

New Eden 711

Chapter 711 Reaching A Conclusion

It was not something Astaroth enjoyed doing, negotiating, so he let Phoenix handle it. In the meantime, he made sure to keep the players in his party in the loop, in case anything had to go down suddenly.

He also sent a message to RedWing, who was back in Bastion City. In that one, he entered their current coordinates, as well as the location of the one-way portal in the palace.

He knew he could trust him, and so he chose to give him access to it, saying he should only use it in case of an emergency.

RedWing replied with many thanks and promised to use it as sparingly as possible, which was as much as he was willing to promise already. Although Astaroth had a feeling that he would use this portal for situations other than emergencies, he could tolerate a bit of leeway.

While doing this, he also looked at the guild treasury, wondering how much accumulated Exp was in it. He had promised the players that accompanied him some levels, but never checked to see the precise amounts they had.

And since they didn't have all that many players in the guild, he had no idea what it would look like.

Of course, Astaroth was less in the loop regarding the other incentives that had been set in place, and wasn't aware they had more than one source of incoming Exp. When he saw the number, he almost shouted in surprise.

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Guild Treasury; Exp:

Taxes to citizens of Stellar Woodlands 5%

Taxes to players of Paragon: 5%

Accumulated total: 847,894,538,946

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This was way more than he had expected, and much more than he needed to fulfill his promise. With this amount of Exp, he could shoot to the forefront of the level charts and get such a comfortable advance that no one would ever overtake him again.

Of course, getting to the top in this fashion didn't interest him. It felt cheap and hollow.

Astaroth thought more about the broad application they could use all that Exp for.

Power levelling new members, rewarding loyal ones, and raising the guild as a whole.

The applications were many.

This was also a great incentive for recruitment. Although, right now, they were trying to go for quality over quantity, in the long run, there were only so many talented players.

When they ran out of rare fish, they would have to switch ponds and go for one where the fish were duller but higher in numbers. This wouldn't be ideal, but it would have to do.

But he chose to set this thought aside.

'We'll cross that bridge when we get there.'

As he closed the interface, he realized Phoenix had already bargained the Matriarchs under the table. The leverage they had, with them being the victims, and with how poorly they had treated them, along with her speaking first, had led to an almost one-sided conversation, and Phoenix had played her part well.

She had gained the rights to deal with the diplomat how they saw fit, as well as the right to execution on their terms. To this, they had also added in a few compensational gifts that would be given to Coral for the scarring experience she had gone through.

The head Matriarch offered to remove the memory from the girl's head entirely, if so was her wish. But Phoenix couldn't speak for Coral in this situation.

She promised to talk to her about it, and share with them her response. But somehow, Phoenix doubted the girl would agree to it.

Coral may look fragile on the outside, but she was a resilient girl. She did not doubt that Coral would get through this and come out stronger.

Her only worry was how her attitude would change. Many women came out of rape situations with new personalities.

Aside from all these superficial things, Phoenix also made them promise that next time they sent a diplomat, to vet him first. They didn't want a rehash of this happening in the future.

The negotiations were pulling to their end, before Astaroth added a point no one had thought about.

"I think a more solid promise should be made for the inter-kingdom relationships. Diplomats are fine when dealing with neutral countries, or trying to get peace. But we are past that stage, I believe."

Astaroth started passing around the interior of the crescent-shaped table.

"What if instead of having you send a diplomat, we had you establish an embassy?"

Phoenix was waiting to see where he would go with this, but for once, she wholeheartedly agreed with him.

"This is a great idea. This way, you can have officials always present in our lands, and it would make it easier to communicate. But I believe we should go one step farther, and also open one for us in Themiscus," Phoenix added.

Her words made many of the Matriarchs frown. In all their existence as a kingdom, Themiscus had never let a kingdom develop any kind of structure in their kingdoms.

Even their long-time allies, and other members of the alliance, were not allowed that luxury.

The reason was also very simple.

Showing the people of Themiscus the culture of other kingdoms, their ruling structure, or even their living conditions, could very well make them want to move there. And that wasn't something they wanted.

As the biggest kingdom on the light continent, as well as one of the most powerful, or 'the' most powerful, if you asked them, it was practically impossible they would allow this clash of living ways.

But Astaroth wasn't joking. And neither was Phoenix.

To them, this was a splendid chance to get possibly closer to them, and maybe someday be truly united.

But their reactions were mixed, at best, and it wasn't something they could decide so fast and decisively. Long talks would be had, and the results of this action would be measured.

And that was their exact reply.

With this done, Astaroth couldn't wait to be out of the room, and go back to where he felt at home.

The head Matriarch dismissed the meeting, and soon after, the different Matriarchs started leaving through their own means, and the room was left practically empty.

Aside from one man. The man Rodney wished to see the least.

His father.

Chapter 712 Home After So Long

Selena Lorhen had already left the room, uninterested in her forlorn son or his current situation. She knew at a glance he still had no magical capacity, and couldn't care less if he had become a king.

Without magic, to her, he was less than nothing.

His father, on the other hand, seemed to be holding in something. He looked at Rodney, his mouth opening a few times, but words never coming out.

Rodney was eventually the one to speak first.

"Father. It has been a long time. I would like to say I missed you, but I doubt the feeling would be mutual."

For a moment, sadness flashed in the older man's eyes before he became awkward again.

"Son. I... I never wanted for this. But I see that you have become a great man on your own. It brings me pr—"

"Stop," Rodney interrupted him.

"All I did, I never did for you or Mother. I did for me, and me alone. I don't want to hear if it brings you pride or joy. That right, you lost the day you banished me into the world, alone with only a sword and clothes to my name."

His father's traits stretched again, his eyes becoming slightly foggy. Astaroth could feel the man was yearning for his son.

He probably never wanted to banish him. But it seemed men held little to no power in Themiscan society.

Seeing as Rodney was cold to his words and feelings, the old man's heart turned back to its icy facade.

"Very well. In this case, mayhap you would like to see some of your siblings? Some of them often ask for news of you."

Rodney wasn't sure it was a good idea. In the past, very few of his siblings ever treated him correctly, some of them even bullying him because he had no magical talent.

His second sister was the only one who ever treated him like a person, and that was because her magical talent was barely above average. Which made him reluctant to meet any of them at all.

He was about to refuse the offer when a hand landed on his shoulder. Turning his head, he saw Astaroth's gaze, in which he could read compassion.

