

## **New Eden 31**

Chapter 31 Finding The Den, Part 2

That was just a normal hit! He grinned as he inspected the three wolves in front of him.

Dire Wolf(1):

Level: 34

Grade: Common

Health: 6'907/7'250

Dire Wolf(2):

Level: 33

Grade: Common

Health: 6'750/6'750

Astaroth lunged back at the wolves, staying in constant movement. The more he moved, the less likely he was to get surrounded.

There were only three enemies to keep in check, so his job wasn't so difficult. After the two-minute duration of his 'Enhance Weapon' expired, Astaroth switched out his longsword for his daggers.

His transformation was expiring in less than thirty seconds, and he wanted to maximize its value. He had brought the three wolves down under fifty percent of their health, with the level thirty-four wolf being a little under thirty percent.

He quickly scanned them.

Dire Wolf:

Level: 34

Grade: Common

Health: 2'105/7'250

Dire Wolf:

Level: 33

Grade: Common

Health: 2'966/6'750

Dire Wolf:

Level: 33

Grade: Common

Health: 3'310/6'750

He was still trying to kill the strongest wolf first. He cast 'Enhance Weapon' on his daggers and used his temporary skill 'Alpha's Howl'.

\*AAAWWWOOOOOO!!!!!!\*

Luck was on his side. Fear struck all three of the Dire Wolves in front of him and they stopped moving, trembling to their core.

Astaroth didn't miss a beat and dashed straight to the level thirty-four wolf. He stabbed it repeatedly in the neck until it died.

\*-486!\* \*-486!\* \*-486!\* \*-486!\* \*-161!\*

\*You have killed a Dire Wolf (Lvl 34). 5100 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 200% for kill two tiers higher)\*

\*Level up! From leveling; you gained 1 skill point and 2 free Attribute points, and all Attributes increased by 1.\*

The short five-second fear wore off as the wolf he was targeting died. He had eighteen seconds left to his transformation and then he would summon White Death out to help him deal with the wolves that were left.

But until then, he still wanted to dish out the most damage he could. Armed with his two daggers, he ran to the wolf with under three thousand health left and started dancing around it, cutting at its sides as he did.

He monitored the second wolf at all times, making sure it wasn't getting behind him. Astaroth heard a branch snap in the forest to his left, but he couldn't see anything there, so he paid no attention to it.

In the forest, Korin, who had been tailing him, was so enraptured by how Astaroth fought, that he had failed to notice a small branch on the ground and had stepped on it, producing a crisp cracking sound.

He immediately froze up, hoping that his stealth would hold. He watched as Astaroth quickly glanced in his direction briefly then focused back on his fight.

He sighed in relief and focused back on his footing while following the fight with his eyes. What he was witnessing was a miracle.

The young man was just level fourteen!

'How is he fighting three monsters of double his level and some?!' He wondered.

Now he understood why Kloud had called him dishonorable. With this kind of strength, he could have overpowered Konnor in a matter of seconds.

Of course, Korin had a different mindset than Kloud. To him, having a hidden ace in your sleeve was always a good thing.

Rogues fought with wits and tricks after all. But Astaroth was just brute-forcing the fight he was in.

The wolves were faster than him, but much less smart. Even if they tried to use pack tactics on Astaroth, he seemed to always think a step ahead of them, keeping the wolves from tag-teaming him.

Back on Astaroth's side, he had just killed a second wolf.

\*You have killed a Dire Wolf (Lvl 33). 4950 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 200% for kill two tiers higher)\*

There were five seconds left to his wolf form. Decided to give himself some breathing room for when he would turn back and lose all those bonus stats.

He would need a second or two to summon White Death. Astaroth got into a defensive position while the Dire Wolf charged at him.

When it jumped at him, he leaned back and kicked the wolf's chest as it passed over him, knocking him further away behind him. He quickly got back up, and the transformation ended.

He swiftly cast 'Spirit Summoning' and summoned White Death. White Death appeared next to him with a howl.

Astaroth ordered it to go after the Dire Wolf. White Death nodded and lunged at the enemy. After less than a minute of battle, Astaroth and White Death felled the remaining Dire Wolf.

\*You have killed a Dire Wolf (Lvl 33). 4950 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 200% for kill two tiers higher)\*

\*Level up! From leveling; you gained 1 skill point and 2 free Attribute points, and all Attributes increased by 1.\*

Astaroth sat down and rested for fifteen minutes. Once the exhaustion had passed, he got back up and ran further into the forest.

He ran and fought in this fashion for a good part of the morning, engaging all the groups of three wolves and less, and going around the bigger groups.

Most fights lasted between two and five minutes. With his rests and the running in between, he would get two to three groups of wolves per hour.

After 4 hours in this manner, he had felled a good measure of beasts. He had killed two Lvl thirty-one, six Lvl thirty-two, four Lvl thirty-three, four Lvl thirty-four, and 4 Lvl thirty-five wolves.

That had leveled him another four times, bringing his level to twenty. He opened up his status screen to see his progress.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 20 (15'411/34'950)

Stats:

HP: 2'300/2'300 MP: 705/705 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 23 (+20) Agility: 26 Constitution: 26 (+20)

Intelligence: 26 Wisdom: 21

Attack Power Str: 215 Attack Power Agi: 130 Magic Attack Power: 130 Healing Power: 105

Natural Defense: 4.6% Armor Defense: 14%

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 12

Available skill points: 7

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

He smiled as he looked at his stats in satisfaction. He was making good progress, good enough to take part in the tournament if nothing went wrong.

All this running and fighting had led Astaroth deep into the wolves' territory. And he was wondering how long it still went.

But that was a question for later. In front of him was the entrance to a cave, one that didn't seem too deep, or big, but the big scratch marks near the entrance scared him a little.

"This is where I made my den." White Death said in his mind.

"Why is the area so empty, then?" Astaroth replied.

"The new alpha probably didn't want to be just a replacement and moved the main grounds away." White Death said.

"Oh well. Let's go see inside if they left anything of value." Astaroth said, shrugging his shoulders.

And into the cave he walked.

Chapter 32 The Orphan, Part 1

Inside the den, Astaroth could smell the stench of death all around. It wasn't a huge den, so he quickly found the reason.

In the back of the den, the body of a wolf was rotting. It was mangled and torn like many wolves had ripped apart it at the same time.

"That was my mated female." Astaroth heard in his mind.

He could feel a slight tinge of sadness in White Death's tone.

"I'm sorry she had to end up this way." He said, with a bit of guilt.

"The Beta couple in the pack had always hated my female. The fault lies in my never taking care of it. Search for a bit more, please. I want to confirm something." White Death asked him.

So Astaroth kept looking around that cave, not even knowing what White Death was looking for. After a while of looking around, White Death spoke again.

"It is not here. Maybe it's... No, I doubt it. But maybe..." He said.

"What is it you are looking for?" Astaroth asked him.

"It doesn't matter. It probably isn't here anymore, Or alive." White Death replied.

Again Astaroth felt the sadness oozing off the soul remnant. He decided not to pry and walked out of the cave.

It was the middle of the day, and he could still farm more Exp before going back to the village, so he started walking slightly angled to where he came from.

