

New Eden 131

Chapter 131 Closing Ceremony

Khalor watched as Astaroth's body dissipated.

"What a waste of time." He said.

He then raised his head to the sky, waiting for something.

A moment after he raised his head, a figure appeared.

"So you were waiting for me. How did you know I would come?" The person asked.

"I think we have already established that I know of many things, Ms. Levesque. Let us skip this useless small talk, shall we?" Khalor said, his gaze cold as the ice of the north pole.

"Very well, Mr. Magnus. Shall we get straight to business, then?" The chairwoman asked.

"I am not interested in fighting you, if that is what you meant. What I truly want is an explanation," Khalor flatly replied.

Constantine seemed almost disappointed for a moment, but quickly regained her composure. Even if she wanted to fight Khalor oh so badly, she was not here for that right now.

"What explanation, pray tell, do you think I owe you?" she asked Khalor.

"Why are you keeping the information? This could save lives. Why are you so adamant about keeping it from the public?" Khalor asked.

Constantine raised a brow at the question.

'Again something he shouldn't know,' she thought.

"I do not know what information you speak of, young man," Constantine said, feigning ignorance.

"Constantine. Don't lie to me." Khalor said, showing slight signs of anger.

"Oh? Are we on a first-name basis now? Very well, David. I'm holding information because mass panic would only make things worse. Do you not agree?" She answered, emphasizing his name.

She was trying to show him she could also learn things about him. But Khalor was unaffected by her taunts.

He already guessed she had discovered many things about him from his past. But he cared little about his past.

Only the future mattered.

"You overestimate the effectiveness of your plan, Constantine. Many people will die at this pace. Is that what you wish?" Khalor asked her.

"Even if you think you know everything, young man, you are wrong. My plan will work as I intended it to. They promised me." Constantine replied, trying to brush off his comment.

"They are lying. Millions will die. That blood will be on your hands. Do not wait until it is too late to reveal the truth. This time, make the right choice." Khalor said.

"Now, be kind, and send the money for the prize to this account number," he added, sending her a private message.

He then vanished.

"Tch. He disconnected." Constantine spat out discontent.

She had been running tracking software on him while they were talking. But this was not enough time for the software to pinpoint his location.

It only gave her a country and state, which she could have already guessed by his accent. It was far from enough to help find him.

At best, it would speed up the search, but not enough for it to help much. With the information David Magnus seemed to possess, he was a threat to her plans.

Constantine disconnected too, since staying in the game no longer had value. Her time would be better spent in the real world.

After disconnecting, she called her employees so they could launch the live stream back up, and the players reconnected. It was time to wrap up this tournament.

The first thing to happen was the players from the final phase reconnecting. They started reappearing one by one, and half a minute later, all of them were back.

They were no longer all floating in the air though, as they were back in the previous arena, where all had started. Most players present were grumbling at the interruption.

No one knew who had won, since the graph had not been updated. Only one of the two finalists reappeared too.

Astaroth didn't bother looking around, since he had still been connected during the conversation between Khalor and Constantine. Which was why he was currently eyeing her with suspicion.

The next thing to happen was the live stream going back online. Once Constantine had the green light, she appeared on a screen in the sky again.

She delivered a grand closing speech, congratulating all the players that made it this far, and those who hadn't. She then plugged in the fact that pods were still available for purchase, but being built as fast as they could.

She mainly addressed this to the masses, as most of the players in the tournament already owned a pod. And those that didn't would promptly buy one after disconnecting.

Constantine then apologized for the live stream going down during the final, saying this was a technical error, and that they would have it fixed for the next event.

She kept out the part where the players present had also been disconnected, lest people become suspicious of foul play.

Then she called up the semi-finalist, each in turn, giving them their reward, in the form of a bank transfer of half a million dollars. Smiles could be seen on their faces, while jealousy spread among the other contestants.

She also congratulated each one personally, telling them how proud she was of their outstanding performances. They thanked her before giving their place to the next reward receiver.

Astaroth was called up next, heading toward the sky, as the game made him float automatically. This was Constantine's way of flaunting her stars to the public.

Her showmanship skills might have paled, compared to music stars or actors, but she had nothing to envy of other presenters.

Astaroth received his bank transfer, his being of a million dollars, without too much emotional outburst. His mind was too busy processing his conversation with Khalor and what had transpired after his defeat.

He was still looking at Constantine wearily, but tried to hide it as best he could. It seemed to be sufficient, as no one asked questions.

And finally, Constantine congratulated Khalor, the grand winner. She excused him to the other players and the public, stating that he had somewhere urgent to be and couldn't be present for the closing.

After that, she held another speech about the importance of these competitions for the players, and for the spectators. She also assured them there would be another one a year from now.

She set the anticipation for the future of the game high and ended the ceremony with fireworks. It was a beautiful display for the people present and the online watchers.

But one person wasn't enjoying it much, and disconnected when the fireworks started.

Alexander's eyes opened up in his pod and he looked troubled.

'What will happen now?' He thought, his mind still a mess.

Chapter 132 Looking To The Future

Alexander lay in his gaming pod for a while, pondering what his next step should be. If the end was coming, and it was inevitable, as Khalor said, or should he call him David?

What should he be doing next? He had never been in an end of the world.

What does one do to prepare for that? Should he go to the market and buy out all the toilet paper?

Or should he stock up on food? Where were the guides to surviving an apocalypse when you needed them?

He eventually got up from his pod, nature calling on him. He went to the bathroom and used that time to think some more.

After doing his business, he cleaned himself up a little and took a shower. The hot water on his head cleared up his thoughts a bit and let him think more rationally.

'I can't just go around saying the end is coming. They would slam me in a nuthouse. But I need to do something,' he thought, letting the water dribble over his head and shoulders.

With the water falling over him, his mind began churning out plan after plan, setting an outline for what to do in the next three years.

If what he had heard from the conversation between Constantine and David was true, then that was the time he had to prepare. The next thing he decided was to start physical training outside the game.

If the end was coming to this world, then being the strongest in the game wouldn't be half as useful as being fit out of it. He thought of plan after plan until he ran out of hot water.

