

New Eden 671

Chapter 671 Another Prospect

After dressing up in the pale grey uniform Talbot had brought him, Alex walked out of the barracks, his hair still damp from the shower. But, at least, he wasn't dripping with blood anymore.

The woman looked at him and nodded.

"This doesn't look half bad on you, kid. You interested in joining in? I'm sure you could learn a thing or two from some professionals. Like, how not to get covered in the blood of your kills, maybe?" she teased.

Alex scoffed at her joke.

"No offence, ma'am. But I think I could kill everyone in this compound and escape with my life if I wanted to," he replied, slicking his hair back with a devilish grin.

The woman felt the same shiver from earlier when he had glared at her and her colleagues. He was not joking, she could sense it.

Was it confidence, or empty bravado, she couldn't tell. But she could feel it in her gut: he believed his words.

She was in no mood to find out, though.

"Alright, follow me, Mr. Leduc. Mr. Bellemare is ready for you on the top floor."

Alex sucked back in the bit of mana aura he had let out. He had realized over time that using this little aura trick, along with the right words, often had a stronger effect on the human psyche than just the words.

As if the human body, even in a world where mana had been previously nonexistent, reacted on instinct to the presence of something stronger than itself.

The more mana he let out, the stronger the effect on the target's mind.

But he had only done this to make the woman give up on trying to recruit him.

In any case, he was almost certain if he had the potential to be a soldier, Alfred would have already asked him to join. Which hadn't happened.

They reached another elevator, which was located closer to the center of the compound, which meant they had to go down a flight of stairs into the compound to reach it. This made them pass by the gym and sparring room.

He watched closely as they passed next to these, keeping his mana vision active, trying to see if someone had gotten in touch with mana. And, to his surprise, he indeed saw one.

Although faint, he found a single soldier, who by his looks alone, couldn't be older than twenty years old, who bore a spark of mana. It was so minuscule that he probably couldn't do anything with it.

But it was the seed that could blossom into power.

He tapped Talbot's shoulder before pointing at him.

"Who is that kid?"

Talbot looked at where he was pointing and raised an eyebrow.

"Why do you ask?" she asked, wary.

"Simple curiosity. The sounds of his punches on that sandbag sound crisp. They sound louder than the others, too."

Talbot chuckled.

"Hey, Alvares!" she shouted.

The young man, clearly Latino now that Alex saw him from the front, and by his name as well.

Talbot motioned him to come over, and he jogged over, before giving her a stuck-up salute.

"Yes, Ma'am! What can I do for you, Ma'am?!"

Talbot shook her head at him.

"Relax kid, I don't got orders for you. Just this man wanted to say your form is good, and your punches sound more powerful than the others. You can get back to it now."

Alvares looked at Alex with a cocked eyebrow, wondering who he was or how he could hear that from so far away. The amount of people punching sandbags or padded gloves was not small.

"Uh... Thank you?" he tentatively responded.

Alexander smiled at him, releasing a burst of mana again. There was no malice in it, and it was only to jolt the kid's mana a bit, to see his reaction.

Alvares felt a shiver run down his spine as he twitched a bit, his fists clenching. But the sensation of threat he felt quickly disappeared, making him wonder where it had come from.

He didn't stick around, and returned to training on his sandbag, glancing occasionally at Alexander and Talbot who left right after.

He smacked one of the older soldiers on the arm and asked, "Hey. Do you know who that was, with Sergeant Talbot?"

The man, closer to his forties, turned his head toward the direction the kid pointed, and his jaw went slack for a moment.

"What the fuck... Why is he here?"

Alvares, judging by the reaction, assumed he knew him and waited for an answer.

The older man worked his mind and remembered today was the day for the op on the Bianchi mansion, which he had asked not to be present on. Seeing Alexander Leduc here, on the day of the op, the soldier had many questions passing through his mind.

This was one of the three guys that Alfred had brought to Alexander's penthouse when they tried ruffing him up. He was also the one Alexander had thrown across the room like he was some vulgar doll.

Although the man had worse wounds in his life, getting flung like that put many of his perspectives under strain. The feat of strength went beyond what a normal human, especially the size of that young man, should be able to do.

It had made him wonder if the world was hiding other wild things. Then the event with the giant rats in the city's service tunnels made him ask those same questions to himself.

Shaking his head out of his stupor, the older merc looked at Alvares and shook his head at him.

"I have a feeling we'll know soon enough. For now, get back on that bag, rookie. Your form is terrible, and those punches couldn't hurt an old lady. You should stop playing that stupid video game so much, and hit the gym more!"

Alvares' face scrunched up a bit, taking the insult personally.

"Funny. I had the impression I had gotten stronger," he murmured.

"What was that, punk?!" the older merc asked, taking a menacing step toward the young Latino.

"Nothing, sir!" he barked, getting back to his sandbag.

But questions still took most of his attention, making his training sloppy, at best.

'Who is he? And why did I feel like I could die from just his glare, for a second, there?'

Chapter 672 Bellemare's Office

It didn't take long for Talbot and Alex to reach the center elevator, from which they would rise to the building's last floor, above ground. The ascension was much longer than the descent, and Alex unconsciously tapped his foot to the elevator's music as they went.

This made Talbot laugh under her breath.

"What's funny?" he asked her, wondering why the sudden hilarity.

"Oh, nothing. I just didn't take you for the type to enjoy elevator music. You're like a polyhedral. So many facets to you, it's hard to grasp who you are."

Alex thought on her words for a moment, before chuckling.

"You wouldn't believe how many facets. Much to my regret, even I don't know," he said, scratching the back of his head.

Ever since he started melding on this side of the veil, he noticed he had developed many strange tics that he could only associate with the many creatures he fused his soul with.

He didn't worry too much about it, as long as it didn't affect his day-to-day life. But he wondered how long it would take for these facets to merge back into his original self.

Did his original self still exist?

He couldn't delve into that thought for long, as the elevator dinged, signalling they had reached their destination.

Talbot gave him a casual salute as he exited the elevator. She stayed on, and rhythmically pressed the down button, before the doors shut.

'A code for the basement, I assume,' Alex thought.

But he was now busy with scanning the rest of the room he had entered.

