

New Eden 401

Chapter 401 Trump Card

Astaroth looked at the demon as it bolted toward him. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't even be able to see it, given the speed at which it was travelling.

But, right now, Astaroth's speed was higher than the demon's, by almost double, and with his Hyper Stimulated status to boot, the duke of hell looked slow in his eyes.

Once the rapier was almost in his gut, Astaroth sidestepped it, keeping his eyes locked on the demon's eyes. He could already see the demon shifting his sight to follow his movement, albeit slowly.

But the weapon was not as quickly retractable, and his extended arm was wide open for Astaroth.

Pulling out Ad Astra, Astaroth changed its form to a greatsword, and swung in an upward motion, using Severing Strike.

He felt the blade pass cleanly through the demon's arm, like a hot knife through butter, as the arm and weapon kept going forward without their owner.

14,786!!

Hemorrhage applied

19,350

Astaroth knew demons had high regenerative abilities, and the Hemorrhage wouldn't last as long as it usually did. But he also knew he was much too fast for the Duke of hell to do anything about him anymore.

In this single second, the result had already been decided as far as he was concerned.

Astaroth then rapidly morphed his weapon again, going into spell slinger mode and unleashing Cyclone of Blades. The Duke of hell saw mana swelling inside Astaroth and launched backward.

He was too slow to dodge the damage entirely, and was hit by ten blades of wind before reaching a safe range.

Astaroth grinned at the damage he inflicted.

116,118

19,350

Another tick of Hemorrhage applied, leeching another chunk of the demon's health. But unfortunately, Astaroth saw the wound was already closing up.

He also noticed the health of the Duke go up by ten percent of its total value.

"Tch. Stupid demonic regen."

Scanning the demon, he at least felt satisfied with the damage he had done in two seconds.

Astaroth, Duke of hell

Level: 75

Grade: Rare

HP: 256,096/387,000

MP: 46,260

Of course, he had used a high damage skill, with a high cooldown to do so, but nonetheless. If he could do a few of those in a row, he would surely put the demon back in its place.

But the Duke of hell didn't want to go down without a fight. Clenching his teeth, he used a spell he seldom ever used, unless his opponent had the upper hand.

"Illusion Domain: Myriad Worlds!"

Astaroth hadn't seen this spell yet, since Solomon had limited his strength the last time they fought. But at full power, he could use it only once, and it would take a toll on his mana.

Astaroth felt his perception become weird, as the world became woozy all around him. His sight multiplied countless times, making every perspective of reality so small he could barely see what was happening.

He suddenly heard the voice of his opponent resonate all around him, in layers, almost like it was playing on a loop of itself.

"I never would have imagined I would need to use my trump card against a measly mortal. I guess you at least deserve my respect in that regard. But power is not everything."

Astaroth suddenly felt something pierce his stomach, but he couldn't see what it was, since his vision kept multiplying on itself. He could only see damage numbers appear in his sight.

1775!

1775!

1775!

...

The numbers appeared in quick succession, at a rate of almost ten per second.

He might have a truckload of health right now, but he wouldn't last long if he couldn't defend himself.

On the outside of this illusion, Aberon and Solomon stood by, watching Astaroth suddenly go motionless. When the demon suddenly started stabbing at his stomach with impunity, looking like a tattoo machine's needle, Aberon felt anxiety rise in his stomach.

Solomon was watching like this was none of his concern. He still had a smile on his lips.

"Will you let the demon kill him?"

Solomon turned toward the old-looking Ash Elf, still unbothered by what was happening mere meters away from them.

"Do you think this is enough to kill your apprentice? I would have thought as his master, you would have the most confidence in his abilities."

Aberon frowned at the accusation.

"It has been over a decade since I last saw him. I do not know how strong he has become. This new form of his already surpassed every expectation I had of the boy."

Solomon chuckled.

"This is nothing. This boy has enough potential locked inside him to be a threat to much stronger beings than a Duke of hell. I doubt he will lose to such a measly foe."

Even though Aberon was confident he could win against the demon before him, strictly because of his experience and multi-elemental affinity, he wasn't so sure about Astaroth. The young man had barely been strong enough to fight the monsters plaguing the surroundings of their last home the last time he saw him.

What Solomon was claiming was an exaggeration, in his opinion. Certainly, he knew the boy had potential.

But to claim a Duke of hell was a 'Measly' opponent for him? That was overstating.

But a sudden burst of energy blew in his face, bringing his attention back to the fight. Looking to the combat once more, Aberon's jaw dropped.

The amount of energy that was washing off Astaroth was much more than he thought was possible for any living being that wasn't at least at the mythic grade.

While the two old men had been discussing, and the demon had been enjoying his stab-o-ton, Astaroth had been focusing all his energy on himself, trying to find a way out of the illusion.

When he noticed no amount of thinking could break through it, he defaulted to brute force.

'Fine. I'll just plow through it. Let's see how much energy your illusion can withstand.'

Taking all the mana inside him, Astaroth suddenly condensed it into pure Aether, pushing it on itself, until the bead of energy was like a glowing sun in his senses.

Once he reached a critical mass, the energy lashed out in every direction, like a nuclear bomb going off, slamming into the walls of the illusion, cracking it into a spiderweb, before shattering it like glass.

The illusion gave way, and the remaining energy pushed outward, throwing the demon away, and washing onto the two old men.

Solomon smiled widely, as he had expected something of the sort.

Aberon only watched in a daze, as his disciple, who he hadn't seen in a decade, suddenly exploded with power much stronger than he ever beheld.

"Finally, I'm out of that stupid illusion. Were you trying to make me throw up?"

Chapter 402 Crushing Victory

The Duke of hell looked at Astaroth in fear, unable to move. Two reasons prompted his inability to move.

The first reason was his state of pure shock. His illusion domain spell was not something just anybody could break out of, after all.

The second reason was that even if he had wanted to pull back, something was holding him there. Breaking out of his torpor, he realized the mortal was holding the tip of his estoc between two fingers.

Pulling with all the strength in his arm, the sword refused to budge for him.

Astaroth looked at his struggle, smirking in response.

"Sorry. Did you want your toothpick back? Here, take it."

Pushing the blade back, Astaroth tilted it upward slightly, lifting the demon off its feet, before giving it a firm push. The results were a bit more than he had expected, as the Duke of hell went barreling backward in the air, only stopping at the cavern wall.

The difference between their brute strength was visible for all to see. Aberon was a tad disappointed that his disciple still used his physique more than his magic, but it was to be expected.

Astaroth had always been more prone to use weapons over magic. It was most likely due to how he had learned to fight in the past.