"Meet with them. We can deal with any reaction as we go. I have your back, and so does Phoenix."

Phoenix nodded her head, agreeing with Astaroth's words.

Rodney felt a slight tug in his heart. A feeling he had long since forgotten rose in it.

Kinship.

His old family might have thrown him to the street, but he had made a new one. And his daughter would never grow up to feel those feelings he had growing up.

Smiling warmly, Rodney looked back at his father.

"I will meet them. You can guide the way."

Ulrick, his father, did not miss the interaction between them and knew instantly. There was no more room in his son's heart for the likes of the Lorhen family.

Someone had already replaced them.

He wasn't sure whether to feel outraged, that his son had replaced him with strangers, or relieved that he no longer was alone in the world.

In the end, he just put the entire matter aside in his heart and head.

Nodding to Rodney, Ulrick walked out of the room, heading toward the passage that led to the Lorhen Manor from underground.

Not many knew this, but the castle was connected to all the Matriarchal manors from an underground tunnel system. Just like the one they had taken to reach the meeting room.

It took them half an hour of manoeuvring to reach the Lorhen manor, before coming back to the light of day, in a courtyard where kids were running around.

Rodney looked around, a tinge of nostalgia hitting him, but he quickly brushed it away. What little good memories he had were too easily overshadowed by the years of torment his siblings subjected him to.

He would rather not think about it.

But immediately as he started walking again, the hair on the back of his neck rose, and he quickly pulled out his sword from its scabbard, swinging it to his right.

As he did, a wind blade twice his size collided against the blade, pushing him back a few inches before it shattered and disappeared.

A slow clapping came from the direction the spell had come from, and already Rodney's mood was souring.

"I'm impressed, 'Brother'. In the past, an attack like this would have sent you directly to the infirmary. You've grown, at least. But I see you still rely on these caveman tools. Still as magic-less as before."

From the right of the courtyard, a tall and slender man walked toward them. He looked a lot like Rodney, if much slimmer and younger looking.

"Brother Elias. How unoriginal of you to attack me the moment you see me. The years have not changed your savage nature," Rodney spat, his face a grimace of hate.

Astaroth turned to look at the man, and he could already tell this was a typical favouritism situation, where the younger brother's talent had made him the focus of attention, making him think he could act like he wanted without prejudice.

He already disliked this person and had yet to greet him properly.

Elias spat on the ground at Rodney's feet, showing no respect whatsoever.

"Don't speak my name, you lesser being. What are you doing in the sanctity of the Lorhen manor? You were banished."

Ulrick didn't even step in to say he had invited him, and this caused Astaroth's forming frown to deepen.

"If it were any of your business, you would have been told, Elias. Now why don't you go play prince with someone who cares? I have better things to do than entertain your boring antics."

Rodney remained calm, even though his younger brother was treating him like absolute shit, which only made the younger brother in question even more angry. At least, in the past, he could get him angry and claim it was Rodney's fault for everything he did.

Feeling the rise in tension, Astaroth glanced at the older man to see if he would step in. But already, the man had stepped aside and closed his eyes, leaning on a wall.

"This family is garbage. No wonder Rodney didn't want to come... Should we have stayed out of it?" he wondered.

Chapter 713 Twofold Bullying

Astaroth didn't have much time to ponder his pushiness, since a shriek brought him back to the current circumstances.

"Eek! What is this abomination of a person doing in our abode?!" a woman shouted from a balcony above the eastern side of the yard.

Flying down from the balcony, and landing on the ground next to the man named Elias, the young woman, with similar traits sneered at Rodney.

Her tight-fitting robe looked to be a size too small on her, as some bumps were visible through the fabric. And to top it off, her roundish face looked like she could slack on the cake and exercise.

"Sister Mariah. What an unpleasant surprise. I had hoped I wouldn't cross paths with you, either. Seems my luck is turning bad today..." Rodney said, his face in disgust.

He was sweating on the inside, memories of these two tormenting him to no end coming to mind, but outside, he stayed strong.

"How dare you show up here?! Your presence sullies our respectable name! You should leave at once!"

Astaroth couldn't believe these people were Rodney's siblings. Warm and family man, Rodney.

He just couldn't fathom they were from the same family or upbringing.

Then he remembered. They weren't.

Not in the genuine sense of the word.

"Do you believe this scum is acting like he's someone now, sister? It's bloody madness how the world outside of Themiscus lets anyone get illusions of grandeur! We should have long since bent the entire continent under our gracious heel!"

Rodney was about to scoff when he heard Phoenix's voice interject.

"I would love to see you try that in Stellar Woodlands. Our walls withstood thousands of Abnormals, who were dozens of times stronger than the both of you."

She had said those words in a calm tone, but the sharpness in them was cutting.

Rodney's sister looked at Phoenix with crazed eyes, her fists clenching.

"Who is this wench?! How dare she disparage the power of the mighty Themiscus?! You should—"

A blade cut the end of her sentence off, halting an inch from her throat, making her squeal in surprise.

"Talk about my queen like that one more time. I dare you. Your head will roll to the ground faster than those fat lips of yours can flap."

Rodney's earlier disgust dripped into his words, as his face displayed killing intent.

"Father!" Elias shouted.

But the older man was still eyes closed and leaning on the wall. It didn't seem like he was about to react.

But Phoenix wasn't going to let herself get insulted and do nothing back.

"You call me wench, and yet, you make all the fat prostitutes look noble. At least, they aren't ashamed of their weight. You make all the round girls look bad, if this is the attitude you show the world."

The woman was frothing at the mouth; the insult reaching deep into her insecurities about her weight. But the proximity of Rodney's sword made her hesitate to insult the woman back.

"I know a way to settle this," Astaroth said.

His voice brought everyone's attention to him, lowering the tension slightly. But he could see the two noble shits were not happy as he spoke.

Two waves of mana crashed into him, but he shattered them with his willpower, and sent one back, much stronger than the two combined, slamming into the overconfident adults.

They reeled from the impact into their minds, but managed to stand strong.

"Your magic is weak. Not even worth my time. As I was saying, I have a way of making things at least bearable. How about you two prove your superiority in a mock battle? You two, versus Rodney."

His words resounded like a slap in the face to the two siblings, as they felt like he had insulted them worse than Rodney did. To even think Rodney was enough for the two of them was unbelievable.

"Do you think he even stands a chance?!" Elias shouted, his face red with anger.

