

New Eden 141

Chapter 141 Forced To Leave

After a night spent hunting monsters, Astaroth took a quick look at his status screen. He hadn't distributed his free attribute points in a while, and wanted to do so now.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 36 (1'420'724/2'569'950)

Stats:

HP: 6'950/6'950 MP: 2'345/2'345 Stamina: 100R

Mana Regen: 5/second in combat, 25/second out of combat

Strength: 54 (79) (+20) (+5)

Agility: 54 (59) (+5)

Constitution: 53 (78) (+20) (+5)

Intelligence: 54 (59) (+5)

Wisdom: 37 (41) (+4)

Attack Power Str: 395

Attack Power Agi: 295

Magic Attack Power: 295

Healing Power: 205

Natural Defense: 7.8%

Armor Defense: 14%

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 16

Available skill points: 7

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

His stats were satisfactory for an all-rounder. But he would much rather have the stats of an attacker.

Yet he knew that would be a waste of time for him, since his spirit companions could always supplement the stats he needed when need be. So he kept building an all-rounder stat sheet.

He put four points in strength, constitution, agility, and intelligence, respectively. After that, his next step was to head back to the village.

Dawn was slowly creeping upon the horizon, and he had promised to go talk with Aberon. He signalled Violette, and they headed back home.

On their way there, they killed a few more monsters that crossed their paths, but didn't hunt them when they fled. By the time they made it to the village, the sun was just rising over the tree line.

Violette wished Astaroth a good day, and they parted after she gave a quick hug to Genie. As for him, he headed to Aberon's house.

He didn't go there often anymore, since he was focusing on stabilizing his foundation of skills before learning more. Although Aberon appreciated his company, he was also happy that Astaroth wasn't trying to overfill his cup.

When Astaroth got to the house, the door opened on its own, as it always did. He invited himself in, ordering Genie to stay outside.

Genie whined a little, but lay down near the door, closing her eyes to rest.

"Good girl." Astaroth complimented her, patting her head, before he entered the abode.

Aberon was rocking his chair in the back room, smoking a pipe. Astaroth rarely saw him smoking, which he only did when something was troubling him.

"What did you want to talk about, sir?" Astaroth asked, giving a bow to Aberon.

"Take a seat. This might take a while." Aberon told him, conjuring up a chair.

Astaroth nodded and sat down in the newly appeared chair. Aberon had creased brows, and his traits seemed tired for some reason.

"Something seems to be bothering you, sir. Is this what you want to talk about?" he asked.

"Aye. It is. I have grave news, young man."

"What is it? Is there a war coming?"

"Indeed, it is a war. But something was odd in the stars. I can usually predict the warring nations before the war starts. But not this time." Aberon started.

"When I tried deciphering where the war would start, the location was hidden behind a nebula. It seems the gods don't want me to know where this war will be until it happens."

Astaroth frowned at the statement.

'He can't have seen an augur from my world in the stars of this one, can he?' he thought.

"But that wasn't the only thing the stars told me. The king is after you again. It seems he had wind of your return, probably through scrying, and I foresaw a troubling future for you." Aberon said.

"I don't want to do this to you, young man, but the choice is already out of my hands. An old friend of mine in the capital has sent word to me. The king has assembled a legion to retrieve you."

"They are on their way here. The village is in danger as long as you stay with us. Even if I could hold them back for a while, it wouldn't be forever. And once they are here, there will be no way out for you."

"Say no more, master Aberon. I will leave of my own volition. The villagers here are my family, and I wish them no harm." Astaroth interrupted the old man.

Sigh

"I really wished the king would give up on you. But it seems his vanity and pride know no bounds. I am sorry, child." Aberon said, his tone heavy.

Astaroth got up and walked in front of Aberon. He kneeled before the old mage and bowed his head.

"It was an honour for me to be part of this family with you, sir. I hope we see each other again, at a more favourable time."

Astaroth then got up, getting ready to leave. But before he could, the old man spoke up again.

"There is one more thing. I must ask this of you, even if it pains me. Can you take the girl with you?"

"If the king showed this much interest in you, I fear he might also want to capture Violette. The girl has much emotional baggage, and I fear such an experience would break her." Aberon asked pleadingly.

"Of course, master Aberon. I will protect her at all costs." Astaroth replied, nodding solemnly.

Astaroth then left the house. He went to pack, for he and Violette would be leaving the very next day.

Just before logging out, he sent a message to Violette.

'When you get back tomorrow, pack up. We are leaving on a trip, and won't be back for some time.'

'Bring everything you would need for a week-long trip and don't forget to gather up food at the barracks. We don't know how long we will be on the road.'

Then he logged out after looking at his alcove ceiling for probably the last time.

'I will miss this peacefulness the most.' he thought, as he closed his eyes, as he started feeling weightless again.

Chapter 142 A Special Visitor

Opening his eyes inside the pod, Alexander reached up to open it. He pushed the top slightly as it lifted mechanically.

Alex went to the bathroom and cleaned himself up. Next, he ate a light breakfast before taking a short one-hour nap.

Although the game put him in some form of sleep, it was always better to have some proper sleep too, just so the body would regulate itself. He had learned that the hard way.

After his nap, Alexander went for a run before heading to the gym for his training session. Today was boxing, and his trainer was already waiting for him in the ring when he arrived.

"Ahh! There you are. I was starting to wonder if you gave up training after your misadventure!" his trainer, Clark, said.

"I haven't. But I might not be able to do much, since my arm is still out of commission for a few weeks. I was actually coming to ask what I could do with only one arm." Alex replied, pointing his arm in a sling.

"Well damn. And I was hoping to spar with you today. You should have told me you couldn't move your arm." Clark said, looking disappointed.

"Sorry. I forgot to mention it." Alexander said, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

"Bah! It's ok. I'll find you something. We can start with skipping rope, to keep your cardio high, while you heal." Clark answered, waving his hand dismissively.

"I only have one hand available. How is that going to work?" Alex asked.

"Simple. We tie the other side to a pole or something. If we tie it at the right height, it'll be like you're holding it." Clark responded, flashing a big grin.

Throughout the three-hour training session, Clark kept finding solutions to accommodate his situation. Changing exercises, or coming up with new ones.

