

New Eden 851

Chapter 851 Canine Reinforcements

In the cave, about halfway down the slope that led to the fruit's alcove, Selena was having a whole other set of problems.

The cavern tunnel wasn't much in terms of width or height, so she didn't have as many enemies swarming her simultaneously. But the frenzied monsters were starting to pile up behind the first row, and slowly but surely, the pile was pushing her down the slope.

Luckily for her, even though unbeknownst, Leon had taken a heavy burden off her shoulders by taunting the monsters outside. He may not grab all their attention, but he was lessening the speed at which she was being driven down.

But Selena was built more for speed than power in her current human form, and if she tried changing into her tiger form, she would no longer be able to handle the horde.

Her size would keep her from being as mobile as she was now, and she would quickly start letting enemies through.

This wasn't an ideal outcome, so she tried to hold it off for as long as possible. But there was only so little she could do in this form.

She had yet to see any ally come to her side, as the king had promised her, but she knew the situation was not as simple.

Bouncing off the walls and ceiling, she kept slashing at vital parts of the incoming monsters, dealing fatal or near-fatal damage on each strike. But there was a quality in quantity.

Selena fought with all her might, leaving piles of corpses on the slope that the monsters stepped over, transforming into paste and blood. This quickly transformed the downward tunnel into a river of blood and other bodily fluids, making it dangerous.

But Selena was not giving up.

The blood and guts splashed on her with every step she touched the ground, and the pristine white fur on her feet was already stained red and dripping with every movement. Her claws kept her from slipping as she pounced and leapt.

But something needed to change.

'I'm almost at the bottom of the slope. At this, I'll be pushed into the alcove again in two minutes. This isn't enough time!'

Inside said alcove, Astaroth was still struggling to stay alive against the Aether rippling through his mind and body. But he could sense the incoming monsters for miles around and knew the dire situation was about to take a turn for the worse.

'Genie! White! I don't know where you guys are, but I need you!' he shouted through their mental connection.

And, like the bells of a church announcing a new day, two howls suddenly echoed through the woods, reaching inside the alcove through the multiple tunnels dug into the ceiling.

On the surface, zone bosses and rare monsters had started appearing amongst the masses of monsters, and Leon had to divert his entire attention to them lest they push into Selena and kill her. This, in turn, allowed more monsters to push into the Beastwoman, accelerating her trip downward. But, suddenly, a burst of roots and wind blades flew into the horde of monsters, decimating dozens of them in a single second before two howls echoed through the forest.

Leon saw a flash of white and brown zip past him, dashing into the horde, straight for the tunnel's entrance, before blocking it with its body.

"About time you showed up, Genie. Let them have it, girl!" Leon shouted at her as he kicked away a giant stag beetle, whose shell resounded like steel under his foot.

The next second, a blue flash zipped past him as well, hovering over the mountain the cave was in and sinking into a burrow.

"Huh?" Leon exclaimed, confused.

Astaroth felt his hair stand on end inside the alcove as the air suddenly filled with static electricity. His mind immediately panicked as flashes of the Raijū's lightning in his sight filled his mind.

He couldn't look away from the fruit as he was focused on redirecting the Aether towards it, but he heard the distinct low growl of a canine behind him.

Lightning bolts arced in all directions around him, vaporizing the insect-type enemies that had burrowed their way into the alcove before he heard a snicker from Shegror.

"Heh! Blue suits you, Death. Take care of this room; I'll help the tiger girl!"

A bark echoed in the room, and Astaroth felt Shegror dash out of the room.

That's when Astaroth recognized the essence of the being inside the alcove with him. Although it had changed slightly, he could still feel the tether inside his mind.

'I'm sorry I'm late, master. We were already fighting some of these monsters a little ways away from here when a sweet scent wafted over us. We ended up following them toward here as you asked for help and slowed down to kill some of them on our way here.'

Astaroth took a second to look away from the fruit, taking two ticks of damage because of whiplash from his failing concentration, and saw White Death, whose fur wasn't as white as before, clear blue striped zigzagging on his pelt.

He had no horn on his forehead, like the Raijū, but a single blue star was marked on his forehead where the horn should have been.

"What the hell happened to you?" he yelled before snapping his head toward the fruit.

'Long story. We can discuss this later. The battle is about to get a lot rougher. We brought along unwanted guests,' White replied.

And as he said that, the ground of the cavern shook, as a massive hole appeared right at the entrance. And from inside, it climbed out a giant mole-looking monster with red eyes.

It screeched at White and Astaroth, the former responding with a threatening growl.

"Shit. I can't help you fight it. Not until this damned fruit is done ripening," Astaroth shouted, feeling the energy level of this monster.

It was at least an Elite grade and most likely a Zone Boss.

'I'll be fine. This new form doesn't just come with new powers, master. This monster is barely a match for me now,' White confidently replied.

"I hope you can back that statement. Because at this rate, this fruit will kill me before I can ripen it," Astaroth shouted, looking at the quest interface.

Fruit Ripeness: 99%

'Only halfway there, and I'm already exhausted, almost dead, and the monsters are only getting fiercer. This is terrible...'

Chapter 852 Pissed-Off Dragon

The timer on the event was ticking down fast, and Astaroth was now sure this transfer rate wasn't enough. He would either die before the fruit ripened or, by some miracle, survive and still fail the quest.

But there was nothing more he could think of.

What little brain capacity he had left that wasn't dedicated to concentrating on the Aether flow, he dedicated to healing himself when his skill came off cooldown.

And it was already a lucky break that changing into Geminae gave him one at all, inside New Eden. He was pretty sure that his healing capacity outside New Eden was just brute-forcing the target's usual regenerative capacity through Aether.

There was only a slim chance this would translate to a healing spell in New Eden, and it had after his second notification had rung.

Astaroth focused on the fruit, hoping for a Hail Mary, but only a minute remained, and he wasn't anywhere close to his target.

Fruit Ripeness: 498,324/500,000

Fruit Ripeness: 498,334/500,000

Fruit Ripeness: 498,344/500,000

Fruit expires in 00:57

'Shit! Fuck! Shit!' Astaroth cursed in his mind.

On the surface, Leon had already taken out two of the seven zone bosses that had shown up, and the last five were in awful shape. But he wasn't without wounds.

