

New Eden 421

Chapter 421 Admiring The Changes

While Phoenix was having her conversation, and Astaroth was duking it out with demons, in a faraway kingdom, Khalor was slowly returning to the undead kingdom.

After leaving the throne room, and letting the vice guild leader slash queen regent talk things out with the officers and Leon, he made his way into the city.

Like most players that had disconnected inside the Bastion, Khalor was surprised by how it had changed. It was more than just the cleared-out ruins and newly built buildings that took him aback.

People were walking the streets by the hundreds, and the mix of races was something that was rarely seen, even in the five great cities.

Many of the races mingled together in the five great cities, but all of them were usually the races you would find only on this continent. Not around him.

There were people from the Demonoid race and Undead race, walking amongst the masses, along with Orcs hanging around food stalls in the busy streets. The other races seemed to ignore their provenance and chatted merrily with them.

This wasn't something you could see anywhere else. Khalor wondered how Leon had made all these people accept each other so openly.

God knew that many other cities had tried this before, but the natural xenophobia of the races living under the light always resurfaced. It was hard to keep the peace for the masses, when a kingdom suddenly defended the minority, which led to most cities treating Demonoids, Undead, and Orcs as outsiders.

He even saw beast people mixed in with everyone, which was even rarer. Beast people were ostracized, even on the dark continent.

Most humanoids saw them as savages or outright monsters, to be killed on sight, aside from some very rare exceptions.

Walking forward, absorbed in everything he saw, Khalor barely noticed when he bumped into a large Tiger Beastman, twice his size, who turned around with an angry stare.

But seeing who he was about to yell at, his instincts kicked in, and he started sweating instead. The Tiger-man turned back to his haggling, the merchant giving him a shark-ish grin, as he ripped him off of every penny he could, while the Beastman was still in shock.

The atmosphere was lively, for a place that most likely sat in the middle of demon-contested territory.

But Khalor quickly understood how the city prospered so much.

Amidst the crowds, he failed to see a single person whose level was under forty. Even the merchants seemed to be battle-proven, since sporting scars on their bodies that would scare any weak-willed bandit away.

Khalor headed to a spot where there were fewer people around and summoned out his undead drake. He wanted to check out the fortress from higher up.

Launching from a side street, up toward the massive tree palace's branches, a small group of four people intercepted him mid-air.

One of them was flying while standing on a broom, two others looked like bird-people, and the last one was an undead with no physical body, similar to a ghost.

"Halt! Flying within the city walls is forbidden unless you have a permit. Please show proof of permit, or land your beast back on the ground. Failure to cooperate will result in your arrest and a fine."

One of the bird-people was the one who had talked. He was at the front of their small formation and was most likely the officer.

Khalor stared the man down, half expecting them to back down at any moment, but no such thing happened.

Sigh

"My name is Khalor. I am an officer of Paragon, the guild that controls this city. I believe I have every right to fly in these skies."

Feeling a wave of mana wash over him, Khalor turned his head to the man on the broom. He saw his face pale a bit before the man went into a perilous bow.

"Our apologies, Lord Khalor. We were not aware of the return of the members of Paragon. Captain, he is who he claims to be."

The bird man turned his hawk-ish head to the mage before nodding once.

"Our apologies, milord. We will be on our way."

But before he could fly away.

"Wait!"

The bird man gulped. Was he going to be punished for intercepting a ruling officer?

"Keep up the good work. I appreciate seeing guards doing their duty diligently."

Khalor was peeved they intercepted him like this, but it also made him happy. He was glad the city guard didn't slack or cower faced with something that could certainly burn them out of the sky.

After giving a thankful nod, the four guards flew away, resuming their patrol. Khalor instructed the drake to go up into the tree's branches, where he landed on a solid-looking one, to glance down at the Bastion.

As he landed, he noticed a few half-hidden huts in the branches, on many levels. Around them, he could see Elves, who were attentively looking outward to the forest.

'Lookouts. Good. Leon has kept the city on alert, it seems. I would have thought that humanoid Garfield would have slacked on the job.'

Looking down at the Bastion, Khalor could see many districts separated in cell-like circles. It was like looking at a pond with waterlilies all across its surface.

When he looked a little further outward, he noticed something that made him grin. Outside of the original walls of the Bastion, they had built another set of walls a couple of miles out.

In between those walls, a more city-like structure was stretched, with square planned streets, and more human-like constructions. From his vantage point, he could see many buildings with familiar markings.

Everything from an adventurer's guild to a mage's tower to what looked like military barracks was constructed, interspersed with many residential districts.

'This place exploded in size. It seems Phoenix made the right call appointing him.'

Further out, looking toward the walls far away, he could see a steady stream of people coming in and out. Turning his head, he also saw a side of the outer portion covered in fields, with a variety of grains and vegetables being grown.

'This city is practically self-sufficient as it is.'

But Khalor stopped admiring the view. He still had places to go, and things to do.

Jumping back on the back of his drake, Khalor launched upward again, piercing the tree's canopy in seconds, and heading toward the nearest Elven city. He wanted to take a portal back to the dark continent, and he didn't stay long enough to notice they had built one in the center of the main plaza.

He would learn later on, when Phoenix contacted him, and curse himself for being so quick to leave.

Chapter 422 Tyr And Chronos

Somewhere, flying over the continent, high in the skies of New Eden, the mountain and cave of time where Tyr lived was currently very active.

The time acceleration spell outside of it had just ended, and the worlds had finally reconnected after ten years of being separated. Chronos, who was still in the cave, was too busy controlling small areas of time flow to notice his interface finally flare back to life.

Tyr was watching his student, Glad of the progress the young man had made in the last decade.

Feeling the time spell end, Tyr knew it was time to send Chronos back. Gaius would come knocking soon enough, and it was best if the Fey man was gone by then.

Clapping his hand together to garner his student's attention, Tyr smiled warmly.

"You have done well in the time we were together. Sadly, my time teaching you comes to an end. You must go back to your kind and use the powers you have gained to help in the conflict to come."

Chronos looked at the old man in confusion.

"Old man Tyr. We have only been training together for a few days. Are you sure we don't have a bit more time?"

Tyr laughed lightly at the Fey's words.

"It has been much more than a few days. Learning to see and control the flow of time has skewed your perception of it. But that is good. It means you will keep learning even once I'm gone, and you return to your life."

