

New Eden 301

Chapter 301 Holding The Line

In another part of the battlefield, Gulnur had just replaced another tank that had died. He was one of the mobile players that moved around the siege the most.

When a tank died somewhere, he was called in to replace them, until they came back from the graveyard. Silent Light followed him around, mostly, and was constantly healing him.

It still amazed the priest player how much damage Gulnur could soak in, and dish back, before even being in danger. Many factors came into play for his ability to sustain damage.

Of course, as a core member of Paragons, Silent was privy to part of this information. One such factor was Gulnur's special class.

Since the dwarven kid dedicated all his stat points and practice to becoming the perfect damage sponge, the system had unlocked him a special class called Defender.

This new class was a recent thing and had changed only a bit before they came to conquer the Bastion. But all its abilities pertained to reducing taken damage, some skills even staggering the damage over a duration.

And to top it all off, it unlocked combat health regen, which made Gulnur an even stronger damage soaker, since the healing he needed was reduced.

But he still needed Silent to follow him around, since, when he took over a zone for another tank, the healers present in these zones were tasked with turning to heal the DPS players.

Phoenix had put this in place so they wouldn't lose their primary source of damage in any zone. It had worked up to now, with only very few casualties.

The graveyard that Silent reactivated was also a godsend. Since the players could revive and directly go back to combat, their effectiveness was almost fully maintained.

Of course, one minor issue arose from this. The level loss was slowly affecting their staying power.

Phoenix was not in a position where she could take focus away from her fight to redistribute the Exp in the guild tab to the players that had died. And the only other person who could access that function was currently battling more players than any other guild member.

Astaroth was knee-deep in enemies, fighting them off like a madman, a beastly grin on his lips. When Khalor's Death Door had been blasted to pieces, the number of players suddenly running into the Bastion increased manifold.

Astaroth relished in the challenge, only getting more excited as time went on. His meld with Morpheus had just ended, and he was back to melding with White.

He had already summoned Morpheus into battle, who was flying above while attacking with sonic attacks. Luna was charging at unsuspecting players, who were taken by surprise when she hit them.

Her size was still that of a fawn, but her damage was anything but small. Of course, she wasn't able to one-shot many players, since most of them were built like bruisers.

But any player that had foregone putting points into constitution, was turned to pixels in a single charge. Astaroth, on the other hand, wasn't having much trouble one-shotting most players.

His new grade, giving him more bonus stats, as well as his high stat points from melding with spirits, as well as the damage from his artifact weapon, was more than enough to tear through any non-tank class.

His eyes suddenly caught on someone he recognized. Standing at the entrance of the tunnel that led outside the gate was a tall undead man.

The particularity to this man, and the reason Astaroth recognized him instantly, was his lack of head on his shoulders. Below its normal fixture point, the head was tucked under his arm.

Astaroth grinned widely. He dashed forward, stopping only a few feet from the tall man.

"Declan! Have you come to get your second chance in combat? I was expecting you to come, eventually."

While he said this, Astaroth kept fighting off players all around him, only barely throwing glances at the tall, hulking man. He wasn't worried about being attacked by surprise by him.

Declan affixed his head back on his shoulders before responding to him.

"I will get my chance at fighting with you again. But it is not my reason for being here today."

"Oh? Pray tell your motive, then."

But instead of answering with his voice, Declan sent a private message to Astaroth. It surprised the latter, since he didn't seem like the conniving type.

But when Astaroth opened the message, half expecting demands about a duel, his eyes widened. Immediately after that, he burst into laughter.

Astaroth nodded silently at the undead, and Declan pulled out his sword. Declan charged at Astaroth, swinging in a wide arc, missing him by a hair.

But while he missed Astaroth, he didn't miss two other players who had chunks of health taken away from them.

"Hey! Watch where you're swinging, big guy!"

"Yeah! Careful not to provoke our 'Thieving Goblins' guild! We will hunt you down!"

Declan looked at them with his glowing eyes inside his helmet, sending shivers down their spines.

"Then stay out of the way of the real men, scrubs."

He turned his back to them, going after Astaroth again. The two men wanted to go after Declan, but they quickly noticed the goons standing not far, watching them with predatory eyes.

This scene happened a few more times, as Declan kept missing Astaroth, but hitting other players chasing after him. Astaroth was laughing internally.

He was splitting his focus on his interface right now, and Declan's actions were keeping him semi-safe. Thinking back to the message he received, Astaroth couldn't help but chuckle.

He completed his fiddling in the interface, closing it with a wide grin. A message soon followed in the guild chat.

Guild leader Astaroth has completed a guild takeover, swallowing the 'Irish Horsemen' guild. Welcome to Paragons, Irish Horsemen!

An influx of twenty-one new players filled in the guild roster, taking by surprise everyone in Paragons. The players from Irish Horsemen, seeing the change in their guild names, howled in excitement.

They all pulled their weapons out, hacking away at the surrounding enemies. Astaroth rapidly went on the full offensive, clearing out the stone bowl, as he affectionately called it.

He had a druid open a path on the back of it, ordering Declan and his followers to enter the Bastion.

"Welcome to the Paragons, boys! Now ask for instruction from Phoenix, our lovely vice leader. She will guide you to where you are most needed!"

The rowdy men all pushed through the tight opening, leaving Declan to enter last.

"Thank you for accepting us. I will expect you to make good on your end of the deal I asked for."

Astaroth slapped his shoulder.

"I will come back to you about it. Thank you, Declan. Your help will be immensely appreciated and rewarded. Now go, so we can close this trap bowl up again!"

Declan nodded and walked through the small opening, which closed directly behind him.

Chapter 302 A Second Breach

The sudden influx of reinforcements was a welcome sight for Phoenix, but it also added work to her plate. Now she needed to think about twenty-one new players, with races and classes unknown.

Adding to that what had just happened on the Eastern front. She had finally melted down the two players and their barrier, but it came at a cost.

A hole now graced the side of the wall, the size of a double-decker bus. It was almost as big as the main gate that led inside the Bastion.

But then an idea came to her.

'If I station all of them here, I won't need to change my plan too much!'

She rapidly messaged the new members through the guild chat, asking for screenshots of their levels, classes, and races. She also promised them to refund any lost level during the siege, as she had for all other members.