"Against you two sheltered brats? I reckon he should mop the ground with those cocky attitudes of yours. If not, he wouldn't deserve to be a commander of our kingdom. And before you try to slander our kingdom, think about who is in front of you. I will shatter your minds at the slightest insult."

Somehow, they felt like the threat was closer to a promise than a threat when looking into his eyes. But they couldn't stand how arrogant his words sounded.

If defeating their useless older brother shut up the young king and his wench of a queen, then the siblings would gladly oblige. Especially since they thought Rodney was no match.

Elias turned to his father, wondering what he thought about it, and the old man nodded, before walking to the running kids and ushering them further into the courtyard.

"Then I guess that answers it," Astaroth said, grinning.

Once a perimeter had been cleared, a few members of the family suddenly gathered just outside of it. They were curious what had brought about this situation.

Rodney stood on one side of the courtyard, with his brother and sister on his opposite.

"I think I will enjoy this. It has been a long time coming," Rodney said, a smile creeping up to his lips.

In front of him, both siblings looked utterly annoyed at his words.

"As if you can even land a single strike against us, you utter trash!" Elias spat.

"Yeah, you trash!" Mariah echoed, like a fat parrot.

Rodney ignored their boring insults and prepared his sword and shield. As he lowered his stance, his father walked in between the three of them.

"I will ask only for one rule. No killing, accidental or intentional. If someone's life is at risk, I will stop this duel immediately. Understood?"

He looked at Rodney, who nodded once. When he turned his head toward his second son and first daughter, they sneered.

"Then you should stop the duel now, because this is going to be a slaughter," Elias arrogantly said.

But Ulrick ignored the comment and stepped back outside the perimeter.

After he reached outside the combat perimeter, he raised his hand. And after a few seconds, he dropped it, uttering a single word.

"Fight."

Chapter 714 Setting Things Straight

Rodney wasted no time bursting forward, his excellent physical condition, due to so many years training his body to peak condition, showing how far he had come. Although his siblings were great mages, they were not so physically inclined.

To them, it almost appeared as if Rodney had flashed forward into them.

Elias, whose time as a Mana Knight's squire had trained him a bit in the martial side of combat, was a bit better off, but not by much. Luckily for him, his wind affinity was extremely high, and his magic revolved mainly around boosting his speed and the sharpness of his attacks.

Pulling out his rapier from his hip-rest, he quickly burst back, firing three slashes of wind toward Rodney, who raised his shield to block.

Mariah barely had any reaction time, but her ice affinity was even greater than Elias' wind affinity, and the speed of her ice spells was practically unrivalled. So when she thought of erecting an ice wall, it magically appeared, just before Rodney slammed into her, separating them.

But it was fleeting, as it was too flimsily built to withstand Rodney's full charge. He crashed through it like a runaway train, but his sister was gone.

Elias was trained to protect the women of his family, so as soon as he saw Rodney was gunning for her, he boosted her movement speed with some wind magic, which allowed her to dart away.

The fight was only starting, and already Rodney had gotten both of them on the run. This soured their mood instantly.

"I am not running from you! You want to cross swords, then so be it!" Elias shouted, before charging back at his older brother.

Rodney was already repositioning to defend himself from Mariah's onslaught of flying icicles, as she went on the offensive when his brother appeared behind him.

"Always the slower one!" Elias shouted, slashing his rapier down.

But a deaf dong was heard as the blade in his hand vibrated in his grip.

By some means Elias couldn't grasp, Rodney had positioned his blade in a back grip, the flat of it resting on his shoulder blades, as it blocked the impact of the thin blade with ease.

From the side, Ulrick was slightly smiling.

'His battle instincts are sharp. Much sharper than those two. His experience shows in every move he makes. Nothing goes to waste,' he mused, his eyes grasping much more than Elias' or Mariah's.

He was proud of his son's growth, even if Rodney refused the sentiment. But Themiscus' society had no place for non-mages in its higher ring.

Shield raised in front of him, icicles crashing into it, Rodney grinned. With a pivot of his foot, his weight shifted from right to left, and he slipped out of the path of the next four icicles.

This had for effect that his brother, who was right behind him, suddenly had to defend against the attacks in his stead.

Elias, whose speed was far greater than many fighters, suddenly flourished his rapier blazingly fast, deviating the icicles away from him, unable to break them. But his face showed anger.

"Mariah! Aim at him! Not me!"

"Shut up!" she shouted back, her voice cracking in fury.

Rodney danced around both of their attacks, almost like he was predicting them before they even happened, and so many times he positioned himself in a fashion to cause friendly fire.

Whether it be from Elias' wind blades or Mariah's pillars of ice and icicles, he was always in a position to defend, deflect, and evade each attack.

It reached a point where Elias even wondered if Rodney had unlocked time sight or some form of magical ability to predict the future. But Ulrick knew what was happening.

'They don't know how to fight together, so it makes them easy to predict. And his instincts for combat were honed by years of fending for himself. They wouldn't land a hit on him in years if they could fight non-stop.'

Ulrick had seen more battles than the three of them combined, so he knew this factually. But something was bothering him.

Fighting against mages was not so easy. Predicting where the spells would come from, or appear, was something that someone unattuned to mana shouldn't be able to do.

This would require the experience of fighting mages that had a high affinity to magic and could control where their spells went and appeared from. Which wasn't so common outside of Themiscus.

Looking at the two monarchs that accompanied his son, Ulrick started having some stray thoughts.

'Which one of the two is the most powerful in magic?'

His battle lust grew a bit, and Astaroth immediately felt a slight sting on his nape. Turning his head to the old man, he saw the intent in his eyes.

'He wants to fight. I wonder why?'

But he quickly ignored the old man, as the battle was getting interesting.

Rodney, through clever positioning and maneuvering, was slowly putting himself in a position where the two siblings would either have to stop attacking by risk of hitting each other or get into melee range with the commander.

Astaroth grinned.

'Checkmate.'

Elias shouted in rage, slashing the air before him, as a massive wind blade conjured from his blade and flew forth.

Rodney ducked, and the blade collided with Mariah, sending her flying back like a meteor.

Fortunately, she had conjured a layer of ice on herself, keeping the wind from injuring her, but she wasn't able to stay on her feet.

Elias froze in shock at what he had done, and it was a grave mistake.

His momentary daze made him unable to react when Rodney's shield suddenly appeared before his face. It smacked into his head hard, sending his eyes rolling into the back of his head, unconscious. And before Mariah could stop her crazy flight back, Rodney turned around, arm and sword raised. In a shout of victory, he shot his blade forward, sending it flying like an arrow off a bowstring, straight toward his sister. There was no killing intent in the attack, but it was flying directly for the woman's head.

