

## New Eden 441

### Chapter 441 First Portal Sealed

Opening the notification, Silent was over the moon.

\*The system has acknowledged your intentions of attacking with holy energy and granted you a spell. Healing mastery level 0 -> 1. Spell learned; Holy Bolt. Congratulations, player Silent Light.\*

He wanted to open his interface right now, to look at the spell's effect, but he was still mid-combat. Plus, the Hell Hounds were now out for his blood, since the Holy Grounds spell had ended.

Silent didn't get to see his damage number, since the shock of the notification drew his attention away. But he was going to find out now.

Raising his hand at the Hell Hound closest to him, he focused on his new spell.

The searing ray of holy energy left his hand once again, eliciting an enormous grin from the teenager as it slammed into the Hell Hound's chest.

\*3,524\*

'Yes! Now we're talking!'

The mana drain on this spell was higher than a normal healing spell, by at least triple. But Silent cared little about that if he could finally have the option to attack at range.

He also noticed the holy ray was slowing down the Hell Hounds every time it collided with them. He used this to his advantage and started kiting them.

They may be faster than him, but it wouldn't matter if they couldn't reach him, right?

The fight proceeded quickly from there on out, as Silent Light took the risk of exhausting himself as a trade-off for a victory of his own. Pure healing classes like him were reputable for lacking attack options, and he had been no exception.

Up to now.

He was glad the system recognized and accepted his intention, but it prompted a string of questions in his mind.

'Is the system adaptive? Why are Astaroth and Khalor constantly trying to go past its boundaries? Is there something they are hiding from the others?'

As he slew the Hell Hounds in rapid succession, Silent Light smiled and headed toward the pit he had been looking down into earlier. Reaching the ledge, he stared down at the portal.

He climbed his way down, being careful not to fall. The drop wasn't very high, at about twenty meters, but it would still hurt like a bitch.

When he reached the ground floor, he walked toward the portal, looking at it warily.

'I hope it doesn't spit out other enemies while I'm closing it.'

He sent a message to Astaroth, notifying him he started closing it and closed his interface.

Focusing on the glowing mass of demonic mana, Silent closed his eyes and concentrated on the circulation of his divine mana, repeating the process Khalor had taught him two weeks prior.

But as he manifested the first strands of energy, he received a message notification.

Seeing it was from Astaroth, he opened it.

\*If you have a skill to protect yourself, now is the time to use it!\*

The Priest frowned at the message, but he suddenly felt a surge of energy coming from outside the hill, and his eyes widened.

He rapidly let go of the strands of divine energy he was wielding and swirled his hands in front of him.

"Solaris' Sanctum!"

Just as he said his last word and a bubble of golden-red energy popped around him, a massive wave of energy engulfed the entire village cave, including the pit he was in. The blast was powerful, and regardless of his protective spell, he was blown away.

He blasted backward, colliding with the nearby cave wall, the bubble around him absorbing the impact. But that didn't mean he was unscathed.

Since his protective spell suddenly came to a stop, he lurched from the center of it and slammed into the inside of the bubble wall. His head knocked hard against it, and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was sprawled on the ground, covered in dust, his head slightly bleeding.

"Oww... What the hell caused that?"

From the outside of the hill, he could hear explosions, like someone was repeatedly blasting dynamite, and he could feel the ground shake with every blast.

'What's going on out there?'

But now wasn't the time for questioning. Turning his head, Silent Light saw the portal of red energy was bubbling and swelling.

'Shit!'

He didn't know what caused this to happen, or what the result would be, but he cared not to learn. Silent got up from his feet as fast as his aching body allowed him and walked over to the portal at a brisk pace.

He focused again, ignoring his head crying out in pain, and reached out into his divine energy again. Silent Light grabbed at the strands of energy, weaving them into a bubble of energy that he wrapped around the portal.

Just as the bubble was closing, he felt a spike in the demonic mana, as if the portal was finally reaching the breach point. But the cocoon of divine energy closed around it before anything could happen, and whatever was going to happen never came to pass.

The portal slowly stabilized before it shrunk into a tear and back into nothingness.

Feeling his body become heavy like lead, Silent Light slumped to the ground, letting himself lie on the cold stone floor.

Huffing and puffing for air, the teenager smiled at his little success.

"One down, two more to go. At least, let's hope it's just two."

From the outside of the cave, he suddenly heard a screech of pain, unlike anything he had ever heard, tearing at his eardrums. Silent smacked his hands on his ears, trying to mitigate the loudness of it, attempting to save his eardrums.

The scream lasted a dozen seconds before absolute silence reigned once more. He could no longer hear explosions, or feel the ground shaking.

This was Silent's cue, telling him the fighting outside had also ended. He sighed in relief.

'Astaroth truly is a monster. Those four enemies would have taken a full party of level fifty players, just to keep in check. And with the surge of energy from before, I can guess one of them might have become stronger mid-combat.'

Silent Light lay there in contemplation. Two such players were present in their guild, currently.

But from what Khalor and Astaroth strived for, they wanted much more people to reach that power level. It seemed like an exercise in futility.

'I wonder if more players can even reach that level of power.'

But the image of two women flashed in his mind, and he knew it wasn't as impossible as he first thought.

'Maybe with enough time, we can all become this strong... Maybe even me...'

#### Chapter 443 Kingdom Survey

On the other end of the continent of light, in Bastion City, Phoenix was currently still catching up with everything that had happened throughout the ten-year time skip. She felt a bit bored about having to do all this on her own and would have much rathered be out fighting monsters.

But this wasn't a duty she could skirt to someone else. But it wasn't all gray and sad.

She found many new functions in her interface that had to do with kingdom building and management, which hadn't been there before the update. One of which had brought an enormous grin to her face.

