

Shadow 531

Chapter 531: By Fire, By Force.

As Damon had stated earlier, what was the point of power if not to abuse it? These people wouldn't cooperate when he asked nicely, but they would if he forced them to.

The world was built on the principle of violence, and violence was equal to power.

Take concepts like democracy, which he hated — it was nothing more than a popularity contest between the elite.

By its nature, democracy was the government of the elite, by the people, for the elite.

Because the common man did not have what it took to win that popularity contest.

This was just the world, power decided everything. It decided war and peace, and all of it was held and controlled by the select few who determined how overwhelming violence would be used.

It was—

Damon paused, losing his train of thought due to the fearful groans of the village head.

"Hmm... you're really annoying. I was about to have a philosophical awakening..." he muttered.

His cold gaze shifted to the tear-and-snot-covered old man in front of him, a man old enough to be his grandfather.

Or... wait. Damon already had a grandfather, and he was centuries old. In that case, this man might as well be a baby in his eyes.

'These people must be my greatest enemies... I was having an intellectual moment.'

Never in his life had he been so rudely interrupted. He had been many times.

He was appalled. He wasn't—

He would never forgive them. That one was kind of true.

But that was just Damon being Damon.

'And the fact that I'm having a conversation in my head is a small reminder that I am technically insane.'

Technically, because he had never been proven to be clinically insane, the tests had all come out negative.

They didn't have a name for his condition.

They did.

Damon's silence caused a subconscious dread to spread.

"Ahem... ahem..."

Unnoticed Singularity had cleared his throat, trying to pull Damon's attention back to the matter at hand.

His cold gaze returned. As far as Damon was concerned, the entire village was already dead.

The village head finally mustered the will to speak, and Damon had to admit — he admired his ability to control his fear.

"W... we... don't have anything that belongs... to your father in the village anymore..."

Damon's smile was cold and thin. What was that supposed to mean? His father had many things in this village.

In fact... Damon was looking at one right now.

"You really want me to bury you alive...?"

The village head trembled.

"Wha... what...?"

Damon leaned down slightly, pointing at the worn clothes Neil's father, Salz, was wearing, a light tunic made of a fine material.

It was dawn-thread, a fabric uniquely made in Lumos. Which meant... Damon's mother must have been the one to gift it to his father, since he remembered how much his father had loved those clothes.

"What about those? Do I look blind to you?"

The village head slowly turned toward Salz, whose eyes widened when Damon's attention fell on him. He, of all people, knew that if Damon decided to go crazy and start killing, he could only pray for a quick death.

"I... I... please don't kill me. I have a family," Salz stammered.

Damon's glare was razor-sharp.

"Everyone has a family. Those clothes belong to my father. Take them off."

Salz nodded quickly — like a hen pecking at grain. He jumped to his feet, moving to go change out of the clothes.

He didn't even try to argue or scheme. What could he possibly do against power that felt absolute from where he stood? All he wanted was to get out of here alive.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Damon's voice, deep and commanding, froze him mid-step. His thin jaw quivered as he turned around slowly.

"I... I'm... trying to go change out of these clothes..."

His voice was low and tinged with fear and it did nothing to soften Damon's gaze.

"It's not my fault you decided to wear something that didn't belong to you. Take them off. Now."

Salz's eyes darted toward the crowd of onlookers.

"I... I don't have anything else... I'll just go change—"

Damon shook his head slowly.

"So much disobedience..."

He reached into the shadows and pulled out a massive sword — its blade as long as a grown man.

[Sword of Nicholas]

The weapon was made for fighting behemoths.

Salz's knees nearly buckled at the sight. Damon's voice followed, sharp as a blade.

"Take it off... or I'll take it off your corpse."

The faint trace of killing intent in those words persuaded him instantly. Dignity? What dignity?

Dignity was surviving to see another day.

He stripped off the tunic first, folding it neatly and setting it aside. Then came the trousers, then the boots — all folded and placed on the growing pile.

Now he stood in only his underwear. These, at least, were his own.

A woman among the travelers slowly covered her child's eyes.

Damon's gaze sharpened.

"What are you doing? You forgot the underwear."

Salz's eyes widened with horror.

"T... those didn't belong to Noctis—"

Damon's stare turned lethal.

"Hey, Uncle Salz... are you calling me a liar? Are you saying I can't recognize my own father's underwear?"

Seeing that cold glare, Salz bit his lip and stripped the underwear off as well, adding it to the pile.

Damon shielded his eyes in disgust.

"You dirty old man. We have children here. Disgusting."

Everyone looked at him with confusion.

Didn't you just make him strip?

Salz turned to leave, but Damon's voice cut him off.

"Stop. You have to be here for what's next."

The old man stood there, buck naked, one hand over his groin.

Damon's attention shifted to the village head, who now looked terrified that he might be stripped as well.

"Is this enough for my father's rites?"

The village head nodded quickly, his face crusted with dried snot.

"Good. Now get to it."

But the old man didn't move — earning Damon's growing ire.

"What is it now?"

"If we want to perform the rites a second time... it's customary to wait three days and pray for the soul of the deceased," the village head stammered.

Right... that was the custom.

Damon's cold eyes lingered on him before he finally spoke.

"Fine," he whispered.

"I'm going home."

He paused, snapping his finger and burning the dirty underwear on the pile.

Chapter 532: Evils Beneath, A Tamarind

As far as they could remember, Little Town was a small, uneventful village.

However, this quiet little place sat close to a forest that people didn't like traveling too deep into at night, and tall mountains loomed beyond.

It was a beautiful village... but why was there a warning about going deep into the woods after sundown?

Naturally, it was because of small monsters — goblins and all manner of other creatures. This was the world of Aetherus, after all. Settlements were the safest places... but then why did this village have a reliable protector?

They weren't thinking about Noctis and his wife. No — before them, the village had been kept safe.

However, generations later, their protector was now just a myth... forgotten... now just a tale even they were unsure had ever existed.

Perhaps it was because this method was deemed vile, cruel, dangerous, and unusual by their predecessors...

Still, trying it was the only option left.

After memorizing every step from the folktales, a figure slipped out of the village in the dead of night, walking alone with a small sack strapped to their back.

The forest was dark and oppressive under the cover of darkness. What they remembered as beautiful and serene by day was now dreadful, every shadow seeming alive. They could feel their heart pounding in their chest...

Yet fear did not dissuade them.

There was a monster in the village — a monster of hate and vengeance, a monster that would never forgive them. He had returned more powerful than ever, and they were sure Damon Grey would never spare them. He was from their village, after all.

How could he not be small-minded and vengeful, especially after being so gravely wronged?

This... was to protect the village.

They continued their quiet journey under the night's shroud, keeping to the familiar trail without any light. Light was forbidden where they were going.