Alexander was happy he had gotten an excellent trainer, because some would have told him to rest up instead of working around his current handicap. But Clark was always bright and resourceful.

During the session, Alexander tried coming up with a way to convince Clark to start playing New Eden, but his efforts had yet to yield results. The man was adamant about not playing video games.

He kept saying they were bad for your body and brain, making you flabby and making your brain mushy. He also kept saying that had never been very good at games.

Alexander tried explaining to him that with VR it was the same as using your actual body, so he would do fine. He even told him some classes were perfect for martially apt people.

Clark had said he would try it, mostly trying to get him off his back, so Alexander had dropped the subject. Throughout the three-hour session, he rapidly noticed something.

Training with a locked body part was especially exhausting. By the time the session was over, Alexander was sweaty in places he thought couldn't sweat.

He was out of breath, and his left side was sore from compensating for his clipped right arm. But it still satisfied him.

He grabbed his stuff and reminded Clark about the game before leaving.

"Yeah, yeah! I'll try it out. But you better not slack on my training because of this!" Clark had responded, heading for the gym showers.

Alexander preferred his shower, where he was safe, to the open showers at the gym. He had become slightly paranoid after the attack on his home, and took the safer option whenever he could.

After getting back home, Alexander took a long, hot shower, and put some clean clothes on. He then made himself lunch, cooking up a nice omelette, filled with vegetables, cheese, and bacon.

He needed the calories after his training, otherwise, he would feel burnt out. He sat outside on his big balcony to eat his omelette, looking down at the cityscape below.

After eating, he washed his dishes and sat back outside, picking up a book he had started. But something cut his peaceful reading time short.

His intercom rang. Someone was calling up his apartment from the lobby.

He walked back inside, tapping the screen to answer.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mr. Leduc. Sorry to disturb you at lunch hour, but you have a guest." The receptionist said.

"A guest? I wasn't expecting any guests. Who is it?" Alexander asked, frowning.

He then heard a deep voice over the intercom.

"Tell him it's Khalor." the person said.

Before the receptionist could even transfer the message, Alexander told her to let the man up. Then he shut down the intercom.

He had been waiting for this meeting for some time now. He stood before the screen, waiting for the camera in the elevator to reveal David's face.

But when the man stepped into the elevator, the camera blurred out entirely. It was wavy and choppy, like someone was rocking it.

'Is he using a jammer?' Alexander was wondering.

He gave up looking at the screen and instead went to wait before the elevator door. A few moments later, the elevator arrived.

Ding!

When the doors opened, something flew out at Alexander. His reflexes kicked in, twisting his body and catching the object with his available hand.

That's when he saw what it was. It was a throwing knife!

Alexander turned his head back at the elevator, as the man inside it walked out slowly.

"Good. I see you are at least ready for intrusions this time." David said, grinning widely.

That's when he took off his hood, revealing his face to Alexander. Before him stood a well-built man, with brown hair and blue eyes.

The man had an aura about him that commanded respect. It was like Alexander was standing before a military officer.

"David Magnus, pleased to make your acquaintance in person finally," David said, extending his hand forward.

"You could have killed me! I'm already wounded!" Alexander growled.

He then dropped the knife to the ground before shaking David's hand. Alex half expected this kind of thing, but now that it happened, he felt slightly peeved.

'What kind of man barges into another man's home, throwing knives at him?' Alexander grumbled internally.

But when he shook his hand, a vision flashed in his eyes. When David had taken off his hood, he reminded him of someone.

Gasp

"It was you, that day in the alley!" He exclaimed.

Chapter 143 Asking A Favor

"Yeah, yeah. Don't mention it." David said, waving his hand.

"Did you know?" Alexander asked.

"Nah. I just didn't want to stand by while a poor chap was getting his ass whooped. No need to thank me. I would do the same for anyone." David explained, touring the penthouse.

He whistled as he walked in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking in the view.

"Quite the crib you got yourself here. Must have cost you a pretty penny," he said, walking out on the balcony.

Alexander shrugged in answer. To which David chuckled.

"I take it you have been using the list I sent you to its full potential? Good. The funds will help you and me in the near future." David said, leaning on the balcony rail.

Silence filled the air. David turned around, looking at Alexander.

"What? Did you think I gave you that list just to help you? Out of the goodness of my heart? Come on, Alex. I thought you would understand me better by now." David said, shaking his head like a disappointed parent.

Alexander wanted to slap his smug, patronizing face. But he knew better than to pick a fight with him now.

"You see, I'm ok in funds, for now. But soon, maybe a year from now, I will need another big influx of cash. So you will be my cash cow. So be sure not to spend it all and make that money grow." David said, before walking back inside the apartment.

Alexander clenched his fists as the man walked by him.

'What is he? A thug?' He growled in his mind.

David jumped on the sofa like it was his own, turning on the television, and lifting his feet on the coffee table. Alexander walked in front of him and smacked them off.

"Keep your feet off my furniture. You are already dragging mud all over the floor. Don't put some on the coffee table. What kind of shit hole do you live in to have mud on your boots?" Alexander growled.

David only gave him a snarky smile in response. Then his face turned dark.

"You picking a fight, wolfy?" He asked, slowly getting up.

"This is my home. You want some respect, show some in return, you damned corpse." Alexander said, taking another step forward.

Both men were nose to nose, staring intensely at each other. Then David started laughing heartedly.

"Good! Very good! I like that attitude. You will need it when shit eventually hits the fan." He exclaimed, taking a step back and going to sit at the table on the balcony.

He then started chowing on Alexander's omelette, much to his displeasure, but he let him be. He instead pulled out a beer from the fridge and opened it.

As he was taking a swig, he heard David say, "'an I 'ave one of 'hose?" With his mouth full.

"Shut up and eat my omelette, you damned raccoon!" Alexander replied, giving a murderous stare.

David laughed and kept eating until the plate was empty.

"Woo! My compliments to the chef, that was scrumptious!" He exclaimed, pushing the plate away from him.

"Why are you here, David?" Alexander asked him, sitting down across the table.

"Oh! Yes! I'm just here to check out your new place and tell you the time of day." He answered, with a big smile, akin to a shark grinning.

