

New Eden 121

Chapter 121 1 VS 4

After her speech, which was a little longer this time, chairwoman Constantine wished luck to everyone and disappeared from the sky. The graph once again replaced her.

Blue Peacock had walked over to Astaroth, stopping right in front of him.

"I hope our fight will bring me as much enjoyment as I had with your friend. I will be going at full power from the start. Don't disappoint me," she told him, looking straight into his eyes.

"I will do my best to entertain you as best I can. That is, before I vanquish you," Astaroth replied, giving his most innocent smile.

Blue smirked at the comment, but said nothing. As she walked away, a smile crept on her face, and her blood began boiling in excitement.

She had, of course, watched all of Astaroth's combats, and knew he was a worthy foe. She could not contain her anticipation, as her mind was already playing different scenarios and strategies.

Their turn came soon after, as they teleported into the arena. Blue pulled out her Kamas, twirling them in anticipation. Astaroth also pulled out two weapons, taking out his longsword in his dominant hand and his shortsword in the other.

It was his first time using this combination, but he needed the extra range against her. He knew she could throw her kamas, since they were tethered to chains, but in melee, he wanted that extra range.

This would allow him to attack without worry, as long as he could close the gap between them. Which he wasn't too worried about, since she seemed eager to lunge at him.

Gong!

Both players lunged at each other, Astaroth crossing the blades in front of him, and Blue Peacock throwing one kama as she spun the other.

Astaroth deflected the flying kama with his short sword, before twisting his body to give momentum to his longsword's slash. Blue had been expecting the hit and ducked under it, slashing at Astaroth's ribs.

A shortsword met her weapon as both players crossed each other. Astaroth was using his shortsword defensively, trying to maximize the lighter weapon's speed to block and deflect attacks.

When both Blue and Astaroth spun around, the former shouted "Phantasmal Propagation", while the latter started growing fur and his hair turned white.

The four copies of the Fey woman threw their right kama simultaneously, and Astaroth waited for the impact to know which one was real. But his eyes went wide after the hit.

All four of them dealt damage!

This threw his plan out the window, since now he couldn't know which one was real. He started thinking of another way to differentiate them, as all four copies lunged at him, pulling their chained kamas back.

They met Astaroth with an onslaught of attacks, as his two swords slashed in a flurry, doing his best to block all the attacks. It was a fruitless endeavour, since two weapons couldn't block eight.

Even though he managed to deflect five of them on each exchange, he was still taking steady damage. Thankfully, his passive regeneration was keeping him from going into a dangerous slope.

But only barely.

He had to think of something, and quickly.

He stared at each copy, trying to discern if they had anything different. Something from which he could find the original.

After a minute of painful exchanges for Astaroth, he finally noticed something.

All four of them were shimmering.

'This! This is mana!' he thought.

He at first had thought this was a skill, but now he knew. This was a spell!

That meant he could find the real one easily!

He waited for the next clash, and when the copies backed away, he closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them, he was seeing the world differently.

In his eyes were all the particles of mana, floating around peacefully. And then his gaze set on each of the women, one after the other, until he finally saw what he wanted.

Three of the copies were glowing, while one of them was only shimmering around her silhouette.

'Found you!' he thought, a smile creeping on his lips.

Blue and her copies once again lunged at him for another clash, but something was different.

Astaroth stood still, weapons at his side, staring directly at her.

'He can't have found out that fast, can he?' Blue questioned, in her mind.

But it soon became crystal clear. Astaroth did not even bother blocking the attacks, as eight kamas embed into his skin.

But he wasn't just taking the attacks for fun. Now that Blue was right in front of him, it was his turn.

He rapidly lifted his leg, sending his foot into the real Blue's sternum. The blow emptied her lungs and sent her flying away.

She smacked into the wall, taking heavy damage. But that wasn't all that happened.

Since Blue needed to consciously control her clones, all three of them just stood there, as she was blown away. And Astaroth used that moment of stillness to fix his problem.

With rapid successive slashes, he tore all three clones to pieces, before Blue could control them to back away. She was back to being in one versus one.

Her health was down to half, and Astaroth's health was slowly going back up. This was bad!

'It had to be luck!' she thought, getting back on her feet.

She set her mind on her next course of action.

'I didn't want to use this skill yet, but it seems I lack a choice,' she said internally.

She closed her eyes momentarily as she whispered.

'Dream Dance.'

Astaroth, who still had his perfect mana sense active, saw a pulse of mana rush off his opponent. The next thing that happened almost had his jaw drop to the ground.

'This would have defeated anyone,' He surmised.

The arena's mana all started fluttering, answering a silent call. One that Blue had made.

Copies of her started popping left and right until there were a dozen of them.

'This would be bad, if I didn't have perfect mana sense,' he thought.

He kept his face from showing emotion, not wanting to throw off the illusion that he was being bested.

'What a dangerous woman,' he said internally, amazed at her control of illusions.

Chapter 122 New Friends And Shady Deals

The copies she made this time were different in his eyes. The perfect mana sense made him see solid blocks of mana earlier, but this time, they were like silhouettes of fog.

He guessed they also couldn't deal damage to him, because then that would be incredibly powerful. But he played along with the illusion.

The real Blue Peacock was not moving for now. But the same couldn't be said about her clones.

The clones all started doing weird dance manoeuvres, circling the arena in seemingly no conceivable pattern. They were dancing about, using Blue Peacock's usual dancing style.

It didn't take too long for them to start launching attacks at him, from close and far. Astaroth was swiftly dodging the attacks, focusing only on this.

This gave out the illusion that he was cornered and could only dodge. Which was exactly what he wanted her to think.

'He's good. But he doesn't know what's real and what isn't. So he's dodging all of them,' Blue Peacock thought, as she observed from the distance.

The woman was patiently waiting a few minutes, so that her opponent was mentally exhausting himself. This was a surefire plan, in her mind.

After waiting for three minutes, she started making her move. She danced.

She was dancing, following the random pattern of her dancing style, but slowly making her way amongst the fakes. She made sure not to take a straight path, as that would make her obvious.

She had circled her opponent twice by the time she was in range to strike. She then lunged forward, at the same time as one of her illusions, aiming for Astaroth's neck.

But that's when she noticed something. Astaroth was looking at her from the corner of his eye!

