

## **New Eden 741**

### Chapter 741 Deserved Punch

"Doesn't matter. I had something else to ask you, and I forgot. So I had to catch up to you."

Clark looked at him, befuddled.

"Of course it matters! Couldn't you call me and tell me to wait here for a minute? Why was your first thought, 'Oh, hey! Let's jump off a fifty-two-story balcony!' That's crazy thinking!" Clark scolded him.

As he did, Clark also felt amazed at the feat.

It wasn't just anyone who could even consider this a viable idea. Most people would have fallen to their death.

Yet, Alex was confident in his plan enough not to hesitate.

He was either crazy or had balls of titanium.

"Yeah, I know. Not the smartest move. Listen. I don't want to hold you long, so you're coming back inside with me. What I want to discuss is not for a public area."

Clark shook his head in slight exasperation. But he at least owed him his attention for a bit longer.

As he turned back to enter the building, he heard Alex behind him.

"Nope. Too slow that way. Hang on!"

"Wha—WHAAA! What are you doing, you crazy asshole?!" Clark shouted as he felt arms grab under his armpits before his feet lifted off the ground.

Alex had already re-melded with Morpheus, this time a complete meld, and launched off the concrete ground.

Clark could hear the loud wing beats behind him, and he tried craning his neck around to look. Doing this, he ended up contorting a bit, and Alex's grip slipped a bit.

After almost dropping him, Alex scolded the trainer.

"Stop wiggling, you idiot. Do you want to fall?"

Seeing they were already thirty meters off the ground, Clark looked down, quickly shook his head no, and became as still as a metal rod.

People on the ground were already taking pictures and videos of this giant humanoid bat-looking thing abducting a person off the street. This would go viral in moments as soon as it hit the internet.

But strangely, the videos would disappear the next day, as if they had never been there, and the story was hushed to bed, never to be heard from again.

But, for now, the people were screaming in fear on the ground, calling the police and taking pictures by the dozen.

On the fifty-second floor, Kary had already returned to the kitchen island to sip her freshly made coffee when she heard loud flapping sounds from the still-open patio door.

'Urgh... Couldn't he take the elevator? People are going to see him if he keeps acting so recklessly...' she thought, turning her head to the balcony.

Moments later, what she saw almost made her choke on her coffee sip.

Two adult men were crashing onto the cement balcony, one white as chalk, while the other was already folding in gigantic bat wings.

Kary rushed out to the balcony.

"What the hell, Alex?! Are you trying to bring all the attention to yourself already? What if people saw you?!"

Alex chuckled as he got up on his feet.

"Oh, people saw me alright. I could hear the snapping of pictures and the voices of people recording themselves as I flew up. But I can't hide forever, can I? Might as well break that ice now, don't you think?"

His reasoning would have sounded sane had he not just transformed into a bat-looking, half-human monster. People would only care that he looked like a monster and not that he was a potential hero to humankind in the future.

She punched him on the shoulder, angry that he was taking this so lightly, and the next moment, another punch came in from the side, clocking him in the jaw.

Alex tripped on his feet, almost falling over the table, before caressing his jaw.

"Yup. Deserved that one too..." he mumbled as he held his mouth.

"WHAT THE FUCK, MAN?! YOU COULD HAVE AT LEAST WARNED ME!" Clark yelled, his face now red in anger.

"I did. I said hang on..." Alex whined.

Clark raised his fist again, ready to strike him, but Kary walked between them.

"Don't bother. He doesn't learn through violence," she said, looking him in the eyes.

Clark lowered his fist, growling to himself.

He had never been more terrified in his life. And that was saying a lot, given he had done extreme sports before.

Clark had tried everything from bungee jumping to base jumping and acrobatic free-fall. But he had never been only a slip away from falling to his death.

These were in controlled environments, with the proper security equipment in place.

Not while being carried by another man up the side of a building, with nothing to save him if he fell.

"Don't ever do that again! I'll kill you myself if you do!" Clark barked, stomping his way inside.

Alex chuckled at his reaction. But he knew it was a fair warning.

Kary walked in, following Clark, after glaring at Alexander.

"Coffee?" she asked the trainer.

"Yes, please," he grumbled, sitting at the kitchen island.

She nodded, walked toward the counter where the coffee machine was, and pulled out a cup and a coffee pod. Slipping the latter into the top of the machine and the former under it, she pressed the button.

Alex walked into the penthouse as well, sitting across from Clark.

He could have sat next to him, but he felt he was courting another punch to the face. So, he abstained from doing so.

"I'll let you have a few sips of your coffee to calm down before I ask you what I have to ask," Alex said, leaning on the counter.

He caressed his jaw again, trying to massage the pain away.

Clark had probably done so unknowingly, but that punch was infused with mana and had hurt a lot more than a regular punch.

If Alex's body hadn't already been tougher than average, the fact he hadn't coated his jaw with mana would have meant a nap for him.

Clark gave him a death glare but said nothing.

He waited for Kary to hand him the cup as she pushed milk and sugar in front of him.

"Thank you," he grumbled.

"Don't worry about it," she replied before sitting beside Alex.

They passed the next few minutes in uncomfortable silence, with only the sound of cups hitting the counter and sipping echoing through the kitchen.

"So," Clark finally broke the silence.

"What did you want to ask?"

## Chapter 742 Revealing The Task

Alex looked at him, mustering the courage to ask for a favour.

"I want first to ask you something," he started, locking gaze with Clark.

Clark saw the seriousness in his eyes, and automatically, his anger vanished. Alex was always joking around or acting stupid, so for him to be serious, it couldn't be a light matter.

"If the world was coming to an end, would you help defend it? If people were to die unless you took up arms, would you join the front lines, risking your life? If you knew you were the only one standing between innocent lives and impending death, would you hold your ground, even if the possibility of dying fell over you?"

With Alex's tone as solemn as it was, Clark immediately understood he wasn't asking those questions rhetorically. But it wasn't something he could answer to with ease.

Many acted righteously, saying they would sacrifice themselves in the face of danger to save another life. But the truth was, most of these people were talking out of their ass.

When it came down to it, they became weak-kneed and fled at the first sign of danger. They would abandon even their loved ones in a heartbeat if it meant saving their own skin.

Clark wasn't one of those, to say he wouldn't hesitate.

The truth was, he had no idea how he would react.

