

Shadow 521

Chapter 521: Nature Of The Omniverse

"Pillar of Conflict... what's that?" Dred asked, sipping his drink.

Unnoticed Singularity sighed.

"Honestly... I'm not really sure. My memories are quite vague when it comes to the Pillars."

Damon didn't ask how Singularity had figured out he knew about the Pillar. However, he still wanted to know what this former old god did remember.

"Anything is fine," Damon said. "I don't know much about the Pillars either. I know something I'm not supposed to... but sort of died and lost the memories."

All eyes fell on Damon.

Damon smiled, placing his hand on his chest with a scoff.

"Don't worry, I walked it off."

Saint's eye twitched.

"Who the hell walks off dying?"

Singularity chuckled.

"Fine. Listen at your own discretion. Keep in mind, if you piss off some god by knowing too much, you could die..."

Twilight rolled his eyes.

"Just say it already."

Dred clenched his fist.

"My family, my home—destroyed. I need to know why."

Ilukras nodded in agreement, the quiet pain in his eyes evident. He had lost his home, too.

Singularity bit his lip.

"The Pillars are fundamental structures that make up the Omniverse. Everything—including you and I—is part of that structure."

He looked at the sky, to the three bright stars and the two moons drifting peacefully above.

"The Omniverse was born in perfect order, a grand design upheld by twelve known Pillars... and one lie."

Wimpy tilted his head.

"One lie? What does that mean?"

Singularity shrugged.

"I do not know. That's the secret of the true beings. Knowing their lie is a good way to get destroyed. Unnoticed Singularity found out the lie—and as you can see, Doom destroyed him."

Damon felt his heart pound. The lie of the gods... It had gotten him killed as well.

Singularity raised his hand to stop the questions.

"Don't ask. I don't know. And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you—not unless you have the Fate Manipulation Resistance skill."

They glanced at one another, then nodded in understanding.

Damon had a mastery with that name—but it must've been different from the skill the Unknown had tried giving him. He hadn't been able to receive it.

Unnoticed Singularity was a treasure trove of cosmic knowledge.

"Tell us what you know about the Pillars," Damon asked.

Singularity raised his hand.

"Now, the ones I know are in this order... so listen carefully."

"First came the Pillar of Beginning—Genesis— from which all things, including the primordial gods, were formed."

"Primordial gods? Do you mean the Old Gods?" Damon asked.

Singularity shook his head.

"No. They are older. The god of Absolute Beginning and the god of Absolute End. But I'll come back to that."

He continued:

"From existence, the Pillar of Reality—Aeternis—took shape, solidifying the fabric of the cosmos. As reality crystallized, the Pillar of Time—Chronis—was born, allowing the past, present, and future to flow."

He took a sip of his drink.

"The emergence of time gave birth to the Pillar of the Soul—Anima—as life awakened and flourished. Old Gods, True Dragons, and mortals were born. All things with souls came into being."

He smiled, as if reminiscing on the miracle of life. The amoral Old Ones predated the concept of emotion.

"From souls arose the Pillar of Emotion—Empyros—carrying desire, will, and the seeds of change. With emotion came the thirst for understanding, leading to the birth of the Pillar of Knowledge—Noesis."

His eyes turned somber.

"Yet knowledge begets doubt, contradiction—and from it emerged the Pillar of Chaos—Pandemion—the force of boundless unpredictability. Chaos, however, could not exist unchecked, and so the Pillar of Order—Kosmos—manifested to bring structure and law."

He narrowed his eyes at what came next.

"The clash of Order and Chaos birthed the Pillar of Conflict—Bellum—the driving force behind evolution, struggle, and growth. From Conflict arose the Pillar of Ascension—Apotheon—embodying the will to rise, transcend, and surpass all limits."

'This was the Pillar that allowed mortals to become gods—to challenge the heavens.' Damon didn't voice his thoughts.

"But all things, no matter how great, must one day return to nothingness. And thus the Pillar of Void—Nihilos—came into being. Even the void must one day reach its conclusion, giving way to renewal, and

so the Pillar of End—Nemesis—emerged, ensuring that every cycle would one day close. This is the perfect system."

Unnoticed Singularity's voice had turned calm, his cadence slower. They were listening in silence now, absorbing the foundations of all reality.

"Then there's the secret. The lie of the gods. It plays a part in all this."

He glanced at them.

"These Pillars are fundamental. Without them holding the Omniverse together, everything would shatter."

"Before the War of the Gods destroyed the Old Omniverse four billion years ago, the Old Ones didn't really care about the Pillars..."

He looked at the starry sky—vast, endless, unknowable.

"But then the lesser beings became True Gods... True Demon Kings. They destroyed the Omniverse in the war. Afterward, they recreated it—after much infighting. They used the Abyss and its authority to create an agreement called the No Absolutes Accord."

"When they were weak, they fought side by side. But after becoming boundless, they saw each other as enemies. After all, if all are boundless—who is the one true god? If all can destroy and create temporary Omniverses on a whim, who is god?"

"That's why the No Absolutes Accord was necessary. It could bind them—but they also needed rules. So they bound themselves."

He took another sip and raised a finger.

"Among the rules was the division of the Pillars."

"They made a special clause. No one was to use power beyond the Seventeenth Rank. And whoever obtained all the Pillars would be acknowledged as the One True God. By this agreement, the others would not interfere with what that god creates or destroys... even if it affects their personal domains."

Singularity's tone dropped to a bitter growl.

"Well, joke's on them. The Abyss wasn't some mindless force. You should've seen their faces when they realized it was a god. The Unknown God. He had predated his own existence... and come the future, he will be born."

"This future, or as we call it now, the present."

Singularity gritted his teeth.

"When all was said and done—when the dust had settled—they divided the Pillars. Five went to the True Gods. Five to the True Demon Kings. The last two were given to the True Dragons."

He chuckled coldly.

"Those arrogant bastards had power that was boundless... so they forgot the Old Gods. Each Pillar was guarded by a single god or demon king. The Pillar of Conflict went to the Goddess of Doom—Minerva... bride of the Unknown God."

He glanced at them. They were all frozen in place.

"That is the Pillar of Conflict. It is the manifestation of all struggle... and as long as it exists in this world..."

He stared into the fire.

"...war will never end."

Chapter 522: Die Of Anger

Damon had so many questions—so many things that needed answers.

The Pillars and their power. The Abyss and the Unknown God. The Old Gods and the True Beings.

How did it all tie together?

Dred closed his eyes.

"Hmm... I kind of noticed something. The twelve Pillars seem to be categorized in a way..."

Damon raised his eyebrows.

Singularity nodded.

"Yes, that's true. They're categorized based on their nature."

He raised his first finger.

"Foundational Pillars — Genesis, Reality, Time, Soul — these form the basis of creation."

He raised his second finger.

"Developmental Pillars — Emotion, Knowledge, Chaos, Order — for the developmental stage of the Omniverse, keeping all things growing and changing."

He raised his third finger.

"Terminal Pillars — Conflict, Ascension, Void, End — these are the ones that bring things to a close. Concepts like death and endings fall under them."

Damon nodded, understanding dawning on him.

"What do they look like?"

Singularity groaned.

"I don't know, okay? I don't have all the memories. You guys can't imagine what it's like being fused with an Old God. I do things sometimes that don't even make sense, I—"

He paused, lowering his head.

"...I'm sorry," he whispered, realizing he'd lost his composure.

Damon bit his lip.

