

New Eden 761

Chapter 761 Assimilation

Astaroth immediately closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. The essence of divinity around him entered his body, softly circulating inside his mana channels.

He felt like his aching body was suddenly energized. It was almost like he had just awakened from a night's sleep.

He focused on the particles of glowing golden energy and followed their movement to find their provenance. And that's when he saw it.

Hidden behind an illusion, a monstrously large orb of golden white soul power.

Astaroth almost gasped at the sight, as this was like looking into a sun.

Only there was no burning heat or blinding light, just the soft glow and the pulsing of familiarity.

Around this orb, a familiar cage of runes, holding in the colossal soul. But something was different.

One line of runes, or bars from the cell, was missing. From this missing link, soul power trickled out and infused the soul space, making it stronger than the rest.

'So this is why the dark spots haven't reached here...' he thought.

Stepping closer to the soul cage, his eyes still closed, Astaroth reached the runes and slid his hands across them.

A tingling sensation coursed through his fingers, but it wasn't painful.

Again, the voice of Nemus whispered in his ear.

'This is only a barrier to hide the soul from Gaius until it finds its next vessel. You have nothing to fear from it. But don't try taking it all at once. Take it slow. This power is yours to wield. It always was.'

Going around the cage, Astaroth stopped before the missing rune line. He could see the golden energy leaking out clearly now.

But he didn't know what to do next. Should he jam his hand into the cage?

Or maybe he could consume the energy leaking out?

But he didn't need to do anything.

The moment his hand touched the energy leaking out of the soul cage, it suddenly snapped to his chest, the flow suddenly increasing, as Astaroth's body wreathed and shook.

His jaw clenched shut, no sound escaping it, as his body convulsed from the power entering him. The sensation coursing through him was a mix of exhilaration and unimaginable pain.

His feet lifted off the ground, his body suddenly floating four feet above the floor of the white room as it started glowing.

Geminae saw this and panicked.

"No! That power is mine! Thief!"

He could feel the power inside his very being getting sapped out as well, as his wings and body shrunk, regressing to a child's.

"No no no no! He shouted in his now much higher-pitched voice.

"Give it back!"

The demon used this moment of confusion to kick Geminae hard in the chest, sending him flying away like a meteor.

"RHAKHAKHAKHA! Talk about a twist! Nice going, but that isn't going to be enough to stop me!"

It charged toward Astaroth to stop him from becoming too strong. He still wanted to gain control of the body, and a powerful Astaroth meant his plan was void.

Reaching him in a mere moment, the demon extended his hand toward Astaroth's throat, trying to clamp down on it.

But the golden light radiating from his body surged out, burning his hand away.

The demon jumped back, letting his hand regenerate, and looked at Astaroth, confused.

"No... This shouldn't be enough divinity to hurt me. Not from a borrowed source..."

And as he said this, he realized where he was mistaken.

His eyes went wide, and he burst forth again.

"No! You can't have that! I refuse to get erased after just getting my freedom!"

He dived at Astaroth's still convulsing body, kicking, punching, and even shooting black flames at him, but the golden light always reacted to keep Astaroth's body safe

The demon felt his power sap away as the mana he used evaporated in contact with the golden light. He could feel himself grow weaker.

Geminae rushed back toward them, his eyes still filled in panic, and he shoved his hands on Astaroth's body.

Unlike the demon, his hands weren't melted away, and his eyes started glowing in the same golden light.

"Give it back! Give it back, I said!"

But the power refused to leave Astaroth's body, solidly anchored in his soul.

The white room changed once more.

The darkness that had swallowed more than half of it started receding at a rate much faster than it had appeared.

Once it was back to being completely white, the change continued. This time, runes appearing on the walls, blue and bright, as the cage around the soul orb disappeared and transcribed into the walls of Astaroth's soul.

The demon saw this, and his eyes turned to fear.

"Stop this! If you finish assimilating it, your soul will burn up! It's too much power for you! We'll all die!"

Geminae grit his teeth.

The demon was right.

But he could tell Astaroth had no control over what was happening.

And what he was about to say made him sick to his stomach, but he knew there was no other way.

"We have to contain the seal! Help me, you disgusting demon. I'll slow down the transfer; you corrupt the seal. Make it so it doesn't finish moving the soul walls!"

The demon looked at him incredulously. This was madness.

"I'll have to use almost all my power to corrupt a seal of that magnitude! Are you trying to get me killed?!"

"Shut up, coward! You're going to die anyway if this thing transcribes completely! It'll flush out all the corruption in his soul! I refuse to die because of a mortal's greed!"

The demon reeled in shock.

Of course, his words were true. He had himself just told Astaroth they would all die.

He couldn't abandon his chance at freedom and life just because it would weaken him. He had to try.

"Argh fuck! If this doesn't work, it'll be your fault!" he screamed as he slapped his hands on the soul cage, now clear for all of them to see.

His hands started sizzling, but he grit his teeth through the pain.

Pouring almost all his power through his hands, he did what demons did best. He corrupted the seal.

The lines of runes started turning black and red, one by one, locking back in place around the soul orb.

But the process was far from fast enough, and he feared for his life.

Geminae had both hands on the white room's walls, trying to slow down the transcription, but it was taking all of his power to reduce its speed by a mere fraction.

"Does a mortal's greed know no bounds?" he complained, his face contorted into pain.

He could feel the last few drops of his essence sapping away from him. If this continued, he would vanish.

The corrupted lines locked in place as the last line of uncorrupted runes appeared on the walls. The soul orb flashed in bright gold, blinding everyone in the room.

A deathly silence followed...

Chapter 762 Coming Back To

Astaroth took a moment to reopen his eyes, his body aching. His jaw felt like he had spent a round in the ring with Clark, and he was lying on the ground.

"What the... What happened to me? The last thing I remember is getting close to the soul orb..."

Spinning his head in every direction, Astaroth looked for the soul orb and found it still near him, but the cage had changed.

Instead of lines of blue runes surrounding it, tightly knit, the cage seemed more aired out, and the runes had gone blackish red.

Astaroth could feel the runes exuding a demonic mana and was almost worried.

"Did the demon win and get out? Am I going to be stuck here forever, forced to watch as my body kills innocent people?"

"If only. Instead, I had to help that despicable angel boy contain your stupidity. Now look at me! I look ridiculous!"

Astaroth looked around for the squeaky voice talking to him until he felt a kick at his heel.

