

## New Eden 21

Chapter 21 First Contract, Part 2

"Yield! You know you can't win. You will die a meaningless death if this goes on. Bond with me and I can guarantee your soul will live and grow stronger. Who knows, I might even build a body for you once more when I get stronger." Astaroth said, trying the trick of the carrot and the stick.

The wolf resisted a bit more, but it knew death was knocking. It finally gave in.

"I yield! Please, make it stop. I don't want to disappear!" It cried out.

Instantly, the pressure crushing it disappeared. Like it was never there.

The Alpha slowly rose to its feet, wobbling a little. It then turned to the Elf who had crushed it. It couldn't believe what was happening.

'How can an Elf be so weak and have such a powerful mind and crushing resolve?' It thought.

"I will bond to you, but first, you must give a name to me. This will imprint my soul on you and make it so I cannot dissipate until you let me." The Alpha said, lowering its head.

"Hmm, a name you say? What about Alpha?" Astaroth asked.

The wolf growled.

"Do not mock me." It answered.

"I am joking." Astaroth laughed.

"I think I will name you, White Death. Do you like that?" He then asked.

"I think it suits me better. I accept your name." The wolf said, bowing a little more.

A blinding flash of light appeared, and Astaroth was back in the cave, in his seating position. He was drenched in sweat from head to toe.

\*Ding!\*

\*You have made your first spirit contract. You have learned the spell 'Spirit Summoning'\*

\*Ding!\*

\*The spirit you have bonded with is strong! You have learned the spell 'Spirit Melding'\*

Astaroth quickly looked at the spell descriptions.

Spirit Summoning: Summon spirit bound to your soul. Duration: 5 minutes. Mana cost: 100 (Exp share 0/100)

List of bonded spirits: White Death

Spirit Melding: Meld with the spirit of your choice, gaining its stats and affinities for two and a half minutes. If the spirit is already summoned, melding time becomes half the duration left on its summon timer. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

"It looks like you are finally back." Aberon's voice sounded from behind him.

"Ahh, yes. I am back. And it seems like I have succeeded. And like I need a bath, hahaha." Astaroth joked.

"I think before that, you will want to summon your new spirit and inspect it." Aberon said.

"Then I shall do that right away, sir." Astaroth nodded.

"Spirit Summoning: White Death." He chanted.

Astaroth felt a sizeable chunk of mana going from his mana lobe to the middle of his abdomen. From there, he sensed a small flame gobbling it up and jumping out of his body.

A wolf made of pure mana appeared in front of him, before howling to the sky. This wolf was much smaller than the Alpha used to be.

Astaroth surmised that the size probably was only attributed to the powerful body. Once the wolf had fully materialized, he inspected it.

Status:

Name: White Death

Race: Dire Wolf

Grade: Common

Level: 20 (0/35K)

Evolve: 0/1000

Stats:

HP: 750/750 MP: 150/150 Stamina: 100

Strength: 20 Agility: 20 Constitution: 20

Intelligence: 20 Wisdom: 20

Attack Power Str: 100 Attack Power Agi: 100 Magic Attack Power: 100 Healing Power: 100

Natural Defense: 2%

Available stat point: 29

Skills: Ghost Claw, Soul Bite

Passive Abilities: Spiritual Body

He then opened its spell list, to read the descriptions.

Passives:

Spiritual Body: This body is an apparition composed of mana. Physical attacks have little effect on it, but magic is its bane. Physical damage taken -50%, Magical damage taken +50%

Actives:

Ghost Claws: This ability phases through armor. Damage ignores armor values. Cooldown: 30 seconds.

Soul Bite: This ability bites the target's soul, causing weakness. All stats -5% for 10 seconds.  
Cooldown: 1 minute.

Then Astaroth circled back to the stats. He was looking at the level and was happy, but the health value disappointed him.

He threw fifteen of the free points into Constitution, seven into Agility, and the last seven into Strength. He wanted to build the wolf into a decent tank, making his later grinding easier.

He looked at the stats again.

Status:

Name: White Death

Race: Dire Wolf

Grade: Common

Level: 20 (0/35K)

Evolve: 0/1000

Stats:

HP: 3000/3000 MP: 150/150 Stamina: 100

Strength: 27 Agility: 27 Constitution: 35 Intelligence: 20 Wisdom: 20

Attack Power Str: 135 Attack Power Agi: 135 Magic Attack Power: 100 Healing Power: 100

Natural Defense: 3.5%

Available stat points: 0

Skills: Ghost Claw, Soul Bite

Passive Abilities: Spiritual Body

Then, there was also the matter of the grade dropping.

"Why has the grade dropped from special to common, sir?" Astaroth asked Aberon.

"The grade a creature has when alive is associated with its body. When it dies, the grade no longer matters. The soul of said creature doesn't go up in grade with the body. That has to be strengthened independently." Aberon replied.

"Then is the 'evolve' line in the status the way to improve its grade?" Astaroth questioned.

"That would be correct. Evolving a soul requires the creature to consume the souls of creatures from the same race. During its life, a creature won't think of that, so the soul always stays of common grade." Aberon answered, proud that Astaroth could deduce that on his own.

"Now. Can you tell me how many souls are required for evolving your summon's grade?" He then asked.

"One thousand." Astaroth flatly said.

"That is a good amount. You will need to kill many dire wolves to get that many souls." The old mage said, his face scrunching a little.

Normally, it wouldn't be that much of a deal. But in this specific case, the wolves were much stronger than the summoner.

It would be a far-fetched idea for him to kill that many on his own soon.

"I suggest you go wash up and rest. You will need to start monster hunting soon, and that requires energy." Aberon told Astaroth.

Astaroth nodded in agreement. He unsummoned the wolf and walked out of the cave.

He walked to the river, washed up, and walked back to his alcove. He then lay on the cot and logged out.

Tomorrow, another big day was waiting for him.

Chapter 22 Gifts For A Life Saved, Part 1

After logging out, Alexander did his usual routine. Wash, eat, and look at forums.

He first opened up the leaderboard, to see how much he had to grind to make it into at least the top ten.

Level Leaderboard:

#1: ??? / Level 25

#2: Phoenix / Level 23

#3: Azamus / Level 23

#4: Grinding\_Beast / Level 22

#5: Real\_Number\_One\_Gamer / Level 21

#6: Stormbringer / Level 21

#7: I\_Am\_Rich / Level 21

#8: Athena / Level 20

#9: Lucian\_Valentine / Level 20

#10: Monster\_Slayer / Level 20

Two more players from the 'Heavenly thousand' were in the top ten, and much more had joined the top fifty. What surprised him the most was the mysterious player in first position.

He had been first for a while, even with all the fluctuations. Astaroth wondered who that player was, and what his trick was to level fast enough to keep his spot.

None of it mattered for now though. He still needed to level a decent amount just to make it into the leaderboard.

For now, he would focus on that. With his contracted spirit, he should be able to do more damage and finally get better Exp from the kills.

At least he hoped so. He scrolled down a little more in the forums but found nothing interesting.

So he closed them and went to bed. Since he had logged out earlier than he normally did, he slept a little longer.

It gave him a proper night's worth of sleep. He woke up feeling refreshed and ready to kill monsters.

He drank a coffee, watched some television, and munched on some cereal. He then dumped the cup and bowl in his sink and logged back in, directly.

\*Launching 'New Eden'\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth\*

His eyes opened up to the familiar ceiling of his alcove and he stood up. He walked right out, heading for the forge.

'My weapons should be ready.' He thought.

He entered the forge, and its blistering heat assaulted him as per usual. On the counter were weapons of all kinds.

