

New Eden 701

Chapter 701 A Test Of Wills

After dealing with the woman, Astaroth looked around the entire group of players and saw no other large signature like hers outside of the mage line.

'At least it was just one,' he said to himself, walking back to the front of the lines and up a few steps.

"Alright, listen up!" he shouted.

Everyone's face went back to being attentive from their previous staring at the woman who had just been humiliated.

"We are only bringing two full parties with us, which means only twenty-one of you are coming along. I won't be testing your skills for this, since we lack the time to do so. So, instead, I will be testing your willpower."

Confused looks appeared here and there before an immense pressure slammed into them, sending a few of them to their knees instantly.

As the pressure kept pressing on them, even the mages were feeling it heavily.

"Since we are going to the kingdom of Themisca, where magic is extremely prevalent, I need people who can resist magic pressure. Resisting this is less of a physical prowess than it is a mental one.

"Your task is simple. Get as close as you can to me, and the twenty-one closest of you come along. Be warned, the closer you get, the stronger the pressure will feel."

Phoenix, who was standing a few feet behind, could feel the mental pressure bearing on her, but she brushed it off easily, and stood by Astaroth's side, proving it was not an impossible task.

Rodney joined on the king's other side, demonstrating that magic was not a requirement to pass this hurdle.

Seeing this, everyone still standing started walking forward.

From the back, the woman who had lost against Astaroth was already kneeling on the ground, gasping for air. That's when she understood how far behind her peers she really was.

As time passed, more and more people stopped walking forward, as their steps suddenly felt like they weighed a ton. With their pride on the line, and the chance to follow the guild leader, some even pushed themselves until they collapsed to the ground.

No one lost consciousness, but they could hear the ones on their backs choking on the air itself like it was too thick to breathe.

But Astaroth did not abate his pressure. He watched as his mana reserves lowered steadily.

Since he was applying his mana pressure unevenly, it required a high level of control and was costing him much more mana than he expected. But it was still manageable.

With his high mana regen, he would be back to full before he even reached Themiscus.

Astaroth watched on as many of the players fell to their knees until only twenty-one remained. He was about to retract his mana presence when Phoenix grabbed his arm.

"Leave it. It's a good chance to find out which one has the most potential in the batch."

Astaroth looked at her with a raised brow but felt like she was right.

Already, the twenty-one different players were sweating bullets, and some of them had shaky legs.

Taking step after step, slowly, they progressed until they reached the stairs Astaroth was perched on. Only five steps separated them from him.

Already, most of the few remaining could tell climbing the stairs would be a monstrous challenge.

Taking a step forward, they climbed the first step. Three people fell to their knees, and only five remained.

All five of them looked at each other with a fire in their eyes. Their competitiveness flared up.

They climbed another step.

One more Player fell to his knees. Four remained.

A third step.

Two people collapsed at the end of their wits. Two remained.

Next to Astaroth, Phoenix and Rodney were starting to sweat a bit themselves, as being under this pressure was mentally exhausting. But they stood strong, trying to be an example.

A fourth step was taken.

One of the two players fell to one knee, wheezing and dripping with sweat. He was done for.

The last one could have ended things there, as she had already proven to be the best out of eighty players.

But when she looked up at Astaroth, her gaze was defiant.

In her eyes, Astaroth could see the strain she was under. He could hear her lightly moaning in pain with every step she took, and he could see her legs shaking like they were about to break.

But she wasn't quitting.

Taking one last step forward, her leg moved incredibly slowly, as she felt it was about to fall off. She screamed in both pain and rage, refusing to abandon.

Putting her right foot on the step, she kept looking at Astaroth, her eyes showing resolve, even though Astaroth could feel her slipping out of consciousness.

She raised her left foot, intent on standing on that last step before Astaroth.

When her foot reached the step, and she grinned victoriously, Astaroth watched as her eyes rolled back into her head.

Astaroth immediately let go of his mana presence, as Rodney stepped forward, catching the girl before she fell.

Phoenix was grinning, proud to see another strong-willed female player in her guild, and Astaroth burst into laughter.

"Ah ha ha ha! I like her! Talk about a strong will."

He looked at the players nearest to him, who were already trying to catch their breath, now that the pressure on their minds had retracted.

Pointing at each one of the twenty-one closest players, Astaroth smiled.

"You lot passed with flying colours. You will be joining me, Phoenix, and Commander Rodney Levine on this trip to Themiscus. Rest up. We leave in an hour."

Following his statement, Astaroth climbed back up the stairs behind him and entered the palace.

When he passed next to the Royal Guards at the door, he could hear them shaking in their armour, and sweat was dripping down their foreheads.

They were well away from him, almost as far as the furthest players, and had been affected by his test.

In the two Natives' eyes, two things became apparent.

The first one was that their king was just as much of a monster as Leon had proven to be over the last decade.

But the second was even more of a surprise.

They finally understood that the Abnormals, who had been nothing but strange in the kingdom, were not just weak-willed looneys.

Some of them had the willpower of battle-proven warriors.

And with how many of them were sprouting across the land, if they ever decided that they didn't need to bend to the established kingdoms and their leaders, they wouldn't need to.

That was unless someone even stronger than them didn't reign them in.

Somehow, the future looked even more uncertain than before, with the demon threat ever present.

Chapter 702 Forming Parties

The hour of rest went by incredibly fast, during which Phoenix took the names and classes of each player that had joined to split them up into parties.

At first, she had thought Astaroth had split them into role lines to do the parties. But after his stunt with mana presence, the class spread was all over the place.

Splitting up the players into parties that would hold at least some coherence was a tougher job than she had expected.

But she did so without complaining. She knew if she asked Astaroth to do it, the compositions would be messy, at best.

Once this had been done, Astaroth and Phoenix met with all the players once again, this time inside the throne room.

It was cramped, inside of the throne room with all the people there. But she didn't care, and neither did Astaroth.

Once everyone had arrived, including those who wouldn't be coming, Astaroth stepped forward from his throne.