The man was already no longer melded, so his stats were not overpowered, but he was still a powerful player. The other thing she noticed, as she was darting forward, was that Astaroth was no longer wielding swords.

He had swapped out his weapons for a great axe! And it was on a direct course for her throat!

It was too late for her to change her trajectory, and she understood she had been played. Blue swiftly lifted her arms to protect her neck, but it wasn't enough.

Astaroth's great axe cut right through her two arms, sending them flying, before continuing into her throat. The strike didn't behead her, since the amputation effect had already struck, but the damage was still incredible.

Her health bar rapidly zeroed out.

"Well played," she told Astaroth, before exploding into particles.

Astaroth stood there grinning. The illusions vanished at the same time she did, and he was promptly taken back to the stands.

Astaroth heard a system ping as soon as he appeared in the stands.

Ding

You have a message from a player not on your friend list. Do you want to display it?

He tapped the yes icon and read through the message.

All it contained was "How?".

He sent a reply, saying "That is a secret for another time."

He then turned to look across the arena stands and winked at Blue, who was looking at him.

Astaroth saw the woman scoffing, as she was looking downwards, and then she looked at him wink and smiled, before flipping him the bird.

Astaroth laughed it off, sitting back down next to Phoenix and Athena, the former about to disappear. Athena saw the weird interaction and frowned.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it," Astaroth said, chuckling.

'Making friends is not my forte, is it?' He thought, still smiling.

But as he thought that, another ping rang in his ear. It was another message.

Another ping, this time a friend request followed it. From Blue Peacock.

He read the message first. It said, "You better accept it."

He laughed and clicked the accept button on the friend request.

'Never mind,' He thought.

By now, Phoenix had already teleported into the arena. Her fight was against War-Machine, and by the looks of it, the gnome did not want to be there at all.

His mechanical form was shivering as he waited for the gong. And it didn't make him wait long.

Astaroth ignored the fight, since he had a good guess of who would win, and went to talk to Khalor. He had a few questions he wanted to ask, and he hoped he would get some answers.

After walking the few meters that separated them, Astaroth sat next to Khalor. The man was silently looking at the arena, rubbing something between his index and thumb.

It looked like a necklace, shaped like an hourglass.

"What's that? Something precious to you?" Astaroth asked, trying to break the silence.

Khalor snapped out of his thoughts, turning his head slightly. When he saw Astaroth, he put the necklace into his shirt.

"It's nothing, just a trinket. What can I do for you, mister ripple?" Khalor asked, smirking.

"I'm not sure how I feel about you calling me that, but ok," Astaroth replied, frowning slightly.

"Whatever. I have questions for you. And I would like some answers." He then said, looking back at the arena.

Khalor turned his head back there too, before replying.

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know how you know all the things you said to me earlier. I'm not sure if I should believe you yet, and answering that question would go a long way for that," Astaroth said.

Khalor thought for a bit. Not that he didn't want to answer his question, but he didn't know how to, without sounding like a madman.

He finally settled on giving him a hint.

"Would it help you believe me, if I said I will explain all in due time?" he asked.

Astaroth sighed.

"How long is due time? Understand that you are asking me to believe in things that sound so out of this world, and do things according to that. I need to be able to trust you here, so give me something," Astaroth said, turning his head back to Khalor.

It was Khalor's turn to sigh.

"I will make a deal with you, then. Make it to the finals, and I will show you. How about it?" Khalor said, looking Astaroth in the eyes.

He then extended his hand forward towards Astaroth.

Astaroth hesitated for a few seconds, but he eventually shook his hand.

"Deal."

Chapter 123 A Necessary Evil

The fight between Phoenix and War-Machine lasted barely a minute, as the man was terrified shitless when Phoenix started casting her fire tornado. Of course, it was a normal reaction.

No one would react well to being engulfed in swirling flames, with no exit in sight. The feeling of burning alive must also be quite excruciating.

The next one in line was Athena versus Khalor, and the former was sweating buckets. She already knew how that would end, but wanted to at least give her all, maybe land a few hits.

As both of them were being teleported, Astaroth glanced at Khalor.

"Don't forget our deal."

"Same to you. Make it to the finals and you will see," Khalor replied, smirking.

When he reappeared in the arena, Khalor looked across at his adversary. The poor Elven girl was looking at him with a mix of fear and disgust.

"You obviously don't like spooky stuff," Khalor said.

"I'm terrified of zombies," Athena responded, looking at him with apprehension.

"Then I'll do you a favor and not summon them. But don't get me wrong. I am not going easy on you," Khalor said, giving her what was supposed to be a smile.

But his undead form did not lend well to that, and his skeleton face looked even creepier. When the gong resounded, Khalor stayed true to his word, not summoning the zombies.

But he also kept his word of not going easy on Athena, as he summoned his raven, the death knight, and something most had not seen yet, the undead manticore.

Athena gulped at the development. She knew the strength of that specific undead, since she had already fought it, though it was alive at the time.

Khalor smiled at the fear in her eyes. He wasn't particularly evil, but he wanted everyone to know he was true to his word, and that he was powerful.

Athena was no doubt feeling this, right now, facing down three undead beasts that could most likely kill her on their own.

She ran with all her might, making sure never to follow a linear path, lest she makes the same mistake as Azamus, and fired as many arrows as she could toward Khalor.

She shot curving arrows, Piercing Shots, Impact Shots, Multishots, and a multitude of other skills, all hoping to hit Khalor at least once.

But it was in vain, as all her attacks were intercepted by the three undead, time and time again. The only thing her struggle gave her was more time to struggle.

Khalor eventually ended her misery. He dashed in, slipping through his undead servants, and pinned Athena into the back wall with his bident.

His death knight did not wait before using her as target practice, slamming his halberd into her body repeatedly. It was over before she knew it.

When she reappeared on the loser's side, she was sobbing. I'die went to comfort her, as he glanced over to the opposite side, where Khalor was sitting, emotionless.

He gave Khalor the stink eye as he rubbed Athena back awkwardly, talking to her in a low voice. Astaroth saw this and looked at Khalor with disappointment.

"You could have ended this sooner and faster. Was there a need to torture her mind like that?" he asked Khalor.

"There was. She needs to toughen up her heart if she wants to be useful in what's coming," Khalor replied coldly.

"I don't like your methods," Astaroth said, frowning at him.