"I'm down here, you big moron!"

Looking at his feet, Astaroth saw an imp, about six inches tall, with facial features resembling his, if much younger, staring daggers at him.

"I look like I couldn't hurt a fly! This is your fault!" the miniature-demonized Astaroth shouted.

It kicked and punched at his leg, barely tickling him, and even tried nibbling at his heel in hopes of doing any damage. Of course, it was all in vain.

It now lacked the strength to pierce Astaroth's skin, let alone bruise it.

Astaroth stared for a moment, making the miniature demon seethe in discomfort.

"Say something, you gigantic monkey!" it howled, raising its little fist at Astaroth.

"Pfft!"

"No! Don't you dare laugh!" the demon shouted in anger.

"Pff! Bahahahahaha! What the heck?! You're so cute, look at you!"

The demon blew out a fuse.

"RRAAGGHH!!! I will murder you!"

Another sequence of weak punches, kicks, bites, scratches, and even some tiny sparks of black fire impacted Astaroth's right leg, tickling him.

"Bahahahahaha! Stop! It tickles! Ahahahah! Ooh, you're so feisty! Bahahaha!"

Astaroth was laughing more than he had in a long while, and for some reason, it felt cathartic.

Almost like a burden that lay on his mind was shaving away with every peal of laughter he expelled from his lungs.

Astaroth bent over to grab the little explosive demon and wrapped his hand around the little thing. It kicked and screamed, demanding release, but Astaroth brought it to eye level.

"Let me go, you giant pain in my ass! If you hadn't intervened, I could be killing so many people right now! It's all your fault!"

Astaroth stopped laughing, containing it to just shaking shoulders, and smiled at the demon.

"With this size? You couldn't kill a baby rat unless you caught it by surprise. But what happened?"

The demon didn't answer his questions; instead, he continued to fight back, hoping to get free from his giant grip.

But a voice behind Astaroth answered his question.

"I can explain it better than they can, I believe."

Astaroth spun around, finding Nemus standing behind him, with a pouting Geminae next to her. He looked down at his feet like a child who had just been scolded.

"If you can, then by all means," Astaroth said, motioning her to speak.

"Not here. Time doesn't stop when you enter your soul space. It only slows down. And you have wasted enough of it inside here. Your partner needs help before that forest guardian kills her.

"You should have found what you sought so that you can fight it now. Find me when you have time. I will explain it in person. I will also be able to help you understand a few things."

Astaroth frowned at her, wondering why she refused to tell him now. But he remembered he was still in the middle of a fight with a giant moving tree, and his mind immediately imagined the worst.

"I have to go! How do I leave this place?!"

Nemus giggled at his panicked state.

"The same way you came in, child. Just will yourself out. Don't worry too much. She isn't in danger but might be if you stay here. Don't forget to seek me out after this. I will be waiting."

Astaroth nodded frantically before closing his eyes and thinking of going back outside.

When he reopened them, he felt a soft fur under his body and a rumbling of shoulders of a quick run.

Quickly realizing where he was, he tried getting up. But a set of roots were holding his legs and arms in place.

"Genie? Why are you here? I thought you were on the southern front, power levelling?"

The female wolf's voice echoed in his head.

'Master! You're awake! You had us worried. I came here when I heard from Morpheus that you had let him control your body. I got here just in time as well, before the fusion ended, and you plummeted a thousand feet toward the ground.'

Reaching inside him, he felt Morpheus' soul orbiting his, exuding worry.

He immediately summoned it, sending it back into combat.

"I'm sorry. I was held inside my mind for longer than I wished. What is going on?"

Genie released his arms so he could sit upright and saw the giant Ent to his right.

Its attention was toward the sky, where a tiny spark of blue was zipping around the myriad of branches and roots flying at it, occasionally throwing an attack of its own.

"Phoenix is still fine. But won't she run out of mana, burning through it like that?"

Genie hooked back towards the combat, and Astaroth realized something.

The debuff was gone from his interface.

Genie could read his thoughts and replied to his silent question.

"Luna's work. She found the cause of the mana deficiency and was able to blow it up. The Ent had a gem inside him that was sucking up ambient mana relentlessly. It took her a lot of power to destroy it since it was inside the Ent, and she vanished after that, but it gave Phoenix the resources she needed to keep fighting."

Astaroth grinned.

"Good work, Luna," he whispered.

He could feel her soul resting next to his, probably from being of mana so much. But he was satisfied.

"Then I guess it's my turn. Bring me under it, Genie. I got a tree to chop."

"Yes, Master!"

Chapter 763 Rookie Mistake

Genie ran at full speed, arcing her path from the outskirts of combat directly toward the Zone Boss monster. Phoenix saw the movement and reached out to Astaroth through the party chat.

**

"You're finally awake, sleeping beauty? About time. I was at my wit's end dealing with this thing. It just doesn't want to die."

"Sorry. I was trying to find something that would do more damage to it. After all, I can't deal elemental damage to it like you."

"Eh, whatever. Did you get what you needed?"

"Watch and see."

**

Astaroth grinned as he closed the message interface. Genie was already taking him under the giant Ent, zigzagging through the roots that carried its massive body around. Some roots tried attacking them, but her speed far surpassed the appendages' speed, and they couldn't even hit her shadow.

Astaroth was already focusing inside himself, where he could feel the strange power he had sensed before. Only this time, it was much more evident.

He reached out to it mentally, pulling out the Ad Astra, and carried the strange energy over to the weapon's blade.

A faint gray hue imbued the blade, dull to the eye, even covering the sheen of the sharp blade. He wondered what it was, but wouldn't know until the system notified him.

Which it would most likely hold back until he landed a successful hit on the monster.

So he looked up.

From his position under the monster, he could see a burnt hole right up the middle that led into the beast, and he guessed that was Luna's handiwork. He couldn't see all the way into the hole, but he could guess it went at least ten meters in.

"I'll need a boost to get me inside it. Can you do that, Genie?" Astaroth asked the wolf.

'Of course, Master!' she replied in his mind.

Astaroth grinned.

"Then let's do this! Stop here and try to aim for that opening."

Genie's legs all stopped, angling forward to halt her momentum as she skidded to a stop.

Astaroth used that forward force to jump off her, flipping in the air. He pushed mana under his feet, forming a pocket of wind ready to burst, and waited for his boost.