"Sorry for putting you on the spot like that... it must be hard. Knowing the things you know... learning something causes agony."

Damon felt his heart pound with dread.

He knew what it felt like to face a True Being. His hands trembled, even though he couldn't remember the encounter.

Still, he forced his trembling hands to stop shaking, pushing a smile.

"I actually once got erased from existence by the God of Inspiration... I think."

Dred caught the clear attempt to change the topic.

"How are you still here? Are you a ghost?"

"Ghosts still exist, bug brain." Aleph sneered.

Singularity sighed, shaking his head.

"I think that would be Muses—the God of Inspiration," he corrected with a wry smile.

"Let's talk about something else. It's not because I'm scared, mind you—it's because I'm ignorant. I don't know all the things Unnoticed Singularity knew, and he didn't know everything under the heavens."

Damon nodded, feeling slightly disappointed.

Knowing cosmic secrets was just too appealing... even if dangerous.

Singularity must've sensed the guilt. He glanced at Damon.

"The Outsiders were sealed away. If you find the Blind Old Daoist, he might just tell you. Though be careful—most cultivators are sly old monsters."

Damon nodded again.

That was a name he'd heard mentioned before—by Valarie Sunwarden.

"Erhm... this is my last question. You can choose not to answer, but... why did the Outsiders come here?"

Singularity shrugged.

"To fulfill their heart's desires. Some came for power. Some were promised something by the Unknown God. Some did so out of reverence. Some... against their will. But all were tricked by the Unknown God."

Damon nodded.

That made sense. The Unknown God was truly sinister. He wanted to ask more... but stayed quiet.

No more questions. He had gained a lot tonight.

Even if it didn't have much to do with their world.

Dred feverishly glanced at the moon, a devoted look in his eyes.

"The moon is gentle... why worship a goddess of doom when we have something so beautiful and divine?"

Damon awkwardly glanced at the others.

Who all shook their heads.

"Sorry about him. He was dropped on his head as a baby..." Ilukras muttered.

Damon raised his hands, waving them in front of him.

"No, no—it's fine. I understand. Lunar Moths love the moon and believe in a goddess of the moon..."

He smiled warmly.

"I think the moon is beautiful too. My little sister has hair and eyes like the moon, and has the same attribute. My parents must have thought so too, since they named her Luna..."

Dred paused. He slowly turned away from the moon.

"...Come again?"

Damon didn't notice the helpless expressions on everyone's faces.

"My little sister Luna has a lunar attribute. I mean, it's a rare attribute, but nothing to write home about..."

Dred's expression instantly contorted.

"You bastard. You dare blaspheme my goddess!?"

Damon tilted his head in confusion.

"Huh? What—?"

Twilight began cracking his knuckles.

Aleph forged a huge metal club and began passing it around to everyone... except Dred.

By this point, Dred was already holding Damon's shoulder tightly.

"So your sister... I want to have babies with her."

Damon's face instantly contorted.

His fist clenched.

"Huh...?" He calmed himself down. He could understand the misconception...

"Arrgh... Luna is underage. She's fifteen."

Dred had a distant expression on his face.

"I don't care. I'll marry her. I love her."

Damon didn't even hesitate.

He kicked the bastard away.

"Absolutely not. My sister is a child, you damn bug!"

Saint sighed, raising his club.

"He really isn't beating those pedo allegations now, is he..."

Dred stood up, fluttering his wings.

"Dred x Luna forever!"

He smiled at Damon.

"Brother-in-law."

That was the last straw.

Damon took the club and began bashing him.

Singularity raised his club.

"I'm open—pass him here!"

Aleph grabbed his head.

"This is why I hate orphans. Damn orphan pedo..."

Saint was already crying black-hearted tears.

"You always disgrace us... every time we try to make new friends..."

Twilight smacked Dred with his club.

"I will beat the perversion out of your soul!"

"I love her... she's going to be my wife!"

"No she's not.."

This guy must've been pain-proof because he got the beating of a lifetime, leaving him on the ground with a swollen face.

They all collapsed, sweating buckets after the intense beatdown.

The ground was shattered. Trees uprooted. The metal clubs were broken.

Yet that bastard Dred was still weakly chanting:

"Dred x Luna forever..."

Damon huffed, taking a deep breath.

"How... how does he still have the energy to talk?"

Twilight and Aleph—who had given him the most hell—were drenched in sweat.

"I think he's a cockroach, not a... ahh... ah... a moth..."

"He's never meeting my sister. Ever."

If he was already this down bad from a name alone, what would he do when he actually saw Luna?

"I better get my sister a protective charm... and some extra security. Perverts are on the loose..."

Singularity nodded.

"Make that double. He's sneaky."

Damon nodded uncontrollably, still boiling with anger.

"How is he pissing me off so much!?"

Aleph raised his hand.

"He's a master of ragebaiting. He can make people cough blood from anger."

Dred laughed maniacally.

"As my brother-in-law, I'll teach it to you. No need to thank me—"

Damon busted out Ashborn.

Chapter 523: Inciting

Their journey continued. Travel was not exactly safe, especially after the encounter with the orcs.

But there was no more danger.

The monsters in the region seemed to be moving farther away from the Golden Roads and that area in general. Whatever it was that they sensed... must've been terrifying.

Damon didn't turn around. He simply continued down the path with the caravan, his eyes fixed ahead.

He was almost at his destination.

His village — Little Town. The caravan would part ways with him here, heading in a different direction toward the Ravenscroft family's domain.

"Come to think of it... Xander returned home to his family."

Damon sighed, slumping slightly in his saddle.

It must be a good feeling — to have a home and parents to return to.

A place that was safe... and his own.

He gently pulled the reins of his stag, whose hooves pounded against the earth with a steady rhythm. The sound was accompanied by a rough dragging noise behind them.

"Ahhh... careful, this road is rocky..."

The words were casual, but Damon didn't even glance down at what his stag was dragging.

A dusty figure bounced along the uneven ground, wings bound tightly behind his back, arms and legs tied with thick rope — Dred, of course.

If it were a normal human, they would've died long ago.

But Dred wasn't exactly normal.

He was already in the second-class advancement. His body could take a lot of abuse, and his speed and strength were both firmly in the realm of superhuman.

One of his fingers twitched. Then his hand lifted lazily.

"Day two of asking for Dred x Luna..."

Damon tugged the reins sharply, and the stag jerked forward — dragging Dred's head into a bump against a jagged rock.

Thud.

That's how he ended up in this situation, naturally.

He had gotten on everyone's nerves.

Beating him up didn't do much. Then he started a new campaign of nonsense: bothering Damon daily with reminders for Dred x Luna.

After much deliberation, the entire caravan — yes, all of them — came to a unanimous decision.

Tie him to Damon's stag and let him collect some dust.

"Argg..." Damon groaned, rubbing his temple.

"He really could anger people to death..."

But... something about this piqued his curiosity.

He glanced down, tugging Dred's rope closer.

"Ouch, ouch — be gentle..." Dred complained, bouncing helplessly.

Damon stared blankly at him.

"Tell me about this rage baiting. Is it like aura farming?"

Dred chuckled. Despite the bruises and dirt on his face, he smirked with the confidence of someone who believed himself a sage.

"Ahh... I see you've seen the light..."

The urge to beat him unconscious bloomed in Damon's chest.

Dred cleared his throat, lifting his chin as if to assume the role of a wise master.

