

## New Eden 921

### Chapter 921 A Snake In The Henhouse

As the evening dawned on the east coast of North America, plenty of New Eden players were once again unsure of what to do with their new spare time.

But one player wasn't in this boat. He had lost everything.

With no more guild, no more sponsor, and now, no more game to purge his anger on, Damien Grimm could think of nothing better to do than cause problems for others.

Even with the debts he had to repay to the sponsors he lost, Damien had no shits to give and was spending his money like it was his last day on earth.

'With the shit life I had, might as well go out with a bang, right?' he thought.

So, after drinking his liver into the gutter, he took the keys to his brand new Porsche, and drove away onto the highway, paying no heed whatsoever to the speed limits.

Piss drunk, and barely able to see straight, it was a miracle Damien was even able to make it to the highway without wrapping himself around a telephone pole. But the burning rage inside his mind kept him lucid enough not to kill himself just yet.

As soon as he stopped thinking about the beautiful women around him, and the booze in his mouth, memories of his father beating him to an inch of his death came back, haunting his mind.

He couldn't get the image of his father's face out of his mind.

There was no rage in his eyes, as he had beaten him—no hatred in his gaze.

No.

The man instead looked like he was enjoying beating him up. Like it was something he relished in doing.

Something he fantasized about and could finally do.

Damien was too intoxicated and angry to hear it, but his teeth had begun grinding against each other, as he gripped his steering wheel increasingly hard.

The metal ring in his hand was whining as the metal was bending in his hands.

Looking at the signs on the side of the road, Damien finally snapped out of his anger.

A creepy smile crept up his lips.

"At least I'll be able to enact one revenge soon enough," he grinned, as he read the highway sign.

\*Montreal: 147km\*

\*\*\*

Back in Montreal, in a hotel across the street from Alex's building, a man was having a glass of wine on an open terrace, facing the building that towered higher than the hotel across the street.

In his right hand, he swirled the glass of wine around, taking in the light aroma of the red wine as it spun in his glass. In his left hand, he held a pair of binoculars, which were resting on his lap.

"It took me weeks to find out where you lived. I can't believe that spoiled brat was willing to pay so much money just to find you. What a waste of my talents. I could have been taking down at least two marks at the same time..." the man complained in a suave voice.

He put the binoculars on the table before him and looked at the crackling fireplace inside his room, which was only a cheap imitation of a proper fire.

"If only a better hotel had been closer to this condo complex... This place might be a four-star, but it's nothing compared to my normal lodgings. Urgh, what a waste of my time..."

The man then glanced down at his left hand, which was now empty, and smiled as he made the hand go invisible, on and off, thinking about all the possibilities of this newfound talent.

"Who would have thought that a game I picked up as a pass-time would yield such marvellous boons? Ah, all the things I can do with a skill like this. Infiltrating facilities, shadowing marks, disappearing into crowds after an easy hit.

"So many options, so little time to explore them all. And yet, here I am. Wasting most of my precious off-time on a simple find-and-observe task from a rich, pompous piece of human trash..." he complained, his face going sombre.

After putting the glass of wine on the terrace table, the man walked into the lounge of his hotel suite and pulled out a long suitcase, lovingly sliding his hand on the cover.

"Ah, my sweet Marlene... How I long to feel the light caress of your recoil as I take down a target from a kilometre away..." he murmured, opening the case slowly and gazing upon a golden-plated rifle.

He slid his hand on the rifle, almost like it was his wife, and shivered in pleasure.

"Ah, the visions you bring me through that scope of yours... Brains flying, blood splattering, people falling to the deadly embrace of your .338 calibre rounds... The soft song of your ejection mechanism, as I pull your bolt back, and the bullet casing goes flying..."

The man started rubbing his crotch as he lovingly rubbed his rifle, making love with the object through his gaze. Any person seeing this would assume this man had a few screws loose, and they wouldn't be wrong.

"I knew you were insane, but I didn't think you were 'Romance a gun while shafting, insane, Gregory," a voice came from the balcony.

Gregory quickly grabbed his rifle, which always had a bullet in the chamber, and spun toward the balcony. With his dick still half-hard, and pants almost entirely unbuttoned, he looked for the source of the voice, but couldn't find it.

"I never thought I'd see you again. To think I was afraid of such a nut job in my last life. Pathetic, really," the voice echoed again, this time coming from inside the room.

Gregory spun on himself, looking for the person talking, but couldn't see him.

What he did notice, though, was the dying fire. The light from it slowly staggered before snuffing out entirely, casting shadows in the room.

"Who are you? How did you get in here without my noticing?" Gregory asked, his voice acidic, but his tone calm.

"What, did you think you were the only one who could play around in the shadows? How foolish of you," the voice echoed.

"If you know who I am, then you should know better than to mess with me, whoever you are," Gregory threatened.

But the voice chuckled, as it echoed inside the room, seemingly coming from everywhere at once.

"To think once upon a time that threat would have had me on my knees, begging for forgiveness. How low I had fallen. Or rather, how low had your little boss dragged me, and so many others."

Gregory was starting to sweat. The pressure he was feeling was all too real, making him question his unwanted guest's identity.

Very few people on this Earth could make him feel like he was a lesser being. It was most unpleasant to be put in a situation where he could tell the person inside the room with him was toying with him.

Especially since he was usually the one doing the toying.

"Tell me what you want and be on your way. Or I can become serious, and we find out which one of us hides better until one of us dies," he grinned.

But his grin was cut short, as he felt two sharp spokes push into his back ever so slightly.

"I would love to play with you, Gregory. But I don't have that kind of time to waste. You see, I don't give a shit about you. You work for money, and can be bought. Which means you can still be useful in the grand scheme of things," the man behind him said, suddenly becoming tangible.

In the reflection of his scope glass, Gregory could see a man, judging by his traits, around his thirties, with a golden bident in his hands.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked.

"That is irrelevant to the situation. What is, though, is when your boss gets here."

Gregory huffed.

"You know I can't sell out my clients. What kind of reputation do you think that would give me? As a fellow hitman, don't you have that common courtesy?"

David, who was having fun with the man's despair, suddenly frowned.

"A fellow hitman? Do you think I'm scummy like you? I would never waste my time killing for money. I'm not a lowlife like yourself," he spat.

"Then how did you get the drop on me?" Gregory asked, confused.

"I have my ways. But, like I said. Irrelevant. Tell me when Damien gets here, or get your heart pierced through your back without a chance to fight back," David threatened, pushing his bident harder into his back.

The truth was, he couldn't keep this weapon manifested for long yet, and he was on a clock, which was why he was being so pushy.

"You think threats will get me to talk? You may think I'm scummy, but I'm not a sellout. I guess we'll have to find out who the better hide-and-seek player is, after all," Gregory said, grinning widely.

The next moment, he vanished from before David, who thrust forward with his bident, only to hit the air.

'Shit. I knew he was slippery, but this is next level,' he thought, as he melted back into the room's shadows.

The room became deathly silent as shadows flickered under the rising moonlight.

It was on.

## Chapter 922 History's Lamest Game Of Tag

There was barely a sound in the room as both men tried to spot the other, making sure to stay hidden.

David had a better understanding of his powers, and was using mana to track the hitman, but it wasn't as easy as he thought. Something was strange about his movements.

It was like the hitman was teleporting in some way. But he shouldn't have that ability.

In David's recollection, Gregory was a master of stealth and long-range assassination, not a wielder of magic. This revelation only deepened the mystery.

Yet his presence kept jumping around the room, and it wasn't in steady paths, either. He could tell the presence was vanishing and reappearing.

But, for the hitman, things were looking grim as well.

He couldn't even get a beat on where his assailant was. He could only feel the threatening presence all around him, like an all-encompassing ball of killing intent.

"Do you intend just to hide, after threatening my life, boy?" Gregory mocked, trying to taunt his assailant out of hiding.

His voice reverberated all around the room, as he was moving all over the place in rapid succession.

"I don't see you being the bigger man and showing yourself either," David mocked back.

David's voice seemed to come from everywhere all at once, making the hitman curse under his breath. He had hoped to pinpoint the man's spot from his voice, but it was futile.

"Did you expect to barge into a master assassin's room and have a fair fight? How stupid can a person get?"

David laughed at this, his laughter echoing in a creepy fashion.

"For a master assassin, you sure are hiding a lot, you pussy. How about you accept your fate and stop bitching so we can end this farce?" David taunted back.

"What did you just call me?!" Gregory snapped.

But he couldn't go out of stealth. If he did, there was no telling from what angle the attack on him would come.

"Come out of your shadows, so I can fucking kill you, asshole!" Gregory shouted, his movements slowing as he tried raising his awareness.

But this only made his life harder, as David started using some of the undead in his shadow to grab at the presence's ankles. The skeletal and zombified hands weren't able to catch him well, but he could tell they were touching him.

But all this expenditure of mana wasn't going to go unnoticed.

Already, from across the street, as certain someone was looking in their direction, his eyes predatorial.

Alexander had been woken up again by the surges of mana near his location. He was standing on his master bedroom balcony, looking at the hotel across the street.

