

New Eden 491

Chapter 491 Getting The Intel

As they walked away from the study, Alfred shook his head, letting out a tired sigh. He was already anticipating the workload for the next few days.

Looking at Alexander, he wasn't sure how to feel. To his understanding, the young man was fierce when defending his loved ones, but this went to a whole other level.

To many people, the justification here would be that they started it. But it would nonetheless be murder.

Lots of it, too.

Alfred grabbed Alex's arm, stopping him.

"I have one question for you. Your answer will decide whether I bring you to see the lady and little lady, or if I bring you to the door and kick you out."

Alex looked at him with intensity.

"What are your motives here? Why are you ready to go to such lengths? You could have accepted Mr. Bellemare's offer and forget about it. Why are you willing to do this yourself?"

Alex pulled his arm out of Alfred's grip slowly.

"I would be lying if there wasn't a part of me that wants revenge, but that isn't my motivation in this case. When Mr. Bellemare told me the Bianchi family had started looking deeper into the matter, I understood I wasn't the only one affected anymore."

Alex sighed, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand, anxiously.

"If they dig around, with the means I assume they have, it won't take long until they have faces and names. The faces and names of everyone I hold dear or consider friends. I may not like looking for a fight, at least outside of New Eden, but I also don't want my people to get into harm's way because of me.

"If doing this myself doesn't make this stupid, prideful family understand I won't rest until they lay this to rest, then I will keep hunting them until my people are safe. And Violette is part of my people."

Alfred looked at him with a new sense of respect. The will to risk yourself for others' safety, and to take responsibility for your actions' effects, was something that many people lacked in these modern times.

He nodded his head solemnly at Alex and resumed walking, taking him toward the back garden.

When they reached it, Katherine was waiting for them, a third chair already pulled up, with a teacup at the ready. Violette was sitting in a chair, her mischievous attitude gone.

Katherine gestured to Alex to sit down. And so he did, as the head maid poured him a cup of tea.

Katherine spoke up first.

"I've been apprised of the situation and will be the one to give you the information you seek. I ask only that you wait for my husband to put together the team that would be your backup."

Alexander raised an eyebrow, wondering how the news had already reached her ears. Or even how she was the one with the information he wanted.

"Aren't you going to wait for me to pay first?" he asked, curiously.

Katherine smiled warmly at him.

"I don't see why I would need such reserves, dear. I know you will pay."

Alex frowned lightly.

'How would she know that? Five hundred grand isn't a small sum...'

"I also have another question."

"Pray tell," Katherine responded, her smile ever present.

"Why are you the one with the information, and not your husband? Isn't he the one who takes care of these things?"

Alex watched as Katherine brought her hand delicately to her mouth before giggling softly.

"Oh, my dear. There are so many things you don't know about the world. The company doesn't just belong to my husband. He did not marry me just for my beautiful face and good manners, after all. Ours was a marriage born in business, first and foremost. Love came after."

Such a weird statement, said with that level of serenity, threw off Alex instantly. Wouldn't a woman marry only for love in this modern day and age?

'High society hasn't developed much, has it?' he wondered, taking a sip of tea.

Alex wasn't about to ask for more details, though. It wasn't his business to pry into their private life.

"Alright, then. But should Violette be here for this?"

Katherine looked at her daughter, her smile warming up a bit more.

"Violette can hear this, as long as we don't delve into your need and intentions for this intel. The intel itself is benign, at least the part that I will give you now."

He nodded his head, still unsure whether the little girl should be present at all, in case he slipped up.

But Katherine didn't send her away before she started speaking.

"The men you are looking for are the Bianchi family, as you are already aware. They are a local branch of a much larger entity, that I assume you can guess the name."

Astaroth nodded his head knowingly. With the name Bianchi and the kind of people they sent to him, he could guess this was the Italian Mafia.

He was a bit confused as to why a family of such a long-lived organization would suddenly act so stupidly, but that was no longer his concern. The line was already crossed, and consequences were due.

"Their estate is in the richer part of Bois-des-Filion and is well guarded. The specifics of how well, I will have delivered to you on the day of the party. But you can be assured they will be prepared. Here is the exact address," she said, sliding a paper across the table.

Alexander picked up the paper and glanced at it, before pocketing it. He nodded at Katherine, who sipped on her tea calmly.

Violette turned her head toward Alex, curious about what the discussion was about. She had understood the word party, and her mind was fixated on that.

"Are you going to a party?"

Alex looked at her, her eyes so innocent, and didn't dare break her illusion.

"Yes, a very big party. It's a private event, so I can't bring anyone with me, but it's going to be a very loud, and very messy party."

Her little eyes lit up excitedly.

"Will there be clowns?! And fireworks?! Oh, oh! And a pool?!"

Alex smiled at her, nodding his head as he did.

"Yes, to all of those things. I'm just sad I have to go alone. It's a very closed event, and there won't be much more people than what your mother mentioned."

He despised himself for lying to her, but he could never tell her the truth. She could never know.

Chapter 492 Feeling Freedom

After enjoying the cup of tea with Katherine and Violette, Alexander excused himself afterwards, under the pretext he had things to do at home. Alfred offered to bring him back home, but Alex refused his lift.

"I want to try something out to get home by my own means. Thanks for offering, though."

Alfred shrugged, uncaring since it wasn't his business.

Once Alex was off the property, the iron gate closing behind him, He looked around to situate himself. He had been here a few times by now, and remembered the path home.

But what he wanted to do was beyond just walk or run home. As he looked around to locate the direction of downtown, he also looked around to see if anyone was looking in his direction.

He only saw a little boy, no older than five, looking at him from a second-floor window, on the opposite side of the street. No one would ever believe what he was about to see, so Alex discarded his presence.

Focus on himself, and closing his eyes, Alexander reached deep inside him, pulling on something that was just an echo of what it should be. He pulled on it until the echo became large enough for him to grab at it mentally.

As soon as he contacted it, he was taken over by the familiar feeling of transformation he had experienced many times. But something different also came with it this time.

Intense pain.

Holding back screams of agony, Alex melded with Morpheus for the first time on this side of the veil, and he groaned and gritted his teeth, as his bone structure changed. Wings soon sprouted from his back, ripping through his skin as they grew.

The skin around the wing bases closed as soon as the wings were out, but he nonetheless bled a bit and stained his shirt. But as soon as they were done growing, Alexander opened his eyes.

