

## New Eden 221

### Chapter 221 Instant Regret

The howl reverberated all over the forest, even scarring some players that were killing monsters at the edge of the woods. For a monster's howl to resound so far, it had to be powerful.

Some more adventurous players were already heading in the howl's direction, hoping they could have a first takedown on whatever creature it was.

Other players were messaging their guilds and friends, thinking this might be a zone event or something. Most of these players would someday remember this day and shiver.

Astaroth was currently looking at the ledge of the hill, where a gigantic dragon was looking down on them, its predatory eyes locked on him. Since the monster was already pissed, Astaroth scanned it.

He immediately regretted it.

Young Red Dragon (Wounded):

Level: 100

Grade: Legendary (Zone Boss)

HP: ???'???'

MP: ???'???

He regretted it almost instantly. A loud, gritty voice echoed in his head.

'How dare a puny creature as you scan me! Do you wish death so badly that challenging me wasn't enough?'

Astaroth's body shuddered under the power in that voice alone. He knew he had fucked up the moment the dragon pulled out of the cavern, and now it was worse.

To make matters even worse, a notification resounded across the skies.

**\*Region Announcement\***

**\*A dangerous monster has appeared in the region, threatening the safety of the kingdom! Fell it, to get glorious rewards!\***

Then a quest notification popped on everyone's interface in the region.

**\*Sudden Event!\***

Quest: Fell the beast!

A fearsome beast has appeared near the city of Sunpeak! It is your duty to defend the bastions of man! Face the creature in battle and slay it.

Rewards:

Participation Reward: Exp = Damage points.

#5 Damage dealer reward: 1 Million Exp + 500 Gold

#4 Damage dealer Reward: 2 Million Exp + 1000 Gold

#3 Damage dealer Reward: 5 Million Exp + 2500 Gold

#2 Damage dealer Reward: 10 Million Exp + 5000 Gold

#1 Damage dealer Reward: 25 Million Exp + 15000 Gold

Slayer Bonus Reward: 50 Million Exp, 50000 Gold, Sunpeak Reputation +5000, Title: Dragon Slayer

It immediately enticed any player who saw the rewards, even the ones that had fled prior to this. No player out of his right mind would skip out on this big of a payout.

It mattered not the difficulty of the quest, or how high the chances of death were. They would still return there after their death, to get better rewards.

Astaroth gulped at how much chaos this would sow. But he had bigger issues.

Like a multiton flying lizard staring at him, wanting only to eat him.

"I think we'll be going, now," Astaroth said, turning to leave.

He was facing the beast, and could already tell that fighting this would only result in pointless deaths. He wasn't willing to risk losing levels for a quest, even one that promised large rewards.

Who could tell if it would end with just one death, either? What if the dragon headed to Sunpeak after killing everyone here, just to get revenge?

This was all risk, no reward, as far as he was concerned. But then a part didn't want to leave either.

The thought of fighting a dragon made his heart beat like crazy. He wasn't sure if it was fear or excitement.

And another part of him feared that he might have unleashed death on the people in Sunpeak, too. He wouldn't be able to sleep at night if a city just vanished because he bothered a dragon.

But he wouldn't be able to leave, anyway. As soon as he turned, the dragon left its perch and landed right in front of him.

\*Woosh! Boom!\*

'Where do you think you are going, future snack?! I haven't tasted one of your kind yet. I wonder what you taste like,' the voice resounded in his head again.

A grin stretched on the dragon's lips, revealing massive teeth bigger than Astaroth himself. He knew at a glance that ending up in that mouth was a one-way trip.

'Fuck.'

Since there was no way to escape from this dragon, it left him with only one choice. Fight it.

White Death was already mentally berating him for thinking about fleeing. Astaroth had to focus to tune out his voice from inside his head.

Since his only option was to fight, he wasted no more time. His halberd appeared in his arm, and he immediately threw it at the dragon's massive eye.

It was staring at him, anyway, might as well bank on that. The halberd flew true, finding purchase in the dragon's left eye, but dealing almost no damage.

But Astaroth wasn't looking for the damage with that attack.

The dragon started roaring to the sky; the halberd stuck in its eye, the shaft halfway in. It batted the weapon away, but it still got blinded temporarily on the left side.

The halberd fell close to Astaroth and he hurriedly went to pick it up as the dragon was thrashing about. The blindness wouldn't last long, so he used it to get under the belly of the beast.

He had to watch out for the stomping feet, but it would be safer to fight from under it, as long as he didn't get squished into a paste. Phoenix and Violette were already pelting the dragon with spells, all of which did so little damage, it was comical.

Astaroth started striking at the legs from different angles, making sure he didn't stay in the same spot for long. Not long after that, players started arriving from the woods.

The quest gave the coordinates on the map to those who accepted it, so they knew where to look. Sadly, for the first batch of newcomers, the dragon had already been readying a breath of fire.

The first players to reach the area were burnt to cinders in a single attack, with only the tanks quick enough to activate mitigations surviving. They weren't much better off, but they were alive, at least.

The situation would rapidly escalate though, as more and more players reached the zone where the fight was. Astaroth tried being happy about the reinforcements, but he noticed that even with over a hundred players hitting the dragon, it had yet to lose a single percent of HP.

Dread washed over him.

'How strong is this thing?'

Chapter 222 A Silent Observer

Players kept pouring in from everywhere, some even quickly travelling from other cities. There were teleporters in the major cities, but they cost fortunes to use.

But many players were willing to spend the many gold pieces to travel to Sunpeak. The rewards were simply too good to pass on.

If they made the top five damage on the event, they would make their loss many-fold.

Astaroth could see many players equipped with guild tabards of different colours and shapes. It was easy to understand how guilds would all fight for rewards these sizeable, even if they were player-specific.

Rumours were circulating on the net that reputation with cities or NPCs unlocked zones, quests or even special classes. It was easy to guess what reputation with a principal city would bring as advantages.

If a guild had a player get that reputation, they would be immediately upgraded to a core member or an officer even. This made more and more guilds pay the funds to get players to Sunpeak.

As the battlefield slowly expanded, trees getting trampled, burned or chopped down, More and more players joined in the fight. It quickly became a full-blown war against a single opponent.

