

## **New Eden 111**

### Chapter 111 Fast Paced Duel

\*Gong!\*

With that sound, all hell broke loose. Phoenix started lobbing firebolt after firebolt, going for quantity over quality.

She was trying to make sure Morticia didn't have time to break into her mind. So keeping the other woman on the move was paramount.

But Morticia was no slouch either. Since she knew that breaking into Phoenix's mind would be no easy feat, she went for the same tactic as her counterpart, sending out small mental bursts.

These minor attacks were battering Phoenix's brain like a sledgehammer, making her feel dizzy, nauseous, and then sleepy, in a random order, repeatedly.

Phoenix had to fight her own body just to keep on focusing. Besides that, she was also slowly taking damage.

It was no secret that psychics were most mages' bane, since they disrupted concentration with each of their attacks. But we could say the same the other way around.

A mage's mind was like a fortress for a psychic. So even if they battered the gates for hours, a powerful mage could withstand a weaker psychic's assault long enough to put them down.

Currently, Morticia was under a constant assault of small bolts of fire, some of which she couldn't dodge in time, and she was slowly accruing burns all over her body. So this battle was currently at a stalemate.

Astaroth was watching this go down from the bleachers and taking mental notes. But for all his quick thinking, his mind was having a hard time focusing on anything else than the fight.

It was so fast-paced for a magic fight that all the mages not present in the tournament currently were watching in awe. It was their dream and aim to be skillful enough to fight in this way.

The prowess both women were showing was what one would expect of high-calibre players. The precision and speed at which they fired their attacks were on a different level.

Astaroth had been teamed with both women, so he knew their fighting styles. And yet, he was still impressed by their ability to adapt to their opponent.

Every time one woman tried changing to a stronger spell that required longer charging time, the other redoubled the onslaught to disrupt it. So, even though they were both powerful casters, they could only use their weaker spells.

It didn't help either of them they seemed to know when these spells were being cast. It was like they were perfectly reading each other.

It startled Morticia the first time Phoenix interrupted her in one of her casting times. She was a trained psychologist, and was very good at reading body language, which made her adept at doing it.

But she had not expected Phoenix to do the same. It went to show the difference in ability between a top-ten player and a top-fifty player.

Astaroth looked at the arena intently. Athena to his side nudged him after noticing his stare.

"You noticed it too, didn't you?" She said.

"Yes. But it seems Morticia hasn't yet. And if she doesn't realize it soon, she will lose." Astaroth replied, frowning.

"Do you want her to win over Phoenix?" I'die said from the side.

"It's not that I want her to win. It's more that I would prefer having to fight her later, over Phoenix." Astaroth answered.

"Ahh. Yes. That would indeed be better." I'die said, realizing his thought process.

It was all about who he fought next. Unfortunately for I'die, both women terrified him.

He was not an outstanding player in his mind. And he was far from having their courage.

Plus, the next combat was his against another pro player. So he feared losing already.

And even if he won, he would then have to fight the winner of this round in the next bracket. I'die started gulping his saliva.

Athena started comforting him as best she could. Astaroth could feel the bond between the two was strong.

He focused back on the fight happening down below, looking at the arena. He was seeing what Morticia was not because of her concentration.

Right now, from his higher standing point, what he saw could only be described as hell. Morticia might not have noticed yet, but all the players in the stands had.

The arena was slowly being covered in fire. And it wasn't going out.

Phoenix was missing around three out of four firebolts she shot, but the firebolts did land in the arena. And by some show of absolute control, Phoenix was keeping the fire alive with her mana.

Astaroth could guess that the technique he had taught her in the underzone of phase one was a big contributor to this.

Since her mana pool had expanded a bit, but she gained mana regen, she now had better resource management.

And she used that mana smartly, by barely keeping the flame lit, and slowly regrouping them in small spots around the arena.

At this pace, in less than two minutes, she would have transformed the whole pit into an inferno. And Morticia was none the wiser about it.

The fight kept going, with the two women battling it out, with a constant barrage of low-damage spells. It wasn't until it was too late that Morticia finally grasped the situation.

She was trying to kite Phoenix as best she could, but she suddenly went out of space. The fire was everywhere.

She gasped as she understood she had been played. She had been dancing in Phoenix's palm all along.

Phoenix, on her side, was smiling widely. She had stopped firing firebolts at Morticia, and was now spinning her arms wide.

The flames answered her silent call as they spun to follow her movement. Morticia knew she didn't have time to cast any tie-breaking spell, so she started barraging her mental attacks even more.

She didn't bother moving, as there was no space to, anyway. But Phoenix still had more health than her, and the match was set.

In a great blaze of glory, Phoenix cast her flaming tornado, which engulfed the arena entirely. When it finally died down, the only player standing was her.

Morticia has already disintegrated into particles.

## Chapter 112 The Gunslinger VS The Scared Druid

With this fight over, Phoenix was transported out of the arena, soon to be replaced by the next two players. The arena grounds were also repaired magically, as nothing had happened a few seconds prior.

Phoenix sat back down next to Astaroth, where she had been previously. She turned to look at him.

He was smiling at her like a proud friend. Her heart almost fluttered for a second, before she steadied her emotions.

'He's kinda cute with that smile.' She thought, before clearing her throat.

"Ahem. So... You seem to be in a better mental spot now. Did you enjoy the show?" She asked him, careful to avoid staring into his eyes.

"Yes. That was some fine control of fire you displayed there. Did that extra mana come in handy?" Astaroth said, teasing her.

He was teasing about the fact that he had shown her the method for mana breathing that had helped her in that fight. But she perceived the teasing as something else.

She slightly blushed, albeit imperceptibly.

"It came in handy." She mumbled, turning her head slightly.

Her change in attitude slightly took aback Astaroth. This kind of mumbling wasn't like her.

Phoenix was usually very outspoken.

"Are you ok? You look a little red." He asked her, thinking she was having a heatstroke from all that fire.

"I'm fine!" She burst out.

Phoenix then got up and walked away briskly. Astaroth looked at her practically running away, with invisible question marks over his head.

"What's gotten into her?" He asked, turning to Athena.

Athena gave him the most dumbfounded look she could give.

'Is he really that dense?' She thought to herself.

