

## **New Eden 541**

### Chapter 541 Strange Dungeon

Astaroth and Phoenix reappeared inside the dungeon, which looked like some old abandoned ruins of a town. The stone and dried mud constructions clues to a long-gone mode of building things, and it told them what kind of dungeon to expect.

But there were no monster corpses or remnants anywhere for them to glean what type of enemy they would face. As they dove further in, the map to the dungeon explored for them already, since they joined a party already inside, they directed themselves toward the green blips on their map.

Strangely, there was no miasma anywhere to be seen, or any demonic mana remnants floating in the air. Astaroth frowned as he clearly saw the particles emanating from the portal.

"Something is wrong. There seems to be no trace of demonic mana here, but I saw some on the portal."

Phoenix flew next to him as they zoomed across the empty streets.

"Maybe the demonic mana or miasma is only further inside the dungeon."

Astaroth nodded his head, her words a possibility.

They moved forward much faster than the group had since there were no monsters to fight, and in a few minutes, reached the boss zone. There was no door to the boss zone, or barrier delimitating the zone.

Only an open town square, with a well in the center. But no ally in sight.

Astaroth and Phoenix could see the green dots on their map, and it showed the party was right next to them, moving around as if fighting. But the players were nowhere to be seen.

Astaroth looked around, trying to find what could cause this. Was it an illusion?

Were the players here but they couldn't see them? But in his inspection, his mind crossed over the well, and something caught his attention.

A flicker of mana escaped the top of the well, and Astaroth frowned.

As he neared the stone well, he noticed a mana fluctuation coming from it.

"I think I found something!" he called out to Phoenix.

She quickly flew over to him, landing on the ground.

"What is it?"

From this close, she could feel the mana coming from the well, and she knew something was amiss. But she couldn't tell what it was.

Her mana vision was more of a mana sensing, and she couldn't see the mana.

"This surface... It looks like an illusion. I can sense mana in the well, like something is there, and can see a thin veil of mana. I think this is the way to the boss room."

Phoenix looked inside the well and could see a reflection of herself and the sky, deep below, like looking at still water. But she trusted the words of Astaroth.

"Only one way to find out," she said.

Following this, she hopped over the well wall and plunged into the hole. Instead of splashing into the water at the bottom of the well, she passed through a viscous matter that felt like passing through jello, and ended up twenty feet above the ground, in an enclosed area.

She immediately combusted herself again, catching her fall and taking flight, and gasped at what she saw below. Right behind her, Astaroth passed through the gelatinous mana membrane, flapping his wings as he entered the true boss room.

Down below them, all six players were running around, but something was amiss.

There was no boss monster to be seen, and neither was there any miasma. But Astaroth could sense a demonic entity's presence, the mana signature heavy in the air.

He scanned all the players below, most of them already on the cusp of dropping dead, and found the culprit.

The heavily armoured human, Galtion, was oozing demonic mana. Over the right side of his face, a thin veil of demonic mana was floating, forming the ugly face of a demon.

Astaroth quickly understood that the room must have been heavy with miasma when they entered it, and one person ended up being the host to it.

Galtion's health bar was flashing red, his HP stuck at one point, but regardless of the greataxe slashes that SharpTusk was landing on him, it wasn't budging.

'Shit... We should have brought a priest,' Astaroth thought.

But there was no time to go back and fetch one.

The gnome in the party, Food Goblin, was running from Galtion, fear clear on his face, as his health bar was also teetering close to empty. Galtion chased after him, almost hitting him many times, but getting intercepted by the Orc player, who tried his best to keep his party alive.

"When are the reinforcements gonna get here?!" SharpTusk shouted.

Barely was he done speaking those words, that he dropped his guard on Galtion, and the possessed human flashed away from him. When he reappeared, his demonic face morphing to a manic grin, he was right before Food Goblin, spear raised, as it flashed countless times toward the Gnome.

Food Goblin closed his eyes, expecting this to be his demise. But no pain came.

Only the sound of metal clashing on metal.

When he reopened his eyes, in between him and his used-to-be friend, stood a tall man, with wings larger than himself, wielding a sword just as fast as the spear, parrying every blow, before kicking away Galtion.

"Luna! Moonlit Sanctuary! Now!"

As Astaroth said that, he used his right wing to push the gnome away from himself and into the group of players further behind. Luna stood before them, smiling brightly.

"Aye aye, Papa!"

The little Ash Elf girl, with a crown of antlers and eyes of milky white, raised her arms. As soon as she did, a large beam of pure white light smashed into the ground, enveloping all the players, as they felt their bodies regenerating suddenly.

Astaroth sighed at the 'Papa' she said, but let it slide for now. He had more urgent matters to attend to.

Before him, the human dragoon was flailing his spear around in a weird motion, screaming his lungs out.

"No! No! No! You can't interrupt my hunt! You pesky pointy ears! You must die! Die! Die DIE!"

The demonic face suddenly screeched, the mana inside Galtion exploding outward, kicking up a gust of wind and a cloud of dust.

Astaroth knew this was only the beginning.

#### Chapter 542 Gauging Power

Astaroth stayed focused on the mana signature of the demon, inside the cloud of dust, making sure he didn't lose sight of it. But something suddenly flew at him, forcing him to wrench his attention away from the demon momentarily.

Galtion lunged at him, spear extended, in a sloppy stab, aiming for Astaroth's torso.

Astaroth quickly smacked the spear tip away from his chest with his blade, but something felt off. As the spear tip angled away from him, Galtion almost tripped on his feet, weirdly catching himself, his body almost floating over the ground.

That was when Astaroth saw a dozen small strings of mana attached to Galtion. He also noticed the glazed-over eyes of the human player, through the visor of his half-burnt helmet.

Galtion's health bar still showed one HP, but his status showed him as unconscious.

"So this demon is controlling him... That's not good."

Turning his head slightly, Astaroth looked at the rest of the party, which Phoenix was standing in front of, making sure they healed themselves. She was acting as a secondary layer of protection, in case the demon lunged at them.

Currently, those players were a liability. If the demon got hold of their bodies, this fight would quickly turn into an all-out brawl, with only him and Phoenix against the demon and his six lackeys.

Of course, Astaroth was never truly alone.

He noticed it was taking no mana to hold Luna out, and this hinted him to some higher form of spirit summoning he had yet to reach. Luna now had a body of her own, graciously gifted by Nemus, and he guessed she could pull her own mana from the surrounding air.

