

Zompiewolf 721

Chapter 721 I'm A Zompiewolf (2)

The training grounds echoed with the sound of clashing steel, a dance of blades between Jo'Han and his apprentice, Rood. The air crackled with anticipation as the two warriors engaged in a spar.

Well, it was only Rood engaging in combat. Jo'Han stayed rooted to his spot, waiting for Rood to land a successful hit. Sparks flew whenever Rood swung his blade at Jo'Han, but even with all his might, Rood's sword never reached even reached Jo'Han.

"Enough playing for today," Jo'Han said, sporting his characteristic smile.

A single gesture from Jo'Han sent Rood sprawling to the ground, defeated without the Precursor putting a finger on him.

"How? How did you defeat me without even using your sword?" Rood said, panting and, on his knees, looking up at his mentor.

"It's not always about the strength of the body, Rood," Jo'Han, with a knowing smile, extended a hand to help Rood up. "It's about mastering the strength within, something every Precursor you'll go against already has."

"But I don't understand," Rood mumbled, accepting the hand and pulling himself up. "You didn't even use your Precursor powers."

"Who said I didn't?" Jo'Han replied, staring at the starry sky above before resting his eye back on Rood. "Precursor combat goes beyond physical prowess. It's about understanding and manipulating the essence that makes us who we are—the Precursor Aura."

"Precursor Aura? What's that?"

They walked to a quiet corner of the training grounds, where their ships were docked. Jo'Han's expression turned serious as he began to explain.

"The Precursor Aura is the essence that surrounds us, a manifestation of our unique abilities. It's an energy field that shields us from harm and enhances our natural skills. But, it can also be a vulnerability if you know how to exploit it."

Rood furrowed his brow, absorbing the information. "Exploit the Precursor Aura? How is that possible? I mean, your kind knows their weakness. There has to be countermeasures—"

"I never said it would be easy," Jo'Han smiled again. "Neither it is impossible... That is if you have the zeal to learn."

Though bruised and battered, Rood knelt in front of his Master to show he was willing to do anything to become his sword.

"I will continue to learn, Master. I won't rest until I can defeat any Precursor that stands in my way."

"Now I'm worried for my life, haha..."

Little did Jo'Han know that the very lessons he had imparted to Rood would be used against his son, Ashton. Rood wasn't inherently evil; he only did what he thought was good for his people.

After all, Rood had heard a lot about Kro'Han from his Master, who admitted it would take more than a dozen top-ranked Precursors to seal him, let alone defeat him.

Now that the Precursors were gone and Ashton wasn't strong enough to deal with Kro'Han alone, only a fool would side with him.

That's why Rood was already in contact with Kro'Han after secretly travelling to Euphoria and offered him his loyalty in exchange for Xyran's safety.

In fact, it was Kro'Han who concocted the story for Rood to tell Ashton and lure him to the Verge to prove that he was capable enough to be a Precursor's servant. That's why Ashton was surprised when he discovered the truth of Humanity's creation.

But that wasn't all. Kro'Han had briefed Rood on the planetary defences and the intricate traps scattered across the landscape.

This information led Rood to vanish into the foundry, where he diligently worked to deactivate the security measures, which was also why Ashton couldn't summon the insectoids for help.

Everything that Kro'Han told Rood should've been enough to deal with Ashton. But their plans went foul the moment Astaroth decided to join them.

Rood informed Kro'Han about the situation, who then gave Rood the location of one of his weapons... the Trident Rood was wielding now. As for how he was able to disassociate Ashton's control over his aura, it was also thanks to the Trident.

With that, Kro'Han had helped Rood more than he wanted to. Even then, as Rood faced Astaroth and Ashton, Kro'Han's words echoed in his ears: "Kill the kid, and I shall spare your kind. You have my word. Fail and... it shall be the last thing you'd ever do."

Thanks to their meticulous planning, circumstances were aligning in his favour. By eliminating the duo, the Xyrans could be spared.

Despite the awareness that he was betraying his former mentor, Rood was prepared to confront the consequences when he'd encountered Jo'Han in the afterlife.

"Still spacing out?" Astaroth yelled before taking another swing at Rood.

A while ago, Ashton had disappeared, leaving Astaroth behind to deal with Rood. But Ashton didn't leave Astaroth alone... he left Balmond with him.

"Focusing on an inconsequential battle is but a waste of time," Rood replied as he effortlessly blocked Astaroth's attack.

Rood's movements were swift and calculated, blocking Astaroth's strikes with effortless precision. Despite his strength, Astaroth found himself being pushed back by the relentless assault. Rood's skills, honed by millenniums of training, were evident as he dodged and parried each attack.

As Astaroth stumbled backwards, Rood seized the opportunity to strike. With a forceful swing of his Trident, Rood sent Astaroth sprawling across the chamber floor. Astaroth grunted in pain but quickly rose, his determination unbroken.

"Join me, Astaroth," he proposed with a hint of sincerity. "Together, we can ensure the survival of the Xyrans."

"Yeah... about that," Astaroth, despite the pain, burst into laughter. "It's like you said... Don't waste your time here, old man."

Disappointment flickered in Rood's eyes, but he quickly regained focus. With a determined look, he raised his Trident, poised to strike. Before the blow could land, an unexpected attack came from behind.

Ashton transformed into his zompiewolf form and lunged at Rood, knocking the Trident out of Rood's hands. Caught off guard, Rood grunted as Ashton's jaws clamped onto his shoulder.

The sudden assault disrupted Rood's composure, allowing Astaroth to recover before Ashton was thrown off Rood's back. Rood noticed the missing Trident and was about to rush towards it when a

portal appeared between them, and a Bone Goliath made of bones from the Precursors kicked Rood away.

"Sorry, it took longer than I expected to gather the bones," Ashton mumbled as he helped Astaroth back to his feet.

"Better late than never..." Astaroth replied, flexing his shoulders. "Shall we end this then?"

Chapter 722 Another Tale Of Backstabbing (1)

Bone Goliath... it had been a while since Ashton last used such skill. Well, it was because he found it a pain to carry vast amounts of bones, and while he could use his skeleton soldiers for supply, the Goliath made from their bones would be too weak to last against Rood or Kro'Han.

Even then, Ashton knew he had to do something unexpected to catch Rood off guard and steal the Trident. That's why he left Astaroth to distract Rood while he summoned his skeleton army to help him look for the bones of the Precursors.

It was a gamble because, for all he knew, the Precursors might not have left their allies' corpses on the Verge. But the fact they had placed several traps and other creations to protect a forsaken planet meant they had to be hiding something.

Thankfully, Ashton's gamble paid off when the skeleton soldiers found a graveyard right outside the ruins. But the bones he gathered weren't enough on their own.

In the end, Ashton had to use some of his soldiers to make up for the lacking amount and summoned a Bone Goliath primarily consisting of Precursor's bones.

With the Trident gone, Ashton's Precursor Aura should return to normal. But Ashton could guess from his earlier encounters that Rood was proficient in fighting against Precursors and Xyrans.

Hence, instead of depending on his newfound genes, Ashton decided to go old school and defeat Rood without using his Precursor lineage.

"You sure about it?" Astaroth asked Ashton again. "You could use your aura to get rid of him-"

"You think he has no contingencies prepared for this situation?" Ashton replied. "He had learned how to fight against Precursors from my father. Although he wasn't as strong as Kro'Han, he was still the leader of the Precursors."

"Yeah... Gotta give the man some credit where he deserves," Astaroth sighed but agreed. "So, what do we do next?"

"Defeat him, what else?" Ashton smirked. "He has to know something about Kro'Han that would come in handy later on, so let's try not to kill him."

"That's easier said than done."

"What do you mean?" Ashton questioned. "Use Raphael and seal him! Wait... no, you didn't!?"

