

New Eden 591

Chapter 591 The Challenges Begin

The pages in Twinxie's book suddenly shuffled, stopping about midway through the book. A powerful yellow glow erupted from the book, the ground shaking more and more, until the sand surface rose.

Next to Jaxx, the earth tore and grew, until a humanoid-looking pile of sand, rock, and dirt stood ten meters up from the ground, with the size of a mining excavator. A low rumble came out from what Jaxx could only assume was its mouth, shaking his clothes with its bassy echoes.

The Imps, unbothered by the appearance of an additional threat, continued charging at them, their snickering getting louder.

Jaxx lowered his stance, ready to meet them in combat, until he saw something from the corner of his eye that struck him as odd.

The earthen construct, which he assumed was an elemental, rolled on itself, compacting into a ball shape, about six meters high.

Jaxx wondered why it was doing this until it started rolling forward. And with every foot it travelled, it gained speed, almost like it was rolling downhill.

It soon enough became an unstoppable force, colliding with the incoming enemies, crushing them like they were ants, as it kept moving.

Turning his head to look at Twinxie, he saw the maniacal grin on her face as her extended hand followed the ball of earth and stone, seemingly guiding it.

'Is everyone in this guild mad? Where are they getting all these powerful skills?!' Jaxx wondered.

Then again, who was he to spit on power? He turned around, hell-bent on not losing out in this show of force.

Roaring to the red skies of the demon plane, Jaxx charged into the fray, his axe swinging around him like the blades of a blender. The battlefield devolved into screams of pain, and pieces of imps flying, landing on the trail of meat paste left behind by 'Pulvi', the ball of death.

Soon enough, Peaceful Grove followed through the portal, with Chronos, Food Goblin and Violette tagging behind. Violette stayed at the portal's mouth, making sure nothing could come through while they were distracted.

The Imps didn't seem flight-capable, which was a good thing, since none of them were inclined to aerial combat.

Peaceful Grove started covering the ground around the portal into sharp thorny vines, making the deep red sand-like ground turn into a dark shade of green. This ensured them a modicum of safety, in case some Imp slipped past them.

She then went into combat, making all kinds of plants grow across the immense battlefield, which started attacking everything close to them with nature's fury.

From giant flytraps to mushrooms with mycelium dragging the Imps into its gills, where the poor demons disappeared without a trace, the battlefield turned into the most dangerous forest-scape ever known to them.

Chronos wasn't much of a battle mage and didn't kill monsters. But they felt his aid all across the battle, be it by monsters suddenly jerking to a stop out of nowhere, before striking at the back of Jaxx, or by the giant ball of stone suddenly accelerating.

His support provided much-needed help to Jaxx, who was constantly assaulted by dozens of Imps at a time. He may have a decent sense for battle, but there was a limit to what one's eyes and ears could do to help sense around them.

Luckily for Jaxx, his legacy skill had a long duration. Without the damage resistance he gained from it, he would have already fallen, of that he was certain.

With the occasional healing winds washing over him, he was hanging on.

Jaxx gained a renewed sense of respect for Astaroth, who had dived into this hellscape alone and came back looking pristine. Jaxx knew he wasn't looking pristine right now.

Although the pain from the attacks was barely equivalent to a scratch, he felt them many times over, across his entire body, sometimes even accompanied by a burning sensation, as poison started coursing through him.

But the power of his legacy cancelled out the effects faster than their intended durations, and he stayed healthy enough to keep fighting. And fight he did, with the rage of a hundred Vikings.

When the Elven mage completed his spell, all six of the players touching him suddenly felt their minds lurch out of their bodies, as everything turned white before the scene changed again.

From a white flash, the scene went to a dark place, with a large white ball floating in the distance. They could feel themselves growing closer to the white ball, which was rapidly turning out to be larger than they had expected.

Around this white sun-like orb of light, six more smaller ones orbited.

It was like looking at a small solar system, with six planets orbiting along the same path. But to Astaroth, the vision was unique.

He recognized the souls for what they were, as he often introspected on his own. And he could see different colours to them than just a blinding white.

The auras of colour, wrapped around the white orbs, indicated which one belonged to which dragon. He could also see the creeping corruption in their core, trying to expand.

He already knew once the dragons became fully corrupted, the mage would suffer the same fate. The tether between him and his familiars was too thick to prevent it.

And by the looks of it, he hadn't lied when he said tearing them away would hurt him as well.

These were soul-binding tethers. Damage to one meant damage to both.

The party was suddenly separated, each of them being absorbed into a different orb, disappearing within.

'This will be a monumental challenge for all of them. I hope they are ok.'

As he merged into the soul space of the orb with a black aura, Astaroth closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was in a bog, thigh-deep in murky waters. Lifting his feet, he could feel the soggy ground tug at his foot, trying to keep it from rising.

But Astaroth didn't have to endure this impediment.

With a burst of mana, the water around his feet exploded outward, before he Sky Step'd out of slimy sand, reaching three meters up instantly. From the air, he melded with Morpheus, and flapped his wings hard, to stay above the tree line.

And from up there, he could assess the situation instantly.

'This is bad. I need to move fast before this dragon is completely gone.'

Chapter 592 Time For A Snack

From above, Astaroth saw a forest of willows and hazel trees, their branches dried and leafless, as black mist floated ever-present just over the murky water. He knew this was the corruption.

He could also see in the distance, at the edge of his vision, a place where the trees were dying. Astaroth understood that's where he needed to go.

Bursting forward, his wings beating strongly behind him, he made his way there. But the rot seemed to quicken, as if aware of his arrival, and he couldn't quite make it to the edge of its influence.

But the closer he got to it, the further the forest stretched ahead of him. He doubted it had an end.

But he still needed to reach the dragon before the corruption did. Redoubling his efforts, Astaroth used his magic to accelerate his flight, finally surpassing the rot trees.

He kept flying in the same direction, hoping to find the dragon soon.

In another dragon's soul space, Phoenix appeared within a cave-like tunnel, the black and red mist floating around her feet. She could feel the mist try to climb on her legs, animated with a will of its own.

She ignited her body, burning away the mist from her, making it reel in fear of the flames.

"This probably won't work forever. I need to find the dragon," she said to herself.

Phoenix looked behind her, trying to find out which way to go, but the tunnel extended out of view in both directions. So she fell back on her magic senses.

Closing her eyes, Phoenix breathed in deep, before exhaling slowly.

The faint whistling of wind that had been present in the tunnel faded away, replaced by utter silence. She felt the light mana coming from the mist all around her, like ripples on a pond.