The cold water on his body brought him back to reality, and he closed the shower. His eyes were clear as the ocean, and his mind was now serene, all traces of worry and panic from earlier now gone.

When he got out of the shower, he picked up his phone, wanting to check the time. He saw he had a message on it.

The messenger was a blocked number, and he could guess who it came from. When he opened it, his face contorted into an awkward smile.

'His ability to know what comes next is creepy,' Alexander thought.

The message contained a brief text message, followed by a lot of information.

The text message said only this.

'Whatever you decide to do next, you will need funds. The coming years will give you time to build capital on your own, but it won't be enough.'

'To help you, I put here some companies you can invest in that will rise in the stock market in the next few months, if you want rapid cash. The next list is one of the companies with slower rises, but better income over the next two years.'

'Put some money on both fronts, as you will need it to complete any plan you get. We may not think the same way, but I know you won't stay idle. Good luck.'

Followed after that by two lists. One of company names with percentile numbers next to it, and a limit on how much time to leave money in them.

The next was filled with well-established companies, and percentile numbers stretched over the next two years. This was all very detailed information that would make any stockbroker crazy.

Alexander smiled.

The next thing he did was check his bank account. Lo-and-behold, he was richer by a million dollars.

He contacted his bank, asking for an appointment with an investment agent, to which the bank gladly obliged. A new millionaire would surely invest a lot of their new money, and that made him a gold mine to them.

They gave him an appointment the same day, and he invested most of the money he had made into many companies, in batches of a hundred thousand dollars.

He kept one such sum of money for himself, so he could live the next few months without depending on dividends.

The investment agent tried to point him to other companies than the ones he wanted to invest in, but Alexander adamantly refused.

After all this, he walked to a nearby gym. His next step was to set himself up with a personal trainer and a schedule to respect.

This was going to be tedious for him, since he had never worked out a day in his life, but it was necessary.

He explained what kind of fitness he was looking for to the trainer, which looked at him weirdly, when he mentioned training for the end of the world, but he complied anyway.

Following that, he chose to treat himself to a delightful meal, since it had been a very long time since he enjoyed good food. He called in a reservation at a pleasant restaurant, but realized he was making a mistake.

He looked at his reflection in a shop window, and saw that he was dressed like a pauper.

'I can't go to a chic restaurant dressed like this,' he thought.

So he pulled out his phone and looked for a nearby classy clothes boutique. It didn't take him long to reach it, since he lived in downtown Montreal.

He barely browsed around before a clerk came to him, looking at him haughtily. And after an awkward conversation, where Alexander had to explain what he was looking for and insist he had the means to pay, the clerk finally served him.

The rest of his evening went smoothly. He enjoyed his scrumptious meal before going back home.

Once there, he looked at himself in a mirror, and for a split second, he thought he could see his character looking back at him. The illusion rapidly dispelled when he blinked.

Alexander went to bed early that night, since he would start having big days from tomorrow on. With playing the game at the center of his day, and all the other activities after, he would become quite busy.

As he lay in bed, looking at his ceiling, a single thought crossed his mind.

'I can't let whatever happened in that vision happen again. I must be ready!'

And that was all he could think of, as he fell asleep.

Chapter 133 New Allies

Inside New Eden

In a clearing not too far from Astaroth's starting village, moonlight shining bright, were four figures. They were currently running around the clearing, having a spar.

Two of them were humanoids, almost blending in the night, while the other two were canine. No lethal strike was ever made from any of them, as they seemed to be training.

"Violette! Keep focus! I see water dripping." came Astaroth's voice, sounding like a drill sergeant.

"Yes, teacher!" The other player replied.

This other player was called Violette. She was a young girl that had only recently started playing the game.

She had chosen the Ash Elf race because one player in the tournament had made a deep impression on her. And by maybe God's will, she had ended up in the same village as said player.

After fumbling around for a while, trying to figure out what to do, she eventually tried leaving the village. It was what normal players did when starting games, or so she had read online.

Violette didn't even know she was making a mistake, and luckily for her, someone stopped her. A gruff hand had landed on her shoulder just as she was walking across the barrier, protecting the entrance.

"Where do you think you are going, girly?" The deep voice had asked her.

Violette had practically turned into stone. The voice was so similar to her father's, her instinctual reaction was to apologize.

Only after apologizing for the third time did she raise her head. That's when she noticed the man wasn't her father.

The tall, well-built man before her was none other than Chris Pentalogius. He frowned when she looked at him.

"Hmm? I don't recognize your face. Are you new here?" Chris had asked her.

After explaining her situation to the man, he laughed and brought her back inside the village. He explained to the girl that outside the barrier was no place for a kid to wander.

They had forced Violette to stay in the village all day before she met someone willing to take her out. And that person had been Astaroth, the player she had seen in the tournament streams.

This was now almost a month later, and the girl might have not grown in size, but she definitely had grown in power. Astaroth had been slowly training her, every day showing her new things.

He also brought her on his hunts, making sure they were in a party together, so she could benefit from his kills. In a month, she had made it over level thirty, and was now almost reaching the mainstream level ranges.

Violette had been blessed with an amazing affinity for water magic, much to her displeasure. And so, Astaroth had been training her in the arts of combat magic.

He would bring her out of the village to hunt, monitoring her at all times, only making sure she didn't get killed. Her growth had been extremely rapid, considering she was still a child.

This went to show how kids had the highest adaptability speed among humans. She had also been learning how to control more than one spell simultaneously, trying to emulate a mage she had seen in the tournament.

Astaroth recognized the attempt, and had some thoughts about the woman that had used that in the tournament.

'I wonder how they are all doing,' he thought, keeping up his attacks on her, trying to break her focus.

Many times, her concentration would break. But that was what training was for.

Right now, Violette was keeping up a disk of water in the air while fighting with Astaroth simultaneously. The disk was floating slowly, amplifying the moonlight under it, like a magnifying glass.

And right under that concentrated beam of moonlight, a small ethereal object was floating. It was an egg.