Alone, they reached a fork in the path, then veered off, cutting a way through the trees away from the main trail.

Walking down the silent path, they were swallowed by the darkness.

"Ahmm—"

A small sound escaped as they kicked a stone by accident, pain shooting up their foot. They clenched their jaw, holding back the urge to cry out. Any noise could be dangerous.

They pressed on, until they reached a massive tree.

It was old, its gnarled roots half-covering a cracked stone marker. Some faded words were etched into the stone, but they didn't care about some old relic. Their business was with the tree.

Not because the tree itself was special. No — it was just an ordinary tamarind tree.

But in the stories... in the folklore... a tamarind tree was the worst place to be in the middle of the night.

They swallowed hard, recalling every step of the village ritual.

Setting down their bag, they stilled the squirming inside.

From the sack, they pulled out a pitch-black kola nut, and then the source of the movement — a pitch-black chicken. Its beak had been tied shut to keep it silent. Noises were not appreciated here.

They placed the kola nut and chicken at the base of the tree, their feet crunching over fallen seeds. Then they knelt by the roots, lowered their head, and whispered three times:

"Lady of the tree.

Lady of the tree.

Lady of the tree."

The forest fell silent. Even the night insects stopped their song.

Without another word, they rose and turned to leave.

They had only taken a few steps when it happened.

A pale-white hand reached out from the tree trunk — though there was no opening. The hand was far too long to be human, yet smooth and elegant like a woman's skin.

It plucked the kola nut from the roots, drawing it into the tree. Next, it reached for the chicken.

Sensing its doom, the chicken thrashed in terror, muffled cries slipping past its bound beak.

Blood sprayed as it was pulled into the tree, followed by sickening crunches. Droplets of red fell to the soil before the sounds went quiet.

And then... the tree moved.

Something emerged from it, following the one who had just left.

They heard the chicken's cry echo in the deep forest, but didn't look back.

Soon, faint movement stirred in the shadows all around them, accompanied by shrill, feminine laughter.

And then — right behind them, so close they could feel the breath on their neck — a voice called their name.

It only asked one thing:

"Turn around... look at me."

Cold dread washed over them. Their eyes watered, their body locking up as if under sleep paralysis.

But they forced their legs to move, keeping their gaze down, never behind.

The voice kept calling their name, promising things they dared not listen to.

They could not acknowledge her — not yet.

If they saw her now, the consequences would be dire.

They walked in silence, each step a battle to keep from making a sound, knowing that if they spoke, they would lose their voice forever.

As the treeline began to thin and the village lights flickered in the distance, the entity grew desperate.

Something long and cold settled on their shoulder.

They looked down — not back — and saw a skeletal woman's hand, flesh rotting, pitch-black fingernails as long as needles.

Terror made their breath catch in their throat as the voice purred their name again, closer now, almost whispering in their ear.

The village was so close... so close they could almost touch it.

Eyes squeezed shut, they took another step, ignoring the voice and its temptation.

Their chest burned with the effort to keep walking, each stride a fight against the primal urge to scream or flee.

Finally, with one last desperate step, they crossed the forest's edge and collapsed on the grass.

The oppressive weight lifted.

The voice was gone. The hand was gone. The cold presence was gone.

And still, they did not look back. That was the rule.

After several long moments, they pushed themselves to their feet and walked slowly toward the village.

Only when they reached its walls did their knees give way, and they slumped against the stone, panting.

"Ahh..."

Now... they only had to repeat this two more times.

Chapter 533: Dealer's Weapon

Three days passed uneventfully in the village. Damon had taken back his old house, kicking his father's relatives out without hesitation.

Oddly enough, they didn't even grumble. After reclaiming it, he should have been able to relax—should have felt some satisfaction—but he didn't. Something sat on his chest like a weight, a lingering unease.

The feeling refused to fade....

He hated these feelings. For him, they were usually a sign that something terrible was about to happen.

His shadow had remained completely natural, showing no strange distortions, not even its regular playful movements, even when his two pets—the raven Croft and the squirrel—tried to provoke it. It behaved like any ordinary shadow.

This was unusual. Damon wondered if it had anything to do with what was on the distant horizon.

Trouble had to be waiting...

The last three days, he had spent in his old home, surrounded by familiar walls, revisiting old memories.

This would be his last moments of peace.

The sun was sinking low in the sky, painting the village cemetery in a fading amber light. The place was filled with cheaply made gravestones jutting unevenly from the earth, many tilted from years of neglect.

All the villagers were there, every single one forced to attend by Damon's will.

The grave before them was open. Damon already knew what lay inside not a body, but a sword buried with the dirt.

The wooden casket was pried open, revealing the broken blade. Next, the clothes of his late father were placed inside. Only then was the sword removed.

It was carefully wrapped in soft fabric, and the grave was slowly filled again as soft hymns and prayers for the deceased rose into the cooling air.

Damon's expression remained impassive throughout. He had made peace with his father's death long ago.

When the grave was finally sealed, he bit his lip, stepped forward, and stood in front of it. He opened his mouth but no words came. Turning away with a quiet sigh, he reached for the broken sword.

The moment his fingers closed around its hilt, he felt it—an unmistakable bond. This was meant to be his Dealer's Hand.

The sword was like him.

It had been something his father loved, yet it had failed to meet expectations in battle and broken under the strain—just as Damon had failed to live up to any of his noble ideals.

A broken thing. But still useful.

The blade was still sharp, still pristine thanks to the casket's protection. Its hilt bore the carving of a setting sun—Twilight.

It fit perfectly. His father had the night attribute a variation of darkness, his mother the light of Day. Twilight was where they met, where the deepest shadows lived.

And Damon—caught between light and darkness—fit that image well.

The blade was only half a sword now, the break forming a sharp, slanted point. Despite its damage, it felt just right in his hand.

The last rays of sunlight gleamed along its edge as Damon smiled faintly.

"I do not desire to live long... but I will certainly be the reason many don't. I am a dealer in death and a merchant in blood... you are the hand that brings my terrible will upon this world."

Skill – [Dealer's Hand]

You may permanently mark a weapon as your Dealer's Hand. This weapon grows sharper with your bond and stronger with every life it claims. Each soul taken feeds its edge, tempering it into a blade of legend. It will never dull, never break—so long as you live. Only in death will it lose its edge.

When Damon activated the skill, shadows around the cemetery stirred.

They rose from every gravestone, sliding like inky rivers toward him. The villagers froze, their fear locking them in place as the shadows fused into Damon's own, which swelled and spread across the ground like a living tide.

When the darkness reached their feet, dread broke them. One villager ran first, and the rest followed in a stampede.

The shadows deepened, and from their mass emerged vague, writhing forms—men, monsters, horrors. All creatures Damon had slain.

