

Shadow 541

Chapter 541: Mothers Final Wish

"You're a master of an illusion, look at all the masses that you're fooling..."

Singularity glanced at Damon with a soft smile, his eyes narrowing slightly as if weighing every layer of the man before him.

"How can you sleep or live with yourself?"

Damon sneered at his obvious jab. He leaned back, arms loosely folded, letting the corner of his lips twist into a smirk.

"Like a baby... no actually, scratch that — babies wake up a lot. I sleep like a rock."

Singularity shook his head slowly, a faint exhale of disbelief leaving his lips.

"On the first night when that spirit appeared... you could have just teleported away before anyone came. But you didn't..."

Of course Damon had known that was a trap. There had been no point in running. His eyes briefly narrowed as if replaying the scene in his mind. Honestly, he knew no one could do anything to him, even if they could prove it.

That said, if this had been in Valerion, where many were more powerful than him, Damon would not have teleported away.

Instead, he would have created a scapegoat to take the fall. The thought brought a faint curl to his lips.

As for how he would do that — it was simple. He would create a shadow clone and use his Faceless skill.

By the time people arrived, they would see him locked in battle with some strange entity. The clone would then escape, and if it was destroyed — injuring him in the process — he could simply claim it had attacked and wounded him.

But here, there had been no danger, so all of that was unnecessary.

"You were doing everything imaginable to farm aura, weren't you? That's why you let them set you ablaze... so you could walk out of the flames."

Damon chuckled lowly, eyes glinting with amusement.

"That's not the only reason. I was trying to level up my Ragebaiting too... and I can safely say I gained a lot of experience here."

Laughter — some genuine, some uneasy — rippled through the busy main hall of the village. After everything, the travelers and villagers had decided to throw a feast in Damon's honor.

They sang songs praising his strength, mercy, and benevolence.

The villagers had confessed the truth, and Damon already knew Seta was the one who had summoned the evil spirit.

The ritual had been simple — for the first few days, she had fed it black kola nuts and black chickens. On the last day, it had appeared, and she had made her request for it to get rid of Damon. But the spirit had demanded too high a price — the life of a child from the village.

She had left, promising to bring it, but that was when she encountered the village head and told him of the deal.

After finding out, he had called a meeting. Seta hadn't needed much time to sway them. She had only needed to remind them of who Damon was... and what they had once done to him.

With the fear of his vengeance looming, they had acted.

They had tied a child around eleven years old, inside a sack, handing it to Seta to deliver.

Honestly, Damon had to respect their solidarity when it came to trying to screw him over.

But in the end, they had all gathered outside his house, bowing low in the dirt. Damon had simply told them to let bygones be bygones.

He was, after all, a forgiver.

People had wept at his mercy.

That had led to this feast, tables heavy with food and drink, meat from chickens, goats, and cows. The best the village had to offer, alongside barley and ale. Women danced in bright skirts, men showed off tricks and feats.

It almost reminded Damon of the harvest festivals when he was a child.

Many had approached him individually to apologize — adventurers, travelers, and villagers alike.

After a while, he grew tired of it all and excused himself, telling them to continue without him.

Stepping out into the cool night air, he left the scent of ale and roasted meat behind.

He scanned the quiet edges of the gathering until his eyes caught a man sitting under a tree, a cup in his hand.

Damon walked toward him, boots crunching softly on the earth.

"You seem to enjoy the silence... or are the festivities not to your liking?"

The man's eyes widened as soon as he recognized him. He set his drink down hastily.

"My... my lord... my apologies, I didn't—"

Damon shook his head, lowering himself to sit beside him in the shade.

"I don't like feasts either. They're too loud. I like the quiet."

The man nodded awkwardly, adjusting his tattered clothing as the breeze tugged at it.

Damon's gaze stayed forward as he continued.

"Tomorrow the caravans and travelers will all be leaving the village. I suppose the commotion is the reason everyone stayed..."

The man gave a soft hum of agreement.

"Do you not recognize me... Linga Felt?"

Linga shook his head quickly.

"I do, my lord. It's just... how can a mere commoner like me speak to the blood of the Grand Duke?"

Damon bit his lip slightly at the words.

"I see. So you knew after all..." A faint, humorless chuckle left him. "Of course you did. Who else would tell my village?"

His gaze turned sharper.

"You're the one who told them my mother was the supposedly dead daughter of Grand Duke Damian Brightwater, weren't you?"

Linga bit his lip, nodding slowly.

"I... yes, I did. It was your mother's wish — for you and your sister to be passed to your grandfather in the event of her death. It was her wish."

Damon's eyes widened slightly. Their mother had wanted them to go to Lumos... to their grandfather? Why was he only hearing this now?

He grabbed Linga's shoulder firmly.

"What do you mean she wanted us to be passed to our grandfather?"

Linga flinched under his grip.

"Ahh... my apologies, sir. But aren't you living with your grandfather in secret now? You are the Ascendant, aren't you? The one in this newspaper..."

He pulled out a folded paper — the front showing the Grand Duke beside a hooded figure. Damon recognized himself instantly.

Damon's grip loosened, his lips curling into a bitter smile.

"Let me guess. When you met me in the village years ago, I was a child. So you could only hand over my parents' belongings. You didn't want to tell a grieving child something so heavy."

The pieces were falling into place.

"So you told the village elders, because my father thought they could be trusted. But when they heard it involved a Grand Duke, they got scared. You left, thinking your mission was complete."

Linga's brow furrowed, but after a moment, understanding seemed to click.

"Ohhh... so that's what happened. I'm sorry... I should have stayed..."

Damon shook his head slowly, though the bitterness in his chest didn't fade. All his suffering... because the villagers had been too scared to carry out the final wish of a dead couple.

"It's fine. I don't blame you. But I do have a question... how did my parents die?"

Linga's jaw tightened, his eyes hardening with hate.

"They were killed by the actions of a man who found out your mother's identity... a Ravenscroft."

Chapter 542: Godric Ravenscroft

Damon's hands trembled, his expression paling slightly.

Because at this moment, all he could think of was Sylvia's prophecy — the one she had told Xander.

"Angry shadows descend... The noble knight's dark deeds become known. He had murdered night and day... He is disgusted by his own reflection... His dark deeds will be embraced by hungry shadows... Death is his final resting place... You will be his silent avenger... forced to forever hunt a faceless enemy... Hope you never see its face..."

'Faceless enemy... how fitting.' Damon had not even heard the name of the Ravenscroft who had caused his parents' deaths, but he was already mentally prepared to kill him.

It couldn't be Xander Ravenscroft — Xander had been a child during the last demon wars. He would not have been on the battlefield.

Damon had always been the type of person who would kill anything and anyone regardless of their status — even if they were from a grand duchy.

