

## **New Eden 211**

### Chapter 211 Finding The Cause

Setting down next to the General, Astaroth kept his Perfect Mana Sense active, to pinpoint where the mana was coming into her. Meanwhile, the General was trying to identify the curse.

The best way to break a curse was to find what caused it, and what it was. It was the only way to find the appropriate cure.

The General was the first one to find his objective, after examining how the mana affected the Baron's wife.

"This curse is quite the nasty one. It is washing out all of your wife's natural mana by forcefully injecting dark mana into her body. The only way to cure this is to find the source and cleanse it."

The General turned his head to Astaroth.

"How is it going on that side, young man?"

Astaroth was frowning. His sense pointed at the woman's chest, but it seemed deeper, for some strange reason.

Almost like the mana was entering her heart. Astaroth leaned in closer, extending his hand forward toward the woman's breast.

"He's trying to defile the lady!" a guard shouted, lunging forward.

But he never made it far, since the Baron held the man back.

"The General trusts him, and I do too. I believe he is trying to help. Back down!"

"I'm... I'm sorry, my lord," the guard said, stowing his weapon and walking back to the wall.

The Baron gave a stern gaze at Astaroth, watching his every movement. Of course, he was worried too, since this was his wife, but he stood by and waited.

Astaroth nodded at the noble and went back to business. He grasped the lady's bed robes, exposing a bit of her bare chest, before pulling on a pendant tied around her neck.

The necklace unclasped from her neck and dangled in his hands.

"This necklace has a weird mana signature to it. Was it always that way?"

He turned to look at the Baron, who had a strange look on his face.

"This necklace can't be the cause of her illness. It is a gift from her clan, and she has had it ever since we were married."

"And has she always worn it, or has there been a moment recently where she wasn't?"

"Hmm. She wears it at all moments, even during her sleep. Wait... Come to think of it, there were a few days when she wasn't wearing it. The clasp had broken and her personal attendant brought it to be fixed."

"And she got sick after that? That didn't raise any alarms?"

"That was months ago. My wife has only been sick for a few days, at most. That can't be the cause."

"Where is her attendant now?"

The Baron became gloomy.

"A demon kidnapped her attendant not long after she fell ill. That is why we are on lockdown. We have yet to find the fiend, or the attendant's body. We fear it might have consumed it already."

"Hmm," Astaroth said, looking at the pendant again.

Something was strange about the necklace. There were traces of dark mana on it, but they were almost imperceptible.

The General was also looking at the necklace with a discerning gaze.

"May I?" he asked, pointing at the pendant.

Astaroth nodded, giving him the necklace, before going back to examining the woman. The dark mana entering her had not slowed down after removing the pendant, so he knew that wasn't the source of the curse.

As Astaroth was still trying to figure out where the mana was entering through, the General made a discovery.

"Hmm. Was there always an engraving on the back of this pendant?"

The Baron looked puzzled. He had inspected the pendant when it came back from being repaired, and he didn't spot any engraving.

But when he walked to the General, and looked at the back of the pendant, there was indeed now an engraving. It was barely a millimetre deep, and hard to spot without looking for it.

"This wasn't there when the necklace came back. But it's impossible to have it done after. My wife has worn the pendant at all times since."

The General passed his thumb on the engraving, looking at it afterwards. There was a slight golden dust on his thumb, matching the colour of the pendant.

He licked his thumb before grimacing.

"This dust is golden bone dust. It is a dust often used to make ink for rituals by witch doctors. But why would it be on the pendant? It needs to be mixed into a liquid to take hold."

Astaroth had an eureka when the General said that.

"I am terribly sorry, Baron Duncan, but I will have to be very improper."

The Baron looked at him, confused, but Astaroth didn't wait for his approval. He tore the Elven woman's robe apart, revealing the woman's ample bust.

The Baron's face contorted into a mask of rage as the guards all lunged forward again, swords pulled out.

"What do you think you are doing?! Men! Kill him!"

But before anyone could execute the order, the General stood up abruptly, his eyes wide. He had just recognized the engraving, and when his eyes shifted to the woman's exposed breast, he found the same one tattooed between her breasts.

"Enough! He is trying to help her!" the General howled, launching a force wave at the guards, catapulting them into the walls behind them.

The action took the Baron aback, since he had rarely seen him expressing himself this way. The mage was usually the quiet and composed type.

After knocking the guards away, the General quickly leaned forward.

"Good thinking, young man. But now I'm afraid we need to work even faster. The sigil on her chest shows how long she has, and the darker it becomes, the less time she has."

Astaroth gulped at the statement, since the sigil was almost all black already. They had almost no time left.

"What can I do to help?" Astaroth hurriedly asked.

"I will try to lock the mana out of her body, to slow down the process. But that will buy us minutes, at best. The only way to stop this curse is to kill the caster."

Astaroth felt the burden on his shoulders and nodded solemnly.

"I think the caster is still on the manor grounds since they quickly issued the lockdown. But you will need to find it, where the guards have been failing for days. Can you do it?"

"I will not fail!" Astaroth promised, before darting out of the room.

## Chapter 212 Sneaky Demon

After dashing out of the room and corridor, Astaroth ended up in the study again. He forwent taking a long way out, and busted through one of the large windows.

As he did, he melded with Morpheus, and used the windowsill as a jumping board, launching himself into the sky with his newly sprouted wings. The guards searching the grounds below all became alarmed at the appearance of this flying monster.

Some even started firing at him with bows and crossbows. Astaroth activated Mana Skin, allowing him to focus less on dodging and more on searching.

He barely had to move, as most arrows just bounced off the layer of mana protecting him. Astaroth closed his eyes and cracked his mouth open.

A barely perceptible high-pitched hum left his lips at regular intervals. He had infused the waves with mana, making them slightly more powerful, and increasing the range they travelled.

After a few seconds, Astaroth had already discerned an area that had weird echoes, and he opened his eyes, pivoting to look at that spot. His Perfect Mana Sense still enabled, he noticed the waves of mana warping around something invisible.

"Found you," Astaroth mumbled, grinning maniacally.

He rapidly pulled out his bow, booking an arrow and aiming at the weird phenomenon. He used his Piercing Shot skill, infusing the arrow with wind mana, before letting it loose.