Astaroth raised his hands again, pointing his finger guns at the crater in the wall, where the Duke of hell had just impacted. There was no doubt in his mind that the demon had regenerated a lot of its lost health, so he had to pump out the damage again.

His Hyper Stimulated state allowed him to perceive time faster, allowing for an interesting boon. His cooldowns were also much shorter.

Just like when he used Thousand Thoughts, his mind could form spells at a much faster rate, allowing him to ignore shorter cooldowns. He had long since understood that the quicker he could form spells, the shorter cooldowns would become.

Sadly for him, magic was not something he was very proficient with. He was certain that in the future, Violette and Phoenix would cast spells much faster and much more powerful than he could.

But to each their strengths.

Unleashing a torrent of Magnet Bullets at the ground toward his opponent, and all around him, before plunging one shot into his chest, Astaroth smiled at the battered demon. Although the impact in the wall had shed only a bit of its health, he was looking more for the stun status it inflicted.

And he still had a few moments of the demon being pinned down. But it wouldn't matter anymore.

Astaroth had effectively caged the demon in a magnetic cage, with all the Magnet Bullets around it acting as restrictions. He was surprised the system didn't register that as an extra spell, but he guessed the system judged it as a creative use of one spell instead of a new one.

But it didn't matter. His goal wasn't to create a new spell with that attack.

What came next was.

Astaroth converted mana into Aether, charging his next Magnet bullet with Aether instead of mana. The bullet swelled in size, arcs of electricity jumping off the projectile as it spun in place in front of his hand.

Once it was formed, Astaroth could already feel the drain on his body. Aether was not simple to convert from mana, and it took a toll.

But he didn't care. He was willing to pay this price.

Releasing the spell toward the demon, the projectile suddenly sped up, reaching incredible speeds, as it continued to speed up all along the path Astaroth had formed, until it hit its intended target.

The head-sized bullet, which would almost be more fitting to call a cannonball, if not for its shape, hit the Duke of hell squarely in the chest, passing through his body like it was a bullet through paper.

454,904!

Astaroth grinned as the one attack killed the demon, sending it back to the ring, defeated.

Turning to Solomon, the old man had a grin on his face too. Aberon, who was still standing next to him, was speechless.

The old man was well known for his affinity with all elements, which made him a terrifying opponent to battle against. But even he did not know what combination Astaroth had just used in his spell.

If he knew that what Astaroth used was a common type of weapon in his world, he would probably pass out. Of course, the requirements to build a functioning railgun in the human world were not that easy to meet.

Astaroth had a bit of knowledge of the simple science behind it and cheated the rest of the way through magic. He wasn't the first to do something similar, and would not be the last, either.

"I knew you would pull through, you Elf. I'm impressed at your application of simple magic. I think your kind will bring a wind of change to the world of magic in our world."

Solomon was glad the one who had found his ring was someone with a wide breadth of knowledge.

Magic may be a rigid science, in terms of affinities limiting what you could do with each element, but the simplest of spells could always be turned into powerful tools, if well used.

Aberon snapped out of his daze, looking at Astaroth like he was an alien.

"Are you still the young, talentless mage I taught a decade ago? This makes no sense. What was that spell? How did you make it so powerful? What elements did you use?"

The tirade of questions came out like a cascade of words, making both Astaroth and Solomon laugh.

"I can answer all your questions later, Aberon. For now, I would like to finish this challenge and get my reward before taking a long nap."

Aberon stopped his yammering, closing his mouth, and nodding his head.

Looking at Solomon once more, Astaroth smiled.

The old man waved his hand, making the Duke of hell reappear. The demon stood there, gaze empty, his mind still locked in the memory of his death coming at him at Mach fuck you.

Finally realizing he was back out of the ring again, his head snapped toward Astaroth. He threw himself at the feet of the mortal he had so despised and smacked his forehead to the ground.

"Master Astaroth!"

Chapter 403 Changed Opinion

Seeing the demon, who had been dragging his name in the mud, insulting him repeatedly, looking down on him like he was dirt, grinding his face in the dirt like so, felt sweet in Astaroth's mind.

"Master Astaroth, this lowly demon has wronged you! I swear on my name and rank that I will never again commit such a sin! Please forgive me and accept my eternal fealty to you!"

Solomon contained a burst of laughter, seeing this overly prideful demon react this way. It made total sense, given how he had just been eradicated in a single attack.

But it was a sight to behold, nonetheless.

Astaroth smirked. He wanted to step on his head so badly, just to make the demon feel powerless.

But that wasn't the type of person he was.

Kneeling down, he put his hand on the demon's shoulder.

"Stop grovelling. You're embarrassing yourself. Let's just call it water under the bridge and move on. Build a better relationship with me from now on."

The Duke of hell jumped to his feet, keeping his body bent at a ninety-degree angle.

"Yes, Master Astaroth! I will serve you faithfully and with respect for eternity!"

Astaroth clicked his tongue, annoyed. But Solomon waved his hand, making the demon disappear.

"Don't mind his total attitude change, young man," Solomon said, walking toward him.

"In hell, power is paramount. You just proved to him you had power on par with some Kings of hell. So it's a given his attitude is so different."

"But does he need to turn into such a boot licker?"

Solomon laughed loudly at the question. It wasn't common for a mortal to call a Duke of hell a bootlicker.

"In any case, my time here comes to an end. I am glad this issue could be fixed. It might not be the last time you have to put one of these troublemakers in their place, but I believe most of them should have learned their lesson."

Astaroth nodded in understanding. A moment later, Solomon disappeared like fog in the wind.

Left alone once again, Astaroth turned to Aberon, who was still looking to where Solomon had disappeared.

That was when he noticed a new notification, as well as the flashing message icon in his interface.

Tapping the notification first, he read it and smiled.

Spell Learned

You have once again found a new application to the spell Stone Bullet, upgrading its mastery from level 2 to level 3. Spell created: Railgun. Congratulations, player Astaroth!

Opening his spell list, he noticed the cooldown on Stone Bullet had gone down by one second again, reaching two seconds. At this pace, he would end up with no cooldown on the spell when he reached mastery level five.

But that wasn't what most impressed him. The new spell on his list was.

Mastery Spell 3; Railgun: Your knowledge of modern science has formed this spell. Overloading a magnetic bullet with Aether, you have augmented its magnetic capacities, making it the perfect lethal projectile. This one bullet must travel upon a preformed path to its target, and the target must be marked. Marking the target requires hitting it with at least one magnetic bullet beforehand. Channelling time: 3 seconds (Path must already be laid and target marked). Aether cost: 5 AP. Cooldown: 30 minutes. Damage: 5,000%

'Such a high damage percentage!'

Five thousand percent was the raw stat for the spell. Astaroth knew full well some spells could be boosted when charged with more Aether.