His smug tone reminded Damon of when he'd met Iris — showing off limited knowledge and shallow wisdom just to get closer to her.

'I should've brought her with me,' Damon thought.

Then immediately shook his head.

No. That was a terrible idea. Instead of gaining experience, she'd probably end up dead.

He was a walking trouble magnet.

"Rage baiting is a simple technique," Dred began slowly.

Damon tugged the rope again, yanking him to a stop.

"Get to the point."

Dred clicked his tongue in mild offense.

"Fine. It's the art of intentionally provoking someone into taking actions fueled by anger. The purpose of rage baiting is to provoke a reaction — deliberately."

Damon nodded thoughtfully. "Sounds like a practical skill."

"So it's like the taunt skill? Provokes aggression on its target?"

Dred sneered, appalled.

"How dare you compare the art of rage baiting to something as lowly as the taunt skill—"

Thunk. Damon tugged again. Dred's head hit another rock.

"Ouch, my head..."

Damon leaned slightly to the side, eyeing him.

"Will this work on someone in the seventh class advancement?"

Those words made everyone pause.

Dred, who had been mostly ignored during the dragging, twitched.

Singularity, who was riding in silence nearby, blinked.

The others sitting on the wagon perked up.

Dred's hand lifted slightly. "Erm... you're not planning to piss off someone in the Seventh Class, are you?"

All eyes turned to Damon.

He scoffed, visibly insulted.

"Of course not. I'm not crazy."

Everyone exhaled in relief—

Until he added, nonchalantly:

"I've already pissed one off."

Wimpy stared at him, his face pale. "How are you even still alive..."

"I'm more interested in what he did," Twilight said with his usual arrogant smirk.

Damon rode alongside the wagon now, reins slack in his hands.

"Nothing much, really. I didn't even do anything. But he might be under the impression that I... impregnated his only daughter and refused to take responsibility or admit it was me."

Silence.

Only the wind howled as the caravan moved forward.

"Do... do you even fear God?" Saint asked, completely stunned.

Damon didn't even hesitate.

"No, not really."

"Then you must be the devil. No wonder you worked me like a dog," Aleph groaned, holding his back with a dramatic wince — a gesture so elegant, even women might envy his beauty.

"Actually, it's not my fault. He started it.

I mean... sure, I may have stabbed his daughter that one time and caused her to be possessed by a dark spirit, which I intentionally let the Summoner call using my blood because I wanted a fragment of its soul. But honestly..."

Damon placed a hand over his chest with mock sincerity.

"I'm the victim here. Did I not save his daughter? Did I not turn her small crush on me into a full-blown romance by promising her the world? Clearly, any unbiased eye would see I am the victim."

He was trying. Really.

"Did I do anything wrong when I was the reason she got trapped in a death zone for months with me...?"

So what if he played the victim and turned their only daughter against them?

The silence was loud.

He could already feel their judgmental stares.

Saint whispered to Ilukras, "I knew he was a piece of shit... just not this much."

Dred stared at him like he was seeing a demon.

"If you die... you aren't going to make heaven."

Ilukras narrowed his eyes.

"As a monk, I'm already feeling rage baited by this guy. I feel so pissed off."

"Yeah, me too."

"He's trash..."

"If I had a daughter, I'd feel bad letting her out with people like him around," Dred muttered.

"Too bad you'll die single," Damon shot back, calm and unbothered.

Dred's eyes flared. "Son of a—wait... you rage baited me."

Damon smiled, innocent as ever.

"I don't care. Does it work on someone that high-ranked?"

Dred shrugged, defeated.

"Yeah, it does. It's not really a skill — just psychological manipulation."

A soft ding rang in Damon's mind.

[Mastery: Rage Baiting Lv2]

He smirked, eyes turning toward the distant road.

He couldn't wait to see Kadelas Moonveil at the war games...

But first — he needed to level this mastery up.

Damon took in a deep breath. The air was thick with the smell of dust, grass, and home.

It was close now.

Just in time too... Spreading his shadow perception ahead, he sensed a... small... no...

A large village.

This place had changed.

He only hoped its people had not.

Chapter 524: The Scent Of Home

The scent of pine and green grass lingered in the air — still the same as he remembered.

The sweet fragrance of ripe fruit wafted through the soft mountain wind, which traveled down the hills, weaved through the forest, and rolled gently over the valleys.

The sun shone as brightly as it had in his childhood, its golden rays slanting over the peaks, casting long shadows across the land. The light struck the distant mountains just right, turning their edges to soft gold.

The forest leading to those mountains remained wild and lush — just as he remembered.

This was where he used to play as a child, out on the forest's edge.

But deeper inside... deeper inside hid mysteries that no child should pry into.

It once seemed so vast to him, when he was small. Now, standing tall and older, he couldn't help but feel as if the distant mountains had grown smaller. Or maybe... he had simply outgrown them.

His gaze drifted to a shining ribbon that curved through the land — a stream, sunlight reflecting off its surface like silver thread.

It all looked so beautiful. So serene.

This land... was the birthplace of Damon Grey.

Seeing it now, a wave of emotion surged in his chest — heavy and slow, filled with warmth and sorrow.

Nostalgia.

It came quietly, and refused to leave.

He remembered the ridge not far from here — where the village children dared each other to cross.

He remembered the streams, the slippery rocks, and the challenge of catching fish with bare hands.

He could still hear his mother's voice calling him home for dinner...

And her angry voice scolding him when he ventured too far.

A soft smile touched his lips.

This was home.

It wasn't much — just a small stop for travelers, few of whom even followed this old road anymore. But it was his home.

At least... it used to be.

The soft rhythm of hooves stopped beside him, crunching the hilltop grass.

"Why did you stop? Is something wrong?" Singularity asked, pulling his mount alongside Damon.

Damon shook his head slowly, his eyes still locked on the village below.

"It's nothing... it's just different, in some ways. Different from what I imagined. What I remembered."

Singularity followed his gaze, silent.

"You've been to Little Town?" he asked after a moment.

Damon nodded, slowly calming his beating heart.

"Yes. Years ago..."

But something caught his attention.

He turned, eyebrows furrowing.

"Why aren't they moving?"

Singularity lifted a brow, then gave a soft sigh.

"Probably because the self-declared leader of the caravan has stopped."

Damon smiled wryly, guilt creeping into his expression.

"Ah... right. My apologies."

He raised his hand, giving the silent order to move forward.

The trail of wagons and carriages resumed, children breaking into laughter as they raced each other down the slope toward Little Town — their joyous voices echoing into the valley.

Damon watched them, his expression somber.

"Are you feeling sad," Singularity said, watching him carefully, "because you've arrived at your destination... or because these people have come to rely on you?"

"Or is it... because of this place in particular?"

Damon smiled faintly, a weary look in his eyes.

"It's both, actually. As they say... 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but familiarity breeds contempt.'"

Singularity shook his head with a small sigh.

"That was awfully unnecessary... The people of our little caravan won't like to hear that from their Lord Ascendant."

Damon's smile softened, his gaze fixed ahead.

"I wasn't referring to them. I was talking about the village. My village."

He had expected that, after all these years away, when he finally returned here — he would be seething with hatred and fury.

He had imagined himself marching back with fire and blood in his wake.

But instead...

All that filled his heart now was a cold, calm serenity.

A faint ache of homesickness.

In the back of his mind, he half-expected to hear his mother call out his name and tell him it was time for dinner.

He imagined walking home to train with his father.

He imagined the villagers smiling warmly at him.

