

## **Shadow 501**

### Chapter 501: Outsiders

He really couldn't shake these people off.

After the caravan stopped for the evening at the foot of some hills, Damon sat under a tree with a raven and a squirrel sleeping lazily on his head.

They had been out scouting from the air all day.

This was his normal group — except, for whatever reason, the group of eccentrics decided they wanted to sit with him.

"Why do I always attract the odd ones..."

Lena handed him a bowl of watered-down soup.

Damon glanced at it... then shook his head.

"I'll pass on that."

She shook her head.

"Ah ah... but you have to eat. I know it looks bad... I mean, it's worse than it looks — I mean it's better than it looks..."

He raised an eyebrow. "You just said it was horrible... you shouldn't eat that either."

Ilukras nodded, holding his chin.

"He's right... that looks like dog shit. Even dogs wouldn't eat that."

Twilight sneered.

"I suppose they didn't teach you manners in the monastery."

Damon took the bowl — carefully rationed supplies — and threw it away.

Lena yelled.

"No! Why did you do that? Food rations are limited!"

Unnoticed Singularity brushed aside his shifting-colored hair.

"I think... we'll power through this one..."

Damon shot him a deadpan look.

"You... and who is 'we'?"

He reached into his shadow storage and pulled out a large grill.

Then, spices. Meat. The works.

Dred leaned next to Aleph.

"See? I told you sticking to this guy was a good idea."

Damon wasn't stingy. He had a lot of meat — enough to share.

The smell spread across the caravan... and of course, it didn't attract monsters.

It attracted something worse.

Hungry children.

Damon smiled, taking a bite of his meat without a care in the world. He even set up a table with chairs.

It was a nice feeling — the last time he'd set this table had been when he was bat-shit insane and talking to himself.

He noticed Saint and Lena giving the pitiful children sad looks — eyes silently asking him to share.

Damon had grown up a street child. You'd think he'd pity hungry kids. But apparently, street children were like jackals — always competing with each other.

In his eyes, they weren't pitiful. They were competition.

Lena gave him a sad look. Damon didn't blink.

He sympathized with them, really... he did.

He sighed.

But before he could say anything... one of them stood up — took the whole roasted slab of meat on the table — and walked straight toward the growing group of children.

And dropped it in front of them.

"Eat."

Damon was surprised.

Because the person who did it wasn't who he expected.

If it had been Saint, he'd understand.

But it wasn't.

It was the alleged orphan-hater — Aleph Cantor.

Damon watched as the children eagerly ripped into the meat — grease on their hands, sauce smeared across their faces.

Most of them rushed to share it with their younger siblings. Some even offered it to the adults.

The adults watched with gentle smiles... but politely refused.

Damon saw no malice in the scene.

There was a genuine... air of kindness.

Unusual, he thought. The world of Aetherus was usually more malicious. He should know. Caravans were full of horrible people.

He paused... thinking of Carmen Vale.

He couldn't help but mutter.

"If you look for the worst in people... that's all you'll ever see. Kindness is reciprocal..."

And... for a moment... a deep darkness inside him washed away.

Malice was everywhere... but that didn't mean kindness couldn't exist.

Was this not a beautiful sight?

Perhaps this was the beauty Valarie Sunwarden wanted to see.

Even in gloom... in despair... in fear... people could still be kind.

In the end, these children weren't the disillusioned street rats of Valerion.

They weren't the capriciously cruel children from his village — the ones who'd turned on him because the adults said so.

He glanced at the androgynous elf.

"I thought you hated orphans."

Aleph glanced back coldly.

"I hate starving children more... I can't eradicate orphans. But I can eradicate the wars that create so many."

He muttered to himself, "Besides, those aren't all orphans; some of them have living parents."

His words struck something in Damon's heart.

Maybe it was the conviction in his eyes.

Dred sneered.

"Son of a bitch is farming aura on us... I was almost moved..."

And like that — they broke into another argument.

Damon laughed lightly.

This... almost reminded me of my party...

Still, he glanced at their leader.

"You guys half-ass everything, don't you? If you're going to give them meat... might as well give them a full belly."

Damon reached into his shadow space — and pulled out more meat.

A lot more.

He raised the cup in his hand.

"Tonight we feast. Tomorrow we feast. As long as I'm here... you will never know empty stomachs."

For a moment — silence.

Then... cheers.

Meat roasted. Ale flowed — some merchant even gave up his personal stock of ale, brightening the mood.

He wasn't the only one; those hoarding or hiding food bought it out and shared it.

That act made Damon pause.

So that's the effect of aura farming... and the charisma stat...

"I can influence people... with my actions..."

He had to admit — it was amazing.

Normally, he manipulated people by giving them no choice — by boxing them into situations where they had to do things his way.

Like with the Knights of the Deep when they faced Rashi Ignath.

Or how he'd dragged his party into three death zones.

By giving them no other alternative.

But this...

This was different.

These people followed because they wanted to.

Why else would they share their food... when they had so little?

Later that night, Damon sat under a tree alone... until Unnoticed Singularity appeared.

Damon glanced at him.

"The way you talk... the way you act... Who are you, really? And mind you — I'll know if you're lying."

Unnoticed Singularity smiled — his eyes drifting to the playing children.

"This world is... weird. Obsessive with war. Sure, war is constant in other worlds... but not like this one."

He smiled at Damon.

"You're asking a question you already know the answer to. It's as you suspected. We're just like you..."

Then, he switched languages.

It was a tongue Damon had never heard before — yet understood perfectly, thanks to his [Soul Tongue] skill.

"We're the same. We're outsiders... from another world."

And just like that...

Damon felt his heart drop.

Outsiders.

Chapter 502: Escape This World

Unnoticed Singularity wasn't a fool. If anything, he was dangerously clever.

No one but someone from their world would understand the language he just spoke. It was obscure—only about 18% of people in their original world knew it fluently. But even if you didn't speak it, you'd recognize it instantly if you belonged to that place. The syntax, the tone, the cadence—it wasn't something you could fake.

That was the safety net that had brought his party together. That was how he'd confirmed who was truly an insider among them.

But never, not in his wildest calculations, would he have expected Damon to understand it—let alone reply.

"Hmm. I see," Damon said smoothly, speaking back in the same language.

Unnoticed Singularity blinked—and then smiled. It was rare for the typically reserved figure to show any emotion, let alone that kind of smile.

They both sat in silence beneath the twin moons, the rest of the caravan lost in sleep. Only the adventurers on night watch remained alert, patrolling quietly in the shadows.

Damon didn't want to talk too much. The more he said, the more he'd risk revealing how little he truly knew. The smarter move was to let Unnoticed Singularity—clearly thrilled to have found someone like himself—do the talking.

"How did you get here?" Singularity asked, watching him closely.

Damon gave a half-smile. "Same as you." Then he went quiet.

Singularity nodded slowly. "I see. Reincarnated by that son of a bitch—the Unknown God."

Damon kept his face neutral. Why wasn't he surprised? Of course the Unknown God had more pawns on the board.

Still, one question nagged at him.

"I thought you were supposed to be an Old One," Damon said. "Unless... you're not the Unnoticed Singularity I've heard of."

