saw the location information disappear from his guild interface, but said nothing about it. He didn't care that this made finding this Khalor more difficult. If it elongated his trip with the strange cat, it was a win in his book.

He entertained the cat's questions and helped him, but it was mostly for his own benefit.

Astaroth left the meeting room, a bit disappointed it had been a waste of time. He had hoped Chronos would come to him to discuss the one that trained him in his time powers.

But it seemed fate had it otherwise, for now.

So he returned to the throne room, where Phoenix was meeting with the present officers of the guild. But while walking there, he saw a door appear on a wall next to him.

'Huh? Who is making doors appear around the palace?' he wondered.

But he was too busy to pay it any mind, so he walked by it, ignoring the door entirely.

Walking toward the throne room, the same, exact, door kept appearing on his path, to the right or left of the corridor. This made him frown.

Astaroth sped up his steps, trying to get away from this weird phenomenon. Until the door popped right in front of him, in the hallway, and opened, swallowing him in one fell swoop.

Astaroth tripped on the doorstep and almost face-planted inside a dimly lit room. As he caught himself putting his hands on a nearby table, Astaroth's eyes widened.

He recognized the room!

Spinning his head around, he quickly confirmed this thought, as every part of the room was the same, aside from a large gaping portal open in the center.

This was the room from the third phase of the time capsule dungeon.

And sitting at a table in the far corner of it was Aberon, teacup in hand, with his young appearance on display, instead of his old-man facade.

Across the table from him, an elegantly dressed Elven man, probably in his forties, was wearing a swanky robe with dragons embroidered into it.

Aberon seemed to talk to the man with some modicum of respect, as Astaroth couldn't hear him swear or shout from where he stood.

"Come closer, boy!" Aberon shouted at him.

Seeing as they had noticed him, Astaroth stepped forth, making his way to the back of the room. He looked around as he did, taking in the sights.

The damage from the battle they had fought here was still present in certain areas. One of these places, the ground in the center, where Shegror had vomited acid on the corrupted Elves.

He stared at it, wondering how the dungeon transposed this into the world. It made no sense to him.



"Yes, it's the same mark. Me and my colleagues are still trying to find out how this happened..." the older Elf said, smiling at Astaroth.

Astaroth stared at him, recognizing some traits on the Elf's face.

"You? I had assumed you would have died that night. We left you and you were so weak."

Aberon choked on his sip of tea, looking at Astaroth with bewildered eyes.

But when he transferred his gaze to the progenitor, expecting to see him furious, all he saw was his chuckle.

"Ahh, yes. You indeed left me in quite a tough situation. One dead dragon, One weakened beyond repair, and the four others knocked out of commission.

"Plus, the spell to send you inside their minds came at a heavy cost. If I hadn't been holding that portal shut for days, I would have been fine. But circumstances had me caught between a rock and a hard place.

"I was fine, in the end, though. Thank you for your concern."

Astaroth looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"That wasn't my — You know what? Nevermind. I guess it makes one other good mage to fight the oncoming end," Astaroth said, shrugging his shoulders.

Aberon wanted to rip the kid's head off, for how nonchalant he was being, with one of the seven forefathers of magic. One of the oldest beings alive.

But Aravelle raised his hand at him.

"Come sit with us, young one. We have things to discuss."

Astaroth looked at the older elf warily. The amount of people he couldn't trust rose by the day, and this one was most definitely part of the list.

But since Aberon was trusting of him, he could give the Elf the benefit of the doubt.

He pulled a chair closer to them, dragging it across the floor loudly, and sat closer to Aberon's side.

Aberon eyed him like he was a madman. But Astaroth didn't even notice, too busy staring at the older elf.

"So. What do you want? I'm a busy man."

Chapter 627 Aravelle Of The Dragons

Aravelle looked at Astaroth with a mix of amusement and curiosity.

"Tell me, young man. What do you feel when you look at me?"

Astaroth eyed him up and down and even tried reading his mana signature. But nothing came up.

Which was unusual, given he knew this man was a mage. He expanded his scope, englobing the room with his sense, but still nothing.

