

New Eden 51

Chapter 51 Second Chance

Back to before game Launch, POV David Magnus

"AARRGGHH!!!" David screamed, waking up in a sweat.

"What a horrible nightmare!" He added, panting and gasping.

He got up from bed and walked to his bathroom to refresh himself. After washing his face with cold water, he walked to his small kitchen to make some coffee.

His mind kept flashing back to his nightmare, shivers crawling up his back. It had felt so real, all the pain and the fear.

David was an ordinary man, with no exciting goal in life. Standard goals of a standard life, for a standard man.

Get a good job, buy a big house, meet a lovely woman, and form a picture-perfect family.

He was currently between jobs, so it filled his days with the monotony of job search. Wake up, look for work on the internet, send applications, make phone calls, and hope for the best.

He had been fruitless for the last week, but he knew if he kept trying, he would eventually get one.

David was a professional welder by trade. He had taken welding jobs in many spheres of work in his life. Be it structural welding for high rises, sub-nautical welding on boat repairs, to many others.

Unfortunately for him, most postings for his trade were looking for workers with more experience, or complete rookies.

So finding a job had been harder than he expected for now. But he wouldn't stop trying until he was back in service.

After drinking his coffee and eating a light breakfast, David went for a walk. The fresh air from outside cleared his mind of that horrible nightmare.

On his walk, he passed in front of a video game store. In the store's window, there was a screen showing an ad for the next game coming out soon.

The release date was for the following week. As David was looking at the screen, the name of the game flashed in big blue letters.

A migraine assaulted his head. Flashes of his nightmare resurfaced, in which he kept seeing himself inside a world of fantasy. A world filled with monsters and creatures of myth.

But the dream in question was a nightmare because of a simple fact; he was a slave to other people.

He could see a collar on his neck. It was black and lined with red shining engravings.

The migraine and visions stopped shortly after, leaving him panting and clutching his chest. He was bent over, in the middle of the sidewalk, people looking at him strangely.

He turned his head around, noticing the stares, and made a run for it.

"Hey! Are you okay pal?!" Someone yelled as he ran for it.

David ran all the way back to his apartment, but on the way, he kept having flashes. The streets were in ruins, buildings half destroyed, and bodies laying in pools of blood.

The visions haunted him all the way into his apartment, where they finally relented.

Once he had closed the door behind him, he collapsed to the ground, breathing fast and heavily, as if he had just run a marathon.

His heartbeat was like a horse on a racetrack. He felt like his head would burst at any minute from the pressure building up in it.

He knew something was wrong with him, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

It took him over half an hour to calm down his breathing and beating heart. His head was still pounding, but the pain had lessened.

He forwent looking for a job that day and stayed home. He closed all his blinds and just laid down on his couch in the dark.

He tried sleeping it off many times, but as soon as closed his eyes, the visions assaulted his mind, repeatedly.

'What the fuck is happening to me?' He thought, many times.

He eventually fell asleep from exhaustion, but the nightmares troubled him through the night. His sleep was all but recuperating.

The next morning, when he woke up, he had a distinct air about him. His eyes were cold and indifferent.

He looked like a different person. His attitude was suddenly a seeping wave of icy anger, like he was out for vengeance.

He walked over to a mirror and looked at himself from different angles.

"Hmm." He hummed.

He pulled up his phone and looked at the time and date.

"I only have a few days to plan. It'll have to suffice." He said in a monotonous tone.

He walked to his computer with a steady gait. One that resembled a predator, stalking its prey.

He booted it up and opened up his browser. He keyed in Evo-Gaming.com/New-Eden.

Once the site had fully loaded, he tapped on the pre-purchase option. He ordered a VR helmet and game combo, entering his bank info and address.

Once he had confirmed all his info, the payment went through and it completed the purchase.

"Step one complete. Now to make adequate preparations." He said in a low voice.

He opened up another website, ordering a few things from it and pre-setting a recurring purchase plan.

He looked at his bank account, slowly draining away, and remedied that.

David had a car, but he barely used it these days, since he wasn't working. He drove it to a dealership and sold it off.

It was still pretty new, so he got a decent deal for it. The salesman tried selling him a new car, but he wasn't interested.

He walked back home, ignoring the surrounding people. Some people would see him walk towards them and directly change sides of the road.

He gave off a violent vibe right now, and most sensitive people could feel like small needles pricking their skin.

Once he was back home, he started moving some furniture around. He moved his computer to a corner of the room, moving everything away from it.

He pushed all his furniture out of the center of the room, leaving a sizeable space.

He looked at it with an empty stare.

"That should be enough, for now." He said to himself.

"Now we wait." He added, before eating a light lunch.

After eating, he browsed many forums and websites, trying to find an information trail on New Eden.

"I will be ready. I won't be a slave this time." He murmured, clenching his fist.

Chapter 52 The Trip

Back to our MC

Astaroth stood there, blankly, while the rest of the escort party was harnessing the wooden stags.

He had just seen his first mythical creatures! He was probably the first to see some!

He looked at the woods where the two giant stags had disappeared and then at Aberon.

"What were those?" Astaroth asked Aberon.

"Exactly what you scanned them out to be." Aberon responded, flatly.

"How do you know I scanned them?" Astaroth asked, puzzled.

"I saw how Arborea looked at you. I recall telling you that magically inclined creatures could tell when you scan them. Also, I recall telling you it is rude." Aberon replied, looking at him like he was a dumb kid.

Astaroth remembered that altercation and smiled wryly, scratching the back of his head.

He stopped pestering the old man and went to help harness the stags. It wasn't hard to do, as all four of them stayed perfectly still as they were being bound to the carriage.

So many questions were floating around in Astaroth's head, to which the people with answers refused to provide them.

He deduced he still hadn't reached that level of trust with them yet. Astaroth made a promise to himself to strive for their trust until he got the answers he so desired.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that his progress on harnessing the stag in front of him stagnated. He was eventually pushed aside by Korin.

The rogue looked at him with a grin and teased.

"Get your head out of the clouds, Wolfie." he said, before chuckling at his own joke.

"Wolfie? You could have done better, right?" Astaroth said, looking at him with disappointment.

Korin opened his mouth to respond, but for a lack of a witty retort, he closed it back up.

Astaroth snorted and walked away before the man actually found something snarky to say.

They were soon ready to depart, as all the supplies were loaded and the stags harnessed.

Astaroth turned to Genie and crouched down.

"I can't bring you with me, girl. Stay here. Be a good girl and don't bother the villagers too much, alright?" He told her while petting her head.

Genie whined a little but still sat down, letting him leave alone.

As soon as everyone was on, Aberon whistled twice, and the stags started trotting away.

Astaroth glanced a last look at the village entrance, seeing Kloud waving from the entrance. He waved back.

Aberon had already told Astaroth that the journey would take three full days, but Astaroth expected some kind of action on the way there.

But all the monsters in their path magically veered out of the way or fled away from their carriage.

After the first day of travel, Astaroth got around to asking Aberon why that was.

"It's because of the stags. Their natural aura copies the ones of their mythical creators." Aberon said, pointing at the four wooden constructs.

"That means that any smart monster on our path moves away on its own, out of fear. Their instinct pushes away the less smart ones." He added, chewing on a piece of jerky from his rations.

"Does that mean we won't have to fight at all on our way to the capital?" Astaroth asked, slightly peeved at the turn of events.

"That is exactly what that means. It's better this way. Some monsters in this forest you are no match for." Aberon responded, looking into the surrounding darkness.

Astaroth went to lie on the ground, closer to the fire. He had gotten the last watch duty for the night, so he was better off sleeping soon, so he wouldn't be tired the next day.

He turned around and closed his eyes, listening to the fire crackling and the trees rustling. The peacefulness of the forest lulled him to sleep.

I'dril woke him up a few hours before the crack of dawn. The fire was still burning lightly next to him, and most of the expedition party was asleep.

He nodded to I'dril and got up to stretch. I'dril took his spot and went to sleep almost immediately.

Astaroth spent the next two hours walking around their camping site, looking into the forest. The light began shining through the treetops.

He walked back to camp, boiling water for breakfast. Since he was the last watch, he was also in charge of the food.

The noise and smell of breakfast being prepared eventually woke the others up. Chris was the first one to rise to his feet.

Astaroth served him a bowl of warm porridge, getting a thankful nod in exchange. He smiled and served the others as they came to him.