He could tell one of the suite rooms on the upper floors was host to a battle between awakened people and could even recognize the essence of one of them.

"What is David doing over there, and who is fighting against him?" he wondered, noticing the inside of the room was much darker than the outside, as the city lights seemed to shed no light into that area.

He knew the trick David was using, as he had used one similar back when he invaded the Bianchi manor. But David's was a little less airtight.

After all, his shadow wasn't meant to be used in this way.

Back inside the hotel room, Gregory noticed someone was eyeing them from across the street, and he grinned.

'If I can't get this fucker off me, then I guess I'll make him get off. If he's here, I can only assume he is protecting the one I have marked. Let's see what he does when I suddenly have his protégé in my sights,' Gregory mentally grinned.

His first mistake was thinking David was here to protect Alex.

Alexander didn't need his protection from a lowlife like this. Hell, David was sure he'd hunted people more dangerous.

Especially since he had caught wind of someone kidnapping Constantine Levesque just the day before, after she had someone pick her up in her private plane halfway up in James Bay.

He didn't know many people who could grab that woman and teleport away with her so easily. So he already knew who did it, even if she wasn't willing to admit it.

The second mistake Gregory made was thinking that this mark was easy.

If the hitman had done his due diligence on the man before trying to track him down, he would have found clues as to who he was trying to track down. How many encounters had Alexander Leduc survived against armed people?

How stupid did one have to be to think his gun would make a difference?

'This level of stupid,' David guessed, as he felt the hitman's presence suddenly stop bouncing around and vanish.

'Is he really going to take a shot at him? Does he realize I'll find him the second he does?' David wondered.

Across the street, Alex suddenly felt killing intent brush against him, and he snickered.

"Do your worst," he mouthed, looking at the suite across the street.

Gregory, who had focused all his skill on completely concealing his presence, was lying down next to his sofa. Marlene was propped on the backrest to angle her muzzle upwards.

He was looking in his scope, aimed at the mark's head, when he read his lips.

'Do your worst? Does he know I'm here? No... It can't be...' Gregory thought, as he hesitated to take the shot.

But his hesitation was his downfall.

Across the street, feeling the killing intent waver, Alex clicked his tongue in annoyance.

He melded with Asmodeus, and teleported into the hotel room, surprising both David and Gregory, as he appeared in the lounging area, grabbing at the air.

But he wasn't grabbing at nothing. He could sense exactly where the hitman was, and he had just grabbed at his collar.

"You had your chance, chump. Since you didn't have the balls to take it, I'll just assume you are second rate and save us the trouble of hunting you down," Alex said, as he snapped the man's neck.

There was a resounding crunch, as the man's head spun a hundred and eighty degrees on itself, before the man went limp, and his rifle fell to the ground.

David reappeared next to Alex, his face in a disappointed grimace.

"I had him, you know?"

Alex turned his head to him and laughed.

"I know. But I got impatient. Do you know who he works for?"

David nodded.

"Damien sent him. This man usually works for the guy's dad. I'm surprised he even had the funds to hire him, even if it was just for a tracking task."

Alex frowned.

"I would ask you how you know all this, but I think I don't want to know."

David only grinned in response.

"I was hoping to get him to tell me when his client was arriving. There is no way Damien hired him just to know where you live. I'm sure he was plotting something."

It was Alex's turn to nod.

"For sure. Did he tell you?"

David shook his head no.

"He was too eager to see if he could take me out before we started a little game of hidden tag. He lost, obviously," David mocked, pointing at the dead man in Alex's grasp.

"Obviously," Alex chuckled.

"A shame I couldn't get him to talk," David said.

"I would have loved to talk to that bastard myself. Try to beat some sense into him, maybe," he added.

But Alex grinned.

"I can get him to talk," he declared, looking at the dead man.

"How? Some high-level undead retain their memories once they are turned, which could work for me, but I doubt he would make one. At best, this clown makes a half-decent skeleton sniper. What other trick did you have in mind?"

Alex turned his head to David.

"Did you need his soul to raise him?"

David chuckled, shaking his head.

"Most undead have been dead for so long that their souls have long since rejoined the cycle. Why do you ask?"

Alex didn't bother asking, as he pressed his left hand on the dead hitman's chest, before making a pulling motion.

David looked in horror, as the soul pulled out of the body, a pristine white flame, flickering in the night's lack of light.

"That... is mildly terrifying..." David admitted, shivering a bit.

Alex chuckled a bit before he twisted his hand, and the soul vanished.

"I'll get you answers soon enough. You can have his body; I don't need it. In the meantime, I will head back home and eat a bite. I'm starving," Alex said, throwing the dead man to the floor.

David watched him teleport back across the street, like nothing had happened, and he hadn't taken a life just a minute ago, as easily as toasting bread.

"I guess it's a good thing he is still on our side..." he mumbled, crouching near the body.

He shook his head to wash away the negative thought.

"As for you, Gregory Lingerian, you will make a fine addition to my backline collection if you retain even half your gunning skills," he muttered, smiling at the body.

Anyone watching this would find the scene perplexing, as if David were a psychopath. But it wasn't death that David enjoyed.

It was the benefits he gained from it. After all, a body was just a new soldier waiting to be raised under his command.

And there could never be enough soldiers under him.

## Chapter 923 A Dispute Quickly Settled

As Alex returned home, he reached into his mind space for a moment to give instructions.

As he arrived, the air was thick with the cacophony of the eight demon kings, their voices clashing in a chaotic symphony, arguing about who should consume this new soul inside the soul space.

"Quiet!" Alex snapped, as the voices died down.

Alex looked at all of them and glanced over at Sangis, who was quietly observing them in a corner.

"I didn't send this man's soul in here for you to snack on. This is not a game. He was working for someone, and we need to know when that someone is getting here. Whoever finds me those answers first gets to eat the soul," he declared, his voice carrying the weight of the task.

But that left one massive issue.

"Sir," Paimon said, walking toward him with a lascivious gait.

"How are we supposed to get answers fairly? Only one of us can possess this soul at a time. Wouldn't that make this an unfair solution?" she asked, brushing her hand on his chest while biting her lip.

Alex slapped the hand away, making her moan in delight.

"Keep your hands to yourself, vixen. I already thought of this. This is why Sangis will be letting you into it one at a time, with a very limited amount of time to question him. No peering into his mind, Sangis will know. Torture him, tear him apart, as long as you leave the soul intact for the one after you; I don't care about your methods," Alex said.

He looked at Paimon and scoffed.

"Hell, you can even fuck his brains out if it gets you the answer," he added.

The demon smiled in glee, thinking of all the pent-up tension she would be allowed to release.

"Then who gets to go first?" Sangis asked, his gritty voice making Alex wince in displeasure.

He looked at the Nephilim and smirked.

"You chose. This space is as much yours as it is mine, so you are the boss. Whatever you do, though, do it fast. I don't want to get surprised by Damien's arrival," he ordered.

Sangis nodded, as did the demon kings, before Alex vanished from the soul space.

And before Sangis could even turn to the demon kings, Paimon was already standing behind him, her hands wrapped around him and clutching his dick through his tunic.

"How about you let me go first, and I give you a bit of my time later, lovely?" she asked, nibbling on Sangis' neck.

"You vixen! That's cheating!" Bael cursed, looking at this whore give herself away so easily.

"You're just jealous I didn't offer myself to you, Bael," Paimon mocked.

"Hah! As if I would be attracted to a being like you, you ugly pig!" Bael rebuked, turning his head away.



But Paimon wasn't done teasing him.

She reappeared behind the demon king Bael, and slid her hands on his chest from behind, lowering them until she was at the edge of his manhood.

"Oink oink, the little piggy wants some. What are you going to do, oh might Bael," she whispered in his ear, making him shiver.

"Enough!" Asmodeus snapped.

"Let the abomination choose. We don't have all day," he added, throwing a disdainful glance at Sangis.

Sangis pulled a rare grin, his face contorting horribly.

"Then I guess you go last, Asmodeus," he declared, his doubling voice annoying Asmodeus deeply.

"Whatever. I have no interest in questioning a human. They will all fail on their first attempt, anyway. I'll prevail in the end, and get to consume this sad excuse of a soul," he mocked, throwing disdainful looks at the others.

"You know, Asmodeus, if your skin wasn't as black as that flame you call a soul, I would think you are an angel. Always thinking you are better than us. Tch! How pompous," Belial said, spitting at Asmodeus' feet.

"What was that, you glorified seer?!" Asmodeus quipped.

"Hey, at least my powers aren't being used as a mode of transportation, you miniature carriage," Belial replied, grinning at his peer.

\*\*\*

Outside the soul space, while the demon kings were trying all manners of bribing and coddling to get the first shot at Gregory's soul, Alex had already tuned them out.

He had no time to waste on listening to these eight fools argue and try to gain favour with Sangis. He could also tell Sangis hated all of them equally.

It was justified, all things considered. They all held a palpable disdain for him, and what he was.

Why would he appreciate any of them, if they treated him like an abomination and a pariah, anyway?