"Yes, I did..." Astaroth admitted with a sheepish grin. "I left him to spend some quality time with his granddaughter back on Xenithar."

Ashton couldn't believe his ears. What kind of glorified general would leave his primary weapon behind before venturing into a potentially dangerous zone? Despite his disbelief, Astaroth's candid confession clarified one of Ashton's lingering confusions.

"So that's why you were fighting barehanded!?"

"Yup... But hey! My arms are no less than a weapon!"

"Sure, your arms are as much a weapon as your brain, which is useless!" The banter would have continued if not for a stray boulder shooting past them.

"Oi! Watch where you're throwing things!" Astaroth yelled at the Goliath, who just shrugged and continued bashing Rood... or at least trying to do it.

Goliath had overwhelmed Rood, and it seemed Rood's strength was fading away without the Trident in hand. Even then, he went toe to toe with the towering bone creature. The sight made Ashton wonder how strong Rood would have been in his prime.

"Looks like your father had an eye for talented people," Astaroth commented.

Ashton didn't respond but smiled. His life had been full of drama, but whenever someone mentioned his father, he couldn't help but wonder what kind of life he led before coming to Earth.

Unfortunately, the only people who seemed to know him personally were out for Ashton's blood, so it wasn't like he could learn more about him from them.

"Let's end this and go home," Ashton mumbled. "We can devise strategies to get rid of Kro'Han some other time."

"Right..."

As soon as they were done, the duo sprouted their wings and rushed towards Rood with all their might. Rood saw the pair heading his way from the corner of his eyes. But even though he did, he could do nothing to stop them as his hands were already tied as he dealt with the Goliath.

Astaroth and Ashton closed in with incredible speed, their wings slicing through the air as they aimed for Rood. The intense rush of wind echoed on the planet as they approached the enemy.

Rood could sense the Precursor Aura leaking from Ashton and knew he couldn't ignore him. He swiftly disentangled himself from the struggling Goliath. The massive creature roared, but Rood paid it no heed. He knew he had a more immediate threat.

"No point in fighting back, Old man!"

Astaroth led the assault, his golden wings glittering in the night. Without stopping, he unleashed a barrage of strikes on Rood, aiming a powerful punch at Rood's midsection.

But Rood, despite being occupied, managed to evade the blow by shifting his body weight to dodge. Astaroth's punch had missed its target, but it created an opening for Ashton.

Ashton lunged at Rood from the side. His massive jaws were ready to clamp down on Rood's shoulder. However, Rood's precognitive skill, honed over the years, kicked in, allowing him to predict the attack.

But even then, he couldn't dodge the strike himself. But he had another way of dodging the attack, by allowing himself to get hit by the Goliath's massive arm.

Thanks to the punch, his body got twisted, and he narrowly avoided Ashton's bite. Rood did not want to face three opponents on the ground and brought out his wings before rushing into the air.

Watching Rood soar over them, Ashton prepared to rush after him, but Astaroth stopped him when he noticed something suspicious in the air.

"No, don't!" Astaroth yelled to stop Ashton.

"What!?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" Astaroth barked back.

A shadow loomed overhead, casting an ominous presence. The two of them looked up, their eyes widening as they saw a massive spaceship descending from the cosmic expanse. It didn't take long for Astaroth to recognise the ship—it was once used by the Precursors.

"Is that... Kro'Han?"

Chapter 723 Another Tale Of Backstabbing (2)

"It can't be him," Astaroth replied. "His explosive aura would give him away."

While Astaroth's words held truth, Kro'Han was the only one Ashton suspected who could have access to precursor technology like their ship. But if it wasn't him, then who else could it be?

For a fraction of a second, Ashton thought it could be his father. Despite Ashton having obliterated the remnants of Jo'Han, a glimmer of hope persisted in his heart—a hope born from the inherent belief that his father, being a precursor, might have somehow endured the seemingly irreversible fate.

But he knew it was impossible. This meant the question remained... who was on that ship? Unluckily for the duo, the sight of the vessel made Rood cackle, which could mean one thing...

"The ship is here for that bastard!" Astaroth said before lunging towards the Xyran.

Before Astaroth could reach Rood, Ashton yanked him back. Surprised by the sudden intervention, Astaroth was about to inquire when a burst of energy surged through the planet's surface, hurtling toward their ship.

Regrettably, the trajectory of the energy burst intersected with the precise location where Rood and the Goliath stood. In an instant, they were obliterated, dissolving into nothingness like they had never existed.

Had Ashton not detected the impending attack and prevented Astaroth from advancing, he too would have met a similar fate, perishing alongside Rood.

"What the hell was that attack?" Astaroth exclaimed in confusion as the hole inside the planet gradually repaired itself.

"We can think about it once we're safe!" Ashton bellowed, charging toward their ship. "Move! Move! Move!"

However, right before they could reach the ship, it was obliterated by the Precursor's vessel. Debris from the obliterated ship scattered in all directions as Ashton and Astaroth ducked for cover behind the remnants of a fallen structure.

The ominous spacecraft hovered menacingly above, its dark silhouette casting an eerie shadow over the landscape.

Ashton gritted his teeth, eyes fixed on the vessel. "We need a plan. Any suggestions, Astaroth?"

"We can't take that ship head-on. It's too powerful," Astaroth scanned the area, assessing their limited options. "We need a distraction."

"Well... I'm out of options," Ashton replied. "No... wait! There might be something I can do!"

Since Rood's trident was the one thing interfering with Ashton's connection with Precursor tech, he should be able to call for reinforcements now that it was gone.

At that moment, a swarm of robotic insects emerged from the ruins. On Ashton's command, the creatures charged toward the spacecraft, diverting its attention momentarily.

Like Ashton had expected, the ship responded with a barrage of smaller energy blasts, disintegrating some insects while the others kept heading towards the vessel.

"This might buy us some time," Ashton commented as they seized the opportunity to move away from the wreckage. "We need to find something like a control room. Something that will help us deal with that fucking ship!"

"Yeah... good luck finding anything in this ruin," Astaroth rolled his eyes, but even he knew it was their only bet at victory. "Fine, let's go! Those damned insects won't last forever!"

As Ashton and Astaroth raced through the desolate landscape, the swarm of robotic insects followed them, engaging the mysterious spacecraft as and when required.

The ship retaliated with a storm of energy blasts, disintegrating some insects, but more appeared through the cracks on the surface. Still, Ashton knew the insects wouldn't last forever, and they needed to move quicker.

As they weaved through the remnants of buildings, they spotted a structure that seemed promising. They sprinted toward it without hesitation, hoping it would provide the solution they desperately needed.

Just as they reached the entrance of the building, the last of the robotic insects succumbed to the ship's assault. The duo, however, managed to dive inside the structure, seeking refuge from the impending danger. The door closed behind them, momentarily shielding them from the hostile onslaught.

"That fucking thing destroyed Goliath and our ship; you think these buildings will protect us?" Astaroth yelled at Ashton, who promptly smacked him.

"Concentrate, you dimwit! Panicking ain't gonna help you out of this mess!"

"I... wasn't panicking, was I?" Astaroth mumbled as if he couldn't remember what happened a couple of moments ago.

"...Let's look for anything useful."

Ashton sighed, frustration evident in his eyes. He sensed something was off with Astaroth since they got to the Xyran homeworld. Ashton had been meaning to talk with Astaroth about his observations, but for now, they had a deadly threat to deal with.

"This place is ancient, Ashton. Are you sure we can find something to deal with that ship?" Astaroth questioned, genuine concern etched on his face.

"We don't have a choice, do we?" Ashton said as his fingers danced over the dusty control panels, and after a moment, a holographic display flickered to life.