Her eyes widened for a moment, thinking it was her end. But the blade halted mere inches from her eyes.

"Alright, that's enough. Rodney wins this fight," Ulrick declared.

Chapter 715 Reaching The Lorhen Training Grounds

Mariah couldn't hear what she heard, looking toward her elder brother, only to see Elias on his back, nose bleeding and mouth frothing.

'How did we lose?' she wondered, feeling anger rise in her, along with shame.

"I think this was a great experience for you two," Ulrick said, looking at his daughter.

But Mariah's face went red, and she started crying.

"How could you let him treat us like this, father? Have you no love for your children?" she cried.

Ulrick looked at her with a stern gaze.

"You are all three, my children. Even if Rodney is no longer of the Lorhen family, he stays my son. And he fought fair, with all odds against him. Respect the outcome, and respect his abilities. I thought you better than this."

Her father's response sent her into shock, and she fell on her ass, eyes wide.

Phoenix laughed.

"I thought mages here would be so much more powerful than elsewhere. But even Violette had better control over her ice magic than this girl," she said, scoffing at Mariah.

The words cut deep into Mariah's esteem. She had no idea who this 'Violette' was, but with how the woman worded her sentence, it felt like an insult to be compared to her.

She gritted her teeth and got to her feet.

As Mariah was about to stomp away, her father raised his hand to halt her movement.

"I take it you think you could have done better?" he asked Phoenix.

Phoenix smirked.

"Ask your son. He's seen me take him out, along with two other commanders. Simultaneously."

She didn't want to toot her own horn, but any occasion to smear more shit in the snotty brat of a noble girl felt soothing to her.

Ulrick smiled at her, realizing what she was doing.

"Then you wouldn't mind showing me this, right?"

Astaroth's mind clicked.

'So that was your goal. Huh. I guess some people love fighting, even in countries that relish peace.'

Phoenix looked at him, her gut telling her that there was more to the old man than her eyes could see. But at the same time, she was curious about where he got his countenance from.

"Sure. But I don't think your courtyard is enough of a battlefield to take on me fighting, regardless of the opponent. I'm afraid I would burn it to the ground."

Ulrick's grin only widened at her words.

"Those are fighting words, young woman. But I accept your challenge. Come with me. We shall go to the training facilities for our Mana Knights. It'll be safer there."

Phoenix nodded her head.

It insulted Mariah that her father gave this woman the time of day, let alone wanted to spar with her. Her father hadn't sparred with anyone in years.

Guardians were much too powerful for regular people to fight them. So hearing him so eager to fight this nobody was the peak of insult for Mariah.

She was about to leave before her father's words once again stopped her.

"Mariah. You are coming as well. And someone wake Elias up. I want you two to see this fight. You need to realize that Themiscus may be the greatest kingdom in the world, it does not contain all the powerful people that walk our planet."

Nodding her head reluctantly, Mariah locked step with her father, as he took her and the three foreigners inward the manor grounds. A servant grabbed Elias by his shoulders and started carrying him behind them, as another splashed his face lightly with cold water, trying to bring him back to his senses.

The motley group entered the manor, servants and kids bowing to Ulrick and Mariah everywhere they went, as they strolled to a staircase that led down.

Astaroth looked around him, taking in the style of the manor, as well as the defences that were hidden within its walls.

He was impressed that even though the manor looked lavish and only suited for receptions and housing, the interior of the walls told a different tale.

This entire building was siege-ready. Traps under every floor tile, weapons inside every wall, and locking mechanisms on every door.

The entire manor was a death trap, as far as Astaroth was concerned. If they wanted to keep them here, they probably could, unless Astaroth used all his power to escape.

'So this is what millennia of preparation does... Impressive, if somewhat scary.'

He took mental note of everything, wondering if he could apply most of these to the interior of the tree palace, back in Bastion City.

Soon enough, the group reached a floor that was built solely in this blue stone material that they made the city walls with. But contrarily to the walls, this one exuded a heavy mana content.

Almost like it was charged up in natural mana.

Astaroth slid his hand against the stone, feeling his skin tingle with power.

"What is this material, if you don't mind me asking?" he said, turning to look at the old man.

Ulrick smiled at him.

"It isn't much of a secret, so I guess I can share. It is called Themiscium, and it is a compound material we created with mana-rich ore and mana crystals.

"Its solidity is good, but its prime property is the ability to store a massive amount of mana inside it. And the more mana is in the stone, the harder it becomes.

"Unfortunately, we don't sell it, as we solely used it in the borders of our inner city, and the castles to the twelve families and the main castle. Many countries wish they could get their hands on it. But as you noticed, Themiscus is not well versed in sharing."

Astaroth wanted to laugh at the words. It sounded like Ulrick was regretful that his kingdom was so closed off.

But it was none of their business.

"In any case, it is also a great material to make magical rooms from, as it serves as both a barrier and a catalyst, to form training grounds. Which is why the Mana Knights of the Lorhen family train inside here. It is where we will be having our duel."

Chapter 716 Let The Duel Begin!

Pushing open a large door, Ulrick entered a massive cave, with a domed ceiling that was slick, almost like it had not been carved, but shaped.

Inside the room, close to a hundred young men were currently training, be it sparring with blades, or target practice with magic, taking up most of the space.

All but a center ring was occupied.

And it was in this center ring that Ulrick was heading.

As he got closer, the ground started shifting in the center, a small platform rising, made of the same stone as the rest of the room. Ulrick walked directly to the platform, stopping before it.

Whispers started spreading amongst the young men as they watched the guardian of their family walk past them.

"Do my eyes deceive me? Why is Guardian Ulrick down in the training room?"

"No, I see him too. But he never comes down here."

"I wonder what brings him here. Has he come to choose a disciple? I thought his son was the next Guardian."

"Elias is there too. He looks out of it, though. Did something happen?"

But the old man ignored the empty words. He was not here to entertain all these kids.

What many people didn't know of the Lorhen family, is that since the Matriarch at its head was a polygamous woman, close to no outsider was ever admitted inside the family.

She would only ever bring in outsiders when she took a fancy to a man and decided to marry him.

This meant that all the Mana Knights of the Lorhen family held the Lorhen name. They were all children to the Matriarch, from one husband or another.

