

## Shadow 561

### Chapter 561: Who Gave You Permission To Leave?

Damon's body broke several trees but he was fine. He held Abellona in his hands, feeling her deep breaths as she tried to regain control of her stiff body.

He had a few bruises but had survived. With their location revealed, Damon didn't need to hold back his shadow perception. He spread his awareness through the shadows, sensing the moving figures of lesser demons rushing through the forest in his direction.

He stood up, forcing himself to shake off the damage he had taken.

Abellona took a deep breath, holding her head. She had taken the brute force of whatever that magic barrier was.

It was rune magic combined with normal magic. Damon couldn't even imagine how much understanding over rune magic Ashcroft had. This particular brand of magic was created by the unknown god. Why would he think Ashcroft didn't have mastery of it?

'Next I'm going to learn he has a system too...'

He spat out blood to the side to push out the bad luck.

'I better not jinx myself.'

Abellona forced herself to her feet, her wings mangled slightly, a charred burning scent rising from them with lingering smoke mixed with blood.

"He concealed the barrier right beneath us. He expected us to try to fly out..."

Damon didn't even try to flee. There was nowhere to run. If they tried to escape, they would be swarmed by lesser demons. If they stayed, they could fight and kill them.

"I would expect no less from a demon..."

Ashcroft was quite scheming. He had anticipated their moves.

'Is this part of his expectations too? Are we dancing in his palm?'

Damon was paranoid by nature, but this just made him even more so.

He took a deep breath, standing back to back with Abellona.

"Can you fight?"

She scoffed, even with every inch of her body aching in pain.

"Who do you think you're talking to? I am Abellona of Destruction."

Her spear flew into her hands, coated by her destructive attribute.

Damon nodded, reaching for his neck and pulling out a pendant with two swords crossed. This was the magic artifact he had gotten from Back-to-Back with the mission of taking to the Halls of Steel in the Silver Glades.

The Silver Blades.

This was an heirloom designed for killing demons. He poured mana into it, forming two silver swords in his hands.

A faint whistle echoed in the air as he commanded his dealer's hand to float around him.

This was where they would hold their ground against the lesser demons.

Damon bit his lip. He just needed to kill ten of them.

Ten lesser demons to level up. That was his current requirement.

'At least I don't have to kill Ashcroft...'

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, the ground shook as a creature with sharp claws and teeth shattered the trees around it.

Damon took a single step, flashing through the distance with Flash Step.

[Skill: Flash Step]

[Description:]

A refined movement art once mastered by phantom assassins of the Forgotten Court, Flash Step allows the user to vanish from their position and reappear a short distance away, as though skipping between heartbeats.

[Effect:]

Moves instantly to a visible location within 15 meters.

[Type:]

Active.

[Cooldown:]

5 seconds.

Damon swung his sword down before the demon could react, but his blade struck the ground instead. The lesser demon, which seemed to be the leader of the swarm, had evaded. Its eyes gleamed coldly.

Its sharp tail whipped at Damon, but he caught it with the sword in his right hand.

A clang of steel rang out, and the sword sliced through the tail.

"Ehrrrheh... aghhht..."

The lesser demon let out a shriek of pain, never expecting its powerful tail to be cut so easily.

Damon was just as surprised. These swords were made for fighting demons, but he hadn't expected them to be this effective.

Using them was a wise decision.

He slid upward, cutting through the demon's head in an arc of blood.

A low chime rang in his ears.

[You have slain a lesser demon]

Before he could celebrate, his dealer's hand whipped past his ear, slicing into another demon. Damon flipped up into a tree and threw one of the silver swords, impaling another lesser demon's head.

It screeched in pain, but the crazed will to kill still burned in its eyes as it charged him with its mouth wide open, rows of jagged fangs bared.

Damon melted into a shadow, reappearing beneath it. He stabbed upward, blood pouring over him as the demon thrashed, giving no regard for its own life, only the desire to kill.

More demons swarmed toward him. Damon tried to pull his sword free, but the dying creature twisted its body, locking the blade in place.

Damon gritted his teeth.

"Screw you..."

He dived into the shadows, reemerging without a sword in his hand. Three lesser demons leapt to tear him apart.

He raised his hand as a blast of dark flames erupted from his body, burning them.

Damon almost relaxed when a horrific realization struck him.

"They resisted Ashborn..."

Their hardened scales were scorched but intact. They had survived the flames.

He twisted his body to dodge a claw, but a tail lashed across his shoulder, catching him off guard. A burning sensation spread through his bloodstream.

Damon's eyes flickered.

"Poison..."

But that wasn't all. A blackness was crawling across his skin, pulsing with a twisted type of magic.

"A curse..."

He fell to his knees, coughing, as lesser demons closed in. Abellona's destructive spear tore through the swarm attacking her, the earth shaking and trees vanishing with each strike, but Damon was being surrounded.

The shackles binding them both still glinted on his wrist.

The demons snarled, closing in on their prey.

Damon's eyes narrowed. He raised his hand, his dealer's hand flying back into his grip from the body of a dead demon. The blade turned black, engulfed in compressed flames.

He swung in a single wide arc, cutting through flesh and hard scales alike. The heat seared the air as the swarm was torn apart.

Charred flesh and blood surrounded him as Damon stood, smiling coldly.

"You're not the only ones who are clever..."

He glanced at Abellona, who was catching her breath after slaying the last demon near her.

'It's a good thing I have resistance to both curses and poison.'

She was short of breath, but alive.

He rushed forward, grabbing her hand.

"Let's go."

She nodded, letting herself be pulled.

Then Damon froze.

A calm voice echoed from the trees.

"Who gave you permission to leave?"

Chapter 562: Despair And Fluke

When she heard that voice she felt an enormous pressure on her chest, along with it a most primordial type of emotion, the oldest type of emotion.

Fear. She felt dread that made her pride and ego mean nothing.

She felt a hand squeeze onto her own. It was warm, and standing in front of her... she couldn't help but feel like she had seen the light in the abyss.

Damon felt it too, dread so deep he felt his legs about to give out just from standing in front of him. He felt like he was all alone, forced to meet that horrible gaze.

Even so.

Even so, he still forced down his fear. He had faced this dread before.

He had felt it when he saw the Keeper of False Truths, but this wasn't the greatest fear he had felt. This was nothing. This at least could be defined as fear.

This was nothing compared to when Sylvia had been possessed by the Unknown God's journey book and started writing that cursed poem with her fingers and blood.

That was fear beyond comprehension. If he survived that, then how could this be enough to shut him up?

"You... who the hell are you and why should I care?"