If this one could be as well, he might have just gained a killer move. Looking at it from a neutral standpoint, this was still just the Stone Bullet spell, but with superior power and application.

He wanted to send a message in the guild chat as soon as possible, to tell the others to experiment as much as possible with their basic spells. But he had a message to open first.

Opening up his messaging interface, he saw a message from Violette.

Astaroth, could you come back to the base soon? There is a prince here that wants to see you. He goes by the name Nalafein.

'Nalafein? Do I even know someone with that name?'

His mind flashed with the image of a young boy Ash Elf. But he shook his head in disbelief.

'It can't be him. What would he be doing so far away from his palace?'

But another message was flashing, this one from Phoenix.

Call ASAP. No time to message.

If it was urgent enough for her to ask him to call, it was not a simple matter. But he wanted to at least go say hi to all the villagers first, and he still had a few questions to answer from Aberon.

He responded to her message.

Busy right now. Call you soon.

After sending his message, he turned back toward Aberon.

"Alright, Aberon. Before I answer your questions, how about we go say hello to everyone? It's been a while since they've seen me."

Aberon snapped out of his thoughts and agreed.

But taking one step toward the makeshift settlement, he stopped and turned around again. His face seemed grave.

"I have to warn you, young man. Ten years is a long time, and many things have happened. You might not recognize everyone here."

"I expect as much," Astaroth said, waving his hand dismissively.

Aberon seemed unsure about his reaction. But he turned around and started walking again.

Reaching the outskirts of the village, Astaroth could already see a few of the warriors, swinging swords in the background. They seemed young at first, but he guessed it was the next generation of militia.

It had been ten years, after all.

Walking toward the fire in the center of the settlement, he recognized a form from behind. The silhouette was all too familiar to him, since he had fought by his side many times.

Stepping forward faster, Astaroth came up behind the man, slapping his back and yelling out.

"Korin! Long time no see, friend!"

But when he cleared the side of the crate, the man was seated on; he froze in terror.

"What in god's name happened to you?!"

"Astaroth. Is that you?"

Chapter 404 Ten Years Of Change

Sitting on the crate, Korin Softpaw, a husk of his original self. What horrified Astaroth was not his sunken cheeks, or pale skin, though.

Korin was much more damaged than that.

In his face, two very important things were missing. His eyes.

In their stead, two hollow holes, veiny and red where discerning eyes had once been.

Astaroth also noticed a leg missing, when his gaze lowered a little. In this state, it was a miracle he had survived whatever had happened to him.

Tears started streaming down Astaroth's face, as memories of Korin smiling while they hunted, or when he woke up in the woods with Korin guarding over him. Or every time he had covered his back during patrols.

The Korin in his memories, was what Astaroth had expected to see again. The Korin in his memories was mentally and physically strong.

But the one before him looked like he had given up on life. His face screamed of malnutrition while his body was battered.

Korin still looked forward, his head not registering where Astaroth was exactly.

"Is that you, Astaroth?"

Holding back a choke of tears, Astaroth responded.

"Yes. It's me. What happened to you, Korin?"

"This old rogue has been through a rough patch. Don't worry about it," Korin replied, faking a peal of laughter.

But as much as he wanted to sound joyful, his face was a mask of sorrow. There was no hiding it.

Aberon finally reached next to Astaroth.

"Young man, let Korin rest. He is tired."

But Astaroth ignored the old man. Spinning on his heels, he scanned the camp, looking at all the people huddled around the fire.

Another familiar silhouette caught his eye across the fire. The form was blurry, because of the fire's rising heat, but he thought he recognized Aj'axx.

A blanket was wrapped around his shoulders, and a gloomy expression hung on his face.

Taking wide strides to reach him, Astaroth was glad Aj'axx looked whole. Reaching him, the man looking surprised to see the familiar face; he grabbed the defender in a hug.

But as he did, reality settled in again. As he hugged Aj'axx, the blanket wrapped around him fell back to the ground, revealing a missing arm, ripped off at the shoulder.

Astaroth's tears rolled down harder.

"What happened to you guys? Who did this to you?"

Aj'axx smiled wearily at him.

"Welcome home Astaroth. I'm afraid you are late for the party. This happened months ago."

"Who did this to you? Was the enemy slain?"

Aj'axx's face became glum again as he looked down. Taking his one arm left, Aj'axx freed himself from Astaroth's grip, before sitting back down on the log he was before Astaroth grabbed him.

"Aj'axx. What happened? Is anyone going to tell me?"

The defender remained silent as Aberon reached Astaroth once more.

"Boy. Come with me. Let's go to my tent and speak for a while."

Turning toward Aberon, Astaroth's tears were still rolling down. His face was slowly morphing from sorrow to anger.

"Why won't anyone answer me? Who did this?!"

"Calm down, Astaroth. Come sit with me. I will explain what happened over the last few years."

Astaroth ignored his plea.

He spun around, looking at the people around the campfire. He recognized a few of them, but their numbers were on the low side.

Walking toward where the noise of training swords clashing was coming, Astaroth came to a halt. All the warriors who were training here were adolescents or very young adults.

He spun toward Aberon.

"Where are the others? Where is Chris? Or Kloud? Or even I'dril? Why are you so few?"

"Child, please calm down. I will explain it all, but you need to come with me."

Astaroth was on the verge of exploding in rage. Everyone seemed to brush over the events that led them to look like battered dogs, and it was irking him to no end.

Ignoring the old man once more, Astaroth sent a wave of mana throughout the camp, discerning every living thing that was living in the cave.

He couldn't find the Colonel, or I'dril, but he found a familiar presence. It was Kloud; he was sure.

Although the presence felt weaker and different, it was too similar not to be him. Taking off with a swift pace, he walked toward the tent that was giving the aura.

It was isolated to the back of the camp, far from the rest of them, and not even a torch lit up the area. Before he could take three steps toward it, a powerful telekinesis grabbed him, and a barrier rose in front of him, blocking his path.

Only one person in this camp was a mage strong enough to hold him like this, to Astaroth's knowledge.

Breaking free from the telekinesis, since he was still under the effects of Royal Protection, albeit unmelded, Astaroth spun angrily toward the mage.

"Why are you trying to stop me?"

"Boy! You must calm down! Going to speak to Kloud right now is the last thing you should do. Listen to me, for once!"

The resistance Aberon was putting up only made Astaroth even more determined to speak to Kloud. He was persuaded he would get answers from him, at the very least.

Astaroth summoned all his Spirit companions simultaneously, sending them at Aberon.

"Old man, I know you mean well. But stay out of my way. I need to know what happened."