The arrow blazed forward, forming a whirlwind behind it, as it impacted a hard surface. To the bystander guards, the arrow seemed to drill through the air, as it wasn't moving from its spot.

But a crack suddenly appeared in the air itself, before a sound of glass shattering echoed across the manor grounds. A bellowing screech soon followed it with an unnatural echo to it.

In the spot where there was previously nothing, there was now a young woman, standing still, with an arrow embedded into her shoulder. Hovering over her head and back, a tall shadow of a humanoid creature.

The woman had an empty stare, as she looked at Astaroth, her skin pale as death. Astaroth couldn't even feel any mana coming from her, and he assumed she was dead.

"Intruder in the west yard!" a guard shouted, seeing the black shadow-covered woman.

The shadow snapped its head toward the guard, and not a second later, his head exploded, sending blood flying on his nearby colleagues.

When the shadow's head, or what Astaroth assumed was a head since its eyes were there, landed back on him, he felt a slight pang in his brain before hearing a notification.

\*Mind Over Body activated. Resisted ??? mental affliction.\*

Astaroth grew cautious.

'A mental status that even the system can't name. That isn't ominous at all...'

The shadow's eyes turned to slits, when it noticed Astaroth was still in the sky, intact. The woman's dead body suddenly shuddered.

Her mouth opened.

"You dare interfere, mortal? I will eat your soul!"

The voice didn't come out of the open mouth, but instead echoed all around the body, like it was coming from the air itself. Every word came with a slight mental weight, which was barely enough to bother Astaroth.

But the guards below weren't as mentally resilient as him, and their ears were already bleeding, as they howled in pain, dropping to their knees.

Astaroth tried scanning his target, but the interface was glitching madly. He wasn't able to discern anything.

'Another ominous thing,' he thought.

Astaroth decided there was no time to waste. Since the General had told him he couldn't hold back the curse for long, Astaroth went for speed over caution.

He dived forward, switching out his weapon from the bow to his war axe. While he descended, the creature howled at him, trying to claw him out of the sky.

Astaroth deftly dodged the strikes, making his way to the inanimate body tied to the shadow. He immediately used his Decapitation Strike skill, intent on ending things in one blow.

His axe plunged through the shoulder where the arrow was still lodged, meeting almost no resistance, before slicing cleanly through it, all the way down.

The shadow screeched loudly again, causing some heads to pop. But it wasn't over.

Tendrils of dark energy were holding the two parts of the body together, slowly bringing the parts back into one piece. Astaroth was fascinated by what was happening, but he shook his head.

A life was at stake, after all. He had no time to admire the creature's resilience.

A rapid bout followed, as the shadow tried to kill its assailant, and Astaroth was trying to figure out a way to slay it. Their attacks kept hitting each other, but only Astaroth took damage.

A frown was creeping up on his face, as he noticed his attacks were ineffective.

'Why is it still alive? It should have died by now, or at least taken damage.'

Astaroth looked at the health bar over the monster, and it was still entirely green. Meanwhile, his was slowly turning redder by the second.

He tried another tactic, jumping back, before unleashing a volley of spells at the entity. But, yet again, there was no damage being registered.

He assumed maybe the shadow had physical damage immunity, so he swapped to magic. Khalor's ghosts had been the same, after all.

But he was still doing nothing to it.

'This makes no sense. Why would they make a creature with no way to kill?'

But suddenly, a bolt of golden-white lightning struck the shadow from the side. Its health bar immediately showed some change as the entity screeched in pain.

Astaroth's head snapped to where the bolt had come from, and saw the Baron, standing on the windowsill he had burst from. The Baron was wielding a thick white shield emblazoned with a golden cross.

In his other hand, he was wielding a mace, similar to the one Silent Light had.

'A Paladin!' Astaroth shouted internally, becoming excited.

"Die, you foul creature! Go back to hell, where you belong!" the Baron shouted, before launching another attack.

### Chapter 213 Full Recovery

Astaroth looked on in awe as the Baron struck the shadow creature with his mace, shaving off chunks of the entity's health. Where he could not even scratch it, the Baron was now beating it half to death.

Astaroth took the role of support in this fight, knocking away incoming attacks, to ensure the Baron could keep wailing on it. The fight was over in a matter of minutes, as the shadow had almost fully dissolved.

It shrieked a last time, shouting out an empty threat as it disappeared.

"You mortals are only delaying the inevitable! The king will reign once more on these lands, sooner or later!"

Baron Duncan struck his mace into the shadow's remaining cluster, disintegrating it.

"Then I will wait for him."

Astaroth slowly clapped at his reply, eliciting an angry stare from the man. He was obviously still mad at Astaroth for exposing his wife's breasts like a savage.

Astaroth raised his hands in a sign of peace, smiling.

"Tch!" the baron clicked his tongue, heading back inside.

Astaroth followed behind the man, at a safe distance. He didn't want to take the chance that the man might spin around and splatter his head with his mace.

They both made their way back to the panic room, finding in it the General with a tired look. He was still seated next to the bed, and on the bed, bed sheets covered the Elven woman.

Her complexion already looked better than previously. That made the Baron utter a sigh of relief.

Astaroth was waiting on his quest to end, but the notification was still not coming. He frowned a little.

Meanwhile, the woman's eyes started fluttering open. Amal threw himself at the bedside.

"Alora! You are awake!" he exclaimed, a tear rolling down his cheek.

The woman seemed disoriented as she tried sitting up in bed. As she did, the General, Astaroth, and all the guards in the room quickly spun around, turning their back to her.

The woman didn't understand why they acted like this until the breath of her husband sent chills down her exposed bust. Her head lowered, finding her two peachy mounds on full display.

Her cheeks flushed red, as the Baron shouted, "Everyone out! Now!"

Not a single soul in the room dared disobey the order. The guards fled the room, quickly followed by Astaroth and the General.

Astaroth suddenly felt boredom through his mental connection with Genie. He realizes he hadn't called on her to deal with the entity from earlier, and she had been waiting outside the mansion all this time.

He excused himself to the guards and the General, explaining that he needed to attend to his companion, and they led him outside. They guided him through the doors this time.

The General followed behind, as he was curious about something. Once outside, Astaroth called on Genie and sat down.