His weapons, he surmised. He picked up the hammer and rang the bell, calling the blacksmith to the front.

The burly man walked out soon after, sweaty and dirty as always.

"Yer weapons 're ready, youngin'. Why don' ye try 'em out? Ay'll adjust 'em if needed." The blacksmith said, pointing at the weapons on the counter.

Astaroth grabbed each weapon one at a time and tested out their balance, their grip, and their overall feel in his hands. He then did a few moves with each weapon, to see if the new weapons affected his fighting.

They were perfectly fine. Well-forged weapons, even if only of lower strength than what he expected.

But you don't look a gift horse in the mouth, they say. So he picked them up and inspected them before putting them in his inventory and assigning each of them to weapon slots.

Basic Short Sword (1h):

Grade: Common

Attack Power: 10

Durability: 20/20

Description: A good short sword for beginners.

Basic Longsword(1h/2h):

Grade: Common

Attack Power: 10 (1h)/20 (2h)

Durability: 20/20

Description: A good longsword for beginners.

Basic War Axe (2h):

Grade: Common

Attack Power: 30

Durability 20/20

Description: A good war axe for beginners.

Basic Polearm (2h):

Grade: Common

Attack Power: 10

Durability: 20/20

Description: A good polearm for beginners.

Basic Daggers (2):

Grade: Common

Attack Power: 10

Durability: 20/20, 20/20

Description: A good set of daggers for beginners.

Basic Wooden Shield:

Grade: Common

Defense Power: 10%

Durability: 75/75

Description: A good wooden shield for beginners.

Basic Bow and Quiver (50):

Grade: Common

Attack Power: 10

Durability: 20/20

Description: A good bow and quiver for beginners.

Satisfied with all his new weapons, he nodded to the blacksmith and turned to leave. He walked towards the barracks to drop off the training weapons and to see if any patrols were leaving so that he could integrate them to go level up.

As he walked into the barracks courtyard, he noticed a training dummy close to the center that was kitted with a full set of gear. He walked closer to inspect the kit, out of curiosity.

Ursid Leather Chestguard:

Grade: Special

Defense Power: 5%

Stats: +5 Str, +5 Con

Durability: 50/50

Description: Ursid leather chestguard, made from the leather of a mighty bear. Part of a set of four.

Ursid Leather Vambraces:

Grade: Special

Defense Power: 2%

Stats: +5 Str, +5 Con

Durability: 50/50

Description: Ursid leather vambraces, made from the leather of a mighty bear. Part of a set of four.

Ursid Leather Leggings:

Grade: Special

Defense Power: 5%

Stats: +5 Str, +5 Con

Durability: 50/50

Description: Ursid leather leggings, made from the leather of a mighty bear. Part of a set of four.

Ursid Leather Boots:

Grade: Special

Defense Power: 2%

Stats: +5 Str, +5 Con

Durability: 50/50

Description: Ursid leather boots, made from the leather of a mighty bear. Part of a set of four.

Ursid Leather Armor: Full Set bonus

When all four pieces of this kit are worn together, gain the skill 'Strength of the Bear'

Strength of the Bear: Gain the strength of a mighty bear. Strength +20 for 30 seconds. Cooldown: 1 hour.

His jaw dropped. Such an excellent set of armor!

This set of armor was probably better than what players could currently get, aside from maybe dungeon gear, but he had heard nothing about dungeons being found yet.

He was almost salivating. He wanted to grab the set and make a run for it.

Sadly, he wouldn't make it far so he restrained himself. He saw from the corner of his eye, Kloud leaving the barracks building.

The man was walking towards him with a slow gait. Astaroth could guess that he was still wounded, so his plans of using Kloud to level up flew out the metaphorical window.

Astaroth felt a bit of guilt, thinking this would not have happened if he wasn't there. He quickly blew those thoughts away.

No point in them anymore, anyway.

Chapter 23 Gifts For A Life Saved, Part 2

Astaroth was about to speak to Kloud, but the man was quicker than him, beating him to the punch.

"I see you like the armor on display, young man. How about trying it on, and seeing if it fits?" Kloud said to Astaroth, motioning to the armor.

"Are you sure, sir? Isn't this someone's armor?" Astaroth asked, unsure he could put it on.

"It's someone's armor alright. That person is looking at it right now too." Kloud responded with a slight chuckle.

Astaroth looked around, trying to see who else was looking at the armor. He couldn't see anyone looking at it specifically.

Then he heard a loud laugh beside him.

"BWAHAHAHAHA! I meant YOU, young man. That armor is yours." Kloud bellowed out, slapping his thigh and laughing.

"Consider it a gift for saving my life, and making sure this village stay's safe." He then added, patting Astaroth on the shoulder.

Astaroth could feel emotions welling up inside him. Happiness, relief, and a tinge of pride all mixed up together.

The corner of his eyes slightly watered.

"Are you sure, sir?" Astaroth asked again, his hand trailing the details on the leather of the armor.

"Yes, now hurry and equip it. I want to see if it needs adjusting." The instructor insisted.

Astaroth no longer hesitated. He tapped each piece one by one and tapped equip.

The armor was a perfect fit. He could already feel so much stronger.

He opened up his stats.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 7 (168/280)



Stats:

HP: 800/800 MP: 385/385 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 9 (+20) Agility: 9 Constitution: 8 (+20)

Intelligence: 9 Wisdom: 8

Attack Power Str: 145 Attack Power Agi: 45 Magic Attack Power: 45 Healing Power: 40

Natural Defense: 2.8% Armor Defense: 14%

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

Available stat points: 0

Available skill points: 2N/nêw n0vel chap/ers are published o/n n0v/e/(lb)i(n.)co/m

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Equipped gear:

Ursid Leather Chestguard, Ursid Leather Vambraces, Ursid Leather Leggings, Ursid Leather Boots, Basic Short Sword, Basic Longsword, Basic War Axe, Basic Polearm, Basic Daggers (2), Basic Wooden Shield, Basic Bow and Quiver (50)

Looking at his stats, Astaroth's mouth gaped.

'Such a tremendous leap!' He thought.

He instantly knew that with these stats, he could solo a Dire Wolf with the help of his spirit summon. He would not have as much trouble against one opponent and that would make his leveling speed soar.

Although he still couldn't leave the village alone, of fear of getting surrounded by creatures, he now had a better chance during a brawl. He no longer had to cower behind someone!

He turned around to face Kloud.

"Thank you, sir Kloud! Thank you so much for this gift!" Astaroth said, bowing repeatedly.

"Stop bowing, young one." Kloud said, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment.

What was he, his sugar daddy?

"Do you want to go test that new armor out?" He then asked Astaroth.

"I would love to, sir. But what about your condition?" Astaroth replied.

He could tell the trainer was in no shape to go fight right now.

"I won't be accompanying you, but I have planned a patrol route for a squad, and you can join them. What say you?" Kloud asked Astaroth.

"I will gladly go with them!" Astaroth instantly answered.

How could he ever let go of such an opportunity? They went over the route together before Astaroth, and the warriors going on patrol with him readied to head out.

The squad was composed of one person he knew, Chris Pentalogius, and three people he had seen in the barrack building a few times but didn't know. He inspected all of them to know their party composition.

Chris Pentalogius:

Level: 32

Grade: Common

Class: Warrior

Health: 4'150 Mana: 680

Korin Swiftpaw:

Level: 28

Grade Common

Class: Rogue

Health: 750 Mana: 540

I'dril Duskveil:

Level: 29

Grade: Common

Class: Reaver

Health: 800 Mana: 1'920

Aj'axx Sote'ria:

Level: 30

Grade: Common

Class: Defender

Health: 5'350 Mana: 600

From what little he could glean from their gear and stats, Chris was a warrior with a broadaxe, probably the off-tank type. Korin was a typical rogue, with dual daggers.

