

New Eden 101

Chapter 101 Phase Three, Round Two

Back to Astaroth

Bang!

As the gong resounded in the arena, Astaroth instantly melded with White, and dodged an incoming bullet. He barely stepped aside as it brushed through his newly grown fur.

Astaroth quickly re-adjusted his footing and launched forward. This wasn't like earlier, where the jungle permitted a nice retreat path for the gunner.

Azamus had minimal space to jump back to, so he would have to run in circles. But Astaroth's speed was immensely higher than his, and it would not work.

Azamus had watched Astaroth's fights and had quickly understood that his mindset on this player was wrong. By all measures, he was a noob, but his strength alone made him a tough opponent.

Azamus hoped his opponent would play defensively, because that would let him kite all he wanted. But Astaroth was not planning on being defensive.

As the latter dashed in a straight line to his enemy, he made sure to at least keep his head in movement, to not take any headshots. And that helped him greatly, as the gnome before him kept aiming at it.

Of course, that meant that even though the bullets didn't hit his head, they still hit his body. So Astaroth's health points were slowly getting chipped away. R/Ad lateSt ch/a/pters at n(v)e(l)bin/.c/o//m Only

But that didn't concern the man much, if at all, since the fight would be over soon. As Azamus was firing another shot, his back hit the platform's barrier, meaning he was out of space.

His eyes went wide in panic. He was a pro player and knew to always keep his environment in mind. But he seethed in anger, and that cost him his focus and clouded his judgement.

Now with his back against the wall, and the enemy so close, his only move left was one he didn't want to take.

Azamus pulled out a round object from his belt and launched it violently at the ground.

Boom!

As soon as the ball-like object hit the ground, it exploded in a powerful blast of fire, mixed with metal shrapnel and bits of the stone floor, creating a similar effect to a frag grenade.

This hit Astaroth and he lost a good chunk of his health, but he wasn't the only one. Even though much of the blast erupted forward, the gust of wind and floor debris still flew backwards, hitting Azamus.

The gnome lost a substantial amount of health to this tactic and was now kneeling on the floor, looking at the debris cloud, hoping his stratagem had paid out.

Sadly for him, what came next was not what he wished for. A white form sped out of the debris, blood all over it, and its claw grasped the gnome's small throat.

"That hurt." Astaroth said with a grin.

"But it didn't hurt enough." He added.

As Astaroth said that, Azamus swapped out his rifle to automatic mode and aimed the muzzle at Astaroth's stomach. But before he could get a single shot off, the Astaroth shoved him into the ground with much force.

The impact blew all the air out of Azamus' lungs, leaving him gasping on the floor. But Astaroth had no intention of letting him catch his breath.

He swung his foot back and kicked the gnome's head like he was a footballer during kickoff. The last bit of health on Azamus' health bar instantly vanished, as his head did the same from the force of impact.

A spray of blood splashed across the transparent barrier enclosing the area, making a small flourish of red.

'They really went all in with the details.' Astaroth thought to himself.

This whole fight had taken less than a minute, and with Azamus dead, he reappeared in the center of the platform, fuming in rage.

All his attack options were locked and he couldn't even walk toward his opponent, as he watched the blood spatter from afar.

"I will make you pay for this!" Azamus spat, his small face red with anger.

"Yeah yeah, I know you will. I'll be waiting." Astaroth replied, not even looking toward the pro player.

He had already focused his gaze on the small screens before him. When he saw he could observe the still ongoing combats, his smile widened.

This meant he could gather info on the participants to make some plans. Of course, there were too many fights and too many contestants for him to adequately prepare, but he could form some basic strategies.

Meanwhile, Azamus was still cursing at him, spit flying out of his mouth with every word. But Astaroth had already tuned his voice out of his head.

He threw rapid glances at his previous allies, and could see that most of them were having an easy time with their current fights. But two of them were in a tougher situation.

Gulnur and I'die were currently locked in heated combat against two pro players. They were currently winning, but only by a small margin.

Gulnur was up against someone Astaroth was familiar with, Morticia. He knew that regardless of all his defences, mental attacks would still go through it.

'You ended up against the worst kind of opponent. Bad luck.' Astaroth mumbled to himself.

As for I'die, he was against a fairy-looking woman that was holding two kamas, and twirling them around at insane speeds. Even for him, they were hard to track.

It took a while before Astaroth finally recognized the woman, and his eyes slightly narrowed at the thought. This was a very experienced fighter, against a very inexperienced one.

I'die had no chance of winning. Even if he was currently higher in health, he guessed it was only because of the start of combat.

He had most likely gained an early advantage, which the woman was already eating away, little by little.

'Poor kid.' Astaroth thought.

Athena and Phoenix were crushing their opponents. Phoenix was practically finished with hers, and Athena was following close behind.

Astaroth looked at the scoreboards and quickly found out that Phoenix had lost her first match. He made an educated guess who could have bested her, but he couldn't watch the man fight, as his combat was already done.

"I can't wait to fight you." Astaroth said in a low tone, his hand fisting up.

Excitement filled him up, anticipation for the next round making him antsy.

"I'll make it to the end, and we shall see who is the strongest." He said, grinning.

Chapter 102 Dullahan

As all the fights of the second round ended, Astaroth was once again teleported to another platform. This time, before him, stood a tall zombie-looking man.

The particularity about him was that his head was missing from its shoulders. The zombie was holding it under its arms, almost like carrying a football.

He was wearing full plate armor, and had a huge great sword strapped to his back. Although he looked mighty for any normal person, Astaroth knew this was a third-tier combatant.

From his gear alone, Astaroth could guess this man was in the bruiser segment of classes. He wasn't entirely a tank, but wasn't a pure DPS either.

Bruisers were typically tough opponents to deal with, as they had the defenses to withstand most onslaughts, and the damage to take down squishy targets.

Of course, most of this wouldn't apply to himself, since his damage was so high and his defenses rivalled most tanks currently, but Astaroth was still only observing for now.

As the timer for the start of combat ticked away, the headless zombie in front of Astaroth finally talked. He spoke in a heavy Irish accent.

