

## **New Eden 891**

### Chapter 891 Ducking Out

"Yeah, oh... Did you think I would investigate something that is already dead?" David asked mockingly.

Alex clicked his tongue at him, throwing a glare his way, but David ignored it, returning to his explanations.

"These shots were taken in the southern part of Alaska just a week ago. There only seem to be sightings of whatever did this, but they are multiplying. I think this monster is quickly getting closer to settlements as he slowly eats his way through the animals in its habitat.

"It's only a question of time before he reaches a human settlement, but I worry more about what would happen if it multiplies. With the possible shatter of the veil, monsters like those could quickly start duplicating. And that would be bad. Like, very bad."

Alex couldn't agree more with David on this one. If the bear was the size he imagined it to be, then it was better dealt with as soon as possible, before it multiplied. However, the other places David mentioned were troublesome.

The situation in Italy was still under control, for now, while the monsters were content with eating vines and crops. But what would happen once they spotted humans and decided to switch diets?

As for the issue in Korea, well, it had already involved a person. How long until law enforcement poked their noses in the wrong spot and it escalated?

The choice was not an easy one to make. They were effectively trying to decide whose lives were more important.

Would they save the rich and sophisticated Italians and their vineyards?

Would they prioritize eradicating a threat to the Koreans on their most touristic island?

Or would they head northwest and save the natives in the frigid colds of the Alaskan forests?

"What are we prioritizing here?" Kary asked.

Both men turned to her, her question unclear.

"Should we prioritize the damage to economies, to the lands, or to the people? Because that is how we can separate these cases," she stated.

"Mind elaborating?" David asked, frowning.

"It's simple, really. If we let the threat in Alaska go for now, then we risk it killing everything in a many-mile radius, with possible human casualties. But the biome it lives in would be utterly destroyed.

"If we go to Italy, it'll be to save the rich folks and their wallets from losing profit, ergo, affecting their economy. But the way I see it, if those birds were interested in humans, they would have already struck at them.

"But the Korean problem is much riskier."

David interrupted her, trying to understand her logic.

"What do you mean, riskier? There is a risk of human casualty in all three places. Why would the one in Korea be higher?"

Kary looked at him with disappointment.

"Think about it. That place is close to a lot of people and is also very tourist-centric. Whatever attacked that man was not alone, and I doubt it'll stop at one person. Even if the local law enforcement doesn't poke their nest, they'll eventually venture out for food.

"What do you think is the closest source when looking at the Korean Peninsula, and the land mass that is Jeju Island? Do you think whatever monster that is will go for the fish in the sea? Or will they target the coastal villages and cities, taking away people to be devoured?"

David finally caught on to her logic.

It wasn't about what damage could be done in the long term. It was about short-term risk.

And the highest short-term risk was the Jeju Island threat.

Alex looked at David's face, where realization was setting in, and he chuckled internally.

"Then I guess that settles it. Korea will be our first stop," Alex said, getting up.

David looked at him, confused.

"Why are you standing? Shouldn't we plan our things while we can?"

Alex huffed.

"Do I look like a planner? If you want to plan, then Kary can help you. I'll be ready to do anything you guys tell me I need to do. But I'm not wasting my precious energy on plans. It's not my forte."

Kary glared at him, realizing he was throwing her at David, hoping to get rid of him.

"We can do this tomorrow, no?" she asked, trying not to sound desperate.

David smiled toothily.

"Nah, I'm already here. Let's get this over with. That way, we can all go back to our things."

While he was saying this, Alex was walking toward the balcony with a smile on his lips.

"Alex, why don't you stay and help?" Kary asked him, almost begging.

"What use is he going to have?" David mocked.

"David's right," Alex said with a smirk.

"Planning is your specialty. Mine is punching. So I'll head out and go do just that. I love you, and I'll be back before dinner!" Alex said before taking his last steps faster and jumping off the balcony.

"Wait... aaaaand he's gone..." Kary mumbled, her face scrunching up.

"Well then, let's get to it!" David exclaimed, holding in his laughter.

He knew very well what Alex had just done. But it wasn't his problem.

He wouldn't put in a good word for him, or defend his actions. Hell, he might even make sure to piss Kary off as much as he could without getting burned to have him pay the price later.

But first, they should focus on hashing out details.

While they started on this, with much arguing involved, Alex had flown away toward the suburbs of Laval, where he had detected another awakened a few days prior.

He wanted to start checking the signatures of mana he had detected to make sure there wouldn't be problems in the near future. With him, Kary, and David gone from Montreal, who would be there to stop them from acting out?

Violette would most likely follow them, and he was almost certain Jonathan would, too. So, that left only the weaker awakened people that Jack and Robert were training.

And they were wholly underwhelming in power or versatility.

Alex flew as high as he could without freezing and expanded his senses to the ground, trying to keep them at a minimum so he wouldn't tip off whoever or whatever he found. And it didn't take him long.

"A person. That's a good start," Alex mumbled as he tried to focus on that person.

His senses sharpened as he started making out details, and suddenly, the person's head snapped upward in his direction.

Alex had a mini heart attack, as he was discovered with so much ease.

Then, a voice reached his ears, as his senses were still razor sharp.

"I can feel you staring at me. Why don't you come down, and we can talk like people instead of making me feel like prey?" the voice whispered.

Alex sighed as he realized there was no mistake. He'd been made.

Diving head first, Alex picked up speed at an insane pace, until he had almost reached the ground. He was headed directly into the backyard of a small home in the suburbs of St-Francois.

Just before hitting the ground, he quickly opened his wings to stop his descent and landed roughly, digging slightly into the grassy backyard.

When he folded his wings into himself, he noticed that there was more than one person in the backyard, and almost all of them were staring at him with wide eyes.

"Uh... Hello... I guess?" Alex stuttered, realizing his mistake.

He'd been so focused on the traces of mana that he failed to sense the other life forces around his target. Now, four people, his target included, had just seen a person land in their backyard from god knows how high, with angel wings on his back.

'Shit... ' he thought, thinking this would make the news, and Kary would tear him apart.

And that was only if Jack didn't get to him first.

"Dad, is that an angel?!" a little boy asked, looking at Alex with wide eyes and a gawking expression.

"No, son. He's a superhero. Like daddy!" the man responded, smiling at his son.

"Honey, take the kids inside, please. He and I have to discuss a... sensitive subject," he added, looking at his wife.

Meanwhile, the wife in question was still looking at Alex, her eyes wide, but her body language was screaming panic.

The last person looking at Alex was a teenage girl, who looked at him with eyes that Kary would want to rip out—eyes of fawning.

When the man saw his wife wasn't reacting, he cleared his throat loudly.

"Ahem! Sarah, get the kids inside. Please."

That was when his wife finally moved out of her stupor.

"Yes... Kids, let's go inside. Let the superheroes talk in private."

"I want to hear!" the little boy shouted, his eyes filled with excitement.

"I'm fine outside, too," the daughter said, smiling sheepishly at Alex.

Alex felt weird about getting hit on by a teen, so he didn't look at her.

Alex started detecting movement under his feet, and his gaze sharpened.

"Maybe we should talk, before you do something you might regret?" he asked, his tone severe.

"Once my kids are inside, I'll decide whether there is regret to be had. For now, keep your mouth shut."

'This is off to a poor start,'

## Chapter 892 A Dangerous Misunderstanding

Alex slowly raised his hands as a sign to prove his non-hostility and waited for the woman to gather her two kids before ushering them inside the house. This action alone already seemed to relieve the man before him, who seemed less tense, but still glared at him.

Vines were starting to break ground under Alexander's feet, and he could feel them slowly climbing up his shoes as they aimed for his ankles.

Once the kids were inside, the vines quickly wrapped around his feet and clamped on him hard. Hard enough that Alex winced as they wrinkled his jeans into his skin.

"Now start talking. Or it gets really ugly, really fast," the man said, putting on a menacing face.

Alex looked at him, his gaze icy.

"Get rid of the snaring vines. I don't react well to threats."

The man looked at him, and his eyes narrowed.

"Yeah? Well, I don't either. You come here, land in my yard, in front of my children. Did you think that I would panic because you know where I live? You're not going to leave here alive if you think taking my kids hostage is the way to get to me. Now, talk!"

Alex frowned.

"You misunderstand my intentions, man. I had no intention of mixing anyone in this. I was just so focused on your mana signature that I didn't even sense your family. If I had, I would have rang the doorbell, like a normal person."

It was the man's turn to frown.

"You're not one of his men?"

"Whose men?" Alex asked, now confused.

The man fell into contemplation, as he mumbled to himself. But Alex's sharp hearing deciphered every word out of his mouth, and his frown deepened.

"If he's not with him, then who sent him? It's been nearly a week since the last one was sent. No. I can't believe him. He has to be lying to get my guard down..."

'Someone is pressuring this man. But who would be stupid enough for that? He seems like a strong druid, at least on this side,' Alex thought, gazing at the vines at his ankles.