He quickly found out during this fight that the zone bosses, individually, weren't much of a threat. But they were smart enough to realize this and were working together.

They had come to a tacit understanding that, with this enemy present, none of them could take the fruit and evolve. With this established, they had agreed non-verbally to work together to take him down and fight for the fruit later, when the coast was clear.

This had led to many situations where Leon was outnumbered and couldn't defend from all attacks. And, although his body was highly resilient, he wasn't invulnerable.

Both sides were now locked in a stare-down. The first one to move might lose this battle, and neither side wanted to die.

"Come on, you dumb beasts! Come at me, already! You think you got what it takes to kill me, huh?! Come on!" Leon shouted at them.

But not a single enemy twitched at the taunting.

They all circled him in hopes of finding an opening. But Leon had experienced multiple-foe fighting before and more often than he cared to count. He was on high alert, and his head was on a swivel.

Nothing got past his heightened senses.

Not the twitch of an eye or the jumping of a muscle.

And his body reacted automatically, making any enemy about to attack reconsider and stand down. But this stalemate wasn't advantageous for either side, either.

The monster horde pushing into the tunnels was getting out of hand.

If Leon didn't get into that cave, there was no telling how long Selena would last. He had no idea there was already someone that was helping her.

Genie was blocking as many enemies as she could, but her stamina was quickly running out, and her root and stone armour was in shambles. The situation was dire for her, just as much as for Leon.

A group of Elite monsters had her surrounded, ready to pounce on her at a moment's notice, similar to Leon's current problem.

'If something doesn't change quickly, this becomes our grave,' Leon thought.

But a sudden subsonic pulse echoed through the forest, stunning almost every creature around and making them dizzy.

Even the zone bosses were affected, if only slightly. But Leon would never waste such an opening.

Before the enemies could react, Leon had already barrelled forward, and two of them had their throats slashed.

There was no more stalemate to hold, so the others dived in, but Leon had a grin on his face.

A mana wave washed out of the cave, followed by a blast of green liquid and a roar.

"This show is finally getting back on track, hahaha!" Leon shouted, laughing maniacally.

Inside the tunnels, about three-quarters of the way up the slope, moments before the blast of green, Selena was fighting with renewed vigour. Her impromptu ally had promised her a way to take away the load from their shoulders.

If she could hold them off for ten seconds, she would wipe the tunnel clear of all enemies in their path and make them a path toward the cave entrance.

She had been unsure, at first, until she saw black scales suddenly form on the woman's neck and face.

"Don't make me repeat myself," Shegror had threatened, her green eyes turning reptilian.

Selena wasn't about to piss off a dragon, as even she knew that it was suicide, and she complied.

Fighting with all her might, she held back the onslaught of enemies on her own for the longest ten seconds of her life. And when the ten seconds were over, she heard from over her shoulder, "Get behind me! Now!"

She didn't need to be told twice, as she jumped on the wall to her left, kicked off of it, and bounced behind the woman. Her throat was glowing green, and her eyes shone with power.

Opening her mouth, a gout of green liquid erupted from it, filling the entire tunnel from floor to ceiling and washing forward and up, until it exploded outward into the forest. The visceral roar of a pissed-off dragon followed it, shaking the monsters to their core.

This, combined with the sudden psychic attacks of a large black bat, released the pressure on Genie outside, who finally could fight back on her assailants.

The tunnel was washed away of every enemy it had been filled with, only sizzling corpses melting away remaining. The sight alone was nauseating, but the smell?

Selena and her acute sense of smell almost hurled on the spot.

Shegror wasn't done, though.

She bolted out of the cave, jumping into the sky with a mighty leap, where she transformed into her true form, casting a shadow on all the monsters present.

She roared a second time, for good measure, sending a message to all the monsters beneath her.

This was now her turf.

Chapter 853 The Power Of Souls

Following the dragon's roar, another one resounded at the cave entrance, this one less loud but just as ferocious.

That's when Genie, who was still struggling to fight off her last three assailants, saw a white blur suddenly snatch one away, a trail of blood following behind it.

With only two enemies, she quickly overpowered them and finally could take a moment to breathe. Looking around, she noticed the battlefield, which had been a stalemate at best and a loss at worst, was now quickly tilting in their favour.

'Master. Do you need me in the cave?' she asked Astaroth, wondering if she could be more useful there.

'I don't see how anything will change for us at this point. Stay up there. White is here, defending me, but I don't think he needs help. Just make sure I don't get attacked,' Astaroth replied through their link.

She realized there wasn't much for her to do up here, anyway, given the allies she had present. So she chose to go down, even though he had told her not to.

Just to be sure she wasn't leaving a weakness up top, she howled to the skies.

A moment after, a song of howls responded to her.

Genie hadn't been sitting on her ass for the last month, and this was the fruit of her labour.

She and White had hunted down the nearest pack of dire wolves, and with White's new powers, plus her strength ever since training under the guardians of the Ash Elf forest, they subdued the pack, which now served Genie.

She was now a true alpha.

Astaroth heard the howls from inside the cave and wondered if more enemies had just shown up. They were already on the fringe as it was.

Even if the situation was tipping in their favour, all it took was the slightest bump, and their counter-offence would collapse.

Leon was practically a dead man standing.

Shegror still hadn't entirely recovered from her previous wounds and spent much of her mana and stamina to do her dragon breath earlier.

Luna was still reforming inside him.

White had finally dealt with the zone boss in the underground cave, but he was wounded, and the insect onslaught was unending.

Selena had changed into her tiger form, growing in power along with her size, but she was already tired from her overexertion from defending the tunnel.

As things stood, they were only marginally winning this encounter. And he still hadn't found a solution to his own problem.

'This is a lost cause. Only fifteen seconds remain, and I can't fill this up. Did we just waste five minutes fighting a losing battle, just to win and get no spoils?' he wondered.

But a voice spoke in his mind, delicate and confident.

'Our domain is that of souls. You are standing inside the region's biggest well of passing souls since the Elvish wars. Use it. Show us you can rule over our power.'

Astaroth felt like he recognized the voice, but it felt unfamiliar to him simultaneously. Like he'd heard it before but couldn't put his finger on the memory of when or where.