Cracks covered the egg, and it would occasionally shake lightly. Astaroth monitored it at all times, even while he fought off the girl shooting spells at him.

He had gotten much better at splitting his focus himself in the last month, and most of the time, it was like two brains were thinking in parallel inside his skull. This had been Aberon's idea.

The egg suddenly started shaking more rapidly. Astaroth swatted aside an incoming spell before lifting his hand in a stop motion.

"Let's take a break. It's almost time," he said to Violette.

Violette then snapped her head toward the egg, as a bright smile illuminated her face.

"It's hatching! I can't wait to see what's inside!" She screamed, gushing.

She looked like she had just been promised a puppy. Astaroth chuckled at the reaction.

He wasn't much better, albeit he contained his excitement inside himself. It had been a month since he used melding with the entity within that egg.

Since then, he had already chosen a name for her, because it was a she, as the creature had abundantly made clear through thought. He was naming her Luna.

Yes, that might be very unoriginal, considering she was feeding on moonlight, but she had reacted the most to that name. Hence, he called her that.

The egg was shaking faster and faster by the second, now.

A few seconds later, it stopped shaking entirely. And then, two holes appeared in it.

From these holes, two little stubs were poking. The stubs retracted inside, before another impact on the inside of the egg broke the top of the shell.

A small head popped up from the orifice. It was a fawn, with lustrous grey and white fur.

Her eyes were like milky white mirrors, reflecting the moonlight on them. Above the fawn's head, a small white bead was floating in place.

When the fawn moved its head, the bead followed the movement. Astaroth found it adorable, but not as much as Violette, who was almost crying in joy.

"Welcome to the world, Luna," Astaroth said, walking forward, and picking the small creature from the egg.

Squee! *Squee!*

"Awwnnnn!" Violette gushed, hearing the fawn's small bleats.

Right as the fawn bleated, the moon itself pulsed. This startled Violette.

"What was that?" She asked, slightly scared that a beast would lunge at them.

"That was a blessing. From Luna's mother, or progenitor, I should say," Astaroth responded.

"It was a welcome to the world for our new little friend." He added, looking up at the moon with gratitude.

This fawn would someday be one of his most treasured and strong ally.

Chapter 134 Lifestyle Changes

Astaroth and Violette stayed in the clearing for a few more hours, enjoying the sight of the newly born fawn stumbling around. Astaroth was using his summoning spell repeatedly, just to keep it present.

He wanted the fawn to get used to the outside world, since he hadn't lived a life like White had. So, experiencing it firsthand was best.

The sun soon started rising on the horizon to the east. That's when Astaroth realized what time it was.

"I believe we have overstayed our gaming time. Let's head back to the village," he said to Violette.

The young girl was slightly pouting at the idea that she had to stop playing with the baby deer. When Astaroth unsummoned Luna, she sighed heavily.

But she knew Astaroth was right. They both had matters to attend to in the real world.

A lot of things happened in the month after the tournament. The day after it concluded, the game went offline for several hours as it launched an update.

Much to many players' disarray, the game time had been set from a two-to-one, back down to a one-to-one time ratio.

For many players, that meant a drastic change in gaming time and schedule. Not only would they level up slower because of it, but they also lost much of their available free time to it.

It also meant a much steeper cost of operation for the gaming pod, to those that had one. Fortunately, Evo-Gaming started offering a subscription for IV bags, at a much lesser price than buying them privately.

This was another plan of theirs to milk their players as much as possible. Many people complained at first, but it tapered down after a week or so.

Astaroth had been one of the first to subscribe to the IV plan, since he intended to keep playing with his pod. If he could save money from it, he didn't care who benefitted.

He also switched his gaming schedule to during the night, so he could stay busy during the day. That had affected his levelling speed, since he now played a bit less than before, but he didn't care.

He had many pressing issues in the real world, for now, to worry about his levelling speed. After reaching the village, both he and Violette bade farewell, and went to their alcoves to disconnect.

Alexander woke up in his pod and went to take a shower. He checked his phone for messages and had none, so he ate breakfast and went about his day.

David had been sending him periodic updates on events to come that he needed to watch out for. One such event had been the crash of almost all other games that were currently in use.

All of them got massive bugs that started appearing, all of a sudden, making most of them unplayable. A lot of players from those games had at first blamed Evo-Gaming, saying it was a scheme to force them to play their game.

David had told him that Evo-Gaming was not responsible, and to keep playing the game. Some whiplash had happened to New Eden because of the accusations, but Alexander paid them no mind.

After his shower, Alexander watched the news for a few minutes, not finding anything strange or worth noting. He then got dressed in sports clothes.

One could see from his body shape that the training was already paying off. Muscle was starting to show through his skin, and what little fat he had around his stomach was all gone.

It had impressed his personal trainer, and he had praised him on his dedication, stating that most people that started such a harsh training regimen usually gave up after a week or two.

Alexander had laughed it off, trying not to show the man any worry. He wasn't going to tell him that this was necessary for the future just yet.

A time would come when he would start warning people, but David kept telling him to wait. He always said the time was coming soon, but was never concise about it.

His trainer had offered him an extra exercise to add to his regimen after the second week. One that could be useful to his 'End of the world' training, he said, chuckling every time.

Alexander had asked what it was, and the man had answered 'boxing'. He had hesitated a bit at first, since he wasn't much of a fighter.

But then he remembered a certain day in an alley, and that he killed monsters for hours on end almost every day now. So he said yes to the boxing lessons.

Of course, he wasn't learning much at first, since he had never fought before. The basics were all he had learned in the past two weeks.

But anything was better than nothing. And yet, little did he know, these lessons were also helping him in-game.

His combat posture had slowly fine-tuned in the game and on the ring, making him steadier on his feet. It had also slowly sharpened his reflexes, even if only by a small margin.

His trainer, Clark, had told him after a session that boxing was something that could be used in everyday life, even when not fighting. It sharpened a lot of senses, and built up muscles less used in the body, giving better overall physical exertion.

Alexander had laughed at the thought at first, but he was slowly seeing a difference in his day-to-day activities. His posture was also getting better.