He could have broken free at any moment, as they were much too flimsy to hold him down, but they were not weak by any other measure.

And, with his powerful mana-sensing capabilities, Alex could tell there were many more where they came from. The entirety of this plot of land was a rolling, coiling mess of vines, ten feet underground.

"Listen, man. Let's start over," Alex said, trying to defuse the situation.

The man turned his head to him, still wary.

"Why don't we start with proper introductions? My name is Alexander. Alexander Leduc. What is yours?" he asked, his hands still up.

The man before him narrowed his eyes at him.

"Playing coy with me is a waste of time, Mr. Leduc. I'm not going to go work for him. Go back to your boss and tell him to give up before I barge into his restaurant and transform it into a miniature jungle."

Alex looked at him with a dumbfounded look.

"Restaurant? Boss? Listen..." Alex started saying, stopping as he waited to get a name.

With a sigh, the man finally gave up and stated his name.

"Randall. Randall West. But you knew that already, if you found my house," he said, in an annoyed tone.

"Pleasure to meet you, Randall. But you are mistaken. I found you through your mana. I knew nothing about you other than there was a mana signature in the area. I detected it about three days ago, when I flew home from up north," Alex explained, trying to get him to calm down.

"I don't believe you!" the man shouted, becoming agitated.

Alex was about to get angry at the man's hardheadedness, but his senses suddenly picked up a new signature only a dozen meters away, and his gaze became icy again, especially since he could sense the bloodlust in this mana signature.

"Randall, someone is at your door, and he's not here for a friendly visit'. Alex tried to warn him.

But Randall took it as a threat instead.

"Do you think I'll take my eyes off you just because you say you're not alone? I'll take care of him after I deal with you," Randall growled, raising his left hand.

"I came alone, Randall. This man isn't with me," Alex said, feeling the vines grow on him and climb up his body.

In a matter of seconds, the vines were up to his neck, and still coming up.

"You'll suffocate in there while I deal with your partner, and no one will find your remains. You'll fertilize my plants for the act of threatening me and my family." The man said, his face neutral.

'The protectiveness of a father is really nothing to scoff at,' Alex thought as a slim smirk popped on his now-covered lips.

He kept his mana senses on, his vision already impeded by the coiling vines, to see what was going on, and barely heard anything other than the vines wrapping around him.

He could feel the vines trying to dig into him, but Alex had already covered his body in a hard shell of mana, preventing anything from going through his skin.

'He wasn't kidding. These vines were ordered to consume me. Decisive. I like it,' Alex thought, keeping track of the situation in the house.

'But he's got the wrong guy. The threat is already inside.'

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Inside the house, only a few moments before Alex got covered in vines, Randall's wife had heard a knock at the door. She wanted to watch what happened in her backyard, but she couldn't ignore the ones at the door, or their semblance of normality would crumble.

So she walked to the door, pulling it open with a wide smile. A smile which instantly dropped, when a hand suddenly latched to her throat, clamping down on it like the jaws of death themselves.

The man choking her walked into the house with his arm extended; the woman wriggling in his grasp, as he looked at her with a grin. His burly figure almost blotted out the sun as his body crossed the threshold of the door, taking nearly the entirety of the door frame.

"Look at you, so frail and small. I could snap your neck like a twig. Tell me where Randall is, and no one gets hurt. Well, no more than now, at least," the man said with a creepy grin.

He then slapped the woman across the face with his other hand, letting her go at the same time, as she was sent practically flying from the force of the strike.

She fell to the ground, coughing and wheezing, as she tried to catch her breath, and the man knelt next to her.

"Tell me where he is," he asked again.

"Leave my mom alone, you meanie!" her son shouted, running at the burly man.

The man looked at the kid run at him, and his grin widened.

As the kid reached him, his hand sprung out like a snake, grabbing onto the kid's clothes and lifting him up as he rose to his feet. He licked his lips in delight.

"It's been years since I last offed a kid. Ah, the ecstasy I felt that day. Are you going to let me relive that, little guy?" he asked the kid, as the child paled.

"Please, let my son go! I'll tell you where Randall is!" the mother jumped to her feet.

But a backhand met her face, sending her tumbling to the floor again.

"Shut up, bitch! I'm talking to the kid!" he glared at her.

"Cynthia!" Randall shouted, as he entered through the back door, seeing his wife get smacked to the ground.

That's when he noticed the man holding his son. He was about to call on his house plants to attack him when the man suddenly twitched.

And in that simple breath of time, a knife had been pulled out, and it now rested on the child's throat.

"Tsk tsk tsk. One wrong move, and I send your son to the afterlife. We've been looking for you, Randall," the man said, licking his lips again.

Randall was in a state of panic.

"My dad is a superhero. He'll kick your butt," the kid whimpered, as the knife pressed against his throat.

He was unafraid because he thought his father would save him. But the reality was rather far from this.

His father knew very well that his magic took time to work, and he would never act quick enough to save his son if he did.

"Let my son go. I already disabled your partner in the back. This can still end with everyone keeping their lives," Randall said, trying to have him let down his son.

The burly man frowned.

"In the back? What are you talking about?" he asked, confused.

But those were the last words out of his mouth, as his head suddenly snapped a hundred and eighty degrees with a horrible crunch, and he ended up face to face with the incarnation of evil itself.

"One down, one to go," Alex said coldly, as the man crumbled to the ground, dead.

## Chapter 893 Done Before It Began

The kid fell to the ground, Alex catching the knife before it could hit the floor. Then, looking over Randall's shoulder, he saw a shadow move strangely on the wall.

Alex didn't hesitate, throwing the knife, which nicked Randall's cheek as it flew past his face, and stabbed into the shadow's shoulder, as a groan echoed from it.

Melting out of the shadow, dragging with it the knife, came a man dressed in all-black clothes, practically looking like a hipster.

The man was young, maybe around Alexander's age, and he glared at Alex. But his glare quickly changed into a look of disgust.

"I thought I was creepy, crawling through the shadows. At least I don't look like that..." he said, pointing at Alex.

And it wasn't without reason.

Everyone else in the house had now noticed Alex's appearance, and fear was growing in them.

Alex looked at them and grinned.

"What? Never seen a demon before? Better get used to it," he mocked.

He had turned into his demonized form, his skin red and horns jutting out of his head to maximize his physical abilities.

That's when Randall realized the resemblance with the man he had wrapped up in his backyard; turning to look at the backyard, all he could see were pieces of vines like his cocoon had exploded from within.

He then realized Alex had attacked another man in his house, which he hadn't known was even in there. His mind slowly caught up with the situation.

Alex pulled back on Randall, putting him behind himself, knowing full well the man was here for him.

This surprised Randall, as he almost jumped out of his skin instinctively, when the demonic being pulled on him.

"I told you I wasn't your enemy. But I can't say the same for him. I'll handle him. Stand back," Alex ordered, taking a step toward the young man who had pulled out the dagger from his shoulder.

Seeing he was at a disadvantage, the young assassin tried turning to grab the teenage girl who was closest to him, hoping to get out of this situation. However, as he stepped toward her, she disappeared from his sight.

'Huh?' he wondered, looking back toward the mother.

Then, she disappeared, too.

'What the fuck is going on?' the young man wondered.

"You should keep your eyes on me," a voice whispered in his ear.

He never even realized the man before him had slipped next to him, let alone saw him move to get the people to safety, when he started flying toward the open door.

Alex had to move extremely fast, so the teen and wife wouldn't try to get away from him, just to keep them away from the assassin. But he did so with ease, given his body's capabilities.

When he was done removing them from immediate threat, he stepped next to the young man, who was still wreathed in shadows, and whispered a warning in his ear.

Then he shoved him toward the open door so hard, the young man flew off like a cannonball.



But before he could even crash into the street's pavement, Alex was already over him, flipping in the air and striking down with an axe kick.

The fight was over before it started, as the young assassin smacked into the asphalt and dug into the ground several inches, his back broken, and his mind fading to nothing.

The fight was done before it even began.

Alex made sure not to kill him, but that didn't mean he went easy on him. By the angle of his spine when he kicked him, Alex knew this young man would never walk again.

And that was if he survived the next few days.

Jack would want to get his hands on him, given he had tried to kill another awakened player.

Thinking about how he would be away from Montreal soon enough, Alex realized the urgency of gathering the awakened people around Jack, who could at least try to organize them and protect them.

But, at this moment, he needed to focus on the prying eyes of the neighbours, who suddenly saw a man with red skin kick another man with a wriggling shadow many inches into the solid pavement.

He rushed back into Randall's house, turning back into a human, and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Listen to me. I know you don't trust me. But we can't stay here. Grab the essentials, and your family, and come with me. I'll arrange transportation."

Randall just looked at him, eyes wide at what he had just seen, and nodded.