She came running from somewhere in the yard, and lay down next to him. She seemed to have forgiven him for forgetting her at the guild the day before.

"I've been neglecting you lately. I swear we'll do something together soon enough."

Genie let out a happy whine before dropping her head on Astaroth's thighs. He chuckled before scratching her head slowly, eliciting some joy from the wolf.

She had grown quite a lot recently, not reaching the size White Death was, but being considerably larger than other Dire Wolves. He could tell that in due time, Genie would have become an alpha.

Her head was already the size of his chest. Astaroth noticed the General was staring at him.

"Is there something you want to ask?"

"Hmm. Ahh, no. I was simply finding your versatility fascinating."

"My versatility? What do y--"

Then it struck him. The strong scanning he felt earlier that day.

How much had the man seen of him? Astaroth's head snapped toward the General, and Genie could feel the sudden wariness through their connection.

She jumped, lowering her stance as she growled at the blond man next to her master. The General chuckled, lifting his arms peacefully.

"She is quite protective of you, I see. You have nothing to worry about. I won't tell anyone your secrets. You probably have your own reasons to hide your full potential, and I can respect that."

Although Astaroth still didn't know how much the blond man knew, he felt like he was being honest, at least. He slid his hand on Genie's back, sending her a wave of reassurance.

The wolf calmed down, but didn't let her eyes wander from the General. This elicited another chuckle from the man.

At that moment, a guard walked towards them. The guard stopped a few feet away, bowing to the General.

"The Lord and Lady are ready to see you."

"Thank you. We know the way. You can tell the lord we are on our way."

The guard bowed again before turning on his heels and leaving. The General looked at Astaroth, smiling, before turning and leaving in the mansion entrance's direction.

Astaroth frowned at his shrouded attitude, but got up and followed behind. Was there even a reason to worry anymore?

The man was much more powerful than him, anyway. If he wanted to air out all his secrets, there wasn't much he could do to stop him.

But Astaroth didn't get any nefarious vibes from him, either.

'I guess only time will tell...'

The two men walked inside the house, heading to the study. They had guessed they would hold the meeting there.

Astaroth looked at the gaping hole in the window behind the desk and smiled sheepishly. The Baron followed his eyes and grumbled under his breath when he was reminded who broke the window.

The Lady, currently seated next to him, since her legs were still weak, put her hand on his arm. That instantly calmed the grumbling man.

"Ahem!" the Baron cleared his throat.

"I would first like to thank both of you for saving my wife's life today. Even if some of your actions were dubious—" the man paused, staring at Astaroth.

"She lives today thanks to your quick thinking, sharp mind, and senses. For this, I shall reward you handsomely."

The two men bowed in gratitude.

"Now, pertaining to your rewards," the Baron said, a devious smile flashing on his face.

Chapter 214 Unwanted Title

"General Enzo. I was told the reason for your visit in the first place was to enquire about my current allegiances. I believe you are running for the next Grand Marshall election and want my support. Is that correct?"

"Please, Baron, call me Hakim. We are still under your roof. But yes, it is indeed the reason for my visit."

"Very well. Although I owe everything I have to the current Grand Marshall, I believe he will understand the circumstances. You have my full backing."

"I couldn't ask for more," The General said, doing a curt bow.

"As for you, adventurer. I was told you already have an S-rank license, so completing quests for ranks is no longer a problem you have. I will pay you a handsome reward for saving my wife's life. But what else can I do for you?"

"Sir, the reward is already more than I can ask for. I wouldn't want to abuse your generosity."

Astaroth guessed this was the end of the quest, and the gold was already plenty for him. He didn't want to ask for more and possibly lose all the rewards.

"Very w--"

"Just a moment, Baron Duncan."

"Yes, Hakim?"

"I believe his deeds today deserve at least some form of reward other than monetary, don't you agree, Lady Duncan?"

The Baron almost growled at the mention of his wife, but stayed silent.

"I believe he has earned at least some recognition," the lady agreed with a nod.

The General smiled at her response.

"Then how about this? You can make him a knight under your service. Would that not be a just reward?"

"Giving out knighthood seems a little overboard, Hakim."



"Excus--"

"I disagree, Amal. I think he deserves as much."

"Um, Exc--"

"Aren't you just trying to find an extra vote for your elections, General?"

"Pard--"

"Nonsense! I simply want the young man to be rewarded justly."

Astaroth was starting to understand how Violette had felt in the dungeon. His face was getting hot, and he was about to shout, when silence took the room.

When he looked up, Astaroth saw that Lady Duncan had raised her hand, silencing the bickering men.

"I believe the young man should have an opinion on the matter, do you not?"

Both men snapped their heads toward Astaroth, and he could feel their opposing opinions on the matter with the differing looks they held.

"Far from me the idea of being rude and refusing such an honour. But I would prefer to keep my freedom, and I think a knighthood would be extremely restrictive."

The General had a disappointed look, but the Baron seemed more than glad he was refusing it.

"Then it's se--"

"Then an honorary title would suffice, right?" the General asked, refusing to let up.

Astaroth sighed.

'Dude! Stop butting in!' Astaroth screamed in his mind.

Seeing he had no way out without agreeing, Astaroth nodded his head. The baron gave up, since his wife was smile-staring at him.

"Very well."

Amal had a guard bring him all the required documents from the nearby administrative office, as well as a knight's crest from his personal vault.

The General was happy he had won, but he had other places to be. He excused himself, making Astaroth promise to visit him at the castle when he had time before leaving.

The ceremony to knight him was short and unimpressive, much to Astaroth's pleasure. It ended with the Baron officially giving him his crest.

"Now rise, sir Astaroth."

The Baron offered his hand to help him get up, and Astaroth took it. When the Baron's hand latched on his, he pulled him in for a soldier's embrace.

He whispered into his ear while they were close.

"If you ever look at my wife, or think of her, in any fashion other than reverence, I will track you down and flay you myself."

Astaroth gulped as the Baron pulled away, smiling widely, like he had not just threatened his life. He gave a solemn nod in response.

Astaroth saw Lady Duncan shaking her head in disapproval from the corner of his eyes. He could easily guess she had heard everything, since the Elven senses were keen.

