

New Eden 641

Chapter 641 Land Ho!

Faraway from Bastion City, on the open ocean that separated the two continents of New Eden, a small boat floated on the waves smoothly.

This little sailboat, with only four people on it, was like a piece of driftwood, going up and down with the waters carrying it.

On the boat, Athena and I'die were looking forward, their eyes set on the horizon.

"Do you see it yet?" I'die asked.

"I won't see it faster if you ask every other minute, Yeobo. We won't sail faster if you just keep asking."

I'die choked on his saliva after Athena called him Yeobo, which he had learned meant darling, or honey.

She had started giving him sweet little nicknames like this only recently, and he still didn't know how to react. It wasn't to say he didn't like it, but he was quite unused to this.

I'die had never had a girlfriend, and never even entertained the idea, since his parents always hounded him with academic excellence.

But ever since he showed them he could live a better life through this game, they had been more lax with him, and he could enjoy more online time. This also came with spending more time with Athena.

One thing led to another, and Athena declared them a couple, without asking him his opinion, and started acting all lovely with him.

He was still wrapping his head around this event, and hardly ever returned her nicknames. But his shyness did not sour Athena.

It only made him more endearing to her.

She was about to fake a pout at him, for not responding to her feelings, when her eyes caught something in the distance. Her face turned into a big, dumb grin.

"There! Five kilometres to the northeast! Land ho!" she shouted.

Her arm extended in the direction she mentioned, as she jumped up and down in joy.

I'die was grateful to the gods that it took her mind off of him, and he let her excitement trickle into him as well.

He laughed and jumped, happy that they had found their target. They had been sailing for days now, in search of a specific island.

Many times had their little vessel been prey to large nautical monsters or unexpected storms. Luckily, the two sailors they had enlisted for their trip were veterans.

They navigated them through the storms with expert ability and made sure their boat stayed safe while Athena and I'die took care of the monsters.

Over the last week, I'die had become very adept at controlling the powers of the sea, and his ability to fight on the sea had improved leaps and bounds.

As for Athena, she usually kept aboard the boat and harassed the enemies from afar. On the very few occasions that she couldn't do that, I'die's spacial awareness had grown enough that he could make her footholds everywhere she moved.

But they had finally found their expedition's target.

It was an island fabled to contain a pond that could grant wishes.

Of course, I'die and Athena doubted it was that simple. They had come only because they wanted to explore every nook and cranny of the map.

The possible wish was a bonus.

Hearing their joyful screams, the two sailors turned the nose of the boat toward the direction she called out, and unfurled the secondary sail, to get some speed.

Five kilometres was a short distance, considering the vastness of the sea, and they made a brisk pace toward it.

Once they landed on the beach, their priority was to make camp and find food and water. Their resources were getting sparse, after a week on the sea.

The boat hit the sand bed, sending its occupants lurching forward, and ground to a stop. With practiced movements, all four of them hopped off the vessel, rope in hand, and started tugging them to bring the little boat further on the shore.

The night's high tides were treacherous if they left the boat too far off the island, after all.

It took the group a little under an hour to set up camp, find a creek with drinkable water, and some fruit trees that were safe for their consumption. And once this was done, they looked at the sun and decided the exploration would go to the next day.

The sun was already lowering on the horizon, and it would set in a few hours. I'die and Athena still took it upon themselves to secure a perimeter around the camp, so they could rest easy through the night.

Both of them were adept trackers, now, thanks to Athena teaching I'die how, and after an hour, declared the surroundings safe.

The island only had a few animals inhabiting it, according to them, and they were mostly critters who fled at the sight of their presence. Their only risk would come from the sea, as it always had.

The pair found a lovely pond near their camp, with hip-deep water, where they could clean off the salt from travelling on the ocean for a week.

Athena called dibs, offering I'die to join her, which he refused with his face redder than a tomato. She giggled at his prude-ness and left to go bathe.

One of the two sailors grinned when he saw her leave, but a single murderous glare from I'die dissuaded him from doing anything unbecoming.

When she came back, smelling like flowers, for some reason, I'die and the sailors went there as well, to clean up.

They took much less time than she had and realized why she smelled so sweet. The water itself smelled like a mix of water lilies and lotus leaves.

It was a welcome addition to washing off the sweat and salt from their skin.

After cleaning up, they returned to camp, where Athena had already started making dinner. It smelled of fruits and roots, which disconcerted the sailors.

"Urgh... When was the last time we had meat? I miss meat..." one of them complained.

The other punched him in the arm.

"Maybe if you hadn't gobbled down all our jerky on the second day, we could enjoy this with some jerky, dumbass."

The two of them started play-fighting, getting sand stuck in their hair, beards and clothes, defeating the purpose of the earlier bath entirely.

I'die ignored their antics and sat down to eat. He thanked Athena for the meal and devoured it ravenously.

Dusk came rapidly, the sunset painting a gorgeous image above the waves, making I'die marvel and Athena's stomach flutter in awe.

She even took a screenshot, to set this moment in stone. Looking at I'die's marvelling face, she smiled softly to herself

'Tonight. Tonight I make my move. He won't be able to refute his feelings any longer.'

Chapter 642 Winding Down

The remainder of the day flew by, across New Eden, and what for most had been an exciting day ended without fanfare, as many of the players logged out of the game, getting ready for their day.

Astaroth opened his eyes, feeling energized, like he had just jolted himself with a million watts of electricity. His stomach was churning, ready to throw up for a while now.

He curled over the dais, throwing up for fifteen minutes straight, his body expelling the black gunk by the bucket. But once he was done, he felt lighter.

Like his body was a feather, carrying itself through the wind.

Astaroth looked at his status screen and grinned.

"I knew doing this here was for the best. Now I'm ready," he mumbled to himself.

After setting the black gunk aflame, Astaroth rose to his feet and left the underground room, heading to his room on the second floor. He was ready to log out, and Phoenix had already messaged him, a few minutes ago, that she was heading out.

Once he entered his room, he undressed completely, his clothes reeking of sweat and impurities, and shoved them into a laundry basket. He quickly jotted down a note to Coral, who he knew would be furious at the state he left the clothes in.

'I'm sorry. I was doing mana lobe cultivation, and body cleansing and ruined the clothes. There are not enough words in the dictionary to explain how terribly sorry I am!'

