

## **Shadow 511**

### Chapter 511: A Position Of Strength

The orcs charged forward, aiming to climb the steep hill.

Damon pulled his hand back. Behind him, the adventurers with long-range capabilities took aim.

Right next to him, the black shadowy figure known as Ghost stood with a bow in hand—Damon's bow.

Having witnessed Ghost's lethality firsthand, Damon had entrusted him with the Helm of Balero. This was the perfect battlefield for him. Although, if Matia had been here, it would've been even better. She could've simply flown into the sky and rained spears of ice down on their enemies.

He really missed his shadow.

Still in recovery after creating Ghost, Matia had gone far beyond her limits to create a minion on par with herself.

Damon didn't know how long she'd need to heal, but he hadn't hesitated to summon Ghost. His ability to fire multiple arrows simultaneously, combined with the Helm of Balero's kill-shot, made him a monster in his own right.

The ground trembled beneath their feet as hundreds of orcs surged up the hill, swarming toward the summit.

Unnoticed Singularity narrowed his eyes, ready for battle.

"I have no idea what you're planning," he muttered, "but it had better be good."

Damon glanced over his shoulder at the civilians huddled behind the metal frame of the train.

"It's simple, really..." he said. "I'll ask them to leave us alone—nicely."

Singularity blinked, then chuckled.

Clearly, Damon was making some kind of joke to ease the tension.

Until he saw Damon's face.

On the ground beside them, barely conscious, Aleph weakly raised a trembling hand.

"This... madman is serious..."

Dred looked to the sky. "Mom... I'll be joining you soon..."

Aleph croaked, "Filthy orphan."

Damon waved his hand.

Arrows and bursts of magical energy thundered down the hill, streaking through the sky, leaving trails of destruction in their wake.

The orcs were hammered by the barrage. The earth shook from balls of magical force launched by mages. Blasts of raw magical energy exploded in the ranks below.

Undeterred, the orcs grabbed the bodies of their fallen comrades and used them as shields—without hesitation or remorse.

This was orc society.

Strength was everything.

Might makes right.

The living were mightier than the dead, and that was the only logic that mattered.

Their battle cries never ceased.

Twilight sneered, twirling his magic dagger.

"You didn't really think I'd let you go far, did you?"

Far below, in front of the charging orcs, a spatial rift tore through the air.

Then came the explosion—pitch-black lightning lanced from the rift, crackling like a storm. The cabin of dark electricity erupted, killing orcs in the blast and stunning those around it.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

That was Twilight's attribute: Black Lightning—a rare variant element.

He turned to Wimpy.

"Get ready to use your second-class skill."

Wimpy nodded, gripping his magic guns.

"Who... am I copying?"

Damon looked at his shadow—Ghost.

"You'll be copying the skill he's about to use."

Wimpy nodded. His skill—Wild Card—let him copy any mana-based skill. It only worked on mana-based skills, couldn't replicate unique class skills not based in mana, and could only store one skill at a time. If overwritten, it had to be re-learned.

Damon looked back down the hill.

Hundreds of orcs scrambled upward, slowed by the traps and obstacles Aleph had created—at great personal cost.

"Ghost."

At his command, the shadow raised his bow to the heavens and fired a single arrow high into the air.

The temperature dropped.

Cold swept across the battlefield as the arrow reached its apex—and began to split.

The single arrow split like breaking glass—fractals of ice and shadow blooming outward—until the sky itself seemed to splinter.

One became ten. Ten became hundreds.

Each one radiated the cold, hungry death in the form of shadow and ice.

The orcs slowed. Some looked up. A few—faster or smarter—shouted in Orcish:

"Take cover! Shields up—take cover!"

They reacted fast.

But not fast enough.

Ghost, who was a third-class shadow, imbued with ice and shadow, unleashed a rain of black icicles that screamed as they fell. One struck an orc using a corpse as cover. The frozen body shattered. His arms iced over. His skin turned black, then white, then blue as frost raced through his bloodstream.

Wimpy grinned. He'd learned the skill.

He raised both guns. Two bullets.

Then came the sounds of thunder and agony as orcs were shredded by the barrage of mana-forged magic bullets.

Wimpy clutched his head from the mana strain, but the blood spray and collapsing enemies boosted morale.

Adventurers cheered. Weapons raised. A victory—however brief.

But that was only the beginning.

Damon's eyes fell on the orc war chief.

The Orc seemed to chuckle. His lips moved.

Then the siege beasts stirred.

Mounted on their backs were crude catapults, fashioned from salvaged magic artillery. They hurled flaming boulders through the air as orc shamans lifted their arms—red magical energy spiraling into the sky.

Unnoticed Singularity sliced a flaming boulder in half as it came flying toward them.

"They're taking us seriously now..." he muttered.

"Any more bright ideas before they kill everyone? My party and I can escape if we have to—but we can't take many with us."

Damon chuckled.

"Actually, everything is going better than I thought."

Singularity raised an eyebrow just as another blast landed inches from Damon, coating his armor in dirt and flames.

The fire rolled harmlessly off his body.

"Uh huh. Very convincing..."

Dred dodged a falling boulder as civilians screamed behind them.

"Quit aura-farming and do what you gotta do!"

Damon sighed and pulled a staff from his shadow storage.

"Like I said... I'll ask nicely."

"To negotiate," he said, walking forward through the rain of fire, "you must first establish a position of strength."

He laughed to himself.

"Before I was a death seeker, I was a merchant in blood... and a dealer in death."

Then, in a voice the orcs would understand, he raised his staff and shouted:

"I am a merchant in blood, and a dealer in death!"

The staff ignited.

Black flames erupted from its tip, casting a wide arc of destruction. From his high vantage point, Damon had clear sightlines on many of the orcs below.

Without hesitation, he launched the attack—

A devastating volley of fire from the Staff of Carnage tore down the slope and struck the orc ranks.

A deafening boom.

A black, consuming explosion.

Then...

Silence.

Chapter 512: Iron

The bottom of the hill was now a vast crater, dust rising in thick columns, with only the lingering groans of those unfortunate enough to be caught at the edges of the explosion.

Silence hung over the epicenter. The blast that had erupted from the top of the hill had left a scorched hollow where half the body of a siege beast had been obliterated. The ground there was blackened, melted, and crystallized—evidence of the sheer force of the blast.

There were no corpses in the center. Nothing had survived. Not even the stronger, more durable bones that could typically withstand magical fire. Everything had been reduced to ash.

It was at the outer rim of the destruction where the true horror lay. The orcs who hadn't died instantly now groaned weakly, their bodies torn and mangled. They would not live long.

Damon walked down the hill slowly, the Staff of Carnage still warm in his hand. This devastation had been his doing.

Regrettably, it hadn't wiped out as many of the orcs as he'd hoped—but it had made a statement. A terrifying one.

He could only use that attack once. The staff was a single-shot weapon, one that needed to be charged over time. He had done so on the way to this battlefield, letting it gather power slowly.

More importantly, he had known that the hill's high vantage point would force the orcs to gather at its base. He had waited. Waited for them to pack themselves tightly into the kill zone—then unleashed hell.

