

## **New Eden 151**

### Chapter 151 Yet Another Enemy

\*\*\*Inside the Ash Elf palace, in the military wing\*\*\*

Rapid steps could be heard pattering on the stone floor. A knock on the door followed.

Sitting behind his desk, the General that had replaced Kloud Stryph was reading quarterly reports. He had been smiling at how the army was quickly expanding, before the knock made him frown.

"Enter," the man said.

A messenger opened the door before bowing at a ninety-degree angle. He held in his hand a rolled-up scroll.

"Sir! A report came in from the eastern border, sir! You need to see this, sir!" the messenger said, staying bowed.

The General clicked his tongue. He did not recall sending anything bigger than a company near that border.

Why was a Captain sending a report to him?

"Why isn't the Colonel assigned to that front taking care of this? You are disturbing my day with matters that are beneath me, soldier!" The General barked.

"Sir, the Colonel asked me to bring this to your attention. He said you would want to see this, sir!" The messenger replied, hoping he wouldn't be trialled for following orders.

The General's frown deepened. What kind of report would be important enough for a Colonel to judge this was an urgent matter enough to disturb his work?

The General glared at the messenger.

"Well, come on then. Give me the damned report!" He barked out.

"Sir, yes sir!" the soldier yelped, before handing him the report and quickly backing away.

The General promptly shooed him away before unrolling the scroll. He slowly read through the contents until his face reddened with anger.

\*Bang!\*

The soldiers guarding the General's door jumped when a desk came blasting through the door, crashing into the hall. There was a fuming hole in it, as if a small meteor had impacted it.

"Two! Hundred! Men! Against! One! And they lost! Fucking weaklings!" The General yelled from inside his office.

The two guards gulped as they turned to face the door, awaiting orders that were sure to come.

"You!" the steaming man said, pointing to the guard on the left.

"Get me that coward of a captain here, right now!"

The man bowed swiftly and departed in a sprint. He did not want to stay a second more.

"And you! Fetch me that damned Court Mage. He has questions to answer!" the General growled.

The second guard bowed and left just as fast as the first one, in a different direction. They had worked under the General long enough to know they shouldn't be near when he blew up.

The General was pacing inside his office, fists clenched, murmuring the same words over and over.

"I'm gonna kill you, runt!"

\*\*\*Back in neutral territory\*\*\*

Astaroth suddenly shivered. He felt a sense of dread wash over him, like a predator was watching him.

Yet he couldn't see or sense anyone nearby that could give him this vibe. He shrugged his shoulders and brushed the thought away.

He and Violette were now halfway to their destination, and they had yet to cross another situation that was remotely as despairing as the burning village.

Along the way, the pair had completed a few quests, killing monsters and saving people. They even took an escort quest that went in the same direction they did, killing two birds with one stone.

This gave them some extra coin that they used to pay for more comfortable rest than sleeping under the stars. With this money, they could log out without worrying about reappearing surrounded by monsters.

Or worse. Players.

Astaroth had heard about a rising trend that some PVP players liked to do. They would stalk their prey until they stopped moving and logged out, and then would hide and wait.

When their prey came back online, they would force them to give all their coins and gear, or kill them and loot their bodies, anyway. This had worried him at first.

What if they logged out of the game, and Violette came back before he did and was ambushed? But his worries were unfounded.

They were stalked by a group of players once, and when they attacked, Violette wiped them out in seconds, drowning some, and freezing the others to death.

Astaroth had only slowly clapped at the result, thoroughly impressed. Apparently, Violette had no scruple about killing other players if they attacked her first.

'It's just a game.' She had told him, shrugging.

Her mentality wasn't wrong, but he would still have offered the players a chance to leave.

'Seems like pity isn't in her character,' Astaroth had thought, shrugging it off.

The day before they reached Sunpeak, he messaged his friends again, telling them he would arrive the next day. He didn't know if they were still there, but he didn't mind.

He had yet to fully explore any city, as the last city he visited had been chasing him all over the place. So visiting Sunpeak was on his to-do list, anyway.

He wondered what a major city would look like, both from the outside and the inside. He had seen images on the net, of places inside the principal cities, but never the complete view.

The next day, when they reconnected around dinner time, Astaroth and Violette quickly left the town they were in. They almost ran through the forest that was left between them and the city.

When they reached the outskirts of the forest, they stopped running, and their jaws hung agape.

Before them was a gigantic plain, filled with fields of different crops, surrounding a mountain in the distance. The mountain was high enough that the peak disappeared into the clouds.

They both quickly understood where the name came from when they beheld the humongous mountain. The stone from the mountain was a bright yellow in colour and reflected part of the sunlight.

The city that was sprawled at its foot was at least three times larger than the Ash Elf capital, by Astaroth's calculations. Words to describe the scene escaped him and Violette.

They stood there, in awe, for minutes on end, taking in the sight. They eventually snapped out of their daze and walked toward it.

Astaroth had gotten confirmation from Phoenix and the others of their presence in the city when he logged it. They were waiting for them in a cafe near the city center.

Excitement filled the pair's hearts as they walked forward.

## Chapter 152 Racism At The Door

After walking for almost an hour, surrounded by fields and farmers, Astaroth and Violette reached the city proper. They were still on the outer portion, but they could already feel the hustle and bustle.

Astaroth was from a city himself, so this hubbub was not unfamiliar to him, and was even quite soothing. Violette was also from a city, but she was quite sheltered, and never left the property grounds.

To her, seeing so many people walking around from place to place was a novelty experience. Astaroth had already received the message that his friends were waiting for him at the café.

But he didn't want to ruin this for the girl, so replied that they might be a little late. Phoenix had told him to take his time, that they would be waiting.

So, instead of pressing his step, Astaroth slowed down. He let Violette imbibe all the atmosphere that came with bigger cities, as her head snapped from side to side.

She trailed people with her eyes, observed merchants haggling with their customers, and listened to the hawkers trying to garner attention for their shops. Every experience was novel to her.

They eventually reached the gates to enter the walled portion of the city. And just as they were about to cross them and enter, they were intercepted.

"Halt. Please state your business in Sunpeak." A guard asked him, as he stood in front of Astaroth, baring his way.

Astaroth frowned lightly, since no one else seemed to get stopped at the entry. He looked around and the guards were looking at him and Violette suspiciously.