'He could have killed me instantly if he wanted to...' was the only thought bouncing around in Randall's head, right now.

"Hey! Snap out of it, man!" Alex barked, shaking him a little.

"Huh... Ah, yes... I'll pack a bag..." he muttered.

Alex clicked his tongue, realizing the man was out of it.

He turned toward his wife.

"Cynthia, was it?"

She nodded, keeping her lips sealed.

"Please get bags for you and your children. We are leaving as soon as my transport gets here. There won't be any dawdling. And get your husband back in control of his mind. He's useless if he can't even think for himself."

Cynthia nodded curtly, jumping to her feet.

"Come on, Daniel. Let's go pack you a bag. Annie, you go pack yours."

The teenage girl sat there momentarily, shocked at what she had witnessed. One moment, a stunningly beautiful man lands in their backyard, and the next, intruders barge into their home.

Then, the gorgeous young man turns into this abominable red-skinned demon that she would most likely never forget, and now he is back to normal.

Her mind was still reeling.

"Hey! Snap out of it, girl!" Alex barked, snapping his fingers in front of her face.

Being called girl brought her back to normal, as she frowned at him.

"Uh, rude... I have a name..." she complained.

Alex shrugged.

"I don't give a shit. Pack a bag. When the transport gets here, we are leaving with what you have on you," Alex said, his face stoic.

The girl huffed before leaving for her room. She was offended by the man's words, and suddenly, his previous lustre was gone.

Alex quickly texted Mr. Gu, who he knew would be the quickest to respond.

'SOS my position. Been made. Need transport for four adults, one gravely injured, and two kids ASAP.'

And as he had expected, the reply came in moments.

'I'll make arrangements. Do you need muscle?'

Alex snickered to himself as he responded.

'I need cleaners for a dead body, but not muscle. It's been dealt with.'

'On it.'

After this exchange, Alex stood still, in the middle of the house, and closed his eyes.

He needed to do a full sweep of his surroundings, in case another threat was nearby.

He extended his mana senses in a bubble around him and soon covered the entire neighbourhood with them. This time, he was less focused on one signature, and took time to include every living being in his search.

It caught even birds, rodents, and insects, but he would rather see everything than miss something.

Once he saw every living thing in a mile radius around him, he honed into anything that had mana traces, and two more traces appeared. They were slowly driving away, about a quarter of a mile north.

His eyes snapped open, and his face became icy.

Cynthia was just passing through the kitchen, trying to grab something from the fridge, when she saw his face, and a shiver ran up her spine.

He looked at her and said, "There are two more not too far away. I'm going after them. I'll be right back. Don't leave the house."

She nodded, her mind flashing to images of him with red skin, and she shivered again.

But when he ran out the door, enormous white wings unfolded on his back, and he jumped into the sky, disappearing from her sight.

"What on earth is he?" she mumbled, her mind unable to comprehend what she was seeing.

But she snapped herself out of it as she remembered the young man's words. She needed to pack a bag and quickly.

In the meantime, Alex flew over the neighbourhood, uncaring that people were seeing him, as he tracked down the vehicle with the two presences he had felt.

He quickly spotted a black sedan about to embark on the highway, which looked out of place, given its make and model for a neighbourhood like this one, and he grinned.

"Found you."

Now that it was surrounded by other vehicles and people, he couldn't go after it, but he still wasn't giving up finding out who they were.

Focusing, Alex stopped his flight, and pulled his hands together, like he was drawing a bow.

As he looked at the car, a condensed form of mana appeared in his hands.

"I may not be able to take care of you now, but you'll never escape me," Alex said, grinning, as he released an arrow of condensed mana and wind.

The arrow zipped through the air, hitting the trunk of the car and disappearing. But Alex could see the car like a beacon in his senses now.

He had marked it with his mana. There was no escaping him, indeed.

But it was a matter for later. For now, he still needed to get that family to safety.

"I'll come for you, whoever you are," he smirked.

#### Chapter 894 Meddling Man

Flying back toward Randall's house, Alex noticed some people gathering around the unconscious body he left in the street. One man was even taking his pulse.

"Meddlesome neighbourhoods are the worst..." he mumbled.

Landing a bit away from them at the corner of the street, he made his way there on foot. And as he arrived, he heard something that he didn't want to.

"I think he's still alive! Someone call an ambulance!"

Alex walked faster, pushing his way through the crowd of people gathering, and stepped in front of a person who seemed to be on the phone.

"Hang up."

"Huh?" the person looked at him, confused.

"I said hang up. That trash doesn't deserve an ambulance."

The man turned around to ignore him, but Alex would not let him.

Grabbing the earpiece out of the man's ear, he crushed it in his hand, looking the man in the eye.

"I wasn't asking," he growled.

The man yelped in fear as he felt like he was suddenly in front of a wild beast.

Turning back toward the man on the ground, trying to check on the assassin's body, Alex stepped up to him.

"Enough. Let this matter go, sir. He got what he deserved, and he won't be an eyesore for much longer," Alex said, grabbing the assassin's collar.

"Hey! What are you doing?! You could hurt him more!" the man said, grabbing Alexander's wrist to stop him from moving the injured man.

Alex turned toward him, glaring at him.

"Let go of my wrist," he growled.

"You let go of that injured young man! You're going to hurt him. Let the ambulance take care of him!" the man insisted.

Alex dropped the assassin's collar and slinked up close to the man's personal space.

"I said let go of my wrist. Unless you want me to break every bone in your body? Is that what this is?"

The man withheld his gaze, seemingly unfazed.

"Kid, I've been part of the JTF2 for longer than you've been allowed to drive. Threats don't work on me. And I sure as hell don't think you can put to practice your threats, either," the man responded, his face hardening.

He still hadn't let go of Alex's wrist, and Alex was about done with this charade.

He was about to tear into him when the sounds of engines roared around the corner, heading their way like raging bulls.

As they pulled up the street, two suburban vehicles and one armoured transport, Alex spat on the ground.

"Saved by the bell..." he grumbled.

A team of heavily equipped mercenaries unloaded from the armoured vehicle, and seeing the guns in their hands, the civilians immediately scattered to the four winds, most of them screaming in panic.

But the big man was still holding Alex's wrist.

Alex recognized the man heading the team and almost laughed to himself.

'He can use mana, and still uses those ridiculous toys. Old habits die hard, I guess...'

The mercenary jogged his way to Alex, pointing his gun at the man.

"Let go of the kid, sir. This can only go one of two ways—wait... Sergeant Burks?! The hell are you doing here?!" the man said, halting his steps and lowering his gun.

"Lemmings?" the man said, looking surprised.

"I thought you had joined a paramilitary organization? What are you doing in this neighbourhood?" he asked, still holding Alex's wrist.

Alex tried pulling away, annoyed at the situation, but the man held tight. He could have yanked his hand away, of course, with the man unable to do anything about it.

But he was scared that if the man squeezed any tighter, he would rip his arm off with it. So, instead, he glared at the mercenary.

"Get him off of me, or I'll tear him into a hundred different pieces and scatter him over the Atlantic..."

The Merc shook his head, getting back into business mode.

His gun rose back at chest level but was not directly aimed at the sergeant.

"I'm sorry, sarge. But you'll have to let go of the kid. I'll also need you to step away from the injured one. He's ours now," the merc reluctantly asked.

Sighing, the Sergeant released Alex's wrist and shook his head.

"You're lucky he saved you, kid. I think you deserved a thrashing to learn respect."

But the merc chuckled at his comment.

"With all due respect, sir. I'm not saving him. I'm saving you. He is more than willing and capable of executing his threat. And I don't want to have to walk to your mother's door to tell her you died, and that there is no body to recover. You understand, right?"

The JTF2 officer looked at the merc, his face turning to a frown, before he looked at Alex again.

"This scrawny thing? Tear me into pieces? You have got to be kidding."

Alex smirked at him.

Something told him the man wouldn't give up easily, so he was already trying to find something in the neighbourhood, his senses honing on the man's essence. He grinned when he found it.

"I'll be right back, merc. Make sure the assassin stays unconscious. He has a strange ability and would easily escape if he woke up. As for the family, they are terrified. Have someone explain what's going on."

"Kid, I was ordered to bring you back as well. You need to come with me."

Alex turned his head toward him, his face glacial.

"I said I was coming back. I only need a few seconds to fix a future issue."

Alex didn't wait for him to reply before dashing off at a speed that was far from human, making even the JTF2 officer wonder what the hell was happening.

He'd been jogging down the street when he found the people amassing around someone on the ground. He hadn't seen what had happened.

If anyone were to tell him the kid had been ingrained into the pavement with an axe kick, from a being with red skin, he'd think they were crazy. But seeing Alex run away, he suddenly felt like something abnormal was happening.

Looking at the mercenaries grabbing a family out of their home, his frown deepened.

"Tell what's happening, Lemmings. You owe me that much."

The merc looked at him, downtrodden.

