

## **New Eden 61**

### Chapter 61 Unbridled Rage

After announcing himself, the court mage walked into the audience room. Calling it a room was a disservice, really.

It was a large chamber, with a ceiling reaching high into the air, the point that if one weren't looking up towards it, they would not see it.

The area it covered was also massive, the room being fifty meters wide by one hundred long. At the end of the audience room, a set of stairs led up to a throne overseeing the whole chamber.

On the said throne sat an ash elf. He looked like he was bored and would have preferred not to be here at all.

As soon as the doors opened up and the court mage made his entry, he lazily gazed towards the door.

The man watched as the guests walked into the audience chamber, examining each one closely. He recognized some of them, and others, not.

He then fixed his gaze on old Aberon.

"Aberon! Old friend. Have you come to your senses and come to pledge your allegiance to the crown?" The man asked Aberon.

"King Vhol'drokk. Surely you jest. My allegiance is to the kingdom, not its crown." Aberon snidely replied, doing a half-baked bow.

"Watch your mouth, old man!" Gelum'vire shouted.

"Silence, court mage!" The king barked.

"Yes, my king." The court mage replied, bowing deeply, but keeping his eyes on Aberon with hatred.

"As for you, old fool. My father owed his life many times to you, so I let many things slide. But don't get too used to it. I am still your king." King Vhol'drokk said, looking at Aberon with contempt.

"Your majesty, let me get something straight. I respected your claim to the throne, because of your bloodline, and the immense respect I had for your father." Aberon started saying, his gaze becoming cold.

"Now, understand this. My loyalty was and has always been to the kingdom. Even when your father was king, it was so." He continued.

The king seemed irked at the reprimand he was getting from the old mage and lifted his hand to silence him.

"Enough. I see you are still as stubborn as always. Let us move forward from this farce." The king said, exasperation in his eyes.

"What is it you wanted from me, to have the audacity to request an audience?" He added.

"Trust me when I say this, my king, I don't want to be here anymore than you do. But they automatically declined any application for the coming of age ceremony from our village." Aberon said, disappointment in his eyes.

"You know the reason for that, old fool." The king interjected.

"Ahh yes. You don't want "traitors" to become stronger. But I have a person in the village that has no attachment to us." Aberon continued, disregarding the interruption.

"If he is from your village, how could he not be related to any of you?" The king asked, a little curious.

The king then started observing the two people he did not recognize. I'dril and Astaroth.

"Astaroth, come forward, boy." Aberon said, beckoning him.

Astaroth walked forward and stopped at Aberon's side. He did a slight bow, saluting the king, trying to minimize the animosity he could have against him.

"Hmm. At least you taught the kid some manners." The king said, resting his chin on his fist.

"I didn't teach him that." Aberon defended himself like Astaroth was at fault.

"But back to our business. This boy is not from our village. Not entirely." Aberon added.

"Oh?" The king said, raising an eyebrow.

"He is an Abnormal. Astaroth only landed in our village by a stroke of bad luck. We should not deny him his birthright." Aberon said, this time bowing lower, showing actual respect.

The action took the king slightly aback, as Aberon had never once bowed to him appropriately. Not even during his coronation.

"I see you are ready to put your pride aside for this boy. But tell me, mage, why should I grant him anything?" The king taunted.

"There is nothing to prove to me he isn't one day going to overthrow me. Especially if he grows around your lot." He added.

"Unless he were to pledge allegiance to me, here and now." He finished, flashing an evil grin.

"You are being unreasonable, king Vhol'drokk. You don't impose this on any other of your subjects. Where is your impartiality?" Aberon rebuked.

"Silence!" The king shouted, standing from his throne.

"Who are you, to lecture me, the king?! I have absolute say in my kingdom! My word is law! My orders, divine edicts!" He added, bursting in anger.

King Vhol'drokk walked down from his perch, fuming in rage. He strode up to Aberon and slapped him across the face.

"You come to MY palace with your demands. You! Who has no right to make demands of ME! And then, you refuse my merciful conditions?! I should have you executed right this moment!" The king shouted, spit flying out of his mouth as he did.

Aberon stood there, for a good while, motionless. His fists curled up, and Astaroth saw something around the man move.

When he focused his gaze on Aberon, he understood it was mana. Aberon's eyes were focused on the king before him and only emanated killing intent.

The surrounding mana was reacting to his unbridled rage, as it spun around him, kicking up an unnatural wind.

"Even your father never dared to strike me when we disagreed." Aberon said, his tone calm as the dead sea.

But the king could feel the seething rage rolling off of the mage. He tried stepping back, but was locked in place.

As he was trying to force his legs to move, scared for his life, his feet lifted off the ground. Seeing the aggression happening, the royal guards tried to come to their king's aid but were also stuck in place.

"Let him go, Aberon!" The court mage yelled, lifting his staff up, ready to fight.

Aberon barely registered him as a threat, but still reacted. He lifted his arm, pointing his palm at the court mage, and six barriers formed around the man.

The barriers stuck to each other like layers of an onion before slowly constricting. Gelum'vire started pushing back on them with his own magic, but could only hold them at bay, not break them.

The king, seeing how the situation was turning, tried crying out for help.

"I implore the... Mmm... mmm!!!!" He started screaming, before his lips fused together, closing his mouth.

"No one is coming to your aid, boy!" Aberon shouted, the mana around now swirling like a miniature hurricane.

Aberon's robes were flapping in the magical wind, and Astaroth, who was right beside him, had a hard time just standing. He watched on, as his magic mentor was about to commit an irreparable sin.

Astaroth wished for Aberon to stop his actions, but could not muster up the courage to tell him. Even Chris, I'dril, Korin, and Aj'axx were only watching on, in horror.

"Can nobody stop him before this goes too far?" Astaroth thought, almost in prayer.

A feminine voice answered his silent wish, talking in his head.

"I can help, but you need to call my name." The delicate voice said to him.

"Who are you?" Astaroth responded in his mind, looking around.

"I am the kingdom spirit, Alantha Anulo. Call out my name and I shall stop this madness." The voice replied.

"How does this work?" Astaroth answered, confused.

"Implore for my help, say my name, and I shall answer your call. Quickly!" The voice said, with a bit more insistence.

Astaroth clasped his hands together in a prayer motion. And in an unperceivable whisper, he called out.

"I implore for your protection, Alantha Anulo. Please stop this before it goes any further."

As Astaroth was having this mental conversation, Aberon lifted his other arm, pointing it at the floating king.

When the arm was pointed at him, the king felt the surrounding air become thinner. It soon became harder for him to breathe, as the oxygen was lacking.

He slowly started suffocating, his skin taking on a shade of bluish-purple, as his consciousness faded away.

Aberon was looking into the king's eyes as life slowly slipped away from them. And all he could feel was rage.

"I should have done this the day you stole the throne from your father!" Aberon yelled, his eyes bloodshot.

It was at that exact moment that Astaroth made his prayer.

The mana in the room suddenly stopped. Immediately after, it siphoned away from the spells being cast and converged toward the ceiling.

The king dropped to the ground like a rag doll, gasping for oxygen, and Gelum'vire ran to his side, looking at Aberon in hatred.

Meanwhile, the mana that had converged was glowing, and slowly taking the shape of a person.

It started glowing as the shape finished forming, looking like the silhouette of a woman. The glowing silhouette slowly floated down from the ceiling, landing in front of Astaroth.

The glow disappeared, as the silhouette crouched before Astaroth, putting her hand on his head.

"Fear no longer, child. I shall protect you from harm." She said in a soft voice.

Chapter 62 The Kingdom's Spirit

As Astaroth felt the hand upon his head, he looked up. His eyes were met with a beautiful face of black skin.

The face belonged to a fair woman, decked in a semi-transparent gown, adorned by the constellations of the night sky.

Her eyes were black as night, the same as her skin, and her pupils resembled lunar eclipses, glowing in delicate light.

Her appearance fascinated Astaroth. She appeared ethereal with hair in pink and purple tints, flowing around her head, and down to her hips, as a nebula in the depths of space.

Everyone in the audience chamber knelt when she appeared.

"Greetings! Lady Anulo!" Everyone saluted simultaneously.

Realizing who was before him, Astaroth also dropped to a knee. The spirit of the kingdom had answered his pleas!

"Stand up, young Astaroth." Alantha said, her voice sounding like a melody.

"You... You know my name?" Astaroth stammered, getting back to his feet.

"I know the name of all ash elves, those that are, and those that were." She answered, her voice soothing his fears.

The king, seeing the spirit of the kingdom, thought it was here to protect him from harm.

"You are looking at the wrong person, spirit. The perpetrator is Aberon!" He said, pointing at the kneeling old mage.

"Silence!" She roared, her hair nebula flaring up around her.

"I am the king! You should obey ME!" The king shouted in anger.

"Remember your place, mortal." Lady Anulo replied, floating to the king.

"You might be king to mortals, but you hold no power over me." She added, stopping mere feet from him.

"You vowed to uphold justice and to protect your people when you were handed the crown. To whom did you vow these things, Vhol'drokk Uuthli'vlos." The spirit demanded, looming over the king's body.

"To you, my lady." The king grumbled in reply after a few seconds of fuming.

"Then you would do well to remember it, before giving me orders, mortal." Alantha said, before turning around and floating to Aberon.

"As for you, Aberon. I shall view your actions today as upholding justice in the kingdom. But never again shall you raise your hand against your king. Understood?" She told the old mage.