Screenshots poured in, one after the other, totalling the twenty-one new members. She recognized one name from the tournament, and he was also the highest level in his guild.

Plus, he had a special class, which meant he would be stronger than the others. So Phoenix assumed he was the guild leader, and she let him control his men for a little longer.

'Declan, please come with all your members to the eastern wall. I will have you all defend this side.'

The man agreed and a couple of minutes later; he was there. Phoenix had been fending off the assailants with Violette as cover, but a full division of players would do a better job as long as they played their cards right.

As soon as the new members were in position, Phoenix flew up to the top of the wall. She observed their fighting for a minute, trying to gauge how they would hold up, and was extremely satisfied.

'So disciplined and organized.' she thought to herself.

There wasn't a single gap in their defensive formation. Every time a member of them went under a certain threshold of health, a bolt of dark energy struck out at enemies, before linking to that member.

This satisfied Phoenix's internal questions, and she let them defend this side on their own. She wouldn't have been at ease to trust new members this quickly under normal circumstances, but since it was Astaroth who brought them in, she flipped the coin.

She turned her head to Violette, who was still by her side, holding up shields to the defenders on the wall.

"This side doesn't need you anymore. I've warned Athena that the snipers are focusing here, and she assured me she had a way to counter it. So we are going to the northern gate."

Violette nodded her head, following Phoenix away. Some of their ranged allies suddenly panicked when they saw the watery shields drip to the ground.

But what else could they do, aside from being more careful from now on?

While they were running toward the northern gate, on another part of the battlefield, another problem was arising.

A worrying sight met Gulnur, who had reached the western side, where Phoenix had burned everything to the ground. A small guild of around fifty players was currently trying to climb the wall with various climbing tools.

After Phoenix had incinerated the forces taking this side under siege, most players stayed away from it. And the wild elf archers sniped away the stray players that thought they could get an easy way in, from the tree overhead.

But this guild had somehow reached there without being seen. This said a lot about their ability to stay hidden.

Gulnur then recognized one of them.

"Blue Peacock!"

The woman snapped her head in the shout's direction, a wide grin forming on her lips.

"Take the others and keep going. This base needs to belong to us."

The man next to her nodded his head before making hand signals to the others. The players climbing the wall resumed their climb, ignoring what was going down on the ground.

Gulnur gulped when he noticed they paid no attention to him. He rapidly sent a message in the guild chat.

'Western wall breached! Around fifty players, all looking like DPS classes. I think they are going to the palace!'

After sending that, he refocused his gaze on Blue. He turned his head slightly, to talk to Silent, without breaking his visual on Blue Peacock.

"You need to leave. If you stay here, she will focus on you."

Silent Light looked at him incredulously.

"You can't fight her on your own! She will tear you apart! Even if she takes time, she will win in the end!"

Gulnur grinned in response.

"She won't have it easy against me. Plus, I think I can win against her."

"Gulnur, I can't—"

"Just go! You will be needed elsewhere, anyway. Contact Phoenix and have her reassign you."

Silent Light looked at Gulnur under a new light. The chuunibyuu inside was in awe at the heroism of his actions.

Even though his rational side screamed at him to stay, he would never go against someone's ambitions of glory. So he solemnly nodded his head and dashed away.

Blue Peacock burst into laughter when she saw Silent leave.

"Good! You still have your honour intact. Fighting you again will be very enjoyable!"

"I would never disrespect you with a two versus one. But don't think one second I sent him away because I think I will lose. Today, you are the one to go down!"

Blue Peacock smirked at his comment.

"I see you have gotten more confident. It will be that much more enjoyable to slay you, little man!"

Pulling her two Kamas, Blue Peacock dashed toward her dwarven opponent.

On top of the wall, her guild vice leader was observing the start of the combat for a few seconds, admiring the courage of the dwarf for standing in his leader's way. Few would have the guts to do so.

After a few exchanges, the man left, with the certitude his guild leader would win. He had seen her vanquish much fiercer foes, and the dwarf was practically a moving target for someone with Blue Peacock's experience.

He only wondered how long he would survive.

Chapter 303 Using Her New Skill

When Phoenix received the warning message from Gulnur in the guild chat, she immediately stopped going north. Violette almost bumped into her with how abruptly she stopped.

Phoenix turned her head toward the palace tree. She was far from it, but the entrance to it was on the other side, so she would have to reach the trunk and follow it to the entrance.

This would take some time. She hoped that she and Violette could make it in time, as they were the only two available to go defend there.

Snapping her head toward Violette, who had just seen the message in the guild chat, she smiled.

"Are you up for it? We'll be vastly outnumbered."

Violette giggled.

"I doubt we'll be as outnumbered as Astaroth or Khalor. I think we can handle just fifty players."

The two of them dashed in the tree palace's direction. Their minds were focused on making it there in time.

Violette started forming a path of ice in front of them, and Phoenix grasped her intentions. She grabbed the girl by the waist with one arm, and let out a jet of flame through her other hand behind them.

The sudden burst in acceleration almost sent the two of them on their faces, but Phoenix corrected the direction of her propulsion so they could stay stable.

They made their way to the palace in record time and noticed people running up the stairs as they arrived. Phoenix and Violette overtook the invaders, only stopping once they were in front of the massive doors.

Violette redirected her stream of ice over the doors, freezing them solidly in seconds. Phoenix stopped projecting fire and stood in the way of the infiltrators.

"Seems we have uninvited guests. I wonder what kind of sewer you climbed out of, little rats."

The players in the formation's front clenched their teeth at the insult.

"Carefully pick your next words, woman. They could be your last ones," one man said.

Phoenix snickered.

"What do you think we should do with them, Violette?"

The little girl looked at Phoenix blankly for a second. The answer was obvious here, and she wondered why the woman asked her.

Seeing her blank stare, Phoenix chuckled internally.

'Silent is rubbing off on me. I tried acting cool.'

"Nevermind, Violette. It was my fault for asking you."

Right after saying this, Phoenix shot out a torrent of fire at the men standing on the stairs. Their reflexes saved them from turning to ashes, but they still took some damage.

The man in the back looked disappointed and angry. His Demonoid race did nothing to ease his angry stare, as he shouted out an order.

"Korosu!"

The close to fifty men and women still huddled on the staircase all pulled out various weapons, ranging from katanas, to throwing stars, guns, and many more. Their races were varied, just as much as their weapons.