They took half an hour to wake up and eat before packing up and resuming their journey.

Another day passed by, as uneventful as the last. This was quite the opposite of what Astaroth had in mind for a journey of a few days.

He was expecting to have to fight many times along the way. Instead, all he did was look around and idle chat away.

It wasn't as though he minded the peaceful travel, but he watched the level leaderboards every day, and people were still climbing.

Meanwhile, he was static in his level, ever since he had gulped down the potion. It was like this game gave him hope, only to rip it away from him right after.

He couldn't wait to be at a level where he could venture forth into danger on his own. Theoretically, he already was at that point.

Sadly, both Aberon and Kloud had forbidden him from going too far from the village on his own. They both claimed there were monsters too strong for him to beat alone.

He knew that there were a few high-level monsters and higher-grade ones, too. But shouldn't those be the exception, rather than the rule?

Albeit his many pleas, they never relented. He was stuck in the village until this trip.

And now the trip was even more constraining on him. Aberon had put a magic mark on him that would alert him if he got too far.

He felt imprisoned. He just wanted to level up. Was that so bad?

Night came again after their second day of traveling. There was one more day left of this, then they would reach the capital.

He got the last watch again since he was the one that had been up the longest that day. So he ate his dinner rations and went to sleep.

The night was calm again. That was until Astaroth walked further away from camp on his watch.

He wanted to find creatures to fight. So he walked a straight line away from the fire and into the night.

After walking for a few minutes, he saw a clearing to his left that was emitting soft white light. He felt like the light was beckoning him.

He turned and walked toward it, still feeling the aura of the wooden stags washing over him. He assumed he was still safe.

When he walked out of the tree line, his face turned ashen white and his jaw dropped by a bit as he nervously glanced at the scene in front of him.

Chapter 53 The Hidden Side

*****POV Damien Grimm, Alias Azamus, the day after the interview*****

After storming off from the studio, Damien had contacted his pilot, ordering him to plan a flight back home, tonight.

The man had tried debating that it was dangerous to fly back home, with little to no rest from their day, but Damien didn't care.

He was an unreasonable man, and people were only tools to him. He threatened the pilot into obedience, dangling his job in front of him.

The pilot eventually relented. He needed this job, and the pay was good.

The pilot did as he asked and planned a flight course. He rested for a brief time and then got the plane ready for departure.

Damien spent his waiting time drinking in his hotel room. When he boarded his plane, he resumed his activity and got totally wasted.

The plane trip was quick, from Montreal to New York City. Damien ordered his attendant to get him some girls for fun in his penthouse.

He got off the plane once it landed and drove home on his own. He miraculously made it without killing himself or anybody else.

Damien parked his car and zig-zagged his way into the elevator. He pressed the floor button that led to his penthouse and scanned his thumb on the print scanner.

Once the elevator was up to his floor, he walked out and crashed into his luxurious leather sofa.

His attendant came back shortly, escorting a young woman with him. She had long blond hair and fair skin.

Her other features were plentiful and would make most men lust for her. She looked impressed by the high-profile decor but lost her enthusiasm when she saw the man she came to see.

Damien was almost drooling as he looked at her and shooed away his attendant. He walked up to the woman, like a beast to its prey.

"Can I pour you a drink, beautiful?" He blurted out.

His breath reeked of alcohol, and the girl winced at the rancid smell.

"No. I'm fine, thank you." She politely declined.

Damien flashed a beastly grin.

"Straight to business, then. I like that too." He said, grabbing her arm.

He pulled the lady to his room and threw her on his bed. Damien struggled to take off his clothes, almost falling many times.

When he was done, the young lady was still fully dressed.

"What are you waiting for? Get naked!" He yelled.

The girl flinched at being yelled at, but she reluctantly obeyed. She had thought she would meet her dream man, but the man before her was far from dreamy.

She knew she shouldn't have come, but sadly, she was stuck there. She couldn't operate the elevator on her own, and the man would probably not let her leave until he was satisfied.

Once she was naked, the man in front of her practically threw himself on her, like a wild beast.

Their intercourse was short and far from enjoyable for the woman. She was tossed and turned to fit the man's mood.

Sometimes he slapped her, other times he choked her. It traumatized the poor woman to the point of not being able to react at all.

After half an hour of what was nothing short of rape, the man ejaculated and fell to the side. He immediately fell asleep, completely ignoring the woman.

She wept for a few minutes before grabbing her clothes and getting dressed. She then walked to the elevator and rang it up.

When the elevator reached the penthouse floor, Damien's attendant was already on it. He waited for the woman to climb in before pressing the underground parking button.

Once the elevator was in motion, he handed the young woman a piece of paper. It was a cheque, with an amount of ten thousand dollars written on it.

"This night never happened. If you talk about it to anyone or go to the police, we will sue you and you will lose." The man started.

"This money is to buy your silence, but also your payment for your actions." He continued.

"Are you saying I'm a whore?!" The young woman growled in rage.

The attendant side-eyed her before continuing.

"I would like to thank you for helping the young master release pent-up anger. I would also like to apologize for any rough treatment he might have put you through." He said, his face still cold as ice.

At that moment, the elevator door rang.

The attendant turned towards her, before motioning to the car that was parked in front of the door.

"This will be your ride home. Please get home safe." He said, before giving a light bow.

The woman stood there for a few seconds, in shock, before storming towards the car.

She wept on her way home, and couldn't believe the chain of events that had transpired.

How could this man be the idol of so many people and act this way? It just didn't fit the persona everyone saw on TV.

When the car left the parking lot, the attendant walked back into the elevator and pressed the penthouse floor button.

As soon as the doors closed, his fists clenched. He punched the wall to his left, gritting his teeth.

He loathed having to do these kinds of threats. He also hated the fact that this wasn't the first time he had to.

All the dirty work his employer had forced him to do disgusted him. Sadly, he was stuck working for him.

He rode the elevator up, seething with anger. But as soon as the doors rang, he regained his composure, as if nothing had happened.

He walked out of the elevator and started cleaning up the place after closing Damien's room door. He picked up what had fallen from the tables during Damien's dangerous trip to the bedroom.

He put back into place the decorations that were ok and picked up the ones that had shattered. He made mental notes to replace them with other artworks and swept up where they had fallen.

Once he was done, he walked to a small room in the penthouse. Since he was attending Damien, he was to stay with him at all times.

So he had his own room in the penthouse, although it was a far cry from the size of the main bedroom. He showered and went to bed.

He would have to be up before Damien and cook him breakfast. He would also need to clean the man's clothes and tidy up his room.

He went to sleep, thinking about how he hated his job. But sadly, he was stuck with it for life.

Chapter 54 Moonlit Encounter

Back to MC

Astaroth was looking into the clearing, and he just couldn't believe what he saw.

In front of him, in the middle of the clearing, was Arborea!

The giant stag was laying down, doing nothing. The glow he had seen earlier was emanating from it.

The mythical creature had its eyes closed, and the surrounding light was coalescing between its antlers.

It was like the moonlight was descending from the sky, and agglomerating over the creature's head. It was forming a ball of glowing, milky white light, like a miniature moon.

The grass and shrubs around it were growing at a visible pace, and the flowers were going through a cycle of blooming and wilting like time was on fast forward.

Astaroth was watching all this happening, his jaw dropped and his eyes wide. Why was Arborea even here?!

"Join me, child." A soft female voice entered his ear.

Those words snapped Astaroth back to reality. He looked around, trying to see where they came from.

Not finding anyone around him, he looked back to the middle of the clearing. There, Arborea's eyes were open, staring right at him.

"Are you the one that spoke?" He asked the stag.

"Indeed, it is I. Join me. Do not be afraid." The soft voice said again, Arborea blinking.

Astaroth briefly hesitated, but he walked into the clearing. He stopped before he reached the circle of flowers wilting and blooming.

Who knew what kind of effect standing in those would have on him? For all he knew, that zone was in a time acceleration and he would end up stuck in it too.

A light laugh came from Arborea. It sounded more like crystals knocking together than a laugh. The sound of it was soothing.

"Do not be scared, child. I am not affecting time. Just the cycle of life and death for these plants." Arborea said.

"Is there really no danger for me?" Astaroth asked.

"It is completely safe." Arborea replied.

Astaroth hesitated a few more seconds, before walking forth again. He stopped when he stood mere meters away from the mythical creature.

From where he stood, Astaroth could feel the immense mana pulsing out from Arborea.