"I don't need you to like them. I need you to understand they are necessary," Khalor said, turning his emotionless eyes to look at Astaroth.

"I will be a tough pill to swallow for most of humanity, but I am a necessary one. Do you understand?" Khalor asked.

"We will see about that. When you show me some proof of what you claim," Astaroth responded, turning to look back at the arena.

The next combat had started already, and by the looks of it, it wouldn't be quick. Both players were gauging each other, never fully committing to an assault.

This ended up dragging the fight on for a good fifteen minutes, as every player watching grew bored. Astaroth had stopped paying attention after a few minutes, going instead to sit near Phoenix.

He talked with her about how their fight was next. They both agreed to not make it a boring one like this one, and to give it their all.

Khalor looked at them from meters away, deep in thought.

'She still hasn't used that. Hmm. I wonder if she'll use it against him,' He thought, scratching his boney chin.

'Last time, she was in the finals against that stupid gnome sniper. I wonder how this will affect the future power structure. Only time will tell,' he thought, looking at the sky.

He still directed his anger at the chairwoman. Had she spoken earlier, nothing that was going to happen would have happened at all last time.

When the fight in the arena finished, chairwoman Constantine made an apparition once again. She was mainly doing this for the PR of her talking to the competing players.

After all, people from around the world were watching the tournament live streams. The more she made the game look good, the more new players she could reel in.

Khalor wasn't against what she was doing, because they indeed needed more players. But he found her methods to be insufficient and a waste of time.

In his opinion, giving the right time of day right now would probably be more useful. But he also knew that it would cause a massive wave of panic, making things worse.

So he swallowed his discontent. He knew what he had to do, and when he had to do it.

The only thing that had changed in his plan was the emergence of a ripple. And that was the player Astaroth.

He hadn't even been present in the last tournament. Khalor was still wondering what had caused that ripple to form.

But it wasn't that important for now. The reason he had given Astaroth a few details was that since he was a butterfly effect, he would use him to the fullest.

That, and the fact that Astaroth had been one of the good guys and talented players in the last run-through.

'I hope he turns out like this again this time,' Khalor mused.

Chapter 124 Pushing The Limits

Constantine's speeches were getting longer and longer between each phase, but that was nothing different from last time, and Khalor armed himself with patience.

Even though his blood was boiling with anger and eagerness, it wasn't worth the repercussions of confronting the woman just yet. But the time would come sooner than later.

Once the chairwoman was done with her long and winding speech, she announced the start of the semi-finals. Three bouts were left before the end of this tournament.

Astaroth looked at Phoenix, and she gazed back. There was anticipation in both gazes, as both knew the next bout would send them to the finals.

"Hold nothing back. You ought to know you'll lose if you do." Astaroth told Phoenix, a smirk creeping up his lips.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Wolfy. You are talking to a pro player. Even if you have the strength to back your words, have a little respect." Phoenix answered smugly.

It was primarily pre-match banter between the two of them, since both knew that their opponent was dangerous. Phoenix especially knew that she couldn't give Astaroth even a second to think.

This fight would all come down to who of the two would act first. And from that first action on, the fight would go at a breakneck pace.

Both combatants were teleported to the arena as the tension in the stands grew by an order of magnitude. Silence permeated the place, as a pin drop could be heard.

The timer ticked away as both players went into hyper-focus.

Gong!

Phoenix immediately cast a firebolt with her left hand, aiming to disrupt Astaroth's mind, as her right hand started gathering flames.

Astaroth, for his part, melded with White instantly, lunging toward Phoenix. He couldn't take a straight path to her, since she was barraging him with firebolts.

He could have taken the spells without too much trouble, but he knew better than to already start taking damage against an opponent that could rapidly escalate her damage output.

Of course, he also remembered not to let too much fire accumulate in the arena as he split his focus to blow out the firebolts that landed on the ground with some sharp wind gusts.

Phoenix would not let him approach so easily either, as she started running back in a circumvented path, trying her best to maintain a distance from Astaroth.

She always made sure to cut the shortest route to her with some firebolts and flame walls, making sure Astaroth could only go the long route.

She knew Astaroth could just run through those, but she also had a good grasp on his tactical mind. She knew he wouldn't take avoidable damage.

The fight rapidly transformed into a game of cat and mouse, with Phoenix being the mouse. Astaroth only had five minutes to catch her and end this, as he wasn't confident in being able to take her down without his buffed stats.

'This isn't going anywhere,' He thought, after chasing her around for three minutes.

Astaroth was already thinking about lunging at her on all fours, but he was weary of something. Phoenix was still only using one hand to fire spells at him.

She occupied her other hand, gathering flames, and that worried him.

'How long does it take to gather fire?' He wondered.

He felt that something was off, and he used his perfect mana sense. That was when he grasped the situation.

Gasp!

Through his heightened senses, the fire in her right hand was shining a bright white, almost like a miniature sun.

'This! This is Aether!' He screamed internally.

That's when he understood what she was doing. She was refining her mana in the flames to make it purer.

'How did she learn about Aether?!' He questioned in his head, as his thoughts started going into turmoil.

He immediately recognized the threat she was going to pose, lest he let her finish that process. Astaroth dropped on all fours, pushing all his strength into his hind legs.

The speed at which he bounded forward made everyone in the stands, and all the others watching from outside the game, drop their jaws in astonishment.

The ground under Astaroth's feet crumbled when he launched forward, practically exploding behind him, as all Phoenix saw was Astaroth appearing before her.

Her eyes went wide in shock for a second. But they quickly reverted to normal, as she grinned.

"Gotcha!" she said, as Astaroth's hand pierced her stomach.

Phoenix grabbed Astaroth's arm and slammed her right hand into her own chest. Astaroth's mind went blank, not understanding why she would attack herself.

But horror quickly replaced the shock.

In his still heightened senses, the bright white flame in her hand melted into her body, before her entirety started shining with the same force.

"Combat Pyromancy: Avatar Of Flames," Phoenix said, closing her eyes, as her body combusted.

Astaroth tried jumping back, but Phoenix's hand was exerting unnatural strength right now, as it began burning in bright orange flames.

Fire covered her body, her hair turning to a blazing inferno behind her, as she transformed into a fiery woman with a face with no mouth.

Her eyes reopened, and instead of eyes, they were now two slits of blue flames extending to the sides. Astaroth quickly understood that she had been holding back with all her previous opponents.