"Probably nothing." She answered, not wanting to meddle.

Astaroth shrugged and focused back on the arena, where I'die's fight was about to start. His opponent was another well-known player from 'ToB', Lucian\_Valentine.

The man was known to always take dual-wielding classes in all his past games, and this time was no different. In 'ToB', he had gone for a class called 'Demon Hunter', which fought with two small crossbows.

This time, he had picked the gnome race, and was playing a gunner. He had two revolvers, one in each hand.

He wasn't as proficient with building stuff, so he hadn't made his own guns, but he was a very technical man. He had drawn up the schematics for his weapons.

Thus, he still profited from the racial bonus the gnomes had. His revolvers looked very rustic, like old western revolvers.

Seeing a gnome with those two guns almost made Astaroth chuckle, but he kept it in. Lucian had a short temper, so he didn't want him to hear his laugh.

Astaroth turned his head to I'die and felt a tinge of pity. The poor Elf was trembling slightly, and you could tell he was very nervous.

He was gripping his staff in both hands tightly, and sweat could be seen on his temples. He knew the stakes were higher this time.

Astaroth couldn't bear to see him so nervous, so he sent him a message. He knew the message function wasn't locked until the gong resounded, so he hurried.

In the message, he wrote 'Breathe in deep, breath out slowly. Keep your head calm and don't let him have a straight line of sight of you at any time. Attack during his reload phases. You'll be fine, kid. You got this!'

He sent it, with a few seconds to spare. He could tell I'die had read it though.

The nervous wreck of an Elf took in a big deep breath, before exhaling slowly, with his eyes closed. When he opened them, they were steady and focused.

'Attaboy.' Astaroth thought.

"Thank you." Athena said beside him.

"Hmm?" Astaroth said, turning his head to her.

"I know you sent him a message. I told him to be calm before he went in, but it probably only made him even more nervous." She replied.

"Hey, I get it. It's his first competition. I can tell. I was nervous during mine too. And I didn't make it half as far as he did today. So I only gave him the same tip someone once gave me." Astaroth said, smiling softly.

"That person was wise. Someone close I suppose?" Athena asked, seeing his nostalgic smile.

"Yes. Someone very dear to me." Astaroth said, his heart pinching a little.

Athena could see the pain in his eyes, despite the smile he had on his lips, and decided not to push further. She focused back on the fight below them.

The gong had just rung, and the fight was already moving along at a fast pace. I'die had erected a stone wall in front of himself, covering his body from any firing line.

Lucian was moving to reposition, occasionally firing at I'die's head poking out of the cover. I'die was gauging where his opponent was mainly by sound, but he was taking peeks to cast his spells at Lucian.

As soon as Lucian had repositioned, he opened fire against I'die. The Elf tried as best he could to take cover on the slim side of the stone wall, but he still took a couple of bullets.

When the firing stopped, he knew it was his chance. He put his hand on the stone wall, some runes forming.

Not a second later, he withdrew his hand and slammed it back on the runes. The stone wall dislodged from the ground and flew straight at Lucian.

The gnome had been expecting an attack, but not that kind. He jumped to the side, cancelling his reload action.

This cost him time, and I'die used that to recast a stone wall between each other again. He then started casting a spell.

The spell shot out three thick spiked vines that tried to latch onto Lucian's legs. They missed, as the gnome jumped into the air.

Lucian kept reloading during his jump, but it was arduous.

His reload ended while he was airborne, and he fired two shots at I'die's exposed head.

\*Bang! Bang!\*

Two huge damage numbers floated above I'die's head.

Everyone gasped.

Chapter 113 Mind Numbing Questions And Silent Hope

Lucian, who was slowly falling from his high jump, was frowning. Something was wrong.

He knew how much damage he usually does, and those numbers weren't right. Even if his opponent had zero defence, the damage was much too high.

That's when he noticed. Instead of turning to particles, the body was slowly melting into a brown puddle.

'A mud decoy!' He realized.

Not a second later, a humongous hand reached out from the ground below him, grabbing his whole body. Attached to the hand was a body made entirely of stone.

The stone giant rose from the ground, taller and taller, until it was standing at a height of ten meters. It had two pit-like eyes and an enormous gaping mouth.

Lucian, who was stuck in the rocky hand up to his shoulders, looked on in horror. This stone golem could only be one person's spell.

I'die, from inside the stone golem, was still frightened by what had happened. When the two gunshots had fired, he was already activating his mud clone spell.

And time had almost slowed down as the spell took shape around him, as he watched the bullets race toward his head. He had sunk into the ground just in time to see the bullets pierce his head.

That was a terrifying thing to see, and he was still shaking from deep inside the stone. Even though he was now safe.

Remembering the situation, he looked at Lucian, squirming in his giant stony hand. He lifted his arm up over his head and slammed it down.

The impact almost rendered Lucian unconscious, as it crushed the air out of his body. I'die then dropped the floppy body down.

Ensued a very gruesome scene, as the giant stone golem started repeatedly slamming its enormous fists onto Lucian, turning him to a pulp.

\*Boom!\*

\*Boom!\*

\*Boom!\*

It was almost rhythmic. It stopped after a few more hits, as Lucian was already dead and had disappeared.

The golem vanished from the arena, as I'die reappeared in the stands, his hands raised in the air in a slamming motion. He almost lost foot as he realized where he was.

He dropped on his butt, huffing. He then burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! That was scary! But so amazing! Did you see me?!" He exclaimed, looking at Athena.

"Yes, I saw." Athena replied, with a chuckle.

I'die then raved on, recounting the experience from his point of view to his friend, as the next combat went underway.

Astaroth was only mildly interested in the fight going on. It was between two pro players that he knew well, but weren't that strong in the last game.

They were both in the top five hundred, which was already impressive in itself, but they weren't top dogs. The players were Stormbringer, the Thundermancer; and War-Machine, the Technomancer.

Their names were not that original, but who would blame them? The gamer community was filled with unoriginal names.

Astaroth watched it absentmindedly as he brought his thoughts back to his conversation with Khalor. Every time he thought about it, the words he said sounded so impossible.

And yet, the more he mulled over them, the more the possibility didn't sound so outlandish.

'What if what he said is true?' He thought.