Now, he walked across scorched earth at an unhurried pace, his expression unreadable. Despite the destruction, their main force remained intact. But they didn't attack him. Not yet. The memory of that explosion and the staff in his hand made them hesitate.

They didn't know it was spent. And Damon had no intention of letting them find out.

He walked calmly into their ranks, past stunned warriors, eyes fixed on the orc war chief still seated atop his throne of bones.

At the top of the hill, the civilians and adventurers watched him go. Their expressions were a mix of hope, fear, and helplessness.

They had hope—because so far, Damon had done the impossible and kept them alive.

They had fear—because the strength of the enemy was overwhelming.

And they felt powerless—because their fate was no longer their own. All they could do was believe in Damon, the Ascendant.

He stopped in front of the warband's elite—a line of hardened orcs, likely former war chiefs themselves, now forced into service under the current leader.

They stared him down, tense, wary. Damon only nodded.

"This really is a 'might makes right' race."

But truthfully, most intelligent species were. Some used wealth, others used intellect, but all power structures were ultimately backed by violence. Nations, families, empires—all were maintained through force.

And the orcs were no different. Their current chief had united them through sheer dominance. That meant he could only be overthrown by something more powerful.

The orc war chief remained on his throne, his gaze cold. When he finally spoke, his voice was a guttural rumble, rough in the common tongue.

"Human. You come. You die."

Damon smiled faintly, his head tilting.

That's promising.

He responded in perfect Orcish, the native tongue of the orcs.

"No need to force yourself to speak a language you're not fluent in. Let's keep this in Orcish."

The orcs exchanged startled glances. This human understood them.

Good. That gave him leverage.

Damon kept his posture loose, unthreatening—but his mind was sharp. He understood exactly why they hadn't attacked him yet. They were waiting. Watching. Because he'd just shown them what he could do.

And now, he was going to negotiate.

Had he tried earlier, they would've laughed him off as weak. But now? After what they'd seen? He could finally speak on his terms.

You don't start negotiations from weakness.

The orc war chief laughed, slapping his thigh. The sound boomed across the battlefield. Then he stood, towering over his warriors. He was easily eight feet tall, with a body built like a stone fortress. Thick cords of muscle, veins like serpents beneath his skin. Around his neck hung a necklace of skulls—human and beast alike.

"You speak our tongue," the chief growled. "What do you want? You haven't come to surrender. If you think to kill me, you will fail."

Damon chuckled coldly.

"You're smart. That's rare among your kind. Strength and cunning—that's how you united them, isn't it?"

The chief didn't answer. He didn't need to. His silence was confirmation.

Damon lowered his gaze slightly, acknowledging the obvious tension.

"Yes, I came to kill you. But there's no need to involve the weak in our fight."

He did the unthinkable.

He tossed the Staff of Carnage—his only visible weapon—to a nearby orc, who caught it with wide eyes.

Gasps rippled through the warband.

Damon raised his voice in fluent Orcish.

"I smell weakness in your leader. I smell fear. I have come to challenge your chief. I will wear no armor. I will use no weapons."

He raised his hand, and his armor faded—vanishing into shadows. He now stood bare-chested, the only protection left being his enchanted boots and light trousers.

Then he pointed directly at the orc war chief.

"Do you dare fight?"

A hush fell over the crowd.

Then, one by one, the orcs began to clap their fists against their chests in approval.

The chief's third-rank aura surged to life like a firestorm. He grinned, all fangs and bloodlust.

"A human wants to fight me unarmed?" he roared. "Iron accepts!"

Without hesitation, he leapt from his bone throne, soaring several meters through the air before landing with a quake in front of Damon.

Dust billowed outward from the impact.

"Iron has never lost."

Damon said nothing. His expression remained calm, but his danger sense flared violently in the back of his mind.

He had just signed himself up for a battle to the death. On the enemy's terms. With no weapons.

And if he lost, he wouldn't be the only one to die.

Chapter 513: Someone Better

Damon had once again dug a hole for himself. Honestly, he felt like his propensity to jump into danger was ten times higher than your average suicidal maniac.

At the top of the hill, Twilight glanced at Ilukras with an inquisitive expression.

"Hey, you speak multiple languages—what did he say?"

Ilukras tilted his head. "Hmm, I'm not sure if I'm hearing him right or if my Orchis is rusty... but it kinda sounds like he just challenged the orc war chief to a hand-to-hand duel."

Twilight stared from above, wide-eyed.

"He just... threw the staff? What is he doing?"

Wimpy whispered, "He's bluffing. Right? Right?"

Saint narrowed his eyes, looking at the spectacle beneath. "I don't think so..."

On the ground, Aleph—who was weakly lying there, drained of mana—raised his hand, gasping for air.

"Serves him right... this is instant karma... damn orphan."

Dred kicked him, taking advantage of his helplessness.

"Should we just toss him to the orcs?"

Unnoticed Singularity glanced at his party. "Great, we can send you too..."

Lena rushed towards them, almost slipping on the grass.

"Hurry, we need to stop him! That orc is a whole rank above him. Taking that one barehanded is like asking a child to wrestle a bear."

Aleph raised his hand, laughing weakly. "Thank god, one less orphan in the world. He can join his parents."

They all glanced at Unnoticed Singularity, who sighed.

"He had it coming. You can beat him up now."

What followed next was them beating the living daylight out of the weak and helpless Aleph.

Lena watched them with trembling hands. Why were they so nonchalant? Why did she expect this party of eccentrics to act normal?

'If he died down there... what hope did they have left? No hero, no miracle. Just the orcs.'

She gritted her teeth, holding her staff, and turned away. Unnoticed Singularity saw her expression and chuckled.

"Don't worry, he won't die from this. Trust his judgment."

Lena bit her lips. Before she could speak, Unnoticed Singularity raised his voice.

"Move the train towards the orcs. Let's get a closer look."

One of the adventurers bit his lips. "That doesn't sound like a good idea... I mean—"

"If he dies, we're done for anyway. Might as well get a closer look," Unnoticed Singularity cut him off.

He slowly began to walk down the hill, pulling Damon's stag with him.

The civilians didn't have much of an idea what was going on. Unlike those adventurers who had awakened a class, these people were rankless and had no class—they did not have superhuman abilities.

The amount of information they could get was limited.

As the train began to slowly move down the hill towards the orcs, they were fearful.

"Are we surrendering to the orcs...?"

"Is this the end...?"

"I heard they eat children and kill all the men..."

"The Ascendant will save us... he promised."

"All nobles are the same—liars."

No, he's not. We'll be fine. I know it.

"Oh goddess, help us..."

Prayers and fear, hope and despair—various emotions were passed and whispered. What else could they do? No one gave them any explanations.

The adventurers were also uneasy as they approached the bottom of the hill.

The roar and clapping of orcs as they rhythmically banged their weapons created a circle, where a barely dressed Damon stood with a calm expression.

They sat in the train, too afraid to come out. It felt like the train was the difference between life and death—having saved them from the orcs before, perhaps it was.

Except now, there was no place to run.

Unnoticed Singularity finally decided to speak.

"This is a duel between the Ascendant and the orc war chief. Only the mightiest will stand, and the weak will fall."

Damon didn't look back to know Unnoticed Singularity was briefing these people. He closed his eyes calmly.

He was starting to wonder how he even got here.