That drew a pause. Singularity looked at him, surprised. "Ah. Right. I suppose you wouldn't know..."

He hesitated, clearly weighing his next words. Damon recognized the opportunity and seized it.

"I was once killed by the Goddess of Doom," Damon said quietly.

"It was the Unknown God who brought me back. I've seen things I shouldn't have—lost some of my memories. The only way I can get them back... is to keep getting stronger."

Singularity's eyes widened slightly. Then, he smiled again. It was smaller. Sadder.

"We lost our memories too, when we first came here. We knew we didn't belong, but it was like we were rewritten. Our lives were overwritten to fit this world. We were given new families, new identities. New bodies."

Damon nodded as if he understood.

"You embraced a new identity."

"Yes," Singularity said. "But we didn't lose everything. Bits and pieces remained. Languages. Slang. Fragments of trivia. Never full memories, but enough to know we were once someone else."

He looked up at the twin moons above them.

"The sky I remember only had one moon," he whispered.

"When I was born into this world, it was into a noble house—one that defied the Goddess. As you'd expect, the temple wiped us out."

He chuckled bitterly. "Well... almost all of us. My name was Veyne Astair. I died that day. Or so I thought."

His voice dropped, haunted.

"In my final moments, something ancient merged with me. What was broken became whole, but not in the same way. I wasn't Veyne anymore, but I wasn't just Unnoticed Singularity either. We became... more. Greater than the sum of our parts."

He smiled thinly.

"Unnoticed Singularity had once been vast, ancient. He was shattered and destroyed by the Goddess of Doom. I'm all that remains of that amoral Old One. Just... some guy now."

He looked at Damon, chuckling.

"So basically, I'm part Old God and part reincarnated human."

If Damon didn't have the Remorseless skill, he might've lost his stoic expression. That was a lot more than he expected to hear.

'Either he's telling the truth... or he's feeding me exactly what I want to hear.'

Still, it made sense. If Singularity hated the goddess that much, maybe it wasn't a stretch for him to overshare. Damon could relate.

"What about the others in your group?" he asked. "Are they also part Old God?"

Singularity laughed. "No, not at all. I'm the oddest one in a group of oddballs. They're just outsiders—reincarnated like you and me. Same memory problems."

He paused, then grinned.

"Dred says we ended up here because of a... 'heated online debate' with someone. Might've been the Unknown God. Apparently, it got real intense. He did this.."

Damon raised a brow. "He? As in the Unknown God?"

Singularity nodded, eyes drifting back to the silent tents.

"Each of us has a tragic story in this world. We may be outsiders, but we've lived here. We've made bonds. Kin. Families... Well, those of us who still have any."

Damon gave a dry laugh.

"As Aleph loves to remind me—I'm an orphan."

Singularity snorted. "That bastard still has living family. It's the only thing he brags about."

He sobered. "I'd tell you more about the others, but it's not my place. Still... you're like us. That's why I'm telling you this. And why I want to make you an offer."

He raised his hand.

"Join us. We're trying to escape this world... before it ends. Or worse—before he ends it."

Damon shook his head slowly. "Thanks... but no."

He stood.

"I'm not even sure that dual-natured god is friend or foe. We're all under his thumb.."

Singularity's smile faded. "So you believe we're all still in his hands?"

Damon shrugged. "We're always in his hands. The only difference is whether he gave us a choice... or just made it look like we had one."

"You think we asked for this? This hell?" Singularity asked bitterly.

"I don't know," Damon replied. "Just because you choose something doesn't mean it was the choice you wanted. He's the god of choice, right? Manipulating choice is well within his domain."

He gave Singularity one last look.

"I'm getting some rest. We head through the Green Hills tomorrow. That's orc territory, in case you didn't know."

As Damon turned, Singularity called out behind him.

"Doesn't it terrify you? Being under the whims of gods?"

Damon stopped. His voice was quiet, but heavy.

"Not at all. That's what being mortal is, isn't it?"

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes like frozen steel.

"Free will's an illusion. And if I have to... I'll face horrors beyond my comprehension. I may not win. But I'll still resist."

Singularity narrowed his eyes. "Even if you know you'll fail?"

Damon clenched his fist, his voice low and final.

"It's because I know I'll fail."

"If I'm going to lose, I'll lose on my own terms."

Then he walked into the darkness.

Chapter 503: Linga Felt

The air was fresh, carrying the scent of the wind. The gentle sunlight bathed the distant hills; a variety of flora grew in this area, with small critters and slimes moving in the area.

It made for a beautiful sight, a shame it didn't have much cover save for the many sloping green hills that made it difficult to see the whole terrain.

No individual hill was taller than the others.

Each of them became a natural obstacle for travelers. It would have been quite a beautiful sight, if not for its dangers.

This place was called the green hills, and these many hills hid and concealed a variety of monsters: goblins, bewilder beasts, but mostly orcs.

Large, lumbering brutes with a taste for human flesh.

This was the golden road, so the lords of the regions usually set adventurers and knights to keep their population down.

This was an effort to avoid monster stampedes.

However, sometimes negligence could lead to disasters.

The caravan's journey pressed on.

At first light, they had roused themselves and begun the long, grueling march once more.

Damon now sat quietly at the back of his great stag, the beast's heavy hoofbeats a steady rhythm against the worn earth. The road was rough, the hills endless, and the sun already threatening to burn the morning mist away.

And yet, what truly vexed Damon wasn't the terrain—it was his growing popularity.

Against his better judgment, he'd shared some of his food and resources with the caravan. The result? Unwanted admiration.

These commoners now viewed him as some wandering noble, maybe even a prince traveling incognito—albeit poorly.

His black armor, ethereal crown, and visible second-class aura did little to help his case. Everything about him reeked of someone high-born or chosen.

Which led to the current problem.

They kept coming to him. To settle disputes. To ask for guidance. To seek blessings.

He would've usually shut them down with cold indifference, but this time—just this once—Damon decided to play along. This was his experiment.

He wanted to engage with the world, at least a little.

If he was going to change anything, he needed more than power. Influence was a power in its own right. And beyond that, perhaps—just perhaps—he was trying to live up to a philosophy. Carmen Vale's kindness. Valarie Sunwarden's ideals.

A balance of strength and kindness.

But in truth, this kindness he offered now was nothing more than a counterweight. A way to justify what he intended to do at the end of this journey. When he returned to his village—not with hatred in his heart, but with calm judgment.

And oddly enough, helping these people had borne fruit.

Among the worn faces of the caravan, Damon spotted someone familiar. Someone from the deep recesses of his half forgotten childhood.

The man sat in the back of a carriage, surrounded by children. His beard was unkempt, his clothes little more than rags, and he now lacked a leg—an addition to the arm he was already missing back then.

His eyes were dull, world-weary. And yet, he smiled gently at the children, as if trying to inspire hope he no longer believed in.

Damon remembered him well.

He had first noticed the man when someone accused him of stealing food.

The matter would've had him thrown out—until Damon stepped in, offering extra labor as punishment and vowing to feed the caravan himself.