One by one, they merged into the black mass surrounding him, flowing toward the sword like a river of night. As they entered the blade, they streamed out the other side and poured into Damon's chest.

Pain tore through him.

"Argh—!"

His voice failed. The agony was so intense he couldn't even scream. Darkness spread from his heart, crawling into his veins, flooding his eyes, hair, skin—until he was a man made entirely of shifting shadow.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, it faded. His skin returned to normal, his hair and eyes as before.

Only the sword remained changed.

It floated before him, pitch black, writhing with pulsing shadows. Damon could feel it radiating death.

He raised a hand, and it flew into his grasp with a clear, ringing note.

He smiled, then willed it forward. The blade tore through the air, slicing a distant tree clean in half before returning to him.

"Not bad... but too slow. In a real battle, that won't work."

His dream of a flying sword would have to wait.

After a moment's thought, his grin returned. He willed the sword to float beneath his feet, stepping onto it. Slowly, it lifted him into the air until he hovered several meters above the ground.

"What do you know... I can use this for transportation."

Not what the skill was meant for, but Damon was the Dealer—he decided the rules.

Calling the sword back into his hand, his expression hardened.

Now came the real test—the reason he had wanted a Dealer's Hand in the first place.

Could this blade withstand the flames of Ashborn?

He ignited the black fire. Shadows spread across the blade, compressing into a single, constantly moving edge of heat and darkness.

It was so sharp he felt it could cut anything.

A rare smile tugged at his lips despite the agony of maintaining Ashborn.

But that smile faded slightly as he sensed just how much shadow energy the weapon was consuming.

Chapter 534: Tall Beautiful Lady

It was late into the night. Everyone had already left the cemetery—everyone except Damon, who had stayed behind to share a drink with his father.

It was strange how sentimental he had become. At first, he hadn't wanted to speak, but once he started, he couldn't stop.

He sat cross-legged on the cold grass before the tombstone, talking to it as though his father's spirit truly stood before him.

"I'm still working on a cure for Luna... but I have a lead. I'm going to find it."

Biting his lip, he glanced at the gravestone, fingers tightening on the bottle in his hand.

"I've made... a few powerful enemies, and I've been thinking of—"

A deafening scream tore through the stillness of the village. Damon froze mid-sentence. His head snapped toward the sound, eyes narrowing into slits.

Without hesitation, he rose to his feet.

One step. That was all it took for him to vanish into the darkness—melting into the shadow at his feet and reappearing in the village streets. He stopped, senses sharpening, and spread his shadow perception outward like an invisible web.

He froze. His eyes widened slightly. There was a scent in the air he knew all too well thick, metallic, disgusting. Blood.

The village was shrouded in darkness; it was midnight, after all. Damon moved toward the narrow gap between two buildings, the stench of blood growing heavier with each step.

He already knew what his shadow perception had shown him. Still... he needed to see it with his own eyes.

His boots made no sound as he slipped into the shadowy alley, broken sword in hand. The cold night air carried a heavy stillness that seemed to cling to his skin.

Then he saw it.

A small arm was nailed to the wall. A severed head lay beneath it—lifeless eyes frozen wide in despair. The body... or what was left of it... was pinned open. Organs spilled across the dirt like a grotesque offering. Blood soaked the ground until it pooled at Damon's feet.

It was the body of a child.

He stepped forward until his boots stood in the blood. She was a young girl, her hair once golden but now matted and crimson with blood. Even in the oppressive darkness, her delicate features were unmistakable.

"Who... who would do this?"

He crouched, shadows rippling faintly as his perception swept the surroundings.

The noise of panicked movement spread through the village—villagers and traveling merchants rushing toward the source of the scream.

She didn't look like she was from the village. Perhaps she was one of the traveling families passing through... but Damon couldn't be sure.

What he did know was troubling—there was no trace of the killer. No footsteps. No signs of struggle. Nothing but his own presence here.

He turned to leave. That's when his danger sense erupted.

He shifted back instinctively, but too late—something slammed into his chest with brutal force. The impact drove him into the pool of blood and torn organs, splattering them across his face and clothes. The cold stickiness clung to him, soaking his long hair and staining his broken sword.

Damon's gaze snapped upward, ready to glare into the eyes of his attacker—only to find that what stood before him was not human.

A figure stood in the alley, dressed in pure white so bright it seemed to drink in the darkness. Long, pitch-black hair fell like a curtain of shadows over her body. Her skin was pale to the point of being almost translucent, lips drained of all color, pulled back into a jagged, inhuman smile lined with rows of serrated teeth.

Her arms were impossibly long, ending in claw-like nails. She was tall—at least eight feet—and her eyes were wrong, pupils twisted in unnatural directions.

When a gust of cold night wind lifted the hem of her gown, Damon saw them...hooves... she did not have feet.

And she had no shadow.

"Heheheheh..."

The sound was low, like laughter bubbling up from deep water. She stepped toward him, each clop of her hooves echoing unnervingly like the sound of a woman in high heels.

Koi...Koi..Koi

Her presence pressed down on him, slowing his limbs, gnawing at his nerves.

Damon knew this sensation. He had felt it many times before—in the deep, dark heart of the Duhu Mountains.

This was no person.

This was an evil spirit.

He blinked—and she was gone.

Danger flared in his mind. Damon dropped into the blood-soaked dirt just as a long, thin arm phased out from the wall beside him, claws raking across his cheek.

Cold seeped into his skin, sliding down into his very soul. He rolled away, blood smearing across his body, hair whipping as he rebounded off the opposite wall. But she emerged again, rising out of the ground itself, claws reaching for his legs.

He lashed out, black flames roaring to life in his palm and streaking toward her. Her long, wet-looking hair shifted like a living curtain, absorbing the attack as strands burned away.

Landing on his feet, Damon felt the shadows around him suddenly shift—not to his command, but against him. Spikes of darkness erupted toward his body. He dove, flipping in the air, and with shadow control he ripped command of the shadows back to himself, forcing them to disperse.

"You really thought you could use shadows against me?"

Her smile widened, eyes narrowing into slits.

"Heenejejejehe..."

Her hair began to move again, stretching and writhing until it filled the entire gap between the buildings, its tips tapering into sharp, spear-like points.

Damon tightened his grip on his sword, igniting it in compressed black fire. The heat of Ashborn's flames seared the air as he cut through her hair, weaving between strikes in the narrow space. In a burst of rapid movement, he stepped through shadow, appearing behind her.

Her twisted pupils swiveled to meet him.

"Die."

He swung down. The compressed heat and freezing cold of Ashborn's flames flared, cutting toward her, but her hair twisted mid-air, intercepting the strike.

Burning strands fell, filling the alley with the acrid scent of charred spirit.

She vanished, reappearing at the alley's edge. Light spilled from approaching torches, voices calling out, drawn by the earlier scream.

