

Shadow 571

Chapter 571: Wings Of Destruction

"For all the people who have died following me... I am... forgive me for my incompetence, for my weakness, but most of all for being Abellona of Destruction..."

This was what had lain in her heart for many years. She was in her late twenties now, a prodigy about to reach the fourth class.

Years of court politics and battles had raised her from an ordinary princess to an extraordinary warrior princess.

A princess of war. Abellona of Destruction.

Yet for every one of her followers who had died, they had died carrying faith, hope, love, and dreams. They had left something behind.

Some had left their families. Others their wishes.

'Why can't I be Abellona of Love... why can't I be Abellona of Kindness... of Hope... of Peace....'

She could not. She had to be Abellona of Destruction. Wherever she walked, grass would never grow. She was born with the singular, most destructive attribute.

Abellona did not wield wind, or fire, or any element. She was born with the very concept of destruction as her attribute.

All she touched would eventually be destroyed.

She was doomed to solitude. No one by her side could stay for long. Those who tried would face death and ruin, again and again.

And with every fallen follower, a new face would rise to take their place, eager to serve her legend, eager to give her their faith.

She carried it all, never forgetting those who had fallen.

All things could be destroyed. Was there anything greater than destruction? Hardly.

Even death was only a form of destruction. Perhaps only nothingness was greater, for even destruction would return to nothingness.

Yet despite all of this, despite all the tragedy she had caused, Abellona still held her pride.

Because all those amazing people had believed in her. They had died believing in her. There had to be something they saw in her that she could not see herself.

She would not let anyone desecrate them—not even the legendary Ashcroft.

Her spear gleamed in her hand.

Her cold eyes strained painfully at Gaston, her lips pressed between her teeth.

Gaston smiled calmly.

"I have never seen such an expression on your face, Princess. Do not be sad. Many still believe in you."

She said nothing as Gaston pulled his sword from its sheath.

"You are strong. Do not show weakness before an enemy."

He took a battle stance.

"I am the knight of the Demon Lord of Domination. Gaston of the Nero Lands."

Abellona's red eyes grew cold. They glowed like a river of blood had been formed.

"...Gaston of the Nero Lands, you have served me well. I am honored to have had your loyalty all these years. I will kill you in three minutes."

Gaston smiled, pain evident in his eyes.

"Hail Lord Ashcroft."

In that moment it was as if the world had changed shades. The air trembled before it collapsed into a cacophony of violence that echoed across the forest.

Even at this distance, it was clear Ashcroft would hear. He would soon arrive.

Still, that did not matter to Abellona.

The earth around her shattered and began to disappear. Everything was raised into the sky.

The trees had been sliced apart by Gaston's single sword sweep, yet that all-consuming attack, which had cut through the forest like a single strand of weak hair, had been stopped.

Stopped by Abellona, glowing red, her golden spear turning crimson where her hands gripped its long metallic shaft.

Her wings spread wide. The golden hue of her feathers faded little by little, turning deep red. Her hair whipped wildly in the winds as the astral force from Gaston's blade pressed against her.

He pulled his sword back and swung it in a circle, building momentum in a flashing instant.

Abellona's wings, tipped in red, met his blade head-on with a deafening clang. Sparks burst outward as if two hard metals had struck.

Her wings were unharmed. His sword chipped, a piece breaking away.

Gaston smiled, then laughed. He struck again. She swung her spear, and the battlefield shook with thunderous flashes. Sparks sprayed with each clash, until dust clouds rolled as they moved across the ground.

The dust and sparks collided beneath their heavy exchanges, steel against steel, flesh against flesh.

Lightning flashed in the dust, making it seem as though a volcano had erupted. The forest trembled. The earth broke, forming deep craters.

Critters scattered in terror.

Blood streaked down Gaston's lips and cheeks. He could not push past her wings with technique alone.

Her skill, [Wings of Destruction], gave her wings the embodiment of destruction itself. Anything they touched ceased to exist.

But he knew the truth. The red spreading across her wings was not magic—it was destruction incarnate. If it spread too far, it would reach her body.

And if destruction touched mortal flesh, the result was clear. Abellona herself would be destroyed.

Her strongest skill was also her undoing.

The more she used it, the faster she hastened toward her demise.

Gaston bit his lip, watching her wings redden by the minute. This was only the beginning.

"Princess..." he muttered.

Her eyes glowed red. He could feel her anguish in every strike, every blow. This was all the pain she hid behind her aloof mask.