Thankfully, they didn't have to look for anything. The dimly lit room revealed countless consoles and flickering but working holographic displays with foreign symbols.

Yet Ashton understood the meaning of the symbols and knew they were in the right place.

"The ship must have shields protecting it," Ashton commented, his fingers dancing across the interface. "We need to get rid of those first."

"Once the shields are down, we can target its propulsion systems," Astaroth leaned in, studying the controls. "That should bring it down."

"But for that, we need massive weapons," Ashton declared, spotting a bank of consoles. "If we can access the planetary defences, we might stand a chance."

"Here!" Astaroth yelled, pointing at a holographic interface. "I got weapons here!"

"Good work!"

Outside, the desolate landscape rumbled as the surface responded to Ashton's command. Old, rusty cannons, remnants of a bygone era, emerged from the ground with a reluctant groan. The once-potent weapons struggled to break free from the shackles of time and decay.

Only some cannons managed to pierce through the layers of dirt and debris accumulated over centuries. Their metal frames, tarnished by time, gleamed dully in the pale light filtering through the dusty atmosphere.

The rest remained trapped, entangled in the wreckage or rendered useless by rust and corrosion.

"Looks like time hasn't been kind to these relics," Astaroth remarked. "But these should be enough to take down one ship."

With a thunderous roar, the cannons released a volley of energy blasts. Some of the shots hit their mark, causing visible damage to the targeted spacecraft. However, the incomplete deployment of the cannons hindered the overall effectiveness of the attack.

But Ashton didn't give up and kept up with the barrage. The duo worked swiftly, their fingers dancing over the alien interface. They managed to locate the ship's vulnerabilities, exploiting weaknesses in its defensive systems. However, their moment of victory was short-lived.

Chapter 724 Another Tale Of Backstabbing (3)

"Did we do it?" Astaroth inquired.

"Not sure..." Aston replied, scratching his head. "Let's head outside and look?"

"The last one outside is gay-"

"Seriously, dude? Grow the fuck up!" Ashton rolled his eyes, but the next second rushed outside.

Within moments, Ashton and Astaroth rushed outside, their eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of the spaceship attacking them.

The echo of their footsteps reverberated through the deserted landscape. Suddenly, they saw the smoking wreckage of the spacecraft, crashed and broken. Their cannons had found their mark.

Ashton and Astaroth exchanged triumphant glances, a fleeting sense of relief washing over them.

"We did it!" Ashton exclaimed, a grin breaking across his face.

Astaroth nodded, his eyes scanning the wreckage. "Looks like they won't be bothering us anymore."

Celebration filled the air as they basked in the apparent victory. However, the jubilation was short-lived. The ground beneath them trembled, and the distant hum of engines filled the air.

As they turned to look, their eyes widened in disbelief. More than a hundred similar ships revealed themselves, their camouflage fading away like shadows in the light.

"Oh no..." The realisation struck Ashton like a punch to the gut.

"It was a trap..." Astaroth's expression mirrored Ashton's growing dread.

The ships' cannons were trained on them, ominous barrels pointing like accusing fingers. The celebration turned to despair as the gravity of the situation sank in.

"We're done for," Astaroth muttered, his voice tinged with desperation.

Ashton's mind raced, searching for a way out, but the sheer number of ships left no room for hope. They were surrounded and trapped in a deadly crossfire.

Ashton tried using the portal to get back to Earth, but his skills didn't activate... none of them did. It was the same with Astaroth, as neither could do anything.

In the middle of their confusion, a shadow fell over them, and a booming voice echoed through the air.

"Heretics! In the name of our lord Kro'Han, you shall be executed for your insolence!"

A figure descended from one of the ships, draped in elaborate robes – the Pope of the Cult of Cosmos. He regarded Ashton and Astaroth with disdain, his eyes burning with fanatic fervour.

"This planet is the holy land of our forefathers, and you defile it with your presence."

Ashton clenched his fists, defiance burning in his eyes. "We won't go down without a fight."

"Fight?" The Pope laughed, pointing at the ships behind him. "This... will be a massacre!"

"...Try your best!"

The Pope, undeterred, raised his hand, signalling the impending doom. But before he could give the command, the device strapped to his hand came alive.

A familiar holograph poked out of the watch to show Kro'Han sitting on a throne made of bones. The Pope religiously bowed before the holograph and listened intently, his expression shifting from arrogance to confusion to submission.

"As you wish, my Lord..." The Pope mumbled.

Astaroth's eyes narrowed as he caught the silent exchange between the Pope and Kro'Han. Still bewildered by his lord's request, the Pope tossed the communicator towards Astaroth, who caught it hesitantly.

"Do you remember your oath or..." Kro'Han's voice resonated through the device, chilling in its authority. "Do you want her to die?"

"Oath? What Oath?" Confusion etched Ashton's face as he looked at Astaroth. "What's he talking about?"

But Astaroth ignored Ashton and kept staring at Kro'Han. "You wouldn't dare-"

"And who is there to stop me from doing it?" Kro'Han laughed. "No one. I'm your only hope if you want to save her. Carefully think about it..."

Astaroth's eyes conveyed anger as he tossed the communicator back to the Pope, who caught it with uncertainty.

"You have your answer," Astaroth replied before walking to Ashton's side.

The Pope, though perplexed, heeded Kro'Han's words. Ashton, growing impatient, demanded answers.

"What's going on, Astaroth? What did he mean?"

Astaroth hesitated momentarily, not bothering to answer Ashton and instead asked his own question.

"Can you use the portal to teleport back to Earth?"

"Not yet," Ashton replied, his confusion deepening.

"Good," Astaroth said cryptically, and without warning, he plunged his hand into Ashton's chest.

Shock and pain flashed across Ashton's face as Astaroth's fingers closed around his heart.

"I'm sorry... But I have to do this," Astaroth whispered, tears glistening in his eyes.

"Wha- ARRGH!"

Ashton's world spun as Astaroth ripped his heart out, the pain excruciating. Everything went black, his consciousness slipping away. The last words he heard were Astaroth's sorrowful apology.

In the void of unconsciousness, Ashton's mind swirled with confusion and betrayal. The once clear line between ally and enemy blurred, leaving a bitter taste of treachery.

Kro'Han's voice, like a thunderclap, reverberated through the desolate landscape as Astaroth wept.

"Good work," he acknowledged, a cold satisfaction laced in his tone.

Astaroth's tears fell unchecked, staining his cheeks with sorrow and regret. Betraying Ashton, his brother-in-arms, cut through him like a jagged blade.

Memories of a similar betrayal from his past haunted him, amplifying the weight of his actions. He hated it when Beelzebub betrayed him, yet he had done the same to Ashton.

No... he didn't betray just Ashton but everyone who trusted him. Astaroth looked at his hands, now smeared with Ashton's blood, and the disgust within him intensified, and he couldn't hold it back anymore.

Astaroth's cry tore through the silence in that desolate moment, a wail of anguish that seemed to echo the pain within his soul. The cultists, witnesses to the grief that consumed their 'enemy', cowered in fear. The terror on their faces mirrored the horror that gripped Astaroth's heart.

Fueled by fear and confusion, the cultists distanced themselves from Astaroth. They whispered amongst themselves, deciding it best to be rid of this unpredictable force. However, Kro'Han, their god and master, had different plans.

Kro'Han, a puppeteer in the shadows, understood the value of power. Astaroth, now broken beyond repair, was a pawn he could control.

Also, now that Ashton was gone, no one could stop him. Kro'Han, calculating and opportunistic as ever, recognised the potential in Astaroth and since he now had Precursor genes as well, Kro'Han knew he couldn't leave him unchecked.

"Hold," Kro'Han commanded the cultists, his words echoing authority that brooked no disobedience.