"Which Ravenscroft?"

Linga bit his lips, knowing the political implications.

"It was in the seventh division of the Valtheron army, battalion six, squadron five."

He looked into the distance with a soft sigh.

"That was where I met your parents... like many others, they had been conscripted for war. At that time our captain and vice-captain had been slain by demons... they were actively given the positions due to their rank."

He swallowed down the lump in his throat.

"The rest of us were not first-class ranked, so they were our best fighters... for the months that followed, all went well. A few of us died, but compared to the chaos of the war, our squadron was in good condition. After all, it was the division led by the legendary Seras Blade."

He laughed faintly, remembering the awe of seeing someone so illustrious in the distance before narrowing his eyes.

"All was well until the battle for Galain... we were facing the army of Demon Lord Adarmalec. The battle went on for days... weeks... and eventually months. During that time, a young noble was given command of the battalion..."

Linga recalled the young man's light armor, his sword, and the benevolent, noble bearing he had carried. For a noble, he had been competent and kind — truly someone who seemed righteous.

He was wise and kind. A true noble.

'Or so I thought...'

He remembered that day like a bitter taste on his tongue. It was a routine inspection. However, the one who came was the battalion commander himself.

He had stumbled into their military tent unexpectedly, carrying drinks and food for the soldiers — a habit he had picked up to boost morale. But the battalion was quite large; he didn't have the time to meet all the soldiers.

So why had his expression instantly frozen when he saw the vice-captain without her helm? Why did he drop everything and turn around with a look of shock?

At that time, Linga had not known. Now, he understood.

It wasn't because she was suspicious. Sure, she never removed her helm outside when the army was moving or in crowded places, and she stayed close to her husband, the squad captain.

A few days later, she was summoned along with the captain to the commander's military tent.

It was only later that Linga would learn she was the supposedly dead daughter of Grand Duke Damian Brightwater — and that the commander was the son of a family with equal rank and power.

More importantly... she was his fiancée. Had been his fiancée

Now she was married to another man — a commoner no less.

No noble could accept that. No man could.

In the end, nothing came of it immediately — or so Linga thought.

Not all poisons were fast-acting. Some were slow... corroding the heart.

The battalion commander kept to himself, seeing to his duties.

However, he would occasionally glance at the vice-captain. It wasn't noticeable at first, but members of their squadron began to see it.

Everything remained the same until the eve of the final battle.

The commander walked into their tent, ignoring who was present.

"Lady Ranar... come back with me. Return to your father... this never happen, this mistake."

The golden-haired woman merely shook her head, holding her husband's hand.

He gritted his teeth as if disgusted by the sight before him.

"This is foul... one of your standing should not be standing next to a... a commoner. I could understand not marrying me if you had chosen a man worthy of you... but this..."

"Lord Ravenscroft, thank you for your concern, but you have no right to meddle in my business."

The coldness in her voice was something Linga never forgot.

The commander argued no further.

He turned around, stopping by the entrance.

"I warned you... I cannot allow your actions to tarnish thousands of years of pure blood... or the honor of your father and mine. For the good of both of our houses, I must right this wrong."

With those words, he left.

Linga sighed, looking at the silent Damon.

"Your parents decided to come clean to the rest of the squadron. They felt they owed us that much."

"We kept their secret; it was our oath."

He took a deep, pained breath.

"When the battle began, we were unexpected by a swarm of lesser demons. Far behind enemy lines... Our squad was ripped to pieces. Everyone died... I alone survived thanks to your father. The lesser demon swarm had been intentionally diverted there by him... so we would all die. It was a clean kill that could never be traced back to him."

Damon's hands trembled as he listened to Linga's tale.

"When I confronted him, I was arrested for trying to stage a mutiny and was to be executed... he couldn't even look me in the eye. My execution was denied by the division commander Seras Blade because it would damage morale, but I was dishonorably discharged."

"I took your father's sword and your mother's locket, adhering to their final wishes, and came to this village... He didn't send anyone to kill me. Maybe he thought I didn't matter... or perhaps he was too consumed by his own shame. Either way... I'm here."

Damon took deep, slow breaths, looking at the world-weary man with lost limbs. Linga had only summarized what had truly happened, but Damon didn't need more detail.

Just one... just one thing he wanted to know.

"Who was he... what is his name?"

Linga smiled faintly.

"Godric Ravenscroft... son of Duke Aspen Ravenscroft."

Damon clenched his fist with a smile.

"Godric..Godric, Godric Ravenscroft.."

He repeated the name, as if imprinting it into his soul.

It was evident Xander's brother was fated to die by his hands.

No, it was his choice to kill him.

Damon's shadow stretched into the trees, pulsing as his face paled with every second. His eyes flickered.

He tapped the man's shoulder calmly.

"Thank you for everything you've done for my family."

He pulled out a vial of his highest-quality potion and dropped it in front of the man, along with a large pouch of zeni.

Standing up, he walked away without another word. His face was calm, but the storm in his heart was anything but.

A single tear fell from his eye, carrying with it his boundless wrath and killing intent.

When it hit the ground, the grass slowly shriveled, blackened, and died.

Chapter 543: No Grudges Left

The villagers watched as Damon left with the caravan. Some travelers were heading towards Valerion, others were heading deeper into Ravenscroft territory.

However, Damon was heading towards the border of the Holy Empire. He would have to part ways with the caravan in about a day's time.

Before he left, he gave the village a million zeni to make their lives better — as it was the place where he was born. The travelers and adventurers kept singing his praise for his wisdom and kindness.

Seta watched Damon leave with the group he came with. No one died. He hadn't killed anyone.

The village resumed its activity. With no travelers around for the first time in a while, only residents remained.

Seta sat under the old oak tree with the village head and Neil.

"He... he actually just left... without killing anyone."

Her words made the village head frown.

"Yes... this old man was surprised... he didn't even try to brand us as heretics."

Neil smiled with lingering fear.

"He can't kill us with so many people around. We have whole families in the village..."

The old village head chuckled lightly.

"Ahhh... he's actually quite soft, like his father. If he had that woman's temperament, he would not have let us go..."

Seta bit her lips, gazing at the evening sun.

"I suppose he forgave us..."

"I did..." a voice came from the top of the tree — a voice that shouldn't be there.

Seta snapped her gaze upwards. A familiar-looking young man sat on one of the thick branches, holding a staff in his hand, his eyes calm and unreadable.

"Y... you... you... Damo... Damon... but... how..."

Damon glanced down at them, his face giving away nothing.

"Ahhh, right... about that... I have the ability to clone myself."

The village head paled when he heard that.

"Wha... what are your intentions...?"

Damon smiled faintly, his tone carrying a dangerous hum.