If only he could do the same for his other soul companions, he thought.

But a movement from the dust cloud brought his focus back. He was still in combat, after all.

A sudden gust of wind pushed the dust cloud away, revealing what had been hiding inside of it.

Standing tall, at over eight feet tall, a slender, almost boney demon with bright red skin looked down at them. His sunken eyes darted around the room, stopping on each of his opponents, and his mouth opened.

A shrill screech echoed out of it, strident enough to cause everyone to cover their ears. Astaroth's eyes squinted.

He could feel only a small amount of mana coming from the demon, which would normally be good. But the burst he had felt earlier was much larger.

This meant the demon was hiding his true strength, or getting himself out of Galtion's body had drained most of his strength away. But this could be terrible both ways.

A weakened demon would do anything to get his full power back, and that meant the weaker players in the boss room were in danger. But a demon that could hide his strength, from Astaroth no less, was big trouble.

Astaroth decided it was better to find out which of the two possibilities it was. Lunging at him, Astaroth changed the Ad Astra's shape, going for a halberd, instead of his sword.

He wanted to have a melee weapon, but stay further back, where he could assess the demon's moves better. A long-shafted halberd would do this for him.

Going for a full stab as his first attack, Astaroth watched as the demon tilted his head toward him. The demon's smirk almost seemed like he was wondering what a mortal could do to him.

Astaroth smirked back.

'You're in for a big surprise, if you underestimate me, filth.'

The halberd jabbed forward lightning fast, as Astaroth suddenly wind stepped forward, accelerating blazingly fast, blurring forward.

The pointy tip of his halberd plunged into the demon's abdomen, dark purple liquid splashing out from the sides, as the demon's eyes went wide, bellowing out another screech, this one pained.

Astaroth plunged his weapon deep into the demon, the axe head stopping on the ribs of the creature, as the tip poked out of its back. He smiled at the demon.

"Didn't think a mortal could damage you, did you? I'll send you back to hell, where you belong!"

Screaming this, Astaroth lifted his weapon, the demon still stuck on it, and swung it around, sending the demon flying into the stone buildings that enclosed the area. The demon flew off like a comet, slamming into the stone buildings, which by magical means didn't instantly collapse.

As the demon pulled itself out of the cratered building's side, it now eyes Astaroth with unabated hatred. It screeched again loudly, lunging forward.

Astaroth braced himself, waiting for the demon to collide with him, but it suddenly blurred out from in front of him. Astaroth's eyes went wide.

'He's fast!'

Astaroth felt a tingle in his spine, his mind telling him to duck, and he did. As he ducked low, a gust of wind passed over his head, tussling his hair.

He couldn't see the attack, but he knew that would have taken a lot of his health. Jumping back on his feet, Astaroth had figured out which of the cases the demon was.

It had been hiding its power.

Rare were the things that could escape his eyes, given his stats while melded, but this demon was barely a red blur to him. He felt like he was trying to fight the crimson speedster.

Another jolt in his body told him to jump to his left, and he listened to his instinct. After he jumped aside, five thin gashes appeared where he had been, cleaving cleanly into the compacted soil.

Astaroth hated being on the defensive. His eyes darted around, trying to catch the demon's form, but all he could see were red blurs zooming around him.

From Phoenix's perspective, the matter was even worse. To her, Astaroth was dodging attacks from something she couldn't even see.

It was like trying to follow a bullet with her eyes.

She quickly erected a flaming wall around her and the other players, trying to safeguard them while they healed. Luna was maintaining the Moonlit Sanctuary much longer than Astaroth could, and using its regenerative properties to bring them back to full, but it wasn't as fast as she would like.

The little girl wanted to join her master in fighting, as she watched the red demon dart around, his form clear as day in her eyes, wishing she could teach it a lesson.

'If only these weaklings weren't almost dead...' she thought.

To make matters worse once more, Galtion, who had been static for a while, finally started moving again.

#### Chapter 543 Brutal Solution

Galtion rushed toward the party that was healing, not even bothering with interfering with Astaroth, as the demon knew it needed no help.

Phoenix thought about incinerating his body, severing the strings controlling him, but she also held back from doing it. The death penalty for her killing him wouldn't be a small one, and it would put him far behind his party's level, transforming him into a burden.

The Fey man in the party lightly coughed to get her attention.

Phoenix first grabbed the charging Galtion, pulling his spear into a spin, and flinging him away like a rag doll, making sure she didn't throw him into any wall or structure that might deal damage to him.

"What is it, Chronos?"

Phoenix could read the name above his head, now that they were in the same party.

"I know a way to stop him for a moment, but I think it would be better if we stopped him inside this healing circle. I think we can break the control the demon has over him if he is conscious."

Phoenix eyed the unconscious dragoon, who was already darting back toward them, and guessed there was no harm in trying. She backed into the healing circle, opening a path in the firewall she had conjured, and forced the other party members to back away a bit, so they were not in the way.

Galtion was still target locked on them, his spear pointed at Food Goblin, as he charged forward. When he reached inside the healing circle, his body jerked slightly, like it was being electrocuted, but he continued forward.

Phoenix batted his spear tip away before it impaled Food Goblin, and hurriedly pinned Galtion down, feeling he was resisting with strength much stronger than he should be capable of.

Phoenix wasn't a strength-oriented character, and she was already feeling her grip slip on the dragoon player, as his body was trying to get upright once more. But just as she was about to get thrown off, a heavy green Orc slammed into Galtion's back, dropping him back onto the ground.

"Let me help you!" SharpTusk growled, feeling responsible for the situation they were in.

Had they listened to Chronos, when he told them they shouldn't come in here, they wouldn't be in this terrible position.

It was too late to regret, though. They could only adapt and try to survive with all their might.

Phoenix nodded at him, thankful he chimed in. As soon as SharpTusk applied all his might in pinning down Galtion, the unconscious dragoon became no better than a flailing child, unable to get free from his powerful grip.

Slowly but surely, Galtion's health pool started refilling itself, causing the unconscious human to gain back consciousness.

"Urgh... My head. What is going on? Why do I feel like someone barrelled me through a brick wall? And why is SharpTusk sitting on my back? And who are you?!"

She frowned at him.

"I'll figure it out."

Galtion's questions went unanswered, as Phoenix was already looking at Chronos.

