

## **Shadow 471**

### Chapter 471: A Civil Person

Revenge.

Ahhh, what a beautiful word. If Revenge were a woman, Damon would've run up to her, dropped to his knees, and asked her to marry him on the spot.

Whoever said getting revenge would make you less clearly had no idea what they were talking about.

Or maybe it was that ridiculous nonsense about forgiveness.

Actually—Damon believed in forgiveness.

He would absolutely forgive his enemies.

After he got his revenge.

As for that tired old saying about how killing your enemies in revenge only meant the number of killers stayed the same?

Bullshit.

No one actually cared about that. If someone slapped you on the right cheek, you weren't supposed to turn the left.

No.

You slapped them back—harder. Twice, maybe thrice. Basically, as many times as it took for them to get the point.

Right and wrong? That didn't matter. It never did.

Should he feel guilty for killing her children—those innocent monsters?

No.

Why didn't she feel guilty for trying to kill him?

But then again... didn't Damon intrude on her territory first? The Evil Forest wasn't exactly human land.

Still—he didn't care.

As far as he was concerned, logic could kiss his ass.

He was the victim, at least in his own head, and that meant he was here for justice.

And, well... "justice and shit like that."

He almost shed a tear at the thought.

Evangeline would be so proud of the man I've become.

"Look at me, thinking about justice and doing what's right... I'm a good guy now," he said, voice thick with sarcasm.

If she actually knew the context, she'd probably side with the Wendigo—who had lost all her children to Damon after he snuck into her den and slaughtered them.

Yet here he was, coming back like the righteous victim.

To be fair... the Wendigo was a man-eating monster. So Damon technically had free reign to kill her. He wasn't committing a crime.

But that begged the question—was this justice?

Why did justice decide the Wendigo's life was worth less than his?

Didn't that mean justice wasn't the same as equity?

That it was just another human construct pretending to know who lives and who dies?

Who gets branded innocent. Who gets branded guilty.

Had justice ever truly been right?

And who gave the judge that authority—basing verdicts on evidence and arbitrary testimonies crafted by laws designed by a handful and imposed on the many?

Was justice even real if it could only be enforced through violence and power?

Damon's thoughts were rapidly spiraling into something philosophical—exactly the kind of conversation Evangeline would've hated.

He missed that golden-haired girl.

Who, as it turned out, was secretly his cousin.

Small world.

He missed Leona and Sylvia too. He'd spent months with them. Now, alone in another death zone, he couldn't help but feel a little... empty.

He'd called them earlier—using his academy pager to reach the Duke's estate. Lilith had generously provided the contact info.

Honestly, he half expected the call wouldn't go through.

But the moment he revealed his identity, the person on the other end became extremely eager to please.

He spoke with them briefly. They hadn't returned yet because—apparently—Sylvia didn't want to come back. Not with her father's soldiers waiting outside the academy.

But she'd agreed to return tomorrow. Her father, the White Ruler, would be arriving personally to attend the upcoming War Games. He'd take her back after.

Damon said his goodbyes, told them about his escapades—dodging exams but still keeping his grades.

He could've waited a day longer to see them.

But revenge?

Revenge waits for no one.

He was eager. Names were piling up on his hit list.

Which brought him here.

It was daytime, but in this place, light barely existed.

After months in death zones, Damon had grown to hate forests, mountains, and trees.

Oh, it wasn't a big deal—it's not like he had traumatic experiences with them or anything.

Nope.

Just a totally normal association between trees and pain, death, horror, madness, and misery.

Once again, Damon braved a death zone—for vengeance this time.

The ground here was pitch black. The sand, tainted. The flora, still trying to kill him.

Yet he walked like he owned the place.

Last time he came here, he was crawling through brush, swinging in trees, flinching at every sound.

Now?

Whatever lurked near the outskirts better pray he ignored them.

Damon stopped, extending his shadow perception until he found the familiar den.

This was where the Evil Forest Wendigo once lived.

He took a single step—Shadow Stride—vanishing into darkness and reappearing in front of the den.

His shadow energy drained slightly from the long distance, but it wasn't a problem.

He could almost taste the Wendigo's blood on his tongue. He could hear the growl, the pain, the—

He cleared his throat.

No need to leak murderous intent yet.

He gently knocked on the den's opening.

He was an avenger, not a barbarian.

Just because you were here to kill someone didn't mean you couldn't be civil about it.

There was silence.

He didn't use his shadow perception to peek inside. After all, the Wendigo was a female. What if she was... changing?

Not that she even wore clothes.

He was civilized.

Still, his playfully murderous mood began to fade.

He knocked a second time.

Still no answer.

No roar. No attack.

Not even the Wendigo's scent.

Just a small scarlet squirrel perched on a tree, nibbling on a nut and watching him curiously.

Damon sighed, finally spreading his shadow perception inside.

Nothing.

The den had been abandoned. Long ago, by the look of it.

His eye twitched.

Imagine coming to kill something... and it didn't even have the decency to wait.

"If I have to hunt you down," he muttered, "torture is on the menu..."

He turned around and met the squirrel's gaze.

With a single step, he teleported to its branch.

The poor creature tried to flee—too late.

He caught it with ease. It squealed in his hand, tiny body trembling.

Damon smiled coldly.

"Relax. I won't hurt you. You seem more intelligent than the average beast..."

The squirrel stopped struggling. Just slightly.

It understood him.

And Damon could understand it.

Soul Tongue.

A skill that allowed him to speak with all creatures—beasts, monsters, and everything in between.

Perfect for what came next.

Chapter 472: Baby Killer

[Skill: Soul Tongue]

[Description:]

Once, he'd heard someone say all humans spoke the same language until Babel. Still, the Weeping Star found the strange language spoken by his mother to be perfectly comprehensible.

[Effect:]

Soul Tongue is the language of the soul... and the source of all languages. Like those on higher planes, you can speak all tongues—though whether you can comprehend them is up to you.

[Type:] Passive

[Cooldown:] None

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This was actually... a pretty lackluster skill, all things considered.

The creature Damon killed to obtain it had the ability to influence the world with its words.

He remembered it as a particularly ugly son of a bitch.

And somehow the only thing Damon got from it was the ability to understand and speak any language spoken to him.

He couldn't invent a language from thin air. And he couldn't speak a language he hadn't heard. But if someone—human or otherwise—spoke to him in any unknown tongue, he would instantly become fluent.

Useful?

Sure. But not epic.

He could speak to any entity. Man, monster, creature, or horror.

Which came with its own problems.

Annoying little problems, like most of his skills.

His human brain wasn't exactly built for this.

For instance, while animals had a language... that didn't mean they were bright. The info he got from them was often incomplete, misinterpreted, or just plain dumb. Most were too simple-minded.

Like dogs. If he passed one on the street, its words would sound like:

Tail. Tail. Bone. Female dog. Woof. Master!

Squirrels? Not much better. Winter. Nuts. Bugs.

Bugs? Don't even go there.

They chose actions based on simple binary logic—safer vs. not safe. Food or no food. Mate or no mate.

Animals were fine for simple things. But horror creatures and abominations? Completely different problem.