Ah, right. He had decided to be selfless and embody the noble ideals of Valarie Sunwarden and the kind Carmen Vale.

How did that end for him? Fighting an eight-foot-tall orc with his bare hands while being a whole rank weaker than it.

Come to think of it, every time he was a good Samaritan, he always got hurt.

If he lost here today, he wouldn't die—because he was never in danger of dying to begin with. He could just shadow stride away anytime.

The reason he was here was because the hundreds of helpless men, women, and children behind him could not.

For once in his life, he wanted to do something that was good—not motivated by guilt or necessity. A decision that was solely his.

He wondered, now that he was on the road to his village... if his father saw him at this moment... would he be proud of what he saw? Or would he be disgusted by the monster beneath?

Damon's thoughts spiraled beyond the battle with Iron.

"You are distracted, human. You look down on me..."

The Orchis language spoken by the orc war chief shook Damon out of his thoughts.

He glanced at the eight-foot-tall orc whose height dwarfed his own, his brown eyes staring down at Damon.

"From where I'm standing, you're looking down on me."

The orc narrowed his eyes, not understanding sarcasm.

"I do not look down on warriors. Only weaklings. Which one are you? Show me—or become a skull on my neck."

He gestured to the chain of skulls on his neck, clearly intent on adding Damon's head.

"Ah, you're too eager. Before we fight, I have conditions."

Dred glanced at Ilukras where they stood on the side, with the human crowd separating them from the orcs.

"What's he saying?" he asked the monk.

Ilukras squeezed his lamp. "He wishes to have a prize upon his victory. The orc chief can choose one of two things: for all the orcs to be enslaved by Damon and serve him to their deaths... or the second option—the orcs must allow our entire caravan safe passage through the Green Hills."

Dred nodded. No way the orcs would choose the first option. No one wants to be enslaved by another.

Unnoticed Singularity chuckled. He was familiar with this. It was a tactic in psychological manipulation.

Giving someone an impossible option first—one they would not agree to—then giving them an alternative option that seemed less bad, which was actually what you wanted them to pick.

Damon glanced at the orc, speaking in their tongue.

"Do you agree? Or are you afraid?"

Iron clenched his fist, making cracking sounds. "Agree. Same for you... we will enslave you all..."

Damon nodded. "Agreed."

He took a battle stance. Before he could steady it, Iron's large fist made astral winds. Damon raised his hand to block. He felt his flesh ripple, skin tear, and shock travel through his bones.

He was pushed back several meters, blood pooling at the side of his mouth.

[HP: 995/1695]

His legs felt weak, trembling from the shock.

Iron smiled. No human takes an orc head-on.

Chapter 514: To Bleed For The Weak

Damon didn't hesitate to retaliate within the time he had been hit by the orc war chief, Iron.

As soon as his fist connected with the orc's body, he felt some of his HP get replenished. The pain he had felt subsided slightly.

[Skill: Vengeance]

[Description:]

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, care not if the world goes blind.

[Effect:]

If you take damage exceeding 25% of your total HP in a single hit, any retaliation within 3 seconds heals you for the amount of damage dealt to the attacker.

[Type:]

Passive

[Cooldown:]

0 secs

This was the skill that was most likely to save Damon's life in this duel with the orc war chief. As long as he returned damage within the three-second time frame, he could recover lost HP.

Damon had activated his [5x] skill and had multiplied his overall strength to five times its initial value.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

The orcs chanted in their native tongue. As for the caravan of people with Damon... they had been quiet, watching the start of the battle while surrounded by hundreds of orcs. All they had were silent and hopeful prayers.

The orc war chief was slightly pushed back by Damon's punch. He looked at where Damon had struck him and smiled lightly, his tusks giving him a menacing look as his towering form stumbled.

"Hahaha! Good, you can fight... it would be pointless if you died in a single hit..."

Damon smiled coldly and replied in Orcish.

"It was but a scratch."

"Win, Lord Ascendant! Kill that orc!" a little boy from the caravan couldn't help but call out despite his fear.

His mother quickly pulled him into her arms and hid him. However, his actions and the orc's disregard for his words made the people in the caravan slowly begin to cheer Damon on.

Lena raised her hand, shouting the loudest...

"Don't lose... win... win!"

Damon chuckled, focusing on his battle. He had no intention of losing.

He was certain the orc war chief had merely struck him first to gauge Damon. There was a reason humans and other members of the goddess races wore armor—it was simple. Their weaker frames could not handle pure physical strain beyond certain levels.

To that end, they used magic, skills, and artifacts.

No one in their right mind would fight an orc without any weapons and armor, especially one above their rank.

It was quite evident Damon was insane.

The orc war chief raised his huge fist with the intention of bringing them down on Damon. He didn't back away. He planted his feet firmly into the ground and punched forward with all his might.

His fist met the hard skin and bones of the orc. A deafening boom echoed out into the air, sending dust and astral winds. Damon felt the ground beneath his feet crack and sink as the force of the impact traveled through his flesh and bones.

Every ounce of his strength desperately held on...

His bones groaned but held still. His skill [Iron Bones] had made him ready for this moment.

[Skill: Iron Bones]

[Description:]

A brutal defensive art originating from the war-prisoners of the Hollow Spire, Iron Bones transforms the user's skeletal structure, reinforcing it through sheer will and arcane calcification.

[Effect:]

Passively increases bone density and durability. Reduces fracture risk and physical damage taken by 20%. Grants resistance to internal blunt trauma.

[Type:]

Passive.

[Cooldown:]

0 secs

Damon didn't hesitate. He rolled under the massive legs of the orc, jumping onto his head. He brought his elbows down on his skull as hard as he could...

Iron roared, reaching up to grab Damon's arms, but Damon turned into a shadow and slipped down on instinct, gliding back to the ground.

He turned back into a human, feeling the gaze of the orc.

Iron sneered.

"Cowardly tricks. Only strong body matters, weak human."

Damon could hear the mocking jeers of the orcs who were spectating the duel.

"What, are you afraid of a little shadow? My, that smells like weakness. But fine, I'll give you a handicap again, you weakling..."

His words seemed to have angered Iron, who charged at him, crossing the distance faster than the eyes of anyone weaker could follow...

Damon just realized the gap was too small, and he could not move his body away fast enough. He had also just said he wouldn't turn into a shadow and avoid it.

He gritted his teeth and took a stance, pushing his own weight to one side as soon as the orc slammed into him...

His bones creaked and his organs cried out. Blood spilled from his mouth. It felt like asking a child to stop a carriage moving at full speed...

Damon didn't have enough force to stop something like that with just his strength.

He was still short the pure power of those in the third class...

So he used the orc's momentum against him. Damon let the force push him and he pulled Iron forward. Using the momentum, he threw the orc to the ground...

Realizing what Damon had just done, Iron tried to catch himself and stand. Damon swept his feet, and with all his weight, he double-knee dropped the back of the orc.

The ground shook as the impact hit the spine of the orc.

"Ahergg..." Iron groaned, blood pouring from his lips.

The people of the caravan cheered at Damon's small success.

Dred looked at him with a wry expression.

"Who the hell grapples an orc?"

Unnoticed Singularity narrowed his eyes.