"We finally meet in single combat, lad. Get ready to fall to the mighty Gan Ceann." He said, putting his head back on his shoulders.

"Can I know your name if you are going to best me in single combat?" Astaroth asked the hulk of a man.

"Aye. Me name's Declan." He replied.

"And mine Astaroth." Astaroth said, taking a slight bow.

"I hope our fight is one of honor and principle. No dirty trick." He added.

"Aye." Declan said, nodding his head.

As the last seconds ticked away, the tall man pulled out his weapon. The sword kept on coming until a full two-meter slab of metal with sharp edges was fully drawn.

It looked more like someone had welded a sheet of steel, one foot wide by two meters long, right onto a sword hilt and guard. Astaroth knew right then that a hit from this would take thousands of his health. U//ppTodateð fr/o/m nô/v/e/lb(i)n.c(o)\m

He had to steer clear of it at all times, lest he become two separate pieces. And by the looks of ease of wielding from Declan, this would not be an easy feat.

Astaroth pulled out his two daggers, deciding to go for speed over strength this time. He could guess this would be his best bet.

As the last second ticked away and the gong resounded, both men dashed at each other.

As impact became imminent, Declan swung his gigantic sword in a sideways arc, as Astaroth dropped to his knees, sliding forward and slashing at the back of the zombie's knees.

As his slide ended, and Astaroth got back up, the hair on his neck stood up, and he quickly rolled forward. As he did, the enormous sword came slicing where his torso had been moments before.

Astaroth even felt the surge of wind displacement from the blade on his back.

'Such force!' He thought, as he jumped back to his feet.

Not a moment too soon, for the enormous blade was incoming again, this time from overhead. The onslaught was almost non-stop, and Astaroth had a bit of trouble finding his footing.

He had wanted to try fighting without melding with White, but be as it may, right now, he could not do much more than dodge.

Declan was quite impressive in his wielding of such a gigantic sword, never stopping its momentum. He would instead make it curve to change its direction, keeping all the force constant.

He looked like a giant top, spinning in different arcs continuously. It was working fine, though, as Astaroth had only just enough response time to duck and dodge the attacks, unable to do any himself.

He concluded he was still too inexperienced to fight without his advantage, so he melded with White. As his hair whitened, and fur grew on his arms, the speed of the sword seemed to slow down.

It was now at a much more manageable speed, where could predict its direction and adjust his movement better.

With this change, Astaroth was now taking the upper hand. As he slipped by the sword over and over, slashing and piercing with his daggers between the plate gaps and into weak points.

The damage he was dealing was negligible, but it was damage nonetheless.

As the big zombie's health slowly ticked away, his face was becoming angrier and angrier. And suddenly there was another change.

Declan jumped in the air, a few feet off the ground, and Astaroth jumped back, feeling something was off. As he did, his eyes went wide.

He had not jumped remotely far enough, as a skeletal horse appeared under Declan, eyes flaming, as it ran toward Astaroth, at a full gallop.

The impact between the warhorse and Astaroth's small body sent him hurtling into the platform's barrier, taking away a good chunk of his health.

After hitting the wall, Astaroth fell to the ground, his breath short and painful. It was like a truck had run him over.

The horse disappeared from under Declan as his feet landed next to Astaroth. Astaroth quickly reacted, kicking his feet on the barrier, sending himself into a slide, away from the hulking figure.

As he slid away, he contorted his body, rolling onto his shoulder before pushing off the floor with his arms, and landing on his feet. Declan was already running at him, his sword following behind him.

They went back to duking it out, for what felt like an eternity for Astaroth, until the zombie finally fell to his knees. His health bar was flickering.

"This was a good fight, Declan." Astaroth said, walking up to the big zombie.

"Aye, t'was. I hope to fight you again, lad." Declan replied, flashing his rotting teeth at Astaroth.

Astaroth pierced his dagger into the exposed chin of the man, taking his last health points. The hulking figure then disappeared from before him and reappeared in the center of the platform.

His head was back under his arm as he slowly walked to Astaroth. He looked calm and composed, like he hadn't just fought to the death.

"I have a question for you." Declan said, stopping before Astaroth.

Chapter 103 Terror Tactic

It tempted Astaroth to watch some matches again, but it would be rude to ignore the man. So he turned to look at him.

"Then I hope I have an answer to your question." He said, smiling.

"Your class. It's a special class, right?" Declan asked.

"Just as much as yours." Astaroth replied with a light smile.

"Then a word of warning. Some guilds are looking to recruit special classes, by hook or by crook. I can tell you are not part of a guild yet. So be careful." Declan said, before walking away a little.

The man started looking at the screens that were left intently. Most likely gauging his possible next opponents.

'He seemed honest enough. I'll heed his warning.' Astaroth thought to himself, turning his head back to the screens too.

The third round was almost done, and what little fights were still ongoing were mostly uninteresting. Astaroth only watched to gather intel, nothing more.

One of the matches ended shortly before the bell rang, and the other ended in a tie, stopped by the bell. And right after, the teleportation happened again.

Astaroth threw a quick glance at Declan, who nodded at him, before it transported them to different platforms.

When he reappeared, Astaroth was face to face with a dwarf. This one, contrary to Gulnur, wore chain-mail armor, instead of a full plate.

He also had two small axes, one in each hand, covered in runic symbols. He looked like a Viking of old, if only half the height.

His hair was shaved to the sides and braided from the top to the tip. His beard was also similarly braided, with a big golden ring holding it together at the end.

He sneered at Astaroth when he saw him.

"Well, if it isn't the cheater." The dwarf said.

Astaroth's face instantly darkened.

'Again, with those baseless accusations.' He thought.

If looks could kill, Astaroth would have already won this bout, with how he was glaring at the dwarf before him. His eyes were sharp, like the edge of his blade, as he pulled out his great axe.

"I'm tired of you all smearing me with baseless words and conspiracies. If I had really cheated, I would already be out of the competition, would I not?" Astaroth spat.

The dwarf looked dumbfounded for a moment. The words struck true and made him look like an idiot.

But that only angered the little man.

"Are you calling me a liar?!" He growled.