This caused the traffic walking around them to walk away and circle them widely.

'Why are they so worried about us?' he wondered.

Then he guessed it was about their race. No other Ash Elf was entering the town from what he could see.

And with the Ash Elf kingdom being on the war foot, he guessed the other races were wary of them. He couldn't fault the guard for doing his job, though.

He answered the question, stating he was visiting friends. The guard asked for the name of his friends under the pretext of verifying his words.

Astaroth clicked his tongue, but complied, giving him the names of Phoenix, Gulnur Deepshield, Athena Woodland and I'die Ad'tempus. The guard frowned at the names, but pointed his chin to another guard that promptly left.

Astaroth even told him where they would be, in case they needed more detail, and the guard nodded his head once. They held him and Violette there for a while, as the other guard was looking for his friends.

Astaroth even received a message from Phoenix asking if everything was okay. She told him a guard came looking for her, trying to confirm if they knew each other.

Astaroth replied that he was being held at the gate, saying it was most likely an issue with his race. Phoenix didn't pry further, and said she had confirmed it and the guard was on his way back.

He thanked her and closed his message box. He didn't wait long before the guard came back, whispering in the other one's ear.

After nodding twice, the guard turned back to face Astaroth.

"You are free to pass. But don't go doing anything suspicious. The guards around the city will have their eyes on you," the guard stated, before moving away from his path.

"Thank you. I will be on my best behaviour," Astaroth replied, flashing his most hypocritical smile.

The guard didn't miss the sarcasm, but said nothing more, only eyeing him meanly. Once Astaroth had left, he sent a message to his superiors, informing them of the situation.

Meanwhile, Astaroth and Violette had headed toward the café. Violette was slowly getting nervous at the prospect of meeting new people.

She secretly hoped they weren't bad people, even though she had a feeling Astaroth wouldn't associate with that type of player. Her nervousness didn't escape Astaroth's eyes.

He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Everything will be fine. They are nice people, I promise," he stated, smiling warmly at her.

This assuaged her fears a bit, stopping her hands from twirling. Soon after, they reached the center of the city and turned to the left. They were heading into a street that was filled with shops with beautiful terraces.

It was easy to see that this was the food market and restaurant district. The smells that permeated the air were filled with unique aromas from the different foods being served.

Astaroth and Violette had to focus to control their saliva from leaking out their mouths. The aromas were divine and mouth-watering.

After walking for a short while, they reached a corner where a sign was hung up high. The sign had a cat wrapped around a steaming coffee on it.

Astaroth almost laughed at the sign. The name on it read, 'The Sleeping Tabby Café' and he thought for a second this might be a cat café.

He wasn't far off the mark, for when he entered the establishment, the receptionist, and almost all the other employees, were cat beast-men.

Violette almost squealed in joy. She had always wanted a cat, but this was even better.

She looked at the receptionist with sparkling eyes, and the lady smiled back, with her eyes closed.

Astaroth laughed internally.

'They went all-in on the concept. I like it,' he thought, smiling.

"Welcome to the sleeping tabby café. How may we serve you today?" The woman asked them.

"Hello. I have some friends that are already here. They should have a private room rented under the name Phoenix," Astaroth replied.

"Ahh yes. Miss Phoenix is a regular here. Please follow me to the private room," The receptionist said, beckoning them to follow her.

She brought them up a flight of stairs, into a hallway with many closed doors, and some open ones. After making their way almost to the end of the corridor, the woman knocked on a door.

"Your last guests are here, miss Phoenix," she said through the door.

Astaroth heard Phoenix's voice through the door.

"Please let them in, Carla."

The woman opened the door, then bowed at Astaroth and Violette, patting the latter's head with her clawed hand, before leaving.

"Come in, you monster! Long time no see!" Phoenix said, smiling at Astaroth.

Chapter 153 Discussing The Dungeon Crawl

Astaroth walked into the small room, followed by Violette, who was almost fusing with his back. Astaroth had never seen her be this shy.

Then again, the only new people she met while he was there were all NPCs. So she probably didn't see them as real people as he did.

He reached back, putting his hand on her shoulder, and brought Violette in front of him.

"Everyone, this is Violette. She is a little shy, but don't judge her by that. She could probably knock you down a peg in single combat," Astaroth introduced.

Blood drained from the little girl's face.

'Why?!' she screamed in her head.

Now everyone would want to fight her and teach her a lesson. Or at least, she thought.

The four players sitting at the table started laughing heartily.

"Ahahaha! If you say that, it means she is at least close to your level. What is your class, little one?" Phoenix asked, smiling toothily.

"I'm a mage," Violette almost murmured.

"Oh? Just like me. What is your favoured element, then?" Phoenix questioned.

"I have a high affinity for the water element and the ice element," Violette responded, easing up a bit.

She loved talking about magic, so being asked questions on the subject calmed her a bit.

Phoenix looked up at Astaroth, who was grinning like a shark.

"My complete opposite. How good is she really?" Phoenix asked, now genuinely interested in fighting the girl.

"I don't think she could beat you just yet. But she would definitely give you a run for your money," Astaroth replied, still grinning.

It almost tempted Phoenix to bring them to the arena right that instant, to try out his claims. But she refrained from doing so.

They had other matters to discuss first. Fun should always come after business.

Astaroth sat down across from Phoenix, I'die, and Athena, sitting Violette between himself and Gulnur. He and Phoenix started discussing the matter of the dungeon, while the other three presented each other to Violette.

After almost an hour of talking and planning, Violette had become at ease with the others in the room. She even joked around with them.

Gulnur and she had hit it off right away, seeing as their ages weren't that different. They both talked about what they had seen during their respective travels, with eyes filled with fascination.

It was quite a refreshing scene for the other four, since they were a little older. Phoenix talked about the dungeon run in detail, but always omitted its difficulty or its name.

Astaroth was getting antsy about it, since he loved exploring. His adventurous side loved going into unknown places.

After dangling the meat in front of him for so long, Phoenix eventually satisfied his curiosity.

"The dungeon we are going to has yet to be explored, to our knowledge. It is a dungeon that players steer clear of, since the level of the zone it is in is level fifty." She dropped.

Astaroth immediately went wide-eyed. A level fifty dungeon was a challenge few people could take on yet.

Let alone a small group like theirs.

"Are we going just the six of us? Or do you have other people in mind?" he asked.

