

New Eden 651

Chapter 651 Two Pump Chump

Looking at each commander in turn, Astaroth watched as they all smiled, tacitly accepting his challenges, and walked into their respective portals.

Astaroth turned his head to the mage.

"Have the portals opened for each regiment as well?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Each regiment is already entering their respective portals and getting ready for battle."

The mage looked more excited than himself, and this almost made Astaroth laugh.

Facing the still shimmering portals, Astaroth raised his hand parallel to the ground.

'You guys know what to do,' he said mentally to his companions.

Three orbs of white shot out of his chest, as well as an orb of red from his hand, entering the portals before him. Two of them into the sky blue portal, and two of them into the gray portal.

The portals closed as soon as everyone who should have been inside the training pocket dimensions had entered. This left only the dark green portal open.

Luna appeared beside him since she didn't need to be summoned anymore, now that she had a body.

"Is this one for us, papa?" she asked, her little head tilting to the side.

"Yes, Luna. Once we get inside, meld with me, and we need to eliminate everyone inside the area as fast as we can. Can you do that with me?"

Luna nodded her head, a smile appearing on her lips.

"Then, let's go!" he said, jumping into the portal.

Luna followed immediately behind him, and they felt the swirling sensation of the portal taking them somewhere, before reappearing inside a forest.

In the distance, through the thick canopy, Astaroth could see the rising tree that was Bastion City's center.

He grinned, as Luna's power washed into him, changing his appearance into the androgynous one he now got from melding with her.

"Royal Protection," he whispered.

His power, which had already multiplied manifold, rose again, shooting way past his normal power level.

A few miles away from him, Commander Alena was getting her troops into formation when she felt a massive surge of power coming from the western forests.

Some of her men almost directly fainted from the sudden pressure, and her face paled.

"What in the fuck is this power?!" she blurted out.

Had she misread the situation? Was the king not being cocky?

"No. That can't be. It must be a subterfuge," she mumbled to herself.

She reformed her panicking regiment, reasserting control, and started giving out orders.

But they were in for a rude awakening.

Alena felt a tingle on her nape, and she reacted instinctively. Raising her sword behind herself, she felt something slam into it, as she shot into the ground below her, eating dirt and grass on impact.

Her body hurt all over, and she could tell her sword arm was in awful shape.

Jumping to her feet, she also noticed half her health was gone.

"What the fuck!?"

"Your reflexes are very impressive, commander. Unfortunately, you only delayed the inevitable by a few seconds."

Lifting her head toward the incoming voice, which was familiar yet unknown, she saw a person floating in the air where she had been, with a clenched fist still steaming from the friction of an impact.

The impact on her sword.

"King Astaroth?!" she asked, confused.

Astaroth disappeared from the air, reappearing behind her again. He wasn't teleporting, but just moving much faster than her eyes could follow.

Astaroth stretched out his leg in a kick, but instead of hitting the commander, a thick golden veil appeared between his attack and its intended target. The blow shattered the shield but gave Alena enough time to back away, slipping just out of reach.

"Men! On me! Take him down!" she shouted, retreating behind her charging Sentinels.

Astaroth snickered to himself.

'Good. Smart move, going behind them. But not nearly enough cannon fodder to protect you from me.'

Raising his hand at the incoming soldiers, Astaroth smiled at them. The next moment, a cone of white light, the size of a building, flashed out of his extended hand.

And with the white light disappearing, so did the soldiers in its path.

Of course, it wasn't a large enough attack to take everyone out, but its power was unmatched.

And Alena was already sweating bullets in the back, having dodged out of the beam just in time.

A part of the forest in the beam trajectory had vaporized, trees, roots, and ground gone. All that in a mere second.

The commander looked at Astaroth, who was grinning back at her from afar.

"Scatter! Flee! Whoever survives five minutes, I will promote!"

Astaroth heard her command and wanted to laugh.

Stepping in front of her again, he flattened out his hand and swung at her neck.

Her head lobbed upward, severed from the neck.

Before she disappeared, Astaroth whispered her a few words.

"Good thinking. But this is not a game of cat and mouse. I will raze this forest to the ground, Bastion City included, to win this."

The calm with which he said those words sent a shiver of terror down Alena's spine as she reappeared outside the portal, back in the training floor's office.

The old gnomish mage was watching displays, a bag of snacks on his legs, and his expression filled with glee.

"Welcome back, Commander!" he shouted to her, keeping his eyes riveted to the displays.

Alena couldn't believe how easily he had taken her out.

"Enlarge the displays. I want to see the rest of the fights. All of them."

The mage shook his head.

"No need, Ma'am. The three simulations are already being displayed in the throne room. If you make it there fast enough, you can catch the beginning of your own match. He made me delay the display by a few minutes."

Alena cursed at the words.

'He's mocking us. How many people is he going to show this to?'

She hurriedly sprinted toward the throne room, taking a shortcut through the fifth floor.

Rushing into the Sentinel's' mainstay, she shouted to the druid, "Throne room! Now!"

The man barely had enough time to pick the pillar she was heading to and input the portal command before she slammed through it.

But when she reappeared inside the throne room, half expecting all the councilmen and new nobles to be present, she instead only found an empty room, with Queen Phoenix lazing on her throne.

And before her, three white screens, with nothing shown.

Phoenix raised an eyebrow at Alena's presence.

"Come. Sit next to me. The fights haven't started yet. You will get to see how your troops fare," Phoenix said.

Alena's stomach dropped.

'How much did he plan? How did he know he would win this fast?'

Chapter 652 Revealing Their Origins

Phoenix was just as surprised to see Alena, as Alena was to see the broadcasts hadn't started yet. To her knowledge, the commander should have still been in combat against Astaroth, right about now.

But something told her it was better to not broach the subject yet.

As Phoenix was about to ask how Alena's day was going, the three screens lit up. Each screen showed a vastly unique landscape.

On the screen to the right, a vast blue sky, with clouds passing by lazily on the lower part of the screen, could be seen. And in the middle of the screen, a group of twenty Griffons, riders atop them, were flying in formation.

On the screen in the middle, a view from the top of Bastion City dominated the screen. And from that view, a clearing was visible from afar.

In this clearing, throngs of soldiers were getting ready, with a person floating in the air above them. One glance from the side of her eye, and Phoenix could tell who that was, and why she was there so quickly.