He kept asking himself that, again and again, like a broken record. He didn't want to believe what Khalor had told him, but for now, most of what he had said sounded like possibilities.

He had brought to his attention details that he shouldn't know about players that were barely known. And talked about situations that were happening right now, outside the game.

But they didn't have access to that information from inside the game, so he could only learn the truth about those once he was out. But they didn't sound like things that couldn't be happening.

In fact, they sounded all too plausible. But how would he know with significant details about things that hadn't happened yet or were happening right this instant?

The more he racked his brain over the matter, the more his headache came back. So he shelved it for now.

Khalor had also given him his personal information, so he could contact him outside of the game. He said to call him after he had confirmed all of what he had told him.

This was where Astaroth hooked. Why would Khalor tell him lies and then give him his info to call him after he confirmed them?

It made no sense. That was the move of someone confident in his information.

The mystery around Khalor only expanded the more he thought about it. Astaroth was so deep in thought that he barely saw the fight, and only saw who won after it ended.

The winner was War-Machine, by a clutch one hundred health margin.

The next two combatants were a Human Monk, named Brooce Li, and an Orc Berserker, named Grogg lockjaw.

Both were again pro players from 'ToB', amongst the top five hundred. These were all small fry in Astaroth's opinion.

The ones he wanted to fight were the top one hundred at a bare minimum. And lower than that, and he feared he wouldn't have any challenge.

Then again, he only considered their past prowess. This time around, these players could be stronger than they were in 'ToB'.

Or they could be weaker.

And from what he could see currently, it wouldn't matter if they were slightly stronger than in 'ToB' anyway, since he was much stronger than them.

In the end, he only cared about facing one person here today. And that person was Khalor.

Even though Khalor had said he would win this tournament, and Astaroth knew he was a very strong opponent, he still hoped he could face him.

And as things were right now, he would only meet him in combat if they both made it to the finals.

Astaroth clenched his fists hard, a grin slipping on his lips.

'I really hope we both make it there. Please don't lose to anyone before then.' He whispered to himself.

Athena, who was standing almost face to him, talking with I'die, saw his face.

'Isn't he pumped up? Guess I'll have to think like that too. It's almost my turn.' She thought, looking at the graph in the sky.

#### Chapter 114 Fall Off The Grid

\*\*\*In Constantine's office, outside the game\*\*\*

Constantine was watching the rounds of the last phase going on with a satisfied smile plastered on her lips. The view ratings were through the roof, and the feedback was positive.

New orders were coming in as a constant stream for gaming pods, as proof of the attraction of the game. People from all over the world were seeing the current cream of the crop and hoping to reach that level.

And for that to happen, they needed to play. Business was booming, and popularity was on the rise.

While she was focused on the statistics defiling on her screen, Constantine heard familiar footsteps in the hallway to her office.

Not long after, her assistant opened the glass door and entered. She was holding a file in her hand that had little body to it.

Constantine was slightly disappointed.

"Ma'am. This was all we could find on the player named Khalor." The assistant said, handing her the file.

Constantine opened it and flash read through the documents. They were very basic things.

His name, date of birth, the schools he went to, and his last known address. But something was off.

"Are these dates accurate?" Constantine asked her assistant.

"Yes, Ma'am." She replied.

"He dropped off the face of the Earth one week before the release of the game. This cannot be a coincidence." Constantine mumbled.

She then looked at another paper in the file. It contained the bank accounts and physical actives of David Magnus before he disappeared.

"It says here he sold everything he had and wired all of his money to a different account. An offshore one."



"This cannot be a coincidence." Constantine said, frowning.

'This man knows something.' She thought.

All the trails went cold after that. No money trail, no houses, cars, or even a cell phone, for that matter.

"This man knew what he was doing, Ma'am." The assistant said.

"Yes. This is no coincidence. I want you to hire the best hackers in the world. Find out from where he's playing the game. I need to talk to him." Constantine said.

She then closed the file and pushed it through a paper shredder. The shredded paper then fell down a shaft that led to an incinerator.

The assistant bowed before taking her leave. She would not come back until her task was complete.

'Where are you, David Magnus? And why go silent all of a sudden?' Constantine asked herself, crossing her hands.

She was looking intensely at the image on her screen that showed David, aka Khalor, appearing in the arena. It was now his turn to fight his first round.

Constantine did not doubt that the man would cakewalk this bout, as he had an advantage no one had. His Legacy.

\*\*\*Back in the game\*\*\*

Astaroth's attention was now fully on the arena down below. In it, the man he so wanted to fight was standing.

And on his opposite side was a woman well known from the time of 'ToB', Mily Lightfoot.

Mily Lightfoot was a woman with a charming appearance and childish physical traits. She was what some would call a loli.

She liked to play classes and races that doubled down on her cuteness, and her choice here had been obvious. She was playing the Fey race, and her class was an offshoot of the Psychic class, the Siren.

The woman had gone all-in on the Fey appearance and was sporting the typical translucent wings, paired with silver chromatic hair.

Her childish features were accentuated by the Fey's normal appearances and made her look like a young teenager. She was smiling delicately as she looked at Khalor.

The undead, on the other hand, was sporting his habitual cool, nonchalant, icy stare. Mily had a small umbrella in her hands, which was resting on her shoulder, shading her from the sun.

She twirled the umbrella, batting her eyelashes at her opponent.

"My my, mister number one. Even though your appearance is not the best, you sure look like a reliable man. Why don't you let me win and come work under my umbrella?" Mily said, each word coming out as a tease.

"I'm sure together, we could become the very best there is." She added, flashing a wink.

"Can it, deceiver. I'm immune to your childish charms. Plus, I'm already the very best. Why would I join you to attain what I already have?" Khalor said coldly.

The woman frowned.

"Your goal is to make me the strongest." She pouted cutely.

"Wrong. My goal is to kill you and win this tournament." Khalor replied, looking at the timer before the gong rang.

There were only a few seconds left.

"Fine, then!" Mily said, stomping her foot angrily.

"I'll make you bow by force, since you insist on it!" She added, her smile turning from innocent to vicious.

**\*Gong!\***

With the sound of the gong, Khalor threw his bident at Mily with unnatural strength. The weapon flew true and grabbed the Fey by the throat as it flew into the wall behind her.

