

New Eden 751

Chapter 751 Sentence Decided, Meeting Adjourned

Rodney felt a shiver run down his spine as he looked at their grinning faces. He knew then that the man's fate had been sealed.

Sealed by him.

But he couldn't bring himself to feel bad for him. Not after the trouble he caused here, under his roof, and the resulting trouble when they went to Themiscus.

Phoenix glanced at Alena and Castien but already knew what they thought. Their happy smiles spoke a great deal.

"I believe he should die in the manner of his kingdom. But without the rights to his rank's mercies. What do you two think?" Phoenix asked, looking at Alena and Castien.

"I think it would repay his blood debt in full," Alena said, the smile on her face unabating.

Nodding, she glanced over at Castien.

"And you?"

"I second what Commander Alena said," Castien replied.

"Very well."

Rodney looked up at the monarchs, opening his mouth again.

"I would like to add something," he said, almost pleading.

Phoenix waved his hand at him, motioning him to speak.

"At any point during this time, the woman who was wronged is allowed to end the perpetrator's misery. This means Coral would have to witness the entire ordeal until she decides he's suffered enough. Are you sure we should do this?"

Phoenix's gaze wavered for a moment. This sounded a bit much.

Even if that pig violated Coral, would she want to watch him burn and scream out in agony for over two hours? Because that is the estimated time he would burn, by her knowledge of the events.

She could already see Coral shifting on her feet, the thought troubling her.

Hearing this statement, Alena and Castien also second-guessed their decision. It sounded a lot less attractive now that they knew she would have to watch everything go down to the end.

They glared a bit at Rodney, feeling like he should have led with this. But the man had no clue they would so readily jump on such a barbaric sentence.

"I think we should reconsider," Rodney pleaded.

But Astaroth cut in.

"No. I think it is an appropriate punishment. And if Coral decides he's suffered enough, then good for him. It'll take a weight off the scales when he gets judged in hell. But I doubt it'll save him from a terrible afterlife."

It might sound brutal of him to decide this, but he had his reasons.

Phoenix side-eyed him for a second, wondering why he was adamant about this, but didn't go against his decision. She somehow felt like it was still too weak of a punishment.

Rape was a grave crime, whatever world you were from, and she felt like no death was harsh enough to atone for the life ruined. But that was just her opinion on the matter, coming from her biased take on it.

"Then it's settled," she said, standing.

"He shall have one last day of life, in reprieve this time, to let him think about his crimes. Tomorrow, he burns."

Phoenix called in some guards, ordering them to make arrangements for the following day, and the meeting was adjourned.

She could feel a weight on her shoulders, as she had just decided the fate of another life. But she felt no guilt about it.

Only the weight of a duty to be carried out.

Astaroth felt nothing of it. Instead, he couldn't wait for the next day as ideas flashed through his mind.

Ideas that if he were to voice them out, he would be called evil or a madman by many people. He knew Aberon would frown upon these ideas if he heard of them.

But he didn't care. The man was already sentenced to death, so who cared what he did after?

'If this works, it'll be another tool at my disposition,' he thought as he and Phoenix left the throne room.

"Should we go back downstairs to get you training Aether again?" Astaroth asked her, shoving the thoughts aside.

Phoenix sighed heavily.

"I don't want to do anything that requires brain power today. This meeting has already mentally exhausted me. Let's take a day off kingdom managing and do brainless farming."

Astaroth looked at her, feeling her fatigue, and chuckled.

"You're right. A day off wouldn't hurt us. Should we do this as a party? Or just the two of us?" he asked, grasping her hand.

"I don't want to deal with clingy party members or over-curious guild mates. How about we go alone? You and me, no one else, and patrol the borderlands to the east? I hear some powerful corrupted monsters spawn there, making it a perfect grinding spot for high levels."

Astaroth wondered where she got that information since he hadn't heard about it. But he wasn't against the idea.

"How powerful are we talking? Challenging powerful? Or potentially deadly powerful?" he asked, his excitement building.

Phoenix smiled at him.

"From the information I received, a party of eight players of level forty-five tried taking a group of three monsters on and got wiped. So I'd say challenging powerful, at best. But who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and find something that can get our hearts pumping. What do you say?"

Astaroth grinned widely.

"It's like you know me better than I do. Let's do this!" he exclaimed, pulling her toward the palace entrance.

It had been a while since a monster had given him a hard time, at least outside a dungeon. That excluded the mythical grade guardians of the forest in the Ash Elf territory.

Those he hadn't expected to have to fight, ever.

But he was always up for a challenge. After all, it was in adversity that people grew stronger.

The pair had to stop at the adventurers' guild in the outer city to have them pull back any quest that led into the eastern borderlands. They didn't want other players, or worse, Natives, to get caught in the aftermath if they ever needed to go all out.

Of course, doing this caused an uproar in the player base that roamed Bastion City, whether they be in Paragons or not.

But Astaroth and Phoenix wouldn't be responsible for them, now that they had the area basically cleared out of unwanted attention. It would be on them if players still wandered into their hunting grounds and died.

"Let's get this show on the road!" Astaroth excitedly said as they launched out of the city and over the outer walls.

Chapter 752 The Healer And The Boy

A certain teenage boy was grumbling his night away inside New Eden, as his plans had fallen apart during the day.

This boy was Silent Light.

He had planned to stay a few days with Phoenix and Astaroth, but when he arrived at the building where they lived, the receptionist told him they weren't there, and that he didn't know when they would be back.

He had called Phoenix, trying to get a hold of her, but she instead deferred to Mr. Gu, who had to fix lodgings for the boy, at least for one night, as they were in a meeting with someone and didn't know when that would end.

But Mr. Gu didn't want to waste time hooking him up with a hotel, so he instead invited the teenager to stay the night at the private hospital compound. It also gave him a reason to pass the boy through many tests, much to the latter's reluctance.

When they gave him a room with a hospital bed and a helmet to connect to New Eden, it was the only moment he felt like it wasn't a prison. But he was still pissed.

"How could they tell me to go to their house, and then ditch me here... I thought Phoenix would be a better host than this," he grumbled.

Silent was travelling from one city to another, taking the long route instead of the teleporters, so he could help heal victims of the new roaming monsters and close portals when he crossed some.

He was sitting in the back of a slow-moving carriage, pulled by two oxen, that a merchant had been nice enough to invite him aboard.

The old man was not unpleasant company, by any means, but Silent Light was peeved at his supposed friends, who had hung him out to dry.