"What next?" she asked him.

"I can hold him down for a minute. We need to figure out how to break the demon's control over him in that timeframe. Can you do that?" Chronos asked Phoenix.

She frowned at him.

"I'll figure it out."

Chronos nodded his head, his eyes suddenly glowing golden. He outstretched his hand forward, grabbing something unseen to all but him.

As soon as his hand closed, Galtion felt his whole body freeze up, suddenly locked in place, as a debuff appeared over his health bar.

\*Time Locked\*

Your body has been forced into a temporal stasis, and you can no longer perform any actions until the duration has expired.

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Galtion watched in horror, as even his mouth couldn't move. His brain still functioned fully, and he could think and feel, but couldn't move.

Already, sweat was forming on Chronos' forehead, as this was something he had rarely done up to now. He was still experimenting with the full breadth of his powers, and this was only one thing he had discovered that was possible for him.

Feeling him stop struggling, SharpTusk let go of Galtion, wondering what came next.

Phoenix was already on her feet, her mind working overtime, trying to figure out a way to break the control the demon had over the player. She could feel the threads of demonic mana attached to Galtion's body, but since she couldn't see them, it was hard to find out where they connected and sever their connection.

Lacking an option in finesse, Phoenix opted for brute force.

"Luna! How much healing can you give him if you focus on him alone?"

Luna tilted her little head to one side, unsure of the answer to her question.

"If I concentrate the sanctuary only on him, it might triple the regeneration speed. Why?"

Phoenix nodded her head.

"Do it," she told Luna.

Then she turned her head to Galtion.

"I don't know if you feel everything right now. But if you do, I'm sorry. This is going to hurt like a bitch."

Panic flashed in Galtion's unmoving eyes.

Phoenix lit her hands on fire, before pointing them at Galtion. Once the Moonlit Sanctuary had reduced in size until it encompassed only Galtion, Phoenix winced in disgust with herself, before unleashing hell.

Two power tongues of fire blasted out of her hands, turning Galtion's backside into an inferno, as his armour quickly melted away before his skin started sizzling and bubbling. SharpTusk watched in horror as his friend's back turned into carbonized meat, with nothing he could do.

Galtion couldn't even scream his pain out, as tears formed in his eyes, rolling down his cheeks. If Chronos hadn't time-locked his body, he would have already fainted from the pain.

But as his luck would have it, that was not the case.

The rest of his party watched on in shock, as their vice guild leader was turning their ally into a pit roast. The regeneration effect was keeping his body from being entirely consumed, which only seemed to make matters worse.

But Phoenix felt a mana thread snap, and she knew they were on the right path. She only hoped the player wouldn't die in vain before she succeeded.

'I'm sorry, Galtion. I don't know how to fix this otherwise...' she thought, miserably.

#### Chapter 544 New Body Testing

It took Phoenix almost the entire minute Galtion time-lock, before she felt the last thread of mana controlling him had snapped. She hurriedly stopped pseudo-cremating him and pulled out something from her inventory she had been keeping for a while.

She had bought this item from the Themiscus markets, when she passed through that city a while back, not long after the tournament had ended. It had cost her a pretty hefty sum of gold, to get her hands on it, since these were rare.

Inside the glass bottle that she pulled out, a thick red liquid, glimmering in golden light. This healing potion, which was something the alchemists in Themiscus produced in small batches, that were mostly picked up by their military, was supposed to heal up any person to full health in an instant.

As she poured its contents out on Galtion's back, the time lock ended and the poor man immediately fell unconscious. There was no surprise in this, as the pain he had been through would send any person in shock.

But at least he was no longer being controlled.

Phoenix sighed internally, watching a thousand gold pieces of potion imbibed itself through the man's torched skin, before the skin reformed like new.

'I hope we can eventually make some of these in Bastion City...'

This would be something handy to have, given its potential in battle. But she understood that Themiscus probably wouldn't share its recipe.

As most of the party members were back to a viable health level, they wanted to rejoin the battle. But they couldn't even see the enemy their guild leader was fighting.

"Should we... help him?" SharpTusk asked with uncertainty.

The Elven woman in his party shook her head.

"Can you even see the demon, Tusk? Because I can't. Our fastest member was Galtion, and he's out for the moment. Maybe we should let the big man take care of this one."

Chronos was currently sitting on the ground, sweating profusely and panting heavily. He hadn't guessed that time-locking a person for a minute could be this draining.

He watched as his MP bar flickered, teetering on the edge of emptiness. But when he looked at their guild leader and his opponent, he could use a part of his time vision, to see things in frames.

Instead of a constant stream, the images flashed in frames, like photos in a diorama, and he could see the demon moving from one place to another. His speed wasn't enough to escape the ever-seeing eyes of time.



But it still wouldn't do much to them if he couldn't actually follow him with his eyes. There was no way for him to apply his magic to an object he couldn't interact with.

But one person could follow the demon fine.

Luna, who had stopped channelling the Moonlit Sanctuary, reared to head into combat. Her new body had yet to taste battle, and she couldn't wait to test it out.

Her eyes darted around, following the demon's every movement. It was moving fast, certainly.

But not fast enough to escape her sight.

She was sure she could follow it, or even surpass its speed. But she bade her time.

When the demon finally arced around to take a strike at her master, Luna smirked.

She leaned forward before dashing in one swift motion, piercing the sound barrier. The players that had been next to her almost went deaf instantly, as a sonic clap echoed right next to their ears, making their ear drums ring loudly.

Astaroth was getting ready to dodge another strike, relying only on his instincts to react, but he heard the sonic clap and smirked.

The demon that had been hounding him had long since pierced the sound barrier and was no longer making that booming noise. That was how he knew another thing had joined the fray.

The red demon, who had been finding the Ash Elf annoying for reacting in hair's breadth to every one of his attacks, heard the clap, but it was already too late.

A small Elven girl with dark grey skin appeared before him, her leg extended fully, as she swiped it toward his torso. He barely had time to readjust his arm to block before a heavy kick slammed into his side, sending him flying to the left.

Astaroth only saw Luna appear before him before the red blur that had been flashing around him bolted in a different direction. But he knew Luna had landed her attack because he saw a few droplets of blood land on the ground before her.

Scanning her, Astaroth almost choked on his own saliva, as he swallowed nervously.

'What in the hells did Nemus do to you?!'

