

New Eden 861

Chapter 861 Esoteric Solutions

He sat down hurriedly, grabbed a pile from his side of the desk, and started flipping through each sheet with rapt attention.

Astaroth wasn't well-versed in politicking or dealing with others. But he was good at finding the most esoteric solutions to the most straightforward problems.

Was it a quality or a shortcoming? Only time would tell.

However, right now, his strange mind was precisely what Phoenix needed.

She'd been poring over these players for weeks, trying to find a middle ground with them, negotiating with them, hoping to find a peaceful resolution to this issue.

The problem was simple.

Phoenix wanted them gone because they were not a good fit for the guild. But the fear of becoming guildless was greater than their fear of retribution, and they refused to break the contracts.

They preferred paying ninety percent of their Exp to the guild and the same percentage of their earned gold and materials in exchange for not becoming solo players.

The risk factor of being guildless was high these days. Many PKers targeted solo players, trying to level up quickly or make easy money.

That, with the inherent difficulty of farming, ever since guilds had grabbed possession of all the dungeons and good farming spots, made solo players easy prey for others.

She understood all this and offered many solutions, such as letting them get a boost in power to reach the average level of the player base and funds to get some proper gear. This would give them a fighting chance.

But it wasn't enough in their minds. The fear was too deep-rooted.

From the more suitable players, Phoenix had learned the reason for this, as well.

The officers in Aces High made sure the players in the lower ranks were reminded daily that they were one mistake away from being kicked out of the guild. Sometimes, they even picked out players to serve as examples.

They would break the contracts, which, at first, was easy since the players felt exploited.

But what came after made all of them regret their actions.

Since they were still linked to the guild building's graveyard, they would respawn there until they linked to another. And the officers knew this.

Using this information, they would PK the players until the dept in Exp was too great for them, and they lost their accounts.

After a few examples were made, the officer stuck to only giving reminders, the fear deeply rooted in the weak player's minds. It was all it took to force them to work harder and without complaining.

And when the players suddenly refused to log in, having enough of their plight, the contracts gave access to their personal information. With it, the officers sent enforcers to the nobodies and lawyers to the more endowed people.

This was usually enough to force them to return and commit to their promised workload.

Phoenix despised Azamus for allowing this to happen and most likely being the one to think about it in the first place, but she wasn't surprised. This was his kind of scheme.

And the players couldn't even complain about it. The moment they did, their accounts locked up, as they broke the NDAs on the contracts.

Now, Paragon was stuck with all these players who feared being kicked out more than being used as slaves.

Astaroth read all the files and found that all the common points they shared were just that. Fear.

He frowned.

"Tell me, could we send these players to Knights of the Sun? It seems like a simple solution, no?" he asked, looking at Phoenix.

She sighed, not because she felt it was a dumb question, but because she had already tried that avenue.

"Tried already. Killi refused to take them. He said that as long as they had those contracts over their head, he wouldn't take them. He accused me of not doing my due diligence before accepting to overtake Aces High, and they were my problem now."

Astaroth clicked his tongue.

"So he doesn't want to risk looking like the slaver, leaving us to bear that blame... What an ally he is..." he complained.

Phoenix rubbed her eyes, trying to rub the tiredness away from them.

"I get it. It's a PR nightmare. Even if we can prove that we took the contracts from Aces High as is, we still look like the bad guys for not breaking them. The people won't care if it's the players who refuse because that would mean we aren't offering reasonable compensation.

"Our reputation would tank, and no one would apply to Paragon anymore. And we are far from powerful enough to stop growing at this junction. Knights of the Sun have already passed the two-thousand-player mark, while we lag just over five hundred.

"And that is mostly because we took in Aces High's players. We need to fix this before focusing on expanding the guild and the kingdom. It's our only recourse."

Astaroth scratched his chin, falling deep into thought.

If these players feared being guildless more than whatever he could throw at them, that left them little to no leverage.

'We could just let things run their course, and they'll change their minds when they see their allies getting stronger and not them,' he thought.

But he shook his head.

More of them would have already broken their contracts if that were true.

As things stood, a quarter of the Aces High players had already broken their contract when Paragon promised them to keep their spot in the guild and offered better terms of employment.

With this alone, the more sensible players from the remainder of the 'slaves' would have already understood what they stood to gain by breaking their contracts.

The issue was that they feared being kicked, and Paragon had not promised to keep them.

Phoenix had made sure she or Morticia vetted every one of them to see whether they suited their mentality or not. But the ones that came back positive were already settled in.

The rest had too many issues to fix to make them a good fit. These players would only hold Paragon back, whether by their untrustworthiness, lack of initiative, or any other issue.

Astaroth had another thought, but he doubted Phoenix would like it. But he offered it nonetheless.

"What if I gave them something bigger to fear? Something that would make their current nightmares look like dreams. And ensured they understood that breaking their contracts was the only way to escape it."

Phoenix frowned at him.

"What did you have in mind?"

Astaroth grinned maniacally.

Chapter 862 Tyrannical Plan

Phoenix listened to his plan with a look of horror. It was not just wrong—it was terrible.

"We can't submit players to that. They would be howling torture on the forums within the hour. Are you trying to make the guild look bad?"

Astaroth chuckled at her words.

"They can't. Remember? They have to keep quiet about everything they see, hear, and are subjected to. Otherwise, Aces High would have been lynched publicly a long time ago. That's what I'm aiming for.

"Something that will have them fear us much more than they fear the contract and make them understand that breaking it is their best option," Astaroth said, looking her in the eyes.

Phoenix gritted her teeth.

He was right that they wouldn't be able to say anything, at least until the contracts were broken.

But what then?

How many of these players would run to the forums and cry to the world that Paragon had tortured them and forced them into silence? This was precisely what she didn't want to happen.

Astaroth could see the conflicted emotions in her eyes and opened his mouth again.

"Listen. I'm not saying it's the best option. I'm saying it looks like it might be our only one. Plus, I don't want to torture them without reason. They'll have an out at any moment. They just need to break the contract and go to Knights of the Sun."

This was his grand plan.

Since Killi and his guild were technically under his, he could send members to them at any moment, and there was no need to kick anyone at all. Of course, Killi wouldn't take them if they still had that slave contract on their heads.

That was why he would offer the carrot, then beat them with the stick until they took it.

Although Phoenix had tried scarring them already, she was not as sadistic as Astaroth planned to be.

