

New Eden 581

Chapter 581 Bustling World

Inside New Eden, in the thick foliage of the Danabor Forest, a man was violently fighting for his survival. After forcing his quarry through all the traps he had set, and going through many rounds of combat with the beast, it still wasn't falling.

He could tell just by looking at it that the Phaser Leopard was gravely wounded. Scanning it would have been a waste of time.

But the beast had it after him, this puny human, who dared challenge it in its domain. Once the first bullet had hit it, there was no way it was letting the human escape its grasp.

But over the next two days, a vicious game of hide and seek, with sporadic physical engagement, just wasn't ending. The human had proven to be much more resourceful than the beast was used to, regardless of his low power level, and there was just no catching it.

Now, with all the damage the Phaser Leopard had taken, it had already become a blood debt that needed to be paid. A life had to end, whether it was its own, or the human's, one life would end at the end of this hunt.

On his side, it had never filled Falchion with as much thrill as now. His two days of nonstop hunting were only possible because of his butler, who was keeping his gaming pod fed on IV bags while he was locked in this fierce hunt.

But even on the inside, exhaustion was creeping up on him. Days without sleep, with barely any time to eat a decent meal, his stress levels peaking every time he heard a noise nearby, or even the constant alertness he had to maintain. It was not for the weak-minded.

Falchion knew he was nearing his limit. Already, his thoughts were becoming sluggish at times, and his actions were not following his thoughts as fast as before.

But he would never give up. This damned cat would fall to him, he promised himself.

As he thought this, a branch cracked to his left.

Not even looking, he immediately lunged to the right, rolling and pulling out his shield and spear. As he did, a large black blur appeared where he had been, blood dripping slowly off its slick fur, as it growled at Falchion.

"You won't escape me forever, human," the Leopard's voice echoed in Falchion's head.

This wasn't the first time the Leopard infiltrated his thoughts. But Falchion was no longer impressed or intimidated by it.

He only grinned in response.

Then he lunged, with a savage war cry, shield raised and spear extended.

Far to the northwest, amongst a massive chain of mountains, sat a large city, which extended across many of the mountain peaks. Bridges on many levels, built with stone, bricks, or even rope bridges, connected the many mountains.

This city, with every peak adorned by a massive statue or church of every different religion on the continent, was Kormir.

Staring at the city part, at the foot of the mountains, Silent Light was musing on his next course of action. The view from the temple of Solaris was breathtaking, and it also offered him some much-needed clarity.

Although the main temple of Solaris was in Themisca, where the religion had birthed, the temple in Kormir was much bigger, and this is where the priests and believers would come on pilgrimage. The path to the temple on the top of the mountain was an arduous one, with many risky paths.

But it was no trouble for some like Silent. Once he had reached the temple and stopped inside to commune with Solaris, it was like his emotional burden had just vanished.

He felt the warm embrace of the god cover him, like a heated blanket in winter, staving off the cold air of the temple, and it just washed away all his worries. In the real world, Silent Light wasn't much of a believer.

But there was something about the proximity of the gods in New Eden that made it hard to deny their existence. He believed Solaris had absolved him of his worries and troubling thoughts.

Now, looking down on the city, he wondered what he should do going forth. Paragon was his home, but he wondered if he should spend all his time around Bastion City, or if he should do something else.

A low whisper echoed in his ear.

"The world needs your light. Solaris' light."

The low tenor voice felt almost like a vibration, more than a voice, and it brought shivers across Silent's body. He recognized that voice.

He had heard it once before when he upgraded his class to Bishop. This was Solaris' voice.

His resolve suddenly firmed up. He knew what he had to do.

Down at the southernmost part of the continent of light, in the arid lands of the dwarves, filled with rocky plains and jagged mountains, Gulnur travelled between two cities. His current mission to bring more Dwarven players to Paragons was going only so-so.

Many guilds were already spreading their influence in the Dwarven and Gnomish cities, and getting free-lance players was not a simple task. He knew people tended to stick to similar-looking groups to themselves, and inviting the Dwarves and Gnomes to Paragons was proving difficult.

But Gulnur was no quitter.

He had battled a deadly illness all his life. He would be damned before a simple setback was all it took to bring him down.

As the train he was on travelled the arid plain, between the mountain city of Voggrum, and the pit city of Thistlehold, Gulnur tried thinking of a better way to attract players to Paragons.

He knew that simply inviting people to the now largest guild wasn't working. He had to find a way to make his offer more compelling.

'How do I convince stubborn players to change ships?' he wondered.

As his thoughts carried him away to many plans, each more convoluted or silly than the last, he didn't see time pass, and the train start descending into a large spiral. The loud whistle of the train, which weirdly echoed around him, was what brought him back to his senses.

That was when he saw they had reached the pit city. The train was currently pulling into the station, about two hundred meters down from the ground level, and already, light was getting rarer.

But the sight from down below was simply unbeatable.

'I love the Dwarven and Gnomish cities... There is just no beating their ingenuity...'

Chapter 582 Preemptive Strikes And Unexpected Event

While every officer of Paragons was otherwise busy with personal matters or missions, another one of them was busy fighting through the corruption, not unlike Khalor.

Gale, who had gone to crush his fear and trauma of demons, was currently hunting demonic tears, gathering information on them or joining purging expeditions across the continent. He had decided that killing corrupted creatures until he found demons was the way to fix his mental scar.

He was currently waist-deep in a bog, somewhere around the center of the continent, with a troop of fifty templar-looking knights, advancing slowly, staying alert to their surroundings. There was news of a tear opening up in this bog, and the nearby kingdom had sent a group to shut it, Gale tagging along.

The kingdoms had long since accepted the help of the Abnormals in these endeavours, with the promise of reward being their only demand. The undying Abnormals made for great cannon fodder, at worst, and otherwise amazing help in clearing what had already devolved into a cross-continental threat.

News of tears opening around the world were no longer an oddity, and many kingdoms were replenishing their military operations, in even the most peaceful kingdoms. The world was slowly getting on the warpath, for most, reluctantly.

In this bog, Gale and the knights had already been assaulted four times, in the last two hours, by what looked like mutated frogs and alligators, as well as snakes the length of caravans. Their initial group of seventy had already gone down a lot.

But these men were prepared to die.

Gale snapped his head to the west, feeling a disturbance in the currents he was holding around the group, and sounded the alarm.

"Enemies to the west! Many small targets, accompanied by two bigger ones! Their movements are too fast to determine their kind!"