The moment Genie was completely immobile, she stomped her front left paw on the dirt and howled, a slight tremor going through the ground under her.

The next moment, a small pillar of rock lifted from the dirt, about a foot in diameter, and lifted right toward Astaroth's feet, slamming into it hard, making the air pocket burst.

Astaroth's downward movement was immediately changed for an upward one as the pillar lifted him two meters before stopping and letting the air escape from under his feet. This blasted him upward, akin to a rocket launching from Earth, and directly toward his goal.

The twenty meters separating him from the underside of the Ent were quickly covered, and Astaroth was shot right inside the tree monster.

As he cleared the outside hole, he entered the monster and realized why he couldn't see inside. With no light source inside it and a thick black mist floating around, it was pitch black.

Covering his mouth, Astaroth frowned.

'Luna came in here? I hope she didn't get some corruption inside her...'

A small snickering voice echoed inside his mind.

'Rhakhakha! Why are you covering your mouth, coward? This little mist can't affect your body, anyway. Not with me inside it. Not after what I had to do inside your soul. Breathe it in. Breathe it all in!'

Astaroth wanted to tell the demon to shut up, but already, he could feel what the demon meant.

Usually, when he crossed through demonic miasma, the reddish kind, it stuck to his skin, feeling icky. But this black one was avoiding him, floating away as it reached near him.

He heard a distinct tongue click in his head as the demon felt discouraged by the mist's actions.

'Did you want me to swallow it so you could consume it? Tricky little shit!' Astaroth berated him.

'What?! No! That's not what I wanted! Liar!' the demon replied, becoming defensive.

Astaroth ignored the reply, looking around him. He couldn't see much, but the greyish glow from his axe was glinting off something on the ground, not far from his current position.

Walking towards that, he quickly started walking on shards of something, making cracking noises under his boots. Lowering to his knees, he grabbed a piece of whatever it was and inspected it under the glow of his axe.

A purple shard of glass-looking material revealed itself; the edges melted like something scorching had pierced through the complete object, shattering it into hundreds of pieces.

More pieces of whatever that was were littered across the surrounding ground, and he imagined this was what was sucking up the mana previously.

Even shattered into pieces, he could feel his mana tugging in his hand as he held the piece.

"This is nasty stuff..." he mumbled.

But he wasn't here for an inspection. This could wait for after the fight if the Ent didn't outright turn to pixels.

Grabbing his axe handle, Astaroth rose back to his feet and raised the weapon above his head.

"Let's see how this thing likes being hit on the inside!"

Astaroth activated his armour's active skill with a powerful war cry, boosting his strength by twenty points and swelling his arms up a bit. He brought his axe down with a mighty swing and watched the damage number rise before his eyes, grinning.

137,200!!

"Now we're talking!" he shouted before starting to hack away at the interior of the Zone Boss.

He looked like a madman, swinging his axe repetitively with a wide grin. Shards of wood flew in all directions with each of his swings, looking like fireworks were going off.

The grey light would flare up on each impact, glowing brightly for a split second before dimming again. This looked like a stroboscope was flashing inside the Ent, like a rave was happening.

Astaroth heard the notification ping in his ear but chose to ignore it in favour of killing this monster before anything else. Being safe was a priority to reading his new skill, and killing the Boss monster was the way to achieve that.

So he hacked and hacked until he heard a low rumble and felt the ground give out under him.

'About time,' he thought, feeling himself fall toward the ground as the body of the boss disappeared around him.

He opened the notifications to read his skill since the fight was practically over, and his face paled.

'Fuck... I should have read this before... Mother-fucking idiot.'

Chapter 764 Whiplash!

Soul Imbue

Imbue the power of your soul into your strikes, making you reach the soul of your target directly. Attacks deal 1000% damage, in true damage, but you take 1% of it back as true damage in a soul whiplash, for using the power of your soul to attack.

**

Astaroth finished reading the skill as another notification rang in his ear.

Soul whiplash calculated. Damage returned: 64,484. This damage is also true damage.

He didn't even get time to activate Sublimate or meld with anything that a soul-wrenching pain assaulted him.

Astaroth gripped his chest as the damage trickled in, in stacks of a thousand, draining his hp slowly but in a manner that left him unable to react. It was like someone was jamming burning rods through his body, slowly pushing them through.

The pain was almost enough to make him pass out. There was no gritting his teeth through that one.

Phoenix landed beside him, seeing his health deteriorating, and wondered what was affecting him.

She slightly panicked as Astaroth screamed off the top of his lungs in agony.

"What's wrong?! What's attacking you?!"

But Astaroth couldn't hear her. His ears were ringing, his mind pounding, his heart thumping. All he could hear was his soul flaring up in response to his stupid use of a skill he knew nothing about.

In less than a minute, with Phoenix unable to help him since she didn't know what was affecting him, Astaroth hit zero HP.

Phoenix watched with horror as Astaroth turned to pixels before shattering and dispersing to the wind.

"Let's just hope that his death penalty isn't too harsh..." she mumbled as she turned toward Bastion City.

She was sure that was where he would reappear, so that was where she made her way to.

In the meantime, Astaroth reappeared in a graveyard, everything around him in grey tones, and sighed loudly.

"So this is what it's like to die?" he asked no one in particular.

He could see before him the timer to his respawn. But he also had other notifications flashing in his sights.

Tapping on them, he started reading them because he had time to spare.

Calculating death penalty: Error!

Resolving issue: Error!

Player wasn't killed by another player or enemy. Creating alternative penalty.

Penalty created. Suicide Penalty: Upon respawn, the player will be forcefully logged out, and the account will be locked for a week. A world announcement will be made for this new penalty.

He stared at the last one with a blank stare.

"..."

"..."

His timer hit zero, and just like clockwork, instead of reappearing in the graveyard, with his sight going back to normal, Astaroth's vision swam before turning to the inside of his pod.

As he was logged out, a world notification rang in the skies over New Eden's two continents.

World Announcement: A player has died by means of his own. A death penalty was created for this situation and will now come into play for any player doing the same. Suicide Penalty: Upon death by means of his own, the player will get forcefully logged out and his account locked for a week. Thank you for your comprehension.

Many players around the world of New Eden paused to hear this news. This was big.

Losing a level because you died to monsters or other players was already inconvenient. But losing an entire week of playtime?

At this stage of the game, the loss of EXP alone was massive, and suddenly, dying in PVP didn't seem that bad...