"Seriously, though. Flaying them? Isn't that a bit too much? Aren't you scared they would stay traumatized? Or that you will kill them and make them lose levels?" she asked.

"Hey, don't get me wrong, taking their levels did pop into my mind. But I'm not evil. This is why I proposed to do this on the training floor, where we can control their respawns and deaths. That way, no one loses levels, and they can't say I'm a tyrant."

Phoenix raised an eyebrow in his direction.

"Do you know the definition of the word tyrant? Because your plan is exactly that. Tyrannical."

Astaroth chuckled.

"I know you don't like this option. But if you want to clear them out while we can, this is the way. Plus, if anyone decides to endure the torture to prove they want to stay in Paragon, then they deserve to stay, and I will personally offer them a spot."

Phoenix was even less sure of that part.

She had vetoed everyone with Morticia, and not one of them had shown strong willpower or traces of a backbone of any kind.

She was sure all of them would start crying out in pain the second Astaroth began hurting them. And with that, she was also sure they wouldn't last long and would accept to break the contract quickly.

But she still felt like this was not the way to go.

"It's too cruel... Isn't there any other way?" she muttered.

"Sometimes, cruel is the only way," Astaroth responded, his tone sad.

He didn't want to become their tormentor either, but from the reports he read, this was the only way at it. The players were so scared of being left guildless that anything short of harming them wouldn't steer their minds into breaking this slavery contract.

"Look at it this way. With this method, we can do everyone at the same time. There is no need for tedious meetings and long negotiations. It all ends in one fell swoop."

Phoenix finally backed down and nodded.

"Fine. I'll have the mages prepare the room and send notices to all of them. But we aren't doing this today. I'm already exhausted, and this drained the last of my energy," Phoenix said, her shoulders dropping.

"Sure. We can do it tomorrow. There is no rush. We can take it easy for the rest of the day. How about a picnic?" he asked, trying to raise her morale.

"Hah! No thanks. I've seen enough of the woods for one day," she replied, laying back in her chair.

"Who said anything about going out into the woods? I know a perfect spot for a nice, quiet picnic. And it's not too far, too."

She looked at him with a smile.

"You mean up there? It's been a while since we've been there... I wouldn't say no to that. Plus, we could ditch the guards while we do it. I doubt Rodney would mind us taking a few hours to ourselves without protection. Even though we already ditched them once today."

Astaroth laughed. It was true that they had ditched them once already, earlier today, when he went after Phoenix. But those were strenuous circumstances, and he doubted Rodney would fault them for it.

Boy, was he wrong.

"No. Absolutely not," Rodney said severely.

They had gone to him, asking to be left alone for a while, since he was in charge directly of their personal guards.

But Rodney was vehemently refusing.

"You have already ditched yours once today, Queen Phoenix. Something I never thought you would do. But then, the king ditched her once and tried ditching her a second time, and now, I still don't see her behind him.

"When will you take this seriously? Do you think I instated this guard for fun?" Rodney asked, his face red.

"You know you work for us, right?" Astaroth asked jokingly.

"I know all too well, King Astaroth. But that changes nothing to my duties, which you have been spitting all over, all day."

Astaroth scratched the back of his head.

Rodney took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

"Listen. I understand your want and need to be left alone for a while. But I cannot accept it. Not after you disregarded my recommendations of keeping by your side already today. You want a nice picnic? Bring them along, I don't care. But they stay glued to you."

Phoenix sighed, but nodded.

"Fine," Astaroth said, his head dropping a bit.

"Good. Now, if you could leave, I have plenty of other things to attend to," Rodney asked them, showing them the door.

Leaving the office in defeat, Astaroth and Phoenix walked toward the kitchens to grab food for their picnic.

"When did he become so severe?" Astaroth asked with a frown.

"That would be when you went missing for a month, sir," Phoenix's personal guard, Gabe, replied.

Astaroth glanced at him, clicking his tongue.

"It's not my fault..." he grumbled.

But he would have to live with the consequences regardless, so he stopped mopping. At least Rodney hadn't asked them to stay inside the palace.

That would have sucked.

'He'll relent eventually,' Astaroth thought.

Chapter 863 The More The Merrier

By the time Astaroth and Phoenix received the food for their chaperoned picnic, the second personal guard had also returned, and Astaroth smiled at her.

"So, how does it feel to reach the Legendary grade? Do you need time to acclimatize to your new strength? I don't mind giving you a few days off," he said, smiling at her.

Phoenix nudged him, knowing what he was trying to do.

"Nice try, darling. But what do you mean, Legendary grade?"

Astaroth looked at Phoenix, confused, before he realized he hadn't told her what had happened.

"Right, I haven't told you yet... Selena is now Legendary grade, because of some lucky circumstances. That's why it took a while for me to come back. She brought me to where she had established her lair in the past, and there was an Evolution Fruit."

Phoenix's eyes went wide.

"How was there a fruit there, after all this time, and nothing consumed it?" she asked in disbelief.

"That's what took so long. The fruit was practically petrified, and we had to pull some serious power into it to make it good again. There was a bit of fighting, a lot of pain, and the birth of a new Legendary defender in Stellar Woodlands!" Astaroth chimed, glossing over the story as best he could.

Phoenix looked at him with a twitch in her eye.

"And you didn't think to keep me in the loop? Or ask for my help?" she said in between clenched teeth.

"There wasn't time. You were the first one on my mind, but there wasn't much you could have done. It was a time-sensitive issue," Astaroth defended himself.

"He's right, my queen. The moment we started reviving the fruit, all hell broke loose, and there was no time to call for help. We were lucky the king can call on allies from within at any time. Or we would have died and lost the fruit," Selena jumped in.

Phoenix looked at them both with an angry stare. But Leon popped in behind them and confirmed their story, too, making Phoenix calm down.

"Next time, try to think before you act, Astaroth. It benefits everyone if you do and leads to stupid situations when you don't," she admonished him.

He tried hugging her to make her anger subside.

"I know, love. I just wasn't expecting a quest to pop at me like that. Otherwise, I would have brought more allies and figured a safer way to ripen the fruit before undertaking that task," he said softly.

"Wait. What do you mean, safer way?" Phoenix asked him, pushing him back.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. I mean, the cave was small and filled with enemies. So it was a dangerous situation," he lied, pulling a fake grin.

Phoenix looked at him, stepped forward, and grabbed his jaw.

"Don't lie to me, Alex," she seethed, using his real name.

"Hey, you aren't supposed to call me that inside New Eden..." he mumbled through his squished lower jaw.