"As you wish, my lady." Aberon replied, still kneeling in submission.

"Good." She answered, hovering back to Astaroth.

"And you, child. I shall give upon you what was asked." She told him, kissing his forehead.

The action took aback Astaroth, but he couldn't react as vertigo took hold of him. He felt as if he was floating through the vast expanse for a few seconds before reality took hold again.

He heard a notification in his head.

**\*Ding\***

**\*Your racial trait has been unlocked. You now have the passive skill 'Children of the Stars'\***

Astaroth quickly glanced at his skill list to see its effects.

Child of the Stars: Your race was born from the Elven race's plea to the stars in times of war. The stars have gifted them the second race of elves, built for war. Your stats are 10% higher than normal. That bonus doubles during the night, when you shine most.

"So overpowered!" Astaroth thought to himself.

"But he works with the traitors!" The king exclaimed in consternation.

Lady Anulo disappeared from before Astaroth and reappeared before the king instantly.

"Silence, mortal! These men are not traitors to the kingdom. Only to your savage intentions. They shall not be treated as traitors before me!" She said, her hair flaring up again.

The king audibly gulped, his face white as chalk. He held no actual power before the spirit of the kingdom, and that had always bothered him.

He was king. Shouldn't the spirit obey him always?

The truth was far from that, as the spirit was an entity bound to the kingdom itself, not its king. He resentfully bowed his head, no longer daring to open his mouth.

Alantha stared down at the king for a few more seconds before floating back to Astaroth. She didn't know why, but the boy held a certain attraction to her.

"Child." She said, reaching Astaroth.

"Yes, my lady?" Astaroth replied.

"To appease this fool's worries, you shall pledge allegiance to me. Do you accept?" Lady Anulo asked.

Astaroth briefly turned his head to Aberon, seeking approval. Aberon simply nodded his head, signaling it was ok.

"Gladly, my lady." He then replied to her request.

"Good. Then repeat after me." She started saying.

"From this day forth, I Astaroth"

"From this day forth, I Astaroth"

"Pledge my undying loyalty to the kingdom of ash elves."

"Pledge my undying loyalty to the kingdom of ash elves."

"I shall never plot or scheme for its downfall"

"I shall never plot or scheme for its downfall"

"Or bring harm to its people unjustly."

"Or bring harm to its people unjustly."

"I swear this on my soul."

"I swear this on my soul." He repeated after her.

As he said the last phrase, Astaroth felt a burning sensation in his soul, like he was being branded. He bore with it, and it only lasted a few seconds.

When the sensation died down, he could tell that acting against this pledge would cost him dearly.

"The pledge is complete. Do you acknowledge this, king Vhol'drokk?" The spirit said, turning to the king.

"Yes, my lady." The king growled.

"The affront of this spirit!" He thought in his mind.

"As for the attack on his majesty, take it as Aberon teaching you a lesson in my stead. You shall not harm him for it. Are we clear?" Lady Anulo affirmed.

"But..." The king started protesting.

But the spirit was already glaring at him, with her black eyes piercing his soul.

"Yes, my lady." The king said, gritting his teeth.

The spirit nodded her head, satisfied with his response. The next moment, her form started flickering lightly.

"It seems I have extended my stay. Stay safe, my children." The spirit said, before vanishing in a flourish of pink and purple like she was sucked into her nebula hair.

The king straightened up before walking back up the stairs that led to his throne. He sat back into it, looking at the 'guests' before him in hatred.

"You have what you came for, mage. Now leave my palace and my city. I never want to see you again." The king said angrily, waving his hand at them.

Aberon and the group got up, turning to leave. But not before Aberon poked at the bear one more time.

"The pleasure was all mine, your highness. Know that the feeling is mutual." He said as he left the audience chamber.

As soon as the group had left the room, and the doors were closed behind them, they heard something crash into the doors.

"Seems like we angered him." Chris chuckled as they were being escorted by another squad of royal knights.

"The king has always had a short temper." Korin added from the side, a small grin plastered on his lips.

"Keep moving and stop talking!" The guard at the front ordered aggressively.

"Aye aye, sir." Korin mocked.

"Stop taunting them, rogue. You just might make them snap at us." Aberon said, still snickering from his last comment to the king.

"You're one to talk, old man." Astaroth said, looking at Aberon before laughing.

The entire group then burst into laughter. It was not every day that someone got into a scuffle with royalty and lived to tell the tale.

The guards angrily escorted them outside the palace, and a squad of regular soldiers brought them all the way outside the city.

Meanwhile, inside the audience chamber.

"RRAAARRRGHHH!!!!!!" The king screamed in a beastly manner.

"I swear that spirit wants me gone from power! She is never on my side of things." He howled.

"I promise her to expand the kingdom and make her more powerful, and all she thinks about is the loss of men from going to war!" He added, throwing things around the room.

The royal guards feared getting hit by projectiles, but couldn't move from their post, lest they anger their monarch even more.

The king pushed the throne to the side, before turning to his court mage.

"Gelum'vire! I want you to have that boy captured!" He shouted while pointing his finger at the mage.

"But, your majesty, the spirit said to not harm them." The mage tried rebuking, knowing this idea was going to backfire against them.

"I don't care what she said! She can't hear me, anyway! I said capture the boy! Just say he stole something from the palace!" The king screamed, taking a step towards the mage.

"Yes, majesty!" Gelum'vire quickly said, not wanting to attract his king's ire.

"Good. Now I'm going to my secondary chambers! Have my concubines brought to me!" The king ordered, leaving through a door behind the throne.

"Yes, my king." Gelum'vire said, bowing as the king left the room.

He had the concubines fetched by one guard, knowing full well that one of them might die that night. Their king's mood was all but unpredictable.

He also told the guard to have a disposal team at the ready near the king's spare chambers. The quicker they responded to his call after the deed, the quicker his mood went back to normal.

Which was arrogant and hateful, but not arrogant and angry.

Gelum'vire then ordered a squad of bounty hunters to hunt down the boy, Astaroth. He told them the boy had stolen from the palace and that the king wanted to deal with him personally.

He also specified to not harm the rest of his surrounding party, lest they anger Lady Anulo.

Once the deed was done, the court mage teleported into his personal tower, intending to rest. He rubbed his temples as he lay down on his bed.

"This king is going to be his own downfall someday." Gelum'vire said, before turning to the side to sleep.

## Chapter 63 The Hunters

After being escorted back out of the city, Aberon, Astaroth, Aj'axx, I'dril, and Korin walked the same path they had walked to the gates on their arrival.



They garnered the same looks of disgust and hatred as previously, but this time around, Astaroth knew why. He simply ignored the masses, as they were but misguided people.

The group walked along the dirt road until they reached the fields, and then the plains. The trudge to the forest took longer, as the previous stressful experience, had exhausted them.

But they eventually made it to the forest. They did the trek into the woods, up to where they had left their carriage and the wooden stags.

The sun was setting on the horizon, making the forest already dusky. So Aberon delayed their departure.

"The night is upon us. We shall depart tomorrow." He said.

"What about repercussions?" Chris asked.

"You know how the king is." He added.

"I don't think he would be foolish enough to go directly against Lady Anulo. But as a precaution, do night watch in pairs." Aberon said, pensively.

The group agreed and set up camp. They knew it was risky to camp so close to the capital, with how the audience had turned out, but it was riskier to travel at night.

The forest had many predators that could hide well during the night, so a campfire was the only thing keeping them in view.

The first pair on watch duty was Korin and Astaroth. The second one would be Aberon and I'dril, and the final would be Chris and Aj'axx.

The group hoped that the night would be without trouble, letting them catch some sleep.

The hunters sent by the court mage had found the group when night had fallen. The campfire had given away their position.

The hunter party closed in on the campsite but quickly noticed the watchmen walking around. They stopped their advance with a hand signal.

The hunters gathered together, backing away from the campsite, making sure they remained unseen.

"What should we do, boss?" One hunter asked.

"I saw only two people on watch. Did any of you see more?" The hunter in the middle asked the group.

All of them shook their heads in a negative motion. The middle hunter then nodded in approval.

"Then we shall proceed as originally planned. Start spreading the sleep gas and make sure it covers the whole campsite before proceeding." The man ordered.

His group all nodded, and spread out in different directions, trying to go around the camp unnoticed. They circled the lit-up zone and then activated some devices that started spewing colorless and odorless gas.

As soon as the devices went into action, they brought up a cloth to their noses, from under their armor, making sure they didn't breathe in fumes.

This was a very efficient sleep gas, one that bounty hunters often used when going for a quiet capture. It worked by changing mana particles chemically, transforming them into gas.

This would normally work on any other mark, but their target this time was special. As soon as Astaroth saw the mana particles changing, he felt something was wrong.

He ran to Korin immediately. He recycled his air by creating a small magic wind around his head, so he wouldn't breathe in whatever it was the mana was producing.

When Astaroth got to Korin, the man was already half asleep, trying to crawl to Aberon's sleeping spot.

"Korin! What's happening!?" Astaroth asked in a panic.

"We... Are under... Attack. Wake... Up... The others." Korin said, staggering and finally collapsing to sleep.

When Astaroth turned to run to Aberon, he noticed through his mana vision that something had already covered the entire camp in a cloud of gas. It would most likely be useless to wake the others at this point.

So instead of doing the exercise in futility, Astaroth thought of another plan. He faked getting drowsy and let himself fall to the ground.