The open area that the elevator had come to was massive. On the walls were rows and rows of collection items, ranging from weapons of old to modern ones, and paintings of old men in so many styles and attires.

"What the hell is this room?" Alex mumbled to himself.

But a voice from all around him responded to his silent question.

"Welcome to the archives, Mr. Leduc. Or, as my ancestors used to call it, the tapestry of history, whatever that meant," Alex heard, coming from speakers on the ceiling.

"Turn right at the old silk loom, and keep going until you reach my desk. I'm waiting for you there," the voice once again resounded.

Alex looked around him, spotting said old loom, and started walking toward it. He stopped momentarily, noticing that the loom wasn't encased in glass, or anything, and seemed to have been recently used as well.

But the stitching in the last row was strange. It wasn't straight and tidy, like the many rows above it.

He wanted to spend more time there, looking at the weaved silk, to see if this was more than just a mistake, but he could feel Richard's staring eyes on his back from the cameras all around, and opted to keep walking.

He turned to the right and kept walking toward Richard, even though he couldn't see where the desk was.

He walked for an entire minute before the glass casings on each side gave way to a recess, where Richard awaited behind a luxurious mahogany desk.

The man was wearing reading glasses, his head down over stacks of papers, with many electronic screens around his desk.

'Who still writes by hand?' Alex wondered, as he looked at the man's careful penmanship.

Richard didn't even look up at him and responded to his mental question as if he had read his thoughts.

"Some ways of old should never go unremembered. Young people these days never take the time to write by hand, and the skills of calligraphy are already being lost to time. But a well-written letter is a piece of art, for the many people of my age."

Alex sucked in cold air, wondering if he had said his thoughts out loud, unknowingly.

"I could guess your thoughts by your frown alone, as you entered the office. Sit down, boy. We have much to talk about."

Richard's tone was neither cold nor arrogant when saying these words. Most likely, he was too focused on his penmanship to even give Alex more than an afterthought.

Alex did as instructed and sat down. He waited for Richard to speak first since he was the one to call him up.

But Richard instead shoved a stack of paper towards him.

"Sign those. Don't take too long. I want to get this meeting with as much as you do."

Alex looked at the pile of paper, and his brain almost blanked. There looked to be at least a hundred sheets of paper before him as Richard deposited a pen on top of the stack.

Seeing his face from over his glasses, Richard almost shook his head in disappointment.

"You do know how to sign your name, right?"

The mocking tone didn't escape Alexander's ears as he glared lightly at Richard.

"I do. I was just surprised at the mountain of work you are making me do..."

Richard huffed.

"Kid. This is not even a tenth of the workload I have to do every day. If this is too much for you, you are even more useless than I thought"

Alex gritted his teeth as he gripped the pen in between his fingers.

"Alright, stop talking. I'll get it done, you old fogey."

Alex leaned into the stack, starting to scan each page to find the signature lines, and Richard's light smirk escaped him.

Richard was not one to shy from some light banter, and he didn't take the 'old fogey' comment to heart. After all, he had just called him useless as well.

Silence took over the room once more, as only the sound of ruffling pages and scribbling pens could be heard.

This lasted for almost half an hour, before Richard set aside his fancy pen and folded his paper into a blank white envelope, sealing it with a smudge of black wax and a stamp.

Alex saw him do this, and wondered once more, 'Who still shuts envelopes like that...'

Richard gazed at him, after setting the envelope to the side, and noticed he was almost done with his signing task.

'Not bad,' he thought, as he leaned back into his large office chair.

The stack he had given Alexander might have looked thick, but the workload was even worse. On the hundred and twenty pages of the document, there were close to three hundred signature lines, and just as many initial boxes, which he wanted Alexander to fill in.

It was no small task, and he had expected the young man to cramp up before even reaching halfway through. And even though he could see him wince in pain, Alex plodded through, keeping a steady pace.

When the young man signed the last sheet, he dropped the pen, with his hand cramping up in the position it had been for the last thirty-five minutes. But he didn't say a peep.

"Good. Now that this matter is done with, let us get to the debrief, shall we?" Richard said, grinning.

Chapter 673 The Don Arrives

It took a little over an hour for Richard to read through the entire debrief report, along with Alex, to make sure everything was accurate. During which, he berated him a few times, saying his savage methods gave the cleaner crews for work than necessary.

But Alex kept his snarky remarks to himself, knowing it wouldn't amount to much, arguing with Richard.

Once they had gone over the reports together, Richard was about to dismiss Alexander when he thought about something else.

He pulled out an envelope from a drawer under his desk and threw it at Alex across the desk.

"Here. Take it. It was originally for Alfred and his men, since they were going to do the heavy lifting. But since you completed the op by yourself, it's only right that you get it. They can get the normal op bonus."

Alex frowned as he caught the envelope. It was heavy for such a small thing.

He was about to snap open the seal when Richard raised his hand.

"Not here, buffoon. Wait till you are at home. If people see you with that, questions will be asked, and I don't want to deal with that. Now go."

Alex pocketed the envelope in one of the uniform pockets and nodded his head.

"I'd say it was a pleasure doing business, but it wasn't. I hope this doesn't have to happen again, young man."

Alex scoffed. That was one point they agreed on.

Just as he turned, Richard called out to him once more.

"Oh! Wait. One more thing."

He got up from his desk and walked toward Alex, extending his hand out.

Alex went to grab the hand, expecting the man to want a handshake, but Richard's other hand instead cocked him in the jaw and he sprawled onto the ground.

Alex's face went dark, but seeing Richard's wide grin, he somehow knew this wasn't just for the fun of it.

"Now, we're even, you little shit," Richard declared, before walking back to his desk.

Alex seethed inside, wanting to tear him a new asshole. But he kept it in, knowing what the punch was for.

He quickly rose back to his feet and stomped his way to the elevator.

Richard waited for the distant ding, before grabbing his fist in his other hand.

"God dammit. What is his jaw made of? Concrete? Fuck... I think I have broken fingers..."

Alex cursed under his breath as the elevator took him back to the underground parking, where Alfred was waiting for him.

Alfred, seeing the light redness on the young man's cheek, chuckled to himself.

"He did say he was going to get you back, eventually. Looks like he tagged you pretty well, too. Anyway, I'm ready to drive you back home. Let's go."