"No. I'm calling you an imbecile. Looks like your brain is perfectly sized to fit that small body of yours." Astaroth replied in contempt.

"You! I'll make you pay!" The dwarf shouted in anger.

He waved his axes around him like a madman, pushing against the arena's restrictions. He couldn't wait to cut the elf into pieces.

His wish came soon, as the gong to start the fight resounded. The dwarf lunged at Astaroth like a crazed animal, famished from starvation.

To Astaroth, it was almost comical. The small tapping of feet on the stone was like that of a rushing toddler.

Astaroth completed the melding with White before the dwarf made it to him, boosting his stats. And before the dwarf could perform even a single attack, a leg appeared in its torso.

The force behind it sent him hurtling through the air before impacting the barrier. He didn't even make it to the floor before a great axe came in at high speed, cutting through his neck and striking the barrier behind it.

And just like that, his health bar zeroed. His head split from the rest of his body, and Astaroth kicked it away. Visit www.v3l3n.com for new *novels*

It dissolved into particles before it could hit anything, along with the body, before reappearing in the center of the platform. But the look in the dwarf's eyes had changed.

Where there was once rage and disgust, there was now clear fear. The dwarf slowly retreated to the other side of the platform, trembling and stumbling.

He was sweating bullets, as he looked at Astaroth like he was the boogie man. Astaroth only glared back, not wanting to give him more attention than he deserved.

He turned his head to look at the screens, and this time he got to catch a glance of Khalor's fight. It was short-lived though, as the Necromancer completed his just seconds after.

It slightly disappointed Astaroth that he couldn't see more, but what he saw told him enough, anyway. He saw the hordes of undead pouring out of the ground around Khalor and grasped his fighting technique from it.

So instead, Astaroth looked around the other screens, trying to find his last opponent from the tier-one players that were left. All the players in that tier were mostly grinders.

They had earned their position in the tournament through fast level up, and weren't pro player levels of skill. So whichever one he got, he would most likely crush them.

Astaroth watched the fights go down, with many of them not being close to ending. He surmised these players would probably run out of time and get ties.

He turned to look at the terrified dwarf, who was still huddled in a corner, shivering. He was white like a drape, and sweating profusely.

It only got worse when Astaroth's gaze landed on him. Even though the dwarf knew he couldn't get attacked any longer, the sight of his head flying away from his body was still imprinted on his brain.

Astaroth slowly walked over to him, making sure every step was imposing and filled with a sense of dread. When he was finally standing before the dwarf, he leaned down.

"I have only one thing to say to you." He said in a low tone.

The dwarf twitched at his voice, looking at the floor.

"If you reach the last phase, surrender directly. You and your type do not deserve to be here." Astaroth said, before straightening back.

The dwarf quivered at the rapid movement, words escaping him, only able to whimper.

Astaroth took his lack of response as a reply to his tactic and walked back to the center of the arena just before the teleportation restarted.

'Only one more to go, before the last phase.' He thought, his lips breaking into a grin.

Chapter 104 Another Ash Elf

After a quick flash of light and a small, dizzying sensation, Astaroth was teleported to a fifth and last platform. Before him stood a scrawny human woman, wearing robes and wielding a wand.

When the woman saw Astaroth, her shoulders instantly drooped. Her eyes already showed defeat, as she knew she stood no chance.

The woman got into a casting stance, getting as ready as she could. She hoped to cast at least one spell before being killed.

Unfortunately for her, Astaroth wanted to get back to observing the other players quickly, so as soon as the gong rang, he melded and rushed at her. A second later, the woman's health bar was depleted.

Astaroth had kicked her away, into the barrier, and fired an arrow at her throat, triple tapping her in a single second, taking away all her health. He could see tears flowing down her face as she popped into pixels.

When she reappeared, he looked at her with apologetic eyes, then switched his focus to the many screens now before him. He could finally see the fight he wanted to see.

Luckily for him too, Khalor was put against a more experienced player, one that was playing a rogue-like class. The man before Khalor was from a race he had not expected to see here either.

The rogue player against Khalor was an Ash Elf!

Astaroth had not heard of any other Ash Elf player that made it out of their starting zones. This was the first he saw.

But he immediately recognized the reason for this man's success. The way he moved out of the way of danger always last second, slipping in attacks with precision.

This player had skills that would only reflect from actual real-world training. This man was either, a trained military, or a hitman.

The precision of his strikes was surgical, and his combat sense was honed to perfection. Khalor's undead army couldn't pin him down at all, as he kited the hell out of them, taking some down in the process.

This dance lasted for around thirty seconds, with Khalor frowning all the while before he ended it. He pointed at the rogue player, and his giant raven and death knight lunged forward.

When the two high-level undead joined the fray, it took mere seconds for the Elf to get cornered and finally take lethal damage.

This gave Astaroth a bit of a clue on how to fight against the Necromancer if he ended up against him in the next phase. The rest of the bouts were less interesting, so Astaroth just sat on the ground, lazing about.

He watched the fights with a distracted eye, as all he wanted to know from the weaker players. As for the stronger players, most of them had already finished their fights too.

While Astaroth was watching the scenes with bored eyes, the skinny mage girl walked up to him.

"Umm... Excuse me... Can I ask you a question?" She said, twiddling her hand behind her back.

"Hmm?" Astaroth replied, turning his head to her.

The woman looked uncomfortable just standing near him. Talking to him was a chore, as far as she was concerned.

"What is it?" Astaroth asked.

"What... What is your class?" She stammered.

Astaroth looked her up and down, trying to spot some physical markers that she was deceiving him. But it seemed as if she was genuinely scared of him.

"And why should I answer your question?" Astaroth asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Oh... You... You don't have to. I was just curious." She replied, taking a step back.

Astaroth almost laughed at the meek girl. She looked like the type of woman that feared confrontation.

Not that he didn't understand that, as he avoided them himself. But she was brave enough to come to ask him a question, albeit her clear fear of him.

So he answered her query.

"My class is Soulmancer. It's a special mage class." He said, turning his eyes back to the screens.

"You're not a Beastmaster?" The woman asked, visibly confused.