He planned to wait for their enemies to show up and deal with them if he could. He lay prone on the ground, keeping his wind spell going, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. A group of five men walked into the camp, all from different directions, with bands of cloth covering their mouths and noses.

They checked everyone was fast asleep, before walking towards Astaroth. Astaroth felt a light kick to his side but didn't react just yet.

"Seems like they are all out cold. Give the mark the Sleeping potion, to be sure, and let's be on our way." One of them said.

"Aye aye, sir." Another responded.

The man replied, then walked closer to Astaroth, kneeling beside him. He then grabbed Astaroth's shoulders and lifted his head a little.

Astaroth heard the pop of a cork and knew it was time to act. He opened his eyes abruptly and pulled his dagger out of his inventory.

The dagger appeared in his hand, and he jammed under the man's chin, his victim's eyes going wide. The hit didn't kill the man outright, but it caused him to hemorrhage, and try as he might, to stop the bleeding.

Astaroth then went to phase two of his impromptu plan and fused with White Death. He surmised that his upgraded stats would most likely reduce the effect of the gas, and he could fight without holding his spell.

As soon as he transformed, he howled to the moon, directly using his Alpha's Howl skill. Unabated terror struck three of the remaining men, but one man resisted it.

The man looked at his companions as they dropped to their knees and pissed themselves, and clicked his tongue in disappointment.

"Cowards." He simply said, before turning his head to look at Astaroth.

"Sweet trick, kid. Are you perhaps a Beastmaster too?" He asked Astaroth.

"Don't question me. I won't be answering your questions. I will just kill you and your friends." Astaroth replied, looking at the man like he was prey.

"You seem to misunderstand the situation here, kid. I'm not your prey. You are mine." The man responded, flashing a beastly grin.

The man then started shapeshifting into a mountain-lion-resembling cat, keeping most of his human traits.

His claws were gleaming in a reddish liquid substance, and Astaroth thought it was probably poison.

"I might not look as savage as your wolf form, but my puma form is more agile than canines." The now cat man said in a growly voice.

"You going to talk all night, or are we going to fight?" Astaroth asked, trying to taunt the man into action.

The hunter lunged at Astaroth, without warning, trying to cut at his belly with his glistening claws. Astaroth barely took a step back in time, dodging the blow and countering with a strike to the head of his own.

His opponent ducked out of the blow and stepped to the side, trying to swipe at his leg this time.

Astaroth stepped to the opposite side, walking out of the strike, and trying to kick the man's head.

The puma back-flipped away, taking his distance, before running sideways around Astaroth. Astaroth braced for the attack to come, following the puma with his eyes.

The hunter then jerked towards him, slashing at his thighs, forcing Astaroth to jump back, but he had lost sight of his surroundings. When he jumped back, he stumbled into Chris' sleeping body, tripping.

As he fell to his back, the puma appeared right over his body, looking at him with feral eyes.

"Got you!" The hunter said, slashing his claws across Astaroth's face.

Astaroth took the blow, and he kicked upwards, hitting the man in the stomach, and sending him flying upwards. His strength was clearly superior to his opponents'

"Got you too!" Astaroth responded, rolling on his back and getting to his feet in a swift motion.

The hit he took barely scratched his health bar, but the problem came from the accompanying effect. In his status effects, he could now see an icon of two Zs.

It said 'drowsy' under it. He didn't have time to read the exact effects, but he quickly felt them.

His eyes felt heavier already, and his movements became slightly sluggish. The hunter, of course, banked on this and kept his assault.

The more they fought, the more Astaroth accrued wounds, and the more stacks of drowsiness were applied. Until he could fight no more.

Keeping his eyes open was already an inhuman feat for him as he slumped to his knees.

"This fight was entertaining. Thank you for that." The hunter said, reverting to his human form.

Astaroth looked at him defiantly, with half-closed eyes.

"It's... not... over... yet." He replied, trying to fight off the sleepiness.

"Oh, but it is." The hunter replied, slamming a fist into Astaroth's jaw.

The hit instantly knocked the already half-asleep Astaroth out.

The rest of the hunter's group had finally snapped out of their terror as they walked back to their boss, heads hanging low.

"We're sorry, boss!" They all exclaimed simultaneously, bowing at ninety-degree angles.

"No use in apologizing. It was probably a skill." The head hunter said, giving them a chance to wash away their shame.

"But change out of your piss-stained pants." He added, before bursting out in laughter and grabbing his mark.

He threw Astaroth over his shoulder before walking back in the capital's direction. This had been a successful hunt, and he would get a fat bounty for it.

Just the thought of all that gold and the things he would buy with it made him break into a wide grin.

#### Chapter 64 Prisoner

After capturing their mark, the group of hunters walked back to their current lodgings. They could have brought the mark right back to the castle, but disturbing the king at this hour was probably not a good idea.

So they kept him drugged and locked until morning. In the meantime, they had whores and booze delivered to their rooms to celebrate the big money coming in.

The hunters gave a small toast to their fallen comrade, but did not dwell on him for long. Those were the risks of bounty hunting.

They emptied a bottle of ale on a prostitute's tits to honor his memory and forgot him for the rest of the night.

The next morning, at the chant of a rooster, the head hunter woke up. He was still groggy from his debauchery and drank a leftover hot ale from the night before, to wash away the hangover.

He smelled of ale and sex, so he went wash up in the public baths before going to the castle. He could not seek an audience smelling like a cheap whorehouse, now, could he?

After a quick bath, the headhunter got dressed in his cleanest clothes, which comprised a pair of pants unstained of blood, and a fresh shirt he bought the day before.

It wasn't anything fancy, but at least he wouldn't look like a savage. He went to grab money bag, which was what he called his mark, and made sure the drugs were still in effect, before flinging him over his shoulder.

The head hunter walked out of his lodgings, holding the still unconscious Astaroth over his shoulder, and walked towards the city gates. He and his gang lived outside the wall, in the poorer part of the city.

Once he was at the gates, he bypassed the queue, throwing a gold coin at the guard, and walked inside the city. The guard nodded at him, catching the coin and pocketing it.

Of course, he was recognized by the guard, but bribes usually loosened their strict moral code. And hunters were not above such methods.

He kept carrying his package to the castle gates, this time staying behind the line. Some people in this queue were nobles or very rich merchants, whom he didn't want to anger or displease.

After all, who would anger a potential future client? It took only fifteen minutes before it was his turn.

When the guards asked him about his business within the castle, he responded with the contract signed by the court mage. He was let through rapidly and was escorted to the palace.

There, his escort was taken over by a royal guard. The royal guard in question was the same one that had suspected Astaroth the day prior.

A grin appeared on his lips when he saw who the hunter was carrying.

"I knew something was weird with you!" He said, smiling before he threw a vicious punch at the unconscious man's face.

He hit Astaroth's nose, instantly drawing blood, to which the hunter reacted by dropping his package.

"Hey, man! Don't get blood on my fresh shirt!" The head hunter said, kicking Astaroth in the stomach.

Astaroth was still unconscious on the ground, oblivious to what was happening. His only clue to this later would be his bloodied nose and sore ribs.

The guard laughed at the hunter's reaction before kicking Astaroth, too. The hunter grinned before grabbing Astaroth again, this time by the scruff of his armor, to drag him along.

The royal guard led him to the audience chamber, where the king awaited their arrival with impatience.

The guard announced their presence, pushing the door before entering the room with the hunter. The king smiled when he saw the state Astaroth was in.

"I see you bring me back my thief." King Vhol'drokk said in a satisfied voice.

"Yes, your majesty. This one was feisty, too. Killed one of my men." The hunter said, looking at the king expectantly.

"And I shall compensate you justly for it. Court mage!" The king called.

"Yes, my king." Gelum'vire answered, bowing his head.

"Compensate this man. Give him a thousand gold pieces for bringing me the thief, and another five hundred for losing a comrade." The king ordered.

"Yes, my king." The court mage replied, making his way to a side door.

"As for you, hunter. What is your name?" The king then turned to ask the hunter.

"My parents gave me the name Do'bauthin Ragar, your majesty." the hunter replied, bowing deeply.

"Hmm. Escapist finder. A fitting name, if I may say." King Vhol'drokk said, grabbing his chin.

"Thank you, my king. You honor my parents and me with your words. And your generosity knows no bounds." Do'bauthin said, metaphorically licking the king's boots.

"Now tell me, hunter. How did this whelp manage to best one of your men?" The king asked.

"He resisted the sleeping gas tool we bounty hunters use. I do not know how, but he did." Do'bauthin replied, scratching his cheek.

To him, that would stay an eternal mystery. Rare were the ones that did not fall to that tool.

Unless they were powerful enough to resist the effect, all men fell. And this kid was not powerful enough, of that he was sure.

"Hmm." The king hummed as he fell into deep thought.

The hunter dared not interrupt his thoughts, so he remained motionless and silent. The next sound to be heard was the sound of a door opening.

The Court mage was with a chest of gold. Two guards were carrying it, and they dropped it before Do'bauthin.

"Your payment, hunter." Gelum'vire said, before walking back to the king's side.

"Thank you, sire." The hunter said, before walking to the chest.

He could feel rich just by standing in front of it. The weight was nothing he couldn't handle, so he hoisted it over his shoulder and prepared to leave.

But before he did, he turned and said one last thing.

"We didn't have magic-suppressing cuffs, so I recommend you put some on him. He was the first to notice fluctuations in mana from our tool, so he might be a mage." Do'bauthin said, before turning to leave.