"I have another player in mind. He will join us over there, since he prefers to steer clear of cities," Phoenix responded.

Astaroth frowned at that statement. There were few people that stayed away from cities.

"Before you imagine things, no, he isn't a criminal. He is just very insecure around people, and cities make tremble in his boots," Phoenix said, clearing his doubts.

Astaroth sighed in relief. He could deal with shady people.

But criminals? He would prefer not.

His life was already risky enough in the real world because of criminals. No need to meet some in the game, too.

"What class is he?" Astaroth asked next.

"He is a priest player. A dedicated healer. We will need one if we are to clear that dungeon." Phoenix said.

I'die lowered his head at the statement. He knew it wasn't aimed at him, but it still stung that his healing wasn't enough.

Athena patted his shoulder, trying to appease him. Astaroth looked at the two with knowing eyes.

Phoenix noticed his look and smiled. I'die was probably the only one who had yet to notice.

Even Gulnur gave the pair a weird look. He wasn't used to anything romantic, so to him, this was alien.

But only a blind person would fail to notice how Athena treated I'die. But I'die was none the wiser.

"You have been calling it this dungeon all this time. Can I know the name of the dungeon?" Astaroth asked, prying his eyes away from the cooing Athena.

"Ahh yes. The dungeon we are exploring is called 'The Jungle Maze'. It is located in a more temperate zone, North East of here," Phoenix answered.

From the name alone, Astaroth could already feel the humidity seeping into his bones. He had never visited an actual jungle, but he had read enough about them to know this much.

They were humid!

He could also guess what type of monsters they would be fighting. Most jungles on Earth crawled with insects, snakes, and predatory cats.

The other detail he gleaned from the name was how the dungeon would proceed. The word maze was most likely not just for gravitas.

He wouldn't be surprised if they got lost in it a few times before clearing it.

Phoenix gave him time to make his own thoughts on the matter, even if they already had quite a lot of information. They had sent in a scouting party, having the layout for the first few 'rooms' inside it.

But she knew Astaroth was smart enough to make his own correct assumptions. She was also happy he had brought another powerful mage with him.

A jungle zone would be too humid for her power to be at its peak. And a water mage would fit right in, just as much as I'die would.

She could surmise they would probably be the two heaviest hitters in the party while they ran it. Of course, she didn't discard Astaroth either.

'This will be a sight to behold, and an achievement for the records!' she thought, clenching her fists under the table.

### Chapter 154 Gauging Her Strength

After finalizing their plan, and setting a time for departure on the morrow, the group all left one by one, going to prepare for the next day. Phoenix, Astaroth, and Violette were the last ones in the room.

pàndá-ňovêi.cóM "Wait. Before you leave. I have a request for you," Phoenix said, looking at Violette.

Violette looked at the woman, tilting her little head.

"I would like to test your capabilities with a spar. I have fought alongside all of the people present earlier, so I know what to expect. But you are a mystery to me."

"Would you mind coming to the arena with me, Violette?" Phoenix asked, trying to keep an amicable smile.

Astaroth knew better than to look at her facade, but he let Violette decide for herself.

"Umm... I don't mind," Violette answered, becoming nervous again.

All she could think of was, 'What if I'm not good enough? Will she not let me come to the dungeon?'

Astaroth could feel her anxiety rise again, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright, Violette. She just wants to know what you can do. Phoenix is the planner for this trip, so the more she knows our abilities, the better our chances are," Astaroth said.

This calmed down the girl. Of course, he only said this, and not his real thoughts.

He could guess by how Phoenix had looked at Violette earlier that Phoenix mainly wanted to know if Violette would be a future competitor. He knew she was a very competitive woman.

It went without saying, since she was a pro player, after all. But he also knew she wouldn't resort to underhanded methods to get rid of opponents, either.

So this was still a safe outcome. Therefore, he wouldn't interfere.

After Violette accepted, the trio headed to the arena together. Once there, they talked to a lobby attendant, requesting to rent the grounds for a duel.



The attendant asked if it was for now, or for later, and set them up for when he was answered now. It didn't take long to set everything up, since a lot of players were renting the arena these days.

That also meant there was a crowd in the stands. Violette's anxiety spiked again, but Astaroth calmed her once more.

"Everything will be fine. Just imagine they are all monsters, looking at you fighting another monster," Astaroth said, taking her mind off the players.

Their turn soon came, and both women walked into the arena. The crowd burst into cheers at the sight of Phoenix.

She was somewhat of a local celebrity, since she often accepted duel requests from players. This allowed her to raise her popularity and get free training dummies.

She also often bet some money on herself, so it was a profitable business. Rumours started spreading in the crowd, when they saw the woman's opponent.

"Look at her. She's so small."

"Is that a child? What is she doing challenging one of the best players in the game?"

"This fight isn't going to last long."

Astaroth wasn't liking what he was hearing, so he murmured something to a player next to him.

"I heard it was Phoenix that challenged the little girl to a duel. Something about seeing how powerful she is."

The man next to him wanted to laugh at first, but when he turned his head to ridicule the whispering player, he recognized him.

"P... Pl... Player Astaroth!" the man blurted out.

Astaroth smiled in a snide way before going to another place in the bleachers. He repeated his little trick until the murmurs in the crowd had changed altogether.

Now the rumours going around were talking about the small girl being a crouching dragon. Others were saying she was maybe a hidden pro player, making her debut fight against Phoenix.

This put a smile on his face, as even though it wasn't the truth, it was already more positive. Maybe after this fight, Violette's name would be known across this entire city, or further away.

The two women were facing off in the arena, while an NPC explained the rules of the duel to them. Phoenix barely listened, since she already knew them, but Violette was extremely attentive.

The rules were standard arena duel rules.

The first one to fall to zero hp had lost

If a player was incapacitated completely, even if they weren't dead, they had lost.

If a player surrendered, they lost.

A very simple set of rules that everyone could get behind, and prevented any misconduct.

Phoenix was staring down at Violette while the NPC explained everything. She was trying to gauge her magical power by the surrounding mana.

She had gotten quite good at this when she fought against mages. Most mages couldn't control the mana around them, making them open books to anyone with good mana senses.

But the girl in front of her was barely emanating mana at all. Phoenix looked over at the stands, spotting Astaroth almost instantly.

Astaroth returned her stare with a wide grin. He mouthed words that only she could see, and it made her grin.