He hadn't been sure whether to approach the man before—but now, he knew.

Linga Felt.

To others, the name meant little. To Damon, it was synonymous with the end of the world—his world.

Linga had been the one to bring back his father's broken sword and his mother's locket.

He hadn't said much to Damon—just handed him the relics in silence. But he'd told the village elders everything. And then he left.

"That was when they showed their true colors," Damon thought grimly.

Now, fate had brought them together again. Just before he returned to the place where everything had started.

He gently urged the stag forward.

But before he could reach the man, two shadows darted across his vision. Fast. Feral.

A red squirrel and a raven raced toward him from the horizon, each trying to outpace the other in a flurry of feathers and fur.

The raven reached him first, landing smoothly on his outstretched hand and hopping to his shoulder with a satisfied caw. The squirrel followed a heartbeat later, hurling a storm of curses at the bird for being a "filthy cheat."

Damon sighed. Each day, the two creatures grew more intelligent—perhaps too intelligent. Their competition with each other was starting to mirror human rivalries.

"That's enough, you two."

Thanks to his [Soul Tongue] skill, he could understand their frantic chatter. Judging from their speed and urgency, they'd found something worth reporting.

The raven cawed again.

"Caw caw—orc orc orc!"

Even without coherent words, the meaning was clear.

Damon turned to the squirrel, who squeaked and gestured rapidly with its tiny paws.

He frowned.

This wasn't good.

Before he could act, a familiar voice called out behind him.

"What's the problem?" asked Unnoticed Singularity, jumping down from one of the carriages.

Damon didn't answer. He grabbed the reins of his stag and galloped ahead, heading straight to the front of the caravan where the adventurers rode—the first and only line of defense if anything went wrong.

He came to a stop in front of the lead carriage, facing a beastkin warrior who did not look pleased to see him.

"Stop the caravan. Now," Damon ordered.

The beastkin narrowed his eyes. "Why? Who are you to give us orders?"

Unnoticed Singularity caught up just in time, breath short from the sprint.

"What's going on?"

Damon raised his voice so all could hear.

"A large—no, a small army of orcs is heading in our direction. They're scattered throughout the hills, likely unaware of our presence."

His words froze the air. Whispers spread like fire.

"How many?" Singularity asked, face pale.

Damon's eyes turned cold.

"Too many. If we keep moving, there'll be civilian casualties."

Chapter 504: Man And Monster

Orcs, for people living in small towns and villages, this was a name that struck fear and dread.

"Orcs were war made flesh — stronger, faster, and towering over humans at nearly eight feet tall."

That said, orcs were much simpler creatures. This was a predominantly male-dominated race. It was simple, really — in orc society, your strength decided your status.

And like most creatures, males were just stronger.

For that reason, orc society was mostly male, and orcs took pride in how many male children they had — as this was equal to power and status for the tribe.

For this reason, the weaker women were closer to property unless they proved their strength.

In the world of orcs, only strength mattered. This was why they always fought among themselves and pillaged their neighbors.

In any region orcs lived, the best course of action would be to have an extermination and subjugation force ready. Their job was to make sure the orc population was low and prevent the warring tribes from joining together.

That said, orcs were little different from humans. It was for that reason many questioned if they were truly monsters due to how complex their societies were.

The conclusion drawn was simple: orcs were monsters.

It was due to a simple reason... orcs had monster cores. Should an orc exist that didn't have one, then that would be considered a person — not a monster.

Though such species were not found yet — or did not exist — in the world of Aetherus.

The line between person and monster was quite thin among intelligent races. An example would be dragons — they had wings, claws, and did far more damage than mere orcs — yet they did not possess a monster core.

Did that not classify them as a very temperamental person? The position of what is a monster and what is a person is too vague. As some demons have cores and some do not.

What is a person and what is a monster? Is a core what makes the difference in what we can kill with impunity — or is aggression the deciding factor?

"In Aetherus, the difference between man and monster often came down to one thing — permission."

[Excerpt from Travel Logs of Athor the Luminant Sage]

This was from a class in the academy, from the excerpt of its founder, Athor. It was supposed to be an argument about what races could and should be classified as monsters, and he begged for leniency... for races like orcs and war trolls, with complex societies mirroring humans and other advanced races.

Although all Damon could remember from that book was how deadly and vicious orcs were.

The adventurer narrowed his eyes.

"We can deal with a few orcs..." His voice didn't sound all too confident. Damon wouldn't mind a few orcs either — but this was a large warband.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Then I suppose you can deal with a whole warband."

The adventurer's beastkin ears twitched, his face irritated.

"What nonsense? There's a fort close by run by the lord of this region. They have knights and adventurers constantly hunting the orcs... they can't form a warband. Only small groups and families..."

Damon scoffed — but it was Unnoticed Singularity that spoke.

"How many orcs are we talking about here?"

The adventurer's eyes fell back on Damon coldly.

Damon didn't back down or show fear.

"A warband of 738 orcs. 9 war chiefs. Six shamans casting. And four siege beasts."

The adventurer sucked in a breath of cold air — this was enough force to level a small city.

Singularity didn't doubt him.

"How long do we have?"

Damon looked into the distant hills.

"A day, at the rate they're moving... scouts will pick us up in half a day... if they haven't already."

The adventurer beastkin twitched.

"I don't believe you..."

Damon was now getting irritated — more than he would normally allow.

He didn't have time for an argument. He walked up to the adventurer and slapped him off the carriage.

His action caused the man to bleed from his mouth. He stood up, dizzy — looking at Damon, whose cold eyes met his.

"Doubt me again and I'll kill you."

He glanced at a horse nearby.

"Take that horse and go see for yourself, fool."

His actions made the other adventurers quiet.

He looked at them all.

"Does anybody else have an opinion?"

There was silence. No one said anything.

"Good. That's what I thought."

He pointed at an adventurer. Using his appraisal skill, he knew his name and class.

"Gudu, your class is a rider type, right? You have a skill that can allow you to ride fast for long distance."

'How does he know that?'

The man nodded his head solemnly. He didn't want to end up like the last guy.

"Good. Take a horse and go to the fort. Tell them the orcs are making a move."

"They won't come out to help us..."

Twilight appeared from the other end of the caravan, holding his dagger.

Damon nodded.

"I know that. Tell them the orcs have found a large loot of magical artifacts from a dungeon and are transporting them in large groups. Including a large chunk of mithril..."

He glanced at him with a cold smile, throwing a chunk of magic ore he had found in Lysithara.

That was the evidence.

"By your estimation, they want to use it to form warbands and make weapons."

He gave him one last look.

"You can opt not to come back... but if you do, next time I see you... I'll kill you on sight. However, if you are successful — I will give you one million zeni."

The adventurer gulped — but the incentive and punishment were worth it. Squeezing the ore in hand.

This was the carrot and the stick. He could feel it in his bones — Damon meant it.

The adventurers looked at Damon. This guy was insane. He wanted them to lie to knights — but the price... this guy was rich. And terrifying.

Unnoticed Singularity chuckled lightly.

"You really want those lazy knights to come running red-eyed with greed, only to find war..."

Twilight smiled, looking at Unnoticed Singularity.

