

## **New Eden 251**

### Chapter 251 Guild Requirements

As Astaroth and his friends were dragged to a secluded room in the back of the building, they slowly stopped hearing the cacophony from the front part of the building.

The sudden silence was a welcomed development, but also brought some questions to the group. They weren't that far from the busy part, and already the noise was gone.

Astaroth had already found the answers to this, since he had activated his Perfect Mana Sense when the sound disappeared, and found traces of mana inlaid into the walls.

As they kept walking toward the room they were promised, he inspected the walls. He could see lines of mana following the bricks, imbued with some kind of lettering.

He guessed there was a formation to block out unwanted eavesdropping. As a bonus, the formation absorbed the stray noise from the busy front desks.

There were so many applications to magic that he needed to learn. Every day he stumbled upon new uses he wouldn't have thought of on his own.

He wished Aberon had taught him some of those, but then again, Aberon had only ever taught him the basics. Maybe when he could return to the village, Aberon would part with more knowledge.

He already guessed he had taught Violette more things than him, but he refused to be jealous of her. He would simply have to wait until the old man shared those bits of knowledge with him.

Upon arrival at a large room in the back part of the building, they walked into a conference room. There was a massive table in the center, made of some kind of exotic wood.

The walls were garnished with shelves upon shelves of books. It gave the entire room a feeling of opulence, but also tranquillity and gravitas.

Astaroth and Phoenix could tell many important meetings had been conducted in this room. Meanwhile, Violette and Gale were busy looking at the tapestries hanging next to the windows.

As the players sat on one side of the table, the man that had brought them here pulled out documents from thin air. Astaroth was slightly surprised.

'Did he materialize them? Or maybe the NPCs also have an inventory.'

The man sat opposite the players, laying the documents on the table. Phoenix was the first one to grab the papers, scrutinizing them with her discerning eyes.

The papers contained the requirements to form a guild, as well as the terms binding to the guild management fees associated with the organization. Phoenix read everything carefully.

Once she was done, she nodded to Astaroth, before laying the papers down again.

Nothing was off about the terms, according to her.

"Now that you have read the documentation, I would like to further make sure you understand what they contain."

Astaroth and Phoenix nodded, their faces serious, while the two younger players were still zoned out, observing the room.

"To form an officially recognized guild, you will need three things. The first one is five beings that sign the documents. You are already four here, so if you have a fifth person in mind, you can have them sign it later or come here now."

As he finished saying that, a function unlocked in the four players' interface. The guild function appeared to them, and inside it, they could invite other players to the guild.

Astaroth immediately sent out invitations to Athena, I'die, Gulnur, Silent, and after a few seconds of thinking, he sent one to Khalor, too.

It didn't take long for most of those to accept the invitation, as their names magically appeared on the guild charter document. The attendant smiled and nodded in approval.

"Good. With this out of the way, let us move on to the second requirement. The management office requires a one thousand gold fee for all the bureaucratic work to officialize your guild across the nation, and beyond."

Astaroth pulled out a thousand gold from his reserves, making a large pouch of gold appear on the table. The attendant jumped a bit at the sudden thump of the pouch, before smiling again.

Astaroth smiled back, pushing the pouch forward across the table.

"Do you need to count it?"

"That won't be necessary. I believe as a Knight you have enough integrity to be trusted."

"Good. Then what is the third requirement?"

"The third requirement can be resolved at an ulterior date. You will need an official base for your guild, as well as a name for said guild."

When he finished saying that, everyone whose name appeared on the charter suddenly received a quest. The quest required them to find or purchase a base for the guild, with the reward being an official guild seal. They would need to complete that part fast, if they wanted to join the guild war and stomp down on Aces High's ambitions. But before Astaroth of Phoenix could accept the quest, it was accepted and completed instantly.

A check mark appeared next to the name of the quest completer. Athena had been the one to fulfill the requirement.

She also sent a message through the now-available guild chat.

'I had already found a place that I was planning on buying. Now I know what to do with it. You are welcome.'

Astaroth chuckled.

'What a resourceful woman.'

The attendant, seeing the requirement suddenly grey out on the document, smiled again.

'These players came prepared. What a refreshing change.'

"The last thing I need from you is a name under which to call your guild. Have you thought of one already?"

Phoenix was the one to talk this time.

"Yes. I think we can all agree with the name, 'Paragons'. Am I right?"

Violette and Astaroth nodded. Gale didn't know what it stood for, but since he was new there, he didn't want to disagree with them.

The man wrote the name on the charter, and soon after, the paper floated upward before burning in a flash of flames.

"Congratulations on forming the guild Paragons. I will deliver your seal to your guild master's inventory."

"Wait. We didn't pick a guild master..." Astaroth said, confused.

The three other players next to him looked at him in confusion.

'He is so dense sometimes,' Violette and Phoenix thought.

"We picked one. It's you, silly," Phoenix said.

"What?!"

Chapter 252 Using The City Teleporter

Astaroth looked at his friends with a startled face.

"I didn't want to be guild leader! It's too much pressure. I thought Phoenix would be the guild leader!"

"You mean you wanted me to bear that pressure?" Phoenix asked, jokingly.

"That's not... You would make a better guild leader, I'm certain."

"You will be fine. I'll help you. It needs to be you."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the strongest. And you are reliable and friendly. That's what people need of a guild leader. Someone they can count on to do the right thing and be there to defend them"

"But what if I mess up?"

"Jesus Astaroth. Have some confidence in yourself. I saw you rip men to shreds on the news, and you saved Violette, even at the risk of your own safety. You will be a great guild leader."

Violette nodded her head furiously.

Astaroth looked at them, still uneasy about having this responsibility shoved onto him. But it was too late to refuse now.

"Okay, fine. I'll do it. But you better help me with anything I don't understand, Phoenix."

Phoenix pecked him on the cheek.

"Of course."