Aberon quickly pulled the barrier back, bringing it toward him to protect himself. Rage overtook the mage, insulted that the young man rebelled against him.

But when the three spirits collided with his barrier, he quickly understood he would have to take care of them first, before he could reason with the boy.

The few seconds this bought for Astaroth were enough for him to step into the tent. The inside was pitch black.

Astaroth felt the air was heavier on the inside of the tent, almost like something was corroding it.

He looked all around himself, looking for Kloud. He finally saw a lump in the tent's corner.

Scanning it with his mana sense, he recognized Kloud.

Feeling the scan go through him, the man spoke up.

"Who is this? Why are you disturbing me? Leave, if you know what is best for you."

"Sir, it is me. Astaroth."

"Astaroth? Is it really you?"

"Yes, sir. It's me. I'm so glad you are ok. It seems something terrible happened, and no one wants to tell me. Surely you must know what happened."

The air in the tent thickened once more.

"Leave."

"What? Sir, you—"

"Leave, now!"

In that instant of screaming, Astaroth felt the aura change of the man in the tent. This change was all too familiar to him.

But before he could ask him what was happening, a gleam lashed out toward his throat, much faster than the Kloud he knew could ever achieve.

Jumping backward, dodging the tip of a blade by a hair's breadth, Astaroth landed outside the tent. The fabric and supports of the tent suddenly collapsed, revealing the figure inside.

"What in tarnation?!"

Chapter 405 Corrupted Teacher

As the tent collapsed, already the trainees in the distance turned to look toward the commotion. Seeing the figure emerge from the collapsed tent, panic set in.

Screams and warnings fused from the trainees.

"Run! He's lashing out again!"

"Warn Aberon!"

"Someone get the wolf here!"

Aberon, who was locked in a stalemate against the three summons of Astaroth, decided it was no longer the time for holding back.

Using telekinesis, he blew away the three spirits before using a spell he seldom used, simply because of the cost it held.

Teleporting from his spot, he appeared next to Astaroth, putting his hand on the young man's shoulder, before teleporting again, bringing Astaroth with him, and grabbing Kloud in the same fashion.

He teleported a third time, this time bringing the two passengers outside the cave and onto the surface. Once they appeared on the surface, Aberon pushed Kloud away with a massive telekinetic wave, trying to make some distance between them and him.

Astaroth was still in shock at the appearance of his old teacher.

Kloud looked older, and tired, like life had been hell on earth for him. But that was just half of his face.

The other half was black as soot, with a horn stabbing out from his forehead, and one red eye. The hair on the side that was black was gone, and the skin looked cracked, like dry dirt.

His Elven side was stuck in a mask of pained terror, while the side with apparent demonic traits was grinning madly, the eye darting about, like it was looking for something.

When it finally stopped moving, it was locked on Astaroth.

"Ahh, finally some freedom! Thank you for destabilizing his focus, mortal. Now I get to end what I had started months ago!"

But as it tried dashing forward, a powerful pressure pushed it to one knee.

Turning its gaze to the old man next to its target, it clicked its tongue.

"You are still alive, you old demented mage? Why don't you croak already?!"

Aberon was sweating bullets.

Astaroth could recognize the symptoms of mana drainage on the old man's face. It was easy to understand why.

Teleportation was not magic that could be used willy-nilly. It came at a steep cost.

Not only had he teleported three times, but he was also holding down the demon with the rest of his power. But Astaroth was still confused about what had happened.

Until Aberon spoke up.

"Kloud! I know you can hear me. Get a grip, you idiot! Don't let that weak demon rampage again. Think of what happened last time!"

"Shishishishi! Your friend is not available at the moment. Whatever his thoughts may be, his body is currently mine to control. Now I get to finish your foolish little tribe and complete my original mission."

"What do you mean by last time, Aberon?" Astaroth asked, realization slowly setting in.

"Now is not the time, you stupid, emotional child. If you start a mess, you better help clean it."

Astaroth took the rebuke like a hammer to his heart. All he wanted was answers.

And now he was treated like he released the apocalypse upon his family.

"Shishishishi! Yes, talk to me some more. Make this stupid vessel fall into despair some more! Do it!"

Astaroth turned to the demon, angered by the accusation.

"Who are you?! What have you done to Kloud?!"

The demon was already standing back up, the pressure on it slowly lessening. Aberon was weakening by the second.

He cursed silently.

'What's the use of having all this power, if just containing this demon takes up all my focus?'

Astaroth could see that Aberon was about to faint, his body already trembling to maintain his spell. When he turned to look at the demon, who was now trudging towards him, he panicked.

'What am I supposed to do? I don't even know what's happening! Is Kloud still in there? Should I help hold the demon down? Should I try reasoning with Kloud's consciousness, if it's even still there?'

The demon took step after step, his body slowly straightening out, until he was mere meters away from Astaroth.

"Shishishi! Yes! Despair! You seem like a better vessel than this old, broken man!"

Astaroth's senses finally picked up something, now that the demon was closer. Although he was still on the last legs of Royal Protection, and his perception of time was still sped up, he activated Thousand Thoughts, to give himself time to think.

Thousand Thoughts activated, overlapping with his already hyperactive mind, and time came to a standstill. Everything around him slowed down so much it was like time had completely stopped.

He could still see the mana particles move, ever so slowly, trying to push the demon down. Focusing on Kloud, he could sense his soul.

He rarely sensed souls with his mana sense, since they weren't composed of mana. He had to be close enough for his soul affinity to sense deeper.

But the current proximity of Kloud made it possible.

Gazing at his interface, he could see the seconds tick down on his Royal Protection and Thousand Thoughts. So he wasted no time.

Investigating what he had sensed, he focused his eyes on Kloud's midsection. There he could see a white blue-ish flame flickering inside his body.

Currently wrapped around it, a black flame was spinning violently. It seemed to corrode the white flame, little by little.

But something else caught Astaroth's attention.

Looking closely at the white soul, he could see a small black fragment trying to push into the white one. The black flames were emanating from that small fragment.

'Is that the demon's soul? So it still hasn't gotten full control... Is it just able to take control under specific circumstances?'

Astaroth was trying to figure out how it was controlling the body it was in, given it was so much smaller and weaker than Kloud's soul. But he figured he was wasting his time trying to find out how, when the damage was already done.

But he had already figured out how to help his old teacher.

As Thousand Thoughts deactivated, Astaroth looked at Aberon.

"I hope you can perform healing magic, too."

The old man looked confused.

"What? Why—"

Before he could ask his question, Astaroth took a quick step toward Kloud, stabbing his hand into his stomach.

The demon looked like he was about to laugh, at first, when he saw the young elf stab his own friend. But when he felt the hand suddenly touch its soul, deep inside the body, its face morphed into horror.