The soldiers all got into formation promptly, now used to the child in their midst accurately predicting the ambushes. They didn't know how he did, but they were grateful he bothered telling them.

Their ranks would have dwindled much more, if not for his timely warnings.

But Gale's face was a mask of disappointment.

'Still no demons. It's been days, and so many tears closed, but still no sign of a single demon invader... This hunt is a waste of time again...'

But he wouldn't leave these men to die, regardless of his internal turmoil.

Across the vast ocean, on the dark continent, Khalor was grinning madly. In front of him lay the bodies of so many lesser demons, they practically formed an extra layer to the ground.

The reinforcements he had been waiting for had finally arrived, after five days of being late, and they were now advancing on the demonic tear. But the tear had long since opened into a portal from which many lesser demons and some lesser officers had poured out.

Already, the land around the tear had become festering in demonic mana, cracking and oozing with some dark red liquid, almost reminiscent to coagulating blood. And when the confrontation had begun, Khalor had been so happy.

These enemies were so much more rewarding than the corrupted monsters that had been assaulting the small town in waves. He was glad for the rewarding trip, but also glad that he was in time to destroy this portal, before it became an even bigger breach point.

The small army he was following into battle was currently resting from their last confrontation, having lost a little under a quarter of their troops. Khalor was flying above them, on his undead drake, looking further ahead, at the encampment the demons were building.

The demons were ill-prepared for a sieging force, and their barricades and defence countermeasures were feeble. This was a good thing.

If the army had waited only a few days more, the demon camp might have become a small stronghold. At that point, they could have already changed the troops inside it with more militaristic combatants.

For now, the worst enemy they had fought were breaching parties, which, on their own, were not much of a threat. But a legion of the demon army was no joke.

Khalor couldn't wait for this fight to proceed further. Once this was taken care of, he knew of a few other places where he could beat back other impending breach points.

Doing this only pushed back the inevitable, of course. But the more time he bought the players, the stronger they were before the conflict spilled onto Earth.

And he knew full well Earth wasn't ready for this conflict. Not yet.

'Let's just hope all those ripples form into a torrent that can push back the end...'

As time advanced in New Eden, conflicts extending into the night for so many, outside of it, the day was already breaking close to noon.

Alex had just finished recounting the altered string of events of the service tunnel incident, the journalists so wrapped around his words they didn't dare interrupt him. After he was done, though, the floodgates slammed open.

Dozens of questions assaulted Alex simultaneously, the voices mingling into a buzz, as he had trouble making out the words. Just as he was about to respond to the one question he understood, his mouth opening, the words stopped short in his throat.

His face turned to a frown, as did Kary's behind him, as both of them received a notification on their phones. Alex's phone was on the tribune before him, in case it rang so he could shut it quickly.

But this notification, flashing before Kary's eyes and on Alex's screen, was not something he could simply ignore.

New Eden Alert! Your body is under attack. Please reconnect as soon as possible.

Alex turned his head to Kary, who nodded at him, already knowing why he looked at her.

He turned to Jack.

"I'm sorry, Jack. We have to go. It's urgent. Can you finish this for me?"

Jack frowned at him a bit, but before he could protest, Alex stepped away from the tribune, grabbing Kary in his arms, as two massive bat wings erupted from his back, shredding through the fabric of his nice shirt, splashing a bit of blood on the ground.

Gasps of fear and shock echoed in the crowd, as Alex bent his knees, wings extending fully, before he launched off the ground, Kary in his arms in a princess carry. He disappeared from their sight faster than they could even process what had happened.

Jack grumbled to himself.

"God dammit, kid. You could have at least gone through the back of the hospital before transforming like this. What am I going to tell them now?"

He sighed to himself before stepping to the tribune, raising his hands.

He switched into crisis management mode once more, thanks to Alexander's antics.

Chapter 583 Inn Flames

Alexander and Kary disappeared into the clouds, Alex beating his wings madly, a sense of hurry overcoming him.

"What do you think this means?!" Kary shouted over the wind brushing her skin.

"I don't know! Violette once told me our bodies disappeared when we disconnected! But it seems they didn't, in that dungeon! I doubt we were the only ones who got this message!"

Kary frowned at his statement. She had also read online that their bodies didn't stay in New Eden when they disconnected.

For them to receive a notification from the game while disconnected was all but normal. She only hoped everyone could log back into New Eden in time, if they were in danger.

Across the world, another eight people received the same notification, bringing a frown to their faces. A few of them quickly headed back home to reconnect into New Eden, a few even making it faster than Alex and Kary.

But some otherwise could not move as quickly. Of them, Hector, also known as SharpTusk, who was currently miles away from home on his motorbike, enjoying the morning breeze, could hardly spin around on the highway.

Edvin almost had to fight his boss, just to get him to move out of his way as he darted off from the garbage triage center. He knew this would put him in a world of trouble, but he wasn't sacrificing his character for this crappy job.

Gaspard and Jeanine had to shove what remained of their breakfast crepes into their mouths and flag down a server rushing to pay for their food. They then ran their way home, sometimes hitting other people on the sidewalks, apologizing without stopping.

Two of the players in the party, Christine; character name Twinxie, and George; character name Food Goblin, who didn't have pods, didn't even receive the notification. They were made aware by Clarissa, or Peaceful Grove in New Eden, who had them both on her friends list.

Christine had to fake illness, just so her teacher would let her leave school, which took her a lot more time than she would have liked, while George lied to his boss that he had a family emergency, so he could leave the office.

The first ones to log back in were Violette and Galtion, who were still home when they received the notification. When they opened their eyes, what met them was a blazing ceiling.

All around both of them, in each of their respective rooms, the walls, ceiling, and parts of the floor were on fire.

Violette quickly started channelling her magic to stop the fire from spreading in her room, while Galtion bolted out of the room, bursting through the door. As he did, he quickly saw the extent of the fire.

In the long hallway filled with doors, a few of them were ajar, with people running toward the staircase at the end of the hall. But all the doors to his companion's rooms were still closed.

He couldn't let them burn, so he did the only thing his mind thought of.

Slamming his body into the first door next to him, he entered the room, which seemed empty. Galtion hadn't paid attention to which rooms were theirs, and he realized this, now that he had to look for his friends.

Seeing nothing but an inferno in this room, Galtion ran back out, just in time to see Violette bust out the door, a bubble of water surrounding her, and water jets fusing in every direction.

"Violette! We need to find the others!"

Violette spun her head to Galtion, calling to her, and nodded briskly.