He left the note of the basket before switching into his usual armour attire and logging out.

Opening his eyes inside his gaming pod, he could hear the shower running from outside of it and smiled.

He rose from the pod, pushing the lid open with one hand and pulling himself up with the other, and jumped out of it.

He and Kary had been in their pods longer than usual, and yet, he felt no numbness or soreness, as he usually did. But he was smelly and sticky.

'Again, the effects of the body cleansing showed through the pod. I wonder how much of it transpired through?'

But it was something he would find out quickly enough. For now, he needed to clean up. The smell emanating from his clothes and body was horrendous.

He directly threw the clothes into the trash bin, almost certain he could never get the smell out, and walked into the shower.

Kary smelled him before she saw him, and her nose scrunched up.

"Urgh... What the hell happened to you? Did you go swimming in a swamp or something?"

Alex laughed it off and faked trying to grapple her. She shrieked in disgust and stepped back.

"Stop! I just finished cleaning myself."

"Hehe. Don't worry, I'm only kidding. I'll be in here a while to scrub this smell off. Can you make us coffee and something to eat in the meantime?"

Kary pulled out of the shower, her body still dripping with water, and gave him a quick peck on the lips, nodding her head.

"Sure. Scrub thoroughly. Seriously," she half-joked as she ran out of the bathroom.

It took him half an hour of scrubbing and soaping to get rid of the horrendous smell. He was glad it disappeared, but a bit pissed it took so long.

'It wasn't this bad last time... Mind you, I hadn't improved this much either, last time. I'll just have to take it one step at a time next time.'

Walking out of the shower, Alexander dried himself up before putting on some clean clothes. He put something comfortable, but sporty.

He needed to go to the gym today. He had been skipping it so much lately, he wouldn't be surprised if Clark ripped his head off and shoved it into his asshole.

Sliding his way down the stairs, the smell of fresh coffee hit his nostrils and made him smile.

It was then followed by the smell of bacon, french toast, and maple syrup.

"Mmm. Smells freaking good down here. If this were the sixties, I'd make a housewife out of you," Alex said jokingly.

Kary smirked.

"You couldn't hold down a treasure like me in a home if you tried, handsome. I'd be making the dough, and you'd be my housewife."

They laughed together, Alex leaning into her back and kissing her neck from behind.

"Stop teasing, you horn-dog. It's almost ready. Set the table."

"Aye aye, boss-lady!" Alex mocked, giving her a sloppy salute.

He then pivoted around like a cheap toy soldier and started setting the table with squarish movements, making Kary laugh as she plated the food.

As they sat down to eat, Alex groaned in pleasure at the taste of the food. He had hardly eaten anything that wasn't hospital food in the last week, and this was like taking a bite of heaven to him.

He devoured his plate, Kary laughing at him from the side.

"Slow down, you'll choke, dummy. I don't know if I should be flattered or frightened, hi hi."

Alex finished his food in record time, taking a long sip of coffee to wash down the last bite, and sighed contently.

"That was good. Hospital food sucks, even when it's a first-class hospital. This was like eating actual food for the first time in ages."

Kary giggled.

"Then maybe you should make sure you don't end up in the hospital so often, you reckless baboon," she chided with a smile.

Alex scratched the back of his head with a guilty smile.

"I'm trying, I swear. It's not my fault danger follows me everywhere. It's like my bad luck keeps increasing. I blame David. It wasn't so bad before I met him."

Alex joked about this, but it wasn't all a lie. Ever since he had met with David, both in and out of the game, his life had taken a turn, both good and bad, and he always seemed to end up in harm's way.

But he chalked it up to bad luck. There was no way David had affected this.

Unless he secretly cursed him, or some shit, it could hardly be his fault.

He just needed to be more careful from now on, that's all.

Chapter 643 Unwelcoming Reception

After their relaxing breakfast, Alex and Kary got ready to head out when the intercom rang.

Alex wasn't expecting any visitors, so he assumed it would be David again, who tended to come unannounced.

But when he got to the intercom, the woman from the front desk looked uncomfortable.

"Mr. Leduc. There is a woman here to see you. She says she knows you."

Alex frowned a bit.

"Does she have a name?"

The woman from the front desk shook her head.

"She said to tell you 'You weren't supposed to be in that dungeon', and that you would know who she is from those words. She is already in front of the elevator. Should I let her in?"

Alexander's frown deepened.

'I wasn't supposed to be in that dungeon? Who the hell introduces themselves like that? What dungeon?' he silently wondered.

The woman on the screen was clearly uncomfortable, like someone was applying pressure on her to let them up. But he still had no idea who it could be.

He was about to say no when he felt a pulse of mana run up the building and hit him directly. He instantly knew that whoever that person was, they would find a way up, even if he denied them access.

"Let her up. Also, tell security to be on standby. There might be a commotion."

The woman looked terrified at his words, but nodded her head.

As soon as the elevator doors opened up downstairs, in the lobby, the camera inside the elevator replaced the woman from the front desk, and Alex realized who it was.

Standing in his elevator, already ascending the floors to his penthouse, was Constantine Levesque, with another woman in a three-piece suit for men.

"Shit."

Kary looked at him from the stairs, where she had been waiting for him to go change.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Chairwoman Levesque is in the elevator, and she's coming up here."

Kary frowned.

"What does she want, to come all the way here, instead of calling or setting up a meeting?"

Alex shook his head.

"I don't really care about what she wants. That's not the problem..."

Kary's gaze focused on him. Alex was suddenly on alert.

"Then what is?"

"She has powers. Strong powers."

"How do you know that?" Kary gasped.

"She scanned me... from the ground floor... I felt it."

Kary understood the implications here. Scanning a person inside New Eden was simple and at everyone's disposition.

But out here, in their world, it required the use of targeted magic sensing. It was not as simple.

And scanning someone from afar, even less so. Even inside the game, scanning someone from far away required some excellent control over mana.

Alex stepped away from the intercom screen, where Miss Levesque was staring at, almost like she could see him through the lens, and stood in the open area connected to the elevator.

Whatever she came for, the scan she did unveiled that she wasn't here just for a friendly chat. And her words.

"You weren't supposed to be in that dungeon."

Something told Alex she wasn't here for tea, or to discuss his outing about the powers he had outside New Eden. He could feel the hair on his arms and nape tingle.

