

## **New Eden 181**

### Chapter 181 Receiving The Rewards

The party was still waiting on the notification they had cleared the dungeon. Since it had yet to come, they assumed they had to collect all their rewards before the system considered it as cleared.

The seven of them tapped the complete quest in unison, receiving an influx of Exp and gold coins. The less fortunate players, I'die, Athena, and Silent, all suddenly felt rich.

The currency exchange feature had been enabled after the tournament, but could only be done with gold. And since gold was still not so simple to get, the exchange rate was still pretty high.

Currently, one gold coin went for one hundred dollars. This was, of course, in a world-renowned currency, the US Dollar.

With Silent Light being the only American player in their party, the rest of them were still thrilled. The USD was high value around the world, and for I'die especially.

Since he was Chinese, his currency was very much lower in value than the dollar. Then Athena was also Asian, but she was Korean, meaning her currency was also on a lower scale.

They were thrilled with the gold coins they received. This would be enough to finally buy a gaming pod.

The second reason the conversion ratio was still so high was that Evo-Gaming had a massive influx in cash when they released the function. They had priced the gold purchase at two-hundred dollars per gold coin.

That kept most of the poorer players from buying gold, but the rich players were all over the function in minutes. This rapidly filled Evo-Gaming's coffers.

When the Exp flew into them, level-up notifications were heard all around, as all of them went up at least one level. Astaroth and Violette benefited most from this, since they were the lowest in the party.

Astaroth and Violette rocketed to level forty with the reward alone, and they had yet to receive the dungeon completion reward. Astaroth was over the moon.

This effectively brought them back closer to the top levels in the rankings. And they would probably level up again, since the dungeon reward would be enormous for an under-levelled and under-manned group.

The forums had found the calculations for dungeon Exp, and from the information he gathered, this dungeon should give them fifty million points divided among the seven of them!

Most players couldn't even dream of so much Exp yet. But before that, they still needed to get their other rewards.

They still needed to claim their two items. They were waiting to be transported into the armory, but instead, someone walked up to them with a magic device.

When the device was activated, it opened up a list of items that could be redeemed. There were numbers next to the items, and they guessed it was the amount that could be redeemed.

The party went through the list and started picking out their items.

Phoenix went for a pair of magic amplifying gauntlets of rare grade, and a necklace that boosted physical stats by five percent of the special grade.

Many items of the elite grade could have been better, but she was thinking about her flame avatar form, and how it relied a lot on physical combat, and thought it was better to make that stronger, too.

Athena picked out a rare bow called the Elder Bow, which had high attack damage, and a pair of boots called the sticky boots. They were special grade, but the ability they had made her curious.

I'die went for a Druid robe, called Barkskin Robes, of rare grade, and a ring of Water Breathing in special grade. He thought it would synergize well with his new skill.

Gulnur picked out a set of plated armor chest piece and legs, both elite grade, called Ironbark Plate Armor chest and leg guards. They had a kit bonus, and they were stronger than his current armor.

Plus, since they were much lighter than his current armor, he could move more freely in them. He also thought they looked really neat, so bonus points for that.

The next person to pick was Silent Light. The items didn't seem to interest him much, but when he scrolled further down, he noticed there was another section.

All the way at the bottom, there was a section for miscellaneous items, with potions of various grades and skillbooks.

He grabbed a rare-grade elixir of wisdom that permanently boosted wisdom, and then he found a skillbook, titled Nature's Respite. The name seemed innocuous, but when he read the description, he immediately bought it.

It was a skill that unlocked mana regen and in combat mana gathering! This would go a long way on a healer, he thought.

The next one to go was Violette. She wasn't that well-versed in games, so Phoenix helped her out, guiding her choices.

The girl ended up picking the same gauntlets Phoenix had, combined with a water magic boosting circlet, called Circlet of The Moon. This would incredibly boost her power in water magic, and it was the best choice.

The last one up was Astaroth. He already had good armor, for now, and he thought weapons would be best.

He picked out a shield and shortsword; the shield being elite grade, and the sword being rare grade. He inspected the two items after picking them out.

High-tide Falcata(1h):

Grade: Rare

Attack Power: 100 (Str)

Durability: 100/100

Stat Bonus: +20 Agi, +20 Str

Special Ability: This sword is highly in tune with the power of water. If imbued with mana, attacks will also apply 50% of user's magic damage.

Description: Flow like the waves, hit like a Tsunami. Show these land dwellers the power of a raging ocean!

Ironbark Shield:

Grade: Elite

Defense Power: 20%

Durability: 500/500

Stat Bonus: +15 Con

Special Ability: This shield can be infused with mana, to balloon its defensive power. Defense Power: 20% -> 50% for 30 seconds. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

Description: This shield was formed out of the strongest tree bark to ever exist. Show the world that nature still is the greatest!

Astaroth grinned widely. The stats he gained from the two items alone were very good, but the overall boost to his power would be even better.

He couldn't wait to try them out.

Chapter 182 Besmirching Her Honor

After selecting their reward items, the seven players gathered before the old toad king. He gave them a speech about righteousness and how they were heroes to the Grippli.

After a ten-minute monologue, the notification for the dungeon's end finally resounded.

\*Ding!\*

\*Dungeon 'Jungle Maze' has been successfully completed.\*

\*Ding!\*

\*Your group is the first one to complete a level fifty dungeon. The gods acknowledge your accomplishments. Would you like to announce your feat to the world?\*

Before the entire group, a window appeared, with a yes and no option.

\*Yes / No\*

Everyone simultaneously tapped yes. They had all agreed to it before even undertaking this journey. This was their end goal, after all.

Announcing to the world that the same group of five, plus two new players, had conquered a new tier of dungeons, without a full group, or the necessary level.

This would make everyone remember who was truly the power-houses in this game. The level leaderboard would become irrelevant from there on out.

Across the skies over the world of New Eden, a message appeared.

\*Ding!\*

\*World Announcement\*

\*The seven-player party named Paragons has successfully completed the first level fifty dungeon! The players in this party are Astaroth, Phoenix, Violette, Athena Woodland, I'die Ad'tempus, Gulnur Deepshield, and Silent Light. Congratulations, Paragons!\*

Every player in the game stopped what they were doing to read the message in the sky. Some players in the wild even almost died from halting their fights.

No one could believe what they were seeing. The leaderboard still had no one at level fifty, meaning no one should be able to complete a dungeon of that level yet, even with a full party of twelve.

