

## **New Eden 71**

Chapter 71 Ranged Enemies, Part 2

She stopped thinking and reacted. She kicked her captor in the balls, hoping that would loosen his grip on her throat.

She achieved the effect intended, as Astaroth grimaced and grabbed at his groin. His hand holding the elf loosened just enough for her to attempt an escape.

She curled herself into a ball before shoving both her feet into Astaroth's chest, pushing with all her might. Astaroth's grip slipped, and she was free.

The strength of the kick sent her flying away as it pushed Astaroth into the bullet's trajectory. Astaroth had heard the shot being fired, with his hearing sense sharpened right now, but it all happened too fast.

Since he was now flying into the bullet, he quickly wrapped his arms behind his head, hoping to protect himself from a possible critical hit. The ball-shaped bullet struck true as it pierced his left arm, causing him negligible damage.

Astaroth was still falling toward the ground, but at least he hadn't been hit in the head. He curled up onto himself, hoping to mitigate some of the fall damage.

The fall still took a significant chunk of his health as it blew the air out of his lungs. He struggled to get up, trying to find cover behind a tree, to hide from the gunner.

Astaroth looked at his transformation timer and noticed he had about eight minutes left on it. Since it still buffed him, he took his anger out on the new assailant.

He knew he wouldn't find the elf anyway, with her stealth skill working against him. So he turned to the direction the bullet had come flying from and blasted forward.

He heard more shots fired, as he was closing in on the shooter, but he dodged all of them, for now. The shooter was perched in a tree, in a laid-down firing position, as he kept squeezing his trigger.

Astaroth finally caught sight of the gunner when he started getting nearer. It was a small person with a long nose.

'A gnome.' Astaroth surmised.

He kept running at the shooter, but the closer he got, the more difficult it became to dodge the bullets, as his reaction time was shortening.

The gnome stayed calm and kept shooting, knowing he would eventually hit his target again. The gnome player was none other than Damien Grimm, gamer tag Azamus.

He had picked gnomes because it was the only race that had guns, and he was religious about those. He had always loved guns and would always love them.

As he was perched there, shooting at the man dashing at him, Azamus was quite surprised at his movement speed. It wasn't every day you saw a person running at the speed of a car on the highway.

Eventually, the distance between the two became short enough that Azamus no longer missed his shots. So he switched from snipping mode to gunner mode and pulled out what looked like an outdated rifle.

He thought his opponent was an idiot that had dropped all his free stat points into agility, so he would most likely have little health. So he wanted to get up and personal, to humiliate that dumb choice.

"You are quick, beast man! But you can't go faster than a bullet!" Azamus said as he dropped from his perching spot.

The gnome ran from his tree to an open clearing. He was a pro gamer and was confident enough of his reflexes to kite a player that chose speed over every other stat.

Once he was there, he taunted the man some more, trying to force him into doing something stupid.

"Come fight me in the open, if you're a man!" Azamus shouted.

"You will know what it feels like to lose to a pro player!" He added.

Astaroth, who was at the edge of the clearing, instantly knew who his opponent was. The difference in skill between the two of them would be a hard bridge to cross.

He walked out of the clearing, trying to look as calm as possible.

"It will be an honor to fight the great Azamus." Astaroth said, respecting his opponent's strength.

"Damn right it will, noob. Now, time to face your death. Thank you for the points!" Azamus said, disregarding his opponent completely.

He opened fire on the man, trying to end this as fast as he could to prove his superiority. Astaroth instantly went into defensive mode, as he tried to dodge as many of the bullets as he could.

He was getting hit often, and his health was steadily lowering. Since he couldn't see his opponent's health bar, Astaroth guessed it was the same for him.

Because of his current high constitution stat, he had more than enough health to tank the shots, but that would change soon. His spirit melding was ticking into its last minute.

Soon, he would revert to normal, and lose all those bonus stats. He knew that would put him in a tough spot, so he wanted to end this fast.

Sadly, his opponent was not letting him get closer. Every time he tried dashing at him, the gnome kited him back.

Astaroth knew that he could reach the gnome if he ran straight at him, but that meant taking all the bullets. That would leave Azamus with a great opportunity for high damage.

Then his mind clicked on something. Since his opponent couldn't see his health, he could use it to trick him.

Astaroth smirked as he chose his course of action. He faked anger as he howled in fake rage to the skies.

Then, he dived in a straight line at his opponent, trying to act rage crazed. His act seemed credible as the gnome smiled.

"Fool! A desperate move from a stupid player!" Azamus shouted, steadying his aim.

"Bullet Storm!" He then shouted, unleashing a skill.

His rifle muzzle suddenly flashed many times in quasi-instant succession, firing a quite literal bullet storm.

That skill was a high-damage skill, but it required its user to stay immobile since they needed to hold back the recoil. Astaroth immediately smiled.

His bait had worked! He crossed his arms before him, still running at his foe, and tanked the damage. Azamus panicked when he saw the beastman not go down.

"Die already!" He shouted, his eyes going round.

Astaroth closed the distance before the skill went out and grabbed hold of the gnome. He spun full circle before throwing his troublesome foe into the skies.

But not before taunting him.

"Say hi to the birds for me!" Astaroth yelled as the gnome took flight at incredible speeds.

The fight ended there, with Astaroth turning back to normal, and the gnome flying off, far in the distance.

Chapter 72 American Sniper

...

"...aaaaaaAAAHHHHH!!!!!!!!!"

\*Bang\* \*Rumble\* \*Whack\*

"Oof!"

A certain gnome flew out of the forest part of the map, and into the middle part, a good way away from the pyramid.

He hit a piece of a broken wall after crashing into the ground. The impact had emptied his lungs of any remaining air that he hadn't yelled on the way there already.

After a few moments of gasping for air and getting up, Azamus clenched his fists.

"FUUUUUUCK!!!!!" Azamus screamed.

Anger permeated his little body as he thought back to what had just happened. He was trying to humiliate a no-name player, and instead, he ended up getting thrown away like a rag doll.

The humiliation was unbearable. No one could do this to him.

If he made it to the next stage. Azamus bode his time until the next round, for now.

Since someone threw him near the pyramid, he would make the most of it. His gamer instincts kicked back in, forcing him to cool his head and take advantage of the situation.

Azamus started trotting towards the pyramid with his small stumpy legs, cursing the height of this race. He only picked it because it was the only one with guns.

Had he known humans also have access to the technology, albeit later, he would have made a different choice. It was pointless thinking about it now.

As Azamus made it closer to the pyramid, He started perceiving other players in the zone. His perception stat had unlocked when he hit level ten as a gunner.

That stat provided him with excellent eyesight and an extended view range. He could focus on a distant point and his eyes would zoom in like he had binoculars.

Seeing many players fight in the area around the pyramid, Azamus profited from it. He looked around and found a good hideout.

There were ruins around the pyramid, like the remains of a dead civilization, and he picked the highest he could find. He ran to the construction and climbed to the highest part.

It was a half-crumbled third floor, in a stone-cut building. The third floor had a tiny space to move in, but a nice vantage point and slight concealment.

It would make the perfect sniping spot. He equipped a long-barreled rifle that looked like a mix between an old flintlock rifle and a recent sniper.

The rifle worked like an old flintlock but with a cartridge-loaded system and scope, resembling more a sailor's Longview than an actual scope.

Azamus had made this weapon himself, using the technology of gnomes and the advanced knowledge he had. The weapon had fascinated the gunsmith that had been watching over him during its creation.

He had even requested Azamus make more for him so he could sell them. But Azamus had turned him down, not wanting to waste time crafting.

He instead contracted a scribe and had him draw out a blueprint for the rifle, and sold it to the gunsmith for an exorbitant sum of gold coins. That had flushed his cash reserves for the foreseeable future and helped him grow fast.

The rifle wasn't a recent model, with black powder-packed bullet casings, so he had to make the chamber slightly different. Since he wanted to use this as a long ranged weapon, he added some rifling to the barrel.

And then, to maximize bullet velocity, he changed the firing mechanism. Since he couldn't use self-propelled bullets, and muzzle loading wouldn't give him the thrust he needed, Azamus improvised.

This world had one advantage that his did not; magic.

He had dug into magic use through technology and found some interesting things. Some gunsmiths used magic-propelled bullets, with wind elements or highly condensed fire magic, to limit noise emission.

He brought the concept a step further and had his bullets engraved with special magic. The bullet itself would be fire-magic propelled, as the inside of the barrel produced wind magic.