Attacks started raining on Phoenix and Violette, the latter immediately forming a water bubble to stop the ranged attacks. Phoenix elected to go all out right away, since there wouldn't be a chance to save this if they failed.

She opened up her skill list and tapped on one that was new and she still hadn't tested.

Royal Protection (Rare): Draw in the power of your Kingdom's Guardian or Spirit, and sublime your body for a limited time. Gain the grade associated with the skill for a set amount of time. Effect duration: 10 minutes. Cooldown: 24 hours. Gain exhaustion for 5 minutes once the skill ends.

Phoenix felt her back suddenly start burning up, making her shout out in pain, and her vision blurred. But instead of a womanly shout, a powerful roar exited her mouth.

Popping and cracking started resounding from her body, as bones rearranged themselves, changing her morphology a bit. Bright golden fur grew on her face and limbs as her hair grew longer.

Phoenix felt her entire body get extremely heavy before going light as a feather. As the pain faded, her vision became steady again.

The players that had been charging at her were suddenly staring at her in terror. Phoenix looked at the ground, which seemed a little further than usual.

As she wondered why, something flicked in the corner of her eye. When she focused on it, she noticed a golden tail was swishing behind her.

She almost panicked, but as she reached out to grab it, she noticed something else. Her hands were now also covered in the same colour of fur as the tail.

Phoenix gasped in surprise, and when she turned to ask Violette what was happening, she noticed the girl staring at her in awe. In the reflection of her eyes, Phoenix finally saw what she looked like.

Standing in front of Violette, at around six feet tall, her body had grown in size, muscles defining in places she didn't know she had muscles.

Her hair reached below her rear and glowed in a bright orange colour. Her eyes, which were previously sky blue, were now a golden yellow, with no sclera in sight.

Her mage robe seemed to have expanded to fit her form, but still seemed a lot tighter than before. The change astounded Phoenix, but a shout reminded her of the situation.

"Why are you all staring at her? I said kill her!"

Phoenix snapped back toward the invaders, a menacing grin forming on her feline face.

She could feel the power in her body, and she intended to put it to use. Dashing into combat, foregoing her magic temporarily, to get a good grasp on her body's capabilities, she started shredding her assailants to pieces.

She roared to the skies, savouring the feeling of absolute power.

Astaroth, who was quite far away, but currently melded to White, which enhanced his senses, heard the roar.

'Has Leon finally awakened? No. That sounded different from his roar. Do we have a new enemy?'

But he had little time to ponder this, since he was still in the middle of a small army of players. It would have to wait for later.

Chapter 304 Grave Mistake

Astaroth had seen the message about infiltrators in the guild chat, but seeing no response from Phoenix to it, he assumed she was already taking care of it. He trusted her completely to prevail, no matter the number of enemies she would face.

Many people thought him or Khalor to be the most formidable player in Paragons, but he disagreed. Admittedly, they were the strongest, in terms of raw combat ability, but he didn't judge power off of just those scales.

To him, players like Phoenix, or Athena, that had high adaptability in any type of situation were much more dangerous. Athena had already proved she could be resourceful in the past, and he knew she would many times in the future as well.

As for Phoenix, he was well aware of her tactical mind and strategic thinking. Many times, in war, leaders would be rigid about their strategies, and stick to what had been pre-planned.

This would often mean the downfall of a combat force. Phoenix was the opposite of these rigid generals, and her plan of keeping many players mobile during this siege was proof.

A rigid general would have set them at their most 'appropriate' position and left them there for the entire battle. Phoenix thought otherwise.

Having players already assigned as mobile, meant they could send them anywhere that needed help swiftly. This could mean the difference between getting breached, thus losing, or keeping the troops well re-partitioned throughout the battle and winning.

Readjusting your plan as the battle progressed meant staying flexible enough to keep taking blows without ever breaking. It took a great mind to see far enough to judge what was a good change or a bad one.

It satisfied Astaroth to leave all that thinking to Phoenix. He preferred being covered in blood and guts, in the middle of a never-ending battle.

He relished the feeling of overcoming impossible odds. He would fight in this stone bowl as long as he needed, if it meant keeping the enemies out of the rest of the Bastion.

He knew that was his job for now, and he intended to knock it out of the park.

On the outside of the walls, Khalor was having entirely different thoughts. He didn't mind being surrounded by players, since his undead could mostly keep him safe.

But another issue was bothering him.

'Where is that dang gnome?!'

Azamus was still nowhere to be seen. He doubted the man was staying safely in a tent somewhere. Even if Azamus was an arrogant bastard, Khalor knew he was also a man of action.

If a battle was going on, he would be there. That only meant he was biding his time somewhere, lining up for the perfect shot.

And that was what worried him. He had been on the receiving end of his sniping, more than once, and he knew Azamus should never be underestimated.

He had also seen Azamus at the peak of New Eden before. He had been the best in the past, and was still trying to reach that again this time.

Azamus was a player that got better the more he felt pressured to achieve greatness. His attitude might be nasty, but his drive was no joke.

That's why Khalor couldn't commit to fighting with abandon, like Astaroth. He had painted a target on his back, and as long as the first shot wasn't taken on Azamus' side, he had to stay cautious.

But the mental strain to stay on top of his game was quickly tiring out his mind. It was only a matter of time before he started making some mistakes.

Khalor had many high-level undead surrounding him, fighting and pushing away any player that tried reaching their master. But that didn't prevent him from having to dodge incoming ranged attacks.

Although he could bat away most projectiles, Khalor wasn't omnipotent. Some damage had already started piling on him, as he occasionally got hit by spells or bullets.

He had come prepared, and when his health dipped under certain levels, he would take a health potion to stay close to full. And that was already more than what many players could afford.

Potions, in general, were quite expensive, and right now, Khalor had already drunk a dozen of them to keep his health topped up. It was outrageous to small-time players.

Someone else monitored Khalor's behaviour, from not too far away. Killi.

He had been staying close enough to be in range for his bow, but far enough to not get tangled with the stronger undead of Khalor. He was trying to wait for an opportune moment to strike.

And that moment soon came. Having examined Khalor's pattern for a while, he knew when the man was about to drink another potion.

