

New Eden 691

Chapter 691 Making Things Hard

Coral wasn't dressed in her usual maid outfit, which only aroused the man even more, as he thought he had gotten the jackpot of maids.

Coral was still too much in shock to react when the man jumped onto her and started tearing her clothes off. Her mind was stuck with one perpetual question.

'Is this really happening?'

Not from the room, Astaroth woke up from a half-daze he had slipped into. All this focus had sent him into a trance-like state, and he had eventually lost track of his original goal.

What brought him back to his senses was the crashing of his door, as the male servant that had just been assaulted burst into his room. A servant would never dare do this, but the man was desperate to find some help for Coral, and since she was the royal maid, he thought maybe the monarchs would care.

The guards that usually stood by the door were already walking toward the commotion when they saw a servant run past, with blood on his face and bruises on his arms. They ignored him, verifying the screams before catching up with him.

So when the servant crashed through the royal room's doors, no one was there to stop him.

"Your Highness! I implore you! Help Coral!"

Astaroth was on his feet faster than ever. His senses came back to him in seconds as his trance-like state subsided.

And with this, he quickly felt the presence of someone else in the room he had assigned to the diplomat. The magic presence in the girl was faint, but he recognized it.

'Of all the servants to pick, it had to be her...!' Astaroth cursed in his mind.

Even if he was willing to be lenient at first, he now knew that Commander Alena would never accept that. And he was much more inclined to keep his commanders happy than a diplomat from another kingdom.

Dashing past the servant, Astaroth ran to the room in question. He even passed his guards on the way there, bursting into the door.

And when he got there, the sight that greeted him made all the restraint he had planned to use fly out the window.

There, on the floor of the room, was a red-faced Coral, with tears streaking down her cheeks, as the older diplomat was roughly raping her.

Impulsively, Astaroth shot a Wind Blade at the diplomat, trying to get him off Coral.

Gerald felt the attack, being an experienced mage himself, and his head snapped in the direction it came from. Quickly, a barrier appeared before him, shattering the weak spell.

But a sound of broken glass soon followed as Astaroth pushed through the barrier with his body, breaking it apart like it was nothing. Unconsciously, he had melded with White and was already punching the old man in the face.

Gerald flew across the room, slamming into the far wall, and coughing a bit of blood.

Astaroth had stopped next to Coral, picking her up gently.

"Are you alright? Did he hurt you in any way?"

She didn't respond, as she turned her sobbing face away from him. Coral barely had any clothes left on herself, and she was trying to hide her naked body, shame engulfing her mind.

Astaroth could smell the blood and saw a trickle of it along her thigh.

The guards arrived at the room's entrance at that moment and caught the scene. They were horrified.

"By the gods..." one of them whispered.

Astaroth got to his feet, lifting Coral in his arms as well. He walked over to the Royal Guards and put the girl in one of them's arms.

"Find something to cover her, then bring her to the fifth floor. Her betrothed is Castien. He will take care of her. Tell him the king is dealing with the situation for now."

The Royal Guard nodded, his face becoming serious.

Whoever this man was, after what he had done, there was no pardon.

Astaroth heard some ruffling on the ground at the far end of the room and knew that Gerald wasn't out yet. He also knew his two guards would be coming here soon, the commotion loud enough for everyone to hear.

Looking at the other guard, he gave another order.

"Put the palace on lockdown. No one in, no one out. Even the Council members and Commanders. If a single one leaves and causes trouble, there will be hell to pay."

The guard nodded his head vigorously before dashing toward the third floor. From there, he could sound the alarm to the rest of the palace.

As he ran past the door to the next room, two men came out of it, running toward the diplomat's room. When they entered, they saw the wounded Gerald on the ground, and the transformed king and drew their weapons.

Astaroth raised a single clawed hand toward them.

"Your quarry broke the laws of my kingdom. Even if he has diplomatic protection, I will not let him go free for what he did. For now, he is going to jail. If you try to act on me, I will consider this an attempt to break him free, and your sentence will be death."

The two guards ignored him, as a burst of mana covered their weapons and bodies.

Scanning them, Astaroth was unimpressed.

Mana Knight Ketric

Level: 40

Grade: Elite

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He didn't bother looking at their health or mana levels.

With their levels and grades, he knew they stood no chance at all.

"Luna, deal with them. They chose death," Astaroth said, turning his back to the dashing knights.

Luna materialized behind him, hands glowing, and two thin beams of pure white launched from her hands. The next second, two thuds were heard, with some screeching of skin on wood.

Both knights had burning holes in their heads. She had killed them in an instant.

Luna seemed unbothered by the order, as she turned to look at Astaroth's back. She had seen everything from inside his mind and was hoping Astaroth would sic her on the old man.

Luna had come to like the maid named Coral over the last few weeks. She often spent some time with her, when Astaroth was out of New Eden, and even helped her clean around the royal room.

Seeing her crying had made her extremely angry, as it did Astaroth.

But he needed to resolve this without killing him.

"Come quietly, Sir Stinson. I don't want to fight you inside the palace. Reparations would cost a fortune."

But the old man was already readying an attack of his own.

"You think you can just attack me and not face consequences?! Feel my wrath!" Gerald shouted, shooting two pillars of flame toward Astaroth.

Sigh

'Why must they always make things complicated?'

Chapter 692 Conceited Elitist

Fire blazed for a minute straight, as Gerald Stinson consumed a large part of his mana in a furious vengeance for getting physically assaulted.

As the flame pillars burned everything in their path, including the floors, ceilings, and furniture, Gerald smiled manically, imagining what he had done to the arrogant king receiving his attack.

When he finally let go of the spell, huffing lightly, Gerald snickered for a moment.

"That'll teach you, you backwater foreigner."

Smoke filled the room, now that a large part of the wooden objects in it had been charred or outright incinerated.

And from the smoke, he heard a loud sigh.

"Are you aware of how much the wood chanters charge for regrowing all of what you burnt? This will cost the kingdom at least five thousand gold pieces, aside from the mana crystals they will use to speed up the process. Do you plan on paying for this?"

Astaroth's voice was laced with undertones of annoyance as he walked through the smoke, completely unharmed.

At his side, Luna was jumping joyfully.

"Was that a nice barrier, Papa? Are you proud of me?"

Astaroth patted her on the head, as he kept walking to the stunned diplomat.

