

Shadow 491

Chapter 491: Divide And Conquer

This was Damon's plan of escape. It was quite obvious — if he ran a hundred kilometers, he would be hit many times before he reached safety.

So the next option was to fly.

However, he didn't have wings to fly.

So the choice was simple. He had to fly — and since he had no wings, he had to borrow some.

Luckily, he had bought Matia. Or rather, the Ruin Fairy had followed him of her own volition.

He almost got emotional.

"Dammit, Matia... I love you... hahahahaha..."

His shadow gave him no reaction. She just continued to fly.

Now it was a contest of snipers.

And Damon had learned from one of the most foul archers he knew. Maybe Back-to-Back wasn't the strongest, but he was the best archer Damon knew.

In fact, he had once seen Back-to-Back remove the wings of a flea twelve kilometers away without killing it.

That was just how good he was... and as his student, Damon was not about to let the elf down.

He pulled the bow and aimed for the next Griffin — but they were not about to be caught by surprise. He shot the arrow like a black streak. It shot toward the Griffin.

"Change formation..." the wind carried their voices.

Before the arrow touched the Griffin, it split in the air, dodging what should have been death.

Damon clicked his tongue.

He had a limited quiver of arrows.

He reached into his shadow storage and pulled out three arrows and fired in succession.

When the Griffin dodged the first one, the second caught it off guard...

Straight in the eye.

However, the elf on its back didn't seem to mind. As it fell, he jumped on its belly and aimed his bow straight at Matia... who was flying.

Damon pushed her body down with his weight, barely dodging the arrows.

He glanced at the distance before they crossed the valley and flatlands.

He released a few more arrows, shooting down a few Griffins...

But at least five more were still in the air, and the elves who had fallen had not stopped chasing him. They were running after him on foot and some on stag steeds.

"Give it a rest already..."

Damon was having a hard time shooting them down. He reached into his hood and pulled out a red squirrel and a raven that had been shamelessly hiding while he fought for his life.

"Go after them and distract them..."

He glanced at the flashing lights of death aimed at them and the terrifying-looking elf.

There was no hesitation. They shook their heads.

Absolutely not. They were not suicidal.

Damon dodged an arrow to his head.

"No helping means no eyeballs or nuts. Helping means you can have their eyes and nuts."

It was both motivational and threatening — but it convinced them.

The squirrel had been eager to please anyway. It let out a battle squeal and flew into the air as a red streak...

Damon's raven cawed with resentment but followed.

The elves didn't care about these two animals in the air — until the red streak stopped on the head of the Griffin. Its form adorable as the wind flipped its fur... next thing he knew was how fast it entered his pants.

"Arrgh, my balls..."

And bit his testicles. The distraction was all Damon needed. And before he knew it, an arrow flew into his skull...

He looked up with confusion, then fell off his flying steed, falling to his death.

Damon smiled.

[You have slain Glardel Astoneil]

Finally, a kill that was actually an enemy...

He reached into his shadow storage to pull out an arrow — but he was out.

"Dammit..."

He was just about to curse when Matia created arrows made of ice and passed them to him.

He caught the freezing arrows and smiled.

"Give me some mist..."

She nodded, her wings slowly beginning to grow colder as her skill, Ruin's End, activated.

However, Damon wasn't trying to freeze. He had resistance. His hand ignited with black flames, and the ice and fire created mist...

Visibility was low for both sides — but from Damon's side, he had the advantage.

He didn't do this for long because it was just to give his two perverted pets the opening they needed.

He held his bow, ready to shoot them. He heard it — the miserable cries of an elf who had lost his nuts — and Damon sniped at the vague shadows.

He heard a low scream as he fell to his death.

He unleashed a few more arrows, following the sound of the screams — but he wasn't safe either.

His enemies could also track him. An arrow was shot at him. He tilted his head just at the last minute due to his Danger Sense.

He could see the approaching tree line and the rocky terrain. This was far from the Golden Road, so therefore, monsters would dwell here...

He just had to force them to land. Well, there were barely enough of them in the sky... this was their best option.

He whistled, calling back the squirrel and the raven... who flew back — but he stopped them, tossing them into the forest.

"Act as my eyes..."

He could sense some grievances — but Damon was not about to let them slack when they could be useful...

Matia flew down like a comet falling from space into the high tree line...

Damon took that opportunity to dive into the trees, jumping from one tree to another until his foot touched the ground.

He didn't forget to set the forest ablaze to create an upward cloud of smoke that obscured their vision.

Damon turned into a shadow, slipping away. At this point, it was already midday.

Now he needed a way to split their numbers.

Divide and conquer.

As soon as he stopped moving, white light flashed as they began to use artillery-class magic again.

This time, it wasn't as much — since he had shaken their air superiority.

Damon raised his bow and shot at them, bringing down their Griffins.

Now they were all in the woods.

Still, that didn't help. They knew where he was, but he didn't know where they were.

Or so they thought.

He spread his shadow perception.

All the shadows in the forest became his eyes.

Chapter 492: Bleeding

They didn't need to check for tracks. They already knew he was running through the forest at breakneck speed.

Saladiriel narrowed his eyes. They were roughly twenty-five in number, plus a dozen Griffin riders.

All tasked with assassinating one boy.

Honestly, he wasn't going to lie — he thought it was overkill to send this many people in the third class advancement after a single boy the same age as the princess.

Each of them were assassins raised in the Moon Glades. They had battle experience and a wealth of bodies — so many, they could collectively fill a river with just the blood on their hands.

Yet they had chased this boy for miles. Not only had they failed to catch him, but he had shot down two of them. They were dead now.

The riders were lightly injured from the fall from the sky.

Saladiriel narrowed his eyes at the archery the boy used.

"Is he a spy of the Silver Glades?"

That was what came to mind as he followed the mark on him. If not the Silver Glades, where would one learn such a style of archery? A double-layered shot and the way the arrows flew, matching the unique breathing of the elves of the Silver Glades.

He pulled the reins of his stag, signaling for his group to fan out and box the boy in.

That would explain a lot. It seemed their neighbors — the Silver Glades — were plotting again. And this boy must be an instrumental spy.

No wonder the royal family wanted him dead.

Though he had heard rumors from some men in the royal guard...

Some nonsense about the princess and this boy.

Nevertheless, he would not believe it. But if this wretch had been sent to seduce their sweet and impressionable princess, he would personally present his head to the king and queen.

Saladiriel finally saw it. He paused.

The princess getting possessed by a dark spirit must have been part of his schemes.

Saladiriel stopped his stag. The terrain was changing — and the wretch was not alone. He had a female fairy knight with him. She was good at hiding too.

Still, he was in awe of the queen's oracle powers once again. She must have seen through his schemes.

He placed his hand on the communication orb on his chest. This was a secure line to the royal family. The fact it was already noon and the boy wasn't dead was putting a stain on the reputation of him and his squad.

"I shall kill him and report to the queen within the hour."

This was a great honor — one he rarely had. It was not often he got to skip the chain of command and report directly to the king or queen.

The rocky terrain was hard on this stag breed. While they were fast, they were not built for this terrain.