Alex ignored the comment about his face, and climbed into the back of the black sedan, as Alfred closed the door behind him, chuckling to himself.

The drive back was quiet, as Alex was still processing his day, as well as the sucker punch he took from Richard. But by the time they reached his building, he had calmed down.

He was ready to go on with his life, ignoring today's events as much as his brain would allow it. It was a sort of coping mechanism for him.

Alfred bid him farewell before driving off, and Alexander looked at the building, wondering how Kary would react to him suddenly coming back with different clothes on.

'She's probably going to scold me...' he assumed.

But there was no going around the matter. At least he was unscathed.

He had kept that one promise of coming back unharmed, at least physically. So that should attenuate her wrath.

'I'll just relax for the rest of the day. I'm beat,' he said to himself, as he walked toward the building entrance.

Far away from Montreal, in southwestern Europe, in the country of Italy, another meeting was being held.

In an estate along the coast of Tuscany, nine men were seated around an outdoor table that overlooked a large vineyard down below.

One seat was empty, at the center of the table, on the left side, and the old men were discussing it in low tones.

"Did you hear? I heard Francesco took over the family on the east coast of Canada, and he began dragging the name in the mud," an old bald guy said.

The guy across the table from him, with slick black hair that was quite obviously dyed, but no one said anything about it, replied to him.

"I heard he overthrew the old bastard because he was sick. And since then, he's been acting like he runs shit."

A few seats down to his right, another old man looked at them and scoffed.

"We all knew Francesco was a little shit. Only his father Roberto held any love for that rascal. He always assumed he could bend him until he acted the part of his bloodline."

A few silent laughs echoed around the table, the old men all agreeing with that statement.

One of them asked a crucial question that broke the laughter.

"Whose gonna replace the Bianchis at the table, now that they are dead?"

Silence permeated the table as they all wondered what family could fill in the spot. There were a few smaller families under each of them that fit the bill.

All of them hoped the don would pick one of their subfamilies, allowing them to have a louder voice at the table. It was a golden opportunity to one-up the others.

Even if they were part of the organization, none of them deluded themselves into thinking they were steadfast allies. The crime world did not work that way.

The discussion suddenly came to a halt, as a crystalline bell was rung. A man walked over to the table, sitting in the empty seat at its tip.

His slicked-back black hair shone in the sunlight as he looked at every one of the men around him.

"I think we all know why I called this meeting today. So let us get to it, shall we?" he said, blinking his eyes slowly.

"Yes, Don Romano!" the men cried out.

Chapter 674 Mutinous Words

After the nine family heads saluted the don, they started talking over each other, trying to sell their sub-families as the best choice for replacement.

The don let this carry on for a short while, hearing them out with a distracted ear, before knocking his cane on the marble floor under the table.

Knock knock

In mere moments, the arguing and loud talking stopped, the terrace becoming silent once more.

He looked at each of the old fellows, one by one, his eyes almost piercing into them.

"I heard what all of you had to say. I believe a few of you have some valid arguments. But the decision was already taken.

"This morning, I got a visit from one prospect I had in mind, and her offer was not something we could afford to turn away. Therefore, I would like you to welcome at the table, Miss Amara Rossi, the replacement of the Bianchi family."

The don started slow clapping, as a woman entered the terrace from behind him, her heels clacking on the marble flooring. When she sat down at the table, a wave of whispers started.

"A woman? We've never had a woman at this table."

"The Rossi family? I haven't heard from them in forever. Wasn't that old senile killed by the cops?"

"Why did the don call us here, if not to deliberate on the subject? Some of us come from far."

Another couple of knocks echoed on the terrace, as Don Romana brought them back to order.

"I hear your whispers. And I know that this beats our century-long tradition. But, for many reasons, I believe it is time we enter a new era. Women are no longer the weaker sex, and Miss Rossi has demonstrated this to me in high detail. And if any of you wish so, she can show you as well."

The woman, who was wearing a nice burgundy dress, which flowed down at her ankles, and some expensive-looking jewelry, smiled at all the old men.

Behind her stood another woman, this one dressed in a three-piece suit, matching the other guards around the table, with eyeglasses sitting on her nose.

Her face was delicate, but her body looked to be a lot more toned, under the suit, than her delicate features led to believe. And her eyes.

Her piercing green eyes, which gave shivers to all the other bodyguards when she stared them down, were sharp and alert.

One of the older men slammed his fist on the table.

"Don Romana! This is egregious! We have never allowed a woman at the table in centuries of existence. This is blasphemy! With all due respect, I, head of the Gallo family, demand that you revoke her right this instant!"

His bodyguard, a large, bald man, stepped forward. His face was still neutral, but his hand was already hovering close to his jacket.

The don looked at him and glared.

"You don't get to make demands of me, Gallo. This is my table. And as long as I live, I choose who sits around it. Your father and mine were close, and by virtue of that alone, I shall disregard your comment. But open your fat mouth again, and I will sow it shut before using your dead body as fertilizer for my vineyard. Understood?"

His voice may have been steady, but his underlying tone was laced with threat.

But the Gallo head huffed in response.

"Then maybe you don't deserve to be sitting at the end of the table."

Gasps of surprise echoed around the table. The older men were all taken aback by the comment.

This was mutiny.

In all the mafia's history, mutiny had never ended well for the mutinous party.

Before the don could speak up, and respond to the mutinous comment, Amara lifted her hand.

"Under our rules, mutiny is punishable by death. As new head, I, Amara Rossi, hereby sentence you to death, Antonio Gallo. Maria, get rid of him."

Antonio panicked at the words. But before he could even instruct his bodyguard to act, he felt a cold blade plunge into his upper back, between two ribs, and pierce his heart.

The other men around the table were all aghast.

The second Amara had ordered her bodyguard, Maria, to get rid of him, something unnatural had happened.

The woman in the suit disappeared from behind Amara, and reappeared between Antonio and his bodyguard, slashing the latter's throat open in one quick swipe, and kicked the head away, before plunging a gleaming Cinquedeia into the former's back, all the way to the guard.

Antonio's shirt bulged in the front, as it turned red, from the blade going cleanly through his heart. His death followed only a few seconds later, as Maria withdrew her blade.

