

New Eden 41

Chapter 41 The Company, Part 1

*** Random employee of 'Evo-Gaming' company POV ***

It had been a normal day at Evo-Gaming HQ, or 'EG' as the people here called it. Dan was a tech safety manager for EG and had been working on the new gaming pod for a while now.

The pod was supposed to be the main tech for 'New Eden' from the start, but because of some slight safety issues, they pushed the launch back.

The company, not wanting to push back the whole launch, had ordered the techies to cobble up something to enable the game to launch on its due date, anyway.

That is when they had come up with the VR helmets. It had the same basic technology as the pod, but came with fewer parameters.

The helmet still enabled the synapse connections and motor function freeze, but did nothing else. It just logged people into the game.

To the tech team, this was just a stopgap, and it repulsed them how low-end the product was.

But no one wanted to lose their jobs, so they delivered it to the head honchos and went back to their major project.

The pod did so much more. It not only connected to the brain but also monitored it.

It could also stimulate the rest of the body from within the pod, to make the users feel more from within the game.

Of course, that came with a plethora of risks. The information being traded from the game body to the actual body had to be restricted.

The mental alignment had to be kept perfect.

The tech team kept refining the program so that these issues were resolved, but the game launch had already happened.

Most of the team were sad about this, since it did not use their pet project at the start, and that would tarnish their reputation.

They only kept their heads up when they thought about how it would still end up being the primary way to play soon.

There were still many weeks of tweaking and debugging to go, but they knew that with time, they could deliver.

Dan was the lead manager on safety checks. His entire job was to make sure the product was up to the safety code before hitting the stores.

He was the one that ran all the simulations imaginable on the programming to fish out errors in it. He was the one that caught the glitches that could endanger the users before they could actually happen.

If the program running the real-time feedback weren't up to par, many accidents could happen.

When a player got his arm cut off in the game, if the feedback program didn't limit the pain transfer, the player could end up severely damaging the nervous system in his arm.

The brain would signal the body that the arm was gone, possibly denying any feeling to it in the long term. This was exactly the type of error that they tasked him with catching.

What if someone got possessed by a demon, or spirit, in the game? Would that leave permanent brain damage on the player?

Would he develop a personality disorder? Who knew?

Therefore, Dan's job was to run any scenario his mind could think of through a simulation and see if the program did its job correctly.

He was still catching errors of that type daily, so he knew they would not launch the pod for a good while.

During the first week of launch, Dan kept up to date with how the game was being received by the players. He looked on the forums often, making sure the helmet he had approved didn't cause any accidents.

When he found out about some players not logging out, causing them to trigger the safety protocol, he was satisfied that his work was functioning properly. He was the one that had proposed this hard limit, to assure the safety of the users.

On the fifth day after launch, while he was running a millionth simulation for the pod, his phone rang.

It was the project supervisor. The man asked him to attend the board meeting on the forty-sixth floor at nine AM sharp the next morning.

When he tried bailing out of it, saying he still had a lot of work to do, his supervisor insisted heavily. He even threatened to fire him and end his career if he wasn't there.

Dan reluctantly agreed and hung up. He hated those kinds of meetings the most.

Stuck up rich men, forcing their ideas and solutions upon the real masterminds of a project. Acting as if they knew best how the tech, the actual geniuses produced, worked.

Those men were what Dan dreaded the most. He had been at many of these meetings throughout his career, most of them ending in him pushing out some tech he wasn't quite satisfied with.

Of course, he always made sure the tech was safe for use, but he mostly left out some small kinks and long-term side effects. Those were the ones that took the most time to fish out and fix.

The next morning, he put on a suit and left for work earlier. He wanted to get this meeting over with as quickly as possible and get back to his proper job.

These gruesome meetings were not his cup of tea. He hated them because he had to be nice and polite to people who knew nothing, just because they have money and power.

If it were up to him, he wouldn't hold these at all. They were a waste of time, in his opinion.

During his musings, he made his way to the office. Instead of taking the elevator down to the lab, he took it upwards, to the management floor.

He made it to the forty-sixth floor and waited outside the meeting room. It would be bad manners for him to be the first to sit in the room since he was just an employee.

He looked at his watch, and he was still fifteen minutes early. So he just stood there, looking at the walls.

Shortly before nine o'clock, the department managers started arriving one by one. But when he thought everyone was there, more people kept coming in.

Some of them he recognized, their faces being quite recognizable. These people were all influential people in the country.

But they were rich. Filthy rich!

He surmised they were the investors for the game, and probably also major and minor shareholders of Evo-Gaming.

His nervousness reached an even higher level as he swallowed his dry saliva.

Gulp

This meeting had just become a lot more serious than he thought.

Chapter 42 The Company, Part 2

Once everyone was seated, the woman at the tip of the table rose and straightened her blouse.

"Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen. I think we need here no presentations, so let us get to the matter at hand." The woman said in a confident voice.

"In this meeting, we will discuss the latest developments on New Eden and what needs to be done to further assure our success with the title." She added.

She then used a small remote to dim the lights in the meeting room. Simultaneously to that, some blinds descended over the large windows, blocking most of the light.

With another tap of her remote, a projector lowered from the ceiling and hummed to life. A chart then projected on the wall behind the woman.

On the chart, one could see a line going up and down while traveling from left to right. To the left of the chart the word 'Popularity' was written, and under the chart, one could see dates.

From the start to the middle of the chart the line zig-zagged up and down, but from the middle to the end it just rose.

Everyone present showed smiles at the chart. For most of them, that meant more money in their pockets.

The woman next to the chart let them all look at it for a few more seconds before clicking her remote again.

The chart that was present, shrunk and then elongated. The word predictions appeared over it too.

This chart was a lot less flattering. Where the line originally stopped, it rose a bit more, then fell off. It oscillated up and down a few times, always going lower and lower. The investors and shareholders started frowning at the sight.

"What is this farce, Chairwoman Constantine?" An old man with a baritone voice said.

Dan recognized the old man. He was a powerful and rich land tycoon.

The man possessed half the city if you believed the words on the street. His name was Jack Boudreau.

He was a hunk of a man like he had trained all his life. The man was an ex-military and had used his pension to launch his real estate empire.

One could tell by looking at him he was from the army. His shoulders were square, his back straight, and an aura of authority permeated off of him.

He also had a large gash on his right cheek, apparently from being shot at.

"This is not a farce, Mr. Boudreau. These are the projections for the coming weeks." The chairwoman replied, keeping a straight face.

"Have you heard of the recent events happening with our title?" She then asked.

"Enlighten us, chairwoman." Jack said, leaning on the table and joining his hands together.

The woman smiled and clicked her remote again. On the wall behind her, the image changed to an article.

The article's image was a man in the ER, tubed up and comatose. The title was 'New-Eden, a game, or a danger to our kids?'.

She then clicked again a few times, showing many similar articles with different photos of young adults in the hospital, with different degrees of sickness.

"There are many cases like these being reported. Kids log in to our game and forget it's not real life. They forget to log out of the game for extensive durations, prompting the emergency log outs and calls." The woman said, before laying the remote down on the table.

"This is becoming increasingly problematic for our scores. Parents and family members are asking us to restrain the game time. Others are asking for compensation for their children or siblings ending up in the hospital." She continued, crossing her arms behind her back.