Sunpeak's nobles, military, and guilds were notified of what was happening inside their border, and they prepared for the worst. If the abnormals failed to contain the dragon, its next target was almost certainly the city.

The city was crawling with players arriving through the teleportation circle and quickly leaving toward the battlefield. Others kept running out of the cathedral, freshly resurrected from dying to the dragon's area attacks, or getting stomped or crunched to death.

The guards had a hard time controlling who was arriving or leaving the city, so much so that the royal guard had to intervene. They were also rapidly swamped and stepped aside and let the players leave at will.

The city became like an anthill that was under attack, with players all leaving in the same direction as they arrived from teleportation or resurrection.

High on the mountain of Sunpeak, a pair of slit eyes were watching the fight unfold. The eyes belonged to the guardian of Sunpeak.

It was a massive golden dragon, one that was much older than the one getting ganged on by players. It was also a dragon that had sided with the humans and other various races of New Eden.

It was currently trying to judge whether it would have to intervene against its kin. For now, the abnormals seemed to contain it, but he didn't know if that would last.

His eyes were more often than not set on a specific humanoid. An Ash Elf that kept morphing into three different forms, his mana signature constantly changing.

He had many soul fragments currently swarming around him, boosting his strength.

"Hmm. Interesting. A Soulmaner. It has been ages since I have seen one," the dragon said, his voice slowly rumbling inside the cavern he was in.

He kept passively observing, ready to act as soon as the red dragon went out of control.

Back on the battlefield, Astaroth was having a hard time. Not only was the dragon focusing on him most of the time, but he was also having trouble focusing, with all the echoes of souls smacking against his mind.

He was using soul steal as much as he could, since he was in the perfect situation for it, but it had its downsides. The soul fragments he stole all had their own voice.

And they were currently screaming in his mind, screaming at him to let them go. But he couldn't.

He needed the extra strength. This dragon was so hellbent on killing him that any slip-up might be fatal.

His head was hurting like crazy, but he pushed through. His light at the end of the tunnel was that no one could deal as much damage as him.

The soul fragments powering him up boosted his already very high damage even higher, and he was head and shoulders over the player in second place.

Surprisingly, the second palace was neither Phoenix nor Violette. Even though they had been attacking for much longer than many other players, they also had to be careful of the occasional wide-range attack.

The player in second place was a player Astaroth would have preferred not to see ever again, Azamus. The gnome had teleported to Sunpeak from his base as soon as he had wind of the event.

This also added a difficulty factor to Astaroth, who would occasionally have to dodge a bullet. Azamus had already decided that if the occasion arose, he would take down Astaroth to stop his damage build-up.

Astaroth felt the same way right now that he did when he fought against Khalor. Danger was all around him, and the amount of concentration he needed to stay alive was rapidly draining his energy.

The good side of having so many players present was that the dragon's health was now steadily dropping. Even ants could take down an elephant given time.

But Astaroth was more scared of that than if the dragon killed them all. He had a nagging feeling that this zone boss would have more than one enrage stage.

It was already difficult to kill as it was. Adding an enrage buff to this would only turn this almost impossible task into utter chaos.

He swiftly glanced at the damage board, and saw that Violette was holding the third spot steadily, while Phoenix was not even in it. The dragon had resistance to fire, and this was proving to be disastrous for her damage.

The battle had already been lasting for over half an hour, when what Astaroth feared happened.

The dragon's health dropped under fifty percent and stopped moving for a second. It then roared to the skies, with enough force to push anyone standing in front of its mouth back many meters.

Its eyes started glowing red, and it started beating its wings. Everyone present knew that if it took flight, this fight was over.

The dragon would either wipe all of them out from a safe distance, or it would flee somewhere, and it would have been all for naught.

Astaroth silently prayed for it to leave, but his wish wouldn't come true.

The next to happen caused his heart to drop to the pit of his stomach, as he cursed in his mind.

'Fuck!'

## Chapter 223 Finding The Wound

Vine whips, tendrils of energy and elements, chains, and ropes all flew at the dragon, wrapping around his legs, wings, and body.

The players were fully intent on keeping him grounded as much as they could. All the strength-based players started grabbing at the various anchors, using all their might to hold the dragon from flying up.

The scene was a sight to behold, for everyone present, as they suddenly worked together. It was an event many would remember, but it was exactly what Astaroth didn't want to see.

When the dragon noticed that its body was being slowly restrained and pinned to the ground, it redirected its anger to the players once again. Fire started gathering in its mouth.

Before it spat it out, the flames started changing colour, going from orange-reddish to a bright blue. Most players were smart enough to know what that change meant.

Tanks all across the field started shouting for the other players to stand behind them, as various mitigations and shield skills and spells started stacking upon each other.

They barely had seconds to act as the torrent of blue fire was now emerging from the dragon's mouth as it swung its head from one side to the other.

Any player that wasn't quick enough to get behind the stacked shields and spells, was burnt to ash instantly. But even those who did were still fearing for their lives.

The fire was rapidly consuming the spell shields, the barriers and the tanks were next. The fire licked away at the first few rows of players, killing most and gravely wounding the others.

The lucky players were those that were under and behind the dragon, as they were out of the skills range of effect. But they weren't out of the clear.

The dragon, after noticing that its attack had done so little damage, tried flying off again. This time, since most players had let go of the tethers, there was nothing to restrain it.

But many players were still thinking strategically. Skill and spell abounded, all with knocking or stunning effects, smashing right into the dragon's head.

Astaroth had even steeled his resolve, now that he saw the players present weren't all dimwitted greed monkeys. He sank into the burnt remains of the trees, using his last few seconds of melding with Luna, to use Travelling Roots.

He didn't travel too far, before circling around and shooting back out, his shield before him. He used a Shield Bash skill to maximize impact, slamming into the dragon's temple.

With all the concussive damage hitting its head, the dragon was almost frothing at the mouth and its wings stopped beating. It fell back down to the ground, stunned long enough for many constricting spells to be set on it.

All the players still alive, along with the ones still arriving banked on this moment, throwing out the heavy-hitting skills and spells they had been holding onto. Now that it was an unmoving target, it was the best time.

A sizable chunk of the dragon's health disappeared in seconds as the players all went ham on it. But Astaroth knew it wouldn't be long before it enraged again.