His mind went razor sharp, as his instincts kicked back in, clearing his head from the shock.

'I need to get out of her grip,' He thought, glancing at his health bar.

It was rapidly dropping, as being close to Phoenix right now was equivalent to being near a miniature sun.

He quickly jumped up, sending both his feet into her chest, taking more damage, but kicking off with all his strength, slipping out of her powerful grasp.

The jump sent him airborne, flying backward for a respectful distance, only landing back on the ground on the opposite side of the arena.

Astaroth's meld timer was almost over, and the situation had just escalated from bad to horrible. But his face showed no signs of desperation.

An enormous smile was instead forming on his lips. He was having so much fun!

Chapter 125 Devising A Plan

In the bleachers and behind screens, everyone was gasping, reeling from shock, or cheering loudly.

The transformation Phoenix had just gone through was not only a great show of force, but it was also badass as hell! Plus, this meant so much to all the mages watching the tournament.

She had effectively just countered a melee player at a melee distance! This was huge!

Most mage players knew they could never emulate the feat, but the possibility of it being feasible was already groundbreaking. Close combat was a mage's biggest weakness.

If there was a solution to it, that effectively made mages practically invincible! Some players stopped watching the tournament, then and there, logging back into the game, to try to reproduce what they had seen.

It would take months before another player copied this feat, and it was not a possibility for run-of-the-mill players.

Khalor looked at Phoenix, grinning.

'She used it,' He thought.

He had been waiting to see if she had mastered it this time around, too. He was glad she had, since that meant he would have an ounce of a challenge if she won this bout.

In his memories, Phoenix had been the first tournament winner last time, but this time around, with him here, that would change. There was also the possibility she didn't make it to the finals at all, with Astaroth present.

He snapped out of his thoughts, focusing back on the fight happening below.

'Show what you can do, little butterfly,' Khalor said internally, smiling.

Astaroth, for his part, was also grinning madly. His meld was running out, and his already strong opponent had just become even more dangerous.

This was the type of situation he loved being in.

'We forge the greatest weapons in the hottest forges,' He said in his mind.

Phoenix had not yet attacked him, apparently taking time to accustom to her new form. Astaroth surmised it was the first time she transformed during combat.

'Damn, she's so impressive,' Astaroth thought, fanboying a little.

While Phoenix was looking at her body, making sure the transformation was complete and successful, Astaroth's melding came undone. Now he was back to his normal stats, and that was a minor problem.

White then spoke in his mind.

'Master. I have an idea' He said, still sounding calm as a cucumber.

'What's your plan?' Astaroth replied.

'Excuse my choice of words, but we will be playing with fire if we do it. Is that alright?' White said.

Astaroth chuckled a bit at the wording, but stayed attentive. It only took a few moments for the wolf to explain his plan to Astaroth, and the man was astounded at what he was being told.

'This plan is more than reckless, it's insane. But if it works, my strength will go up by leaps and bounds again,' Astaroth said to White.

'Are you sure this can work?' he asked.

'I am almost certain, Master,' White responded, certainty in his tone.

'Alright then. We shall try,' Astaroth mentally nodded.

As they finished their mental discussion, that had all happened almost instantly, because of Astaroth using Thousand Thoughts when they started speaking, to buy himself some time.

He summoned out White Death, getting ready to enact this crazy plan. At the same moment, Phoenix seemed to be done inspecting herself.

Only a few seconds had passed, but the players in the stands and behind screens were holding their breath in anticipation. The tension was palpable.

"Are we ready for round two?" Astaroth asked, trying to sound cocky.

"I'm ready, are you?" Phoenix replied, sounding smug.

She had no mouth, currently, but Astaroth could guess she was grinning at him by the tone she used.

"Don't expect an easy victory, even if you are now much more powerful," Astaroth told her, getting low.

He had pulled out his shield and shortsword, and used a lot of mana to enhance the shield and popped up mana skin.

"Don't come crying to me later, after I incinerate you," Phoenix replied, starting to float in his direction.

She floated slowly, at first, but suddenly sped up, becoming an orange streak of fire, zooming across the arena. Astaroth braced the shield for impact, making sure to look at his opponent at all moments.

She was moving blazingly fast, so it was difficult, but his eyes were used to tracking fast movement, since he was usually the one travelling at that speed.

Phoenix punched out at Astaroth, hitting the shield with her fist. To Astaroth, it felt like a cannonball had just collided with his arm.

'So strong!' He thought, wincing in pain.

His bones were creaking from the impact, and had he not enhanced the shield and used mana skin, he would have lost an enormous amount of health.

Flames washed off the shield as the punch delivered a wave of fire with it. Most of it brushed aside from Astaroth, only heating the air around, but some of it seared his armor.

Astaroth could feel the flames' heat sliding off his form, and it was no stove flame. This fire was hotter than a kiln's flame, and he knew he shouldn't take a direct hit from it.

He glanced at Phoenix's mana bar, and was disappointed for a moment. He had hoped that a skill this powerful would have a massive drain on her mana, but the mana was not ticking down fast enough to his taste.

'And that's my fault,' He quickly remembered.

Had he not taught her the mana breathing technique and the body cleansing, her mana pool would be smaller and she wouldn't have any mana regen.

This would have made fighting with this skill so consuming, it would have lasted a minute or two, at best. But now, from the mana drain he could see, she could keep it active for at least four minutes, if not more.

'This is bad,' He thought.

White Death used the moment of the collision to get behind Phoenix, trying to bite at her nape. He was unsuccessful, since Phoenix was currently much faster than him, and dodged out of the way.

They started a game of tag, with White chasing Phoenix, and her chasing Astaroth. Astaroth stuck to defending against her powerful attacks, making sure never to take them head-on.

This game of tag was tiresome for him, since he didn't have the speed to outrun her, and was constantly having to be careful of her attacks.

His mind was tiring quickly, but he held strong.

'Just a little more, Master,' He heard White's voice in his head.

'I'm trying!' He cried out, every hit from Phoenix almost blowing off his shield arm.

'This better work! I'm getting pummeled over here!' Astaroth exclaimed in his head.

A few seconds later, White shouted in his mind again.

'Master! Now!'

Astaroth grinned.

Chapter 126 Ace Versus Ace

In the bleachers, Khalor was watching as Phoenix and Astaroth were running around the arena. After two minutes of this, he started frowning.