After paying him his gold, the Baron sent him away, so he and his wife could rest. He was quite happy, since he couldn't wait to rest himself.

He got his notification on the way out.

\*Ding!\*

\*Quest complete!\*

Quest: Find A Cure (Updated).

Objectives:

Find out what is ailing the Baron's wife.  $\hat{\alpha}$ "

Find a cure or solution to her illness.  $\hat{\alpha}$ "

Slay the demon apparition alone. x

Rewards:

Reputation in Sunpeak +1000  $\hat{\alpha}$ "

Reputation with Baron Declan +5000  $\hat{\alpha}$ "

Gold +1000  $\hat{\alpha}$ "

Honorary Title, Knight  $\hat{\alpha}$ "

??? x

The new objective made him frown a bit. He guessed it would have been possible for maybe a cleric or paladin player to achieve it, but he couldn't deal any damage to the apparition.

It saddened him a bit to not know what reward came with defeating it, but it wasn't really a loss if he didn't know. Astaroth walked back to the inn, since many hours had already passed.

He was exhausted, and couldn't wait to go to sleep for a few hours in his bed. But before he tapped the log out button, he started receiving messages from his friends list.

Most of them were congratulatory messages, with a few having mocking undertones, calling him 'Sire'. He didn't quite understand why they were congratulating him until he thanked one and saw the name next to his response.

Sir Astaroth, Honorary Knight of Sunpeak.

When Astaroth saw that, his heart stopped beating. He quickly opened his status window to see if it was there, too.

And there it was, black on white, his title. The game automatically equipped it.

Astaroth was at a loss for words. He had decided not to equip the title, since it sounded so cringe to him.

But it seemed the game had taken that choice from him.

'God dammit! There goes trying to be low key. This game is sabotaging me, I swear!'

"Log out!" Astaroth shouted in displeasure.

## Chapter 215 Impatient Man

Opening his eyes inside his pod, Alexander looked at the clock. It was still early morning, and Violette would still sleep for a few hours.

He let her sleep while he cleaned himself up, then went down to make breakfast. He went for something easy and light, making omelettes with bacon and vegetables.

While whisking the mix, he heard a light footfall on the staircase. Alex turned his head slightly, seeing Violette coming down from her room in zombie mode.

"Good morning, sunshine."

"Mmm."

Alexander went back to his bowl, and he heard the girl pull a chair at the kitchen island. He could tell she had sat there, as he heard a very distinct thump of her head hitting the countertop.

Alex chuckled a bit, still whisking his eggs, before slowly transferring them to the hot pan. As the egg slowly cooked, Alex made a side of toast and made a cup of hot chocolate for Violette as he poured himself some coffee.

Alex put some cheese in his omelette, since he had been up a little longer and it wouldn't upset his stomach. He tried asking Violette if she wanted some, but she was back to sleep, her face on the cold stone counter.

He finished cooking breakfast, waking her up with the smell of food in her face, as he slid her plate before her. Violette woke up like a rabid dog, wolfing the food on her plate like she had been starving.

"Woah, calm down, hahaha. No one is going to take your food. At least take the time to breathe between your bites."

Violette half ignored him, barely slowing down. She only slowed down once the plate was almost empty, realizing she was being very un-lady-like.

"Um... I'm sorry. I was so hungry."

"Don't worry about it. I can make more if you want. I was more worried about you choking."

Violette shook her head no, as she slowly started drinking her hot chocolate. Alex laughed it off and ate his own plate.

He finished his food faster than usual, still hungry, and made himself another small omelette.

'I guess we both were hungry.'

He ate his second portion, finishing his coffee, before cleaning the kitchen. He told Violette to go dress up, since it was gym day, and she scampered away.

As he cleaned up, he received a text message from a blocked number.

'We need to talk. When can I come over?'

Alex guessed who it was from and replied with a time for when he would be back from training. He didn't want to bother his schedule for David, so the man would have to bend around his.

David only replied with 'Ok' before Alex went to prepare for the gym. When he came out of his room, Violette was also ready, and they both took the elevator down.

The pair made record time to the gym, Violette skipping happily, while Alexander took long strides. Clark was almost disappointed to not see the woman this time, but he said nothing of it.

After three hours of intense cardio training for Alex, and some light muscle exercises for Violette, Clark sent them home, happy that they looked completely spent.

Alexander stopped on the way to the changing room, turning back to his personal trainer.

"Clark. Did you give some thought to what I told you a while back?"

"Hmm? About the game?"

"Yes, about New Eden. Will you try it?"

"I'm still thinking about it, Alex. This isn't my type of thing."

"At least try it before selling it out."

"Why is it so important to you that I play that game? Do you need more friends to play with?"

"That's not wh... Nevermind. Please, just try the game."

"Fine. I'll try it out this weekend. But you'll owe me. This helmet is worth a fortune."

"You think that's bad? You should check the gaming pod prices," Alexander said, smiling as he turned away.

After changing out of his training clothes, Alexander and Violette left the gym. On the way home, Alexander received another text from David.

'I'm in the lobby, waiting for you.'

Alex grumbled to himself.

'I told you to be there in an hour. Why are you there already?' he replied angrily, tapping his phone.

No reply came back, and Alexander slowly boiled as they walked back to the building. Violette noticed his anger, but said nothing.

Once they reached the building and entered, Alex immediately saw David lurking in a corner. The lobby security was already eyeing him wearily.

He walked over to him, tapping his shoulder, before continuing to the elevator. David said nothing, simply following behind.

Once they were all three in the elevator, Violette hanging behind Alexander, David finally spoke.

"Took you long enough. I have little time to be outside the game. You should put aside what you are doing when I text you."

"David, you don't own me. I have a life too. Next time, if I say a time, respect that time, or I'll make sure you can't come in this building."

"Tch! As if you could keep me from coming here. Also, who is this little girl? Is she yours?" he asked, stretching his arm toward Violette.

Alexander intercepted his arm, squeezing his forearm fiercely.

"Hands off, or I'll break them."

There was a look of protectiveness in Alexander's eyes as Violette took cover even more behind him.

David looked Alex in the eyes, feeling something was off.

'Is he already using mana too? No. That's not possible. He shouldn't even know it's here yet.'

He pulled his arm back, breaking free of Alex's grasp, before scoffing at him.