But those were lies.

His mother and father were dead and buried — no, not even buried. There were no corpses to return.

The villagers were cruel and greedy, carrying small-minded intentions in their little hearts.

Even the children here were capricious and cruel, easily swayed to hatred by the adults that raised them.

"This place makes me sick..." he muttered.

"This change makes me sick."

Singularity stayed quiet, only glancing at him from the side.

He had never been here — he could not see the change.

But Damon had been born here. He could.

There were a few new buildings. No, a lot more.

The village had grown. No — they had thrived.

While he and his sister had suffered... these people had flourished.

The village pub had become a full tavern — a large one, too.

They had built new windmills. The fields were wider.

There were inns now. Multiple.

Damon stretched out his shadow perception, and it spilled across the village.

He sensed newer shadows. People he didn't know.

Children he didn't know.

Those he did remember... had grown.

Life had moved on.

The stag stepped carefully down the slope, its hooves quiet against the grass. As it moved, Damon's armor shimmered and faded, replaced by a light tunic of fine craftsmanship.

He pulled up the hood he'd received from his grandfather, the Grand Duke Damien Brightwater. It fell over his crown, covering the glint of nobility from view.

"Hey... can you do me a favor?" Damon asked, turning slightly toward Singularity.

Singularity nodded without hesitation.

"I would be happy to oblige."

Damon smiled at the quick response.

"I need everyone in the caravan to treat me like a nobody when we reach the village. Also, I'd like to borrow some lower-tier clothes. I don't have anything low-quality on me."

Singularity chuckled, shaking his head.

"Are you seriously bragging about being rich right now?"

Damon didn't mean to — but it couldn't be helped.

Most of his clothes were bought by Lilith Astranova, an actual duchess. And she wasn't stingy with money. Their outfits were often made with the same matching fabrics and tailored down to every thread.

"I'll get some of the merchants and travelers to donate their ragged clothes," Singularity said.

"Convincing them to act like you're a nobody won't be hard. I'll get them to stay quiet for now."

He glanced down at the children racing ahead toward the village.

"The children will play along if we ask them nicely. They practically idolize you. Might be even better if we tell them it's a game."

Damon nodded. It seemed Unnoticed Singularity had taken it upon himself to cover for him.

Singularity smiled warmly.

"I don't know why you want to do this... but my party and I have your back. Leave it to us."

"As of now, consider yourself a nobody."

Damon nodded again, eyes locked on the village below.

'If you want to see someone's true face... watch how they treat you when they think they're better than you. When someone holds absolute power over you... that's when they show you who they are.'

"Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Regardless of who held it.

Singularity placed a firm hand on Damon's shoulder.

"Hey, nobody... I'll be taking your expensive-looking stag. Nobodies walk on their feet."

He grinned, handing Damon a bundle of clothes he had somehow already secured.

"Now walk, peasant."

Chapter 525: I Was Dead, I Got Better

The village's main path was not paved like those in the big cities. It was a hard, dried trail of packed soil, the caravan wheels kicking up dust as they approached.

Children ran ahead with bright, happy smiles, finally free from the boredom of the long journey.

Even though this wasn't their final destination, they would remain here for a few days. It wasn't because Little Town was particularly special; it was simply the last safe resting place before the road ahead became perilous, wild, and far less forgiving.

This was a convenient resting place, a spot where they could meet other traveling merchants, trade goods, gather information on the routes ahead, and maybe share a tale or two.

Perhaps that's why, in recent years, Little Town had grown.

A young man dressed in ragged, patched-up clothes sat silently on the edge of a wagon, his face obscured by a faded scarf wrapped low around his eyes and nose.

Strangely, the people of the caravan, a group otherwise warm and tight-knit, subtly avoided him, though every now and then their eyes would drift toward him with faint reverence.

A discerning eye could spot it.

The caravan, like many others, was protected by adventurers paid to see them through safely. But even they needed rest.

And this village, this quiet dot on the map, was that place.

As they entered, no one stopped them. No guards or gatekeepers stood in their way. The line of wagons and carriages trailed inward with a slow, steady rhythm.

The carriages themselves looked slightly rougher than most, no surprise, as they were crafted by orc hands, durable but less refined.

They came to a halt in the village square, just in front of a statue Damon didn't recognize a modest stone sculpture of the goddess. That hadn't been here before. It must've been built after he left.

Everything changed with time.

Why would this village be any different?

No one came out to greet them and why would they? This wasn't a royal procession or a parade of knights. No noble house was passing through. No one owed them reverence.

Damon jumped off the slow-moving wagon with a single practiced step, landing lightly on the dusty road. His handsome face, still striking even beneath the dirt and rough fabric tied around his head, remained unbothered.

The tattered cloak and patched shirt clung loosely to his well-toned frame, slightly damp from sweat, the scent of the road clinging to the wool and leather.

But he didn't mind.

He had worn worse, much worse in his days as a street child.

He scanned the road, eyes calm, waiting for even one villager to look at him with recognition.

None did.

They walked past him like he was a shadow.

They smiled, laughed, called to one another in casual tones but not to him.

He still remembered most of their faces.

And yet...

A quiet, bitter disappointment settled over him.

"Ah... I'll have to introduce myself in my own home, no less."

He walked forward toward the local pub — no, tavern now — which towered slightly higher than it used to. It had been rebuilt, possibly expanded. The wooden beams looked newer, the sign freshly painted.

Inside, the tavern buzzed with chatter and clatter, the scent of ale, old meat, and something vaguely burnt wafting from the back kitchen. Grilled fish, maybe. Or goat.

Damon stepped in without pause, the noise wrapping around him like a coat. He walked toward the counter — and saw her.

A young woman, about his age, with auburn hair tied back with a scarf, moved briskly between patrons, mug in hand, towel over shoulder. Her clothes were plain, worn at the edges. Nothing about her stood out... except for the scent of ale that clung to her like a second skin.

Damon smiled faintly, settling onto the nearest stool. His deep, dark eyes studied her quietly.

She approached the bar, not sparing him much of a glance.

"What can I get for you?" she asked, flashing a tired, professional smile.

He held that same quiet smile.

This girl, this woman, had once been a childhood friend. Like most kids from the village, she'd been part of those old summer games and wild dares.

"Justice... and a side of ale."

She squinted slightly, not amused. She'd clearly heard her fair share of idiotic pickup lines.

"We don't sell that here. Just ale."

Damon tilted his head and sighed dramatically.

"In that case... I'll take some recognition. And a side of ale."

She blinked, her eyes narrowing.

"If you're not buying anything, please leave."

He chuckled softly.

"Still as hot-tempered as always, Seta..."

Her expression didn't change.

"If you're trying to hit on me, you'd have better luck with the pigs."

Damon lifted his chin, locking eyes with her.

"That's a cruel way to treat an old friend. Am I that forgettable?"

She let out a short laugh, nodding sarcastically.

"Not bad. That was the most interesting pickup line I've heard this week. Ale it is."

She turned, filled a worn mug with lukewarm ale from the tap, and slammed it down in front of him with the grace of someone used to hard hands and long hours.

"Life really doesn't treat anyone fairly, huh?" he muttered. "All the dreams of your childhood die in your youth... Once you start seeing the world for what it really is."

Despite herself, she was watching him now. There was something familiar, something too familiar about this man.

Her brows pulled together.

"...Who are you? And what the hell do you want?"

Damon didn't answer immediately. He looked past her, through the window, to the windmill spinning lazily in the afternoon breeze.