Blood spattered on the bodyguards of the other heads as they watched the woman once again vanish and reappear behind Amara Rossi.

Everyone was speechless at what they could only describe as witchcraft.

But before chaos could erupt, the don slowly clapped his hands together, an enormous grin on his face.

"What a beautiful display, Miss Rossi! If everyone under you is as competent, then it was the best decision to nominate you as the tenth head. Splendid work!"

"You flatter me, Don Romana. I was only doing my duty as head of family. It is our prerogative to ensure the don stays safe, even from our fellow heads."

The don started laughing loudly, happy with her response.

"If only more heads had been like you in the past. This organization might have become much larger and influential. Boahahaha! I like you, young woman. You will go far in this organization. I can feel it."

The other heads started clapping, reluctantly, lest the woman see it as an affront. But their unhappy faces said long about their true feelings.

"Head Conti!" the don barked.

"Yes, don?!"

"Make sure the Gallos elect a new head from their family. And remind them that mutiny is punishable by death. If they want to keep existing and keep a place at this table, they better behave."

"Yes, don!" the head of the Contis answered.

He felt a shiver down his spine and noticed Amara Rossi was staring at him.

'Who the fuck is this woman?' he wondered, his mind a complete mess after today's events.

Chapter 675 Meetings Everywhere

After a few more broached subjects, and Amara's inauguration speech, the meeting was declared over.

As Amara left the villa, she climbed aboard her Maserati, on the passenger side, and Maria on the driver's side, and they drove off.

The car bolted out of the driveway, hitting the paved road to the estate in seconds, and disappeared into the distance.

While they drove away, Amara's smile only grew wider.

"Maria. Reach out to our people in Canada. I want to move to Montreal as soon as possible. And try to get a hold of this man. I want to thank him."

She sent an image onto the onboard screen of the car, showing a young man getting off a black sedan with a militaristic uniform on.

"Yes, Ma'am," Maria replied, nodding her head.

"I don't know how you cleared out that mansion in a single day, but you can't be normal. You have to be like us..." Amara mumbled as she stared intensely at the image.

Back in Montreal, Alexander sneezed out of the blue and brushed his nose with his finger.

'Dust? Nah, it can't be. This place is spotless. Eh. Whatever,' he thought, shrugging.

He went about his things as the sun was setting. It was almost time to log back into New Eden.

Kary had given him an earful upon arrival, seeing as he wasn't wearing his clothes anymore. She could already guess why that was and was far from proud of him.

When Alex had tried calming her with the fact he was unharmed, and was far from proud of him.

When Alex had tried calming her with the fact he was unharmed, she had gut-punched him, saying it wasn't funny.

But amidst Alex's laughter, she eventually calmed down.

Now, the day was almost over, and they had a kingdom to run, and a woman to convince of joining their ranks.

The next days passed on quickly, with Alex and Kary being so busy in both New Eden and in their everyday tasks, that they barely saw it go by.

The only eventful thing that had happened was when Khalor had suddenly teleported into the city's main plaza, with his drake still summoned. This sent the city guard into a frenzy until orders from Declan resolved the situation.

Khalor cursed at the security guards, saying they should recognize him by now. This was the second time they stopped him inside the city, and he was getting annoyed.

But it was partly his fault for never showing up in the city, and showing up with his monstrosity of a drake summoned every time he did. Even though he and Declan shared the same rank, that didn't stop the older undead from scolding Khalor.

But he had only come by to talk to Astaroth and was gone a few hours later.

At the end of the three-day trial run for the commander post, Astaroth, Phoenix, Dilya, and Singing Grove met up once more.

During the trial run, Astaroth had brought the prospect commander, along with the newly recruited mages for the regiment, to a low-level dungeon, which stood just at the limit of their territory.

In there, he tested her ability to lead troops, as well as her combat awareness, and her performance under pressure. He also occasionally sparred with her, as did Phoenix, to gauge her prowess as a mage.

And well to her merit, she handled herself very well, given her inexperience in most of the tasks she would have to perform.

They even sent her to take a crash course in report filling, from Brienne, their bookkeeper.

Even with all the added stress of wanting to prove her worth, regardless of how sure she was about taking up the commander's mantle, Dilya performed way beyond what Astaroth and Phoenix thought she would. And this brought a smile to their faces.

When the meeting time was decided, Singing Grove made it at the appointed time, with the three others already present. The moment the Fey entered the room, her face changed to a look of defeat.

The happiness present on Dilya's face was more than enough to tell her what decision she would take. Now, she could only make sure the transition went without a hitch.

Singing Grove helped her ex-protégé to negotiate good terms, since she could no longer hold her back. She would make sure to get the best conditions from the monarchs for such a talent.

At the end of the meeting, the Fey woman insisted on meeting with the monarchs alone for a moment, and Phoenix granted her the audience.

Astaroth wasn't going to interfere, since he was curious about what she wanted in the first place.

Once they were left alone, Singing Grove's face turned to an angry stare. Which she was directing at Astaroth.

"King Astaroth. I know you went through 'fair' procedures to steal this talent from me. But I am very unhappy with the results. I wish for a favour, in return for losing such an asset as Dilya Naemenor."

Astaroth frowned.

Her tone was less than friendly, and even Phoenix had never heard her sound so angry.

The Fey was usually so calm and disconnected. This wasn't like her.

"What is it you want to ask for, Councilwoman Grove?" Astaroth responded, making sure to remain professional.

"First, before asking this of you, I want your guarantee that whatever happens, you won't resent me, or take any action against the adventurers' guild because of the favour."

Astaroth's frown deepened.

'Is she going to attack me?' he wondered.

"How bad of a favour are you going to ask, to ask such a guarantee from us?" Phoenix asked, her face turning serious.

Her business instincts told her that asking for such a thing meant what she would ask was not something very good, or even acceptable, in normal circumstances.

"Swear it to me."

Phoenix was about to refute her, but Astaroth took her short.

"Sure. I promise this will not affect your position, or the guild's position, or standing with us, or the kingdom in any way. Now ask your favour, Lady Grove."

Singing Grove's face turned to an enormous grin, something Phoenix had never seen her do.