'Serves them right for letting their emotions about him transpire so much in his presence. Now that he holds power over who gets a chance at consuming this soul, they might stop treating him like shit.'

Alex may not have liked Sangis' voice, but he didn't hate him, per se. Sangis was a part of him, after all.

It would be hypocritical of him to hate the very thing he was stupid enough to create.

All things considered, the Nephilim was a great addition to his power, and the fusing of the two entities had stopped the constant power struggle inside his mind. He still had no idea what the third form available to him would give, in terms of benefits, but he wasn't in a hurry to find out.

For now, though, he needed to think about the next few days.

Since the plane was soon to be ready for them to use, and they had already picked their first stop, they needed to figure out what the most pressing matter was to settle once there.

Should they recruit locals to help them? Or should they do all the hard work themselves and only tell the locals afterward?

In terms of difficulty, Alex doubted that the harpies of South Korea would be much of a threat to them. So they could deal with them without too many hands.

But dealing with the monsters alone, without locals, might breed political unrest. After all, they were basically an armed force stepping into a foreign country to deal with an issue on their soil.

Any sane person could see what issues this entailed.

Then, if they hired locals, how were they to convince these hired hands to follow their orders and not go rogue on them? This could set them back big time if these hired locals suddenly got themselves killed.

It was a hassle either way.

"Wait... Isn't Athena Korean?" Alex remembered.

If he could get her to guide them, and act as their local face, then that would save him trouble. But he wasn't sure she'd say yes.

Last he checked in with her, she was having family troubles, and was practically under house arrest by her parents.

"Not that they can keep her there, if she doesn't want to," he mumbled, imagining she had already started changing.

But he knew filiality played a much heavier role in Eastern cultures. If Athena refused to go against her parents' words, he couldn't force her.

He doubted they would listen to the pleas of a Westerner like him, especially one who wasn't a hardworking person by their standards.

"Why is everything always so complicated?" he grumbled, stepping back inside the bedroom.

"Because life isn't supposed to be easy, love," Kary mumbled from the bed, half awake.

"Did I wake you up?" Alex asked, looking at her apologetically.

"No. It was the freaking mana waves from across the street. Do you know what happened?" she asked, looking at him with tussled hair.

He chuckled at her appearance, finding it delightful, before laying down next to her.

"It was nothing—an argument between two awakened in the hotel across the street. I dealt with it already," he said, hiding the fact he had killed one of them, and the other was David.

"Mm," she groaned, cuddling up to his chest.

"Can we sleep a bit longer?" she asked, sighing tiredly.

"Sadly, we've been sleeping all day already. We shouldn't extend that much further, or we'll fuck up our sleep schedule even worse," Alex chuckled, brushing her hair with his hand.

Kary moaned in pleasure as the hand softly stroked the top of her head and the base of her nape.

"Fine, I'll get up. In a few minutes, though. Let me enjoy this moment first," she said, wrapping her arms around him.

"Sure. We can stay like this for a few minutes," Alex replied, smiling warmly.

They lay in bed for a while more, going way past the couple minutes Kary had requested, as she practically fell asleep in his arms again, while Alex thought about the coming times, softly brushing her hair with his fingers.

'I wonder how long we will be able to enjoy such a calm rhythm of life...' he mused, his smile dropping sadly.

Even if the merging didn't happen anytime soon, a genuine threat was still looming above their heads.

That alone was enough to cut their calm lifestyle...

"Let's hope it's longer than a few weeks..."

#### Chapter 924 A Quaint Coffee Shop

After letting Kary nap a bit more, Alex slowly shook her awake, murmuring in her ear.

"Alright, sleepy head. Even though night is soon falling, I would like for us to get a few things done. Otherwise, we'll have wasted an entire day being totally unproductive."

Kary groaned into his chest, wanting to stay like this, but Alex chuckled, as he rose from the bed, leaving her alone in a strange position under the covers.

"I'll go make coffee while you wake up. If you aren't down in five minutes, I'm coming back up and jumping on the bed until you get up," Alex threatened, laughing his way out of the room as he saw a flicker of flames above the bed.

He sauntered his way downstairs and started brewing a soothing coffee pot as he inhaled the pleasant smell of freshly brewed coffee.

Remembering the acidic comment Richard had made earlier that day, Alex frowned.

"My coffee smells nice... Who is he to judge it and call it garbage..." he grumbled, pulling out the card the man had left him.

He looked at the number, wondering if it was worth his time to call it, or if he should just throw the card away as the insult it was.

"..."

"Ah, what the hell. What do I have to lose aside from a bit of cash?" he muttered, putting his phone into his ear.

He looked at the card, and the number flashed in his thoughts, instantly dialling itself as the ring echoed in his mind.

"Hello, and thank you for calling Adrés Ground Paradise. This is Andrés himself speaking. How may I help you today?" a man with a heavy Colombian accent answered after a few rings.

"Hi, sir. An acquaintance of mine gave me your card, saying you had the best coffee in town. I was wondering if you were still open?" Alex asked, surprised to get an answer at all.

Given the later time of day, he had half expected to fall on voicemail and get the opening hours told to him by a machine.

"Unfortunately, sir, we are currently closed. But I always pick up the phone, regardless. Some of my clients are more the nightbird kind, and an excellent coffee has no clock attached to it, if you know what I mean.

"Is there anything I could do for you?" the man asked, sounding very happy.

"Uh... I guess. This acquaintance of mine said the coffee I keep is garbage. Could you recommend a blend that would be a bit higher in quality?" Alex said, unsure of what to ask.

He wasn't a coffee expert, so he had no idea what to ask for, after all.

"You called the right person. Here's what we can do. I'll give you the address to my shop, and you can meet me there in thirty minutes. If I can learn about your tastes, I'll be able to counsel you in person better. Is that okay with you?" the man asked.

Alex was astounded.

"Aren't you closed? I don't want to be an inconvenience..."

"Nonsense, sir. For a potential new client, no inconvenience in sight. It will be my pleasure to the world of high-quality coffee!" Adrés said, sounding proud.

Alex was taken aback.

"This is what you call premium service,' he thought.

"Alright then, I'll note your address down, and be there in thirty minutes," he replied, a smile creeping up his face.

The man happily told him the shop's address before he hung up.

Alex noted down the address on a post-it before shoving it into his pocket. Kary barely turned the corner of the staircase when she saw him stuff a piece of paper into his pockets, and walked up to him, grumbling.

"Who was that on the phone? Was it Richard again?" she asked, grabbing a cup in the cupboard.

"No, it was someone else. We are heading to meet them, so make your coffee to go," Alex replied with a wide smile.

"Meet them? At this time of day?" Kary asked, looking at the clock on the coffee machine.

It was quarter past seven.

"Who meets up at after dinner hours?" she asked, confused.

"You'll see once we are there. Now get dressed. We have to be there in thirty minutes," Alex mocked, heading upstairs to put on cleaner clothes.

Kary groaned in discontent, unhappy that she was being rushed around like this only minutes after getting to her feet. This was the opposite of how she imagined getting up that day.

But she still went and got dressed, pulling her messy hair into a ponytail, as she had no time to do anything else, and waited by the elevator doors with her to-go mug in hand.

Alex was actually slower than her, this time around, as he tried putting on clothes that looked a bit more upper-class than usual.

Kary growled when she saw him coming toward the elevator.

"If you'd told me we were meeting someone important, I would have told you to go alone. I'm not in a formal and presentable attire..."

Alex chuckled.

"Don't worry about it. I doubt the person we are about to meet will care. I'm just trying to look flashy, so he doesn't keep the door locked in my face," Alex explained.

"This has better be worth it..." Kary grumbled, sipping her coffee as the elevator doors dinged open.

Alex walked into the elevator, pressed the ground floor button, and mapped out their destination on his neurophone.

Luckily for them, it wasn't too far away, so they wouldn't need to call a cab. They could walk to it and make it with a few minutes to spare.

Kary was a bit disappointed that they would be walking given she was still tired as hell, but she kept her complaining to low growls and grunts.

Alex had to contain his laughter as he walked around with the basic equivalent of a cave woman, who was grunting her discontent next to him, at least until her coffee started kicking her brain into gear.

After walking for almost fifteen minutes, Alex stopped in front of a large shop window, with closed lights inside the shop. In the window, Kary could read 'Adrés Ground Paradise,' and she wondered what this was about.

"Did we walk over here to come to a closed coffee shop?" she asked, confused.

Alex chuckled as he grabbed her free hand.

"Don't worry, we didn't walk here for nothing. And, if I believe Richard's words, this man sells the best coffee grounds in town. Since he's from old money, I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't an exaggeration," Alex declared, kissing the top of her hand.

Kary looked at him, unconvinced, and took a sip of her coffee, drinking the last of it before sighing.

"This was far from enough caffeine..." she grumbled.

"Then it's a good thing you came with your husband!" a voice exclaimed behind her, with a heavy Colombian accent.

Kary almost jumped, as she hadn't been aware a man had walked in behind her like this.

But when she looked at the chubby man behind her, all she could feel was sweetness from his smile, which was covered by a ridiculously bushy mustache.