'Shouldn't she have reverted back already?' he thought.

'Last time, it only lasted for two minutes. Is there something different this time around?'

He observed carefully, and in the next few seconds, he noticed another oddity.

'He could have dodged that hit. Why did he block it instead? He's taking unnecessary damage.' He thought.

But as he looked closer, he saw something weird.

'Did he just... Absorb some flames? No, that's not it. He absorbed some of the Aether in the flames!' Khalor realized.

Back in the arena, Astaroth was now grinning wide. This threw Phoenix off, so she backed away from him.

"Why are you smiling so much? Is getting beat up your thing?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Oh, no. Quite the opposite. I'm smiling because the roles are about to switch up," Astaroth replied.

In the next moment, a pulse emanated from Astaroth, transparent, but still visible to most. It was followed by a sound.

Bathump *Bathump* *Bathump*

Phoenix frowned. This sound, she recognized it.

It was a heartbeat. But where was it coming from?

Her silent question was rapidly answered, as Astaroth started transforming again.

"This! How?! Your cooldown should be over yet!" she exclaimed.

But then she noticed something odd. The transformation was different.

His hair still went white, but instead of having fur that grew on his arms and face, something else accompanied it.

'Are those... antlers?' Phoenix asked internally.

They were indeed antlers. Astaroth was growing antlers on the sides of his head, and they twisted upward, forming what looked like a crown.

Something appeared over the crown. A small ball of white light.

Astaroth grinned as he looked at his stats.

Status:

Name: Astaroth (Fused to ???)

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 32 (12'875/1'189'950)

Stats:

HP: 30'500/30'500 MP: 14'750/14'750 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 130 (+20 armor) (+10 passive)

Agility: 110 (+10 passive)

Constitution: 161 (+20 armor) (+13 passive)

Intelligence: 176 (+16 passive)

Wisdom: 157 (+14)

Attack Power Str: 650

Attack Power Agi: 550

Magic Attack Power: 880

Healing Power: 785

Natural Defense: 16.1 %

Armor Defense: 14 %

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 0

Available skill points: 0

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Skill Gained: Clear Minded (Passive), Aura Of Superiority (Passive), Moon Beam (Active)

He then opened his skill window and skimmed through the new skills.

Clear Minded (Passive): Your mind is as clear as the moonlit sky. No mental ailment can plague your judgment. Immunity to all mental ailments.

Aura Of Superiority (Passive): All monsters two grades and under naturally fear you. It is ingrained in their being.

Moon Beam (Active): You fire a beam of concentrated moonlight. 500% magic damage. Mana cost: 10'000.

Astaroth almost giggled in glee when seeing all the goodies he got from this melding.

That had been White's plan all along. White had told Astaroth that he could feel some response from the spirit seed next to his soul.

It seemed to be slowly awakening, by absorbing the ambient Aether. So he thought they could kick start its awakening by absorbing Aether more actively.

And since Phoenix was currently disgorging it by the bucket, maintaining her form, they had a ready-made source. That was the reason he had been so passive in the last minutes.

He was letting himself get hit, albeit guarding with the shield, so he could siphon some Aether from her attacks. And it had worked wonders.

They both knew this melding would only work once, since the spirit seed didn't hatch, it only cracked. But this temporary boost would be plenty enough to win this bout!

He focused back on Phoenix, just as she decided she had waited enough. She was dashing back towards him blazingly fast.

But it did not impress Astaroth, since his agility was now back up quite a lot. It wasn't as much as when Melded with White, but it sufficed to be as fast as his opponent.

Since he could now match her speed, he went back on the offensive. He pulled out his longsword and lunged at Phoenix.

She had half expected him to be fast enough, so she didn't fully commit to the attack. They clashed as a burst of flame surged with her attack.

But Astaroth let the flames lick his form, as his defence was now quite high, and his health pool was insanely high for his level. So the damage it inflicted on him was negligible.

Phoenix saw the small dent she made in his health pool and frowned as she backed away.

"Where had you been hiding this power? We could have used it in the cave," she asked him.

It was quite weird for Astaroth to hear her talk, since there was no mouth to speak the words. They just emanated from her.

"I didn't have that power yet. I'm happy it gave me a trump card though, seeing as you had one too," He responded.

"Well, let's test it out," Phoenix said, lifting her hands to the sky.

In Astaroth's mana sense, he saw the fire mana gather up over her hands, slowly forming a lance-like shape. He lifted his hand at her in response.

He gathered the mana inside him, pushing it toward his hand. He could feel this was a huge drain, as it also pumped up some of the Aether from the spirit seed.

He could surmise it wouldn't awaken for a good while now, with all the energy he stole from it.

"Sunfire Lance!" Phoenix shouted out, a few seconds later.

She swiftly shot her hands forward, as a large flaming lance appeared over her head, shooting forward at Astaroth.

"Moon Beam," Astaroth whispered in response.

A bright white ball formed in front of his hand before shooting a milky white beam at the lance. They aimed both attacks at their counterpart, and they would collide in the middle.

Not a moment later, the flaming lance and the bright beam collided in a great flash of light. The blast of energy kicked dust up, blinding everyone momentarily.

When the flash faded, only one person remained in the arena.

Chapter 127 Change In Venue

The arena was dead silent as the dust fell back down. The victor was clear as day, standing alone in the arena, smiling widely.

The people around the world watching erupted in cheers. The players in the arena were dead silent, contemplating the effect of this win.

The players could see the competitor's numbers on the chart, and knew very well Astaroth was one of the last ones to qualify. That also meant he was one of the lowest levelled present here.

And Phoenix had been one of the first to qualify for the tournament. That meant the level gap between them should have pushed the balance of victory in her favor.

She also used a super powerful ability, pushing the boundaries of her class. And yet, this player had won.

The player named Astaroth had just vaporized one of the most talented players in the tournament, maybe even the world, with a single attack. What's more, that attack had chewed through Phoenix's attack first.

This was overwhelming for most of them here. To them, that meant this man was not only talented, but he was also monstrously powerful.

They shivered, thinking about how they would have to measure up to him someday. The players on the loser's side of the stands all looked at the other side, glancing at the other mysterious monster in their midst.

Khalor, unaware of the stares directed at him, was grinning madly while looking at Astaroth.