'Seize our power. Make it yours, as it was meant to be,' the voice spoke again.

But this time, it came with a pulse of the divinity fragment inside him.

'Are you the one talking to me?' Astaroth asked, looking inside his soul space.

'Seize our power. Make it yours, as it was meant to be,' the voice replied, reiterating its words.

Astaroth didn't understand what it meant by 'seize our power.' The last time he came into contact with the divinity fragment, it saved his life; the time before, it threatened to consume it.

Touching that thing was the last thing he wanted to do. He had no time to deal with a hostile takeover again, and he refused to fall unconscious here, of all places.

But Astaroth felt something shove him forward.

Looking behind him, he noticed Geminae pushing him into the cage.

"What are you doing?!" Astaroth shouted.

"I'm following its command. Seize the power. Become whole. Become who you were meant to be," Geminae said, his eyes resolute.

Astaroth tried pushing against him, but he felt a suction coming from the divinity fragment, but he could not resist.

"God dammit! I can't even decide what I do inside my own body! Let go of me! I'm not gambling on unknown power!" he shouted, struggling against the suction and Geminae's pushing.

But it was useless.

His body slammed into the cage, and instantly, his hand rose to touch the bright orb of white.

His body convulsed inside and outside the soul space, as his eyes shone a bright golden light.

A halo the size of a cart wheel appeared behind him, with sigils in a language no one present would understand. In the middle of this halo, a single blueish-white flame flickered, not unlike the one that had been on the orb Astaroth absorbed the first time he met with Aberon.

A pulse of Aether left his body, reaching the sky over his position, forming a bubble atop the forest. And inside this bubble, the souls of the dying monsters suddenly stopped ascending.

In a matter of seconds, all the souls had reversed their path and were heading toward the ground again. But instead of returning to their previous bodies, they sank into the ground, seemingly going toward the same place.

Underground, Astaroth was already gathering the souls that had been closer to him and, with his spare hand, was shoving them into the Evolution Fruit, which had started glowing.

The scent escaping it grew by the second, and White quickly understood it was reaching the cusp.

Astaroth wasn't conscious of his actions and couldn't watch as the timer for expiration ticked away.

Three seconds.

Two.

One.

And right before it ticked its last second away, a notification rang in Astaroth's mind, which he was unaware of.

Ding!

You have completed the special event: Ripening the Fruit!

Congratulations, Player Astaroth!

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Chapter 854 Argument

Astaroth wasn't unconscious for long, but while he was, the monsters' efforts to enter the cave and steal the fruit redoubled, their minds beguiled by the scent of the fruit as it had matured.

Even Astaroth's allies couldn't lie to themselves; the fruit clearly attracted their bodies. But they had a better grasp on their minds, given they were linked to each other and Astaroth.

The only one that remained unaffected was Leon. He wondered why, at first, since the same fruit was what had made him as powerful as he was right now.

But when the battle was over, and he laid his eyes on it, he understood. His body was telling him this wasn't the way to get stronger anymore.

But an argument quickly erupted in the alcove about who should get it.

"What do you mean, I couldn't have defended this place without you, dragon?! We were holding out fine before you got here! The king already promised me the fruit!" Selena shouted, standing in front of the glowing fruit, still hanging from its branch.

"I didn't hear him promise you anything. Why should I care about your word alone? This fruit should be mine for the taking. I deserve it most since I was the most useful in its defence," Shegror argued, her eyes still locked on it.

"If you lay a hand on it, I will tear you to shreds. To hell with your draconic bloodline," Selena growled, her eyes going yellow.

"You think your threats scare me, kitty cat? I've killed stronger foes than you in my sleep. I'll melt all traces of you away from existence," Shegror responded, scales growing on her face again.

"Alright, enough!" Leon interjected.

"The decision isn't ours to make. The king revived the fruit. It is on his lands. And he is our ruler. It's his decision to make. I see a single hand move toward that fruit, and that hand gets cut off. Understood?" he threatened, standing directly between them and the Evolution Fruit.

Selena gave him a flustered gaze.

"I swear the king promised me the fruit, Leon. It's rightfully mine."

Leon raised his hand to shut her up.

"If that is the case, then you won't mind waiting for him to wake up and restate this promise. In any case, I stand by my threat. If any of you try anything stupid, I will personally punish them."

Selena kicked the ground under her foot, angry that she had to wait for the fruit, now that it lay before her, ripe for the taking.

Shegror huffed at Leon, taking a step forward.

"I don't owe you anything, lion. I don't obey your orders. Step aside, or I'll melt you, too," she threatened, her throat starting to glow green.

Leon unleashed his mana pressure on her, the difference in their power instantly becoming clear.

"Try me, you low-class winged lizard. I've chased away dragons before. Take one more step, and I'll make a bed out of your wings and a mantle decoration out of your skull," Leon growled, fur growing on his face.

Shegror shuddered under the pressure, realizing that even in a weakened state, Leon still overpowered her.

She wasn't in a fighting state, either. Most of her mana she had expended, and her stamina was low. She needed to rest.

"Tch! I know he'll give the fruit to me, anyway. It's the most sensible thing to do. A dragon in the legendary realm is much more valuable than a striped cat. I'll wait for him, and then I'll have the fruit for myself and eat it in front of all of you."

Genie was in a corner, her gaze locked on the fruit, drool dripping from her maw. She was controlling every instinct in her body to pounce on it, with White Death by her side, watching her closely.

He could understand the urge to get stronger, oh so much. He once had that same urge himself.

But, ever since he evolved into this lightning version of himself, he felt much more confident in his power. And he knew there was still room for him to grow without relying on such a cheat item.

'Control the urge, daughter. You don't need this to grow more powerful than any of these fools. You can still become so much more than what you are now,' White told Genie through the mental connection.

Her head snapped toward him, her breath rough, and her eyes completely dilated. But she turned her head away again, facing the cave wall, trying to focus her mind elsewhere.

'Good. You are better than these fools,' White complimented her.

He was almost sure the urges in her body were a hundred times worse than the ones in the other beings in the room, and yet, instead of arguing, she was working on controlling herself.

This showed a mental fortitude that the others would benefit from gaining.