"What made you think I was?" Astaroth asked.

"Well... You are fighting with weapons. Mages usually stay back. At least most do." She answered, looking at Astaroth curiously now.

"Well, I'm also learning the way of the Weapons Master." Astaroth said nonchalantly.

"But... Wouldn't that mean you aren't focusing on your main class?" The woman asked.

"Ahh, but is that so bad?" Astaroth replied, with a question of his own.

"Yes?" The woman said, almost unsure.

"People often think that mastering one thing is the best. But have you ever heard the quote 'Jack of all trades, master of none, but often better than master of one'?" Astaroth asked her.

This sent the woman into thinking, her face scrunching up, as she started pacing. Astaroth could see he had given her things to think about, so he returned to watching the bouts.

Sadly for him, they were almost all done, and the ones left were between unskilled players, simply swinging at each other like drunken brawlers.

When the woman finally snapped out of her thinking, a look of realization dawned on her face. She spun around to look at Astaroth, but before she could say anything, they both started glowing.

Astaroth smiled at her, as they both got teleported away.

Every player started reappearing in the large arena from the start, with a large screen appearing in the sky again. On it, popped up the face of chairwoman Constantine.

She was all smiles, her hands crossed on the desk in front of her.

"Phase three has now concluded. The scores of every player will now be shown, and players not in the top thirty-two will get disqualified." She said, as the screen split in two. U//ppTodatēd fr/o/m nô/v/e/lb(i)n.c(o)\m

The scores were all over the place, ranging from ten to zero, with only three players having a score of ten. Astaroth grinned as his name was in those three.

The other two were Khalor and Lucian_Valentine. The second name surprised him a little, as even though he was a pro player, he wasn't all that known.

Astaroth guessed he had been lucky on his opponents, and got less skilled players during the phase, letting him attain victory in every round.

But it mattered not. He was in the top thirty-two, and that meant he was entering the final stage.

'I made it!' He thought.

Chapter 105 The Final Phase Begins

While everyone was looking at the scoreboard, most of them with disappointed looks, Astaroth scanned the names of the players moving to the next stage. He was happy to see four familiar ones.

All the players from their makeshift team from phase one had passed to the next phase, with two of them being very close not to. Gulnur and I'die were talented players but lacked experience, which showed in their scores.

Both of them had lost two fights and won three, putting them at the very bottom of the top thirty-two. But they made the cut as he had expected. VîSit no(v)3lb/!n(.)com for new *novels*

Astaroth stopped looking at the board and started scanning the crowd. He eventually saw who he was looking for and walked his way.

His query was standing only a few meters away, trying to blend into the crowd as much as possible. When he noticed Astaroth walking towards him, he tried disappearing into the crowd.

Astaroth frowned, but didn't need to search for him much longer, as all the disqualified players exploded into particles and vanished. This exposed the fleeing ash elf and made him sigh.

After closing the distance with swift steps, Astaroth stopped before the man.

"Why are you walking away from me?" He asked the man.

"I don't want to be associated with you." The man replied, pulling his hood further over his head.

"Aw, come on man, don't be like that. I just wanted to ask you how you survived your starting zone." Astaroth said, trying to look sad.

"What does it matter to you?" The other ash elf asked.

"Simply curious." Astaroth answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"Most likely the same way you did. I had a caravan take me to a lower-level zone." The man replied, looking around himself to make sure no one heard.

"Ahh. I should have thought about that." Astaroth said, scratching the back of his head.

The reply made the other man freeze. He rapidly looked Astaroth in the eyes.

"Wait. How did you do it then?" He asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Easy. I trained and fought my way out." Astaroth said nonchalantly.

"You fought your way out of a level thirty zone as a level one!?" The man burst out, almost shouting.

"Yeah. Wasn't that hard." Astaroth replied, shrugging again.

Of course, he was grossly exaggerating, since it had been tough, and he almost died many times. But he would not admit that now.

The man started mumbling to himself, pacing in a small circle. He looked like a mad scientist that had just had an epiphany.

"Ah. I have another question for you." Astaroth then said.

"Hmm? What?" The man said, still pacing about.

"Did you go back for your racial passive?" Astaroth asked.

"My racial passive. What racial passive. I thought this race had none." The man replied, stopping in his tracks.

"Oh no. It has one. So I take it you don't have it. How are you so fast in combat, then? Your stats shouldn't be that high." Astaroth said, bringing his hand to his chin and rubbing it.

"Stats? Does the passive affect the stats?!" The rogue asked, grabbing at Astaroth's arm.

"Wow, man. Chill out. Don't get touchy." Astaroth replied, pushing the man away.

"Answer my question!" The rogue replied, looking at Astaroth intensely.

Astaroth looked at him for a second, pondering if he should. Then he decided against it.

"Forget it. I don't want to talk to you anymore." He said, before walking away.

As he turned his back on the rogue, wind swooshed past him, and the man was once again in front of him. But this time, his hands were on his daggers.

"I said, answer my question." He growled.

"Not interested." Astaroth replied, turning his back to him again.

Not a second later, the hair on his neck stood, and White Death jumped out of his back. The wolf was now standing on the ash elf, his paw on his chest, and his maw closed on his throat.

While all this was happening, chairwoman Constantine was explaining how the next phase was going to proceed again. When she saw from above the giant dire wolf pop out of one player and jump on another, she cleared her throat.

"Ahem. I see we have some players eager to fight. Then I shall shorten my explanation and change the fight order a bit." She said, turning her head to her left and tapping on her keyboard.

The side of the screen with the scoreboard now displayed a chart, with thirty-two names at the bottom, and lines that extended upward, forming the elimination chart.

The first two names on the left were Astaroth and Stinger. Astaroth guessed that was the name of the rogue White was currently holding in his jaws.

"Now. Since we have two eager combatants, I have placed them in the first slot. We will start the last phase of the tournament shortly. May the best win!" Constantine said, smiling widely at everyone.

After she said that, everyone disappeared from the arena again, appearing in the surrounding bleachers. It also transported Astaroth to one side of the arena, with White Death unsummoned.