"Strangely, nothing. But I assume that since you come from a time that predates the Ash Elves, and that I have noticed magic seems to lengthen life span, you are far from just forty years old.

"Also, I was told that the demon war was thousands of years ago. Now. I wonder why I saw Aberon there. Weren't you a few hundred years old?" he asked, spinning his head to Aberon.

Aberon chuckled.

"Yeah, a few hundred years old. Somewhere around thirty hundred. I've stopped counting. But you couldn't fathom the age of Sir Aravelle."

Astaroth frowned at the 'Sir'. Aberon was never this polite.

Not even with the king of Ash Elves.

So why now?

"It is of no import. I want you to focus on staying conscious. Can you do that for me?" Aravelle asked with a snide smile.

Astaroth raised an eyebrow.

"Staying conscious? What do y—"

**\*WOOONG!\***

Before Astaroth could finish his sentence, a pressure hit his shoulders, making him feel like he was carrying the weight of the world.

His body was immediately drenched in cold sweats, as he bent forward, feeling like he was being crushed by a thousand moons.

Lifting his head with immense difficulty, Astaroth locked eyes with Aravelle. Instantly, his mind was assaulted by the roar of a hundred dragons.

Shegror, still taking hold inside him, shook in response, sending back a meek whimper of obedience.

Astaroth could feel his mind close to collapse, and it had barely been ten seconds.

'What kind of fucking monster is this guy?!' he shouted in his mind.

But just as he felt his eyes beginning to roll back, the pressure vanished as fast as it had appeared, sending him to his knees, gasping for air, and dripping sweat like he had run a marathon.

Aravelle burst out in laughter.

"MAH HA HA HA! I'm impressed, young Ash Elf. Very few can resist this presence for remotely as long as you did. Truly impressive."

Astaroth raised his head, trying to grasp what kind of madman this Elf was. Next to him, still sitting on his sofa, Aberon was white like chalk, his body drenched in sweat as well.

The only difference between his state and Astaroth's was that the old man was still seated.

"What the fuck was that?!" Astaroth spat between two gasps.

"That, young man, was the power of a progenitor of magic. Power that rivals lesser gods, and even some greater ones."

Astaroth was still reeling from the roars, let alone the pressure of his magic power. But he piqued his curiosity.

"What the hell is a progenitor of magic? And how are equals to gods, if you still walk the mortal realm?"

Aravelle smiled at his questions.

"Curiosity is not a terrible trait to have. But you are asking questions that answer is irrelevant to you, for now. You should be asking what I'm doing here, or what I want."

Aberon kept quiet, focusing on calming his jagged breathing and cooling off his burning mind.

After calming himself enough to stand, Astaroth dragged his ass back into the chair. His previous wary gaze on Aravelle was now coated with a healthy dose of fear.

Astaroth wasn't the type to get scared easily. But this was a man that could end him in the snap of his fingers.

Aravelle grinned at him.

"Good. I like the look in your eyes. Fear is a good inhibitor to acting stupid. And from what I gather from my sources across the lands, you tend to act first, and think never."

Astaroth gritted his teeth at the comment.

"Aren't you afraid you sent the entire palace into a frenzy?" Astaroth asked, trying to take the subject off of him.

"With that? No risk. I limited the influence to this room. No one could have even felt a fragment of it. But you are still asking the wrong questions, lad."

"Fine. I'll ask the questions you want me to ask," Astaroth spat.

He didn't like when people controlled the entire discussion on their terms. It made him uncomfortable.

"Who are you? What do you want with me? And why are you in my kingdom and my palace?"

Aravelle smiled widely.

"Now we are going in the right direction.

"First off, who I am. My name is Aravelle of the Dragons. I am a progenitor of magic and the creator of Contract-type magic. I see you use the gifts I brought into this world well. That means we have more in common than you think.

"Second, what I want with you. The answer is nothing. I didn't come here for you. I came here for a purpose much grander than your little person. A purpose which I shall reveal, in due time, but not now.

"And third," Aravelle said, locking his eyes on Astaroth's, taking a slight pause.