But Ulrick only ever had three kids. Rodney, Elias, and Mariah.

After giving the Matriarch and elder daughter, she had gone and picked out her next husband.

He wasn't sour about this, but he also couldn't care less about the kids of her other husbands.

Inputting a few commands into a magic display that appeared on the stone pedestal, Ulrick smiled as a portal opened. He turned to face Phoenix.

"Alright, I set the room parameters. I hope you don't mind if I set it so these young seeds can watch if they want?"

Phoenix looked around and imagined they would only be watching for him, rather than her, so she didn't care much. She shook her head to signal her response.

Ulrick smiled before passing into the portal. His daughter, Mariah, also followed closely behind.

Astaroth stopped Phoenix for a second, spinning her towards him.

"Are you sure about this? He seems a bit too excited about that spar. I feel like he has hidden intentions—"

Phoenix put her hand over his.

"I'm sure he does. But so do I. Fighting him lets us find out how strong the guardians of Themiscus are. That in itself is valuable information. Let's not waste the opportunity."

Astaroth sighed inwardly.

'What a very Phoenix thing to do. I guess I can always intervene if there is any foul play.'

Phoenix entered the portal, followed by Astaroth, Rodney, and the two servants still trying to snap Elias back to his senses. He was awake but still seemed in shock about his loss.

When they appeared on the other side of the portal, Phoenix realized the man had set up the room as an old coliseum-type arena, and she smiled. Her days of 'ToB' flashed in her mind.

She and Ulrick had been sent directly into the arena grounds, while Astaroth and Rodney were on one side of the bleachers, and the siblings, along with the servants, were on the other.

Phoenix could also feel an increasing amount of gazes on her back, a sign that the young ones outside the portal were starting to watch the spar.

"Thank you for accepting this duel, Queen Phoenix. It will be my honour to fight a woman of your status. But I do have to warn you. I will be going all out to see where you gain your confidence from. Do not resent me if you lose."

Phoenix giggled in response.

"Then I pay the same request to you. When I win this, I hope you don't feel sour about losing to such a younger girl."

Ulrick smiled even wider, liking her confidence.

"Then let us begin!"

As he said his words, his armour suddenly lit up, magic runes appearing all over it, as his hair changed colours from dark brown to golden blond. His eyes, which were a deep shade of blue, now shone in a crystalline white, radiating with power.

Astaroth, from the side, now understood why he felt so much power from the armour.

'It's an enhancement-type armament. And that is far stronger than a rare grade. I can't imagine how twelve of these would look like in a war...'

He was impressed, but Phoenix wasn't about to let herself get overshadowed.

Lighting both hands on fire, and pumping more and more mana into them, she turned the flames blue. Then, slamming both hands together, a bright flash of white exploded outward of her.

The next second, as the light faded, her fine robes were gone, replaced by an Amazonian-type armour, wreathing in blue fire. And in her hand, a glaive made of concentrated fire flickered.

Rodney gulped as he saw this.

"She's even faster to don that than the last time... You Abnormals grow so fast, it's terrifying..."

Astaroth chuckled at his words.

"You haven't seen the extent of it. She was always a force to reckon with. I feel like New Eden only made her more fearsome. Who knows how far she'll go..."

As they spoke, both contestants were gauging each other, looking for openings in their posture, or for slight movements, which could signal an attack.

Ulrick could stay like this for days, and his patience was renowned amongst the guardians. But, somehow, he could tell Phoenix wasn't able to maintain this for too long.

And out of honour and respect for women, he decided that he would keep the fight within the bounds of her maximum output.

Therefore, he charged at her, intent on keeping this fight as short as possible.

"Let's see how well you fare in close combat!" he hollered, reaching her in a single instant.

Clang!

Chapter 717 Hidden Intent

His sword swept horizontally, aimed at the woman's exposed mid-section. But instead of evading the blow, Phoenix spun the glaive like the blades of a windmill, and slammed the blade against her opponents, producing a deafening sound.

The feeling of the collision took aback Ulrick. This was fire, yet it felt like his sword had hit steel.

'How condensed did she get those flames?!' he wondered, bewildered.

But he didn't have much time to ponder. The glaive was already on the move again, rotating from vertically to horizontally, in a collision course with his neck.

Ulrick was fast enough to bend backward, escaping from the weapon, but he felt the flames lick at his face. Even just the proximity of the weapon shaved a bit of his health away.

"Good! This is great!" Ulrick shouted, spinning on his back foot, before launching a kick at Phoenix's stomach.

Phoenix managed to bring the shaft of her conjured weapon in front of the attack just in time, but hadn't expected such a powerful push. The kick impacted the weapon, and her entire body lifted off the ground, starting to fly back.

Fortunately for her, Phoenix was no stranger to flying, and she wasn't about to become an easy target.

Ulrick chased after her, jumping forward, and slashing his sword in a downward arc. But before his weapon could find purchase, Phoenix's body had already shifted sideways, and with a flourish and spin, she went to slam her glaive into his exposed back.

However, just like Rodney earlier, Ulrick's sword suddenly shifted to his back, laying flat against it, and absorbing the hit.

Phoenix expected him to rocket away since she put quite a bit of force into that attack, but just like her, Ulrick wasn't against fighting off the ground. He shifted forward a few feet before spinning and kicking on the air itself, dashing forward once more.

The fight went from the ground to the sky instantly, and already the young Mana Knights outside the arena were uttering oohs and ahhs. They rarely saw the guardian of their family fight, and even less often saw someone go toe to toe with him.

This was rarer than meeting a mythical creature.

Inside the arena, or rather, over it, Phoenix and Ulrick were going at each other with the ferocity of two tigers fighting over a mountain. But their faces showed no aggression.

Both of them were all smiles, enjoying every clash, every spell fired, and every injury taken. They had shifted from a pure melee fight to a mix of melee and ranged attacks.

Phoenix showed superior control over her magic, over Ulrick, but the man was much more powerful, in terms of raw power.

And with the fight stretching on, Phoenix could feel the power in her regalia start to flicker. She was running on fumes already.

From the sidelines, Rodney was watching with rapt attention. Both the might of his queen, but also the moves his father employed, made him realize he still had so much to learn.

Unfortunately for him, the human lifespan was far from the longest thing. And from his traits alone, he already looked older than his father in certain aspects.

He wondered if he would ever be as strong as him. If he could ever say he surpassed his father, a guardian of Themiscus, proudly.