"Be ready for a fight, Kary. I don't know why she's here, but I don't feel like it's a friendly visit."

Kary immediately furrowed her brows.

Alex's instincts were rarely off, and that was worrisome. If he felt like a scuffle was bound to happen, then the chances were high that it would.

She stood aside from the room, in the kitchen, where she wouldn't be seen immediately, and waited, her heart beating faster.

Ding!

The elevator rang as it reached its destination. The doors slowly parted, revealing Constantine Levesque, a wide smile on her lips.

She immediately saw Alexander standing in the middle of the room, his eyes already locked on her, his gaze intense and piercing.

"My my, young man. What a greeting. I wasn't expecting you to stand there in wait. I feel honoured."

Of course, her words were a facade, and both of them knew it. She was already inspecting the interior of the penthouse with her eyes as her assistant walked out; her gaze doing the same.

"To what do I owe this visit, Miss Levesque?" Alex asked, stretching a smile on his lips that couldn't have looked more forced.

Constantine scoffed.

"You'll have to work on that smile if you are to embark on the political journey Jack wants you to, young man. You couldn't fool a child if you tried."

She walked forward, heading to the living room as if this was her home.

Her stiletto heels clattered on the tiling floor as she made her way past Alex, who was eyeing the assistant with wariness.

He doubted someone with chairwoman Constantine's skill-set would have with her a useless assistant. He could guess there was a weapon under that jacket of hers.

"Kary, my dear, come on out. I can feel you from here!" Constantine shouted out, not even looking toward the kitchen, where Kary was already looking at her.

Kary stepped forward, revealing herself to the assistant, and walked next to Alex.

Alex pointed at the living room while looking at the assistant.

The suited woman looked at him and smirked, continuing her visual inspection.

"If you don't go sit, I will make you. This is my home, not a tourist site," Alex threatened.

The woman turned to look at him, a grin on her lips, but Constantine waved her hand.

"Come on, dear. Don't be impolite. Come sit with me. I doubt Mr. Leduc has anything concealed or prepared that could do us harm. He doesn't seem the type."

The assistant clicked her tongue while giving a death glare at Alexander before sitting next to her boss.

Alex and Kary sat on the opposite sofa, staring at the women who had invited themselves over.

"What do you want?" Alex asked, cutting to the chase.

Constantine smiled at him.

"It's less about what I want, and more about what I don't want, Mr Leduc," Constantine replied, looking at him smugly.

The tension in the air rose a level and could almost be cut with a knife.

Kary feared Alex might have been right...

Chapter 644 Pissing Contest

Silence enveloped the room in a blanket of discomfort.

Both sides stared at each other, trying to gauge what the other's intentions were.

"Speak, then. Miss Levesque. What is it you don't want, enough to visit me in my humble abode? Without being invited."

Alex's words became sharp, toward the last sentence, as he tried to make her understand she was unwelcome.

"Come, now. Don't be like that, young man. I can go where I please in this city. I practically own it. Your home is hardly an exception to this."

The sound of teeth scraping together could be heard in the quiet after Constantine's sentence.

"Nonetheless, I do have a reason for coming by. I believe the words I left for the receptionist were enough to say what that is."

Alex looked at her with a glare.

"What dungeon? If there was a dungeon I shouldn't have been in, then why even let it open? That sounds like a you problem, not a me problem."

Constantine clicked her tongue at the young man's arrogance.

"The dungeon portal you and your friends travelled through was an anomaly, and shouldn't have opened. It was a bug in the programming. I want whatever you have gained from it to be relinquished to my mods. The sooner the better."

Astaroth scoffed at her words.

"Chairwoman Levesque. You and I both know that saying words like bugs and glitches, don't apply to New Eden. I felt your scan. You can hardly lie to me, as you saw through me as well. Be truthful, or be gone."

Constantine's assistant jumped up, pouncing toward Alex.

"You rude little—"

But her words got interrupted, as was her movement, when an invisible hand grabbed her, locking her in place. And before her face, a burning hand had been ready to receive her.

Looking up the arm of said hand, the assistant saw Kary's glaring eyes. There was no hesitation in them.

"Sit down, or I will ruin your well-maintained face, lady," Kary spat, her words seething with anger.

Constantine pulled back her hand, and with the movement, the invisible grasp on her assistant pulled her back as well. Once the suited woman was back on her ass, Constantine's smile disappeared.

"It would seem you are much more aware than I had thought. I did not aim my scan at your partner, so I was unaware you were both awakened. Good for you. But it changes nothing in the power dynamic here. You will obey, player Astaroth."

Alex let his mana start to seep out of him, as he mentally reached for his soul companions. He still only had access to White, Morpheus, and a few of the demons inside Solomon's ring.

But he thought they were enough, should he need to take her on.

Alex could feel the mana radiating from her, but her body itself didn't seem augmented by it. Contrary to his.

"Listen. If the dungeon was a 'bug', like you said. Then I am not to blame for what we got, and neither are my friends. Therefore, we do not owe it to you to give back our rewards. I think that is only fair for a lack of 'programming' on your side, don't you agree?"

It was Constantine's turn to clench her jaw and grind her teeth.

"No. You listen. I don't think you understand the situation here. You are not in a position to say no. I can deny you access to the game forever, with a simple call. Do you want that to happen to you and your friends?"

Alex scoffed at her.

"If you could deny us access, you would have led with that. You are just lying out of your ass. I've had enough. If you came just to threaten me, you might as well leave. I am unimpressed."

Alex rose from the sofa, stepped toward them, and pointed at the elevator doors.

"The exit is that way. Same way you came in."

As he said this, Constantine waved her hand, and he felt an invisible force grapple him. She grinned at him, almost sadistically.

Kary burst into action, igniting her arms, ready to set the woman ablaze, but with a wave of her other hand, Constantine locked her in place as well.

"I told you. You are misunderstanding the power dynamics at play here. But you didn't want to listen."

Constantine rose to her feet and started walking toward the balcony doors. And as she did, Alex's body floated backward as well.

Constantine's assistant punched Kary while she passed next to her on her way to open the glass doors.

"I heard you could fly. I wonder if that's true. Huh. I guess there is only one way to find out. I'm not sure of the range of my magic, so I hope it breaks before you smack into the ground. That would be a terrible outcome."

