

New Eden 831

Chapter 831 Dirty Business

He hadn't received a call at all. In truth, Alex had discreetly programmed his earpiece to flash like he was receiving a call right before following her into the shower.

He had done this to buy himself some time alone.

But he did have a call to make.

As the ringing echoed inside his head a few times, Alex hoped that who he was calling hadn't suddenly started playing New Eden, which would make him unreachable at night.

But the sound of the phone picking up made him smile.

"Who is this? How did you get this number?" came a gruff voice on the other side.

"I'm glad to see you haven't changed yet, Alfred," Alex said, stopping in front of the large windows overlooking the city.

"Alexander? I thought you were missing... When did you—"

"Yesterday. But it's not relevant to the reason for my calling. I need a favour," Alex interrupted him.

There was a pause, followed by a deep sigh.

"This better be good. I don't take lightly to people asking me favours," Alfred replied.

"I need a team on standby that can make legal arrests. I can't tell you where or why yet. But they will be necessary."

Alex could almost hear the frown form on Alfred's face after hearing his words.

"Why would y—nope. I don't want to know. I don't care. Tell me where they should stand by and be ready to pay up," Alfred answered before cutting the call.

Alex smirked as the call cut, imagining how Alfred must be annoyed. But he still needed the favour.

He couldn't legally make arrests, and what he was about to do would most certainly require some unless he killed whoever he caught, which he would rather avoid.

He texted Kary, who he knew would see them inside New Eden since he had already linked his new number to his account.

'It was Alfred. He heard I was back and asked to see me before I logged back into New Eden. It shouldn't take more than a few hours.'

Alex returned to the room, getting clothes and dressing, when he received her reply.

'Do you need me to log back out?'

'Nah. It's nothing like that. I'll be in as soon as I'm back home. Love you,' he replied.

Kary replied with, 'I love you too.'

Alex smiled lightly before exiting through his room balcony access and jumping off into the night sky.

Before gravity could assert itself over him, long white wings grew on his back, and he beat them vigorously, taking altitude.

Once he was above the tallest building in the city, Alex stopped and admired the lights below him.

"This view will always be stunning... But let's get busy," he mumbled.

Closing his eyes, Alex reached out to Geminae, borrowing his power. The divine entity willingly gave him access to it, still trying to build a trust bond between each other.

Alex felt the powers rush into him, and he instantly knew how to use them.

Focusing on his essence, he let the power spread slowly out of him until it covered the city. This felt like a light warmth to the people below him, like a pleasant memory passing through their minds.

Only the awakened people would know this wasn't normal, and Alex was banking on this.

He instantly felt many pulses of power in the city below, none powerful enough to reach him, and he grinned.

"Now that they know something more powerful than them is out there, let's see how they react."

Soon enough, the pulses he felt either retracted and shrunk or echoed once more, their location different.

Some were trying to find him, and others were already hiding.

But the one he wanted to find was one of the ones hiding.

Sadly for them, it was futile. He still sensed them like a dot of light in the darkness.

Alex looked into the downtown area, where all the business high-rises were, and frowned.

"What is he doing over there at this hour? Everything is closed..." he mumbled.

'Seems like I was right. He's into some dirty shit...' Alex thought, making his way toward downtown Montreal.

Meanwhile, Gabriel was sweating bullets in a black van in that same area.

"There it is again. That suffocating presence... I can't stay here..." he mumbled to himself.

"Hm? What was that, boss?" a man next to him asked.

This man was none other than Emerest, who was now out of his restaurant uniform and in some black form-fitting clothes.

"We have to call this off and leave. I felt something off, and we shouldn't be here when it gets here."

Emerest looked at him with knives in his eyes. With a swift movement of his feet, he was standing in Gabriel's face, and there was a knife against his ribs.

"Listen, Gabriel. I may call you boss, but don't delude yourself. You are still my bitch. I call the shots when we are on ops. So, sit the fuck down, and keep telling the team where to go and what to punch into those pads. Or I'll gut you like a fish."

At that moment, Emerest had gone from an unassuming man into a cold-blooded man with abilities he shouldn't possess.

And Emerest wasn't the only one to feel the change.

In the sky above their position, Alex halted his dive, frowning.

"That's strange. I could have sworn this was a normal person beside him. Why are they suddenly showing traces of mana?" Alex asked himself.

And someone else inside him was riling up.

'I can smell fear. Mmm. The sweet scent of absolute terror, of fear for your life. Get me some of that, man. I swear I'll behave if I can look at that person's life leave their eyes. Rhakhakha!' the imp begged in his mind.

Alex shut him up, using a trick he took from Geminae, as thick golden ropes tied around the imp and wrapped around his mouth.

'But he isn't wrong. This fear... It's intense. Whoever this is, he's scared for his life like never before...' Geminae said in Alex's mind.

'I can tell. And I think I know why...' Alex replied.

But he had no time to mess around. He needed to act.

Something was going down.

The building in front of him had just flashed, the faint sound of gunshots reaching his ears.

Chapter 832 Taking Action

Alex wasted no time taking action. Whatever was happening, the flashes of gunfire repeated profusely, and he thought he also heard some screaming.

So he crashed into the window, passing through it like it was nothing, and landed inside the building on what he estimated to be the tenth floor.

The gunshot sounds became apparent, and he could finally determine where they came from.

Dashing forward toward the noise, Alex came to a corridor riddled with holes and found two security guards hiding behind a reception desk.

One of them was critically injured, holding his neck, and he choked on blood, while the other one was trying as best he could to fire back at the machine gun-wielding maniacs.

A bullet grazed his cheek, the wound healing almost instantly, and Alex dipped behind the counter as well.

From the tests, he had understood that Geminae's body wasn't all that tough, aside from his practically indestructible wings, and he should be careful. His healing may be quick, but a lethal wound would still be so if he died on the spot.

"Hold fire!" he heard from over the counter.

The shooting stopped, and he heard whispers.

"What's up, chef?"

"I saw someone else dip behind the counter. But... I don't know. Something was off. I think I saw... wings?" the voice that had commanded replied.

"Hah. I think you took too much to drink before coming, chef. Wings? Come now, that makes no sense."

Alex heard a faint slap before hearing a peal of laughter.

In the meantime, he had grabbed the throat of the wounded guard, as a faint golden light shone in his hand, the wound starting to heal up.