In front of Damon was a goblin that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. He just stood there under the shade of the trees that had survived the battle with the lesser demons.

There was an aura of control and charisma around him as if he was born to rule.

"Who am I... do I even need to state it? That woman with you seems to know... why don't you ask her?"

Damon glanced at Abellona, who was squeezing his hand so tight he could feel his bones strain. Maybe she had forgotten, but she was in the third class, and he was just in the second class.

Though, he did have the Iron Bone skill.

That was no reason to crush his bones... he bit his lips, his musings serving only as a minor distraction from the cruel reality.

"So what... you don't know your own name?"

The goblin took a step forward, walking into the sun. He didn't have a shadow, so he made for a strange image with the sun directly above him.

"Kneel before Ashcroft..."

He raised his hand, bringing it down. Damon felt the curvature in space shrink and twist as gravity was altered by force and pressed down on the both of them.

Damon's legs trembled as he forced himself to stand. His bones shattered, blood flooding from his legs, but his eyes remained fixed on Ashcroft. Abellona was smashed into the ground until a large crater formed.

She clawed at the earth, growling through blood, refusing to kneel—until Ashcroft simply tilted his fingers, and she was smashed flat like an insect

Ashcroft smiled watching them.

She had been running on fumes to begin with. The barrier had done a number on her. She groaned and went still.

"I'm impressed she held out so long... with those wounds..."

He walked toward Damon. With the small green legs of a goblin, he kicked him forward, smashing his ribs and causing him to cough up blood as he was sent flying into the body of the lesser demon he had stabbed with the silver blades earlier.

It was still barely alive, but... it would succumb soon.

Damon coughed blood, forcing himself to stand up, his leg bones crushed and his body dizzy from blood loss.

Ashcroft stayed where he was with a domineering expression, his eyes looking at Damon with casual indifference.

"Hmmm... you can still stand. Good. I like that. Your will is strong."

He kicked Damon's Dealer's Hand back to him, his face calm.

"I just returned... I'm in need of good minions to do my bidding. You will do."

He glanced at Abellona.

"Kill that woman and kneel before me."

Damon took a deep breath, chuckling lightly. He heard the sounds of low breaths — he was unsure if it was him struggling to breathe or the lesser demon behind him.

Slowly he raised his fingers to this manifestation of despair.

"I have a better idea... why don't you kneel before me instead..."

His broken sword flew into his hands as he stared down Ashcroft, the Demon Lord of Domination.

"I'm planning to take over the world. Why don't you serve me, little goblin?"

Ashcroft's eyes narrowed with deep coldness. Then he smiled.

"Ahhh... defiant. I like that. Makes you more worthwhile when I break you."

He raised his hand wide.

Damon was barely conscious. That was just one attack, just Ashcroft treating him casually, and he was half-dead. His HP was almost depleted.

A smile couldn't help but form on his lips.

Ashcroft was momentarily confused.

"Why... are you smiling?"

Damon smiled wider, the taste of blood on his lips.

"I can die here... I can possibly die here... that's why..."

Ashcroft shook his head.

"Die? No, you will not... because you are mine."

He raised his hand at Damon. With a few steps, he closed the distance.

"Mind Dominate..."

He would enslave his mind and make him his minion.

However, Damon's eyes remained clear. The pale crown made him immune to mental domination. He swung his sword down, stabbing toward Ashcroft. The demon lord casually caught the blade with his fingers, blocking it.

"Not bad... but not good enough..."

Ashcroft raised his hand to strike Damon, but his face creased.

"Wha... what is..." He looked down at the ground, right at Damon's feet.

His eyes widened.

"Is... that my shadow? You... what... how did you obtain my shadow... give it back!"

He reached for Damon's throat, grabbing him.

"Arghhh..." Damon couldn't breathe. He felt his neck getting crushed by Ashcroft.

It was at this moment the lesser demon behind him finally gave out and died.

With its death Damon heard a low chime.

[You have slain a lesser demon]

[You have leveled up]

[You have gained 160 attribute points]

[You have unlocked a new mechanic]

[Quest mechanic]

[Do you wish to proceed]

[Y/N]

Damon didn't know what it held, but he knew this was his chance against Ashcroft.

"Yes."

Chapter 563: The Usurper

[Overcome adversity, defy fate, make your own choice and create your destiny. The greatest of champions are forged through a trial by fire. The quest mechanic rewards the completion of challenges and trials.]

[You have a quest..]

[Quest]

One will rule and one will perish.

Ashcroft has returned. However, there is but a single throne, and a throne cannot have two kings.

Defeat Ashcroft and devour his main soul.

Fail and be dominated by Ashcroft.

Rewards

?????

Level up

Failure.

You will be consumed by Ashcroft.

[Do you accept this quest]

Y/N

Damon was in no situation to read any of that. Luckily, the system spoke into his head. Even covered in blood, he had a small moment of clarity.

"Yes.."

He coughed up blood.

The quest began. With those words echoing in his head, Damon's body started to fade away.

Ashcroft raised his hand.

"Dominate space..."

But Damon was still fading away, and with him Abellona who was linked to him.

Ashcroft finally showed an expression other than arrogance. He showed anger.

"Time dominate..."

With that single word, Damon felt time grow to a slow crawl as if they existed in a different timeline, separate from the world.

Ashcroft's goblin ear began to bleed, falling off.

"You won't escape... return my shadow, you little thief..."

Damon took a deep breath, forcing his battered body to move. His form dissolved into darkness as he turned himself into a shadow.

"Come and take it..."

Ashcroft raised his hand with a soft, murderous whisper.

"Die..."

Damon felt his soul tremble as Ashcroft tried to crush it. Refusing to relent, he ignored the searing pain and leapt at Ashcroft, biting into his shoulder until his teeth sank into the demon's flesh.

"What are you doing..."

Ashcroft grabbed him and slammed him into the ground. He raised his hand.

"Water dominate..."

A droplet of water formed, circling around Damon. Slowly, more gathered around his glowing form.

Taking a pointed shape.

He raised his hand again.

"Freeze..."

The water frosted and froze over by his will.

He swiped down, sharp droplets impaling Damon's body in all directions. The goblin body trembled, nearly collapsing as Ashcroft felt the strain.

He looked at his prey. But when his gaze fell on the figure impaled by ice, all he saw were cold, icy eyes that didn't show a hint of defeat. Damon's gaze was defiant—so much so that Ashcroft was momentarily paused by it.

Damon weakly raised his half-destroyed body.

"I'll... kill... you..."

