

New Eden 681

Chapter 681 Quantity Is A Quality

Astaroth swung his sword from much too far away, making Titania frown for a single moment before it suddenly grew longer and wrapped around her.

And as he flew past her, Astaroth used the momentum to send her into a spin, using his weight, and the speed he moved at, to turn her into a sling.

With a quick twist of his wrist, the whip sword retracted into a blade, and Titania was sent flying off uncontrollably, tumbling across the air.

Titania tried catching herself but was far from fast enough, as another projectile flew at her, one filled with Aether.

The Fey felt as if time itself had slowed in her mind, as she saw an enormous blue spear, made of compressed fire, flying directly at her abdomen.

She could not react in time, as it slammed into her before exploding outward. The flames engulfed her, and the area surrounding her into a blue inferno.

Phoenix, from a distance away, grinned at the column of fire that rose into the sky.

"Finally, we hit you," she mumbled.

Shortly after the demons had started their onslaught, Astaroth had sent her a message in the party chat, explaining what he thought about the woman.

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"I think Lady Grove, sorry, Titania, is an agility-based fighter. Her mana and health are high, but not enough to compare to either a mage or a true brawler. Her speed is the problem. We are going to need to swarm her if we want to stand a chance. I know she will worry about me the most, so we will have to really on your firepower to deal damage. I'll create opportunities with my demons."

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Phoenix was glad he was finally getting a good sense of tactics, even if that was barely an outline of a plan. She could build on this basis and make a battle plan that would at least give them a chance.

But their opponent wouldn't let them just pile up on her.

After the initial burst of fire, Titania corrected herself, and landed on the ground. The flames were hurting her, yes, but not as much as her pride was hurting.

'I underestimated them. No more.'

She flashed out of the pillar of fire, a sonic boom clapping, which was a signal for Astaroth to act again.

"Sabnock! As many imps as you can!" he commanded.

"Ronové! I need you to make the ground as hard to traverse for her as possible. Confine her to the sky." He then ordered Ronové, who stood next to him.

Both Marquis nodded in acknowledgement.

They wouldn't have too much trouble finding the Fey, as Paimon was still following her with her eyes, and sending the location information through her mind to all her underlings.

A torrent of imps started coming out of a large portal, which Sabnock had opened. This was his army, and the portal didn't connect directly to hell, but inside him.

Astaroth looked at the battlefield, following the trail of death to try to see where Titania was. She was moving much too fast for him.

Near him, Andromalius did not know what to do. His powers were ill-fitted for combat, especially against a single opponent, whose mind seemed like a steel wall to him.

Not far, Ose was having a similar thought, after her many attempts to breach into Titania's mind had no result.

They stuck close to Astaroth, in case they could at least sacrifice themselves for him, giving him more time to fight. But, other than that, they felt useless.

On her side, Phoenix was waiting for the next opening.

She could see approximately where Titania had been, but not where she was or where she was going.

The Fey seemed to be razing through the battlefield aimlessly.

Titania was mowing down the obnoxious little imps and tried to reach the weaker demons, to get rid of them. But they always seemed to move away from her, like they knew where she was.

Feeling a gaze locked on her, she understood this was Paimon's doing.

'You aren't fast enough to follow me, but that doesn't mean you can't observe me, I see. Time to fix that.'

"Mist Blades, activate."

As soon as she muttered those words, a cloud of thick fog erupted from her swords, covering the entire battlefield. It became impossible for anyone to see anything relying on their eyes.

But as the demons, Phoenix, and Astaroth started expanding their magical senses, they realized something else.

The fog was also thickly laced with mana!

It was like they were swimming in mana. To most, this made piercing it incredibly difficult, as their mana senses almost immediately reflected to them.

Astaroth was better off, as his perfect mana sense made him capable of piercing through the fog for a few metres. But not far enough to get an excellent overview.

But as soon as he felt Titania's presence cross into his coverage, he sent the coordinates to the demons through the ring.

But she was already gone.

"She's toying with us..." Astaroth growled.

He noticed a strange thing as he said those words. He barely heard them.

Trying to speak again, Astaroth realized the fog was blocking more than just their sight. It was also blocking their hearing.

The battlefield had become eerily silent, with no one hearing much of their own words, let alone the Fey that was running around, taking down demons like picking flowers.

The fog held for ten seconds. But as it disappeared, Astaroth gasped.

Before him, where there were once eight demons and several thousand imps, almost nothing remained.

Paimon was wounded, with her two Marquis in terrible shape next to her.

Phoenix was too far away and was unaffected.

The two dukes and three counts were dead. No more imps remained, as their blood was already draining through the strange multicoloured sand.

Titania looked at the few remaining threats and grinned.

"It has been a long time since I could go wild. I thank you both for this chance. But the farce has gone on long enough. Time to finish this.

"Fey Queen's domain; Death in Dreamland."

Chapter 682 The Deadly Domain

Astaroth felt a powerful ring of Aether expand outward, but it was too fast for him to react. As it passed through him, he heard a notification.

Condition detected: sleep. Mind Over Body activated. Success. Error. Domain detected. Calculating player's willpower versus domain creator. Player is too weak to resist the domain. Mind Over Body overridden.

At first, Astaroth was about to grin since he resisted it. But the second part of the notification made him frown.

'A domain? What is that?'

He felt his body become like lead as his mind went black. And when he woke up, he was back in the real world.

He was in his kitchen, at the kitchen island, enjoying breakfast. Kary was next to him, and they were talking.

But the words spoken were all unclear, like spoken through a closed door. It was strange.

Then someone entered his penthouse, stepping off the elevator. Their face was blurred out.

'What in the hell is happening?' he wondered.

He felt a hand grab at his collar before it hurled him through his patio glass doors and over the balcony railing.

Astaroth felt gravity take him toward the ground, and struggled to meld with Morpheus, or even Asmodeus, but nothing was working.

'Is this how I die?'

As his thought ended, he slammed into the ground, before waking up again, now in a hospital bed.

He was still injured, his body covered from head to toe in bandages. He tried recalling what had brought him there, but his mind was all fuzzy.