The cultists, fearing Kro'Han's wrath, froze in their tracks. Astaroth, his cries now reduced to choked sobs, looked up with hollow eyes.

"You passed the test, Astaroth," Kro'Han acknowledged Astaroth's efforts, but his praise only made Astaroth more disgusted. But that was the extent of what he could do.

"Rise, Astaroth. Your loyalty shall be rewarded."

As Astaroth stood, the remnants of his former self crumbled as he did. Meanwhile, Kro'Han continued to weave his intricate web of control.

"Ashton's demise was unfortunate but necessary. Still, I have plans for the universe that require a strong enforcer of my will. You, Astaroth, shall be that enforcer."

Astaroth looked like he was about to tear Kro'Han's holograph into pieces. But he controlled his rage. He had already committed the unforgivable sin. There was no point in holding on to the goodness in his heart anymore.

"You shall be my right hand, Astaroth. Together, we shall shape the destiny of the universe." Kro'Han's eyes gleamed with a malevolent light as he concluded.

"I... accept."

The tears on his cheeks had dried, leaving behind a cold resolve. Kro'Han, satisfied with his new puppet, gestured towards the hundred ships that loomed overhead.

"The universe awaits, Astaroth. We have much work to do," Kro'Han declared, his voice a harbinger of impending darkness. "Come to me without any delay."

"As you wish... my lord," Astaroth said, casting a final, vacant glance at the spot where Ashton had fallen. "See you later... brother."

Chapter 725 Farewell... Old Friend

Ashton's eyes shot open in the eerie quiet of the unknown, and he found himself engulfed in an all-encompassing darkness. It wasn't the familiar darkness of a closed room or a night devoid of stars – it was a profound, endless void, a blackness that seemed to stretch on forever.

"Where am I?"

A start jolted through him, and he sat up abruptly, surrounded by the impenetrable dark. There were no outlines, no shapes, just an oppressive nothingness. No skies above, no ground below. Just darkness stretching out in every direction.

"Please tell me this is some kind of a prank..." Ashton said out loud, hoping someone would reply, but no one did.

The silence was deafening, and Ashton strained to hear any sound, but it was as if the very air absorbed any attempt at noise. He tried to discern any hint of his surroundings, but the darkness clung to him like a shroud, offering no answers.

Ashton's breath quickened as he strained his eyes, trying to make sense of this void that seemed to defy any logic of space or time. The weight of the unknown pressed upon him, and a feeling of isolation set in, and then there was a sound.

"Footsteps? They're faint but undeniable."

Ashton's head snapped towards the direction of the noise, squinting into the darkness. Gradually, a figure emerged, a silhouette taking shape against the black backdrop.

It was Sven, his shadow knight, walking steadily toward him. The relief washed over Ashton at the sight of Sven walking towards him.

"Sven?" he called out, his voice echoing, swallowed by the darkness.

"My lord," he acknowledged as his stoic figure was hugged with shadows.

A sense of reassurance settled upon Ashton, but the questions lingered, pressing at the edges of his thoughts.

"Where are we?"

"I do not know, my lord. Much like you, I find myself in a realm unfamiliar to me." Sven replied, yet Ashton thought his summon knew more than he was letting on.

"Is that so?" Ashton nodded, a frown etching his features. "Then I suppose you don't know how we get out of here?"

"I know the way, master. I can see the exit in the distance," A glint of determination flickered in Sven's shadowy eyes. "I can guide you if you follow me, my lord."

"You said you don't know where we are, but you know the way out?" Ashton rolled his eyes. "You're a terrible liar, unlike me. But well, I'll entertain your words. Lead the way."

Soon, Ashton trailed behind Sven. Yet every step felt uncertain, and the air thickened as they moved through the enigmatic void. Ashton's senses strained to grasp any semblance of his surroundings, but the darkness persisted.

The emptiness was disorienting, and Ashton's mind grappled with the surrealism of it all. As he walked behind Sven, he couldn't shake the feeling that this was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

He pinched himself, half-expecting the sensation of a dream, but there was nothing. No pain, no tangible feeling – just the haunting void.

"What a strange place is this?" Ashton laughed. "It's like I'm dead or something-"

And then, a revelation donned on his mind. Ashton glanced down, and his heart skipped a beat. There, right in the middle of his chest, was a gaping hole.

A void within the void, a reminder of Astaroth's betrayal. Ashton's mind swirled with confusion, the puzzle pieces refusing to align. Why would Astaroth betray him?

Anger bubbled within Ashton as he remembered his last moments, a fierce surge that threatened to consume him. Yet, as quickly as it rose, it subsided.

If he was truly dead, what good was anger? Instead, his thoughts shifted to Anna, his mother Ava, and the worry etched across his face deepened.

A realisation dawned on him – Sven, his faithful companion, was walking alongside him in this mysterious afterlife. But why? Hadn't he left Sven on Earth to protect his loved ones?

"Sven," Ashton questioned, the confusion evident in his voice, "why are you here with me? I left you to protect Anna and my mother."

"My lord, you summoned me into this dark space as soon as you woke up." Sven's response only added to the enigma.

"I didn't summon you," Ashton furrowed his brow, grappling with the implications. "How is this possible?"

"I do not know, My Lord..." Sven remained silent for a moment before offering a cryptic explanation.

"I was on Earth, carrying out my duties as I was instructed to when I felt a sudden pull," he said. "Someone was calling for me, for my help. It was you, master. I heard your voice, and the next moment, I was in this strange realm."

"...But I distinctly remember not summoning you," Ashton mumbled, trying to come up with a solution.

The pair continued through the void, Sven leading the way with unwavering determination. Ashton's thoughts continued to churn, a storm of uncertainty raging within him.

As they continued through the abyss, Ashton couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something larger was at play. His thoughts whirred, trying to make sense of the situation. If he was truly dead, what awaited him beyond this darkness?

The two figures moved through the darkness, the air heavy with unspoken emotions. As Ashton's mind grappled with the surreal circumstances, he found himself standing before a bright door.

It radiated an otherworldly glow, contrasting starkly with the surrounding darkness. Curious, Ashton tried to peer beyond the door, but all he could see was a blinding light.

"Hm... I suppose that's the entrance to hell?" Ashton laughed. "But it looks too pure to be that. I thought hell would look more... fiery?"

With a solemn demeanour, Sven dropped to his knees and bowed before Ashton.

"What is this, Sven?"

"My lord, it has been an honour to serve you."

"What are you doing, Sven?" Astonished, Ashton took a step back, his eyes widening.

"You are not going to heaven or hell, my lord." Sven's voice carried a mixture of reverence and finality. "Someone is, but not you."

It then hit Ashton. His title... [The Emissary Of Death] must have activated in his dying moments and summoned Sven in whatever realm they were to die in Ashton's place.

At that moment, Ashton couldn't help but feel a sense of gratitude for Sven's unwavering loyalty. The bond between master and shadow knight, it seemed, transcended the boundaries of life and death.

"Sven, why did you sacrifice yourself for me?" Ashton inquired, a genuine curiosity in his voice.

"That is a stupid question, my Lord," Sven paused before responding, his words carrying a weight of profound commitment. "My purpose is to serve you, my lord. I pledged my loyalty to you. It goes without saying that I would gladly give my existence for your safety."

"Even if I didn't ask for such sacrifice?" Ashton chuckled, a bittersweet smile playing on his lips as he realised it was the final moment he would get to share with his loyal summon.

"Especially in that case..." Sven said, and for once, he was smiling.

"Sven, I... I don't know how to thank you," Ashton began, his voice trailing off as emotions threatened to overcome him.

"It was my duty, my lord. Your safety is paramount."

A sombre smile played on Ashton's lips as he reached out, placing a hand on Sven's shadowy form. The touch was intangible, yet it conveyed volumes.