He walked for a while, not encountering much until he reached a small river bend that ran away from the direction of the village. The river was flowing quickly and had many protruding rocks in it, causing waves all over.

Astaroth looked across the river, and what he saw froze his blood. He threw himself into nearby shrubs to hide.

On the other side of the river, a large black wolf was standing. It had a large scar across its left eye and streaks of white fur on its tail. Astaroth inspected it.

Dire Wolf Beta (In Transition to Alpha):

Level: 37

Grade: Special

Health: 83'500 Mana: 880

'So much health!' He thought, panting.

Then he noticed the wolf was carrying something in its jaw. It looked like a little ball of white and red fur from this distance, but then it wiggled.

And he saw what it was: a small wolf pup, wounded and weak. The big black wolf was holding it over the ledge of the river.

Then it tossed it in, turned around, and left.

"Jump in the river! Save that pup!" White Death screamed in his mind.

"What?!" Astaroth replied in his head, surprised at the request.

"Save the pup! Or let me out so I can save it myself!" The soul barked at him.

"Do you want me to die?!" Astaroth replied, not wanting to risk the river's rage.

"SAVE IT OR LET ME OUT!" White Death bellowed in his mind.

Astaroth could feel the panic in its tone.

"God dammit!" Astaroth cursed, as he ran and jumped into the river.

\*Splash\*

As soon as his body hit the water, he felt himself get dragged away by the current. It was spinning him and tossing him about, sending him dangerously close to many jagged rocks.

Astaroth swam as hard as he could just to stay at the surface of the water, but he couldn't see the pup yet.

"Further ahead, on a dead tree!" He heard White Death yell in his mind.

Astaroth scanned the river with his eyes quickly until he found the dead tree the soul was talking about. About fifty meters ahead of him, to the left, there was a dead tree fallen over the left part of the river.

The current had probably washed the wolf pup against it and was now holding on for its life. Astaroth could see that the pup was running out of energy fast, because of his injuries most likely, and he was slowly slipping off the trunk.

Astaroth swam with all his strength to the left, making his way to the tree trunk. As soon as he got there, the pup slipped away into the current.

Luckily for the little fellow, Astaroth caught it by the scruff of its neck just in time. But they weren't out of trouble just yet.

The river was still powerfully pushing against them, trying to wash them away. Astaroth brought the wolf to him and lifted him onto the trunk.

He quickly summoned White Death onto the tree trunk and lifted the pup to him.

"Bring him to the shore!" He yelled to White Death.

The wolf nodded and grabbed the young pup by the neck. As he grabbed it, the tree trunk shook.

It made a cracking sound and started groaning. The trunk was breaking!

It had probably started rotting after some time in the water, and Astaroth's collision with it had weakened it. White Death dashed the short distance to the edge of the river, but the trunk snapped before he made it.

The summon jumped with all its strength to its hind legs, in a last-ditch attempt at saving the pup. When it saw it wouldn't make it, It turned its head in a quick motion and threw the pup on the shore.

He saved the pup.

Astaroth was getting washed away again. Every time he tried swimming to the shore, the currents would wash him back away.

It was like the river wanted to drown him. After a hundred meters downstream, Astaroth saw something that caused him a minor heart attack.

Ahead of him, the river stopped. It was a waterfall.

And he couldn't see the bottom from where he was.

Not over ten seconds later, he was swung off of it. He fell nearly a hundred meters down until he landed in the water below.

The waterfall's foot was not deep, and when he submerged, he quickly reached the bottom and smacked his head. The world turned dark around him and he fainted.

His last thought had been 'Am I really going to have my first death like this?'

Chapter 33 The Orphan, Part 2

Astaroth woke up what seemed to be several hours later. The sky was dark and close to him, he could hear the crackling of a fire.

There was a blanket covering him. He groggily lifted his head, before terrible pain assaulted him.

He caressed his head, and there he found a nasty gash, covered in some kind of ointment, on the back of his skull.

'Who saved me?' He wondered.

Then he heard a cracking noise behind him. Astaroth got up as fast as his state permitted him and equipped his polearm, pointing it in the crack's direction.

"Easy there, kiddo." He heard in a familiar voice.

"Korin?" Astaroth asked, puzzled.

Vertigo then caught him, and he started dropping.

"Woah there. Easy now. Sit down, will ya?" Korin said, catching him back before he hit his head on the ground again.

"What are you doing here?" Astaroth asked him.

"What you mean to say is thank you for saving my sorry ass, I think." Korin teased him.

"Ahh, you are the one who pulled me out of the river?" Astaroth asked, still hazy on the events

"Who else would have saved you, kid?" Korin said, giving him a silly smile.

"You were in trouble, and I was there. I would not let you drown and waste all that precious day of training now, would I?" He added.

"How do you... It's you! You were the one I kept feeling was following me!" Astaroth exclaimed, finally understanding what had transpired.

"Oh? So you knew you were being followed? Why didn't you try to find me?" Korin asked, now curious at the young man's thought process.

"Well, I guessed if what or who was following me had nefarious intentions, they would have attacked me while I was fighting, or right after, when I was exhausted." Astaroth explained.

"How naïve." Korin smirked.

"Huh? Why?" Astaroth replied, confused.

"Do you think a good hunter attacks when his prey is weak? No. He attacks when his prey least expects it." Korin said, matter-of-factly.

"Hmm." Astaroth hummed in contemplation.

It was at this moment that Astaroth noticed a little white lump, on the other side of the fire. He stretched his neck, trying to see what it was, and then he saw two little ears wiggle on the lump.»

"The pup!" Astaroth exclaimed, crawling to it.

"Yeah. When your wolf threw it to the river bank, I picked it up. You were trying so hard to save the little fellow, that I didn't want your efforts to go to waste. So I picked him up before following you downstream." Korin said, smiling gently.

"Young master. Please let me out." Astaroth heard in his head.

"Young master? Since when do you call me that? You usually call me weakling or Elf." Astaroth replied with an eyebrow rising.

"You saved my kin. I shall be eternally grateful for it. You deserve my full respect." White Death said in his head.

Astaroth could feel the reverence in his tone. He summoned him out.

The wolf appeared next to him and slightly bowed its head, before walking to the pup. White Death sniffed the pup all over, licking the wounds on the poor thing.

It did all of this, ever so gently. It surprised Astaroth how gentle the wolf was right now.

Then again, he had already guessed that the pup was his. After the panicked reaction and the insistence to save it, plus that he had been looking for something in his old den, the dots were easy to connect.

When the pup felt the nudging and licking, it weakly opened its eyes. It immediately recognized the white wolf in front of him, although it was smaller.

It whimpered and tried to get up. White Death pushed it back down and kept taking care of it.

"So that's why you were saving it." Astaroth heard from the side.

"Yeah. The pup is his. They rejected it from the pack after the alpha died and swapped to another wolf." He nodded.

"Makes sense." Korin replied.

When the five-minute summon was almost up, White Death grabbed the pup by its scruff and brought it before Astaroth.

"I have told her who saved it. I also told her who my master was now and why it should follow you, too." White Death said to Astaroth.

"You want me to adopt it?" He answered, a little bewildered.

He had never had a pet in his life because it was too much responsibility. He feared he wouldn't know what to do.