On the last screen, to the left, a dense jungle came into view. In the middle of this dense jungle, a large group of soldiers in grey armour were escorting a palanquin with closed curtains.

At the head of this contingent, a large man was riding a white horse, on which some ornate battle harness reflected the little light piercing through the canopy.

Phoenix recognized Rodney Levine, sitting atop that horse, and smirked.

"Is that what his mount looks like? I haven't seen him ride it ever since we've come back. How ostentatious of him."

A flash of light caught Phoenix's attention, back on the middle screen, and she focused her gaze there. And when she saw what it was, she sighed heavily.

"He played like that... How ungentlemanly. He could have at least let your men get ready for him," she grumbled.

Alena eyed the queen with suspicious eyes.

"Did you know?" she asked.

"Hm? Know what?"

"That he was this strong?"

Phoenix giggled at the question.

"I understand how you haven't seen us in 10 years. But I ask you this, commander. We got this land and kingdom by beating the creatures that were controlling it. That includes Leon. And days later, we fell under siege by thousands, if not tens of thousands of players, or Abnormals, as you call us. Have you not understood by now that some of us are potentially much stronger than normal adventurers?"

Alena looked at the queen with conflicted eyes. It was normal for her to think the way she did.

After all, the Natives trained for years, only to gain a few levels and become slightly stronger.

Yet, ever since the king had come back, a few weeks back, he had already progressed leaps and bounds. She could say the same about Queen Phoenix, who had taken on the three commanders the day before.

Their fight might have been much more balanced, in a three versus one scenario, but that was far from flattering.

"Why do you need an army, if the abnormals under you can all become this strong?" she asked the queen.

Phoenix scoffed.

"My dear, if all the players in our guild could be remotely as strong as Astaroth, we wouldn't need an army. But the fighting level at which he combats isn't something so easy to achieve," Phoenix said.

She leaned into her seat, looking at the screens for the two other combats. The middle one had already lost its appeal, given it was now just Astaroth hunting down mice.

"Look at it this way. Most of us are still getting used to being this strong. You, the Natives, grow up and gain in power slowly. You get used to your power level, as you live with it constantly. It's not the same for us."

Alena looked at the queen with attention.

"The world we come from... It doesn't have mana. It's a world where humans are prevalent, but where power is determined by wealth and status. Not the strength of your body or magic. Even the strongest of men in our world wouldn't last a second against Astaroth in this one."

"You mean to say that everyone is just a regular person? No mage? No powerful fighter? But how did you tame the beasts that roam the land? How did you establish a civilization?"

Confusion was apparent on Alena's face.

But Phoenix smiled in response. She tapped the side of her head.

"By using our wits. The human race is very good at adapting to most situations. We are also great at imitating the things we see through technology. Maybe in a few millennia, the humans in this world will have done the same. Imitated magic through science."

Alena scoffed.

"They have been trying for centuries already. I doubt they could achieve any progress."

Phoenix clicked her tongue.

"Don't dismiss us so soon. The adaptability of humans on your side might be lower, given some of them can access magic. But where I'm from, our creativity knows no bounds. Just look at how we fight. The way we process information. It's nothing like the Natives."

The commander agreed with that statement. A lot of the tactics she had seen the Abnormal adventurers use were uncommon and esoteric. But she had seen nothing that defied a certain logic.

"I don't understand what you meant earlier. You said it wasn't the same for you. How so?"

Phoenix smiled again.

"Let me ask you something. Would you believe me if I told you that Astaroth only learned magic a few months ago, in our perception?"

"Hah! I wouldn't believe those as words of a sane person. He is using concepts far over his apparent age already."

"Then what about me?"

"I believe you are a prodigy of magic, my queen. Blessed by the world itself."

"Yet, it is the truth. We have to adapt to a curve of power much steeper than yours, in a much shorter time. And I believe we have only seen the start of it. Who knows when we will disappear again? Or when we'll come back. How many years, or decades, will have passed then?"

This gave food for thought to the commander, who fell into thought and ignored the two other combat screens altogether.

'If they grow this fast, how strong can they become?'

Chapter 653 A Dance In The Skies

Phoenix had already focused on the screen to her right, where some movement caught her attention. A massive black blur had just flown into view, and next to it, a minuscule by comparison pitch-black bat, fluttered quickly to keep pace.

The griffons, who were many a mile away, all noticed the giant silhouette piercing through the cloudy cover under them. And screeches echoed through the clear skies.

Screeches of both fear and declaration. A declaration that they would chase out the intruder to their open domain, which was the skies.

But Shegror wouldn't let them declare this without responding.

A guttural roar left its throat, threatening the Griffons and their riders. The skies were not theirs.

They were hers.

Morpheus could hardly join in this threat, but that didn't deter the bat from claiming a part of the rights to fly for itself. A powerful pulse of mana left Morpheus' mouth, expanding in every direction like a growing bubble.

And everyone caught in it who wasn't an ally, suddenly felt their sense twitch strangely, before going back to normal.

The first pulse of Dissonance affected very little of them, which was not surprising, given the higher origin of griffons and military training of their riders.

But the threat was still plenty.

They couldn't ignore the bat. That would spell disaster.

Phoenix watched this screen with attention, only glancing occasionally at the other two screens. The middle screen, which showed the Sentinels challenge, had already almost come to a close.

Astaroth was an efficient hunter since he learned to expand his mana sensing over long distances. And the Sentinels were all decked in at least one magic item, which, unbeknownst to them, had been what the king locked on to hunt them.

Their readiness for combat would have been their downfall.

On the screen to the left, the advancing contingent had slowed down considerably. They seemed to be suddenly on high alert.

This made the screen of the Griffon Scouts' challenge the most interesting one.

But something was missing from it. The copy of Astaroth was missing from the screen.

This was strange, given it was a copy from him during the siege, and he hadn't discovered Sky Steps or the demons that allowed him to fly at that time.

So where was he?

That was a question that soon found an answer when the two forces suddenly began an aerial ballet.

Coming out from between the black dragon's claws, the small Elven form of Astaroth launched at the closest Griffon Rider. In a matter of seconds, he knocked the rider off the back of his partner and sent tumbling down toward the ground.

Morpheus dove out to catch the rebounding Astaroth, who had kicked off the Griffon's back, and with his clawed feet, he grabbed Astaroth's hands, swung, and shot the Ash Elf toward the enormous black dragon.