"You've been more than a summon, Sven. You've been a friend, a companion," Ashton's voice began to break. "I can't bear the thought of losing you."

"I am and always will be a part of you, my lord," Sven's eyes, filled with a depth that transcended his shadowy exterior, met Ashton's. "Our paths may diverge, my lord, but I will always be watching over you."

Ashton sighed, the weight of the moment settling upon them. "You've given me more than I could ever repay."

"Live a long and eventful life, my Lord," Sven smiled yet again as his shadowy form began disintegrating. "That will be the payment of my sacrifice."

"Sven, is there nothing I can do? Can't you come with me?"

"Our paths are intertwined no more, my lord. But do not carry the burden of sorrow. I leave with gratitude in my heart."

Ashton nodded, a silent understanding passing between them. "Thank you, Sven. For everything."

The shadows embraced Sven, tendrils of darkness enveloping him like a shroud. Ashton watched with a heavy heart as his loyal companion began to dissipate, returning to the ephemeral realm from which he had emerged. As Sven's form gradually faded, his voice echoed in the air one last time.

"Every shadow has a purpose; mine was to stand by you. As I fade away, know that you are never truly alone. I'll always be there in your shadows, silently cheering you on."

"I will... my friend..."

Following Sven's demise, the bright door behind him swung open, and an intense light consumed him. Time seemed to stretch into infinity as Ashton was enveloped in the blinding light, his consciousness spiralling into an unknown realm.

After what felt like an eternity, Ashton's eyes flickered open. He was no longer surrounded by the void. Instead, he found himself in where he had died – the Verge. But it was eerily empty. No Astaroth, no Sven, just the remnants of a battlefield on a desolate planet.

Ashton struggled to sit up, memories flooding back – Astaroth's betrayal, Sven's sacrifice. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to understand it all.

Then, words appeared before his eyes in bold letters:

[Title: Emissary of Death has taken effect.]

[You have been resurrected.]

[Your summon: Sven has been sacrificed in your stead.]

[Remaining Summons: 09]

"Astaroth... I swear it on my life: I will dismantle everything you hold dear, piece by piece."

In tears, Ashton took an oath that would forever change the history of their lives and the entire universe.

Chapter 726 Brother No More (1)

In the bustling heart of the Eastern palace, Anna moved among the workers, orchestrating the meticulous organisation of weapons and supplies.

Aliens, humans, and mutants were all working together to ensure they got their respective tasks done. At first, it was weird to see everyone getting along with each other so easily, but slowly, she got used to the sight.

Still, the atmosphere was charged with urgency as the looming threat of war hung over Earth. Ashton and Astaroth should have returned a while ago, and since there wasn't any information given to them by the Xyrans, Anna had started to worry for their safety.

Unfortunately, she couldn't dwell in worry for long. In Ashton's absence, the task of preparing for a war fell on her shoulders. Although there were many capable people to support her, Anna intentionally took a significant share of the work because she didn't worry about Ashton all that much while overworking herself.

"Make sure the swords are sorted by size and the ammunition is properly stored within magazines. Don't keep the explosives there! Use the vault!"

Anna directed a group of workers, her voice cutting through the clamour of activity. The workers nodded in acknowledgement, scurrying to carry out her orders.

"I swear the moment Ashton returns, he will get an earful from me..."

In the moment of respite, Ashton's absence weighed heavily on Anna's heart, and she couldn't shake the worry that gnawed at her. The news of the Kro'Han survival had sent shockwaves through the resistance, and even though nobody said anything about Ashton's disappearance to her face, Anna knew everyone was worried and some even scared.

"Please get back to me, to us soon," Anna sighed and returned to work.

As she oversaw the workers, a sudden shift in the air caught her attention. An almost imperceptible ripple heralded the opening of a portal behind her.

Without warning, Ashton emerged, leaning on a long staff for support. The sight of him, battered and frail, struck Anna like a bolt of lightning.

"Ashton!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening in disbelief.

Without a second thought, she rushed to his side, her heart pounding with relief and worry. The workers around her paused in their tasks, glancing at the unexpected arrival.

Ashton's usually vibrant eyes were dulled, and his every movement seemed to carry the weight of a profound exhaustion. Anna reached out, steadying him as he leaned heavily on the long stick.

"Ashton, what happened? Where have you been?"

"Anna..." Ashton managed a weak smile, his voice a mere whisper. "looks like I... I made it back after all."

A sudden weakness gripped him before he could say more, and his strength faltered. Anna's eyes widened in alarm as Ashton's body, battered and worn, succumbed to the toll it had endured. He collapsed, unconscious, into Anna's arms.

"Someone get a doctor!" Anna's voice cut through the air with urgency as she cradled Ashton, panic etching lines on her face.

The workers around her scrambled to fetch medical assistance, the gravity of the situation sinking in. They didn't know what had happened to their lord, but things were not looking good for him.

Once again vulnerable and frail, Ashton's limp form stirred a tumult of emotions within Anna. The man who had faced countless battles defied death and returned from the brink now lay helpless in her arms.

She couldn't fathom the trials he had endured, and worry etched deep lines on her face as she held Ashton tightly in his arm, afraid he might disappear into thin air if she let go of him.

The doctor arrived swiftly, followed by Ava and Mazton, a sense of urgency in their movements.

"What happened here!?" Ava questioned Anna, who shook her head with tear-filled eyes, gesturing she had no idea how or why Ashton was in such a condition.

They began assessing Ashton's condition, checking for injuries and examining the toll his journey had exacted on his body. Anna watched with bated breath, her fingers intertwined with Ashton's, wishing him to awaken soon.

Anna had already seen Ashton in such a condition once, after his confrontation with Kro'Han. She had managed to push those thoughts out of her head with a lot of time and effort, but there she was... having to experience it all over again.

"He's weak, severely weakened," the doctor announced, her brow furrowed with concern. "I have never seen anything like it. It's like he was dead for hours. I don't know how to explain it, but it looks like his body reforming itself."

She continued, "But he is out of danger now. He should return to normal in a couple of weeks with some rest."

"Oh, thank god..." Anna nodded, her gaze never leaving Ashton's unconscious form.

She was torn between the relief of having him back and the anguish of seeing him so debilitated. The workers, sensing the sombre atmosphere, resumed their tasks with hushed whispers, respecting the gravity of the moment.

Ashton stirred, eyelids fluttering open to reveal the weariness etched in his gaze. Ava offered him a reassuring smile.

"You're back, my little boy," she mumbled while caressing his face. "I have a lot of questions to ask, but for now, you need to rest."

Ashton managed a weak nod, his eyes seeking Anna's. "Anna..."

"I'm right here," She leaned in, her concern evident in her eyes. "What happened to you!?"

Ashton hesitated, the weight of unspoken truths pressing upon him. "It's a long story, Anna. But I'll tell you all about it later..."

Anna's brow furrowed with worry, her hand reaching out to caress Ashton's cheek. "We'll do whatever you want, but let's get you in bed for now."

Ashton managed a tired smile, grateful for the unwavering support that emanated from Anna's presence.

"Can't wait for me to get better, huh?" he chuckled weakly.

"You're still as annoying as ever..." She smiled, wiping away the stray drop of tear. "Come on, let's go."

"Yeah... but first call the Xyran representative," Ashton coldly instructed everyone. "And make sure to seize any weapons they have."

Chapter 727 Brother No More (2)

"Astaroth killed me," Ashton revealed, his gaze shifting between the faces of those gathered.

The revelation sent a shiver through the room, and Anna's grip on his hand tightened. Ava's eyes widened in disbelief, and Mazton's stoic expression wavered for a moment.

Astaroth and Ashton were like each others' shadows, so no one could believe what Ashton said. But his frail state was an alibi for his story.

