

## **Shadow 461**

Chapter 461: Compromise

[You have gained 120 attribute points]

[You have awakened: Shadow Stride]

Damon didn't have time to look at the new skill. Honestly, he didn't even bother.

He walked up to Chrome's headless corpse, raising his hand as Ashborn flickered to life—black flames licking out, blending seamlessly with the writhing shadows.

He used Shadow Control to engulf the corpse completely. Before it was burned.

While everyone watched the flames consume what remained, Damon secretly pulled the body into his shadow storage.

It was impossible to tell where the flames ended and the shadows began.

To the untrained eye, it was all just flickering shadows.

He stepped over to Chrome's severed head and picked it up.

The professors were too shocked to speak. From the moment they heard the explosion to now—it had all happened so fast. They had arrived just in time to see Damon behead Chrome.

The students were in disbelief. There was fear, anger, and confusion.

And why wouldn't there be?

Chrome was one of the kindest professors on campus. Everyone had only good things to say about the old man.

Which was exactly why Damon couldn't forgive him.

He had used kindness to deal out malice in the shadows.

Now, those shadows had come for him.

A girl in the back collapsed to her knees, sobbing.

"He... killed him... He killed Professor Chrome..."

"W...what have you done?" Emeraldalda's voice trembled.

Professor Alfred stepped forward, raising his hand as mana swirled into his palm.

"Turn yourself in. Right now. You have a lot of explaining to do..."

Alfred had mixed feelings—because they had heard it. All of them.

They had heard exactly what Chrome said before he died.

Hail Unknown... the Unknown God.

That was blasphemy of the highest order.

If that phrase spread beyond these walls, the Temple would have every reason to investigate the academy.

Chrome had been Alfred's friend. That made it worse.

And just those words alone would absolve Damon of many crimes... Heretics were executed on sight—until recently. Now they were given trials.

Sometimes.

Alfred was sure he wasn't the only one who heard it.

The students, on the other hand, had heard nothing.

All they saw was their favorite professor killed—beheaded before their eyes.

Damon sighed, dismissing the Staff of Carnage back into his shadow storage.

"I don't mind cooperating, professors... but I'm sure you're not deaf. This was just a little payback."

He glanced toward Lilith, who had arrived with Kael.

She walked up to Alfred and handed over several stacks of paper—evidence she'd gathered over time.

Kael had also been tailing Chrome.

Alfred's hands trembled as he read.

His voice dropped cold.

"All students... dismissed. Now."

His aura flared, and the students quickly evacuated.

One professor raised a hand to form a barrier over the area, but before it could stabilize—

An old man casually stepped through it.

The Headmaster.

Alfred bit his lip and handed the documents over.

The Headmaster flipped through them in silence.

Then he sighed deeply.

"Chrome has been here since his youth... when did he go wrong? Why did he take this path?"

Damon didn't care for their regrets.

"I'll be taking his head. As for the Temple—you can skip the lengthy interrogation. I'll keep his affiliations to the Unknown God to myself."

He turned toward the Headmaster—who had the most authority present.

"I've destroyed his corpse, so there isn't much evidence left. You can weave the story however you like. Whatever saves the academy's face. But I will be handing his head to the White Ruler."

He clenched his fist.

"After what he's done to us, he shouldn't even dream of a funeral or last rites... though I don't know how deep his bonds run with some of you."

From his shadow, Damon pulled out the Disorienting Bell—the same artifact Chrome had used during their battle.

"This belonged to him. You can bury it if it makes you feel better."

Kael let out a long sigh, holding his head.

"You shouldn't have killed him. You had evidence. You should've submitted it. The academy would have captured him. We'd have made sure you got the justice you deserved..."

Damon cut him off.

"I don't believe in justice. But I do believe in vengeance."

"I couldn't care less what god he worshipped... all I care about is that he tried to kill me. This wasn't justice."

"This was vengeance."

"An eye for an eye."

The Headmaster sighed again.

"I could still have you incarcerated for killing a professor, excessive violence, and taking the law into your own hands..."

Damon shrugged.

"I took that into account. I figure I'll get... what? Three weeks detention at most? No matter what charges you create."

"Of course, I could always call the Temple. One pager is all it takes..."

He gave the Headmaster a tired look.

"Let's not pretend. You don't want the Temple here any more than I do. Did you already forget the Cleric Incident? I don't like them either."

The Headmaster closed his eyes.

"Very well. You may keep the head. You've already destroyed the body, and since he was responsible for the Dark Spirit Incident, we'll close that particular case."

"However... what happened here stays secret."

Damon crossed his arms.

"So, my punishment is what—being labeled an outcast by students who'll think I murdered a professor without reason?"

The Headmaster nodded.

"And we'll need you gone from the academy for now. At least until this blows over. We'll notify you when it's time."

Damon found that acceptable. The academy was still on break anyway.

He'd be back before the War Games.

The Headmaster turned to the other professors.

"What happened here was a tragedy. Trust in the academy will plummet if this gets out—both in the students and in us as faculty."

"But Damon has volunteered to take the fall. The least we can do is... let go of our resentment."

Damon rolled his eyes.

"I didn't volunteer. You literally forced me."

The Headmaster stroked his beard.

"I call that a win-win."

He began walking away.

"You, Matia and the Student Council President—come with me. I still need to interrogate you... or at least put on a good show of it."

"I think a good story would be... Professor Chrome was replaced by a doppelganger from a heretical organization."

"It was discovered by Damon Grey, who uncovered the truth and eventually killed it—avenging the real Chrome."

"It was behind all the recent evils in the academy."

He smiled.

"It'll take time to forge all the evidence. But we will investigate—formally."

Damon watched the old man walk away.

He was pragmatic, that much was clear.

In one stroke, the Headmaster had rewritten Chrome's entire history—from traitor to victim.

And Damon... still got to keep the head.

For now, it would be kept under wraps—until the academy was ready to submit the forged story to the Temple and the Knight's HQ.

Chapter 462: Key Of Lazarak

Damon went through a lengthy interrogation, along with Lilith and Matia, who were supposed to be his accomplices.

Professor Kael, of course, was also called in for questioning—but as far as Damon was concerned, it felt more like a research defense than a criminal interrogation.

He wasn't in chains, and he was allowed to make his points while they asked questions.

Lilith answered with her usual grace.

Matia, on the other hand, said absolutely nothing. Not a word. Not even a change in expression.

By the time the sun rose, the academy had no more reason to keep Damon detained.

They tried to take Chrome's severed head, but Damon flat-out refused.

The Headmaster argued that capturing Chrome alive and presenting him to the White Ruler would've been far more useful—but Damon answered with a single, blunt statement:

"I simply wanted to kill him myself."

The Headmaster sighed.

By morning, the students had already made a memorial for Chrome.

Candles had been lit around his office and near the academy's fountains.

Word traveled fast.

They expected to see justice. But Damon just walked out of the building beside Lilith, his expression completely calm.