She smiled at him.

"Ahem. Is there anything else I can do for you today, Sir?" the attendant asked.

"Ahh! Yes. I wanted to know how to recruit NP—ahem, locals, to the guild."

"I can help you with that. We can hang a flyer on our board for the locals to see. You will have to handle the negotiations with them yourself, though. Is that alright?"

"Yes, that's fine. How much for that service?"

"Since you are newly established, you get to use this service once, for free. Do you wish to redeem it?"

"Yes, please."

"Very well. I shall make sure it is done. Anything else?"

Astaroth turned his head to Phoenix, who shook her head.

"No. I think that will be all for today."

"In that case, let me bring you back to the front desks, so you may take your leave."

The man escorted them back to the common area, as the hubbub assaulted their ears again. The four players fled the building, trying to escape from the cacophony of laughter and shouting.

Phoenix opened up the guild interface, looking for the base management options. Astaroth had already assigned her as co-leader, so he had access to everything he did, aside from kicking him out of the guild.

She rapidly found what she was looking for. In the management tab, she could see the guild base level, its empty asset list, the virgin building plots, as well as the coordinates for their base.

She pinned the coordinates to her map, and saw that it was in a greyed-out place for her. That meant she hadn't been there yet.

Which wasn't such a stretch, since exploring hadn't been her primary focus. But for Athena and I'die, it had been almost their only focus.

They probably had the most complete map out of all the players in New Eden. The pair travelled across the lands of New Eden, day in and day out.

That was most likely how they had found the location for the guild base.

"Alright. Let's go see what we have to work with. We need to have a semblance of a base before we think about joining in this guild war."

The three others agreed.

Phoenix messaged Athena, asking her which kingdom the base was in, since she couldn't see on her map.

'It's in the Elven kingdom. You will need to teleport to the Elven capital, and travel South East.'

After getting the response, Phoenix led the group to the city teleporters. Astaroth had yet to use one of those and wondered what it felt like. Violette was having the same line of thought.

As for Gale, he had used one to get to Sunpeak, since his starting zone was another kingdom to the North.

After walking to the center of the city, the party arrived at a busy plaza, with a solid cubic arch in the middle. The arch looked like the Arch de Triomphe, which all of them had seen at least once in pictures or movies.

The four sides of it were constantly flashing in blue light as people walked through it. Astaroth and Violette looked at the structure in awe.

"I've only ever watched the structure from afar. It looks so much cooler from this close."

He was watching as he could see the other side through the arches, but every time someone walked through an arch, the opening flashed blue all the way up, for a millisecond, and the person was gone.

"You like it now. Let's see how you like it once we pass through."

Astaroth looked at her questioningly as they walked over to a guard.

Phoenix told the guard where they wanted to go, and he took out a stamp from a box. He stamped all four players; the ink sinking into their skin.

Astaroth could feel mana emanating from the stamp and ink, and he guessed it worked like a marker that the portal would read to send them to the right place.

'Huh. Neat.'

After getting marked, the four of them walked towards the large stone arch, wondering what the transfer would feel like. When they walked under the arch, everything around them shimmered, as goose bumps ran over them, and they reappeared in another plaza.

Astaroth looked around, examining the architecture of the nearby buildings, and his eyes almost sparkled.

"Even though the teleportation was kind of anti-climactic, the scenery here is lovely. I presume we are in the Elven kingdom?"

Phoenix nodded her head. But someone rapidly crashed their happy sightseeing.

"Hey! You! Identify yourselves!"

A squad of guards in leather armours, armed with longbows, and silvery lances blocked their path. Astaroth then slapped his forehead.

'I should have known when I saw the trees. The Elves still hate Ash Elves.'

The guards were looking at him and Violette with apparent hostility, and Astaroth already knew why. He raised his hands to signify his peaceful intentions, taking a step in front of Violette.

"We aren't here to cause trouble. We are simply passing through."

"You should have stayed away from our pristine cities, dark skin!" one guard spat.

'God dammit. This will not end well...'

## Chapter 253 A Grand Mage To The Rescue

The situation was looking dire for Astaroth and his friends. The guards had already isolated them from the other arrivals, and they quickly surrounded them, weapons aimed at the party.

Phoenix's mind was swimming in confusion right now, not understanding why they were suddenly treated like public enemy number one.

Most players didn't know that Ash Elves and normal Elves had a history of war and hatred. In fact, most people in New Eden as a whole did not know this.

The war between the two races had happened so long ago, history had already forgotten most of it. Only the two races concerned, and some erudites still remembered.

Since Elves tended to live quasi-endless lives, it was easy for them to keep track of their long history. And they shared most of their knowledge from generation to generation through spoken tales.

This meant that all the emotions contained in the tale survived through the ages. Many Elves, even ones that had been born centuries after the war ended, still held hatred and grudge against the Ash Elf race.

The war had taken many lives, on either side, and yet the Elves acted as victims in the story. It mattered not to them that they had enslaved and mistreated the race for generations.

It mattered only that they had rebelled and killed so many of their brethren. To most, the hypocrisy of the situation was disgusting.

But to the Elves, it was only right that Ash Elves should be their lesser, since they wouldn't exist without them. The Elves that knew the full story were long gone, and only bribes of truth remained, smudged by loath and disgust.

Astaroth knew a bit more than most, ever since his talk with Kela'ra. But even his knowledge was extremely limited.

The only place where he could learn more would be at the palace library of the Ash Elf kingdom. But that was not a place he could go.

For now, he had bigger issues than history on his plate. Like the spears and arrows, currently aimed at his throat.

"Listen, sir. We are adventurers just passing through. We want no trouble."

"Shut up! Your lies won't save you."

"I'm not lying. Look, here's my adventurer's card."

Astaroth pulled out his crystalline-coloured card, getting a few oohs and ahh's from the crowd that was amassing around the encirclement.