She was still hesitating to put it into function and had wanted to hold an officer meeting, to get everyone's opinion on the matter. But with Astaroth at the other end of the continent, Silent Light with him, and Khalor back on the dark continent, it would have to wait.

'I really shouldn't wait for them much. Maybe I could do a survey instead?'

Calling out for Brienne, Phoenix waited for her in a side room. She wasn't very fond of doing her business in the big throne room and preferred holding her small meetings in the small chambers next to it, where they had accepted to give the ambassador role to Elwin.

She had a small thought for the man, wondering what had become of him. But Brienne entered the room, breaking her thought line.

"My queen," Brienne said, bowing down respectfully.

"Brienne, please. Don't be so formal when it's just the two of us. All this dancing around is making my head hurt."

"As you wish, my queen."

Brienne stood back up from her bow, but her demeanour barely changed.

With a deep sigh, Phoenix gave up for now.

"I called you here to ask for your opinion on a matter."

"I shall give you an answer at the best of my ability, your majesty."

"I see in my management interface that I can impose a tax on Exp for the citizens of the kingdom, be it Native or not. But I wonder if I should establish it."

Brienne looked slightly confused at the jargon Phoenix used, but the two had spoken a few times before, and Phoenix had tried giving her a rundown of the jargon, so they could understand each other better.

"Although I am not sure what 'Exp' is yet, your majesty, I believe the Native citizens of the kingdom would not notice if you imposed a tax on it, given it isn't too harsh. Maybe we can do a survey? Would that ease your hesitation?"

Phoenix rested her chin on her hand for a moment, falling into thought.

'I guess a survey of the Native's thoughts on the matter would be the easiest way. I know for certain that players won't mind. It is common practice in guilds usually.'

She just wasn't sure if she should do this without asking Astaroth. Even though she was second in command, in both the guild and the kingdom, ultimately, he was still the leader.

'I could send him a message, asking for his opinion, while the survey takes place.'

She looked back at Brienne, who was silently waiting for her to take a decision.

"Alright. Do the survey. For clarity, Exp is what makes people gain levels, and become stronger. I know the Natives don't have as good a grasp on them as us Abnormals, but you guys are still aware of your levels."

Brienne nodded her head, confirming that statement.

"How should I word the tax on it, your majesty? Do you have a set amount in mind already?"

"I do, yes. I was thinking of setting the tax to five percent for the Natives. But I would like the survey to ask how much they would think is just. Also, I think that if we tax on Exp, we should reduce the income tax slightly, to keep everything fair. You can state that in the survey."

Brienne pulled out a sheet of paper and scribbled notes on it as Phoenix talked. They went over a few points together, before Brienne took her leave, going to put this into motion.

A kingdom-wide survey wasn't a minor task, but they should still complete it promptly. If she set up a survey office and posted about the survey on boards everywhere around the city, the citizens would come of their own accord.

This took a load off Phoenix's mind. She opened up her interface, sending a message to Astaroth, keeping him apprised of the situation.

\*I started a survey in the kingdom for an Exp tax. I intend to tax the players of the guild a bit more than the Natives, but I think it wouldn't be bad to tax them, too. It would give us a larger safety net, come the need to level up quickly. What do you think?\*

It took a moment before Astaroth's answer came, but it was expected. Silent had kept her notified of their progress in the Ash Elf territory, and she knew they were busy.

\*I'm okay with it. Just make sure it's not too salty. We don't want the natives to think they are being treated unequally.\*

\*I'll explain what I had in mind when you have time to talk. Make sure you call me when you have a bit of time.\*

\*Will do. It's hectic over here, for now, but it'll calm down once we've taken care of the portals. I'll call you then. I'm reaching another portal, gotta go. I love you.\*

Phoenix smiled warmly.

\*Stay safe, and don't die. Exp isn't easy to get from what I hear from our players. Love you too.\*

She closed her interface, not expecting a reply from him for a while. She had gathered intel on the tears and portals spawning everywhere across the two continents, and from what she heard, even though every monster was suddenly stronger, and gave more Exp, it still wasn't enough to palliate the massive amounts needed to level up past level fifty.

Dying against some of the stronger creatures coming out of the portals was like committing level suicide.

Leon had done a good job making sure the threats stayed contained during the time skip. Some kingdoms were less active about the issue and were now facing constant onslaught.

'Let's just hope we can keep our territory free of the demons. It would suck to lose all our progress to an oversight.'

Phoenix closed all her interface windows and went to take a walk inside the city. She needed to change her mind a bit.

#### Chapter 444 Reaching The First Target

On the dark continent, reaching the Demonoid lands, Khalor was flying over the desolate lands with a frown on his face. Below him, where Demon-Bulls and a variety of other monsters native to this zone normally roamed, the lands were desolate.

He had no time to stop and investigate, but he was certain this wasn't normal. His current objective was a certain kingdom in the Demonoid lands that was about to have the first wave of invasion.

Had Astaroth been present when they re-logged into New Eden, he would have asked for his help. But he didn't want to bring too many people in on his upcoming task.

It was a massive Exp gain, and he would rather keep it all for the people worthy of becoming stronger. He had yet to determine who that was within his allies.

Phoenix would have insisted he take some of the guild players, had he told her, so he kept it to himself. Anyway, it would be good for him to retake his level lead.

The leaderboards were about to change the ranking system, and even though he was almost sure he would still be first, he preferred to not take any chances. More levels meant more strength.

That stayed a cold, hard fact.

On the horizon, Khalor could finally see the silhouette of a city poke into the sky. He just hoped the timeline hadn't changed, and he was too late.

He knew he couldn't fly all the way to the city, since they would shoot him out of the sky, so he landed a few miles out. He was fine with walking the remaining distance.