'What the hell is going on? Where am I?'

His body once again moved on its own, like he was just a spectator to his own life, and he rose from the bed. His legs brought him to the door, where he exited into a large area with a desk at the center.

At the desk, many nurses were cowering in fear, as a young man about his age and an old man were having a discussion. Around the old man, five large men in suits were looking around, scanning the place.

When he walked forward, the young man pointed at him, and said something, of which Astaroth only heard 'There' and 'Him'. And right as the words were said, the old man raised his left hand, before all the guys in suits pulled out submachine guns and sprayed him full of bullets.

Once again, his sight went black before he woke up somewhere else.

This went on and on, without Astaroth knowing how many times he had died and woken up anymore.

But on the outside of his mind, his body was still standing, his eyes whited over, as his shoulders slumped forward.

As soon as he had fallen asleep, his Legacy Skill had stopped, and the demons had vanished, whatever little of them remained.

Now, Titania was simply smiling as she looked at Astaroth's and Phoenix's health drop in large lumps, as they died over and over again, inside her dream domain.

Occasionally, she would also stab or slash at them, just for fun. Phoenix was already close to dying, her health pool much smaller than Astaroth's.

Titania could have ended this at any moment, by ending their lives while they couldn't move. But she was enjoying her little payback.

And since this was a training room, she knew they were both safe. So why not take this moment of bliss and let it last?

Outside the room, the gnome was watching this, his breath held, wondering if another upset would happen, and the monarchs would turn this around.

Soon enough, Phoenix's health dropped to zero, and her body exploded into pixels before she reappeared in the training room.

She looked at her hands, her mind reeling from what she had experienced, and her body started shaking. Her breath became ragged, and tears went up in her eyes.

Although she was safe, her mind had just gone through so many deaths that it was still in shock.

'What a terrifying power,' Phoenix thought in fear, as her body shivered.

It took her a minute to regain her senses, and she noticed Astaroth was still not present. She knew he had more health than her, but she hadn't thought that Lady Grove would let it take so long.

She rushed over behind the gnome to look at the screen. He was eating some kind of nut mix, his eyes glued to the display.

On it, she could see Astaroth, body standing but slumped, as his health ticked away, chunk by chunk.

'Come on, Astaroth. Do something... I know you can.'

Inside the training room, Titania stood before the king, enjoying every jolt his body went through each time he died in his dreams. She could see what was going on, since this was her domain.

Only her domain did not create death scenarios. It only took near-death experiences and turned them into death scenarios.

And seeing how many of these the king had, it mildly impressed her.

'His life has been a rocky one. But regardless, he has seen nothing yet. It's time he learned there are people stronger than him everywhere,' she thought, as she waited for his health to empty.

But as his health neared zero, her connection to his dreams suddenly snapped.

"What the hell?"

Titania tried peering into his mind, but as she did, a golden pair of eyes stared back at her. She reeled back instinctively, pulling out her weapons before her.

"What the?!"

The eyes that had stared at her contained power. Power beyond what the king had.

Power beyond what any mortal should have, for that matter.

'Is he getting divine help?! Why would a god help him? I have to kill him now before they establish the connection and he wakes up!' she panicked internally.

Dashing forward, her two swords raised and ready to strike, she saw Astaroth's head lift, and the same golden eyes locked on her.

She didn't hear the words coming out of his mouth, but read his lips.

"Divine Domain; Soul's Judgement."

Chapter 683 The Reward Of Perseverance

Inside Astaroth's forced dream trance, he had already lost track of how many times he had died and come back. Everything had become a blur.

He relived every near-death experience in his life, all of them turning to the worst right before his eyes. And god only knew this wasn't just a few occasions in the last year.

His feelings had already dulled, and he was just going through the motions.

By now he was back to when he was a teen, that one time he fell from a tree he was climbing. He wasn't sure how the true event had gone by, and right now, he was falling head-first to the ground.

But right before he hit the exposed roots below him, the ground shattered like glass, and he kept falling. Everything around him turned to white, and gravity slowly disappeared until he felt himself floating in nothingness.

His mind slowly went back to normal, and he realized what had happened.

"What the fuck is it now? Killing me a hundred times wasn't enough? Now you want me to die of boredom?" he complained into the surrounding nothing.

Silence was the answer he received.

After a few moments of erring, weightlessly, Astaroth wondered how long it would take before his body finally succumbed.

Then a prickling feeling on his nape caught his attention, as his body spun around on its own.

And right behind him, or under him, he wasn't sure, a massive pair of eyes were staring at him. Their golden irises were shining like the rays of the morning sun, and Astaroth had to squint to look at them.

A voice echoed all around him.

"Have you given up? Is this all your mind can bear before breaking?"

The voice was neither masculine nor feminine, but it was soft. There wasn't mocking or disdain in the words.

Yet they pierced into Astaroth's chest like a knife.

"What else do you want me to do?! I can't break out. I've been completely overpowered. What can I do aside from wait to die?!"

The eyes didn't blink.

But when they shrunk fast and rushed toward Astaroth, his heart skipped a beat.

A copy of himself now stood before him, but with slightly unique traits.

The face was androgynous but square enough to be recognized as a man.

The hair was silver coloured, with speckled light blue in it, like dust.

And the eyes. The golden eyes, which looked so soft on this emotionless face, but reflected a strength Astaroth couldn't start to fathom.

But what clashed the most with his appearance were the two huge, white wings, folded on its back.

"Are you ready to give up? Are you not ready to face hardship?"

Yet again, his voice contained no judgement or disdain, but they hurt Astaroth.

The questions sounded more like a child was asking them than an adult. He didn't know what to answer.

"It's not that I give up. But there is nothing I can do. Titania has me dancing in the palm of her hands, and I can't muster the power to fight back..."

The doppelgänger before him tilted his head a bit.

"Power? Do you need power to not give up? Do you need power to fight back?"

Astaroth sighed loudly.

"It's not that I want to give up. I want to fight back. But I'm too weak as it is. And power is not something I can just pray for and obtain. It takes time..."