Chronos tilted his head.

"Gone? Are you leaving somewhere?"

Chronos didn't feel like it had been long since he had entered this weird cave, and started learning with the old man. A few days at most.

But now, the old man seemed to insinuate otherwise. And with the choice of words he just made, it also seemed like he was resolved to leave somewhere.

"Yes. I am indeed leaving for somewhere else. But so are you. You need to go back to the surface and to your world. You have been away for a long time, and many things have changed."

Ten years in isolation, outside of normal time flow, had skewed a lot more than Chronos' perception of time. His emotions seemed to have run dry, and he felt like something was missing inside him, but couldn't say what.

"But, old man Tyr. I have been here for such a short time. Are you sure you can't keep me longer, and teach me more?"

"Child. You have been here for ten years. Mind you, in your world, I believe it is closer to one week. But the world below has moved ahead of us ten years, and is now in a crisis like it hasn't seen in a very long time."

The revelation hit Chronos like a train. Or it should have, had he been able to feel anything currently.

"Ten years? A week? I don't understand what you are saying. I know you can bend time, but to that extent?"

"You underestimate how strong I am, child. I may seem like an old man to you, but I am much more than that. I am a god, after all. The river of time answers my call, and does my bidding."

Chronos' head tilted the other way?

"A god? So, such existences are a thing in New Eden? Who would have thought?"

Tyr looked at the young man with a tinge of sadness.

'It seems I might have changed him forever. The powers of time are treacherous for mortal souls. Let's hope this change will not negatively affect him.'

There was no changing what had happened now, and Tyr could only make sure the Fey man lived long enough to recover by his own means.

"This is goodbye, Chronos. May we meet again, if the rivers of time allow it."

Waving his hand before himself, Tyr conjured a portal, before grabbing Chronos by the arm and throwing him inside. This portal led to the lands below, in a reclusive part of a secure forest, where Chronos wouldn't be in immediate danger.

Of that much, Tyr made sure. The god made sure the other gods couldn't feel his influence on the young Fey, unless they were standing directly before Chronos, buying him some time to develop into what the world needed him to be.

After sending Chronos away, he looked upward, already feeling someone he seldom wanted to see had landed on the top of his mountain. Popping open another portal, Tyr walked through it, his eyes resolute.

Appearing on the top of the mountain, Tyr was back to his godly appearance, and he stared down at his unwanted guest.

"What do you want now, Gaius? I did what you asked. Doesn't that buy me at least a century of peace?"

Gaius was floating nonchalantly before Tyr's throne, his back facing the god of time.

"I know what you did, Tyr. I thought I had told you to get rid of the mortal."

"I just did. What are ten years with an old fool like me going to do? He was fine when he left."

Gaius turned around, his empty, black eyes, stared at Tyr.

"You kept him by your side for the full duration of the time spell. He should have been sent home to his world. You disobeyed me, again."

"It was my payment for playing with time at your demand. You acknowledged it as payment. He is gone now, so the issue is closed."

Tyr walked toward his throne, wanting to sit on it. But Gaius stood in his way.

"I wanted him gone before I came back. Yet, I arrived and could still feel him there. You failed to follow such simple instructions."

Tyr clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"You didn't warn me you were coming. How was I supposed to know when to send him back? What's it to you, anyway? It is but one mortal, among many. Turn a blind eye to it, just like you turn a blind eye to what is happening down below."

Gaius' eyes squinted into what Tyr assumed was the most sarcastic smile the god could pull.

"Your rebellious acts will have consequences."

Tyr was about to reply to Gaius that there was nothing he could do to him, but something was off. Gaius was never this calm when someone disobeyed him.

But before he could do or think about anything, his eyes flashed with a vision of a future to come. He saw Gaius pulling out something resembling an hourglass, and trapping him inside.

Snapping out of his vision, prepared to flee if he had to, Tyr's eyes widened in horror.

Gaius was holding in his hands an hourglass-like object, exactly like he had just seen.

"So you know. It doesn't matter, it's already too late. Thanks to the demons, I now have something to trap you in for eternity. Worry not, your duties will fall on the next in line with your powers. I hope you enjoy your vacation, you old fool."

Tyr felt his body already turn to sand, as he was sucked into the prison in Gaius' hand.

'I should have known you would pull something like this,' Tyr thought, as he disappeared into the hourglass.

Chapter 423 Finding A City

Chronos stumbled out of the portal Tyr had shoved him and looked around to get his bearings. Seeing nothing but trees around himself, he wondered where he had been thrown to.

Chronos looked upward, trying to figure out where he was from the stars. One thing he had studied before getting transported to Tyr's cave was the many star charts in the Fey kingdom's libraries.

But the bright blue skies met his eyes, and he sighed.

"I guess I'll have to pick a direction and walk."

Just as he started lowering his head, a massive flying creature zoomed across his head, shaking the treetops. Chronos could barely identify what it was with the speed at which it passed.

What he saw was a draconic creature, with what seemed to be a shadowy form on its back, almost like it was riding it.

Not wanting to head in the same direction that the monster went, Chronos turned opposite it and started walking.

It took him hours before he came upon signs of civilization, as he crossed some dirt roads, with occasional torches at the sides. Chronos looked at the road, which was almost parallel to him, and kept going in the direction away from the draconic creature, but this time on the road.

He couldn't see what lay ahead of the road yet, but if there was a road, there was a settlement. He eventually crossed paths with a group of NPC adventurers that were going in the opposite direction from him, and he stopped them.

"Excuse me, sirs. Can one of you tell me where this road leads?"

The group comprised one Elf archer woman, a Human caster-type man, a kind of Lizardman fighter, and a Demonoid barbarian woman.

The Lizardman was the one to step toward him and answer his question.

"Yesss. Thissss is the way to the Ssstellar Woodlandsss Kingdom. Ssstay on the road, and you will reach it in lessss than an hour."

Chronos bowed his head slightly before resuming his walk. The Lizardman watched him leave, his nictitating eyelid closing and shutting sideways on his eyes.

It was rare to find a Fey outside of their strange forests, even in these parts. The population of Fey people was tiny in the budding kingdom, since they were unattracted to dangerous places where fighting was common.

And the gods knew how the surroundings of this kingdom were a breeding ground for battle. With the constant waves of corrupted beasts, and sometimes even people, coming from any direction, it was no wonder the adventurer population was so high.