"My intentions? Did I not tell you...? It's obvious... You are all going to die..."

Neil didn't even wait for Damon to finish. He turned and bolted towards the edge of the village, screaming.

"Run! Run! He's going to kill us all!"

Damon didn't even look at him, still seated casually in the tree.

"There's nowhere to escape. I used those runes to keep the evil spirit in... but that wasn't the only reason. It was also to keep you all in as well... No one will escape."

As Neil ran, his screams caused panic. When someone tried to stop him, he frantically shouted Damon's name.

Those who were smart enough understood what would come next and began running towards the village's edge.

But when they reached it...

They hit an invisible wall.

Damon smiled, watching their helplessness.

Seta fell to her knees, looking up at the figure in the tree.

"You said you forgave us..."

"I did forgive you. That's why I'm wiping out all grudges."

He glanced at the village head.

"I'm not going to ask why you didn't fulfill my parents' last wish, but that's fine."

The village head raised his hand in fear.

"Please... show us mercy. Everything we did... we did to preserve the village. We were afraid we would get caught up in the politics of powerful nobles. Our village would never survive. I beg you... spare us."

Damon's expression remained calm.

"When we begged... did you show us any?"

Seta bowed her head, tears filling her eyes.

"We were wrong... please, give us another chance to change..."

"I did give you a chance. You just proved me right. And for that... I can't let you live. You will make this world more ugly."

Seta's eyes widened.

"If you kill us, that doesn't—"

"Enough..." Damon cut her off sharply.

"This small talk is so annoying. I think I'll just destroy the village."

He took a single step, leaping into the sky with his skill Air Walk. As he reached the highest vantage point, every villager could see him.

Damon raised the Staff of Carnage.

From the staff, a massive ball of black flames began to condense in the sky. The village watched in horror as the darkness spread. Those at the edge of the barrier pounded against it harder, desperate to escape, but nothing worked.

With a flick of the staff, the ball of destruction began to descend — slowly, deliberately, giving them time to witness their doom.

"Make your peace with the goddess... though you will not see her. I offer your souls to the god of the abyss."

Screams and desperate cries filled the air, but all was futile. Today, an entire village would be erased from the ground.

Men, women, even children... whole families were eviscerated, leaving nothing but ash.

With a roaring boom that echoed for miles and tremors that carried even farther, the small village of Littletown was destroyed.

Everything was gone. The earth was scorched and hardened into glass. Men and women were reduced to piles of ash, their shadows permanently burned into the ground by the searing destruction of the Ashborn flames.

And in the shadows, a faceless entity watched the destruction of what had once been his home. Where once he had been happy, everything was gone now — the house he grew up in, the fields, the windmills, part of the distant forest, the streams, even the gravestones of his parents.

Where he stood today, grass would never grow.

He had tried. He had really tried. He had wanted to be better — to be someone who could live up to a single noble idea.

But he was Damon Grey. How could there be anything noble about him? He could not be the justice-driven Evangeline, the honorable Xander, as pure as Leona, as loyal as Matia, or as accepting as Sylvia.

He was Damon Grey... and right now, all he could think of was blood. He didn't care how — but he wanted it. The heart in his chest was not allowed to feel guilty.

That emotion, he had given entirely to his main body. Let that version of him wallow in self-pity.

This version of him wanted blood, and by the unknown god, he would have it.

And as he stood there, he heard a familiar chime.

[You have leveled up.]

[You have gained 150 Attribute Points.]

[You have awakened the skill: Heart of Shadow.]

Chapter 544: New Grudge

A few hours after leaving the village, a long caravan of travelers already larger than when they'd left Little Town came to a stop.

It was still a few hours until sunset, but they paused to bid farewell to the ascendant who had carried them through trials and tribulations.

There was a straight path ahead for their journey; however, Damon was heading towards the border of the Holy Empire. For that reason, he was going his separate way.

This road led to the center of the Ravenscroft domain. It was the only official route.

However, Damon reasoned that if he went through the more dangerous, uncharted areas away from the Golden Roads, he could meet Lilith Astranova on time.

Staying with them would set him a few weeks behind schedule.

Unnoticed Singularity and his party stood next to Damon.

"You really won these people over with manipulation..." Singularity remarked, his tone dry.

Damon smiled, shaking his head.

"I like to call it selectively honest..."

Twilight narrowed his eyes.

"You're nicer than I thought, letting those people live... I couldn't do something like that..."

Damon smiled faintly, making sure his voice carried far enough for the caravan to hear.

"If I killed them, the number of killers in this world would stay the same. And if I killed the adults... what about the children?"

His tone was loud enough for almost everyone nearby to hear.

Saint chuckled.

"You didn't have to say it so loudly..."

Damon smiled again. That was true.

He raised his hand for a handshake.

"You guys are unusual, but I had fun. Our journey was interesting, and I learned quite a bit from you all."

Singularity took his hand. Damon leaned in slightly, lowering his voice.

"Where are you guys heading now?"

Singularity smiled lightly.

"We actually found a clue to leave this world—far under the Vuldren, the Sky Continent. This might be the last time you see us."

Damon nodded, feeling a trace of sadness.

"I see... I hope you guys succeed in getting out of this shitty world. Farewell and safe travels—except Dred. The bug can die."

Dred chuckled.

"That's not very nice, brother-in-law. If I don't leave this world, I'll marry your sister."

Damon pulled out his dealer's hand, the blade gleaming sharply.

"I don't mind... I taking you out of it now."

The others chimed in.

"We can help. We're tired of his shenanigans."

Damon sighed, taking hold of his stag's reins. With a nod, he set off, waving to the caravan.

The people tossed flowers into the air and sang songs in his honor as his figure disappeared down the distant road.

A few minutes later.

A tremor traveled through the earth. On the horizon, a black sphere of destruction hung in the air, dust and smoke billowing upward.

Singularity narrowed his eyes.

"That's the direction of Little Town."

He turned to look in Damon's direction, but the ascendant was already gone.

"That bastard just gave himself an alibi..."

Even if someone passed by Little Town and saw it destroyed, no one would suspect Damon—the benevolent savior of the caravan. After all, it was impossible for a person to be in two places at once.

"At this point, I'm not even sure how he did it..." Singularity muttered.

It didn't matter.

Many miles away, the sun had set. Damon sat perched in the branches of a tree, gazing toward where his village had once stood.

On his shoulder rested a raven, and a red squirrel lounged lazily on his head.

Damon sighed, bitterness twisting in his chest. His village was gone now... he had wiped them all out.

He wasn't quite sure how to feel. On one hand, there was his clone—an extension of himself acting out Damon's darkest impulses. On the other, there was his main body, left to feel the melancholy.