Saying this, Constantine flung Alex's immobile body over the railing of his balcony and watched him fall.

"Nooooo!!!" Kary cried out in horror.

Whack!

A strong hook to the temple from Constantine's assistant knocked her unconscious.

"Shut up, bitch. I think I should ruin your face for threatening to ruin mine."

Constantine released her magic grasp on Kary, who was out cold, and clicked her tongue.

"Never mind your sadistic tendencies. We have other things to do. You can come back when you are alone. I have no interest in seeing you at work."

Saying this, Constantine felt her magic bindings over Alexander snap, and she smiled.

'Let's hope he has enough time to break his fall. It would be a tragedy to lose an able body before the great reveal.'

She turned around to leave, but a burst of magic in front of her interrupted her momentum.

In a puff of black fire, a human figure appeared, with long horns and a swanky suit.

The black eyes and red irises were a dead giveaway of what this entity was.

"A demon?! On this side already? Impossible!" Constantine screamed, waving her hand to bind the entity.

Gaius had told her about these abominations that had to be kept at bay inside New Eden. She knew they were the enemy.

But as her magic took hold, it immediately broke.

"You thought you could throw me off my balcony? Big mistake."

Constantine's eyes widened at the words.

"You? Ho—"

Before she could finish her question, Alexander's hand clasped her throat and blocked the air from escaping, cutting her off.

"My turn."

Chapter 645 Tit For Tat

Bang! Bang!

Tink! *Ping*

Two gunshots resounded in the penthouse, immediately followed by two ricochet sounds, one duller than the other.

Alexander turned his head toward the source of the gunshots. The suited woman, Constantine's assistant, who was looking at him with eyes wide.

The bullets had bounced off Alexander's demonized skin, on the base of his right horn, and the other off the side of his cheek, leaving barely a mark.

"Sit down," Alex growled, his voice almost modulated from the demon's voice coming out over his.

The woman took two steps back, only to collide with something behind her. Turning her head, all she saw was a burning fist smack into her jaw.

It sent her sprawling onto the couch to her left; her face burned on the right side, and howling in pain. When she tried raising her gun to fire at the angry Kary who was stepping toward her, she howled in pain again.

In her hand, where the firearm had been, was now a melting puddle of slag, which carried away with it her skin, as it dripped to the ground.

"Tsk tsK tsK," Kary clicked her tongue.

"You brought a gun to a magic fight. Not very smart of you."

Alex looked at her and grinned.

"I'll let you handle the assistant. Constantine and I have to talk. Be right back."

And with those words, he vanished in another puff of black flames.

Alex and Constantine reappeared in a cloudy sky, very high above the penthouse and the city. Under them, the building looked like little grey boxes, and Constantine immediately understood his intentions.

But it was too late.

Alexander released his hold on her neck, and gravity asserted itself, sending her tumbling to her impending death. But he wasn't done with her.

Plunging next to her, he made sure he followed on her descent and spoke to her, over her panicking shouts.

"I wonder if you can fly. High-level mages usually figure out how to, so you should, right? You have, well, had, thirty thousand feet to figure it out. That gives you approximately forty seconds to figure it out. I think you should stop panicking and start thinking."

Constantine's mind was already too far gone to register his words. All she saw in him was his demonic grin, as she fell to her death.

"Stop this! If I die, everyone will die!" she screamed, flailing helplessly.

Alex frowned and stretched his arm out, grabbing her collar. The falling halted so suddenly that Constantine felt her body crack in places that weren't supposed to crack.

But she gritted her teeth and endured the pain.

"What do you mean, everyone will die?" Alex asked, gazing at her sternly.

"I mean, I'm humanity's only chance at survival! You can't let me die. If I die, no one will survive!"

Alexander huffed.

"If this is how strong you are now, I think we don't need you. Plenty of people in the world will soon surpass your strength by leaps and bounds. You won't be saving anyone with your paltry magic."

He started loosening his grip on her collar, and she felt it. So she hung on to his arm.

"Please! Stop this madness! If I die, Gaius will know something is up, and he'll start his plans much sooner! We are not ready!"

Hearing this, Alex's grip clenched up again.

"Gaius? What does he have to do with this?"

Constantine felt relief that he hadn't dropped her again, but now she was in a pinch. She couldn't talk about Gaius' plans to anyone because of a curse he put on her.

Mentioning the plans at all was already a risk.

"I can't tell you. If I talk, I'll die, and then we are back to him starting his plans early," she begged.

"Tch. No wonder he picked someone like you to follow his every command. You'll try to weasel your way out of taking responsibility till the end, won't you?"

Constantine's eyes widened in fear.

"Please! I swear this is not what I'm doing! Humanity is not ready to face the demons! That is why he asked me to help prepare it!"

A sharp pain in her stomach cut her words off, and she coughed blood.

It was only fleeting, as she hadn't said much, but it was enough to remind her to keep her mouth shut, and enough to show Alex she wasn't lying.

He looked at her with disgust.

"He's made you into his loyal little puppet, didn't he? Unfortunate."

"I want to help," Constantine said, wiping her mouth of the blood she had just coughed.

"We don't want your help. Your help would have been to warn people that playing the game is what saves them. Keeping this from them will only end in tragedy."

"I can't do that! I would have if I were allowed!" she shouted, trying to plead her case.

"It doesn't matter. Keep your secrets. Khalor and I will make sure we prepare the world while you sit on your laurels and mountains of money. People like you will be the first to fall when the end comes, anyway. I wouldn't be surprised if Gaius ended you personally, simply for what you know."

The thought had crossed Constantine's mind more than once, and she knew it was a possibility.

"Please. Just let me go. Let me help while I still can."

"Oh, I'll let you go alright. But your help is not needed, nor is it welcome. Just stay out of our way. If you make waves in our plans, I'll make sure it's the last thing you do, even if the world isn't ready. Understood?"

Constantine reluctantly shook her head yes.

"Good. See you back on the ground, then."

"What? Eeeee!"

Alexander smiled at her and released his grip, shaking her off his arm, and watched as she resumed her plummeting to the ground.

He heard Asmodeus' voice inside his head.

'I like this new you. No hesitation. There might be potential in you yet.'

'Shut up. I'm not letting her die. She just needs to understand that she isn't pulling the reins anymore. A close brush with death will drive the point across.'

