

## **New Eden 571**

### Chapter 571 Finding The Portal

It took the six pairs a little over two hours to search the entire city, and they still all came back empty-handed.

Making their way back to the arena to see if they had missed anything, Phoenix looked pensive. Her partner, whom she had explicitly taken with her to keep her eyes on, much to the man's regret, Jaxx, kept looking around, in case he would see something they had missed on their first pass.

Phoenix was thinking about how to reach the underground area, and her mind was imagining hundreds of possibilities. Most of which she scratched away herself, for lack of pertinence or feasibility.

As they inched toward the arena, something caught Jaxx's eye, and he squinted, approaching it.

Phoenix saw him swerve to the left, and she interrupted her thinking.

"Did you find something?" she asked, hopeful.

"It might be nothing, Ma'am. But this torch's placement is strange..." Jaxx replied.

As he said this, he reached the side of a building a few blocks away from the arena. The building had seemed pretty innocuous, on their first pass, with sconces and torches around it, to light the streets at night.

It looked like a shop, of sorts, the ruined interior not indicative of its purpose. But something caught Jaxx's curious gaze as they passed near it again.

One torch was positioned strangely. Jaxx looked at the surrounding area, and it was just an empty courtyard.

The torch wouldn't light anything in it if lit, as it was in the wrong corner of the building. And the street it was pointed to, led directly to the arena, and was more than well lit, with all the sconces in places on the other buildings.

This torch wouldn't add anything to the pre-existing lighting.

Leaning closer to the torch, Jaxx scrutinized it.

"It's just a torch, Jaxx. We don't have time to waste. Come."

But Jaxx ignored her command, still inspecting the sconce and torch, his gut telling him there was more to it than met the eye. And he found what pretty easily once he was an inch away from the darn thing.

The sconce, which was screwed into the building's stone, had an extra piece to it, which stuck out like a sore thumb when looking this closely. A hinge.

Grinning like an idiot, Jaxx set his hands on the torch before pulling it downward. It refused to move on his first try, rust jamming the hinge, but after a bit more pulling and wiggling, and acting on it with more strength, the torch whined and pivoted downward.

Jaxx heard a subtle \*click\* behind the wall and smiled.

"Ma'am! This sconce activated something. I heard it click."

Phoenix frowned at him, getting closer and observing the sconce. She saw the hinge, and even activated the makeshift lever a few times, hearing the distinctive click for herself every time she did.

But nothing happened aside from this.

As she was about to abandon this useless endeavour, Violette reached out through the party chat.

'Who is doing something repeatedly?! There is a torch in the arena that keeps lighting up and extinguishing itself, out of nowhere!'

Phoenix's eyes widened.

She shifted the sconce up, putting it in its normal position.

'Is it extinguished now?' she asked.

'Yes!' Violette replied.

Phoenix tilted down the sconce, before typing in chat again.

'Open now?'

'Yes!' Violette answered.

'What are you doing?' she also asked.

'I think Jaxx just found us our answer! Split back out into the city. Find roads that point directly toward the Coliseum, with things that seem out of place. There is a hidden mechanism in place. How many torches are in the arena, Violette?'

Violette did a quick count before answering with, 'Eight.'

Phoenix smiled.

'Then there should be eight levers or activators in place as well. Find them, activate them, and we get to our next stage!'

She turned around to face Jaxx, who was still grinning widely, proud of himself.

"Good job, Jaxx. You may prove yourself useful after all," she said, smiling at him.

Jaxx was unsure whether this was a compliment or an insult, but he elected to take it as the former. He raised a thumb before darting off to find another hidden mechanism.

As a kid who had been a victim of bullying a lot, in school, he had developed a sixth sense for spotting things that were out of place. This had saved him many times, from being victim to bad pranks in his locker or class desk.

He was glad this could serve them, on other things than saving him from embarrassment.

After another hour of searching, the pairs finally found the other seven hidden mechanisms. Some were torches, like the first one Jaxx had found.

But others were chariot wheels, leaned against buildings in a much too upright position to be normal. Or even wall stones that seemed to stick out too much from their buildings, making them suspicious.

When the last one was activated, a low rumble echoed through the city, with the ground shaking ever so slightly in the streets. But for Violette, who was still in the arena serving as confirmation, it was much more violent.

The ground shook wildly, tearing apart into eight equal pieces in the center of the arena grounds, revealing a large spiralling staircase going down.

She yelped excitedly, looking down into the dark descending hole.

Astaroth was the first one to come back, using Genie as a mount to make haste. Chronos followed closely behind him, walking, or so it looked, but his strides were unnaturally long.

As everyone swiftly made their way back to the coliseum, they all surrounded the newly revealed staircase, anticipation already building. This was it.

This was the next stage.

Phoenix grinned at the significance of this situation.

Having to puzzle their way forward through the second stage meant that this dungeon now had a brain element to it. Those dungeons were few but always had better rewards.

This also meant this dungeon was a onetime opportunity. Puzzle dungeons always closed up after they were completed, at least up to now.

That was one of their silent questions answered. Many more sprung up to replace it.

How long would this dungeon be? Would it get harder as they went?

Would it turn into a multi-day exploration? Would they all pull through at the end?

So many questions, with no answers in sight.

Their only way of finding out was to proceed forward.

And so they did.

### Chapter 572 Third Stage Conundrum

Their descent into darkness was uneventful, with no more surprises, enemies, or puzzles in sight. They reached a small, dark room, with, in the middle of it, a shimmering white portal, waiting for them.

Astaroth wordlessly stepped through, his curiosity reaching new peaks.

He felt a small tug on his body as he passed through the portal, before reappearing in a forest, with the tree line fading away close by.

One by one, his allies started appearing near him, weapons drawn and at the ready. But they stowed them away not long after when they noticed no immediate danger.

Astaroth was already walking forward, trying to see past the tree line. After walking for half a minute, he reached the end of the forest, opening up to a small hill down, and open fields ahead.

But something else stole his attention.

The massive tree, towering over the fields, surrounded by stone walls of dark grey stone. This was an exact copy of Bastion City before they had reconquered it.

With one exception.

Dragons were flying around the top of the tree, seemingly in harmony.

"What the fuck... This dungeon is messing with us..." he said, under his breath.

Phoenix wandered over next to him, taking in the sights as well, her breath cutting short.