\*Luna\*

Race: Lunar Dear (Human form)

Grade: Mythic

Level: 75

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He didn't even need to glance further into her stat window, to know had a humanoid body. He got the feeling it would be weird, for him and the people watching, for him to fuse with the little girl.

she heavily overpowered him, even when melded with Morpheus or White Death. It was easy to guess she also overpowered most of the demons in the ring of Solomon.

Whatever Nemus had done to Luna's soul, it had strengthened not only her by twenty-five levels but boosted her grade, too! He couldn't wait to meld with her, to see how strong he would become.

But another part of him felt bad for melding with her, now that she had a humanoid body. He got the feeling it would be weird, for him and the people watching, for him to fuse with the little girl.

So instead, he decided she was more useful on her own. It saddened him a bit to lose such a powerful source of personal strength, but he could live with the downsides.

As the red demon smashed into the buildings at the edge of the boss room, it left a vast crater in them, its body digging a few meters into them.

But it didn't stay lodged there long, as it extracted its body from the rubble, eyeing Luna cautiously. A new foe had joined the battle, and she wasn't looking as weak as previously in his eyes, suddenly.

Luna released her mana aura, engulfing the entire room in a milky white glow, the mana aura powerful enough to radiate in the visible spectre, even for the non-mages. The players in Astaroth's party gulped audibly.

'Will we be alright being in the same room, if she goes all out?' they worried.

But they were about to find out.

#### Chapter 545 Bloody Game Of Tag

The demon, feeling it was finally p against a worthy opponent, did the same as Luna. A thick black and red mist started radiating from its skin, before booming outward, pushing back against Luna's aura a bit, claiming its own space.

Astaroth chortled to himself, seeing how little it pushed back Luna's power. It was like watching a puppy bark at an old dog.

But Luna did not take the affront so well.

Seeing as her enemy wanted to play this the hard way, Luna opted for a more direct approach. Astaroth watched as her body ballooned in size, changing form into a large stag, her crown unravelling and becoming this enormous set of antlers, with miniature orbs of white floating above each point.

Luna reached around the same size as Teraria and Arborea, her pelt taking shades of green, brown, and white. The transformation amazed Astaroth.

She looked a lot more impressive like this than she had as a doe.

Luna finished transforming, the demon still trying to push back her mana aura, and charged at her foe.

Astaroth wanted nothing more than to battle as well, but he felt like this combat was Luna's and hers alone. So he walked back toward Phoenix and the other players.

Seeing Galtion on the ground, unconscious, but with his health bar full, he cocked his head a bit.

"What happened to him?"

Phoenix looked at him with a tinge of disappointment, not in him, but in herself.

"I had to get rid of the demon's control, and couldn't think of any delicate way to do so. He passed out from the procedure."

Astaroth thought about the vivid light of fire coming from this direction earlier and decided not to ask further.

Looking at the other members of the party, one by one, he finally landed on the last one.

"You're new. Chronos, is it? I get a feeling like I've seen you somewhere before..."

Chronos was looking at Astaroth with wide eyes. Not because of the man's words, but because of the golden string of fate connected between himself and Astaroth.

From this proximity, his time vision had activated on its own, and he was now looking at Astaroth's soul presence, with so many golden threads attached to it.

It was insane.

It was like looking at a miniature version of the web of time, something which Tyr had taught him a bit, during their training. But it made little to no sense that a man had so many threads of fate connected to him.

Astaroth looked at Chronos' surprised face, wondering if he had said something wrong.

"Hello? Earth to Chronos? You good, buddy?"

Chronos finally snapped out of his daze, realizing he had been staring at Astaroth for ten straight seconds, his mouth agape, eyes wide, and silent like a statue.

"I'm sorry, guild leader. Yes, I am Chronos. And I don't believe we have ever met. But it is a pleasure. I'm sorry I was staring. I was just realizing who you were..."

Astaroth chuckled.

"Please tell me you aren't another groupie, like this big fella..."

Astaroth pointed at SharpTusk as he said that, making the Orc player turn his head in discomfort.

"I'm not a groupie..." Tusk grumbled to the side.

"No, I assure you, sir. I am not a groupie. It's just... Your reputation precedes you, King Astaroth, the first player to attain royalty."

Astaroth frowned. It was the first time he heard someone say he had a growing reputation.

He wasn't sure whether to feel honoured or worried. Having a reputation could open some doors, but it also brought with it the risk of having it tarnished at the slightest wrong move.

Phoenix watched Astaroth's face change a few times and laughed internally.

'He's finally realizing people from all over the world look up to him. Maybe that'll make him think more before he acts. Although I doubt it...' she thought.

All the while they were talking, Luna and the red demon were having a rather violent game of tag, in the boss room, with Luna being it, and the demon fleeing.

On their first collision, the demon rapidly understood he wasn't an opponent to this gigantic stag. Her speed rivalled him, maybe even surpassing him slightly.

But the issue was something else entirely. Her strength far surpassed his.

The red demon was a demon who specialized in speed. Having that only advantage overshadowed at all was bad for him. So standing up to this monstrosity of a stag, who overpowered every aspect of him, was quite worrying.

But every time he tried looping around, to go for the mortals, trying to tether one under his control again, the giant stag cut off his path. His prospects were looking worse by the second.

But Luna was also frowning. Although she kept planting her antlers into the demon and piercing its flesh, there was no apparent damage left on it. It didn't look worse for wear, and no wounds stayed open for longer than a second.

She finally understood her master's frustration when fighting these abominations. There was no downing them unless it came in powerful successive blows or one mass destruction strike.

Luna thought about using a new skill she had gained, but looking at her master and the other Abnormals near him, she advised against it. It was too risky and could take them out if they had nothing to protect themselves.

Ramming into the demon once again, Luna continued thinking about her options to end this fight. She had tested enough and wanted to be done.

But the demon decided for her.

Backing away against one of the room's walls, the demon screeched out in anger. As he did, his form bloated, fast, and his mana signature swelled.

Astaroth felt the change and spun his head toward the demon.

"Shit!" he cursed.

He turned his head toward Luna.

"Luna! He's going to self-destruct! Forget about him. We need to defend ourselves!"

But Astaroth wasn't sure they could defend from this, or how. If they had been on the outside, running as fast as they could would have been an option.

But in this boss room, locked in like they were, there wasn't any room to do so. Things looked grim.