So crossing a member of the peace-loving, frolicking Fey species out in these parts was uncommon. But the Lizardman had no interest in the man any longer, and turned back to his party, resuming their patrol route.

Chronos kept walking forward until he reached the opening of the forest. The road kept going forward until it reached a heavily fortified gate that seemed to be hewn right out of the massive stone wall it opened into.

Guarding the entrance, a group of five guards was inspecting the wares people dragged with them, checking identity cards, before letting them in. Chronos walked up behind the short waiting line, pulling out his adventurer license right away.

His turn came soon enough, and he walked to the guard, face still emotionless, as he handed the guard his card. The guard scanned the card in a magic device he was holding before looking at him and nodding.

"Welcome to Stellar Woodlands, young adventurer. The adventurers' guild is straight ahead, about a mile in. Enjoy your stay."

Chronos nodded a thank you, taking his license back, as the guard was already turning to the next in line.

He walked into the city, and was immediately met with the hubbub of military drills and clashing of blades to his right. To his left was the neighing and pawing of hooves, coming from a stable with many stalls and horses.

Chronos could tell by the number of visible handlers that this stable was very busy. This effectively meant that the city was quite prosperous.

And yet, he had never heard of the name Stellar Woodlands before. He had learned the name of many of the major cities, including the five great cities of the continent, even learning a few names of cities on the dark continent.

But Stellar Woodlands was not one he had ever heard of or read about.

'Cities don't just grow out of the ground. It must have boomed in recent times. I wonder who rules this city. And where it is located.'

Chronos lost no time heading to the adventurers' guild, registering locally and renting out a room to stay in. Then he asked the clerk for directions to a library or place to gather information.

The Dwarven woman smiled her large toothy smile at him, before leaning down on the counter from her side.

Her large breasts hit the counter before her arms, which wasn't a surprise, given the length of them, compared to the thickness of the others.

"Aye. Ay' can tell ye where ta go fer information. M'ay sister runs an inn 'round the corner. T'is as good a playce as any fer information, I reckon."

Her heavy dwarven accent gritted made her harder to understand for Chronos, but he got the gist of her message.

"Around which corner should I go to reach that fine establishment?"

He was trying to stay as polite as he could, since dwarves were renowned for their shorter fuses, amongst other things.

"Hah! Ay' wouldn' call it a fine establishmen'. You can find it to the left of 'ere. T'is about two blocks from 'ere."

Chronos nodded in thanks before flicking a silver piece over the counter to the dwarven lady. She caught the coin with a deftness uncommon for someone with small arms, and pocketed it quicker than a thief hiding his loot.

He left the guild, heading left of the building, and easily found the inn. As the woman had said, it was far from a 'Fine' establishment.

The exterior was clean enough to pass for a respectable place, but the loudness of the crowd inside was filtering heavily through the closed doors and shutters. Chronos was already wincing at how loud it would be inside.

'I need information. Guess I'll have to find someplace calm to rest my ears after this.'

He resolved himself before pushing through the closed door, assaulted immediately by heavy laughter and chanting, as well as the rancid odour of cheap ale and sweaty patrons.

"Welcome to the Singing Boar Inn, traveller. Come right in, I'll be with you in a moment!"

Chapter 424 Jack And Margaret, Entering New Eden

Across the continent from Stellar Woodlands, in a small human settlement, many new players appeared for the first time in New Eden. Amongst these players, an old man opened his steel-grey eyes slowly, taking in the new feeling of a different world.

This old man was Jack Boudreau, playing New Eden for the first time, alongside his wife, who was nowhere to be found near him.

Jack had done his homework, figuring out the interface commands and options before he ever launched the game. So he was ready for this eventuality and knew what to do.

He opened up the message interface, which he had already linked to his phone contacts before they completed the game update, and opened up a message window to his wife.

'Were you teleported into a town?'

The response from his wife came back quickly.

'Yes. It looks like a small, rundown village. The people here look haggard.'

Jack looked around himself, but the scenery was a little different. He looked to be in some kind of walled-up settlement, too small to be a city, but too large to be considered a village.

Opening his map, Jack looked at the greyed-out area all around what had been lit up to him with exasperation. He noted his location coordinates and sent them to his wife.

She did the same.

Through this, they could establish that they weren't that far from each other, given that the coordinate numbers matched a standard metric like on Earth.

Jack had noted every large city and their location from the forums, and their closest large city was Aravelle. It was the one closest to both of them.

'Let's meet up in Aravelle. Do you need the coordinates?'

His wife's response made him chuckle to himself.

'Jack, my dear, you underestimate me. Did I ever need your help to find my way somewhere?'

'I'm sorry, old habits die hard. Then we shall meet there as soon as possible. We need to reach the Paragons base as soon as we can, and we can do our things from there.'

After receiving confirmation from his wife, he closed the chat window. He looked around himself, trying to find a mercantile district, or anything resembling it.

He could see a few stalls on the sides of the road, but they sold mostly food and daily wares. What he wanted was a weapon and armour shop.

Asking around to some people, which the youngsters called NPCs, he was guided toward the shop he was looking for.

Entering the small shop, he saw a few leather armours and metal armours lined up on the walls, as well as some standard weapons on racks in the middle of the open shop. There were also a few better-looking pieces on the wall behind the merchant counter.

Browsing through the weapons, he picked out a simple-looking dagger, and a light leather armour that looked serviceable. He then headed to the counter, where the merchant looked bored out of his mind, leaning lazily.

"Hello, sir. I would like to buy these, as well as the pair of pistols on the wall behind you. Also, do you have a rifle anywhere that I could purchase?"

The merchant looked at the old man before him, dressed in pauper clothes, and almost sneered.

"The wares behind the counter are premium quality, and you can't afford them. Stick to that side of the counter, old man."

Jack's gaze became cold.

"I wasn't asking for a price. I said I wanted them. Don't worry about money. It is not an issue."

"Tch! Like someone of your standing could buy these premium weapons. The pair of pistols alone costs five gold. And, although I have a rifle in the back, its price is out of your range, marked at ten gold pieces."

Jack looked at the pistols before looking the merchant in the eye again.

"Please bring the rifle to the counter and show me the pistols. I would like to inspect them."

The merchant looked at the old man in annoyance, before walking to the back of the store. When he came back to the front, he was holding a large-sized rifle, with a revolving barrel, same as on the pistols on the wall.

