

Shadow 551

Chapter 551: Overwhelming Power

No one needed to be reminded of what goblins were, but for those who needed to know...

Goblins were small monsters. They were low- to mid-tier threats at best—unless they came in swarms numbering in the thousands, they were not considered a serious danger. Exceptions existed, of course—dangerous subspecies like Red Caps, and a few others, or perhaps advanced types like Hobgoblins, who grew to the size of a man, or worse, Great Goblins, that grew to the size of a troll.

However, most were just small, especially the common green types barely half the height of a man.

They were weak... or at least, that was the case.

No one took them seriously.... Except newbie adventurers.

So why did Damon's heart pound? Why did his shadow tremble, urging him to flee?

Yet Damon wanted to see this. He couldn't leave, this distance was far from safe.

'Curiosity killed the cat, and satisfaction brought it back... assuming I live to enjoy the feeling.'

Because what he saw made him freeze. A knight in the Fourth Class had just been brought to his knees... by a... by a...

'Lowly goblin.'

He wasn't the only one who froze. The knight trembled as if resisting some unseen force, clutching his head.

"Ahrggggg... ghhahhah!" he screamed frantically, clawing at his helm.

The goblin sighed in disappointment and waved his hand.

The screaming stopped. What followed was the sound of something rolling on the ground. Damon, far away, felt his hands tremble and his eyes widen in horror.

"I... I... didn't even see what... he did..."

And he hadn't—because what rolled was the knight's head. This was a high-ranking officer in the Fourth Class...

A Fourth Class knight had died—helpless. This was someone in the same league as Marabel Defontee, someone who could shatter mountains and live for a thousand years or more...

They were just killed by... by a goblin.

Damon wasn't the only one consumed by shock. If the knight had been killed so easily by a dragon or a scylla, it would have made sense...

"Wha... wha... Commander Clinton... h... how..."

Everyone froze until another knight, also in the Fourth Class, raised his spear. Its tip glowed, his body swelling with power as the earth around him shattered. The wind howled, carrying a destructive intent far greater than before.

"Dieeeeeee!"

The goblin still wore the same bored expression, as if these people weren't threats at all. He casually raised a finger, smiling thinly.

"Vector Dominate."

With a roar like the heavens falling, the spear struck the goblin's fingertip.

And stopped.

The knight pushed with all his Fourth Class might... but it was useless. It was like training against an unmoving boulder in his youth except now, it was many, many times more terrifying.

"Not bad... I almost felt that one..."

The goblin smiled, pushing his hand forward slightly. His smile sharpened.

"Flesh Dominate."

There was a small jolt. The knight felt something slither across his skin from the arm holding the spear to his head, then the rest of his body. He looked down at his armored hand and narrowed his eyes in confusion. Something was leaking out from under the plates.

It wasn't just red, it was other colors too, viscous and thick. His eyes widened as he realized his flesh, bones, muscles, and nerves were spilling out of him. Before he could react, the rest of him followed leaving only a semi-liquid pile with the vile stench of blood and waste.

The shock made everyone tremble with fear.

The knight leader knew they could not survive this unknown monster.

"Take the lady and escape, Lita! Knights of Valtheron—to death!"

There was no fear in his eyes, only resolve. The knights roared and raised their swords high.

"For the Empire!"

Lita turned around, meeting the helpless gaze of her lady.

"We need to go..."

The lady bit her lip until she tasted blood. She knew it was the only choice, but she still hated it. She turned, eyes hard with resolve.

Her subordinates carried the same determination—warriors forged through hell who would fight despite fear.

The goblin's eyes narrowed as a trickle of blood ran from his ear. He calmly wiped it away.

"I don't have much time left..."

He acted as if they weren't even charging. With a casual motion, he raised his hand.

"Mind Dominate."

The unstoppable charge froze. None of them could move.

"Kill those who resist, and when you're done... kill yourselves."

The command instantly turned most of the Third Class knights. They stabbed the knight leader from all sides piercing his neck, head, chest, back, and stomach. Bones snapped, and they stabbed again and again, blood soaking the ground.

Some cried as they resisted, but their bodies obeyed the command.

The knight leader roared, shoving them away with his last strength. His sword glowed as he charged at the goblin.

"For the princess!"

He raised his sword high—

"Kneel before me."

The weight of a mountain crushed him to his knees.

The goblin looked down at him.

"You will do just fine... as a minion."

"Mind Dominate."

The knight leader's eyes glazed over. Slowly, he lowered his head, bowing to his new master.

"The rest of you—kill yourselves. I have no use for you."

Blades slashed throats. Bodies fell.

When it was done, the goblin looked up—at the woman flying away with her attendant.

"Wind Dominate."

Thin blades of air sliced through the sky, killing the attendant instantly. Her remains rained down on the forest below.

The goblin smiled, hand outstretched.

"Fall."

With a single word, the flying lady plummeted to the earth. He was about to speak again—

"Agh... cough, cough..."

Blood spilled from his lips. He wiped it away.

"Ahhh... this body is too weak... ahh... the new body the Unknown God is giving me better live up to my expectations..."

He glanced at where the woman had fallen, then at the lesser demons.

"Bring her to me."

They roared, rushing into the distance where she had fallen.

Naturally... she had fallen right on top of Damon.

Chapter 552: The Honorable Man

Damon just lay there for a moment with the soft figure of the woman slumped on his body, her breath steady even after falling from the sky.

He spread his shadow perception around him, sensing the movements of lesser demons coming his way.

He had no idea what that crazy goblin was. What he did know was that he did not want to get involved with that thing...

It gave him chills. The last time he had been that uneasy was when he first ran into the Keeper of False Truths in the ruins of Lysithara.

Damon brushed the woman's hair aside and, with a small push, slid her to the side.

There was no hesitation in his eyes. He had no hostility with whatever that thing was—but she did—so he would let her handle her own problems.

He was never here. In fact, he didn't see anything. No—better—he was blind and deaf.

Damon glanced far ahead. His familiars were already way ahead of him, diving through the trees.

"Wait for me, you jerks..."

Damon did not even consider for a moment that he was leaving a beautiful damsel in distress to face a horrible fate.

There was no hesitation, he bolted as soon as he took a step.

"Arghg..." she groaned softly, but that wasn't why he stopped. She held his leg with her hand, and her grip was strong, as if he had been held down by clamps.

She coughed out blood.

"St... stop... take... me..."

Damon sneered. Did this woman think he was some honorable fool? He wasn't getting himself killed for some chick he met in the woods.

"Screw off..."

Damon forcefully pulled his leg away as the growls of lesser demons grew closer.