'Tch. How boring. In that case, you can join her in her fall.'

After saying these words, Asmodeus forcefully retracted his powers, sending Alex tumbling down as well.

'You shit! Morpheus, come!' Alex called out mentally.

Within seconds, wings had sprouted on his back, and he curled them around himself, sending himself into a full dive.

He originally planned to teleport back to Constantine and catch her, but with Asmodeus' powers gone, he now had to reach her before she turned into paste.

"Motherfucker!" he shouted as he dove.

It would be clutch.

Chapter 646 The Exit Is That Way

Picking up speed, Alexander quickly realized he wouldn't catch up in time. He had to go faster.

With a quick thought, he channelled mana into the air before him, creating a vacuum zone, and projecting the sucked-up wind behind him instead, reducing friction and propelling him at the same time.

He picked up speed, suddenly descending much faster than before, as the air around his vacuum zone started heating up.

The ground was getting closer, insanely fast, though.

He caught up to Constantine as they reached the rooftops of the nearby skyscrapers and grabbed her by the waist.

Opening his wings to catch air, he quickly angled his trajectory, gliding near the glass panes, hoping to catch the natural updrafts these buildings caused to help slow him down.

The rising winds, together with him constantly pushing against the air pressure to change his trajectory, eventually got him to get parallel to the ground. And not a moment too soon, as he had reached about fifty meters from the ground.

But his speed was still insanely high, and he needed to change that if he had any hopes of landing safely.

With some more effort, Alexander angled himself upward, taking his current gliding speed to rise back up into the skies, before someone noticed a giant humanoid bat in the streets of the city and panicked.

Once he had reached high enough and slowed down to a normal flight speed, he returned to his balcony, with Constantine passed out in his grasp. The high Gs from the rapid change of trajectory, along with the fear of death, had taken her out.

It was a good thing, though.

He hardly wanted to deal with her rambling ass anymore.

He quickly made his way back home and landed on the balcony, throwing Constantine into the house like a teenager throwing his backpack when coming home from school.

She was still passed out, eyes rolled into the back of her head when she hit the ground.

Inside the penthouse, Kary was eyeing the assistant with hatred as she held a loop of flames alight around her head. Not close enough to singe her, but close enough to make her fear for her life.

When she heard the dull thud of Constantine's body hitting the ground, she spun her head toward the balcony.

"I had kind of hoped you wouldn't bring her back here," Kary said, slightly annoyed.

Alex undid the meld and looked at her, shrugging his shoulders.

"I almost didn't. Asmodeus decided to be a dick and cancelled the meld at twenty-eight thousand feet above ground. If I hadn't had Morpheus available, she and I both would be soup on a sidewalk somewhere nearby."

Kary chortled a bit at the statement.

"You need to get those demons under control more. Or don't use them until you do."

Sigh

"I know. I agree as well. But he was the only way to get back up here before smacking into the pavement when she tossed me. It wasn't by choice. And don't worry. Asmodeus will get what's coming."

Kary huffed. She was still pissed at both the women, and Alex's problems could wait.

"What about them?" she asked.

"Their leaving. Ain't that right, you brainless bitch?" he asked, looking at the assistant.

Kary dispelled her flame spell, letting the woman look at them.

"Get your boss and get the fuck out of my home. And if you ever come back here, or even think of getting back at us, you'll end up as ashes in a ditch somewhere. As for your boss, I can't kill her, but I can hurt her enough she'd wish she was dead. Make sure you tell her that. Now piss off!"

The suited woman, whose face was still oozing from the burn on it, and whose hand was half melted away, quickly rushed to chairwoman Levesque's side, grabbed her and bolted toward the elevator doors.

She had no intention of staying for a second more than needed. The couple had proven more than willing to execute their threats, as attested by her burnt face and hand, and the passed-out chairwoman on her back.

She glared at them one last time, as the doors closed on her, and then they were gone.

Alex watched them on the intercom cam until they left the elevator. He calmed down once they were gone.

"Now that they're gone, let's clean up this mess."

He looked at the floor, where a melted lump of metal lay, and exhaled.

"I hope that didn't damage the tiling..."

Kary giggled, returning to her normal countenance now that the threat had passed.

"Can you promise me you won't let strangers come into our home willy-nilly in the future?" she asked, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh? Our home? Have you decided to live here permanently now?" he teased.

Saying this, Alexander used a weak version of telekinesis to pick up the still-hot metal from the ground and sighed in relief at the only dirty floor underneath. He didn't want to have to contact the contractor, just to swap out one burnt tile.

"I've been living here for almost a month full-time. I thought that was clear by now," Kary giggled.

"Eh. That's not wrong."

He shrugged as he threw the metal down the trash chute.

"I was just wondering why you hadn't moved all your clothes into the closet yet, since you moved in, hehe."

She smiled at him.

"Oh, no. That won't do. I'd rather we go shopping for new clothes instead. That way, I don't have to taxi from here to my mother's place, just to transfer all my clothes."

Alex almost smacked himself on the forehead at the mention of shopping.

'I should have kept my mouth shut...'

"We can do that later, after we go to the gym. How about it?" she asked, all joyfully.

He wanted to say no. He hated going shopping.

But he couldn't

'Happy wife, happy life, they say...'

"Sure. We can go later. Oh, shit! The gym! Fuck!"

Kary smiled at him, pointing at the bags near the couch.

"I'm ready to go. What about you?"

Alex started sweating.

"God dammit... He's going to tear me a new one..."

Chapter 647 North Shore Situation

Over on the northern shore of Montreal's island, David was watching the construction of his bunker from overhead.

Ever since Jack had sent more help, the construction had sped up threefold, and the pace steadied as well. The additional parts that Jack added to his plans were already being added to the original layout, and David smirked.

'He wanted our bunkers to connect... He should have just asked. Everything is always secret with old men like him,' he grumbled mentally.

He was glad about the addition, though. Jack had not only made the original plans much bigger, to accommodate the added load, if one bunker emptied into the other, but had also connected the two's power sources and life support systems.

By doing this, unless both sanctuaries suddenly got hit by catastrophes simultaneously, neither would fall off the grid. And the connections between the two were so deep underground that it would be almost impossible to take them out from the surface.