The slower moose types were best for this due to their powerful hooves — or the giant goat types.

His men sent him a message.

They were breaking off into smaller squads to trap the target.

He acknowledged their request. This was the plan — to tire the prey out.

He glanced at his hand where there was an artifact tracking the movement of the boy. He had reached the dark parts of the terrain — high slope rocks and trees. The place was quite dark even in the day.

"You cannot hide from us, boy..."

Then slowly, the icon on the map stopped moving.

He smiled.

It was clear the boy had gotten exhausted from their relentless hunt. Killing him was well and fine — but catching him alive would be even better.

They could torture him for information — and who he was reporting to.

He raised his hand, signaling for his men to surround the area.

He walked into the darkness. The deep shadows of the trees and rocks did nothing to halt his movement. He easily moved across the terrain...

The smile on his face was almost reaching his eyes. He could see it now — the praise he would get from completing this mission.

The king and queen would certainly be pleased.

Then he climbed over a huge rock... the boy was just around the corner.

He waved his hand at his men... those close to him were less than he recalled.

They must have split further to corner the prey. After all, they were in the third class — he was merely second class.

Slowly, he reached for his waist, pulling out his blade... and turned the corner expecting some degree of resistance.

But when he turned, all he saw was blood pooling on the rocks and soil... and the soft sound of blood dripping.

There was a faint sound of human blood dripping... yes, this was human blood — not the blood of his fellow elves.

But what he saw was not the corpse of the dark-haired human boy, Damon Grey.

No.

In its place was a single human arm. It had been cut off and was covered in dripping blood...

There was a bloody dagger used to nail the arm to the rock.

Saladiriel paused for a moment when he noticed his men were surprisingly quiet — more so than they were supposed to be...

But what happened here was, without a doubt, a simple affair. A simple ruthless affair.

It was not one of the elves that had caught Damon.

No.

The boy had known the mark on his arm gave his location away to them — and that he could not go out of its range.

So like a beast ripping off a piece of its body to survive... he had willingly stopped and cut off his own limb.

He had used this dagger to cut off his own arm and nailed it to the rock — leading them here to this spot.

Was this not the most ruthless act he had seen a teenager commit? The decisiveness to willingly cut off his own arm... and lead them to this spot.

When his thoughts reached that point, he froze. A lot of his men had gathered here.

This place... he looked up.

It was closed off. It looked like a good hiding place — except the trees here created a direct view to the skyline.

As soon as he made that conjecture, he looked up at the sky... and there he saw an angel in armor.

His eyes widened.

Because that wasn't an angel.

No. It was the fairy that was with him.

And in the sky, she had created hundreds of spears made of ice — and they were falling.

It was too late. They were caught in the open — boxed in by the very land they had thought would trap him.

In the distant forest, he heard one of his men send out a distress flare... but he was in no position to help.

The cold icicles of death fell.

There was too much noise to hear any other sounds.

Death was thunderous.

As he felt it — ice pierced his body.

He gasped out blood.

"It... was a trap."

Chapter 493: Act Of Will

The pain numbed his body — he couldn't feel his legs... or anything below his waist.

A deep, sharp ringing filled his ears as something warm spread across his body. The metallic taste of blood overwhelmed his tongue.

He tried to move — he couldn't. It had happened too fast, too sudden. He forced his head to turn, his neck bones screaming in agony as he fought against the shock.

Slowly, inch by inch, he tilted his head. In the distance... a strange roar echoed — a creature's howl mingled with the dying screams of his men. Then... silence.

He gritted his teeth, forcing his head to move despite the blood pouring out... and what he saw made him tremble in despair.

The battlefield was gone.

Only a frozen graveyard of ice spears remained — hundreds of them, piercing through the mangled corpses of his men.

Their bodies had been torn apart — organs shredded, blood splattered across the shattered earth, victims of the rain of falling spears.

They had grown careless. They had walked right into a trap.

The others... the ones in the woods... they must be dead too.

He tried to move his legs — only then did he realize... he wasn't even on the ground.

He was hanging. Impaled by several spears of ice — through his lower abdomen... his lungs... his stomach.

His entire body was held together by the very things killing him.

He had been the only one who saw the attack before it struck — barely enough time to react. Maybe that's why he'd survived this long... or maybe... it was because he carried the same ice attribute... and his body had resisted.

"Arghrgh..." he coughed out, blood spilling past his lips before it could choke him.

And then... she appeared.

The fairy woman — the one who had done this — stood before him. Her helm hid her face.

He did not tremble. Death was an old companion to assassins. But still... he had to know.

"Who... what are you...?"

She said nothing.

Saladirel felt his strength fading. If he moved, he would bleed out. The holes in his gut would have nothing to hold them closed once the magic ice melted.

He was ready to give up — until she spoke.

Her voice was regal. Cold. Impassive — as though speaking itself was a burden.

"I am... Ruin Fairy. A shadow."

That was all.

But even those few words made Saladirel smile weakly. It wasn't often a dying assassin got acknowledged... by a knight.

How could killers like them compare... to noble, upright knights?

He closed his eyes... but her cold, blue gaze never left him. She stood there... waiting for him to die.

Then... something stirred in the woods.

A creature emerged — inky black, formed of shadows. Its monstrous shape moved on all fours, long fangs gleaming beneath sharp claws. Armor made of writhing shadows clung to its body.

And in its mouth... it carried something.

Saladirel gasped.

"Daniiel..." he choked out.

It was an arm — ripped clean off — and he recognized the bracelet on its wrist.

The creature dropped the severed limb with a soft, twisted laugh.

"Hehehahaha..."

The sound was low... guttural... almost inhuman. A voice that scraped against the spine.

"It seems... one survived..."

Even with death looming, a wave of fear and disgust twisted Saladirel's face.

"What... what is that thing...?"

"Thing...?" the creature echoed back. "You hunt me... and call me... a thing?"

Then the realization hit him.

"You... You are... Damon Grey... You... were a monster all along..."

The creature's mouth stretched into a long, sinister grin — jagged fangs on full display.

"That's... not a very nice thing to say... I actually went insane and used Ravenous."

Damon's voice rasped. "Had to use my full power to kill all of you... and even then, I almost died..."

Saladirel's pale face tightened.

Damon walked past him, towering and monstrous. He grabbed one of the ice spears, lifted a corpse skewered on it... and like popping a grape into his mouth... devoured it.

The shadows around him pulsed — and as the corpse vanished, Damon's ravenous form bled away. His shadow fell back to his feet.

And that's when Saladirel saw it —

The young man... beneath the monster.

One arm gone... the stump still raw. His armor shattered... dented... ripped apart.

Wounds gaped along his body — too many for his battered armor to hide.

Flesh torn off his legs... charred skin marking his lower abdomen — the stench of burnt flesh heavy in the air.

Damon turned with a tired sigh, his hand running through blood-soaked hair. He moved his hand in a slow circle — a crown forming atop his head.

He exhaled sharply.

"Phew... That was a relief. Sorry about that... I kinda lost it a few moments ago."