"What kind of diplomat comes to an ally kingdom and causes an incident the only night they stay? Is this how they train you in Themiscus? Or maybe it was just you? Has all the years of being treated like you were someone gone to your head?"

Gerald prepared to cast another spell, but suddenly felt the mana inside him drain away, making him weak-kneed and feeble.

"You've done enough. No more spells from you," Astaroth said, as he held in his hand a small ball of concentrated mana.

Gerald could feel it was his, as it contained his essence.

"How did you — You would need to have a much higher mana control than me? How would a backwater mage have learned these concepts?!" he asked in panic.

"How conceited are you, thinking mages from other countries cannot rival you? I hope the authorities in place in Themiscus are more reasonable than you. Or dealing with this matter will be highly annoying..."

Taking the last step that separated him from the diplomat, Astaroth struck him, sending him to the ground, unconscious and foaming at the mouth.

Aberon appeared behind him, hands raised, ready to defend the palace. But when he saw the man on the ground, and Astaroth bending over to pick him up, he scoffed.

He then saw the two mana knights on the ground, dead, and he figured out what had happened.

"This is not good, young man. Themiscus is famous for treating countries that insult them harshly. And killing two of their knights, as well as capturing one of their officials? I'd say that qualifies as an insult."

Astaroth clicked his tongue in response.

"He broke our laws. Diplomat or not, justice must be served. For now, he is going to prison, and I will deal with the matriarchs of Themiscus tomorrow. I doubt they will know tonight happened, unless somehow they keep track of their every official from afar."

'You wouldn't believe how far they go to keep their people in line...' Aberon thought, his face darkening.

"Why are you here, Aberon? I thought you spent most of your days with Aravelle lately?"

Aberon looked at Astaroth and grimaced.

"Although sir Aravelle indeed takes up a lot of my free time, I am still free to do what I wish. I came when I felt a surge in mana inside the palace. I thought we were under attack. Reflexes from spending ten years under siege, I guess."

Astaroth understood his reaction. He couldn't fathom how spending ten years in similar conditions would change his mind.

"Well, since you are here. Can you take him to the prison cells on the third floor? And make sure Commander Alena doesn't get access to him yet. I fear what she would do to him."

Aberon frowned.

"Do I look like a servant to you, boy? Why are you ordering me around?"

Astaroth sighed once more.

"Aberon. I know you are older and wiser, and possibly stronger than me. But this is my palace, in my kingdom. And you said you stay here and serve me as an adviser. If you aren't going to advise me, then at least serve me and do me this favour. I have to go warn Phoenix of what happened and the coming repercussions."

Aberon grumbled for a moment before grabbing the scruff of the man's nightgown and disappearing from the room.

"Thank you, grumpy," Astaroth whispered into the air. He knew that even though Aberon had already left, he could hear him.

Looking at the surrounding disaster, Astaroth felt like the events of the last minutes had blown out of proportion so much. Things like these shouldn't happen, should they?

But it was too late to regret his actions or take them back. It was time to deal with what came next.

Walking out of the room, Astaroth went up to the third floor to cancel his order of locking down the palace. There was no use anymore, now that he dealt with the diplomat.

He had ordered this only in case the two bodyguards and the diplomat were tougher to deal with than he had expected. But he had clearly overestimated them.

Declan was not online anymore, and he had to go directly to Rodney's office to discuss with him. Since he commanded the Royal Guards, the palace fell under his direct purview.

Only when Declan was online did Rodney focus on other matters. The two middle-aged men had a relationship of trust and understanding that confused Astaroth.

'Are all older men so quick to trust each other? Or is it just those two?'

What he didn't know was that the first week that Declan had become the war councilman, he and Rodney had butted heads more often than two goats claiming a mountain.

This was how they had eventually established boundaries and a modicum of respect for each other.

Reaching Rodney's office, Astaroth could see the door was open, and light was shining from within.

Astaroth knocked on the door frame, as he peeked inside the office.

"Come in, Your Highness. I was expecting you."

Chapter 693 Warning His People

Astaroth proceeded inside the room, where he found Rodney sitting at his desk, with only leather pants and a plain white shirt on. It was obvious he had been sleeping moments ago, with how the drowsiness still clung to his eyes.

But his sharp gaze was all but asleep.

Rodney was thinking about repercussions. He knew how the matriarchs thought.

"Sit down, sir. We have much to discuss."

"I was only coming to cancel out the lockdown order. I need to go back to my world to warn Phoenix about this as soon as possible."

Rodney nodded at him.

"I already cancelled the order. When the guard rushed in to start the lockdown procedures, they woke me up. And from there, I learned you were already on the scene. So I ordered the lockdown to be annulled."

Astaroth wasn't sure whether this was a sign of trust or mistrust.

"I was told of what happened briefly. Alena and her son are going to be very unhappy. It'll take a lot of effort and bureaucratic pussyfooting to keep them away from the cells. I hope I can get your support on this matter," Rodney asked, giving Astaroth an expectant look.

"Sure. Whatever keeps them from murdering or torturing the fool. I'll make sure Declan stays in the loop as well."

Rodney nodded once more, rubbing his tired eyes.

Astaroth sent a quick message to Declan through his friends list.

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"Incident in the palace. Already resolved. Commander Alena and her son need to be kept away from the prison on floor three."

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He hoped this would be enough for Declan to understand the situation, and use his weight to keep Alena at bay. But he doubted it would work completely.

Castien was friends with a few soldiers from the other regiments, and somehow, Astaroth knew he would eventually bypass the measures in place and land in the prison cell they would throw Gerald in.

He only hoped that by then, he had calmed down enough not to outright murder him. Otherwise, it could complicate things greatly.

"Listen, commander. Let me go warn Phoenix, and I will be back in the morning. Can you deal with this in the meantime?"

Rodney looked aghast at the question. He also wanted to rest.

But he knew the king had a right to ask this of him.

"I'll do what I can, Your Highness. But once this matter reaches Commander Alena, which I'm sure it will, soon, given you had the girl sent up to the sentinels, things will get complicated."

Astaroth felt guilty for shoving this into Rodney's lap. But he needed the rest.

The Natives only had one world to live in and care about. Players like him led two lives.

And managing both could be a hassle.

"I'll try to come back as early as I can," he promised the commander.

Leaving the office, Astaroth went back to his room, before laying on the bed.