The guards looked at the guard with reserve. Their stances weakened a bit, as most knew what that colour meant.

But one guard didn't seem receptive to it. He moved forward, trying to grab the card out of Astaroth's hands.

But Astaroth pulled his hand back, not wanting to relinquish what seemed to be his only protection for now.

"You can see it without taking it. Hands off."

"Give me the card, dark skin. I have no proof you didn't steal it from another adventurer."

When Astaroth refused to hand over the card again, the guard started lunging at him, his spear extended forward.

Seeing that there would be no more talking, Astaroth pulled out his weapon. As soon as Ad Astra was out in the open, the other guards went on the offensive, too.

"He's attacking one of ours! Kill them!"

But just before all hell broke loose, a powerful pressure descended upon the portal plaza.

"Enough! All of you, stand down!"

The mana in the plaza was acting in a frenzy, as most mages or mana-susceptible people around broke into cold sweats. The soldiers all looked up to where the man emitting this pressure was floating.

Floating fifty feet above the plaza, a slender elf man with silver hair was looking down on everyone. His face was currently a mask of anger.

Astaroth wasn't sure whether that was directed at him or not. The next phrase out of the elf's mouth assuaged his fears.

"You! Guard captain!"

The mage pointed to a soldier. The guard he pointed to almost yelped.

"Ye... Yes, sir!"

"Why didn't you stop your soldier? You know full well the authority of the adventurer's guild. That card he is holding allows him to go where he pleases, and you are not in a position to refuse him access."

"But sir. He's an Ash Elf."

"I don't care!" the mage thundered.

The mage looked down at Astaroth and his friends.

"Troublesome child, leave the city at once. Next time you want to come here, make sure you send a message beforehand, so we can arrange a safe passage. Now go!"

Astaroth quickly nodded his head. He signalled to his friends it was time to go, but as they were about to leave, the guards refused to move out of the way.

The soldier standing in front of Astaroth was practically shaking in his boots, but since he had received no order to back down from his superior, he held his bowstring taut.

The pressure on that soldier suddenly increased, enough so that the elf fainted. Astaroth took that as his go signal and dashed out of the encirclement.

He and his friends ran out of the city, no longer trying to stop and do some sightseeing.

As soon as they crossed the gates outside, Phoenix took the lead, leading them in the direction they needed to go. The monsters near the city were weak, so they ignored most of them, one-shotting those that insisted on standing in their way.

They rapidly distanced themselves from the Elven city, stopping once they were miles away. Phoenix turned to look at Astaroth.

"What was all that about? Why did they immediately become hostile to us?"

"Yeah, that was weird," Gale chimed in.

Violette looked at Astaroth, her head slightly tilted.

"It's an old grudge, I would say."

"An old grudge? Have you ever been there?"

"Not me personally, no. But Elves and Ash Elves have some history together. Some lingering bad blood."

Phoenix frowned.

"How bad does it have to be for them to immediately attack us like that?"

"War causing bad. But from what I gather, it's not just black and white."

Phoenix let out a long sigh.

"Let's just stay away from Elven cities for a while. If we need to go, I'll send someone other than you or Violette."

"Aww... But I wanted to see the Elf city..." Violette pouted.

"Maybe another time, Violette."

Astaroth interrupted them.

"We can discuss this later. We should be heading to the guild base. I want us to be up and running soon, so we can rain on Aces High's parade."

The group nodded before they started moving again.

#### Chapter 254 Finding The Base

The group of four made it further and further into the forests of the Elven kingdom. Soon, they reached a zone where the monsters were higher levelled.

The group had to fight a few of them on their way to the pin on Phoenix's map. But it was nothing they couldn't handle.

Once they had almost reached the location they were looking for, Astaroth suddenly stopped. His head snapped to the left, as his hand blurred, lifting to catch something.



Right before his face, now clamped in his hand, an arrow. When he looked in the distance, to see where it came from, he noticed something moving in the trees.

Many silhouettes were jumping from branch to branch, and tree to tree, getting closer to them. Suddenly, one silhouette dropped next to him.

That was when he recognized it.

"Athena. You could have told your friends not to shoot at us."

"I'm sorry, Wolfie. I wasn't expecting you so quickly."

"Don't call me Wolfie..." Astaroth growled.

From the trees all around, more people dropped from the trees. Ten Elven men and women suddenly surrounded Astaroth, Violette, Phoenix, and Gale, all of them wearing little clothing.

The tribal paintings they had on their skin, in tones of brown and green, set them apart from the elves they had seen a few hours prior. Astaroth felt like they had a more savage air to them, too.

"Who are your friends, Athena?" Phoenix asked, eyeing the elves warily.

I'die was the one to respond, as he slipped down a tree trunk.

"They are a tribe of wild elves. We met them not too long ago."

"Ahh, there you are. I should have known you wouldn't be far away from Athena."

Astaroth's comment slid off I'die like water off an umbrella.

"They are the reason we found a place for our guild base. Follow us."

I'die took off, heading in the direction of the guild base. Phoenix looked at the pin on her map and acknowledged they were going in the same direction.

They wouldn't need to travel far, as the marker showed they were merely a couple of miles away. But the forest didn't extend all the way to it.

After walking for half the remaining distance, the forest abruptly ended. In front of them, in the distance, they could see a large stone barrier.

From over the rocks, they also saw the top of a humongous tree as it overshadowed the stone formation. It looked like the tree was closing the top of a stone bowl.

Between the woods and the stone wall, rows upon rows of bushes and trees filled their sight. It was too well placed to be the work of nature, and they understood it was a farm.

On the trees and bushes, fruit and vegetables could be seen hanging. Some animals were wandering amongst the rows of plants, nibbling on the occasional fruit or vegetable.

If Astaroth and his friends hadn't just exited a zone chock full of monsters, they would believe they were nearing a city. It was so serene here, one would never imagine monsters were mere meters away in the forest.