His concept was that the bullet would use fire propulsion and the wind gust from the barrel would both push the bullet out of the cannon, but also fuel the fire on the bullet, making it reach an even higher velocity.

When he had the bullets engraved and the detonation system enchanted into the flintlock rifle, the gunsmith supervising him almost went crazy.

The gnomes never thought about this, since this was science at a higher level, from the human civilization out of the game. Since magitech was something that already existed in the game, he used his knowledge to make some.

Azamus grasped his creation, feeling a slight sense of pride, as he lay down in a shooting position. The bonus damage from his racial trait helped him a lot with sniping with this beauty.

But then there were also his personal skills that helped, Eagle's Eye and Head Shot. The first, stacked over his perception stat, making him able to see incredibly far away, with much detail.

The second was an attack skill. It gave him 250% extra damage on headshots, aside from the bonus of a critical hit.

So if he hit his mark, which he often did, being a brilliant marksman in real life already, he would do at least 350% of his damage. Double that if he crits.

As he lay there, motionless, Azamus was setting his sights on his first target.

It was a human warrior, wielding two axes, like a berserker of old. He wore thin armor on his torso and also wore leg pads and boots.

Azamus activated Eagles Eye, augmenting his vision with many details. The details, in this case, were wind velocity, humidity levels, wind direction, and total distance to his target.

He rapidly calculated in his head, before taking a large breath and blowing out half of it. He held the rest of his breath in, as his hand became steadier than rocks.

Azamus pressed his trigger, and he heard a clicking sound. A sharp whistling sound of wind and a sonic clap immediately followed it as the bullet left the barrel.

As much as Azamus had tried making the gun silent, the laws of physics were not something he could ignore, and the sound barrier was still something that existed.

The bullet left the barrel of his rifle with a bang, but that was just the beginning. The engraved fire spell on the butt of the bullet lit up.

The wind spell from the barrel propelled the bullet out and left the form of a wind tunnel in front of the barrel, in which the fire spell took all the air and shot forward like a rocket.

That was an application of magitech: the gnomes had not yet perfected, but that was because of a simple fact.

Guns in this world did not yet incorporate rifling in the barrel. That was a concept from the real world's advanced gun science.

The grooves of the rifling caused the wind spell to focus in a line instead of dispersing. So when it left the barrel, it continued on a bit, before spreading.

That was what the wind tunnel was. Focused wind power in a turbine motion.

This oxygen fueled the fire from the bullet and burned brightly as it launched its projectile even faster.

That was the sonic clap. His bullet left the barrel and gained momentum quasi-instantly.

The people around the pyramid, fighting, only heard the sonic clap and looked around. The only one that knew what that had been was the woman fighting the human warrior.

The reason being, the man in front of her was immobile, a hole through his head. He stood there, unmoving, as he turned to particles and dispersed to the winds.

Azamus grinned devilishly, as he used the bolt action to empty the bullet chamber.

"One down, many more to go." He said.

The woman that witnessed the aftereffect of the shot suddenly screamed.

"Sniper! Take cover!"

But it was too late. Another bang resounded as she stood there, her vision already blurring.

She vanished into particles soon after. Azamus would keep reaping lives in this fashion for a while, not even bothering to get the potion.

The potion was his bait, and he was the hunter.

In the forest part of the map, Astaroth was still trudging along, trying to see if there were some hidden secrets to the map. He heard the shot coming from the direction he had thrown the gnome.

"Sorry." He said, pulling a pitiful smile.

He knew full well what he had done, but he really couldn't focus on that. He went back to his trekking, moving that thought away from his mind.

Astaroth was determined to explore since he thought there was more to this giant map than met the eye. So he kept venturing deeper into the tropical forest they had dumped him in.

He hoped to find an underground cave, or something of the sort, with hidden treasures or advantages he could use.

"If there are treasures, I will find them!" He said enthusiastically.

Chapter 73 The Pit, Part 1

It had been a little over an hour now since the tournament's first phase had started. Astaroth was still exploring the tropical forest.

He guessed that if there was a hidden zone, this place was the most likely entrance to it. Tropical jungles were renowned for their mysteries and confounding terrain.

So he refused to go into another zone. By now, they had already taken the first hundred players down.

A little under four hundred players were left to kill before phase one ended. At this rate, it would take another four hours or more.

It all depended on how safely the players eventually proceeded. If the players left when there were only one hundred left to eliminate, hid, and extended this, hoping to be last, then this could go on for a long time.

Astaroth was kind of hoping that would be the case though since he wanted to find an Easter egg. As he mused about the possible hidden treasures he would find, Astaroth heard a muffled voice from somewhere near.

He slowed down to discern its direction and heard it from his left. He changed his trajectory, to go see what was happening since the voice was calling for help.

As he got closer to the cries for help, he started discerning a second voice from the same direction, also calling for help. Astaroth quickened his step a bit, curious to see what was happening.

He soon reached a clearing devoid of trees, but with vines slithering across the ground everywhere. Between the vines was moss, covering every inch of ground in the clearing.

When Astaroth stepped into the clearing, he felt the moss squelch under his feet, like it was filled with water. He kept walking towards the source of the voices and found something abnormal.

In the middle of the clearing, the vines crisscrossed each other, forming a kind of thick net, of sorts, in a perfect circle. Next to it, he could see a clear skid mark of ripped moss.

The mark seemed to have been done by something tumbling into the glade from the south and ending right at the vine net. The voices also sounded less muffled, now that he was close to that.

He slowly approached the vine-filled surface, making sure not to trip and fall, lest he also ends in the predicament as the two voices below. As he reached the skid mark, he noticed the vines parted way just in front of it.

It was like something had slid and passed through at that spot, and he immediately understood what had happened. He inched closer to the hole in the vines and saw two silhouettes at the bottom of a hole made of some sort of rock.

"You ok down there?" Astaroth yelled into the vine hole.

"Finally! Someone found us!" He heard a young boyish voice.

"No thanks to your weak voice, salad eater." A still young, but rougher, voice said.

"Alright, no fighting, kids." Astaroth teased.

He could guess they had fallen through while fighting each other, so this was an excellent lesson in combat awareness. He just needed them to think 'I never want to be in this position again!'

"I'm not a kid!" Both voices shouted at the same time.

Astaroth chuckled a little, before tearing the hole in the vine wider to let more light into the stone hole. He tore the woody appendages until he hit the side of the rock hole.

From there, he widened it further on each side, trying to make a bigger opening, but the vines seemed well rooted the further away he tried going. So he tried using fire magic, but the fire fizzled out on the vines.

"Don't waste your time, mister. I already tried magic on them, but there was no reaction." One boy said.

Now that there was a little more light in the pit, Astaroth could discern their traits better. The one that had warned him, was a slim, light-skinned elf, wearing a cloth robe.

'Probably a druid.' Astaroth guessed.

The other was a small, burly, bearded-looking child, with plate mail covering his body, a big tower shield in his left hand, and a hammer in his right. By the looks of him, he was a dwarf and a pure tank class.

The exact situation that caused the both of them to fall in there still eluded him, but his guess was as good as any.

"Since you tried magic on the vines, did you try anything else, kid?" Astaroth asked the elf.

"I'm not a kid! My name is I'die Ad-Tempus, and I'm seventeen years old!" He responded.

"Sure ki... Young man. Now, can you answer my question?" Astaroth said, catching his 'kid' before he dropped it.

The elf boy huffed but answered still.

"I tried using earth magic to make stairs, too. But it all failed. It's like magic doesn't work down here." I'die said, looking downtrodden.

Astaroth thought about what the boy said and tried something. He lit a small fire in his hands and descended it past the vine cover.

If the zone blocked magic, then his spell would fizzle out, as soon as it passed the limit. But that did not happen.

His small fireball stayed alight as he descended his arm as far as it could go inside, without him falling. Once that confirmed that the zone was not anti-magic, he switched up his spell.

He tried sending it to the middle of the improvised roof, without launching it at the vines. It took him a few tries, but he then kept it steadily centered in the pit.

A notification rang in his ears.

*\*Ding\**

*\*In your ingenuity, you formed a spell with no prior knowledge. You learned the spell 'Flame Beacon'\**

Astaroth maintained the spell, as he looked at his spell list.