"No! Stop! What are you—"

Before it could finish its phrase, its eyes unfocused, as did Astaroth's.

Standing there, with one's hand inside the other's body, both Ash Elves were still as statues.

Chapter 406 Inside The Teacher's Mind

When Astaroth touched the souls inside Kloud's body, his mind was already working on how to separate them and pull out the demon. It wouldn't be a simple task.

He had to pull apart two souls in the process of fusing, without damaging Kloud's. This would require finesse, which he knew he sucked at.

But as soon as his hand came into contact with the black flames surrounding Kloud's soul, he was already feeling the pushback. Plowing through with his superior soul strength, he touched Kloud's soul, anyway.

Contrarily to all his stints into mind spaces, this time, he didn't end up in black nothingness. Instead, he landed in a strange, white environment, with no way to discern a ceiling or walls.

He looked around, trying to find something he could guide himself with. But there was nothing around.

Only white surroundings, as far as his eyes could see.

Changing his method of detection, Astaroth pushed out a wave of mana from his body, making it expand in every direction, glad this still worked inside someone else's mind.

The mana blasted away from him, travelling much faster than he intended, leaving behind floating particles as it expanded away.

After a few moments, Astaroth received feedback from the mana wave from his right side. Turning in that direction, he started walking.

He walked and walked, without turning or changing directions for a long time. It was difficult to judge how time went by, in a space made of only light.

But he walked forward, trusting he would eventually find something.

'How far could my mana wave have expanded, right?' he thought.

But after what felt like hours, his face already morphing into a frown, he stopped.

"This is strange. Judging by the speed the wave was travelling, I should already have found what it bounced on."

But spinning on himself, Astaroth could still only see white in every direction.

Facing back in the direction he had been walking, Astaroth focused and shot out another wave of mana. Similarly to the first one, it blasted away in all directions, travelling fast.

He waited a bit longer before receiving feedback this time, and it came from a new direction entirely. Turning to his left, he frowned.

It felt even further than before, with how it took longer for his mana to react. But, nonetheless, he started walking in the direction the reaction came from.

He walked for what seemed like a second eternity before stopping once more.

"This makes no sense. I can feel something is responding to my mana, but I seem to get further from it instead of closer..."

Astaroth talked to himself, trying to take his mind off the complete silence surrounding him. Even when he walked, his footsteps made no sound.

He sent a third wave of mana out, this time pouring much more mana into it, and focusing intensely.

The wave shot out, leaving his body like a runaway train, before disappearing into this white void.

After minutes of waiting, his mana finally hit the object he had been sensing. The extra mana he had poured into the wave this time allowed him to get better details from his ping.

His mind received the feedback, and he could see the silhouette of a small house, almost like a cabin, built with logs. There was a small chimney on top, spewing smoke.

Keeping his mind on that image, Astaroth took a step forward, and immediately he stopped. When he stepped forward, he felt the small structure get farther away from him, instead of closer, causing him to halt.

"What the fuck?"

He was facing the right direction, and yet, stepping forward seemed to bring him farther, instead of closer.

Astaroth tried doing the opposite, stepping back from the structure, his mind still locked onto it, and he could feel the distance between him and it remained the same.

"That makes no sense. Stepping toward it pushes it back, but stepping away from it keeps me at the same distance..."

Confused about what to do, Astaroth tried stepping sideways to see if it changed anything. To his surprise, and not in a good way, he lost contact with the cabin.

"Fuck! What is wrong with this place? Is Kloud's mind always this fucked up?"

Launching a fourth wave of mana, this one even denser than the third, Astaroth waited. After a couple of minutes, the structure came into his mind again, his mana reacting to it.

But something was different about it.

This time around, there was no more smoke coming from the chimney in his mind, and some strong shadows seemed to lurk around the house's exterior wall. As he focused on them, a pair of eyes appeared in the shadows, staring back at him.

The hair on Astaroth's neck stood on end as he sensed imminent danger.

Opening his eyes, he jumped back, as a whip of black flames lashed where he had been standing. But looking around, he couldn't find where it had come from.

It was like it had formed from thin air and returned to it after missing him.

But a snicker echoed around him.

"Shishishishi. I see you have found your way inside. But you are too late. You will never reach him. Not before I take full control of him."

Astaroth spun full circle, trying to see where the voice was coming from, but it simply echoed off the air itself, coming from all around him.

"Show yourself, coward!"

"Shishishi! Your taunting is useless. Fighting you would be a waste of my time and energy. Once I have full control of this vessel, I can take care of all the trash and come back to possess you, instead, if you really want to fight me. Shishishishishi!"

Astaroth felt rage bubble inside him. But he rapidly quelled the negative emotion.

As soon as the rage started rising in him, he felt as though the air in this white void grew thicker. Then he remembered the demon had gotten control from Kloud losing grip on his emotions.

It had been caused by him suddenly appearing, and asking questions that were probably a sensitive matter.

"My emotions keep causing trouble to everyone around me... I need to keep them in check more."

But there was no time for self-reflection and moping. Astaroth was once again without direction, and he shot out a fifth wave of mana.

'This time, I will reach you, Kloud. Hold on, for your sake and everyone else's.'

He clenched his fists in determination.

Chapter 407 Pulling Out

Waiting to get a reaction from his mana again, Astaroth thought hard about how to reach the cabin. He could tell by how the demon was trying to breach into it, this was where Kloud's mind had locked itself.

The mind and the soul were so strongly connected that it was hard to corrupt one, without corrupting or controlling the other, as well. Astaroth didn't know how Kloud locked his mind like this, but he had done well.

As his mind received the feedback he had waited for, another whip of black flames lashed out at him. But this time, he didn't dodge it, keeping his mind on the cabin.

As the flaming whip lashed across his back, leaving a burning streak on his armour, Astaroth ignored the pain and damage number floating up on his interface.

His mind locked on the cabin, feeling like it was suddenly closer.

'Hmm?'

Another flaming whip lashed across the air, this time striking him in the chest. As the whip streaked across his armour once more, Astaroth sensed the cabin getting closer.

He stayed focused on it, not wanting to lose sight of it again, all the while keeping his eyes closed and his mind clear.

A third whip streaked across the air, aiming at his face.

A cut appeared on his left cheek, deep enough to see a part of his cheekbone and muscles. A lick of flames was also slowly burning his flesh, dealing minor damage continuously.

But Astaroth was grinning. The pain barely registered in his mind as he confirmed his thoughts.

Screaming at the top of his lungs, he provoked the demon.

"Do you call that an attack?! I thought a demon who could take control of my friend would be at least two-no-three times stronger than this. You're weak!"

The eyes that formed in the fire surrounding the cabin squinted at him.

