

New Eden 631

Chapter 631 World Laid Bare

In Bastion City, somewhere in between the planes, in Aravelle's hidden study, Astaroth was watching the Elven mage pace nervously, muttering to himself.

It had been half an hour since he started pacing, after Astaroth revealed he had perfect mana sense, and the man still looked like a nervous wreck.

"Aravelle? Hellooooo? Urgh... Please just let me leave..." Astaroth complained, still sitting on the soft-cushioned sofa.

He had watched Aravelle pace patiently for thirty minutes, but he was done. His patience only extended so far.

"Aravelle. I'm going to leave now. I've got shit to do. Call me when you snap out of your stupor, okay?"

But as he tried standing, a force suddenly locked him in place.

"Sit, boy. I'll be right there with you," Aravelle said, still pacing.

He then resumed his muttering to himself, his pacing unabated.

Astaroth looked at him with anger.

"Listen, man. I'm done indulging you. You'd think a millennia-old man would have undone himself from feelings like nervousness and angst. You need to let me go until you got your shit in order."

Aravelle didn't even look at him.

"Fine... The hard way it is."

Astaroth used Soul Sap and invoked all the power of his soul companions, including Shegror, and snapped free of the weak spell holding him down.

With a single step forward, he appeared in Aravelle's face, giving him a crisp slap to the face, snapping him out of his rambling.

Slap

Aravelle looked at Astaroth with incredulity.

"How did you..."

"It doesn't matter. Listen, man. I've had enough of your nervous rambling and incessant pacing. If you are done with your explanations, I will be leaving. You have wasted enough of my time already."

Aravelle was unfazed by the slap he took, having felt nothing through his permanently up mana skin. But the fact Astaroth could lift himself from the chair, even if he didn't put much effort into holding him there, was nothing to scoff at.

"I am not done with you. Give me time to think, young man."

Astaroth glared at him.

"You've had over thirty minutes to think. Time's up. If you get your shit together right now, I'm tearing this place a new exit. And believe me, I couldn't care if you were a god right now. If I say I'm leaving, you better not fuck with me, or we'll have a problem."

Aravelle looked at Astaroth, his face becoming stern.

"Sit down, boy. Fine, I'll keep my thinking for later. But do not threaten me. Not in my domain. You may think nothing of me, but I will find ways ever so creative to tear you to pieces until you give me my due respect. Now. Sit."

Astaroth felt a shiver run down his spine. Aravelle was not kidding.

The murderous intent that had seeped into his words made him instantly cool off. He was still mad at being held here for so long, for nothing, but he couldn't just throw his weight around.

Not against a being like Aravelle.

Clicking his tongue, Astaroth cut off his spell, making the cooldown on his soul companions shorter, since he didn't use the entire duration shorter, and sat down.

But when Aravelle sat back down across from him, taking a long sip of tea, Astaroth at least understood his time wouldn't be wasted anymore.

"I must say, it has been a while since someone struck me, physically, I mean. You have some balls, young man. Or a death wish. I can't quite put my finger on which one, yet."

"Probably the latter..." Astaroth muttered under his breath.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing. Please proceed, Aravelle. I have things to do, and people waiting on me."

"Yes, yes, yes. A kingdom to rule, and all that. I understand," Aravelle said, waving his hand dismissively.

Laying his teacup back on the table, Aravelle waved his hand slowly above the table, making a sphere appear semi-translucent, and with bright blue lines snaking across under the surface.

Astaroth's eyes squinted, recognizing some reliefs.

"Is this?"

"Yes. It's our world. New Eden. And under the surface, the world's veins. The Ley lines."

Astaroth looked at the spinning globe with attention, his previous anger gone. He opened his map in the interface, comparing the layout to find reference points.

And he didn't take long to find a few.

The towering mountain of Sunpeak.

The plains of Themiscus, that he got from Phoenix's map info-sharing.

The eternal forests of the Elven kingdom.

But something caught his attention.

Under the surface of the world, many of the veins, or Ley lines, seemed to intersect at a dozen places across the globe. And a few of these places ended up in places he was familiar with.

One of them, in the Elven forests.

"Isn't this here?" he asked, pointing to the four crossing Ley lines on the spinning globe.

Aravelle smiled.

"Very astute, young man. Yes, this is indeed under the tower, or Bastion City's palace, as you would call it. There is a reason for this mage tower's existence. It is what I wanted to teach you."

Astaroth's interest suddenly came back, and he sat straight, looking at Aravelle insistently.

Aravelle snickered internally.

'So voracious for knowledge. An excellent trait to have for a young mage.'

"The tower sits directly over a Ley line hotspot because I was using it to strengthen the world. After the war against the demons, and what we did to close the portal and banish the demon lord, the world was weak, and a colleague of mine gave us this solution.

"We were to inject Aether into the world's Ley lines ourselves, to restore the damage we had done. That is why when a portal appeared so suddenly in my tower and corrupted my dragons, I was too weak to deal with it.

"The me you saw at that point was the weakest I had been in millennia. It was a good thing you arrived when you did. I don't know what would have happened if you didn't."

Astaroth listened to Aravelle's explanation with curiosity. But he still didn't understand why the mage was suddenly back here.

Why come back after so long, if he had left?

Chapter 632 A Deal Made Long Ago

"But this is now why I brought you here. You are here so that I can tell you the mage's guild will no longer be causing trouble for you. The matter with Argos Thornwood is to be shelved, indefinitely. I previous accord stands and your barriers will stay under our purview," Aravelle declared, clearing his mind of the thoughts from the distant past.

Astaroth snapped out of his musings, nodding his head in satisfaction.

"And if we ever expand once more?"

Aravelle waved his hand dismissively.

"You could expand this city a hundred times. It wouldn't matter. Our help will be there as long as you don't act against us. I will ensure this personally."

This satisfied Astaroth very much.

There was no telling when the next update would come, and how long it would spell for inside New Eden. He needed to be sure that when they came back, the city still stood.

And with Aravelle's word, he had this certitude.

"Also," Aravelle started speaking again.

"I will be injecting a considerable amount of Aether into the Ley lines from underneath your palace. I believe you know from where, and I would appreciate it if no one goes near there when I am at work. The nature of power transference is a bit... unstable."

Astaroth frowned at the request.