With a wave of his hand, shadows spread across the battlefield. The corpses sank into the darkness like stones dropped into a lake.

Saladirel stared. The boy's armor faded away — only then did he see how dire his wounds really were.

And yet... he was alive.

The damage his comrades had inflicted... and still this thing lived.

Damon reached into the shadows, pulled out a vial filled with something Saladirel had never seen before... and drank.

Right before his eyes... the wounds began to heal. Even the severed arm... slowly, unnervingly... regrew.

Damon let out a soft sigh of relief.

"Guess I got lucky... High-quality loot from killing you guys. Shame I didn't get any skills, but... my mastery went up. Can't complain."

Saladirel barely understood a word of it... but he knew... he'd be joining his comrades soon.

"If... you kept me alive to interrogate me... it's pointless. I'll never talk..."

Damon summoned his sword.

"There's no need. I don't want to know."

He raised his blade... ready to strike...

But then... she moved.

Matia stepped between them — the Ruin Fairy held Damon's severed arm in her hand.

She lifted it slightly... pointing it at Saladirel.

Damon tilted his head.

"You don't want me to kill him?"

She nodded once.

Damon sighed.

"Sure... whatever."

It wasn't every day she acted on her own. He wanted to see what she'd do.

Matia walked up to Saladirel... the severed arm still in her grasp.

As the assassin met her gaze... she raised her sword... and plunged it straight into his heart.

Damon blinked in surprise... until he saw what happened next.

Chapter 494: They're Sort Of Dead

Damon watched as the ice spread from Matia's sword into the struggling body of Saladirel. The elf tried to scream... but no sound came out.

A black aura bled from Matia's form, swirling like dark mist. Damon's severed arm — the one Matia still held — dissolved into shadow, sinking into Saladirel's body.

At that moment, Damon felt it — his shadow energy drained from him... siphoned into Matia... then funneled into the form of the elf.

There was a brief pause... and then Saladirel gasped. His eyes rolled back... and closed.

He was dead.

But Damon didn't hear any system notification.

The air turned ice cold. The shadows thickened. Saladirel's shadow rose from the ground... devouring his corpse as it tore free from the ice.

The shadow condensed, molding itself into a solid form.

An orb fell from the corpse's chest with a soft thud — Damon barely spared it a glance.

Before him stood a creature wrapped in pitch-black armor. Its skin glistened like inky oil, its form hazy like a living shadow.

Then — a soft chime echoed.

[Your Shadow Ruin Fairy has created a Shadow.]

Damon blinked.

Right... she could do that. She had the ability to create minions.

But this... this was different.

This shadow wasn't like the others — this one was on her level.

A minion in the same rank.

He glanced toward Matia. She staggered, collapsing to her knees for a moment before slowly rising.

The shadow of Saladirel...

He was nothing like Matia. She still resembled her human self with minor changes pale skin, altered eyes, darker hair... subtle shifts.

But Saladirel...

His skin was jet black, his eyes glowing a fierce blue. Tendrils of shadow smoke curled off his body.

Matia examined him like a craftsman judging her own creation. She gave Damon a look... waiting.

He cleared his throat. "Ahem... right, right..."

Damon circled the shadow, inspecting him. Then he stood directly before him.

"Whom do you serve?"

The shadow raised its head slightly.

Then, a single word echoed — not spoken, but heard in Damon's mind.

"Grey."

Damon nodded. "I like him. We're keeping him."

Matia gave a slight nod of approval.

Damon activated his [Appraisal].

Name: —

Race: Shadow

Rank: Three

Attribute: Shadow / Ice

Skills:

[Death Mark] — Marks a target, allowing him to track them endlessly. As a shadow, he becomes known to all shadows the target touches. The mark steadily drains the target's life force over time.

[Wraith Walker] — Moves like a wraith, undetectable in both shadow and ice storms. The power of this skill grows stronger the deeper he is in darkness.

[Thousand Thorns] — Fires countless shadow arrows in a single storm-like volley. The stronger he is, the more arrows he can unleash — until it feels like the sky itself is falling.

Damon glanced at Matia. At this point, she could no longer keep up the façade — she was weakened by creating this shadow.

But his power was the real deal.

As for a name, this shadow didn't have a name.

Damon glanced at him.

"You are now Saladirel — Ghost of the Glades. We shall call you Ghost for short."

It slowly fell to its knees.

Damon glanced at Matia — his shadow wasn't doing so hot.

"Hmmm... I wonder what the condition is to create shadows... I noticed you used my arm and still siphoned shadow energy from me."

She tried to force herself to stand up — he waved his hand. His shadow pulled her down. She disappeared into his shadow space.

She could heal and rest there.

He glanced at Ghost.

"Come."

The shadow didn't move.

Damon's eyes twitched. He glanced at where Matia had just disappeared. Could it be he couldn't command this shadow without her there?

He shook his head. Impossible. Wouldn't that be useless?

He raised his hand.

"Come." He commanded — except this time he used [Shadow Control] as well.

As soon as he spoke, the shadow obeyed.

Damon didn't like the idea of using shadow control every time... though, he did not get drained of shadow energy at all.

That's a plus.

He gave a command.

"Obey me."

Ghost nodded, bowing his head.

"Good."

Damon glanced at this shadow.

Matia had encountered different enemies in their travels. She never tried turning any into shadows.

What made this one so special?

"Is it because he has an ice attribute?"

That couldn't be the case. There were more than a few elves here with that attribute.

Damon groaned, looking at his arm that was slowly regenerating.

"Don't tell me I have to lose a limb every time she makes one of these."

He gritted his teeth.

'I better not be an ingredient in shadow production.'

As Damon was thinking, a squirrel and a raven flew out of the forest with excited cries. It seemed they had quite the haul.

Except their haul was elf eyeballs... and their nuts.

They landed on the new shadow and examined him while, in no uncertain words, letting him know there was a hierarchy — and they were on top.

Ghost gave no reaction — only standing there, giving off the aura of cold and shadow.

He sighed. At least they were useful this time.

Snapping his fingers, he glanced at Ghost.

"Go find me a mount."

The elves had a few stag mounts when they began hunting him. He was too hurt and tired to walk.

Besides... it was a long journey.

When he turned around, the shadow was gone — it had disappeared to fulfill its orders.

Damon looked around, picking up any magic artifacts he missed and devouring the ones he didn't like for attribute points.

He walked up to the orb that had fallen from the body of the elf Saladirel — who was now a minion of his shadow.

Small world, really. One moment you're an elf assassin... next you're serving your target.

Just as Damon was about to throw the orb at his shadow...

It flashed a little... then vibrated.

Damon paused. This was a communication orb.

He hesitated a bit... but figured he might as well let the elves know he was very alive... and very disappointed they had failed to kill him.

He poured a little mana into it.

A voice came before he could speak.

"Report. What is your situation?"

Damon paused. This was the gentle voice of a woman... but it was a bit stern at the moment.

It had a regal tone to it. This was the voice of someone in power.

"Ahem... ahem..." Damon cleared his throat. Goddess... he was in the presence of royalty.

"This is the target. Erm... they're sort of dead."