While the revelation dumbfounded everyone, Ashton knew he had to keep pushing and tell everyone about Rood and probably a Xyran invasion of Earth.

Although Ashton wasn't sure about it, Astaroth could easily manipulate the Xyrans to turn the tables on him and say it was Ashton who had betrayed them and not the other way around.

Unfortunately, Ashton didn't know what Astaroth was capable of anymore, so he had to consider every scenario before acting on his emotions.

But more than everything, the part that scared him most was his emotionlessness. He had been betrayed and killed, yet, for some reason, he couldn't get angry at Astaroth anymore. It almost felt like his body knew something that he didn't.

'Ignore the itch to piece everything together,' Ashton reminded himself. 'There's more important things to take care of...'

"So, I'm here to finish what Astaroth started, to protect Earth from Kro'Han and to ensure that no one else falls victim to their treachery," Ashton declared with a determined glint in his eyes.

"I find these claims utterly preposterous," suddenly, a voice rose from the far corner of the room. "Lord Rood would never betray his allies. Your claims are baseless, and I find it hard to believe that our esteemed leader would resort to such treachery."

Ashton turned to face the owner of the voice, and sure enough, it was the Xyran Ambassador, Rea. Adorned in intricate robes symbolising her status, Rea stared at Ashton with scepticism and disdain.

Like everyone, she had been worried about Ashton when he arrived, but upon hearing what he had to say, she no longer had the warmth in her eyes anymore.

'Gotcha,' Ashton smiled inwardly, realising the bait he had thrown was working.

But Ashton couldn't show his genuine emotions in front of Rea and maintained a calm demeanour. He knew that the Xyrans valued loyalty above all else, and Astaroth's and Rood's betrayal went against the very core of their principles.

Ashton also knew his words could have sparked outrage amongst the Xyrans. That's why Ashton had taken precautions before revealing the truth to everyone. His trusted allies had rounded up the Xyrans in the room, discreetly disarming them to avoid confrontations.

"So, you have nothing to say for yourself?" Rea asked him once more.

The Xyran ambassador's words echoed in the room, challenging Ashton's credibility. But instead of directly rebuking her claims, Ashton smiled, an expression that hinted at both amusement and indifference.

"I couldn't care less about what a Xyran thinks about me," Ashton replied, his voice carrying a subtle confidence. "But if you find my words hard to believe, Ambassador, I'm more than willing to undergo a lie detector test."

He continued, "In fact, I propose that the Xyrans conduct the test themselves. That way, we can put this matter to rest."

The ambassador's stern facade wavered, caught off guard by Ashton's unexpected counteroffer. She hesitated, unable to meet the eyes of those gathered in the room, expecting an answer from her.

Ashton's suggestion shifted the dynamics of the confrontation, challenging the principles the Xyrans held dear without showing hostility.

Finally, the ambassador, unable to maintain eye contact with those in the room, spoke with a strained resolve, "I will personally conduct the test to get to the truth. I will not let baseless accusations tarnish Lord Rood's name."

"You're more than welcome to do so, Ambassador," Ashton, still wearing a subtle smile, nodded in agreement. "As I have nothing to hide."

With that, the Xyran ambassador stormed out of the room, her robes billowing behind her in frustration. The Xyrans, who had been disarmed, cast glances at each other, unsure of how to react. But soon followed suit and left the room.

As the door closed behind the departing ambassador, Anna turned to Ashton, her eyes filled with curiosity and concern.

"Why go to such lengths to prove your words, Ashton?" she asked. "Everyone here trusted your words, and as for them, you don't need to prove shit to them."

"Woah, my lady," Ashton laughed. "As much as I love seeing you shed your cover of nobility before me, you should still have some restraint."

"Really? You're lecturing me in this situation?" Anna rolled her eyes but smiled the next second. "I know there's something else going inside your head, and we all want to know about it."

Ashton's smile held a touch of cunning as he explained, "Because, Anna, it's not just about proving myself. It's about sowing the seed of mistrust among the Xyrans."

"I don't get it..." Ava mumbled.

"Let me explain it this way. The Xyrans have been conditioned to trust their leaders unquestionably. A seed of doubt, even a tiny one, will cause internal strife among them."

He continued, "That way, the Xyran upper echelon will have their hands full dealing with internal troubles, and they won't be thinking about attacking Earth anytime soon."

"So, you're playing the long game," Anna, though initially taken aback, nodded in understanding. "Making sure they have their own problems to deal with."

"Weakening their unity will buy us time," Mazton added, his gaze focused on the closed door through which the Xyran ambassador had exited. "And time is something we need in abundance. Time to prepare, time to ensure Earth's safety, time to... Gosh, there's so many things we need to do."

"This is just the beginning of the game, and we need every advantage we can get." Ashton chimed in.
"No matter the method. After all, everything is fair in love and war."

"Still, we will need a lot more than mere words to keep the Xyrans occupied," Mazton commented.

"And that's where the pirates come in," Ashton replied, staring out the window. "Astaroth knows me like the back of his hand, so it's time to do things differently."

Chapter 728 Kro'Han's Warning

The desolate landscape of Euphoria served as the stage for a tense encounter between Astaroth and Kro'Han. The air crackled with an unspoken tension as the Cultists arrived on the planet along with Astaroth.

The following moments where the two powerful beings faced each other were filled with palpable tension, their respective auras clashing in a silent battle of wills.

Astaroth had helped Kro'Han, but his feelings towards the Precursor were no secret. Kro'Han knew this and was aware he needed to put the Xyran in his place before making him work like a slave.

'Let's see how you hold up when I do this...' Kro'Han thought before unleashing a fraction of his aura.

Within a moment, the Cultists were on their knees, gasping for breath. Yet Astaroth remained unaffected by the Precursor's show of power.

However, unlike the Cultists, he didn't cower in fear and unleashed his own aura, an instance which cleared any doubts Kro'Han had about the Xyran.

'I see... but defiance isn't what I need from my herald.'

Kro'Han, without wasting a second, unleashed the full brunt of his aura before staring down at Astaroth with a gaze that penetrated the very core of his being.

Astaroth, though formidable, couldn't help but feel a shiver down his spine in the presence of the enigmatic figure before him. He now understood how the guy managed to give PTSD to someone like Ashton... he was in a league of his own.

Astaroth began to falter and was soon on his knees. But before his legs hit the ground, Kro'Han retracted his aura, allowing those around him to breathe.

"So, you betrayed your 'brother', Xyran," Kro'Han's voice echoed through the eerie silence. "As your master, I can't help but feel... uncomfortable how easily you killed him."

"Let's get one thing clear... I serve no master," Astaroth, his stance defiant, retorted as he got back to his feet. "I serve only myself."

Kro'Han's eyes narrowed, a subtle glint of amusement dancing in them. "You're alive due to my mercy, Astaroth. Do not forget that."

"That's why you're delusional," Astaroth scoffed. "You think I'll be a pawn and serve you faithfully when that couldn't be far from the truth. I won't be your slave to manipulate."

"Manipulate? Oh, dear Astaroth, you've always been free to make your choices," Kro'Han shrugged. "But then again, choices have consequences. You must already know what it feels like?"

"Yeah, and I'm already paying the price for it," Astaroth said, clenching his fists, a surge of defiance coursing through him. "But as my master used to say, siding with you was a mere convenience, not a necessity."

The tension in the air thickened, the planet itself seemingly holding its breath as the two beings stood on the edge of conflict. Astaroth's form rippled with dark energy, and Kro'Han's aura exuded an undeniable dominance.

The confrontation escalated, teetering on the edge of violence, when Kro'Han's expression shifted, a sly smile playing on his lips. He didn't need to fight someone like Astaroth. His words were more than sufficient to tame the raging moron.