The other ash elf, Stinger, was now on the opposite end, his daggers still in his hands, a look of anger in his eyes. He crouched down, crossing his daggers before him, ready to lunge forward.

Astaroth sighed, looking at the man.

'Why is it that everyone is always angry at me?' He complained in his mind.

Everyone always thought that he owed them everything, and got angry when he didn't comply with them. He knew that most people in the gaming community were obnoxious, but this was next level.

'It's the law of the jungle now, I guess.' He thought, pulling out his polearm.

He lowered his stance, extending the weapon in front of himself, and awaited the countdown.

He also prepared to meld so he could get his advantage right away. This would be a rough fight.

He had seen Stinger fight, and knew he was a slippery fellow. But he still needed to win this. Seconds ticked away from the timer before a loud gong resounded in the arena.

Gong!

Chapter 106 Stealing Your Moves

With the ring of the gong, both men lunged at each other. Astaroth melded almost instantly, while the rogue started throwing kunai at him.

The attack threw Astaroth off for half a second, but not long enough for him to get caught by it. Stinger had not used ranged attacks in his other combat, so it surprised Astaroth.

That's where you could see the man had some previous experience. As Astaroth ducked down, the knives whizzed past Astaroth's ear, catching a strand of his white hair.

Astaroth and Stinger crossed weapons in a clash of daggers, and many slashes and stabs were performed quickly. Astaroth was not as masterful in his weapon-wielding as Stinger, so he was on the defensive in that trade.

Although less adept, Astaroth was much quicker while melded, so he fended off the attacks and slipped some through of his own. None ever found purchase though, as the rogue slipped aside from each strike.

Astaroth felt like he was fighting against a snake for a second, as he wasn't able to pinpoint where to strike. Stinger kept dodging and dipping out of his slashes and stabs, as though a slithering serpent.

Since he couldn't land a hit, Astaroth went for a more educational approach. He stopped attacking entirely, and went on the defensive, as he watched every move Stinger performed.

Kloud had once told him that against a more skillful opponent, as long as he could defend himself, he could learn from his foe. And that was what he was trying to do here.

Since Stinger was so adept at knife fighting, Astaroth only blocked and dodged, as he observed all of his body movements. Since his speed was so much higher than Stinger's, Astaroth could see most of it.

Astaroth also used his skill; Thousand Thoughts, to slow his perception of time. This permitted him to take in all the muscle twitches and subtle body movements he couldn't see before.

'Shame the skill only lasts ten seconds.' Astaroth thought, as his eyes followed the daggers in Stinger's hands.

Over the next ten seconds, Astaroth took in as much information as his senses allowed him to, and started adjusting his posture. Slowly, his dodging and parrying became more fluid.

This didn't escape Stinger's experienced eye, as his strikes started going wide more often, and the strength behind the parries became lesser, as the angles on them became more optimal.

Stinger thought that Astaroth might have been hiding his skill level, as this sudden improvement was highly improbable. But as the fight kept on, he realized that was not it.

After the first ten seconds of adjustments, Astaroth kept his eyes peeled on Stinger's moves, and adapted more and more, until he was almost shadowing the latter's moves.

Stinger could see and feel the slow progress and understood what was happening.

'He's copying my movements!' He thought, his mind almost going into shock.

'He can't have learned my style before this. It's custom-made by me. How is he doing this?' He wondered, unrelenting in his assault.

But his attacks were becoming less and less effective. Time was playing against him.

Stinger finally changed tactics. Instead of just knife fighting, he started incorporating game skills into his strikes. Visit www.v3l3n.com for new *novels*

He was still unused to this, as he lacked the practice of merging them together, but it still made him more lethal. His attacks became ferocious again.

The change in the attack pattern surprised Astaroth, but he adjusted quickly. They were two minutes into their fight when Astaroth felt comfortable enough in this style of fighting to integrate attacks of his own.

It was Stinger's turn to be taken aback. The kid before him had just learned his style in two minutes, while fighting, and was now using it against him.

Stinger redoubled his efforts to take Astaroth down, merging more and more skills into his attacks. He knew Astaroth's buff had a time limit, and thought that if he could burn that out, he would win eventually.

The fight kept going, as both men stabbed; slashed; dodged; parried; engaged; disengaged. It was like a ballet, only deadlier.

The crowd in the bleachers was going wild, as were the people watching from their phones and televisions. But the two combatants couldn't hear them.

Their focus was currently so high that all they could see was the person in front of them. They couldn't hear, let alone see, what was happening around the arena.

In the crowd, pro players were talking together. Most of them knew about Stinger and his previous job.

Blue Peacock was one of them. She knew Stinger personally, as they had been in the same business before gaming.

She had fought him before in 'ToB' too. So she knew his knife style pretty well.

When Astaroth started mimicking it, to the point it was indistinguishable from the original, she frowned.

"Whoever fights him next needs to make the fight quick." She said to the others.

"You think Stinger will lose?" Killi said, sitting next to her.

"Isn't it obvious? He beat me, after all, even if it was just a fluke." Azamus chimed in, cocky as usual.

"That's not why I'm saying that." Blue said, looking at Azamus with disdain.

"Hmph!" Azamus huffed, looking away from her.

"Did you see how quickly he adapted to Stinger?" Killi asked, trying to defuse them.

"He didn't adapt." Blue said.

"Care to explain?" Killi asked, frowning.

"He didn't adapt to Stinger. He copied his knife style. Don't you see?" Blue said, pointing at both fighters.

Killi turned his head, looking back at the fight. It took him a few seconds of focusing, but he finally understood what Blue Peacock meant.

The moves and strikes of both men were practically identical. It was like watching two students of the same master spar.

"How?! It hasn't even been five minutes!" Killi said, as realization dawned on him.

"That's why I said to make the fight against him fast. I think he has the ability to shadow his opponent. Maybe even learn from them." Blue said, her eyes narrowing.

"If that is the case, he will only become stronger the more he fights." Killi sighed.

"I think a new number one is forming." Blue said, looking at Astaroth intently.

'And I need to nip it in the bud.' She thought to herself.