And since Khalor would stop moving to do so, that was the perfect moment to hit. As soon as Khalor stopped moving around, Killi pulled out his bow.

He took aim in a single breath, pointing the arrow tip at the Necromancer's head. As the bottle reached his lips, Killi released the arrow.

Khalor was almost sipping on his potion when the hair on his nape stood on end. His eye caught something flying at his face rapidly, and he tilted his head backward to dodge it.

The arrow missed his face, but it had another unintended effect.

Khalor's eyes widened in horror as the edge of the arrow tip nicked the side of his vial of potion, shattering the glass. The contents of the vial dropped to the ground, getting rapidly absorbed by the disturbed dirt.

His miss disappointed Killi.

'Dammit! Now he will expect attacks from me. I'll never get another chance like this.'

But as he thought that, Killi received a private message. He glanced at it, and his eyes went wide, as a smile formed on his lips.

Khalor, who had straightened back to look at Killi, saw the lips stretching into a smile.

His heart dropped.

'Fuck! Where? Where is it going to come from?!'

The hair on his neck stood again, his body sensing the impending danger.

A loud bang echoed from the forest behind the 'Knights' guild. Khalor knew it was already too late.

Hearing this bang meant his fate was sealed. He barely saw something gleam before a bullet pierced through his skull.

As his head exploded from the shot, which had immediately emptied his health, all of his undead vanished. Khalor was now standing in a graveyard, inside the Bastion, everything around him grey.

This was a familiar sight for him, since he had died many times in New Eden in the past. But it was the first time in this timeline.

Hatred filled his mind.

"I'm going to kill you!" he shouted.

Chapter 305 New Phenomenon

Hearing the gunshot from inside the Bastion's walls, Astaroth knew something was up. He looked at the guild roster to see who had been wiped, and what he saw made him freeze.

Khalor's name was greyed out, with the little skull next to it, signifying he was dead. And since Khalor was the one that had been limiting the player flow into the gate, this was terrible news.

Astaroth was just about to switch melds from White to Luna, and he made a snap decision. Since no one was guarding the entrance anymore, he couldn't stay inside anymore.

He had to move outside the walls.

As he melded with Luna, he activated another skill as well. Royal Protection.

His back flared up in pain, not dissimilar to the one he felt when he was being marked, and he felt like he was going to incinerate. Unbeknownst to him, his body was flaring up in energy shockwaves, pushing the nearby players away.

The melding process, which was usually slightly painful, now seemed like tickling in comparison. He felt his body changing, like the first time he had melded with Morpheus, his bone structure changing.

Although he was used to melding with Morpheus now, this pain wasn't remotely at the same level. It was like someone was torching him with a flamethrower to expose his skeleton and remodel it.

After about thirty seconds of excruciating pain, a soothing wave washed over him. Like someone applied balm on the burning.

Astaroth felt something different from usual. Melding with Luna usually calmed him, like sleeping under a moonlit sky.

But not this time. Quite the opposite.

He glanced at his status screen and gawked.

Status:

Name: Astaroth (Fused to Solara)

Race: Ash Elf

Grade: Special (Legendary 9:58)

Luna's name had changed. And he was sure it didn't stop there.

Scrolling down rapidly, he saw the 'acquired skill' list, for the skills he gained when melding had changed too.

Skill Gained: Hyper Stimulus (Passive), Aura Of Superiority (Passive), Sun Flare (Active), Lightstep, Cleansing Flame

Four out of the five skills she usually gained were different!

He skimmed through the descriptions, wanting to know what they did.

Hyper Stimulus (Passive): Your mind is in a state of hypervigilance. Your thoughts are much quicker than usual, and you perceive time at an accelerated pace. All mental ailments will burn up as they activate.

Sun Flare (Active): The power of the sun flares from your body in a circle around you, burning anything in its path. 1000% Magic Damage. Mana cost: 5000 MP.

Cleansing Flame (Active): You dispense a wave of flames that burns away any physical ailment they touch, and heal wounds otherwise mortal. Mana cost: 5'000 MP. Cleanses all physical ailments. Heals to full any ally touched by it. Onetime use per meld.

Lightstep (Active): You can take one step in any direction, and travel at the speed of light to reach your intended destination, at a maximum of one light second away. Onetime Use per meld.

His jaw slacked. These were all game-breaking abilities!

Even if he couldn't use all of them as much as he wanted, they would still be called cheating later, and he knew it. But he didn't care.

For now, all that mattered was winning this siege.

But Astaroth was curious about one last thing. He wanted to know what his body looked like.

He could see and feel that he was taller, and also bulkier. But he wondered what else had changed.

The players surrounding him were still looking at him in awe, with a smidge of fear. Astaroth thought the Aura Of Superiority might be affecting them, so he used it to his advantage.

He spotted a player with a bright steel shield that was over-polished to his tastes. But he could use it as a makeshift mirror.

He took a few heavy steps in the player's direction, who shrunk as the massive man walked toward him. Reaching him, Astaroth grabbed the shield by its edge.

When he tried pulling it, the man instinctively resisted, to which Astaroth clicked his tongue. But when he yanked harder, the result was more than expected.

Astaroth was now holding the gleaming shield, with on its backside, an arm dangling, blood dripping to the ground. The man, to whom this arm belonged, started howling in pain, as someone had ripped his extremity off.

Astaroth looked at him with a tinge of regret.

"Oops. Sorry, man. You should have let it go sooner."

The surrounding players watched in horror as the player bled out before bursting into pixels.

Meanwhile, Astaroth was watching his reflection on the shield. He quite liked this new look.

His face looked fiercer, with some fuzzy fur covering it. He could see prominent canines peeking from his mouth corners, that looked capable of tearing through flesh with ease.

His head was still with the crown-like antlers, like when he melded with Luna normally. But one detail was different.

Over his head floated a small ball of orange flames, slowly rotating on its axis. It was like a mini sun.

He was also now much taller, reaching almost eight feet high, and his body looked like that of a bodybuilder. He chuckled.

'I'm a beefy boy now.'

But he didn't have time to admire himself anymore. The surrounding players were already snapping out of their daze.

Astaroth smirked, dashing back to the center of the stone bowl, before unleashing his new spell, Sun Flare.

He felt the energy surge from above his head as a massive circle of fire flared from his spot, reaching the walls of the stone enclosure. Everyone that was touched disintegrated on sight.

