

New Eden 81

Chapter 81 Wolf-Nam In The Underground

This cave differed from the others. Its layout was flat when the other caves had been multi-layered.

This meant that the party's fighting formation would have to be different. They couldn't form a choke point and have I'die, Athena, and Phoenix bombard from a distance.

Astaroth and Gulnur would have to fight as vanguards, making sure they didn't get bypassed. It would not be simple, since the terrain was so open.

As they advanced into the cavern, the wolves resting at the edge finally discovered them, howling to alert the others.

"Alright, here it goes!" Astaroth shouted.

He and Gulnur fanned out a little, with White death taking the center, and cleaning up any enemy that tried going around them. Astaroth forwent his spirit melding for the beginning since that would leave Gulnur alone to deal with lots of pressure.

He would use it after his summon timed out, but for now, splitting the pressure was more important, as to protect his back line. As the first wave of wolves crashed into them, Gulnur used a taunting skill to grab as much aggro as he could.

Astaroth on his side used Intimidation Shout, maximizing the aggro pull on himself from the other side and causing many monsters to get feared.

This would let him deal with the first wave efficiently for the first few seconds since the feared monsters were backing away. Astaroth didn't forget to cast Mana Skin, to bolster his defense.

He also used his short sword and shield, acting like an off-tank. He blocked most of the remaining wolves that charged at them, leaving the last few to White.

To give White a better fighting chance, he boosted his Constitution stat with three points he had from leveling up. His health bar jumped to close to eight thousand health, making him almost tankier than Gulnur.

Then he did the same with his own free points, dumping all eight of them into Constitution. That took his health from forty-one hundred to fifty-three hundred points.

That might look negligible, but that put him at equal health levels as full brawler classes. To give a good comparison, Gulnur, a full tank, had almost eight thousand health.

The boost let him tank better, but this would still just be a temporary solution. He could never tank a mob of monsters for long unless he started boosting only his Constitution stat.

That was not his intention, of course, as he was trying to go for a full damage build. His next best option would be to find a soul to contract that had a tank predisposition.

But that would not be an easy feat. Astaroth got his shoulder bit because he was in his thoughts, and he snapped back to the now.

He stabbed the wolf in the eye with his short sword, forcing it off of him, before kicking it in the chest to push it back. A soothing green energy, with petals swirling through, washed over him, bringing his health back up, and closing the wound.

He turned his head over to I'die and thanked him with a nod. I'die answered him with a smile, before going back to attacking the wolves.

He waved his staff, and a wave of stalagmites grew in front of Gulnur, impaling the wolves it hit.

'Such a troublesome class to deal with.' Astaroth thought to himself.

A class that could attack and heal, would be a terror on the battlefield. Of course, he was also an aberration to other players, but that thought never crossed his mind.

It had only been three minutes into the fight, and already some wolves were dropping. That never allowed the party to rest though, as wave after wave crashed into their frontline.

Gulnur was doing an excellent job keeping most of the wolves locked on him, using one taunt after another, and using so many defense skills, it was scary.

Astaroth watched him from the corner of his eye and was incredibly impressed. The dwarf had not once yet been in a position where he was in actual danger.

There was always a defense skill active on him, and his spatial awareness was impressive. Nothing went past him without his knowledge, it appeared, as whatever did, either got taunted by him or ended in White Death's jaws.

To the players inside the tournament, this scene would already be impressive. But to the players watching the broadcasts, it was outright inhuman.

No one in the tournament knew they broadcast it outside of the game, since chairwoman Constantine had said nothing about it.

But, at the moment, the eyes of almost all the players in the game, and even the non-players outside of the game, were glued to their screens.

The broadcast would switch between points of interest, trying to keep its audience entertained. But for the last few minutes, except for a quick interlude to the pyramid and Khalor, the cameras had been on Astaroth and his group.

Even Constantine was watching the broadcasts, from her cozy office. It slightly angered her, though, because there shouldn't be any player in the under zone they had designed.

They had designed that complete zone simply as a gigantic holding cell for the monsters. Those monsters were to be used if the players tried to stale the phase too much.

But with what was happening right now, there would be no monster left to do that. This little group of misfits was driving a wrench into her planning.

"Their teamwork is sloppy, but their power is nothing to look down on." Constantine muttered as she watched the party mow down wolf after wolf.

Currently, the entire world was wondering if the monsters were too weak, or if the players were too strong. Some nincompoop players had already tried repeating the feat.

Little needed to be said about how that ended. Many of those simple-minded players were currently trying to defend their deaths by saying the wolves they fought were stronger.

Of course, the broadcasts showed the levels of the monsters, just as much as the ones of the players. So no one believed their stupid claims.

Back in the cave, around two hundred wolves had already been slain, in a little under ten minutes. There was just one minute left to White Death's summon timer, and Astaroth was getting mentally ready to dive into the mob.

The situation had already devolved into a game of catch at this point. The party was circling the room, keeping their formation, as they kept a wall at their back, but never staying in the same spot.

This maneuver was the only reason they had not yet been overwhelmed. Most of this was thanks to Phoenix, whose leading skills were a grade above.

No one ever doubted her commands, and that had yet to fail them. Astaroth called to her.

"Phoenix! My summon is almost done. I'm going in!" He said, getting ready.

"Understood!" She answered back.

Her mind went into overload, trying to see what would be the best move here. She thought of a plan and quickly shared it in the group chat, through thought.

She knew they had no time to go over it, so she let Astaroth read it and execute it in his own way. When Astaroth saw the message, he grinned widely.

Phoenix had asked him to pull as many enemies as he could off of them, after his transformation, and fight in guerilla tactics. Since his speed was higher than the monsters' speed, he could do hit-and-run tactics.

"Ten-four, Phoenix!" He shouted as White Death faded away, his timer reaching zero.

"Spirit Melding." He then muttered.

Again, his hair turned white, his eyes went deep blue, and his arms grew some fur, as he transformed. He howled loudly to the skies, or ceiling in this case, and madly dashed away.

He moved in a straight line, through the wolves, making it to the center of the mob. Once he was there, he used one of his acquired skills, Alpha's Howl.

The howl pulled so much aggro in its fifty-meter radius, that most of the pressure was taken off of Gulnur. The fear effect also kicked in, sending almost three-quarters of the wolves into ingrained terror.

This was his queue to start guerilla tactics. He dived back out of the mob and started doing hit-and-runs, making sure he kept aggro as much as possible.

What little wolves he hadn't hit, kept going at the rest of the party. But Phoenix had ordered them to hunker down, going for a defensive fight for now.

Astaroth had pulled out his two daggers, and he was zooming in and out of the wolves following him, claiming lives every few strikes. When he left a wolf with little health but couldn't finish it, he tagged coordinates in the chat.

Soon after, an arrow would fly in, finishing the beast off before it could even move. Athena's precision, even when she had no sight of her target, was terrifying.