"Now that they're dead... I suppose I should figure out how to move in with Grandpa..."

Damon winced. Saying it out loud made his skin crawl. But even if he couldn't let go of his paranoia, his mother had trusted her father with them—that was enough. In fact, it was plenty.

The problem was Damon didn't quite know how to approach the old Duke... or if he truly wanted to.

"Luna's treatment is expensive, but after the war games, I can get her a permanent cure in the World Dungeon."

Still, that wasn't the only reason. Damon didn't know if anyone might come after Luna. Trouble coming for him was fine, but he couldn't protect both Luna and Iris at once.

If he moved in with his grandfather, he would secure the protection of one of the most powerful people in the Empire—and the world.

"I can also get some much-needed breathing room to focus on other things..."

He closed his eyes, seeing the world from two points of view—his own, and that of his shadow clone.

His clone was already heading toward the center of the domain to assassinate the son of a Duke and celebrated war hero.

Killing him quietly would be difficult... so Damon decided he wouldn't be quiet at all. No plan—he'd figure it out when he got there.

He jumped down from the tree.

The level up requirement had been for him to kill his whole village, but he hadn't done it for leveling. No—he had done it because he wanted to. It was his choice.

He had also gained a new skill—one far more useful than he'd first thought. Seeing its potential almost made him feel vindicated for all the suffering he had endured because of his shadow.

He was about to sit and examine the skill when the ground trembled beneath him.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

It was close. Spreading his shadow perception, he located a group of heavily armed knights escorting a moving convoy of carriages.

They bore no crest, but the knights' movements marked them as Valtheron-trained. Damon's gaze sharpened—it was clear they were on a secret mission.

Quickly, he led his stag into the bushes, blending into the shadows as the convoy passed through the uncharted land.

He felt powerful auras among them, including some in the Fourth Class Advancement.

When they passed by, one knight stopped, turning toward the bushes.

With a casual wave of his hand, he slaughtered Damon's stag.

Damon's brow furrowed. His steed collapsed beside where Damon had already melted into shadow.

The knight scanned the area.

"An elven stag... hmm. No rider..."

He was about to dismount when another knight called from behind him.

"Sir, if I'm not wrong, this must belong to the elven assassins we were updated about. Reports said they perished—this must be one of their mounts."

The first knight nodded.

"I see... lowly elves shouldn't be allowed to act so boldly in the Empire."

"Send a search party. If there is anyone who has seen us... eliminate them."

Damon stayed still, acting like any normal shadow.

Still, his heart was filled with bitterness and a nascent grudge.

Chapter 545: Heart Of Shadow

Damon was already in a bad mood... these people could have just left him to wallow in his melancholy and self-pity.

But no — fate, or rather someone, had made a choice to mess with him.

He would have come out to give them a piece of his mind, but these guys had some knights in the fourth class.

It wasn't that he didn't dare — he just wasn't in the mood for that kind of fight.

They weren't that powerful; they were only two ranks higher than him and could shatter mountains and level cities. It was nothing to him.

The lower-ranked knights in the third class searched the area, not finding anything... except a strange pair in a tree watching them with bored expressions.

Naturally, it was the raven and the squirrel.

Damon almost cursed his two wretched pets for how casual they were taking things.

The knights didn't find anything, so they mounted their steeds — dragon horses by the looks of them — and chased after the convoy.

After a few minutes, Damon emerged from the shadows.

He glanced at the corpse of the stag he had gotten from the elven assassins.

Its neck was sliced, blood pooled beneath it, its body covered in red, and its eyes now glassy.

It had died without even making a sound. The saddle didn't have anything on it, so the knights must have concluded there was no rider.

As for why there was nothing on it... that was because Damon had his shadow storage.

He placed his hand on the stag.

'I could have sold this for some money...'

Elven stags were expensive, especially one like this.

There was also the fact that it looked cool and helped farm aura.

'Now I have to walk like a... like a peasant...'

While Damon was grieving the loss, the raven and squirrel — who had no shame or sense of camaraderie — were already looting the corpse.

The raven ate the eye while the vile squirrel went for the less dignified parts.

Damon's eyes twitched.

"The both of you have no honor... he was on our side..."

The raven cawed with disdain.

"Look who's talking..."

The squirrel sneered with a squeal, adding a few more squeals.

"We barely knew him."

Maybe someone needed to remind the damn rodent she was a newcomer too.

Damon's eyes twitched. He really had to be careful who he called his friends, these two might just be waiting for him to die so they could feast on his corpse.

Come to think of it, each of them had a reason to hold a grudge against him. He had shot the raven and destroyed the squirrel's collection.

"You two better not be nursing a grudge from way back when..."

They didn't even care about him as they continued eating the remains of the stag.

Still, Damon was feeling petty. He didn't want to let this just go. He was Damon Grey — when had he not pissed off those more powerful than him?

He glanced in the direction they were headed.

"Hmmm... they're going deep into what could be potential danger..."

That was farther into where whatever was awakening was. Damon had intended to divert from the area after a few more kilometers.

He glanced at the two animals.

"Hey... we may not have known Stag for long... but don't you think it's unfair to let him die in vain..."

The raven and squirrel glanced at each other.

'Did this bastard forget those guys were more powerful than him? If he was going to commit suicide, we're out...'

The squirrel, who was a master at avoiding danger, gave him a disgusted sneer.

Damon shook his head.

"There are eyeballs and testicles if it goes well..."

There was a brief silence before they both jumped onto his shoulders, cursing the foul men who killed Brother Stag.

Damon smiled — having their usual company was soothing in a way.

He clenched his fist.

"I have no idea what horror is in that direction, but I'm going there... that knight guy killed my mount..."

A squeal came from the squirrel. "Yeah, let's kill his mount..."

Damon grabbed its tail.

"Don't interrupt, fool. We're stealing his mount. Goddess, we're thieves, not murderers..."

The raven took the opportunity to curry favor, cawing at the squirrel.

"What did that dragon horse ever do to you..."

Damon squeezed his fist. The feeling of unease in his chest grew... but he didn't want to let this go. He had two choices:

Divert and go to the border of the Holy Kingdom... or jump straight into danger and potentially certain death for a brief moment of pettiness that would not pay off.

Obviously, Damon was not smart enough to go for safety... pettiness was the way to go.

He walked casually forward, his shadow perception keeping track of them while avoiding detection.

Shadow energy was not a problem — not with his new skill.

He opened the system panel.

[Heart of Shadow]

[Description]

The shadow was her soul, inseparable, constant. One night, in a forgotten place, the darkness stole it away. She cried, but it was gone — leaving her hollow, lost in a world of empty light.

"To lose your shadow is to lose yourself in the dark."