Flame Beacon: You create a small ball of fire that you can position in a radius of 50m around you. The ball is 10 centimeters in diameter and projects light. You can widen the ball of fire, in increments of 10 centimeters in diameter, at the cost of increasingly more mana. Mana cost: 10MP. Cost to enlarge: x2 last size cost. Maintaining spell cost's total size mana cost per minute.

The description satisfied him. That meant that as long as he had mana, he would never be in the dark.



## Chapter 74 The Pit, Part 2

Astaroth went back to the task at hand as he closed his skill window.

The two boys in the hole looked at him, grinning, without understanding. Was he happy at being able to control his skill?

They did not know he had just made the spell, that it was a new one. But Astaroth would not tell them, anyway.

He started looking inside the hole, which was now brightly lit. He could see the rock surface of the walls better now, and what he saw fascinated him.

There were runes etched across the whole pit, in a spiraling fashion, that went from the bottom to the top. He couldn't discern if they were letters or pictograms, since he couldn't understand any of them.

He looked on in awe until the dwarf snapped him back to reality.

"Excuse me, mister. But could you help us out, instead of looking at the walls?" The dwarf asked.

Astaroth looked at him incredulously. Was he not interested in the carvings?

Was it just him who was feeling like a child on Christmas morning? This was probably what he had been looking for, for over an hour!

"What is your name, small guy?" Astaroth asked.

"Hey! I'm a dwarf! Not a small guy!" The dwarf rebuked, raising his hammer to Astaroth.

"Yeah, yeah. Po-ta-to po-tah-to." Astaroth responded, waving his hand dismissively.

"What's your name, dwarf guy?" He then asked.

The dwarf puffed his cheeks, as they became red with anger, but still answered.

"My name is Gulnur Deepshield!" He said.

"All right then, Gulnur, I'die. Do none of you recognize the etchings on the walls?" Astaroth asked both of them.

"No." They both responded, simultaneously.

Astaroth nodded his head in understanding. He then stood up and stretched.

"What are you doing, mister?" I'die asked, seeing him do some calisthenics.

"If I'm not wrong, the spot you two fell in is a secret door." Astaroth started explaining, still stretching.

"And it probably leads to a secret zone under this one." He added.

As he was stretching, he saw another two silhouettes at the edge of the woods. He looked at them from the corner of his eye, but they didn't seem intent on attacking him.

He had guessed they had probably been there for a bit.

"Come out and join me, if you're curious." He said out loud, keeping up his exercise.

The two silhouettes walked out of the wood, a good distance apart from each other. They walked towards Astaroth while monitoring each other.

Both of the silhouettes were of women. One looked like a human, and the other was a familiar person.

When they reached a safe distance from him, a red-haired human woman talked to him first. The other he already recognized.

"We heard what you just said. But is it true?" She asked him.

"Politeness dictates you state your name before questioning someone, missus." Astaroth replied, half-jokingly.

His intention here was to learn the names of those he was dealing with. Knowledge was power, after all.

"My name is Phoenix." The redhead replied, turning her head to the other woman.

"My name is Athena Woodland." The Elven woman, with hair of gold, said.

"Athena?!" I'die's voice came from the pit.

"I'die?!" The Elven woman responded, dropping all pretense of cautiousness, and running to the pit, right next to Astaroth.

"Athena! You found me!" I'die said, almost in tears.

"Please keep the heartwarming reunion for later people. Time is a resource that is scarce." Astaroth said, his eyes on his interface.

The number of eliminated players had just reached over two hundred, meaning time was running out. He needed to be quick.

He directly melded with White, before crouching low. He cast some wind under his feet, ready to use propel on himself.

The red-haired woman, Phoenix, watched in astonishment. It was rare to see a player use both a spell and a trait from the Beastmaster class.

She was wondering what class the man was playing. But she couldn't just ask him, either.

The Elven archer looked at him in mistrust, as she knew he could kill them all with that form. But what he said next caused her eyes to widen.

"Step aside from the hole, unless you want to fall in when I punch through it!" Astaroth yelled, before jumping.

The term jumping here might have been an understatement. Using propel, plus his strength stat boosted so much, Astaroth launched into the air.

He reached an impressive height of sixty meters before he fell back down. He pulled out his war axe, enchanting it with magic, layer after layer, producing a mirage that was much larger.

As he fell, he brought the axe up in a strike position, waiting for the perfect moment. To any bystander seeing this, Astaroth looked like a war god, falling from the heavens right now.

'I hope this works.' He thought as he plummeted towards the vine cover.

He passed right through it, rapidly reaching above the floor of the pit. The two captives had already skedaddled to the edges of the walls, making sure they didn't get hit.

"BREAK!" Astaroth shouted, as he swung down his axe with significant force and momentum.

When the two objects impacted, it produced a resounding noise of metal on rock before the floor began cracking. The floor cracked everywhere before giving way.

The ground collapsed and fell into a pit even deeper, black like the abyss. Astaroth laughed like a madman, as he fell, along with the two young men.

The elf boy and the dwarven kid started yelling as the ground beneath their feet vanished. Gravity rapidly took hold of them, and they dropped into the darkness.

The two women still on the surface panicked as they saw the ground break.

"I die!" Athena yelled, before throwing herself into the abyss.

"God damn idiot!" Phoenix shouted, looking at all of them disappear from view.

Of course, she couldn't let them possibly find something sweet without her. The appeal was too great.

So she gritted her teeth, cursed, and then took the plunge. She soon disappeared into the abyss, too.

## Chapter 75 Clash Of Titans

### \*\*\* Elsewhere in the tournament map\*\*\*

In the center of the map, the fighting between players had already died down a lot. Most players were afraid to go into the pyramid zone, because of the sniper.

Every time they fired a shot, the sonic clap would make players flinch. And that was those not targeted.

The players that became the sniper's unfortunate target, died in one hit almost every time. So that zone became a no-man's-land, except for the brave or foolhardy.

The fighting in most of the zones had died down also, because of the sheer size of the map. Players were crossing paths less and less, making the elimination process slow down.

They were already down two hundred and fifty players, halfway through the end of phase one. Some smarter players had already started switching tactics from hunting to ambush.

They set up traps and waited in hiding, pouncing only when an unlucky player walked into them. They had already taken most of the terrible players out of the picture, and the remaining ones were almost all professional gamers.

This effectively meant that traps were no longer a sure kill method since those who remained were good enough to recover from ambushes. It not only functioned as a good peeling method.

Azamus was still laying down in his perch, waiting for his next prey to waltz into firing range. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a player walking into the pyramid zone.

When he turned his rifle to the player, his scope enabled him to see more details on him, her, in this case. The woman was wearing flashy colored garments, with kaleidoscope patterns.

Azamus locked his reticle on her, readying to shoot, but then he noticed something else. She had wings on her back.

'A fey.' Azamus surmised.

He focused, ready to shoot, but then something weird started happening. The player started dancing.

The fey woman had two kamas, one in each hand, and she was dancing in what looked to be a dance of death. Her movements were graceful and light to the untrained eye.

But to the trained eye of someone like Azamus, it was a whole other monster. The dance moves were strikes, each swipe of her weapons containing strength and precision.

From that alone, he recognized the player. It was another pro player from their days in 'Tower of Babel'.

The graceful killer, Blue Peacock. Her strikes were all but simple.

Azamus had fought her frequently. Her fighting style was resemblant a dance, but her true striking angles were unpredictable.

There was no pattern to her dancing, and one had to go on instinct alone, just to resist her attacks. He had been close to losing to her many times, but his sharp instincts always saved him.

But there was something different about her right now. Azamus focused a bit more on her with his scope, and he noticed something else.

She was... blinking? Her body seemed to blink forward, backward, and sideways at brief intervals like she was at one spot, and then she wasn't.

Azamus immediately connected that to her race.

'What a tricky woman. She picked the Fey race to use illusion magic in her already complicated style.' Azamus thought.

'What a hassle. She has just become a greater enemy than before.' He thought, deciding he couldn't let her get the potion.

He pushed away any distracting thoughts and honed in on his sight and instinct. He aimed before her a bit, at chest height, and fired.

*\*Bang!\** *\*Ting!\**

Azamus saw sparks, where the shot should have gone through nothing, and he knew he had wasted his surprise factor. The illusion surrounding the woman briefly flickered, showing her standing in the exact spot Azamus hit.

She was in a half-crouched position, her kama at head height, with some smoke coming off of it. Her dancing had parried the shot that would have otherwise struck her beautiful face.

Yet, the grin she made, while looking in the shooter's direction, was all but beautiful. She looked like a demon that had just found prey to torment.