"How will we know when we can or cannot go down?" he asked.

Aravelle smiled snidely.

"I'm sure your perfect mana sense will allow you to know. And anyone with even a slight perception of mana will feel it as well. So you best make sure someone who can tell guards the entrance to the underground commune."

Before Astaroth could argue that this was easier said than done, Aravelle snapped his fingers, and Astaroth disappeared from the room.

Aravelle looked at the empty sofa before a plume of black smoke exited from his right hand.

The smoke swirled forward, reaching the sofa, and transformed into a humanoid creature with fair skin and patches of black scales, curled horns adorning the side of his head.

"Rare of you to exit the confines of my body, Shegror. How are you faring these days?"

The humanoid dragon looked at Aravelle and smiled softly. His skin was a sickly colour, but it otherwise looked healthy.

"I'm feeling well today. The soul shard I parted with, so many centuries ago, has reconnected to me earlier today. And it seems his end of the deal is finally coming into effect. I can feel my strength already rising, if slowly."

Aravelle snickered.

"I had never thought a proud being like you would have parted with a piece of its soul, especially to someone so weak in comparison."

Shegror clicked his tongue.

"He had me in a tough spot, and I couldn't make him leave. It wasn't exactly willingly, that I parted with it. I asked for a high price in return, though. But since he wasn't from that time, I'm assuming the price was not to be paid until he returned to his own place in time."

"Yes. I am quite curious. What did you ask for?"

"I asked for one percent of his power, in constant supply, forever. He said yes. I was expecting a trickle from such an inferior being. But I felt a surge, earlier. Like he had suddenly become incredibly more powerful. But it barely lasted."

Aravelle squinted at the words. He knew exactly what moment Shegror was talking about.

"You mean to say the young man accepted to transfer one percent of his power forever? That seems like a losing deal for him. Permanently reducing your mana by one percent can lead to an astronomical portion, in the long run."

But thinking back on the kid, it did not surprise Aravelle that he had said yes.

"I doubt he even considered one percent to be enough. I'm sure you could have asked for more," he commented.

But Shegror shook his head.

"I doubt he would have accepted. I was considerably weaker than him at the moment we made the deal. He knew that. I could feel him resist the urge to kill me and take the entire soul."

Aravelle looked at Shegror with a tinge of anger.

"I wouldn't have let that happen. You know that."

"Hah! I doubt you could have done anything, at the time. You were weakened, and I could feel he was still hiding some of his strength."

Aravelle raised an eyebrow.

"You think he would have beaten me? A progenitor of magic? Even in a weakened state, that would be infinitely difficult for a person at his level. I don't believe he could have."

Shegror chuckled.

"When the soul shard reconnected with me, I saw something. A memory. Of him, taking down Mel'gaz. A Colonel of the demon army."

Aravelle became pensive.

"A Colonel, you say. I think I would have held my own against a colonel, even in that state. But how did he stand against one at all? He doesn't hold that kind of power."

"I can see inside him. He doesn't have that power directly. But his powers are very much like yours. He has allies within himself. Powerful allies. And he bears the mark of royalty."

Aravelle had always refused to take up the title of royalty, even when the elves asked for him to become their king, millennia ago. He didn't want to tie himself down back then.

He knew it came with certain advantages, but he always knew that he would reach those same advantages on his own, with time.

But for someone weak like the boy, these advantages could mean the difference between heaven and earth.

But, still. Taking down a colonel of the demon lord's army...

That was no small feat. Even with help, for a person at Astaroth's level, it was like an ant killing an elephant.

"This young man will someday become a problem for whoever is against him. I only wish he uses his power for the good of the mortal realm. One more powerful enemy to kill is not what we need right now..." Aravelle muttered.

Chapter 633 A Riddle For The King

Astaroth reappeared in the corridor they had taken him from, his mouth open to protest. But he clamped it shut when he noticed he wasn't in Aravelle's presence anymore.

'That old codger... He shoved me out the moment he was done talking. He could have at least let me ask him for a better solution then, just post someone who will sense me...' he complained, internally.

Astaroth resumed walking toward the throne room, a bit peeved at his new dilemma. Someone who could sense mana meant at least a mage.

But he couldn't just take one out of his patrols for a guarding job, could he?

This put him in a foul mood.

Reaching the throne room, Astaroth noticed nobody was inside, and clicked his tongue.

'He held me for so long, the meeting is over...'

"Guard, do you know the queen's whereabouts?"

The guard to the right of the door smacked his heels together.

"Yes, Your Highness! The queen has advised to tell you if you were looking for her, to look for the moonlit sky, and the maiden of stars, sir!"

Astaroth looked at the guard, who was shouting and winced.

"At ease, my friend. I don't want you people to be so uptight around me. It makes me uncomfortable..."

"I'm sorry, sir!" the guard shouted, taking a bow.

Astaroth sighed.

"Thank you for your help, soldier."

He walked away, thinking about the words of the guard.

'A riddle? Really? Good thing I know what she meant because I would have searched for a while...'

Astaroth started walking toward the palace entrance and walked into the plaza that faced it.

A few new nobles were walking to and fro, across the plaza, and not a single one missed a beat, saluting him when he crossed paths with them.

"Your Highness."

"Your Majesty."

"King Astaroth. What a pleasant surprise meeting you here!"

Astaroth waved and smiled at them, remembering Phoenix's words to act cordially with them, as much as he could, but he kept walking all along.

He had no time for idle banter and meaningless chatter.

Once he was far enough from the doors that he could see more than one layer of branches above his head, he leaned down and jumped with all his strength.

The leap alone brought him ten feet off the ground, before he stepped on the air and started making his way upwards.

The guards and nobles watched him lift toward the bough of the tree palace, with a mix of dread at seeing the monarch take risks, and joy at witnessing his magic in action.

Even though this was the most basic of spells, in Astaroth's opinion, many magicians never learned how to fly or take air at all. For them, it was a sign of power to reach the skies with ease.

But Astaroth ignored them, making his way toward a very specific area of the bough over Bastion City. The place he had taken the maid, Coral, not too long ago.

The place where he and Phoenix had slept under the moonlit sky and met with Lady Anulo, to infuse the evolution fruit with star Aether.

It took him a while, one step at a time like this, but he eventually made it to his target branch. And there she was, waiting for him while staring out at the kingdom from above, Phoenix.