From the other side of the coliseum, Elias, who had finally come to completely, was watching in awe. Rarely had he seen a woman so powerful outside of his mother.

If she hadn't been with another, he would have asked her to marry him outright. Of course, his mother would have never let him.

In Themiscan society, a man married into a woman's family, not the other way around. So he would have to leave the kingdom. His mother would never allow it.

Also, there was the man she was with, who he wasn't sure why, but felt a visceral fear when he locked eyes with. Like his soul was crying to him, not to confront him.

Next to him, his sister was also watching with rapt attention, but for some different reason altogether.

'She will eventually weaken. She might be strong now, but she can't stay like that forever. There is no way. When she goes weak, it'll be my chance. I will teach her that no one talks to a Lorhen woman like she did. Not without facing the consequences.'

Astaroth suddenly felt uneasy.

'What's this ominous feeling? The fight has stayed fair this whole time. Why do I feel like something bad is going to happen?'

He looked around, seeing everyone looking at the fight with focus, and wondered where his unease was stemming from.

Up in the air, Ulrick could feel Phoenix's attacks weakening by the second and knew it was time to put an end to it.

"Alright, we've had our fun. Time to end this!" he shouted, suddenly flashing forward.

He appeared right behind Phoenix, his sword already in motion. Phoenix blocked the strike with her glaive but felt herself lurch forward.

'This is so much more powerful than his other strikes! Has he been holding back?'

Again, Ulrick disappeared, reappearing before her, and slashing.

Phoenix barely managed to bring her weapon back to the front and felt the attack go into the haft of her glaive. It was starting to lose solidity.

With another step, Ulrick was now to her left. The attack this time smacked Phoenix's weapon away as it dissipated.

Ulrick rotated his body in mid-air, going from a horizontal slash to an overhead chop.

Phoenix's eyes widened as she brought both her arms before her, wrapping them in heavily condensed flames, hoping it would block the blow.

The sword hit the small fire shield she conjured and catapulted her toward the ground. In her focus to strengthen her defence, she had let go of her attention to maintaining a stable flight.

As she flew down toward the ground, that was when Mariah made her move.

Her eyes gleamed with malice, and her killing intent pulsed inside the arena.

"Die!" she screamed, raising her hand toward the arena floor, where a plethora of ice spikes appeared, sharp and ready to catch Phoenix.

The next moment flashed by, every onlooker suddenly holding their breath.

Chapter 718 Time Slows, Blood Flows

Time seemed to slow down for the people inside the arena.

The first to move into action was Rodney. He felt his body become incredibly light, like wings had grown on his back, as he flew forward, trying to catch his queen.

Ulrick, who saw what happened, was about to dive forward as well, so no one would get hurt. But a second killing intent pulsed in the training room, this one much more vicious.

Immediately, he felt a heavy pressure slam into him, and he instantly knew this threat was much more dangerous.

Looking down toward the bleachers, he saw a blur go from the guest side to where his daughter was and knew what was happening.

He couldn't afford to care about Phoenix's well-being or his son's attempt at saving the girl. If he did, his daughter would die, he was certain.

He flash-stepped down, heading for his daughter, and got there at the same time as the other party dashing there.

Explosions occurred, as the sound barrier was pierced multiple times in a single second, and a cloud of dust was kicked up.

From outside, the visibility became null, as they waited, their breaths held. When the dust settled down, many things became obvious.

Down in the arena, Phoenix was on the ground, a few cuts on her arms and back, while Rodney was half impaled on the ice spikes, coughing blood.

The situation looked dire. But somehow, it was worse in the bleachers.

On the Lorhen side of the stands, the two servants were on the ground, eyes wide and mouths agape.

This was because everything had moved so fast, and now someone might die.

Ulrick, who had moved just fast enough, was now standing next to Astaroth, his blade pressed against the latter's throat. Already, blood trickled from the edge of the blade.

As for Astaroth, he was wrist deep into the Lorhen first daughter's chest, his arms covered in white fur, which was now stained with blood.

The daughter was looking down at the arm, fear in her eyes, as the burning pain of the hand wrapped around her heart pulsed throughout her body. Blood was leaking from her mouth.

"Let her go, King Astaroth. I swear if my daughter dies, I will make sure you die as well, and your kingdom burns. Do not make me go down this path."

Ulrick's voice trembled with a mix of fear for his daughter's life, and rage that someone had put her in this situation. He knew she had done this to herself, but as a father, he didn't care.

"She tried to kill Phoenix. Tell me, sir Ulrick. Why would she deserve to live? Do you think her life is worth more than Phoenix's? Choose your next words carefully."

There was no tremble in Astaroth's voice. Not even a shiver of anger.

He was already too far gone for this. Hell could break loose right now around him, and he wouldn't care.

But the beating heart in his hands would soon become paste, if Ulrick chose the wrong words.

"King Astaroth. Your queen is fine. But your commander requires medical attention. Let go of my daughter, and we can settle the situation. Act like this never happened. No one needs to die today."

Ulrick was starting to sweat. Not because he feared Astaroth.

But because there seemed to be no hesitation or fear in the young man's voice. A blade was pressed into his skin, and he seemed to disregard it entirely.

Ulrick even dug the blade a millimetre deeper, hoping to dissuade him from committing the irreparable.

"Astaroth! Rodney's dying!" Phoenix cried from the arena grounds, panic in her voice.

The spikes in Rodney's body were starting to melt away, both because of his body heat, but also because Mariah was no longer maintaining the spell, her consciousness fading from the pain of the hand in her chest, holding her beating heart.

A deep, guttural growl escaped Astaroth's lips as his face neared Mariah's

"I want you to remember this moment for the rest of your miserable life. Know that the very woman you tried to kill is the reason you will survive today. Not your daddy. Nor you mommy. Not the threat of war. Her, and the importance I give to your brother's life."

Astaroth yanked his hand out of the young woman's chest, blood splattering everywhere, and turned around to go check on Rodney.

Immediately, Ulrick took action.

"Get the healers in here! Now! If a single person dies, I will blame them!" he shouted to the air, where he knew the Mana Knights were watching from.

It instantly became hectic outside, as the young knights scrambled to get the healers into the training portal. Their time was counted.

Astaroth jumped into the arena, dashing toward Rodney, as his meld undid itself.

Cough cough *Splatter*

Blood hit the dirt ground, seeping into the dry compacted soil, as Rodney looked up to the bleachers, past Astaroth.

He could see his wounded sister in his father's arms, and his first thought was for her safety.