"Third, why I am here. But before I tell you that, let me set something straight with you. You may have earned the right to call these lands yours, in the eyes of the world. But this place was mine, long before you came to be, and will be mine again when you cease to be.

"I grew this tree myself, before the likes of your race even rebelled against the Elven kind. And with the power that went into it, it will stand here long after your life ends."

Astaroth looked at him with a look of understanding.

Now he knew why he always felt magic inside the walls of the tree palace. He also understood how it had seemingly withheld the onslaught of time.

A tree this size needed nutrients, and to grow this size, and not eat the life out of the other plants and wildlife nearby, something had to feed it with enough energy to maintain itself.

But he was still unsure about the why, for Aravelle's presence.

Chapter 628 Dubious Answers

"You haven't answered my third question, Aravelle of the Dragons..." Astaroth pointed out.

"Oh please. Aravelle is fine. No need to add my title at the end. It'll get tiresome pretty fast, I assure you."

Astaroth clicked his tongue.

"Fine, Aravelle. But answer the question, please. Why are you here? I doubt someone of your... prestige would wander here in a small upstart kingdom, for no reason."

Aravelle smiled once more.

"Good deduction. Indeed, there is a reason. The reason is that you beat up one of my mages. At least, that is the official reason. Let's say this was a good timing and cover story for why I needed to be back in this tower."

Astaroth remembered how Argos had called the palace a tower as well. And how the other one, that he had given to Nalafein, was also called a mage tower.

But he still wondered what was so important about these structures, or why their creators suddenly needed to come back to them, especially if the old proprietor of the thing was as strong as he claimed to be.

Since everyone was back in their seat, Aravelle straightened up his wrinkled robe and grabbed his teacup. After a long sip, and a sigh of appreciation, he rested the teacup on the table again, looking at Astaroth.

"Where do you think magic comes from, young one?" Aravelle asked, setting his hands on the armrests of his sofa.

This question took Astaroth by surprise. When had this become a quiz?

"I don't think it comes from anywhere. I feel like magic is more of a natural force of the universe."

Aravelle became pensive at his answer.

"Your view isn't entirely correct, but it is close to the truth. Did your master teach you this?"

Aberon shook his head, saying, "I only taught him how to use his talents. I have nothing to do with what he did with them and the development of his understanding of magic."

Aravelle gave a sharp look toward Aberon.

"Let the boy answer for himself. I believe he is smart enough to respond to his own questions without a chaperone."

Aberon shut his mouth, clenching his jaw. If this hadn't been one of the ten most powerful people in the world, he would have already blown up in anger, from being talked to like he was a child.

"What old man Aberon said is the truth, though," Astaroth said, to take the conversation away from Aberon.

He could see how his old teacher was uncomfortable in the presence of this mage and tried to help ease the situation away from him.

Aberon eased up a bit when Aravelle's gaze left him and nodded ever so gently toward Astaroth.

"In that case, your perception of the world and its guiding forces is very astute. You aren't far from the truth," Aravelle commented, taking another long sip of tea.

"Magic is a binding agent to the universe. It is what holds its multiple facets and powers together, in as much harmony as the laws of nature allow. When a world is born, it is magic that binds all the elements needed to make it thrive. This means magic, by definition, is also the world's lifeblood."

Astaroth listened to his words and tried making sense of them.

"I don't see what that has to do with why you are here, Aravelle."

"Sir, Aravelle," Aberon interjected, looking at Astaroth with a stink eye.

He feared that if Astaroth kept not using due respect, the old monster might anger and get rid of him. This was a less-than-desirable outcome.

But Aravelle raised his hand at Aberon.

"Let him speak how he wants. It's refreshing to be talked to like an equal. As for your confusion on the matter, young one, it is natural. This isn't something that every mage learns. If every mage knew about what I'm about to tell you, the amount of uncontrolled mages in the world would skyrocket. So I hope what I tell you here never leaves this room."

Looking at his body language, Astaroth quickly understood it was less of a request, and much more of an order. He nodded his head, swallowing his dried saliva.

"When you first met me, hundreds of years ago, through whatever means you used to travel back, did I seem weak to you?" Aravelle asked.