"I'm sorry, we aren't married. Just a couple," Kary corrected him.

"Huh... You could have fooled me. You youngsters ooze of love and care; I could have sworn you were married," the man said, smiling toothily.

Alex grinned at him, extending his hand toward the man.

"Andrés, I presume?"

"The one and only, at least within a twenty-mile radius, hah hah hah!" the short, chubby man exclaimed, firmly grabbing the hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Alexander Leduc, and this is my girlfriend, Kary Deveille. I was the one you spoke with on the phone," Alex introduced himself and Kary, giving the hand a firm shake back.

"Well, Mr. Leduc, you got here a bit sooner than I thought you would. If you can give me a moment so that I can light up the shop, I'll be right with you. In the meantime, let us not dawdle in the street. Come in, come in!" he exclaimed, unlocking the storefront and inviting them inside.

The second Alex and Kary stepped inside the shop, a wall of fragrances hit them, some strong, some soft, but all of which got their brains kicking into overdrive.

The smell of coffee was strong inside this shop, and it alone was almost enough to get Kary on her feet instantly.

"It smells heavenly in here!" Kary exclaimed, feeling reinvigorated.

"Christ, who knew coffee could smell this good..." Alex mumbled.

In the meantime, Andrés had gone to the back, where he turned on the power to the storefront, listening to their comments and smiling to himself.

Coffee was his pride and joy. His father and grandfather before him had all worked in the coffee business, all in some different way, and he intended to lead his son down the same industry.

His grandfather was a successful coffee bean farmer in Columbia when he was a young man, and when he passed down the farm to his sons, Andrés's father inherited the exportation part of the farm.

Moving out of Columbia to establish connections, Andrés's father moved to North America, and his son, Andrés himself, opened this shop back in the early 2000s.

All the beans in his shop came from their farm in South America, and he was very proud of this fact.

Walking back to the storefront, the man got his business face on.

"Very well! Let's sit down and learn about your preferences, so I can best recommend you!"

## Chapter 925 Getting Roped Into A Big Purchase

The next half hour was spent discussing tastes, brewing minuscule amounts of coffee to trial-taste them, and narrowing down the options.

Kary was getting excited as the kinds of beans were narrowing down as time went by. She was not a coffee aficionado by any measure, but all this tasting was incredible.

The coffee's rich flavours, accompanied by their natural aromatic aftertastes of chocolate, toffee, nuts, and citrus, enveloped her senses. Each small sip was a journey to coffee paradise.

The shop held its name to a higher standard in her mind now.

Even Alex, who had grown up not to be a difficult person and eat or drink what he was served without complaining, enjoyed each flavour more than the next.

After narrowing down to three beans, the owner looked at them with a smile.

"I think we have narrowed this down enough in shop. How about I make three small bags, and you can trial-run them at home? This way, you'll know which one suits your tastes better. Does that sound acceptable?"

Alex looked at the beans, remembering their unique flavours, and thought it wasn't a bad plan. After all, he couldn't decide which of these three he preferred.

"I think that is an acceptable compromise. What about you, love?" Alex asked Kary.

She simply nodded her head, thinking about the next cup she would brew herself.

"I do have one question before I bag those beans up for you," Andrés said, looking at them with a critical eye.

"Hm?" Alex hummed.

"Do you have a slow brewer at home? Because putting these beans into a standard coffee machine would be a travesty to their quality. It would ruin their unique flavours."

"Uh..." Alex uttered, looking at him bewilderedly.

Andrés knew that look and laughed.

"Hah hah hah! Don't worry about it. We have some models available in store. I just want to be sure you don't ruin the taste of the bean by doing the disservice of treating it like regular coffee. These are premium beans from my home, after all," he said, dragging his feet over to a bead curtain.

"Please follow me next door, where we sell our slow brewers. These are made by my cousin's company, back in Bogotá. Since you are also buying coffee, I'll chip in a ten percent discount; how about it?" he said, proceeding across the bead curtain.

Alex wasn't sure how he could give a ten percent discount on a slow-brew coffee machine for just three bags of coffee beans, but he wouldn't spit on a discount.

They looked at all the models Andrés showed them, but in the end, they followed his top recommendation and bought a coffee machine for a hefty price of a little over two grand, even after the discount.

Alex wasn't that attached to his money now that he had enough to sustain a thousand of his old lifestyles. But this still pinched his heart a little.

And it only got worse when he finally heard the price for three hundred gram bags of coffee beans.

"Alright! The total for the beans comes to two-thousand, seven hundred and ninety-four dollars," Andrés said with a straight face plastered with a wide smile.

Alex almost coughed blood at the price.

There were no price tags in the shop, at least on the coffee beans' side, so he had no way of knowing how much they cost until he passed the register. But the staggering price caught him by surprise and stole the wind from his lungs.

Andrés looked at him with a sharkish grin.

"I know, I know. The price is steep. But these are three of my greatest bean varieties, and they go for a hefty premium anywhere on the globe. The fact that I have direct connections to the farm already cut out twenty percent off the price," he explained.

Alex didn't want to believe the words he was hearing. But he refused to look cheap at this point.

First, it would make him look stupid, now that he had already bought the coffee machine.

Second, it would be disrespectful to refuse to buy them now after the shop owner came here himself, after hours, to give him a degustation and personal recommendations.

Lastly, it would make him look like a fraud, after he had so meticulously dressed up to look like an upper-class guy, to suddenly skimp out on the coffee beans he had wasted the man's time on.

"I think it's a fair price," Kary said, knowing Alex was on the ropes.

But she had actually looked at the prices online for the beans they were picking while Alex was checking out the coffee makers. She knew what to expect, and, as Andrés said, they were cheaper here than if she ordered some online directly from the farm in Columbia.

Alex couldn't complain unless he wanted to look like a skimping cheapskate, so he presented his card, smiling at Andrés.

"I guess it is only a fair price to pay, given the quality of this coffee," he said, laughing reluctantly.

Andrés smiled wide, nodding his head.

"The best Columbian coffee on the East Coast, if I dare say so," the older man replied, scanning the card to get his payment.

As soon as the machine dinged in confirmation, he was more than happy to lead them to the door so that he could close the shop again. But on the way out, another man stepped in through the door.

"Carlos? What are you doing here at this hour? I thought you played your game at this hour usually?" the old man asked the young man stepping into the door, looking surprised to find the store lit.

"Abuelito? Why are you serving customers at eight at night? You know that I usually deal with night orders. You should be home resting," the young man replied, looking at Alex and Kary disapprovingly.

"Nonsense, Nieto. It was a new customer, and you know full well I deal with new customers. Answer my question, young man," Andrés said, looking at the young man severely.

"Abuelito... I told you the game was down days ago. Since I have time, I thought I'd contact Diego down at the farm before it's nighttime there, too."

The old man looked at his grandson disapprovingly.



"You know your brother didn't go to the farm. Why do you keep forcing yourself to believe his lies? We'll discuss this further after I walk the customers out," the old man said, his voice icy.

"You know, it's quite alright. We can see ourselves out. Thank you for the great service, sir. I will assuredly come again, next time during open hours, for more of this brown gold you sell," Alex said awkwardly, walking past the young man on his way out.

"Please, Mr. Leduc. Call me Andrés. If these beans aren't to your liking, I will gladly recommend other beans to you. The door will always be open for a loyal customer," the old man said, returning to a wide smile.

"Then, if I am to call you Andrés, feel free to call me Alex. It was a pleasure meeting you and your grandson. See you around," Alex replied, waving at them as they left the store.

As they passed next to the young man, Carlos, Alex and Kary heard the young man whisper to them, "I know what you are."

They ignored the comment, their faces going neutral, as they left the store and walked back toward their home.

But once they reached a few blocks away, Alex looked at Kary, and said, "You felt it too, right?"

Kary nodded.

"Yeah... He's one of us... But, that was not curiosity I felt from him. Or wariness, for that matter. He was outright hostile..."

Alex nodded his head, having felt the same thing.

But it didn't make sense. Why would he be hostile toward them if they hadn't met yet?

"For now, let's ignore him and see what happens next. We don't really have time to worry about him, anyway. The plane should have already landed in Montreal and been cleared for our use by Katherine," Alex said, brushing the bloodlust off as a simple warning.

Maybe the young man thought they were after him, and were passing through his grandfather to get to him. In any case, it was useless to worry about a single kid, who probably wasn't even strong enough to take on Violette on his own.

They had bigger fish to fry. But Alex sent a text to Mr. Gu, saying he had found another awakened in Montreal, in case they hadn't spotted him already.

It was a precaution, in case the kid was trying to stay hidden, and also doubled down as a potential ally, if he could stop being so hostile.

For now, they couldn't worry about this. They had to make sure they were mentally ready for their trip.

"I wonder how Jeju Island is around this time of year," Kary said, changing the subject.

"You know what? We should maybe do some research once we get home. I wouldn't want to get there with summer clothes and freeze my ass off. Or worse, get caught in constant rain..." Alex replied, smirking.

"Let's do that once we get home. It'll give us a reason to break in this new coffee machine," she said, tapping the box in Alex's hands.