Yet a party of seven had just done so. This was crazy news, and people instantly overloaded the forums with posts asking how they had done it.

As for the players concerned, they were now being teleported outside the dungeon, a little over seven million Exp richer, and with a new title.

But they didn't have time to look at any of it, since they were now faced with a fresh problem.

At their exit from the dungeon, familiar players were waiting for them. The party that had entered after them was already here, resting, before going back.

They couldn't attack them, since they were in a safe zone, but that didn't hold the Dwarves and Gnomes from showing a threatening disposition. A Dwarf moved a bit forward from the rest of his party.

"Gulnur! I knew you wouldn't wait for the rest of us to enter the dungeon!" the Dwarf growled.

"You're one to talk! What is that behind you, if not a raiding party? I should have known better than to trust you."

"That sounds like your problem, not mine. Now give us the dungeon rewards!" the dwarf angrily barked, pulling out his two axes.

Phoenix stepped forward to try to de-escalate the situation.

"First, let's not devolve into savagery. We earned these fair and square. You want rewards? Complete the dungeon."

"Second, we are in a safe zone. You can't even attack us, so cease your futile intimidation tactic."

"And lastly, we just completed a dungeon that seems to have wiped your party. What makes you think you can win a fight against us?" she said, that last point with a snarky smile.

"Shut up, woman! You might be strong, but you are still of the weaker sex. Don't ask yourself why the number one is a man!" The Dwarf shouted out, sending spit everywhere.

Phoenix's face went dark, as did Athena's and Violette's. Even the men in her party were now looking at the Dwarf with hatred and disgust.

Phoenix wanted nothing more than to burn them to ashes, but they were still in the safe zone, and that wouldn't be possible. Before she could open her mouth to roast the little man alive, Astaroth put his hand on her shoulder.

When she looked at him, the scornful gaze he had in his eyes made her shiver for a second.

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth, you little shit?" Astaroth said, with a calm tone.

His voice sounded almost more like the rumble of thunder before a storm. Astaroth suddenly left the party.

Surprise slightly washed the other members of the group, but they rapidly understood what his intentions were.

"If you want to act like an obnoxious macho, fine. I'll play your game. You won't mind accepting a duel then?" Astaroth said, pulling out his new sword and shield.

The shimmer around the blade signalled the rarity of it to the others, and they instantly had looks of greed.

"Tch! You think you can take me on without your party?" The Dwarf said, feeling insulted.

"Oh, not just you. I will take on your entire party. What do you say? I'll even put all my gear on the line."

"You! You think--"

Before he could finish his phrase, a duel invite appeared before him, with a list of rewards. When he saw all the special, elite, and rare equipment on the list, his eyes widened.

His party members quickly pushed him into accepting through their party chat. Cockiness washed over the Dwarf.

"Fine! But it wouldn't be fair if you got nothing in return, if by ungodly luck you won. What do you want?"

"I want two of your levels. Each. And. Everyone. Of. You." Astaroth replied, his lips stretching upwards in a manic grin.

His to-be opponents all shivered in fear at the statement. How confident did one have to be to ask for such a high price of them?

Even if they recognized him from the tournament, they assumed a one-on-twelve fight could only go in their direction. Yet, the ash elf looked to think otherwise.

Hesitation spread amongst the party of twelve. But before anyone could back out, their party leader set in the conditions for his loss, and pressed accept on the duel screen.

A timer appeared before their eyes, and an invisible barrier formed, limiting anyone not in the duel from intervening. Astaroth's grin only widened.

"Thank you for the Exp, dumbass."

\* 3, 2, 1, Duel Start!\*

## Chapter 183 Honor Defended

The moment the bell rang on the duel start, Astroth melded with Luna, whilst summoning Morpheus and White Death. He started receiving ranged attacks, but merely ignored their damage.

He then sent White and Morpheus to the enemy party's back-line, disrupting their damage, before he dove into the frontline, accompanied by Genie, who came out of hiding.

His opponents comprised two tanks, four melee damage dealers, 4 ranged damage dealers, and two healers. This was a pretty balanced team, all things considered.

But it wouldn't matter much to him. At his current speed, he was too fast for any of them to catch him, so he prowled through their ranks with impunity.

He never targeted one person in particular, dealing damage around the whole of them equally. He already had a plan in mind, and that would wipe away their dumb attitude forever.

As their health levels slowly went down, the healers tried their best to keep them alive, but with Morpheus' aerial bombardment and White's constant harassment, they were having a hard time healing.

One tank eventually broke away from the front-line, trying to go grab aggro on the two monsters. But the moment he turned his back to Astaroth, his fate was sealed.

Astaroth practically appeared behind him, now armed with his war axe, swinging for the neck. There was nothing the poor Gnome could do.

Even though he was inside his mechanical armor, the axe cleaved cleanly through, sending his head flying away. His three-quarters of health instantly vanished, as the insta-kill effect from beheading happened.

The Gnome, who had previously over ten thousand HP, was now down on the floor, blood pooling around his body. But the duel wasn't over yet.

Astaroth started using tongue clicks every other second, activating Hypnosis, but failing to charm them. He was slightly disappointed, but it mattered little.

When their mental defences dropped, he used Intimidation Shout, causing most of them to tremble in fear. With them all becoming immobile, he then lined himself with them.

With a cocky wink to their Dwarven party leader, Astaroth unleashed an Aether-primed Moon Beam. Although it wasn't charged fully, it still did way more damage than needed to end all the remaining players in one hit.

When they disintegrated, the surrounding barrier disappeared, freeing Astaroth's movement. He wasn't done yet, though.

Since this was a safe zone, outside a dungeon, there was a cemetery nearby. Unfortunately for the ragtag group of Dwarves and Gnomes, it was located outside the safe zone, and Astaroth had a bone to pick.

He hurriedly ran to the graveyard, where the players were reappearing, and killed them another two times before his meld timer ended.

By that time, the twelve players were already disconnecting as fast as they could upon respawning. They were bleeding Exp like crazy, and this was more of a slaughter than a fight at this point.

Now that this was over, and he was out of combat, Astaroth finally received the Exp. And his jaw dropped.

pαndα`novε1~coM \*Exp received for PVP, 159'118'200 points. Congratulations, player!\*

\*Level up! Level up!...\*

Astaroth got a level-up notification six times, putting him at level forty-seven! That sat him in front of Khalor by 2 levels!

