

New Eden 161

Chapter 161 Stacking Spells

Astaroth scanned the boss as it charged at them.

Stone Ape King:

Level: 45

Grade: Special (Zone Boss)

HP: 83'822/189'500

MP: 5'500

He smirked as he saw how low his attack had brought the zone boss. It was worth cancelling his melding early, in his opinion.

Now was not the time to ponder his damage, though. And so he prepared to face the monster again.

But there would be no more fighting.

I'die had been casting another spell, which made the ground in front of them into soft earth, instead of stone. He then turned his head to Violette, who nodded in return.

It seemed the synergy of the vine wall had given them an idea, and they were now trying it out.

Violette sent a constant stream of mana into the now soft dirt, forming water pockets inside it. When the ape kind stepped on that spot of ground, his foot immediately sank.

Astaroth looked on in awe, as he understood what they were doing. They had created a sinkhole with magic!

The ground soon collapsed further under the heavy ape king, causing him to become submerged up to his torso. The ape was flailing around, trying to dig himself out, but the ground kept collapsing deeper and deeper.

Phoenix caught on to their plan and started concentrating mana, too. She soon had an enormous amount of mana gathered before her, which caused the air itself to heat up.

Once the ape was sunken to his shoulders, she released the wave of concentrated heat at the pit he was in. The dirt and sand quickly dried out, before becoming red with heat.

Damage numbers started floating above the monster's head, and they were slowly rising. The pit went from a spot of hot dirt to a pool of molten stone rapidly, as the ape was flailing around in pain.

The damage he was taking was constantly rising, as his tough skin slowly melted, exposing weak spots that the magma was burning into. Gulnur and Athena watched in horror as the monkey cooked alive.

They hadn't thought mages working together could be so dangerous. They silently gulped, remembering to stay in the trio's good graces.

Astaroth, in the meantime, was watching the mana reactions closely. He was trying to understand how each spell had synergized together.

Since he had no specific elemental affinity, he could recreate these things on a smaller scale if he understood how they worked. So he studied every little detail, ignoring the screaming and burning monkey.

After a round a minute of burning and melting agony screaming, the ape king finally fell silent.

You have killed a Stone Ape King (Special, Zone Boss) (Lvl 45). 4500 Exp awarded for contribution (Bonus 100% for kill one tier higher).

Astaroth looked at the Exp disappointingly, but when he checked the amount he got from the normal apes, he shrugged his shoulders.

You have killed a Stone Ape (Lvl 36). 225 Exp awarded for contribution.

The amount in itself was wholly inadequate, but then, they had killed so many of them. From the digit next to the unseen notifications, he understood they had killed almost five hundred of them.

This made the amount of Exp a little more reasonable. He was very close to levelling up with this.

Everyone in the party aside from Violette was at a higher level than him, and that peeved him a little. He knew it was because of many circumstances, but still.

Genie, who had been in a passive role in this fight, picking off apes that slipped past him and Gulnur, had levelled up, though. He was happy.

His companions were all becoming stronger. He couldn't control the stat direction for Genie, so he only eyed her status screen while nodding.

White Death was also close to levelling, and Luna. Well.

Luna was so high level that the EXP she was getting from combat was being diminished greatly. That meant she wouldn't be levelling any time soon.

On the bright side, it mattered little, since the stats she had were still greatly superior to any monster he was fighting currently.

He was hoping the dungeon where they were going would help him level up quicker. He missed the days when he was in the top one thousand level ranking.

The circumstances that pulled him out of it were out of his control, but it still irked him. It didn't really matter much, though, since he knew he was on par with the top ten players, anyway.

His semi-finalist title said as much.

Back to the matters at hand. He had observed the interaction between each form of elemental mana, as the magma pool was forming.

He understood the underlying principle of what they had done, but there were still some details that escaped him.

'I'll have to keep observing when they do some synergized spells,' he thought, rubbing his chin.

Phoenix walked up to him, while he was still deep in thought.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Hmm? Sure, go ahead," Astaroth responded, snapping out of his pondering.

"When you melded with your second companion during the tournament. You weren't this strong, were you?" she asked.

"You mean Luna? No, I wasn't. Luna was still unborn at that point, and I only had half her stats from the melding," Astaroth responded, not even wondering why she asked this.

"So, you weren't at full power?" she questioned.

"I mean. I was, at that time. But since Luna has been born, her stats have doubled. So I guess not?" Astaroth said, scratching his chin pensively.

"Do you think you could have won against Khalor if Luna had been born back then?" Phoenix asked, curious.

"No," Astaroth flatly replied.

There was a tinge of disappointment in his answer. It was like he felt regret for his weakness.

"There is something about one skill Khalor used, that I feel like he could have torn me to shreds if he wanted," Astaroth stated, his eyes serious.

Phoenix stopped questioning him, as she started thinking about what skill he was talking about. The only one her mind kept creeping back to was when everyone had been logged out.

But no one except for the devs and the two players present knew what had happened in there.

'What kind of skill was it?' she silently wondered.

She shrugged off the question for now, as they had to keep going if they wanted to make it to the dungeon soon.

Chapter 162 Setting Up Watch

The rest of their trip through the mountain range was close to uneventful, with only the occasional groups of monsters wandering through their path.

The party stuck to the road, so there were fewer monsters present. It would have been a whole other story if they had wandered off the path.

When Gulnur and his group explored this zone, they had been deeper into the mountains and often had to hide from the larger predators in the area. Wild zones like these always contained their fair share of zone bosses.

The trek through the mountains took the better part of their day, but they made it through. Once they were out of that zone, they took another break, taking turns to log out and do what they needed to.

The ones that had it easy were the players with pods. All they had to do was hook up more IV bags to the pod and attend to basic needs.

The night was starting to fall, and the party discussed whether to keep going or camp the night out. Of course, the two players without pods would be better off logging out for the night if they did.

But the four others with pods could establish a night watch and proceed with it. But they went for another method instead.

"I don't think we should penalize them for not having pods. I vote we establish three watch shifts, and the ones not on a watch can log out and have some proper sleep while the two players patrol the area." Phoenix stated.

"This way, everyone gets to have actual rest, and maybe some Exp from wandering monsters. Who's in favour?" she asked, raising her hand.

Astaroth, who had been the one to say the helmet users should log off for the night, was reticent. It wasn't about unfairness for him.