There was a small moment of silence. Damon was unsure why — maybe she was surprised... or just taking a moment to register the audacity.

"Damon Grey... I take it?"

Damon smiled.

"I don't know... whose asking?"

There was brief silence at the manner of speaking. Damon had intentionally spoken like someone from the underworld.

Actually... he spent his childhood there.

Her voice returned.

"I am Daphne Moonveil..."

A soft intake of breath.

"Queen of the Moon Glades."

Chapter 495: I Need To Heal

"Ok."

That was all Damon could say to meeting the queen of the Moon Glades.

Honestly, he wasn't the type to revere royalty. He barely revered the goddess—and she was an actual god.

Daphne was quiet for a moment. Then her voice rang through the communication orb.

"You actually managed to kill all of them... that's impressive. I didn't think you could."

Damon looked at the stub where his arm was slowly regrowing.

"Honestly, it was kind of underwhelming. 'I mean... if you're going to send someone to kill me, at least have the decency to send someone in the fourth class or higher. Tsk. Got my hopes up for nothing."

Daphne Moonveil was surprised for a moment. He was actually serious... disappointed he didn't die.

If Damon could see her face, he'd see an amused smile on it.

"That makes both of us. Though, I am surprised... no, on second thought—shocked. Why would anyone be disappointed they survived such an ordeal? Those were some of the Moon Glades' best assassins."

Damon sneered, wearing a smile.

"I'll stop you right there... it seems the Moon Glades has a lot of trash it mistakes for gold. No wonder Sylvia has such unrealistic expectations of the world."

Daphne's voice stayed calm.

"I won't take offense to that. After all, they failed to kill you, so you can say whatever you want. However, as their queen, I still feel the need to defend them... they aren't trash. You're just unusual."

Damon was a bit confused. He expected a heated exchange or her throwing insults, but the queen was surprisingly amicable... as if she hadn't sent thirty-seven assassins after him.

'This woman is quite the schemer.'

He hated how quickly she was trying to disarm any hostility.

He had sent that jab to rile her up... and failed.

"Daphne... can I call you Daphne?"

Damon could forgive the attempted assassination. But how dare she not show anger?

If he failed here, then his years of pissing off those in power would've been for nothing.

How could he call himself a death seeker if he didn't court death? Not at this point. He should be engaged to death.

The queen listened to his words. There was some surprise in her tone.

"That's... tantamount to lese-majesty."

Damon smiled.

"Only if I was a citizen of the Moon Glades, which I'm not. Not only am I a citizen of another nation, but I'm a student of the academy. You've crossed a few lines here, Daphne."

There was a soft chuckle from her.

"Like what?"

Damon smiled. Was she baiting him? Fine.

"The empire overlooked this incident to give you face. But I'm still a citizen of the empire. Naturally, if this gets out of hand, they'll lose face as the nation who sold out their citizen to another nation... even when on paper I committed no crimes."

He moved the orb closer to his face.

"Knowing how high and mighty the Valtheron imperial family is... they can't allow that to happen. That's why your assassins waited until I was out of the capital. And it's also why, despite having someone in the fourth rank, you couldn't deploy them. The empire didn't allow that."

Damon's smile widened.

"It wasn't because you didn't want to... you couldn't. The academy can't protect me all the way out here, and if I'm already dead, there would be no need to start anything with the Moon Glades."

Daphne chuckled.

"My, that's quite a good assessment. Mind if I switch to visual display? I would love to see the face of the person with such audacity."

Damon didn't mind. He wore an impassive expression.

"Knock yourself out."

The orb changed, slowly shifting until it revealed the figure of a beautiful woman with long silver hair.

Honestly, she kind of looked like Sylvia.

If Sylvia was a hot older woman.

"Ahem, ahem..." Damon cleared his throat.

He smiled at her.

"I see where Sylvia gets her looks from. You, my lady, are beautiful."

She smiled, pushing her hair to the side.

"Why, thank you. You're quite the gentleman."

Damon sneered with a chuckle.

"If you thought so, you wouldn't be trying to kill me. Instead, we'd be getting to know each other in a different way."

She glared at him.

"Boy... you sure have gall. But I'm married."

Damon shrugged. This was his actual strike.

"That's fine. I'll settle for your daughter. Elves age slow, but you can't drink fine wine without waiting."

Then he saw it. Her white eyes went cold. There was no more mirth in her eyes.

He waved the stump of his other arm.

"Relax, Daphne. I was just joking. Geez... don't elves have a sense of humor?"

She smiled coldly. "It seems even your audacity has limits."

Damon suppressed a smile.

She had no idea.

He looked at the orb.

"Now then, let's get back to business... why are you trying to kill me?"

She glanced at Damon, her strange white eyes peering through the orb.

"You're so smart. Take a guess."

Damon wasn't known to piss off nobles for nothing. He was going to make sure she left this meeting with a bad taste in her mouth... and a mild heart attack.

"Well... now that I know you can't send more assassins after me without making an enemy of the empire for violation of their sovereign rights... I have nothing to fear. This was all you could send."

She chuckled.

"I suppose that's true... clever boy."

He nodded, then continued.

"Let's see... is it because I stabbed Sylvia? Or because I snuck into her dorm a few nights? It can't be because I took her out on a date... or because of the Death Zones..."

The queen's eyes were already cold.

Damon raised his stump of an arm that was forming nerves and bones.

He smiled coldly.

"Yes, I see it. It can only be one thing... you must want to kill me for getting Sylvia pregnant and refusing to take responsibility. But what can I say? Stuff happened in Lysithara. I need time to heal emotionally. Besides... she came onto me. I couldn't resist."

There was a deep silence. Damon looked at the orb. He saw the face of the queen — it looked completely pale and frozen.

She opened her mouth slowly. No words came.

Damon acted confused, then as if coming to a realization.

"Wai... wait... Sylvia didn't tell you... huh... you guys were actually trying to kill me for a different reason..."

The queen's eyes looked like saucers. She was visibly trembling.

"Wha... what did you just say..."

"...You're lying..." She didn't even believe her own words.

Damon quickly and awkwardly turned off the orb.

He looked at the sky and laughed maniacally.

The queen probably got a heart attack.

He loved that pale expression on her face.

As for the orb, he'd keep it. Having the elf queen on speed dial was awesome.

As for Sylvia... she wasn't actually pregnant. He just said that to give the queen a fright.

"Sorry about this, Sylvia."

The orb kept flashing, but Damon just tossed it into his shadow storage.

"I better call Sylvia and ask her to play along."

Chapter 496: Make Sure, They Lose Sleep

Damon sighed, it was quite obvious with this little stunt he was now in the shit list of the Moonveil royal family.

Still, that was a good thing — he certainly hoped they find a way to kill him.

Preferably after the whole world dungeon incident.

But he wasn't getting his hopes up — nothing short of a miracle. Could overcome deathless.

Now that he had played a small prank on the queen, might as well call Sylvia and let her know.

Damon took out his pager from his shadow storage. He still only had a single arm left since he had cut off his own arm.

But that was a small price for victory.

He was a little woozy from blood loss, but it wasn't enough to hinder him... for now.