The prongs on the bident lodged themselves deep into the wall, constricting her throat strongly. The woman was having much trouble breathing, and could not talk.

"As if I would let you speak a single word." Khalor said, as he opened up his portal to the underworld.

Out of it ran a legion of undead, all running at Mily. The woman's eyes became wide as saucers with terror.

They soon drowned her in a wave of hungry ghouls and zombies. The whole fight lasted less than ten seconds, as her health bar plummeted from the rapid assault of the undead.

Mily exploded into pixels, with her eyes staring at Khalor, red with rage and murderous intent.

"One down, four to go." Khalor said, as he was teleported out of the arena again.

Everyone was staring at him in horror. What he had done was ruthless, like any player should do, but it went a step further, as he showed no mercy whatsoever.

'What kind of man treats a woman like this!?' They all thought.

Chapter 115 Power Moves

Astaroth laughed as soon as Khalor reappeared in the stands.

"Hahaha!"

"Man! You are something else! I can't wait to fight you!" He exclaimed.

Khalor frowned at his outburst. Not that Astaroth was wrong, but that was an unlikely take on what had happened.

He brushed it off as being over-enthusiastic.

"If you want to fight me, make it to the finals." Khalor replied, giving back a smile.

The smile was filled with confidence. Astaroth replied with a wide grin of his own.

Close to them, Azamus was fuming. They were talking like the rest of the players here didn't exist, and that pissed him off.

He was number one! No one looked down on him!

It was his turn to fight next, and when he appeared in the arena, his mood soured even further. His opponent was a weak player, that loved roleplay a bit too much.

The man standing tall before him was called Parthenon. He was a Human Warrior, that was playing a subclass called spartan.

And he dressed like one to match the class. It was ridiculous for most onlookers.

Parthenon was wearing a short leather striped skirt, with metal padding, and a metal-plated chest piece, sculpted to look chiselled.

He was also wearing a spartan helmet, with red crista included. He looked like he was pulled out of the movie Spartacus, and it was ostentatious, to say the least.

Parthenon had painted all of his armor gold and red, and he painted his shield with the logo of ancient Sparta.

'This guy is a joke!' Azamus thought, his teeth gnashing together.

He pulled out his sniper rifle and awaited the gong, which wouldn't ring for another fifteen seconds.

"Time to lose, little man! Bahahaha!" Parthenon shouted.

He opened his arms wide, showing he wasn't scared of the rifle, trying to ridicule Azamus.

"It's about time there is a change in the order of players! You are going down, all for the rise of this mighty man! Parthenon!" The spartan shouted.

"AHOU! AHOU! AHOU!" He then cried out, slamming his short spear into his shield three times.

As his arms opened on the third slam, the gong resounded.

\*Gong!\*

\*Bang!\*

The arena went silent. Azamus had his rifle stocked to his shoulder, eye in the sights.

At the other end of the arena, a cloud of particles was slowly dispersing. Where there was once a standing show-off was now nothing.

Azamus grinned, as he was teleported back out of the arena. He had used his strongest attack; Headshot, to end this fight in one move.

'That'll teach you, you moron.' Azamus thought.

He sat back down on his seat, grinning from ear to ear, as it instantly reminded the others why he had been number one in 'ToB'.

This man was an expert marksman. Getting in his sights meant assured death almost all the time. And he had just shown them why he was always so arrogant.

Strength was the only talking needed in these cases. And he had proved he still had that strength.

Khalor huffed to the side. He was no stranger to these kinds of shows of force.

But he had fought him before, and he was far from impressed. He would crush him again in the next round.

Athena, whose turn it was, was getting mentally ready. She knew the person she was fighting was not a pro player, but if he had made it here, he was still at least a worthy opponent.

She stood up, as the teleportation spell started working its magic, nodded to Astaroth and smiled at I'die.

"See you soon." She said, as she teleported.

Standing opposite her was a skeleton, wielding a short sword and a shield. He was looking at her with his glowing eye sockets, but seemed unsure.

There was no idle banter or taunting speeches said, this time, from either side. They both just braced and waited for the fight to start.

\*Gong!\*

With the signal, the skeleton started running at Athena, making a weird clacking sound with every footfall. Athena fired arrows at his body, which the skeleton blocked with his buckler shield.

When he was half the distance away, he quickly sped up, his shield braced forward.

Athena recognized this skill, and jumped back twice, before back flipping, her feet landing on the wall, and launching upwards over the charging skeleton.

Mid-flight, she spun her body, pointing her bow at the skeleton, and loosing a volley of attacks. Two of these attacks were not normal arrows, one spinning rapidly, and the other being covered in energy, forming a hammerhead.

All three attacks slammed into the back of the player's head, making him tip over and slam face-first into the wall. The concussive blow from the arrow and the wall stunned the player for a few seconds.

Athena used these seconds to flip in the air, and land safely, before resuming her offensive. She relentlessly fired arrow after arrow, hitting her mark with every one of them.

Although her opponent had significantly more health than her, she made quick work of it, winning her fight in a little under a minute. The crowd in the bleachers was cheering, impressed by the newcomer's agility.

Athena smiled as the last arrow lodged in the skeleton's head, the latter having no chance to attack at all. Athena had kitted him all around the arena, leading him around like a dog on a leash.

When the skeleton vanished in a puff of particles, she jumped up in excitement. She had won her first match in this phase, and it stoked her.

To her, it meant she was pro-player material. And that had been one of her hopes in life.

When she teleported out of the arena, she jumped in I'die's arms, who received her unwillingly, clearly blushing. Astaroth laughed at the scene as he patted Athena's shoulder, congratulating her.

She thanked him, still all smiles. She could barely contain the tears of joy forming at the corner of her eyes.

Astaroth recognized that face, as he had once felt the same joy when he won his first amateur tournament in 'ToB'.

Sadness again hit his heart, as he thought about his parents, that had been the ones cheering for him, and receiving him like I'die had received Athena.

He brushed the sadness away. This was a moment of joy, not melancholy.

The next battles were almost pointless for him to watch, so he started talking with his friends while they went on.

The next round would be much more interesting.