"I'll take the end of the hall! You go towards the stairs!" she shouted back, running past him.

Galtion didn't dally, dashing past her as well, as he started slamming into every door on the way toward the stairs. He quickly found a person, although not one of his friends.

In the back of the second room he opened, was a woman savagely trying to break open the windows, with little success. Grasping at her robe, was a little boy, whose eyes were streaming with tears, that dried up before even reaching his chin in the blazing heat of the room.

Galtion pulled out his spear, and dashed forward, shouting "Move!"

The woman jumped back in fright, when suddenly a man in metal armour lunged toward her, spear at the ready. But as she moved aside, the man kept moving and charged through the windows, exploding them outward, along with the wall they were part of.

She looked at him, mouth agape, as he turned his helmeted head towards her.

"Go! Now!" Galtion screamed.

The woman snapped out of her stupor, grabbing her son and looking out the now busted outer wall. The jump down wasn't very high, as they were only on the second floor, but she couldn't hesitate. She jumped down with her son in her arms, landing with a muffled cry, before getting on her feet and limping away from the burning inn.

Galtion nodded to himself, before moving on to the next room.

As this happened, Violette was already breaking open a door further down the hall with a pressurized water jet, sending the door exploding inward in a shrapnel rain. In this room was Twinxie, whose Pixie friend was buzzing frantically around, visible to the naked eye.

Violette ran to the bed.

"I can get her out! Get to a safe place on her!"

The Pixie held her hands forward, a menacing glow around them, before recognizing the girl in the water bubble. She floated to Twinxie, getting inside a tunic pocket, as Violette channelled her magic.

A massive gout of water exploded from her water bubble, bashing into the wall of the room that led to the outside, and shattering it like a house of cards. Violette then focused the gout downward, making a ramp with it, and turned her head to Twinxie.

With her left hand, she made a twisting motion, willing a water bubble around the fey girl, and rolled it into the gout of water. The water bubble suddenly jerked forward, following the flowing water downward, like a ball in a tube, until it rolled on the gravel road below.

Violette nodded to herself and snapped around. Her job wasn't over yet.

Chapter 584 Burning Rage

Before Galtion could bust open the next door, it pulled open on its own. Out of the doorway came running Jaxx, who was looking worried.

On the opposite side of the hallway, another door opened, where Jeanne d'Arc came rushing out.

"What is happening?!" she asked, looking frantically around.

"I don't know more than this place is on fire! Help me get people out before it collapses!" Galtion replied.

Jaxx nodded his head once, dashing down the hall. But Jeanne shook her head.

"I'll head outside! If anyone needs healing, I'll be more useful there!"

Galtion looked at her back as she darted to the staircase. He could hardly argue with her logic.

He headed to the next room toward the stairs, taking one side of the hall, while Jaxx took the other, and they made brisk progress.

In the other direction, Violette was already almost at the end of the hall. Most of the doors here had opened, with their occupants rushing out while crying and screaming in fear.

But one door remained shut.

At the end of the hall, the last door on the left, where Astaroth and Phoenix were sleeping.

Reaching the door, Violette noticed a smear of crimson red on the door handle. Her heart skipped a beat.

She violently burst the door inward, finding the room completely ablaze. There was one body on the ground, face down, which Violette hurriedly flipped over onto its back. She didn't recognize the man and frowned.

'What is he doing in their room? And where are they?'

The man's face was stuck in a rictus of pain and fear, with his throat slit. Whatever had happened here, Violette had no time to investigate.

Astaroth and Phoenix's room was the one where the fire was blazing the strongest, and it made her worry even more.

'What in the nine hells is happening here?' she wondered, searching the room from the safety of her water bubble.

She found no trace of her friends and eventually had to leave, as the beams over her head whined and threatened to buckle.

When she got back in the hallway, she made her way toward the stairs, still shooting water everywhere around herself, attempting to contain a bit of the fire. All the rooms were empty, Jaxx and Galtion carrying the last of their unconscious teammates outside.

As the three of them rushed out, the ground level on fire as well, if somewhat less affected, they darted out the door. Seeing a few of her allies up and about, she ran to them.

Meat-Shield still looked frazzled, as he had just connected, finding himself outside a burning building, on the ground, not where he remembered disconnecting.

Peaceful Grove was helping Jeanne with healing the few Natives that had burn marks on them, with some weak nature magic. She also had a look of confusion in her eyes as she healed the people, wondering what had caused this.

It was a strange experience, to wake up lying down in the gravel, when you remembered going to sleep on a bed, with a roof over your head. Especially when said roof was now burning up in a massive inferno.

Violette tallied the allies she could see. Almost everyone was accounted for, with Twinxie and Food Goblin still unconscious on the ground, where Jaxx and Galtion had just dropped them, while SharpTusk was barely waking up, sitting on the street.

Counting herself, though, she came up two short.

Astaroth and Phoenix.

"Has anyone seen Astaroth and Phoenix?!" she asked in panic.

Jaxx turned to her before looking around. But his search was fruitless.

Galtion looked at her.

"You were the one that went toward their rooms. Weren't they in there?" he asked, confused.

"No. Their room was empty, aside from the body of a Native, with his throat slit."

As she said that, she immediately regretted it. The Natives surrounding them suddenly started looking at the Abnormals with murderous looks or fear-filled glances.

She could see they took her words as confirmation that they had done this, even if they had no proof.

"It's them! Their friends set the inn on fire! She just admitted it!" a man screamed, pointing at Violette accusingly.

Violette raised both hands in front of herself, trying to reason with him.

"Mister. I swear our friends are not to blame for this. We woke up in the blaze, just like you. We even saved some of you."

The man was having none of it.

"That means nothing!" he shrieked.

"That just means your friends tried killing you, as well!" another chimed in.

The situation was quickly turning bad, as some Natives were picking up stones and sticks from the ground.

But one of them stepped between the separating groups.

"Who are you to judge if they are the culprits?! You are no lawman! Stand down!" the old lady chided.

This was the proprietor of the inn. She was unconvinced this was the work of the foreigners.

She had always considered herself to have a good eye for judging people, and this motley group gave her nothing but good vibes, aside from their obvious wariness.

"Step aside, you old crone! You should be pissed at them as much as us, if not more! This is your inn that they burned down!"

But the old woman shook her head, raising her arms in a T pose.

"We do not judge a situation with a lawman around here, and you know this! You'll have to step over me!"

Her words caused a few of the angered Natives to falter. This old woman had a reputation as being someone you didn't want to mess with.