Once he was out of the room, Gelum'vire made a head gesture to a guard, and the guard went to fetch magic-suppressing cuffs. He would heed the advice, simply because one was never too prudent.

The guard soon came back with the cuffs, swapping out the ones already on the prisoner. The mage could feel mana emanating from Astaroth, although diminished, even with the cuffs on.

That perplexed him a bit, but he wrote it off as residual mana. It wouldn't matter anyway, as the cuffs would suppress any attempt at casting a spell of any kind.

"Gelum'vire." The king called, snapping him out of his trance.

"Yes, my king!" The court mage responded, jolted back to reality.

"You seem perplexed. Care to explain why?" King Vhol'drokk asked his court mage.

"It's hard to explain, your majesty." The mage started explaining.

"It's like there is still mana emanating from him, even with the magic-suppressing cuffs. But that should be impossible." He added.

"And what do you think is causing such a phenomenon?" The king asked.

"I don't know, your majesty. But it might simply be residual mana from his fight. I have no way to tell." Gelum'vire said, a little awkward at his lack of a better answer.

"Then it matters not. Have him brought to the cells. I want to interrogate him when he wakes up." The king said, waving his hand dismissively.

"Yes, your majesty." The court mage replied.

Gelum'vire then waved at two guards and had them bring the prisoner to the holding cells. The king would not let go until he had the answers he wanted, so the kid might be there for a while.

His only ways out were to give satisfactory answers or death. He hoped the kid would not be stubborn, because killing him would most likely anger the kingdom's spirit.

And that was something that had to be avoided at all costs. The king's right to rule would be at stake then.

The two royal guards brought Astaroth to the holding cells and unceremoniously threw him into one. They then bowed to the court mage and took their leave.

Gelum'vire stood before the prison cell for a while, wondering just what the kingdom spirit wanted from this boy. Rarely had it reacted like this to defend a single citizen other than the king.

Since they would only get answers when the hunter's drogues wore off, the mage wasted no more time here and left. Soon, the only noise around was the sound of rats squealing and running around.

Many hours passed by before Astaroth finally came to. His mind felt cloudy, memories of what happened last, hazy.

He tried looking around him, but everything was just bright and foggy. It took him some time before his vision gradually started clearing up. Then he heard a young-sounding voice near him.

"Are you finally awake, sir?" Said the voice.

Astaroth had to focus just to hear where that voice had come from. When he pinpointed it, he turned his head.

Looking at him from behind a set of bars was a little boy. It was more accurate to say he was the one behind bars from the looks of the surrounding room.

Astaroth focused on the boy.

"Who are you? And where am I?" Astaroth asked.

Chapter 65 The Test

**\*\*\*POV David Magnus\*\*\***

It had almost been a week of in-game time now since the tournament positions had locked. David was currently playing his character in the game, named Khalor.

Khalor was an undead caster type, in the wraith subrace. But his class was special.

Khalor was wielding a bident, contrary to the normal caster weapon of wraiths. He was using a mix of spells and melee fighting, using every bit of time he had during the fight.

Khalor was currently in a zone where he could cross paths with other players, so he was trying to go further into monster territory. His current level was 36, so he could advance much further into monster territory.

Khalor could reach zones of monsters a few levels over him and still fight well alone. He pushed further into the zone to get away from prying eyes.

Khalor was already attracting unwanted attention with his uncommon weapon for his class. So many players approached him to know where he had gotten it, and if it was a class-related weapon.

Some went further still, trying to pry the information out of him. Those, he reserved a very nasty fate to, wiping the floor with their bodies and stealing their loot.

As Khalor made it into the level forty monster zone, most players stopped following him. They did not want to die in that zone and lose their hard-earned levels.

As soon as his groupies stopped hounding him, he found a quiet place with open fields and stood still.

"Come out." He said, raising a hand in front of him.

At first, nothing happened. But then the ground shook and hands started popping from the ground.

Some consisted only of bones, others were in multiple different stages of decomposition. A few ghost-like entities also started appearing from thin air.

Khalor looked at the small undead army form up before him with a smile.

"We answer our master's call!" Those that had vocal cords shouted as the line finished forming.

As for the others, they either clacked their bony jaws together or performed an eerie wail that pierced the veil of the afterlife.

Khalor grinned widely, in a fashion most would describe as devilish. But to him, it was just his natural smile that had been deformed by his past experiences.



"We hunt once more, my friends! For our lord! Hades!" Khalor rallied, before marching deeper into the monsters' territory.

As soon as the horde of undead, numbering in the dozens, met a monster, the poor soul would be shredded to pieces.

Khalor only joined in to keep his undead from getting killed, and mostly observed from the side the rest of the time.

They hunted a while in this fashion, before entering what Khalor knew was a Zone Boss's territory. They wouldn't cross another monster for a while until he heard a loud screech.

An armored form walked up to Khalor. The only thing distinguishable from its face, hidden underneath a full-faced war helm, were two glowing purple eyes.

It stopped in front of Khalor and knelt.

"Master. The creature has appeared. It is in the clearing up ahead, but refuses to come down from its perch, even with all the taunts thrown at it." The armored form said in a cavernous voice.

The armored form before Khalor was a Death Knight, one of the strongest undead to exist. Hades himself had assigned it to him, to act both as a guard and a monitor.

Khalor was currently trying to prove his worthiness to lord Hades, to inherit his legacy. He knew from past information that Hades's legacy was one of the strongest there was, and he needed it for his plan.

Khalor nodded at the Death Knight's words, and walked forward, entering the aforementioned clearing. And there it stood.

On a tree, highly perched, sat a gigantic two-headed raven, with feathers falling and skin rotting. This undead monstrosity was his test.

Lord Hades has ordered him to make it a part of his forces, as proof that he could tame the forces of undeath, and lead them into battle to maintain balance.

Khalor was more than welcoming this challenge, as he already knew what needed to be done. So many players had attempted this challenge before him and failed.

But he would be different because he knew. He knew the way.

Khalor ordered his small army to back away from the bird, and he himself walked forward. He stopped in the middle of the clearing.

"All of you, back away. I don't want anyone to interfere in this fight." Khalor ordered his undead army.

"Yes, Master!" They responded.

As if of one mind, all of his undead lackeys walked to the edge of the clearing, and turned to observe their master. They instinctively knew their master would fight with all he had.

Khalor looked at his army retreating and then turned to face the bird. He simply stood still, looking it in the eyes.

The raven eventually cawed loudly. Words echoed loudly in Khalor's mind.

"Have you come to best me, servant of Hades?" An ethereal voice asked.

Khalor only responded with a smirk, not even opening his mouth.

"Then so be it." The voice echoed in his mind again.

"Die!" The voice shouted, as the bird cawed loudly.

The two-headed raven dove from its perch, heading directly toward Khalor, who finally reacted. He burst forth, heading towards the bird too, on a collision course.

His bident appeared in his hand, as he lunged to the side slightly, evading the deadly talons, as it zoomed past him. He jabbed his bident at the bird as it flew past, drawing first blood.

The raven did a couple of dive passes, trying to catch Khalor in its claws, but every time missing and receiving damage instead. It knew it had to change tactics.

After regaining altitude, it flapped its wings, keeping its body afloat at around one hundred feet in the air. Khalor looked at it fly up and braced for the next dive pass.

But instead of diving back down again, the raven spread its wings wide, screeching loudly. The next moment, feathers detached from its body, with the pointy tips aimed at Khalor.

The feathers then shot forward at breakneck speeds, aiming to impale him and end his life. Khalor, of course, would not let them.

He started running in a curved path, forcing the feathers to spiral toward him. Khalor kept just enough speed for the feathers to miss him and land on the ground behind him.

After the last feather hit the ground, he abruptly stopped his running and faced the raven.

"You are not the only one with ranged attacks!" He yelled as he brought his bident before him.

"Skull Bombs: Death's Cascade!" He shouted as hundreds of skull-shaped white flames appeared behind him.

When he swung his bident at the raven, half the skulls launched forwards, aimed directly at the bird in the sky.

The raven's eyes turned to slits, as it dove at an angle, trying to imitate Khalor's previous maneuver. Unfortunately for it, Khalor had considered that possibility.

He waved his bident again, this time sending the remaining skulls on a collision course with the raven, opposite the other skulls.

The raven, realizing its mistake, changed its plan. Instead of flying into the skulls at full speed, it flew back upwards before curling its wings on itself.

The skulls all hit their mark, causing a midair explosion. The skies flared up in bright white light, visible for many miles around.

Khalor knew this fight wasn't done, since he got no kill notification, and he awaited the raven's emergence. He didn't wait for long, as the bird flew out from the fire, still burning white.

It screeched loudly, aiming its hate-filled eyes at Khalor. The raven performed a full circle in the air, gathering speed, before diving at him at speeds unperceivable.

Khalor lost sight of the monster when it dove, as it became a blur in the wind. But he was not worried.

Quite the contrary. A victorious smirk appeared on his lips as he lowered his weapon.

Khalor, instead of bracing for impact, or trying to dodge, stretched his arms to the sides, making a T pose.

The raven flew right into his chest, becoming a shadow as it did, and disappearing. When it did, Khalor slumped to the ground, his eyes closed, but his face still sporting a smile.

When he opened his eyes, he was floating in a dark space, devoid of any light. Before him, floated the gigantic raven, looking at him with predatory eyes.

It spoke into his mind.

"Do you fear death!?" The raven asked.

"I fear not death, as it is but a cycle of life." Khalor responded calmly.

"Then what do you fear, puppet of Hades?!" It said, with a follow-up question.