"I seem to remember you once saying something about marrying a rich and handsome lord... and living the good life." He turned back to her with a soft smirk. "The lord must own a shitty tavern for you to still be here."

She narrowed her eyes.

That was a very specific thing to say. Something she had said when they were kids, one of those loud, bold declarations all children made back then.

All of them had dreamed ridiculous things.

None of them had come true.

"So you did your research," she said flatly. "I'll give you five points for effort. Solid dedication to your pickup game."

Damon's tone shifted.

"Why so cold?" he asked, scanning the tavern. "I don't see your father... Does he still beat your mother when he gets drunk?"

Her whole body went still.

Her fists clenched.

That was no rumor. That was history. Painful, quiet, buried history the elders didn't speak of — especially since her father had died years ago. Most people had long forgotten.

But this man hadn't.

Her breath tightened.

She stared at him, voice trembling with warning. "I'm not going to ask again... Who the hell are you?"

To Damon, her attempt at intimidation felt like a kitten growling at a dragon.

He gave a slow, easy smile.

"I suppose it's not your fault. The years have changed me. But I'll give you a clue..."

He lifted the mug and took a calm sip.

"When I grow up... I'm going to be a hero."

The moment the words left his lips, she felt the strength in her knees vanish. Her hands trembled, and her breath caught in her throat.

No...

It couldn't be...

"You... you're... Damon...?" she whispered, her voice cracking with disbelief. "But... you're dead..."

Damon smiled gently, lowering the mug.

"I was dead. I got better."

Chapter 526: Comfort From An Old Friend

Hiding his power and pretending to be weak...

Never in his life had Damon imagined he would stoop to something so pedestrian.

What was the point of power if not to abuse it?

He had once been weak. And people had abused their power over him.

Now that he held power himself, there was no way he would "be the bigger person."

Why wouldn't he bully the weak?

The weak weren't synonymous with kind. The weak could be just as wicked — only less capable.

And what about his pride?

Pride? What pride?

He prided himself on having no pride.

He'd never be caught dead carrying something as heavy and useless as honor.

He was arrogant. He was egotistical. And Damon truly believed he was an unpleasant person.

However...

Even with all that said, he wanted to be better.

That's why he had chosen the long, miserable path of feigning weakness — for now.

His anger issues, however, could never.

His gaze fell on Seta, who was still sitting beside him, her face painted with a weary mix of confusion and worry.

"W...why did you come back here?" she whispered.

Damon tilted his head in mock confusion, his lips curling into a sharp smile.

"I have nowhere else to go. This is my home, after all. Even if it were razed to the ground in black flames, I would come back here..."

Seta bit her lip and sank into the empty chair next to him.

"I... this village was happier without you..." she muttered, barely audible. "Are you back for revenge?"

Damon smiled softly. This girl's perception was still sharp.

"Revenge? Why would I want that?" he replied with a small chuckle. "It's not like you guys did anything to me..."

She lowered her gaze.

Damon took a long, thoughtful sip from his ale.

"You came to kill us, didn't you...?" she murmured. "You promised you would."

Damon blinked.

Had he really said that? A promise like that didn't sound like something he'd forget...

"Really? I did?" He looked genuinely puzzled.

"Must have skipped my mind. Which is weird. I never forget anything. I don't remember saying that."

Seta swallowed hard and looked away, guilt knotting in her chest.

"I know you..." she said slowly. "You never forgive. You always get even, one way or another. I'm not sure if you remember, but once... you got into an argument with Heton. Days later, you broke his arm as payback. Your mother got so angry, she beat you herself and put you under house arrest."

Damon furrowed his brow. "Really? That happened?"

As far as he remembered, he was an upright child. Mischievous, sure. But not vengeful. Not then.

Seta nodded slowly. "You did it because he touched a flower you planted."

Damon leaned back, bringing a hand to his chin thoughtfully.

"Huh. I must've really loved that flower, then." He shrugged. "Oh well. Ancient history."

His eyes drifted back to her.

"How've you been? It's been too long. Last time I saw you, you were throwing rocks at me."

Seta gave a weak chuckle, trying to calm her nerves.

"I'm fine. How've you been all these years? We all thought you died a long time ago..."

She paused, her eyes narrowing.

"...How's Luna?"

Damon's eyes hardened.

"She got magic circuit cancer."

His voice was dry. Flat.

He offered no further explanation.

"I... I see. I'm sorry," she whispered softly, visibly shaken. The thought of Luna — bright, fragile Luna — suffering from something so cruel cut her deeply.

Damon didn't bother correcting her. Luna was still alive.

"It's fine. I'm over it."

Seta bit her lip again. The death of his sister must've scarred him. He looked different now — so world-weary. There were no sparks of youth left in his eyes, only cold, dark quiet.

She wanted to pry — to dig into the truth. She needed to know what kind of life he'd lived outside the village... and more importantly, how dangerous he was to their way of life.

Seta had known Damon since before they could walk. He was a close childhood friend. But she also knew his flaws — his temper, his ability to hold a grudge like no one else.

"Where did you go... after you left the village?" she asked carefully.

Damon smirked, sipping the lukewarm ale.

"I went to the capital. Valerion," he began casually.

"I was a street kid. Worked for a local gang. Luna got magic circuit cancer. The group I worked for was later destroyed. I was chased by elven assassins. After a lot of running, I ended up here again. You can imagine the rest."

His voice painted a tale of survival — pathetic, even tragic.

What he left out was simple:

He was the one who destroyed the gang.

He killed the assassins.

And he hadn't run — he had slaughtered.

Seta nodded slowly. Good. He was weak. He had no backing. He was just a desperate traveler with nowhere else to go. His damp, ragged clothes spoke of hardship.

That was good. Less to fear.

"I see..." she said. "Must be hard making it in the big cities."

Damon nodded with a practiced smile.

"You've changed," she added, studying him closer. "Even your eye color's different. You look... different with long hair."

She reached out, placing a tentative hand on his cheek.

"Did you ink your eyes... when you joined the gang?"

He hadn't.

No ink could turn someone's eyes as dark as his — not without the power of shadows that now ran through his body and soul.

But he nodded anyway. "Yeah. How did you know?"

She smiled faintly. "Ahh. Right. Obvious, huh?"

Damon smiled too. "This reminds me of old times."

His eyes flicked to her, the intensity fading for a moment.

"What about you, Seta? How's life been treating you?"

She sighed, her smile tinged with sorrow.

"My father died. My mother and I took over the pub — not that he ever helped. The village came into some money, and the elders invested in some projects... made things more profitable."

Damon's hand tightened around his mug. The wood groaned in protest, cracking under his grip.

Of course.

They had sold off his and Luna's inheritance.

Used it to fund their precious prosperity.

This and that was what the village got for leaving two children to rot.

Their prosperity was built on betrayal.

How do they sleep at night? he wondered bitterly.

'I really have a lot to learn when it comes to being scum...'

Squeezing the mug.

The mug was already empty, so no ale spilled as he forced himself to relax. He didn't crush it. Barely.

Seta stood and gently took his hand.

"Now that you're back... why don't we let everyone know?" she said softly.

"I'm sure your relatives would be happy to see you."

Damon smiled.

But it was cold.

Sharp.

Predatory.

"I'll be happy to see them too..."

Chapter 527: A Vagrants Kindness

He followed Seta through the village, passing by familiar and unfamiliar places as they walked. It felt like he was somewhere entirely different, yet still stitched with pieces of the place he once knew.