"Rhikhhikhi. Boy, it would be best if you smiled once in a while. Or you'll end up old and wrinkled, just like my deceased wife. Look at me. Smiling since I was a kid, and not a wrinkle on my handsome face!" the merchant exclaimed, smiling widely at Silent.

Silent gave him a distracted smile, trying to be a good passenger, but his mind was elsewhere. Plus, the old man was lying.

He was covered in wrinkles.

The teen lost himself in thought once more as the old man shook his head with a chortle.

"Ahh, kids these days. Troubled by every little thing," the old man said mockingly.

But Silent Light was already deep in thought.

There had to be a reason his friends couldn't receive him at home, right? They were the ones to tell him to meet them there, after all.

They wouldn't have said that to tease him. They weren't like that.

As he was lost in thought, a sudden rumbling, with loud cracking coming from the forest to the right, caused Silent Light to snap out of his thoughts.

It sounded like something was crashing through trees at high speed, heading directly for the carriage.

Silent's face turned serious.

This was a known spot on the road for high corrupted monster activity. So he was half expecting this to happen.

He ordered the old man to speed up the carriage while he jumped off to take a look at the sound. The old merchant did not need to be told twice as he whipped the oxen into a gallop.

Silent Light stayed in the middle of the road, his shield and mace now equipped.

As the cracking grew louder, Silent braced himself.

When the noise passed the threshold of the side of the wide road and the trees shouldering it, Silent Light's face changed to surprise.

Instead of a monster, as he had expected, a human boy was flying at him at high speed. And he didn't look in good shape.

Silent only had a second to act, as the boy flew at him head first, his back parallel to the ground, blood seeping out of his mouth and leaking from his face.

Silent had a gut feeling that if the boy hit the ground or any other obstacle, he would die right then and there. But he could hardly move aside anymore.

It was too late.

So he did only what he could think of in that split second.

A small golden bubble appeared around the boy as he slammed into Silent Light's shield, pushing the healer back several feet as his feet dug into the ground.

When the momentum was finally depleted, the boy fell to the ground, the surrounding shield dissipating as Silent Light breathed heavily.

He knew this kid hadn't flown this way of his own volition.

'Whatever threw him or whacked him this way did so with incredible force...' he thought.

The path of broken and uprooted trees before him was a testament to that. But he couldn't see any monsters nearby, which was strange.

Monsters, especially corrupt monsters, rarely gave up chasing after throwing an enemy away. They were particularly vicious and unrelenting.

Silent Light stepped around the boy, trying to put himself between him and whatever would soon be coming after him, and turned to look at his injuries.

That was when he noticed something.

Kneeling to heal the kid, Silent wiped some of the blood covering his face away, revealing a familiar face.

"What the fuck? Gale?!"

A shiver went down his spine before Silent could recover from that shock, and a shadow appeared over his head.

Reflexively, he raised his shield above himself, bracing for an impact to come, and it followed immediately after.

With a loud 'Dong' that sent Silent's ears into an eardrum-piercing ring, Silent Felt his entire body sink into the ground a few inches, as the ground under cracked like a spiderweb.

'So heavy!'

He instantly felt like his body would be crushed under that hit and he had to activate a defence skill to take away the weight before he collapsed.

A loud screech resounded as Silent watched his mana reserves dip under half instantly, the shield consuming his mana to absorb the damage.

He turned around, only to see two massive clawed hands raking at his golden barrier as his jaw slacked.

"What the fuck is this?!"

Chapter 753 Herald Of Solaris

Standing before him, looking like Slenderman directly from hell, a tall, skinny, black demon with a featureless face, aside from its wide open mouth, relentlessly slashed at the barrier he was holding up.

The demon's claws were sizzling from the contact with the holy energy of the barrier, but it didn't seem to care.

Silent was looking at it, aghast, as memories of watching a horror movie with a monster looking like this one in it. He had been terrified of the dark for years after that movie.

But he had to snap out of it, as his mana bar was already flashing red.

"Fuck! I didn't want to use this skill so early in any fight. I don't have a choice, though..." he complained, bringing his hand to his chest.

He brushed his hand against the holy symbol dangling from his chest, which lit up in bright yellow before flaring in red and orange hues.

"Legacy Skill: Herald Of Solaris!" he chanted as a solar flare erupted from him.

The demon shrieked in agony as the holy flames licked at its demonic essence, forcing it to jump away.

It jumped back an impressive distance, steering it clear of the radiating divine energy, shielding its eyeless face from the bright light.

Silent stood in the middle of that bright light, his chain armour suddenly glowing with his entire equipment in a golden glow that would blind anyone looking directly at him.

A crown-looking halo hovered behind his head, wreathed in golden fire, as a cape fluttered behind him, made of the same flames.

This was a new skill he had unlocked recently when Solaris had reached out to him on the peaks of Kormir. That day, he had received more than just words from the god tied to his class.

Silent Light looked behind him, where Gale's body lay still on the ground, unconscious.

Gale

Level: 52

Race: Human

Hp: 67/9,775

Mp: 1,439/6,435

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With how much health he had left, it was a miracle he was even still alive. All the contact with trees on his way to the road must have taken a lot out of his health pool.

"Flaming Mantle," Silent whispered, waving his hand toward Gale.

A cloak of soft orange fire appeared over the boy's body, covering it gently. On contact, wounds on Gale were already starting to close up, and the blood flowed back into his body.

It was a slow process, but Silent didn't care.

The Mantle wasn't just a healing spell but also a protection spell. With this over his friend, he could battle the demon without worrying about a sneak attack on the unconscious boy.

Silent Light turned his head toward the demon, who was snarling at him from afar. He quickly scanned it as well.

Faceless Demon

Level: 50

Grade: Special (Zone Boss)

Hp: 43%

Mp: 81%

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Silent frowned.

'Percentages? This is the first time I see percentages instead of hard values...'

He wasn't sure whether this was a good thing or a bad one. He hadn't scanned the demon before using his legacy skill and didn't check to see the damage he did to it, either.

So, he had no idea how high its health pool was. He would only find out as he fought.

"I guess I don't have a choice but to go in practically blind..." he muttered, gripping his mace tighter.

But the grin on his face belied his true feelings. He wasn't afraid or even nervous.

Instead, he was glad he found an enemy that would make him test out the full power of his legacy skill.