He could feel their gazes, hear the whispers. Once, they'd mocked him. Now?

Mostly fear.

And that was fine by him.

Now that Chrome was dead, the next name on his hit list wasn't far away.

His "good friend," the Wendigo.

After that, he'd go to the capital city—wipe out a few more names—then travel many miles back to his village.

There, he would retrieve his father's broken sword.

Hopefully, it would work as his dealer's hand.

He really wanted to test how powerful that skill was—and whether it synergized well with Ashborn.

Naturally, he didn't return to his dorm.

Instead, he headed straight for the Student Council office.

Lilith opened the door and sat down on the large sofa.

Damon took his place next to her, while Matia stood silently behind him in her armor—like a stalwart knight.

If he didn't know her better, he might not have even noticed her. She liked hiding in his shadow these days.

'I should put a stop to that,' Damon thought. 'Or she'll start following me everywhere. Even to the restroom...'

Lilith sighed.

"Everything went according to plan. Now we have an excuse to leave the academy for a while. It's about time we start looking for clues and expanding our operations..."

Damon nodded. That had always been the point.

"They wanted to investigate the Temple Lilith got her stigmata from."

And the Snake Temple—Lilith had done research on that too, but it was on the Demon Continent. So they couldn't go there.

She pulled out a map.

"This is where we're going. It's on the borders of the Holy Empire, which means we're leaving Valtheron—but not quite entering their domain."

Damon's eyes narrowed. That location was close to Ravenscroft territory. The spot she pointed to was a city just a few hundred kilometers from his village. It was ruled by Xander's family.

"We'll stop there until the next full moon."

He didn't disagree. The place where Lilith had gained her stigmata was off the Golden Road, in an area marked by a mana anomaly. The place couldn't be accessed properly unless it was under the light of a full moon.

The alternative was to travel around the anomaly through the Holy Kingdom, which would take a month and a half—and involve constant battles with monsters.

"The city's a safe zone, so we can take Iris and Luna while we wait. It's a frontier region. Lots of adventurers pass through. Who knows—we might even find potential recruits."

Damon still had a bitter taste in his mouth.

"So, we'll be staying in that city for a month... then heading into monster-infested territory to look for the temple?"

Lilith smiled, her green eyes flickered slightly.

"I'm sorry if you think you can't catch a break. It's not a death zone, but... yeah. It's still dangerous. The only reason I ended up in the temple the first time was because I was traveling in that direction from the Holy Empire."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"So basically... we have to travel deep inside that region."

She tilted her head.

"Do you want to go through the Holy Empire instead?"

He shook his head.

"I'd rather not. This is fine."

He clenched his fist.

"While you guys wait in the city for a month, I've got more than enough time to settle some old accounts..."

Lilith sighed, leaning into him just slightly.

"Do you want me to come with you? I can."

"No. It's fine."

"You weren't there when they wronged me. There's no need for you to be there when I kill them."

Lilith said nothing for a moment.

Then she nodded.

"Fine. I suppose I can allow that. Just... stay in touch."

Damon agreed. But seeing how disappointed she looked made him feel a bit guilty.

He reached into his shadow storage, pulling out a rusted key.

It was long, with multiple magical symbols and ancient circuits carved into its body.

"I found this on Chrome. If I'm not wrong... it leads to a hidden space."

Lilith's eyes flickered.

Damon had already appraised it. He'd only managed to learn the name.

"It's called the Key of Lazarak."

That, and it held two enchantments.

Lilith examined it closely.

"This is a spatial artifact. Really well made. Probably one of the best I've ever seen."

She brushed her fingers across the surface.

"It connects to a hidden space—somewhere unknown..."

She walked up to the office door and inserted the key.

When she opened it, Damon saw the other side was no longer the academy.

It looked like a research lab.

She quickly closed the door, removed the key, and opened it again—it was now back to normal.

"Yeah, it's a trap for sure. That's the second enchantment. A failsafe against intruders."

She held her chin thoughtfully.

"I see. It can only be opened through marked coordinates. And only someone with spatial access or understanding can use it safely... it can also tear through space once a day even without a door."

She waved her hand, crushing something invisible in the air.

"The door was laced with a trap. Luckily, I'm the Priestess of the Void. Without that, we'd be lost in the spatial currents if we went through."

She opened the door again—this time pouring her magic inside.

Damon watched as the rippling space collapsed and then stabilized.

"Now it's safe."

She turned toward him.

"Do you want to explore it?"

Chapter 463:: Page Of Truth

Exploring the hidden space sounded appealing. Damon was quite curious to know what Chrome had been researching.

Too bad he had killed the old man. He could have tortured and interrogated him.

Still, he had killed him for that very reason.

Simply put, if he let Chrome live, the old man might've dragged him down with him. After all, Damon had been devouring fellow students—and Chrome knew. The professor could've exposed him easily.

That alone was reason enough for him to die.

And yet, that wasn't the only reason.

But Damon remained cautious. Stepping into some unknown hidden space was dangerous business.

Lilith spent nearly an hour probing the area, scanning it thoroughly for traps or triggers. In the end, she confirmed there were none.

Still, to be extra cautious, they left Matia behind.

She would ensure the door remained open and act as a tether to prevent them from getting trapped inside.

Damon sighed. He had just killed a major problem, but instead of praise, he was being treated like a monster by the rest of the academy.

That was fine for now.

Once the academy finished forging their version of events, the story would change. He would go from villain to misunderstood hero. All in due time.

Until then, he was on everyone's shit list—for killing the kind professor.

Which actually worked well for him.

Commoners didn't hold much weight in the eyes of nobility. And when one of the successful ones turned out to be a madman or a heretic, the public faith in commoner talents would take a hit.

Not that nobles were fond of commoners to begin with, especially those who refused to trade their label for a noble title despite surpassing them in strength or skill.

Damon had always wondered why someone like Chrome, who was respected even by the imperial court and cabinet, never received a title.

Now, with Chrome gone, many questions would remain unanswered.

A shame—dead men tell no tales.

Devouring his corpse had granted Damon some shadow energy, but not much else.

He approached the rippling door. The space shimmered like disturbed water.

Lilith took his hand as he looked back briefly at Matia. A raven was perched on her head, completely still.

"You two can wait here," Damon said simply.

Without another word, he stepped through the spatial ripple with Lilith beside him.

The first thing he noticed was the shift in temperature. Subtle, but present—like the entire space was air-conditioned.

Not unusual for a lab.

But what caught his eye were the test tubes—some containing bones that looked ancient, others holding what resembled fresh embryos. The lab itself was spotless. To the side was a desk with neatly arranged documents.

Lilith's eyes were drawn to a large vaulted door on the far end and several smaller ones nearby. She narrowed her eyes.

"Are we in a dungeon?"

Damon was more interested in the contents of the lab. He stepped toward one of the embryos.

The ceiling arced into darkness, and sometimes, if he stared long enough, Damon swore he could see stars.