Drip

A larger ripple washed over her, the sound of a drop of water hitting water right before it.

Drip

Honing in on this sound, her sense extended behind her, pinging back to her like a mana sonar, every few seconds, telling her which way to go.

Phoenix started walking, her eyes still closed, sliding her hand on the wall to guide herself. Her travelling speed was slow, but she could feel the sound of water drop getting louder, as the ripples in her mind became bigger and bigger.

When her hand suddenly had no more wall to follow, one final ripple washed over her, accompanied by a splashing sound.

Phoenix opened her eyes, and right before her, in a now large open cave, was a green dragon, staring at her, his maw uncomfortably close.

"Who are you, who dares enter my soul domain?" the low, raspy voice echoed in her mind.

Phoenix shuddered slightly at the mental pressure the dragon exerted over her.

"I have come to help you get rid of the corruption attacking your mind. I mean no harm," she replied, taking a small bow.

The dragon huffed, his nostrils flaring, as a powerful gust of wind pushed Phoenix back a bit. But she resisted its push.

"Two intruders in one day. How annoying these intrusions are becoming..." the dragon growled.

Phoenix looked around her, searching for traces of the dark mist. But the room was strangely devoid of it.

Thump thump

She heard a faint thumping coming from the other side of the cave. She tried seeing what caused it, but the gigantic dragon's shape was blocking her view.

But as if he had noticed what she was looking for, the dragon huffed once more.

"The other intruder, I have locked away. Unless they are stronger than me, they won't come into my domain. I ought to do the same to you. Or maybe I will just eat you? Hmm. Yes, the option is tempting..."

Phoenix paled a bit.

"Sir dragon, I am not your enemy. Please let me help you get rid of the other intruder, and then I can leave you alone."

Thump Thump!

The thumping started becoming louder, which made the dragon turn his head toward the opposite of the cave.

On the other side of the gigantic cavern, a thin veil of green mist was blocking out a cloud of black-reddish mist, and it seemed to ram itself upon the green veil.

"Tsk! What a pesky intruder this is! Perturbing my sleep. Assaulting my mind in the middle of the night. How presumptuous!"

Phoenix looked at the other entrance, barred by magic, and frowned.

'If he's blocking it outside of his domain, then why is he acting out on the outside?' she wondered.

Contrary to Astaroth, Phoenix had never been inside someone's soul. So she didn't know the entire space was its domain.

If she did, she would have understood that the slight mist floating about the floor in the tunnels was already a sign of corruption. This other enormous cloud was just the principal source of it.

THUMP THUMP THUMP!

The collisions were getting stronger. The veil was showing signs of stretching.

"Sir Dragon. Please. Let me help you get rid of it," she begged.

The dragon spun his head around again, looking at her. Hunger filled his eyes.

That's when she saw it. A faint flicker of black mist, dancing about in the dragon's eyes.

'He's already changing... I don't think he will let me help...' she realized.

As her thoughts flashed by, the green dragon sneered at her before licking his lips.

"You will make a fine hors-d'oeuvre, Human."

Opening his gigantic maw, which was only a few feet away from Phoenix, it lunged forward.

Snap!

The sound of its jaw clamping shut echoed through the room. Phoenix was nowhere to be seen.

The dragon looked happy with itself, raising its head to a normal height for its body size, and spun around. It started walking toward the other side of the cavern before halting abruptly.

A strange frown appeared on its face, as its nostrils flared up, blue flames exploding out of them and out the side of its mouth.

Spitting out the sudden ball of fire in its mouth, the dragon coughed, smoke escaping its throat. The inside of its mouth was in pain, as part of its tongue, and the majority of its palate had been seared violently.

Out of its mouth flew Phoenix, who was alight in blue fire.

"I come to help, and you eat me?! You ungrateful fat lizard! Fine! I'll burn everything, including you, if it gets rid of the threat!" she shouted, rage on her face from being almost eaten alive.

"Avatar of Flames; Regulus Supernova!"

Chapter 593 Facing Their Challenges

In another soul space, Galtion opened his eyes to a chaotic scene.

He stood amongst the rubble of a destroyed stone construction building, with a cloud-filled sky, so high above, he wondered if it was natural.

Walking out of the rubble, he came to a stop just outside it, a cliff before him. Down the cliff, a cyclone of electric energy, circling under what seemed like a floating land mass, which he was standing on.

He noticed another little piece of land, a few hundred feet above, about fifty feet further away, with another ruined building. Turning his eyes upward, he noticed many more of them, positioned strangely, almost imitating a staircase.

Something suddenly flashed in front of him, with a loud swooshing sound, and a burst of wind almost sweeping him off his feet.

Galtion turned his head, trying to see what it was, and something else flashed again in front of him, this time soundlessly, producing no wind at all.

That's when he saw what it was.

Flying between the land masses, spinning and looping, going up, going down, left and right, a blue dragon. Hot on its tail, a cloud of blackish-red mist chasing it.

And by the looks of it, the mist was gaining in on it.

They were moving so fast that Galtion was having trouble just following them with his eyes.

A voice appeared in Galtion's mind, vibrating with every word, like speaking through the blades of a spinning fan.

'If you are here, it means the master has asked for your help. So don't just stay there, dazed out. Help me get rid of this thing.'

Galtion frowned.

"How am I supposed to help you? I can barely follow your movements with my eyes..." he said.

The dragon seemed to hear his words, as it responded once again in his head.

'If you were sent here, it means you are the fastest in your group. Prove it. Make your way up and strike this thing of my tail.'

It said the words with a calm tone, but they contained a sense of urgency, nonetheless. Galtion could feel the urgency, more than hear it, like the dragon was conveying his feelings directly to his mind.

His mind raced, trying to find a way to go help the dragon. Already the pair of racing silhouettes were accelerating and going higher and higher.

Looking at the land masses, and their positioning, which progressively got higher and farther from each other, an idea sprouted in his mind.

'I would need to accelerate constantly if this is to work... I can't misstep, or make a mistake.'

Clicking his boots together, activating their ability, Galtion started circling the floating island he was on. It wasn't very big, but it had just enough space around the ruin to make a circuit.

After spinning around it a dozen times, he felt he had reached fast enough for his first jump. He wrapped around, angling himself toward the next island, and jumped.

He felt his entire body lift off the ground with much more force than he had expected, making the first jump with ease. The gravity was a bit iffy in this soul space, and he felt lighter when he landed on the next island.

A smile crept up on his lips.

"Even better," he muttered.