I'dril looked like a caster, with his staff and high mana, and Aj'axx was a textbook tank, with high health, sturdy plate armor, and a big tower shield.

This seemed like a perfect team composition for patrolling, although he wondered how they managed their health with no healer in the group. Not that it mattered to him that much.

He only needed to take care of himself. They got acquainted with each other and then left for the patrol with well-being wishes from the rest of the warriors in the barracks.

Astaroth could tell that this community was a tight-knit one. He had not once seen someone fight with anyone in all his stay here, aside from training and drunken brawls that always ended in laughter and more drinking.

Shortly after leaving the village barrier, Astaroth saw the rogue in their party, Korin, skip ahead and crouch to the ground.

'A tracker' He deduced.

The rogue ruffled aside leaves and twigs from the ground and found a trail. He pointed north to the group and they started heading that way, with the rogue always ahead of them to act as the tracker and a scout.

It didn't take long for Astaroth to see where they were headed to. He recognized the trail well enough since he had run it not so long ago.

They were heading right for the Dire Wolves' territory. He hoped they hadn't got another Alpha, because they were not strong enough to tackle it, in his opinion.

They trekked slowly into wolf territory until they started hearing howling in the distance. Astaroth smiled nervously.

'The grind begins' He thought to himself, pulling out his longsword.

Chapter 24 Grinding Levels, Part 1

Astaroth and the party slowed down their march after the howls. They could meet wolves at any moment now, so they tightened up their formation and walked in a loose circle, observing their surroundings.

As they trudged along, Aj'axx, who was at the vanguard, lifted his hand, stopping the group. He then pointed farther up ahead and made a four with his fingers.

Just across the tree line was a small clearing and in the clearing were four wolves, chewing on what looked like the remains of a deer.

The party stopped advancing at the tree line, to stay out of sight. Then they discussed their attack plan through inaudible whispers.

"I'll go in and taunt them, then the Colonel can keep aggro with me while everyone attacks." Aj'axx said.

"Astaroth, you can attack them, but at the smallest sign of one turning to you, run back behind me or the Colonel, whichever one is not aggro'd, so we can keep them off of you. Got it?" He added.

"Yes, sir." Astaroth nodded.

Although Chris was the highest in rank among them, all of them had fought enough together to know that once the fight began, Chris would no longer be giving out orders. So it fell on the tank in their group to coordinate all of them.

Once all of them were clear on their roles, Aj'axx dashed through the tree line and yelled.

"Eyes on me, you dumb dogs! Today you die!" He hollered, smacking his shield with his mace.

'Nice taunt' Astaroth thought, holding in a snicker.

The four wolves in the clearing all turned their heads to the man, growling and snarling, drool mixed with blood dripping from their mouths. All the others in the party then ran into the clearing, getting into formation there.

Astaroth then inspected the enemies, to know what they were up against.

Dire Wolf:

Level: 30

Grade: Common

Health: 4'250 Mana: 800

Dire Wolf:

Level: 32

Grade: Common

Health: 5'750 Mana: 915

Dire Wolf:

Level: 34

Grade: Common

Health: 7'250 Mana: 1'030

Dire Wolf:

Level: 35

Grade: Common

Health: 8'250 Mana: 1'100

The level values were higher than theirs, but he still stayed confident. As the combat started, he enhanced his weapon with magic, then he roamed around and went in and out, dealing one hit to every mob, to get all the Exp from the kills.

Wielding his longsword with both hands, he hit the strongest enemy first, going down in levels as he went.

\*-176\* \*-176\* \*-177\* \*-356!\*

During his hit-and-run tactic, he caught the level thirty wolf off guard and hit it in the neck, landing a critical hit! The wolf, which had not yet been hit by anyone else, immediately turned around to face him after that.

He had overtaken aggro with the high damage number. Astaroth tried running back toward the group to have Chris sap away the aggro, but both he and Aj'axx were busy, so he couldn't rely on them.

When Korin saw the situation Astaroth had put himself into he clicked his tongue.

'Amateur' He thought, changing trajectory to go help the newbie.

Meanwhile, Astaroth's brain worked at super speed, thinking of his potential solutions. He decided now was as good a time as any to try his hand at solo killing the beast.

He could see Korin running in at high speed to help him, but he wasn't gonna let the rogue steal away Exp from him!

"Stay away!" Astaroth yelled.

"I got this one!" He added.

Then he swapped out his longsword for the short sword and shield. He cast 'Mana Skin' and another 'Enhance Weapon' but this time on the shield, to focus purely on defense.

His defense shot up to 26.8% with the armor bonus and his shield went from 10% blocked to 20% blocked. Of course, all this cost him a lot of mana.

These three spells all cost him fifty points each, bringing his mana to 235/385. And he wasn't done.

He then murmured another chant.

"Spirit Summoning: White Death."

Another hundred mana points left his mana lobe, leaving him slightly fatigued. But it was all worth it, as the next second, an ethereal wolf lunged out of his body, biting at the Dire wolf's neck.

\*-260!\*

White Death had used his 'Soul Bite' ability, draining away 5% of the enemy wolf's stats.

While White Death held the wolf in its maw, Astaroth stabbed its eyes with his short sword, making sure the aggro remained on him.

\*-298!\*

He hit the bullseye, and the crit kept his damage number comfortably over his summons. Korin, who had been dashing in for support, finally halted to a stop.

He watched on for a few seconds and judged that the rookie didn't need his help for now. The wolf ghost he had summoned was helping him enough, so he went back to the primary group of enemies.

Of course, not that Astaroth had the situation completely under control, but he still blocked the attacks that would hit him every time, reducing the damage taken significantly.

And when he dropped under fifty percent of his health, a cool wind washed over him, restoring a whopping 315 health to him. He looked around to find where the healing came from and understood.

I'dril, the reaver, was a half-caster, half-healer class. He would attack a monster with a red and black tendril, then the tendril came back to him and blew back out as a healing wind.

'That's an interesting class' Astaroth thought.

He had brief eye contact with I'dril and nodded his way. I'dril nodded back.

The fight went on for a few minutes until the only fighters left fighting were Astaroth and his wolf. The others had cleared the other three wolves already but didn't want to take away anything from the rookie, after seeing him fight so fiercely.

They had a newfound respect for him, again, this time for his battle prowess. Astaroth fought and fought until the Dire Wolf finally succumbed to the onslaught.

Chapter 25 Grinding Levels, Part 2

As it died, White Death's timer also ended, and he evaporated, going back to being just a flame attached to Astaroth's soul.

Astaroth could finally look at his notifications.

\*You have helped in killing a Dire Wolf (Lvl 35). 149 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 300% for kill three tiers higher) (2.31% damage done)\*

\*Level up! You are now level 8. From leveling; you gained 1 skill point, 1 free Attribute point, and all Attributes increased by 1.\*

\*You have helped in killing a Dire Wolf (Lvl 34). 165 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 300% for kill three tiers higher) (2.43% damage done)\*

\*You have helped in killing a Dire Wolf (Lvl 32). 147 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 200% for kill two tiers higher) (3.08% damage done)\*

\*You have killed a Dire Wolf (Lvl 30). 4500 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 200% for kill two tiers higher)\*

\*Level up! Level up! Level up! Level up! From leveling; you gained 4 skill points and 6 free Attribute points, and all Attributes increased by 4.\*

"Wooooh!" Astaroth sighed loudly, laying on his back.