Ashcroft could no longer maintain time dominate. He was at his limit.

He scowled as Damon's body finally faded away along with Abellona.

Raising his hand with mild anger in his expression, he waved and whispered softly.

"System panel."

A system panel made of red letters on a black background appeared. Most of it was filled with question marks.

Ashcroft glared at it.

"What is this... who is that, and why did you give him my shadow..."

The system panel remained blank, as if the one watching didn't feel the need to answer the arrogant Ashcroft.

Ashcroft's eyes began to bleed, the red ichor dripping to the ground.

He was about to close the panel when it suddenly changed. One of the question marks disappeared.

At the top of the panel, a soft chime echoed in Ashcroft's head. It was the same familiar female voice Damon usually heard in his mind.

Welcome back to the domination system, Ashcroft.

[Your resurrection is incomplete.]

[Your current vessel is decaying.]

[Obtain your shadow to proceed.]

Ashcroft frowned. He was here. He was alive. And now the system had become active, acting like he was still dead.

No, half-alive.

His gaze fell on the familiar quest window.

[Quest]

[Return of the king]

[Welcome back, dominator. You return broken and stripped of your greatness. You exist on borrowed time.]

Your title may be stolen by a would-be usurper. You cannot allow that.

Before your body falls apart, obtain your shadow and the boon of the usurper's physical vessel.]

Failure.

[Death and loss of your boons to the usurper.]

Rewards.

New physical vessel.

[Obtain that which belongs to the usurper and what you have lost.]

Ashcroft read the whole thing with an indifferent expression.

"You interfere... I would have killed him already..."

His eyes narrowed, anger flashing in his gaze.

Ashcroft hadn't given Damon any regard to begin with. He had killed many great and talented warriors, forged through hell, legends of their time.

Damon was just a brat of the new era.

Yet somehow the unknown god was actually pitting him against Ashcroft. The Ashcroft.

Surely he knew the boy would die. While it was true Ashcroft was getting weaker by the minute, and all Damon had to do was survive...

This was Ashcroft.

One doesn't encounter Ashcroft. One survives Ashcroft. That saying wasn't a joke, and that was under the rare circumstance Ashcroft didn't feel like killing.

It wasn't about how strong or weak you were. It was about how much abuse Ashcroft wanted to inflict before killing you.

The probability of Damon winning was almost zero, even if Ashcroft fell to his rank.

'The best outcome would be for him to hide and wait for this body to fail completely...'

If that was the case, the unknown god would never think so highly of him.

"Besides, where can he hide from me..."

Damon was still within the barrier. Ashcroft simply had to find and kill him before his time was up.

He knew Damon wasn't dead. If he was, his system would have notified him.

The cold, defiant eyes of the young man still lingered in Ashcroft's mind. Normally, when others faced him, his overwhelming power dwarfed them. They either gave up or were consumed by despair.

Yet Damon kept getting up, his eyes never losing that fire.

"He knows he'll lose but still wants to fight... That insect..."

Ashcroft shook his head. The unknown god was cruel. But despite how twisted he was, in some measure, he was also fair.

Which meant Damon had a fair chance of winning. No, surviving.

Ashcroft smiled, changing the way he addressed him. From now on Damon was not just another nameless ant. He was...

"My rival... No. The usurper."

#### Chapter 564: Abellona Of Destruction

There was something warm flowing. A faint metallic and fishy scent clung to the air. She tried to breathe, but the overwhelming familiar stench filled her nose, dragging her deep into a dark memory of a chaotic battlefield, where she had swung her spear as fast and as chaotically as possible.

The suffocating smell filled the air, the earth beneath her boots sticky and soft with it.

This...

Her eyes snapped open from her unconscious state. Her face was half covered in a flowing pool of red.

Blood.

This was blood. It glittered faintly in the light from above, flowing across her body in heavy pools.

Her body ached with dull pains so overwhelming she could not even identify their source. That was how much pain she was in, how much abuse she had taken.

But... this wasn't her blood.

She pushed herself out of the pool, raising her head. Her eyes widened slightly as she saw the source of the half-dried pool that was thickening by the moment.

Right in front of her.

Raising her gaze... there was a porcupine. A porcupine with tens of thin spikes.

But as her eyes regained focus, she realized... this was not a porcupine.

This was a man. The man whose hand she was shackled to.

The spikes weren't spikes at all, but ice, each one piercing through his body.

Abellona's hands trembled. He was still standing there, his body, his neck, his lungs—all of him was impaled.

She turned her gaze around the cave. This was the same cave they had left from. How... did they get back here?

Where was Ashcroft? How was she still alive?

She walked toward him, her hands moving slowly to his face.

This stranger, who refused to tell her his name. She brushed aside his blood-soaked hair.

She stumbled back when she saw the cold, icy eyes that remained blazing with an uncontrollable will. There was no fear in those eyes, only fury. Fury that burned like a flame that would not go out, even if the flames of his life force were extinguished.

It almost seemed indomitable.

Abellona stared, wide-eyed, until one of the ice spikes broke, melting and shattering on the floor.

Only then did she regain her senses. She rushed to his side.

"He's still alive despite all this..."

She knew it. Even though she couldn't sense any vital signs, her reasoning was simple.

She was still alive. If he were dead, the chains of the magic shackles binding them together would have killed her too.

There was a pause. She was unsure how to save him. If she touched him, she might snuff out whatever remained of his life.

He was broken, almost beyond repair.

Did he risk his life to protect her?

With the last dregs of her strength, she created a wave of destruction magic, shattering the ice that kept her from laying him down.

Slowly, she laid him flat on the ground.

Reaching into her spatial ring, she pulled out everything she could find that might let her attempt the impossible—bringing back a man with no vital signs.

One of the ice spikes had gone through his heart. She was sure he was not far from death.

She gritted her teeth. Ashcroft had taken her knights.

Now, she had killed her reluctant champion.

It was like everyone who got close to her died.

She bit her lip.

"I really only leave destruction in my wake."

That was why she wanted him to live. She opened the potions and began pouring them into his open wounds.

She grabbed a bandage and began covering the gaping holes.

Taking out a needle, a red flash of magic glowed at her fingertips.

"I can't do healing magic... but I learned to compensate with more mundane skills."

"Are you listening to me..." she whispered, as she used fiber thread to sew his torn body back together.

Abellona didn't know if he would live. If he died, so would she. But if he was still in there, she wanted him to hear her voice. She didn't know what to say—she wasn't close to him.

She didn't even know his name. So she spoke of the person she knew best.

Pushing the thread through his skin, the needle was coated with her attribute of destruction, breaking his tough flesh so she could save him.