Seeing as I'die, Athena, and the wild elves kept walking forward, the four of them followed behind. They soon reached a small village-like outcropping of tents, just outside the stone wall.

A tall, muscular elf was standing before the largest tent.

'The village chief,' Astaroth surmised.

I'die and Athena kneeled in front of the man. Seeing this, the four other players did the same.

"Huntress Athena. You bring more strangers into our village. I hope you have a good reason."

"Village Chief Elrond. I had already warned that my friends would be coming. They are here to help reclaim the bastion, as I had promised."

'The bastion?' the four players thought.

"Hmm. Then they shall be allowed passage into our lands safely. As long as they do not show hostility toward my people."

"I promise they will be respectful and mindful of your people. And I will maintain the promise I made to you, for after we reclaim the bastion."

"Very good. Then go, and good luck."

The village chief turned on his heels, entering the tent behind him. His small entourage quickly followed behind.

Athena waved her hand at her friends, signalling them to follow her. Astaroth walked up to her as they approached the stone wall, which now seemed much larger from up close.

"Athena. What is this about us reclaiming a bastion? I thought we were here for our guild base..."

"We are. This is it."

Athena pointed forward, toward the thick stone, and the tree above it. Astaroth looked at her in confusion.

It was Phoenix who understood first. She was sliding her hand across the stone surface when she sensed something in the rock.

"This... something magically erected this stone!"

"Astaroth. I think she means this structure is the base."

Athena nodded at Phoenix, smiling at her. But Astaroth only looked more confused.

They kept walking as they talked, and soon everything fell into place. The group of six players and one wolf arrived at a large hole in the rock, and Astaroth understood.

Barring the hole in the stone was a large metal gate, which stood out from the rest, since it was clearly forged. That was when he understood this wasn't a natural rock formation.

This was a fortress wall, made entirely of solid stone. Across from the gate, Astaroth could see inside a bit, and he noticed what looked like crudely shaped buildings made of earth, wood, and stone.

"Is this... Is this a city?!"

Athena grinned widely.

"Bingo!"

"But why are these elves living outside? Wouldn't they be safer inside?"

"That's the catch. The only reason I could lay claim to the city was that I snuck inside and touched the throne, or what was left of it. The city is infested with monsters."

"Why haven't they tried killing the monsters? If they live here, they should at least be capable of that much."

"Because the zone is now considered a dungeon. And there is a boss monster, much stronger than the others, guarding the top levels of the palace. It's at the top of the tree."

"So you are saying if we can clear this place, it's ours?"

"It's already ours. But we need to chase out the vermin if we want to live here."

Astaroth looked at the humongous stone wall, the thick metal gate guarding the entrance, as well as the extremely wide space inside. He knew this place would be an amazing guild base already.

"Then what are we waiting for?!" he exclaimed, smiling madly.

But before he could lunge inside, Phoenix bopped him on the head.

"We should at least get the others here. More people wouldn't hurt us if we need to fight a boss."

Astaroth sheepishly agreed, as Athena laughed at him loudly. Phoenix then sent out a message to all the other guild members with a location pin link.

She knew they could all make it here, even if it took a bit of time. All they needed to do now was to warn the villagers and wait for their reinforcements.

## Chapter 255 Jealousy In The Air

After waiting for a few hours, the rest of the guild members arrived. Only Khalor refused to join them, since he had other things to worry about.

It surprised Astaroth Khalor even joined the guild when he sent him an invitation. He had half expected the man to refuse it outright.

But Khalor had accepted, under the condition that he couldn't be forced into anything if he didn't have time. Astaroth accepted his condition, since he would have asked the same thing.

There were two additions to what Astaroth had originally expected, since Gulnur and Silent had both brought a friend for help. Astaroth had told them that as long as they trusted them, they would be welcome.

Gulnur came with one of his friends, a long-time friend, one of the rare few he had in the real world, who had also started playing New Eden.

The kid was a little older than Gulnur, but seemed just as joyous and outgoing. He played a Gnome gunslinger, and he was named Death The Gnome.

The name elicited a chuckle from both Astaroth and Phoenix, who understood the reference. They were surprised that someone as young as he did, though.

The person Silent Light brought along also surprised a few of the members of the guild. That was because they recognized her.

Astaroth especially, since he had fought alongside her a few times already. It was Morticia.

Astaroth quickly scanned her, noticing that her level was sitting comfortably in the higher part of the level leaderboard, with a level forty-three. He also noticed another thing had changed.

Morticia was no longer a psychic class, but was now a class called Enchantress. He didn't know what that entailed exactly, but he could guess roughly that she was now more of a support player.

"Hello again, Morticia."

"We meet again, Astaroth. I had a feeling we would. Although I am surprised you started a guild. I had pegged you as a solitary type."

"I usually prefer to play with fewer people, yes. But for what I wanted to do after this, I needed a guild."

Morticia looked at Astaroth with a wide smile. The man looked bulkier than the last time she saw him, and was pleasing to look at.

They also seemed to be around the same age, so she wouldn't mind learning to know him more.

Phoenix was catching up with Silent a little further, and noticed Morticia talking with Astaroth. Something in the woman's smile slightly annoyed her, and she felt the need to make her presence known.

She walked over to Astaroth, latching on to his arm. The poor man almost jumped out of his skin, not expecting someone to grab him so suddenly.

"Hello, Morticia."

"Phoenix."

"Umm... I'm gonna go make sure everyone is ready..." Astaroth said, trying to get away from the two women's staring contest.

But Phoenix was holding on to his arm firmly. Morticia looked at the interlocked arms and giggled.

"I see you two are an item now. Congratulations to both of you."

"Thank you. I'm surprised you know Silent Light. I didn't think that was the type of player you hung out with."

"I rarely hang out with him. Silent is my little brother. I joined because he asked me. I didn't even know what we were going to do until I arrived here."