"He's still alive... An attack that close and physical should feel, like Lena said earlier, a child taking on a grizzly bear."

Ilukras closed his eyes with a resigned expression.

"That Iron is more like a polar bear. Even an adult wouldn't fight that bare-handed..."

Twilight's eyes glowed slightly, looking at Iron.

"Something is off about that Iron... I can't tell what..."

"Like what?" Wimpy asked, watching the duel.

Saint grabbed Singularity by the shoulder, whispering in his ear.

"Why did he stop using his skills... is he trying to buy time?"

Unnoticed Singularity glanced at Saint.

"There's no need to whisper. They don't care. If he wins, it won't matter... whether he is or not..."

They continued to exchange blows with each other for the next few minutes, each second more intense than the last.

Everyone cheered, screaming on top of their lungs.

Damon didn't have time to focus on them. He had just received a kick to the gut.

Blood poured out of his mouth. Before he could react, he suffered an uppercut...

He couldn't understand it... why this orc was able to hit him faster than he could counter, even when he had the Beholder's Gaze skill, which allowed him to affect time after he dodged attacks.

What the hell was happening...

Damon tried Appraisal, but the skill only showed question marks...

Iron attacked again. Damon weaved right, but the orc's leg smashed into his ribs...

He coughed up blood.

'He didn't let me retaliate...'

Damon stood up, his head heavy, blood pooling, his body battered and his flesh blue and purple...

The fight was only a few minutes in...

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"How..." he raised his fist to attack, but the orc blocked it...

It was then that Damon figured it out...

This... orc was using some type of skill... he had to be...

He felt his body get smashed into the ground. Warm blood flowed out.

Except knowing was virtually useless.

Chapter 515: What Makes A Monster

The options were laid bare before him — what made this orc different from the rest? How did he achieve the feat of uniting the other orc war chiefs of the same rank?

Damon dived left, evading a punch. Ahh, yes... he could see it now.

He jumped and double-kicked the orc, regaining some HP from the damage dealt. The towering orc stumbled back a few steps from the momentum. Damon pressed forward — an uppercut, then a swift roll into a backhanded swing of his fist, followed by a brutal headbutt. Grabbing the orc war chief's hair, Damon brought his knee smashing into Iron's nose.

The orc regained his senses and grabbed Damon. At that range, it would've been ideal to activate Ashborn and burn the orc, but this was a purely physical duel.

Instead, Damon slammed the back of his head into Iron's face again, causing the orc's blood to pour over his already-bleeding scalp. His long hair was soaked in a mix of sweat and blood.

They huffed and continued to clash.

Dred narrowed his eyes.

"They've been at this for fifteen minutes already... I don't think he can last much longer."

He glanced at Twilight. "Haven't you discovered what's weird about this orc?"

Twilight shook his head. "I know something's off — just not what."

Damon rolled to the side, breathing heavily. His body was black and purple from the brutal hits. Blood clots gathered under his skin, and his mouth filled with blood.

There was no way he could last long enough for the knights to arrive. And if they did, the civilians wouldn't survive the battle that followed.

As much as Damon was used to taking lives, his objective wasn't to kill — it was to save the caravan.

He activated [Appraisal] once more. This time, Iron was weak enough for it to work. What he saw almost gave him pause.

He smiled.

This would be his chance to win. It wasn't that he found a weakness to exploit — it was simple, really, why Iron was so strong.

Why he seemed more intelligent than the other orcs.

Iron had a skill for [Precognition]. That was how he predicted Damon's moves.

He had a skill that let him grow stronger the more damage he took.

And lastly, a skill that made his body tougher than iron — hence the name.

Damon slid across the ground, raising his left hand. He caught a blow from Iron, grabbing the orc's fist. Damon's arm twisted and his bones snapped slightly under the strain.

Before Iron could pull back, shadows wrapped around Damon's arm — and Iron's right arm — binding them together with [Shadow Armor].

The skill [Shadow Armor] let Damon form hard shadows around his body like armor. He had promised not to use armor on himself — but never said he wouldn't use it on Iron.

He formed a gauntlet to lock their arms together.

Iron smiled, his breath close enough that Damon could feel it.

"You tied yourself to me, human... now you can't run."

Damon chuckled coldly. With both their arms tied, they could only fight with one arm and their legs — no room to dodge now.

He leaned close and whispered:

"I see it now... your secret."

Iron hesitated — and that was all the opening Damon needed.

His Skill Activated [5x] giving his Strength a Boost

After its cooldown, the skill was usable again. Damon boosted his strength and delivered an uppercut, burying his fist into Iron's eye.

He ignored the pain in his body and the dullness of his eyes, focusing his shadow perception instead.

Iron retaliated. Damon tilted his head, dodging, then raised his leg and kicked the one place he hadn't touched all fight — the orc's groin.

"ARRGGG—!" Iron howled, dropping to his knees for the first time since the battle began.

With their faces now level, Damon didn't need to leap. He had a direct line to his temples.

He pummeled them with all his might.

Fist after fist, blood pooled steadily. Damon's knuckles cracked against the orc's skull.

The pain of being kicked in the groin was truly abominable.

Yet in the cheering crowd, a red squirrel solemnly nodded in approval.

In a formal duel, it might be considered dishonorable. But not illegal. And this was a duel with an orc — they had no such rules.

Iron, recovering slightly from the agony, tried to lift his bleeding head — but Damon was ruthless.

Another kick to the groin.

Followed by a jab to the eyes — effectively blinding the orc.

Still, Iron knew: if he let Damon have his way, he would die.

He reached out to grab Damon — but the bastard pulled him with the locked arm, drop-kicked him, then grabbed one of his tusks and slammed his head into the ground.

"Iron's losing to a human..."

The orc warriors murmured among themselves.

"He's weak in the balls..."

Iron heard them as Damon slammed his head again.

"ARRGHHRRGHH!" he roared. His third-rank strength surged. He dragged Damon down with him, trying to crush him with his full weight.

There was no resistance. Just Damon's cold smile.

As he was pulled down, Damon leaned in and whispered into Iron's ear:

"You've lost your monster core... haven't you?"

Iron's eyes widened. Damon wrapped his arm around his neck — a chokehold aimed to break it.

Iron tried to resist, but Damon tightened the grip.

"You aren't a monster anymore. That's why you're more cunning than the others. You've left the monster evolution path. Should I tell them...?"

Iron's grip faltered.

Damon wrapped his legs around the orc's torso, twisting his neck further.

"You have a class... you aren't a monster anymore. What will your fellow orcs do when they find out?"

He twisted — Iron tried to resist in the opposite direction.

With a voice like a demon, Damon whispered:

"Yield... or die."

Iron felt his bones creaking painfully.

He looked at his people — wild, cheering, reckless orcs. Fools who wouldn't survive without him.

He roared in rage.

"AREEGHHHRHH!"

Then tapped Damon's arm.

"I yield..."

Chapter 516: Iron Resolve

Mentally breaking an enemy was a dishonorable way of fighting... however, Damon prided himself on having no pride.

If anything, he had given Iron a handicap—fighting him in his own field of specialization.

Still, Damon didn't have time to be surprised. Iron was truly a rare specimen—an orc that was no longer a monster. The lack of a mana core simply meant that, based on technicalities, he was a member of the goddess races.

