

New Eden 841

Chapter 841 Meeting Him

The pillar of light was visible from far away, kingdoms on the eastern coast all clearly seeing it, and even the central lands could glimpse at it from hundreds of miles away.

Inside seven massive trees, of which were part Bastion City's palace and the new fortress in the Ash Elf kingdom, all seven progenitors of magic felt an enormous ripple in the world's ley lines.

"A god on the mortal plane? When was the last time they graced the land with their presence? And a powerful one, at that. Most likely upper pantheon," Aravelle mumbled, as he was closest to the landing location and could feel the essence better than the others.

"But what is he doing here? They didn't even lift a finger when the demon lord appeared a millennium ago..."

The other progenitors were having similar questions. Even if they couldn't tell what kind of god it was, they still felt the divinity leaking into the world's ley lines.

A few of them even felt tempted to teleport there and confront the deity. The sheer affront of them showing up in the mortal plane, risking to break the fragile balance of the plane, irked them.

But they held back.

Even if they were the closest thing a mortal being could ever get to a god, they still wouldn't be a match.

At the edge of Elven Forest, Astaroth was still face first in the dirt; the surrounding trees ripped out of the ground and strewn further; Luna bent next to him to protect him.

Now that the pillar of light was gone, his eyes still had trouble returning to normal, the flash having almost blinded him. But he could still see a blindingly bright humanoid figure.

'Who the hell is that? And how is his presence so overbearing?' he wondered, having trouble seeing the figure correctly.

"PSYYYYCHEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!" the figure roared.

The land shook with the sound vibration and the rage in the scream.

Astaroth's heart skipped a beat at the word.

'Fuck...' he cursed mentally, realizing what was happening.

The being teleported directly in front of Astaroth, and in the same second, the latter was straightened back up, floating above the ground, his breath suddenly short. It was like an invisible hand was clamped on his throat and kept him from breathing.

Luna wanted to jump on the being, but with a single glance, her form shattered, and she returned to Astaroth's soul space to recover.

"Where is Psyche, Earth maggot!" Gaius asked Astaroth, his words causing damage to Astaroth as the rage infused them with Aether.

Blood started leaking from his lips as he tried responding.

"Can't... Breathe..."

Gaius clicked his tongue in annoyance, releasing his telekinesis from the mortal.

"Speak! I felt her! Where is she?!" Gaius immediately asked as Astaroth crashed to the ground, hacking and coughing, trying to catch his breath.

"I don't know who you are talking about *Cough cough*" Astaroth lied.

"Don't lie to me, maggot! I can still smell her essence lingering in the air!" Gaius spat.

'He felt my mana from another plane? Who the hell is this guy?' Astaroth wondered, clutching his painful throat.

"What do you mean, your mana?! I felt the aura of a goddess! How could a mortal ever have that kind of essence? Stop lying to me, maggot! I am a god and know when I'm being lied to!" Gaius snapped, having heard Astaroth's thoughts.

"I swear I don't know anyone by that name. At least not personally. I've only ever heard legends of the goddess Psyche," Astaroth replied, trying to bend the truth as much as he could.

Gaius' eyes narrowed to slits as he sent a powerful pulse of Aether through Astaroth, scanning him thoroughly.

Astaroth felt like he was laid bare for a second before the Aether retracted from his body.

The overbearing pressure suddenly lessened as the crackling energy around the god tapered out.

"Hmm. Your essence is similar to hers. Too similar..." he said, squinting his eyes a bit more.

Astaroth wondered how the god was talking, as he failed to see a mouth on his face. But he had used magic to project his voice before, so he wasn't too surprised.

Gaius crouched next to Astaroth, locking his black eyes into Astaroth's.

"Tell me how you got this form, mortal. And if you lie, I'll erase you from existence, and not only on this side of the veil. I don't need a rebelling lab rat."

Astaroth's mouth suddenly went dry.

'He's serious...' he thought.

"Deadly serious. Now, speak!" Gaius said, reading his thoughts again.

"I... I chanced upon it when I witnessed two mythical beings kill each other. Their souls intermingled, and I tried taking it for myself since I'm a Soulmaner. But it changed again once inside me and formed the little girl you destroyed, and this form..." he said.

Which wasn't a lie, by all accounts, but was a gross misdirection. He had omitted so many things from this truth that if it wasn't still a fragment of the truth; he felt as if he would have just vanished on the spot.

Gaius stared at him for what seemed like forever, his eyes dissecting every word that had come out of the mortal's mouth and reading surface thoughts and memories to detect a lie. But he felt no lie in his words.

"Tch! And here I thought I had finally caught her," Gaius cursed as he stood back up.

Astaroth still couldn't go higher than on his knees and hands, the pressure on him still pushing him down, and he barely noticed when someone else crashed into the ground a few meters away from them.

Gaius glanced at the intruder, seeing it was a human woman, and immediately ignored her presence.

"If you ever catch wind of a goddess named Psyche, pray to me, mortal, and I will reward you handsomely," Gaius said, stepping away slowly.

"How will I know who to pray to?!" Astaroth asked, trying to lift his head.

"Pray to Gaius, the supreme god. I will answer."

He said those words and disappeared in a flash of purple Aether; the pressure disappearing with him.

Astaroth crumpled to the ground, feeling like he'd just run a marathon. He was exhausted from only being in this god's presence.

"Astaroth..." a tired voice echoed not far from him.

That's when he realized he wasn't alone.

Phoenix was on the ground not far from him, her complexion pale as a ghost.

"Phoenix!"

Chapter 842 Aftermath

Crawling toward her as fast as he could, he noticed she had crashed into a broken branch, and it impaled into her left side. Blood was trickling from it, and he could hear a small whistle when she breathed in and out.

'Punctured lung, maybe a few cracked ribs, and she's bleeding a lot. I need to help her,' he thought.

"Quite the landing you stuck there. This will hurt, but I have to remove that branch to heal you," Astaroth joked, trying to calm her breathing.

Instead, she coughed up a bit of blood as she snickered.

Astaroth didn't hesitate and yanked the sharp branch out of her side, simultaneously drawing a scream from her.

He rapidly chucked the branch away before applying both hands on the wound, golden light shooting out of his hands and into her left side.

Phoenix groaned as she felt her closing, her bones snapping back into place, and her muscles reattaching themselves. The process was far from painless, like when a priest did this.

But after a few moments, which was much quicker than a healer usually would heal such a wound, the pain stopped, and she took her first full breath in a minute since getting here.