The Griffon that had lost its rider suddenly dove to catch him, prioritizing its partner's safety over itself, and it cost it.

Shegror lost no time diving after the beast and snapped its gigantic maw on it, bisecting it immediately, as it burst into particles. As soon as the rider crossed the cloud cover, followed suit, and burst into pixels.

But Commander Kadmus was not stupid. She immediately understood what the king's copy was trying to do.

"Keep distance. Switch to harassing tactics. Crossbows out!" she shouted.

The Griffons and their riders immediately spread out, making the battlefield suddenly expand, and Astaroth's tactic become useless. But even as a copy, he wasn't one to give up.

Since he couldn't force them to break out of formation anymore, he would try something else.

Pulling on the tether that connected him and Morpheus, Astaroth yanked the bat back into himself before melding with it. But he wasn't done.

The Griffon Scouts and their commander didn't hear the next words that came out of his mouth, but Phoenix did.

And with a smirk, she switched her attention to the left screen.

Alena, who had been deep in thought, heard the ruffling of the queen's dress and snapped out of her musings.

She noticed the queen wasn't observing the ongoing combat on the right screen and began frowning.

"Is that much action not interesting to you, Your Highness?"

Phoenix laughed softly.

"On the contrary. It was quite captivating. But the combat is as good as over. Astaroth's copy stays within his pattern of thought. And he just used the skill that he used to wipe out both you and your regiment."

Commander Alena frowned deeper, her attention locking onto the screen to the right. A wave of blue energy erupted out of Astaroth's winged body, and the Griffons started falling like flies.

She thought they were diving to get closer to him at first. But the erratic descent quickly showed her the truth.

Both beast and rider were out cold and falling uncontrollably.

Whatever skill King Astaroth had just used, he had overwhelmed their minds, and they passed out instantly.

Only a few Griffons and riders didn't immediately fall to their doom. But their lack of reactions got them caught in one of the dragon's acid breaths, and they melted away like butter in a hot pan.

At that moment, as the screen to the right was shutting down, Astaroth also took down the last of her men, who were hiding the best they could, and ended the challenge on their side as well.

That was two overwhelming defeats. Both of which took less than three minutes.

As for the last one, whose screen now expanded to take up the space of the two others, there were suddenly fewer soldiers escorting the palanquin.

"Where are the rest of the royal guards?" Alena asked, since she hadn't been paying attention.

"Got killed by a trap," Phoenix responded, keeping her focus on the screen.

Alena remembered the king had specified there would be traps. But not what kind.

She focused on the last display, and as she did, the sound from it reached her ears.

"Royal Guards! Regroup! Don't let that shit happen again! Keep your eyes peeled, and your senses on high alert!" Commander Levine shouted, trotting closer to the palanquin.

Whatever had happened, most likely took them by surprise.

Chapter 654 Guarding Duty

Inside that simulation, Rodney was sweating bullets. The trap that had just sprung had hit so close to the palanquin that, a few feet to its left, and it would have swallowed it whole.

That would have been an instant failure.

Even with his senses already on high alert, he hadn't felt the trap until a few seconds before it sprung. This didn't leave him any time to warn his soldiers.

But Rodney knew he wasn't at the end of his troubles. A few moments before the trap had sprung, he had felt the intense glare of a powerful enemy on him.

The timing of the trap hadn't allowed him to pay attention to the direction it had come from, and this made him nervous.

'Where the hell did it come from? How many are there? What are they? What will they target first?'

Questions blazed inside his mind, to which he had no answers.

Although Rodney usually kept a cool mind and maintained logical thinking in times of crisis, this situation was different. The prize on the line for this challenge's success was putting untold amounts of pressure on his mind, and he was losing his cool.

The men and women under his command were also insanely nervous.

Some of them had also felt the same glare as their commander, and they were trembling slightly. This was the pressure of a stronger being, pushing down on their minds.

Their advance significantly slowed down as they fell into high alert, watching for traps and watching for monsters.

The rustling of leaves in the surrounding forests made them twitch. The cracking of branches made some archers shoot arrows into the thickets, only to be met with silence.

Something was stalking them. And by how the directions of sounds were all over the place, it was not just one enemy.

Rodney was unsure whether the king had arranged simulated monsters, or if he had sicced some of his summons on them. But one thing was sure, they were threats.

Genie and White were using the tether to Astaroth's soul and mind to communicate with each other and were enjoying the hunt. Their tactic at this moment was to wear the soldiers' minds down.

Doing this made them more susceptible to mistakes, and with the traps on the road, it would be fatal.

Both of them knew that Commander Levine was more than capable of taking them on alone, so they couldn't just rush into the fray while he still had so many men under him. It would be suicide.

Astaroth had tasked them with testing this man's mental fortitude and ability to protect his quarry. And they intended to do just that.

The minutes crawled by, like snails sliming their way forward, as time seemed to stretch in the nervous soldiers' minds. And a few hundred meters from the first trap, the road reminded them they needed to focus.

The first trap had been a sudden pitfall. The second one, which popped from the forest itself, had caught a few unsuspecting guards.

Poking out of the forest with insane speed, dozens of vines, animated with a will of their own, latched on whatever was closest to them, dragging the soldier back into the forest, where their screaming lasted only for a few seconds, before subsiding.

Rodney lost six more Royal Guards to this sudden vine trap and cursed under his breath.

His regiment was not the smallest of the three, but also far from the biggest. His fifty somewhat Royal Guards had already dwindled to less than thirty.

At this pace, he wasn't sure he would reach Bastion City. The massive tree's bough, which he could still see in the distance, wasn't getting any closer.

His mind strayed to his fellow commanders, wondering how their challenges were going. But he promptly shook the thoughts away.

He had no time to think about them. His own chances for glory were on the line.

Rodney might not have been hungry for glory, usually. But when the chances for it suddenly dance right before your eyes, only a fool wouldn't try his best to grasp it.

A tingling sensation on the back of his neck alerted him to danger, and his focus became razor sharp.

A sudden spike in mana came in from the left, and he could tell what was coming.

"Every down! Mages, protect the palanquin!" he shouted, jumping upward of his steed.

There was nothing he could do to save the horse here, as a massive wind blade sheared through the contingent, cutting everything in its path.

Luckily for his soldiers, Rodney had been quick enough to sense it, and the blade only took two soldiers, who had frozen in surprise and couldn't get down in time, as well as his horse.