'That power! He didn't have that power last time! This is a marvelous development,' He thought.

'We might have a chance this time!' He internalized, losing himself in his thoughts again.

Astaroth was teleported out of the arena, as it magically fixed itself once more. He was still vibrating from all the mana and Aether his body had channelled.

He was also shaking because of the excitement of facing death and winning. There might also have been some exhaustion from draining his mana so quickly mixed in there.

But he currently didn't care about exhaustion. He had made it.

He was in the finals!

Astaroth had to use every ounce of his mind, just to keep himself from bursting out in tears of joy.

'I did it! I'm in the finals!' he screamed internally.

He had a quick thought to his parents, most likely smiling at him from the afterlife.

'Now I hope he makes it too. So I can get some answers,' Astaroth thought, glancing down at the arena, where Khalor and his opponent had been teleported.

Khalor was not even looking at his counterpart, too caught up in thought. When the gong resounded, he didn't even snap out of them.

That didn't mean he was going to lose, though, as his three strongest undead came out from his body to guard him. Not a minute later and the fight was over, with an overwhelming victory for Khalor.

He hadn't lifted a finger, as his manticore, raven, and death knight trampled all over his opponent. It was a pitiful sight to behold for all the onlookers.

'Monster!' was the thought in everyone's head.

The power discrepancy between Khalor and his opponents had been terrifying all along the tournament. Everyone always hoped another monster in the lineup would eventually beat him, but that didn't come to pass.

They had their hopes up, though, seeing who was going up against Khalor in the final round. It would be a titanic fight.

As with every other round end, chairwoman Constantine appeared in the sky again, delivering a long winding speech about giving their maximum.

She raved on and on, complimenting every player that had taken part in what would be history someday. She also talked about the last two players, talking in length about how they had been dark horses.

Astaroth and Khalor weren't listening as she talked about them, though, as they were busy staring each other down. The pressure around both men was almost visible to the other players present.

Phoenix, who was now on the other side of the stands, was silently rooting for Astaroth. She knew his odds were bad, but she hoped nonetheless.

After almost fifteen minutes of long and boring monologue, which was only a PR stunt for Constantine, She finally announced the start of the final round of the tournament.

The round where the strongest player in New Eden would be crowned. This was the culmination of all this event.

"Now, for our last round, seeing as our two contestants are too powerful to be bound by this arena, the devs and I have decided to bring about a venue change," Constantine announced.

"We will relocate all of you there shortly, as you discover all at the same time. I hope this brings about more interesting plays from the part of our finalists, as they play in a wider field," she added.

"So without further ado, let us begin this final round!" she finished, as the environment changed.

Everyone in the stands was teleported away as the two finalists reappeared in an open field. This field was familiar to them, as it was the first round's map.

The other players, for their part, were teleported into the sky. They were now looking down at the combat about to happen from a bird's-eye viewpoint.

A lot of players panicked at first, from reappearing so high up, but they calmed down when they saw they weren't falling. They all tried awkwardly to get in a comfortable position to watch.

It was a fun sight to behold, as no one had ever been in a zero-gravity environment. It was like watching toddlers flailing around in their parent's arms.

Down below all this, the two last contestants were taking in their surroundings. Both of them recognized the map and didn't linger any longer on it.

Astaroth looked Khalor in the eyes.

"We both made it here. Now, you owe me answers," He said.

"I do. And you will get them," Khalor responded.

Both men were mentally prepared for the sound of the gong. This was it.

For one, this was his time to get answers. For the other, it was time to cement his supremacy.

Gong!

Chapter 128 A Vision Of The End

The first one to react was Khalor. He slammed both his hands together, almost in a praying position, and murmured.

'Legacy Skill: Memories Of The Dead'

A dark sphere started expanding from his hands. It rapidly grew, exploding outwards as it swallowed the zone they were in.

Astaroth looked on in awe, as the surroundings changed from a plain with a pyramid to a burning and desolate cityscape. He could hear screams of terror and pain in the distance.

"Where is this?" He asked, looking all around him.

"I am not surprised you don't recognize it in this state," Khalor said, flashing a sad smile.

"Should I even recognize this?" Astaroth questioned, his face shifting in confusion.

"Ahh, yes. You should." Khalor answered.

Astaroth looked around, this time trying to focus a little more, but nothing seemed familiar to him. So he gazed back at Khalor.

"A hint, maybe?" He asked the Necromancer.

Khalor extended his hand, pointing at a ruined building. He said nothing, just pointing his ghostly finger forward.

Astaroth followed the direction and turned his head to look at the building. At first, all he could see was a charred mess of what used to be a building.

It was only after a few seconds of focus that he spotted something. There was a half-burned ad placard in one of the broken-down windows.

When he read what was left of it, his eyes widened in terror.

"This... This can't be where I think it is. How is it in the game?" He asked, his mind racing.

"These are memories. The memories of dead people. They don't come from the game." Khalor slowly replied, pressing every word.

"What dead people? You are not making sense." Astaroth replied, the confusion in his head becoming thicker.

"The skill I used lets me conjure up the memories of the dead I control. Sadly, this doesn't come from them. This one is a bit more personal." Khalor explained.

'Shouldn't be long, now,' he thought, turning his head to one side of the street.

Not a moment later, a group of four people ran around the corner. They had terrified looks in their eyes, and their clothes were bloodied.

Astaroth turned his head, following Khalor's movement, and saw the group running. When he looked at them, he frowned.

These were all Humans. And their clothes were not clothes from inside the game either.

They were dressed like your regular Jack and Jill. One guy was wearing sports clothes, as if he had just been at the gym.

Another was wearing a hoodie and jogging pants, almost as if he had been at home, playing video games just a moment earlier.

The two women following right behind were also dressed in normal day attire, one wearing a skirt and nice blouse, had it not been bloody, and the other wearing what looked like a store uniform.

This confused Astaroth. How were they wearing normal clothes while inside the game?

He hadn't heard of anyone yet crafting outside clothes for inside the game. This made no sense.

The group of four ran past him and Khalor, not even looking at them. It was as if they weren't even there.

"What are you running from?!" Astaroth shouted, trying to grab one woman by the arm.

His hand went through her, though, like she was made of fog.

"What the..." Astaroth looked at her in confusion.

"Don't bother. I told you we were in a memory. These people don't see us." Khalor said.