They were often too broken to form coherent thought. And when they did speak, it was pure malicious garbage. Hate. Violence. Nonsense.

There were a few exceptions, of course.

But for the most part, if Damon didn't use this skill for very specific purposes—like interrogating horrors or understanding strange creatures—then it just wasn't worth the mental strain.

Still, it did have perks.

Linguists would die for what he had. And now he could at least chat with Ravenscroft, his pet raven. Though... that bird might be smart, but it sucked at expressing itself.

This squirrel, however...

This little red menace had been watching him from the start—ever since he stepped foot back into the Evil Forest in search of the Wendigo.

He was hoping it had some intelligence. Maybe even enough to tell him what happened to his old enemy.

Keep your friends close... and your enemies closer. If your enemies started winning in life. You destroy them with negativity.

Yeah, that was the full quote.

He squeezed the squirrel in his hand, watching it squirm.

He could tell it was terrified. Honestly, if he saw himself right now, even he'd be terrified of himself.

He activated his Appraisal skill.

Sure enough...

[Scarlet Flying Squirrel]

Fast. Agile. Loves nuts.

Except these particular squirrels love living nuts. Enemy of all men. Can bite through armor. Especially groin armor. Also called testicle collector.

Age: 17 years

Rank: Unranked

Status: Healthy

Damon's eye twitched.

Oh yeah. He'd heard about these things. Their reputation was legendary in very unfortunate circles.

Appraisal was such a weird skill. Sometimes it gave clear info, other times it just spat out question marks or burned his eyes out of his skull.

He was supposed to be asking about the Wendigo.

But he couldn't help himself.

He looked down at the tiny furball in his hand.

"So you've been looking at my nuts, huh? You wanna eat my little— I mean big treasures?"

The squirrel squealed in sheer panic.

Damon heard its desperate shriek as:

"Nut—not!!"

He slammed his hand—and the squirrel—into the tree trunk beside him, rattling the entire ancient tree.

"I'm gonna ask you some questions. You lie—I eat your nuts."

The squirrel squirmed and looked toward a small hole in the tree.

Damon followed its gaze.

"Oh? That's where your stash is, huh?"

He spread his shadow perception into the tree.

What he saw made his expression twist in horror.

"...You little pervert."

Inside the hollow was a nut collection—but not just any nuts.

Testicles.

Dozens.

None human, but clearly the remains of various beast species around the forest.

Huge ones too. A nocturnal stag. A swamp cat. A couple demon boars.

The squirrel had been busy.

It was now trembling in pure terror. Its expression reminded Damon of a nobleman discovering he'd gone bankrupt overnight.

He looked up and whistled.

"Croft."

The raven circling above came swooping down.

The squirrel looked up, eyes wide—like it was seeing an old enemy.

Its next squeal translated clearly:

"Help me..."

Croft landed beside him. Gave the squirrel a sharp glance, then looked back at Damon.

Definitely familiar with the little freak.

Then, without ceremony, Croft hopped to the tree hole, plucked out a fresh blood-stained testicle, and started munching.

The squirrel looked devastated. Utter betrayal.

Damon could've sworn it was crying.

He cleared his throat. This was exactly why he hated talking to animals.

They got too easily distracted.

He lifted the heartbroken squirrel up by its fur, holding it eye-level.

He pointed in the direction of the Wendigo's old den.

"Your neighbor. Where did she go?"

The squirrel hesitated. Then pointed.

To the left.

While squealing: "Right!"

Damon's eye twitched.

Right. Animals didn't know left or right.

"When did she leave?"

It began screeching in a rapid, jumbled string of thoughts. The Soul Tongue skill translated as a confusing mess of instincts, memory fragments, and vague time references.

Still—he got the gist.

The Wendigo had left a few days after Damon killed her children.

The squirrel said something else too. Something that stood out.

Apparently, Damon should be careful.

There's a baby killer on the loose.

Damon blinked.

Then smirked.

"...Yeah. That's me. I'm the baby killer."

He could've sworn its fur lost color when he said that.

Chapter 473: Footprints On The Stone

Life was truly a mysterious thing...

One moment, you were out and about collecting nuts—living your best life.

Just honest testicle harvesting. Not hurting anybody.

It wasn't much, but it was honest work.

Sure, your neighbor—the Evil Forest Wendigo—had just lost all three of her asexually produced offspring to some heartless baby killer, but that had nothing to do with you.

You were just minding your business.

Yes, the world was a horrible place. Yes, monsters lurked at every corner. But that didn't concern a humble squirrel just trying to survive. You were about honest living.

Squeal squeal.

Then—bam. Some fiend showed up.

Didn't chase. Didn't fly. No fair warning.

Just poof—appeared out of the shadows and grabbed you.

What kind of dishonorable scum teleports next to an innocent squirrel?

You'd gotten cocky, thought no one could catch you.

Why did the goddess hate good, honest work?

Squeal...

What god had you wronged?

After today, you swore—you'd change. No more evil nuts. Only ethical nuts. Mind your business. Stay low. Never trust a talking bird again.

But honestly, what hurt most?

That hateful, smug bird eating your hard-earned collection. The stash you'd risked everything for.

Did it know how many enemies you made just to collect those precious testicles? How many beasts you'd snuck past or stolen from?

And here it was—munching.

No wonder it was gone for so long. It had been working with the shadow fiend.

Traitor.

So when the shadow bastard asked where the Wendigo went?

The Scarlet Squirrel didn't hesitate.

It pointed. It told him everything. Even some things it didn't need to say. If it could've drawn a map, it would've done that too.

This was the Evil Forest. It was every monster for itself.

It betrayed the Wendigo without blinking.

Damon, of course, could barely make sense of it. The squirrel's speech was... chaotic.

It was like someone used to speaking formal grammar encountering a caveman on an energy drink high.

To him it was basically speaking broken.

He understood just enough.

He squeezed the squirrel in his palm.

"Thanks for the directions... your reward—I'll spare your life. But the nuts... go."

He smiled gently.

Then a flicker of darkness danced from his fingertips.

Black, shadow-like flames erupted, consuming the tree hollow entirely.

The squirrel screamed—clutching its head in disbelief.

It staggered up to the scorched hole, staring into the ashes.

Even the bird stepped aside.

Dead look. Eyes full of tears.

It collapsed to its knees.

A long, pitiful squeal escaped its throat before it lay still.

Damon almost felt bad.

He cleared his throat.

"Ahem... sorry about that. It's just... you have a weird fetish. But, uh, thanks for the info. Let's never meet again."

Croft, perched nearby, looked at the squirrel with mild pity.

Personally, he had no testicles, so he didn't really see the big deal. But still... nuts?

Really?

Clearly eyeballs were superior.

He watched as Damon teleported away without a word.

As Damon's trusted pet, Croft figured he had to offer some form of apology on his master's behalf.

So, he cawed.

And then cawed some more.

Bragging, mostly.

About how he'd tamed Damon. How he was the real brains behind this revenge operation. How Damon once shot him down from the sky, but he'd returned stronger, better—and now lived rent-free on Damon's shoulder.

He even mentioned how Damon was always killing people. How he got to feast on their premium-quality eyeballs.

Sure, he ran a few errands. But what kind of good pet didn't?