It was about trying to ensure they didn't wear the helmets for too long at a time. He still remembered the incidents that happened early on in the game, and would prefer his friends not to become part of this statistic.

He eventually raised his hand when it became almost unanimous. Phoenix smiled at him, and he wryly smiled back.

They decided on the watch order and pairs through vote again, making sure to leave one of their three strongest players connected at all times.

Violette was a little discomfited when she was assigned a watch with Gulnur, but the latter was almost ecstatic about it. She still wasn't quite familiar with these people and was slow to open up.

Gulnur, on the other hand, was happy he got to know her more. Making new friends in this game had been his greatest experience in New Eden.

They assigned the first watch to Astaroth and I'die, the second watch to Phoenix and Athena, and the third watch to Gulnur and Violette.

I'die was a little uncomfortable at first, to be separated from Athena, but he quickly adjusted. He knew Astaroth since the tournament, and was slowly getting accustomed to him.

They talked about small things during their turn, Astaroth trying to make the lad feel more at ease. I'die talked about his home, his family, and how he had to almost beg his parents to get a copy of the game.

Astaroth listened to him, feeling a dash of melancholy. He then explained how he had to do the same things with his parents when 'ToB' had just become popular.

"How did your parents react when you told them about New Eden?" I'die had asked.

"Unfortunately, I didn't get to tell them yet," Astaroth replied, looking at the sky for a few seconds.

"But I'm sure they are happy for me, wherever they are now," he added with a soft smile.

I'die looked at him, head cocked, for a second, and then understood the underlying meaning. He immediately bowed at a ninety-degree angle, his face flush with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry! That was so inconsiderate of me. I did not know--" I'die started apologizing.

"Not so loud," Astaroth chuckled as he cut him off.

"I'm so sorry!" I'die whispered loudly.

"Don't worry about it, I'die. It's not like I talk about it much. So it isn't your fault," Astaroth said, putting a hand on the elf's shoulder.

It took the young man a while to go back to small talk after that, as he was being careful not to step on another metaphorical landmine. Astaroth repeatedly told him it was fine, but I'die still felt bad about it.

During their three hours of patrol, the duo met only small fry monsters, barely worth the time to kill them. They did so anyway, since they were tasked with making sure no monster got to their camp.

The two of them together made quick work of any monster that wandered too close to their encampment, not even breaking a sweat while they did. The night would be quite relaxing if it went on like this.

When it came time to switch watch parties, Astaroth messaged Phoenix, and I'die messaged Athena. Both women came back online only seconds apart, their traits relaxed and seemingly well-rested.

After giving a quick rundown of the area to both women, I'die and Astaroth logged out to get some rest. Phoenix and Athena took over the patrol route, with the former heading into the trees, to get a better vantage point.

Their patrol was quite silent, as both women elected to keep the talking to a minimum. But it wasn't awkward by any measure.

Phoenix was a regular to night patrol on games and knew that talking less meant hunting more. As for Athena, she almost acted like a military in this situation.

If one wasn't looking for her, she would never be found in this dark forest, jumping among the treetops. The only reason Phoenix didn't lose track of her was that she could see her pin on the mini-map.

The pair hunted down a few more monsters, as their silence didn't scare away most of them. This would put the two previous ones on patrol to shame if they were there to see it.

These three hours of patrol also went without a hitch, with the only incident being minor. Athena thought she had heard some clicking noises coming from further away, but they never found anything, so brushed it aside.

They wrote to the last watch group, appraised them of the situation, and logged back out.

Chapter 163 Facing Another Horde

Gulnur and Violette set out for their patrol, the former constantly asking questions of the latter. Violette was reticent to answer at first, scared telling someone else about herself would be weird.

But she quickly caught on that Gulnur was only trying to become good friends with her and eventually opened up. Unfortunately, the boy was being so loud that most monsters fled them before they even got near.

Occasionally, there would be a bat that flustered overhead them, but it was always too high for Gulnur to reach, and Violette didn't want to fight unless necessary.

The bat would flutter around for a bit, then leave. This scene repeated a few times, all during their patrol round, and Violette was starting to find it weird.

Gulnur was so preoccupied with trying to befriend her, that he paid it little attention. But Violette was weary.

It was always the same bat, too, as she had slowly become accustomed to its mana signature. She eventually killed it, lest there was something else going on.

She fired a high-powered water jet at it, clipping one of its wings and bringing it down. When the bat collided with the ground, it died on impact.

As soon as it died, a strong pulse of mana permeated the area. Even Gulnur felt it, and he went on high alert instantly.

Another pulse radiated towards them, this time a little stronger. Gulnur's face paled.

"We need to head back to camp and wake the others up!" he shouted, turning around to head back to camp.

Violette asked no questions and followed behind him. She wondered what had him in such a panic until a third pulse hit them.

You are affected by drowsiness.

She opened up her status window to look at the mental statuses as she kept running. Her jaw dropped.

Mental Condition: Drowsy (10% reduction in agility, 10% chance to lose concentration during sustained actions)

This was terrible!

They both ran with all their might towards the camp, as they both messaged the rest of the party to get back online. The first responses came from I'die and Astaroth, who had been off for hours now, and probably were rested enough to hear their phones beep.

The first one online was I'die, who had his computer still running, ready to go, right next to his bed. Soon after came Astaroth, who had jumped into his pod, still in his underwear.

When he connected, Violette and Gulnur were just arriving at the camp. Behind them, a gargantuan swarm of hideous-looking brown bats.

The bats had enormous ears and beak-like mouths that looked to be made of soft tissue. But the biggest foe was what flew over them.

Flapping its gigantic wings over the swarm, a much larger bat, this one completely black, with a white muzzle. Its eyes were two small red beads shining in the night.

When the monster noticed Astaroth and I'die had appeared, it opened its maw, and a silent screech echoed through the air. Astaroth saw the pulse of mana, through his mana vision, as it passed through him.

Mind Over Body activated. Drowsiness resisted.

When he saw the notification, he turned his eyes to the party window. I'die had also resisted it, but Violette and Gulnur were both affected.

And by the small number over the bow, he could guess it had hit them more than once. He didn't know the effects yet, and he didn't care to find out either.

He focused his eyes on the gigantic black bat and scanned it.