'Found you.' She mouthed without a sound, knowing full well Azamus was still looking at her through his scope.

"Shit." He grumbled.

She had been planning on finding him all along. Going towards the pyramid was bait.

Azamus needed to reload at that moment, and he knew she would never let him fire another bullet after that, so he gave up on it. He stowed his magitech flintlock and pulled out the semi-automatic rifle from earlier.

Azamus jumped down from the third floor of his ruin and started running in the other direction, as best as his stubby legs allowed him. He needed open terrain as much as possible, against her.

Any place to hide or duck would mean an opportunity to get closer to him now. He could hear the rapid footsteps of the woman behind him, and just pulled out a grenade from his inventory and chucked it over his shoulder.

A few seconds later, it blew up behind him, pushing him forward a bit with the blast. Azamus spotted a spot of open terrain to his left, so he adjusted his trajectory.

A sudden chill ran through his spine, and he dove forward. A sheen passed over his head incredibly fast, and had he not dove, it would have hit the back of his neck.

Azamus landed on the ground, tucking his shoulder in and rolling back to his feet, now looking to where was behind him seconds prior. And there she stood.

Blue Peacock was staring at him with the eyes of a madwoman, holding her kamas, now linked with chains, smiling devilishly.

"We meet at last, Azamus. How long has it been since our last fight?" She asked, walking to him in an alluring fashion.

Azamus could already feel the slip on his senses, as the woman was most likely already performing some illusion magic on him. So he did what any sane American would do.

He fired all around him. One bullet hit Blue Peacock, and that disrupted her illusion, making Azamus fully aware again.

He dashed away from his opponent, firing in a wide cone around her, trying to get some lucky shots in. Blue, in the meantime, started dancing as she advanced, making her movements wild and erratic.

She also conjured the skill she had used earlier, called Illusory Steps, making her appear as though she was in some place while being elsewhere.

Azamus held nothing back, as he kept shooting at her and backing away. He was almost at the open terrain he wanted to reach, and from there, he could kite his opponent better.

Blue Peacock would not let him reach it easily though, as sashayed her way to him, dodging and deflecting most of his bullets. Of course, some still hit, but none in critical areas.

Slowly but surely, she was gaining in on him, almost reaching her range to launch her chained kamas at him. But Azamus was no fool.

He swapped out weapons on the run again, going from his machine gun, to what looked like a prehistoric shotgun.

"Recoil Escape!" He yelled as he fired the gun.

The gun barked out a massive amount of lead pellets, spraying over a large zone in a cone before him. But that wasn't that skill's actual function.

The skill he just used had to be used with high recoil weapons, as it wouldn't be available otherwise. Recoil Escape let its user fire a shot and use the recoil to propel themselves backward by ten meters.

Azamus had used it just now, to stay out of reach of the Fey woman, so she couldn't attack him. It was the perfect kitting skill, but it had a long cooldown.

Blue had to stop moving forward and focus on deflecting the pellets that might hit her weak spots. Her kamas danced before her exposed belly and face, ricocheting lots of little beads.

The bead wave only lasted one second, but although she had blocked the critical hits, and the beads did minor damage individually, she still lost a lot of health from that.

Even if one bead only dealt one or two points of damage, taking almost a hundred of those in an instant was bound to hurt. She looked up at Azamus, who was now smirking at her.

He riddled her body with small holes, some of which were bleeding. She became enraged.

"How dare you wound my perfect skin!?" She howled, her face a scowl of hatred.

"Phantasmal Propagation!" She yelled, as copies of her melted out of her body.

Three copies of her walked to her sides, making the people looking at this from afar see four of her. All four of them then dashed towards Azamus, simultaneously.

His response to this was to switch weapons again. He went from his prehistoric shotgun to two flintlock pistols with weird contraptions on their butt.

Azamus then started firing at all four Feys coming his way, but their dancing steps made it hard for him to hit. He couldn't let her surround him, so he started running backward, trying to keep them all in the same general direction.

It didn't work out quite like he planned, since his opponent was more agility oriented than he was, so she was quicker. It took only a few seconds before Blue Peacock had a copy of herself at each of Azamus' cardinals.

They suddenly all rushed at him from those directions, aiming for a joint strike. Only one of these was real, but Azamus had no way of knowing if the copies could damage him, so he shot at all four.

The copies took the bullets, with as much realism as the real one would, and that worried him. He thought maybe the original one was the one behind him, so she could strike a crit, but he wasn't sure.

Just as all the copies swung their kamas at him, an arrow came at him at incredible speeds.

'Shit! I can't dodge it!' Azamus thought, gritting his teeth in wait for the multiple hits to come.

But no such thing happened. The arrow grazed his cheek but planted into the ground where one copy had been. That copy had jumped back before the arrow hit it, as the three other copies landed their hits without damage on Azamus, before fading away.

"Seems like you owe me one, asshole." A voice came from a faraway building ruin.

Azamus turned and saw who that voice belonged to.

"You!" He growled in seething rage.

Chapter 76 Surprise Surprise!

**\*\*\*Back to Astaroth, falling into darkness\*\*\***

"YEEEEEEHAAAAHHHHHH!" Astaroth shouted, as he was free falling into the darkness of the pit.

The feeling of falling like this felt quite exhilarating.

He guessed this was how parachutists felt as they dived, before opening their chutes. Of course, he had no parachute, but he was not worried.

He had faith that he would survive this fall. Meanwhile, the others falling with him had already started finding their own solutions.

The druid had used magic to grow a gigantic dandelion in his hands. The dandelion was in the seeding phase of its growth, so its head was white and fluffy.

The multiple white strands caught the wind of the downfall, reducing his falling speed to a very much survivable level. Astaroth zoomed past him, as I'die slowed down.

Next, he flipped on his back, to see how the others were faring. The redhead, Phoenix, had pulled out a leather tarp with two handles.

She was currently holding the two handles in one hand and heating the air inside it with the other, creating a makeshift hot-air balloon. She was the next one to slow down.

Athena was redirecting her downward motion by bouncing off the walls on each side of the pit. It seemed to work, as her speed was already slower than Astaroth's.

She did this until she passed near I'die, who gave up his dandelion to her, before magically forming another one.

'Hmm. They have a tight bond and trust each other.' Astaroth thought.

He turned back to face downward, only to see that the dwarf was still free-falling. He didn't seem to have a solution to break his fall and was screaming for help.

"Aarrgghh!!! Help me!!! I can't slow down!!!!"

Astaroth used propel again, this time pushing himself towards a wall. When he reached the wall, he pushed off of it in the dwarf's direction, picking up much speed.

As he made it to the dwarf, he grabbed his small armored form and propelled himself once more to the wall. He used Athena's trick and bounced himself off the walls, transferring some momentum to them as he did.

He was happy it worked out for him, most of the reason being he was still buffed with White's stats, but that was short-lived.

The tunnel was becoming slightly brighter, but that made him realize something. The pit walls ended before he would reach the ground.

Astaroth slightly panicked as he thought about a way to survive. As he was thinking, the walls ended, meaning he had nothing left to break his fall anymore.

His eyes went wide, as he now saw the ground. It was coming in fast! One last idea flashed through his mind, but it was risky.

He started gathering wind mana around his hand as much as he could. And just before he hit the ground, he fired it at a forty-five-degree angle downwards and sideways.

That move effectively reduced his downward momentum to zero, but he was now rolling on the ground really fast. He and Gulnur rolled for quite some distance, until they stopped, bodies half over a ledge.

They both gasped in surprise and fear, at how close they had been from one more drop. They both pushed themselves back from the ledge and flipped on their backs.

They could see the others gliding down from the ceiling, and felt a tinge of jealousy.

"You idiots still alive?!" Phoenix's voice sounded, from overhead.

Both Astaroth and Gulnur raised a thumb to the sky, before looking at each other and bursting into laughter.

"Nice catch, you long-eared freak of nature!" Gulnur said, slapping Astaroth's arm.

"You should have seen your face, you heavy hunk of steel!" Astaroth retorted, laughing his ass off.

"Hey man, what kind of madman smiles while he's falling to his death?" The dwarf rebuked, looking at Astaroth with a wide grin.

"This kind." Astaroth replied, pointing to himself with two thumbs.

Another round of loud laughter spread in the open space before they both stood up. Athena was looking at them cautiously.

Meanwhile, I'die was looking at them with a shy smile, and Phoenix was looking at them like they were dolts. She watched the boys get back up, judging them silently.