Her eyes turned into those of a predator as she watched Astaroth, who was none the wiser about what was currently going on.

Chapter 107 Trick The Trickster

Back in the arena, Astaroth was watching the timer on his melding slowly run out, and clicked his tongue in disappointment.

Even though he had mimicked the fighting technique of his opponent, the man had started using skills wildly, and he couldn't land a strike on him because of it.

Just as the meld was about to end, he kicked off his left foot, dashing backwards, as he pulled out his bow and fired two arrows.

While Stinger was busy dodging one and parrying the other, Astaroth summoned White safely. And with him out, the clashing became a lot more unilateral.

Stinger was good in one-on-one combat, and he could find his way in and out of a brawl against most groups, but the coordination White and Astaroth showed was no joke.

They caught him in pincer many times, and even though he always dodged one of the two attacks, he never got out unscathed from these trades.

Slowly, his health started going down, and he grit his teeth, angered at the situation. He was losing to a kid half his age.

Although Stinger knew better than to not judge a person by their age, he could see the lack of experience in his opponent's moves. So it angered him he was still losing.

'I'm losing to a pup who barely knows which end of the knife to stab with!' He thought.

Squeezing the handles of his daggers harder, he used a skill that he didn't want to use yet. One that he considered his trump card.

Just as Astaroth and White were pinching him again, for the fifth time, Stinger slapped his foot on his own shadow. As he did that, his body melted into it, vanishing from between Astaroth and White.

He reappeared behind Astaroth, both daggers stabbing into his back, as White crashed into his master, unable to stop his momentum in such a short distance.

Astaroth took a massive amount of damage from the two-pronged attack, as Stinger jumped back. He grinned as he watched the two collide and his prey's health drop drastically.

It surprised him he didn't outright kill him, as he had done to other players before. But with how much health he took from him, it was now only a matter of time.

Astaroth, on his side, looked up at his health bar and winced. More than half of it was gone.

The only reason he was not instantly dead was that he cast mana skin instantly when he saw Stinger disappear. And he was happy he did.

Close to two-thirds of his health was lost, from a single attack. He could surmise that Stinger had used at least two skills in that one instant, seeing how a normal hit would not half done such damage.

He hoped that his little teleport skill had a long cooldown, because if it didn't he was now most likely screwed.

Astaroth turned to look at Stinger, who was still in an attack stance, grinning at him from a short distance away.

"Nice skill." Astaroth said, lowering his stance again.

"Same to you, kid. That was some very impressive reaction time." Stinger replied, half honestly.

In his mind, he was cursing. When he looked at the boy and the wolf colliding, he saw the shimmer coming off of his body.

He guessed that was the reason Astaroth hadn't died instantly. A defensive skill, he surmised.

In his skill list, Stinger could see the timer for his Shadow Step skill was just under a minute. That meant if he could hold on for another minute, he could finish this combat in a victory.

Stinger looked at his own health bar, and it was under half. It was not that much health to start with, since he was an agility-based player.

He had a little under two thousand health points left, but he still thought he had more than Astaroth, who was down two-thirds of his.

Astaroth looked at his health bar. He still had fifteen hundred health points left.

It was not good, but it was enough. He had just formed a plan to end this battle.

He quickly explained it to his spirit companion, as he started pacing around Stinger. Stinger did the same, as they engaged in a three-man awkward walk around, Mexican standoff style.

This didn't go on for long, as Astaroth dashed forward, lunging at Stinger. Stinger also ran, but in a concentric motion, trying to stay away from White. He was trying to make sure he could see them both at all times.

The three of them clashed a few times, White not quite getting behind Stinger, as he kept positioning himself close to the walls. It took almost five more minutes of manoeuvring to pincer him again.

Stinger held onto his Shadow Step for a perfect opportunity, but since he wasn't letting them pincer him, it took time to get this shot.

But it soon came, as Astaroth and White finally positioned him between themselves. With both of them dashing at him from different directions, he lifted his foot, half grinning.

But something threw him off when he looked at Astaroth's face. The kid was smiling widely.

Also, his strike stance was off. He was holding his daggers back to back like they were one long pole.

Then, as his foot tapped his shadow, he remembered something. But it was too late.

He remembered the kid could use many weapons, but since Astaroth had been wielding only daggers against him all this while, it had slipped his mind. And that stance he was in right now was not a dagger stance.

As he started disappearing from between them from the corner of his eye, he saw White sidestepping. The next thing he saw was Astaroth's mad grin, as he reappeared behind him.

In his hands were no longer two daggers, but one greataxe. And the axe was already in a swinging motion.

Stinger understood he had been played. Astaroth had been waiting for this exact moment.

The axe came in sideways, aimed at his torso, and he could not defend against it. It passed cleanly through his midsection.

Silence permeated the arena, as half of Stinger's body was falling from the other half, his eyes wide open.

When it hit the ground, the crowd erupted in a cheer.

Chapter 108 Confronting The Monster

Astaroth fell to his knees, sweating and panting. The last five minutes had been nerve-wracking for him.

If at any moment, Stinger had used his teleport skill, he would have been unprepared. Luckily for him, the man had waited for the opportunity he was creating.

It was a matter of luck and mind games, and he had won. Astaroth looked up to see the board change, as his name slid up one bracket.

He smiled widely as he dropped to his back. He was then transported out of the arena, and into the now almost empty bleachers, while the next fight was about to begin.

The remaining 28 players were all loosely sitting next to each other. A large chunk of them were pro players, with a few dark horses amongst them.

Astaroth was one such dark horse in this competition, with most of the others being Athena, I'die, and Gulnur. There were a few others too, but he mostly focused on them.

Because they were walking towards him, accompanied by Phoenix.

"Astaroth! You finally won!" Gulnur exclaimed, almost running with his short legs.

"What do you mean, finally?! That wasn't an easy fight!" Astaroth replied, frowning playfully.

"Bah! I saw you mow down dozens of monsters at a time! How did one player give you such a hard time?!" He replied, holding his hips in a disappointed parent style.

He then guffawed in laughter, as did Astaroth, enjoying the moment to relax.