The voice resounded around him again.

"You act big, mortal. But soon enough, you will be dead, and I will take control of this man's body and mind, and kill everyone in here."

"Hah! You couldn't kill me if you tried. You are much too weak for that."

Astaroth could feel the demon's anger from all this distance away. It seethed in anger, whips of flames appearing everywhere around Astaroth.

"Let's see how long you can maintain your false bravado, mortal! Die!"

Hundreds of attacks started raining on Astaroth. Although the damage was negligible on every attack, the accumulation was nothing to scoff at.

But he already had a solution to this problem.

Melding with White, he let the passive health regen kick in, as it cancelled almost all the damage he was taking. The whipping intensified shortly after, the demon probably sensing his target wasn't weakening.

But this was exactly what Astaroth wanted.

He could feel the cabin getting closer in his mind, with every strike he received.

The demon didn't seem to be aware of the distance shortening between him and the mortal, as he kept lashing out at Astaroth. Astaroth was laughing mentally at this weak show of force, thinking it was so easy to taunt demons.

Of course, he knew that smarter demons existed, of which some of them lived in Solomon's Signet ring. But the lower-rank demons seemed to all be vain and prideful.

Every attack brought the equivalent of a footstep closer to his objective.

After taking this onslaught for the full duration of White's melding time, and then some, Astaroth could finally see the cabin with his eyes. It was at that moment that the demon realized what he had done.

But it was too late.

Grinning like a madman, Astaroth dashed forward, closing the distance between him and the flames in a single step. Once he was standing right in front of them, he could discern where the flames originated from, and thus found the demon.

Grabbing a handful of fire, the flames suddenly condensed around Astaroth's hand, forming a skinny obsidian demon with two small horns and a tail swishing around behind it.

The demon stared wide-eyed at Astaroth, surprised the mortal found him so fast.

'Huh. He looks like the imps from cartoons. It's almost comical.'

But now that he had his hands on him, he could do what he came here for.

"You're coming with me, little fella."

Concentrating, Astaroth pulled out of Kloud's mind-space, grasping the demon's soul and consciousness tightly.

But instead of heading back into the world, Astaroth had other plans.

The surroundings changed, going from a white void, to another white space, but this one was slightly different.

Seeing the space change, the demon thought he was being pulled out into reality for a moment, until he recognized the energy around him as another mind-space.

He started laughing loudly.

"Shishishishi! You fool! You brought me into your own mind while trying to extract me from your friend! Now I get to invade you just as easily as I invaded your friend!"

But the demon couldn't break free from Astaroth's grasp.

'How strong are his mind and soul?! I should have broken free from him already!'

Noticing the grin on the mortal's face, the demon had a bad feeling.

"This isn't my mind. And you'll find that the person who it belongs to doesn't have much to fear from a wimp like you."

Already, the demon could feel a pressure pushing down on his mind, like someone was pressing on his brain, slowly but inevitably.

A voice came from behind him.

"Why did you bring this trash in here, young man?"

When the demon turned to see who the voice belonged to, he noticed another of his kin standing behind an old man, its attitude docile. But the tame attitude did not fool him.

The aura washing off of the tall and slim black demon was overwhelming.

"I thought it might be good sustenance for some of our servants."

The old man looked at the minor demon, pity flashing in his gaze.

"I wonder if such a small thing even has enough power to feed the weakest of them. Nevertheless, I'm sure they will be happy to absorb something else than mana, for a change."

Snapping his fingers, the imp in Astaroth's hands disappeared. It reappeared in a dark space, with nothing but darkness around it. But it quickly understood it wasn't alone.

Solomon looked at Astaroth, chuckling.

"Demons usually reform in hell after a while when they are killed, unless something divine kills them. But this one will never see hell again. Demons rarely cannibalize amongst themselves. But when they do, the eaten party becomes essence for them to grow, disappearing forever."

"Good," Astaroth said, nodding his head. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I still have my hand inside a friend's stomach, and would much like to go fix that situation."

Solomon nodded at him as the Ash Elf vanished from inside the ring.

'What a ruthless plan. This young man is much crueller than I had first expected.'

Chapter 408 The Request

Re-opening his eyes, Astaroth was still standing before Kloud, whose eyes were in the back of his head, unconscious. Before pulling his hand out of his chest, Astaroth looked around to find Aberon.

The old man stood a few feet back, his staff still in hand, looking unsure. But seeing Astaroth's head turn, he twitched.

But once they made eye contact, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Seems you are still you, young Astaroth."

"Yes. The demon is also gone. But now we have another issue. My hand is still inside Kloud, and I'm unsure what organs I pierced. He's unconscious, for now, but I don't know how long he'll live when I pull out my hand."

Aberon rushed to his side, understanding the gravity of the situation.

"What stupid idea was it to shove your hand inside his chest, then?"

He knocked his staff lightly on Astaroth's head in punishment.

"It was the fastest way to contact Kloud's soul. That's how I could wrest control from the demon."

Aberon grumbled. His mana reserves were very low, and now he had to perform the type of magic he never improved in, healing magic.

"I'll do my best to make sure he comes out alive," the old man uttered.

Seeing the old man focus intensely, Astaroth got ready to pull his hand out. A few seconds went by, Aberon not saying a thing.

Flickering particles of mana started appearing all around them, yellowish-white, looking like fireflies on a hot summer day.

A few more moments went by before Aberon opened his eyes again. His eyes were slightly glowing in a greenish hue.

"I'm ready."

Astaroth nodded his head, pulling out his hand swiftly, and holding on to Kloud's body as he brought it to the ground delicately. Luckily for him, his hand hadn't pierced all the way through, and the blood that leaked out stayed contained to his midsection.

The firefly-looking mana in the air was already rushing to the wound, as Aberon guided it with his hand and staff, his eyes squinting. Big beads of sweat were already pearling off the old man's forehead.

Astaroth looked at the wound with worry until it eventually started healing up.

The surrounding blood receded into Kloud, leaving only slight stains on the man's clothes, before the flesh slowly reformed on the open wound. In a matter of seconds, the exterior wound was fully healed.

But Aberon didn't lose focus. His mind was already looking inward, inside Kloud's stomach, where he still needed to restore the damaged organs.

Luckily for both Kloud and Astaroth, the latter's strike had hit a space in between organs. It had only hit the top of the stomach, as well as the bottom of the liver, dealing only superficial damage.

Of course, if left untreated, those wounds were still mortal. But they were not an immediate threat.

Given Aberon was already healing them, they wouldn't cause future issues.

It took an entire minute for Aberon to heave a sigh of relief and drop his concentration. Once he did, his shaky legs buckled under him, prompting him to fall to his ass.