The little boy across the street was screaming inside his room, as shown by his mask of terror and wide open mouth. Alex winked at him before launching up into the skies.

It took him a few seconds to get used to his wings again, the flight upward erratic as a result, but he quickly adapted and rose like a rock flung from a sling. Alex rapidly reached a height where the air was thinning and the temperature dropped, and he guessed this would be enough not to attract attention.

He spun around, finding the building where he lived with relative ease, and flapped his wings to alter his course. The cold air biting his skin was not the most pleasant feeling ever, but it didn't feel bad either.

At this altitude, the air smelled different. Less smoggy, with almost a tinge of freshness.

The feeling of flight in his own body also gave him a sense of freedom he hadn't felt in this world in a long time. The last time he felt so free, he was on a zip-line with his father, back when he was a child.

Yet, the two barely compared, as he wasn't in a harness now, and he was free to move like he wished.

At his current altitude, Alexander was passing by clouds, and his curiosity suddenly spiked.

'What does it feel like to pass through a cloud?' he wondered.

There was only one way to find out.

Tilting slightly to the side, he aimed himself directly through a large, white, fluffy cloud and dove inside it.

As he passed through, he felt his skin tingling, and his cheeks became slightly wet, as everything around him turned to white. It took him a few seconds to get completely across, but when he came out, his clothes were damp, and his skin was wet, but his face was locked in a smile.

'This is what freedom feels like!' he thought, in glee.

At this moment, he felt like the world below him didn't matter. Like it was just a part of life that he could discard and disappear, never to be found again.

But a small whimper echoed in his mind. It was Morpheus, trying to communicate with him.

When he focused on the feelings the bat was trying to convey, he felt fatigued and understood what the bat meant.

At that moment, his body also got over the feeling of excitement, as the adrenaline in his system passed, and his body instantly felt heavier. He understood he was still too weak to fly for extended periods, and that he needed to reach home fast.

It had barely been a minute, but he knew if he didn't land in the next minute, he would faint and fall to his imminent death. He could already imagine the unrest in the news.

****A man falls from the sky, with no buildings nearby, and splatters on the pavement!****

This would be a terrible thing to see, and he still had a life to live, so he quickly changed his trajectory back to his home. He dove almost straight down, picking up incredible speed, and reached his tower in fifteen seconds.

Flapping his wings crazily, he slowed down his descent, just enough not to crash into his balcony, and landed in catastrophe, rolling to a stop as his back collided lightly with the patio door.

He felt his eyes go heavy, but managed to hold himself awake with much effort. But as he tried crawling back to a sitting position, he heard the door slide open behind him.

"What the hell?! How did you get here? And why is your shirt all torn and bloody?!"

Kary instantly went into panic mode, looking around the balcony, trying to find an enemy that wasn't there, until she heard her boyfriend start laughing weakly.

"Hehehe. Don't worry, nothing is attacking. I just tried something out, and I didn't expect it to result in this. Also, the view is marvellous from a mile up."

Kary looked at him like he had lost his mind. But looking at the sky, and then at him, she caught on quickly with what he meant.

"You came in flying?! Are you insane?! What if someone saw you?"

But Alex couldn't care less, right now, as he let his mind rest from the exertion of melding with Morpheus. His body wasn't yet ready to pull this kind of stunt.

For now, he only wanted to get washed, changed, and rest up for the rest of the day.

He tried pushing on his legs to get up but only ended up almost falling to his face. Kary caught him just in time, keeping him from kissing the concrete.

"Alright, take it slow. I'll help you up. I swear to god, you are one raging dumbass. What I found attractive in you, I sometimes wonder."

Lifting his head, Alex smiled and responded, "My Colgate white smile."

Kary lightly punched him, before laughing her head off as she dragged him inside.

Chapter 493 Changing Bodies

Once they were inside, Alexander had to force himself up on his wobbly legs, if only for a few minutes, to get up the stairs to the bathroom. He needed to wash off the blood on his back, and most likely burn the shirt he was wearing.

The backside of it was torn open, and it was beyond repair at this point. This gave Alex a small sense of sadness, as this shirt hadn't been cheap, and he quite liked it.

He would know better next time.

This had never been an issue in New Eden, as the armour would magically adjust to him when transforming, and he guessed it came naturally, due to the inherent magic of the world.

That wasn't the case on Earth.

Reaching the bathroom, Kary helped him get his shirt off and noticed white lines, like old scars, where his wings might have sprouted out. They didn't affect his royalty scarring, being just over where the mane ended, but still stood out.

Kary had already noticed that the tip of Alexander's fingers had small white scars that had appeared after the first time he melded with White, but hadn't paid much attention to it. But now that these had appeared, she wondered if Alex would end up with scars and marks, everywhere his body changed, over time.

She didn't mind, per se, but it worried her. This could mean that his body wasn't adapting as well here as on the other side every time he transformed.

It could become a cause for concern in the long run. Alex didn't notice the worried look on her face, as she helped him wash away the blood that had dried on his back, but he could feel the tension in the air.

"Is something wrong back there? You've been awfully quiet for the last minute."

After a moment of hesitation, Kary decided she shouldn't keep it to herself.

"Have you noticed the scars?" she asked.

Alex's silence was all the answer she needed. After a moment, he replied.

"I didn't want to worry you. It was so benign I didn't pay it any mind. I'm guessing there are new ones on my back now, huh?"

Kary silently nodded her head.

"Alex... I know you want your power over here, just as much as over there. And I know you'll eventually need it, too. But shouldn't you wait before you use too much of it? What if our bodies aren't ready for this yet?"

Her concerns had also been trotting around Alex's head for a while, ever since he first melded with White. But he couldn't just wait until the world was past a certain point before using his powers.

Even David had started changing. Even though the man would never admit it, Alex had noticed.

The last time they spoke on the phone, his voice had been a little husky. And when they had gone on the goblin hunt, Alex had noticed the paling of his skin.

David might have brushed it off as not going under the sun enough, but he wasn't duped.

These were signs. Would they be bad omens or good omens in the long run, only time would tell.

Alexander put his hand on Kary's, trying to make himself reassuring.

"I'll be careful in the future. But there will come times when I don't have a choice."

Kary nodded her head, understanding that much. She only wished it wouldn't have nefarious effects on them.