'I'll have to log back in as soon as I can. If this matter waits too long, it could blow up in our face...'

"Log out."

Feeling his body plunge toward the floor, Alex reopened his eyes to his gaming pod's familiar interior. He sighed before opening the top.

As he rose from the pod, he saw Kary on the bed, eyes closed and enjoying a bit of sleep.

'Lucky her...'

He didn't want to wake her up right away, so he went to take a shower first, hoping it would wash away a bit of the shit he had landed himself in. But aside from making him clean, the shower did nothing to appease his mind.

When he came back into his room, he saw Kary was stirring awake. Looking at the time, he saw it was a little past nine.

'We are staying inside longer and longer... At this pace, we eventually won't sleep much or at all on this side.'

Alex slinked up to the bedside and slipped into bed next to Kary, embracing her. He was hoping he could put her in a good mood before telling her what had just happened.

"Hm? You are finally out of there? What time is it?" Kary asked, snuggling into his embrace.

"Just a bit past nine. I had to stay in a bit longer. But everything is fine now."

Kary smiled, digging into his chest with her head. Until she pieced together his words and her head snapped back.

"Wait. Fine, now? Did something happen? Oh, my god. What happened? Alex, tell me you didn't cause a diplomatic incident. This is not the time for this crap."

Alexander looked at her, trying to smile. But she saw right through him.

With a sigh and a low growl into her pillow, Kary knew it was bad.

"Just tell me what happened."

Alex looked at her pleadingly.

"Can we at least discuss this over breakfast and coffee? I haven't had a wink of sleep."

"Fine. I'll go make coffee. You make breakfast. I want pancakes. And you better make me the best pancakes. I deserve a treat with all you are putting us through lately."

Alexander chuckled, nodding his head.

"I'll make you the best pancakes you ever had," he boasted.

It took him half an hour to have breakfast ready, and he and Kary had already started talking about the incident over coffee, as he was making the pancakes.

When she heard the start of his recounting, she was frowning deeply, her forehead creasing.

Once he had told her everything, she took a moment to internalize the information and come to her conclusions.

"So, let me get this straight. He physically assaulted our servants and then raped the royal maid, Coral. You attacked him to get him off her, but then his goons tried attacking you? You offered them to surrender. They didn't. You killed them. And then you asked the douche to come willingly, and he tried burning you alive?"

Alex took a bite of his pancake, nodding his head.

With his mouth still half full, he replied, "Sounds about right."

Kary slapped his arm.

"At least finish swallowing, you numb nuts. If you choke, who is going to take responsibility for this?"

Alex swallowed his bite before chuckling a bit.

"Is that what worries you about me choking to death? Having to take responsibility?"

"For now, yes," she replied, giving him a fake stink eye and pulling out her tongue.

"This is a colossal mess. But at least, with how you treated the situation as you did, we still are within our rights to imprison him. As for sentencing him, I think that will be a tougher matter. I hope Rodney can enlighten us a bit about this when we hop back in."

Alex was wondering why Rodney seemed to know what would happen, and now, with her saying this, he became even more curious.

"Why would he know so much about this?"

Kary looked at him with a dumbfounded look.

"Did he not tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Alex asked, confused.

"I'm surprised you didn't try to learn more about him. It's crucial you know your men more, dear."

Alex frowned.

"What is so important about him that I should have asked?"

"The reason he knows more. Rodney grew up in Themiscus. His father was a Royal Knight there. He only left because he couldn't wield magic. Rodney is Themiscus nobility."

Chapter 694 Matriarchal Society

Alex looked at Kary, stunned, his jaw hanging loose.

"Excuse me, what? Nobility? How have I never heard of this?"

Kary giggled.

"If you had taken time to learn of all your men, you would know many of them don't come from the Elven kingdoms. Every non-elf comes from human settlements or other cities across the continent.

"Our no-discrimination policy brought people from all over the two continents. Although we have almost no Demonoids or Undead, the rest of the races are aplenty all over the city. This also means a lot of our soldiers come from a bit of everywhere. This includes Rodney."

Alexander took a moment to process what she was saying.

"This is why he wanted to discuss things. He probably knows how the matriarchs will react. Was making him wait a bad idea?" Alex wondered, gulping.

"I might have told Rodney to wait until we log back in to take any action concerning this matter..."

Kary looked at him before sighing loudly.

"Of course you did... Sometimes, you make me think you are the smartest one in the room. Other times, I feel like I'm taking care of a teen."

She said those words with no malice, but the dig still hurt Alex a bit. It wasn't like he was doing this on purpose.

"Hey. I'm not to blame if no one tells me anything. I react according to what?know."

Kary shook her head with a smile.

"I know. It's too late to change what you said. We are already out here. Let's take care of our day, and we can log back in right after dinner. This way, we won't make him wait too much."

Alex nodded his head, agreeing to this course of action, before shoving the remaining pancake on his plate into his mouth.

He would rather shovel food in his mouth than think about the events to come.

Inside New Eden, close to the center of the light continent, in a city of magic and glowing blue stone, a meeting was being held.

Twelve women of varying ages occupied a table shaped like a ring, with at its center a floating magical orb. Behind each woman, a man in flourished armour and colourful robes.

These were the matriarchs and their husbands or partners.

Marriage was not an obligatory status, in Themiscus, and a lot of the matriarchs were actually polygamous, holding a harem of husbands or sexual partners.

However, only one male per matriarch was allowed to attend the meetings. This always formed jealousy and contention in the polygamous matriarchs' circles.

But they couldn't care less. The power was in their hands, and they could choose to banish, castrate, or even kill whatever man was kicking up waves.

The men were only ever there to offer council, from a more direct approach to the matriarchs of Themiscus. Since men and women never thought the same way, it was a welcome addition to the table.

But, right now, they were not inclined to even listen to the opinions of their lesser counterparts. For what they were seeing on the large crystalized orb in the center of the room was angering them greatly.

In the middle of the night, a meeting had been called by the matriarch who managed their diplomats, Selena Lorhen. Behind her, her first husband, Ulrick Lorhen, was the one who had awakened her in the middle of the night with bad news.

"Ulrick. Please repeat the report you made to me," Selena said, her voice stern.

Her husband bowed low before stepping to her side.

"Tonight, about an hour ago, one of our diplomat's guards was killed in action, and the diplomat in question was thrown into a jail cell.