Chapter 116 End Of The First Rounds

\*\*\*Bellemare family residence, Westmount, Montreal\*\*\*

"Honey, I've already told you this a million times! I don't have time to spend with her!"

"How can you even consider yourself her father?! You haven't spent a second with her since Tommy died!"

"Again, I don't have time! I fell behind so much on work, because of Tommy's funeral, the shareholders are hounding me! If I don't catch up, I'll lose the company!"

"Who cares about your stupid company?! Our daughter should be your priority!"

"She's young! She'll get over it with time! Time that I don't have! I have to go now!"

\*Slam!\*

\*soft sobbing\*

"Mother?" A soft girl's voice called out.

\*Sniff\*

"Oh, sweetheart... You heard us, didn't you?" Mrs. Bellemare asked her daughter, her eyes all puffy from crying.

"Yes, mother. Why is dad never home? Does he hate me?" Violette Bellemare asked.

"Oh, darling. Of course not. Your father is just still processing his emotions. Your brother's death was a tragedy for all of us, but it affected your father the most." Mrs. Bellemare said.

"Does he think it's my fault?" Violette asked, tears pooling in her eyes.

"No one thinks it's your fault, sweetheart. You couldn't have done anything in that situation." Mrs. Bellemare said, almost choking on her words.

In the mother's mind, she didn't want to blame her only remaining child for the death of the other. But a small part of her did indeed blame her.

Even if it had been an accident, the fact remained that it was Violette that had insisted they play near the pool. None of this would have happened if they played in the yard.

Now, her son was gone, and her family was falling apart. But she refused to blame her daughter.

What was done, was done. The past couldn't be changed.

Mrs. Bellemare and her daughter sat in the portico, softly sobbing together. They quietly mourned the boy, silently hoping for this to be a nightmare.

Mr. Bellemare came back that night, tired and inebriated. His breath smelled of scotch and cigars, and his clothes were messy.

His wife knew better than to confront him when he was drunk, but she silently resented him. Their marriage was falling apart because he refused to mourn his son, and instead fell into liquor.

Mr. Bellemare went to bed, half-dressed and fully drunk, falling asleep instantly.

The next morning, he woke up groggy, his head thumping and ears ringing. He brushed it off as he headed to the dinner table to eat breakfast.

Their chef had prepared a special plate for him, with food that would help with his hangover. He ate in silence as his wife and daughter held their heads down.

Eventually, Mr. Bellemare broke the silence.

"Violette."

"Yes, father?" The daughter responded, keeping her head low.

"I saw news of the new game that came out recently. New Eden, I think it is called. I will buy you a gaming pod. Play it. It will help you pass time and keep out of trouble." He said, his tone final.

"Yes, father." Violette responded.

After breakfast, they all went about their day, avoiding each other. The pod arrived later that day, and was installed promptly.

Violette had watched a few videos from the game, some of which were live feeds from a tournament currently happening. Although the game was enticing, her heart was still weeping.

Violette wasn't in the mood to play today, so she went to bed early after dinner and slept until the next day.

\*\*\*Back to the tournament\*\*\*

Astaroth was calmly having a conversation with I'die, Athena, and Phoenix, who had eventually come back to sit with them. They were practically ignoring the current fights happening down below.

Of the five bouts left in this round, two happened relatively quickly. The other three were against more cautious and experienced players, which dragged things out.

Two of those three fights lasted a little over five minutes, and the last one lasted well over ten minutes. This gave plenty of time to Astaroth and the gang to discuss their next opponents.

Astaroth had little to say about Killi, since he had already fought him once. As for the others, I'die was ultra nervous, since his next opponent was Phoenix.

Phoenix had only told him to do his best, and she would do the same. Athena had elbowed Phoenix and gave her the stink eye.

Phoenix had then coughed and said she would make it quick, earning an even more vicious glare from the Elven woman. To which Phoenix had raised her shoulders, not knowing what else to say.

Astaroth had watched the exchange silently, trying his best not to laugh. Athena had stomped his foot discreetly, and he had to keep himself from yelping in pain.

The players that weren't far from this group could only watch in envy, as they were nervous wrecks. Anyone would be, in this situation, and they couldn't understand why most of them were so collected.

The only one that was showing normal behaviour was the scrawny Elf Druid. And they could easily relate to him, since they knew who he was fighting next.

Even if everyone here was confident about their strength, they couldn't help but gulp when they remembered the blazing tornado Phoenix had conjured earlier.

That did not look like a level thirty player's spell. It was like she was harnessing powers way above her level.

Athena knew about her opponent, only what she saw from his fight. Which wasn't much, since he won relatively rapidly.

But she had been less attentive to their conversation during his fight, trying to catch any details that could help her. But even though the information was lacking, she still seemed confident.

Their discussion came to an end when the last combat was finished. Chairwoman Constantine's face appeared in the sky again, gathering everyone's attention.

"The first round of this last phase has concluded. All around you are currently the sixteen strongest and most skilled players." Constantine said, smiling warmly.

"The next round will further reduce your numbers to eight players before starting the quarter-finals. I hope all of you that have been holding on to their aces, start using them, as the fighting will only get more intense." She added.

"I hope you are all enjoying yourselves, because the world is enjoying the show. With the popularity the tournament has garnered, some sponsors have chipped in, so more rewards are given."

"With their help, we now have a bigger first prize, and three other prizes, for the semi-finalists and the runner-up. I hope you all give your one hundred percent to attain these prizes."

"So, without further ado, let us start the second round of the final phase!"

Greed struck the players.

'More Prizes!' They all thought.

## Chapter 117 One Oofs, And Two Goofs

Astaroth turned his head expectantly towards Killi. The man was also looking at him. He was smiling.

They both started shining, as they got teleported back into the arena. The two men looked at each other, in anticipation.

\*Gong!\*

Astaroth was the first to dash forward. He melded with White as he did, gaining more speed as he advanced.

Killi started running in a circular motion, trying to deal as much damage as he could before the first clash.

"Oh no, you don't!" Astaroth exclaimed.

He dropped on all fours, the claws on his hands digging into the stone floor, and he launched himself at Killi, taking an interception course.

"What the!" Killi yelled, as a beastly, white torpedo was not coming at him like a jet-propelled missile.