His pager had a few missed calls — a lot from Leona, some from Sylvia, Evangeline called too, and surprisingly Xander as well.

He had two from Lilith.

She was probably calling to check up on him.

He smiled, but he didn't move to call her. Instead, he moved his thumb to Sylvia and tapped on her name.

Almost as soon as it rang, it connected.

Damon expected to hear her voice — instead...

There was only silence.

He was somewhat worried — what if her parents had gotten to her pager first?

Still, he already spoke to her mother. He had nothing to fear.

"Hello... ermh... Sylvia."

Her voice came soon after — cold and distant.

"Who is this... do I know you?"

Damon lifted his pager from his ear and looked at it.

This was Sylvia, right? He was sure that was her voice, but he'd never heard her speak so coldly.

"Please don't tell me you lost your memory... or you are suffering under some strange curse."

There was a brief pause.

"You... you... you're the worst... you just left me... you didn't even bother glancing at me when Lilith Astranova showed up..."

Damon felt his ears ring. She wasn't done.

"Now you call after I left a gazillion calls... don't act like everything is okay after ghosting me."

He suddenly felt bad. He had sort of ignored her. Even when she called, he had seen her calls when he was in the capital... but ignored them.

He had been busy wiping names from his personal hit list.

He could understand her indignation.

"Sylvia, come on... don't be like that... I had my reasons... I was thinking of you every moment..."

There was a pause.

"Why did you even think that would work? You're lying out of your teeth. I know you better than that... it's obvious you called because you want something from me..."

Damon looked around awkwardly.

He sighed.

"Alright... I'll hang up..."

"No!!!" she yelled, stopping him.

Then she spoke softly.

"Ermh... I don't mind... so ermh... don't hang up."

Damon smiled. Hook, line, and sinker.

He got her.

He sighed.

"I... you can't handle this... it's fine... I'll ask someone else."

"No. I insist. You already called... might as well help." She replied quickly.

He smiled.

"You can't... I mean, if I told you, I know you wouldn't be able to do it... it's fine... I bet Lilith can help me figure something out."

Sylvia's voice turned stern — he could hear a cold edge in her tone.

"I will do whatever it takes... tell me now!!"

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"I can't tell you... at least until you promise you will."

Sylvia's tone was unchanged.

"I swear I will..."

Damon smiled. This was easier than he thought.

"Well, it's not that big of a deal... I'm just going to need you to do some acting for me..."

Sylvia scoffed, then giggled.

"Is that all? You should have just said so... I can do it. No need to involve that woman."

Damon smirked. He knew Sylvia didn't like Lilith from the moment she mentioned the name earlier.

"Well, it's your funeral... but fine. Do I take this as having your word you won't back out?"

"Yes!" she replied without hesitation.

Damon chuckled evilly. Sylvia had grown, but she was still susceptible to his manipulations — but that was fine.

"Hmmm... you see, the role I want you to play is kind of simple."

She was getting impatient.

"Stop beating around the bush and tell me."

Damon sighed, looking up at the sky.

"Sylvia... I'm going to need you to tell your parents you are pregnant with my child."

There was a long silence.

Then...

"Huh... what?"

Damon cleared his throat.

"I'm going to need you to tell your parents you are pregnant with my child..."

Sylvia was quiet... then whispered.

"I... I am pregnant with your child."

Damon heard her mutter softly.

"So kissing can actually get someone pregnant... my father was actually telling the truth... the books were wrong."

He raised an eyebrow. Did she think she got pregnant from kissing him?

"That's not possible... and you aren't actually pregnant. The books were right."

Sylvia paused, her voice going quiet again.

Then... as if taking the time to register his words...

"Wh... what? Are you crazy? Why do you want me to tell them such a blatant lie... except... ermh... if you want to actually have a baby... I heard childbirth can be painful... bu... but I'll try my best."

Damon wore a deadpan expression as she continued to mumble.

"Sylvia... you're only acting..."

She suddenly regained herself after he screamed into his pager.

Damon sighed, feeling a little bad for driving a wedge between Sylvia and her parents.

"Your mother and I sort of had a conversation... and I may have led her to believe I got you pregnant and refused to take responsibility..."

"I want you to play the role of the young girl who got pregnant... but the guy — which is me — doesn't want to take responsibility for his actions. You are three months in, and you have a lot of symptoms... more than that, you are depressed... and might take your own life... figure the rest out..."

Sylvia was quiet. Damon was unsure if she was shocked... or scared.

Then she spoke again.

"Well, that explains why my mother and father have been blowing up my pager all this time."

She chuckled.

"You do realize they will kill you."

Damon glanced at the blood-soaked forest.

"A little too late for that."

Sylvia paused, understanding his words.

"I see... I'm sorry... I—"

"Don't apologize. This is my payback. Be sure to make it hurt for me... that way we'll be even."

Sylvia chuckled coldly.

"I'll make sure they lose sleep."

Chapter 497: Road Back Home

A figure rode on a stag, its form towering as it crossed the grass plains. The figure seemed to be wearing armor and was covered with a hood.

There were some dried bloodstains on his armor as he sat steadily on the back of the stag.

In the sky above him, the sun hung high. However, what was easily notable were the two animals in the sky — a raven with pitch-black wings and a squirrel with scarlet fur. These two creatures seemed to fly circles around the man.

The man was naturally Damon.

He had been traveling for days. After some days, he had finally made it back onto the golden roads.

And luckily for him, he had also healed most of his wounds.

He still had quite a journey if he was going to make it back to his village. But that was fine.

There was a thin smile under his face. He wondered how his village had changed over the years. Were the people from his childhood still there?

Did it still smell the same? Did the distant mountains and streams over the forest and valleys look as beautiful with the rainbows?

Now that he was on his way there, he was feeling nostalgic.

He had too many bad memories there, but right now only the good ones came forth — which was a surprise since he knew how his mind worked.

He wondered if this was just him psychologically building this up before he brought them down — that way his rage would reach its peak.

Still, it didn't matter. Now his heart was serene.

He could imagine his mother's voice, her scent... how soft she felt... her pinching his cheek... the soft scent of food in the kitchen.

He could almost feel his younger sister sneaking her veggies into his plate.

Their father's dark hair... the smell of sweat mixing in with the morning air when he practiced swordsmanship... or his voice as he reminded Damon of the importance of the basics.

Damon's heart was warm for the first time in years...

The stag carried him onto the golden road.

As the name suggested, this was a golden road... well, not actual gold. It was golden because it was relatively safe from dangers.

The golden roads referred to any road that was deemed safe to a degree — or rather, as safe as you could be in the world of Aetherus.

As Damon crossed the golden road, he let out a sigh of relief.

He had been battling monsters these past two days. Well, it wasn't that bad... just the regular.

Goblins, kobolds... nothing strange and eldritch... no creepy evil spirits or extremely intelligent horrors.

As the stag galloped forward... Damon's shadow perception picked up a moving caravan on the way.

This type of caravan was not unusual — people traveled in groups because it was safer.

They hired adventurers to protect them and chipped in to pay them.