'Do your worse.'

She quickly understood that the person who taught magic to Violette must have been the same master as Astaroth. And by the looks of it, she had learned more about magic than the latter.

This only made Phoenix even more enthusiastic about this duel. She could feel the anticipation buzzing at her fingertips.

After going over the rules, the NPC looked over at both women in turn.

"Player Phoenix, are you ready?!" He asked her.

Phoenix nodded in response.

"Player Violette, are you ready?!" He asked Violette, turning his head to her.

"Yes!" She said, her voice shaking.

She was holding her staff in her hands; her grip tighter than a noose on a hanging man. She did her best to control the mana trying to leak from it, just as Aberon had taught her.

The old man had once told her that the best mages left no power leak from them at any time. So she had practiced hiding her mana signature a lot.

Her opponent, Phoenix, was barely releasing any mana herself. But she already knew how powerful the woman was from having watched the tournament.

The NPC raised his hands.

"May the best player win!"

"Fight!"

Chapter 155 Triple Casting

Immediately after shouting 'fight', the NPC disappeared from the arena as a barrier erected itself. Phoenix was already taking action too, as a fireball appeared in her hand.

But before she could throw it at Violette, a condensed water jet extinguished right out of her hand. Phoenix looked at Violette in a daze.

She had been looking for mana movement, and could barely see any from the girl before the water jet shot out. Phoenix ignited another fireball, but the same thing happened.

Only this time, she glimpsed at what happened. Violette had channelled her inner mana, pushing it through her staff, before the gem at its tip exponentially multiplied its power.

'Efficient. Good.' Phoenix thought, smiling.

She then started launching the fireballs as they ignited, going for speed over power. But Violette remained calm as she shot each one down, like she was at a shooting range.

Phoenix smiled even wider, pouring an immense amount of mana forward, conjuring forth a wall of flame. In response, Violette conjured a wall of ice, blocking its path.

When the spells collided, a steam cloud exploded outward, obscuring the arena rapidly. But the barrier worked as a true sight screen, showing the two players clear as day.

Violette started running in a concentric path, firing jets of water, and bullets of ice at Phoenix, trying to use the steam as cover for her actions.

But Phoenix was shooting out attacks of her own, intercepting the projectiles. The players were dumbstruck at what they were seeing.

Both the woman and the girl were precisely shooting at each other, in close to nil visibility. It was like the steam wasn't even there for them.

Both of them were currently using a form of mana sensing, Phoenix seeing it through her eyes, while Violette was feeling it more naturally, like her mind was echo-locating the mana particles.

The spells progressively became stronger as both players tried to gain the upper hand.

Violette conjured a giant water ball around Phoenix, encasing her in it, before promptly freezing it. But before it could finish freezing all the way, a giant fire tornado spun to life, melting the ball of ice.

Phoenix pushed the tornado forward, enlarging it as it moved, blocking retreat paths for Violette. But the girl didn't panic, as she waved her staff sideways, as a small-sized tsunami appeared behind her.

The wave and the tornado collided, once again creating more steam in the arena. The visibility was now reduced to zero for anyone inside the barrier.

But spells kept getting launched from both players, as though nothing was there. Violette even went into double casting, unleashing a torrent of ice shards from her staff, as her hand now held a whip made of water.

She whipped at Phoenix repetitively, but none hitting true, as Phoenix had conjured a small wall of fire that she moved around with her hand, blocking the attacks.

Everyone in the crowd was now roaring and cheering, witnessing a battle that could be on par with mage battles in the tournament. The pace at which both the woman and girl were throwing spells was insane.

Any other mage would have needed to drink a mana potion by now, since their mana pools would be spent. But this seemed like a trivial moment for both fighters, as they never once stopped to drink a potion.

The spectators had access to basic information displayed on the fighters in the arena, and could see the mana bars and health bars.

But what they saw was a mystery. The health bars were still full on both sides, and the mana bars kept going down, slowly, but would replenish by a large amount whenever they reached under fifty percent.

But no one understood how, since the players never stopped launching attacks at each other. After this fight, a lot of mages would start prodding at their teachers and masters, and would eventually discover mana breathing.

But for now, only a few players knew of it. And they were not sharing their secrets.

Astaroth was currently sitting in the bleachers, but he wasn't looking at the fight below. Instead, his head was tilted upwards, and he was sporting a grin that could only be compared to a proud parent's grin.

A player next to him eventually noticed, and turned his head upwards. When he did, his eyes went wide, and the blood in his face drained.

The barrier protecting the arena was not semi-spherical, but cylindrical. That allowed a lot of casters to enjoy a wider range of angles for attacking.

There was an ungodly amount of ice shards at the top of the cylinder, each icicle like a needle. They were being formed out of the rising amount of steam that emanated from the fight of water and fire below.

The player then pointed at it, stuttering.

"Ev... Everyone! Look up!"

Some of the surrounding people wondered what the commotion was about, so they also looked up. And slowly gasps and shouts started propagating around the stands.

It took no more than ten seconds for all the spectators to look upward. And the ice shards kept multiplying by the second.

'You keep going, Violette. Push yourself further. Go beyond yourself!' Astaroth cheered internally.

Violette, who was fighting a standstill battle down in the arena, and appeared to be double casting, was performing a feat many would never achieve. She was triple casting, all the while moving around and attacking.

The amount of split concentration required to do what she was doing was inhuman, and regular mages would drool at the prospect of achieving this. But it was no simple feat.

In the arena with her, Phoenix was still unaware of what was happening over her head. The steam produced by both elemental attacks was magical in nature, so it charged the air with mana particles.

But the farce eventually ended when Violette grinned and lifted both arms to the sky. And then she chanted out loud.

"Cataclysmic event: Unending Hailstorm!"

Phoenix raised her head and finally saw what was over her head all this time.

'Wow,' was her first thought.

"Shit." was what she said, before the millions of small needles of ice started falling.

Chapter 156 Back From The Jaws Of Defeat

Phoenix knew there was no room for her to dodge. And she wouldn't be able to cat a firewall strong enough to withstand the attack, either. She could feel it.

So she encased herself in flames, hoping she had enough time to gather a bit of Aether. She was going to show a new move she was working on.

Phoenix rapidly breathed in the surrounding fire, separating the mana particles from it, and condensing it as best she could.