"Welcome to the palace. I assume most of you had yet to see the interior of this room. Know that aside from the guild's officers, the council members of the kingdom, and some important dignitaries, few have. See this as a motivation. Perform well for the guild, and maybe someday, you will be here more often."

From the players in the first two rows, which would be the ones accompanying them, he saw many smiles light up, as determined looks appeared on their faces.

Hearing this had certainly motivated them. It meant they did not limit the officer ranks to the ones they currently had.

If even the mere possibility of rising in the ranks existed, then many people would strive to climb that ladder.

Such was the nature of people.

"Now. There is a reason we decided to meet you here instead of back in the plaza. The ones coming with us will, starting today, gain the rank as inner members. This means you gain access to the palace, as well as the training facility on the sixth floor.

"This will cost you contribution points every time you want to use it, but it will be accessible at any moment, given you pay."

Astaroth took a moment to let this information sink in for the players. This was big news to them.

"As for the other parties, the ones on standby, you will be promoted to outer members. I know. It's not much of an upgrade from where you currently stand. But there are advantages. The first one is the amount of available quests on the guild board, and their contribution payout."

As he was saying this, already Phoenix was applying the changes to their ranks. Since she had a list with their names on it, it was simple.

And the Players didn't lose a second to check what the new quests were. And their faces were already lighting up with glee.

The quests in the new section they had access to were only a little harder than before, but gave out many more contribution points.

This was a great trade-off!

Contribution points were not super useful to the recruits of the guild, which was what all the newer members started as. But they knew once they reached further ranks, there were many advantages to having contribution points.

In a sense, the recruit rank was a time when they could stock up on contribution points for later.

And one such way of spending contribution points had just appeared in their guild interface window.

Item Trade

Already, some players present were clicking on the tab to see what they had access to.

Astaroth coughed lightly to gather up their attention again.

"I know you are all excited to see what your extra advantages are. But now is hardly the time. There are more pressing matters. So I ask you to wait later to check these new things."

Hearing his words, the Players understood they were still in a meeting and they had jumped the gun. All of them closed their interface, bottling up their excitement.

"Good. Now, I will name you one by one, and give you a team number. Teams one and two will be coming with me and Phoenix, but will be completely under the command of Commander Levine. Even if he isn't in your party, while we are out of the kingdom, he is the absolute authority, unless we say otherwise. Understood?"

Heads nodded all across, and Astaroth nodded in satisfaction.

"Then let's form those parties, shall we?" he said, flashing a smile.

Phoenix stepped forward with a rolled-up scroll. On it, she had written the names of every Player present, along with the team number she assigned them to.

"I will start with teams one and two. If I call your name, split to your left for team one."

Seeing everyone understood her instructions, her eyes went to the scroll.

"Kayle Pendragon; Simo; Kniffy Staberson; Stout Beard-o; Saida; Misty Mind; Grud Firefang; Casper The Unfreindly Ghost; Toony Spark; and finally, Mog. All of you will be in team one, with Astaroth and Commander Levine."

Astaroth watched the ten Players split up, and head to his right, and in them, the woman who had walked right up to him in the test earlier. She was the one called Kayle Pendragon.

'Fitting name, Pendragon. Your will is as strong as the fabled king,' Astaroth thought.

Once the ten Players had split off, Phoenix continued.

"Now for team two. Split off to your right once called.

"O'Santo; S'Tank McRot; Cory Trixster; Hanbi; Silverleaf Bloomsteen; Bella Storm; Chris Toffer; The Fabulous Houdini; Ratchet Gneimstein; Thomrir Axebearer; and Robin Dude. You eleven are team two, with me. The rest of you are the teams on standby."

Phoenix went ahead and named all the teams she had composed, trying to keep the mixes of class as even and efficient as possible. In the end, one team was a Player short, but they didn't pay much attention to it.

With all the teams separated, it was time to set out for the monarchs, commander, and two parties. Themiscus awaited their arrival.

Chapter 703 Themiscus' Secret

The two parties headed out of the palace, on their way to the city portal square. A Royal Guard escort followed them all the way there, causing a lot of attention to gather on them.

Astaroth didn't mind all that much, but some players in the two following groups were much more nervous at the thought of hundreds of people watching them go down the street.

It didn't take long for them to reach the portal square, since most residents and adventurers parted ways for them as they walked. A group of twenty-four people walking together was already impressive in itself.

The fact that both monarchs were with them only made this even more memorable.

Once there, the portal was already primed and ready to go, thanks to Commander Levine's forewarning. All they had to do now was step through.

Astaroth gave one last look at the surrounding people, and said, "Alright! Let's go face the music!"

He stepped through first, as the guards in Themiscus were already expecting his arrival.

As the colours assaulted his sight, and a swirling sensation overcame his senses, Astaroth grit his teeth for a moment, before reappearing through another portal, in a plaza of bluish stone floor, and buildings of solid stone.

Meeting his eye was the sight of dozens of guards surrounding the plaza, with weapons still stowed, but hands twitching. They were all wearing half-plate armour, with bluish tints to the metal, as well as what looked like mage robes.

From the look of nervousness on their faces, they knew Astaroth was not going to be alone out of the portal, and were waiting to see if there would be a confrontation.

As twenty-three more people poured out of the portal, tension rose on both sides. When the players and Commander Levine finally exited the portal, and the portal shut down, a single armoured person walked forth from the Themiscus guard.

Astaroth walked forward to meet him.

"King Astaroth. The council awaits your presence at the castle. Please follow us."

Astaroth nodded at him, before waving at the two parties behind him to follow him.

The soldiers that were present in the plaza suddenly split into two, wrapping around the twenty-four people from the Stellar Woodlands kingdom.

Moving forth from the portal plaza, the citizens of the kingdom gasped and whispered, wondering why so many mana knights were surrounding this large assortment of people. It was all but a common sight.

But no one dared step up and ask what was going on with the guards. They only whispered amongst themselves, theorizing.

Astaroth and a few other players with good auditory senses caught some whispers. But none of them sounded very positive.

"Do you think they are a group of bandits?" one person whispered.

"No. They look like adventurers and soldiers," a man replied, eyeing the group.