Seeing the light next to him, the other guard finally realized he wasn't alone with his colleague anymore.

"You're!" he started exclaiming.

But Alex slammed his hand over his mouth, glaring at him, his golden eyes suddenly flashing red.

"Shut up. They don't know I'm here yet," Alex whispered.

The guard nodded his head, and Alex let go of his mouth.

"Hey, smart ass. Since you think I'm hallucinating, why don't you go check?" the commanding voice said, annoyed.

"What about the guards? I know we hit one of them good, but the second one didn't seem too bothered, as he shot back at us..."

"Are you arguing?" Alex heard the commanding voice ask as the raking of a shotgun echoed in the dark hallway.

"No, chef!" the voice suddenly replied, a nervousness in its tone.

"That's what I thought."

Alex slowly but surely heard the footsteps come toward them and knew he had to move.

The wound on the guard's neck was healed, but the man was pale as a sheet, his blood almost entirely on the ground.

"Grab him and leave. Call this number, not the cops, and tell the man the address and that there are six perps. Don't ask questions and don't hold the line longer than you need. Understood?" Alex said, giving the security agent a black card with just a number.

"And burn the card after calling. I don't want anyone finding it, or I'll come back for you," Alex added.

The guard looked at the folded wings on Alex's back and nodded furiously.

This thing might have saved him and his buddy, but he still had wings on his back. Who knew what kind of thing this was?

Alex knew he had to draw fire on him if he wanted the guards to escape, so he prepared himself mentally.

As soon as the footsteps sounded closer, as the crinkling of shattered wood underfoot echoed, he burst out of his hiding place, wings furled over his body. The man coming to escape froze as the massive white wings rushed him.

"What the—Oof!" he started saying before one wing whipped open, throwing him back toward the other armed men, and the bullets began raining again.

Alex folded his wings over himself again, taking a hallway to his left, making sure he called out to the men simultaneously.

"You've picked the wrong night to commit a crime! Now that White Wing is here, your crime spree is over, criminals!"

He cringed as he said those words, gritting his teeth, but they had their intended effect.

"White Wing? Who the fuck does this clown think he is?! After him, boys. Show him what happens when you fuck with us!" the commanding voice howled.

The sound of running footsteps echoed behind him, and Alex knew his plot had worked, however lame he had sounded.

The gunshots started again, bullets bouncing off his wings as he ran. Alex tried running at a normal speed since he wanted them to think he was just a person in a silly suit for now.

But when he turned another corner, Alex suddenly accelerated, flapping the wings behind him, as he manoeuvred the building's halls to come around the men. He flew past one, doing an aerial spin, and knocked him into a wall.

The air was knocked out of the gunman's lungs as he smashed into a concrete wall, a weird crunching sound coming from his back.

Alex could only hope he hadn't killed him before the shouts echoed and bullets rained on him again.

"How did he get behind us?! Kill him!"

But Alex wasn't done baiting them like this. He kept this up, running into halls he could circle to, and repeated his action twice before the man they called 'Chef' caught on.

"Stop following him! Everyone to the office area! Make him come to us!"

Two of his men were already down, and they didn't seem like they were about to get up anytime soon. In his ear, he could hear the furious voice of Emerest, telling him to cut his losses and retreat.

But he was a prideful man, and there was no way he would let a wannabe hero mess him up.

Taking the earpiece out and shutting off his body cam, the chef shot forward, trying to reach a wide-open area as fast as possible. This was the only way to stop this jackass from playing around with them.

Passing one of the men Alex had knocked out, the chef briefly paused, pulling out a pistol.

Blam!

Chapter 833 Surrender!

After the voice shouted, Alex realized they weren't chasing him, and he abruptly halted.

He circled back to them, making sure to remain unseen, trying to figure out where they were going, and he saw what had happened in the first hallway.

The gunshot echoed, and Alex's face darkened.

'So this is the kind of leader you are. They could get caught, so you kill them? I guess I was trying to be nice to the wrong people...' he thought, his body shaking in anger.

'Yes! Get mad! Let me at him! He's a bad guy, right?! There is no harm in letting me rip his innards out, right?!' the imp shouted in his mind, apparently having freed his mouth from the bindings.

Geminae was about to strike his face to silence him, but Alex suddenly appeared in the soul space.

The imp shivered in fear at the anger apparent on Alex's face. He thought he had suddenly messed up.

Alex started walking toward him, and his anger rippled off of him, making him look like a god of death to the demon.

"Please! I'll shut up! I'll stop talking!" the imp suddenly pleaded.

It had already realized that if Alex could muffle him without coming in here; he had gotten used to controlling his soul space. That meant there was no way to overpower him anymore.

The imp yelped in fear when Alex crouched next to his tied-up body.

Grabbing the golden roping, Alex brought the imp's face directly before his.

"Listen to me, and listen well because I won't be repeating myself," Alex started talking, his tone icy.

The imp gulped, nodding his head frantically.

"My world already has enough evil in it as it stands. If I ever let you out willingly, you'll be under such scrutiny that you won't even breathe without me controlling your lung muscles.

"Now. If I don't ask for your input, I don't want you anywhere near my thoughts. If I hear you in my head again without my say-so, I will find a way to hurt you so much; your essence will only become a spec of dust in my soul. Just enough for me not to die. Understood?"

The imp felt a shiver run down his spine. He was revolted at the idea of a demon fearing a human.

But, then again, this wasn't a regular human anymore. He shouldn't treat him like one, either.

Nodding his head again, the imp kept his mouth sealed.

Alex smirked in satisfaction before shoving the imp back to the ground and rising to his feet again.

He glanced at Geminae, who kept gawking at him, and scoffed.

"The warning stands for you as well. I've had enough people in my thoughts. It's my brain, and you having access to it is insulting enough as it is. Stay out of my head unless I ask for you."

Before Geminae could even reply yes, Alex was gone again.

Opening his eyes, Alex could no longer hear the running, which meant the three remaining men had huddled up somewhere.

But he could hear the taunting shouts from afar of the man they called chef.

"Come on out, little White Wing! Show us what you got! This isn't a fantasy world, kid! You aren't a superhero!"

Alex grinned to himself.

"You couldn't be more right. Because if I were a superhero, I would care about your lives," Alex mumbled.

