

## **New Eden 321**

### Chapter 321 Splitting Up The Work

Astaroth, Phoenix, and Khalor were all smart enough to deduce that the invaders had something to keep bringing them back to life. It was easy to guess that such an item or structure existed.

But finding it, all the while fighting off thousands of players, was not a minor task. So they had bid their time.

They were certain Athena wouldn't have brought anything to their attention that wasn't at least that important. And now, with the whistling echoing in their ears, it would be easy to find.

All three of them dove out of the base over the southern wall in quick succession. Phoenix had been monitoring the fight from inside the tree's canopy, while Khalor was close to that wall doing his massacre run.

As for Astaroth, he was inside the tree and could rapidly orient himself in the right direction. All three could fly, so reaching their destination was easy for them.

As the three reached the spot marked by the alarm spell, they quickly noticed the huge black puma shredding any player that respawned, as it prowled around the graveyard.

It was easy to tell what this was, as the mausoleum in the center was pretty standard. Plus, some graves had sprouted all around it.

Phoenix was the first to arrive. When Khalor and Astaroth joined her, she started giving instructions.

"Khalor, can you take care of the players' spawning? Your army can cover the most ground."

"On it."

His lack of rebuke almost surprised Phoenix, but she took it while it lasted.

"Astaroth, you take care of the zone boss. Khalor can help you when there are no players in his way."

"With pleasure!"

Astaroth rapidly dove onto the puma's back, two daggers in his hands, formed out of the Ad Astra. He started stabbing it repetitively, drawing spurts of blood with every new puncture.

Phoenix looked at the stone structure in the middle. She could tell this was the key to keeping the graveyard active.

Now the question was how to get inside it. The stone doors keeping it shut seemed pretty sturdy.

She landed in front of the structure, sliding her hand across the stone. It reddened at the contact of her hand, but nothing more.

There was no sign of the stone melting. She concentrated, pouring more mana into her Avatar of Flame form, pushing the heat it generated higher and higher.

Soon enough, the flames on her body changed from bright orange to vivid blue. She pushed her hand on the mausoleum again, watching the reaction.

The stone reddened to the point of almost becoming white, but there were no signs of melting again. Phoenix sighed in disappointment.

'I guess heat alone won't be enough.'

Phoenix closed her eyes, focusing on the nexus of her power. She then modelled it, pushing the form from a full-body one to a condensed layer of armour.

Her hair stayed lit up blue, but the rest of the flames moved about her body, correlating to her chest, legs, wrists and extremities.

Opening her eyes, Phoenix looked down at her body. Her stomach was exposed, as were her upper arms and lower legs.

Astaroth glimpsed the change while he was jumping off the bucking puma, and his heart skipped a beat. From afar, she looked like a fire goddess, coated in flames of bright blue, ready to burn the world.

But he rapidly focused back on his task, since the puma was lunging at his throat.

Phoenix took a solid stance in front of the doors, pulling back her fist as she pivoted her shoulders and hips. When she punched forward, the motion was fluid and instant, like she had practised it many times.

The direct punch impacted the stone doors, shaking the entire structure, as the heat from her fist melted a part of it inward. The sight of the melted dent made Phoenix smile.

She changed her posture to one similar to a boxer in front of a punching bag. When she started swinging at the doors, each hit resounded throughout the forest, like fireworks going off.

Khalor was happy to be on her side. Even if he could overwhelm her with his army, there was no way his body could take these hits directly.

Glancing at Astaroth, he thought, 'Maybe he could?'

But his attention was rapidly brought back to the players he was hunting down. One in particular, that he had been wanting to see for a while, had just respawned close to him.

Hearing a gunshot, as one of his undead dropped to the ground, Khalor smiled viciously.

"There you are, you fucking midget!"

Azamus' head snapped toward the voice.

"You! Good, I get to kill you again!"

Azamus' rifle snapped in Khalor's direction, only to be knocked away by a halberd hitting the barrel as he fired. The bullet flew next to Khalor's head, barely missing him, as he was still grinning.

"Don't even think that taking me down will be easy again. I'm going to skin you alive this time!"

Azamus, seeing his rifle would not be an option for now, pulled out his blunderbuss. He fired it at the death knight, using Recoil Shot to jump back to a safe distance.

He rapidly swapped weapons again, pulling out two pistols with comically big revolving chambers. He started firing the pistols at Khalor, who was moving in a random pattern to make himself hard to hit.

It was working well, although not perfectly, making him hard, but not impossible, to hit. But the pistols were not as powerful as the blunderbuss or his rifle.

Azamus glanced at where the loud banging was coming, other than his guns, and saw Phoenix wailing on the mausoleum doors. He turned one of his pistols to her, trying to pull a shot in, to stop her from destroying the mobile graveyard.

But before he could pull the trigger, something came flying at him, hitting his back. The enormous black puma that had shredded him to bits earlier turned back on its paws, surprised someone sent it flying.

It ignored the gnome it had just rolled over, dashing back at Astaroth. Azamus looked at Astaroth with hatred, as the latter smirked at him, conscious of what he had done.

Azamus' skin was going from brown to burgundy faster by the second. The three players that dared humiliate him more than Killi were all present at the same time around him.

But he was too busy fighting one of them to even lash out at the others. His head snapped back at Khalor, who was almost in his face.

"Fine! You'll die first!"

"Right back at you!"

## Chapter 322 Trouble In The Trap Zone

Inside the trap zone between the walls of the Bastion, the guerilla tactics were still in full swing. Even though the three most powerful players in Paragons were not inside the base, the thinning number of assailants was also reducing the forces they had to fight.

The overhead pinning of enemies from the ranged players, combined with the mobile strikes in the trap zone from the melee players, was proving to work beautifully.

One player in Paragon, in particular, was thriving in this setup. A gnome with a pistol and a knife.

His name was Berny. It wasn't the best player name, but it was the one he chose.

He had started as a gunner class, but his choice in skills, as well as his fighting style, had changed it to commando. And he loved being in situations like these, where he tracked down, and slew his enemy, while remaining discreet.

Berny was once an American Navy Seal, and infiltration missions were his specialty. This made him like a fish in water in this setting of combat.

Aside from Astaroth and Khalor, he was the one that had taken out the most infiltrators yet. His pistol was now equipped with a short barrel add-on that many would recognize.

He was currently stalking a group of three players, two fighters and a mage, who were teetering dangerously close to the inner wall. But before they could reach it, he suddenly snuck behind the mage, slitting his throat and firing three times into his back.