Reaching the gates, which were currently closed, he hollered to the men on the walls.

"I seek an audience with the one leading this city!"

A pudgy Demonoid man leaned over the wall, sneering at him.

"Galena is closed for the foreseeable future! Go away!"

Khalor clicked his tongue.

'So they have already been hit by the first wave of monsters.'

In his memory, Galena was the first city to take on a raid with demon forces, not just corrupted monsters. Although they won in the end, it wasn't without a cost.

"I have information on your enemy and would like to help in tiding this crisis! Tell your mayor I wish to speak to him!"

The Demonoid leaned over the wall again.

"Information? You could also be a spy! Why don't you tell me now and be on your way? We will be forever grateful!"

The sneer on his face rubbed Khalor the wrong way, but he had to be diplomatic about this. He expected resistance, but he also didn't want to be made a fool of.

"And let you take credit for my knowledge? Don't kid yourself, guardsman. Send someone to tell your mayor that Khalor of Stellar Woodlands wishes to talk to them!"

The Demonoid was getting annoyed at the Undead man pestering him. But when he heard him state, he was from Stellar Woodlands; he had to take a moment and reconsider.

His superior would chew him up if he had left a noble standing outside while they were under siege. He took out an item that scanned people and pointed it at Khalor.

Khalor knew he had already won, so an enormous grin flashed on his face. He heard a clear 'Tch!' coming from the top of the wall and snickered to himself.

'I guess the guild becoming a kingdom has more than one perk.'

The pudgy Demonoid once again leaned over the wall.

"Wait here a moment, Sir!"

The stretch of the last word almost made Khalor burst into laughter. Served him right for treating him like rabble.

It was obvious the Demonoid didn't want to get in trouble and only conceded because of that reason. But that was good enough for Khalor.

A dozen minutes later, the portcullis in front of him started creaking to life, as they opened to reveal a large portcullis, which was also opening. Behind the portcullis, a tall, muscular Demonoid with blood-red skin was waiting, a fake smile plastered on his lips.

When the portcullis had opened high enough, Khalor started walking into the city. The tall Demonoid immediately greeted him.

"Greetings, Lord Khalor. I am Lord Rakis, mayor of Galena. What can our humble city do for you?"

'A suck-up? That's rare for Demonoid Natives.'

"It isn't about what you can do for me, but what I can do for you. As I told your guardsman before, I have information concerning the looming threat on your city."

Lord Rakis eyed the guardsman in question, his eyes displaying clear hostility.

"I do hope our guardsmen have not been rude or otherwise unaccommodating towards you, your lordship."

Looking at the pudgy guard, Khalor grinned like a shark. The man instantly paled.

"Not at all, Lord Rakis. He was prompt about getting you, and I didn't have to wait more than necessary."

Lord Rakis looked unconvinced, but glossed over the matter. If the Undead noble willingly let go of the matter, then he wouldn't fuss over it either.

The guard bowed at ninety degrees, facing Khalor.

"It was my pleasure to serve you, Sir Khalor!"

Khalor walked up to the man, leaning in close to his ear.

"You owe me, fatso. Remember that."

Then he straightened up, before saying, "Don't worry about it, soldier. You were doing your job."

The guard was trembling under his armour, realising he wasn't out of the woods yet. But Khalor didn't let him take up any more of his time.

He walked over to Lord Rakis and smiled.

"Shall we go somewhere more private and comfortable, so we can discuss what I know?"

Lord Rakis smiled back, nodding.

"Of course. Follow me, we shall go to my manor."

They walked side by side, exchanging platitudes and empty compliments. Khalor despised this, but he knew it was common etiquette with nobles, and his goal required him to butter up to this lord.

'Let's just hope it doesn't take too much ass-kissing. I hate boot-lickers.'

Meanwhile, the Demonoid Lord was having drastically different thoughts.

'If I can forge an alliance between the Demonoid kingdom and Stellar Woodlands, with me as an intermediary, my station will go up again! This golden goose must be treated with the utmost respect!'

#### Chapter 445 Trouble For The Russian

While Khalor was having the most boring and fake conversation of his life, somewhere not so far from him, in the lands of the Demonoids, a guild was getting ready to fight a battle for their continuity. And this guild was the Neo-Spetsnaz.

After Anton had sent lackeys to investigate the mysterious red glint in the distance, his henchmen had come back with bad news. That glint looked like a red rip in the air itself, and it was spewing some red-black miasma.

When they had tried touching the miasma, notifications of corruption progression had assaulted their ears, and after a brave, or foolish, member tried reaching a hundred percent, they had instantly regretted it.

When the player in question reached a hundred percent corruption, his screen went red, and he lost control of his avatar. He stayed conscious of the entire ordeal, while his body suddenly started spewing red and black mist.

He levelled up ten times, and his grade went up by one, as he started attacking his allies. It was a slaughter, as he had suddenly transformed into a simili-boss to his allies, and tore them apart.

The after-effect of this transformation also left a bitter taste in his mouth. When he regained control, his levels dropped back to normal, before losing another one, and his stats were now all messed up, with no chance to put them back right.

The player had to redo his ratio going forward, and his stats were no longer tailored to him, for the time being. His grade also went back to normal, killing every hope of an actual upgrade.

When they brought this information back to Anton, their guild leader, the Komandir, had ordered for information to be found about these rips and a solution to be brought to him. Of course, solutions for this weren't abundant, yet, and he would have to pussyfoot around that zone for the time being.

But over the first week after the update, the zone around the tear had slowly grown in size, and all the monsters still in the zone had gone mad, getting corrupted by the strange miasma, and attacking anything in range. And the closest thing in range was Neo-Spetsnaz's guild building.