Your shadow now becomes your heart; it can never be lost.

[Effect:]

Your shadow now becomes your heart and can never be lost.

Absorbs and stores shadows, slowly breaking them into shadow energy.

Passively generates shadow energy as long as you remain in the presence of deep shadows.

[Type:]

Passive

[Cooldown:]

0 sec

This skill was truly the best Damon had. It now provided a permanent solution to his need to feed his shadow with flesh.

As long as he was in the dark or in the embrace of shadows, he could passively regain lost shadow energy.

He could also absorb and store shadows in his heart.

With this, the parameters for the shadow reconstruction skill were also complete.

He could now recreate his body if it got destroyed.

Damon touched his chest — he could feel the shadow energy trickling inside and filling his heart.

He could also feel Matia inside his heart.

His heart was now vast — more so than a human's.

He placed his hand firmly on his chest.

"I've come far... from the person who didn't want to be a man-eating monster... to someone who accepted it..."

Damon looked at the deep shadows around him.

"What am I becoming..."

The answer to that was still unknown to him, like many things. But the one thing he did know was:

"I am still Damon Grey, and that should be all that matters..."

Chapter 546: I'll Wing It

He had to be careful. While he was suicidal, he was not ready to die at the moment. However, Damon was also aware that defeating them was not even a factor in his equation.

The few knights in the fourth class here were a massive threat — just one could take him out. Then there was the multitude of those in the third class.

He kept his shadow perception off them, careful not to trigger attention.

At the same time, Damon still had to keep an eye on them without actually looking directly. It was a well-known fact that at a certain level of strength, you could instantly sense when someone was staring at you.

This level of equipment and troops... they seemed well-organized and far too secretive.

It was clear from the scratches on their carriages that they had not contacted any civilized part of the world in quite some time.

"However, they knew about the elves."

Which meant they still had information passed to them even in the wilderness.

Who in the empire had such power? Damon could only think of a few who could casually deploy such a force.

It was clear... this was either the grand duchies or the imperial crown.

He ruled out the Temple. If it was them, he would have seen some trace of religious designs. These knights were more loyal to the state than to the goddess.

Damon swung down from a tree, his feet briefly stepping on the air like it was solid ground before he slid into a shadow, tailing them from a few kilometers behind.

There seemed to be a chain of command — someone in the main carriage was giving orders, and this group of knights obeyed with almost reverent precision.

Damon felt a twinge of envy.

"Goddess, when..."

When would he have this kind of privilege? All he had was a few hundred orcs... maybe he was being ungrateful.

He shook his head. This was not the time to remember he was poor.

The chase — or rather, their journey — continued deeper into the wilderness, across rough terrain.

For hours, the cover of darkness grew deeper. Damon began to wonder if these people even planned to stop for the night. He disliked stalwart knightly types — workaholics to the bone.

Except Matia. She was perfect.

Just as he considered whether it was worth continuing the chase, they slowed at a clearing and began setting up camp. The knights quickly used a magic artifact to raise a large command tent.

Afterwards, they arranged themselves into a protective formation and approached the main carriage. Using massive tower shields, they formed a canopy that connected to the tent flaps.

Damon didn't see who stepped out, nor did he use his shadow perception to check. Whoever it was, they were clearly high profile.

"They must really like being dramatic... I mean, walk out of the carriage like a normal person. I can understand if it's sunny or raining, but come on..."

The raven and the squirrel merely watched the dirt-poor commoner vent about the good life.

The person entered the tent before the rest began setting up smaller tents around the clearing. At the center, what seemed to be a mage class woman was activating a magic artifact that projected a barrier over the area to keep intruders out.

Damon slipped inside just before the barrier sealed, hiding his shadow form within the shrubbery.

He looked no different from any ordinary patch of darkness.

If a formless shadow had lips, Damon would have smiled. Now that he had the Heart of Shadow, he didn't have to worry too much about shadow energy.

"I can do this all day..."

The squirrel and raven didn't even need to hide. In a forest, they were just forest critters. The knights ignored them so long as they didn't cause trouble — though Damon didn't trust those two.

The raven had been well-behaved... until the squirrel joined.

Damon slid casually through the shadows.

Only after entering the camp's inner perimeter did he realize he didn't have a plan. Not a damn one. Not even a vague idea.

'Man proposes, Unknown God disposes... planning is useless. I'll wing it.'

Damon was certain that come what may, he would not die.

And if he got captured and tortured... that sounded like a good time. In case he couldn't escape, he could always play his "rescue me" card: Big Sis Lilith Astranova.

If that didn't work, he'd arrogantly declare, "Do you know who my grandfather is?"

Would that make him lose aura? Yes. But so what? Having rich backers was part of life.

"You only hate nepotism because it doesn't benefit you..."

It wouldn't come to that, though. He was just here to steal a dragon horse — er, get compensation for the mount that knight killed.

By now, half an hour had passed. The knights had campfires going, the scent of delicious food wafting out. They spoke softly, their discipline unshakable.

No doubt about it — imperial knights.

Which begged the question: who was leading them?

Damon glanced toward the dragon horses being fed on the far side of camp. He could circle around, but cutting across would save time.

"I can teleport out of here, right..."

He probably couldn't, but curiosity won out.

"Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back..."

With that as his guide, Damon began mapping escape routes in his head. The raven and squirrel moved in from different sides of the camp.

He avoided knights by hiding and gliding through shadows. When he reached the tent, he sensed the aura of two rank-four knights pressing against him.

He froze as one turned toward his location — spotting only a raven standing in the grass, its deep shadow stretching unnaturally long.

The knight looked away, losing interest in the bird.

Damon exhaled quietly in relief, then slid around to the back of the tent and sank into its shadow, using shadow movement to slip inside.

What he saw made his eyes widen slightly.

Chapter 547: The Audacity

He swore he was not jealous... but lately, the unknown god was really stingy with the items he got... because whoever had this tent was living it up.

It was massive inside, far bigger than the outside clearly, spatial magic had been used to expand it, giving it the feeling of a palace.

It had chandeliers, long and bright, with gold embossed everywhere. The carpet was soft, and a large table with a map on it dominated the center. Weapons and armor were arranged along the walls, serving as part of its grand interior.

'Can't I steal this instead...'

At the center, there was a large golden throne.

Damon placed his hand on his chin, disappointment in his eyes.

"This golden throne isn't bad... but I'll have to change it to black. The color just isn't for me."

Did someone need to remind this piece of shit that this was not his, and he couldn't change anything?

There was another flap that led to more private quarters.

Whatever... he would check that part later. He turned to the map and walked around like he owned the place, his steps carrying an effortless grace. If someone had walked in right then, they might have mistaken him for the actual owner of this magical tent.