Would he flee? Would he cower in fear?

Would he rise to face the threat, or throw his life away, hoping to save as many people as he could?

Only being put in the situation would tell him what kind of man he was. But was he willing to even put himself in that spot to begin with?

Alex could see the wheels turning in Clark's mind. But he couldn't afford to wait forever for the answer.

"Clark. I know they are tough questions, but I need an answer."

Clark clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"How do you want me to respond to that? I've never been put in a situation like that before, and I don't know how I would react. I would love to say that I would stand up for strangers. But would I? Cut me some slack, man."

Alex smiled at his reply.

"Good. At least you don't have false bravado."

Clark tilted his head in confusion.

"What's with these questions, anyway? It's not like the world is ending, is it?"

Alex and Kary smiled wryly.

"Well..." Alex started saying.

But Kary cut him short.

"Discussion for another time, Clark. What Alex wants to ask, what he's been spinning around the pot for, is, will you fight with us? We need awakened people tomorrow for something I can only discuss if you say yes. And you are one of us.

"If you don't join, it's fine. But your help would greatly improve our odds of success and survival..."

Clark took in her question, and his mind went blank.

How was he supposed to say yes to something he knew nothing about?

"Why are you asking me this? And why survival? Are you guys going on a suicide mission or something?" Clark asked, confused.

"Something like that. But that is beside the point, Clark," Kary said, trying to keep the conversation on track.

"We need help, and there are not many we can ask. You are now part of those few. Can you and will you help us?"

Alex wasn't sure that bombarding Clark like this was the way to go, but it was already too late. He still wanted to give the man an out, though.

They were asking a lot, from someone who wasn't in the know. His reaction was only natural.

"Look. We would love to say this is for the greater good. Or that humanity needs us. The world isn't heading toward a peaceful state. Things will happen in the coming months, and years, that put humanity on the brink.

"If we manage to break that curb a bit now, who knows how many more people will be there to fight when the time comes. But we need help, and you have the power to help. Will you help us, Clark?"

Clark instantly felt like Alex's words had a deeper meaning than he let on.

"What's going on with the world? What are you talking about, Alex?"

"I'll tell you later. For now, I want to know if you can trust me enough to join us without knowing the full story. I won't keep you in the dark for long, but it's better if you are, for now."

Clark ran that statement in his mind on a loop.

Could he trust Alex? Could he follow him blindly into something he told him was dangerous enough to lose lives?

The obvious answer was no. He barely knew the guy.

But he had a feeling saying no would lead to more secrets. Lead to more uncertainties.

And he was tired of this. If following the kid into a battlefield where he could lose his life was the way to see the complete picture, then so be it.

"I can't say that I trust you, Alex. You are hiding too much from me. But if you need my help, and I can get you to promise no more secrets? Then I will lend my measly strength to you."

Alex grinned from ear to ear.

"Sure! After this is done, we can sit down and talk. I'll tell you everything I know. But first, the matter at hand."

Alex pulled out a copy of the files David had shown them that morning and rushed to his television. He loaded the files by shoving the data stick into a slot on the TV's back.

He needed to explain the situation thoroughly to Clark if he would have him fight with them. He couldn't have him going in blind, after all.

And boy, Clark was not ready for this information. They spent the next half hour less on explaining the fight to come than explaining how wolves the size of bears, much less ones the size of construction trucks, could even exist.

This was all so surreal...

Chapter 743 Another Member Secured

Alex and Kary took much longer than they would have liked to explain everything to Clark. But they couldn't blame him.

Up to a few months ago, anyone telling them the same thing would have been considered crazy. To him, that was most likely what they sounded like: crazy people.

"So. You good with all this?" Alex asked at the end of his explanation.

"..."

It took a moment for Clark to open his mouth to speak. He just looked at the images, the charts, and all the information on the TV before him, and his mind went blank.

"I... You... I have so many questions..."

Alex chuckled at his reaction.

"I get it. But they'll have to wait after the raid. For now, I want to know if you feel okay being there?"

Clark nodded his head absent-mindedly.

"How many people would be affected if we don't go?" he asked, wanting to know the gravity of the situation.

"I looked up the info on the town. There aren't many people up there. Maybe two hundred? But it's fishing season. And I can only assume there will be swarms of fishers for tourism. So I wouldn't expect under three hundred casualties on the first day."

Three hundred may not be a massive amount in the grander scheme of things. But that would only be on the first day.

How far could a pack of wolves the size of these travel in one day to reach their next hunting ground? How much time before they went further south and started attacking larger towns?

This wasn't something they could gloss over and let the police handle. Especially not if what David had told them earlier that day held true.

If guns barely tickled them, then what would stop them?

But Clark couldn't wrap his head around something.

"Wait. If guns can't hurt them, then how are we supposed to take them down? I doubt I can punch harder than a shotgun slug shell..."

Alex scratched the back of his head.

"I'm not sure myself. It's probably something caused by mana. When we got attacked in the service tunnels, the cops shot at the rat queen many times and did nothing to her. Yet we had already wounded her a few times."

It made little sense to Clark, as his mind still functioned according to societal standards. Humanity transitioned to guns because they were more lethal than blades, bows, and arrows.

He hadn't seen what it was like to fight monsters in this world yet.

"Well, in that case, maybe I can be of assistance. I'm unsure how much help I'll be, but I'll be there. Just tell me when we leave and from where. I'll be there."

Alex smiled and nodded.

That made another person for their mission.

Now, if he managed to hire the merc he had seen a few days ago, they would be at their goal of ten people. This would be as safe as the mission could get for them.

"I'll make sure the arrangements are made. Someone will get you to your apartment tomorrow morning, around seven. That good for you?" Kary asked.

She was already texting Mr. Gu, who was in charge of dealing with those details, and he confirmed her request just as fast.

"Then it's settled," Alex exclaimed, rising from the sofa.

Clark followed suit, ready to take his leave for the second time today.

"Want a lift down?" Alex joked, taking a step toward him.

"Don't you! I swear, I will knock you out! I'll take the elevator, thank you," Clark scowled, raising his fists.

Alex raised his hands in a peace gesture, laughing his ass off. He found his joke to be hilarious.

The same couldn't be said for Clark or Kary, as they looked at him with death glares.

"Sheesh! Tough crowd. Fine, take the long way down. The boring way," Alex mocked, pulling a fake yawn.