"Thank you..." Phoenix whispered, catching her breath.

Astaroth didn't even respond, grabbing onto her with a hug.

Phoenix froze momentarily, her mind going to that situation earlier before the thought melted away when she felt Astaroth's trembling chest.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to scare you. I didn't think things through before acting, and I scarred you. It's not what I wanted to do..."

She hugged him back, realizing this was the real Astaroth. Not the monster she thought he had become.

"It's okay. I'll be alright. Just don't ever do that again..." she said, pushing her face into his chest.

They sat there for a while, taking the time to calm down their flaring emotions and their breath. Until Astaroth asked Phoenix, "What are you doing here, anyway?"

She separated from his chest, looking at him with a confused look.

"Same as you, I assume. I came to see what that massive beam of light was and why it suddenly appeared here. When I got in visual range, an ungodly pressure knocked me out of the sky. I almost fainted directly. What was that?"

Astaroth looked at her with a wry smile.

"I didn't come here for that. I was looking for you."

She smiled at him.

"You were looking for me and stumbled into it? You really are unlucky. What was it, anyway? I didn't get a good glimpse of it; my vision blurred when I got close enough."

Astaroth chuckled.

"I didn't stumble into it. I was looking for you, and it seems it reacted to my aura when melded to Geminae. That was a god. Gaius, the supreme god, he called himself."

Phoenix's face went stiff.

"You're kidding, right? A god? While the hell would a god descend here? And looking for you, too?" she stammered.

"Not looking for me," Astaroth corrected.

"Looking for Psyche. I told him I didn't know who he was talking about."

"But you..."

Astaroth put his hand over her mouth.

"We don't know who that is. Never met them, barely even heard of them. No need to trouble ourselves about it."

She quickly understood what he was doing when he glanced around and nodded her head.

Astaroth removed his hand and forced himself to his feet. But his body felt like it had been used as a punching bag by Mike Tyson, and there wasn't a muscle in his body that felt okay.

"Urgh... That aura was dreadful, and I feel like shit. What do you think about returning to the palace and calling it a day? We can do some boring paperwork. I'm sure there is plenty to do..." Astaroth said, looking at Phoenix with a wry smile.

"I concur. It felt like I was getting crushed by a mountain. It's a miracle I didn't die on the spot. The crash, the branch, and even the pressure were dealing damage to me every second. A bit longer, and I would have pixelized..."

Astaroth chuckled at her statement, helping her to her feet, and he looked at the sky.

"Alright, west it is. But there is no way I'm walking there, and I don't have the strength to fly. Let's see if I can get an Uber here," Astaroth joked.

It made Phoenix giggle, but she trusted he could do it still.

Extending his aura out again toward the sky, Astaroth found what he was looking for and smiled.

Connecting to the mind of a griffin rider hovering above the clouds, Astaroth spoke to him directly.

"Tell your commander that the king and queen need rides. We are right under you."

He didn't give the rider time to identify them or recover from the sudden message in his head and severed the connection. His mana was running dangerously low, as most of it had instinctively reacted to Gaius's pressure to keep him from fainting.

So, holding a connection was tiring, and he risked passing out.

Phoenix heard a sudden screech above them as a bird-like form dove toward them before arcing back up and heading west.

"Was that?" she asked.

"Yup. Probably sent here to check on the beam. I asked him to get us rides. It shouldn't take too long. Griffins are pretty fast. I'm sure Mary will tear me a new asshole for using her majestic mounts as taxis, but I can deal with that later."

Phoenix laughed at the thought of Commander Kadmus riding Astaroth's ear into the ground, but she agreed with the idea. She could barely feel her legs under her, and walking was out of the question.

As for her mana reserves? Glancing at her status bars, she was at around three percent mana remaining, and it was slowly recuperating.

"Remind me never to piss off a god," she joked, looking at all the negative statuses under her health bar.

"Yeah, haha. That would be a terrible idea," Astaroth replied.

'Not like I have much of a choice in the matter anymore,' he thought.

He would need to talk to Nemus sooner rather than later and keep her in the loop with what happened. But he assumed she already knew part of it.

'Things are bound to get more complicated...'

Chapter 843 Back At The Palace

It took a dozen minutes for a screeching to echo at the forest's edge, where Astaroth and Phoenix were waiting. And soon after, four griffins landed in the busted part of the forest.

One was larger than the others, sporting a silvery sheen, and an angry woman jumped from it.

"Do you think my riders are carriage drivers, King Astaroth?!" Mary burst into anger.

"Urgh, pipe down. I already have a headache from mana deprivation. Can we have this conversation back at the palace? I'll listen to all your berating then. I won't even interrupt you. Deal?" Astaroth asked, wincing in pain.

Mary clenched her fists and growled, staring at Astaroth and Phoenix.

"Fine! But you better get ready mentally. I'm going to fill your head up with my screams until you hear only that when falling asleep at night!"

"Ooh. Kinky. Commander Kadmus, I never thought of you like that," Astaroth joked, making the woman go beet red.

The next moment, he took a weak punch to the ribs from Phoenix, who didn't appreciate the connotation of his joke, and a not-so-weak one to the jaw from a very pissed-off Commander Kadmus.

She roared in fury; her face red with either shyness or rage, and jumped back on her griffin.

"Get him on his griffin and back to the palace! And make sure he doesn't die on the way there! I want to kill him myself!" she shouted before sending Silverwind rocketing into the skies.

Astaroth was on the ground, chuckling to himself as he caressed his jaw.

"Man, you can't even pull a joke to a gall these days without taking a hit," he jokingly complained.

"You deserved that punch. Both punches, actually," Phoenix commented, staggering her way toward an empty saddled griffin.

The beast looked at her warily as she got closer, but since she did nothing threatening, it let her approach enough to pull herself on the saddle.

Phoenix lowered her face toward the griffin's head, talking to him in whispers and caressing the side of his head, reassuring it that she was a friend.

It calmed down quickly while the soldier ran to Astaroth with a panicked look.

"Please forgive the commander, sir. She has a temper, but she's a good person. Please don't punish her or the riders," he pleaded, picking Astaroth up.

Astaroth laughed as he was picked up.

"Calm down, soldier. I had no such intention. The queen is right; I deserved that hit. I only wished she had been slightly gentler. My body is already hurting everywhere."

After helping him up on the last griffin, the soldier ensured the king wouldn't fall, even as the concerned party said he would hang on via magic. There was no way he would disobey a direct order from the commander.