Alex nodded, smiling at her.

## Chapter 926 An Interesting Solution

On their way home, Alex finally got the intel he wanted inside his head, and he cursed mentally.

'Are you sure this is accurate, Sangis?' he asked, since Sangis was the only one who could communicate directly with him.

'It seems to be the truth, master,' Sangis' grating voice replied in his head.

'And who found out?' he asked, curious what had worked on the soul.

'Paimon. It seems the man was especially talkative when she showed him images of him having intercourse with his weapon. She was disappointed that it was an inanimate object that got him to speak,' Sangis' replied, seemingly enjoying her misery.

Alex shivered at the thought.

'What a fucking freak...' he thought.

Alex brought his thoughts back to reality, texting David. He had already lied about the situation to Kary, so he could hardly take care of this on his own.

David was the safest option.

\*\*\*

'Damien is arriving at the hotel to see the hitman in less than an hour. I can't deal with it right now. Can you take care of it?'

\*\*\*

It took a while before he got a reply, and he almost cursed at the reply.

\*\*\*

'I got other stuff to do. Handle this yourself. And what took you so long? I thought you could get answers faster than this?'

\*\*\*

Alex was half tempted to teleport to David's shelter and slap him across the face. But he refrained from doing so.

It would rouse suspicion from Kary if he suddenly said he had something to do and teleported away. Instead, he had to think of a way to fix this on his own.

So he did what he always did when he couldn't think of a solution—he texted Mr. Gu.

He explained the situation as briefly as he could and asked him to ensure the American wouldn't bother them.

Of course, Mr. Gu wasn't thrilled that Alex suddenly asked him to deal with his issues again. He told him again that he didn't work for him, but Alex said he could go through Jack, if that was what the man wanted.

It calmed down the Chinese man almost instantly. There was no use arguing.

If the young man asked him a favour, Mr. Gu knew that Jack would make him deal with it, anyway. So he told Alex he'd deal with it, without asking if he wanted it dealt with in a peaceful manner or not.

Alex brushed the concern aside, knowing that Gu Fang was intelligent and competent enough to handle the tenacious fucker that was Damien Grimm. There were other matters on his plate, after all.

"Hey, I was thinking about something," Alex said, turning his head to Kary.

Kary turned to look at him, making a fake surprised face.

"You can think?" she asked, acting impressed.

Alex clicked his tongue, knowing she was just teasing him.

"Since we chose to go to Korea as our first issue, I thought we could ask Athena for her help. She's from Korea, right?" he said, ignoring her snarky comment.

Kary put a finger to her chin, thinking about his proposal.

"I mean, we could ask her, but I don't know if she'll want to help. The last time I talked to her, she was having trouble at home and was focusing on that. Now that the game is down, I wonder what happened with the situation in her house..."

Alex wasn't in contact with a lot of people. Hell, the one he talked to the most often, aside from Kary, who lived with him, was David. And even then, that was rare.

He was the type of guy who thought, 'No news, good news.'

So, he wasn't aware of most of their living situations. But Kary was a little more social than he was.

She kept in touch with the guild officers regularly, especially the female ones.

"Could you reach out to her, then? Ask her if she's interested in helping with at least this one task. Having a local with us would help us a whole lot, don't you think?" he asked, trying to convince her.

Kary giggled.

"I can ask her, sure. But I won't force her. If she tells me she's busy, or that she doesn't want to, I won't push her."

Alex nodded.

"Of course. I wouldn't want you to force her hand, either. We are friends. Not boss and employee," he said, smiling.

"Well, technically, since we are the guild masters, we are both. But I don't want to force any of the officers to do anything. Guild members, sure. But not the officers. They deserve at least our respect for their private lives," Kary said, looking serious.

"Speaking of guild members," Alex said, pausing.

"Since the game is down, do we even have a way to contact them if we need them?" he asked.

Now that the game was offline, this was a critical point. If they needed more muscle than they could muster rapidly, their guild members might be a good option if they could reach out to them quickly.

But he hadn't added any of them to his friends' list, so he didn't have their contact information.

But Kary laughed lightly at him.

"You really haven't checked anything since you've returned, have you?"

Alex looked at her, confused.

"Huh?"

"If you had opened the guild interface once, since you came back, you would have noticed an addition in our guild page," she said, shaking her head disappointingly.

"What addition?"

"I already made sure we could stay in touch with all our guild members," Kary said, smiling at him.

Alex frowned.

"You did? How?"

Kary looked at him like he was dumb.

\*Sigh\*

"You really are a terrible guild leader... It's a good thing I'm at the helm with you, or this guild would have burned from inside already..."

Alex didn't know what to reply to that. He firmly believed it was true.

"Can you tell me, instead of mocking me?" he asked, giving her puppy eyes.

She giggled at his antics and nodded.

"I made a forum page for Paragon, and they need a valid player ID of one of our guild members to log into it. However, they needed to enter valid contact info to create their profile. I have all the info I need on them to know who to reach and where," Kary proudly declared.

"How detailed are we talking about?" Alex asked, curious.

"Phone number, country, state or province, and city. With this, wherever we go, we can reach out to the members near us if we need to. Of course, all this information is only available to the page's administrators, which are me, you, and the officers."

Alex's face went blank.

"That is... quite the detailed info. Weren't you scared they wouldn't want to sign up with those requirements?" he asked.

"At first, I thought so, too. But I realized a lot of the other guilds were doing the same. And it seems the players are more than willing to share this info, if they get to chat with their peers at any moment, without filling in their friends list.

"Many players prefer to play only with their close friends. But having quick access to knowledge in the form of a guild forum is still an exciting prospect.

"Plus, this makes it easier for the guild leaders and officers to reach them if a sudden event happens, which makes it all the more enticing. Who would want to miss a sudden event because they didn't fill in their info, right?" Kary said, smiling at him.

Alex was stumped.

"That is quite the elaborate scheme to get your players' personal info..." he muttered.

But Kary giggled.

"I don't see it as a scheme. It's more like a rewarding incentive. In my opinion, the rewards far outweigh the costs. And in the players' opinions, as well," she said confidently.

Alex had been part of guilds before, back on ToB. But none of them had been a big guild, and none of them ever asked for his personal information.

And the one guild that he joined, that did? Well, he instantly left it.

He valued his privacy too much to give just anyone his info.

But in this case, he was the one with access to all this information, and it felt like a massive invasion of privacy.

Kary could see his face change as the thoughts succeeded each other in his mind.

"Alex. This is the way that big guilds function. You need this to stay at the top. If something happens, you want to be able to get as many players online as possible, as fast as possible. This is how," she said.

"And no one forced them to give their information. If they don't want to join the forum, they don't have to. It locks them to an outer member position, since they don't trust us enough, but they lose nothing else," she added.

Alex sighed.

"It's not my place to complain about it. I left you alone to deal with the guild for a month; I guess that's what I get. In any case, it's going to be a massive help, now that we need it... So... I guess it's not as bad as I make it out to be..." he mumbled.

While they talked, they had finally reached the condo building, and were about to go inside when someone stopped them at the door.

"Mr. Leduc! Mr Leduc! Please wait a moment!"

Chapter 927 The Journalist

Turning his head toward the voice, Alex cursed.

"Fuck. Why did he come looking for me, instead of calling the number on the card..." he groaned.

"Hmm?" Kary hummed, looking at the man running at them.

"Mr. Leduc! Please! A moment of your time!" the man shouted, running at them, holding his shoulder bag in place with one hand, and his notebook with the other.

Alex stepped between him and Kary, glaring at the man.

"Listen, man. Whatever it is you want to ask, I'm not interested in answering. You are invading my privacy, and I don't deal well with that. Now, back off," he growled.

The man's feet almost screeched to a halt as his face paled.

"I am terribly sorry I came to your home. But I couldn't find any other way to reach you, Mr. Leduc," the man apologized, his face still pale, but his eyes taking in the surroundings.

Kary looked at him over Alex's shoulder and smirked.

'Typical journalist. They never know when they are stepping over boundaries until they are roughed around. And then, they become martyrs,' she thought.

Before Alex said something that would affect his budding image as the good guy, she needed to step in.

She grabbed Alex's shoulder and shook her head at him when he peaked at her over it.

Sighing loudly, Alex stepped back next to Kary.

The journalist finally caught a glimpse of the woman walking with his quarry.

"Mrs. Deveille! What a surprise to see you here with him!" the journalist exclaimed.

The journalist finally caught a glimpse of the woman walking with his quarry.

"Mrs. Deveille! What a surprise to see you here with him!" the journalist exclaimed.

Examining him, Alex found himself thinking this man was as bland as they got.

Wearing a plaid shirt and navy blue jeans, his big round glasses did his face a disservice, as his roundish jawline only looked rounder with them on. His brown eyes were sharp, though, as they darted around, his gaze taking in every detail.

A pair of high-quality earphones were wrapped around his neck, the wire dangling as he moved as it traced back into his shoulder bag. Adding to that his auburn hair, this man would blend into a crowd so well, one wouldn't be able to tell him apart from the masses if they tried.