Clark walked to the elevator, keeping his eye on Alex in case he tried something stupid. He stayed wary until the doors shut on him, and he was alone in the metal box.

But his mind was already some place else. Thoughts of fighting with his life on the line troubled his mind, the threat suddenly so very real.

'Let's hope the danger he claimed was overstated...' he thought, reaching the ground floor.

In the meantime, Alex was already calling someone else from his penthouse—the person he least wanted to deal with: Richard Bellemare.

Somehow, he felt like Richard would try to screw him out of his money. It was his modus operandi, as far as he was concerned.

His flip phone rang a few times before connecting to Alfred.

"Yes, Mr. Leduc?" Alfred's calm voice echoed from the other side of the call.

He sounded winded, like he had been running or doing some other kind of exercise.

"Hey, Alfred. I was hoping to talk to Richard. Can you put him on?"

"Sadly, Mr. Bellemare is out of town for a few days, which is why I took the call. What can Bellemare & Delphis do for you, Mr. Leduc?" Alfred asked, sounding super professional.

Alexander sighed.

'Why do I feel like Alfred will ask for even more than Richard? He knows his men better. Something tells me he noticed one of his men had awakened...'

"I need a set of arms for a mission. And I have particular requirements. Do you see where I'm going with this?" Alex asked.

From his end, Alex could almost hear the grin stretching on Alfred's leathery face.

"I certainly do, young man. But you had to know it would cost you. Are you ready to fork out?"

Sighing loudly again, Alex replied, "Of course. I wouldn't have called if I wasn't."

There wasn't much he could do anymore. With Richard, he was hoping to curry it as a favour.

But with Alfred? That chance flew out the window the moment he picked up the call.

Now, it would be a negotiation. And god knows how bad Alexander was at negotiating.

Chapter 744 Negotiating With Alfred

"Let's start with the basics, kid. Which soldier did you want, and for how long?"

Alex was already getting confused.

"Do you have more than one awakened soldier? I only noticed one last time..."

He heard Alfred chuckling from the other side.

"Things move fast in the world, kid. Knowledge is power, and we have recently acquired such knowledge. But that is beside the point. Which soldier was it you thought you wanted?"

Alex wracked his mind for a moment, trying to remember the name that Talbot woman had told him.

"A certain recruit called Alvares, I think? He was young. Looked almost out of place amongst the veterans in the compound."

Alex heard Alfred hum in his ear.

"Yeah, I know the kid. I'm surprised he caught your attention. He's barely awakened from what we garner."

Alex scoffed.

"Let me ask you this, Alfred. When I went to the compound, were any others awakened there?"

Alfred took a moment to think, and three names popped into his mind.

"Yes. There were two others. Why?"

Another scoff echoed in the phone call.

"Then I don't know by what measure you are gauging your awakened people, but it's wrong. That kid was the only one I sensed was an actual awakened person. It would be best if you double-checked your info."

"In any case, I'll be hiring him. Just name the price."

Alex could hear the shuffling of paper and a few strokes of some keys in his ear.

It sounded like an old-generation calculator, with all the clacking that it did.

"How long do you need him, and will you carry him around, or do we have to handle transport?" Alfred asked, pausing his keystrokes.

Alex thought for a bit. He wasn't sure if they would resolve the issue in a single day or if this would turn into a hunt.

The latter was a high-possibility scenario, so he took no chances.

"I'll need him for about a week. But we will handle transport."

Another few keystrokes later, Alfred asked another question.

"What about weaponry and ammunition? Do you make the arrangements?"

Alex paused. The question was a good one.

"Do you know what class he is in New Eden?" Alex asked tentatively.

It was Alfred's turn to pause.

He had to pull up the kid's file on their internal system, where this info had recently been added.

"It says here he's a berserker, and his weapon is a greataxe. But what does that change?"

"I'll take care of arming him. Guns won't be of much use for what we are fighting unless he was a gunning-type class."

Alfred felt confused momentarily, but didn't care to ask for more details.

He returned to his calculations, factoring in what Alex had just told him, and eventually gave his result.

"With all the things you take care of, the estimated price comes at around fifty thousand. There is an insurance fee since you are only taking one man. If this price suits you, I can have him prepare as soon as the contract is signed and paid in full."

Alex sucked in some cold air.

Given his recent earnings, fifty thousand was a small sum to him, but it was still much more than he had expected.

"Sure... That'll be fine," Alex said softly, thinking about the burning money.

"Perfect. Let me send you the contract by email... and then the invoice... And once those are confirmed, paid, and signed, you'll be all set."

Alex received a notification as Alfred told him this and slipped the phone away from his face to check.

He pressed the screen to put Alfred on speaker. As he checked his emails, there it was.

He quickly reviewed the terms and conditions, as he cared little about this. He felt a sting in his mind, thinking Kary would tear him a new asshole if she saw him skim over this so fast, but he had no time.

At the end of the contract, he had to do a biometric scan on his phone, which grabbed a scan of his thumbprint and retina before a signature appeared on the document.

Then, he read the invoice and confirmed it with his bank info.

Another notification flashed on his screen from his banking app, telling him fifty thousand dollars had been deducted, stinging his heart a little. He may be rich now, but he had grown up poor.

Losing that much money so fast was bound to hurt him, just like when he had bought the pod.

Alfred received confirmation on his side soon after, and Alex could almost hear the smile of victory on his face.

"All is fine on my side. I wish you a good day, kid. I'll go prepare Private Alvares."

Alfred hung up faster than Alex could react, and he stood there, his phone in a dial tone, wondering if he had missed something.

'I hope that was all I needed to ask...' he thought, putting his phone away.

Walking back to the living room, Alex sat down next to Kary, who was still reading the texts from Silent Light. There were a lot of emojis and exclamation marks, so he only assumed the kid was either excited or panicking.

Of course, Alex couldn't see those, as she wasn't holding a phone for him to look at.

"I'm done on my side. How about you?" he asked, leaning on her lap.

Kary started petting his hair, making him close his eyes and smile in pleasure.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. I've been done for a while. I'm just checking in on Silent once in a while to see where he is. He's making brisk progress."

Alex looked at her from below.

"Where is he now? It's been what? An hour since he left Syracuse?"