Somnus Bat:

Level: 50

Grade: Elite (Zone Boss)

HP: 127'950

MP: 11'770

By the name alone, Astaroth could guess that a dragged-out fight against this monster was a bad idea. He would need to go all in from the start, and hope Phoenix would do the same.

And if that enemy alone wasn't enough, there were close to a thousand of the smaller bats flocking the skies. He scanned them too, to know how strong they were.

Their levels ranged from forty to fifty, and they weren't particularly resistant, but by the amount of MP they had, he guessed they could fire magic attacks.

His thoughts were confirmed when a bat came at him, opening its maw up. A pulse of magic came flying out, almost like a sonar pulse, and hit him directly.

-297

Mind Over Body passive activated. Resisted dissonance status.

Although the damage he took was dismal, the fact it could also apply a debuff was a terrible thing. With the number of bats flying in the air right now, they could rapidly overcome their numbers with all the status ailments they could inflict.

After firing its magic attack, the bat extended its claws toward Astaroth, aiming to claw him before retreating. The poor monster never had that chance, as Astaroth stepped aside before slicing its wings off.

His war axe was now gleaming in the moonlight, blood dripping off the blade. The bat screeched in pain before he delivered a finishing blow to its head.

That was the moment Athena logged back in. When she saw the situation, she instantly understood where the clicking noises had come from during her patrol.

Her eyes scanned the battlefield rapidly, and she spotted the boss monster. She ignored the smaller ones, focusing all her attacks on that one.

With the number of bats in the sky, it was a waste of time for her, who had no AOE attacks, to go after them. It was better for her to focus on that single target.

Astaroth smiled at her tactical thinking. He melded with Luna and started firing spell after spell at the bats.

He went for wider-range spells, this time, and fired some fireballs that exploded on contact. They did not do enough damage to kill the small monsters in one hit, but were enough to bring them down, where Genie and Gulnur made rapid work of them.

Phoenix was the last one to appear, and she immediately started burning the smaller bats to ashes. This was a true AOE mage's capability.

The decrease of pressure on Violette allowed her to concentrate more on attacking, and a blizzard quickly started raging high in the sky.

'Time to get serious,' Astaroth thought, as he messaged in the party chat.

'We need to all hit the big one together. Don't worry about the smaller ones for now.'

After typing that, he closed his eyes and murmured, 'Moonlit Sanctuary'.

Chapter 164 Mowing Down The Enemy

After murmuring his incantation, a bright ray of moonlight shone down from the sky. It encompassed the clearing where they had made camp, and everyone inside it instantly felt the effects.

Violette and Gulnur, who had been hit by multiple mental afflictions, felt their minds become clear once more, as the moonlight cleansed them away. Gulnur even saw his health ticking back up, and he gasped.

The dwarf turned his head toward Astaroth, his eyes wide.

"Where have you been hiding this?!" he exclaimed.

"I wasn't hiding anything. I just didn't have a reason to use it yet. Now stop wasting it and start attacking!" Astaroth replied, before turning his attention to the boss.

He cast his Moon Beam spell, not waiting to gather Aether, since he didn't have time for it. The small orb of milky white energy formed before his hand, before unleashing it torrent forward.

-6'822

The attack wiped out any bat that was unfortunate enough to be caught in front, as it slammed into the Somnus Bat. Although the attack only shaved about five percent of the boss' health, that was not the end of it.

The force behind the attack sent it barreling toward the ground, losing control over its flight. It corrected its fall, beating its large wings and returning to an upright position, but not before it reached the treetop's height.

I'die didn't miss a beat to act. He quickly directed his staff to the closest tree to the monster and chanted something in elvish. The tree's branches then rapidly extended upwards, wrapping around the bat's wings, keeping it from fleeing back out of reach.

The giant white bat tried wriggling free from its ensnarement, but strength was not its forte, as it failed to break the branches holding it.

Phoenix, who had been readying a massive fire spell, changed her target to the smaller bats. Using fire on the boss at this moment would only help it regain freedom.

Instead, she incinerated its underlings in rapid succession. Violette took over the mantle of the heavy damage dealer, as she focused an enormous amount of mana over the trapped monster.

"Cataclysmic event: Unending Hailstorm!" Violette chanted, shards of ice forming in the sky.

They instantly formed a million needles before raining down on the Somnus Bat. The spell was much more taxing on Violette, now that she had to cast it rapidly.

When she had used it previously, she would coax the ambient mana into her spell, making it more efficient. But she didn't have time for this right now, so she used her own mana pool.

It rapidly drained, as she maintained the spell, and she even had to use Mana Siphon many times in a row, just to maintain her channelling.

She was already starting to feel the sickness from over-using that technique, as it pumped a lot of unpurified mana into her system. But she held on.

It was worth it, as the damage she was doing was insane. Every second, a new damage number would appear over the Somnus Bat's head.

-749

-749

-1498!

It seemed small at first, but after maintaining the spell for thirty seconds, it showed.

Violette had to stop channeling, as she couldn't refrain from the sickness in her stomach anymore, which stemmed from too many Mana Siphons. She curled over and puked black gunk.

But her job was done.

The damage she did in thirty seconds of channelling her spell was equivalent to five of Astaroth's Moon Beams! And as an added benefit, it practically tore the wings of that bat to shreds.

Athena pounced on this development, firing an Impact Shot at the base of one of its wings. The already damaged appendage broke with a resounding snap as the branches holding it collapsed.

Violette had also killed a few more of the Echo Bats during her blizzard, and there were now less than two hundred of them left. But Phoenix was getting ready to fix that problem, too.

As soon as the boss hit the ground, a flaming tornado erupted around it, rising into the night skies, and making the area bright as day. The remaining bats flying over the area were all caught in the blaze.

Since Astaroth was still melded with Luna, his magic power was still very high. So he chipped in, forming another vortex, this one of wind, enveloping the first one.

It spun in the same direction, feeding the flames in oxygen, making it burn hotter. The flames started turning blue, reaching a new height in temperature.

A few seconds later, the party received the notification they had been waiting for.

You have killed a Somnus Bat (Elite Zone Boss) (Lvl 50). (16'667) Exp awarded.

This amount, stacked with close to three hundred and sixty-three thousand points from the swarm each, put all of them in a good mood.

Astaroth especially, since he, White Death, and Violette had levelled up from this encounter. This meant even more power for the dungeon crawl to come!