The fight went on for the next nine minutes, with Astaroth running loops around the wolves and the rest of the party defending themselves in a corner. Gulnur was doing a beautiful job, but he still needed to be healed very often.

When Astaroth's melding was almost done, he received a command through the chat from Phoenix. She asked him to round up the wolves in the center of the room.

"All of them?" Astaroth asked.

"Yes. All of them." She responded.

"On it." He replied.

He knew she had a plan, otherwise, she wouldn't be giving him that order. So he asked questions no more and did what she asked.

He ran the cave full circle again, grabbing aggro on the group of wolves in front of Gulnur on the way, and rounded the wolves up like sheep.

Once he was done, he ran back to the group, as he heard Phoenix chant.

"Cataclysmic Event: Fire Tornado!"

Chapter 82 From Ally To Teacher

At first, a magic circle almost the full size of the room appeared under the wolves. Then, wisps of fire started appearing at the edges of it.

They grew in numbers as they started spinning, slowly, accelerating with more and more power and speed. It did not take long before the fire was a raging twister, spanning from the floor to the ceiling.

The party stood there, watching the pillar of fire that was consuming the remaining wolves by the dozens every second. It was a sight to behold.

Astaroth turned his head slightly, looking at Phoenix. He knew a spell of this size required an enormous amount of mana since he had seen the spell before.

Phoenix was behind the group, panting and sweating, with her hands on her knees. Astaroth walked to stand next to her.

"Are you ok?" He asked her, in a low tone.

"I'll... be fine... thank you." She responded between heavy breaths.

"Mana deprivation could cause you to faint. Be careful." Astaroth added.

"I know. I'll drink a mana potion. It'll be fine." She replied, standing up.

"Did you learn Mana Breathing?" Astaroth asked, at her response.

He could see her mana bar in the party list. Yes, it had reached the quarter, which was why she was panting.

But it shouldn't be a reason enough to drink a mana potion when they were almost out of combat already. Phoenix looked at him weirdly.

"Mana Breathing?" She asked, her face a mask of question.

"Did your mentor not teach you?" Astaroth replied, his brow lifting.

"Never heard of it." Phoenix said.

"Gosh. Ok. Guess your mentor is less good than mine." Astaroth said, exhaling.

Phoenix stiffened up at that statement. Her master was a great pyromancer from the Human Empire.

How could someone like him be of a lower caliber than another mage? That statement peeved her a little, while also making her curious about who Astaroth's master was.

"They taught you this Mana Breathing? Your mentor, I mean." She asked, thinking maybe he had just heard about it.

"Oh, yes. In our early days of training. He said it was important for the next step." Astaroth answered like this was common knowledge.

"Can you..." Phoenix started saying, before being interrupted by a map-wide announcement.

Attention dear participants. We have reached an important point in phase one, and will now speed up the tempo. Only six hundred of you are left, and for the last one hundred players, you will have only one hour to eliminate them. Failing to attain this goal will cause penalties for all remaining players. May the strongest players remain!

Following that announcement, a clock appeared on everyone's interface. It started ticking down from one hour.

"Looks like we have little time left here. We better get moving then." Astaroth said, looking at Phoenix.

"Wait!" She exclaimed.

"Hmm?" Astaroth hummed, looking at her.

"Can you teach me?" Phoenix asked.

"Teach you? Mana Breathing you mean?" Astaroth asked.

"Yes. If it's something that can help me grow stronger, I want to know!" She insisted.

"I... I don't know if I should." Astaroth said, hesitating.

"Please teach me!" Phoenix said, her eyes full of resolve.

Astaroth could tell she was ready to meet any price to learn the skill. But he wasn't sure he should teach anyone this at all.

After all, Aberon told him this was a higher concept. He was sure there was no risk of just Mana Breathing, but the problem lay in the accumulation of impurities that came with fast replenishing one's mana.

The others in the party had gathered around wondering what Phoenix was asking him to teach her. Astaroth saw them all around him and became nervous.

"Phoenix, I can't teach you this. It comes with risks." Astaroth said with a sigh.

He was trying to brush her off. But he had not expected the next words out of her mouth.

"I will use my favor. You would be rid of my part of the contract after. Is that enough?" She asked, almost sounding desperate.

Phoenix had noticed that Astaroth never went out of mana. But she thought it was because of an immense mana pool.

Now that she knew he had a skill to replenish his mana, she understood why he was not even trying to conserve mana. He theoretically had an unlimited supply!

Of course, this statement was a tad flawed, since he still had a limited mana pool. But his mana regen passive mitigated a big part of the problem.

Astaroth was now stuck between a rock and a hard place. He couldn't possibly refuse her demand if she used the contract clause, but he couldn't in good conscience teach her mana breathing without teaching her body cleansing.

"It will take more than that." Astaroth said, his tone becoming cold.

He was going to break them all out of the contract. He didn't want the contract, but he didn't want to put anyone in danger, either.

"What else will it take?" Phoenix asked, not caring about the price.

"All of them." Astaroth replied.

"All of them?" Phoenix asked, becoming confused.

"Yes. All of your favors." Astaroth confirmed, looking at the rest of the group too.

"Hold on! Why would we give our favors for her demand!?" Athene demanded, her anger slightly flaring up.

"Yeah. I'm not sure I'm okay with this either." Gulnur said, passing his hand on his beard.

"I don't really mind." I'die said, wanting to avoid confrontation.

"The answer to your questions is simple. Because I will teach you all the same thing." Astaroth said.

"What would I do with a skill called Mana Breathing'?" Gulnur asked.

"I don't even use mana." He added.

"Because I won't just teach you that. Mana Breathing is the first part of a two-part technique." Astaroth answered.

"And the second part is dangerous if it's not done right." He added, his eyes serious.

"That still doesn't answer my question." Gulnur slightly rebuked.

"The second part of the technique works for anyone and any class. It enhances your body entirely." Astaroth answered.

The group gasped lightly. A technique that enhances the body?

Would that not mean they could become stronger with this? How had Astaroth stumbled upon such a technique in the first place?

'How lucky!' They all thought.

That last bit of information immediately enticed the rest of the group. Right after, the contract interface on Astaroth's menu started flashing.

When he tapped on it, he saw the names of everyone on the contract grow dimmer. He received the request to teach them the two skills, in exchange for the aforementioned promised favor.

Astaroth smiled lightly. He didn't want to teach them this, but he had put himself in this situation.

He and his big mouth again had gotten him in trouble, as always. At least, now he would free himself of this constraining contract before it even bothered him that much.

He had all of them sit down. He started by grabbing all the Soul Cores and Monster Cores lying about everywhere, before coming back to them.

He then taught them Mana Breathing, just like Aberon had taught him. The only difference was that he didn't have Gulnur or Athena direct the mana into their mana lobe, since they lacked one.

He had them just circulate the mana through their bodies, getting used to the process. Once all of them had gained the first skill, he noticed some differences.

Athena and Gulnur had received different skills than the rest. It was called Mana Cycling.