The loud banging of Phoenix's fists on the stone doors, in the distance, covered the muffled firing noises. So the mage's allies never realized one of them went down.

It took them about thirty seconds to realize one of their party members was now greyed out on the list. When they turned to look for him, they found nothing.

Berny had already dragged the body to some foliage, where it disintegrated.

He was now looking at them from above, laying down on a tree branch. He could feel their uneasiness from up there, and it made him grin.

He slowly crouched up, as the two men were about to pass under him. He had already scanned them, showing which one was the lowest in health.

Dropping on the weakest, Berny stabbed three times in a swift motion, and fired his silenced gun through the eyeball of his target. The fighter exploded into pixels in a second, as Berny rapidly shuffled back into the shrubbery.

The second invaded had tried following him, but as soon as he ran through a bush, the man lost him. But Berny knew exactly where his next kill was, and soon enough, he pounced again.

The man never saw him coming, as a knife struck him in the back of the throat, muffling his cries for help, and bullets pierced the back of his head, exploding out the front.

Berny started hunting again, in the look of his next victims.

In another part of the newly grown jungle, Declan was doing the opposite of Berny. He was making as much noise as he could, attracting enemies to him.

Declan had been in the army too, but he was an Irish Infantryman. He hated being subtle, and would rather fight things head-on.

As invader after invader ran at him, attracted by the screams and clanging of his weapon against rocks, Declan cut them up like a giant meat grinder on legs. His was not a subtle battle, but still worked very well.

He was the only one that was crazy enough to bait enemies toward himself, though. Most would rather do hit-and-run tactics, as it was safer.

The only other player who was actively baiting players was another of Declan's pals. The military Battlefield Engineer.

The dwarven man kept setting up traps everywhere, before baiting players into them with bells and whistles, before letting them get caught in the traps.

He had dug out pitfalls with spikes, built log drops, jury-rigged bolt launchers, that shot out sharpened branches, and many other traps.

His mind was surprisingly nimble for a man his age. The number of different traps he thought of would put many Viet Cong to shame.

His scheming didn't kill many players, but his traps always left the victims in poor shape. Other players on the ground, or the ranged players in the tree up above, eventually picked these poor lads and ladies off.

The ten top guilds were getting more and more reports of incredible resistance from within the fortress. If they were to believe all of their members, they would believe an army defended the place, rather than by less than a hundred players.

And to add to their difficulty, their dying players couldn't rejoin the battlefield anymore. Something was killing them at the mobile graveyard.

At first, it was reports of a zone boss, but it rapidly changed to reports of a player hindering their respawn. Over this issue, another was added a while ago.

Monsters had come running out of the forest all around them, wreaking havoc on each front, stomping players into the ground like they were flies.

It took the officers of each top guild to stop these beasts from massacring their troops. And that was the reason they hadn't been able to send help to the graveyard, yet.

These issues were rapidly escalating into a possible defeat. The only reason they hadn't backed out yet was that their pride as top guilds was clouding their judgement.

But they knew they had to make things change, and fast. They kept hope, as the three beasts they had stopped were slowly but surely dying.

Considering the beast at the graveyard, they had four unexpected enemies disrupting their conquest of this fortress.

They hoped they could take care of them soon, or their enemy would just bunker down even more. But the invading guilds had missed another enemy.

This one was already inside the trap zone, prowling after players from both sides, not even giving them time to react. Athena was receiving reports of something killing her underlings inside the trap zone.

When she used her echolocation to find out what it was, the ping she got back drained the blood out of her face. The creature was looking in her direction, its eyes staring at her like a predator looking down at its prey.

She instantly knew the only players who could take that thing head-on were not in the base currently. So she had to go to her only other option, Leon.

'Let's just hope he listens to me,' she thought, as she vaulted from branch to branch, going down toward the second-floor windows.

### Chapter 323 Getting The Guardian To Act

Reaching the first set of windows and vaulting through them, Athena landed inside an outer ring room. She swiftly ran out, heading for the center room, where Leon had gone back to napping.

When she barged into his room, the lion-man turned his head to her with a look of annoyance.

"Can't a man get a cat nap undisturbed in here?"

"Leon. Astaroth told me to come to you if a monster entered the trap zone, that you would deal with it."

"Yeah. Is there one?"

"Yes, and he's killing our members, along with the invaders. Can you do something about it?"

Leon yawned loudly.

"Maybe later. For now, you guys can take care of you."

"It's your job!"

"Listen, archer girl. I don't take orders from you. Bug off."

Athena felt wronged by what Leon said. It was true that, technically, Leon wasn't under her orders.

But Astaroth had said he would obey. And now he was sending her away like a servant.

But Athena would not take no for an answer. She lifted her bow back, pointing an arrow at Leon's head.

"Astaroth said you would obey, and obey you will. If I have to force you, I will."

Leon didn't react to her threats.

Athena's teeth clenched hard as she released the arrow on her bowstring. Leon suddenly jerked up, reaching his hand forward to catch the projectile.

But as the arrow arrived close to his hand, it disappeared. Then a stinging sensation flared up on the beast-man's shoulder.

Turning his head, he noticed the arrow lodged in his shoulder blade. He turned his head toward Athena, eyes filled with anger.

Leon took a step forward, suddenly appearing right in front of Athena. The woman almost jumped in surprise, but contained the outburst.

Leon was staring at her in the eyes, from close enough that she could see the specks of light deep within his pupil. Athena withstood his stare, showing some anger of her own.

"Astaroth said you would move if a monster were within our trap zone. Well, there is one now. So, move."

Leon low growled, the staccato in it sending shivers down Athena's spine, but she stood strong. Seeing his intimidation tactic wasn't working, the beast-man sighed loud.

"Fine! I'll go. I just wanted to take a nap first, but it seems like work comes first. Just point me in the right direction, bow-lady."

Athena contained her relief. She didn't want the lion to see her sweating buckets yet.

"The beast came in through the west. I saw it coming at first, but when I focused on something else, I lost his presence. He somehow got inside the Bastion with no one else noticing."

Leon barely looked at her while she explained. He was already walking towards the nearest direct exit to the palace, yawning and stretching as he walked away.

Athena followed him.

"I don't know exactly what the monster is, since when I tried locating it, he locked on me and pushed my skill away."

"Did you see its eyes?" Leon asked, slightly curious which of his enemies he would fight.