And then... she smiled. Her towering form leaned toward Damon with a slow, deliberate malice.

When she spoke again, her voice was not her own.

It was the soft, trembling voice of a little girl.

"Ahhhhhhh! Please... don't! I don't want to die!"

The scream was sharp, piercing—and then came the sound of something wet tearing, blood splattering onto stone.

Her smile returned, jagged teeth gleaming in the dark. Then she was gone, fading into the night like mist in the wind.

Damon stood alone, dripping in blood, broken sword in hand.

The torches arrived moments later. Gasps and whispers broke out as people saw him—standing in the alley over the torn remains of a child no older than eleven.

A suffocating silence fell.

Then a man stepped forward, his voice trembling, lips quivering in horror.

"Se... sen... Sena... my child... what have you done to my child...?"

Chapter 535: Seeing Is Believing

Seeing is believing. What you saw with your own eyes was far more believable than anything, because you were the witness.

It was damning evidence.

A man armed with a sword, covered in blood from head to toe, stared coldly as he stood over the dismembered remains of a little girl.

What else could it be? There was no one there... just him.

The despaired cries of the father, who did not care if he was cut down as well, were the only thing that echoed out as he tried in his meager way to put his dead daughter back together.

It was hopeless. Even if he stitched every fiber of her body back together, she would not come back.

Even then... he still dipped his hands in the bloodied remains of his eleven-year-old child and tried putting the arms, organs, and legs back with her head.

Tears dripped from his eyes as he called out her name again and again — Sena, Sena, Sena. His desperate voice made Damon feel a small ache in his heart.

The man knelt in his daughter's remains, crying like a child.

Damon didn't say anything. He still couldn't sense the evil spirit that had done this.

The man raised his blood-stained hands, his voice hoarse from calling his daughter's name. With a helpless, powerless, and ragged expression, he cried out.

Why... why did you do this to my little girl... whyyyyy?

He wailed helplessly. Helpless because he knew he could not do anything with his meager power to bring justice for his child.

How could common folk fight someone so powerful?

All he could do was cry, rage, resist, and die.

Whyyyy... he roared.

Damon narrowed his eyes. The crowd at the side of the alley whispered fearfully.

"He killed a little girl..."

"What a monster... she was just a child..."

"He needs to be stopped... demons like this can't go free..."

"Where are the adventurers?"

The adventurers among their ranks grew tense. Damon was powerful — too powerful for them to do anything.

"Just because you are powerful doesn't mean you can go around killing whoever you want." A swordsman cried out.

Damon sighed, ignoring the adventurer, his eyes focused on the man with tear-stained cheeks clutching the head of his daughter.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Sorry... you're sorry? You killed my daughter and all you can say is sorry?"

Damon frowned.

"I didn't kill her."

"It was a woman... with long dark hair, sharp serrated fangs, and eight feet tall. She did this. I tried to fight her... but she escaped."

The man trembled with tears in his eyes.

"What eight-foot-tall woman? You're the one covered in my Sena's blood. You're the only one here."

The crowd of travelers and villagers watched with rage and disgust.

"He killed her."

"He's a murderer."

"Hang him, monster."

The adventurers among their ranks were already drawing their weapons.

Driven by righteous hatred, all were united in a shared desire to protect the children from this monster.

Damon narrowed his eyes. This was annoying. If that was the evil spirit's intention, then it was highly intelligent — it had poisoned the minds of these people against him.

Not that the village liked him anyway.

His dark eyes glared at them all.

"Silence."

"Think for a moment, you fools. Did any of you see me kill the girl? No, you didn't. You can't just jump to conclusions."

A merchant's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Then why are you covered in blood? Why are you carrying a weapon?"

He pointed at the remains on the floor.

"Those are sword wounds—only a sword in the hands of a sadistic swordsman can make cuts like that."

Damon took a closer look at the remains. Those were truly sword wounds, and from the looks of it, made from a sword of a certain type — with fast and speedy slices.

Many slices designed to kill slowly and agonizingly.

The merchant opened his mouth, pointing at the village head. Damon already knew what he was going to say.

"Just three days ago, you promised to kill the old village head with a thousand slices — a slow and agonizing death. Now you did it on an innocent child."

This was truly damning. Damon realized that no words could clear him here... these people wanted to believe he was a monster.

They already believed what they saw. His words were nothing against that.

He took a deep breath as they rained insults on him.

As he stood there watching them...

Unnoticed, Singularity passed through the crowd with his party. When they saw what was going on, their eyes widened.

Saint immediately rushed toward the remains, eyes trembling with anger.

"W... who would do this..."

The villagers and travelers pointed at Damon with venom in their voices.

"It was him... it was this evil man."

"We saw him do it."

Damon narrowed his eyes coldly.

They saw him do it? When? What a bald-faced lie.

He took in a deep breath.

"This is annoying. You saw me do it? Yeah, right. You fools know clearly — if I wanted any of you dead, who here could resist? I could take on everyone in this village at the same time and still kill you. Do I need to hide if I wanted to do something like this?"

Damon dismissed his dealer's hand. It turned into a wave of shadows fluttering and then vanishing.

He walked toward the crowd. The adventurers held their ground with weapons in hand.

"Don't let him escape!"

Damon merely glared at these common side characters, his aura pressing down on them.

"Ahhh..." a swordsman in front roared, willing himself to strike. His sword was effortlessly caught between Damon's fingers.

"I'm in a bad mood. Except if you want to die... I suggest you screw off."

He walked toward the crowd, all of them parting with hate in their eyes.

From behind him, the father of the girl cried out with bitter resentment.

"Damn you nobles... I curse you. I curse you. First you took my wife, now my daughter... my everything. If there is a god who listens... I pray to the most vile of demons, anyone.... I pray you suffer."

Damon paused, touching the gleaming crown on his head. Right... he was still wearing that. No wonder he was mistaken for a noble.

He gave the man one final glance.

"There is a god who listens... you're just not part of his domain."

"If you meet him... you can cry out your resentment to him."

Walking through the parted crowd, he added...

"I pray you never pay his price."

As he was walking away, unnoticed, Singularity grabbed his hand.

"Did you do it?"

Damon glanced at him, walking away with fury in his heart.

"What do you think?"

Chapter 536: Witness

Three children had gone missing... no—three children had been found dead.

They had died in the most gruesome ways possible. The first was the young girl—she had died by a thousand cuts.

The second was a young boy—he had been burned and charred, intentionally left with most of his body remaining except all burnt.

He was alive, but he was better off dead... his eyes had melted, still open, trapped in perpetual fullness, as if only his body was alive but his soul was gone.

The healers had declared him dead, even though his mother refused to let him go—because his heart was still beating and his lungs still heaving.