The old men around the table started talking to each other, all at the same time. The room became a jumbled mess of voices.

The woman didn't let it devolve into chaos for too long and eventually clapped her hands together.

"Gentlemen! Please show some restraint. EG already has a solution." She said, her voice not accepting talk back.

After letting the men all calm down, she nodded slightly and kept talking.

"That is the reason there is a less known face among us today." The woman stated.

Dan knew who she was referring to and his blood drained from his face. She then immediately pointed his way.

"This man there, is Dan Bergeron, our Technology Safety Manager. He is the one that makes sure our products don't kill anyone." Chairwoman Constantine presented him.

Dan got up from his chair, white as a piece of chalk. He did a slight bow and sat back down.

"He is here today to announce something good." She continued after he sat down.

"I am?" Dan asked, confused.

"Oh, don't be modest, Dan. Tell them how you have finally made the pod safe for use." The woman said, gazing him.

At that moment, Dan felt like he was being watched by a predator. He gulped audibly.

Unfortunately, he couldn't talk, since he despised lying, and he didn't want to go against his boss either.

Dan kept his mouth shut. Seeing this, Constantine chuckled.

"Excuse his shyness, I believe he has never been in the spotlight. What he is here to announce is that the techies have finally secured the use of our primary tool for New Eden." She announced.

"The pod has finally cleared all the tests for distribution, which will stop this trend from continuing. The hardcore customers will now be able to stay longer in the game, without negatively affecting their health." She said, pacing.

"With this tech released, our bad press will instantly disappear, making us go back up in the goodwill of our clients." She continued, still walking around the table.

"We will also price the pod at different ranges for different models, assuring we cover most wealth ranges." She finished, as she came back to the front after a full circle.

The men and women in the room clapped. Most were back to being happy.

Dan had his head down the whole time. He was torn between stopping her lies and keeping his job.

He eventually waited for the end of the meeting before bringing up his qualms to the chairwoman.

The meeting lasted for another hour before the men eventually left one after another.

Dan stayed seated until everyone had left. Chairwoman Constantine had seen him so she also stayed with her assistant.

Once everyone was gone, she walked towards him and sat next to him, cross-legged.

"What is wrong, Mr. Bergeron?" The woman asked, smiling gently.

"Ma'am, if I may. The product is not ready yet. We still have weeks of testing before we are certain it is secure." Dan eventually said, after gathering his courage.

The woman next to him never stopped smiling.

"Oh but Dan, your supervisor assured me it was safe. Are you saying he is wrong?" She said, almost tauntingly.

"No ma'am, the product is theoretically safe. But we still have many minor issues that need resolving. The safety is not one hundred percent yet." He replied, clenching his fists.

"Don't worry about those details, Dan. We can still do program hot fixes after the release, so there is nothing to worry about." She said, leaning on her hand, which was propped on the table with her elbow.

"But ma'am..." Dan tried insisting.

"Don't worry. We have the situation under control. You should go home. Take the day off, paid of course. Go rest." The woman said, smiling warmly.

"... Okay..." Dan said, giving up.

The man got up, with crumpled shoulders, and left the meeting room. He walked towards the elevator and went down, heading back home.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, the smile left Constantine's face.

"Get rid of him. Make it look clean." She said, getting up and taking a private elevator up to her penthouse.

She owned the building so her home was in it, to reduce travel.

Her assistant nodded silently before leaving the room separately.

That day, Dan Bergeron never made it home. He lost control of his car near the St-Laurent's and dove into it, drowning before rescues made it to the scene.

Chapter 43 Pandora's Box: Fear

*** Astaroth's POV ***

It had been close to a week in 'New Eden' since his *training* had begun, and Astaroth had become good at zoning out. But he was worrying about the tournament more and more.

He looked at the attendance board every day and it was filling quickly. This morning it had passed the nine-hundred mark.

Astaroth knew he would never have enough time to reach level thirty before it filled up. He had mostly given up.

He tuned that thought out of his mind and focused on his mental training.

'Might as well become good at this faster, so I can shoot past the masses after.' He thought to himself.

He focused on himself, trying to picture the world around him as inexistent. He could imagine the world around him becoming black, like the deepest parts of space.

He sat there, cross-legged, in the middle of nothing, focused on his breathing. He could stay in this state for hours now, due to all the practice.

He had tuned out every physical stimulus from around him. Sound, smells, vibrations, nothing could reach his mind at the moment.

It was like he was no longer physically in the cave with Aberon. In this state, Astaroth didn't hear the notifications that rang in his ears.

Ding

Your mind has reached a level of peace required. You have learned the Passive skill 'Mind over Body'

Ding

Your thought process has evolved. You have learned the skill 'Thousand Thoughts'

Aberon from the side could see the trance-like state Astaroth had gone into. He could also see the mana particles around his head go into a frenzy, like bees around their hive being attacked.

From those signs, he deduced Astaroth had reached the point in training he wanted him to reach.

He rose to his feet and walked closer to Astaroth and leaned in. Once his face was near the boy's, he whispered into his ear.

"Illusory Domain: Pandora's Box" He chanted low, wisps of mana mingling with his voice.

"Now let's see if you pass the test." Aberon said, getting back up and standing to the side.

From Astaroth's perspective, his surroundings changed. He went from sitting cross-legged in the void to lying down in his pod, awake.

He felt the change in pressure on his back and opened his eyes. He saw the inside of the pod with its lights flickering.

'Did I get forcefully logged out?' He wondered.

He opened up the pod, deciding to go eat and sleep since he wasn't in the game anymore.

As he lifted himself out of the contraption, he heard some clicking noises come from his apartment door.

Was someone trying to break into his home?

He was still woozy from his many days in semi-stasis, so he couldn't move too fast, but he raced to his kitchen counter and grabbed a knife.

He stood before the door, clenching the knife handle with both hands. Then he yelled.

"Whoever you are, leave! I have called the cops and I'm armed. Leave now!"

The clicking noises stopped. He sighed in relief, but it was short-lived.

Bang!

There was a gunshot outside his door, and something punched through the locking mechanism. Then the door flew open.

In came three people, all of which Alexander recognized. They were the three men that had tried to beat him up and take his IV bags.

The two big thugs had guns in their hands, and the last one just walked into the apartment, a look of disdain on his face.

"What a shit hole!" One thug blurted out.

"Boys, let's get what we came for and leave." The tall man in the back said.

"Yes, sir!" Both goons responded.

When they made their way toward Alexander's pod, he walked in between it and them.

"That belongs to me! Leave now, before the cops get here and I won't tell anyone what happened." He said, his voice trembling a little.

Both men looked at each other, before laughing loudly. The one on the left then pointed his gun at Alexander's knee and shot.

Bang!

The bullet tore through his knee and leg, bursting out on the other side like it was a hot knife through butter.

Alexander collapsed to the ground, his weight suddenly becoming too much for that leg to bear.

"AAARRRGGGHHH!!!!" He yelled in pain.

He let go of the knife and grabbed his knee with both hands, tears welling up in his eyes.

The two men then walked over his crumpled body and walked to the pod, opening up the back compartment.

They yanked out the remaining bags from the pod, which Alexander found weird. Had he not been disconnected because he ran out of IV?