He had always been hunched because of all the time spent on a computer. But now, his shoulders were squaring up, and his back was straightening out.

He originally cared little, since it only made him less sore over time, but he noticed another difference. His new posture was attracting eyes.

He was building up mass, and with his posture becoming better, he looked bigger and taller than before. The women living in his apartment complex didn't fail to notice, as he got more and more undesired stares.

'I need to move out of here,' He had thought one day, after a girl from across the hall had almost blocked him from entering his own home.

His apartment building wasn't a bad one, but it wasn't a good one either. And since he had started living better, getting nicer clothes, taking care of himself, and cooking actual food, people started noticing.

And most times, a better quality of life was associated with more money. And the single women in this building were now acting like seagulls over a fast-food parking lot.

Today was no different, only getting worse. A man had even confronted him, because his wife was staring at him too much.

Alexander decided that day he was going to move.

'Tomorrow, I will call an agency. I need better lodgings.'

Chapter 135 Familiar Scene

After locking the door behind himself, Alexander unpacked the groceries he had bought. He had watched quite a few videos on the internet to learn some very basic recipes.

And tonight, he was trying a new one out. He was making himself his own spaghetti sauce.

He wasn't confident in making the pasta yet, so he used some store-bought ones. But he had seen a nice recipe for the sauce that looked simple enough for him, and wanted to try his hand at it.

Two hours, and many cooking dishes dirty later, he was done. He set himself up to eat, spinning a large amount of pasta on his plate, before saucing them with a large ladle.

Just as he was about to eat, he heard a knock on his door. Alexander sighed heavily, hoping it wasn't one of his annoying neighbour ladies.

He put his fork down before getting up. Since the person was at the door knocking, he couldn't look through the intercom camera to see who it was.

So he walked straight to the door, putting his eye on the peephole. Strangely, he couldn't see the other side of the door. The peephole was completely black.

"Who is this?" he asked through the door.

"It's... It's me, Frank, the janitor. Your downstairs neighbours are complaining about water in their ceiling. I think you might have a burst pipe," the man on the other side said.

Alexander recognized the old man's voice, so he started unlocking the door. As soon as he unlocked the last safety, and opened the door, it violently flew open, striking him in the face on the way.

Paf!

Alexander fell backwards, his nose bleeding. A big man in a suit was in a sidekick position at the entrance of his apartment.

His eyes narrowed to slits as he recognized the big man. It was one of the two goons that had beat him up in an alley, almost two months ago.

Alexander rolled backwards, getting back to his feet, and putting his arms up in defence.

"You! What do you want?!" he asked, seething with anger.

The man lowered his leg, coming into the apartment slowly, immediately followed by his friend. That's when Alex saw Frank in the corridor.

The poor old man had a gun to his head, and at the other end of that gun, the tall skinny man. Funnily enough, he looked exactly as he did in the illusion magic produced by Aberon.

He was tall and slim, black hair slicked back into a tight ponytail. He was wearing an expensive-looking branded butler suit and black gloves.

The butler was handing a stack of money to Frank, who was sweating bullets.

"Tell anyone we were here, and I will come back for you. Capisce?" he asked the janitor.

Frank nodded his head frantically, not uttering a sound, before taking off running. But not before giving an apologetic gaze to Alexander.

Alex wasn't mad at the man, though. His past self would have done the same thing, if only to preserve his life.

The two goons were now standing in front of him, a few feet away, making sure they blocked the way to the door. The butler entered the apartment and closed the door behind him.

After closing it, he locked all the locks back up, just so Alexander couldn't flee if he gave his two boys the slip. He then turned around to look at the apartment.

"What a shit hole," he said, before walking around his men.

"Should we bang him up a bit before asking him questions, boss?" one goon asked.

"I don't think it will be necessary. You'll answer my questions. Right?" the butler asked, taping the side of his gun on the dinner table.

Alex was in a tough spot right now, and he knew it. But he was strangely calm.

His arms were still raised before him, in case one goon attacked him, but there was no fear in his gaze. Like the situation was still in his control.

'I'm not letting this go like last time.' was the only thought in his mind right now.

"What do you want with me? And how did you find where I live?" Alex asked his intruders.

"Finding a rat like you wasn't that hard," the butler answered, a snide smile forming on his lips.

"As for what I want, well, that is a simple answer. I want the money you won in the tournament, Player Astaroth." the man then added.

His last words almost threw Alexander off.

'How does he know who I am?' he was wondering.

"Now, before you wander into your thoughts too much, finding that out was simple. We were already running your face through facial recognition to find you, and we got a hit from an unexpected place. New Eden." the butler started explaining.

"And since we already wanted to find you, finding out your name and address through hackers was simple once we had your gamer name."

"And seeing as you still live in this... dump, I can guess you haven't spent much of the money you won yet. Am I wrong, little rat?" he asked Alexander.

"Give me a good reason I should give that to you. I earned that money," Alex replied, keeping his calm attitude.

"Well, that's simple too. Because if you don't, I will kill you." The butler replied, pointing his gun at him.

"Killing me won't get you the money. I thought you were smart, since you found me. But it seems you have just as many brain cells as these two gorillas," Alexander spat out.

This comment visibly angered all three men, but before the butler could react, one goon lost his shit.

"Who are you calling a gorilla?! I will kill you, you little shit!" The man screamed, lunging at Alexander.

Alexander smiled internally as he shifted his position, trying to keep the goons between himself and the armed butler. The big man was slow, because of his size, but Alex knew better than to judge by appearance.

As the goon lunged at him, he threw a punch at Alexander. Alex ducked under the man's arm, sending a punch of his own into his exposed ribs.

Promptly after landing his punch, Alex jumped back, still making sure he was covered from the butler's firing line. It took a few seconds for the scuffle to reach the apartment's balcony doors.

But the goon was like an enraged bull, and all he could see was Alexander. When he lunged at him, screaming and spitting, Alex smiled.

'Now's my time to leave!' he thought.

Chapter 136 Like A Rat In A Maze

As the goon lunged at him like a wild boar, Alexander stayed before his open patio door. The balcony on the other side was tiny, and the railing had long since been maintained.