He felt exhausted from the fight. He had to constantly refresh 'Mana Skin' and 'Enhance Weapon' on the shield, just to mitigate as much damage as he could.

That plus counter-striking on every chance he got, just as to not lose aggro. Next fight he wouldn't try to keep it.

It was too much trouble for him, for now. He would let White Death tank it, as he had planned originally.

This fight was just a test of his capabilities. From this combat, he also gleaned another detail.

Most attacks were best avoided altogether. He couldn't dodge the wolf's attacks this time, because its agility stat was probably much higher than his, but he knew that when he got to the same level, that would no longer be a problem.

He had also withheld the active skill gained from his armor set in that engagement. He wanted to find out his capabilities before using all his tricks.

"Nice moves, for a rookie." Astaroth heard from his side.

He turned his head and received a flick on his forehead. The voice had come from Korin, the rogue.

"Next time, if you want to fight a creature on your own, just say so, instead of acting so carelessly." Korin added, a disapproving look on his face.

"Ahh, yes. I'm sorry, I only wanted to know my strength." Astaroth responded, rubbing his forehead.

"All right, lads. I think we have rested enough. We should get a move on." The Colonel said, grabbing his broadaxe from the tree he had rested it on.

"Aye, sir!" Everyone replied, getting ready to move.

Astaroth got up from the ground and they all got back into formation, with Korin scouting up ahead like earlier. Astaroth walked towards the back of the formation, where I'dril was.

"Thanks for the healing, by the way." Astaroth said to the reaver.

"Only doing my job." I'dril responded, nodding lightly.

'Not much of a talker, I see.' Astaroth thought.

"Err, I have a question for you." He said to I'dril, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

"Hmm?" I'dril said, turning his head to Astaroth.

"Where would one go, to learn your magic?" Astaroth asked.

"To a city." I'dril answered, not offering more words or conversation.

...

"Thank you." Astaroth replied, walking back forward.

I'dril was the silent type, and he didn't know how to deal well with those. So he walked back to his spot in the formation and peeled his eyes to his surroundings.

His silence didn't last very long, as their tank, Aj'axx, walked back to him, leaving Chris in the lead.

"Say, rookie. That wolf of yours, can you use it as many times as you want?" Aj'axx questioned.

"Ahh, you mean White Death? Yes. I can summon him back right away when he disappears. There is no cooldown." Astaroth answered.

"And can it be used to take some weight off me?" Aj'axx followed up, with another question.

"I originally intended to, yes. Would you want me to do that?" Astaroth replied.

"That would be great!" Aj'axx exclaimed.

"If you can take even one enemy off of me every fight, this patrol will be much easier." He added.

"Then it's as good as done." Astaroth said, smiling and giving a thumbs up.

Aj'axx patted Astaroth's shoulder, smiling, before going back to the front. The next voice Astaroth heard came from within.

"Boy. I received no experience from that fight. Have you not activated the Exp share?" White Death spoke, in his head.

"Ahh, I might have forgotten." Astaroth replied with his mind.

He quickly opened his skill page and switched the Exp share from 0/100 to 25/75. While he did that, he heard a snicker of contempt in his head.

"How did I lose to an airhead like you?" White Death derisively said.

"You tell me." Astaroth replied with a smidge of mocking.

**He then ignored the wolf's complaining.**

They soon came across another group of wolves. They again arranged their formation before combat, this time letting Astaroth grab one monster on his own.

They supervised him from the corner of their eyes but never interfered. They knew this patrol was training him and strengthening him.

The most trouble they got into was when they stumbled upon a group of wolves with higher average levels. There were no weaker enemies for Astaroth to bait to the side, therefore, he had to fight with them, only doing hit-and-run tactics.

He still gained much from the entire ordeal and leveled up two times. He was happy with his progress.

Although he knew he was far behind the main level of players, he was closing the gap quickly. They had also got some good loot in the progress.

Astaroth noticed that monsters in this game did not drop coins. So he requested a part of the loot.

He could probably sell it for some coin later.

Thus they returned to the village and Astaroth went to rest and logged off.

Chapter 26 First Tournament Announced!

**After logging out, Alexander repeated his usual routine. It was around dinnertime, so he sat in front of the news while eating.**

He watched the local sports channel that also covered Esports. They were displaying the rankings for 'New Eden' on one side of the screen and the reporter was commenting on the names of the players appearing on it.

To no one's surprise, especially not Alexander, most top ten and top fifty spots were now occupied by players from the last popular game 'Tower of Babel's 'Heavenly Thousand'.

The only unchanged name on the list was full of question marks. That player was still number one.

The host, Elizabeth Rainer, then announced an interview with the top two and three from 'New Eden', Azamus and Phoenix. It also presented them with their real names since they were already famous Esports athletes.

"Without further ado, live on set, on ESN Canada, Kary Deveille, better known through her character alias, Phoenix!" The host presented, lifting her arm to the side.

Cameras shifted and welcomed on set a beautiful curvy woman. Her weight did not affect her grace and elegance as she strode to sit on the couch next to the host, a smile beaming.



The audience clapped as she walked.

"She is currently second on rankings, combating our next guest fiercely to stay ahead. He is from the United States of America and is the ex-number one player in the famous title 'Tower of Babel'. The Esports community well knew his alias, Azamus, American Esports superstar, Damien Grimm, is also live, on set!" The host presented the second guest.

She lifted her arm again, motioning to the side. Cameras again shifted to the side, and a tall and fit man appeared on-screen.

He looked like a frequent gym client, as he had well-defined and toned muscles, visible through his tight grey shirt. He had an arrogant smile on his face, like he was used to being acclaimed by crowds.

The man had let fame go to his head, and it was clear as day, with how he looked mockingly at Kary.

"Hello, number ten." He said haughtily, as he sat down next to her, crossing his legs.

"Hello, EX number one." Kary replied, with a cocky smile.

"Ohhh! I can feel the tension already climbing on set!" The host commented, fanning her cue cards in her face.

"Now tell me, Mr. Grimm. How does it feel to no longer be in the first place? You have held that title for quite some time on 'Tower of Babel'. It must feel discouraging to no longer be at the top." The host said, obviously trying to fan the flames.

Damien's eyebrow twitched a little, but he kept his face locked in a smile.

"Please, call me Damien. And to answer your question, it is only a slight delay. The position is as good as mine and I shall claim it back in no time at all." The man said with a cocky tone.

"Over my dead body." Kary said, looking at the man with a deadpan expression.

"Gladly." Damien answered, grinning widely.

"Hahaha! I like the energy you both give off. This is peak rivalry on your screen, ladies and gentlemen! Now. Mrs. Deveille, would you like to share how you climbed the ranks so fast and overcome Mr. Damien over here?" The host intervened, not letting the situation escalate too far.

She wanted fire, not an inferno, after all.

"Ahh, I can't give out my secret now, can I?" Kary responded to the host, going back to her amiable smile.

"Excuse my blunder, Mrs Deveille. I didn't want to pry into your secrets. I only wanted you to share tips and tricks with our audience." The host responded, acting sorry.

"No offense taken. As for tips, I recommend to all the players in the game to not play 'New Eden' like a conventional game. Train in there as you would out here. That will improve your strength." Kary said, giving a small tip out of charity.

This would boost her popularity ratings, and as an Esports athlete, those were important. That was what kept the sponsors happy.

Damien snorted.

"Or you could do like the player in the number one spot and cheat your way through leveling up." He casually said, with a derisive smile.

"Oh? Care to enlighten us, Mr. Damien?" The host said, curiously.

You could see the glint of greed in her eyes. She could smell a scoop or scandal incoming!