"Yes. Although I wouldn't say adopt it. More like making her your companion." White Death replied.

"And how do I do that?" Astaroth asked.



"Name her and make a blood pact with her." White Death said, like it was the most normal thing to do.

"A blood pact?! How do I form a blood pact with her?!" Astaroth said in bewilderment.

"Name her first. If she accepts the name, the first step is already done. Then cut open your thumb and press it upon her forehead. That will seal the pact." White Death said, looking at Astaroth like he should know this.

As he looked at him, he started fading. Time was up.

Astaroth just looked down on the pup, and it looked back at him. Her big, black, puppy eyes were staring at him like she was peering into his soul.

He finally shrugged and went through with it. He thought for a brief moment, trying to find a suitable name.

Then he recalled something he had read in a psychology paper once. Something about an orphan girl, abused and cast away.

The situation here fit, so he recalled that little girl's name.

"Genie." He said, looking at the pup.

"Does that name suit you?" He asked.

The little pup bobbed her head a bit like she was nodding. It almost looked like she could understand him.

"Okay then. You shall be called Genie." Astaroth said, nodding too.

He then pulled his dagger out, cut the tip of his finger, and pressed it upon the Genie's forehead. A spout of vertigo took Astaroth, but it lasted only for a moment.

He could feel a conscience connect to his. No words came from it though, only feelings.

He felt a bit of fear from it, followed by a wave of relief. He looked back down and Genie was now climbing his legs and lying down on them.

She fell asleep right there and then, curled up in a small ball of white fur.

"Well, it seems like you have yourself another ally." Korin said from the side.

"Take care of the little thing and it can become a powerful helper." He added.

"Mmm." Astaroth replied, in a daze.

He looked at the pup's stats, now that it was bound to him.

Status:

Name: Genie

Race: Dire Wolf (Pup)

Level: 4 (0/100) (Exp share 50/50)

Grade: Special

Stat Allocation: Agi-Con-Agi-Int-Str

Str: 4 Agi: 6 Con: 5 Int: 5 Wis: 4

Heath: 250 Mana: 45

Attack Power Str (Bite):20 Attack Power Agi (Claw): 30

Defense: 0.5%

'Great. Now I have another burden on my Exp.' Astaroth thought.

Then again, that is only in the short term. In the long term, this companion would become another asset to put him on top.

Astaroth looked at the little fur ball sleeping on his lap, smiled, and got some rest.

"I'm tired, can I leave you to guard the first part of the night?" He asked Korin.

"Sure, kiddo. I'll wake you up when it's your turn on watch duty." Korin Replied.

Astaroth thanked him, lied down, rolled into the blanket, and closed his eyes. It didn't take long for him to fall asleep, his day catching up to him.

Chapter 34 Innovation, Part 1

That night, since he fell asleep in the game, Astaroth forgot to log out. Therefore, he spent his night in the game.

Slight tremors awakened him. Korin was shaking his body awake, to switch out of watch duty and catch some shut-eye.

The night was relatively uneventful, and no beast came to disturb them. The morning came soon enough and Astaroth woke Korin up.

"Thank you for saving me yesterday. And for staying the night with me. But I wish to stay out here for another day. I will come back to the village by sundown, I promise." Astaroth told Korin, bowing in appreciation.

"Fine. But in case you don't make it back, keep the blanket. It will let you camp out without freezing. I will go back to the village today. I'll tell the captain that you don't need to join patrols anymore. And I'll also tell him to send the patrols in another direction for a few days, at least until you come back." Korin said, getting up and stretching his limbs.

Korin then walked to the fire and stomped it out. He grabbed his stuff and walked back in the village's direction.

Korin knew the woods like the back of his hand and needed no help to go back home. As for Astaroth, he had the game's map function to guide him.

That was also how he knew where he was now. He was far away from the village, but it was nothing he couldn't trek back when he needed to.

Astaroth watched Korin's figure disappear into the woods. He was thankful the man had helped him, but even more that he left him alone to get stronger.

After all, he already had two leeches on his Exp now. He looked down at his new companion, who was awake and prancing around him.

The pup looked back up at him expectantly.

"Alright girl. Let's get you leveled up." Astaroth said to the pup.

They left their makeshift campsite and went back into the woods. He would have to farm much more, just to reach level thirty now.

The little wolf accompanying him would be a burden at first, but she would quickly become an asset, in Astaroth's opinion. Another source of damage linked directly to his own.

Although she would take half of what little Exp he was still gaining, she would quickly level up and become strong enough for him to go after larger groups of enemies.

That would make his grind go faster than before, and would compensate for the loss he was experiencing. Astaroth soon after found a small group of wolves.

He used the same method as the day before to slay them, making max use of his 'Spirit Melding' and 'Spirit Summoning' abilities to boost his power.

Genie was contributing minor damage at first, but as her level rose, her damage did with it.

They went about killing all the wolf groups they encountered, no longer stopping at just groups of three or fewer wolves.

Astaroth upped the game up to six wolves today, making the training more taxing on his mind, but also much more lucrative for his level. Astaroth farmed for the whole day, killing almost fifty wolves this time.

His level had only gone up by one, but White Death's level had also gone up by one, and Genie's level had the most drastic upgrade, going up by a whole fourteen levels.

When Genie reached level fifteen she had grown bigger, becoming an adolescent wolf. It had not affected her stats, but she had unlocked a skill.

Astaroth assumed that it was probably a normal skill for the special-grade wolves. He opened her status window, to look at her progress.

Status:

Name: Genie

Race: Dire Wolf (Adolescent)

Level: 18 (7'252/13'050) (Exp share 50/50)

Grade: Special

Str: 23 Agi: 28 Con: 23 Int: 23 Wis: 18

Heath: 2'100 Mana: 410

Attack Power Str (Bite):115 Attack Power Agi (Claw): 140

Defense: 2.3%

Abilities: Tearing Claw

Tearing Claw: Uses a powerful claw attack that does more damage and causes bleeding. Can be seen by the sheen around the claws. +100% claw damage, causes bleed 1% HP/s that stops when treated. Cooldown 1 minute.

Astaroth had no control over her stat points, so he guessed they followed a predetermined path, specific to this breed of wolves.

The amount of health Genie had was staggering for her small amount of constitution points, but he surmised it was because of her being a special-grade creature.

He then opened up his status window to see how many points he had at his disposal.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 21 (37'285/55'950)

Stats:

HP: 2'400/2'400 MP: 735/735 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 24 (+20) Agility: 27 Constitution: 27 (+20)

Intelligence: 27 Wisdom: 22

Attack Power Str: 220 Attack Power Agi: 135 Magic Attack Power: 135 Healing Power: 110

Natural Defense: 4.7% Armor Defense: 14%

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 15

Available skill points: 8

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

He brought all his attack stats to thirty, followed by his constitution stat also to thirty, using all fifteen free points at once.

He looked at it again.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 21 (37'285/55'950)

Stats:

HP: 2'700/2'700 MP: 780/780 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 30 (+20) Agility: 30 Constitution: 30 (+20)

Intelligence: 30 Wisdom: 22

Attack Power Str: 250 Attack Power Agi: 150 Magic Attack Power: 150 Healing Power: 110

Natural Defense: 5% Armor Defense: 14%

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 0

Available skill points: 8

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Astaroth grinned in satisfaction and started walking back towards the village. He had done enough for today.