He glanced at the map, which was carved directly into the table. There were a few trail markers showing their route.

"Hmmm... guess I was right. They've been in the uncharted wilderness all this time, traveling in secret."

He put two and two together.

"But it seems they've completed their mission and are heading back to Valerion."

Taking a deep breath, he inhaled the elegant fragrance lingering in the air.

At some point, the raven and the squirrel had entered. The squirrel came to his feet, pointing at where the raven had found some papers.

Damon looked at them with disgust.

"You think I would pry into someone's private affairs... I am appalled that you didn't show me sooner."

Of course, the squirrel knew his character.

He sat down in the chair, leaning back, and noticed a half-empty glass of clearly expensive wine.

Picking up the glass and the paper, he began reading the report.

"It's not much, really... just a confirmation of death report. Apparently, some long-dead knights sent on a secret mission has finally been confirmed dead..."

He was reading casually until he got to the part that mentioned where they died.

"Lysithara..." Damon muttered, setting down the glass.

Did this have to do with that knights sent by the empire? He remembered one of the Fallen — a man who had become a living tree after failing the Keeper's riddle.

"That was centuries ago... yet the empire didn't rule them out until now."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Whose tent am I in...?"

He put down the report and began walking toward the inner tent flap. Just as he was about to open it, he paused.

"Ahhh, no... I'm crazy. How can I forget to take the nice wine?"

He went back, grabbed the wine bottle and the expensive-looking glass, then peeked through the flap.

There was no one inside... just a massive room with several flaps leading elsewhere.

A large bed, a soft ambiance, a table with chairs, and comfortable sofas filled the space — a perfect room fit for royalty.

Soft carpets covered the floor. On the bed, disassembled armor lay neatly beside a massive spear, and a dress lay discarded on the floor, leading toward another flap from which he could hear the faint sound of running water.

'I see... it's a lady's chamber.' Damon walked to the armor and spear.

'Should I steal these...?'

He was about to touch them when a faint sensation from his danger sense made him pause.

'I'll hold off until I'm about to leave...'

The spear looked golden and beautiful, with a wide tip and a faint halo. Runes were carved into it, reading:

Destruction.

With nothing else to do, he sprawled out on the bed, finishing the report. Rolling around in the covers with a calm, almost bored expression, he grew a bit too comfortable, a hint of drowsiness creeping in.

"This is some good bed... I'll take this too."

Worried he might actually fall asleep, he stood and moved to the chair, sitting down to continue reading.

It seemed the empire and temple were in a race to track down any traces of Ashcroft's. So far, they had found nothing — except the fact that he would return to the continent where he had fallen. That was why Soltheon was always the first continent demons attacked during a demon war.

Damon set down the papers and took another sip of wine, letting it help him relax.

Leaning back, his thoughts drifted to the mysteries of Ashcroft's — the Demon Lord of Domination.

Ashcroft had been the most powerful demon the world had ever known. He had single-handedly defeated the heroes and legends of his era, rebuilt the demon race from ruins, and brought them to a power that dominated nine continents. He had come close to uniting the world under his rule... until, in his hubris, he had stood before the statue of the goddess and called her the Bride of the Unknown God.

That had been why he was destroyed by her vast will.

However, Damon knew one thing... just as he had died and been brought back, the unknown god would bring Ashcroft's back — he had said he would.

And the unknown god always kept a promise.

Sighing softly, Damon swirled the wine in his glass, lost in thought, forgetting that he was not the master of this place and was just an intruder.

Closing his eyes, he took another sip, savoring the taste... until he heard the sound of dripping water.

When he looked, Damon felt his heart go cold.

His gaze fell on the wide eyes of a woman with long black hair, wet and clinging to her form. He was caught by the intensity of her red eyes and the breathtaking elegance of her beauty. Her presence was otherworldly and alluring.

She was also completely naked.

Her gaze didn't waver. She slowly moved her arm to cover her chest, hiding what little she could, her expression calm.

Damon was unsure how to react. She was composed, and he was insane enough not to let her outdo him.

He took a sip of the wine.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Naturally, the arrogant voice didn't come from the woman who owned the tent. No, it came from the wretched bastard who had broken in and seen her naked.

The audacity.

Chapter 548: Target Neutralized

No words were exchanged. All she did was look at this mysterious man in front of her.

There was a soft, regal aura about him; he was calm, as if unbothered by her nudity or her beauty.

He wore a crown upon his head, his long dark hair matching the elegance of his beautiful light armor. A darkness lingered in his eyes, one that refused to reflect any light at all.

It was like the night.

Damon kept his expression calm. His unusual confidence gave her pause did he not care that he was surrounded by knights, some of them officers in the fourth class advancement?

Was he more powerful than them, to have gotten inside without anyone noticing?

Was he an assassin sent to kill her? He wouldn't be the first...

Many thoughts ran through her head.

Damon waited for her to answer his question, remaining perfectly still with that familiar hint of baseless arrogance.

She slowly turned toward the bed where her spear lay, taking her time as she stepped toward the dress she'd left discarded on the floor.

Damon already felt the awkwardness creeping in, but whoever lost their cool first would lose the advantage.

There was a small tremble in her hands that told Damon she was not as calm as she appeared.

And the faint redness on her ears... though he was unsure if it came from rage or embarrassment.

She picked up the dress, pulling it up from her feet with slow, deliberate movements.

Damon's danger sense suddenly screamed to life as she dashed toward her spear on the bed.

He didn't even see her raise it — all he heard was the word:

"Die..."

What followed wasn't destruction from flame or force... it was simply destruction itself.

Damon reacted instantly, his form melting into shadow before teleporting out of the tent just as a deafening boom tore through the camp.

He felt aggrieved really, he did. He was just asking her who she was. Sure, he'd sounded arrogant... but that was simply the way Damon Grey worked.

It wasn't his fault she'd come out of the bath naked in her own private chamber, in her own private tent, where no one else was supposed to be.

He'd done nothing wrong. He was just there to get what was owed to him.

"I'm just collecting debt, dammit."

Damon wasn't a fool — reckless, yes, but not foolish. He had already planned his escape.

As the chaos erupted in the main tent, every knight and attendant rushed to protect their lady.

He knew that for this reason she would take her time to get dressed before making her move.

With their formation breaking to converge on the central tent, other parts of the camp would be left unguarded.

While they charged in, Damon teleported directly beside the magic artifact powering the barrier. As soon as he appeared, he drew his broken sword, ignited it with the flames of Ashborn, and drove it into the artifact's core.

The black fire cut through its metallic frame with only a flicker of resistance.

The barrier around the camp sputtered and collapsed. Damon's next step placed him beside the dragon horses tied to the pickets.

He released each one, sending a few magic bullets into the air to scatter them into a frenzy.