"They don't look all that dangerous, though. Why are they being escorted by so many Man Knights?" a woman asked in a hushed tone.

"Why are you asking me? I know as much as you do," the woman next to her replied.

All along the road, many similar whispers were spreading, causing rumours to spread amongst the residents of Themiscus.

Astaroth ignored it after a point. The rumours would soon die down, whether his meeting went well or not.

There was no use in worrying about them.

Plus, this wasn't his kingdom. He couldn't care less what people thought about him in a foreign nation.

This was more about the politics between the two kingdoms, than their reputation.

The further they walked from the plaza, the scarcer the public became, and the more luxurious the houses started to look. Astaroth could also feel the density of mana in the air increase as they travelled further into the city center.

'This isn't just about the people around. I can feel it.'

Expanding his senses under him, Astaroth prodded the earth for something. And he soon found it.

Opening his eyes in surprise, Astaroth almost paused his walking.

This made Phoenix curious, and she asked him, "What's wrong?"

Astaroth exhaled in astonishment.

"Wrong? Nothing is wrong. But I know why the kingdom is so biased toward magic. Whoever started it must have been a very powerful mage," he stated.

Phoenix tilted her head in confusion.

"The city. It's lying on a Ley line bed. It's nothing like I have ever seen. They don't cross paths, but there are so many of them..."

Phoenix wasn't sure what to think about this. She wasn't very well versed in Ley lines and only remembered the snippets her magic mentor had taught her.

One thing she remembered strongly, though, was what he had once told her about them.

"Don't tap into their power!" he had told her, with a foreboding tone.

This had been the one time he had spoken with absolute terror in his tone. Almost like something terrible would happen if she did.

"What does that change?" she asked.

Astaroth looked at her for a moment, wondering why her master hadn't taught her this. But then, he remembered, Aberon was also not the one to teach him this.

'Is this not something they teach mages that have potential?'

But he wasn't going to hide this from her. It changed nothing in his eyes if she knew or not, so why not share the knowledge?

"The more Ley lines are in an area, the denser the natural mana in that area becomes. Because the Ley lines nourish the earth in mana. Having this many Ley lines pass under the city means they are

being constantly fed in natural mana. It explains why mages are so much more common here, compared to other places."

Rodney looked at him, wondering where he learned this information. That was one of the most secretly guarded information this kingdom had.

In the hands of a powerful magus, this info could cause the loss of a strategic advantage for the kingdom of Themisca.

But in Astaroth's head, he was asking another question.

'If Rodney grew up in a city so rich in natural mana, how did he not gain mage talents? Especially so close to the center...'

Chapter 704 Greeting Committee

Astaroth glanced rapidly toward Rodney, wondering if there was something wrong with him.

He felt like it was highly unlikely for a man born to a powerful mage and a magically inclined knight to end up with no mana capacity at all. Especially not in an environment like this one.

'Is there maybe a way for me to help him?' he mused.

Going back to Phoenix's question, Astaroth acted like he had been thinking about something.

"To answer your question, for what it changes. It's quite simple. For a city to be so close to so many Ley lines, more Natives will discover their talents in magic than elsewhere. And for the ones that would have been already magically inclined, their power will be greater. In the long term, I expect this to form a positive loop, and it would be my assumed reason Themiscus is still the font of magic users that it is."

Phoenix pondered for a moment.

As a human race, and a mage since the beginning of New Eden, she had appeared in this city. She knew there was a higher amount of mage, sorcerers, and warlocks than anywhere else.

But she had not expected this to be the reason.

When she started New Eden, since she thought it was just a normal game back then, she had thought this was by design. She would have never thought it was something so much deeper in significance.

She lost herself in thought while they kept heading to the castle, and only snapped back to attention when she heard the grinding of the gate on stone.

Astaroth had been busy as well, scanning the deep underground of the city with his magic senses, trying to see just how much of an advantage this city had for casters.

And it didn't take him too long to find out the city's magic barriers and defences all tapped into the Ley lines by some unknown means. He wondered if he could do something similar in Bastion City, to rely less on the mage's guild.

It would be a major boon, if he could power the barriers with natural mana, instead of crystals. He was certain it would not only be stronger, given the junction they had under the palace, but also last much longer.

When his eyes landed on the inner city, where the castle was located, he frowned a bit.

Looking past the wall and gates, Astaroth set his eyes upon the massive castle of Themiscus, which was made almost entirely of the same blue stone that the wall was built from.

What caught his attention was something else, though. Surrounding the enormous castle in the center were twelve enormous palaces, almost identical in size and style, in two semi-circles.

Rodney could see his king's confusion, and walked next to him.

"These are the twelve houses that rule Themiscus. Their palaces are all apart from the castle, to signify their equal statuses. Of course, the main matriarch, who is elected by vote internally, lives in the main castle, with her immediate family."

This helped Astaroth understand a little, but he was still confused as to why even make their palaces separate. He would have expected the twelve matriarchs to live inside the main castle together.

Not separate like this.

Rodney could see there was still some confusion in Astaroth's eyes, but he could hardly explain the entire geopolitical situation of a kingdom in a few minutes. It was a large subject, especially since the kingdom was many millennia old.

But Astaroth wouldn't have to wait too long to understand either, as the matriarchs had sent representatives to greet him at the gate.

Rodney had expected this, and was already standing near the monarch to greet them properly.

Bending down in a bow, with his two hands extended outward and palms facing up, Rodney saluted the twelve representatives.

"Rodney Levine, Commander of Stellar Woodland's Royal Guard, speaking for the king and queen, greets thee."

The twelve women nodded their heads, glad the visitors had someone versed in their etiquette talking for them.

One woman walked forward, separating from the others.

"Well met, Commander Levine. I am the representative of the head matriarch, Elindra Casovan. The matriarchs have balloted who meets with you first and our family was lucky enough to get first turn. If you would so kindly come with me, and the other representatives will come fetch you later."

Rodney nodded his head in agreement, but Astaroth took a step forward.

"Wait. We have to meet all of you? Can't we just tell our side of the story to everyone all at once?"