"I want you to prove her talent won't be wasted. I want you both to fight me. Regardless of the result, nothing changes for the girl, or me and the guild. Can you do that?"

Phoenix's eyes widened at the request.

But, Astaroth's face, instead, turned into a combative smirk.

And before Phoenix could ask him to think about this, he responded to her.

"Deal. Training floor. Right now."

Chapter 676 Setting The Room

Singing Grove didn't wait to hear Phoenix's reply and swung her arm in a wide arc. Almost instantly, all three of them disappeared from the throne room, and reappeared into the sixth-floor room, startling the gnomish mage who resided and worked there.

"What in tarnation?!" the old gnome exclaimed, dropping the papers he had in hand.

He brought a hand over his heart, trying to calm his palpitating heart, as three people appeared on his floor unannounced. To make matters even worse, two were the monarchs, and the last was a councilwoman.

"We are using the facilities," Lady Grove said, her face still in a devilish grin.

The gnome's face fell, his mouth dropping low, as the words stunned him.

"I... I... What?"

Astaroth wanted to laugh at the situation, but he was already thinking about the Fey's powers, and what to expect.

This was a situation where the councilwoman had an advantage over him. Most of the kingdom knew about the king's and queen's power.

But he knew next to nothing about the strengths and weaknesses of Singing Grove.

Astaroth could guess she hadn't become a guild leader by being weak. But weakness was relative.

One could be called weak in a mage context, and still be able to smash a boulder bare-handed. Or have the constitution of a sickly child, but be able to cast spells at the highest level.

Not knowing the skills, spells, or physical abilities of his opponent, Astaroth was going in blind. And he loved it.

Already, he could feel his blood pumping loudly inside his veins, as the excitement was spreading through him.

Phoenix dealt with the gnome mage, as he was confused about the situation, and Astaroth was already lost in thought.

'Battle junkie,' she thought, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

"We need to use your services. Lady Grove wants to spar, and it seems only appropriate that we do so in the safety of the training grounds. Would you be so kind as to give us a room?" she asked, smiling warmly at the gnome.

The old gnome finally regained his composure, hearing the queen's words, and nodded his head.

"I can, your highness. But there is one issue. The last time you came here, you tested the room's resistance against the commanders. And then, after reinforcing them for the king's sake, he still almost crumbled the walls to another room the next day.

"I am afraid having both of you in the same room, in addition to our esteemed Lady Grove, would take a massive toll on the palace's mana resources. And I would also need to empty the other training grounds, to ensure a maximum of the resources go to your room."

The gnome looked perplexed at the thought.

In front of him, four screens were displayed, and in them, a few of the off-duty squads from the different regiments were having some training sessions, and interrupting them seemed rude to him.

Phoenix understood his reticence. It was out of his pay grade to order around the soldiers of the kingdom.

"Patch me into the rooms. I will ask them to leave," she said, walking forward.

The gnome sighed in relief. Since she was willing to tell them to leave, he wouldn't have to attract their ire.

He drew a few magic symbols directly on the wooden table in front of him, causing a few lights to glow lightly.

"All done, my queen. They can now hear you."

Phoenix cleared her throat before speaking to the soldiers, who she could see on the projected screens.

All of them had stopped their training, as a sound had alerted them to an incoming message.

"Good day to you, soldiers of Stellar Woodlands. This is Queen Phoenix speaking. I know it is at the last second, and quite abrupt of us, but the king and I would like to request the use of the training rooms for ourselves. And we are being told that requires all the other occupants to leave them, if only temporarily. If you would be so kind as to postpone your training sessions to later, Astaroth and I would be very grateful."

Inside the four rooms, all the soldiers looked at each other before chanting almost all at the same time.

"Yes, my queen!"

With their approval, the gnome could pull them out of the rooms they were in, without causing discourse or anger. The old man wanted to avoid a confrontation with the commanders at all costs.

With all four rooms emptied soon after, he could divert all the resources to maintaining a single one. With a few strokes of his fingers on the wooden surface, the gnome also diverted a large part of the magic crystals' power to the room, as well.

He would have to explain this to the mage's guild, later on, since they were in charge of the crystals, but he didn't mind. He worked for them, and explaining this would be a trivial matter.

As soon as he was certain enough power had been diverted, he turned to look at the three VIPs.

"Are there any preferences for the room's layout?"

With how much power at their disposal, he could mould the room into anything.

Astaroth opened his mouth to speak, saying it didn't matter, but Singing Grove beat him to the punch.

"Yes. Make it into the maze forest of the Fey wild."

Astaroth and Phoenix both frowned at the request.

"Yes, ma'am," the gnome replied.

It took only a few seconds for him to modify the appearance of the room into the requested one, and immediately after, he spun his arm into a large circle, making the portal appear before the monarchs and councilwoman.

"The room is all yours. I hope the power I diverted is enough to contain whatever you throw at it. If not, I will have to put in a request to have a mana font built into the room itself," the gnome said, chuckling to himself.

Astaroth looked at the portal, which was flashing in a myriad of colours, and his face twitched.

'What kind of alien place is she sending us to?' he wondered.

But seeing the councilwoman step right in, his pride wouldn't let him think about it twice. He stepped forth, walking into the portal, followed by Phoenix, who had a look of defeat on her face.

'I wish he wasn't so reactive, sometimes...'

Chapter 677 Her Real Visage

The portal twisted and turned, giving Astaroth and Phoenix a slight headache and minor nausea, but it quickly receded once they were out of it.

Looking around themselves, Astaroth was already confused, and Phoenix was flabbergasted.

They had landed in a forest of some kind, but the scenery was so different, it looked like they were in a different world, where the normal laws of nature didn't apply.

The tree had trunks of transparent crystal, where a clear blue sap was visibly travelling, slowly. There were some on the ground, which was a myriad of different colours of dirt, and others floating sluggishly through the air.

Birds with bodies of vibrant colours flew around, catching their attention almost immediately with their anomalous morphology.

Some were flying around fast, with elongated bodies, almost like cranes. Others were round and bloated, flying about slowly, like bubbles in the wind.

In a matter of seconds, Astaroth could already feel his mind swimming, but it was rapidly eased away with a notification.

Mental affliction: Disoriented, detected. Mind Over Body activated. Condition resisted.