She cared more than she admitted. What kind of ruler could endure watching their followers die?

He could feel her guilt. Why was she always the one who lived?

His arms screamed under her power, pulverized by her strikes. His sword cracked apart. A swordsman without a sword was already a dead man.

He smiled as her wings crushed his form. At last, his mind was freed from Ashcroft's domination. His body faded, only his head remained for a moment longer.

His mouth opened slowly.

"It was an honor, Princess... thank you for everything."

Abellona finished him without hesitation. Her hand clenched around her bleeding fist, her spear steady in her grip, her hair drifting in the storm.

She paused for a moment; the world grew silent, so did her heart.

"I was honored."

Her eyes turned to Damon, who was locked in battle with the Balrog.

Chapter 572: Point Blank Range

"Razkara..." the Balrog spoke in a tongue that was all too easy to understand due to his ability to comprehend different languages.

Still, Damon wasn't fazed. He knew the odds and he was not trying to win. There was a deafening sound behind him as Abellona began to fight Gaston. He just needed to buy her time.

The Balrog roared, raising its flaming whip and lashing it toward Damon. He quickly took a step back, diving into the shadows before the whip struck.

He slid through the shadows around him as clouds of dust and destruction rained down from Abellona's battle with Gaston.

'Damn, those in the fourth class are real monsters.'

Abellona wasn't even in the fourth class, but her power was unbelievably destructive. Where did he get the audacity to pick on such a dangerous woman?

"I really need to start watching my mouth."

"Arrggg..." the Balrog shot out a large ring of fire, jumping down with a wave of flames and sulfur in the air. Whatever was left of the trees was razed in flames. The red hue of destruction spread everywhere, smoke rising into the sky.

'Well there's no hiding this from Ashcroft.'

A battle on their level could never be low key. The higher the rank, the greater the power. The fourth class could already stomp mountains. How much more powerful were those in the seventh class?

And by that measure, how powerful were the Outsiders at their peak?

A large black flaming claw swiped past Damon. He dodged, giving him the opportunity to use Beholder's Gaze. Time slowed slightly. Using that moment, his speed doubled and he slashed at the wrist of the massive balrog, its wrist as wide as his waist.

He ducked down as red boiling blood poured onto the ground around him, sizzling like acid.

Damon narrowed his eyes, stepping on the air with Air Walk.

"Did he just get bigger..."

Stepping on the air, he pushed himself in another direction just as a falling whip slashed through the space, the heat distorting the very air.

Damon took a deep breath, keeping his heart calm and his breathing steady. That was a close call. Actually, he had already had more than a few close calls. This thing might be injured, but it was still two ranks higher than him.

He considered using his Sovereign Mantle form and then going Ravenous, but he needed to save his tricks for when he fought Ashcroft.

Damon watched his hand, flipping the weapon between his fingers, the heat singing his skin slightly even with his elemental resistance.

The Balrog raised its hand and smashed the ground around him. As the cacophony of violence around them increased, Damon waved his hand.

His Dealer's Hand, which was actually just his father's broken sword, flew from where he had hidden it behind the balrog's horn and straight into its eye.

He jumped into the air and drew a massive sword.

The Sword of Nicholas. The weapon was easily the size of a fully grown man or larger.

He raised the massive blade and pushed down with both hands, using his weight and falling momentum to hack into the Balrog's huge shoulder.

"Ghehrass..."

It hissed in agony under the sword's power.

[Sword of Nicholas]

[Type: Weapon]

[Description]

Nicholas was quite a small man. However, what he lacked in stature, he made up for in spirit. Where bigger men stood, Nicholas stood longer. Where greater men fell, Nicholas still stood. There was no one who looked down on Nicholas... until the dragon Ashergon flew the skies. His fangs were swords and his claws were spears, and none could stop Ashergon.

The small Nicholas volunteered to face the mighty Ashergon. To make up for his small stature, he forged a massive and bulky sword.

When he came face to face with Ashergon, he became a pile of ash not even worth remembering, leaving behind a massive sword no one would ever recall.

[Effect]

By some measure he must have been resentful. The sword's aesthetic is not displeasing. It might seem small against a colossal, however it is imbued with the power to slay colossal beings, allowing it to grow bigger, lighter, and sharper.

Damon pressed down harder.

This was the power of the Sword of Nicholas. It might not be a big deal to creatures of modest size, but anything that scaled at a massive size would take far more damage from this sword.

Not to mention, it was quite light. Damon had gotten this sword from fighting some giant horror in Lysithara while searching for Matia.