Before long, the icicles started pelting her flame cocoon, and it was rapidly becoming weaker. By the time she had absorbed enough Aether to do what she wanted, the cocoon was gone.

She had started taking damage from all the needles, and her health was dwindling. But she managed to save herself in time.

"Combat Pyromancy: Flame Armor," Phoenix murmured.

Flames erupted from her body, pushing away the ice needles falling at her, and melting the closest ones. The icicles stopped reaching her; the heat emanating from her being too high, and she used that to her advantage.

Phoenix darted forward, heading directly toward Violette. The girl couldn't move anymore, since holding a spell this strong required most of her focus. The best she could do was to focus the rain of ice on Phoenix's path.

The ice needle suddenly started raining in a much more concentrated fashion, trying to block Phoenix's path. She had to twirl and sidestep, as she kept slowly moving toward Violette.

Once she reached her target, Phoenix punched forward into Violette's abdomen.

"Flash-fire Fist!" she yelled out, as all the flames on her body moved to her hand and shot out instantly.

Violette felt like a sledgehammer had just impacted her body as she was sent flying backward, falling outside of the arena. She rose to her feet, but it was already too late.

Sadness clouded her mind, and she spun around to run away, feeling tears rise to her eyes. But before she could take a step away, two feminine arms enveloped her from behind.

She was lifted off her feet, and spun around rapidly, before being put on the ground again. When Violette turned, she was face to face with a smiling Phoenix.

"You are an amazing little girl! I can't believe you almost defeated me!" Phoenix blurted out, holding Violette by her shoulders.

The tears in the little girl's eyes seemed to vanish, as a sense of pride washed over her.

"The strongest mage in the game just called me amazing!" she exclaimed internally, her face beaming.

The barrier had already been shut down, and the cheers from the crowd permeated the area. The crowd was practically rioting, unsure of what they had just witnessed.

Astaroth had left the bleachers, going for the entrance of the building to wait for both of his friends. It wasn't too long before they made it out, too.

Phoenix had a radiant smile on her face, and Violette was practically shining. Astaroth waved at them.

"So. Is she up to your standards?" he asked Phoenix.

Phoenix walked up to him and playfully punched his arm.

"Where were you hiding such a gem? You can't start hoarding talented players on your own, you know?" Phoenix teased him.

"Hey! Don't blame me for that. She simply appeared in the same village as me. It's not like I forced her to join me," Astaroth chuckled, rubbing his arm.

Violette was not even listening to them, as her mind was still revelling in the praise she got from Phoenix. When she had learned that she had a high magic affinity, she had hoped she could someday be like a certain red-haired mage.

Now, her dreams were coming to fruition, as said mage was praising her talent and strength.

Astaroth saw the daze the girl was in and refrained from breaking it. He simply grabbed her hand, dragging her along as they left the area.

They promptly left before the players in the crowd started washing out and swarmed them. Popularity was good, but too much could also be a detriment.

As they faded into some alleys, the arena emptied out, much to the displeasure of the proprietors. They had made a lump sum of gold from this fight, but no one could match this level and the next fights had been cancelled.

No one wanted to pose after such a fight. There would be no one to watch it, and what little crowd would remain would not be thrilled.

Astaroth, Phoenix, and Violette prowled the quieter streets, making their way to an inn. They would be resting there for the rest of the evening.

The weekend started the next day, and they agreed to play during the day instead of the night. This way, everyone would be fresh and in their best form.

Astaroth paid for his and Violette's rooms, being flush with cash again. He had high hopes for Violette, but he knew she wouldn't win, so he had bet on Phoenix.

Phoenix gave him the stink eye when she saw him pull out the pouch of gold, sporting the arena's logo on it, knowing full well where his money came from.

He gave her a wry smile, shrugging innocently, before she also paid for a room and climbed the stairs to go rest.

Astaroth pushed along Violette, who was still in her daze, which was now starting to mix with fatigue. When he reached her room, he unlocked it, pushing her inside, reminding her to log out and rest, before closing the door and locking it.

He then walked one room further down the hall and entered it. He locked the door behind him and lay down on the soft bed.

He closed his eyes before logging out.

When he opened them again, he was staring at the familiar pod interior. He pushed it open and rose from it.

Alexander took a long, hot shower before going to bed early. Tomorrow was going to be a long and adventure-filled day.

After a long night's sleep, he woke up feeling like crap, as he always did. He walked his zombie walk to the kitchen, starting up the coffeemaker.

He also cooked himself a quick but nutritious breakfast that he ate while enjoying his coffee and the view of the city. Once done, he washed his dishes and went back to his room to dress up.

Before logging back in, he went to the gym and trained with Clark before jogging back home. Alex took another shower before lying down inside his gaming pod, and making sure the IV bags were all full.

"Log in."

Chapter 157 Travelling To The Mountains

\*Launching 'New Eden'\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth\*

Astaroth opened his eyes to the wood and mud inn ceiling. He rose to his feet, stretching his body, before heading to Violette's room.

As he opened his door, he noticed Violette was standing in front of it, her little fist raised in a knocking position. Violette slightly yelped when the door opened, surprising her.

\*Cough\*

"Phoenix just wrote to me. Everyone got here early, and they are waiting for us at the northern gate," Violette said, bringing her hand down.

Astaroth smiled and walked out of the room.

"You know knocking wouldn't have worked if I was disconnected, right?" he asked Violette, still smiling.

"Erm... Outside habits, I guess?" she responded, shrugging her shoulders.

Astaroth chuckled at the answer, as the both of them walked down the stairs. He gave back both keys to their rooms to the innkeeper and thanked her for her hospitality.

The short, round woman smiled at him, telling him to again.

Walking in the direction of the north gate, Astaroth asked Violette how her family had reacted to her being gone for almost all weekend. He knew that family was a sensitive subject for Violette, but he inquired anyway.

"My mother was worried at first, stating that I should be in here too long at a time. I managed to calm her down, saying that the pod ensured I was safe," she said, smiling wryly.

"My dad, on the other hand. He seemed thrilled I would be gone all weekend. Something about him being happy I made friends. I could tell it was a lie though," she added, her face darkening.

Astaroth knew from previous conversations that they didn't have a good relationship, but he never got her to tell him the reason. But whatever the reason was, he already didn't like the man much.