It seemed to Jack, these were crude attempts at making multi-shot guns, like one would expect of the early eighteen hundreds. Jack picked up the rifle as soon as the merchant dropped it on the counter and started inspecting it.

Although its weight was much heavier than the new-generation rifles he was used to, it wasn't anything too bad. The steel parts on it were crudely fashioned, and the wooden covering was of inferior quality.

The muzzle pin and back sight were slightly misaligned, which would assuredly mess up the aim for someone inexperienced, but Jack could make do. Next, he opened the barrel mechanism, verifying the roll on it to make sure it wouldn't lock while in use.

Everything was crude, but in order. The rifle wouldn't be the best he had ever wielded, but it wouldn't blow up in his face or jam too easily.

He did a similar inspection of the two pistols, which were in similar conditions as the rifle, before putting them back on the counter.

"How much for all of this?"

The merchant was looking at the old man nervously. He had never seen someone inspect a gun so rapidly and accurately, since it was a gnomish weapon, and he was afraid he had to deal with someone of knowledge.

"Uh. The rifle is ten gold, and the pair of pistols are five gold. As for the armour and dagger you chose, they are five silver and one silver, respectively. The total would come to fifteen gold and six silver coins."

Looking at the gear he put on the counter, Jack did a quick estimate.

'This isn't worth over ten gold, by my estimates. What a rip-off.'

"The rifle's aim is misaligned, and the pistols' barrels are rusty. The armour had a repair on the back, and the dagger has a nick close to the hilt. Ten gold pieces."

Of course, Jack knew the merchant was overpricing the guns, since they were not human made. But a little haggling wouldn't hurt the man.

The merchant started sweating. All the problems the old man listed out were true, and he knew it.

He had hoped the man was not familiar with what he was purchasing, but he turned out to be wrong.

"I run a business here, old man. I can't go lower than fourteen gold."

"Fine, I'll pay you a finder's fee. Twelve gold coins. Take it or leave it."

The merchant looked at Jack with uncertainty. But the look on the old man's face wasn't one of unease.

So he broke down first.

"Fine. Twelve gold pieces. But do you even have that much on you?"

Jack flashed a shark-ish grin, pulling out a small pouch of money with exactly twelve gold coins in it.

"I said money wasn't an issue. Have a good day, sir."

Chapter 425 Escorting Party

A few hundred kilometres from there, Jack's wife had just finished buying some gear for herself. The dark leather armour she bought, in conjunction with the two daggers strapped to her lower back, hid her actual age well.

Margarett was close to Jack's age too, being fifty-eight years old herself. But when dressed well, and pampered up, she could easily pass off as a late thirties woman.

And right now, with her equipment on, she looked like a mature man-eater assassin.

Since her husband had warned her about the possibility of monsters out of their capabilities around the starting zones, she played the safe card, and looked for a party of gullible... Ahem... generous youngsters that would take her along.

She positioned herself close to the village's exit, making herself look in distress, and waited for her charms to do the rest. It took around ten minutes before a young man walked up to her with an enormous smile.

"Hello, miss. Are you perhaps waiting on some friends to adventure with?"

With the widest smile she could muster, Margarett replied.

"No. I'm alone. Me and my husband decided to play together, but he was put in another town, a ways away from here. I was waiting for him to come to get me, so we can head to a city called Aravelle."

The young man extended his hand to her.

"We are heading to Aravelle ourselves! Do you want us to escort you? That way you can save some travelling for your husband."

'Hook, line, and sinker,' Margarett thought, flashing a surprised look.

"Would I not be a bother for your group?"

"Of course not, miss..."

"ShadowFang. I know, it's a childish name. I wanted it to sound cool, like you youngsters say."

"Miss ShadowFang. It is no problem at all. My party would gladly help you reach Aravelle."

"Then I'll be in your care, mister..."

"Blazing Heart. But you can call me Blaze. It'll be our pleasure."

The full-plated young man brought Margarett back to his party, introducing her to his three friends. The party was composed of a Knight class, a Sorcerer, a Hunter and a Priest.

The party of four were IRL friends, and had begun playing New Eden a few days before the update, and were now ready to head to Aravelle, now that the update went live.

Their levels were all around ten to twelve, and they promised to keep ShadowFang safe on the way there. The four young men all looked no older than twenty years old and were as gullible as young men could get.

The woman showed smiles and gratefulness, all the while thinking she would ditch them as soon as she could. Their over-friendly attitudes already falling on her nerves.

They left the small desolate village, which the four young men said didn't use to look like this before the update, and headed into the high grass plains around it.

"Be mindful of your steps, miss ShadowFang. The monsters around here are all small, and jump from the grass, often being in groups of five to ten," the knight, Blazing Heart, told her.

ShadowFang had pulled out her daggers, holding them in a loose grip, making her look like a total amateur.

"If we get attacked, just stand next to our priest, Light of Hope, and we'll guard you," the Hunter, Hidden Arrow, added.

"I can help, if needed," ShadowFang said, gripping her daggers a little tighter.

But the four boys shook their heads.

"We'll be fine on our own, Miss Fang. This zone barely has monsters over level five, so we can handle all the fighting. Just make sure you don't get killed," Blazing Heart said, flashing a confident grin.

"Okay then," ShadowFang replied, smiling sheepishly.

'These young bucks are too easy to manipulate. It's like dealing with children,' ShadowFang thought to herself.

She would let them do the heavy lifting, since they had invited her to a party. She would get Exp, regardless of her combat contribution.

Might as well use their bravado, for now, and keep up the act of the toothless damsel. But she had a hunch this wouldn't last, since she could already feel they were being watched, and she seemed to be the only one to feel it.

'What a bunch of amateurs.'

Soon after their conversation ended, a group of ten Honey Badgers charged at them in a straight line, disturbing the tall grass as they went, foregoing stealth.

Their levels varied between one and five, and they seemed pretty weak. The four boys surrounded ShadowFang, taking defensive stances, with Blazing Heart at the forefront, shield raised.

The Hunter, Hidden Arrow, was already shooting his bow, missing every other shot, while the Sorcerer was launching pebble-sized stone bullets at the incoming enemies, also missing a few shots.

'Their formation isn't bad, but their aim is terrible.'