The Balrog screamed. Damon felt it grab the sword and, with its massive head, rammed him like an angry bull.

Damon felt his body grow hot as he was sent toward the ground, blood gushing from his nose.

He turned his body into a shadow as he smashed into the earth, scattering into a pool of inky blackness. Rising again, he rejoined into his human form, raising his hand. A small hook shot out from his body, pinning itself into the flaming body of the Balrog as it thrashed around trying to pull out the Sword of Nicholas from its lava-like blood.

Damon closed the distance with a deep coldness in his eyes. He reached out midair as the Dealer's Hand flew into his grip. The moment he felt the cold hilt, he gritted his teeth, pain exploding from his body.

"Ahrrrhggg..."

He let flames explode from his sword, forming a pointed tip. The ashborn flames he created felt both hot and cold at the same time.

With the wires made from the web of a crystal spider, he knew they could hold out against the heat of the balrog's flesh.

He pointed at its heart.

"Die..."

As he pierced toward its chest, the Balrog reached down, sacrificing its right side. Damon's eyes flicked. He had missed its heart.

That was fine; he had the staff of carnage at point-blank range.

It raised its claw, reaching for his head. Damon braced for impact when he heard a sharp sound in the air and a fountain of boiling blood fell around him.

He glanced up for a moment, seeing a pale-faced Abellona glancing at him with a surprised expression.

"You actually won against a balrog..."

Damon jumped down from the balrog, feeling slightly disappointed that she had to save him from potentially debilitating burns.

"I wouldn't call that winning..."

Abellona opened her mouth.

"I agree... how about a rematch..."

Damon froze when he heard the voice behind him.

Abellona paled until her face was white, muttering with cold dread.

"As... Ashcroft..."

Chapter 573: How Many More Children

Hearing the voice behind him, Damon couldn't help but smile. By his estimation Ashcroft would take exactly seven minutes to get here, and they had killed their opponents in three. That meant they had time to escape.

Damon turned around with the same smile plastered on his face.

"You sure came here in a hurry... are you that eager to die?"

Ashcroft smiled, closing his eyes calmly. He didn't have the usual disdain he carried for opponents. It was as if he was looking at Damon as an equal.

"I'm not the one fleeing with my tail between my legs... you forgot to hide."

Damon shook his head, showing no regard for the fact that this was the great demon lord of domination. It seemed Ashcroft had made some sacrifices to reach them so quickly.

"I'm not the one who looks half dead and trapped in the body of a little goblin."

Ashcroft didn't need to reply, but he did, since Damon had no intention of running.

"Speaks volumes of your character if you're running from a little goblin. If I had a moderately decent body... you would have died."

Damon replied with cold indifference, knowing that even now Ashcroft had the power to do just that.

"If I had been in the same rank... I would kill you with a thought. But all I hear are excuses."

He glanced down at Ashcroft, using his height to look over the small form of the goblin.

"You look like you're on your last legs..." He smirked, showing not a trace of fear. And if he felt any, he was doing a damn good job of hiding it.

However, his words carried weight. Ashcroft glanced at his goblin body.

It was a wreck, which was almost funny since no one had come close to touching him. He was simply too powerful. But that same great power was also his undoing.

Domination was the power of a king, a monarch. How could a lowly goblin hold such power?

His body was decaying from the inside out. Every breath he drew was agony. His bones were rotting, barely holding together. His organs were melting, his power dropping.

On the outside he had lost one of the goblin's ears. His nose was falling apart, barely clinging to flesh. His body was leaking and dripping blood as if it were sweat.

Even in this pain he still wore the same arrogant expression, even against this would-be usurper.

This was supposed to be his last obstacle before he could resurrect. This boy... just a child that did not know fear.

Seeing this youth, sixteen or seventeen at most, holding a weapon, almost made him think of his own life as a soldier. Fighting with brothers in arms, hearing bullets fly, the willingness to lay on a grenade for the rest.

The image of young children holding guns flashed though his mind.

He opened his eyes.

'How many more children must I kill?'

That life was gone now. Distant.

He raised his head, his eyes bleeding yet still domineering.

"Shall we end this? I have an end goal to achieve, if you don't mind."

Damon scoffed, holding his Dealer's Hand, knowing escape was impossible.

He was about to take a step forward when Abellona grabbed his hand, nudging him. Turning around, he looked at the pale-faced princess.

She shook her head, but Damon knew it was pointless. Ashcroft would never allow them to escape.