He didn't have time or capacity to think about that, as the pain in his leg was sapping much of his concentration.

Because of that, he never noticed the man walk towards him. Alexander felt his hair being grabbed and yanked back.

This brought him face-to-face with the third man. Alexander could now see him properly.

The man had long black hair, tied in a ponytail. He was wearing a branded butler outfit and black gloves.

His eyes were a deep shade of blue and looked at him with a haughty stare.

"You have been a pain to find, young man." The man said, picking up the knife from the ground next to Alexander.

He then slid his gloved finger across the blade, smiling slightly. He took the knife and pressed it against Alexander's throat.

"Now. This can go one of two ways." The man stated.

"Either you give us what we want without resisting, and you live. We might even drop you off at the hospital if I feel generous enough." He said, lifting one finger in the air.

"Or. You can keep resisting like you are now, and I slash your throat open. Either way, we are leaving with those IV bags." The man added, lifting a second finger, smiling devilishly.

Alexander was too scared to answer. His whole body was trembling, and he was close to fainting of sheer terror.

He looked into the man's eyes and couldn't see an ounce of sympathy. He could already guess that the man was going to kill him either way.

He had seen their faces already. There was no way they let him live after this.

He tried to think of a way out of his predicament, but he couldn't think over the sound of his heart pounding in his chest.

His heart was beating at over two hundred BPM. He felt like it was on the verge of exploding.

That's when he noticed something from the corner of his eye. On the inside part of the pod's hatch, a red light was flashing.

He could make out writing from this distance, and it read 'Caution! Heart rate elevated!'

His brain did a double take on that. How could it show his vitals if he wasn't inside it?

That's when he clicked. He was still inside it!

This was all just an illusion. It had to be!

That was the only rational explanation.

Time seemed to slow down around him. His heartbeat slowed down drastically, as he realized he wasn't in any real danger.

That's when he noticed them. The mana particles that were floating around him.

He was still inside the game, now he was sure!

He immediately tamed his fear and started thinking. Everything around him was moving slowly like time had slowed down.

But then he understood it was only his thoughts that were going at super speed when he tried moving and was going so slowly too.

He took in the situation and fought back. When he realized he was in an illusion, the pain from his wound faded away.

He looked back at the eyes of the man in front of him.

As time seemed to re-accelerate to normal speed, Alexander grabbed the hand with the knife in it, pushing it towards his assailant. He grabbed the inside of his elbow forcing it to bend.

The whole movement took only a second, and the result was a complete turn of the tables. The man ended up with the knife in his hand planted into his own throat.

He looked at Alexander with surprised eyes, as he choked on his blood.

A second ago, the boy had been shaking and close to pissing himself. Now he had a knife in his throat and was dying fast.

When all this happened, both thugs had been turning around. They saw the whole thing go down and couldn't react.

When their boss fell back, his eyes still open, bleeding out, they finally reacted.

They both pointed their guns at Alexander and fired. But as the guns fired, the entire scene faded away.

The ground under Alexander disappeared and made way for darkness, the same as the walls and ceiling. He was back in a sitting position, his eyes closed.

Alexander did not see this change happen, as the illusion made the transfer seamless.

Chapter 44 Pandora's Box: Anguish, Part 1

In the cave under Astaroth's starting village, Aberon was looking at the young man in front of him with a knowing look.

He could feel it when the target of his 'Illusion Domain: Pandora's Box' spell completed one challenge. He had felt the realm from the spell disappear, so he knew it was cleared.

This spell of his could trap enemies within it, or he could use a lighter version of it that could serve as a mental fortitude test. This was one such test.

If Astaroth could clear all three realms, or emotional barriers, in this test, Aberon would let him go. He would consider the kid stable enough to use his powers endangering no one, for now.

Of course, if he failed even one realm, he would keep training him for another long period before testing him again.

From the reactions on the boy's face and the rate at which his heart had beat earlier, Aberon could tell which test he had gone through.

The realms generated by the spell varied from person to person. They also could change with time, as the three predominant emotions the person was bottling up generated them.

Aberon wondered which were gonna be the next emotions, but he had a good guess, as Astaroth sweat buckets and tears were forming at the corner of his eyes.

"Anguish is a bottomless pit, I wonder what caused him to feel this way. I hope he fares well in this one." Aberon said, keeping a close eye on Astaroth.

Inside the spell, Alexander had just woken up on his bed. He rose, looking around him.

His pod was nowhere to be seen, and neither was the VR helmet. It puzzled him for a while and then looked at his phone.

The date on his phone was Monday, August twelfth, two thousand and thirty. A little over a year before the release of New Eden.

Seeing the date made him sad, but he quickly brushed it off.

Seeing the date made him sad for some reason, but he quickly brushed it off.

"Did I dream all of that?" He thought out loud.

He looked at his phone again and saw what time it was. It was six in the morning, his alarm wouldn't ring for another half hour.

He got up anyway, to get ready for his day. He didn't work yet, so he liked to play 'tower of Babel' all day, trying to become a pro.

He walked out of his room and walked to the bathroom. He washed his face and brushed his teeth before going to sit in the kitchen.

He could smell some breakfast already being cooked. He walked into the kitchen, where his mom was attending to some eggs and bacon.

"Morning, mom." Alexander said, tiredly.

When he said that, he felt a slight pinching sensation in his heart. He grabbed his chest through his shirt.

"Are you alright, dear?" His mom said, noticing the motion.

"Yeah, I'm ok. Probably just a cramp." He answered, smiling.

"Ahh, how I missed your bacon and eggs." He added, almost salivating.

His mother looked at him weirdly.

"You had some yesterday, honey. Are you sure you are alright?" She said, walking to him and touching his forehead.

"I'm fine, mom." Alexander said, brushing her hand aside gently.

"Where is dad, by the way?" He asked, turning his head around to find him.

"Your father is in the garage, fixing up his old motorcycle." His mother responded, pointing to the door that led to the garage.

"I'll go get him for breakfast!" Alexander said, stealing a strip of crispy bacon as he walked by.

"Wait until you are served, you little hooligan!" His mother said with a laugh.

"I can't mom. Your cooking is just too good!" He replied, not turning back and heading to the garage.

He chewed on the bacon strip as he walked into the garage and walked down the three steps.

"Dad. Breakfast is ready." He said, his mouth still full of bacon.

"Ahh. Alex. Come here. I have to show you something." His father replied with a joyous tone.

Alexander went around their blue sedan and found his father leaning next to an old Honda motorcycle. The model was a Honda CB600F, also known as the Hornet in Europe, when it was produced, in nineteen ninety-eight.

It was a bright yellow sports motorcycle, with sharp angles and an aggressive-looking front light. His father had been tinkering on it for years, but he was not a mechanic, so the work had taken much more time than needed.

Alexander liked the look of the motorcycle. He had been around that bike for years and had even gotten his motorcycle license, in case he could ever drive it.

So when he saw the machine fully reconstructed like this, he got a little giddy.

"Are you done fixing it?" He said excitedly, brushing his fingers against the handlebar.

"Finished her up barely ten minutes ago. I was putting some finishing touches on it." His father said with a wide grin.

It was too early to start up the motorcycle, but he was surely going to bring her out for a joy ride later in the day.