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The damage was staggering. And this was strictly with mana.

He had pumped no Aether into his attack.

Astaroth was more than impressed as the people all around him vanished. He now had a clear view of the tunnel leading to him.

He grinned as he dashed in its direction.

"Time to go have some real fun!"

Chapter 306 Vanishing Damage

Killing everything on his way out, Astaroth burst out of the gate, stopping right in front of the entrance. He scanned the incoming enemies one by one, in a mere moment.

A few players were worth his attention, but the frontline was mostly disappointing. But as he looked further away, his smile returned.

Changing the Ad Astra's form once again, to their spell slinger mode, Astaroth started firing at the incoming players, with incredible accuracy. Even when the players dodged the attack, the ones behind them got his.

Not a single player made it past the fifty feet mark alive. Of course, Astaroth had to dodge many incoming attacks of his own, but that was as easy as breathing for him right now.

Seeing his troops get decimated, Killi decided it was time to send the more powerful members of his guild. With a quick message in his guild chat, ten players burst into action.

All of them were currently part of the top one hundred rankings and were also well-recognized pro players. Killi hadn't been slacking in his recruitment process.

And since he wasn't as stuck up and anger-prone as Azamus, he was able to get many players under him that would normally play solo, or start their own guild.

Killi had a vision for his Knights of the Sun guild, and in that vision, he saw his guild as the largest force, with the best players in New Eden. And right now, his eyes were on the Bastion, thinking this was the perfect place to expand his guild from.

If he could capture it, he was set forever. His guild was already the one with the most players under it, so defending a fortress like this would be much easier for them.

But currently, one thing was stopping him. The incredible resilience of the players in Paragon, specifically, their core members.

Khalor had held back a literal army, with one of his own, and it had taken much more time than they wanted to kill him, and that was only with the help of a mysterious magic phenomenon.

And now that he was dead, when Killi finally thought they would breach this damned gate, someone else came running out of it. And that person was currently decimating the players, while holding the front of the gate securely.

So he needed to stop pulling his punches. He had been holding back his strongest players since the start of this, since he wanted to have them when it came time to claim the base.

Anyone with a brain cell could guess how hectic it would become once they reached the base inside the fortress. The alliance would fall apart, and it would be every guild for itself.

Having all his top players still in fighting condition was paramount to winning the base rights once that happened. But he could no longer realistically maintain this.

For now, all the guilds had kept pushing, regardless of how they kept bleeding players for two reasons.

First, they had a mobile graveyard set up away from the battlefield that allowed them to respawn close enough to keep coming back. Second, they outnumbered the Paragons at about one hundred to one.

But somehow, this ratio seemed to mean nothing. The core players of Paragon were crushing the weaker players like they were ants, and that held especially true for Khalor and what seemed to be Astaroth.

So he needed to kick his plan into gear earlier, lest they lose too many player levels, and it became unrealistic to keep assaulting the fortress.

The ten players that charged forth all stopped at different distances from Astaroth. Of these ten, three were tanks; one pure tank, one strength-based bruiser tank, and the last one an agility-based tank.

As outlandish as it sounded, the non-restrictive class system of New Eden allowed for such a play style. Two more players were pure melee DPS classes, one being a rogue type, while the other was wielding a metal-shafted naginata.

There was also an archer and a gunner, as well as two mages in colourful robes, serving as ranged firepower. The last player was one with a weird special class, Witch Doctor.

Killi had seen him hold a full raid party alive during a level forty-five dungeon on his own. But the means he used to do so were unconventional, at best.

But methods mattered not, only results. With this team of powerful players, he hoped to take Astaroth away from the gates so his guild and the others could push into the fortress.

In terms of power, in the 'Knights' guild, Killi had put forth almost all his might, aside from himself and his vice-leader. Seeing him do this, many guilds were inspired to do the same.

A roster of around forty players accumulated just outside the kill zone Astaroth had been maintaining. He noticed the movements of all these players, but he let them prepare.

He thought he would at least give them a chance to resist. But he knew they wouldn't last long once he started going at them.

Once they were ready, and started charging at him, Astaroth had around one minute left to his melding timer, and six left to his Royal Protection buff. He wondered what form his Meld with Morpheus would take under the buff.

The formation that these more experienced players took was almost flawless, and Astaroth was impressed. But it all amounted to nothing in the face of crushing power.

When Astaroth aimed his finger guns at one of the melee fighters, a tank rapidly jumped in front, to take the blow for him. Astaroth snickered as he fired a bolt of fire.

But where he thought he would vaporize the tank, the damage number stumped him.

-0

Something was wrong. Astaroth fired many other spells at the incoming players, and some hit true, killing his target instantly, but other spells hit and did nothing.

-0 *-0*

This baffled Astaroth. He knew there was no way to completely mitigate damage on so many attacks that wouldn't require an extremely powerful spell or skill.

And yet, he couldn't see any traces of intense mana use, and the people he struck didn't seem to use big skills either.

'What the hell is happening, and where is my damage going?'

Chapter 307 Finding The Cause

Astaroth kept on this farce for about a minute until his meld with Luna ended. He immediately switched to Morpheus, summoning Luna back to the battlefield.

He had to find out the reason they weren't dying, and quickly. If he got held up by them now, a lot of players would go swarming inside the Bastion.

That wasn't an option.

He continued attacking any player that deigned to get closer to the gates, but the same five players kept taking no damage at all. He focused his attacks on them, trying to understand the phenomenon.

He finally caught sight of something weird. A wisp of energy left their bodies as the attacks hit and left toward the back of their formation.

Following the wisp with his eyes, he noticed something weird.

At the back of the formation, almost outside of all the fighting players, a totem was standing about four feet high. On this totem were small cloth effigies, pinned with needles.

Astaroth could see a person crouched in front of the totem, prostrating repeatedly. And between the player and the totem, a string of energy.

But something was odd about it. The string was much too bright in his senses to be mana.

He gasped out in shock.

'He's using Aether! How did he even find out about it?!'

Astaroth fired another attack, a sonic one this time, to one tank he couldn't damage. With his eyes, he followed the wisp of energy to the totem, where it entered a doll, and sunk into the totem.

As it did, the tether between the totem and the player flashed a bit before going back to normal.

Then it clicked.