It also made her scared to use her power as much. What if she tried pushing herself further?

Would she end up torching herself if she tried to go into flame avatar form? Would she severely burn herself if she tried controlling a blaze too powerful for her?

Pushing her worries away, she splashed water on her face before resuming rinsing Alex's back. He could feel her worried look on his back, but stayed silent.

Once the blood was all washed away, and his shirt thrown into the trash chute, Alex wobbled his way back into his room to grab a T-shirt he could put on. The couple went back down to the living room, where they enjoyed each other's warming presence until dinner.

Neither felt like cooking that night, and they ordered out.

Not too far from there, in David's someday-to-be underground shelter, the man was currently meditating to recuperate some mana. He was practising using his powers daily, and it took a lot out of him, so he had to meditate often.

Feeling a chill go down his spine, and hearing bones clattering around him, David opened his eyes.

Standing in the corner of the room was a smiling Guo.

"What can I do for you, Guo? Does Mr. Boudreau want more money out of me? Or did you just come to prove to me you can come and go here without my permission?"

Guo chortled at his questions before stepping toward the skeletons. None attacked him as they awaited orders from their master.

Guo was impressed, though. The last time he had seen the man, he couldn't control more than two skeletons so casually.

The ones in the woods in Nebraska had been willing to join him and were temporary. These, not so much.

Staring at him through gaping holes in their skulls, eight skeletons followed his movements with their heads, gazes locked on him.

"You've improved, again. I can already feel your Qi has reached a new plateau. It shouldn't be too long before you rival some of the most proficient masters in the world. But that is not the reason for my visit."

"First, you are mistaken about one thing. This isn't Qi, it's mana. And second, tell me the reason, before I lose patience."

David was in no mood for riddles and questioning.

Guo smiled at him deviously, wanting nothing more than to test how far David had progressed. But he restrained his intentions.

"Mr. Boudreau has asked me to get the blueprints for your shelter. He would like to bring a few modifications to them, for free, of course."

David frowned.

"What kind of modifications?"

"Nothing too drastic, I assure you. Your plans will remain yours. But he has been quite happy with the money coming in from your insider information on stock markets, and he wishes to return a bit of the favour."

This wasn't much of an answer for David. But he also wouldn't say no to an upgrade to his plans.

He had gone with what limited budget he had at the start, and the shelter was not nearly as big or tough as he originally wished.

Walking to the table where his computer was, David grabbed a large rolled-up blueprint and tossed it to Guo.

"Make sure the information also reaches the contractors. Otherwise, this will be for nothing."

Guo nodded, as he caught the blueprints. He then gave a small bow before vanishing from where he stood.

David could see more clearly this time the trick he used and chuckled to himself.

'Short-range transposition. And to say I thought he had teleported at first.'

Walking forward, he grabbed a small stone that had fallen to the ground where Guo had been. On it, a piece of paper with symbols scrawled on it lay.

He grabbed the stone and tossed it out of his tent before returning to his meditation. He still had a lot of mana to recuperate.

Chapter 494 The Oracle

A little further north, in the tranquil suburb of Bois-des-Filion, inside a large mansion's security room, were three men having a minor panic attack.

"Get the boss! Someone's breaching our security!"

The man that shouted that was sitting a bit further back from the two others, enjoying a cigar, when alarms started flashing in the security room.

The two other men were manning the computer screens, checking the cameras showing the inside and outside of the mansion, as well as a large part of the yard that surrounded it.

But right now, their cameras were failing, one by one, in rapid succession. As each screen turned black, it wasn't long until the screens displayed lines of code, constantly defiling down, as a nasty virus chewed away at their firewall.

It wasn't long before the firewall broke, and the hacker was inside their systems.

Around the house, fire sprinklers started showering the unsuspecting residents, doors locked people in their rooms, sliders shut on the windows, and alarms blared on and off.

A young man suddenly rushed into the room. The man was around thirty-five years old and looked like a typical mafioso you would see in movies, wearing an expensive suit, which was now drenched.

He was sporting a rage-filled look as he smacked the leader of his security team behind the head.

"What the fuck is going on, Rico?! Why is my mansion acting like a haunted house?!"

"A hacker cracked into our systems, boss! We're trying to kick him out, but the Stronzo is skilled!"

The security chief was an adept hacker himself, but he couldn't push back the intruder. Viruses were coming in through the breach at a faster pace than he could stop them, and it wouldn't be long before he lost access entirely.

He typed furiously on his keyboard, entering lines of code in a vain attempt to fight back. But it was already too late.

He already guessed that his firewall had only caught the hacker after the hack had started, and the damage was already beyond his means of repair. This revealed access to some serious hardware and showed the level of skill this hacker had.

A few tense minutes went by, with the young Italian shouting in the back, cursing at his employee for his ineptness in pushing the intruder out. And then the screens went completely black again.

The boss stopped shouting insults.

"Did you kick him out?!"

But his chief of security's face was livid, as he shook his head no.

An enormous eye appeared on the screens, blinking once before a robotic voice spoke.

The Oracle has foreseen your fate. You have played with forces you cannot fathom and your future has been forever altered. The Oracle prophesizes your end in the near future. Take the rest of your life to repent in silence, as the world has abandoned you.

Immediately after finishing, the screens shut off, followed by the mansion's power. The inside of the house went dark, as the sun was setting outside, and no more electricity fed the lights.

The chief of security was still staring at the screens, his face pale as a ghost, as a slight trembling took his hands.

His boss smacked him behind the head.

"Who the fuck is the Oracle?! And why did they hack into our shit?!"

The trembling man turned around to face his boss, his face now a mask of despair.

"Sir..." he started, with a trembling voice.

"No one knows who the Oracle is. Hackers around the world call the Oracle the best hacker ever, but that is all we know about them. When they hack into someone's mainframe, they always leave a prophecy, and it always comes true. Word is, The Oracle has the power to see the future, or alter it."

The Italian man looked at his subordinate like he had lost his mind and snapped.

"What the fuck are you even saying?! How could a hacker alter the future?! Stop being such a superstitious vigliacco, and get the security back running!"

But his chief of security shook his head again.

"I can't, sir. If the Oracle shut us down, there is no way I can get us back online. They will have total control of the entire grid around the mansion, be it electric, or internet. Nothing is coming in, or getting out, without their say-so."