Astaroth had been raised in a loving family, and could hardly fathom what it was like to grow up being disliked by a parent. The only thing he knew was that it was unacceptable for a parent to be so brazen about it.

A child should never feel hated or unloved by a parent, no matter what. It left a foul taste in his mouth.

"Hey, maybe if you become super famous in New Eden, your father will cut you some slack?" Astaroth said, while scratching the back of his head.

"Maybe..." Violette responded, looking at her feet.

'Shit. I made her sad again. I'm so stupid,' he thought, berating himself.

They arrived at their destination shortly after, walking in awkward silence. Phoenix noticed the tension right away.

She walked to Astaroth, punching his arm.

"What did you do to this poor girl, you idiot?" she growled at him, staring daggers.

"Hey! Quite punching me. And why does it have to be me, absolutely?!" Astaroth said, raising his hands defensively.

"Because you are a big moron, that's why!" Phoenix replied, before grabbing Violette by the shoulders.

Violette had wild eyes, not quite understanding what had happened, but let herself be carried away.

Astaroth turned to the rest of the party with bewildered eyes. Gulnur shrugged, while I'die looked at his feet, and Athena simply smiled back.

"Did someone kick her dog or something?" he asked them.

Athena sighed before leaving to join the other girls. Astaroth looked at her leave, becoming more confused by the second.



"I guess it's just us boys. Right!?" he said, before walking towards them.

Gulnur smiled, clueless about the situation, while I'die gave a slight bow.

"I would prefer not to," I'die answered, before scampering in the women's direction.

Both Astaroth and Gulnur watched him skip away, dejectedly. They then looked at each other, shrugged, and started walking in that direction too.

They eventually caught up to the marching women, who glared at them from time to time, except for Violette, who kept giving Astaroth apologetic looks.

'Ahh, girls. I will never understand them,' Astaroth thought.

Astaroth received a group invite from Phoenix, who gave him a stink eye, before turning her head back forward. He accepted it, chuckling silently.

The group walked toward the north for a good while, toward a prodigiously large mountain range. From where they currently stood, it was all they could see from east to west.

It took them the better half of the day to reach the foot of the mountain range, and they stopped to eat lunch before going inside it. The information they had gathered from the area put this zone in the levels thirty-five to forty.

They also took turns logging off and replenishing their pods, for those who had one. Those of them that still played on helmets, which was only I'die and Athena, logged out to take care of basic needs, like hydrating and eating.

It took the entire party a little under an hour to be all ready and packed back up before departing into the mountains. The path through them was sinuous and winding.

At times, it went up, and at others, it dipped down, but one thing was constant. Ever since they came into the mountain paths, they had all started feeling watched.

Gulnur's group had been the one to explore this region in the last weeks, and he assured them this was new. So the party went on high alert.

They walked slower than their usual pace, all of them looking in different directions, trying to spot where their peeper was.

They never could pinpoint the location, but all of them swore they saw a shadow moving about sometimes. Astroth eventually had enough of being prey.

It was time to swap roles.

He melded with White, before crouching down low. Phoenix saw him act and stepped away a few paces.

The others imitated her, taking their distance, as wind accumulated under Astaroth's feet. He then launched upward in an arcing path, aiming at a nearby rock outcropping.

When he reached there, he grabbed onto it with his claws and feet, and bounced upward again. The height he reached with his maneuver showed him what he wanted to see.

He pulled out his bow, while still flying upwards, and nocked an arrow. The arrow tip lit up with fire, balling up into a sphere.

'Time to come out and play,' he murmured, loosing his arrow.

## Chapter 158 Synergy

\*Woosh\*

\*Boom!\*

Astaroth's arrow flew true, as it hit his target in the back, before igniting into a flashbang explosion. This gave away its position to the rest of the party, who immediately turned their heads that way.

But Astaroth grinned and started to fall back, his senses alerted him to danger from another direction. He leaned his head to the left as a small rock whizzed past his ear.

When he turned his head to see where it was from, he gulped. Standing on another mountain ledge were many more of the enemies he had just shot.

He got a better look at them, since they were closer.

The monsters looked like chimpanzees, but their colour was a light gray, blending in with their surroundings a bit. They also had thick wrists that looked covered in rock.

He scanned a few of them rapidly as he fell by them.

Stone Ape:

Level: 35

HP: 1'225

MP: 800

Stone Ape:

Level: 37

HP: 1'375

MP: 880

Stone Ape:

Level: 40

HP: 1'600

MP: 1'000

As he fell, a water bubble started forming under him, catching him and slowing his descent. When he landed, the apes had climbed down the mountainside, and were now chucking rocks at all of them.

Violette had been the first to react, being used to fighting alongside Astaroth more than the others. When the rocks started raining on them, she erected a water shield around the party.

The rocks hit the bubble and lost all their momentum, falling limply to the ground. On the other hand, any arrow shot from inside this barrier by Athena seemed projected, instead of slowing down.

Phoenix showed her improved mana control by starting her spells from outside the water bubble. That way, the magical water wouldn't weaken her fire spells.

It took a few minutes for the apes to realize their assault was having no effect, and they continued climbing down. This would soon turn into a brawl, with the apes having the numbers advantage.

The party's position wasn't that great either, since they were stuck between mountains on two sides and would be sandwiched by the apes.

But this was a party of quick-thinking players, and I'die soon fixed the problem for them. He turned to face where they had come from and slammed his hand on the ground.

"Entangling Wall!" he shouted, as vines sprouted from the rock.

The stone passage behind them cracked and tore as vines started sprouting and twisting together, forming a wall that covered the whole path. Any ape that touched the wall after that got caught by whipping vines and entangled in it.

"This will last only two minutes. We'll have to reduce their numbers before then," I'die said, turning back to the group.

Everyone nodded in unison, turning their back to the vine wall, and giving their all to clear as many enemies as they could. Astaroth did what he always did, and dashed into the melee, leaving a trail of bloodied and battered apes.

He couldn't kill them as fast as in the underzone, because these monkeys had extremely tough hides. It was like hitting a soft stone.

Every attack he hit would send some reverberations into his hands, making them numb rapidly. Phoenix quickly saw the difference in damage.

When she focused on everyone's damage output, she quickly found a solution.

"They seem weak to magic. Try attacking them with any magical means!" she shouted to her allies.