"Forty-five minutes, but yeah. He just stopped in Lansdowne to refuel, and then he'll hit the four-oh-one eastbound towards us. His next stop should be in Saint-Zotique, and then here."

Alex smiled. That was indeed brisk progress.

Hell, that was frightening progress, even. He wouldn't be surprised if the kid got here terrified out of his mind.

"I'll contact the reception, tell them I'll have someone use our parking spot. They can give him access when he arrives," Alex said.

But, for now, he closed his eyes again and enjoyed a few moments of peace and head scratches.

#### Chapter 745 Visit Out Of The Blue

Alex wanted to enjoy this peace for as long as it would last, since there hadn't been many moments of peace in his life lately.

But fate was a cruel mistress, and his peacefulness was cut short soon after it started.

\*Dooroorooroo\*

His intercom rang, interrupting his head scratches, as Kary was about to get up and go answer. But Alex put his hand on her thigh.

"I'll get it. We aren't expecting anyone, so it must be reception."

Kary smiled at him, kissing his forehead as he got up, and she stayed seated.

Alex sighed, disappointed with how calm never seemed to stick lately.

He reached the intercom as it rang for a third time. Pressing the answer button, he saw the smiling face of the receptionist, who usually manned the downstairs desk at this time of day.

"Hello, Mr. Leduc. My apologies for disturbing you, but we have a man here wishing to speak to you. His name is Louis, and he says he works for a certain 'Azamus.' Should I let him up?"

Alex frowned at the names.

He knew no one named Louis, but he certainly knew who Azamus was. But he had no idea how they would know where to find him.

"No. Tell him I'll be down there in a few minutes. Tell him you'll call security if he asks to come up again."

The man nodded his head, still smiling.

"Very well, sir. I'll relay the message."

The screen went black as the call ended, and Alex's frown deepened.

Kary had heard everything from the living room and was also sporting a scowl.

"What does that guy want?" she asked, her tone cold.

"I have no idea. But I'm more curious about how he found out where I live. This isn't common knowledge, or something just anyone can look up..." Alex replied.

Kary rose from the sofa to the coat hanger near the entrance. When she grabbed a vest, Alex wondered what she was doing.

She saw his curious look and smiled at him.

"You didn't think I would let you go alone, I hope. If Azamus sent someone here, he wants to discuss New Eden things. And Paragons is my guild as well."

He could hardly refute her statement, so he just shrugged at her. He pressed the elevator button, waiting for it to come up, before stepping inside, accompanied by Kary.

"I hope that dumbass isn't trying to start beef outside New Eden... That would be his type," Kary said as the elevator doors closed.

Alex scoffed, thinking about it.

"What could he even do? He has money, but so do we. He has connections, but ours are most likely better. Everything he could use against us, I'm pretty sure we can muster better.

"Besides, his only other option would be to have awakened, but he would have boasted about it already. So, I doubt there is anything he 'can' do. Both in and out of New Eden."

Kary could find sense in Alex's words, but still felt bad. Damien Grimm was a cunning person.

He hadn't risen to the top of ToB through skill alone. He was also a very good puppeteer, handling things in the shadows.

Rumours about him had circulated on the internet for years. But they were never proven.

"Let's hope you are right..." she murmured to herself.

When the elevator stopped on the ground floor and the doors opened, Kary and Alex exited it with a measured stride, trying to look confident. It worked to a certain degree, as the people noticing them couldn't help but feel like they were a power couple.

But one person was unimpressed: Louis.

He'd been to many meetings with his boss, Damien, and it wasn't the first time he saw a routine like this. But theirs was sloppy, at best.

It lacked the refinement of many years of practice.

He nonetheless bowed before them, his face remaining stoic.

"I apologize for taking some of your time, Mr. Astaroth and Ms. Phoenix. Master Damien said this matter was urgent, so I was ordered not to take no for an answer. I hope you understand."

Alex scanned the guy from head to toe, and he reeked of submissiveness. His face was devoid of all emotion, and he was sure that if he played poker, he could bluff professionals under the table.

But he at least didn't seem rude, contrary to his alleged master.

"Whatever it is, I would prefer you use our real names instead of our gamer names, Mr. Louis," Kary asked, giving him a stern look.

"As you wish, Ms. Deveille," Louis replied, taking a small apologetic bow.

"In any case, this discussion won't be happening in our home. Let's go to a more neutral place. I hope you don't mind," Alex said, pointing toward the building's entrance.

"Not at all," Louis replied.

Louis had a car parked in the building's car park, on the public portion, and he offered to take them to wherever they wanted to go, but Alex declined his offer.

"I'll call us a ride. I don't trust you or your boss. Nothing personal."

Louis bowed his head in acceptance.

It made complete sense, given the strenuous relationship between them inside New Eden, and it wasn't his place to question this or complain about it.

He was just a messenger.

Alex called the only person he knew could have a limo to them in a brief delay, Mr. Gu. The man sighed on the phone since assisting Alexander wasn't his job, but he still complied.

Jack had given him the order to accommodate Alex if they needed him, so he could only wish the young man had never called him. But a limousine wasn't much trouble, so it didn't bother him too much.

The vehicle reached the condominium building in minutes, and the three boarded it, heading toward downtown.

Alex gave an address to the driver through the rolled-down window and then sat down. He had picked a posh restaurant in one of the commercial high-rises since he had heard it was the perfect place for business meetings.

It even had private rooms for such meetings, and the service was apparently excellent. This was the perfect chance to try it out.

The trip there wasn't long, and the limousine driver told Alex he was going to wait around the corner and to call him directly once they were ready to leave, giving him his card. Alex thanked him as he took the card and disembarked from the limousine.

Once inside the building, and up to one of the last floors, they took out a private room and were seated in minutes.

Now, it was time for the true talks.

#### Chapter 746 Changing Venues

After being seated, a server came in, wearing a tuxedo, which basically out-dressed both Kary and Alex, who were dressed casually. This caused them to look uncomfortable, as if they were out of place.

But the server quickly felt their unease and smiled.

"Please don't mind your attire, missus, sir. We receive guests with more money than most here, and they often are dressed in shorts and floral shirts. There isn't a dress code in place here. As long as you can afford the entrance fee, you already proved you were a serious dinner."

Alex instantly calmed down. He had indeed paid the entrance fee, which he found outrageous.