The shadows in the corners didn't follow the light—they moved on their own

"More importantly, what was he researching... Was he trying to create a homunculus? That's illegal. Well, so is summoning a dark spirit strong enough to destroy a city, but somehow... this feels worse."

Lilith approached the research table and pressed a button. A hidden bookshelf rotated into view, revealing stacks of ancient tomes.

Damon's eyes gleamed. "Demonology. Black arts. Forbidden magic... If this space wasn't so valuable, turning this stuff in would net us a ton of points."

Lilith nodded. "But the space itself is priceless. A hidden subdimension like this... whoever made it was a true master of spatial craft."

She picked up a worn page—just a single sheet, but one that pulsed with a faint magical aura.

"Hey, look at this."

Damon stepped closer, his eyes narrowing.

It looked like a torn piece of a diary. What caught his attention, though, was the signature at the bottom.

Mugu.

His heart skipped. "This is..."

Lilith nodded. "A page from Mugu's journal. Or a record left behind by him. He must've been a major figure in the First Epoch—even if no one today remembers his name. Or maybe... he was erased from the history books."

Damon leaned in as she held the paper.

The words scrawled across the page were raw, almost desperate.

"Ever lost, I remain now... I have no more purpose. Why have I sacrificed so much for this outcome?"

I do not even know who to hate...

Still, I thank you for hearing my cries that never made a sound... and for the knowledge you have freely shared with me.

What beauty your final goal presents...

I shall strive to aid you in your wish—Unknown God."

The ink had aged, the page brittle, but the words still pulsed with significance.

A fragment of despair... but also devotion.

Damon flipped the page.

This one was different—more structured.

"The Unknown God said knowledge is power, and ignorance is a sin.

To that end, He shared with me truths—some I may never be able to use.

I lost because I was pathetic and weak.

And when I gained power... it was too late.

Today I have learned of the three primary paths of power. Mana is only one of them.

A person may utilize a maximum of two... and only rare beings can wield all three.

Each leads to a pinnacle:

Mana flows from the heart. Its final destination is Akasha.

Akasha, The pinnacle of magical knowledge. To understand the world, one must first master it.

Akasha is the path to absolute truth. Objective truth

Ki flows through the Dantian. Its goal is Dao.

A path of defiance against heaven. All truths are subjective. Cultivators are selfish by design.

Here the self is greater than the heavens and therefore truth is relative.

Relative truth.

Ether flows through the mind. It leads to Aatraxia.

A realm where truths are born within the self and become as absolute as the heavens.

Subjective truth.

The Unknown God revealed one final truth

All beings—great and small—may rise through Apotheon, the Pillar of Ascension, even if the gods do not allow it.

'There is only one absolute truth:

You can achieve Akasha... if you dare to defy.'

– Mugu"

Damon and Lilith fell silent, both breathing in sharply.

It felt as if the Unknown God had whispered the words directly to them.

"Anyone can achieve Akasha..." Damon muttered, voice low.

Lilith's eyes gleamed with the same thought.

This wasn't just forbidden knowledge—it was a revelation.

A path forward.

And a declaration of war... against gods themselves.

Chapter 464: Apotheon

Silence was deafening.

It was always deafening when it was silent... The heavens may not have shaken, but their hearts certainly had.

Akasha wasn't a place. It wasn't a relic, a treasure, or a lost civilization. It was just absolute knowledge.

Calling it "just" knowledge would be madness... but that's what it was. The absolute knowledge of magic.

Damon couldn't even begin to imagine what one could do—what one could become—with that level of understanding.

With just this single page, he hadn't only learned of Akasha... he'd been introduced to the three main sources of power, each a path in its own right.

Mana that flowed from the heart... leading to Akasha, the absolute comprehension of the world. That was an objective truth.

Ki that gathered in the dantian... which led to the Dao, a selfish path that bent the heavens to one's will. Your comprehension of the heavens mattered more than what actually was. This was a relative truth.

And Ether, which flowed through the mind... leading to Aatraxia, where all truths were born of thought. The last was a subjective truth.

But what shook Damon the most wasn't any of those.

It was the mention of Apotheon.

The Pillar of Ascension.

Did that mean there was more than one pillar? He already knew of Bellum—the Pillar of Conflict—hidden somewhere in this world. The Unknown God had been seeking it.

So then... what about Apotheon?

Which of the countless stars in the heavens was that one hidden on? Would the Unknown God seek that out too?

"Do you know what this means?" Lilith whispered, her voice nearly lost to the silence.

Damon nodded solemnly. "There's more than one pillar out there."

She shook her head. "Yes, that... but more importantly, Ashcroft wasn't the only one who left behind traces. Mugu did as well. If we find more of his journal, we can piece together everything he learned from the Unknown God."

Damon narrowed his eyes at her. "Mugu was supposedly the prophet of the Unknown God. He could commune with Him directly. So tell me, Miss Priestess of the Unknown God... why can't you do any of that?"

Lilith raised an eyebrow and glared. "You got a system from Him. Why can't you?"

Damon chuckled. "Fair enough."

He crossed his arms, brow furrowed. "How did Chrome find this page? From the looks of it, he definitely didn't get it here in this subdimensional space."

Lilith tapped her chin. "For now, we shouldn't dwell on that. Let's focus on what's right in front of us. As for clues from the past, we'll gather them as we go. The only thing we truly don't have any leads on... is the Zero Epoch, and how it ended."

She stored the fragile page into the hidden space within her stigmata.

"We can still find clues. I happen to know someone who's an expert at tracking spells. With this one piece, we might be able to find more."

Damon picked up another stack of documents, flipping through them.

"Hmm... it looks like Chrome was trying to create physical vessels. His whole purpose was to build a new body—one that could harness the power of the dark spirit, Rashi Ignath."

Lilith continued browsing through weathered tomes and magical seals.

"He based his research on what the Visitors achieved. They abandoned their original bodies for new ones. But to do that, he needed to reach the fourth class... a rank where the soul can leave the body temporarily."

Damon sneered. "So all this... was because he thought he could build the perfect body. All so he could claim Ignath's power—and maybe reach something as vague as Akasha."

Lilith sighed. "If Akasha were that easy to attain, everyone would be a master of all magic. But Akasha is blasphemy at this point... because to master all magic means having control over every attribute... without limitation."

Damon understood the implication.

The Goddess of Doom had taken that away.

The ability to use more than one attribute had been erased from the world of Aetherus. It happened during the Zero Epoch. In the First Epoch, mortals tried to resist her decree, which eventually brought the Visitors... and the Unknown God. That was when demons were introduced into the world.

The Second Epoch saw the rise of the Temple, and with it, the dark legacy of Ashcroft. But Ashcroft was destroyed by the goddess herself. All of those events... everything... was tied to the Pillar of Conflict.

This was a world where the Temple reigned. Anything that defied the goddess was branded heresy—and destroyed.

Especially anything related to the Unknown God.