"I fear but only the end of the cycle and the break in its balance." Khalor said.

He was reciting from memory what the last owner of the legacy had said, in hopes it would still work for him. The raven looked at him for a few moments, its beak still closed.

"What could a weak thing like you ever do against an event like the break in balance and the stop in the cycle of life?" The raven asked, its eyes squinting.

"All I could do is to struggle to keep balance and force the wheel to keep rolling. At the cost of my own life, if need be!" Khalor replied, clenching his fists.

The raven looked at him, keeping quiet. Then it flapped its wings, sending Khalor tumbling through the space.

"Then so be it! I will help you in your futile endeavor, if only to collect your soul myself at the end!" It bellowed.

Khalor hit an invisible wall and lost consciousness. When he came to, he was sprawled on the ground in the clearing, a small two-headed raven perched upon his chest.

'It worked!' Khalor thought to himself, clenching his fists and grinning like a madman.

Chapter 66 Unexpected Helper

\*\*\*Back to our MC\*\*\*

"Who are you?" Astaroth asked again when the boy didn't respond.

"It matters not who I am, for now." The boy replied.

"Lady Anulo has tasked me with helping you break free. But I want an answer first." The boy asked.

Astaroth looked at the boy incredulously. Was this a stratagem? Would his captors pop up after he escaped and re-capture him, before torturing him for trying to escape?

He couldn't tell by the boy's facial expressions. The only thing he could tell from the boy at all was that he came from a wealthy background since he was richly dressed.

"Can you at least tell me where I am?" Astaroth asked, trying to switch his angle.

The boy looked at him weirdly, like he should know where he was, before answering.

"Do you not know?" He asked, frowning a bit.

"I wouldn't ask if I did, buddy." Astaroth asked, a little exasperated.

"You are in the royal holding cells." The boy replied flatly.

"The royal...I'm back in the palace!?" Astaroth asked, slightly panicking.

"I shouldn't be here! Please, if you were sent to help me, do so fast." He added, in a hurry.

"On one condition." The boy said.

"Name it!" Astaroth instantly accepted.

"Tell me why I feel multiple souls from your body." The boy said, his gaze locked on Astaroth's eyes.

Astaroth froze for a moment. He really shouldn't tell anyone about his powers if he believed what Aberon had told him.

But now he had the choice to either rot in jail and possibly be tortured and killed, or tell the kid and be hunted forever.

His mind raced to find another option, but he couldn't think straight until the boy spoke again.

"Usually, only murderers have souls clinging to them. Most often of the people they killed." He said, frowning as he looked at Astaroth.

"And in those cases, the souls are resentful. But that isn't your case." He added, peering into Astaroth's eyes like he was looking straight at his soul.

"I feel another soul tied to yours, and it seems... at peace? There is also something else." The boy said, tilting his head to the side.

"It looks like... an egg?" He said, half questioningly.

"Kid, I'm no murderer. I swear." Astaroth tried defending himself.

"Then answer my question." The kid re-stated his condition.

Astaroth still hesitated. There was so much risk at hand here. The soft voice of Alantha Anulo then whispered in his ear.

"It is alright, he is a friend." Astaroth heard softly.

"If you don't answer me..." The kid started saying, turning to leave.

"I'm a Soulmaner!" Astaroth blurted out.

"The soul you feel inside me is my contracted spirit. As for the other, I don't know what it is yet." He admitted.

"A Soulmaner... Now I see why father wants you in his possession." The kid said.

That statement baffled Astaroth. He had already guessed why he was in the royal holding cells.

The king wanted something from him. Or maybe he just wanted to stick it to Aberon by killing a friend of his.

He couldn't know the exact reason, but those were two guesses that sounded plausible. But now this kid said his father?

"Are you perhaps... A prince?" Astaroth asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"That would be correct." The boy answered like this situation was entirely normal.

"Then why? Why are you helping me?" Astaroth questioned, his mind falling into confusion.

"I told you already. Lady Anulo asked me to help you." The boy replied.

Sounds then echoed off the walls from afar. It sounded like someone was opening a gate.

The prince's eyes widened in fear.

"Quick! Put your hands to the bars!" He ordered Astaroth, getting closer to the cell.

Astaroth did as he was told and soon felt a weight fall off his wrists. The thunk of something hitting the soft ground followed it.

With his hands now free, Astaroth already felt better, but then a voice shouted in his mind.

"Kid! You finally hear me." He heard White Death's voice in his head.

"No time to chat! We're fusing right now!" Astaroth replied, using his Spirit Melding spell.

The prince watched on in amazement, as Astaroth's hair turned white, and some white fur grew on his arms and face.

"Move aside, your highness!" Astaroth said, stretching his leg.

The prince hurriedly stepped away from the front of the cell, as Astaroth kicked on the cell door, sending it flying off its hinges and into the wall in front of it.

"Quick! This way!" The prince then said, pointing in the opposite direction from the footsteps.

The sound of steps quickened after the cell door hit the wall.

'Aww shucks. We attracted their attention.' Astaroth thought to himself, before following the boy.

After barely five seconds of running behind him, Astaroth already felt like they wouldn't make it at this speed. Suddenly, the prince felt his feet leave the ground, and he gasped in surprise.

Astaroth looked at him from over his shoulder.

"Tell me the directions, I'll run for the both of us." He said, before dashing into the hall at much greater speeds.

The prince almost had the wind sucked out of his lungs from the sudden acceleration. He guided Astaroth through the halls at a speed he never would have dreamt of going.

Astaroth had to maneuver the corridors doing acrobatics since his speed was far from normal running speed, and the corridors were not made to accommodate someone running through them.

So he turned most corridors by jumping into them and kicking off walls, sometimes even looping up to the ceiling, to keep up his pace.

He could already tell that the steps were getting further away. He was losing them.

But then he had to come to a sudden halt. The path before him was a dead end!

"Boy! Did you trick me?!" Astaroth asked, turning the prince to face him.

"No! Put me down, quickly!" The prince ordered.

Astaroth dropped him down, and the prince walked to the wall. He started counting the bricks from up to down, and then from left to right.

The prince then slapped a brick on the wall. Nothing happened.

"What now!" Astaroth pressured him.

"This should be the right one!" He said, slapping the same brick again.

Still nothing.

"Step aside!" Astaroth said, before punching the brick with all his might.

The brick barely budged, but it shifted inwards just enough for the two boys to hear a click. The sound of gears started resounding from behind the wall before it caved in and slid to the right.

"A secret passage! Well done, your highness!" Astaroth said, before going to grab the prince again.

"No, leave me! You need to travel alone from here, or they'll think you kidnapped me." The prince said, backing up.

"Won't you be in trouble for helping me?" Astaroth asked, not wanting to leave the little prince in trouble after he had helped him escape.

"I'll just deny it! Now go!" He answered, before using his small arms to push Astaroth into the tunnel.

Once Astaroth was in the tunnel, he turned around.

"Won't I get lost in here?" He asked the boy.

"There is only a single path. Follow it and it will lead you to the inner walls. Hurry!" He answered, pushing another brick on the wall.

The wall then started sliding back into place. Astaroth heard the prince wish him good luck and say goodbye before the tunnel entrance was completely sealed.

Astaroth lightly punched the surface before turning around and bolting at full speed. He would not make the prince's efforts go to waste.

He ran even faster than before, unburdened by a passenger, and even dropped to all fours at some point. The feeling of running at this speed was exhilarating to him.

He soon saw some light at the end of his tunnel. It did not take long for him to reach there and bolt out into an alley outside the palace walls.

An alarm bell was being rung on the walls, probably alerting his escape. Astaroth undid the melding to regain a less animalistic appearance and grabbed a nearby cloth that was hanging on a clothesline.

He wrapped around his face, trying to cover most of his face. He didn't want to get caught just yet, so he had to be low-key right now.

Astaroth kept to the alleys and side roads inside the city, making his way to the city gates. Getting out would not be a simple task, but he had to do it, anyway.

He had to hide from patrols of running soldiers many times as he made his way to the gates. Some even almost caught him occasionally.

Once he was close to the city entrance, what he saw broke his hopes. The portcullis to the outside was closed and guards were everywhere.

His chances of getting out were practically zero now. He silently cursed his fate and the greedy king for wanting to imprison him.

Astaroth walked back deeper into the alley, trying to figure out a plan of action.

"Cmon Astaroth, think. Think!" He said, pacing the back alley.

Then a voice shocked him and froze his blood.

"Hey! You! Turn around slowly, so I can see your face!" The voice said from behind him.

'Fuck!' he cursed in his mind.

Chapter 67 The Swashbuckler

Astaroth raised his hands to tuck in his face-cover more.

"Hey! Slowly! And keep your hands where I can see them!" The soldier yelled at him from behind.

The commotion was garnering unwanted attention for Astaroth, as more soldiers had gathered at the entrance to the alley. He didn't see them, but he could hear the footsteps.

"I'm not looking for trouble." Astaroth replied, his hand suspended mid-air.

"Then do as told and turn around!" The soldier replied.

Astaroth heard the sounds of swords leaving sheaths. He knew things would get dicey if he stayed here.

Of course, he didn't want to kill innocent people, but if they forced him to do it, he wouldn't hesitate. It had become kill or be killed at this point.

Astaroth slowly raised his hands to his makeshift hood, and instead of lowering it, he pulled it further.

"I'm not an enemy, I swear. Just trying to mind my own business." Astaroth said, walking further into the alley.