Rodney's face went pale.

And before he could even tell Astaroth that the law worked differently for political crimes, here in Themiscus, the representative of the head matriarch spoke up.

"King Astaroth. Although I am aware of your lack of knowledge of our laws, I would ask you to refrain from making uneducated guesses. The reason for this way of functioning is simple. Making you repeat the events from your point of view is to assure that you are not lying. If you do not like

our way of handling this, then we can simply report it to the matriarchs and see how they treat your request."

The way she phrased her words, many people would have taken it as a work-around. But Astaroth was not a fool.

He could hear the hidden intent in her words, and chose not to push the situation in a difficult direction. At least for as long as he could.

If the matriarchs were reasonable, then it would be a simply resolved matter.

However, no one could tell if they were going to be reasonable or not. It was a gamble.

With a deep sigh, Astaroth replied to the cunning woman.

"No, we'll do it your way. This is your country, after all. I was most concerned about wasting time. The more time this takes, the longer your diplomat spends in a cell in our country, with less-than-happy jailers. I would have thought you would want to resolve this fast, given his less than favourable conditions."

He saw the woman's face twitch slightly, but her smile remained.

"We are aware of his conditions. Nonetheless, we want to proceed by the book. Now, if you would follow me."

This answered one of Astaroth's doubts. They didn't care much about what happened to him.

Chapter 705 Heading In The Wrong Direction

Astaroth nodded his head before stepping toward the woman. As he did, so did all the players behind him, as well as Phoenix and Rodney.

The guards surrounding them suddenly drew their weapons, pointing them at the players.

Instantly, spells were primed, and weapons were drawn on both sides.

"Woah woah woah woah!" Astaroth shouted, raising his hands toward both sides.

The woman before Astaroth looked at him with a serious face.

"I'm afraid your troops will have to stay here. We will allow the queen and your commander to accompany you, but no more."

Astaroth frowned at her.

"Couldn't you have just told us so? It would have been better than just raising your weapons on them, no?"

The woman nodded her head with an apologetic look.

"I am sorry, King Astaroth. I had expected you above most would understand the need to keep combat-ready troops away from the inside of a royal establishment. Your men can be brought to a separate building to wait under our supervision. But they cannot accompany you."

Astaroth nodded, already feeling the exasperation climbing inside him.

'It's almost like they want to pull power plays on us. This is already becoming troublesome.'

The players lowered their weapons first, also killing the spells that were primed in the casters' hands, staves or wands, followed by the guards. The tension stayed elevated, but at least there was no risk of immediate confrontation.

'This is going to be a long day...' Astaroth thought.

Away from Themiscus, on a boat headed to the dark continent, another player was taking in the sights, his face displaying a small smile. It had been a while since emotions could be seen on his face.

Chronos was just starting to reconnect with his more humane nature. His psyche still worked in a very monotonous and logical way, but his emotions were slowly returning to him.

To his side, on the wooden railing of the sailing ship, a cat was seated. To most, this cat looked black, but to Chronos, the proper colours of its pelt could be observed.

The purplish, green, and pink hues of its fur were dancing around as usual, around its body, looking like an aurora. This was a sight that would have made a lot of people curious, and not in a safe way.

This was why Nebulae, after a long discussion with Chronos, had elected to form an illusion around itself to appear like a regular cat. Of course, the illusion could fool most people, but divinely attuned folks or powerful magic users would right through it.

But people of such reaches would usually know better than to poke around a being that looked out of this world. Especially one that exuded such a level of divine energy.

Chronos had expected the trip to be much quicker, with their access to a teleporter, but apparently, theirs was not connected to any city on the dark continent. So they had to go the traditional way.

This was why they were now in their current situation.

"How beneath a majestic creature like myself to be taking such a barbaric and primitive way of transportation! Why is it that no one from this 'dark continent' has connected portals to this continent? Are they this backward that they can't offer such a basic service?!" hissed Nebulae.

This was the third day of their travels across the vast seas that separated the two continents, and Nebulae, being the cat that he was, was not enjoying this mode of transportation. He had been complaining since day one, but today was especially bad.

Chronos might have been disconnected from most of his emotions, but he was not above being annoyed at the constant tirades.

"Nebulae. Please stop this complaining. It is getting heavy on my mind, and I can't stand it much more. I agreed to follow you because you seemed reasonable and sophisticated. But you have not shown those traits since we have embarked."

The cat looked at the Fey player with a venomous gaze before shutting its mouth. But not before some low-voiced grumbling.

They were still on Khalor's trail, even though Chronos was almost certain the undead player was no longer there. He had read online reports that the undead drake that was so often seen with him had landed back in Bastion City on the second day of their trip on the ocean.

But he wasn't going to say this to Nebulae.

Since he had been travelling with the cat, the constant tapping into the web of time from the little bugger had allowed Chronos to grasp how the web could work for him a lot better. He wasn't at a point where he could read the threads that well, but he had started to glimpse into them willingly, instead of coincidentally.

Unfortunately, even if he could tap into them to see in time, he hadn't been able to tell what part of it he read, and he could glimpse a few seconds of his own accord. The only time he saw more was when the web deemed he should see more.

But in time, Chronos was certain the web would obey him much more. For now, however, he was still only its guest.

And since he wasn't in a hurry to find Khalor, given his progress while following the divine pain in his ass, he wouldn't tell him the player was no longer where they were going.

He only hoped they would reach land soon. At least on land, Nebulae seemed to act normal.

In the meantime, back on the light continent, the player in question, Khalor, was travelling across the skies, heading toward a secluded area in the northern mountain ranges. This was his next destination.

When Khalor had landed back in Bastion City, it had been to give codes and coordinates to a Demonoid capital portal, which he had gained as a reward from the Demonoid king, in the territory he had defended.

With these, it opened up a new player base for the less popular races of New Eden, and meant they could get a more diversified player base in Paragon. But he hadn't done this for no reason.

Khalor knew a few of the players on the dark continent were actually key to pushing back the invasion when it would begin full-on. And every player that could be useful, he would make sure, led back to Paragon.