"This guy is the devil. He's telling them there's wealth to be made — but not how difficult it will be to get it..."

Singularity sneered. "They won't be finding any wealth. Only heavily armed orcs."

The man nodded and rode the horse. Using his skill, the horse became a blur.

Damon jumped on top of the carriage in front.

His action of stopping the caravan had caused the merchants to come forward and form a crowd at the center — wanting an explanation as to why they were wasting daylight.

He raised his hand.

"There is a large warband of orcs approaching as we speak. We can try to leave — but we'd never be able to outrun them..."

A sword appeared in his hands.

"Fear not... for I am here."

Damon's crown gleamed in the sun.

"From now, I will take command of all human and material resources in this caravan until the threat is dealt with. If any wish to oppose me — speak now..."

His dark eyes boiled with killing intent.

"So I can bury you now — and save the orcs the trouble."

Chapter 505: Bringer Of Hope

There was silence. No one said anything... until the lunar moth Dred fluttered down next to Unnoticed Singularity, wings catching glimmers of sunlight like silver dust.

"Damn this guy is nuts," Dred whispered, his wings twitching as he leaned closer.

"He was just giving these people food, now he's threatening to kill them..."

Singularity smacked him on the back of the head, not hard, but sharp enough to sting.

"Shut up. He's trying to rally everyone."

Twilight closed his eyes, voice low and bitter.

"We should've let the knights arrest this bastard."

Dred scoffed under his breath. Why were they being so mean to him?

Still... It seemed Damon had no more opposition. No one wanted to be the leader of a small caravan about to encounter a warband of 738 orcs.

Well... it was obvious.

There was no winning.

The merchants trembled, eyes sweeping across the long stretch of wagons and people. The size of the caravan was its own doom.

If they tried to run, they wouldn't make it far. Too many old, too many children, too many who couldn't even hold a blade. And if they left on their own? The orcs would see that for what it was — fear, weakness.

And orcs hunted weakness.

They'd be hunted for sport.

It was written already in the dirt beneath their feet: this caravan was going to end up like so many others before it.

Destroyed.

A man in ragged clothes pulled a rust-bitten dagger from his side. His eyes were empty. He staggered toward a woman—his wife—her shoulders shaking, clutching a small pack.

He raised the dagger, tears cutting down the grime on his cheeks.

"This... this is a better fate than being caught by orcs..."

He pushed the blade down—slow, shaking—but the steel never reached her throat.

A hand caught his wrist mid-drop. Firm. Unyielding.

Damon.

He stood there, silent, his grip like a vice.

"What do you think you're doing..." His voice was calm.

The man turned to look at him, eyes wide with terror and loss. His clothes were tattered, patched and dirty. His wife fell to her knees between them, arms up in fear.

"Please, my lord, don't hurt my husband..."

The man pulled her behind him with trembling hands. He stood like a cornered dog, trembling, eyes glassy. But behind the fear was something sharper.

Hopelessness.

"I'm saving her..." he whispered hoarsely.

"You know what happens to women who get caught by them. They're not people to those things. They're toys. They're broken. Used. I'm saving her from that..."

Damon didn't look away. His eyes were cold, calm — not judging, not condemning.

"If you kill her... then what?"

The man's teeth clenched.

"Then I kill myself too. I'll join her... this isn't the first time we've seen this hell. Wh-what did we do?! When lords wage their wars, why is it always us? Us commoners who suffer?! We just wanted to live! With what little we had... in our small homes...with pur little lives.."

His voice broke, shattering into sobs.

"Why... why did our little boy have to die?! We did nothing wrong...!"

He collapsed to his knees, weeping openly in front of everyone. His sobs weren't just his—they were echoed in the faces of the gathered crowd. All of them bore the same scars, the same pain.

They were the lowliest. The poor. Not even rich commoners, just the forgotten—the expendable.

And all they had left... was hope.

And hope was fickle. Hope was a candle in the wind.

Damon stood there for a moment, breathing slowly. He didn't know how to inspire hope. That wasn't his role. He was a master of despair, of surviving misery when hope failed.

But this... this was different.

"Weakness is a sin in this world..." Damon said.

The man raised his tear-streaked face, listening.

Damon looked at him.

"But so what... You are weak. But I... I am strong. Therefore, today, you don't have to be. Because I am the one with power here. And it is my goddess-given authority... to lord over the weak."

His voice hardened.

"And I say... you will not die here today."

He had no idea what he was saying. Not really. He just knew he had to say something — anything — to keep these people from falling into that pit.

Because if Valarie Sunwarden were here, she would tell them life was cruel... but still beautiful.

Damon clenched his fist.

"I will protect you... all of you."

A merchant near the front bit his lip, pointing at Damon, desperation crackling in his voice.

"Who are you to say that?! You can't beat an army of orcs!"

Of course Damon knew that.

He wasn't strong enough to beat an army.

But that wasn't the question.

The question was — who was he?

He needed to be someone greater. Someone powerful. Someone whose name could turn fear into belief. Someone they could throw their fate to and believe it wouldn't shatter.

But that wasn't Damon Grey.

Damon Grey was a coward, a liar, a failure. He was weak. Pathetic. Spiteful. He lacked even the base dignity of a man. He had given up long ago. He had tried to die... and failed. He had failed even at death.

These people didn't need Damon Grey.

They needed something else.

He chuckled. His crown gleamed on his head.

"Who am I?"

He took a step forward. His voice rose, strong.

"I have faced horrors. I've faced the great dragon Ashergon. I have slain the Beldam of the Whispering Forest. I have killed Faceless, and hunted the Horrors."

He raised his voice higher, so all could hear.

"I've crossed the Duhu Mountains and braved the cursed boroughs of the Whispering Forest. I have fought and vanquished the abominations of Lysithara."

He stood tall now, his shadow stretching behind him like a cloak of darkness.

"I have walked the path of kings and earned the legacy of heroes..."

His crown flared, twisting into deep darkness. His armor thickened, darkened, transformed into its sovereign mantle. He stood encased in blackened plate and dark trim, halo burning on his helm like a crown of the abyss.

"I am a king without a throne."

He lifted his head.

"I am the ruler of that which is forgotten."

And then, with a whisper that moved like forgotten prophecy.

"I am... the Ascendant."

Silence.

No one moved. No one breathed.

He had stilled fear itself.

Right now, in this moment... he wasn't one of them.

He was something else.

In this world of endless war, heroes and legends were sacred. Because strength was sacred. And symbols of strength were divine.

Unnoticed Singularity smiled. This was it. The moment had come. He had taken up the mantle of legend.

But some people still doubted. Which is why Singularity decided to push harder.

"Ahh right... I knew I recognized him." He turned to the others, voice rising.

"You're the Ascendant. I saw you in a newspaper. You were standing with Grand Duke of Brightwater."

Aleph, androgynous with beautiful female features, nodded eagerly.

"I heard he killed a Rank Four Beldam with a single attack."

Twilight smiled and crossed his arms.

"He did. And only while still in first class."

Ilukras, even louder, called out over the crowd, voice almost joyful.