He had a feeling of déjà vu.

Seta stopped in front of a wooden building—larger than he remembered.

"This is the village head's house," she whispered softly

Damon didn't expect him to be inside. The old man preferred being behind the house, sitting beneath the oak tree, wasting time with a board game and a few other elders.

Sure enough, when Seta knocked, no one answered.

She groaned. "He's at the back again..."

Some things just don't change. Damon took the lead, walking around the house. It didn't take long to spot the wide, familiar shadow of the oak tree.

Beneath it sat five elderly men, hunched around a game board.

Damon approached with unhurried steps. His presence was quiet, but deliberate. Seta caught up just as he reached the group.

"Interesting game you're playing, Village Head," Damon said, voice calm but sharp.

"But clearly Old Man Ron is cheating."

The village head raised a hand and smacked the shoulder of the man furthest from him.

"You always do this, Ronny. Don't you have any shame?"

Ron stood up, frowning. "I'm not cheating. He's lying."

His eyes narrowed as he stared at Damon.

"Who are you? Outsiders shouldn't interfere in village affairs."

Damon shook his head slowly, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"But I'm not an outsider. Don't you recognize me?"

They all stared, faces blank with confusion.

Seta bit her lip. "Village Head... It's Damon. Damon Grey."

The village head stiffened. The board game instantly lost its audience. All five men turned their full attention toward the young man before them.

"Damon... Grey," the old man whispered.

Damon lifted his chin. "Let's skip the whole 'we thought you were dead' speech. I'm alive. Very much so."

The village head trembled slightly. Before he could speak, Damon added—

"I mean you no harm."

For now, he thought.

He sat beneath the tree, legs crossed. Seta followed, hesitantly taking a seat beside him. The silence stretched awkwardly, so she filled it.

She explained to the elders what Damon had told her—his life on the streets, Luna's illness and death, the collapse of the gang he once ran with, and how he was now being hunted.

She exaggerated the darker truths, painting him weak and pitiful.

When she finished, the village head's expression had changed. His eyes were cold, sharp.

"This is no longer your home," he said flatly. "Leave."

Damon chuckled softly, not expecting the boldness—but not surprised either.

Weakness always gave cowards courage.

He stared at the old man's grey hairs and smiled.

"Very well. I will... but with some conditions."

The village head looked at him, surprised.

"What could you possibly want?" he asked with disdain.

"I want my father's broken sword."

The old man recoiled, his face wrinkling in disgust.

"You really are without morals. You want to desecrate your father's grave—for a piece of junk?"

Damon shook his head.

"If I must, I will. But I don't need to. I want you to lead the village in performing his last rites again. We'll bury something else. I'll take the sword."

The village head's voice grew harsher. "You're mad. Where would you even find something that belonged to Noctis?"

Damon didn't answer directly. His eyes drifted toward the edge of the village, to the place where his old house stood. The old man followed his gaze.

"There's nothing left of your father's things there," he said.

Damon looked back at him.

"And why is that? Because you people stole it?"

The village head glared. "We stole nothing. The only thief here is you. You stole from the village and ran."

Damon's smile sharpened.

"I took what was mine. The real thieves are sitting right here."

Seta raised her hand, trying to step in. She hadn't expected the village head to be this openly hostile.

Damon stopped her with a gesture. She wasn't truly on his side—just another watcher, a leash meant to keep him from acting out.

That was her role.

"I'll be here a few days," Damon said.

"Gather the villagers. Perform the rites. What you've taken already—consider it payment for the trouble."

The village head stood, fury shaking his hands. The other elders stayed silent, watching.

"Get out. Get out of my sight. If you don't leave this village, I'll have you arrested for theft—you dirty vagrant!"

Damon didn't flinch.

"Arrested? By whom? You and what army?" He took a step forward.

"I'll say it again—accept my offer and let bygones be bygones. Or there will be consequences."

The village head sneered.

"I choose consequences. What will you do? You don't even have a place to stay. You're on the run. Your presence puts this entire village in danger. Leave while I'm still being generous."

His voice rose, spittle flying from his mouth.

"If it weren't for your father, I'd have had you beaten to death already!"

Damon remained calm. This was expected. This was the village he grew up in.

Seta stepped between them quickly, pulling Damon back. She expected him to explode. Instead, he was quiet.

He must be quite weak if he was this meek.

His eyes didn't flicker.

First chance, wasted.

"I see," Damon said coolly.

"So be it. I'll return tomorrow. Whatever happens next... just remember, I gave you a chance."

"Kindness is reciprocal."

The village head scoffed. "I don't need a vagrant's kindness!"

Damon turned away as the old man launched into a flurry of insults. He didn't react.

His goal remained the same: retrieve the sword buried with his father. But he wouldn't disrespect Noctis. Not like that. He needed someone to perform the rites—and something to replace what he would take.

Seta walked beside him, silent for a moment.

"I'll show you the inn... It's best if you leave in the morning."

Damon looked at her, his voice calm, but cutting.

"No. I want to see what you're all really capable of."

Chapter 528: Mob Mentality

He didn't need them to perform his father's last rites — but he wanted them to. Because having people from your home there... that was tradition. That was ritual.

His father had dedicated his life to the village. In death, the least they could do was show him some kindness.

And while Damon had made some less-than-subtle threats, it was the village head who had been the first to shed any semblance of cordiality.

Damon had gone to bed with these thoughts circling in his mind.

He didn't bother doing anything else — just got himself a room at the inn and slept. There was no reason for him to worry. He wasn't in a rush.

The inn was modest. A small room, far from luxurious. Even though he had paid the innkeeper, Lana, double the amount, she still only gave him the bare minimum.

That was fine.

He didn't mind that the bed felt like stone, or that the pillow was more like a crumpled rag. He was on the upper floor, with a nice view of the village, and that was enough.

It was morning now, and he could sense many shadows moving throughout the village.

He pulled back his shadow perception, completely disinterested in whatever tricks they were plotting.

To put it simply: at this moment, Damon was without a doubt the most powerful being in the village.

And soon... he wanted them to know that.

His shadow.

Hmm... where was his shadow?

Looking for it, he found it facing north it's form twitching with anxious unease.

He walked up to it.

"What's up?" he asked calmly.

The shadow only shrugged. It didn't seem to know either.

Damon sighed. That was never a good sign.

Speaking of shadows — his minion, Ghost, had gone off to meet with Lilith Astranova and the orcs.

"They should have met up by now..." he murmured.

But Matia, who had created Ghost, was still unresponsive. Damon could feel her in his shadow, but he couldn't summon her.

"Creating a minion at her rank must really cost a lot..." he muttered, the worry in his voice barely hidden.

Still, he had company now.

Damon walked to the window. From where he stood, he saw a group of young men — farmers, judging by the tools they carried: sickles, hoes, pitchforks... and a few even had machetes.

He smiled, shaking his head.

He recognized most of them.

At the front was the village head, his hair fully gray. And beside him, a relative of Damon's. No one important. The man's father had been the cousin of Damon's father, so that would make him...

"Someone I don't give a damn about," Damon muttered under his breath.

Among the group were a few low-ranked adventurers, clearly brought in as backup muscle.

"I must be really intimidating if they came to get rid of me and still brought help..."

He turned from the window and wrapped himself in tattered clothes, hiding what he was actually wearing underneath.

Then, he walked to the ground floor and sat at a table, waiting for the drama to find him.