Astaroth's head drooped as he said those words. And when he lifted it back up, the doppelg?nger was standing mere inches away from him, his face almost in his.

"Do you want power to not give up? Do you need power to fight back?"

His words were more stern this time. The question didn't sound like one, and Astaroth felt his heart jump in his chest.

But the intense stare of the doppelg?nger told him he wanted an answer.

Steeling his resolve, Astaroth's mouth opened up.

"I want to fight back. I want to be strong enough that no one can make me or my friends and family feel this powerless ever again."

The doppelg?nger's traits softened a little as a smile found its way across its lips.

"Then I give you power."

Astaroth was about to ask him how, but the doppelg?nger moved so fast, grabbing the top of his head with one hand, and putting his other over his face, that he couldn't even react.

Then a piercing pain entered his brain, as another flood of information, runes, knowledge of concepts of magic entered his head. This one was much bigger than the one Solomon had given him, with the Legacy Skill, and Astaroth felt like his mind was melting.

It lasted only a few seconds before the doppelg?nger let go of him and disappeared, leaving Astaroth gasping for air and screaming in pain while clutching the sides of his head.

That was the moment Titania felt the connection break outside the domain.

And when she tried to peer into Astaroth's mind, to see what was happening, he felt the intrusion and his eyes burst open, glowing golden and showing power and fury.

That was the moment she realized she needed to end this before it was too late.

Astaroth's pain was gone, and replacing it was a feeling of hope. He now had something to fight back with.

From inside this white space, he could see outside, where Titania was now charging at him, weapons raised.

His mouth opened there, and outside, saying the words that had been seared into his memory, along with the runes of magic that went with them.

"Divine Domain; Soul's Judgement."

The surrounding white broke like glass, and fell into nothing, as a backdrop of eternal black replaced it. In the distance, he could see stars as a garden appeared under his feet.

Astaroth recognized this garden. He had been here before.

But now, he was looking over the vast starry expanse, and he saw a figure float towards him. A Fey, whose weapons and armour had vanished.

Titania.

Chapter 684 Borrowed Domain

Seeing her float towards him, her face a mask of shock and fear; he smiled.

Her feet touched the cobblestones of the garden paths, and she immediately dashed toward Astaroth.

But before she could reach him, an invisible force locked her in place.

She struggled for a few moments before shouting out to Astaroth.

"How did you break my domain?! And where are we now?!"

Astaroth looked around, his smile still there. Then his golden eyes locked back on Titania.

"I don't know much about this power yet. It is quite new. Thank you for that, by the way. But I do believe this is what you call a domain."

Titania knew she hadn't misinterpreted his words now.

"You are a thousand years too young to know what a domain is, let alone have one. Which divinity did you sell your soul to, to get this power?" Titania growled at him.

Astaroth chuckled.

He understood why she said this.

When the knowledge had entered his mind, he realized this wasn't something he should have at all. The power required to use this skill went beyond what he had access to, even when melded under Royal Protection, and probably even Sublimation.

A domain required one to use enough Aether to bend the laws of the world into creating a world for him, where his power couldn't be ignored.

This was not a skill he should have. He also knew he wouldn't be able to cast it again before a long time had passed, and he had become much stronger.

The doppelg?nger had left him with not only the knowledge, but also the power to cast it once.

After this, he would be left on his own to cast it again.

"It matters not how I got it. It only matters what I do with it. But I will not be too harsh on you. I understand what your goal was, and I respect it. But I refuse to lose. To anyone."

Walking slowly toward Titania, every step he took echoed on the cobblestone and made the woman twitch.

When he reached right in front of her, he slowly raised his hand.

"Sorry for the improper touching," Astaroth said, before sliding his hand in between her breasts and into her chest.

She felt his hand go in, but there was no pain.

But when he pulled it back, what she saw made her go pale.

In his hand, he was holding her soul.

The size and power he could feel from it impressed Astaroth. This woman was much stronger than she let on, even in their little spar.

"Be careful with that! You could kill me!" she shouted in panic.

Astaroth knew this, so he was handling the soul very delicately.

He knew if he shattered it here and there, he would kill the Fey, and not just in the training area. Lady Grove would die, even outside the training room, her soul forever destroyed.

He had pulled the soul without too much effort, but he knew if he ever reached this domain again, it wouldn't be this easy.

"Do not worry. I don't want to kill you. Only make you lose the fight."

And with a flick, he sent it back into Titania's chest. The flick on the soul and the impact of it flying back into place sent her mind into shock, and she instantly fell unconscious, both in and out of the domain.

As the domain withered away around him, Astaroth inspected it.

'Thank you, Psyche.'

When he opened his eyes, Titania was sprawled on the ground before him, eyes turned inside her head, as he could see foam coming out of her mouth.

There were still a few seconds left to his meld, so he used them to end the fight before he fell unconscious as well.

Switching the Ad Astra into a greataxe, he used a skill he seldom used, Severing Strike, and separated her head from her body, instantly killing her.

With this, her body shattered into pixels of light and vanished.

The next second, he was returned to the training floor, where he collapsed.

Phoenix had expected this and caught him before his body crumpled to the floor, cradling him against her chest.

She was looking at him in awe. The last moments of the battle had been so weird, for both her and the gnome.

They had seen him slumped over, health falling, and then he was standing upright, and Titania was dashing at him, only to collapse to the ground next, as he towered over her, his eyes glowing in golden light.

They had stayed this way for a moment, before Astaroth finally moved and severed the Fey's head, winning their bout.

She had no idea what had happened, but she knew it was nothing so simple as just mind control or something of the sort.

She would have to ask him when he woke up, which she had no idea how long it would take.

Phoenix called some Royal Guards over, asking them to bring Lady Grove's unconscious body to a room on the second floor, where she could rest until she came to. As for Astaroth, she brought him to their chambers herself.

It was funny for some to see the queen carry the king in a princess hold, his head and arms dangling off the side. For others, it caused a slight panic as they wondered what had happened.