"What did you mean by safer way?" she asked again.

With a sigh, Astaroth gave up and told her the truth.

"Sometimes, I really wonder if you aren't stupid..." she said, hearing his tale.

"Hey!" he complained.

"Aravelle told us not too long ago that Aether was dangerous for mortals, and you go ahead and channel a Ley line directly through your mind? Are you insane? What if it had killed you? Or worse, affected your real body outside of here? Seriously, Astaroth, you need to weigh your decisions more. You are way past reckless..."

Astaroth took her admonishment in silence, realizing she was right.

Silence permeated the corridor before Selena sniffed the air.

"What's that in your baskets? It smells good. I'm starving," she said, taking the conversation away from the subject.

Phoenix locked eyes on her, and a shiver went down Selena's spine.

'I'm a Legendary grade, and she still makes me uncomfortable...'

"We were going on a picnic, and you were to follow us. Good of you to join. But I don't think I'm hungry anymore," Phoenix growled.

"Oh! More food for me, then," Selena said jokingly.

But Phoenix's death glare made her rethink the joke.

"I'm kidding, my queen," she said, lowering her head.

Sigh

"We are going anyway. Maybe the cold air will change my mood. As for you two, you better change your reckless tendencies in the future. Or else..." Phoenix said.

Astaroth and Selena both started apologizing and promising they would behave as the quartet walked toward the staircase that led to the top levels of the palace.

They would have to pass through the fifth floor, where the Sentinels resided, to get to the treetop, and there was a long walk to get there.

Selena offered to grab the baskets, as her strength was much higher than anyone else's, and Phoenix happily chuckled and basked at her.

It took them almost twenty minutes of stair climbing just to reach the floor, where they were greeted by Commander Alena, as well as Castien and Coral, who happened to be on their way down.

"Your Highnesses," the three of them saluted with a bow.

Phoenix smiled at them, trying to keep appearances, even though she was furious. But Alena immediately felt her bad mood.

Her head turned to Astaroth, and she said with a blaming voice, "What have you done this time, King Astaroth?"

Astaroth huffed at the question.

"Why does everyone assume I'm to blame every time the queen is angry?" he whined.

Everyone present turned to look at him with raised eyebrows and slack jaws.

Astaroth could read the silent words on their faces.

"Fine! It's my fault. But it's not always my fault!" he defended himself.

Coral giggled before saying, "It rarely isn't, your majesty."

He huffed again, his face turning to a pout as he crossed his arms.

"It's not my fault she gets moody super fast," he grumbled.

An elbow landed in his ribs, making him lose his breath, and he leaned on the wall.

Phoenix looked at him with a satisfied grin.

"We were just heading to the treetop for a picnic. So we won't be holding you," she said to Alena.

"Oh? We were heading down for a meal in the privacy of the servant quarters. Care if we join you instead?" Castien asked, smiling at the queen.

"Eh, whatever. The more the merrier, right?" she said, shrugging.

'Well, there goes my plan for a romantic picnic,' Astaroth complained mentally.

Chapter 864 Picnic Spot

Commander Alena couldn't be bothered with walking all the way down to get food from the royal kitchens, so she pivoted and headed back into the floor toward the cafeteria.

She barked orders at the cooks, and in less time than it took her to tap her foot fifty times impatiently, the head cook returned with a child-sized basket filled with what Astaroth could only imagine was food and drinks he had personally prepared.

The cook looked in their direction, a flash of sadness passing his eyes before he smiled wide toward the monarchs.

Astaroth and Phoenix returned his smile in kind, with a nod of their heads, before they headed toward the area where the roots were, which would bring them up in the tree's bough.

Castien walked up to the mage and shook his hand amicably.

"Hey, Barrett. What are you doing here on your day off? Shouldn't you be with your wife in the outer city?"

The burly man guffawed at the question.

"My wife has been in a mood lately. A client of hers has been taking care of the rabble in her tavern, but his methods are strange, and she says it always leaves her dishes suddenly stale or cold.

"Normally, I'd deal with him, but he's made the establishment safer ever since he started staying there. Plus, I don't want to mess with a man that can bend time. I'm already old as it is.

"So when I heard Charlie had caught a stomach bug and was taking the day off, I jumped at the opportunity to stay here. Don't tell my wife, though. She would murder me, Boahahahaha!"

As he guffawed, the mage behind the counter noticed the retinue behind Castien and paled.

"Your Majesties! I'm sorry! I hadn't noticed you there!" he apologized as he bowed, almost slamming his head onto the counter.

Astaroth was still hung at his mention of a man who could bend time, so he barely reacted. But Phoenix took charge.

"Don't worry about it, Barrett, was it? We didn't announce our coming here, either. We were heading up on a whim. Would you mind opening us a path? She asked him with a warm smile.

"Absolutely, my queen! Right away! Did you have a location in mind?"

Castien looked at him, taking over the conversation.

"Actually, Barrett, I think the new place I had you enter is perfect for what we had in mind. Could you link us there?"

Barrett looked at him before looking at the others. He leaned in closer to whisper.

"You sure? You are bringing a lot of people there. Won't that defeat the purpose of a hidden romantic spot?"

Castien chuckled.

"It was never my hidden spot to begin with. Just link us up."

Barrett shrugged before tapping twice and sliding his hand across the desk before a pillar root nearby contorted and lit up.

"That'll bring you up there. Have a nice evening," he said to everyone before adding, "Please be safe up there, your Highnesses."

Astaroth wanted to laugh, but he refrained from it.

'As if I was ever in danger up there,' he mused.

The party walked through the portal, and soon after, they appeared out of the trunk in the tree palace's bough.

Astaroth looked around and quickly recognized the place, a grin rising to his lips.

He turned to Castien, who glared at him.

"Not a word. I already know what you're thinking. Coral took a liking to the view. But I still blame you for her fall."

Astaroth laughed it off.

"Was it really my fault? Eh. It's in the past now, isn't it? Let's just enjoy a calm meal in the presence of... friends?" he said, his tone rising in uncertainty.

Alena coughed at him, and Castien glared, but the others smiled.

Reaching the opening in the branches and leaves, Astaroth walked to the edge of the giant branch they were on and looked down on the city.

It was close to dinnertime already, and the sun was starting to disappear above the forest. New Eden's seasons seemed to be in sync with Earth's, and with September almost over, the days were getting shorter and shorter.

Stellar Woodlands sat in the middle western part of the Elven forest, landing them around the equator of New Eden's world. So the temperatures were still hot, even for the coming fall.