The old man chuckled at the weakness.

"I haven't been so close to fainting in ages, young man. You had to make me use the one magic type that I have the worst affinity for."

Astaroth chuckled before apologizing.

"I'm sorry, master Aberon. If I could heal as well, I would have. Unfortunately, I have yet to learn any spell or skill to help on that front."

Aberon waved his hand dismissively.

"Bah. It matters no longer. All that matters now is to monitor Kloud's recovery. We can only hope that the demon did not damage his mind permanently."

Astaroth nodded slowly.

He was about to ask what had happened again, but remembered Violette and Phoenix had asked him to contact them. Phoenix's message, especially, seemed to be urgent.

Calling her with the in-game chat, Astaroth waited for her to pick up.

Aberon felt the mana around Astaroth's head suddenly extend outward rapidly.

'He's learned telepathy? Who taught him that?'

But he would have to wait until the young man had finished his conversation before asking.

Disturbing a telepathic conversation was ill-advised.

Little did he know, the adverse effects of a normal telepathic conversation did not apply to the players, as their bodies came naturally resistant to them. It was a characteristic the bodies of these abnormals all shared.

After a few moments, Phoenix finally answered the call.

'Astaroth! Finally, you called me back!'

'What's wrong? Is the Bastion under attack again?'

'The Bastion is fine. The issue lies elsewhere. Remember, Violette asked you to come back, because someone here had something to talk to you about?'

'Yes?'

'Well, he asked me to pass you a request. An urgent one.'

'I don't eve—'

'You are taking the request! The Ash Elf capital is under attack. It's a demon!'

Astaroth's face sank. He knew there were a few people in the kingdom's capital that could fight a demon.

But he doubted the king would send them out to fight it immediately. How many innocents would die before the king acted?

'Tell whoever asked for this that I'm going. I'll hang up now. I don't know how close I am to the capital.'

'Good luck, Astaroth. And be careful. I spoke to Khalor. He said dying to demons is the biggest way to get affected by their corruption.'

'Alright. I'll call back once I'm done.'

Hanging up the call, Astaroth turned to Aberon with a grave face.

"Aberon. I know I wanted to ask many questions, and so did you. But I need to leave right now. Can you tell me in which direction the capital is?"

Aberon looked confused for a moment, but still pointed North-East.

"It's that way. But we are deep inside the forest. Getting there, even if you forgo your security, will take you days..."

Astaroth looked in the direction the old man pointed, and leaned down. He had already stopped listening.

"I'll come back as soon as I'm done over there. I can't stay here any longer, for now."

Melding with Luna again, Astaroth launched upward, using sky steps to reach the high ceiling of the cave. Once there, he rapidly grabbed a root, suddenly getting sucked in.

Aberon looked on in a stupor, seeing the young man disappear into the root, as if he had teleported. He could already feel his aura getting away at an unnatural speed.

'Another new ability. Just how much has he grown?'

Chapter 409 The Scout

In a normal circumstance, Astaroth would have felt less rushed to leave. He knew there was always a military presence in the capital city of Tel'narel.

He had been on the receiving end of it, once, after all. But even if foot soldiers confronted a demon, there was just no way they could stop it.

Even a weak demon was far stronger than simple foot soldiers. And Astaroth just knew the king wouldn't send his strongest troops out until he was in immediate danger.

That was just the type of man the rotten king was.

So he had to make haste and reach the capital, lest he finds only a burnt husk of a city once he arrived. That was why he was using Travelling Roots.

The speed at which he travelled through the roots was incomparable to his running or flying speed. By the time he launched out of a treetop with a sonic boom at the end of his melding time, the city already greeted his sight in the distance.

But he knew he was late.

The tree he had launched from was a burning husk, and from his viewpoint in the sky, a part of the outer city was just the same. Melding with Morpheus, he lost no time, bursting forward with the help of Propel.

He kept his wings folded on himself for a while, using the second burst from Propel, and his initial exit speed, to soar through the skies for a bit. When he felt he had slowed down enough and was descending again, he opened his wings, going into a glide.

Astaroth reached the city in the next few seconds, landing with a cloud of dust, taking a bit of damage and feeling his knees whine. But he had little time to care about his own safety or health.

He was already hearing the screams of terror and pain in a nearby street. From above head, he had seen where the destruction stopped, roughly, and had landed there, hoping the demon would be nearby.

Astaroth had landed in what looked like a market street. Carts were strewn all around him, destroyed and burning.

There was no Ash Elf in sight, and even through his mana senses, he couldn't sense anyone near him. When he eventually caught a mana signature through his sense, he became glum.

His head snapped toward the top of the buildings, where a red demon popped over a rooftop. The demon felt the wave of mana as he passed through it, and its head also turned to meet Astaroth's gaze.

An enormous grin appeared on the creature's face as it screeched and dove toward its prey.

Astaroth's mind flashed on something similar he had once seen, but he forced his attention back to the matter at hand. Scanning the demon, Astaroth frowned.

Demon Scout

Level: 50

Grade: Elite

HP: 96,600

MP: 2,310

This was just a scout. Why hadn't the king sent people to fight it?

He had seen no bodies at all, yet. Not even civilians.

He could surmise the demon had probably killed them in their homes, which was why he couldn't see bodies outside. But that only amounted to civilians.

Where were the bodies of the soldiers? He had not crossed a single one yet.

He had no time to think about this, as the demon was almost in his face. Unfortunately for the latter, it had grossly misjudged its new prey.

Catching the demon by its throat, Astaroth looked at it with a murderous gaze.

"You've killed enough innocents."

The demon only cackled, no fear in its eyes, as it slashed at Astaroth with red daggers, made of its own blood.

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Looking at the damage numbers in his view, Astaroth could feel anger boil the blood in his veins.

'Such a weak foe, and yet, not a single soldier was sent out to fight it. What is this fool of a king doing?'

Astaroth didn't want to waste time fighting the weak enemy. He plunged his hand inside the demon's chest, not even stopping the creature from slashing at him, and grasped its dark and tainted soul.

The demon's face changed when it felt something tugging at its very existence. It screeched in panic, redoubling its efforts at slashing the mortal in front of it.

The demon even resorted to kicking Astaroth, trying desperately to break free from the mortal's grasp. But the hand holding its throat was tight like a clamp, unbudging.

Astaroth looked the demon in the eyes, anger still washing off of him.

"If your soul ever enters the wheels of reincarnation, I hope you repent a million times in your next life."

Finishing his sentence, Astaroth pushed Aether into the soul. The sudden increase in power almost confused the demon, who felt like it could suddenly cut mountains.

But the feeling was fleeting, already overloading.