But before Athena could respond, a roar came from within the trap zone. The roar was much lower in tone than Leon, and the reverberation inside it was also different.

Leon instantly knew who it was.

"No need to answer. I know which one it is. It seems like he's healed from our last fight. Good. Let's settle this."

"Wait!"

But she couldn't finish asking, as the guardian blasted away in the roar's direction.

"Fuck! I hope he takes his fight further away. He'll ruin Phoenix's plan if he razes the forest to the ground inside the trap zone."

Athena kept muttering to herself as she climbed back up the tree. She silently hoped Leon would be smart enough not to destroy the base in his pissing contest.

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Back at the mobile graveyard's location, Khalor was locked in pursuit of Azamus. The darned gnome kept kiting him out of reach.

He could have caught him if he used all his stronger undead, but he needed them to control the spawning players. And their load was becoming heavier and heavier, as the players dying outside and inside of the bastion were all trying to respawn here.

He no longer even had enough leeway to help Astaroth with the black puma. Not that he seemed to need the help.

Astaroth was about to run out of melding time with Morpheus, which would force him back to the ground to fight his opponent. But he was fine with that.

In those close to four minutes, he had dropped the monster by half its health, and he knew he could finish it soon enough. He had even summoned Genie to help, withdrawing her from the trap zone.

All the time he was away from it, Genie had kept prowling, attacking players and then leaving them to get killed by others. Her efforts had eased the guerilla tactic a lot.

But now, she was needed here more. Astaroth mentally ordered her to help take down the spawning players as a priority, and help him with the puma when she could.

For now, everything was under control.

As for things on Phoenix's side, she seemed to be close to entering the mausoleum. From the small hole she had already melted, they could see another player inside, praying in front of a large stone cross.

It was easy to conclude he was the one keeping the place active. Phoenix was eyeing him ravenously while she kept punching with abandon at the melting stone doors.

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On the frontline of the Bastion, just outside the walls, the first beast finally fell to the efforts of Killi and his officers. He rapidly dispatched his men to help against the other zone bosses, since he would need them to counter the three assaulting the graveyard.

Everything was falling back into the normal order for the sieging side. As long as Paragons had no hidden trump card, this could still end in a victory for them.

Little did they know that Paragon's strongest ally was just now about to start his fight against another powerful enemy.

Leon was staring down at the white tiger that was inside the trap zone, vanishing pixels of dead players floating around him.

"So we meet again, you wretched false king," the humongous tiger said.

"Who are you calling a false king, you lonely cat? You can't be a king if you don't have subjects," Leon replied.

Both of them stared into each other's eyes. At a minute twitch of its tail, the tiger lunged at Leon. Their battle had started.

#### Chapter 324 Changes In New Eden

Far away from that battlefield, on a different continent, in a pit that went down several hundred meters into the ground, a small crack had appeared.

This pit was riddled with bodies, some decayed to the bone, others partly turned to dust and ash. This pit was once a battlefield of its own, in a battle between forces much larger and stronger than the abnormals fighting in the Elven forests.

The surrounding land was as desolate as the sight of thousands of fossilized skeletons. The crack that had appeared at the bottom of this pit was leaking red miasma, and faint cries could be heard beyond it.

But no one was around to hear these or see the forming tear. The red miasma escaping from the crack soon reached the first nearby skeletons.

When the slithering smoke of red wrapped around the bones, it started vibrating. Soon after, the eyes glowed red, before the skeleton rose to its feet.

With its mouth clattering, it turned its head to the tear. Walking in a slow, unstable gait, it reached the edges of the crack to god knows where.

Reaching its boney hands inside it, it started pulling, the lack of muscle on it hindering its effort. But it wouldn't be alone for long.

Soon enough, another dusty skeleton joined it, pulling at the crack from the other side. As the number of skeletons grew, until all of them in the pit were pulling at the crack, or on their fellow skeletons, to exert pressure on it, it budged ever so slightly.



Miasma leaked out slightly faster, covering the first skeletons next to it even more. After an hour of being bathed in the miasma, the first few rows pulling on the crack suddenly cried out, with an eerie sound that shouldn't have existed in the first place, since they lacked vocal cords.

Some muscle seemed to grow on them, exuding the same red miasma they had been covered in. When they resumed their pulling, they were pulling with more vigour than before.

This cycle would repeat on and on for a long time. But no one would see the results of it until it was too late.

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On a floating mountain somewhere over the lands of the elves, high in the clouds, an old hut was resting inside a large cave. This cave, dug out of the mountain by magical means, as belied the smooth walls, was filled with floating particles of white energy.

But instead of floating in a natural pattern, the particles seemed to fall like dust, before suddenly warping back up unnaturally. The whole cave seemed to repeat that same action.

The wind coming into the cave soon was sucked back outside. The waterfall next to the hut looked normal at first, until one looked closely at it, and noticed that it was flowing upward instead of down.

Inside the small hut, an old man was reading a book, with its cover ever-changing between old and worn, to brand new and velvety. But a clap of energy, followed by a dull thump, distracted him.

Through his old wooden walls, he heard the voice of a young man.

"Ow... Where the hell am I now?"

The old man slowly closed his book, putting it on a table next to him.

'A visitor? It's been so long... How did he get here?'

Getting up, the man grabbed a large staff, with at its head a floating hourglass, that kept flipping from one side to the other.

He walked out of the hut, as the young man was staring at his waterfall.

Clearing his throat, to catch the youngster's attention, the young Fey man jumped up and fell into the waterfall. Getting up and pulling out a wand, the man tried putting on a brave face.

"Who are you, and why are you attacking me?"

The old man chuckled.

"Far from me the intention of startling you, young Fey. May I ask for your name?"

Seeing the defenceless-looking old man before him, the young man stowed away his wand.

"Good etiquette dictates you state your name when asking some for theirs."

"Ahh, yes. Excuse my manners. I haven't had a visitor in Eons, you see? There was a time when mortals called me Tyr. May I have your name now?"

"My name is Chronos. It is a pleasure meeting you, Tyr. Your name sounds familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Hmm, Chronos. What a nice name. The name of the titan of time. I knew him before he lost his mind and was imprisoned by his offspring. Strapping lad."

His rambling took aback Chronos.

'Knew Chronos? What is he talking about?'

"But I digress. What brings you here, young Fey?"

"I was wondering the same thing. I was exploring some old ruins, and I touched an odd-looking device. Next thing I knew, I was here, in this strange cavern..."