Ever since getting it, he never had a chance to use it to its full potential. When he activated it, the lower demons mostly vaporized, and the corrupted beasts immediately fell unconscious, the corruption gone from their bodies.

It was the most incredible tool he had ever had against monsters of that type. But this also meant he couldn't try it out to its maximum extent.

But this demon, although seemingly reluctant to approach him, wasn't dead immediately. This meant he would at least give him a good idea of the skills capabilities.

"Alright, you fugly demon. Show me what you got," Silent murmured to himself, lowering his stance.

The next second, a sonic clap and a cloud of dust replaced Silent Light where he had been.

All the way west of the continent of light, in a reclusive forest of the Ash Elven kingdom, a small delegation had just appeared at the entrance of the growing fortress that now housed Prince Nalafein and the guild Knights of the Sun.

The once smooth stone walls, shaped like stuck-together monoliths, were now covered in spikes. This had been an addition offered by the guild's druids.

Although Prince Nalafein had been reticent at first, Kloud had convinced him to agree, given the additional defence it would give them.

But to visitors, it looked like the walls were uninviting and that simply stepping too close to them could spell trouble.

But they hadn't walked ten feet from where they appeared, that already a group of players and Natives surrounded them, with an Ash Elf rogue already in their midst, daggers pointed at two different throats.

"This area is off limits. Identify yourselves!" Korin barked, his face stern.

A few of the mages were already considering returning to Themiscus, as the welcoming committee was not... well... welcoming. But a death glare from one of the surrounding players made them gulp instead, realizing someone was locking the surrounding mana.

"We are diplomats from Themiscus, here on orders from the council and the great alliance! Please! We were sent to deliver a formal invitation. We aren't a threat!" the man at the front pleaded, his face pale as chalk.

"I'll be the judge of that, lad. For now, you're coming inside with us. We'll sort you out there. Come on, walk!"

Korin wasn't trusting anyone who could just appear at their walls. All the players from Knight of the Sun were supposedly here already, and there shouldn't be teleportation outside the walls anymore.

The only things appearing now should be enemies. And with the enemies they had here, a hoax was not out of the question.

"General Kloud will decide if you are lying and what fate you'll have."

Chapter 754 A Wave Of Panic

All around the world of New Eden, tensions reached a high point. Small kingdoms reinforced their defences, villages boarded up their houses, and even guarded road checkpoints were suddenly refilled with soldiers.

They kept the attacks from corrupted monsters under limited control, and the only reason the damage levels hadn't reached catastrophic levels was that the great alliance had been sending their armies across the two continents, trying to maintain liveable conditions.

But they were now pulling back all their troops, and people were scared.

Everyone knew this moment was coming since it was 'That' time of year. But they had somehow wished the great alliance would bring the situation under control before starting their vanity contest.

Missives were being sent back and forth between the smaller kingdoms and the great alliance, asking to have the support back, but the answers were never positive.

"How can your kingdom thrive and become big if you always rely on us to defend your borders and lands?" a familiar man said into a communication device.

"Sir Enzo... Without your troops, my kingdom on Azarim will fall... The beasts of the region have become much too powerful for us to handle..." a haggard-looking king pleaded on the other end.

But Sir Enzo was having none of it.

"Listen, King Farim. We have warned you for over a month to hire adventurers or conscript more soldiers. The military exercises will happen, regardless of your plight, and we need all our troops present.

"Sunpeak is hosting them this year, and we can't afford to have a part of our army out defending elsewhere than the capital. The decision has been made a while ago, and I warned you. If you haven't made arrangements, that is your problem.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, other people await my call. You aren't the only smaller entity we were helping. Any further communications until after the exercises will be ignored.

"Have a good day, King Farim, and godspeed."

Sir Enzo pressed the crystal apparatus, and the image vanished.

With a loud sigh, Hakim Enzo pressed his fingers to his eyes, fatigue evident on his face.

It had been a rough last few years, and his body was suffering from it. He was only thirty-eight, but crow's feet could already be seen in the corner of his eyes.

His once golden blond hair had tarnished down and now looked closer to grey than blond. But the sharpness of his gaze had not degraded at all in the last ten years.

Hakim took a moment to breathe, as he had been on calls like these all day, and his mind was numb. He grabbed a teacup on his desk that had long gone cold and reheated it with a clever application of mana.

Reclining back into his chair, he looked up toward his decorated ceiling, with the motif of a golden dragon painted on it.

"In two weeks, the exercises... Already. I wonder if this year is the last year we can relax enough for them... These breaches from the demon realm are becoming too numerous and frequent," he mumbled.

The year the Abnormals disappeared, the breaches, tears, or whatever other name the people gave them started spreading like wildfire. It took them years to figure out that they could be closed by high-level priests.

That same year, Grand Marshall Promenta, his predecessor, had retired. He was pretty young and still quite stout of a man back then, and a lot had wondered why he took his leave from his duties.

But, looking back and looking now, Hakim could think of many reasons, the primary one being the workload. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if that was the sole reason.

"Old coot even vouched for me, making the Grand Marshall elections a breeze... If I'd known, I wouldn't have applied for the job..." Hakim muttered.

As he reminisced about his past as a general, a memory about one particular Abnormal man resurfaced. One he had tried roping into his political agenda, only for him to bolt away from the kingdom on the first occasion.

"To think he'd go on to become a king... That idiot Amal should have let me knight him fully. If he had the potential to be recognized by the world for rulership, keeping him close would have been much better," Hakim said, sighing.

"I wonder if he'll recognize me when we meet again."

He had heard from some Abnormals that the army had employed that the 'Update,' as they called it, the ten-year span that they had disappeared, had only lasted a week for them.

So, to him, it would have been a couple of months. But to Hakim, the ten years hadn't been kind.

"Bah, why worry? It doesn't matter if he doesn't. I'll reintroduce myself. Nothing wrong with being close pals to a king, after all."

But, in the meantime, he still needed to make other calls. His duties were almost done for the day, but he dreaded the last three calls.

"They were barely holding on, even with our periodic help. Will these two weeks be their end?" he wondered, picking up another crystal.

The crystal vibrated rhythmically in his hand as he infused mana into it. But no one responded.

It was strange since the liaison to that kingdom was usually punctual to a fault. For him not to answer meant he was either extremely busy or something had happened.

But they had received no news of an incident in that small kingdom. At least not in the latest days since their last visit.

After a minute, Hakim gave up and put the crystal back on his desk.

"Guard!" he called out.