Phoenix heard the notification like everyone else, but she also saw Astaroth log out, and her face paled.

"Please be someone else. Please be someone else," she uttered as she opened her friends' list.

She quickly tapped on Astaroth's name and initiated a call.

The call picked up, and she could hear his ragged breath on the other side.

"Please tell me you lagged out and are about to log back in. A week-long lockout will kill your advantage over other players..."

She could hear the breathing on the other side, as if he was containing rage.

"It's not a mistake. I can't log back in. It's giving me a countdown with a week on it..." Alex replied, his voice shivering in rage.

"God dammit. What happened, Alex?" Phoenix asked.

Alexander took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down, before responding.

"I tried out a new skill that I got, but I didn't read it beforehand. And it turns out that skill had a whiplash to it. I couldn't meld with a companion in time or use Sublimation, and the pain locked me out of my skills. I died to the whiplash..."

Phoenix took a second to digest what he had told her.

This was a serious matter.

Not only because he couldn't play for a week, but also because the narrative of this penalty wasn't something he was the only subject to.

On the forums, many players had found skills with health costs or whiplash effects, but usually, they used them in controlled environments with potions to spare, healers at hand, or stopped before they killed themselves.

Which was why the suicide penalty was never issued until now.

With this news out, many players using these skills would suddenly grow cold feet at their use. Even she had one such skill in her arsenal that she seldom used.

Now, she was even more terrified of using it.

The problem here was that these skills were often extremely useful or powerful.

But it seemed like the game was trying to remind them that dying came at a risk. It was probably New Eden's way of regulating the fact they were practically immortal.

They sat silently for a moment as one processed, and the other tried calming down.

"What are you going to do for the time being? Do you want me to stay out of the game with you?" Phoenix asked, her voice shaking.

"No. Please don't waste your week on my mistake. I'll find a way to catch back. For now, use this opportunity to power level. In the worst-case scenario, I'll use the taxed EXP. But I'm sure I can figure out something.

"As for what I'll do for the week? I'll figure something out. Don't worry about it. Anyway, it's still the middle of the night here. I'll take a shower and sleep in the bed a bit. See you later. Love you."

Alexander hung up the call before leaving his pod with a pissed look. He couldn't blame or force her to suffer his penalty with him.

He'd have to manage his time on his own.

"They should have figured these things out before we played. I get that New Eden isn't a game, and that our mechanics are strange in that world, but Jesus, Evo Gaming. Do your homework next time..."

Alexander cursed them a bit more as he ran a hot shower. This just wasn't a good week for him, he guessed.

Chapter 765 Growing On Earth

After his shower, Alex looked at the time and sighed.

It was around three in the morning, and he wasn't tired in the slightest. His mind was still reeling from getting locked out of the game for a week.

But he didn't know what to do until Kary popped out of her gaming pod. And he hoped that wouldn't be for a few hours still.

He didn't want her to fall behind because of him. That would make him feel terrible.

"I could snoop around on the forums... Or maybe I can meditate?" he mumbled.

Activating his mana vision, Alex could see clearly as day the mana breach over his pod. And just over Kary's, there was another, this one a smidge smaller.

Focusing his mind on the mana particles floating around his room, he made them swirl around for a while, causing a breeze to form.

But he couldn't control all of it, and that made him realize his mana control on this side of the veil was weak. "Well, if I can't get stronger in New Eden, then I guess I'll power up on this side," he said, clenching his fist.

Sitting on the bed, Alex closed his eyes and visualized himself quickly expanding his scope to the room. He could see every mana particle floating around and the ones leaking out of the breaches.

Focusing his mind, he started making them move again, spiralling them around the room a few times before they would funnel toward him. He didn't want to consume them yet, so he only made them swirl fast around himself.

He did this until he could control every particle. It took him an hour before he was confident that every bit of mana in the room, including the one appearing from the breaches, obeyed his will.

And once he was sure of it, he started funnelling the mana inside him.

His hands lay on his knees, palm open and facing upward, and he made sure to pass the mana coming into his body through his hands before it circulated inside him once and then rose to his brain.

He knew where the mana lobe was in New Eden and also knew there was no such thing in the human body on Earth. Up to now, all the mana he and Kary had used had been stored inside their cells.

Strangely, the human cells could store an insane amount of energy, even one that was foreign to their world.

But he wanted to find out if that was the only way to store mana. Because forming a mana lobe, or its equivalent, on this side of the veil would be a terrifying but rewarding thing.

Having access to mana more efficiently, and being able to store more within their bodies, would be a great boon for when shit hit the metaphorical fan.

This went on for ten minutes, the mana accumulating in one spot in his head as Alexander forced it to stay there, and still, nothing had happened.

Alex kept pushing everything there; the mana in his room was now down to what was leaking through, and nothing had changed.

Aside from a minor headache, Alex couldn't feel the formation of a mana lobe inside him.

'What else can I try?' he wondered.

Then he realized. Even though all that mana was inside his head, it was just a loose cluster. His brain cells had absorbed most of it, making him feel energized and a clarity he never experienced before.

But it wasn't forming a lobe, a place where it would stay. He knew if he let go of his concentration, most of what his body hadn't absorbed would go back to the room, floating aimlessly.

It was thanks to his newfound clarity that a thought entered his mind.

In New Eden, he had noticed that his mana lobe had started growing a thick shell on its exterior as if the mana were crystallizing.

His theory was that the mana lobe was the people's equivalent of a monster orb. This made him think.

'What if the mana lobe is already a basic form of crystallization of mana, but inside our head? Like the brain forming a mana crystal for us to draw from,' he mused.

'Would this mean I can't get a mana lobe here, since Earth doesn't have mana?'

A frown formed on his face.

'No, that can't be right. David once told me that newborns will be able to form a mana lobe in the future. The mana, by then, would have imbued the world in its entirety. I just need to find a way to convince the world that I already am at that stage...'

He surmised the world was probably judging he didn't have enough mana inside him to require a mana lobe. But he could change this.

He could focus on something else since his body had absorbed a large part of the mana floating in his room.

Alex honed his mind on the two breaches and the mana leaking from them. They resembled two slow streams.

'Guess I'll have to pull more mana in,' he mused, a grin rising on his lips.

Alex started pulling on the mana from the breaches firmly, forcing it directly toward him instead of around the room, and suddenly, the two small streams turned into rivulets.