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't. It's classified. You know how it is."

The Sergeant looked at him, unsure whether this was a lie, or if he had uncovered a secret that he shouldn't be aware of. But his special ops training was egging him to discover what this was about.

"You know I'll find out, Lemmings. Why don't you save us both some trouble?"

The merc looked at him and chuckled.

"I'm sure you'll try. But it won't be that easy. In any case, I have to go. It was good seeing you again, sir. I only wish it had been under better circumstances..."

"Let's go," Alex said, reappearing next to the JTF2 officer.

"Oh, and one last thing," he added, turning to the Sergeant.

"You said you were JTF2. I assume that means you are in the military, with special training. I just want to give you one warning. Don't put your nose where it doesn't belong. You risk losing it, along with the rest of your head."

The man was about to step forward to intimidate this cocky half-portion of a man when another merc came in and interrupted them.

"Everyone's been loaded, sir! We are ready to leave!"

"Alright. You heard the man! Everybody back in their truck, we're leaving!"

Turning to the officer, he added one more bit.

"Please don't try to follow us. I was ordered to dispatch tails. I don't want to be the one to do you in..."

"He won't," Alex said, walking to the armoured vehicle.

But he stopped after two steps, barely turning his head to speak to the officer.

"I've marked you. If I ever sense your presence near me, or near where we are going, no one will ever find your corpse," he threatened.

Alex then resumed his walk toward the armoured truck and climbed in the back, locking his eyes on the still-unconscious assassin.

The merc shook his head, annoyed that Alex felt the need to threaten him, but he understood. There were things the public still didn't need to know. Technically, even if he was part of the JTF2, Sergeant Burks was a civilian.

He wasn't part of their need-to-know list.

Climbing aboard one of the SUVs, the merc signalled everyone to start moving.

The vehicles turned around, leaving from where they had arrived, the SUVs filing in front and behind the armoured truck, like an escort, as they disappeared from the neighbourhood.

The Sergeant waited for them to turn the corner before sprinting back towards his home.

'Like hell, I won't follow, kid. That's like asking a buzzard not to eat a carcass it finds.'

But when he got home and went to hop into his car, he noticed the slashed tires.

"Is that what you went to do? Pathetic. Like that would stop me from going after you," the man said, heading directly toward his garage.

But as he passed the front of his car, he halted abruptly, and his jaw dropped.

The hood was gone, apparently ripped off the hinges, and there was a hole in his engine block. Looking closely, the man couldn't understand what would have done this, as it was no bigger than four inches wide.

Then he remembered a detail he had spotted on the kid when he returned.

A few drops of black liquid were on his shirt.

'Did he punch a hole into my engine block? That's not possible...'

Chapter 895 A New Power In Town

In the meantime, Alex was grinning to himself, imagining the man's reaction when he found out what he had done.

'I wonder what silly scenario his mind will try telling itself as his mind fails to understand how I pierced his engine bloc. He'll probably try imagining a new kind of weapon. Something top-secret. Heh he.'

Of course, it was nothing so elaborate. Alexander really had just punched a hole into the engine block.

Considering the power and speed he could attain using his demon form's strength, it was pretty easy.

The mercenaries in the back of the armoured truck with him couldn't help but feel weirded out by his wide grin. He almost looked like a maniac, imagining his next evil ploy.

Alexander eventually refocused on the situation at hand.

He was annoyed that he now had to head to Jack's compound, and the man would assuredly ask for a debrief on what happened, and what led to Alex calling him. It was a massive waste of time.

But he could hardly deny the old man this courtesy after calling in for his help. It was the least he could do.

But it put a massive setback on his plans to check out all the mana signatures he could find in the immediate region.

He had initially thought this would be a breeze. He would simply drop by each one of their homes and quickly explain that there was a place where they could go to get checked out and registered.

He had already planned on dumping them all on Jack's plate and making them his problem while he was gone. But now he would have to loop Jack into his plan before leaving, and there was a chance the old man would refuse.

"Why does everything always go sideways?" he muttered.

"Huh?" the mercenary to his left asked, turning to look at him.

Alex looked at him, realizing he had said that out loud, and shook his head.

"Nothing. Talking to myself. Keep your eyes on him," Alex said, pointing at the still-unconscious young man.

Alex could tell the man wasn't about to wake up anytime soon, but it was better to stay vigilant than get caught with their pants down.

The ride was brief, as the trucks practically plowed their way through traffic, with emergency vehicle lights turned on when needed, to get cars to move out of their way. Alex wondered how Jack had gotten permission to use those, but he hardly cared.

They arrived at the compound in less than ten minutes. Alex felt the trucks descend into the underground parking lot and felt like passing through jello as they crossed into the shielded area.

When the vehicles came to a stop and the doors to the armoured truck opened, Alex jumped out first, falling face-to-face with an angry old man.

"Young man, what do you think you are doing? Going around and pulling awakened people out of hiding... Are you trying to spook them? What was your big plan? Alert them all to our presence and dump them onto my lap?" Jack growled, arms crossed behind his back.

"Uh... Something like that?" Alex replied, scratching the back of his head.

'Hah... Caught red-handed...'

Jack sighed, angry that Alex had tried to do something stupid without first asking him.

"We already had a plan to get the awakened people to contact us, Alexander. You might have just scared them away... Would it hurt you to ask other's opinions before doing some dumb shit sometimes?" Jack admonished him, as he rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"Sorry, I guess? Listen, I was just trying to save us some time. Since David, Kary, and I are leaving soon, you will lose most of your leverage. Violette will come, too, and I'm sure your grandson will want to join in. Who will be left that will be strong enough to keep these people in check?" Alex asked, trying to justify himself.

Jack shook his head disappointingly.

"Jonathan will not be accompanying you around the world. I've already talked him out of it. As for strength, I think you underestimate the progress the others had in your absence.

"I may not be as strong as you, but I sure as hell can kick most of these people's asses to the curb. How about you have faith in your partners and allies, huh?" Jack said, looking at him with expectation.

Alex shrugged.

"It's not that I don't trust that you've become stronger, Jack. Or anyone else, for that matter. But that is the problem in itself. If everyone has progressed even fifty percent as fast as you did, how do you expect to catch them?

"Soon enough, with the game no longer accessible, the rotten apples will start acting out in the real world. What will you do if they haven't been rooted out by then? You want to appear as the face of



good. But what will you do when forced into a corner and someone needs to die to save many others?"

Jack looked at Alex with narrowed eyes.

The young man wasn't wrong. He had already imagined this worst-case scenario.

Many times, actually.

But that didn't detract from his point, either.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there, won't we? Why are you trying to rush things ahead of time? How little faith do you have in humanity that you assume there will be more rotten apples than good ones?" Jack asked him.

Alex huffed.

"Have you watched the news in the last decade? I refuse to believe you are naïve enough to think humanity is good. Not you."

Jack sighed.

"You are right. I know that humanity has a poor track record of finding itself in power so suddenly. But I also refuse to believe that everyone is fundamentally bad. Shouldn't we keep hope in a situation that all but spells disaster?"

Alex shook his head no.

"I don't believe we should. I may sound pessimistic when I say this, but I think we should assume everyone is a threat until proven otherwise. In the long run, it will save lives..."

Jack stared at him for a while, trying to understand where this heavy mind came from. Alex had been much more positive before his incident. What had caused him to see the bad in people first?

Why would he go from being a person who wanted to see the good in everyone to a person who assumed the bad would take hold first?

But it wasn't a question for the now.

"We'll have this discussion later, in a more... private environment. For now, how about you tell me about these people you are bringing me?" Jack asked, looking at the family disembarking the two SUVs.

"Sure, let's do that," Alex said, shrugging.

"Randall West, his wife Claire, his daughter Annie, and his son Daniel. I know Randall is awakened, and the others are still regular people. I also know that Randall is most likely a druid, and a powerful one at that.

"I was going to scout them out, and maybe take him in, when two other awakened people attacked him. I killed one of them before he could hurt the child, but I managed to take the second one alive," Alex explained.

Jack looked at the young man being unloaded on a stretcher, his back curved inward, and he frowned.

"Only barely alive, I see. Restraint isn't your strong suit. You should assume that even if they are awakened, people can't take full power strikes from you. Because they can't..." Jack admonished.

"Eh, whatever. He was trying to kill them, and I chose not to go easy on him. His life or theirs kind of deal. But, regardless, I think he has info on his boss."

Jack's eyebrow raised.

"Boss? You don't think he was working for himself?"

"Hell no. I know for a fact he wasn't alone, either. As I apprehended him, I spotted two other awakened people leaving the area. I marked their car so I could find them later. But I can assure you he didn't work alone, especially not after what Randall told me when I tried talking to him. Someone was after him and his powers."

Jack frowned.

'Is there another person trying to amass awakened people? Who the hell would know to do this?' he mused.