"The actions leading to this are still a mystery to us, since we require the surveillance branch's say-so to view the footage before the deaths and capture.

"The diplomat in question was Gerald Stinson, sent to Stellar Woodlands to explain their new role before the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises."

After saying his piece, the man took two steps back, letting the woman speak to each other.

Selena turned her head to her right, and two seats down from her, a sleepy-looking young woman yawned toward her.

"Korah. Do we have your permission?"

The younger woman, Korah, waved her hand dismissively. She had been playing with her boy toys for hours before the meeting was called.

And now that her action stopped so abruptly, she was hit with a wave of drowsiness. She couldn't care less if the diplomacy branch wanted to view the recordings.

Selena didn't react to her rudeness, and instead waved her hand at the orb, making the images on it wind back until before the altercation. On them, they saw the guards rushing to the room, and they heard the man in front of them tell them of the broken laws, and to surrender.

But they did not train Mana Knights to surrender their quarries without fighting. They could only expect a combat to take place.

However, there was no such thing. The next moment, a petite girl with milky white hair appeared from the man's back, and shot two thin beams through their heads, killing them instantly.

"Whomever that girl is, she must be powerful. Those were not our most powerful Mana Knights, but it would still take considerable power to kill them in a single attack. Please switch to the diplomat, and wind back until before the altercation," Selena commanded the orb.

As if it had a mind of its own, the orb suddenly changed from two perspectives to one and started rewinding.

After a moment, they saw images that made all of them gasp in horror and anger.

On it, they saw Gerald attack a manservant, which wasn't much of a problem, given the difference in ranks. But then, they saw the young girl, who jumped in to help the boy.

When they saw the hands of Gerald latching onto her wrists and dragging her like a slave about to be punished, they all felt anger rise in them.

The moment he slapped her, Selena wanted to stop the video. But an older woman raised her hand.

"Let it play. I want to know the full events," she said, with a husky voice.

Selena respectfully nodded her head and resumed the playback.

When the scene went from the slap to outright rape, almost all the matriarchs were gritting their teeth in anger.

"Alright, we've seen enough!" one of them shouted, forcefully stopping the recording.

"I don't know how you train your diplomats, Selena, but this is unacceptable. Assaulting a girl? Forcing himself into her? This man deserves to get castrated and burned at the stake!"

The elder woman raised her hand again, bringing quiet to the table.

"Let us not devolve into savagery amongst ourselves. I am sure Lady Lorhen has an explanation for this. Let us discuss, as we always do."

"Yes, Head Matriarch!" the eleven other women said, bowing their heads.

Chapter 695 A Summons To The Court

The day crept by slowly for Alex and Kary, as they apprehended how they would deal with the diplomatic situation they were thrust into. Especially Alex, who knew this was partially his fault.

He felt guilty for not asking the man to leave as soon as their meeting was done. He could have taken a small backlash for their hospitality, over the shit-storm that was bound to come their way after beating the man into submission.

Kary could see this turmoil on Alex's face, and tried telling him a few times it wasn't his fault, that he couldn't have predicted this outcome. But somehow, he knew he was bad news when he saw the look Gerald had directed at the maid that served them tea.

Beating himself up mentally for his lack of decisiveness, Alex felt droopy all day. By the time dinner came around, he wasn't sure he wanted to log in at all.

But he also knew he had to face the music.

The couple ate in silence, after ordering in, and Kary tried thinking of a way to get Alex's mind back on track before they went back to New Eden. If they went in there with a defeated mindset, there was no way they would salvage the situation.

Opening her mouth to talk, Alex looked at her, shaking his head.

"Don't say it. I know what you are thinking. But it's much simpler to assume this was my fault and live with the consequences. I'm not saying we won't fight back. But I need to own up to my mistake and face this head on..."

Kary closed her mouth. She wasn't going to say it wasn't his fault, but she intended to tell him he needed to steel his resolve.

However, seeing he had already done so, even if it was by taking the blame, she decided to let him deal with this how he saw fit. In the end, she would have his back, no matter the situation.

After finishing their meal and cleaning up a bit, Alex and Kary stepped into the room. Alex looked at his pod with a bit of apprehension, but knew what had to be done.

As for Kary, she climbed into hers wordlessly, already thinking of ways to smooth things over and avoid conflict with the biggest and oldest kingdom in New Eden.

She already had a few ideas, but she would wait to see how the situation develops, before making any moves.

Once both of them had closed their pod doors, they logged in simultaneously.

"Log in."

Launching New Eden

Logging in

Welcome back player Astaroth/Phoenix

With the familiar feeling of weightlessness and swirl of colours, both of them reopened their eyes to the royal room's ceiling.

Phoenix heard Astaroth sigh loudly next to her before jumping out of bed.

"Alright. Let's see what I have to deal with. I hope nothing else happened while I was out."

Phoenix let him go talk to Rodney as she curved her path toward the cells on the third floor. Astaroth saw her changing paths and wondered what she wanted to do, but he was too preoccupied to ask.

Reaching Rodney's office again, he knocked on the door, which was closed at the moment.

"Come in," Astaroth heard through the door.

Commander Levine's voice sounded tired, and as Astaroth opened the door, he saw the black bags under the man's eyes, and knew it wasn't just his voice.

"God, you look like shit. You didn't get to rest much, did you?" Astaroth said, the words escaping him.

"You look like shit too, Your Highness. Are your actions weighing on your mind?" Rodney replied, unbothered by the comment.

"Eh. You could say that," Astaroth said, trying to downplay it.

"Come in. Sit. We can have the discussion I wanted to have last night. And then I will be getting some much-needed sleep."

Astaroth nodded his head, sitting across from his commander. Rodney looked and sounded tired, but his eyes still showed acuity, meaning he was not completely drained yet.

"As I wanted to say last night, before you dropped everything on my lap and disappeared, the kingdom of Themiscus is bound to know what happened.

"They always have items on their officials that record everything that happens to them. So they will already know what is going on."

Astaroth heard those words and gulped. How would they interpret the situation if they saw what happened?

"Now. I spoke with Coral while you were away. The girl is devastated, and her betrothed, Castien, is furious beyond words. He tried getting to the cells four times since you captured Gerald Stinson and two of those times, he barged in, forcing us to resort to violence.