"He's too powerful. You can't win. You'll die..."

She whispered softly to him, urging him to flee.

Ashcroft smiled coldly.

"She's right. Give up... your death would be painless."

Of course Damon knew that. But they couldn't escape.

He grabbed Abellona's face, moving his own close until his lips hovered inches from hers. Her eyes widened, not understanding what he was doing. She glanced at Ashcroft, who was simply staring at them.

"Excuse me... a little privacy here." Damon forced a smile.

Ashcroft frowned, but took it as the last wish of a dying man. Getting the kiss of a beautiful woman was something all men desired.

He closed his eyes. Damon glanced at the stunned Abellona, then mouthed something, hoping she could read his lips.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was still something.

Then he turned to face Ashcroft.

"I can't win? Who decided that?"

He glanced at the demon lord, squeezing his Dealer's Hand as he dismissed the Staff of Carnage.

It was useless here. At least for now.

Abellona stepped back as far as she could, biting her lips until they bled. She couldn't say anything. The only thing left was the glow of her wings, still slowly turning red, each feather becoming an incarnation of destruction.

Damon's eyes flickered with tendrils of shadow as he reached for Ashcroft.

Ashcroft's brown goblin eyes didn't change. All he saw was his victory. As Damon took the first step, understanding what Ashcroft did to those he considered equals.

Damon felt something he had not felt before, not even when Ashcroft had been furious about him having his shadow.

His breath caught in his throat as if he had been forced to the bottom of the ocean. The deep pressure made it impossible to breathe, impossible to move freely.

He couldn't breathe, but this was not water. Water could not drown him. The world around him felt eerie and red, as though covered in blood. Breathing blood. Everything black. Everything reeking of despair.

He could feel the deep baleful aura that made his heart pound in his chest as if it were about to explode. The remorseless skill that kept him cool-headed in countless situations was failing him completely.

This... this was the killing intent of Ashcroft.

Even so, Damon roared, forcing down the cold dread, the unspeakable power, the horror. How could anyone sane want to face this killing intent? How could anyone want to be dragged into this quagmire of blood, bones, and death?

The sane could not overpower Ashcroft's will.

Still Damon pressed forward, because he would rather die his way than retreat under someone else's terms.

Ashcroft merely raised his hand. When there was killing intent, what usually followed was...

Death.

Damon felt something invisible tear straight through his body from the waist, cutting him in half.

His eyes widened as he looked down, blood gushing from his waist. The top half of his body fell next to his lower half.

The world went blank as the sounds of devastation rang out, along with the scream of a woman.

The familiar blackness of death took him once more in its mercifully cruel embrace.

Chapter 574: Bond Forged In Shared Ruin

Death was just the natural end of life. For those still alive, what was there to fear from death?

From the vast emptiness of your soul leaving your body...

No one alive truly knew what death felt like. It was one of those things you could only experience once.

Death was an unknown to the living, and the unknown was to be feared. Life was horrible, it was hard, but it was an evil you recognized, one you were intimately familiar with. Death could be a mercy, or it could be a greater evil. But no one would know until it came.

'I'm just so tired of it.'

This was the first thought that crossed Damon's mind.

All this came in the form of rushing images, words and feelings forming faster than they could truly be expressed.

Damon didn't know what condition he was in, but he knew he was alive. Somehow, impossibly, he was still alive. He almost didn't want to open his eyes.

This peace was something he had craved.

If he had been asked before he was born, he would have regretted making the choice to come into the world. And if he hadn't been asked, if he was here because of someone else's decision... then he prayed for it to end.

His eyes weakly fluttered open. His eyelids felt heavy, as though made of lead. His head throbbed like a blacksmith's workshop, hammering away at an unrelenting pace.

Damon took a shallow breath, not sure how he was still alive at all. He didn't doubt that he had been killed by Ashcroft, his body split in half by the demon lord of domination.

His legs felt numb. The thought of having legs at all was so surprising that he had to look down to make sure they weren't ghost limbs. He half-expected it to be that strange phantom sensation people felt when a limb was missing.

Tilting his head, his eyes widened with shock.

His limbs still existed. That alone was the biggest surprise.

"Where... am I..."

Damon didn't fear death. He knew he would not die. Deathless would make sure he was revived.

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.

Even if he wished for it... no, because he wished for it, he would not die.

Damon had never been worried Ashcroft would kill him, because fate itself seemed to be against his death. When he stepped forward to face Ashcroft, he had been hoping for death. That meant he had fulfilled the condition for this cursed skill.