A soldier quickly entered his room, slamming his heels together and saluting him.

"Yes, Grand Marshall!"

"Call the thirty-fourth. Have them send a scout division back to Lizbat. Their liaison isn't responding. I have a bad feeling..."

"Sir? The thirty-fourth left that kingdom only two days ago. Maybe the man was busy?"

Hakim scoffed.

"I know I told you lot that I preferred if you could think for yourselves. But this isn't a request. It's an order. Get moving."

"Yes, Grand Marshall!" the man exclaimed, his face turning red from the rebuke.

He quickly left the room and headed to the communications station for the military.

'I should have just obeyed instead of talking back... Why did I listen to such trick advice? I'm so stupid,' the guard berated himself, as he ran away.

Chapter 755 Looking For A Fight

A similar situation happened in each of the great alliance's capitals, as they had to pull back their troops to prepare for the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises. The only one unaffected by this was Stellar Woodlands.

Their very limited military machine meant they kept to themselves a lot, aside from the few times Leon took some of them on mercenary jobs over the last ten years.

So, their interactions with most kingdoms were through their limited number of diplomats.

This made for a simple preparation for the exercises, as no one relied on them for defence. Point in case was also that the lands around their kingdom and into the Elven forests were mostly devoid of threat, given how many adventurers stayed in Bastion City.

Khalor had made sure the worse of the breaches was sealed before they even left for the update. This move alone had saved the eastern part of the continent of light thousands of lives.

But the tension was at its highest in centuries, and many kingdoms threatened to go to war with the alliance if they pulled out now. The five original members of the alliance scoffed the threats away.

If any kingdoms threatening them had the power to do anything, they would already be in the alliance.

Of course, the risk of them banding together and striking at one city at a time was very present. But the great alliance was not just a name they gave themselves.

Their combined military machine was enough to raze through the entire continent quickly. Some of these growing medium kingdoms needed a reminder.

So, as a message, four of the five kingdoms sent the divisions that were returning home to these rebellious kingdoms.

A few kingdoms were humbled over the next two days, and the complaints stopped. But the players barely registered these events, as most of the kingdoms affected were too small to be main attraction points to them.

And the players who noticed the events were smart enough not to try anything funny against a division of armed Natives that looked like they could tear them to pieces.

But the day moved forward, life moving on for everyone between the two continents.

It wasn't great for every person, but life was never fair.

And in Bastion city, life was in a particularly special slump that day.

"Seriously, why did the king and queen take an entire section of borderlands for themselves? Aren't they always cooped up in the palace? Why the sudden urge to go hunt?" an Orc Native complained, sitting at a tavern in the outer city.

"What do you mean, dude? They are players like me. They don't just sit there. I heard they cleared out a special dungeon the other day. A unique one, at that. Their power levels can't be compared to you or me. Let them hunt if they want to," a human male said next to him before downing his mug of ale.

The Orc looked at him with a weird side-eye.

"Your whole kind is always so ready to throw yourselves at death. It's impressive there are any of you left... You aren't even that powerful..." he bitched.

The player, who was starting to get heavily intoxicated, took that as a personal offence and spun on his bar stool.

"What d'ya say?! Say that again to my face; you tusked fugly! I'ma show you what players can do!"

The Orc immediately took offence to the racial slur and grabbed the human by the collar.

"I'm going to shut your loud mouth, you fragile hummie!"

Both of them swung their hands back, ready to fight, when one large, scaly, red hand landed on each of their shoulders.

"Pipe down, you bozos! You're ruining everyone's drink with your incessant babbling and bitching. Take it outside if you want to fight!"

The human player immediately shrunk in on himself as he scanned the person and saw the name above their head.

RedWing

Guild: Paragon (Lieutenant)

Race: Dragonborn

Level: 52

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He gulped as he realized the trouble he could be in if he went through with this brawl inside the bar.

"I'm sorry, sir! I think I'd rather go hunt to cool my temper. Yes. A hunt!"

The human player immediately let go of the Orc, knocking away his hands, before bolting out the front door, his face pale.

Pissing off an officer, even just a lieutenant, could land him outside the guild. Getting in had been hard for him; getting kicked out now would waste his efforts.

The Orc stared aggressively at the Dragonborn, looking down at the hand on his shoulder. Already, a low growl was leaving his lips.

But RedWing shoved his face in close to the Orc's face.

"Got something to say, pal? Cuz' I'll gladly take that chump's place and take you outside. I need to stretch my wings, anyway."

His hand started clamping shut, and the Orc felt the power inside the grip. Whomever this was, he was not lacking in physical prowess.

"No, Sir. I'll go back to drinking if you don't mind," the Orc said, trying to turn around.

But the hand on his shoulder clasped him in place.

"Tch. You're no fun," RedWing complained as he let the Orc's shoulder go.

He wouldn't start the fight if the man had no will to fight. But he could have used a little warm-up.

RedWing had just returned from a hunting quest with the adventurer's guild, which also aligned with a guild quest, giving him double rewards, and was only catching a drink and bite before leaving again.

Returning to his table, he sat down with his friends; two familiar faces were in addition to his usual gang.

"If you want to brawl that bad, we can go to the training grounds, you know, tough guy?" Jaxx mocked.

RedWing scoffed, a small gout of fire bursting out of his nose.

"Brawling with you isn't fun. That legacy of yours makes you unkillable. Where's the fun in wailing on a target that doesn't retaliate?" he mocked.

"Hey! It's not like I can do shit other than that! The strength you got from that race change makes you a monster. Plus, when you sense you could lose, you fly up, you cheap ass."

"Alright, settle down, you two," Jeanne said, shaking her head.

The rest of the players at the table giggled and chuckled at the sight of the meatheads taunting each other.

Peaceful Grove placed her hand on the table, making a small rose bloom, which got everyone's attention.

"Alright. Where to next, scaly?"

Chapter 756 Hunting For The Hidden Zone Boss

Far east of this conversation, a pair of players were having the time of their lives.

In the eastern borderlands of Bastion City, in a part of the forest that had lost all its lushness to the point of almost being a marshland, Astaroth and Phoenix were currently dealing with a handful of powerful treants.

They were not particularly powerful, and Phoenix's fire was highly effective against them, but something set them apart from regular monsters. They showed cohesion.

The ones not being attacked would actively defend the others, sprouting roots and branches in the way of Phoenix's attacks or pushing Astaroth back when he charged. The other part of their strength came from the massive health pools they had.