"Are you boys done being stupid?" She asked them, looking around the gloomy cave-like area.

There was no light source in the cave, and yet, they could see well. It was like they had suddenly all gained dark vision.

"Where are we?" Athena asked, looking around, her bowstring taut, ready to respond to danger.

"It seems like we are under the combat map." Astaroth declared, dusting his clothes.

Gulnur walked around a bit, after getting up. But a frown found its way on his face.

"This is a cave network, and a big one, too." He said as he laid his hand on the wall near him.



"And how do you know that, little man?" I'die said, mockingly.

"It's a dwarf thing." He responded, ignoring the comment about his height.

He was concentrating on the rock under his hand, and he closed his eyes. His dwarven senses echoed through the rocky surface, giving a flash of how the cavern network looked like.

This was indeed a special skill of the dwarves, one they gained naturally once they reached level ten.

It was the reason dwarves never got lost in caves and such. They could read the rock like one would read a map.

"The cave layout looks like the upper zone, with enormous caves near all the entrances to the top level." Gulnur affirmed, reopening his eyes.

"Wait. All the entrances?" Astaroth asked, astonished.

"Yes. From what I saw, there is seemingly an entrance in each zone above us." The dwarf confirmed.

"I knew there was something more to this map. Wait. You said big caves?" Astaroth exclaimed, before asking.

"Yes. Enormous caves. One of them is right under us." Gulnur said, nodding his head.

Astaroth tilted his head, before turning it to where the ledge had been. He walked to the side of it, trying to see down below.

It was so dark he couldn't see anything. So he remedied the situation.

Phoenix had been feeling weird ever since they had landed here. Like something was watching them, and they weren't the predators here.

When she saw Astaroth raise his hand and light a fireball, she immediately panicked.

"No! Stop!" She shouted.

It was too late. Astaroth shot his flame beacon spell.

He also enlarged it so he could get light at the bottom. But he instantly regretted it.

From under the cover of darkness, thousands of eyes, all fixed on the man who just shot a giant fireball over their heads. The monsters were looking at him with snarls, jaws dripping with saliva.

Astaroth immediately extinguished the flame beacon, but the damage was done. The entire group had seen the monsters down below, and they were all now white as ghosts.

"Well, shit." Astaroth said.

Howls started sounding from below, as the ground started rumbling. Phoenix was the first to react, as she lit her hand with fire.

"Idiot!" She said, pointing her hand at the monsters.

"Flame Torrent!" She chanted, as the fire on her hand flew forward.

The fire expanded massively, as it left her hand, turning into a gigantic fire wave, and washing over the monsters. The monsters howled in pain, but that was far from enough to kill them.

"Help me kill them! Don't just stand there!" She yelled at the four players behind her.

They were all looking at the flame wave in astonishment.

'So overbearing!' They thought.

Astaroth had seen some bigger flame spells before, but even then he was awestruck. This was a player, not an overpowered NPC.

The other players finally reacted and started attacking the monsters from a distance. The only one who only stood and watched, was the dwarf since he had no ranged attacks.

Astaroth thought about something, as he started flicking small fireballs at the monsters. Since this was going to degenerate into a monster-slaying festival, wouldn't that mean they could hunt together?

He looked into his menu and tried inviting Gulnur to a party. Gulnur turned towards him with a frown, before he appeared on the party list.

'Yes! It works!' Astaroth exclaimed in his head.

He immediately shot out a party invite to the other three, before turning back to the enemies. This would turn out better than he had expected.

All the monsters below seemed to be level thirty, but they were legion. But that mattered not to him, as his melded stats blew that out of the equation.

The sad thing was that he only had two minutes left to his melding for now. So he deactivated it directly, before summoning out White Death instead.

The others had all accepted the party invite at this point. They knew this would play out better as a party, than if they were fighting on their own.

Astaroth turned to the druid.

"I'die! Do you think you can make a small ramp for the monsters to get up here?" He asked.

"What?! Why would he do that?!" Phoenix exclaimed.

They were currently using their range advantage, why would they waste it so? Then she saw the dwarf just standing there.

"Can you do it or not?!" Astaroth asked again.

The elf looked unsure about the request, but when he turned to his friend Athena, she nodded at him. Athena knew full well the melee battle prowess of the man, so she trusted he could handle a few monsters alone.

"I can do it!" I'die responded, regaining his confidence.

"Good! Make it small, enough for two monsters at most! And make it come up on the far end!" Astaroth said as he pointed to the edge of their elevated platform.

"Ok!" I'die said, splitting from the other ranged attackers.

He walked to the edge where Astaroth was now standing and crouched down. He touched the ground before chanting softly.

"Nature's Call: Earthen Path." He said, and the ground started shaking.

A small ledge started forming from the wall, as it followed it down towards the monster mob. Astaroth smiled at the sight.

"It's time to hunt!" He howled, getting ready to fight.

#### Chapter 77 Massacre

Astaroth stood at the top of the now-formed ramp and watched as the first monsters started running up. Gulnur had quickly joined him there, happy he could finally contribute.

He stood near Astaroth, nodding at him and readying his shield. The latter seeing him stand there, switched up tactics.

"Can you hold the frontline against two of them if my summoned wolf helps you?" Astaroth asked Gulnur.

The dwarf smiled a wide, toothy grin in response. That was all the answer Astaroth needed as he motioned to Gulnur to walk forth a bit, as he drew out his bow.

He thought this was as good a chance as any to sharpen his aim. He pulled the bowstring and started taking aim.

When the first monster, a jaguar, climbed half of the ramp and was in a comfortable range for him, he loosed his arrow. The arrow flew straight to the monster, but only hit it in the shoulder.

Astaroth heard a chuckle from behind him, as another arrow whizzed past his ear and lodged itself into the jaguar's eye.

"Nice shot, man!" Gulnur said.

"That wasn't mine." Astaroth replied with a gloomy expression.

He turned to look at Athena, but she wasn't even looking in his direction. Astaroth could see a smirk on her face though.

He turned back to the ramp, determined to get better. He would not take that small humiliation lying down.

He pulled his bowstring back again, aiming at the now much closer monsters. But before he loosed, he heard Athena from behind him.

"Straighten up your back, dude. You look like wet spaghetti. And lift that elbow higher. It should be perpendicular to the ground." She told him.

Astaroth turned his head, but Athena was not even looking at him. She was barely side-eyeing him, from the corner of her eye.

He grumbled as he tried to fix his posture.

'Wet spaghetti yourself.' He mumbled, as he straightened his back and lifted his elbow.

He focused back on the monsters that were now fighting Gulnur. The thought of hitting him scared him, so he waited for a moment to shoot.

It came faster than he expected, as another feline monster jumped over its peers to get to Gulnur. Astaroth aimed at its neck and let go.

The arrow flew straight, but hit the feline in the chest, a little lower than where he had aimed.

"Tch!" He clicked his tongue.

Hitting moving targets was proving more difficult than he had thought. The cougar-looking feline was now about to land behind Gulnur, as Astaroth heard Athena from behind him again.

"Combo skill; Double Shot + Impact Shot!" She shouted as an arrow left her bow.

The arrowhead changed mid-flight, becoming a weird steel ball. Astaroth was looking at it and noticed another detail.

The arrow had a mirage of a second one, heeling it behind. Both arrows whistled past him, as they both hit the feline squarely in the chest.

The hits threw the cougar back from the double impact, and bounced off the wall, before falling back off the ramp. Astaroth watched the scene, stupefied at the strength the arrows had carried.

Those two arrows had worked in succession, the first one stopping the forward momentum of the feline, and the second one knocking it back strongly. She impressed him with her quick thinking and calculations.

These were some pro-level gaming skills. Was she some sort of low-key Esports player?

"Your stance was better, so your arrow carried more power. But your aim is still god awful." Athena dropped, aiming her words at Astaroth.

"I'm doing the best I can!" Astaroth rebuked.

He was not an archer by any measure, so it didn't come naturally to him.

"I can see that, but you are doing it wrong." She replied.

"Fine then! What is it I am doing wrong? Teach me, oh great goddess of the bow!" Astaroth barked, losing his temper a bit at being belittled.

Athena clicked her tongue at him.

"You are aiming with just your eyes. Aim with your gut. Stop calculating your arrow trajectory. Feel it!" She replied, helping him regardless of his temper.

"What?" Astaroth asked, looking at her like she was stupid.