Phoenix had to assure them the king was fine, and only out cold, as they tried inquiring on the matter.

She kept brushing them aside, as she had no idea what to reply. She didn't know what had happened, after all.

When she reached their room, she slowly laid Astaroth on the bed, his head sinking into the soft pillow.

"I hope you tell me everything when you get back on your feet. You just took down a Mythical being in a single attack. You may be strong, but that was beyond even you..." she mumbled to him, as she sat on the bed's edge.

If she could find a way to make a spell like he had, that could take down creatures this powerful, then she would be unstoppable.

But she doubted it was that simple.

Chapter 685 Duties To Attend To

The first one of the two to wake was Singing Grove, who jumped to her feet, not recognizing the room at first. She realized she was still inside the palace, as she had stayed in a similar room once or twice when the council was being formed.

Then, her memories snapped back into place, and she remembered why she was there. And, more importantly, who had done this to her.

It had been centuries since she was last defeated in combat, and even longer since she had lost consciousness to an enemy.

Even though she realized that Astaroth was not an enemy, per se, he had gone from an annoyance to an actual threat in her mind.

'If he grows into that power he used, we may just see the birth of a new god... When was the last time that happened? The Ash Elves?'

Her mind calmed down a bit, as she understood there was no risk in the immediate.

Singing Grove was old enough to know how the gods played their games—one of them in particular, who played this game viciously, Gaius.

The last time a new god had risen, when the lady of the stars was created, back when the Ash Elves finally separated from their oppressors, many gods had touched mortal ground, to make sure the new one knew who was at the top of the food chain.

And before her, many others had to pass through the same thing.

Singing Grove had a feeling Astaroth would not play nice if the same thing happened to him. So she wanted to at least warn him.

But then she thought again.

'What's the point? It was probably a fluke. A power spike given to him by all his soul tampering and demons. How would that kid ever become a god...'

Although she wanted to meet him, Singing Grove wanted to first get back to her office and refresh herself. Maybe even catch some rest.

She would never admit it, but whatever Astaroth had done to her and her soul, she felt completely drained.

Leaving the room, she made sure to tell the guards in front of the royal chambers that she would come back on the morrow to speak to the king. The guards saluted the councilwoman, assuring her they would relay the message.

Phoenix, who was still inside the room with the sleeping Astaroth, had heard it but chose to say nothing. She wanted to wait for the next day as well.

The day may not have been very far along, but she could also feel a certain mental drain.

'Is this caused by the domain thing she used?' she wondered.

Seeing as Astaroth was fast asleep, Phoenix decided to go back to their duties and let him sleep. There were still a few matters to attend to that day.

Nothing of major import, but nonetheless, things that required her attention or Astaroth's.

Reaching the throne room, she saw that there were a few new nobles in there, already waiting for her and Astaroth.

This was the first matter.

Phoenix walked toward the throne, her heels clattering on the stone floor, which caught the attention of the three young men and women.

"My Queen!" they saluted, bowing deeply.

The table in the center had already been removed, and they waited for her at the foot of the dais.

"Gentleman, Ladies. It is a pleasure to meet some fresh faces around here finally. Let me get seated and we shall get to this matter."

The new nobles said nothing, letting the monarch reach her seat before they stood ramrod straight before her.

Phoenix looked at them and wanted to giggle. But she kept it in.

"At ease. We are here to discuss your titles and the advantages that come with them. So let us speak plainly, shall we?"

The three young men and women relaxed a bit, hearing her words.

They waited for her to start the conversation, knowing their place.

"We have granted you the titles of baron and baroness, and will all be attending royal court starting next week, given councilman Finnegan clears you to do so. It will depend on how he deems your court manners. But I digress," Phoenix said, waving her hand aside.

"Talks about expansion have been going around in the council talks, and since the possibility is getting closer and closer, we are starting to give out titles and land. The baronies you will receive will become your responsibilities, as well as your seats of power.

"We will grant each of you gold from the kingdom's treasury, to launch your estates, as well as some residents willing to move out, to start a new settlement. With this, for the first year, the adventurer's guild will also protect your settlements, for a fee, and the members of Paragons, given you can entice them by yourselves.

"Each one of your lands will lie at the edge of our current safe zones, far from each other, so you can explore and expand at your own convenience, given you can protect your land. I know this is an enormous responsibility, but Councilman Finnigan has deemed you not only worthy, but adequate.

"Once the lands you will be granted are ready for your arrival, we will set your departure dates. Until then, you are to attend the court meetings and learn how to deal with affairs with hands-on experience. Questions?"

Phoenix could already see she had set deep anxiety into the three young nobles' hearts. Unfortunately, they had accepted the honour of the titles.

Now they had to accept the responsibilities that came with them.

Looking at each of them, she knew what each had done to earn their titles, and she approved. But she somehow wondered how they would fare once they were in a ruling position.

'I hope Edmond wasn't wrong about their characters. If he was, we'll have three additional problems on our shoulders.'

At that moment, Astaroth woke up in the rooms above, feeling like he had used all his mana, aether, and stamina, all at the same time. He felt drained.

His body was like lead, heavy, and hard to move. And his mind was like walking through a bog.

'Urgh... I won't be using that again for a long time. Now I know the difference in power between me and Mythical creatures...'

Chapter 686 Thoughts For The Future

Getting up from the bed, Astaroth could feel his body was still weak, and that it would be this way for a while.

He could feel the mana concentration in his body was much lower than usual. The skill he had used had clearly drained much more out of him than he thought.

But he still had to show a strong facade. So he straightened himself up before leaving his room.

When he pushed open the doors, the guards at the entrance saluted him, before telling him where the queen was, and that Lady Grove had said she would come back on the morrow, to speak with him.

Already, Astaroth could feel a headache starting at the thought of her inquisitive questions.

But he owed her an explanation, to say the least.

Although she had tried overpowering them with her own domain, she was only letting out steam at that point, and he knew it. He wasn't against that, either.

He also knew he had technically cheated. That skill was never his own, to begin with.

Sigh

'What a hassle. Like I didn't already have a lot on my plate...'