He was about to teleport away with Shadow Stride when he felt a weight get added to his shadow.

This barely conscious woman did one thing right—Damon was human garbage. There was no way he'd take her with him when she was the target, not him.

He looked at his right wrist. There was a shackle there—golden, with runes and magic seals embossed on its form.

Damon intuitively knew he couldn't remove it. Still, he tried to pry it off with his strength...

It didn't work. He glanced down, the other shackle was tied to her wrist.

Damon twitched. He squatted down with the intention of patting her down to find the shackle's key—surely she must have it on her person.

With his heart calmed by his Remorseless skill, Damon took a deep breath and calculated how long before the lesser demons reached them.

He didn't hesitate to turn her around. With a quick pat of her soft body, past the light armor... he didn't find anything. Of course he wouldn't...

He was too busy being a gentleman. He took a deep breath.

Then reached his hand into her bosom, past her breast and into a pocket inside—but it was empty.

"Ahhg... damn it..."

He didn't have time to fully search every inch of her.

With no other alternative, Damon grabbed her and raised his hand, shooting his omnidirectional gear through the trees. The wires grew taut and pulled him into the tree line.

He didn't have any time. As soon as he moved into the trees, the growls of lesser demons followed as their claws and fangs ripped through the wood.

They pounced where he had been, sniffing the ground, then raised their heads and growled into the forest before continuing their chase after Damon.

With lesser demons hot on his tail, Damon did not have time to think of anything else—he just needed to escape. And he needed to do it fast. However, he had to stay within the tree line lest he fall under the same attack that killed that harpy woman Lita... and then the attack that took out this woman he was now carrying through the woods.

"I can't use Airwalk... and I can't use my Dealer's Hand to fly..."

His broken sword would have been a great option, but it was not a fast tool for flying. Then there was the forest itself... unfamiliar terrain. He had no idea where they were or what monsters lurked within these lands.

What he did know so far was there were lesser demons, Balors, Goristro... and a seriously overpowered goblin.

'I can't encounter any of them...'

He stepped on a branch as his combined weight with the woman caused it to crack and break, falling to the ground right as he jumped to the next one.

Each of those opponents would be horrible to encounter—but the goblin was the worst. Damon couldn't even imagine killing something like that.

"...With how easily he killed those in the fourth rank... that's at least sixth class advancement..."

The branch falling away from him made the sound of the lesser demons chasing grow louder.

He couldn't use Shadow Stride—not with this woman's weight consuming too much shadow energy. He could not fully turn to shadow either, because a shadow could not carry her.

She had also shackled herself to him. He could not kill her... because a corpse would be hard to carry—and if he did kill her and devoured her corpse... that would be much easier... but there were two reasons why he couldn't. The first was not even a moral one—actually, none of them were moral.

The first was because the lesser demons would realize she was gone and keep searching—meaning the goblin would know about him. The second was because his shadow was acting weird... more so than usual.

Damon stepped on the air, crossing a small distance before diving into a shrub on the ground. Rolling with the woman in his hands, sweat beading down his head, he thought of an escape... the lesser demons getting closer and closer.

"What now..."

From what he saw with his shadow perception... they had gotten his scent too and had been surrounding him.

"Damn lesser demons and their perverted intellect..."

He looked around until he saw a raven and a squirrel in the distance, gesturing toward what seemed to be a whooshing noise.

After a moment, he realized it was the sound of water. He spread his shadow perception further—a waterfall.

The lesser demons around him were already cutting through the distance.

Damon took a deep breath, then dived into the shadow of a tree. He was welcomed by the shadows—however, the woman was unknown to them... he had to pay her price, and that came in a massive amount of shadow energy.

With that, Damon teleported with her, appearing a short distance away under the dampness of a tree next to the waterfall.

He gambled, as the foam's wall and rising coldness mingled with the roar of water falling.

"This is the only way to hide our scent..."

He bit his lips... then he jumped.

Chapter 553: Kiss Of Life

The waterfall was vast, with long streams of light creating rainbows in sweeping arcs. The forest behind and around it formed a serene and beautiful backdrop, as if painted by a lovesick artist who found beauty in every detail.

It could have been a scene of pure romance—if Damon hadn't been leaping straight over the fall, with lesser demons scouring the forest above in search of him.

Actually, not him, the lady with him, who had been the sole reason he was dragged into this.

Normally people got pulled into his shenanigans, not the other way around.

He pulled the unconscious woman tighter into his arms as the force of gravity dragged them both toward the barely visible cloud of foam below.

Wind roared loudly with the backdrop of water behind them.

Water droplets battered his face and clothes, soaking him even before they reached the bottom. The wind tore at his hair, and the roar of the falls swallowed all other sound.

Even if he screamed here, no one would hear him... not that it would help. He was alone here, and he would not want to be heard.

They free-fell until he partially entered the misty shroud, knowing he was close to the ground below. Raising his foot, he took a single step in mid-air, creating an invisible foothold that slowed their descent, almost as if he were walking on air.

It was the Air Walk skill.

Damon knew that hitting the water at full speed wouldn't kill them, but it would hurt—and he had no intention of dealing with unnecessary impact injuries if he could avoid it.

Though the possibility of injury from falling was negligible, it was better to be safe than sorry.

With their fall slowed, his mind wandered to the churning white beneath the veil of water. What was creating so much foam? If it was rock beneath them, it would still hurt on impact.

Damon hit the water faster than he expected and immediately sank lower. Sunlight couldn't reach this deep. The pounding of the falls above faded into a distant roar, echoing off what seemed like a hidden grotto—its rocky walls shaped into caves by centuries of water flow.

He didn't bother rushing to the surface. Drowning wasn't a concern for him. Thanks to his skill, Water Celebration, Damon could breathe underwater.

The same couldn't be said for the woman in his arms. Water rushing into her lungs must have been more than her body could bear, because her crimson eyes snapped open. She began to thrash, struggling against him.

Damon pushed her down, keeping her from breaking the surface. She was a higher rank than him, but injured—her frantic movements leaving trails of blood in the water. She kept reaching for something, but he wouldn't let her.

Just as he considered surfacing, a vast shadow moved through the water.

Damon instantly clamped down on her arms, halting her movements. She couldn't breathe, but any motion could draw the attention of whatever was out there. Raising a finger to his lips, he signaled for her to be quiet.

She must have sensed it too, though her air was running out. The choice was grim—stay still and risk suffocating, or move and get killed.

She struggled again, but Damon kept his grip firm. They were chained together; if she got herself eaten, he would follow her fate.

The real problem was her lack of air. Damon pushed her under the shelter of some rocks. She tried to do the opposite, but he gritted his teeth—he wasn't giving her a choice.