He turned around, deciding to ignore her. She might be a better archer than him, but what she was saying made no sense.

Feel the arrow? How was he supposed to feel something inanimate?

It made no sense! He aimed another arrow at the monsters, going back to helping Gulnur.

The little dwarf was doing fine holding back the monsters before him. Of course, White Death let nothing slip past him, which was why he was still holding on.

The wolf had been attacking anything that came around the dwarf, making sure he wasn't surrounded. But he would soon disappear, as his summon timer was nearing its end.

Astaroth was waiting on that moment to meld back, and go perform some carnage in the monster horde. Only thirty seconds left.

He aimed another arrow at a monster, a monkey this time, as it was jumping off the wall and over Gulnur. The arrow was loose, but missed its target, as the monkey pushed off the wall at a slight angle away from it.

The result displeased Astaroth, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He stowed the bow away, pulling out his longsword instead.

He wielded it with two hands, maximizing his damage numbers and enhancing his control over it too. Astaroth dashed at the monkey, deciding to help White Death take care of it before his spirit disappeared.

They made quick work of the primate and finished it just before White faded away. Astaroth then smirked.

It was time to change the pace.

He spirit melded, before running past Gulnur.

"I'm going down! Hold the line here! There should be fewer monsters coming your way soon!" He yelled as he jumped over him.

"Wait! How am I going to deal with the circling ones!?" Gulnur asked, a slight look of panic washing on his face.

"I'll deal with them!" Athena shouted, turning her bow to the ramp.

"Thanks!" Astaroth answered, before diving into the mob.

He hacked and slashed his way through to the bottom of the ramp, practically transforming into a bladed tornado. Damage numbers kept flashing in his eyes, as each hit connected to their intended targets.

He then jumped off what little remained of the ramp, landing straight into the mob of monsters down below. He grinned savagely as he began cutting again.

The ranged players up on the platform looked at him in dread and horror. The man was going up against the hundreds down there, without a care in the world.

It was both amazing that he survived for the first few minutes, and scary that he slew monsters left and right with such ease.

Astaroth's teammates could see the damage numbers he was dealing and it scared them. Could one man have so many skills and deal so much damage nonstop?

But Astaroth was not using any skills, other than Enchant Weapon. This damage was simply because of his high stats.

He fought his way through the horde, monitoring his melding timer, making sure he didn't stray too far from the ramp. He didn't want to get stranded down there after all.

He killed and slayed all that came at him until there were only 2 minutes left to his meld. That was when he climbed back up.

He mowed his way through the crowd of monsters again, this time up the ramp. When he reached the top, he jumped over the rest and kicked off the wall to land behind Gulnur.

His melding ended a few seconds after he landed. Astaroth was heaving and gasping for air. Now that his adrenaline levels went down, and his stats went back to normal, fatigue caught up to him.

"Can you keep covering for me for a few seconds, please?" Astaroth asked Athena, between big gulps of air.

She simply nodded in response. Her snarky attitude from before was now gone.

She understood the difference in their skill sets already but had not thought the gap to be this big. Athena would never risk going against so many creatures, without running away.

She knew her limits. This display of sheer power Astaroth had just pulled was not only astounding, it was inhuman.

She knew of no one who could dive into a group of monsters of their own level, and walk out mostly unscathed. The man had not even needed healing!

The entire group had watched as Astaroth fought through the horde, his health going up and down, never going to a dangerous level. And now that he had transformed back, his health was back to full!

"What kind of monstrous spell is that?!" Athena thought to herself.

"Oh, and by the way." Astaroth said, turning his head to Athena.

"Hmm?" She hummed, still firing arrows.

"I think I just understood what you meant by feeling the arrow." Astaroth affirmed, smiling widely.

During the fight, Astaroth had mainly relied on his instincts to swing his sword, making sure he never tunnel-visioned on one enemy. That was the reason his fight went so fluidly.

And that made him think about what Athena had told him. Was he not doing exactly what she told him right now?

He was feeling his sword's trajectory, instead of consciously maneuvering it. That had made him understand what she had meant.

He had to aim, yes, but he should trust his instincts on the shot too. He was ready to try it, now.

"It's time for round two!" He grinned, as he pulled out his bow again.

Chapter 78 A New Threat

\*\*\*Back to the surface\*\*\*

"You!" Azamus said, looking at the recent addition on the playing field.

Standing before him, was a tall, well-built man. His hair was a dark shade of brown and reached his shoulders.

He was dressed in full leather armor, with a quiver on his back, and two scimitars at his belt. The short-bow in his hands seemed made of a mix between wood and metal.

"I'm surprised you made it in the top one thousand, Killi." Azamus spat out, with acid in his tone.

"Don't discard me so fast, you angry garden dwarf." Killi said, mockingly

The man, Killi, was another Esports player that was well known throughout the community. He and Azamus had a long-standing rivalry, as one was the best player in the American community, and the other in the British community.

"What did you call me?! You old has-been!" Azamus answered, almost frothing at the mouth, as he pointed his pistols at Killi.

Killi had also been the number one player in the game before 'Tower of Babel', a game Azamus had been too young to play professionally for. Killi was an older Esports player, his age closer to thirty years old.

"You can call me a has-been, and old all you want. But that does not detract from the fact of your height and predisposition to rage." Killi responded, laughing lightly.

Both men then had to jump back, as kamas struck where they had been standing a few moments prior.

"You boys are awfully confident, to be disregarding my presence here." Blue Peacock seethed, as she retracted her weapons.

"I would never dare, my lady." Killi responded with a slight bow.

"I don't need my full attention on you." Azamus replied, scowling at her.

"You dare say that after Killi just saved your skin? You arrogant midget!" Blue fumed, as she gripped her kamas harder.

"Stop referencing my height! This is just the race I picked!" Azamus howled.

Both Killi and Blue started laughing at his outburst, mocking him mostly. Azamus was having none of it, as he pulled out two grenades, throwing them toward the two.

\*Boom\* \*Boom\*

The explosions kicked up clouds of dust, making the visibility go down. Azamus knew he hadn't hit them, but at least now, they would have to focus on something else than his height.

An arrow and a kama came flying at him, from opposite directions. He back flipped away from them, as they hit the ground where he stood.

"Fine. No more chit-chat." Killi said as the dust cloud cleared away, revealing his serious face.

"Time to claim your head." Blue said from the other side, swooshing the dust away with her spinning kama.

All three of them were standing in a triangle, in a Mexican stand-off style, waiting for one another to make the first move. Azamus, with his short fuse, was the first one to flinch.

He turned to Blue, intent on finishing their earlier fight, hoping that it would split her focus on both him and Killi. The problem was that he also had to do that, as the latter seemed intent on sabotaging him.

Killi shot an arrow at Azamus, forcing him to look his way, but was kept from charging as a kama on a chain flew at his face. He blocked the blow with the metal part of his short-bow, before shooting an arrow back at Blue.

The three of them were keeping each other in check, both defending and attacking each other in quick succession. The fight was for now at a standstill.

Many players were at the edge of the pyramid zone, watching, as these three monsters were fighting in a three-way fight. Most of them recognized the three pro players and knew better than to barge in.

Some were a little less knowledgeable, unfortunately for them, as they tried using blind spots to reap in some kills. The sad thing about that was that they almost always landed a hit.

But as if the three monstrous players had reached a tacit agreement, they always covered each other's back. It wasn't a silent agreement though.

The trio only wanted to keep anyone else from stealing their kill. Especially some random player that had no prestige.

Every time a random player tried swooping in for a kill, they ended up getting barraged by attacks from all three monstrous Esports athletes. After a few unfortunate souls died in this process, the rest learned their lesson.

The fight went back to just them, as the spot of combat kept moving in a parabolic trajectory around the pyramid. Seeing the battleground moving, some of the waiting players went back to trying to get the potion.

The brawling restarted in the middle zone, following the path of the pro players' fight, as more and more people joined in. Killi and Azamus shot those who got too close, or they had their throats slit by flying kamas.

The trio would not let people reach the top of the pyramid as they actively monitored it. But splitting their focus on so many things took its toll quickly.

Azamus was the first one to drop the ball since his stamina was lesser than the other two. As he was back-stepping from a clash with Blue, he tripped on an insignificant obstacle that he failed to notice.

Killi did not hesitate to pounce on the occasion, as he fired four arrows in quick succession, all aimed at Azamus' side. Azamus did not miss those, as he forced his body to turn, putting his back to the arrows.