He spun around the island he reached twice, picking up speed again, and launched to the next one. This one was a little higher up, and farther, than his first jump, but he was confident.

Arcing through the dark blue sky, lightning streaking high above, he reached the second island, landing on the edge of it, his heart almost skipping a beat at the proximity of the precipice.

He noticed that not only were the islands further from each other with every step up, but they also got smaller, and they seemed to be moving.

What he had thought would simply be running and jumping had now turned into a much harder challenge. And the dragon was still climbing higher, the mist hot on its tail.

'I guess this isn't going to be easy, after all...' he thought, his mind sharpening.

From SharpTusk's perspective, he landed in a burning landscape, with swathes of black dunes, further than his eye could see, with not a plant or building in sight. The sky was red; the sun blazing from so close; heat immediately assaulted his body.

Sweat formed almost instantly on his skin, his body trying to fight off the blazing atmosphere around him.

He felt shock waves washing over him, coming from over the horizon, just out of sight.

Tusk rushed in the direction the shock waves echoed from, climbing over a few dunes of black sand, which slid under his feet, almost like glass beads, until he found the source.

At the bottom of the dune he crested, which stood almost two thousand feet above the next flat surface, were two beasts fighting for dominion.

One of them; a large red dragon, clawing, biting, and spitting flames that melted the sand under them into a black obsidian-looking glass.

The other; A cloud of black-reddish mist, in the shape of a dragon, fighting back with as much ferocity. But with every one of its attacks, a small plume of black smoke rose from the red dragon's body, joining into the mist one, making him grow in size.

The red dragon wouldn't be able to resist for very long, at this rate.

So he did the only thing he knew how to do.

"ARRGGHH!!!!"

Shouting like a madman, SharpTusk rushed down the sandy dune, taking leaping bounds down, his Half-Orc body cruising like a missile. He reached the bottom of the hill in less than a minute, ready

to jump into the fray, when a large red tail slammed into him, shooting him to the side, and colliding with another dune.

After slamming into the sand and tumbling for a few seconds, SharpTusk rose to his feet, absolutely furious.

"What the fuck! I'm trying to help you!" he shouted, looking at the struggling red dragon.

'Stay out of this, puny mortal!' a voice resounded in his head, almost sending him to his knees.

But he wouldn't stand aside, even if god asked him to. He was sent to help, and help he would!

Chapter 594 7 Battles, One Tied Fate

Meat-Shield wasn't so lucky as to land away from the conflict, in the mind space he was dragged into.

He appeared under the belly of the humongous brown dragon, who was holding out under a constant stream of attacks, coming from a looming cloud of dark mist. The shape of the mist was weird, looking like a bipedal dragon, whose neck was abnormally thick.

Its two front paws were slashing at the brown dragon's hide, as he braced itself in defence. Its wings were folded on its back, trying to cover the weaker area in its scaly armour.

The dragon's face was under its body, and when it saw the Dwarf appear, its eyes squinted.

Face to face with the dragon's visage, Meat-Shield almost dropped to his ass as he stepped back and stumbled on his own feet.

"I'm here to help. I'm not the enemy!" he hurriedly shouted.

The dragon huffed in response before speaking in his mind.

'Then help! I can't resist the onslaught for much longer, and I can't attack with all the attacks I'm taking.'

Looking at the situation, Meat-Shield could only do one thing. So he charged out from under the dragon, bracing his shield, and slammed his mace on it.

"Look over here, you black fart cloud!"

Using his most powerful taunt, in conjunction with his strongest defence skill, Meat-Shield stole aggro from the brown dragon instantly.

But when the dark cloud looked at him, with its two red burning dots serving as eyes, he gulped.

'Shit...'

The last of the players that were sent to the soul spaces, Jeanne d'Arc, appeared in a snowy landscape, the biting of the wind immediately gnawing at her skin. She wasn't dressed for this kind of temperature, and shivers crawled up her spine, her teeth immediately clattering.

"W-w-why did I-I-I have to l-l-land in the c-c-cold spot? F-f-fuck me!" she stuttered through her shivering body and rattling teeth.

But she had a task to do, and couldn't let the cold get the better of her. Casting a blessing spell on herself, she managed to stave off a bit of the freezing, enough for her to focus on her surroundings.

With a quick sweep of her eyes, she saw she was on a plateau on the flank of a tall mountain, atop which loomed a black and red cloud that seemed to streak down in black lightning every few seconds. Under the level of her plateau, a cloud similar to the one atop the mountain was slowly creeping upward.

She knew her only way was up.

Starting her ascent, Jeanne had to refresh her blessing spell often, just so she wouldn't freeze to death. The climb was a harrowing experience for her, who had never been in either this type of cold or mountainous region.

But once she made her way to the top, what she found froze her very blood.

Laying on the top of the mountain's last plateau, blood pooling around its form in quantities abnormally large, was a white dragon, whose once pristine scales were covered in cuts, burns, and deep gouges, from which rivulets of blood seeped out.

The dragon, feeling a creature approach its body, weakly opened its eyes.

Jeanne felt a sense of vertigo take over her body as she peered into the icy blue eyes of the massive creature.

'Leave, child. It is already too late for me. I can't take it's harrying for much longer. When I turn, I want you to be far away, so I don't kill you.'

The voice was neither angered nor depressed, but flowing with a sense of peace. Acceptance of what was to come.

The white dragon had already accepted its coming fate, only resisting in hopes it would kill the least of its wards as possible.

But Jeanne couldn't let it die. After all, if it died, they were next.

She ran up to the Dragon, laying her hands on the enormous snout of the beast.

"Don't give up yet. You aren't dead, and I won't let it happen. I will give you every ounce of my strength if that is what it takes for you to survive."

The resolve in her voice moved the dragon. But what could a single Human girl do against the onslaught of demonic corruption?

Jeanne knew her shielding spells wouldn't be powerful enough to cover against the might of the black lightning strike. She also knew her healing would barely be enough to her alive.

But she had to try.

Focusing on her holy emblem, dangling from her neck, she poured every bit of mana she could muster into it, calling out to the god her class was tied to.

"Please, Mother Medicus. Grant me the power to save this life. For the sake of many more," she whispered.

The dragon felt the amulet pulse slowly, like a heartbeat of power had animated it. Then, healing magic poured into it, steadily replenishing its life force.

It was far from enough to bring her back to her feet, but the dragon felt enough power flow into her to counteract the unabating strikes of the corruption. Perhaps there was hope.

From outside the dragons' souls, the Elven mage was keeping watch. He couldn't intervene, since keeping this spell alone was draining all his mana, but watching was easy for him.