Astaroth's eyes went wide. He looked at Silent in disbelief.

Morticia and Silent's behaviours were so different, he would have never guessed they were related, if she hadn't just told them.

Phoenix just silently stared at Morticia, her intentions clear as day. Morticia giggled in response.

"Well, if you don't mind, I will acquaint myself with the others I will be raiding with shortly. It's a pleasure to be fighting by your side again, Astaroth."

"The pleasure is all mine," Astaroth replied, smiling.

But as Morticia walked away, he felt a sharp pain in his side. Phoenix was looking at him with daggers in her eyes as she pinched his waist.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"The pleasure is all yours? Really? I saw how she looked at you. That vixen."

"Phoenix, relax. I doubt there was anything to it."

"Oh please! I've known her for a long time. Morticia likes to bewitch men and have them under her thumb. She is very nice, and very talented, but she is a witch!"

"You don't have to worry in the slightest. She isn't my type, anyway."

As he said that, Astaroth leaned into Phoenix's ear, giving a small kiss on her neck.

"You are my type. And I think a bit of jealousy is very attractive."

Phoenix felt shivers run down her spine when Astaroth kissed her neck and whispered in her ear. For a shy man, he was quite outgoing.

She could guess he was doing this for her, and she appreciated it. But she was still extremely wary of Morticia.

"Fine. I will trust you. But if she ever pulls something on you, I will burn her alive."

Astaroth laughed at her response.

"I will pass the message along if it happens."

He laughed again and kissed Phoenix. They then separated and went along to make sure everyone was ready to start their assault.

Athena was already inside the walls, sneaking around in recon. She was sending updates to I'die, via chat, as the druid player drew a map on a scroll.

He was also marking everywhere that Athena thought could have traps and the levels and types of monsters in each room. In the meantime, Phoenix was devising a formation for the assault.

Their group would comprise Gulnur, Astaroth, and Genie on the front lines; Athena, Death, Gale, and Silent in the middle; and lastly, Violette, I'die, Morticia and herself on the back line.

With Astaroth's summons, their party would be as full as a full dungeon party. This made her job easier, since she didn't have to treat it as a hard setting.

They also had quite the spread in classes. What they lacked in healing, they highly compensated in damage.

Astaroth was more than resistant, making him and Gulnur a very apt front line, and they wouldn't need as much healing as regular parties would.

Of course, Silent Light would still be crucial, and I'die's assisted healing would also save them quite the trouble. I'die had gained a few spells that would help, in terms of healing.

Phoenix looked at the map I'die was drawing, keeping her mind busy with plans. She made so many contingency plans, she wouldn't have to worry about anything surprising her.

Phoenix smiled as her heart thumped in anticipation. And everyone felt the same way.

Chapter 256 Backup Plan

\*\*\*Level 50 Dungeon, Bowels Of The Earth\*\*\*

Khalor was currently standing in front of the treasure chest of the first boss, in the dungeon he was running. He was panting heavily as he sat in front of the chest.

"That was too close for comfort. Seems like the monsters at this level are smart enough to understand the principle of the summoner and summoned creature."

His body was currently recovering from some heavy wounds that the boss he had slain had inflicted on him. The monster had rapidly understood who was controlling the undead and Khalor had ended up in a tight spot.

Even though his never-ending army of undead kept the boss monster mostly at bay, it still managed to slip through them occasionally, dealing a great deal of damage directly to him.

Khalor wasn't a tank, and any hit he took was potentially mortal. Of course, his class allowed him some latitude, in terms of death, but that didn't mean he could allow himself to die so easily.

This boss monster had given him a run for his money, but his objective was still attained. Laying behind him, looking at Khalor intently, was a half-zombified flame wyvern.

It was looking at Khalor with mixed emotions, ranging between hatred and reverence. But its brain kept it from lunging at the man that had just slain it.

Khalor could feel the stare on the back of his head, like a drill bit boring through his skull. He turned his head to the wyvern.

"Don't worry. Even if you hate me, I'll treat you well. And soon enough, you will get to vent a bit of that anger from dying."

Khalor finished resting and stood up. When he looked at his level, he smiled a bit.

'Level forty-seven. I'm catching back to that brat. Soon I'll be ahead again.'

As he remembered why he needed to rush through his levelling process, his face became gloomy.

'That fucking gnome. I will have his life if he ruins everything again.'

Khalor went back to his dungeon crawl, anger pushing him to kill everything in his way faster, as if his ass were on fire.

\*\*\*Back to the Bastion\*\*\*

Athena had just come back from her scouting. She had to skip many zones, since the monsters in there were so numerous, they would have caught her.

But all the information she gave to I'die painted out a pretty decent map. Even if some zones were still a mystery, including the zone where Athena presumed the boss was, the group was lucky with the info they had.

Some information was better than none.

Phoenix looked at the map with scrutiny. She was planning the shortest and most efficient route to the boss, while making sure they killed everything on the way there.

She had already discussed their assigned positions and roles with everyone. She even stepped on her jealousy and talked to Morticia, to have a better idea of what her new class did.

Morticia explained that her new class allowed her to charm her enemies with higher chances of success, meaning she could turn enemies into temporary allies.

This would be incredibly useful in those places where the monsters were aplenty. Even if Phoenix hated the way Morticia looked at her man, she couldn't discard her usefulness in the raid to come.

As for the other player she didn't know, his class was pretty straightforward. Gunslingers pointed their guns and shot.

Be it one gun, or many, a pistol or a rifle, the concept remained the same. They were pure damage dealers.

Although their party had a disproportionate amount of DPS versus the two other roles, she knew they would be fine. Silent and I'die had already proved their mettle as healers, and Gulnur was an outstanding tank.

Astaroth wasn't even to be worried about, since his skills made him a monster in his own right. As tanky as a tank, as lethal as a DPS, and his passive health regen on his wolf form meant he needed little healing.