"Stop! I said stop!" The soldier yelled as Astaroth tried to walk away.

"After him!" The soldier said, pulling out his sword.

Astaroth immediately used Spirit Melding to gain the extra stats and ran like hell. How hard could it be to lose a tail in a city, right?

And he was right, in part, that losing it was easy. At least, at the speed he was running away.

His problem lay elsewhere. Even after losing the tail, Astaroth couldn't rest for very long, before they found him again.

It was like he was trying to flee ants, in their own anthill. They kept finding him again, and again, each time with more soldiers and higher-ranked NPCs.

He couldn't leave the city through any of the gates, since they were highly guarded, but he couldn't climb the walls either. That would instantly reveal his location!

Astaroth quickly became caught between a rock and a hard place. During one of his many escapes, he received a system notification that gave him hope, though.

\*Ding\*

\*Only one hour remains before 'Tournament of Heroes' begins. Please be ready and in a safe location before teleportation. Any players imprisoned at the moment of teleportation will be automatically disqualified.\*

'I just need to keep running until the teleportation!' He thought.

Unfortunately for him, that would be easier said than done. The more he got found, the harder it was to escape.

It was only when there were five minutes left he got surrounded. He wasn't sure whether he would be fine for those five minutes, or if he would end up captured.

A soldier walked out of the encirclement. That soldier was a woman, wearing a set of leather armor with a metal pauldron.

Her armor had flourishes of gold and etchings on the pauldron, making her stand out from the crowd. She was wielding a rapier in one hand and a small buckler in the other.

Astaroth gazed at her, as he darted his eyes around, trying to find a flaw in the encirclement. He couldn't find one.

Time was still ticking as the woman stopped a few meters away from him, arms still at her side.

"Give up, garcon. You are surrounded." She said, with a thick accent.

Since Astaroth was from a French province, he recognized the accent and smirked.

"How well designed." He thought, looking at the woman.

She was in an accouterment that screamed French Swashbuckler, and her heavy French accent sold it even further.

"I am innocent, damoiselle. Please let me go." Astaroth tried to plead his case.



"Sottise, garçon! You have stolen from the king and escaped from prison. You are far from innocent!" She replied, swishing her rapier before her.

"Those were all lies, set up to capture me! I swear I did none of those crimes!" Astaroth rebuked.

"Well... Except flee from prison." He added, scratching the back of his head.

"Enough talking and get your face to the ground!" The woman barked.

Astaroth still had over three minutes before his teleportation, and he needed to stall. So he switched tactics.

Since talking things out was no longer an option, he would go for taunting.

"How dishonorable are you lot, ganging up on a single person? And here I thought the army was filled with mighty warriors, not cowards." Astaroth baited, switching his facial expression to a smirk.

The results were instant. The woman before him sneered in anger, raising her rapier.

"Who are you calling dishonorable, thieving boy? We are not the criminals here, you arrogant petit idiot!" She said, losing her temper.

"Then why don't you fight me in single combat, woman!" Astaroth replied, throwing down the misogyny card.

The woman instantly flared up.

"Are you mocking me, garçon?!" She yelled, her eyes almost popping out of their sockets.

"Do I even need to, woman? Your men don't think you can capture me alone, it would seem, as they have been inching closer every second." He replied, pulling off his most mocking grin.

"Assez! You will pay dearly for mocking me, garçon!" The woman shouted, bringing her buckler up and her rapier parallel to her face.

"Men! You are not to interfere. I will make him regret his words!" She added.

"Do you have the ability?" Astaroth taunted again, lowering his stance, ready to spirit meld and pounce.

"I will pierce your heart for your insolence! En Garde!" She yelled, as her men backed away a few feet.

Astaroth saw them back up and knew she might mean business. He would have to be serious from the start, just to remain unscathed.

Astaroth kept his eyes on the woman, ready to react at the slightest twitch. Sadly for him, he might have underestimated her.

The woman standing before him blinked out of existence, and Astaroth's instinct flared up, screaming at him to bend down. He didn't hesitate and did so.

A fraction of a second after he bent down, the woman reappeared in front of him, her rapier in a full extension where his heart had been.

Cold sweat broke out on Astaroth's back as he realized she hadn't disappeared. She was just moving too fast for him to see.

He directly started spirit melding, but the woman spun and whacked her buckler on the side of his head, sending him tumbling away.

When he got up, he was already fused with White Death, and his stats had their boost. He saw a blur come at him from the front and knew what it was.

He slid to the right slightly, watching something shine as it brushed past his arm before he struck his claw forward. He only scratched wood, as his hand was met with a buckler, not meeting his intended target.

The woman dashed back in a zigzag pattern, stopping four meters away from him.

"Finally showing some teeth, are you, garcon?" She said with a smirk.

"Do you still think I cannot apprehend you alone?" She added, getting serious again.

Astaroth arrogantly stretched his neck and arms.

"I was just warming up. You won't land another hit like that, I promise." He replied, getting back into a fighting stance.

He didn't want to use his weapons because he thought if he could hold out until the teleportation, he wouldn't add murder to his charges.

The woman in front of him sneered, before lifting her rapier up again.

"Tell me your name, garcon, so I know what to write on your gravestone." She said, arrogantly.

"Astaroth." He replied, not falling for the obvious taunt.

"Very well, Astaroth. My name is Sarnor Nacta. And today I will be your judge, jury, and executioner." She said, still in guard position.

Astaroth only smirked. He side-eyed the timer on his interface, and it showed two minutes left.

'Please, let me hold out that long.' He prayed to whoever would listen.

He was acting cocky on the outside, hoping to have the woman talk as much as possible, but knew this was a double-edged blade. If he pushed her too much, she might just try to kill him instead of capturing him.

And he realized he might have already watched that ship sail, as the woman was suddenly looking at him with ice-cold eyes. If eyes could kill, Astaroth would be dead already.

He stared down at his opponent, waiting for her to make the first move. She blurred out again, dashing in a circular motion at him, her rapier to the side, ready to strike.

She got to him a moment later, piercing forward with her rapier, as Astaroth jumped back slightly, trying to claw at her from the side, only to meet her shield again.

As his claws hit the shield, he felt barely any resistance, contrary to the precedent hit, and that worried him. He was right to worry, as the woman's arm and body followed the blow downwards.

The push forced her body into a lateral spinning motion, and she used the momentum to deliver a powerful overhead kick. Astaroth lifted his other arm to block.

He felt the leg smash into his forearm violently, like a sledgehammer meeting a brick wall, and one of his legs buckled under the weight, forcing him to kneel.

As his knee bent, he did a counter of his own and twisted his arm. He grabbed the woman's leg before she could retract it, and used all his strength to swing her toward the ground.

As he swung, Sarnor used her other foot to kick at his wrist, loosening his grip. She got free from his grasp, getting thrown away, instead of into the ground.

She hit the ground in a rolling motion, taking barely any damage, and getting back up in one motion.

Once up, she dusted her clothes. Sarnor looked at Astaroth with a tinge of respect, as she walked towards him with a steady gait.

She stopped before reaching him and stared him down.

"You are not as bad in combat as I thought you would be, garcon. But you are still grossly underestimating me." She said, lifting her weapon yet again.

Astaroth looked at his timer again. Only one minute left.

He braced for the next dash that would surely come, hoping the woman wouldn't pull a one-hit KO on him.

Sarnor dashed back at him, and they clashed many times in mere seconds, Astaroth always being careful not to give her too much power.

He kept eyeing the timer as he fought, causing him to receive small kicks and buckler whacks. The seconds were ticking oh so slowly for him, but they were ticking.

When the timer reached five seconds, Astaroth started glowing. Sarnor recognized the typical glow of a transportation spell and panicked.

Mana suddenly flared up around her as she went full throttle and end this farce. Four seconds.

She dashed back out of melee range, gathering some momentum. Three seconds.

She dashed back towards Astaroth, the cobblestone beneath her feet exploding behind her steps. Two seconds.

Sarnor brought her rapier back, before thrusting it forward violently, causing the air at the tip to rip. One second.

Astaroth smiled, as the tip of the rapier approached his heart. He glowed in golden light, blinding everyone around.

Sarnor, who was closest, had to close her eyes as the glow was like a miniature sun. Had she hit her target?

Chapter 68 Wrong Turn

As the flash of light died down, Sarnor re-opened her eyes. Her adversary was gone from his spot, but something made her smile slightly.

The tip of her sword was bloodied, on a length of about three inches and it was still dripping. That meant she had struck true.

One of the surrounding soldiers walked up to her.

"Ma'am! Should we tell the king he has escaped?" The man asked, saluting the woman.

"No. I shall report to sa majesté myself." She responded, dismissing the man.

Sarnor pulled out a cloth from her belt and cleaned the tip of her rapier. Judging by the length of the blood smear, she was almost certain she had pierced his heart.

Even if the boy had escaped, she was confident to say that unless he received immediate treatment from high-tier healing magic, he would die before the end of the day.

She was confident in her knowledge of anatomy to know that the boy would bleed from the inside and die from internal bleeding.

With this thought in mind, she smiled as she made her way back toward the castle gates. She would seek an audience with the king herself and announce the good news in person.

She could already smell the promotion on the horizon. She had been stuck at the rank of Major for a while, and she hoped this would fix her problem.

When Sarnor reached the castle gates, the royal guards let her through without even looking. She walked to the palace, where she went to ask for an audience with the king, to his attendant.

The attendant nodded to her before leaving to seek the king. After a little while, the attendant came back to her.