"I certainly can, Mrs. Rainer." Damien said, politely.

"Oh please, call me Elizabeth, Damien." The host said, faking a blush.

"The player in the number one spot has been there ever since the leaderboards were unlocked, Elizabeth. He is always many levels ahead of every other player, including me and Phoenix, over there." Damien said, pointing at the leaderboards behind him.

"The players from the top of the Esports community know nothing of this mysterious player, and no one has ever seen him either. No one knows him, and he has never made a public appearance." He added.

"What other reason would he have to stay anonymous, if not because he is cheating?" Damien finished his explanation, a mischievous smile on his lips.

"That seems like a very plausible explanation, Mr. Damien. But would 'Evo-Gaming' not have banned the player, or at least issued a statement, if that were the case?" The host, Elizabeth, asked.

"What company would admit their blunder in this position, Elizabeth?" Damien confidently replied.

Damien's master plan for this accusation was to have the mysterious player banned, even if he wasn't cheating. He hoped that the company's higher-ups would feel shamed by the interview and have him banned, to protect their reputation.

The host then brought her hand to her ear for a few seconds and nodded slightly.

"The production director has just notified me that a person claiming to be the number one player of 'New Eden' has just reached out to the station and agreed to join in through video conference — anonymously, of course." The host, Elizabeth, said, almost ignoring Damien.

That threw off the man a bit. He wasn't expecting anyone to claim to be that player after he had just dragged the person through the mud.

None of it mattered, though. He controlled his thoughts quickly and decided on a Plan B.

A square appeared on the screen behind them, showing a black decor and the blurred form of a person.

"Azamus, your petty tricks and manipulation mean nothing in the grand scheme of things." The blurred man said, with distortion to his voice.

"Hmph! Can you even prove you are the player at the top of the rankings? If you can't, I will out you as a poser and a liar!" Damien huffed, slightly losing his cool.

The image changed from the blurred man to a screenshot of an Exp bar. Next to it, they could see a level. Level 30. That fit with the highest player's level in the game.

"Hah! What a joke! Who can tell if that is not a trafficked image? You showed no actual proof there. Why don't you share your whole status screen, if you are telling the truth?!" Damien almost shouted.

He was trying to provoke the man into sharing all his info with the world. He hoped the person was stupid enough to take the bait.

Sadly for him, it did not happen.

"Your baits and tantrums prove only your lack of maturity, Azamus. If you want proof, you shall get it at the tournament in 'New Eden' that 'Evo-Gaming' has just announced." The man in the image said.

"I will see you there, and I will crush you." The man then added before the connection was closed.

"Rrraaagghhhhh!!!!!!" Damien yelled, completely losing control.

"I knew I shouldn't have come here, to this garbage show, in this garbage country!" The American yelled venomously.

"You Canadiens are always trying to uplift yourselves to America's standard! You are a waste of space of a country!" He howled, ripping away the microphone on his shirt and throwing it to the ground.

He then stormed out of the studio, with cameras following him, until he was out of reach.

"Well, that was unexpected!" Elizabeth said, trying to regain control of her show.

"We will come back to our interview after a short commercial break. Stay tuned, ladies and gentlemen!" The host added, sending the show into an ad break.

Alexander completely zoned out from the television. A sentence had caught his attention, and he was already on his phone looking up at the forums.

The top player had said that they had announced a tournament!

He opened the forums and scrolled until he found the section about official announcements. And just as the man had said, there it was.

'New Eden First Tournament of Heroes!'

'What a lame name.' Alexander thought.

He tapped on the post and started reading it. It was a game dev announcing that since players had reached level thirty, they could announce the first tournament.

It would lock in the participants once one thousand players had reached level thirty and would then happen a week later.

Alexander knew from then on that he was in a time crunch. If he wanted to climb to the top in this game, he needed to be a part of those thousand players.

He kept reading, trying to glean details from the post about what the tournament format would be, but the subject was never broached.

'I guess I'll know when I'm in it.' Alexander thought, clenching his fist in determination.

He texted his boss, asking for a week of vacation. He knew it was very much last minute and that he probably wouldn't get it, but he tried anyway.

A few minutes later, his boss texted back, asking what he needed the week off for.

Alexander responded he wanted the week to prepare for a tournament in the game he was playing. He also added that he never asked for any leave and that he was always there, even when sick.

He was going for the 'I'm a model employee' card.

His boss replied by asking him if he was taking a break for a game, and that this would badly reflect on his record. Alexander insisted he needed to do this and that it would be a onetime thing.

He then saw that his boss was typing. The little icon for the reply hovered for a minute or two. Alexander felt a bit of anxiety while he waited.

He didn't want to force his way out of work, but if his boss refused to give him this week, he might just quit altogether.

The replying icon then disappeared. Immediately after, a reply came in.

It simply contained the word 'OK'. Alexander sighed in relief.

He thanked his boss profusely, before putting his phone on DND and closing the screen.

Alexander quickly finished his meal and picked up his things. He did some dishes and cleaned up a bit.

He wouldn't be taking much time out of the game in the next week, so he wanted to make sure it wouldn't stink up in his apartment.

After doing that, he went back to his chair, reclined it back, put the VR helmet on, and logged in.

\*Launching 'New Eden'\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth\*

Chapter 27 Race Against The Clock

Astaroth quickly rose from his cot and made his way to the barracks. He had no time to waste.

Once there, he made his way to Kloud, who was training the recruits.

"Teacher! I need your help!" Astaroth said, panting slightly.

"What is it, lad?" Kloud asked calmly.

"I need to get stronger fast. I need to reach level thirty as fast as possible!" Astaroth exclaimed.

He then explained the situation to Kloud. Astaroth then told him about the tournament and the requirements to enter.

He also told him how that would be his best chance to prove himself to his peers. Kloud listened without a word, nodding a few times during the explanation.

But a frown soon found its way to his face.

"Hmm. I don't believe growing strong too fast is good for you, though. I think that will weaken your foundation." Kloud pondered.

"I know, teacher. But I need this. This is probably my only chance to make my name known to my peers." Astaroth insisted.

\*Sigh\*

"Fine. I will help you and make sure you get stronger fast. But only on one condition!" Kloud replied after a loud sigh.

"Whatever you ask, teacher!" Astaroth quickly said, excitement oozing out of his words.

"Once that tournament of yours is done, I want you back here training. And I will put you through the wringer, to make sure your foundation stays solid." Kloud said, looking at Astaroth with a sadistic grin.

Astaroth gulped.

"Yes, teacher!" He replied, slightly terrified.

He knew he would have a hellish time after the tournament, but it was all worth it.

\*Clap!\*

"Okay then! I'll get you into patrol teams for the entire week. Don't let down your training on multiple weapons." Kloud said.

"Chris told me you didn't change your weapons much yesterday. I'm disappointed. I didn't teach you all those weapons without reason, so train them." Kloud added disapprovingly, after clapping his hands loudly.

The trainer assigned patrol teams to take Astaroth with them and train him. For the next week, Astaroth would leave on patrol duty every day and confronting groups of Dire Wolves again and again.

Before leaving for this endeavor, Astaroth looked at his status screen.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 14 (4'995/6'450)

Stats:

HP: 1'325/1'325 MP: 510/510 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 16 (+20) Agility: 16 Constitution: 15 (+20)

Intelligence: 16 Wisdom: 15

Attack Power Str: 180 Attack Power Agi: 80 Magic Attack Power: 80 Healing Power: 75

Natural Defense: 3.5% Armor Defense: 14%

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

Available stat points: 11

Available skill points: 9

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Equipped gear:

Ursid Leather Chestguard, Ursid Leather Vambraces, Ursid Leather Leggings, Ursid Leather Boots, Basic Short Sword, Basic Longsword, Basic War Axe, Basic Polearm, Basic Daggers (2), Basic Wooden Shield, Basic Bow and Quiver (50)

Since he would do a lot of fighting and he wanted to earn more experience, he also wanted to deal more damage. Therefore, he boosted his intelligence and agility to twenty points each, eating up eight points from the get-go.