But Astaroth could feel the chill of a coming winter in the winds.

Maybe it was because he was used to the higher temps of the place, but he could tell the temps would feel colder, even though he came from Canada, where winter was frigid.

But that didn't stop him from enjoying the cool breeze and the stunning view.

Coral approached him while the guards and Castien set up the picnic spot.

"I remember coming here for the first time with you. I was terrified. But the view stuck with me after the event, and I asked Castien to bring me up a few times since then. It seems my fear of heights has subsided, at least for here."

Astaroth looked at her, a warm smile coming to his lips.

"I am glad to see the view was powerful enough to get you back here. I'm also impressed with how calm you are, given the fall you took last time we were here, you and I. What changed?"

Coral shivered slightly, something that didn't escape Astaroth's eyes, before replying.

"I think... that... event made me fear something more than heights. Before it happened, I had already come with Castien twice up here, and I was terrified. But after that... It was like the height no longer scared me. But I still see his face when going to sleep sometimes..." Coral said, her voice streaking off.

Astaroth put his hand on her shoulder.

"He's dead, Coral. And I promise I won't ever let anything like that happen to you or anyone ever again. Your betrothed would have my head, anyway, ha ha!" Astaroth said, trying to lighten her mood.

Coral wiped away a stray tear but smiled at him.

"Thank you, King Astaroth. I hope it never happens again, either. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Now, let's discuss something more pleasant and enjoy a good meal."

She stepped away from the ledge, Castien keeping a hawkish eye on her, and Astaroth snickered.

'Sadly, many other things will soon happen. I only hope we can withstand everything...'

Chapter 865 Answered Call

Sitting down on a delicate piece of cloth that the servants had packed, Astaroth looked at everything that was out and salivated.

Roasted meat, pot pies, a delicious smelling vegetable puree, crudities, fruits, and appetizing desserts.

Although he hadn't been hungry originally, he was starving now.

Astaroth didn't wait for the others to all be seated before diving into the food, and Phoenix gave him a blank stare, followed by Alena doing the same.

Astaroth took a moment to notice, before he stopped shoving food in his mouth, and asked, "Wha'? I wa' hun'ry..."

Phoenix shook her head, and Alena sighed in disbelief.

"How is he the one you are paired to, Queen Phoenix?" the commander asked.

Phoenix giggled before turning her head toward the woman.

"Don't ask me, I don't know. Sometimes, he's the most lovable idiot and a romantic lover. And other times, I feel like I fell in love with a caveman."

Alena nodded her head, understanding the feeling. Although she could only believe Phoenix's words, for the first part, she could speak at length about how the king appeared as a caveman in her eyes almost every time they interacted.

Of course, she wouldn't say this out loud since he was still the king. But if the queen ever asked her in private, many words would flow out of her mouth.

As everyone else joined the king in eating, the guards stuck back, keeping their eyes open, as was their job, until Astaroth lost patience.

"Hey, get over here. Seriously, I already dislike that I'll have you following me around. Don't make this unnecessarily boring by standing aside. Get your asses over here and eat."

Gabe looked at the queen since he was technically under her orders, not the king, and she nodded at him. A wide smile bloomed on his lips, and he practically ran forward to sit down.

Selena, on the other hand, shook her head.

"I'm sorry, King Astaroth, but I'm already quite full. The fruit filled me, and I presume it'll be like that for the days to come."

Astaroth looked at her, sighing, and nodded in response.

Selena was at her spot, the food not tempting her at all, as the smell alone made her feel full, and she observed in the distance.

Her senses were already spread throughout the entire palace, which didn't escape Astaroth's senses, and she was on high alert even though there were no threats present.

She was still getting used to her new, extensive senses, and she was a bit overwhelmed by the feedback she was receiving. But this was the best time to practice it.

She could feel every being inside the palace and beyond, hear their footsteps if she focused hard enough, and their heartbeats if she focused on a single person.

It was like she was right before them, and it amazed her.

'Is this how Leon sees everything all the time? How far does his senses reach with his Mythical grade?' she wondered.

In the meantime, the lion in question had returned to his room, where he was lounging on his enormous bed, looking at the ceiling.

Sigh

"What is he trying to do? If he starts amassing powerful beings under his banner, they won't stand by and do nothing... I doubt the world hasn't warned him already of the path he's put himself on... I just hope he realizes what it means to tread that path."

On the ceiling of his room, Leon had asked artists to paint the constellation of the lion, both as a reminder of his position but also as a way to communicate with his second master.

He had infused a large amount of his Aether into the paint they used and could now channel the painting as a way to commune with Lady Anulo, goddess of the stars.

And that was what he was trying to do, at this moment, for the umpteenth time in the last year.

But, as every other time, the connection didn't happen, and he was left alone in the room, his thoughts wandering to where she had gone.

He knew the painting wasn't at fault, as it had worked many times before. But, for a little over a year, he had had no response from the goddess.

The last time he had contacted her was almost six months before the Abnormals returned.

And she had been troubled about something. But she had refused to share what, insisting it wasn't his issue to worry about.

But now, with her missing, it was all he worried about.

Very few things in the world could act against the gods, even the lesser ones. At least, that was the case before.

However, with her being awol, he feared something might have tipped that scale. And if there was, then the world was in greater peril than they thought.

But, without proof, he couldn't go and warn anyone.

'Wait... There is one person I could ask... But will he even want to see me?' Leon mused.

He took a moment to focus his mind and expanded his senses in a flash, covering the entire kingdom in a breath before calling them back.

Every magic-capable being in the kingdom felt a slight tingle as the Aetheric presence washed over them before disappearing almost instantly.

And only the ones with enough power were able to feel who had done it.

Aberon, Selena, Astaroth, and Phoenix all felt the wave, their heads spinning toward the source before the presence that had done this disappeared.

And it was nowhere to be seen or felt anymore.

This put Selena on even higher alert, her face becoming dour as the king and queen looked at her.

They both nodded, signalling they had felt it, too, and Alena looked at them with a serious gaze.

"What was that?" she asked, having felt the tingle but unable to identify it.

"That was Leon. He was looking for something. And I think he found it."

"Then we'll have to ask him when we get down," Alena said dismissively.

"I'm afraid we won't be able to do that..." Selena said, her face still gloomy.

"Huh?" Alena asked, a frown forming on her face.

"I'm afraid it'll have to wait until he's back. And I have no idea how long that'll take."