All in all, the additions suited him as much as they suited Jack. And at the pace of construction, they would finish his shelter by the end of next year.

This meant he only had to bleed his money for another fifteen to sixteen months. He looked at his calendar and smiled.

This was much faster than he had anticipated.

They had marked the original date of the end of construction as the year after, in 2052 instead of 2051. The extra year time would give him much-needed freedom to get stronger.

"September is coming up fast. The first complications have already started occurring, and the elections for mayor will be all-around solutions for these cropping problems. But, last time, the elected mayor failed so hard at his job. He only made things worse..." David mumbled to himself.

But he had a feeling that things would be different this time around.

A candidate that had lost last time had a bigger selling point, in this iteration.

'Let's hope Alexander does his job well enough to put wind in Jack's sails.'

Visions of poorly built underground bunkers, barely a few meters from the surface, flashed in his mind. These bunkers, getting breached on the first wave of invasion.

So many deaths occurred because of terrible planning and cheap solutions. Visions of his friends getting torn to shreds as he fled for his life.

David shook his head, making the thoughts go away. He couldn't think about the past.

No.

He had to think about this future, not the one that had already been failed. That was their only path to survival.

"This time, we will be ready. The demons won't stand a chance..." he told himself, fists clenching.

"This time, we will win. At all costs..."

A little to the east of David's bunker, in a suburb that was always so calm, one mansion was on high alert. In the Bianchi mansion, on the outskirts of Bois-des-Filion, it had been a little over two weeks since their control over the facility had been usurped from them.

Many technicians had already been shot dead, as the head of the family lost patience with them for their incompetence. Food was running low, no one had enjoyed hot water in forever, and the morale was all but gone.

Only one person was still living a semi-normal lifestyle. The Bianchi head.

His secret basement bunker, which he had opened up once the generators powered up the house a bit, had everything he needed to weather out an attack if another family suddenly decided to take his head.

It had a separate power supply, as well as commodities that would make all his men tear their eyes out. It was stocked with food, wine, and other things necessary to live well, regardless of the chaos outside.

Of course, he let no one in, not even his closest bodyguard, as he enjoyed all these privileges.

The camera in the basement recorded every one of his ins and outs of this room, time-stamping them, and sent them through an encrypted line toward the oracle.

All the cameras in the mansion were doing the same, keeping tabs on each good in the place, and their pathetic attempts to retake control.

One of them even tried cutting off all the power to the mansion, which resulted in him frying himself as a sudden surge happened at the exact moment he tried cutting the primary power lines.

The Oracle was ever-watching.

And the Oracle wasn't one to let anyone escape its prophecies once it doled them out.

Things were looking dire for the men in the Bianchi mansion. If the situation didn't change soon, they would have nothing left to eat, and this would drive them into desperation.

Only a few of them knew about the secret panic room, and their loyalty to the Bianchi head was unwavering. They would live and die for him, regardless of how much of an asshole he was.

So when pictures started appearing on the monitors across the mansion, showing the secret room's inside, where the Bianchi head was dining like a king, unrest quickly swept the men.

The four men forever loyal to him quickly shot every screen and monitor in the house, cutting off the feed, trying to quell the issue. But some men still ended up getting shot for causing a scene.

Tension was at its peak, when another prophecy echoed inside the mansion, this time through the intercom.

"The Oracle has seen your plight. The Oracle provides to the lost lambs and offers safe passage. When tragedy befalls the head, the hand can choose to cut itself off, to save itself from rotting."

After the message ended, the mounted machine guns in the yard started firing into the ground. After a few seconds of bullet deluge, they went silent again.

One guard of the compound went to see what they had fired at and instead saw they had carved a message into the grass with the devastation.

****Tomorrow at sundown. South gate. Surrender and live. Resist and perish. The Oracle.****

Gasps echoed through the mansion once the message started spreading through the remaining men. The Oracle had answered their prayers.

Chapter 648 Two Households, Two Moods, One Pair

In a calm part of Korea, in a recluse mountain village a few hours away from Seoul, in the Gangwon-do province, lay the Jin household. And inside this household, in a locked room, lay a gaming pod.

Its occupant, Jin Sil Yeoja, known as player Athena Woodland, was in a deep sleep state, still inside the game, even as the sun rose outside of New Eden, and fell over the game.

Her mother, who had to calm the fuming temper of her husband after her daughter had threatened him, was currently standing outside the room, with a platter of food, presumably breakfast, waiting for an answer to her knock.

Seeing as there was not a peep from inside the room, she pulled out a key from her pockets and unlocked the door. Her husband didn't know she had this key, as her daughter had made her swear to keep it a secret.

She quietly opened the door and stepped into the room, closing it behind her. Seeing the pod's lights were still flashing, she understood her daughter was still inside her game.

As she had done many times, the mother carefully left the platter on a nearby desk and crouched next to the pod. She opened the compartment for the IV bags, and carefully replaced the empty ones, to ensure her daughter didn't get sick, and closed the panel up again.

After picking up the platter she had left in here the last time, she threw one last look at the pod and left the room, locking it behind her.

'She spends more time in there than out here these days. I hope she comes out soon, and mends things with her father...'

But she knew this was wishful thinking.

Her husband had been sour ever since their daughter had stopped competing in archery. He kept telling her she was wasting away her future.

She could only hope that someday, he would realize he was pushing their daughter away.

With melancholy on her face, and sadness in her heart, the mother quietly walked away, her steps heavy with remorse. Remorse for not staying her husband's hand every time he went to scold their daughter.

But the past was the past.

Far to the west of the Jin household, in China, in a small city house, with a placard spelling Hóngsè hanging over the door, a similar situation was happening.

Only, in this household, where Rì-chū, who many now knew as player I'die Ad-Tempus, there was no underlying sadness or floating anger.

Ever since their son began playing this game, he had been more happy overall, and every other endeavour he undertook, he did so with gusto and a spryness that hadn't been there before.

This made his parents so happy, and when he started bringing in money as well, they became supportive of him. So when his mother knocked at his door, to see if he was out of the game, and got no answer, there was no lock barring her way into the room.

She changed his IV bags to this brand new pod he had bought himself, humming a little tune as she did, and left him a note saying the food was in the fridge when he got out.

There was no sourness present in her, and she even picked up a few pieces of clothing lying about before leaving the room, still humming.