He could solve her oxygen problem. Pulling her closer, he looked directly into her eyes before pressing his mouth to hers, forcing air into her lungs.

Her eyes widened, and she sank with him, motionless now. Damon wasn't sure if her stillness was from surprise or helplessness.

He kept their lips locked, sustaining her. He had no fear of drowning; his skill provided an unlimited supply of oxygen. The exact mechanism was a mystery to him, but he didn't need to understand it.

He pinned her in place, his gaze locked on hers while his focus stayed on the darkness beyond. Slowly, he spread his shadow perception outward, searching for the source of the earlier movement. When he finally brushed against it, he froze.

A monster lurked with them in the depths—a massive, eel-like creature, its body as dark as the abyss. Serrated fangs glinted faintly, an obvious sign that it was no herbivore. Long, sensitive tendrils waved in the water, built to detect even the faintest motion.

Its aura marked it as a fifth-class advancement beast—a ruler of the deep.

The woman pulled away from his lips, her breath held, her face cold.

Damon gestured toward the darkness, dragging a thumb across his throat. She understood instantly.

The question was how to get out. At this depth, he couldn't even sense the shadows above. Extending his perception further risked alerting the creature.

She turned toward the rock beside her and began carving letters into it with her finger.

He glanced at the words she etched into the stone: Let's use the buoyancy to float out.

Damon's eyes flicked with realization. Right—if they stayed still and let the water carry them upward, the creature might mistake them for drifting debris. But that depended on whether she could hold her breath long enough.

He was about to offer her another breath when she pulled something from the ring on her finger—something he had completely overlooked.

A spatial ring. From it, she produced a small magic artifact, slipping it into her mouth. She glared at him as if she had something to say.

Only then did Damon realize the truth—his earlier "kiss of life" hadn't been necessary.

She had been struggling not from lack of air, but because she was trying to reach for her artifact, and he had been stopping her.

With the artifact in place, she let her body drift upward. Damon, still chained to her, rose with her into the dark water.

Chapter 554: Vexation

Sure enough, the buoyancy did its thing and lifted them up. It had been quite the fall from the top of the waterfall to the depths; their weight and gravity had pulled them lower than Damon had thought.

Still, Damon remained unmoving, acting like a corpse so he would float. He relaxed his muscles and dispersed his will.

His presence became faint, then it disappeared — the last thing he wanted was to be sensed by whatever was inside the water.

He could still feel it swimming in the depths below them.

The woman was unmoving as well. She must have been lighter, because she floated up faster....

It was only after he looked at her chest did he come to an understanding. It wasn't that she was lighter — no, that wasn't it. She also had something to help her float.

The light from the surface and the chaotic slashes of water from the waterfall soon reached them as they broke through to open air.

As soon as she reached the surface, she spread her arms and jumped out of the water. Wings burst from her back, feathers slicked by spray, and she tried to soar out of the foaming pool....

However, she groaned, her body trembling, and fell back down into Damon's arms.

"The hell do you think you're going..." Damon mumbled.

She trembled slightly, forcing herself out of his grasp. Her scarlet eyes burned with fury. This scum had been taking too many liberties with her — from seeing her naked to kissing her....

Damon allowed himself to sink under the thick cloud of foam. He spread his shadow perception outward and found a grotto hidden beyond. It was a dry cave, concealed from whatever the hell that goblin was.

He'd use that opportunity to break the shackles on his wrist and leave without her.

Swimming through the crashing water, he dragged the reluctant woman along. When they reached the mouth of the flooded cave...

"Where are you taking us... the bank is the other way..."

Damon glanced at her with a scoff.

"I'm not blind, captain obvious. The bank is easy to spot from the top of the waterfall. And we have no idea what's in the woods."

She bit her lips, gaze flicking between the falling water and her own battered body.

Was he looking for a place to hide so she could recover? It seemed he wasn't as bad as she thought. He seemed... somewhat competent.

Damon, however, wasn't thinking about her. She was just his decoy to escape... and also a source of information if she had any about the goblin.

Without another word, he dived down, pulling her into the narrow underwater cave entrance.

Small fish and creatures darted past as Damon kept his head clear, focusing on conserving strength. After minutes of swimming, he surfaced, dragging himself up beside a slick rock.

The woman lay nearby, gasping, her body trembling as she breathed heavily. Her wet clothes clung to her skin, leaving her cold and pale.

Damon scanned the cave. Glowing ores dotted the ceiling, their light refracting against massive crystal spikes. They looked fragile, as though too much noise would send them crashing down.

The tunnel stretched deeper. From the way the air moved, Damon could tell there was another entrance somewhere else.

'This is the ideal place for crystal spiders...'

His soaked clothes clung to him unpleasantly, so Damon stood. The movement rattled the chain connecting him to the woman, dragging her across the rough stone with a soft groan.

She raised her head with an annoyed expression, her cold red eyes glaring up at him.

Damon glared right back.

"What? You're the one who shackled me to you."

She turned her face away, silent. Damon wasn't done. He yanked the chain, expecting resistance, but to his surprise... she didn't fight.

She was pulled through the air toward him. Damon shifted slightly, letting her momentum carry her past him. Her body slammed into a rock with a crunch, fragments scattering.

She gasped, staggering to her feet, her hands trembling from rage she could barely contain.

Her eyes widened, her face twisted tight. Her fist clenched, and despite her injuries she raised her hand.

".... In all my life, there has never been anyone who has debased me... dishonored me... so much. I have never suffered a slight that I have not repaid...."

Damon tilted his head in surprise.

"Yeah, that goblin did a number on you. I'd be mad too."

Her hands shook, her voice cracking.

"I was talking about you...."

Her chest heaved as she screamed.

"You walk into my tent and defile me... with your eyes..."

Damon's expression remained flat.

"Not my fault you walked out of the bath naked."

She took a deep, shaky breath, not sure if it was from anger, frustration, or the cold water.

"You defiled my body by groping me... touching me in places no man ever had..."

Damon rolled his eyes. He had no idea she was conscious.

"I was just looking for a key to the shackles you put on me. Your breasts were mid at best."

Her hands trembled, rage boiling inside her. Her lips quivered. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

"You... you... took it too far!" she screamed, losing all form of composure.

Never in all her life had anyone provoked her so much. Never had she felt such indignity... such fury.

This insufferable man didn't even feel he had done anything wrong. He acted like he was the victim.

"I was trying... to use an artifact, and you stole my lips... you kissed me like I was yours to kiss!"

Damon shrugged nonchalantly.