"Seriously," Alexander said, putting down his beer bottle.

David stretched out, trying to snatch the bottle, but Alex smacked his hand away.

"Sheesh, so stingy!" David said, caressing his hand.

"I came here to tell you I will need your help soon." He then said, his face becoming serious again.

Alexander crossed his hands on the table, listening carefully.

"In a little less than two months from now, we will need to be someplace nearby, and I will need your help for a... demonstration, of sorts," David said, sounding mysterious.

"What kind of demonstration?" Alexander asked.

"Aww. I don't want to tell you yet. Where's the fun in that?" David replied, trying to look coy.

"Stop fooling around, David. Does this concern what's coming?" Alexander asked, a vein pulsing on his forehead.

"Gosh, you're no fun. You know, I just act like this with you. You're a mystery to me, you know? I don't know how you'll turn or even if you'll survive the first incident." David said, looking at Alex weirdly.

"Anyway! I will need you to be at a specific place, at a specific time, all of which I will text you in due time. For now, I just wanted to tell you to be frugal with our money." David said, looking out to the city.

Alexander looked at the cityscape too, getting flashbacks of that horrible memory that was in David's head. He still had nightmares sometimes, of that woman getting torn to pieces.

When Alexander turned his head back to David, the man had a look of nostalgia mixed in with melancholy. He couldn't quite understand how the man was feeling.

Who would, though? The man had died and been brought back into the past, only to live through the events that led to his demise.

It had to be a terrible feeling to know what was to come and not be able to undo it completely. Just thinking about it made Alexander feel down.

David then clapped his hands together, changing back to his earlier playful smile. Alexander could guess it was just a facade, though.

"Alright! Well, my job is done. Keep your phone nearby. I will text you the place and time when the time comes," he said, before getting up and walking toward the elevator.

Alexander looked at him walk away, without moving. When David was almost at the elevator, he hollered at him.

"Hey, asshole! Take care."

"Same for, dipshit!" David responded, getting in the elevator and disappearing as the doors closed.

'To think our future depends on such an oddball,' Alexander thought, turning his head to look at the city again.

He stayed there for a good while, letting his thoughts wander, thinking about how he might be an oddball too, if he changed the lens he looked at himself from.

After spending an hour outside, he cleared his thoughts and walked back inside his home. The sun was slowly setting in the west, projecting streaks of orange and red in the clouds.

'Time to go back inside. I have a journey to plan!' He thought, walking to his room and entering his pod.

"Log in," Alexander said, closing the lid of the pod.

Launching 'New Eden'

Logging in

Welcome back player Astaroth

Chapter 144 Going On A Long Journey

After waking up in his alcove, Astaroth started packing what little he kept here. It was almost nothing, as most of his stuff, he kept inside his inventory.

He then walked out, heading to Violette's alcove. It wasn't far away from his, so took his time, walking slowly, enjoying the sight of the village slightly below, for the last time.

"Violette? Are you ready?" he called out into the alcove.

"Almost! Give me a minute!" came Violette's reply from inside.

Astaroth didn't press her, turning around to admire what little activity was happening in the village. The forge was still billowing smoke, while the barracks courtyard had people training inside it.

Looking at this brought about a small wave of melancholy. Leaving this place already, and by obligation, saddened him.

He knew he would have to leave soon, since levelling up was becoming harder and harder for him. But he didn't think it would be just yet.

He had promised White to take care of the Alpha that had replaced him at the head of his pack, and wanted to reach level forty before attempting it. But now, his timetable was pushed forward.

He wanted to leave this place with a clear conscience, and that was one task he had to do to achieve that. White could hear his thoughts and chimed in.

'Master, we do not have to do it now. We can come back when you are ready and stronger.' White said in his mind.

'No. I want to leave this place with no regrets. And this regret might not be mine, but you are part of me, making it my responsibility.' Astaroth replied silently.

'Thank you, Master.' White responded.

Astaroth could feel the wave of gratitude washing off of White's soul, right next to his. Luna's soul also reacted, pulsing with glee.

The fawn was excited at the prospect of seeing more places. After all, for now, all it had seen was inside of Astaroth's soul, and the nearby forest.

That hardly qualified as exploration for the little creature. She yearned to see more places and experience new things.

Violette soon came out of her alcove, carrying with her something new. In her hand, she was holding a staff, made of dark wood, with a shining Aquamarine gem sitting at the top.

The staff was a little taller than herself, and she held it clumsily, but with pride. Astaroth could guess who gave her that, as he had seen that staff somewhere before.

"A parting gift from Aberon?" he asked the girl.

"Mhm!" the girl hummed, her face glowing with happiness.

Astaroth could feel the power pulsing from the gem. This staff was probably precious, and giving it to a small girl would be a mistake, in most cases.

But, in this case, the small girl was more than capable of protecting it. He still asked her to keep the staff in her inventory when they reached their next settlement, since it would attract unwanted attention.

Violette nodded her head in understanding. Seeing as they were both set, they walked down towards the entrance of the village.

But they couldn't exit just yet, as almost all the villagers amassed at the entrance, blocking it entirely. This warmed the duo's hearts, bringing tears to Violette's eyes.

They exchanged many goodbyes over the next minutes, accompanied by accolades for Astaroth and many head pats for Violette. By the time they were almost through the blockade, the people that were left were the village warriors.

Standing at their head, Kloud, Chris, and Aberon. Chris was the first to walk forward.

He crouched down to pat Violette's head, telling her he would miss her. Then he got back up and gave a powerful bear hug to Astaroth.

"You will be missed, boy! Come back when things cool down. Never forget you are part of our family," Chris said, before depositing Astaroth back on the ground.

"Thank you, Colonel. I will miss all of you, too. I will try to come back as soon as I can. Till then, please make sure nothing happens to this village." Astaroth said, smiling softly.

The next one to move up was Aberon. He stopped before Astaroth, smiling at him.

"I'm old, young man. But I want to hear the tales of your power before I die. So make sure you do great things." Aberon said, putting his hand on Astaroth's shoulder.

"I will try my best, Master Aberon," Astaroth replied.

Then the old mage crouched before Violette.

"As for you, little prodigy. I want to hear tales of grand magical battles between you and whatever forces bar your way. Make sure your name resounds across the realm," he told the little girl.