Both father and son stood there, admiring the machine for a few minutes.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Alexander's father said.

"She sure is." He responded, daydreaming about taking rides on the motorcycle.

"When can I take her for a spin?" He asked his father, turning to face him.

"Not before I do." His father replied, laughing loudly after.

"Enough drooling. Let's go eat before your mother gets jealous. Bahahaha!" His father added, laughing again.

Alexander's father had always been a 'Bon vivant' as they said in his hometown. Which was why he was a much-appreciated neighbor and a loved husband.

After his father washed up, they headed inside to eat breakfast. After eating Alexander went to his room to play his video game a bit.

An hour later, he received a text message from a friend. They wanted to hang out.

Alexander didn't really want to go, but he needed to uphold his social image, so he replied anyway.

He finished his quest on the game and took a quick shower. He then got dressed and walked out.

His parents were outside, drinking a coffee on the terrace, so he went to tell them he would be back later.

They told him to be safe and to come back for dinner. His father even told him he would take his mother for a ride on the bike instead of him.

Alexander only smiled and told him to have fun and be prudent.

He left the house and walked to the nearby park where they always met up before going into town.

Chapter 45 Pandora's Box: Anguish, Part 2

Once all of them were there, they went into town and headed to the local arcade. They always hung out there, since all of them were gamers to the core, and they had even met there.

They played for a few hours, before eating lunch in the little restaurant tied to the arcade.

Then they went back to play for a good part of the afternoon.

Around three in the afternoon, Alexander had more than his dose of social interactions and made his way back home. He bid farewell to his friends and walked out of the arcade, heading to his house.

On the way there, he saw a few police cars and two ambulances speed by him.

'Another car accident.' He thought.

These things were quite frequent in his part of town since the roads were winding and it was hard to see on the other side of the curves.

He paid it no mind and kept walking until he got home. He entered through the side door and took his shoes off.

"Mom! Dad! I'm home!" He called out.

He got no answer and surmised they had not gotten home from the ride yet.

So he did what he always did and logged back into Tower of Babel. His parents would holler at him when they got back, anyway.

He played for a long time before noticing they still hadn't come home. He logged out and made his way into the kitchen.

"Mom? Dad? Are you home yet?" He yelled.

Still no answer.

'That must be one hell of a joy ride if they forgot to come back home.' He thought to himself.

He looked at the clock and it showed six o'clock. He shrugged and guessed his father had taken a long route since he had wanted to joy-ride his baby for a long time.

He turned around and was about to go back to his room when his phone rang in his pocket.

'Ahh. Must be them calling to tell me they are going to be late.' He guessed.

But he couldn't recognize the number. He answered the phone unwillingly, hoping it wasn't a scammer or a religious nut.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello. Can we speak to Alexander Leduc please?" The voice on the other end asked.

"That would be me..." Alexander replied.

"Alexander Leduc? Son to Robert Leduc and Anabelle Leduc?" The person asked again.

"Yes, that is me. Who is this?" Alexander asked, getting annoyed at the questioning.

"I'm Dr. Dufresne, from Joliet General Hospital. I'm calling you because your parents have you both down as emergency contact." The doctor started saying.

"Oh my god, are they ok?" Alexander asked, worry gripping him.

"Your parents have been in a car accident, Mr. Leduc." The doctor continued.

"Yes, but are they ok?!" Alexander cut him again.

A brief silence ensued, causing Alexander's worry to turn into anguish.

"Sir... They were declared dead on site. We would like you to come in and confirm their identities and sign some paperwork. Can you get here on your own, or should we send someone to get you?" The doctor finally declared.

Alexander was in such shock that he dropped his phone to the floor.

The doctor, hearing a loud thud through the phone speaker, called out to the boy a few times. He then guessed what was happening and hung up.

He ordered an ambulance to go fetch him at home, using the address on the emergency contact list.

When the ambulance finally got there, the paramedics found Alexander sitting on the ground in his kitchen, listless.

They grabbed him and sat him in the back of the ambulance. The paramedic in the back talked to him on the way to the hospital, but Alexander was unresponsive, his mind only repeating the words the doctor had told him.

He finally broke down at the hospital, when the doctor lifted a white sheet from his parents' bodies, laying in the morgue.

This was just too much for his brain and just shut down on him. The hospital was accustomed to reactions like these and moved him up to mental treatment floors to wait until he snapped back to reality.

It only took a day, but his mind was still broken. Alexander was functioning on auto-pilot, signing papers, meeting the notary, and the funeral home.

The next days all passed by him like he was just a watcher in his own life. His mind kept replaying the day his parents had died to him.

He kept wondering what would have happened if he had stayed home. Would his father have taken him for the ride instead?

Would they have avoided the crash if he was with him? Would they be alive and ok right now?

Was this his fault?

He just couldn't shake away the feeling he had something to do with his parents' death, making him wallow further and further into anguish and despair.

Days turned to weeks and then months, and yet, a nagging feeling kept appearing in his mind. Hadn't he seen all this once already?

He racked his brain and remembered the day of the accident. He had woken up feeling a sense of Déjà vu.

Like he had already lived through all these events. He tried remembering the dream he had that night, then he realized.

His brain finally realigned with his memories, and it restored his mind to clarity. This was all an illusion.

He was still stuck in an illusion, more than likely the continuation of the previous one.

With his heart still aching at what was happening, his thought process steadied itself.

He tried to think of a way to get out of this illusion, but couldn't quite figure it out.

So he started wandering about in his town, trying to find something that shouldn't be there. Something that would lead him out of here.

He soon found it, in the park near his home. The small building with the water controls for the fountains had a detail on it, it shouldn't have.

On the door to enter, there was a number carved into the door. It was his apartment door number, and it shouldn't be there.

He walked to the door, and when he put his hand on the doorknob, everything vanished again.

'Let's hope this is the end.' He thought as he felt his consciousness fading again.

Chapter 46 Rare Potion

Everything shifted again, and he ended up back in his apartment. Only this time, he still knew he was in an illusion.

He looked around in disappointment.

"Let me out, Aberon. I've had enough of this mental torture." Alexander yelled, alone in his home.

There was no answer.

"Fine! I'll break myself out then!" He shouted again, sitting on his bed cross-legged.

He focused his mind on meditating like he had been training in the cave for days.

It only took him a few minutes to reach absolute peace of mind and he visualized himself being in the void of space again.

Around him, his surroundings started distorting. It was like the surrounding space was twisting on itself, with him at the center.

The scenery changed, as he reappeared in the little street the thugs had beaten him up in, a few days prior.

He was on the ground getting pounded, but he never opened his eyes. He had zoned out everything.

The scene changed again, switching to his workplace. His colleagues around him, all mocking him for his dream.

But Alexander was not paying them any mind, still locking his mind to external stimuli.

Around him, the scene changed many times, bringing him into situations that would have normally angered him greatly, but his eyes were closed and his ears heard nothing.

He was concentrating on getting out of the illusion, and the illusion was fighting back. Changing constantly, trying to make him angry, trying to make him go into a fit of rage.

After half an hour of this, the scene around Alexander finally cracked. The noise of glass shattering filled the surrounding air, and he was assaulted back with condensed mana, a sign that he was back in the cave with the shield artifact.