"Let's search the other rooms," Damon said. They'd deal with the rest later. For now, they had to understand where this place was... and how they could use it.

Lilith took the lead, examining the other rooms. Most were empty, save for a few rare potions, some research scrolls, and some zeni. One had a bed, barely used.

After sweeping through the hidden space, they turned off the homunculus equipment.

It felt wrong—creating life that way. Inhumane. Even if it wasn't illegal, it wasn't for them.

Eventually, they found themselves standing before the massive vaulted door.

Lilith frowned, staring at the glowing runes and ancient seals etched into its surface.

They weren't sure if the seals were meant to keep something in... or keep them out.

Either way, they had to know.

Especially if they planned to use the Key of Lazrak for future plans.

A hidden base like this—safe, secret, and almost impossible to trace—was a rare asset.

"What do you think is out there?" Lilith asked quietly.

Damon shook his head. "Whatever it is... we're about to find out."

Lilith glanced back toward their escape route. Matia was waiting beyond the spatial door, a spear of ice forming in her hand.

If anything went wrong, she'd bombard the place with a volley.

That thought gave Damon a little peace of mind.

And he had his new skill—Shadow Stride—so escape wasn't impossible.

He nodded at Lilith.

She raised her hand. A single, quiet motion—and the large seals began to unlock.

The vault doors rumbled, chains clanking as they slowly pulled open.

Damon watched as a cold breath of air swept through the opening.

What greeted him... was darkness.

A deep, oppressive blackness—so thick it almost clung to the skin.

His eyes slowly adjusted.

The hallway beyond was silent. Still.

And with one step forward... the shadows welcomed him—

—into the unknown.

#### Chapter 465: A Stride To The Abyss

The oppressive darkness didn't seem like much to Damon—one of the perks of being able to see in the dark.

That said, in the world of Aetherus, being able to see in the dark might as well be a curse. Especially in places like the death zones... where you weren't meant to see certain things at all.

When his party had traveled through the Duhu Mountains, Damon had seen many horrible things in that darkness.

He acted like he didn't. He had to. But he still saw them.

But every time he noticed something... they would turn to look in his direction. As if sensing that he had seen them. So, like the old rule stated—

If you see something? No, you didn't.

He wasn't sure what kind of entities lurked in this darkness, but with his luck, something had to be here.

Something definitely would be... he could feel it in his gut.

Still, Damon decided to take a look at his new skill before diving deeper. He wanted to be sure it was what he thought it was.

By now, he could already tell what most skills did just by feeling them out... but still.

"Let's stop before we cross that door," he said.

Lilith had been about to move forward but paused, watching him bring up his stat window.

Right... he got a new skill for killing Chrome. She had almost forgotten with all the fires they had been putting out.

She stood beside him, peering at the system panel he so generously let her see.

[Shadow Stride]

Each stride took him further from home. Each flap of his wings reminded him of their betrayal. He could stay no longer. He could not forgive them for what he had done. He could not forgive himself.

When he finally found the abyss, the Weeping Star stared into its darkness... broken and betrayed.

He spoke these words to comfort a heart torn by agony.

"We are not asked to be born; we are forced to exist.

Today was a horrible day; tomorrow will be worse.

In the end, it will all come to pass.

All things fade.

Memories perish with time—the greatest destroyer."

On that vile day, he took a single stride into the abyss...

And when he emerged, he had become the one true Unknown God.

[Effect]

A single stride allows you to teleport through shadows, as vast as the distance you can sense, as far as your energy can carry you.

[Type]

Active

[Cooldown]

0 seconds

Damon was quiet for a moment. Not even the oppressive darkness ahead could stir him. The mystery of the Unknown God remained unsolved.

One thing was clear—he had once been the Weeping Star. That’s why the poem said the Weeping Star came first...

And then there was the abyss.

"More importantly... the Unknown God left his home, the Crystal Palace, because he had done something," Damon muttered.

Lilith held her chin thoughtfully.

"He couldn’t forgive them for what he did... but if he was the one who did something, why did it say they betrayed him?"

Damon shrugged. "I don’t have a clue. But I do know this—he yearns for his home. And his home... it still waits for him. But he can’t return."

He saw that in the description for the armor of shattered ice.

None of it made sense. The Unknown God was supposedly the one who gave all things their names. And yet, there were creatures that predated him. Entities far older than even his existence.

He was the progeny of the Vile Thief. Timeline-wise, the Vile Thief stole from the True Beings... then built the Crystal Palace... where the Weeping Star was born.

"Ahhh..." Damon shook his head. "I’m not dealing with this shit. There’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this."

Lilith gave him a look. "This is in the domain of gods. Expect a perfectly unreasonable explanation instead."

Damon sighed. "The Unknown God was called the Origin of Origins... and the End of Ends. It's possible he existed before he was even born. How's that for an unreasonable explanation? You hear how that sounds? Why don't you tell me how that sounds?"

Lilith wore an exasperated expression. "Ridiculous. Is that the answer you wanted?"

"Exactly," Damon groaned.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she frowned.

"That actually makes sense... I mean, if the abyss existed before him—and the abyss is an extension of him—wouldn't that mean he predated himself?"

Damon glanced at her, pursing his lips.

"I think you might need the mental health quartermaster. But seeing as I'm the one insane enough to try explaining gods with mortal rules... I apologize. That does make sense."

Lilith wasn't even sure if she was making sense anymore. She glanced back at the darkness—there was no movement.

Which was good.

Movement was a bad sign.

Damon's new skill was indeed handy. Unlike Shadow Movement, which let him move within connecting shadows, this allowed him to link non-physical shadows—a teleportation ability.

"Which means with a single step... I can cross vast distances."

Of course, he didn't forget the cost. Shadow energy.

But his pool was deeper now. Richer. He could go longer without feeling the hunger gnawing at him.

He took a step into his shadow—and vanished.

When he appeared again, he was in another corner of the lab. The movement was instantaneous. His body drifted through the shadow-space and emerged through another.

He tried it again, grinning as the sensation of teleportation hit him. Smooth. Cold. Fluid.

The greater the distance, the more energy it took. But it didn't matter.

With this skill... who could ever catch him?

He smiled to himself.

Lilith, however, seemed less amused.

She stood with one hand on her hip, a deadpan expression painted across her face.

"If you're done playing around with your new power, can we go? We don't have all day, you know."

He smirked. "Is that jealousy I hear, Miss Priestess?"

She scoffed, turning toward the yawning void of darkness ahead. "It's all in your head."

Chapter 466: The Halls Of Perpetual Screams

Damon held his sword in one hand, his expression somewhat calm.

Though it wouldn't have helped to lose his cool anyway.

They had stepped into the darkness... but there was nothing inside. The place was quite large, he could tell by the air flow.

Though how air got there, he did not know. This place was strange.

Just a vast hallway. The halls were like a labyrinth, filled with many interconnected paths and twisting walls.

The doors seemed to move from one location to another, shifting subtly when they weren't looking. Still, they made sure to mark their positions.