It had become his goal. His mission.

Chapter 706 Patience Tested

Astaroth, along with Phoenix and Rodney were brought to the first manor to the left, next to the castle, where they were led to a nice meeting room with very few guards watching them.

It looked to the three like they weren't considered threats in this part of the city. It did not surprise Rodney, but Astaroth wondered why this was the case.

Rodney knew this was the case because hardly anyone had ever tried fleeing from the matriarchal manors. But those that did never made it farther than three steps from the front doors.

And Astaroth quickly understood why.

Extending his mana senses outward once again, he quickly saw how the Ley lines cluster was denser under the manors, and powered them directly through some kind of magic tether. This tether was connected directly to a panoply of magical traps, defence measures, as well as concealed magic weapons, most likely of the projectile variety.

The manors were, plainly put, death traps. Once someone was in it, unless told otherwise, there was no leaving unscathed.

Of course, the representative of the head matriarch didn't come to meet them right away, letting them stew in a waiting room for over thirty minutes. This only made Astaroth even more on edge.

Not because he had anything to hide. But rather, because he didn't know in what state the prisoner would be, the longer they left him alone to the cares of Commander Alena and her son Castien.

The quicker they resolved here, the faster they could get rid of that burden. And who knew, maybe the matriarchs would let them deal with him how they saw fit.

Of course, to Astaroth, this meant a quick death and an end to the situation. But to Alena and Castien, this might mean something much worse.

But first, they needed to meet with all twelve of the representatives.

When the woman finally deemed them worthy of her time, Astaroth almost sighed in exasperation. But a quick elbow shot to the ribs from Phoenix made him remain polite.

The interview, or interrogation rather, took little time, Astaroth breezing through the situation's description in record time. Then he answered a few questions where the woman asked for clarifications, and they were done in ten minutes.

Almost just as they finished together, they heard a knock at the door. When the woman gestured to her guards to open it, in came walking another woman from earlier, claiming it was her turn to be briefed next.

The process of going through every house, and re-explaining each time, was tedious and stupid, in Astaroth's opinion. They could have done this in one go, and they would already be on their merry way.

He was ready to leave already, after the twelfth meeting, and he was then told there was one more meeting with the matriarchs themselves. Astaroth was about to blow, before another sharp nudge from Phoenix brought him back to clarity.

"Fine. We can go wait in the main castle for your matriarchs to meet us. But it has been hours since we arrived. At least let us have something to eat or drink. How bad of a host do you guys intend to be, just to prove you are the superior country?"

Phoenix withheld from reacting to this comment, as she wholeheartedly agreed with it. Even if they were receiving someone that they didn't want to see that much, it was just common courtesy to offer them snacks or drinks.

Yet, they had been lugged around all morning, as well as a part of the afternoon, without so much as a glass of water or a biscuit. This was beyond bad hosting.

It was direct rudeness.

As a country, both recognized by the rest of the world, and a member of the alliance, they should have been treated with equal respect as the hosts.

But it was far from the case.

However, the head representative, the one who escorted them to the main castle, assured them it wouldn't be the case there. A meal and some accommodations had already been prepared for them.

"Wait. Accommodations? Aren't we just needed to report to them, and then get whatever judgment they declare in this situation, before leaving?" he asked in slight confusion.

The representative of the head matriarch smiled at him warmly, before responding.

"Why, we have much more prepared for such distinguished guests such as you. How could we ever send you back home so late in the day, without at least treating you to typical Themiscan hospitality?"

Her tone left no room for discussion, and this threw Astaroth into another fit of anger. He had to bite the inside of his cheeks, to the point where the taste of iron spread in his mouth, before he said something he might regret.

Phoenix was the one to reply, given the dark gaze Astaroth was giving, and the tenseness of his body.

"We would be honoured to 'finally' get to taste your kingdom's hospitality. We have heard many good things about it," she said, emphasizing the word finally.

The woman facing her did not miss the stab at the lack of manners that had been applied to the king and queen of Stellar Woodlands, or to one of their commanders.

But she didn't seem to take offence at the quick stab. She instead elected to ignore it entirely, turning to guide them toward the castle waiting room.

It took them another twenty minutes, just to get to the waiting room, where there would be a banquet held soon after.

Sadly, from her understanding, Phoenix realized no matriarch would be present there either. It was almost like they were avoiding them like pest.

She could tell that even Rodney, who had grown up in this bureaucracy, was starting to find it tiresome. As for Astaroth, he had been on the verge of blowing up for a while now, and things were only adding up to the list of why.

But there wasn't much they could do, aside from following the flow. At least until they knew the clear intent of the kingdom.

'I just hope they stop doing this sooner than later. Astaroth isn't going to endure much longer. And if he blows, so do our chances at a peaceful resolution...'

Chapter 707 Strange Welcome

After waiting for almost an hour at the main castle, this time in a much larger and more luxurious waiting room, guards came to fetch Astaroth, Phoenix, and Rodney. Astaroth got to his feet immediately, almost jumping up, his face already a mask of impatience.

"About time," he grumbled.

The Mana Knights that fetched them eyed them with a tinge of aggressivity, but no more than that.

They walked out of the room, immediately flanked by two knights, and followed by three, as the one in the front led the march in a determined gait. The corridors winded left and right, sometimes long, other times very short, making it hard for them to know which way they had truly come from.

And with how similar every corridor looked, it obfuscated their sense of direction even more.

Only Astaroth could keep his wits about him the entire time. And this was because he kept his mana senses active, and could see the layout of the Ley lines under them at all times.

But they were still taken a long way away from the waiting room, sometimes even briefly teleporting.

Phoenix frowned the first time they did, her senses telling her they had been displaced, but the feeling was so brief and fleeting that she couldn't tell if it was teleportation or sensorial alteration.

As for Astaroth, he noticed that the teleportation was switching them from one floor to another, always in a straight line, up or down. It was almost like they were in a three-dimensional maze, and the invisible portals were making it harder for them to find a solution to it.

Through this, though, Astaroth could determine that the castle was only for show on the exterior. They were already many layers underground.