She would have him cleaning the griffin pens for weeks if he did. So whether the king was happy about getting murdered by her or not was no longer his problem.

The flight back was relatively eventless, aside from the single scare factor of a black dragon suddenly charging at them from nowhere. Astaroth had heard Shegror saying she was coming back, but he didn't bother warning the others, thinking she was warning him well in advance.

But there were only a few seconds between her warning and her showing up. And she even scared Astaroth, as she never slowed down, heading straight for him, turning into a soul fragment barely at the last second before slamming into him.

He thought he was about to get flung off the griffon at Mach Jesus, but instead, his heart only stopped for a few seconds.

After landing at the palace, inside the last floor, where the griffin perches were, Astaroth tried fleeing the scene sneakily but was rapidly sold out by his girlfriend.

"Where are you going? I thought you wanted to talk to Mary before leaving?" Phoenix asked before walking by him.

She stopped next to him, giving him a quick peck on the cheek as she grinned at him.

"Traitor," Astaroth whispered, pouting.

"I love you, too," she replied before walking down the stairs toward their room.

"King Astaroth!" Mary shouted, noticing him near the stairs.

"You thought you could escape me?!" she howled.

"Far from me the thought, Commander Kadmus," Astaroth said with a sigh.

He listened to her yelling for over fifteen minutes until the woman had screamed herself hoarse and fled the scene while she went to grab some water, most likely with the intention to keep going.

When she saw he had run away, she growled but led the matter to rest, at least for now.

Astaroth had to be wary while running down the stairs, as his legs were still wobbly, but he made it to the second floor safely. His first stop was Leon's room, where he knew he would find the lazing lion.

Barging into the room, he woke Leon mid-nap, startling him awake.

"Wake up, you lazy ass!" Astaroth barked.

"Huh?! What? What's going on?" Leon asked, jumping up with half-closed eyes.

"Did you not feel that massive aura earlier? Or were you too far in your slumber that you missed that?" Astaroth questioned, walking up to the bed.

Leon sighed loudly, sitting back on his bed, before rubbing his eyes.

"No. I felt it. But what was I supposed to do? Go running in on a god?" Leon asked, looking annoyed.

"Oh, I don't know. Have a look, at least, maybe? Or was your nap more important?"

"Should I answer that?" Leon asked sarcastically.

Astaroth clicked his tongue at him.

"What would you have done if the god killed me? Or Phoenix?" Astaroth asked, annoyed by the lion's nonchalance.

"There isn't much I could have done... Rule in your stead until you come back, or pick new rulers once I know you aren't?" he asked, unsure what a suitable answer would sound like.

Astaroth couldn't fault him for taking this matter lightly. He figured there really wasn't much Leon could have done against a god. But he would have liked to know that his guardian at least had his back if shit went down.

"At least go check next time..." Astaroth sighed before leaving the room.

The lion promptly returned to his nap after the king left. He was in charge at night while the king and queen were gone, so he spent most of his days sleeping.

'As if I could mess around with a god...' he thought, closing his eyes and falling asleep.

Chapter 844 Getting To Work On Relaxing

After leaving Leon's room, Astaroth made his way down to the office Phoenix often used as a personal meeting room and where she did her paperwork in peace.

He found a single guard at the door, who looked almost too young to be standing there in the Royal Guard uniform.

When the guard saw him, he clanged his heels together, slamming his fist into his chest plate.

"Your Highness!" he saluted.

"At ease," Astaroth replied, heading into the room.

The soldier calmed down after he passed next to him, but then looked at the hall with a curious face.

"Uhm... Sir?" he called out.

"Hmm?" Astaroth hummed, stopping his steps.

"Where is your assigned guard?"

Astaroth's eyebrow raised, wondering what he was talking about.

"What assigned guard?"

"Your assigned private guard, sir. Orders from the Royal Guard commander?"

Astaroth looked at him with the eyes of a dead fish, having no idea what he was talking about.

"I was not assigned one, and I doubt Rodney would even think I need one... I don't even understand why Phoenix has one. Why would I have someone follow me around when they are not going to be needed if a fight breaks out?"

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"Hmm?" Astaroth hummed, stopping his steps.

"What assigned guard?"

"Where is your assigned guard?"

"Your assigned private guard, sir. Orders from the Royal Guard commander?"

The guard looked stunned for a second, assuming the king had been briefed about this before going back to a stoic face.

"Sir. I implore you to get your guard. They were orders from Commander Levine and concerned both you and the queen."

Astaroth sighed loudly.

"I don't ne—"

Before Astaroth could finish his rant, Commander Levine popped out of a side corridor.

"Ahh! There you are! I've been looking for you since the meeting. Where were you?" Rodney asked, visibly annoyed.

Astaroth looked at him and frowned.

"Here and there. Why? Did you need me for something?"

As he asked this, Astaroth saw a soldier pop out of the same corridor Rodney had come from, and his face dropped.

"Rodney, I—"

"Nope! I don't want to hear it. I'm not asking. As your Royal Guard commander and de facto general of this nation, I'm ordering you to always have this personal guard with you. Get used to him. Selena, he's all yours. Don't lose him."

"Yes, sir!" the woman shouted, saluting the commander, who promptly left.

Astaroth was left in the hallway, with a snickering Royal Guard in front of the door to Phoenix's office and another suddenly shadowing him.

"Urgh... Just don't get in my way if a fight ever breaks out. And by all means, make sure you can follow me."

"I will do my best, sir!" the woman said.

That was when Astaroth noticed two small pointed ears on the top of her head amidst her hair. They had flicked around as she answered, catching his attention.

"Are you a beast person? I thought most of your kind stayed hidden?" Astaroth asked, getting closer to her ears.

The woman immediately stepped back, keeping a respectful distance from the monarch.

"The guardian recruited me after he defeated me. It hasn't been long since I've started showing my face around, sir. But I have been in the kingdom for months."

Astaroth looked at her, trying to remember if he had seen her before. White hair, azure blue eyes, striped ears.

He would think she was related to the white tiger that had assaulted Bastion City during the siege if he didn't know better. But it couldn't be.

That tiger was a full-on monster. There was nothing human about it.

He saw a long black-and-white stripped tail swish behind her, and his face contorted strangely.

"Have we ever met?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

Seeing a bead of sweat form over her brow, Astaroth knew he was on to something.

"I... I don't believe we have, y-y-your majesty, ah hahaha," he laughed nervously.