What would it do next time? Would it heal, would it grow a second head, would it flee?

It was anybody's guess at this point. But no one present dared underestimate it.

Even though the dragon was wounded, they still had to find out in which way. It stayed a legendary creature, doubled with a zone boss, and tripled with a huge level advantage.

Astaroth went back to harassing the dragon from between its legs, where he was also safer from the bullets flying at him. It seemed Azamus was now focusing on him.

But the stats he currently had made him much faster than the projectiles flying at him. But his troubles only became more when a group of six familiar dwarves and gnomes appeared around him.

'Tch! Them again.'

The dwarf at their head was about to open his mouth, but never had time to utter a sound. Astaroth's longsword slashed his head clean off his body, and the rest of his party was squashed under the dragon's foot.

The dragon had been aiming at Astaroth, but since he was amidst their group, they ended up collateral damage. Astaroth laughed it off.

Azamus was fuming from his distant perch.

"Useless trash! If not that you already are a part of my guild, I would kill you until you can't play!" he growled, reloading his rifle.

Another ten minutes went by before the dragon reached the twenty-five percent health mark. Most players were paying attention to that, and stepped back when it ticked away.

The players that weren't paying attention were all struck by a fear effect, as the dragon roared to the skies once more. Many players that had stepped back were also hit, but they were safe behind the tanks.

As for Astaroth, who was still zooming between its legs, his passive saved his skin once again.

The dragon reared its head, preparing another torrent of flames, but this time, its tail also accompanied it, swinging around in the back as it spun full circle.

Those who thought they were safe were suddenly looking at a massive tail heading for them blazingly fast. And if that wasn't enough, the torrent of fire this time was down all around the dragon.

Players died in swathes, making many guilds panic. Their core players might not be among these, but even losing levels on normal-level players was bad for them.

And now they were losing levels by the dozens. It tempted many guild representatives to pull back their troupes, but the dragon was so close to dying that they bit the bullet.

The tide of players coming from Sunpeak was thinning over time, as some players had already died many times and weren't willing to lose more levels in this foolish endeavour.

This was worrying for the ones still there, since their damage output was reducing by the minute. If they didn't end this soon, they would have died so many times for nothing, since the dragon would most likely escape with its life.

Astaroth was still fighting under the monster when he finally noticed something weird. His eyes widened as he realized what it was.

'Phoenix! Get under the dragon, now!' he wrote in the party chat.

## Chapter 224 Thinning Players

Phoenix, who had already ignited herself in her Avatar of Flames, came flying in like a comet. She knew Astaroth wouldn't call her into the danger zone without reason.

Once she was in shouting distance, he pointed upwards.

"Look under his armpit!"

Phoenix flew in closer, pivoting to look at the dragon's massive underside, and found what Astaroth was pointing at. Lodged in the dragon's armpit, an enormous iron bar that could either be a lance, or a ballista bolt, was sticking out.

The surrounding wound was loose, though. Almost as if all the movement had stretched the cut open.

It begged to ask how the object lodged in was still holding. But it was a question for later.

Phoenix saw the golden opportunity and didn't hesitate. She flew in like a flaming bullet, jamming herself into the open wound.

This action alone would have made many women, and even some men, queasy. She was now inside the dragon.

The stench assaulting her was horrendous, and she refused to land or step foot on anything inside. She spun around, her only source of light being herself, and she found what she was looking for.

The rest of the metal object was visible from inside, and she could now identify it as a lance. But it was a strange one, made entirely of black iron, blade tip included, and the bladed part was like a tri-spoke spiral.

It was lodged into the dragon's shoulder joint, halfway into the blade, or at least that's what she assumed by the size of it. Whatever threw this did so with incredible strength.

But now was not the time to be amazed. Phoenix had to use this golden opportunity.

She began shooting goutts of flame at every surface she could, flying along the inside of the beast. Her damage was back to normal, meaning the interior was not fire resistant like the exterior.

She grinned madly, unleashing even more flames. She had a lot of damage to make up for.

From the outside, Astaroth could already see her damage climbing again, and he smiled. He could have gone inside himself, but he feared the extra Exp would shoot him over level fifty.

So he let his ally benefit, instead. And he intended to let Violette benefit too.

Astaroth shot forward, running to where Violette was shooting ice lances from, grabbing her by the midsection. She cried out in surprise, almost icing Astaroth's arm, before realizing who it was.

He didn't have time to waste on explanation, so he just ran back under the dragon before throwing Violette with all his might, aiming for the cut.

Violette screamed on her way up, before the spin in her flight made her see what Astaroth was trying to do. She panicked, since she didn't want to end up inside the dragon, but it was too late.



With a gross slurping noise, her body entered that of the beast. Unfortunately for Astaroth, his little stunt had attracted the attention of other players.

They now saw the wound, and that you could enter through it. They also saw the damage of Phoenix, who was steadily climbing the ranking, and since they couldn't see her, they assumed she was inside.

This rapidly escalated in many attempts to send players inside by the guilds. But Astaroth refused to let this advantage go to them.

His meld timer was only halfway for White, currently, but he cancelled it, and melded with Morpheus. Using his wings, he flew up, body blocking the improvised entrance and batting away the thrown players, sending most of them hurtling to their deaths.

When the players noticed Astaroth defending the entrance, they started cursing him out, and attacks started pouring on him instead of the dragon.

'Shit!'

Astaroth was suddenly back to dodging instead of attacking. This stalled his damage dealing, and Azamus used this distraction to deal massive damage to the dragon.

Astaroth was looking at the ranking from the corner of his eye, and he clicked his tongue.

'This damned sniper. I'll have to move where I can keep attacking.'

Astaroth wasted no more time and flew out from under the beast. This would let the players under keep attempting to send in their own, but he had already warned Phoenix.

She flew back toward the cut and started pouring fire through it continuously. This made the hole inaccessible, but it also started cauterizing the wound.

After a few seconds of burning, I already cauterized the wound enough it had almost sealed itself. Phoenix could now safely go back to rampaging inside the dragon.

Astaroth was now flying over the beast's back, attacking as fast as he could, but he was back to having to deal with Azamus' pesky shots. The gnome player was always firing in a way where he could still deal damage to the dragon if he missed.