His senses went back to normal, and immediately he fell into high alert.

'What kind of place did she bring us to? Was this on purpose?'

Turning his head toward Phoenix, he could see her eyes were slightly glazed over, most likely under the effect of the Disoriented status.

Albeit one of the most annoying statuses, it was also easy to remediate.

Astaroth waved his hand in front of Phoenix's face, and snapped his fingers a few times, interrupting the stimuli from the forest itself.

"Hey. Snap out of it. The terrain is causing us mental afflictions. Make sure you don't focus on it too much."

Phoenix shook her head, her senses coming back slowly.

"What a troublesome battlefield to fight in..." she muttered.

"Yeah, tell me about it. This fight could have been over in moments if my passives didn't block it out."

Phoenix made sure to not stare too long at one thing, and never focus on it either, making her look like a panicked and scared person. But it was better than falling into a daze and getting slain while unable to defend.

A cracking sound came from their left, and both of them spun, their weapons now drawn, as Lady Grove pulled out between a row of crystalline trees.

Two massive wings were unfurled behind her, Phoenix and Astaroth seeing them for the first time. They were of the same colour as the trees, with blue lines pulsing in them.

But Astaroth could sense what was in those veins. And it wasn't sap or blood.

Astaroth eyes narrowed, as he finally scanned her.

Titania

Level: 150

Grade: Mythical

Health: 13,811,400

Mana: 938,450

**

His blood froze.

"Phoenix. Go all in. No hesitation."

Immediately, as he said that, he started melding with Luna. He was also ready to cast Sublimation, and chain it with Royal Protection, to give himself a ten-minute boost.

Of course, the whiplash would be massive afterwards. But he expected he would need it.

With the level and grade he saw, the health and mana didn't add up to what he estimated was the right amount. This meant she had at least one more stat that was highly boosted, that the scan didn't show him.

He immediately knew this would not be a tough fight. It would be a matter of how long they would last.

Phoenix, hearing his words, and seeing him meld with Luna straight away, understood he was not kidding, and immediately condensed a large part of her mana into flames, and coated herself with it. She had been practising this move for a while now, and transforming into her Avatar of Flames form was now much faster.

But she couldn't go into supernova mode as fast. She would need at least thirty seconds of channelling her flames to do so.

Even if she could do that while fighting, she wasn't sure if she would have thirty seconds. Astaroth very rarely went all in from the start.

She had a good grasp on his train of thought and knew he liked testing himself as much as he could before pushing himself harder.

If he insisted on going guns blazing at the start, then he already knew he couldn't do so.

Phoenix almost didn't dare to scan the councilwoman because of this.

But she had to.

And once she did, she instantly understood the mistake they had committed.

"You should have said no," she said to Astaroth, her tone shaking with anger.

"Yeah... I realize that now..." he replied.

The Fey woman kept walking toward them, slowly, every step filled with the grace one would expect of royalty. The dirt under her barren feet shimmered in a myriad of colours when her feet touched it, almost like the ground was happy to feel her.

When she stopped only a few metres away, Singing Grove, or rather Titania, grinned.

"Now that you have seen this, and are ready to take me seriously, how about we start this spar? I believe we are all busy people, and wasting time isn't good for any of us."

Astaroth lowered his stance, his white hair already flaring up, as a miniature sun appeared above his head.

"I agree. Let's get this over with."

Before any other movement was done, Phoenix bolted backward, throwing a quickly conjured fire spear at Titania, before taking off into the sky. She wanted to keep a distance, so she could activate her battle regalia and supernova mode.

Titania knocked the spear away with ease, as two thin swords appeared in her hands. They looked like a mix between a rapier and a sabre, the blade thin and long.

But, with how sturdy it sounded, as it smacked the flaming spear away, Astaroth knew it could slash just as much as stab.

Titania watched as Phoenix flew away and took a single step forward.

Astaroth saw her disappear from her spot as soon as she lifted her leg and knew where she was going.

Although his speed was not fast enough to follow her, he had other aces up his sleeve.

"Ipos! Swap us, now!"

Chapter 678 All In

As the demon appeared by his side, it was already performing some hand movements, and with it, it swapped Astaroth and Phoenix in space.

When switching places, Astaroth had already equipped his Ironbark Shield and pulled out the Ad Astra, in shortsword form, ready to take the hit instead of her.

With his shield already raised before him, he felt like a bullet train had just slammed into him, and the force behind the hit was all contained in a single spot on his shield, where the tip of Titania's blade was pushing him back.

She stopped her advance when she noticed the different target in front of her and clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"I will deal with you after. Wait for your turn."

Her words were spat with a certain disdain. Almost like Astaroth wasn't worthy of her time, as long as she didn't want to give it to him.

She slashed at him with her second sword, Astaroth barely having enough time to erect a barrier and twist his shield in the way again, before getting batted aside like a baseball in a home-run.

His trajectory was downward, and he knew he would hit the ground very soon. And the dame would not be pleasant.

Even though he had greatly reduced the damage of the first and second attacks, he knew they were only regular strikes.

Titania was not taking them seriously as enemies at all.

'Ipos! Again! Me and her, this time!' he shouted in his mind.

The demon reacted, and with another strange hand movement, Titania and Astaroth were switched places.

The thing with the demon Count's power was that, when he swapped things, they would also trade their momentums and trajectories.

This meant that Titania, who was now again charging toward Phoenix, was now diving face-first into the ground. She barely had any time to react, but still managed to mitigate a large part of the impact by spinning on herself and digging her feet into the ground instead of her face.

As for Astaroth, he used a powerful surge of wind magic to slow down his flight toward Phoenix, and then landed on his feet before sliding for about a hundred feet.

He was as strong as he could be right now, and she was still treating him like a plaything. And that did not sit well with him.

He wasn't sure if he should wait to use sublimation after Royal Protection, or use it in culmination right now, and hope it was enough to battle the woman.

But what he did know was that this battle was not something they would win.

Even if Phoenix powered up to her maximum, and he chose to take the heavy toll and double down on his exhaustion, a level one-hundred and fifty Mythical being was no joke.

He knew he couldn't, or rather, shouldn't, summon his other soul companions. It would be useless.