He was slowly inching back to the level ranges of the top players. Currently, Khalor still sat at number one, with a level forty-four, and Phoenix was still second, at level forty-two.

The level gaps had slowly shortened, as the amount of Exp required per level was getting higher and higher. Astaroth still kept the hope of catching up to them, though.

There was no way he would stay behind them and do nothing. His competitive spirit flared up as he thought of becoming number one and calling Khalor to brag.

But that wasn't quite attainable just yet. Khalor wasn't just standing still, either. The man was power levelling almost day in and day out.

That was the reason no one had yet passed him, even though guilds were plowing through dungeons as fast as they could, to level up their first-class players.

Astaroth snapped out of his thoughts, when the loot from all the monsters was amassed at the center of their camp. It was time to divvy up.

Most parties would have split the loot equally, and some might have split the loot by contribution. But they worked a little differently.

As they had agreed upon before leaving for the dungeon, any item, ingredient, or money worth loot, would be split among them all.

But the gear would go to the most fitting player, and the cores would be mostly going to Astaroth. He had agreed to renounce his part of the money-worth loot, so he could get the cores.

He had things he wanted to try out, after all.

Chapter 165 Reaching The Dungeon

Amongst the loot gathered, there were many monster cores and a few soul cores. But one core, in particular, caught his attention.

It was the Somnus Bat's soul core!

This was a big boon for him. Astaroth had already tried using normal soul cores to make spirit companions, but failed. It appeared any monster under the elite stage wasn't strong enough to be converted.

But the Somnus Bat was an elite monster! He could now have a third companion.

No one in the party objected when he started grabbing the cores for himself, as they had agreed upon it. Then, they dispatched the meats and leathers equally between each other.

Next were items.

Most items dropped by normal monsters were ingredients and materials. But zone bosses also dropped gear occasionally.

The previous zone boss, the ape king, had dropped two such items. And this one just dropped three!

The ape king had dropped a tower shield, made out of one of its chest plates. It looked like a big stone slab, but it was actually quite light and thin.

That didn't take away from its durability, though, and Gulnur had immediately equipped it. The other item it had dropped was a ring of constitution, which had also gone to Gulnur.

This boss, though, had dropped a set of daggers, a necklace, and a quarterstaff. The daggers went to Astaroth, who was the only dagger user in the group.

Bat Fang Daggers (2):

Grade: Special

Attack Power: 30 (Agi)

Durability: (50) (50)

Stat Bonus: +10 Agi

Special Ability: Has 50% chance to life leech the damage done on hit. Life leech heals for 10% of the damage done.

Description: These daggers were once the fangs of a mighty monster. Its ability to heal from its injuries is still embedded in the weapons.

He equipped the dagger set immediately, already feeling the agility boost. The daggers looked sharp and vicious, their white surface gleaming in the campfire light.

The necklace was called the Echolocation Necklace. As its name implied, it allowed the user to echo locate, and made the wearer able to maneuver in complete darkness with ease.

The echolocation ability had a range of a kilometre, and thus, it was given to their scout, Athena. She had tried it out almost immediately to get used to it.

With her eyes closed, she opened her mouth, sending out a pulse of high-frequency sound. It was soundless to the party, but Athena heard it clearly and the reverberations from it showed in her vision.

An image of the surrounding kilometre radius showed in her mind, in black and white. The shapes were distinct, and she could tell this would be a great tool for her in the near future.

As for the last item, the quarterstaff, they gave it to I'die. It was called the Staff Of Swarms.

It allowed the person equipped with it to summon a small swarm of creatures to control. The monsters it summoned had to be small, and weren't very strong, but he could use them in many ways.

I'die was already thinking about how to use this new item. After doing the split of loot, the sun was slowly peeking above the horizon.

They decided to rest for half an hour, and let the adrenaline from the previous fight go down before proceeding further. Astaroth used that time to tame the Somnus Bat's soul and closed his eyes.

After a brief struggle, Astaroth beat the creature down hard enough for it to yield. It then accepted the soul-binding contract and became his third spirit companion.

Funnily enough, the Somnus Bat had shrunk from its massive size, and was now the size of a regular bat on earth. Astaroth had named Morpheus, finding the name fitting a bat that induces sleep.

He couldn't wait to meld with it, to discover the new abilities he had gained from it. In the meantime, the new soul started orbiting his own, sweating into place.

When Astaroth opened his eyes again, he noticed everyone was looking at him. They seemed to be ready to get back on the road, and were gazing at him.

They didn't need to ask him if he had been successful, since he was wearing a grin on his face. Astaroth apologized for making them wait and gathered his things.

ꝛꝁꝅꝁ-ñovê|·cóm They soon left in the dungeon's direction.

On the way there, they crossed stray monsters many times, but never a horde. Either they were just outside the boss' territories, or they were just lucky enough to not cross paths.

They counted it as a good thing, since they still had almost a full day's worth of walking to do to get to the dungeon. Stopping every hour to fight a horde of monsters was good for farming, but would delay their goal.

Their trip proceeded smoothly, mostly, and they only ever stopped for brief breaks. Most times to eat, and let the helmet players rest off the game a little.

At some point, Phoenix and Astaroth discussed the possibility of buying pods for I'die and Athena. Gulnur also said he could chip in.

Astaroth had his money slowly piling up, and Phoenix still hadn't touched her prize money. As for Gulnur, he had explained he was from a wealthy family and had money set aside from his allowance.

Of course, they discussed that while the two players in question were offline. Violette wanted to help too, but she didn't have an allowance, so she had no money.

After their long day of walking, interspersed with breaks and fighting, they finally reached the dungeon entrance. The group rested outside of it, since it was a safe zone.

The game devs had made the entrance to dungeons safe zones, since when one died in a dungeon, he would respawn at the entrance outside. This ensured a player didn't die again from bad luck as soon as they reappeared.

The other cool thing about dungeons was that they waived the death penalty. That meant a player could die as many times as they wanted inside a dungeon, and not lose Exp.

This had made dungeons hot contested spots, since they ensured quick levelling without penalty. Guilds were already fighting over most of the known ones.

The party instilled a watch again for the night, keeping the pairings as they were, and started resting.

Tomorrow was a big day.