As they bolted, his sword whirled from his grasp, decapitating one of the dragon horses instantly.

That one belonged to the knight that had killed his stag.

"Intruder!"

One of the knights spotted him. Damon vaulted onto the nearest mount, leaping over the corpse of the slain beast.

His sword returned to his hand as he spurred the dragon horse forward, diving into the dark forest ahead.

Before he got far, a sharp chill ran down his neck, instinct made him duck before his danger sense could even fully register.

A soft slicing sound cut the air.

When he raised his head, all the trees within a kilometer in every direction had been severed cleanly.

His face paled. A deep shadow loomed behind him.

One of the fourth-class advancement knights had moved — and it hadn't even been with a sword. Just a wave of the man's hand.

'I did not think this through...'

The dragon horse, a rank-three magic beast, decreased the distance with incredible speed, but Damon could feel the shadows of pursuit closing in.

He'd scattered their mounts, but that meant little — these knights were superhuman, able to run him down on foot.

Wind tore through his hair as the hooves thundered beneath him, the rhythm matched by the organized charge of those behind.

Arrows streaked through the air, forcing him to weave and twist in the saddle, never slowing his pace.

The dragon horse's breathing grew heavier, but Damon urged it on, hooves barely skimming the ground.

This was their beast, their property — and he was using it against them.

Sweat ran down his temple as the wind roared past.

"Damn you bastard... you started this... you started this..."

He dove past a massive tree, his shoulder smashing through part of its trunk. Relief began to creep in — maybe he had lost them.

Then the world went white.

From above, a mage had hurled a sphere of pure destruction down at him.

Damon reined in the dragon horse there was no escaping it at this speed, not from that range.

In the distance, the knights closed in on foot, just in time to see him smile, arms spread wide as if welcoming the attack.

Light swallowed everything, erasing shadows as the blast incinerated the forest for several kilometers.

When it faded, nothing remained except the half-melted hooves of the dragon horse.

The knights approached cautiously, scanning the scorched ground.

One of them glanced at the others.

"Report back. Target neutralized."

He narrowed his eyes.

"However, to be safe, sweep several kilometers for any trace of dark or shadow attributes."

Naturally, Damon was long gone. Not because he could overpower their equipment or strength — no, not at all.

He had simply hidden in the one place they would never think to look.

Chapter 549: Safe And Close

"The search only confirmed one thing — the unknown intruder is dead, leaving no remains, and that concludes my report."

A harpy woman bowed as she completed her report.

The lady she was facing was a woman of breathtaking beauty, long dark hair cascading down her back, and deep red eyes that seemed to shimmer.

She narrowed her eyes.

"Search again..."

It was the fifth time she had repeated that order to her subordinates. She was unsure why, but she had a feeling the man she had seen would not die easily — especially not so quietly.

The knight outside the carriage bowed slowly.

"Prin—general, I believe the target is dead. However, I dare not question your judgment. That said, with all due respect, we are behind schedule... the emperor is losing patience with each passing day."

The woman bit her lip when the emperor was mentioned.

She closed the flap to the carriage, shutting out the knight.

"Very well then... we can proceed. However, if you find him, I want him alive. If that's not possible, kill him."

The knight's voice acknowledged her order.

"As you wish, my lady..."

The harpy woman sat quietly, observing the change in her lady, the deep creases forming on her beautiful brows.

As the carriages began to move, the black-haired lady turned her gaze to a cage beside her.

Inside was a raven and a squirrel quietly watching her.

These had been in her quarters when the mysterious man had left. She had captured them.

"Who was he..." she asked no one in particular.

However, the harpy attendant still answered.

"We are unable to determine his identity at the moment. We are still working on a sketch..."

She picked up the cage, holding it up as she examined the two animals.

"This is a three-eyed raven — they are rare, and in their youth, they look indistinguishable from normal ravens. They are said to be messengers of death and harbingers of darkness... quite rare..."

Her eyes narrowed when she looked at the squirrel.

"As for this, it should be a scarlet flying squirrel, a species unique to the Evil Forest, known for their extreme speed, sharp claws, and fangs... and a little quirk — a love for male genitalia, specifically their testicles..."

The attendant was once again in awe of her lady's knowledge.

"From that, I can deduce he is from Soltheon... because these two are creatures native to the Evil Forest. From his accent, I can deduce he's from Valtheron... there was also the way he was holding the wine cup — something native to a noble of this empire. It's subtle but noticeable. But..."

She narrowed her eyes.

"What I can't place is his face. If he were a noble of Valtheron, I would know about him... especially if he is high-ranked enough to wear something like a crown."

She placed a hand on her chin.

"He's not a member of the ducal households. Nothing about them would fly under my radar..."

The attendant frowned.

"Could he be a foreign noble who stayed in Valtheron?"

She smiled, shaking her head.

"No, Lita... I don't think so. His etiquette is something pounded into his very essence the kind you get taught as a child until it becomes a habit."

"Understood..." Lita replied.

"Tell me, Lita... why do you think he was in my quarters? If he was there to kill me, he was certainly too bold... there's also the fact he didn't have any hostility..."

Lita smirked, looking at the beautiful woman.

"Could he be one of your countless suitors, looking for new ways to impress you?"

The woman frowned, remembering that Damon had seen her naked. That wretch...

"If he was, he is going about it in all the worst ways..."

She smiled lightly.

"But I do commend his audacity. I'll keep his head and use his skull to drink from as a way to remember such boldness... when I find him."

Damon sneered, watching the woman from an unexpected place.

'If you find me...'

Seriously, what was wrong with this woman? Was she a stalker? What did he even do to her?

Damon didn't sigh — because he couldn't. How could a shadow sigh? Which made him wonder... how was he even breathing?

For the most part, he was safe. However, as the old saying goes — the most dangerous places were often the safest.

His danger sense was going crazy the longer he stayed there, but Damon also couldn't leave. The farther they traveled, the greater the feeling grew.

He knew he would not be able to escape their detection, so he took the only viable option hiding right under their nose.

Well, in this case, it would be hiding under her skirt... or close to that.

Damon was naturally in the convoy's main carriage, hiding right under the woman's carriage seat... as a harmless-looking shadow.

Of all the places to search, they would never have guessed he chose to hide inside the carriage of their lady.

It wasn't just audacious, it was suicidal. And that was why it was the best option. No... it was the only option.

And thus, Damon just went along for the ride. His evil familiars were here too since they had been captured. He honestly expected them to rat him out, but it seemed they were content to stay quiet.

The woman seemed to have taken an interest in them — and in him — but wanting to drink from his skull?

For what? Because he saw her naked? And that one time, he didn't even look that much.