Astaroth's gaze narrowed.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

Before she could crack, Phoenix's voice from inside the office drifted their way.

"Alright, leave her alone. That's harassment, you know?"

Astaroth rolled his eyes upward, stepping back from the guard.

"I just wanted to know who I was dealing with..." he replied, entering the office.

"Couldn't you have done that in a more civilized fashion? Instead of stepping into her face like that? I swear, sometimes I wonder how you can be so crude and so delicate on the same day. It astounds me," Phoenix admonished him.

"Close the door, please, Gabe," she ordered her personal guard.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

As the door closed, the beast woman mouthed the word thank you to Phoenix, and she winked back.

"Why did you just wink?" Astaroth asked, snapping his head back toward the door as it closed completely.

"I didn't wink. I had something in my eye. Now sit down. We have a few things I would like to do if we pass the rest of our day in here."

"Oh? Really? What kind of things?" Astaroth asked, wriggling his eyebrows.

"Shut up, dummy. Sit down; we have plenty of work to do. You know? Proper work? Something you have been skimping on for over a month?" she teased him.

"Hey! That wasn't my fault!" he rebuked.

Phoenix giggled, taking her stack of paper and splitting it in the middle. She then slammed it across her desk in front of the despairing Astaroth.

"Go through these. These are members of Aces High, whom I still haven't accepted to break the contract. Most of them are dead weight, and don't deserve to stay in Paragon. But they refuse to leave."

Astaroth looked at the piles, and his head spun.

"How are so many of them who don't want to break the contracts? From what you told me, those are basically slavery contracts..."

"I know. Listen, they are afraid that they won't be able to find another guild if they leave. I get it. This world has become a dangerous place to be a solo player. But I don't want uncommitted people in Paragon or people who risk selling our info at the first sign of danger..."

Astaroth sighed, dragging the pile closer to him.

"Fine... Let's get this over with..."

Chapter 845 Making A Run For It

After an hour of reading and filling, Astaroth was already mentally drained beyond repair.

"URGH!! Release me from this torture, oh mighty gods!" he lamented, his face on the desk.

Phoenix sighed in annoyance at his drama.

"It's only been an hour... What are you complaining about? I've been doing this at least four hours daily, every day, for the last few weeks."

Astaroth moaned, still face-first on the desk surface.

"I hate doing paperwork. It's soooooo booooooring!" he complained.

Sigh

"Fine! We can take a few minutes of break. But no more complaining after that!" she scolded him.

His face rose from the desk, a sheet of paper stuck to it.

"Really?! Thank you so much, oh benevolent goddess!" he exclaimed, giving her puppy eyes.

"Tch! Don't push your luck. You're cute, but not that cute."

Astaroth chuckled, shooting up from his chair and stretching, looking at the door to the office.

"I'll go take a quick run around the palace to stretch my legs. That okay?" he asked Phoenix with a smile.

"Sure. Just don't forget your personal guard. I tried ditching mine once, and Rodney chewed me up."

"I'll go take a quick run around the palace to stretch my legs. That okay?" he asked Phoenix with a smile.

"Sure. Just don't forget your personal guard. I tried ditching mine once, and Rodney chewed me up."

Astaroth grinned.

"Sure. If she can follow me, that is."

As he walked to the door slowly, Phoenix looked up at him and felt the mana build up in his lower body.

"Astaroth don't, you'll—"

But it was already too late.

The moment Astaroth opened the door, a sonic boom erupted, sending a shock wave inside the office, and all the papers on the desk flew up, dancing in a chaotic aerial ballet.

"Mess up the office..." she finished her sentence, looking at the flying sheets of paper.

With a deep sigh, she controlled their fall so they wouldn't scatter too far. She would still have to set them back into their proper files, but at least she saved herself some time.

"I swear, he never thinks before acting. He's a man when it comes times to certain things. But he acts like a child the remainder of the time..." she mumbled, shaking her head in discontent.

A second sonic boom erupted from outside the door, and Phoenix snickered.

"Too bad for him, Rodney thought about everything. He won't leave that guard in the dust for long."

Astaroth had darted directly for the palace doors, bolting out of the building like hell was on his tail. He wanted to give a little test to his guard to see if she could find him when he fled.

But when he heard the second sonic boom, his mind froze momentarily.

"There is no way..." he told himself, looking behind.

He was already halfway out of the inner section of Bastion City, but he could already see a trail of dust kick up behind him.

Astaroth looked back forward, his eyes turning from playful to serious.

'Fine. Let's see how long you can keep up.'

As he thought this, he landed on the top of the inner wall, his leg briefly growing bigger as the fabric of his pants threatened to burst from the sudden expansion, and he rocketed off the top of the wall toward the forest.

He left a small crater on the top of the wall that automatically started repairing itself and flashed out of sight. But he wasn't the only one who could boost themselves.

Right next to where he had landed, another figure briefly touched the top of the inner wall, before another crater appeared.

The distance to the outer wall was too vast for them to cover in one jump, but Astaroth had no intention of landing.

With a single thought, a pair of wings grew on his back, which he flapped with power, accelerating again toward the outside of the city.

But he saw under him a white blur, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, almost following his speed as they barrelled out of the city.

"Jesus. How fast is that woman?" Astaroth asked, looking below as the guard accelerated again outside the city.

Astaroth could barely see her moving through the canopy of the Elven forest, but he knew she was there. Her mana presence was unmistakable.

Astaroth clicked his tongue, annoyed at her persistence.

"Speed isn't enough when trying to prove yourself to me. Let's see what you do against strength!"

He flapped his wings vigorously, accelerating again, and looped around toward the ground. Entering the canopy like an arrow off a bow, Astaroth aimed directly at the woman, the wings on his back disappearing as his skin turned red.

With a spin of his body, he kicked at the rapidly incoming woman, a grin on his face.

He saw how she had followed him and was now convinced he knew what she was.

Selena, whose arms and legs had turned to powerful tiger paws, was jumping in the trees, following her quarry's scent, when she suddenly gasped in surprise.

The king's scent had just changed, and a red being that looked like him was now directly before her, its leg aimed at her midsection.

Her first reflex was to curl up, so the incoming attack wouldn't hit her fragile stomach, but as soon as the leg hit her arms, she knew it wouldn't be enough.

It felt like she was trying to hold back a mountain from crushing her almost instantly; the speed and mass of her assailant all concentrated on that one point.

Instinctively, her body ballooned in size, an ear-shattering roar escaping her mouth.