"This dungeon is the strangest I have ever been in. It feels like more of a trial than a dungeon. It feels like it's showing us the past, more than anything else. A bit like the other one we completed together."

Astaroth nodded his head at her words. But this felt much more profound than that time. It was like the dungeon was trying to teach them something.

Astaroth waited for everyone to gather at the edge of the forest before they discussed their next step.

This stage felt like it would take a while.

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Across the continent of light, in a remote valley of the Ash Elf kingdom, Killi was meeting up with his officers in their new guild base. Most of his guild was still on their way there, taking the slow and stealthy path here.

But his officers were more resourceful, for the most part, and had rushed there with their own means. They looked on in awe at the size of the base from atop one of its walls.

"Is this all ours, for real?" one of them asked.

Killi chuckled.

"Mostly ours, at least. By proxy. But yes."

Another of the officers looked around himself, before raising an eyebrow.

"Doesn't this look exactly like the Paragons' base?" he asked.

Killi chuckled again.

"I thought the same thing when we arrived here a few days ago. The court mage said places like these were a myth, but were said to be present across the lands. I guess this is one of them."

"Wait... Court mage?" the same officer asked.

"There is much to discuss. Let us get to a more suitable meeting venue. The view here is to kill for, but not where we should discuss important matters."

As Killi and his officers travelled toward the large tree, in the center of this walled-off valley, they passed a few newly built huts and hovels, with a few Ash Elves looking at them warily.

The officers felt strange about being looked at like they were aliens and averted their gazes.

"Don't worry. They'll get used to us in no time," Killi affirmed.

They made their way to the tree, whose entrance was a large hole, with no doors barring the way. It was a strange sight, for something that was supposed to be protected.

But before they could enter, a group of Ash Elves suddenly appeared around them, weapons drawn and pointed at them. At their head, a tall man with silver hair, and an air of authority about him.

"Halt. Identify yourselves, newcomers."

Killi took a step forward, raising his hands in a sign of peace.

"Sir Kloud. Surely this isn't necessary. These men are my officers and are under my orders."

Kloud looked at Killi, his eyes still stone cold.

"Just following my orders, Sir Killi. They are unfamiliar faces and must identify themselves before entering. Those are the rules."

With a resigned sigh, Killi motioned to his men to proceed.

One by one they identified themselves, a bit insulted they had to be subjected to this, in what was supposed to be their new guild base. But one quick scan of the man in front of them made them swallow their pride instantly.

Kloud felt the magic brush over him, but made nothing of it. He knew the Abnormals had a tendency to scan everyone and everything they saw.

Once everyone checked out with the names they called out, Kloud stepped aside, and the rest of the soldiers lowered their weapons.

As they entered the tree, one soldier walked over to Kloud, stowing his daggers away.

"Don't they look weak? I would have expected the Abnormals he sent here to be stronger looking than this. At least almost as strong as himself."

Kloud laughed lightly at this comment.

"I doubt many of them are as strong as him, Korin. The speed at which he grew was nothing to scoff at, even by our standards."

Korin nodded, agreeing with Kloud's words. But he still felt a tad disappointed that their new allies looked weak enough to fall to the local wildlife.

It was only a week later, when all the Knights of the Sun finally arrived, that he understood why Astaroth had sent them their way. The sheer amount of abnormals, with their levels all between thirty and forty, was enough to make him understand what power they held.

There was a quality in quantity, after all.

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In Bastion City, a woman sneaked into the outer city, by climbing over the walls, accompanied by four other men. They managed to go undetected and started heading toward the inner walls, sneaking their way around town.

When they reached the familiar walls, which all of them aside from her had climbed over not but a month ago, she grinned.

"Leader. Is it wise to go over these walls? They seemed much better guarded than the last time we were here..."

The woman turned her head to face this man and sneered.

"There will be no cowards in my ranks. If you can't muster some courage for yourself, run yourself through with your blade and leave my guild this instant."

The man gulped at her words but steeled his expression.

"I apologize for my words, leader!"

After waiting for the patrol to fly over them, the group of five quickly climbed over the wall, seemingly undetected. Such were the skills of trained assassins.

### Chapter 573 Strange Stage

After a lengthy discussion amongst themselves, Astaroth and his party voted to scout out the town before they chose their course of action. It wouldn't be a simple task, since they stood out like sore thumbs.

But after a bit of sneaking around, Astaroth found a dozen brown cloaks and drapes that they used to cover their traits and clothes. He had noticed during their first approach that a squad of crudely geared soldiers manned the main gate.

So they collectively opted to go in, passing themselves as travelling adventurers.

Cloaking themselves, they started using the main path down to the walls. There was no file to get in, and they made their way directly to the gates.

"Halt! Show your faces and state your purpose!" a guard shouted, raising one hand as the other went down to his scimitar at his belt.

Astaroth raised his hands to signal cooperation, before taking the hood of his head.

"I'm sorry, good sir. We didn't want to look suspicious. We are only shielding ourselves from the harsh sun. My friends and I are a band of travelling adventurers, looking for shelter before the night comes."

The guard eyed him warily, not taking his hand off the hilt of his scimitar.

"A Dark Elf. Your kind isn't welcome in these parts," the guard replied.

His long ears and golden flowing hair marked him as a wood elf, and there seemed to be aggressiveness to his tone.

Phoenix pulled her hood back, revealing her face as well.

"Sir guard, the Ash Elf is with us. Surely you can look away this once, for two of their kind?" she asked, making a hand sign to the party, prompting them to pull their hoods off.

And they did, revealing the mix of races, trying to sell their deceit.

The guard eyed them one by one, before clicking his tongue.

"Let me verify with my superior first. Make one wrong move, and you will not live to see tomorrow. Am I clear?"

Each player nodded their head.

The guard stepped back, keeping his face toward them, before disappearing behind the wall.

Astaroth sent a message to Phoenix in a private chat.

'I thought we wanted to keep cover, and I was to get us in. Why did you have everyone reveal themselves?'

'I think we aren't long after the war between the Elves and Ash Elves. It looked like he was about to slash at you just for being dark-skinned,' she replied.

'You know about the war?' Astaroth asked, his face frowning a bit.

'Do you think you are the only one with access to knowledge? There are libraries in this world, dummy. I read some history books before heading out into the world. I wanted to know what to expect. Seems I was right to do so.'

Her dedication and studiousness impressed Astaroth. He wasn't much of a reader, and much preferred to learn in the thick of it.