His Sky Steps was not a noisy spell, so he took it upon himself to sneak up on Phoenix, to embrace her from behind. But the moment he landed on the enormous branch near her, she spun around.

"Good, you didn't make me wait too long."

"Aww. I wanted to sneak up on you..." Astaroth pouted.

Phoenix giggled lightly, making butterflies flutter in Astaroth's stomach.

"I was practicing my new skill, so I felt you coming from inside the palace. I'm glad you understood my riddle."

Astaroth smirked.

"I would never dare forget that night. A night under the moonlit skies with the most perfect of women? Only a fool would forget that."

"Oh, you sweet-talker," Phoenix scolded, with a smile and a light punch to his shoulder.

But she sunk into his chest, kissing his exposed neck softly.

"Where were you today? You were gone for hours."

Astaroth frowned.

"Hours? I was gone for less than one hour..."

Phoenix looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Have you looked at the time since you came back?" she asked, her eyebrow still cocked.

Astaroth opened up his interface, wanting to refute her claims, but when he looked at the integrated clock, he gasped.

He really had been gone for hours. Three hours, to be precise.

"That fucking mage... He brought me into his domain, and I'm guessing there is a time dilatation spell in it. It was less than an hour for me..."

"What mage?" Phoenix asked, tilting her head in confusion.

"Aravelle. The Elf mage we saved in the dungeon. That mage."

Phoenix's mouth opened in surprise.

"He's still alive? He must be ancient by now."

Astaroth laughed at her words.

"That's putting it lightly. But he doesn't look ancient. Apparently, he's many millennia old and isn't about to die, either. But that's irrelevant. He took me there to talk to me, and now I have many things to discuss with you and with Khalor."

Phoenix looked at him and smiled.

"Look at you, wanting to take responsibility for the kingdom. Keep it up, and you might make a great king someday."

Astaroth almost coughed at her words, feeling like he had been stabbed.

"I'll call him back for you. I heard he had finished his task on the dark continent, for now. So he should be available," Phoenix said with an enormous smile, seeing Astaroth's reaction to her covert insult.

"We should discuss this with our military officers as well. I have a conundrum to resolve, and their input might help me find a solution," Astaroth added, his face pouty.

Phoenix nodded her head and headed toward the edge of the branch.

"In that case, let's head down. See you on the ground!" she blurted out before stepping off the branch.

Astaroth felt his heart skip as he saw her disappear.

"I will never wonder why she sticks with me... Two peas in a pod, I swear..." he muttered, jumping off with a bound.

Chapter 634 The Sentinels' Request

Both of them plummeted, the hundreds of meters separating them from the hard, compacted soil and stone that comprised the ground closing in fast, before using their own means to stop their descent.

Meanwhile, the guards on the ground were panicking at the sight of two people falling from the bough of the tree, and running around on the ground, trying to think of a way to break their fall.

But their aid was not required, as both sovereigns suddenly slowed down, one with a gout of flames, and the other with a burst of wind, before landing on their feet, like nothing had happened.

Phoenix smoothed out her wrinkled dress, and Astaroth walked to her, smiling like an idiot.

"I had a splendid view while going down, being behind you and all."

She elbowed him in the ribs, motioning at the guards that were getting closer, and he chuckled.

"Your grace! Are you alright?!" a guard asked, in panic, looking at Phoenix from head to toe.

"I'm fine, soldier. It'll take much more than a brief fall like this to take me out. Off you go, now. Get back to your posts, all of you."

The guards all looked at her incredulously before saluting her and obeying the order with a smidge of reluctance. Getting brushed off like this wasn't pleasant.

But their queen was ultimately the one in charge. They couldn't disobey her orders even if they wanted to.

As the couple walked toward the palace doors, Phoenix's arm wrapped around Astaroth's, the latter noticed a woman standing near the door, getting the stink-eye from the guards near her.

As they got closer, the woman started approaching them.

"What is it with you and falling women, King Astaroth? Do you like the thrill of putting them in danger?"

"It's a pleasure to see you as well, Commander Alena. To my defence, she was the one that jumped first. I only followed."

The commander of the Sentinels huffed disapprovingly and bowed to Phoenix.

"I would throw myself off the highest cliff as well, rather than tolerate his presence, my queen. I am glad you are fine."

Phoenix giggled lightly, bringing her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, come one, now, commander. King Astaroth isn't such bad company. He's actually quite funny when you get to know him," Phoenix defended him.

Alena scoffed.

"I'd rather not. I am still mad at him for putting my daughter-in-law in danger, and having my son strike him like it was a normal thing to strike a monarch. If it wasn't for my protection, Castien would have lost his post as a Sentinel for his actions."

Astaroth scratched the back of his head, feeling slight guilt about this.

"If I had known it would cause him problems, I would have taken him to somewhere private, before letting him hit me..." Astaroth mumbled.

Alena snickered at him.

"It would have been better, yes. In any case, I was not here, waiting for you, just to bring up that incident. The Sentinels have a request to make to you both, and I would like an audience."

Phoenix smiled at the commander, her business mode kicking in.

"Why, by all means, Commander Alena. Follow us to the throne room. We were about to summon all the commanders there, anyway. We can hold you an audience in private first if you wish."

Alena nodded her head before signaling them to lead the march.

The walk to the throne room wasn't too long, and once there, Astaroth asked the guards to leave them in private. If the Sentinels had a request to make, then it was their business and theirs alone.

The guards obeyed the order, quickly filing out of the room before closing the door behind them. The hallway became slightly crowded, but the guards paid it no mind.

Once they were left alone, Astaroth climbed to his throne, as did Pheonix, while Commander Alena stayed at the bottom of the few-step dais. Once seated, Phoenix motioned the commander to speak.

"What is it your Sentinels wish to ask of us, commander?"

Commander Alena went down to one knee, bringing her fist to her heart.

"I would like to ask your majesties for the honour of sending my Sentinels to the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises! There would be no greater honour for my regiment to be sent to represent the kingdom!"

Astaroth looked at her with a frown.

"The what?" he asked, confused.

But Phoenix intervened before he looked like an idiot.

"Commander Alena. You realize what you are asking us, right?" she asked, with gravitas.