"I heard he's surpassed the feats of the legendary Seras Blade!"

Damon felt it.

A shift.

It was faint. But real.

The glimmer.

The glimmer of hope.

And now it was up to him to turn it into fire — and then into faith.

Perhaps...

Perhaps this was the true beginning of the legend of the Ascendant.

Chapter 506: War Council

Damon appreciated the support from the eccentrics. Still, the odds weren't in the favor of this particular caravan.

Seven hundred and thirty-eight orcs. That was a lot. Hell, it was too much.

However, their objective wasn't to win—it was to survive. And for that reason.

Damon called a war council. Or a makeshift one.

It wasn't much; Damon simply wanted to see what he was working with: their skills, abilities, and attributes, those with utility or direct combat applications.

An adventurer's party usually consisted of seven people—that was the upper limit. The merchants had hired nine adventurer parties in total, making sixty-three adventurers.

It must have come at a hefty sum since these adventurers seemed to be decently skilled and had some degree of fame in their locality.

Sixty three adventurers.

Excluding Damon, he wasn't paid to be here; he had simply joined them by chance, or was it fate?

No, it was just a choice he had made which led off to this.

Still, one of them was missing.

He'd sent one to the nearby fort to lure out the knights and soldiers, but it would take time for them to arrive.

The best course of action was to move the caravan in their direction. It wouldn't be easy. The orcs would likely catch up. Still, it was their best chance—meeting the knights halfway.

The meeting was to gather information—assign roles—organize chaos into structure.

Damon stood in a tent, surrounded by adventurers and a few merchants. They were here to share opinions. To strategize for survival.

Unnoticed Singularity stared at the map they'd drawn, his fingers resting on his chin.

"We could try going through this hill, but climbing with these carriages and wagons? It'd slow us down. They'll catch up for sure..."

Twilight nodded, hand on his blade.

"Maybe guerilla tactics—hit and run?"

Ilukras shook his head, his lantern glowing dimly in his hand.

"No good. They can't catch us, but the civilians will die."

Aleph narrowed his eyes, his elf ears twitching.

"If only we had a way to move the carriages faster. If this were a train and the carriages were just carts, we could pull them all at the same speed."

Dred's silver hair shimmered as his moth wings fluttered faintly.

"What if won't help. And I can't fly that many people out..."

The adventurers murmured among themselves, opinions flying like sparks. Damon listened in silence, flipping through sheets of paper—lists of attributes, classes, magical artifacts.

So far, everyone was useless. Except the eccentric party.

They were his best bet. Still not enough.

He glanced at Aleph Cantor.

"Your attribute is metal. Your class—Artificer. You're basically an alchemist who molds anything."

Aleph nodded. "With enough mana. But some things are more complex."

Damon smiled faintly. "That's a problem."

He turned to Wimpy, who was cleaning his magic guns.

"Your attribute is energy manipulation. Interesting..."

Wimpy blinked. "Um... yeah?"

He had a bad feeling about this.

Damon turned to the group, who were watching him with confusion. Where was he going with this?

"Aleph's idea is genius. We can't move all the carriages. But we can build a train."

Aleph tilted his head. "Huh? Come again?"

Damon didn't flinch. "We're building a train."

Aleph's eyes widened. "I can't build a train—not in this timeframe. I don't even have a blueprint. That's insane."

Damon nodded.

Of course, a real train was a marvel of magic engineering. They couldn't build that. But—

He had the Key of Lysithara.

And with it, archives of blueprints. All he needed was one.

He grabbed a pen, sketched quickly on parchment.

"Make this."

"It's not a train exactly. Just the metallic shell. A frame to connect all the carriages. The inside stays the same. But outside—rigid, mobile, connected."

Dred narrowed his eyes.

"How will it move?"

Damon pointed outside.

"With horses. I'll draw runes to lighten the weight. The horses go up front—inside the frame—pulling everything."

Unnoticed Singularity shook his head.

"Still too heavy."

Twilight agreed, voice low.

The others voiced doubt. Until Aleph—now holding the blueprint—spoke.

"Actually... it could work. The base has wheels. Manual pushers can help take the load off the horses. It might just work."

The people inside can manually push the wheels, and pulleys will make them turn.

Lena leaned over Aleph's shoulder.

"I don't understand any of this. But if there's a chance—we try."

A merchant stepped forward, hands rubbing nervously.

"My lord... this sounds like a massive project. We can't finish it in hours..."

Damon nodded. "We don't have to. We just have to make it in time."

He turned toward the map.

"We just need to delay the orcs."

"Hit and run tactics."

He glanced at Dred. The moth blinked.

"...Me? I can't solo a warband! Come on—!"

Twilight smirked. "His death would be heroic."

Damon chuckled. "Glad you agree. You'll be there to witness it."

Twilight blinked. "...Wait. Me too?"

Damon nodded. "You're fast. Your weapons are assassin-type. Slow the orcs until nightfall. If they get past you—"

His eyes narrowed.

"They face the second wave. That includes me."

Wimpy burst out laughing, wiping tears.

"Haha! The edge lord and the pedo are gonna be orc food!"

Damon gave him a pitying look.

He had no idea what was coming.

"Ilukras. Your attribute is Balance. You can scale objects, right? I need you to reduce the weight of Aleph's materials until they're assembled."

Ilukras groaned.

"That'll cost a ton of mana..."

Damon pulled out five recovery potions—clean glass, pristine labels.

"That won't be enough."

He pointed at Wimpy.

"But don't worry. He'll be your mana battery."

Wimpy froze.

"Wait... huh?"

Damon smiled. "He'll siphon ambient mana and feed it to you. When you run dry."

Wimpy's hands trembled.

"W-Wait a sec—isn't that insanely painful? Isn't that mentally taxing?! Hey—hey! Are you a demon?!"

Damon ignored him.

"Everyone—assist Aleph. Let's get it done."

He turned.

"Dismissed."

Wimpy shrieked. "WAIT! What about me?! I have guns! I can snipe—let me fight orcs, come on—!"

Anything was better than being a mana battery.

it was too late.

Dred and Twilight dragged him away, ignoring his flailing.

His screams echoed through the caravan.

Chapter 507: Riders

Construction wasn't easy. There were just too many people, and building and creating metal was taxing on Aleph a few hours in.

He collapsed on his back, sweat pooling around him.

Wimpy groaned next to him, having used his attribute, energy manipulation, again and again to give Aleph and Ilukras mana.

His gaze fell on Damon, who had been creating runes non-stop for the past few hours, carving them at the bottom of the makeshift train.

"Hhuh. Ahm. Are you even human? Why do you have so much mana..."

Damon was already feeling dizzy. Still, he closed his bloodshot eyes and smiled calmly.

"This is good practice for me... Now get up. Let's assemble it."

They groaned, standing up. Aleph, who had made all the metal and designed it based on the blueprint, bent over and began to throw up.

Honestly, Damon felt a little bad for the androgynous elf, but they were running out of time.

He looked over the distant hills.

The scouting party had long since been worn out, and the second wave of adventurers were fighting the orcs using hit-and-run tactics.