He met every requirement: a species created by the goddess, possessing human-level intelligence, and—more importantly—the absence of a mana core.

However, to Iron, this was a mark of shame. Like all orcs, he seemed proud of their monstrous nature. Yet he alone was different.

An outcast who had achieved a different kind of evolution.

Damon wasn't surprised. Iron wasn't the first. There was the Wendigo in the Evil Forest who turned into a woman... and was apparently still out to kill him.

He didn't quite know how relevant that was now, but it was clear—the Unknown God was part of the reason.

The world of Aetherus was pushing itself to evolve faster, sensing an impending threat.

'This is truly the era he makes his final move...'

Damon weakly glanced at Unnoticed Singularity.

That outsider was still trying to leave this world... likely because he suspected the Unknown God would destroy the world if it served his goal.

Iron raised his head, his deep brown eyes settling on Damon's bleeding form.

The orcs and the people of the caravan remained still, watching in a tense silence as the aftermath was about to be decided.

Damon's gaze lingered on the orc. The sun had yet to reach its highest point... and unfortunately, the knights had not yet arrived.

'Useless.'

You really couldn't trust the government to do anything right.

"I gave you two options... I'll let you choose your fate."

Iron breathed heavily, blood dripping freely from the gash on his temple.

Give us free passage... or choose a life of servitude.

A tense silence followed as the orcs turned to Iron, waiting for his decision.

He seemed to be contemplating something—something that made Damon uneasy.

He could very easily order the horde to attack.

All Damon wanted was safe passage for the caravan.

If the orcs still wanted a fight, they could fight the knights on their way here.

"We orcs worship strength... you have defeated me... with treachery..."

Damon felt his heart sink.

Yeah... that was not a good sign. He had sort of blackmailed Iron... and mentally pressured him.

"You are cunning and treacherous... smarter than orc... but very bold and strong... you fight for weak who follow you..."

Damon's eyes locked on the towering eight-foot orc as he slowly stood up, blood running down his face, his expression grim... yet oddly calm.

His eyes didn't waver from Damon.

"I admit... Iron does not compare... Iron would have lost if you had armor and magic..."

Damon didn't like where this was going.

He could feel the agitation building in the horde.

They were about to get aggressive.

Iron raised his hand slowly...

"You have all that Iron lacks... all that Iron cannot give orc..."

Then, before anyone could fully process it, he fell to one knee.

"Orc choose servitude... we only ask... you treat orc fairly..."

The war chiefs looked at each other, uncertain—then, one by one, they followed. Slowly lowering themselves in submission... bowing to the only law they truly respected.

The law of strength.

Damon's eye twitched.

'Wha... what the actual... huh...?'

This... this was not what he had been expecting.

Who in their right mind would choose to enslave their entire race... when they could have chosen the lesser option?

He stared at Iron in disbelief.

"You do realize... you could have just let us pass..."

The orc nodded, blood dripping steadily to the ground from his jaw.

"Iron know... but Iron also know when Iron is not enough... I united all orc not to wage war... to survive... orc will follow whoever Iron follow..."

Damon narrowed his gaze, turning to look in the direction the orcs had come from.

Survive what, exactly?

Were they fleeing from something?

Come to think of it... didn't the first wave of orcs say something about no more fleeing or something along those lines?

At the time, he'd been under the impression they were telling the caravan not to run.

Had he been wrong?

He reached into his pouch, pulling out a vial of healing potion.

Having wiped out so many orcs with the Staff of Carnage, he'd gotten a load of stat points, potions, and even miscellaneous items—packed meat, bottled drinks, and the like.

He tossed one potion to Iron, then downed the other himself.

The bruises and bleeding vanished in an instant—his battered body healing like paper being smoothed by an invisible hand.

Iron held the vial in his hand, marveling at the swirling golden liquid like it was a divine gift. His eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Damon gave him a sidelong glance.

"Drink it."

Iron nodded solemnly and drank the potion.

Watching the huge orc down the contents, Damon felt a pang of uncertainty rise in his chest.

He hadn't expected this.

The orcs... they wanted to be his minions?

It wasn't normal.

Orcs didn't follow humans.

They followed demons—served them willingly. Most intelligent monster races did.

They never agreed to serve humans.

'Don't tell me this bastard thinks there's something demonic about me...'

Damon wasn't really that demonic.

He was just a little insane... had questionable morals... occasionally ate humans... offered their souls to the demon god... conspired to take down the world's foremost religious institution... all while acting like a decent person.

Nothing demonic about that.

Still, he was curious.

"Where were you planning to go? You had to have realized you're in the Valtheron Empire's territory. You could take down a small fiefdom, maybe a castle or fort at best—but no more. The Empire would just send a subjugation unit and wipe you all out."

Iron clenched his fist.

He seemed aware of his limitations.

'Son of a bitch... he's trying to pass the problem to me.'

He must've reasoned... if he couldn't get his people to safety, then he just had to find someone who could.

Damon extended his shadow perception, sweeping it across several kilometers behind the caravan.

He sensed them—many groups of slower-moving orcs trailing behind.

They were the weaker ones... women, children... a few elderly orcs who had managed to survive long enough to pass down their brutal experience to the younger warriors.

What kind of threat would make orcs—creatures that craved the thrill of battle—flee?

His eyes sharpened.

He turned to Iron, tone flat, serious.

"What are you running from...?"

Iron's hands trembled—subtly, but unmistakably.

A primal fear.

He slowly raised his arm and pointed at the winding, distant roads ahead.

"I... I don't know... it... something ancient... is awakening... if we disturb it... we will suffer..."

Damon followed the direction he pointed.

And then...

His heart sank.

It was the same direction he was going.

Chapter 517: Something In The Distance

Something ancient is awakening.

Yeah, that was never a good sign. Damon closed his eyes. He was really starting to hate how his life was going.

Was someone out there setting his life to the highest difficulty setting on purpose? Seriously, at this point, he should've been dead and buried with a lawn growing over his grave.

Yet here he was. Living.

Deathless was really working overtime to make sure he didn't die.

'Death must really love all the business I bring it.'

Still, whatever was in that direction, he was going to have to see it for himself. His village was in that direction.

He had to go back there for two reasons.

The first was Dealer's Hand—he wasn't using his first-class skill at all, and its absence was the reason why.

The second reason was... well, because he wanted to wipe out the village and bury the hatchet.

Ahh, forgiveness. Truly beautiful. Especially when there was no one left to hate.

However, he wondered how the village had changed.

A small part of his mind whispered all the reasons why he shouldn't go back.

'If you look for the worst in people, that's all you'll ever see.'

Damon sighed. Even after death, Carmen Vale's words still haunted him more than the ghost of the man ever did.

As the first person to show Damon genuine kindness, Carmen had carved a deep mark in his psyche.

Iron glanced at Damon, feeling as though he needed to explain more.

"The shamans claim something half-forgotten is waking up. We had to leave or face its wrath..."

"And your shamans didn't say what it was?"

Iron shook his head.

Damon groaned. Was he still going to head that way?

He'd hate for something ancient to beat him to his own village.

Then there was the problem of the orcs. He could just point them in a direction that would get them killed, but... he figured they could be useful. How exactly? That part was still a work in progress.