But it was a good place, if that was all it took for them to ignore their unprofessional clothing choices. Mind you, a person in joggings and a sweatshirt wasn't that common in places like these unless they were filthy rich and didn't care what others thought.

The two thousand dollar entry fee was enough to make poor clientele avoid a place like this.

Seeing he had reassured his guests, the server went about his usual spiel.

"Will you be starting with an apéritif? Or maybe some of our seasonal appetizers from our menu du jour?" he asked.

Alex wasn't much of a fancy drinker, so he doubted they had anything that suited his cheap palate here, but he wasn't against some appetizers. Dinner was right around the bend, and he was getting hungry.

Especially since they had received a waft of delectable odours as soon as they walked near the kitchen entrance.

"What would the appetizers be, if I may ask?" Kary beat him to it.

The server turned towards her, smiling.

"Today, we have three options. The first is a pineapple, ginger, and habanero salsa, served with freshly baked tortilla chips.

"The second option is for the spicy lovers; we have some jalapeno pepper poppers wrapped in crispy bacon.

"And the third option is for the sour lovers amongst our clients; we have grilled potato and Napoleon goat cheese stackers with a balsamic and basil vinaigrette."

The server paused, letting the info sink in before asking, "So, what will it be?"

Kary was already salivating at the names alone and couldn't see or smell the food. But her mind was made up the moment she heard one word.

"I'll take your second option. The pepper poppers in bacon, please."

The server grinned widely.

"I somehow knew you would take that option. You look like a lady with a palate for tasty food and not a care for calories."

Kary wasn't sure whether he was saying she looked chubby or if he genuinely meant it as a compliment, but she decided to take it as the latter.

"Who would say no to bacon?" she asked with a grin.

The server turned toward the two men, waiting for their answer.

Louis didn't want to speak before Alex, so he waited patiently.

"Let me ask you first. Do you hold beers? Or do you just have fine wines and liquors?"

The server nodded at him.

"We would hardly be a local restaurant if we didn't hold some of the best micro-brewery beers on retainer. What can I get you, a blonde, a brown, a black, or a red beer?"

Alex paused, surprised a fancy place held beer, but he wasn't about to slip past this occasion.

"I'll take a blonde, please. And I would also like an entrée of your salsa with chips, please."

The server nodded at him, turning toward the last man in the room.

"What about you, sir?"

Louis looked up, his face still stoic.

"I'll have a glass of Porto with your potato and cheese appetizer."

"Very well. Did the lady also want something to drink, or should I bring water?" the server asked, turning to Kary again.

"Water is perfect, thank you," she replied.

"Very well. I shall get the appetizers going and have your drinks ready soon. My name is Mickael. Just ask me if you need anything. I will be just outside."

He left the room, leaving the three of them alone, as he went to get the drinks ready and order the food.

Silence immediately filled the room as Kary and Alex started staring at Louis.

Knowing he was the one to reach out to them, he understood it was also his job to speak up.

"Let me start by saying I am grateful you accepted to speak to me so readily. I realize Master Damien is not the most approachable or friendly man. So accepting to talk to me speaks in length of your open-mindedness."

Taking a pause, he observed their reactions.

Kary stayed motionless, her face still serious, while Alex smirked at the friendliness comment.

From this, he deduced their overall feelings for his boss.

'So the woman doesn't care about him and sees him as just another player. But the man. He sees him as lesser. I can play on that,' he thought.

"Master Damien has asked me to relay his request to you. He knows you aren't on good terms and that nothing obliges you to accept his request, so he has given me the liberty to offer money to entertain his whims."

Alex frowned at the mention of this.

'Offering money just to say yes to his proposal? He's either confident enough or desperate...' he thought.

And Kary had the same line of thought.

"How about we start by hearing his request, and then we can discuss how much he's willing to offer for us to say yes? There is no use in going around this pot any longer," Kary said.

Louis nodded at her words.

"I agree. But how about we wait for the drinks to be here so we can speak more casually?" he asked, repositioning in his chair and loosening his bowtie.

Kary almost laughed at his sudden loosening up. She had expected the man to stay stuck up to the end.

Maybe it was just her impression of Damien that made her think he would only hire someone submissive to the point of slavery, but she hadn't expected she would talk to this man as a person, much less in a casual fashion.

"I'm okay with that," Alex said, breaking the awkwardness.

"I'm not too keen on super formality, anyway."

And so they waited.

Chapter 747 A Prelude To The Agreement

The server, Mickael, took very little time to return with everyone's drinks. For Kary, he brought in a tall glass and a pitcher filled with iced water.

After putting everything on the table, he served her a glass from the pitcher and retook his leave with a wide smile. Part of his job was to know when the clients wanted to be left alone.

And he could tell this was such a moment.

Once he left the room and the door closed, Alex locked gazes with Louis.

Louis took this as his cue to speak.

"Before I explain the details of the request, I will put it simply so you know what to expect. Master Damien wants to fight it out in New Eden and put your guilds at stake."

The words dropped like a bomb on Alex and Kary.

This wasn't just an unreasonable demand. It was inconceivable for anyone even to ask this.

But before either of them could say anything, Louis kept talking.

"He is ready to put Aces High, as well as all its assets, players, base, and treasury included, into one big bet. One single fight. The winner takes all, and the loser vassals under the other guild.

"The format would be base rush, with each guild trying to conquer the other's base in a simulated environment, so no damage to the actual bases is done. Either guild is allowed to recruit outside help, in the form of Natives of New Eden, but excluding other guilds.

"No guardian would be allowed to fight since Aces High doesn't have one as a guild, making this fight fair. The victory condition would be to destroy the base core explicitly created for this event. The first one to destroy the other's base core wins.

"Any means accessible to players for this would be allowed, as this would be a contest of player guilds. As for the rest of the details, I need your agreement to partake in this duel to give you more.

"As I said earlier, Master Damien has allowed me to use money to coerce you into saying yes. I can make a starting bid of five million US dollars. What do you say?"

Kary took a moment to digest all the information he had just given them. This deal seemed too one-sided toward them for something Damien would conduce.

There had to be a catch.

Damien would never make a deal not to his advantage. That wasn't like him.

And since the rest of the details couldn't be heard until they accepted, this was a risky move.

What if they said yes and only learned once in combat that Aces High had subdued thirty smaller guilds, making their player count bigger than Knights of the Sun?