The next part was to assemble the materials. The whole caravan got to work, removing wooden slabs from the wagons and rearranging them inside, repurposing wheels and any useful part of the carriages.

By the time the sun was stretching over the horizon, they were done.

However, the sounds of orcs were louder than ever—their battle cries, war calls, and massive drumming.

Dred flew—or rather crashed down—covered in blood with a bleeding Twilight in tow. He huffed, holding his head.

His wings were torn in some parts, and his hair was disheveled.

Not long after, Unnoticed Singularity came back riding Damon's stag along with a few horses, but half the riders were gone.

Damon gritted his teeth.

It seemed most of the members of the second wave didn't survive.

Unnoticed Singularity dismounted.

"We lost a few people, but against the odds we're dealing with, it's a fair price."

Damon nodded, glancing at Dred.

"How long do we have...?"

Dred took a moment, then steadied his breath and downed a healing potion Aleph had tossed to him.

"We managed to make them go off course for a little while, but it's no good... even if we start moving now, they'll catch up in half a day or less."

Unnoticed Singularity bit his lips, feeling uncertain.

"Hunting parties are already after us as we speak. Half a day is how long it'll take the main force. But the hunters... might as well be here."

Damon didn't waste time or allow the despair to sink in.

"Everyone on board now. Abandon any unnecessary supplies—only food and essentials."

The merchants felt their blood run cold. Abandon the merchandise? What about their wealth? Their money?

"That's absurd... we'd suffer losses..."

Damon grabbed the merchant who said that.

"You only suffer losses when you're alive. If you stay, you die."

Still, this was going to earn him some resentment, and these merchants would have lost their means of livelihood. Some might become homeless.

What he said next surprised even him.

"I will reimburse all those who have suffered losses when the crisis is over."

The merchants glanced at each other. Not that they had a choice, but his word was all they had at this moment. It was plenty.

This was simply not his way of doing things, but this was what a leader would do. He may not like it, but it was the right call.

Over the hill, the sounds of war drums grew louder, and the panic made women, men, and children all rush into the metal makeshift train.

"Hurry! Get in..."

"Don't leave us!"

"Momma...!"

The different sounds made Damon feel an emotion he didn't understand. All he knew was it was heavy.

Horses were pushed inside the frame to act as the pulling force, and goods were loaded up.

Damon bit his lips, looking at what they had left behind—carriages of goods and wagons of half-broken wood.

Lena looked at the mess.

"We need to go... It's a shame we can't use this in any way. What a waste."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Hmmm... what if they could? He smiled, grabbing one of the merchants.

"Do you still have barrels of alcohol in there?"

The man nodded slowly, his expression bitter at the loss.

"Yes... I had planned to restart my business in safer lands with fair taxation... ahh... bu-but now..."

Damon didn't care much for his sob story at the moment.

"I didn't ask for that. Just live, and you'll see another customer. How many do you have?"

He pointed at three wagons.

"All those are mine."

Damon nodded.

"Alright... go now."

The makeshift train, for lack of a better name, began to scrape across the green grass of the hills as horses and the people inside began to force its mechanisms to move its long body.

Runes under it with the word "feather" began to absorb Damon's magic, and slowly the weight of the train began to reduce.

Adventurers took positions around it with the remaining horses, and archers and anyone with ranged attacks opted to climb its metal body, acting as human turrets.

Damon's shadow perception picked up a group of orcs riding giant hyenas—or creatures that looked like them. They galloped through the hills, heading toward the caravan.

The train was already moving up the slopes and hills, carrying the people along. Damon remained still, not doing anything. He didn't follow.

Next to him, Unnoticed Singularity narrowed his eyes.

"Killing the hunting party will waste what little time and energy we have."

Damon nodded.

"Yes, I know that."

His gaze was not even in the direction of the approaching orcs.

"They'll catch up soon... and signal the main force."

Singularity narrowed his eyes.

"Nothing we can do about that now..." he paused, his gaze catching a small smile on Damon's face.

Then he chuckled.

"You're not serious."

Damon's smile widened.

"Did I ever tell you I was something of an arsonist?"

Unnoticed Singularity shook his head with an evil chuckle.

The distance wasn't much. The strong orcs and their mounts soon enough caught the scent of weak races. Their nostrils flared, and they could almost smell the blood.

"Rawr!"

They called out battle chants and rushed toward what seemed like a group of wagons and carriages.

They easily crossed the carriages, stopping when they found no one.

The leader of the hunting party stopped, calling out in Orchish as they followed the scents until a unique smell—not uncommon—seemed to be the strongest.

Before they could react, a small arrow came out of the shadows with a small spark.

"Arg...!"

Flames engulfed barrels of alcohol and the orcs, smoke rising into the sky.

With this simple act, Damon had spread smoke and masked their scents, buying them just a little more time.

Chapter 508: Road Rage

The darkness created after the setting sun gave Damon an edge; a shame this advantage was not shared by his allies, with the exception of the lunar moth dred, who rose with the night much like Damon.

His shadow perception was stronger at night thanks to the depth of the shadows and the limited light. It was different from the day since his perception worked best with shadows, and unfortunately, these hills didn't have many shadows.

He squeezed the Staff of carnage in his hand; this would only be useful if he used it right...

A shadow slid back beneath Damon's feet as he watched the trail of smoke, mingled with the scent of burning spices, rise into the night.

It would take some time before their scent could be properly tracked.

His shadow—Ghost—slid beside him. Technically, Ghost was a shadow of a shadow. A mouthful, really. It had been created by Matia, but after that action, she had become weak and unresponsive. So far, Damon couldn't summon her again for combat.

Which meant—for now—he would make do with Ghost.

Still, that was fine. Ghost was an assassin-type. Stealthy. Lethal.

How else had he been able to sneak behind enemy lines and fire the arrow that started the flames?

A shame, really—no orc had died in the blast.

That only confirmed it. These ones were high-ranked. Strong enough to shrug off flames reinforced by rune magic.

Damon rode beside the makeshift train. It was meant to be a train, but there were no rails, and it certainly didn't move like one.

If anything, Damon was under pressure. Heavy pressure. The runes he had carved were what kept the machine hovering just slightly above the ground.

It looked like a steel worm—rough, unpolished. Some parts were unfinished, others dragged wheels across the dirt.

The "head" was hitched to a team of horses whose hooves shook the earth with every step.

He glanced at the freakish thing, this steel serpent that shouldn't be moving. But credit where it was due—Aleph had turned his vague blueprint into something workable. That in itself was impressive.

He hadn't expected it to actually work—at least not this well.

Riding beside him, Unnoticed Singularity scanned the distant hills.

"Where are we going now?"

Damon nodded. A bad habit of his—not explaining everything. Maybe it was the paranoid part of him.

He pointed toward the horizon.

"To the tallest hill."

Twilight, riding atop the moving train, overheard him and turned. His eyes widened.

The hill was massive. From here, it might as well have been a small mountain. Walking up would be exhausting on both body and mind. Grass covered the slope thickly, making it slippery and difficult.

He looked down at the hunk of metal he stood on.

"This thing won't make it up there. Not fast enough."

Unnoticed Singularity agreed, nodding.