The suction he applied was strong, and he only made it more potent with time, using the mana inside himself to coax the one outside to obey him.

The rivulets turned jets, and the surrounding breaches started cracking wider as the mana leaking from them grew. Soon enough, the thin streams turned to gouts, and Alex was filling with mana at an alarming rate.

He knew he had to stop soon, or something terrible would happen.

He could feel the cells in his body vibrating with power, and his mind was pulsing in pain. But gritting his teeth through the pain, he suddenly stopped pulling at the breaches and focused internally.

A raging torrent was spinning inside him, no longer contained in his mind, since he didn't have enough room for it there. But that was where he would begin.

Focusing on his brain, he started compressing all the mana inside it, slowly pushing it toward where the mana lobe should be. As his brain emptied, he pulled up the mana raging in his body, as well, and kept compressing it until nothing was left aside from what his cells contained.

But he could feel he wasn't there yet. He was on the cusp of forming it, but missing something.

Then his mind clicked.

The energy of the world. Aether.

Aether was probably the last ingredient for the formation of a mana lobe. And since mana wasn't from this world, Aether was also absent.

How would he complete that last step? He refused to give up now.

Alex could feel the mana in his mind shaking against his control. He wouldn't be able to hold it for much longer.

'Did I do all this for nothing? I can't give up now!'

His body was already slipping out of consciousness, given he had drained all his mana into his mind for this endeavour.

'I can't fail. I refuse to fail...'

Then a crystalline giggle echoed in his ear.

Chapter 766 Outside Help

A presence which he had yet to feel on this side of the veil brushed his mind, and he felt a warmth emanate from the pit of his stomach—a familiar feeling.

'Do you need help, papa?' a soft voice asked in his mind.

'Luna? How did you find me?' Alex asked her mentally.

'I felt you far away and followed the tether to your soul. I found this crack in the darkness, and when I pushed through, I was back inside you.'

Alex could imagine that his pulling at the mana leak formed a wide crack in the veil that separated their worlds. It was good news that Luna could follow it there, but it was also not good.

If she could sense him through it, what else could?

But right now, he couldn't waste time thinking about this. Every second he wasted, his body absorbed more of the mana concentrated inside his head, and the rest were fighting against his control to break free once more.

'Yes, I need your help. I can't generate Aether here, and I think the natural mana of the world on this side is too weak to form a mana lobe. Can you do something about this?'

Luna giggled in his mind again.

'I will help you, papa. But this might hurt.'

'Wha—'

Before he could finish asking what she meant, a searing pain entered his head as he detected a single particle of bright white in there, forcing its way toward the center of the mana cluster.

It shone like a miniature sun in his head, burning his mind like a molten metal rod poking at his brain. But he gritted his teeth through the pain, refusing to let out the howl reaching his throat.

Instead, he groaned in pain, his hands slapping the side of his head, gripping his hair.

But he could feel the changes happening already.

The moment the Aether particle reached the cluster's center, and even on its way there, the mana particles that passed right next to it suddenly jerked onto it, like magnets sticking together.

And the more mana stuck to the Aether, the more the attraction force grew. Before long, all the loose mana in his brain had formed one clump.

But the process wasn't over. Alex, whose brain was still in excessive pain, could feel the attraction of the Aether particle redouble.

The surrounding mana started vibrating as the Aether was pulling on it like a vacuum, sucking up something slightly too big for the tube. The suction force grew and grew until the mana started compacting on itself.

With every millimetre, the cluster shrunk; it pulsed out with power, sending a searing pain in Alex's mind. He remembered this pain, although he had hoped it wouldn't be as bad the second time.

He wanted to scream his throat out, let the pain knock him out. But he knew it was not the best thing to do.

If he passed out, who would keep the mana together?

Luna was already holding the Aether particle in place, and he could feel her presence waning by the second.

Simply being on this side of the veil was draining for her. She was too powerful for a world without mana.

Alexander felt like time slowed to a crawl, the mana in his head pulsing rhythmically as it condensed and crystallized.

Ten minutes passed before the mana pulsed one last time, this time spreading warmth instead of searing pain, and Alex passed out.

As he did, he faintly heard Luna's voice in his mind.

'I can't stay here any longer. I will see you in my world, papa.'

A few hours passed, with Alex out cold on his bed, sweat drenching his clothes and the bedsheets. His body was reacting strongly to something inside it that was unnatural to the laws of the world and fighting it off like a virus.

But soon enough, the mana from the mana lobe spread through the body, forcing it to acknowledge its existence, and his body calmed down.

Kary was the first one to rise, as her pod top popped open, her body lifting upright as she stretched with a yawn.

When she saw Alex on the bed, still in his pyjamas, his clothes sticking to his body, and the bedsheets visibly drenched, she wondered what had happened.

She shook Alex awake slowly, wanting answers about this.

"Hey, handsome. Wake up."

Alex groaned as his eyes started fluttering.

"Mmm. What happened? Did I succeed?"

Kary's head tilted in confusion, her left eyebrow cocking up.

"Succeed what? In taking a bath on the bed? It would seem like it. What were you doing while I was in New Eden?"

Alex slowly opened his eyes, looking straight into Kary's, and paused.

In that moment of pause, Kary saw a glint of blue flash in Alex's pupils where there should only be black. But it was gone faster than it had come, leaving her with even more questions.

"Huh? A bath in the bed?" Alex asked, confused.

That's when he noticed he was all sticky, his pyjamas stuck to his boy, and the bed he was lying on was utterly drenched. The acrid smell of sweat suddenly assaulted both their noses as he moved.

"Oh, boy!" Kary exclaimed, pinching her nose.

"What in the name of god did you do while I was in New Eden?! She asked, sounding nasal as she held her nose closed.

"I don't know what happened to the bed, but I do know what I was doing before that. How the bed ended up in this state, I have no idea..." he replied, his face livid.

By the looks of it, he would have to call a specialty cleaner for this or buy a new bed. He could already tell the sweat circle would stain.

"Let's open up the windows and shower first," Kary said, her nose still pinched.

"Good idea..." Alex replied, jumping up from the bed.

He could tell her what he was doing once they didn't smell like they were in a hockey team's changing room.

Chapter 767 Like An Animal

Using the intelligent remote for the penthouse, Alex opened all windows to the room, letting the end-of-summer breeze waft in. He could feel the cold front in the air, a sign that autumn was approaching.