Astaroth opened his eyes, taking in the familiar sight. He rubbed his cheeks, which felt wet and got up to stretch.

That is when he noticed Aberon, staring at him wide-eyed.

"What?" Astaroth asked.

"How?" was Aberon's only response.

"How... What?" Astaroth replied, now confused.

"How did you get out of the illusion?" The old man asked, looking at him incredulously.

"Was I not supposed to get out?" Astaroth questioned, getting more confused by the second.

"No... Yes... No... Not that way at least!" Aberon stammered.

"What way?" Astaroth asked, still puzzled by the conversation.

"You broke out! You were supposed to tame your emotions, but you brutally forced your way out. How?!" Aberon replied, finally giving a clearer answer.

"I shut out everything." Astaroth answered like it was the simplest thing in the world.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Aberon questioned, his face a big question mark.

"I knew I was in an illusion. I ignored it." Astaroth said, turning to pet Genie, who was lying in a corner of the cave.

"You... Ignored it? How is that even possible? The illusion affects the mind foremost." The old man said, sitting down, his back to the artifact's pedestal.

"I knew it was an illusion, so I just stopped paying attention to it." Astaroth shrugged.

"I don't think you understand the amount of willpower required to brute force out of that level of illusion, young man." Aberon said, looking at him like he was a monster in human flesh.

"Does that mean I passed your test?" Astaroth turned around, excited.

"Test? Ahh... Yes. You pass." Aberon replied, still rattled at Astaroth's answer.

Astaroth smiled at the answer and was preparing to leave. But before that, he looked at the attendance window for the tournament.

The window popped open before him, and a look of disappointment appeared on his face.

Tournament Attendance

996/1000

His hopes of joining it were dashed. He could never level up fast enough to join now.

His shoulders dropped as he sighed loudly. He started walking towards the exit, bummed that he would have to wait longer before getting a chance at shining.

Aberon finally snapped out of his stormy thoughts and saw Astaroth was leaving. He jumped up and yelled.

"Wait! I have something for you."

He walked towards Astaroth, all the while pulling something from within his robe.

Astaroth turned around, watching the old man walk to him while searching his robe for something.

'What could he have for me?' He wondered.

The mage finally pulled out a vial from his sleeve. It was slim and about ten centimeters long.

He stretched his arm towards Astaroth, with the vial in his hand.

"Here. Drink this. It's from Captain Kloud." Aberon said, handing him the vial.

Astaroth inspected the item before taking it.

Exp Potion

Grade: Legendary

Description: This potion will give its consumer a boost in experience points. The amount of Exp gained depends on the quality or grade of the potion consumed.

Astaroth's eyes went wide when he saw the grade of the Item.

"I... I can't accept this, sir. This is too much." Astaroth stuttered, trying to push the vial away.

"Listen, young man. This isn't from me. So I'm not taking no for an answer. I also don't think you deserve such an item just yet. But I was told to give it to you, so accept it." Aberon said, pushing the vial back at Astaroth aggressively.

Astaroth could guess that the old man didn't want to give such a precious item. Which brought the question, why did Kloud want him to have this?

He carefully took the vial in his hands, not sure when he should consume it.

Aberon could read the question in his eyes and answered it for him.

"Kloud said you should consume it here, away from prying eyes. This thing is worth enough to make good people bad." He said, walking towards the passage back to his abode.

"I'll make sure no one comes down here in the meantime." He added, before walking away.

Astaroth went back to sitting in front of the pedestal, still eyeing the potion in his hands.

This could give him the Exp he needed to enter the tournament.

"No. It can't be." He said out loud.

He could guess the rough amount he needed to get to level thirty, by deduction of his prior levels. And that amount was not small.

He calculated he needed over a million points of Exp to level up to thirty, and that was excluding his Exp share with Genie. White wouldn't benefit from this, since he hadn't been summoned out.

But then again, maybe he should summon him. The Exp share had changed when maxing the level of his summoning skill.

Maybe he could benefit too, without him losing anything.

He went through with it. He summoned out White Death and breathed loudly.

"Here goes nothing!" He exclaimed, before drinking the potion.

Chapter 47 My Spot!

Astaroth's body shone brightly inside the cave, alone with Genie.

He heard loud notifications in his ears.

Ding!

You have consumed a legendary potion. Congratulations on being the first player to use a legendary consumable!

Ding!

You have consumed an Exp Potion. Exp given is calculated in function of the Grade of the potion. Calculating Exp given!

Ding!

Calculations are done! Three million Exp points gained!

Level up! Level up! Level up!... You are now level 30. From leveling; you gained 9 skill points, 27 free Attribute points, and all Attributes increased by 9.

Ding!

Congratulations, you have achieved the required level to join the 'Tournament of Heroes'

Ding!

World Announcement!

All thousand spots for the 'Tournament of Heroes' are now filled! Congratulations to all future participants! May the strongest win!

With all these notifications, Astaroth just sat there, mouth agape in astonishment.

'3 Million points! So much Exp!' He thought to himself, his brain still reeling from shock.

He had expected it to give a decent amount since it was legendary, but that was way beyond what he had imagined.

He had shot straight to level thirty, and when he looked at Genie's and White Death's status windows, he could see it didn't stop there.

Genie had also shot to level thirty, and White was now level twenty-seven! The stat gain from these levels alone would render him capable of moving alone in the zone much faster now.

Plus, he could easily calculate that he would be monstrously stronger when spirit melded with White now.

This was great!

Then he looked at the tournament attendance window again. He could see his entry number on it.

He was the nine hundred ninety-eighth participant. Some players were close to taking all the spots.

His taking the potion barely secured him the spot. He was thankful for the way Kloud treated him.

Now, he could go to the national stage and try to make his mark. Of course, it wouldn't be easy by any means, but he was ready for the challenge.

Still celebrating in his mind, he looked at his status screen to distribute all the points he had earned.

Status:

Name: Astaroth

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 30 (157'735/559'950)

Stats:

HP: 3'825/3'825 MP: 1300/1300 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 39 (+20) Agility: 39 Constitution: 39 (+20)

Intelligence: 39 Wisdom: 31

Attack Power Str: 295 Attack Power Agi: 195 Magic Attack Power: 195 Healing Power: 155

Natural Defense: 5.9% Armor Defense: 14%

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 27

Available skill points: 9

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

He put all his free points into his damage stats, so he dropped nine points into strength, agility, and intelligence, respectively.

That brought those three stats to forty-eight and boosted the damage numbers by an extra forty-five points in all three.

He also brought the skill 'Mana Skin' to max level, before leaving the remaining 5 skill points to sit for now.

Mana Skin: Lvl 1 -> Lvl 5 (Max) (Mastery Lvl 0/5)

Damage Reduction: 10% -> 20%

Repelling Chances: 20% -> 25%

Mana Cost: 50 -> 150

Duration: 2 minutes -> 5 minutes

The overall change was more of a time upgrade, but it still satisfied him. That meant he wouldn't need to cast it as often.

While he was doing all this, Astaroth was also walking in the path towards the old man's abode.

It took him a little longer than usual since he was focusing on his status screen, but he made it shortly after.

Once there, the old man was sitting in his chair next to the opening, waiting for him to return. He eyed him critically.