Astaroth nodded his head.

"I assumed as much since you threatened me the way you did," the elf chuckled.

"You threatened a progenitor of magic?! What the hell is wrong with you, boy?!" Aberon exploded.

But before he could keep berating Astaroth, Aravelle let out a long sigh and snapped his fingers. As the snap resounded, Aberon disappeared with a flash, his voice vanishing from the room with him.

"He still is as explosive as hundreds of years ago," Aravelle sighed, shaking his head.

But Astaroth only felt more intimidated now that he was alone with Aravelle. He doubted many people in New Eden could simply whisk Aberon away with a snap of their fingers.

Once again, the power level difference was made very clear.

"I apologize for threatening you back then, Aravelle. My friends' lives were on the line, and I spoke without thinking."

Aravelle left out a soft chuckle.

"From where I stand, you do a lot of things without thinking. But think nothing of it. I understand how you felt. I had friends I would have fought the gods to protect as well, long ago, so I took no offence at your words. On the contrary. They showed incredible loyalty. As well as stupidity, but I have noticed in my long life that those two concepts are rarely exclusive to one another."

Astaroth felt a weight shift off his shoulders.

"But let us get back to what I was saying, now that we have some quiet. Shall we?"

Nodding his head, Astaroth switched from his wooden chair to Aberon's more comfortable-looking sofa.

"As I was saying, this knowledge I am about to impart upon you must never leave this room's secrecy. You would be unleashing upon the world a wave of berserk mages and sorcerers, and this is not a desirable outcome, given the world's current circumstances. Understood?"

Astaroth nodded his head once more.

"Good. Then the class is in session," Aravelle said, waving his hand.

#### Chapter 629 Class In Session

"Like I said, magic is the lifeblood of the world we live in. And like every entity in the universe, if it has blood, the blood flows through channels. People have veins, and the world has the same, but with a different name and nature.

"We call them Ley lines. They carry the energy of the world. But the Ley lines aren't something of physical nature. They are more of an intangible thing. And they traverse the world, under its surface, reaching the highest of heights, and the deepest of depths, feeding it with the life energy it needs to sustain itself."

Astaroth listened with rapt attention. He may not be much of a thinker, but there was nothing in the world he liked more than learning new things.

Unfortunately for him, what Aravelle was saying to him was such a foreign concept to him he was having a hard time understanding the implications.

"Wait..." he interrupted the Elf.

"If it feeds the world, then wouldn't tapping into these lay lines be safe for anyone? Don't they carry mana around?"

The interruption didn't anger Aravelle. He had mentored many mages over his millennia of life, after all.

This wasn't the first time he was asked this question, or the first time he would answer it.

"The Ley lines don't carry mana, young one. They carry an energy much purer, and much more powerful than mana."

Astaroth looked at him with his head tilted slightly.

"So, Aether?" he asked.

Aravelle looked at Astaroth and frowned.

"How do you know of Aether? This isn't something a fledgling like you should know of."

Astaroth's lips pulled into a cocky smile.

He then imbued the Ad Astra with Aether, just to show his ability to use it.

Aravelle looked at the blade coated in Aether and became silent.

He got up and started spinning around Astaroth, staring at the blade.

"Although very crude, this application of Aether is unerringly efficient, for someone your age... I wonder what the world is thinking, letting a youngster like you tap into its most precious resource..."

Astaroth raised an eyebrow.

"Uh... I'm not tapping into the world's Aether, Aravelle. I'm using my own..."

Aravelle's steps stopped abruptly, as he looked at Astaroth like he was the most incredulous thing he had ever seen.

"Your own? I don't sense a shred of Aether from you, boy. How could you use a resource you do not have access to?"

"By... purifying it?" he responded, unsure how someone of Aravelle calibre in magic didn't know this.

Aravelle stepped in front of him.

Astaroth felt a powerful and invasive wave of Aether wash through him, scrutinizing every nook and cranny of his being. He felt slightly peeved at the invasiveness of the scan.

"Wow... You really left nothing up to your imagination, did you?" he commented, making an angry pout.