Chapter 546 Shifted Stats

Luna blurred out of sight for a second, reappearing near the players.

Planting her feet on the ground, she focused on the small orbs of light floating above her antlers. As she did, they slowly started spinning in place, before rising into the air, dancing in a perfect circle.

They closed in on each other, still spinning smoothly, before accelerating.

Then, suddenly, they dispersed, slamming into the ground in a perfect circle around the party and her, as a barrier of energy formed between each orb, closing in like a dome above the players' heads.

The transparent barrier was invisible to those who couldn't see or feel mana, which was very few people in this group. But for the others who could, it was like looking at a glass bubble, with speckles of light dancing in the glass.

It was beautiful to watch, but terrifying to sense.

Astaroth could see the amount of Aether packed tightly in this barrier, and he felt flabbergasted. Even he couldn't generate this much Aether in such a short time.

'Nemus really gave you an incredible gift, didn't she?' Astaroth told Luna, through their mind link.

But Luna was so focused on holding up the barrier, she didn't respond.

On the other side of this dome, the demon had ballooned up to the size of a small hot-air balloon. The surrounding air was undulating with power, as his mana was slowly reaching the tipping point.

And when it did, he popped. The seemingly innocuous reaction looked no different from an overblown balloon, reaching the maximum stretching capacity, in the eyes of SharpTusk, who couldn't see mana.

But to mages in the party, it was horror.

They watched as a deflagration the size of Hiroshima happened before their very eyes. The very next second, the demon's mana ignited the very air around it, forcing everyone to close their eyes, as the room outside their protective dome suddenly turned bright white.

SharpTusk witnessed this much, as the shock wave instantly smashed into the barrier Luna was holding, and everyone felt the residual energy wash through them, blasting them to their asses.

The explosion only lasted a few seconds, but its effects were fear-inducing.

The entire boss room, which was previously dirt floors, and beige and grey stone buildings locking the area closed, were gone. The ground was now blackened and charred, with pools of molten lava here and there.

The buildings which had been holding them here now looked like blackened cliffs. Their surfaces looked like a volcano's cliff side, still red in some spots, where the loose stone from the previous impacts had melted into slag.

The only spot that was left untouched was the small circle the players were standing in.

But a notification came that snapped them out of their awe.

**\*First Boss; Corrupted Aspect of Speed, defeated.\***

Special rewards were added for forcing the demon into self-destructing and surviving.

\*\*

A chest appeared in the middle of the room, between two pools of lava, and right behind it, a glowing white portal swirled into existence.

The barrier around them then suddenly dispersed, a dull thud echoing behind the players, who were looking at the exit portal. Turning his head first, Astaroth saw Luna's gigantic stag form revert to her small Ash Elven form.

Her forehead dripped with sweat, and her little robes drenched. She was about four feet off the ground as she reverted, and Astaroth dashed forward to catch her, as gravity reasserted itself on her.

As he caught her in his arms, falling to his knees, she smiled weakly at him.

"Did I do good, Papa?" she meekly asked.

Her eyes were having trouble staying open, and he could see she was extremely fatigued. He guessed that withstanding such a blast had taken its toll, even on her powered-up form.

"You were amazing, my sweet girl. Sleep now, recharge. I'll take care of the rest for now."

Luna weakly nodded, before her body shone white and melted into his.

Phoenix glimpsed at him, giving Luna such tenderness, and she felt a tinge of jealousy. She quickly brushed it away, though, realizing it was unwarranted.

'What am I thinking? She is like a daughter to him. Nothing to be jealous about.'

She smiled as she walked toward him, who was standing back on his feet.

"When did Luna become this strong?" she asked.

She had seen Luna in action many times before. But Luna had never been this powerful.

She could feel something different from the doe, aside from its ability to take a humanoid shape. But she hadn't been able to put her finger on what, exactly.

"It was Nemus' doing. Luna isn't just her anymore. She is like an amalgam of many beings, myself included. But two of those beings were her parents, so to speak. And she inherited their grade after being reformed by Nemus."

Phoenix tilted her head a bit, confused.

"Luna was previously legendary grade. But now, she is mythical grade. Her level also went up a bit."

Hearing his words, Phoenix almost went slack-jawed. Every player on god's green earth would kill to get a mythical companion.

"Just how high is your luck stat?" she asked him, stumped.

"Hmm? It's at zero. Why?"

Phoenix just couldn't believe him.

"Show me. There is no way your luck score is at zero, with every good break you get."

Astaroth's shoulder rose as he was telling the truth.

He opened his inventory and pressed share for Phoenix to see. But as he went down his stats, something had changed in them.

"Huh? Why does it say five? I never put points in it..."

Phoenix looked at his five points of luck, and she slapped her forehead.

"It figures. There was no way you were at zero luck. But how did you reach five points? Even the human players who put all of it in there only have two."

Again, Astaroth raised his shoulders in a shrug.

"Don't ask me. I put no points in there because Ash Elves don't get starting points at all. I never even noticed it had gone up..."

Phoenix knew something had altered his stats to get five points. People online were claiming they had gained luck points through fortuitous encounters.

But they had gained only one point. Not five.

She wondered what kind of encounter could cause such a major shift? But then it clicked.

Nemus.

Hadn't Astaroth said Nemus was a goddess? Nothing else made sense.

She eyed her boyfriend with envy.

'I wonder if me meeting her would do the same...'

#### Chapter 547 Getting Reinforcements

But now was not the time for thinking about this. Phoenix focused on what they still had to do.

Already, the other players were walking toward the treasure chest, resisting the urge to just outright open it. All of them knew that without Astaroth and Phoenix, they would be dead and back at the dungeon's entrance, empty-handed.

As the pair of leaders walked over to the treasure chest, Astaroth felt like something was off.

"Is it just me, or did we not get any Exp for killing this boss?" he asked, pausing his step.

Phoenix halted as well. She hadn't paid mind to it until now, but Astaroth was right.

She looked at the other players, and all of them shook their heads no.

SharpTusk turned to face Astaroth.

"We were wondering the same thing. We fought many a monster to get here, but not one gave us Exp. None of us were sure if it was a bug, so we just kept pushing deeper."

Astaroth frowned. He and Phoenix hadn't fought to get to the boss room, so they had no way of knowing.

But a dungeon that gave no Exp was indeed worth calling a bug. He only hoped it wasn't like this throughout the entire dungeon, given how difficult he guessed it would be.