The urge to poke himself out from under the seat and tell her off was strong in his heart, but he let it go...

Just as he was starting to relax in this dangerous place, taking in her pleasant fragrance...

The ground shook. There were loud growls that echoed through the forest, as well as the voices of knights.

"Ambush! Battle stations! Protect the general! Protect the general!"

Damon didn't spread his shadow perception to avoid detection — although he wished he had — because he heard a low crack as the world spun on its head, flipping and crashing, shattering upon the hard trees and earth. Wood and leaves poured in with the outside sunlight.

Something had thrown the carriage aside. The woman and her attendant jumped out, weapons appearing in their hands.

With them gone, Damon grabbed the cage with his squeaking pets inside.

As the sounds of battle grew intense, Damon slipped out as a shadow.

What he saw made him freeze.

Chapter 550: Just A Harmless Little Goblin

Damon froze because what he saw was not uncommon, but still surprising to witness in this particular region, especially with Valerion merely a week away and the Ravenscroft domain so close.

These creatures walked on all fours, their slick black scales glistening in the dim light. Long, whip-like tails lashed behind them, claws as long as daggers dug furrows into the ground, and sharp fangs more than capable of biting through steel armor flashed in the shadows.

Their monstrous strength and speed were such that they could rip a grown man in half with relative ease.

Their eyes held that same spark of murderous intellect Damon had once read about.

"Lesser demons," he whispered.

And from the looks of it... they were just the start.

Damon gripped the bars of the cage and, with a soft snap, broke them apart. Croft and Scar shot out immediately—one in a burst of black feathers, the other darting away with a flick of a bushy tail.

Seeing the danger, they didn't need encouragement. Damon really wanted to curse the damn raven and squirrel, but it seemed they had the right idea.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, something moved in the corner of his vision. What was flung toward him was the body of a knight—or rather, half of it.

The severed remains tumbled through the air before crashing to the ground, armor clattering, entrails spilling out with a fetid stench that burned his nostrils.

Damon's danger sense exploded, a sharp pressure in his chest. This had been a knight in the Third Class... what could do that to him?

He didn't even need to look far.

Something—no, a group of somethings—was tearing through the knights.

They were easily nine meters tall, their horned heads rising above the treetops, bodies covered in thick fur. They looked almost like minotaurs—except far, far worse.

"Goristro." Damon slid back further, trying to put distance between himself and the carnage.

This was a monstrous type of demon with the strength and power to shake the earth. Aggressive, relentless, and always full of rage.

Screrrrch... THANG!

The sound of tearing metal and splitting earth filled the air. Damon saw the glow of flames and heard the deafening sound of the forest itself being torn apart.

In the smoke and chaos, wings of fire spread wide. One of the knights—Fourth Class by his armor and aura—was engaged in a desperate battle against a towering horned monstrosity with a body of molten rock and sulfur.

The ground around it cracked and blackened, turning to bubbling lava as it hurled burning chunks of earth with every step.

Balrog.

The flaming wings were what made this species of demon so feared in the Demon Wars.

Balors, as some called them, were cunning and avoided head-on fights when possible, preferring to scheme from a distance and decimate their enemies with devastating spells and vile magic.

In mere moments, the forest lay in ruins. Goristros ripped entire trees apart, scattering splinters as both allies and enemies fell in heaps of broken bodies.

Through the chaos, Damon caught sight of a striking figure—a beautiful woman clad in gleaming armor, a long spear in her hand. On her back unfurled a pair of golden-yellow wings.

"She's a fae..." Damon muttered, turning to flee the scene.

The woman sidestepped a lashing demon tail and, with a precise thrust, impaled the lesser demon's head. Shifting her wings, she surged slightly into the air.

Her spear glowed with destructive light, her eyes briefly flicking toward the commander locked in combat with the Balrog.

Seeing they didn't need her help, she exhaled in relief. As long as those in the Fourth Class held their ground, they could handle this.

"Stand your ground... switch to Formation Five!"

She raised her hand, and feathers from her wings floated forward, drifting down like golden petals. The first feather landed on the head of a lesser demon. Its skull caved in with a wet crack, shattering into a burst of blood that sprayed across a knight's armor.

Damon, already keeping his distance, narrowed his eyes.

"She's in the Third Class... but not far from the Fourth. And she's quite the monster..."

Not that he cared—his danger sense was spiking higher and higher. And worse...

Whatever was coming, he needed to see it from a safe distance.

"This is Lysithara all over again..."

The battle raged on. With superior skill and discipline, the knights began to overwhelm the demons.

Damon watched as victory started to shift back toward the humans. He considered going back to try and devour a demon corpse, but quickly shook his head.

Safe distance was better.

The knight officers in the Fourth Class shattered the Balrog's horn in a blinding white flash. The mage woman—who had nearly pulverized Damon earlier—launched a spell with terrifying force, obliterating the demon. The knights pushed forward, boxing the remaining demons in and cutting them down.

Swords and spears clashed against teeth and claws. Damon's unease grew. Something wasn't right—there was no demon-kin leading them.

Normally, a very human-looking demon would be in charge. But here... there was nothing.

He wasn't the only one to feel it. The fae woman's wings flickered restlessly, her brows creasing.

This was too unusual. Demons didn't simply attack without cause—especially not here. No one should have known the knights' route, and even if they had, she wouldn't expect this kind of force.

Judging by the way the demons had reacted, it seemed more like they had been caught off-guard by the knights' presence, rather than executing a planned ambush.

As she processed this, something stepped out from the burning ruins of the trees—what little was left of them that wasn't shattered or aflame.

It was small.

A creature walking on two legs, with pointed ears and green skin, no taller than half a man. A long nose jutted from its face.

A goblin.

Ordinary, common, forgettable. And yet...

When she saw it, her hands trembled.

This goblin walked with the air of a conqueror, as if the world owed him allegiance as if all existence existed to serve this proud, chosen son of heaven.

He strolled past the corpses of the slain demons. The moment he appeared, the battlefield went silent. Not just the demons—everyone stopped.

Far in his hiding place, Damon felt his chest tighten. His shadow trembled and twitched like it did when it hungered only now, so much worse.

Every instinct screamed at him to flee... but he couldn't. He had to witness this formless majesty.

The goblin reached the center of the battlefield and glanced at the Balrog's corpse, letting out a disappointed sigh.

"They just don't make Balors like they used to..."

His words were calm, clear, carrying a deep-seated arrogance and charisma that made you want to bow before him.

A knight in the Fourth Class stood in front of him, raising his sword with all his strength.

"Die, critter!"

The goblin didn't even move. He muttered softly to himself.

"This body is failing me... no matter."

He extended his hand, palm open toward the knight, and spoke a single command.

"Mind dominate."