Leon observed every being in the room, and he could tell they were fighting back their power lust as best they could. But if Astaroth didn't wake up soon, there was no saying how long they would resist their urges.

He would hate to have to beat them into submission.

Looking at the floor next to him, he could see Astaroth's chest rising and dropping rhythmically, his breathing regular, as if asleep.

But Leon could see past this; his senses were much more perceptive than the others. He could tell something was struggling inside Astaroth's mind and soul, and he only hoped whatever the issue was, it would resolve itself for the best and promptly.

He had instantly recognized the mana signature from the wave that had engulfed the forest when the souls started going back toward here. He knew this was Astaroth.

But he also felt like something else was at play.

'You better win against whatever this is, Astaroth. I didn't lose against you and swear allegiance to you just to see you lose to corruption or possession from another being,' Leon prayed.

Chapter 855 Fragment Consumed

Inside Astaroth, another change was happening for the umpteenth time, and his mind struggled to adapt.

The divinity fragment that had once been wholly sealed inside him, which eventually freed a part of itself to become Nemus before another part separated from the remainder to become Geminae, was no longer caged.

The cage had been broken once and twice, and now for a third time, and this time, there was no more caging it.

The cage shattered the moment Astaroth came into direct contact with the fragment, and his soul shuddered. It swelled in power as the lines of runes that Geminae had inscribed were being erased.

Although Geminae did as the fragment had ordered him to, he suddenly feared for his continued existence. He was technically a part of this divinity fragment, and now that it was assimilating into Astaroth's soul, he feared it would absorb him, too.

In the corner of the soul, the imp was crying out in pain as the golden light burned his skin, the regeneration only barely keeping him protected from it.

Astaroth was once again floating in the center of his soul space, this time upright, as a golden halo shone behind him, a bluish-white flame flickering at its center, runes circling inside the halo.

Geminae could understand the runes, but not what they meant as a whole. It was like the letters moved as he tried reading them, keeping him from grasping their meaning.

Once the fragment completely consumed itself, strengthening the interior of Astaroth's soul, the halo disappeared from behind him, and his eyes stopped glowing before he dropped to the ground like a rag doll.

Geminae sighed in relief, as he hadn't been erased in the process, but could feel something had changed.

Instead of being a part of the divinity fragment, he now felt like he was no more than a fragment of Astaroth. This made him uncomfortable, given he was sharing the soul with his antipodal being.

The imp had it worse, as even being here was hurting him. His skin was burning, and he felt like his presence inside Astaroth's soul was blasphemous to the universe itself.

The imp could slowly feel his strength sapping away and his regenerative abilities weaken. If this went on, he would burn up and cease to exist.

The imp ran over to Astaroth, who was now his only hope for a future.

"Hey! Wake up, flesh puppet! Wake up!" he shouted, slapping him in the face.

Just the act of touching Astaroth's skin was burning the inside of his palms, and he understood what was happening.

"Come on! If I die, you die too! Wake the fuck up!" the imp shouted.

Seeing as he was getting no answer, the imp did the only thing he could think of. He tore a horn from his head and stabbed it into Astaroth's leg.

The latter jumped up in pain as he glared at the imp. The horn was already burning away, its ashes turning golden, before sinking into the floor.

"You have to do something! If I die, you die, remember?!" the imp screamed, his voice laced with panic.

"He's lying," Geminae said, looking at the imp with disdain.

Astaroth looked at both of them and could see the imp burning up, and Geminae suddenly seemed more tame.

"Please! I beg you! I'm telling the truth! Help me!" the imp begged, throwing himself to the ground.

But Geminae interjected again.

"What just happened to you has made your soul whole again. You no longer need either of us to survive. Hell, we are no more than parasites, leaching off you, now," Geminae claimed with a defeated tone.

The imp was staring daggers at Geminae, his eyes screaming at him to shut up.

But Astaroth was already ignoring them both.

He looked around him and couldn't find the fragment anymore, and the voice was gone. But when he looked at the imp and Geminae, he could clearly see the flame flickering inside them.

'Are those their souls? This is new...' he mused.

"Hey! Look at me! I'm burning up! Save me! I swear, I'll do anything!" the imp shouted, grabbing hold of Astaroth's face, his hands instantly starting to sizzle.

Astaroth looked at him with eyes devoid of emotions.

"Why would I save you? You've been nothing but a problem for me. Since I no longer need you to survive, what's stopping me from just outright ending you myself?" he asked, his tone neutral.

"You need me! I'm a great ally! My powers aren't like the other demons, and you know that! Please, just keep me alive. You can enslave me, for all I care, as long as I don't die!"

Black tears started rolling down the imp's face, startling even him. Demons weren't supposed to know fear, let alone sadness.

Yet, here he was, begging for his life, crying at the prospect of dying before he could become complete.

Astaroth could almost feel pity for him. But he couldn't stop the hate from overcoming him.

But before he opened his mouth to tell the demon to fuck off, the voice echoed in his mind again.

'Save him. His powers will be useful later. I know a way to bind him. He can never harm you or anyone around you unless you order him to.'

'Who are you?' Astaroth asked, still glaring at the demon.

'Who am I? I am you. Or rather, I am what you were to become. What you will become. Trust me, and humanity has a chance at being saved,' the voice claimed.

Astaroth had trouble believing those words at face value. He'd lied to himself before when the demon was trying to take form.

What was to say this wasn't just another elaborate deception of his?

'If you don't act now, he will disappear, and his powers will never be yours to control again. This will tilt the balance in Gaius' favour. Save him.'

Astaroth clicked his tongue mentally.

He wanted to refuse the voice. But the thought alone of getting back at Gaius suddenly spiked a feeling of satisfaction within him.

'Fine. Guide me.'

Chapter 856 Saving The Demon

He was reluctant to do this, as he still wasn't sure who this voice belonged to. But the prospect of getting back at Gaius sparked a taste for retribution inside him that he couldn't ignore.

He was mad at the god for many reasons, the most recent being that he disintegrated Luna. If she hadn't been a soul manifestation, that would have been the end for her.

And the thought of losing her to a fickle god who couldn't manage his anger? That set him off.

But there were other reasons, too. Like the fact he was hunting for Psyche, or Nemus, as she was now called, and Nemus was his ally.