This was the life... yes he had tamed a human... no a fiend.

The squirrel's eyes twitched.

That cawing—it reignited something.

It stood. Slowly. Eyes gleaming.

It sniffed the air, scanned for the shadow fiend, but only saw the raven.

The traitor.

It turned and leapt from the branch, wings extended—scarlet fur glinting in the light.

An idea had been born.

If Damon had still been around, he would've heard the squirrel mutter the Evil Forest equivalent of:

"An eye for an eye. A nut for a nut."

The squirrel vanished into the forest, a red blur streaking through the trees.

This was the Evil Forest. All the creatures here were monsters.

But it took a special kind of monster to survive being weak.

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Not that Damon cared.

He wasn't thinking about the squirrel.

Even if it was, admittedly, extremely cute—with large eyes and scarlet fur.

No, he was more disturbed by the idea of it running up someone's pants and biting their—

Yeah. He didn't want to imagine that happening to him.

He took a step—appearing beneath a tree.

A large worm burst from the ground, trying to swallow him whole.

He simply took another step and vanished again.

Didn't have time to kill it.

He stopped on a hill, scanning the distance.

A stone. A few trees. Traces of battle.

His gaze settled on a charred rock etched with deep claw marks.

Wendigo claws.

"It seems you came this way..."

He knelt, running a hand across the ground.

But it was faint.

Too faint.

"Been weeks..."

It wasn't normal for monsters to switch habitats.

Not without reason.

It looked like she'd entered another monster's domain... and killed it.

But didn't stay.

He looked up. The barrier that surrounded the Evil Forest shimmered faintly in the distance.

He dashed forward, using short teleport shadow strides until his shadow energy wore thin.

Then he began running. Leaping. Swinging through the trees with inhuman speed and strength.

Kilometers passed in seconds.

He stopped at the edge.

Trees were broken, but healing.

Blood on the ground. Marks that refused to fade.

The Wendigo had fought here.

Damon followed the signs.

The tracks led right up to the barrier.

And slammed into it.

Over and over.

Deep gashes. Dents.

She had tried to break out.

Beyond that barrier lay the road to Valtheron. The capital city Valerion

He was about to dismiss it... until he saw it.

A footprint.

Solid.

Embedded in stone.

Not beast-like. Not monstrous.

It was a human footprint.

Small. Narrow. Judging by the size...

Female.

Croft landed on his shoulder, eyes narrowed.

Had the Wendigo... taken a human form?

Damon stepped toward the barrier, pressing against it.

He passed through easily.

The squirrel leapt onto his back, slipping through as well.

Damon caught it mid-air.

He squatted down, holding it in his palm.

"Sniff this. Is it the Wendigo?"

The squirrel nodded rapidly. The scent was faint. But it was her.

Damon clicked his tongue and let it go.

This was bad.

His weak enemy had grown.

Powerful.

Taken a human form.

And now, somewhere in this wide world... she walked among them.

He didn't even know what she looked like.

Didn't know her name. If she even had one.

Didn't know how to find her.

A monster among humans.

He clenched his fist.

This wasn't over.

He turned and walked away into the distance.

The nutless squirrel followed silently, its dark eyes filled with purpose.

And Damon?

He only now realized—

He'd made a terrible enemy.

Chapter 474: Scar Of The Nuts

Damon didn't really know what was up with this weird squirrel...

Honestly, he had more important things to worry about. His enemy had just achieved an unprecedented evolution up the ladder.

He didn't even know what she looked like—only that she was vengeful.

Well, so was he.

Damon glanced at his shadow. It had been unusually still these days, like it was preparing for something.

He had a bad feeling.

He glanced at his eternal companion.

"Hey... the Wendigo is gone now... what do we do?"

His shadow merely shrugged.

Instead, it seemed more concerned with the raven and the scarlet squirrel that had been following them.

Damon looked up and sighed.

He raised his hand—and the raven, Croft, took it as a sign to fly straight into Damon's arm.

It was, after all, Damon's pet. Croft cawed in disdain at the squirrel, who fluttered down to the ground a few meters away from Damon and stopped.

Damon glanced at it. Then, taking a single step in its direction, the squirrel vanished in a red blur, darting several meters back.

He frowned but turned away.

Reaching into his shadow, he pulled out an eyeball his shadow had so generously been saving for Croft... and fed it to the raven.

Seriously, he had no idea when his shadow and raven had formed such a deep bond, but apparently, most of the things he killed and devoured, his shadow saved a single eyeball from—for Croft.

And since Damon had killed a lot, Croft had quite the stash.

That was after Damon had gotten rid of a bunch already.

Still, as he walked, the squirrel continued to follow... slowly, cautiously.

Damon was starting to wonder if it was after his nuts in revenge. The way it followed him around—it just made him uneasy.

From the looks of it, the squirrel was wary of the shadows now. It wouldn't let Damon catch it again.

So, Damon did what it didn't expect.

His shadow moved on its own, stretching across the ground.

Damon took a step—appearing through it—and caught the squirrel again.

It squealed, begging for mercy.

Damon sighed, looking at its big eyes, puffy tail, and those wide, twitchy ears. It really was cute. It would be cuter if it didn't rip off people's testicles.

"You're here to steal my nuts, aren't you..."

The squirrel squealed in indignation.

It was an honorable squirrel! How dare this fiend insult it like that?!

It would've squealed every insult in the book and let him have it, if it wasn't so afraid of him...

Still, it was here to market its skills—to get a slice of the good life that traitorous bird was talking about.

It widened its eyes, looked pitiful, even made its fur fluff up just a little more.

Damon stared at the cute act with a deadpan expression.

"That's not going to work on me. I know you steal nuts."

It almost cried.

As expected of the shadow fiend—heartless.

Caw. Caw.

Croft's mocking caws only made it worse.

But the squirrel wasn't done. Clearly the fiend wanted to know where the Wendigo went.

It had a good nose. It could be useful. And if the murderous fiend happened to kill or capture people...

Well, it could take a nut—or two.

It was already imagining the possibilities.

But before it could squeal out something dramatic like,

"You're here to steal my nuts... die!"

The fiend squeezed.

It squealed in terror, flailing its paws, screaming its truth.

Damon paused.

"...You're not after my nuts in revenge?"

It squealed again.

No.

Damon nodded, satisfied.

He had the Eye of Veracity skill. As long as someone believed they were telling the truth, he could tell.

Caw. Caw.

Croft was still mocking.

Damon groaned.

"Then why are you following me?"

"For nuts," it squealed.

Then quickly corrected: "But not yours."

Damon sighed.

He was a magnet for weirdos.

First, a raven obsessed with eyeballs. Now a squirrel obsessed with nuts.

The squirrel wasn't done.

It patted its tiny chest—swearing it could remember the Wendigo's scent. Even in her human form.

"So you can track her?"

Excited squeals followed—an entire employment pitch, complete with humble boasts.

Damon sighed again.

He really didn't need another pet... but the ability to make someone's nuts disappear was a truly terrifying power.

He could see it now.

Some arrogant noble pissing him off—just send this squirrel into their pants and boom.

No more nuts.

He almost smiled thinking of the possibilities.