Never in the fifty years that she had opened her inn had anyone dared try to harm her. Especially so in the last twenty, after the war.

But some men looked even more angered at her act of defending the foreigners.

One lifted the stick in his hands, ready to strike her down. But when he tried swinging, the stick remained unmoving.

Turning his head, he saw an armoured man holding it in one hand, giving him a death glare.

"Haven't enough people been harmed tonight? Stand down, or be struck down."

As he said that, a group of twenty guards rushed in from the side streets, rounding up everyone with their hands on their weapons. These were the city guards, coming to investigate what was happening.

Chapter 585 Reconnecting In A Strange Place

Alexander and Kary landed on the balcony not long after departing from the private hospital on the northern shores of Montreal. He had flown as fast as he could, occasionally boosting himself with a bit of wind magic.

Using wind steps was still out of reach for his current level of mana, but he could form a small wind shield in front of himself, in a convex oval, to glide the wind currents away, thus reducing the resistance. Sadly, he wasn't capable enough to form a full bubble and was still a victim of drag forces.

Reaching his house, Alex trough open the balcony door, which he never locked, given how high up they were. Now that he thought about it, he guessed installing a lock on the patio door wouldn't be a loss, since he doubted he was the only one who would be flight-enabled in the future.

But he didn't have time to think more about this. His phone had kept buzzing with notifications, regularly, ever since the first one. They were in a hurry to log back in.

With him and Kary running up the stairs, Alex morphed back to normal, feeling the exhaustion already gnawing at his mind.

They both jumped into their open pods, hastily closing the tops.

"Log in!" both of them barked simultaneously.

Their bodies slumped back into the soft gel as an array of colours zoomed past them before being met with darkness.

Astaroth knew they were back inside New Eden, just by the thickness of the surrounding mana, but his eyes were covered, and he couldn't see.

"Well, look at that. The lovely couple is waking up! Hah!"

Following the words, which came from a familiar voice, Astaroth felt a sharp pain in his left side as something lacerated his skin.

"Mmh! What the hell is going on here?" he asked, after growling away the pain.

Something suddenly tugged away the fabric that covered his eyes, revealing the face of the guard that had threatened him at the gates. To his right, Kary lay on the ground, hands and feet bound, with nary any clothes left on her body.

Around her hovered three other Elves, with eagerness in their eyes.

Astaroth immediately felt his blood freeze. His gaze turned icy as he stared back at the Elven guard.

The red colour of his pupils was a strong giveaway to the corruption affecting his mind. But Astaroth could no longer care what the reasons for their actions were.

He heard Phoenix mumble through the cloth tied around her head and into her mouth.

"Yes. Yes! That's the look I want to see. Haha! Hahahaha! I knew you Ash Elves were all savages. I'll force you to show your true colours. Looks like pain isn't working. But maybe I'm inflicting it on the wrong person!"

The Elf had a look of madness in his eyes as he spat those words in Astaroth's face. As he finished his phrase, he turned his head toward Phoenix, a sick smile on his lips.

"If you lay your hands on her, I will murder you and all your friends."

Astaroth's voice trembled ever so slightly, seething with rage. But it only instigated the Elf further.

"Yes! Curse me! Get angry! Break free and kill! Show me what your race is truly about!" the Elf shouted, stepping toward Phoenix, staring at Astaroth as he did.

"Once everyone sees what you are like, they will side with me, and we can get revenge on your disgusting kind. I can finally avenge my brother's death!"

But the aggressors seemed to misjudge the situation. They wanted Astaroth to get angry, to lash out.

But they forgot the other person in the room.

Phoenix finally understood the situation they were in and wasn't letting them have it their way. She may be naked and unarmed, but that mattered little to her.

Her hair suddenly fluttered upward violently, catching fire. Her body followed suit, as the rope binding her burned to ash, as did the fabric over her eyes and in her mouth.

The Elves watched in confusion as the Human woman they thought barely was a threat, suddenly blazed into a menacing pyre, her skin itself turning to flames, her face losing most of its features.

Only two flickers of bright blue remained where her eyes had been. But her voice resonated inside the small, dark room.

"You should have killed us, instead of capturing us. I won't be as lenient."

The voice suddenly ringing in their heads caused them to tremble in fear, before their eyes flashed a bright red, and they lost themselves.

All four Elves started cackling crazily, their bodies contorting and snapping in unnatural positions. Astaroth knew at that moment, they were gone.

Phoenix did not give them time to do anything else than cackle, as her arms opened up, and a torrent of flames washed over the room, carefully avoiding Astaroth, but sweeping the rest of it with cleansing fire. Seconds later, the flames died down, revealing an empty room, charred black.

Nothing remained of the four guards, aside from their metal armour and weapons, now melted slag on the floor, slowly sizzling through the wooden planks.

Astaroth got to his feet, snapping the ropes that bound him.

He looked at Phoenix, who was now back to her naked Human form, rustling through the ashes. She pulled out a set of robes from a pile of cinders and smiled.

Turning to Astaroth, she snickered.

"Flameproof fabric. The rest of my equipment I had already stowed in my inventory before going to bed."

Astaroth was still incredibly angered and only forced himself to smile in response.

"I guess now we know what this stage is about. How about we join back with the others and clear this stupid floor?"

Phoenix nodded, before adding, "It's not a great thing to be playing again during the day, but I get a feeling we don't have a choice."

Astaroth looked around himself, locating the door. He kicked it open, half expecting there to be more people guarding outside, but found no one.

They seemed to be in a remote part of the small city that surrounded the large tree. And in the distance, he could see a pillar of smoke, with an orange hue under it.

"Let's go," he said, taking off running toward the smoke.

Phoenix re-equipped her robes and gear before launching behind him.

Chapter 586 Unordinary Old Lady

The pair of them made a quick beeline across the small city, dashing through the cramped streets.

Astaroth could hear screaming coming from some houses. He could guess what was happening.

"We are in the middle of the corruption spread. We need to get to the others faster. I doubt it's a localized phenomenon."

Phoenix agreed, and they sped up a bit, jumping up to the rooftops, where they could run in a straight line toward the inn they had been sleeping at. Arriving there, they saw the guards stepping just in time for the old innkeeper to not get her head bashed in.

Jumping back to the ground, Astaroth darted toward his allies, Phoenix following closely behind.

The guards tried stopping them, as they hardly recognized the duo rushing at them, but Astaroth plowed through them. He couldn't care less how the guards thought of him right now.