"Calm down, mother hen. I just wanted to know who she was."

\*Ding\*

The elevator doors opened, signifying they had reached the penthouse. David was the first one to exit the confined elevator, walking into the penthouse like he owned the place.

Alex looked at him walk in, before kneeling next to Violette.

"I want you to go in your room and stay inside until I come to get you. Can you do that for me?"

"Are you in trouble?" the girl asked, worry taking hold of her.

"Nothing like that. But I don't want this man near you."

"Okay..."

Violette hurriedly went up the stairs, David only glancing at her as she did before shaking his head.

"I thought you trusted me."

"I trust the information you hold. You are another matter I haven't quite decided on yet. Now tell me, what is so urgent that you couldn't even wait an extra hour?"

"Fine, right to business it is."

David sat down on the plush sofa, his gaze washing around the penthouse.

'Something feels off in here.'

Chapter 216 Future Changing

David stopped paying attention to his distracting thoughts and snapped his attention back to Alex, who was sitting down across from him.

"So? What was so urgent?"

"I have more than one thing to talk about. But first things first. How did you surpass my level this fast? Did you suddenly go on a PVP killing spree?"

"Funny you would ask that. Yes, I did."

David clicked his tongue in disappointment.

"I thought you understood the concept of 'Everyone needs to be stronger'. Why would you willingly take levels from other players?"

"That's my business. Are you mad because I passed you on the charts?"

David shook his head slowly.

"I couldn't care less about that stupid chart. What I care about is having the players grow stronger and more numerous. I already explained this to you last time."

"Then why are you bringing this up?"

"Because you are making potential assets weaker, dumbass!"

"Trust me on this, David. These men were nothing worth considering as assets. I did the world a favour by making them weaker."

"Tch! You still aren't seeing the big picture. Every player is an asset for the future."

"What do a few players matter in the grander scheme of things?"

"They will outnumber us, Alex! Every human that can stand in their way will be essential. If you make the players weaker already, I came back for nothing."

"Fine! I'll restrain myself from PVP in the future."

"Good," David said, trying to calm back down.

"Now, for the second matter. There will be an update soon. The update will include a time skip inside the game. I need you to delay that as much as you can."

"How am I supposed to delay an update? I don't work at Evo-Gaming, remember?"

"They already set the update. It will automatically schedule itself for twenty-four hours after a player reaches level fifty. I need you to hold on to levelling further than forty-nine."

Alexander's brows furrowed.

"Are you asking me this so you can reach the top again?"

"It's like you aren't listening to me at all... I won't be levelling past forty-nine either. And if you can, tell your friends to do the same. The longer we hold on to this update, the better our odds will be in the future."

"What does this update matter for? Does something happen after it?"

"Not quite something. But once the update goes live, the game will have skipped ten years ahead, and it leaves the kingdoms unprepared for what happens in those ten years."

"And what is that?"

"The invasion starts."

"What invasion? And why would it matter if it's only inside New Eden?"

\*Sigh\*

"The invasion starts inside New Eden before bleeding out into our world. We need the world of New Eden to hold on longer than it did last time, so we can better prepare over here."

Alexander couldn't quite follow what David was insinuating.

Are you implying that the two worlds are connected?"

"No. I'm saying it isn't two worlds to start with, Alex. New Eden isn't a game. I'm sure you already noticed as much."

Alexander took a few moments to take that info in. He, of course, had noticed the game seemed too real to be just a game.

But he was far from thinking it was an actual place. In his mind, his theory was that New Eden was just the next phase in AI and technology.

David gave him some time to digest this news. He wanted Alexander's help, and for that, he would need to slowly give him more and more info about what would happen.

After a few minutes, David decided he had thought about it enough.

"Now I also have another request. Remember when I said I would need extra money? Well, that time has come."

"Huh? Already? How much do you need?"

"As much as you can spare. My plans are moving along, but money is slowly becoming an issue."

Alex frowned. He still didn't know what David's plans were entirely, and it annoyed him, but he had already agreed to help.

He pulled out his phone, looking at how many funds he had now, but remembered something. Alexander pulled open the EG website and logged into his account.

Once he was in, he looked at his current amount of gold. He had a little over sixteen thousand gold pieces.

He looked at the current exchange rate, and it was still at one hundred dollars for a gold piece. This meant he had a little over a million and a half that he could transfer out of the game.

"Is a million good enough for now?" he asked David.

David frowned slightly, but he nodded.

Alexander pulled out the gold, passing through the exchange function, and sent it immediately to David through a phone transfer.

David received the notification and smiled. He got up, getting ready to leave, before stopping and turning to Alex again.

"One last thing."

David lunged at him, extending his arm to Alex's throat. He was using mana to enhance his strength to intimidate him.

He lifted him by his throat.

Surprise took Alex, but he quickly lifted his hands to free himself.

"Never lay your hands on me again," David said, malice shining in his eyes.

Fear almost took Alexander, as David's form was shrouded in shadows in his eyes. But something washed the fear away as quickly as it appeared, and his strength suddenly grew.

He pried open David's hand before punching him in the jaw.

It was David's turn to be surprised. He had used mana to enhance his strength, so anyone that wasn't doing the same shouldn't be able to break free so easily.

That's when he understood what felt wrong in Alex's house. He could feel trace amounts of mana!

"Leave, before I throw you out from the balcony," Alex said to him, his eyes slightly glowing.

David got back up, laughing like a maniac, before walking to the elevator. He didn't bother with retaliating on Alex, since they were mostly equal in strength.

It thoroughly sparked his interest.

"Things are already changing. This time, it will be alright!" he thought, as he left.

## Chapter 217 Taming Mana Again

While the elevator was bringing David back down, Alexander was standing in his living room, looking at his hand. He wasn't looking at the surface, but more at what was happening inside it.

He could feel something flowing inside his body that hadn't been there previously. And when he focused on it, he could sense the small particles again.

This time they were clearer, and he noticed there were also some floating around him in the living room. He took a few minutes to observe their movements.

He could tell this time what they were, like something had unlocked in his mind. He tried controlling it with his mind as he did inside New Eden, but nothing happened.

The mana wasn't reacting to his silent orders, as it did in New Eden, and he guessed that was pretty normal. After all, this was a novelty to him in this world.