His armor had better coverage on the back than sides, so the damage was lessened, but he still fell into critical territory. He knew his fighting was over for now, so as he rolled on the ground, he used Recoil Escape on Blue again, pushing himself away.

When he landed after his skill, he quickly darted away, dodging arrows as he did. When Killi and Blue tried giving chase to him, they ended up on a trajectory into each other.

Blue attacked Killi, forcing him to stop and retaliate. The two of them gave up on the gnome since they would never catch him if they had to fight each other off too.

The fight quickly went from a fierce three-way battle, into a direct one-on-one, as Killi switched his bow out for his simitars.

Blue was expecting an easier fight in melee than in range, but Killi proved her wrong. His mastery of the dual scimitars was on par with his bow skills, as he fought her on equal footing.

Killi's class was not the normal Archer class. It was a special one, called Ranger.

As a Ranger, he gained the ability to use both melee and ranged weapons without penalty. If a normal Archer player tried that, they would have a ten percent penalty to their damage done.

Since Killi was originally a melee fighter in most games he played, he was already proficient in swords and sabers. The archery part, he learned from being a posh British noble.

His family often took hunting trips in the forests of England, so his skills with a bow were not negligible. He had started the game as an Archer class, to vary from his usual style.

But when he found out about the Ranger class, Killi was overjoyed. He could do both melee and ranged with that class, and that meant being very flexible.

This was a choice that suited him very much, and he had not hesitated to make the change. Of course, since the class was a kind of multiclass, the skills he gained from it were much less powerful than the straightforward ones from Archer or Warrior.

But that was only the beginning, and he couldn't wait to reach a higher level.

The fight between him and Blue was in full swing when the both of them noticed something odd. They no longer heard the clashing of other weapons.

As they split from a clash, the both of them quickly glanced around. There was no one following them anymore.

Then something caught Blue's eye. At the top of the tower, a man was standing.

He had an open case before him, with a red potion in his hand. Blue and Killi did not recognize the man, but they knew reaching the top of that pyramid, with all the fighting going on, was no small feat.

Then Killi noticed something in the distance. His face dropped before he turned to look at Blue.

"This man... He killed all the players fighting for the potion." He said, with a grave tone.

"How can you be sure of that?" She asked, not seeing what he had seen.

"Backtrack a bit, you'll see what I mean." Killi said as he kept his eyes on the man on the pyramid.

The man on the pyramid had just uncorked the glass container and drank its content. Blue saw that and made an awkward face.

She went around Killi, making sure not to get too close to him, in case this was a trick. But when she got around him and saw further around the pyramid, she broke out in a sweat.

Standing there, before the pyramid, were dozens of undead monsters, but not a single player in sight. Blue then gazed at the man on the pyramid.

He was smiling coldly.

That man was a Necromancer.

Chapter 79 Faraway Menace

From the top of the pyramid, Khalor looked back at the two pro players watching him. He smiled in a fake fashion.

"I don't want to fight you, but I will, if need be." He told them, keeping up the facade.

Killi and Blue could feel the cold aura washing off of the man. It felt like just the mere act of looking at him was robbing them of their life.

Blue was the first one to snap out of the half-trance.

"What is it you want then?" She asked, cautiously.

"I want to reach the next stage, but not before I get one more item." He replied, sitting down on the steps.

"What item?" Killi asked next.

"That is on a need-to-know basis. And you don't fucking need to know." Khalor responded, angry at the prying Ranger.

"Oh? And what if I decide I want that item." Killi said with a smirk, as he pulled his bowstring taut.

"Then you would seek death." Khalor said, his gaze piercing into Killi.

\*CAW!\*

Killi heard a loud cawing from high in the sky before gusts of wind kicked up around the pyramid. He was almost knocked to his ass by the sheer force of the wind.

Then a large two-headed raven landed behind Khalor. It cawed loudly another time, spreading its wings wide.

The shadow it cast upon the pyramid was immense, and Blue audibly gulped. This was most likely a boss-level monster, she thought.

"What in the hell!" Killi said, visibly shaken.

"Just who are you?" He asked the man on the pyramid.

"My name is Khalor. But you can call me The Monarch of Death." Khalor said as he smiled slightly.

"Tch! Poser! Calling yourself a monarch. Do you know who I am? I'm a real nobility!" Killi shouted, letting his anger slip from him.

"I know who you are, arrogant tea drinker. I know full well, Kiligan Norrington, what your lineage is. But I don't care." Khalor replied, brushing him off like he was nothing.

Killi just blanked, as the man had just named him by his real name. How did he know his full name?

No one had interviewed Killi with his full name in years. Most people should have already forgotten about him in the gaming circles.

Yet, this man seemed fully aware of who he was speaking to. While Killi knew nothing about this 'Khalor' guy.

Everyone knew that information was crucial in war, and gaming was a war too. But now, his opponent had a full information advantage over him.

This was bad. Terrible, even.

"Listen, both of you. I don't want to fight more than necessary. So just don't get in my way." Khalor said as he stretched lazily.

He then gave a silent order to his undead, sending them on a hunt. He had to reduce the number of players left to six hundred soon.

The undead army turned on their heels and scattered into all the zones. It didn't take long for the kill count to go up again.

It had already been an hour since they started phase one, and the remaining players still numbered a little over seven hundred. He needed to get that number down.

But not too low, and not too fast either.

He ordered his undead to hunt the players down and to stop when there were six hundred players left. Beside him, he kept two undead.

One was the giant two-headed raven. The other was a tall death knight in full-plated armor.

Khalor turned his head to the pro players, as they were still standing there. He sighed.

"Don't just stand there. Go, hunt players." Khalor told them, shooing them away.

Blue and Killi felt insulted by this, but they knew they wouldn't stand a chance against him with just the two of them. That's how strong they thought he was.

Blue clicked her tongue, as she started walking towards the volcanic region. Killi for his part looked at Khalor with a mix of hatred and fear.

Hatred from being looked down at, but fear from being totally exposed. What if that man acted on him outside the game?

Of course, his estate was protected. But he knew nothing from this newcomer.

What if the man had connections to dangerous people? Or what if he was one of those himself?

With access to his full personal information, much damage could be done to him. And that was excluding the threat to his life.

Killi carefully walked away, towards the urban zone, monitoring Khalor all the way until he could no longer see him.

"Master, he might be a problem later. Should I deal with him right away?" The death knight asked Khalor, doing a low bow.

"Hmm. No. Leave him be, for now. We have bigger fish to fry." Khalor replied, looking to the desert zone.

From the top of the pyramid, Khalor could see far into any of the zones, but the desert one was where his attention lay. That was the direction Azamus had fled to.

If any player was currently a threat to him, it would be that gnome. He could shoot him from halfway across the full map and kill him in one strike.

So he kept his eye on that zone, to be sure he could react in time if he ever heard or saw something out of the ordinary. Khalor could see many vantage points in the desert zone that could be used as sniper's nests.

That's what he was keeping his eyes on. But there were many spots, and he had to constantly move his eyes.

This was not the best way of staying safe from a sniper, but it was his only choice for now. He knew Azamus would try to shoot down the potion drinker, to eliminate an enormous threat for the next phases.

At the end of the desert, Azamus was already perched on a pillar of rocks. Climbing there had been hard on him since he was wounded, but he had made it.

Now he was looking to score as many points as he could before the phase ended. As soon as he had a clear shot on someone, he would open fire, and reap a life.

This boosted his points some more, as he already had many. But then he noticed something in the faraway distance.

A big black bird had landed on the pyramid. He could still see the pyramid, albeit poorly, even with his scope.

That was how far he had run from it. He had used every escape skill in his arsenal, just to create as much distance as he could.

To a sniper, being undetected was the ideal situation. Of course, since he could hold his own as a gunner, he had gone toe to toe with Blue and Killi, but it had cost him.

Now he was back to trying and sniping his opponents from a distance, and currently, he was seeing one in his scope. A man, sitting on the stairs of the pyramid.

The man was looking in his general location like he was searching for something. Or someone.

'What is he looking for?' Azamus wondered as he started looking around through his scope.

He thought maybe the man was looking for prey that had escaped. But after a few minutes of searching, he found nothing.

No players could be seen in the desert anymore. Probably because this was the worst place to be.

Almost totally open terrain, with barely any obstacle to hide or duck behind. Any sane person would look for a better place to fight.

The dessert was basically a death trap for any melee player, against any ranged player. Unless they were good enough to reach them.