These treants were level sixty and uncorrupted, but their aggressivity was reminiscent of corrupted monsters.

The treants travelled in groups of five to ten and were hard to kill since they rotated from front line to back line, actively defended each other, and had health pools equivalent to boss monsters.

But this didn't stop the mighty duo from burning hundreds of them to ashes during the day. But they could tell they hadn't found what they wanted yet.

Phoenix had intel on a much larger treant that should be visible from afar, given it towered over the forest. However, during their entire day of hunting, they had seen nothing of the kind.

Finishing up the five treants simultaneously, Phoenix landed next to Astaroth, extinguishing the flames covering her body from the avatar form, and frowned.

"We've killed hundreds of them today... Why is the Zone Boss still nowhere to be seen? The intel I have said that it popped out after you killed two or three groups. This doesn't make any sense..."

Astaroth tended to agree with her.

But he couldn't find it with his mana senses, either. It was like the entire forest was devoid of mana.

Not even a speckle of it registered in his mana vision, whether at a short distance or a long one. They had even received a debuff when they entered this part of the forest called 'Mana Deficiency'.

The lack of mana in their surroundings caused their mana regeneration to get suppressed. This debuff took away half of their mana regen; for Phoenix, this was a lot, given her heavy reliance on the resource.

"I tried to find it, but even the treants are only visible once they start moving. This massive treant must be hiding. And I can't think of a way to flush it out without burning the whole place down."

Phoenix snort-laughed.

"If I do that, we'll have to deal with it, and all the remaining treants, simultaneously. I know we're strong, but this is pushing it. I'll do another flight recon and see if I can find a tree bigger than the others. It can't just be taller; it must also be larger."

Astaroth nodded at her, starting to walk around the forest alone. Up to now, this was the time when the treants would usually appear and gang up on him.

It almost made Astaroth pity the monsters.

They had cohesion and fought together like a well-oiled machine, giving hope to sentience. But then, they tried to gang up on the one player who could raze this forest to the ground single-handedly.

'Maybe they aren't smart individually? What if the Zone Boss was the one controlling them from afar?' he wondered.

Astaroth crouched down, pushing mana under his feet, and jumped up. He wanted to check where they were compared to the kingdom, and wasting melding time with Morpheus for this was stupid.

As the air released from under him, pistoning him upwards as he launched from an arbalest, Astaroth soared fifty meters into the sky, using short bursts of mana to spin himself around simultaneously.

He could spot Bastion City in the distance and smiled.

"We've made quite the road trip today," he mumbled.

As he spun, he also caught sight of a trail of flames further west as Phoenix scrutinized the forest. But even from his spot, he couldn't see any tree that seemed abnormally larger or taller than the others.

Wherever that Zone Boss was hidden, he was being extremely cautious.

"This makes no sense... Where is it?" he mused as gravity slowly reasserted itself over him.

Astaroth glimpsed at their position through the mountain range he could see a little way north. Those were the Guntarr mountains, the end of the Elven forests, and the delimitation of Dwarvenkind's kingdom.

He'd been studying maps recently, on the order of Phoenix, who found his lack of regional knowledge worrying and unacceptable. And he now knew how terribly positioned Bastion City was, relative to the Elven Forests.

Bastion City was to the northeast of the forest, almost cutting it at two-thirds of it and close enough to the edge of it that the entire northern part of the forest was lost to the Elves.

He no longer wondered why they had been so pissed when the kingdom was formed and the world recognized those lands as his. He had basically stolen a third of the Elven forests for himself.

But this position was also where all the demon portals would open, according to Khalor. It was the hotbed of activity on the continent of light, at least from his recollection.

With how controlled the region had been since they established Stellar Woodlands, it hadn't devolved into that. But the problem only seemed to have been delayed and shifted elsewhere.

Astaroth's senses went on high alert as he landed back on the humid forest ground, his boots sinking two inches down with a slurp.

As soon as he had landed, he felt a presence brush his, if only momentarily, and now he felt like he was being observed. Spinning around, he tried finding where the feeling came from but couldn't pinpoint it.

'It's almost like it's coming from everywhere simultaneously...' he thought, his eyes focused on any movement.

"This damned forest is creeping me out..." he muttered.

He couldn't wait to return to a more regular part of the forest. There, at least, he knew when to expect attacks from monsters.

"Come on, where are you, you overgrown twig?"

Chapter 757 Found Them First

Phoenix did one last quick flight over their general location; her eyes peeled for anything abnormal. But she couldn't find anything.

Landing next to Astaroth, she could see he was on edge, and instead of cancelling her Avatar of Flames form, she left it active and walked to his side.

"Did you see something?" she asked him hushedly.

"No. But I can sense we are being observed. I think the Zone Boss is finally aware that we're stomping in his territory. But I can't sense it anywhere."

Phoenix nodded, craning her neck and putting Astaroth at her back.

This part of the forest was so quiet; it was eerie. And right now, it had fallen even more silent.

Usually, one would hear the wind whistling through branches and leaves in a forest like this one. But there was no such thing here.

The air was stale, and the ground was covered in moss that absorbed most of the vibrations from their footsteps.

Astaroth focused on his mana senses alone, his vision obsolete at this point, given how static everything in this forest was. At least, until it wasn't.

He extended his mana sense as far as he could, which now reached almost a mile out, but still couldn't feel the slightest presence of mana or mana particles.

In his mind, picturing his surroundings in mana signatures, Astaroth was getting nothing. Not even the trees or the earth.

It was like a vast black room, with darkness staring at him.

Phoenix could also stretch her mana senses, but hers functioned differently. Instead of giving her a clear outline of mana signatures and what they belonged to, it was a much more vague feeling.

But her senses reached much farther than Astaroth's.

Ever since that stint in the unique dungeon, the Time Capsule, her ability to stretch out her mana senses had more than quintupled in size.

Extending out her senses, Astaroth felt the brush of her mana pulse against his, reaching past his limit, and he grinned for a moment before going back to a stoic face.

'She's already surpassed me with that skill. How frightful...'

Phoenix's senses stopped expanding after two miles, not because she couldn't reach further but because the environment was sapping away the mana of her pulse, making it stop short.

The two of them were expecting an attack at any second now.

In Astaroth's mind, his hyper-focus allowed him to catch what sounded like a crackling of branches in his mana sense. The ping in his mind gave him a location not too far away, and his head snapped toward it.

Opening his eyes, he saw Phoenix's head was also turned toward the mana ping.