He was hoping the big guy would go over the railing and down the third floor, all the way to the pavement. But he planned to hitch a ride with him, using him as a landing apparatus.

As the goon ran at him, Alex ducked under his bear hug and followed behind. At this point, his back was exposed to the butler, and he had a clear firing line on him.

But by the time he could shoot his pistol, it would be too late for him to get a lethal shot in. Or at least Alex hoped as much.

When the tall gorilla of a man passed over Alexander, he quickly tackled his back, keeping him from stopping his momentum. The two of them hit the railing like a runaway train.

Alexander had thought the railing would bend, and they would topple over. But it was in worse shape than he had thought.

When the goon hit the balcony guard with his momentum, and Alexander's extra push, the railing snapped off from the floor, and they both fell off in a straight line.

A three-story drop wouldn't be lethal, in normal circumstances, unless you dropped on your head. But the goon had extra weight latched on to him, which would make his landing very painful at the very least.

Time seemed to slow down for Alexander, as he felt his body become weightless, and plummet to the ground, still latched on to the big man. The fall took less than two seconds, but ended abruptly.

Alexander had been so caught in his mind when he went overboard that he hadn't heard the gunshot resound behind him. After impact, his breath still short, he got up and started running away as best he could.

A gunshot resounded again, the bullet hitting a car near him, but he didn't stop. Stopping meant death, and he couldn't afford to die.

After a few seconds of running, the adrenaline pumping rapidly through his system, he finally noticed his arm was flapping around weirdly. He looked at it while running and noticed a lot of blood.

There was a hole in his shoulder, leaking blood rapidly, but he couldn't even feel pain from it. He grabbed his shoulder and kept running.

There was a police station a few blocks from him, but he didn't know if he would make it. Already, he could hear heavy footsteps behind him.

And they were gaining on him fast.

'These big guys sure run fast.' he thought, trying to turn into an alley to ditch his pursuer.

He knew this neighbourhood like the back of his hand, since he had been living here for a while, and started zigzagging through the many alleys, always keeping his destination in mind.

But as luck had it, he wasn't the only one that knew where he was going. The butler turned the corner of the alley up ahead, lifting his gun.

Alexander turned into another alley, as yet another gunshot resounded.

'There's no way the cops aren't hearing this!' he thought, furious at the speed of their reaction.

Already, the people in the streets around were taking cover and hiding inside shops and houses, not wanting to take a stray bullet. The police had already been called, but would they make it in time?

Knowing he was getting cornered, Alexander chose the lesser of two evils, and tried to confront the butler while he was still alone. He changed courses again, making sure he kept his distance from the goon.

After turning two corners, he ran face to face with the butler, who was looking for him. The poor skinny man didn't have time to lift his arm this time, as Alex ran into him like a mad bull.

Ensued a minor scuffle, Alexander coming out on top, as the skinny man had probably never fought a person once. But just as he delivered a knockout punch, the goon turned the corner of the alley, too.

Alexander got up from the butler, his shoulder hurting him like crazy. His adrenaline levels were going down, since he was trying to fight with a level head.

This was half playing against him, since now he had to deal with the pain of the bullet wound, and possibly bruised ribs from the fall. He lifted his arms into a defensive position as best he could.

"You killed my cousin! I'm gonna kill you!" the gorilla yelled at him, lunging forward.

They fought for a minute, Alexander becoming more of a punching bag with every passing second. He was heavily wounded, and this man was no slouch in fist-fighting.

Alexander's mind was slowly slipping, punch after punch hitting his face, making his brain ring with every impact. But suddenly, the punches stopped coming.

He couldn't see the reason, since his eyes were almost swollen shut, but he could still hear, ever so faintly.

"Get down on the ground! Now!" was all he heard before losing consciousness.

Alexander woke up several hours later in a hospital bed. He tried getting up to see where he was, but something was restraining his wrists.

When he turned his head to look, he noticed he was cuffed to the bed on both sides. A police officer was with him in the room, and hearing the cuffs jingle brought his attention to Alex.

The man took his shoulder radio and called in that he was awake. After that, he put his hand on his sidearm, looking at Alexander wearily.

Another man came into the room after a minute, looking at the police officer.

"Get your hand off that pistol, officer. He's cuffed. Do you think he's magically going to kill you, from two meters away?" the man said.

The police officer looked sheepish for a second, before he said he had somewhere else to be, and left the room. The other man looked at Alexander, displaying a confident smile.

"Excuse the cuffs and the armed babysitter. They were necessary precautions. My name is detective Trudeau. I would say I'm happy to meet you, Mr. Leduc, but circumstances aren't that good." The man said, introducing himself.

Only one thought crossed Alexander's mind.

'What the hell is happening?!'

Chapter 137 Hospitalized

"Where am I?" Alexander asked, his head still ringing from being beaten on like a drum.

"You are at the CHUM, being treated for a gunshot to the shoulder, a broken clavicle, a cracked rib, and a minor concussion. You had a wild day, Mr. Leduc. Care to tell me what happened?" the detective asked, taking out a notepad.

Alexander's head was pulsing every time he tried thinking. It was painful, but not unbearable.

"Can I have some water first? I feel like I've been cooking out in the sun for days," Alex responded, his throat dry and his mouth feeling like paste.

"Sure thing, kid." the detective said, walking over to the water dispenser.

He pulled out a paper cup from the side and filled it. He then brought it over to Alexander, before realizing how he would have trouble drinking, being cuffed and all.

"Ahh. Here. Let me give you a shred of freedom, so you can drink on your own," the detective said, fetching his cuff keys from his pocket.

He then freed one hand for Alexander to take the cup with. He didn't bother backing away from him, not being scared by a twenty-five-year-old man, half-cuffed in a hospital bed.

After downing the cup of water, Alexander let out a satisfied sigh. The cold water helped his thirst, but also eased his head drumming slightly.

"Better?" the detective asked, taking the cup away from him.

"Yes. Thank you." Alex replied.