"Hmm, an odd device... Did I forget a warp device somewhere on the surface? I can't seem to remember. My memory isn't what it used to be, after all this time..."

Chronos was getting more and more confused. A draft of wind blasted into the cave, brushing over his wet clothes, and a shiver traversed his spine.

Seeing him shiver, the old man snapped out of his thoughts.

"Ahh, where are my manners? Let me fix that for you."

"My wet clothes? How are—"

The old man spun his staff in front of Chronos once, and the water in his clothes suddenly started pouring out in every direction, before following an odd path back to the bottom of the waterfall.

Observing closely, Chronos noticed the path the water was taking was exactly the one he had taken as he got up.

"Sir... What was that spell?"

The old man looked at him, his head slightly tilting to the side.

"Spell? I used no spell. Just my innate power."

Chronos didn't understand what he meant. But he was interested in learning.

"Can you teach me? I love learning new things."

Tyr looked at the young man for a bit, hesitating. But then he shrugged.

"Sure. That'll give me something to pass the time for a while. Join me inside the hut."

Fist-bumping the air, Chronos happily followed the old man into the wooden hut, unaware of who he was following behind.

## Chapter 325 Rebellion

All around New Eden, events started happening that harkened to an upcoming event that would change the map of the world. Small cracks appeared in the fabric of reality in many places.

Some areas remote and reclusive, others more populated. These cracks all had one thing in common.

All of them spewed the same red miasma that coiled and crawled on the ground, looking for something to attach to. This day would someday come to be called the Day of the Shattering.

But for now, all the attention of the players in New Eden was on another event entirely. They were all riveted to what little stream they could find that still broadcasted the siege on the Paragon's base.

Never in the history of gaming had the ten largest guilds in any game worked together for anything. And yet, here they were, all ten of them cooperating to take down a single base belonging to one guild.

What was even more captivating was their inability to do so. The siege had been ongoing for a little over an hour now, and yet, not a single player had made it remotely close to the base core.

For many small-time players, and innumerable unknown guilds, this was paramount to one message. The large guilds can be stood up to!

Many of these players yearned for the feeling of standing up to the big guy. Some were players that had been rejected when applying to one of these guilds.

Others were small-time guilds that had to bow down to the power of the bigger guilds and yield land, resources, and sometimes even dungeons.

But now, all these people had one thing in common. A newfound respect for a starting guild, and a fire burning in their hearts, to rise to the occasion and fight back the oppression.

Across the three continents of New Eden, small guilds banded together, reaching massive member counts, and started doing what they had wanted to do ever since the guilds started forming.

They fought back.

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At the Bastion, on the southern battlefield, where the mobile graveyard had been installed, two battles still raged on, while Phoenix had finally broken into the mausoleum.

She looked at the priest player, who was still eyes closed, chanting and channelling mana into the cross, and grinned.

She walked up to him; the heat brushing off her, forcing him to open his eyes.

"Sorry pal. You'll have to stop what you are doing and die for me. Okay?"

After saying that, the priest's eyes widened, before a flare of blue disintegrated him instantly.

Phoenix smiled as she slid her hand across the large cross. An interface appeared in her eyes.

\*Portable Graveyard\*

Use requires a priest to keep active. Do you wish to cancel activation and revert this to item mode?

\*Yes/No\*

Phoenix tapped yes, and soon the cross at the center of the mausoleum shrunk, until it turned into a small crucifix necklace. She rapidly grabbed the item, stowing it inside her inventory.

The mausoleum started turning to dust as soon as she grabbed the item, and the graves were doing the same. Suddenly, any player that died to Khalor's undead and Genie stopped being able to respawn there.

It suddenly redirected the players freshly dying in the trap zone to the nearest graveyard, which was in an Elven city many miles away. In a matter of moments, the pressure started lessening on Khalor.

Seeing as most of his undead could now deal with the last remaining players, a grin formed on his ghostly lips. Seeing this grin, Azamus felt a surge in anger.

Genie could help Astaroth deal with the Puma, and Phoenix did the same. In minutes, they took the monster down, leaving only one enemy remaining.

Seeing his chances flying out the window, Azamus did something he hated doing, with every fibre of his body. He fled.

Khalor was about to leave after him when Phoenix stepped in front of him.

"Please, let me finish him."

"What? Why?"

Phoenix turned her face to a pout.

"C'mon. You guys have both killed him once. I want in on that, too."

Khalor was astonished. He didn't know how to respond, so he turned to look at Astaroth.

The latter only shrugged at him, his face stuck in contained laughter.

"Fine! But hurry, he'll get away."

Phoenix's face beamed a bright smile.

"Thank you!"

She blasted off in a gout of flame, strong enough that Khalor had to shield his face from the residual heat. He walked over to Astaroth.

"I can't understand her. Or how you tolerate her antics, for that matter."

Astaroth looked at him and laughed.

"I guess I just quickly got used to it. I just let her have her way. It makes it easier to bear."

"Anyway. We should head back. The rest of the ten guilds are probably still trying to pierce through our defences."

Astaroth agreed with Khalor, and they launched toward the Bastion. Khalor remounted his drake, taking the air, while the former, who was now melded with White, just ran like hell toward their base.

As they arrived, the sight that greeted them made them stop in place.

In front of them, on the southern battlefield, Aces High, along with the two other guilds besieging this side, were beating a retreat. They were hastily grabbing their combat resources and running toward the north.

Khalor, who was high in the air, could see that most of the battlefronts were performing similar actions.

'What the fuck is happening?'

Astaroth quickly climbed the wall before jumping into the trap zone and heading toward the palace. He opened up his guild chat.

'Can someone explain to me what the hell is happening?'

Silent Light was the one to respond.

'Open up the forums. Something big is happening!'

Astaroth did so, as he kept running toward the palace. But once the forums were opened, he skidded to a stop.

His mouth dropped, and his eyes widened.

The trending post that jumped out at his face was titled 'Rise of a New Era'

He tapped it, and in the first lines, he rapidly understood why all the guilds were suddenly retreating. All of their bases were under attack.

And since most of their members were here, the situation was turning sour for them quite fast.

'What the hell is happening to everyone?'

Chapter 326 A Selfish Request

But he had no time to wonder about these things, as a massive explosion rocked the western side of the Bastion. Astaroth's head snapped in that direction, as he started running again.

He massaged the one person he was sure knew what was happening.

'Athena, what the hell is going on in the western part of the base?'

The response took a few moments to arrive.

'Leon is fighting.'