He was currently worried about the threat the Ash Elf had uttered to him, but the man seemed to take his task seriously. Or at least, there wasn't currently cause for concern.

Although all the young Abnormals were each doing whatever they could to fix the corruption problem, some were going about it with more violence than necessary.

But he doubted they were powerful enough to take down dragons.

'They couldn't possibly take down dragons on their own. Could they?' he silently worried.

In the demon plane, the rest of Astaroth's party was fighting an arduous battle. They weren't in any life-threatening danger, their teamwork covering for any mistakes they committed.

But the more the battle went on, the more the risk rose. Tiredness was already sweeping over Jaxx, as his Legacy skill had just recently ended.

Twinxie's summon had timed out, and she had pulled out another elemental spirit, this one of wind. But her mana had dropped significantly from those two powerful summons.

The casters were running on fumes, and Jaxx was beginning to become sluggish. They all wondered how long they would last.

The Imps kept appearing in a never-ending wave. Things were getting dire.

Chapter 595 One And Done

Violette started using more of her power to fight back the growing threat of minor demons. At first, her role had been more of a stop-gap, a safety cushion, of sorts.

But at the pace her allies were exhausting their high-tier skills and combat resources, it wouldn't be enough. She had to play a more dynamic part.

But after a while of shooting icicles and high-pressure water jets at anything in her range, she quickly understood even that wouldn't be enough. Even the occasional high-tiered spells, with enormous casualty results, were barely enough.

They had no way to sustain their killing pace against the unending rise of the imps.

And Violette feared this was only the beginning.

As time went on, Jaxx slowly got pushed back, as did the casters and Food Goblin, until they stood at the entrance back into the dungeon. Hope was becoming a scarce resource, and so was their energy.

Violette, standing at the back of the group, was the first one to get pushed out of the portal.

'I can't let them down. I won't let them down!' she told herself.

"Everyone out! I'm sealing it again!" she shouted.

The casters didn't need to be told again, and they rushed out of the portal. But Jaxx wanted to stay behind and acted stubborn.

"I can do this! Please! Let me prove to the guild leader I am a worthy ally!" he shouted back.

As he did, he kept hacking, slashing, and even kicking enemies away. His body was riddled with countless minor cuts, some oozing a green liquid.

His health bar teetered under the twenty percent mark, the passive healing from Peaceful Grove barely enough to sustain him anymore. But he refused to back out.

"If you don't get out right now, I'm sealing you inside! I am not joking!" Violette hollered back.

But Jaxx stood firm.

"Fine! Have it your way!"

Seeing he was being obstinate, Violette no longer had the patience to argue. With a significant chunk of her mana, she iced up the portal entrance, layering sheets of ice over each other, compacting them so much that the ice whined and popped into itself.

Once she was done, a thick blue wall stood at the entrance, clear enough for them to see through, where Jaxx remained under a constant barrage of attacks. But Peaceful Grove's face dropped.

"My magic... It can't reach him through your seal. It's too weak..."

Violette's heart skipped a beat. She hadn't thought about that.

Had she just condemned the player to an assured death? Had she taken away his only chance of surviving?

She was about to lift her hand, and undo the magic, to pull him out, but Chronos grabbed her hand.

"Leave him. His fate is strong, still. He won't die. You promised the leader you would stop the creatures from leaking into this world, and this is how. Let's focus on another problem," he said.

Then he pointed at the door to the room from which they had arrived. And standing in the large archway, Elves.

Dozens of them, with eyes redder than molten metal.

Violette's face hardened.

'So it's out of the frying pan and into the fire, huh?' she thought, dejectedly.

The moment the corrupted Elves saw the players, a loud shriek echoed through the staircase.

The blood-curdling scream echoed, and echoed, getting fainter as it did, but staying loud enough for the players to understand it wasn't simply an echo. It was a reply.

The staircase leading up the tree might very well be filled with corrupted Elves, ready to tear them apart.

Violette realized their only true front liner was locked behind a wall of ice and gulped.

The Elves started running towards them, crossing the short distance rapidly. Spells fused in their direction and Food Goblin jumped into the fray, taking some of them down.

But it wasn't enough. The stairwell kept disgorging swathes of enemies, repeating the same pattern as inside the demon plane.

'I told Phoenix I would hold here. Am I going to fail at keeping my word?' Violette worried.

But a loud, rumbling roar echoed through the open room. And with it, a banging sound of metal on metal.

Turning to see what caused the noise, Violette smiled in relief.

"Alright! Round two, you long-eared maggots!" Meat-Shield yelled, a wide grin on his lips.

He charged into the oncoming wave of corrupted elves, his speed higher than previously, surprising Violette. She also noticed another strange thing about him.

Where the skin of his face wasn't hidden by his bushy Dwarf beard, the skin seemed strange. Almost scaly.

'What happened in there?' she wondered, glancing at the other five of her allies, still holding onto the mage.

But now wasn't the time to be lost in thought. They might have regained a front liner, but they were still extremely exhausted and under-manned.

But something had indeed happened to Meat-Shield, while he was inside the dragon's soul space.

"Look over here, you black fart cloud!"

But as the eyes stared at Meat-Shield, his courage almost escaped him through his urethra.

A feral sense of fear took his body, and he fought with every ounce of his will not to fall prey to it. It took him a second to readjust his mind correctly, but already the black mist was wailing on him.

Watching his health almost plummet to zero instantly, Meat-Shield hurriedly activated an invulnerability skill.

He gulped in fear.

Only one such skill was available to him, and it only lasted ten seconds. Once those ten seconds were over, he would die...

In the flurry of attacks that landed on him, regardless of his high resistance, he lost ninety percent of his HP in less than a second.

It was easy to grasp the difference in power between him and the foe striking at him with abandon.

'Did I bite off more than I can chew?' he asked himself.

But there was nothing to do about it anymore. He had come here to help the dragon beat the corruption.

If he died doing so, then so be it. At least it would have helped his allies push through this dungeon.

Five seconds.

'I heard Astaroth, Phoenix, and Violette once defeated a dragon. I wonder if it was stronger than this one?'

Three seconds.

'Maybe it was weaker, and I won't have anything to be ashamed of.'

One second.

'Well, it was a good run. I hope I get Exp even if I die inside the dungeon. Going back empty-handed would suck.'

But as his skill ended, a shock wave blew him back.

Fwoooooom!

And where once stood the black mist dragonoid, nothing remained.

That's when Meat-Shield finally saw the landscape in its entirety.