Once the badgers were close enough, Blazing Heart smacked his sword on his shield, shouting out, and all the enemies suddenly focused their gazes on him.

'A taunting skill. At least he knows his role well.'

ShadowFang was analyzing their every move, with eyes containing a breadth of experience that contradicted her previous attitude. But the four boys were too busy concentrating on the fight to notice.

The combat was over in less than a minute, but ShadowFang was still snapping her head around.

'This is wrong. Those monsters were running a straight line. That wasn't an ambush. They were fleeing.'

Lowering her stance, ShadowFang reversed her grip on her daggers, her eyes still darting around.

Her actions alerted the four boys, and Blazing Heart was eyeing her suspiciously. The air she gave out was totally different now than a few minutes prior.

"Are you alright, Miss Fang?"

She didn't bother looking at him before responding.

"The fight isn't over. We're surrounded."

The four boys looked around, but couldn't see any enemies, with their eyes or their mini-map. They were half tempted to laugh it off as unease from the newbie woman, but her aura was making them nervous.

When the first attack came from the hidden enemies, it was already too late to retreat.

Chapter 426 Komandir Anton

On a different continent, commonly known as the dark continent, in a city run by Demonoids, a certain player had just re-logged into the game, appearing in the main hall of his guild, the Neo-Spetsnaz.

This player had earned the guild leader title through a show of force, and his participation in the first tournament EG had held for New Eden.

This player was Anton the Berserker.

He had earned this moniker after the tournament, when he unlocked a special class, Berserker, in the most circumstantial way. By being constantly angry, and fighting with friend and foe alike.

He had gained this class after an outburst against his allies, when they refused to obey him and raid the base of Paragons, which he knew belonged to his hated enemy, Astaroth.

After slaughtering almost his entire guild roster once, he had woken up in a hut-like house, alone with a large man, wearing a bear's pelt on his back, and was sharpening his axe vigorously.

He later came to know the man as Bödvar Bjarki, the first Berserker. After proving his resolve and mettle, through a plethora of challenges, which he only passed through by envisioning himself ripping Astaroth apart, the large man marked him with a burning bear paw-shaped iron, before bestowing him with a legacy.

Since then, Anton had often proven his strength, be it in battle or out of it. His power had risen manifold, and he couldn't wait for the day he would meet Astaroth in battle again, and tear him apart.

His guild members reappeared, one by one, in a mix of Demonoids, Undead, and Orcs, all of them sharing some similar physical traits. The Neo-Spetsnaz guild was recognized as one that treasured power over wits.

But that only meant it was what they favoured, and didn't preclude them from having smart players amongst their ranks. The vice-leader was one such man.

His power was not the highest in the guild, but his wit allowed him to overcome most of the players in the guild, aside from the leader, Anton. His name was Chernobyl, in honour of the fear the place inspired in people.

He was a warlock Demonoid, whose patron was a demon whose power of corruption was unequalled, or so he claimed. Chernobyl used this power in combat to weaken his opponents, as he strengthened himself.

This often led him to victory, as his opponents forwent defence, allowing him to excerpt his influence on them. He only ever lost to Anton, whose power gap was enough to plow through the corruption, and beat him to a pulp before the corruption could take hold.

As Chernobyl appeared, Anton walked over to him.

"Start investigating what the changes are to the game immediately. We need to be the first to know the situation on the dark continent, if possible."

"Yes, komandir. What about the information gathering on the Paragons?"

"Put that on the back burner. I want information on our situation, first. We can deal with the trash later."

"Yes, komandir."

The vice-leader left Anton's side, immediately grabbing a few of the reappearing members and leaving the guild building.

Anton walked up to the roof of their one-story building and looked outward. Their guild base looked like an abandoned factory of some sort, like an old sawmill, alone, in the middle of an empty plain.

There was nothing for miles around, no trees, no lakes, no mountains. Whatever had been around this factory in the past was gone.

It begged to wonder how the factory withstood the passage of time, when nothing else around it did. As he looked around, he saw something shimmer in the distance.

Contrary to its name, the dark continent was covered in light, just like the other continent, and it wasn't perpetually night. But there was a permanent haze in the skies that filtered out the light a bit, making it seem like it was never the middle of the day.

The days were lit up like a sunset most of the time, making everything bask in an orange and red hue all the time. Sometimes, when the light reflected on a lake, it almost seemed as if the lake was on fire.

But whatever shimmered in the distance had a hue redder than the skin tone of the Demonoids, and it was moving.

Anton squinted, trying to see if he could make out what it was from his position, but it was too far to garner any details. Looking at the yard below him, where some of the guild members had filtered out of the building, he barked out commands.

"You lot! I want a full group to form up, and go scout out to the East of here. There is a weird phenomenon, and I want to know what it is."

The people in the yard promptly formed a full group of twelve, excited to already be back in action, and left on a jog toward the East.

The rest of the guild, lacking specific instructions, started going about their business.

Many of them left for the major cities of the dark continent, resuming their prior tasks of recruiting players for the guild. Anton had been clear about how he wanted to form the biggest and strongest guild on the dark continent, before taking that position outside of it, too.

In the meantime, the others started gathering resources in the more prosperous regions of the continent, to make gold for the guild coffers.

Anton had set a contribution system, where the players that contributed the most would get special privileges, and better access to new gear or skill books they gathered from dungeons and raids.

Of course, the officers had the first choice, making sure they were kept at the top of the power chain for as long as they could. Anton preferred to keep the officers he had in place, as much as possible.

He knew them, and their agendas, and it was safer to have someone you know about being close to you. It reduced the risk of getting backstabbed.

Anton wasn't unfamiliar with backstabbing, but he preferred to be on the giving side rather than the receiving side.

'This time, I conquer the continent, before moving on to squashing the Paragons.'

Chapter 427 First Week

As players from all rungs of the world reconnected into New Eden, be it in the Elven forests, the Human plains, or the Dwarven mining cities, all the way to the mystical alter-plane of the Fey, and the perpetual dusk skies of the dark continent, things had changed.

Cities had grown, towns had fortified, villages disappeared, along with landscapes altered. It wasn't something quite noticeable at first, but the players would rapidly find out that an unknown threat had risen all over the world of New Eden.

Some players reappeared in the towns and villages they had disconnected from, only to land in destroyed ruins amidst hordes of monsters covered in red mist. Needless to say, these players were killed in a heartbeat, unaware they would spawn in the middle of enemies, and unprepared to defend themselves.