"Nonsense!" the boss screamed, pulling out a pistol.

"Get us back in control, or I will put a bullet inside that big brain of yours!" he added.

But the hacker was too far into despair to even care. Whatever his boss had done to anger the Oracle, he was already in their cross-hairs. He was a dead man walking either way.

Seeing his inaction, the boss pulled the trigger.

Bang!

Brain matter splattered on the screen behind the chief of security and on his two subordinates, as he slumped in his chair, unmoving.

Pointing his gun at one of them, the boss yelled, "Get to work, or you'll be next!"

The man nodded his head hastily, getting off his chair to boot up the auxiliary power line. He needed power if he wanted to push the Oracle out.

Seeing them spring into action, the Italian boss stowed his gun, leaving the room. He had people to contact if he wanted to get to the bottom of this.

As he walked away, putting his phone over his ear, all he heard from it was a dead tone. He angrily tried to restart it, in hopes it would work again, but nothing changed.

He screamed as he lobbed the darned thing into a nearby wall, shattering it into hundreds of pieces. He stormed off, heading for a secret room in the basement of the house.

But he couldn't get inside the room, as all its security measures were on the same power source as his home. He would need to get generators running if he wanted to do anything further.

Going back upstairs, he stopped the first person he could get and shouted at them.

"Get some generators running, you useless idiots. We need power in the house, or the defence system is as useless as you!"

The man nodded his head, scampering toward one of the numerous sheds on the property, pulling out generators to get some power flowing again. But they still had no access to the defence system and could only power the house's primary functions, such as lights and door locks.

This made the boss even more angry, and he shot another of his subordinates as a result.

"Will one of you turn out to be useful, or do I have to kill all of you myself?! Get us back to normal, or I swear on the Bianchi name, that I will murder all of you and your families!!!"

It was a hectic night, that night, in the Bianchi mansion.

Chapter 495 Spreading Further

Across the world from Montreal, in a peaceful village of Argentina called San Antonio de Areco, a truck pulled up on the main road of the village, Alvear. The truck driver, a Latino youth, no older than sixteen years old, was looking for a store in specific, to which he had to deliver.

There was little traffic in this small town, and he was able to locate his destination quickly enough. The store was a gaming store, with many big, flashy banners on the sidewalk in front of it.

The banners, all written in Spanish, announced the coming soon of a batch of new-tech VR helmets, to play the new game that was in vogue across the globe; New Eden. There was a file of people waiting on the sidewalk, extending many blocks, of excited kids with their parents, waiting to go into the store.

The store still had its doors closed, regardless of the time of day, and was waiting on their delivery before opening, modifying its closing hours that day specifically for this.

When the crowd saw the large white delivery truck pull to the side of the store, cheers were heard, and tension started rising. The employees of the store rushed out the back to start bringing in the merchandise as quickly as possible.

The truck emptied in fifteen minutes, astounding the kid that drove it with their efficiency. As soon as he got the manager to sign the delivery bill, he was off again, back to the storage he had come from, to make the next delivery.

On his side, the manager ran to the front of the store, pulled out his keys, and unleashed hell on himself and his employees, as a literal human tide pushed into the store, fighting to get their hands on the helmets before the others.

It so often almost turned into a bloodbath, as clients tried taking helmets from other people, forcefully if needed.

The same scene could be seen in many places around the world, in small countryside villages or underdeveloped countries. EG had finally pushed its marketing strategies into full gear and started selling in smaller places and remote locations.

They had waited this long before doing it, to build up attraction and momentum for the game. And as the sales for the helmets and the pods skyrocketed once more, they knew they had succeeded.

Constantine Levesque sat in her metaphorical ivory tower, watching the sales numbers reach vertiginous heights, and grinned. But as she revelled in her success, a voice resounded in her head.

"Paladina! Come to me. Now!"

A shiver went down her spine. Gaius sounded angry, and their meetings rarely went well, when he was angry.

But she couldn't turn him down, either. Getting up from her chair, Constantine shooed away her assistant, before sending her office on lockdown.

As soon as it completed the lockdown, she stood up and walked to the doors on her left, proceeding into her personal loft, tied to her office. But she wasn't there to rest.

She rapidly jumped into the pod at the center of the room before launching the connection.

As her body sunk into the cushioning of the pod, and her mind was sucked upward, Constantine reappeared upon the same cloud as before. But this time, she didn't have to wait for Gaius.

She instantly dropped to a knee, lowering her head simultaneously, so she wouldn't look him in the face and greeted him.

"Your champion has arrived, Lord Gaius. What may this humble mortal do for you?"

But Paladina could feel Gaius' angry stare on her. It was vibrating her very soul to the core, and it made her increasingly uncomfortable. When Gaius opened his mouth to respond, every word felt like it was tugging at her body, ready to tear it apart.

"You promised me an entertaining result if we proceeded your way to the convergence, Paladina. I am not entertained. I am angered. Fix this, or it'll be you on the pillory before your entire race."

Paladina swallowed nervously.

"What is irritating you, if I may ask, your godship? I will try my best to remedy the situation."

Gaius walked closer to her, Aether buzzing around him. Although Paladina's level one-hundred body and legendary grade eased a lot of the burden on her, it still wasn't enough to lessen the burden a god's power applied on her.

She could feel the pressure crush her, as her health started dropping steadily.

"One of your 'Players' has released something upon the world that will put all my plans into jeopardy. I want you to fix this problem she couldn't muster the courage to ask him, either.

"As you command, Lord Gaius, so I will obey."

while I seal back this thorn in my side. And do it fast."

Paladina had no idea what or whom Gaius was talking about, but she couldn't muster the courage to ask him, either.

"As you command, Lord Gaius, so I will obey."

Gaius looked at her and could feel her confusion. He shook his head disappointingly, unimpressed by the mortal's lack of understanding.

"Deal with it, Paladina. I gave you this body, and I can take it away. How would you fare without this powerful body when the convergence happens, I wonder?"

Saying these last words, Gaius opened up a golden portal, ever so close to Paladina, making her feel the waves of Aether crash into her body, putting her in an increasingly dangerous state. But once he walked into it, it disappeared instantly.

Paladina collapsed to the ground, gasping for air, looking at her health bar, which was dangerously close to zero, and she sighed in relief.

'What put him in such a foul mood? I doubt any mortal can do anything to make him feel this way. Did he fight with another divinity?'