Anton was currently in his office, talking with his officers, making plans to fight back the next waves of corrupted monsters. Up to now, the waves had been small, as the monsters around here were few.

But the zone was about to reach their doorstep, and Anton refused to move to another location.



"Komandir. We have to accept the possibility that our base might get overrun. And if we fight them back, how long until the miasma reaches us, and we can no longer stay here?"

Anton looked scowled at the officer.

"Are you saying we should just give up and move? After investing so much in this base and its construction?"

The officers in the room all looked dejected. They didn't want to move away either, but the situation was getting dire.

The second in command, Chernobyl, was deftly tapping in the air before him, a web page open, that only he could see. He had barely left the forums over the past week, and he was still coming dry in terms of ways to close the tear.

That was, until now. A new post had just been added, titled 'The Tears Are Closable!'

Opening it up, the poster claimed he had been on raids all week with NPC troops, cleaning up the surroundings of the kingdom he was currently stuck in, and they had found a red tear inside a nearby mountain.

It had taken a full group of twelve players, as well as a small army company of a little over a hundred men and women, just to make it to the darned thing. And from there, a group of cleric NPCs contained the tear, until they finally closed it, after a day of ritual chanting.

A grin appeared on Chernobyl's face. He rapidly screenshotted the article, before sending it directly to Anton, who was staring down his officers one by one.

When the guild leader received it, he glanced over at his second in command, who always lurked in the corner, and saw his grin.

'Hm? Finally, some good news, maybe?'

Opening up the image, Anton read through it briskly, and a small smile bloomed on his face.

"Men!"

"Yes, Komandir!" the men hollered.

The sudden change in mood he had experienced surprised them. But anything was better than him being mad.

"Chernobyl, the only useful one of you lot, has found a lead to save our position. But it requires some clerics, priests, or whatever divine class we can find. Set out and fetch me some divine classes!"

The officers looked puzzled for a few seconds before Anton snapped at them.

"Now! You lazy sons of your mothers!"

"Yes, Komandir!" they chanted in unison again.

The room emptied rapidly, the men happy they had a way out of there without being on their way to the nearest graveyard. Anton watched them scurry away like rats and laughed interiorly.

'What a bunch of pussies. I can't wait to get stronger players, so I can change those worthless pawns for stronger men.'

Chernobyl walked up to the guild leader, his hands folded into his robe sleeves.

"Komandir. I have a feeling we might not get someone in time for this. Do you want me to reach out and contract a priest class from outside our guild so we can start moving in on this phenomenon?"

Anton scratched his chin in thought, before nodding his head once.

"If you think it's best for us, do as you wish. Just make sure you don't pay too much for them. Our resources would be better spent elsewhere, if possible."

"Yes, Komandir. I will get right to it."

The Warlock pivoted around, walking out of the office in a silent step. His mind already reaching online again, to set up a recruitment ad on the forums.

Anton smiled again.

'He's the only useful officer in this whole guild, aside from me.'

His smile faded away as he retrieved a note from his left drawer. On it, intel on Chernobyl's covert actions, to query favour from the big players in other guilds.

This was a clear affront to Anton, but the Berserker tolerated it, as long as it stayed under the rug, and remained at the stage of querying favour. If the Warlock ever tried backstabbing him, though, there would be hell to pay.

A murderous glint flashed across Anton's eyes.

'Let's just hope you are smart enough to stop before crossing the line.'

#### Chapter 446 Reaching Stellar Woodlands

In Bastion City, two players were entering through the main gate that had been travelling here for the entire week. Crossing danger zone after danger zone, without letting the risks affect their state of mind or pace.

The two older players were being stared at by the young uns, almost like they were aliens landing on Earth. The man and woman only laughed at their attitudes.

The woman, Margaret, aka ShadowFang, and the man, Jack, aka OldGrizzly, were looking around themselves, taking in the sights. The air about them might have been mistaken as nonchalance by the youngsters, but the city guards, who were natives, had a much better grasp on this aura.

The aura of experienced killers. This immediately put them on edge, but they refrained from doing anything rash.

There were many crouched tigers and hidden dragons in this city, as it was a hotspot for adventurers. So the guards took down the names and warned their superiors.

As the couple entered the city's outer ring, they headed straight for the inner walls. OldGrizzly had already messaged Astaroth, telling him he and his wife had made it to Bastion City, and he had assured him they would be granted passage.

It took them an hour of walking, just to make it from one wall to the other, and this had both of them impressed.

"I thought you said this was a new city? Did the kid lie to you?" ShadowFang asked her husband.

"I doubt he lied. But the girl did say it had grown a lot in the update time. She said ten years went by inside the game while a week went by outside. But this... Even in ten years, this kind of development is astonishing," OldGrizzly replied.

Being a businessman outside New Eden, who specialized in land acquisition and development, even he had to admit the growth was explosive. Especially considering they were in hostile territory.

And the variety of architecture they were seeing was also no joke. The diversity was astounding, ranging from houses resembling large-trunked trees to more industrial-looking cubic buildings, all the way to houses that seemed hewn out of solid rock and brought here through unknown means.

When they reached the inner wall, OldGrizzly was met with another surprise. The outer walls were clear, man-made constructions, but the inner wall was all but.

Looking at the immense stone slabs, huddled together to form a natural barrier, OldGrizzly was sent down the rabbit hole many others before him had visited.

He wondered, 'How did these get here, and who brought them?'

But his wife wouldn't let him ponder for long.

"Keep moving, darling. We have little time left to be on here today, so let's make some progress on our goals before real life calls us back."

OldGrizzly shook the thoughts from his head and resumed walking. Although he would have loved to contemplate the provenance of the stone pillars that formed the inner wall, his wife was right.