He died on the second day. His mother's mournful cry had echoed through the village... she swore she had seen Damon teleport out of the room when her son burned.

The third child... was in a room with her sister. Her head had been twisted off, blood spraying across the walls and ceiling—dyeing everything in red, even her sister, who had witnessed the horror.

The younger sister lost her voice... yet she saw who did it.

Today, the village would get the confirmation they needed.

Some of the travellers were already planning to ambush the suspect—no, the perpetrator.

Who else had the power to do this?

Yet he was so tyrannical no one could do anything to him.

He either denied any accusation or refused to respond.

The whole village was angry... how could he do this?

Like masses ready to die fighting a tyrant, the villagers and travellers marched toward Damon's home with pitchforks and flames.

Chanting: "Kill one, kill us all!"

If he was going to kill their children... he might as well kill the parents too.

They carried the little girl that had gone mute with them. She was the witness, the one who saw who ripped her sister's head off.

Outraged, these people hated more than they feared.

Perhaps it was the same for the common man—one day, he would be pushed so far he would no longer fear the crown.

This had been the cause of the Peasant Revolution in the past...

Except Damon never imagined he would be the tyrant they would be facing.

As they reached his home, Damon sighed, walking out of the house with a staff in his hand. Black flames continuously swirled around it as he charged it with ashborn.

When he stepped into view, the staff sank into the shadows. These last days had been hard on him too...

He truly felt indignant—this was a sinister scheme. Every time he fought the spirit, it refused to die, always escaping.

He had sent Unnoticed Singularity's party to investigate, giving them a handsome commission for the job. He was expecting to hear from them soon.

Until then, it was his word against all the evidence that pointed to him.

The first girl was killed with a thousand cuts—after he had threatened the village head with the same fate days earlier.

The second had been burned... just when he had been seen using fire.

The third's head was ripped off... that could have been anyone with strength, but they just happened to have a witness—one who apparently survived the encounter but had lost her voice.

Damon glanced at the mob, all of them resolved to die if they had to.

The father of the young blonde girl who had died days earlier held an axe, rage burning in his eyes. He looked like he had nothing left to lose.

The village head fumed with righteous hatred, now emboldened by the crowd.

"Damon Grey... you have committed atrocities since you came to this village. We lived a peaceful life until you came. You have no regard for human life and no mercy even for children... I condemn you in the name of the Empire, its people, and its goddess."

Damon wore an impassive expression.

The village head continued with Neil at his side, holding a rusty sword.

"How do you plead? I advise you surrender."

Damon watched him without a flicker of emotion.

"Not guilty."

The old village head sighed, nodding at Neil.

"Bring the witness."

He turned around. From behind him, Seta walked out holding a little girl in her arms.

When the little girl made eye contact with Damon, she trembled with fear—as if she were seeing something monstrous.

Her small face went pale, her breathing hitched, and she began to gasp... hyperventilating from terror. Seta hugged her tightly, rubbing her back and whispering to calm her.

"Don't be scared, Ena. No one can hurt you now. Ena... can you show me who attacked you and your sister?"

The small girl with short bangs, no older than seven, visibly stiffened. She glanced at Damon... and to no one's surprise, she lifted her trembling hand and pointed straight at him.

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

That was all the mob needed to forget their fear of his power. The adventurers among them roared with rage—or perhaps to boost their courage—before charging forward.

The first sword came down toward him. Damon sidestepped, grabbed the man, and threw him back into the crowd, sending several tumbling like dominoes.

He didn't speak. There was no point—he knew that.

"Arrghh!" Neil raised his hand, earth magic bursting up from the ground, his rusty sword empowered by it.

Damon didn't even bother dodging. This level of magic couldn't break through even his most basic resistance.

The rusted steel shattered—along with the weak traces of earth magic.

A spear flew toward him, thrown by an adventurer. Damon caught it effortlessly and hurled it back—not at the man's body, but at the shaft—striking hard enough to drop him without killing him.

A group of villagers and travellers surrounded him.

"Die, fiend!"

Damon took one step—and vanished, teleporting away.

Torches and bursts of magic flew at where he had been, lighting the area in chaotic flashes of color.

He dodged them all, making no effort to strike back.

As his patience waned, his killing intent grew. He grabbed one man by the collar—

Before he could crush his bones, Saint landed, the air trembling with the force of his magic.

"Enough! Everyone stop!"

The mob, bruised and battered, froze in place. Unnoticed Singularity and the rest of the party appeared, closing in behind him.

Saint raised his hand. "I know you are angry and scared, but I assure you there is a reasonable explanation for all of this."

Dred fluttered down from the sky. "We've had eyes on him, and he didn't do it."

Unnoticed Singularity waved his hand. "We've found a clue about what's happening. This village is haunted by an evil spirit, and we will deal with it."

"We don't believe you—you're working with him!" the village head roared.

Twilight's glare was like a blade. A tattoo stretched from his arm to his neck began to glow faintly.

"Talk again and you die... old man."

The village head gulped, stepping back.

Saint walked toward the mob, his calm and soothing aura radiating outward. It worked—their rage softened, their breathing slowed. He made them a promise to find evidence.

The mob reluctantly left, knowing they couldn't do anything here.

Unnoticed Singularity let out a long breath of relief.

He looked at Damon, his expression serious.

"We have trouble... serious trouble."

Chapter 537: Home Of Evil

"What did you find..."

Damon asked, looking out the window with a calm expression. His hands rested behind his back, posture straight, the faint light from outside casting a sharp outline of his figure.

This was not something he would allow to go on any longer.

Aleph's elf ears twitched slightly.

"We found traces of the assailant, and it's like you said... it's an evil spirit."

Damon nodded slowly. Naturally, he would know. He was far too familiar with these cruel and unusual creatures.

"In the forest there's a tamarind tree. Tamarind trees are known to attract evil spirits..." Ilukras began speaking softly, his gaze distant as if recalling unpleasant memories.

"It's one of the many types of trees you can find an evil presence hidden within..."

Damon already knew that. He had heard something similar from Sylvia, back when she had explained the difference between an evil spirit and a dark one.

"Tamarind trees, baobab trees, and Ficus platyhylla trees — all of these trees can hide evil beings within them..."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"If that's the case, I can only remember one place in this region with a tree like that... deep in the forest, an old tamarind tree."

Saint bit his lip, nodding with a pained expression.

"We found traces of someone making a ritual there... first it was chicken blood, then the most recent was a human offering... a child..."

Damon's lips curled into a cold smile.

"Let me guess — it's one of the village children and not a traveler's. That would bring the total number of dead children to four, not three."

Twilight's gaze sharpened, immediately catching Damon's implication.

"Are you trying to say the villagers were the ones who summoned this evil spirit?"

Damon nodded.