He walked toward the sound of the man's voice, doing something he hadn't done in a while.

His mana started leaking out of him frantically, spreading out on the floor, his presence suddenly suffocating.

The two guards from earlier had already taken the stairs down and weren't hit by this, but still felt an unnerving presence over their heads.

But the three remaining men weren't spared.

The mana swallowed the entire floor, making their breathing suddenly ragged, like they had run a marathon. Lifting their arms felt like they suddenly weighed ten times more, and their hearts started beating crazily.

"Chef... I don't think we should stay. Let's retreat. This op is compromised."

The chef pistol-whipped his underling, growling at him.

"Don't question my orders. This little punk already cost me time, men, and money. I'm not backing down until his bloodied body lays at my feet!"

The man looked at his boss with a fearful gaze, blood streaking down the side of his face.

"If you say so, chef..."

The other man was too busy spinning his head around like an owl, looking for White Wing, even to notice the argument behind him.

And Alex could hear his heart beating loudly like it was about to explode.

He used his mana to mimic his voice inside the man's ear.

"You know it's useless to resist. You can feel it, can't you? The immense pressure on your shoulders that makes you want to bow down? Surrender," his voice whispered.

The man suddenly snapped around, pointing his gun everywhere, scaring his boss and colleague.

"Get out of my head! Get out!" the man shouted, firing a few shots at the ceiling tiles.

"Hey! Stop this! You're going to hit us, you imbecile!" the chef shouted, trying to grab onto his man.

But the man jumped away from him, terror on his face.

"Don't touch me!" the man shouted as he suddenly dashed away.

"Get back over here, you fucking pussy!" the chef shouted.

But he fell on deaf ears.

All the man could hear was Alex's voice in his ears, whispering over and over.

"Surrender. Surrender! Surrender!!"

The man ran like the devil was on his heels until he turned a corner leading to an emergency exit and slammed into something hard. As he fell to his ass, he realized what he had slammed into.

"Boo!" Alex said, leaning forward.

The man's eyes rolled in the back of his head as froth started forming in his mouth, and he convulsed on the ground.

He was out for the count.

"One more down, two to go. Let's see how I deal with the next one."

Chapter 834 Reaching The Safehouse

No longer hearing his running, the chef gritted his teeth.

"Coward," he cursed.

"Chef. I don't think staying is a smart move. What if those guards called the cops already? We should leave."

"Shut up!" the chef shouted, pointing his pistol at his underling.

"One hell of a crew you got there. You can't even keep them in check. Now, I've taken out four of you, and I'm sure if I wait long enough, you'll take each other out. Ah ha ha ha!" Alex's voice echoed in the open area.

The chef's head snapped around, trying to find where it came from.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam!

"Come out here and face me, you coward!" the chef screamed after firing his pistol four times.

"Boss! We need to go!" the henchman shouted.

"I said shut up!" the chef screamed, turning to his underling, gun raised.

The subordinate's face went pale, and the chef grinned.

"Yeah! That's right! You should be scared of me! You know what happens to those that don't listen!"

But the chef realized the man wasn't looking at him but past him. With a shaky finger, his underling pointed behind him as a shadow extended over him.

Turning around, he ended up face to face with the grinning Alex, wings extended on both sides, his four-meter-long wingspan covering his entire vision.

"You should have listened to him," Alex said, grabbing his throat.

The man tried raising his arm to shoot White Wing in the face, but a sharp pain assaulted him, a wing flashing by his face, and he realized he couldn't feel his arm anymore.

Until a dull thud echoed on the floor.

The pain reached his brain, but his throat was being clenched so hard he couldn't get air in to scream. He fainted from the pain and suffocation while his underling stood there, frozen in terror.

When Alex let go of the passed-out man, he shot out a small gout of fire, cauterizing his wound so he wouldn't bleed out.

'I still prefer not to dirty my hands with the likes of you,' he thought.

But his eyes never left the underling's face.

The man could have fired his machine gun, tried to escape, or even dropped and begged. But his body was there, in utter shock.

"What the fuck are you..." he finally asked, his mouth the only moving part of him.

"It doesn't matter what I am, only what happens to you next. Now. Tell me. Where would your boss go in a situation like this? Do you have a safe house?"

The man looked at him, unsure of what he was asking. After all, his boss was lying on the ground, right in front of him.

"I... I don't know what you are asking of me..."

Alex clicked his tongue.

"Wrong answer."

A sharp gust of wind flew past the man's face, and he felt something burn on his cheek as blood started trickling down to his chin.

"You won't get another warning. Answer me, or I'll lop off your head. I don't care if you die anymore."

The man felt a shiver run down his spine.

"Listen, man. I work for the chef. I don't know anything about the manager or the owner. Hell, I don't even know their names. Please. I'm just a grunt."

Alex sighed in annoyance before clamping down on the man's throat, blocking his airways.

"Last chance. Stop lying to me. People like you always meet the big boss at least once. That would be in a safe house. Tell me where it is, or join your friends in hell. The ones the chef shot."

The man tried speaking, but no words came out of his mouth. He tapped rapidly on Alex's arm, trying to tell him to let go.

Releasing some pressure on his neck, Alex locked his eyes on the man's gaze.

"Speak."

"If I tell you, he'll kill me. I'll never make it to jail..."

A crisp slap resounded in the open area.

"If you don't tell me, I'll kill you, and you still won't make it to jail. How does that sound? Or maybe you don't believe me? I hope this convinces you..." Alex said, starting to push his fingers into the man's throat.

The criminal could feel the fingers digging into his skin, and he immediately panicked.

"Stop! I'll tell you!"

Alex grinned at him.

"Go on, then," he said, keeping the fingers dug in.

"We meet in a small abandoned shop on Sherbrooke Street! Eighteen-nineteen Sherbrooke East. Please, don't kill me."

Alex smiled at him.

"Thank you."

Then he punched him in the stomach, forcing out any remaining air in the man's lungs, and let him crumple to the ground, eyes rolled back into his head.

Already, Alex could hear the sound of footsteps running up the stairwell and knew his time here was running short.

He dashed forward, using the wings to boost his running speed, and flew himself out the same window he came in from. As he burst out of the building again, Alex took the direction of the Plateau district.