"Is it really a surprise?" Kary asked, breaking Alex's train of thought.

"Pardon?" the journalist asked.

"We are often seen together, whether in New Eden or out of it. I thought the peanut gallery would have already assumed we were together. Or has the quality of journalism dropped so low that you guys can't even guess something so obvious?" she mocked.

She wasn't mocking to make him look stupid, but to make him understand he was overstepping into something he had no idea about.

"I... I'm sorry if I am disturbing your time together, Mrs. Deveille. Mr. Leduc. But I have so many questions to ask Mr. Leduc... I needed to come find him. And since I couldn't find his phone number anywhere, I was forced to dig into sightings of him, hoping to find him here," the man defended himself.

"And what do you want to know? I'm as bland as they come, man. Don't you think there is a reason no one can find my number anywhere? I like to keep to myself," Alex said, scoffing.

The journalist looked at him, frowning.

"Pardon my bluntness, but your appearance yesterday in that gang situation was far from 'keeping to yourself,' Mr. Leduc..." the journalist said, looking at him with a knowing look.

"I was just passing by, and I didn't want to be bothered. That is why I left you a card with a number to call if you had questions," Alex lied.

"Sir," the journalist said, looking at him with a face that screamed 'Stop lying.'

"I reviewed the footage about a hundred times. There is no mistaking it—those white wings, the hair colour change, and golden eyes. I know it was you who saved those hostages. I just want to know why you did it."

Alex clicked his tongue in annoyance.

He knew people would eventually link it back to him, but he had hoped it would take longer. He also knew Jack wanted to make him the face of this movement he was starting, with the awakened people he was training to keep the others in check.

But Alex didn't want all that attention. He was willing to take some attention, for Jack's sake, since he had already agreed to that.

But he would rather keep on the down low in all other instances.

"Fine. Let's go inside, and you can ask your questions. But keep our names off the record, and if someone shows up where we live, asking more questions, the blame will fall on you. Understood?" Kary said.

She could see the people walking by them, looking at them with curiosity, and the attention they were garnering was only growing.

"I wouldn't dare ask for more!" the journalist happily exclaimed.

Alex looked at her, groaning in displeasure, but he went along. If Kary thought this was good, he would trust her judgment.

They walked into the building and straight to the elevator, where Alex swiped his keycard, scanned his hand and retina, and spoke the voice recognition code before the elevator started moving upward.

"Wow... That is some impressive security you got there, Mr. Leduc..." the journalist said, looking at the control panel in a daze.

"And yet, I keep getting pesky visitors, who waltz into my home like they own the place..." Alex grumbled back at him.

The man swallowed nervously, wondering why Alex was in such a bad mood.

Once the elevator stopped on the fifty-first floor, where their penthouse was, Alex stepped out of the elevator first, walking directly to the kitchen, where he started grinding coffee beans.

If he were going to do an interview, it wouldn't be without coffee.

Kary giggled at his grumpy actions, waving her hand inward to the journalist.

"We'll set up in the living room. Forgive us if we don't offer a tour of the house; it's not a friendly visit," Kary said, making it clear he wasn't to wander off.

The journalist nodded, his eyes going wide as he ambled into the penthouse.

He had seen many rich houses before, so the minimalist decoration of the walls did not impress him. But the apartment itself screamed of wealth.

Everything was enormous, from the rooms to the ceiling's impressive height. The living room of this penthouse could fit his entire apartment, with room to spare, and the open-air kitchen and dining room attached to it made him feel small.

"This is quite the impressive home, Mr. Leduc, Mrs. Deveille. I never thought pro gamers could earn enough to live this lavishly, especially a guild without sponsors..." the man said as he sat on the expensive sofa.

He could tell at a glance that the leather was genuine, and sitting on it only confirmed his thought. Caressing the material, the journalist couldn't help but hold a bit of envy.

He could only wish ever to own something like this. And he knew it wasn't as a field journalist that he would make the money to afford it, either.

After grinding the beans, Alex slowly set them into the slow-drip coffee maker and sat across from the man next to Kary, who had already taken a place on the large sofa.

"Alright. Let's get this over with," he said, already looking annoyed.

"Right!" the journalist said, remembering why he was there.

He set his bag on the ground next to him before pulling out a dictaphone and pen, putting the former on the table between them, and opening the notebook to an empty page.

Alex looked at the dictaphone and could tell it wasn't new. It looked like a vintage model.

"Doesn't your job give you better equipment than this?" he commented.

The journalist looked at him, confused, before seeing what he was referring to.

"Ahh. Yes. The paper I work for gave me a brand new one when I started working for them. But it's still in its packaging, somewhere in my desk at the office. I prefer this one," the man replied.

Alex frowned.

"Why? Wouldn't the sound quality on the newer model?" he asked, curious.

"Oh, yes. By far. But I like this one. It holds sentimental value. And the vintage crackling reminds me of the times my f—Sorry. I'm sidetracking. Let us get back to the interview. I don't want to bother you longer than necessary," the journalist said, stopping his story midway.

"No, let's talk about that. I don't want to answer your questions until my coffee is ready, anyway. And we have half an hour to kill. Tell me about the dictaphone," Alex insisted.

Kary giggled at his insistence. For someone who wanted to get this interview over as fast as possible, he was awfully quick to sidetrack the subject.

"Okay..." the journalist replied, confused.



"So, where does it come from, and why do you prefer it to a newer model?" Alex asked, as if he were conducting an interview.

"It's a long story, and it is quite boring..." the journalist answered, uncomfortable with suddenly being the one under the spotlight.

"We got time."

## Chapter 928 The Zhong Kui's Truth

Far away from the bustling city of Montreal, in the remote and mysterious heartland of mainland China, nestled near the majestic peak of Huashan Mountain, a man stood, his gaze fixed on the untamed wilderness that sprawled beneath him.

His face was serene, but his eyes contained a tinge of rage.

"What are you saying, Elder Bai? You were sent there with three of our most powerful warriors, two of whom are promising upstarts, and you still were beaten back after confirming the presence of a demonic entity?"

"Master Gu Chen... It's not that simple. The boy wasn't alone. He had two of these 'awakened' with him, one whom we had already put on a watchlist. To make things worse, he had the help of Gu Fang..." the elder said, bowing to the man looking away from him.

The old master's eyebrow tilted up, hearing the name Gu Fang.

"Gu Fang, you say... What interference did he run? Did he defend the demonic entity?" the old man asked.

His anger had slightly subsided. Hearing his youngest son's name and hearing that he had beaten back four of their most powerful fighters brought pride to his heart.

'Maybe he'll see reason soon enough, when the world starts rotting, and he'll return to his rightful place here, amongst his people of the Zhong Kui. Not with that Laowai who uses him as a glorified secretary...' he thought.

"He didn't defend him, per se, Master... Gu Fang vouched for the boy, claiming he was in control of the demon within him. We tried reasoning with him, but he insisted the boy was sane of mind..."

The master spun around, his eyes back to being enraged.

"Then who defeated you?! Is it the demon, or the two awakened children?! How far have we fallen as an organization, if some game-playing kids can beat our strongest warriors into the dirt?!" he spat.

Elder Bai lowered his gaze, not daring to look the master in the eye.

"It was the demon, mostly, master. But the dead-raiser thwarted our plans as well. He knows things... things he shouldn't know..." Elder Bai said, his heart starting to beat faster.

The master could hear his heart thumping inside his chest, and his mouth started salivating.

As he lowered his head, something changed in him that Elder Bai couldn't see. His eyes.

Going from their plain brown, the master's eyes changed colour to bright gold, as the pupil of his eye turned to a feline-like slit.

"How could a filthy demon overpower you? Have I not taught you Qi arts that made even the most powerful demons quake in fear more than a millennium ago? How weak has the Zhong Kui become if a single demon can overpower four of its members?!" the master spat, his teeth sharpening.

Elder Bai could feel the power welling inside the master, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he was killed if he didn't give a satisfactory explanation.

"Master... We stopped fighting when the dead-raiser got there. He started spilling secrets about us that no one should know. He used the name of the Zhong Kui with such certainty that we—" he started saying, before being abruptly interrupted by a weight on his body, crushing him into the ground.

"Enough! Of course, he knew about the Zhong Kui! He works with a filthy demon! Our name has scared them since the dawn of man!" the master shouted, his voice producing shock waves in the air as it travelled across the mountaintop.

"Master! It's far greater than this! He spoke of our location! He mentioned the Huashan mountain!" Elder Bai pleaded, feeling his energy getting sapped out of his body.

Such was the truth of their master.

The organization had existed for a long time, always with a master who descended from the great Zhong Kui himself. But that had changed over two thousand years ago, around the same time the Christian messiah had appeared.

A person named Gu had reached out to them, offering them power beyond their wildest dreams. Power to rival the demons.

At first, the master turned the man down. But this Gu person refused the outcome of the conversation, and after what was all but an anticlimactic fight, the master was killed, and the man revealed his true nature.

A beast whom their culture had long since considered a celestial beast, a nine-tailed fox with white fur and golden eyes.