He surmised it was due to lacking a mana lobe. It mattered not for the next part, though.

He then directed all of them into packing their cells with mana, forcing their bodies into becoming miniature mana batteries.

It all took some time, as Astaroth kept his eye on the timer. He also watched the player counter, noticing that it was barely going down.

It seemed like most of the remaining players didn't care what the penalty would be. They only cared about staying alive in the next phase.

After half an hour of teaching, Gulnur was the first one to retch. Soon after, followed by Athena.

No sooner than five minutes later, the last two started throwing up at almost the same time. Gulnur and Athena had complained in the meantime, the odor getting to their stomachs.

Astaroth had burned away the impurities, explaining what it was to them. They were both happy about their bonus stats, though.

The two of them had received stamina, instead of mana, from body cleansing. Astaroth guessed that might be more useful to them if the system changed the formula for them.

When everyone was done with expunging their bodies and listening to his explanations, Astaroth looked at the timer again. There were twenty minutes left before the hour allotted ended.

They needed to get moving. All of them started running through the tunnels, with Gulnur leading the way.

When they got to the last chamber, their jaws went slack. This chamber was different.

Instead of an enormous cave, with monsters by the thousand, another thing awaited them. In the middle of an enormous ceremony hall-looking room, sleeping a giant feline creature.

It had the body of a giant lion, but with wings sprouting on each side and a scorpion's tail.

"A manticore..." Astaroth gasped.

He enjoyed reading up on mythological creatures, so he immediately recognized it. Then he scanned it and his eyes went wide.

Manticore:

Level: 50

Grade: Legendary (Boss)

Health: ???'??? Mana: ?'???

When Gulnur saw the monster, he scanned it too. At first, he was okay, but then his face paled.

He dropped his hammer, his breathing becoming heavy, accompanied by the others in the same situation. When the hammer hit the ground, it made a clear dinging sound.

The Manticore started moving, as it got up and stretched, before yawning. That's when it saw the five players in its lair.

It looked at them before its eyes narrowed.

RROOAARR!!!

Chapter 83 Past Actions Have Repercussions

***** Back on the surface, just before the one-hour time started *****

Khalor was sitting on the last pyramid step, looking in the desert's direction. He was still trying to find Azamus, who he knew had fled to that part of the map.

Right now, most players wouldn't be able to get near him enough to deal some damage to him, but that wasn't a problem for Azamus.

His longer-than-average range made him a threat from a much larger distance. And since he had past dealings with him, he knew that his particular skill set made him good at instant takedowns.

Suddenly, a light flash caught the corner of his eye, and he instantly jumped up, a bullet hitting the steps behind where his head had been a moment earlier.

While in the air, Khalor saw a compact form dashing away from a pillar of stone, making its way away from the center pyramid. He immediately gave chase.

As Khalor ran, his giant two-headed raven picked him up from the back of his clothes, swinging him on its back and flying after the Gnome.

The raven had an excellent vision from up in the air, and with the desert being very barren, Azamus had no space to hide from it. He tried to stop a few times, to shoot at his pursuer, but it was a wasted effort, as the raven dodged away from most shots.

And even where the bird took damage, it was negligible. Since this monster was almost a boss-like entity, for players at their current level, the damage it took to kill it was not something easily attainable.

The chase lasted mere minutes, as Khalor and the raven caught up to Azamus, in the middle of the desert, with no place for the sniper to hide. He swapped out his rifle for a blunderbuss-looking gun and turned around.

"Who are you, and why are you chasing me!?" Azamus shouted, as he aimed his gun muzzle at the player before him.

"I am simply a player you have tormented before, coming for vengeance." Khalor responded, keeping his calm.

"I don't even know who you are!" Azamus said, his eyes red from anger.

"It matters not for now. Know that you have tortured and tormented me enough times to warrant my following actions." Khalor said, pointing his finger at Azamus.

The two-headed raven cawed to the skies before lunging forward at break-neck speed.

Azamus side-stepped away, dodging the attack narrowly, and shot his blunderbuss at the bird, hoping to hurt it enough to kill it.

-378

The damage number disappointed him greatly, as he expected to do much more. This was a blunderbuss shot at point blank, after all.

With his attack stat, he should have done a minimum of four hundred and fifty points of damage. Plus, he expected a crit on the attack, but it happened neither.

The massive raven flew upwards before doing a one-eighty turn in the sky, aiming back down at Azamus. The next attack would be a dive attack, making its speed much higher.

Azamus would have less time to react and dodge, if any at all, and then the raven would wipe him out in a second.

At least that was the plan, but Azamus wasn't just going to just sit still and die, after all. He was a pro player and had his pride.

As the raven swooped in, and almost pierced him with its twin beaks, Azamus used Recoil Escape, pushing himself out of the dive attack, and to safety.

He then swapped out his guns fast, from the blunderbuss to the automatic rifle from earlier. Azamus started peppering the raven in rapid fire, trying to peel away its health as quickly as he could.

The damage numbers appearing were laughable, but he did not relent, hoping to kill this gigantic bird, before targeting its master.

Normally, one would go for the master first, but in this case, he couldn't take his attention off from the raven, as it was fast enough to force him into kiting it.

This fight would not be an easy one, Azamus thought, as he kite the raven in circles, constantly shooting at it with different firearms.

Meanwhile, from the side, Khalor simply watched as all this unfolded. He could have acted at anytime, ending this masquerade, but that was not his plan.

He planned on making Azamus see the difference between their strengths, to make him feel small and weak. He wanted the gnome to feel like he had in the past.

Flashbacks kept appearing in his head, of that man towering over him, a whip in his hand, while he cowered in fear, crying in pain at each crack of the whip.

It took every ounce of his mental strength to not fall into utter rage. He shut his thoughts out entirely, making sure he couldn't think about that no more.

This fight would go on for a while, before anyone became the victor.

*** Back to the cave with the Manticore ***

Astaroth was looking at the enormous monster that was now staring back at them, salivating on the ground beneath it.

It was already imagining itself munching of the fresh meat, standing before it, and started advancing towards them. Astaroth snapped out of his slight daze and clapped his hands together.

Clap!

"This is going to be a fun fight, but we need to play it smart. Phoenix, are you confident on leading us to victory?" He asked the woman, keeping his eyes on the approaching boss monster.

"I can try, but this will not be easy." She responded, a slight hesitation in her tone.

It was understandable though, as they were horribly under level to take on such a monster. Not even thinking about damage, they weren't sure if Gulnur could tank this Manticore without dying in one hit.

But now was not the time to think about it, but the time to act. The manticore roared again, this time from much closer, almost sending the frail I'die to his ass.

"It's fighting time!" Astaroth yelled, melding with White Death.

Chapter 84 First Step, On A Thousand Mile Journey

As the Manticore stood there staring, Astaroth completed his melding, and he dashed forward.

"Gulnur!! You are up!" he yelled, circumventing the manticore for the right.