Screeching in pain and horror, the demon's soul ballooned up before popping. The demon went limp in Astaroth's grasp, before it suddenly started turning to ash.

The wind brought the ash away, scattering it until nothing was left. But Astaroth wasn't done just yet.

Sending a wave of mana around him, Astaroth expanded it as far as the city walls in every direction. He finally sensed mana spots, here and there, from citizens who had a bit of magic potential.

He realized he couldn't feel people if they didn't have mana, and that explained why he couldn't feel anyone around him. The demon had probably been attracted to their mana, too, and killed those people first.

To confirm his thoughts, Astaroth heard some shuffling in the debris to his right.

Turning his head, he saw a child crawl out of a broken doorway, to a house half-destroyed. The little girl seemed terrified, clutching a teddy-bear plush, looking at Astaroth like he was an abomination.

He realized he still had wings on his back, since he was melded to Morpheus. He quickly undid the meld, going back to normal.

"Everything is ok, now, little girl. I'm an Ash Elf, just like you. I killed the big evil demon. You are safe."

The little girl was reticent at first, but she eventually walked to him, looking at Astaroth with tear-filled eyes.

"Mommy is still in the house. She's sleeping and I can't wake her up. Can you help me?"

Astaroth's heart froze. He nodded at the little girl, already guessing her mother wasn't sleeping.

Walking up to the collapsed door, he cleared the way with a bit of telekinesis. When he saw the mother inside, he closed his eyes, turning the girl around.

"Mommy looks like she needs some more rest. Come with me. I will bring you to a garrison, where the guards will keep you safe until she wakes up, okay?"

The little girl reluctantly nodded, looking over her shoulder at her mother.

"Sleep tight, Mommy."

Astaroth was ready to explode in anger. He held back his emotions, only showing the little girl a fake smile, and walking away, holding her hand.

Chapter 410 Reaching The Castle Gates

It did not take long to reach a garrison, as there were many on the inside wall that led to the royal district. Once he reached close to it, he stopped in front of the counter, where a soldier was looking at him nervously.

The aura Astaroth was giving off might not be noticeable to a little girl, no older than five years old, with no mana capacity. But to a trained soldier, with at least a small amount, it was a different story.

Astaroth's figure seemed shrouded in deep red waves of hatred from the soldier's perspective, and he was barely holding on to his consciousness.

"C... C... Can I h... h... help you, S... S... Sir?"

In the most deadpan tone the soldier had ever heard, Astaroth replied.

"Yes. Take this little girl in. She requires the kingdom's protection. Her mother is... deceased."

Astaroth's aura flared a little more when saying that last word, eliciting a small yelp from the soldier.

It was clear to see that he was a recruit, being stationed at a garrison post like this. The young man was no older than twenty, and had probably seen next to nothing in life.

Being face-to-face with Astaroth, who currently exerted enough power to be on par with the military officers in the capital, was a lot to take in for the soldier. But he held on, nodding his head with sweat flying off his chin.

"Of c... c... course, Sir. Right this way little m... m... miss."

The little girl turned to Astaroth, who had led her here.

"What does deceased mean?"

"It means taking a long nap. Now go with the soldier. He will protect you for now."

The little girl nodded her head, unaware of the situation she was truly in. She walked over to the door the soldier had opened to the side of his post, walking into the garrison.

After letting the girl in and closing the door, the soldier went back to the window. His armor was already drenched in sweat.

His stuttering had stopped, but it was apparent that it took a lot of willpower for the young man to do so.

"Anything else I can help you with, Sir?"

"No. Take care of the girl."

Astaroth walked away, heading toward the nearest gate that led inward to the royal district. There was, unsurprisingly, no queue to go in.

But the guards suddenly blocked his way as he tried entering.

"Halt! No one is allowed past this point without the king or his court mage's approval! State your name!"

Astaroth looked at the surrounding guards, seemingly unaffected by the mana washing off of him. He was holding in his power, so no physical phenomena were happening yet.

"I am the king of a nation. Lower your weapons, soldiers, unless you want to get into trouble."

The guard that had spoken to him scanned him up and down with his eyes before bursting into laughter.

"Hahahaha! If you are a king, then I am the prince of the Ash Elves! Stop lying, you delusional fuck, and walk away before we kill you for trespassing."

Astaroth clicked his tongue in disdain.

"Fine, have it your way."

Snapping his fingers twice, Astaroth produced an invisible sound wave that washed over the surrounding guards, who suddenly started wavering.

One of them seemed a little more resistant to the effect, and as he noticed his buddies crumbling on themselves suddenly, their forms turning to heaps, asleep on the ground, he stabbed his spear at Astaroth.

But the attack was sloppy, and slow, allowing Astaroth to catch the tip of the spear between his fingers, holding it there.

"You should have just let yourself fall asleep."

Taking a swift step forward, Astaroth punched the guard in the stomach with enough force to bend his armour inward. The man collapsed on the ground, passing out from the lack of air and pain.

As he hit the ground, and Astaroth was about to walk into the gates, a man in black robes appeared not far ahead, standing in his path.

"Hmm. I don't recognize you, young man. Do you serve this kingdom?" the man in the cloak asked.

Astaroth frowned.

'He has no presence or mana. How did he appear there?'

"I used to. Now, I am the king of my own lands, and I request an audience with King Uuthli'vlos."

The man shuffled in his robes, prompting Astaroth to pull out Ad Astra, in a shortsword form.

Raising one hand forward, as to show his peaceful intentions, the man pulled out a scroll.

Unrolling the scroll, he seemed to look through its contents before putting it away.

Astaroth couldn't see the man's face, even though the cloak wasn't covering it entirely. Only a black shadow was visible, instead of his face.

That, in itself, was enough for anyone to feel weary of them. But many other things troubled Astaroth.

The lack of a mana signature, in a man that had just teleported in front of him.

The weird familiar sensation he was getting from the man.

The cloak, which seemed to warp light itself around it.

Many things were eerie about this man.

"King Astaroth. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I am sure the king will be glad to see you. Don't mind the mess here. I will see that the guards are punished for their rudeness. If you could just follow me."

Astaroth's frown grew deeper.

"How do you know my name?"

"Ahh, excuse my rudeness, your highness. The scroll I was reading is a registry of all the rulers on the continent. Your name is in it, right over an image of your illustrious self."

Although Astaroth didn't like the prospect of someone knowing his face and name from a scroll, it was something plausible for this world.

"Maybe the guards should be equipped with such a magical item. It would have prevented this situation."

"I will consider your wise advice, your highness. Now, if you would?"

Giving a slight bow, the man waved his arm behind himself, gesturing Astaroth to follow him.

'I don't like him,' Astaroth thought, stowing his weapon away.