"Where were you planning to go?"

Iron nodded solemnly.

"Iron heard demons recruit orcs for war. Iron thought to find demon..."

Damon sneered.

"So you thought you could make it to the demon continent."

He smiled coldly.

"But you were smart enough to realize going through the uncharted zones with a group this large would get you killed. So you decided to use the golden roads—even if it risked getting the Empire's attention."

Iron nodded. That had been the plan. It was the only alternative better than braving uncharted lands and ending up in a death zone, or crossing some ancient horror. But now, Iron had decided to bet on Damon. Maybe he could help them.

Damon had to admit: the orc was clever. Or at least had good intuition. Because he actually could help them. And more importantly, he had uses for their kind and birth-capable manpower.

"I'll accept you all under one condition, secrecy. You'll sign an Oath Scroll. And for the sake of those who don't speak Orcish, you'll act like we came to a reluctant agreement."

Damon stated a few terms. It was basically slavery, but Iron didn't mind.

He also made them agree to fix the caravans carriages, reinforce the carriages and wagons, and provide food and rations.

Iron nodded, then asked, "Will Chief guarantee orc safety... and let orc stay on your land as slaves?"

Damon raised his head. Chief?

Ah. He saw the misunderstanding now. The crown must've made the orcs think he was a noble with actual territory.

"I can give you a place to stay that's relatively safe. With food. But you may have to fight for it."

Iron found that quite appealing. Damon gave the orc a pitying look. This wasn't some open grassland. In fact, it was a tomb.

Damon raised his hand.

"You can get to work and discuss it with your people. I'll talk with mine and contact someone who'll arrange your accommodations."

Iron nodded, smiling happily.

Damon felt really bad about this.

Then he suddenly remembered the knights heading this way—ready to loot the orcs.

He wouldn't be needing them anymore. The orcs worked for him now.

"Right. Some two hundred knights are heading this way to loot you. You can do whatever you want with them, but don't kill the adventurer with them.."

Iron nodded, clapping his chest.

"Iron shall capture them all alive."

Damon's lips twitched.

These orcs were really eager to please... His Charisma stat must really be working overtime. Come to think of it, it had grown when the orcs bowed to him.

He walked up to Unnoticed Singularity and the crowd of humans, donning his armor once more.

He cleared his throat, putting on his most heroic and wise voice.

"I have vanquished the orcs. They will honor the terms we've discussed and shall allow us safe passage—and give us some of their supplies."

The people erupted in cheers, surrounding Damon in excitement.

He couldn't wait to get out of the crowd.

He looked among the hundreds of civilians, keeping his eyes on Linga. He'd talk to him later.

He signaled Unnoticed Singularity to help him escape the mob.

On the ground, Aleph sneered, watching the crowd swarm around Damon like he was some divine being.

"That bastard's farming aura now. Only just learned about it..."

Twilight smiled, watching the scene.

"Ahh, they grow up so fast. Now that he's learned aura farming, let's teach him rage baiting..."

Saint held his head in his hand. His friends were trying to corrupt someone who was already morally bankrupt.

It was like teaching the devil new tricks.

Unnoticed Singularity stepped between Damon and the crowd, making an excuse that Damon needed rest.

Damon was grateful for the help. He wasn't quite sure how to play hero. He was more used to playing the villain.

"Hahaha... I did not expect that," the almost always expressionless Singularity laughed.

He glanced at Damon.

"What are you going to do with hundreds of orcs?"

Damon bit his lip.

"I didn't know you spoke Orcish."

Singularity shook his head.

"I don't. Ilukras does. Don't worry, your secret's safe with us."

Damon shrugged, giving a thin smile.

"Great. I don't have to kill you guys."

Dred, who had followed with the rest of the party acting as Damon's supposed bodyguards, fluttered down.

"That's a joke, right? He's joking, right?"

Aleph weakly raised his hand from Wimpy's back, where he was being carried like a sack of potatoes.

"Never trust an orphan..."

Wimpy smacked him, taking full advantage of his helplessness.

Damon smiled. These guys really reminded him of his party.

He took out his pager.

"I have to make a call."

Dred chuckled mockingly.

"Bro really wants to act like he has a girlfriend. It's all right, friend..."

Damon tilted his head.

"Hm? I am contacting a girl. And she is my friend... you know, the kind that kisses you."

Dred's wings turned green. His legs wobbled.

Damon walked away with a smile, paging Lilith Astranova.

Her cold voice echoed out through the device.

"You only call when you need something. What do you want now?"

Chapter 518: Thankless Job

What was wrong with the women in his life?

Why did they always assume he only called when he wanted something?

Couldn't he call just because he missed them? Or simply to talk?

It made him seem like a bad person.

Damon felt indignation rise in his chest. Sylvia had said the same thing the last time he reached out, and now Lilith too.

"Hmph. Why do you assume I want something? Can't I just call because I felt like it?" he asked, exasperated.

Lilith snickered on the other side of the line.

"So, you don't want anything?"

Damon bit his lip, his eye twitching slightly.

"I mean... I do want something... but assuming that's the only reason I ever call? That's just cruel."

Lilith sighed—long, tired, and deeply unimpressed.

"I've been trying to reach you for the past few days. Do you have something against your pager? Why didn't you pick up?"

Damon glanced at the distant hills, scratching his head awkwardly.

Right. His pager had been stuffed into his shadow storage. Out of sight, out of mind.

"I was on a journey of self-discovery," he said, putting on his most pious tone.

"Maybe you didn't realize it, but I'm trying to better myself... as a human being."

"You're on a journey for revenge. That's not bettering yourself—it's deepening the hole you're already in. Try again."

What was up with this junior of hers? He was just too shameless.

Damon sighed. She was really getting pushy.

"Funny you'd say that, because I haven't killed that many people. Just a couple guys from the underworld. And some elves from the Moonglades. Other than that, I've been saving people. Regardless of race."

Lilith's voice shifted, slightly sharper now.

"Elves from the Moonglades... huh. So the White Ruler really wants you dead if he's been acting that brazenly in Valtheron."

She paused, then her tone softened just a bit.

"Do you want me to come to you? They wouldn't dare attack if the heir of one of the empire's Grand Duchies was by your side."

He appreciated her concern—really, he did—but he wasn't going to need her for this.

"As much as I'd love to hide behind a beautiful woman's skirts, I won't be needing your help. Not yet."

Lilith chuckled. Did he eventually plan to hide behind her skirt?

"You really have no shame. You didn't have to put it like that."

Damon smiled, genuinely enjoying her voice.

"I'll fill you in later, but I do sort of need a favor. I need you to take in some people."

Lilith was already suspicious.

"What kind of favor? And how many people are we talking?"

Damon cleared his throat, guilt creeping in.

"About... a few hundred to a thousand."

Silence.

"That's going to be a logistics nightmare," she muttered at last. "But I can shelter that many in my family's domain."

Damon gulped, smiling sheepishly.

"Erm... I'm glad you agree. But... they're orcs."

Another pause—longer this time.

"What?"

"Orcs? Why—how do you even—no, never mind. Why do you have that many orcs?"

Damon rubbed the back of his head.