He was gone before the door to the tenth floor was kicked in by a squad of SWAT-like men, and he was already thinking about his next step.

This caused him to miss the disappointed look of one of them as he looked out the shattered window.

Alex reached his destination in minutes, and the van he had seen earlier was already parked out back. He could feel one man inside with Geminae's senses and grinned.

"Let's end this farce. Men are dead for your greed. It's time to face the music."

Alex landed at the back door, reverting to his human appearance, and knocked on the door.

It creaked open, as it wasn't fully closed, and he heard some pained moaning inside.

"I'm coming in! Let's talk before you do something stupid!" Alex shouted into the back-store.

Silence was his answer.

Alex could already tell he had said this for nothing.

'Of course, they always pick the stupid option. Who am I kidding?' he thought, pushing his way into the store.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Chapter 835 The Stupid Option

Three shots echoed in the store, followed by the clinking of the three shells falling to the ground.

Emerest grinned as he looked at the shadow he had just shot at, thinking he had won.

But something felt wrong. The body was falling forward or crumpling.

Alex slowly turned around with a sigh, the three bullets suddenly falling out of his shirt, where red skin had blocked them from going further.

"I told you not to take the stupid option. A thought an awakened would at least be smart enough to recognize another and wouldn't use a normal weapon to kill him. This tickled, at best."

Emerest's face turned to a mask of anger.

"Why are you sticking your nose in my business? You made me lose men and money today! And now, I won't even be able to use the restaurant to gather intel! This is all your fault!"

A dagger appeared in his hand, and Alex could see a blueish sheen on it.

This wasn't a regular knife.

His eyebrow cocked up.

"You managed to get your game weapon out? Huh... I still haven't done that. Either I've been out of New Eden too long, or that's one hell of a weapon you got there."

Emerest grinned at him like a maniac.

"I guess you aren't as stupid as you look. But I won't tell you jack shit. Why would I? You'll be dead in a moment."

After saying this, Emerest dashed at Alex, his speed impressive, even by Alex's standards. But not fast enough.

Slashing, stabbing, running, spinning. Emerest transformed into a miniature blade tornado, going all out on Alexander.

But every time he thought he would strike his target, Alex moved with the bare minimum of effort, and the knife missed him.

Emerest quickly understood that his opponent could match his speed and redoubled his efforts.

He started using kicks and punches and even tried shoving the young man off balance, but with little to no effect.

Alex eventually got bored with this little dance, caught Emerest's wrist instead of dodging, and spun around, throwing the man like a rag doll.

Mid-air, Emerest spun around, landing with his feet on the wall, and dashed forward again.

"You can't keep dodging me forever. You are bound to tire out eventually!" he shouted, resuming his assault.

But Alex repeated his catch-and-throw routine, sending him toward a decrepit rack this time.

When Emerest corrected his trajectory, bolting toward Alex, he suddenly lost track of him.

Feeling a shiver on his nape, Emerest threw himself forward, going into a tuck and roll, as he heard the air whistle where he had been.

"Good reflexes," he heard the young man say suddenly in front of him.

But he wasn't fast enough to dodge the incoming foot, and it slammed into his ribs, sending him packing, rolling over the floor a few times before he kicked off of it and landed on his feet.

But he winced in pain.

"By the face you made and the feeling under my foot, I'd say two—no, make that three broken ribs. Do you want to keep going? Because you won't win. And the more you annoy me, the higher the chances I snap and kill you. I would prefer to keep my hands clean tonight."

Emerest gave Alex a rage-filled glare.

"When are you going to take action, you fucking coward?!" he seethed, looking past Alex's shoulder.

But his face changed when silence was the only thing to respond to him.

"Oh, did you think Gabriel would help you? He's already out of commission. He tried prodding into my head, and I let him see something he would rather never see. Poor sod passed out and pissed himself," Alex said calmly.

He could hear Emerest's teeth grinding against each other and knew he had him back into a corner.

"What are you? Why are you butting in if you are this strong? You could put the city under your thumb, and no one could stop you. Why are you wasting your time on people like me?" Emerest asked, his eyes darting around.

He was looking for an escape, but the young man stood between him and the doorway.

"Why would I want to put this city under my rule? I have a better one in New Eden, and, at least there, no criminal hounds my streets to fuck up people needlessly."

That's when Emerest realized who was before him.

The previous number-one player in New Eden, who had gone AWOL for a month. Astaroth, King of Stellar Woodlands, and Leader of the Paragons.

But Alex wouldn't let him have the time to think of his next move.

With a snap of his fingers, heavy pressure slammed onto Emerest's shoulders as his entire mana presence pushed onto him, and Alex sauntered forward.

"We've played around enough. Your men are going to jail, at least the ones your chef didn't murder. As for you and Gabriel? Well, let's say you won't be seeing the light of day for a long time. Now be a dear for me and fall unconscious."

Emerest couldn't even lift his finger, the mana pressure affecting him way more than normal humans, and he couldn't react when Alex suddenly punched him in the head.

His eyes rolled back as his body crumpled to the ground, and he passed out. Alex looked at the place and sighed heavily.

"I hope it's not all the awakened that are like these two dumbasses. Or I'll have a lot of work ahead of me..."

He called Mr. Gu, telling him where the two awakened were, as Mr. Gu questioned him about how he knew where and who they were. Alex dodged the questions adeptly, saying he still had to connect to New Eden, and he hung up.

Flying back home, he ignored all the callbacks Mr. Gu made and landed on his room balcony, turning back into a human as he slid the door closed.

His clothes were ok, for once, as he had been careful when growing his wings to infuse mana into them. This had stopped them from ripping apart.

He also had kept blood from landing on them, so he wouldn't have to explain himself to Kary the next day.

After a quick shower, Alex headed into his pod for the first time in over a month, and closed its top.

The comfortable gel-like substance under him felt nostalgic as his pod welcomed him back.

"Log in."

Launching New Eden

Logging in

Welcome back, player Astaroth

Chapter 836 Bold Statement

The familiar feeling of falling, followed by the rush of colours and wind, made Astaroth slightly nostalgic.

It felt like forever since he last entered New Eden, and his mind suddenly felt at peace, like he was meant to be here and not in his world.

Opening his eyes, Astaroth saw the familiar ceiling of the royal bedroom, and before he could even get up, something slammed into him hard.