Astaroth looked at the progress they had made, and was disappointed. The dragon was barely losing health right now.

'Too many players gave up...'

He knew the situation was becoming dire. By the time they dropped him to ten percent health, how many of them would be left to endure his next enrage?

'This is bad.'

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Inside Sunpeak, the guardian dragon was looking at the situation unfold, his eyes steadily locked on his kin. He could already judge that the abnormals wouldn't win this.

Their damage had already lowered too much, since the weaker ones had already stopped joining back. And now, when the red dragon raged next, there wouldn't be anyone left to stop him.

He would have to act soon, or the city would be in danger.

Unfolding his enormous golden wings, he walked out on the ledge of his cavern. The citizens of Sunpeak city down below could suddenly see the sun reflecting off the dragon's golden scales, blazing like a second sun.

The guardian took off from the peak, its wings sending blasts of wind to the city below, regardless of the distance separating the two. It had been a long time since the citizens saw the guardian take action, and all of them became slightly scared.

As for the players who saw this, they rapidly informed the players on the frontline. This caused players to flee in all directions, lessening the burden on the red dragon even more.

The situation was worsening by the second.

#### Chapter 225 Scaly Intervention

A few seconds after the golden dragon departed from Sunpeak, there were already only about a hundred players left around the red dragon. The damage they were doing was now microscopic.

Many of the players present were either pro players or fearless idiots. But they could all recognize the issue at hand.

They would never take down the dragon like this.

Among these players, one man was already thinking of a solution. This man was Killi.

But he wasn't sure anyone would agree to it. Players were always stubborn, after all, especially if they had stuck with this suicide quest up to now.

But his doubts soon vanished.

The event quest was suddenly updated, sending a system prompt to all the players still present. There was an additional clause to it.

**\*Quest update!\***

**\*The minimum number of players for this quest is no longer met. A party reward is now established in case of takedown.\***

**\*Extra Reward for the killing party: One item from loot/player.\***

Many players had questions pop into their minds from the wording. What did the system mean?

Wasn't the loot guaranteed to go to the killing party already? But something rapidly washed the questions away, when a large armed force appeared at the edge of the burnt woods.

The army was flying banners of Sunpeak and the royal guard. The players immediately understood what would happen after they slew the beast.

Many players were tempted to just leave right away, since there was no longer loot to be gained if they weren't part of the winning party.

But Killi was of a different mindset.

He backed away from the dragon briefly, trying to spot Astaroth. Once he did, he used the private messaging function.

Astaroth was busy zooming around the dragon's back and dodging bullets from Azamus when he received a message from Killi. The distraction almost caused him to crash into the left wing of the beast.

He opened the message, wondering why the man was sending him messages mid-battle.

'Astaroth, send me a party invite.'

Astaroth frowned, looking at the man from above. He could see Killi mouthing the word 'Hurry' from all the way up, and it only made him more confused.

'Why would I invite you to my party?'

'Because anyone not in the slayer's party won't get anything. Let's make this event worth it.'

'And what makes you think my party will be the slayer?'

'Just a hunch. Quickly, we are running out of time. The boss is about to rage again!'

Astaroth couldn't argue with his logic, as he had already seen the army approaching before the others, since he was at a vantage point. He had already guessed what they were here for.

No kingdom would skip out on a dragon's loot, after all. Since the system updated the quest to full-party rewards for the slayers, Astaroth got an idea.

He invited Killi, but then he changed the party settings, switching it from a party to a raid team. This automatically adjusted the party limit from twelve players to a hundred.

Astaroth could tell there were more players than that still present, but he didn't care. It would become first come, first served.

He sent out a team invitation to all the players in his sight, and before long, players started accepting them. Astaroth purposely skipped Azamus, since he had been shooting at him, anyway.

The raid team filled up in a matter of seconds. You could see the raid size next to the invitation, and when the first few people started accepting it, and the number grew, it was like dominoes falling.

Phoenix sent Astaroth a private message.

'What are you doing?! Why did you invite all these players suddenly?'

'Look at the updated quest message. You can't see this, but there is an army from Sunpeak, waiting for us to either die so they can slay the dragon, or for us to kill it so they can loot it.'

No response came for a while, before she typed the word 'Fine.'

Astaroth could feel she disapproved of his move, but he knew she would come around. This was the best way to make sure everyone profits from the situation, and it would boost their reputation among the player community.

Killi was already silently approving of this move. PR was a big part of being a pro player, and this move was a massive PR stunt.

He would have proposed it if Astaroth didn't think about it himself, but he underestimated his smarts.

But the situation rapidly turned. The red dragon's health finally reached ten percent, and it bellowed to the sky for the third time.

The players were expecting this and kept fighting, but they soon realized how bad this was. The defences of the dragon had suddenly leaped so much that everyone on the outside was doing less than ten percent of their normal damage.

If this wasn't dire enough, the dragon blew out a gout of fire again, this time pure white, and even with shields and magic, it disintegrated anyone caught in its wake.

This left only the players that were nimble enough to move out of the way standing. It instantly greyed half of the raid team out in the raid window.

To make matters worse, a gigantic shadow started descending on them. Another dragon, this one gold, was diving onto the red one.

Astaroth had to throw himself off the dragon's back, just to avoid getting crushed. The collision of the two massive beasts made the red dragon's legs buckle, laying it flat on its stomach.

This killed another batch of players, who were standing underneath it. When the golden dragon bit down on the red one's throat, the damage it dealt made everyone gasp in horror.

A single bite took away four percent of the dragon's remaining health. A second bite came soon after, and before long, the dragon died.

But the player's jaws hit the floor again. Any player that had joined the raiding party was currently seeing the same prompt before their eyes.

\*Congratulations to player Violette, for slaying the Dragon. Violette's party has been awarded the secondary rewards!\*

One word echoed in everyone's mind:

'HOW?!'

## Chapter 226 Killing Blow

Truth was, it had been sheer luck.

When the golden dragon landed on the red one, it dislodged the lance that was stuck in its shoulder bone. Violette was next to where it landed inside the dragon and acted on instinct.

She used her magic to grab onto the shaft and then flung it toward the biggest mana source she could sense. That source was the dragon's beating heart.