And the further they went, the closer they got to the Ley lines. Their proximity was already causing Astaroth's skin to tingle.

It took the better part of twenty minutes to reach an enormous stone gate, where the guards stopped and turned toward them.

"Any offence to the Matriarchs is forbidden, and will be treated as a crime. If you make so much as an aggressive twitch toward our leaders, you will be treated as criminals. So we will deem much as a raised voice as a threat, and appropriate reactions will ensue. Do you understand?" their guiding knight asked.

Astaroth scoffed at him.

"You make us waste time repeatedly, and then tell us we are basically peasants here? Do you realize we are royalty, or do you just not care?"

Phoenix nudged him in the side, trying to rein him in, even though she agreed to his words. It was outrageous that they would be treated as lessers, even though this wasn't their turf.

The guard gave a deathly stare to Astaroth, who proceeded to unleash a part of his magic pressure on him, annoyed at the gall of these people.

The Mana Knights around them rapidly grabbed the hilts of their weapons at the threatening aura, but a stern voice from inside stopped them in their tracks.

"Enough!" the voice said, shivering, as if old and frail.

The guard at the forefront was already sweating heavily, even though he was a powerful magic user by Themiscus standards. This made him realize something was wrong with how much power this young king was displaying.

It felt almost muddled to him. As if more than one mana signature was mixed into one.

"Let them in. They have waited enough," the voice from inside spoke.

As the Mana Knights let go of their weapons, glaring at Astaroth, the gate slid open, almost without a sound.

Astaroth retracted his mana presence, sneering at the knight. His patience had already run its course.

Once the door slid away completely, the interior revealed itself to the three visitors, and Rodney froze up instantly.

A large crescent-shaped table greeted Astaroth, Phoenix, and Rodney, at which twelve women of varying ages and looks sat. Behind each of the women, one man stood in fancy clothing.

They would look like trophy men, to most, if it wasn't for the pressing presence that exuded from their clothes.

'This is at least rare-grade gear...' Astaroth realized.

The sheen that most players would see on rare-grade gear wasn't present, though. The clothes were enchanted in such a way as to look innocuous.

They almost pushed the three of them into the room, where they stood a little ahead of the two table points. From there, all the Matriarchs could see them clearly, and already a few knowing looks were exchanged amongst them.

The men behind each woman barely glanced at them before focusing straight ahead, like the guests were not worth their attention. But Astaroth knew better.

He could feel the slight brushes of their mana against him constantly, almost like waves lapping at a shoreline. It was no more than a brief graze every time, almost like they were just feeling for something.

Aberon had once told him you could read a lot through someone's mana, so he wondered if this was what they were doing.

One man, however, was holding his gaze directly on someone in their trio. Directly on Rodney.

The doors shut behind them, and silence permeated the room.

After a few moments of silence, the woman at the center of the crescent table rose to her feet. The gentleman behind her stepped forward, holding his arm out so she could lean on it.

The man looked like he was at least sixty years old, but Astaroth felt like the number was wrong. The pressure coming from him, not even magical, was much too refined and heavy for him to be merely sixty, by New Eden standards.

Once the woman was standing, and steady enough, she looked at the three of them and smiled warmly.

"I would like to personally welcome the new monarchs of this budding kingdom that has made it into our alliance, Phoenix and Astaroth, of Stellar Woodlands. Although the circumstances of your visit may be contentious, your presence is still a welcome one. Welcome to Themiscus, the cradle of magic."

As soon as she said this, twelve waves of magic crashed into Astaroth and Phoenix, carefully avoiding Rodney, before retracting almost instantly.

Immediately, the two of them had to release a part of their own mana, lest they become overwhelmed.

If this was the council's equivalent of a warm greeting, Astaroth no longer wondered why everyone here was so aggressive.

'This is going to be mentally tiring... ' Astaroth immediately thought.

Chapter 708 Factice Trial

After retracting all of their auras, the Matriarchs sat there in silence, seemingly waiting for something.

That's when Rodney leaned in next to Astaroth's and Phoenix's ears.

"They are waiting for your response. This is a way to establish a social pecking order. Hit them with everything you can control in a brief burst."

Astaroth eyed him with weariness.

"I'm getting tired of these power plays. What if I don't want to play their games?"

Phoenix was the one to reply, her tone serious.

"Then I guess that makes us automatically lesser..."

Rodney only nodded at her words.

With an audible sigh, Astaroth turned back to the twelve seated women.

'Guess I'll give it my best shot then.'

Phoenix, next to him, was already amassing a part of her mana to release in a short but powerful burst. And when she did, the Matriarchs were visibly content with her action, before locking eyes with Astaroth.

Astaroth used a skill he didn't use often, where he sapped power from all of his soul companions for a few moments, and suddenly erupted in a burst of mana as powerful as the Matriarch's pulses. All of them looked mildly impressed.

All but one.

The head Matriarch, who was seated at the center of the crescent table, looked at him with a slight frown. She could feel something was wrong.

Earlier, when she had released her pulse of mana, she had detected the royal marking on him. But in the mana burst he released, she hadn't even a speck of the same essence it contained.

And even then, he had managed to release a mana wave as powerful as the other Matriarchs. She knew she had also contained a part of her power, unsure whether he could take it, but now she feared they might have underestimated him.

The man behind her also looked at the young king with an eagle's stare. He had felt the same thing.

"Good. a proof of your worthiness to your high rank in the world. Now that this is done, let us get to the main reason for your presence here, King Astaroth, Queen Phoenix, and Commander Rodney Levine, of Stellar Woodlands," the older Matriarch said.

After saying this, she turned her head to the left, looking at the woman who was on the far left side of the table.

"Matriarch Lorhen, if you will?" the head Matriarch said, waving her hand.

"Of course, head Matriarch," the woman replied.

Standing on her feet, she motioned in the air with her hand, and soon after, a magical display appeared in the center of the crescent-shaped table. On it was a small recording of the incidents that had led to them being all sent there.

She let the recording play, with on it only the moment where Astaroth attacked the diplomat, with a very clear cropping of the image so they couldn't see the floor, where a bloodied, innocent girl was supposed to be.