Astaroth walked down to the main floor, heading toward the throne room. He knew Phoenix was there, thanks to the guards, but he could also sense her and could have guessed, as well.

They had a busy day, today, and he had pushed off a lot of things by accepting Lady Grove's combat request.

He knew Phoenix would already be there, taking care of matters.

Turning toward the hall that led to the throne room, Astaroth could see the open door in the distance. And out of it came three young men and women, rushing away, their faces filled with nervousness.

He could guess who they were and expected the meeting with them to last longer. He couldn't have been passed out that long, right?

Astaroth walked up to the guards, giving them a curt nod, before turning into the throne room. There, sitting on her throne, Phoenix looked a bit disappointed.

She was lost in thought, with a scrunched-up face, and only realized Astaroth had entered the room when she heard his footsteps on the stone.

Looking up at him, her face went back to a smile.

"Ahh. You are awake. I hadn't expected you to be up so soon. I thought you'd be out for the day, at least."

Astaroth smiled back at her.

"I'm not one to skip out on responsibilities. I wouldn't have left you alone to deal with this busy day. I saw the kids rush out. Did anything come up?"

Phoenix's face scrunched back up a bit.

"Nothing came up, per se... But I'm not sure giving titles, land, and responsibilities to what are basically children is a good idea. I know we aren't much older, but I feel like we are jumping the gun."

Astaroth could feel the worry in her voice.

As he sat down next to her, he took her hand and squeezed it lightly, before caressing the top of it with his thumb.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. It's not like we are asking them to become big-time nobles now. We only want them to be ready for the kingdom's expansion when that comes up. And it will, that I'm sure.

"The Elven forests are vast, and the Elves stay clustered together. This means their lands are far from safe. Making our kingdom's territory bigger will step on a few feet, but it will ensure nothing comes out of these forests to take over the rest of the continent."

The confidence in his voice reassured Phoenix a bit. She knew the goal behind expanding their kingdom.

It wasn't to wage war. It was to make a larger safe area, both around themselves, and for the rest of this forest that took almost a quarter of the light continent.

With how the forest was spread, covering the southwestern coast of the continent, if demons suddenly popped out of it, they would have easy access to so many kingdoms that it would spell disaster.

Leon had originally been the one to suggest enlarging the safety perimeter. However, he only wanted them to patrol further.

It was Edmond Finnegan, who had suggested doing it as traditional kingdoms did, and anointing new nobles and making them deal with it. It would make their kingdom bigger and more stable within itself, and also promote natural growth.

They knew he wasn't exactly wrong. But one factor that they had no control over was weighing on Phoenix's mind.

When the next update came around. How long would they be gone from this world?

She shook her head, trying to focus on the now, rather than the later. What use was it to worry about something they had no control over?

Astaroth could tell she was regaining control over her mind as the creases of her forehead lessened.

"So! What's the next matter we need to worry about?" he asked, startling her a bit, trying to make her focus on their day.

"I think it was complaints? I had told the guards that they could open the doors to the inner city today, so we could talk to concerned citizens. And apparently, we have got quite a few lined up outside the palace..."

Astaroth was about to ask her why on God's green earth she would do that, but he remembered Phoenix wanted them to be open with the residents. It would foster good faith between them and the lower rungs of their kingdom, assuring a peaceful relationship.

Phoenix had made a point to him, reminding him how many rulers were shut out from their citizens to a point where rebellion bred in their kingdoms under their noses. So many rulers on earth had fallen to rebellions.

It was stupid to make the same mistakes.

But it meant they would have a long day ahead.

Feeling the fatigue in his bones already, Astaroth put up the nicest fake smile he could muster.

"Then let's meet them, shall we?"

Phoenix had to control herself not to laugh. Anyone would see this wasn't an honest smile.

"Just keep a straight face. You are terrible at faking a smile. Let me do most of the talking."

Astaroth went back to being serious, and nodded at her, making a little thumbs up.

Phoenix turned her head to the throne room entrance, where two guards were waiting inside.

"Start letting in the citizens."

Chapter 687 Less Order Than Expected

From that moment on, Astaroth and Phoenix barely had a moment of reprieve, as citizen after citizen entered the throne room, be it to praise or complain, in a never-ending stream.

Since a large part of the citizens were adventurers, and very few were regular people, there were not many regular people wishing to meet them. And those who did mostly wanted to see the face of their new monarchs.

The majority were adventurers, with some occasional players who had mixed themselves in, just to get a chance to meet the guild master and vice guild master.

The comments were an almost equal mix of praise from the Players and Natives, who thought the system in place was conducive to power growth. But in the complaining portion, they wanted more initiatives to be taken for regular citizens.

Astaroth and Phoenix took the time to listen to everyone, especially the ones bringing complaints, and after four long hours, they had finally reached the end of the line.

It baffled Phoenix how many regular citizens and shopkeepers complained about how rowdy the adventurer population was in the outer ring. She thought they had kept this to a minimum, since they had some royal guards patrol the outer ring as much as the inner one.

She knew there were adventurers both on the Natives' and Players' sides that were less than inclined to stick to their She knew there were adventurers both on the Natives' and Players' sides that were less than inclined to stick to their manners. She only hoped that the Players that were being rowdy were not part of their guild.

This would reflect terribly on them.

Astaroth had a similar line of thought since this was the point that stuck out the most. He didn't want what little Native residents they had to suddenly pack up and leave.

As they were left alone once more, Astaroth got up to stretch, as they had been seated for a long time. His butt was sore, and his legs felt like jello, as he rose to his feet.

"God, it's finally over!" he exclaimed, as he pulled his arms over his head.

"I never thought it would be so tedious to run a kingdom... I thought kings and queens had other people deal with this kind of stuff."

Phoenix giggled.

"You aren't entirely wrong. But I think it's better if we deal with it in the foreseeable future. We wouldn't want to create a schism between the citizens and us so early on. Leon said he would meet like this at least once a month, so the newer residents knew he wasn't detached from them. I think we should keep up this trend."

Astaroth knew she was right, and that it was a good habit. But Christ, was he bored.