"You felt it, too?" he asked.

"Barely. Like a rustling of leaves. But it came from that direction," she answered, raising her arm to point northeast.

Astaroth grinned. He had an idea of what that could be and hoped he was right.

They had just found the Zone Boss' hiding place if he was. The spot from which he controlled the treants' attacks.

"Let's go," he said.

But he kept his mana senses stretched out, since that mana signature was already gone. And it could have been anything.

Phoenix nodded, and they dashed toward the location of their feeling.

As soon as they started moving toward it, another ping of mana echoed in his senses, this one more potent, and right after, eight mana signatures flared to life in their vicinity.

"Treants," Phoenix warned as she sensed them come to life.

"Ignore them," Astaroth replied.

"We have a lock on the Zone Boss. We can deal with them all simultaneously once we force him out of hiding."

She silently agreed, and they rushed past a barrage of roots, branches, and clumps of mud as the treants locked onto them.

The treants were slow, by any measure, and as soon as they passed their position, they quickly lost them in the forest. But more of them kept appearing, the trees all around them unearthing themselves from the wet ground and attacking them on sight.

But the distance between the original mana signature and them was shortening at an incredible pace.

The ground started rumbling under their feet, forcing them to take to the skies, lest they trip and become treant bait. And from there, they saw what caused all this rumbling and vibration.

In the middle of where Phoenix had passed earlier, a large swath of trees started rising from the mud, and they realized why they couldn't find the Zone Boss earlier.

"That's how he hid. Ingenious," Astaroth mumbled, his face stretching into a smile.

A group of thirty-odd trees, all varying in size, emerged from the ground, connecting into a much larger trunk that had been submerged. Now that they saw the main body, calling them trees was an inaccurate name.

They looked more like branches, pointed straight up, forming a patch of what looked like spiky hair on the head of the massive treant. His face was contorted in a mask of pain and anger, its eyes leaking in black and red miasma.

"I don't think we would have noticed it if we stepped on it. And that would have been a terrible mistake; I reckon," Astaroth said, half-jokingly.

Phoenix wasn't in a joking mood, though. She had flown over that patch of trees a few times during the day, always finding them odd at how close they were to each other.

But since she relied on her mana senses to determine if something was wrong and couldn't read anything from them, she had ignored her gut feeling.

And now that she saw what they were up against, she realized she had made a mistake.

Forest Father Gordonan (Corrupted)

Race: Ent

Grade: Legendary (Zone Boss)

Level: 75

Hp: ???

Mp: ???

**

Astaroth and Phoenix scanned it simultaneously, and their faces became serious.

"Well, shit. Talk about a load of fun..." Astaroth said.

His face was calm, but his heart was already thumping inside his chest. He felt excited, even though this enemy was too much for them to handle alone.

He couldn't help himself. This was what gaming was all about.

Finding your limit and shattering it.

"No use in holding back. Let's have at it!" he shouted, summoning all his soul companions.

Chapter 758 Realizing Their Err

Phoenix's flames slowly went from orange to blue as she poured some purified mana into it, which she had been condensing for a while. She still couldn't use Aether, but her refinement technique was on point.

Astaroth had already pulled out Luna, White, and Morpheus. Unfortunately, he couldn't pull out Geminae for some reason.

But it didn't matter for now. He had other things he could use.

"Hell's Descent, First Layer; Avernus Rising!" he shouted, extending his hand.

Soon after, Astaroth erupted in black flames again, like the last time he used it. However, he knew what was happening this time and saw the portal ripping open.

He watched as each of the eight demons casually walked out of the hell portal, starting to look at their surroundings. When Paimon walked out, the portal closed behind her, and she immediately spun toward Astaroth and Phoenix in mid-air.

The demons had no trouble staying afloat in the sky, by some unknown means, and looked like they were walking on solid ground.

"Master Astaroth! How happy I am that you summoned me!" Paimon exclaimed, taking a few steps toward Astaroth.

She paused after three steps, turning her head to Phoenix.

"You too, hottie. I couldn't wait to see you again. Let's have some fun this time, okay?"

Phoenix low growled at her, the flames around her hands burning brighter.

"Focus on the fight, whore of a demon. We don't have time to play around."

To drive her point home, the Ent below them, whose body almost reached them in the sky, released the mother of all growls, the air itself shaking in the bassy vibrations of its voice.

Paimon's face turned sour.

She spun to look at the oversized walking tree and hissed.

"You're interrupting my flirting, you dumb guardian! I'll burn you alive for this!" she spat between her closed teeth.

Astaroth had already begun ignoring her and charged in with his soul companions.

Pulling out the Ad Astra, he felt like a fitting weapon to fight this abomination had to be an axe, so he transformed the weapon into a greataxe, taking a mighty swing at one of its roots.

The axe lodged in deep, making wood shrapnel fly off in every direction as he pulled it out. A large gash was left in the root, but it wasn't severed.

The giant tree entity didn't even register his attack as Astaroth stared at the damage number.

2,248

'That was crappy...' he thought.

He was forced to jump back as a root suddenly veered in his direction, trying to pierce through him. He used the broadside of his greataxe to push a part of the force away, giving himself a push backward, as well.

This quickly got him out of the root's attack range, and he had to re-evaluate his options.

"It doesn't seem like physical attacks are as effective against this one. I'm pretty sure my damage should have been higher. I'll have to infuse magic into every strike..." he mumbled as he circled the base of the Ent.

He had noticed recently that against most of the higher-level monsters, simply using Enhance no longer registered as magic damage to them. Almost like the amount of mana he used was too small to affect them.

So when he went against monsters with natural physical resistance, he needed to use magic or find an alternate means to hit with magical damage.

But his answer came from watching Phoenix fight when she entered melee combat style.

She only suffered such an issue when she went against magic or fire-resistant monsters. So he assumed her weapon made of fire counted as a spell in the eyes of the system.

This had caused him to think about what he could do.

In all the time he had used magic in New Eden, he had never infused elemental magic into his attacks. His affinity for each element was too weak for the elemental mana to stay where he asked it to.

This led to many rebukes and name-calling from Aberon when he was still training under him. Aberon always said he had potential as a mage, but his low affinities with every element were a handicap.

And Aberon firmly believed that Astaroth's propensity to use magic while melded to maximize its effect was a crutch at best and a lack of actual talent at worst.

Aberon had instructed many times to find a solution to this problem. The melding stats should only boost his power, not his full power.