'What the hell is he fighting to be making this kind of ruckus?' he asked back.

'One creature that answered his challenge was more of an opponent he was expecting, I think.'

Astaroth grumbled at that response.

'I knew he shouldn't have done that,' he grumbled mentally.

There was nothing he could do about it now, except help the fight end sooner. If they brought it up a notch, Astaroth was scared that Leon would blow up their newly reconstructed buildings, and possibly the base.

When he reached the site of the explosion, Khalor was already flying overhead on his drake. But he had yet to take any action.

He quickly messaged the Necromancer.

'What are you doing? Get down there and help Leon, before those two blow up the fortress.'

'We shouldn't butt in.'

'What do you mean?! We need to. Otherwise, they will raze this whole place to the ground.'

'I tried sending help. Look at the center of the crater.'

Astaroth turned his head to the explosion crater. He quickly understood what Khalor meant.

In the middle of the blown-in ground, there was a purple armoured form, completely immobile. Next to it, a snapped halberd.

He looked at Leon, and by how he was looking at the cadaver of the death knight, he could infer what had happened. But he couldn't let the fight continue here.

He ran forward, getting close to Leon, before hearing a deep voice from behind him.

"Another flea wants to put its nose where it doesn't belong."

By the size of the shadow over him, and its form, Astaroth knew who it belonged to. Where the Giant white tiger had been, the spot was now empty.

Leon reacted on the double, jumping just over Astaroth's head, and kicking the tiger away, sending him barreling into the outer wall. The impact of the tiger on the wall cratered it.

Leon then snapped toward Astaroth.

"Go away! This is my fight to resolve!"

Astaroth took a step forward, punching Leon in the nose.

Taken aback by the action, the guardian looked at him wide-eyed.

"I don't care if you want to win this fight alone. But stop destroying the base, you colossal idiot! Look around you!"

Leon realized why his new master was angry. Leon had sworn to protect the land under Astaroth's name, and now he was destroying it with every attack.

He looked back at Astaroth with a sorry look.

"Take him outside, into the forest, for all I care. But stop destroying everything here. I'll make sure no one interferes."

Leon nodded his head before dashing toward where the tiger had impacted. The feline was just getting back on its legs when suddenly, a powerful kick struck from its underside.

Feeling its body bend around the leg, and its weight suddenly disappearing, the tiger flew off into the sky. Leon burst off the ground, on a direct trajectory towards it.

Once he was at the same height, he spun on himself, delivering a kick to the tiger's body again, sending hurtling into the forest. Landing atop the outer wall, Leon dashed after his prey.

He had been trying to hold back while he was inside the Bastion, semi-conscious of his surroundings. But he wouldn't have to do that out here.

From inside the base walls, the sonic booms of every attack started shaking the trees ever so lightly. The situation inside the trap zone was quickly settling, as the guilds had called their players back.

It seemed as if the siege would soon be officially over. But other matters required the guild's officers' attention. Phoenix had just sent a message to Astaroth, that she had accomplished her task, and that they should convene a meeting with all the officers.

Astaroth wrote a message in the guild chat, inviting all the officers back into the palace where they had met previously. He got many confirmations in the next few seconds.

He started heading that way himself, using the last minutes of his meld with White to zoom across the base and over the inner wall. Looking at said wall, Astaroth wondered if they should destroy it, or keep it for the future.

He brushed the thought away, thinking it would be better for Phoenix to decide on this matter. As he reached the front steps of the palace, his meld ended, and he returned to his normal hair colour.

Walking inside the palace, he noticed some of the wild elves were inside. One, in particular, was catching his attention.

The wild elf village chief was standing near the door to the throne room. When he saw Astaroth walk into the palace, he walked over to him.

But when he reached the abnormal, what he did, stunned Astaroth and the other wild elves following their chief. He kneeled, lowering his head.

"Your Highness. I have a selfish request to make. Please offer me a moment of your time?"

Astaroth took a moment to come back from his shock, to which was added all the other wild elves suddenly kneeling too.

"Your Highness!" they all called simultaneously.

"Please. Get up! You don't need to treat me like this. These were your lands, to begin with, chief. I consider you my equal."

The village chief didn't raise his head, however.

"You honour me with your words, your highness. But you are an official ruler. I am but a mere village chief. But my request has to do with this. Please grant me some of your time."

Astaroth didn't want to discuss this in the hall, so he brought him to a room next to the throne room where he would meet his officers in a moment.

As they sat down, Astaroth signalled the village chief to talk. He nodded his head before opening his mouth.

"It is my understanding that you wish to build a city out of this fortress of old. I would like to offer my help with this endeavour."

Astaroth nodded.

"You see, my people, the Elves, are rather reserved to outsiders. Seeing as this is still within their territory, getting their support foremost would be the best first move."

"I see your point, chief. But I still haven't heard the demand in all this."

"Then I will get straight to it. I would like to be named as an ambassador for your contact with the Elven nations. I guarantee talking with one of their own will ease the proceedings."

Astaroth scratched his chin. The idea was not bad.

"I think I should consult with Phoenix on the matter. Would you mind waiting for a bit?"

"Not at all, your highness."

Astaroth nodded before sending a message to Phoenix.

She responded right away.

'On my way.'

### Chapter 327 Accepting The Request

Seeing as Phoenix was already in the room practically next door, it didn't take her long to enter this smaller meeting room. When she saw all the people present, she put on a solemn face.

Sitting next to Astaroth, she waited for someone to speak up and tell her why her presence was necessary. Astaroth was the one to do so.

"The village chief has asked something from me, but I feel you would be a better judge of whether or not I should allow it."

Phoenix looked at the village chief, waiting for him to repeat his request to her directly. Feeling her stare bore into his mind, the chief understood.

"Your Majesty, I came here to make a selfish request. I would like to be named as an ambassador for your great new kingdom and be the one to form the bridges with the Elven people in your name."

Phoenix nodded her head, signalling she understood his request, but kept her lips shut tight. She thought for a moment, the only sound in the room, the echoes of Leon's battle in the nearby forest.

When she opened her mouth again, she was looking at Astaroth.

"I think naming him ambassador would be a good thing. But I have only one issue that bothers me."

"And what is that?" Astaroth replied, his face stoic.

Phoenix turned back to the village chief.

"Have you ever been in contact with other people that are not from your tribe? Aside from us, of course."

The village chief hesitated for a moment before shaking his head no.