"I see you gained the strength you desired so badly. Hmph! All that just to flaunt it to your peers. What a shame. I thought you were less vain." Aberon told Astaroth, with a slight look of disappointment.

"It is not about vanity, sir. Doing this gives me the chance to live a better life in the real world." Astaroth tried to justify himself.

"What do you mean, real world? This is the real world, boy!" Aberon replied.

Sigh

"It is too hard to explain. There are many players like me in the game, and we have a tournament to determine who is the strongest coming up. I really needed to take part." Astaroth said, trying to sum it up for the old man.

"Boy, I know about you Players. However, we call you Abnormals, not Players. We know you come from another world, and that you have weird customs. But it doesn't make our world less real!" The old man said with conviction.

'They really gave it their all in the emotion AI' Astaroth thought, raising his thumb to the creators mentally.

"I still consider it to be a vanity contest." Aberon harrumphed.

"That doesn't change what I just said, sir." Astaroth said, shrugging his shoulders.

"How much time until your pissing contest?" The old man asked, not even looking at him.

"I have a week before the tournament." Astaroth replied with a chuckle.

"Hmm. That should be enough time." Aberon said, brushing his hand through his beard.

"Enough time? For what, sir?" Astaroth asked, becoming curious.

"Enough time to get you to the capital and pass your coming-of-age ceremony." The old man said, looking at him.

"Umm... My what now?" Astaroth questioned, confused.

Sigh

"Your coming of age ceremony, boy. The ceremony where you unlock your racial trait. All Ash Elves go through it once they get to level thirty. That is our custom." Aberon said, looking at Astaroth like he was stupid.

At that moment, Astaroth got a notification prompt in his vision.

Ding

Your gaming pod has used up its IV reserves. Please log out soon to refresh them and make sure you rest properly.

'Huh. How convenient.' Astaroth thought.

"Excuse me, sir. But I might need to leave for the rest of the day. Can we continue this conversation tomorrow?" Astaroth asked, trying to leave as soon as he could.

He could tell the old man was not happy with his recent choices and actions. He needed to do all those and wouldn't hesitate to make the same choices again.

"Tch. Fine! I'll prepare your trip while you are gone, who knows where. But be here early tomorrow!" He shouted, throwing his hands in the air.

Astaroth bowed and left in a hurry. He ran to his alcove and lay down before logging out.

Chapter 48 Preparation

Alexander woke up in the Pod. His body was sore after being laid down for almost five days.

His body was sweaty, and his bowels were excited.

He got out of the contraption and ran to his bathroom.

He felt liberated as he left the bathroom, since his body had been holding it in for days.

The next order of things was to eat a solid meal. He wasn't hungry that much, being on IV fluids whilst in the pod, but his body still needed some proper food.

As Alexander ate a bowl of cereal, he scrolled through the game forums with his cell phone, trying to find anything of interest.

He read a post about a function someone had found in their pod—phone linking.

The person found out by fiddling in their pod options they could link their phone to it and receive messages in-game from the phone.

It could even receive calls, although time dilatation issues were making the calls awkward for the person on the outside.

Alexander finished eating and went back to his pod, trying to find that option.

It didn't take him much time, as the post author had explained the setting location clearly.

Once he found it and linked it to his phone, he grinned. That would save him from being unreachable for days.

He wasn't able to test it because he was almost out of IV bags. There were only two left.

Alexander opened up the pharmacy's online platform on his phone, going to the medical portion.

He scrolled till he found the IV bags and gasped. The price increased from the last time.

The bags were now marked at two hundred and fifty dollars apiece. He bit his lip and ordered eight of them.

He tapped the delivery option and looked at the estimated delivery time. It would be six hours before he got them, so he filled his time up.

He looked online for Gamer Guilds, as the community called them. They were companies that had formed around in-game guilds.

If you wanted a sponsorship, they would be the ones to join. The companies paid players to push their brand into new games.

Most of them needed you to interview, and they all had strict hiring standards.

Alexander hated being under a microscope.

He still applied to all the ones in his current vicinity and decided he would bite the bullet if the need arose.

Alexander then went to take a shower to cleanse his sweaty body. He felt sore, like he had run a marathon, but he couldn't understand why.

Had he not been laying down for five days? He attributed it to being immobile for so long and discarded it as simply numbness.

He took a long hot shower, letting the heat relax his muscles and soothe his aches.

Once he was out and dry, he sat down in front of his television, watching the news a little, waiting for his delivery.

The news displayed was quite grim. People were fighting for pod supplies. The rich were trying to monopolize them.

The poorer, who couldn't afford even the cheapest pod, were still staying dangerously long inside the game with the helmet.

Some players had even died, because of health issues, caused by dehydration and injury.

Alexander felt like things were getting out of hand. If players started dying, the game would have to shut down, for safety reasons.

But the next bit of news threw him off even more.

While he was inside the game, 'Evo-Gaming' had opened up new shares on the market, on which many businessmen and women had jumped, to gain a piece of the pie.

The pricing on the pods enticed them so much. If more and more gamers bought them, then the return on investment would be monstrous!

The company had also given a press conference, announcing something else that would be a game changer.

They were introducing a currency exchange! Now players could trade their hard-earned money for in-game gold!

This would force a major power shift in the player community. The poorer players, even if good, would now have to compete with money to get better gear from merchants and auction houses!

He was lucky to be out of that struggle for now, as there probably weren't many players in the Ash Elf zone, anyway.

But that wouldn't last very long, as he would eventually have to venture out of that zone, to explore the wider game world.

Most of the higher-level zones were out of any countries if he believed what he could read online.

It was a matter for other people to wrack their brains with, since he didn't have any money left to spare, anyway. For now, he was mainly concerned that he wouldn't be able to make adequate preparations for the tournament.

He didn't have access to merchants at all in his starter village. But he most likely had an easier time leveling up.

The monsters here were a gold mine for low-level players, after all.

But that was beside the point. He needed to see if he could find gear for the tournament.

And skills, or spells, to bolster his arsenal. Finding a trainer that suits his needs would be tough too, unless he stuck with Kloud and Aberon.

He was almost certain that the only thing he would have time to do was the coming-of-age ceremony Aberon had mentioned.

As he watched the news and contemplated his options, time flew by. His doorbell eventually rang.

He rose from his couch and walked to the intercom. On the screen was a man in a delivery uniform, tagged with the pharmacy's logo.

He pressed the button to talk to the man.

"Hello."

"Hi. Is this Alexander Leduc's residence?" The man asked, looking at the camera.

"That would be correct." Alexander replied.

"I have a delivery from the pharmacy to your name. Can I come in?" The man said, showing his D/O.

Alexander buzzed him in and waited at the door for his order.

Once he had received it and signed off on it, he closed his door and went to set the bags in place.

He would return inside the game soon, to make as many preps as he could for the upcoming tournament.

He cleaned a little around his apartment and then got ready to dive again.

As he lay down in his pod, he heard the electronic voice welcoming him.

"Welcome back, Player Astaroth."

"Log in" Alexander simply replied, closing the lid on the pod.

Launching 'New Eden'

Logging in

Welcome back player Astaroth

Chapter 49 Night Patrol

As Astaroth logged back in, he noticed it was dark outside his alcove. He hadn't counted in the time dilation and a little over twelve hours had gone by in-game.

It was still dark, and his clock showed it was close to midnight.