But that didn't explain where he was. Damon was surrounded by a soft glowing light, the glow a faint blue. The cave around him felt familiar, and yet not.

He spread his shadow perception. The area was full of glowing crystals, their azure light spilling across rough stone. Monsters stirred in the distance.

This was a dungeon.

Glancing to his side. It seemed his request had brought them here.

He had said "them" because she was here too. Damon didn't fear death, but Deathless didn't mean he couldn't be captured, tortured, or worse.

She sat leaning against a jagged blue crystal rising from the ground. Her wings were torn, one nearly cut in half. Blood had dried on her pale skin. Bandages were wrapped around her arms, her abdomen, her head—clearly the bare minimum she had managed just to keep herself alive.

A pang of guilt spread through his chest. She must have risked everything to bring him here with her.

Damon had only mouthed vague instructions.

He raised his hand, looking at the chains she had placed between them. If she died, he would die too. It went both ways.

A small, paranoid part of him whispered that she hadn't done this out of kindness. That maybe she had kept him alive to protect her own skin.

"Even then... she still did..."

Damon gasped, trying to move his body. His small motion seemed to jolt Abellona awake. Her long black hair was dried and tangled, lacking even the slightest trace of the regal princess he had first met days ago.

Her eyes opened wide as she raised a trembling hand to stop him.

"Do... don't move. You'll tear your body apart..."

Damon didn't like ominous words, but he forced his body to stay still.

Abellona didn't seem like she could stand, and he knew it, because she tried. She pushed herself up only to collapse to her knees. Damon noticed the strip of cloth ripped from her lower garment, tied tightly around her thigh as a makeshift bandage, soaked through with blood.

He had given her some of his potions. It was clear she had run out of the ones he shared. Damon had been stingy with the high-quality ones from his system, most of which he had collected after destroying the orcs with the Staff of Carnage. At the time, he hadn't understood why he had been given so many. After this, he did.

Abellona limped toward him, trying to carry herself with the grace of a princess. But the pain and helplessness overwhelmed her with each step.

Damon narrowed his eyes, noticing a faint black mark spreading along her neck. Her face was pale, yet feverishly red.

She collapsed beside him with a dull thud, breathing heavily, and dragged herself closer until she was seated at his side.

Only then did Damon see the full extent of her damage. How she was even alive was a miracle in itself.

Her lips were cracked, her eyes dull, her body broken. Yet she looked at him as though he were a miracle.

"Don't move... please, don't move... please don't die..."

Her pleading made Damon narrow his eyes. It was as if she were hallucinating from blood loss... or perhaps she had simply become vulnerable enough to show a weaker, less aloof side of herself.

She bit her dried, cracked lips.

"You'll live... you lived. I put you back together..."

Hearing those words, Damon's heart twisted. He had not cared if he died to Ashcroft. But Abellona had cared. And when he had survived, she had wanted him to live.

He could see it now. The people who fought by her side always died, leaving her as the survivor.

'She must have hated her name, Abellona of Destruction. But she still carried it, because it carried the wishes of the fallen.'

Damon, who refused to die twice, must have touched something inside her.

Her eyes, dull as they were, still carried hope.

Damon bit his lip. He hated that he had been paranoid of her.

He glanced at her with a frown. The blackness on her neck was spreading.

"You've... been cursed..."

Chapter 575: Fever

Abellona bit her lips when he said that. She subconsciously touched the black mark on her neck. There was a sinister type of magic traveling through her body.

She was hot, like she was burning up. Her insides were on fire, her body filled with so many injuries.

Worst of all, her mind was clouded with all these desires she never knew she had.

For what it was worth, she didn't remember much either. She wished she could tell him how she got the curse from Ashcroft, but it had all happened so fast...it was a blur.

At least it seemed so in her mind. It was like she had subconsciously created a mental disconnect between her actual memories and the cruel reality.

Now she could only vaguely remember Damon getting cut in half and her battle cry—or rather, her scream. In reality, it was just a helpless scream she had made, maybe to give herself a little courage as she faced the overwhelming might of Ashcroft.

What happened after, she did not know.

She could only remember the pain. Her own screams still echoed in her ears. But somehow...somehow she had managed to gather both parts of Damon and flee to this dungeon.

That was all she could remember. How she got to the dungeon, she really didn't know. All she knew was that Damon had mouthed something about going to the dungeon.