Of course, that had its own inherent risks.

He snapped out of his thoughts as the guard reappeared in view, turning the corner of the wall. His stride was angry, and his face filled with silent anger.

"My superior said to let you in. The lord said to keep the gates open to anyone that wished refuge, he says."

Astaroth smiled at his response, walking forward.

But the guard latched onto his arm as he walked by, squeezing it hard.

"I'll have eyes on you, dark elf. Your kind is nothing but slaves and should have never been free. Your rebellion cost me my brother."

After saying that, he spat on Astaroth's feet.

Astaroth's eyes darkened, and he had to use every ounce of his self-control not to lob this man's head clean off his shoulders. A pat on the back from Phoenix also helped him calm down.

Taking a moment to re-center himself, and taking a deep breath, Astaroth broke into a hypocritical smile.

"I'm sorry you feel that way about my race, sir guard. My condolences to your brother. I wish the war had never needed to happen. But my kind was never meant to be slaves. We were proud warriors, summoned by your leaders to win a war for you."

The guard's face morphed into rage, and he started pulling out his weapon.

"You bast—"

"Enough! Syndar, let them through! Contain yourself, for crying out loud."

The interrupting voice came from the edge of the wall, where another elf had just made himself visible. The man looked slightly older, his golden hair tainted with grey hair, here and there, making him look wiser.

But his face was currently a mask of disappointment.

"The war is over, and the Ash Elves have earned their freedom. Your brother's death is regrettable, no doubt. But it should not cloud your duty and judgment."

The guard threw one last death glare at Astaroth, before stowing his weapon and storming off into the fields, to go release some anger, most likely.

Astaroth resumed walking, and when he passed next to the older Elf, he thanked him.

"Thank you, kind sir."

The older elf looked at him, a flash of malice traversing his gaze.

"I am merely doing my duty as ordered. There is no kindness in my heart for your kind, dark skin. Now, in. Before I change my mind. And if you do anything unlawful, I will catch you and discipline you myself."

The low growl he said those words in was an obvious threat, and Astaroth halted momentarily as the officer turned the corner of the wall again.

When Astaroth and his party crossed the threshold to the city, he saw the building on the inside of the wall, which seemed to be the barracks next to the gate where the soldiers stayed while on duty.

He saw the door closing behind who was most likely the officer in charge of this gate, and spat on the ground.

"Fuck racism. In this world and the next. It's a stupid mentality."

Meat-Shield nodded his head, his skin tone on the darker side. He agreed wholeheartedly with his guild leader on the matter.

"Amen to that," he added.

The party proceeded inward the city, trying to find an inn or hostel in which they could stay the night. They had a feeling this stage wouldn't be finish-able in one day.

#### Chapter 574 Throwing Him Under The Bus

After finding an inn, with one of the most whimsical names most of them had ever seen, they signed in for rooms, almost booking the whole place for their group. The proprietor woman of the Welcoming Sprite Inn was an older Elven woman, with tired facial traits, but eyes as sharp as razors.

She didn't bat an eye at lodging the two Ash Elves, which elicited a raised eyebrow from Astaroth, who would have thought the older the Elves were, the more racist they would be. But the woman was unfazed.

"Seen your kind before. Behind bars and not. Your darker skin and flashier hair don't make you any less of an Elf in my eyes," was the response she gave to his questioning gaze.

Astaroth felt kind of relieved to be treated fairly, especially by the woman who would man their rooms for the duration of their stay. He felt like he could rest more easily, now that he knew this.

After setting themselves up for the night, they gathered in the dining area of the inn, ordering food for all of them before discussing their plan of action.



Phoenix was the first to speak.

"Since we got here, we have yet to encounter any monster or enemy of any kind. There is no timer, meaning there is no time limit to complete this stage. But we have yet to find any indication of what we need to do, either."

The party nodded their heads, agreeing with her statements.

"This doesn't feel like a stage that we can brute force through," Astaroth said, scratching his chin.

Another round of nodding around the table occurred.

"In any case, a more thorough investigation needs to be done. There is no guarantee we can stay here forever, either. And if we do, the lack of Exp gain is also an issue. The more time we stay here, stuck, the more we get behind on other players across the world."

A few worried faces popped up at the revelation that they might stay stuck here if they didn't find out how to pass the stage.

"I doubt we will stay stuck here. I have a feeling this stage will eject us if we don't complete it within a certain time frame. Even if we don't have a timer, it doesn't mean we don't have a time limit," Astaroth said, his eyes squinting.

This was also an outcome they couldn't discard, and Phoenix thought it might be the case. But for now, they lacked information to make an enlightened decision.

"We shall stay the night here and get up to investigate early tomorrow morning. Till then, you are free to do as you wish," Phoenix said, watching as the food was arriving from the kitchen.

The older patron woman brought each plate in an orderly fashion, her deftness surprising the more impressionable players. Once everyone was served, they dove into the food, which tasted like heaven, until they were full and content.

As each player went to their respective rooms, locking the doors behind themselves, most of them logged off, getting some things done during their day. Astaroth and Phoenix were no different.

Waking up in their beds, they rose from their long night of sleepless lack of motion before stretching.

"I hope this stage doesn't take too long. I'm okay with dungeons, but a multi-day commitment is a bit much," Alex said, getting rid of the helmet on his head.

"I'm more worried about how long this dungeon is going to take in its entirety. If stage three is already a long one, there is no way of knowing about the next stages. What if we landed ourselves in a week-long endeavour?"

Alex chuckled at the thought.

"Wouldn't that be fucking amazing? Hehe. A week of guaranteed peace from kingdom ruling. I call that a win!"

As he exclaimed that, Kary threw him a pillow.

"Shirking off responsibilities is very unattractive, I'll have you know, dummy."

Alexander giggled as he threw the pillow back at her before getting up. He went toward the shower attached to his hospital room, his body already feeling better.

The last few days in the private hospital, the doctors had watched in amazement, as his bones fixed themselves in record time, like some kind of magic was at work.

Alex had been back on his feet in three days and was almost ready to go back home. Of course, the doctors didn't want to let him leave so fast.

But a few talks with Jack had gotten them to back off. Alex was due to go home today if all went well in his last examination.

Turning on the shower to wash off the sweat his body had worked up under the hot bed sheets, he took the hospital gown off and shoved it into the basket.