'He's using his mana or Aether to absorb the damage from his allies! Since I have no way of knowing how long it can hold out for, I better eliminate the threat entirely.'

But his eyes, being fixed on the totem and player like that, made it pretty clear to the nine other players where he was looking. Instantly, understanding Astaroth had made them, they became much more aggressive.

"Surround him! Don't let him move a single step away!" one tank shouted.

The three tanks and two melee players suddenly all lunged simultaneously forward, locking Astaroth in a pentagram formation. Any step he took, in any direction, put him in the range of one of them.

Astaroth was going to push his way through, but when he took his first hit, his eyes went wide. He had dodged and parried all the attacks up to now, so he had yet to take damage from them.

But the number he saw now was not something he wanted to receive repetitively.

-144,519!

Admittedly, the hit was a critical hit, because it hit his exposed back. But that still didn't explain the numbers.

His defence was currently locked at its maximum twenty-five percent from constitution, and he had his fourteen percent from armour. Factoring in the mana skin he had been keeping active all along, he was currently cancelling out fifty-nine percent of the damage he received.

A number this high shouldn't be possible.

Seeing the shock on his face, the player that struck his back smirked.

"You didn't think we would come unprepared to take you down, right?"

Astaroth refused to let himself get taunted. He tried pushing into the person who struck his back, hoping he was the only one who could hurt him as much, and was half right.

This time, instead of a knife strike to his back, he received a shield bash that shoved him forward off balance, which allowed the naginata wielder to strike his exposed ribs.

-47,367! *-86,513!*

Astaroth glanced at his health bar.

Health: 288,351/566,750

His eyes widened. They had shaved half of his health off in three attacks.

It was a good thing his legendary grade was still active, because he would be dead. But he still understood he was in peril.

He needed to get out of this lock, and fast.

Astaroth had noticed that his wings hadn't sprouted on his back, and he wondered if it was due to using Leon's power. But he could still subconsciously feel the wing muscles.

He decided to test that theory. Crouching down in a swift motion, Astaroth shot back up, lifting off the ground many meters.

Thinking about flapping his wings, two massive wings made of pure fire sprouted out of his back. He smirked as his thoughts were confirmed.

The five players that had been locking him in place looked angry, but there wasn't much they could do. On the other hand, the four ranged attackers now had clear lines of sight on him.

Astaroth had to veer left and right, dodging incoming projectiles and various spells coming his way. But his target wasn't the DPS.

He had already locked his sight on the totem and player in the back line. Killi ordered all his weaker players to rush inside the Bastion, as he and his guild leader instantly dashed to flank the witch doctor.

But as they ran to reach him, Astaroth practically appeared next to him, a long spear in his hands. The spear swiftly pierced through the witch doctor's back, pinning him to the totem.

Astaroth took a breath in, before launching out a sonic attack that was currently boosted by his legendary grade stats. The witch doctor stood no chance.

The sonic wave resonated inside his head, turning his brain to mush, before his head exploded in a magnificent fountain of brains and blood. Astaroth smirked, looking at Killi and his vice leader dashing towards him.

The real carnage could now begin.

Launching back into the sky, Astaroth shot out another sonic attack, this one in a cone, hitting a hundred players in a single breath. The few players that were streaming this scene for their viewers had many complaints for the days to come.

The sight of one hundred heads exploding in a rain of blood and brain matter was not a pretty one. Astaroth laughed it off, knowing they weren't really dead, and that with players, he could use violence with abandon.

"Let's see how big a firework I can make of your guild, Killi!"

Killi gulped in terror.

'Monster' was all he could think.

Chapter 308 Dwarven Resistance

Farther on the western side of the Bastion, two people were fighting with the fierceness of beasts. Gulnur and Blue Peacock had been engaged in their slugfest for almost ten minutes, and neither seemed to be close to dying.

Although Gulnur received many more attacks than Blue, he didn't take a beating without retaliation. Every chance he got, he would swing his hammer, landing some attacks of his, albeit doing much less damage.

Every time he tried landing a powerful attack skill, Blue would whammy him with an illusion spell, making him miss his mark by inches. He was feeling infuriated by it, but he knew what her fighting style was.

That didn't prevent him from trying as many times as he needed. He hoped Blue Peacock couldn't hold this pace of fighting for too long, or he would be in trouble.

He was already feeling slouchy, even though his strength and constitution stats made his armor light as a feather for him, and his stamina pretty good.

Blue, on the other hand, was practically dressed like a belly dancer, making her weight close to nothing. Of course, this would help her last longer, but her much faster combat pace, as well as her constant attacking, had to be taking a toll.

She stopped for a moment, looking Gulnur in the eye.

"I will admit you have gotten much stronger, little man. But I can see you are tiring out."

Gulnur huffed.

"Speak for yourself! You look out of breath. I'm fit as a fiddle!"

Of course, his panting while saying that betrayed his actual physical state. It made his reply quite comical.

"Hah! You still have spunk! Good! I'll feel less guilty for killing you if you aren't laying down."

Blue Peacock started wavering from left to right, in a weird motion of her whole body. Her strange dance almost made her look like a drunken lady walking home.

But as she kept swaying, clones of her started appearing all over the place. Gulnur knew they weren't all real. But annoyingly, their attacks still dealt damage.

Gulnur didn't want to let her summon too many of them, so he dashed back at her. But when he struck her still swaying body, his hammer went straight through, hitting the burnt ground at his feet.

The image he hit vanished from its place. Blue's voice echoed from all the clones swaying with the same rhythm as her.

"You won't find me, little man. You aren't the only one that has gotten stronger. Take in my new and improved illusory dance!"

Her swaying stopped, but it was already too late. Over twenty clones were surrounding Gulnur from every direction, and it looked bad.

Attacks started coming from every side, as the clones started circling him, with their chained kamas swinging in wide arcs at him. He blocked, parried, and dodged as many as he could.

But there was a limit to his abilities, especially since there was an enormous disparity in agility between him and Blue Peacock. His health started ticking down rapidly.

But instead of panicking, Gulnur endured quietly. This threw Blue off quite a bit.

The last time they fought, when Gulnur was close to dying, he became like a rabid animal, lashing out and scoring a few good hits before finally going down. His tame attitude now worried her.

'Has he still got a hidden card? Or is he simply masking his emotions?'