Astaroth and Phoenix saw this and their eyes went hollow.

'Are they trying to frame us?' they wondered.

The video finished with Astaroth looking down on the unconscious body of the diplomat, as if aware he was being watched. And that was the Matriarch's queue to start talking.

"As we all saw in this recording, King Astaroth attacked our diplomat, in his guest bedroom, with the savageness one would expect of a barbarian. And when our diplomat tried defending himself, things only became more violent, until they left the man unconscious. These actions alone would be enough for us to declare your kingdom an enemy of Themiscus, in any normal circumstances."

She paused for a few seconds, taking a dramatic pause. In these moments, she could see that the king and queen facing them were already turning sour.

'Good,' she thought, before proceeding.

"We also have further footage of said diplomat being sent to a prison cell, where he was left defenceless against two assailants who come back to him every hour, to bring him unimaginable pain. This act of holding him against his will, as well as torturing him, goes against our very laws, and is far from acceptable, even when committed by an allied royalty."

Astaroth was fuming.

They were taking everything out of context and making them look like villains. He and they both knew that they could have sent someone to fetch him at any moment, saving him from any harm.

He was also certain that the fact of him attacking the diplomat should have caused an aggressive chain reaction, had he been in the wrong.

They were playing on their inaction as if he had acted too fast, instead of owning up to their uncaring. And this did not play well with Astaroth.

His ears stopped registering what she was saying, and next to him, Rodney and Phoenix could feel him become colder.

Almost like the air was reacting to his emotions.

The Matriarch kept on explaining how, in normal circumstances, their kingdoms would already be at war, simply for taking such drastic actions.

She even added that the king's current reaction seemed to prove her point about how he was a barbaric person.

The woman even pointed out how their relations had been so great when Leon was in charge of the kingdom, wondering how such a rash person had taken the throne instead of him.

Every second that passed, every blaming word that came out of this woman's mouth, he was wondering more and more what would keep him from slaughtering them all.

Inside him, he could feel that small black spot on his soul stirring, yearning for him to act out. To cause untold destruction and misfortune to these old crones.

On his left hand, the signet of Solomon stirred to life, animated by a power that wasn't Astaroth's.

The guards on the sides were already rushing forward when a snap of fingers was heard. And suddenly the rushing footsteps went quiet.

Next to Astaroth, a tall, svelte demon stood, dressed in what looked to him like an old Victorian men's wear, with frivolous collar included. This was Asmodeus' physical form.

"I see that politics in the living's realm never changed. How disappointing."

Chapter 709 Stupid Bluff

Asmodeus looked at Astaroth next to him and shook his head slightly.

"You need to get your emotions under better control, young, foolish master. If not, you will never earn the respect of old shrews like these."

The twelve men that stood behind the Matriarchs had all stepped forth, weapons drawn, and auras of immense magic crashing into the four people in front of them

The one behind the head Matriarch spoke up.

"I recognize you, demon of old. What is a dog of Solomon doing here, away from its master?" he asked, his tone stern but calm.

Asmodeus looked at him and snickered.

"I see there are still people alive who remember the true faces of fear. But I am afraid you are wrong, little human. I am not away from my master, simply away from the old one."

The head Matriarch looked at Astaroth, whose face was dark, and whose eyes showed emotions that should never be in the eyes of a ruler.

"You are saying he is the new master of Solomon's demons? Please. Do not mock me. I may be much younger than you, but I am no fool," the older man said, his face turning into a sneer.

But the head Matriarch raised her hand, silencing him.

"Enough. This is not the place to be measuring cocks. I thought you knew better, Edelbart," she said, with disappointment in her voice.

The older man turned his head slightly to look at his master and wife before taking a step back and lowering his blade. He kept it out, but his stance looked a little less aggressive.

Then the old woman spoke again.

"I do not know why you came out of your prison, demon, but you are not welcome here. Either shut your mouth or leave."

Asmodeus creepily smiled at her.

"You are old, woman. But not old enough to give me orders. And certainly not powerful enough in that form. Why don't you take your true form, and we can have a true discussion?"

While they bantered, Astaroth had already lost focus on all this. He had been fuming so much, he barely realized when his mind was pulled inward himself, into a familiar white place.

What made him conscious of this was a familiar voice, soft and androgynous.

"Injustice. Lies. Accusations unfounded. Do you require power?"

Astaroth snapped out of his darkening thoughts, the darkness in his soul immediately simmering down, as he looked up to the winged humanoid in front of him.

"Hmm?" he hummed, still out of focus.

"False justice. Onerous claims. Fallacies. Do you require power?"

His words were simple, almost like a child still learning to speak. But their meanings were much more profound than they should have been, compared to a child.

"How would power change the situation?" Astaroth asked, his tone derisive.

"Wrongs become rights. Power to fix injustice. Do you require power?"

Astaroth looked at him, wondering what prompted the soul to reach out to him more lately. Was it because he needed more power than before?

Or was it the need to counterbalance the presence of the demon power he used so often?

Maybe it wasn't either, but just a will to be let free more often. He had no idea.

But why would he ever say no to free power? Especially in a time of need.

Astaroth was confident he could take them on. But he would have to use so much more of his strength than he wanted.

Also, if possible at all, Astaroth wanted to keep this violence-less. Even though they kept making him out to be the villain, in the story they so brilliantly distorted.

"Can you fix this mess without shedding blood?" he asked the angel-looking copy of himself.

The soul nodded its head once in response.

Then yes. Give me all the power I need. Let's put an end to this masquerade."

Outside his mind, the bantering had stopped abruptly when a surge of power erupted next to Asmodeus and the others.

Standing next to the demon, and in front of Phoenix and Rodney, was Astaroth with large white wings blooming from his back.

"Enough," he said, his voice booming.

The air shook to his words, the power in them vibrating the naturally thick mana in the room.

Again, the twelve men in the room stepped forward, weapons at the ready, but two words from Astaroth stopped them clean in their tracks.

"Stay there."