"Yes... they did. They sacrificed a child from the village — one of their own. Since no one raised alarms, it means they're covering for each other. The children killed recently? None of them were from the village."

Saint's face contorted with disgust.

"Wh... who would do that to their own..."

"My village would." Damon's voice carried no emotion, no hesitation. He couldn't be disappointed in them anymore — he had no expectations left. These people were deplorable.

"I see... so they're going to act like the child never got killed, and if someone notices, they just blame you, not their evil spirit."

Damon walked away from the window and sat down in a chair inside the house. His hand continued to pour black flames into the staff resting across his lap, its surface pulsing faintly from the energy.

"When I was a child, the village head used to tell us folk tales of an eight-foot-tall lady in the forest. She would come out on a sunny day or in the middle of the night and take any child that didn't listen to their parents."

He frowned slightly. "We got into trouble a lot, so we heard that story too many times..."

Dred narrowed his eyes.

"I think I know about that type of evil spirit. Umrakinise — telekinesis, voice manipulation, possession, mimicry, soul manipulation, immortality... that's just the basics of what it can do."

Unnoticed Singularity stood from his seat.

"That's why it's troublesome. It's immortal unless we kill the summoner, or if it can be absorbed by something, or sealed away. But then it will just flee back to the tamarind tree."

Damon stood with a sigh, stretching his shoulders.

"I know where it is... I just didn't do anything because there was no point."

The others paused, staring at him.

"Huh... you do?"

He nodded with a small smile.

"I'm on a tight schedule — there's a beautiful lady waiting for me. I already did some aura farming in this village; I don't have time to waste... Let's go... to the tamarind tree."

Reaching the tamarind tree wasn't difficult. The group emerged into a small clearing, the air heavy and oppressive. Damon's eyes studied the tree with a reminiscent expression.

This was the tree he had once come to hang himself from years ago. The old stone was still there, half-buried, with words carved into it — words that had once introduced him to the domain of the unknown god. Words he had spoken like a chant.

Words that shaped his life.

His shadow stretched toward the stone of its own accord. It wasn't the only thing reacting — Unnoticed Singularity's presence seemed to pulse faintly, though he tried to hide it.

"You okay..." Damon asked, his gaze sharp.

Singularity nodded with an impassive look.

"Yes, I'm fine... this place just feels different from my eyes. No wonder an evil spirit lived here — there's so much resentment, and it came from the heart of one person."

Damon pointed at the stone, the roots of the tamarind tree curling around it like skeletal fingers.

"Someone here glorified the unknown god... with those half-buried stone marker."

Singularity lowered his voice.

"Yes... I noticed. It's Mugu's penmanship — I recognize it. This must be where he first heard the voice of the unknown god."

He smiled faintly.

"I never thought I'd find it so... plain. It's not what I expected. There's no divine symbol — just a half-destroyed rock and an old tree... with some evil spirit calling it home."

Damon understood the simplicity of it.

"If you want to hide a tree, hide it in a forest. Either that, or this place had no significance to the unknown god. After all, he's a god who doesn't even have his own temples or shrines... neither does he demand faith."

Dred lazily glanced at the twisted trunk.

"If you two are done dropping all that unnecessary lore, can we get to whatever we're doing here..."

Aleph facepalmed.

"This is why I have a problem with you orphans... you never want to learn..."

Damon stepped forward. The oppressive darkness radiating from the tree didn't bother him in the slightest. He circled it slowly, appraising it. He could already tell the evil spirit wasn't home.

Raising his hand, he released a controlled surge of black flames. They shot from his palm, climbing the trunk, racing into the branches and leaves. The ancient tamarind tree, older than anyone could guess, began to burn in silence before cracking loudly, releasing thick black smoke into the sky.

Its leaves ignited, its roots shriveled and turned brittle. As the flames devoured it, a piercing, inhuman shriek burst from within, making Damon groan as blood trickled from his ears.

The tree finally toppled, crumbling to ash before it even touched the ground. Damon stood over the smoldering remains.

The canopy empty, and sky light streaming down with soft moonlight.

"I had once come to die under your shadow... now you have died under mine."

Chapter 538: It Was You

A few hours had passed. They were watching the sun rise... when something in the air shifted. Damon moved first.

"Let's go kill that thing."

He turned with the intention of heading back to the village. This evil spirit thought it was cunning — fine. However, if it thought it could break him psychologically, that was laughable at best.

He was used to being the outcast, so much so that he saw other people as merely side characters in his life.

'Why would I care what side characters think of me?'

"What's the plan of attack?" Singularity asked.

"I have a plan... attack!" Damon took a single step and dissolved into the shadow.

His next step placed him directly inside the village.

The sun was already rising. The travelers had long since given up expecting justice.

The village bustled with movement, and — to no one's surprise — the villagers had gathered outside the village head's house for a meeting on how to deal with Damon. After much whispered deliberation, they had decided to pool their coin and hire adventurers in the third-class advancement to kill him.

Damon casually teleported to the center of their group.

As soon as he appeared, they were about to erupt into outrage. He lazily raised his hand.

"I'm a bit tired, so I have little patience. Whoever speaks without my permission will die."

His words made the crowd go instantly silent. Fear spread through them like frost, stiffening their spines.

His mastery of Tyranny leveled up. Damon didn't particularly like that, but so be it.

"You have all spoken, and so far, I have listened. I have barely reacted to your accusations."

No one dared speak.

He was really tired. After all this time, his preparations were complete. There was no more reason to linger.

"If you want justice, I will give it to you. I want all people in the village present, regardless of age."

He glared at the village head, who opened his mouth to speak.

"Now."

The village head bit his lips and nodded. A glance to several young men sent them off to gather the rest of the people.

Damon summoned a table from his shadow storage along with several chairs, then waited.

Singularity arrived with his party shortly after. He could have teleported, but it seemed they wanted to arrive together.

When they sat down without a word, the villagers began to trickle in, children clinging to parents, elders muttering nervously. Damon's shadow perception spread over the village to ensure no one was hiding.

"All villagers to my left, travelers to the right."

With a few curses and grumbles, they obeyed, parents tugging children toward the proper side.

Seta held tightly to the hand of the little traveler girl who had lost her sister and become mute.

They seemed inseparable, so Damon let them stay together. The child still looked pale, her eyes unfocused — the air around her thick with trauma.

There was a current of helplessness in the crowd. What could they do? Nothing.

Tyranny was the act of exercising power without regard to the will of those forced to obey. But what people often forgot was that tyrants were human too, and even they sometimes wanted to see something beautiful... unless they were simply evil.

And from where the villagers stood, Damon was pure evil.

He stepped toward the travelers — the minority here, as expected.

"Over the course of a few days, children have been killed gruesomely. While many of you are indignant and wish to bring the culprit to justice, I assure you that I am not the one."

"Then who is, murderer?" someone from the villagers spat.