He went to patrol outside the village while the people were still sleeping. It would pass the time, at least.

When he passed the entrance to the village, two people were outside, standing guard. One of them was the healer that had healed Konnor during their first duel. The second was an archer he wasn't familiar with.

He nodded their head to them and kept walking further away, hoping to see an enemy or monster he could test out his new strength on.

Genie was tailing behind Astaroth at a slow pace, looking around her, searching for something to sink her teeth in.

As he hadn't fed her in a few days, she had hunted rodents and such small creatures to sustain herself.

Astaroth was about to pull a slab of wolf meat from his inventory to feed her when she lunged at a nearby bush.

He heard a slight squeal from the brush and then Genie came out of it holding a squirrel-looking creature.

She gobbled it up quickly, not even leaving enough time for Astaroth to scan the creature. He could guess it was a trash mob like most games had.

What made him curious about it was the possibility that their levels were low enough that he could have used those to level up early.

But it was already too late to think about this matter. He was now strong enough that he did not need to kill such small critters.

After eating her snack, Genie looked towards the north, her ears perking up.

"What is it, girl?" Astaroth asked, seeing her reaction.

Genie growled in the direction she was looking before darting away. All Astaroth could feel through their connection was anger.

He launched himself at Genie's pursuit, making sure he never lost sight of her.

Astaroth could hear fighting noises in the distance. The further he ran, the more those became clear.

They eventually both ran to the edge of a clearing and saw what was causing all the ruckus.

The unit that was on patrol was fighting a flock of giant red bats. The bats were almost a meter wide, and they were blood red.

Astaroth scanned one, to figure out if he should help or not.

Blood Bat

Level: 12

Grade: Common

Health: 350 Mana: 140

He surmised the monsters were of the swarming type. He scanned many more, but all of them ranged between Lvl 10 to Lvl 15.

Where the issue lay, and why he intervened, was in their numbers. They numbered in the hundred.

He couldn't possibly count them, but he could roughly guess by the size of the bats and the size of the swarm.

He remembered to upgrade White Death's stats and dumped the eighteen available points into agility. Then he used Spirit Meld.

His hair turned white, and fur grew on his arms and cheeks. Claws also grew out of his fingertips. Astaroth again felt the rush of being powerful.

He quickly glanced at his status window before lunging into combat.

Status:

Name: Astaroth (Fused to White Death)

Race: Ash Elf

Level: 30 (37'285/55'950)

Stats:

HP: 11'850/11'850 MP: 2'890/2'890 Stamina: 100

Mana Regen: 1/second in combat, 5/second out of combat

Strength: 48 (+55) Agility: 48 (+53) Constitution: 39 (+63)

Intelligence: 48 (+27) Wisdom: 31 (+27)

Attack Power Str: 515 Attack Power Agi: 505 Magic Attack Power: 375 Healing Power: 290

Natural Defense: 10.2% Armor Defense: 14%

Luck: 0 (Stat unaffected by Level up and free points)

Available stat points: 0

Available skill points: 0

Physical Condition: Normal

Mental Condition: Normal

Seeing his insane stats, he instantly knew he didn't need to pull out weapons to deal with these creatures.

So he decided against it, and went into full feral mode, tearing apart the bats with his claws. He tried biting one to death at some point, but the taste was so horrible, he didn't try it again.

The rush of tearing the enemies apart with his own hands exhilarated him, but he remembered to keep his emotions in check, always keeping his head screwed on straight.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Genie was also faring well. Even though she couldn't one-shot all her foes, she still dealt quite enough damage to them on each hit.

The battle went on for almost an hour, with the bats not always being in range for melee combat.

During all that time, he received many notifications about resisting confusion.

The bats had an attack called Sonic Cry that could inflict confusion, but apparently, his mental resistance was currently higher than their chances of confusing him.

The same wasn't true about his impromptu allies and Genie, as they sometimes started throwing attacks at their allies.

That forced the people being attacked to focus on defense and allowed the bats to dish out more damage. Astaroth even had to hold Genie a few times, lest she attack the others nearby.

She might not kill them, but she would render the situation more perilous, and that was less than ideal.

During the times Astaroth wasn't spirit melded, they also confused him a few times, due to receiving so many Sonic Cries at the same time.

It was a given that some would work, even with his high mental resistance. When you receive fifty attacks, one after the other, one of them is bound to succeed.

The feeling he got from the confusion was peculiar. While he was confused, when he looked around, all he could see were bats.

He couldn't tell where his allies had been seconds prior, and that resulted in some attacks from him hurting his comrades.

It happened less and less throughout the fight since the number of enemies was falling at a steady pace.

Once the last bat had died, Astaroth sat down, exhaustion catching up with him. They had been fighting non-stop for almost an hour, and they couldn't lower their guard even once.

Out of all the combatants present, only Genie looked like she was fine. That was normal, with her animalistic stamina, he thought.

The patrol unit thanked Astaroth for helping, before asking him what he was doing outside the village at this time of the night.

Astaroth brushed them off, saying he had woken up and needed fresh air. He added that when he heard the commotion; he went to check it out and found them fighting.

He couldn't in good conscience leave them to fight so many enemies on their own, so he joined in.

While they were talking, Genie strolled around, eating the hearts of the bats straight out of their chests.

That creeped out the fellow elves around Astaroth, and he could only chuckle wryly.

She enjoyed her meal for a while, before being full and coming to lie down near Astaroth.

He simply smiled and pet her back, while looking up at the starry sky.

It was a beautiful night, and the weather was cozy. After emptying his energy reserves this way, he felt like he could just fall asleep right there.

It was tempting to do so, too. But he couldn't know when other monsters would walk by him and decide to use him as a late-night snack.

After a bit of rest, he asked the patrol if they wanted his help for the rest of the night, but they politely declined.

What would they look like if they couldn't perform their duties without outside help, after all?

Astaroth didn't insist and walked back towards the village. He wandered around a little before deciding to go to a recluse corner and train.

He fought with his eyes closed, imagining enemies around him. He would fight with one weapon, then switch to another, and then another, cycling between his full arsenal.

The enemies, he imagined, all wielded different weapons, thus the weapon changing, to adapt to their shortcomings.

This lasted until the break of dawn, when someone walked up to Astaroth, watching him train with a critical eye.

Astaroth was the first to break the silence, not stopping his shadow training.

"Have you come to watch me, or spar with me?" He asked his observer.

"Simply to watch, boy. You have progressed in the art of adapting, I see." Kloud, who was standing there, told him.

"I'm still not at the point where I would feel comfortable doing it in actual combat." Astaroth responded.

"In due time. Nothing comes from rushing things, young man." Kloud said, nodding his head.

The smile on his face betrayed the pride he held, looking at his protege growing.

"I was told today was the day I venture to the capital for my coming-of-age." Astaroth said, opening one eye to see Kloud's reaction.

"Aye. Aberon has apprised me of such news." Kloud replied, nodding his head slightly again.

Astaroth saw the smile drop a little on his teacher's face when he said that.

"Is something bothering you, teacher?" He asked.

"Nothing for you to concern yourself about, young one." Kloud said, smiling again.

Astaroth knew he was hiding something, but he didn't pry further. He just hoped Kloud would eventually trust him enough to tell him his story. Who knows, maybe that would unlock a quest.