"In any case, you should put him in a mana-locking cell and interrogate him. I don't know how well the cell will work on him, but I do know it has to be done. If I'm right, another power has made its way into town, and they are hidden from us—from me, even."

This was a worrying declaration. If Montreal suddenly became a turf war for two different powers amassing awakened people, there would assuredly be casualties.

And that was the last thing Jack wanted to see. Innocents dying for something they wouldn't even understand...

"Alright, I'll get to it. But Alex. Don't go hunting until we know more. I don't want you to kick a hornet's nest inadvertently. Think of the civilians, please," Jack pleaded.

Alex sighed, but nodded.

"Fine. But hurry up and find out who he's working for. Because I'm sure it won't be the last we see of them."

Chapter 896 A True Oracle

While Alex and Jack were having their discussion, another one was happening in a place not too far from them.

Across the island of Montreal, on the southern shore of its metropolitan region, in the burg of Candiac, a car was pulling up to a cozy manor-style house.

As they pulled into the driveway, getting checked by the guard at the large iron gate, the car was cleared to proceed and drove the few hundred meters to the house.

As they exited the car, a person awaited them on the steps to the front door.

"I thought I told you to bring back the druid, Angelo, Sergio. Where is my druid?" a tall woman asked them.

"Someone strong beat us to him, boss. He took out Ronny and Francesco in seconds. I never saw someone move that fast. We pulled away before he made us so he wouldn't know who called the shots. But we lost two men," the fatter one of the two said.

The woman looked at the two men, and then at the car.

"Did you make sure they were dead?" she asked, calmly walking down the steps.

"Pardon?" the same guy asked.

"Did you make sure our men were dead?" she reiterated.

"Boss... Ronny's head spun a hundred and eighty degrees, and Francesco's back bent backward, almost folding in two. They are dead..." the other man replied, his face like stone.

"But did you make sure they were dead?" the woman asked, her tone hardening as she slid her hand across the car, stopping at the trunk.

Her eyes narrowed as she stopped upon a specific spot, and she clicked her tongue.

"If one of them is still alive, the man who did this will assuredly find a way to make them talk. If you left a loose end, they might pull that thread back to us and make us out. That is, if that option is still even required..."

"Excuse me, Ma'am? What do you mean... We weren't followed; I made sure of it," the fat guy said, becoming nervous.

The matron of the Rossi family was not known for her pleasant side. She was cold, calculating, and ruthless.

If he had fucked up, things wouldn't turn out well for him.

Sliding her hand off the trunk, the woman turned her eyes northward as they clouded over white.

"Alexander Leduc, or rather, Astaroth. You are a dangerous man, if you can even be called that anymore. I had hoped to get your attention eventually, but not like this..." she sighed, her eyes returning to normal.

With a snap of her fingers, two men walked to her.

"Get rid of these buffoons. They compromised our position."

"Yes, Ma'am!" the men said, turning to the two goons.

"Wait! We did everyone right! How did we compromise the position?!" they panicked.

The woman barely looked at them as they were brought away, fighting back, before they got hit on the nape with gunstocks.

As the woman walked back inside the mansion, another appeared beside her.

"I went to check the location, Ma'am. There were no more traces of our men. A clean-up crew had already cleared the premises. But the indent on the pavement in front of the house left no doubt about who made it. This man is dangerous. Are we sure we want to contact him?" the second in command, Maria asked.

Amara sighed tiredly.

"I don't have a choice. Those two idiots that came back were marked. The car bore a clear mark of mana on the trunk. And I can't get it off. It's too strong and pure. He'll come find us if we don't find him first."

Maria frowned.

"Shouldn't I deal with him now if he's a threat? We know where he lives. I could take his woman hostage and force him to fight me. Surely, I would win in a contest of speed."

Amara stopped walking and slid her hand on her second-in-command's face.

"Oh, my sweet love, Maria. You wouldn't last ten seconds in a fight against him. Please don't be rash. I don't want to bury you yet. His girlfriend would probably burn you to cinders before you even made it to calling him. They are not to be trifled with."

The woman smiled lightly as the hand caressed her cheek, but she frowned at the words.

"They can't possibly be that much stronger than us, right? That wouldn't make sense. Unless they started assimilating mana sooner than us, no one should be stronger."

Amara stopped caressing her cheek and shook her head disappointingly.

"We were never the first ones to discover the mana on Earth, my dear Maria," she said, as she resumed walking toward the back of the mansion.

She walked out the back door into a marvellous garden, where flowers of all kinds were in bloom, wafting a marvellous scent everywhere.

"Mr. Leduc, Mrs. Deveille, Mr. Magnus. I all saw them in a vision of mine, when I first started looking into time. They will be at the forefront of our battle against evil," she said, sliding her hand on the flowers nearest her.

"This joke of a mafia is only a means to an end. Once we reach out to whom we need to, I do not intend to stay. They will only weigh us down in the future. They will want to know how we became stronger so fast. But we can't tell them," she added, balling her fist.

"People like them would only do evil with that kind of power. And evil will already be aplenty. No. We joined the table only to access their power and wealth. Once we have attained our goals, they become loose ends, just like those two buffoons."

Maria followed her quietly, taking every word she said like gospel, as if she were a lost lamb.

"If we can reach the good graces of someone like Alexander Leduc, we can achieve much greater things than on our own," she said, stopping under a lovely wooden pergola.

The flowers falling on each side acted like lovely scented curtains, hiding them from the rest of the world.

Amara sat down at a small round table, where a tea set was lying in wait.

"Sit. Have a cup with me. It's been so long, my love," she said, looking at her second-in-command.

Maria's traits softened, and she took a seat.

"It has, hasn't it? We were so busy carving our place in the cruel world that we lost the time to enjoy the small things..." she said, a melancholic smile adorning her face.

"You won't need to go after Astaroth. He will come to us. Take the car the two morons drove back here, and set it in the middle of our roundabout, in plain sight. Let him know we know. But, later. For now, let us enjoy bliss and silence. Together. For old times' sake."

Maria nodded, keeping her mouth shut, before pouring them each a cup of tea.

She took a sip, and the soothing flavour calmed her.

It had been a while since they enjoyed peace and quiet, ever since Amara had discovered what was to come.

Maria had been so lost about what to do the first time Amara had a vision.

The absolute horror that Amara had seen had sent her into shock, and she lost her appetite for days. Even looking at Maria had been hard for her.

Like she had seen something that tarnished her view of the world. Tainted it in blood.

Amara's first vision had been of a time not too distant in the future, either. A time when the sky ripped in half with golden light before a torrent of red beings washed out of it, killing everything in sight.

A vision in which Maria never made it past the first wave of demons.

Fortunately, she quickly understood the purpose of her visions, and was able to change many things. The first one being getting Maria to play New Eden.

Once the mana finally leaked into their world enough, she got them both to cultivate it. That was how they had become strong.

How they had risen from being poor girls selling flowers to being heads of a mafia family.

It had taken a toll on their outlook on life, but such was the price of survival, they told each other.

Many times had the vision that Amara saw changed since then. And every time it changed, more and more people fought back.

It was like the pieces that were originally pawns were slowly turning into towers, knights, and jacks—like someone was flipping the rules of this cruel chessboard.

Amara knew it wasn't her doing. Yes, she had changed a few pieces, but not on this scale. This was much bigger than her reach.

Much more profound. Like someone who knew the entire picture was moving pieces from the shadows.

She had yet to find out who, but if she were to guess, the three people in her most recent vision were the most likely candidates.

'I'll find out. One way or the other.'

#### Chapter 897 Meeting With Another

During this time, Alex had finished debriefing Jack as to what had happened, skipping no detail, neither on how he killed the first man, nor how he marked the car, and Jack sat behind his desk in contemplation.

"Your use of mana is so versatile compared to how my men have been using it until now. It's like comparing children with a drill to an adult equipped with a welder. Couldn't you teach them how to do all this?" Jack asked, his gaze narrowing.

Alex scoffed.

"I could, if they were predisposed to learning. Your men already have a hard time going from using their previous training to use their newfound powers. Do you think I can ask them to scrap what they barely just learned to learn something else?" Alex replied.

Jack looked at him for a moment before sighing and shaking his head.

"No. It wouldn't work. Soldiers might be adaptable on a battlefield, but that flexibility doesn't extend much farther, I'm afraid."

Alex chuckled.

"Don't beat yourself up, Jack. Even if they could learn this, they wouldn't be able to replicate it. Most of them can barely sense the mana inside their own bodies. I can sense the mana around me, like it's visible. That's how I can control it better than they can."

Jack waved his hand dismissively.

"I get it. You're a monster. Let's move on to the next matter at hand. This new organization, whose trying to grab awakened people from their homes, by hook or by crook. They could ruin all my careful planning. What do you intend to do?"

Alex shrugged.

"For now, probably nothing. I wanted to wait and see what their next move was. I don't get the feeling their original intention was to kill Randall.