He didn't know for how long, but at least he had still made it. He was over the moon.

But then he realized his companions had also levelled-up many times!

Genie had shot up to level forty-three, White Death had levelled to level forty-two, Morpheus levelled once, making him level forty-six, and Luna still had a long way to go, sadly.

While he was looking at all the status windows, Phoenix walked up to him from behind. He was too focused to notice her approach, but was snapped out of his thoughts when two arms embraced him from behind.

"Thank you," Phoenix whispered.

She then realized what she was doing and let go of Astaroth, before turning around and promptly returning to the safe zone. When she walked next to the rest of the party, Athena was looking at her with knowing eyes.

"Shut up! Don't say a word, or I'll burn you alive!" Phoenix said, looking at Athena with murderous intent, before speeding away.

Athena only giggled, while I'die was looking at them weirdly.

"Am I not understanding something?" the boy asked.

Athena looked at him, before rolling her eyes and walking toward the safe zone too.

Everyone looked at I'die with friendly disappointment, before leaving too, aside from Violette. Violette was looking at the motionless Astaroth.

She was waiting for him to move, but after a minute of silence and not moving, she walked up to his side.

"Are you--?"

When she arrived at his side, she saw a glimpse of his face, which was currently red as a tomato. She understood why he was still not moving and giggled.

"We'll be waiting for you in the safe zone."

After saying her piece, Violette walked away, humming joyful songs to herself. She quite liked Astaroth and Phoenix, and seeing the always so confident man react this way, to the latter's touch, made her feel fluttery inside.

She guessed it was probably how Astaroth felt currently, and left him alone to think.

In the meantime, Astaroth was having a mental meltdown. He had rarely ever had contact with women before, since he had become rather reserved after his parents' deaths.

Not that he was still pure, but he had very little contact. Needless to say, being embraced that way without expecting it had short-circuited his brain for a moment.

He stood there, motionless, with his face on fire, for a few minutes, before finally regaining some semblance of composure. He wasn't sure how to respond to Phoenix's caress, but he now at least knew there was more to it.

He would need some time to think about how he felt, but he knew he couldn't act as if nothing had happened. So he opened up his messaging window and sent a brief text to Phoenix.

'I'm glad to have defended your honour, and also glad to know how you feel about it. I'm not very experienced with these things, so I will need some time. I hope we can keep being friends while I sort this out.'

He sent it and waited for a response. After a short while, a message came back.

'I can wait. I'll try not to be awkward about it in the meantime.'

Astaroth breathed a sigh of relief.

Then he became antsy again.

'A girl likes me. What do I do now?'

Chapter 184 Going Back To Town

\*\*\*In another level 50 dungeon\*\*\*

Khalor was fighting against the last boss of the dungeon he was in when the world notification popped. He couldn't pay it much attention, but still caught the gist of it at a quick glance.

"Tsk. Guess they were faster than me on this. I'll have to have a little chat with Alex again."

He focused back on the fight before him. Even if his class allowed him to send an almost never-ending army of undead at his enemies, their levels were all pretty low.

Even if there was a quality in quantity, even a numbers' advantage held no sway against absolute power. The only thing keeping him from losing was the death knight serving him.

The raven was still on the lower scales in terms of level, and the manticore had lost levels during its raising, so the knight was the only undead he had at the right level.

Of course, that didn't keep him from killing his way to the last boss on his own. The numbers more than largely made up for the level difference up to this point. But last bosses were always in a realm of their own.



After fighting the boss for another thirty minutes, it fell to its knees before drawing its last breath. Khalor was pissed at not having the option of getting a world announcement, but he was still okay with clearing the dungeon solo.

He glanced at the level ranking, and his eyes turned to slits once more.

"When did he pass me? Guess that talk will come sooner than later."

Even with the dungeon reward, his level was still under Astaroth's. But he knew it wouldn't be like that for long.

Playing on your own had certain benefits, after all. He barely had to share his Exp with anyone else, and aside from his stronger undead, almost all the Exp from kills went to him.

It didn't matter to him that some of his undead were weak and could be considered fodder at best. He still kept them around, and just raised more along the way.

He could only have as many minions as his Int score, but since they couldn't really die, he could always re-summon them.

He closed the panel for the leaderboards and disconnected for the day. He still had business to attend to in the real world.

'Guess these idiot contractors really can't do anything without seeing the money first,' he thought, as he logged out.

\*\*\*Back to Astaroth\*\*\*

After regaining his bearings, Astaroth walked back to the safe zone next to the dungeon entrance. He and Phoenix acted like nothing had happened, to the pleasure of the others, who didn't wish to see any awkwardness.

After resting for a short while, they left back in the direction of the city of Sunpeak. Even if the group enjoyed playing together as friends, they still had other responsibilities to attend to.

Phoenix had a lot of grinding to do to keep her spot on the level leaderboard. Athena and I'die preferred adventuring and discovering unknown places together.

Gulnur was slowly becoming a social bug, making friends left and right, since he could hardly do that in the real world. As for Silent Light, he preferred to wander between groups.

That left Astaroth and Violette to go explore on their own again. Neither minded, though, as they still enjoyed the novelties together.

Astaroth would hardly leave the girl alone with strangers. That went against his conscience, and he had developed quite the big brother instincts with Violette.

After travelling back for another two days, and making it back to Sunpeak, the party enjoyed one last moment together, going to the cat café and getting a meal.

Silent was a little more outgoing during the meal, slightly losing control of his act once surrounded by catgirls. After being threatened to be thrown out a few times, for trying to pet unwilling waitresses, he calmed down.

The group enjoyed their meal, talking about their future plans a bit, before parting ways well into the night. Some of them had already overstayed their gaming time by days.

Phoenix, Astaroth, and Violette walked to the nearest inn, where they rented rooms for the night. Before entering hers, Phoenix turned around to look at Astaroth.

Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and she had both hands behind her back.

"Umm. About our... situation. I would like to talk about it in person, if possible. Can I come around your place sometime soon?"

Astaroth's heart skipped a beat for a second before he cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Yes. You already have my address. You can come when you have time."

His cheeks were burning up as he tried to contain his shyness. Phoenix smiled before opening her inn room door.

"In that case, see you soon."

She shut the door behind her, not even looking at him. Violette was still standing to the side, her hand on the door handle to her room.