"What do you think we should do about the rowdy adventurers?" Astaroth asked.

He figured Phoenix would already have a few ideas about this matter.

"I was thinking maybe we should establish a proper city guard, instead of splitting the Royal Guards thin. But it's not like we have soldiers to spare..."

She had a few ideas on how to fix that issue, but none of them were ideal.

"What about using players from the guild?" Astaroth asked.

Phoenix shook her head.

"I thought about it. But there won't be many players who will accept to stay inside the city walls and use all their play times, just to play guard. And how do we even pay them? Wouldn't that be just forcing them to work, instead of playing the game?"

Astaroth listened to her, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

"And we can't really put Natives either, since we are in short supply of soldiers, as you said earlier."

Phoenix nodded her head.

"What about both?" Astaroth asked.

She looked at him, tilting her head in thought.

"It's not a bad idea. But how do you consolidate power? If we put a Native in charge, the Players might not be inclined to follow orders for long. And if we put a Player in charge, the Natives might not want to join at all..."

Astaroth chuckled.

"You are thinking about too much. The way I see it, it's simple, really. Put one of each. And we make sure the teams or squads under them are a mix of both as well. This way, they learn to work together."

Phoenix looked at him with a strange frown.

The idea was crazy. Two commanders?

Wouldn't they fight for power?

And what of the squads? Would they even try to work together?

Players weren't exactly models of virtue.

"I'm afraid two commanders would just make for a power struggle waiting to happen," Phoenix said.

"Not if you put someone over them whom they have to report to. This way, they don't really have a choice to get along. Since they don't hold the last say. As for trying to one-up each other. Let them.

"You forget that healthy competition breeds growth. Isn't that all what players are about? And if the Natives see the Players being so competitive, there is no way they will let themselves fall behind."

In Astaroth's mind, he equated every soldier with someone like him. Someone who wanted to grow in power, for one objective or another.

Phoenix wanted to slap him behind the head, for oversimplifying the matter so much, but she had to admit. He made a certain sense.

"Who would we put in charge?" she asked.

"Easy. Rodney Levine, the Royal Guard Commander. He already knows how to run an effective guard. He'll drill anyone we put in charge into shape in no time flat. I'm certain of that much."

Phoenix took a moment to digest everything he said. Already, Astaroth could see the cogwheels of her mind turning, as she took his rough idea, and turned it into a workable solution.

He didn't want to interrupt her thinking process, so he walked down the dais, toward the door. There was one more matter to settle that day, and it was waiting for an audience.

But instead of busting Phoenix's thinking bubble, he decided to take it to another place.

Pulling out of the throne room, he turned to the guards.

"Would one of you know where they sent the Themiscus diplomat, by chance?"

Surprise slightly took the two guards, as they were not expecting this question. But one of them recovered faster than the other.

"Yes, Your Highness. We sent the diplomat to the luxurious meeting room, in the east wing."

Astaroth smiled at them, thanking them, before he walked away, both hands behind his head, whistling joyfully.

'Today was a productive day. One last meeting, and we get to spend the rest of the day in peace,' Astaroth thought.

'It will be a well-deserved rest.'

Chapter 688 Meeting The Diplomat

Reaching the posh meeting room, Astaroth didn't wait for the guards to announce his presence and walked in.

This startled the diplomat, along with his two guards, who jumped into a protective stance, weapons drawn.

Since the two countries were on good terms, and part of an alliance, the guards had been allowed to keep their weapons.

This made Astaroth laugh, as he looked them both in the eyes.

"Put those toys away. I'm not an enemy."

The guards wanted to step closer to the man who had so abruptly barged into the room, but a hand clasped on both their shoulders, followed by words.

"Stand down, men. That is the king of Stellar Woodlands."

The two men were slightly confused. They had met the king, a few years back, when talks about this kingdom joining the alliance had come on the table.

And this was not him.

Astaroth smiled and walked toward the diplomat.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir. I am Astaroth, king of this blooming kingdom. I was told you wanted a meeting, and the queen is currently using the throne room, so we will have it here instead. Rest assured, the room is just as safe."

Stretching out his hand for a handshake, Astaroth kept a wide smile on his lips.

Two Royal Guards had come in behind Astaroth, and seeing the two still-drawn swords, they brought their hands to their pommels. But a quick raised hand from Astaroth interrupted their movements.

"No need. These fine gentlemen will stow their weapons, will they not?" he asked, his smile turning to a grin.

And with this, he let out a powerful wave of magic pressure, letting it slam into them before dissipating before reaching the diplomat.

Both guards to the latter immediately started sweating buckets, as if they had just faced a fearsome beast. Their hands were shaking on their weapons as they stowed it away.

"We apologize... King Astaroth..." the one on his left said.

The other simply lowered his head, too shocked to talk.

The diplomat behind them seemed a bit disappointed in Astaroth's brutish handling of the situation, but he quickly schooled his face. He had been told beforehand that the king might act a bit more like a warlord than a dignified noble.

He attributed it to his Abnormal origins.

Reaching out to shake Astaroth's hand, he smiled.

"The pleasure is all mine, King Astaroth. My name is Gerald Stinson. I apologize for my men's rough reaction and lack of manners. Please then, if we are to proceed to the meeting here, then let us get comfortable."

He waved at the two sofas, with a table in between them, where there was already a kettle of tea and some cups that had been brought for him not so long ago.

As both men sat down, the Royal Guards stood back near the door, knowing it would take a miracle for the three men in there to harm their king. And on the other side of the table, the diplomat's guards stood behind his sofa, eyeing the King with wariness.

The pressure they had felt coming from him was not normal for someone his age. It had shaken them to their core.

They came from a kingdom that revolved around magic and were used to powerful mages. But usually, someone with such pressure would be at least fifty years older.

"So, I believe you were informed of the nature of our visit today, King Astaroth?" the diplomat asked.

Astaroth nodded, his smile still wide.

"Don't worry about your men's reaction. I was at fault for not announcing myself. As for the reason for your visit, yes, I was made aware."