"Aye aye!" Gulnur responded.

He then smacked his hammer on his shield as a translucent wave spread from the impact point and washed over the manticore.

The monster instantly went from looking at the dashing Astaroth to the small dwarven man looking at it defiantly.

"That's right, you ugly bastard! Look at me!" Gulnur yelled, as he sprinted on his small legs at the creature.

The manticore roared at the affront and tried swatting the dwarf aside. But it wouldn't be that easy.

The teamwork that the party had fine-tuned during their run in the underground maze was kicking in full throttle. Gulnur stopped dashing as the giant paw came at him and braced for impact.

Something slowly covered his feet, going up to his knees and hardening. It was rock, from a spell cast by I'die, that anchored the dwarf in place.

Gulnur took an extra precaution and activated one of his low cooldown tanking abilities, which reduced damage taken by ten percent.

"Steadfast Protector!" He shouted, as his body started glowing with a faint golden glow.

Dong!

The claw impacted the tower shield with much force, that if the dwarf had not been held in place with rock, he would have flown away.

He looked at the damage number that appeared, and his face paled.

-348

'That wasn't even a critical hit!' Gulnur exclaimed in his mind.

He knew he was blocking a decent amount of damage from his gear alone, which gave him fifty percent damage mitigation, and then his skill gave another ten percent.

So if the damage he took right now was only forty percent of the total damage, didn't want to think about the full amount.

While he was having his internal musings, he failed to notice the other manticore's paw, lifting from the ground, and barreling at him.

"Watch out!" Astaroth shouted, snapping Gulnur out of his thoughts.

The dwarf had just enough time to reposition his shield on the other side, but the rocks from earlier had already cracked around his feet.

When the second claw impacted the shield, the rock broke. The impact sent Gulnur flying like a comet, straight into a nearby cavern wall.

He lost another chunk of his health from the claw attack, but an even larger amount from the wall impact he couldn't protect himself from.

-348 *-702!*

Gulnur fell to the ground, gasping for air, as the impact on the wall had emptied his lungs. He tried and tried to get air into them, but to no avail.

Then he heard shouts from the side, over the ringing in his ears.

"... t... p!... nur!... et up!" At first, they were hard to discern, but they eventually cleared up.

"Gulnur! Get up!" He heard Phoenix's panicked voice say.

When he finally understood the words, he lifted his head. Coming straight at him was the still-enraged Manticore.

As it reached him and lowered its stance to take a bite of the still-prone dwarf, a sudden force smacked into the back of one of its hind legs.

The force came accompanied by a sharp sensation, as something cut at its tendons, making the leg weak. The Manticore limped on that leg and had to stop running.

The stop in its motion permitted a second event to happen. An arrow with sharp winds around its tip came flying in at high speeds, and hit the monster in the eye, sending it reeling in pain.

It roared in anger and agony, as it desperately tried to dislodge the projectile in its eye, with no meaningful results. The hit to its hind leg had come from Astaroth and his longsword, while the arrow flew off Athena's bow.

They both took action to protect their tank, as, without him, they would die quickly. Maybe Astaroth could flee and survive, but the rest were as good as dead.

Gulnur snapped out of his daze and jumped to his feet. His eyes showed fury as he lunged back toward his foe, fully intent on giving it some payback.

As he ran up to the Manticore's legs, he brought his hammer behind his back, in a lowered position.

"Retribution Strike!" Gulnur shouted, lifting his weapon in an upward diagonal.

His attack struck the Manticore's chin as it was crouched and pawing at its eye to remove the arrow embedded in it.

Bang!

The hammer hit true, with a thunderous sound, like that of a blacksmith smacking an anvil at full strength. The Manticore's head flew upwards, the impact jerking its head towards the ceiling as it lifted off its front paws.

Although lifting the monster off its front paws was already impressive, the force was nowhere near enough to send it flying, as it had just done to Gulnur. But the result still satisfied the dwarven player.

-3'495

With the damage from Astaroth's slash and the arrow in the eye, the Manticore's health finally budged from its hundred percent mark, dropping to ninety-nine percent.

The amount of health needed to slay this monster slightly took aback the party. Phoenix had kept track of the damage they had dealt up to now, and they had just crossed the five thousand damage mark.

Of course, the massive damage from Gulnur upon it had slightly offset the calculations, but that still meant the monster had easily close to five hundred thousand health points!

After striking the tail of the manticore, Astaroth had jumped back, ready for any sort of retaliation. But it didn't come straight away, because of Athena's arrow, and Gulnur's strike.

So he understood the massive undertaking they had just thrown themselves against. He gulped as he resumed his attacks.

'It's today we know how strong I am.' He thought to himself, steeling his resolve.

This would not be a quick fight, and the band of players knew that. But they would not give up for now.

They could still beat it, they all thought in confidence.

Chapter 85 Battle For Supremacy

After fifteen minutes of intense fighting, Astaroth and his party had whittled the Manticore's health down by a quarter. Although this was already an accomplishment, it was far from enough.

The party's resources were running thin. Even with the mana breathing technique Astaroth had taught the casters, they were burning through their mana pool right now.

They were taking mana potions here and there, trying to keep steadily over half, but their stocks were thinning out. As for Athena's arrow supply, it was also beginning to run low from all the shooting.

They could not reasonably keep this pace until they brought it down, so Phoenix switched tactics.

"Astaroth! Can you keep it busy on your next melding?!" She shouted.

Astaroth, who's cooldown for Spirit Melding was almost over, looked over at Phoenix, and then the manticore. He grit his teeth and replied.

"I should be able to, yes!"

"But it won't be an easy feat!" He added.

The next reply came from within his mind, from the party chat function. Astaroth was still not used to it, as Athena and I'die had just barely explained the function, minutes after their combat start.

It much facilitated the communications during combat, reducing cross talk and yelling to a minimum, and it worked much like any normal voice chat program.

'You are quicker than Gulnur, so you can dodge more attacks. You also have that healing passive from your transformation, that can help keep you topped off.' Astaroth heard Phoenix's voice, in his head.

'Doing this, and swapping between you and Gulnur tanking, will permit us to save on mana resources on healing and potions, stretching our effective combat time by double at least.' She added, via party chat.

'Ok. I get the gist of your plan. But how am I supposed to grab aggro back from Gulnur?'

'He has been holding it for fifteen minutes without fail. It'll make it that much harder for me to leech it.' Astaroth replied, frowning a bit.

'Going off the fact that the Manticore was alone in this grotto, I'm guessing that it is very territorial. That means it wouldn't let anything challenge its authority.' Phoenix said.

Astaroth instantly understood where she was going with her train of thought. A wide grin appeared on his face.

As soon as the cooldown was over on his melding skill, he used it again. White, who had been next to him all this time, biting at the manticore every chance it got, turned into a ball of white energy, and dived into Astaroth's chest.

As soon as the ball entered him, Astaroth started transforming, his hair turning white, fur growing on his arms and face, and he immediately used one of his melded skills.