"Well, it's a long story. But I was thinking you could use the Key of Lazarak to house them in the Tomb of Lazarak."

She sounded even more irritated now.

"A long story? Good. I have time."

Damon put on his most harmless smile, even though she couldn't see it.

"Senior... are you angry?"

He heard the sound of something being crushed. Her voice came calm and steady.

"No, not really. At this point, I'm just used to your reckless and impulsive actions."

So he told her everything. From the beginning. How he ended up involved with the orcs, what happened along the way—he left out only the part about his conversation with the Elf Queen.

Lilith took it all in quietly, including details about the eccentric adventurers' party. Eventually, they circled back to the core issue: the orcs.

"The safest option," she said coldly, "would be to abandon them."

Damon nodded slowly. He could see her logic.

"However, you want to recruit them. And we do need the manpower."

A smile tugged at his lips.

"So how do we get them into the tomb?" she asked. "Where are you right now?"

"The key's with you, right? You're more proficient in its use." he asked calmly.

"I'm far from your location," she said. "But I can change course. If I take a teleportation gate, I'll be three days north of you."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"And where exactly would that be?"

"Weion City. It's a small dungeon city. I'll meet you—and the orcs—at the forest ruins. There's an abandoned fort there from the Peasant Revolution."

Damon glanced over his shoulder. The orcs were working, fixing the carriages and wagons. Civilians kept their distance.

Another group of orcs was returning from a skirmish, dragging blindfolded knights behind them.

Pathetic.

These were the men who were supposed to guard this region?

The orcs hadn't just defeated them—they'd captured them all alive.

"So, three days then?" Lilith's voice turned soft—almost excited to see him.

Damon exhaled slowly.

"No. I can't."

"Huh? Why not?"

"I want to see you too. And hang out with the three of you. But... I have to go to my village."

There was a pause.

"Then how do we get the orcs into the tomb?"

"I'll give Iron my pager and send my new shadow minion to keep an eye on them. You can stay in contact with them."

"And you?"

"I've got the Whisper Coin. I can get another pager."

She sighed, disappointed.

"Fine. I'll keep your pager until you come back."

Damon nodded with a smile.

"Bringing the orcs to the tomb benefits us both. We can use them to expand control of the tomb—and secure more of its secrets."

"I understand. I'll meet them in three days."

He glanced again at the two hundred knights, tied and blindfolded, lying in the dirt.

"Oh, right—make space for the knights too. It'd be nice if we could indoctrinate them."

Lilith groaned this was going to be annoying.

"You really do love leaving the annoying work to me."

#### Chapter 519: Tyrant

The flames flickered slowly, giving off a distant warmth. Its glow illuminated the entire tent, casting light across the massive throne of bones within.

It was a strange sight inside the sealed-off war tent. At the center sat a human with long black hair and a crown upon his head. He wore armor that matched his crown—dark as the shadows surrounding him.

His eyes, exceptionally deep and dark, seemed to devour all the light that touched them.

And yet, that wasn't the strangest part. The real oddity came from the orcs kneeling before him.

It wasn't impossible for orcs to kneel to demons, yes. But to elves or humans? Highly doubtful.

It was easier to kill them than make them obey.

Yet here they were, kneeling.

In front was Iron, the war chief, as well as the cohort of former war chiefs he had defeated to earn the title. To the side were the tribe's shamans—bead-wearing orcs exuding magical energy.

Even they knelt.

Iron had great control over the orcs, so Damon faced no resistance when he came to power. Either that, or the orcs were simply terrified of whatever they had been running from.

The war chiefs occasionally glanced at Damon's side, where a deep pool of darkness watched them with cold, unblinking eyes. Naturally, this was Damon's shadow—the former elf assassin.

Damon waved his hand dismissively and leaned back in a chair many times larger than his frame. It had been made for a massive orc, but now served to amplify his intimidating presence.

"I've contacted an ally of mine," Damon said, voice calm but firm. "Your tribe will head in her direction come dawn."

Iron nodded and sat on the ground. The other orcs followed suit, forming a semi-circle.

"As you wish, Great Chief. But if I may ask... what shall we do with the captured goddess-race knights?"

Damon felt a headache coming on. He couldn't release the knights—not when they could summon reinforcements or, worse, trigger political fallout. Even if they ran and kept quiet, someone would eventually notice.

He had no moral conflict with killing them. Not because he was evil—well, he wasn't righteous either—but because he understood the rules. Those who lived by the sword had chosen their path. Soldiers, adventurers—they lived to kill. And so, they should expect death.

"Take them with you. Unspoiled. However, if they try to escape, you may act at your own discretion."

"Great Chief," one of the orc shamans spoke. She was a female with a frail-looking body, a chain of beads around her neck, and a single golden tooth that glinted in the firelight.

"If I may ask—where do you intend for us to live?"

She spoke in a soft dialect of Orcish, but Damon could still hear the suspicion in her voice.

The direction he had pointed them toward led near a dungeon city—a place crawling with powerful adventurers looking for loot and glory.

If word spread that an orc tribe was coming, it would be a slaughter.

Iron stood abruptly, glaring at her. "Gold Tooth, you question the Chief?"

She bowed her head, unshaken. "I mean no disrespect. However, you are not the orc chief anymore."

Damon sighed. Right. Orcs only obeyed strength.

He raised his hand and conjured a small ball of black flame, then launched it at her.

"Aaargh!" Her screams filled the tent as the Ashborn fire rolled across her flesh and soul.

When the flames finally subsided, she lay twitching on the ground, trembling and charred.

"Mercy... mercy..."

Ding.

[Mastery: Tyranny Lv.1]

Damon's eyes flickered. Had he seriously just unlocked a new mastery from that? Was this the system's way of encouraging him to become a tyrant?

The orcs, now drenched in sweat, lowered their heads. No one else dared speak.

It seemed effective.

Reaching into the shadows, Damon pulled out a vial of high-grade healing potion and tossed it toward Gold Tooth. With trembling hands, she poured it into her mouth, the potion quickly mending her body.

But not the scars on her soul.

Ashborn was a horrific power. Its flames didn't just burn flesh—they carved themselves into the very being of the victim. Survivors carried that agony forever... if they survived at all.

This was the first time Damon had used the flames with the intent to maim, not kill.

The orcs swallowed hard. Everything about this man screamed demonic—from his living shadow, to the silent, pitch-black specter that stood behind him, to the eerie crown upon his head.

Damon let out a bored sigh, trying to act as if he was fully in control, but his performance only made the orcs more terrified.

They silently thanked their ancestors they hadn't been the ones to speak.

He glanced at Gold Tooth. Her legs were weak. Her expression hollow.

Then, in a cold voice, he said, "I have no intention of letting you die. Your tribe will survive."

Leaning back on the massive throne of bones, he continued.

"You will fight battles like you've never fought before. Under my reign—"

The orcs' eyes lit up with anticipation.

"I will turn your useless, scattered warband into an army. You will conquer. You will clash with the greatest foes and emerge victorious."

Cheers began to rise.

"I will make you part of something greater."

"Ahhha! Ahhh!"

The orcs shouted with excitement, their voices echoing beyond the tent.

Damon raised his hand and the noise ceased instantly.