And Astaroth still had difficulty figuring something out. But yesterday, something had changed.

When he had to save Rodney and forcefully used Geminae's powers, he felt something inside him move. A restraint of some sort shifted out of place.

And he could glimpse inside him a power that hadn't been previously there.

And all day today, he had tried to figure out what that power could be since he was scared to reach out and touch it inside his soul space.

What if the power was harmful to him? What if that was the reason it was locked away?

Should he take that risk? Especially in the middle of a fight?

Looking around the battlefield, he could see his demons barely scratching the thing. Phoenix was throwing spears of blue fire at it, and she was the one that seemed to be affecting it the most.

This caused the Ent to focus on her, significantly reducing the pressure she was applying. But scanning the Ent again, Astaroth gulped.

Forest Father Gordonan (Corrupted)

Race: Ent

Grade: Legendary (Zone Boss)

Level: 75

Hp: 99%

Mp: ???

**

They had been fighting for over a minute while he was thinking, and they had shaved away only a single percent of his health.

And he could already imagine that Phoenix had done the most of that percentage. Without her constantly attacking, they would never win.

To make matters worse, Phoenix's mana bar was already down to half, from what Astaroth could see in the party window. This debuff was seriously screwing her over.

"I need to do something. We can't win this at this rate..."

Astaroth could see red dots appearing on his radar, meaning the treants from the forest had finally reached them. This already hopeless battle was about to turn into a bloody nightmare.

"I can't hesitate," Astaroth mumbled, his eyes going cold.

Astaroth called Morpheus back and melded with him before launching into the sky.

Phoenix almost panicked as she saw him launching straight up, wondering where he was going. But she trusted him not to run away.

As he flew up, Astaroth closed his eyes. He muttered inside his mind.

'Keep us safe and in the sky, Morpheus. I trust you.'

And his senses went blank.

He was back in the white room.

Chapter 759 Releasing Something

Astaroth looked around, searching for Geminae, and as soon as he turned his head to his left, there he was.

"You're here again."

Astaroth was surprised as he looked at Geminae. His appearance was now much closer to his, many of the effeminate traits nowhere to be seen, replaced by his one structure.

The difference was now much smaller. The silver colour of his hair, against the ashen colour of Astaroth's or the diamond-coloured irises, against Astaroth's sapphire blue eyes.

The muscle density also looked different, but if Astaroth had to guess, Geminae looked more defined than him, if somewhat less bulky. Like a perfect version of him, but with big-ass white wings.

"This is my mind. Can I not enter it as I please?" Astaroth replied, cocking an eyebrow.

Geminae sighed lightly, his head shaking from left to right.

"You never come here just to chat. You always want something. You mortals always want something. Greed has been the worst motivator for mankind. I would have long eradicated it if it weren't a necessary evil."

Astaroth frowned at his words. He sounded way too refined suddenly.

The last time he and Geminae talked, he sounded docile, even though it was brief.

'Is this what they call the rebellious phase?' he wondered.

"I am not being rebellious; I am being objective. It isn't my fault you never come to me to talk. Learn more about me. No. Every time we meet, you require something. And you always need more..."

Astaroth could hear a tinge of annoyance in his voice. No.

It was deeper than annoyance. Was it anger?

"Geminae, I have to get stronger. I'm sure you know why. Don't you think it's normal that I always ask for more power?"

Geminae's eyes flashed with malice for a second. In that split second, Astaroth felt like the innocent child he had seen the first time, the one who had willingly reached out to help him, was gone.

"Mother Psyche should have never entrusted us to you. You are undeserving of her power. Leave this place."

Geminae turned around, walking away from Astaroth, and shimmered before disappearing. Astaroth could no longer sense his presence.

All he could see was white all around.

"What the... I didn't come here to go back empty-handed!" Astaroth screamed at the top of his lungs.

But silence was his answer.

"Seriously? Get your ass back here! You don't get to refuse me anything! I'm the one in control of this body!" Astaroth shouted, extending his mana presence.

Immediately as he started expanding his mana presence, another presence crashed into him, crushing it and sending him to his knees, immense pressure holding him down.

Geminae's voice echoed in his ear, with his body nowhere to be seen.

"You don't have the power to force me into submission. I am not a mortal being, nor am I a docile doe. You still control your body because I need you to cover my aura. Now, leave!"

Astaroth felt the pressure increase, sending him on all fours, gasping for air.

"You fuckhead! You think you can treat me like this inside my own mind?! Come here and fight me if you dare!" he screamed, his face dripping with sweat.

This was bad. He had come for power, only to realize he wasn't going to get any and that he was basically a glorified meat envelope.

But he wouldn't take this lying down.

Focusing all his power, Astaroth managed to get some of the pressure off of him, enough to stand again, if in a somewhat bent position. He slowly looked around, looking for Geminae.

To exert this pressure, he couldn't be far.

'Where is he hiding?' he wondered, seeing nothing but white.

Astaroth couldn't walk around to find him, as his legs felt like they were stuck in concrete. And his mana senses couldn't expand out to look for him either, as he was using all his concentration to hold back the pressure.

'Fuck! Is he going to kick me out of my own soul? No! I can't let this happen! I have to fight back!'

As he thought that, a whisper reached his ear.

"I can help you..."

The whisper was faint, almost like it came from far away, carried by the wind. But Astaroth was grasping at straws.

"Who are you?" he called out.

Geminae, who was hiding nearby, heard him call out and frowned.

'Is he losing his mind to the pressure? Maybe I should reduce it. I still need him...'

"I can help you..." the whisper echoed again.

I didn't seem to want to answer Astaroth's question. But he was feeling himself starting to buckle again.

His knees shook, his back aching, and he could feel his mana reserves dipping dangerously low.

"Ah, to hell with it! If you can help, then help! Before I get crushed!"

Immediately, Geminae realized he was talking to someone. And his face became livid.

Aside from Astaroth and him, nothing should be able to come here. This was the soul space.

They shouldn't have access unless Astaroth, or he, willingly let the companions in. And, right now, he was locking the space shut.

This meant Astaroth couldn't even reach his soul companions if he tried. This meant that whatever was talking to him was already inside.

This could only mean one thing.

Looking about the room, Geminae used his considerably stronger mana senses to find the other entity. And as he did, it struck.

Geminae felt something sharp stab him in the back, right under his left wing, and he jumped forward. He had to release his concealment spell, making himself visible to Astaroth again.