Letting her imagination run wild did her no good, though. She had to go back and find out who did anything that might hamper his plans.

Paladina thought back to all the pearl-white promises Gaius had made to her in their first contact, and her resolve firmed up.

'I need to protect that at all costs. Humanity depends on my success.'

Chapter 496 How It Started

This had all started a decade prior, when Constantine was still a pro gamer. She had a vision of a golden being, promising her riches and power beyond her imagination, if she followed his instructions.

The younger Constantine had been charmed right away by the promises, whether they be true or not, and had immediately sworn fealty to this being of gold. But over the years, as he made her do things increasingly questionable, her adoration had waned little by little.

That was until he finally realized one of his promises, that of riches. Constantine's budding gaming company took off the ground, with a game called Tower of Babel, and money started flowing into her accounts in amounts she would have never dreamed of.

When she had met the golden being once more, though, he had revealed things to her that made her almost fall into despair.

"Your world will soon face an event that will put it on the brink of extinction. Your actions up till now were to make the world stronger as a whole, so it might survive. But you are far from done. There is one more step you need to do to ensure the survival of your species."

Constantine had begged the golden being to reveal what that was to her. It was at that moment that he had brought her through the veil and into New Eden.

Constantine couldn't believe her eyes. A world of magic and strength beyond compare. Beings of power rivalling the gods of legends in her home world.

But the golden being hadn't brought her here, simply to show her. He built her a new body, explaining to her that she would need to make as much of her kind traverse into this world as well, so they could become strong enough to resist the upcoming catastrophe.

Constantine never once doubted the benevolence of this golden being, who later revealed his name as Gaius, when he made her renew her vows of fealty. She vowed to bring humanity up to this world so they could survive; and he had only nodded his head.

Years passed before she could eventually create a technology with the highest experts in connectivity and VR in the world that she could use to bring her race to this new world.

Gaius had called this new world their salvation, their new beginning. New Eden.

And thus, once the technology was prototyped, and she was able to bring proof of her success to Gaius, the god had shown much pleasure in her success.

"With this, your kind will stand a chance against the coming times. Good work, Paladina. Keep on working this well for me, and you will have a place at the top of the new world order, once your kind tides through its harder times."

The promise of power over her kin had made her resolve even stronger to succeed, and only a few years after this, New Eden was finally ready to launch. All her efforts were finally going to bear fruit.

Gaius was on her side, trying to make humanity survive. He was a benevolent god in her mind, although prone to pangs of anger.

She had learned to walk around his mood swings with deftness and always managed to make sure he was pleased. Constantine didn't want the only god that hoped for their survival to suddenly abandon them.

He had told her that the other gods had already abandoned all hope for humankind and that he was the only one that still believed in their chances at survival. With this revelation, Constantine shunned the other gods and their lack of faith in them.

But as time went by, and they finally released New Eden, Constantine's mind started thinking about certain things. She would never admit to Gaius this, but she had started thinking he might not just be in this for their survival.

When attacks started happening around the world, with beasts that resembled things she had seen on the other side, she wondered why he had still not shown himself to the rest of humankind.

Constantine sighed loudly as she re-opened her eyes in her gaming pod.

"When will he tell the rest of the world that he is here to help us? If he did, so much more people would get into New Eden, to build up their strength. We could all survive this together."

Constantine couldn't help but want to make the announcement herself, but she couldn't, for two reasons.

The first one, very obvious, was that she would sound like a crazy person if she suddenly came out to the world, revealing she was having meetings with a god, and that she was trying to save humanity.

The second reason was that Gaius had forbidden her from doing so, saying he would take care of it in due time.

As she lifted herself out of her pod, she went back to her office, undoing the lockdown, and called her assistant back inside.

Once the assistant was at her side, Constantine thought of ways to find out which player had done something to make Gaius unhappy, but could only think of one man that might be capable of such.

"How are the preparations for David Magnus' capture going?"

Her assistant pulled out a tablet from her bag and turned it over to Constantine.

"We are almost done. But something came up that might throw a wrench into our plans, Ma'am." Constantine frowned as she opened up the tablet.

They had found, not so long ago, David's whereabouts, and knew he was in the middle of building something. Constantine felt like this strangely resembled an end-of-the-world bunker and wondered what the man knew.

But now, the images she was scrolling through brought a scowl on her face.

"What is Jack Boudreau doing associating with this nobody? Why is he suddenly sending so much workforce to this construction?"

The assistant looked uneasy.

"We haven't been able to find out why, Ma'am. But we think that Mr. Magnus might have told something to Mr. Boudreau that convinced him to back the man completely."

"God damned old busybody," Constantine muttered under her "Yes, Ma'am. Right away, Ma'am."

Her assistant walked off, already putting her phone to her ear, and breath.

"Set up a meeting with Jack. I want to know what his long game is, here."

"Yes, Ma'am. Right away, Ma'am."

Her assistant walked off, already putting her phone to her ear, and making calls.

'What do you know, David Magnus? Why do you act like you know more than me?' Constantine thought.

Her eyes turned to slits as she focused her gaze on the man's figure in the photos. He looked much paler than before, to an almost worrying degree.

'I will find out everything you know. Whether by hook or by crook. You don't deserve to keep this knowledge for yourself, you meddling child.'

Chapter 497 Another Meeting

Back in Alexander's penthouse, the mood had become very tranquil after finishing dinner. He and Kary cuddled up together on the large sofa, watching some old movies together.

As the sun started slowly lowering on the horizon, they both knew their day had to come to an end. New Eden's morning was poking its head around the corner, and it was time to go back.

They had many things to do, after all.

"Have you considered who might be a good ally to send to Prince Nalafein?" Alex asked as they walked upstairs.

"I have. I had a few ideas at first, thinking sending a few small guilds would help promote their growth, and also tie in a bunch of people to us. But then I realized this also meant sending people that might not see eye to eye forever."

Alexander nodded in agreement. It would have been good to tie some small guild under them for the future, but how they would act with each other remained a forever question mark.

"My next thought was to start a subsidiary of Paragons and send them, instead. But that came with so much work, and with how full our plates are right now, I rapidly discarded that thought."

Alex chuckled wryly, as they reached the room. They had no time to take care of another growing guild. Theirs was already growing so fast; it required more and more of their intake.