"Ah, yes. 'She' is important to you, isn't she?" Kro'Han smirked. "Maybe I should give her a visit?"

Astaroth's eyes widened, a flicker of vulnerability crossing his features. "What do you know about her?"

"I know more than you think, Astaroth," Kro'Han chuckled, the sound resonating through the desolate expanse. "More than you'd care to admit."

Astaroth's fists trembled with a mixture of anger and concern. "Leave her out of this, Kro'Han."

But instead of heeding Astaroth's plea, Kro'Han's demeanour shifted abruptly. He moved with blinding speed, seizing Astaroth's head in a vice-like grip before slamming it mercilessly into the ground. The impact echoed through the realm, a stark reminder of Kro'Han's overwhelming power.

Astaroth, momentarily stunned, felt the cold ground beneath him, blood trickling from his forehead. Kro'Han, unyielding, placed a foot on Astaroth's head, exerting pressure that threatened to crush him.

"You are a pawn, Astaroth," Kro'Han declared, his voice low and menacing. "A convenience. Do not mistake yourself for anything more. If you dare to raise your fist against me again, the consequences will be beyond your capacity to bear.

He continued, "You know what I'm capable of more than anyone alive. Don't make me do something that will leave you broken for the rest of your pathetic, miserable life."

With that ominous warning, Kro'Han released Astaroth, leaving him sprawled on the ground, bloodied and battered. Though seething with rage, Astaroth understood the futility of defiance at that moment.

Kro'Han's power was beyond comprehension, and the reminder of 'her' vulnerability had served as a stark reality check.

As Kro'Han departed, the echoes of his warning lingered in the air. Astaroth, left alone in the desolate realm, grappled with the aftermath of their encounter.

The taste of blood on his lips and the throbbing pain in his head served as tangible reminders of his vulnerability in the face of cosmic forces beyond his control.

Astaroth, battered but not broken, gathered his strength in the silence that followed. The encounter with Kro'Han had left scars, not just on his physical form but on his psyche.

As he rose from the ground, he couldn't help but laugh at his misery. He betrayed Ashton for what? He didn't know where 'she' was, and the encounter with Kro'Han left no doubt in his mind about what would happen next.

Ever since Ashton had told him about Kro'Han, Astaroth had wondered one thing. If Kro'Han was so strong, then why didn't he invade Earth?

Someone like Kro'Han shouldn't have any problems against a budding planet like Earth. Which led Astaroth to two scenarios.

First was the possibility that Kro'Han wasn't as strong as he had let on. Astaroth just tested that possibility and knew he was stronger than Ashton knew.

This more or less confirmed Astaroth's second hunch. Someone on Euphoria was restraining Kro'Han's movement. In other words, for some reason, Kro'Han wasn't allowed to leave Euphoria and needed someone like himself to execute his orders.

If that was the case, it meant 'She' was somewhere on the planet, as Kro'Han couldn't keep an eye on her and control Astaroth if she was elsewhere.

If Kro'Han was indeed bound to Euphoria, it would give Astaroth enough freedom to devise a plan to deal with the Precursor bastard.

"Getting beat up was worth it after all," Astaroth smiled as he followed Kro'Han's trail... for now.

Chapter 729 Nocturnal Reverie

The night hung over the little empire that Ashton had created with the help of his friends and family. The city lights below twinkled like stars on Earth, and a gentle breeze carried the whispers of uncertainties.

Ashton stood alone on the balcony, overlooking the sprawling landscape that mirrored the complex tapestry of his thoughts. After his return, everyone seemed happy, and his presence alone boosted everyone's morale.

Unfortunately, Ashton couldn't be like them. In his lonely moments, he had to confront the truth of the situation, and things were not looking good for them... at all.

The war with Astaroth and Kro'Han loomed on the horizon, casting a shadow over Ashton's usually stubborn demeanour. But more than that, the inevitability of a confrontation with Astaroth and Kro'Han gnawed at him.

He was a formidable force, but facing both Astaroth and Kro'Han simultaneously was suicide. He would be killed before he'd even had a chance to take one of them down.

"If I could isolate Astaroth, I could somehow defeat him and turn him into a summon. We could then face Kro'Han together," Ashton mumbled. "Maybe then we'd have a chance against him. But I'm sure Astaroth knows what I'm thinking... there's no other way, is there?"

The gentle breeze tousled his hair as he grappled with the reality that, for the first time, he harboured doubts about victory. Manpower, or the lack thereof, weighed heavily on his mind.

It wasn't just the case of dealing with Astaroth and Kro'Han. The Precursor fleet he had seen one Verge alone would wipe out any soldier he would bring into battle.

No matter what plan he came up with, Ashton could point out its flaw instantly, making it even more difficult to catch a wink of sleep with his restless mind.

Ashton knew the odds were stacked against them, and the little empire he had built, a haven against the encroaching darkness, felt vulnerable in the face of cosmic threats.

"Regardless... I would rather die fighting than running away like a roach," Ashton smiled wanly. "I can't say the same about them, though..."

Ashton's gaze lingered on the city below, the heartbeat of his makeshift kingdom. He could feel the weight of responsibility pressing down on him, the burden of leadership in a time of uncertainty.

The gentle breeze touched his face again and seemed to carry the whispers of an impending storm. He was standing at the end of his story, and while it was a fun one, he couldn't help but question his past decisions.

But Ashton didn't get much time to dwell in the past as his attention was brought to the present. A soft footstep approached from behind, and before Anna could utter a word, Ashton turned to face her.

There was a familiarity in the silence between them, a shared understanding that transcended words. Without a word, Anna walked up to him, and Ashton pulled Anna into his arms as she nestled against his chest.

A few moments passed in a quiet exchange, the unspoken language of two souls entwined in the dance of emotions. The night embraced them, and as if in response to the unspoken turmoil within Ashton, Anna lifted her head to meet his gaze.

"I thought you were sleeping?" Ashton asked her, to which she shrugged.

"Your thoughts are loud enough for me to hear them."

"Is that so?"

A gentle smile played on Ashton's lips as he leaned down to kiss Anna. Their lips met in a lingering embrace, a fusion of passion and a promise that transcended the uncertainties of their life.

As they parted, Anna, with a tender concern in her eyes, asked, "What's on your mind, Ashton?"

"We're fighting a losing war, Anna. I didn't want to admit it earlier as I didn't want to shatter everyone's morale." He took a deep breath, the weight of his thoughts evident in his eyes. "But the truth is, even I'm not confident in winning this one."

Anna held onto him tighter, understanding the gravity of his words. The little empire they had built, the sanctuary against the encroaching darkness, now seemed on the verge of destruction.

But it wasn't just them. If Kro'Han won, then everything would come to an end. The entire galaxy and probably the entire universe would be at Kro'Han's mercy.

"Even if all the species unite under one banner, I doubt we can force Kro'Han to do anything," Ashton said, his gaze lingering on the distant horizon.

He continued, "We're lacking the manpower to face both Astaroth and Kro'Han. I may be strong, but I'm not strong enough to take them on alone, not to mention defeating them."

Anna nodded, her eyes reflecting a mix of empathy and shared concern. "So, what do we do, Ashton?"

"I don't know, Anna. I don't have a plan for this one," He sighed, a weary acknowledgement of the challenges that lay ahead. "I always had something up my sleeve, but now..."

Before he could finish, Anna gently cupped his face and said, "If that's the case, let's make the most of the time we have left."

She broke the embrace and unhooked her dress, leaving Ashton momentarily taken aback by the sudden shift in the atmosphere. Anna entered the room, her silhouette framed by the soft glow of ambient light.

"Are you coming?"

A wry smile played on Ashton's lips, a blend of amusement and surprise. "Once a succubus, always a succubus."