Astaroth stood before the door for a few seconds, his hand on his chest, as he tried calming his thumping heart. Violette's voice snapped him out of his wild thoughts.

"Umm... Could I come too, someday?"

Astaroth frowned a little. He remembered Violette was barely old enough to be outside her home alone.

"Wouldn't your parents object to you going to an older guy's house? I wouldn't want you to get in trouble. Or me, for that matter."

"My parents don't mind, as long as they know where I am. My mother might want to meet you first though."

"Hmm. I wouldn't mind meeting her first, so her mind is at peace. Talk to your parents about it, and we'll talk about this again after. Deal?"

Violette beamed a smile at him.

"Okay! I'll bring up the subject at breakfast tomorrow! Goodnight, Bro—Astaroth!"

After saying that, she opened the door, throwing herself inside the room, before slamming it shut. A few seconds later, her tag already showed her offline.

Astaroth chuckled a bit. They had a good relationship, and he already saw her as a little sister.

It wouldn't have bothered him much if she called him brother, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

He walked into his own room before lying in bed and logging out.

Chapter 185 Not Asking

\*\*\*Inside the game, at the moment of the world announcement\*\*\*

Azamus was sitting at a desk in his brand-new guild building. He had levied money from all his benefactors and sponsors, promising to make his guild the best in exchange for them paying for its establishment.

When the notification rang across the world, his smile immediately vanished, replaced by a gnashing of teeth and his fists clenching. He started cursing at his bad luck.

"That fucking bitch and her new friend are at it again! Stealing achievements that are rightfully mine! I swear to the gods above, I will crush them!"

As he shouted out this curse, alone in his office, a chill crept up his spine. His anger kept him from feeling it too much, and it only lingered as an afterthought.

He called in his servant, who was now also playing the game, if only to serve his young master.

"Start spreading the news that we are established. And make sure you filter the applications right. I don't want any bottom feeder in my guild."

"Yes, sir. I shall get to it right away."

"One last thing. Make sure you get mostly high-tier players, but get some medium-tier, too. We're gonna need cannon fodder in due time."

"Yes, master."

The servant bowed low before backing out of the room. He knew his master enough to know what requirements he wanted from his guild members.

But inside, he was actually sad for all the poor saps that would take the bait of high pay and fame. Damien had always been a snake, and he would wiggle out of any deal he made that wasn't in his favour.

Unfortunately, he couldn't go against his master's wishes. So off he went, to complete his assigned task.

\*\*\*Back outside of the game\*\*\*

Alexander opened his eyes to the familiar interior of his pod. He pushed it open, and exited it, heading to his bathroom to wash up quickly, before heading to bed.

He had a busy day outside the game tomorrow, since he hadn't been to the gym in a while.

"Shit. Clark is going to chew me up this time..."

Just thinking about his buff trainer, and the reception he would have, after not coming to the gym for almost a week, sent shivers down his spine.

The man wasn't mean, or evil, by any measure, but he was a strict person who liked order and respect. So breaking his established schedule, to play a game, was not something he took laughing.

After cleaning up, Alex went to bed for a good night's rest, the first one in a while. His sleep was painted with pleasant dreams of new horizons, interspersed with the occasional lingering thought of Phoenix.

He woke up the next morning with his hardest conundrum ever.

"God dammit. It's like I'm a teenager again..."

\*Sigh\*

Alex took a cold shower to straighten his mind out, before heading out for his jog in the gym's direction. Once there, Clark received him with a stern look.

"I'm sorry I missed so many days! I promise I have a good reason."

"I don't wanna hear it."

"But—"

"How is your arm?"

"It's healed up nicely, I guess?"

Alexander showed that by doing a few stretches and swift jabs and hooks.

"Good. You'll need it."

"Uh... For what?"

"Since you stood me up for a week, today we are in the ring. You'll be learning how to guard."

'Fuck... ' Alex thought.

He knew what that meant. Clark would use him as a human punching bag for the next three hours.

After a painful lesson on punctuality and respect, Alex went back home, sore and bruised.

'He could have gone easy on me,' he mumbled as he walked back home.

As he walked back home, his phone vibrated inside his pocket. When he picked it out, he had a new text message.

It was from Violette.

'I talked to my mom. She says she wants to meet you.'

Alex smiled and answered.

'I'm fine with it. Just tell me when.'

As he waited for the answer, he arrived home. On the way up to his penthouse, the icon for a reply appeared and disappeared a few times.

He wondered what she was having trouble writing. Then the icon disappeared again, before his phone rang.

It was Violette's number. The weird thing was that the girl never called him outside the game.

She always texted.

So her calling suddenly raised all kinds of flags for him. But he wasn't going to ignore the call, so he manned up and answered.

"Hey, Violette. How rare of you to call me. What's up?"

"Hello, young man. Is this Alexander Leduc speaking?"

Alex didn't recognize the voice, and he immediately understood what was happening.

"Yes, that is me. And whom do I have the honour of speaking to?"

"This is Violette's mother. You can call me Mrs. Beauregard. My daughter told me you agreed to meet me. That's good. Make time today."

"Oh! Uh, Ma'am. I don't know where you live and I don't own a car. It might be—"

"That won't be a problem. I already have your coordinates, and I sent a car to pick you up. I will see you soon."

\*Click\*

'Damn, that was an intense woman.'

Alexander quickly hopped into the shower. He didn't want to present himself to Violette's mother, smelling like the bottom of a sports bag.

After quickly washing up, he almost ran to his wardrobe to pick out an outfit.

'I don't want to look like I'm meeting an in-law, but I don't want to look too casual either...' he mumbled, pulling out clothes rapidly.

After piling half his wardrobe on his bed, he finally picked a pair of chic pants and a casual shirt. This would have to do.

His intercom rang as he finished putting his clothes on. As he answered, the receptionist smiled at the little camera.

"Mister Leduc, you have a chauffeur here saying he is here to pick you up. Were you waiting for him?"

"Ahh, yes! I'll be down in a minute."

Alex quickly closed the link and finished prepping.

'Well. Here goes nothing!' he thought, sighing heavily in his elevator.

## Chapter 186 First Impression

The elevator ride down seemed to take an eternity, as stress tore Alex's inside. He never had been in the presence of rich people much, and going to meet a little girl's parents to prove he wasn't a molester wasn't his idea of a nice meet and greet.

Once he got to the lobby, he walked to the front desk, where a tall man in a black suit was waiting for him. He had on his head one of those chauffeur hats you see in the movies.