He had only summoned Ipos so he could use his powers. But he felt like Titania would catch on soon enough.

And just to prove his point, a thin line of deep purple energy came flying at the demon, too fast for him to do anything.

Immediately after it passed through him, Ipos smiled at Astaroth.

"I'm sorry, Master Astaroth. This is as far as I go in this fight."

A line of blood formed on him before his body slipped into two halves and he exploded into pixels.

Astaroth knew the demon had only gone back into the ring. But that had been much too fast.

'A single strike... That's all it took.'

Astaroth looked toward the now falling dust cloud that the attack had come from, and he saw Titania walking out, her face sullied with dust, and angry.

Her wings were pulsing behind her, a trait players online had talked about meaning the Fey's were angry. Their wings would reflect their emotions more than their face, like an emotional mirror.

The Aether he could feel inside the wings was rotating wildly, almost like a raging river.

"You have sullied me. I thought I would go easy on you and take each of you out quickly to assuage my anger. But now, I think I will kill you slowly."

As she dashed, time around Astaroth stopped. The colours drained out of his vision, everything becoming monochromatic in shades of black and white.

Then he heard Solomon's voice in his head.

"The fairy queen Titania. It has been a long time since I saw her. Still as beautiful as ever, even after almost five millennia.

"You seem to have landed yourself in a tough spot, as usual. But I can help you out of this one. I think it is high time I teach you your first legacy skill. Although it won't do much to augment your personal power, I think the skill itself will be useful to this fight."

Astaroth couldn't respond, his thoughts frozen like the surrounding time. He could hear, and think, but not talk back.

But as Solomon finished speaking, a deluge of magical symbols appeared inside Astaroth's head, flooding his memory, like it had always been part of it.

So many symbols, so many runes, and so much power associated with them. He could feel all this coursing in his mind as time was stopped.

Once the information stopped coursing into his mind, he heard Solomon once more.

"Although not all the demons under this rung have accepted you as their master yet, the spell will force them to obey. And who knows, after this, they might just willingly obey you. Give her hell, kid. Literally."

Time slowly moving forward again, but Astaroth was the first to move again as if the time stop had originated from him.

As his mind unfroze from the time stop, so did his body. He was moving so slowly, but he knew what to do to remediate that.

Activating Thousand Thoughts, his mind could move at a normal pace and counter the slowly speeding up time.

And he used this to cast the spell Solomon had just dumped into his mind.

"Legacy skill: Hell's descent, first layer; Avernus Rising."

Chapter 679 Legacy Skill Activated

Titania, who could feel a slight change in Astaroth's presence, suddenly backed off. She heard his whispers, and her eyes widened.

She quickly jumped back, trying to put some distance between the two of them.

'I knew I recognized that ring,' she thought, as she backed away.

Astaroth erupted with black flames, as a ring of runes appeared under his feet, growing in size until it was almost a hundred metres wide. The runes shone in red-black shades, as a portal opened up behind Astaroth.

He may have been too busy burning up in demonic flames to notice the portal behind him, but Phoenix wasn't.

And from afar, her eyes widened.

'That portal... It's like the one in the dungeon's last stage...'

Her mind couldn't wrap around the fact that Astaroth was opening such a portal. Just how close to hell's powers had Solomon's legacy made Astaroth?

Phoenix's concentration almost slipped far enough that she dropped her mana condensing. Fortunately, she was smart enough to realize what was happening, and caught herself in time, before having wasted all this effort to no avail.

While Titania was looking at the portal with dread and awe, Phoenix used this respite to finalize her flame condensation, activated Regulus Supernova, and switched it into Battle Regalia form.

Feeling the surge in power from another source, Titania knew the battle had just gotten serious.

"These two sure are troublesome..." she muttered.

She only wanted to blow some steam to start with. But now it seemed like she would have to get serious a bit.

A surge of fire erupted under Titania's feet, like a volcano exploding, but she felt the mana surge before it did and was already moving away.

Astaroth, whose spell had finally finished, was now surrounded by eight demons.

He knew exactly who they were, but was still surprised to see a few of them.

Looking at each demon, Astaroth tried remembering all their powers, since he would need to use them correctly during this fight.

'So many things to control... Is this what Khalor has to consider all the time? No wonder he prefers to play solo.'

In the counts, two of them he recognized and knew their powers well since he had used them not too long ago. These were Räum and Ose.

The former's shadow powers fit with the first rung of hell, now that he knew what it was for. Causing the despair of the falling souls.

What would cause despair more than shadows eating at you?

Then came Ose, whose power to control the minds of her targets, came as no surprise in her allegiances either.

Her ability to see through the minds of her victims allowed her to dig deep enough to uncover their fears and play on those.

But a third Count was there, as well; Andromalius.

His powers, Astaroth took a moment to remember. But when he did, he realized he also wasn't a poor fit for the first level of hell.

The power to corrupt and infect the mind.

It might not be at a level strong enough to make him dangerous, but he was the main reason a lot of souls eventually became full-fledged demons.

At the Duke level, the two Dukes were Gusion and Gremory, a pair of twin demons, which Astaroth didn't particularly affectionate.

Solomon had told him about them, when he first passed the challenge, as he did for all the others as well, and their past was all kinds of messed up.

Gusion and Gremory, in life, had been a pair of cultists turned necromancers that dealt in blood magic and human sacrifices.

When the god of death had reached out to them, to judge their wrongdoings, the twins had sacrificed each other to a demon, in hopes of escaping judgement.

And the demon they had bound their souls to was also present.

The Marquis, Sabnock.

Sabnock was a Marquis, but also the general under the king of the first hell, when they were still in power. His powers were not too dissimilar to Astaroth's or Khalors, as he could summon droves of pawns to fight for him.

The other Marquis that was present was Ronové.

Ronové's powers were a little stranger, as they affected matter of all kinds, changing its shape and properties.

Solomon had said that Ronové had once been a powerful Alchemist, whose search for the philosopher's stone had eventually turned onto a darker path, corrupting his soul until he fell to the demons' promises.

And lastly, the king of the first hell, a female demon, Paimon. Solomon had explained that demons used the word king as a gender-neutral title, signifying power more than sex and that he shouldn't look into it further than that.

And although her rank was king, Paimon's nickname was the Cursed Queen.