Their time in New Eden every day was very limited. His wife might no longer work, but that didn't mean her days were purposeless.

As for him, well, his company could run without him present, but it was less than ideal. The young bucks working under him would want nothing more than a reason to dethrone him and take over his position.

Reaching the gate that led into the inner city, another checkpoint greeted them. OldGrizzly and ShadowFang presented their adventurers' credentials and waited for the guard to verify their identities.

When he came back with their guards, he suddenly looked deferential.

"Sir, Ma'am, please follow me this way."

The change in attitude was slightly weird, and OldGrizzly became alert, in case of trouble. But his wife smiled widely, her attitude almost too easygoing for the situation.

But the man wasn't new to this act of hers.

He leaned in next to her and whispered in her ear.

"Please refrain from killing anyone if trouble starts. I don't want to be branded a criminal."

Turning her warm smile towards him, OldGrizzly shuddered.

"Of course, my love. I'll only injure them gravely. No one needs to die for misunderstandings."

But the troubles they were expecting never came to pass. Instead, the guard led them to a carriage on the inside of the gate, with a jockey already waiting.

"This carriage will bring you directly to the palace, where accommodations were made, and the Queen is waiting for you. Good day, Sir, Ma'am."

Watching the guard go back to his station, OldGrizzly and ShadowFang frowned.

The woman turned to look at her husband, a puzzled look on her face.

"The Queen? Do you know anyone this important in the game already?"

OldGrizzly was just as confused as her.

"I don't think so. The kids told me they had a guild, and a city under their name, but nothing more."

But there was no use asking questions now. They climbed into the carriage, which started moving a few seconds after they closed the door.

In minutes, they had reached their destination, and the jockey opened the door for them again.

Walking out of the carriage, OldGrizzly and ShadowFang climbed down, now facing the humongous tree that towered in the center of the city. This tree they had seen from far away when they approached the city.

But they hadn't thought it would be the palace.

A set of guards walked up to them, greeting them in a military salute.

"Sir, Ma'am, please follow us. The Queen is expecting you in the meeting chambers."

Nodding their heads, the old couple followed behind the guarded escort, getting led into the large tree that took their entire vision.

As they climbed the steps, ShadowFang was looking at the branches, hundreds of meters in the air, overhead, and thought she could see small structures up there. She was already casing out the surroundings, her training kicking in.

OldGrizzly, in contrast, was looking at the guards in every corner, trying to gauge the level of their training. Both looked at the palace with different tactical outlooks, their minds already planning escape routes if they needed them.

But once they reached the meeting room and led inside, OldGrizzly recognized the only person waiting inside.

"Ms. Deveille. Sorry, it is Phoenix here, I believe. I was told I was meeting the queen?"

Phoenix smiled at him.

"You are. That would be me. Welcome to the Stellar Woodlands kingdom, Mr. Boudreau. Mrs. Boudreau. It is a pleasure meeting you."

The old couple lost their words momentarily.

'Players can become rulers? What a strange game,' both of them thought.

#### Chapter 447 Miasma Filled Gorge

As he was travelling to the second portal when he received a message from Phoenix that Jack and Margaret had arrived at Bastion City. He smiled, knowing they had made their way there on their own, instead of teleporting.

He sent a quick reply, sending his regards, and focused back on the task at hand. Silent Light trailed behind him, acting as a mobile miasma repellent, as they trudged to the next portal.

This one was located in a deep valley, flanked by cliff sides on each side of it, looking almost like the grand canyon, only deeper. When they entered the valley, through one of the ends, the miasma's thickness suddenly became almost opaque, and they had to stick close to each other lest they lose sight of one another.

Losing long-distance sight like this was unsettling, to say the least, but it was easier than the second thing that happened. After walking about two hundred meters into the valley, the wind stopped blowing, and everything became eerie.

The only sound both players could hear was the crunching of the gravel beneath their feet, and their heavy breathing, as they continued forward. Astaroth was thrown off by the presence of creatures, or lack of, to be exact.

If he remembered what Kloud had once told him about the forest and its areas, this used to be a breeding ground for the blood bats. But now, nothing was present at all.

"Keep your eyes peeled, and your ears perked. Something is wrong."

Silent Light nodded his head vigorously as he clutched his mace tighter in his right hand. When he tried sending his senses outward, all he was met by was the overwhelming demonic presence that suffocated him.

So he didn't try that again, as he broke into a heavy sweat.

Astaroth restrained a chuckle. He understood what had happened to the teen, as he had almost the same thing happen to him when they entered.

Luckily for him, his mana sense was much more developed, and he could pierce through the veil of demonic mana everywhere around them. But there was nothing more beyond it, and that was what was troubling him.

As they moved further ahead, they eventually found the portal, which was spewing miasma in high concentrations, like a witch's cauldron. No enemies were around, and it was almost suspicious.

But as Silent Light started sealing the portal, Astaroth kept on high alert, his head spinning periodically in every direction. Nothing came.

The portal closed, but the miasma already present never receded. This was strange since the miasma in every other location always dissipated soon after the portal closed.

But not this time. It stayed, thick as before, lingering like the morning fog on the coastal towns of Nova Scotia, in early summer. If it wasn't for the persistent feeling of dread it emanated, the scene might have been enchanting.

But they wouldn't stick around long enough to know when it receded. Astaroth tapped Silent Light's arm, signalling they had to leave.

"The next portal I know of isn't so far away. But we'll have to fly out of here. Taking the long way out would stretch our journey."

"Urgh. Do we have to? I hate being carried like a princess. It makes me look so uncool..."

Astaroth stifled a laugh.

"Kid, it's just me and you here. And I won't say a word to anyone else. How do you think I look when I carry you like my gay bride? But it's the fastest way."