"Back from where? Leon went straight to his room when he got back..." Gabe said.

"Leon's been taken by the palace's uninvited guest," Astaroth said, his tone grave.

"There is no way this is a coincidence. What does Aravelle want with him?"

Chapter 866 A Path Taken Unknowingly

Leon saw a portal appear in front of him the moment he pulsed out with Aether, and the next moment, it was swallowing him whole.

He didn't get a second to react, and he was already in another room, with an old man before him, who held a staff in his hands.

The staff shone blue, and a rope made of water snapped toward Leon.

It was too quick for him to react but harmless enough that he didn't feel the need to.

But the moment it touched him, he ended up wrapped up tightly in a strong layer of ice. He couldn't move a muscle, and breathing was difficult.

Leon glared at the old man, wondering what this was about.

"Before you start cursing me out, young lion, know that I am doing this for your good. You did something stupid, and I'm concealing you from prying eyes."

Leon kept his eyes locked on him, ready to engulf himself in flames to break free if he sensed even an ounce of threat from him.

"For me? You bring me here without warning and then tie me up and seal my Aether in my body. How is this for me?"

Aravelle looked at him with a discouraged gaze.

"Ah, you are just like him. It checks out why you accepted him as king, I reckon. But what you did wasn't smart. Using your Aether over a large area like that. Are you trying to bring the eyes of the gods to this place?"

Leon's gaze changed to confusion.

"What does that change? What would the gods want from this small, inconsequential kingdom in the realm of mortals? And what does my Aether have anything to do with them?"

Aravelle sighed loudly.

"Let's put this conversation on hold for a moment. Given the kingdom's demographical change, I believe two other people should be present. I'll get them here and release you if you stop radiating your power like this."

Leon stayed wary of the old man, but nodded anyway. Bottling up his power, the ice melted from his body, freeing up his limbs.

Aravelle focused for a moment before frowning.

Outside Aravelle's hidey-hole, Astaroth heard him call inside his head, and by Selena's face changing, he knew he had also called out to her.

'I need you here for a while. Drop what you're doing and get ready to teleport,' Aravelle's voice commanded him.

'Nah. I'm busy. I'll come later,' Astaroth replied, shoving more food into his mouth.

But he quickly understood it wasn't a request when he felt his body shift from the matter, getting sucked into the branch he was seated on and reappearing inside Aravelle's room. Only, he wasn't on the ground.

"What the—oof!" he exclaimed as he dropped the twenty feet that separated him from the ceiling, falling on his back.

"I told you before, young man. You don't turn down my requests. You are in no position to deny me anything."

Selena's face turned to rage as she saw this old man mistreat her charge, and her body started growing in size.

"Back down, Selena. He doesn't mean us harm. At least for now," Leon's voice came from behind her.

"He teleports us against our will, then drops the king from the ceiling. That's enough reason for me to want to harm him," Selena said, chuffing between the sentences.

"Pipe down, kitten. If I wanted you harmed, you'd be dead," Aravelle threatened.

Selena growled at Aravelle, the kitten comment rubbing her fur the wrong way. But Astaroth rose to his feet and put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's ok, Selena. He's not an enemy. Although I wouldn't call him a friend or ally, he's not against us. But I do wonder why you called us here urgently like this. This doesn't seem like you."

Aravelle brushed aside the matter of threats and growing tension, making his staff disappear.

"I had a good reason, that which I will share with you now. But, first, let me congratulate you on something, young king. Congratulations on your transcendence. Although it came much too early, and you are at incredible risk, it is no small feat."

Astaroth's face scrunched up.

"How did you know that? I haven't told anyone yet..." he said, his eyes narrowing.

"Did you think you could hide that from someone like me? Someone who has also transcended? How very foolish of you..." Aravelle admonished him.

But the two others present were in shock, looking at Astaroth with wide eyes and slack jaws.

When Astaroth saw how they were looking at him, he frowned.

"What? Something wrong with my face?" he asked, faking to touch his face for a problem.

Selena had only recently learned about transcendence when she asked Leon how he had become this strong. But the latter knew a little more.

Alantha Anulo had told him more about it, as he had skipped that process altogether.

So, he was the only one to open his mouth to respond.

"Astaroth... Do you realize what that means?"

Astaroth shrugged his shoulders, not sure what it changed at all.

Leon's face turned to disbelief. He looked at Aravelle, understanding why he had pulled him here so fast, and sealed his Aether.

Looking back at Astaroth, who was still waiting for an answer, he sighed.

"It means you painted the biggest target in existence on yourself and, by that intermediary, the entire kingdom..."

Then he looked at Selena, and he sighed even louder.

"And you inadvertently made the target bigger by swearing him eternal fealty..."

"I had no idea..." Selena mumbled, her eyes still wide.

"I know. I doubt he himself knew what he was doing," Aravelle interrupted them.

"But I have a way of fixing this. As long as we can follow a simple set of rules and limit the usage of Aether around the king, he shouldn't attract too much attention."

Astaroth was still confused.

"What the hell are you talking about? Our kingdom was already painted as a target for many enemies. What does that transcendence change to it all?"

Aravelle looked at him and frowned.

"You really don't know, do you? The world hasn't shown you the way yet... That means they don't know either. That's good. We can work with this," Aravelle said, brushing his beard.

"Know what?!" Astaroth lost patience.

Aravelle clicked his tongue at the shouting.

"You've stepped on the path to godhood. But you did so without the power and prestige to defend your place. Now, every other player in that path will be after you, and they are more numerous than you would think. That also includes minor gods.

"You just made yourself the number one target in the world. Taking you down means a chance at stealing your followers and prestige and being that much closer to ascending. But since the gods don't know yet, you still have a chance at passing under their radar."

Astaroth looked at Aravelle with a blank stare.

"The path to godhood? What the hell are you on about?"

Chapter 867 Contingency Plans

While this conversation was taking place, the people in the treetop were having another conversation, one laced with panic for some of its participants.

"Queen Phoenix, we must get you to the training room. That's the only place where people can't forcibly teleport you out of," Alena said, trying to grab the queen's arm.

"Stop, Alena. There is no use. I know where the king is. There is no risk of me being snatched next. I would have already joined them if I had been needed," Phoenix said, trying to calm her down.

Alena looked at her with wide eyes.

Even Gabe was uncertain what to do. His duty was to protect the queen, so he couldn't let her out of his sight.

He put his hand on her shoulder to be sure she wouldn't get taken away without him.