A moment later, he was under the hot water, letting it wash off the murky thoughts that often clouded his mind when he stopped thinking about New Eden. He was so absorbed in them; he didn't hear Kary hop in behind him, startling him when she touched his back.

"Muh! Jesus! You scared me. You were so quiet."

Kary smirked at him before her traits softened.

"I wasn't that sneaky. You were just so absorbed in that beautiful head of yours. What's troubling you?"

Alex turned around to embrace her, before telling her what was on his mind. They talked for a while, under the hot water drizzling on their skin, before heading out and getting ready for their day.

Today was the day of the press conference, and both of them were febrile about it. Jack had insisted they put Alexander as the one that had acted against the rats since David wanted no part in this publicity.

He was the one that had proposed to throw Alex under the bus \*Ahem\* make him the face of this incident, and Jack's plans for the future. After a bit of consideration, Jack had agreed, as this made a few of his intentions easier to start with.

Of course, this had been decided behind Alex's back, and he was only told after the fact. It had made him angry that they took such a decision for him, but it was too late to change it.

Jack had announced the press conference and its subject as soon as he decided, trying to stay in front of the matter.

This was a part of what his mind had been in doubt about. And today was the day those dark thoughts went out the window.

"In a few hours, the entire city will know of me and my freaky abilities. I wonder how the people will react..." he muttered to himself, as he got dressed.

Chapter 575 A Broken Armed Playboy

Alex walked out of the room he was in, heading toward the elevator. On this floor, few rooms were in use, and the ones that were used were by older rich men, who rarely came out of their rooms.

Only one room was occupied, by a person who sometimes came out of it, and it so happened that the person in question was out of his room at the moment, flirting with the head nurse.

Alex and Kary tried sneaking past them, which wasn't easy, given that the elevator faced the desk, with little success. The man, seeing them, hollered at Alex.

"Hey! Rex! Come over here a moment!"

"Urgh..." Alex growled under his breath.

Turning to look at the man, who couldn't be older than thirty by his looks alone, Alex faked a smile. The man, dressed in a swanky polo, with shorts that were illegally, well, short, he was the picturesque version of a rich daddy's boy.

"It's Alex. Not Rex. What do you want, Kent?"

"Whatever you say, Flex. Come here and help me convince this woman to date me."

Kary rolled her eyes in their sockets, unbelieving of the man's gall.

"I will do no such thing, Kent. Leave the poor woman alone, will you?"

Kent looked at Alex with a frown, still unused to people saying no to him.

"Ahh, come on. Have a bit of solidarity for your fellow men. Wingman for me, and I might let you get her after me, huh? What do you say?"

He said that with a straight face and a smile, and Kary almost blew a fuse.

"She isn't an object, you self-absorbed douche! Have some respect for women, you cock!"

Kent was the rich playboy type, who made it his personal mission to fuck any woman he met that were within his standards. The head nurse of the hospital was just another victim of his harassment, and she couldn't do much but politely refuse his advances.

Alex had the feeling the man wasn't even sick and only paid money to be there and get a reason to harass the poor lady.

"I always forget how your woman is feisty, Rolex. You should really teach her some manners. It reflects poorly on yourself."

Alex could see the flames starting to flickering Kary's hair and intervened before she incinerated the poor sod.

"You need to learn to shut your big mouth, dude. One day, it'll get you into trouble," Alex replied.

Then he turned to Kary.

"Let's go, love. He isn't worth your time and anger."

Kary huffed in anger before spinning around and smacking the elevator button in anger.

"Wow! Such an attitude! Ahah! Give her to me a few days and I'll give her back to you nice and tame!"

Alex felt something snap in his head. He was going too far now.

He slowly walked over to Kent, a smile ever-present on his face. When he reached him, he grabbed his forearm and started squeezing.

At first, Kent smiled back, but his face quickly morphed to discomfort, and then to pain, as Alex's grip was closing like a vise on his arm.

"You better mind how you speak about my girl, Kent. If she had no restraint, she would have burned you alive already. As for myself? I don't suffer from restraint."

"Let me go! You're hurting me! Do you know who my father is?!" Kent panicked, as he felt his bones about to break.

"I couldn't care less, you overconfident turd. Know your place."

As he finished saying this, Alex's eyes flashed silver, as he released a bit of his wolfish pressure on the man, before tightening his hand one last time, feeling the bones crack under his fingers.

\*Crack\*

Kent's face drained of all its colour as he pissed himself in fright before his mind reconnected with his now broken arm.

"Aarrgghh! He broke my arm! This maniac broke my arm! Arrgghhh!"

Alex let go of his arm before facing the nurse.

"He needs medical attention. If he ever troubles you again, tell me. I'll speak to him."

The nurse was pale as a ghost, as she watched the man saunter away, after having broken another man's arm like it was a twig. She quickly came back to her senses, though, and called a doctor up for Kent.

At that moment, Alex and Kary boarded the now-open elevator, before the doors closed on them, both smiling.

"You know, I would have preferred to defend myself. That man will never respect women until one of us puts him in his place."

Alex smiled at her lovingly.

"I know. But your powers need to stay under the rug, for now. Mine won't be a secret for much longer, so I might as well use them when I see fit."

Kary punched him in the arm lightly before kissing his cheek.

"My knight in shining armour," she said, mockingly.

"Anything for you, my princess," Alex replied, puffing his chest up, comically.

They both laughed in unison until the elevator arrived at the underground parking, where they switched elevators to go lower into the hidden compound below. When the door opened in the facility, Guo was standing before it, waiting for them.

"Mr. Leduc. Ms. Deveille. I hear you are making waves on the top floor again. I would ask on Mr. Boudreau's behalf that you refrain from harming our other clients. It reflects poorly on our reputation, you see?" Guo said, with his wide, unnerving smile.

Alex laughed a bit before responding.

"I doubt a client like that reflects well on your reputation, to start with. If something, having him away from here is good for your image."

Guo chuckled lightly.

"Although it is true that Mr. Beaumont is a poor example of our reputable clients. But his father is one of the most respected politicians in the city. You should still give him due respect."

Kary huffed.

"He did. He didn't kill him. Because I would have. Talking to me like I'm a piece of meat, and being so misogynistic. He deserved that broken arm and more."

Guo sighed in defeat. There was no reasoning with them.

Although he agreed with their sentiment, they needed to understand the under-workings of politicking. Especially given the near future to come for them.