"Don't worry, that kiss meant nothing to me. It was a medical procedure. No need to thank me for saving your life."

Her body shook violently.

"Thank you...."

He raised his hand casually.

"I said no need. It's fine."

"I wasn't thanking you. Why would I thank someone who defiled me?"

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"She's so ungrateful. I just saved her life. No decency whatsoever. What can I expect from a damn fae...."

She grit her teeth and pointed at him.

"I am Abellona of Valtheron, third princess of the great Valtheron Empire! And by the authority of the imperial family—"

Damon cut her off with a raised hand and a bored look.

"I'll stop you there. I don't give a shit. You're not even the first princess. Two people are already ahead of you. Come back when you're first in line."

Her entire body trembled with rage. Blood bubbled up her throat as her fury overwhelmed her injuries, and she coughed it out before collapsing, unconscious.

Damon stared down at her limp body.

"Hmm... did I take my rage-baiting too far...?"

Chapter 555: Stranger

Ding

[Ragebaiting lv3]

Damon was feeling guilty, really he was. While he was a deplorable person most of the time, he was still someone who felt guilty far too easily.

Looking at things objectively, she hadn't really done anything wrong to him. She didn't kill his stag.

He was acting reckless and bold because he didn't want to give himself any free time or the mental headspace to accept that he had just massacred his whole village.

If he stopped for a moment, the guilt would catch up to him. He knew running was never a good idea because his life had already taught him time without number that running did not help. His actions always caught up to him.

When they did, they either broke him or left him with scars from lessons he refused to learn or accept.

That was just Damon Grey. He was still tired. He still just wanted to close his eyes and go to the one place where pain, sorrow, joy, or anguish did not matter.

However, while he was still here, still alive, he wanted to smile — not for himself but because he didn't want those who cared about him to be brought down by his gloom.

Before he was gone, he wanted to do one thing right.

An action that would make him a true hero. Because the greatest of heroes were those who died at the end of their tale having saved a beautiful girl.

Even if their deaths would hurt that beautiful girl and all those who had followed their journey.

Damon carried Abellona and placed her on a blanket he had pulled out from his shadow storage.

He glanced at the beautiful woman in front of him, hand shackled to his own.

With a soft sigh, he reached into his shadow storage and pulled out a healing potion. Opening her mouth, he fed it to her.

However, in her unconscious state she was unable to drink the contents.

Damon glanced around.

"Ahem ahem... well, I suppose I must help her... if I don't go to hell, who would... I don't enjoy this, you know... I have no choice..."

Why was he even giving that justification?

His shadow just watched him without any reaction.

He poured the contents of the potion into his mouth, lowering his head. His lips touched her own, using his mouth to give her the potion.

After the potion was administered, Damon sat to the side as her body began to heal.

She would wake up in a few minutes.

However, her wet clothes didn't help matters. Her body shivered occasionally.

"Should I help her take it off..." He stopped himself right there.

He had already given the princess of Valtheron the worst possible impression of him. There was no need to do any more.

'Suppose I should build a fire...'

Damon pulled out a dried log he just so happened to have in his shadow storage for a rainy day.

He threw it to the ground and with a flick of his finger he created a small black flame which turned red, spreading heat across the cave.

Damon carried her closer to the fire to keep her warm. He dismissed the top part of his armor and sat there in silence watching the flame dance.

A few minutes passed, then he heard soft groans at his side. Looking down, he saw the red eyes of Abellona staring coldly at him.

He jiggled the shackle on his wrist.

"Can you take this off..."

She didn't say anything, only sat up next to him. Straightening her disheveled clothes and hair, she finally spoke.

"Who are you..."

She finally asked the question that had been burning through her mind all this time, since the first day she had met this insufferable man.

"Why does that matter... who I am is of no consequence to you..."

She closed her eyes, glancing at the flames.

"I have introduced myself in good faith. Should you not do the same, stranger..."

Damon was not going to tell her who he was. He had just provoked Abellona of Destruction. He was not about to let her know his name.

However, he was too egotistical and arrogant to just let bygones be bygones by apologizing — not that she would let it go.

"You introduced yourself in good faith? Is that what you call it..."

He chuckled.

"You were hoping to use your identity to pressure me. Apologies, princess, but that wouldn't work on me. Your identity holds no weight here. In this cave, in this wilderness, you are just a woman and I am just a man. The only laws that matter here are the laws of the jungle."

She didn't seem fazed by his words, a thin smile on her face.

"I didn't ask you for a lesson, I asked for your name... surely you are not without an identity..."

There was a calculating calm in her red eyes, as if she had cooled down from earlier.

"I do... I did not come out of a rock... however I do not feel inclined to share..."

She smiled coldly as if she had found some leverage.

"Hmm, I see. So you are from Valtheron... you do not want to reveal your identity because you fear I would cause trouble for you or retaliate. Is that right... I cannot punish a nameless, faceless person."

Damon tilted his head with a smile on his face. The last time he had met someone so cunning was little Astranova. As expected of a master of court politics.

'She really just buried her anger.'

"Why would I be worried about that..."

Damon smiled calmly.

"There are things that I fear, but you are not one of them, princess. There are things that should not be provoked, but I have already provoked them all. Why would I fear... you..."

She smiled at him, her eyes narrowing.

"If that is the case then you have nothing to fear... I merely want to know who I am sitting alone in a grotto with... surely you cannot be an assassin or I would have been dead in my sleep..."

Damon sneered, then he scoffed, raising his shackled hands.

"If I did that I would die too... thanks to these magic shackles... a single wearer does both do..."

Her eyes flickered slightly.

He continued.

"You didn't leave anything to chance..."

There was a soft smile on her face.

"I would die too if you were to perish... is that not enough reason to tell me your name... what do I call you... mysterious man..."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Very well then, if you must call me something... you may refer to me... as..."

"Stranger."

"Because I am just a nameless, aimless stranger. Will that do for you, princess."

She glanced at him momentarily, nodding her head.

"As you wish... I would like to make a proposition, Mister Stranger... if you would be interested..."

Damon didn't even let her finish.

"Screw off..."

Chapter 556: You're Excused

The last woman who made a proposition dragged him into a conflict with the temple that was still a work in progress. He had no idea what this woman was selling, but he wasn't buying it.

Her proposition was obviously going to involve whatever the hell that goblin was.

He wanted none of it if he could help it, though his gut told him it was inevitable.

She glanced at him with a calm expression.

"For someone with noble blood you certainly do speak your mind..."

Damon sighed over the crackling of the flames.

"What gave you that impression..."

She glanced at him from head to toe. He was still wearing the crown from earlier. She couldn't imagine anyone but a noble who would have the audacity to wear that.