Croft noticed.

He didn't like that smile.

Was Damon actually being tamed... by a dirty furball?

What happened to the majestic raven?

Caw caw!

Damon pinched his beak.

"That's enough. We shouldn't use vulgar words. Croft, from today you're in charge of the newbie. Show him—err, her—the ropes."

Damon had a feeling he wouldn't be able to get rid of the squirrel without killing it.

And he still felt kinda bad about destroying her testicle stash...

Life was unique.

Some people loved money.

Some birds loved eyeballs.

Some squirrels loved nuts.

His shadow nudged him.

Oh right—and some shadows loved fresh souls and corpses.

No reason they couldn't all be civil.

This world was big enough for everyone's hobbies.

"We're all good people here, little buddy. Stick with us and you'll go places."

Damon cleared his throat, mood noticeably better.

"I still feel guilty destroying your nuts... haven't forgiven myself yet... Ahem. So, about your nut-stealing ability. Can you steal other things? Like keys... or small, expensive trinkets?"

The squirrel on his shoulder perked up proudly.

It squealed stories of all it had stolen, how many enemies it had in the Evil Forest. It preferred to let its victims know:

It stole the nuts.

But it could be discreet if Damon required it.

Damon nodded, musing out loud.

Damon tossed it a coin. It vanished in a blink. Yeah... this thing had potential.

He made for quite the strange sight—young man talking to a squirrel and a raven like they were people.

"Hmm... We should give you a name..."

He rubbed his chin.

"Redtail the Nutless? No... ah! Scarlet the Nut Stealer....Scar for short."

He certainly wanted to scar a lot of people.

And thus, a horrible group was born.

Goddess save their victims.

Chapter 475: Difference Between Princess And Queen

"You do realize that's a bad idea, right..."

Lilith spoke coldly into her pager, her voice crisp with irritation. She could already hear Damon's low chuckle from the other side.

He didn't seem to care.

Typical.

She sighed, closing her eyes in frustration. All that talk about the two of them being together, all those promises... and the first real chance he gets, he leaves her to go chase after revenge.

That was fine.

She didn't even care.

So what if he might provoke all of Valtheron's criminal underworld?

Clearly, he was either overly confident in his power... or just suicidal.

She was leaning toward suicidal.

Still, she muttered under her breath, 'I certainly hope that Deathless skill is just as good as advertised...'

Because he was going to need it.

Lilith stood from her office chair, the sleek surface of her desk reflecting the faint shimmer of the Academy's luxurious runes. She walked to the window and stared out—

Only to see an irritated white-haired elf girl below, her expression furrowed and clearly pissed.

"Hmph. Did you leave because you didn't want to get involved with our elf friends?"

Damon's chuckle came again through the pager, quieter now.

"No... I left because I was sure if they annoyed me, I'd kill them."

She blinked.

A normal person wouldn't even think of threatening the Elven Royal Guard—let alone say it out loud.

But Damon?

He wasn't normal.

He'd absolutely do it. Even knowing the consequences.

'I really hate how he knows the consequences and still acts however he pleases...'

Sylvia Moonveil wasn't the only one who had returned. Leona had come back. Evangeline. Even Xander.

Lilith was mostly alone now.

Well—she would have been, if Damon hadn't left Matia behind.

He must've summoned her through the shadows again. Or maybe... maybe he couldn't, not at such a great distance.

She hung up after their brief conversation, the click of the pager's shutdown echoing faintly.

Communication with Matia—Damon's shadow—was... difficult.

She didn't seem to like responding to anyone but Damon. Still, he had told her to do as she pleased.

Lilith turned away from the window.

"Mati—"

But Matia was gone.

Lilith's eye twitched slightly.

Of course.

She sighed.

That was fine.

If Matia had followed him, then she was doing as instructed.

"Next time, give her a clear order," Lilith muttered under her breath.

She opened the door to her office and stepped out. She was leaving the Academy for a while too, just like Damon as his accomplices.

Damon wasn't exactly forthcoming about what happened in the Death Zones, and the Academy was hoping to get more out of his party members.

She walked down the corridor with purpose—until she turned a corner and bumped into someone.

The second it happened, her irritation spiked.

"Astranova, watch where you're going," came the snide voice of Renata, the violet-haired bitch.

Lilith closed her eyes.

Nope. Not today.

"I won't stoop to your level," she said coldly. "Goodbye."

She walked past Renata, ignoring her gaze, heading for the war halls to get her luggage.

She'd need to stop by Athor's Sanctuary to pick up Luna and Iris on the way.

That bastard left his little sister and apprentice in his quest for vengeance...

Suppose that was a sign of trust.

As she left, Renata narrowed her eyes.

"Hmmm... What has she been up to this past month?" she whispered.

She had time to kill.

Smiling faintly, she waved her hand—her presence erased, her magical signature vanished. Her attribute concealed everything.

Lilith reached the war halls, stepping into the elevator on the ground floor.

Only to bump into her.

Sylvia Moonveil.

Her presence alone made Lilith's irritation go from zero to a million.

She didn't even know why.

She just suddenly... disliked Sylvia.

Deeply.

Lilith moved to one corner of the elevator, giving a curt nod—formal, as was expected from a senior and the student council president.

Sylvia's face remained cold. Irritated. Her white hair drifted slightly despite the still air.

The elevator hummed quietly, its runes glowing faintly. Several seconds passed in silence.

Then Sylvia spoke.

"The feeling is mutual, you know."

Lilith glanced at her.

"I don't like you either. You don't have to pretend with me or wear a mask. I can see right through you."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I'm a Seer, in case you didn't know."

Lilith smiled sweetly, but her eyes were pure ice.

"Oh, I see. Thank you. Thank you for being a tactless bitch. But pray tell—why do you hate me? I've barely ever spoken to you."

Sylvia nodded slowly. Her white hair drifted again, unnaturally.

"I should thank you for responding in kind," she murmured. "I would've been embarrassed if you didn't act like a total bitch. It's good to know you're not a better person than me. That's a relief."

Her eyes met Lilith's—piercing.

"As for why I hate you... I'm sorry. I really don't want to. I just can't help it."

Her fists clenched at her sides. Fingers trembling.

Maybe it was the pressure from her father. Maybe the weight of being treated like a fragile doll who needed to be hidden and protected.

Her voice cracked.

"You're not more beautiful than me... your breasts aren't bigger, your hips aren't wider, your legs aren't longer, you don't have a better voice, or more wealth..."

She whispered through clenched teeth.

"So I just... I just don't understand. Why."

Her gaze turned icy. But her voice...

"Why does he... always pick you? It's not fair. You're not better than me. Why does he have more assurance in you? Why does he trust you more?"

A crack formed.

"Why does he see less of a risk... being with you than me... why... am I not good enough?"

Sylvia's voice trembled, her lips quivering.

"Is my love not good enough? Is it weaker than yours? Am I that weak of a woman?"

A single tear slid down her cheek.

Just one.

A sign of frustration—of weakness she had no choice but to show.

Because this life... this princess life, politics, expectations—it had chained her.

And despite all that, it wasn't in the Death Zone where she'd felt most suffocated.

No.

It was here.