"Oof!" he exclaimed, his lungs emptying out.

"PAPA!" Luna's high-pitched voice exclaimed.

Tears started rolling down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around Astaroth's chest, sobbing in a mix of sadness of missing him and joy of seeing him again, safe and sound.

Astaroth looked down at her and smiled warmly. He embraced her as well, feeling their souls reconnecting.

It was soon followed by the tethers between him and all his soul companions reforming.

One by one, he felt White Death, Morpheus, and Genie's presence wrap around his soul and mind like a warm blanket on a cold winter's day.

He instantly knew where all of them were and what they were doing. But most of all, he also immediately felt their power.

'I see you all have been keeping busy. Well, almost all of you,' he said in his mind, looking at the top of Luna's head.

Astaroth opened his interface and saw a new tab, and his head tilted.

Summons

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He didn't know when this had appeared, but he knew this was an excellent addition.

'Most likely, many players started forming bonds with creatures of New Eden, and EG patched the interface.'

He still didn't know how EG could force the interface on New Eden since this was an entire world, but he speculated that it was a player-specific thing and that the pods and helmets were responsible for it.

But this was not important.

He tapped the summons tab, curious about what it added to the game, and grinned.

On a list, from the oldest bond to most recent, he had access to all their stat windows and a resume of them all right there.

Levels, HP, MP, Statuses. Everything was shortened, meaning he no longer had to scan every one of them individually.

Summons

Souls:

White Death (51):

HP: 87% / MP: 56% / Status: Summoned (Forced)

Genie (53):

HP: 84% / MP: 49% / Status: Embodied

Luna (75):

HP: 100% / MP: 100% / Status: Embodied

Morpheus (51):

HP: 100% / MP: 100% / Status: Summoned (Forced)

Shegror (55):

HP: 24% / MP: 11% / Status: Summoned (Forced)

Demons:

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Astaroth didn't keep reading the list down into the demon section since he already had all their info. But he did notice something missing in the souls section.

'Where did Geminae go?' he wondered.

He knew that Anima Geminae was originally a soul companion, even though it was a shard from a higher being. But now, it was gone entirely from the list.

'Do you know why?' he asked Geminae in his mind.

'That is because I no longer am a soul shard,' Geminae responded.

'You'll have to explain yourself better than this,' Astaroth grumbled.

'I've already told you why. We have become a single entity. Your soul is no longer just you. It is an amalgam of you, me, and that retched red skin.'

Astaroth felt like slapping Geminae in the face for being so vague. But he held himself back.

'You'll have to explain the complete ramifications of this later, Geminae. I want the full story.'

'As you wish,' Geminae replied before going silent again.

For now, Astaroth had things to do. Things that couldn't wait.

The first one was to announce he had returned to his officials and guild.

The latter, he could do right now with a quick message in the guild chat. But the former was a bit more complicated.

Leaving the royal chambers, Astaroth walked toward the staircase. He wanted to see Chele and ask him to mobilize the officials in the palace.

As he moved around the palace, the Royal Guards and servants quickly noticed him, which caused a wave of whispers to spread around the palace before he could even gather the officials.

When he reached Chele's office, the tall Lizardman was already waiting outside the door.

"Your Highnesssss. It issss, a plaesssure to see you ssssafe and ssssound again. I have already ssssent for the offissssialsssss. They will gather in the throne room."

Astaroth smiled at him, giving a curt nod.

"Very well. Thank you, Chele. As always, you are on top of everything that happens in this palace. It is a pleasure to see you again as well. You should head to the throne room as well. I have a message for everyone, you included."

Chele bowed his head, saying, "Asss you wissssh, sssire."

He followed the monarch toward the throne room, which was already abuzz with the news of the king's return. Phoenix had kept mum until he was officially back since she knew he would want to address them on his own.

But that didn't mean she wouldn't be present.

When Astaroth entered the busy throne room, a lot of the officials were already gathered, with the last few reaching the doors soon after him. Silence filled the room as Astaroth's footsteps across it echoed in the enormous throne room.

Everyone watched him walk past them, go up the dais, and sit down with a wide grin.

The moment his ass was on that throne, the doors to the throne room closed, and everyone suddenly dropped to one knee.

"Welcome back, King Astaroth!" they chanted altogether.

Astaroth's smile widened.

There were a few fresh faces in the room, which he didn't recognize, but all the other faces he remembered were there. And that made him happy.

'No one died or got replaced. That is the best start I could hope for.'

"Thank you all for this warm welcome. You can relax. I am still me, and I still disdain too much protocol," Astaroth said with a chuckle.

This caused a small wave of giggles and chortles before the room quieted again.

"The reason I wanted all of you here at this time was because I have an announcement. And it is one I want all of you to hear. Because it concerns all of you."

Everyone's eyes were glued to him, including Phoenix's.

"Starting next week, Stellar Woodlands is going to war."

Chapter 837 Consternation

Everyone's face instantly dropped. Even Phoenix's heart skipped a beat.

"What are you—"

"Before panic erupts, let me finish," Astaroth interrupted the rising voices, raising his hand to silence them.

"You cannot be serious! Calling us in for a declaration of war?! Have you lost your mind?!" Commander Alena shouted.

"I said let me finish!" Astaroth's voice boomed, a pulse of mana slamming into the woman.

She felt like a mountain had just slammed onto her shoulders, and her knees almost buckled instantly.

'What the... When did he become this powerful?!' she wondered, struggling to stand up straight.

The last time they had fought, a few days before his disappearance, he had needed to meld and use Royal Protection just to make her feel this way. But she couldn't see any traces of such a thing on him currently.

In Astaroth's ears, a notification rang, almost distracting him from his announcement. But he swung it aside for now, wanting to finish this order of business first.

"I am not declaring war on anyone. Yes, we are going to war. But no one will die. At least, I hope not."

Phoenix frowned.

"Then what did you mean? Because that was a bold statement to make without proper explanation," she stated.

"I'm getting there, love," Astaroth replied, smiling at her.

"First, let me say this. Do not misinterpret my words. We will eventually have to go to actual war. The Ash Elves have a crisis on their hands, and we will help them when they call for us.

"Secondly, the issue with the demon tears and demonic resurgence is also only starting. It will drag us to war as well before too long. But that is not what I meant. Starting next week, we are going to war against our inadequacy."