The same captain from earlier saw him and pulled out his scimitar.

"Here I am, trying to defend your allies. And you come barging through my guards like some savage. Where were you, Ash Elf?"

The captain eyed Astaroth with wariness and rage, unsure of what was happening.

But Astaroth replied to his stare with a sneer.

"You'll have to excuse my lack of care for your men, sir. I was just attacked and kidnapped by four of them, as was my companion. I care little about what happens to your men, as of five minutes ago."

The Captain frowned at the accusation.

"What proof do you have of your slander towards the proud city guard?"

Astaroth opened his mouth to reply, but Phoenix put her hand on his arm.

She then stepped forward two steps.

"I would show you their bodies, as well as the weapons they cut my companion with, but unfortunately, I turn them to ashes, and their weapons to molten metal. All we have are the wounds that are already healing on my companion's body."

The Captain's eyes narrowed.

"Are you admitting to killing guards?"

"Why, I most certainly am, sir. In self-defence, of course."

The Captain of the guards stepped forward, but as he did, the man with the wooden stick suddenly shouted in a guttural fashion, his eyes going entirely red, as he dashed toward the old lady again.

The Captain wasn't quick enough to catch him and reached the old woman in an instant. But he suddenly froze there.

Astaroth saw a blur at the old woman's side and quickly understood what had happened, when the man started crumpling to the ground, his head rolling away from his body.

'That was much too fast, for an old lady,' he thought, raising an eyebrow.

The Captain looked at the old woman, exhaling.

"I'm sorry, General Isarrel. I wasn't fast enough to keep him from attacking you."

The old lady sneered at him.

"Don't call me that. I gave up my rank after the war. I wanted to leave the killing behind. But it seems it isn't over yet. He isn't the only one affected," the old woman said, pointing behind the captain.

Following her finger, the captain and Astaroth saw two other bystanders suddenly twitching uncontrollably, their eyes turning bright red.

"What in the hells?" the Captain exclaimed, turning his scimitar towards them.

"Men! Capture them!" he shouted.

But something blurred past him, and the two civilians dropped, their heads missing.

Astaroth looked at them drop to the ground, his hand raised and pointed at them, a slick metal glove over his hand, fingers shaping a gun.

"They were corrupted. There is nothing left to do but kill them. Don't waste your energy trying to capture them."

His coldness made Phoenix shiver a bit.

She needed to force him to calm down, before he lost his cool and went on a rampage.

Violette had told her of the one time this had happened. The image she had portrayed with her words was not a pleasant one.

"Astaroth, you need to calm down. I'm okay. Nothing happened. Breathe."

But Astaroth practically ignored her. Even the other members of the party were seeing a side of him they had never seen or heard of.

The captain of the guard looked at him and could feel his rage silently boiling under his icy glare.

"Look, outsider. I don't care what your allegations are. This is my city, and you can't just kill anyone you want, simply under the pretext of this 'Corruption' you talk of. I will have to arrest you."

The guards turned their weapons back toward Astaroth and his group.

But then, one of them started cracking and popping, his body contorting into weird positions, his eyes going red.

"Your kind killed my father! You must die!" the guard screamed, his eyes now bright red.

But before he even took a step forward, Astaroth cut his head clean off his shoulders, the Ad Astra now in sword form.

The guard captain was now thoroughly confused.

"I'm telling you. The corruption is spreading. While we waste time arguing here, more and more people will be affected. And once they are tainted, there is no going back. Death will be their only respite. You should be finding the source of it and fixing it. Instead, you try to play good soldier here, and waste all of our time."

The old lady was currently trailing Astaroth's every movement with her eyes. His weapon was particularly attracting her gaze.

"Do as he says, Captain. He may be an outsider and a violent client, but I think he is right. I can sense something wrong with the bodies he just felled. Something demonic."

The old woman walked toward Astaroth as she said those words, staring at his weapon.

The guard captain growled under his breath but obeyed the order. Even if the woman said she had renounced her rank, she was still officially recognized by the military as one of the great generals of the Elven Kingdom.

"Alright, men! You heard the General. Spread out. Anyone with red eyes goes down."

"Yes, sir!" the men shouted in unison.

They spread out in every direction, the captain staying behind, still untrusting of the foreigners in their city. He watched as the General stopped before the young man who had killed already three people before his eyes.

Astaroth glanced at the old lady.

She glanced at the weapon, then at him.

"I know who you are. I know why you're here. Follow me," she said, before turning toward the tree in the middle of the city, and walking away.

Astaroth motioned everyone to follow him and walked behind the old woman. Whatever she had to say, he was now curious to hear.

Chapter 587 Dark Interior

Following her away from the blazing in that was once hers, Astaroth watched the old woman's figure closely. He half expected her to suddenly turn and strike him, but it never came to pass.

The closer they got to the central tree, the more restless he and his party members became. Especially since they were still two members short.

Astaroth's anger had receded a bit to the back of his mind. He was still angry, but the rage had passed.

"Excuse me, madam Isarrel. But where are you bringing me?" Astaroth asked.

He wasn't against being guided directly to the center of the city, but he felt like his time could be better spent right now. With the corruption rapidly spreading through town, he could put his blade to use.

The old woman turned her head to him a bit, her stride forward unabating.

"That artifact you wield. I recognize it. I was tasked with bringing it to the king in a not-so-distant past."

Astaroth halted his steps, his face hardening.

"I will not hand it over. Whatever you want with it, it will be over my dead body."

The old woman turned her head back forward with a snort.

"Hah! If I still wanted it, I would have taken it from your still-hot corpse already, child. You are a century too young to be a threat to the likes of me. No. That is not what I meant by this."

Astaroth's eyes squinted at her words. He wanted to scan her, to see where she got her confidence, but had a feeling it was a terrible idea to do so.

Luckily for him, someone in his party wasn't as concerned about that.

Jaxx, a few steps behind him, suddenly gasped, grinding to a stop. His face was pale, and his mouth agape.

"Le-le-le-Legendary grade!" he stuttered, shaking in fear a bit.

Jaxx had seen only her grade and level, before averting his prying gaze, as the woman was already glaring at him. She had stopped walking and turned to face the party of Abnormals.

"I don't appreciate people poking their nose into my status, young runt. Your muscles may be large, but it seems your head is devoid of the respect you owe your elders."

Astaroth raised his hand.

"I apologize on my ally's behalf. We are not from around here, and most of us lack knowledge about these things. But I would like to know why someone of your... stature... is interested in the artifact and not taking it."