The three mages he had in his regiment reacted promptly and erected a sturdy barrier around the palanquin, with themselves inside, and watched as the wind blade crashed into it, making it flicker before the offensive spell vanished.

But their troubles weren't over.

Two more wind blades rushed out of the forest, all from the same direction, this time in a cross pattern, gouging out the earthen ground on its path.

Rodney couldn't let them hit the barrier. He immediately understood the three mages wouldn't be strong enough to hold the attack back.

With his shield raised, Commander Levine rushed in between the attack and the palanquin, blocking it and slamming his shield into the ground to keep himself from getting pushed back.

The wind blades shattered after pushing against him for a couple of seconds. But he could feel this wasn't over.

"Everyone around the palanquin. Something is after us."

"Yes, sir!" the guards shouted, getting to their feet and encircling their quarry.

They would be damned if they let their commander down.

But when howls began echoing through the woods, a shiver ran up everyone's spine.

Throngs of dire wolves started sauntering out of the woods, their maws drooling, and their throats rumbling with growls.

Ten wolves.

Twenty wolves.

Fifty wolves.

And then came two much larger ones, whose glare made some soldiers immediately tremble in fear. They recognized the pressure.

Even the commander felt uneasy.

'So this is the real challenge, huh? Well, it's good to know he at least gave us a chance...'

Chapter 655 Much Needed Rest

The next minutes were a massacre. The wolves outnumbered the guards under him two-to-one, and were of the same level as them, too.

The pack tactics of the beasts made quick work of them, and the fewer soldiers remained, the more wolves ganged up on the guards.

The commander held his own against Genie and White, although not without taking some damage, but they quickly overran him, as well.

The moment he fell, and burst into particles, he reappeared inside the training floor, where the old gnomish mage was clapping his hands.

"Wonderful! What a glorious way to go out! Swinging with the might of ten men! How wonderful!" the gnome shouted, clapping his hands like a groupie.

Rodney wasn't in the mood for this and saw himself out.

He met Mary in the stairwell, where she was sitting on a step, her gaze empty.

"How bad was it?" he asked her, stopping next to her.

The commander, caught deep in a daze of her own making, barely looked at him.

"At first, we were an equal match. Then he showed us why he was king... To think I thought the queen was a monster yesterday..."

Rodney looked at her with empathy. He knew what she meant.

He kept walking toward the bottom floor, letting his feet guide him as his mind replayed the last fight of the simulation.

He had been a close match for the two ginormous wolves. At some point, he even thought he could win.

But then he started getting nipped at the heels by the dire wolves, and his chances dropped like a stone in a lake.

'To think he controls such beasts and can fuse with them, to gain their strength... We misjudged his power... Maybe this was his way of reminding us?'

Rodney let his thought wander, as his body dragged itself toward the throne room, where he knew he would find the king and queen waiting for him.

Reaching there, the doors opened for him, and he let himself in.

On the dais where the thrones were, two people smiled at him as he entered.

Astaroth, who was back on his throne, his face looking worn and tired. And Phoenix, who seemed proud of something.

At the bottom of the dais, on her knee with her hand to her chest, Commander Alena.

He copied her posture and clamored something close to what she had said moments before he entered.

"King Astaroth. I humbly accept this defeat and promise to train and get strong enough that I shall no longer know such shame. I swear my eternal loyalty to you."

"As do I!" a voice echoed from the entrance of the room, where Mary Kadmus had just burst into the room.

She rushed toward her two peers and knelt.

Astaroth smiled genuinely at them, his eyes heavy with exhaustion. He was still reeling from using Royal Protection.

"Thank you. All three of you. It warms my heart that you finally accept me as your ruler, without conditions or afterthoughts. But in the shape I am right now, a child could beat me into submission, hehe.

"How about we reconvene in a few hours, get some rest, and comfort the soldiers that their defeat was nothing shameful?"

The three commanders looked at the king and nodded. He indeed looked like he was about to pass out.

So they sprung to their feet and excused themselves.

It was a good idea to take their men and make sure they weren't scarred for life by this humiliating beat-down.

The Sentinels' commander especially knew how badly her troops had suffered. Soldiers were proud people.

Being ordered to flee, and then getting hunted like wild game, was not something easy to overcome, mentally. She knew she had a lot of work ahead of herself.

She would have to not only reinstate their pride and courage. But she also needed to make sure she trained all her troops enough that the same thing didn't happen in the upcoming Military Exercises.

If this had happened on the continental scale of the exercise's broadcasts, she would never recover from that shame.

The same could be said about the other two commanders, who had to motivate their regiments into a positive loop of training and expansion.

It was a tough journey ahead, to prove their worth for the exercises of the following year.

They couldn't let the Sentinels hog all the glory, could they?

As all three of them left the room, Astaroth sighed tiredly.

"Hehe. You really shouldn't abuse that power. It makes you weaker than a level-one monster," Phoenix teased him.

"I know. But did you see how strong it makes me? I could probably take on a dungeon on my own if I could stay in that state long enough."

Astaroth's mind filled with images of him clearing out dungeons in solo, and his heart filled with glee. Of course, it was a fantasy, and nothing else.

He knew Khalor took on dungeons solo, but with his legacy skills, giving him access to an army of undead, it was hardly solo.

Astaroth wondered how strong the dick had become, and how he would fare against him in PVP. But it was not something Khalor would accept.

He was too busy with his planning and scheming to want to give the time of day to anyone. Which he and Phoenix were mostly fine with.

Having someone who wasn't a team player in a guild was a lot of trouble.

Keeping him at arm's length was better for everyone concerned.

With the room cleared, Astaroth and Phoenix rose from their thrones, the latter helping the former, since he could barely stand on his own two feet, and they went to the back room.

In there, Astaroth could rest away from the eyes of his subjects.

It wasn't long before he returned to normal and was ready for the next order of things for the day.

"Alright. We should call this Dilya over. And the Adventurers' Guild's master, Singing Grove. We still need to convince them both to let Dilya work directly under us."

Phoenix sighed at the task ahead.

She had dealt with Singing Grove before. It was no easy feat to get her to talk.

'I hope she is more loquacious with him than she was with me...' she sighed internally.