Phoenix looked at him awkwardly, understanding what he was doing, but brushed his hand off.

"You all need to calm down. They aren't in danger," Phoenix insisted.

"How can you say that, your highness?! Leon, the king, and his guard have all disappeared in quick succession! How can you stay so calm?!"

"Alena, enough!" Phoenix barked.

The commander was having a normal reaction to a situation she knew nothing about. But Phoenix wasn't under the same circumstances.

She knew where Astaroth had been taken.

The commander stood in place, her eyes bewildered, as the queen rose to her feet and walked up to her.

"Snap out of your panic, commander. What example are you giving to your juniors? You should be the calm one in a situation like this. There is nothing to fear. The king and the others are still in the palace. Just in a part of it you don't know about."

Alena frowned.

She had gone through this palace, from root to branches, and knew every nook and cranny of it, even the secret room the king and queen had asked no one to go to.

How could the queen tell her there was a part of the palace she didn't know about?

"I know this palace inside and out, my queen. There is no place I don't know about."

Phoenix shook her head.

"But there is. A place where you can't go unless he wants you to. Hell, even Astaroth and I can't go there uninvited. Which is why, I assume, I'm still standing before you. But that person is not an enemy."

Alena narrowed her eyes at the queen.

"How can you be so sure? Do you know this person well, whoever they are?" she asked, suddenly on her guard.

"I do. We've met a few times. And he has been of help before. Who do you think made sure the infiltrators couldn't escape last month? No one in this kingdom can raise a barrier that strong except for him."

"Are you talking about Aberon?" Alena asked, frowning.

"No. Not Aberon. Although he is mighty, he isn't that strong. No. I'm talking about someone else whose power level outmatches everyone in this kingdom. And we built our kingdom in his mage tower."

Alena was confused when they got someone who could out-power everyone in their kingdom. Leon was nothing to scoff at in the power department, and hearing that someone even stronger was present sent shivers down her spine.

'Just what kind of power are we sleeping over every night?' she wondered.

"In any case, I'll try to contact Astaroth through our messaging function, and we'll see what this is about. If he doesn't answer, we can start panicking after that, alright?" Phoenix asked the commander.

Alena sighed, dismayed at how calm the queen was.

"Fine. But I'll ready my troops for a retrieval operation in the meantime. I don't trust anyone I haven't met," the woman growled, conceding.

Phoenix smiled at her.

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you. I'll keep you in the loop. We can start looking for him if he doesn't respond in the next half hour. Until then, get your men ready. But don't tell them who they will be looking for. It would cause a panic wave through the kingdom."

Alena nodded, understanding her duty. But she glared at Castien, ensuring he wouldn't open his mouth either.

"Hey, I'm not going to disobey an order from the queen, ma'am. My lips are sealed."

"Mine are too," Coral added.

As for Gabe, there was no way he would go against the queen's orders. That would guarantee a direct demotion, and possibly getting dropped from the Royal Guard.

When she saw him shake his head, Phoenix knew he would keep quiet, too. She nodded and cleared her throat.

"Then get to it. Coral, you go about your day like nothing happened, and I'll keep you updated as well, so you don't worry."

"Yes, Your Highness," Coral said, bowing.

"As for the others, you have a job to do. Get to it. I'll reach out to Astaroth in the meantime."

"Yes, Your Highness!" the others saluted.

As they left the branch, all aside from Gabe and Phoenix, the latter looked at the food still on the cloth and sighed.

"What a waste. At least they could have waited for us to finish eating before kicking the beehive..." she complained.

"I can have someone come and dispose of the food, Queen Phoenix," Gabe said.

"Don't have it disposed. Make sure it reaches the city. I heard some signs of poverty have started showing in the outer ring. Have those delivered to the families that need it most. You can ask Brienne; she'll have a list for you."

Gabe nodded, grabbing a small crystal ball from his pockets.

This permitted the Natives to communicate with people far away, acting like the messaging system the players had integrated into their interface.

She left him to his messaging, while she reached out to Astaroth through her own.

**

'Are you with Aravelle? And why did he grab you so suddenly? Are you safe?' she asked.

**

I took a few moments before the response came, which made her wonder if Aravelle had nefarious intentions. He had never been this abrupt before.

**

'I'm fine. Aravelle had something urgent to discuss with Leon, Selena, and me. I'll explain later when I'm back. But I'm safe.'

**

Phoenix sighed in relief before telling him she'd wait for him before logging off. Then, she notified the others that the king was safe.

But that didn't stop Alena from keeping her troops on standby if the situation changed.

'What could be so urgent that he nabbed him like this?' she wondered.

Chapter 868 Immortal

Astaroth was still processing what Aravelle had told him and taking a moment to decide if it was a truth he would accept. After all, even if he had finally integrated with the rest of the fragment of divinity inside him, he was far from feeling godly.

At best, he felt stronger than before. At worst, he felt it had taken something he couldn't take back from him.

His humanity.

Astaroth could tell he had deviated from that which bound him to the human race for a while. But he thought that wouldn't be for long, given the rest of humanity was also changing.

However, now that he had consumed that fragment, he could feel the souls of the people around him when focusing, and he could tell that wasn't something just anyone could do. And it scared him.

'I don't want to be a god. They are the exact opposite of what I want to become. Gods do nothing for us. They stand by the sidelines and watch as the world goes to shit. Gods don't care. I want to save humankind...' Astaroth thought.

He was getting lost in those thoughts when a jolt of mana from Aravelle brought him back to reality.

"Don't fall off the deep end just yet, young man. There is still much to discuss and do before you are allowed to fall into thoughts. Stay focused, young man."

Astaroth looked at him almost in a daze.

"What did I do wrong?" he asked, feeling like the world was crumbling around him.

If he walked that path, the path to godhood, he would lose everything. First, he would lose everyone he cared about to the dangers of having them around him.

And even if he managed to protect them, what would that change in the end? If he followed this path through, wouldn't he lose his ability to see them?

Gods rarely came to the mortal realm, and he had an inkling of a thought to the reason why.

The mortal realm wasn't strong enough to support their presence.

Minor gods may have a bit more leeway since they were much weaker. But Gaius had razed a small part of the western Elven forest just by appearing there.

And since Astaroth was highly attuned to Aether, he could tell the repercussions didn't stop there.

He could still feel Gaius' presence in the distance like the god was still standing there. Like he had left a permanent imprint on the land.

And what that would lead to, he would rather not think about.