The diplomat nodded.

"Good. Then this makes my work a lot easier. As this is your first year participating in the exercises, I am sure you have many questions regarding the events themselves, but this would be to discuss

with the next envoy, who will come next week. The events haven't been formally decided, since we couldn't get in touch with you, and you have to approve of them as well, given your seat in the alliance.

"But I am not here to discuss this. Today, I am here to discuss your invitee. Have you decided on which kingdom or force you wanted to invite, and do you have their coordinates if they are a mobile force?"

Astaroth knew they were here for this. At first, Phoenix had wanted to ask questions about whom they were allowed to invite, but since she was busy, and the diplomat had been so vague about it, he figured he could invite whomever he wanted.

"I do. I would like to invite an Abnormal Guild called the Knights of the Sun. And they are currently in a stronghold deep in Ash Elven territory. I hope that is not an issue?"

Astaroth wasn't sure if they would send a messenger their way, since the Ash Elven territory was a bit of a contentious area at the moment. But he had already decided who he wanted to send, and Phoenix had agreed.

They could wait until the next year, before using this as a tool to make diplomatic connections to smaller kingdoms. Since they were surrounded by the Elven forests anyway, it didn't matter.

Gerald looked at Astaroth with a slight frown for a moment, before going back to his politician smile.

"That is a good choice. There were talks in other kingdoms about sending some Abnormal soldiers with the Natives, given your kind's rapid growth. But most kingdoms prefer to stick to their known factors.

"It will be a welcome sight to see a troop composed entirely of your kind. The Matriarchs of Themiscus had expected you to be so bold and do something like this."

Astaroth watched as both men behind the diplomat bowed their heads at the mention of the matriarchs.

"They're almost like cult members. Do they revere the Matriarchs?" he wondered silently.

"As for their location, some exact coordinates would be best if you can, but an approximate will also do. We will send a messenger with a magic contingent, so they won't have issues going to a from the Ash Elven kingdom."

Astaroth happily obliged, as he pulled the coordinates from his map and wrote them down on a piece of parchment. Gerald took the piece of paper, smiled, and scribbled something else on it, before, with a snap of his fingers, it disappeared into a flash of flames.

"Now that this is done. On to the second matter. The rules," Gerald said, laying back into his sofa.

Chapter 689 Unvoiced Requests

A servant came back with a tray of cakes and biscuits, setting it between the two men. She pulled off the top of the teapot, where the tea had been steeping for a while, and pulled a tin closer.

She pulled out the leaves with a little scoop, before serving a cup to both the king and the diplomat, as well as small plates with cake on them. The servant then bowed and left the room.

All the while she had been there, the diplomat had eyed her with squinted eyes. All of which had not escaped Astaroth's piercing gaze.

'He's one of those. I hope he doesn't ask for her...'

Astaroth lightly coughed as the young girl left, getting the diplomat's eyes off the servant and back on him.

"You were saying? The rules?" he said, his tone flat.

"Ahh, yes. Sorry, I was distracted. Are all your servants such beauties?"

Astaroth's hand gripped the sofa's armrest strongly as he tried to keep cool.

'Calm down, calm down, calm down. What would Phoenix do?'

As he thought this, images of the diplomat burning to cinders came to mind.

'Nope. Wrong question. Just stay chill. He wouldn't dare ask for her.'

"I think we are veering off subject here, Sir Stinson. Let's stay on track."

The diplomat audibly clicked his tongue, which made Astaroth's eyelid twitch slightly. But he kept his cool.

"All work and no play. Alright, King Astaroth. We can keep this for after I have explained the rules to you."

'I would rather we don't talk about it at all,' Astaroth thought.

"Regardless of the games that will be selected, the regiments that are sent will all have the same amount of warriors, which is to be limited to two hundred and fifty strong. Any group that doesn't meet this criterion is welcome to bolster their regiment with other troops from the coming nation or even with adventurers. But the upper limit is the same for everyone.

"As for the composition, anything and everything is welcome. We had a year when an invitee sent a force of fifty soldiers, along with two hundred beasts. There are no true limitations, aside from the number of bodies. Mounts count in there, so mounted cavalry is often not recommended.

"Aside from this, each force will engage in four events, to rank them, based on performance, before they enter the next stage of the exercises. In past years, there would always be ten forces, so we would then eliminate the two weakest and get into an elimination tournament. But since this year we have an additional two, things will be a little different.

"Every invitee force will pick a number in a ballot and go against another one of the alliance kingdoms. Then, depending on how they did before losing, we will keep the ones with the most potential to go forward with the rest of the exercises."

Astaroth looked him in the eyes.

"And what happens if one of the invitee forces wins his match?"

The diplomat looked at him before bursting into laughter. He laughed for a few moments, expecting Astaroth to join in.

But when he noticed he was the only one laughing, he recomposed himself.

"King Astaroth. I assure you, this has never happened before. There is a reason the alliance is so restrained in its membership. We are the strongest kingdoms in the land.

"If any army from a small kingdom or force could take us on and win, I assure you, they would be in the alliance already. It is the very reason yours was allowed to join. We had a feeling, with Leon in your midst, that it was a possibility.

"The alliance would never allow a lesser force to mock its superiority. Nor do I believe anyone on the continent or the other has the power to do so."

That was the moment Astaroth decided to laugh.

After laughing for a minute, Astaroth wiped a small tear from the corner of his eye and returned to his smiling face.

"I think you misunderstand me, Sir Stinson. The force I am inviting has the potential to tear at my gates, and it keeps growing every passing day. The only reason they haven't tried tearing my doors down again is because they now work for me."

The diplomat smirked at Astaroth's words.

"Although that might be true for a budding kingdom like yours, Your Highness, I wholeheartedly doubt the capacity of this force to take down a part of our military. But I guess we shall see, if you are so confident in them."

The last words he spoke contained traces of venom in them, as the diplomat took it as an affront to their power. But he couldn't treat Astaroth badly, as he was a king part of the alliance.

Why the other kingdoms had accepted such a young kingdom into it was beyond him. But he owed them to treat the newest member with respect.