Of course, their graveyard spawn took them out of the danger zones, since unconsecrated graveyards became inactive. This meant the players wouldn't die repetitively.

But this was only a temporary respite. The corruption had already spread far and wide, all across the lands, and they inevitably face the corrupted beasts again, at a later date.

The new players, who connected for the first time, had a fifty percent chance of landing in a town that was actively fighting back against corruption, or just outside of the corruption zones.

Many towns had invested in smaller portals, so that they could retreat if they suddenly could not defend any longer. These smaller portals only ever connected to one city, usually the closest major city.

But this small addition allowed many of the higher level players to step back into the lower level zones, and help the new players level, at a fee, of course, setting grounds for a new money-making scheme.

Rare were the solo players, before the update, and even rarer were they now. Travelling alone had become closer to suicide than just plain risk.

Only the strongest of the strong dared travel alone anymore. But it wasn't without rewards.

The new corrupted monsters and their augmented levels and grades allowed for much quicker Exp gain than before, making the risk-to-reward ratio not too bad.

The first week of this new update was the busiest the players had ever been. Activities ranged from gathering intel to fighting back waves of monsters, all the way to politicking for guilds and their leaders.

Astaroth had been on a constant loop of fighting back the waves of corruption, which kept growing in size and apparent strength over the course of the week, as he waited for his reinforcements.

He had sent a message back to Phoenix, asking for a priest player to be sent his way, with a means to seal a demon portal. He wasn't sure how long the portal would keep spewing corruption before it changed to something more.

There had already been two demons out of the portal, the first attacking his temporary camping spot, and taking hold of Kloud, and the second attacking the Ash Elf capital, Tel'narel.

The gap between the two incidents was around half a year, by what he had garnered from Aberon and the others. But how long would it take until another demon came out, he had no idea.

Plus, he had no clue when the demon that acted as court mage for the rotten king of the Ash Elves had popped out, and from where. He still had to talk to whoever was waiting for him back at the Bastion, but he couldn't exactly leave here.

If he left, it would leave the settlement practically undefended. Kloud still wasn't exactly battle ready, his mind not entirely recovered from guilt and the demon's corruption, and Aberon was using every ounce of mana he had to maintain the barrier that the forest guardians had set up.

For some reason, the day after Astaroth had reappeared, the barrier suddenly started weakening. He wanted to investigate what had caused this, but he was temporarily locked here.

Phoenix sent Silent Light, along with a small party, to escort him toward Astaroth's location. It wasn't until the end of the first week that they arrived at the desolate settlement.

The players all across New Eden, who had access to gaming pods, had taken a habit of only going out of the game to resupply their IVs and take care of their basic needs.

A wave of calm took Earth, as most of its younger population suddenly stopped visiting society. Evo-Gaming had also reduced the gold-to-money ratio by half, making it one gold coin for fifty dollars.

But even with this lowering of the exchange rate, a lot of new players swarmed the game, trying to change the station in life through farming money inside New Eden. Some were successful, others not so much.

But the fresh wave of players allowed for the still-standing towns and smaller kingdoms to remain alive, for the time being. The world of New Eden viewed the abnormals as their light of hope.

Most players busied themselves fighting the waves of corrupted beasts, whose resources were now worth more than before, given as the quality of their materials had risen.

But there were still some players with nefarious intentions crawling about in the shadows, waiting for their time to shine. Amongst these players, Shadow Scourge, also known as the Kingslayer, was the one with the most anticipation.

The new corrupted beasts were only test subjects, for him, acting as an additional source of poison material. He had already started experimenting with the beasts' blood, testing out his new poisons on regular monsters.

His goal was to gain a poison that could act as a weapon, but also a boon. He was not unaware of what the corruption did to the monsters, and was trying to replicate it for human use.

Shadow Scourge was a scientist at heart, and even though his methods and goals were dubious, he was still trying to better humanity outside of New Eden. This goal guided him through many experiments, better left untold.

Chapter 428 Setting Up A Job

Two days into his travelling across the wide continent, Silent Light could feel mental exhaustion creeping up on him already. The distance itself wasn't much of an issue, since he teleported to Sunpeak, shortening his route by a lot.

But the non-stop state of alertness, and the fighting every other hour, was slowing down the travelling by a lot. Of course, Silent Light wasn't alone, and his escort allowed him to plow through combat efficiently.

They had yet to cross a zone where the monsters' levels equalled or surpassed theirs, and this made it a lot easier for them, as a group. The half-party of six, including Silent Light, was trudging along much faster than Astaroth and Violette had, back when they did this same cross-country trip.

Of course, they were also passing through zones that Astaroth had gone around, since he was lower on the level scale when he was doing it. Silent Light was level fifty, and his party members were all around level forty.

The disparity was so glaring, even though they were part of the same guild. But these were not core members of Paragon.

Instead of asking the core members to escort him, wasting their precious time, Phoenix had done something else. She had used the guild interface to make a guild job offer.

It was an option that they had yet to use to its full potential, since the guild had been very young before the update, and had only barely done the siege. But now was the perfect time to use it fully.

The guild job offer worked the same way a quest would, but instead of being given by a native, the guild officers could set them, and the rewards for them, and give them to guild members to accept.

Phoenix had set the reward this time to a full level, a hundred gold pieces, and the possibility of entering the core of Paragon, if Silent Light deemed them worthy. She had set the requirements for a party of five, with experience in dungeon running, as well as a healer-less composition.

Phoenix didn't want a second healer in a party that would contain Silent Light, even if she wasn't sure how rough of a trip this would be.

She needed Silent to stay on top of his healing game, as well as a party that could maximize damage over sustainability, since that would speed up their pace.

A party had met the job requirements in less than ten minutes, since once they posted the quest, it would notify every guild member that met the requirements, which she had set to regular members.

But the team composition that met her outside the tree palace surprised Phoenix. She had half expected a party with one tank, and four well-balanced DPS'.

But what was standing before her was quite an esoteric party.

At the forefront of the party, a large Orc barbarian, with almost no armour on him, was standing proud, tusks protruding two inches out of his lower lip.

Behind him, an Elven druid woman, with closed eyes and a serene expression, almost like she was sleeping. Phoenix could feel the mountain-like pressure of the woman's mana washing off of her, and knew she wasn't as she appeared.