Turning to lock eyes with Astaroth, he asked, "Did you let her live?"

Astaroth nodded his head, his teeth clenching.

"Her safety is not important over yours, Rodney. You need to focus on staying awake. Understand?"

Rodney slowly blinked, feeling his life slip away.

"It is important. I wouldn't want a war to start because of me. It would haunt me into the afterlife."

Cough cough

"Stop talking, you idiot! Focus on staying awake, and only that. Luna! Come out. Start healing him!"

The small girl appeared behind Astaroth, her face already filled with worry, as her hands lit up in a soft milky glow. She pressed them against Rodney's chest, the icicles already melted away, leaving gaping holes in his body, which were slowly closing.

"Come on. Hang in there," Astaroth said, his teeth clenched.

"Don't you dare die from saving me, you idiot! I wouldn't forgive myself," Phoenix added, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Blinking again, his eyes feeling so heavy, Rodney forced a smile on his lips.

"Thank you. For everything."

A long sigh escaped his lips as the words left them, his eyes going dull.

Chapter 719 Desperate Measures

Rodney felt his mind slip away, suddenly free-floating in a comfortable darkness.

'Is this what death feels like?' his mind mused.

'It's a lot more peaceful than I thought. No hell. No heaven. Just serenity.'

His mind drifted to the scene of Phoenix crying, and Astaroth looking angry.

'I hope you two don't do anything rash. This wasn't your fault. Had I not insisted on coming, the situation would not have gone this way. I hope I didn't start a war...'

The comfort of the silent darkness around him made him feel like he could just close his eyes forever and let time slip by.

But a heat rose in his chest.

Opening his eyes, he looked down and could see his chest glowing in bright white light.

'What is going on?' he wondered.

"...in th..."

'Huh? Was that a voice?'

"...ng in the..."

'That sounds so familiar...'

His chest pulsed with heat again, and a soft voice rang in his ear.

"It is not your time yet. Live. Guide him. Do not let him succumb to his darkness."

'Who was that?' Rodney wondered.

But the voice was gone just as quickly as it came, replaced by Astaroth's voice once again, this time clearer.

"Hang in there, god dammit!"

'He sounds so desperate. Did I mean that much to him? But we barely shared time together...'

"Don't you die on us, you idiot! You have a daughter to take care of!" Astaroth's voice echoed again, stronger this time.

'Right. My daughter. What will she become if I leave her? Who will take care of her?' he thought.

Once again, his chest pulsed in heat, this time so hot, he felt pain.

'Argh. That hurt. What the heck?'

"Come on! Wake up, Rodney!"

Another pulse of heat shook him, searing his insides.

'Argh! Make it stop!' his mind shouted.

"Get up, you hear me?!"

The pain surged again as his body writhed in the darkness.

And then...

Gasp

Rodney suddenly jerked up, taking a deep breath, before coughing out some of the remaining blood in his throat and mouth.

"What... What is going on? What happened?" he asked, in confusion.

His memory was blurry, the last images in his mind being of Phoenix crying.

Turning to look around, he could see some Themiscus healers standing around him, mouths hanging. In front of him, Astaroth was sweating profusely, as two white wings on his back started turning to ash.

"Good. You are back. Don't you dare leave us hanging like this again..." Astaroth said, his eyes heavy, as he punched Rodney's chest weakly.

"What happened?" the commander asked, still confused.

When Rodney had sighed his last breath out, Astaroth had entered into panic mode.

"Come on, Luna! Why isn't your healing working?"

The little girl was sweating, as her mana was already running out. And that was saying a lot, given her very deep mana pool.

But she was pouring everything she had into healing Rodney, as she could feel the fear of loss in Astaroth's soul.

But even with all her mana going into healing, she could only close the wounds. There wasn't much she could do about replenishing his lost blood.

And there was a lot of lost blood.

The Themiscan healers had come in a few seconds later, spreading out to Phoenix, Mariah, and Rodney, in equal numbers.

Phoenix had pushed them away, shouting, "Heal him! I'm fine!"

But when looking at Rodney's already cooling body, their faces dropped.

"Ma'am... He's already—"

"No! Don't say it! Bring him back!"

Ulrick had gone to the arena grounds, once the healers assured him his daughter would live, and stopped above his son's corpse. Already his traits were hardening.

"I said no one was to die. Why did you get here so slowly?" he asked, his voice seething with anger.

The healers felt a pressure set in on their minds. But what could they do?

"Sir. Bringing back someone from the dead requires an extremely high level of holy magic. There is nothing we can do..."

Astaroth's heart was pumping loudly in his chest.

'Think Alex. Think. There has to be something you can do. You said no more losing anyone. Then do something!' he berated himself mentally.

He was hearing the people talk around him, but his mind was elsewhere. He only snapped back to his senses when he heard 'High-level holy magic'.

'Could we get Silent Light here? I think he has a spell for this, right? No. He's out of reach. What other option do we have?'

"Then get me a healer who can, you half-wit!" Ulrick shouted, about to start smacking some heads around.

"I lost my son once. I am not losing him a second time! Beg the other kingdoms if you have to, but get me someone who can bring him back! Now!"

The healers were beginning to fear for their lives.

That's when Astaroth's mind clicked to another being who had high-level holy power.

'Geminae!' Astaroth shouted in his mind.

Instantly, he felt himself sink into his soul, where the familiar white room greeted him. In front of him, Geminae was looking at him calmly.

"I need your help. Can you bring someone back from the dead?"

The soul doppelgänger looked at him, a tinge of sadness flashing by its eyes before it shook its head no.

"Death... Permanent..." he replied, his words heavy.

"No. No, no no no. No, no, no no! I refuse to take that as an answer! There has to be a way!"

Astaroth started spinning in place, wracking his mind like a madman. But then his gaze snapped back to the doppelgänger?

"I'm borrowing your power. If you can't do anything about it, then I will!"

Geminae shook his head no, refusing to lend his power. But Astaroth didn't care.

"I'm not asking," he said, slamming his hand into Geminae, the power immediately starting to transfer from the angel-looking soul into his.

Immediately, the doppelgänger's eyes widened in panic. He wasn't afraid of losing his life, but Astaroth was not ready to wield his powers.

But Astaroth didn't care. He refused to lose someone he cared about.

Not again.

When he opened his eyes again, his body was surging with power. Wings had grown on his back once more, and he could look at the people's souls around him.

And Rodney's was still not entirely gone.