Then he boosted his Constitution with his last three points to make him more resistant, boosting his survivability.

He looked at his stats again and felt satisfied.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 14 (4'995/6'450)

Stats:

HP: 1'550/1'550 MP: 550/550 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 16 (+20) Agility: 20 Constitution: 18 (+20)

Intelligence: 20 Wisdom: 15

Attack Power Str: 180 Attack Power Agi: 100 Magic Attack Power: 100 Healing Power: 75

Natural Defense: 3.8% Armor Defense: 14%

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

Available stat points: 0

Available skill points: 9

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Equipped gear:

Ursid Leather Chestguard, Ursid Leather Vambraces, Ursid Leather Leggings, Ursid Leather Boots, Basic Short Sword, Basic Longsword, Basic War Axe, Basic Polearm, Basic Daggers (2), Basic Wooden Shield, Basic Bow and Quiver (50)

Next came his skills. He looked at all his skills, wondering which ones he should put points into.

Then he decided he should boost his damage as much as he could. That would be his deciding factor for leveling speed.

He dropped 4 skill points into 'Piercing Shot' and 'Ignite', bringing them both to max level. He kept his last point for now.

Piercing Shot: Lvl1 -> Lvl 5 (Max) (Mastery Lvl0/5)

Damage: +100% -> +250%

Mana cost: 25 -> 50

Ignite: Lvl1 -> Lvl 5 (Max) (Mastery Lvl0/5)

Damage: 10%/s -> 25%/s

Mana cost: Base 10 scaling -> 50

He noticed the mana cost on 'Ignite' no longer scaled, depending on the material. He surmised the spell was now strong enough to take hold of any material.

It tempted Astaroth for a second to drop his last skill point into 'Mana Skin' to boost his defenses a little more, but he thought, for now, it was useless.

White Death would tank for him most of the time, and he would be with a group. Maybe when he started farming on his own.

Until then, he would withhold the urge. His first patrol would be the next morning, as the one for the day had already left.

So for the rest of the day, he became Kloud's plaything. He was beaten black and blue countless times, learning a few tricks and moves but mainly being hurt.

The bad news for him was that since he was now higher leveled and had more health, Kloud held back less, and the damage he took significantly went up.

The good news of that was that through the manhandling he was being subject to, he gained another two points in Constitution and one point in Strength. He was glad his training was useful, but god did it hurt!

After a full day of ass whooping...Ahem...training, Astaroth washed up at the river and went to his alcove. He lay down on his cot and logged out of the game.

Alexander got up from his chair, ate, and washed. He then stretched his limbs, feeling sore from all his gaming on a gaming chair.

Alexander looked at his computer and thought of something. He unhooked his setup and moved it closer to his bed.

He hooked everything back and looked at his setup with pride.

'Should have thought of that sooner, der der.' He thought.

After that, he logged in to the forums via his phone and started scrolling in search of interesting info again. Sadly, the only thing he found of slight interest was the post for the tournament, which now had a real-time update of the number of players at level thirty.

It wasn't much of a sight yet, since it hadn't reached one hundred. The leaderboard showed that most of the top fifty had reached level thirty and the rest of them were level twenty to twenty-nine, with the lowest being level twenty.

If Alexander had to guess, he would say he had probably reached the average low-level player's level range. He still needed to up his pace, but he stayed certain that he was much stronger than other players.

After all, he could take on monsters almost twenty levels over him, solo. Most players could take on two monsters of an equal level at most, solo.

The elite players could take on groups of monsters at the same level as themselves. But he didn't know of anyone who could beat monsters much higher level than themselves.

That made him feel like an anomaly in the game. And yet, when he looked at the level the top player was right now, he couldn't think of anything else than the word anomaly to describe him.

The top player was now level thirty-two. He had been level thirty just a day ago, and that was in-game time!

'What a monstrous leveling speed!' Alexander thought, sucking in cold air.

'I need to at least match his speed if I want to be part of the tournament.'

Alexander clenched his fist, his heart racing in excitement. He would not get left behind.

Alexander scrolled down a bit more in the forums, but nothing garnered his attention, so he closed his phone and went to bed. He set an alarm for four hours later and fell asleep shortly after laying his head on the pillow.

When his alarm rang four hours later, he didn't even waste time taking a coffee. He directly grabbed his VR helmet from his desk, which was now nearby, and put it on his head.

He then logged into 'New Eden' promptly.

\*Launching 'New Eden'\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth\*

Chapter 28 The Duel, Part 1

As soon as he connected, he got up and left his alcove. He walked straight to the barracks and looked around, trying to find the patrol team.



He saw a group of four preparing their gear in a corner and guessed it was them.

The group differed from the last time, and he barely recognized their faces from seeing them in the barracks building a few times. He approached them and presented himself.

"Hello, sirs. I am Astaroth. Thank you for letting me join you on your patrol today." He said, giving a small bow.

"Enough bootlicking, twerp." One man responded, clear disdain in his voice.

Astaroth was quickly taken aback. Had he ever done something to this man?

He didn't recall ever talking to him personally at all.

"Pardon?" He replied, a little confused.

"We never agreed to you joining us. Unfortunately for us, the captain has lugged you on our backs. So I don't want to hear a word from you. Tag along and fight. That's all you need to do." The man said, sneering at Astaroth.

Astaroth looked at the man up and down. He had muscles rippling under his tight-fit leather clothes.

His weapons were on his belt; iron knuckles. He looked like a bruiser class.

Astaroth then inspected him.

Konnor Mac'Greygor:

Level: 28

Grade: Common

Race: Ash Elf

Class: Pugilist

Health: 2'100 Mana: 540

Stats:

Str: 46 Agi: 46 Con: 45 Int: 28 Wis: 28

Attack Power (Str + Agi): 460

Natural Defense: 4.5% Armor Defense: 10%

Gear: Leather Armor Set, Iron Knuckles (+15 DMG)

Astaroth frowned.

"What, you scared after seeing my stats, twerp?" Konnor said arrogantly.

"No, sir. Just wondering why you are so aggressive with me." Astaroth replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"What did you say, shorty?!" The man puffed up.

"Nothing, sir." Astaroth said, trying to blow the matter away.

Konnor walked to Astaroth and got an inch away from his face. Astaroth could feel the anger oozing off the man.

He looked him straight in the eyes, not wanting to back down.

"Repeat. What. You. Said. Twerp." The man said to Astaroth, poking Astaroth's shoulder with his finger at every word.

"Nothing, sir." Astaroth said, his tone now cold.

The man was getting on his nerves. He had done nothing to him, and yet, he was provoking him blatantly.

"That's what I thought." Konnor said, shoving past Astaroth.

"In here, only the strong get to talk." He added, walking towards the gate of the courtyard.

Astaroth was now gritting his teeth. Why was this man being such a prick with him?

Then something struck him. Did the man not just say 'only the strong get to talk'?

An idea bloomed in his mind. A grin formed on his face.

"So what you mean to say is, I only need to beat you to have your respect?" Astaroth said loudly, not even turning around.

It had the effect he wanted because he heard the man's steps stop abruptly.

Konnor turned around and looked at Astaroth mockingly.