He also had to consider he had been in the game for two full days, which meant he had been in there for twenty-four hours in real-time. That was a lot of time and very unhealthy for his body.

He would need to look into managing this better. Astaroth was almost certain he wasn't the only one that had done this either.

Maybe 'Evo-Gaming' would remedy the situation eventually, but for now, logging in and out was his safest option.

Chapter 35 Innovation, Part 2

As he walked in the village's direction, he opened up the last thing that he still needed to keep up to date. His skill list.

Skills: Propel, Ignite, Mana Siphon, Mana Skin, Enhance Weapon, Soul Steal, Intimidation Shout, Piercing Shot, Spirit Summoning, Spirit Melding, Shield Bash

Passive abilities: Mana Lobe Lvl 2, Mana Control Lvl 2, Perfect Mana Sense, Mana Breathing Lvl 1, Body Cleansing Lvl 2, ???

He was using 'Spirit Summoning' and 'Spirit Melding' a lot, so he max-leveled them directly.

Spirit Summoning:

Level: 1 -> 5 (Max)

Mana cost: 100 -> 250

Duration: 5 minutes -> 10 minutes

Exp Share: 0 (Min)/100 (max) -> 25 (Min)/100 (Max)

Spirit Melding:

Level: 1 -> 5 (Max)

Duration: 2m30s -> 5 minutes

Cooldown: 5 minutes -> 10 minutes

Stat Gain: Summon stats + 0 -> Summon stats + 5

Astaroth stopped walking, his jaw hitting the floor. The qualitative changes to those spells were the biggest he had seen yet, but they were also the best for his current situation!

He was just complaining about his Exp, and now his summon would no longer eat up any of his points! He had thought about how he would like the transformation from 'Spirit Melding' to last longer, and there it was!

This was a gift from heaven! His luck stat was zero, but he felt so lucky!

That made him think about that stat.

'What does the luck stat give?' He wondered.

It was a question for another time.

He resumed his trek towards the village, fully intent on making it there before sundown. He needed to disconnect that night without fail.

Else his body would start failing and he would either be forcefully disconnected, or he would die. He wondered if there was a function on the helmet, to make sure players didn't abuse the game to the point of putting their lives in danger.

As he thought about that, a notification popped in front of him.

\*Ding!\*

\*Warning! Critical body functions detected. 'Malnourishment' detected. Please log out soon.\*

'Well, it would seem there is at least a warning about it.' He thought.

Which meant there was probably a fail-safe to go with it too. It wouldn't matter too much to him, because he intended to log out soon, anyway.

He reached the village entrance after around an hour of walking, and he walked towards the river to freshen up. Then he walked into his alcove.

He pulled out one slab of meat he got as loot from the wolves and dropped it in the corner for Genie. He realized it was cannibalism and was about to take it back, but she had already started feasting on it, with seemingly no care in the world.

So he lay down on the cot and logged out.

He woke up on his bed, feeling weak and dizzy. His stomach was rumbling like a magnitude 7 earthquake and his whole body was shaking just to hold him up.

"Well, I will not stay in that game that long another time. I feel like crap." Astaroth grumbled out loud.

He walked to his fridge and pulled out one of his frozen meals and shoved it weakly into the microwave. He stayed standing next to it, for fear of not being able to get back up if he sat down for even a second.

After the five-minute reheating time, he pulled out the meal and straight up ate it in front of the counter and microwave. Once he had fed himself, he went to sit in front of his television and opened it.

He wanted to give his body time to process the food. When he opened the television, it opened up to the last channel he had been on, ESN Canada.

And on it was a report on how many players of 'New Eden' had been exaggerating their playing time lately, because of the announcement of the first tournament. The reporter was in front of the Evo-Gaming headquarters.

The reporter was talking about incidents happening where players had played for many days in a row without logging out, resulting in forced logout from the game.

The helmet was loaded with safety measures, forced logout, many warning notifications, and even a 'Call Emergency Services' function.

It only activated the last one during forced logouts and was there because if the game forced you out, you were past the point where you could care for yourself.

'Hmm. Handy.' Alexander thought.

He would prefer not having to deal with that altogether though, and that was why he had logged out every night in-game to take care of his needs.

Of course, he would also love to pass more time in the game, but that meant putting his health at risk, and he wasn't a fool either.

The report continued for a while, talking about cases where people had to be brought into the ER, but such cases were rarer, most just being cases of emergency responders giving nutrients to the players and leaving with a strong warning.

After a while, the reporter brought his hand to his ear. He nodded and announced that Evo-Gaming had just responded to the ongoing phenomenon by pushing out a new product.

The reporter sent the channel to an ad break, showcasing the product. The product was an oval-shaped pod, like a nap pod, and it opened up to a gel interior that acted as cushioning for the players.

The pod came equipped with needles that would inject IV solutions into the bloodstream, to keep players hydrated and full of nutrients during extended sessions.

Of course, you had to replace the IV bags when they were empty, but it still enabled long sessions of uninterrupted gaming and reduced the risks to the players' health to a minimum.

The product presenter rambled about how this was the highest innovation and the future of gaming. That this new product would revolutionize the gaming industry.

The ad concluded with the web link to order the pods and a very steep price. Most households wouldn't be able to afford it, as they priced it starting at fifty thousand for inferior quality to two hundred thousand for best quality.

Alexander immediately opened up the web link on his phone and went to the order section. He tapped on the highest quality and entered his bank account information.

He still had close to three hundred and fifty thousand saved up, from the sale of his parents' house and his own savings combined. He pressed 'confirm order' after checking the 'same-day shipping box'.

The cost was up by another ten thousand dollars, but he didn't care. That would solve his biggest issue, time. He wanted that pod yesterday!

To him, that was an investment, not a waste of money. If he could spend more time in the game than out of it, he would rapidly overtake the other, less fortunate players, and rush to the top of the leaderboards.

That would surely secure him some sponsors, he thought.

'Innovation is the best!' He thought, pumping his fist in the air.

#### Chapter 36 Scuffle

After ordering his new gaming pod, Alexander went to take a shower and a small nap. He felt better when he woke up a few hours later.

He no longer felt like he was on the verge of collapsing. He brewed himself a pot of coffee and made some toast.

As he was having breakfast, his door buzzer rang. He got up to check, and lo-and-behold, his pod had already arrived.

He opened up his door, letting the delivery men in. The pod didn't come in any fancy box or presentation, nor did it require assembling of any sort.

All it needed was a power source and to be connected to the internet.

Alexander had them place it in his living room and plugged it into an outlet. He then took the cable that came with it and hooked it to his modem.

The men then had him sign a proof of delivery and took off. They had many deliveries today, Alexander assumed.

The brand new pod came with two 1000ml bags of IV already hooked into it, but he would need to order more before he ran out. And that wouldn't take too long.

It said in the instruction book that it regulated the IV bags to last ten hours per bag. He could hook only ten bags into the pod at the same time.

So he would be good for a little over four days on a full load, but right now, he only had enough for twenty hours.



He looked online to buy some and found a pharmacy nearby that sold them at a unitary price. But the price was not something anyone would afford in the long term.