"Yes, Master Aberon!" Violette cried out, tears and snot leaking from her face.

Aberon chuckled at the display before taking a step back. Then stepped forth Kloud.

He stopped in front of Violette, patting her head and smiling.

"I want to give you a mission, little lady," Kloud said.

"What mission, Mister Kloud?" Violette asked.

"I want you to make sure this brash, fool of a man does nothing stupid. Can you do that for me?" He asked her.

"I will try my best. But it will be hard." The girl replied, eliciting a chuckle from all the warriors around.

"Hey!" Astaroth complained.

"Thank you, little miss. Have safe travels." Kloud finished, getting up and facing Astaroth.

"As for you, young man. I want you to remember that power always comes at a cost. Bear that in mind whenever you use yours. And only use it for good. I would hate to see you become evil and have to come to kill you myself," Kloud said, winking at him.

"Yes, teacher!" Astaroth answered, feeling a pang in his heart.

"Safe travels, son," Kloud added, hugging Astaroth tightly.

For a second, it brought Astaroth back to when his father hugged him before his competitions. The feeling he got from Kloud was the same.

This almost caused him to cry as he hugged back. Breaking up their hug, the warriors split apart, making a path toward the village entrance.

As both the man and the girl passed between them, they started chanting out loud.

"For Astaroth and Violette! For hope, and for the Future!"

They chanted this until both players disappeared into the forest. This filled Astaroth and Violette with the courage to face their journey.

And off they departed.

Chapter 145 Planning A Dungeon Crawl

In one of the major cities of the game

Sitting in a cafe, inside a private room, were four players. These players were familiar to even the newbies, since they had all appeared in the first tournament over a month ago.

They were also all part of the top fifty charts, two of them even being in the top ten charts. These players were Phoenix, Gulnur Deepshield, I'die Ad'tempus, and Athena Woodland.

"I wonder how much time it'll take him to catch up to us and surpass us on the charts," I'die said, looking at his teacup.

"Don't be like that, tree hugger. I know he is strong and will eventually pass us in power, but stay positive. That way, it might take longer," Gulnur responded, looking down.

"Have some faith in yourselves, boys. He is still stuck in a level thirty zone, from what he's told us. So even if he surpasses us, it will take a long time." Athena tried reassuring them.

"He wrote me a message earlier. Apparently, he has one thing left to do before leaving his starting zone. After that, he's exploring towards us." Phoenix said, trying to bring the main subject back.

"He told me he's with the little girl he was training, so I don't know how long before they get here. But he was adamant about getting us all together to run some dungeons."

"Something about his zone not having any, and wanting to have fun together again," she said before taking a sip of her coffee.

"Now. If we do a dungeon run with him, we might as well do one that brings benefits," she added.

"Hmm? What did you have in mind?" Athena asked, getting curious.

All three of them knew Phoenix was a shrewd person and a meticulous planner. The fact she had gathered them here already, instead of waiting for Astaroth to arrive, was a sign of her brewing something.

"As we are already aware, dungeons offer more of a challenge than regular zones, because of the monsters all being of special grade and higher. Now my plan is as follows."

"All of us are strong enough to go into level forty dungeons with a reduced group, seeing as we did something similar before. But what of our two friends that are on their way?"

Athena interjected here.

"I think Astaroth could most likely go into a level forty dungeon on his own, if his power in the tournament hasn't stagnated. And anyone travelling with him should be no weak player either."

Phoenix nodded at the woman's words. Her train of thought aligned with Athena's.

"I also think adding those two to a party with us four already in, would make us capable of more. So I want us to attempt something harder. Something that hasn't been completed yet." Phoenix said, crossing her hand on the table.

I'die audibly gulped at her statement. From the side. Athena was grinning savagely, and Gulnur's eyes were sparkling.

"How high are we talking about?" Gulnur asked, anticipation shaking in his voice.

"The highest dungeon completed yet, was a level forty-five. I want to go higher than that. I want to run a level fifty dungeon and beat it." Phoenix answered, smiling like a shark.

The other three players gasped.

"But, we have found yet no dungeon of that level. No one has ventured into zones of level fifty, since they are so much more dangerous." Athena said, her forehead creasing.

"From the coordinates Astaroth gave me in his last message, he won't reach this place for at least two weeks. So we have less time than that to find a level fifty dungeon," Phoenix said.

"Now I believe you all have friends you play with, and trust. Our best chance of doing this would be to each get our own group, and start slowly exploring level fifty zones."

"This way, we can keep levelling up, and maybe find our objective in time, before Astaroth reaches here," Phoenix said, before grabbing her coffee, and taking another sip.

The three other players at the table pondered for a few minutes. They were letting the task sink in before they started thinking about a way to make it possible.

Gulnur already had some people in mind that he could party with to explore higher-level zones. He had been playing with a group of dwarves and gnomes recently, and they fit the bill.

Most of them had the strength to plod into level fifty territory and were mostly over-eager to play with him. That made them the perfect group to do this with, as they would most likely say yes to his demand.

I'die and Athena were also thinking about this issue, and Athena had some people in mind. She shared her ideas with I'die, and he nodded, being as submissive as always with her.

As for Phoenix, she already knew who she was taking with her. A guild had tried to poach her not so long ago.

They had offered her a trial run to see if they were worthy of hiring her, and she decided to take them up on that offer for this task. Of course, she had no intention of joining them.

She intended to start her own guild, in due time, and joining one now would only complicate her plans. But she always appreciated free labour.

After discussing their plans with each other a little, and choosing different zones to go to, they paid for their stay and parted ways. The next two weeks would be adventure-filled, and they couldn't idle any longer.

Back to the Ash Elf territory, deep inside the dire wolf zone

Astaroth and Violette took down the last of the wolves from a group of seven before looting them and taking a brief break. The last hours had gone by in a breeze, as the both of them plowed through the wolveren territory.

They were clueless about the direction to go at first, but when the packs of hunting wolves started getting larger in numbers, they understood they were going in the right direction.

They were now very close to the den, as every time they took down one group, another came in reinforcement not long after. Astaroth could feel White becoming restless inside him.