'Though ... I'll have to admit he is outrageously audacious...'

"I can tell from your gait... however allow me to get straight to the point..."

Damon was getting tired of this woman and was not in the mood to deal with hidden schemes.

"Let me guess... I'll offer you wealth and power beyond your wildest imagination... I'll also forgive all your transgressions against me... all you need to do is follow my will."

He glanced at her, adding:

"Is that about right..."

She smiled with a gentle gaze, one that was far from her earlier rage.

"Not how I would word it exactly, but I like working with intelligent people..."

Damon shook his head.

"Not interested, so no..."

She sighed softly.

"That's not what I was expecting..."

He rolled his eyes.

"Actually you were... this is the part where you use the stick in your carrot-and-stick approach. Let me guess... if I don't help you, you'll say I'd be making an enemy of Abellona of Valtheron blah blah blah..."

Damon smiled lightly, seeing her eyes twitch.

"You'll make life difficult for me if I don't help... you'll use your power to pressure my family or whatever else, make me lose my standing in noble circles..."

He moved his hand, pulling the chains on his wrist and grabbing her arms.

"None of that matters... actually, if anything, you have more to lose, miss chaste princess of the empire. You have a standing, a reputation, too much to lose in a competition against your siblings for the imperial throne..."

Abellona grew quiet, her eyes cold. She didn't say anything more.

"I on the other hand have nothing to lose... you want to pressure me, go ahead. Let's see how far your authority as princess of the empire holds up. Maybe against nobodies it means something, but against me... it's nothing..."

Abellona smiled strangely, almost satisfied.

"Thank you for confirming your standing, mister stranger..."

Damon didn't say anything more. He had created the illusion of a high noble who didn't fear imperial authority—not that of a mere princess, no matter how talented and influential she was.

However, the truth was far more mundane than what she was imagining in her head.

He was just a commoner. He only had the backing of the academy, which would not let him be passed on to any government—unless he committed a grave crime.

"I'm not a noble... and I didn't confirm anything... if anything, I'm just a lowly commoner..."

She scoffed. Did this man take her for a fool, or did he think her juvenile?

Damon suppressed the urge to smile. Having the advantage was quite amusing.

He raised his shackled wrist.

"Do you mind removing these..."

She shook her head.

"I wish I could, but I can't... this will stay on until the threat to my life is neutralized... that's just the nature of the artifact..."

Damon sneered. His skill Eye of Veracity showed that she really wasn't lying.

He was trapped with her. If she died, he died. If he died, she died. However, she would not die.

As for why, it was simple: if she died, Damon died. And Damon wanted to die. Therefore he could not die. His second class skill [Deathless] would never allow that.

Skill – [Deathless]

The more you desire your own death, the more improbable events happen to prevent it. Death will follow when you least desire it.

He would not die.

Fine then. He raised his hand, and with it a broken sword she had not even seen him pull out of the shadows around him. Like a beast trying to escape a death trap, Damon pressed the sword onto his own wrist and sliced it off, the blood spraying in wide arcs as steel grated against bone.

His expression didn't even change. Abellona's eyes widened as blood splattered across her face.

Was... what was wrong with this man... the decisiveness and ruthlessness to cut off his own arm...

She wanted to tell him it was pointless. And sure enough, the shackle glowed golden and like a flash of lightning, it moved along his arm and clamped down again, as if daring him to cut off another part of his body.

"It's pointless... even I can't take it off, and cutting off our limbs would not work..."

She had been more worried he would pin her down and cut off her arm... but he didn't. She glanced at his face, expecting to see some frustration or helplessness from such a grave sacrifice.

The blood was still gushing out from his wrist, the fishy, metallic smell of it heavy in her nostrils.

Damon nodded.

"Hmmm, well, it was worth the try..."

That was all he said. Reaching into the shadows, he pulled out a vial of potion and drank it. With his other hand, he grabbed his severed arm and pressed it to his bleeding wrist.

With soft sounds of flesh mending, the potion knit his arm back together. Abellona stared at the vial in disbelief.

"What... kind of potion is that, effectively..."

He didn't even look up.

"The good kind."

He didn't have time to entertain her, so he got straight to the point.

"I'll work with you... however, I want a formal contract."

She nodded.

"I have an oath scroll..."

She smiled, her eyes lingering on his blood-soaked wrist that had now healed.

"If you get me out of this ordeal alive... I will forgive your transgressions against my person. You will have the favor of Abellona of Valtheron—"

Damon sneered, his face full of unmasked disdain.

"I don't give a damn about that. Bitch, pay me... how much is your life worth..."

She blinked in complete and utter shock.

"Wha... excuse me..."

"You're excused."

Chapter 557: Agreement

"You must learn to control your emotions, princess. The imperial court is full of two-faced snakes. A failure in judgement due to cloudy feelings will result in your fall."

Abellona did not forget this voice, the voice of her instructor. With that in mind she had to restrain her emotions no matter how much she found this person getting on her bad side.

At the same time she felt a sensation she had never experienced before. She was born into the imperial family, always fawned over by many. As she grew older, she became more beautiful. She was easily one of the most beautiful women in the Valtheron Empire. Countless men would lay down their lives just to impress her. They had brought jewels and treasures from around the world, yet none had impressed her.

Her status and her beauty were reason enough for any man to want to help her.

"Y.. you're asking for... money..."

She found it confounding. This was not how things were supposed to go. She was a princess and he was a hot-blooded young warrior. Wasn't he supposed to be doing everything he could to save her?

Damon glanced at her confused expression as if he had spoken in a strange language.

"Did I stutter."

She nodded slowly.

"Deplorable... don't you have any pride as a noble..."

Damon smiled, taking in a breath of cold air. He had been waiting for her to say that.

"Actually... I pride myself on having no pride."

There truly was no understanding this man.

"Fine. How much is your price... I'll hire you as a mercenary."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"A mercenary... do I look like common trash to you? Do you know what noble blood flows through my veins? If you're thinking of hiring me for cheap, you can forget it."

She almost gasped. What was up with this guy and his unpredictability? Wasn't that why he was asking for money?

'Didn't he say he was a commoner earlier?'

"I don't know, you never told me. And if you took pride in your pedigree, you would help without asking for a price."

Damon chuckled.

"Alright then... how much do you think you're worth."

She paused. She was the third princess, the favorite of her imperial father. How could he ask her to name her price as if she were a common prostitute, or a mare being priced at a marketplace? Never in her life had she felt so insulted.

"I am priceless."

Damon sneered.

"You are worthless."

He lifted his hand to her chin, lifting her face up. There was a mild irritation in her eyes.