The men felt their souls tug at their bodies as if disobeying this command would tear them asunder. It was instinctual, almost like they were born to obey this command.

The Matriarchs felt the power reverberating from Astaroth's words and suddenly doubted his presence near them was a good idea.

But one of them was only looking with her mouth hanging.

The head Matriarch had met a person with a similar aura before. An aura of power that surpassed what was possible for mortals.

This was the same level of power as the mother of Themiscus. The Progenitor of Words.

Of course, this power was nothing like the progenitors and only felt like it. But she wouldn't know the difference if it spat in her face.

'Has a new progenitor been born?' she wondered, in awe.

But Astaroth could feel his very cells draining their of life force. Whatever power this new soul companion of his had given him was not something he should be using so freely.

So he needed to make this quick. And the best solution was bluffing.

"I have heard enough of your lies. You seem to want a violent resolution, so I am ready to give you one. Have you any last request before I end l of you?"

The threat took everyone in the room by surprise, even Asmodeus. And that was because he looked like the avatar of good, at the moment, but his statement was far from exuding the same righteousness.

"Wait! Let's not rush into something that drastic!" the head Matriarch exclaimed, her voice cracking before she started coughing.

All the other Matriarchs were nodding their heads frantically, in accord with their leader.

Astaroth could only smile inwardly, glad his stratagem had worked.

'That could have gone wrong. I'm glad it didn't.'

Chapter 710 Tables Turned

Even if the head Matriarch had a feeling the power the young king had displayed was not something he could hold for long, she still didn't want there to be a conflict. The original intent was to make him feel bad and indebted for his actions.

There was never really the option of war in the first place. Themiscus had long since fought an actual war, and the peace the kingdom knew was not something the current head Matriarch wanted to break.

The earlier threats were mostly empty.

Of course, they were war ready, if the need ever arose. But the entire kingdom had enjoyed peace for a long time, and unless a major threat appeared from an unseen realm, it would remain at peace.

Even if some smaller kingdoms had fallen to the recent waves of strange beasts and monsters, Themiscus never felt threatened by them.

At best, they made for the perfect training dummies. At worst, the weaker kingdoms got culled, and made room for stronger nations to grow or rise.

New nations, not unlike Stellar Woodlands.

Astaroth undid the meld with Geminae, before looking at the Matriarchs, one by one, giving them judgmental looks from their earlier poor treatment.

The men behind the leaders all looked back at Astaroth with anger. But there was nothing they could do.

As long as he wasn't a threat, they were not supposed to act.

They were husbands, playthings, trophies, yes. But at the heart of it, they were protectors.

Most kingdoms had rulers, and guardians, or lesser gods acting as guardians. But Themiscus was different.

Being the oldest kingdom still standing, Themiscus was part of what had created such a thing to begin with. Back when the Progenitor of Words still ruled the kingdom, she had wanted something to take her place, since she didn't want to rule forever.

And so, she had made a pact with the world that was extended out to the rest of the kingdoms over both continents. One of mutual benefits.

The world would grant them strength, and in turn, they would use this power to help it flourish and thrive. With the use of newly invented runes and symbols, the Progenitor of Words had invented the ruler symbol and guardian system.

Even now, over ten millennia later, this system was still in place and assured new rulers who were recognized by the world itself, some form of extra strength, to defend their lands and people.

But since Themiscus was the starting point of this, it had always been different.

Instead of one ruler and one guardian, Themiscus had more. Which is why the council saw the light of day.

Twelve families would ensure a just rule, and one head, who would make the final decisions. And in each family, a single person, acting as a representation of the guardians.

Each council member held a symbol of a ruler, one that was weaker than a true ruler's mark, but held the same weight, and the head Matriarch held another, that set her atop her peers.

Each Matriarch selected one man to whom she entrusted a set of armour, which granted powers unmatched by regular people. These were the guardians.

But having more people wield power meant the world also imposed more limitations.

The Matriarchs could be voted away, and replaced by other members of their family, and guardians could be replaced. But the biggest limitation was the activation of these powers.

Most rulers could choose when to use their ruler's mark to become stronger.

But Themiscus' council could not. Nor could their guardians.

This was why they had seemed so menacing to Asmodeus when he appeared, but were so tame against Astaroth. He was not threatening the rulers.

Asmodeus looked at all this circus going down and burst into laughter.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Well, THAT is what I call a show. You should be like this more often, young master Astaroth. It suits you more than playing the sage person."

Astaroth glared at him.

"Why are you even out of the ring? I didn't summon you. Go back."

Asmodeus fake pouted, acting like Astaroth's words had hurt him.

"Aww. But I just got here. Let me enjoy this a bit more. Pretty please?"

Astaroth grumbled, as he took a step toward the demon king.

Asmodeus stepped back, his hands raised, as he snickered.

"Fine, fine. I'll leave. But you, young man, are no fun. Call on me again if you ever want to murder this lot. They are old, anyway. They could use a replacement in here."

As he said this, Asmodeus disappeared in a puff of black smoke and got sucked back into the ring. All twelve guardians looked at him with deadly glares, but said nothing.

The head Matriarch took a moment to recenter herself, before clearing her throat.

"As I was saying before, let's not jump into anything drastic. We can resolve this without unnecessary bloodshed, and I believe everyone agrees that we should."

Most of the Matriarchs shook their heads, but a couple of them still looked mad that Astaroth had so openly threatened them.

But in the end, the majority wanted a peaceful resolution, so it would be so.

The head Matriarch nodded her head toward the woman who had been speaking earlier, and a new video was played. One where the complete scene was captured, including the scene before Astaroth arrived.

With this, Astaroth, Phoenix, and Rodney had a lot more leverage against the council of Themiscus.

Once the video had run its course, the room went silent. Both sides knew that the first one to talk would certainly have the upper hand.

But it was hard to gauge what good first words should be used.

Eventually, words were uttered on the visiting side, who also happened to be the victim's side.

"In light of the entire situation, even though the diplomat came from Themiscus, and should have been treated well, I believe we are due compensation," Phoenix said, activating her negotiation mode.

And with that, the floodgates of discussion opened.