After saying this, the faces in the room morphed from outrage to confusion.

But Astaroth wasn't going to let them hang out to dry.

"I was gone for a month, and the reason isn't because I wanted to be left alone or any other reason that may have been told to you. The truth is, I died," Astaroth said, his face grave.

Declan, who was also a player, looked at him with a strange gaze.

"Sir, with all due respect, us Abnormals can't die in New Eden. We simply respawn."

Astaroth locked gazes with him.

"I don't mean in here, Councilman. The real me died. Out in our world. And if fate hadn't been a cruel and treacherous mistress, I wouldn't be here to talk about it."

The implications to the Natives were unclear, as they were used to people not coming back after death, and the Abnormals had already shattered their worldviews on this.

But this was world-breaking to Declan and the other players who were part of the officials.

"Let's not dawdle on the subject for long, as it is only relevant to the why of my statement. I realized that my inadequacy was the reason for my fall. And now that fate has given me a second chance, albeit poisoned, I intend to make it its problem.

"I realized that we were not ready. None of us are. And we are not going to be, at the rate we are going. So starting next week, this kingdom will become hell on earth for everyone living in it.

"Not a single person will be left out, as long as they decide to stay. We will all be training to become the most powerful nation in the world. Because if we don't, the world will fall."

After saying his piece, Astaroth let them digest the information.

Phoenix sent him a private message so no one would hear her.

**

'Are you insane? If you turn Bastion City into a boot camp, all the progress to grow into the kingdom we are will go out the window. Be reasonable. I understand wanting to make the troops stronger, but the citizens?'

**

Astaroth could understand her point of view, but he viewed this differently.

**

'You don't get it. The demons will not stop at the troops. They will not imprison the civilians or turn them into slaves. They are not here for that. The demons don't want to conquer. They want to feed. And the world is a moving buffet.'

**

He saw her eyes widen slightly at his words, as if she finally understood what they were fighting against.

Astaroth grabbed her hand, shaking his head lightly at her, before looking forward again.

He could see the eyes of some of them already hardening.

"Sir. I don't know if I can get behind this approach," Commander Kadmus said, her eyes wavering.

"Mary. I understand your reluctance. But please understand something. The world will soon turn into a battlefield. And there will be nowhere safe. The people will flock to the largest cities in hopes of safety. How are we to protect them if we can't fight off the threat?" Astaroth replied to her.

And, although his words made sense, it just didn't appeal to her mind.

"But why everyone? Can't we recruit more troops and make them stronger? Why would we mix the civilians in this?" she asked, her eyes pleading.

"Commander Kadmus, let me make something clear. I am not forcing anyone who doesn't want to stay to partake in this endeavour. But it will happen. We need everyone ready," Astaroth said, his tone serious.

"Of course, I won't make civilians into soldiers. I'm not a monster. However, there will be rigorous training for them in evacuation protocols, urgent situation response, and first aid training. I need everyone to be on their A-game if the demons ever reach our walls," he added.

He saw in her eyes that calmed her fears a little. But Astaroth knew he would need to have a one-on-one talk with her.

He needed everyone in this room to be on the same page if this was to work.

He knew Phoenix was already thinking up plans in her mind, even though he hadn't talked about the big picture with her.

He could already see her eyes darting about as she mumbled to herself.

"This isn't going to be easy or pleasant. But it needs to be done. Prepare yourselves mentally. Meeting adjourned," Astaroth declared, leaving through the back room.

Chapter 838 Dumb Move

Phoenix hurried behind him, realizing he was leaving, and caught up to him in the room behind the thrones.

"Seriously, you need to tell me these kinds of things before springing shit on me. Did you take even a single second to think about the repercussions of your words?" she growled at him.

Astaroth sighed heavily.

"You may think I didn't. But that isn't true. Listen, I know you think I'm ruining your efforts. But I realized something in the last few days. Anyone can die."

Phoenix looked at him with anger.

"What does this have to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with it!" Astaroth shouted.

Phoenix took a step back, startled by his sudden explosion.

Sigh

"Look. Can you tell me how you would react if a demon suddenly appeared and killed me? No fight, no running. Just instantly killed me."

Phoenix looked at him incredulously.

"But that can't—"

"Just answer. Don't think. First thing that comes to your mind," Astaroth interrupted her.

"I... I..." she stammered.

"That's the problem. If you froze like that, you would be dead in an instant, too. And that is a normal reaction, Phoenix. But we need to break that. And not just in our combatants.

"We need to ensure everyone in this city can react, even when their bodies refuse to obey them and their instincts are screaming at them to flee. They need to act on autopilot. No thinking, just acting. If they don't, they die."

She understood the point he was trying to make, but still had trouble wrapping her head around his decision.

"Astaroth, we can't just..." she said, her shoulders lowering.

But before she could finish her sentence, her face was suddenly against the wall behind her, and claws were on her throat, an acrid breath brushing against her face.

"What if I were to tear into you? Right here, right now. What would you do? Do you think anyone would have time to react if they took even a second to think?"

Phoenix's brain froze up, realizing Astaroth had demonized in a split second, and her life could very well be in danger. But her body refused to react.

A feral fear rose in her.

'Am I going to die?' was her only thought.

Feeling her start to shake, Astaroth returned to normal before spinning her toward him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to frighten you. But I had to make you understand. It's human nature to think before it acts. We can't afford this against the enemies we are going to face. A single wasted second can and will mean death."

He took the shaking Phoenix in his arms, trying to hug her, but she twitched and stepped back.

Her eyes pained him as she looked at him in terror.

"Phoenix, I—"

Before he could finish, she darted away, not looking back.

'Fuck... I shouldn't have done that...' he realized.

His need to prove a point had made him act before thinking in a situation where thinking would have been better. And now, he wasn't sure how long Phoenix would take to recover.

After leaving the room, Phoenix ran outside the palace and burst into flame, launching into the sky and disappearing over the tree line. Her mind was in shock, and her body navigated the way on autopilot as the thought of death lingered on her mind.

By the time she snapped back and realized she was flying away, she was already almost out of the eastern edge of the Elven Forests. Somehow, she had gotten away from Bastion City, her brain associating it with demon Astaroth.

Landing on a sturdy-looking tree, Phoenix extinguished herself before crumpling on the branch and erupting into tears.