"In any case. If you would follow me. Mr. Boudreau is waiting for you to brief you on the press conference later this morning."

Alex nodded, erasing the incident from his mind, like it had never happened. He had bigger fish to fry.

He and Kary followed Guo toward the big man's office. They had a long discussion ahead of them.

#### Chapter 576 Long-Term Plans

Guo stepped in first, heading to his spot at the corner of the room, as Alex and Kary sat down in the chairs before the desk. Alex eyed the room a bit, curious if anything had changed, and the only thing he noticed was the tinted back window.

Jack saw his gaze stop on the window and smiled.

"It's almost done, in case you're wondering. I tinted the windows so you don't get to see it before the others. When it's ready, I'll have everyone gather up to reveal it."

Alex smiled back at Jack.

"I bet it will be a grand reveal."

Jack guffawed.

"Hah! I sure damn hope so. I sank billions into that shelter. It'll make your friend's shelter look like a mole's burrow, in comparison. Even though they will both connect by emergency tunnels."

Alex snickered at the comment. He knew Jack didn't particularly like David, but this little pettiness between them was comical.

"Anyway, you wanted to brief us, so let's get this done with. I hate the fact you forced me into this position, but there is no taking it back now."

Jack's face became serious.

"I'm sorry I pushed this on you, young man. But I believe it was the best move. Putting a face on the future actions to be taken this early will give us a hand up on everyone else that might try to do the same."

Alex cocked an eyebrow.

"And what future actions are we talking about here?" he asked, leaning in.

"Remember when I told you I was paying you in favours because I would ask something of you later? Well, this is it. I wasn't sure how the world would change once New Eden released, but I had received warning weird things were going to happen. An old... acquaintance of mine warned me."

Alex frowned.

"Warned you? How?"

Jack waved his hand dismissively.

"It's irrelevant now. See it as another inexplicable bit of knowledge of an old man."

Alex squinted at him briefly, but then sat back in the chair. There was no use prodding Jack if he didn't want to talk about it.

"Well then, out with it. Why were you so kind to me so many times? What is the favour I owe you?"

Jack smiled at him, with his signature businessman sharkish grin.

"I need a leader for a task force I am putting in place. A task force that will deal with events like the service tunnel incident and the bank incident. As well as future events to come. But also, a task force that will keep under control people like you who emerge, soon enough. People with otherworldly abilities."

Alex looked at him with renewed respect. This was how far a man that had seen the world at its worst planned.

It was quite impressive.

"You could have picked anyone. Why Alex?" Kary asked, frowning.

Jack smiled at her.

"Your boyfriend made himself well known in New Eden before the world even started changing. And when I met him the first time, I knew it had to be him. I could have dug out the information about David and gone with him, since he seemed to be the strongest. But I didn't like the vibe he gave."

Kary agreed with Jack on that point. Even though she was slowly getting used to his cold facade, and knew that deep down he was only doing it to keep himself in check, she still hated his attitude.

"I want to know exactly what you are asking of me, Jack. Are you asking me to become a hero, an enforcer, a PR representative? What is it you want?"

Jack focused back on Alex before leaning back into his seat.

"None of those options. And all of those options," he replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

Alex became a bit confused.

After sighing loudly, Jack opened his mouth again to explain.

"I don't want to make you an enforcer, or PR stunt, or political puppet, Alex. I want to make you a leader for the inevitable future that is upon us.

"You may not be the best choice, since you know next to nothing of what makes a good leader. But you have the one most important quality. You can inspire respect from the ones under you, through your own efforts and principles."

Jack looked solemn as he said this. Like he was asking the world out of Alex.

But Alex only frowned back.

"A leader... What if I don't want to be a leader?" he asked, uncertainty fluttering behind his eyes.

"I don't think you have a choice. The world is ending. Quite literally. And someone needs to take charge. And even if Mr. Magnus thinks it's his job, I think his opinion on the matter is too skewed to make him adequate for the task.

"No. It has to be you."

Jack looked absolutely certain of his choice. Where he thought it had become his responsibility to pick a leader for the times to come, no one knew.

But he had taken it upon himself, at some point, to shape the future head of this resistance humanity would need.

He was aware there would be more than one resistance group when shit hit the fan, on account of the size of Earth alone. But he wanted to pick the one here, if he could.

Alex looked uncertain, and mixed emotions flashed on his face in quick succession. But Kary put her hand on his arm, to reassure and support him.

It calmed him down.

"In any case, that is only my long-term goal. For today, you only need to accept the burden of greatness from your heroic acts in the service tunnels. David ever-graciously accepted to let you have all the glory this time. He said he would take the next one if you didn't want it."

Alex chuckled at the words. He knew very well, deep inside, that David wouldn't want to become the face of anything for as long as he could help it.

It was enough for him to save the world from the shadows. Alex felt like in this situation, David might just become his shadow equivalent when times became dire.

"Fine. I'll do it," Alex said, confidence building up inside him.

"I'll be the leader the world will need."

Chapter 577 Unwelcoming Party

Jack smiled in response to Alexander's statement. This eased his plans up, by a lot, if the kid was willingly stepping up.

"In this case, let us go over what we are going to tell the media. The press conference is in two hours, and I want us to be coherent."

Already, Guo was seeing the vans amassing at the private hospital's entrance, with journalists setting up and talking to each other, probably gossiping or theory-crafting.

He sent a quick message to some of his staff to set up a small stand, where Jack could stand above them for ease of view. Of course, this stand would be filled with microphones from all news channels and other news outlets, like podcasts and amateur journalists.

This wasn't Jack's first rodeo, and he would be fine. But Guo wondered how Alex would fare in front of three dozen hungry journalists, bombarding him with questions. The young man had never been interviewed before, that he knew of.

But Guo had faith that with a bit of guidance from Kary, and a lot from Jack, he would do just fine.

They discussed for an hour, getting their stories aligned, since they needed to lie a bit, to make it look like Alex had done this on his own. Alex had an accurate accounting of the facts, and with this, they could alter the parts that David and Kary intervened in, in order to make it sound like it was all his doing.

The hour of truth was nearing fast when they finally fine-tuned their version of the facts. Alex already looked exhausted.

"I guess we find out now how fame deals with me," he said, his forehead slightly sweaty.

Kary giggled lightly.

"I'm pretty sure it's the other way around, but you'll do just fine. Just stand straight, and keep a steady voice. As long as you don't show weakness to those vultures, they shouldn't push into you too hard."