It was not overbearing, like standing in front of a furnace, but more like standing in front of a soundless bass speaker. The pulses vibrated his body to the core, but it didn't hurt.

The mana inside him became agitated by the pulsing. He had to cycle it willingly, just to stop its erratic movement.

He didn't know if it would have negative repercussions, but he couldn't take that chance.

"Why did I feel called here? Was it your doing?" Astaroth questioned.

"I did not call you here." Arborea replied, shaking its head lightly.

"Then why did I feel beckoned by that glow of yours, then?" He asked, puzzled.

"You can see the glow?" Arborea asked, tilting its head slightly.

"Why yes, quite clearly. I would be surprised if anyone couldn't see it." Astaroth answered, with a slight frown.

"Hmm." Arborea hummed.

"Most living beings can't see it." It added.

"How could one not see this ball of light and the glow it's producing? It may not be blinding, but it is definitely bright." Astaroth said, his frown deepening.

"Because most beings can not perceive this energy." The stag replied.

It could see question marks in Astaroth's eyes.

'How can anyone not see this?' He wondered.

"It would seem you see it." Arborea stated, its eyes locked on Astaroth.

"Clear as the moon in the sky." Astaroth replied.

"Then do you know what this is?" The stag asked.

"Uh... Moonlight?" Astaroth replied.

"Hihihi." Arborea laughed in its crystalline tone.

"One could indeed say it is. But not exactly." It added.

"Then what is it?" Astaroth asked, now curious.

"It is Aether. The purest form of mana." Arborea answered.

Astaroth furrowed his brows, trying to remember where he had heard that term. Then he realized.

When he and Aberon were talking about the purity of mana, he had talked about Aether.

Then he realized something. Arborea was collecting it, this Aether, like it was just water from a fall.

Mana in its purest form and that stag was siphoning it like it was natural. He realized just how strong one had to be to do this.

He thought to himself, 'If Arborea was strong enough to siphon Aether, how easily could it kill him?'

He shivered at the thought.

Arborea was still staring at Astaroth while he was having his internal musings. To it, the qualms of such a young ash elf were entertaining.

It waited for the young man, letting him come back to the now on his own. Astaroth didn't make it wait long.

Astaroth looked at the orb of Aether over the stag's head. It really looked like a small moon, but when he focused and used his perfect mana sense, it transformed into a blazing sun.

The energy in that small orb looked like it was enough to fuel a small nuke, in his opinion. He promptly shut his eyes to save his eyesight.

Arborea saw the scene and only wanted to laugh.

"Now I know why you see it." It said.

"You are naturally attuned to mana, at a physiological level." It added.

"But this isn't mana, right?" Astaroth said, confused.

"In a certain sense, yes." Arborea answered.

"Aether is to mana, what blood is to the living." It added.

"I don't follow." Astaroth said, not able to understand the metaphor.

"Aether is the essence of mana, just like blood is the essence of living." Arborea explained, not mad at his lack of understanding.

"So, what you mean is that Aether is like the mother of mana?" Astaroth asked, trying to make sense of it.

"You could also view it that way." Arborea agreed, with a nod.

"Can you teach me how to harness it?" Astaroth asked, getting excited.

If he could harness such potent energy, wouldn't his spells be overpowered? That got his blood pumping.

But he was soon to be disappointed.

"You are not ready to harness such force. And it remains to be seen whether you ever will be." Arborea said, declining his request.

Astaroth's shoulders drooped.

"But, that you can see it makes your chances higher than most." It consoled him.

That did not give Astaroth his enthusiasm back, but it at least gave him hope.

If he could one day harness that power, it would make him an incredible mage. One that could not be toyed with or manipulated against its will.

As he was thinking of all that, the energy accumulating over Arborea's head stopped coalescing. Dawn was peeking over the horizon and the moon would soon be gone from view.

"My time here is ending. I must go back." Arborea said, standing up.

From this close, the stag was towering over Astaroth by twice his height. Three times, if one counted the tall antlers over its head.

"It was a pleasure to talk to you, little one." It said to Astaroth.

"Wait! If I ever need to find you, is there a way?" Astaroth asked, trying to leave a channel of communication open.

One could never be wrong, making friends with a mythical creature, right?

Arborea stood still for a while before lowering its head to the ground. There, it poked the ground with its snout, causing a small plant to grow.

The plant looked like the stem of a flower, but at the end, Astaroth could see a small whistle.

The whistle looked like the one Aberon had blown.

"Use this to call me, but only inside this forest. My domain does not extend further." The stag said, turning to leave.

"Thank you!" Astaroth said, bowing and leaning to grab the whistle.

Arborea took a few steps away before stopping. It turned around once more.

"I have another gift for you, though one you won't be able to use before some time." It said.

"Hmm?" Astaroth hummed questioningly.

A portion of the Aether over Arborea's head detached and entered its head. Astaroth could see the glow through its body as it traveled closer to its chest.

It then pulsed three times before exiting through the chest. Immediately after, it zipped into Astaroth's chest, flying at him like a bullet.

Astaroth was expecting an impact, but the energy ball just phased into him.

"What was that?" He asked.

"You will know, in due time." Arborea answered, turning to leave again.

This time it didn't stop, and as soon as it crossed the treeline, it disappeared.

Astaroth was confused. He could feel the orb hovering near his soul, but it wasn't doing anything to it.

No energy leaked from it. No connection formed between the two either.

Since he couldn't understand its purpose, he stopped paying attention to it.

That's when he noticed dawn on the horizon. He dashed back to camp, hoping that no one had gotten up yet.

"Oh man, I hope they are all still sleeping." He said to himself as he ran.

Chapter 55 A New Family

After running for a few minutes, covering the road he had done backward, Astaroth returned to camp. His eyes widened in fear at what he saw.

Around the fire, three men were standing with clear looks of displeasure. Soon enough, Aberon turned to look at him.

"You're finally back." Aberon said, angrily.

He then blew, between his fingers, a sharp and brief whistle.

Next to Aberon, were Aj'axx and I'dril, with Chris and Korin nowhere to be seen.

"I was doing a round of patrol." Astaroth lied.

"Where are the others?" He then asked.

When he asked that, Aj'axx smiled at him wryly and I'dril turned his head to the side, avoiding eye contact.

Astaroth then felt something grab his arms from behind, locking their movements.

"Huh?!" He said, surprised.

"I'm sorry. Just following orders." Astaroth heard Korin's voice next to his ear.

"What are you doing?! Rel... Oof!" He started saying before a punch in his abdomen blew the words out of his mouth.

Chris then popped from the side, his fist still balled up. He was smiling from ear to ear sardonically.

"That one was for worrying me." Chris said, with his devilish grin.

"This one is me following orders to punish you." He added.

The second punch also hit his stomach, but this time, in an upward motion, blowing all the air out of Astaroth's lungs.

Korin let go of him right after, letting Astaroth fall to the ground, gasping for air.

"Sorry, kiddo." Korin said as he walked towards the fire.

Aberon walked from the fire to Astaroth's writhing body, crouching near him.

"When are you going to learn to obey orders, young man?" Aberon asked Astaroth.

Astaroth couldn't even answer, still coughing and hacking, his lungs still refusing to fully expand.

Aberon looked at him with disapproval but would not let him choke to death just yet. So he cast a slight breeze of wind magic, sending it through his nose and mouth, pushing air into his lungs.

Following that minor spell, Astaroth could finally take in a full breath of air on his own.

Gasp *Cough* *Gasp*

"Chris, you crazy old coot! I thought I was going to die!" Astaroth screamed, his eyes still teary from nearly choking to death.

"Bahahaha! I didn't even hit you that hard. Bahahaha!" Chris laughed.

Astaroth let out a low growl in response, being of a different opinion. That punch had felt like a sledgehammer to him.

"I told you not to leave the camp!" Aberon barked, bringing Astaroth's attention back to him.

"The woods are dangerous without protection!" He added.

"I was only trying to hunt some monsters!" Astaroth tried defending himself.

"Plus, you told me monsters wouldn't attack us, because of the aura of the guardians emanating from these four." He added, pointing to the four wooden stags.

"I said no such thing, young man!" Aberon growled.

"I said weaker monsters wouldn't wander near us, because the aura pushed them off course." He added before continuing his sermon.

"But there are stronger monsters, creatures that rival the guardians, that don't care about that aura." Aberon said.