Mountains, over mountains, endless in numbers, as far as his eyes could see. And right in front of him, a smoking hole that drilled through hundreds of mountains in a straight line.

"What...The... Fuck..."

Chapter 596 Round Two, Maggots!

The hole in the mountains glowed red hot on its edges, with signs of extreme friction and power passing through it. And the enemy that had stood in its wake?

Nothing remained of it.

The brown dragon stepped aside, getting away from the Dwarf under his body, before collapsing to the ground. That was when Meat-Shield noticed the blood puddle all around him.

The underside of the dragon may still have been in perfect condition. But the back and flanks of the beast were far from.

Deep and thick lacerations covered the beast from the middle of its neck, all the way to the base of its tail. Its injuries were severe.

As its body hit the ground, causing a dust cloud to poof out from under it, it sighed heavily.

'Thank you, stone-dweller. The time you bought me was enough for me to get rid of it. But I am tired now. Unless you require anything from me, I will bid you farewell, and send you on your way out.'

Meat-Shield panicked.

"Wait! Are you certain this thing is gone? What if it comes back?"

The brown dragon huffed out a weak laugh, rumbling the ground under it as its body shook up and down.

'If it took that attack and survived, it would have long since had the better of me. Worry not, stonedweller.'

Meat-Shield's shoulders dropped in relief. He also felt the hurt crawl up his body as the adrenaline in his system flushed out.

Falling to his ass, he laughed out loud, thinking about what had transpired. As he relaxed, the dragon looked at the tiny humanoid next to it and decided it deserved a reward for saving its hide.

With a single thought, a stone goblet appeared in front of the Dwarf. And with another thought, a small stream of crimson-red liquid filled it to the brim.

'Here. For saving me, your reward. Drink, and leave.'

Meat-Shield noticed the cup haven been too busy laughing his anxiety out and didn't even ask what was in it.

"Ooh! I'm parched. This couldn't be better!"

He grabbed the cup, whose stone exterior was rough to the touch, and gulped down the content without thinking. As the hot, viscous liquid slid down his throat, a salty, metallic taste permeated his mouth.

He almost spat out the liquid, his stomach immediately turning, but still swallowed, reflexively.

"Urgh... What was that? It tasted awful..." he grunted.

The dragon huffed a chuckle again.

'My essence. Blood of a dragon. A reward of great value. I will not tell you what its properties are. You will find out in due time. Now, leave.'

Before Meat-Shield could even process what he'd just been told, his body jerked back, and sent tumbling out of the soul space, floating into a white open area, with no gravity. He tumbled for a while until he could stabilize himself.

But then, the shock of having just drunk blood hit him. His mind reeled, and his stomach churned.

He started gagging uncontrollably, but try as he may, nothing came out. It was like trying to puke, after having already puked a dozen times.

The gagging went on, unabated, for a dozen minutes, until something else washed over Meat-Shield.

Pain.

Incredible pain.

Meat-Shield went from a bent position, gagging his life away to a stretched-out position, screaming out in pain.

"Aarrgghh!!!"

This went on for five minutes, nonstop, with his body contorting and snapping in weird positions. His skin felt like it was on fire, and his insides gave him the impression they had turned into a molten slag, boiling the interior of his body.

His head pounded like a drum as the blood pumping in his veins caught on fire and pumped faster. The pain was excruciating.

But once it ended, and Meat-Shield could breathe in normally, he could feel the difference in his body. Something had changed.

He felt... lighter?

His full-plated armour didn't feel as heavy, but that wasn't it. He felt as if someone, or something, had lifted a weight from his mind, as well as his body.

He tried accessing his status screen, but it didn't appear.

'Maybe I can't access it until I'm back out in the dungeon?'

As he thought that, his body suddenly jerked backwards, now falling, and he felt pulled out from the white, weightless space.

His eyes popped open, back in the tree's open ceiling room. And a violent shrieking assaulted his ears.

Shaking his head to get all his ideas back in place, his mind still slightly in shock from the sickness and pain, he looked around himself.

That's when he saw the portal, iced up, and the five players in front of it, with horrified looks. He couldn't see the big guy anywhere and assumed the worst.

But when the shirking stopped, the ground rumbled, as wave after wave of corrupted elves lunged at the five players.

The gnome lunged forward, trying to give a semblance of a front line to the four casters. But he wouldn't last long, judging by the look of exhaustion on his face.

So Meat-Shield did what he did best.

"Alright! Round two, you long-eared maggots!"

Screaming this, he dashed forward, banging his hammer onto his shield, as the taunt spread out like a wave. The enemies reaching the casters abruptly turned to face him, as he passed the latter, and they collided in a mess of arms and weapons.

Meat-Shield rapidly distanced himself from the four casters, trying to give them a safety net, in case he dropped some aggro. But something felt different.

As he fought, he kept getting these strange feelings in his head, like pings of vibration, alerting him to danger. Every time his head received one, soon after an attack came from the location the feeling came from.

The sensation was like someone, or something, lightly tapping his brain in the direction an enemy came from. But it was unerring.

For now, it only came from the directions he wasn't looking, but as time went on, it started expanding in scope and getting more precise. And in mere minutes, he was seeing his surroundings in three dimensions inside his mind, like a hologram of the surrounding situation.

With every step a creature took, the vision changed, showing their new location and position.

Meat-Shield felt like he could close his eyes and still fight without issue. He wasn't keen on trying it, though, but he had a feeling it would work.

'Did I get a new skill? A passive, maybe?' he wondered.

He was so curious, but there was no time to look.

'I guess I'll find out once this mess is over.'

Chapter 597 Birth Of A Name

Ziut!

Screech!

In a storm-filled sky, amongst the many floating islands of the blue dragon's domain, a human figure was bouncing off the small land masses. After each contact with a piece of floating island, another buzzing sound would echo, followed by a roaring screech.

This was Galtion, who had finally reached his maximum speed and the top of the sky stairs, atop which the dragon and cloud of dark mist were still in chase for each other. With every pass Galtion made through the mist, he saw it slow down.

But it was always a temporary thing, as it went back to full speed soon after. This only ensured the blue dragon didn't get caught.

For now.

But Galtion couldn't run and attack like this forever.

Already, his forehead dribbled with sweat under his full-face helmet, and his body felt like it was made of lead. He was quickly reaching his limit.

"This isn't working!" he shouted for the dragon to hear.

'Your attacks are too weak, Human. If I could strike at the corruption myself, this would already be over. But if I stop, it will strike at me and take over my soul.'

Galtion felt disheartened at being told he was too weak. It stung his ego.