Jack smiled at her comments. She was right, if somewhat lightly put.

Of course, he expected some level of nefarious drive in the journalists. A press conference without at least one or two trouble-seekers was unheard of.

"I will answer the brunt of the questions, if that reassures you, young man. But I can't shield you from everything. You will need to take some of the uncomfortable questions and answer them on your own," Jack added.

Alex nodded his head, his courage wavering a bit. But Kary stroked his arm gently, which put him at ease again.

Kary had a feeling Jack was using this press conference for more than just informing the public about the incident. She wasn't sure what else, yet, but she could tell through his businessman facade that he had ulterior goals.

Of course, this wasn't any of her business, as long as it didn't affect her or Alex negatively.

Looking at his watch, Jack clapped his hands.

"Time's up for our little meeting. I have more things to prepare before the conference in twenty minutes. So if you don't mind leaving me alone, that would be much appreciated."

Alex and Kary knew this wasn't a request, as much as him telling them to leave, so they rose from their seats and headed toward the door.

"See you in a bit," Jack added as the door was closing.



Once it was closed, Guo turned his head toward Jack.

"Are you sure using this conference to announce that is wise, sir? What if this backfires and goes against your intentions?"

Jack sighed.

"I know it's a risky move, Guo. But this is as good an opportunity as it is a risk. If I can show that I have a grasp on the situation before it becomes critical, it will be a massive boon for us and our plans."

Guo looked thoughtful for a second before nodding his head.

Jack was the business savvy here. If he smelled an opportunity, then Guo would follow him into it, whether it burned them or not.

Meanwhile, Alexander and Kary took the elevator back up to his room to prepare. They needed to put on some better clothes for the press conference.

When they reached the last floor of the hospital, the main desk was buzzing with activity. Men in suits and sunglasses were flanking an old man, whose smile was all but genuine.

Alexander immediately recognized the smile of a politician, sighing deeply inside himself.

"Well, here we go..." he said, looking tired already.

Kary wondered what he meant, but it took only a moment before she and Alex were surrounded by the same men in suits at the counter.

"Ahh. There he is. The one who assaulted my son so savagely. Young man, you are coming with me. We need to talk."

The head nurse and doctor tried talking the old man out of his actions, but he seemed resolved.

"Sir. Please reconsider. This young man is under Mr. Boudreau's direct protection. Taking action against him in this hospital is like spitting in Mr. Boudreau's face," the doctor said, his hands raised pleadingly.

"I'm the client here! I get to spit in that money-laundering bastard's face if I want to. Do you know who you are addressing, you fool?!" the old man shouted, anger replacing his smile.

The doctor reeled back in fear.

Meanwhile, the men in suits were slowly encasing closer around Alex, extending their hands toward Kary to pull her out of their encirclement.

"Touch her, and lose the hand," Alex growled, a murderous gaze in his eyes.

"You see?! A savage, just like my son said! Men, seize him! We are bringing him to justice!" the old man shouted.

But just as the men were about to grab onto Kary's arm, the elevator dinged behind the couple.

\*Ding!\*

Out of it came rushing ten men, kitted in bulletproof vests and holding in their hands semi-automatic rifles. The guns immediately pointed at the men in suits.

One of them stepped one step closer to the old man, his gun lowered.

"Sir. You may be the mayor of Montreal City, but you hold no sway here. Mr. Boudreau has ordered us to keep this young man safe, and we intend to do just that. The way I see this, it's ten against five, with a severe mismatch in firepower. How about you reconsider?"

This was the same mercenary Alex had dealt with many times before. And he didn't seem in a mood to joke.

The five men in suits all had their hands hovering over their vests, seemingly ready to pull out whatever was under them. The old man was slowly turning red in rage.

"How dare a nobody like you give me orders! Fine! But Jack will not hear the end of this! Grab the girl, we're leaving!" he shouted.

Hearing this, Alex's eyes became slits.

A man extended his hand quickly, trying to grab Kary.

But, just as promised...

Chapter 578 Mixed Reactions

\*Shluck\* \*Thud\*

As soon as his hand hovered an inch over Kary's skin, something flashed, and the hand fell to the ground.

Blood splashed on Kary's arm, her gaze icy, almost uncaring, as she stared at the man's now stumpy forearm.

The man didn't scream, much to his credit, but his pained grunting was immediately followed by the sound of guns pulling out and shouting.

"Put the gun down! Down! Now!"

The situation turned into a shouting contest, and a game of chicken, neither side wanting to back down.

Alex, in the meantime, was ready to pounce at a second's notice. He would kill anyone and everyone in the room if he needed to.

No one would touch a hair on Kary's head.

Kary bent down to the man who was grunting in pain, holding his stub amidst the chaos, and smiled at him. But it wasn't a happy or comforting smile.

"Here. Let me help you stop that bleeding."

The moment her hand lit on fire, the man's eyes went wide in fear. But he wasn't fast enough to crawl away, as she jammed her burning hand directly on his open wrist.

This time, the man could not stop his shout from escaping his lips.

"Aarrgghh!"

The chaos almost immediately stopped, in reaction to the pained shout, and the old man watched in horror as the young woman he had ordered taken was now burning his bodyguard's arm with her hand!

"Just what the heck are you people?! Men! Kill them!" he shouted, his voice cracking in fear.

Five loud bangs echoed simultaneously.

Followed by four dull thumps.

The bodyguards all had one smoking hole in their foreheads as they hit the ground, lifeless.

The Mayor fell to his ass immediately after, his face devoid of any blood.

A loud sigh echoed in the hallway.

"God dammit... You couldn't just have them stand down. Now I have an even bigger mess to clean up..." the mercenary complained, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"You, and you, escort the quarry to his room. He needs to clean up and change. The press conference is in five minutes..."

He pointed to two of his men, who nodded and lowered their weapons, flanking Alexander.

Kary rose to her feet, looking disappointed.

"I was cauterizing his wound... What a waste of mana..."

"Thank you, Ma'am. Less blood to clean up. But you also need to get ready."

Seeing her looking at him with a disinterested gaze, the mercenary frowned.

"Go on! Yip yip!"

Kary scoffed at his rudeness but followed behind Alex and his new bosom buddies.

Inside her mind, she was still in shock, of how quickly the situation had devolved into death. But she wasn't as affected as she had hoped.

'Is New Eden getting me too comfortable with death?' she wondered.