"Good. Now from the beginning, please." the man said, pulling the chair closer and sitting in it.

Alexander recounted his day as best he could, his mind still a little blurry. While he did, the detective wrote everything down on his pad.

He only stopped him when Alexander told him he had tackled the goon over the balcony railing.

"Wait. You intentionally tackled him down a three-stair fall?" He asked, incredulously.

"Yes. I figured a three-story fall would have a better chance of survival than confronting three men in my cramped apartment." Alexander replied, scratching the back of his head sheepishly.

"I don't know whether you are crazy, stupid, or brave, kid." the detective said, looking at him like he was an idiot.

"A bit of the three, maybe?" Alexander replied, chuckling.

"Hah. Keep going." the detective said, shaking his head.

Alexander proceeded on with explaining his day, incorporating how he felt along the way. The more detail he gave, the more his story would be solid.

After recounting the whole thing, he waited for the detective to finish writing. It took around five minutes for the man to finish up before he closed his notepad.

"Well, young man. I think the cuffs are no longer necessary." the detective said, before un-cuffing his other hand.

"We interrogated the man you mentioned, Frank. The man was scared at first, but he eventually admitted to letting the man in the building and leading them to your apartment."

"We were planning on charging him with complicity to attempted murder. His trial should be fair, though, since he helped us identify the butler." the detective said.

Alexander smiled wryly.

"Please, I don't want to press charges against Frank. He is an honest man, with a family. He only did what he had to do to protect his life," he said, lowering his head a bit.

Truth was, Alexander was mad at Frank a bit, but he understood him, too. No one would refuse to act at the threat of a gun.

Unless they were brave or stupid like him.

"Hm. I shall convey your thoughts to the attorney general. He might get lighter charges. But justice must be served, kid." the detective said, looking at Alexander with respect.

"As for yourself. I recommend you change apartments, and find somewhere safer to live. The man this butler worked for is not to be trifled with." he added, before heading to the door.

"I will tell the nurse to bring you your personal effects. Once you are healed up, you are free to go," he said, before leaving the room.

Alexander sat in bed, looking at the door. He was contemplating what to do next.

His plans for moving had to be put forward faster now, but that would eat a large sum of money that he didn't want to take just yet. Other thoughts were also cruising in his head.

Like the question, who sends goons to steal money? Or what kind of man had the capital to have another man's face run through face recognition software?

He might have just made a terrible enemy without knowing it. His anxiety levels started rising slightly.

'Now I'll have to look over my shoulder at all times.' he thought.

The nurse interrupted his thoughts when she came into the room. She had in a pile, his clothes, his wallet, and his phone.

Alex was happy to have his things back, but the bloody clothes disgusted him a little. So he asked the nurse to get rid of them.

He ordered new clothes online with his phone, having them delivered to his hospital room. They would arrive the next day.

Right after completing his order, his phone rang. He looked at the caller and smiled lightly.

On the screen was not a number, but a contact name. A name from inside the game.

Since the update on the time adjustment, communicating with people inside or outside the game had become easier. The person calling him right now was Violette.

They almost always played together nowadays, and seeing as he didn't connect that day, she was probably worrying. They had become quite friendly over the last month.

He didn't want to worry her too much, so he picked up the call. He put it on speaker.

"Hello, Violette. I'm sorry I'm not online yet. Something came up and I won't be able to connect for a few days. You might have to play alone for a few days. I will be back online as soon as I can." Alexander said, trying not to let her too much time to answer.

He was also talking loud enough to cover the noise of the surrounding hospital. She answered 'ok' in a worried voice, but didn't ask questions.

After that, he hung up.

'I hope I'm not stuck here for too long.' he thought, browsing his phone again.

Chapter 138 A Friendly Visit

The next week was spent in the hospital, much to Alexander's displeasure. He made his week as productive as he could, though, calling a house-hunting agency, and setting his demands for a new home.

He also told them what budget he was willing to put in, and the type of security minimum he wanted. After all, he didn't want just any Tom, Dick, and Harry to barge into his home like this time.

After setting that into motion, he called his financial advisor, and had a large sum of money withdrawn from all his investments almost equally, to not hurt any of them too much.

His financial advisor did his job and advised against that move, as it would hurt his investment wallet in the long term. But Alex cared little about the long term, since there wouldn't be any long term.

His financial advisor eventually gave up and did as ordered, transferring the money into Alexander's account. He soon got the notification of a transfer of almost two million dollars.

His money had multiplied by a lot over the course of one month, since he had followed the list David sent him. Respecting the timetables and reinvesting the money when he pulled one out, he made millions in a few weeks.

His first advisor had complained a lot about these moves, until Alex was tired of it, and fired him.

The new one he got after that asked fewer questions about the abrupt transfers, since they bore fruit, but was more stringent on pulling money out for personal use.

But he was only an advisor, and ultimately, the money wasn't his. He was just sad that his commission would lower in the next few months.

Over the span of the week, he received many messages from players he had on his friend list, asking why he hadn't been online in so long. All of which he answered the same thing. 'I've been busy.'

Most of them stopped pestering after that answer, but some only became more insistent. One, in particular, asked many more questions than the others.

Phoenix had kept pestering Alexander every day, asking for the truth, and spouting theories that became increasingly nonsensical.

That was, until she asked a question that was spot on, and Alex hesitated too long to answer, queuing her in. When she grasped she had hit the bullseye, she insisted on him telling her where he was hospitalized.

She refused to take no for an answer, and he eventually gave up trying. He gave her the hospital name and room number, saying that he could take visits at any time.

He had upgraded his hospital stay when the money hit his account, being transferred to one of the VIP rooms. Since he had the money, might as well use it, and make his stay more comfortable.

The very next day, Phoenix came to visit. Alexander knew she lived in the same province, and in a city not so far from Montreal, but he was still surprised.

She took a day out of the game, losing some of her level advantages to visit him, even though he insisted he was fine. She insisted that's what friends do.

He didn't remember being so friendly with her, but he didn't mind. He had been lonely the last few days, since he had no one who visited, aside from the detective on his case.