"I'm sorry, your majesty. Our tribe keeps to itself, and the only people we have interacted with in decades, maybe even centuries, are you people..."

"Good," Phoenix said, a satisfied smile on her lips.



"Excuse me?"

The village chief looked back at her, his face a mix of confusion and excitement.

"I wanted to make sure you haven't been in any tribal conflicts, or maybe hunted on grounds of the nearby kingdoms without their consent. If you haven't, I believe you can be an ambassador."

"Even if I have no experience?"

"Chief. Do you think the first ambassador in history had prior training? The fact you have managed your tribe, all the while avoiding conflict, makes you a suitable candidate."

His mouth agape, the village chief's face morphed into joy. But Phoenix wasn't done.

"As for training, I know someone who can help you. A native in Sunpeak, who owes me a favour. I'll have him come here to give you proper training, and then you can be named ambassador."

The village chief nodded his head vigorously.

Astaroth kept his mouth shut. People like Phoenix handled things like these best.

His brain functioned at its best during combat, but issues like these required more brain cells than he was willing to spare. And, in the end, whatever she chose would be ok with him, anyway.

Phoenix wrote a few things on a paper she pulled from her inventory, officializing her statement, and then tapped an option on her interface. The form flashed golden for a moment, before a stamp appeared on it.

Astaroth looked at the process with curiosity. He wondered what Phoenix had done and took a mental note to ask her later when no one could hear him.

But seeing his face, Phoenix already knew he would ask. She lightly shook her head in disappointment at him.

She sent him a private message through the interface.

'You really need to explore your interface more often. There is a new tab, ever since we were marked.'

Astaroth discreetly looked at his interface, keeping his face as still as he could. Opening up the interface, a new tab called Kingdom was slowly flashing at the bottom of his list.

He curiously opened it up and had to contain his shock when the menu rolled down for more than a few seconds.

'So many new options!' he thought, schooling his face to stay stoic.

He closed up the menu, not wanting to get lost in it just yet. He would look like he was disinterested if someone asked him a question, but he was too busy reading his interface to answer.

Phoenix handed the newly stamped document to the village chief, who smiled from ear to ear, before thanking her profusely.

"This will guarantee you can exercise your functions once my contact has approved of your completed training. I wish you the best of luck, chief. Oh, by the way, I would rather call you by your name."

"Yes, your highness! My name is Elwin. I do not have a surname, as we have lost it to the ages."

"A name is fine, Elwin. I wish you success in your training and must now take my leave. I also need to drag the king with me, so if you will excuse us."

Phoenix got up, signalling the meeting was over, and Astaroth followed suit. Elwin stood up, and he and his following bowed as Astaroth and Phoenix left the room.

Once they were out of the small meeting room, Astaroth and Phoenix only had a small corridor to traverse to enter the throne room, where the officers were waiting for them.

Astaroth stopped the woman before she entered the room.

"Thank you. I did not know if making him an ambassador was a good idea or not. I'm sorry for dumping all these responsibilities on you."

Phoenix gave him a soft smile.

"Don't worry about it, love. This arrangement isn't particularly rare. In ancient times, when the king was a warrior-king, and he was at war, the queen would rule the kingdom in his stead. We can consider our arrangement to be similar."

Astaroth looked at Phoenix lovingly.

"Did I ever tell you how smart you are?"

"I don't believe you have, but it is never too late to fix that."

Phoenix gave him a small wink.

Astaroth grabbed her hips, bringing her in closer.

"You are the smartest woman I know, and I love you."

"Oh, you charmer! Am I even smarter than Morticia, who has a Ph.D. in psychology?"

"By leaps and bounds!" he replied, leaning in to kiss her.

As the lovers kissed, they heard a cough through the door they were leaning on.

\*muffled\*

"Ahem! We can hear you guys, you know?"

Astaroth became beet red as he released Phoenix from his grasp, clearing his throat.

Phoenix entered the room, giggling softly.

"Then let us begin our debrief. Astaroth and I can get back to frolicking later."

Complaints about too much information fused, as Astaroth was almost steaming in embarrassment. Only one person in the room smiled silently, Morticia.

"Alright, let's get to it!"

## Chapter 328 Surprise Rewards And Hidden Problem

Debriefing everyone at the table, getting all the info she could from their encounters or strategies, Phoenix took a copious amount of notes. She was particularly interested in information on the other guilds' power pillars.

All this information was something that would probably stay relevant for a brief period, but it was still an excellent base for their knowledge of their potential enemies.

The other big subject Phoenix lingered on a lot was the strategies used by each officer on their respective fronts, or during the trap zone phase.

She especially paid great attention to Declan, who seemed to have some real tactical experience. She asked him to spare her some time for more details on a later date, to which Declan nodded yes.

Next came the subject of Exp distribution. But as she was about to open the panel for stored Exp, a notification rang in all the officers' ears.

They all opened it simultaneously, reading it with wide eyes.

**\*Special Guild Announcement, for Paragons!\***

**\*For fighting off forces that could have toppled small kingdoms, with only enough men to hold a village in the wilderness, the system has generated a reward, to compensate for your heroic actions and ingenuity.\***

**\*Generating Reward\***

**\*Ding!\***

**\*Rewards generated!\***

5 million gold added to your guild treasury

5 million Exp added to your Exp stored points

Various resources have been added to your treasury

10,000 world reputation points have been added to your kingdom

Special Teleportation Device instant construction blueprint added to the treasury

**\*Congratulations to the guild Paragons, for your exceptional resilience in the face of adversity!\***

All of them were momentarily stunned. Khalor was sporting a larger grin than usual.

He hadn't expected these rewards, since no one had done such a stupid thing in his past. The top guilds usually stayed in their corner, trying not to fight too much with each other.

There were some wars, but never had someone challenged all of them and lived to tell the tale. In his past, any guild that alienated the top guilds was wiped out of New Eden.

Their players were hunted down and killed until they couldn't play anymore under that character. They burned the bases to the ground and plundered their resources among themselves.

Khalor was half expecting retaliation from the top guilds. But he imagined it would take a while to mount, since the next stage of the game would take a while to stabilize.

While the other officers were discussing how to use their new resources, Khalor was already thinking about the next update and its effect on the game and out of it. Astaroth could see the gears turning in the undead's head.

He raised his hand, commanding the silence of everyone. Phoenix was almost surprised that Astaroth butted in.

"Khalor. Mind telling us the next step you had thought of?"