Astaroth pulled out his shield, impacting Killi in the chest with it not a second later. The collision blew the air out of Killi's lungs, blowing him away and launching him into the nearest wall.

He took a lot of damage from the two hits, but not enough to kill him. He jumped out of the rubble, expecting a follow-up attack.

But it didn't come, as Astaroth had not landed on his feet from the collision. He was getting up just as Killi noticed him, dusting off his armor.

"That needs some working on." Astaroth said casually.

Killi burst out in laughter.

"Ahahaha! Kid, you are mad! Very well. I shall get serious too." Killi said.

He put away his longbow, trading it for his two scimitars. Astaroth grinned at the action.

He knew Killi was a very skilled swordsman. He had seen many of his fencing competitions.

So he was expecting a tough battle from here on out. Even though his stats were much higher than Killi's right now, skill was paramount in a duel.

Astaroth forewent taking a weapon and chose to get experience fighting with just his beastly claws. They were weapons of their own, anyway.

Both men lunged at each other, starting a clash of steel and claws that resounded and sent shockwaves through the air. The tension in the arena was palpable, even to the people watching from screens.



Astaroth knew he had only five minutes with this stat advantage, and then he would have to play it safer and pace his attacks. So he made the most out of his current situation.

The more time went by, the more refined his fighting technique became. He wasn't shadowing his opponent this time, since he wasn't wielding blades, but he was learning an entirely new style.

It overjoyed Killi to have a worthy opponent. It had been years since someone clashed against his sword and managed to stay relatively unscathed for so long.

Time ticked away rapidly, as both men were enjoying this confrontation to the maximum. But Astaroth would soon lose his advantage.

He was starting to make headway into dishing some attacks of his own during the exchanges, but it wasn't fast enough. There were only thirty seconds left to his melding, and Killi's health was not going down as fast as he needed.

His last seconds of melding passed without change. When the melding undid itself, he immediately summoned White, sending him after Killi.

Astaroth went for a different technique than the last time he fought him. Instead of trying to pincer him with White, Astaroth started attacking from afar with his shortbow.

He tried all kinds of tricks, combining magic with almost every shot, finding out a multitude of new spells. Some of which were very unsuited for combat, others that were much more.

After expending almost all of White's summon timer, and most of his health too, Killi finally dropped to his knees. Astaroth was thoroughly impressed.

White currently had the stats of a level twenty-five zone boss. And yet, Killi had withstood his and Astaroth's onslaught for almost ten minutes.

Plus, given more time, he would have felled the wolf. That was no small feat.

Astaroth walked to Killi, pulling out his great axe for the final blow. Killi looked him in the eyes while he did.

"You have potential, kid. Don't turn out like the angry garden dwarf in the stands. You can do better. You can be better." He said, lowering his head.

Astaroth lifted his axe up high.

"I thank you for the high praise. I will try to live up to it." He replied, before swinging his axe down.

Killi's body turned to pixels, reappearing in the arena, but on the other side from the rest of the players.

'Sweet. I get to watch.' he thought, chuckling.

Astaroth was teleported out, reappearing near his friends, and saw Killi on the opposite side. He nodded his head once to the man before sitting down.

The next combat was between Blue Peacock, and a player that had made it here by a mix of skill and sheer luck. She made quick work of him, using him as target practice, more than an actual opponent.

It only took her 2 minutes to kill him, seeing as his health pool was large, and she refused to use any skill. The man tried the best he could, but did not even land one attack on her.

She was too elusive for the likes of him. After dying a dog's death, he reappeared on the other side, his shoulders drooped and his head slung low.

Astaroth almost had pity for him. But this was the way of the powerful.

The next ones up were Phoenix and I'die. Phoenix clapped the latter's shoulder, smiling at him, as they both disappeared from the bleachers.

When the gong rang to signal the start of combat, I'die froze, as Phoenix immediately started with her power move. The flame tornado engulfed the arena, vaporizing the poor elf, and sending him directly to the loser's side.

Athena punched Phoenix's shoulder when she reappeared, giving her an earful about 'being nice' and 'Giving the kid a chance'. Phoenix took the scolding with a wry smile, saying nothing back.

Astaroth once again watched from the sidelines, chuckling to himself.

'At least it's not me.' He thought.

Chapter 118 A Good Thrashing

Half of the second-round fights were done with four of the second-round fights already complete. The next duo to go toe-to-toe would be Khalor and Azamus.

Azamus was shaking with anticipation. His eyes were bloodshot red, his mouth dry and his breathing ragged. The people around him felt like they were looking at a wild animal.

He focused on finding the most humiliating way to beat Khalor to the ground. He wanted to make this a lesson for all to see.

That he was still number one. That level meant nothing before his unbeatable skill.

Khalor could feel the oozing hatred and killing intent washing off of Azamus, but it only made him laugh internally. To him, Azamus was a raging child, throwing a tantrum.

Both men teleported from the stands to the arena, Azamus taking out his rifle already. Khalor stood still, simply smiling.

The smile irked Azamus to no end, as his heart beat faster and harder.

The only thought in his mind was 'Kill!'.

He couldn't see the people in the stands. Hell, he could barely see the surrounding arena at all.

He locked his gaze on his opponent, his eyes almost drying out from not blinking. In the meantime, Khalor did not even budge.

Azamus was already pointing his rifle at him, steadily aimed at his head, and he remained stationary. His smile never left his lips.

Astaroth, from the bleachers, knew Khalor was only taunting Azamus. He made himself wide open, leaving his head unprotected so that Azamus would want to fire there directly.

Most likely, Khalor was already ready to intercept the shot, and was already planning how the rest of the combat would go.

'The best way to predict a wild animal is to play along with its instincts,' Astaroth thought.

\*Gong!\*

\*Bang!\*

\*Ting!\*

Almost instantly, as the gong rang, Azamus fired his rifle, the bullet in a direct course to his enemy's head. But it didn't make it to the target.

A large halberd head intercepted the bullet, before it could reach Khalor's head. At the end of that halberd, a tall knight in plated armor, with dark purple eyes.

The knight's eyes were locked on the gnome that had attacked its master. Azamus was currently feeling the same intensity from the knight's gaze that Khalor was feeling from his own.