Damon and Lilith were more in flight mode than fight. They had no idea what was here, and frankly speaking, they had no plans to explore too deeply into this place.

If they were going to, they would have brought supplies, gear, and prepared for a potentially long expedition.

However, they hadn't. Since Chrome had stayed here for quite a while, it should have been relatively safe...

While they moved, Damon heard a sound in the distance.

He glanced at Lilith.

"Did you hear that?"

She nodded slowly.

"A scream..."

They looked at each other, silently debating whether to investigate or retreat.

After a few moments of thought, Damon walked toward the sound.

The scream didn't stop. And as he got closer, it only got louder.

When Damon turned the corner, expecting to find the source... he found only a vast hallway overlooking a large drop, railings lining the edge.

He held his ears, reducing the noise while he prodded the darkness with his shadow perception.

No one. Nothing. Just a scream that would never stop.

A woman's scream—fearful, desperate, eternal.

Damon stepped forward and looked down beyond the railings.

The other side seemed to be a higher floor. But right there, by the statue of a weeping angel... Damon saw nothing else.

Just the angel.

Seeing it made him narrow his eyes. Lysithara also had weeping angels. But he had never met any, not directly. Valerie had always made sure to take paths that avoided this particular type of horror.

He certainly hoped that was just a statue.

He activated his appraisal skill.

[Skill: Appraisal]

[Description:]

The Unknown God had countless skills. Strangely enough, this was his favorite. His lightless eyes saw too much but learned too little.

[Effect:]

Reveals name, rarity, condition, known effects, and origin of target item or being. Accuracy increases with user's power and the less guarded a target. Be wary—you may lose your sight to things beyond its reach.

[Type:]

Active

[Cooldown:]

0 seconds

It was just a statue of a weeping angel. He almost let out a sigh of relief.

But then, something flickered in the darkness.

It clung to the walls, with pale ashen skin. From the distance Damon stood, he saw it smile at him—its mouth full of jagged, inhuman teeth—before it flickered off into the shadows.

Damon's eyes twitched.

"It seems we have company..."

Lilith narrowed her eyes. She couldn't see as well in the dark as he could.

"The nice and friendly kind... or the rip-your-head-off kind?"

Damon smiled with his eyes closed, tilting his head slightly.

"It looks like it wants to give you a kiss with those jagged teeth. Well, I won't be here when it shows up. See you."

Lilith almost rolled her eyes at his usual sarcasm.

Judging by the direction Damon had glanced earlier, the creature would be coming from behind them. Whatever it was, fighting it in the twisting halls would be a bad idea.

Since Damon hadn't moved yet, she already knew he understood that.

This open place... it was their best chance.

Still, the place was noisy. The scream never stopped. It echoed across the empty halls like some cursed song that refused to die.

Damon pulled Lilith's hand and moved toward the center of the platform. From here, they'd see it coming. No sneak attacks.

The eternal scream became background noise.

But everything else was too quiet.

There were no footsteps. No breaths. Not even distant whispers.

Just... silence. Deep and absolute.

This place felt almost like a tomb.

And these foolish intruders had trespassed on its silence.

They would pay dearly for such insolence.

Lilith could have created light. But instead, she trusted Damon.

He kept his shadow perception close. Just in case it was a creature strong enough to overwhelm even that.

Lilith's hand shimmered slightly, ready to call forth her Third-Class skill. Her intentions were clear.

From the direction they had come, a creature crawled on the walls and leaped—soaring above them.

Damon's nose wrinkled. The stench that came with it was vile. Its malformed legs twitched mid-air.

Before it could land, Lilith raised her hand.

Black blood spilled onto the ground. Bits of its limbs—arms, legs, and even the head—hit the floor in chunks.

It screamed.

Its grey eyes lost their light before its shredded body even hit the stone.

Damon was once again reminded of how powerful Lilith Astranova truly was.

Judging by its speed and aura, the creature had been in the Second Class... yet it had died in an instant, without her even moving from where she stood.

But its scream...

It didn't stop.

Even in death, it screamed. It joined the woman's eternal scream.

Together, they formed a new chorus. A deeper wail.

The screams echoed across the empty, lifeless halls.

Before Damon could move to devour the creature's remains, it melted. Absorbed into the dark stone of the hall.

No bones. No flesh. Not even a fading aura.

Only its horrible scream remained.

Alongside the nameless woman's cry.

Together, they screamed.

Forever.

Damon took a deep breath.

Now... he could name this place.

The Hall of Perpetual Screams.

A place where the cries of the dead would never cease.

He glanced at Lilith.

Surely, this would only be the first of many horrors here.

"Do you want... to go ahead?" he asked quietly.

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"Let's at least reach the next chamber."

Chapter 467: Echoes of the Lesser Gods

Life was just one of those things that had a way of dumping horrible events on you. If Damon had to count how many times he'd ended up in this type of creepy, horrifying situation... it'd be less than a thousand, but definitely more than ten.

Which was a lot for a guy who was just about seventeen.

He really had to give himself a pat on the back for being such a magnet for trouble.

The fact of the matter was, the world of Aetherus was actually a post-apocalyptic dystopia.

So why was there still order?

Well, not many people noticed, but at the end of every epoch, some pieces of shit always messed things up so bad that the world effectively reset itself.

That's why guys like Damon had to be born into a world still recovering—surrounded by the ruins of thousands of lost civilizations.

Aetherus was actually quite safe in large settlements. But the smaller the settlement—and the farther it was from the protection of powerful individuals—the more dangerous it became.

Monsters could pour out of dungeons that just randomly spawned out of nowhere.

Some ancient abomination could awaken from a slumber in a forgotten ruin, forcing the monsters of that region to migrate.

Some greedy adventurer might touch a sealed relic from Goddess-knows-what era and unleash something even worse.

Disasters. Man-made calamities.

The Pillar of Conflict.

Fact was—everything and anything in Aetherus was trying to kill you.

Damon could only groan at the fact that none of them had succeeded yet.

Honestly, he could use the break.

But that was fine. He was a death-seeker. Not to be mistaken for a thrill-seeker—he genuinely sought death.

Though ironically, he was deathless too, so he'd be here a while.

He was pretty sure he was that one guy in the suicide subjugation squad who makes it to the very end despite being the most reckless. Everyone places their bets like:

'This bastard'll die in a few hours.'

But he lives. Scared. Traumatized. But very much alive.

"Maybe I should take that as a clue and get with Sylvia... Her father would love to kill me. Even better if I make it public."

He smiled, picturing Kadelas Moonveil skewering him.

Damon was almost certain he'd live through it. His skill Deathless pretty much guaranteed it—as long as he still wished to die.

In great pain and broken but still alive.

Maybe someone could kill him. But that someone... probably wasn't Kadelas Moonveil.

Though Damon had figured out one way to die—someone just had to convince him to truly want to live.

Maybe mind control could work? Except... he had a crown that granted immunity to that.