"Being born a princess isn't all its glitter and gold... it's really hard..."

She pressed down on his abdomen with red-bloody hands, forcing his torn intestines back into his body.

"No one asked me what I wanted to be, or what I wanted to do with my life. I was just pushed through an education program and ordered to excel..."

She bit off the bloody end of the thread with her teeth, spitting it out before threading another needle.

"While I wasn't given the choice of the family I was born into... I at least hoped we could be like other families. Apparently not. My siblings weren't my allies. They were my competitors..."

She poured another potion across his body, pressing down on his chest in hopes of forcing out any clogged blood in his lungs.

"...it was hard to accept. I envied siblings who loved and trusted each other... so I naively tried to make a friend..."

Her breathing grew heavier, her body slick with his blood.

"I didn't think about how easily they could be turned against me. They were only my friends because their lord father wanted to support my rise... to the throne..."

Her voice grew soft.

"And when I failed to meet expectations, they moved to another sibling..."

She carefully broke the ice around his still heart, pouring more potion as it melted into water.

"And anyone else who genuinely liked me, or wanted to be around me... died. That was how I got the name Abellona of Destruction. It wasn't just because of my attribute..."

She bit her lips, looking down at his chest. She had patched him up as best as she could. Her red eyes flickered with a distant, tearful reflection.

"It wasn't because I was a victor of many wars. It was because my followers and supporters just keep dying for me. I tried to act numb, creating the image of a powerful ruler, but it hurts. I hate it. I hate it. I hate that the more people die, the more others want to follow me..."

She leaned over Damon's unmoving body, a soft tear dripping from her eye.

"So please... just this once, goddess... let this one person live. Please... live..."

She stayed there, praying in her heart—for this stranger, and for herself.

But there was no response. Of course there wouldn't be.

At least this time, she would die too. She relaxed her head, waiting for the inevitable.

There was a soft smile on her face.

"I never imagined I'd die with a stranger in a cave... I don't mind it..."

"I mind it."

Her head snapped to the side.

Those cold, dark eyes were staring at her.

"I'm not dead yet... not until I settle my grudge... in blood."

Chapter 565: Half Lie

Damon didn't know how she did it, but he was feeling a heck of a lot better, well... as better as someone with a body full of stitches would feel.

He was low on blood and was slightly worried he would get necrosis. He reached into his shadow storage, bringing out several vials of potions and downing them.

This was the closest he'd come to actually dying. His consciousness was almost lost — the only reason he was still able to come back was because his shadow clone was still active, or he may have become brain dead.

His heart was destroyed... or at least his physical heart. However, his heart of shadows was still well and intact.

Deathless had made sure he would continue with his cursed life.

And this time it had used Abellona of Valtheron to avoid his death.

What were the odds he would survive something like that...

"Ashcroft..." he called, his fist tightening as he tried to sit up. Abellona's eyes flashed as she pushed him down.

"Stay down. I order you to stay down."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Order it... who did she think she was to order him to do anything...

He was about to say something but stopped, laying back down. While he didn't necessarily want to be saved, she had still saved him.

No, she had given him a chance for a showdown with Ashcroft.

And while he was injured, he heard what she said...

Damon really hated the elite and rich — the top one percent who controlled the world.

He had been raised on the streets, after all. Still, Abellona had her own problems too.

Damon was sour and resentful... he had so much anger with nowhere to go. The emotions in his chest were something he could hide with smiles and crude words, but not the scars.

How does one act like he didn't massacre a village of women, children... whole families?

His own village no less.

This wasn't regret... it was just... it was frustration. He was frustrated because he failed to live up to the wishes of Carmen or Valarie.

He glanced at Abellona. He had been taking out his anger on her, even if he didn't mean to... but he was also not one to apologize.

She glanced at him with relief in her eyes.

"You're alive..."

Damon nodded slowly, glancing at her.

"Obviously..."

He had used high-level potions from the system to heal his wounds, so he was going to be fully healed in a matter of hours.

Damon glanced at her, having heard what she had to say about herself. He remembered...

Nobles were people too. While he couldn't apologize, he could say...

"Thank you..." he whispered.

That much he could do.

Abellona shook her head.

"I should thank you... you saved my life."

Damon nodded, biting his lip. He didn't expect her to seem so happy. He bit his lip again.

"I'm...I apologize..."

He muttered inaudibly.

Abellona tilted her head, muttering back what he had called her so rudely earlier today.

"Retard, shady retard..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Was she insulting him?

She smiled lightly.

"Now we are even..."

"Shall we let bygones be bygones then..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. He was in pain, but he had grown used to pain.

He was not one to beat around the bush.

"Does this have anything to do with your moniker... Abellona of Destruction?"

Her eyes trembled slightly as she lowered her head.

"What does that matter to you..."

Damon shook his head.

"It doesn't."

He glanced at her with a tired expression.

"It's just... in some ways I can understand you. You may seem distant and cold, but you value the lives of your followers. And when those who have followed you, believed in you, die... you feel so helpless..."

Damon stared at his shadow, where Matia was. Now she was his shadow — once, she had been his friend...

And he had killed her with his own two hands.

Abellona bit her lip.

"I... I... see... you have also lost those you trust... those who believed in you..."

She glanced at him with a confused expression.

"How do you deal with that..."

Damon smiled in a self-deprecating way.

"I don't... I can't forget... and I know it's all my fault... I... still continue to move forward because if I stand still, I know my regrets and sins will catch up."

Abellona nodded, listening to his words.

"If you stay here with me, you will die..."

She reached her hand, shaking the shackle.

"If I die... I may drag you down with me. I can't beat Ashcroft... and I apologize for asking you..."

Damon didn't know why she was suddenly being so nice, but she must have thought this was because of her. There was no need to correct her...

This was actually between the Unknown God, Damon, and Ashcroft. The Unknown God wanted him to face Ashcroft now.

Damon didn't understand why he and Ashcroft couldn't just work together at the beginning, but after meeting him he knew he would never work with Ashcroft.

That demon saw no one as his equal.

He saw himself as king, emperor, maybe even as a god.

You either kneel or die...

Still, Damon knew there had to be a possibility of winning. That was just how the Unknown God was — he set the table, but there was always a degree of fairness to it... no matter how twisted.

'I'll use every card in my deck...'

Abellona pushed her hair to the side, blood dried on her hands and face from helping Damon.

"Stranger... how do... no, what do we do with the little we have..."

"Damian..."

She turned her head with a confused crease on her forehead.

"Excuse me..."