In addition, now that Gaius had seen how close his essence was to hers, there was no telling when he would decide that Astaroth was too much of a threat, and come back down here to put an end to him.

Or worse. Go on Earth and kill him.

Astaroth let the voice guide his actions, listening to her commands.

'First, you will need to make contact with his soul. It's part of yours, but it remains an individuality inside yours. So you can still have access to it.'

Astaroth grinned at the imp, who suddenly felt shivers run down his spine.

"Why are you lo—ARGGHH!!!! You insane motherfucker!!!" the imp started saying before howling in pain as Astaroth's hand pierced into his chest.

Astaroth could have taken a gentler and more roundabout way to grasp the imp's soul, but this was much more fun.

He grabbed onto the soul and asked the voice, 'Now what?'

'Now, you power it up.'

Astaroth's grin turned flat, his thoughts freezing momentarily.

'Excuse me? Make it stronger? Why the fuck would I want to do that?' That is the opposite of what I want,' Astaroth argued.

'You can't save him if he vanishes from inside you. And at this pace, he'll burn away before you can stabilize him. You need to make him stronger if you want to save him. You don't have to make him stronger than you. Just strong enough so he stops burning.'

Astaroth growled in disagreement, but he proceeded.

"You'll feel your strength growing. I need to do this to save you. If you act out, I'm crushing your soul directly. Understood, you little red shit?" he asked the imp, who was still wailing in pain.

"I don't care what you do, but keep me alive and take your hand out of my body!" the imp replied, his eyes bloodshot.

It was strange to see the red cracks join the red iris in his pitch-black sclera, but Astaroth had no time to observe the phenomenon.

The demon's legs were already starting to disintegrate.

He injected pure Aether into the demon, pouring into his soul, and the difference was immediately apparent.

The demon's legs regrew; his horn as well, and he started growing in size, reaching the same height as Astaroth.

The wails of pain turned to grunts, and he stopped complaining.

Astaroth stopped powering him up when the demon's skin stopped sizzling on contact with his own and the ground.

'That's enough. What's the next step?' he asked the voice.

'You should strengthen him more. It'll make the next part easier.'

'I said that's enough. Tell me the next step, or I will crush the demon's soul. You have given me only reasons to distrust you, whoever you are, and I am no longer playing your game. What's the next step?'

There was no reply for a few seconds before he heard a sigh.

'Fine. You don't need to hold his soul anymore for the next step. But you will need to mark him with something that represents you. This will bind him to you, and then we can start the sealing process.'

Astaroth wasn't sure what the voice meant by the sealing process, but as long as the demon couldn't fuck around with his body, he didn't care if it was locked forever.

Thinking about how to brand the demon, only one way came to mind. He pulled his hand out of the demon's chest and slapped it over the wound.

"This will hurt. Lash out, and I take away all that power and watch you burn."

The demon clicked his tongue.

"Stop threatening me and do it already. My skin still itches from being in here," it replied.

The next moment, Astaroth burned a sigil under his palm, directly into the demon's skin. And he burned it with Aether, making the skin unable to ever regenerate from the mark completely.

That wound would forever brand him.

Pulling his hand away, Astaroth grinned.

The letter A was now burnt into the demon's flesh, with a small star inside the A's top part, to signify his Ash Elf heritage, the children of the stars.

The demon looked down at its chest and grunted.

"Lame. Couldn't you have thought of something better?" it complained.

"Shut up. I'm not done with you yet."

"What's next?" he asked the voice again.

'Next is the part that this creature will hate the most. You have to seal a part of its demonic essence and replace it with ours. It will fundamentally change its nature and make it resilient to the divinity of your soul without taking away its powers.'

Astaroth almost burst into laughter at the statement.

Now he knew for sure the voice wasn't a subterfuge from the demon. A demon's pride would never allow itself to be tainted by divinity like this.

Whoever or whatever this voice belonged to, it did not have the demon's interests in mind. Only its own.

However, Astaroth wondered how he would seal away a part of the demon's essence. He had no idea where to start from.

But then, it struck him like a thunderbolt.

The flame hovering over its head.

Astaroth had seen it flicker in battle, or get stronger when it enraged, both in his dreams and when he first released it. It reflected its power spikes and dips, meaning it was a part of his essence.

Grabbing the demon's horns, Astaroth looked into its eyes. It was disturbing that the demon looked exactly like him, but he moved on.

"Hey! Let go!" the demon complained.

"I said shut up. I'm not done. Or do you want me to take back the power boost and let you burn?"

The demon growled but let Astaroth get to work.

But when the sealing began, the pain immediately became unbearable. To the demon, it was like Astaroth was tearing its soul in two, and the pain, both mental and physical, was not something anything could bear.

It screamed and howled for a moment before going limp.

"Finally. Some quiet."

Chapter 857 Unethical, Even For Demons

As soon as the demon passed out, Astaroth turned his head to Geminae.

"You. Come here. I need your help with something."

Geminae nodded, keeping silent.

The truth was that Astaroth had no idea how to seal anything. He wasn't versed in sealing techniques or even half decent in runic language.

Which was why he was asking Geminae for help.

"Help me seal this flame on the demon's head. I don't know how to do it."

Geminae seemed confused about Astaroth's chain of actions.

First, he powered up the demon, which was a terrible idea in his mind. Then he knocked him out and wanted to seal away a part of its power.

Why power him up if he was going to seal away his power anyway? He could have just let him die.

Seeing his confused face, Astaroth sighed in annoyance.

"Stop dawdling there and help me. I don't have all day. I have shit to do outside of here."

Geminae jumped out of his daze and cupped his hand around the flame, which tried to lash out at his hands.

But Astaroth's Aether protected the hands, forming a miniature barrier around the ball of black fire.

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But Astaroth's Aether protected the hands, forming a miniature barrier around the ball of black fire.

"Use the Aether I'm injecting to seal it. And do it quickly. I can already feel him rousing."

"Yes, master," Geminae replied.

In a matter of seconds, dozens of lines of runes surrounded the flame over the demon's head, forming a cage around it. Two small chains shot out from the cage, tied to the demon head's horns, creating a floating cage bound to the horns.

Once this was done, Astaroth could already feel the demon weakening. Now, he only needed to merge a bit of divinity into him.