"You don't have an Aetheric Seed, young man. Are you lying to me?"

Aravelle's face was turning into one of anger. He couldn't believe what Astaroth was claiming.

"I'm not lying, though. I really just purify the mana, and compress it back into Aether... Is that such a difficult thing to believe?"

"Young man. The level of mana perception one would need to purify mana goes beyond masterful. You would need a perception of mana on a fundamental level. A point that no one has ever reached. Are you meaning to tell me you have reached this?"

Astaroth was unsure of how to respond.

He had the skill of perfect mana sense ever since he had developed an ability for magic. That hadn't been something he needed to develop.

"I'm not sure what you want me to respond, Aravelle. I can see the mana particles very well, and sense them inside me perfectly. That's how I started purifying the mana back into Aether. The cost is astronomical, though. Wasteful, if you want my opinion."

Astaroth felt the hair on his neck suddenly stand, and he activated Thousand Thoughts.

As he did, he saw a needle of quasi-invisible mana fly toward him. It was aimed at his head.

He wouldn't even call it an attack, as it was incredibly weak. But he could feel like it wasn't meant to damage his body.

The flavour was more of the psychic variety.

Astaroth pulsed his mana outward, ordering the ambient mana in the room to deviate the needle away from him, and it obeyed. The deviation was ever so slight, barely moving far enough so it wouldn't hit him, but it was more than enough.

Aravelle looked at him with wide eyes.

He could see mana, just as much as Astaroth, and decipher its nature as well. But there was something about how Astaroth reacted that baffled him.

"How did you know to push it away? And why with the ambient mana?" he asked.

"I saw it was a psychic attack. I assumed it was locked on my mana signature, given you aimed it at my head, so it wouldn't react to my mana. So I coaxed the ambient mana into doing it for me. But why did you attack me?"

The move confused Astaroth. If Aravelle was trying to teach him about a higher concept of magic, then why suddenly attack him?

"Boy. Psychic magic is barely visible on the magic scale. It is why psychics are a mage's bane. You say you saw the attack?"

"Yeah. It was shaped like a thin but long needle. It was hardly visible, though. Like a needle of glass, in a basin of water."

Aravelle looked at him, dumbstruck.

"So you weren't lying. This is unheard of... Why has the world gifted someone with the ability to sense its lifeblood so precisely? Just how bad is the impending future?" Aravelle muttered as he started pacing around the room.

"Um... Aravelle? You good, man?" Astaroth asked, watching the man pace pensively.

Aravelle didn't stop his pacing, muttering to himself. Nothing ever happened for nothing in the world.

If the world had suddenly gifted a person with the equivalent of the holy grail of magic abilities, it was a terrible omen.

"I knew the demons were trying to come back... But this... This means it's going to be far worse... Are our efforts going to be in vain?" Aravelle whispered to himself, as he circled the sofas.

'What now?' Astaroth wondered.

Chapter 630 Unseen Moves



Aberon, who had been shoved out of the room, figuratively, paced around his room. His senses spread across the entire palace, waiting for Astaroth to come out of the room.

He wasn't sure that letting the kid with Aravelle was even remotely a good idea, and he hated every second that passed more than the last.

"What if the boy insults him? Or worse, pops off at him and attacks him? Will his powers as an Abnormal bring him back? Or will the powers of the progenitor erase him permanently? By the Star Lady's grace, Astaroth, please be smart enough to keep respectful..."

Further down in the palace, inside the throne room, Phoenix was busy discussing with the officers. She was worried about why Astaroth had never shown up and had already checked her friend's list to see what he was up to.

His tag showed online, but his location and status were greyed out.

'What did he land himself into this time?' she sighed internally.

But she kept talking to the officers since she had called this meeting, and no one seemed to notice that Astaroth was missing.

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On the western side of the continent, in the Ash Elf kingdom, far into its forbidden forests, Killi was busy organizing more and more patrols into the lands surrounding the budding fortress he now called home.

The corrupted beasts' presence, which Astaroth had assured him he had taken care of, had suddenly restarted in full force. He didn't know what had suddenly caused this, but it was a problem he hurriedly had to deal with.