"AWOOOO!!!!" He howled, loudly, his head raising towards the ceiling.

The Alpha's Howl skill reverberated in every inch of the cave, causing an eerie echo. The Manticore froze, for about half a second, before shaking its head, unaffected by the fear effect of the skill.

But that was not the reason he used that skill. The Manticore turned to face him, fury in its eyes.

Astaroth grinned again, satisfied with the results. The howl had effectively told the Manticore that another presence was trying to rest the authority from it, inside its own lair.

The Manticore roared back astoundingly loudly. The roar caused the air itself to vibrate visibly, and Astaroth had to bend forward to not get blown away.

"GRRRAAAWWRRRR!!!!"

"That's right, you oversized, mutated, ugly cat! I'm the real alpha here!" Astaroth yelled, trying to add insult to injury.

And the effect was immediately noticeable to everyone present, as the Manticore swiped both its claws at him.

Astaroth jumped back with his upgraded agility, which was just enough for him to keep track of the beast's movements. Sadly, it also put him into range for the monster's stinger, which was now barreling towards him.

Just before the stinger could pierce Astaroth, though, something came flying in at incredible speed from the direction Gulnur was in. His shield impacted the bulb of the stinger, sending it ever so slightly off course.

This redirection gave just enough wiggle room for Astaroth to twist his torso, dodging the tip of the stinger by a hair's breadth.

He thanked Gulnur in the party chat, as the shield bounced back towards him.

'Thanks Cap!'

Gulnur only nodded his head, chuckling at the reference. He had tried to copy that one superhero's shield throw, and was quite proud that it had worked out.

With this attack out of the way, Astaroth landed back on the ground, launching forward, between the Manticore's legs, and striking its exposed belly with his longsword, wielding it two handed.

The strike left a thin, long, cut along the stomach, but barely did any damage. But that was just an attack of opportunity.

His real aim was the rear left paw, which he had struck with his longsword earlier. He swapped out his longsword, for his war axe, and swung in a wide arc, aiming for the rear of the paw.

The greataxe swung true, as it hit the tendons in the rear leg, with a nasty 'Schlurp' sound. Astaroth felt the slight resistance of the nerves, flesh, and tendons, before the sliced and gave way.

The next thing that stopped the blade of his axe was the bone of the Manticore, which was accompanied by a loud painful cry.

Astaroth Then swapped out his weapons for his shield and shortsword, as the other hind leg kicked at him. He barely had enough time to put his shield before him, before being swatted away.

Since he was expecting the impact, he braced himself enough to control his flight and fall. He managed to backflip in the air, before landing on his two feet.

The Manticore, already angry at him for defying its supremacy, was now seething and snarling, in utter rage. It had only one person in its vision as of now, and that was Astaroth.

Chapter 86 Piling On The Damage

Now that the focus of the Manticore was fully on Astaroth, it set a strange ballet into motion. The monster chased Astaroth around, as he dipped and dodged as much as possible, delivering occasional strikes of his own.

With this method of fighting, Astaroth's aggro should never be able to stay first, but since he was defying the beast's supremacy, it stayed fully focused on him.

This would go on for five minutes, lasting the full transformation of Astaroth, with their overall damage being temporarily reduced. But they met the effect Phoenix wanted to attain.

Gulnur went back to full health slowly, with the help of his natural health regeneration and a minor spell from I'die. He also cast the same spell on Astaroth, to help with his own health regen.

With his passive skill already doing most of the heavy lifting, Astaroth dodging as many hits as he could, and blocking the rest with his small shield, his health never went into a dangerous range.

Seeing his melding timer was almost out, Astaroth yelled out.

"Switch!"

And with a nod, Gulnur taunted the Manticore back, smacking his hammer on his shield. The same wave of transparent energy boomed out, with the shield at its center.

The Manticore roared, its instincts telling it to keep hitting the wolf-like man in front of it, but its mind locked onto Gulnur, anyway. And with the swap in targets. Astaroth's melding wore off.

As his hair went back to its black colour, and the fur disappeared from his body, Astaroth grinned manically. It was time for him to hit back for real.

He had been running around the whole cave, canvassing it as he went. It was all hoping to take advantage of his surroundings in the fight.

There were some stalagmites strewn around sparsely that he could use to cover from the spikes that the Manticore occasionally shot out from its tail.

They had learnt, at I'die's expense, that the spikes applied poison when they had a direct hit. He had been concentrating on a spell and couldn't dodge one entirely, as it nicked his arm.

The poison's damage was not incredibly high, but the duration lasted quite long, and the number over the icon left interpretation that it could stack.

So after cleansing himself from the poison and healing himself, he had called it out to the others, making sure they didn't let themselves get hit by those.

Healing was already difficult with the insane damage numbers the Manticore was dealing, poisoned allies would make it exponentially worse.

Another thing that Astaroth noticed from canvassing this cavern was that there was a side of the cavern that had a slight incline to it. One that could be used as a ramp of sorts.

And he formed a plan for it.

"Gulnur! Turn the beasts towards the western wall!" He shouted.

Gulnur looked confused at the request for a second, but with a nod from Phoenix, he agreed to it. He ran toward the western wall, keeping the Manticore's attention on him.

He also made sure to always keep his shield in the monster's direction, giving him at least some cover, if it were to attack while he wasn't looking.

After reaching his destination, Gulnur turned back to face the Manticore. Just in time too, as the beast unleashed another series of strikes with its paws, in a cross-motion.

Gulnur instantly activated a high defence skill, mitigating most of the damage from the hit, but was still knocked backwards from the force of the blow.

He flew backwards for a short distance before a soft wind caught his body and brought his feet back to the ground. He nodded in I'die's direction, knowing it was his doing.

The air cushion had caught him before he smacked into a wall again, saving him from another massive dose of damage, but also saving him from the disorientation of the blow.

Gulnur immediately lowered his stance again, guarding against the incoming tail stabs of the manticore. He knocked them away with his tower shield, parrying the blows entirely.

They had learned that parrying blows negated the damage completely, and those that were in melee with the beast had used it more and more. The more damage they could negate, the better their fighting chances.

Gulnur was wondering what Astaroth was doing, since he hadn't been hitting the Manticore since he asked him to turn the darn thing. He could see Astaroth on the map, circling the cave wall, but couldn't see him with his eyes.

That's when Astaroth's dot on the map abruptly lunged from the wall to the manticore. Athena was the first one to see what Astaroth was doing and understood his intention.

She swiftly nocked another arrow on her bow and aimed for the monster's eyes. Immediately after, they heard a loud clunk in the cavern, followed by a roar and a dull thud.

Astaroth had jumped from his improvised ramp and violently swung his war axe at the Manticore's tail, just before the spiked tip, severing it from the beast, rendering its ranged attacks impossible.

The Manticore had roared in pain, its head lifting to the ceiling. That is when Athena loosed her arrow.