"I don't like having to knock around a fellow soldier, especially since his mother is now hounding me for wounding her soldier and son. But I obeyed your order, and neither of them were allowed to see the prisoner."

Astaroth nodded his head, glad this had at least been achieved. He didn't know how much trouble they would be in if Alena or Castien had laid hands on the man.

"Have we received any message, missive, or report from Themisca since?" Astaroth asked, starting to sweat.

Rodney sighed deeply at the question, accentuating Astaroth's stress.

"Unfortunately, we have. And it's not good news."

Swallowing nervously, Astaroth asked what it contained.

"We received a magic message, which appeared directly on my desk, which in itself is worrying. The Matriarch Council wants to meet you to discuss further actions. They are saying to leave the prisoner in his cell for now, as unharmed as possible, until they talk with you and the queen."

Astaroth's heart dropped at the words. Somehow, he wasn't sure his words would even hold weight in front of a council of women.

He felt that if women ruled their society for so long, the men wouldn't hold much sway. Which is why, he assumed, they wanted Phoenix to be there as well.

"And when do they want to meet?" Astaroth asked, his palms becoming clammy.

"Today."

Chapter 696 A Past Recounted

Astaroth couldn't believe the answer.

"Today?!" he exclaimed.

"How am I supposed to travel to the center of the continent in one day?!"

Rodney looked at the king with a raised eyebrow.

"The... teleporter?" he said, confused how Astaroth had forgotten the immense cubic structure that dominated the south plaza of the outer ring.

Astaroth took a second to register the response.

"Oh... Right..."

Rodney shook his head slightly.

"But that is beside the issue here. Even if making it there fast is not a problem, that means you can't go with a proper escort. We will never have time to prepare a contingent. Bringing soldiers anywhere requires a massive amount of supplies and preparation.

"I'm sure the matriarchs did this exactly for this reason. They probably expect you to go alone with the queen, and maybe two or three escorts. This way, they have the upper hand. Their slyness hasn't diminished one bit in two decades..."

Astaroth could see the unease on Rodney's face as he said those last words.

"Phoenix told me. Is going there too much for you? I can ask another commander to come if you prefer not to be there. Or I can ask Leon, who I am sure will complain, but he'll obey."

With a tired sigh, Rodney shook his head again.

"No. I am the commander of the Royal Guards. It is my duty to protect the monarchs, and mine alone. I will go, even if going back displeases me. I'm sure the queen told you what I used to be. But even she doesn't know why I left."

"Rodney... If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to."

Astaroth was trying to dodge a possible uncomfortable subject. But Rodney looked at him with determination.

"I can't. It would be preferable if you knew everything before we go. It'll shed light on the situation a little, and allow us to go with more confidence."

There was no use in denying it, he thought.

"As the queen must have told you, I used to be Themiscus nobility. At least until I reached the age of twenty-one," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"My father, Ulrick, married into nobility, as many men do in Themiscus. Women occupy the largest roles and functions of society in that kingdom, as many know. Although I'm sure your kind doesn't know much about this.

"He was picked by a Matriarch, for his excellent magic ability and his physical prowess. He used to be a mana knight until the day he was picked. To him, it was a great honour to join the nobility of the kingdom, even if he knew he wouldn't be the Matriarch's only husband.

"As time passed, and the Matriarch in question grew older, she picked out more husbands. But my father was her first, and thus, he held a higher status. So when he birthed a son, it was his and her first disappointment. And time would only make this worse."

Astaroth could feel the bitterness in Rodney's voice as he recounted his tale.

"The birth of a girl soon outshone the first child of the new Lorhen Matriarch and pushed him to the back of the family, where men often ended. But that was only the beginning.

"As years passed, the boy's inability to use magic came to light. And in a kingdom that values magic as much as money, this came as a great disservice to his already poor treatment.

"The rest of the family, be it his brothers, sisters, father, and mother, all pushed him so far aside that they practically confined him to his room inside the Lorhen manor. And when he reached twenty-one years of age, a decision was taken.

"Since the boy could not become a Mana Knight, due to having no mana, they threw him out of the house, bound to become a commoner. His father did not even bat an eye at the order, and could only offer the boy a surname from when he was a commoner himself.

"So, with only a sword and a name to himself, the boy chose to leave the kingdom altogether. This boy was I. I left Themiscus with a cheap training sword, and the name Levine, to remember the shame of being mana-less, in a kingdom that valued magic over everything else."

Astaroth sat there, listening to him, and he could feel every emotion that passed through the man as he told his past to him. Despair, anguish, fear, anger.

"Rodney, I don't want to force you to come. If what you say is true, and I don't doubt you, then you would have to meet with your mother. The woman who cast you out for not reaching her expectations... That would be insensitive of me..."

But Rodney looked at him with resolve.

"You are not forcing me, King Astaroth. I want to go. I want to show my mother and father what I have become. Show them that even without their precious magic, I became someone important. Someone powerful. Please, allow me this chance."

From the look in his eyes, Astaroth understood this meant a lot to him.

It meant a chance. A chance to redeem himself in the eyes of people who thought nothing of him.

He could never take this away from him.

"Okay. Then, if you are to come, you will still lead men. But not your own. I don't want to let them wait too much, in case they take it as a sign of weakness. I will have a group of adventurers from Paragons be ready to depart in a few hours.

"You will lead them to defend Phoenix and me. And you will prove Rodney Levine is not a nobody. He is the proud commander of the Stellar Woodlands Royal Guard."

Rodney's face changed to a proud smile.

Slamming his fist into his chest, he rose to his feet.

"I shall not disappoint you, my king! I shall make Themiscus' Council of Matriarchs understand, that our kingdom is not one they can step on as they please!"

Astaroth only smiled in response.

Chapter 697 Delusional Prisoner

Once the meeting with Rodney was over, he let the man get some quick shuteye. Although he would only get two or three hours of sleep, at most, it would still stave off his current fatigue.

As a man who grew up in a militaristic upbringing and lived an adventurer's life, he was accustomed to this. It might not bring him back to a hundred percent, but he would be pretty darn close.

Astaroth left Rodney's office feeling a fire lighting in his chest. They were going to Themiscus to defend their actions, but he would not waste the opportunity to show their council he had earned his place in the alliance.

If the diplomat was showing a bit of reticence toward him, then he could guess the rulers of Themiscus might also feel this way.