Worry still covered Astaroth's face. He was waiting for the shoe to drop.

But the old woman only glared a bit more at Jaxx, before spinning on her heels and resuming her walk.

"There is someone who will want to meet you. He is in there," she said, pointing at the tree.

Curiosity overwhelmed Astaroth's wariness, just long enough for him to start walking forward again. He was still keeping a healthy distance between him and the old woman, but he wanted to see where this led.

They crossed paths with a few corrupted citizens on their way to the tree, but nothing that could slow them down. The ex-General, Isarrel, cut them down, with ruthless efficiency, whenever they came near her.

It didn't seem to bother her that these were her brethren. Her face remained stoic, with not a drop of blood ever reaching her figure.

Astaroth did the same to any stray corrupted Elves that rushed toward him and the party. He barely let them have any time to react, and the enemies dropped dead.

Their grades might have gone up, and their levels as well, but the Elves were impressively weak, for a level fifty-five dungeon. Something didn't add up.

'Where is the real threat? Why are there only weak enemies on this floor?' Astaroth wondered, his eyes peeled for any sign of danger.

Once they reached the tree, amidst the now orange-lit city, with fires breaking out in every corner of it, the old woman stopped and pivoted toward them.

"My part stops here. The lord will want to see you. Step inside, he'll guide you to him."

As she said that, the large door adorning the tree, which would eventually become their palace, groaned open, making the ground shake slightly under its movement and weight.

Once the opening reached five feet wide, it stopped. The scarcely lit interior, with reflections of flames on what seemed like vases and shiny statues of marble, made the scene eerie.

But Astaroth heard a whisper in his ear that sounded tired.

"Come. Climb the steps. Reach the bough. Help."

It said the last word with a sense of urgency that Astaroth felt it echo inside his head.

"Let's go," he commanded, as he entered the darkened tree's interior.

As his group followed him inside, the door shut behind them, leaving them in complete darkness.

Phoenix lit up a small fireball that she used to light their path, as did Astaroth. Soon after they entered, Twinxie suddenly jolted up from SharpTusk's back, falling to the ground.

"What's happening?! I got a notification we were under attack! Where is the enemy?!"

She jumped to her feet, hands raised, ready to enter combat, only to notice the dark room they were in, with only two flickering flames as light sources. Next to her, her allies were looking at her with smiles and chuckles.

Before they could explain the situation to her, the gnome of the party, Food Goblin, also jolted up from Galtion's grasp. He pulled out his kitchen knife and frying pan, swinging them around, shouting.

"Aarrgghh!!! Come at me, you damned monsters!"

Clang!

A loud clanging of metal on metal echoed in the small enclosed room, as the frying pan collided with Galtion's armoured leg.

"Argh! You little fuck! That hurts!" Galtion started cursing, jumping on his other leg, and holding his tibia.

Food Goblin spun on himself, looking for enemies, his breath rapid, before calming down.

"What the fuck happened? Why aren't we in the inn anymore?" he asked, putting away his arsenal.

SharpTusk opened his mouth to give them both an abridged version of the last half hour, but Astaroth interrupted him.

"We can talk while we walk. Follow me," he commanded.

Phoenix was curious why he suddenly looked in a hurry. But she didn't want to voice it and instead wrote to him in private.

'What's wrong?'

'We are being watched. And whoever wants to talk to us seems to need our help. Time is of the essence.'

Phoenix nodded covertly, understanding his reasoning. But she still wondered how he knew this.

Astaroth didn't tell them he had heard someone whisper in his ear. And no one else but him heard it, either.

But they followed his lead, and started climbing the staircase, once they found it, while Tusk resumed his explaining to Twinxie and Food Goblin.

Their climb would take a long time, after all.

Chapter 588 Taking Action

It took the party around fifteen minutes to reach the top of what seemed like a never-ending large spiral staircase. The surrounding darkness, only lightly pushed back by the two flickering balls of fire floating above them, did a number on their nerves, as the shadows seemed to move on the walls and floors.

Halfway up the staircase, the group had fallen nervously silent, their minds playing tricks on them as they walked up toward god knew what.

Astaroth had kept mum about the voice he had heard, still unsure if he could trust it or not.

Ever since they had started climbing the stairs, he had heard it another two times, the messages always the same. The voice seemed to get weaker, even though he knew he was getting closer to the source of them.

He could have rushed ahead, leaving the rest of the group to catch up, but something inside him tugged at his mind, telling him not to go alone. Whether it was instinct, reacting to a looming threat, or paranoia, keeping him from reacting quickly, he couldn't tell.

When they finally scaled the last step, they arrived in a wide open room, very similar to what Nemus had made domicile in, in the Ash Elf mage tower. But the decor was vastly different.

Instead of the barren room, with only a raised dais at the end, this one looked more like a study.

Although vastly larger, and with much larger libraries at the sides, as well as desks here and there, with various tools or open books laid overtop them, the room resembled Aberon's little abode, in the village he had started his adventure in.

But in the center, Astaroth saw something he would remember for a long time.

A slender elf, wearing purple robes, his silver hair flowing uncontrollably under some kind of mystical wind, his skin as white as the moon, with both arms raised in opposite directions.

On one side, to his left, he was channelling an immense amount of mana into a large golden shield over the room's open ceiling, on which six dragons were occasionally scraping their claws and spitting gouts of elemental magic.

On his other side, to the right, he was sending whatever mana he could spare into a large red portal, across which Astaroth could see thousands of demons pushing against the film of mana, blocking their exit.

Beads of sweat were rolling off the sunken cheeks of the Elf, who looked at his wit's end.

Astaroth burst into action, his brain finally connecting the dots.

He rushed to the portal first, trying to glimpse at the levels of the demons on the other side. Thanking the gods, Astaroth scanned a few demons and got the same stats all around.

Imp Infantry

Level: 30

Grade: Special

Health: 24,700

Mana: 1,000

**

Everywhere he looked, all the imps had the same stats. This made them much less of a threat, given their small health pool than larger demons.

But still, twenty-four thousand HP was no joke. Given the numbers in which they came, he understood why the mage was trying to hold the portal sealed.

But something was still seeping out of the thin film, covering the entrance and sinking into the tree below the portal. Miasma.

Astaroth now understood how the citizens below were affected, and what to do.

The Elf finally realized he wasn't alone in the room, an Ash Elf suddenly staring inside the portal.

"Get away from there!" he weakly shouted.

Astaroth looked at him.

"We are here to help. Let us help. What can we do for you?"