When he arrived at the desk, the man recognized him, which was weird. He probably had been shown an image of what Alexander looked like, but it still creeped him out.

A family capable of gathering information on a nobody like him so quickly was nothing to scoff at. This was most likely a family with old money.

Alex was already mentally preparing for what he thought would be a stuck-up meeting, with a lot of play on words. The luxury car he was practically shoved in drove away from his home.

It headed towards the southwest, staying inside the city but leaving downtown, until it reached what Alex assumed was the Westmount district. He knew a lot of rich people lived in this district.

They passed many big houses that were not much short of being called mansions, if not for their smaller terrains. They eventually drove into the driveway of an old brickwork house.

The house was enormous and seemed like it had been built more than a century ago. And yet, it was in pristine condition, a testament to the deep pockets of the owners.

The car stopped at a massive iron-barred gate. The driver lowered his window, swiping a card into the reader next to the gate, and it started opening inwards.

After driving the car up a semi-circle road that led to the entrance, the chauffeur stopped it and got out to open Alex's door. Alex waited for the door to be opened for him, lest he break some sort of etiquette he wasn't aware of.

The chauffeur gave a slight bow as he exited the car, still not saying a word. The only words he had said were in the lobby, and they consisted of 'Please follow me, mister Leduc.'

As he walked up the stairs to the house, the door opened, revealing an elderly-looking maid. She gave Alex a curt bow.

"Welcome to the Bellemare residence, Mr. Leduc. The lady of the house is expecting you. Please follow me inside."

Alex nodded, trying to keep his words to a minimum. He also didn't want to sound nervous, and that would be no small feat, given his throat was already dry like a desert.

The maid led him inside, where she sat him in a lounge that looked more like a library than a living room. The sheer opulence in the house was astounding to him.

The velvet colours with golden and white accents screamed richness. The wall-mounted bookshelves were made of genuine wood, and by the looks of it, not cheap cedar or maple wood, either.

After he took his seat, the maid left and came back shortly with a crystal pitcher, filled with water, and two gold-lined glasses. She poured him a glass and poured another one, setting it on a table in front of him.

He didn't know if Mrs. Bellemare was trying to intimidate him or not with the pressure of all this wealth, but it was sure working. Alex was almost sweating bullets at this point.

He rapidly downed his glass of water, trying to hydrate his parched throat, eliciting a small smile from the maid. Behind her smile, he could gleam a tinge of victory.

'Fuck. I messed up. Now they know I'm nervous as hell.' he thought, gulping silently.

"Would you want another glass, Mr. Leduc?" the maid asked.

"Ahem. Yes, please," Alex replied, trying to sound in control of himself.

His voice cracked as he said it, making his attempt fail miserably. The maid kept on smiling as she walked over to pour him another glass.

That was the moment the lady of the house made her entry. She walked in slowly, with measured steps, in a fashion that belied her practiced movements.

This was clearly not the first time she pulled this power move. And that, in turn, told him how she most likely came from a prominent family herself, before marrying Mr. Bellemare.

Alex snapped to his feet, giving a bow to the woman.

"Mrs. Bellemare, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"We shall see if the pleasure is mutual," the woman replied, her tone cold, as she sat across the table from Alexander.

Alexander sat back down, closing his mouth. He could feel the coldness in the air around the woman as she gauged him with her eyes.

"What is the relationship you have with my daughter?"

"We are strictly friends and gaming buddies, Ma'am."

"And how did you come to meet her?"

"Ahh. Well, she spawned in the same village I did after creating her character. And since there were only the two of us as players, I helped her out."

"Have you ever heard of the Bellemare family before?"

"I've heard of Bellemare industries, yes. But I didn't know Violette was from your renowned family, Ma'am. I didn't even know her surname."

"Are you trying to tie into our family, young man?"

As she said that, her stern eyes showed a flash of worry.

"No, Ma'am. Far from me that idea. Violette is only a friend. At best, I would consider her like a little sister."

Mrs. Bellemare's eyes flashed in anger for half a second before she went back to being cold. But that didn't escape Alex's eyes, since he was maintaining eye contact as much as possible.

'Shit. Did I say something I shouldn't have? Fuck! That's right! Her son! Dammit.'

"Do you have family, mister Leduc? Or rather, do you have any remaining family?"

Alexander bitterly smiled at her sentence.

"Unfortunately, no. My parents were all I had, and they are no longer among us."

Alex felt a pang in his heart as he said that. He didn't enjoy talking about this subject, even if it was something that happened years ago.

Mrs. Bellemare seemed to soften up at his pain. She seldom understood how it felt to lose family.

"What do you think hurts more, mister Leduc? Losing a parent, or losing a child."

This wasn't a question that had any right answer, and Alex knew that. But he still had to answer.

"I don't think they are comparable pains, Mrs. Bellemare. Losing my two parents at once was something that deeply broke me and took many years to mend."

"But I would never try to compare my pain to that of a parent losing a child. I believe no parent should ever witness their children's funerals."

"As such, I believe even though the pain of either situation is not the same, they shouldn't be compared."

The woman took a moment to reflect on his answer.

The silence sent Alexander back into his stress spiral until the woman spoke again.

"Alright. Come with me, young man. We shall go to a more... friendly room."

Chapter 187 Time To Grieve

After saying that, Mrs. Bellemare stood and walked toward the door. The maid beckoned Alex to follow her, before picking up the water pitcher and the glasses.

The lady walked towards the back end of the house, still taking measured steps. It was like walking to her was still part of her acting as a lady.

Mind you, it might be. Alex had never been close to anyone from a posh family, so he knew next to nothing about proper etiquette.

They reached a small veranda at the back of the house that overlooked their small but very prosperous yard. In the center of that yard, there was a large paved area.

Alexander immediately guessed that was where the pool used to be. Violette had told him how her father had it filled in the week following her brother's funeral.

Mrs. Bellemare took a seat at a nice patio set, and as she did, she caught Alex's gaze. When she followed it, and saw what he was looking at, her eyes saddened.

"A perpetual reminder of what happened." She said with a sigh.

"Why don't you move out? It wouldn't be uncommon or weird to want to move out of a house where such a tragedy happened."

"This house has been in my husband's family for generations. He would never move out of here."

"Does your husband not care what you think?"

Astaroth was getting a better picture of why Violette didn't particularly talk about her family. This didn't feel like the tight-knit family he had.