Chapter 166 Changing Dungeon

After an eventless night, the entire group gathered at the dungeon portal in the morning. Tension and anticipation were palpable.

The priest player Phoenix had mentioned joined them not long after they started getting ready. It was a mystery for Astaroth how he got here on his own, but he didn't pry.

The man was a short skinny blond priest, dressed in clerical robes, that seemed to be draped over a chain-mail. He could easily pass as a priest from a templar order.

The man wasn't much of a talker, and barely introduced himself. His name was Silent Light.

After getting the introductions out of the way, their stress levels rose again.

They were going to attempt a dungeon many levels over their own, and were trying to beat it quickly. Astaroth had gathered info on forums during his resting time, and apparently, a guild had found another level fifty dungeon.

They were attempting it the next day, and now, this meant the party had only one day to go through this one. Because a guild would be much better equipped to go through a dungeon of this difficulty.

Not only did they have more players, but they also had better equipment generally. There was also the constant nagging feeling that Phoenix and Astaroth had, that Khalor might be doing something similar on his end.

This built up pressure on everyone's shoulders, as they were now competing against two very serious threats to their achievement. But Astaroth was confident they would succeed.

After a brief reminder of what they would see inside, Gulnur was the first one to step in. Following him was Astaroth, Phoenix, Violette, Silent, Athena, and finally, I'die.

Entering in this order ensured maximum efficiency of their respective roles, and also made sure Gulnur was always in front with Astaroth close behind, to take aggro if something jumped at them on entry.

Although nothing was upon them directly on entry, the environment itself was quite different inside than outside. The hot, humid air immediately assaulted Astaroth upon crossing the portal.

It was like he had just entered a sauna, but with no walls in sight. The surrounding jungle was thick, and it was hard to see much farther than a few dozen meters away.

When the last two players entered, Athena complained about the humidity.

"This is going to frazzle my hair. Also, it's going to be terrible on my skin. Urgh..." she said, grimacing.

"Yeah, same for me," I'die said, scrunching his nose.

His words elicited a giggle from Violette. She wasn't used to hearing a boy complain about skin issues, and it lightened her mood.

I'die had mentioned to the group that he was Chinese, and that, as a respectable Asian man, his skincare was not to be trifled with.

Of course, Gulnur agreed, since he had grown up in a rich family, where appearances were of the utmost importance. But his medical condition meant he couldn't use many products.

Astaroth was probably the only boy in the group that had never thought about taking care of his skin. It was a foreign concept to him, as he grew up surrounded by dirty boys and mud-throwing games.

If Silent Light agreed with him, he never worded it.

The most Astaroth did for his face was wash it with water daily. That's what he called skincare.

The party kept advancing through the jungle, as they tried to explain to this caveman the benefits of exfoliating, until Astaroth's head snapped in a direction, as he signalled everyone to stop and keep quiet.

Not a second later, he pulled out his shield as a projectile impacted it with a dull thud sound.

When Astaroth peeked at the front of his shield, two fangs were lodged in it. He looked back into the jungle, and two yellow eyes stared back at him.

Slowly, the eyes started getting closer to the tree line, where everyone could see them. A gigantic cobra slithered out of the jungle, brown with red spots adorning its long body.

It was at least twenty meters long, and its hood stretched out three meters wide from its head. The cobra's massive tongue was whipping the air rapidly as it stared down at the party trespassing on its territory.

Giant Cobra:

Level: 50

Grade: Special

HP: 17'500

MP: 1'800

They had been waiting for the first monster to show up. Now that they were staring at it, their excitement reached its peak.

Gulnur looked at the snake with a manic grin and taunted it.

"Come and try to eat me, you oversized danger noodle!" he shouted, slamming his hammer onto his new stone shield.

The cobra tilted its head down to look at the dwarf and seemed to scoff. The movement didn't escape Gulnur, and it lit a fire under his ass.

He dashed at the monster, hellbent on teaching it a lesson. As the two of them clashed, Astaroth melded with White, and dashed into the fight, too.

The casters and Athena started attacking from afar, pelting the cobra with spells and arrows. I'die focusing on trying to restrict the snake's movement, while Silent healed Gulnur.

The snake was taken down rapidly, as they had a very high damage output, and this was a single beast. But they knew they were only at the beginning of the dungeon.

The scouting party Gulnur had been part of, had found the few first rooms to be very easy, but that didn't last long. So the party was already on high alert.

Gulnur, who had been here previously, was already starting to feel uneasy, though. There was something different about the path they were taking.

He wasn't very good with directions, and the dungeons blurred out the map on re-entry, so he couldn't tell for sure. But his gut was telling him something was wrong.

After a few more minutes of walking through the jungle, he realized what it was.

"Everyone stop!" he called out.

"I think the path is different from the last time I came. I don't remember going this way when I scouted here."

The party stopped advancing. If the path had changed, the level of danger they were in had just gone up drastically.

Chapter 167 Forming A Plan

Knowing where you are heading and what monsters to expect makes exploring easy. The opposite made it dangerous.

Since they were now going blind, they had to change their party formation. Athena would have to go ahead of the group, acting as a scout, while the rest of them clustered closer.

She nodded her head and climbed into the trees. From there, she closed her eyes and used her new item's ability.

She opened her mouth, and the silent pulse emerged. The echoes that came back to her showed her the path ahead and the monsters' forms, but it came back shorter than her first use.

That made her frown.

She jumped back down from the tree to explain what she had seen, and Phoenix connected the dots.

"Now we know why it's called Jungle Maze. This place is a magical maze. That means it changes as we advance," she said.

This blew up their plan of using Athena as a scout. Now they were in a bind.

They instead decided to stay more conservative and grouped up in a thigh formation. They walked ahead slowly, making sure they were looking everywhere around.

Athena used the echolocation skill every minute, just to make sure they weren't heading in an ambush. She could see some monsters at the edge of the range, but since she couldn't see much further ahead of them, she didn't know how many there really were.

Their mini-map slowly revealed more and more of itself, making their path known for now. But they did not know which way led to the boss room, and which way led to a potential death trap.

After walking for ten minutes, they reached the cluster of monsters that Athena had detected. They approached cautiously, making sure they stayed undetected for as long as they could.

What came into view was a group of big multicoloured frogs. They looked cute and harmless, but all the players present knew better than to judge by appearance.