"Hmm. It doesn't matter, for now. We will wait here for a while."

Phoenix nodded her head, agreeing with his statement. It was ill-advised to keep going with just their party, as things were right now.

It was better to get reinforcements if they were to complete this dungeon. Which was what she was already calling for, in the guild's officer chat.

\*\*

'For any officer currently not on duty, we need four able bodies for a dungeon nearby. It is possibly a single-trial dungeon, so let's not have too many people launch raids inside simultaneously. Composition needs one full tank and one full healer player. The last two can be whatever. One officer needed with three trustable players from the ranks.'

\*\*

Of their officers, few were available. Gulnur was currently in Dwarven country, trying to appeal to the players there and get more dwarves to join Paragon.

Silent Light had gone to the nearby capital of Kormir, one of the five great cities of the alliance, and the of faith of most religions of the continent of light. He wanted to get in touch with the pope of the sun, to confess his feelings about killing people.

Phoenix wouldn't stop him, if it made him feel better with himself, and firm his resolve.

Declan was stuck in the city, still putting in place measures of defence. The headless man had been keeping his levels rising through joining patrols, under the guise of learning the names of his men and women.

It was gathering much-needed respect in the ranks and file of their growing military.

Morticia was still fine-tuning the workings of the newly built player embassy inside Bastion City. The sooner this was up and running, the sooner she could go back to roaming the wilds and growing her power.

Phoenix had approved her plans entirely, in which Morticia would only give input on highly important matters, the rest being dealt with by a mix of Natives and players.

Gale was unreachable since the incident outside of New Eden. He had said he was going on a trip to regrow his self-worth and power.

Nothing Astaroth and Phoenix had said to him changed his mind, and they let him go. For a six-year-old to act so downtrodden was strange for them, to say the least.

Khalor was on the dark continent, fighting in a minor war against corruption for his own agenda. It was better to let him deal with his things as he saw fit, anyway, lest they want him bitching.

I'die and Athena were somewhere in the wilds of the continent, exploring what New Eden was hiding. Astaroth had tasked them with reporting any strange findings to him and Phoenix, as well as noting any important areas they may step upon.

With them doing this, he might find and complete two of his quests without having to lift so much as his pinky. It made them happy, and it saved him work.

The only one left was Violette. She had been keeping herself busy close by Bastion City, in a zone with a large lake and aquatic creatures.



Reading the message, Violette swam back to the surface of the lake, bursting out of the water in her water elemental form, before stretching into a thin string of water, all the way to shore.

When the string of water touched the ground, it turned into her, with eyes resolute. She was dry, as if she hadn't been submerged in water for the last hour.

She was here to learn to control her watery form, as well as put into practice all her swimming lessons from outside the game and turn them into practical experience. In the last days, she had made leaps and bounds in her control over water.

Aberon, who was still away from Bastion City since the mages' tower incident, sometimes teleported to her to check in on her progress and shower her with praise.

But when she had read the message, she knew she was the only one who was immediately available. She only worried momentarily, since she didn't know much about the players in their guild.

But she knew who to go see to fix this.

Conjuring a layer of ice under her feet, as well as blades of water under her boots, Violette skated back toward Bastion City. On her way there, she sent a message to Morticia and Declan.

'I need help to gather the players for our leaders' call. Can you get me three players you trust for this that fit their demands?'

The replies came in pretty fast, from both Morticia and Declan.

'I have a tank player rearing to get a real challenge here in the palace. I'll put him at your disposition,' Declan responded.

'A pair of players came to me today, one a cleric and the other a warrior. They were looking for a way to get recognition from Paragon's higher echelons. I'm not sure if they are trustworthy, but they would do fine to prove it in this circumstance. I'll have them wait by the south entrance,' Morticia wrote.

Violette messaged Declan back, after reading Morticia's message, asking him to have the tank player head to the south gate. It would make it easier for her to get everyone in one instance.

He acquiesced, and things were set. Violette could already see the tree's bough in the distance.

#### Chapter 548 Gathering The Trio

When she arrived at the city's south entrance, she nodded at the guards, who let her in, passing the entire checkpoint line in one swift motion. Some grumbling echoed as she skated past them, but the guards quickly set order back in place.

Inside the gate, about a hundred meters to the right, a group of three players were discussing with each other, looking to be waiting for something, or someone.

Violette assumed this was her new posse and made her way toward them.

"What do you think this 'Violette' lady looks like?"

"How would I know? I never met her either..."

"I bet she's this tall, seductive woman with purple hair. Maybe a Fey?"

Violette could already hear the conversation of the two men in the party, and her traits darkened. The last one of the trio, a woman in clerical robes, was staying slightly back, not joining this degrading conversation, and noticed Violette approaching.

She was about to smack her companion on the arm, to silence him, but decided against it. It would be funnier to watch him get reprimanded.

When Violette stopped next to the group, the Human male with the two hand axes looked down at her, his eyebrow rising.

He mistook her lowered head for fear and thought this was an NPC coming to give him a quest.

"I'm sorry, shrimp. I don't have time to bring you back your toy, or whatever it is you lost. Go ask someone else."

The other man, a Dwarf in heavy plate mail, turned his head to the little girl and reflexively scanned her. As her name popped into his eyes, his heart dropped to the pit of his stomach.

But before he could even correct the warrior's misunderstanding, an orb of water already encapsulated the both of them.

Both men were taken by surprise and hadn't enough time to suck in some air before being completely submerged, floating three feet above the ground. That was when the warrior scanned his assailant.

His eyes went wide, as he realized his error, and already, a headache started pounding in his head.

'Am I going to get kicked out of the guild already? This is bad...'

The cleric woman chuckled from a few feet away, enjoying the scene.

Violette snapped her head at her.

"Does their conversation amuse you? Perhaps you would like to join them?"

"Oh, but it is not their conversation that amuses me, Lady Violette, but their predicament. I'll just stand here and enjoy the show, if you don't mind."

Violette glared at her for a second before snapping her head back to the players in the water bubble.

"Is my appearance not to your liking? Would you have preferred a tall and slim Fey woman with a curvaceous figure?" she asked the trapped men.

The Human warrior looked pensive for a second, before the Dwarf punched him in the side, causing him to lose a bit of his air. Already his face was turning red from holding his breath.