But he knew the dragon was right.

'Is there a way to get around this?' he mused.

He remembered how Astaroth had boosted his attack power against the lich with his holy aura and wondered if the dragon could do something similar.

An idea crept up in his mind. But it was madness.

Galtion was willing to bet his life on it, though. His options were limited.

If it failed, he died, and the corruption won.

If he did nothing but keep attacking like this, he tired out and the corruption eventually caught up with the dragon. In that case, he would die, and the corruption would win.

But if his idea worked, they both got out of here alive.

He made up his mind and changed his movement pattern.

From a short and quick attack path, he expanded out into a more peripheral path, where he stayed out of the dragon's path.

"Shoot your lightning at me!" he shouted, while bouncing next to the dragon.

'Have you lost your mind? It will kill you instantly!' the dragon replied in his mind.

"Just do it!" Galtion shouted back.

With the relent in Galtion's attacks, the corruption was quickly gaining on the blue dragon's flight, and it was a matter of seconds before it caught up. There was no time for the beast to ponder on the Human's sanity.

'Fine. Get in front of me,' it said, doubtful of this Human's plan.

Galtion bounced on another two floating islands, which sent him directly across the dragon's path and focused his mind.

Time almost slowed down as his focus honed to razor-sharp.

The dragon opened its mouth, spitting out a lightning bolt as thick as his arm on a direct collision course with him. It was do or die.

Galtion spun his body mid-air, getting clear of the bolt, but putting his spear tip right in its course. As the lightning bolt hit the spear, he saw damage numbers appear.

-1,000

-1,000

...

He knew his meagre health pool wouldn't last, as the lightning bolt sank into his weapon, already coursing into his body.

Keeping his motion going, Galtion slammed feet first into another floating island, before bounding back, aimed on a collision course with the corruption mist.

His spear glowed white hot as electricity arced off the shaft, making it look like a miniature Tesla coil. But when he passed into the mist this time, he felt a much higher resistance.

It felt like physical matter.

And by the screech it released, the corruption also felt this attack much more than the others.

SCREECH!!!

The mist cloud halted in its tracks, suddenly contracting and expanding. It was seizing.

But Galtion wasn't done.

He bounced off another island, repeating his earlier attack pattern, this time with a weapon slowly killing him. By the time the lightning dissipated from his spear, he was almost dead.

His body couldn't support him anymore, and instead of bouncing off the next island, he slammed into it, taking another instance of damage, and falling off toward the cyclone of lightning at the bottom of the soul space.

Galtion could barely feel his body, let alone move it. But as he fell, he smirked.

Above him, the cloud of corruption was almost entirely gone, and an ultimate attack from the dragon brought it down.

'At least, I did my part,' he thought.

Galtion closed his eyes, at peace with this result. Even if he died, he would have at least helped his party.

A jolt of electricity coursed through him, his eyes opening in pain. Then he realized where he was.

Back in the mage's study.

Another shock coursed through him. It was coming from his hand.

Looking down, he saw his spear was out, where it hadn't been previously. But it was different.

Arcing with sparks, the once black-shafted spear, with a dull metal head, was now blue-shafted, with a spear-tip of a silver sheen. Just under the spearhead, a metallic dragon, with its head rested on the spear's blade, its tail coiled around the shaft, and its wings folded around the joint, forming a round crossguard.

The sparks stopped arcing from it, seemingly what had caused it to change, and Galtion stared at it, in awe.

But a deathly screeching caught brought his attention elsewhere. That was when he noticed the situation in the room with him.

Corrupted Elves everywhere, with his allies fighting with all their might, trying to beat them back. Meat-Shield was there, uncannily beating back attacks coming from behind him like he saw them coming.

Galtion realized he had no time to admire his new acquisition. There was still a fight ongoing, and his friends needed him.

Grasping the spear's shaft in his hands, feeling the power that coursed through it, he grinned.

"Let's see what you can do," he muttered to himself.

But a notification popped before him.

Please name your newly created artifact.

Galtion almost lost his breath at the word artifact. But he quickly caught himself.

"StormFury," he said, confidently.

Ding!

Name granted. StormFury. May this name echo through the skies, and strike fear in the heart of its enemies!

Chapter 598 Prides Collide

Bzzt

Crackle

Bzzt

After naming the weapon, Galtion noticed the sparks started coursing along the shaft once more. But this time, they didn't harm him.

On the contrary, he could feel their energy coursing through him.

With a grin, Galtion lowered his stance, gripping his spear in both hands. Then he stepped forward.

Flash *Boom*

A flash of blue-ish white light erupted inside the room, followed by a zigzagging of lightning and a sonic boom. And in the trajectory of the lightning, every Elf hit was suddenly husks of black, their form carbonized in an instant.

Galtion, who had been in the center of the room, was now at the edge of it, his eyes wide. He looked down at the spear in his hands, still crackling with blue blots of lightning.

"What the fuck?! This is amazing!"

He had never moved this fast. And the acceleration!

It had been instantaneous!

Looking at the result of his single dash forward, he grinned even wider.

"Now we're talking! Let's go, StormFury!" he shouted.

The rest of the players in the room had to take a moment to realize what had just happened, as well. But they couldn't dawdle too long, as the corrupted Elves weren't mentally affected by the phenomenon.

Violette smiled at the turn of events. If these two were out, then the others wouldn't be long before they came out as well.

It was a good thing because the situation wasn't getting any better. With most of their resources spent on all four casters, and them being semi-burdens by now, the addition of fresh bodies in the battle was much needed.

If only their healer could come back next. Health levels were low all around, aside from the two new returners, and Peaceful Grove was using every bit of mana at her disposal to keep them standing.

'Come on, you two. How weren't you the first ones to come back?' Violette thought to herself.

Inside the red dragon's soul space, SharpTusk was dealing with an entirely different issue.

His quarry, the dragon he came here to help, was refusing any help he offered and actively hindering him from helping. Even though the corruption kept sending smaller shadows at SharpTusk, to prevent him from helping, SharpTusk couldn't even make it close to them.

Every time he took a step towards the red dragon, it either threatened him or actively attacked him. The shadows couldn't go beyond a certain point away from the main body and kept returning to it, restoring its power.

"Let me help, you dumb fucking dragon! Can't you see it weaken every time it sends shadows my way?! At least let me take some burden off your shoulders!"

But the dragon stood firm.

'No! Stay out of this conflict! It is mine to overcome, and mine alone!'