'Soon, my friend. Soon you will have your revenge.' He told the wolf inside his head.

White's trepidation was leaking into him too, as his adrenaline levels refused to go down.

An enormous grin appeared on his face.

Chapter 146 Facing The New Alpha

After their quick break, Astaroth and Violette could already hear the wolves honing in on them. But, instead of waiting for them, they went after them.

Astaroth and Violette hounded the wolves, hunting them down as they neared the den with every encounter. White was fighting with more and more vigour the closer they got.

When they finally reached their destination, Violette gasped. Waiting in a large clearing were about fifty wolves, all gathered around one very large black one.

White Death was snarling from within Astaroth, while Genie was already growling at the Alpha, her stance low. She recognized the wolf that had thrown her to her death.

Genie had grown quite a lot in the last months, ever since Astaroth had left for the capital. She was now one size bigger than most dire wolves, but still smaller than the alpha.

Even white would have paled in comparison. The black alpha was humongous, reaching almost the size of a giant brown bear.

Astaroth scanned him.

Dire Wolf Alpha (Zone Boss):

Level: 40

Grade: Special

Health: 157'900

Mana: 4'320

Astaroth grinned manically. The update had brought about some changes to the stats of monsters, lowering their health at higher levels a little.

But since the last time he saw this alpha, it had gained the Zone Boss status, completely negating that change. In fact, it was now most likely even stronger.

While he was having a stare-down with the alpha, White spoke in his head.

'Master. I would like to fight him myself. Can you summon me first?'

Astaroth had guessed the spirit would ask something like this.

'I was already planning on that. I will meld with Luna first and try to reduce the load on your combat. We should not decimate the entire pack.' Astaroth replied in his head.

'I think taking down their alpha should make them yield. Without a leader, they would have to retreat.' White agreed.

Reaching this agreement, Astaroth summoned White Death, making the large white wolf appear next to Genie. This enraged the black alpha, since he now had to face an old nemesis, and a potential new threat.

Plus, the two pesky elves near the two wolves would be annoying to deal with too, since they had shown the strength to cull his pack already. The black alpha lost patience first, and howled loudly.

AWOOOOOO!

This signalled his pack into action, as many wolves started running forward.

"Violette, try not to kill all of them! Use crowd control as best you can and help us take down the big one." Astaroth said, making sure Violette didn't wipe out the pack.

She nodded in response, starting to cast a spell. A gigantic wave appeared before her, washing the charging wolves back, before freezing into a tall wall of ice.

With this move alone, she had already isolated half of the pack, making their efforts in combat easier for some time.

Then Astaroth melded with Luna, boosting his stats immensely, and darting at the black wolf. He used his daggers, going for hit-and-run tactics while he was faster than his enemy.

Melding with Luna, since she had been born, gave him much more power than that one time in the tournament arena. He guessed the stats he had gained that time were only a part of her full strength because of her egg status.

Now, melding with her gave him the power of a level sixty monster, at the very least. So even if this alpha was a zone boss, for the next five minutes, Astaroth's stats were higher than it.

White darted into combat too, lunging at his usurper. His spirit form passive made him much more resistant to the black wolves' attacks, letting him take the beast on without too much worry.

Violette tried her best to make the surroundings clear of the regular dire wolves, pushing them back, or gravely wounding them, so Astaroth could fight without having to look over his shoulder.

Occasionally, she would also shoot bullets of ice, and high-pressure jets of water at the wolf, from his blind spots. Those attacks were hurting him and making him angrier.

After two minutes of getting assaulted by Violette's magic attacks and Astaroth's dagger slashes, the alpha was already a quarter of his health down. But then, something changed.

The black wolf howled again, his eyes starting to glow red. The dire wolves in the pack all had their eyes turn red too.

Suddenly, the ones behind the wall of ice broke through. By the force at which the ice exploded outward, Astaroth understood what was happening.

"Violette, be careful! They are in a temporary rage effect, so they are now stronger!" He yelled.

And just to prove his point, the alpha spun around much faster than it should have and attacked Astaroth. Astaroth's eyes went wide, as a paw was coming at his face faster than he could dodge.

He quickly cast Mana Skin, and swapped out one dagger for his shield, enhancing it at the same time. He managed to block the attack a fraction of a second before it hit him.

'So heavy!' he thought, as the paw was launching him away like a bullet out of a gun.

Astaroth flew backwards, blowing through trees with his back, like a humanoid cannonball. Each impact ate away at his health quickly, as it fell from full to a quarter before he stopped.

As he tumbled to a stop, he looked at the distance he had travelled. He was now on the ground, hundreds of meters from where he was previously standing.

He watched as the alpha had swapped targets now, going from White to attacking Violette. The girl was erecting wall of ice after wall of ice, trying to block his path.

She knew from what she had just noticed that one attack would be lethal for her, so she did as Astaroth had trained her to do. She ran back inside the forest, all the while building walls akin to a maze around her.

But she could hear the sounds of crushing ice getting nearer.

"Astaroth! Help me!" She cried out, getting scared.

Chapter 147 Jet Shield To The Face

The gigantic black wolf broke through barrier after barrier of ice, making his way to his prey. Violette was panicking.

Even if this was a game, and she knew it, the prospect of dying would weaken anyone apart from psychos and highly trained players. And she was none of these.

As the alpha broke the last wall separating them, fear overcame Violette, and she froze. The time came to a crawl in her senses, as the looming black wolf's jaws opened, aiming to gobble her whole.

She could see every droplet of saliva flying out in slow motion as the jaw opened wider and wider. It was nearing, inch by inch, her heart beating faster and faster.

Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw something moving even faster, coming at the wolf. To any normal human being, all they would see was a blur.

Astaroth was using a newly gained skill from his meld with Luna, that let him reach her faster than anything he could do normally.

The skill was called Traveling Roots. It allowed him to pass through the root of trees, as long as they touched each other, to reach somewhere fast.

And since they were in an old and vast forest, the trees around these parts had intertwined roots. That allowed him to lunge into a tree and practically teleport to where Violette was.

The travel through the roots sped him up the farther he went. So when he popped out at the tree beside Violette and the alpha, he was travelling almost ten times faster than normal, piercing the sound barrier.