"There is still a chance..." he muttered.

"Get out my way!" he shouted, pushing through the healers and reaching back at Rodney's body.

Dropping to his knees, Astaroth touched Rodney's chest, feeling the soul fading away.

"No. You are not dying. I refuse to let you go."

He started pouring his mana into the soul, trying to keep it from fading away completely.

His high affinity with soul magic allowed a miracle to take place. The mana he poured into Rodney took on a unique property and started trickling into the soul, reinvigorating it.

It wasn't enough to restore it, but it was enough to keep him from fading to nothing.

"Hang in there, Rodney. You can't go just yet."

Astaroth redoubled the effort, pouring his mana in faster, trying to beat the speed of fading.

"Come on. Hang in there."

He could feel a reaction happening in Rodney's body, as he kept shoving the equivalent of divine energy into his commander.

"Hang in there, god dammit!"

Rodney's body shook ever so slightly.

"Don't you die on us, you idiot! You have a daughter to take care of!" Astaroth shouted at the body.

The body shook again, this time visible for all to see.

"Oh, my god. He's reviving him! But how?! He isn't even casting a spell!" one healer exclaimed.

"Come on! Wake up, Rodney!" Astaroth screamed.

He could feel his body weakening fast. If Rodney didn't come back soon, he would run out of juice, and all would be for nought.

"Get up, you hear me?!" he shouted in desperation.

And the miracle had happened.

Gasp

'Thank the gods... I was able to save him,' Astaroth thought, feeling himself fall asleep.

After punching him in the chest, Astaroth collapsed, completely drained.

Chapter 720 Revelation

Many things happened after the incident in the training room, many of which could have caused a massive upturn in the current situation, had word reached outside the Lorhen manor. But it never did.

Ulrick may have been only the first husband, and many were vying for his Guardian position, but through a show of force and threats that would make the most courageous men wet themselves, he kept everything under wraps.

Of course, it wasn't to say that the other Lorhen husbands didn't keep a tally of all the things that happened. But it was just too hard for them to strike at his public image from the shadows.

They had to wait patiently until the old man made a mistake that angered the Matriarch, and then they could pounce on the opportunity and point out all his other mishaps. But how long that would take was anyone's guess.

With how long mages could live, Ulrick could end up being a Guardian to the Lorhen Matriarch until she retired, for all they knew.

And during all the closed-door plotting and shady deals, they had brought Astaroth and Rodney to a section of the manor that belonged to the guardian.

Even though Rodney was back upright, he was still incredibly weak due to all the blood he had lost. It was a miracle he even had enough to make his body move.

Ulrick had them carried to a room adjacent to his own, where he let Astaroth and Rodney rest so they could get back on their feet properly. He still had to deal with the Lorhen husbands, to make sure they kept their mouths shut.

One word was all it took for this situation to reach the Matriarch, and who knew how she would react? She had always looked fondly at her first daughter since she was to become the next in line.

But with what had just happened, Ulrick would have to convince Selena that the girl wasn't ready, or worthy, for that matter.

It pained him to admit it, but they might have been too lenient with their kids' education. How would they become the next Guardian or Matriarch, if they couldn't even act like just people and only acted like spoiled kids?

He had always hoped that time would iron that trait out of them, but he realized they were wrong.

How would he keep his position, if all three of his kids held no value in the eyes of the Matriarch?

'This situation has become so complicated... Couldn't that dumbass of a diplomat keep his hands to himself that one time?' Ulrick mused as he walked toward the chambers of his wife.

When he arrived, the door was closed, so he had to knock and announce himself.

"Matriarch. It is I, Ulrick. May I come in?"

He could hear some moaning from the other side of the door, and knew she was busy entertaining one of the younger husbands she had recently taken.

"Yes. You may come in."

Ulrick pushed in the door, coming into the room that smelled of sweat and intercourse, and stopped before the bed. The young man barely glanced at him, pulling a cocky smile, before he kept pleasuring the Matriarch right in front of the guardian.

"What is it, Ulrick? You rarely come to my chambers anymore, unless I call you."

"You have me so busy, my lady. I would love to entertain you more. But time is a luxury I don't have much of."

Selena smiled at him. Even though she was happy to get attention from the younger husbands, Ulrick had always been her first, and the bond they shared went beyond physical pleasure.

Even when they only held themselves together and talked about the future, she could enjoy his company. But that wasn't to say he had lost any of his vigour.

If something, the experience Ulrick had over these young bucks overshadowed their more vigorous bodies. He knew what pleased her more than any other of her husbands.

"Maybe you can join in, teach this youngling a few tricks?" she teased, smiling sensually at Ulrick.

"I would love it, my lady. But I unfortunately have something to talk to you about, which requires him to leave. Do you want me to come back?"

Selena saw his serious face, and her pleasure faded away almost immediately.

"No. You never disturb me for nothing. Karim, please leave. I will call you back when we are done."

The young man, astounded that the Matriarch brushed him off so easily, shot a deathly stare at Ulrick, as he picked up his clothes and left through a side door. Ulrick only smirked at him.

'These young fools. They always think they can eventually toss me aside through their prowesses in bed. Do they think that is enough? Idiots.'

But he had no time to gloat about this young man's misfortune. The situation was dire.

Selena sat in bed, her breasts still exposed to the older man, who smiled as he took in her splendour, but cleared his throat to bring himself back to business.

"I have bad news," he said, looking the woman straight in the eyes.

"What happened?"

Ulrick explained what had happened in the last hour, leaving no detail out, not even the insults flung on both sides or death glares he had caught. Selena needed to have the entire portrait, so she didn't throw the blame over their guests.

"Therefore, in light of the situation, with great regret, I would like you to reconsider the upbringing of Mariah into the next Matriarch. She is too rash and undisciplined for this honourable task.

"As for Elias, although his arrogance was mostly whipped out of him by Rodney, I believe keeping him as a replacement for me would only cause internal strife. How would people react if a future Guardian had lost to a normal man, devoid of magic? It would only cause people to cry out nepotism. I wish not for you to have to deal with such problems."

He ended his report with those requests, and bowed his head, waiting for his wife to talk.

"Ulrick. Thank you for your honesty. I appreciate it. I also value your opinion, as the wisdom you possess has helped me many times before. But I cannot change who will become the next Matriarch now."

Ulrick raised his head, his face turning into a frown.

"Why, if I may ask, my lady?"

She looked at him with a sour face.

"Because I am dying."