"My queen. I know I am asking you a great favour. But I am not asking you to play favourites. We are ready to relinquish our chance at going to the next ones, if we can be in the first ones. I am ready to beg for this chance, Your Highness!" Alena said, getting her second knee down, and prostrating.

"Enough!" Astaroth shouted.

His vehement reaction took aback Alena. Her face dropped, realizing they had shot her down.

She got back up, getting into a simple bow.

"I apologize for asking this out of place. I will fetch the other commanders. If you'll excuse me."

But Astaroth raised his hand.

Phoenix looked at him with a smile, already leaning back into her throne. If he wanted to deal with this, she wouldn't interfere.

"We are not done. I do not excuse you."

Alena stopped backing away and raised herself, looking at the king's face with confusion.

"I wasn't saying enough because I refuse. I was saying enough because you prostrated. Never again do I want to see one of my commanders on his knees like this. Have some pride, for crying out loud."

Alena felt the words punch into her like sledgehammers.

"Sir, I—"

"Stop. I'm not done."

Alena shut her mouth promptly, lowering her head.

"I don't know what these exercises are, and I'm guessing that is because I missed many a meeting. But if you willingly go down on both knees, I take it is of great importance. Why don't you tell me more, before we decide if we grant your request or not?"

Alena's face lit up.

There was still a chance!

Chapter 635 Selling Her Salad

"I will gladly explain them to you, my king," Alena said, excitement in her eyes.

Astaroth leaned back into his throne, getting comfortable, and sent a message to Phoenix in the private chat.

'Did you know about these "Exercises"?'

Phoenix replied almost immediately, almost as if expecting his question.

'Yes. We discussed it in a meeting a bit before you came back here. But we haven't had time to discuss it together yet. We still had to choose which one to send, and I didn't want to pick without you.'

Astaroth felt disgruntled at the reminder of how hectic things had been since the patch had hit. They barely had time to sit and talk about important things.

But he washed away the stray thoughts and focused on Alena, who was already speaking.

"The Inter-Alliance Military Exercises are a tournament-style drill, held by the alliance every year, to keep their troops in war-ready condition. They started a few decades ago, and have been a continental event ever since.

"The alliance picks one vassal kingdom or force under them, and one of their regiments, to send to the tournament, as well as a few more kingdoms invited by officials, to set up a tournament between the armies, with prizes for the winners.

"To be invited is a great honour, and usually means great turnover for the invited kingdoms or forces, both from the alliance's invitees and the random ones. It breeds trust in those kingdoms and allows them to expand their military might and economic empires.

"I heard from Leon that we received an invitation four years ago, but he turned it down since we were too busy with the corruption in our lands. It was a shame to turn down such an honour, but it was understandable then.

"But since we are now part of the alliance, we do not need an invitation! We are, by default, allowed in the exercises!"

Astaroth looked at her excitement peak and almost laughed. It was a treat to watch such a stern woman suddenly act like a child at the prospect of going to the candy store.

"This is why, I would like to request you send the Sentinels as first pick, my king! Allowing us to go first would be the greatest of honours, and would also increase my regiment's morale tremendously!"

Seeing as she was done talking, Astaroth leaned forward.

"Tell me, Commander Alena. Why should I send your regiment instead of the Royal Guards or the Griffon Scouts? What makes you believe you are the best suited to represent Stellar Woodlands? Convince me and the spot is yours. Sell it to me."

Alena's eyes narrowed as a grin reached her lips.

"Yes, my king!"

She pulled out a small orb and tossed it before her. As the orb whirred to life, it began hovering in place, and an image appeared above it.

'A projector?' Astaroth realized.

The images the little magic gadget started showing were that of his troops training, both in the courtyard and skies above the forests of the kingdom. Astaroth was quite satisfied with what he saw, but he knew this was only an appetizer.

"This, my king, is footage of the Royal Guards and Griffon Scouts during their daily drills. Their performances are stellar, in their respective duties. But what you need for the exercises is not a regiment that only functions in one capacity.

"The alliance is large, and the kingdoms have long since established their military ways. The regiments they will send will be versatile beyond belief, and ready for anything thrown at them. Especially so for the kingdom of Themiscus.

"They have won the exercises many times before, and have the most established military culture. Being the oldest standing kingdom on both kingdoms has its boons, after all."

Astaroth listened to her words while watching the footage of both regiments. He agreed their drills were extremely one-directional and lacked the flexibility needed for a wide-scale tournament.

But he failed to see how her Sentinels would do any better. To his knowledge, they were the eyes of the kingdom and their first line of defence.

Not a troop ready to march on other armies.

"Tell me, Alena. What makes you think your Sentinels will fare any better?" he asked her, his eyes narrowing on her.

Alena smirked in response and pulled out another orb. Throwing it into the air, she recalled the first one.

As the images sprung to life, the contents were in stark contrast.

Images of Sentinels, training in various environments, fighting enemies above, as well as below. Image of Sentinels fighting as much in a range capacity, as in the thick of melee.

Astaroth watched as the footage showed them taking on large mobs, other troops, enormous monsters, as well as Leon himself, and always picking an adequate tactic for the situation.

He even saw images of the Sentinels fighting both the Royal Guards and the Griffon Scouts, and coming out on top. This particular footage, piqued his curiosity.

"How did you get the other regiments to agree to fight against yours, commander? I doubt they would willingly get into a fight if they think they would lose."

Alena grinned like a shark.

"My king. These orbs are recording devices that the mages from the mage's guild have installed in the training facility on the sixth floor. They record our training sessions, so we can study where we make mistakes and work on them."

Astaroth nodded his head. This was not a bad idea in itself.

"Ok. But I still don't see how you made the other regiments fight you..."

Alena shook her head.

"I didn't, sir. Since the facility records our training, it also means it can duplicate our fights and learn from our combat exercises."

Astaroth's eyes widened.

"You got the mages to make a simulation for you?!"

Alena nodded her head with pride.

"Correct. We asked the mage's guild to make a simulation, based on both troops' training footage, so we could have mock battles against them. And we came out triumphant in every scenario. We also had them make us fight multiple different combat scenarios, even fighting a mock battle against Leon himself."

Astaroth could see why she was so confident in her claim that they were best suited for this. He watched the different footage flash before his eyes and grinned widely.