"Anything that can't be priced is worth nothing. Right now, princess, that's what you are."

She slapped his hand away, ignoring his almost bewitching tone.

"Five hundred million zeni... that's how much I'm willing to pay."

Damon shook his head.

"For a princess? Please. You really aren't worth much. I can't let you insult yourself like that... ten billion zeni."

Abellona's eyes flickered with a scoff. Did he really expect her to have that much money? Was he trying to equip an army, no, create one? That much money wasn't something she could simply fork out.

"I'll give you three billion."

That was her best offer, else she would have to borrow money from the war banks and pay back later.

"Make that five and we have a deal." Damon pressed his final offer.

"Deal." Abellona agreed before he could jack up the price further.

At this rate she would have to borrow from the war banks. Their interest rates were just horrible. Hopefully he would agree for her to pay in installments.

'That way I can also figure out his identity...'

Damon nodded with a thin smile, his gaze briefly flashing to her spatial ring.

She took out the oath scrolls, and after reading it several times to be sure, she added his own conditions, which included no act of retaliation against him for anything that might happen within the course of their contract and three years after. Of course she disagreed, however Damon agreed to no deposit for that clause to be settled.

With that, Damon was set to go. His conversation with her had not been long, but it wasn't short either. His body was already dry from the flames.

He re-equipped his armor. With a deep breath he took out some meat and a grill and began to roast them over the flames, adding spices.

The sizzling and scent created a soft ambiance in the cave. When the meat was done Damon brought out his usual table and chairs from his shadow storage.

Being in a cave was no reason to live like a beast. He swore after Lysithara he would live well whenever he could.

Abellona watched him with a stunned expression as he set up the table.

He arranged the meat, brought out some potatoes, and cooked a bit of side for his main course. For the final touch he took out the expensive wine he stole from Abellona.

After that he set the table, pulling Abellona, who was still shackled to him, to it.

With the table set, he sat down wordless and began to serve himself.

Seeing the food, Abellona's mouth watered slightly. Seeing this as a show of hospitality, she reached for a fork.

She felt a smack on her hand.

She looked at where Damon had struck her.

He sneered. "This is mine. You didn't pay for feeding."

She twitched.

"How much."

"Well, I charge fair rates... so you know what, I'll give you a discount... a million zeni per meal."

She stood up, smacking the table. Fair

"That's daylight robbery..."

He looked around.

"It's night time now."

She trembled, pointing at the wine bottle.

"That's mine..."

Damon took a slice of his meat, sipping a glass.

"Was. Now it's mine. Finders keepers."

She sat down with a sour expression. Finders. He stole it.

"The price is too outrageous..."

He elegantly sliced up some more meat.

"This is royal quality cooking, top notch. The ingredients are foreign and very expensive, rare and hard to come by..."

She gritted her teeth, holding back her anger.

"I just watched you make it... with the cheapest ingredients possible. The kind you find at street stalls in Valerion..."

He took another bite.

"Exactly. Rare. We aren't in Valerion, are we?"

She gritted her teeth.

"Fine... five hundred thousand..."

He looked like he was hesitant, but then agreed. The meal prep and ingredients wouldn't even cost ten thousand zeni.

They ate in silence until Damon spoke.

"Tell me what you know about that goblin... what have you learned."

She paused, her hands trembling slightly.

"I have learned we cannot defeat him... should we face him, we will die."

Damon smiled coldly.

"Makes me want to face him even more."

Chapter 558: The Great Demon Lord Reincarnates As A Typical Nobody

"Didn't you run away from him." she sneered.

Damon raised a hand.

"Run.. no I didn't run I just don't like getting involved in other people's matters.. it's called minding your own business.."

She resisted the urge to blast him with all her magic. Seeing the absolute lack of shame, based on the thickness of his skin, he might as well have been a castle wall.

"Right... I must have been delusional.."

He took a sip of his drink.

"What are your thoughts on its power..."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Not its, his power..."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"Right he seemed to have a particularly vibrant personality..."

She raised her hand with a cold expression.

"I'll stop you right there.. the goblin isn't important since we aren't fighting it.. what we need to worry about are the lesser demons, and any Balors or Goristro.."

Naturally Damon didn't forget about these demons lurking in the woods.

He nodded slowly.

"Lesser demons are fiends. Legends say this species of monstrous demon was created by Ashcroft, the demon lord of domination..."

He held his chin. This was one of the most discussed types of demons in demonology class. He could even remember some excerpts.

"These demons were first spotted during Ashcroft's invasion of Vuldren. With hardened scales and long sharp claws, they had been mistaken for mere beasts brought forth by Ashcroft to carry out his unholy will. However, we were soon proven wrong. Behind their monstrous forms, the lesser demons... had a perverted intelligence.

With each part of their body a living weapon, they were built to kill. Every inch of their form was a masterful design to inflict death.

Their presence decimated our rank and file, creating seas of blood and battlefields without corpses, as they devoured all in sight.

With each kill they laid their eggs, bringing forth more of them. With each that fell, they would devour their own remains, birthing more and consequently growing stronger.

Each one was part of a hive led by a queen, and each battle created more queens.

Our folly was belittling these creatures. How could abominable monsters created by the unknown god be anything but nightmares."

Abellona didn't say anything more to him.

"Which means we'll be dealing with a monstrous relentless swarm..."

He put down his cutlery.

"What if we kill the queen.."

She shook her head, biting her lips.

"These ones don't have a queen... they're all directly under the goblin. He can control them even without a swarm.."

Damon could see what she was hiding. With a soft sigh he raised his hand at her, then whispered.

"Mind Dominate..."

Her figure trembled when he said those words. However, seeing his smile and the fact there was no mental attack trying to dominate her, she knew she was safe.

He tilted his head coldly.

"What... did you think I was.."

He stopped without finishing.

She narrowed her eyes with a trace of accusation.

"That word should never leave your lips."

There was a coldness in her voice.

"What are you implying..."

Damon smiled softly, leaning back in the chair.

"I'm not implying anything. I just thought of an old saying."

He leaned forward with a soft chuckle.

"One doesn't encounter Ashcroft, one survives Ashcroft."

When he said that, her hand trembled.

He smiled lightly. He should not have known about Ashcroft's powers well, because an epoch had passed since he was around. At this point he was just a myth. Most people knew his name and his supposed power, but he was just a myth.

Or so the world would have you believe. But Ashcroft was very real. Damon knew that. This world had tried to forget Ashcroft, like it had Mugu, but Ashcroft was just too unforgettable. His name could not be erased.

No one knew Mugu anymore, but even the blind and deaf knew Ashcroft, even if they didn't believe he was real.