Phoenix giggled to herself, remembering that Astaroth was practically a one-man team. Just as a certain Necromancer, they both knew.

It was a shame Khalor had refused to come. This operation would have been a breeze with him there, adding a numbers advantage to their side.

Phoenix finally decided on the path they would take, drawing it on the map. She clapped her hands, gathering the attention of all the surrounding players.

"Alright! Let's get this done quickly. Our leader has a certain gnome he wants to teach a lesson to."

She started explaining her primary plan to everyone, and the players nodded when given specific instructions. She sometimes added in some contingency plans for certain situations, making sure they always had a way out.

It was better to be safe than sorry. It took her over half an hour to make sure everyone understood their role. But once she was done, they were ready.

They got into position, taking a kind of sandwich formation, as they stood before the iron gate that closed the walls. Astaroth walked to the side, pulling a lever that activated a hidden mechanism.

The gate started slowly sliding upward, with a metal-on-stone screech. It wasn't long before the gate was completely retracted.

The party slowly walked inside, keeping all their senses peeled. An ambush at the entrance would be terrible, but the chances were low.

As the last of the back line crossed the gate, a roar suddenly echoed through the skies.

\*RROOAARR!!!\*

Immediately after the roar was silenced, a notification popped on everyone's interface.

\*Ding!\*

\*Surprise Event!\*

\*The Zone Boss has felt trespassers in its domain. It has alerted all of its underlings, and is now ready to drive the intruders back. Get ready!\*

Everyone had the same thought.

'Shit!'

The ground started rumbling under everyone's feet, and the vibration caused whatever was holding the gate up to break, sending it crashing back down.

The entire group was now stuck inside the walls, with a horde of monsters on their way to eat them.

"Fuck! This just turned into a wave defence!" Gulnur shouted.

"Don't panic! We have a plan for this. Everyone! Switch to defensive positions. I'die, form some walls to our sides. We need to funnel enemies to our front lines!" Phoenix commanded.

"On it!"

"Gale, switch to the front line! Death, support him so he never gets surrounded."

"Aye aye!"

"Yes, boss lady!"

"Get ready, here they come!" Athena shouted, her eyes fixed forward, as she nocked an arrow.

"Astaroth! Raise some hell!"

"With pleasure! AWWOOOO!!!!!"

Astaroth melded with White, dashing out of the defensive position they were building.

Chaos ensued.

## Chapter 258 Meeting The Boss

The situation kept escalating, and soon enough, Morticia could no longer do much. She had used mana potions to keep herself from being useless, but those weren't cheap.

And since they had a cooldown on use, she had to reduce her mana consumption by a great deal. Since her role had mainly been of charming monsters to fight others, as much as she could, the pressure on Gulnur went up a notch.



Even if she still used psychic attacks, dealing some form of damage, it was not nearly as much as before. And since the monsters assaulting Gulnur now died slower, his health started going down faster.

This caused a domino effect on Silent and I'die, who now had to heal Gulnur more often, draining their mana reserves quicker. The situation was quickly getting out of hand.

Phoenix knew she had to do something before they got wiped out. She started swirling her hands rapidly, conjuring flames around the stone walls protecting them.

The more she spun her hands, the more fire appeared, until the entire area they were in turned into a cocoon of fire. Astaroth looked on in amazement until another fact hit him.

He was stuck outside.

The monsters at the front rapidly backed away from the intense fire, howling and growling. Until they found someone they could vent their anger on.

Astaroth gulped. He furiously wrote in the group chat.

'Why didn't you warn me?! I'm stuck outside!'

Phoenix replied.

'There was no time. Silent was about to run out of mana, and Gulnur was in awful shape. Listen. I know this is bad, but you can outrun them.'

'I don't have a choice now, do I?! Next time just tell me first!'

Astaroth rapidly changed his meld to Morpheus. Even though his timer was greatly reduced, since the bat had been summoned, he had no other choice.

He bolted into the air, trying to distance himself from the horde of monsters as much as he could. The creatures were on his tail quicker than he'd hoped, and he knew that even if he got away for a while, his meld would end before he could completely outrun them.

'How long can you hold that defence?' he asked Phoenix in the chat.

'About thirty more seconds.'

'God dammit. Fine! I'll make sure I bring as many as I can away. But you all better come help me as soon as you can!'

Astaroth closed his chat interface, not wanting to get distracted. He focused his mind on one thing, and one thing only. Getting as far from his party as he could.

This would sound stupid in any gamer's mind, since the party was a synonym for survival and combat power in almost all cases. But this wasn't the case right now.

Astaroth knew he would have at least some chance of surviving on his own, whereas his party members would almost certainly die on their own. And since they were in dire straights already, it fell on him to become the sacrificial lamb.

As he flew away from the burning dome of flames, he saw that almost all the monsters followed him. He had become like a beacon in the night for them.

Astaroth navigated away from the monsters on his tail, entering parts of the map that Athena hadn't scouted. He knew that entering uncharted zones was stupid, but it was his only choice.

Every other place he wanted to go was crawling with enemies. Only the uncharted rooms were empty.

As he kept flying, watching how long he had left fused, he stopped paying attention to the map. There was no point, since he was flying blind, anyway.

His constant looking back and looking at his interface caused another situation to arouse. He wasn't paying attention to where he was flying, and only noticed once it was too late.

His senses suddenly alerted him to mortal danger, and his head snapped to the front. Something was flying at him insanely fast and he had no time to dodge.

Astaroth instantly equipped his Ironbark Shield, enhancing it immediately, and reinforced his Mana Skin. As he finished doing those three actions, which took less than a second, he saw what was approaching.

His eyes widened.

The thing flying at him was a man, wearing light leather clothing and sporting a blonde mane that flowed behind him. The man got next to him, spinning on himself, and kicked at Astaroth.