This caused Astaroth to wonder who else in the alliance felt like he might not belong. If they allowed Stellar Woodlands to join because of Leon, there was no telling what they thought of him.

But he would deal with this at a later date.

For now, he needed to use a function of the guild interface he hadn't used yet. The quest function.

Opening up his interface, he pulled up the guild tab. Then he tapped on the guild quest button and started entering the conditions, description, and rewards.

He wasn't quite sure what rewards he should give, and he thought for a moment to wait and ask Phoenix. But then, he decided against it.

If he asked Phoenix to deal with every minor matter like this, he would never be the guild leader he needed to be.

Astaroth wrote down the quest as he walked toward the cell block and finished it as he reached the palace wing where it was.

Ding!

You have created a guild quest! Quest name: Protect The Royals.

Everyone in the guild received the quest automatically, with a choice to accept it or refuse it. Of course, the ones who didn't meet the basic requirements he set would have the 'accept' option grayed out.

Astaroth hoped this would give a bit of a motivational spark to those who hadn't reached his conditions. Maybe if they saw this, they would think they needed to get stronger, in case another quest popped up for them.

The Paragon's quest board was already full with a bunch of other quests, most of which were repeatable, and would give out contribution points, along with gold, and sometimes even an item of their choice in the guild treasury.

But seeing the quest appear, the amount of people who applied was through the roof.

Even though Paragon only had around two hundred players by now, and only half of them were in the requirements bracket, most of these hundred players applied almost instantly.

Guild Quest: Protect The Royals

Description: The Matriarch Council of Themiscus Kingdom has requested a meeting with the monarchs of Stellar Woodlands kingdom. A protection detail is needed for them, and the king has elected to take Players, instead of Natives. Will you answer the call of your king and guild leader?

Requirements:

- 1) Level fifty minimum.
- 2) Inner member

3) Be ready to follow orders

Quest Objectives:

- 1) Protect the Royals at any cost
- 2) Cause no diplomatic incident
- 3) Answer the call to arms if needed
- 4) Sub-objectives might apply

Quest Rewards:

- 1) 10,000 gold/player
- 2) Exp for a level-up
- 3) 1 item of Rare grade from the treasury
- 4) More rewards will be attributed accordingly to performance and sub-objectives completed

**

Astaroth looked satisfied with himself, as he closed the interface before entering the jail section of the third floor.

He had discovered an option where he could leave the objectives and reward options floating, so he could add more or subtract some at will. This had made his choices a lot easier.

As he entered the cell block, he saw Phoenix standing in front of a cell, with her face showing anger.

He could already guess who was in the cell. What he wondered was why she was suddenly angry.

There was no use in guessing, so he walked over to her. And as he did, he caught some words coming from inside the jail cell.

"You may be a queen, but you are nothing compared to our Matriarchs. They will get me out of here, and I will walk scot-free. Your kingdom means nothing to the great kingdom of Themisca!"

Hearing this, Astaroth understood why his girlfriend was mad.

The man had most likely been dragging their name into the mud for a while.

Astaroth could see the tip of Phoenix's hair flicker with flames, as her anger was getting worse by the second.

Reaching the cell, Astaroth banged on the bars.

"Shut up, will you? Unless you want me to fetch the woman whom you violated's husband, and let him have a bit of time alone with you in there? Or better yet, her mother-in-law. I doubt you would be as talkative to them as you are to the queen."

Phoenix clenched her fist.

"Don't bother threatening him. He seems to have lost his mind. Either that, or he doesn't realize his precious kingdom has already abandoned him."

Hearing her words, Gerald twitched.

"Hah! Themiscus would never abandon one of its own in the hands of another kingdom. Especially not one weaker than itself. You are stupid if you believe yourself in this!"

He spat at Phoenix's feet, causing her hair to flare up entirely.

"Alright. I've had enough. I'm getting Castien and Alena. They can deal with this piece of shit."

Astaroth's jaw dropped in surprise.

"Are you sure? Aren't you afraid this might make matters worse?" he asked her.

He didn't care, and he would rather kill the man right now. But they had to respect a certain protocol for diplomats.

Diplomatic immunity was not something they could just gloss over. Hurting another country's diplomat often led to war.

"I don't care anymore. He has been slinging insults at me for half an hour. I'm done taking his shit. We can deal with Themiscus when it comes to it."

She didn't let Astaroth say another word, storming out of the cell block.

"Well damn. You're in trouble now. I've rarely seen her this angry. I'm surprised she didn't incinerate you herself," Astaroth said with a chuckle.

He heard Gerald gulp inside his cell.

'The facade cracks. Let's see what it takes to break it.'

Chapter 698 Granting Passage

"You aren't going to let her torture me, are you? This will only make Themiscus' retaliation worse. You are already looking at being banished from the alliance. Do you want an all-out war?!" Gerald asked, his voice cracking.

Astaroth looked at him with a smirk.

"Listen to yourself. Was that supposed to be the voice of confidence? I'm certain you already know what your kingdom thinks about your actions. Just like you know, they have already seen what you did.

"It's the reason no one has come to your rescue already. And the reason I am going to meet with them in a few hours, leaving you here, under guard by the very commander whose daughter-in-law you so savagely raped."

As he said these words, the man's face started paling.

"How did you—"

But Astaroth interrupted him by raising his hand.

"It doesn't matter anymore. I'm sure your Matriarchs are still watching right now," he said, staring at the man.

He could see the top of a marking on his chest, and from it, he could feel mana pulsing. That was how he knew he was being watched.

"If you are watching this, ladies, to you I ask this. Would you tolerate a man doing what he did to a young woman whose virtue he so violently wrenched from? Because if you do, then talking to you will be a waste of our time. Stellar Woodlands has no place for this type of lawlessness and cruelty."

His face had become hard like stone, as he said this, his anger flaring up.

But when he felt the pulsing of mana stop, he knew his message had come across.

Phoenix returned shortly after, with Alena and Castien in tow, both of whom they could see seething with rage.

Astaroth stopped the pair before they ran to the cell bars.

"Before I let you in, I want to establish something."

Alena turned her head at him, her teeth clenched. And behind her, her son was looking at the man who had violated his wife-to-be.

The intensity in his gaze could be felt all the way down Gerald's spine.

If looks could kill, the diplomat would be suffering a million deaths. And it wouldn't even begin to soothe Castien's fury.