She wanted to think long about this. It would be stupid to rush into a trap like this one, especially with how obvious it was.

"Fifty million," Alex said, breaking her line of thoughts.

"Alex, wh—" Kary blurted out.

"Ten million," Louis cut her again.

"Forty-five," Alex immediately bid again.

"Alex, we ne—"

"Twenty-five, I can't go higher," Louis said with a sour face.

It was his first emotion since talking to them, and Alex knew he was serious.

"Deal," he said, leaning over the table to shake hands.

Kary's face went red with anger.

"No! No deal! Will you listen to me? This is obviously a trap. We can't just walk into it," she shouted, slamming her hands on the table.

"Calm down, Kary. I know that. But I think we can beat his trap. And if we say no, I have a feeling Azamus will do something even stupider that would risk the citizens of Bastion City's lives. I don't want to risk that."

Kary swallowed her fury, understanding what he meant. She didn't want to calm down.

When in the history of anger had saying 'Calm down' ever calmed a person down? Never was the answer.

But what he said made sense. And she could easily imagine Damien taking out his tiny dick anger on the entire city instead of just a simulated version, with simulated lives at stake.

Alex was right. They had to look at the bigger implications.

Yes, the trap was obvious. But what about the results of saying no to this trap?

If Damien decided to start a guild war again while they were away for the Inter-Alliance Military Exercises, who would defend the city?

Half their forces would be away, as well as themselves and Leon. All their power players would be gone.

And with how stringent they were on recruitment, their player ranks still hadn't grown enough to be considered a big guild. At best, they were considered a medium-sized guild.

Their number one position on the guild ranking meant nothing if most of their power was away from the base during an attack.

She loathed the idea of taking this deal. But the risks of saying no were even greater.

"Fine," she growled.

"But if this backfires, it'll be completely on you. I will not be staying under Damien Grimm. Not over my dead body."

Louis chimed in at this moment.

"Of course, anyone that wouldn't wish to stay in Aces High wouldn't be held there against their will. But their chances of joining other guilds would be on the line. That is one of the finer details."

Kary's ears turned red as her blood boiled.

She snapped her head toward Alex.

"You better own up to your word, mister. Or we'll be solo players for the rest of our time on New Eden."

Louis cocked his head to the side a bit, wondering what she meant by her words. But it was irrelevant to the matter at hand, so he tossed the thought aside.

Alex nodded his head solemnly.

"When have I not backed my word with actions?" he asked, smiling cockily.

Kary scoffed as she looked away.

Louis took this as an okay and shook Alex's still-extended hand, sealing this deal. They would, of course, sign a contract to make this legally binding, but the handshake was all he needed to proceed.

Damien had told him the two were sticklers to their words and wouldn't renege after shaking his hand.

"Then let us get into the finer details," Louis said, finally smiling at them.

#### Chapter 748 Checking On The Prisoner

The first of their food soon came in as they discussed the finer details of the contest Damien wanted to hold, and they paused to enjoy the appetizers. Soft groans of pleasure replaced the serious talk as the food hit their palates.

Kary couldn't have been happier about her choice as she looked at the appetizer Louis had ordered and found it looked way too fancy for her. On the other hand, Alex's salsa and chips looked good as he shovelled each bite into his mouth.

Alex glanced in Kary's entrée's direction once, and after she growled at him almost animalistically, he stared at his food instead.

Stealing a bite wasn't worth losing a limb to her bite.

The server returned a few minutes later when he heard the talking restart to take the order for the main dish, and all the options tempted Alex and Kary.

They finally settled on something not too filling since they would be here for a while, and if they overate, they would feel drowsy.

The conversation lasted two hours until Alexander eventually decided they had discussed enough.

He and Kary had to log into New Eden early today. They had something to do.

Something important.

Louis couldn't hold them long and only insisted they sign the draft contracts he had come up with following their discussions before they left. Once they did, he bid them farewell and let them bolt out of the restaurant, saying he would cover the tab as a thank you.

Alex and Kary didn't hesitate to use the limo to return home, letting the man deal with his own transport situation alone. They were already close to being late.

Alex even rushed the driver, saying they were in a hurry, which caused him great displeasure, as he ran yellow lights and only slowed down at stop signs. But his job was accommodating his passengers, even if he was slightly bending the traffic laws.

They made it home in just under ten minutes, a better time than the twenty they had taken to get to the restaurant, and quickly thanked the driver before running inside.

The man shook his head in annoyance but was already paid, so there was no real trouble. But he had hoped to do his usual spiel, offering them preferred rates if they called him directly.

"Bah. Who cares? They are probably nouveau rich and won't have money long, spending it like this. Or worse, they are spending daddy's money. Who cares? They can pay full price next time, too," the man complained as he pulled away from the building.

If he had known they had just signed a contract that gave them twenty-five million US dollars up front, the man would have chewed his shoes.

As Alex and Kary reached the penthouse, they rushed up the stairs for a quick shower before shoving themselves into the gaming pod for at least fourteen hours.

They had to open one of the patio doors so the little drone from EG could resupply the IV bags while they played. Alex finally got the service when he noticed they played well over ten hours per day.

The hassle of getting out and changing the pouches, only to go back in, was annoying.

For the price he paid, at least he had the peace of mind of not getting interrupted if he was in the middle of something important.

Of course, he could have turned the notifications off and let himself go past those ten hours without changing the pouches. He was never in there long enough to cause severe problems.

But he pulled out of the pods feeling parched, and his mouth tasted like a handful of coins. It wasn't enjoyable.

He'd rather pay than feel like that every morning.

Once they were both in their pods, they logged in simultaneously.

"Log In."

\*Launching New Eden\*

\*Logging in\*

\*Welcome back player Astaroth/Phoenix\*

Opening their eyes to the familiar brown ceiling of their royal room, Astaroth and Phoenix quickly rushed up and grabbed the clothes left for them on their dressers.

They practically jumped into the clothes before rushing out of the room and upstairs to the holding cells.

There, they found a dishevelled and heavily wounded diplomat whose once defiant eyes now showed an emptiness. All his false bravado from the previous day was gone.

"Sheesh. I don't even want to know what he went through. Even though he deserved every second of it, I'm surprised how far they went," Astaroth commented.

He had expected to find him broken, but not to this point.

Then again, he was surprised the man was still alive.