He glanced at her with a sigh.

"My name is Damian... there's no point in hiding it anymore... though I ask your pardon for not revealing my full name."

She glanced at him, her red eyes gaining a gentle flicker. She nodded slowly.

"Damian... it's an honor to make your acquaintance."

Damon nodded slowly. With this, he had gained her trust to a certain degree...

It was a shame he had to lie to her about his name, but so be it. Most times when people used fake names, it was close to their original.

Still he made her a promise.

"I won't die.... I'll live to cash out on the price we agreed upon..."

## Chapter 566: Blood Ties

Damian was the name of his grandfather, and ironically, his mother may have named him Damon because, in some part of her, she wanted a connection to her estranged father.

After meeting the old man, Damon could say without a doubt that he had inherited his most temperamental traits directly from him. The old man looked like he didn't even fear God.

Arrogance ran in his blood. By some measure, even Evangeline carried it. After all, this was the same girl who never gave anyone the time of day. She didn't even know Damon existed despite being in the same class as him. That level of ego, to disregard the entire world, was something else.

You would think she had at least heard the rumors.

But she didn't care. Damon was something of a celebrity at the academy. He still was, even now, though for a very different reason.

That ego of his did have a tendency to get him in trouble. A lot.

He glanced down at his body, dried blood crusted against his skin. These were the marks of his latest injuries, the result of standing up to Ashcroft. And right now, Damon was racking his brain on how to kill that demon.

He considered using his shadow clone to send for help from the capital, maybe even contact Lilith Astranova, but he dismissed the idea. His clone was already deep inside Ravenscroft territory, preparing to assassinate the heir of a grand dukedom.

He didn't want to jeopardize that.

The second reason was Ashcroft himself. If the empire caught wind of what Damon could do, they would want to verify it, or worse, terminate him before any leaks spread. His ability to clone himself was not something he could risk exposing.

But the most important reason was the unknown god.

This was a quest between him and Ashcroft. The god had already accounted for the time and the place. Foreign interference would not be allowed.

Even if he contacted Lilith, she wouldn't reach him faster than she could return to Valerion. She could send a message or make a call, but she would also be forced to reveal her source.

And even if they did mobilize, would they really be able to break through Ashcroft's barrier in time?

All of these reasons, and one more above them all—Damon wanted to kill Ashcroft with his own hands.

He didn't want to borrow another man's knife. He wanted the satisfaction of ending him with his own strength.

Ashcroft was arrogant. So was he.

This was ego against ego, and his pride was the only thing on the line.

But the question remained. How could he kill Ashcroft?

Abellona sat quietly next to him, her brows knit in thought, searching for the solution to their predicament.

"He's growing weaker," she muttered, her voice laced with anger. How could she have missed something so obvious? How could a rankless goblin be so powerful? Clearly, Ashcroft was breaking some natural law of the world.

He had seemed invincible. She hadn't even placed him in the category of an enemy that could be beaten.

Damon nodded slowly.

"The more he uses his power, the more he falls apart."

She drew in a shaky breath. "What do we do with this information? In war, knowing isn't enough. You have to exploit it."

Damon stretched his hand forward, a sharp pain racing through his body as he moved.

"In that case, we should identify what cards he has in his deck and compare them to ours."

Abellona bit her lip.

"The strongest thing he has is the fact that he is Ashcroft. That alone is a key to victory."

Damon shook his head, anger flickering in his eyes.

"But we've already established that he doesn't have time. He won't waste his energy searching for us personally unless he has to."

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you implying?"

Damon smirked, a thin smile pulling at his lips.

"Exactly what you think I am. He's a king before he's a warrior, and we both know kings don't dirty their own hands unless they're forced to."

Abellona frowned. She didn't like the way he said that. It felt like he was mocking her own status as a princess. But it was also true. If she were searching for someone hidden, she wouldn't go herself either. She would send her subordinates while she commanded from the center.

And when the enemy was finally revealed, she would crush them.

"Right," she said quietly. "He didn't show his face until his lesser demons found us. He just let us walk into his trap."

Damon nodded, his bones stiff with pain.

"Exactly. Which means we need to take out his minions."

Her eyes flickered with a dark light, a sinister smile tugging at her lips.

"If we take them out, he'll have no choice but to come searching himself. That means he wastes more energy and falls apart quicker. Then we just wait for him to die."

Damon raised his hand, shaking his head.

"No. Not that. I want to fight him on even ground. His full strength against mine."

Abellona stared at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Is that so? Then why don't you go fight him now?"

Damon knew what she was thinking. But if he let Ashcroft die on his own, without facing him, then he would run from Ashcroft's shadow for the rest of his life.

"I'll be fine. I promise you won't die."

Her eyes narrowed. "If you fight Ashcroft at the same rank, would you win?"

She bit her lip, but the question already hung in the air.

"Who's stronger? Him or you?"

Damon smiled, recalling the overwhelming pressure of Ashcroft's power.

"Well, if Ashcroft regained his full power, he might give me some trouble."

She gave him a flat, deadpan look, unimpressed.

"But would you lose?" she pressed.

Damon raised his head, not hesitating for even a second.

"Nah. I'd win."

Her gaze swept over him with open disdain.

"If we survive this, I'm taking you straight to the mental health quartermaster."

Chapter 567: Love Yourself

She was absolutely sure about it now. This man was crazy. It was either that or he was just stupidly brave.

What kind of person would willingly choose to face the demon lord of domination?

"You do realize you have other choices. A safer choice."

Damon smiled at her words. Choice. It was funny she would say such a word.

He did have a choice, but that was the thing. When we made a choice, was it really our own or were there factors influencing it? Wasn't that just called fate? Yes, this battle was fated.

After all, a god had set it all up. Damon knew by some measure the unknown god was a hypocrite, but at the same time he wasn't.

He was a hypocrite because he denied fate by calling it choice, giving those who believed in his ideology the illusion of control when they made deals with him or invoked his name. But at the same time, he wasn't a hypocrite because he never said he wouldn't make choices himself.

Fate was merely a collection of choices that resulted in consequences. It was the result of free will. But did the unknown god not also have the will to act on his own choices as well?

"It's all convoluted. Choice is just fate," Damon responded to her.

That was true. He was fated to kill his whole village. The unknown god had set it up, but Damon had wanted to do it, and he would have done it even if it wasn't a level-up requirement.

But what if he didn't want to? Wouldn't that mean he had to make a choice—level up or refuse and never level up again?

What if the system one day asked him to kill someone he cared about?

It could be his sister, Iris, Lilith, Eva, Sylvia, Leona—anyone he cared about.