"Until then, you will head north. Take my pager and stay in contact with my ally. Avoid all settlements. Do not attack. Do not pillage. And if any of you forces yourselves on anyone, you will die."

He turned toward the silent figure at his side.

"My shadow ghost will act as your overseer—my eyes and ears."

He met their gazes with a cold stare, and then added, "You will stop at the forest ruins. My ally will move you to a safe location. She speaks with my voice. Her will is my will. Disobey her—and die."

Activating Omen of Dread and Terror Engine, Damon flooded the room with cold, suffocating fear.

The orcs dropped to their knees, fully subdued.

He let out a breath.

That should keep them under control for the next three days.

With that handled, it was time to resume his journey—and hopefully pry some long-buried secrets out of the aloof, elusive Unnoticed Singularity.

Hopefully, this time... the secrets wouldn't get him killed by the Goddess.

Chapter 520: Influence Of Conflict

A day had passed since Damon's caravan had encountered the orcs, and after having their carriages fixed, they continued their journey.

Aleph didn't forget to curse Damon for being a slave driver — evil and demonic — for making him build a whole train in a day... and later dismantling it.

Damon felt a little bad about that, so he didn't make things difficult for the androgynous elf. He had really worked overtime for the caravan.

Too bad Damon took all the glory.

During this time, Damon had been hesitant about a few things.

For one, he had questions about the First Epoch he wanted to ask Unnoticed Singularity.

The second was a bit more personal. His gaze lingered on a man who looked weary and tired, still wearing a gentle smile.

Linga Felt.

This man knew the circumstances that led to his parents' death during the demon wars.

Damon hadn't cared before—he had accepted they died at war. But now, seeing Linga, he wanted to know.

Knowing wouldn't change anything, but he still wanted closure.

Especially since they were getting closer to his village.

However, Damon eventually decided to hold off on that. He'd ask when they made it to his village.

Linga Felt wasn't going anywhere.

They were about two days away. It wouldn't be long now.

Damon sat in the corner of the caravan campsite when they stopped for the night.

Among these people, Damon was revered as both a leader and a savior — yet at his core, he was still the same gloomy person who didn't like interacting with crowds.

Food was abundant since the orcs had given them their rations.

The merchants were in a good mood since Damon had asked them to value their goods — which they did — and he paid them off for their losses.

It didn't seem like anyone jacked up the prices. Their reverence for him had prevented their greed.

He had saved their lives and returned their lost wealth — which he didn't even have to do.

Damon could hear the laughter of happy children in the caravan that had once carried only somber and hopeless energy.

For whatever reason, seeing that made his heart feel lighter.

This was a new feeling. He couldn't help but smile.

"People are amazing, aren't they... Companionship is one of the most beautiful things."

Damon didn't need to look. He hadn't sensed him arrive — but that was par for the course for someone called Unnoticed Singularity.

"Human nature is born in primary groups. Man doesn't have it at birth — and it decays in isolation."

Singularity nodded at Damon's words.

"Yes... isolation is cruel. I think I can understand Unnoticed Singularity more now. Why he would want to be a part of me."

He sat down next to Damon, staring at the flickering fire.

Dred's wings fluttered as he landed beside the flames with some raw meat skewers.

"You really aren't a people person."

Twilight and the others showed up almost out of nowhere, seating themselves around the fire.

"We figured we might keep you company. Think of it as us helping the emo kid."

Damon chuckled.

"The emo kid appreciates the company."

They sat and started roasting the meat over the fire, laughing and telling jokes — some of which Damon didn't quite get.

Unnoticed Singularity glanced at him.

"Suppose it's hard for you to get these jokes... since you aren't actually an Outsider."

Damon raised an eyebrow, catching the calm expression on their faces.

"Since when did you find out?"

Singularity shrugged.

"I had some clues. You're able to speak our language because of a skill, right?"

Damon chuckled, taking a sip of his drink.

"You're more sly than I thought. As expected of a guy who was a former Old One."

Dred sneered, clutching his chest.

"I'm so heartbroken. I thought you were one of us."

Damon sighed.

"Aren't I? We're all people who got royally screwed by the Unknown God. We're kindred spirits."

They glanced at each other — then burst into laughter.

Saint raised his cup.

"I'll drink to that."

Damon looked around at them.

"I won't try to pry information out of you guys, but I'll appreciate it if you share."

Twilight crossed his arms.

"That's a really manipulative way of getting information — guilt-tripping, huh?"

Damon smiled, raising his cup.

"I'll drink to that."

Twilight chuckled.

"Suppose I should go first."

He looked at the twin moons in the sky.

"I was born in a noble family, hailed as a prodigy. Some even said I'd rival Sera's Blade. Life should've been good... until one day, my attribute mutated. My family began to shun me. Naturally, I got tired of

it. So I took the family heirloom dagger and set out. The memories of the life I lived before guided me. That's how I met these guys. The end."

Damon chuckled, recognizing how Twilight had summarized what was clearly a tragic life.

He didn't linger — not wanting to dig too deep into wounds that clearly still hurt.

Saint lowered his head.

"My parents were actually good... but they got killed. I had to survive on my own. You can imagine how life treats orphans... since you're one yourself."

Wimpy chuckled bitterly.

"Geez, almost all of us are orphans, huh? What's with the crazy difficulty setting? Mine's more or less the same. Slum gangsters. Too much fallout. I gambled as a street kid to survive. Life's a game — where's the fun if you don't live on the edge?"

Damon understood now why his class was called Thrill Seeker. This guy had the devil's luck — the kind that could get out of anything with just luck and a few tricks.

Ilukras smiled, shaking his head at Wimpy's playful way of hiding his pain.

"I came from a monastery that preached harmony in a world of war. We were heretics. It was peaceful... until the monastery was destroyed. The monks went crazy one day — started killing each other. I alone survived. I travel the world in search of harmony. I've found none. Hopefully our old world has some."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Monks... going insane and fighting to the death?

Aleph sneered, his elf ears twitching.

"Don't even look at me. I don't have a tragic story. I was born in a family of mathematicians. I didn't have much — only a loving family, lots of money, and happiness. Painful, I know. I left looking for a reason why I was in this world. I hate how everyone's an orphan with some sob story."

Damon could understand a little why Aleph didn't like orphans.

He turned his eyes to the lunar moth, Dred, who lowered his head, fists clenched.

"We lived in a secret part of the Anarchy Mountains, worshipping the moon. Safe. Hidden. Not many people knew we lived there, and those who did didn't care enough to bother us. It was a small tribe. We were against war and violence. It was boring. We weren't a warrior race... until one day, we all went crazy. It was as if a voice — or instinct — forced us to fight to the death."

He squeezed the pendant on his neck, shaped like the moon.

"When I came to, only a few of us were alive. I tried to stop them, but it was pointless. My mother died trying to protect us. The voice... it took me over again. When I came to, I had killed the one responsible — but all my tribe were dead. All of them. The voice... the will or instinct... was gone. As if it only wanted us to fight."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

What could have caused such a strange phenomenon? A monastery of monks driven to madness. A peaceful tribe forced to slaughter each other.

Only one possibility came to mind — a far-fetched theory.

Unnoticed Singularity glanced at him calmly.

"It's as you thought."

He stared at the flames.

"It's the Pillar of Conflict."