"Then let me ask you this. How confident would you be in taking me in a mock battle? Using the same method, of course, so no one gets hurt," he asked, grinning at her with a sharkish grin.

Chapter 636 An Enticing Offer

Alena raised an eyebrow at him, uncertain what he was asking.

"My king?"

"You heard me, commander. Do you think your Sentinels could take me down if I were to go all out?"

Alena had seen her soldiers hold their own against Leon. Even if the king was stronger than he let on, she doubted he was powerful enough to rival a mythical beast of Leon's calibre.

"Sir... I don't think it's a good idea... How would our soldiers feel if they were to take out their king? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose you had for asserting dominance over the court when you came back?"

Astaroth scoffed at her words.

"You seem pretty quick to discard me. Let me make things easier for you. I will go all out, and I want all your Sentinels, including yourself, to do the same. If you think you can take me out, this is your chance to try. Are you game?"

Alena was curious about Astaroth's true power level. But she felt like taking this bet was risky on so many levels.

What if they took him down too fast and the soldiers lost faith in his power? Wouldn't that be detrimental to him?

Astaroth could see the hesitation in her eyes.

He wanted to fight them, not to allow them to go. But to gauge their strength.

So he opted to sweeten the pot.

"I will make you an offer I doubt you will refuse. Take the fight. If you win, you get to go for the next five years, without exception or going back on my word."

The offer was enticing, and Alena was already inclined to take it. But she was still hesitating.

"And what if you win?" she asked, biting her lower lip nervously.

"If I win, then you go only this year, and the next year will be a fair competition between all regiments. No detriment in it for you, right?"

Her eyes widened.

This meant the king had already agreed to let her regiment go. This competition had no more incident in this year's selection.

But she wondered where the king took his confidence.

"And if I accept? When would we be holding this mock battle?" she asked.

Astaroth smiled at her.

"If you say yes now, then we can set it up as early as tomorrow. I am tired today and have been up for a long time. So we can take the day to rest, get your men ready, and convene on the training floor tomorrow at dawn. What say you?"

Alena had virtually no reason to say no. But something from the confidence exuded by her monarch made her feel off.

She was no slouch in terms of power, which was why she had become commander of the Sentinels in the first place. And under her were a little over two hundred men and women that had proven their worth over the last decade.

Yet, the king was a wild card, as far as she was concerned. She had asked Leon, once, why he bowed to Astaroth, back when the king and his ilk were still nowhere to be found.

Leon had been taken aback by the question but had answered still.

"King Astaroth may not be powerful by himself as of now. But a time will come when his potential pushes him far beyond mortal reach. By then, how far under him will even I be? Only time can tell..." he had answered.

She had always thought he said this only for her to stay in her lane. But something about how he phrased his words still echoed in her mind to this day.

'His potential, huh? How much of it has he unearthed, as of now?'

"Then I accept. I will get my men ready by the morrow. I hope you will come prepared, and that you will be humble in defeat, my king."

Astaroth stepped off the throne dais and stepped down to stand in front of Alena, a wide grin plastered on his face.

"I hope your men are ready to take the most horrible loss they have ever taken, commander!" Astaroth declared loudly, extending his hand toward her.

Alena grabbed his forearm in a knightly handshake. She grinned back, as well, putting up a facade of confidence.

Once they let go of each other's forearm, Astaroth climbed back the few steps to the top of the dais and sat back on his throne.

"Now that this is settled, would you mind fetching the other commanders? We have a few things to discuss."

The commander nodded her head, taking a quick bow, before backing out of the room.

As she left, Phoenix finally opened her mouth to speak.

"I don't mind you deciding on your own, but don't you think accepting for her regiment to go so easily will breed feelings of mistrust, about favouritism?"

Astaroth shook his head before answering her question.

"I will make sure it doesn't happen. I already have a solution in mind for that. Tomorrow, when I fight her regiment, it won't be the only fight I will be holding."

Phoenix's curiosity was piqued.

"Tell me more, oh wise King Astaroth," she teased, a smile on her lips.

"Tch. I was going to, but since you want to mock me, I guess you'll find out tomorrow at the same time as the others."

"Aww... Don't be like that, love. Pretty please?"

Phoenix made a pouty face, pursing her lips and batting her eyelashes. But Astaroth pulled out his tongue toward her jokingly.

"Not telling you, even if you beg. It'll be a surprise for everyone, anyway."

Phoenix crossed her arms, trying to appear angry at him, but her curiosity was visible on her face, and Astaroth knew she was faking.

"Don't worry. It's nothing too big, and you only have to wait one day to know."

She huffed in fake anger at him and punched him lightly on the shoulder.

The doors to the throne room started creaking open, so she quickly switched back to smiling, as if nothing had happened. The speed of her transition impressed Astaroth.

'Years of practice, I suppose...'

Chapter 637 Getting Ready To Fly

The meeting with the other officers went by briskly, as Astaroth only wanted to discuss a few things with them. He told them who was being selected for the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises, and that they had weighed the decision in accordance with their current estimated troop strength.

Astaroth promised the other two the chance to prove their might for the following year and brushed off their further questions on the matter.

This wasn't the main reason he wanted to convene a meeting.

Once he told them he wanted to form another regiment, composed primarily of mages, he asked for their opinion on who should lead it, and who they believed was trustworthy enough, or capable enough to mount such a regiment.

A single name popped out from all three of their mouths.

Dilya Naemenor.

From what they said about her, she was an Elven woman, who had taken refuge in their city from a nearby village that had fallen to the corrupted monsters, not long after the Abnormals had disappeared.

The three commanders were in accord that her magic prowess was nothing to be scoffed at, and she had been around long enough for her to make her mark. The only downside to this was that she had made her mark as an adventurer.

Getting her to leave the guild to take up official functions under the kingdom would be far from easy. Especially with the guild leader, Singing Grove, who would assuredly do everything in her power to keep such a promising talent under herself.

Astaroth was determined to rope her in. But it would likely take a few tries.

After the meeting, Astaroth sent Phoenix back on her way alone, as he wanted to stop by a few places.

The first place he went was on the sixth floor. He could finally see what the training floor looked like.

After climbing the stairs, almost winding himself out from the thousands of steps, he reached the floor.

But it was much smaller than he expected.