"Then I settled for going with a large guild that would align well with our plans and wouldn't think of fighting back against us, at least for a good while. But I haven't settled on who, yet. I wanted to discuss our options together."

Alex opened the top of his pod, scratching his chin, and only one face popped into his mind that he wouldn't have too much trouble trusting. But he wondered if Kary had thought of him as an option. She knew the top players better than him, after all.

"We can finish this discussion on the other side. We have much to do, and I think it wouldn't be a bad thing if we include the others in this discussion."

Kary nodded her head, opening the top of her new pod as well.

"Alright then. I'll send a message to the officer chat, so we can gather. The rest of the council will also want to butt in, even if the matter doesn't concern them."

Alex felt a headache start to grow as he thought about how the Natives might suddenly meddle in their decisions. He could already tell some of them were confrontative by nature.

"I'll make sure to remind them it's none of their business, then," Alex grumbled, as he lay down in his pod.

Kary only huffed a laugh before doing the same. She couldn't wait to see the look on their faces.

"Log in!" both of them said simultaneously.

As their bodies sank into the soft gel, they both heard the familiar message.

Launching New Eden

Logging in

Welcome back, player Astaroth/Phoenix

They re-opened their eyes and were both back in their room in the tree palace. Looking each other up and down, they decided to change clothes before leaving the room, lest they wanted to look like they could only wear the same thing every day.

Two outfits were already prepared on the bed, on each side of it. Astaroth's eyebrow rose, but Phoenix was already accustomed to it.

"I already told the servants that if they wanted to prepare our outfits, they should do in the night, if we aren't there, or wait for us to wake up if we sleep here. It wasn't easy to explain to them our bodies might not be here when they come in, but they eventually came to terms with it."

He imagined their faces as she explained they were mostly gone at night, and chuckled to himself.

As he walked over to his side of the bed, he eyed the outfit ready for him.

It was a lot less audacious than the one he currently wore. He silently thanked Coral, who he guessed had prepared it, given he could still feel a bit of her mana lingering on it.

Phoenix, on her side of the bed, had a nice long dress ready, in light tones of red and pink, matching the colour scheme of his own outfit. Looking at the velvety shirt, combined with the obsidian black pants, he only complained silently about the frill on the shirt.

Phoenix giggled as she saw his dejected face and changed up while he grumbled. Astaroth couldn't help but eye her body as she did, only cursing they didn't have the time to enjoy themselves a bit before undressing as well.

As he donned the outfit, he kept the necklace on, since he felt it still fit with his current look. Glancing at himself in the mirror, he grumbled about the frill, but still thought he looked sharp as hell.

As they both were finally ready to leave the room, Phoenix put her arm into Astaroth's, smiling at him.

"I've already sent the message. Most of them are on their way, and I have convened the council. Some of them might complain that the other officers are there, but I am confident you will keep the meeting civilized."

Astaroth winked at her with a grin on his lips.

"Oh, it'll be civilized, alright. If any of those people think they can speak out of turn with me there, they'll rapidly understand who's in charge."

Phoenix pinched his side, keeping a smile on her lips.

"Please, love. No cock fights at official functions. The Natives already think poorly of us and call most players savages. No need to add to that reputation."

Astaroth winced as the fingers dug into his thin skin over his ribs, but laughed nonetheless.

"Fine. I'll just make sure they know to wait for their turns to speak. I'll be as nice as I can. Let's get going. We have a long day ahead of us."

Nodding her head, Phoenix locked step with him, as he pushed open the doors to the hallway. The two guards on duty saluted them as they left and closed the doors behind them.

Chapter 498 Waiting For Everyone

As the couple slowly made their way to the throne room, they passed many people going about their business, that stopped in their tracks to bow and salute them. Phoenix had gotten used to this, and politely nodded and smiled in response.

But Astaroth wasn't sure how to react to all this attention. He didn't know if he should salute them back, or just nod, like Phoenix, so he ended up looking at everyone weirdly instead.

"Just nod and smile, you big dummy," Phoenix whispered to him.

"I don't know what I'm doing!" he replied in a hushed tone.

Pfft!

Phoenix stifled a peal of laughter, if only barely, and whispered back to Astaroth, "I noticed. Just do like me."

He nodded his head while grumbling at her. Something about her making fun of him.

But she ignored his old man grumbling as they kept making their way to the throne room. As they reached it, someone had already reinstalled the table in its usual place, allowing for the meeting to be held normally.

Phoenix walked over to the first seat on the left, leaving the head of the table to Astaroth, and sat down. Seeing she wanted him to take the head seat, Astaroth did not complain and sat there.

Not everyone had made it yet, and they waited on the others, Astaroth making idle chatter with the few officers already here. He didn't talk much with the council members, since he barely knew them.

They also didn't seem to want to chat with him much, as they kept silent. All but one, at least.

A Half-Orc man, sitting to the right of Leon, who was directly to Astaroth's right, looked at Astaroth patiently, like waiting his turn. When Astaroth noticed, he interrupted his idle chat with Silent, who was standing close behind Leon, and turned his head to the man.

"You seem to have something you wish to say... Mr. Grit Herman, right?"

The Half-Orc beamed a smile, happy to see Astaroth had remembered his name. The smile revealed his tusks completely, which would have been menacing had he not looked genuinely excited.

"I do, your majesty, and I am glad you remembered my name. I would like to ask how it feels, to be fighting unrelentingly for so long like you have. Would you like to indulge me in some of your tales?"

Astaroth rose a brow at the question. He didn't know much about the councilman, other than he was in charge of their economy.

But by his race alone, he thought the man would have a few tales of combat himself. But his question seemed to say otherwise.

"I could, Mr. Herman. But I doubt my tales would entertain someone of the Orc descent. Your people are well known for their combativeness, after all."

The councilman shook his head slightly.

"As a Half-Orc, I was not allowed the same liberty of fighting as the others in my tribe. They considered me weaker than them, and that is the reason I took up merchanting. I could only hear of these fights from a second-hand perspective. But I do enjoy a good combat tale."

Astaroth looked surprised to hear there was segregation in a race like the Orcs. But he shouldn't assume anything about segregation anywhere.

After all, the Elves had enslaved the Ash Elves in the past. Even if they were a sub-race of them, it was a stupid thing to do, in his opinion.

"Well, in that case, Mr. Herman, I would gladly do so. But how about in a more private setting, so we don't bore our other friends around the table, with tales of combat they might not enjoy as much?"