With a sonic clap, Astaroth drove his shield forward in a shield bash, colliding into the black wolf's head. The damage number that appeared made his heart skip a beat.

-110'500!

But a damage number also appeared above his head.

11'050

His already low health dropped even lower, making it dangerously low. His health was now under five thousand points from his previous close to sixteen thousand.

And that amount had already been a quarter of his health. Melding with Luna made him extremely resistant, but colliding with trees on his back had chewed away at his health.

The black wolf's head deformed slightly, as his head snapped sideways, taking on a weird bend. Then the force kept going sideways to it, dragging its body.

It launched the alpha sideways, sending it barreling through the forest like a runaway train. White chased after the black wolf's form, while Astaroth stopped near Violette.

"Are you okay? Can you still fight?" he asked the trembling girl.

It took her a second to snap out of her daze. Blood had drained from her face, and she was sitting on the ground, seemingly paralyzed.

Astaroth understood she wouldn't be doing anything more for a while.

"It's fine. Rest here. I will end this quickly," he told her, before ordering Genie to guard her.

The wolf nodded her head, and Astaroth ran after his improvised projectile.

By the time he reached where the alpha had stopped, White was already in battle with it. The weakened black wolf was having trouble keeping up with White.

It seemed rattled and confused. Astaroth figured that a hit to the head at Mach one should at least give it a minor concussion. It surprised him that the shield bash at that speed didn't instantly kill it.

That impact would have destroyed anything weaker. But the fight wasn't over yet, a testament to that wolf's resilience.

He joined White, tag teaming the alpha, until the last of its health was ripped away from it by White and his jaw. After ripping out the alpha's throat, White howled to the sky.

This howl caused all the dire wolves that were fighting Genie to stop. They then backed away, fearful of the enormous wolf in front of them.

Since their alpha was dead, their chances of winning had reached zero, and their survival instincts kicked in, beckoning them to flee.

And so flee they did.

Astaroth heard from afar the quick yelps from the dire wolves, as they ran away, tails between their legs.

'This should buy some peace to the village for a while.' he thought, as the meld ended, and his form reverted to normal.

He and White walked back to where Violette was, making sure no enemies were left, before sitting next to her. Astaroth unsummoned White and exhaled loudly.

"That was a fight that could have gone wrong quickly. I'm sorry I put you in danger, Violette," he told the girl, looking at her from the corner of his eye.

Violette shook her head vigorously.

"No! I'm sorry I froze! You wouldn't have had to use such a damaging ability if I kept running!" Violette responded, feeling like she was the reason Astaroth had almost died.

She had seen his health plummet when he impacted the alpha, and for a second, she had been scared he would die because of her. The penalty of death here would have been tremendous.

The alpha alone had given them sixteen thousand Exp points, but then, the fifty wolves would have also been counted on the death penalty. This would have meant hundreds of thousands of Exp in penalty!

Astaroth reassured her he was fine, and that he wouldn't have died, anyway. He was planning on melding with White if his death came too low, to regenerate it quickly.

That assuaged her guilt, if ever so slightly. Both of the players rested on the forest floor, letting their adrenaline levels go down and their health go up.

After resting, the duo picked themselves up before leaving the forest. They wouldn't be back in these parts for a good amount of time, and a tinge of sadness enveloped their hearts as they left it behind.

'I will come back someday. And I will make sure that the anger-prone king gets his due.' Astaroth thought, as he looked to the future.

He marched with Violette toward the great city of Sunpeak, where his friends were waiting for him. He had the coordinates, so he pinned them on his map, giving him the direction to go.

'It was time I explored the rest of the game, anyway,' he thought, as they walked away from their starting point.

Chapter 148 Snap

It had already been two days since Astaroth and Violette left the forest where the village was hidden. And they had travelled through many different terrains since then.

Tunnels of darkness untold; Plains as far as the eye can see; Mountains high enough to give you neck pains looking for the top; Rivers of torrential flow; Lakes as calm as a praying monk.

Violette had been astounded at every new site, and Astaroth was frankly impressed at the level of detail the devs put into the game. If he didn't know better, he would think this was an entirely new world.

They had been through different level zones too, varying from level ten zones to level fifty zones. The latter especially made them slow down.

Even though Astaroth was confident in their battle prowess, he doubted they could get out of a swarm of level fifty monsters. It was simply suicide.

At times, they had slaughtered everything in their way, at other times, they had hidden from passing monster hordes. Camping out in the open in high-level zones also came with much danger.

But, for now, they had been doing fine. How long that would last remained a mystery, but Astaroth appreciated the peace while it could last.

It wasn't until the middle of their third day of travels that they met something that made them hesitate to change paths. But contrary to what Astaroth thought it would have been, monsters, it was something much worse.

Ahead of them, in a valley surrounded by yellow grass plains, there was a village. And that village was currently on fire.

They could see the plume of smoke from quite a distance away, but had no way of knowing what it was emanating from until they got closer. And what came into view almost made Violette throw up.

Along the plains, dipping into the valley, there were bodies. Among the bodies, there were humans and ash elves.

Astaroth knew they were nearing the borders of the Ash Elf kingdom, but he hadn't expected to see a human settlement for a few more days. Let alone one that seemed ravaged by war.

'This must be a hidden settlement.' He thought.

But that still didn't explain why there were so many bodies strewn around. Why would the ash elves go to war against a small settlement?

His next thought made his face grow dark.

'Did they attack the settlement simply because they were human?'

But he could guess what the answer was. Chris had told him a war was brewing, after all.

Clearing the borders of the enemy would make sense. But this was going too far.

None of the humans in the corpses looked like soldiers, let alone were they wearing anything remotely like armor. These people were all dressed like farmers and hunters.

And yet, they had been slaughtered, most having wounds on their backs and being laid down face first. This meant someone had struck them while they were fleeing.

Anger was rapidly rising in his body, and it was noticeable. Violette quickly noticed the ambient mana particles acting restlessly.

When she turned her head to Astaroth, the man had an almost palpable aura of rage seething off of him.

"Astaroth? Are you ok?" she asked, in a half-choked voice.

Seeing him like this was scaring her. She had seen Astaroth with many emotions up to now, ranging from happiness to sadness, all the way to ecstasy.