The pharmacy sold them at one hundred and fifty dollars per bag. That meant he would have to pay one and a half grand just to play for four days.

That was an insane price if you weren't sponsored, which he wasn't at the moment.

He needed them, so he didn't think about it too much. He wrote the address down into his phone, got dressed, and left to go get some, locking up behind him. The pharmacy he needed to go to was just a few blocks from where he lived, so he walked there.

It only took him a couple of minutes to walk there, and he easily found the place. The pharmacy was swarming with people inside and outside.

Most of these people, were dressed in suits and looked like rich handlers or assistants. He guessed these people were here at the behest of their employers to buy some IVs for pods.

After all, why would they come here otherwise, in a local neighborhood pharmacy, if not for this?

Alexander had looked for the closest to him, but he had also seen that the next closest was miles further, in another part of town. He also lived close to downtown, so he knew these people worked for businessmen and women.

He shouldered his way inside and skipped the line to the counter. Since this was where he usually came for meds, they had his file and he had access to renewal through their app.

He went on his phone and picked out eight pouches of IV from the app and checked them out. Then he made his way to the online order line, which was almost empty, and waited for his turn.

Once he got called to the counter, he grabbed the box they gave him and struggled his way out of the pharmacy. He heard a commotion from behind him and could guess what was happening.

They had run out of bags to sell. He quickly made his way out before getting assaulted for his.

Once he was outside, he hastened toward his home. He hadn't made it a full block away before a car pulled up in front of him, almost climbing on the sidewalk.

Two bulky men walked out of the front of the car, and a back window lowered.

Alexander could see a skinny man in the back. The man was not even looking at him when he spoke.

"Listen peasant. I will buy those IV bags from you for triple their value." He said, waving a thick wad of cash.

"No thank you, sir. I need them for my sick mother." Alexander lied.

"Tchh. Fine, I can go higher, how about four times?" The man said, clicking his tongue in disdain.

He clearly didn't want to negotiate with him.

"Sir, I need these." Alexander insisted, holding his box close.

"Listen here, punk. The master wants these. So you either sell them to us, or we will beat the shit out of you and take them, anyway." One of the bulky men said, getting dangerously close to Alexander.

Alexander plodded back, trying to disengage from this confrontation.

"I really need them. I can't sell them to you." Alexander insisted again, refusing to yield.

"Alright enough. Get the box boys." The man in the car said, closing his window.

"Yes, sir!" Both men said, grinning manically.

"Fuck!" Alexander said, swiftly turning around and running for it.

The two men were obviously no slouches and caught up to him in no time. Alexander had never been much of a fighter, so he was never a match for them.

They easily shoved him to the ground, one grabbing the box, while the other kicked him in the stomach.

The men started walking away, but Alexander wasn't to let go so easily. He got back up, his breath still choppy, and jumped on the back of the one carrying the box of IV.

"Let go! That is mine!" He yelled, punching the back of the man's head.

The big man dropped the box, but now he was pissed. The other guy grabbed Alexander by his shirt and threw him to the ground.

Then both men started kicking the shit out of him, cursing at him at the same time.

Alexander covered his head and rolled in a ball, trying to protect his head and ribs as much as he could. He knew he had messed up, but he never was one to let people trample over him.

But this time, he knew these guys would mess him up good. He just hoped they stopped before killing him.

He suddenly heard one of the man's yelp, soon followed by the other. The kicking had also stopped.

He could still hear thudding noises like a fight was still going on, but he never dared to look, scared that he would take a kick to the face.

After a few seconds, the noises stopped entirely.

"Get up, man." He heard from in front of him.

Alexander peeked from the side of his arm and was shocked. His two assailants were down, out cold, and one man had his box in his arms, walking to him.

He sat up, wondering what was happening.

"Grab it and leave, before their boss sees you." The guy said, dropping the box on Alexander's lap.

"Th... Thank you." Alexander stuttered.

"Who are you?" He then asked.

"I'm no one." The man replied, already leaving the other way, putting on his hoodie.

"Wait! How can I thank you properly!?" Alexander shouted, getting up.

"No need!" The other man yelled, getting in a jog.

Alexander was all beat up, so he couldn't run after him. He decided to just hurry home before the cops got here or worst.

He hurriedly unlocked his door and locked it back behind him once he was in his apartment. He was panting and hurting everywhere.

He went to take a shower and tend to his slight cuts and bruises, before setting up his gaming pod.

It took him an hour to tend to all his wounds. He didn't have many cuts, but they bruised him all over.

He applied topic pain relief cream, and put on a light shirt, straining to move because of the pain. It was now close to noon on Tuesday, so if he went into the pod after eating lunch, he could stay in until Saturday noon, giving him eight days of in-game time.

He would have time to do a lot of things in so much time.

He ordered food on his phone. He wanted to have a hearty meal, before going into semi-stasis for four days, so he ordered from a Chinese place near his house.

He ordered 3 different combos, which was enough food for three adults, but he would eat the whole thing on his own. It didn't take long for his food to arrive, and he ravenously devoured it.

With that, he was sure he would have enough nutrients in his body with the IV to not be weak at his exit in four days.

He then did a bit of cleaning in his house. Since he would be in the pod for four days, he wanted nothing to stink up in the meantime.

He did the dishes, put out the trash, and washed a few things in his home. Once all this was done, he bounced to the pod and opened it.

It smelled brand new in there, like when you buy a new car, and it made him giggity. He sat down slowly in the pod and then laid back.

He could feel the gel pads on his back, shaping to espouse his form perfectly.

'So comfy' He thought.

He then activated the pod. It was voice-activated, so he simply said 'Activate Pod'.

From the outside, you could hear a little humming. From the inside, Alexander had already stopped moving, his conscience slipping into the virtual world.

He was now standing in a white room, with a wall in front of him. On the wall, a prompt about needing to be linked to accounts was seen.

So he walked to the wall and entered his account information for 'New Eden' and it found his account.

He could now see a hologram of his character floating in front of him. He could recognize certain distinct traits of his face.

He smiled and looked around, to see if they showed other things. He couldn't find anything.

Inside the pod, the needles had already poked into his veins. At first, they drew a bit of blood, then they started injecting an IV slowly into his bloodstream.

The blood it had drawn was to link the pod to a single user, meaning no one could play from his pod except himself.

Of course, from inside the white room, Alexander felt none of that. He quickly stopped looking for things that weren't there and logged into the game.

All he had to do was say 'Launch New Eden' and he felt the familiar drop.

\*Launching 'New Eden'\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth\*

Chapter 37 Realism Upgrade, Part 1

The log-in this time was a little different. When Astaroth woke up on the bed, he felt heavier than usual.

Up to now, his body had felt weightless to him, like his own. But now it felt different. Like he wasn't in his own body.

It felt heavier, but also sturdier. He could feel the muscles working on every move he made. It was weird at first, but he quickly got accustomed to it, simply by doing some stretching exercises.

After a few minutes, he felt normal again, like his brain had re-accustomed itself.

"Hmm. That was weird." He mumbled to himself.

"Probably the pod readjusting my avatar to fit me better." He added, shrugging his shoulders.

He walked over to where Genie was resting. He patted her gently, waking her up.