The Half-Orc looked around the table, before clearing his throat and composing himself.

"Of course, your majesty. I will arrange a time when we are both available, then."

Astaroth smiled at him, and he could already see the light sighs of relief from some of the more disinterested members. The players present couldn't care less about his fights, as they had their own fair share of combat.

As for the other council members, Leon couldn't give a rat's ass about how Astaroth fought since he had done the same for a decade now. The adventurers' guild's representative looked entirely disinterested in tales of combat, and the mages' guild's representative looked at them like they were barbaric, albeit half-hiding.

By this, Astaroth could tell the mage was more of a desk wizard than a combat one, like Aberon. And just as he thought of the old man, he walked into the throne room, sporting his usual discontent scowl.

He walked right up to Astaroth, ignoring the stupefied look of Argos, and started complaining.

"What is it with you and meetings? Can't an old man get a single day to settle into his new place before the royal prick-in-charge constantly disturbs him?"

Leon choked on his saliva, as he tried to contain his laughter, and the councilmen around the table all showed shocked expressions.

"Good morning to you too, Aberon. I wanted to only talk to the officers of my guild, but Phoenix thought it better to include the council. And since you are staying here, I appointed you as an honorary member, if only in a consultant function."

Aberon's scowl deepened.

"And who gave you the right to order me around? I don't remember pledging anything to you, young man."

Astaroth chuckled, already expecting this reaction from Aberon.

"You are free to not attend, Aberon. But this concerns Prince Nalafein, as well as the kingdom of Ash Elves, and I thought you would be interested to know my next step."

Aberon calmed down slightly when hearing about the subject. But he kept an unhappy frown.

"Next time, tell the messenger to state the business first. I almost drowned the poor sod for disturbing my sleep."

After finishing his spiel of complaints, he stood behind Astaroth, a bit in retreat to the right, and glared at Leon, who was still containing his laughter. Leon only replied with a large toothy grin, which would have terrified most people.

But Aberon was unimpressed.

But a booming voice suddenly interrupted the idle chatter.

"How dare you show your face in front of a member of the mages' guild, and not show proper deference, Omni-mage!"

Chapter 499 Aberon The Traitor

A slam echoed in the room, as Argos Thornwood struck the surface of the table with his palms, standing up abruptly. A little mana emanated from the blow, in an attempt to augment the impact.

Astaroth's eyes reduced to slits, as his gaze landed on the mage.

"Lord Argos. I realize you and I don't know each other very much. But Aberon is a friend of mine and has just as much right to be here as you. And since I am the highest authority here, I don't see why he would have to defer to you at all. Now sit back down."

A cold aura started seeping out of Astaroth, as he said these words. Aberon, from behind him, only grinned at the mages' guild representative, causing the man to become even angrier.

"King Astaroth. With all due respect, this matter concerns you not, and you best stay out of it. This... traitor has no right to stand next to another mage without a proper salute to his superiors."

Silence permeated the room, as even the new arrivals could feel the rising tension. Leon sat back in his chair, curious as to where this would lead.

He was ready to intervene if Astaroth ordered him to. But he doubted the brazen young man would ask it.

Phoenix opened her mouth to ask the mage to calm down, but Astaroth rose his hand slowly, shaking his head at her. She understood he wanted to deal with this on his own.

Aberon snickered in the back, enjoying Astaroth's reaction. Of course, the mage had all the reasons in the world to be angry at him, given the past Aberon had with his guild.

But Astaroth wasn't going to take this with his mouth shut.

"Lord Argos," he uttered, his words suddenly laden with Aether, "You misunderstand my words. This is my council, in my throne room, in my palace, and in my kingdom. Everything here concerns me. Now. Sit. Down."

The pressure of his words climbed up a notch with every word of the last request. But he was talking to a mage well versed in the powers of the arcane, and a thick veil of mana was already covering him.

Argos looked at the king, his eyes filled with anger.

"King Astaroth. I believe you misunderstand my words as well. The conversation I want to have with the Omni-mage is not one that someone of your age gets to partake in, regardless of status. You are a hundred years too young to get a word in it, child."

Astaroth and Argos stared at each other, their mana presence becoming steadily larger until most of the people here who weren't mages were starting to feel their bodies become heavier. Leon put his hands on the table, ready to defuse the situation, before it went further.

Phoenix was already sporting a look of discouragement.

'So much for a peaceful resolution, I guess,' she thought, closing her eyes and rubbing them.

She knew of the mages' guild better than Astaroth, since her master had told her about it, and was part of it. She also knew the list of traitors to it was relatively short, for an organization that had lived for over a millennium.

But she hadn't asked for names. Now, hearing that Astaroth's master was part of that list, put them in a tough position.

The mages' guild usually regulated all the magic users of the continent, in hopes of keeping their powers contained to good use. Most of the traitors to this guild were mages that decided to use their powers where and when they wanted, without adhering to the guild's rules.

Theoretically, if she had been a Native, she would already have been forced to join. But Abnormals were wildcards, and the guild refused to deal with them.

But right now, Astaroth risked earning the ire of the entire guild if he pulled any violent move on Argos. Seeing Leon about to intervene, she sighed in relief.

But a burst of Aether pushed everything away from Astaroth, the table, chairs, and people included. Phoenix yelped in surprised when her chair suddenly skidded ten feet back, almost slamming into the wall.

Astaroth got up from his chair, which remained unmoved under him, and walked over to Argos, with nothing in his way.

Astaroth's Aether was pulsing off of him, putting even Argos in a tough spot. Argos Thornwood was no slouch in terms of magic.

But Aether was incredibly more potent than mana, and it took a lot of effort just to remain on his feet.

Astaroth stopped a foot away from Argos, their similar heights allowing him to stare into Argos' eyes.

"Tell me again how I'm too young. Call me a child, in my own palace, that I earned through my efforts. Explain to me how an old codger like you gets to order me around, under my roof."

The deadpan expression and emotionless tone he used were more worrying to Phoenix than if he had burst into anger. Astaroth rarely contained himself this way, and it was troubling.

She was about to stand up and put an end to it when something she hadn't expected happened. The old mage snapped.

"Enough! You may be a king, but you don't get to talk to me like I'm your subject! Get out of my way, or suffer the consequences!"