'The king will see you in the audience chamber in thirty minutes. He said to wait there.' The attendant told Sarnor.

She nodded her head back at him and walked to the audience chamber. She walked in and walked to the set of stairs that led to the throne.

Sarnor stopped there and kneeled, waiting for the king to arrive. She entertained her mind with fantasies of becoming a general and leading armies to battle.

She had always dreamt of riding into battle, thousands of men at her back. Ever since she was little, she had looked up to the kingdom's generals, even when said generals were banished for treason.

While she was daydreaming, the king entered the chambers through the door behind the throne. He walked up to the throne and sat lazily on it.

"I was told you have intercepted my prisoner. Where is he?" King Vhol'drokk asked, almost yawning.

"Yes, I have, majesté. I have dealt with it." Sarnor responded, her head still hanging low.

"But where is he now?" The king asked again, in annoyance.

"My king, the boy has escaped. But he..." She started saying, before being interrupted.

"He WHAT?!" The king howled, standing from his throne.

"He escaped, but he will not go far, my king!" Sarnor quickly replied before the king got the wrong idea.

"Why? Did you mark him or something?" Vhol'drokk asked, slightly hopeful.

"No, sire. Better yet. I inflicted a deadly wound on the criminal. He will not live through the day." She said, lifting her head with a victorious smile.

The king's face went still. He smiled warmly, a smile that most people would recognize as the epitome of fake smiles.

Sarnor, none the wiser, thought her king was proud of her. She looked at him proudly, as he walked down the steps to the throne, until he was standing before her.

**\*SLAP\* \*BANG\***

Vhol'drokk raised his arm so fast, Sarnor did not even see it blur, as it came back down at her face. The slap contained such strength, that any normal person would have died on the spot.

But Sarnor was a battle-hardened veteran. When the king's hand contacted her face, she was sent flying into the nearby wall, with incredible force.

"You IDIOT!" The king shouted.

"I needed him ALIVE!" He added, in fury.

Sarnor got back up from the rubble, her face bloodied and her body covered in debris and dust. She looked at the king in a terrified stupor.

"But majesté. I thought he was a criminal to be sentenced to death?" She tried defending her actions.

"I needed answers from him! Not death! How could you presume to know what I thought! YOU! Who can't even get your own men's respect!" The king howled, belittling her.

"My king, I apologize! Please let me make this right." Sarnor started pleading, throwing herself at the king's feet.

She kept her head to the floor, tears forming in the corner of her eyes. She had made a terrible mistake.

"Had he just escaped, I would have been disappointed only. But now, you leave me no choice." The king started saying, trying to regain his cool.

"Majesté! Please no!" Sarnor pleaded harder.

"I banish you! Until you find that boy's corpse and bring it back to me, you are not to step foot in this city again! Am I clear?!" Vhol'drokk said, turning his back to Sarnor.

Sarnor clenched her fists. She held her tears back and got up.

"Yes, my king! I shall bring his corpse back if it's the last thing I do!" Sarnor pledged.

"Now, begone, idiot girl. Before you sour my mood further." The king waved her away.

Sarnor performed a salute before rushing out of the audience chamber. She almost ran out of the palace, going to her private quarters in the military part of the castle to gather her things.

Once she made her bag, she left the place with a sense of bitterness. She might never see these quarters again.

She vowed to herself to find that boy, alive or dead, and bring him back to her king. Sarnor then closed the door and left the castle and city, not looking behind.

Meanwhile, in the audience chamber, the king was still sitting on the throne, chewing at his nails. He had called for his court mage to come to him.

The mage had been resting when a servant knocked at his tower's door. When the servant explained the situation to him, Gelum'vire shooed him away before getting dressed.

He walked in a quick stride towards the audience chamber, having a good guess why the king had called upon his presence. Once he got to the door, he pushed it in, not even announcing his arrival.

"Gelum'vire! Finally, you are here." The king said, standing up.

"The servant apprised me of the situation, my king. What can I do for you?" The court mage asked, bowing slightly.

"I want you to scry the boy's whereabouts before he dies. We need to find him, preferably before he dies, so we can fix this darned situation." The king said, pacing in front of the throne.

"My king, if the boy is already dead, it will not work." Gelum'vire replied.

"I know! That is why I am asking you to do this fast. We have a chance that he still lives." Vhol'drokk urged the mage.

"I understand, my king. I will need to prepare the materials for the scrying spell. May I take my leave?" The mage asked, bowing again.

"Yes, yes. Hurry." The king waved him away.

Gelum'vire did not need to be told twice, as he rushed out of the audience chambers. They needed to act fast if they were to salvage this situation.

He almost ran back to his tower, which was thankfully the nearest one, and gathered all the materials he needed for the spell. All he would need now was something the query had touched.

He again almost ran back to the audience chamber, entering without announcing himself and fast walking to before the steps.

"I have almost everything, my king. All I am missing is something the boy has touched. I assume we still have the magic-suppressing cuffs he wore?" Gelum'vire asked while he prepared the rest of the spell.

King Vhol'drokk nodded and waved at a servant to fetch them. They had kept the cuffs nearby, as the locksmith was figuring out if someone had tampered with them.

They were brought into the room quickly. The servant quickly handed them to the mage before stepping back at a healthy distance.

The mage grabbed the cuffs and placed them before him, just in front of a crystal ball. He then murmured an incantation before his head kicked back and his eyes turned white.

The scene lasted only a short moment before Gelum'vire returned to himself.

"My king, I have good news and bad news." He announced.

"I have no time for riddles, mage. Tell me." The king said, sitting on the throne and tapping his foot.

"The good news is, the boy is alive." He started saying.

"Marvelous! We can still save this mess." The king jumped, happy this wasn't yet irreparable.

"Where is he, then?" He asked.

"That... My king, that is the bad news. The boy is no longer on our plane." Gelum'vire said, smiling wryly.

"What do you mean, not in our plane? Speak plainly, mage!" The king barked.

"I cannot track his position, as he is no longer in our world. The teleportation spell that took him, brought him to another plane of existence." Gelum'vire said, lowering his head in defeat.

The king became pale. If that was true, then that meant they could never get him back, much less keep him alive.

This was a catastrophe. Lady Anulo would have his head.

King Vhol'drokk crashed back into his throne, despair gripping him. He was doomed.

Meanwhile, in another plane, Astaroth appeared. He clutched at his chest in pain, dropping to his knees.

"Shit! She got me." He said, squeezing his thorax.

#### Chapter 69 Entrance Ceremony

The other players all appearing next to Astaroth looked at him weirdly, as he clutched his chest. Some even whispered among each other, asking if he was ok.

Astaroth, on his side, was clutching his chest hard, in deep pain.

"Fuck! That bitch landed a clean hit before I teleported away." He grumbled, clutching over his heart.

Astaroth was taking no damage, and his health bar was full. No status ailments were affecting him either.

But the pain from being stabbed in the heart persisted in his body and mind. It took some time before it subsided, and in the meantime, more and more players teleported around him.

When one thousand players appeared on the platform Astaroth was on, a big screen flashed over the platform. Everyone present turned their gazes upwards.

A woman was on the screen, sitting at a long table, as she looked into a camera.

"Welcome to the first Tournament of Heroes, young gamers! Some of you will recognize me, others will not, so I shall present myself." The woman on the screen said.

"My name is Constantine Levesque and I am the chairwoman of Evo-Gaming. I am happy to be the one to preside over the very first Tournament of Heroes, as we make history together." She added.

"Now for those of you, wondering if a businesswoman should preside over a gaming event, I assure you. I was a pro gamer myself, before launching my company, and have the knowledge to be doing this." She continued, crossing her hands on the table in front of her.

She then pressed a small remote near her hand, and the screen split into two parts. The part to the right was now divided into sections of its own.

"I will now explain how the tournament will proceed. Rest easy, if you ever need to have a point re-explained to you, the system shall provide you with the details as many times as needed." Constantine said, smiling softly.

The screen zoomed in on the segment on the right side. It had a title at the top, showing the name Brawlhalla.

"The first part of the tournament will be what we adequately named 'Brawlhalla'. It will be a free-for-all brawl amongst all the participants until only five hundred of you are left." Mrs. Levesque explained.

"You may use all matters of technique to survive and kill your opponents, as long as you make it into the top five hundred. We will assign points for each kill, and we will use these for the next phase." She continued.

"To make this fight less of a mess, we have generated a gigantic map for you to fight on, ensuring you are spread out enough at the beginning." Constantine added.

"There will also be a bonus for whoever can reach the middle of the map and claim it. There will be a pyramid in the center of the map, with a potion placed upon it." She said, clicking on her remote again.

The image on the right switched to a massive Mayan-style pyramid, with something encased at the top. She made a zoom on the screen, showing a bottle of bright red liquid.

"This is a potion of damage increase. It will increase your main attack stat by twenty percent for the rest of the tournament, or until you are disqualified." Mrs. Levesque explained, making many players gasp.

Most of them were damage dealers, and the thought of boosting their attack by twenty percent sent them into a frenzy. This could ensure a better position in the tournament, or better yet, victory itself.

The chairwoman could sense their agitation from across the screen and she smiled in satisfaction. The goal they had with this potion was to force the shyer players into action with good bait.

And this potion was a great bait. Any player's chances would immediately skyrocket with such a boost in power.

After letting the players' minds stir up a bit, she continued her explanation.



"The map will be divided into sections, each with a different climate. There are five zones, each with an ecosystem of its own." She said, tapping her remote again.