He remembered Violette was still waiting for him to tell her it was ok to leave her room, so he stopped experimenting. Alex walked upstairs, before knocking softly on her door.

"Violette. It's me. You can come out now."



After waiting for a few seconds, he heard the door unlock, and it slowly opened. Violette's scared face was on the other side.

"Are you ok?" she asked Alex.

"Of course. Are you?" Alex responded, crouching to look her in the eyes.

Violette could see the red marks on his neck, even though they were already fading, and was worried that the scary man had been here to attack him.

Alex saw where she was looking and smiled at her softly.

"Don't worry about those. That man and I disagreed on something and he thought he could rough me up. But I sent him home with a souvenir of his own."

The grin on Alexander's lips reassured Violette enough to leave the room. She hugged Alex, and he hugged her back.

"I had a bad feeling a few minutes ago, like something bad was happening."

Alexander frowned at her words. He understood that David's grip was unnatural once he saw the mana particles himself.

But if Violette had a bad feeling as it happened, that meant she might also have felt the mana. He kept Violette in his arms as he got up, eliciting a small scream of surprise from the girl.

"I have something I want to show you."

Violette nodded.

Alexander walked into his room. He focused his senses, and this time he clearly saw the point from where the particles were coming.

It was like there was a small hole right in front of his pod that the particles were leaking in from. They slowly floated away from the pod, filling the room and traversing the walls of the other rooms.

As he walked into the room, Violette started frowning.

'So she feels it...'

"Are you alright, Violette?"

"I'm ok... But this feeling. It's... strange."

"Strange how?"

"Like I have felt this before..."

Alex smiled and nodded. Even he was finding it strange to see mana particles.

This wasn't something that should be normal in the real world. From all the hints and bribes of information David had given him up to now, he guessed it might happen sometime in the future.

But he hadn't thought he would see it in his own penthouse. Was this a good or bad augur for the future?

He had yet to find out.

For now, the only logical course of action was to use this new resource at their disposal.

"I want you to focus on this feeling. This isn't something you are new to."

Violette looked at him with questioning eyes.

"You feel like it's familiar because it is. Think of it like you are inside the game."

"But we aren't inside New Eden..." Violette said, frowning.

"Just try it, Violette."

Violette looked at him for a few seconds, her frown deepening, before closing her eyes. Alexander felt her body relaxing in his arms as her focus went completely to her senses.

Her frown relaxed a bit as she started concentrating before it came back.

Alexander was still focusing his eyes, doing his best to sense the surrounding mana. He could see it reacting to whatever Violette was doing.

"This feeling... This is mana!" Violette exclaimed.

She opened her eyes, looking at Alexander in a bewildered manner.

"Was this always here?!"

"I don't think so. If it was, I don't think we were ready to sense it yet."

"But if there is mana in this world, doesn't that mean we should be able to do magic?"

"We might, in due time. But before we go that far, there is something else we should discuss."

Violette's head tilted at his statement.

Alexander dropped her back to the ground, walking down the stairs. He went to sit on the sofa again, beckoning her to do the same.

He explained what little he knew of the situation, Violette frequently interrupting him to ask questions. He answered all her queries to the best of his abilities, trying to paint the glum picture David had painted him.

Even if Violette was still a child, he didn't think hiding this from her was a good idea. Now that they could both sense mana, maybe they could use it to train preemptively for the future to come.

He could hardly think of a lie to tell her so he could make her train her mind and body with mana, instead of just trying to learn how to use magic. So telling the truth felt like the better alternative.

Their discussion took hours, since the young girl kept asking questions, but once they were done, she became eerily silent. Alexander let her think, since pushing her at this point could have adverse effects.

After a few minutes of occasional frowning, and various other facial expressions, Violette finally looked back at Alex.

"Why are we keeping this a secret? Shouldn't we tell everyone that they need to play New Eden?"

"David told me it was better not to tell them for now. He said he has a plan to get more people in when the time comes."

"Can we trust him?"

"I'm still thinking about that myself. For now, I trust his words."

Violette frowned again. She decided to trust Alex over trusting David and promised she would keep quiet.

They then agreed on finding a way to train in using mana together. Alexander knew full well his earlier exploit had been purely instinctual and reactionary.

They needed to practice until they could do this on demand. It would be a long journey.

## Chapter 218 Connecting Worlds

It took the pair the rest of the day just to interact with the ambient mana actively. This was much tougher than in New Eden.

They easily understood that if mana had always been present, their bodies would be accustomed to it. So that cleared away the theory that it wasn't a recent phenomenon.

They could only have a light effect on it, though. Just enough to move it around and absorb a minute portion of the particles.

After barely an hour of absorbing some mana, the pair were already sweating profusely. Their bodies were fighting against this alternative energy source entering it, and they were tiring themselves out.

The first one to stop was Violette. Her body was smaller and she could take much less of this physical burden than Alexander.

Alexander kept absorbing mana for a few more minutes, before his body threatened to shut down from fatigue. He dropped to his back, gasping for air.

Violette had already fetched a glass of water for him, since she had been parched after this exertion. Alex drank the water like he had been in the desert for days.

After hydrating himself, he sat there for a few more minutes to let his body rest.

'If it's that complicated to get mana in our bodies now, I can't imagine how it will be for non-players.'

Alexander had already guessed that without his prior knowledge and experience with mana, from playing New Eden, he wouldn't have been able to sense it at all. This explained why David was so preoccupied with getting more people to play.

'What if playing the game is the only way to even sense it in the first place?' he wondered.

His stomach suddenly grumbled. Alex looked at the clock and realized it was already past dinner, and they hadn't eaten yet.

He asked Violette what she would like to eat, but she seemed too tired to answer. So he opted for some takeout.

He called in some poutine from a nearby fast-food restaurant. He could already guess Violette probably never had this kind of 'peasant' food, but he knew she would love it.

After all, who in the world would dislike a good old poutine? Especially a person from Quebec.

It took close to twenty minutes for the delivery guy to arrive in the lobby, and Alex used this time to go wash up. He was sticky with sweat, and it wasn't a pleasant sensation.

Violette did the same, as it went against her upbringing to be in this physical state. It was very unladylike.