"At least they respected our one request. He's still alive," Phoenix said, shrugging.

Astaroth shrugged his shoulders as well in response. It no longer mattered, since they were allowed to deal with him how they wanted.

Now, they had to decide how they would do the deed. It was already decided in their minds that his life was forfeit.

But picking a death sentence wasn't as easy as saying, 'Alright, death by hanging.'

Even though the man deserved no respect, taking a life was a serious matter.

"Let's convene a meeting, and we can take the input from the people concerned. I think that's only fair," Phoenix said, turning around.

"Sounds fair indeed," Astaroth replied, glancing one last time at the prisoner.

All the while they discussed, he didn't even look at them. He was gone far inside his own mind, probably trying to protect the last bits of his sanity.

Astaroth and Phoenix didn't know that Commander Alena and her son, Castien, had been torturing the man nonstop, on a rotation, for the last day. He hadn't had even a minute of reprieve.

This was enough to drive anyone on the precipice of despair. It was a testament to his mental fortitude that he was only silent and not a blabbering mess.

Astaroth walked to the throne room with Phoenix by his side as they stopped at the head servant Chele's little office, asking him to convene a meeting with the people from the incident present.

The Lizardman inquired if all the people had to be there, alluding to Coral, but Astaroth repeated that everyone concerned should be there. Chele nodded his head before the monarchs left.

He could only hope that speaking about this wouldn't further traumatize the girl. But it wasn't his place to call out the monarchs on their decisions.

#### Chapter 749 Asking The Victims

Every person concerned was quickly brought in, and the meeting was ready to start.

Phoenix and Astaroth were on their thrones, acting as judges in this situation, while Coral, Alena, Rodney, Castien, Chele, and the beaten servant were kneeling before them at the foot of the dais.

"Alright, all rise," Astaroth said once everyone was there.

They all rose to their feet, looking at the king and queen.

"We asked you here this morning to deliberate on the prisoner's fate. We were given free rights to deal with him how we deemed fit, but picking a sentence is not as simple as it sounds.

"For the purposes of staying fair to the victims, we thought it was better to consult you before deciding his fate," Phoenix said, taking the matter into her hands.

Already, she could see a malicious grin stretch on Alena's and Castien's faces. Meanwhile, Chele's face remained placid, Rodney had a complicated gaze, and Coral and the other servant had uncomfortable faces.

They were twitching nervously, remembering the events from only two nights ago.

"We don't want to shake this mess up more, as we believe the people concerned have suffered enough. But we want to hear what they think would be an appropriate sentence," Astaroth added.

"I think he needs to be hanged from the tree palace's branches!" Castien exclaimed, not waiting for the monarchs to permit them to speak.

"I second that," Alena called out, smirking.

"Silence!" Phoenix snapped, slamming her fist on her throne's armrest.

"We will tell you when you can speak. Until then, you best keep your mouths shut and behave. Respect this room's proper etiquette, both of you," she growled.

Both of them clenched their teeth, but lowered their heads apologetically.

Nodding in satisfaction, Phoenix turned her gaze to the servant boy, who still exhibited cuts and bruises.

"You, young servant. What is your name?" she asked the boy, who couldn't be older than Silent Light.

"My... my name is Tobias, Your Majesty. Tobias Hawthorn."

He kept his head down, not daring to look at the queen as he spoke to her.

"Please look at me when you speak, Tobias. It is disrespectful not to look at your interlocutor when holding a conversation," Phoenix chided lightly.

"Yes, Your Highness!" Tobias almost shouted out in nervousness.

His face went red as he realized the decibel level in his voice, but he kept his ashamed eyes on the queen.

She smiled at him, paying no attention to his screaming.

"Good. Now. I know you don't want to remember that night, and I understand that. But I would like you to tell me what you think would be an appropriate punishment for what that man did to you. And Tobias. Think nothing of his status. He no longer has one."

Phoenix added the last words as a reminder that he needed not consider whose feet he stepped on. A kingdom no longer backed the diplomat.

He was now just a regular man who had assaulted him.

"I... I believe prison is only fair for what he did to me..." Tobias mumbled.

Phoenix nodded her head, acknowledging his words.

She then turned her head toward Coral.

"Coral. My dear Coral. I know you want to forget this the most. But as the gravest victim of this man's actions, your opinion is the one that weighs the most here this morning. What do you think he deserves for his actions towards you?"

Coral fumbled her hands together, looking at her feet, tears already accumulating at the corner of her eyes. Images of her being raped flashed through her mind.

"Coral. Please look at me," Phoenix gently asked.

The maid lifted her chin, her tear-filled eyes locking on the queen.

"I know this must feel terrible for you, and I am sorry we need to remind you of such a painful and horrifying memory. But I believe your opinion matters. Can you share it with us?"

Castien looked at his fiancé, and her pain hurt him. The Coral he had known, the one he fell in love with and proposed to, was nowhere to be seen.

"Your Majesty," he spoke up, trying to relieve the pressure from Coral.

But a little girl appearing before his eyes, floating a foot and a half above the ground, who grabbed his jaw and shut it for him, interrupted him.

This was Luna, acting on Astaroth's orders.

"Castien, do you not know the meaning of silence?" Astaroth asked, looking at him with anger.

Castien didn't even know how to react.

Alena opened her mouth to speak up but received a death glare from Luna, and shivers ran down her spine.

"Papa said quiet. You be quiet," Luna said in her cute but heavily mana-laced voice.

"If either of you opens their mouth out of turn, you will eat soup for the foreseeable future. I don't want to have to warn you again."

Alena nodded, clenching her jaw shut. She was angry at the king for the threat, but, ultimately; he was the authority in the room and had already ordered them to stay quiet.

Or, at least, Phoenix, the queen, had.

Castien couldn't nod, as the pressure from Luna's hand clamping down on his jaw was too powerful. But from the look he gave Astaroth, he had understood.

With a simple mental command, Luna disappeared inside him, and he nodded to Phoenix.

Coral was white as chalk at the situation.

She felt like the room would blow up at any moment as it waited for her to talk.

Coral could hear her heartbeat inside her head. The room was spinning as the blood flow accelerated inside her, making her dizzy.

Phoenix rose from her throne, walking down the dais as Coral started hyperventilating.

The maid couldn't see what was happening around her already, as the room was spinning too fast, her legs shaking under her.