As he headed toward the shower, Alex's mind wandered off to the first day he got into New Eden, when he had gone through this process of becoming a mage. He had been far from thinking this possibility would ever happen to him in this world.

'It's been almost four months already... It's hard to believe no one has reached level sixty yet. The devs were not kidding when they said levelling would be hard in New Eden...'

His mind suddenly returned to reality as he heard a set of clothes drop to the ground. He looked at Kary's naked back, her royal markings in broad display, and bit his lips.

He wasn't sure what had caused her to lose weight, but in the last months, she had gone from being a plump goddess to having that curvy hourglass figure and looking at her made him want to turn into an animal.

He could already feel his pyjamas restricting around his crotch as his member gorged with blood.

He took a step towards her, trying to grab at her body, but she snapped her head towards him.

"No. I'll be in the bath, waiting if you want to, but you must shower first. You smell like a dirty jockstrap. Let me rinse up, and then you better get to scrubbing, love."

Alex grunted as he licked his lips, looking at her with eagerness.

"I said no. Get washed first, you dirty dog."

She giggled as she jumped into the shower, hearing him almost tear off his clothes in eagerness. Quickly rinsing herself off, Kary left the shower as Alex entered it and walked over to the bath, which she started to fill.

Alex didn't miss his chance and grabbed her butt with his hand as she passed near him, grinning like an idiot.

Kary huffed, slapping his arm jokingly.

"You animal. Have some restraint," she fake-complained.

The truth was, she loved the way he looked at her. What woman in her right mind didn't want her man to look at her like he wanted to eat her alive?

It made her feel wanted. Of course, Alex also often looked at her with a loving gaze or with deep respect, making those animalistic stares all the more attractive to her.

She knew he wasn't just looking at her like a piece of meat. But she would serve herself up on a silver platter if that meant he would eat her up.

Kary could already hear Alexander scrubbing himself raw with his loofah, hurrying to get out of the shower.

She giggled to herself, shutting off the water to the bathtub, as it was already full. Drawing a bath didn't take very long when there were three taps to fill it.

She dipped her body into the hot water, sighing in pleasure, letting the heat soothe her muscles, which were a little sore.

The gaming pod had measures in place to keep a player from getting completely numb, but it wasn't perfect. Long gaming sessions, like the ones they pulled, often leave them feeling weak or sore.

But it was nothing a hot bath, and some movement couldn't fix.

Kary glanced at the clock on the nightstand, which she could barely see from the bathroom, and saw what time it was.

'Already seven o'clock... We leave in a couple of hours. I hope Alex doesn't intend to waste all my energy for the day before it even begins,' she mused, a smile creeping up her lips.

Ever since they started living together, he had become much less shy and more active, often even making the first move on her.

She loved this and wouldn't change the dynamic for anything, but it sometimes led to them having rushed schedules. When they already had things planned for their day, and Alex decided to take a few hours out of their time because his urges took over, it could lead to awkward explanations.

As she was thinking about this, she heard the shower door slide open abruptly and the pitter-patter of wet feet across the bathroom tiles.

Her eyes were half-closed, and she could still tell when he slid into the bath, with the water level rising and splashing against the ground around the tub.

"So eager. Like a dog waiting for his treat, hihi," she giggled.

But Alex wasn't paying attention to her words. He was already leaning in against her, gently kissing her neck.

"Mmm," she moaned, the light touch of his lips against her skin sending shivers down her spine.

"Fine, let's indulge, shall we?" she said, dropping her hard-to-get act.

They started in the bath, fore playing for a while until Kary climbed atop Alex, sliding onto him with a soft moan.

Alex took his time, savouring every second, before ending their fling on a bed of towels on the bathroom floor.

Having sex in the tub was fun and all, but it was a mess to clean up. Semen had a weird reaction to water.

After thoroughly enjoying themselves, spending a little over an hour caressing every inch of each other's body and sliding finger, tongue, and other pieces of their anatomies on places better left unnamed, Kary fell to her back, her face flushed.

She panted for a few seconds as Alex flopped down beside her, trying to catch his breath.

"Alright, that was enough for now. We have something big to do today. And we shouldn't be late."

Alex nodded his head between two gasps.

"You're right. We should prepare. I bet the car will be arriving soon, anyway."

It was Kary's turn to nod.

They both got up to their feet, picking up the towels and giving the floor a little pat down before shoving all the towels in the dirty hamper.

Then they rushed to get dressed and eat a quick bite before the intercom rang.

"I guess they're here," Alex said, his face becoming serious.

It was time.

Chapter 768 Hitting The Road

Alex and Kary walked into the elevator, taking a bag, each with spare clothes in them. Their faces were stoic, the weight of the next few days weighing on them already.

As the doors closed, Kary looked at Alexander.

"What if we can't stop them?" she asked, nervousness leaking through her voice.

"Stop. Don't think like that already. We can do this. We have to. We'll be fine."

Alex rubbed her back a bit, trying to comfort her, and kept looking at his reflection on the polished doors.

'If we fail, so many people will die. We can't afford to fail.'

The fifty floors down felt longer than usual, the two of them standing there in silence, Alex rubbing Kary's back as she looked at her feet, deeply lost in thought.

There wasn't much more he could do. If there were a magic phrase, he could tell her to make her feel better, he would say it.

But life didn't work that way. They had the weight of many human beings on their shoulders, and if they fucked up, people would pay that price dearly.

When the elevator reached the ground floor and the doors dinged open, Kary took a deep breath, slapping her cheeks lightly.

"Alright! We got this!" she lied, her cheeks red.

Alex smiled.

'At least she wants to have the right mindset,' he thought.

Slowly, the pair walked out of the elevator, approaching the front doors. The receptionist had already told them a chauffeur was waiting for them outside.

They knew instantly which vehicle they were hoping into when they saw it.

The sizeable suburban SUV, matte black, with windows tinted and a mean-looking push-bar on the front, looked anything but something you would use in a city. Passersby were already looking at it with a mix of awe and fear.

It looked directly pulled out of an apocalypse movie.

A familiar mercenary was waiting for them outside the vehicle, standing next to the doors. The same one they kept crossing paths with on Jack's properties.

He saw them and shook his head disappointingly.

"You kids need to find a better way to spend your time. I swear to god, whenever I pick you up, you are either in trouble or heading towards it. I guess this time is the latter. I should have called in sick..."

Alex could tell he was only half joking, as his face showed some of his true feelings. And he wasn't happy to be there.