"Then what difference does it make? If I meet any of these monsters, even with you around, I don't stand a chance at living." Astaroth rebuked.

Slap

Aberon struck Astaroth's face with a crisp slap, leaving a red hand mark on his cheek.

"Stop talking and listen!" Aberon barked.

"There are more immediate threats than monsters." He added.

"The closer we get to the capital, the closer we get to royal patrols." He dropped, becoming extremely serious.

"Royal Patrols?" Astaroth questioned.

"Isn't that a good thing?" He then asked.

"Not exactly, kid." Chris chimed in.

"We aren't exactly welcomed in the capital. We aren't criminals, pariahs would be the better term, so we can't stay there long." He added.

"Pariahs? Why?" Astaroth asked, becoming confused.

"The why and the how do not matter, for now, young man." Aberon interjected, throwing a stern look at Chris.

"What matters is that a royal patrol should not catch you without us." He then said.

"Ok. I understand." Astaroth said, lowering his head apologetically.

Sigh

"And don't run off again! We were all worried about your safety." Aberon said after a deep sigh.

Astaroth felt warm and fuzzy at that statement. He hadn't felt like this in a long time.

He could feel the worry of his companions. One that would only stem from deep connections, like family bonds.

The entire scene reminded him of how his parents would scold him when he came back late. His mother would stay up in worry, and his father would leave to go look for him.

That was probably how these guys had felt, too.

"I'm sorry!" Astaroth said loudly, smacking his forehead to the ground.

He had a small tear in the corner of his eye.

Everyone in the camp became awkward at the display. The first one to react was I'dril.

He walked over to Astaroth, grabbed his arm, and pulled him up.

"It's okay, Astaroth. Just don't leave without telling us like this again." He said, with a gentle smile on his lips.

Astaroth quickly wiped the tear away from his eye, not wanting them to see him cry. He looked at the surrounding men, who were mostly smiling now, and he felt warmth from them.

For a second, he could see his parents between them, smiling warmly at him, before fading away.

At that moment, he knew. These people from the village were his family.

It didn't matter to him if they were just lines of data on a server or not. They treated him like family, and he would do the same for them.

Otherwise, his parents would probably scold him in the afterlife. That thought brought a smile to his lips and a light chuckle escaped his lips.

"Alright! Let me make breakfast for you guys as an apology. I can even throw in some meat, as a side dish." Astaroth said, walking up to the fire and a cauldron hanging over it.

"Woo! Meat! Hell yeah!" Chris and Aj'axx hollered, fist-bumping the air.

The meal was prepared and cooked a short while after, and the lot of them enjoyed breakfast while laughing. They were mostly laughing at Astaroth's earlier predicament, but no hard feelings abounded.

They laughed and fooled around, washing away the earlier heavy atmosphere before packing up again. The last bit of their trip was only going to take four or five hours.

So they wanted to clear it soon, so they could leave before dusk. None of them wanted to stay in the capital, where they would be scorned, for too long.

Thus resumed their traveling.

Chapter 56 The Omni-Mage

The trip was close to its end by noon, and the men could already see the outline of a city over the trees. From afar, all they could see was the top of towers and the tip of what seemed like a castle keep.

Once the group was close to the treeline, Aberon ordered everyone to disembark the carriage.

"We walk the rest of the way." He ordered.

"What about the carriage?" Astaroth asked curiously.

"It stays here until we return." Aberon stated, walking away in the capital's direction.

After the men all disembarked, they caught up with Aberon and walked towards the city.

Half of the way there were plains and fields of crops, then the other half transitioned into small houses and huts, most likely the farmers' houses.

They walked on the beaten dirt path that led to the walls encasing the main part of the capital. The immense stone walls were so long, they disappeared into the distance on each side.

They spanned fifty meters high and, from the looks Astaroth could glean from the open gate, they seemed to be about ten to fifteen meters thick.

These walls would make most siege weapons irrelevant by their apparent solidity.

There was a small line formed in front of the city gates, with soldiers checking identities at the front. Some soldiers were also moving up and down the line, making sure no one suspicious made it to the front.

Aberon walked into line, followed by the rest of his allies. They waited and walked the pace of the queue until it was their turn at the gate.

"Welcome to Tel'narel. Identification and reason of visit." A soldier with a stern face said, looking at Aberon.

Aberon glanced at him with a side-eye.

"You know who I am, soldier. These men are with me. Let us through." He replied as flatly as a rug.

"Identification and reason of visit." He repeated, clearly annoyed.

"Call your captain, soldier. I don't have time to deal with your incompetence." Aberon sneered.

The soldier instantly became furious, drawing his sword. He brought it close to Aberon's throat.

"Say it again. I dare you." The soldier growled.

When the man pulled his weapon, Chris, Aj'axx, I'dril, Korin, and Astaroth all pulled out their weapons at the same time.

Aberon only lifted his hand, signaling them to stay put.

"Let me ask you something, soldier. Do you know who I am?" Aberon asked the man, his gaze becoming intense.

Astaroth, with his perfect mana sense, could feel and see the mana around Aberon become deathly still. He gulped.

"Oh, I know who you are, traitor. And I don't care." The soldier replied with a menacing smile.

"Oh? You do? Then why aren't you calling reinforcements then?" Aberon asked, his face distorting into a smile that would freeze over hell.

The soldier shivered slightly at the sight of it, but he quickly steeled himself again.

"I don't need reinforcements to deal with an old codger like you!" The soldier barked, spit flying as he did.

While all this back and forth was happening, the soldiers that were going up and down the line were now all at the front. They were surrounding Astaroth and the rest of his group.

Another man in armor walked out of the gates. His armor was shinier and bulkier than the rest of the men.

"What's happening here?!" He yelled, dissatisfied at the interruption from whatever he was doing before.

"Are you perhaps the captain?" Aberon asked, turning his head slightly, to look at the man.

"What is it to you?" The man asked with a disdainful smirk.

"I will assume that means yes. Then I ask you, captain. How many?" Aberon said, his face still in a cold, evil grin.

"Huh? How many what?" The guard captain asked, his face turning into a frown.

"How many men are you willing to lose?" Aberon replied, snapping his fingers.

The man in front of him then started screaming in horror.

"Snakes! Snakes everywhere! Help me! HELP ME!!!" He yelled, clawing at his own face, tearing it to shreds.

The other soldiers watched on in horror as their companion scratched his face off and tore the skin off his own neck. The captain was the first to snap back to reality.

"KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!" He screamed, unsheathing his sword too, and dashing at Aberon.

Astaroth and the rest of the party were about to react when they heard Aberon's voice over the commotion.

"Don't you move! I will handle this!" He shouted, waving his hands around in the air.

The following events would haunt Astaroth for a long time, reminding them to never provoke Aberon, lest they wish to die.

The first thing that happened was the captain flying away. It was like an invisible hand had grabbed him and thrown him into the city wall.

Once he hit the wall, he stuck there, as the surrounding stone slowly started wrapping around him. Horror gripped his heart, and he started screaming like a little girl.

The next thing was a semi-transparent barrier forming around Astaroth and the rest, taking the shape of a dome. Astaroth had tried pushing out of the dome, but it was quite sturdy.

Following suit right after, the rest of the guards finally reacted to the situation. Seeing the barrier around their previous quarry, they swapped targets and charged at Aberon.

Aberon sneered at their fake bravado, before waving his hand before him, like he was sliding it across a flat surface. A wall of fire then manifested in front of the charging men, standing ten feet tall.

Aberon did a wrapping motion with his hands, causing the fire wall to wrap around the soldiers. Next, he twirled his finger in a spinning motion.

The fire wall soon followed suit, spinning faster and faster, before rising into a blazing tornado.

The men in the middle of it started feeling the heat rise as their bodies started sweating. The more time passed, the hotter it became, until their skin finally started blistering.

They screamed in pain from the center of the tornado, but Aberon did not relent.

"This is your call, captain." Aberon said, turning to look at the man stuck to the wall.

The surrounding stone was still encasing him at a slow pace, to a point much of his limbs were already one with the wall.

"Please, let me go!" The captain bawled, his face a snotty mess.

"Then answer my question! How many? How many men are you willing to sacrifice for this stupid show of dominance?!" Aberon said as he exploded in anger.

"I don't care! Just let me go!" The captain cried.

By now, the stone crawling over him had covered half of his chest. It would not take long before the rest was covered, and it moved on to his head.