"Even if we do get there, the orcs could just follow. Going around the hill seems smarter."

Damon's hair blew in the wind as his stag galloped beside the train. He didn't disagree.

"That's true," he called over the noise. "But if we go around, we won't make it in time. It'll also be harder to defend and protect the civilians."

"Defend?" someone inside the train shouted. "You want us to defend?"

Damon nodded again, gripping the staff in his hand.

"The hill makes it harder to surround us. Gives us the high ground." His gaze turned sharp.

"And if enough of them gather in one place—we can wipe them out. That opens the door to the next phase of my plan."

Before they could press further, howls split the air. The beasts the orcs rode—hyena-like things—were closing in.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

His earlier effort hadn't bought them much time.

Worse still, the hills made terrible terrain for hiding a caravan. Staying at the base only left them exposed. But moving up meant being visible.

The train pushed up the first slope, offering a better view of the land beyond. Damon clicked his tongue as he spotted dark dots racing toward them—fast.

Mounted riders. Shadow perception confirmed it. Hunters.

"Move! Faster! Get this thing over that hill!"

Inside the train, the people scrambled. Wheels were turned harder, reins were whipped. Everything was pushed to its limit.

"Defend?" someone inside the train shouted.

"Turn, turn argh.."

The wheels screeched, churning grass and dirt. Damon rode alongside, issuing commands as best he could.

"Adventurers! Archers and mages—battle stations!"

He pointed toward the incoming riders.

"Mounted units with me! The metal's too fragile—we can't let them reach the train!"

He pulled in closer. Inside the cab, Saint was helping Ilukras keep the train stable.

Damon leaned in through the window.

"Ilukras, it's up to you. Get this thing to the top."

He turned to another figure nearby.

"Wimpy—grab your magic guns and show me what you've got."

They didn't hesitate. Ilukras seized the lever, and Wimpy vanished toward the rear, energy flaring.

Near a wooden panel, Aleph lay half-conscious—having built the entire train in just a few hours.

Damon pulled his stag back, listening to the orcs' guttural screams in their native tongue.

"Catch them! Surround them all!"

"Kill the men. Leave the women and children."

"They'll make fine slaves!"

He yanked the reins. Part of him wondered—again—how he'd ended up in this situation. But now wasn't the time for reflection. He had one job buy time.

The world remained dark. Dawn was still a ways off.

But Damon could already tell.

This was going to be a long night.

He dismissed the Staff of Carnage. It slipped back into the shadows.

From that same darkness, he drew two swords—cold, quiet steel. The reins dropped from his hands, but the stag didn't stop.

It was a war-beast from the Moon Glades. It knew how to fight.

The growls of the approaching beasts grew louder. Hulking silhouettes appeared—massive orcs on monstrous mounts.

Damon's first thought?

"They're big... good. They'll feed my shadows just fine."

The stag kicked out, slamming its hooves into the jaw of the nearest beast.

Arrows whistled through the air, passing Damon. One struck an orc in the neck.

The high-speed battle began.

Chapter 509: Bug Protocol

The stag Damon rode was aggressive, just as expected from a beast trained in the Moonglades—bred for elite units that rode into battle without hesitation.

The assassins sent to kill him had been riding this beast and had chased him without fear or rest.

Naturally, they didn't shy away from war.

Damon raised his hand—and brought his sword down.

Dark Blade.

A wave of sword energy, channeled through his mana, ripped through the air. It slashed clean through an orc, cutting him in half.

[You have slain Turkan Stringthigh.]

His mastery of the Brightwater sword techniques had grown.

With that same motion, Damon waved his hand, black flames racing up his blade. The sword darkened further, then with another sweep, the flames spilled across the grass. They twisted, turned red—and ignited.

The mount of the dead orc, which had been moments from pouncing, was caught in the dark fire and incinerated.

Damon yanked the stag to the side. More orcs were coming—dozens of them. He could see their silhouettes emerging over the hilltops. Runners. Riders. And their numbers were only growing.

"You've got to be kidding me..."

Unnoticed Singularity, atop his horse, teleported—vanishing and reappearing above the nearest orc. Horse and rider came crashing down, spine and skull crushed beneath the weight.

He teleported again, now chasing after the orcs closing in on the train.

Damon stood tall on the moving stag, eyes on the blade in his hand. It had already begun to melt.

He tossed it into the shadows—into his personal shadow storage.

His gaze lifted to the massive, sloping hill ahead.

They needed to make it to the top.

With one hand free, he pointed at the orcs.

[Magic Gatling]

An explosion of magical energy burst outward as mana surged. Spheres of energy formed around his palm, rotating faster and faster until, with a thunderous chain of bangs—

Bullets of mana tore through the air.

The soft earth quaked as the magic bullets shredded the ground and anything in their path.

Damon didn't bother aiming. The spell wasn't built for precision. But with orcs this massive and grouped together—it didn't need to be.

The barrage devastated a full squad of orc riders.

They dropped from their beasts as magic bullets slammed into them.

Without hesitation, they scattered and chased.

One orc managed to leap from his dying mount, rolling across the dirt. He laughed—laughed—as he landed, and without missing a beat, jumped onto the back of another passing mount.

He roared in Orchis, voice laced with bloodlust.

"Ride! Ride! We may yet fight someone strong! No more fleeing! ORCS—WAAARRR! RAAARWWW!"

Even from a distance, Damon could feel it. The orc's battle intent was real.

"...I'm really starting to hate that I can understand all languages."

If not for that, he wouldn't know that killing them only raised their morale.

"Damn war-loving race..."

His hand started to burn—that was the warning. He was overusing Magic Gatling.

"I need to improve this spell..."

He sat down on the stag, grabbing the reins again.

That desire to improve the magic bullet spell had lingered for a while. The spell was based on the most basic combat magic firing balls of mana at your opponent and hoping it killed them.

The problem?

High magic resistance made it worthless.

Even Magic Bullets, for all their speed and power, suffered the same flaw. He needed more destructive force. Something that could kill many at once.

"It's not like I can make it explode..." he muttered.

But the moment he paused, the orcs began their offensive.

And they weren't aiming for him.

They were targeting the train.

Damon hadn't worried at first—they didn't seem to have ranged weapons. But he'd been short-sighted.

He watched, stunned, as one orc grabbed another by the wrist—and threw him.

The airborne orc roared with laughter, chanting battle cries mid-flight.

A second later, the train jerked—terrain shift, most likely—and veered off-course just enough to avoid a direct hit.

The orc hit the ground, laughed—and lost his head. Twilight had sliced him cleanly from across the train without even shifting his stance.

"Anyone dead?" Twilight called.

Damon felt the shift—the gravity pulling him back as the train began climbing the steepest part of the hill.

"Oh no..."

The climb meant one thing the train was slowing down.

He waved to Unnoticed Singularity, who nodded and signaled to Twilight and the rest of his party.

"Mages! Archers! Aim for the ones being thrown!"

Wimpy pulled his magic guns and took aim.

But it wasn't enough.

The orcs weren't going to make this easy.

Bursts of magic and steel lit up the night—roaring through the air like thunder. Explosions. Arrows. Screams.