She threw the lance with enough magical force that it went right through, leaving a gaping hole in its heart. Phoenix watched as the lance lodged itself in a rib, ending its flight with a 'Ting!' sound.

But the damage number astounded her. Floating next to the heart was a flashing damage number.

\*-3'000'000!!!\*

It was no surprise to her why she got the kill. But she knew this high damage wasn't caused by Violette alone. Phoenix's eyes drifted back to the lance stuck in a rib near her.

'What kind of weapon is this?'

She didn't have time to think about it, though, as they needed to get out of it for now. The air inside was already thinning out.

Phoenix flew to Violette, grabbing her by the hips and lifting her onto her back.

"Hang on tight!"

She then launched forward, directing her course toward what she assumed was the dragon's throat. When she came out, she ended up face-to-face with the golden dragon.

The sheer size of it was at least twice that of the one they had just killed. Phoenix felt small, as she was only as big as one of its eyes.

The golden dragon blinked, its eye peering deep inside the two humanoids before it, before turning its head away.

It was now looking at Astaroth, and the piercing gaze of a dragon was not something Astaroth appreciated much right now. Nonetheless, he withstood its stare.

After looking at the Ash Elf for a few seconds, the guardian of Sunpeak took flight, heading back to its nest. Its job was done, as far as it was concerned.

Astaroth breathed a sigh of relief when the dragon flew off. He was silently praying that this dragon was not here to kill them, too.

But they weren't out of the woods just yet. As the players started amassing around the dragon's corpse, waiting for the loot window to pop, a horn resounded in the air.

The army that was standing at the edge of the burnt forest was now slowly marching forward. Most players instinctively went into a defensive stance.

They were ready to defend their right to loot, even if it was against an NPC force. Even if it cost them their access to a major city.

Astaroth was already walking to meet them. A small group of three NPCs also split from the primary force.

Astaroth couldn't see their faces well from this distance, but he already recognized one person, from their magic aura alone, or rather, complete lack of one.

Once the three men on horses had arrived closer, they dismounted and walked the last few feet to Astaroth.

Amongst the three was an old man that Astaroth had already recognized as the guild master of the adventurer's guild. The other two he didn't recognize, but could take guesses as to their identities.

One of the two had a very militaristic air to him, his back ramrod straight and the decorations on his armour reflecting the sunlight.

The other one looked more shrewd, and by his lack of armour, but overcompensating panache, he could guess this man was here to represent the nobles or royals of Sunpeak.

Astaroth already expected this conversation to turn into a political debacle. He felt exhausted at the thought, even though it hadn't started yet.

He bowed at the men when they stopped before him, eliciting a smile and a quick nod from Master Eustas.

"Hello again, Guild Master."

"I am pleased to see you again alive, young man," the old man replied, glancing at the dead dragon behind him.

"It wasn't easy to stay this way," Astaroth joked.

But before he could continue his conversation, the military man in the middle raised his hand to silence them.

"You can keep idle chat for when you two are alone. Let's get down to business."

His tone was final, and Astaroth cared little about going against him.

Euclesias materialized a table between them, followed by four chairs. Two of the chairs were on one side of the table, and the two others were on the other side.

Astaroth took a seat, knowing who would sit next to him. He quickly understood why the guild was here.

Since most players had joined the adventurer's guild, they had a legitimate claim to the remains. The guild master could also ensure they gave rewards to the players who helped take down the beast.

Facing them, the representatives of the army and the government would be fighting to grab the lion's share of the beast's loot. Astaroth was freshly out of a battle, and they threw him back into another, this one of wits and words.

The representative from the government, or nobles, in this case, looked grossed out at having to sit at a table with him. Astaroth already disliked him.

"Let's get this over quickly. I can't wait to be away from this dead monstrosity and all these peasants."

"Duke Archambault. Please refrain from calling my adventurers 'peasants'. Remember, they play a large part in ensuring our kingdom's safety."

"These abnormals shouldn't even be allowed in our walls!" the duke rebuked, his voice almost a screech.

Astaroth could feel the undertones of hatred and fear in his statement. He understood his feelings, though.

Who wouldn't fear people who can't die, after all?

The military glanced at the noble with slight disgust. It was obvious he had a different opinion about players.

He could already feel the looks of greed from the man too, but they were aimed at the players, not the dragon. And more specifically, toward a young girl with black skin and pointy ears.

"Ahem. Let me introduce myself. I am Grand Marshall Promentha, leader of the armies of Sunpeak, and duke to the court."

Astaroth gave a nod to him, staying wary of his glances toward Violette.

"I've heard about you, young Astaroth," the marshall added, his gaze suddenly locking onto Astaroth.

## Chapter 227 Spicy Negotiations

"I'm honoured you even know my name, sire."

"Don't be happy just yet. I was told you refused to be knighted to the city of Sunpeak. Your strength would be quite an asset for Sunpeak. Is our city not worth your consideration?"

He said the last words with enough of a warning undertone that Astaroth knew they were meant more like an interrogation than a question.

"Quite the opposite, Grand Marshall. I believe you would waste such a title on the likes of me. I also very much like the freedom of being an adventurer."

Euclesias smiled at his statement, while the duke snorted in agreement.

"Nonsense, boy. You have proved your worth in battle, and I would be willing to offer you the title of Baron, just to get you in the army."

"Sire, I must—"

"Marshall, I would advise you to keep your greedy hands off my adventurers. I wouldn't be against moving the guild out of the city to protect the freedom of my men," Master Eustas said, his gaze sharpening.

The Lord Marshall stared back at him, as the aura of both men started leaking outward, making the air itself heavy. Sweat was already trickling down the noble's temple, and Astaroth was beginning to feel very uncomfortable.

"Marshall! Must I remind you only my brother, the king, has the power to give out such a title?! A fake noble like you has no such right!" the duke screeched out, his face a mix of terror and anger.

"Who are you to call me a fake noble? Must I remind you we hold the same rank?" The marshall seethed, looking back to the duke.

"My brother was foolish to give soldiers ranks. A brainless meathead like you should have never held such a noble right in the first place!"

The Marshall stood up so fast that the chair beneath him exploded backward. His sword was already drawn and leaning in against a force field conjured before his throat.