Astaroth quickly enhanced his weapons with mana, and the difference was like night and day. Where his weapons once almost bounced off the apes' skin, it was now sliding in like a hot knife through butter.

This enormously sped up his efforts, as the apes fell one after the other. But he wasn't the only one that could compensate their damage.

Gulnur made a small prayer while holding his hammer before his face. The hammer's texture soon changed from its normal metallic surface to a more stone-like surface.

When he hit with his hammer again after doing that, the damage number had significantly risen. He grinned at the result.

The next person to adapt was Athena. But her method was far from conventional.

Instead of using a skill or spell to make her damage magical, she nodded at I'die. The druid then waved his hand at the ground.

Small vines grew through the stone, thin and sharp, covered in thorns, and with small leaves at the bottom. Athena grabbed the vines, which were now semi-dried out, and snapped them off the ground.

She was now holding in her hands, hard arrow-shaped vines that pulsed in nature magic. She winked at I'die, who blushed and turned to keep fighting the apes.

It appeared they had already found a method to go around physical resistance when they played together. The synergy between the two amazed Violette and made the others shake their heads in silence.

Phoenix noticed the vine wall was drying out, and would soon collapse.

"The wall is drying out! Get ready to fight on two fronts!" she shouted out for the rest of the party.

"Understood!"

"I'm ready!"

"All right!"

"Aye aye!"

But before the wall collapsed, it was suddenly covered in a thick layer of water magic. The drying vines sucked in the water like a plant in the desert, going back to a vibrant green colour.

The vines grew thicker, and the wall grew a few feet higher under everyone's amazed eyes. Phoenix quickly snapped her head in Violette's direction.

"Nice thinking, Violette" she praised the girl.

Violette nodded her head shyly before turning back to the monsters and continuing her assault.

"How long till the wall collapses, I'die?" Phoenix then asked the druid.

The druid looked at his interface for a second, and his eyes went wide. He then turned his head to the vine wall and noticed something.

At the foot of the wall, water was constantly flowing, following a stream that led back to Violette's feet.

The constant feed in water had taken away the time limit on the vine wall, and it was currently showing an infinity symbol on the duration slot.

The girl's ability to hold multiple spells simultaneously thoroughly impressed I'die. Then he remembered to answer the question.

"Violette is keeping the wall up with her magic. As long as she keeps feeding it water, it won't move!" he shouted to Phoenix.

Phoenix smiled widely. This girl's resourcefulness would never stop amazing her.

"Then let's clear out these monkeys, people!" she shouted out, charging up a powerful spell.

Chapter 159 Facing The Congress

Phoenix rotated her hands, charging up her signature flame tornado, preparing to kill what remained of the apes in one go. But then a roar echoed through the gorge they were in.

\*RAWR!\*

The stone apes all lifted their head to the roar, echoing it with theirs, which was much less intimidating. Then they started retreating altogether.

Phoenix had to cancel her channelling, lest she waste mana on a targetless spell. The party looked upward, in the direction of the roar.

Staring at them, from the same ledge the other monkeys had descended earlier, was another ape. This one was much larger, and his fur was covered with plates of stone, almost like armor.

Its beady black eyes were staring back at them. Then, the ape turned its head to where Astaroth was still mowing down its brethren.

It roared again, before jumping to him, aiming to crush him on the landing. But Astaroth was not oblivious to the situation.

When the ape was airborne, he jumped back towards his party, steering clear of danger for now. Then he stared at the monkey, scanning him too.

Stone Ape King:

Level: 45

Grade: Special (Zone Boss)

HP: 189'500

MP: 5'500

"Careful, guys. This one is much stronger," Astaroth said, without looking back.

Gulnur, who was standing next to him, chuckled.

"Say that to your face, you battle maniac."

Astaroth had a maniacal grin plastered on his lips. Stronger opponents made his blood boil, he couldn't help it.

The ape king, seeing his foes did not take him seriously, roared again, drumming his massive fists on his stone-plated chest. He then plunged his hand into the ground, pulling a huge chunk of stone out.

"He's gonna throw a rock! Get inside the water shield!" Phoenix said to Gulnur and Astaroth.

Both guys obeyed the call, dashing for the water bubble behind them. But before they could reach it, Athena shouted, "Watch out!".

Gulnur turned his head slightly, seeing that it was no longer a massive rock coming at them. In its place, there were around fifty shards of stone, all zipping through the gorge.

His instincts told him this was not something the water bubble would endure. As soon as he crossed into it, and Astaroth passed by him, he lifted his shield.

"Get behind me!" he shouted.

"Bastion of Stone!" he then called out, bracing his shield to the ground with both hands.

When the shield contacted the ground, the stone started climbing up onto it, before expanding outwards rapidly. A second later, a stone slab three meters wide and six meters high was standing in place of the tower shield.

The top of it pierced through the water bubble, but didn't destroy it. He erected the stone shield just in time, as the rock projectiles flew through the water bubble almost unimpeded, and impacted it.

Shrapnel of stone could be seen flying to the side until there were no projectiles left. Gulnur's skill also ended shortly after, as it was a very short-lasting skill.

The ape king roared in discontent, seeing his skill had no effect, and charged at the intruders in his domain. Since Gulnur was still recuperating from his skill, Astaroth stepped up to cover his allies.

He ran at the ape king, switching out his weapons from longsword and shortsword; to shortsword and shield. He enhanced his shield with mana, and cast mana skin, feeling he would need it.

He also used his shield bash skill, hoping to deal some return damage on impact. But the impact was much stronger than he anticipated.

Even with his upgraded strength while melded with White, the impact took a huge chunk of his health, and sent him flying backwards, toward his allies. Violette used a waterfall spell to catch him.

This brought him back to his feet, albeit wet, without taking additional collision damage with a wall or other obstacle. His arms were numb from the impact, but he was satisfied with the result, anyway.

The ape king had also taken some damage, less than him, but that was irrelevant, and his fist had been knocked back, too. Some steam could be seen coming off the fist, too.

Astaroth looked at his melding timer and saw he had less than two minutes left. He still hadn't summoned Luna either, trying to make sure he was using all his bonuses to the fullest.

Now that all the apes were coordinating with the king, the combat would gain a degree of difficulty that wasn't present before. But no one in the party complained.

This zone boss just gave them free experience in their opinion. No one present was worried about a special grade zone boss of level forty-five.