"Wake up, girl, it's time to go hunt again." He said, looking at the wolf lovingly.

He had always liked dogs, but could never get one, his situation not being ideal for a pet.

"Are you hungry?" He asked Genie, pulling out a slab of meat from his inventory to feed her.

Genie got up fast, wagging her tail and drooling at the piece of meat. As soon as Astaroth dropped it to the ground, she jumped on it and, literally, wolfed it down.

Astaroth petted her fur some more while she ate ravenously, enjoying the soft feeling in his hand. As soon as she was done, she lifted her head to him, licking her lips.

Her deep blue eyes looked content as she sat in front of him. Their bond had started only through White, but Astaroth could feel that it had deepened as they fought together and he took care of her.

It might only have been a day, but it felt like she understood he had saved her.

Astaroth smiled at her and got up.

"Time to go. We got some hunting to do!" He told Genie, walking out of his alcove.

He went straight to the village entrance, not wanting to stop at the barracks and confront Kloud just yet. But trouble came to seek him faster than he had expected.

Just as he walked out of the village, he took a swift kick to the chest that sent him flying back across the barrier. He landed on his back and tumbled for a few feet before stopping his course by turning to his stomach and gripping the dirt.

He looked at his health bar, and it had dropped by half with that single attack. He looked outside the barrier and saw someone he wasn't expecting to see.

It was Konnor. Kloud had banished him a few days prior, but that obviously didn't stop him from coming back.

'Why is he still here?' Astaroth thought, frowning.

"What was that for, you psycho?" He growled at Konnor.

"Shut up, boy! I didn't come for you. That kick was payback. Now be a good kid and fetch the Captain, will ya?" Konnor said, clear hatred in his eyes and tone.

Astaroth frowned at the order.

"What do you want with the Captain?" He asked Konnor.

"It should be obvious! I'm here to take back my honor!" Konnor said, getting angrier.

"I shouldn't have been banished for beating a shrimp like you! The strong should always dictate the lives of the weak. Had you died, it would have been your own fault for provoking me!" Konnor added, almost frothing at the mouth.

"You are an idiot if you think I beat you unfairly." Astaroth replied, his face getting darker.

He already knew it from their altercation the first time, but he hated this guy's guts. He was a typical brute who only knew how to punch and call people weak.

Astaroth wanted to cave his face in right there, but a hand landed on his shoulder.

He turned his head and met Kloud's gaze. The man was looking at Astaroth with a fatherly look.

He then walked outside the barrier with a steady gait, stopping only a couple of meters before Konnor.

His back was straight, his gaze on Konnor, and his aura of authority was felt from a distance.

"What do you want with me? I thought I was clear when I said I never wanted to see your face again." Kloud said to Konnor with anger.

"This is MY home too! You can't just banish me for the sake of some weakling!" Konnor responded, seething.

"I banished you because you lack honor! You should have just taken the loss honorably." Kloud barked back.

"I DON'T LOSE TO WEAKLINGS!" Konnor yelled, his breath becoming ragged.

"It is too late now. The decision was taken, and I don't go back on my decisions. Leave now, while I still permit it." Kloud said, turning around to go back into the village.

"NO! I invoke the rules of the military, and challenge you for the spot of captain!" Konnor screamed.

"Don't do this, Konnor. You know I will kill you if we fight seriously." Kloud said, not turning back.

His eyes were glum now. He knew Konnor wouldn't change his mind in the state of rage he was in, but he kept hope.

He hoped the threat of death would make him come to his senses.

Kloud did not want to kill Konnor for such a petty reason. He believed that with enough time, the man would see the error in his ways and adjust his mentality.

Of course, he couldn't let him back here either. The man had been dishonorable, and that was a line he refused to have crossed by his men.

Unfortunately for him, it had the opposite effect. Konnor seemed to grin at the threat like it was what he hoped for.

"Good! Because I fully intend to fight to the death!" Konnor replied, his tone cold, as he armed up.

More people had lined up at the village entrance. The tension between Kloud and Konnor was also building up fast.

The people around could feel the pressure building up like someone was stepping on their chest.

Both Kloud and Konnor were staring at each other, ready to pounce. But they were interrupted before it happened.

Chapter 38 Realism Upgrade, Part 2

"Wait!" Came Astaroth's voice from the side.

"Stay out of this, shrimp!" Konnor yelled at Astaroth.

"Shut the fuck up, you impulsive moron!" Astaroth snapped back at him.

He then turned to Kloud.

"Sir. Let me fight him in your stead. No need to dirty your hands on such a fool." He said, giving a martial bow to Kloud.

"Son, you could die. What about your progress?" Kloud asked him, a worried look on his face.

He didn't want the boy's training to go to waste with a nonsensical death.

"Don't worry about me, sir, I won't lose." Astaroth replied to Kloud.

"Please trust me." He added.

\*Sigh\*

"Fine." Kloud said, after sighing loudly.

He turned to face Konnor again.

"I invoke the right to a champion." He simply said to the raging man.

"Are you refusing to fight me? Be a man!" Konnor said, his hatred and disdain leaking through his words.

"I am not refusing. Simply that the kid wants to beat you senseless himself. Who am I to refuse his request?" Kloud said, tauntingly.

Konnor almost spat blood at the words. The captain was clearly disregarding him.

He then redirected his hate to Astaroth. This was the second time this pipsqueak taunted him into a fight.

He would regret it today.

"This is a fight to the death, shrimp. Are you ready to accept that?" Konnor spat.

"Only you will die here." Astaroth replied, walking to face the man.

"Your funeral!" Konnor yelled, running straight at him.

Astaroth had already been prepared for that move. He had already cast 'Mana Skin' on himself.

He was also already casting 'Spirit Melding' to boost his stats to the max, before teaching this goon a lesson. He was going to vent for taking a beating in the real world on this dumb guy.

He felt his whole body become heavy again, then lighter than ever. The rush of feeling stronger was exhilarating, and he almost forgot the situation he was in for a second.

But he quickly snapped his focus back to the man running at him at full speed.

As Konnor punched out, aiming at Astaroth's head, Astaroth ducked to the side, and delivered a right hook of his own, smacking the man squarely in the jaw.

\*-675!\*

The hit sent Konnor reeling in pain. The action happened quick, fast enough for him not to react.

That one hit took away almost a third of his health!

'When did the kid become this strong?' He thought.

That was when he noticed Astaroth's hair had turned white and he looked more like a beast than a man suddenly.

Astaroth dashed at Konnor, fully intending to finish this fight quickly. He still had some leveling to do, after all.

The speed at which he burst forth would frighten most players right now, even the ones that focused on agility. Only players at level 22 that had put all their points in agility would be as fast as him right now.

His agility stat right now was at fifty-nine, making him run at 53.1 Km/h or 33 Mph. That was faster than Usain Bolt by almost a third of his fastest speed!

And since his strength was even higher, there was almost no delay for acceleration, making him burst forth like a bullet out of a gun.

Astaroth ran straight at Konnor and delivered another two quick punches to his stomach.

\*-338\* \*-338\*

Konnor kicked, aiming at Astaroth's head with a roundhouse, trying to push him away. But Astaroth blocked the attack with his arm, before sweeping Konnor's legs from under him.