Chapter 656 Infiltrator In The Palace

Phoenix sent for the two women they wanted to meet, but it wouldn't be before a few hours that they would be here. So they could attend to other issues in the meantime.

Like who would they send the invitation to, for their second spot in the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises?

"I think we both know who we should send it to... But I'm not sure we should give them that much more advantages over other guilds. It feels like favouritism..." Astaroth said, with a sigh.

Phoenix agreed. But this put them at a bit of an impasse.

It's not like they had other kingdoms that would work under them at the promise of this chance. Or another guild willing to bend to them, in exchange for the clout this would give.

"Should we try selling the invitation to one of the top guilds?" Phoenix asked.

"Eh. That gives a chance to Aces High, and I don't want that prick to get that chance."

Phoenix giggled.

"We don't have to entertain his offer at all. People might call it being unfair, but that's none of our concern. We get to pick who goes, regardless of their thoughts."

Astaroth scratched his chin.

They were back inside the throne room discussing this, where no one could interrupt their thoughts.

"Maybe if we sell it, we can use those funds toward incentives to gather more recruits?" Astaroth proposed.

"Or I can give you a better alternative," a voice proclaimed from the shadows.

Astaroth immediately pulled out his weapon and summoned his companions.

"Who are you, and how did you get in here?!" he asked, ready to tussle.

"Blue Peacock..." Phoenix said, with a bit of venom in her voice.

"Phoenix. Long time no see," Blue Peacock said, walking out of a dark recess in the throne room.

But Astaroth couldn't give a shit less about who this was.

"You didn't answer my question. How the fuck did you get in?"

"Calm down, little king. I've been trying to infiltrate your palace for weeks. It was a chance this morning, when all your guards and patrols were suddenly off doing something at the same time. It gave me the easiest access I have ever had, into a very much guarded place like this one."

Astaroth cursed himself. He knew the patrols had almost emptied because of him. Even if the adventurers' guild had taken on a bit of this burden for gold, their cover couldn't be as good, since they didn't know the palace as well as the Royal Guards or Sentinels.

"But I'm not here to cause trouble. As a matter of fact, I came here with a proposal, and hearing what you two were discussing, I think my timing couldn't be better. How about we have a chat?" Blue said, sauntering up toward the summons.

Genie and White lowered their stances, growling and drooling, while Luna already had miniature moonbeams charged in her little Ash Elven hands. Shegror was in a form Astaroth had never seen, that of a woman in a black and green robe, while Morpheus had perched on the throne behind him.

Phoenix put her hand on Astaroth's arm, shaking her head no. He called back his summons, albeit reluctantly, but kept his weapon out.

Blue Peacock kept advancing, reaching the bottom of the dais, before Astaroth raised his sword.

"Take another step and lose your head. You're close enough."

Blue Peacock smiled wide, her eyes closing in the process.

"My my. Aren't you a cautious one? Fine. I can say what I need to say from here. No need for threats."

"Alright, talk," Phoenix interjected.

"You have five minutes. If in five minutes I'm not interested in what you came to say, I'm letting him have his way. And I don't think you want that."

Blue Peacock grinned as her eyes turned to slits while looking at Astaroth.

"Oh, but I might. I'm always up for an enjoyable challenge. Alas, I have already lost a lot of time by trying to get into the palace. So I would prefer to get this over with quickly."

Astaroth let his magic aura seep out, anger rising inside him. Blue Peacock immediately felt the pressure.

But it did not deter her. She had seen more imposing people before, both in and out of New Eden.

"Kowai," she teased, her grin still stretched wide.

"Anyhow. I came here to offer an alliance between our guilds. Not unlike the one you forged with Knights of the Sun. I was wondering what we could offer in exchange, but you served me my answer on a platter.

"What if I were to win these 'exercises' you were talking about? Of course, I am ready to buy this chance off of you, if just my loyalty isn't enough of an offer."

Phoenix eyes her warily. She had known Blue Peacock for a while.

She also knew what the woman was, outside of her gaming career. Allying herself with her was not without risks.

"How much?" Phoenix asked.

"With my loyalty on the line, I won't offer higher than five. I believe that is a reasonable offer. The services of my guild are usually quite pricey. Getting them for free is already a massive offer in itself."

Astaroth was eyeing the woman's every move, making him unable to follow the complete train of discussion happening.

"Five what?" he asked roughly.

Blue Peacock looked at him and chuckled.

"Why, five million, of course. Transferable in full right now, if you take my offer."

The old Astaroth would have dropped in awe at the amount. But not the current Astaroth.

"Five million is a paltry sum, compared to what we could get from other guilds. You're saying your guild's services are worth that much? How am I to believe you?"

Blue Peacock smiled at him and pulled something out of her inventory.

The sudden movement caused Astaroth to raise his sword again, but he interrupted his movement as something flew at his face.

Catching the projectile, a rolled-up scroll, Astaroth frowned.

"What is this?"

"Proof of how effective we are. Consider it a freebie. A gift, of sorts, to show our goodwill."

Astaroth opened the scroll, taking only one eye away from her to look at its contents. And then he gasped.

'Holy fuck!'

Chapter 657 New Cards In Hand

Inside the scroll were many names and numbers.

Guild names and coordinates. Coordinates to their bases.

Over fifty different guilds, and their bases, were exposed in this scroll. And under those pieces of information, were also the location of a few of their claimed dungeons, their level, and their location.

With this scroll alone, Astaroth could send so many guilds into dire straights. These were not top guilds, but they were big ones.

Using this info, he could send the small guild coalitions on a hunt, and change the power structure of New Eden's guilds effortlessly.

"You don't have the info of top guilds, right?" he asked, his eyebrow cocked.

"Little king. Even if I did, I wouldn't hand them out so easily. Some of them are my clients, and I am an honourable spy," she teased.

What Astaroth had in his hands already impressed Phoenix. But something was bothering her.

"Why are you coming to us? You always allied yourself with one of the triumvirate, in the past. Why ally to an upstart like us?"

Blue Peacock turned her gaze to Phoenix.

"Isn't it obvious? I follow power, Phoenix. And right now, you hold power. I would be a fool to go towards my usual partners. Although, I must say. You also did already grab one of them under your wing. Isn't that alone a good reason?"

Phoenix didn't like her simple explanation. Nothing was ever this simple with this woman.