"With what he told me, they were trying to recruit him. He must have pushed their levers until they felt it was better to get rid of him. And yet, I feel like their primary objective today wasn't to kill him, either. Maybe his family. But not him."

Jack leaned forward, crossing his hands together as his gaze hardened.

"What use would killing his family have? I know I wouldn't want to work for someone who killed my loved ones, and I'm sure you wouldn't either. Who would be dumb enough to think that works?" Jack asked.

Alex shrugged.

"Beats me. But I don't think they planned on killing all of them. Maybe the kids, to force him to rethink his stance. I don't know, Jack. I'm not in their heads. All I know is that they had an obvious intention. And we busted their plan."

Jack raised an eyebrow.

"We? You mean you busted their plan, right?"

Alex looked at him with a deadpan expression.

"Potato, potahto. Aren't we business partners? What I do is what you do, no?" Alex mocked.

Jack clicked his tongue, leaning back into his chair.

"You are still the arrogant little shit you always were, I see. It calms me to know your stint as a demon for a month hasn't changed you too much, Alex," Jack said, looking at him with a smile.

Alex shrugged again.

"It'll take more than that for me to change. What's the saying again? Old habits die hard? As if the demon inside me could change how I am at the core. Maybe made me a bit more prone to violence, but I figure I was already quite easily anger-able. So, meh."

Jack burst into laughter.

After a while of laughing and discussing a few other minor things, Jack let Alex go, and the latter decided he could still stop by another person's place before going back home.

He would have to let Kary know what he was up to at some point, but he figured if the wheels were already in motion, she would be less reluctant to let him do his thing. After all, it was harder to stop a moving car than one only in neutral, right?

And with this in mind, Alex walked his way out of the hospital's front door, the guard at the entrance confused as to when he had gotten there at all, and kept walking until he was on the private lane that led to the hospital.

From there, he could take to the skies without too many prying eyes looking at him.

Once he had taken flight, and reached an altitude where people could mistake him for a bird from the ground, Alex once again closed his eyes, extending his mana senses as far as he could.

He was far from Montreal, being on the northern shore of the metropolitan area, and he could see all the way to the southern one, but he figured he would still find some awakened people close by.

And from the constant feeling pulling his sights toward the south, Alex knew that was where the marked car had gone.

"I'll get to you soon enough. For now, let me grab a hold of a few more pieces on this chessboard," he muttered, before locking on a presence near him.

From the amount of mana he could detect from that person, he could tell they weren't mages, so that already saved him trouble. But he wondered what he would be stepping into.

"Let's hope they aren't as defensive as Randall. I'm sure this could have turned out better if he hadn't insisted on pinning me down..."

Flying off to the east, Alex flew over the burgh of Boisbriand and into the burgh of Rosemere before landing behind a small outlet mall.

He looked at the small outlet and frowned.

"I feel mana still lingering in this place... I thought all the mana leaks had closed..." Alex mumbled.

There was only one way to find out why that was, and Alex decided there was no better time than now.

Walking to the front of the outlets, Alex kept his senses trailed on the person he was tracking, which led him to a small kendo dojo. These places were rare here in the Western part of the world, but not inexistent.

Looking through the glass shop front, he could see a class was in session, and he stayed there for a moment, watching them spar. A smile crept up his lips as he remembered when he and Kloud had trained in a similar fashion.

This was only a few months ago, and yet, it felt like a lifetime ago already.

His musing was interrupted by a shiver down his spine when the sensei in front of the class locked her eyes on him.

And from the intensity of her gaze, and the mana in her body, Alex could tell he had found his quarry.

She lifted a hand toward him, making a five with it, and Alex nodded.

He had looked at the hours on the door, and he could understand she was about to close for lunch.

Alex decided to sit on the terrace next door, since it was already close to noon, and he ordered two entrees. This was a Mexican place, so he went for two entrees of nachos, hoping she wouldn't spit on his nicety.

After five minutes, the kids started walking out the door of the dojo. Soon after, the woman came out, still wearing her sparring outfit, and she came to sit in front of him.

She stared at him in silence, making the atmosphere awkward, at least until the food arrived.

When she saw the two entrees, her traits softened a little.

Alex decided now was as good a time as any to strike up a conversation.

"I know what you are. And I assume you know what I am, too. But I want to say that I am not here to cause trouble. I just want to talk."

The woman looked at him, took a bite of the fresh plate of nachos in front of her, and turned to a server.

"Two coronas with this, please, Anthony."

The teenage boy looked at her with a smile and nodded.

"Coming right up, Elise. Limes?" he asked.

The woman turned to Alex, gauging him with her eyes, and turned back to reply, "Yes. On both."

Alex snickered.

"I take it you'll accept talking with me?" he asked.

She stared at him for a second before her body relaxed.

"You have until the end of this lunch. I have classes to teach. And if you are here to ask for a fight, like that last idiot, rethink it. I don't have the means to pay for another hospital trip. I should have known he was untrained, and that I would hurt him..."

Alex's eyebrow cocked up, wondering what she was talking about. But he didn't want to go off a secondary subject.



"No, not at all. I want to ask you if you are willing to join up with others like us, and help protect this city, actually. I won't be the one you'll fight. Wouldn't be much of a contest, I'm afraid," Alex said, smirking.

She looked at him and huffed.

"Damn right, it wouldn't! I would turn you upside down faster than you could say, 'What the fuck!'" she exclaimed as the beers arrived at the table.

Chapter 898 Not So Friendly Spar

Alex froze for a second, wondering if she was being serious, before bursting into laughter.

"I take it you have very little mana-sensing capabilities. Ahahahaha! Oh boy!"

The woman looked at him; her gaze hardening.

"You think that changes anything?" she asked, her tone flat.

Alex became serious again, feeling a shiver from the intensity of her glare.

"I think that physical aptitude can determine the outcome of a fight, yes. When the gap between the opponents is big enough, no amount of talent can compensate for it."

She looked at him and grinned.

"Care to take a bet on that?"

Her confidence was almost a telltale sign, as far as Alex was concerned, of how much she believed in her talent. But would it be enough to make him flinch?

Never.

"Sure. What do you want to bet on?" Alex bit.

"How about we start with this meal? While they prepare our order, we have a short spar in my dojo. First to three hits win, and the loser pays for lunch."

Alex almost scoffed. He had already the intention of paying for her lunch.

But if she wanted to bet on it over a sword fight, why would he ever say no?

"Sure. Your funeral. I'm rich and a skilled swordsman. I guess getting my lunch paid would be a rare thing," he taunted.

The woman grinned.

"Anthony!" she called out to the server.

The teenage kid came rushing in, his smile as wide as his face.

"Yes, sensei?" he asked, stopping beside the table.

"Prepare the Taco-Fest. We'll be right back."

Anthony looked at her, his eyes going wide.

"Elise! That's our most expensive platter... I thought you were... you know... having a hard time..."

The swordswoman glared at him, unhappy he was airing out her financial situation.

"Won't matter. Richy rich over here will be paying. That is, after I whoop his ass in a spar. That's why we'll be coming right back. Keep our table, please."

The young teen looked at the young man, and he frowned.

"Please don't let yourself get swindled, sir. Elise does this more often than we'd like to admit," he pleaded to Alex.

"Hey! Mind your own business! Your father loves it when I do this. It brings in money!" Elise argued.

But Alex laughed the matter off.

"Don't worry, kid. One, I don't intend to lose. And two, I doubt you'll make my wallet cry. Prepare the meal."

Elise grinned at him.

"I like you! Not shy for a challenge. But you'll still be losing, Hah!" she mocked, jumping up to her feet.

Alex slowly rose to his, followed her back into the dojo next door, and removed his shoes. Alex smiled and stepped on the bamboo flooring, reminiscent of an authentic Japanese Kendo dojo.

'She really went for authenticity. There is no doubt she learned from true masters,' he thought.

The woman walked to a rack in the wide open room, grabbed two bamboo shinai, and threw one at Alex, who caught it with a flourish before facing her.

"Do you have rules? Or is it actual combat simulation?" he asked.

She snickered at him.

"That would be unfair to you. No. There will be only one rule. We'll start at opposite ends of the room, and when a hit connects, we go back to our ends before going back at each other. The first to strike three times wins."

Alex nodded. These were acceptable terms.

He walked away from her, reaching the other end of the dojo, and turned to face her, his sword lowered to his side.

"Should I fight at full force? Or keep at your level?" Alex mocked her.

But she didn't respond. Her eyes were already locked on him like a hawk on his prey, her mouth a thin line.

He could feel the mana inside her suddenly spike a moment before she dashed at full speed toward him. The gap was closed in an instant, and her speed was much higher than Alex had anticipated.

\*Whack!\*

Alex looked at her, his eyes turning serious, as a cut on his cheek closed.

The Shinai had smacked so fast on his skin that it had cut into it, like a real sword.