Quite the opposite, from the vibes he was feeling at the moment.

"My husband was raised in a very patriarchal environment. So he is quite... Stubborn. The opinions of a woman have less weight in his eyes than his own."

"That sounds very misogynistic..."

"Young man, nothing in life is black or white. There are large amounts of grey zones you must learn to navigate, and marriage is one such thing."

"I'm sorry if I sounded patronizing, Mrs. Bellemare."



"It is quite okay. It's also refreshing to hear a man apologize. Your parents raised a good kid."

"Thank you. I'm sure they are happy to hear that wherever they may be now."

"Now, let's get to our principal business. I can see you have no ill intention toward my daughter, or my family. But why does she want to visit you, when I can simply have you come here, where she is safe?"

"You would have to ask her. She was the one who asked if she could come to my place, and I told her to check with you first. I fully understand the misunderstandings such a young girl going to a grown man's home would cause."

"Hmm." The mother hummed, pensively.

She lifted her hand, signaling the maid she wanted something. The elderly woman got closer, giving a curt bow.

"Fetch Violette please, Martha."

"As you wish, my lady."

The maid departed, leaving Alex alone with Mrs. Bellemare, who was silently looking at the gardens at her side. Alex didn't want to disturb her thoughts, so he started looking at the flowers, too.

The garden was a lovely mix of red and purple flowers, that blended in so well with the luscious scene the house already depicted. It was the kind of garden emperors would have.

Alex looked on in amazement as the flowers drew his attention like a magnet. He barely noticed his surroundings.

At some point he almost felt vertigo, and he reeled back, this head spinning.

"Hahahaha. You let your senses get lost in the flowers, did you?" Mrs. Bellemare asked, after laughing lightly.

"What was that?"

"It's the flower arrangement. It was set to pull you in if you stare too long at one flower. The purple flowers act as the attraction, and the red flowers obfuscate your senses."

"How can a flower arrangement do that?" Alex asked, befuddled.

"We had a hypnotist set a pattern, and the two-tone flowers to the rest. The colors we chose are the two colors we associate with our children." The woman responded, still looking at the flowers, with a soft smile.

Alex could feel the nostalgia washing off the woman, and it was mixed with intense sadness. He could tell she was not remotely close to being done grieving.

"Mrs. Bellemare—"

"Please, call me Katherine. I think as a friend of my daughter, you deserve at least that freedom." The woman interjected, smiling softly at him.

"In that case, don't mind if I do. Katherine, can I ask you a very personal question?"

"As long as it isn't anything unbecoming, yes."

"Have you really taken time to grieve? With your husband, I mean?"

"Is it that obvious?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I've lost my family. I can recognize that much at a glance."

"We seldom have time to stop and grieve. Especially Richard, my husband."

"Maybe you should take time?"

"We couldn't if we wanted. We still have to take care of Violette. But thank you for worrying about us. It is very noble of you."

Violette arrived near the garden and heard that last sentence as her mother said it. Instead of walking out, she hid near the door and eavesdropped.

After a moment of silence, Alexander thought of something he could do for the woman. If his plan worked, both the parents would get to mourn, and that might help mend the relationship in their family.

"I may have a solution for you, Katherine. Would you be interested in hearing it?"

That piqued the woman's interest, and she stopped gazing at the flowers.

"Pray tell."

"What if I took the burden off of you, for the time you need?"

"What burden?"

"What if I temporarily took care of your daughter? I have enough room in my home, and I'm not half bad at cooking, so she wouldn't die of food poisoning, hehe."

The woman looked at him incredulously, her eyes going slightly wider.

"I couldn't... I wouldn't dare ask—"

"Please. I insist. I believe mourning our lost ones is a crucial step in walking forward. It wouldn't bother in the slightest to take care of Violette in the meantime."

"But what about you? Wouldn't your schedule be all messed up?"

"Mrs. Bellemare—Erm... Katherine. I don't have a schedule to begin with. My money comes from investments and playing New Eden. I have all the free time in the world."

"I don't know if—"

"Say yes! Please, mom!" Violette came rushing in, her outburst a plea.

She practically threw herself at her mother's feet, her hands locked together.

"Please say yes," she repeated.

Chapter 188 Heated Situation

Violette was practically begging her mother, as Alex was looking at the latter with a wry smile.

"Young man, I don't know what you did to bewitch my daughter like this, but I thank you. She hasn't had this much enthusiasm since..."

"I didn't do anything. I was just there, as a friend."

"Please, mom. Please let me go spend some time with Asta–Alexander. I promise I'll be safe and that I'll be on my best behaviour. Please say yes!"

Katherine looked at her daughter with incredulous eyes. She wondered what pushed her daughter to want to leave the house so badly.

But then, she understood her, too. Her father had been a shell of what he once was, and the surrounding mood was always sombre, especially between the two of them.

It must have been hurting her daughter so much, to feel rejected so much, almost like an unwanted stranger in her own home.

"Fine. As long as it isn't too much of a burden on mister Leduc. And if you ever want to come back home, you simply have to call and I will send Alfred to pick you up."

"As I have said, it will be no problem at all. She will be welcome in my home for as long as she wants."

Violette screeched in happiness.

"I'll go make my bag then! Thank you, mother!"

She jumped into her mother's arms, giving her a tight hug, before storming off, followed by the maid. Katherine shook her head slightly, a soft smile on her lips.

"Thank you, young man. I believe it will be a balm for her, as much as for us."

"Please. I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want to, or didn't think it was necessary. Violette is a friend, and so I believe that makes her family my friends, too."

"I think that is what she needed. A friend. Thank you for being her friend, Alexander."

As she said that, they heard the front door to the house slamming. Her mood instantly soured.

Alex saw the change in expression on her face and knew who had slammed that door.

'Her husband.'

"Katherine! Where are you?!"

The voice contained traces of rage, but the words were also slightly slurry.

"In the veranda, darling."

"You'll have to excuse his manners. I think he is drunk again," she then said in a lower voice to Alexander.

Alex merely nodded in response. The two of them could hear the heavy steps coming toward them, accompanied by the occasional stumbling.

Soon after, Richard stormed into the veranda, his suit ruffled, his tie loose, and clear wet spots on his blouse. As he got closer to Alex, the stench of liquor also assaulted their nostrils.

"Are you the one that my daughter has been wanting to go see so much? What are you, a pedophile?!"