The meal went similarly to when he ordered pizza, with Violette almost crying in happiness at trying new food. Alex laughed a bit, telling her more than once to be careful, as poutine could be messy.

The sauce could rapidly transform this divine food into a nightmare for clothes.

After eating lunch, Alex and Violette logged into New Eden for the day. That would let them get more stuff done.

Alex got a message from Kary while they were heading to their pods, saying she could play with them that night. He relayed the message to Violette, telling her they would have to stay close to the inn so they could meet up.

She was done with the things her mother needed help with, and could finally go back to playing more. She couldn't wait to go back to levelling, so she could catch up to the now over-levelled Astaroth.

His little stunt with the PVP had burned him across many levels. They already frowned upon PVP a lot in the higher community.

When a pro player started using PVP to level up, the other pro players would come and stomp them. This was all to stroke their egos and prove they were better than others without killing low-level trash.

Astaroth had probably painted a huge target on his back already by doing it. It all depended on how well-known it was that he levelled up that way.

As Alex went to his room to log in, he felt a presence brush against his mind. The feeling was faint and extremely brief, but it still nagged at his subconscious.

He tried feeling it again, for a little while, but seeing as it wasn't happening again, he brushed the thought aside. He stepped inside his pod and closed the top.

"Log in."

\*Launching 'New Eden'\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth\*

\*\*\*Somewhere in outer space\*\*\*

Lady Alantha Anulo was once again in front of her mirror, looking at the region of space being altered every moment. She could see new spots appearing, slowly growing in size.

Some spots were getting big enough for her to send her consciousness through, trying to see what was on the other side. She tried sending through many of these, all leading into caves and forests, or jungles.

She could guess these places now receiving mana would soon become dungeons. But one final hole she pushed her mind through brought her to something new to her.

Her consciousness was hovering over a humongous city, with buildings high enough to touch the sky, and carts without horses rolling around roads made of some strange stone.

Her eyes scanned around her, seeing the polluted river in the distance, and the air dirty with gas and dust. She wondered how anyone could even breathe this muck.

As she extended her senses across a wider scope, her mind brushed on a consciousness she vaguely recognized. When she tried focusing on it, the surrounding space collapsed, and her mind snapped back to her body.

"That soul and mind. I know them. Wasn't that Astaroth?"

She looked at her mirror again, but all she could see was the space riddled with many spots of white. She thought back to her contact with the consciousness.

There were many similarities with Astaroth's soul, but some things felt different. The first of them was that he felt more human than Ash Elf.

The next one was that his mana signature was almost nonexistent. It felt weird, since Astaroth was a powerful mage for his age.

She vowed to look again after a while, to get a better read.

## Chapter 219 Ditching The Pests

David went back to his hidden home, thinking about possibilities for the future and how it had already changed. He would still have a lot of preparations to make, but he felt more confident in their chances.

He logged back into New Eden, too.

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

After logging back in, he and Violette waited for Phoenix to come and join them, enjoying a hearty meal at the inn. It didn't take very long, since she was already logged on and only needed to walk back to the inn.

She had been taking care of a few things on her side, making sure she had no obligations for the next few days, since she wanted to enjoy her time with Astaroth. Violette was thrilled when Phoenix told them they could play together for the next few days.

Astaroth didn't forget to mention to her they should hold back on levelling to level fifty. He wasn't happy at the idea of keeping back from harder quests or dungeons, but he had agreed with Khalor.

Phoenix had asked for a reason, but when Astaroth promised to tell her the next time they were face to face, she accepted. She could hardly start their relationship without a bit of trust.

The trio went to the adventurer's guild to find a hunting quest. Phoenix was a C-rank adventurer, which was already considered the top for players, currently.

The higher rank a player had gotten right at the start was D, and then they had to complete quests to rank up. Phoenix had been lucky to rank there herself, and it only took around fifty quests to rank up.

But when they walked up to a counter, Astaroth insisted she let him pick the quest. It made her curious, so she accepted.

When the notification for a B-rank quest popped on her interface, her jaw almost hit the floor. She watched as Astaroth came back to them, looking at him with wide eyes.

"When did you have time to rank up to B-rank?!"

"Huh? Oh, that. I'll explain when there are fewer ears around."

Phoenix agreed when she noticed her outburst had already attracted unwanted attention. Some players were looking at them with voracious eyes.

The quest Astaroth had picked sent them to a forest near the outskirts of Sunpeak, to the west. They had to investigate the appearance of some powerful monster.

The farmers that tended the lands to the west had complained about incursions from low-level monsters into their farmlands to the adventurer's guild. When they sent a team to clean up the monsters, their tracker found traces of a larger threat.

Since they were lower-ranked adventurers, they had to report their findings to the guild, and the guild issued a higher-ranked quest.

The three of them left the guild buildings, heading toward an exit gate. Violette asked Phoenix why they were heading to the south gate when she noticed, and Phoenix made a shushing gesture.

She typed into the group chat, 'We are being followed. We'll need to throw them off our scent.'

Violette's eyes became gloomy when she read the message. Astaroth almost laughed at her reaction.

He knew very well Violette wasn't against killing other players, but it was better if she didn't do that, for now. This would most likely send her levels flying upwards, and they needed to prevent that for now.

Astaroth had an idea and shared it in the group chat.

'We can ditch them at the south gate. I'll meld with Morpheus and grab Phoenix. Violette, you can ride on Genie and we'll dart out of here.'

'What if they send an agility-based player on our tracks?' Phoenix asked.

'Then Violette can get rid of it quickly with Genie. That way, she doesn't level up too much and we get rid of our tail.'

Everyone agreed to the plan, and they kept walking in silence. The players tailing them were not very good at dissimulation, and even if they were, the three players they were following had a good grasp on sensing without their eyes.

When the trio reached the south gate and crossed it, Astaroth immediately melded with Morpheus, wings sprouting on his back, and grabbed Phoenix behind her knees and back before lifting off the ground in a strong wing beat.

Violette hopped on Genie's back as she started galloping behind the flying Astaroth. The sudden speed increase they made threw off their pursuers, and they couldn't follow.

They only had a rogue player that was fast enough to follow behind, and they sent him ahead, so they didn't lose their mark.