In the pit of her stomach, this fear just refused to leave. At that moment, she felt like there was no respawning, no second chance, just death.

It broke her hard facade, making her remember things she had buried deep inside her. Things she never wanted to think about again.

In the meantime, in the palace, Astaroth sat there, in the back room of the throne room, feeling like an idiot.

He was stuck in self-loathing when a blue portal opened up next to him.

He saw it from the corner of his eye and turned his head away.

"Not now, Aravelle. I'm in no mood to talk."

He knew the old mage could hear him, as Aravelle could hear everything in this palace, and hoped he would leave him alone.

But instead of disappearing, the portal suddenly jumped toward him, swallowing him whole. And before he knew it, Astaroth was back in the room Aravelle called his home.

"Don't turn me down when I call for you, boy. I don't care what mood you are in."

"Tch!" Astaroth clicked his tongue.

"Although I disapprove of your methods, I believe the point you were trying to make was valid. But you have to revisit your methods. That poor girl sat in here every day for over a month, thinking only about your safe return, and you traumatize her like that," Aravelle admonished him.

"I don't want to hear it from you, Aravelle. What do you want?" Astaroth asked, looking annoyed.

Aravelle glared at him.

"I can see that little devil inside you has corrupted your manners. Maybe I should beat some into you."

Astaroth's eyes narrowed.

"How did you know?" he asked, his tone low.

"Did you think you could come into this tower and hide such a thing from me? Stupid of you to think that way. I'm older than this forest, boy, and I've seen demons many times before. I could smell him the moment you reappeared in that room of yours."

Astaroth became vigilant.

"Is that why you called me? To take care of the lingering threat?"

"You? A threat? Hardly. No. I called you because I heard your statement, and think I can help. Your methods may be barbaric, but your intentions are noble and come from a good heart. Now sit down, so we can speak like civilized people," Aravelle said, waving his hand, making a sofa appear.

Astaroth looked at it and wondered what kind of help Aravelle could even offer. But he sat down nonetheless.

"What now?"

Chapter 839 Family Issues

Outside New Eden, in Washington DC, USA, someone else was having a similar get-together with someone they didn't want to see.

Sitting at a dinner table in a lavishly decorated living room with plates of bright white ceramic and golden cutlery, Damien Grimm was pushing around a piece of steak on his plate.

Three seats to his right, at the end of the table, a slender older man was eating his steak in silence, not even looking at the young man.

"Dad, I—" Damien started saying

"Ahem," the older man cleared his throat.

"But I—"

"Don't make me repeat myself, son. Eat. We can talk after dinner."

"I'm not hungry," Damien grumbled.

"I don't care. Eat. You are spending so much time in your stupid game that you barely eat solid food anymore. It's probably what has gotten you so weak-minded. Eat, boy."

Damien ground his teeth together, forcibly putting the food in his mouth, although his stomach turned at the thought of swallowing the meat. His appetite had been gone for a while now.

Ever since that dreaded whore of a Pyromancer had stolen his guild.

The thought alone of her face made his heart race with anger. His fists clenched on the utensils as he reluctantly chewed the food in his mouth.

The meal went on, the father eating like a distinguished gentleman while the son stabbed the food with his utensils and chewed aggressively.

Once the meal was done, a butler came in and emptied the table, leaving only the cup of wine before both of them.

"You haven't taken a sip of the wine. At least taste it. Or have your taste buds gone to shit as much as your personality?"

"Tch. That's cheap wine. You serve it to me like it's the best Pinot Noir in town. Old man, I think your taste buds are the ones going to shit," Damien retorted, pushing the cup away.

"You insolent maggot. Do you think that because the price isn't as high as that expensive crap you buy, it's cheap wine? You really inherited that stupid attitude from your mother, haven't you?" the father replied with disdain dripping off his words.

Damien's jaw clenched.

"If you hated her so much, why did you keep me? You could have made this go away at any point, right, 'Mr. Senator.'" Damien spat, giving a hate-filled look to his genitor.

"You think I wanted you? Don't delude yourself, son. If your mother hadn't threatened to tell the public what she did for a living, I wouldn't have given her the time of day. Better yet, I should have checked that damned condom she put on my cock, and I would have dodged a bullet."

"If you hate me so much, why don't you just disinherit me already?!" Damien shouted, slamming his fists on the table.

"Don't shout at me, you son of a whore! You think I wouldn't have if I wanted?! Your mother made my life a living minefield the day she told me she was pregnant, and you just made things worse!

"I only kept you around because you showed promise! And now even that is gone! You worthless son of mine! How did you lose everything I carefully built for you?! Do you have any idea how many favours I pulled to get you those sponsors?! No one wants to work with you in the industry, you little devilish son of a bitch!" his father snapped.

Damien had never in his life wanted to kill him more than now. But the four men at the edges of the room dissuaded him from taking action, their loaded guns evident under their jackets.

"Why did you call me here, Dad? I don't want to see you any more than you do. Tell me what you want so I can return to New York." Damien spat, trying to calm down.

"That's why I called you. You're not going back to New York. Starting tonight, you live here, where I can keep an eye on you, and you're starting therapy tomorrow. I've had enough of cleaning up messes behind you."

"What?! You can't do this to me! I refuse to live anywhere near you! New York was already too close for my tastes! If you had let me, I would have moved to the west coast!" Damien shouted, jumping up from his seat.

The four men jumped forward, their hands slipping into their jackets, as Damien's father blew a fuse.

"SIT THE FUCK DOWN, BOY!"

Damien glared at him defiantly, but obeyed the order. His father would have no scruples asking the four bodyguards to whoop his ass.

Even though he was sure he could take them on, he would rather not go through the trouble that came after.

It was hard to go against a senator, especially one running for president. And that was who was sitting at that table with him.

Although he called him father, Damien felt no love for his genitor—only hatred and detachment.

Taking a deep breath and replacing his tie, his father rose from the table.

"I've already made arrangements. Your stuff is flying in tomorrow, and I fired your attendant. He looked almost pleased when I told him he wasn't needed anymore. I don't blame him. I wouldn't want to stay with an insufferable little shit like you, either.

"But until you've attended therapy and returned to a more socially acceptable attitude, you will live in the guest house. And if you try to leave without telling me, I will have you hunted down like the rabid dog that you are. Understood?"