The map of the place appeared on the screen, and it was split up into five sectors. From the colors alone, the players knew a bit about what to expect.

One zone was almost entirely white, and seemed elevated, probably a mountain. Another one, next to the first, looked like an abandoned city, covered in green.

On the other side of the snowy peak was a patch of pure green, with a river lazily flowing in it. It looked like a small version of Earth's tropical forests.

On the other side of the forest lay a patch of black ground, dotted with red puddles. To the expert eyes of some, they recognized a volcanic region, covered in pools of magma.

Then between that, and the abandoned urban zone, was a patch of beige, with bumps everywhere. Most players recognized it as a desert, with sands flowing.

Then smack dab in the middle of it all, the pyramid. It took almost as much space as the other five zones, but that was mainly the surrounding grounds.

The actual pyramid was not that big, but it would be visible from almost everywhere on the map, due to one thing. The bright white beacon radiating out of its tip, and disappearing into the sky.

"As you can see from the map, the pyramid is the centerpiece of the grounds you will fight on. You can choose to try your hand at taking the potion, or you can choose to fight in your zones or others, to claim points." The chairwoman said, after letting them digest the map.

"Of course, there will be other factors to take into consideration, but I will not be telling you. After all, who doesn't like a little mystery?" Constantine said, flashing an alluring smile.

Most male players felt their hearts flutter at the sight and thought only one thing.

'What a goddess!'

The chairwoman did not let their imaginations run wild for too long, as she pressed on her remote again. The image swapped from the map to the second segment of the tournament board.

"Our next order of things will be phase number two. We called phase two of this tournament 'The Battle of Strays'." She said, smiling.

The name elicited mixed reactions from the players, as most considered strays to be rabble and wild animals. Constantine moved quickly to break their misconception.

"The name might be a little weird to some of you, but know that it is not without meaning. The battle of strays will be a team battle format, with randomly decided teammates." She explained.

"The points you gather from the first phase will separate all of you into brackets. Five different brackets will be formed, and we will pick the teams from the brackets." She added.

"Each team will have one player from each bracket, making the matching the fairest it could be. Of course, factors of skill and adaptation, more than personal strength, will decide the results of the preceding fights." She continued.

"We will hold the matches until only one hundred players remain. Meaning eighty teams out of one hundred will be eliminated." She finished.

Constantine took a slight pause here, letting all the information sink in before she moved on to explaining phase three.

"There are no special gimmicks or tricks to phase two, so I will explain phase three. Round Robin." She simply said.

"As the name implies, round three is also randomized, but this time in a one-on-one format. All the remaining players will fight five matches, scoring points through victory." She said, as the screen changed again, showing a diagram.

On-screen, the players could read the payout to each match result. A victory would give two points, a draw one, and a defeat zero. It was pretty straightforward.

The matches were timed matches, with a two-minute limit. If both players were still alive at that point, it meant a draw.

This format was well known in the gaming community, so no one dwelled on it for long. The chairwoman included.

She tapped her remote another time, revealing the next phase.

"This phase is the elimination phase. We called it 'Sudden Death'." Mrs. Levesque said, grinning lightly.

"During this phase, players only fight once and are disqualified as soon as they lose. The fights go on until only one player is left." She added, going back to her charming smile.

"As for the last player left at the end, we have something special for him. But I shall only announce it once the winner is decided." Constantine said, finishing her brief slide show.

One player could no longer hold himself in and asked what was burning everyone's mind.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. What are the rewards for the finalists?" He asked, looking at the woman on the screen.

Constantine kept her smile charming as she answered the query.

"Since this is only the first tournament, Evo-Gaming has decided to only give out a prize to the final winner." She said, expecting it to be the end of the question.

But the player was not satisfied. He frowned when the actual answer he wanted didn't come.

"Uh... Excuse me again, Ma'am. But you didn't answer the question. What are the rewards for the finalist?" He asked again, garnering some disapproving looks from the other players.

The chairwoman's eyebrow twitched almost imperceptibly. She hated being delayed in her schedule, and this event was now running late, because of a simple-minded idiot... Ahem... Participant.

"The rewards were not supposed to be disclosed until the round-robin phase, but since you insist. The winner from this tournament will have a monetary prize of one million dollars, transferred into his account." She said, raising her chin.

To most people, this kind of money was an insane amount and would set them for years! All the players present felt their motivations stoked, as a metaphorical fire, lit in their hearts.

Seeing that no one asked any more questions, Constantine closed this entrance ceremony.

"Now that you all know the proceedings, let us without further ado, move on to phase one. May the best player win!" She exclaimed as fireworks exploded in the sky.

The next moment, a humongous magic formation lit up under the players, teleporting them away. They were brought to the Brawlhalla map and scattered to the four winds.

Astaroth was teleported into the tropical forest, and he immediately felt the humidity. He was extremely excited.

"It finally begins!" He grinned.

Chapter 70 Ranged Enemies, Part 1

The first thing Astaroth noticed after the humid air, was the thick foliage of trees around him. There were flowers and bushes and vines everywhere he turned his head.

So, to help himself move forward, he pulled out his short sword, and used it as a makeshift machete, to cut through the greenery.

Astaroth moved forward cautiously, keeping his mana going full throttle constantly. That was the reason he noticed some fights breaking loose all around him.

He could feel and see the mana fluctuate in spots all around him, flaring up and getting siphoned, disturbing the natural flow.

Astaroth reduced his sensing, trying to focus on the few meters around him, so he didn't get ambushed. He walked along no determined path, trying to avoid the combat zones.

That made him zigzag across the forest, never getting much closer to the end of the zone. The chairwoman was not joking when she said the zone would be big.

Astaroth didn't want to walk aimlessly for too long, so he tried climbing a tree, hoping to get a vantage point up there. As he was close to reaching the top of the tree, something entered his mana sense.

To his vision, it was a streak of powerful pure white mana, coming at him at incredible speed. Astaroth did not hesitate a single second, and kicked off from the tree trunk, propelling himself back to the ground.

When he kicked off the tree, the arrow hit the spot where he had been and bore a hole the size of a soccer ball into and through the tree trunk. The tree he had been climbing was close to three feet thick, so that was no small feat.

Once he landed back on the ground, he hyper-focused on around himself, trying to find where the arrow had shot from. But looking as much as he could, he didn't seem to find anyone or anything nearby.

Suddenly, another arrow came at him, this time from another direction entirely. Instead of dodging backward, Astaroth shot forward, towards the arrow, only barely getting out of its trajectory, trying to reach the shooter.

After traveling in a straight line for a few seconds, Astaroth had still not seen any signs of an attacker. He stopped moving again, waiting for the next attack to come in his direction.

He did not have to wait long, as another arrow came flying his way, again from a different direction. Astaroth guessed that the player shooting at him had a much higher agility stat than him.

'If they want to play that game, then so be it.' Astaroth thought while dodging the arrow.

He stayed in place, but this time cast Spirit Melding. If his opponent wanted to play a game of agility, he would crush them with that stat!

His hair turned white, fur grew on his limbs, and his senses became sharper. He could discern sounds and smells better right now, and that would also help him find his assailant.

As Astaroth focused on sound alone, he heard a small \*Thung\* and the sound of rustling leaves. The second after an arrow came flying at him from behind.

He sidestepped it and burst forth in the sound's direction, at speeds inconceivable to a man's body. His agility stat in melded form was at a staggering one hundred and one points!

That meant his running speed was at twenty-five point twenty-five meters per second or a whopping ninety-one kilometers per hour! And since his strength was practically the same, his acceleration was quasi-instant!

Astaroth felt like he was riding a convertible, with the winds whipping his face at that speed. He quickly reached the spot where the sound had come from, only to see a blur move away rapidly.

Astaroth landed on the tree the player had been in and launched back in the direction they had left. He quickly caught up because of his superior agility.

As Astaroth neared his attacker, he started discerning his silhouette, although it was only an outline. The person fleeing from him was semi-transparent right now, most likely because of a stealth spell or skill.

He caught up to the fleeing silhouette and grabbed its leg. As soon as he touched the player, his stealth fizzled out, revealing a young elf woman with a longbow.

She seemed surprised that her target had caught up to her and her eyes were wide in disbelief. Astaroth pulled the leg towards him, sending his other hand at the woman's throat.

Their flight ended on the branch of a tree, with Astaroth holding the elf by her throat, and the elf lodged in the tree. She could still breathe, but it was difficult.

She looked on in horror at her opponent's blue-grey eyes as he looked at her with coldness.

"When you saw you couldn't hit me, you should have left." Astaroth told her, observing the woman.

"I wanted points, and you seemed like an easy target. I was mistaken. Please, let me go." She replied, taking hard breaths after each sentence.

"Give me one good reason to do that." Astaroth said, suddenly grinning.

"After all, you also look like easy points right now." He added, stretching out his wolf claws in a menacing way.

The Elven woman's face drained of color as she saw the claws. She had been trying to break free from his grasp ever since he grabbed her, but his strength was higher than hers.

Surely if he hit her right now, it would cause a lot of damage. Not only that, but since she couldn't escape, he could just hit her until she died.

That would spell the end of her time in the tournament. She couldn't accept that fate.

Her mind went into overdrive, looking for a way out when something caught her attention. A sheen in the distant trees, followed by a slight flash.

Her perception was high since she was an archer, so she saw what that was. It was the reflection of a gun scope and the flare of a detonation.

Now was her time to act!