The demon lord of domination who had single-handedly almost taken over the whole world.

Ashcroft, who had defeated the legendary sage Athor... he who had never known defeat, the one and only arrogant monarch.

Who thought himself above all and beneath no one. He who stood before the statue of Minerva, the goddess of doom, and called her the bride of the demon god.

Well, that last part got him killed, but the whole thing only cemented a myth into fact. Ashcroft could not be defeated by any mortal. Only a true god could defeat him.

Because he was Ashcroft.

The proud son of heaven.

"How did you know... did your household tell you about him"

Damon smiled. His household, right. His grandfather, the grand duke, would know, but that wasn't the reason why.

The one who had told him was Sylvia. She had once been possessed by Rashi Ignath and had seen the memory of that dark spirit's birth. He had been born when Ashcroft set his sights on the Verdant Continent. From the resentment and passion of countless fallen elves, the unknown god created Ignath.

It was in that memory Sylvia saw Ashcroft use Mind Dominate.

Naturally she told Damon. Of course the outcome of that battle ended in Ashcroft's victory.

'That guy really never suffered a loss..'

Damon put on airs in front of Abellona, who, like anyone raised in this world, would be spooked by that demon's name.

She bit her lips.

"If you know I don't have to hide anything. As you know, Ashcroft was promised to return by the unknown god, and as you can imagine, his promise has been fulfilled.."

Damon nodded knowingly, though he was just trying to pry information from her.

"The goddess created this world. However, the unknown god found a way to slowly spread his influence here. Ashcroft was his greatest weapon. While the goddess acted once to destroy him, which in and of itself is unprecedented, a god on her level would not care for our tiny world.."

He smiled. It seemed she didn't know about the pillar.

"That sounds like blasphemy to me."

She bit her lips, misunderstanding.

'He must be a man of deep faith.'

"I mean no disrespect to the goddess. We have been preparing for his return all these years, searching for where his first fragment would show itself. Because that would be his main fragment. If we destroy it, he would never reassemble his body or regain his power.."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

'Fragment.'

Was she trying to imply there were parts of Ashcroft all over, and they just happened to run into his main fragment that carried his personality and will.

She clenched her fist.

"We are no match. But if we escape and report to the capital, those in the seventh class would mobilize to end it all before it starts... we would be saving the world.."

She spoke as if he was already in the loop, while Damon acted like he knew everything.

While in his heart he was more baffled by the unknown god's sick humor.

'The great demon lord reincarnates as a typical nobody.'

'No worse.'

'The great demon lord reincarnates as a goblin.'

Chapter 559: Ashcroft Fragments

Damon sat in the darkness with a crease in his brows. The cave glowed with a pale light, the crystals scattered along the walls casting a soft illumination that pushed back the gloom in patches.

Yet where there was light, the shadows pooled thicker, lurking in the corners like silent spectators.

By his side lay a woman of ravishing beauty, long black hair spread across the blanket like a silken veil. Her beauty was sharp enough to be intimidating, her presence regal and cold. This was Abellona.

She rested on the soft blanket Damon had laid out, though he had originally wished to pull an entire bed from his shadow storage if only he had the space.

This was the best he could manage for now. Naturally, he hadn't done it out of kindness.

Damon wasn't the type to provide comfort without compensation—he had charged her for it.

For that reason she allowed him no closeness. Her distrust went beyond the charge; she clearly believed he might harass her. Damon was acutely aware she wasn't asleep.

His eyes lingered on the dagger she kept hidden beneath the pillow he had given her. The moment he made any suspicious movement, she would not hesitate to stab him.

He lifted his wrist and studied the shackle binding him to her. The cold metal carried faint runes, pulsing like a heartbeat.

This was a magical artifact. The chains could disappear, allowing them to be separated, but only up to a distance of three kilometers.

However, the further they were apart, the heavier the cost—both of them would lose too much mana. Such a gamble could be endured in battle, but doing so now would be foolish. They needed every drop of strength. And if either of them died, the shackles would ensure the other followed to the grave.

Damon had appraised the artifact long ago. Its name lingered in his mind, Bond Eternal.

But the shackles weren't the source of his current brooding. In the dark corner of the cave, surrounded by shadows, he was focused on recovering his shadow energy, letting it seep into the staff of carnage that lay across his knees in the form of black flames.

His mind turned restless.

'You are part of the conduit now...'

Those words repeated in his head, burned into him from the description of his most recent skill. His intuition clawed at him, telling him he wouldn't leave this place easily.

There was still some time before he was meant to meet Lilith. He had tried to use the Whisper Coin, but something told him the message hadn't gone through. His gut twisted with cold dread.

At first light, after they had rested, they would leave this place. That much was decided.

Even so, Damon had already sent his shadow ahead to scout. The act had left his shadow reluctant, and he understood why. His shadow wasn't just his—it carried something else. A part of an Ashcroft fragment.

From Abellona, he had learned what few knew in the world. The goddess herself had shattered Ashcroft into countless pieces to kill him. Yet the unknown god had prepared for this.

Those fragments were never meant to stay buried. They would reawaken when Ashcroft's soul resurrected, each striving to return to him.

That was why the empire and temple scoured the death zones, sealing away fragments whenever they could, in hopes of delaying the inevitable resurrection. The fragments themselves were powerful, but no one could wield them. The few who tried paid the price in blood and madness.

And Damon carried one.

His own shadow had fused with Ashcroft's fragment on that fateful night. His shadow had not disappeared—it had become something more.

'My shadow fused with Ashcroft's that night.'

He knew what it meant. Ashcroft would never accept him as an ally. That arrogant demon lord would never allow Damon to hold even a piece of him.

Then Damon remembered a curious detail.

"He didn't have a shadow..."

He chuckled softly.

'If he sees me... he'll definitely try to kill me.'

The unknown god's cruelty was clear. A situation had been crafted where only one could survive.

'If that's the case... then I'm sure there's no way for us to leave without one of us dying...'

Damon narrowed his eyes. Fate itself seemed cruel. Yet the unknown god had no use for fate. What he believed in was choice.

If Abellona's knight had not killed Damon's stag, Damon would not have followed them. If he had not followed, he would not have stumbled upon Ashcroft. Every step was born not from fate but from choice.

It was Damon's choice to accept the system, and with it Ashcroft's shadow. It had been Ashcroft's choice to speak arrogantly to doom herself. And it was the unknown god's choice to set their paths on a collision course.

Damon chuckled again, the sound low in the shadows.

He could see it now, the unknown god's philosophy. This god had stripped fate of its dignity, reducing its inevitable majesty from a divine hand to nothing more than the sum of mortal actions.