Phoenix had given him her real name and contact information when she visited, saying that friends don't call each other by their gamer tag. So he did the same with her.

It felt good to have someone treat him like a friend after so long of being alone. So he went along with her whims for the time she was there.

She had brought him flowers and a get-well-soon card that brought a sincere smile to his lips. And when lunchtime came knocking, she ordered food from a nearby restaurant, insisting that he shouldn't eat the hospital food.

He had laughed at that comment, since his VIP status gave him a better menu than the rest of the patients. But she refused to listen to his complaints.

She paid for the order, even after he said he wanted to chip in, saying he had the money. To which she gave him a death stare, asking him if he was saying she didn't.

After backpedalling as hard as his brain could, and apologizing a few times, she showed a smile again, saying it was fine.

'This woman is terrifying!' He had thought.

Over the few hours she stayed, they talked about what they had been doing since the tournament, and Kary gave him some updates on the important events that had happened in-game.

A few hours after lunch, she got a call and had to leave. She insisted on visiting him again in a few days, but he refused her, since he would be out by then.

He instead told her he would give her the address to his new place when he was settled in, and that she could visit him there. That had placated her, and she left, wishing him to get better.

A smile hung on his lips for the rest of the day, his good mood also infecting the nurses that regularly checked up on him. Gossip was already spreading among the nurses about who the young woman might be.

Alexander didn't mind, since he wouldn't be there much longer, and gossip couldn't hurt anyone.

The next day, he called the detective, asking for updates on the case, and he got good news. Since they had started the investigation, they had found eyewitnesses to the incident, and a video circulating on the internet.

The video showed him getting shot at and chased in an alley, confirming his side of the story, and absolving him. He was now completely out of the suspect list, and the two deaths were going to be ruled as self-defence in court.

He thanked the man before hanging up. His heart felt a few ounces lighter, with that weight off his shoulders.

The next few days went by peacefully, before he was finally discharged and sent back home. The next couple of days were going to be busy yet again, before he could finally relax in his new home.

Chapter 139 A New Home

In the next two days, Alexander ran around town a lot.

First, he went to make sure everything was still in his apartment. Then he went to visit the house hunting agency he had contracted.

They had lined up a few visits for him over the week he was in the hospital. He agreed to go visit a few of them the same day, and the last couple the next day.

But he didn't have to go in the next day, for he found what he wanted on the third visit they went on.

The realtor was giving him options from the lowest he was willing to pay, to the highest he had asked. But the woman had also slipped in another option, a little over his budget, but with all the requirements he had asked for.

It was a penthouse in some newly built condo building in downtown Montreal. The security was top-notch, with private elevators for the penthouses, locked by keycard and biometric locks.

Anyone that wanted to go up would have to either be allowed up from inside the penthouse, or scan their handprint, eye, and keycard access. Getting across all those measures was no small feat.

Then, there was virtually no access from the outside, since the penthouse was situated well over a hundred meters up. The windows were also bulletproof, since they expected VIPs in this kind of condo.

The penthouse had a large open area living room and dining room, with easy access to the kitchen on the first floor. And on the second floor, one master bedroom, two secondary bedrooms, and an office.

Both floors had access to a balcony, each on a different side of the building. The view, both from inside the penthouse and on the balcony, was breathtaking.

Alexander knew this penthouse would be over his budget, most likely by a big margin, but he had to ask for its price.

"Well, Mr. Leduc, over the phone, you specified you wanted to stop your budget at a million and a half. Now normally, this penthouse is on sale at two point five," the lady said.

Alexander gasped at the price. This was a full million over what he wanted to pay!

"But the contractor that built this building is an open-minded fellow. He also knows who is visiting today, and was willing to offer another pricing for it," she added.

Alexander frowned at the statement. Why had the realtor told the contractor who he was? And what use would knowing that, have to the sale?

"And what would that be?" he asked the realtor.

"The contractor has been trying to sell his penthouses for a while, but they come at a relatively steep price per footage. The reason is the top-notch security measures," she stated.

"Now. He is willing to reduce the price by half a million, specifically for you. But only on one condition." She added.

Alexander's frown deepened.

"And what condition is that?" he asked wearily.

"He would like to use your name and your story as an advertisement for his other penthouses. Your situation is quite peculiar and fits right into his target audience. So he is willing to lower the price by a fifth, on that condition." She finally said, coming clean.

Alexander took a moment to take in this information. He didn't want people to know where he lived, but with the security here, he would probably be safe, anyway.

Then, there was also the fact that this transaction would still leave a paper trail to him if anyone wanted to find him specifically. The pros and cons were balanced here.

What pushed the scale in one direction was that he very much needed a new home, and the sooner, the better. He took a few minutes to think things over and finally gave his ok.

The realtor became ecstatic as she pulled out her phone, contacting the contractor. While she did that, he called his financial advisor, asking him for another fund transfer.

The man grumbled a bit, but did as asked. The money came in, and all that was left was for him to sign the papers and pay for the property.

The contractor insisted on being there for the signing, saying he wanted to meet the man in person. So, after waiting for close to half an hour, the contractor arrived.

They had some idle chatter as they signed the papers together; the realtor seeing dollar bills with every pen stroke. Once the transaction was complete, Alexander called a moving company.

He fixed the whole payment and schedule in twenty minutes, and had his stuff brought to him the next day. The expediency cost him a pretty penny, but all things considered, it was still better than waiting for days.

The next day was spent placing his belongings in his new home, starting with the gaming pod. He set his pod in his room, setting up his new IP address in the account.

He then had to switch his delivery address on Evo-Gaming's website for his IV subscription. The change took some time, since he needed to confirm his ID and new address with some form of legal document.

But once all this was done, he launched the pod in idle mode so that it would connect to the network. He had the internet and cable installed in the morning, and now he was all set.

He wasn't in a hurry to launch the game yet, as it was still early in the day, and he decided to enjoy the breeze from his balcony.

The air at this altitude was cold, but with the scorching summer sun, it was a pleasant contrast. Of course, the balcony on the other side was currently shielded from the wind, but he wanted to feel the wind.