"Maybe a skill that manipulates emotions could work. I don't have a resistance to that..."

While Damon was off in his head, walking the dark halls like he owned the place, Lilith was actually being cautious. She studied every room they passed, examining the structure.

More importantly, she had learned the Nightlight spell from Damon.

It took a few minutes—it was basic magic for someone like her.

Meanwhile, Damon just continued walking. Occasionally smiling or nodding his head like he'd just unlocked a masterful plot or stumbled upon buried treasure.

Lilith didn't even want to ask how he could be so nonchalant in a place like this. But after Lysithara... she wasn't surprised.

He'd lived in a creepy death zone for months. This was basically a new kind of normal for him.

'He's... adaptable. I'll give him that.'

She stopped in front of another statue. She'd seen statues like these scattered all over—each different in their own way.

More importantly, they all bore the same symbols now adopted by the Temple.

The symbol of doom.

And yet, they were still worshipped. Some bore different elemental signatures, different divine traits.

She squatted down, narrowing her eyes as she examined them carefully.

"What gods are these...?"

Damon leaned over her shoulder. She could feel his warmth as he placed a hand lightly on her.

It almost made her heart skip a beat.

Lilith's breath caught for a moment. She hated that she noticed his hand was warm. Too warm.

She shoved the thought aside like everything else she couldn't control.

"These are probably lesser gods... yeah. I think they're either dead or asleep. I'm not too clear on that. But apparently, waking them up would mean having more battle power against the outsiders."

Lilith's eyes flickered.

Right—Damon had mentioned something like that before. That the so-called lesser gods weren't real... at least, that was what current experts said.

The lesser gods, they claimed, were just powerful spirits worshipped by the goddess races during the Zero Epoch—ignorant of the true creator the Goddess.

Others argued differently.

It wasn't that the goddess races didn't know about the Goddess. Rather, they used these lesser gods as intermediaries—proxies to deliver prayers. Because lowly mortals shouldn't disturb the Creator with their endless desires.

These lesser gods acted as filters. Some prayers got passed up the divine chain, others didn't. And if your prayer wasn't answered? Well, tough luck—the lesser god didn't deliver it.

Naturally, this led people to pour offerings and devotion toward these divine messengers, hoping to earn favor.

Damon listened to her explanation with a bit of disdain.

"Let me guess—they became tyrannical and corrupt, right? Exploiting our ancestors?"

Lilith shrugged.

"I don't know. It's just a theory. We don't even know if they were spirits or not. But since spirits are still around... I'd argue they weren't spirits."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"What do you think happened to them? The lesser gods."

She sighed and stepped further into the darkness.

"I don't know. The Zero Epoch is too far back. But it's the root of all our problems... I'm sure someone knows. The Temple definitely does. But who are we to get that info?"

Damon frowned.

"That would make sense... the Temple is basically acting just like those lesser gods. Taking wealth, offerings, power—all in the name of the Goddess. The ignorant common man believes going against the Temple is the same as going against the Goddess who created them. They use faith to control the masses."

Lilith smiled coldly.

"And the masses control the world... even if they don't know it."

Chapter 468: The Tomb of Lesser Gods

All this talk of lesser gods made Damon think of Valarie, Vathren... and Lysithara as a whole.

The ancient ascendants had lived in a city forged as a melting pot of culture and knowledge after the world was broken in the Zero Epoch.

These people had built temples where they worshipped both the Goddess and the Unknown God.

It was as if someone had intentionally spread this type of dual faith. Actually... someone had. Maybe Mugu. Or maybe someone before him.

Damon couldn't be sure.

But these days, the Unknown God had followers in every corner of Aetherus. The demon continent, even regions beyond—it was almost ridiculous.

Damon didn't know who was running the PR for the Goddess, but whoever it was must be biting their lips and coughing up blood.

In just a short three hundred thousand years, the Unknown God had gathered a strong, devoted following—ironic, considering he didn't even care about being worshipped.

'The Zero Epoch... I need to know about it.'

How did the Unknown God's influence start? Damon believed it began with Mugu... but what if that wasn't the start? What if Mugu was just the most successful of many? The last to still carry the weight of the many forgotten names?

Vathren had said the Unknown God wanted the Pillar of Conflict.

But didn't that mean he didn't give a damn what happened to their world?

Damon didn't mind dying. But the world had to survive.

Where else was his sister supposed to live?

That was why he had to get stronger. When the final hour came—the one that decided the fate of the world—he wanted to be one of the players making the calls.

'Ahh... I'm contradicting myself again. How can I want to die and still want to make choices?'

Shaking his head, he brushed the thoughts aside.

Only then did he realize—they had arrived somewhere new.

A massive statue of the Goddess stood before them, towering in quiet divinity. But more interesting was the large vaulted door behind her. It looked just like the one they'd used to enter this place—except this one was wide open, leading deeper into the maze of halls and forgotten statues.

Lilith stepped around the base of the statue, then froze.

She waved him over.

"Hey... come look at this."

Damon took a single step, disappearing into his own shadow and reappearing beside her with a soft pulse of shadow energy.

He glanced at the symbol carved beside the statue—an emblem that looked suspiciously like the mark of the Unknown God, but unfinished.

Normally, the full symbol had four wings and an Abyssal eye at its center. Some versions even had two swords crossed behind it.

But this one...

Only two wings. And a dot in the center.

As if someone had begun to draw it, then stopped. Or... couldn't finish.

It looked ancient. As old as the eerie, living stones this place was built from.

Damon furrowed his brows. He was cautious... but his curiosity still won out.

He activated Appraisal.

The moment he did, there was a soft plup—followed by the splatter of something wet across Lilith's face.

She raised her head slowly.

Damon groaned, one hand clutching a gaping hole where his eye used to be.

Blood spilled freely. A thick, red stream gushed from his ruined socket as he staggered and fell to one knee.

"D-Damon!" she rushed to him, trying to help—but even she could tell how much pain he was in.

He laughed through clenched teeth, grinning like a lunatic as he stood back up. One side of his face painted in red, the other clean.

"I have pain resistance... this is nothing."

It wasn't nothing. Not by the way his eye twitched. Not by the way his teeth were grinding.

Lilith reached into her pocket space, quickly pulling out a high-level potion.

But Damon beat her to it—pulling out one of his own, much weaker medium-grade potions. He poured it directly into the bleeding socket.

It was still better because his came from the system.

A sizzling hiss echoed as steam rose from his eye.

Flesh began to twist and reform.

It was going to take a while.

"Hehe... I'm out of those high-tier system potions. So, yeah... regeneration's gonna be slow."

Lilith bit her lip.

She tore part of her uniform and wrapped it over his eyes, fashioning a makeshift bandage. Her hands trembled slightly.

"You're insane," she whispered.

He smiled.

"I almost got brain-fried, but I learned something. Guess this is one of the reasons I don't use that skill on random crap."

"You think?" she growled.

He waved it off.