But what was dripping off from him was pure unabated rage. She remembered once that Kloud had told her to make sure he never let his emotions run rampant.

But she was wondering what she could do to calm him. He didn't seem to even notice her anymore.

In the distance, a scream resounded. A woman, crying for help, before the scream was muffled.

Violette jumped in surprise when she heard the shout. But blood drained from her face when she heard Astaroth's words.

"Stay here, Violette. Whatever you hear, you stay here."

He said those words all in a monotonous voice. There was no emotion left in his words.

It was almost like a robot had spoken instead of him, and it terrified her. It was too late.

Inside Astaroth's head, it was currently absolute silence. White was screaming at Astaroth, and Luna was whimpering loudly, but none of that reached Astaroth's brain.

His body was moving on its own as he walked forward toward the village. Something was tugging at his arm, but he barely responded, only shaking it off.

Around him, the souls of the dead were rising from the bodies, wailing in anguish, as they clouded around Astaroth. There were so many that he looked like the center of a tornado of death and crying souls.

Astaroth's soul was cocooned inside himself, seemingly asleep. Thoughts passed by in his head, as all his mind could see was darkness.

'What happened? Where am I?'

By this point, he had reached the village entrance, where a dozen of ash elf soldiers were guarding, so no one would escape. They had not expected someone to come from behind.

They only noticed the intruder once one of them wailed in pain. Astaroth was holding the poor man's arm, twisted in a weird shape, bone sticking out of it.

The man was crying in pain, unable to even defend himself, as the souls around Astaroth assaulted his mind, breaking him from the inside.

Some soldiers fled in fear at the sight, too cowardly to confront what could only be called an apparition before them. A few tried to pull out their weapons, but were cut short.

They wondered what was happening, when their eyes were suddenly seeing the sky, before their heads thumped to the ground. Their bodies soon followed suit, necks cleanly sliced through.

Astaroth's body kept walking towards the center of town, like it was drawn by something, while Violette was trying to scream at him to stop.

Some souls wandered in her direction, but never reached her, as though they were reigned in subconsciously.

"Astaroth! Please, listen to me! Please stop!"

But no answer came. Only silence.

Chapter 149 Nobody Home

His body walked in a straight line, killing the soldiers that came for him, only adding to the souls circling him. He eventually made it to the center of town, where a small regiment of soldiers was standing at the ready.

Behind them stood a tall and slick ash elf. He had a snide on his lips, like the man walking towards them was only vermin.

"Why are you attacking your fellow ash elves?! Are you a traitor?!" the man screeched from behind his men.

No answer.

"Answer, filthy traitor!" He angrily shouted.

His only answer was the wailing wisps floating around the man.

"Kill him!" he ordered, in an almost funny high-pitch scream.

The soldiers obeyed and ran at Astaroth, weapons drawn. These men and women would never return to their families.

Somewhere in the sky, among the stars

The kingdom spirit of the ash elves, Alantha Anulo, was resting on a gaseous nebula, observing the kingdom from above. She had rested for a month after the incident in the palace, and had been observing ever since.

The king was still making preparations for war, training soldiers and amassing more and more taxes to pay for his rising military expenses.

Although she was vehemently against war, due to the substantial cost to the people, as long as the king didn't intentionally kill his people, she could do nothing about it.

It irked her that such a man had been born from such a noble bloodline as the Uuthli'vlos. Their family had been honourable and good for the last four generations, and now this warmonger was graced by their name.

She silently wept as visions of death haunted her dreams at night. This day was no different, as she observed the army slowly expanding.

She had witnessed a battalion attack a human settlement within their borders, but could do nothing to intervene since they weren't ash elves. After the killing started, she had turned her eyes elsewhere.

'I'm sorry, humans,' she had thought silently, shedding a single tear.

But after half an hour of that incident, she suddenly felt a pang of emotion from that same place. But this time, it was much more powerful, and she could feel it came from an ash elf.

She glanced back to the settlement, and what she saw horrified her. From the sky, she could see the massive tornado of blackened, corrupted souls spinning around a single man.

She recognized that man, but she couldn't recognize his soul imprint right now. It was traceless, like he completely locked his soul out.

The pang of emotion came from the man he was currently grasping at the throat. His other hand was deposited on the choking man's chest, as the souls surrounding him rapidly flew inside him.

She gasped in horror as she understood what was happening. Her hair immediately flared up as a portal opened before her.

She stepped inside, reappearing over Astaroth and the quickly dying military officer. Lady Anulo rapidly flew down, trying to salvage the situation.

But the souls tried blocking her path. She angered rapidly, waving her hand at them, disintegrating them.

When she reached the men, she put her hand on Astaroth's head, trying to breach his mind.

"Boy, listen to me. You must stop this madness." She whispered, trying to reach his soul.

Astaroth was still floating deep within himself, enjoying the silence and peace enveloping him. Suddenly, he heard a whisper around him.

A soft voice reaching out to him.

'Who's there?' He shouted, opening his eyes.

As he did, his mind reconnected with a part of his senses. His vision appeared to him, like watching through a screen, in a first-person view.

He saw his arm holding a person by the throat, while his other was pressed on his torso, as black wisps floated inside the man around his hand.

At first, he wondered what was happening, but then he heard the voice, clearly this time.

"Boy, please hear me. I do not want to have to kill you. Please let my voice reach you," he heard the voice say.

Astaroth recognized the voice as lady Anulo's and slowly, his mind started recollecting what was happening. He gripped his head as images of blood and death assaulted his brain.

'Stop. Please stop.' he shouted in his mind.

Until he shouted with more strength, and it came out of his mouth this time.

"Stop!"

The surrounding souls stopped pushing into the officer as his grip around the man's throat slowly loosened. Astaroth's eyes regained some semblance of emotion in them, and Anulo knew she had reached him.

She sighed in relief as she embraced Astaroth from behind.

"Welcome back, boy. I thank the gods you were not completely lost." She said to him, closing her eyes.

Astaroth slowly regained full control of his body, as the souls started dispersing. He released the half-dead man in his grasp, and his legs went soft.

He slowly turned his head, seeing what he had done in the village. He had to refrain from puking, as bodies mangled beyond recognition were strewn all around the place.