"Please!" The man pleaded.

"ENOUGH!" Boomed a voice from the top of the ramparts.

Immediately after, a torrent of snow and hail washed over the tornado of flames, extinguishing it. Down from the ramparts, flew a man in a white mage robe.

His hair was blue and his skin pale as a dead person's. He landed on the ground softly, mere meters away from Aberon, sneering at him.

"You still cause trouble here, even after years of being pushed away. How dare you, Aberon?!" The man shouted.

"Pleasure to see you too, Gelum'vire. Long time no see." Aberon replied, his devilish grin still plastered on his face.

"Court Mage! Save us! Please!" The captain shouted.

As he finished his plea, an icicle pierced his throat, making him choke on his own blood as the life faded away from his eyes.

"Don't you dare speak to me, COWARD!" The court mage bellowed, lowering his hand.

"Still a monster in human clothing, I see." Aberon snickered.

"Enough! You could have just walked in the city, but you caused a scene!" The mage said, waving his arms around.

"The king will not be happy about this!" He added.

Aberon scoffed.

"And yet, I didn't kill a single one of them. Then you arrive and a soldier dies." He said, putting his hands into his sleeves, acting all innocent.

"What about this man? Huh?!" Gelum'vire asked, pointing at the man with his face and throat ripped off.

"Him? He did that to himself. I have nothing to do with it." Aberon lied, smiling innocently.

"You!" The court mage fumed.

"Hmph! Just head to the palace. The king will see you in a few hours." The mage harrumphed, flying off over the wall.

Aberon smiled even wider, happy to have pissed off the young mage. He then turned around and waved the barrier surrounding his friends away.

"Come. We can go in now." Aberon said, turning around and walking off.

Astaroth looked at the damage around him and couldn't believe it.

"Just who is he?" He muttered.

"Best you don't know, for now." Chris answered, winking at him.

The group then walked behind Aberon into the city, heading straight for the enormous castle in the distance.

Chapter 57 The Newbie Druid

*****Another Player POV, one week before game launch*****

Hóngshè Rì-Chū was a young Chinese living in Beijing. He was in high school in his senior year and loved video games.

When he saw the new game from Evo-Gaming coming out, he begged his parents to buy him the new VR helmets. His family was well off, so they agreed, as long as his grades stayed good.

He was ecstatic, but he made sure to never let go of his studies. When the release date was finally upon him, he reminded his parents and they did as promised.

With the new game installed on his helmet, he felt overexcited, but couldn't play until he had done his studies and homework.

He sped through them, thinking only about gaming in this seemingly new genre of games. The entire work took more time than he would have liked, and he ended up not starting the game until a few hours after the launch.

Hóngshè was mad about his tardiness, but he guessed there was still a chance for him to catch up. He created his character and was amazed by the range of choices for races.

The svelte Elven man at character creation guided him through the races, and Hóngshè eventually picked Elf as his starting race. The NPC was overjoyed, and quickly guided him through the available starting classes.

Hóngshè picked Druid, as the prospect of casting magic enticed him greatly. Who hadn't thought once in their life about using magic?

After picking his race and class, the game prompted him to pick a name. Hóngshè was a fan of old languages and therefore used Latin in his character's name.

He thought for a while about his name, not sure what he would go for. He eventually thought about something that made him chuckle.

Since he wouldn't be able to play as much as most people, due to school, he called himself I'die Ad-Tempus. That translated into one day at a time, from Latin to English.

The Elven man praised him on his out-of-the-box name and sent him on his way into the game.

After a maelstrom of colors, and a flight over forests and mountains, pulled straight out of a fantasy game, he appeared in a city built of trees.

Everyone around him had long hair, in shades of silver, brown, and blonde. They also had a pointed characteristic of elves from all fantasies, long ears.

From a quick glance, he couldn't see who was a player and who was an NPC. No names showed up over anyone's head, and nothing differentiated the two either.

It took him a lot of time and focus to find what he wanted. After gazing at someone for a couple of seconds, a screen appeared in front of his eyes.

The screen had Status Screen, written at the top, and showed some stats about the person.

Status Screen:

Jay Yescyne/Fisherman

Level: 24

Race: Elf

Health: 550/550 Mana: 420/420

"Ahh. So I can scan people." I'die Ad-Tempus thought to himself.

He then went around for a while, scanning everyone he met. He couldn't differentiate players at first, but it changed when he noticed that most NPCs had higher levels compared to them.

After finding that difference, I'die thought he should hunt some monsters. So he walked to an NPC to ask the direction to exit the city.

The NPC looked at him weirdly before pointing to the southeast. I'die thanked him before traveling in the direction they showed him.

It took him a few minutes to reach the city gate, which was formed by two massive trees intertwining to form an arch.

The city walls were formed by huge monoliths of rock, tied together with thick roots, joining everything together to make a nigh impenetrable barrier.

The sight of it all took his breath away. This now really looked like an elven city.

There were very few handmade structures, or at least it seemed like it. Every building, house, or shop seemed like it had grown out of a tree.

After admiring the structures for a couple of minutes, I'die finally remembered why he was going to the city gates.

He shook his head, getting his bearings back, and kept walking towards the gate. While he was crossing the portcullis, he noticed people were getting stopped before going in, but not as they went out.

He imagined it was some kind of security measure, but he found it weird for a game to simulate that.

'So realistic!' He thought.

He walked out of the city and into a majestic forest. The trees all climbed high into the sunny sky, with trunks thick as modern skyscrapers.

The sun pierced through the thick foliage of the canopy in a feat that we could describe as magic.

The forest was well-lit, completely disregarding the fact that most of it was covered by the umbrella of leaves overhead.

I'die walked further and further away from the city, eventually crossing some low-level monsters. They were some small boars, ranging from level one to three.

He played it safe and attacked a level one boar, pulling its aggro and kiting it away from the rest of them.

His beginner gear gave him some druid robes and a basic training quarterstaff. All he could do for now was throw ranged attacks since he had no skills yet.

He tried kiting it to the best of his ability, but he was only hitting so often. Since the boar was moving erratically and I'die's aim was not that good, he missed most of his shots.

After kiting it for a few minutes, and hitting the boar only twice, dealing only ten damage points, he finally made a misstep and got rammed by the animal.

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This hit, which would seem small to higher-level players, cost him half his health bar. He instantly went into panic mode, firing his attacks left and right, hoping to fell the monster before it felled him.

It only took the boar a few seconds to come back charging. Most of I'die's shots missed the monster by either a small amount or sizable gaps.

When it was only a few feet away from finally colliding with him again, I'die closed his eyes.

'What a crappy death.' He thought.

Then he heard words and a thud to his left.

"Impact Shot!"

Thud

I'die waited a few seconds, waiting for his impending death, but nothing happened. He eventually opened one eye, looking for the boar, only to find it sprawled a few feet to the side.

It had a part of its head caved in, like a hammer had smacked it hard.

I'die got up, dusting his robe and looking around, trying to see where the voice had come from.

"Up here!" He heard, coming from the branches over his head.

When he raised his head, he saw a humanoid shape drop from the branches and land squarely in front of him.

It was another elf, but this one, he was pretty sure, was a player. When he scanned the elf, their level showed level four.

"Thank you!" I'die yelled, bowing at ninety degrees.

"Hey man, don't bow. I was just helping a player in need!" The other elf replied, trying to lift I'die to his feet.

I'die hadn't assumed by the voice, but now that he was looking straight at the other player, he noticed the distinct forms of a woman.

"The name's Athena Woodland." She said, shoving her hand into his and shaking it.

"Uh... I'die Ad-Tempus." He replied, his meek shoulder following the shaking hand.

"Pleasure to meet you, I'die!" Athena exclaimed, still shaking his hand.

"Uh... Can I... Have my hand back? Please?" I'die said, scratching the back of his head with his other hand.

"Ahh! Yes! Sorry about that." Athena said, letting go of the hand.

"Um... do you want the loot? Since you killed it and all." I'die said, looking at the boar on the ground.

"Huh? Oh! No. It's yours. I was just helping." Athena said, shaking her hands in front of her.

"Okay. Thank you." I'die replied.

He walked up to the boar and touched it, prompting a loot menu. In it were a boar tusk and a boar hide.

He grabbed both and sent them to his inventory, happy he got something from this ordeal.

He also got a notification of the monster's death. It was still flashing to the side of his vision.