Here, where society said she wasn't good enough for the man she loved.

She knew it wasn't Lilith's fault.

But still—she couldn't help but feel it.

Lilith didn't comfort her.

She couldn't.

This was her rival.

And no rival of hers was allowed to be weak.

So, she smiled coldly.

"Isn't it obvious?" she said quietly. "It's because, unlike you, Princess, he knows no one can stop me from getting what I want. Not my father. Not my grandmother. Not even the Goddess."

She leaned in, her voice sharp as a blade.

"And then there's you—so easily stopped. So easily defeated. How can he trust a woman who won't even take on her measly little father and one measly kingdom?"

Ding.

The elevator door opened.

Lilith stepped out.

She glanced back once, her eyes gleaming.

"I'm prepared to take on the world and watch it burn. Are you?"

Chapter 476 Unreasonable Real World

Renata glanced around awkwardly. She had been climbing via the walls and had snuck into the elevator shaft to follow Lilith.

She shook her head.

"My my... that Damon is really popular with the ladies. He is sort of cute, but... he's so screwed if the White Ruler gets wind of this..."

She climbed out, then slid out the window, her movement fluid and practiced. Following Lilith in secret had been surprisingly fruitful.

Where else was she supposed to get such high-quality drama?

Sylvia hadn't sensed Renata at all. She slowly walked through the halls until she reached her room.

As soon as she got inside, she collapsed onto her dorm bed, face first.

She pulled her pillow over her head.

She should have felt embarrassed about what she'd said to Lilith Astranova... but really, she was just trying to explain to herself why Lilith might be the better choice.

Maybe that's why she ended up focusing on Lilith's physical traits.

Was that what men wanted?

She had read something like that once... but she doubted Damon was that shallow. No, she knew he wasn't.

"I'm beautiful too..."

She whispered it into the pillow. She meant it. Damon wouldn't care about superficial appearances.

What hurt the most wasn't the comparison.

It was that she hadn't even gotten to see him before he vanished again.

She wanted to blame the elven guards posted outside the academy. If they hadn't been there, she might have at least seen Damon one more time...

"I should kill them all... they should just die... all of them..."

Her voice cracked.

Then she bit her lip.

They were just following orders.

From her father.

"Maybe Lilith Astranova is right... I can't even deal with one measly kingdom..."

She clenched her fists, her eyes full of fury.

Was she really going to accept that?

Absolutely not.

Her resolve wasn't weak.

As she reaffirmed her commitment to getting what she wanted, her pager rang.

Sylvia frowned deeply. She picked it up, recognizing the voice instantly—it was her mother.

Her tone was slow, calm.

"Sylvia... whatever it is you're planning to do... don't do it."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed.

She hadn't done anything yet. But of course, her mother was calling already.

No surprise there—her mother was an oracle.

"Did she get some revelation...?" Sylvia muttered under her breath.

She answered, keeping her voice smooth.

"What are you talking about, Mother? Did I do something wrong?"

Her mother sighed gently on the other end.

"Listen. I'm sorry. About your father. He's just worried about you. He was furious when he found out you got stabbed in the back by a commoner classmate... someone you called a friend..."

Sylvia's grip on the pager tightened. Her hands trembled.

It was just like her mother to know everything.

But she didn't understand. Damon stabbing her during the mid-semester evaluation—it hadn't meant anything. Not like that.

Though she did end up possessed.

Her mother continued, her voice turning more serious.

"You were only sent to the academy because I insisted. Your father didn't agree. But we couldn't keep you locked behind the palace walls forever. And look what's happened. You got possessed by a spirit—not just any spirit, but Ignath... all because of him."

Sylvia's teeth sank into her lower lip.

Tears threatened the corners of her eyes.

Her mother's next words made her heart skip.

"All that... may be explained. But what I find most unsettling about this so-called Damon Grey... is that as hard as I try... I can't divine a single thing about him."

There was a pause.

"Sylvia... the unknown is dangerous. And this boy has proven to be a dangerous unknown."

Sylvia scoffed.

"I see... so that's why..."

Her voice was laced with disdain.

"That's why Father's been acting so tyrannical. Because you can't exercise your powers on him, so suddenly he's dangerous... is that it?"

She glared at the device.

"You can't divine anything about him, so you decide my friend is a threat and has to die. Isn't that right?"

Her grip tightened.

"Is it because you care about your daughter's well-being—or is it just an excuse to eliminate an unreadable variable from another nation? Even better—since he's a commoner, killing him won't have any repercussions."

Her mother's voice remained calm.

"Sylvia, that's not—"

"That's not what?" she snapped.

"The truth? You kill two birds with one stone. Actually—you kill one nuisance with one move."

Her voice trembled with fury.

"I learn new things every day... but what I haven't learned yet is how truly despicable we are."

"Sylvia, that's enough!" her mother's voice suddenly rose.

It startled her.

Then softened again.

"You shouldn't let that human boy come between you and your family... You've suffered in that death zone. You're tired. After everything that's happened... your father and I are coming to the War Games in Valtheron. You'll remain in the academy until then."

Sylvia chuckled bitterly.

"What—worried I'll be talking to that lowly human boy?"

The line went quiet.

The queen's voice was calm... but uncertain.

"No... I'm not. He's out of the academy. Or so my sources say. Still, it would behoove you to take my advice. That boy is bad news. What else can you say about someone who would kill one of their professors?"

Sylvia sat motionless. Her expression was cold.

Her mother's gentle voice continued.

"I'm sorry if you think we're being harsh on you... it's just... we want what's best for you."

Sylvia nodded slowly.

"I understand."

But she wasn't finished.

"I was happy when you called. I thought that you, of all people, would be on my side. Now I know—I'm truly alone."

Her eyes shimmered with tears.

"You say you want what's best for me... then why do you deny my possibilities? I've grown stronger... but clearly, not strong enough to earn your trust."

She ended the call before her mother could speak again.

The pager slipped from her hand and hit the floor with a dull thud.

All her hope, all her expectations—dashed. It stung so much, she couldn't breathe.

She had trusted her mother to be the voice of reason. Someone she could rely on.

Tears streamed freely from her eyes now.

Now I understand...

I am truly alone.

She had two choices: let this break her—or carry her convictions forward.

"Ohhh... I see it now..."

Her voice trembled.

This is the difference between me and Lilith Astranova...

Lilith didn't need approval.

She didn't seek permission.

The difference between them... was conviction.

Sylvia wiped her eyes.

These would be the last tears she ever shed.

"I will do whatever it takes... I will sacrifice whatever it takes..."

The floating book she had gotten from the Unknown God shimmered softly in front of her.

Her eyes hardened.

"This is my conviction..."

She placed her hand over the glowing text.

"I swear it... by the Lord of this book."

Chapter 477: Scum Of Her Family

Evangeline sighed, her head throbbing from a splitting headache. She wasn't sure if it was the five hours of being questioned by the academy—having every bit of information pried out of her by sly professors—or if it was just the weight of her abundant mental stress.

She'd been subjected to a physical examination first, then a mental one. And strangely enough, it wasn't her own volatile mental state that had shocked her.

No—it was Damon's.

She'd seen his mental health evaluation results, and they were... unbelievable, to say the least.