Opening from the stairwell, he found a small round room, with runes carved into the floor, and a small desk at the back, close to the wall.

Behind the desk, a gnome with a beard longer than himself was reading a thick tome, unaware someone had entered the room.

Astaroth walked over to the gnome, clearing his throat to catch his attention.

The gnome lifted a finger, signalling him to wait, and kept on reading for a minute, before lowering the tome. When he saw who he had asked to wait, his face paled.

"I'm terribly sorry, my liege! I thought you were just a soldier coming for a training session! I had never expected the king to come here unannounced!"

Astaroth wanted to laugh at the gnome's reaction, but he didn't want to embarrass him further.

"Pay it no mind. It was my fault for not making my arrival known beforehand. But I did not come here to schedule a training session. I came here for information."

The gnome cocked his head to the side, curious.

"What kind of information, my liege?"

"I would like to know the capacity of the training room. How many sessions can it hold simultaneously? How powerful an opponent can it simulate? What size is it inside? Things like that."

The gnome looked at him curiously before explaining the room's functions and details thoroughly.

It took him over an hour to get all the details he wanted, but once he was done, Astaroth left the room satisfied, but not before ordering the gnome to reserve the training room the next morning at dawn for himself.

The gnome noted it and assured the room would be vacant for his personal use, without issue.

Next, Astaroth wanted to visit the two other commanders under him for private meetings.

He could have had them brought to him, but he felt he owed them the courtesy of showing up on their turfs. Especially after not letting them plead their case for the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises.

He started with Commander Kadmus, of the Griffon Scouts, since he was close to the top of the tree.

It took him a few minutes to make it to her floor, which was designed like stables, where a dozen griffons were currently being tended to, and a few more empty stalls that were cared for.

He assumed these riders were on patrol, but it didn't matter. He wanted to talk to Mary Kadmus, not her troops.

He found her caring for a Griffon, whose feathers and fur were a silvery-grey, instead of the brownish beige of the others.

Its size was also slightly larger than the others, his piercing eyes already locked on him as he approached the stall.

"Commander Kadmus," Astaroth said, announcing himself.

The woman turned her head, noticing the king, and went back to brushing her griffon.

"Yes, Your Majesty?" she asked, foregoing the usual etiquette.

But Astaroth didn't care about things like etiquette, anyway.

"I wanted to have a conversation with you, in private, if possible. Can you make time for me?"

Mary turned to face him, rising to her feet and setting the brush aside.

"I was about to take my Griffon out for a ride. Can you take the sky with me? He's been restless in his stall, and he gets violent when left in there too long, so I can't postpone."

Astaroth looked at the Griffon and assumed that it wasn't pretty if it suddenly went on a rampage.

"It is not a problem. But how will we talk, if all we hear is the whistling wind?"

Commander Kadmus chuckled before walking to a stable hand nearby.

"Saddle Silverwind for me, boy. I need him ready ASAP."

The stable hand nodded his head swiftly before skipping off toward the stall. The large Griffon cawed at the running stable hand, forcing him to slow his pace, but nothing more.

Mary walked to a shelf near the far end of the floor and pulled out a drawer. From it, she pulled out two small black things, one of which she threw at Astaroth.

Astaroth caught it deftly and looked at it. He recognized the object.

It was an earpiece.

'Well, shit. A magic Bluetooth. I'm impressed.'

"We'll hear each other fine, with those, Your Majesty."

Astaroth nodded, sliding the earpiece into his right ear.

But he could already tell by Mary's smug face that this would be more than a simple ride. She had a look of vengeance burning in her eyes.

'This is going to be interesting...'

Chapter 638 Aerial Supremacy

In a matter of minutes, the massive Griffon had been saddled and was now rearing to take off. Commander Kadmus had pressed a sigil on the wall that had opened it up like some kind of fake barrier.

A gust of wind rushed into the sixth floor, sending Astaroth's long hair flitting around him. He could tell they were at the top of the tree by the lack of branches blocking the exit.

Mary jumped on her Griffon, giving a stern look at Astaroth, before sending the beast galloping out of the opening, wings beating furiously as it took off the ledge.

Astaroth ran behind her, simply jumping off the platform, making the stable hands shout in panic, before he rose above the level of the platform, wings behind his back.

He quickly caught up to the commander, who was flying off toward the north.

Astaroth could feel the cold numbing his limbs as he flew away from the tree palace. But it wasn't as bad as he had expected.

But that thought wouldn't last, since the commander directed her Griffon upward, sending it piercing through the clouds.

Astaroth followed suit, passing through the misty clouds, feeling the water vapour in it cling to his clothes until he was above them. The sun in the sky was high above, with no more clouds impeding its shine.

The view was breathtaking.

Astaroth noticed something, though. The air was very thin at this height.

He quickly used some wind magic to send some oxygen into his lungs before it started making him dizzy and scrutinized the sky for Commander Kadmus.

He couldn't find her, either because she was still inside the clouds, or she had used something to cloak herself. But a tingling sensation on his back suddenly put him on high alert.

A whistle in the wind caught his ear from above, and he looked up. The sun's glare blinded him temporarily, but he knew he needed to move.

With a quick flap of his wings and a burst of wind, Astaroth slipped sideways five meters, and a silver blur flashed where he had been.

Astaroth growled, before tapping the earpiece on his ear.

"Commander! What is the meaning of this?!"

He heard a chuckle in response, along with the whistling wind, before Mary's words reached his ear.

"The sky is our domain. Ours, the Griffin Scouts. You speak of regiment power, but you forget that the conditions of battle were never in our favour, to begin with, my king. The Sentinels wouldn't last a minute against my Griffons and their riders if given the right battlefield. And I will show you why!"

A piercing screech echoed in the sky, and Astaroth knew Commander Kadmus had just sicced her Griffon on him.

But instead of feeling threatened, Astaroth only felt elated.

He tapped his earpiece again.

"You think the sky is your domain, Commander? You are mistaken. Everything in, above, and under these lands is mine. I will show you why you don't challenge a dragon with a bird!"

Releasing the earpiece, Astaroth reached into himself.

"Shegror. I know you have settled in. Now is the time to answer my call. Show this arrogant bird who truly rules the skies."

Astaroth felt the eagerness of the dragon rise inside of him, as an enormous chunk of his mana sapped away.