Azamus focused back on the pyramid. Right now, he was at a range where just seeing his opponent's head was already a feat.

But he thought about the position of the man. Since he was sitting on the pyramid, did that not mean the potion was gone?

Was it he who had drunk it? Or did he just sit there after the act?

He looked through his scope again, noticing another detail. An empty glass bottle was near the man.

Azamus had to focus, just to see the sheen off the darn thing. But that made his questions vanish.

There was no way someone else drank the potion and left the bottle there intact, right? No, it was assuredly him who drank it.

Azamus jumped off his current perch. He needed to get closer, or he would never make the shot.

He ran a few hundred meters forward, making sure he stayed as much in cover as he could. He ran behind dunes and rock pillars when he could.

After walking forward for almost a kilometer, he picked the nearest stone pillar. He climbed to its top, a hard endeavor once again, before lying down.

He readjusted his scope angles, making sure they accounted for the reduced distance before he looked through it again. He now had a much better view of his target.

He could make out his traits better, and one thing stood out to him. His face seemed familiar.

He swatted away that stray thought as he breathed in, and expelled half the breath, holding in the other half.

His hands steadied, and he pulled the trigger.

**\*Bang!\***

Chapter 80 Account Binding Contract

**\*\*\*Back to the under zone\*\*\***

Astaroth and Gulnur crashed to their backs, fully exhausted, after fighting for the last twenty minutes. They were both drenched in sweat, panting, as they admired the ceiling.

They had killed a thousand monsters, of which almost a hundred were special grade. Those were the last few monsters that had cropped up.

Everyone had made the same amount of Exp, three hundred and twenty-four thousand points. Since they were all in a party, it divided the Exp into equal parts.

Since Genie was not in the tournament area, Astaroth made his full Exp amount this time, and that made him slightly happy. But having an extra pair of limbs to help would have been better, he thought.

No one had leveled up from this round of monster bashing, but many were close. Mostly, none of them had expected to gain Exp during a PvP tournament.

This was all bonus, candy, if you will. They wouldn't complain, though.

"What are the chances that each large cave in this zone is a monster's nest?" Astaroth asked, knowing full well the answer.

"I'd say, ninety percent?" Gulnur responded, smiling widely through his beard.

"Any of you want to quit now?" Astaroth followed up with another question.

Their heads were shaking, and everyone was smiling. This was a perfect spot for some grinding, and who knows, there might be treasure down here too.

Astaroth and Gulnur got to their feet, and the group proceeded forward into the tunnel network. Gulnur was acting as their guide and vanguard as they reached the next large cavity.

They fought their way through another three caverns, leaving them with just one last zone and the center grotto. Gulnur had told them that the center grotto was much larger than the other five.

So most of the group expected that cavern to be where the main event would be held. There was most likely a boss-level monster in that cavern, and they would defeat it at any cost.

The cavern tunnels they had been walking through were a maze, and their trajectory had not been in a perfect circle around the map. The last zone they ended up in, before the center one, was under the urban zone.

Most of the party had leveled up once at this point. Only Athena and Phoenix had yet to level up, but Astaroth had leveled twice on his side.

Those were the perks of still being level thirty, he guessed. The one thing that really peeved the group was that the monsters did not drop any worthwhile loot.

They dropped Monster Cores and Soul Cores, but the Monster Cores were not worth much. The Soul Cores though, were worth a pretty penny.

So far, they had divided the monster cores and soul cores between each other, as fairly as they could. They could make a decent lump of coins if they sold them after the tournament.

Some crafters had already started leveling up their trade classes and were making big money in the game. Proof enough that it wasn't just about monster bashing.

They could make many applications of monster cores and soul cores, as Astaroth had already seen from White Death's soul core. Astaroth had gained more soul cores from this, but none from boss-level monsters.

White Death was currently stuck as a normal-level soul, but Aberon had told him that if he sublimed his soul, he might regain his zone boss stats.

That meant a massive increase in strength for White, but also for him. Having a summon at that level of strength meant he would have a powerful helper, but also gain a massive stat boost during melding.

But for now, this was still a distant dream. Or at least he thought so.

Until he reached the next zone's cave. The large cave opened up to a massive flat area in which many monsters were lying down, napping.

His mouth hung agape as he saw them. Dire wolves.

Hundreds of dire wolves. All just lying there, ready to be harvested.

Astaroth stood at the entrance to the cave, almost drooling. If he was lucky here, he could push White Death to the next phase with all those souls in here.

He turned around, facing the rest of their makeshift group.

"I need a favor!" He exclaimed, trying to activate puppy eyes mode.

The four others looked at him weirdly before Phoenix broke the silence.

"What do you want?" She asked.

"What do we get in exchange?" She added, her smile resembling a shark's.

Astaroth thought for a bit, before pulling back all the Soul Cores and Monster Cores from his inventory.

"I will give you all back my part of the Soul Cores and Monster Cores!" He said, trying to bargain with them.

"What is it you want in exchange so badly?" Phoenix said, curiously.

"I want all the Soul Cores and Monster Cores from this room." Astaroth said, laying it out.

He knew he was a terrible negotiator, and that she would probably scam him for greater value. So he gave up even trying and was forthcoming.

"What do you need those for, specifically those, I might add?" Phoenix said, frowning.

Astaroth wanted to keep that information for himself, but he knew the situation wasn't in his favor. So he told them a half lie.

"I need wolf Soul Cores and Monster Cores for a quest." He lied.

"A quest, huh?" Phoenix said, having a hard time believing him.

"Yes. A very important quest." He lied again.

"Hmm. Fine. But the cores are not enough." She responded.

Astaroth did not care for the cores, so he gave them away right away.

"What else do you want, then?" He asked as he gave them away.

"You seem like a man of your word. How about you sign a contract to owe us all a favor?" She said, smiling again.

The request took aback Astaroth. Could one sign a contract within the game that was binding in any way?

"Sign a contract? How would that ensure I keep my promise? Not that I wouldn't, but I don't see how that is binding." Astaroth said, his brows furrowing.

"That is a simple question to answer. There is a contract function that is account bound." She started stating.

"That function allows me to call in the favor at any moment of my choice, and you must respond." She continued.

"If you refuse, it will lock your account for one day. If you refuse again, it becomes three days, then a week, then permanent." She finished, with the smile of a devil brandishing its offer to a human.

Astaroth was shaken. There was such a function in the game?

How had he never heard about it? Was it maybe a new function?

Unless he hadn't heard about it because he had not yet started using it much. Or maybe it wasn't well known because it wasn't a normal function.

"Don't worry too much about how it works. Just know that it works." Phoenix said, seeing the wheels in his mind spin full throttle.

Astaroth was brought back to the current situation with her words. He knew they couldn't wait too long before going into the cave, since the remaining players' counter had already dropped to six hundred and fifty.

He thought about the offer for a few more seconds before nodding his head. Then Phoenix started tapping the air before her, probably pulling out a menu in the interface.

She had a contract draft down in a few seconds and everyone in the party received a notification. Astaroth tapped on it.

It was the contract offer, written with all the names of the current party members. In it, it was specified that Astaroth would owe each person in the contract one favor, callable at any moment.

Phoenix had already signed her part of it, and all the party members were currently reading it. They seemed satisfied as their names all started flashing brightly on the contract interface.

All that was left was for Astaroth to sign. He was slightly hesitant because that meant he could sell his levels to them if they decided that's what they wanted.

He asked if he could add a clause about not asking for something like his life or forcing him to die voluntarily, and Phoenix nodded. It was a reasonable demand, so she added the clause.

They all resigned their names before it came back to Astaroth again. He read the clause but was satisfied as he could be with it.

He signed his name on the contract, and it shone a bright white. A new option appeared in his interface, where he could view his current contracts.



The interface menu also gave him instructions on how to accept or demand a contract, as well as what happened when the contract was honored or not.

If a contract encompassed many players, like in this case, every time a player pulled their favor and he acquitted it, their names would disappear from the contract.

This meant that they wouldn't be able to request many favors from him because of a loophole. This reassured him a bit, as his shoulders slumped.

'I now owe my ass to four different people.' He mused internally.

But with this, his thoughts went back to the wolves in the cavern behind him. With some luck, he could upgrade White Death's soul after the tournament, and that meant he would be stronger.

A smile found its way back onto his face. He looked back at the wolves and grinned.

"Fingers crossed. I need this!" He said as the party readied to dive into the monster mob.