They were still too far away to scan what the monsters' names were, but they soon understood one thing about them.

One frog had an eye spinning around, and then it suddenly spat out its tongue blazingly fast, catching a small creature passing near the tree line.

The tongue immediately grasped the poor little thing and brought it back into the frog's mouth. When the critter was trapped in its maw, Astaroth and the others could hear a very distinct hiss.

The small part of the creature that was still hanging out of the frog's mouth started sizzling and melting.

παῖδα-ñovê|·cóm 'Shit. Acid.' was the thought they all had at the same time.

This wasn't inherently dangerous, damage-wise. But acid damage burned through armor durability at an accelerated pace.

Fighting against an acid creature for too long would almost guarantee the armor you were wearing would break. There were ways to prevent this, of course, such as oils and acid resistance spells and potions.

But no one had brought any of those, since they weren't expecting any acid monsters in a jungle dungeon. They started whispering amongst each other.

"What do we do? Do we find another path?" Gulnur asked.

His armor was the most vulnerable to acid since it was pure metal.

"I saw another path earlier, but I think there were more monsters there," Athena replied.

"We could lose a lot of time if we switch paths and the next group of monsters also has acid attacks," Phoenix added.

"What about razing the whole clearing in one attack? You could use your fire tornado, and I can boost it, as we did against the bats," Astaroth said, offering a plan.

"It won't work. My fire magic is weakened with all this humidity," Phoenix answered.

"Umm... Exc—" Violette tried saying, before being interrupted by I'die.

"Maybe I could capture all of them in a bog spell? They wouldn't be able to move,"

"That wouldn't work. They could still attack with their tongues," Athena said, shaking her head.

"Exc—" Violette tried interjecting again.

This time, Gulnur cut her off.

"I really don't like the idea of having my armor melt on me. Or my shield, for that matter."

"Pard—" Violette tried again, cut off by Phoenix this time.

"We should go see if the other path is safer. Maybe it—"

Before she could finish her thought, Silent smacked his cane on a nearby tree.

Thwack

Everyone stopped talking at his outburst. Silent had been mostly, as his name suggested, well, silent.

"The girl wants to talk," he mumbled, before going back to his stoic face.

The party members then turned to look at Violette. Her little cheeks were puffed and red.

Phoenix was the first one to apologize to her. Then all the others followed suit.

"What were you trying to say, Violette?" Astaroth asked her.

"I was going to say that I might have a spell that can help us. But it would mean I can't attack and can't be disturbed while I'm channelling it," she answered, her cheeks still slightly puffed.

"Can you elaborate?" Phoenix asked, now intrigued.

"When my master was teaching me the basics of water magic, he told me about its use against acid. He taught me a spell that can negate the acid damage to durability."

"The spell is called Water Skin. It creates a thin layer of water on your body and armor, washing away the acid when you are hit by some. The problem is that it is a single-target spell."

"Are you saying you can cast it on all of us?" Athena asked, befuddled.

She was not a mage, but she knew maintaining that many spells at the same time was a ludicrous claim to make.

"I—" Violette started responding, looking unsure, before Astaroth interrupted her.

"I believe you can do it," he said confidently.

"So do I," Phoenix chimed in.

Violette looked at them with a beaming smile.

"I think I can," she said, nodding her head.

"But I'll have to stay behind everyone, so I don't get attacked."

"I'll cover her in the back line," Silent Light said, stepping next to her.

Astaroth nodded at the man and nodded back.

"Then we have a start of a plan. Let's keep this ball rolling," Phoenix said, leaning into the group.

Chapter 168 Reaching The First Boss

A couple of minutes later, the plan was set into motion. Astaroth and Gulnur rushed out of the jungle from one side of the clearing, and the rest of them sneaked in from the other.

Astaroth had already melded with White, and he also summoned Morpheus, his new companion. Morpheus served as an additional long ranged harasser, and his occasional debuffs would help them too.

Once Astaroth and Gulnur had gotten the attention of all the monsters, the rest of the party started going to town. Arrows started peppering the frogs, as well as binding spells and blasts of fire.

Violette was carefully tucked behind Silent Light, her forehead creased, as she maintained concentration on her spells. Around the body of every other party member, a thin film of water was floating.

When the first acid attack finally hit Gulnur's shield, his face scrunched for a second, before a smile gleamed from his beard.

'It works!' he thought.

He then stopped worrying and went all in. The faster these frogs went down, the less strain Violette had to endure.

Astaroth was much too fast for the frogs to catch him, and he was using this criss-cross between them, sometimes causing friendly fire.

It seemed the frogs' mouths were immune to the acid, but the rest of their body, not so much. When they got attacked by the other frogs, their bodies sizzled and showed clear signs of corrosion.

This was a positive turn of events. Athena noticed the spots and grinned.

The melted spots that kept appearing on the frogs gave her more and more weak points to target. She shot arrow after arrow, using skills amid them, maximizing her damage output.

Every arrow she fired planted itself into the small melted spots on her targets, making the frogs slowly look like porcupines.

The group of seven frogs was slowly ground to death until the last one died to Astaroth's axe. Once the frog dropped to the ground, Violette let go of her channelling, dropping to her knees.

She looked exhausted, but a smile floated on her lips. She had done it!

She had maintained six spells at the same time. Even if they were the same spells, and were not complicated ones, this was a great step forward for her.

But it was a tiring one. Almost all her mana was gone, and she had used Mana Siphon a few times during the fight, too.

Water Skin was not a costly spell to maintain on its own. It only cost ten points of mana per second.

But when you maintained it on six players at once, that rapidly became a burden. Even though the fight lasted about three minutes, that was a very costly three minutes.

The team elected to take a small rest, so Violette could get back to peak condition. She was a very important asset to the party, after all.

After resting for five minutes, her mana was back to full, and her breathing had steadied, too. Violette stood, signalling she was ready to keep going.

While the others picked their things up, she walked over to Silent Light.

"Thank you for covering me earlier. I saw you take a few attacks for me, and I know the healer should be the one that gets protection," Violette said, giving a small bow.

"No worries, young lady. If I couldn't take a few hits for an important teammate, I wouldn't join dungeon runs," Silent Light replied, his tone monotonous.

His lack of emotion almost took aback Violette, but she then remembered who she was talking to. The man barely talked or reacted even during combat.