But Astaroth knew they were waiting for his okay.

"Two things. The first one, I want him to stay alive."

Castien's head snapped toward Astaroth, his mouth opening to say something, but a raised hand from Astaroth silenced him.

"Let me finish, Castien. I want him alive. Not because killing him is not what he deserves. But because killing him now only makes things difficult for us.

"Keep him alive until our return. I will make sure they grant us the death penalty for him, and you will get to do the honours yourself. I only hope this will be enough of a start for you to forgive me for letting him stay in the palace."

Castien's face untensed a bit.

"Your Highness. I do not blame you for this. You couldn't have predicted such a savage was a diplomat of a respected country. But I will get my vengeance, whether you allow it or not."

His words were meant to warn Astaroth, even though he was under him.

"Do not worry. I will make sure you do," Astaroth nodded.

"As for my second point. It is simple, really. Anything you make him endure, make sure he is still in enough shape to suffer when we come back to sentence him to death. I don't want his death to be a quick one."

Although Phoenix felt this was unnecessarily cruel, she agreed to it to an extent.

Men like him deserved cruel deaths. Not a rapid escape.

Hearing this, both Alena and Castien grinned.

That was all the words they wanted to hear. Now, they could deal how they wanted with the scum.

Alena mouthed the words thank you before locking her gaze on the prisoner.

"I have been trying to get to you for the entire night. Who would have thought that being a commander wasn't going to let me do all I wanted?"

"But I have the king and queen's blessings now. You and I will be spending some 'quality' time together. I hope you are mentally ready."

Her sadistic grin was mimicked by her son, who couldn't wait to start getting his revenge.

Castien had to comfort Coral all night until she finally fell asleep from exhaustion. And he knew this was only the first night of many where she would feel this way.

So his wrath was already boiling, just looking at the responsible for this.

Astaroth looked at them one last time, before grabbing the keys he had taken from the guard at the entrance of the cell block and handing them over to Alena.

"I'll tell the Royal Guards to keep a healer close and to not disturb you unless necessary. I don't expect to be back before tomorrow. Keep him alive and in as much of one piece as you can."

Looking down at the man, whose face had gone ghostly pale, he said one last thing.

"I think Chele would also love to have a piece of him for attacking two of his employees. Try to share."

Alena chortled at his words.

"I will keep this in mind, Your Highness. Godspeed in Themisca," Alena said, saluting him.

"Your Majesty!" Castien shouted, slamming his fist into his chest.

Astaroth walked away, followed by Phoenix. The situation was now no longer of their resort.

They would deal with the diplomatic aspect of it, even though they had assuredly made it more difficult for them. They still believed this to be the right course of action.

As they left the jail section, Astaroth relayed his orders to the Royal Guards at the guard post, and the guards nodded and saluted him.

Already, some screams were reaching the entrance to the cell block, a mix of fear and pain.

They had a few things to prepare before leaving, and only a few hours to do so. So he and Phoenix went to the royal room to grab some things.

'This might be more than just a political visit,' Astaroth mused.

Chapter 699 Splitting The Players

Although both Phoenix and Astaroth were going there for an official function, they wanted to have clothes that would both represent their title, but also seem ready for business.

They both had a feeling that if they showed up looking too pompous, it would only play against them. One way or another, they could re-equip their gear at any moment.

But that would only come as a last resort.

Once they were ready, they also had to go through whoever wanted to join the party.

Phoenix had seen the quest and the amount of people who accepted it.

"You forgot to set a limit of people who can join. We can't possibly take almost eighty players with us. Themiscus will see it as a provocation," she stated, as they headed to the palace entrance.

"I know. But there is a reason I didn't put a limit. You'll understand when we get there."

As the pair exited the palace through its large wooden doors, they ended up facing a little army of players, all of them waiting in the plaza before the palace.

As soon as they had accepted the quest, the guards at the inner gates saw a list with names, growing, that had to be led to the palace plaza. So the players present had all been escorted there and were still being kept in check by the Royal Guards.

Astaroth clapped his hands loudly, adding a bit of mana to the strikes of his palms, so the sound would be louder, until he caught everyone's attention and they quieted down.

"Alright, folks. Thank you for accepting the quest in such great numbers. Now, I know most of you wonder why so many people were allowed to join the quest. Let me enlighten you."

He started walking down the steps slowly, making a dramatic pause. He could feel the excitement rising in the players' midst.

"I will not need all of you for this trip. Only twenty-one of you will be joining me and the Phoenix, along with the Royal Guard's commander."

A few murmurs of disappointment echoed in the crowd.

"But fear not, none of you will be turned around. Once the players who will join us have been selected, the remainder of you will stay here, training, and staying ready to act at any moment."

Saying this, Astaroth scanned the crowd with his eyes. He could see the looks of confusion amongst them.

"We don't know how it will go where we are going, and I don't want to be caught with my pants down. I want a troop ready to come to our aid. Of course, the people staying here will not get the item reward, unless we have to call on them. But you will still get the gold and Exp, just for being ready to act."

The looks of confusion were replaced by jovial smiles. The prospect of lazing around the palace plaza, and train without danger, and still getting gold and Exp, sounded almost too good to be true.

One player raised his hand, and when Astaroth looked at him with a chuckle, he realized he looked like a kid at school. Lowering his hand sheepishly, he asked a question.

"Can we willingly stay here instead of joining you on the trip?"

Astaroth looked at him and smiled toothily.

"Of course you can."

The man started smiling. A smile that soon disappeared as Astaroth continued talking.

"But if you do, I will consider that you never really wanted to join on this quest, and you will get no reward at all. Does that sound fair?"

The player gulped as he nodded slowly.

This made everyone present understand that the choice was not theirs. Either they wanted to join the team, and couldn't, or they didn't want to join, and got no rewards.

Phoenix grinned at how Astaroth handled the matter.

'Not bad. Of course, many players were brought here with the prospect of easy Exp.' She thought.

Some of them would much rather stay here and laze around. Making them understand that without the willingness to put themselves on the line, they would go home empty-handed, set them all back into the right mindset.

Nothing was free in life. Why would New Eden be any different?

Seeing as he got everyone in the right mindset, Astaroth clapped his hands again.

"Alright! Let's get all of you sorted out. I want five lines formed right now. Starting from my left to my right, I want a tank line, a healer line, a mage line, a melee line, and finally, a ranged line."