The other officers were curious why the guild leader asked this of Khalor, except for Phoenix and Violette. Both girls looked at Khalor too, wondering what his grand plan was.

"Hm? Honestly, my previous plan has to be almost entirely scrapped. So many unforeseen events took place that I will need to think of new plans."

Astaroth scratched his chin.

"In that case, can you shed a bit of light on the next update? I think it would be better if everyone in this room could prepare a bit in advance. Or at least, be ready when it hits."

Khalor looked at Astaroth with a look of disapproval. He would rather have the least people know he had access to information from the game that he shouldn't have.

Declan then interjected. His head was on the table, making everyone talking to him have a hard time knowing where to look.

But as he looked at Khalor, the latter looked directly into his eyes.

"And how would you have access to such information? I've been trying to get inside information on New Eden ever since it came out, and always came out empty-handed."

Khalor smirked

"I have a reliable source. Calls himself Mr. Future. He hasn't lied to me once, yet."

Declan looked unconvinced, his eyes squinting at Khalor. But he didn't pry further.

"As for your question, Astaroth, yes I could throw you guys a bone. There would be no harm in that."

"Then go on. What should we expect?"

"Before I tell you anything, I should show you something. Would you all mind following me somewhere? Especially you, priest."

He looked into Silent Light's eyes as he said those last words. The teen almost shivered at the intensity of Khalor's eyes.

'So gloomy, yet so cool!' he thought to himself, maintaining his poker face.

Silent nodded his head, rising from his seat. The other officers followed suit, wondering what Khalor wanted to show them.

Khalor walked out of the room, remaining silent from then on. He turned to the left, heading deeper inside the center of the tree palace.

Astaroth almost found it weird that Khalor knew exactly where he was going, although no one had the time to fully explore the palace yet. But he guessed that was another bit of information from his past.

Reaching behind what would be the wall directly behind the throne, in the throne room, Khalor started passing his hand across the wooden surface. He did this for almost a full minute, before he finally smiled.

"There you are."

Pushing his hand on the wooden surface, a small part of the wall suddenly sunk inwards. It had been so uniform with the wall before that, that no one could have found it without knowing where to look.

The wall, made out entirely of bark, suddenly started cracking and popping, before it retracted on itself, revealing a hidden staircase.

"Please follow me down here. And, priest, have some holy magic ready."

Everyone nodded, Silent Light clenching his jaw, too.

As they started walking down the stairs, Astaroth felt something familiar coming from below. His mana sense flared up, his eyes suddenly seeing every mana particle floating around.

Strangely enough, there wasn't much mana flying around, which was weird, considering magic had just opened the passage. But the lower they went, the scarcer it was, until something else became visible to him.

"This mana signature! How did it get under the tree palace?!"

Astaroth jumped on the wall next to him, somersaulting over Khalor. As he landed on the stairs in front of the group, he darted forward.

"This shouldn't be here!" he screamed internally.

"Wait up!" everyone behind him screamed.

## Chapter 329 Time For A Lesson

Astaroth ran like a madman, going down the stairs in groups of four, as the dark particles of mana he dreaded thickened the further down he went. He had been down almost five hundred steps when he finally saw the end of the stairs.

He calculated he was about a hundred meters under the tree palace, and by how the stairs spiralled, he was still right under the core. When he reached the floor, his thoughts were confirmed.

All around him, the walls were a mix of compacted dirt, stone, and roots; some thin, some thick. He was in an oddly shaped room, closely resembling an octagon, with a large stone dais in the center.

But his attention was on something else right now.

At the far end of the room, a large red gash in the air itself was spewing out thick red and black miasma. The miasma was filled with the same mana signature he had been dreading finding.

Demonic mana.

When the others reached the end of the staircase behind him, small gasps of shock escaped them. Only Khalor was unfazed.

He stepped forward, reaching next to Astaroth.

"This is what I wanted to show you. Since we have made this base ours, we need to get rid of this right now. Or else, when the update finishes, there won't be a base to come back to."

Astaroth kept his eyes on the tear, but still felt questions bubbling inside him.

"What do you mean, it won't be there?"

"First, let's let the priest close this, while he still can."

Turning around to face Silent Light, Khalor gestured for him to come forward.

"You are the only one of us who can close this, kid. So do us a favour, and blast it full of divine energy."

Silent looked confused. He had no attack spells yet and did not know how to convey his mana in any other way than healing.

Seeing his apparent confusion, Khalor clicked his tongue. He turned to Phoenix, then to Astaroth.

"Have you guys not taught at least your officers how to use mana more fluidly, yet? This is important stuff! God damn it. Fine, I'll teach him"

His head snapped back at Silent.

"First things first. Cast a healing spell on an ally, but focus on the energy doing the healing."

Silent Light did as ordered, and cast a small healing spell, choosing Khalor as his target. But as the energy touched Khalor, a sizzling noise emanated from him, as he yelped in pain.

"Not me, you imbecile! I'm an undead, you are damaging me!"

Khalor lightly conked Silent Light on the head, glaring at him in pain.

"I'm sorry! I didn't know!"

Silent Light hurriedly picked Astaroth as his next target, before casting the same healing spell. This time, he was able to focus on the energy conveying his healing power.

But it was only a vague feeling, as he was not graced with mana sensing like Phoenix. But this vague feeling was enough for him to get a sense of what it was supposed to feel like.

The energy felt like a ray of sunlight that hit you while you rested under the shade of a tree. It was warm and soothing, almost like a hug from your grandmother.

Seeing him squinting, Khalor knew he had grasped the base.

"Okay, next step. Now that you know how that feels, I need you to envision it differently. Imagine that same feeling, but instead of being just a ray or wave, make it into a bubble, and wrap it around the red tear."

The other officers listened to his explanation, and wheels were turning in their heads too. The ones that had yet to understand the underlying use of mana started trying to repeat the experiment Khalor was making Silent Light do.

Athena had already grasped at this when she unlocked her new legacy. The same thing could apply to Gulnur.

As for the other officers, other situations also clued them into it. Morticia had unlocked a mastery level through this process on her own.

Astaroth, Violette, and Phoenix all had understood this principle quite early in their magic training. I'die had figured a part of it out, when Violette had synergized their spells on their dungeon run.

As for Gale, he was the most advanced in it, since he was already applying it outside of New Eden. This left only Declan, who did not know how to use mana at all.

But that didn't stop the less experienced to double down on this lesson, making I'die, Morticia, Athena, and Declan squint like Silent, while they tried to understand more about the natural energy in New Eden.