To which Astaroth replied with a smile.

'And now we're passed the point of no return,' Phoenix thought, her heart dropping to her stomach.

"I'm glad you said that, Lord Argos. Now it means you have also threatened me, and an appropriate response is in due."

And before anyone could react, horns erupted out of Astaroth's head, as he melded with Asmodeus. He grabbed the old mage's throat and before anyone could move, with a puff of smoke, they both disappeared from the throne room.

"Fuck!" Phoenix exclaimed.

Turning her head to Aberon, who was just as surprised as the others, she yelled, "You! This is your fault! Do something about it!"

Aberon jumped in surprise at the angry woman's shout, and he laughed.

"I see why he likes you, woman! Alright. I'll find them and separate them before any harm is done."

Aberon disappeared from the throne room as well, leaving the people in it in an awkward position. No one knew if the meeting was still going to take place, but no one was brave enough to ask the queen, who currently looked like she could combust at any moment.

Meanwhile, miles to the south of there, in a deserted region of the forest, at the edge of Stellar Woodlands' official territory, two men appeared in the sky, one of them throwing the other like a baseball, effortlessly.

Argos flew away, taking a moment to stabilize his flight before righting himself in the air.

"Now you've done it!" he shouted.

Astaroth stared back at him, his clothes vanishing from him, replaced by his combat armour, his weapon now in hand.

"Glad we agree," he responded, having enough of false niceties.

It was time to make the mage understand who was boss in the kingdom he was stationed in. The mages' guild might have their hand in every pie, but it wasn't theirs to eat, and it was time someone reminded them.

Chapter 500 Put Back In Place

Aberon teleported himself a mile in the air, above the palace, to have a good vantage point from which to look and extend his mana perception. But he didn't have to do the latter, as a loud explosion rocked the forest a few miles south, catching his attention.

Turning to face that direction, he saw a plume of fire rise into the sky, followed immediately by large brambles, their trunk the size of a common tree trunk. The way the brambles lashed about, it was clear they were trying to swat something out of the sky.

Aberon smiled as he burst forward in that direction, knowing he had found his quarry.

Astaroth, in the meantime, had been playing a game of tag with the brambles striking at him. He was the target, but moved much too fast for the plants to strike him out of the sky.

Occasionally, he would launch a firebolt at Argos, forcing the man to stay on his toes as well. The first firebolt Astaroth had fired, Argos made the mistake of taking it head-on, assuming his mana shield would brush away such a weak attack.

But Astaroth was not an idiot. He had pumped Aether in the attack, and with his current stats, the firebolt itself would have been enough to one-shot a level forty monster, turning it into cinders.

So when it slammed into the mana shield of the mage, his eyes went wide as it burned through it, the residual attack slamming into his chest, singeing his beard and his mage robes. That was the moment Argos understood.

Astaroth was not playing around with magic. He was a legitimate threat.

Argos had not played around, either, and unleashed his full power immediately.

Astaroth had looked at the man suddenly go from an old codger to a younger man, beard still well singed and long, but his traits all seemed at least forty years younger. He understood that the old man took him seriously, and that was enough to fire him up even more.

But before things could get interesting, Astaroth felt another spike of mana, coming this time from above himself. That's when he saw Aberon flying over him.

Aberon wasted no time, swiftly casting out a wide net of mana, capturing every bramble growth with it, and holding them in place. His feat of magic annoyed Argos even further, as he tried casting another spell at Aberon this time.

"Stay out of it, you traitor! Forest of Thorns!"

But just as his mana started peaking, and his spell was taking root, a powerful blow to his sternum blew the air out of his lungs, knocking him out. Astaroth caught him before he fell to the ground, holding his limp form in one arm.

Aberon chortled at the sight before he undid the first spell the thorn mage had cast. The large brambles suddenly fell to the ground, turning to ashes as they disappeared one by one.

He then flew down next to Astaroth.

"If it was this easy for you to end this, why didn't you do it at the beginning? Now, you might have brought upon the ire of all the mages' guild on you and your kingdom."

Astaroth looked at Aberon, the former's eyes still black as night.

"I needed him to know he couldn't just mess with me. But you ruined my superb choreography. I had to knock him out before he changed the landscape too much."

"Hah! Look at you being all cocky again. What would you have done if you couldn't meld with whatever abomination you are melded to right now?"

Astaroth's voice resounded double, as Asmodeus replied through him.

"I don't appreciate being called an abomination, mortal. If I wasn't bound to this young man, I would make you eat your own tongue."

Astaroth rocked his head, growling to himself.

"What did I say about speaking out of turn? Do you want me to lock you up further inside the ring?!"

Astaroth suddenly lost his demonic appearance, as Asmodeus willingly pulled out of him, retreating into the ring. This had the effect of Astaroth suddenly losing the power to fly, and he felt his body lurch toward the ground.

His quick thinking kicked in, and he used Sky Steps to go back down without crashing into the forest floor. But he grumbled to himself all the way there.

Aberon watched the comical scene, simply enjoying it like a sketch at the theatre, without saying anything. But they now had to fix the issue on their hands.

It wouldn't take long for the mages' guild to know what happened here today. All of them had their mana levels tracked at every moment of the day, and Argos releasing his full power like this would not have gone unnoticed.

Aberon estimated that it would take no longer than four hours before they sent someone to investigate. They had to get Argos back on his feet and on their side before then.

Flying to the ground, Aberon landed next to Astaroth.

"Alright, young man. Head back to the throne room. They are waiting for you there. I'll take care of this burden for you. And I'll try to make it so we don't end up in trouble."

Astaroth frowned at Aberon.

"You were just watching everything unfold before, and now you want to help? How strange of you..."

But a quick smack to the back of Astaroth's head made him stop his complaining.

"Or I could just let you deal with an organization that has outlived kingdoms and wars while I watch from the sidelines! Do you want my help, or not?"

"I'm sorry! Yes, I'll take any help I can get! Please and thank you, master Aberon!"

Aberon leaned in to smack Astaroth again, but he dropped Argos and bolted out before it could reach him. Aberon watched the young Ash Elf disappear into the forest, his laughter echoing on the trees, chuckling to himself.

"You little shit," he mumbled, a smile on his lips.

But looking down at Argos' unconscious form took his smile away.

"Now. To deal with you. How I wished your guild would get off their high horses sometimes. That's why I left..."