Her legs, the armour on it morphing away to reveal powerful tiger hind legs, clamped down on the branch below her, her arms going from a guarding position to a grappling one.

She contorted in a swift movement, shifting the momentum of the kick sideways as she spun out of the attack. But she hadn't released the leg yet.

This caused Astaroth's grin to vanish as the momentum of his attack suddenly worked against him.

His body started shifting sideways, and he knew he had screwed up.

The woman, who now looked more animal than human, spun a complete turn once before releasing the leg and sending Astaroth away, like a rock launching from a sling.

Moments later, there was a trail of destruction, trees uprooted, rocks shattered, and the ground gouged out, for about a hundred meters, at the end of which, Astaroth was currently embedded inside a bigger tree than the others, head down toward the ground, laughing his lungs out.

"Woo! That was a surprise!"

Chapter 846 Discussing A Past Interaction

The tiger woman took a moment to calm down her pounding heart. Her animal nature had taken control over her senses, feeling the impending threat, and she had reacted with all her might.

With all intents and purposes, her attack had contained killing intent. But now that she realized who she had thrown, her heart froze.

Dashing toward the king, still embedded in the tree, she returned to her human appearance, with only her ears and tail remaining.

"I'm so sorry, King Astaroth!" she immediately apologized, kowtowing into the dirt.

"I shouldn't have attacked you back! I should have dodged or taken the strike! I will take any punishment you deem fit!" she exclaimed, not even looking at him.

That's when she realized Astaroth was laughing his ass off.

"Ahahahahaha! That was blood-rushing! Who'd have thought someone could fling me around like that? I wouldn't have put all my strength behind a hit if I'd known. Ahahahahaha!"

She lifted her head a bit, looking at him to make sure he wasn't faking, and noticed his upside-down body lodged in the tree trunk.

"Pfft!"

Slapping her hands on her mouth to contain her laughter, her eyes widened.

Astaroth looked at her with a big, dumb grin.

"If you want to laugh, at least help me down. You lodged me in here good. I'm stuck," Astaroth said, trying to wiggle free.

The tree crackled around him, but he was still stuck.

"Pfft! Yes, my king! Aha! Ahahaha! Right away, sir! I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh! Ahahaha!"

She trembled as she tried to contain her laughter, but Astaroth couldn't care less.

As far as he was concerned, this was a situation of his making. She could laugh all she wanted, but at least she should help him down.

Which she did, her body still shivering as she tried to laugh silently.

After helping him down, Selena tried her best to contain her laughter while Astaroth brushed the wood shrapnel out of his clothes.

"Of fine. I guess you still have a certain use. At least you have the speed and reflexes needed to follow me around. I guess Rodney thought about this long enough to come up with a viable solution," Astaroth said, as he finished straightening out his outfit.

"We should head back, sir. We shouldn't be outside the palace alone. Even if you are powerful enough to fight most things in these woods, it's better to stay safe inside the walls..." Selena said, glancing around.

She could already feel the gazes of curious monsters, but they were staying away. Selena thought it was because of her domineering aura, given that she used to terrorize most of those monsters.

But the truth was far from.

What they feared was the presence they had felt moments ago when Astaroth had changed into his demon form.

With how often corruption took hold of monsters in the Elven forests lately, even the monsters had grown to fear the essence of demons naturally. And he reeked of it, even if it was only for a short while.

"I just needed to stretch my legs, anyway. We can head back," Astaroth replied, sensing the monsters too, but not caring.

He could tell there wasn't anything powerful enough to hurt him in the immediate vicinity. A monster with that power level would give off an aura that could hardly be contained or hidden.

Astaroth ran instead of flying as they darted back toward the city. He used this time to get a feel of his new guard's true essence.

"Why do I feel like I've seen you before?" he asked.

He already had an idea about the answer to that question, but he wanted her to say it.

"We might have crossed paths before. It's been a long time, though. I'm actually surprised you haven't aged more than that in ten years," Selena responded, looking at him nervously.

"I seem to recall a white tiger from before the update. One that called me a flea. Does that ring any bell?" Astaroth asked, giving her a knowing look.

"I don't recall ever saying those words, ah ha ha ha," she laughed, her forehead suddenly covered in sweat.

"Don't worry about it. That was probably an accurate description at the time," Astaroth said, chuckling.

"Sir. You had defeated the ruler of the forest, Leon, back then. I believe you could have killed me if we had fought."

Astaroth looked at her with a snicker.

"I didn't exactly win that combat. I used a dirty trick and paid the price for it as much as he did. The difference is that I had allies to help me recover. He didn't," Astaroth defended Leon.

"A win is a win, sir. In the animal kingdom, it doesn't matter if you kill your prey after they are wounded. It only means you were more careful and cunning," Selena rebuked.

Astaroth could tell she was on the defensive about this one, and he assumed it was because she most likely won more than one fight precisely like that.

'A frightening mentality, given she is supposed to defend me...' he thought.

"In any case, that win was only one reason Leon followed me instead of betraying me on the first occasion. The other is that I made him stronger. Everyone becomes more pliable at the offer of power."

Selena tilted her head to the side, looking at him with curiosity.

"How could a mortal make a being already more powerful than it, even stronger?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"By pulling in favours with gods, heh," Astaroth chuckled.

Of course, this wasn't something he could do at any time. But it had served him that one time.

He could see the shock in the tiger-woman's eyes.

Being able to pull a favour from the gods wasn't something just anyone could accomplish.

"Don't think too hard about it. It cost me just as much as it cost the god. It was more of a transaction than a favour. I'm not blessed by the gods, I assure you. Hell, I might be as far from their favourite person as is possible," Astaroth added with pessimistic laughter.

'I doubt any god will want to approach me with a hundred-foot pole, now that Gaius has his eyes on me...' he mused.

Chapter 847 Another Fruit?

But his statement only brought her more curiosity.

If the gods did not favour him, then why would they even entertain a transaction with him? Gods were fickle by nature and hardly ever cared about mortals.

What made a god lay eyes on him and agree to trade something with him, especially something as important as power?

She especially wanted to know because it was the reason Leon had defeated her that time. He had grown more powerful.

They had been an equal match until that fight and had skirmished many times. Leon was the reason she held the nickname False King before.

The proper title would have been False Queen, but Leon had never bothered to find out if she was male or female before giving her the new moniker.

And he only did that after he decimated all her followers who refused to go under him.

Shaking her head, Selena shook the thoughts away.

'That is in the past. We are on the same side now. He is my leader, and this mortal is my king. No use thinking about it any longer...'