"Of course, I came prepared. Here is a first draft of an alliance contract. Change it to your heart's content, and then send it back to me, so we can establish something that pleases the both of us," Blue Peacock said, throwing another scroll, this time, to Phoenix.

Phoenix caught it with her left hand but didn't open it.

"I'll look at it. If it suits me, I'll consider it further. For now, you should leave. We have people coming, and finding an intruder inside the throne room would be bad news for you," Phoenix said flatly.

"Thank you for the warning. I will be waiting to hear from you," Blue Peacock said with a grin.

She sent a friend invitation to Phoenix before stepping back into the shadows.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out!" Astaroth shouted, glad she was leaving.

He wasn't sure how to feel about how easily a person had infiltrated into the palace. Even if it was a player that was well known for getting into the toughest of places.

With how common PKing had become, this was very bad.

What if an assassin somehow got in and got the drop on him, or Phoenix?

Yes, they would respawn.

But with their levels, this was a bad outcome, regardless. It would hurt their reputation, and their strength, and give a massive boost to the opportunist.

'We need to get some security measures in place. I don't want to get stabbed in the back while I'm taking a walk in the halls,' Astaroth mused.

Phoenix had waited a few moments, after Blue Peacock's departure, before opening the scroll, which contained the draft contract. Her eyes narrowed as she read.

"She went heavy on the quill when she drafted this. It's so skewed in her favour, it's a guaranteed loss for us. I'll have to let Brienne have a look at this..." she mumbled, mostly to herself.

But there wasn't time right now for this. It would have to wait for later.

A knock at the door brought them out of their musings and forced them to stow the scrolls into their inventories hurriedly.

The guards at the door, who had come back to their post, announced the guests.

"Councilwoman and Guild Master Singing Grove, and Adventurer Dilya Naemenor, Here to see the monarchs!"

"Let them in," Astaroth responded, rising from his throne.

He didn't want to speak to them in a heightened position, and instead magically pulled the table and chairs from the side back to the center of the throne room.

As the two women walked in, Dilya ramrod straight and sweating nervously, and Singing Grove as silent as always, Phoenix smiled and greeted them.

"Ladies. Thank you for responding to our summons so fast. Please, have a seat."

She motioned to the table, where Astaroth had already taken a seat.

He had taken a seat on the right side of the table, instead of at the tip, to signify his intentions to talk openly, instead of formally.

Phoenix sat next to him, and the two women sat on the opposite side.

Singing Grove eyed Astaroth silently, as he felt an almost imperceptible wave of mana wash through him. He said nothing, not wanting to start the meeting on an unpleasant note, but the slight frown he pulled alerted the fairy to his knowledge of her action.

She dragged her gaze away from him, eyeing Phoenix instead.

'I almost didn't feel that. How proficient does she need to be that even I can barely feel her scan?' he silently wondered.

It tempted him to scan her in return, but he abstained from it. Maybe someday, but not now.

He needed her in her best mood if she was ever to say yes to letting Dilya work under them.

Looking at the young Elven woman, Astaroth had to school his emotions, because her pale complexion and nervous fidgeting almost made him chuckle. She was so stressed, he could feel it from across the table.

Phoenix tried soothing her.

"Do you want something to drink? Tea? Wine, perhaps? Or just water?"

Singing Grove shook her head slowly, while Dilya twisted her hands on her lap.

"Maybe some tea? Something calming?" she muttered, almost too quiet.

"Of course, I'll have some brought. Please, Dilya, there is no need to be this nervous. We only wish to talk."

This didn't appease the girl's emotions in the slightest.

In her mind, she was in trouble. Why else would the king and queen call her in here, along with her guild master, if not for punishment?

Even though she had heard that the monarchs were friendly, she still was wary. It wasn't just anyone that got called into the throne room to meet their lieges.

It wasn't until the tea arrived and got served that she started calming down.

And once she had calmed down enough to entertain a conversation, Phoenix took the lead.

"Now that everyone is at ease, let us get to business, shall we?"

Chapter 658 Grass Cut Under Her Foot

Singing Grove seemed almost disinterested in the whole affair and was laid back in her chair, her eyes almost closed. Astaroth knew this was about to change, though.

"So, Dilya. We called you here today because we have an offer to make you. And we called the guild master because she must also approve of this," Astaroth started.

This statement alone made the Guild Master raise a brow and made the Elven girl shrink even more.

'What could a king and queen possibly want from me?' she wondered, her mind filling with angst.

Phoenix took the torch from there, and leaned in, propping herself on the table with her elbows, clasping her hands together.

"We would like you to become a commander for a magic regiment we intend to form. You came highly recommended by the three current commanders, and they said they would love working with you.

"You would work directly for the kingdom, and wouldn't have to go on dangerous adventure runs if you accept. Of course, you would be free to relinquish the role at any moment, give you elect a replacement for yourself, and your freedom would not be otherwise restricted.

"What say you?" she asked, at the end of her sales pitch.

Singing Grove, who had been laying back and relaxing, was now alert and invested.

She looked to her right, at Dilya Naemenor, and wondered what the girl would say to this. As the guild master, she was wholly against losing this precious asset.

But she couldn't force her to stay, either.

At best, she could offer large incentives to try to change her mind. But the moment she did this, there was the risk of devolving into a bidding war with the kingdom.

Even though the Adventurers' Guild was a massive organization, they were each tasked with controlling their branch's budget on their own.

So she wasn't that wealthy to begin with.

Dilya looked to her left, noticing the heavy gaze of Singing Grove, and her shoulders drooped a bit as her heart rate sped up.

She could hear the darned thing beating in her ears and feared the others could hear it, too.

Astaroth kept a composed face, even as he watched Dilya's ear tips turn red from the quickening blood flow. He could hear her heart thumping in her chest, with his heightened senses, and knew she was nervous as hell.

So he threw out an additional incentive.

"Working under us may sound like a tedious job, but I can assure you it is not. My intention with the kingdom is to lead it into being a pillar of resistance against the encroaching demon forces.

"Some day, it might even be the last kingdom lasting, gods forbid, and for this, I will need the troops under it to train, constantly, to become powerful. That will include sorties and contractual aid to other nations. Which means you won't stay locked inside the palace, doing boring paperwork"

Dilya looked at the king, and his words echoed in her mind. As an adventurer, her goal had always been to travel the world. She had only stopped in Stellar Woodlands to take missions and make money before heading on the next leg of her journey.