"You!" Geminae seethed.

Turning his head to Astaroth, he cursed him.

"How could you ask help of that thing, of all things?! Are you mad?! Do you intend to give away your body?!"

Astaroth could already feel the pressure on him reduce.

"Hah! Like you weren't intending to do just that yourself? Please. Fool someone else. If he wants to aid me, and that gets you in line, then I'll fight it out with him after!" he screamed, getting back up straight.

Where Geminae had been standing a moment earlier, hand dripping in golden blood, was a being that Astaroth recognized. He had seen it before, in a dream.

Or rather, he had seen himself as it, in a nightmare. One he never wished to see come true.

"RHAKHAKHAKHA! Finally, I can move! Thank you, weakling, for setting me free! I'll deal with this holy pain in the ass first, and then I'll grant you your wish. We can fight to see who keeps control!"

A tall copy of Astaroth stood there, licking the golden blood of its hand.

Two black horns protruded a foot high from its skull, with a ball of black fire hovering between them. On its back, a myriad of scars decorated its scarlet skin, with two larger than the others.

It looked like something had once been there and torn away with much violence.

No shirt adorned its chest, showing its rippling muscles, and its legs were covered in tattered leather pants, not unlike the ones Astaroth was currently wearing. Only, they were dyed reddish-brown in dried blood.

This was the demon he saw himself become—the representation of the growing corruption afflicting Astaroth's soul.

"Now! Shall we dance angel boy?" the demonized Astaroth asked, his grin stretching far up his cheeks.

Chapter 760 A Fight For His Body And Soul

Astaroth looked from a fair distance away, the pressure on his shoulders now gone, as the demonized him and angelic him fought it out inside the soul space.

Black flames erupted, washed away by rays of golden white light. One moment, Geminae shot out of the explosions, chased by his demonized version, and the next moment, the tables were turned.

"They look equally matched, for now," Astaroth mumbled as he tried to avoid the fight.

When the two started duking it out, he rapidly realized they cared little for him, as attacks closely missed him or flames licked at his face as he jumped back.

He could become collateral damage at any point if he stayed too close to them. The problem was that their combat was moving quickly and all over the soul space.

Astaroth didn't know where to go to stay safe anymore.

He also wasn't sure leaving them to fight alone was a good idea.

So he kept moving around, keeping as much distance as possible, and observed.

Outside his mind, time had crawled down almost to a stop around Astaroth as things happening in the soul space occurred at a different pace than outside. And if someone were to observe his face right now, they would see an expression of pain on it as tears of blood leaked out of his closed eyes.

His nose and mouth were also slowly beginning to trickle in crimson liquid, making him look like a virulent bio-weapon or something had infected him.

Back inside the soul space, the two opposing forces kept wailing on each other, attacking with magic just as much as their bodies, as wounds appeared and disappeared on the two of them rapidly.

The demon's natural regeneration factor far outclassed Geminae's, but the latter had the power to use healing spells and kept himself as immaculate as possible.

Although the fight looked like it could go on forever, since neither of the combatants seemed to tire out, the surrounding room quickly changed. Where there had been only an expanse of white, there were now spots of black everywhere, slowly growing and spreading.

Astaroth was the first to notice when one of those spots appeared near his feet, and he lost balance. The black spot was akin to a hole in which the whiteness was getting swallowed.

Astaroth frowned at the sight as he looked around and saw more and more of these black spots appear.

"It's like the demon's essence is swallowing the place..." he muttered.

Astaroth didn't know if he should let this phenomenon continue to happen or if he should intervene. The issue was picking a side.

Since Geminae had clearly made known his intent of using Astaroth as a meat suit or vessel, he wasn't sure he wanted to help him.

But he knew that the demon wouldn't even give him the courtesy of choosing the when.

Images of the bad dream he had flashed in his mind

Flashes of her, with a hand through Phoenix's chest, her weeping eyes looking at him with sadness and love as life slowly left them.

The question she had asked resounded in his head.

"When did you lose faith in humanity?" he repeated to himself.

He pondered on the question.

'Have I? Have I lost faith in humanity?' he wondered.

The answer may be unclear to him, but he didn't feel like he had. He wouldn't be so adamant about keeping Earth safe from monsters if he had.

Another thing struck him about that dream, as well.

'Is that what would have happened if the corruption slowly ate at me? How long would that have taken? Months? Years?'

He also felt that if the corruption manifestation in his soul space right now got out, it wouldn't turn out like his dream. Would it wait for an opportune time to strike?

Or would it go on a wanton destruction spree? He had the inkling of a feeling toward the latter.

Astaroth knew that something terrible would happen once Geminae fell, or even if the demon lost. But he also couldn't just let either of them think he was helping them.

He wanted to make them understand he was still in charge and that he was the core of this soul, not them.

But how to do so?

'I'm no match for either of them. Geminae pinned me down so quickly, and this demon matches his power. How am I supposed to bend them to my will instead of vice versa?' he wondered.

Just keeping out of their attacks was already proving to be a hassle, as more and more of the white room turned into black spots of nothing. If this continued, they would be fighting over the void while he fell forever.

Or at least until he gave up and exited the soul space. But he didn't want to think of the results of that course of action.

Only one area of the white room had yet to be affected by those black spots. And Astaroth wasn't the only one to notice.

"So that's where you hide it! RHAKHAKHAKHA! Let's see how long you fare without the source of your power, angel boy!" the demon laughed hysterically as he lunged toward the only wholly white area of the soul space.

Astaroth saw him do this and understood immediately what he meant.

Turning his head toward the white space, Astaroth's eyes turned resolute.

'I can't let him reach that.'

He started running toward it, much slower than the demon, but at least he was unimpeded.

On the other hand, the demon had to contend with Geminae, who suddenly became a lot more violent, desperation evident on his face.

"You shall not sully my essence, you filth!" Geminae shouted, shooting out a wide beam of golden white energy, threatening to slice the demon in half.

The demonized Astaroth had to focus on defence lest he become charcoal, and this stopped his advance toward the spotless white chunk of the room.

This allowed Astaroth to reach it, and he instantly felt the difference.

The air around there almost tasted of divinity. It was like he was standing back in front of Nemus once more.

'I'm here. But now what?' he wondered.

And a soft voice entered his mind.

'Focus, Astaroth. Focus on the essence. It is yours, to begin with. Take what is rightfully yours to claim.'

He recognized this voice.

It was Nemus.