"In any case, that is how the start will proceed. As for after the first round, we will eliminate the weakest four, and the rest will move on to the traditional format. Do you have questions?"

Gerald was already tired of dealing with this arrogant young king. He was used to visiting the smaller kingdoms, the invitees, and being treated like a superior to their kings.

Yet, this child treated him like someone beneath him. He still hadn't offered him what had caught his eye.

"No questions for me. I think I understand what I need."

Gerald clapped his hands together.

"Good! Then, if that is the case, the day is well on its way to be over. How about we call it a night, and my men and I leave in the morning tomorrow?" he asked, an enormous grin on his face.

Astaroth stood up and stretched his hand across once more.

"I can arrange that. I will have a room prepared for you on the second floor. Your men will get another one, right next to it, and I will make sure you lack of nothing."

The diplomat grinned widely.

'I can't wait to get my hands on that little maid,' he thought, getting all excited.

But Astaroth could almost hear his thoughts through his greed-filled pig eyes.

'I will make sure no female maid goes near your room...'

Chapter 690 Nightly Commotion

After this insult of a meeting, Astaroth quickly left toward the throne room, after instructing guards and servants on what to do with Gerald Stinson.

He hurriedly stopped on the way, entering the head servant's office, where Chele could be seen working through some paperwork.

When he heard his door open, the Lizardman lifted his head, his eyes locking on the king and he slowly rose to his feet, taking a long bow.

"To what do I owe thissss honour, my ssssoverign," he asked, with his forked tongue flicking outside his mouth with every S he pronounced.

"Chele. I have some special instructions for you. We are having a diplomat from Themiscus in our guest rooms tonight."

The Lizardman looked at him with a wide smile.

"I will make ssssure he issss taken care of, my ssssovereign."

"Yes, yes. That's fine and all. But not what I want to ask."

Chele tilted his head to the side slightly, confused.

"I want you to make sure only male servants go near his room. I don't like how he eyed our female servants, and I don't want anything unbecoming to happen. Understood?"

The Lizardman's eyes narrowed.

"Sssshould we have ssssomeone keep watch?"

Astaroth raised his hands.

"No. Nothing so invasive. Just make sure no woman goes near his room until he leaves. I don't trust him to keep to himself."

Chele bowed again, saying, "Assss you wissssh, my ssssovereign."

Astaroth thanked him before leaving again. He wanted to go get Phoenix and warn her about the man as well before she had to cross paths with him in a hallway.

Although she would hardly pass for a servant, who knew how far this diplomat's mind had been twisted? He could tell the man was expecting to get royal treatment.

He found her in the throne room, still, head tilted to the side, as she was murmuring to herself.

"Ahh! There you are!" she exclaimed when she saw him come into the room.

"I think I found a way to make everyone happy for a future city guard."

Astaroth smiled at her, expecting nothing less from her beautiful mind.

"I didn't doubt you for a moment. But I need to tell you something."

Phoenix's train of thought abruptly stopped.

"Hmm? Yes, what is it?"

"The diplomat we were receiving today. Stay away from him. I don't like how he ogles the servants, and I don't think has a shred of sense to keep his hands to himself."

Phoenix frowned.

"If he's stupid enough to lay hands on me, then I guess it's his loss. Did you make sure he wouldn't cause an incident?"

"Yes. I spoke to Chele. He should only send male servants near that guest room. I just hope that is enough."

Phoenix didn't appreciate that they possibly had a predator under their roof. But they had to treat him right, at least as long as he respected their laws and held himself to proper etiquette.

The day was coming to a close, and dinner time rolled around. During the dinner, Phoenix understood what Astaroth had meant since they had to invite the diplomat to dine with them and be suitable hosts.

When she saw how he looked at her, or any other women around him, she almost felt sick to her stomach. She had to control every urge in her body to punch his face when she saw Gerald lick his lips as he looked at one of the maid's rear.

"Should we send guards in front of his door, saying it for his protection?" she asked Astaroth in a private message.

"That would only kick up a fuss, I feel. Let's just hope my precautions are enough to keep anything from happening," he replied.

As night came around, and everyone went to bed, Astaroth couldn't stop the nagging feeling in his mind that disconnecting was a bad idea.

Phoenix told him she agreed, but that they needed to log off for now.

"I'll log out in an hour. If nothing happened, we'll be set until the morning."

Phoenix nodded her head, agreeing that it was an excellent compromise. But she headed out first, claiming she needed some beauty sleep.

Astaroth lay there, on his back, keeping his senses peeled, both physical and magical, hoping the hour would be eventless.

Coral, who was used to her little routine by now, and would go into the monarchs' room once she was certain they had vanished, and tidy up, was currently walking in the hallway. She heard a commotion ahead, in the curve of the hall, and accelerated her step.

"What is it with this palace?! Treating me like this! Where are all the women?! Why do they keep sending man servants to my room?!"

Coral heard an object shatter, along with a weak whimper. She got to a run, wondering who was causing a scene.

Coral had been busy all day and wasn't informed women shouldn't go near a certain chamber. Since it was her day off, as well as Castien's, her betrothed, they had spent the day together on the fifth floor.

When she got around the corner, she could see one of her colleagues on the ground, his body covered in bruises, and a few cuts on his face. Behind him, a shattered vase.

"Luke!" she called out, recognizing the boy.

She ran to his side, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe the blood off his face.

"Are you alright?" she asked him, ignoring the man and his tantrum behind her. But it had become strangely quiet.

When she turned around, she saw the man in his night robe, looking at her with some of the most beastly eyes she had ever seen.

"Finally! Something worth my time! You will do just fine, girl!"

Coral froze as the words made their way into her brain. She quickly understood their meaning.

But it was too late.

Already, the man was grabbing her wrist and pulling her into his room.

"Stop! Let go of me!" she shouted, hoping someone would hear the commotion.

"Shut up, you little whore!" the man screamed at her, before slapping her cheek with so much violence she fell to the floor.

"Don't resist. You'll only make this worse for yourself."