"Ahh... I'm a really patient person now," he muttered softly to himself.

"Leona and Eva would be so proud of the man I've become..."

He waited a bit longer, they were still some distance away, though he had seen them clearly with his shadow perception.

"Hmm... it seems they've arrived."

And they had.

Clearly, they didn't want to risk him escaping — they had surrounded the inn.

The innkeeper dropped off a plate of sausages, beans, and tomatoes for breakfast.

Damon sighed.

"How crude..."

He wasn't mocking the food. No, he was mocking the obvious and pathetic attempt to poison him.

Seriously... what did he do to deserve such amateur treatment?

Without hesitation, he grabbed a sausage with his fork and took a bite. After he had eaten it, he noticed the innkeeper throw something out the window likely the signal.

When he looked up, he saw seven young men enter the inn with weapons or, more accurately, tools in hand.

At the front his distant relative.

Neil slammed his hand on Damon's table.

"You're coming with us, thief!" he growled.

Damon took a slow sip of his drink.

"Or what?"

Neil didn't bother with more words. He threw a punch.

Damon watched the fist come toward him in slow motion. As far as he was concerned, it had less force than a fly buzzing against glass.

After a moment of reflection, he decided... no point in blocking or dodging.

CRACK!

Neil's fist hit Damon's unmoving face.

"AHH! Aghhh!!"

Neil screamed, clutching his arm. His wrist was twisted. Fingers bent inward unnaturally.

"Arghhhh!"

The others rushed to help him, thinking he had just messed up the timing of his attack.

Damon sighed and stood up.

"Let's see what the commotion outside is about..."

Without urgency, he walked to the door. As he stepped out, the ones inside rushed after him.

Paying them no mind, he looked at the village head, surrounded by armed young men and a crowd of curious travelers who had gathered to watch.

The village head raised a finger, pointing at Damon.

"This person is a thief who stole from the village years ago!" he shouted.

"Now that he's back, the village treasury is gone! At this rate, we won't survive the winter!"

Damon sneered, letting out a chuckle.

"That's a bald-faced accusation, old man. I've never stolen from you."

"You calling me a liar? An elderly man like me... lie to a child I raised like my own? I watched you grow up, you always brought trouble!"

The village head fumed with righteous indignation.

"Fine! You don't believe me? What about your relative here?" He gestured at Neil's father

"He and a few others saw you sneak into my house at night and steal all the zeni I had reserved for the village. That was everyone's harvest money!"

The words began to sway the crowd. People started yelling, pointing, accusing.

Well... almost everyone.

A few travelers ones from the caravan Damon had arrived with raised hesitant voices.

"That's a lie..."

"I'd never believe it..."

Damon gave them a thin smile.

They got the message.... they went quiet. He had told them to treat him like a nobody.

"You don't have evidence," Damon stated calmly.

Right on cue, the innkeeper ran out with a sack.

"Village head! I found this in his room!"

The crowd gasped.

"The village treasury!" the old man exclaimed, shaking as he took it.

"In this village, we have no mercy for thieves. Bring the wood and oil. Burn him! Burn him!"

And just like that... the crowd began to chant:

"Burn him! Burn him! Burn him!"

Damon wasn't even given a chance to speak.

'Gotta hand it to them... this isn't a bad scheme,' he thought.

They'd used the people's hatred of thieves to stir a mob mentality. Jungle justice. The poison wasn't to kill him it was to weaken him so he couldn't run or fight.

He chuckled.

Easier said than done.

He hadn't even offended them yet.

"These people are deplorable..." Damon whispered to himself, smiling faintly.

"I can learn a thing or two from them."

Chapter 529: Righteous Hate

Mob mentality.

Truth be told, the human mind was easily influenced—people’s opinions on matters of any kind were swayed by the collective, by their relationship to the whole.

It’s for that reason public outrage spread so easily. All it took was a few people in a crowd lashing out, and the rest would follow. A single spark of violence was all it took.

An example? Catch a thief in a market square—just one person needs to act out, and the others will descend with them. In the end, nobody killed the thief, because everybody did.

Damon was facing that same type of monster now—the crowd.

Who would they believe? The word of one man they didn’t know?

Or the village head of a village they’d traveled to and traded with countless times?

Damon’s eyes scanned the growing frenzy. He spotted Seta dragging over a barrel of oil.

Honestly, he thought, a bit overkill for burning one man...

Still, Damon said nothing. His expression calm. Detached.

He’d seen this kind of madness before. He was experienced in mob violence—and he knew better than most that no words would stop it.

His words wouldn’t.

"Surround him!" someone yelled.

The young men of the village, the strongest and healthiest of them moved fast, circling him with ropes in hand.

He could have stopped them all.

Not with words. No those were useless now.

With violence.

How else do you control a group or an individual who refuses to listen to reason?

Violence is never the answer...

Until it's the only answer.

Still, Damon chose restraint.

Not because he believed it would change anything, but because he wanted to give these people one more chance.

He was looking for a reason not to slaughter every last one of them.

"I didn't do anything," Damon said, his voice firm, even, projecting across the rising noise.

"I am innocent."

His words echoed.

But no one listened.

They dragged him through the dirt toward the town square, chanting louder with every step:

"Burn him! Burn him!"

Damon offered no resistance. His face unreadable, calm—but in his eyes was the deep-seated disgust of a man who had seen this before.

Did they expect him to grovel?

To beg?

Never. Not to them.

In the village square, they had already set up the pyre. A pole. Hay and thatch piled up like a crude stage built for the show that was his death.

Clearly, they had built it before coming to find him. They didn't care if he was innocent.

He was tied to the post without protest. His lack of struggle only emboldened them further.

"You... all of you," Damon began, his voice rising, pain now slipping into his anger.

"After everything my family has done for this village, this is how you repay us? You all betray us?"

He turned, locking eyes with a blue-haired man in the crowd.

"You. Alson. You got lost in the woods, didn't you? My father spent days searching for you. Even when everyone else gave up believed you were dead."

Alson lowered his head, biting his lip.

Damon's gaze shifted.

"Miss Dadind... your bakery went bankrupt. My mother gave you money to start again."

She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Old man Ron," Damon snapped, "when your son left with some mercenaries—who helped you tend your fields? Who put food on your table? Who convinced your son to leave that violent life behind?"

The old man's lips quivered. His son had told him. Damon's father had.

Damon laughed, but there was no joy in it.

"That's right. My father did.

Did I ask any of you to repay what you stole from me? No.

Yet you accuse me."

He turned slowly, locking eyes with the village head.

"And you... You were sick. My mother found an expensive potion and healed you. With her magic. Isn't that right?"

Damon's voice rose to a yell.

The village head said nothing. His lips pressed tight.

But Neil stepped forward, a sneer on his face.

"So what? That has nothing to do with you, thief. You're a danger to this village."

He smirked, standing tall beside his parents.

"That's right. He's a disgrace to my cousin's memory." His father added.

Then, chanting:

"Burn the thief! Burn the thief!"

They brought the oil.

Damon watched in cold silence.

So this is how it ends. I'm a danger to the village?

He caught the eye of a few from the caravan—the travelers he'd come with. They looked ready to fight for him.

But deep in the crowd, Singularity gave the faintest shake of his head. Stopping them.

This was Damon's matter.

He wanted this—for some reason.

They dumped the oil over Damon's head. It ran down his hair, soaked into his shirt, dripped to the kindling at his feet.