It was almost disconcerting. She bowed again, this time feeling a bit more embarrassed.

'Am I the one that is overacting?' she wondered, as she walked back to Astaroth's side.

Meanwhile, Silent watched her walk away, his eyes deadpan and emotionless. But in his head, a whole other thing was happening.

'Yuss! She saw me act cool and save her! I bet I looked awesome when I stood up for her too!' he screamed in his mind.

Silent Light was his gaming persona, but the human behind it was far less silent. He had always enjoyed acting cool and collected when he gamed.

Roleplaying the silent hero was his favourite activity, but he himself was an overexcitable kid that had the eighth-grade syndrome. Silent Light was a young teenager, with too much time on his hands.

And he loved gaming more than anything. He knew Phoenix from another game, and had stayed friends with her when transferring to New Eden.

Phoenix knew how he really was, since she had gamed with him for some time now, and sometimes he would drop his act accidentally. But he stayed a very talented player and healer.

So she never held his weirdness against him. She had also seen the interaction between him and Violette, and was chuckling inside.

'He must be losing his shit right about now,' she thought, shaking her head with a giggle.

Astaroth noticed her laugh and saw who she was looking at.

'Is she into the silent type? That would explain a lot of things.' he thought.

'I couldn't act like that even if I tried,' he said internally.

After having picked their things up, the party started advancing slowly into the dungeon once more. Their pace was steady, as Athena kept using her new skill to tell them which direction to go.

After plowing through a few more quick encounters, the party finally reached the first boss room. It was established in the forums that all the currently known dungeons had three bosses.

There could be more in higher-level dungeons, but that was the current established paradigm. So they were happy to reach this place, since that meant they were progressing well.

They could tell they were in the boss room, because the jungle opened up from the small path to a large open space, with a stone floor.

At the far end of the room, there was a wall that stood tall and strong. It seemed the only door to proceed forward was in this room.

And in front of this door, a humanoid was sitting cross-legged. From the distance they were standing, they couldn't make out his traits.

But to his side, planted in the ground, there was a tall halberd. They understood he was the boss.

Chapter 169 Finding A Pace

As the party slowly inched forward, on high alert, the path behind them suddenly closed up. Vines sprouted from the trees and ground, intertwining together, forming an impassable wall.

There was now only one way out, and that was behind the boss. When they reached the center of the room, the humanoid figure lifted its head.

Now that they were closer, they could glean more details of his appearance. The humanoid figure was a lean, well-built male.

His body looked like a professional martial artist, sculpted from the toughest stone. As he stood from his cross-legged position, the party noticed something weird about his legs.

His thighs seemed much thicker than normal, and his shins were slim but looked sturdy. As for his feet, he had no footwear on, and they could see four long toes with pods at the tips.

Then his face was revealed more clearly to them. His traits looked nothing human, as his head was one of a frog.

His big, bulging eyes looked straight at them with a predatory look. That's when the party could finally scan their enemy.

Grippli Lieutenant:

Level: 50

Grade: Elite (Zone Boss)

HP: 479'250

MP: 8'580

As they scanned him, the frog man opened his mouth.

"Are you ready to meet your maker?"

"You can speak?" Gulnur asked, surprised the frog could talk.

"What an ignorant question. I would expect as much from a lowly life form like yours, dwarf. Now answer my question. Are you ready to meet your maker?"

Gulnur felt insulted at being called a lowly life form. But he knew better than to succumb to his anger and charge at a boss monster without thinking.

"Hmph! We'll see who's a lowly life form, once you are on the ground dying, you amphibian freak."

The Grippli Lieutenant started croaking rhythmically, in what the group assumed was a laugh.

"So you have chosen death. Very well."

As he finished saying this, the frogman jumped forward, his muscular legs propelling him like a drag racing car. His acceleration was almost instantaneous.

Gulnur had already prepared his shield for an attack, and the impact still pushed him back into his party. But from there, Astaroth used the opening to the boss' side to attack with his long sword.

But the attack didn't reach its intended target, as the Grippli lifted his halberd's butt end, sending it to meet the longsword, as the frogman jumped back out of range simultaneously.

Clang

The weapons collided, and Astaroth felt the force behind the impact.

'So heavy!' he thought.

He melded with White in that instant, trying to mitigate the blowback, and succeeded to a minor degree. His feet still slid back a few feet.

Then he summoned Morpheus, keeping Luna in reserve for now. He wanted to meld with her next, so he couldn't waste her timer just yet.

Morpheus appeared out of his back, flying up in the air. The small bat started bombarding the Grippli Lieutenant with sonic attacks, using its debuff attacks every time they were off cooldown.

Astaroth dashed back into the melee with the frog, trying to keep it pinned down, while Gulnur slowly ran back at it too. Together, they tried pinching the monster between each other, but failed at it.

This was an experienced combatant, and locking him in place was almost impossible. The Grippli would parry and block the incoming attacks from one of them and entirely dodge the others, in a graceful movement.

His halberd swung around him like the blades of a windmill, in a constant rotation, batting away any attack that threatened him. But they weren't the only two enemies he had to worry about.

Astaroth's attacks were coming at him with a speed high enough to warrant some attention. So when arrows and spells started coming at it from different angles, it started taking hits.

It had to choose between taking the blows in melee, or the attacks from afar, and its defence was slowly showing openings. But that was short-lived.

The boss jumped back, reaching the wall behind it, before running up it like a ninja. Once it was at a decent height, it croaked loudly.

From the top of the vine wall surrounding the boss room, three more frogmen came jumping down. They were armed with shields and swords, and started running at the party's back line.

Astaroth had to divert his attention from the boss, so he could keep them off the healer and ranged players. Even though they could have taken care of them by themselves, it was better to have him tank them.

It would allow the back line to make quicker work of them. He dashed through the three frogs, tagging them with his daggers on the way through, to catch the aggro.

Once he was between them and the back line, he started dancing around them while attacking, imitating the knife style he had stolen from Stinger during the tournament.

Athena also pelted the three adds with arrows, shifting her focus there to get rid of them quickly. Thirty seconds after they appeared, the frogs were already dead.

All the focus then returned to the boss monster, who was attacking Gulnur, with rapid consecutive blows. The dwarf was sweating from the pressure, but still mitigated every hit.

When Astaroth came back into the melee, Gulnur was finally able to breathe a little. But the situation rapidly changed again.