"How dare you speak ill of the king? You may be his brother, but you still owe him all your respect, you snake."

"Men! MEN! Defend me!" the duke screeched, his eyes wide in fear.

His personal guard was already moving forth, weapons drawn, as another barrier was erected between their small group and the troops.

Astaroth was now sweating profusely. He was the one that formed the force field, protecting the duke by compressing mana in front of the blade.

But keeping it in place was taking all of his focus.

'So heavy!'

The marshall didn't seem to be applying much of his strength, but the compressed mana was already showing signs of splitting apart. Astaroth could tell by that alone that his mana skin would be like flannel against a sword strike from this man.

"Guild Master! Are you siding with this maniac?!"

"Quite the opposite, Duke Archambeault. I am keeping your men alive."

"S...Sir.." Astaroth muttered, his concentration slipping.

Master Eustas gave a stern look to the Marshall, who clicked his tongue and withdrew his blade.

\*Gasp\*

Astaroth started wheezing. Even the dragon hadn't tired him this much.

He now understood why he was here in the first place. He was there to slay the dragon if the players failed.

It slightly impressed Marshall Promentha that the kid was even fast enough to conjure a barrier, even one so small, that could block his sword.

It spoke lengths of his quick thinking and his potential power. The Marshall wanted him in the army even more, but by the look in Euclesias' eyes, he knew that wouldn't happen.

The guild master conjured another chair, so the man could sit back down.

"Now, can we get back to the reason we came?" the old man asked, a smile forming on his lips.

Astaroth was still unsure how the situation would turn out at this point. He secretly hoped they told him to leave so he could escape from this nightmare.

But such a thing never happened.

After over an hour of back and forth between the men, over who should get the dragon's loot and materials, Astaroth's head felt like bursting.



The noble representative insisted that such a treasure should belong solely to the government of Sunpeak, and that the adventurers should only get paid for the kill.

The military representative counterattacked, saying that the materials were required to make the army stronger, and that any weapon in its loot should also be theirs. The rest could be split between the other two parties.

The guild master was even more rash, insisting that since this wasn't an official request, but a wild kill, it belonged entirely to the guild, and that they should be allowed to do what they want with it.

Astaroth still didn't know what he was doing at the table. He tried taking the side of the players, advocating for their rights to loot, but the noble almost shut his claims down.

At this point, the sun was setting, and the issue was still unresolved. Neither of the three men wanted to back down or concede.

It was eventually decided that the king would have the last word, since they couldn't agree. They sent their troops to tally the amount of loot and the state of the dragons' corpse, before they brought it back to the city.

Astaroth was finally released from this tedious duty, and he walked back tiredly to his friends.

"Urgh! Finally!" he cried out, letting himself drop to his back next to Violette and Phoenix.

The girls looked at him, giggling a bit, before Phoenix asked what took so long.

Astaroth recounted in broad strokes the situation, painting a grim portrait of the loot. But since it had not officially completed the quest, there was still hope.

The players that had accepted his party invite were already trying to swarm him for answers. They were expecting him to give out the loot right then and there.

Most were grumbling in disappointment when he told them he didn't have it. An emissary saved his hide from these scavengers when they came to tell Astaroth to show up at the royal court the next day, with all his party members.

This assuaged most of their complaints, and Astaroth was left alone. He couldn't wait to go to bed.

## Chapter 228 Testing Out The Realism

As they walked back toward Sunpeak, Astaroth asked Violette how she managed to get the killing blow. He had been itching to ask her in party chat, but since he wasn't sure how much of the functions could be seen by high-level NPCs, he didn't dare try.

But now that they were alone, he asked her directly. Violette answered honestly, and Astaroth was almost sad he didn't get to see the lance.

A weapon that strong had to be at least at the legendary rank. Astaroth thought about all the exp he got from the event and smiled.

Even though that last hit from Violette had shot her all the way into first place, he was still happy with second place. And Phoenix had managed to get back up to third, too.

This made the three of them the top three damage, which also meant they got the most Exp. Violette had levelled up twice from this, since she was the lowest in all of them, but neither he, nor Phoenix had levelled.

He looked at his status window and saw he was close. He was disappointed when he looked at the status window of Genie and his soul companions.

They had received no Exp from the kill. It was like the Exp was split up to the players taking part, and the killing strike was worth nothing.

Then again, with what they received already, he wasn't all that sad. But his soul companions were being left behind.

He kept thinking about that while they walked back to town. He was still conversing with Phoenix and Violette, but his mind wasn't fully on them.

Once back, Astaroth noticed they were receiving weird stares from the NPCs. After paying closer attention, he realized it wasn't them they were looking at, but Violette specifically.

He scanned her for the first time since they had killed the dragon and started laughing loudly. It startled Phoenix and Violette.

"What's gotten into you?" Phoenix asked.

"Scan Violette," Astaroth responded between two bouts of hysteria.

When Phoenix scanned the girl, she stifled laughter, too. This made Violette curious, and she opened her status window.

What she saw there made her face drop.

"Why is it already equipped?! I don't want that title!"

Her current name showed up as 'Dragon-slayer Violette'. Even if it had a catchy ring to it, anyone who would see that title on a petite nine-year-old girl would laugh, too.

The only ones not laughing were the NPCs, since the title was awe-inspiring for them. Astaroth had noticed that titles affected how the NPCs interacted with him.

Now, Violette would suffer from the same change. Although hers would probably be very positive, since slaying a dragon was a heavenly feat.

"Stop laughing!" Violette complained, stomping her little foot.

Astaroth had to exert every ounce left of his strength to contain his laughter. Phoenix had an easier time, since she was already containing it well.

The trio started walking again, with Violette pouting, as they made it to the inn they had rooms at. With all the gold Astaroth still had, he could easily have bought his own home in the game.

But he didn't want to be constrained to one place, so the idea repulsed him for now. As they entered the inn, a slow tide of clapping started.

The patrons in the inn were clapping for their victory against the dragon, oblivious to the fact they were the ones who provoked it in the first place. The trio walked to the counter to pay for their rooms.

Phoenix said she didn't need a room, and Violette was exempt from paying forever by the owner. Astaroth almost felt insulted that he still had to pay.