All the pressure from the last week seemed to vanish, carried away by the summer breeze. He leaned on his balcony's ledge and looked at Montreal from his aerial point.

'Is this what it feels like to be rich? Yet I feel so much poorer. This place cost me a fortune,' he thought, contemplating the city from above.

He stayed on the balcony for well over an hour, letting his thoughts wander about. He snapped out of his reverie when his stomach rumbled.

Since he hadn't yet bought some groceries, he ordered in. This tested out his security system at the same time satisfying a bit of vanity from him.

After eating, he went to lie down in his pod. It was time.

"Welcome back, Player Astaroth." The robotic voice said, as per usual.

"Log in," Alexander said, closing the lid of the pod.

Launching 'New Eden'

Logging in

Welcome back player Astaroth

Chapter 140 Diving Back In

Astaroth opened his eyes to a familiar cave ceiling.

'It feels good to be back,' he thought, as he got up.

He stretched his body a bit, making sure his character hadn't atrophied. After all, it had spent a week sleeping on that bed.

That thought brought him to another one.

'Do our characters stay visible while we are offline? Or do we disappear?'

Since there weren't any other players here before, he never really knew the answer to that question. But now he had Violette.

He could test out his theory with her help. Which reminded him to contact her.

He wrote a quick message to her, telling her he was back online. Not a second after sending it, he received a reply.

'I'm with Genie, outside the barrier. We are fighting the blood bats. Come join us!'

He chuckled as he read the reply. Violette had taken a liking to his wolf companion, Genie, and the wolf did not seem to be bothered by it.

Often, when he was late to connect, or when he couldn't log in at all, Violette went hunting with Genie, ensuring both she and the wolf kept levelling up.

He walked out of his alcove and headed toward the village entrance. The villagers saluted him as he passed, as they had long since been accustomed to his presence.

Once outside the barrier, all he had to do to find Genie and Violette was to look up. He quickly located the large swarm of blood-red bats, flying circles over a part of the nearby forest.

Astaroth started sprinting towards the swarm, melding with White on the way there to get more speed. Once he reached his destination, he let loose amongst the flying monsters, letting the thrill of the hunt sink back in.

The freedom of fighting in this game just couldn't be matched outside, in the real world. Since the physical capacity of the human body had a limit out there, many things were impossible to do.

Here, on the other hand, it seemed like anything could be achieved if you just had the strength to do it. Astaroth was jumping meters into the air, catching bats as they flew up and ripping them to shreds.

He had accustomed himself to fighting without weapons in this form, as it felt more...natural. Of course, when faced with a dangerous foe, he didn't hesitate to pull out his weapons.

He wasn't a fool, after all. But fighting like a beast, when fused with a beast, had its own charm.

White had also given him many pointers on how to maximize his form, since he was accustomed to this mode of combat. An hour after he arrived, there were already very few bats left.

Most were dead, and some had fled. What was left, were soon to be killed, as Violette used her magic to round them up in a massive sphere of water, before flash-freezing it.

Astaroth looked at her, impressed.

"Your control is getting better. When did you learn to freeze your water spells?" he asked the girl.

"While you were gone. I had nothing much to do, since hunting alone is too dangerous. So I went to old man Aberon's house. He's the one who taught me," she answered, all smiles.

A few of the village warriors looked at the little girl weirdly, when she called Aberon 'old man' so casually. Most of them had an ingrained fear of him, and not without reason.

And as they spun around to go back on patrol, they became livid.

"Sire Aberon!" They called out, bowing in unison.

Astaroth and Violette both spun on their heels, seeing the mage standing there, his arms crossed. He had an angry look on his face as he looked at the duo.

The warriors gulped in unison.

'They are dead.' They thought.

"You could have come to me first, before throwing yourself into battle, you bloodthirsty youngster." Aberon admonished Astaroth.

Then his traits softened as he looked at Violette and caressed her head gently.

"That was impressive magic control, little one. You make my old heart proud," he told her, smiling like a proud grandfather.

Everyone except Astaroth had their jaws drop simultaneously. No one could believe what they were seeing.

Astaroth was used to seeing this attitude from Aberon, as he had been the one to present the two. He hadn't expected Aberon to act as an old grandpa with Violette, but it wasn't a bad thing.

Her very high magical aptitude made her a potential apprentice for the old man, and he practically pounced at the prospect. The last apprentice he had trained still worked with the king, after all.

Getting to form another talented mage, into possibly a superpower in the magical world, was a high honour for mages. Aberon was not one to refuse such an honour.

And Violette was such a studious apprentice that she could grasp advanced concepts in days that took many mages' years to learn.

Astaroth was happy that the girl had a mentor, and Aberon was happy to train a girl with such potential. It was a win all around the board.

He had quickly noticed that in terms of magic ability, Violette was head and shoulders over him, possibly being on par with Phoenix. This was a welcome surprise, coming from such a young child.

While his mind was reminiscing, Aberon had been giving pointers on how to improve her technique to Violette. She listened avidly, her eyes wide and her ears perked, taking in every word like it was law.

Eventually, Astaroth had to break up their discussion on magic, since they had veered off technique, and were now talking about advanced concepts.

"Ahem." Astaroth cleared his throat.

Aberon snapped his head at him with an angry stare. He hated being interrupted, especially when talking about magic.

But his gaze went back to normal quickly, as he understood Astaroth's look.

"Sir. May I ask why you are out here?" Astaroth asked the old mage.

"Ahh yes. I came to see you. Come to my abode before disappearing again in the morning. We have much to discuss," Aberon said, tucking his hands inside his sleeves.

He had a serious look in his eyes when he said that, so Astaroth understood it was an important matter.

"In that case, I shall be there by dawn," he replied, giving a quick bow.

Aberon nodded, and vanished from before the two players.

"What is it? Are you in trouble?" Violette asked, looking at Astaroth with her head slightly tilted.

"I highly doubt it, little one. I just think we need to have a grown-up talk, that's all," Astaroth answered, giving the girl a wide smile.

Violette pouted at the answer, but they quickly went back to hunting, making her forget why she was mad.