The Dwarf clasped his hands together in an apologetic gesture, trying to make her understand he was sorry. The Human quickly copied his gesture, making a praying motion.

Violette wanted to let them stew a little while, but she also realized time was against them, and growled as she released her spell.

As both men slammed into the ground, the nearby players watching with glee this altercation, they started coughing, as they gasped for air.

The Dwarf was the first to catch his breath and, with his first lung full of air, he apologized vehemently.

"I'm sorry, Lady Violette! It was only the idle banter of two men! Please find it in you to forgive us!"

The Human warrior sneered momentarily at the Dwarf before a quick kick to the back of his knees dropped him to the ground.

Turning his head angrily at the cleric, the man scowled.

"Hey! What the hell is your problem? Do you think that because you are my sister, I won't attack you?"

\*Smack!\*

"You idiot. Step on your dumb pride for a second and apologize to the officer of this guild that you just offended before we both get kicked out of it."

It tempted Violette to leave this asshole right there and grab any other player on the street that looked like a melee combatant, just as a lesson. But Morticia would probably reprimand her for acting so impulsively.

Spitting on the ground, the man lowered his head, apologizing half-assedly.

"I'm sorry, Lady Violette. I was just talking for the sake of it."

Violette could feel the pride oozing off of the man and decided this was the perfect time to break it. Pride was an undesirable trait to have when you had to obey orders.

She released her mana, focusing it entirely on the man, immediately sending him face-first onto the ground.

"Apologize like you mean it, at least. You insulted me twice."

The Human warrior's eyes bulged, as he realized just now how vast the gap in their power was. This wasn't the first time a mage tried applying their strength on him, but he usually resisted it, with his strong willpower.

But not this time. His body felt like a ton of lead, and he could not lift even a finger.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be impolite!"

Violette could feel he was more sincere this time around and released him from her pressure.

She lifted her head toward the cleric woman, who had an impressed look on her face.

"Are you ready? We are pressed for time," Violette declared.

"I'm ready whenever you are, Lady Violette," the woman replied.

The two men scrambled to their feet, hoping their actions and words hadn't reflected badly on them. The Dwarf, especially, hoped this wouldn't get him kicked out.

Declan had so graciously invited him into Paragons. If he got kicked by Violette for talking smack, it would reflect badly on him.

But Violette had already brushed the matter aside. She didn't like the warrior very much, but she understood every person had their own pride and feelings.

She could hardly hold him in contempt for them when she reacted the way she did.

"Alright, then. Let us leave," she declared.

Violette rapidly sent them all a party invite, before sending a message to Astaroth.

'I have the members invite me to your party.'

Chapter 549 Checking The Rewards

Astaroth received Violette's message from inside the dungeon and nodded his head.

'It didn't her too long,' he thought.

Violette immediately accepted the invite as soon as he sent it, and four more names appeared on the party list. Aside from Violette's name, Astaroth read the other three.

The Warrior was called Jaxx; the Defender had named himself Meat-Shield, and the cleric, Jeanne d'Arc, which brought Astaroth's eyebrow up.

'A French name? We haven't crossed many of those in the game, yet.'

But his curiosity quickly died down, as he remembered the task ahead of them. He now only hoped these three players could pull their weight.

If a boss like this was the first one, what would become of the next ones? One thing also bothered him.

Starting in level fifty dungeons, players around the world were finding dungeons that didn't simply have three bosses. The highest amount found in a single dungeon had become seven bosses, and many parties had wiped trying to conquer that dungeon.

In the end, Knights of the Sun had been the ones to conquer it first, after sending in their elite team, with Killi at its head.

Thinking back on their level fifty dungeon, Astaroth realized theirs had not been just three bosses either. After the first two, the zone he had gone into also had many bosses.

With this kind of pattern, Astaroth wondered what the dungeons would be like when they reached higher levels. But this was a question for later.

Right now, he had a more pressing one.

"Lieutenant Tusk."

"What level were the monsters when you started pushing into the dungeon?"

Tusk scratched his head, trying to remember. He was the type to dive into enemies without scanning them, so he rarely remembered the levels of the foes he felled.

He tried checking through his notification board, but since they had received no notifications of enemies killed, or Exp gained, it was a bust.

Fortunately, his party members weren't all airheads like him, and Peaceful Grove replied in his stead.

"The monster varied between level fifty and level fifty-five, sir."

Astaroth looked at her and nodded.

'The levels are in a manageable range. This dungeon shouldn't be too hard, even if it suddenly pumps out boss monsters like crazy,' Astaroth thought.

Astaroth gazed toward the loot chest, which was still untouched. He could see the greed and lust for items in the eyes of his party members, aside from Phoenix, himself, and Chronos, and decided they didn't have to wait on the others to open it.

Walking toward the chest, Astaroth clapped his hand, gathering everyone's attention.

"Alright! Let's open up this reward. Before any of you ask, I don't work as a meritocracy for dungeon loot. You won't be rewarded in function of how you did.

"Of course, it affects the overall distribution, but it is not my primary criterion. I judge how the item could be useful to each individual. Does that pose a problem to any of you?"

No one raised a voice to complain, as it was a fair distribution method, given their current party composition. The only part where it would cause more discourse was if there was good gear for casters.

Their party was full of that.

Astaroth took their silence as an agreement and kneeled to open up the chest at his feet. The reward chests were all small, whatever the reward was, and it was surprising the amount of loot that could fit in these small coffers, sometimes.

A white flash burst out from the chest, as Astaroth opened it, forcing him to close his eyes for a second. And when he reopened them, a list of rewards appeared in front of them.

\*First Boss Reward Chest\*

- 1) 100,000 x Gold Pieces
- 2) 20 x Body Purification Potions
- 3) Boots of the Speed Demon
- 4) Monocle of True Sight
- 5) Book of Forbidden Knowledge

\*\*

Astaroth looked slightly disappointed at the loot they got. There was no weapon and barely one piece of battle gear.

He wasn't sure what the Monocle did, or what the book contained, but he doubted they were that good. But he still had to identify them, so he could properly give out the loot.

He started with the boots.

### \*Boots of the Speed Demon\*

Grade: Rare

Defence Power: 1%

Stats: +30 Agility

Durability: 50/50

Special Ability; Charge attacks: These boots allow their user to use his momentum as a bonus to damage. Damage Ratio: 10% extra damage per second travelled at maximum speed.