But he also had no idea how to do that. He wasn't in control of the fragment; neither was it even present anymore.

Glancing at Geminae, an idea sprouted in his mind. But Geminae would not like it.

So he didn't give him a choice.

"I'm sorry, Geminae," Astaroth said before stabbing his hand into the young angel's chest.

Gemini gasped as the pain assaulted him, but before it could devolve into screaming, Astaroth was already pulling the soul out.

And with a quick movement, he jammed his hand, still holding Geminae's soul fragment, into the demon's body.

The demon's soul pounced on the fragment, trying to consume it as per its nature, but Astaroth intervened.

Pouring more Aether into the soul, he forcibly separated them before tying them together in an attempt to force them to merge.

This was as far a travesty to souls as it was possible to commit, and he could feel a part of his soul seethe at his actions inside him.

But it was a necessity.

He had no other recourse.

It took time before the two souls started to merge, but with enough Aether and constant supervision, the transition happened. And once done, the demon exploded in power, pushing Astaroth away.

But when it stood to its feet, it started convulsing as its body changed.

The wings on its back fell before a set of white wings burst out, splashing black blood everywhere.

But the wings didn't stay white for long. They burst into black flames; the demon trying to cry out in pain, but no noise coming out of its throat.

The wings stopped burning once they were pitch-black.

However, the changes didn't stop there.

The originally red irises in the center of its eyes turned golden as black blood leaked out of the eyes, each change seemingly causing harm to the demon before a red flicker appeared in the pupil.

Its dark red skin lightened slightly, going from a crimson tint to a more vermillion tone.

A golden ring formed on its neck, looking almost like a collar, with black runes on both sides of the ring.

Astaroth stood there, watching the changes, wondering what he had done. There was no telling whether this would turn out well for him.

He had acted on impulse, as he always did, and crossed his fingers.

It took what seemed like an eternity for the demon to stop convulsing and bleeding out of every orifice and pore on its body. And once it did, it stood there, silent, for a while before raising its head and locking eyes with Astaroth.

"What have you done to me?" it asked.

But its voice no longer resembled either his or Geminae's. The coarse, demonic, grating voice it had earlier had softened.

But the soft crystalline voice of Geminae was gone, having lowered in octaves, as it intermingled with the demon's voice, creating a strange two-tone voice, as if both of them spoke simultaneously, through the same mouth.

"I did what I had to," Astaroth replied, his face stoic.

"You fused us! You did something even the goddess of souls would have never dared! How could you?! Undo this!" the voices harried him.

But Astaroth ignored their plights.

'Is there another step?' he asked the voice inside his head.

There was silence for a while as the chimeric being before Astaroth kept shouting at it to undo this.

'There is one last step. Naming it. But I would have never thought you would do this. This... thing... is an abomination to the nature of souls. To the nature of our domain,' the voice said, sounding dismayed.

'I don't care what you think anymore. You said seize the power. Make it mine. Well, now it is, and I have decided what to do with it. Once this is done, I would prefer you never speak to me again,' Astaroth said, before locking eyes on the aberration.

"Stop shouting. I'm not undoing this," Astaroth ordered, wincing as his ears started hurting.

"No. No no no no! NO!!!!!" the being shouted before dashing toward Astaroth.

"Undo this! Now!" it howled.

"Enough! On your knees, and shut your mouth!" Astaroth shouted back, his face morphing into a mask of rage.

The ring around the being's neck glowed, and instantly, the being stopped, threw itself to its knees and closed its mouth.

"From now on, you will be called Sanguis Oxym. And, if I don't call on you, I don't want to hear your disturbing voice inside my head. Understood?"

The ring shone again, and some new runes appeared on the golden ring.

The sealing was complete.

Chapter 858 Solving The Standoff

Immediately, the abomination went quiet, and Astaroth felt his headache subside.

"Now what?" he asked, knowing the voice could hear him.

'Now, I'm quiet until you ask for me. If I deign respond. Good luck, me.'

Astaroth grunted, knowing he would hear the voice again before long, even if he didn't ask its opinion.

It had already talked inside his head more than once without being asked for anything. He was sure it would happen again.

He was also sure it wouldn't respond if he asked for help. So he couldn't care less.

For now, his priority was to get back out and find out what had happened. He could tell he'd been in here long enough, too long, even.

There was no telling what happened to the fruit or his allies after he passed out.

"I need to stop passing out every time..." he mumbled.

But was there anything he could do about it? He doubted that.

Focusing on his breathing, he reached a trance-like state and pulled himself back into the world.

His eyes fluttered open, and he saw the cavern's grey ceiling, which looked like a Swiss cheese wheel, with holes upon holes dotting the surface.

But at least he wasn't in a graveyard, which was a plus.

Sitting up, he looked around to find his allies around him.

Genie and White were in a corner, the former trembling like a scared child while the latter flanked her, nudging her gently.

Shegror sat in another corner, a side of the wall melted into a chair, as she fiddled with a long needle.

'One of her tail spikes, I presume,' he thought.

Selena was pacing in front of Leon, her eyes locked on the fruit, her gaze a mix of impatience, greed, and yearning.

Leon, who stood between her and the fruit, had his eyes closed, seemingly in meditation, his ears perked.

Luna was still not reformed, so she slept inside his body, her soul hovering around him.

Lastly, Morpheus swung upside down from the ceiling, first to notice Astaroth was no longer out cold.

With a light chirp of echolocation, he alerted the others before dropping before Astaroth.

With a light swoosh and thump, Morpheus landed and nudged Astaroth with his pointy nose.

"Yes, I know I worried you. Sorry. I did something I wasn't supposed to, even though it wasn't entirely on purpose, and the whiplash was quite severe. But I'm fine now," Astaroth said to the bat, caressing its head.

He looked at the other beings in the room, some of whom looked at him with worry and others with respect, and smiled.

Astaroth stood to his feet, brushing the dirt and rock dust off his ass before clearing his throat.

"Ahem! I know finding me like that must have worried some of you, but I don't apologize for my actions. What I did that put me in that state is why I succeeded in bringing the fruit to ripeness.

"I am guessing by the standoff in the cave and the fact that the fruit still hasn't been consumed that there might have been a disagreement about who should get it. But before clarifying this, let me thank all of you for showing up and helping when I needed you."