"You should go wash up and prepare for the trip ahead, lad. It is a long journey to the capital." Kloud said, walking away.

"Aye aye, teacher." Astaroth said, stopping his training and giving him a salute.

He then went to wash up and prepare.

Chapter 50 Securing A Ride

There wasn't much to prepare for his trip, apart from some food for the road and a blanket to sleep out.

He took the blanket Korin had given him and shoved it into his inventory. Then he walked to the barracks to request some travel rations. The man at the counter agreed and gave him three days' worth of food.

Astaroth thanked him before heading to the old mage's abode. Aberon was walking out of his home when Astaroth arrived at the front of the house.

He waited before the stairs, letting the man turn around. When Aberon turned around, he looked at Astaroth with a tired look.

"Do you know how much trouble you are putting me through, young man?" Aberon asked him.

"Trouble? What trouble, sir?" Astaroth asked, oblivious to what he meant.

Sigh

"I haven't been to the capital in a long time. Too long." Aberon said with a sigh.

Astaroth could see a look of longing mixed with a tinge of melancholy in his eyes. He really wanted to know more, but he knew better than to anger the man with his inquisitive questioning.

That didn't stop him from staring at Aberon with burning curiosity. The mage could feel the stare even with his back to Astaroth.

"Don't look at me for answers, young one, for they are not mine to give." Aberon said, his tone final.

Astaroth couldn't help but wonder who he would need to question for those answers, if not Aberon. After all, he was the one that hadn't been there in so long.

They walked towards the village entrance, where a carriage was waiting. Weirdly, though, the carriage had no horses or bulls attached to it.

Astaroth could see the attachment in the front, where one would normally harness horses or bulls, but no animal was there.

He could see some of the village warriors loading some baggage on the back of the carriage. He recognized them as the first team he had patrolled with.

I'dril was leading the loading of the supplies, Korin and Aj'axx doing all the heavy lifting, while Chris was talking to Kloud to the side.

Astaroth walked to the two men with a quick gait.

"Kloud, Chris! Are you both coming on this trip?" He asked, almost enthusiastically.

"Bahahaha!" Chris bellowed.

"You don't need the two strongest men in the kingdom to reach the capital, kid." He added. Slapping Astaroth on the back.

"Only Chris is going." Kloud said, gazing at the man sternly.

"I can't reasonably leave the village without a high-level combatant, can I?" He added.

"But why is it Chris that's coming, and not you?" Astaroth asked.

Again, Astaroth could see a look of melancholy flash in Kloud's eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared.

"That's... a story for another time, boy." Kloud said, walking away with his back ramrod straight.

Once more, Astaroth was being devoured by curiosity as Kloud was walking away. A light smack behind his head brought him back to reality.

Chris was looking at him with a gentle smile.

"Be patient. He will open up to you someday." He said, patting Astaroth's shoulder.

Chris then turned around and walked to the carriage. He began helping to load it up.

Astaroth stood there for a few moments, wondering if everyone in this village knew something that they weren't telling him.

He shook his head, throwing that thought away.

'There is probably a good reason for keeping it from me.' He thought.

He walked over to help prepare the carriage for the trip, still wondering where the creatures to pull it were.

It only took a few minutes to finish packing up, and then Astaroth turned to look at Aberon.

"I think we are ready. What now?" He asked the old man.

Aberon walked by him, not responding. He looked at Chris and Aj'axx.

"Pull the carriage outside." He ordered, walking towards the village entrance.

Astaroth followed the old man, wondering what he was going to do. He hoped they wouldn't have to pull the carriage themselves until they reached the capital.

After walking outside the barrier, the old man pulled something from his sleeve. It looked like a wooden whistle with some weird engravings on it.

He brought the object to his mouth and blew lightly in it. The melody that came out of the whistle was neither aggressive nor stressful.

Rather, it was quite delicate, like the sound of wind blowing through treetops. It whistled like the rustling of leaves and echoed the sound of hollow tree trunks.

Astaroth felt it was quite a relaxing sound, pleasing to the ear.

Nothing happened for a few moments after Aberon blew the whistle. The birds started scattering from the distant trees.

Astaroth couldn't see what had caused this yet, but Genie, beside him, started growling. Her fur was standing straight on her back like she was feeling the approach of a predator.

Astaroth bent down to pet her.

"What's the matter, girl? Is something approaching that is scarring you?" He asked her, gently caressing her back to calm her.

"Her reaction is normal. You will understand soon enough." Aberon said, moving forward a few steps.

He then pulled out a pouch from his robe and waited.

The wait was short-lived when two shadows darted out of the forest in front of them.

Astaroth's heart almost stopped at the sight. His hair stood on his arms, in fear so primal he couldn't control it.

In front of Aberon stood two stags of abnormal size. To call them giants was a step too far, but one could neither call their sizes normal.

Their bodies seemed coated in tree moss of vibrant green. Their antlers, made of intertwining branches, spread wide above their heads.

There were so many points to them that Astaroth gave up counting them. Their eyes were pitch black, reflecting every little detail around them.

Astaroth tried inspecting the creatures but only got names out of them.

Guardian of the Forest, Arborea:

Level: ???

Grade: Mythical

Guardian of the Forest, Teraria:

Level: ???

Grade: Mythical

Astaroth's jaw dropped. Mythical creatures.

The fear both he and Genie were feeling right now was the natural reaction to facing a greater being. He couldn't even stand up from the mental pressure the two stags were emitting.

He locked eyes with one, Arborea, and his vision swam. Visions of leaves and trees, for miles and miles, filled his head.

It only lasted for a fleeting moment, before Chris jerked his head downwards, breaking eye contact.

"Don't look them in the eyes." Chris whispered, letting go of Astaroth's head.

"You could have warned me beforehand." Astaroth grumbled, keeping his line of sight low.

"YOU HAVE CALLED ON US, MAGE. SPEAK YOUR REQUEST." A voice boomed all around them.

"I need safe passage across your forests to reach the capital of the Ash Elf kingdom." Aberon replied, bowing low.

"YOU CALLED ON US, GUARDIANS, FOR SUCH A MENIAL REQUEST?" The voice boomed again, with an undertone of anger.

"I have. I know of the dangers roaming your lands, and which safe passage with my fellow men." Aberon answered, keeping his body at a ninety-degree angle.

...

"PAY THE TRIBUTE." The loud voice said.

Aberon lifted the pouch in his hand and emptied the content into his other.

In his hand now lay six acorns. They had a pristine shine to them, as if they had just fallen from a tree.

"Acorns, from the mother of the forest. One for each traveler." Aberon said, stretching his hand forward.

The stag on the right, the one Astaroth had locked eyes with, Arborea, moved forward. It took the acorns out of Aberon's hand.

A few moments passed in silence before the voice boomed again.

"THE TRIBUTE HAS BEEN PAID. MAY YOUR TRIP BE SAFE AND FORTUITOUS."

Then the two stags turned around to leave. Arborea stopped turning for a slight moment, its eyes peering at Astaroth before it resumed its action and left.

As they left, four wooden stags the size of horses grew out of the ground.

"Harness them, boys!" Chris bellowed.

The train of events took Astaroth's breath away.

'What just happened?' He thought.