If he had been diagnosed with a serious mental illness, Evangeline would have nodded solemnly and accepted it. But no... it had been the opposite.

Damon Grey was completely and utterly mentally sound.

In fact, the academy had run his tests multiple times just to be sure. Each result came back the same—he was perfectly sane.

Too sane, even.

"Looks like he won't be needing a mental health quartermaster... that's so unfair."

Evangeline's shock vanished almost instantly the moment she remembered the real reason why the academy's scans thought that.

'That bastard wears a crown that keeps him sane as long as he has it on...'

So much for group therapy sessions...looks like she wouldn't be seeing him for a while.

The academy probably had no idea they'd unleashed a madman onto the world—worse, they were giving him preferential treatment.

And that was the problem with Aether Academy.

It was a meritocracy.

And right now, Damon Grey was their star student.

Still, Evangeline couldn't help but think about him.

She hadn't confirmed it yet, but it seemed he was related to her allegedly dead aunt.

Worse—he was her cousin.

She wasn't sure if her father and grandfather had figured it out yet, but she knew now. All those stories her father told her about her aunt's death were lies.

'So many damn liars in this family... but what can I expect from people related to Damon...'

'It's like they have no morals. They lie without blinking.'

She had been afraid that someone at Lumos or the academy would discover Damon's identity, but it seemed that hadn't happened.

"Which is a relief... I guess his dark hair doesn't look that much like ours."

She muttered to herself as she walked through the long hall.

"He probably got it from his father..."

Still, she had to protect that bastard—if not as a friend, then at least as family. She'd do whatever was necessary. She couldn't just abandon that wretch.

Even if he got on her nerves. A lot.

Evangeline allowed herself a small smile.

Suppose that's why they were always bickering. Sometimes, Leona said they sounded like an old married couple, and Professor Emeraldal had once joked they were like siblings.

Evangeline smiled bitterly.

She wondered if Damon knew. No... if he knew, with his personality, he might confront her grandfather—well, their grandfather—and demand answers.

'Or worse... he might demand money and never come back.'

'He'd probably say something like, "Buy me out, Your Excellency, and I'll keep my relationship with you a secret. You don't want people finding out your daughter married a commoner and had a kid, right?"'

She could hear him saying it.

And her grandfather's reaction?

Just as explosive as Damon's.

"That's probably where he gets that egotistical personality of his..."

They really had a lot in common. Her grandfather was called the Golden Sun—not because of his light attribute magic, but because of his ego. Like the sun at high noon, overwhelming and blinding.

They even said he was the kind of man who would say "no" to the gods.

Evangeline didn't know the full extent of his reputation.

"Oh, and they both love tamberly cake..."

She could think of more than a few similarities.

She seemed to recall her grandfather had a very good impression of Damon.

Which was rare—most people couldn't stand that unpleasant bastard.

'I wonder if he'd still like him if he knew he was his grandson...'

What was she supposed to do?

Keep Damon away and preserve the family name—and his life?

Or bring him back, risk losing face, and endanger Damon?

There were too many ways it could all go wrong.

If they didn't kill him outright, they might use him as a political pawn. And what about his sister, Luna—who Evangeline had never even met?

"Ahh... this is hard..."

She was juggling too many psychotic men in her family.

A short-tempered grandfather.

A scheming father.

And Damon—who was both of them rolled into one... with a dash of insanity.

"They won't listen to me. At all..."

It was painfully simple in this equation.

Evangeline was the weakest. Her grandfather had the most power, then her father... then Damon.

She was too weak to influence them. Damon was too weak to decide his fate against them.

"I can try appealing to Father... but even if he agrees, Grandfather has the final say. He is the Grand Duke..."

It still bothered her.

Her grandfather hadn't left his wing in years... and yet, he suddenly came out the moment she returned from Lysithara.

She smiled faintly.

Was it because he missed her... or was he suspicious?

She shook her head.

No, that couldn't be it.

If he were suspicious, why would he give her this letter?

Before she left, she had been summoned—and given very clear instructions.

The Grand Duke had his eyes on Damon. He saw him as a bright talent of the era.

He wanted to recruit Damon to their side—at any cost.

To that end, Evangeline had been given a task.

As the daughter of House Brightwater... she was to do everything—and anything—to recruit Damon Grey.

And until that task was complete, she had been temporarily granted the authority to act in the Grand Duke's name.

Evangeline clenched her fists.

"I must dedicate myself to this goal..."

As she walked away, she had no idea...

That the wretched men in her family already knew everything.

And were simply setting her up...

As a honey trap.

For Damon Grey.

Chapter 478: Adventurers Guild

The streets of Valerion never seemed to change.

They were always bustling, always lively. A beautiful, thriving metropolis wrapped in high walls, brimming with tall spires and polished roads. A place where the power and pride of the empire gathered—and all of its filth too.

Valerion was a melting pot of culture, magic, art, commerce... and crime. The Valtheron imperial family ruled from its heart, and even the holy temple had its headquarters here.

It was, by all accounts, one of the largest cities in the world.

And it was in the slums of this so-called jewel that a wretch like Damon Grey had earned the name Phantom.

He was a lowly, pathetic thing back then. Small but proud. Bitter. Jaded. His ego didn't help either—not when he was so weak. But still... he refused to shut up. Refused to lie down and accept it.

He knew—if he were the main character of some story—the audience would probably be disgusted by how small-minded he was.

But that was fine.

He didn't need anyone's approval. He was fine just the way he was: unyielding and defiant.

At the very least, he could die knowing one thing—

That he never grovelled.

He never bent the knee for anyone, and he never compromised his ideals to make others happy.

Can the same be said of the people who bent, broke, and twisted themselves just to fit in?

Maybe he was pathetic, but he had the clarity to raise his head and say—

'I didn't let myself down.'

Those were the thoughts pounding in his heart as he passed through the gates of Valerion.

But he wasn't weak anymore, was he?

He had grown stronger.

And with that strength came a day of reckoning. Not for him.

No—

For everyone who had wronged him.

Today, Valerion's streets would be dyed in blood.

He squeezed the Staff of Carnage in his hand.

From a distance, he looked like any young man—his face hidden beneath a hood, a long staff clutched in his grip. The orb at its top gleamed faintly, and metal rings curved around it like an archaic disk etched with runes.

Dark flames flickered at his fingertips, feeding slowly into the staff.

His lips tightened—he was in pain.

He was using Ashborn to charge the Staff of Carnage.

[Artifact: Staff of Carnage]

Type: Weapon

Description:

His fangs were swords, his wings the wind, and his breath could reduce cities to ash. All feared Ashergon. Wherever he flew, only smoldering ruins remained in his wake.

[Effect:]

Forged in destruction, this staff can absorb any single form of energy from your body. There is no limit—no matter how vast or volatile.

When released, it unleashes a cataclysmic burst mimicking the fury of a dragon's breath. Push it too far, and the staff will crack... then shatter.

[Cooldown:]

24 hours

This was Damon's reward for killing a fourth-rank monster.

Not that he fought it head-on.

No, he waited.

Watched as it battled another horror, then struck the final blow when it was on the brink of death.  
That's how he won.