Damon sighed. "And I get interrupted..."

In an instant, he teleported into the crowd, appearing before the man. Without a single word, he ripped the man's head clean off.

"You won't make a liar of me."

The headless body collapsed with a thud. Women and children screamed, but no one dared move. Fear clamped down on their throats.

Damon walked back to his previous spot.

"Now... where was I?"

Saint's hand trembled, but before he could speak, Twilight placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head.

"He's pissed now... later."

"You want justice? I'll give you justice. You just won't like how I do it."

No one spoke.

"You all had your chance to speak. I listened. Now I will speak, and you will listen."

He pointed at the villagers.

"Hand over the person who summoned the evil spirit."

The village head paled. "What are you talking about? We don't—"

Damon became a blur of shadow, his hand clamping around the old man's throat.

"I have tried to be civil with you people, but again you want me to treat you like beasts. Fine."

He slammed the village head into the ground.

"Now I have defeated you. Now your body is mine."

The crown upon Damon's head pulsed faintly. Before their eyes, the village head stood again, but his posture was rigid, his voice firm and alien.

"I'll give you all a choice. Speak, or face the same fate. I only want an answer — yes or no."

This was the enhancement of the Pale Crown:

[Empty Throne] – Dominate the mind of a single weakened enemy, turning them into a puppet, or even possessing their body.

Neil trembled. "Village head... what's wrong with you?"

The old man's body moved stiffly. "There is no village head here, fool. The old man is now lost."

Everyone paled. What kind of demonic ability was this? The travelers watched in horrified silence. If they had thought Damon terrifying before, now he redefined the word.

"I already know you did it. I just want you to admit it."

His gaze locked on Neil. Silence pressed down on the gathering like a weight.

"Seta."

His eyes shifted to the auburn-haired innkeeper.

Her face drained of color.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

She shook her head frantically. "I didn't do anything, I swear. I'm the only one on your side!"

Damon's cold gaze met hers.

"A shame. That's not what the Eye of Veracity shows."

A broken sword appeared in his hand as he walked toward her. Black flames erupted along its edge. When he was next to her, he swung — but not at Seta.

He struck the little mute girl.

Gasps and cries tore through the crowd as the child fell, lifeless. Horror gripped the onlookers.

Then the girl's expression twisted into a sinister smile. A woman's voice echoed through the air.

"Ahhh... you caught me."

Her small form warped, stretching into a tall, eerie woman with long, serrated fangs.

"Heheheheheheh..."

Chapter 539: Little Net

What was the difference between dark spirits and evil spirits? The answer was actually quite negligible, yet also very different.

For one, a dark spirit was not necessarily evil — however, all evil spirits were evil. Know the difference.

A dark spirit was a spirit with dark affinity powers, fueled by resentment.

Evil spirits, on the other hand, didn't need to have dark affinity powers... they were just evil, that's it.

Their objective wasn't to get a price that benefited them. Their objective was to demand a price so painful for you to pay that it broke you.

They were evil for the sheer sake of it.

An evil spirit simply wanted to make you suffer. There was no other satisfaction in it for them.

Dark spirits could destroy cities... but evil spirits broke minds.

Seta pushed herself as far away from the eight-foot-tall lady as she possibly could, her eyes wide with dread.

This whole time... the spirit had been right next to her.

"How did you know..." it asked in a beautiful, feminine voice.

"Because you lied... If that little girl Ena had really seen me... why did it look like a lie?"

He raised his sword again.

"And you — I couldn't sense your shadow, or see through you with appraisal. That really gave you away..."

Her long hair stretched and swayed as she began to laugh — a chilling, resonating sound — her hair dancing unnaturally in the wind.

The travelers watched in horror as the woman's full form loomed before them: eight feet tall, serrated teeth gleaming in her mouth.

The adventurers instantly drew their weapons.

Damon sighed, releasing his control over the village head. As soon as the old man returned to himself, blinking and confused, Damon grabbed him by the hair.

"This... is what you allowed to be unleashed upon this village." His voice was cold and heavy.

"After this is over, you all have some serious explaining to do..."

He tossed the old man aside like discarded rubbish.

The eight-foot-tall lady tried to teleport away, but before she could move, a sword sliced across her back in a blur.

Twilight's eyes flickered. "I see you..."

She tried to move again, but gashes appeared across her body in rapid succession.

Damon narrowed his eyes. He hadn't sensed the attack at all, even when it passed directly by him.

It came from Unnoticed Singularity.

"Ahhhhejjejjeh!" She laughed with pure malice, yanking on her own hair with long, clawed hands.

"Ahhrgggg..."

Saint roared, his body erupting in golden light as he bound her in radiant chains. His expression was a mask of furious rage. Instead of casting a spell, he slammed his fist into her body with raw force.

Bang. Bang. The sharp crack of magic guns echoed through the square.

"Debuff bullet — Soul Corrosion!" Wimpy shouted.

Damon felt the soul of the towering woman weaken under the barrage.

Dred raised his hand, a full moon materializing behind him.

"Moon Shatter."

The illusionary moon blade fractured into countless shards, each one slicing at the evil spirit with merciless precision.

Damon sensed it immediately — a soul attack, and a particularly vicious one.

Ilukras lifted his lamp, muttering under his breath.

"Edge of the Scale."

The world seemed to shift. The aura and power of the evil spirit were suddenly cut in half, while everyone else's strength surged.

"Ahhhj!" The spirit shrieked in agony.

What followed was a cruel bombardment of attacks so relentless Damon began to wonder if he even knew these people at all.

He didn't even get the chance to join in.

They had her surrounded on all sides, not giving her a second to breathe or escape. Her piercing screams rattled the air, disorienting everyone's senses.

Taking advantage of the moment, she darted into the air, flying toward the edge of the village.

Saint's eyes flashed with golden light as he drew a bow to shoot her down — but Damon stopped him with a thin smile.

"Don't worry... she won't escape."

Saint glanced at him in surprise.

"I wasn't just wasting time doing nothing these past few days..."

Damon pressed his palm to the ground, pouring mana into it.

All around the village, hidden runes began to glow — etched into doors, walls, even the fur of small critters. Each one, meticulously carved, bore the same single word: Seal.

"Rune magic takes a while... so I had to wait."

With that, Damon stepped into the shadows and reappeared at the village's edge, where the tall woman was clawing at an invisible wall of mana.

He walked toward her casually.

"Yeah... it was annoying when you escaped the first time. So I took some precautions. I knew if I sent Unnoticed Singularity's party to your home, you'd follow to see what was going on. During that time, I created this little net. I placed runes all over the village..."

His broken sword floated around him in a slow, deliberate circle.

"I admit, moving all those runes was tricky... but I had something you overlooked."

She turned to face him, smiling. "Hehehe..."