He had explained to him that Paimon had once been, a very long time ago, the disciple of a very powerful witch, who had taught her everything she knew.

But in a fit of jealousy, when Paimon couldn't surpass her mentor, she had tried laying a curse on her. Only, her mentor was infinitely more powerful than her and had turned the curse against her, condemning her to burn for eternity, until her soul finally broke and became a demon.

She had quickly risen in the ranks, as her magic was not something the demons could do much against, until she reached the peak of the first hell, at the king rank.

Paimon never bothered trying to reach higher, since the next rank was something which politics would grant more than power. And she was never one to delve into those.

Paimon turned to look at Astaroth, her seductive face smiling at him tauntingly. Her naked body would have made many men forget themselves and slip down to the embraces of hell's fires.

But Astaroth barely glanced back at her, causing her to feel slighted.

She slinked into her shadow, emerging from Astaroth, as she caressed his body and whispered into his ear.

"You finally call on me, boy. I thought you never would. What do you want me to do? Should we go somewhere more private, or did you call the others to watch?"

But a blue flame lance landed near her feet, pulling her attention away from Astaroth.

The next second, a blue flaming fist smacked into her face, sending her back a few feet.

"Hands off, vixen. He's mine."

Chapter 680 Attacks From All Sides

Paimon, after stepping back a couple of steps and caressing her slightly singed black skin, smiled enticingly at the woman near her master.

Phoenix, whose blue flames had condensed on her form in a fitting blue fire armour, in the looks of a leather breastplate, and some pieces over her arms and legs as well, looked like an Amazonian coated in fire.

Paimon looked her up and down before taking a step forward again.

"For a hottie like you, I might as well share," she said, smiling seductively.

Before Phoenix could say anything to rebuke her, or even attack her, Astaroth's commanding voice came from next to her.

"Enough, Paimon. I didn't call you out for you to play whore. Your target is over there."

He pointed behind Paimon, where the Fey woman, Titania, was looking on with wariness.

Titania knew of the demons before her, as she had once seen another man fight using them. But that was over five thousand years ago.

"I knew Solomon had disappeared. But to think he was dead and his legacy had found a new user. I am impressed. But you don't seem to control the demons entirely," Titania said, lowering her stance.

"This may only be a fraction of the powers in that ring, but it will still be troublesome..."

A demon king was nothing to scoff at.

Especially since demon kings usually sported the same power as her.

Paimon knew the Fey before her was her match, simply by looking at her. She also thought the woman looked familiar, but it was blurry thoughts, at best.

"You also look tasty, little butterfly. May I taste you, as well?"

Titania shot forward a crescent slash, which detached from her thin sword and flashed toward the demoness.

But with a flick of her wrist, the attack disappeared without reaching her.

"Your magic is wholly inadequate, little butterfly."

Somehow, hearing Paimon call Titania like this made Astaroth's teeth grind on each other.

He turned his head to the other demons, who were still awaiting commands, and spoke.

"The Fey is the target. If a single attack grazes the human, I will cut you off for a week. No. Make it a month. Understood?"

The demons gulped in fear.

Phoenix wondered what he meant, but didn't care to ask now. Maybe later, when a level hundred and fifty mythical native wasn't threatening to take their lives, only then would she take that time.

Until then, her focus needed to return to the battle at hand.

Titania decided she had waited around enough. Since Astaroth willingly went this far, using a power she could tell he wasn't ready to use, then she would kick up a gear as well.

"Queen's Regalia, activate."

Her armour pulsed to match her wings, and Astaroth felt a surge in Aether coming from it.

'An armour skill. I wonder what it does...'

But the answer came soon enough when she vanished from sight.

Astaroth saw her blur out and knew she was coming at him. But her speed was twice what it had already been.

He didn't have time to react and felt like it would be over instantly. His Thousand Thoughts was already in cooldown, and he couldn't use it to see where the attack would come from.

But a jingling of chains appeared behind him, making him jump forward and spin midair.

And right behind where he had been, Titania stood, her sword stretched forward in a stabbing motion. Around the blade, as well as around her feet, thick black chains had risen and wrapped around her weapon and legs.

Astaroth heard Paimon's mocking laughter.

"Shishishi. Did you think I would leave my master open for attacks from a zippy opponent like him? I already marked him."

Titania blurred out again, appearing further away, as the chains had broken off her. But her eyes were narrowed.

'This demon is annoying to deal with,' she thought.

But she didn't have time to think much, as a sudden surge of attack came her way, and her shadow tried swallowing her legs into the ground.

Titania beat her wings fiercely, taking off the ground, to escape the shadows, but exposed herself to blood blades flying at her.

She smacked them away, the power behind them weak. But she felt something fly at her from behind.

Turning her head, she saw one demon flying at her, with wings made of bone and flesh, looking like an abomination.

His face was distorted, as was his body, suddenly bigger than earlier.

"Ra ka ka ka! It's been so long since I used the flesh of my sacrifices! They sing for freedom! Let me give it to them!" Duke Gusion shouted, his voice cracking with madness.

Titania thought the demon was about to slam at her from under, as his hands clasped together, but suddenly, her eyes widened. She jerked backward, dodging a much closer attack, as a giant blood hammer appeared in the abomination's hands.

Looking below, she saw the other demon that had sent blood blades flying at her, controlling the blood he had sent flying with his magic, and forming new objects.

'The twins! Annoying little weaklings,' Titania cursed in her mind.

She would normally wipe the floor with them, but the pressure was coming from all around.

After dodging the blood hammer, one of the demon's ugly wings flew at her, whacking her to the side. She blocked the blow with her swords, but it still pushed her away, the weight behind the attack unnatural.

As her body neared the ground, she saw her shadow become murky again, and she knew she couldn't land.

Flapping her wings again, she stalled her descent.

But the shadow grew, and out of it came flying two things.

The first one was Astaroth, coming at her incredibly fast. And with him, another batch of thick black chains.

The chains attempted to wrap around her legs, to keep her from leaving, but a quick swipe from her sword shattered them. Unfortunately, she left herself open to Astaroth's attack.

Expecting a strike from his short sword, she tried angling herself to make it land on her armour.

But she did not expect the next thing that happened.