The arrow was accompanied by swirling winds, as it spun on itself rapidly and penetrated the beast's now-exposed throat.

With a gurgle, the roar was interrupted, as a massive damage number appeared before everyone's eyes.

3'800!!

-6'188!!

The damage number from that alone was astounding. The double exclamation points meant she and Astaroth had both landed super critical hits.

Astaroth's hit alone had almost taken a full percent off the Manticore's health, and that was without counting the other insane damage Athena had done simultaneously.

The beast wanted to cry out in rage, but all that came out were wet gurgles, as it now had a gaping hole in its throat. An icon with blood drops appeared under its health bar.

It was now bleeding, and from the looks of it, it was a severe bleed, as it started losing one percent health per second. No one in their party knew how long it would last, but they didn't care.

This was their time to pile the pain. They all started using their high cooldown, high damage skills, bursting damage on the Manticore as much as they could.

Astaroth noticed that the penalty timer had been flashing for a while. But nothing was happening yet. It all changed a few minutes later, though.

And now, they all looked astounded.

'What have we done?!' They all thought.

Chapter 87 Hail Mary

Astaroth, Athena, Gulnur, I'die, and Phoenix all looked toward the ceiling at the same time. The reason they stopped fighting and looked up was plain.

Five minutes after the timer had reached zero for the penalty, the ceiling of the cave they were in started opening up. A giant hole was forming in the ceiling.

He could see sunlight peering into the dark cave, from above. Astaroth then understood what the penalties applied were going to be.

The cave they were in currently, and all the other caverns they had passed through, were now opening to the upper level. The penalties were the monster hordes.

Normally, for parties of pro players, these hordes were not much of a menace. But the current situation brought another element to it.

Since they were in a tournament, everyone considered the others as enemies. The party that had formed here was an anomaly, more than anything else.

No player on the upper level would team up to survive under these circumstances, as they were more likely to try to take advantage of the beasts to get more kills.

Astaroth and his party were under different circumstances since they had all dived here willingly. They also knew that none of them would survive if they didn't cooperate.

That was the basis of their party, and the reason they had all played fair and square. In any other situation, the party would not have formed, and they would have fought.

But with the ceiling opening, came another problem. The Manticore's focus was wavering from them to the hole in the ceiling.

Like its instincts were telling it to fly out. And Astaroth figured it wouldn't be long before it acted on those instincts.

"We need to keep it down here! Otherwise, our efforts will be wasted!" He yelled out.

They all snapped out of their initial shock at the shouting. Athena and Phoenix were the first ones to understand what he meant.

Both women started shooting arrows and spells at the Manticore's wings, trying to damage them, and make them flight unworthy.

If the monster took flight, they would have wasted all their resources for naught.

The Manticore finally opted out and started flapping its wings. The wind gusts from the wings blew away Athena's arrows and extinguished the fire Phoenix had just lit on the leathery part of the wings.

The Manticore roared at the skies, as it started gaining height. But the group wouldn't let it escape that easily.

I'die started chanting in a low voice, his hands slapped against the ground. As he finished, a low pulse of magic reverberated in the ground.

It was like a water drop that had fallen on the surface of a lake. Slow ripples started moving outwards, I'die at their center.

They travelled through the floor, and up the walls, reaching the hole in the ceiling within seconds. The mouth of the hole then began shaking slightly, as the rocks reformed into a full wall.

But the process was slow, and it would not be completed in time, judging by the speed the Manticore was now flying toward the ceiling.

Gulnur was the next one to make a move.

"Everyone! Cover your ears!"

As soon as the dwarf shouted this, all the other players swiftly put their hands over their ears. As soon as they did, a loud sound boomed.

It was like a thunderclap had happened right before them. Or if someone had detonated a flashbang grenade.

"Sonic Wave." Gulnur said, as he violently smacked his hammer on his tower shield.

When the two items collided, the air visibly warped from the point of impact and outward, rippling in the air, as sound carried through the whole cave and deafened anything that wasn't protecting their ears.

Even though his allies had covered their ears, the resounding clap still had their heads spinning slightly and their ears ringing.

The Manticore, which had not protected its ears, was affected. And with its acute sense of hearing, it affected it even more.

The sound wave hit it, and it froze. Its wings stopped beating for three seconds, stopping its upward momentum and sending it hurtling toward the ground again.

The stun wore out as it was still some distance away from the floor, so it caught itself from smashing into the ground. But it had lost most of its height and all of its momentum.

This was enough for Astaroth to run up the ramp, in his half-dizzied state, and jump onto the Manticore's back. As soon as he landed there, he got to work.

He ran towards the nearest wing base and started hacking away at it with his war axe. It would not snap that easily, and he had not yet recuperated his new skill either.

All he could do was damage it as much as possible before the beast eventually shrugged him off. The Manticore ignored him at first, focusing on climbing back up to the closing hole.

But as the hits kept happening, eventually the pain became unbearable, and it got rid of its unwanted passenger.

The Manticore flapped its right wing strongly, before closing both of them close to its abdomen. This had for effect, the Manticore spun in the air, sending the unprepared Astaroth plummeting.

As he fell, he saw the base of the left wing he had been hacking at, was badly wounded, and the bone was exposed and riddled with micro-fractures. He acted on it.

"Shoot the base of the left wing!" He yelled, pulling out his own bow.

He focused deeply, shutting out his fear of falling, and breathing deeply. The surrounding time seemed to slow, as his brain started working much faster.

He pulled his bowstring to the maximum, with an arrow at the ready, and waited for his body to align where it needed to be on its own. After twisting for three seconds, which seemed like an eternity for him, he loosed the arrow.

It flew off from the bowstring, in his still slowed state of mind, as he kept spinning in the air, his body now facing the ground.

'Let's hope that was good enough.' He thought, as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 88 Enraged

Astaroth, who was now falling to the ground, his eyes closed, heard the following sounds.

Shlock* *Bang* *Bam* *Crack

A booming pained roar followed these. He smiled.

Suddenly a burst of wind caught his form, in a diagonal motion, slowing down his fall and angling him better for a rolled landing.

Astaroth opened his eyes again, looking at the ground getting closer and closer. His now diagonal motion made it possible for him to attempt a smoother landing, and cancel out the fall damage.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, he dived forward and balled himself up, letting his body roll out the rest of the momentum. After a few seconds of rolling, he was now safe on the ground, his face to the ceiling.

He smiled at what he then saw. The Manticore was now falling too, with one of its wings bent at a weird angle, and it tried softening the fall with the other, still intact wing.

It was easier said than done, and the beast still hit the ground violently, with a weird crunch.

The players watched as the dust slowly settled, waiting for any sign of movement. What they got instead, was a low guttural growl, mixed with a slight gurgle, and two red dots in the dust cloud.

Phoenix was the first one to understand what they were seeing. This wasn't her first MMO game, after all.

"He's enraged! Pull back! Don't let him hit anyone but Gulnur!" She shouted to the others, running towards the furthest wall.