Fortunately for him, the number of players in his guild was still rising every day, and he had more than enough manpower to deal with it. He constantly had to promote trustworthy players to higher ranks to control the patrols he sent out.

At this pace, his guild would be more of an army than a guild. Not that he minded.

Since he had allied with Paragon, or rather, under Paragon, many players flocked to his guild, as the easier-to-enter option. He had no idea who had put the standards of recruitment so high over in Paragon, but he was glad they did.

He couldn't care less how many low-level players he got. Levels could be raised.

And even if they weren't the cream of the crop, there was also a quality, in quantity.

The door to his office opened up, as Killi was looming over the map of the region his people had drawn up.

"Sir! Patrol team S-21 has found a tear. They reported to us as soon as they did, and are currently trying to contain the miasma leaking out of it. They contacted us again, asking for a raiding party to come take care of it. It seems it's about to open up into a portal."

Killi cursed under his breath.

"Contact them back. Tell them our priests are all busy. They will have to hold out for a bit. I'm having a batch of them trained in Kormir. They should be back tomorrow."

"Send a second patrol team to rotate with them so they can rest. Send a third one if needed. But don't let the portal become a problem. Astaroth told me that portals held far more dangerous foes than corrupted beasts. I don't want whatever it is to roam our lands."

The reporting officer saluted Killi before running back out of the room.

Killi was left with his second in command once again. The man had been awfully quiet up to now.

"Spit it out, Savnir. You are never this quiet without reason," Killi spat, looking at his vice leader from the corner of his eye.

"I have a bad feeling about the situation, that is all. If Astaroth wasn't lying, which I doubt he was, there shouldn't be tears left. Why did they suddenly open again? What changed?"

Killi looked at him with worry.

"What do you think?"

Savnir scratched his chin, looking at the map. He pointed to an area more to the north-east, where the map stopped.

"From what I gather from our scouting reports, the kingdom of the Ash Elves is many miles out in this direction. And the further we send out patrols in this direction, the more corrupted beasts they encounter. I don't think this is happening at random..."

Killi looked at him, and his eyes became cold.

"You think this is intentional?"

Savnir only nodded.

Killi's fists clenched as his eyes fell on the map again.

"I should tell Prince Nalafein what you told me. If what you say is remotely true, he needs to know. And we will need to start pushing against his homeland sooner than anticipated."

Savnir looked at Killi with resolve flashing in his eyes.

"I'll start making plans for our troops."

Killi nodded his head at him, watching his second-in-command walk out of his office.

A long sigh escaped his lips.

"We aren't ready to fight the kingdom... Our players are too few and too weak... But if they play dirty like this, we will never be able to attack them. They will just keep us busy with beasts and lesser demons, while they plan and expand..." he muttered.

This was not an ideal situation. But fate had dealt him his hand.

Now he needed to play it.

Leaving his office soon after, having put into writing his report, he walked toward the higher floors of the mage tower. Contrary to Paragon's palace, Nalafein had opted to put his offices and court on higher floors.

This was a tactical move, allowing him to have a large buffer before anyone could reach him, in case of attack. And they expected them any day now.

After reaching the fourth floor, Killi stopped before a massive set of double doors, flanked by guards.

The guards nodded at him, recognizing him, and one left inside to announce his presence.

Killi was ushered inside the room soon after, but asked to wait for the prince to finish his meeting before reporting. And as he entered, he saw why.

In the throne room, in front of the four-step dais, a woman was pacing, her hand behind her back, as a magic structure made of words followed her around.

Killi wasn't a mage, and the display confused him, as much as it awed him. But he maintained his silence until he was called.

And as he waited, a tall Ash Elf walked next to him. It was the new general under Nalafein, Kloud Stryph.

Both of them nodded to each other, Killi handing him the written report, before they waited for the prince to call on them. The two men had grown to respect each other greatly since Killi arrived, sparring regularly in the courtyard below.

Kloud knew Killi wouldn't come up here for no reason, so he was already apprehensive of his presence.

'Are we already stepping into the warpath?' he wondered, eyeing the prince protectively.