Silent Light grumbled under his breath but eventually nodded his head reluctantly.

After melding with Morpheus, Astaroth grabbed him behind the knees and back, and lifted off, while Silent did everything in his power to look away from his winged taxi provider.

But Astaroth had lied to him, partially. He wouldn't say a word about it, but that didn't preclude him from taking a screenshot of his vision, with the mad-blushing face of Silent Light in his arms.

He sent it to Phoenix discreetly, telling her to keep it for herself. The relationship between his girlfriend and this teen still mystified him, by its nature, but he didn't care.

He felt like the relationship between Phoenix and Silent resembled the one he had with Violette. One closer to sibling attention than actual friendship.

He received a thumbs-up emoji, followed by the words 'Thank You', and giggled internally.

'She is going to pester him about this for the rest of his life. Poor kid, hehe.'

After exiting the gorge they had been in, the wind of fresh air ruffling their hair and clothes felt great. They no longer felt like they were trying to breathe through a straw with every breath, and both boys sighed in relief.

But their troubles weren't over.

The next portal was close by, and Astaroth knew for a fact that this one would be much more troubling to deal with. Spreading his mana sense as far as he could, he could already sense it from here.

All the mana signatures surrounding the one large blip of demonic mana.

He hadn't even known this was a possibility until he searched for the portals the first time.

The third portal he had located, had opened up in a small village, and from how many mana signatures there were around it, it had spared no one.

The entire village had been corrupted.

The first time he spotted it was shortly after he learned the cleansing spell with Aether, and he had been hopeful about it. But something came to his attention not long after that killed his mood on the matter.

Every monster he had cleansed the day before, which had crawled away from the settlement, with tired bodies and even more fatigued minds, had died not even twenty-four hours later.

Their cause of death. Acute exhaustion.

Apparently, their bodies had been under strain for so long, due to the demonic mana holding them in a constant state of overload, that even when he cleansed them, it was too late.

Thinking about the possibility that no matter what he did for those Ash Elves, they would die, left a sour taste in his mouth. He took it upon himself to warn Silent before they reached the village.

"Silent. I have something to tell you."

"Hmm? What's up?" the teen asked, turning his head toward Astaroth.

The gloominess on Astaroth's face was an instant red flag.

'Crap. What is it now?' he thought.

Chapter 448 Guilt Catching Up

Astaroth landed on a small hill that rose over a small plain. Down on the plain, Silent Light could see a small settlement.

But to his discouragement, red and black mist covered the small town, leaking out the side of it, leaving not an inch safe from it.

Silent Light turned his head to Astaroth after he had dropped him to his feet.

"Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Sighing heavily, Astaroth nodded.

"As you can guess, this place is the third portal I know about. But it comes with one big problem. There are no monsters here. Only people."

Silent Light gazed at the village, but couldn't see people from the distance they were at.

"Where are they?"

"Right now? Huddled around the center of the town. I'm guessing the tear opened up in the village well, and they didn't realise it until it was too late. I can't sense a single person who isn't corrupted down there."

The teenager could guess what the issue was.

"You don't want to kill them, right?"

Astaroth sighed again.

Walking to a nearby protruding rock, he sat down on it, looking troubled.

"I do not. Those are people. Not mindless monsters."

Silent Light frowned a bit.

"I noticed you act this way often. You and Khalor, and sometimes Phoenix, too. You treat the NPCs like people. Aren't you taking the roleplay a bit too far?"

Astaroth chuckled at his question.

"This isn't just a question of roleplay anymore, kid. Take a seat. I'll explain, so you understand."

His tone seemed too serious to be just a poor joke, and Silent was confused whether he should listen to him, or just check him into an asylum. But he gave the man the benefit of the doubt and sat on the ground.

"Information has come up, through means that don't matter anymore, and the situation has changed. People playing New Eden shouldn't consider it a game anymore."

Interrupting him, Silent asked the question anyone would.

"What should we consider it, then?"

"Another world. The NPCs aren't coding. They are real people, in another world, we don't know how far from our own. Everything that we do impacts this world's future, and to an extent, our own, as well."

The frown on Silent's face deepened.

The words that came out of Astaroth's mouth were pure madness. He was tempted to stand up and leave right away.

Of course, he had been there when the officers had discussed that their world was changing, right before the update. But he thought it was the game affecting their reality like he had read so often in mangas.

Saying this was an actual world went beyond his fantasies.

"What are you trying to say, Astaroth? Spit it out."

"I'm saying you should consider every action you take in New Eden the same way you would on Earth. Because the repercussions will turn out to be the same in the long run."

Silent Light took a moment to take in the info, unwilling to commit to the idea just yet. He might be the biggest Chuuni the planet had ever known, but he was still a skeptic.

Astaroth opened his mouth again.

"Listen. I know this is a lot to consider. But killing all these people down there is no better in here than out in our world. I wanted you to know now before anything happens, so you can be mentally prepared to face the consequences."

Lifting his head and locking his eyes into Astaroth's, Silent Light's unease was visible.

"What consequences?"



"If we do end up killing them. If there is really no other way. Then we will be murderers. No amount of justification will change it, and we will have to live with this fact for the rest of our lives."

Astaroth's words hit the teen like a sledgehammer to the brain.

"But... This is just a game. They're data... Coding... They'll come back, no?"

"They won't. I know you don't want to believe it. But it's the truth. These are people."

But before Astaroth could keep talking, he noticed something.

Tears were streaming down Silent's face suddenly. His eyes had turned red in an instant, and he had begun crying silently.

"Are all the NPCs people? Real people?"

"I believe so. And so do Khalor and Phoenix. And we think they should be treated as such."

"But... That means..."

His crying intensified, and he curled on himself.