Damon himself had traveled in such caravans when he was a child fleeing his village.

It was honestly the only way to stay relatively safe on the golden roads without strength.

The adventurers could not protect everyone from monsters and bandits — it was just how the world worked.

"Nobles have greater security while commoners just get by."

Damon didn't care about this caravan... he had better things to deal with.

The stag easily caught up to the caravan.

As he approached, the adventurers in the caravan seemed alert.

Except one group who didn't seem all too bothered — but Damon could tell they were looking at him.

As his stag reached the first carriage, the adventurers were even more guarded.

Damon's ascendant armor did look expensive, so they must have mistaken him for some noble's knight.

He wondered which lord's territory this was.

Still, Damon stopped his stag. While he was sure this was the way to his village... he couldn't be sure. He had not been there in years, and he had sort of lost his way after being chased into the wilderness by elves.

Damon's action of stopping caused the adventurers to pull out their weapons.

"Identify yourself..."

He didn't say a word — he merely pulled out his newly acquired adventurer's ID, which was more of a badge, and lifted it up to them.

They narrowed their eyes.

A large man put down his giant sword.

"An adventurer... you registered in Valerion... you're a rank two..."

Damon nodded his head, his hood hiding his face...

"Hey, Twilight, check it out — another aura farm has joined..."

He heard a voice from the group of adventurers who had not been bothered to move.

He had no idea what they were talking about, but he paid them no mind — focusing on a merchant who had rushed forward from the safest part of the caravan.

"Greetings. I am Emil Payda. I am heading this caravan... how may I be of assistance to you?"

Damon nodded slowly, the raven Croft slowly landing on his shoulders.

"I want to confirm something... is this the road to Ronel?"

The merchant glanced at the adventurers.

"Yes, this is the road to Ronel. We'll be crossing through dire lands to get there... are you traveling there, sir?"

Damon understood what he was trying to convey.

He was trying to say the road was dangerous for a lone traveler and there was safety in numbers.

More importantly, if Damon was an adventurer joining them, that was just free and extra protection.

Damon nodded slowly. He wanted to know one more thing.

"Have you heard of a small village by the name Little Town?"

The merchant glanced at the adventurers, then nodded.

"Yes... that is one of our major stops before Ronel."

Damon smiled. He wasn't really going to Ronel. The reason he asked was because Ronel was the closest large city to his no-name village.

'I see... that damn village still exists.'

The merchant rubbed his palms together.

"If you're going that way, why not join the caravan? The road is long and dangerous. We have many people in this caravan — there is safety in numbers..."

Damon glanced at the caravan. He didn't really care. He would be fine on his own.

He moved his stag. The merchant raised his hand.

"There are bandits and monsters along the road. The last caravan was destroyed... many people died. A lone man can't pass safely alone... you can't make it to Little Town these days without numbers... even now many will die."

Damon glanced at the people in the caravan. Many of them were just commoner families — even children...

He seemed to recall when he had made such a journey with his sister Luna... they had barely survived.

He had been about to leave when he suddenly thought of something.

'If I protected this caravan... would that be something beautiful? Will this kindness be reciprocated?'

That was the thought that had entered his heart.

He recalled the philosophy of Valarie Sunwarden... and the kindness of Carmen Vale.

Valarie had asked him to create something beautiful... while Carmen had told him kindness was reciprocal.

He glanced at the carriages and the long road ahead.

"I shall join... only until Little Town."

Chapter 498: Cameo Of Discord

300 million zeni — that was how much zeni he had with him, liquid. This was a lot of money.

Damon couldn't suppress his smile.

Robbing that casino blind before burning it down was the best decision ever.

Then there were the jewels and trinkets he had gotten.

He was on a path to generational wealth.

Though this money would soon be lost... the money Lilith spent on Luna was no small sum, and the potions that kept her alive and moving were also expensive.

"This isn't enough to pay back Lilith."

Damon could understand why it was better to let people with magic circuit cancer die.

Noble families simply couldn't pay that much money — it wasn't worth it, except if you were a high noble, and even then, they were better off.

He gritted his teeth. All the money in the world could never compare to his sister's life.

Closing his eyes, he let the movement of the carriage rock him off to sleep... or at least he tried, until a woman's voice echoed.

"Are you sleeping?"

Damon sighed. This woman was back again.

She was really trying hard to make conversation.

"What do you want..."

She smiled at him.

"So you're not sleeping. That's good. It's dangerous to sleep on top of a moving carriage — especially since monsters can attack."

He closed his eyes, bathing in the sunlight as she chirped off.

This woman was called Lena. She was a dark-haired adventurer at the first class advancement. She looked quite young, but evidently, she was actually in her late twenties.

She had been part of the group of adventurers that had stopped Damon when he had initially met the caravan.

She had a tendency to chirp off — and maybe give lectures on safety — seeing as she was supposedly the more experienced adventurer.

Though Damon was of a higher rank than her.

He didn't give her a response. It's been a few days since he joined this caravan heading to Ronel.

Honestly, it had been uneventful. The road was slow and boring — some low-level monster attacks, but none that he needed to interfere.

Damon stood up, glancing at her.

'Why are you here?'

She smiled, rolling her hair on her fingers.

He watched her with a deadpan expression.

'I have no idea what she wants... but I'm a minor.'

Well, not that she knew that, but it was better not to jump to conclusions about her intentions.

"Well... I've just noticed you were always alone. You don't talk to anyone, and you brush off everyone who tries to..."

Damon glanced at her as the carriages moved down the wide road.

Was she seriously pitying him... or just upset he was lonely? He didn't feel offended. This almost reminded him of Leona. She had gone out of her way to break his walls and make him more open to others.

"I see."

That was all he said to her. If this had been the past, he might have said something rude — but it seemed Leona's efforts paid off.

She bit her lips, glaring...

"This is a long journey, and maybe you've forgotten, but no one survives alone on Aetherus. That's why adventurers have parties and guilds. The whole world is out to kill us. We gotta stick together..."

Damon suppressed the urge to smile as she began another lecture.

"Heheheheahah..." he laughed lightly. This woman really was as pure and kind-hearted as Leona.

She glared at him.

"Why are you laughing? I didn't say anything funny..."

Damon smiled, his face still hidden by the hood.

"No one survives alone, huh... I find that doubtful — or I would have, if I had not seen what I have seen and know what I know..."

She glanced at him, confused for a moment. Then she raised an eyebrow.

"Errmh... okay. If you knew that, why are you alone...?"

Damon smiled, pulling down his hood. When he did, she stopped talking, her gaze fixed on his person.

He had long dark hair and a crown on his head.

"My name is Damon... nice to meet you, Lena."

She didn't move her gaze from his face...

"Ahh... ahh..."

Damon tilted his head at her reaction.

Is something the problem...?

She shook her head, bowing awkwardly.

"I... I am sorry... I had no idea I was standing in front of royalty..."

Damon smiled. He wasn't royalty — but the audacity to wear a crown despite being a commoner was unheard of.

"That's not the right courtesy — and I'm not royalty... you can stop."

She raised her head slightly as if she didn't believe him before nodding slowly.