That's how he survived.

That's how he got this—the Staff of Carnage.

His most powerful artifact.

If charged long enough, it could level a city.

It was how he'd defeated Matia. Blew her up completely. Not that it killed her, of course.

The staff worked on a simple principle—choose a single energy type: mana, shadow, or Ashborn flame.  
Once chosen, you couldn't add another. Any attempt would waste it.

Damon chose Ashborn. Simple reason—his flame was far more destructive than anything else he had.

Far beyond mana. Far beyond shadow energy.

The pain of using it was severe.

But so what?

This pain wasn't enough to distract him—not from this city. Not today.

He walked with steady steps toward the Adventurers Guild.

The guild in Valerion was massive. A towering structure with grand arched doors, marble floors, and a constant stream of adventurers of every race going in and out.

Damon stepped through the entrance.

Eyes flicked toward him.

To them, he looked like a mage—staff in hand, cloaked in expensive-looking clothes, and holding back an obvious storm of mana. His hood and outfit both screamed nobility—another product of Lilith’s meddling. She’d chosen this outfit, so of course it looked like money.

He stepped up to the receptionist desk.

A harpy woman stood behind it, auburn hair tied in a neat bun.

"Hello! Welcome to the Adventurers Guild. I’m Cherry Vine. How may I assist you today?"

She sounded sweet.

Too sweet.

If she was always this friendly, she wouldn’t survive long in a den of misfit adventurers. Then again, maybe this was how she survived.

Her eyes lingered on his staff.

Ah.

So that's why she was smiling.

His clothes, his presence, his gear...

'She thinks I'm some rich young noble.'

Too bad he barely had enough zeni to buy a decent meal on him.

But that wasn't why he was here.

"I'm here to register."

She nodded and passed him a form without hesitation.

"Please fill this out. I'll need an ID if you have one. If not, we can capture your image in the next room."

She added, "If your rank is too low, you'll need to take an aptitude test and complete two weeks of mandatory training."

While she spoke, Damon filled out the form silently and handed over his student pager.

She glanced at the name.

And froze.

"Damon Grey... first year..."

She stared at the rest of the form.

Rank: Second-Class Advancement.

Age: 17.

Her eyes widened.

He looked at her.

"Well? Do I meet the requirements?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes... you do. I'll have your Adventurer's License ready shortly."

Damon gave a curt nod.

"In the meantime... I'd like to sell something."

She blinked but nodded again.

"Of course."

Typically, the Guild only bought from its members there were normally no exceptions.

He would soon become a member, so he counted too.

Damon reached into the shadows and pulled something out.

An artifact.

"I'd like to sell this."

At first, she wasn't fazed. Not until she saw the old sigil etched into the metal.

Her eyes went wide.

She squealed.

"L-Lysithara-made artifact?!"

The room stilled.

All eyes turned to them.

Damon sighed.

It was just junk.

What was the big deal?

Chapter 479: Traget

Damon could understand the silence. Honestly, he had expected it.

But he was strapped for cash—and he had a lot of junk he'd picked up from Lysithara that wasn't working or was just half-broken. Still, due to the fact that they originated from the Path of Kings, their market value was insanely high.

Lysithara, back in the First Epoch, was a hotbed of innovation, knowledge, and magic. It had shaped the world—training heroes, kings, and legends alike.

Out of all the buried gems in history, objects from Lysithara had the highest value.

Too bad almost no one could enter Lysithara.

And those who did?

Never came back.

It was a death zone.

Damon had survived there for months—though that was mostly because of luck. And because they had Valerie, one of the last rulers of the fallen city.

He had seen the fate of those who didn't make it out.

Even the greedy didn't dare venture into Lysithara.

Not that they could—the gates leading there from Valtheron were guarded by two behemoths at fifth class.

And that was just the beginning.

Damon could hear the whispers from the adventurers around him. Most were higher ranked than him. He didn't care.

Some of them were probably greedy, sure.

But that just meant some of them might die.

"Lysithara? You think she meant that same Lysithara?"

He heard a sneer.

"How many Lysitharas do you know, Oakland? It's the Path of Kings..."

Others joined in, voices low.

"He must've found it somewhere else. No way he went to the Lysithara..."

"Some ancient probably took it from there before it fell. Ended up in another ruin."

A gruff voice from a one-armed man muttered, "I wonder what kind of ruin this lucky bastard got into. Probably swimming in zeni..."

Damon ignored them all.

He calmly pushed down his hood, shooing away the curious red squirrel trying to peek out.

The receptionist bowed her head, her tone becoming formal.

"Sorry, this is just routine, but could you share where you obtained this artifact? I'll have to submit a guild report..."

Damon nodded slowly. He didn't mind.

"I got it in the Forbidden Library."

She blinked, reaching under the desk and pulling out a crystal orb.

"I'm sorry, where exactly is that? Do you mean the Aramanic Library?"

"No," Damon replied coldly. "I mean the library in Lysithara."

Silence swept the guild hall.

Then came the murmurs.

"...Is he serious?"

"No way. He's obviously lying."

"If he went to Lysithara, I'll eat my own balls."

Damon didn't care about them. His attention was only on the receptionist. She looked doubtful at first, but then—

As if recalling something, she glanced back at his hooded face, then quickly reached beneath the counter and pulled out a newspaper.

Her face palmed.

The same hood. A young man standing beside the Grand Duke in a photograph.

"Y-You're the Ascendant..."

Damon frowned.

"I don't like to call myself that. The last Ascendant was a great person. I'd only disgrace the name."

Her eyes flickered.

"So humble..."

She glanced toward the peanut gallery of adventurers, then took the artifact and gestured to a side door.

"Please follow me, sir."

Damon noticed the cold sweat forming on her brow.

'Being a celebrity has its perks...'

Though that wasn't why she was sweating.

It was because recently, the Brightwater family had put immense political clout behind the Ascendant title—and pressure on organizations across Valerion.

As long as he claimed the title, Damon was bound to get preferential treatment.

She nearly sniffled, holding her tears back.

'I almost got in trouble... thank the goddess I didn't doubt him too quickly...'

As he walked away, he heard the whispers follow him.

"So that's the Ascendant..."

"I heard he killed a rank four Beldam with a single strike."

"That's nothing. He faced Ashergon the dragon—and lived."

"Bullshit. Just noble propaganda."

"I even heard he trained with the ghost of a First Epoch Ascendant..."

"He's gotta be loaded... full of treasures..."

"Easy pickings... jejejeje..."

Damon ignored them and followed her inside.

The room was softly lit and cooled by magic—a sharp contrast to the noisy hall.

He sat on a plush sofa.

The receptionist gave a respectful bow.

"I shall fetch the appraiser. He'll be with you shortly."

She left, and soon after, a maid entered with a trolley of refreshments, setting it down silently before leaving.

As soon as the door shut—

The red squirrel burst out of his hood and jumped on the table.

Right behind it came a raven, wings flaring as it tried to knock the squirrel off its perch.

Damon sighed.

"That's enough, you two. Be on your best behavior."

The raven cawed in disdain. The squirrel tried to cozy up to him.

Damon shook his head.