They walked up the stairs, amidst the continuing acclamation, until they disappeared around the upper corner. Astaroth's ears were buzzing.

He wished Violette a good night, before heading to his own door. He was about to wish Phoenix a good night as he opened his door, but she pushed him inside the room.

She followed inside, closing the door behind her. When she spun around to face him, she was wearing a naughty grin on her lips.

"What are you doing? Didn't you already have a room?"

"I do. It's right here," she answered, waving her hand around.

Astaroth gulped nervously.

"But we are going to disconnect, anyway. What's the point of sharing the room?"

Phoenix looked at him incredulously.

'Is he really this dense?' she wondered.

Then she remembered who she was talking about.

"How much time does Violette usually sleep when she logs off?"

Astaroth was confused.

"A few hours. Four, maybe? Why?"

"Then that leaves us four hours."

Phoenix started taking off her armour, leaving her with only her clothes underneath.

"I want to test how well this game emulates the feeling of skin on skin," she said, winking at him.

Astaroth finally understood what she meant, and his face went red. He hadn't thought they would do this again this soon.

His body ached all over and his mind was a mess, but Phoenix didn't look deterred. She undressed right before him.

She went to the corner of the room to wash herself off in the wooden bath. Once she was done, she pushed him toward the bath before going to the bed.

Astaroth had never washed in front of anyone before, aside from his mother when he was a child, and he became extremely nervous. Phoenix laughed at his every reaction.

"C'mon, tough guy. I've seen you naked already. Hurry, before I change my mind."

Although Astaroth was currently super nervous, that didn't keep his body from accelerating subconsciously. He was on autopilot, and before he realized it, he was already clean and in bed next to Phoenix.

He gulped nervously, looking at her lips as they parted into a smile. When she stretched her hand to caress his arm, the two of them became pleasantly surprised at the realism of the sensations.

"Not bad," Phoenix muttered, as her hand slid on Astaroth's abs.

Every touch felt just as real as they had a few days prior in his penthouse bed. They lost themselves to the pleasure, enjoying what little time they had together, forgetting they were still inside a game.

After making love, they cuddled up, whispering soft words to each other. What pulled them away from each other was the blaring notifications that their pods were out of IV.

They separated, although reluctantly, to go back to their respective lives outside the game.

Phoenix was the first to disconnect, leaving Astaroth with a promise.

"I'm free for the next week, and I would like to come back to your place, assuming that is ok, since you left me the key. I will arrive tomorrow. Goodnight."

Astaroth watched her pixelate and disappear, a smile hanging on his lips.

"Log out."

## Chapter 229 Manifestations

\*\*\*Owens residence, Birmingham, England\*\*\*

Winston was having his monthly examinations, bloodwork, vitals, spinal tap, and the whole proceeds. His doctor had with him two nurses and a few specialized machines to speed up the process.

Currently, the doctor was looking at his blood test results, a frown creasing on his forehead.

"Hmm."

"Is there something wrong, doctor?" the boy asked.

"It's nothing, young man. I'll be right back. I need to talk to your parents."

Winston began worrying. It was never a good sign when the doctor wanted to speak to his parents alone.

The last time it had happened, the doctor had announced to his parents that his condition was degrading. The time before that, Winston had caught a cold that almost killed him.

As the doctor left the room, one nurse sat next to him. She was the doctor's assistant, and she had been with him every time since he started treating Winston.

"Don't worry, Winston. I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Thank you, Marry. But when has speaking in private to my parents ever been good news?" he sighed.

"I have a good feeling. You also seem to have a bit more colour to your skin. Who knows, maybe you are getting better." she responded with a smile.

The other nurse kept working, her face stoic. She was silently shunning the woman for giving false hope to this slowly dying child.

Winston suddenly heard his mother sob from behind the closed door. His heart dropped.

The doctor came back inside the room, his parents tailing behind, both crying.

"How much time, doc?" Winston asked, trying to smile.

He would prefer his parents see him with a brave face on, as he accepted his death long ago.

"I will need to have you come by the hospital for a more thorough test, but for nowâ€"wait. How much time? Dear god, no. Winston, you aren't dying."

"Then why do I need to be tested? Did I catch a disease or something?"

His mother took three rapid steps, throwing herself at his feet. She was still crying, but Winston could glean a smile behind her tear-filled face.

"Winston, my sweet pearl. The doctor thinks you are getting better."

"I can't be sure just yet. But all the signs point to it. That is why I want to run better tests at the hospital. Winston, I think your body is finally fighting back the CEDS."

Winston felt something rise in his chest, something he hadn't felt in a great deal of time. Hope.

Tears started rolling down his cheeks. He tried brushing them away and holding them back, but it was a fruitless endeavour.

The nurse that was sitting next to him smiled wide, happy for the boy, while the other nurse was just standing in the back, her jaw slack.

CEDS had no known cure, even after many years of study. Since it was a genetic condition, it was not something that could easily be researched.

Doubled over that, that it was a rare condition, there was still much to be discovered about it. If this kid was suddenly healing from it, it was either a miracle or the next medical breakthrough happening right before their eyes.

"For now, keep being careful and stay in your sterile environment. But if my conclusions prove right, you might soon be able to start having a normal life again, young man."

After scheduling an appointment at the hospital with his parents, Winston's doctor smiled at him one last time before leaving with the nurses and equipment.

Winston and his parents rejoiced at the news. Even after many warnings from his father to not be too optimistic yet, even he couldn't contain his hope.

This meant he might see his son grow up to be a normal boy and man. He had no greater wish that was stronger in his heart.

The family let themselves hope, for the first time in a long time.

\*\*\*Somewhere in Japan, in a secluded village, inside the Kujaku residence\*\*\*

Aoi Kujaku, known to others in New Eden as Blue Peacock, was currently training in a closed room. The form and style she was training here were practically the same as in the game, aside from some minor adjustments to the strength of the strikes.

Aoi was swinging around a small sickle, or Kama, as the Japanese called it, tied at the end of a chain. The arcs made by the weapon were dangerously close to her own body as she whizzed it around.

One could tell by her closed eyes she was more than experienced with these movements. In a sudden snap of her wrist, the weapon changed direction, heading for a wooden dummy.