She felt bad five men had to die for the old shit in the lobby, but no more. This worried her a bit, but she brushed it aside.

As she and Alex entered the room, leaving the two goons at the door, she looked at Alex's unbothered face.

"Do you feel any remorse for them?"

Alex turned to glance at her, his face still icy.

"Not a drop. They were not taking you away without paying the price. If something, getting shot saved them a lot of pain."

Kary frowned at his words.

She was hoping he would reassure her, tell her it was okay to feel a bit of remorse. Instead, he reinforced her feeling that it was okay that they died.

Almost like they deserved it.

This was an alarming way of thinking. She only hoped it would not become a common occurrence.

As she started undressing, to go have a quick rinse in the shower, since blood had splattered on her earlier, Alex got changed.

He took a moment to reflect on his actions, but no matter how he spun it, he felt like he had done nothing wrong.

'They were going to take her. Maybe even harm her. No. I did the right thing...'

When Kary popped back out of the shower, she quickly patted herself dry before sliding into a black dress she had prepared for the press conference. She kept thinking about how easily Alex had accepted those men's deaths, and it troubled her a bit.

She was so lost in thought; she didn't hear him come into the bathroom behind her.

Alex hugged her from behind, laying a kiss on her nape.

"I know this is not something you want to hear. But I will say it because you need to hear it. Death is a horrible thing to happen, I know. But if anyone tries to harm you before me, I would turn the world into a river of unending blood to protect you.

"Think nothing of those monkeys. They were trying to take you away, possibly to harm you. It was self-defence."

Kary sighed.

She knew he was brushing over this too easily. But she was also turning the thought in her mind, and her brain kept telling her it was just self-defence.

Hearing him confirm this thought eased her heart a bit.

"I just think we shouldn't take lives like this and brush over it so fast. What if it becomes too easy for us to take lives and we become heartless monsters?"

Alexander spun her in his arms.

"We are not monsters for defending ourselves. They attacked us."

Kary stared into Alex's eyes, trying to detect any wavering in his emotions, but found nothing but steel resolve. He believed in his words entirely as the truth.

"Fine. I'll leave it at that. Let's go, we are awaited downstairs."

Alex kissed her on the lips, which she reluctantly responded to. He understood her feelings, but didn't think they were necessary.

He knew he was acting cold-hearted. But sometimes, the world is cold-hearted with you, so you must respond in kind.

They walked out of the room, where the two goons flanked them once more, and walked toward the elevator. Already, the five bodies were gone, and the blood was being wiped clean.

Kary turned her head away from the sight, whispering to herself, "It was self-defence. It was self-defence," almost like a mantra.

Chapter 579 Reaching The Tribune

As the pair reached the ground floor of the hospital, they could see through the glass doors to the entrance a plethora of flashing lights, as well as Jack's built form, who was already in front of the stand.

Guo was waiting on the inside. When he saw Kary and Alex, he rushed over to them, looking them all over, to make sure no blood or wounds were visible on their skin.

"You made a mess again, Mr. Leduc. Cleaning behind you is getting more and more frequent and exhausting. Learn some restraint, by the gods."

Alex sneered a bit.

"It's not like I went looking for trouble. They attacked us, not the other way around."

Guo glared at him from the corner of his eye.

"You know what I meant. Anyway. Let's not cry over spilled milk. You seem fine and presentable. I hope you have your part memorized. Mr. Boudreau has already started the press conference.

"He had to when the threat of gunshots became apparent. The distraction worked, and no one noticed the flashes coming from the sixth floor. But that also means your turn is coming up sooner than expected."

Alex looked at him with a frown.

"No one heard the gunshots?"

Guo snickered.

"Mr. Leduc. This is a high-grade hospital, where privacy is paramount. The windows here are all bulletproof, soundproof, and paparazzi-proof. Any camera lens aimed at it will see only black windows.

"Sadly, the human eye isn't affected by this, and if Mr. Boudreau hadn't distracted them, the five flashes from earlier would most definitely have brought attention. Good thing Mr. Boudreau is a smart man, or the troubles would have kept piling up on your plate."

Alex looked apologetic for a moment before going back to normal.

Kary, still hanging onto his arm, looked outside, bracing herself mentally for the cameras about to be locked onto them. She was used to this, but this time, they wouldn't be trailing her as much.

She had stopped reciting her little mantra in the elevator, quickly making peace with the events from only minutes prior. She had no time to feel remorse right now.

It would have to wait until later when they weren't assaulted by flashes and questions.

Guo raised his hand to his ear, listening to his earpiece.

"It seems your cue is coming up, young man. Good luck."

As he said that, Alex saw Jack step aside from the small tribune with his hand extended toward the glass doors. Taking a deep breath to steel his nerves, Alex walked out.

The cacophony of camera flashes and flying drones overhead, plus the dozens of questions that suddenly fused his way, was deafening. But he maintained his confident look and stride and walked to the tribune, where the microphones awaited him.

"Young man! What is your name?!"

"What is your connection to Jack Boudreau?!"

"What do you know about the service tunnel incident?!"

They hurled questions at him in quick succession, making it hard to focus on any question in particular. But just like Jack and Kary had told him earlier, he focused on one question he could hear and pointed to the woman who asked it.

"You first. You asked what my name is. I think that is the most important matter to tackle first. I shall introduce myself," Alex started.

As soon as he spoke, the journalists quieted down, so they could hear his response clearly.

The sudden silence, aside from the occasional click of a camera flash, made Alex uncomfortable. He suddenly heard his heartbeat in his ears.

But he soldiered on.

"My name is Alexander Leduc. I am not a very well-known person yet. But I intend to change that in due time. Some of you may think they recognize me. Which they wouldn't be wrong to assume. I also go by the name Astaroth, in New Eden."

As soon as he finished saying this, he saw some eyes widen in realization.

This was a golden opportunity

No one had interviewed the runner-up for the first tournament yet, and he hadn't stepped forward until now. This gave him some immediate and very-needed clout.

A torrent of questions unfurled once again, most of them incomprehensible among the others. But he heard one clearer than the others.

"What is your connection to Jack Boudreau, and why is he the one introducing you?!"

Pointing at the man who asked this, Alex locked eyes with him.

He and Jack had already discussed what to answer if this question came up.

"Mr. Boudreau is my official sponsor for New Eden pro playing, as well as a business partner. The reason he introduced me is that in a sponsor capacity, it is his right and privilege."