The man would have laughed at the proposal if he had the strength to do so.

An Ash Elf? Proposing to save Elven lives?

"Don't mock me, Ash Elf. I was there when your leaders rebelled against our people. I know your kind would love to see us fall to the demons."

Astaroth walked up to the man, slapping his face lightly.

Slap

"Get your head out of your ass, you pointy-eared prick! I'm not here to watch people die. I'm here to help save them. Let us help you!"

Astaroth waved his hand at the party following him, who were looking at the portal in dread, and then the dome of golden energy keeping six fucking dragons at bay.

The situation was dire.

The Elf looked at them and noticed an Elf and a Fey in the party, two races which he never expected the Ash Elves to ally with. He wanted to believe the Ash Elf before him.

But he knew of the bad blood between their races.

"Fine. You don't want to believe me? That's on you. I'll do my thing, then."

Astaroth felt the mana streams weakening on the mage and knew he had no time to dawdle. Actions needed to be taken, and they needed to be taken now.

He walked back to the portal before pulling out the Ad Astra.

The Elven mage saw the weapon and his eyes widened.

'What is the chosen of their goddess doing here, so far in our territory?'

But Astaroth did something that caught the man off guard.

Transforming the weapon into two small daggers, he stabbed them into the barrier, coating the portal.

"Stop! You will break the barrier and let them run rampant!" he shouted.

But Astaroth was no longer interested in his words.

"Phoenix! Once I'm in there, guard the portal with whatever means you can! Let not a single demon out!" he shouted out, over the buzzing of his daggers severing the mana links of the barrier.

And with a strong yank in opposite directions, Astaroth pulled the daggers apart, ripping the spell in half. The barrier fizzled out, disappearing immediately.

The noise from across it suddenly entered the room. The high-pitched screech of thousands of Imps, ready to unleash chaos onto the material realm, washed into the room.

Some of Astaroth's allies covered their ears, the noise hurting their heads.

But Astaroth was already gone.

The moment the barrier disappeared, he dashed through the open hole between dimensions and got to work. Already, some of the screeching was switching from victorious chitter to painful wailing.

In hell, all hell broke loose.

Chapter 589 Making Do

Phoenix jumped in front of the portal, unleashing a barrage of flames. In an instant, the portal turned into a large circle of fire, looking straight like an entrance to the deepest reaches of hell.

The mage looked at the situation, dumbfounded.

He somehow now understood the Ash Elf wasn't lying. But his actions were all but conventional.

After all, who would willingly throw themselves into the jaws of hell? That was like signing your own death warrant.

"Your friend will die in there. Why is he sacrificing himself for the Elves?"

Phoenix glanced at him.

"You are wrong."

The mage frowned.

"On what? Do you think he has a chance in hell? Few men traverse into that plane and live to tell the tale."

Phoenix chortled.

"You underestimate him. But that is not what I meant. I'm more worried about the demons' well-being than his. I meant you are wrong about his reasons. Astaroth isn't sacrificing himself for Elves. He is taking a risk for people. Be it your people, or his. That is how he is. Now tell us how we can help you with those dragons."

As she said that, two dragons bathed the shield he was holding in flames and thunder, making the shield flicker in strain.

The mage hurriedly brought his second arm up, channelling more mana into it.

"What can you even do to help me? These are dragons. Six of them. If I could defeat them, they would already be dead. And you are whelps," the mage scoffed.

Phoenix furrowed her brows.

What was the point of trying to help a man who didn't believe they could help him? She was half-tempted to call back Astaroth from the demons' plane, and let the Elf perish along with his arrogance.

"What is wrong with them? Why are they all gathered here, attacking this place?" she asked, trying to get a better grasp of the situation.

"These dragons are my familiars. Normally, they aren't trying to attack me. I don't know what is wrong with them."

Diverting a bit of her attention, Phoenix scanned one of them.

Red Dragon Fledgling (Corrupted)

Level: 60

Grade: Rare

Health: 298,200

Mana: 9,730

**

She doubted this mage, whatever his level was, couldn't handle them. Which brought her to wonder why he hadn't struck them down yet.

"These dragons are not that strong. Why haven't you gotten rid of them yet?"

The Elven mage looked at her with an irate face.

"I can't kill them because they are tied to my soul. I would hurt myself by taking them down. Do you think I'm stupid, Human girl?"

Phoenix clicked her tongue.

Tsk

"Rude! The first part would have been enough. Fine then. What else could we do?"

In the meantime, the rest of the party was sitting idle, wondering what they could do as well. They wanted to dive inside the portal with Astaroth since they couldn't do anything here.

But they were waiting for their orders.

Jaxx was fidgeting in place uncomfortably, itching to fight, as was SharpTusk.

Even Galtion was nervously squeezing his spear shaft.

But the mage's face suddenly brightened.

"I have an idea. You seem like you like to take risks if you follow such a madman. I may have a way to fix this problem, but I will need your help."

Phoenix looked at him expectantly.

"I can feel the dragon's resisting the corruption. But they are losing. I can send one of you to each dragon's mind space to help them. But I will need specific affinities for each of them."

Phoenix thought about it for a moment. This didn't sound too bad of a plan. But she felt like there was a catch.

"What are the affinities you need?" she asked, keeping a realistic outlook.

The mage nodded his head.

"I need your fastest person, your strongest person physically, your most resistant to attacks, your most powerful mage, your most wise healer, and finally, your most balanced ally in all those categories."

Phoenix could easily figure out who she would dispatch to each category. But there was a problem.

Their most balanced player was stuck in the hell plane.

Violette could see the conundrum she was going through with her facial expressions.

"I have an idea, Phoenix," she said, taking a step toward her.

Phoenix looked at her, waiting for her to talk.

"Dispatch the players and get Astaroth to go into the last dragon. You can take the one of magic. Whoever you leave here can deal with the demons from the portal."

Phoenix thought about it for a moment. She could agree to her plan, but there was still a nagging feeling in her mind that they were missing some information.

But there was no time to lose. The barrier protecting them from the dragon attacks was visibly dimming.

It wouldn't hold much longer.

"Fine. Let's do it this way," Phoenix said, making up her mind.

She called back Astaroth, who agreed to the plan she explained, even though it left the demon plane in a delicate state if he left. He wondered who would keep the imps at bay, but he trusted Phoenix and Violette.

Dashing out of the fire Phoenix was keeping in place, he landed back inside the room, his armour covered in gore and viscera.

"Violette, take charge of covering the portal, for now."