The knight spun its halberd like a windmill, slamming the butt onto the stone floor. Another shadow appeared out of Khalor's back at that moment.

A large two-headed raven flew out, floating behind Khalor, hovering overhead. Khalor was still smiling with cockiness.

"For you, I will not even use all my undead. Only these two will suffice," Khalor said, pointing to the two undead.

"Are you mocking me?!" Azamus growled.

"Why yes, I most certainly am. Call it a little payback," Khalor replied, his grin widening.

As he finished saying that, both the knight and the raven lunged at Azamus, forcing the latter into a backward run. The arena wall was soon to his back, so he had to choose a direction to go.

But his options were being cut short, as the knight and the raven split to each side, trying to pincer him. The only open path was to Khalor, but that wouldn't be wise of him, since Khalor was a melee player.

But his window to move was shortening by the second, so he dove forward anyway. As he did, he pulled out his automatic rifles, firing a full salvo at Khalor.

The undead man did not move or dodge, simply taking what few bullets hit him, still smiling. Azamus was becoming more enraged with every second that passed.

He pulled out grenades, throwing them at Khalor, but Khalor knocked them aside with his bident, sending them at the wall before they blew up.

Suddenly, a strike from behind knocked him to the floor. The knight was already upon him.

He thought dashing forward had given him time, but it seems the knight had not been going full speed. He easily caught up to Azamus and slammed the side of his halberd on his back.

The knight followed his attack by grabbing the gnome from the back of his leather armor and swinging him high up in the air. Awaiting him up there were a two-headed raven's talons.

The talons grabbed at his shoulders, locking him in their grip, as the raven flew toward the sky. It flew higher and higher, as Azamus flailed about, shooting at the bird's underside, trying to force it to drop him.

It was all for nought. The higher he flew up, the less it was a good idea to have the raven drop him.

Azamus gulped, as he knew what would come next. The raven eventually stopped flying upward and dove back down.

The speed it was gaining was dangerous on its own for an impact, but Azamus knew the moment he got caught it was already too late.

He cursed in his mind, vowing over and over to find this player and kill him. And not just in the game.

He would end this man's life with his own hands, even if it was the last thing he did!

After diving back down for a few seconds, the raven opened its talons as it beat its wings to stop its descent.

Azamus had nothing to break his fall except for the arena floor. So he yelled in fury as he crashed into the ground, turning into a paste and then particles.

Khalor looked at the crater the gnome left behind in satisfaction. He knew he had just taunted a very rich person into very dangerous thoughts. But he was confident no one would find him.

He was aware that the chairwoman Constantine was probably searching for him already. But he had made preparations so he could be untraceable.

Khalor teleported out of the arena and reappeared on the winner's side of the stands. On the other side, an angry gnome was shouting, before he disappeared from the stands.

'Hah! He disconnected. Now he's angry. Good.' Khalor thought, his grin never subsiding.

This had been his plan all along, after all.

## Chapter 119 Trick Shots

Athena watched on in half horror as the gnome plummeted from the sky, only to transform into a gut pancake. She squirmed a little after the impact, her stomach lightly churning, but she kept cool.

It was her turn next, so she changed her mindset to one of battle, as she got ready to face her opponent. When the teleport brought her to the arena, she pulled out her bow.

Her adversary this time was a Human Mage, that seemed to specialize in wind magic, from the spells he had been casting since the start. This would bum her a bit, since he could erect a wind wall, to block her arrows.

She would have to be creative about her attacks to make sure they all reached their target. Not that she worried.

Athena had much experience with bows. Her mind wandered to memories of her youth.

Hours spent down at the shooting range. Perfecting her aim.

She had seen more of her targets than her friends in those years. All of it to satisfy her parent's feeble pride.

She had never wanted to focus on archery, but since she had a talent for it, her parents had forced her down that path. The days spent training and others in competitions.

She had learned so many firing techniques she could shoot her bow in most conditions and still hit the bullseye. Her aim had been praised so many times.

That was, until she lost her first competition. From then on, her parents ridiculed her.

Pointing out how she had missed such an easy shot for her skills. And how she had lost to someone younger and less experienced than her.

The day that happened, she had been under intense stress, and her mind had wandered off while she was aiming, missing the target entirely.

Athena shook her head, washing away the bitter memories. That was the reason she had started playing New Eden.

Her parents had stopped forcing her into competitions after that, so it had freed her time up quite a lot. That's when she discovered her love for video games.

When she found this new game coming out, she begged her parents to buy her a headset. They had complied, wanting to occupy her mind.

She had been moping around a lot before that, and it irked them. They were so disappointed with her.

But this had led her to New Eden. And in this game, she made peace with archery once again.

She went on adventures, healing her wounded heart. She made friends, curing her loneliness.

And with this competition, she might make her parents proud of her again. That was what she hoped for.

\*Gong!\*

The sound of the gong snapped her thoughts back to the present. She nocked an arrow on her string, sliding it slightly towards the top.

When she pointed her bow at the player across from her, the mage lifted his hand, conjuring a wall of wind. Athena loosed her arrow.

When the arrow left the bowstring, it curved over to the right, before going around the wall and into the mage's shoulder. Athena was happy to hit her target with tricks she had learned, but her aim was off.

She had aimed at his throat. Her next arrows were all shot in a trick shot fashion, keeping the mage on his toes. He never knew in which direction the arrows would come, so he hesitated to fire spells at his opponent.

This hesitation allowed Athena to consecutively fire at him, not allowing him a moment's respite. The poor guy started panicking after ten arrows had pierced his body.

He stopped defending and started launching wind blades at Athena, but it was too little, too late. His health was already at a dangerous threshold, and Athena used a piercing shot to fire through the wind wall.

The arrow spun at incredible speeds, as it bore through the wind wall, and into the player's head. He dropped dead with a hole from one side to the other of his forehead.

I'die was cheering loudly, from the loser's side, clapping and shouting, as Athena was teleported back to the stands. When she appeared there, she dropped to her seat, sweat pouring from her forehead.

She hadn't practiced these trick shots in a long time, and having to fire all her arrows in such a fashion required a lot of calculations. The height of the nock on her string, the angle of her bow, and how far to pull the string.