Of course, Astaroth could see the emotions changing on her face and could guess her thought process.

"If there were a way to power you up easily, trust me, I would. We'll need all the power we can get in the foreseeable future, and having another Legendary or Mythic beast under our banner would do wonders. Sadly, I don't know what I can do..."

Hearing his words, Selena snapped her head toward him.

"Do you mean it?"

"Huh?" Astaroth asked, confused.

"Do you mean your words? Would you help me become more powerful if there was a way?"

Astaroth looked at her with a confused gaze. He halted his steps, stopping in the middle of the forest.

By the look on her face, Selena already knew of a way.

"It depends. I would if I could be assured of your continued loyalty. And loyalty isn't something you buy. I don't know you or know if I can trust you."

Selena frowned slightly.

"I assumed you didn't know Leon long before helping grow, either. What is different with me?" she asked with a bit of reproach.

"That is a good question, and the answer is simple. I made him promise before the goddess that helped me help him. He didn't have a choice. I can hardly make you promise before that same goddess, given that I don't even know if she still exists."

Selena frowned at his statement.

Gods didn't simply stop existing. They weren't mortals whose life could end at any given time.

"In any case, I assume you ask because you know a way. Is this way limited to you, or can it be applied to others?"

Selena's traits changed to worry.

'Is he going to force me to tell him and steal my chance?' she wondered, becoming guarded.

"And don't bother lying to me. I'll know," Astaroth said, suddenly expanding his aura into her.

The difference in power between them wasn't very high, but his control of magic was much higher than hers, which meant he could read her like an open book.

With a deep sigh, Selena gave up her trump card.

"I didn't want to tell anyone this because I was hoping to use it myself. But it's not a personal method. It's an item..."

Astaroth looked at her, curiosity taking hold of him.

"What kind of item?"

Selena wasn't sure she wanted to tell him, but there was no more going back at this point.

"I found it a long time ago—a cave, with inside it a root. And on the root grew a small tree that bore fruit. It has never reached maturity, though, so it hasn't attracted any other creatures to it. The fruit is stillborn."

Astaroth's eyes went wide.

'Another evolution fruit? No... It can't be. Those fruits shouldn't grow in such a short time, right?' he wondered, his thoughts racing.

"Bring me to that cave," Astaroth ordered her.

"Sir... I think we—"

"I wasn't asking."

"..."

Astaroth stared at her for a while before her shoulders dropped and her head drooped.

"Fine. But I implore you, sir. I've been waiting for this chance for decades. Please don't take this away from me..."

Astaroth didn't bother replying.

For now, he had no intention of taking the chance away from her. He only wanted to verify what the fruit was and see if there was a chance it was the same fruit he gave to Leon.

He would decide from there what to do with it.

He quickly messaged Phoenix, telling her something had come up. Something that could benefit them, the kingdom, and the guild, if it was what he thought.

She was pissed, at first, stating he was leaving her alone to do the tedious work again. But he said she could wait for him if she wanted to, that he wouldn't take long.

She took him up on his offer and made him promise he wouldn't flake on her again.

Astaroth followed the Beastwoman through the forest, reaching parts of it that he was sure hadn't been explored, given the aura of danger permeating the air.

He could feel a multitude of stares on him, like hundreds of creatures were staring at him from afar. But he could tell they feared him more than he feared them.

Luna was still recovering inside his soul, but he could feel her soul reacting to something.

'Papa. I feel a potent source of life nearby... But something is wrong with it... It feels—'

'Dead. Yes, I can feel it, too. But there is still hope. If the source gives off this strong of a signature, then there is still a chance we can salvage it.'

Luna became silent again, focusing on reforming her body, while Astaroth and Selena reached a cave entrance.

"This is the place..." Selena said, looking at Astaroth's face, trying to discern his intentions.

"Take me to the fruit. I think I know what I'm dealing with."

Astaroth could feel it, now that he was closer. A strong vein of Aether passed under this cave.

A part of the Ley lines that connected under Bastion City.

'Something is wrong with them, though. Like they were supposed to converge here and were stretched further...'

He would have to ask Aravelle if he knew about this later. But for now, it was time to find a treasure.

Chapter 848 Touching The Fruit

Selena guided him into the cave, which sunk into the ground on a semi-steep slope. Astaroth saw her change her feet to clawed feet, somewhere at a half-point between her normal tiger feet and her human ones, and thought of doing the same.

But he still hadn't called out White Death since they reconnected, and he somehow felt it wasn't the right time. Like his soul recognized that the wolf was doing something important, and couldn't be bothered for now.

So, instead, he used basic telekinesis to push his feet down on the ground, to augment his grip. It was uncomfortable, like he had someone stepping on his feet constantly, but it was better than slipping and possibly hurting himself.

They proceeded downward for a while, and Astaroth could now clearly feel the Aether veins that lay below the stone. But his question only grew as he felt two different veins, which should have joined together by all measures.

He could see the serpentine they did toward each other, yet they stayed apart.

As Astaroth analyzed the Ley lines, he didn't notice they had reached flat ground. It was only when Selena called out to him that he noticed.

"Sir. This way. If you keep going straight, you'll end up in my old lair. There is nothing there anymore, so it's pointless."

Astaroth nodded, turning toward her and following behind her once more.

"You made this cave your lair because you could protect the fruit? Or were here before it?" he asked.

Selena looked at him with confused eyes.

"How old do you think I am? Even I could tell this fruit was way older than me. I moved in here when I found it. I lived in another section of the forest before."

Astaroth pinched his lips, realizing his comment was misconstrued as an insult.

"I'm sorry if you felt I was calling you old. It's just, you can never know with powerful beasts and magic users..."

She waved her hand dismissively.

"Forget about it. We are here, anyway," she said, turning a corner.

Astaroth turned the corner behind her, and they entered a large alcove where a small tree grew, no bigger than a Bonzai. Although, no leaves remained on it, and a single, dried-up fruit hung from its branches.

But he could feel the residual Aether inside the core of the fruit.

Scanning it, his face morphed into a grin.

Evolution fruit (unripe)

Ripeness level: 98%

Status: Dried up (100%)

Description: This evolution fruit was close to reaching maturity when the source of its growth was wrenched from under the tree it grew on. It dried out over the last centuries and now requires a heavy influx of Aether to finish its growth. Eating it as is could cause severe damage to the essence of any living being.