Everyone bolted away from the Manticore at this statement, except for two people. Gulnur and Astaroth.

They immediately surmised that the fight was now on its last leg. The danger levels, which were already very high, had just reached another pinnacle.

The Manticore then leaped forward at Astaroth. Here, leaping was an understatement, as it practically teleported forward, from the sheer speed it was moving at.

It swiped one paw at Astaroth, who barely had enough time to re-equip his shield and lift his arm. When the paw connected to its intended target, Astaroth was sent flying.

The force behind the hit was twice as much as before, and there was no way for him to resist it now. In his wolf form, he might have had more chance to deflect or better brace for it, but that was still on cooldown for another eight minutes.

As he shot sideways, he saw the damage number appear in his eyes. His jaw dropped.

-878

This was neither a skill nor a critical hit, and yet, it took away a sixth of his total health, even after the defence from his armor, his mana skin, and the shield block.

This effectively blocked a little over fifty percent of the damage. That meant that the raw damage number would have taken over a third of his health.

That was insane!

Judging from that alone, and the health that his teammates had, I'die and Athena were instant one-shots, and Phoenix would be close to death after a hit too.

Only he and Gulnur had what it took to block those hits, without being in immediate danger. The problem lay elsewhere, though.

That was only one normal hit!

What if the Manticore used a skill or a multistrike attack? Even they would be in a pickle at that point.

They needed to finish this fight soon, but it was not a simple thing to do, either. They had been fighting it for almost twenty-five minutes, and it had now just dropped to ten percent.

Astaroth also assumed that since its attack had boosted, most likely that all its stats also had. Which meant that its defence was now higher, too.

And with all their heavy-hitting skills on cooldown still, from their earlier burst, it would not be possible to use them for a while.

Phoenix, on her side, was also calculating their odds. She was an expert in combat analysis.

It was one reason she had climbed so high in the gaming scene. She could plan on the go, and most of them were rock solid.

Even if her plans were thwarted, she would make another one. Her intellect had always been one key to most of her victories.

She was already calculating the potential damage the monster could now output, just from seeing how much damage Astaroth had taken, and she assumed were his defences.

She came to the same conclusion as Astaroth and knew she couldn't let Athena or I'die anywhere near the Manticore. She also guessed that damage was not the only parameter that had changed in this fight.

By her calculations, it would take them at least five minutes to whittle down the remaining health points of the Manticore. What remained to be seen was whether they would still survive that long.

She planned a quick plan in her head and shared it with the party through the chat.

'We need to apply as much DOT as we can and fight defensively for the rest of the fight.' She said.

Everyone agreed, and some icons started appearing under the Manticore's health bar. But even with the five DOTs they applied, the health was only moving sliver by sliver.

It seemed they would only get one percent per minute, and that was oh so little. But even then, it cut the duration of the fight by almost half, if they played it out well.

The next part would be to have I'die focus on healing their tank, while he focused on taking hits, retaliating only if he had an opening.

Gulnur had essentially become a dwarf-sized punching bag. He wouldn't complain about it, since he knew that was essentially his role, but it still annoyed him.

As the fight dragged on, he kept receiving massive hits from the manticore, losing close to a thousand health points per strike.

It was a good thing that I'die focused on healing him because he didn't even have enough time to take a healing potion. He had to keep all his focus on the Manticore, which was zooming around insanely fast.

After a while of taking all those hits, his Retribution Strike skill came off cooldown. He knew that with all the damage he had taken, it would hurt the manticore, so he used it.

As the Manticore came in from his left, he spun around, his hammer extended outwards, aiming it at the incoming paw. The two attacks collided, and the Manticore's paw was thrown back.

The damage dealt to Gulnur was insane, since he didn't block with his shield, but the damage he dealt back was equally painful to the Manticore.

-15'883

Astaroth and Phoenix gasped at the number. This was the damage after the reduction too!

'This attack is dangerous!' They both thought.

It was a good thing the dwarf was on their team. That strike had reduced the Manticore's health to under two percent.

"Get ready! The last phase is coming!" Phoenix yelled.

Just as she yelled that, the manticore roared to the heavens. The surrounding air shook, the walls of the cavern shaking and some pieces crumbling away.

A fear effect immediately affected the five players. They all stood there, frozen in place, as the Manticore reared its head towards all of them, one by one.

They instantly knew this was the end.

'Fuck.' They all thought, simultaneously.

Chapter 89 Last Strike

Back on the surface

While Azamus was getting chased by the two-headed raven and the death knight, Khalor never stopped watching the timer. He was waiting for it to reach zero.

His goal had never been to take out players, only to get the potion. After that, all he wanted was to wait for the penalty to go off.

Since this wasn't his first play-through, he already knew what the penalty was. Although he hadn't taken part in the original first tournament, or any subsequent, he watched all of them through live streams.

He had intended to kill Azamus quickly and go sit back on the pyramid, to wait it out, but had underestimated the pro player's resilience.

After a full twenty minutes of chasing around, shooting, and dive attacks, Azamus was still standing. He kept drinking potions, to keep his health close to full, but his stock was practically empty.

Khalor was grinning madly, enjoying this futile resistance from his prey. He could see Azamus was struggling, and he was slowly growing tired.

This fight was nearing its end.

But there was another issue at hand. The timer for the round penalty had already run out.

And yet, nothing was happening. He had felt the slight tremors from the gates to the underzone opening, but the monsters were nowhere to be seen.

When the timer had reached zero, there had been an announcement that punishment was being served, but nothing was happening.

This brought a frown to Khalor's face. He had immediately sent the death knight to investigate the underzone entrance, and was still waiting for it to come back.

For now, with him gone, this had given a bit of respite to Azamus, who was now occasionally sending potshots toward Khalor. This only amused the latter, as he lightly dodged the incoming fire.

At the five-minute mark past the end of the timer, Khalor knew he had to end the fight soon, or else he would miss his secondary objective, but that was the moment the death knight came back.

"Sire! The gate was open, but the tunnels were empty!" The death knight said, kneeling before Khalor.

"What!?" Khalor exclaimed.

His head snapped towards the pyramid, which was now opening, but nothing was coming out of it. His mind immediately went into a panic.

'Has someone found out about the underzone? Are they wiping out the monsters? Where is the last boss?!' He thought, his brain a jumbled mess.

He snapped around, looking at Azamus.

"Munin! Forget the gnome! We need to fly back to the pyramid! Now!" he shouted to the two-headed raven.

"Yes, master." It responded.

It swooped away from Azamus and toward Khalor, picking up the latter as it swooped down, and back up.

Azamus, who was happy to have a moment to breathe, became very displeased at being ignored like this, though. He immediately switched his weapon back to his rifle and aimed at Khalor's head.

"Don't think I will let you leave that easily!" He shouted.

But just as he was about to pull his trigger, Khalor turned his head, facing him. The two men's eyes locked.