All those calculations had to be done quickly, lest her opponent bank on her pauses to throw some magic around. Luckily for her, she hadn't lost her touch.

Astaroth patted her shoulder, smiling at her.

"Nice shooting in there. I take it you have a lot of experience with bows?" He said.

"Ahh. Yes, I do. Used to be in competitions. It's all in the past though," she responded, looking at her shaking hands.

She knew if she had missed any of those arrows, the mage player against her would have shredded her to pieces. The only wind blade he had thrown had taken close to a quarter of her health pool.

Athena was happy she had won, but now another problem arose. Her next opponent.

She would face Khalor next, and his undead summons terrified her. She had never been a fan of scary movies, and the thought of being swarmed by zombies sent shivers down her spine.

She turned her head slightly, taking a peek at the man, and he was looking at her.

"Eek!" she yelped out.

Khalor chuckled at her reaction and nodded at her.

He wasn't unaware of how she had been looking at him, and he understood his appearance most likely scared her. Of course, that changed nothing to what would happen.

He needed to win the tournament, so he would still take her down. But he was thinking of quick ways to do so, so he didn't mentally scar her for life.

After all, she still had a role to play in what was to come. They all did.

His mind drifted off to his memories, reliving events of horror untold. Losing friends and loved ones.

His face became sombre.

'Never again,' he said in his mind.

Chapter 120 Foregone Timeline

\*\*\*Somewhere on Earth, three years after the release of New Eden, in a timeline that no longer exists\*\*\*

"Xavier, can you, or can you not cast that spell?" A tall man asked.

"I think I can. But if I do, they will know where we are. There is only one try at this." Xavier replied.

"It no longer matters. They will find us eventually. It's only a matter of time. Cast the spell," the tall man said, his tone final.

"Fine. But I can not be disturbed in the least. It could mess up the spell," Xavier said, exhaling.

"I will make sure you are left alone," the tall man said, leaving the room.

Xavier then started grabbing items off shelves frantically. He mixed a few potions together before forming a pattern on the ground with the liquid.

He then placed items in certain spots of the pattern that was starting to light up in a bright blue light. The last item, he deposited in the center of his glyph like pattern.

This item belonged to the tall man. It was supposed to be the catalyst to send him back.

This was their last hope. The war was lost, and humanity was on the brink of extinction.

As he placed the last item, a siren started blaring all around him.

"They're here!" Xavier gasped.

He quickly got into position and started chanting in a language unknown to most. It was Elvish.

The tall man came back running to this room, blood on his armor.

"Are you casting the spell?!" He asked frantically.

"I just started chanting, don't disturb me!" Xavier replied, going back to his chant.

"Hurry up! We can't hold them back for long!" The tall man exclaimed.

He ran back out, leaving the door slightly ajar. From the opening, Xavier could hear the sounds of battle.

Swords clashing, the screaming of people dying, mixed in with wails of inhuman creatures. Xavier chanted as fast as he could.

The more he did, the brighter the light became. Through that thick, bright light, Xavier failed to notice a shadow slipping into the room.

He finished chanting, and a moment later, a sword pierced through him from the back. The blade swiftly slipped back out of his body as he dropped to his knees, his breath short and painful.

"It's too late, human. We have won. There is nothing you can do about it," came a raspy voice.

Then it walked in front of him. A slim, red, humanoid figure with horns to the side of its head.

In its hand, a bloody sword. Xavier's eyes went wide as he recognized the creature.

"Belenos. You came here yourself. What an honor." Xavier said, coughing out blood.

The creature walked to the glowing glyph on the ground and destroyed the item in the center with a rapid sword slash. He then turned back to the man.

"With no item to act as a catalyst, your spell will flicker out. Just like your life. I hope to see you back in hell, human," Belenos said, cackling maniacally as he left the room.

Xavier's eyes were slowly becoming heavy as his life slipped away from him. He crawled to the glyph.

He painfully pulled something out of the pocket of his robe. He smiled gently, a single tear forming in his eye.

In his hand was a necklace in the shape of an hourglass. It was made of fine aluminium and welded together to form the shape.

"I'm sorry, friend, I must disturb your rest. I hope you can do the right thing for humanity," Xavier said, as he dropped the necklace in the center of the glyph.

The last thing he saw, as he drew his final breath, was the spell glyph flash in a bright white color, before the necklace vanished.

The tear rolled out of his eye as they lost their luster.

\*\*\*Back to the present timeline, in the stands of the arena\*\*\*

Khalor was still lost in his terrible memories, clutching a necklace in his hands. His mind kept replaying one particular memory for him.

It was a memory no one should have, since it was one of death. In this memory, demons chased Khalor, with his friends running with him, falling one by one.

He was the last one to fall, crying as he ran, before receiving a spear through the back. He died a coward's death, running for his life, a spear through his back.

This did not sit well for him. He refused to let this happen again.

It was the reason his attitude had changed so much. Experiencing death does not leave one's psyche unscathed.

Losing all his friends and all his loved ones had left him hollow. It locked his emotions behind a terror of losing everything again.



Khalor snapped out of his thoughts, just as the last combat of round two was concluding. He looked up at the current graph to see who had won the one he missed, and was disappointed.

'The butterfly effect has let weaklings into the last phase. Unacceptable,' He thought, gritting his teeth.

To him, this tournament was the start of the forging process, from which would emerge humanity's strongest weapons. The Paragons.

Humanity's hope, and only chance of winning the war. He had to make sure no one unworthy made the cut.

That was why he had pissed off one of the strongest players in this game. He was unworthy.

That gnome had brought about many disasters, and pain to many people, in his timeline. He wouldn't let the same happen again here.

Khalor kept his eyes to the sky, waiting for the chairwoman's deceiving face to appear. And it did not take long.

"Congratulations to our eight quarter-finalists. This round was filled with many unexpected turnarounds, and adrenaline-inducing situations!" Constantine said.

"The next round will be even more exciting and fulfilling, as we get closer to having our final winner. May you all keep giving your all to this in the hopes of achieving victory!" She added.

Khalor clicked his tongue at her words. In his mind, he was cursing her.

'You knew. You knew, and you said nothing until it was too late.' he growled, mentally.