Hits rained and rained on Gulnur, who did his best to knock away kamas with his hammer and shield, whilst evading what little attacks he saw.

His health kept lowering.

Fifty percent.

Forty percent.

Thirty percent.

Twenty percent.

Just as he hit ten percent, a grin formed on his lips. Now was the time.

His grin did not escape Blue, who felt reassured he was finally going to act normal. But it also worried her he waited this long.

Gulnur smiled.

He shouted at the top of his lungs, slamming his shield into the ground.

"Legacy Skill: Last Stand!"

Blue Peacock gulped at the mention of a legacy.

Players had found yet very few legacies, and none of their players talked about them much, since it was their trump cards. She secretly hoped Gulnur was bluffing.

But as the shield slammed into the ground, a shockwave echoed outward, blowing away the ashes of what used to be a wheat field, but also erasing all her illusions from existence.

Gulnur's armour suddenly turned golden, the texture of it changing to resemble a form-fitting cloth more than metal. But the sunlight's reflection off of it belied its solid material.

The hammer in Gulnur's hands suddenly elongated, and its head thickened. It now looked more like a two-handed mace than a hammer.

Grasping the handle with his other hand, Gulnur leaned forward.

Blue's eyes widened, shock apparent on her face. Gulnur's speed had doubled, rivalling her own.

His health was also suddenly full, but it seemed to be rapidly ticking down.

Gulnur swung the two-hander hammer horizontally, aiming for her torso. Blue Peacock reacted by lowering her two kama into a cross position to block the hit.

When the mace collided with her weapons, it felt like she was trying to block a truck with a fly swatter. With a hollow dong noise, Blue was flung away violently.

She lost a quarter of her health in a single hit. Although she caught herself midair by twirling her body in flight, allowing her to land on her feet, she was still taken aback.

She knew she shouldn't try to block the next hit. Next hit that wouldn't wait too long to come, since Gulnur was now already above her head, mace pulled behind him, in a slamming motion.

Blue didn't hesitate, and started running in the opposite direction, hoping she would be out of the strike zone before it hit. But she underestimated the power of the attack.

The mace in Gulnur's hands weighed around four hundred kilos, which was close to his maximum liftable weight, with his currently doubled stats. But factoring in his own weight, and the power behind the strike, it was like a block of C4 detonated under his impact point.

Blue Peacock was flung away once again, this time smacking into the Bastion's walls. People on the other side of the fortress felt the ground shake under their feet slightly.

Blue Peacock took another quarter of her health in damage on impact against the wall. When she got up, she looked at Gulnur with a gloomy face.

'At this rate, I will lose.'

Chapter 309 New Trump Card

Inside the Bastion, near the entrance to the tree palace, Violette and Phoenix were locked in a fierce fight against the mercenary guild under Blue Peacock. Phoenix's Royal Protection was close to over, and she knew this would be bad.

The exhaustion status that came at the end of it would be terrible if the enemies weren't all dead. She had taken out almost half of them, but the other thirty players were quite tenacious.

Although, in their case, elusive would be the best term to use. Even with her elevated stats, Phoenix couldn't land as many clean hits as she wanted.

She had foregone melee after two minutes, having tested her new capabilities enough. But even while kitting them as a mage, the players seemed to always be a step ahead of her.

It was easy to tell they had a lot of combat experience, be it in a game or out of it. But this annoyed Phoenix.

She wasn't sure how exhausted the status effect would make her once it hit, and how much more combat she could put up then. And even though Violette was a great mage, she doubted she could handle thirty melee players on her own.

She needed to confirm something with her.

'Violette. Can you access Aether?' Phoenix asked through a private message.

Violette kept pushing back players as she responded.

'Astaroth taught me how to sense it. But I don't know how to make or use it yet. Why?'

'When this transformation ends, I fear I won't be of much use. Now would be a good time for you to learn how to tap into that power.'

'I don't think I can do it under the circumstances here...'

Phoenix looked at her timer. Only thirty seconds remained.

'You will have to. I'll try to guide you.'

'But I can't use fire, like you. How will you guide me?'

'I'll explain my thought process to you. Start focusing. I'll handle the enemies while you do.'

Violette nodded her head, jumping back and closing her eyes. Phoenix became more aggressive, taking the few players on Violette's back and launching them away with gouts of flame.

'Good. Now, the way I use mana to form Aether is simple, but I don't know if it'll work for water. I use compression. By pressing the fire together stronger and tighter, it burns hotter until it purifies itself, becoming fire Aether.'

Phoenix sensed Violette trying to do the same, but the water mana compressed and compressed, until it turned into vapour and vanished. It was easy to understand that a process for one element didn't mean it would work for another.

But they had to make this work. Only Twenty seconds remained.

'Violette focus. What does the element feel like, to you, when you use it?'

'I don't know how to explain it. It's like trying to make waves in a pool. I'm not really ordering it around, only guiding it. It's like water mana has a life of its own.'

Phoenix thought about this hard, trying to make sense of it, and use it to make Aether. But her time was running out.

Ten seconds remained.

'Then try to guide as many water particles as you can, try binding them together, but unforcefully.'

Violette's closed eyes pinched closed tighter. It was easy to guess she was focusing extremely hard.

Phoenix could feel the mana accumulating around the girl at an extremely rapid pace, but no water was being created.

'I don't think this is going to work... We'll need to find another,' she thought.

Five seconds.

Phoenix pumped out as much fire as she could, trying to push away the enemies, so she would have time to get Violette and retreat inside the palace. If they were lucky, it would be easier to defend against them in cramped corridors.

As her Royal Protection skill ended, a wave of fatigue hit her, making her drop to her knees.

'This is bad,' she thought, as her arms dangled to her side.

She could barely move a muscle, and even breathing had become arduous. Looking at her status, she saw the timer on the effect.

Exhausted / 4:59

The assailants that had been swarming her suddenly stopped. The smirks on their faces spoke lengths about their mocking.

She was propped there, on her knees, completely defenceless, while in the back, Violette was almost backed up against the iced-up doors, her eyes shut tight.

They must have thought she was simply too terrified to act anymore, and they mentally decided they had won this fight.

Only twenty of them remained.

But in the next moment, Phoenix felt a surge in energy behind her, reminisce to Aether. She could barely turn her head to see what was happening, but the shocked faces of the enemy were quite telling.