Astaroth could see the air around the man's leg bend, and he knew this kick would hurt. As he braced himself behind his shield, lifting it to meet the kick, he clenched his jaw.

When the leg impacted the shield, Astaroth felt as if he was trying to stop a runaway train. Since he wasn't on the ground, he had nothing to brace his body on, and the impact sent him flying like a comet.

His body flew through many ruined buildings, along with trees, before slamming into the ground. Astaroth coughed out blood as the air left his lungs.

His health bar was flashing red, alerting him to his very near-death condition.

Astaroth stumbled to his feet, as something landed not far in front of him. When he raised his head, his stomach dropped.

The way the mana around the man reacted was already enough to tell him who that was. This was the zone boss.

His devilish grin and wild eyes stared at him.

"I'm surprised you survived that attack, humanoid scum. I guess you will be fun to play with until I eat you."

It almost tempted Astaroth to rebuke the man, and point out that he was a humanoid, too. But the feral energy he was giving off made him shudder, his mind screaming at him to flee.

Astaroth knew he was screwed, so he scanned him anyway.

\*Beast King, Leon\*

Level: 100

Grade: Semi-Legendary (Zone Boss)

HP: ???

MP: ???

The beast before him smiled widely as it felt the scan. It started walking towards him slowly, each step a threat to Astaroth's life.

"Yes. Look at me. Cower in fear. Your meat will taste even better."

The grin on his face, as drool dribbled down his mouth, would have scared any person into passing out.

But Astaroth wasn't impressed.

He opened up his message interface again.

'You better hurry and rejoin me. I found the boss.'

After sending that, he looked the half-beast man in the eyes.

"I've fought a dragon. You don't scare me much."

The beast stopped his step, his grin disappearing. A low growl of rage replaced it.

"We'll see how long you keep that courageous front."

Chapter 259 Wager With The Beast

Beasts of all kinds that had been chasing Astaroth started arriving where he was. Strangely, they all stopped running at him when they saw the man before him.

Astaroth even saw some of them lower their heads in submission. He was half expecting them to keep dashing at him madly, but apparently, they had enough brain cells to realize when to simmer down.

Astaroth could see the blue dots of his allies at the edge of his minimap. They were just a bit behind the last row of red dots.

He doubted they could push through to him in time to help, so he would have to deal with this on his own. Unless he could force the boss to let them rejoin.

A glimpse of a plan brushed his mind.

'Would it work? Won't know until I try...'

Astaroth smiled smugly.

"So I take it you're the strongest one around."

The beast-man looked at him before puffing out his chest.

"Isn't that obvious?!"

Astaroth's smile widened.

'Good. He's prideful.'

"Then would you care for a wager?"

"Hah! What could a pitiful humanoid like you offer me, the king of beasts?!"

"A free meal?"

"I already have one, standing right there," the boss said, pointing at him.

"I don't believe I am enough to sate your hunger. I have something better."

The beast-man seemed suddenly interested. He looked at Astaroth with curiosity.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you only if you accept my wager."

Leon huffed, angered at his deviousness.

"Fine. I will eat you anyway. What is it you want to wager?"

"I want my group and I to have a fair fight against you. If you allow us that, and we defeat you, I want you to join our guild."

"As if I would ever lose to the likes of you! Hah!"

"That remains to be seen."

"I like your courage, appetizer. What about when I win?"

"If you win, I will divulge the location of a city with many more people to feast on. I can guess you never bothered with the ones outside since they are too few. Am I wrong?"

"The humanoids outside are cattle. I am waiting for them to grow in numbers before I devour them."

"Then I am right. But I know of a place with many humanoids you could easily gnaw on."

"Aren't you cold towards your own race? That doesn't sound like one of you humanoids."

"The place I talk about doesn't have people of my race. And I would gladly serve them up for you."

Of course, Astaroth was lying. He would never sell out hundreds of thousands of people to a beast, simply to get the chance to fight him.

He had no intention of giving him the location of an actual city. But he hoped the bait of it would be enough to lure the beast-man into accepting the wager.

Astaroth had faith that he and his party could take on the boss if the other monsters did not interrupt them. He could see the gleam of hunger flash across the beast-man's eyes.

The beast-man wasn't blindly going to believe him, but he had his ways of enforcing this deal if he so wanted. And to prove that to Astaroth, he waved his hand at a nearby beast.

The beast walked forward, its head hung low. When it was next to Leon, the beast-man swung its claws at it, severing the body of the beast into two pieces.

A cry of agony echoed all around, as the creature fell to the ground, bleeding heavily. Leon then pointed his hand at it, as fire danced off his finger, setting the beast ablaze.

Astaroth thought the boss was trying to show him how powerful he was to intimidate him. But what he saw next made his blood freeze.

The beast which had been set ablaze rose from the ground, in not two pieces, but as a whole. The wound on it was gone, and Astaroth could see that its health was all back.

When the boss noticed Astaroth's complexion change, he figured his threat had found purchase.

"I can keep you from dying forever if I want to. All the while inflicting unimaginable pain on you. Do not think you can trick me."

Astaroth almost backpedaled out of the wager. The thought of dying in a game didn't scare him.

But the thought of torture was a whole different matter. Especially since the pain felt so real in here.

Before Astaroth could start speaking again and change his terms, the beast-man spoke again.

"I accept your wager. If you win, I will join your 'Guild'. But when I win, I expect you to keep your word, and give me the location for that tasty meal."

To make matters worse, a scroll appeared in the air between the two. Words started writing themselves on it before it burst into flames.

Astaroth had time to read what was written, and his face paled.

'Did New Eden just enforce my wager with a boss monster?! What the fuck?!'

The beast-man started laughing loudly.

"Rrah ha ha ha! You didn't think the gods would take your word for it, did you? A wager with a legendary creature is not a simple matter!"

Astaroth cried inwardly. If he had known this, he wouldn't have offered something so ridiculous.