"Like that would ever happen, runt. I would beat you in seconds." Konnor scoffed.

"Only dogs bark, sir." Astaroth taunted him, turning to face him with a mocking smile.

"You!" Konnor screamed.

The man then grabbed his iron knuckles from his belt and put them on.

From the side, Chris was watching raptly. When he saw Konnor grab his weapons, he got up to intervene, but then he saw Kloud stroll past him, so he sat back down.

Just as Konnor was about to lunge at Astaroth, Kloud grabbed his shoulder.

"You better not be thinking of beating a recruit up for standing up to you. You know the rules." Kloud told the man coldly, looking him in the eye.

Konnor spat on the ground.

"Fine! You! You better be more than talk!" He screamed, pointing at Astaroth.

"I officially challenge you to a duel!" He added, smiling from ear to ear.

"You don't have to accept his challenge, lad. But be ready to lose all credibility and respect if you don't." Kloud said, now looking at Astaroth.

"I never intended to back out, teacher." Astaroth replied, still looking at Konnor mockingly.

Both men walked to the center of the courtyard, where Kloud and Astaroth had been sparring a few days prior. They looked at each other, hate in one pair of eyes, and mocking in the other.

"To make this fair for you, runt, I won't be using any skills. I wouldn't want to kill you." Konnor said, grinning maniacally.

"You're still barking." Astaroth blandly replied.

"You! I will beat you in ten seconds and be over with it." Konnor growled.

Kloud walked to the middle of the courtyard with them.

"Do both of you agree to this duel?" He asked, looking at both men.

"Yes!" Both replied, simultaneously.

He then looked specifically at Konnor.

"You said you won't use skills. I expect you to honor and enforce that." He said, giving Konnor a hard stare.

Konnor snorted.

"Like I would ever need that to beat that runt." He said to Kloud, angrily.

Kloud only nodded and walked away from the sparring zone. He walked back beside Chris and leaned on the wall.

Chris looked at him, frowning slightly.

"Shouldn't we stop this farce from going any further?" He asked Kloud, slightly worried for the kid.

"No. The lad wants to prove himself. This is a splendid chance to do so." Kloud responded, not turning his head.

"Of course, should there be any danger to anyone's life, I will intervene." He added.

"Hmm." Chris said, looking at the sparring area.

Both men in the sparring area were staring at each other, gauging the other, waiting for the other to do the first move. The tension in the air was incredible.

All the warriors had come out of the barracks to see the duel. It was a rare occurrence in the village since everyone had known each other for a long time.

Astaroth was the only newcomer, which also made him a mystery for most.

"All right. Who wants to take bets?!" A voice sounded from one side.

It was Korin. He looked at everyone present, a coin pouch in his hand.

"I will put fifty gold coins on the rookie." He added, a smile on his face.

All the surrounding warriors started buzzing about. To them, those fifty gold coins were free money.

The rookie couldn't win, in their opinion. So they all started betting.

Only a few people bet on Astaroth, only because they liked risk and that if the rookie won, they would make bank.

The pot quickly piled up, and as more people bet, almost all the bets went for Konnor. It quickly reached one thousand gold coins.

"I'll bet five hundred gold coins on the lad." Kloud said, walking up to Korin.

The people around gasped, but then they internally rejoiced. If Konnor won, they would make so much money!

"So will I." Came Chris' voice soon after.

At that point, the people who had bet on Konnor had money signs in their eyes.

## Chapter 29 The Duel, Part 2

As for the combatants, they were still eyeing each other, not flinching. Konnor was waiting for the betting to spice up.

He would ask them for a part of it after his victory. Astaroth was waiting on Konnor to make the first move.

He knew that if he tried doing the first move, he would lose, since the man was stronger than him.

Once the betting stopped on the sides, Konnor decided he had waited enough. He bent down a little, then sprang forth, aiming his fist right at Astaroth's face.

He wanted to knock him out with one hit and waste no more time. When Astaroth saw Konnor dashing at him, he grinned.

During their staring contest, he had already made some kind of plan. As the man ran to him, he used his skill; propel.

But instead of throwing an object, he focused it on Konnor's foot, which was not touching the ground, and pushed it back.

The quick jerk to his foot threw Konnor off balance for a second, but that second was more than enough for Astaroth. He equipped his shield and put it in front of him.

He then took two quick steps forward, leaning into the shield, and aiming it at Konnor's face.

\*Bang!\* \*Woosh!\*

\*-633!\*

\*Ding!\*

\*You have learned the skill 'Shield Bash'\*

The impact produced a crunching sound and bounced Konnor back by a few meters, sending him tumbling in the dirt. His course through the dirt kicked up dust.

Konnor quickly got back up, dashing out of the dust cloud to keep his eyes on Astaroth. Astaroth was still standing where the impact had happened, but you could see the footmarks on the ground.

He had slid back a few feet from the force.

Konnor touched his bleeding nose and could feel that it was crooked. He grabbed it between his thumb and index, and cracked it back the other way, bringing it back straight.

Astaroth was looking at him and smiling.

"It has been ten seconds." Astaroth said, keeping his smile.

"You little!" Konnor growled, before lunging back at Astaroth.

This time, he watched his footing, making sure he wouldn't fall into the same trap. With his attention being on Astaroth and his feet, he failed to notice the glowing wolf come out of the dust behind him and nip at his heel.

Konnor Mac'Greygor:

21:10

Level: 28

The attack did little damage, but again affected his balance. He quickly caught himself back, but not before receiving a glancing blow to the shoulder from a short sword.

After hitting him, Astaroth quickly tried to back away, to maintain distance. If he could kite him like this, he could win.

He scanned his adversary again.

Konnor Mac'Greygor:

Level: 28

Grade: Common

Race: Ash Elf

Class: Pugilist

Health: 1'185/2'100 Mana: 540/540

Almost half his health was gone! Astaroth gained a boost of confidence. In all honesty, he had hoped to do the most damage he could before losing, but now he thought he had a winning chance.

The fight went on for a couple of minutes, Astaroth running and hitting when a chance presented itself.

White Death, whom he had summoned, attacked from behind when Konnor focused on catching Astaroth too much, and Konnor; running after Astaroth and growing madder by the second.

In his mind, the pugilist thought Astaroth was fighting like a coward. Why couldn't he stay still for a moment and take his punch, like a man?!

After a few minutes of fighting, his health was now dangerously low. He lost his shit.

"RRAAAGGGHHHHH!!!!!!!" He screamed, his eyes going red.

"Dragon's Fist!" He yelled out, punching the air before him.

What happened next, Astaroth would remember for a long time.

The air in front of Konnor distorted and transformed into the head of a dragon. The dragon head roared and lunged towards him at blazing speeds.

He lifted his shield, used 'Enhance Weapon' on it, used 'Mana Skin', and braced for impact.

The attack engulfed him an instant later. The hit propelled him back at vertiginous speeds, sending him flying toward the wall.

\*-1650\*

He was expecting a second impact on his back and a second damage number, but all that came was a slight impact. He could feel hands on his shoulders.

When he looked up, he saw Chris towering behind him. He separated himself from Chris, but then he was hit by a shock.

Chris was embedded into the courtyard wall a few centimeters. The hulking man dislodged himself and looked towards the sparring zone with anger.

In the sparring zone, another man was standing next to Konnor, holding a wolf by his mane. That man was Kloud.

And everyone around them was white right now, their faces drained of blood. Kloud emitted a pressure around him that most people would collapse from.

It was pure killing intent. And he directed it at Konnor.

Kloud let go of White Death when he noticed the wolf had fainted from the pressure he exerted.