His reaction threw Astaroth off. He wasn't sure what would cause his sudden change in attitude.

But regardless, he stepped off his rock and walked next to Silent Light to comfort him.

"I know this is a task heavy to bear and I am ok with handling the villagers, and leaving you to only sealing the portal. I already have blood on my hands. There is no need to get yours dirty as well."

"...dy are..."

Silent Light said something that Astaroth didn't quite get through the muffled cries and Silent's crossed arms.

"What?"

Silent Light lifted his head, snot dripping from his nose, as the heavy tear-fall from his eyes kept going.

"They already are."

The words stunned Astaroth.

"What do you mean? When did it happen?"

Silent Light proceeded to retell an event of when he had started the game. About how he had saved a pontiff of the church he now worked for from a bandit attack back when he was still low level.

Silent had started in the priest class, yes, but he was a godless priest, as the natives called the priest players. Saving that pontiff had been how he gained more spells and better healing abilities.

But the fight against the bandits hadn't been a clean one, and he had needed to defend himself, killing some bandits with his own hands. At the time, he had thought he was being cool by saving people like a hero.

But with Astaroth's revelation, it hit him like a truck. His hands were covered in the blood of men.

For the next hour or so, Astaroth held Silent in his arms, consoling him, telling him he had saved a life, and that alone made him a hero. He tried easing the mental burden from the teenager's mind, as best he could, swearing to himself he wouldn't allow Silent to even lift a finger against those villagers.

'I'm not letting you get more blood on your hands.'

#### Chapter 449 Dead Village

After consoling the kid until no more tears left his body, Astaroth promised him he would handle the village as long as he handled the portal. Silent Light had weakly nodded, no longer motivated to do his task.

But it still needed to be done.

"Alright. When we get near the center of the village, I will run forward. I will clear the path for you, and you get to the portal. It looks like it's underground, so I'm guessing at the bottom of their well. Just jump down, it's not too deep. Can you do that?"

Silent looked at Astaroth, his eyes still puffy, and nodded meekly. The latter didn't like seeing him like this.

'I guess I should tell Morticia to talk with him when he logs out. Good thing his sister is a shrink.'

The teenager and the man both left the small hill they had been on and walked cautiously toward the deserted village outskirts. As soon as they walked into the thick miasma, Astaroth could feel they were being observed.

This was strange, as it was the first time he felt like this while inside some miasma.

'It's like it has a mind of its own and is wary of us...'

Raising his hand, he signalled Silent to slow down even more. Their pace slowed to a crawl, as Astaroth looked inside every open door, every alley, and every window, trying to see from where they were being observed.

It was all for naught, as he found nothing. But it at least reassured him about a possible ambush.

As they stepped closer and closer to the village center, Astaroth finally gave the signal to Silent to stop and wait. He looked into the town square, and there he saw it.

The population of villagers, all amassed around a small stone well. They were all facing the well, rocking from left to right, like some mindless zombies.

It brought a pang of sadness to Astaroth's heart, to see his fellow race members looking like this. It especially hurt him to know he couldn't do anything to help them.

The bodies of every Ash Elf present showed clear signs of starvation, bones apparent through the skin, as well as signs of dehydration.

Even if he cured them of the corruption, they would assuredly drop dead on the spot, or be in critical condition.

Even Silent Light looked discomfited at their state. In the few trainings he received as a priest when he joined the church of Solaris, they taught him a few things about patient states.

And what he was looking at was a far cry from a healthy state. Even he could tell they were already dead, being held up only by the constant manipulation of the corruption miasma.

He felt sad for Astaroth, who was looking at them like they were his kin. The man's compassion touched his heart.

Walking up to Astaroth, he pulled on his sleeve. The Elf turned his head, eyes hurting, and looked at Silent.

"Astaroth. You shouldn't feel bad if you need to kill them. The original inhabitants of these bodies are already dead. Only the miasma seems to be controlling them now."

Smiling sadly, Astaroth nodded his head once.

"I know. But I feel like this is my fault. If I had come sooner, they might still be saveable. Now, all that's left is bodies kept alive by demonic mana."

It was comical how their situations had flipped, and now Astaroth looked down, rather than Silent Light. But instead of consoling him, Silent offered respite.

"You said you had a way to purge the corruption of their bodies earlier when we talked. Could you do it on all of them?"

"I could. But I fear it would be useless now."

"Do it. I will try to ease their passage into the afterlife. And for those who are still holding on to life, I will make sure they feel nothing as they take their ultimate step."

Astaroth wasn't sure what Silent could do in this situation, but he trusted him.

"Thank you."

Closing his eyes, he focused on gathering mana from himself and changing it into Aether, as he pushed his senses outward. Making sure he was in range to hit every corrupted villager, Astaroth whispered his incantation.

"Ignite; Flaming Cleanse."

A pulse of Aether left his body, rushing outward as it burned the demonic essence around him, burning away even the lingering miasma. When it washed over the villagers, a deluge of pained screams echoed, making Astaroth wince.

But it was too late. The spell had taken effect.

Every villager shook as their bodies writhed in agony from the demonic miasma burning inside them, before collapsing to the ground, as a cloud of pure black smoke rose over the well.

Silent Light already had his hands clasped in a praying fashion, as he murmured to himself, offering up the souls of the villagers to Solaris, god of the sun, asking him to grant them peace and eternal rest with their loved ones.

He could already feel his prayers answered, as he saw shimmers of divine essence escape from the villagers as they dropped to the ground, their faces suddenly at peace. Astaroth was grateful for it, but his mind was already focused on the black cloud forming over the village.

'This one is much larger than the first time. I have a bad feeling about this.'

I took some time before the last villager stopped writhing in pain and the smoke stopped rising from their body. But once it did, a heavy presence descended upon the two players.