The contrast between these two situations was as stark as the difference between night and day. And yet, the situation for these two players inside the game was one and the same.

As they stood under the moonlit sky, on a small island that they still had to explore, Athena took I'die by the hand, pulling him into the jungle.

"Where are you taking me? It's the middle of the night, there might be monsters," I'die protested.

Athena giggled at his whimpering, but kept dragging him along. Her higher strength stat made this very easy.

"Oh, don't be a scared-y cat, Yeobo. I only want to show you something nice. You're going to love it."

He kept meekly resisting, even though his curiosity was piqued, until they reached a small clearing, with the pond where they had bathed earlier shining in the moonlight.

"Is this what you wanted to show me? I saw this already, Athena. Although I will admit, the moonlight makes it incredibly pretty."

Athena smiled at him.

"Prettier than me?" she asked, biting her lower lip slightly.

I'die froze, his head spinning as he tried answering.

"That's n—I wouldn't—I can't—"

His stammering made Athena laugh.

Her delicate laughter sent a shiver down I'die's spine. But not one of fear.

Feeling his face become hotter, I'die closed his mouth.

Athena backed up into the water, until it reached her hips, and lowered herself completely inside it.

I'die raised a brow, but his mouth dropped open right after.

Athena had risen back up to her feet, but her equipment was gone. She was in a white tunic, no longer than mid-thigh, that caressed every one of her curves tentatively, as the now wet fabric appeared more translucent than white.

"How about now?" she asked, as she walked toward him seductively.

I'die's mind went blank.

His heart started beating faster and faster until he could hear the thumping in his ears. He felt his throat dry up in nervousness as Athena stepped closer and closer.

Until she was standing mere inches away from him, her breast already pushed against his chest.

He stared into her eyes, still frozen, jaw hanging loose.

When she leaned in to kiss him, he had to shake himself into action, mentally, lest she kiss his slack, open jaw.

When he returned her kiss, Athena did not hesitate to take his hand and lead it to her body. She would move him like a puppet if she needed to until he understood what she wanted.

It took much less time than she had expected, before I'die finally let go of his nervousness, and abandoned himself to her embrace.

And right there, under the moonlight, bodies half submerged in the lukewarm pond, I'die finally professed his feelings openly to her, through action and words.

Chapter 649 Shopping Spree

Morning flew by for Alex and Kary after the incident with Constantine Levesque.

They had rushed to the gym after receiving an angry text from a certain trainer, who threatened to spill out their insides if they didn't get there in time.

Alex and Kary both decided it was the safer bet not to keep him waiting. With a clever use of a little mana, they rushed through alleys and side streets, making record time to the gym.

Without breaking a sweat, or even getting slightly out of breath, the pair entered the gym like a gust of wind, scaring the two young girls at the desk.

They had to hard brake on the polished cement floor before they crashed through the gym gates. And with a fit of laughter, they proceeded through, ignoring the pale girls at the counter.

But the next three hours with Clark were less than enjoyable. The trainer drove into them hard, for making him wait so long, even though they insisted they had a reason.

After three hours of hellish slave-driving, rough sparring against him, and more training, the two of them pulled out of the gym looking haggard.

Unfortunately, the day was hardly over.

Alex still needed to call Jack and tell him about what had happened that morning. This wasn't something that should just fly under the radar.

The conversation was brief, as the old man was busy with work, and preparing for something big, apparently.

But Alex did get Jack's word that he would make sure this never happened again.

He wasn't sure how the old man would do good on that word, but he had a feeling he would, regardless.

With this done, the last thing Alex and Kary needed to do that day was a bit of shopping, as he had promised.

Alex could already feel the dread rise inside him.

He hated shopping.

Not with Kary or with anyone, particularly. But shopping in general.

He always had.

Alexander felt like spending hours roaming the mall, just to get a few pieces of clothes, was a waste of time. Time he could have spent playing games or keeping the house clean.

But he had said yes to Kary and wasn't one to rescind his word.

Surprisingly, though, Kary wasn't a slow shopper. She zoomed in and out of shops, carrying increasingly more bags, which eventually all landed in his arms, for some reason, as they zigzagged through the mall like mice on cocaine.

It took a little under two hours, which Alex still found to be a long time. But they did so many shops and now had so many bags with them.

"It's like you are making yourself a second wardrobe. Could we have done this in maybe more than one trip?"

Kary giggled at how simply his mind worked.

"Oh, love. This is only the first trip. We will make a few more."

Alexander's heart dropped at the mention of more shopping sprees.

'I don't want that...'

He could already imagine having to carry all those bags, and his mind reeled.

But Kary was only teasing him.

"Don't worry, darling. I will go with someone else next time. I won't force you to come."

Alex tried sighing silently, but failed miserably, exhaling loudly in relief.

He got curious, though.

"Who will you be going with? Do you have friends in the city?"

Kary nodded her head.

"I have a few. Though I only recently told them I was staying here more often now. So they have already asked when we could hang out."

"Huh. Well, then that reassures me. I thought I was taking you away from all your friends and family."

Kary giggled again.

"I grew up in a small town. Most of my friends have moved into the city. Either here or in Quebec. I hadn't seen most of them in a while, because of it. Moving here actually gives me a chance to reconnect with them."

"That's nice. I wish I had friends to reconnect with, too. But ever since my parents' accident, I pushed most of them away. I felt better alone. And now I doubt they would give me the time of day..."

Saying this out loud, Alex realized how sad I sounded. He felt a wave of melancholy wash over him.

But Kary grabbed his wrist, smiling at him warmly.

"Don't worry. You have friends. They might not be old friends, but they stay your friends."

Alex smiled back.

"I know. Anyway. Let's get back home with all this. I'm getting hungry and some good ol' mac'n'cheese sounds good. The cheap brand. It'll wash away all the fancy food we always eat, hehe."

Kary laughed a bit as they headed out of the mall. They had come here on foot, but returning home on foot, with all these bags, seemed like a stupid idea.

So she called a cab service, and they talked about the game as they waited for it.

"I heard from the commanders that you had offered them all a deal for the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises of next year and beyond. Care to share with me what it is?"

Kary still wanted to know what he had offered to them, and what his plans were, since he had done all this on his own. But the commanders had been mum about this, since they were all in the presence of each other at the moment it came up.