Konnor fell to his back, the air leaving his lungs. Astaroth would not let his chance slip.

He immediately jumped on Konnor and grabbed his throat. Konnor started punching his face, but with his high constitution and defense boost from mana skin, the attacks were negligible.

Annoyed by the man's attempts at dislodging him, Astaroth punched Konnor's face again, taking away another huge chunk of his health.

\*-675!\*

Konnor barely had any health left, and he almost passed out from the last hit. Astaroth still held a tight grip on his throat, feeling exhilarated by the feeling of dominating the man.

He felt the breathing slow down until there was almost no breath left.

Suddenly, he let go. A look of slight horror found itself on his half-wolven face. He didn't recognize what he was doing as right.

This wasn't him. Had he lost his mind?

From within his mind, he heard White Death speak.

"Finish him! Make him pay for affronting you! Show him who is truly strong between the two of you! Kill him! KILL HIM!" He howled.

"No! Shut up! What is wrong with you?!" Astaroth responded, panicking.

'Was he losing control over himself? Was he going to end up a passenger inside his own body, with White Death at the helm?' He thought.

A quick chop to his nape rapidly stopped his thoughts, and he lost consciousness.

"Bring him to the barracks and monitor him. If he hasn't turned back to his normal self in ten minutes, put him down." Kloud said, holding Astaroth in his arms.

'I hope you take back control, son.' Kloud thought, looking at Astaroth's face with worry.

Inside Astaroth's mind was a jumble of thoughts belonging to him, but also to White Death. He was getting lost in those thoughts, slowly slipping away.

It scared him, but he couldn't let go. He had to pull through!

Astaroth remembered his parent's laughter. Their full support to him, over his smallest victories.



That was his anchor. And that was what kept him from slipping away forever.

From inside the gaming pod in his apartment, red lights were flashing. His heartbeat was currently shown, and it was through the roof.

There was also a display showing mental activity, and one could clearly see two distinct lines on it, like two minds were working in his.

But it eventually calmed down. His vitals stabilized, and slowly the second line on his mental activity chart faded away.

His breathing calmed down, but he was sweating buckets.

Chapter 39 The Risks of Greater Power

Astaroth woke up after what seemed like an instant to him. Truth was, he had been out cold for many hours.

Many warriors had been constantly keeping watch on him during this time.

Luckily for him, the melding had gone away before the time limit Kloud had established, otherwise he would have suffered his first death, accompanied by an immense loss in Exp.

"Ugh." Astaroth groaned, feeling like crap.

"Where am I?" He asked, trying to get up and look around.

A man near him immediately unsheathed his sword and placed it in Astaroth's face in panic.

"Don't move!" The man yelled.

Astaroth could clearly see fear on his face and he was slightly trembling. This resulted from what Kloud had told them while Astaroth was out cold.

He had told the men keeping watch that if Astaroth were to rise after losing control, he could kill any of them in a matter of seconds.

All the men in the room Astaroth was in went on high alert when Astaroth groaned, and one of them left in a jog to go get Kloud and Chris.

Both men got there shortly after and Astaroth was still looking at the man with his sword in his face with a gloomy look.

When Astaroth noticed Kloud and Chris in the corner of his eyes, he finally looked away.

"What's the meaning of this, teacher?" Astaroth asked, looking at Kloud questioningly.

"Just a precaution." Kloud replied.

"Stow your weapon lad. If he was out of control, you would already be dead." Kloud told the man with the sword.

"As for you, boy. Next time you lose control over your own power like that, I won't be as lenient." Kloud said to Astaroth, a light scowl on his face.

"Is that what happened?" Astaroth asked, his head still thrumming a little.

"After you let go of Konnor, your eyes went red. You even started howling." Chris chimed in.

"Alright, everybody out." Kloud suddenly said.

Astaroth watched as everyone apart from Kloud and Chris left the room. Chris sat in the room's corner, while Kloud dragged a chair near the bed Astaroth was lying on.

He had a grave look on his face.

"Do you know why people fear soul magic, son?" Kloud asked him, looking him deep in the eyes.

"Because those that wield it are powerful?" Astaroth answered.

"We indeed consider them powerhouses. But that is not the primary reason people fear them." Kloud said.

After a slight pause, he kept talking.

"It's because they are dangerous." He said.

"Dangerous? Doesn't that depend on the person?" Astaroth questioned, now confused.

"Not in this case." Chris answered from the side.

"Huh?" Astaroth said, not understanding where the conversation was going.

"It's because as strong as they are, they are also a major risk." Kloud finally said.

"I don't understand why?" Astaroth replied.

"Because of control. You almost lost it this time. You should understand the most." Kloud said.

"I lost control... I just remember my summon screaming in my mind." Astaroth said with a confused tone, not remembering anything else.

The events from the day before were still fuzzy in his memory. He remembered that at some point he started enjoying beating up his opponent, maybe too much.

And then the yelling in his head, but that was it. Did something happen after that?

"That was around the time you lost it. Luckily for you, I have already seen what that looks like in the past. Otherwise, things might have turned out differently." Kloud said with a sigh.

"Look, kid. You become much stronger when you fuse with those souls. But that also comes with a risk. You are letting them in very close to your mind. All it takes is a little push for them to gain control over you, instead of the other way around." Chris said.

"And then they get to do what they want." Kloud completed.

"Now take a wild guess what would have happened if that wolf were to be set free in this village." Chris added.

The thought sent shivers down Astaroth's spine. Of course that couldn't end well.

The people that killed it were all there after all.

"But how do I keep that from happening again?" Astaroth asked, after a second of pondering.

"You need to make sure you don't give them that push they need." Kloud said.

"How do I even know what that 'push' is?" Astaroth asked, even more confused than before.

"Emotion." All three men heard from the door.

In the door frame stood Aberon, the old mage. Kloud looked at him with a bit of apprehension.

Chris just nodded at the old man.

"I know you blame me for teaching him this, Kloud. But he wants to get stronger. Who are we to keep him from fulfilling his potential?" Aberon stated, walking into the room.

"He has martial talent. That would have been enough. But you had to put dangerous magic at his disposal, you old coot." Kloud grumbled, clearly dissatisfied with Aberon.

"You always thought magic was dangerous, you dumb gorilla. Even when you were offered to heal your wounds with it, you refused. Now, look at you. You have become weaker than ever, and you lost your titles and post because of it." Aberon angrily said, looking at Kloud with disappointment.

"You had a bright future, and you threw it away out of fear of magic." He added, with a tinge of disapproval.

"That was my choice to make, and I did what I felt was right. And I would take the same decision again." Kloud debated, mildly.

Astaroth could see there was a bit of regret on Kloud's face, but he did not dare ask what they were talking about.

"Umm... Can we come back to my problem, please?" Astaroth ventured.

"Ahh. Yes. Excuse our rambling." Aberon said, focusing back on him.

"You said emotion. Is emotion the key they need to gain control?" Astaroth questioned.

"Yes." Aberon replied.

"If your emotions become in sync enough with the soul you are fused with, the boundaries between your two souls blur. It is at that moment that you are the most vulnerable. It is through that weakness that the mixed soul can insert itself into dominion on the body." He added.