"You are still not making sense," Astaroth replied, his eyes showing signs of anger.

Khalor sighed heavily.

"This is the memory of a dead man. That dead man," he said, pointing at the guy in the sweatpants.

"But who is he? And when is he dead?" Astaroth asked, fishing for answers at this point.

"That man is me. And the answer to your question is three years from now. Or at least, it was, before a month ago." Khalor answered, his eyes locking on Astaroth.

"How can you say we are in a memory, and then say it is a memory of three years from now? You make no sense!" Astaroth burst out.

Khalor had promised him answers, and all he was giving him were enigmas and more questions. So anger was taking hold of him.

Khalor chuckled at the outburst.

"I thought you would have a more relaxed temper than this. Looks like I was wrong. Follow me," Khalor said, snapping his fingers.

He then teleported both him and Astaroth up to the top of a building, looking down on the street they had just been. Khalor walked to another side of the building.

Astaroth followed him, walking to the edge of the building, but keeping a healthy distance from Khalor. Khalor again pointed at something.

Astaroth looked in the pointed direction and saw a billboard in the distance. The billboard was still relatively intact compared to the rest of the city.

On it, an ad for New Eden was plastered. It was an ad for the next tournament.

The strange thing was that it announced the fourth tournament. And there was a date underlined right under it.

The date showed the month of August, but the year was off by three years. Khalor, who was standing further to his side, noticed the look of confusion.

"The date isn't wrong, in case you were wondering. You were supposed to be in that tournament, by the way. Sadly, it was never meant to be," Khalor said, sighing lightly.

He then turned his head to look down at the streets again. His gaze was following the group of four.

Astaroth was staring at the billboard, trying to make sense of it all. But that was not an easy task.

He snapped out of his thoughts when he heard a woman scream. The scream came from below, and his eyes looked for the source.

'Goodbye, Carmen.' Khalor whispered out of earshot.

Astaroth found the source of the screaming and his face contorted in horror.

The woman that had screamed had a spear in her shoulder, and she was down on her knees. And before her stood three tall figures, skin red as blood, horns jutting out of their heads.

It took a matter of seconds before one of them started chewing on the woman, not bothering to kill her before doing so. He tore through her in a matter of minutes, while the other two figures went on after the rest of the group.

"Can't we help them?!" Astaroth barked, turning to face Khalor.

"No. I already said this more than once. We are in a memory. Nothing can be altered here. It has already happened." Khalor reiterated, annoyance creeping up his face.

Blood drained out of Astaroth's face, as realization dawned on him.

'This can't be real,' he thought, dropping to his knees.

Chapter 129 The Accord

In chairwoman Constantine's office

After doing her speech and getting everything in place for the final, Constantine went back to watching the live stream. She was looking forward to it too, since it was from two players she could only describe as errors.

But when the gong resounded, and the black bubble started expanding, she frowned. No players should have access to legacies yet, and Khalor had already broken that fact.

But he was going a step further, having already attained his first legacy skill. Which was no small feat.

Her frown deepened when she saw the cityscape forming. It made little sense for a memory skill to bring up a cityscape so desolate.

Then her eyes went wide.

"Impossible!" she shouted in her office.

She rapidly grabbed her phone, calling the ones that managed the live stream for her. Her phone rang three times before a tired voice picked up the other side.

"Yes, Ma'am?" the person asked.

"Cut the live feed, right this second," Constantine ordered, her tone not asking.

"But, Ma'am..."

"I said cut the feed this instant!" she barked.

"This feed needs to go down right now! Make up an excuse as to why, but shut it down, now!" She ordered again, before hanging up.

She picked her phone back up and called another number.

"Server monitoring room." A womanly voice answered.

"I want all the losing contestants to be disconnected from the tournament sub-server. And make this quick." Constantine ordered the woman.

"Yes, Ma'am!" The woman said, before hanging up.

Constantine then picked up her personal phone and speed-dialled a number. Her assistant picked up seconds later.

"Yes Ma'am?"

"I need you to hurry up the search for player Khalor. Offer double, no, triple the price to the hackers if need be, but find him as soon as possible." Constantine ordered.

"It shall be done." Her assistant replied before hanging up the line.

'How is this even possible? He shouldn't be possible.' Constantine muttered under her breath.

Moments later, everyone watching the tournament around the world experienced great disappointment when the live stream went down. The moderators were claiming network issues at the game establishments.

Some conspiracy theorists started spreading rumours of falsehoods being uncovered in the tournament by Khalor, and the game shutting it down because of it. Moderators tried placating such people in vain.

Even the players that had been watching the final round from the sky started taking to the net, expressing their displeasure. Something had forcefully logged them out, and it made most of them moody.

Two players, in particular, were more fearful of what it meant, since they might lose their rewards. Phoenix quietly waited in her pod, waiting for it to log her back in.

From that moment on, the only person who could still see what was happening, apart from the two players concerned, was Constantine herself.

All other video logs were being erased as they wrote themselves, as per ordered by the boss lady. Some employees felt this was wrong and strange, but they knew better than to question the boss woman.

Ever since that strange accident, a few weeks prior, where one of the security managers had died, some people had started worrying. No one dared utter their concern, though, fearing they might be next.

Quitting the job was not an option either, since it was a very lucrative job, and they feared it might arouse suspicion. So everyone kept on the down low and did their job without questions.

Back inside the game

Astaroth was watching on, as the remaining creatures, whatever they were, hunted the remaining people down, killing them one by one. His heart wanted to jump down and go help them, but his brain was still in shock.

He couldn't fathom what was before his own eyes. He didn't want to believe it.

But everything pointed to only one conclusion. Khalor was from the future.

'How is this even possible?' he thought, trying to make sense of things.

He didn't want to believe what his mind decided was a conclusion, but it added up. Khalor knew things that were going to happen.

He also claimed he wanted to help change what was to come. Plus, this memory of his was filled with details that couldn't be imagined.

This all pointed to this unbelievable conclusion. As Shakespeare had once said, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Astaroth did not want to believe Khalor. But what other choice did he have left?

Right now, what he was being shown was nothing short of the end of the world. If he could keep this from happening, shouldn't he do everything in his power to do so?

Believing Khalor was the first step in that direction. Astaroth reluctantly accepted this impossible truth.