Would he choose power, or would he defy?

"You don't have to make a choice like that, you know," Abellona replied, not knowing what he was thinking about or what dilemma had crossed his mind.

Damon smiled. She had said something that made him feel a weight lift from his chest without even meaning to.

"Right. The goddess believes in fate, right? She is a goddess of fate. Then would you not say it was fate that brought us here?"

Subconsciously, Damon couldn't help but contrast the unknown god's path to that of the goddess.

Was fate a choice, or was choice just fated and inevitable, with no design of your own will but a cosmic act of predestination? Could you really not resist it?

"Are we truly not asked to be born..." he muttered aloud.

Abellona narrowed her eyes. She didn't understand the sudden shift in his mood. Was he having second thoughts about facing Ashcroft?

"I don't know if I was asked before I was born. But I am here. I exist. I have life. While I am, I will live it as best I can. Whether I was asked or not, I'm glad I'm here. And I will live it with every ounce of my will. Come what may, I will treasure it."

She glanced at him. Her cold red eyes softened.

"You should learn to love yours too. Love yourself."

"Love myself..." Damon repeated. Was his self-loathing really that obvious?

Damon smiled lightly. Right. It wasn't that deep. Whether fate was an inevitable choice or one born of free will, it didn't matter.

For now, the system's level-up requirement served him. It had not gone against his wishes. If it did, then he would make his own choice. There had been no reason to think about it because he knew himself.

He was Damon Grey. And if he was going to lose, he would lose on his own terms.

Damon glanced at Abellona, his body healing due to the potions with soft dull aches remaining.

"What do you have in mind before we have our final showdown?"

Abellona nodded, his confidence making her smile softly.

"As planned, we need to get rid of his minions."

She drew a circle on the hard floor of the cave with her fingers, carving through stone like it was nothing.

"The strongest were the balors, but all are dead save one who is injured with a broken wing."

She drew the shape of a cow horn, using it as a symbol for another demon.

"The next would be the Goristro. These aren't just brutes. They are terrifyingly good at navigating labyrinths and finding people. It's a miracle they haven't found us."

Damon nodded, thinking of the minotaur-type demons and their cow horns.

"Your knights killed most of them, so we don't really have much to worry about. I'd say a few are left."

"Ashcroft must have kept them as reserve forces, or they're dead."

She shook her head with a frown.

"That's not good enough. Incomplete information is worse than no information at all."

She glanced at Damon with a piercing gaze.

"You can communicate with animals, if that wasn't an excuse to insult me, that is."

Damon cleared his throat, feeling a little bad for that.

"I can. Are you hoping I use them for information gathering? I'll stop you there."

He held his abdomen with one hand, wincing through the pain.

"I can speak to them, but I can't make them obey of their own free will. And it's hard to make sense of their nonsense sometimes."

Abellona narrowed her eyes, holding her chin.

"What about the raven and the squirrel?"

Damon shrugged. "I asked the woodpecker, but it seems they fled. However, if he sees them, I did leave instructions to wait until I show up."

She bit her lips. She couldn't believe she was relying on a bird and a rodent.

Damon glanced at her.

"I think you forgot the dragon in the room."

She narrowed her eyes with a grim flicker. He saw the way she clenched her fist.

Taking a deep breath, she held her arms and looked away for a moment, as if to reconcile what she was about to say.

"I didn't forget. It's just... Gaston has served me for years. I never imagined he would be taken over by Ashcroft."

She clenched her fist, recalling all the battles he had survived with her.

Lita was dead too. How could she not be sad?

"Gaston of the Nero Lands has been taken over by Ashcroft. As one he had sworn fealty to, it is my duty to kill him and free him from the demon's control."

She placed a hand on her chest.

"I will kill him myself."

Damon raised his eyebrows.

"You do realize he's in the fourth class while you're only peak third class. Isn't he too much?"

She glanced at Damon, imitating his crude words from earlier with no regard to her status as third princess.

There was a soft smile on her face.

"Nah. I'd win."

Chapter 568: Evolutionary Path

Damon found her imitation of his words quite amusing. He really had a knack for corrupting princesses. He could not help but think of Sylvia. Wasn't she also influenced by his devil-may-care attitude.

Never in a million years did he imagine the famed Abellona of Valtheron would say something like "nah I'd win."

Damon smiled. She was growing on him.

'Ahh I've gotten soft.' He was changing as a person.

He took a deep painful breath, the smell of blood heavy on his person.

"Now that we discussed our plans for the minions what about Ashcroft himself..."

He glanced at her with narrowed eyes.

"How can I be sure your mind would not get dominated."

She shook her head, spreading her wings, showing off their golden yellowish gleam in the cave lights.

"I am resistant to mind domination due to my destruction attribute. If he had a few hours or days to break me then I would be taken over. But in the heat of battle there is no worry."

Damon nodded his head slowly.

She glanced at him.

"What about you. How can I be sure you cannot be taken over."

Damon sneered.

"Getting mentally taken over is pedestrian. Could never be me."

She scoffed with visible disdain on her elegant face. If she could hit him she would.

"So what. Your ego is greater than what Ashcroft can dominate."

She summoned her spear out of thin air and pointed the wide golden tip at his neck.

"Should I just kill you now and save myself the trouble."

Damon smiled lightly, glancing at her.

"Hmm the way things stand if I fight you I would lose. Ahh how the tables have turned on little old me."

She smiled at that realization. Before, he was arrogant with good reason, since she had been injured. But now she was better and he was the one injured. And even if both of them were uninjured, she was higher ranked. She would win.

Damon closed his eyes.

"I cannot be dominated."

She frowned with disbelief plastered on her calm face.

"Who do you think you are. Mind Dominate works on everyone. It just takes longer with others, and those of greater power have stronger minds."

Damon shrugged, feeling a sharp jolt of pain.

"I am immune to mental domination."

Abellona was not sure if he was joking or not. She took a deep breath.

"Fine then. I will take your word for it."

Damon almost felt aggrieved. Was she really doubtful. He truly was immune to mental domination. The crown on his head gave him that immunity. This was an ascendant armor, forged with knowledge from the Crystal Palace.

"Did not know my word was so little to go on. I feel hurt."

She narrowed her eyes, giving him a once over.

"You do not look hurt."

Damon glanced at his aching body where some stitches were still sewn into his skin, then looked back at her.

"Bad choice of words, princess."

She shook her head and returned to the topic.

"We already know our targets. We just need to find them and kill them one at a time. The hardest would be the Balrog and Ser Gaston."