Astaroth shook his head in disappointment at the decision. Any meat-headed player would have guessed this was a trap, but it seemed greed had blinded these players.

They flew straight out of the city, making a beeline for the hills, where they could hide their change in course. Once they crossed the first hilltop, Astaroth hooked right, and started heading for their actual destination.

Violette ordered Genie to hide somewhere in waiting. A few moments later, the rogue also zoomed across the hilltop, only to be met by a set of fangs to the throat.

His eyes widened as he tried pulling out his daggers to defend himself. He didn't have that luxury, though, since Violette almost instantly wiped out his health with a high-pressure jet of water through the head.

Violette scanned him as he disappeared and almost clicked her tongue. His level was only thirty-two, so she barely made any Exp.

She remounted Genie, as they headed in the same direction as their two other party members. She sent them a message that she was done, making Astaroth and Phoenix chuckle.

When Violette told them it was a low-level party, they almost cried at their stupidity. The party following them could have scanned them at any moment to verify who they were.

But they didn't do it, since it would tell their targets they were being followed. The price of their stealthiness was that they lost a member and now their mark's location.

This was clearly a party that was new to PVP, seeing their level and lack of brains. But it mattered no more to the trio.

Now that they were rid of their tail, they could focus on their quest.

## Chapter 220 Provocation

The beginning of the quest wasn't far from the west gate, but since they had left from another gate and taken some distance to lose the players following them, they took a while to make it back to their quest.

Once they made it there, they were already inside the forest they needed to inspect. Since they skipped the part where they could have talked to the locals to get clues, they had to search blindly.

The only good news was that with Genie amongst them, the party had access to an excellent tracker. Genie went to work as soon as they arrived, sniffing the air and the ground.

She soon found tracks for the smaller monsters that had left the forest, and from there, they backtracked further into it. They followed the tracks further and further into the forest until the canopy was thick enough to block out almost all the daylight.

Astaroth was already on high alert, since they could get trampled by smaller beasts fleeing at any moment. Phoenix was being more mindful of the tracks themselves, as Violette just rode Genie like they were taking a walk.

Genie then suddenly stopped advancing. Her stance lowered as she growled at the trees before her.

Astaroth immediately pulled out his sword and shield. Since they had no tank with them, he would have to be frontline.

He sent a pulse of mana forward, trying to detect any hidden enemies, but he failed to do so. Astaroth frowned at the result.

He knew Genie wasn't growling without reason, but he couldn't find any creatures nearby. His mana senses couldn't even detect bugs.

It was eerily empty all around them. And that was worse than just monsters.

Anything that could make even the bugs flee had to be extremely dangerous, since bugs had virtually no sense of danger to start with. That's when he felt it.

A pulse of mana came back in their direction, but it wasn't his. The mana had an almost feral feeling to it, and it sent shivers down all three of their spines.

Genie's growling doubled as she took a slight step back.

Astaroth jumped in front of the wolf and its rider, raising his shield. Just in time, too, as a large ball of fire came crashing into him.

The flames licked off his shield, spreading around them as they dispersed. The heat emanating from these flames was not any weaker than Phoenix's own flames, and that worried Astaroth.

A low rumbling growl came from all around them, shaking the trees and the air itself.

*\*Ding\**

*\*Mind Over Body activated. Draconic Aura of Fear resisted.\**

"I think I know what enemy we are facing," Astaroth said, gulping.

But when he turned around, he noticed Genie, Phoenix, and Violette were all shivering in fear. Seemed he had been lucky that his passive kicked in, because if all three were affected, that meant the chances were high.

"Hey! Snap out of it! We need to face it, so there is no time to be afraid."

Phoenix shook her head, controlling her emotions again, but her shivering never completely stopped. Violette nodded, trying to fight through the fear, even though it wasn't leaving her.

As for Genie, Astaroth sent a wave of calmness through their mental link, allowing her to break free from the fear effect. Astaroth nodded at them, before lifting his shield again and walking forward.



From the direction of the fireball, he could guess where they needed to head. Occasionally, other fireballs flew at him, which he blocked with his shield and the help of Violette's water spells.

Another growl resounded, this one sounding more viscous, as it washed over the group again. Violette was the only one affected this time, since she hadn't completely snapped out of the previous effect.

"I think we should give this quest up. Leave to more powerful adventurers."

Astaroth and Phoenix looked at her incredulously. It was the first time either of them heard Violette talking like she wanted to quit.

Even in the dungeon, the week prior, against the very much overpowered bosses, she had fought without complaint. This went to show how powerful a fear effect could be.

"Violette, we are fine. This is the fear effect speaking for you. Just focus on calming down for now. We are almost at the monster's location. I can already start feeling its aura."

Violette nodded her head, shaking like a leaf in the wind. They kept walking, reaching a hill that had been hidden from them because the canopy was so thick.

The hill wasn't particularly big, but they still had to tilt their heads upwards to see the top. Close to the top, a large hole could be seen.

It was easy to guess that the monster would be up there, and that it wasn't small. They could see large footprints on the ground all around them.

When Astaroth bent down to inspect them, he found the shape to be familiar. The prints looked reptilian in nature, which he only knew since a friend of his had an iguana in the past.

But by the size of them, how deep the prints were, and the apparent claw marks digging into the ground, he could guess it wasn't an iguana.

Then, with the draconic aura of fear confirming it, he already knew what their opponent would be. Astaroth didn't want to fight a draconic creature in its nest though, so he stopped to think of a plan.

They needed to flush it out of its lair, or they would never have a chance at winning. He knew from previous games that dragons and their kin were almost always stronger in their lairs.

He shared his thoughts with the two girls, and Phoenix came up with a good idea.

"What if you melded with White, and used your Alpha's Howl skill? Wouldn't that pull it out of its cavern?"

Astaroth thought about it, and it made sense. Dragons were always known to be territorial, which was also the reason all life had evacuated the surroundings.

If he challenged its dominion, then it would most likely charge out at him to crush the contender. He consulted White about it.

'I have no qualms about showing my superiority to a dragon. Lizards should always grovel to wolves, anyway.'

White's cocky answer made Astaroth chuckle. Since that was settled, he wasted no time.

Astaroth melded with White Death and howled as loud as he could, activating his skill.

\*AAWWOOOOOO!!!!!!\*