"Huh? Where did you hear that? Did you speak to them?"

Kary smiled at him and winked.

"I had a few hours of fun with all of them. Let's just say they were more open to discussion after getting slammed into the floor a few times."

Alex looked at her with a raised eyebrow but didn't pry.

"It was a tempting offer for all of them. And I only needed to play my cards right. But I still won't tell you."

"Aww. Why?" she whined.

"Because you'll find out in a few hours anyway, darling. Why ruin the surprise? Matter of fact, everyone will find out in a few hours."

It was Kary's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"Everyone?"

"Yeah, everyone. You'll see," he answered, a cocky smile stretching on his lips.

Their cab arrived as he said this. A small van, with plenty of room for all their bags in the back, and space for their legs in the seating area.

It brought them home promptly, and a luggage carrier helped them carry the shopping bags upstairs for them.

Only a few hours of the day remained before they needed to log back in. Sunrise was pretty early, in New Eden, after all.

Chapter 650 Battle Briefing

The afternoon breezed by, and by dinnertime, both Alex and Kary were ready to log back in. They ate a quick dinner and headed to the room, ready to step into the pods.

"I hope whatever it is you made a deal out of, you don't alienate any of them," Kary said, before lying down in her pod.

"Have a little faith. Everything is going to be fine," he responded, imitating her.

As both of them closed their pods, the display inside humming to life, they commanded together.

"Log in."

Multi-coloured lights flashed past their vision as their bodies sank into weightlessness. Closing their eyes, to limit the strobing effect consciousness transfer, they waited for gravity to re-assert itself.

Once it did, they opened their eyes again, looking up at the baldaquin bedposts of their room in the palace of Bastion City.

Turning his head toward Phoenix, Astaroth smiled.

"Alright, see you later."

He got on his elbows to kiss her and then bolted out of the room.

Astaroth ran past the guards at the door and up the stairs that led to the training room. He had a few floors to climb, but he helped himself with some Wind Walking and Sky Steps, to ascend the stairs like a rocket.

Reaching the sixth floor in no time flat, he stepped inside the room where the old gnome was waiting for him. But the gnome wasn't alone.

With him, inside this minuscule, cramped room, three disgruntled commanders who all stared daggers at each other.

"The king told me to meet him here. You shouldn't be here. Leave before he arrives," Alena growled at the other two.

"Strange that you would say that, Sentinel. The king promised a fight to me and my riders this morning. It is you who shouldn't be here," Mary Kadmus replied, her eyes locked on her counterpart.

"Ladies. Let's calm ourselves, shall we? You are blowing this out of proportion. There must be a reason the king would call all of us here."

Astaroth laughed as he entered the room.

"Hahaha! I see you are all in good spirits. Perfect. Commander Levine is right. There is a reason I asked all of you here without telling you the others would be present. It wouldn't be much of a competition if you all knew what to expect."

"A competition?" Alena asked, her eyes narrowing to slits.

"I thought this would be a chance for me to secure our passage to the next five years of Military Exercises. What is the meaning of this, Your Highness?"

Astaroth raised his hands to calm them down.

The two other commanders felt their blood boil at the words she said.

"Commander Alena. I believe my words were, 'If you can beat me.' Now. I know you exalt yourself and your troops, but that is just not going to happen," he said, a smile creeping up his lips.

"As for the two of you," he added.

"You are here for the same reason. Anyone who can beat me gains an assured position for the next five years of military exercises. And if more than one of you wins, then you can compete between the two of you, on a battlefield of my choosing, to get the privilege.

"But I want to add this. You might as well set your aim lower. Because I have no intention of letting you win. Matter of fact, none of you will survive ten minutes in there, alone with me.

"Now, sir mage. If you would open the portals, please, as we discussed yesterday."

The old gnome watched the scene with excitement. The demands the king had made the day before had riled him up so much that he hadn't slept last night, getting all three battlefields ready.

"Everything is ready, as you demanded, my king. I wish you all good luck."

Three portals opened in the room, making the already cramped room even tighter. One blue, one grey, and one dark green.

Astaroth smiled as he looked at the portals.

"Alright, line up, the three of you."

The commanders grumbled as they did as ordered.

"This isn't—" Alena started complaining.

But Astaroth raised his hand, glaring at her. She shut her mouth, even though she wanted to stomp his face so much.

"This is how things will go this morning. Let's start with you, Commander Kadmus."

"Sir!"

"You said your regiment needed the perfect scenario to prove its might, and that such a situation hadn't happened yet. Well, I made sure today would be just that."

"How so, Your Highness?" the commander asked.

"Simple. You will have your aerial combat. A veritable one. With no land targets. Your opponents will be my two aerial companions and a copy of myself from during the siege. I had to share some recorded footage with the mage yesterday just to set this up."

Commander Kadmus smiled. She had wanted to take a swing at that dragon the day before, and her Griffon had already passed over his visceral fear of the beast.

Letting the other beasts, as well as their riders, face that same thing, would let them feel what a true sky predator felt like. But she wondered one thing.

"What is your other aerial companion, sir?"

Astaroth smiled devilishly.

"You will find out when the fight begins."

He then turned to Rodney Levine.

"Your fight requires something more complex than simple might. Your simulation will be an escort mission. You will escort a copy of me and Queen Phoenix to safety through a forest field with traps and enemies. The enemies, well, you will find on your own what they are during the simulation."

Rodney shook his head, feeling his heart pump faster.

His Royal Guards' ability to complete their duty was being tested through this simulation.

Turning to face Alena, Astaroth's smile turned into a grin.

"As for you, Commander Alena. Your challenge will be the hardest one since you are so confident in your strength."

She tilted her head, curious about what he had cooked up for her.

"I had the entire territory of this kingdom simulated just for you and your men. You will fight the most dangerous thing in this kingdom."

Alena looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Leon accepted to fight with us?"

Astaroth burst into laughter.

"Hah! Leon. He wishes he was the strongest one here. No. You will fight me. At full power. Your time limit is five minutes. If even one of your men is still alive at the end of the five minutes, I will consider this a win for you."

Alena almost laughed at his statement.

"I accept that challenge, Your Highness!" she blurted, her mouth stretching into a grin.

'Just surviving? He is overestimating himself. I finally get to stomp him into the ground and show him we aren't to be messed with.'