Damon raised his hand and rubbed his chin. She had not mentioned something, or perhaps she considered them unimportant as individuals. But Damon knew how terrifying they could be and how much of a nuisance they were at the right moment.

"You did not forget the swarm of lesser demons did you."

She closed her eyes, pushing her jet black hair to the side.

"Of course not. Lesser demons may be weak individually but they are a problem if they continue to grow. The only reason powerful ones are rare is because those things do not live very long, and those who do evolve into a new type of demon."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Wait. This was his first time hearing it. Lesser demons become other types of demons.

She glanced at him as if expecting his ignorance on the matter.

"Well that confirms your household did not tell you everything. How can they tell you about Ashcroft but neglect to mention this detail."

Damon smiled, controlling his expression. Right. She was still under that impression.

"My grandfather is a troublesome old man. He is not someone to mention details unless it comes up."

She sighed, looking down at the scribbles on the ground with a smile, taking in the information he had given her about himself.

"Well it is known by most high ranking military officers who fought in the demon wars. Demons have an evolutionary chain. Lesser demons can evolve into other demon types."

Pushing her hair behind her ears, she glanced at Damon.

"There are two types of demons, as I am sure you know. The monstrous types and the demon kin who look and act completely human, save for the fact they have wings, horns, and tails."

"The evolutionary path for monster types is to become more human."

Damon nodded his head. That much he knew. It was the same for normal monsters too, just like the evil forest wendigo. It became human too.

He spoke of the little he knew of demon kin.

"Their inhuman appendages can be concealed, making them no different from us. Only male demon kin have horns, while a female demon kin cannot produce a horn, as a horn is a symbol of reproductive capability. Right."

She nodded at his textbook example of demon kin.

"The monstrous types are based on many different species. Legends say they were originally monsters. While some say the first demon lord summoned them from the abyss to aid the demon kin."

She took a deep breath.

"While the demon kin were said to be goddess races, humans, elves, fae, just like you and I. They were guided by the first demon lord and became demons. Their descendants who carried their bloodlines became known as demon kin."

Damon did not say anything, but first demon lord—was she perhaps referring to Mugu or someone else. It would make more sense for it to be Mugu.

But that raised another answer. After Mugu left Lysithara for the second time, where did he go, and how did he become a demon.

There was still so much hidden about the first epoch.

Abellona continued to explain what she knew, even if some of it was military secrets.

After a few minutes she was done. With that out of the way, they finished their plans and decided to rest.

Tomorrow they would put their plan to the test. This might be the very last time they would have quiet.

Ashcroft was waiting.

#### Chapter 569: Forest Mafia

Once again Damon found himself out in the forest with Abellona, the Valtheron princess known for her beauty and destructive capabilities.

Seeing the lush forest and feeling the fresh humid breeze, Damon felt a sting in his chest and a deep-seated grudge.

The last time he was outside, Ashcroft had toyed with him and showed off his overwhelming powers. Damon had felt the insurmountable gap in strength between the demon lord of domination and himself.

"Tsk." He clicked his tongue. He wasn't even sure he would win if they were the same rank. This must have been how the Ascendants felt when they fought the Outsiders.

Even at the same rank, the Outsiders had more experience and knew what higher levels of power were like, having already touched them themselves.

That was Damon's dilemma.

'No... it's future Damon's problem.'

For now, he only needed to focus on the task at hand.

Abellona squatted down under some shrubs, her eyes narrowing. She turned to Damon and yanked at the shackles tying them together.

"Don't get distracted. This is the place, right?"

Damon was jolted out of his train of thought.

"I wasn't distracted. I was thinking of important stuff."

Abellona didn't look convinced.

"Very well then."

Damon sighed, glancing around. This should be the place. They had arranged a meeting with Damon's pets through the woodpecker, and the two animals had chosen this as the spot where they would reveal the location of their targets.

He closed his eyes, spreading his shadow perception carefully, keeping it slow to avoid detection by anything that might trace it back.

There was still lingering trauma from when his mind had almost been fried by something in the Whispering Forest.

After a moment, Damon reached out and grabbed Abellona's hand, pulling her between two trees.

Her eyes flickered, but she didn't resist. He had done worse than hold her hand against her will.

Following him, she found herself at a tree where a brown squirrel appeared, carrying a nut in its tiny hand. This was not the red squirrel she knew.

It stopped on a branch and squealed softly, as if speaking in a language she couldn't understand.

"What's it saying?" she asked Damon.

"He's asking for a password," Damon replied, realizing his pets might have been busy with their own affairs.

That wouldn't be strange. Damon had once been the nemesis of all ravens in the academy until he made peace with Croft. Only then had they stopped harassing him.

If they had been busy, then maybe he could use this ability of theirs to his advantage.

"Password is... Lilith Astranova is prettier than Abellona of Valtheron."

Abellona froze the instant she heard her name.

"Wha... what? That's not true at all! I was number one on Fashion Monthly four times in a row!"

Her expression shifted to anger.

"Are you trying to rile me up? If you are, it's working! Whose side are you even on? Are you one of those men enthralled by Lady Astranova? That is not a factual statement! I'm not inferior to Lady Astranova... what can I expect... from—"

Damon raised his hand, cutting her off.

"It's not that deep."

He muttered to himself.

'Geez, women really do hate comparisons. This is the most I've ever heard her talk.'

He would be wise never to mention Lilith in front of her again.

The squirrel didn't care about her rant. After hearing the password, it squeaked again, asking another question.

Damon sighed softly.

"Nuts are the best."

The squirrel squealed happily, then jumped to another tree, slowing its pace so they could follow.

Damon pulled Abellona along, following the squirrel as it led them deeper into demon territory.

They crawled under fallen trees, moved through thick shrubs, and passed burrows until they reached a tree that had toppled over a stream. The squirrel crossed it nimbly while Damon and Abellona simply jumped across as if it were nothing.

Finally, they came to a cluster of trees. There, they noticed something unusual—birds of different kinds perched in the branches, squirrels and rodents patrolling like guards.

Abellona raised an eyebrow.

"What is this?"

Damon almost blushed in embarrassment. It looked like his pets had formed a forest mafia—or was it more accurate to call it a kingdom?

When they reached the center, he wasn't surprised to see the raven surrounded by other birds. At its side was the red squirrel, seated on a pile of nuts and acorns while several others flapped and fed it.

Damon's expression went flat. He walked forward slowly, grabbing both of them, scattering their followers back into the trees.

"You two little shits... while I've been out there getting my ass handed to me and dying, you've been living the high life."

He bit his lip, then glanced at Abellona behind him.