"I'm more interested in another fact." Phoenix said, sliding next to Astaroth.

"And what would that be?" Astaroth asked, almost uncomfortable with her proximity.

"You were shadowing him at the end. Where did you learn to move like Stinger?" She asked, leaning in close to him.

Astaroth backed away awkwardly, scratching the back of his head.

"Nowhere. I guess I just copied what he was doing." He replied.

The surrounding four looked at him silently.

"You copied him?" Phoenix asked, her eyebrows lowering.

"Yes?" Astaroth answered, hesitantly.

"In the middle of a fight. You copied your opponent's moves." She said slowly, trying to drive her point.

"Yes. I looked at his movements and copied them. I always was a quick learner." Astaroth said, trying to smile.

It ended in an awkward smile that made him look oddly guilty. Athena was the first to react to his statement.

She burst out laughing.

"Hahahaha! I already knew you were a monster, but this! This wins first prize!" She exclaimed, clutching her stomach.

"What's so funny?" Astaroth asked, frowning.

He felt slighted that she was laughing. He thought she was mocking him and not believing what he said.

"Do you not realize how ridiculous that sounds?" I'die chimed in, his face contorted from trying not to laugh.

"What do you mean, ridiculous? I'm not lying!" Astaroth said, almost pouting.

"No one says you are. It's just... *sigh*" Phoenix said, breathing out a long sigh.

"We believe you. It's just... Do you know who Stinger is?" Phoenix then added.

Astaroth looked at her curiously, his head slightly tilted.

"I know he is a pro player. And that he was in the top fifty in 'ToB'. But that's it." Astaroth answered.

He wasn't sure why Phoenix was asking him this.

"Stinger is not just a pro player. He was a world-class mercenary before becoming a gamer. The dagger style you just copied is one of his own making." Phoenix said, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

The specific situation that led them there was most likely their escapade during round one, which Astaroth had told her about. It barely made sense to her, but she kept observing.

As for Khalor, he had come with another aim in mind. When he got to Astaroth, he asked if he could have a quick chat one-on-one with him.

Astaroth hesitated at first, not sure what he wanted to talk about, but still agreed to his demands. After getting up and walking away a few meters, Khalor looked him right in the eye, and said the weirdest thing Astaroth had ever been told.

"You are my butterfly effect. There are things we need to discuss."

"Your what?!" Astaroth replied, completely confused.

Chapter 109 Battle Maniacs

When Astaroth and Khalor stepped away to have their private conversation, the fight in the arena ended. That was the second fight out of the first sixteen, and the next one would be interesting.

It pitted Gulnur against Blue Peacock. Gulnur was confident in his tanking abilities, but he was no fool. He knew this was as far as he went in this tournament.

He bade farewell to all his friends currently next to him, and asked them to deliver his farewell to Astaroth, too, before being teleported into the arena. Both he and Blue appeared simultaneously in it, face to face.

Gulnur gave her a small nod, to which she responded in kind. There was respect in both parties' gesture, as they both recognized each other's skills.

"I know this is as far as I can go. So I only wish we have a fair fight and enjoy the thrill of combat together." Gulnur said, bracing his shield before him.

"Even though your fate was unfortunate to have you cross paths with me, I shall honor your requests and fight with all I have." Blue replied, pulling a deep and elegant bow, kamas in hand.

Gulnur smiled and nodded again.

Gong!

With the resounding sound of the gong, Gulnur started moving forward to his opponent, as Blue Peacock did the same. She stopped her forward movement when she reached ten feet and instead started circling Gulnur.

Gulnur started looking all around himself, as he knew what came next. And right on cue, the first Kama flew in from above.

He deflected it with his hammer, but it was almost immediately followed by another, this one from the left. After blocking that one with his shield, the next came at a diagonal right.

This game of death tennis continued on for a good while, as Gulnur deflected, parried and blocked the incoming attacks as best he could. Blue Peacock had a wicked smile across her lips as her kamas danced around her. Check out *latest novels* on [n/ovels/bin\(.\)/com](http://n/ovels/bin(.)/com)

She was fully enjoying this fight, as she had promised Gulnur. And even though the Dwarf posed little a threat to her, she respected his strength nonetheless.

Gulnur was one of few people that had read her attacks so well in a long time, and even if some of his defensive manoeuvres were timely sometimes, he protected himself quite well.

Not that he didn't take damage at all though, as his health ever so slowly ticked away. Even though Gulnur had a massive health pool, he couldn't block the full damage of an attack unless he parried it.

Dodging was the second best option, but his agility was so low, it was practically void against an opponent like Blue. And since he wasn't fast enough to parry all the attack he couldn't dodge, blocking was his other best defence.

Sadly, that came with damage, even if super mitigated by his skills and shield defence. This would be a unilateral fight for Blue as it was.

She eventually gave the man a fighting chance and stopped attacking at a distance. That wasn't to say she would let herself get hit, though.

Since she was so much quicker than Gulnur, getting in melee range meant he could no longer see the attacks coming in advance, and some started slipping through his defence.

His health went down quicker now, because of that, but he was still grinning madly. To him, this was the most excitement he had since the caves with hordes of monsters in the first phase.

And it was the most exciting moment he had ever had in his life, because of his sickness. This made him feel so alive, that he almost forgot that his body outside the game was that of a frail young boy.

He laughed as the fight went on, making Blue's smile go even wider. The people in the crowd sighed in understanding.

This was a fight between two battle maniacs, and most people here could easily understand what they were feeling. Some even envied their current situation.

The odds were overwhelmingly in Blue's favor, but that didn't mean she was not having a hard time. She was doing so minor damage to the defender that she was quickly exhausting herself.

Her attacking speed was gradually reduced because of fatigue. She wasn't out of shape or anything, but she had been at full steam since the first second, and this was not a sustainable rhythm.

Gulnur constantly monitored his health bar, like he was waiting for something. When his health went under twenty-five percent, he opened his guard up wide.

Blue Peacock pounced on the opening and lashed out with five attacks in quick succession, dealing a substantial amount of damage to Gulnur. But that was what he had been waiting for.