Damon tapped the side next to him.

"Have a seat..."

She nodded, then slowly sat down on the moving carriage, the wind blowing their hair.

He glanced at her.

"You can relax — I don't bite..."

She nodded.

Damon found her awkward silence unusual for the woman who had pestered him for the past two days.

He smiled at her.

"So... why don't you start by telling me about this caravan..."

She nodded. "If you want... I mean, we came from Lorndale — actually, no, we came from the Beenes but stopped at Lorndale... There's a war between the two lords of the area, so there's some refugees and people who want to leave. It's been nine years since the demon wars, and there's no sign of another one — so alliances are breaking..."

Damon looked at the large caravan.

"Where are they going, then? Nowhere is safe from war. This is Soltheon — the war continent — and Aetherus is a world lit up by the light of war."

She shook her head. "They're moving to newer homes — somewhere in the Holy Empire. There's a place where the wars don't reach. It's remote and quiet... that's where they want to go..."

Damon nodded. This was the world of Aetherus — war was constant here. But that didn't mean the common folk wanted it.

They had no choice.

War was everywhere here. It was worshiped and revered... and doom was embraced and accepted. War brought doom.

She shook her head, not letting herself get depressed.

"Why don't I tell you about the adventurers here? There are several parties."

Damon didn't care much. Only one party caught his eyes.

He pointed at a party in the distance.

"Who are they?"

There was a pause. Then Lena narrowed her eyes.

"Those guys are eccentrics..." She glanced at them one by one and named them. "I don't know much... but this is what I heard from them."

"The one there is the leader — Veyne Astair. His nickname is 'Unnoticed Singularity.'"

Damon paused when he heard that name get mentioned.

Lena didn't notice but continued.

"That one is called Eivind 'Wimpy' Waltson. They just call him Wimpy."

She pointed at another — an elf.

"That's not a woman — he's a man. His name is Aleph. The one next to him is called Ilukras."

She pointed again.

"The handsome one is called Leon Saint... he has a heart of gold."

"The arrogant-looking one is the Twilight Reaper — his name is also Twilight."

Damon nodded.

She whispered in his ear.

"The lunar moth guy is apparently a moon-obsessed pedo called Dred..."

As soon as she said that —

Damon heard the person in question stand up.

"No, I'm not! Which bastard is slandering me?!"

It was then that the one called Saint Leon stood up with a completely serious expression.

"Yeah... there's nothing wrong if he likes little girls. Thirteen is a ripe age... he's only an embarrassment to the group."

Dred gasped.

"Yo... you... my... whose side are you on?!"

Chapter 499: Farmer

Damon felt his eyes twitch. He had no idea how it got to this point, but the eccentric group of adventurers had made it across to the carriage he was on... now that small space had nine people on it.

"Sorry for the intrusion. It seems my friends are under the impression you're a like-minded person..."

Damon raised an eyebrow, his gaze fixed on the person in front of him.

His appearance was quite eye-catching — not in the sense that he was handsome... actually, he was, but that wasn't the point. His eyes were reflective, blank purple eyes. Though what actually caught Damon's attention about this person was his hair. It seemed to have no fixed color — constantly changing based on shifting light and a person's perception.

He had a lean build. Damon's attention was fixed on him due to his moniker.

Unnoticed Singularity.

He'd heard the name mentioned by Valarie — allegedly, an outsider who had once been an Old One.

Damon glanced at the pale skin and face of this young man — obviously a noble from his mannerisms.

Yeah... there's no way... must be a coincidence.

He had used his appraisal skill but only got question marks... on all of them. Not just this person.

He shook his head.

"I don't mind..."

"Hehe... who's going to bet we'd run into something trying to kill us soon?"

The voice came from Eivind Wimpy Waltson — or Wimpy, as he was called by his party. He was someone that gave Damon the impression of a fellow slum kid. He seemed to have a rare weapon.

Two magic guns strapped on his waist. Damon wondered how he even used them... these weren't the most efficient weapons.

'Except if he has the Gunner class... or a class in that category.'

"Oh my goddess... this is why you gamble all the time. What can I expect from a dirty orphan... you didn't have any parents to teach you common sense."

Damon took that one personally — but it seemed the others in this party didn't mind.

Naturally, this had come from... the androgynous-looking elf, Aleph Cantor. He wore a disgusted expression on his beautiful face — yes, beautiful. He looked almost like a woman.

Maybe he was more beautiful than most women.

He was an alleged orphan-hater... Damon could confirm that was true.

This guy, who looked like a woman, had no maternal instincts. He was definitely a man.

"Calm down, Aleph. Someone who always causes bandits to attack us due to his looks shouldn't say such words... be at balance... find peace..."

Damon had no idea what the hell that meant.

But seeing as this person was like a monk... he could understand the nonsense coming from his mouth.

He was a calm-looking man who carried a lantern. His name was Nathanael Ilukras.

"Why do we still have that child-hater in our party? Let's just beat the crap out of him and kick him out..."

The voice came from the moth-man... Dred. He was actually a lunar moth — his attribute was the moon — and for all was almost like a fairy in terms of appearance. Except he had a decent build, his eyes were pure white, and his skin smooth.

'And here I thought his kind were extinct...'

"Better than liking children..."

The arrogant voice came from Twilight. He stood at the edge of the carriage, giving off the desolate aura of a lone wolf. He had jet-black hair, ember-red eyes... and a distinct mole on his upper lip...

Damon's eyes twitched. There was something about this guy that reminded him of himself. He couldn't quite place it, but other than his appearance... his blade stuck out.

It was an artifact. Damon felt a mild urge to steal it just from its appearance.

It was a sword — something an assassin type would use. However, it was a single-blade sword. It had no guard — normally, swords of that design had a rain guard. This one did not. It just had fine black steel and runes on it..

There was also a short dagger sheathed on his waist.

Damon pulled back his shadow perception. Prying was rude — well, not that he cared.

The words of Twilight had thrown Dred into a furious defense of himself — causing them to bicker.

Twilight didn't offer a response. He just stared into the distance... as if... as if...

That was when it hit Damon why this guy's attitude was familiar.

'Ahh... I see... he's... he's an edge lord...'

He shivered slightly.

'Is this how I looked to people...?'

He took another look at him...

'Not gonna lie... he's kinda cool...'

He approved of this fellow contrarian.

The carriage they were on rocked and shook. Lena, who had been sitting close to Damon, hugged him to stay steady.

"That's enough... you guys always do this. That's why we're called Eccentrics everywhere we go..."

The last member of this strange party, Leon Saint, stood up — pushing Aleph away from Dred, mostly because they had been pulling each other's ears.

Veyne just held his head as if he had a headache — but he was just hiding his face.

Saint was a young man with golden hair and bright blue eyes. His presence could instantly disarm anyone...

He stood up on the moving carriage and bowed his head slightly.

"I apologize on behalf of my friends. They may be weird... but they're good people."

Lena nodded, holding Damon. He, on the other hand, didn't care.

He noticed they had no intention of leaving — so he decided to just say it.

"Great... you've introduced yourselves. You can leave now."