Violette nodded her head and waved her hands at it. A wave of water appeared out of thin air, washing away the flames, before solidifying into ice.

The imps, now left alone, started pushing back toward the portal. In no time flat, they reached for the ice sheet and started hacking away at it with their claws.

But Phoenix was already picking out the people to tackle the dragons.

"Meat-Shield, Jeanne, Galtion, Astaroth, SharpTusk and Myself will deal with the dragons. Grove, Twinxie, Violette, Food Goblin, Chronos, and Jaxx, you deal with the portal and whatever other problem crops up," she commanded.

She then locked her gaze on Jaxx.

"You want to prove your strength, now is the time. Try to fill Astaroth's shoes for just a few minutes."

Jaxx gulped audibly. The pressure pushed on his shoulders heavily, and his back arched down a bit.

But his sister slapped his shoulder as she walked toward the Elven Mage.

"Come on, brother. Straighten up. You can finally prove you are strong, to all the people that matter."

Her words weren't much of an encouragement, but were more than enough to light a fire under Jaxx's ass. His eyes flashed with resolve, and his back straightened.

"I will not disappoint you, vice-leader Phoenix!" he cried out, slamming his axes together.

"Good," Phoenix replied, turning her back on him.

"Now, on to our task..." she mumbled to herself.

Chapter 590 Inside The Demon Portal

The Elven mage, seeing they were getting ready to follow his instructions, beckoned them closer.

"All of you need to lay one hand on me for this to work. You will feel a discomfort, as I reach into your minds to tether them. This is a necessary step. Please don't resist it. Once I'm done tethering all of you, you will feel vertigo, as I pull your minds into mine and theirs."

Astaroth was familiar with this process. He had gone through something similar when he helped Kloud get rid of his possessing demon.

As everyone lay their hands on the Elf, Astaroth stared at him a while, before doing the same. He whispered as he got closer, just loud enough for only the mage to hear.

"If you try anything funny, I will tear your soul apart and feed it to my demons."

But the mage barely had time to react, as he was already channelling his spell.

His eyes widened at the threat before they went white.

As they did, the barrier covering the ceiling vanished. Violette looked up in horror.

But the next moment, the six dragons that had been circling the sky over the room all froze before plummeting to the ground.

Violette heard six dull thumps from far away and knew they were temporarily out of commission. But there was still the issue of the portal.

The Imps had piled up on the thick layer of ice blocking their way, carving into it with abandon. Violette had to drop her spell if she wanted them to deal with it.

But with how things stood, if she dropped the spell, the imps would tumble into the room, becoming a big problem instantly.

She worked her mind overtime, trying to find a solution. But Peaceful Grove tapped her shoulder.

"I think I know what's troubling you. I have a solution."

Violette smiled at her.

"Please. Anything that works, I'll take."

"I can conjure a storm with high winds. With enough time to concentrate, I could bring the winds from the storm into the room and push them against the portal. This would push the monsters back."

"How much time do you need?" Violette asked, excited to see this.

Grove smiled at the little girl's visible excitement.

"About a minute? Can you hold the barrier for that long?"

Violette smirked.

"A minute? I can hold this barrier forever. I think."

She focused on the ice block she was holding up, and it suddenly thickened by a foot, pushing into the portal, and by default pushing the imps back with it.

Seeing this, Peaceful Grove knew she could concentrate on her spell safely.

Raising her eyes to the sky, they crackled with blue arcs of lightning. The black sky, which was dotted with stars, suddenly covered up.

Dark clouds formed over the city, thick with apparent rain, and crackling with lightning. Rain started drizzling on other parts of the city, quickly becoming a torrential pour.

The winds picked up speed, making even the giant tree they were in sway. A small sense of unease washed over the other players, as the floor they were on swayed, like standing on a boat in troubled waters.

Chronos leaned over on a desk near him, having no sea legs whatsoever. His stomach turned a bit, as he became queasy.

The branches over their head, which were still visible through the open ceiling, swayed madly. Strangely, no rain fell in the room.

An enchantment on the ceiling made it so it streaked away from the opening as it fell, leaving the open room completely dry. It made for a strange feeling, as the wind still conveyed itself in the room, the papers everywhere starting to flutter.

Book pages rustled, papers flew, and hair was made a mess.

For a straight minute, the storm picked up, becoming almost a cyclone, as the city was assaulted by the strongest winds and rain it had ever experienced. Until Grove lowered her chin, eyes still crackling with lightning, and she nodded her head once.

With a swirl of her hands over her head, followed by a second, and a third, her allies saw the wind funnel, suddenly worried they would be part of a tornado touching ground. But before forming a complete funnel, Grove opened her arms, pointing at the portal.

"Now!" she shouted.

The wind whistled into the room, deafening for the people in it. Violette dropped her spell and hurriedly grabbed onto a piece of furniture. During this phenomenon, the group of seven individuals in the center of the room were unmoved, like some sort of mystical protection saved them from the shearing winds.

But the rest of the room wasn't so lucky.

Jaxx, feeling the push of the winds getting stronger, and seeing Twinxie, whose compact form was already struggling to remain on her feet, suddenly lift from the ground, and reacted without thinking.

He jumped forward, grabbing the little girl, wrapping his arms around her, covering most of her form as they flew into the portal. The surrounding temperature changed as he passed through the portal, and he knew danger was imminent.

Twinxie, who was swept off her feet, suddenly felt something slam into her, as two massive arms cradled her. And immediately after, as the surroundings became unbearably hotter, the arms started thickening and rippling in strength.

They tumbled onto the red sand-like ground of the demon plane, Jaxx taking damage to cover her petite body. But his legacy cancelled the brunt of it, making him shrug off the rest like it was nothing.

But they had to react, and fast.

Jumping to his feet, he released Twinxie, stepping before her, as he glanced around.

And what he saw was worrying.

Hundreds upon hundreds of red-skinned, small-horned demons, all looking at them like they were food. Their strident cackling was grating to the ears as they slowly loomed closer.

"Stay behind me, Twinxie. Get to the portal, if you can," Jaxx said, feeling their chances were slim to survive if they stayed there.

But he wouldn't let her die. Not after he promised he would rise to Phoenix's challenge.

But Twinxie huffed.

"To hell with this. These little things don't scare me. And their dirty world messed up my robes!" she fumed.

"Pulvi, rise! Show them what the meaning of stuck between a rock and a hard place means!" she shrieked, completely raging.

Jaxx felt the ground shake under his feet.

"What the fuck?"