'She has no control over her mana pool, but its sheer size means business.'

She nodded in approval.

Next to the druid, a tall human, in a dragon-looking half-plate, with a long spear strapped to his back, was standing still. The lower part of his face was devoid of emotion, while the upper part was hidden inside a dragon-head helmet.

Standing behind the spearman was a petite girl with wings, and a large book hanging from her belt. Phoenix was unsure what her class was, but she could sense some mana coming from the book, so she assumed the girl was a caster.

Her shyness was cute, although a bit unsettling, given they were going to encounter a lot of monsters on their trip. But Silent was the one that would judge their capabilities, not her, so she brushed the matter aside.

The last member was the one that perplexed Phoenix the most. Standing proudly to the side, with the widest grin she had ever seen, was a Gnome.

The gnome was wearing standard clothes, with a leather apron over them. To his side were two daggers that resembled kitchen knives more than actual weapons.

And on his back, there was what looked to be a large frying pan and a long ladle. Phoenix was unsure if he was a combat class or a crafter class.

She cleared her throat.

"Ahem. Thank you for accepting the job offer so quickly. The urgency required from this task is of the utmost importance, so I will not go too much into detail.

"The officer, Silent Light, a priest class, needs to reach Ash Elf territory as fast as possible, to deal with an urgent matter, and you will escort him. He will tell you more about the details of the mission on the road.

"But I have one question before you leave for this mission. This trip needs to be done with speed as its priority. Can you effectively take care of combat without too much supervision in a small group?"

The Orc player grinned widely, which looked slightly menacing, given his two large tusks.

"It will not be an issue, Ma'am. Our party has been through many dungeons and dangerous zones before, and we have a well-oiled combat routine."

Phoenix looked at him before scanning the entire party again with her gaze.

"Then can I know why you have a crafter with you?" she asked, pointing to the Gnome.

Turning to look at who she pointed to, the Orc looked at her again, bellowing in a laugh.

"Gragagaga! You mean Food Goblin? He is our most important party member. And do not let his gear fool you, Ma'am. Food Goblin is a combat class. He got a special class called War Cook a while back, and we have been grateful ever since."

Although Phoenix wasn't convinced, she wasn't sure they had the time to argue his capabilities or test his strength. So she would have to roll with it.

In any case, they did not yet have the manpower to be picky about whom to send, unless she used other officers as escort. Nodding in defeat, she approved the party for the guild job and sealed the deal.

She sent them on their way shortly after, after bidding Silent goodbye and safe travels.

'I hope they live up to their claims. Astaroth seemed to need Silent Light sooner than later.'

Chapter 429 Learning To Trust

The party progressed swiftly, regardless of the constant fighting, and the need for them to go out of the game occasionally to resupply their pods. Silent Light had been observing the five members of his party like a hawk ever since they left Sunpeak.

He was also curious about the Gnome called Food Goblin. Special classes were no longer as rare as when the game started and were now more of an uncommon result than a rare occurrence.

More and more special classes were popping up around New Eden, often a result of a weird combination of skills or strange fighting style. Many legacy classes had also started springing up.

Most of them were low-ranking legacies, in the Special grade and Elite grade, with the occasional Rare grade. If higher-grade legacies had sprouted, no one said anything about them, and the people concerned kept it for themselves.

Of course, speculation about Khalor's legacy was plentiful, with some people saying it was either a Rare grade, or a Legendary grade legacy. Silent wondered if he would find a legacy for himself someday.

But he brushed away the stray thoughts, yawning from the accumulated fatigue.

It was already nighttime of their third day travelling, and they had apparently reached the border of the Ash Elf territory. Silent Light had kept in touch with Astaroth, giving him occasional status reports, as well as asking questions about the situation they were walking into.

Through their continued communications, Silent determined he was asked to come so he could close a tear, most likely more advanced than the one they had found under the Bastion.

Astaroth also warned him to stay off the roads once he entered the Ash Elf kingdom. When he had asked why, Astaroth had replied that it was highly likely that military patrols would be swarming the roads in search of anyone who wasn't an Ash Elf.

Not wanting to try his luck with soldiers from a kingdom he knew nothing about, Silent had taken this tip seriously. They would enter those borders the next morning, and he was already prepared to stick away from any road he crossed.

Over the last three days, Silent had confirmed the party's claims that Food Goblin was indeed their most invaluable member. He brought something to the table that few classes could boast of yet.

When they stopped during the day, to rest or resupply a pod, Food Goblin would pull his huge frying pan, as well as his ladle and knives, and he would cook food for everyone. But it was not ordinary food.

Silent Light had experienced it firsthand the first time they stopped to rest. The food he made from any meat, broth, herbs, or other ingredient he had on hand gave out buffs, depending on what was used.

Food Goblin wasn't a chef in the real world, and his skills might not be the sharpest in a kitchen, but the meals he made in New Eden had yet to turn out badly. He wasn't exactly sure how the game determined what food gave what buff, yet, but he tried many things hoping to find new combos all the time.

And Silent Light was glad he was coming along with them. His combat capabilities were quite strange, but they were not a wasted space in the party.

Food Goblin had the ability to change the parts he struck on a beast into ingredients, if he hit the part in question for enough damage. This effectively meant he could hit a monster's arm and turn it into a piece of meat, rendering the monster unable to use the appendage.

This might sound stupid random, and weak, at first glance. But when teamed with a party that knew how to maximize its effect, it was a great way to incapacitate an enemy in no time, flat.

Sadly, they had rapidly realized once they started fighting corrupted beasts that the meat from them was unusable to cook, when taken as is. It wasn't until Silent Light tried a purifying spell on the meat that they were able to use it.

It otherwise rendered whatever meal cooked with it inedible. Silent Light shook his head from all the stray thoughts.

He could tell he was mentally fatigued when he started rambling in his own thoughts. He instead focused on the crackling of the firewood and the soft sounds of the surrounding plains.

Looking at four of his temporary party members asleep, he couldn't wait until it was his turn. He turned his head to the Orc, doing rounds around their makeshift camp.

He was the leader of this small group, usually, and he had a knack for keeping the morale of his friends high. His name was SharpTusk.

Silent Light found the name to be a bit underbearing, given the extremely outgoing nature of the man. But he wasn't one to judge a name, given his past in the matter.