Notes were being jotted down on notepads, and recordings were annexed with personal comments by podcasters and small-time amateur journalists. All the while, the news channel journalists restarted their shouting contest, hoping the young man would answer their question next.

Alex raised his hand to ask for silence.

"Before I answer your questions, I would like to go through the main reason we gathered all of you here today. You can ask your questions once I have addressed this."

The journalists quieted down, ready for the scoop of the year.

"Regarding the service tunnel incident. I heard earlier, one of you asked what I knew about it. The answer is the following. I know everything. I was present when it happened."

A journalist shouted a question, interrupting Alexander.

"If you were present, then tell us! What happened down there?!"

Alex locked his eyes on him, giving him a death glare. The journalist gulped down nervously, suddenly feeling like he was getting faced down by a predator.

"I am going to. If you stop interrupting me, that is."

The man nervously nodded his head.

"Some of you might have heard rumours about what happened down there. Or seen some footage of freelance reporters crawling their way past the police cordon in the tunnels to get a shot of what happened. But today, I will tell you the entire story of how it went down, and why I was down there."

Silence suddenly permeated the area. Aside from shutters and the buzzing of drones, not a single sound could be heard.

Alex slowly passed his gaze over everyone, seeing he had their full attention. With a deep breath, he readied himself for the future.

'No more privacy or low-key for me. Here on out, it's high profile...'

Chapter 580 Interlude To The Dungeon

A ways away from Montreal, inside a small apartment in Le Panier, Marseille, two pods were opening.

Out of one of them came a svelte woman, who seemed taller than your average woman, and whose slender neck assuredly made a few men turn their heads.

Out of the other, a hunk of a man stood up, stretching his muscly body around, before stepping out.

These two people were Jaxx and Jeanne d'Arc.

The woman, looking at her brother, shook her head a bit.

"You're stupid ego almost cost us our chance at being part of the biggest guild in New Eden, Gaspard. When will you learn? Are the supplements you are taking finally clogging up your brain?"

Gaspard turned his head, looking at his sister with a pitiful look.

"I'm sorry Jeanine. I was only trying to make the best impression I could... I didn't think things through..."

Jeanine looked at her brother's regretful face and sighed loudly.

"It's fine. Forget it. Astaroth seems to want to give you another chance. Let's make the most out of it."

Gaspard meekly nodded.

Stepping out of her own pod, Jeanine stretched her slender body before taking five steps forward and opening their fridge. The appliance was close to barren, with only orange juice and a jar of pickles in the back of it, along with leftover soup in a Tupperware container.

The soup was from their mother, who often made them some food to bring back, since their financial situation was less than ideal, ever since they bought these 'Stupid Space shuttles' as her mother called them. But they both intended to make their situation better through New Eden.

Jeanine turned her head toward her brother.

"Want to get some shawarma around the corner? I'm starving," she asked, holding her stomach.

Gaspard looked at her strangely.

"Shawarma for breakfast? Why don't we go to that nice crepe place down by the pier? A breakfast seems more appropriate."

Jeanine remembered it was morning and giggled.

"You're right. A crepe sounds good as well."

They washed up quickly in their tiny washroom, almost stepping over each other's feet as they fought over ownership of the sink while brushing their teeth. Then they put on fresh clothes and left the apartment, heading to the pier.

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A little farther to the northeast, in Nokia, Finland, a stout young man in his early twenties exited a gaming pod of his own. He looked outside the window, seeing the sun low in the sky, and roughly growled.

"Skeida, it's already morning. My boss will chew my head off..."

This young man, with a head of unkempt hair and patchy scruff of a beard, was Meat-Shield. On his table, letters from notaries, with large printed logos on them, littered.

The name on these letters read as Edvin Virtanen.

Edvin hurriedly washed his face in his kitchen sink, sending some water in his hair before roughly brushing it with a comb, and then he jumped into a dirty-looking overall with the logo of a blue garbage bag. Rushing out of his small home, with little to no yard, Edvin jumped on his scooter before driving to work.

He cursed all the way there, berating himself for staying up so long after everyone went to bed in New Eden. He had been looking stuff up on the forums and lost track of time.

Because of this, he was an hour late to work.

As he drove into the garbage triage plant, his boss was waiting by the door.

"Hanttapuli! You are late again! If I didn't need to replace you, I would fire you right here, right now!"

Edvin took the berating with his head down, cursing in his head.

'Just wait until I make it big in New Eden, you k??kk?. I won't ever have to work for you again.'

After getting berated and yelled at for five minutes, taking it quietly, only opening his mouth to apologize, Edvin darted inside, where he headed to his post at the triage machine.

His colleague and friend, Mikael, fist-bumped him as he ran by.



"Stayed too long on your game, again?" he asked, a smirk on his lips.

Edvin huffed.

"When you play it, you will understand, Mikael. New Eden is like a new life, away from all this paska. It's an amazing new world. So much better than here."

Mikael shook his head with a chortle.

"Yes, yes. You've told me a million times. I don't have the money to buy one of those expensive capsules you play in, Edvin. I told you already."

"Buy a helmet! I can pay it for you, Mikael. I have some money from New Eden. You could play with me. Join this awesome guild I just joined!"

Mikael smacked him on the arm, to signal him the boss was coming, and both of them turned to the machine, falling silent.

The boss passed behind them, eyeing them like the garbage they were sorting, before leaving for his office.

"You will get us in trouble with all your game talk, Edvin. We can discuss this over lunch. For now, just work. I covered for your quota while you were absent this morning, but I would also like to relax."

Edvin spat on the ground, looking toward the boss' office with a glare.

"When I make it big in New Eden, I won't have to come work in this cesspool of a job. You could make it big with me and then we could buy ourselves a big house and live the big life."

His daydreaming almost made him let by a piece of garbage that needed to be set aside, and Mikael needed to reach over the conveyor belt to grab it.

"Stop daydreaming, Edvin. We'll talk about this at lunch."

Over the speakers, the boss' voice barked.

"Edvin! You lazy bum! Stop talking and get working before I fire you!"

Edvin cursed under his breath, looking at one camera and smiling. He then focused on his work, before his boss finally put his threats to execution.

Even if he knew he would make it big in New Eden someday, for now, he needed this job to pay his bills. But that didn't stop him from daydreaming a bit, making Mikael's job slightly more complicated.