The dragon even spat a gout of fire in SharpTusk's direction, forcing the Half-Orc to take cover behind a dune, lest he become barbecued meat.

"You fucking stubborn lizard!" he barked, as he got back up from behind his cover.

The dragon was losing, and it was clear as day. Wounds seeping with black smoke were everywhere on its body, and blood was falling like rain under it, making the red sand under it a darker shade as it muddled up.

"Alright, fuck it. It wants to play like that? I'm done being nice," Tusk muttered.

His hands gripped the haft of his greataxe with force, the wood creaking a bit, and he dived forward.

"Rargh!" he roared.

Charging forward, SharpTusk let all his pent-up rage loose, having enough of this masquerade.

As he closed in, the cloud of corruption once again sent out the shadows to intercept him. Tusk dove at them, keeping an eye out for any attacks from his true foe, the red dragon.

It didn't take long once SharpTusk started hacking and slashing at the shadows before the dragon noticed his insolent return.

'I said stay out of this!' its thunderous voice screamed in Tusk's mind.

A tail swipe swooshed toward the Half-Orc, kicking sand up under it. But SharpTusk was not taking any more of his bullshit.

"No!" he shouted, as he slammed his axe into the tail, whacking it away.

The power behind the attack surprised the dragon briefly, but the next words out of SharpTusk's mouth only angered it further.

"You can fucking stay out of this! I've had enough of your fucking misplaced pride! Get in my way, and I will cut you down!"

With a gout of fire burning into the cloud of corruption, the dragon's voice slammed into SharpTusk's mind.

'YOU DARE THREATEN ME?! A MIGHTY DRAGON?!'

But SharpTusk didn't back down.

"FUCK YOU! YOU ATTACK ME, THEN YOU GET PAYBACK!"

Shouting this, he thundered his way through the horde of shadows attacking him, uncaring of the swipes they took at him, and jumped up to meet the dragon's eye level. And he slammed his axe in between its eyes.

The dragon's pride was hurt more than his body on this strike.

The fight rampaged on, with the sides becoming threefold, and erupted into an all-out brawl.

By the time it ended, only one side remained standing.

Falling onto his back, his health bar flashing red, with only a single digit number flashing under it, SharpTusk started laughing. It started low and weak until it crescendoed into one of pure ecstasy.

Of course, his laughter ended in a fit of coughing, given his body was so wounded, and his mouth filled with the blood of both the dragon and his, from all the attacks he dished out and received.

But in the end, he had prevailed.

Of course, the dragon wasn't dead. But it lay weakly to the side, panting, as its battered form refused to obey it anymore.

SharpTusk's red skin didn't look all that damaged, his blood matching his skin tone, but he was about as structurally complete as a sieve.

'You have shown much more pride than I *cough* are you sure you aren't of red dragon descent?' the dragon's voice weakly echoed in his head.

"Oh, fuck off. If I were a dragon, would you have accepted my help?" Tusk asked.

'Heh! Not a chance,' the dragon replied.

It weakly laughed, as did SharpTusk. In the end, even if they fought, they both wanted the same thing. And they had achieved it.

'You must go now. Your friends need you. I will give you a little something for the lesson you taught me this day. Do not waste its potential.'

"What? What are y—"

But before he could finish his question, he felt his body get sucked down into the ground, as he was thrown into a space so white his eyes hurt.

"Where am I? Why did I—"

"ARGH!"

Chapter 599 More Changes

Unspeakable pain assaulted SharpTusk's every sense. His brain instantly felt like it was being tossed in a blender.

His eyes felt like they were being shone a concentrated ray of the sun into them. His ears felt like the loudest sound in existence was being blared right into them.

He could feel all his organs burn up like molten lava had just appeared inside his chest cavity. His skin peeled off from his body before disappearing in a flash of flames.

The next two minutes of SharpTusk's life felt like an eternity to him. As his body passed through so many stages of intense pain, his mind felt like it was about to break.

When it ended, his body kept twitching for a while, his mind still in utter shock.

What pulled him back to his senses was the sudden sound of a notification.

Ding!

Your race has successfully been altered. Do you wish for a name change?

Yes / No

"Race alteration? What the hell are you talking about?" SharpTusk asked, his face scrunching up.

But when he raised his hands to look at them, he gasped.

Where his red skin had been previously calloused by the repetitive swinging of his axe, a tough-looking leather had replaced it. And on the top side of his hands, bright red scales decorated his hands and arms.

"What in the hells?!" he barked.

Touching his face and body, SharpTusk realized his entire body had changed to this scaly exterior. But that wasn't the biggest change.

His face was.

Instead of a humanoid-looking face, with two large tusks protruding from his lower lip, now he had an elongated snout, with a scraggly jawline, spikes protruding from it. From the back of his head, two large horns slightly curved inwards.

And the worst, he came to discover when he spun on himself to look at his legs.

A tail and wings.

A large, thick tail adorned his lower back, like that of a lizard, with a crest of small spikes on top.

And on his back, two wings, currently folded, with a leathery texture, stretched between four bony ribs.

"What the fuck did that dragon do to me?!" Tusk cried out.

His appearance had changed so much that he doubted his allies would even recognize him anymore.

What if they thought he was a new enemy?

But he didn't get to mourn his old appearance for long, as the sound of battle and fierce screeching entered his ears, at a decibel level he wasn't ready for. It appeared his hearing was much sharper than before.

As he brought his head back up, he realized he was back in the room from earlier, his hand still on the mage's shoulder. He hastily pulled it back, noticing the claws at his fingertips, slightly digging into the man's robes.

He looked to his side, and there stood still three of his friends, Astaroth, Phoenix, and Jeanne d'Arc. Their faces showed a range of different emotions.

But when he looked further away, he saw the battle that had drawn him out of his stupor.

Opening his party list, he noticed the three allies whose names and status still showed in grey, and the rest of his party, with varying levels of low health, and almost empty mana bars.

He quickly got the gist of the situation and knew he had to act now. He could worry about his strange new appearance later.

But first, he needed to get rid of this notification floating before his eyes.

He tapped yes, entered the rename option, and entered the first name that crossed his mind.

Ding

Your new name has been accepted. Congratulations on your new rare race, Player RedWing.

**

Once this stopped flashing before his eyes, he burst into action. Pulling his greataxe from his inventory, he dashed toward the nearest group of corrupted Elves.

The wings on his back unconsciously flapped once, giving him much more speed than he had expected, and instead of appearing before his target, he slammed into them with the power of a compact car going full speed ahead.

He jumped to his feet after tumbling twice, and grumbled, "Fucking wings. Now I have to get used to moving with those darned sails on my back. Fuck."