Astaroth looked each one in the eyes and smiled.

"All of you will get something for this dangerous situation you put yourselves in willingly. But, for now, the fruit is not on the table."

Selena looked at him with a stunned face, her eyes reflecting betrayal, and she opened her mouth to complain, only for Astaroth to raise her hand toward her.

"The reason for this is that I already promised it to someone. Selena, it's all yours. I hope you do good on the promise you made me, as I did on mine. I expect much more trouble in the future, and having a Legendary grade ally can only be a boon."

Selena's mouth instantly shut, her face glowing with joy as she turned to look at the fruit that had been haunting her dreams for decades. She took a step forward, Leon still between her and it, and he smiled before moving aside.

Astaroth heard Shegror's tongue click in annoyance before she vanished from sight, returning inside him to rest.

'You'll get your turn. For now, endure and stop with the attitude. Remember, we have a transactional relationship. I have no reason to help you if you don't help me. And the Aether that channelled through me already paid you tenfold today. So pipe down,' he told her through their mental link.

There was no reply, and Astaroth knew she was ignoring him and pouting. But he didn't care.

Looking in the cave, he could see the disappointed look on Genie's and Morpheus's faces, but he could do nothing about it.

"I swear I'll find a way to help you get stronger, guys. But, for now, the fruit was promised, and nothing will make me a liar."

They understood the underlying warning, and Genie walked toward the cave exit. She wanted to escape the fruit and its attractive scent, but she also didn't want to watch as another being grew in power right before her eyes.

It was too big a disappointment for her to bear.

Astaroth looked at her, feeling her emotions through their connection, and he sent White after her.

'Make sure she doesn't sulk too much. I have ideas about her already, but I can't look into them now. Just let her know that her time will come.'

White nodded before heading out after Genie.

Astaroth knew he could calm her, so he focused on the others present in the alcove.

Morpheus wasn't even looking at the fruit, as if it wasn't bothering him that he didn't get it. But, deep down, Astaroth could feel the envy in his heart.

"Don't worry, M, I'll find you something even better. Maybe if we look hard enough, I can find a way to make you like Luna. Having a human body would give you much flexibility and better chances of getting stronger. Sound good?"

The enormous bat chirped, tilting his head slightly before sinking back into Astaroth.

Looking at Leon, Astaroth smiled.

"That leaves only you."

Chapter 859 Sensory Overload

Looking into Leon's eyes, he couldn't see the same hunger for the fruit as the others and wondered why. It was strange for any creature to turn its back on a chance to grow past its limitations.

"I can hear the cogs turning in your head, King Astaroth. The fruit doesn't tempt me because it's no good to me. I think reaching Mythical grade from one was already past what this fruit should do.

"I doubt eating another one would do me any good. So, it has no hold on my mind. Although, it smells nice and would make a great smoothie, judging by the scent alone, heh heh," Leon joked.

Astaroth chuckled, realizing the logic behind his words.

It made sense that a creature who was only one grade under being a god wouldn't get much out of something that wasn't of divine nature. But the last part of his statement made him curious.

"What do you mean, Mythical was already past its capacity? Wouldn't it have stopped your growth at Legendary, then?"

Leon scratched the back of his head, grimacing.

"I don't know the details, but it's a feeling I get when looking at it. Like it was never meant to push me past that grade, and that something we did to it accomplished that. The fruit itself should have a maximum capacity of Legendary."

Thinking back on the fruit he gave Leon, Astaroth could only think of one possibility. The star Aether that came from Lady Anulo.

Maybe the touch of a god made the fruit go into overdrive, and that was the reason it outperformed its use.

But it wasn't something he could accomplish on the regular.

He knew Nemus would refuse even if he reached out to her and asked her to repeat that feat. It would bring too much attention to her if she started pulling so much power to her.

And, whether he thought it could work or not, it was already too late.

Selena had initially approached the tree slowly, only grazing the fruit as if it would shatter if she plucked it.

However, once it sat comfortably in her hand, her animal instincts took over, and she devoured it as if she hadn't eaten in days.

And with the last bite sliding down her throat, a pulse of power echoed inside the cave, audible and visible, and Astaroth grinned.

"It's starting. Maybe with her in our ranks, expanding Stellar Woodlands isn't too big a project."

Phoenix had shown him plans she had made while he was away about expanding the kingdom by making new villages and cities inside the Elven forest. But it was hard to make these happen or even have them grow if demons and corrupted beasts kept popping out from everywhere.

With the addition of another powerful ally, it wasn't as difficult to imagine now.

But that remained to luck's whims.

There was a chance consuming the fruit wouldn't do anything for Selena, after all. Astaroth doubted it was at full power, with how long it had been dried out, even if he made it ripen by force.

But, if luck were on his side, he would gain more than just a powerful ally. Astaroth had glimpsed at something when he touched the divinity fragment.

Something he doubted Khalor knew about. Something that would put them in a better position to become more powerful.

A breach in the veil. He saw where it was in New Eden and where it landed in their world.

'I can't wait to tell him and see the face he makes,' he mused, grinning.

Meanwhile, the pulsing of power had kept repeating, the intervals getting closer as if a heartbeat were accelerating. Selena was curled on herself, her face showing intense pain, but she didn't make a peep.

Her teeth were grinding against each other, her eyes already turned yellow, as her tiger form was trying to come out. However, she didn't let it take over.

She wanted to be fully in control of this transition, even if it hurt her like drinking fire and dipping her body into boiling oil.

This lasted for minutes, Selena eventually grunting in pain but never screaming or crying.

Her stubbornness and pain tolerance impressed Astaroth, as he had just gone through a process not too dissimilar. He knew she was in excruciating pain.

The pulsing accelerated until it became like drumming, and, before long, a larger one happened, followed by a mighty tiger roar, which shook the cave's ceiling, making dust and pebbles fall on Astaroth's and Leon's heads.

Selena got back to her feet, her white hair now golden and her eyes glowing like a gold coin in the sun. Her eyes seemed sharper, and her ears alert, like she was hearing the world for the first time.

Leon walked up to her and covered her ears, telling her to close her eyes.