So the offer of going out of the kingdom to help other nations was an enticing one.

And Singing Grove could see her eyes change.

She knew she had to act now or lose the asset.

Astaroth watched as Singing Grove opened her mouth to speak, for the first time in his presence.

"You don't have to answer them now. I'm sure they are willing to give you some time to think this over, Dilya, my dear."

Her soothing came as a surprise to Astaroth, who had expected her voice to be icy, for some reason. But her words were obvious to him.

She wanted to get the girl to back away now, so she had time to convince her back in the guild buildings.

Fortunately, Astaroth was ready for it as well.

"This offer is not something that you should take lightly, and I agree with Lady Grove, that you should take some time to think on it. But I can also offer you a trial run. Give you the position temporarily, and let you experience what it is you will have to do.

"And once the trial is done, let's say, three days, you can give me your definitive answer. If you don't wish to take the position, then no harm is done, and you can go back to the Adventurer's Guild, with no consequences coming your way.

"This would be a no-strings-attached trial. And at any moment, if you don't like it, you are welcome to tell us and be on your merry way. But after the three days, a decision will have to be made. What do you say? Are you interested in that?"

Singing Grove almost seethed at the king. He worded this in such a fashion that he seemed like a good guy.

But she could see through it. This would give her three days around him, and away from her, cancelling out any way for her to entice the girl to stay in the Adventurers' Guild.

His ruse surprised her. And it impressed another person at the table.

Phoenix, who had discussed this matter a bit with him beforehand, had warned him of the tricks Singing Grove might try to buy time. But she was certain she would have to deal with this.

When Astaroth took things in hand, his shrewdness astounded her.

She sent a quick private message to him.

'Nice going. You make me feel a certain way when you take charge like this.'

She sent a wink emoji, as well, to drive her point home.

Astaroth read the message and had to focus on not coughing or becoming red-faced.

Singing Grove's mind was spinning at full speed, trying to find a way to counter his offer.

But before she could open her mouth to speak, Dilya's voice interrupted her train of thought.

"I will take the trial. You assure me there will be no repercussions if I dislike it?"

Astaroth smiled warmly.

"Of course! No strings attached. Just you trying out the post and deciding for yourself if you want to work for us. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Then I'll take it!" she replied, a smile stretching on her face.

Singing Grove clenched her fists under the table.

'Shrewd little king. We'll have a talk later,' she thought to herself, making her face into a smile.

Chapter 659 Fated Day

The day was still young and with all these things off of Astaroth's and Phoenix's schedule; the pair wondered how they would fill the rest of it. Astaroth thought about going to the training room, but there wasn't much that appealed to him, now that he had wiped the floor with his entire army.

So, instead, he and Phoenix held a few meetings, with the council members, the guild in town, and even with their available officers, of which they invited RedWing, for his first official meeting.

They used this occasion to fit him under an officer, officially forming the first division inside their guild.

Phoenix hoped they could use this model fully, in due time, and have a well-structured guild. But there was much work to be done.

After all their meetings, Astaroth contacted the last officers, who weren't present, to give them an update on the situation.

Khalor hardly cared and simply replied with 'Ok.'

As for the others, they also gave the leaders a status report of their activities and their whereabouts, keeping them in the loop.

Silent Light was off wandering the continent, making sure he helped wherever he needed to. He told Phoenix he was on a mission from his god, and she didn't ask for more details, assuming he meant he had found a class quest.

Astaroth was the one to talk to Gale, and the little boy seemed to have gone over a part of his demon trauma experience. But he still was unsatisfied with his strength level and said he would be back once he reached a satisfactory level.

Astaroth could see Gale's name on the level leaderboard, in the top fifty, and he knew the kid wasn't talking about that level. It had a deeper meaning.

But he wouldn't pry. Gale's decisions were his own, and as long as he answered the call if they absolutely needed, which he had promised to do, then he was free to act as he wanted.

As for I'die and Athena, Phoenix was the one to take the news from Athena, and once she was done conversing with her, she had a smile floating on her lips.

"Did she have some good news?" Astaroth asked her.

"Huh? Oh. Nah. She found the island she was looking for, but the legend was a dud, it seems."

Astaroth gave a short frown.

"Then why are you smiling like a teenager?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing!" she chimed, before prancing away.

Astaroth shook his head with a chuckle. He couldn't fathom the workings of a woman's brain.

Phoenix and he decided to log off early that night. The weekend was coming in fast, and Astaroth had a busy Saturday ahead of him, apparently.

Phoenix hadn't pried too much on what the business was when he received a call from Katherine Bellemare. She assumed it had to do with the business he had told her a while back.

Phoenix wasn't too hot at the idea of Astaroth rushing into a war zone, but she could hardly change his mind. Every time they talked about it, his face darkened, and he would grow cold.

Recently, ever since the last dungeon, he was easier to anger, and when he got cold, even the surrounding air seemed to be affected.

But he never aimed it at her, or any of their friends, either online or offline, so she just took it as him getting more defensive about his loved ones.

But Astaroth knew it was more than that. He had also noticed the change.

Unfortunately, since he could see inside himself, he knew something deeper caused the change. His soul now sported a much larger blot of black on the side of it.

He had already tried a few times to fix this, but it didn't budge. Astaroth just knew he would have to live with it.

Logging off, the pair took a quick shower and breakfast, before the intercom rang.

Picking up the call, Alexander saw the face of the receptionist smiling at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Leduc. I have a chauffeur here for you. Were you expecting someone?"

Alex smiled back at her.

"Ah, yes. Tell him I'll be right down. Thanks for the warning."

He hung up quickly as the woman nodded her head with a wide smile.

When he spun to look at Kary, she had a worried look on her face.

"Please don't get yourself killed. You tend to take on more than you can handle lately, and it's becoming a dangerous habit."

Alex smiled at Kary warmly, wrapping his arms around her. As he gave her a big hug, he kissed her on the neck.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. It's just a few thugs. I'll be back before the end of the day, with as little blood on me as I can. I promise."

Kary punched him lightly in the ribs for his stupid comment, but still returned his hug. As she tightened her grasp around his waist, she could hear his heart thump calmly.

He wasn't worried in the slightest about his upcoming task. This reassured her a bit.

"Then stay as safe as you can. And give them hell."

She kissed him on the lips and pushed him toward the door.