The Lieutenant started dipping in and out of melee, and spitting water bullets at Phoenix, Athena, I'die, Violette, and Silent. The first time it did so, Phoenix took the water bullet to the face.

Her health took a rapid drop, as the damage from the attack was nothing to scoff at. Silent had almost instantly healed her back to full, but this put the back line on the defensive, effectively reducing the pressure on the boss.

They could see how taking a dungeon at this level, with a small party, was playing against them right now. But it was too late for regret.

They fought with all their might, as they still had confidence in their victory. Two minutes after summoning the first batch of soldiers, the Grippli summoned another.

Phoenix kept track of the timers on skills and took mental notes. The more she knew about it, the easier it was to counter it.

Surprisingly, for now, the boss had yet to use anything other than his water bullets and the soldier summoning. Then again, his martial skill alone made him a terrible foe.

This was going to take a while.

Chapter 170 Berserk Boss

The first five minutes of the fight went by quickly, as everyone was hyper-focused. As soon as Astaroth's melding timer hit zero, he summoned out White, and Melded with Luna.

He immediately started amassing Aether, while he went from a melee stance to a kiting mage stance. He still hadn't learned any hard-hitting spells, so he was rapidly firing weaker ones instead.

The boss was also starting to get affected by the debuffs Morpheus was inflicting. This effectively reduced the pressure on Gulnur some more, as some of its attacks started missing him entirely.

Astaroth honestly felt like it should have been worse by now, but he took what he could get. Three stacks of dissonance, and one stack of drowsiness currently affected the Grippli.

The dissonance status was making it have a fifteen percent chance of missing its attacks, five percent per stack. And the drowsiness reduced its agility, making it more manageable to fight against.

Of course, this only slightly bettered their odds, but every bit helped. With the boss getting slower and hitting less, the pace of combat steadied out a bit.

A minute later, the lieutenant summoned the next batch of soldiers. This time, Astaroth barely had to do anything, as Phoenix incinerated them almost instantly.

She had been waiting for them to spawn, charging up a flame tornado. This ensured that their attacks on the boss kept going without delay.

She couldn't do this to the next batch, but she was already instructing Violette to take the next group out similarly. The girl nodded, already having an idea of how to do so.

Seeing it was becoming more and more difficult to hit his prey with his halberd, the Gripli went into a more hand-to-hand style, using his halberd like a bo staff.

Fighting closer like this made it harder to miss, since the discrepancy in his movements was smaller. On the other hand, he also put himself within Gulnur's reach.

Gulnur, who had been purely on the defensive until now, grinned as he switched to a more offensive style. His hammer started coming into contact with the frogman's body, slowly chipping at his health.

He also let attacks hit him more often, but it was a tradeoff he was willing to pay. After letting a few good hits through, Gulnur primed his weapon backward, as it shone in a golden light.

"Retribution Strike!"

Thwack!

-41'630!

The Gripli Lieutenant tried blocking the hit with the shaft of his weapon, but the power behind the strike exceeded his expectations. It batted aside the halberd as the hammer impacted his ribcage.

The frogman felt the air inside his lungs escape his body, as the blow threw him like a rag doll into the wall he was guarding.

-19'800

The impact on the wall took another slice of his health away, but his troubles were far from over. Seeing as the boss was shortly incapacitated, every other party member threw hard-hitting spells and skills.

The damage quickly piled onto the boss monster, as it received a sudden bombardment of spells and attacks. The attacks kicked up a cloud of dust as they hit him, making the area unseeable.

They stopped attacking, for fear of hitting nothing and wasting resources. As they waited for the dust to settle, they heard the weird jerky croaking from inside the dust cloud.

"You have proven yourselves to be worthy adversaries. I might fall to you today, but I won't be going down alone."

As the frogman finished saying this, the cloud of dust had settled back down. The monster's health was down to around twenty-five percent of its full value.

But then, the Gripli did something unexpected.

It pulled out a dagger from a hidden sheath on its back. The dagger looked rather simple, but the etchings on the blade were glowing red.

Astaroth and Violette had never seen anything like it yet, but the rest of the party had.

"Die! Restrain him! Quick!" Phoenix shouted, as she fired a bolt of fire at the dagger.

Die conjured a vine out of the ground under the boss' feet, trying to tie his arm down. But it was quicker than him.

The Gripli Lieutenant jumped back, landing on the wall, as its feet stuck to it, and it laughed.

"Now, you die!"

After yelling that, it violently stabbed the dagger into its own heart. Astaroth looked at it incredulously.

But once the dagger was embedded to the hilt, red glowing veins started spreading from the stab wound.

"Fuck! We need to kill it! Now!" Phoenix howled.

She then started charging up her flame tornado again. But before she could finish casting it, a shadow appeared next to her.

It was the boss. He had moved so fast; it was like he teleported.

He had no weapon in his hands, but his leg was coming at her blazingly fast, and she couldn't move in time.

Just as the boss' foot impacted her side, her skin glowed goldenly. It violently knocked her away, sending her flying off like a rock from a catapult.

Phoenix rapidly slammed into the vine wall surrounding the boss room, the air being knocked out of her lungs. Luckily for her, Silent had put up an invulnerability skill just in time, and she took no damage.

But that skill didn't come cheap, as it almost fully depleted his mana reserves, and the cooldown on it was extremely long. After kicking Phoenix away, the frogman turned to the man that had saved her life.

His eyes were bulging and red as he grinned like a madman. He dashed toward Silent Light, who was huffing for air from mana depletion.

Gulnur was running toward him, but he wouldn't make it in time. Fortunately, Astaroth was closer and faster.

Astaroth deflected the incoming punch from Silent with a Shield Bash skill. But that put him directly in front of the berserk frogman.

The Grippli pivoted on its left foot, sending a roundhouse kick at Astaroth's back with his right foot.

-12'980!!

The kick sent him flying forward, taking away almost a quarter of his HP, as he flew toward the trees and vines at the edge of the room. But Astaroth had a surprise for the boss, too.

Right before he impacted the wall of trees and vines, he used his skill Traveling Roots, melting into the tree trunk without taking damage.

He circled the room from within the wall of trees and vines, before popping back out behind the boss, who was still walking toward their healer.

"Eyes on me, you amphibian fuck!" he shouted.