"Everything has a price. Especially knowledge. And yeah... this one was excessive, but I got something."

He leaned back, grimacing.

"This isn't just a creepy shrine. It's also a dwelling. It's called the Tomb of the Lesser Gods. Built by Lazarak—a lesser god who wanted to kill and bury all the others."

Lilith's eyes darkened.

"Lazarak?"

"Yeah... take it with a grain of salt. What I saw was fragmented. But apparently, he discovered there was a god out there just as powerful as the Goddess. Someone who could help him. That's why he tried to draw the Unknown God's symbol."

Damon leaned against the wall.

"He was a traitor, Lilith. That's all conjecture—but it's what I got before my eye went pop."

"From what I glimpsed... Lazarak wasn't just a traitor. He thought the other lesser gods were holding the world back. And he wanted help—divine help—to wipe the board clean.... But he was too small to matter."

Lilith glared at him.

"You risked an eye for information we can't even confirm?"

Her voice shook. She wasn't sure if it was from anger or fear.

"You're reckless. Dammit, Damon."

She turned away.

"Let's go. We're leaving."

Damon blinked, his one eye still functional.

"Wait—there's more. These doors have a spe—"

RURRRRRRAAAAAAHHH...

A heavy rumble echoed.

Both of them turned.

Something was forcing its way through the open door.

At first, all they saw were eyes—dozens, maybe hundreds—poking out like a grotesque sea of white orbs. Countless thin, rope-like hairs slithered across its skin, and some larger tendrils moved like whips forged from polished metal.

Damon's body tensed.

Its aura was cold. Terrifying.

A Fourth-Class creature.

'...We're not going to outrun that.'

Lilith exhaled, her heartbeat heavy in her chest.

"Then we try... not to die."

Damon stared at her, then back at the horror.

"How long can you keep it out? I have a plan."

Lilith narrowed her eyes, raising her hand. Her aura flared like the beginning of a storm.

"A few minutes."

Damon twitched.

'We're screwed.'

Chapter 469: Close But Hidden

Lilith almost cursed when he said that.

She had been about to teleport them away—until she realized exactly why Damon muttered those words: "We're screwed."

The creature's eyes... hundreds of them. They had locked onto the two of them like searchlights in a dark field, and once it had you in its gaze, teleportation was restricted.

"Which means we really can't outrun it..." she whispered.

As long as those many hateful eyes were fixed on them, long-range spatial movement was impossible.

What a dangerous creature.

She almost wanted to laugh—Damon had just gotten his shiny new teleportation skill, walking around like some demon king who ruled heaven and earth. And just when that planet-sized ego of his was about to blow?

Fate—or perhaps the Unknown God himself—had sent him a dose of humility.

If the monster's fearsome aura wasn't crushing her lungs, she really would've turned to him and laughed in his face.

Still, this abomination... it was no joke. A creature of the fourth rank.

One of its many long, hair-thin tendrils lashed out at her like a whip.

Lilith flickered away, teleporting a short distance with her First-Class skill.

Even with space locked, she was still the Priestess of the Void.

She was known to the Void.

And the void encompassed all things—things far beyond the grasp of her mortal comprehension.

She moved her hand slightly, and the air around her tore. Countless invisible blades carved through space, slicing with unseen precision.

The creature flinched.

It retaliated fast, its metal-like whips slashing at the parts of space where her attacks had distorted the air—but its body remained largely untouched. Only a few of its strands were severed, scattered like threads in the wind.

This was her Second-Class skill—one she'd awakened naturally upon ranking up. She hadn't bought it. Hadn't gained it through some scroll or relic.

No... a god had gifted her this.

After all, she was the favorite of one.

Her Third-Class skill was Void Scythe.

Though it sounded like a weapon, the skill wasn't a scythe at all—it was death in the form of Void. It was a literal black hole, as far as her limited human imagination could perceive. A singularity.

But it could be anything.

A supernova. A quasar. Strange matter. Nothingness.

Death in its purest, most incomprehensible form. As long as it was related to the void.

The Void Scythe could become whatever could kill in the heavens. Anything in the void.

Still, using it came at a cost. Skills that could unmake reality required power no mortal should bear.

Maybe the Unknown God could toss it around like a toy, but for her... it was far too heavy to wield recklessly.

And all this—all of it—was before she even tapped into her stigmata.

The chamber rumbled. The floor cracked.

Lilith flickered from place to place, dodging the creature's tendrils as they crashed through the stone like whips of divine punishment.

Winning against a Fourth-Class monster... it was difficult, even for her.

The gap between Third and Fourth Class was a wall.

One she could not leap over so easily.

'Or should I... use my trump card?'

Too risky. Not yet.

Damon sat crouched near the statue, his head pounding.

The bandage across his ruined eye still dripped with blood. It had been torn from Lilith's uniform, and even now, faint traces of her scent remained... soaked into the fabric, mixed with his own blood and sweat.

But he wasn't wasting time.

While Lilith bought them precious seconds, Damon had used Appraisal on the statue—despite the cost—and discovered something crucial.

The goddess statue was linked to the doors.

There was a mechanism.

He had no clue why Lazarak would build a tomb for the other lesser gods, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was finding a way to activate the damn thing.

His fingers traced the statue's base—until they found a small, hidden stone button.

He slammed his hand on it.

Click.

A soft light flashed across the chamber.

He stepped back.

When the light faded, Damon saw it a small altar had emerged from the floor, appearing beneath the incomplete mark of the Unknown God.

He rushed to it.

On its surface were lines—magic circuits and archaic seals carved into ancient stone. No runes. Of course not. Back in the Zero Epoch, runes weren't widespread—maybe the Goddess used them, but certainly not the modern kinds.

This was old magic. Forgotten magic.

He had no idea how it worked, but at the center of the altar was a strange dial.

Behind him, the sounds of battle were growing more violent. The walls trembled. Stone cracked. That thing was almost through.

He had no more time.

Damon slammed his hand onto the dial.

And poured everything he had into it.

Mana surged from his body like a flood—drawn into the altar as if the entire tomb were a desert, and his power the first drop of rain.

A violet glow pulsed from the altar.

It spread outward—flowing through the hidden lines of the tomb, through the circuits etched deep into its bones, toward the giant open doors.

As the light reached them, the heavy doors began to groan and close.

The creature shrieked.

It tried to force its body through the narrowing gap—but Lilith, seeing the opportunity, went on the offensive. Her void attacks became sharper, more feral.

The monster slammed into the doorframe.

And the doors began to crush its limbs.

It screamed—an unearthly, mind-rending noise—as it pulled back, retreating into the darkness before it could be completely severed in two.

The doors slammed shut.

Silence fell.

Ding.

A quiet chime echoed in Damon's head.

[You have claimed an Altar.]

Lilith dropped to her knees, chest heaving.

Damon sat on his rear, gasping.

That had been too close.

But now... something had changed. He could feel it.

A thread, stretching from his mind, linking him to the altar.