Damien looked at him, his eyes filling with tears of rage.

"I wish she had killed you all those years back. That knife should have gone into your throat, not your shoulder. The world would be a better place," Damien seethed, looking at his father.

The old man snapped again, this time blowing off the handle completely.

Jumping over the table, he started wailing at his son like he was beating a peasant in a back alley. He only let go when Damien was limp in his grasp.

"You never talk to me in that tone again, you son of a whore. I will have you disappear faster than your mother. Understood?" his father said between clenched teeth.

Damien smiled at him before spitting a mouthful of blood into his face.

"Fuck you..."

That night ended badly for him, and the nurses at the ER were told he was attacked in a dark park when taking a walk. Mugged and beaten for his money.

No one would ever know the truth except the people in that room.

Chapter 840 Looking For The Queen

Meanwhile, inside New Eden, Astaroth was planning out ways to train the populace of Bastion City in safety protocols with Aravelle. The man was old and a fount of knowledge, and he had many good ideas.

Of course, even if he wanted to say yes to all these things, he wouldn't answer without consulting Phoenix. And that was only after he found her and apologized profusely.

"Alright, Aravelle. Thank you for all the ideas. Sounds great. But I have to go and find Phoenix. I can't leave things as they are right now."

Aravelle snickered at him.

"I was wondering when you would realize that. I only kept you from darting after her. She seemed like she needed time. But you should have realized at least an hour ago that she needs you to find her, too."

Astaroth's eye twitched.

"I don't remember asking you to butt into my relationship..."

"Hah. Boy, if I hadn't, you would have made things worse. I may be old and alone, but that doesn't mean I don't know more than you about women. I've been with women for lifetimes. Now go. She left eastward."

Astaroth was about to reply to him with a snarky comment, but he was already back in the throne room's back room.

"Fucking nosey old man..." he grumbled instead.

Astaroth left the room, heading to the palace exit, failing to notice the mirror suddenly showing a middle finger briefly. Once outside, Astaroth oriented himself eastward and was about to call on Morpheus when he paused.

'I still haven't looked at that notification. I'll look at that quickly before leaving.'

He opened his interface, pulling up the notification window, and his face turned to a frown.

Changes detected. System recalibrating race options. 00:49:16

'Huh? What does that even mean?' Astaroth wondered.

But he brushed the notification aside, shrugging. He figured he would find out in about fifty minutes, anyway.

He reached into his mind, going for the tether with Morpheus when he felt a tug on his sleeve.

Looking down, Astaroth saw Luna's worried face.

"Papa... Where is Mama?" Luna asked with a sad face.

Astaroth felt a pinch in his heart as he thought about his earlier actions.

"Mama is... taking a break from leading the kingdom. I'm going to get her now. Want to come?"

Luna nodded her little head, the sadness on her face lingering.

Before he could meld with Morpheus, Luna decided running would be quicker, and she transformed into her stag form, startling the guards not too far to the side.

'Hop up. I'll take us to where she is,' Luna said in his head.

"Do you know where she is?" Astaroth asked, cocking an eyebrow.

'No. But you do,' she replied, huffing and stomping the ground with a hoof.

Astaroth held back a chuckle, hopping onto her back and grabbing the sides of her thick neck. He hung on the best he could, lacking any kind of riding experience for giant deers, and Luna bolted forward.

The speed and acceleration were almost enough to launch him off her back as she almost instantly reached the inner walls. Astaroth had to use mana to anchor himself to her back lest he get flung off.

Leaping over the walls, Luna scared the patrolling soldiers on the walls, who barely saw a streak of white passing over their heads, the wind pushing them close to the edge of the walls.

Luna used mana to form platforms under her hooves, not letting herself land on the busy streets of the outer ring. She pranced over the entire outer city before leaping over the massive outer wall and heading into the thick jungle surrounding Bastion City.

Astaroth wasn't sure how far Phoenix had gone, but he knew how far the forest extended. If she changed direction at any time during her flight, finding her would be like finding a needle in the most enormous haystack in creation.

Luna ran until they reached the edge of the Elven Forest, and they still hadn't found Phoenix. Astaroth looked worried.

While they had run, he sent a message to Phoenix, hoping she would tell him where she was, but the message still showed as unread. And he could see her still connected in his friends list and the guild roster.

He sent her a new one, hoping she'd answer him this time. Or at least read the messages.

**

'Please tell me where you are... I'm worried, and we need to talk. I want to apologize, but not over messaging.'

**

He waited for a few moments, but there was still no answer.

"Is Mama mad at you?" Luna asked him, having returned to her petite Elven form.

Astaroth looked at her with a saddened face.

"Yes... It's my fault. I did something that I shouldn't have to drive a point across, and I think I terrorized her. There's no telling if she'll even want to talk to me now. I wouldn't be surprised if she returned to our world and packed her things to leave..."

Luna looked at him with a disappointed look.

"Is it because of the changes inside you?" she asked, taking his hand in hers.

Astaroth looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"How did... No. Of course you'd find out. Our souls are connected..."

Luna tried smiling at him, but it came across as a grimace more than a smile.

"I'm sure if you apologize sincerely, she'll forgive you."

Astaroth smiled meekly.

"Let's hope that's all it takes. But we still need to find her first," he sighed.

Thinking about it, his only options were to ask her in a party, and hope she accepted, so he could see her on his minimap, or use Geminae's powers to sense her from afar.

Reaching inside him, he still couldn't find Geminae's soul fragment, so he tried a different method.

'Let's hope this works...' he thought, closing his eyes and focusing on Geminae's essence inside his soul.

Immediately as he focused on it, he felt the power surge inside him, as the familiar white wings grew on his back, and his eyes turned golden.

Smiling at the success, Astaroth extended his senses outward in a large area, combing through the forest for Phoenix. He soon locked on her aura and smiled to himself.

As he retracted his senses, getting ready to grab Luna and head toward Phoenix, a crushing presence smashed into him, sending him face-first into the ground.

'What the fuck?!' his mind raced, as he had never felt such a crushing presence.

Even Aravelle's magic aura didn't stomp on him this strongly.

The next moment, a golden beam of light extended from the sky to the ground, and a massive explosion shook the eastern side of the continent of light.

BOOM!