Silent Light was having trouble following Khalor's instructions, sensing the eyes of the latter, as well as those of Astaroth, Phoenix, and Violette linger on him. His lack of focus caused him to fumble many times, earning him stern reprimands from Khalor.

But after a dozen attempts, Khalor noticed the change, at the same time as Astaroth did. The miasma leaking out of the tear was slowly thinning as a faint golden glow started surrounding it.

A few minutes went by, with Silent Light now sweating abundantly, his eyes closed as he focused on the feeling. He was envisioning a warm blanket wrapping around the red tear, forming a cozy cocoon.

Then he got a notification as a hand hit his shoulder.

"Congrats, kid. You did it."

Opening his eyes, Silent was face to face with Khalor's terrifying, ghostly face. He held back a scream of surprise, only jolting back.

But he was more interested in the notification he heard.

Opening his interface, he read it.

\*Congratulations! Your practice has formed a new spell. Spell 'Minor Divine Seal' added to the skill list.\*

Silent Light was ecstatic about this, and when he looked forward, at where the tear was, he saw a golden cocoon, slowly shrinking on itself. The golden ball shrunk and shrunk until it completely disappeared, bringing the leaking miasma crack with it.

The miasma on the ground quickly dissipated when it lost its source. Looking back at Khalor, he seemed to have a satisfied look on his face, even though it was hard to read it, as it was bones and a shifting mist.

"Now! On to the next part of the explanation!" Khalor exclaimed, grabbing everyone's attention.

## Chapter 330 Talking About The Update

Khalor walked up the dais in the center of the room, taking a high point to tell the other officers and his guild leaders what he knew about the update itself. But as he turned around to talk, he felt Astaroth's glare on him.

"Get down from there, you boney prick. You don't need to be standing higher than us to tell us this."

Although the insult stung him a little, Khalor only showed disappointment. He wanted to make himself feel above the others, but Astaroth saw through him.

"Tch! You're no fun."

Khalor walked down the two steps to the dais and sat on the last one. The other officers gathered around him, so he needn't shout.

"Okay. Here's what I can tell you about the incoming update. First, the first player to reach level fifty will get a special item that will help in the rest of the game going onwards."

Phoenix interrupted.

"What kind of item? Is that why you were trying to reach level fifty before anyone else?"

"Please don't interrupt me... It's an item that will be needed, to beat back what's coming. It doesn't need to go to me, but I mainly wanted to make sure the one that reached level fifty the first last time doesn't get it again. It's wasted on him."

"Can you describe what it does, at least?" Astaroth asked.

"Sure. It's an amulet. And it will be needed to seal away the first wave that will strike at the world."

The other officers thought he meant New Eden, but three of them knew better. Astaroth, Phoenix, and Violette understood the importance of such an item.

"It is an item that is best used by someone who can wield holy mana, so I think it would be best if kiddo over here got it."

Saying that, Khalor pointed at Silent Light. That suddenly put the teenager under the spot, and he loved it.

Plus, the prospect of saving the world appealed strongly to his chuunibyoutai brain. He would gladly take on the role of saviour.

"But that isn't the most important part. The reason I brought you down here to close this rift was something else entirely. The update will hit New Eden with a time skip, and leaving that here, to fester, would have been bad for us if we want to keep the base."

Astaroth looked puzzled. By the looks of it, the red tear could have been there for a while, before the miasma reached anywhere near the surface.

And there was no way to know what it would do once it got into contact with the natives. But it wouldn't be before a long time had passed.

Looking at Khalor, he asked what was on everyone's mind.



"How long of a time skip?"

Khalor looked at him gravely.

"Ten years. Long enough for these things to settle in and open up for real. That is when the next patch brings us to. That is why we needed to close this one."

They sucked breaths of air all around. Ten years was a long time, and many things could happen in such a period.

All of them were wondering what the game world would look like ten years from now. But something else was troubling Astaroth's mind.

If Khalor's information was right, and his observations concurred, then how would the game advance ten years without them going forward at the same time?

Khalor saw the silent question in his eyes and shook his head slightly. He immediately sent Astaroth a private message.

'We will discuss this away from all of them. They don't need to know, yet. I also don't know which one of them I can trust just yet.'

Astaroth nodded ever so slightly, his move escaping everyone else's attention. Khalor then resumed his explanation.

"When the first player to reach level fifty does so, a counter for twenty-four hours will start. Once it reaches zero, the system will forcefully log every player out of New Eden, and the game will be offline for a week."

"Speaking of which, shouldn't we give out that level soon, before another guild does it before us?" Violette asked.

Phoenix agreed with her statement, and looked at Khalor, who only shrugged. Seeing he didn't have any objections, she opened the interface and went to the guild tab.

In that tab, she tapped the Exp vault icon. From there, she could select a player in the guild, and give them Exp.

She asked Silent Light for his missing amount to reach level fifty, and he replied, 'All of it.'

Since they had locked the gained Exp from the war, and he had already been at zero Exp in level forty-nine, he was missing the whole amount.

She rapidly scanned her own Exp bar and sent the amount at the end to Silent Light. As he received it and levelled up, a world announcement resounded.

\*Congratulations to the player Silent Light for reaching the level 50 milestone first! Silent Light will be awarded 5000 world reputation points, and a special item for his achievements!\*

\*\*\*

Across the world of New Eden, a certain gnome was just reaching his base, where he was about to give himself all the Exp accumulated in his vault that he could spare. The rest would go to bringing his members back to their previous levels.

When he heard the notification resound, his mind went blank before he exploded with anger.

"Who the fuck is Silent Light! Fuck him and Fuck Paragons! FUUUUCK!!!"

Now, even if he dumped all the Exp on himself, it wouldn't matter. He had lost this achievement to a no-name player. Azamus was enraged beyond compare, and furniture flew around in his office, shattering against the walls.

He felt like everyone in New Eden was trying to screw him over at every turn of the game, and it was rubbing him the wrong way. He would have stopped playing this stupid game already if his sponsors didn't have him by the balls.

\*\*\*

Back in the tree palace's hidden basement, a shiny box the size of a jewel box had just appeared above Silent Light's hands. As he grabbed it, it stopped shining.

He couldn't wait to open it and scan its contents. But he controlled his eagerness, waiting for Khalor to finish his little expose on the update coming in twenty-four hours.

The ghastly man nodded at him in approval.

"Now. Where was I? Ah, yes. The ten-year time skip."