But the next moment, they started laughing loudly.

"Hahaha! Look at her, she tried doing something, and now she lost control of her magic!"

"I think she might just kill herself like this! Ahahaha! Nante chīsana bakananda!"

What they were seeing right now was the terrified Violette, her eyes wide open, as her body was rapidly changing into water and dropping to the ground. She wasn't sure where she had gone wrong, but it was unmistakable that she no longer controlled the magic.

"Phoenix, I think I messed up!"

Phoenix, hearing the panic in her eyes, forced herself to fall on her back, getting in a position where she could look at Violette. The panic in the little girl's eyes was clear as day, but Phoenix only smiled widely.

Violette couldn't understand the woman's smile as the last part of her finally turned to liquid and dripped to the ground.

The enemies were still laughing their asses off until Phoenix started laughing, too.

"Hahaha! You idiots!"

Their laughing stopped abruptly. Had she lost her mind? They wondered.

"Why are you laughing? Your friend killed herself trying to help you, and now we will kill you, too"

"You imbeciles! You should be running. Violette didn't die. She sublimated, and now you are all dead men!"

Frowns appeared on their faces, as they started moving closer to Phoenix, to end her rambling. But one of them, the vice leader, caught some movement on the ground.

The puddle of water that used to be the little girl was gathering in one spot. As it gathered, more and more water started bubbling out of the ground, joining together.

His face paled.

"Run! Run, now!"

But it was too late.

Chapter 310 Organized Defence

Near the gate, inside the walls, Khalor was making his way back to the battlefield. But before he could cross over the walls, he noticed hundreds of players swarming the stone bowl they had made.

Astaroth was nowhere in sight, and since he was the one that was tasked to defend this zone on his own, no one was stopping the players from trying to climb out.

"Tch! He should be here. I bet he assumed he could steal my spot since I died."

He quickly sent a private message to the dissident.

'Get your ass back in your zone! Players are climbing out of the bowl as we speak.'

After a moment, a reply came.

'Take care of it, ghosty! I'm busy doing your job, which I wouldn't have to do if you stayed alive.'

Getting his nose rubbed in this again hurt Khalor's pride and made him sour. But he still had to follow the order, even if it displeased him.

He vowed to himself to talk with him later, and maybe even beat him around a bit. But, for now, he dropped in the middle of the bowl, sending his undead after everyone in sight.

"Seems you're back to dealing with me, scrubs! Time to get a bit of payoff!"

The resounding shrill voice of the Necromancer suddenly behind them made many players pale.

Many of them had the same thought.

'What is wrong with this guild? Why are the players so damn strong?!

This siege should have been a walk in the park, with how many players they brought here. But this small guild was pushing them back at every turn, like a certain small village against the Romans, in a cartoon.

Khalor went full throttle, even fighting himself, to vent out some of his frustration.

On the eastern part of the Bastion, a small group of players was standing guard in front of a hole in the wall. This group was Declan and his previous guild members.

When Phoenix had left, the zone was filled with lava, and Declan and his men had to fight outside of it, so they didn't take constant damage.

But now, the lava had cooled down, and they could stand on it. Some defenders up on the crest of the wall had died, and Declan had used their platforms.

The hole in the wall was now well-defended behind two rows of wooden barricades. One player in Declan's group used to be a battlefield engineer for the army, and he had jury-rigged some barricades out of the platforms.

The seven ranged attackers they had were well lodged behind the row closest to the hole, while the ones with melee weapons with a modicum of range were behind the other, attacking at maximum range, pushing back the attackers.

Meanwhile, the four other players who were better suited to close combat fighting, were outside that circle, swaying in and out of combat, taking every opportunity they could to down players.

Declan was one of them, and with his massive Claymore sword, he was bisecting enemies left and right. Enough so that most enemies had tried to stay away from him.

The four players outside, including Declan, had such uncanny reflexes, always reacting to attacks as they happened, making them practically untouchable. And what minor damage they took, Silent Light had arrived to take care of.

When the priest had arrived, he expected to see a cluster of twenty players fending off wave after wave of enemies. But the organized defence he came to see almost broke him out of character.

He had wanted to exclaim, 'How freaking cool is this?!' so bad.

But he kept his reaction to a simple gawking mouth and large, toothy smile. He then did his job.

He didn't miss the opportunity to look at the fighting, though. Declan was quite impressive, swinging his monstrously big sword around, cleaving enemies like a hot knife through butter.

But he wasn't the only one that was remarkable. The three other ones fighting in the clusterfuck of enemies were no slouches.

One of them was a barbarian Demonoid, taking hits left and right that barely left scratches on him, fully attributed to the barbarian's natural resistance to any physical damage.

Another was a gnome, who was wielding in one hand a pistol, and in the other, a tactical knife. This one was shooting as he ran past players, and on every occasion he had, he would strike his knife in exposed weak points, like throats, ribcages, behind knees, and such places.

On every strike of his knife, a player dropped to their knees, getting promptly executed, or died on the spot. His precision was frightening.

The last one, the only human in this group of twenty players, was something akin to a monk. He was in constant movement, striking out with hands, elbows, feet, knees, and occasionally even his forehead.

Watching him waltz through enemy forces, smacking the shit out of them, like some kind of Chuck Norris incarnate, was simply beautiful. Silent was watching them, fanboying at every move they pulled, almost wanting to join them in the fray.

But the only time he almost let his impulses win, one of the semi-long-range melee players held him back.

"Are you out of your mind, son?! You stay on this side of the barricade unless you want to die. And if you act stupid, I will kill you myself and fuck your corpse!"

The threat made Silent Light gulp in fear. He wasn't sure it was even a possibility, since their bodies disintegrated into pixels on death.

But he would rather not try it.

'This man is crazy...'

But even though he was now mildly terrified, Silent kept up his healing. Phoenix had assigned him to where he thought was the most important, and he thought this was the place.

The two monsters in their guild handled the front gate, while Gulnur insisted on handling the west side, and Phoenix and Violette were handling the palace breach. As for the south part, Morticia and Gale were currently there, supporting the newer members holding that side.

They already had healers there, so his place was here.

'I wonder how long they will keep sieging us. They should have already run out of players. How are they coming back so fast?'