"You dishonorable scum." Kloud growled, looking Konnor in the eyes.

"He... He... He was humiliating me..." Konnor stuttered, barely able to stay standing.

"That is no reason to kill him!" Kloud exploded.

"Give me a good reason not to end your life right now!" He added, beyond furious.

"I was losing. I... I couldn't just lose to a rookie!" Konnor stammered, feeling that it was not an empty threat.

"THEN YOU TAKE YOUR LOSS LIKE A MAN AND GROW STRONGER!" Kloud bellowed.

"Healer! Heal this sad sack right now!" He added, looking at a person wearing robes, a wand hanging at his belt.

The man quickly grabbed his wand and silently chanted something, pointing the wand at Konnor. A soft green wisp of energy left the wand and washed over Konnor, healing his injuries and recovering his health.

As soon as Konnor's health reached over half, Kloud punched him in the face with tremendous force, sending him sprawling many meters further, close to death again.

"You are lucky for two things today! The first is, the boy resisted the first blow and Chris caught him before he impacted the wall, saving him from death. Second, I caught the boy's wolf in time, before it killed you." Kloud stated, still shouting.

"Killed me?" Konnor said, eyeing the white wolf on the ground.

"Once the wolf sensed you were going for a killing blow, it lunged at you with killing intent, aiming to rip out your throat while you were busy throwing your skill. With how low your health was, it would have killed you instantly! You lost your cool, going into a state of rage, unfitting a warrior under my command." Kloud loudly admonished the man.

"I could have overlooked you for challenging a rookie if you had won justly or lost like a man. But I can't turn a blind eye to attempted murder." Kloud said, his eyes sad.

"From here on out, I banish you from this village. You have one day to grab your things and leave. Any longer, and I will chase you out myself." He added with a tone of finality.

Konnor just sat there for a few seconds, his gaze empty.

They banished him...

### Chapter 30 Finding The Den, Part 1

After all the ordeal with Konnor, Astaroth was hoping they would still patrol today. He didn't want to miss out on leveling, even after what had just happened.

Sadly, his health was almost depleted, and he had nothing to refill it. He looked at the casters nearby expectantly, hoping one of them would heal him, but none did such a thing.

Astaroth turned to look at Kloud, hoping to get some answers. What greeted him as he turned shocked him.

\*Slap!\*

A crisp slap to his left cheek, leaving a slight hand print. Astaroth's eyes went wide, as Kloud's hand was still extended.

Kloud's face was a frown of disappointment.

"You didn't need to provoke so much. We lost a good fighter today, because of a childish pissing contest. I am not proud of you, Astaroth. That was very dishonorable of you." Kloud scolded him.

"But, sir. I only responded to his roughness. How am I to blame? Is a duel not an honorable way of quelling a dispute?" Astaroth replied, still in shock.

"It is, but not this one. You could have ended matters quickly. Yet you toyed with him." Kloud said, turning to leave.

"I cancel your patrol for the day. Go home, reflect on your actions." He added, walking away.

"But, teacher, I..." Astaroth stammered, watching Kloud's back get further away.

Chris, from the side, saw the interaction and felt pity for the kid. He walked over and patted his shoulder.

"Don't worry, kid. He is just a little disappointed. You could have ended this fight sooner, but you played catch with your opponent instead. The captain is very strict about how honorable his pupils should be." He said, looking at Kloud leave.

"But, Colonel. I was fighting as best I could. I don't understand why you say I could have ended this sooner." Astaroth replied, still confused.

"Son, I have fought mages with soul aptitude. Me and Kloud both. As soon as we saw the wolf, we knew. That was the Alpha's soul, was it not?" Chris asked, looking Astaroth in the eyes.

"It is, but I." Astaroth started saying.

Then it hit him. Spirit Melding!

Had he used that instead of summoning White Death, he could have overpowered Konnor rapidly with the combined stats? It had slipped his mind completely.

Chris watched Astaroth's face as realization made his eyes go wide.

"You finally understand your mistake. Good. Go reflect on it. I'll go talk to Kloud and make sure you can patrol tomorrow. Now scamper." Chris said, shooing Astaroth away.

Astaroth stood in the courtyard for a while, dejected at losing a day of leveling.

'At this rate, I can never compete' He thought.

'I can't just lose a day.'

He formed his resolve and walked out of the barracks. He would absolutely not waste his day.

He was going to level with or without help. He walked in the village's entrance direction .

He stopped in front of the barrier for a bit, wondering if this was just reckless, but he quickly threw that thought aside. He didn't care.

He wanted to get stronger. He NEEDED to get stronger.

Thus he walked out and started running into the forest, direction, the wolves' territory. As Astaroth had walked out of the barracks, someone had been staring at him.

Korin had seen his eyes go from shaken to steeled. He recognized that look on Astaroth's face.

The look of a fool about to do something stupid. Korin had blended with the shadows around him and started tailing Astaroth from a distance away.

When he saw the young man stop at the barrier, he thought Astaroth had gotten cold feet. But Astaroth quickly proved him wrong about that, and right about his assessment.

The kid was going to do something stupid. He watched as Astaroth walked across the barrier and started running into the wilderness.

He thought of going to warn the Colonel but quickly brushed that idea aside, knowing that he would lose the trail of the boy quickly if he didn't directly follow him. And so he did.

He stayed as best hidden as he could and followed Astaroth. After running for a few minutes, Astaroth could already hear the howling in the distance.

He didn't slow down and re-oriented himself towards the closest howl he heard. He no longer cared about his safety, only leveling.

He would use his skills to the limit and drain his mana dry if that meant he could fight alone. He soon found a small group of three wolves lazing about in a clearing.



Astaroth didn't stop running. He pulled out his longsword, wielding it with two hands, and cast 'Mana Skin', 'Spirit Melding', and 'Enhance Weapon' one after the other. After casting 'Spirit Melding', he felt all his stats go up.

He felt stronger, faster, and sturdier. Like he was unbeatable.

His hair turned white, and he could feel some fur had grown on his cheeks. His canines had also elongated, and he could feel them poking out of his lips.

He almost looked like a half-transformed werewolf! He looked at his status window really fast.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Melded: White Death (Time remaining: 2m28s)

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 14 (4'995/6'450)

Stats:

HP: 6'325/6'325 MP: 953/1'150 Stamina: 100

Health Regen: 1% / second

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 17 (+47) Agility: 20 (+27) Constitution: 20 (+55)

Intelligence: 20 (+20) Wisdom: 15 (+20)

Attack Power Str: 320 Attack Power Agi: 235 Magic Attack Power: 200 Healing Power: 175

Natural Defense: 7.5% Armor Defense: 14%

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

Available stat points: 0

Available skill points: 1

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Skill Gained: Wolven Heart (Passive), Alpha's Howl (Active), Hyper Senses (Passive)

Wolven Heart (Passive): Gain the heart of a wolf, granting you high survivability. +1% Health regen per second.

Hyper Senses (Passive): Your senses become one of a canine. Your hearing, smell, and sight are greatly improved.

Alpha's Howl (Active): Howl to establish dominance. All enemies in a 50m radius face genetic fear of the Alpha (50% chance of fear for 5 seconds). Can only be used once per meld.

'What a monstrous boost.' He thought.

'I almost have the same stats as a level 36!'

As he was looking at his status screen, he never stopped running toward the wolves. Now he was right in front of one, and it was jumping at his throat.

The wolf was still quicker than him, but that mattered little, as he was prepared for them. He leaned his body to the side, barely clearing the wolf's lunge, and sliced upwards with his longsword.

Astaroth looked at the number with wide eyes.