**

Astaroth now understood why the fruit was still there. There was a chance that, at some point, another creature might have guarded the fruit when it was almost ripe. But seeing at the cusp of ripening, nothing would have jumped the gun.

But as the energy grew, it dissipated, and whatever creature that would have been guarding it would have realized it was weakening. And instead of taking a risk, they gave it up.

This was how it went undetected for so long. And Selena had been lucky to find it.

But even if she remained by its side forever, it would have never changed.

Astaroth stepped up to the fruit, slightly touching it, and injected a single point of Aether inside it. The moment he did, the fruit shook, and his system rang.

Ding!

Special event prompted: Revive the fruit!

Rewards: ???

You have stumbled upon a rare discovery in New Eden: a Fruit of Evolution! Congratulations! But this fruit is incomplete and requires an influx of power to finish developing. Your injection of Aether into the fruit has rekindled its instincts of survival. Will you help it grow?

Yes / No

**

Astaroth looked at the prompt and felt a hand clench onto his shoulder.

"Sir. I don't know what you did, but I felt the fruit react. I beg you. Please. If you make this fruit ripen and let me consume it, I will swear my allegiance to you and the kingdom forever!"

He could see the seriousness in her gaze and the flashes of greed when she glanced at the fruit.

"I can't guarantee the fruit will go to you without more than just a promise of loyalty. Swear allegiance now, and the fruit is yours. Otherwise, this deal is off the table, and I'll feed it to another being. Or I can eat it myself," Astaroth said, locking his eyes into hers.

He saw a flash of rage go through her gaze, but she quickly became subdued.

Kneeling on the stone ground, Selena lowered her head and put her hand above her head.

"I, Selena Catz, White Tiger of the East, swear allegiance to King Astaroth, ruler of Stellar Woodlands and the aforementioned kingdom. May the gods be my witnesses and punish me should I betray my word."

Though no cloud dotted its skies, thunder rumbled over the Elven forest. People with knowledge of pledges to the gods instantly recognized the sign.

Inside Bastion City's palace, Leon felt his tether with Selena shift away from him, and his face turned to a frown. When he heard the thunder rumbling, his eyes widened.

"He got her to pledge to him? No way... I thought that tiger was way too stubborn to pledge to a mortal... Something is up..." Leon mumbled to himself.

Astaroth felt the connection establish itself, and he smiled.

Tapping yes on the quest window, Astaroth helped the Beastwoman up.

"I require nothing more from you than this. I will gladly honour this promise," he claimed, putting his hand on the fruit again.

He pumped every single Aether point he could muster inside the fruit, which was a grand total of a hundred, and the fruit suddenly cracked before shining in a bright white light.

A burst of mist shot out into the cavern with the crack and the light, filling it with a sweet and tangy scent.

Astaroth received another notification, and his face dropped.

"Fuck..."

Ding!

You have completed the special event: Revive the fruit!

Reward received: 1000 World Reputation

You have received a follow-up special event: Ripening the Fruit!

Rewards: Fruit of Evolution, +5000 World Reputation points

Failure Penalty: Loss of the fruit, -5000 World Reputation points, Selena's eternal resentment.

Conditions for Success: Complete the ripening of the Evolution Fruit; keep it safe.

Conditions for Failure: Fail to ripen the fruit, Lose the fruit, Fruit gets destroyed.

Description: You have successfully reawakened the fruit from its deep slumber. Now, it yearns for sustenance. Failure to provide with Aether to ripen will cause it to decay and rot forever.

The reawakening of the fruit so close to ripeness has caused the beasts in the immediate vicinity to enter into a frenzy. Defend the fruit as you feed it, lest it get stolen. Don't let enemies damage the fruit during its growth, or it will shatter and be lost.

Timer before the fruit starts rotting: 4:50

Aether required to ripen: 492,254/500,000

Quest cannot be declined. Good luck, player Astaroth!

**

"Shit! Fuck!" Astaroth cursed as he realized his mistake.

His lack of planning was once again kicking him in the balls. But he had no time to lament.

He could already feel the ground rumbling above him from the monsters rushing their way. And he knew there would be more than they could handle.

Especially since he had to maintain the feeding of the fruit.

But even then, he didn't know how to do that. He had nowhere near enough Aether to finish the ripening, even if he melded with Luna and activated Royal Protection.

And Aether wasn't a resource he could replenish that quickly. Five minutes would never be enough time.

"Selena, defend the cave entrance as best you can. You'll have to do it alone; I have to complete the ripening. I'll send people your way as fast as possible!" Astaroth commanded her.

"Yes, Sir!"

She bolted out of the alcove and headed toward the entrance. She wouldn't make it in time for some beasts to enter, but at least she could halt them on the slope.

Astaroth paced around the alcove, trying to figure out how to feed enough Aether into the fruit so he didn't fail the quest, but his mind was like muddied waters.

"Come on, Astaroth, think. Think, man!"

'How was it getting the energy it needed, anyway? If my theory is correct, there was a previous Ley line connection. But it's gone now. How do I even give it enough Aether to compensate for that?' he wondered, his mind racing.

A rock fell from the ceiling, clattering to the ground next to him, and Astaroth felt his hair rise.

Immediately, he snapped his head upward, only to see a pair of sharp pincers bearing down on him. Reacting off of instinct, his skin turned red, and he kicked the insect away, watching it slam into the wall left of the fruit.

"Fuck! I have to be careful about damaging it!" he shouted, panicking slightly.

But his troubles weren't ending.

More and more insects started dropping from the ceiling into the alcove, and there wasn't much room to defend himself. Plus, he still hadn't found a way to feed the damned fruit.

"Can this day get any worse!?" he clamoured as he dashed forward.

Things quickly got dicey within the alcove as he pulled out the Ad Astra in greatsword form, hacking and slashing away at the insect-type monsters dropping from above.

The flow was practically endless, and his mind was getting cloudier and cloudier.

'I have to feed the fruit. But I can't stop killing those monsters... What in the fuck can I do?'

A feminine voice replied in his head.

'Let me out. I'll deal with the vermin. I'm wounded, but it's nothing these insects can do anything about.'

'Shegror? But I can't let you out here. The cave is much too small to accommodate your dragon body.'

'Irrelevant. I'm coming out,' Shegror replied.

Astaroth felt a large part of his remaining mana drain out as the dragon forcibly exited the confines of his soul.

He watched in horror as a massive form of light engulfed the room, thinking she would crush the fruit and fail his quest.

But the light shrunk instantly, reaching the size of a person only slightly bigger than Violette.