When he opened his mouth to speak again, someone gagged him. A cloth tied around his face— anything to stop him from swaying the crowd again.

Damon didn't fight it.

'What did I expect from them?

When I was a child after my parents died in the Demon War these same villagers starved us. Me and my sister.'

'They beat us. Threw stones. Called us monsters. We were just children.'

'These people didn't deserve to live.

Their vile progeny should never walk this earth.'

And yet... he understood.

They were small.

Small because they were afraid.

They wanted to protect their families.

He knew that.

But still...

"I've tried to see the best in them," Damon thought, "but all I see is malice. I've overlooked the worst in them—but it's the only thing they ever show me."

He had tried.

Tried to live up to the philosophy and kindness of Carmen Vale.

To the wisdom of Valarie Sunwarden.

And yet—he was reminded, once again, why he had always seen the worst in people.

He would die today.

And for what?

Because he gave these people a chance.

The oil clung to his skin. Soaked the straw below.

The chants grew deafening.

He saw it—flickering firelight.

A torch. Passed into the village head's hands.

The old man didn't even hesitate. He passed it to Neil.

Neil approached slowly.

Grinning like a man who believed he was doing the world a favor.

He whispered.

"I am the last thing you'll ever see, cousin..."

And then he dropped the torch.

Flames met oil.

The blaze rose fast and loud, engulfing Damon Grey in an instant.

A wave of heat pulsed outward.

And... nothing.

No scream.

Did he die instantly? From shock? From pain?

Then—

"Heheheheh... hahahahah..."

A low, echoing laugh rose from the fire.

The ropes turned to ash.

The tattered fabric burned away.

And the flames moved—with the figure of the burning man.

A voice echoed through the crackle of fire:

"Righteous hate turns men into monsters..."

Damon stepped forward, wreathed in fire.

His eyes glowed like coals.

"Fine.

You want me to treat you like beasts?

I will."

Chapter 530: I'm Not Asking

It was dark here...

Deep and oppressive darkness, so thick it filled your lungs and broke your spirit. The ground was corrupted, and countless abominable horrors clashed in a chaotic symphony of pain and suffering.

Yet, despite the vileness of this place, there was a red glow. It flickered wildly from within — the light of wild, unrelenting flame. And within those flames, a man burned... laughing. Laughing crazily into the void.

The more he burned, the greater his resistance to the fire became. He didn't burn because someone had set him ablaze. He burned because he wanted to.

The pain meant nothing to him. And as the flames scorched his flesh and licked at his soul...

His mastery grew.

Damon walked out of the pyre the villagers had built to kill him. Did they truly believe he would burn from such mundane fire? Wood and oil? When he had once set himself ablaze in the dark depths of Lysithara with magical fire, enduring torment so potent it shattered weaker minds?

He had used the flames of Ashborn every chance he got, even knowing he'd feel tenfold the agony of burning alive.

Fire? What fire?

The flames crawling over him now were lukewarm, a mere ember's kiss compared to what he had survived.

These people had acted like animals. And even then — even then, he had offered them mercy.

But this was not Damon's way. Not anymore. Giving someone a second chance was like turning your back and asking them to stab you again because they failed the first time.

His body, wreathed in flame, moved with slow, steady grace. No fear. No pain. No screams. Only his dark eyes, calm and absolute peering out from the inferno.

The village head froze, eyes wide with disbelief, his face ashen. His jaw trembled as Damon emerged, walking through the fire unscathed.

"By the goddess..." he whispered, his lips quivering with dread.

"The gag burned to ash and the crown upon Damon's head gleamed in the firelight."

The village head, consumed by panic, raised his hand toward the adventurers.

"Demon...! Demon! It's a demon attack! We have to strike now... now!"

The words snapped the crowd from their stupor. The adventurers reached to draw their weapons.

But Damon turned toward them — and with that single motion, a wave of horror surged through every soul present.

Hands shook. Legs wobbled. A crushing, intangible dread weighed down on their hearts.

Then, Damon unleashed his second class aura, pulsing with immense mana. It forced them to their knees, blood dribbling from the corners of their mouths as their lungs refused to draw breath.

"A-ah... ah..."

An adventurer tried to scream, but only the pounding of his heart registered in his mind. He couldn't even breathe.

Damon's gaze drifted away from them. They weren't worth his attention.

He turned to the villagers.

Each step he took crackled with fire, though the flames began to die away — revealing a figure clad in light black armor, a crown resting perfectly atop his head. He moved with sovereign poise.

Regal and Untouchable, with terrifying grace....

He looked like a noble dark king who had, for some cursed reason, graced this pitiful village with his presence.

The villagers should have fallen to their knees in gratitude — but instead, they had provoked the wrath of such an entity.

The village head trembled, his stomach churning with regret.

Why did I listen to Neil...?

If only he had just ignored Damon. But now... now they had summoned a calamity upon themselves.

He staggered, searching desperately for help.

Spotting a group of powerful-looking adventurers

Singularity's group!

Yes — there was hope. Damon wouldn't go too far. He wouldn't kill them with so many witnesses. Yes...

He swallowed hard, raised a trembling hand, and croaked out a plea:

"Help... help us! He — he wants to kill us all...! Please! We have children in the village!"

Damon narrowed his eyes.

So the old man was cunning after all. But did he really think that would save them?

Other villagers caught on quickly, echoing the plea. Pride abandoned, they knelt and sobbed, begging toward anyone who might be their savior.

"Kill me but spare my child."

"My wife is pregnant, she won't survive without me.."

The village head crumbled beneath Damon's stare, falling to the ground and rolling in the dirt. He stopped at Twilight's feet, staring up at the young man with an arrogant posture, desperation leaking from every pore.

"Help us, brave adventurers... save us... save our children..."

Damon was disgusted.

How could anyone be so small?

'Pathetic.'

Twilight sighed, exchanging glances with his party before looking at Damon.

"What do you wanna do with them?"

The village head turned pale.

What?!

Damon was... with them?

Of course. They were his traveling companions.

Damon stepped forward.

He grabbed the old man by the neck and lifted him off the ground, raising him above eye level with one arm.

The villagers tried to flee, but Damon unleashed Omen of Dread once more. Fear paralyzed them instantly, like being pinned in a nightmare with their eyes wide open.

"Whoever moves without my permission dies."

The air grew heavy again. The old man trembled in Damon's grip.

"P-please... spare this old man... I beg you..."

Damon sneered.

"I really hate when a leader only cares about himself and not his people. A true leader would gladly die for them."

That was true for Vathren, the Lord of Lysithara — a real leader. A king in all but title.

This old man? He wasn't even worthy of his dirt.

"Are you willing to die for them?" Damon's voice dropped into a whisper laced with menace.

"If I kill you with a thousand cuts and let the others live, would you agree?"

The village head was sobbing now. A stench of urine spread from him as it dripped down his leg.

"Please... spare me... I beg you... please...my child, I watched you grow, remember...please.. I'm old "

Damon sighed.

What had he expected? His rage twisted like a knife in his chest. His grip tightened.

The old man gagged, his carotid arteries compressed by Damon's iron grasp. The crowd watched, paralyzed — their fear fueling Damon's Terror Engine.

And then...

He dropped him.

The old man fell to the ground, gasping, sucking in air with ragged desperation.

"You won't die today," Damon said coldly.

"Like I said before... I need you to perform my father's last rites."

He leaned in, so close the man could feel the heat of his breath.

"This time, I'm not asking."