Violette, who had been shivering in fright, watching from afar, ran to him at full speed when the souls started disappearing.

She was crying tears of joy as she jumped at his chest to hug him. She didn't recognize the tall lady behind him, but she felt at ease next to her, so she ignored her presence.

"Finally, you're back! I thought you were gone forever!" she cried, giving him small punches on the chest, as she sobbed.

"I'm sorry I worried you," Astaroth replied, patting her head with his bloody hands.

"Thank you, lady Anulo. I'm sorry I caused you to worry," he whispered to the woman, embracing his back.

"It is alright, my child. You deserve my protection just as much as any other Ash Elf. I am only glad I could reach you and you were not gone too far," Lady Anulo responded.

"But now I need to go. Staying here drains my energy rapidly, and I am already weakening. Please do be careful, child," she added, letting go of him and floating upwards.

And just as she had done to get here, her hair flared up, creating a portal that she stepped through and disappeared.

Astaroth watched her disappear as his vision blurred.

"Violette, I'm sorry, but can you guard me?" he asked as he lost consciousness.

Violette almost panicked at first when he crashed to the ground, but she quickly saw he was only sleeping.

So she guarded him for the rest of the day, and a good part of the night, staying awake and connected as long as he didn't wake up.

Chapter 150 Corruption

After sleeping for so long, what woke Astaroth up was not his body, or even Violette. It was the constant notifications from his pod, stating that the IV bags were empty, and to log out before dehydration.

When he opened his eyes, Violette was watching him from a small distance, and she ran next to him.

"You are up! I thought you wouldn't wake up for a long time, still."

"Ugh... My head hurts..." Astaroth uttered.

"You should log out quickly. It must have been hours ago that your IV depleted," Violette said.

"Yeah. I see the notifications. Should you do the same?" Astaroth asked groggily.

"I already have. I left Genie to guard you while I went. It only took me a few minutes," she responded.

"Alright, alright. I'm going," Astaroth yielded.

He rapidly pressed the command to log out. He opened his eyes to the pod cover, slowly blinking in red with warnings.

He tapped the open button, pushing the top upward, before getting up from the pod. His body felt weary and battered, like he had been fighting, not lying down in gel.

'This is the second time I feel this way when exiting the pod. How weird,' Alexander thought.

He quickly resupplied the pod with new IV bags and lay back in. It was still the middle of the night, so he could play a few more hours before he had to come back out.

He rapidly logged back in, reappearing inside the desolate village. Astaroth looked around a little, but couldn't spot traces of the prior massacre.

Violette could see his eyes trailing and answered his silent query.

"I cleaned up the village a bit while you were unconscious. The bodies strewn about were making me nauseous and sad," she said, twirling her hands.

"Don't worry, I gave them a proper send-off," she added.

He slowly nodded at her answer, proud of her, but his head was still pounding. Astaroth sat back down next to a burnt tree.

Holding his head between his hands, Astaroth remembered something he wanted to ask.

"I've been meaning to ask this. Did my body disappear while I was logged out? Or did it just stand there?" he asked the girl.

"You disappeared. But..." Violette started, before her look turned weird.

"Hmm?" Astaroth said, tilting his head.

"Well... Your presence was still there. Also, I could feel your mana still lingering. It was almost like you teleported away, not disappeared," Violette said, her little forehead creasing.

Astaroth took a few moments to digest the information. Someone less attuned to mana might have missed this, but Violette was almost as good as him at detecting it.

'What could this mean,' he wondered.

Now was not the time to ponder this matter, though, as they still had much distance to traverse. Today had already been a massive loss of time.

Astaroth looked inside himself, to see if everything was still the same, and there were his two soul companions, slowly orbiting his own soul.

But something caught his mind's eye when he observed his soul. Where there was only pristine white, a dark spot was now present.

'Does one of you know when that happened or what it is?' he asked internally, to his two spirits.

Luna only whimpered in response, still too young to talk. But White was a little more informative.

'Master, this darkness appeared when we lost contact with you. And it was spreading, fast,' White said, a tinge of worry in his tone.

From that statement alone, Astaroth could guess what this was. The angry wisps that had amassed around him when he lost control had corrupted his soul.

'When did it rescind?' he asked.

'It started receding when you awoke again. And during your rest, it grew smaller until only this spot remained. But this seems to be staying this size, for now,' White replied.

'Thank you, White. I'm sorry if I worried you two. I will try to never let that happen again,' Astaroth promised.

White and Luna both pulsed in reassurance as Astaroth reopened his eyes. He turned his head to Violette and smiled.

"We've lingered enough. Time to hit the road," he said.

Violette looked at him and frowned.

"Are you sure you are okay to travel? You look exhausted," she said to him.

"I'll be fine, Violette. Thank you for worrying about me. But everything will be ok," Astaroth answered, smiling warmly.

He was being honest with her, or at least he firmly believed everything would go back to normal. But Violette was still anxious.

She no longer objected to travelling, though. Arguing had never been in her nature, and Astaroth had a tendency to do what he wanted, anyway.

The duo left the dead village behind as they resumed their road to the east. Astaroth still had the coordinates pinned in his map for Sunpeak, so they knew which direction to go.

Their travels resumed the pace it had previously, going fast at times, and slower at others. But they made progress over the next few days.

The fact that they needed to disconnect every day, and could only be back around the evening, severely hampered their speed, but it was to be expected.

They made the pods for extended play, not perpetual, after all. So Astaroth and Violette made do with what they could, and set times to come back so they had the least waiting time possible.

After leaving the village, they had been near the Ash Elf border, so after a day more of travel, they had left that behind, already feeling safer.

Having the possibility of a military patrol catching them, or even an ambush always looming over their head, was mentally draining. They were happy to leave that behind.

The territory they were in now was neutral territory. The Ash Elves had always been segregated from the rest of the races by choice, not by racism.

And now that they were out of that territory, they crossed multiple villages with different races living together. Violette was once again fascinated to see so many different-looking people.

She would almost rudely stare at any new race they encountered along the way, Astaroth having to apologize for her misbehaviour.

But they were also being looked at weirdly, since Ash Elves weren't common outside of their territory. But it didn't seem to bother the pair.