The train tilted sharply.

Lena, who had been standing near the edge, slipped—about to fall. Twilight caught her with one hand.

What's with you and falling off carriages?

"So..sorry.."

He looked down. The incline was too steep. If you didn't hold on, you'd fall. But if you did hold on—you couldn't fight.

"Ahh, come on—you gotta be shitting me!"

Their high-ground advantage was now a liability.

Damon saw it clearly: the slope was too steep, the train too heavy. The people inside were spinning the wheels, trying to keep it moving. The horses neighed, straining as they dragged it uphill inch by inch.

If they lost momentum, the train would slide back—and the next climb would be impossible.

Assuming they got a chance to attempt another climb.

He raised his voice.

"All adventurers—except Singularity's party—get inside and help pull the train forward!"

They didn't hesitate. Anything was better than being outside with the incoming orcs.

Damon turned to Singularity.

The young man smirked.

"We're using that?"

Damon nodded.

"Send out the Bug Protocol."

Singularity roared the signal.

"The moon is out.."

From inside the train, a silver-winged figure burst into the air. Moth-like wings shimmered behind him as he spun upward, magic gun in hand, laughing maniacally.

"Hell... yeah."

Wimpy's eyes twitched, looking at the gun in his hands.

"If you damage my baby, I'll kill you, you goddamn PEDOOOOO!!!"

Damon turned again, eyes scanning the horizon—and then his expression froze.

From this vantage point, he could finally see it.

What lay behind.

He saw it.

He saw the face of despair.

Chapter 510: No Mana Left

Over the distant horizon—across the hills and sweeping green plains—glowed the flicker of flames. His eyes, accustomed to the dark, didn't need the light to see it.

That's why he saw what he saw.

Honestly, the ability to see in the dark was great, but in some places, it was best to not see at all; a good example would be the horrors of the duhu mountains.

Though this time, it was nothing that macabre; it was the mundane type of horror.

Orcs. Marching. Armed to the teeth. Chanting battle cries.

Massive beasts the size of city walls dragged forward wooden platforms and siege weapons. Towering creatures that looked like twisted gorillas with tusks and four arms—walking bulldozers bred to tear down stone walls.

Orc shamans clad in robes and dangling bead collars sang strange songs and wove spells, their magic rising in threads of green and red through the night air.

The march of the orcs was unimpeded. These hills were their home. They moved swiftly—like they belonged to the land.

From where he stood, Damon's eyes locked onto a large orc sitting on a throne of bones, the skeletal remains of some beast long dead. The throne was lashed onto a platform pulled by two of those monstrous siege beasts.

His skin prickled.

Danger.

That orc warlord—the one on the bone throne—was staring at him.

"I suppose that's the war chief that united them," Damon muttered.

The main force of the orcs had arrived.

He glanced behind—up the hill, where the train had just barely crested the summit. Even with all the fighters and defensive spells, the carts were battered.

"What now...?" Twilight appeared at Damon's side.

Damon stared down at the enemy massing below. Hundreds, if not more. He closed his eyes, drawing his bow.

"Now... we defend."

His gaze flicked toward the carts.

"Archers and mages—get ready. Whatever happens, do not let them up this hill."

He pointed toward the front cart.

"Someone get me Aleph. I need him to do a little more work."

Inside the cart, Aleph heard his name and groaned, licking his dry, cracked lips.

"That demon's gonna work me to death... this is why I hate orphans—horrible work ethics..."

He didn't get to finish his grumbling.

Saint grabbed him by the collar and hurled him out of the train. He was passed along from adventurer to adventurer like a sack of bricks until the Lunar Moth Dred tossed him down at Damon's feet.

"Here he is! Looking good as new—after all that rest." Dred grinned.

Damon looked down at the pale-faced elf. Androgynous. Pretty enough to give any woman a run for her money.

His skin was bone dry, lips parched, eyes red and swollen from exhaustion. Deep black circles shadowed his face.

Aleph met Damon's gaze, pleading.

"I've contributed enough... cough... cough... I don't have any mana left—I don't have any mana left..."

Damon gave him a sad, sympathetic smile.

"I understand. You've worked hard."

Hope bloomed in Aleph's eyes—until Damon added:

"If you can breathe, you can work."

He handed small vials of recovery potions to Dred.

"Make sure he takes them."

Dred cackled with glee, clutching the helpless elf.

"Hehehe, I told you not to go for the production build. Now look at you. Who's helpless now, orphan hater..."

Aleph tried to scream, thrashing.

"GET OFF ME, PEDO! I'M STRAIGHT! AND OVER THE AGE YOU LIKE!"

No one helped. They just watched—shaking their heads.

Damon didn't care much for their antics. If anything, he allowed it. That kind of bravado in the face of danger? It gave the illusion of control. And that illusion kept people calm.

Especially now—with the odds against them laid bare.

Soon enough, a few hours passed, and the orcs were closing in.

The sun was rising. Dawn's light crept up the hill, illuminating the enemy below.

Aleph's only job was to create spike barriers and conjure a blockade in the orcs' path. He got to work, still cursing, still being pinned down every now and then by Dred forcing another potion into his mouth.

Unnoticed Singularity stepped up beside Damon.

"Even with all this," he said calmly, "we'll still lose. You know that, right?"

He pointed down the hill at the three orc warbands—each waiting for their full force to gather at the base.

"Orcs aren't the brightest race—but they're smart where it matters. In battle."

Damon nodded. "I'm counting on that. Orcs respect strength."

Unnoticed Singularity narrowed his eyes. "How long until the knights arrive? And if they do... will it even matter?"

Damon's expression remained cool.

"They won't. They're just bait."

At that moment, two shadows soared in from the sky—one landed on each shoulder.

A raven and a red squirrel.

They cawed and squealed, feeding him the information he'd sent them to gather.

Damon chuckled, glancing at Singularity.

"Looks like the knights aren't far off. They're coming in with about two hundred men."

Singularity's smile turned cold.

"That's not enough to win. Especially not in open field. Only fools take orcs head-on like that."

Damon agreed.

"Only fools."

"Birds die for food, and men die for wealth."

They were probably confident they could rob the orcs and flee with the spoils. That kind of arrogance would get them killed.

Still—it was good they came.

If Damon had told them the orcs were gathered in full strength, they would've hidden behind their fortress walls and let this caravan die.

But instead, he told them the orcs had treasure—loot.

And that brought them out to earn glory.

The sun's rays finally crested the hill, lighting up the field and reflecting off bloodied armor and scorched banners.

He heard voices behind him—uneasy murmurs from the caravan.

Damon's grip on the sword tightened. He wasn't afraid—but this many orcs meant something had gone wrong deeper in the wilds.

Someone or something let this happen.

He raised his sword, its edge catching the morning light.

"The knights are coming," he shouted. "We only need to hold until noon!"

A cheer broke out across the hilltop.

At the same time—down at the bottom of the slope—the orc war chief raised his arm and roared in guttural Orcish:

"Attack. Kill the men. Enslave the children. Bring me their leader's head!"

The orcs roared as one—and charged.

Damon's lips curved into a cold smile.