As the light faded, Astaroth saw a woman take its place, hair black and skin of alabaster, with eyes greener than emeralds. She was wearing a black and green kimono-style dress and held two thin needles dripping with greenish liquid in her hands.

Every time the drops hit the stone ground, a sizzle would echo, and smoke would rise as the stone melted.

"What the fuck?" Astaroth said, his mind reeling in confusion.

"I know you've never seen this form of mine, but now is not the time to gawk. Get to work 'Master'" Shegror said, dripping the last word with mocking.

Astaroth shook his head. She was right.

He could tell it was really Shegror by the tether between them, anyway. So he didn't have a reason to worry.

But his true challenge still awaited him. How in the hell was he supposed to feed this fruit with almost eight thousand points of Aether?

Above the ground, another figure appeared that was here to help.

"I recognize this place. This is where Selena used to hole up. This is bad. I can smell the fruit inside. What was this idiot thinking, pulling out an Evolution Fruit so far in monster territory..." Leon spat, looking at the monsters rushing a small cave entrance not far from him.

The monsters were ignoring him, as their minds were locked on the enchanting smell that came from the cave's mouth. Even Leon had trouble keeping his mind clear.

But he knew he had to defend the cave. So he did what he did best.

RRROOOAAARRR!!!

The ground shook, the trees quivered, leaves falling from them, and the beasts all around him halted in fear.

"That's right, you brainless shits! That fruit isn't yours to consume! Come at me if you want to feed on it!"

A cacophony of roars, wails, screeches, and other monstrous sounds echoed in response as a part of the monster hoard hooked towards the new threat to their evolution.

'This'll have to do. I hope you have something planned, Astaroth. Hah! Who am I kidding? Of course, you don't. But I know you'll pull through,' Leon thought, readying for an intense fight.

Chapter 850 A Desperate Attempt

Astaroth could feel the intensity of the battle behind him, as well as in the cave and above ground, and realized he wasn't as defenceless as he thought. But this was far from a won fight.

After all, even if they kept monsters from coming in or reaching the fruit, there was still no way to feed the darned thing enough Aether to make it ripen.

His mind raced in all directions, thinking about every solution his brain could crap out, but nothing came close to the amount he needed.

Even with the crazy theory he came up with, he still didn't think it would be enough.

'Geminae. I have a question.'

It took a moment for the little angel to respond.

'Yes?'

'Do you think I could meld with Luna, even if I'm changed into your or the imp's form? I need to maximize my Aether intake, but I don't have many options.'

Geminae frowned inside his soul space.

'You shouldn't be messing with Aether that much. It's the energy of the gods, and it's not something mortals at your level should fool around with. It's a miracle that you can use it at all,' he replied.

'Just answer my question. Could I, or could I not?'

With a sigh, Geminae responded.

'In theory, you could. But I wouldn't try it in a dangerous environment. If there is whiplash, you want to be in a safe place. This is hardly what I would call safe.'

Astaroth agreed with his reasoning. But this didn't fix his current problem.

'I cannot fail this quest. I would have planned better if I knew it came with penalties. But, as it stands, I can't complete it, regardless. Should I just cut my losses?' he wondered.

But Geminae cut his train of thought.

'Why don't you fix the Ley lines, then?'

'Fix them? What do you mean?'

'I mean, this fruit shouldn't have grown anywhere else than over a Ley line junction. This means that something or someone altered them from their original path, and that's why the fruit dried.'

'You might be able to pull on them to fix them if you change into my form and meld with the deer.'

'The deer's name is Luna, and this is insane. I don't have the kind of power to pull both Ley lines back together. That's a monstrous level of power it would need.'

But what Geminae told him did give him an idea. One that would require less power but more control.

And he was much more proficient in that department when he changed into Geminae's body or melded with Luna.

'Luna. Do you feel strong enough to meld with me for at most 3 minutes?' he asked her.

Luna's unease washed over him.

'It's okay. I'll use Geminae. You keep resting. I know Gaius did a number on you.'

Astaroth had completely assimilated Geminae's body with a thought, and his power surged.

But he didn't need the power right now. He needed the body's natural attunement and control of Aether.

Reaching into the ground with his mind, he made contact with the Ley line, the Aetheric powers flowing in it immediately flowing into his mind, making him grunt in pain.

"Ungh! It's like lava just flowed into my brain!" he yelled out.

Shegror felt the surge, her strength suddenly jumping up. Since she had made a deal with Astaroth to take a part of his mana at all times, suddenly juicing up on Aether also affected her.

But she couldn't take her mind off the combat. She was already having a hard time as it was.

Shegror was a dragon. They didn't deal in finesse.

When a horde of enemies appeared on their doorstep, they were one dragon's breath away from death.

But if she did that in here, she would assuredly melt the Evolution Fruit.

She was already tempted to take the fruit and run when it was ripe, but she knew her new master would tear her a new one. So, destroying it was also out of the question.

But the power boost made her quicker, stronger, and more resistant. She could now anticipate and strike preemptively where she had previously only handled the enemies pouring out.

It made her job so much easier.

As for Astaroth, he had to pull on the Aether as best he could without burning his body out and send it directly into the fruit. He was basically acting like a booster cable for the Ley line.

But this came at a price.

Astaroth watched as his health ticked away with every passing second.

-10,000

-10,000

...

If he hadn't raised his health by using Geminae's body, he would already be dead. And as it was, he could barely split his focus to cast some healing on himself occasionally.

He was keeping himself alive, if only barely, to feed this darned fruit.

And the more Aether poured into the fruit, the more the smell of it became intense.

This, in turn, affected the monsters all around the cave and within it, as they started showing signs of healing as the combat went on.

It was like they were strengthening from the residual scent alone.

This was because they were all lower-tier beasts, which would have significantly benefitted from such a blessing as the Evolution Fruit. And now, just being in its presence was already helping them.

But this only made Selena, Shegror, and Leon's jobs all that more difficult.

Leon wasn't having trouble beating the enemies into pulps, but there were so many. He could not stop the flow going toward the cave.

Not unless he let loose. And that was a risk in itself.

He could cause a cave collapse or send too much fire toward it and risk the flames licking into some burrows and burning the fruit.

And now, with the scent getting stronger, it was also bound to attract stronger monsters.

'This is just a gift that keeps on giving, isn't it? No wonder it attracted me all those years back...'
Leon mused as he slashed a bear into pieces with his claws.

"I hope it's not all for nothing..." he muttered.