Summoning Shegror was much more costly than any other soul companion. He assumed it was because he was borrowing power from a still-alive being.

But he had mana to spare aplenty, so he couldn't care less.

A guttural roar echoed through the clear skies, pushing away some clouds under him with sheer pressure. The dragon he took power from may only be a fledgling, with a low level, by draconic standards, but it was still a dragon.

Silverwind, Mary's Griffon, suddenly jerked away from his direction, having been revealed by the parting clouds, and screeched loudly.

The Griffon reacted on instinct, to a creature who was by all accounts above it on the food chain. But with a few soothing words from its rider, Silverwind circled back, keeping its head now locked on the massive, black dragon.

Astaroth heard his earpiece activate.

"Where in the nine hells did you get a black dragon?! I thought they were extinct!"

Astaroth snickered before tapping his earpiece.

"Does it matter where I got it? It matters only that I did. Now, we could battle it out, and prove who deserves to call the sky their domain, or you could put away your pride and listen to the offer I came to give you.

"I won't be mad either way, but someone will get hurt if we fight. I doubt you want to injure your partner for something as petty as pride."

The only sound that cut through the following silence was the whistling of the wind, and the flapping of three sets of wings.

Astaroth heard a sigh in his earpiece, and he knew he had touched the right chord.

"Fine, Your Majesty. I will listen to your offer. But it will be in the air, where I feel most at ease. My Griffon still needs his exercise."

Astaroth tapped the earpiece.

"That is fine by me, Commander. I will fly with you, but I will send the dragon away. I don't want to send the kingdom into a frenzy at the sight of this apex predator."

Astaroth turned his head to Shegror, who was expecting an attack command.

"Go hunt in the mountains to the north. Try not to hurt anyone who isn't a monster. Can you do that?"

Astaroth heard a loud huff in his mind.

'Who do you take me for, mortal? I'm a dragon, not some stupid wyvern or wyrm. I'm smart enough to know the difference between monster and person.'

The dragon beat its wings once before looping down into a dive through the clouds. It then disappeared into the distant north, its beating wings getting further and further.

Astaroth flew closer to Silverwind and its rider, giving out a smile.

"After you, Commander."

Chapter 639 Deals Made, Preparations Begin

After an hour of aerobatics and racing, Astaroth and Commander Kadmus returned to the tree palace. Both of them seemed in a good mood when they landed, and the commander even saluted the king as he left her floor.

Silverwing chirped at him happily, apparently friendly toward him now.

Astaroth left the floor smiling from ear to ear.

'One down, one more to go.'

Commander Kadmus had vehemently agreed with his proposal once she heard the entirety of it. Even if they didn't consider her regiment for this year's Inter-Alliance Military Exercises, he guaranteed that taking his offer meant they had a legitimate shot the next year.

Of course, Astaroth didn't tell her about the bet he had going on with Commander Alena. But he didn't need to tell her, since he was sure he would win his bet, anyway.

But now, he still had to go to Commander Levine.

Going down to the third floor, where the man had his office, Astaroth strolled directly into it. Rodney Levine, Commander of the Royal Guards, was in the process of filling in some paperwork and only heard the footsteps once Astaroth was a few steps away from the desk he was at.

"Commander Levine!" Astaroth blurted, trying to catch him off guard.

"Take a seat, Your Majesty. I just need a moment to finish these dossiers, and I will be right with you."

The commander seemed unfazed by Astaroth's sudden shouting and kept his eyes glued to the stack of paper before him.

Astaroth pouted a bit as he sat in one of the two chairs on his side of the desk and waited patiently for the man to finish what he was doing.

It only took a few minutes before the commander put down his quill and smiled at Astaroth.

"What can I do for you, my king?" he asked, his smile stretched wide.

Astaroth frowned a bit.

"You don't seem mad. I was expecting a bit of anger, since we denied you the exercises this year, commander."

But Rodney waved his hand dismissively.

"Surely you jest, King Astaroth. I know my troops better than anyone and know that we are not up to a true regiment's standards yet. Finding strong recruits is a lot easier said than done, after all. My goals are for a quality regiment, not a quantity one. So it takes more time to form. But maybe next year, we can live up to your expectations."

Astaroth paused, looking at the man with renewed respect. This was a man who knew where his strengths and weaknesses lay.

"If only Commander Kadmus had seen it your way, it would have made for a much easier discussion," he sighed.

"Oh? You went to see Mary first? She was fuming when we left the throne room earlier. I hope she held the due decorum in your presence."

Astaroth chuckled.

"She did not. But I don't care about it much. I talked to her and got her back in a good mood, so I'd say it's a win."

Rodney smiled again, nodding his head.

"Then I presume there is a reason for you to visit my office, instead of calling for me, Your Highness?"

"Ah, yes. I came to talk to you about something. The same something I discussed with Commander Kadmus. I believed it was better for me to meet each of you in private, and under circumstances that made you feel at ease."

Rodney leaned back in his chair, propping his elbow on the armrests.

He made a quick sign to one guard at the entrance of the room to close the door, and a heavy silence engulfed the room as it shut.

"We may speak freely and be sure that no one hears us now. What is it you wanted to discuss, my king?"

Astaroth started spewing his spiel, as he had done with Mary, only a few minutes ago, immediately catching the commander's interest.

It was far easier to convince him than it had been to convince both Mary Kadmus and Alena. This reaffirmed Astaroth's belief that Rodney was the better man for the job of commanding the royal guards.

He was reasonable and logic driven. His emotions didn't dictate his thoughts, and he was always on top of them.

Those were noble traits to have when your whole duty was to protect a king and queen.

It took mere minutes for Astaroth to explain his thoughts, and the deal he offered, to which Commander Levine immediately said yes. The man looked overjoyed at the prospect of this deal, and what it meant to all the parties concerned.

After leaving the office, Astaroth now only had to prepare for the next day. And the preparations would not be small by any measure.

He sent a private message to Phoenix, saying that he would see her outside the game in a few hours, and quickly made his way to the hidden passageway down to under the palace.

Once he reached there, he walked up to the small dais and activated his Perfect Mana Sense. It was the first time he activated it down here, and now he understood why Aravelle said this was an important space.

The thickness of the mana present in the air was incredible!