While she was deep in her attack pattern, he swung his mace at her in an upward diagonal. The mace was almost emitting bloodlust in Blue's eyes, and she knew she couldn't get hit by it.

She started oscillating weirdly, as she jumped back, and Gulnur's hammer went right through her. Gulnur knew this was just an illusion, though, as there was no resistance in the hit.

But he had been expecting as much from an experienced player as her, so that hit was just a feint. He brought his shield back forward and took five rapid steps forward, performing a Shield Charge.

The skill found purchase, as this time it hit something solid, before making it to the image of Blue. The fake image flickered out, as the real Blue peacock lost balance backwards, almost typing over.

Blue kicked her foot squarely on the shield before falling, propelling herself further back, almost to the wall. She did a somersault in the air, landing back on her feet and steady.

But Gulnur was not done with her. As she landed, Gulnur's humongous shield came flying at her face like a frisbee, threatening to smash her face. Blue had to lift her weapons up to block the hit, which dealt some damage.

But that wasn't all it dealt. She also ended up stunned, with Gulnur running at her, hammer lowered behind him.

He had been waiting for this exact moment. Just as he made it to Blue, he swung his hammer up.

"Retribution Strike!" He shouted, as he swung deftly.

Chapter 110 Unbelievable Truths

Back in the stands, Astaroth and Khalor had just finished their discussion, which turned out to be more of a monologue from Khalor. Astaroth was visibly shaken.

What Khalor had just told him was not only unbelievable, it was also inconceivable for anyone. Some things he said were so far out of the realm of the possible that Astaroth's head was hurting right now.

The conversation was over just in time to see the end of Gulnur's combat. Astaroth wanted to cheer his friend on, but his head was still processing Khalor's words.

So he only watched in a daze as Gulnur started his offensive. He saw the whole chasing and shield charge, culminating to the shield lob and Gulnur's ultimate move; Retribution Strike.

Astaroth was slowly snapping out of his daze, with every move his friend did. And for a moment, he saw hope.

Hope that Gulnur would come out victorious. Hope that a wild card tank would beat a highly experienced DPS.

But these hopes were rapidly crushed. When Gulnur's hammer was about to pass through Blue Peacock, her form split up into four copies.

His strike whooshed through the form before him, but nothing solid, going through it like air. The other copies spun around him and he was soon covered in cuts.

His what little health was left, plummeted all the way to zero. He stood there, flabbergasted, as he turned to particles.

But not before he could boom out a laughter that sounded as genuine as they get. This made Blue smile.

She had to use a trump card just to get out of danger, because she had a sharp feeling that if that last hammer strike had hit her, she would have vaporised instantly. The source of this content n/o/v/(el)bi((n))

She was teleported out of the arena as a wave of fatigue hit her full force. She was pooped from that high-intensity fight.

But she still had one thing to do, before she could relax until her next fight. She walked over to where Astaroth and his friends were sitting.

There was no sign of her habitual arrogance in her current attitude. It was like she was walking up a shrine's steps.

When she finally arrived at their seating spot, she bowed deeply to Astaroth and the others.

"Your friend was an honorable warrior and a fearsome fighter. And I hope you can convey this message to him for me." She said, bowed down low, before standing up and leaving.

All of them sat there, mouths agape, not sure what had just happened. Especially Phoenix, who knew Blue as a very arrogant and narcissistic woman.

This was so out of character for her that some people around even wondered if her whole arrogant persona was just roleplay. But she rapidly proved them wrong about that thought, as she went back to her usual self.

Khalor was the first one to speak about it.

"His tenaciousness and battle will must have impressed her." He said, before standing up.

"As for you." He added, pointing at Astaroth.

"Don't forget what I just talked about. Things will get into motion after this tournament. Make sure you stay on top of your game." He finished, walking away.

Astaroth only nodded, his face scrunching up again. His mind centered back on the conversation again.

He entered his thoughts again, practically ignoring the next combat. It wasn't one he wanted to see anyway, as involved players he had no interest in.

Phoenix's fight would be next after this one, and that one he didn't want to miss, since she was fighting Morticia. He wanted to see how a psychic fared against a bona fide mage.

His master had told him that powerful psychics could give most mages a run for their money, even though mages had strong mentalities.

So that combat was one he wanted to see. He also considered Morticia to be an experienced player and a powerful psychic.

But for now, his mind was in all kinds of turmoil. He kept thinking back to what Khalor had told him.

'What if what he said is true?' He thought.

'Wouldn't that spell disaster? But how does he know these things?' His mind spun, thinking about the repercussions.

Khalor had told him many things, but he had been so mysterious about all those things that he might as well have said nothing. Which was why Astaroth was so disturbed by it.

Phoenix saw Astaroth slowly spiral into thought and tried to help him.

"Hey. Are you ok?" She asked him, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Hmm? Ahh. Yes, I'm fine." Astaroth said absentmindedly.

"You don't look fine. What is it you talked about?" She questioned, worry apparent in her eyes.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Astaroth said, trying to brush her off.

Khalor had told him to not repeat these things to anyone, unless he trusted them fully. And, although he trusted Phoenix to have his back in combat, he didn't trust her that much otherwise.

He wanted to talk to someone about it, but he just couldn't think about anyone that fit the bill. There was no one that he trusted this much, not anymore, at least.

In times like these, he missed his parents so much. A pang of pain assaulted his heart, as he thought about their death again.

Phoenix was not blind and saw the emotions flash in his eyes, but she didn't push further. His business was his alone.

If he wanted to talk to her, she would listen, but she wouldn't force him to talk. After seeing the pain flash in his eyes, she put her hand on his shoulder.

"If you need to talk, I will gladly listen. But for now, my turn is almost up. So I will leave it at that." She said.

Right after saying that, Astaroth received a friend invite from her. It was his first friend invite, and he reflexively accepted it.

He smiled at her weakly, and she smiled back before walking away. Her turn soon came up, and she was teleported to the arena.

She received a message in her private inbox from Astaroth, as she appeared in the arena. It only said two words.

'Good Luck'

She smiled as her eyes met her opponents.

'Time to show off!' She thought, as she grinned.