Until—

The squirrel muttered something about the people outside having hostile intent.

"...Can we steal their nuts?"

Damon stared at the testicle-obsessed squirrel and sighed again.

"Not yet."

The raven cawed louder in disgust.

The fool knew nothing.

Unlike him, the raven had known Damon longer. He could tell just from the look in his eyes.

A bloodbath was coming.

While the two familiars bickered, Damon waited.

He was curious.

He wanted to see how this appraiser would stack up against his own skill.

His ability already told him this artifact was junk. Broken. Worthless.

"I wonder what he'll say. Maybe they're buying it just for its historical value..."

Sure enough, the door opened.

A short, bearded man walked in. His vibrant green outfit and shifty eyes gave him away instantly.

A leprechaun.

Damon recognized the race at once.

'Great. A Trickster.'

Greedy, no-good swindlers with strange magical abilities.

They were infamous for ripping people off, but they had a keen eye for treasures.

Which was why they were often made treasurers, appraisers, and guild financiers.

The leprechaun sat across from him, stroking his beard with a sly grin.

"Welcome, welcome, young hero. I am... Kudi Kudi."

Damon nodded slowly.

'He's already trying to butter me up...'

Chapter 480: Long Thought Out Scheme

The Leruchuna slowly sat down. His boots were worn, as expected. They were always running around, after all, until their soles gave way to the dirt and road.

Still, Damon wouldn't be disarmed by the harmless-looking façade.

He was here in Valerion for revenge.

But even so—he didn't know how things would pan out after destroying Quick Hand. That was why he needed to secure funds beforehand and complete his objectives.

The Leruchuna—Kudi—sat comfortably, lifting a small monocle to his eye. He picked up the relic and stroked his beard as he began his appraisal.

"Hmmm... yes... hmmm. Such a rare piece... Fascinating! A true relic of the Golden Age of Kings! You've got a keen eye, young master. Might I ask what you're hoping to get for it?"

Damon almost sneered.

As expected of a Leruchuna.

Flattery was just the first weapon in their arsenal.

'He's baiting me to name a price first. Classic leprechaun tactic—make you set the ceiling, then laugh inside.'

He picked up the cup of tea on the table, swirling it slightly.

If he named something too high, the leprechaun would balk. If it was too low, he'd act like it was a loss... and then lower it even more.

"I'll leave that to you, the expert," Damon said casually. "However, the price depends on the buyer's honesty. I'm not just here to sell. I'm here to establish trust."

Kudi maintained his smile, but it was clear—Damon wasn't like the other pampered young nobles.

'Tch... this kid looks like the stingy type. Damn.'

"My, young master... surely you have some idea of the value. I would like to know your opening price."

Damon smiled under his hood.

"You tell me. You're the appraiser here. Or should I go find someone with appraisal skills?"

Kudi's eye twitched. But he kept his tone level—he couldn't afford to be baited.

So, he moved to the next phase of his plan.

"Well, you see, this sigil does resemble those found in the Eastern sector of Lysithara, but the mana residue is faint. Perhaps degraded over the centuries. Or... it might be a replica?"

Damon sneered.

He was trying to imply it was a fake. A classic tactic to dissuade and undervalue.

So Damon fired back.

"It seems you know too little about Lysithara. The eastern section is no more dangerous than the center. This artifact came directly from the city center. But then again, what could I expect? All you know of Lysithara is from old sages and musty textbooks."

Kudi gave a slight bow, still smiling.

"Ohh, I apologize, young master. No offense intended. That said, what you said doesn't really address the crux of the matter..."

He sighed dramatically.

"The artifact might still be... a little lackluster."

Damon smirked, his face still hidden.

"So a 'replica' made of First Epoch magic alloy, sealed with runes no one alive can replicate, and found in a city no one escapes from? That's a bold claim."

Kudi froze internally.

He was trapped.

Damon had baited him—using the truth.

Even if the artifact was broken or useless, its origin alone gave it value. And if he lost this deal, the guild would be livid.

He decided to double down.

Feigning disinterest, he spoke, "Well, while certainly aesthetically intriguing, it is broken. Damaged artifacts are difficult to resell, you know. I might be able to offer... say, three million zeni."

Damon wore a casual expression. The smile on his face made Kudi uneasy.

"You're free to offer that. But if you do, I'll just sell to your competitors."

He leaned forward.

"You saw the adventurers outside. One thing we both know—adventurers have big mouths. I wouldn't even have to advertise it. They'll spread the word on their own. I could get millions with fair competition. I might even auction it off."

He leaned in closer.

"Try that number again."

Kudi internally groaned.

'That's why he let the receptionist see the artifact... he wanted the attention. Damn it...'

He realized he was well and truly cornered.

"You drive a hard bargain... but leave me some leeway here..."

He gritted his teeth.

"Best price I can do is thirty million zeni."

Damon's eyes scanned him briefly. His skill Eye of Veracity was active. The Leruchuna wasn't lying.

"Fine," Damon said flatly. "We have a deal."

Kudi groaned, almost physically in pain as he reached into his green coat and pulled out a pouch.

"Thirty million zeni. All in premium coin."

Damon inspected the large denomination coins. They were real.

He nodded, then tossed the pouch into his shadow storage.

Kudi took the artifact carefully, inspecting it like a miser discovering a forgotten inheritance.

Meanwhile, Damon's attention shifted.

The red squirrel was eating the snacks brought in earlier, cheeks puffed like a balloon. The raven stared at him, as if begging Damon to slap the bumpkin across the table.

He ignored them both and turned back to Kudi.

"Now that my business with the guild is done... I have a somewhat personal proposition for you."

Damon took out a basic potion. He placed it gently on the table.

The moment Kudi saw the vial, he let go of the artifact like it had turned into dirt.

He grabbed the potion like it was divine.

His voice trembled with reverence.

"W-What is this marvelous elixir...?"

Damon almost laughed.

It was the lowest-grade potion from the System.

But it came from the Unknown God.

Which meant—even the most basic potion... had zero percent impurities. Something absolutely unheard of.

A perfect potion.

And to a man like Kudi, whose eyes had seen too much... it was beyond comprehension.

"This is..."

Damon smiled.

It was time to come for his real goal.

Recruitment.

He dropped three more basic potions on the table.

"You see, Kudi... I'm creating a guild. With a certain duchess friend of mine. And we want you to be part of our founding staff."

He smiled, his tone tempting.

"Think of this as a personal gift."

The leprechaun's eyes widened.

"My... Lord... this... I... goddess..."

Damon noticed the shift instantly.

He had gone from "young master" to "my lord."

Perfect.

He reached into his coat and pulled out one mid-grade potion.

It was his last one.

"Sell this for me. Think of it as a test... for our future staff."

Damon stood up and dropped a small contact card on the table.

"All correspondence should be made to that contact. There's more where that came from. Make the wise choice, Kudi Kudi. We'll be expecting your call."

As the stunned leprechaun stared at the potions—

Damon turned and dissolved into the shadows.

He felt a small headache coming on.

But he had finally settled things with one of Lilith's potential recruits.

Of course, the contact card he left behind...

Was Lilith's.

"She better not say I ran off without helping after this..."

Now it was time for vengeance.