"Therefore, you need to learn to school your emotions." Chris chimed in.

"The Colonel is right. You are going to need to learn to tame your mind. Make it a sea of calmness." Kloud added.

"And, for this reason, you will train your mind with me this week." Aberon said, cutting in.

"What?! But sir! I need to level up!" Astaroth revolted.

\*Smack!\*

"Oww! Stop slapping me! I'm not a child!" Astaroth yelled out, looking at the person who had smacked him for the second time since they knew each other.

"Then stop acting like one!" Kloud thundered.

"Are you going to be reckless and use that power again, without being able to control it?! Are you deliberately trying to put the surrounding people in danger?!" He added, screaming in rage.

"But teacher! I must g..."Astaroth started.

"ENOUGH!" Kloud bellowed, shaking Astaroth to his core.

The aura washing off of Kloud right now was unfathomable. To Astaroth, it felt like he was looking into the eyes of a dragon.

This feeling of visceral fear that washed over him made him shut his mouth.

"Now. Are you going to do the training? Or do I have to beat you to death until you can no longer survive a mosquito bite?" Kloud said, calming down a bit.

Astaroth bit his lower lip in anger. He was going to lose precious days.

He might even lose his chance at the tournament with this!

"Yes, teacher. I will do the training." He finally grumbled out.

"Good. Then my work here is done for today." Kloud said, getting up.

He walked in the door's direction but stopped in the doorway.

"Oh, and don't slip out like last time. I will have a sentry posted at the entrance of the village. If you try to leave before your training is over, I will hunt you down myself. Are we clear?" He added, not even turning back.

"Yes, teacher." Astaroth growled.

Chris got up from his chair to the side and walked to Astaroth. He put his hand on Astaroth's shoulder.

"Don't resent him for that, kid. He is only trying to protect you and the others." Chris said, before patting his shoulder and leaving.

"Now that all this drama is done, I can also leave." Aberon said, walking towards the door too.

"Wait, sir! What happened to Konnor?" Astaroth called out.

"He is dead." Aberon said plainly.

"Did I...?" Astaroth stuttered.

"No. It was the captain. He cut him down when the man tried to escape. Don't think that Kloud is a merciful man, kid. He is a cold killer." Aberon said, before leaving the room.

'Should I have minded my own business?' Astaroth thought, before lying back down.

His mind was a mess so he would rather sleep it off. And so he closed his eyes and fell in the arms of Morpheus.

Chapter 40 Tedious Training

Astaroth slept little, since he had already been out cold for a few hours. Besides that, his dreams kept going back to screams in his brain and visions of him losing control and killing everyone.

He woke up two hours later, feeling like a pile of burning garbage.

"Urgh... Great. Now I feel like it's Monday." He said, grabbing his head as he sat up from the bed.

"White... Are you still there?" He added, thinking out loud.

There was a momentary silence at first, followed by a low response.

"Yes... Master... I didn't want..." White Death started saying, in his mind.

"No need to explain. I think I know what happened." Astaroth said, cutting him off.

Astaroth could guess what had happened, even if he was slightly uncertain.

He had already been in an enraged state of mind before the fight, and he must have lost control over his emotions at some point.

That eventually led to the animal instincts of White Death going into override, and because of the proximity of their souls, he got dragged into it.

"I don't blame you, White. But I think you also need to keep your instincts in check in the future." Astaroth declared.

"Yes, master." White Death responded solemnly.

Astaroth then got up and stretched. There was a small basin of water in the room's corner, which he used to clean his face.

The water in the basin was numbingly cold, and that washed away the last bit of fatigue he had.

Astaroth stood up from the basin and walked towards the door. He knew he would grow bored in the next few days, but he had to do it, anyway.

What he dreaded the most was the fact that he would lose a lot of time on this training. He wouldn't be leveling up in the meantime and that killed him inside.

His chances of participating in the first tournaments for 'New Eden' had just left the station.

While he was thinking about all this, he had walked into the tavern part of the barracks, and he was already close to the doors.

He had not been oblivious to the looks he was receiving. Some were looks of awe, others were looks of fear.

There were even some looks of anger mixed in the lot, though he wondered why.

But that was a question for another day. Astaroth just walked out of the barracks, not stopping for anything.

After exiting the yard, he turned toward the old mage's abode. He saw from the corner of his eye a white furry form walk up to him.

It was Genie. She had probably waited for him outside the barracks the whole time since no one would let her in.

To the men in there, she was a wild beast, but at Kloud's orders, she had been left alone.

"How are you, girl?" Astaroth asked her, bending down to pet her head gently.

Genie responded with a low whimper and rubbed her head in his hand.

Astaroth could see on the side of the wall a small pile of bones, so he knew someone had fed her, so she wasn't hungry. But she had probably been very lonely since no one else came close to her.

"Alright girl. Come with me. We have a long week ahead of us." He said, straightening up.

Genie looked towards the village entrance and then back to where Astaroth was walking, looking a bit confused.

Astaroth chuckled at the sight.

"No. We are not going hunting today, or for the foreseeable future." He said, shaking his head left and right.

"We have some mental training to do." He added, pulling a face.

Genie tilted her head a bit at his statement, but followed him.

Both he and Genie walked over to the old man's house and entered it. Astaroth maneuvered the book maze, Genie following from behind, looking around curiously.

Once they made it to the back of the house, Astaroth once again went down the stairs in the wall, making his way down to the cave under the village.

He walked through the tunnel in silence until he reached his destination. Once there, he found Aberon sitting in front of the artifact, eyes closed, as he seemingly always did.

"Hello, sir." Astaroth announced himself with a bow.

"Hmm." Aberon simply hummed back.

Astaroth walked over to him and sat down next to him, waiting for instructions. In the meantime, he looked around a little before focusing his mind on the artifact.

There was nothing much he could glean from the object as it floated there in front of him. He could see carvings on it, but they made no sense to him, so he didn't bother trying to read them.

After sitting there for over an hour, Astaroth was getting restless.

"Sir. What is the training you were saying I should do?" He asked the old man, trying to pry information out of him.

"You are already doing it. Now stop talking." Aberon responded without even opening his eyes.

"Huh?" Astaroth said, puzzled.

"I said stop talking." Aberon repeated, turning to look at Astaroth angrily.

"Yes, sir!" Astaroth replied, looking away and shutting his mouth.

They sat there in silence for another hour before he got restless again.

"Sir. I don't understand what it is I'm supposed to do. Can you at least give me a clue?" He asked, twisting his hand together.

"You meditate." Aberon replied plainly.

"Meditate?" Astaroth questioned.

"Yes. You meditate until you can push out all distractions and emotions. Until your mind becomes as calm as the dead sea." Aberon replied.

Astaroth didn't respond to that and simply turned his eyes away from the old man.

He was wondering what meditation really was, since he had done none. He closed his eyes and focus on his breathing.

In the movies, this is what they did anyway, so he might as well try it.

The next hours flew by as Astaroth almost fell asleep a few times, only to get slapped behind the head by Aberon.

Eventually, the whole day had gone by and Aberon shooed him away. He ordered Astaroth to come back again the next day, and that made him frown.

Sadly for him, he couldn't go against these orders and obeyed them.

Thus began his days of 'doing nothing'.