From that alone, he imagined it wasn't that simple for the gods even to lay foot in the mortal realm.

He didn't want this. Not in a thousand years.

"Aravelle. I don't want this. Is there a way to stop the process? A way for me to step off that path?"

Aravelle looked at him with a complicated look.

"Normally, I would say yes. In the regular process, you would have reached Legendary grade first, then started on the path to Mythical, which puts you on that path. But... Your circumstance is a bit... Irregular..."

Astaroth became confused.

"What do you mean by irregular?"

Aravelle sighed.

"I didn't want to have to explain the entire process in front of two beings who can technically embark on it. But, oh well. I don't have much of a choice now."

Selena's ears perked, as did Leon's, and suddenly, they became curious.

Leon knew he had something to do to become stronger that didn't entail training, but he couldn't put his hand on it. And now, Aravelle was going to explain it.

As for Selena, she had just become a Legendary grade, and her power was far from cemented. But if she could come about this knowledge, the sooner, the better, right?

"Sit down, all of you. This will take a while."

Aravelle materialized enough chairs for everyone and sat down, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"You had to cause something like this on a day like today, of all days. When something already disturbed the world's Aether twice, in a single day..."

Astaroth's face scrunched up, and he grimaced.

"Ahh... Yeah, about that..."

Aravelle's head snapped toward him. Then he looked at Selena, and the dots connected in his mind.

"It was you! You little—We'll talk about that later. Messing with the Ley lines is stupid, but this matter takes priority. But make no mistake. There will be punishment, you little idiot..."

Astaroth gulped, thinking about what Aravelle would do. This helped take his mind off the dark future ahead, but not for long.

With a deep sigh, Aravelle continued with his planned explanation.

"Let me start from the beginning. The process usually begins when a being becomes Legendary grade. They start feeling that power is no longer enough. It takes a while since their powers are still cementing into place.

"But once they have finally stabilized, all Legendary grade beings realize that getting stronger no longer goes through training. Leon, you should have started feeling this, even though you skipped an entire grade of life."

Leon nodded, feeling like Aravelle knew precisely what the next step was.

"The next step is much more complicated, but not impossible. All the Progenitors of Magic, including myself, learned this through trial and error. But we never went through with the last step. But that is for later.

"Before that, let me explain the first step on the path to godhood. The step that it usually takes to reach the Mythical grade and the step that the kitten will need to take if it wishes to become a new god. A step I advise against taking."

Selena frowned at his words.

"Why would you advise against becoming stronger? Power is what you protect what you love with. Why would becoming more powerful be bad?" she asked, confused.

"Because beings who aren't tied to a god already are usually wiped off the board before they reach Mythical grade. Gods are not only fickle. They are also very possessive and territorial. Stepping into godhood means stepping on someone's toes, up there, and they don't like that."

Selena's frown deepened.

"How would they even do that? Are gods allowed to act on mortals?"

Aravelle sighed again.

"I don't think you understand what becoming Legendary grade entails..."

Leon cut him.

"Selena, your power isn't stabilized yet, but you'll understand when it is. You can't die anymore. You've entered the realm of immortality."

Selena's face went blank, as did her mind.

"I beg your pardon?"

Chapter 869 Step By Step

Aravelle gave a stern look at Leon, who interrupted him but let go of the transgression.

"Leon's right. At least partially. You can no longer die at the hands of anything that comes from the mortal realm.

"Your legend, the essence of your power and your being, lives on, and you can come back from the dead, given enough time passes, and you aren't forgotten before you reform. You are no longer mortal.

"Although you don't have enough clout for now to use that, which is why you have to make a name for yourself. Which is also part of the next step in life. A step that Leon, here, skipped entirely.

"Fortunately for him, he caught up on that after becoming Mythical grade."

Leon suddenly understood why he felt like he was becoming stronger during the ten years that the Abnormals were absent. It wasn't because of training.

He was cementing his legend. Cementing his immortality and power.

"However, as I said, that is only partially true. Anything from the divine can and will still kill you. And make no mistake. The gods who don't want to see a new being ascend all have followers with the power to defeat you and the tools to erase you."

This put a damper on Selena's rising mood instantly. She thought she was becoming powerful enough to live forever.

But it seemed it wasn't quite a reality yet. At least, not until she was endorsed by a god.

"Let's get back to the path, shall we?" Aravelle said, looking at the shifting moods.

Leon was introspecting, seemingly having found a clue to his next step in life, while Selena was imagining how long it would be before someone showed up before her to stop her from advancing.

As for Astaroth, well, he was still in a daze, realizing the doozy he had done.

His kingdom was already in a pickle, with everything happening: the demon outbreak in the Elven forest, the infiltrators from god knows where, the target painted on their back since Knights of the Sun won the Inter-Alliance Military Exercise.

And now, he had painted another one over that one.

He had embarked on a path rife with danger for himself and everyone around him and dragged Selena along. This was the worst outcome he could think of.

"Ahem!"

Hearing Aravelle clear his throat loudly, the three of them snapped out of their stray thoughts.

"Where was I? Ah, yes. Cementing your power. This requires the legendary being to go around and get their name out there. The more their name is known, the more their legend solidifies, and the closer they get to immortality.

"Once a certain point is reached, the power solidifies, and they become immortal. Of course, as I said earlier, relics from the gods can still kill them. One such relic is in Astaroth's possession, too.

"Although it wouldn't work against a god, that weapon could very easily cleave a Legendary being's immortality from them. But I digress."

Astaroth's eyes went wide, realizing what Aravelle had said.

"Wait!" he exclaimed.

Aravelle sighed at the interruption again.

"My weapon can kill immortals? At least the ones still in the mortal realm?"

Aravelle looked at him with a discouraged look.

"Yes. At least, the ones at the legendary grade. Mythical grade beings are an entirely different beast, and even if your weapon has the potential, its wielder; you are still much too weak. At best, you would make their regeneration time longer. But I'm not finished talking."

Astaroth jubilated at the thought. But he shook his head and apologized for interrupting.

"As I was saying, such a weapon can still slay immortals, given the one wielding them is strong enough. But then comes the next step. The one Leon skipped. Expanding their domain."

Leon frowned at the words.

"Domain? What do you mean?"

Aravelle looked at him and smiled.

"There are two ways to become Mythical grade. The first, the easiest one, is to have cemented your legend and be recognized by a god. The Legendary being then gains a domain that follows the one of the god they have tethered to or sworn allegiance to.