"Mortals! You dare take away from me my new servants?! Who are you, to take what is mine?!"

The high-pitched voice came from above them amidst the cloud of black smoke, sounding almost childish.

Astaroth's eyes were squinted as he already sensed the mana inside the cloud condensing. It wasn't like last time.

This time, the demonic essence in this cloud was thicker and seemed to contain something else. As it swirled and shrunk, it took the form of a child-like humanoid, looking no older than ten years of age.

But the two long black horns on its head were more than enough to convince both players that this was no ordinary child. And if that hadn't been enough, the heavy pressure and demonic aura around it were the cherry on top of this very dangerous cake.

When Astaroth tried scanning him, that was when he knew things were serious.

\*Miasma Manifestation Demon\*

Level: ???

Grade: ???

HP: ???

MP: ???

Chapter 450 An Annoying Game Of Tag

'I can't get a read on it, at all. This is bad.'

"Silent, when I tell you, rush to close the portal. I'll deal with this thing."

But no response came back.

Turning his head, Astaroth glanced at Silent Light's face, and he understood. The teenager's face was stuck in a rictus of pure terror.

He had most likely also scanned the demon, and the lack of information was information of its own. The consensus online was that players could scan things up to thirty levels over them.

Of course, there were exceptions. But generally speaking, it was the truth.

And in this case, both players were level fifty. Meaning this demon was at least level eighty.

But Astaroth had scanned monsters with a larger level gap than this before. His mana affinity allowed him to peer through more information than normal during scans, which allowed this.

And even then, his unablence to scan this demon was worrisome. But the Elf's eyes were on the prize.

He wanted to seal the portal, and they could find a way to win or flee after that. Astaroth was ready to keep this demon occupied until then.

But it utterly discouraged Silent Light.

"Kid, I need you to focus! I can't seal that portal, only you can. I'll keep this thing busy."

As Astaroth was saying this, the hair on his entire body suddenly stood up.

"Shaaaaaa. Mortal. You smell of yummy souls."

Jumping back with all his strength, Astaroth distanced himself from the demon, which had just appeared in front of him.

'I couldn't even sense his movement!'

But as he landed and looked forward, the demon was gone again. From his side, he heard the childish voice again.

"Since you set me free from these fleshly containers, I will give you a chance to please me and live. Feed me the souls you have inside you that aren't yours, and you and your friend can go free."

'Jesus fuck! How is he moving so close to me without me feeling him?!'

Astaroth punched out toward the demon, trying to force it back, and it vanished from its place, simply reappearing a few meters away. It now had a disappointed look on its face.

"So is that a no on my offer?" the demon asked, its head tilted to the side.

"And here I thought I was being generous. In that case, I'll just eat you, along with your friend and all the tasty souls."

The demon's smirk sent shivers down Astaroth's spine. He locked his eyes on it but shouted at Silent.

"Now! Go for the portal now!"

Astaroth then lunged forward, pulling out the Ad Astra and melding with Luna. The sudden surge in speed surprised the demon, who stepped away, once again vanishing from its place.

'Is it teleporting, or just moving too fast for me to see?'

Astaroth had locked his mana senses on its presence, though, and could find it instantly when it reappeared. He stomped on the ground, changing trajectories instantly, and dashing at the demon once more.

This little dance happened a few more times, with the demon child's face still in a perpetual smirk. After a few times, it even taunted Astaroth.

"Did you want to play tag? I'll play with you. If you can touch me, I'll let your friend live, and then I'll be it. Ok?"

Even though he was being treated as a plaything, Astaroth kept his cool. Countless times he tried hitting the demon, wanting only to see how much damage he could deal to it.

He wanted only to gauge the enemy, to know if he even had a chance.

Meanwhile, Silent Light finally snapped out of his terrified trance and realized he had a job to do. He ran to the well in the middle of the square, while Astaroth chased down the demon and jumped down into it.

Reaching the bottom of the well, which was dry, he landed face-to-face with the portal, oozing blackish-red miasma. He hurriedly started sealing the portal, as it was already bubbling.

He had no intention of finding out what would happen after the bubbling. Focusing as much as he could, he started weaving his divine mana together, forming the loose cocoon around the portal.

As his sealing started taking effect, he heard the childish voice of the demon from above him. It sounded like the demon was speaking into the well.

"You are wasting your time down there. I'll just open another one after I eat you. Come help your friend, instead. Two against one might give you a chance. Oops. Gotta go."

It worried him since Astaroth had been chasing it. How did it find time to mess with his mind down here?

'Is it too fast for Astaroth to catch it?'

But up on the surface, Astaroth was now smiling.

Through all their time playing tag, Astaroth had finally understood the pattern in which the demon moved. It never moved further than a set distance of fifty meters or disappeared for more than a second.

This gave him a radius and timeframe to work with, to figure out where it would pop out every time it moved. Now he only needed to find out a way to guess the direction of its movement, to catch up.

Astaroth popped Thousand Thoughts, trying to figure out if it was teleporting or just moving fast, and he concluded it was teleportation. He still couldn't see the demon when it moved from one place to another, even with his sped-up perception, so it was the only answer.

But he also noticed something else.

By looking closely at the demon, when it was about to teleport, he was able to deduce its direction.

In this slow-motion perception of his, Astaroth saw the demon switch its eyes over to a side when Astaroth was about to hit it and disappear. Looking toward the direction the demon had looked, Astaroth waited.

Lo-and-behold, it reappeared exactly fifty meters from him, in the direction it had looked, still smirking.

'He has to see where he's going! I have you now, you little shit!'

Astaroth dived at the demon again, this time sporting a smirk of his own.

'This time, you aren't getting away!'