His mind boxed that in, taking all the confusion he had previously felt, and sending it in the same box. For now, this would have to do.

Astaroth rose back to his feet, steeling his resolve. At that same moment, a fourth cry echoed out.

He turned his head, looking in the scream's direction. The last person was being pinned to the ground, as one of the red-skinned creatures ripped his throat out.

Following that gruesome sight, the world started shifting back to the plain and the pyramid. He understood the memory was over.

"So that really was you..." Astaroth said, turning to look at Khalor.

The man had a pained look on his face, but only anger was shining in his eyes. Astaroth could understand the feeling, as he guessed he would also be angry to look at himself dying too.

"So. Do you believe me now?" Khalor asked, turning to face Astaroth after a few seconds.

"I don't want to. But after all I just saw, I don't think I have a choice." Astaroth answered, clenching his fists.

"Well, in that case, if you understand, give up the tournament," Khalor said.

"What?!" Astaroth replied.

His mind spun out for a second, trying to understand what Khalor had just asked him. What did giving up the tournament change in the future?

He didn't want to simply give up. Not after making it this far.

"No." He answered.

Chapter 130 One Man Against An Army

"Excuse me?" Khalor asked, slightly confused.

Had he not made his point abundantly clear? Had Astaroth not just agreed to help him?

Why was he still refusing to concede this tournament?

"I said no." Astaroth reiterated.

"You just agreed to help me. Why aren't you accepting my demand?" Khalor asked.

"I will help you. But I will not give up on this tournament. You want first place? Defeat me. That shouldn't be that hard for you, right?" Astaroth said, pulling out his shortbow and aiming an arrow at Khalor's head.

Tsk

Khalor looked at Astaroth in disappointment. He had hoped the man would understand that fighting this pointless fight made no sense. Logic dictated that he should win so he could garner the attention he needed to enact his plan.

Yet, Astaroth didn't respond to that logic. Instead, he wanted to fight it out, make it a contest of strength again.

After clicking his tongue, Khalor let out all his undead. He spared none, as legions upon legions of zombies; skeletons; ghosts; ghouls, and many more poured out of his body.

"Then I shall not go easy on you. I will make this quick, and be done with it." Khalor said, his face becoming cold again.

'Damn. That is a lot of undead,' Astaroth thought, as he watched the undead pour out of Khalor.

Inside him, the spirit seed he had used earlier was dormant once again. Slowly pulsing once in a while.

'Well, that's no longer an option,' he thought, focusing back on the army before him.

'Are you ready for this, White?' he mentally asked his companion.

'We are not going to win this, master. But we will not go down without a fight either,' White responded.

Astaroth could feel the eagerness to fight from the response and smiled. This was going to be one hell of a brawl.

Astaroth did not wait for Khalor to give a signal of any kind. The gong had already resounded long ago, so this was already free game.

He shot arrows in quick succession, taking undead monsters left and right. They were not very high level, so they weren't very hard to take down, especially not when melded.

But he held on to his meld, for now. He would use it when the undead became too close to shoot at.

That way, he could maximize his time with it. It didn't take long for that to happen, though.

Even if he was running backwards while shooting, some of the undead were incredibly fast and closed the gap in barely thirty seconds.

The first to reach him were the ghouls. As soon as they reached a few meters from him, he melded with White, swapping out from his bow to his polearm.

The extra reach allowed him a little more breathing room for now. He kept mowing down his undead enemies, but they were trying to box him in, so he couldn't keep fleeing away from the main force.

That meant that not long after the ghouls reached him, the skeletons and ghosts reached him, too. He swapped out from his polearm, this time going for his longsword and shortsword.

He rapidly became a tornado of blades, as the undead were felled by the second. As for the ghosts, when he first slashed one, he noticed the very low damage he did.

So he coated his weapons with mana instantly, quickly plugging that weakness. He would also periodically send out waves of fire, shooting it from the edge of his sword.

That unlocked another spell for him, and that made him happy, but he couldn't dwell on it for long. After the skeletons and ghosts, the zombies also soon joined the melee.

He was rapidly being surrounded, and although he was killing everything that got too close, the gap between him and the monsters was shortening.

He tried using Alpha's Howl at some point, but that failed miserably. It seemed fear did not affect the undead in any way.

After fighting for what seemed an eternity for Astaroth, his melding finally ended. He quickly summoned White, making sure they did not drown him in a never-ending wave of undeath.

Somehow, Astaroth felt like he was fighting in vain. No matter how many undead he killed, there always seemed to be more behind it.

From somewhere nearby, he heard Khalor's voice.

"What you are doing is futile. Surrender to death's embrace. Don't make us both waste time."

"I said you would have to earn your victory. I meant it," Astaroth replied, never stopping his slashes and stabs.

"Then so be it." Khalor's voice came, from much closer this time.

Astaroth barely had enough time to turn around and block as a bident came flying at him. Khalor was now getting serious.

It only took a few clashes for Astaroth to grasp that their skill level was very close to one another. Where the problem lay was that Khalor wasn't alone.

Astaroth had to focus on Khalor's attacks, but he also had to make sure his undead did not swarm him. White Death took a part of that burden, but his health was rapidly dwindling, and he would soon un-summon.

And the cherry on top, Astaroth had to dodge the occasional surprise attack from the death knight, the ranged attacks from the mantichore, and the swift swoops of the two-headed raven.

Long story short, Astaroth was burning out incredibly fast. Even though he wasn't a stranger to fast-paced combat and long-lasting fights, this one was on another level entirely.

It was soon clear to him he wouldn't be winning this combat. Try as he may, he could never break the lock around his position.

It was like he was playing a first-person survival game, and Khalor was playing a real-time strategy game. Wherever he looked around himself, Astaroth saw only undead.

After another three minutes of fighting, White succumbed to the onslaught. Moments later, the pressure on Astaroth increased tenfold.

He was already panting and sweating profusely, and now the pressure became suffocating. It only took a single mistake for him to fall on the path of defeat now.

And that mistake soon came about, as he stepped on a small rock, losing balance. When he started stumbling, Khalor struck at the speed of lightning, impaling Astaroth in the stomach with his bident.

Astaroth was already low on health, and that strike took the last of it.

"You fought valiantly. I hope you fight as hard when the time comes to save us all," Khalor said to him, as he turned to pixels.

'I lost,' Astaroth thought, as his body disappeared.