The last time he had met them, he was forced to carry a kid, knocked unconscious, into a private para-military facility, where they were still keeping him captive illegally.

Seeing Alexander's face had never resulted in a good encounter yet. And he was starting to grow tired of it.

'Man, I'm getting too old for this shit. Why didn't they take one of the newbies? Did I have to be the one driving?' he complained internally as he let the pair into the truck.

He closed the door behind them and peeled off toward the northern shore of Montreal.

They had a meeting point where they would gather the rest of the people going to the mission, and he had been ordered not to be late. Tardiness would be penalized by a pay cut.

The mercenary spoke into a closed channel radio without talking to the passengers he was carrying.

"Red one here. I have the lions. Everyone got their quarry?" he asked, putting the radio to his mouth.

Soon after, a voice came back in response.

"Blue one here. I have the clergyman."

"Yellow one here. Skeletor secured."

The mercenary vehicles identified each other, all replying that they had their quarry with one funnier name than the next.

And from what Alex was counting, only two people were missing.

That's when their driver took to the radio again.

"Alright, then. It's time to meet up with Bear and Reaper. Then we drive north. Buckle up, boys; I doubt the mission will be fun this time. Red one, out."

A symphony of mercenaries' replying echoed for a moment before the radio became silent again.

That's when Alex decided he couldn't contain his curiosity anymore.

"Reaper? Isn't Jack a bit old to give himself that code name?" he asked, a chortle in his voice.

But the mercenary momentarily looked at him in the rearview mirror before bursting into laughter.

"Buahahahaha! Mr. Boudreau! The Reaper! Buahahaha! He wishes, kid! You got this all wrong! Buahahaha!"

Alex wasn't sure how to react to the laughing. Was the man laughing at him or from something he said? What was so funny he felt the need to guffaw like this?"

Alex waited for him to calm down before asking his next question.

"Then who is the Reaper? Did Jack get someone new to be there?"

The man took a moment before replying, unsure he should reveal this. But he decided since they were going to meet anyway, there was no use in hiding the identity of the person called the Reaper.

"Mr. Boudreau isn't the Reaper. Mr. Boudreau is Bear. He wouldn't be a civilian if he had Reaper's kill count. A person like that rarely leaves active service. At least, that holds true for men..." he said before staring forward.

A shiver ran down his spine a moment later, and he shut his mouth.

It didn't take long for the truck they were in to meet up with others similar in appearance. And soon enough, they looked like a president's convoy, with so many black trucks following each other.

Alex could see them behind him and in front as he frowned.

"Isn't this too conspicuous? As a civilian, I would dare say that a convoy of black SUVs with tainted windows and push-bars in front would seem very weird to any passerby."

"No one cares, kid. Aside from kids, no one looks at trucks like ours when we drive around. It's why we do it. People tend to keep their eyes on themselves when they see a vehicle that looks like this.

"Too much to lose, now what I mean?" he said, rambling his explanation.

Alex couldn't understand why people would look away from them. They were so jarring.

But he didn't want to look ignorant, so he nodded his head emptily.

It didn't matter. As long as they got to the area safely, he couldn't care less.

Chapter 769 Worries Of An Ex Assassin

Alexander might not understand this yet, but a line of big black trucks often meant dangerous people. Many regular Joes had the film mentality that if you see a line of black SUVs, you steer clear before trouble finds you.

It was all a psychological phenomenon caused by big screen showings and serialized shows that portrayed them as such. Of course, many times, that was precisely what that meant.

After all, what better vehicle to make a mobile tank out of than a suburban vehicle? Those things were already rigged to carry much more weight than they had and built with room to spare.

Bullet-proofing a vehicle like that was easy, and it would still look unassuming to the regular folk.

There was a reason politicians drove around in those, and it wasn't simply for comfort.

The line of trucks drove their way off the main island of Montreal and onto the island of Laval, making their way southwest. They would meet up with Bear and Reaper close to their home, and from there, they would drive up north.

The drive wasn't too long, considering the hard part was getting off Montreal, but the road was still annoyingly winding. The mercenary driving Alex and Kary was already nervous about carrying those two in his vehicle.

But he had a job to do, and he would complete it.

Reaching the westernmost part of Laval, another vehicle joined the convoy, and the radio hummed back to life.

"Silver one here. Bear and Reaper confirmed. Coordinates to destination synchronized to the convoy. Drive single-file, keep order, and don't stop under any circumstance."

The merc grabbed his radio and replied, "Red one, ten four."

The other vehicles chimed in, one after another, with the same reply, and the convoy rode back onto the highway, directed toward the north.

Silence took the radio channel once more, and suddenly, tension grew.

The coordinates synced into every vehicle's GPS, and they saw their destination for the first time. Every driver wondered what could be so important that they had to drive so many people there without information.

All they knew was that it was something important and secretive.

The drive was just as painful for the lot getting driven there as they were kept in the dark. Only a few knew what would happen, and they were the most nervous.

In the front car, a luxury silver sedan, Jack and Margaret were having a calm discussion with deadpan expressions, even though the tension in the car was thick.

"Are you sure we can trust these kids on a mission like this one? You know as well as I that rescue and containment missions are the hardest. They aren't trained soldiers, Jack."

Jack sighed heavily.

"I know, Margaret. But we don't have much of a choice. In this case, normal people can't deal with the enemy. And we lack options on who to bring."

"Still, shouldn't we at least keep the mercenaries with us? At least as support troops?" she asked, her eyebrows furrowing.

"I wish it were that simple. If we keep them along, what happens when they start shooting at the monsters? When their bullets bounce off without so much as a scratch. Will they start panicking? I know they are trained soldiers, but it would be a normal reaction."

Margaret brought her hand to her chin, her eyes narrowing.

"I guess the unknown factor is a danger in itself. But what about the kids? How will they react? Jonathan is a child. So is the Bellemare girl. How will they react to monsters?"

Jack scoffed lightly.

"I'm not worried about the Bellemare kid. She's seen worse monsters, in and out of New Eden. And, although Jonathan is still a child, he's fought a demon already. We can't claim to have done the same, even though we've taken more lives than I care to count."

Margaret's eyes flashed with a tinge of sorrow for a moment before returning to their icy expression.

"And the others? I'm sure the three in the service tunnel incident will be fine. But what about the American kid? Or the personal trainer? Or that young merc, from Bellemare & Delphis? I doubt they are mentally ready for this."