All of them, apart from Astaroth and Violette, had been in dungeons before, and bosses like these were common there. And for the latter two, they had just fought one, two weeks before this.

The ape king roared, pointing its meaty hand forward, as the smaller apes all charged forward. Astaroth uttered a guttural howl of his own, before dashing forward with enhanced speed.

Astaroth had cast a wind spell around his feet again, as he had done previously, and this time, it registered as a new spell.

\*Ding\*

\*New spell created. Wind Walking has been added to your spell list.\*

He didn't need to look at the spell description, to know what it did, as he instantly felt the increase in his running speed. He was running at approximately fifty percent faster than usual, by his calculation.

This gave him the edge he needed to keep mowing down apes left and right, without getting caught by the ape king that kept trying to squish him under its massive body.

In the meantime, spells and arrows were flying around him, hitting enemies that were going to surround him, or go around him, making sure he was safe from all angles.

He thanked Phoenix, Athena, and Violette in the group chat, since he didn't have time to shout it out. Gulnur, for his part, kept harassing the king ape, trying to take its aggro back.

It wasn't a simple task, since Astaroth kept killing its subjects and had done some good damage on it earlier too. But he eventually succeeded, buying Astaroth some breathing room.

Soon, his melding timed out, and before long, he was back to normal.

'Time for the big guns,' Astaroth thought, grinning madly.

## Chapter 160 Mage Mode

Astaroth summoned White Death and quickly melded with Luna, making sure he didn't stay idle for too long. Even if he was powerful on his own, the monsters were many, and they were mostly higher level than him.

As small antlers grew from the side of his head, wrapping around it like a crown, his stats burst up again, this time higher. Luna's level at birth had been set at fifty, so her total stat points were already much higher than White's.

That, combined with her higher grade, made her a much more dangerous entity altogether. So being melded with her made him an utter monster of a player.

The rest of his party saw his health shoot up rapidly, and they gasped. Phoenix had been on the receiving end of this form, and now that she saw the stats in her interface, she understood why she lost.

But something bugged her. The stats seemed much higher than they should have been, and Astaroth's current power didn't match the tournament.

'He looks much stronger now. Was the melding not complete back in the tournament?' she wondered.

In the meantime, Astaroth had switched from a physical combat mode to a battle mage style. He was now zooming around amidst the apes, shooting basic spells at them.

But his basic spells did the same amount of damage to them as a mid-tier spell would do. His intelligence score right now could be compared to a boss monster.

Each firebolt he cast hit for over two thousand points of damage, which was enough to one-shot any ape he hit. So Phoenix decided to inspect him to fully grasp the situation.

Status:

Name: Astaroth (Fused to Luna)

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 36

Stats:

HP: 53'125/53'125 MP: 36'620/36'620 Stamina: 100

Strength: 154 (189) (+20 armor) (+15 passive)

Agility: 154 (169) (+15 passive)

Constitution: 211 (252) (+20 armor) (+21 passive)

Intelligence: 274 (301) (+27 passive)

Wisdom: 257 (283) (+26 passive)

She gasped in surprise. No player was even remotely close to this level of power, currently.

The only one she thought of that might be able to contest this strength would be Khalor, and by virtue of his army of undead only. In a one-versus-one fight, she was sure Astaroth would win.

Phoenix wondered what a high-tier spell would do with that intelligence score. She guessed it wouldn't be pretty for anything receiving it.

After fighting for another four minutes, around half of the horde of monkeys were dead. The rest were clinging to the walls of the gorge and throwing rocks at them every few seconds.

Astaroth had enough of this nonsense, and Gulnur was constantly needing healing, since he was tanking the ape king all this time.

"Gulnur, stun it and back away!" he shouted to the dwarf.

"Alright!" Gulnur shouted back.

He then swung his hammer back before smacking it dead center on his shield.

\*Dong!\*

Gulnur used his Sonic Wave skill, causing all the surrounding monsters, the king included, to be stunned for three seconds. He used those seconds to run behind Astaroth.

Once the dwarf was standing behind him, Astaroth brought his hands forward, as an orb of milky white energy formed between them.

In Phoenix' and Violette's senses, the power contained within that small orb was like a miniature sun. Phoenix recognized a touch of essence in it that wasn't mana.

'He's using Aether too?!' she thought, befuddled.

She hadn't been used to the essence of Aether enough to recognize it the first time she faced this attack. But now, it was undeniable.

Contained within that small ball of white mana, was a seed of Aether. And from what Phoenix could feel of it, whatever damage this spell was supposed to do originally, it would be much more now.



Astaroth was focused on his spell. Infusing it with Aether was no small task, and he had been accumulating it inside himself ever since he melded with Luna.

Luna's legendary grade made it easier for her to attract the higher level energy, which in turn, meant he also had an easier time with it when they were fused.

He had been playing with that every chance he could, slowly getting the hang of gathering snippets of Aether. But this time, he was infusing all he could gather in this one spell.

Astaroth was watching, as the number next to the spell explanation kept changing according to the amount of Aether he had infused. What had started as a five hundred percent damage spell was now sitting on a five thousand percent.

The apes, who had recovered from the stun a couple of seconds ago, were now running at him fast. He knew he couldn't charge the spell any longer, so he let it go.

"Moon Beam," he muttered.

The ball of energy, which was now the size of a bowling ball, erupted into a white beam of focused light. It was bright enough that the rest of his party had to shield their eyes.

Astaroth, however, kept looking straight ahead.

\*-98'578\*

That was the only number that appeared. The rest of the horde of monkeys were vaporized so quickly, the system didn't bother giving the damage report.

The ape king took on the blast, with his chest forward, trying to prove to his foes he didn't fear them. When the beam hit him, it charred all of his front, turning the stone plates on his chest to dust, and burning his fur.

The monkey roared in pain as its eyes went red and it thrashed about.

"Be careful, that looks like an enrage skill!" Phoenix shouted out.

She was aware that her party members knew what that was, but it was always better to voice these things and keep the party on its toes.

Astaroth came out of his melding after he cast Moon Beam, even though his timer wasn't completely over. He had learned with practice that consuming Aether for spells would increase their cooldown times and reduce their duration.

Fortunately, he could still summon Luna and fight with his two companions for the remaining five and a half minutes before he could meld with White again.

He summoned her and grinned at the enraged ape. The ape roared and charged at the party.