Slap

He was smacked on the back of the head by Lena.

Damon glanced at her. What audacity.

She glared at him.

"Be nice... they took the initiative... now it's your turn..."

He raised an eyebrow... this woman got comfortable with him too quickly...

'Is this the Leona Effect...?'

He made up some strange effect in his mind with no research or scientific basis.

He sighed deeply.

"Apology accepted. My name is Damon Grey..."

"Now... why the fuck are you here...?"

Lena glared at him... he narrowed his eyes.

"Please..." he added.

Saint smiled. It was a radiant and pure smile — as if the sun had just risen in a dark, dark world.

Then he said something Damon didn't even understand.

"Ahh... right. We're here because my friends think you're an Aura Farmer..."

Damon tilted his head — glancing at a confused Lena.

"Huh... a what...?"

Chapter 500: Reality Of BullShit

"Aura Farmer..."

Damon was a little confused. Was this some kind of spell or skill he didn't know about? Or was it a unique class? He'd never heard anyone mention it.

Lena tilted her head with an inquisitive expression.

"You're an aura farmer?"

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"Don't look at me like that. I have no idea what he's talking about..."

Saint rubbed the back of his head awkwardly.

"Right... suppose you wouldn't know what that means. Sorry... sorry about that. Forget it. It's nothing."

Damon sighed and glanced at his shadow — who, oddly enough, seemed interested.

His shadow's sudden movement caught Lena off guard. She yelped, almost falling off the moving carriage. Damon reached out, grabbed her clothes, and pulled her back.

She steadied herself.

"Ahh... your shadow... it moved..."

Damon sighed. Explaining himself was annoying.

"A side effect of my first class."

She nodded in understanding. The group didn't seem to mind his shadow moving at all.

His shadow even waved at Lena, who awkwardly waved back.

Then, with a motion like it was clearing its throat, his shadow began a brief explanation of aura farming.

Damon narrowed his eyes. His shadow actually knew what they were talking about. That was... not common.

It even gave a strange military salute — except by moving its hand to its head instead of its chest.

Damon glanced at them. This party was definitely weird.

"So basically... aura farming is the act of looking cool..."

Twilight narrowed his eyes, insulted.

"Aura farming is the act of looking cool...? You dare insult the art of aura farming?! Aura farming is an art form! No... it's more than that! It's a way of life!"

As he spoke, the others nodded slowly, agreeing with his words.

Damon just stared at them with a deadpan expression.

"So... it's basically being a poser and getting attention?"

The lunar moth, Dred, immediately reached out and pulled his lunar blades, rage flashing in his eyes — before he could attack, the androgynous elf Aleph Cantor pinned him down.

"No... no... scum like this aren't worth killing. You may be a pedo, but you have dignity..."

Dred roared, his eyes glistening with tears.

"Yo... you... but he... he said something repulsive!"

Damon didn't even move. These guys really were eccentrics...

Ilukras stood up, calm as ever, his monk-like aura radiating as his hair danced in the wind.

"It seems we have found a lost lamb... we must guide him on the path of aura farming. That is our true purpose in this world... that is why we are here..."

Lena glanced at Ilukras — he looked so cool, standing there with his lantern in hand and the wind blowing around him.

"Amazing..." she whispered.

Unnoticed Singularity sighed.

"Dude... can you stop aura farming on us?"

Ilukras cleared his throat and sat down.

"Ahem... sorry about that. It's a reflex now..."

Wimpy smiled, glancing at the calm Ilukras.

"If what he says is true... then we must guide this young aura farmer to his full potential. It's the only way..."

Lena leaned over and whispered to Damon.

"I think they like you..."

Damon furrowed his brows.

"You think..."

He didn't take them seriously — until Unnoticed Singularity glanced at Saint.

"Bring it out."

With a solemn nod, Saint stood up and waved his hand. A rift opened in space beside him.

He reached inside the spatial pocket created by Unnoticed Singularity's magic... and pulled out a massive book.

As soon as it appeared, Aleph stood up and waved his hand, creating a metal podium.

Mind you — they were still on top of a moving carriage — but clearly, they weren't done.

Saint waved his hand, and light streamed down from the sky, shining on the book.

As soon as he placed it on the podium, Dred took out a pair of gloves and glasses and handed them to Ilukras.

Twilight touched his left shoulder, then his right, then his forehead, muttering a short prayer.

Damon and Lena watched this whole display with stupefied expressions.

"Ahem... ahem..." Ilukras cleared his throat and opened the book.

There was a solemn silence — it almost reminded Damon of a religious sermon in a temple.

Ilukras lifted his head and, in a clear voice, spoke:

"Before there was Heaven... before there was Earth... before there were thots, goth lolitas, and Latina baddies... before even gods... there was aura farming..."

Damon could not understand half of that. Or rather... he did... but he'd never heard of any of those.

What the hell is a Latina baddie...?

Ilukras continued — everyone listening with a solemn expression.

"It was aura farming that brought life to the heavens and earth. And I say unto you... do you see this fit... do you feel this aura...? My enemies are many. My equals are none. If I had a million days... I would aura farm..."

He closed the book. All of them placed their hands together.

"Amen."

Damon glanced at Lena. Lena glanced back.

What were they even talking about...? How did this conversation even lead to this weird display...?

She leaned to his ear.

"Is this some circular religion...? Should we report them to the temple?"

Damon leaned back.

"Just smile, Lena... just smile. Don't eat anything they give you... or you might get indoctrinated into their strange cult."

Saint cleared his throat.

"Do you understand now...? This is aura farming. It's a way of life."

It was then Twilight stepped away from his corner and walked up to Damon — raising his hand.

"Would you like to join the aura farmers?"

Damon's eye twitched.

"Ermh... sorry about that... last week my mother told me... not to join any organization. I'll have to get her permission first..."

"Tsk..." Aleph clicked his tongue, spitting to the side of the moving carriage.

"He's obviously lying... you have the stench of a filthy orphan... you don't have a home..."

Damon's eyes twitched.

'Go ahead... hit me where it really hurts...'

Saint smacked Aleph on the head.

"That's rude... let me talk to him..."

He placed a hand on Damon's shoulder.

"Aura farming isn't a cult. It's a way of life."

He smiled — giving off an aura of pure warmth.

"Why don't you try it...?"

Damon shook his head.

"I'd rather not..."

They surrounded him.

"We insist."

"Come on... just one time."

"Kid, you're a natural..."

"Just do it..."

Damon finally experienced something he never had in his life... peer pressure.

"Fine... one time..."

After that, Saint whispered some instructions. Damon sighed and stood up.

He stepped in front of the carriage — the wind blowing his hair... he wore a calm expression. He made sure the light and shadows intersected in just the right way.

Lena's eyes sparkled.

"Amazing..."

Damon was about to speak... when he heard a system chime.

Ding!

[You have gained Mastery: Aura Farming Lv. 3]

[Your Presence and Charisma grows. You can now influence individuals more effectively.]

[You have gained Mastery: Charisma Lv. 2]

Damon's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding me... that was an actual thing...?"

In a world ruled by perception, even bullshit becomes reality.