The players started spreading out, forming hasty lines on the plaza. The split he got did not surprise Astaroth.

'As I thought, more melee players and mages than any other roles. Good thing I don't need many of the other groups.'

Astaroth wanted to scan the players, to determine their levels, stats, and gear, but at the same time, he didn't want to be here all day.

Since gear often exuded mana, the higher grade it was, due to the materials that went into their crafting, Astaroth went about it in another way.

Activating his mana vision, he erupted in a pulse of pure mana, making it latch onto everyone's aura. This allowed him to gauge their power levels roughly, through mana emanation alone.

The mage players felt the mana pulse pass through them, and a few of them became pale, as they felt the raw power coming from it, and imagined the level of control it took to do this. As for the less magically inclined, they felt like they were being scanned and ignored the sensation.

Given that players scanned almost everyone they crossed paths with, they could hardly complain when someone did the same to them.

Now that he saw the aura of everyone, Astaroth started picking out people mentally, not saying anything yet.

But as he scanned through everyone with his gaze, he noticed a player in the tank line, who was shining almost as bright as the mages. This caused him to pause.

'Is she a magic tank, or is she simply geared in excellent gear?' he wondered.

Deciding to find out, he walked toward the human woman, wearing gleaming armour of gold and silver, with a weapon that was exuding a visible glow.

When she saw the guild leader walk toward her, the woman smiled widely.

Chapter 700 Wallet Warrior

Astaroth stopped in front of the grinning woman and looked at her up and down.

"Nice gear," he said, off-handedly.

"Thank you, guild leader. It's the best gear money can buy."

Astaroth smirked. That was exactly what he thought.

"Did you get through the start of this game by buying your way up? Or do you have skills?" he asked, already unimpressed.

Phoenix chuckled to herself from afar.

As a pro player, she had seen her type before. Climbing up the ladder through money.

But when came time to fight talented people, they always fell short, even if their gear was better. Money would never trump skill.

The young woman looked offended at the comment, and already she was gripping her mace.

"I have skill, sir. And I can prove it."

Astaroth's smirk extended.

"Good. Prove it, right now."

The woman looked confused for a moment, waiting for him to tell her how to prove herself.

"Come on, lady. I don't have all day. Prove to me you have skills."

"But sir, you haven't told me how you want me to prove it..." she responded, her face scrunching up in anger.

"Isn't it obvious? Come at me. With all you got. Land one strike, and you are in the protection detail."

The woman grinned. She was confident that she could land at least one hit on the guild leader.

He may be strong, but her gear gave her so many active and passive skills that she was on par with top players, of that she was certain.

Deciding to grab the bull by the horns, she activated one of said skills, and lunged at Astaroth, too fast for what tank should be able to move.

"Quickstep! Hammer Fall!" she shouted, activating the armour skill, followed by a weapon skill.

Astaroth lightly twisted his body, barely moving from his spot, and watched as the hammer slammed into the stone ground of the plaza, blowing a part of it into dust.

"Strong, but too slow. Again."

The woman didn't let herself feel down. She assumed Astaroth was an agility build and decided to not play the chase game.

Instead, she activated another gear ability, this time from her shield.

"Shield Charge!"

As she shouted this, her shield glowed red hot, and she practically teleported in front of Astaroth. This skill was auto-targeted, and the target couldn't escape it.

Raising his hand, Astaroth stopped her charge by doing a partial meld with White to gain extra strength. With this, his hand turned to a white claw, and gripped the shield tightly, stopping the woman in her tracks.

"Again!" Astaroth shouted, shoving her back.

He shoved her with his one melded arm, yet the woman felt like a runaway car had hit her, skidding backward for many meters, before she finally stopped.

She was starting to feel both hopeless and filled with rage.

Why couldn't she hit him? Why did she feel like she was fighting someone twenty levels over her?

This was the first time she felt so helpless.

In a desperate attempt to prove she was worthy and skillful, she activated one last skill from her armour set.

"Atomic Boost!" she shouted, her entire set of armour suddenly shining bright red.

This skill allowed her stats to double for thirty seconds.

With the added stats, she activated skill after skill from her skill tree, hoping one of them would catch the guild leader off guard.

Strikes coming from over, from under, from left and right, rained down on Astaroth, but not a single one hit him. He bobbed and weaved between the attacks, his face reflecting his disappointment and boredom.

After ten seconds of this, Astaroth grabbed her mace while she was swinging it and chucked her away, using the momentum of the weapon and his strength against her.

The woman flew back for a dozen of meters, before landing on the ground.

"Alright, enough. You can stay here and train. I don't need a wallet warrior on my team. Get back in line." Astaroth proclaimed, turning his back to her.

The woman rose back to her feet, dashing at him again.

"I'm not done! I will land a hit!" she shouted.

Astaroth ignored her, thinking she would stand down since he had ordered her to. But sensing the attack inching closer, he reacted on instinct.

Spinning on a dime, Astaroth grabbed her by the throat, cutting the airflow to her lungs instantly, and punched her in the gut, making what little air she still had escape through her mouth, along with a bit of bile.

His eyes squinted as he looked directly at hers.

"I told you to stand down. Yet you attack me when I'm turned. If you want a proper fight, I will be happy to oblige you. But it will not be now. You are going to stay here and train. I don't need dead weight coming along with me in a possibly dangerous situation. Especially not one that doesn't obey orders. Now. Get. Back. In. Line."

As her brain started shutting down from the lack of oxygen, what the young woman saw was not Astaroth's Ash Elven face, staring at her. Instead, what she saw was a shadow covering his face, with eyes of white light, looking at her like a beast.

Astaroth dropped her to the ground, where she started gasping for air, trying to regain her senses. She wasn't sure if what she had seen was real, or a hallucination caused by asphyxia.

But what she knew was that the guild leader was not to be messed with. In that single moment, he had overpowered her like she was nothing, regardless of her doubled stats.

It was like an adult smacking around a child. There was no contest of strength.

Only domination.

She ran back in line, massaging her throat. At first, it tempted her to flee this place outright and leave the guild.

But she felt like it would be riskier to do that than simply step on her pride and soldier on. Starting from that day, rumours started inside Paragon, which eventually reached the rest of the player base.

The guild leader of Paragon was a demon in disguise.