"The raven and the squirrel," Damon continued, his voice steady.

"Seems even you overlooked them. They were instrumental in moving the rocks and objects I'd carved runes into, placing them exactly where I needed."

He sighed.

"Put simply — you thought you were playing me... but I already had you in checkmate."

She floated higher, black hair swirling in the air like smoke.

"I can't be killed... I am immortal."

Damon stood face to face with her.

"Who said anything about killing you? You... are my meal, fool."

As soon as the words left his mouth, something tore free from Damon's body — and smiled.

It was his soul.

It lunged at the spirit, gripping her by the neck, pinning her down with crushing force.

[Skill: Astral Projection]

[Description:]

A forbidden soul technique practiced by the Dreamwalkers of Y'shara, Astral Projection allows the user's spirit to leave their body, traversing unseen planes and hidden paths between worlds. Only those with extreme mastery of ether dare to travel the metaverse.

[Effect:]

Allows the user's soul to leave their body, drastically increasing soul-based abilities but leaving both soul and body vulnerable while separated.

[Type:]

Active.

[Cooldown:]

0 seconds.

Pinned by his astral form, she glared up at him with disdain — until his shadow, still at the feet of his physical body, began to move.

It rose from the ground like a living thing, coiling around her body.

She tried to scream and break free, but it was too late.

The unkillable was devoured by shadow.

As soon as she was gone, Damon's soul snapped back into his body, cold sweat beading across his skin.

[You have slain Doguwa, the Eight-Foot-Tall Lady.]

[You have acquired the skill: Soul Conduit.]

Chapter 540: You Are Part Of The Conduit.

Damon sighed, seeing what was happening in the village with his shadow perception.

He smiled... everything was going well, just the way he wanted.

Life was full of downsides, and turning those downsides into something that benefited him was just how he had lived.

And sometimes, in order to gain, you must first take risks and suffer losses.

He had lost his reputation, his newly built goodwill, but now he had gained it back while making them all feel guilty. Now he merely needed to finish the last act.

"Until then... I can take my time..."

He smiled, opening his system panel.

"The best aura farmers show up in the last minute..."

He glanced at his new skill.

Skill: Soul Conduit

[Description:]

From the depths of the soul, fine threads are spun — each a fragment of the weaver's will. These ethereal strands form an unseen network, binding every soul they touch. Once drawn in, escape is impossible — you are part of the conduit now.

[Effect:]

Souls ensnared can be guided, restrained, or possessed, their essence echoing the weaver's command. Freedom comes only by severing every strand.

[Cooldown:]

0 seconds

Damon narrowed his eyes... this was just a soul skill. At best, what it did was increase the range of his soul abilities. Even that would take time, since he had to create these soul threads.

The skill aside, he was more interested in the end of the skill description. Damon had, for all intents and purposes, gotten rid of the source of his unease by devouring the eight-foot-tall lady.

But his unease was still there.

"I am part of the conduit now..."

He looked into the distance far to the north. What rotten luck — that was the direction he was supposed to travel.

The same direction the orcs had sensed danger.

Damon sighed, dismissing his system panel.

It was time now for him to make his entrance.

He took a single step, fading into the shadows. When he appeared again, he was in the town square — surrounded by raging and angry voices.

Except this time, the accusing hands were not pointed at him.

They were pointed at a young woman tied to a stake, surrounded by wood and oil...

Alongside her, the old village head lay bleeding and unconscious.

She watched helplessly, horror filling her eyes as the noise grew.

And a mob chanted.

"Burn her! Burn her!"

The only difference was, unlike him, she could not fight the mob.

'What's up with these people and arson... that's my thing...'

Damon waved his hand, his sword slicing cleanly through Seta's ropes.

Putting on his most noble voice, he stood before the crowd.

"Enough... this is not the way..."

His words and presence instantly made everyone stop.

There were many emotions on their faces — fear, guilt, anger...

"You... my lord, this woman is a witch! She did horrible things and tarnished your noble image!"

"Yeah, why are you stopping us?"

"My lord, I beg you to give justice for my child..."

Damon sighed. This was the desired outcome, but he couldn't allow outsiders to kill his childhood friend.

If anything, Seta was almost something of a childhood sweetheart of his.

'Ahh... so many fond memories...'

He raised his hand.

"My reputation should not be worth more than a person's life..."

His words sounded so humble, his charisma and benevolence almost made them cry.

Damon shifted slightly, allowing the light to hit his face at just the right angle, making him look noble.

"We have lost too much these last few days... too many have died. One death... is too much... no more..."

He glanced at Seta, who was bruised and gagged, her clothes half torn, barely covering her form, one of her breasts hanging out in the open.

"We... are not animals..." He reached into his shadow storage, pulling out a blanket — one he had shared with Evangeline. In Lysithara, the fact that this filthy woman was even close to it almost made him lose his calm.

He draped it over her shoulders. She gazed up at him, trembling, and as he covered her, he smiled.

"Don't worry, Seta... it will be alright..."

His benevolence and words instantly made her break into tears. This was not the Damon she knew, how could he be so forgiving?

The crowd was moved by his kindness.

He turned around, standing tall.

"What happened was horrible, and I see many of you demand justice... but does justice mean that a woman who has lost her way must die?"

There was silence.

"Seta will be punished... but not like this."

Again, silence... until a woman looked up at him.

"My lord... what about my son? What about his justice?"

Damon nodded, pulling out the giant sword of Nicholas from his shadow space.

"Very well then... I will give you justice in this woman's blood..."

Seta began trembling — until Damon continued.

"Or I can compensate the families of the deceased with a million zeni... for each person lost."

Damon clenched his fist.

"If she dies, justice will be served... but your children would want you all to live better lives. Is that not justice? That you live?"

Silence followed.

Damon closed his eyes.

"I shall give you the compensation now. It cannot bring back the dead... but it can make life better."

Everyone was moved by his words and benevolence.

Damon needed them to believe him, so he walked up to the mother of the boy who had been burned alive.

Placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, he put on his most political smile.

Reaching into the shadows, he pulled out a pouch of premium zeni coins and placed them in her hands — some falling, rolling across the ground at her feet.

Tears streamed down her face.

Damon slowly closed her palms around the pouch and hugged her gently.

"It is alright... the night has passed... do not fear anymore..."

The woman's mournful cries echoed through the village as she wept into Damon's chest, even though he was covered in pristine material and she was just a dirty commoner.

He looked like a king comforting a peasant.

The people were brought to tears, applauding his benevolence... and hailing him.

Damon smiled.

How easily people were swayed — it was a good thing his deception stat was quite high.

There was no world in which he would let anyone kill his fellow villagers...

Because he wanted to kill them with his own two hands.

All good things to those who wait... he had waited years, he could wait a few more days.