You have helped in killing a Young Boar (Lvl 1). 1 Exp awarded for contribution (40% damage done) (Rounded up to the highest digit)

"Sheesh, the Exp is so meager." I'die said, frowning.

"It gets better, the higher the level of the monster you kill. I heard that monsters over level ten give tons of Exp!" Athena exclaimed, almost gushing in envy.

"Since you are still here, do you want to form a party?" I'die asked, scratching the back of his head again.

He wasn't socially adept with strangers, but he guessed since this was a game, why not try a different approach?

"I was wondering when you would ask!" Athena said, launching the party invite instantly.

And so both of the elves started hunting in a pair, taking on progressively harder monsters.

Chapter 58 Small History Lesson

Back to our favorite MC

As Aberon walked down the streets, heading to the castle gates, the people in the streets looked at him in hatred.

Astaroth, Chris, I'dril, Aj'axx, and Korin, who were following from behind, got similar looks, but also some looks of disgust and occasional sneers.

All the stares really grated against Astaroth's patience, but Chris patted his back.

"Don't worry about these fools, son. They don't even know why they hate us. They are just following the king's propaganda." He said, smiling widely.

But Astaroth could feel the fakeness from that smile. It felt like he was looking at a plastic doll, empty and creepy.

He knew instantly that Chris was only smiling to peeve the people off even more. He was probably feeling anger and hatred himself, aimed at all these ignorants.

"But what propaganda is it?" Astaroth asked, oblivious to what the colonel meant.

Chris hesitated a bit, before sighing and explaining the situation.

"It's an old story now, but it stems from the passing of power from the last king to the current one." He started.

"Close to a decade ago, this city was much more prosperous and less fortified. The capital city used to represent our monetary might. Now it represents our military might." He said, a tinge of sadness in his eyes.

"What happened?" Astaroth questioned.

"The king was replaced." Chris said, hatred gleaming in his eyes.

"Replaced?" Astaroth echoed.

"Yes. Replaced. Usurped, to be exact, but don't let the soldiers hear you say that." Chris whispered to him.

"The old king was always an advocate for peace. He tried his best to push our race out of its isolation and into the rest of the continent." He continued.

"He was wise and just." Chris added with a gentle smile. But then his gaze turned icy again.

"His eldest son, the current king, was always an aggressive little mongrel. When he was old enough to inherit the throne, he demanded his father step down." Chris said, his fists clenching slowly.

"What happened then?" Astaroth asked.

"His father refused, of course." Chris said, scoffing.

"The old king knew his son was not yet wise enough to rule. He had ears everywhere in his palace and knew all too well what his son would do with such power." He added.

"What would he do?" Astaroth asked.

"War." Chris said, flatly.

"When his father refused to concede him the throne, the son started scheming behind his back. He made deals with nobles, bribed military officials, and threatened all that refused to join his side." He added.

"After months of doing that, he finally confronted his father again, this time demanding the throne. With all the nobles and officials backing him, and the others taking a step back, the old king was pushed out of power." Chris said, his tone becoming grave.

Chris sighed loudly, closing his eyes for a few seconds. Astaroth could feel the pain and anger washing off of the man.

"Then what?" He asked Chris, wanting to know the rest of the story.

"Then the new king asked for everyone to re-pledge allegiance to the crown." Chris answered, opening his eyes back.

For a second after he opened his eyes, Chris radiated another feeling than anger. Astaroth looked at him, and all he could discern felt like... pride?

He couldn't be sure, but it certainly felt like it. It only lasted a moment, and then Chris went back to anger.

With that reaction, Astaroth could already guess what happened next.

"Is that why all these people look at us like we kicked a puppy?" Astaroth asked, looking at the surrounding people.

"Bahaha! I like your analogy! Bahaha!" Chris started laughing, dispelling a bit of his anger.

"Yes, that would be why. As you have probably guessed, some people in the throne room that day refused to pledge. One of them being our illustrious general."

"General?" Astaroth appeared puzzled.

"Yes. The general of all the kingdom's military. He outright refused, calling the prince a usurper. He was banished, and stripped of his strength." Chris said, nodding.

"The only reason they did not execute him on the spot was that the military branch opposed it fervently. And the new king needed them on his side." He added, smirking a bit.

"Then what happened to that General?" Astaroth asked.

"Oh, not much! He moved out into an isolated village, living a calm life as a guard captain." Chris responded, grinning and side-eyeing Astaroth.

Astaroth looked at Chris for a moment, before his eyes went wide.

"You don't mean..." He blurted out.

"I sure do, son." Chris said, smiling widely.

"Then that means... Your nickname, the Colonel..." Astaroth stammered, trying to fit the pieces together.

"That's right. Not just a nickname. Although I don't have that rank anymore." Chris nodded, patting Astaroth's shoulder.

"Then, are all the villagers...?" Astaroth asked, realizing why they survived in such an environment.

"Not all. But most of them, yes." Chris answered.

"And what about..." Astaroth asked, looking towards Aberon.

"Oh yes! Him especially. Bahahaha!" He guffawed.

"But why is he still so powerful?" Astaroth asked.

"That is a pretty straightforward answer, son. Because the king has no power over him. Aberon has pledged his allegiance to the kingdom before he was even born." Chris said, smiling wryly.

Astaroth looked at Aberon in a new light after that statement. How powerful did one have to be to go against the power of a king?

"But there is something I don't understand." Astaroth said, turning to Chris again.

"Hmm?" Chris replied, still looking forward.

"How did he strip you of your strength?" Astaroth questioned.

It seemed a little far-fetched that a person could rob you of the strength you trained to get. Let alone the stats, he took the levels and everything along with it.

"That is another simple answer. Kingdom-level magic." Chris said, shrugging.

"Kingdom-level magic? What is that?" Astaroth asked, his questions multiplying in his head.

"As its name suggests, it is magic that needs the power of a kingdom to be cast. So only rulers of a country, kingdom, or empire can use it." Chris responded, explaining in simple words.

"But if he used that kind of magic, wouldn't that over-power Aberon's strength?" Astaroth asked, his confusion growing again.

"In theory, it would. But here's the catch, son. Aberon pledged his loyalty to the kingdom, not to the king. So his communion with the kingdom protects him from an unjust ruling." Chris explained, a smirk on his lips.

"So, what you are saying is the kingdom protected Aberon by itself?" Astaroth questioned.

"That is exactly what I mean. The king needs to borrow power from the kingdom to use it. But when he tried using it against Aberon, the kingdom refused." Chris said.

"But something doesn't add up. A kingdom is not something conscious. How could it decide anything?" Astaroth asked, still confused.

Chris turned his head to look at Astaroth. The kid had eyes burning with questions.

He could practically see them smacking the sides of his head, begging to be answered. So he indulged him.

"Kid. What do you think makes a kingdom?" Chris Asked Astaroth.

"A kingdom is a piece of land, ruled by a king, where citizens live." Astaroth said, trying to oversimplify it.

"Although your answer is correct, it is also wrong. It's more than that." Chris responded.

"A kingdom is a place where people group together to have safety in numbers. It is a place where many citizens protect each other from the dangers of the world, and occasionally, other kingdoms." He added.

Astaroth nodded his attention fully on the explanation. Chris then continued.

"I will give you an example. One you can understand. What would happen if you were to take the soul fragments of many dead monsters of the same type and bunch them together?" Chris asked him.

"I guess they would fuse and form an amalgamated soul?" Astaroth answered.

"Next question. What makes a person alive? On a fundamental level." Chris said, with a follow-up question.

"Their soul?" Astaroth replied, unsure where this was going.

"Correct. Now tell me again. What is a kingdom?" Chris asked again.

"A place where people group together for safety in numbers." Astaroth said.

Then he realized.

"An amalgam of people. An amalgam of their souls..." He said as if epiphany had just taken hold of him.

"Correct again. Now. What happens when you push many souls together?" Chris asked, pushing Astaroth to the answer.

"An amalgamated soul forms!" Astaroth answered, finally understanding.

"That would mean the kingdom is alive. It means it's an actual being!" Astaroth added, almost in hysteria.

"Yes. And she is powerful. Also, strikingly beautiful." Chris said, putting his hand on Astaroth's shoulder, so he would pipe down.

"But we are sidetracking here. You wanted to know why the people scorned us. It is very simple." Chris said, bringing back the original subject.

Astaroth was a little disappointed. He would have loved to talk more about the soul of the kingdom.