It promised power to the ones of the Zhong Kui who swore allegiance to it, saying it could make them stronger, all for the good of humanity. Few were those who refused, especially after the first few were outright killed for refusing.

The beast claimed it was only protecting its identity, and that it was on the side of good.

Elder Bai didn't know if his ancestors had accepted out of fear or lust for power, but the outcome hadn't been too bad.

The beast had kept its word, teaching them Qi arts that even the great Zhong Kui himself had never dreamt of wielding. It had made them stronger than ever before, and their slaying of demons had eased up to the point where they almost eradicated their kind on Earth.

Centuries had passed since then, with the fox's only condition being that the next leader submit their body to it so it could keep living and teaching them. No one ever questioned this practice, as it assured them continued power.

But the elders knew something that most of their organization didn't. This fox was fickle.

It was easy to displease it, and the result was always a gruesome death.

As the thought of dying here today passed in Bai Feng's mind, he felt the pressure ease up on him.

"What did you say?" he heard the fox's voice seethe.

"Master... The dead-raiser knows where the Zhong Kui is... He told me the exact location..." Bai Feng panted, trying to catch his breath.

The master's eyes and teeth returned to normal, as the pressure vanished from the elder's body.

"That is impossible. For so long, I have kept this place hidden from human and demon eyes. I doubt anyone even remembers what is up here after so long," the master said, regaining his calm.

"I would never dare say you are wrong, Master Gu. But that young man. He knew exactly where it was. He even threatened to come here and eradicate us, if we were to go after the demon boy again..."

Master Gu scoffed, finding this claim to be egregious.

"As if a human, awakened or not, could come here and kill me. That is beyond arrogant a claim to make."

"I do not doubt you would win, master. But I was more worried about the clan itself. What would happen if he managed to wipe out everyone before you ended him? The Zhong Kui protects humanity from the demons. Who will do it if we are gone?"

The master looked at the top of Elder Bai's head, sneering.

"Are you claiming that you are irreplaceable? Humans with a talent for Qi are uncommon, but not rare. Even if you all died, I could replenish this place with fresh blood in less than a year.

"The amount of humans who lust for power is far beyond what your tiny mind can fathom. Tell me. Why shouldn't I purge this place myself? Inject fresh blood within the organization?" the fox in human skin asked.

"Master..." Elder Bai said, looking up at him.

Making eye contact with the master was considered a sin in their organization, but Bai Feng was willing to risk it. The words of the dead-raiser were resounding in his head.

"I don't think we have a year..." he said.

Gu Chen glared at him, feeling his anger rising again.

"How dare you look me in the eye, you puny mortal!" he seethed.

"Master, I implore you. Listen to what I have to say. If what the dead-raiser claimed is true, it would explain all the changes we've been noticing worldwide. And if that is true, then his claim about the future is too dangerous to be ignored..."

"How dare you insinuate that a mortal knows more about the flow of time than a celestial who has lived hundreds of your lifetimes!" the master shouted, his traits changing again.

It was the first time Bai Feng saw the master's eyes change to golden, and he was terrified. But his duty as protector of mankind was more important than his life.

"If what he said is true, then you could live a million lifetimes; it wouldn't matter. There would be no humanity left to protect. Nothing more than a charred planet, filled with the very demon-kind you loathe so much!

"I beg of you, Master Gu! Please listen to what I have to say!" Bai Feng implored, slamming his head into the ground, his forehead immediately beginning to bleed.

The fox could smell the blood leaking on his forehead, and his mouth drooled again. He had to push the impulse to eat this human, out only of fear that his words might contain an ounce of truth.

"Speak. And leave no detail out," he growled, sitting back down in his chair.

"If you lie to me once, I will eat the flesh of your bones, and slay your entire lineage as punishment," he added, his tone ice cold.

## Chapter 929 Calling In Korea

Back in Montreal, a few hours passed, setting well into the night, before the journalist, whose name was Bernard Collins, finally had all the answers he wanted. Alex and Kary led him to the elevator, where they bid him farewell before sending him back down.

Once the doors had closed, Alex sighed tiredly.

"Urgh... Interviews are so tedious... I don't know how you do this and act like you enjoy it..." he complained, looking over at Kary.

"Oh, but I'm not acting. I enjoy interviews. It allows me to share my story with more people, and maybe reach the ears of more people who are hesitating with their dreams. Maybe my words will give them the push they need."

Alex frowned.

"That interview had nothing to do with dreams or reaching out to people, though..."

Kary giggled.

"I meant, in general, you dummy. Of course, some interviews are more tedious than others; this is a perfect example. All that this journalist cared about was how you saved the two hostages and what motivation you had behind it."

Alex scoffed.

"Yeah, and I had to lie about it... There was no way I could tell him I did it only to get in the good graces of another awakened, hoping she would join us in the future. That would have sounded so shallow..."

Kary hugged him from behind as he walked away from the elevator.

"Don't worry, darling. I know you aren't shallow. Sometimes, the end justifies the means. I'm sure you would have helped regardless of Elise's request if you had been present when it happened. That's just who you are," she declared, comforting him.

Of course, she was right.

There was no way Alex would have walked past a situation without at least seeing if he could help. And in this case, he knew he could.

The question was, would he have jumped in so fast if he hadn't known the context? And if David hadn't shown up, how would he have dealt with the gang members?

Knowing how his latest altercations with bad people had gone, Alex was almost sure he would have passed for the bad guy if he had dealt with the criminals himself.

But he brushed away those thoughts from his mind.

"What time is it, nine? Do you think we can call Athena? What time would it be in South Korea?"

Kary touched her chin for a moment, thinking.

"If I remember correctly, South Korea is thirteen hours ahead of us. So I believe it would be alright to call her at this hour. Keep in mind we don't have a translator function on the neuro-phones, though. This isn't inside New Eden. I don't know how much English she knows..."

Alex frowned.

"Don't the new neuro-phones have a translator function? I thought this technology was from the phones," Alex said, confused.

"It's not as good. The one they used inside New Eden had the computing power of their entire servers behind it, making it a real-time translation. The neuro-phones don't have that kind of processing power behind them," Kary explained.

"God dammit..." Alex cursed.

"Then I guess we can only hope her English is good enough for us to understand each other because I don't speak Korean. Do you?"

Kary shook her head.

"I wish. I've always wanted to visit Korea. But learning Korean isn't as easy as it sounds. So I hope you're right and she's fluent. Because if not, we are better off texting each other," she replied, giggling.

At least, in text messaging, the translator function could easily take the time needed to swap the message from one language to another. But it was a tedious process.

If they wanted to set everything in motion quickly, it was better to talk than to text.

Since neuro-phones no longer had screens, whoever wrote to Athena would have to repeat every message to the other before replying, wasting a lot of time.

At least, setting the phone on speaker was still an option, allowing many people to talk together simultaneously. Users could even join a conference call with as many users as they wished.

"You should be the one calling her. I'm sure she would find it weird if I were the one calling," Alex said, looking at Kary.

"Hmm. You're right. She would at least feel more comfortable if I were the one initiating the conversation. If you called her out of the blue, she would worry, I'm sure."

Kary pulled her earpiece out, setting it on speaker mode, and called Athena through her friends' list option, which was one of the few things still available from New Eden's servers.

The phone rang a few times before the ring stopped, and a female voice responded.

"Yeoboseyo?"

"Hi, Athena. It's Phoenix. I know I'm asking a lot already, but do you speak English? We need to talk, and texting is too complicated for the conversation we need to have..." Kary said, hoping she was being understood.

"Phoenix? I'm sorry, I answered in Korean reflexively. Yes, I speak English. Although you might have to repeat certain words for me, as I am not fluent..." Athena replied, her accent heavy, and her words measured.

Alex smiled wide. This was already a minor victory.

"Can I get Astaroth on the line with us? This is a conversation he needs to be part of," Kary asked.

"Yes. Not a problem."

Giving a thumb up to Alex, Kary set the earpiece back into her ear, going back to normal mode, and added Alex to the call. There was only one ring this time, as Alex was already waiting to answer.

"Hi, Athena. How are you?" Alex asked, acting casual.

"I am good. You?" Athena replied, her tone still neutral.

"I have a question for you. I'm sure you are busy with many things, but I have a favour to ask, and you are the only one I could ask."

There was a pause as Athena replayed the phrase in her head, trying to understand all the words.

"A favour?" she asked, unsure about the word.

"Yes, a favour. A request, if you prefer that word."

"Request. Yes, I know request. What is it?" she answered, sounding more confident.

"Phoenix and I are visiting Korea soon, and we wondered if you could be our guide. We have something to do on Jeju Island, and we need a local to guide us to where we need to go. Of course, we are ready to pay you, if you need us to," Alex explained, leaving out the details for now.

"You need a guide to Jeju Island?" Athena asked, confused.

There were many tour guides that would do a much better job than her if they just wanted a tour. Why did they call her for this?

She already had so much on her plate. She entertained the idea of hanging up already.

And with the pause she took, Kary could tell as much.

"Athena, given how you told me things were going on your end the last time we texted, I know this is asking a lot. But we need a special type of guide—one like you—one like us, actually, if you understand my meaning..." she said, trying to be subtle.