With that, Anna entered the room, leaving a trail of warmth and desire in her wake. Ashton followed suit. The door closed behind them, shutting out the uncertainties of the world outside.

In the intimate space, lit only by the soft glow of city lights filtering through the curtains, Ashton and Anna shared a night, knowing it could be one of their last ones.

As the first light of dawn painted the sky, Ashton and Anna lay intertwined, the echoes of their shared passion lingering in the quiet morning.

The weight of their responsibilities awaited them, but for now, in the aftermath of the night, they found solace in the warmth of each other's presence, but not for long as Ashton was called to be informed about the test he had proposed to Rea.

Chapter 730 You Messed With The Wrong Man (1)

The room was a hive of activity as Rea oversaw the final preparations for Ashton's lie detection test. Xyrans moved efficiently, setting up intricate systems and ensuring every detail was in place.

Rea, her expression stern, coordinated the efforts with military precision. Her eyes, sharp and calculating, surveyed the room as Xyran technicians fine-tuned the lie detection equipment.

Unlike the rest of them, Rea was on a mission to prove Ashton was wrong and then make him pay the price for making up lies and defaming the Xyran lords.

Besides, she knew the chaos Ashton could bring to the Xyrans from his allegations and wanted to stop it at all costs. While lost in her thoughts, the attendant informed her of Ashton's arrival and instructed him to be brought inside.

Ashton entered the room, his gaze meeting Rea's cold stare. The atmosphere crackled with unspoken tension as they locked eyes.

With an air of authority, Rea acknowledged his presence with a cold greeting, "Ashton."

He responded with a curt nod, his expression unreadable. Coldly greeted by Rea, Ashton showed no sign of being affected. Instead, he calmly approached the lie detection setup, acknowledging the presence of Xyrans around him with a nod.

Rea, the so-called embodiment of Xyran's loyalty, didn't like Ashton's calm demeanour and decided to play around a little.

"I hope you didn't take a drug or something to fool our systems," She said.

"Do I look like a Xyran to you?" Ashton quickly quipped with a smile.

Rea understood it was useless to get him riled up and gestured him towards the setup for his test.

Undeterred by her antics, Ashton sat in the designated area. Before he allowed the lie detection test to commence, he presented his condition, which would ruffle Rea's composed exterior.

"You'll take the test after me," Ashton declared, his gaze unwavering.

"What? Why would I do that?" Rea's brow furrowed in disbelief. "I don't need to prove anything. You are the one who-"

Ashton interrupted without wasting a second. "I don't need to prove anything to you or your people. My people believe in me, and that's enough."

Rea, vexed by Ashton's unexpected condition, vehemently denied his request. "This is absurd! You're the one making accusations, not me. I have nothing to prove."

"I already told you," Ashton stood up, his gaze piercing Rea's panicked exterior. "I don't need to prove anything to you, Rea. My people believe me, and that's all that matters. If you're unwilling to undergo the test after me, I won't take it either."

"I don't-"

"Fine, I'll give you a reason to do it," Ashton smiled. "I have reasons to believe that your equipment has been tampered with."

Rea, caught off guard by Ashton's claim, hesitated momentarily. The room held its breath as the two figures confronted each other, locked in a silent battle of wills.

"Fine. I'll sit for the test after you. But this doesn't change anything," Rea finally relented, her voice tight with displeasure. "Your accusations regarding lord Rood won't hold water."

Ashton nodded, satisfied. However, before they proceeded, he introduced another condition. "You'll be the only Xyran present in the room. My people will watch the equipment to ensure there's no touching the equipment when it is your turn."

"Listen here, you..." Rea's eyes flashed with defiance. "I already agreed to one condition. I won't continue bowing to your demands."

Ashton smiled, his tone unwavering. "Take it or leave it, Rea. Your choice."

"...Fine!"

Reluctantly, Rea agreed to Ashton's condition, bitterness evident in her gaze. As Ashton settled back into the chair, Rea assumed her place before him.

With a few clicks, the lie detection equipment hummed to life, its complex mechanisms preparing to examine truths and falsehoods. Rea, with a veneer of composed resolve, began the test.

"Ashton, do you hold animosity towards the Xyrans?"

"No."

The machine responded with a resounding false. Rea's eyes narrowed momentarily before she scoffed and rolled her eyes. "If you're willing to go as far as framing us, then it's obvious how you feel about us."

"You can say whatever you want. The truth will reveal itself sooner than later," Ashton replied, "Ask me something else."

Rea continued the questioning, and each answer from Ashton met with the machine's judgment of falsehood. The room hung heavy with the tension of impending revelation.

Slowly, Rea had 'proven' that Ashton was lying about everything he had said the day before. However, she couldn't get any reaction from Ashton, no matter what she did.

Unexpectedly, Anna, standing on the sidelines, took the initiative. "Ashton, is this planet Earth?"

"Yes," Ashton replied, his smile got even wider.

The machine, to everyone's surprise, reported another false. Confusion rippled through the room as Rea's face seemed to crumble.

Rea, catching on to Anna's strategy, moved to intervene. But before she could utter a word, Mazton stepped forward, his expression stern.

"Stay where you are, Rea. Let the test proceed."

Rea opened her mouth to protest, knowing if she let things go, her lies would be exposed. She signalled one of her subordinates to reset the system, but before he could do it, Vimur grabbed his hand, pushing him away from the machine.

The rest of Ashton's crew jumped in, warning the Xyrans to stay away from the machine or they'd have to face the consequences. A few tried to protest but were quickly escorted out of the room.

Anna, a glint of satisfaction in her eyes, continued her line of questioning. "Is water wet?"

"Yes."

False.

"Do you love me?"

"More than myself."

False.

"Aw, hell nah," Vimur laughed out loud. "If that guy doesn't love her, then I don't know if love is real!"

Vimur's remarks were accompanied by laughs and shaking heads. Rea's frustration grew as her scheme was slowly exposed to everyone. The room buzzed with murmurs, and a sense of unease settled in.

"It's clear someone has tampered with the machine," Ashton said. "Since you personally oversaw this operation, I think you'd know who will do such a thing."

Rea, her composure slipping, snapped back, "This is preposterous! I did nothing."

"He never said you did it," Anna chimed in. "Sir Mazton, let your people check the equipment. Something's not right here."

Mazton nodded, and a moment later, the technicians from the Tower walked in. Technicians quickly surrounded the lie detection setup, inspecting the machinery for any signs of foul play.

As the investigation unfolded, it became apparent – the machine had been manipulated. Truths were being reported as falsehoods and lies as truths. The integrity of the lie detection test had been compromised.

Rea, cornered by the revelation, glared at the floor. There was no point in hiding what she had done anymore.

"I did what I had to," Rea admitted. "I wanted to preserve the faith the Xyrans have in their superiors. You wouldn't understand the consequences-"

Ashton, his tone cutting, retorted, "Ah yes, your loyalty is more important than truth, is that it?"

"Someone like you will never understand my reasons," Rea, defiant to the end, asserted, "Even if I did what I did, the intergalactic community would rather believe the Xyrans than a mercenary like you."

"Then it's a good thing that I brought cameras with me," Ashton scoffed, his gaze unwavering.

"Whatever you did has already been broadcasted throughout the galaxy. I'm sure your higher-ups would love to reward you for your loyalty."

As soon as he said that, cameramen entered Rea's vision, capturing her face and confession. She realised that her actions had inadvertently exposed the darker underbelly of Xyran's loyalty to the entire galaxy.

Addressing the onlookers, Ashton declared, "Imprison Rea for her crimes. As for the Xyrans, stay away from Earth. If you want, we will hear your explanations and consider compensation. But crimes committed on foreign soil won't be tolerated."