"The reason the people call us traitors and such names is because when we were banished, the king branded us as deserters. Claiming we refused to fight for the ash elf cause and our country." Chris continued.

Astaroth felt aggrieved for the men and women that had served their country, only to be banished as traitors. This treatment was too unfair.

And all that just because they didn't believe in the new king's cause. What a horrible turn of life.

"Anyhow, we shall keep the rest of this conversation for another day. We have arrived at the castle gates." Chris said, his eyes becoming stern again.

In front of the group stood another massive wall, this one filled with arrow slits. It looked like they could defend it even better than the first one.

Many guards in full-plated armor were manning the gate. It would be nigh impossible to infiltrate this castle without the skills of an elite spy.

There was another small line to enter the gates. Everyone was being scanned through a magic device that verified their identity and what they had on them.

Soon it was their turn to pass the gate, and they were called forward.

"Next!"

Chapter 59 From Protected To Protector

*****POV A sheltered boy in England, before the game launch*****

In the city of Birmingham, England lived a small sickly kid. His name was Winston Jr. Owen.

Winston was a kid that was born with a weak immune system. He had Caspase Eight Deficiency State or CEDS for short.

That meant he had virtually no antibodies to fight against viral infections and bacteria. He could die from a single cold if he ever caught one.

Winston's parents had sheltered him from his birth to now, making sure no one sick ever got close to him. They had done their utmost to keep him away from any risk.

But that also meant the kid never went to school. He was home-schooled until high school when he switched to online classes.

Winston had little to no friends since no one could come near him without being free of bacteria. He had lived his entire life either in his house or at the hospital.

Winston's parents were two well-off people, one a businessman, the other a renowned pastry chef. They had enough money to go around, so they spoiled their child as much as he wanted.

This was to compensate for the restrained living they put him through. The guilt from caging him his whole life ate at them slowly, and only relented slightly when they saw him happy with the gifts they gave him.

Little did they know, the only thing bothering Winston, in his situation, was the fact that he couldn't go outside. He couldn't go meet new people and make new friends.

He could probably never explore unknown places or climb dangerous mountains. Winston yearned to leave his mark on the world, but his sickness confined him to home.

So when he was surfing online and saw that a new video game was coming out soon and that it was in full VR, he became ecstatic.

He begged his parents to get him the required material to play the game. He already had a laptop, but it was far from powerful enough to run top games.

His parents couldn't refuse his demands, seeing how excited he seemed at the prospect of the game. They splurged on him once again, buying him a state-of-the-art computer.

Then they pre-purchased the game and the VR helmet, making sure he was ready for launch day. They had never seen him as happy as he became when received all these gifts.

Winston cried a little when he finished setting up the computer and the VR helmet close to his bed. He would finally explore some place other than the confines of his home, or the floors of the hospital.

There were only a few days left until the game release, and Winston talked solely about that at the dinner table and in their after-dinner conversations.

His parents were thrilled that something had finally stoked his passion as much and hoped the game did not disappoint him when it finally launched.

The days went by fast in the Owen household, as his parents were mostly gone during the day, leaving Winston to his online classes.

On the announced day of the launch, Winston's parents agreed to an early dinner, so he could be ready and on time for the game release.

Once he was done with dinner, Winston practically ran away from the table, telling his parents he loved them and running up to his room.

Winston threw his body onto his bed and grabbed the VR helmet off his desk. He jammed it on his head and launched it.

There was still around half an hour until the game started, but he couldn't care less. He watched the background screensaver of the VR helmet until the game unlocked on the interface.

It did so around fifteen minutes before the official release time. He had read on the website that it would let the players create their characters before the game launch.

He selected the game icon and clicked launch. Winston then felt sucked into his bed, like he was suddenly free-falling.

The feeling exhilarated him. Suddenly gravity became normal again, as he was standing on a white platform, with nothing but darkness around him.

In front of him stood a tall man with silver hair and pointy ears.

"An elf!" The boy exclaimed.

"Indeed, I am, child. Welcome to New Eden. Are you here to experience the adventure of a lifetime?" The Elven man asked.

"If I'm ready?! I can't wait!" Winston responded gleefully.

"Good. Very good." The elf responded.

"Your adventure will be fraught with unknown dangers and enemies beyond mortal reason. Are you ready to face such challenges?" He asked.

"Yes, I am!" Winston practically shouted.

He had balled his little fists, and his hype levels were going through the metaphorical roof.

"First, what should one call you, young adventurer?" The elf asked as an empty bar appeared before Winston's eyes.

"Um, can I come back to that later? When I know what race and class I want?" Winston asked the elf.

"Yes, by all means, young one." The svelte elf responded.

"Thank you." Winston said, giving a quick nod.

Winston then opened up the race window, looking at all the options. The only one that didn't attract his fancy was humans.

Why would he play human, if he already was one? In a game, one should never stick to convention, otherwise where was the fun?

But he couldn't choose what to go, either. The choices were many, and he didn't know what class would suit him the most.

Seeing the boy taking a lot of time, the Elven man helped him in his conundrum.

"What is it you desire to accomplish in this world, young man?" The elf asked Winston.

"Hmm. If I had to pick a goal for myself, it would be to pay back what my parents have given me my whole life." Winston answered, after thinking for a few seconds.

"And what would that be, young man?" The elf questioned again.

"I'd say protection. My whole life, my parents have protected me from the world, making sure I was never in danger." Winston replied, a pang of guilt and melancholy flashing in his eyes.

"Ahh. I see. So you wish to pay forward that protection?" The elf asked.

Winston thought for a moment, then nodded his head.

"In that case, let me recommend you to a race and class." The elf said, waving his hand at the menu in front of Winston.

The menu started shrinking, some races disappearing from it until only one was left. Dwarves.

Winston read the race description again and noticed that one of the two classes was currently highlighted.

"Shield bearer? That sounds like a tanking class. Doesn't that put me on the front lines?" Winston asked the elf.

"Ahh, yes. But that would make you a steadfast protector." The elf said, giving a slow nod.

"Dwarves may be a rowdy bunch and lack manners, but they are most honorable allies. Having a dwarf serve as your front line means your chances of surviving are highly elevated." He added.

Winston let that information soak in for a moment.

He wanted to pay forth the protection they gave him all his life, and this was a great way. He made his choice and tapped the shield bearer's class.

His body morphed to fit into his new race. His body grew bulkier, and a beard appeared on his face.

"At least I'm still the same height." Winston said, his voice sounding a few octaves graver.

"Now, what would you like to be called, young dwarf?" the elf asked, a smile still plastered on his face.

Winston thought about it for a moment and recalled the name a friend had once used for his dwarven character in a game of TTRPG.

"Gulnur Deepshield." He replied.

The name bar instantly filled with the name he chose, and he hit confirm.

After picking his race, class, and name, his character was finally ready for the adventure.

"Congratulations on finalizing your avatar, young dwarf. I wish you luck on your grand quest." The elf said.

"Know that whatever may happen on your journey, your decisions will define it. Now off you go!" The elf added, with a big smile, before waving his arm, making the scene before Gulnur fade away.

In its stead, a giant timer appeared before him. Only a few seconds remained on it, and Gulnur was happy to have made it before the game launch.

He wouldn't want to start late and be at a disadvantage. He watched the clock tick away the remaining seconds, his anticipation building up.

When the last second ticked away, the decor changed.

The black made way for bright colors. The darkness around Gulnur switched over to a flight view of a bright new world.

He was flying over a continent in the world of New Eden and could see the cities, forests, mountains, and other sights to behold. An announcement sounded all around him.

WELCOME TO ALL, IN THIS NEW WORLD OF ADVENTURE CALLED NEW EDEN. MAY YOUR FUTURE BE BRIGHT AND YOUR PATH BE FILLED WITH THE BODIES OF YOUR ENEMIES. LET YOUR NEW LIVES BEGIN!

Then his view changed again, spinning and turning until he was standing on the side of a road.

He looked around and up, only to see a cavernous ceiling high above his head. It looked like he was in a city, built inside a cave or a mountain.

The people walking around him were all stocky and bearded, except for the women, who were stocky and had hair down to their bottom.

Gulnur breathed in the air, tasting the earthiness in it, and tears rolled down his cheeks. This was what genuine air tasted like, not filtered air.

His adventures and exploring he had dreamt about all his life could finally start. He would make the most of it, savoring every moment to the fullest.