When she felt arms hug her frail body, she almost jumped in fright. Her sight filled with red hair, which smelled of lavender and vanilla, as the queen hugged her tightly.

"It's okay, Coral. No one is going to hurt you. You are amongst friends and family. You are safe. Breathe in, breathe out."

Coral started breathing in and exhaling loudly as her heart slowed and her breathing stabilized. But the emotions inside her exploded, her tears flowing out uncontrollably.

She sobbed in Phoenix's arms as the red-haired woman rocked her sideways, trying to comfort her.

Alena's hardass facade broke down as she saw her daughter-in-law in shambles. She joined in the hug, awkwardly at first, until she realized Phoenix had started holding her as well.

"It's ok to cry. You are allowed to cry. You are allowed to feel weak. It is my duty to be strong for you. And I will complete my duty. However, I want to know what that duty entails. But take your time. Cry. Cry and empty out the fear from your mind. It's ok," Phoenix ushered in her ear.

And so she did.

## Chapter 750 A Horrifying Option

Coral cried her heart out for fifteen minutes uninterrupted, to the point of crying herself dry. All the pent-up emotions inside her were released in this flow of tears, snot, and unintelligible babbling that the people around could only listen to and empathize with.

Her betrothed, Castien, felt guilty that he couldn't do anything to help. Glancing at King Astaroth, he knew the man wouldn't allow him to join in on the hug.

And even if he did, he would only hug Queen Phoenix and his mother, not even reaching his fiancé.

But his guilt ran deeper.

The guilt of being unable to protect her, to be there for her, when she was in danger. Rage filled him as he thought of the atrocities committed against the woman he loved.

His fists clenched so hard, his nails dug into his palms, as blood started trickling down his fingers and onto the ground.

Astaroth could smell the crimson liquid and looked at Castien.

His eyes mellowed out as he felt remorseful for his actions only minutes ago.

'Maybe I went a bit overboard? He is, after all, grieving. Just like her...' Astaroth thought as he glanced in Coral's direction.

'No. I had to stay strong. If he can't respect us even in this very room, then he never will. I'll talk to him later. Set things straight,' he mused.

When the tears finally stopped and the sobbing receded, Alena pulled back, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. She looked at the queen, who embraced the girl tightly, and a faint smile reached her lips.

Glancing at the king, Alena knew he only acted the way he did toward Castien to reign in the impulses of her son. This was a throne room, a place supposed to be the summum of dignity.

Astaroth felt her gaze on him and turned his eyes to look at her.

Alena nodded at him, and he nodded back.

'They aren't trying to be tyrannical. They care. But order must be maintained,' Alena thought, walking to her son's side.

"Behave yourself for the rest of this meeting. We can talk to him later if we have any grievances. He'll listen. For now, respect your fiancé's pain, and keep your mouth shut until told to. Understood?"

Castien looked at his mother, another pang of guilt crashing into him. He nodded his head weakly before lowering his eyes to the ground.

'Is that what I'm doing? Disrespecting her pain? But what about my pain? Am I being selfish?' he wondered, feeling a knot in his throat.

Phoenix kept Coral in her arms until her shaking stopped.

Then she heard Coral's hoarse and feeble voice whisper from within her arms.

"Thank you, Queen Phoenix. I'm okay now. I can talk."

Phoenix pulled away, still holding the girl's shoulders, giving her a loving smile.

"Remember, Coral: friends and family. You are safe. Speak freely."

Saying these words, Phoenix let go of her and walked back up the dais to sit next to Astaroth.

"Let us resume this hearing, shall we?" she asked, glancing over at everyone.

Heads nodded all around, and Phoenix was satisfied.

"Alright. Coral, I believe it is your turn to speak. We are listening."

Coral could feel the gazes land on her, but instead of feeling pressuring, as they did earlier, she felt as if they were a blanket wrapping around her, warm and comforting.

She breathed in, exhaled loudly to muster her courage, and lifted her eyes toward the thrones.

"I... I don't want to be the cause of more pain. But I think he should pay for the things..."

Coral paused, her hands beginning to shake again. But she felt a firm hand land on her shoulder.

Lifting her eyes to meet the gaze of the person next to her, she found her betrothed's gaze saddened but supporting. This gave her the push she needed.

She turned her gaze back to Astaroth and Phoenix but focused on Astaroth.

"He did unspeakable things. Things I wouldn't wish upon the worst person on this continent. I don't want to cause more pain, as karma usually takes care of things like that. But I want him to pay. I want him to feel the pain I felt."

Astaroth could feel a shiver of rage inside her voice. He smiled in response.

"It goes without saying, Coral," Astaroth said, smiling at her warmly.

"But I don't want to decide his fate," Coral added.

"Hmm. Very well," Phoenix hummed, her hand reaching under her chin.

"I know two people who would love to give a verdict. But before we get to them, I want to ask the others here what they think.

"Chele? What is your verdict on the matter?" Phoenix asked, turning to the Lizardman, who had remained quiet all along.

A smile, or something resembling it, stretched on the head servant's face.

"I, glad you assked, my Queen. For the crime of violently assaulting one of my ssservantsss, and violating the sssanctity of another, he dessservesss death. In my homeland, he would be beheaded and left to rot under the sssun," Chele said, his S' dragging out through his forked tongue.

Astaroth and Phoenix nodded their heads.

As he wasn't speaking more, Phoenix turned her gaze to Rodney next.

"What about you, Commander Levine? What would Themiscus do to him for his crimes?" she asked.

Rodney gazed at her with a complicated look.

"It depends on his status. The assault of a servant is a matter dealt with trivially in Themiscus. But the matter of defiling a maiden's purity... well... that is harsher punishment."

He paused, his face showing discomfort.

"How much harsher, Rodney?" Astaroth pressed.

Rodney sighed loudly before speaking again.

"Given his high status before, he would be sent to the gallows, and deprived of food, water, but most importantly, mana, until his body gave up on him."

"And what about a commoner?" Phoenix asked, her eyes cold.

Rodney shuddered at the thought.

"A commoner committing such crimes... would be burned at the stake for a hundred times longer than he forced himself on the maiden," Rodney said gravely.

Raising his eyes to see the monarchs' reactions, he had expected horror.

But instead, he was the one reacting in horror.

They were both grinning.