Unbeknownst to herself, Aoi's eyes shone slightly as she executed the attack. On impact, the Kama sliced cleanly through a part of the dummy, making the wooden piece fall to the ground with a dull thud.

The woman looked at the dummy, her weapon embedded in the ground under it, and the piece of wood on the floor, her eyes slightly wide. As she stood back up straight, her mind was already asking all kinds of questions.

Aoi walked to the dummy, inspecting the wood, to see if there were any defects in the grain that she might have accidentally hit, but she couldn't find any.

The slice through the material was straight and clean, almost surgical. She knew that such a cut would require much more strength than she could exert.

Her face formed a frown. She went back to training, trying to emulate the phenomenon, but never managed to, even after hours of trying.

All around the world, many similar events were happening. People achieving feats that were not typically possible in normal circumstances, or suddenly getting better from diseases.

Many people brushed it off as spikes of adrenaline, or miracles. But one common denominator tied all these people together.

These people were all players of New Eden. More so, they were all players with access to gaming pods.

Inside EG's headquarters, Constantine Levesque was currently meditating inside her penthouse in the building. She has done so every day since they released New Eden.

But something was different this time. She could feel her consciousness expand far outside her own body.

With her eyes closed, she could see places inside the building without being there. When she opened her eyes, she logged into the security network, verifying what she had seen through the cameras.

She smiled as everything was as she saw.

"So it begins."

## Chapter 230 From Stroll To Dread

As all of this was happening around the world, Alexander and Violette were having a relaxing day. Since he didn't need to go to the gym, and was too tired anyway, Alex suggested a walk in a nearby park.

He promised Violette the park was beautiful, and they could even stop to feed some ducks around the pond. At the mention of ducks, Violette immediately agreed.

So after a quick breakfast, they both dressed and left the house. The park wasn't so far from there, but they still had to take the subway for a while.

This was a fresh experience for Violette, and Alex had to remind her to hold his hand constantly. He didn't want her wandering off, and potentially falling on the tracks.

Her mother would kill him if she was harmed while under his purview. The thought alone of her being mad sent shivers down his spine.

During the ride on the subway, Alexander had a weird feeling about something, but he couldn't put his finger on what. He felt like he was being watched, but could see no one staring at him or anything.

He brushed it aside, since he had been getting a lot of these feelings recently. It might just be his imagination.

After the quick subway ride, they unboarded and walked back to the surface. They were only two blocks away from the park now, and Violette was getting more and more excited.

Alex stopped at the park entrance, buying a small bag of duck feed. This park was well known for this activity, and the pond in its center was enormous.

It was also constantly flocked with ducks, except for winter time. So the city made it mandatory that the feeders only feed the appropriate food to the ducks, so they didn't disturb their diet.

As they walked toward the pond, Violette was getting restless. Alex had to tell her many times to calm down, unless she wanted to scare the ducks away.

Once they reached the center of the park, Alex picked an empty bench near the pond. Ducks were already slowly quaking their way to the pair.

Alex picked out a handful of oats and grains from the bag of feed, and threw it a few feet in front of him. The ducks rapidly swam to reach them before flapping their wings a bit to get out of the pond and onto dry land.

"Me too! Me too!" Violette clamoured, making a few ducks jump back frightened.

"Calm down, Jesus." Alex laughed.

"Here. take a handful and gently toss it that way. And don't yell or move too fast, you'll scare them away."

An old couple on a nearby bench watched the scene whilst laughing. Alexander looked at them, smiling, before shaking his head a bit.

Violette tossed the feed in front of her, trying to keep it close. She silently hoped she could pet a duck.

Alex already knew what she was thinking, but it wouldn't be an easy feat. The ducks might be used to getting fed by humans, but they were still wild birds.

As Violette was trudging her way forward, trying to get the ducks to let her pet them, Alex felt someone sit next to him on the bench.

When he turned his head to tell the person the bench was already occupied, his words froze in his throat.

"We meet again, little shit."

Sitting next to Alexander was the butler that had tried killing him previously. He had a gun in his hands that he was hiding inside his jacket, and on the muzzle was a silencer.

"Move too fast, or shout, and you'll be dead before anyone realizes what happened. Nod your head if you understand."

Alexander was already getting angry, but he wasn't alone, and making any rash decision now meant putting Violette in danger. So he nodded his head.

Hatred was already filling his eyes.

Suddenly, another man sat on the other side of him. It was a hulking man, with sunglasses on and dressed in a clean suit.

"Your new gorilla?" Alex asked, looking back at the butler.

The big guy slapped him behind the head, eliciting a grunt from Alex.

"Don't give me attitude. It won't end well for you this time. Do you know why I'm here?"

"Why should I? Maybe you've taken a liking to me."

The butler punched him in the ribs with his free hand before pressing the gun to them.

"Hilarious. No. I've come to settle a debt with you."

"What debt?" Alex asked, his eyebrows knitting together.

The butler showed him his free hand, where a finger was now missing. He could tell that wasn't an old wound, since the stitches still looked recent.

"Your little stunt last time got me in trouble with my boss. And for this trouble, I paid a price. I've come to pay you back."

Alex gulped at the statement. Violette chose that moment to turn around and saw the two new people on the bench.

She started walking towards them.

"Who are these people, Alex?"

"Violette, stay where you are."

When Alex said that, was when Violette saw the gun stuck to his torso. Her eyes began filling with fear.

"Violette, stay quiet. Everything is fine. Just stay quiet and don't move. Understood?"

The girl was already pale as a ghost, as she nodded her head slowly.

"Good girl," the butler said, flashing a vicious grin.

Alex snapped his head at the man.

"If you so much as touch her, I will rip your throat out."



His tone was so low that it sounded more like a beast's growl than words.

"Is that so?" the butler said, his grin turning malicious.

"Burt, take the little lady away. She won't want to see what happens next."

The big man nodded in silence, getting up in a swift motion. He started walking toward Violette, his face expressionless.

Violette was now backpedalling in fear. The problem was that the pond was not far behind her, and she would soon fall in if she didn't stop.

The old man on the bench next to them got up.

"Excuse me, young man. Would you mind leaving the girl alone? Maybe pick on someone your own size?"

To anyone seeing the events of that day, it would remain a blur in their minds in the future.