He could see a flashing icon in the contracts section of his interface. He could already guess what it was.

"I... I was simply surprised. That is all. Can your... subjects let my friends through now?"

"Yes, yes."

The beast-man turned his head, looking in the direction the rest of Astaroth's party was, and gave a low growl. All the beasts in the way started parting, making a clear path that Astaroth's party members could use to reach him.

It surprised them just as much as him, but he explained the situation in the party chat. Two people were very unhappy with his bid.

Athena and I'die both cursed him for putting the lives of innocent Elves in danger for a stupid battle. But they also understood the situation they were in.

They needed this place to be theirs, and they couldn't do that without fighting this boss. If they left here empty-handed, they would have to go to a guild management building and reapply for another permit, since they didn't have a building for their base.

And buying a building was just not possible with their money, either.

So, even after some cursing and angry rebukes, they still followed his plan.

All they had to do was win, right?

Chapter 260 Let The Fight Begin!

\*\*\*Level fifty dungeon, Bowels Of The Earth; Last boss' room\*\*\*

Khalor was sprawled on the ground, heavily wounded, and panting for air. He had won his combat, and the dungeon was conquered, but it took every ounce of his energy to do so.

He looked at the stoney ceiling, reflecting the red hue of the magma falling all around the room, and smiled.

"I'm already stronger than the last time. Let's hope that I keep getting stronger fast enough to change more than just my ranking."

As he talked to himself, he noticed an icon flashing in his interface. When he tapped on it, he saw it was the contract tab.

Since he was part of Paragons, he got the notification of the contract at the same time as the others. His face turned into a frown.

"What kind of terms are those? Did he get himself in trouble?"

He cared little, since it was a problem for NPCs, more than for players, but he wondered what had led there. He swept the interface away, getting to his feet.

"Alright. Time to get my rewards and go to the next place."

'Let's hope that idiot knows what he's doing,' Khalor thought, shaking his head.

\*\*\* Back at the Bastion\*\*\*

Only two members of the party didn't receive the notification, since the system judged the contract was a guild deal, since a guild master had done it, and it had 'Joining the guild' as one of the results.

But when Morticia and Death the Gnome were told what was happening, they directed a deep frown toward Astaroth. They weren't sure whether he was a madman, or just too confident.

Wagering the lives of an entire city, in a fight they weren't sure they could win, was folly. But then again, both players had seen what Astaroth was capable of.

Morticia especially knew that Astaroth was like a surprise bag. One could never guess what trick he would pull out of his ass.

Once everyone was near Astaroth, the beast man roared, causing the air to vibrate.

The beasts all around them backed away, giving them much more room in the battle's event. The party readied up their weapons.

"Now! Let's see how long you can entertain me, my next meal!" the beast-man shouted, before his traits became savage again.

Astaroth knew he and Gulnur were the only ones who could take attacks from this boss. They would catapult anyone else to their deaths.

That wasn't a desirable result, at least not if they wanted to win. The problem was that this wasn't just a monster.

This was a thinking being, and Astaroth wasn't sure they could keep aggro, whether it be with taunt skills or pure damage. He feared the boss would try to get rid of the healers or the mages first.

The possibility was very high, and not just Astaroth thought about it. The entire party was tense and on edge.

Astaroth melded with Luna, expecting the boss to make the first move, and as soon as the meld was done, he was proven right. Only, the target was not the one he had expected.

He had half expected the boss to lunge at Silent Light since he was their healer. But when he saw who Leon was diving to, his heart dropped, and rage filled his head.

His step forward crumbled the earth under his foot as he launched forward like a missile.

"No!"

Leon turned his head as he reached Phoenix, grabbing her throat as she looked in horror. She was taken by surprise, and didn't get time to move.

Now a clawed hand was wrapped around her throat.

The blonde maned beast-man sniffed her like an animal.

"Ahh, yes. I can smell his scent all over you. You must be his mate."

Astaroth reached him as he finished his phrase. Ad Astra was already morphed to cover his hands, like metallic gloves.

The thickness of them was reminiscent of boxer gloves, and when he smashed them into the boss' face, he felt something crack.

But Astaroth didn't care. He wailed his hands into Leon's face like a madman, to make the man drop Phoenix.

It took seven punches before the grip loosened. By then, the rest of the party was already launching attacks on the boss, being careful not to hit the hostage, Phoenix.

Astaroth, seeing his attack was having some effect, tried prying the hand off. But when he stopped hitting Leon, he saw the beast-man grinning at him.

"Here, you can have her back!"

Leon pushed Astaroth back, like pushing a child away, and spun on himself. After a complete turn, he launched Phoenix at Astaroth, with enough speed and force to cause damage to the both of them.

Astaroth caught the woman as best he could, not caring about the damage taken, and they tumbled backward. After rolling for a few feet, Astaroth jumped back to his feet, looking at Phoenix all over.

"Are you alright?!"

"Astaroth, I'm fine. We don't have time for this."

Phoenix pointed at the boss, who was already trying to assault Violette. It was like he was aiming specifically for people close to Astaroth.

Violette was ready for the assault though, and she was already jumping back in retreat, using every ounce of magic she could to push the monster back.

Astaroth nodded his head at Phoenix reluctantly. She smiled at him before she snapped her head back at the boss.

'I'll make sure he can't sniff anything, ever again, dumb beast,' she thought to herself.

The mana in her body started routing toward her hands, as goutts of flame licked off her body. She was angry enough to skip the small play and go directly to her most powerful abilities.

Astaroth backed away from her, as the flames were getting intense. He chuckled and ran back into the fray.

Meanwhile, Phoenix was slowly getting covered in flames, until no skin remained visible.

"Combat Pyromancy: Avatar Of Flames."

As Phoenix opened her eyes, two goutts of blue flame erupted in their place.

"I will burn you into dust!"