No, not exactly.

He could tell the woman had pulled back her strength at the last moment, realizing he wasn't going to parry. After all, the bamboo sword was still emitting faint traces of mana.

If it had struck him without her holding back, he would have a deep laceration.

Wiping away the blood that trickled on his cheek, Alex locked eyes with her as she backed up to her starting spot.

"That's one." She said, her gaze still intense.

Alex didn't reply, lowering his stance.

"It looks like you understand your position," Elise said, a grin flashing on her lips.

But her grin was cut short as she reached her spot, and Alex suddenly appeared before her, swinging in a wide arc with his Shinai.

She blocked the strike, but her eyes widened when the two weapons touched. Instead of leaning into her block, she tilted her body backwards as the shinai in her hands snapped like a twig.

Alex anticipated her movement, pulling at her leg with his, making her lose balance, and he slashed down with his sword, stopping it an inch before her face.

"I take it that counts?" he mocked, as she panted, her face pale.

She nodded, back flipping to her feet, as he started walking back to his position, while she grabbed another Shinai.

'What was that insane strength and speed?' she wondered.

But that wasn't the part that had shocked her the most. In that instant that the young man had swung at her on the ground, something else had grazed.

Something sharp. Something dangerous.

Pure killing intent.

Her hands were still shaking at the pressure she felt in that one instant, like looking at the face of death.

She shook her head, clearing her mind, and went back into her focused mode.

'Seems like I can't play with him. He's the real deal...'

As soon as Alex reached his spot, his back still turned toward her; she didn't wait for him to turn around. She bolted forward, intent on ending this before he could find his pace.

Alex expected as much, and his sword rose to block hers behind his back. He kicked toward her legs again, but this time, she was prepared.

Jumping briefly off the ground, she spun around and kicked at his head as well.

Alex grabbed her foot before it reached his head and spun her like a rag doll before throwing her back toward her spot. He dashed after her and struck her midair.

Before she could even land, he was back at his starting position, waiting for her to land.

The moment her feet touched the ground, they both dashed forward, meeting in the center of the room, as the swords snapped against each other.

The force at which they swung would have shattered the weapons if a thick layer of mana had not coated each one.

On Alex's side, the layer was thick and wild, like a raging torrent, while on Elise's weapon, the layer was thinner, but much calmer and sturdier.

Alex could tell from this alone that she had practiced this. She had an actual sword intent.

Their weapons clashed a few times before a feint performed by the woman took him by surprise, and a rising slash cut the underside of his chin, as he wasn't quick enough to tilt his head out of the way.

They both jumped back, reaching their starting position, and dashed back at each other, not taking a moment to relax, and their weapons met again, in a flurry that would scare any normal person away.

Through the walls, in the kitchen next door, the cooks could hear the slapping of the wooden weapons, as they met with enough power to make the walls shake.

Alex traded blows, parrying and dodging on every strike, as they slashed at each other relentlessly for almost a complete minute. Until Elise reached a state of pure calm, and the next slash sent fear into Alex's heart.

He knew, the second the sword slashed toward him, that if he tried blocking it, it wouldn't work. He couldn't even hear the bamboo sword cutting through the air.

It was soundless.

His instincts kicked in, and he instantly went into overdrive. His skin took a reddish hue, and he diverted most of his mana into the Shinai, trying to shatter it instead of blocking it.

When the swords collided, there was no resistance. Alex's eyes went wide as the sword in Elise's hands flew away, passing through the back wall, flying off into the back alley, and her movement continued without it.

The layer of mana that had been coating it was gone, and now flowed along the woman's hand, as it took on a bladed shape, and she slashed at his face.

\*Zuut\*

\*Drip drip\*

Chapter 899 One Loss, One Victory

Alex looked Elise in the eyes. His eyes had already turned black and red as his instincts kicked in. He had felt the genuine threat to his life and turned without wanting to.

Now, he was holding Elise by her throat, air barely flowing through it, as her eyes had widened in fear.

"What the hell are you?" she asked, struggling to utter the words.

Alex raised his left hand, sliding it against his chin, and wiped away blood. He looked at the black blood on his fingers and locked eyes with her again.

"Had I not tilted back, you would have cut my throat open... Did you intend to kill me?" he asked, his voice quivering in anger.

She shook her head as best she could.

"No... I knew you would move out of the way. I just wanted to land the hit. I win..." she muttered, her face slowly turning blueish.

Alex's eyes narrowed.

With a sigh, he released her throat, as she collapsed to the ground, gasping for air, and he turned back to human.

"What if I hadn't moved out of the way?" he asked, crouching beside her.

She massaged her neck as she grinned at him.

"Do you think I'm so inexperienced as not to be able to control my strikes? I would have given you a nice shave, but you wouldn't be in life-threatening danger," she declared, clearing her throat a few times along the way.

Alex still wasn't convinced.

She sighed.

"Look. You came at me with clear killing intent on that first strike. I still felt it even if you didn't strike a killing blow. I only responded in kind. Don't you think your reaction is a little hypocritical?"

Alex looked her in the eyes, trying to sense if she was lying. But there was no malice in her gaze.

Only determination.

"Fine. You win. You drew blood, and I didn't. I guess I'll be paying for that lunch," Alex said, getting back to his feet.

He offered his hand to her, helping her get back on her's and walked toward the front wall, where he rested the Shinai he had picked back up.

Elise looked at his back as he walked to the exit, putting his shoes back on, and a shiver went down her spine.

'He was ready to kill me. No hesitation. There was no fluctuation in his emotions. This was not his first time... This man is dangerous...' she thought.

She wasn't sure she should even consider anything he would ask her in the following half hour. A man so ready to kill was terrible news with a capital N.

Associating with him could be bad for her image and, eventually, bad for her safety.

Alex stopped at the door, looking back at her.

"Are you coming, or what? I'm sure you don't have all day."

"Ah... Yes," she replied, stepping toward the exit as well.

'I at least owe it to eat the meal he so graciously is paying for, right?' she mused, grinning at the thought of the feast that awaited them next door.

As they sat back down on the terrace, Anthony saw them and dashed to the kitchen.

He soon returned with a rolling cart, with platters on three different shelves, and started unloading them on their table.

The boy even pulled a second table next to them to put the rest of the food, and he looked at Alexander.

"I'm sorry for you, sir. I tried warning you..." he said, with a regretful tone.

"Stop bothering the clients, son!" a gruff voice came from behind him.

A beast of a man walked behind him, overshadowing him, as he towered at least two heads above the kid, and grinned at Alex.

"Thank you for your patronage, good sir. I hope everything is to your liking, and that you consider returning when you crave authentic Mexican food. I'm the best place in town!" he claimed, balling up his fists in a victorious pose.

Alex chuckled at the display and smiled at him.

"Well, everything looks and smells divine. Once I've eaten my fill, I will personally come and tell you what I thought of it. In the meantime, how about I pay you and your cooks a round of beers? It's hot outside today, and I can't begin to imagine how hot it is in the kitchen."

The man's grin widened up to his ears.

"Now that's the kind of man I like, Señor! I will tell the boys to take five and enjoy a cold one for you! I'm sure they will be thrilled!" the man said, slapping Alex on the shoulder like they were best friends.

He frowned a little when Alex barely budged and the inside of his hand started stinging, but he quickly returned to smiling and guffawing as he left toward the kitchen.

Alex heard the yips of joy coming from the kitchen, as the cooks were told to take five, and he saw them rushing to the front, amassing around the bar fridge, before each taking a cold Corona from it, and rushing back into the kitchen.

Alex knew they were going out back to enjoy their well-deserved break, and he chuckled as he looked back at the food.

To no surprise, Elise had already started shoving food down her gullet, without waiting on him, and she looked ravenous.

"That good, huh?" he asked, chuckling.

"Shu' up an' ea'," she responded, pointing at the food in front of him with a dumb smile.

Alex shook his head at her lack of care for class, and he dug into the food himself.

She was entirely right to scarf down the food so voraciously, though. Alex's palate almost exploded when the first bite hit his tongue.

The flavours were like a gut punch from Mike Tyson, assaulting him with the power of fifteen suns. The spiciness immediately attacked his tongue.

But the sweetness of the vegetables, the tanginess of the salsa and sour cream, and the savouriness of the meat tamed it.

If the Nachos had already been good, this was in a whole other dimension.

"Holy shit..." he muttered, as he swallowed the first bite.

"Righ'?!" the woman before him replied, almost spitting out some food toward him.

Alex looked at her side of the table, and a quarter of her portion had already disappeared.

If he wanted to enjoy the food and taste everything, he would need to kick into gear.

It suddenly became a contest to see who could eat the fastest, enjoying everything before the other chomped it away. It was like watching two cavemen fighting for the last piece of mammoth steak.

From afar, Anthony shook his head with a smile.

"Animals, both of them," he chuckled.

But, from the kitchen windows, his father was grinning madly.