"This is what gave you yours. I assume you haven't quite discovered the extent of it, given you played around much with your powers and haven't discussed it with your goddess, Lady Anulo."

Leon's gaze sharpened, realizing Aravelle knew much more than he let on.

"Relax. I don't care which god you follow, as long as it's not Gaius. But you should get to know your domain. It is the key to becoming stronger at your stage. That, and getting acknowledged by the world itself."

Leon instantly got confused.

"Acknowledged by the world? What does that even mean?"

Aravelle chuckled.

"Exactly what I said. The how remains a mystery, even for us, the Progenitors of Magic. It's different for all beings. But it is what brings you closer to the next step. And the last step is to gain followers.

"This is where I and the other Progenitors of Magic stopped our ascension. We didn't want to become gods, since we had our fair share of things to protect in the mortal realm. We made it clear to the gods and the world, which is why we are still alive.

"We renounced our chance at godhood, gaining only the Semi-Divine grade, to stay here and protect the world. But we can never go back on that promise. In light of the current circumstances, this might have been the wrong choice back then.

"But the past is the past, and we live with our choices. But that is irrelevant to you three. Especially Astaroth. You must not concern yourself with this for now. Your path forward is still a long one."

Astaroth locked eyes with Aravelle, trying to see if he was hiding something more from him. But the old man's sharp gaze was impenetrable.

He was thousands of years old, and Astaroth doubted he could ever pierce into his mind.

'Let's just hope he has a solution to our current problem. Because, if not, I'm a walking, ticking time bomb. And everyone around me is at risk...'

Chapter 870 A Gamble Worth Betting On

"Now, with how this situation differs from the norm, I'm sure the path will be loaded with traps and tests," Aravelle resumed.

"You are much weaker than the normal transcended and have already shattered the shackles of your mortality. But you don't have anything to support your immortality, so you are still very much mortal.

"This only simplifies the ascension step and does not affect your path until then. Every other ascender will try to bar your path. And you are far too weak to pose a challenge for them.

"Fortunately for you, you also have nothing for them to gain from killing you. Yet."

Astaroth looked at Aravelle and frowned.

"They can't kill me, anyway. I'm an Abnormal. We don't die, remember?"

Aravelle laughed at him, making him uncomfortable.

"How safe do you think you really are between these two worlds? Do you think nothing can touch you over there, from over here? Tell me, Astaroth. Is your soul not in here while your other body lays dormant on the other side of this veil?"

Astaroth's face paled.

"How do you know we lay dormant when we come here?"

"Hah! Neither your mind nor your soul can be in two places at the same time. Such is the rule of the universe. Unless you are a god, those two things can only be in one place at a time. And when you are here, your body is just an empty shell on the other side.

"Do you think if I scar your soul, your body will stay safe? Or better yet, if I trace that soul, don't you think I'll find cracks through which I can reach your other body? The veil is thinning between New Eden and the demon realm.

"That also means the realm between here and your world is also thinning. How long do you think your world, your true body, will stay safe? Especially if beings who are close to transcending this world go after it?"

The threats rocked Astaroth to his core.

'It can't be true, right? Even if the veil was lifted, aren't our worlds much too far apart for anyone to reach there from here?' Astaroth's mind spun.

"But that is beside the point. They can hurt you. They might not be able to kill you the first time, if they try in a conventional way, since your status as an Abnormal would make you come back. But they would never get fooled twice.

"And if they know they can't kill your body without killing your soul, then they will know what to target. You are not safe from them."

Astaroth fell into contemplation. His mind was reeling from the possibility of his death transcending New Eden.

'Would I at least know that I died over there? Or would I simply cease to exist?'

Aravelle calmed down, realizing he was terrorizing the young man.

Sigh

"In any case, as I have said, they gain nothing from coming after you for now. Even if they wanted to gain your first follower, it would be useless to them. The kitten isn't strong enough to be worth it."

Selena glared at him, but Aravelle ignored her.

"As of now, you are safe by default of your weakness. But I have seen you, over the course of the last months. You grow fast. Your kind grows fast. How long they will stay away from you before treating you as an opponent, I cannot say.

"But there will come a time when they come for you. And when that time comes, you will need to be ready. And I think I know how."

This was the first words that Aravelle said that were a relief to hear.

Astaroth immediately focused on him.

"How can I be powerful enough to face them without being powerful enough to attract their attention?" Astaroth asked.

Aravelle grinned.

"By doing what we do best, you and I. By forming contracts. By forming bonds. The magic of a Soulmaner isn't unlike my own, and I can help you.

"If you stop growing in power for the foreseeable future, and only focus on building your repertoire of souls when the time comes, you will have the power to hold off any of your foes.

"But that comes with its fair share of trouble."

Astaroth was practically hanging on to his lips at this point.

"And what problem is that?"

Aravelle locked eyes with him.

"The amount of souls you can control, or even contract with, is limited by your body's power. That means that to control enough souls to hold off an Actual Mythical grade, you would need to be almost at the Legendary grade power level.

"And you can't reach that without strengthening yourself. This means you have to look for your limit before slowly growing and pushing that limit along. If you grow too fast, you won't be strong enough.

"But if you grow too slow, and they find you to be a threat before you have enough allies, then you are doomed. And the allies you contract cannot be weak, either."

Astaroth's forehead creased.

Finding souls to contract was not like going to the market to buy fruit. Souls didn't just roam the land freely.

Aravelle was telling him to get stronger without getting stronger by getting allies, who were as strong as possible in a pool of already limited possibilities, without getting caught.

Nothing made sense in his mind.

Aravelle could see the confusion creeping up in his eyes and rose to his feet.

He walked to Astaroth and touched his shoulder, breaking his downward spiralling.

"I will help you. I know ways to get you the power you need. But by doing so, I can't perform my duty to strengthen the veil, which will weaken faster. Are you ready to bear the weight of that decision?"

Astaroth looked at him and frowned.

"Wouldn't it be counterproductive? If the veil breaks sooner, the demons get here sooner. And then, we are back at square one. No?"

Aravelle shook his head.

"Not if you have become strong enough. By the time the demons return, the gods' followers will have to ignore you and defend the world. Gaining another being capable of fighting the upper-tier demons is not something small, either.

"I am ready to take that gamble. But you must be, too. There is more than this kingdom at stake."

Astaroth sucked in a cold breath. He looked at Leon and Selena, who were waiting for him to speak. When he turned back to Aravelle, his eyes were filled with resolve.

"I'll do it."