Alexander climbed onto the elevator, pressing the lobby button. He smiled and waved at Kary as the doors closed.

Once the doors were closed, he kept smiling to himself, remembering there was a camera inside the elevator.

He couldn't let Kary worry about him, so he had schooled his face into the most genuine fake smile he could until he got off the elevator.

But the man who exited the elevator was not the warm and smiling Alexander. His face showed calm hatred, and even his body language was exuding pressure.

"Have a good day... Mr... Leduc..." the receptionist said, at first in a chime, and ending in cold sweats.

She watched him leave the building, silent and resolute.

Alexander didn't notice it, but when he walked past the spinning door, slight cracks appeared in the reinforced glass, due to his mana leaking out of his body.

Alfred, who was waiting for him outside, saw his face and became alert. He had seen this face before.

It was the face of a cold-blooded killer. Not the face this man usually showed.

Even he was slightly shaken by it. But he said nothing and opened the door for the young man.

His job was to drive him to his destination, not question his motive.

Chapter 660 Reaching The Op-Site

As Alfred drove off the island of Montreal and onto the northern shore, toward the burgs, he kept throwing glances at Alexander in the mirror. But the young man simply looked out the window and remained silent.

He decided to cut the silence before they reached their destination.

"You know, son. There is no need for you to get involved. We have a team ready and don't need to get you involved. Even if Mr. Bellemare said you should, I can tell him you did, while you wait in the car."

Alexander looked into the mirror, his face stoic.

And with a loud sigh, he replied.

"Thank you, Alfred. Your words mean a lot. But I am not letting anyone go in there aside from me. This is my mess to clean, and my payback to get. You and your men can stay outside."

Although he sounded genuinely happy that Alfred had offered him to stay back, his face still displayed no emotion. It was like an alabaster mask, still and cold.

Alfred didn't know what had caused the young man to become so cold and comfortable ending lives. He knew this wasn't the first time, but it also felt different.

Like something was stretching thin within his character.

"Very well. Have it your way, son. I won't stand in your way, and my men won't either."

Alfred didn't want to let his men anywhere near someone with this look. Even though he had been to war, and his men had seen dark shit, killing should always bring sorrow.

One should not take lightly to reaping a life. They weren't gods, after all.

Who were they to decide who lived and who died?

Once they arrived close to the domain in which the Bianchi residence was located, the car stopped behind a large black bus, surrounded by small black vans.

"We're here," Alfred said.

Alexander nodded before opening the door and stepping out of the sedan. He looked around, seeing the gate not too far ahead, and started walking towards it.

A woman in military gear saw him walk past them and called out to him.

"Excuse me, sir! This area is off-limits right now!"

The young man didn't even turn his head to look at her and kept walking. So another of her colleagues stepped in front of the young man.

"Hey, boy. The woman said the area is off-limits. Walk away, while you still can walk on your own two legs."

Alex stopped and glared at the man. His eyes dug deep into the mercenary's soul, as if trying to reach the confines of his being.

Alfred stepped out of the car at the same time. But before he could tell his men that Alexander was cleared for the op, Alex's arm slammed into the man, knocking him aside like a baseball off a bat.

The other mercs started raising their weapons, and pointing them at Alex, yelling at him to get down on his knees, until Alfred shouted, "Alright, that's enough! Everyone stand down! Now!"

He looked at Alexander as he said this, as it was also directed at him.

"I thought you said your men wouldn't get in my way," Alex said, his tone icy.

With a sigh, Alfred responded, "You didn't give me time to explain the situation to him. Get on the bus, son. We have images to show you before you barge in."

Alex sneered in impatience but did as Alfred asked. He owed him that much respect.

The mercenaries all lowered their weapons, looking at the young man with a tinge of fear. Especially the one that had been knocked off his feet so easily.

Even with his gear on, he felt the blow, like someone had slammed a metal pipe into his abdomen while swinging from a moving car. He wasn't sure if he hadn't broken a rib, with how the pain in his chest was pulsing.

Alexander climbed onto the bus, followed by Alfred, where they found a multitude of screens on one side, with half a dozen techies working their hands away on their keyboards, in a symphony of clickety-clacks.

At the end of the bus, working on a small laptop, her eyes zooming from left to right, was Katherine Bellemare.

Alex paused for a second.

"Why are you here, Katherine?" he asked.

Alfred elbowed him in the ribs as he passed next to him.

"Ahem. That's Ms. Bellemare, for you. Have some respect."

Alexander glared at him, but did nothing, as Katherine raised her hand.

"Let him be, Alfred. As a friend of the family and someone who doesn't work for us, he can call me by my name."

Alex grinned at Alfred as the old man scoffed and sat down in a free chair.

"Can I get an answer to my question?" Alex asked.

"Yes, in a moment," Katherine replied, her finger raised.

She droned on her keyboard like a madwoman for a few more seconds and then closed the top.

"There, all done. To answer your question, Alexander, I am here to help you. You can consider my presence to be akin to your master key inside the Bianchi residence. I will make sure no door bars your way, and that no system boots up to keep you from reaching your destination."

Alex looked at her with a cocked eyebrow.

"Then what are these guys here for?" he asked, pointing at the techies.

"These gentlemen and women are here to make sure the grid in the entire domain doesn't come on and ruin our secret op. They will scrub all traces of us ever being here on the network, and a cleanup crew will make sure no physical evidence remains afterward, as well."

The preparation was so complete, from what Alex could garner, that it seemed highly unlikely that this was a first-time occurrence for her.

But he wasn't about to barge into her business.

"Then why did you need me in here? If you have all planned, can't I just barge in and fuck shit up?" Alex asked.

Katherine shook her finger sideways, clicking her tongue like chiding a child.

"Young man. You can't just barge into a secure location and 'Fuck shit up', as you say. Planning is an important step in any operation."

Alex chuckled lightly, feeling his body relax a bit at a thought he had.

"I would love to introduce you to Kary. I feel like the two of you would hit it off instantly."

Katherine smiled at him while walking toward the front of the bus where he stood.

"Clear the main screen for me, Timothy," she ordered the tech at the front-most of the bus.

"Yes, Ma'am," he chimed while tapping a few keys rapidly.

After he pressed enter, the large screen overhead of the techies turned black, and then, on it, appeared some plans. Blueprints to the mansion of the Bianchi family.

"Let us get started, shall we?" Katherine said, smiling at Alexander.