"No sir. I am no such thing. Simply a friend."

"Pah! What kind of grown man befriends a young girl?!"

The drunken man then started stepping closer to Alex, before picking him up by his collar.

"Honey! He is a guest, restrain yourself!"

"Shut up, woman! I won't let a possible child abuser take my daughter from me!"

Alexander's eyes darkened at the blatant attack on him, but he kept his cool.

"Sir. I understand your worries, but I am not that kind of person. I didn't invite your daughter to come to see me. She asked of her own volition. We are nothing more than friends."

"Husband, unhand him. You are being ungentlemanly!"

"I said shut up, Katherine. I am the man here. I decide who is a good person. Not you!"

Alexander's blood began to boil. How could such a man call himself a father and a husband?

He was currently showing nothing but the typical abusive man traits you would expect from a wife-beater. His fists started clenching in anger.

Katherine saw this and tried de-escalating the situation once more.

"Please, Richard. Contain yourself. You are drunk, and this young man has done nothing wrong. Why do you think I had him brought here in the first place? I already interrogated him, and he seems like a fine young man."

\*Slap!\*

Katherine fell to her butt, a handprint on her cheek, her eyes wide in surprise. Richard had been abusive verbally before, but he had never laid hands on her.

Two things happened in quick succession from there. The first was Alex's mind reeling in anger.

He would never tolerate a man hitting a woman, even less a man his wife. An icy chill washed off Alexander as his arm swept back, taking a swing.

The next thing that happened was a crisp resounding sound, as his fist impacted the drunk man's cheek, sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Don't you dare strike your wife like that, you pathetic excuse of a man! Grieving is no excuse to become an abusive husband!"

Richard looked at him from the ground, his eyes filled with anger.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Bellemare. I will take my leave now. If Violette still wants to come to stay with me temporarily, she is more than welcome. If not, I would understand."

As Alexander turned to leave, the drunk man got up from the ground, rushing at him, well intent on fighting him. But as he got near, and Alex turned to face him, his hands already in a guarding position, something else happened.

Katherine got up, faster than a bolt of lightning, and dashed between them, before smacking her husband across the face.

"Enough! Have you not shamed us enough?! Go take a cold shower and sober up!"

Richard was taken aback. His wife had always been soft-spoken and nonviolent.

The slap to his face brought a bit of reason back to his mind. He angrily stomped away, shouldering Alex on the way past him, as he stormed inside the house.

"I'm sorry you had to witness this, Mr. Leduc. Please, go wait up front. I will send Violette in a moment."

Her tone was back to the icy tone she had when she first spoke to him. But Alex knew it wasn't aimed at him.

He gave a curt bow before heading back to the front door and exiting the house, waiting next to the car upfront.

'I think I overstepped. When did I become so quick to resort to violence?' he thought, as waited next to the car.

#### Chapter 189 A Broken Little Girl

Alexander waited for close to half an hour, standing next to the car, until Violette came out the front door. Her earlier excitement was nowhere to be found, and her eyes seemed a little puffy.

"Let's go please, Alfred."

"Yes, young lady," the chauffeur responded, bowing.

He then picked up her luggage and set it in the trunk of the car. Violette silently sat inside the cabin, looking at her feet all the while passing next to Alex.

'Is she mad at me?'

Alex sat in the back of the car, sitting next to the downtrodden girl. When the car started moving, Violette looked up at the chauffeur's mirror.

"Alfred, can we get some privacy for a moment, please?"

"Of course, young lady."

The man pressed a button on his dash, and a small tinted window started rising, separating the driver from the back. Then Violette burst into tears.

"Oh, Violette. Please don't cry."

Alexander didn't know whether he should hug her or just let her be. He had never consoled a girl before, so he was at a loss.

"I'm sorry my dad attacked you. Please don't be mad at him. He's not a bad person."

Violette started apologizing for her father's actions, choking on her tears at the same time, and sniffing her words out. This gave a mix of anger and sadness to Alex.

He was mad that she felt the need to apologize for her father's inexcusable actions. But he also felt sad that she thought it was the right thing to do.

"Violette. Stop apologizing. You have no fault in this situation. Your father is responsible for his own actions, and you don't have to apologize for them."

The girl kept sobbing, but she stopped apologizing. She eventually leaned in on him, and he hugged her, trying to help her calm down.

"I'm not mad at your father for attacking me. I understand his actions, and I would probably feel the same way in the same circumstances."

"I am sorry for punching him, even if I think my action was justified. I am only mad at your father for striking your mother, nothing more."

"Now. Let's talk about what we should do in the next few days. I don't know how long you will stay with me, but we can't just be playing video games, now, can we?"

Violette stopped sobbing. Tears kept rolling down her cheeks, but they did so in silence.

She looked pensive as she calmed down, and eventually stopped crying entirely. Alex found it slightly weird that they hadn't yet reached his building, since the trip to Violette's house had taken less time.

But he surmised the driver was probably taking a long roundabout to let them have their conversation in peace.

'This chauffeur is used to these situations. A real professional,' Alex thought.

Once Violette had stopped crying, she leaned forward and tapped on the tinted window. A moment after, it started sliding down.

"Yes, young lady?"

"You can drive us there now."

"Very well."

Not ten minutes later, they were stopped in front of Alexander's building. It seemed they hadn't strayed too much from it.

Violette had been silent for the remainder of the trip, her mind too busy thinking about what they should do. This was like a long sleepover for her, but she hadn't had many of those.

Alexander went to the back of the car to grab Violette's bag, but the chauffeur beat him to it.

"I can carry her bag inside. I'm sure you have other things to attend to, sir."

"I will bring the young lady's bag inside, Mr. Leduc. Those are my instructions."

"It's fine. I can do it."

"I insist."

When the chauffeur said those last words, the stare he gave Alexander gave him chills.

'This isn't just a chauffeur,' Alexander thought, as he swallowed his dry saliva.

"S... Sure. Whatever you say..."

He then let go of the bag.

Alexander led both of them to his elevator, swiping his pass card, and entering his code and biometrics, before the elevator door closed.

The chauffeur looked at the security panel and nodded silently.

'He's probably tasked with ensuring her security. Better stay out of his way for now.'

When they arrived at his penthouse, Alexander left the elevator and tapped a code in his security system, which elicited another nod from Alfred.

"The rooms are up the stairs. I have two guest rooms. You can pick whichever you want."