The air in Azamus' lungs all escaped. He froze in terror as his mind went blank.

Khalor enthralled his mind with an illusion strong enough to make the player piss himself. He had used a spell to show Azamus his worst imagined death.

By the time Azamus broke out of the illusion and caught his breath, tears running along his cheeks, Khalor was already too far from him to do anything.

He clenched his jaw hard enough to hear his teeth creaking.

"You are going to pay for this, you worthless noob!" He growled.

Azamus then unleashed his rage against any unfortunate player to cross his path. He didn't sneak around and snipe, but actively sought other players to tear them a new one.

In the meantime, Khalor had reached the pyramid, and it was now split up into four pieces, sporting a gaping hole in the center that dove underground.

There was no sign of the last boss he expected to see here, and that made him nervous. He couldn't hear the sounds of fighting or anything, either.

"We're diving in!" He ordered.

They wasted no time on a response, as the two-headed raven, Munin, dove into the hole. They flew downwards at blazing speeds, as the death knight followed behind in free fall.

They didn't go down for very long, as they reached a rocky surface, where there should have been none. Khalor pointed at it.

"Valerian! Break through it!"

The death knight then pulled out a massive halberd from thin air and swung it with much might, making the air vibrate as it cut through it.

When the halberd connected with the stone, a deafening ring echoed, followed by a cracking noise and the crumbling of stone. The hit had pierced through its obstacle in one shot.

Munin dove again, appearing in an enclosed cavern with high ceilings and a large open area. Khalor then saw what had been holding the boss monster back.

He was slightly in shock, from how low the beast's health had been brought down to, but could see that all the players present were unmoving.

He guessed what was happening in mere moments and acted to seal the Manticore's fate. Khalor jumped off Munin, as the raven kept diving straight down, aiming to pin the Manticore to the ground.

The beast, who was too busy charging up a finishing attack, failed to notice the new arrivals. Something soon pinned it down to the floor, with talons planted in its nape.

The impact alone took away most of the remaining health from the Manticore, but the true finishing strike came a moment after, as Khalor came dropping from above, bident in hand.

He planted his weapon directly into the eye that had already had an arrow lodged into it. The hit, along with the momentum of his fall, took out the little health the boss had left.

With a small whimper and twitch, the life faded out of the Manticore's remaining intact eye.

Chapter 90 The Necromancer

Astaroth POV

Standing there, frozen in place, watching the Manticore charging up a finishing move, the entire party knew they had messed up.

They could all clearly see the Manticore's throat light up in a red glow. It was easy to guess what was coming next.

But before any sort of attack could happen, a loud boom happened overhead, and the ceiling collapsed where I'die had closed the hole. Something big and black came lunging down from it.

The form was barely a blur as it travelled the distance from the ceiling to the floor almost instantly. That was when the party noticed what it was.

A large, black, two-headed raven was now standing on top of the pinned Manticore. It was holding the creature down to the ground with its huge talons, as something else fell from the ceiling.

This form was descending much slower, and was easily discernible as a human. But something was peculiar about him.

His skin was as white as alabaster, and his eyes were black as night. The man was well-defined, and strongly built, but, also had a grace to his figure.

Astaroth almost mistook him for a vampire, but he was almost certain that was not an available race to play in New Eden. And yet, he could also feel in his gut, the huge aura of death, emanating from this player.

It felt somewhat familiar.

The next thing that caught his eye was the face of the man. He could swear he had seen it somewhere before, but could not remember where.

As the man fell from the ceiling, he landed squarely on the Manticore's face. His weapon embedded itself in the already wounded eye of the monster, and from the side, Astaroth could see the life slipping from the Manticore.

Right after, a notification rang in his and his allies' ears.

Ding!

You have helped in killing a Manticore (Legendary Boss)(Lvl 50). 375'000 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 200% for kill two tiers higher) (98% damage done)

'Such an enormous sum of Exp!' Astaroth thought.

But now was not the time to think about that.

As soon as the Manticore died, the fear effect pinning them in place disappeared, and the five party members quickly regrouped, making sure they monitored the newcomer.

The man on top of the manticore looked up after killing the monster. He could now identify the player present.

He recognized four of them from his memories, but one of them wasn't supposed to be here. That player was the Ash Elf.

He brushed aside the stray thoughts and did what he had come here to do. After climbing down from the Manticore, he turned to face it, completely ignoring the party of five.

He didn't feel any threat from them. With the death knight and Munir covering him, no player could reach him currently.

Khalor stopped thinking about them and put his hands on the beast's corpse. The bystanders were wondering why the corps hadn't disappeared already, since all the other monsters had burst into particles almost right after their death.

It didn't take long before they understood why.

They heard an indistinctive murmur, and a sudden burst of mana shot out of the man and into the body. The energy then roiled around the corpse of the Manticore in a black and blue miniature tornado.

Soon after, the corpse started twitching. It was as if the nerves and muscles were all spasming from an electric shock.

Astaroth was the first to get what was happening.

'A Necromancer.' He immediately thought.

Lo-and-behold, a few seconds after that thought, the Manticore opened its eyes again. They were now completely black, and to anyone looking straight into them, they looked like small black holes.

The monster slowly rose to its feet, as the tendons in its rear paw reattached themselves, and the broken wing snapped back into place, as if it was never damaged.

The Manticore roared at the party of five, still angry at the damage they had dealt it. But with a raise of his hand, the man silenced it.

"There is no reason to fight amongst ourselves, for now." He simply said.

The man then turned his back to the party and mounted the Manticore. But before he could leave, Astaroth stepped forward.

"Who are you?" He asked.

The man hesitated for a few seconds before deciding it wasn't worth hiding his identity any longer.

"My name is Khalor. But you would have found that out in a few minutes, during the next phase of this tournament." Khalor said, before heeling the Manticore.

The now undead monster roared again before crouching. With a strong beat of its wings, combined with a mighty leap, it soared up toward the ceiling.

Khalor left the five players alone in the cave, leaving almost as fast as he had arrived. All of them stood there, confused at what they had just seen.

But another announcement snapped them out of their confusion.

Congratulations to the remaining players! The first phase is now over! We will soon teleport you out of the map and onto the next stage of the tournament! Good luck!

Astaroth sighed in relief. At least they didn't need to fight other players for their right to the phase. This whole underzone had given them a freebie and much-needed Exp.

As they all stood there, waiting for the teleportation to happen, Phoenix walked over to Astaroth.

"Why did you seem to recognize him?" She asked.

"Huh?" Astaroth said, turning around.

"The expression you had when you saw him. You looked like you recognized him." She replied.

"Oh... No, I did not recognize him, per se. But he had a familiar face. Like I had seen him somewhere before." Astaroth answered.

"Hmm. I see." Phoenix said.

Soon after, their bodies started glowing gold again, just like when they had been teleported to the arena for the first time.

"See you in the next phase." Phoenix said to Astaroth.

He smiled at her, as they disappeared from the underzone altogether.