But he was only complaining for the sake of complaining. In truth, he was impressed with the added capabilities they gave him.

But he would indeed need a while to get used to the extra appendages.

His allies gaped at the appearance of the man-sized dragon suddenly fighting at their side, but didn't complain. Whoever this was, he was helping.

The first one to catch on to the identity of their new friend was Galtion, who recognized the brutish fighting style of his party leader and good friend, SharpTusk.

"Tusk?! Is that you?!" he asked, as he bolted next to the dragon-looking man.

"Yes! I know, I look ridiculous. I'll have that dragon's head, for changing me into this!" RedWing replied.

"The hell do you mean?! You look fucking badass! I'm kind of jealous I just got this artifact weapon," Galtion dejectedly said.

RedWing looked at him with rage.

"You got an artifact weapon?! What the fuck, man! That's so unfair!"

While the two of them bantered and fought, side-to-side, and back-to-back, another of their allies came back, this time with a much louder commotion.

"You fucking green gecko piece of shit! I will burn you to cinders!" Phoenix howled, erupting into flames.

She snapped her head toward the ceiling, not even giving her friends a thought, and flew out with a trail of fire behind her, like an angry comet.

Whatever had transpired in the soul space she had been drawn into, it still filled her with spite, and apparently, a score to settle.

Violette called to her, to no avail, and she resorted to sending a message to her.

'Phoenix, we need your help up here. Where are you going?'

Phoenix's reply came immediately.

'I'm going to burn this stupid green dragon a new asshole! I'm sorry, but figure it out without me up there!'

Violette was stunned by Phoenix's reply. She had never seen her this angry.

'What did that dragon do to her?' she wondered.

But she couldn't afford to take her attention away from the fight for too long.

Chapter 600 Negotiating With Dragons

A few moments earlier, in the soul space of the green dragon, Phoenix landed on the cavern ground, the stone melted slag, as she walked to the half-carbonized green dragon. She could see no trace of the black mist anywhere.

The walls, ceiling and floor of the cavern were all either blackened, red hot, or turned to crystal from the intense heat.

Slinking into the corner of the grotto, the green dragon watched as the reason for all this destruction walked towards him.

'Human. The corruption is gone. You can stop now.'

But Phoenix sneered at it.

"I'm not stopping until you apologize for trying to eat me."

Saying this, she shot another gout of blue flames directly into the dragon's side.

Many scorch marks were already adorning its scales, and the hide under it, where no scales remained. But Phoenix seemed unsatisfied.

'I already thanked you for getting rid of the corruption in my mind. What more do you want from me?' the dragon whined, as the flames licked its flank.

"I want you to apologize! Is it that hard to understand?"

'You are asking for too much, Human girl! I am a prideful dragon. Why would I apologize to an insect, like you?'

Phoenix added her second hand to the flame pillar, making it twice as big and much hotter.

The dragon roared in pain. Its stupid pride was what put it in this situation, but it was refusing to abandon it.

'If you hadn't attacked me like this, I might have rewarded you for helping me. But now all you get is the knowledge I will never apologize to you!'

As the dragon's voice resounded in Phoenix's head, she felt a tug on her mind. She winced at the little pain it inflicted on her.

But when she opened her eyes, she was back in the mage's room.

Phoenix took a second to realize it had just taunted her before kicking her out, and her anger peaked once more. Roaring furiously, she vowed to herself to make the dragon bend to her.

No matter the cost.

Meanwhile, inside the black dragon's soul domain, Astaroth stood before the proprietor.

"I don't want what you offer, dragon. It doesn't interest me."

The black mist was nowhere to be seen, and apparently, Astaroth had elected to negotiate his reward with the dragon directly. But negotiations weren't going smoothly.

The dragon huffed, a hint of anger flashing in its eyes.

It had tried kicking out this stranger from inside its soul a few times already, but the dark elf wasn't disappearing.

'What else could you want of me, mortal? I offered you an artifact. I offered the bloodline of the prideful dragon before you and even offered you to change your very race. Yet you still obstinately refuse my gifts. What is it you want?' it asked, annoyance clear in its tone.

"What I want, you haven't offered yet. And I can't ask it of you. It needs to be consensual. So I will stay here until you reach the right conclusion."

Astaroth was aware the dragon had tried ejecting him from inside its soul many times. But his affinity for soul magic had allowed him to anchor himself to the soul temporarily.

So he couldn't be pushed out without his say-so.

The dragon looked about him, its patience running out.

'What is more precious to you than the power I have already offered? What is it that you consider is worth more than an artifact, or a bloodline so powerful, others would kill to get their hands on it?'

Astaroth smirked.

"Your offers were all tempting. But what I want is much more personal. And also much closer to the root of your power. I think you already know what I want. You just don't want to share it."

The dragon's eye turned to slits.

It lowered its head to Astaroth's height.

'Are you aware of what you are asking of me? Of the toll it would take? Of the enemies you will make, just because you have it?'

Astaroth grinned. Now their thoughts aligned.

He snapped his fingers, making all his soul companions appear. Yes, most of them might not be impressive, considering they were still lower grade and or level, but it immediately pushed the point across.

"I already wield so much of this power, I have a target painted on my back bigger than your body."

Pointing at the little angel boy, he kept speaking.

"This one alone. If I were to invoke its full power outside this dungeon we are in, I would immediately alarm a god. Do you think a simple dragon soul, added to this collection, can put me in an even more dangerous position?"

The dragon raised its head back.

'Soulmancer. I should have sniffed you out the moment you stepped into my domain. Your kind are a fearful bunch. Can you even hold all this power at bay, boy?'

Astaroth burst out laughing.

"This, and so much more. Just give it to me, already. I know you don't want me to stay here much, any more than I want to stay. Let's strike this deal, and be out of each other's hair."

But they both knew it wasn't as simple as striking a deal. And the dragon didn't want to part with a piece of itself.

Especially since it would make it weaker than its companions for a while.

'I have a condition. If you can honour this condition, I will accept your request,' it finally said, with a sigh.

An enormous grin spread across Astaroth's lips.

"Tell me what your condition is. I'm sure we can come to this agreement, as long as it's nothing too ridiculous."

Outside this soul space, Astaroth finally re-opened his eyes. And as he did, he flashed a toothy grin.

He turned his head toward the cacophonous battle happening mere metres away from him and stretched his limbs.

Cracking his fingers, he leaned forward.

"Alright. Let's test out this recent addition to my roster. Come on out, Shegror, the black scourge."