The chauffeur walked up the stairs, his eyes scanning the whole place as he did, with what could only be called an experienced gaze. Alex guessed the man was maybe ex-military, or something similar.

As that happened, Violette was already exploring the main floor, oohing and awing at the luxury of the place. She then walked out on the balcony, to look at the amazing view.

"Be careful Violette. We don't want you falling."

"Wow! We're so high up! The view is so beautiful!"

The chauffeur came down the stairs at that moment, throwing a stern look at Alex, before walking outside and inspecting the balcony. Alex could tell that the man had more than likely already inspected the one upstairs.

The man knocked on the glass door on his way out. The knocks were not hard, but Alex could tell he was checking the solidity of the window.

"They're bulletproof," he told the chauffeur.

The man nodded another time before walking up to Violette.

"Young lady, I have inspected the premises. You will be safe here. I will now be going back to the Bellemare residence. If you ever need me, do not hesitate to call."

"Mm," Violette responded with a smile.

As the chauffeur walked back toward the elevator, he stopped next to Alexander, whispering something to him.

"Please take good care of her. If harm were ever to befall her while she is under your purview, the implications would be... less than ideal for you."

\*Gulp\*

"I will make sure she stays safe."

"If the need ever arises, you can call me directly on this number," the man added, handing a business card to Alexander.

The card was plain black, with a number printed in red on it.

"Goodbye, Mr. Leduc."

Chapter 190 A First Taste

The tension left the penthouse with Alfred, and Alex finally breathed a sigh of relief.

'That man has a heavy presence. Almost like Kloud.'

In the meantime, Violette was enjoying the view outside, her chin resting on the balcony glass railing, since her head barely poked over it. She would look for a few seconds at one spot, then move around to another side of the building and repeat.

It was cute to watch, but Alex decided to get her back in before a stupid accident happened. Even though the glass panes were also bulletproof, one could never be too safe.

"Violette, wanna come back in? Let's get you settled and have something to eat. Then we can think about what we do next. What do you think?"

"Okaaayyy!"

She zoomed back in like a mini tornado before running up the stairs in front of Alex. That made him chuckle as he followed behind.

"Careful not to fall."

\*Thump\*

"I'm okay!"

As Alex set foot on the second floor and turned the corner to the rooms, he found Violette sprawled on the ground, giggling to herself. It looked like she had slipped on the hardwood floors and tumbled into the wall.

She was fine, but it was a scene to behold. Her bum was against the wall, with her feet in the air, and she was looking at Alex upside down.

"C'mon, goofy. Let's get you unpacked. That way we can see if you forgot anything."

"Okay!" she chimed, as she flipped back to a normal posture.

She ran to the doors, trying to find what room would be hers for the next few days. Alex had the master bedroom at the end of the hall, and the room to its left was his office.

The two rooms to the right were the guest rooms. He had them furnished, in case he ever needed them, so she would be fine.

The chauffeur had dropped her thing in the room closest to his, which was also the furthest from the stairs. Most likely a safety option in the improbable case of a break-in.



That room was also the only other room that had access to the panic room connected to the master bedroom. Alexander had found out about it after the purchase, since it wasn't mentioned on the blueprints.

When he called the contractor about it, he said that was by design. 'Can't expect a panic room when it's not on the blueprints!' had been his answer.

Alfred had probably noticed it during his rapid inspection, and chose this room accordingly. The man's perceptiveness really impressed Alexander, since the panic room was currently closed.

Alexander brushed his stray thoughts aside, helping Violette to unpack her back, until she screamed at him to let her finish on her own. He didn't quite understand her switch in attitude, but he did as she asked.

"I'll go make us some lunch then. I'll be in the kitchen."

"Alright, I'll come down when I'm done!" she said, almost slamming the door on his ass.

'Jeez, what's gotten into her?'

He shrugged and went back downstairs. He opened up his fridge, looking for something to eat that would be good for two people, and couldn't find anything.

All his prepared portions were for a single person, and he didn't want to have her eat something different from him. So he instead ordered food from a nearby pizza joint.

He didn't know what Violette liked, so he ordered a half-and-half pizza, one side all dressed and the other pepperoni and cheese. He was tempted to order a Hawaiian pizza, but what if Violette was one of those 'pineapple on pizza' haters?

'Better safe than sorry.'

By the time he hung up, he heard footsteps on the stairs. Violette was coming back down from her room.

"I had nothing we could eat together, so I ordered pizza. Is that okay with you?"

"Pizza?! I've never had pizza!" Violette squealed.

"Excuse me...? You've never had pizza? What kind of nightmare life were you living in that house?"

Alexander looked at the girl with eyes wide and a look of horror. What kind of parents never let their kids eat pizza?

That was blasphemy!

It almost tempted him to call back and have them switch his order up. He would be fine with eating pizza for days, if that meant she could taste all the kinds.

But then again, that wasn't a very healthy thing to do, so he refrained from doing so.

It took around twenty minutes for the delivery guy to reach the lobby. Violette and he had been talking and planning their next few days.

They didn't know how long Violette would be here, so they only planned a few days ahead.

Alexander buzzed the pizza guy up, paying him as soon as the elevator doors opened, and sent him back on his way. The delivery guy had eyes like saucers, having never seen a home like this one.

Alex gave him a fat tip, trying to get him to stop looking in his home as fast as possible. He was still a bit paranoid about his home invasion.

He walked to the kitchen counter, pulled out two plates, and served up the pie, with glasses of coca and some fries.

Violette stood next to him, watching him carefully, practically drooling as she looked at the pizza. Her nostrils were taking in the smell voraciously, and her stomach was already starting to rumble.

"Jesus. It's like no one ever fed you," Alex said, chuckling.

After serving the plates, he brought them to the dining table, seating Violette next to him. She sat down, looking at her plate like a predator.

"Go ahead, take a bite. But be careful, it's still very hot."

Violette nodded her head, never taking her eyes off the prize. She looked at Alex for a second.

"Don't we need utensils?"

"Oh my god! How sheltered were you? Use your hands. Look at me," he said, grabbing the pizza with both hands, and taking a bite.

Violette watched him and imitated his technique. After taking her bite, she went completely silent.

A small tear rolled off her cheek before she devoured half the point in her plate.

"Wow! Slow down, before you choke, hahaha!"

"It's sooooo goood!" she uttered, her mouth full of pizza.