By that design, no mortal could blame the heavens, or even gods, for their suffering. Their lives had always been in their own hands. And if so, they could choose what to do with it.

Damon clenched his fist, his voice low and resolute.

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

This had always been Damon's way of life. Perhaps it seemed small and pathetic, but it was him.

He glanced at Abellona, a thin smile touching his lips.

'She thought she dragged me into this conflict... but it seems I was the one who dragged her into a new type of hell.'

If he crossed paths with Ashcroft, there was every chance she would uncover Damon's secrets as well. That was something he could not allow. His connection to the unknown god had to remain hidden, especially from the princess of Valtheron.

His eyes hardened. The cave air grew colder, his murderous intent seeping into every corner, stilling the silence. He looked at her as she lay with eyes closed, her breathing calm and steady. Yet he knew she was awake, listening.

If it came to that...

'I'll kill her.'

He did not care that she was a princess. It was only treason if he got caught.

Chapter 560: Seal

Damon cleaned off the blood on his dealer's hand, pushing his body out of a gouge in the ground.

He took a deep breath of the fresh forest air, looking up from the deep darkness. His eyes narrowed at the soft sounds of flapping wings above.

"You could have just pulled me up."

Abellona, flying a few meters above him, smiled coldly.

"I could, if you paid one million zeni. It's quite cheap."

Damon scoffed, his expression filled with indignation.

"You have no shame. You're supposed to be the princess of this great country, how can you be so cheap and small-minded..."

Her eyes twitched. What was he even talking about? Where did he think she learned this behavior, this was how he treated her.

"You have the gall to talk of shame when you expect me to pay five billion zenī for a glorified tag-along."

Damon rolled his eyes. He didn't have time to argue with someone so morally bankrupt.

Though objectively speaking, he had started it. But so what? He was a pride-less person.

"Shouldn't a princess uphold herself to a higher standard?"

She smiled coldly. If this were in the capital, or anywhere else with anyone else, she would never be so disregarded.

With a soft flutter of her wings, she landed beside him.

"I don't see any demons around here, so it should be fine. We have no idea how many he has here... or if he summoned any."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Right. Demon lords could sometimes summon demons. Well, all demons could be summoned, but you needed a summoning circle, mana, an appropriate sacrifice, and some other things the academy hadn't told them in class.

After all, demon summoning was forbidden magic.

"He as in Ashcroft—"

She covered his mouth with her soft hand, pressing him back to a tree. Her eyes flicked around as if expecting Ashcroft himself to appear.

"You shouldn't say his name out in the open so casually. We don't know what he's truly capable of."

Damon nodded, pulling her hand away from his mouth.

"I'll be charging a hundred thousand for sexual harassment. And that's only because you're slightly easy on the eye."

Abellona was dumbfounded. She had been trying to help, and this was what she got.

"You... what... can't you take anything seriously?"

Damon smiled, walking into the woods.

"Life is a tragedy.... but at a distance, it's a comedy. From where I stand, you're doing it wrong."

She trudged after him with a cold expression.

"Sounds like what a suicidal sociopath would say."

Her footsteps were light, her spear in hand.

"I wonder how you're still alive with how casually you say what's on your mind."

Damon sighed.

"I wonder about that too."

The morning sun had risen a few hours ago. After resting, they had set out of the grotto, following the path his shadow had found for them. It was a deep and complex cave system that seemed to hide a dungeon in its lower depths.

They had no business with a dungeon, so they had pushed their way out. That had led them to a few monsters, and as Damon had guessed, some crystal spiders.

Nothing they couldn't handle. They made quick work of the rank one monsters.

All in all, they found themselves climbing out of a gouge.

Damon stopped beside a small tree. He peered into the branches, then reached in and pulled out a woodpecker.

He cleared his throat before he spoke.

Abellona glanced at him.

"What are you doing?"

Damon narrowed his eyes, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world and she was stupid for asking.

"I'm asking it for directions, obviously."

She crossed her arms over her chest, exasperated.

"How is that obvious?"

Damon ignored her and looked at the woodpecker.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, she's a bit of a retard."

"What did you just say..." she spat with mild anger.

Damon coughed, clearing his throat.

"Sorry about that. She's a royal retard."

Abellona had never been so blatantly insulted in her life. Her fist trembled.

"By the goddess, I will have your head on a pike for lèse-majesté."

He raised his hand.

"Can you shut up a moment? I'm trying to have a reasonable conversation with this bird."

He was trying to talk to a bird... and she was supposed to shut up. She, Abellona of Valtheron, was supposed to shut up because he was talking to a bird.

Wait... he could talk to birds? That was when she realized what she had overlooked.

'Is that a skill? How many does he even have? I can overlook the abilities related to shadow, those could easily be spells. But what about when he could breathe underwater, or when he walked on air like it was solid?'

'No... no, that's not possible. There has to be a valid explanation. He doesn't have multiple skills... it's probably an enchantment from one of the artifacts he's wearing.'

That was the only valid explanation. No other made sense.

Damon nodded with understanding as the bird chirped. He didn't understand most of it—birds weren't meant to talk to people—but he got the general idea.

"I see. Thank you. Please keep an eye out. If you see them, do tell me."

He stretched out his hand and let the bird fly free.

"Alright, let's go. The demons are only in this region. If we go straight ahead, we shouldn't have any problems. As for our goblin friend, he's that way."

Damon pointed through the trees at a slope ahead.

"If you aren't within range, we can just fly away."

Abellona bit her lip, glancing at the open sky.

"Right... but if we fly, balors might chase us."

Damon shook his head.

"There's only one Balrog left, and it's injured, so it can't fly."

She nodded, grabbing his hand without hesitation.

"If that's the case, what are we waiting for?"

Before Damon could react, she spread her wings, beating them hard. Dust swirled as she yanked him into the sky.

Her red eyes glimmered as she rose higher, dragging Damon with her. As they soared, Damon's eyes narrowed.

"This is... too easy."

Then he looked down.

That was when he noticed it: a massive magical circle glowing beneath them, a single rune blazing in its center.

Seal.

"Wait, get us down no—"

Before he could finish, his body slammed into something. An electrifying force surged through him. His vision went black for a moment.

A barrier... it covered the entire sky.

When he came to, the roar of wind filled his ears. Beside him, Abellona was falling toward the forest below, her body charged and smoking faintly.

Damon maneuvered his body, pulling her toward him. His trembling, stiff hands gripped her tightly as they plummeted. Together, they crashed into the earth with a thunderous impact.

The growls of demons echoed through the forest.

They had been found.