'Most of all... they're embarrassing me in front of the princess.'

Abellona studied the unusually intelligent creatures, then gave Damon a strange look.

He really was something. To tame creatures from the evil forest—rare, exotic, and priceless. She knew they fetched sky-high prices, and even if one bought them, they could never truly be domesticated.

Given his personality, she was surprised he hadn't thought to sell them.

'He must be sentimental at heart. I knew he had a chivalrous side.'

No—that wasn't it. The truth was Damon simply didn't know how valuable they were. If he did, he'd sell the bastards without hesitation.

Better yet, he'd run a scam—sell them for a fortune, wait for them to escape their new owners, then sell them again to someone else for even more money.

It was a good thing he didn't know.

Damon began to question them, and before long, he pieced together a mental map of the forest. After several minutes, he nodded, a cold smile tugging at his lips.

Turning to Abellona, he chuckled.

"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

She drew a deep breath.

"Good news first."

He nodded, smirking thinly.

"The good news is Ashcroft is on the opposite side of our targets."

She frowned, knowing full well he could still cross that distance easily.

"And the bad news?"

"The bad news is Gaston is in the same forest region as the Balrog."

Her lips tightened. She couldn't face both.

"I can't kill them both."

Damon nodded.

"Well, it's a good thing you have me. I'll deal with the injured Balrog and give you the chance to kill Gaston."

Chapter 570: You Cannot Pass

This was so unnecessary. He didn't even have to be here. He was here because of a moment of pettiness.

And somehow that had led him into a battle with the demon lord of domination.

There was a strange beauty to it. He was truly living up to his class—Death Seeker. It was like he was allergic to living peacefully.

Damon held a staff in one hand and one of the silver blades in the other. On his shoulders perched his two eccentric followers, the raven and the squirrel.

He kept his breathing steady, making no noise whatsoever. Damon was certain this would end in disaster, but if they succeeded now, they would cripple Ashcroft's main force.

The only problem was time. They had to kill both the Balrog and Gaston in under seven minutes, all while making sure they didn't attract too much attention.

Damon touched his chest, feeling his heart pounding.

Abellona had said she had a means of retreat if the worst came to pass and Ashcroft himself appeared.

Damon bit his lip. Ashcroft was weakening with each moment.

"I wonder how weak he's gotten..."

He was anxious—not because he feared Ashcroft, but because he feared the demon lord would become too weak. Damon wanted a fair fight, one on level ground: him versus Ashcroft.

The dominator demon lord against the ravenous living shadow.

One would rule, and one would perish.

Abellona's soft breathing grew heavier as the glow of flames flickered below them. From their perch in the trees, they could see it clearly.

A massive creature, humanoid in form, wreathed in flames. Bent horns twisted from its head. A long flaming whip dangled from its hand, and broken, malformed wings like those of a giant burning bat stretched uselessly at its back.

It limped across the forest floor, half of its face destroyed. It had lost the ability to fly and was clearly still recovering from its deep wounds.

Behind it walked a man. He stood stalwart with a sword at his waist, wearing plain armor without an emblem. But anyone with a discerning eye could see—he was a knight of Valtheron.

This was Gaston. Once a loyal knight to Abellona, now reduced to Ashcroft's thrall. His mind had been broken, his will bent until all that remained was service to the demon lord of domination.

"Balrog, you make too much noise. The targets will hear you from a mile away."

The Balrog turned its massive head, its ruined features glowing faintly with lingering rage. It was Gaston who had dealt the wounds that stripped it of its dignity.

Lord Ashcroft had been displeased with the Balrog's performance. Gaston was now his new favorite.

The beast hissed with quiet fury, its resentment burning deeper than its flames. It prayed silently for the abyss to swallow this wretch whole.

But it said nothing.

Gaston frowned.

"Lord Ashcroft would be displeased with your attitude toward me. While I am to blame for your injuries, I deeply regret what I had done before I was enlightened."

The word made Abellona clench her fist where she hid beside Damon in the tree.

Enlightened? That was what they called it? Mental enslavement by a demon lord, dressed up in a word meant to sound holy.

What a vicious power—to strip a being of free will, to warp them into nothing more than an extension of another’s will. Their ideals, their loves, their enemies, their very lives ceased to matter.

All that remained was Ashcroft.

Damon couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to wield that kind of power. The things he could do with it.

All it required was a simple act and the will to dominate.

‘The unknown god made this guy too powerful.’

Abellona took a deep breath. She had seen enough. Ashcroft would not insult Gaston like this any longer. She would end it, here and now.

She poured magic into the chains tying her to Damon. The shackles expanded, then vanished, leaving only the cuffs around their wrists but no physical connection between them.

Without another word, her spear plummeted from the tree. She leapt after it, kicking it downward, straight at Gaston.

Damon sighed. Taking a step, he melted into the shadows now that Abellona was no longer weighing him down.

He reappeared in front of the Balrog. Its eyes glowed, horns blazing, whip tightening in its grip.

Damon raised the staff in his hand. The Staff of Carnage. He had brought it as a last resort. He didn’t want to use it unless he had to.

The Balrog's attention shifted briefly to Abellona as she charged Gaston. Her aura burned like a star, and even in its fury the beast felt a flicker of unease.

Gaston's rank was higher, but that woman was terrifying.

And now this insect stood in its path. A second-class warrior with a silver sword gleaming, and a floating fragment of steel dripping with the memory of too much blood.

A broken sword.

It understood their plan. They wanted to hold it back while she killed Gaston. Too bad—it could not allow that.

Even if it hated Gaston, he was still a servant of Lord Ashcroft.

And it would not fail its master again. It would die before that happened.

The whip ignited, curling in fire.

Damon glanced at the raven and the squirrel on his shoulders.

"Fly, fools."

He didn't need to ask twice. They fled instantly.

Damon's eye twitched. Couldn't they have at least hesitated? Pretended to care for his life, even for a second? Why did they leave so quickly?

Of course they knew he was about to fight for his life. That was exactly why they ran.

He sighed. Then his gaze shifted to Abellona. She was about to face Gaston, a rank higher than her.

Damon gripped his staff tighter. He couldn't kill a Balrog, even injured. It was a rank four monster.

'I just need to make sure it doesn't interfere until Abellona kills Gaston and backs me up. Though I can make its injuries worse.'

The huge Balrog raised its flaming whip high, fire crackling in the night.

Damon lifted both sword and staff, his voice echoing as he roared:

"You shall not pass!"

The Balrog would not get past Damon.

That wasn't a declaration.

It was a fact.