Silent Light was his name now, but it used to be that he chose names much more on the ridiculous side. When SharpTusk came back to sit next to Silent, he started a conversation.

"So. Who is this person we are going to help? In three days, all you said about him was that he's an important member of Paragons. I would love a bit more detail."

Silent looked at the Orc, unsure if he could trust him yet. The priest was a blabber mouth by nature, and he understood the ease at which it was to drop secrets and regret it later.

But this was a case worse than this. If anyone knew who they were going to help before they reached there, they risked getting swarmed by players wanting to prove themselves against one of the most powerful players in New Eden.

So he was still unwilling to tell them where they were going exactly, or who they were rejoining. But he knew he would eventually have to trust the small group.

Keeping the information from them for too long would breed distrust between them and Paragon, and that would be bad in the long term.

The Orc sighed.

"It's okay. I understand the lack of trust. You barely know us and we haven't been in the guild for long, since we joined right before the game went down. But just so you know, we didn't join

Paragons because it was the strongest. We joined because we heard the players in it were treated like friends and family."

Silent Light almost felt bad that he was proving this to be untrue.

'Will he leave if I never tell him? Trust is very important in a guild...'

Feeling it was riskier to stay quiet than to talk, Silent opened his mouth to respond.

"I'll tell you. But can you wait until we reach him before telling the rest of your friends?"

The Orc smiled widely, happy he had finally earned a bit of trust.

"Of course. They will understand."

Nodding slowly, Silent sighed.

"We are going to help the guild leader, Astaroth. He's stuck in a place where a breach keeps pouring corrupted beasts on NPCs and he can't leave without putting them at risk of dying."

SharpTusk's eyes went wide.

'The guild leader?! This is our chance to make a good impression!' he thought to himself.

Chapter 430 Tied Futures

Back in the kingdom of Stellar Woodlands, in Bastion City, whose name Leon had chosen while everyone was gone, Chronos was in a room above the dirty bar in the Singing Boar Inn.

He had rented a room there after his conversation with the Inn owner, Kitebera, who was much better outspoken than her sister in the adventurers' guild. She had given him a lot of info on the city he was in, including who currently ruled it.

Chronos initially wanted to stay here for a short time, enough to get money from guild quests and bounce back to exploring the world. Even though he seemed to feel nothing anymore, he still remembered his original intentions for playing New Eden.

He had come back from his first day of questing and was tired. Most of the quests in Bastion City were for corruption patrol and elimination.

The patrol group he had first crossed when walking toward here had been one such group, and he rapidly learned that many of them came in and out of the city, be it day or night.

Groups of adventurers, sometimes composed of only NPCs, other times purely of players, and sometimes even mixed parties, constantly came to and from the city. Hawkers stood before the quest board, to gather party members in parties that were short of a set of arms.

That was how he had done for the day, as he didn't know anyone here yet. But as he lay on his bed, contemplating the day's events, he wondered how a city prospered, in a land surrounded by monsters of such power.

The monsters around the city ranged from level forty-five, all the way to level sixty. The grades were also never under special, making the hunts very dangerous for business.

Luckily for everyone involved, the stronger monsters were never in groups, making the challenge somewhat manageable.

From what Chronos heard when he lingered in the Inn's bar, downstairs, Bastion City was the only city that actively hunted the corrupted monsters, which also seemed to be the reason they never clumped up in hordes.

The pay was apparently better for adventurers here, and that explained why there was such a large population of them present. Chronos wondered who had come up with such a business model.

Whoever they were, they were extremely smart, and their foresight in economics was out of this world. He also wondered what kind of starting capital a city needed to launch such a business model.

'It can't be anything too small. The salaries for hunting quests are easily twice as high as elsewhere, if I believe the gossip.'

Laying there on his back, Chronos decided he would train his new skills a bit before going to sleep.

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, before exhaling slowly. When he opened his eyes again, they were shining lightly, in an azure blue colour, and he could see the time smoothly flowing around him.

But almost immediately, something caught his eye. With practice, Chronos had started seeing time threads, although not all the time.

And right now, he was seeing countless of them floating all around him, passing through the walls and ceiling. The amount of them floating around was unnatural, even for a city.

He usually only saw time threads of people he was close to. His ability to see the time threads was currently limited to seeing the ones that intertwined with his own.

He looked down at his chest, where he could see his own thread, connected to his soul, or so Tyr had explained, leaving him and travelling in the same direction as the others.

Chronos' curiosity kicked in, and he got up from his bed. Opening his window, he looked at the threads passing around him, all going in the same direction.

He couldn't see where they were going from his window, so he climbed out of it, making his way to the roof of the Inn. Once there, he stared in one direction, slack-jawed.

All these golden threads that stemmed from all directions, some of them stretching further than his eyesight allowed, all travelled in one direction. And their destination was the massive tree that stood in the middle of Bastion City.

From the information he had gathered the previous day, that tree was a palace where the city was ruled from. He had yet to go inside the inner wall of Bastion City, but his thread still travelled towards it.

Looking around him from the rooftop, many threads passed right next to him. Tyr had once told him that with enough experience, he would someday learn to read the threads, like watching someone's life through their eyes for a moment.

He was curious to see if he knew some people whose thread passed next to him, and was tempted to read them. But he had never done it before, and wasn't sure he would even be capable of doing it.

He picked the closest thread and extended his hand toward it. But nothing happened.

His hand slipped right through the golden thread, like it was simply air. Closing his eyes, he focused as much as he could on his sense of time, cutting out all other sensory intakes.

He lost his sense of smell first, then his hearing went, soon followed by the sense of touch. All he could feel with his closed eyes was the vibrations emanating from the threads of time.

He felt them closely enough to not need to open his eyes and still knew where they were around him. Picking another thread that had flowed closer to him, he stretched out his hand again.

As his hand brushed against the thread, this time, he felt resistance. It was like blocking the flow of water with your hand when you stuck it under a flowing tap.

But instead of removing his hand, he flowed his hand in the same direction as the flow, suddenly feeling the resistance going away.

A sense of vertigo took him, and he almost lost balance. When he reopened his eyes, he was standing in a large open field, with grass up to his abdomen.

He heard something from his right rustle, and his body moved on its own. Seeing two daggers rise in front of his face, he finally understood.

'I did it. This isn't my body. I'm watching someone else's life.'