He knew the comments would be good, from the expression on the young man's face alone.

Elise and Alex fought for the last bite, growling at each other like rabid dogs, before Alex eventually yanked on it with more strength than Elise and grinned as he shoved the last piece of Cochinita Pibil in his mouth, the juices dripping down his chin.

Elise made a disappointed whine, but a loud burp and a sigh of fulfillment quickly replaced it.

"Hoooo! I haven't eaten that much in a while. This was sooooo goooooood!" she exclaimed, forgetting Alex was here to talk to her about something.

Alex took a wet cloth that Anthony had brought when he started taking away the empty plates and washed his mouth and hands.

"This was indeed quite the exquisite meal... I wonder how such a place has stayed under the radar. It seems to me like a place like this should be crawling with dinners..." he said, looking around in confusion.

There were barely any people on the terrace, and the inside wasn't much more garnished with clientele.

As a matter of fact, he noticed that the entire street had been quite empty all this time.

"Yeah... Ever since that incident with the gangs nearby, this part of town has been like a ghost town..." Elise said, her face turning sad.

"Gangs?" Alex asked, his eyebrow rising.

He hadn't been following regular news for a while now, and he knew nothing of what she was talking about.

"Yeah. A gang set up shop in a neighbouring street, and they've been terrorizing the people. People are scared to leave their houses for leisure, anymore. A kid's already been caught in the crossfire between them and a rival gang car, and he's still in the ICU..."

With how her expression hardened at the mention of that, Alex could only assume she knew the kid in question.

"And the police aren't doing anything?" he asked, his gaze hardening.

He saw her fists clench and already knew the answer.

"No. Their cowards. All of them!" she spat.

Alex looked at her, and he already knew what to do to win her over. It might be a bit of a crooked way to curry favour, but he would be killing two birds with one stone.

Taking care of trash and getting a powerful ally. Who didn't like win-win deals, right?

"I have an offer for you. One that I insist you listen to in full before refusing. Because I'm sure you will want me to go through with it."

Chapter 900 An Offer To Think About

Already, Elise was curious as to what he would say. There wasn't much he could offer her that she would want.

But he seemed so convinced that he would captivate her that, if nothing, his confidence at least made it interesting.

"I'm listening."

Alex smiled, and he leaned on the table.

"I know what you're thinking. 'What he got to offer me? Money? Fame? I don't want those.' Well, I could offer those. I have a way to make both a reality, after all. But that isn't what a person like you would be captivated by."

He looked deep into her eyes, and made only his eyes change to black and red, with a devilish grin.

"What if I offered you peace of mind? What if I offered everyone in the neighbourhood peace of mind? In an irrevocable way."

Elise frowned at his words.

"Stop trying to be mysterious and come out with it," she spat.

"You thought earlier that I was dangerous, that my killing intent was all too calm, all too familiar. I'm sure you thought I might also have blood on my hands. You wouldn't be wrong," Alex said, looking at his hands pensively.

Images of that mound of bodies flashed in his mind, and he had to keep a gag from escaping his mouth.

"I've never killed anyone that didn't deserve it, though. That much, I can promise. But, sometimes, justice isn't something that the law can bring. It's something you take for yourself."

Elise could resonate with that thought. But she never had the guts to do anything.

She knew she would floor anyone who tried dealing with her physically. But she wasn't bulletproof.

"What are you? Some kind of benevolent superman?" she mocked.



"You could say that, sure," Alex replied with a smirk.

"But I'm not offering to lock them up. I'm offering to eliminate the problem permanently."

A shiver ran down her spine for the umpteenth time that day.

Elise wasn't used to this. She was a strong woman.

She considered herself as far removed from the word coward as she could be. But there was something about the words this young man spoke.

They were like the ultimate truth, as if when he declared something, it would come to pass.

It wouldn't be a matter of if, but a matter of when.

"What do you want in return? My soul or something?" she asked, almost believing her own words.

Alex choked back a laugh.

"What? I'm not the devil, you idiot. What use would I have for your soul? You're too weak to join my spirit companions. I would rather keep you alive and count you among my allies."

She looked at him strangely.

'He didn't deny that he could use souls...'

"Look," Alex said, snapping her attention back to him.

"I would rather keep my hands clean when I can. But if I believe what you're saying, then these bastards are already putting lives in danger. And I would rather that not be the case.

"Humanity is already in dire straights. We need no more pointless deaths—at least not on the side of the good people..."

The phrasing he used made her frown once again.

"The good people? What do you mean?" she asked.

Alex realized he had said too much and ignored her question.

"It doesn't matter. Are you taking up my offer? You have things to return to, and so do I."

Elise looked at him and sighed.

"Can you give me time to think about it? Even if you say you'll take care of it, their fate would still be in my hands. I'm not sure I want that kind of weight on my mind..."

Alex smiled at her.

"Sure. Take all the time you need. It's a costly decision to make. I don't blame you. Here, take this," Alex said, scribbling his number on a piece of napkin.

"Call me when you've made your decision. I should be available at any time of day."

She looked at the napkin he put in front of her, her mind falling deep in thought.

Alex decided it was his time to go.

He said nothing, heading to the booth where the server was. He paid for the meal and left a fat tip as well, the kid almost tearing up at the sight of so much cash.

Walking around the outlet, he heard Elise call out to him.

"Wait!"

She jumped out of her seat, dashing after him.

But Alex had no intention of waiting.

Once he turned around the corner and disappeared from sight, he immediately formed his white wings and shot into the sky, keeping the building and trees between him and the woman.

As Elise reached around the corner of the building, all she heard was a ruffling of leaves.

She turned the corner, and Alex was gone.

"The fuck?" she mumbled.

She looked up, where the leaves had ruffled, and she caught sight of something white.

Concentrating on her legs' muscles, she focused some of her power on them, jumped to the branch, and grabbed the white object.

As she landed, her eyes lay upon what revealed itself to be a pristine white feather.

And not a small one, either. That feather was about a foot and a half long.

"What in tarnation was that guy?" she mumbled, taking the feather and hiding it in her Gi as she walked toward the back door of her dojo.

Reaching it, she noticed the small hole in the brick wall, and as her gaze followed the straight path from it, she found the Shinai she had wielded earlier, embedded to the hilt in the cement of the back alley retention wall.

Walking to the wall, she pulled on the wooden hilt, trying to dislodge it, and noticed it was stuck. She used more of her power to boost her arms and managed to break it free.

But then she saw the shape of the poor sparring weapon.

The bamboo was frayed and on the verge of snapping. It was as damaged as if it had been used a million times.

She knew her power tended to accelerate the wear of her equipment, but this was past that. It was like the wood itself had aged a decade in a single moment.

She walked into the dojo, looking at the sword in her hands, and sat on the mats up front.

With a flick of her finger, the weapon fell apart, like it had been barely holding on, and she sighed.

"To think just touching his power made the Shinai like this. Just how much of a monster are you, Alexander Leduc?" she asked herself, glancing at the napkin she pulled from her pocket.

She went in the back again, grabbing some spare Shinai's for her next class, and stopped next to her office.

Calling it an office was a stretch, of course. She had no dedicated office room in this dojo.

It was more of a broom closet that she had converted. But it did the job.

She pushed the door open to the windowless office and pulled the feather from her Gi. She stared at it for a moment, feeling the power inside pulsing in her hands, and stretched to deposit it on her desk.

But a thought crossed her mind.

She looked at the feather, then to the Shinai in her hands, and wondered.

"No. I'm sure that's not possible..." she muttered.

But a nagging feeling kept tugging at her mind.

"Maybe just one try?"

She put the Shinai on the ground, keeping only one in hand, and grabbed the base of the feather, feeling its density in her grip.

She raised the Shinai in her hand in front of her, and her other hand over her head, with the feather in her grasp.

With a swift movement, she swung the feather down, feeling no resistance whatsoever.

At first, she thought the feather might have bent out of the way.

But her eyes widened.

\*Katakata\*

The front half of the Shinai had just dropped to the floor, a clean cut upon the width of it, like an actual sword had cut it.

'No. This may be even cleaner...' she thought, looking at the cut on the part she still held.

There wasn't even a single filament of bamboo loosely hanging. It had been perfectly sliced—almost surgically...

She dropped the cut sword and touched the feather.

It looked everything like a typical feather, and it even felt like one to the touch, she realized, as she slid her fingers on it.

'So soft... How can this have cut through the bamboo?'

It made no sense...

She set the feather on her desk, looking at it with awe, and picked up the two pieces of wrecked Shinai, before throwing them out into the garbage. They were useless now, anyway.

Grabbing the rest of the spare swords, she brought them to the front and set them on the rack to that effect. But she couldn't take her mind off what she had just seen.

A feather... sliced a bamboo sword...

'If it can get hard enough, could it protect, too?' she wondered.

She had no idea how close to the truth she had just wandered...