He grinned and stroked his newfound beard.

"Let my legend begin."

Chapter 60 Awaiting An Audience

Back to our MC

"Next!" The guard moving the line forward shouted.

Aberon strode forward, his gait as confident as always. The rest of the group just followed behind him.

"We are here for an audience with the king. He have already granted us it, we are awaited." Aberon said, looking straight at the castle.

The soldier before them sneered at the clear disrespect but didn't dare do anything more. He walked to the small guardhouse and activated a little rune circle on the table.

The rune circle glowed and flashed for a few seconds, before lighting up brighter and a voice was heard from it.

'Huh. They have intercoms.' Astaroth thought, seeing the apparatus work.

The thought made him chuckle.

'Well designed, devs. Well designed.' He thought, smiling.

The guard spoke to a person for a couple of minutes and then came back to the group.

"The court mage cleared your passage." He said, still showing clear disdain.

"They ordered me to have you escorted to the guest waiting room inside the palace." He added, pointing at a full squad of soldiers nearby.

The squad assembled before him, forming a nice straight row, and saluting him.

"Escort these traitors, I mean, honored guests, to the guest waiting room." The guardsman said to the squad, giving a disgusted side-eye to Aberon and his following.

"Yes, sir!" The men said, clapping their heels together, before forming a square around the group.

"Lead the way." Aberon told the soldiers, pointing forward.

The soldier at the front started walking in the castle's direction, but never fully made it there. Just before reaching it, they swerved to the right, going to a smaller, yet much grander, part of the castle.

That was the palace. One could tell from all the flourishes and richness in the decor that this was where the king lived.

Once they got there, another group of soldiers, these much better armored and armed, stopped the group. Their armor had golden flourishes on them, and you could see the quality of their weapons.

"Royal guards." Aj'axx whispered to Astaroth, a bit of envy in his eyes.

Astaroth had already guessed as much, Aj'axx only confirming his thoughts. The guards here also looked much more powerful and serious.

Astaroth kept his back straight, and his eyes peeled. He had a bad feeling, ever since they had stepped into the castle walls.

Like, someone with nefarious intentions was watching them. He couldn't pinpoint the source of this feeling, but he trusted his gut.

Astaroth had no weapons on him when they checked him, having stowed them away in his inventory. The guards looked at him suspiciously when they saw him unarmed.

"Where are your weapons, lad?" One of the royal guards asked him, eyeing him like a falcon.

"They escorted me here, sir. I am unarmed." Astaroth replied, showing his empty hands and twirling on himself.

The rest of the group eyed him funnily, knowing that was a flat-faced lie. Korin even smiled and winked at him.

After smiling innocently at the guard one more time, they were let through once everyone else's weapon was confiscated.

The royal guard that questioned Astaroth followed him with his eyes, all the way into the palace. A royal guard escort replaced the escort that had brought them.

They were standing closer to them, almost boxing them in with their large armored frames.

They escorted Astaroth and his group across many hallways, in a fashion that made it seem like they were lost. After fifteen minutes of walking around, they finally led them into a room.

The room had lavish decorations like it housed dignitaries, not a rag-tag bunch of warriors and an old mage.

The royal guards then split up, with one staying inside the room with the group, two standing guard outside the door, and the last one going to announce their arrival.

When the other guards had left the room, Aberon turned to Astaroth.

"We need to talk. Privately." Aberon said, grabbing Astaroth by his arm, and dragging him to a corner of the room.

Once they were there, Aberon waved his arm behind him. A wall of condensed mana formed, from the floor to the ceiling, becoming opaque when it finished forming.

Astaroth stared at the wall in amazement.

"What spell is this?" He asked, sliding his fingers across the surface.

"It is telekinesis, but that is of no importance right now." Aberon replied.

"I know you still have your weapons on you. It was a good choice to hide them when you did." Aberon continued.

"Now, we have little time to discuss, so I will make this short. Don't interrupt me." He added.

Astaroth nodded his head in understanding.

"Good. The king is not our ally in this situation. He can't refuse you access to the coming of age ceremony, in normal circumstances, but these are far from." Aberon said, pacing slightly.

"You are to, under no circumstance, reveal the fact that you can perform soul magic. If you do, the king will most likely have you captured and imprisoned until you pledge allegiance to him." He continued.

"If he asks you to pledge allegiance to him, you say yes, but when the time comes, you pledge it to the kingdom. Not to him." Aberon added, staring at Astaroth, making sure he understood.

"This will make sure you are protected, and that he won't be able to force you into anything. Of course, it won't keep him from using underhanded methods, but at least, it will buy us time to respond in kind." He continued.

"Are we clear on this?" Aberon finished.

"Yes, sir." Astaroth nodded, solemnly.

"Good." Aberon said, waving his hand again, making the wall disappear.

When the wall appeared, the royal guard in the room drew his weapon.

"Drop the spell!" He ordered, walking towards the mana wall.

Chris walked in between the guard and the magic wall, lifting his arms up in a show of peace.

"Calm down, soldier. You don't want to anger that mage, now, do you?" He asked the soldier, trying to get him to back off.

"Move out of the way, sir. Or I will have to cut you down." The soldier said, pointing his sword at Chris.

Chris was unfazed by the power-move the soldier tried to pull, as he kept eye contact with the young man.

"Listen, kid. Let them have their chat. There is no reason to go crazy for a few hidden words." Chris said, his arms still in front of him.

"What if they're plotting to kill the king?! I can't let that happen! Move aside!" The soldier said, taking another step forward.

"I can assure you, that mage wouldn't talk about such a subject here." Chris tried reassuring the man.

"If the Omni-mage wanted to kill the king, he wouldn't have wasted time bringing us here." He added.

The guards from outside the room had come in after they heard shouting, and now Aj'axx and Korin were also trying to block their way.

I'dril stood in the back, ready to cast his magic at a moment's notice. But before the situation could go any further, the magic wall went down and disappeared.

Aberon, seeing the new situation, crossed his arms in disappointment.

"What's all this fuss about?" He asked, looking at I'dril, who was closest to him.

"Just a misunderstanding, right boys?" Chris said before I'dril could open his mouth to answer.

Aberon scanned the entire room, looking at everyone concerned, trying to see who was looking for trouble. Only one person defiantly withstood his gaze.

"You." Aberon said, pointing at the guard that was in the room from the beginning.

"Why did you escalate this situation?" He asked the soldier.

"You hid behind magic, possibly to plot against the king! State what business you talked about behind the wall!" The royal guard said, trying to keep up a brave facade.

"That is none of your business, boy. Now, I think our audience with the king is upon us. Take us there." Aberon said, ignoring the request of the soldier.

That made the young man even angrier, and he took another step forward, his sword now dangerously close to Chris.

Aberon's eyes went cold.

"Wrong choice, boy." He said before an incredibly powerful aura radiated out of him.

The guards in the room all dropped to their knees, gasping for air, clawing at their throats to make their airways expand.

It was an exercise in futility, as it wasn't the airflow that was lacking. Their bodies were simply reacting to the feral fear Aberon's magic was inducing into them.

It lasted a few moments before another powerful aura washed over the room, this one cold. The court mage then walked into the room.

"Still causing trouble, I see. Keep this up and the king won't honor your audience with him, Aberon." Gelum'vire said, his gaze washing upon the room.

"Hmph! They started it." Aberon said, retracting his aura.

"Now, will someone lead us to this audience, or do you plan to waste more of my time?" Aberon asked, walking to the door.

Sigh

After sighing loudly, the court mage escorted the group to the audience room inside the palace. He was quite annoyed with having to do the job of a servant.

But he feared what other trick Aberon might pull if he left him in the care of weaker people. So he took the safest option and did it himself.

In a manner of minutes, the court mage had brought them in front of two massive doors, made of what looked like strong metals.

This door would pass as the entrance to a castle's keep if it wasn't adorned with gold, silver, and jewels across its entire surface.

He turned around, facing Aberon. Then he looked at each of the ash elves behind him.

"The king will see you now. Be on your best behavior, and know that if you disrespect our king, I shall have your head." Gelum'vire said, looking at everyone, one by one.

"That includes you, Aberon." He then added, setting his gaze back on the old mage.

"Let's get this over with." Aberon replied, ignoring the very obvious threat.

The court mage snorted, before turning around and opening the doors without touching them.

"Court mage Gelum'vire greets his majesty!"