Looking around him, Astaroth could see the particles floating around like glowing dust in a sunlit room. They were absolutely everywhere.

Astaroth could feel the massive source of Aether below his feet, which was only a few hundred feet under him.

Reaching out with his mana sense, he could see the Ley lines in his mind, as clear as day, and feel their power.

The Aether that ran through the Ley lines pulsed slowly, like a heartbeat.

Oomph oomph

Oomph oomph

Astaroth stood there for a few moments, letting the slow pulsing enter him, and calm his mind into a state of quasi-trance.

He sat down on the dais, right in its center, where the Ley lines crossed paths under him, and reached down with his mana to connect to it.

The surge of power that coursed through him as he connected to it was like a wild river, trying to rush him away. But, simultaneously, it set him in such a zen state of mind, like nothing else in the world mattered.

The conflicting feelings tugged at his mind, trying to gain traction, but Astaroth emptied his thoughts.

"I don't want to control you. I just want to feel your power and let it guide mine," he muttered.

As if it heard his words, the raging torrent of Aether calmed down, turning into a silent and still pond. The beating pulse echoed around him, like droplets of water falling on the pond, far away from him.

Astaroth could already feel the mana inside him refining itself on its own. He smiled to himself.

This was what he came for.

Chapter 640 Finding A Pass Time

Astaroth had a feeling that being so close to a source of Aether would send his mana into a frenzy. Just like magnets always trying to slam back together, his mana would want to refine and return to its source.

With this in mind, he wanted to use this environment to refine his mana lobe, and make himself more powerful, while he still had some time. He only had a few hours left before him, before he needed to head out of New Eden, so he intended to use them fully.

Meanwhile, outside the palace, Phoenix was peeved she didn't have her partner to play with but still knew what to do to pass the time.

She calmly exited their room and directed her steps toward the training floor that Leon had mentioned to her. She was curious about how it functioned and what was possible inside.

Reaching the sixth floor swiftly, she saw the old gnome behind his desk, scrutinizing something out of view in front of him.

Phoenix walked toward him, her heels clattering on the wooden floor, which caught the gnome's attention. He raised his eyes from whatever he was staring at, and they widened in surprise.

"My queen! What a day it is! I should count my lucky stars. Both the king and the queen pay these old bones a visit, on the same day! How auspicious. What can I do for you, Your Majesty?"

Phoenix's brow raised at the mention of Astaroth's passage, but she brushed the questions in her head aside.

"I wanted to see how the training floor functioned. Maybe get a few hours in it, as well?"

The gnome frowned a bit, his eyes going back to the back of his desk.

"Um... The room is currently in use, my queen. I can have it vacated if you wish," the old man said, rubbing his hands together nervously.

But Phoenix didn't want to piss off anyone in there.

"Oh? Is it in use right now? Can you tell me who is in there?"

The gnome's face relaxed a little.

"Why certainly, your highness. The three commanders of our army are currently in a sparring session of the most impromptu nature. And they seem to be going at each other's throat with vehemence."

He laughed nervously, looking down again.

Phoenix understood he was probably watching them spar through some means and went around the desk to get a look. And she wasn't wrong.

On a small projected square, they could see the inside of the training floor, with currently three people and one Griffon locked in a heated battle.

Sword strikes, scimitar flourishes, beak and claw swings, and arrows flew across the simulated plains. Crimson blood dyed the ground red when strikes connected, and valiant roars of resolve echoed.

"Isn't there a danger of wounding themselves if they fight with such violence?" she asked, worried that the commanders might kill each other.

"Ah, no worries, your majesty. All the damage taken inside the training floor is only simulated, as is the pain. Their bodies are totally fine once they leave. That is why the training floor is so popular. The fighters can train in all seriousness, without risk to their lives. Of course, the pain is all too real, and getting hit or losing a limb is all but pleasant."

Phoenix hummed in satisfaction.

'So a virtual reality. Very much like we thought this world was, to begin with. Interesting.'

"Is there a way to add a person to their session mid-way?" she asked, eyeing the old gnome with a knowing gaze.

"Why certainly. All three of them came at different times and requested to join the others. So adding another person is no issue. I would only need to warn them and reset their simulated bodies."

Phoenix grinned.

"Then, in that case, warn them and send me in. I will finally be able to gauge their strength by myself."

The gnome's face paled at the request.

"You mean you want to join their session, my queen? Isn't that a bit... barbaric?"

Phoenix looked at him with a chortle.

"I think you misunderstand how my people are, my good sir. Abnormals love being barbaric. I am not an exception."

The gnome gulped nervously.

On one hand, he wondered if he would be in trouble for sending the queen to the training room, where she could very much feel the pain of her injuries.

But on the other hand, he felt ecstatic at the chance of seeing the queen battle with his own eyes.

Talks about the king's propensity for violence were not uncommon. But the queen had always displayed a facade of calm and collectiveness.

He also could hardly say no to the monarch.

With the press of a button, the current actions of the commanders halted, and the room went from a plain to a dark-filled space.

All three commanders looked upward, where the gnome's face appeared to them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your session, sir, ma'am, and ma'am, but someone would like to join you in there."

Commander Kadmus clicker her tongue.

"Which fool dares interrupt the commanders' sparing to join in, tell me, gnome?!" she shouted, discontent.

The gnome opened his mouth to respond, his face suddenly white as chalk, but he was shoved aside. And Phoenix's face replaced his on the display.

"This fool. I believe I have all the rights to interrupt you, don't I, Commander Kadmus?"

Mary's face changed from a scowl to a face of fear.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty! I had no idea! Yes, of course! It would be our honour!" she blurted, lowering her head and slamming her fist into her leather armour over her heart.

Phoenix giggled.

Her face left the display, as it also disappeared, but not before they heard her voice in the back.

"Send me in."

Phoenix appeared in the center of the dark space, her magnificent dress already changed for her red mage robes. In her hand, an ornate wand adorned with a ruby at its tip.

She grinned at the three commanders.

"Pick the battlefield. I want this to be a challenge."

Rodney stepped forward, his face showing confusion.

"I'm sorry, my queen. A challenge? What do you mean?"

She smiled at him viciously.

"I mean, I want to test all of you. And I want it to be challenging. Pick the battlefield, one where you can work together, and come at me like I'm trying to murder the king."

All three of them fell deathly silent.