Athena's curiosity was piqued.

"One like us? What do you mean? A woman?"

Kary giggled at her misunderstanding.

"No, not a woman. We need someone who has awakened, someone with abilities from inside New Eden, someone who won't be in danger if we come across things that aren't normal."

Athena was now really interested.

"What kind of not-normal things?" she asked, her voice shaking in excitement a bit.

"Things that you would only normally see inside the game. I'm sure you are aware that some things are changing. There is an incident we have to look into as soon as possible, and we need someone to guide us there who can handle things of the supernatural type—someone like us," Kary repeated.

Athena took a moment to think their offer over.

As she glanced over the bags she was packing, her mind went to her current situation. Given what she had told her mother the night before, she had been getting ready to leave her parents' house.

If they were coming over to Korea, this was maybe a good chance for her to hitch a ride back with them, at least until she was able to get on her own feet.

"Can I ask for something else than money in exchange?" she asked.

Alex replied faster than Kary had time to ask what exactly.

"Sure. Anything you want. As long as I can give it to you, I will."

Kary glared at him.

She cut the sound on her phone, talking directly to Alex.

"Don't go promising things we can't promise. She's our friend, remember? Don't disappoint her, or I'll tear you a new one," she threatened.

Alex gulped.

"As long as it's reasonable, of course," he added, for Athena.

Athena hadn't heard their exchange, so she was unaware of the threat Alex had just received.

"I want to leave Korea. If you can get me out of here, that is all I would ask."

Alex smiled wide.

They could easily arrange this, which made Kary sigh in relief.

"Of course! Whatever you need. Helping a friend in need is being a friend indeed!" Alex exclaimed with a wide grin.

"What?" Athena asked, confused.

"Nothing! I'll make the arrangements. Don't worry about a thing."

#### Chapter 930 Filling Their Numbers

Since Athena agreed to guide them, the rest of the conversation was much more straightforward, with Kary explaining what they were walking into.

Athena seemed captivated by the idea of trying out her capabilities on this side of the veil, on something other than immobile targets. Almost too excited, to be fair.

Alex wasn't sure when they would get there, and what airport they would land at, so he couldn't give her those details, but they made sure to fill her in on everything they could.

In the end, it wasn't a long call, since Athena was having trouble understanding some details they were trying to explain to her.

The language barrier was hindering them greatly, which was already a downside, but not being able to share with her the images they had, to help explain, was their downfall.

They ended up confusing the poor girl more than anything, and promised to re-explain everything once they landed in Korea and made contact with her. It would be much easier in person, that much they were sure of.

After settling all the details about where to land and where to meet that were best for both of them, Alex left the conference call, letting Kary and Athena speak to each other.

He could tell from Kary's smile that it was appreciated, and he kissed her on the forehead before moving over to the kitchen to text a few people without feeling like he was prying.

Even though the neuro-phones cut the sound out of conversations, and Kary didn't need to speak to be heard, it still felt rude to him just to stay there and wait. It felt to him like he was eavesdropping, even though he couldn't hear a thing.

He started texting David, to find out if he had reached out to people to bring to Korea, and was surprised by the man's readiness.

David called him, refusing to continue this conversation over text.

"Of course, I reached out to people. Did you think I was going to let you handle everything? I can trust Kary to plan these things out, but you? I wouldn't trust you as far as I can throw you, hah!" David mocked.

Alex frowned.

"You realize you can throw me pretty far, right? That expression hardly applies to people like us, now..." he complained.

"Right..." David replied, realizing the irony of his comment.

"Nevertheless, I would never rely on you to plan everything. Originally, I wasn't going to rely on anyone, remember? So, of course, I have already started making calls."

Alex scoffed at his nonchalance.

"Tell me who you got," he huffed, insulted that David still preferred to handle as much as he could alone.

"I managed to get the priest kid back, Cody?"

"You mean Cory. At least don't fuck up their names..."

"Huh... I couldn't have sworn it was Cody. Well, it's on him for not correcting me once. Anyway. I got him, as well as little Jonathan. His old man wasn't happy about it, but he could hardly fault me since I didn't force the kid."



Alex was impressed that he had convinced Jack to stand down from keeping the young Jonathan at home on this one.

"How did you get him to stand down? This is going to be a dangerous one. You said so yourself," Alex asked, curious.

"Well, we are going up against what I think are harpies. The fewer people we have who are ground-bound, the better. Every player who is pinned to the ground and can't attack at a range will be useless. So, the kid is actually crucial.

"When I explained that to Jonathan, he was happy to join us, and the old man backed down after the kid begged him to let him go. He basically did all the heavy lifting for me, hehe," David chuckled.

David's logic was sound, so he understood why the old man backed down. But he was still impressed.

He would never have thought Jack would be so lenient on the young boy, not after the demon incident. He barely let the kid away from his sight.

"Alright, Mr. Cocky. Who else you got to join us?"

"I reached out through the guild forum, and got a few ranged players to join in, as well. Many of which we'll have to stop and grab as we go toward our destination, making our flight longer than intended."

Alex frowned again.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, Killi practically forced me to bring him along, saying he wanted to film the fight, so he could use the footage to convince his guild members to take him seriously. Apparently, most of his players have yet to awaken, aside from a few of his officers and himself.

"It's been causing him trouble to have them listen to him. He finally sees what taking in anyone gives him. Most of his guild members are only in the guild for the bragging rights, and now it's pulling him down. He'll organize his affairs eventually, but he's struggling right now," David said, sounding amused.

"It makes sense that he would need a little more convincing for them, then. But I thought he would be loaded enough to join us there... Why do we need to get him and extend our trip by going eastbound instead of westbound? Korea is closer through the west..." Alex asked, confused.

"Because he won't be the only one we grab on our way there. I have a few other players around Europe that want to join. Aside from Killi, Gulnur also wanted to join us. I told him he wouldn't be of much use, since he was ground-bound, but he insisted.

"Something about finally being able to travel, and wanting to visit Korea before the world went to shit. My words, not his, of course," David said, chuckling.

Alex also chuckled, as it sounded like something the kid would say. They had talked on multiple occasions, and he knew of Winston's condition and how it had progressed in the last months.

It was a good thing that his doctor had cleared him, but he wondered if his parents would allow him to follow them into the jaws of death. Had he even told them yet?

"Alright, that's two. But you said a few more players. Who are the others?"

"I was getting to it, you impatient little shit," David mocked.

"Then stop turning around the pot, or I'll start rotting and join your army before you're done, you slow-ass motherfucker," Alex replied, grimacing.

David clicked his tongue, half annoyed, half amused, before clearing his throat and continuing.

"I also contacted someone I thought could be useful to us, since he's one of the strongest druids we know. He was hard to talk to, and get ourselves to an understanding, but I managed. I'die said he was glad to help, and that he might take this chance to visit his wittle girlfwiend in Korea," David said, jokingly.

"Hah! It's funny you should say that. We actually got Athena to join us, too," Alex said, laughing.

"Oh?" David exclaimed.

"I wasn't sure she would give me the time of day if I called her. But it's a good thing you convinced her, even though I'm sure it was mostly Kary's doing. Her archery skills will be a great boon to our hunt."

"Hey! I was the one who suggested we call her. Kary only acted as the intermediary in this case," Alex rebuked, pissed that David was attributing his thunder to Kary.

"Congratulations, dick head. You were an adult for a single conversation. Want a medal?" David mocked.

"Pfft! Fuck you too, asshole," Alex spat.

"Are you going to let me finish? Or are you going to keep interrupting?" David asked, sounding impatient.

"Because you're the one who said I was taking too long," he added.

Alex grumbled, "Fine," biting the inside of his cheek to keep himself from commenting again.

Aside from those three, I also got a guy from the guild who lives in Finland. A rifleman by the name of Simo? Apparently, he did well in some test you administered a while back, and Kary put a note next to his name that said 'Promising Talent.'

"I thought it would be a good addition to our party. I don't want us to be too many there since we would be grabbing too much attention, so I figured ten would be a good number. Adding Athena makes eleven. I think that's enough."

Alex recounted, ensuring he wasn't forgetting anyone, and came to the same number as David. But the pause didn't escape the undead player.

"Did you just recount my math?" he asked, peeved.

"Just making sure your brain hasn't rotted too much yet," Alex mocked.

"Fuck off," David spat, huffing.

"Hey, I'm only treating you like you treat me, you dick," Alex chuckled.

"Anyway, if you think that is enough, then we can go with just that many. It's a shame, though. With only one more person, we'd have been a full party of twelve," he added.

David paused.

"I mean... I can think of one more person, but it seems like a stretch..."

"Huh?" Alex asked, confused.

"We could bring Xavier... I'm not sure how much he has awakened of his powers yet, but if he has even ten percent of what I know he's capable of, he would already be a great boon to our party," David said, sounding hesitant.

"That sounds great. Why do you sound so conflicted about this?" Alex asked.

"Because I'm not sure I want to risk him dying... Me being here depends on him being alive..." David replied after another pause.

"Beg your pardon?"