Description: These boots adorned a powerful Lancer's feet, once, who was rumoured to breach castle gates with his charges alone. His disappearance remained a mystery that remains veiled.

\*\*

He already guessed who he would give those to, but he wanted to inspect the other items first.

### \*Monocle of True Sight\*

Grade: Special

Stats: Perception unlocked/ +50 perception

Durability: 10/10

Special Ability; True Sight: This eyewear lets its user see beyond mere illusions, granting it a vision of reality, whatever it may be. Only grand illusions or world-transcending spells can hide from this monocle.

Description: This monocle was fabled to be worn by the greatest detective the world has ever known, allowing him to see past the lies and subterfuges of the world.

\*\*

This item gave him a bit more of a conundrum about whom he should give it to. But he staved off the wondering after he verified the last item.

He tapped on the book on the list, making it appear in his hands. He wasn't sure if he should open it, as it might automatically bind it to him, meaning he couldn't let another party member have it.

But there was nothing to tell him what it contained, either. No small synopsis on the back, or scannable description.

The only thing to hint him, were the traces of mana coming from the book itself, and its appearance.

The book's outer layer was leather, but the leather felt strange. It was too smooth to come from any animal he knew of.

There were also faint traces of demonic mana emanating from the book, like it contained something trapped inside. Something dark and evil.

He decided he should keep the book, as he couldn't discern its true purpose as of now.

"Alright, gather round. I'll distribute the loot," Astaroth called out.

Chapter 550 Full Party

As his party gathered around him, Astaroth pulled the items out, one by one, and handed them out. To the now awake Galtion, he handed a pair of boots.

"I think these are best used for you. I take it your combat style fits the most with them."

Galtion looked at the boots, unsure he was deserving of them. But seeing as the guild leader wasn't pulling his hands back, he reluctantly took them.

But once they were in his hands, and he scanned them, his eyes went wide.

Galtion's head snapped upward, looking at Astaroth with a bewildered look.

"Sir, these boots are too good... Shouldn't you be taking them?"

Astaroth's eyebrow rose.

"Do you not want them?"

Galtion shook his head furiously.

"That is not what I meant, sir! I will gladly accept them! Thank you so much!"

A soft round of chuckling and giggling spread through the party members.

Astaroth then turned to Chronos. He had hesitated to give this either to the new guy or to the spirit user.

He was sure both of them could use this kind of item to grow stronger, but his gut told him it would be better to give it to Chronos. And Astaroth's gut had never lied to him.

Chronos looked at his guild leader, his eyes back to their cold, uncaring appearance. He looked down at the item in his hand and smiled lightly.

He had to remind himself to smile, as he had noticed his emotions rarely showed anymore. But he gladly took the item, equipping it directly.

"Thank you, Guild Master."

Astaroth looked at all the surrounding players, shaking his head.

"Let us get something straight here. I understand our positions, and won't shun you for being like this normally. But we are in a dungeon. We are brothers in arms, for however long this lasts. So at least call me by my name, please."

SharpTusk's face bloomed. He had been waiting for his guild leader to open up to them all this time.

"Big bro Astaroth! I'm so glad you finally warmed up to us!" he exclaimed.

But as he stepped forward to grab Astaroth in a bear hug, a blazing bolt of fire landed at his feet. A shiver travelled up his spine as he turned his head toward Phoenix, her hand still on fire.

"Don't exaggerate, Lieutenant. He is still your guild leader."

"Y... Yes Ma'am!" Tusk stuttered.

'What a terrifying woman...' he thought, stepping back toward his friends.

Phoenix snickered internally. She knew Astaroth well enough that he wouldn't mind the extra affection.

But she considered he still had his position to keep in mind, even if he wanted them to be on more friendly terms than calling him guild leader all the time.

Astaroth looked at her, a wry smile on his lips.

"Alright, back to it. There was also a book in the loot, but since I can't say what it does yet, I will keep it. As for the hundred thousand gold pieces, each of us will get ten thousand, and the extra twenty will go to the guild coffers."

Everyone was glad they could get their hands on some extra gold, especially a sweet amount like this. Although the gold trade had already gone down to one-for-one, it was still nice to make some extra cash.

As Astaroth finished divvying up the gold, he got another message from Violette.

'Where are you guys? I'm in the town center, and I see your dots on the map. But I can't see you.'

Astaroth laughed to himself.

'Down the well. Some kind of subspace down there is where we are.'

A few seconds later, four people came flying out of the ceiling, a Dwarf, two Humans, and an Ash Elf girl. Violette quickly reacted to the sudden lack of a landing zone, wanting to make sure her little group didn't take undue damage.

She conjured a jet of water that curved downward slowly, catching all three of the players and herself, as they slid down the water and landed safely. Of course, the end of the slide was pretty abrupt, and only the cleric caught herself from rolling off into the burning floor.

The two men were not as lucky. As they slid off the water, they tumbled and rolled, getting covered in soot, and suffering a few minor burns. Nothing dramatic, or enough to lose health points, but enough to bruise their ego, as they realized they were being watched by eight other players.

Astaroth looked at the two men, holding a chuckle back, and turned his head toward Violette. He sent her a private message.

'I saw that. You helped the girl up with your magic. Why did you let them crash down like that? Did something happen on the way here?'

Violette smirked at him before responding.

'Nothing that hasn't been taken care of. I was just getting a little payback, that's all.'

Astaroth shrugged his shoulders at her response. Who was he to keep her from getting a bit of revenge?

He wasn't against getting some himself, so it would be hypocritical of him to chastise her for it. He would have probably done the same.

Petty acts of revenge were always the most satisfying ones, after all.

"Since we are all here," Astaroth said, clapping his hands, "Let us proceed further. We have dallied enough here."



Everyone agreed with the sentiment, aside from the new arrivals. But they were also in a hurry to switch attention off of them.

Astaroth opened the march, stepping into the shimmering portal first. The four melee players, SharpTusk, Jaxx, Meat-Shield, and Galtion, followed him. Following behind them, their new cleric, Jeanne d'Arc, followed by the rest of the party, with Phoenix closing the march.

The dungeon was only starting, and it was time to find out what the situation was beyond this point. Almost all the players present were feeling the excitement rise in them.

Only Astaroth felt like something was off.

'A dungeon with no Exp is abnormal. Something feels like we stepped into a trap, more than a dungeon...'