"What you are feeling now is called sensory overload. Your new senses as a Legendary beast are much more acute than they were before, and even the faintest whisper sounds like the howling of a harpy," he whispered next to her covered ear.

"It will take a few hours for your body to regulate and return to normal. Until then, we will stay here and maintain quiet. We wouldn't want you to pass out before your body has acclimated to its new strength," he added, still whispering.

Selena shook her head, scared to talk.

She could hear her heart pounding and the blood pumping through her veins like it was happening inside her ears. She didn't dare imagine what her voice would do to her eardrums in this state.

"Good."

Turning his head toward Astaroth, Leon mouthed the words, 'I'll take care of her,' to Astaroth, and he nodded in response.

Leaving the cave, Astaroth was careful not to make too much noise and looked at her one last time before leaving.

He saw Selena's lips move, forming the words, 'Thank you,' and he grinned.

His promise was fulfilled. Now, he could go back to Phoenix before she found him and tore him apart for skipping on the guild's paperwork.

'God help me, she is going to be furious. I wonder how long I was out...' he thought, leaving the cavern and heading toward Bastion City.

Chapter 860 Changes Cemented

On the outside, he found traces of the battle, ground overturned, trees strewn on the ground everywhere, and traces of blood still present, even though the bodies had already disappeared. Astaroth could see who had fought where based on the damage the ground held, with burnt patches or melted ground and lacerations in the surroundings. He could tell this had been a heated battle.

After close inspection, he found Genie and White's tracks and could easily deduce where they were going.

Behind their tracks were dozens of other sets of tracks of smaller-sized canines, and Astaroth wondered where they came from.

He hadn't seen the pack Genie and White came with and had no idea she was now leading her own pack. But it was irrelevant to him right now, so he brushed it off.

Looking toward the city, using the compass on his minimap, Astaroth tested out if he could still transform into his demon form or Geminae's form.

'Rather, I should call them my angel and demon form. Geminae and the demon no longer exist. It's Sanguis Ozym, now. And I'm not ready to test how obedient he is just yet,' Astaroth mused.

But, as he ordered his body to change, it did, without a hitch, and he smiled.

Both forms were still available to him.

This was a relief, as they were good to his stats. Their bonuses had been cemented when he received his second notification earlier today about the changes to his race options.

He looked at his new passive again, and he smiled.

Mortality Shattered (Passive): Your mortal coil has failed you, and you have died. But beings from both sides of the eternal conflict of good and evil have decided you had value and saved you.

Since both sides laid claim to you, you have gained the traits of a Nephilim, a child of both sides, with the potential to overthrow either of them. Your existence rank has grown a tier, and you have access to both heritages at will (Must be changed into either form to benefit)

Demon Form: Strength, Constitution, and Agility scores +200%. Intelligence and Wisdom scores - 50%. Maximum natural defense limit +50%. Vulnerability to holy energy (Damage taken +100%). Resistance to demonic powers (Damage taken -50%). Corruption strengthens you (Max 50% boost).

Demons are the incarnation of brutality, and their bodies reflect such a heritage. You gain incredible physical capabilities and resistance at the cost of your reason and sagacity, and you develop a vulnerability to anything holy.

Angel Form: Agility score +100%. Intelligence and Wisdom scores +200%. Maximum natural defense limit +25%. Vulnerability to demonic energy (Damage taken 100%). Resistance to holy powers (Damage taken -50%). Immune to corruption effects, but weakened by it (Max 50% debuff). Your body sheds a natural aura that casts away weak corruption.

Angels are the justiciars of life, and their wisdom knows no bounds. You gain the smarts and insight of a being who has lived through time, and evil holds no power over your mind.

Your kind may be fewer, but their strength is nothing to scoff at, and weakness is not an option. But evil always plays dirty, so you must remain vigilant.

[Third Form locked]

He already had an idea about the third form but wasn't in a hurry to unlock it, either. If it made him look like the being in his soul, he wasn't excited to try it yet.

But these boosts were significant in themselves.

This would make him much more powerful in the long run, and he could use the power against enemies he would surely face in the coming times.

He stayed in the angel form, returning to Bastion City, thinking about the things to come.

The one-year mark on the game was slowly creeping up on them, and Khalor had been adamant that they reach at least level seventy-five before that point. He still hadn't told them why, but Astaroth was willing to trust that it was for a good reason.

His level of trust in Khalor had grown in the last few days, both because he came to help him at home when the Zhong Kui had tried killing him and because he had held him at bay when the demon tried going on a rampage on his return.

He had proved he was an ally to him, even though his attitude was still shit.

Reaching the palace in a few minutes, his speed significantly superior to the one he had taken when he left and his path unincumbered, Astaroth landed before the palace doors, returning to his normal body.

The guards jumped in surprise when he landed, immediately grabbing their weapons. But they sheathed them back when they saw who landed and saluted him.

"King Astaroth!"

"At ease, soldiers," Astaroth replied, walking past them without stopping.

He needed to get back to the office where Phoenix was before she decided he had been gone for too long, and she flipped the palace and city on its head to find him.

Reaching the office at the back of the palace, Astaroth stopped before the guard. As he looked behind Astaroth, he let out an enormous sigh.

"Sir. Where is your guard?"

Astaroth chuckled.

"I didn't ditch her, if that is what you are thinking. She's with Leon. I couldn't wait for them, so I came back alone. She'll find me when she's done. Now, let me in, please."

The guard shook his head, his face discouraged, but he pushed the door to the office open.

Astaroth thanked him with a nod before walking into the room, where Phoenix was intensely focused on a set of sheets of paper. Her scrunched-up nose and furrowed brow told him this was a tough case.

"I'm sorry for taking this long to come back. Something came up, and it took much longer than anticipated. But I can resume where I was now," he said softly.

He hoped talking to her soothingly would prevent her from being mad.

Instead, she only looked up briefly, glancing at him, before pointing at the seat across the desk.

"Then get to it. We need to come up with plans to deal with each of these players before the end of the week. Because I doubt they'll be happy with your new plan for the kingdom. And I don't want them to start calling us slavers on the forums."

Astaroth gulped, realizing why she was in a hurry to turn that page for the guild.

The situation was already bad, and he just poured oil over it and lit it on fire. Now, they were on a clock to fix it, before it burned them.