The entire area—from here all the way back to the earlier doors—was under his control.

Lilith stumbled over, hair tangled, face dirtied with dust and soot.

She glared at him.

"What... just happened?"

He lifted his arm lazily. She grabbed it, pulling him up into her arms. Then, just as quickly, let go.

He leaned on her shoulder and gestured to the altar.

"This place... it's got a mechanism. That's why Chrome could hide here for so long. If you claim an altar, the whole region it's in comes under your control. The doors keep monsters out."

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"Which means if someone else claims your altar... you lose control?"

"Exactly. And if monsters invade... they can take it back too. I'm guessing if we push too far, they'll retaliate."

She nodded.

"And if someone finds this place and conquers your altar... they can force us out."

"But if we take the main altar..." Damon smiled. "We rule all of it."

Lilith's lips curled slightly.

She looked at the altar's glowing map, showing the territory they had now claimed for themselves.

Then she turned to Damon, her voice low.

"Do you know what this means?"

He blinked.

She stepped closer, her expression fierce.

"We finally have a base of operations. Far removed from our enemies' sphere of influence."

She smiled coldly.

"No—better yet... right under their noses."

Chapter 470: Another Old Person

'This damn temple hater...' Damon smirked.

Lilith sometimes wished her hatred for the temple was born solely out of a desire for good and justice.

Maybe then, she could pretend her dreams of destroying them were noble. That she wanted to make the world a better place.

But no—that wasn't it.

Her hatred ran deeper. Stronger. Wilder.

It was just vengeance.

Even now, as she stood by the altar, she was plotting. Calculating. Always thinking of ways to undermine them.

She just wasn't strong enough yet.

She glanced at the altar, voice low. "The Key of Lazarak is a great tool... we could move troops and logistics with ease using it..."

Damon immediately understood what she was implying—but shook his head slightly.

It wouldn't work.

The Key could create doorways to this hidden tomb from nearly anywhere in the world, even tear through space entirely—if you had the right affinity.

What Lilith wanted was to use this place as a buffer zone—a gateway. Connect two distant places through the tomb and turn it into a bridge for logistics, movement, escape.

But for that, they needed two keys.

One to enter. One to exit.

Without that, it would just be a one-way corridor.

"Wouldn't that be a dream..." Damon muttered, thinking about the possibilities.

"We could ignore every danger of travel. We'd only need to make a trip once."

All the danger zones. The travel time. The expenses.

Gone.

Lilith bit her lip, her face turned downward, frustration tightening her expression.

"That is a shame... but... maybe we can recruit an alchemist and an artificer. Someone who can recreate the crucial enchantments. We can still do this."

She looked up at him then—eyes slightly wide, a flicker of desperate hope behind them.

"Look how far we've come... we can go even further... can't we?"

Damon stared at her.

It was in these moments he remembered... Lilith Astranova wasn't perfect. She wasn't invincible.

She was human.

A young human, at that. Not even twenty.

Powerful, yes. But still fragile.

So Damon smiled.

"Obviously," he said. "Like we could actually lose—with all the broken abilities we've got in our arsenal."

He tapped his temple with a grin.

"And let's not forget—I've got most of Lysithara's tech archives in my head."

Well... technically, in his crown. But she got the point.

He turned to scan the chamber, his gaze shifting toward the altar's dial—where a few red dots still flickered.

Roaming monsters. Stragglers within their new sphere of influence.

"We just need to kill a few more of those, and this place'll be fully secured."

He pointed off to the corner of the room.

"We can have banners there. A flag over there. There's enough space for an organization—this is a fresh start."

He turned back to her, smiling again.

"We can do this."

Lilith listened, her smile slowly forming. Her eyes gleamed with a quiet warmth as she touched the glowing map on the dial.

"We can use this place as a meeting room."

Damon chuckled.

"We can build our whole operation right under their noses."

He leaned slightly toward her, grin sharp.

"As for our relationship with the temple... I've had an idea. I've been thinking about it for months."

Lilith tilted her head curiously.

Damon placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Have you heard of a little something called... political lobbying?"

Lilith blinked. "Erhm... yes?"

Damon's grin turned devious.

"The temple's an organization. Which means it's run by people. And people? They want to climb the ladder."

He turned, gesturing with his hand like a showman introducing a grand performance.

"What we do is... fund a few of them. Kind, devoted contributors to the faith—help them rise. Pay their way to power."

He flicked his hand, as if tossing gold into the wind.

"And in exchange? They support us. Feed us info. Nudge policies in our favor. You know—the works."

Lilith stared at him, stunned.

It was... clever. Risky. But clever.

Then she frowned.

That would take an insane amount of money. Money they absolutely did not have.

Damon raised his hand before she could speak.

"I know what you're going to say—we're broke. So why not earn it?"

He paused.

"I can get billions... if I give up my dignity."

Lilith blinked again.

"Please don't tell me, you're planning to mess around with another old noble woman."

She wasn't sure what he meant by giving up his dignity, but it sounded dangerous.

It had better not be.

Damon smirked.

"Better an old man."

He wasn't done.

"We build a public organization," Damon continued. "A guild. Trades resources, does business. But still keeps a military function."

"A front," she muttered, she didn't even want to consider what he'd do for money.

He nodded.

"Exactly. That lets us build wealth, amass resources, weapons, people—all without making the state suspicious."

He leaned closer.

"Meanwhile, in the shadows... we build a real organization. Based here. Underground. Secret."

He pointed downward.

"This place feeds off the surface. Hidden, nameless. And that's where we gather the strength to destroy the temple."

Lilith stared at him. Silently. He really had thought this through.

But even with a plan, it wouldn't be easy.

"There are already powerful people out there," she murmured. "They'll try to crush us. We'll suffer losses. We may go bankrupt just trying to get started."

Her voice lowered.

"And if we're discovered... this secret organization will be branded heretical. Treasonous. Both religion and state will want our heads. It's just the two of us right now. No members. No backers. How do we even begin?"

Damon stepped closer.

"For the public front, we start with Lysithara's tech. We advance magic. Bring innovations no one's seen in thousands of years."

"We patent our products—medicine, transport, quality-of-life enchantments. We sell them."

He took her hand in his.

"We take the wealth, and we recruit."

He looked her in the eyes.

"The temple's on top. You don't get to the top without enemies. So we recruit them. And if that's not enough..."

His smile returned.

"We work with demons."

"We conquer this place. One step at a time. We build one step at a time."

Lilith looked at him, her lips parting.

"Together."

He nodded.

"Hmm. Together."

She smiled.

Squeezing his hand tightly.

"So, shall we get started? We don't even have a name for our organization yet... and we're flat broke. We have zero influence. And a mountain of work ahead of us..."

She turned, pulling him by the hand, a rare and gentle laugh rising from her throat.

"Come on then... let's not dawdle. We've got enemies to kill—"

She glanced back, eyes alight.

"—and allies to find and a temple to burn."