Although his wife was making good points in the conversation, Jack had a feeling she was just nervous that they would have to bring home a body. She'd mostly worked alone in all her career and had never had to worry about carrying home a deceased ally.

The same couldn't be said for Jack. He had been in a more traditional service line and had to bury more friends than he wanted to remember. Bringing home the corpse of your friend was never a fun thing.

He had grown to sense the kinds of incidents before they even happened over the years, like a sixth sense of impending death.

But strangely, today, he wasn't sensing this. His mind was calm, and he felt things were still in the clear.

That's why he wasn't letting his wife's veiled worry affect him.

"Let's get there first and pass one day. We can do a risk assessment from there on out. At the moment, we need to focus on our plan of attack. These monsters are not going to react or think like troops. Getting them where we need them and hunting them will be more of that young woman's domain than mine."

Margaret's lips stretched into a thin smile.

"How rare of you to admit someone can plan an assault better than you. I can't wait to see her at work. This will be interesting."

Jack chuckled.

"This isn't an assault; it's a siege. And although I have resisted one or two of them before, I never had to deal with actual monsters. The Deveille girl has. And with brio, I might add."

Margarett's brow rose again.

"That well, huh? Well then, I guess we are in expert hands."

"I'll send you the video links to that battle. I know you like to understand the people you work with. That should give you a good clue."

Jack had watched every clip about the Bastion City siege before the update. All of them were from players assaulting the fortress and had terrible angles, but they still gave a lot of information when you knew where to look.

Phoenix's, or Kary's troop placement and flexibility, were quite entertaining for someone like him, who did this for a living a few years back. She had room to grow but was already displaying leading abilities beyond what many were capable of.

'Let's hope it also shows in this mission,' he mused.

Chapter 770 Meeting Up At The Chalet

The trip to the small hunting town lasted a little over an hour and quickly became boring as they left the city. Trees and mountains quickly replaced the houses and stores, as far as the eye could see, and became monotonous.

Alex and Kary were barely talking, as the latter was already lost in her thoughts. She was trying to figure out a good way to contain an attack from a horde of wolves in an undefendable small town.

She also had to consider all the houses between the horde and the town and how they would temporarily get these most likely old-timers to move out of their homes for safety concerns.

Old people were almost always stubborn, and they would need a compelling excuse to have them abandon their houses for the duration of this hunt. If they couldn't convince them, they risked having them die or expose a truth that should stay hidden for a bit longer.

Either option wasn't good for them.

As for Alex, he was lost in thought as well, but in a completely different direction.

In his mind, he was feeling the new addition to his brain. It felt strange to sense something there that hadn't been there before.

Both physically and mentally.

When his mana lobe had formed in New Eden, it had immediately faded away from thought, as if it was always supposed to be there.

But on this side of the veil, he could still feel the growth in his head, like a slight pressure point of a headache forming, but without the pain. It was a mild discomfort, and he hoped it would eventually fade.

But the other thing he was trying to wrap his head around, quite literally, was the fact he had to think about using the mana from the freshly formed lobe.

It wasn't an innate thing, like in New Eden. His body was practically fighting against it.

He had been circulating mana in his body, trying to grow accustomed to the motions again, as he had done in his first days of playing New Eden, but it was more complicated.

His body constantly tried taking the mana from the cells instead of circulating all the way to the brain in a complete loop. It was more tiring than he remembered, if only mental exhaustion.

But he knew it was better to figure that out now than wait for it to become a problem later.

Then, there was also the issue of charging the mana lobe up.

His apartment was filled with mana ever since the leak had appeared. Even if he and Kary absorbed a good part of it, there was always more where it came from.

But ever since he had torn it open wider to form his mana lobe, the apartment had become chock full of mana, making it easy for him to cultivate.

The problem lay with his current location.

There was no mana in the area, making it impossible for him to resupply if he ran out. He also hadn't re-learned mana breathing yet.

It was too complicated, with his lack of mana lobe before. And he hadn't stopped to take care of the issue after forming it.

Not that it would matter if there was no mana to absorb in the air, either.

He realized there were so many issues with his actions and sighed inwardly.

'If only I had asked David before doing this. I bet he would have given me some pointers. Now, I have to figure it all by myself.'

Alex only snapped out of his tribulations when he saw a sign on the side of the road, which said, 'Welcome to Lacs-des-Seizes-
Îles.'

He realized they had entered the territory of their mission, and his mind cleared out of any stray thoughts. They had to focus from here on out.

Even the simplest of mistakes could be life-ending.

Kary felt the vehicle slow down, and her mind returned to reality. Looking out the window, everything seemed so peaceful.

"To think this town would have become a graveyard in a day if we did nothing..." she said, her voice heavy with apprehension.

The radio hummed to life in the front of the vehicle, making Alex and Kary turn their heads toward it, wondering what this was about.

"Silver one here. The rented cabin is up ahead. That will be our regrouping point. Once the operatives have been dropped, all soldiers will go into town and stock up for three days' worth of food and supplies. The next task will be given after this one is completed. Silver one, over and out."

"Red one, ten four," the merc replied, hanging back his radio mic to the dash.

"To think we are going to be reduced to glorified guard dogs..." he mumbled, looking in the rear-view mirror.

Alex heard his complaining, but said nothing.

He felt it would insult the man if he told him how useless he would be in a fight against their coming foes. It was better he remained in the dark.

The convoy rolled through town, catching the attention of everyone who saw it, for better or worse, before disappearing northward again.

Jack had rented out a sizeable chalet, a bit north of the main town, where the men could stay and regroup while they hunted the monsters. This way, they didn't have to send the mercs back toward Montreal, saving them costs.

This also gave them a roof to sleep under if the hunt went well enough that they could afford to sleep. But he doubted that part.

As far as he was concerned, this place would be a base for the mercs and a place from where they could control the flow of villagers, as they convinced them to leave town for a while.

As the convoy parked around the chalet, all the vehicles opened up, letting out the drivers and the people they were carrying.

That's when a few of them realized they recognized many of the faces present.

Cory was the first to react, as the others knew what they were getting into.

"Gale?! Violette?! What the hell are you guys doing here?! I thought this was dangerous?" he exclaimed.

Then he noticed the two older people, squinting his eyes a bit, and recognized them as well. He had only briefly met them but had a good memory for faces.

"What the heck is going on?" he asked, bewildered.