She recalled coming here though it was blurry. She remembered pouring her potions on him and failing. She used the potions he gave her and they had a modest effect.

"I'm sorry...the potions didn't work..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. What did she mean by the potions didn't work? He finally noticed the small scrapes that seemed half-healed on her wrist.

"Did...you use forbidden magic? Is that why you seem so weak?"

She bit her lips. Forbidden magic was magic deemed too dangerous, or magic that touched upon a taboo.

Such taboos included sacrifice, or invoking the names of unorthodox entities in exchange for a result.

The forbidden magic she had used, in this case, was at a personal cost to herself.

Abellona turned away, shaking her head softly.

"It's nothing. I only lost a bit of blood. It's of no consequence."

Damon closed his eyes. It looked like she had lost more than just a bit of blood. That too, after having survived Ashcroft.

He really had no words. This woman... she had done all this, and she didn't need to. If she had done the bare minimum of keeping him alive in any state, even a malformed one, she would have had a better chance of surviving. But she had gone above and beyond to preserve him.

Damon reached into his shadow storage and pulled out some more potions. From where he lay, he opened a vial. However, instead of drinking it himself, he passed it to Abellona, who had slumped down, laying her head against his shoulder because she could no longer sit up without something to lean on.

Her red eyes stared weakly at him before she slowly reached her hand to take the potion, pouring the contents into her mouth. Damon reached for another and opened it. Just like the first time, he didn't drink it himself. He passed it over to Abellona.

She put down the first vial, shaking her head.

"You need this more than I do..."

Damon didn't speak. Only his eyes stared down at her, the soft breath from her reaching his neck.

He pushed the vial toward her, saying nothing. Not because he didn't know what to say, but because he couldn't say it. It was better to let his actions speak for him.

Realizing she had no other alternative but to comply, Abellona slowly nodded and took another vial. As the contents flowed down her throat, she felt her wounds stirring, bones knitting back together, torn flesh and muscle restoring themselves.

These were the best potions she had ever used. She felt no trace of impurities. She could drink a million vials without any side effects.

If she had been in better straits, she would have wanted to know who the alchemist behind them was.

Damon, seeing her condition improve, finally took out a vial for himself and drank it slowly, closing his eyes to allow the potion to do its work.

His body had been cut in half. Having gotten a moment to himself, he was starting to wonder how his organs had not scattered.

"I wonder if the cut will leave a scar."

He had been cut in half, after all. He should at least be allowed to muse.

"I doubt that..." a soft voice whispered in his ear.

Damon tilted his head slightly to find Abellona laying her head on his shoulder. It seemed she was still not in the condition to move freely. She must have wanted to rest too. It had been quite a tiring ordeal.

He smiled softly, in a way she had never seen him smile before. There was none of that casual arrogance in his eyes.

"I'd really hate that...having a thin line across my waist. What will I tell people when they see it..."

His voice was soft and low, like he didn't want to be heard.

"That I was sliced in half by a lowly goblin."

Abellona's face was still feverishly red, her breath shallow. Even so, she smiled. Her face so close, he was overtaken by her fragrance.

"You...could tell them you were in a battle with the legendary Ashcroft. Having faced him twice, this scar would be your proof..."

Her soft whispers made him smile a little.

"Yeah, no one's gonna believe I fought Ashcroft. They'd think I'm crazy, telling them I fought a myth."

She held his hand weakly, glancing at him. Her red eyes carried an intensity he was unfamiliar with.

"I'll vouch for you. No one is crazy enough to call Abellona of Destruction crazy."

Damon smiled lightly.

"I would..."

She whispered softly.

"Except if they're you, of course."

Damon narrowed his eyes with a trace of suspicion. He glanced at Abellona.

"What kind of curse is this..."

She smiled, her hand trembling as if afraid he would find out.

Damon didn't care. He used his appraisal skill. When he saw what the curse did, he glanced at Abellona, his gaze moving across her body, her torn clothes, her long legs, the redness of her face, her sudden attitude, why she was hiding it.

It all made sense now. He couldn't help but curse in his mind.

'Damn you, Ashcroft...'

Chapter 576: Rose To Bloom

Condition: Cursed (The Crimson Bloom)

Stage: Active – Unstable

Description:

A forbidden curse woven into blood and soul. The Crimson Bloom feeds upon unfulfilled desire, igniting the vessel with fevered hunger. The afflicted is driven towards yearning, delirium and carnal release. Should the vessel maintain purity past the appointed threshold, the bloom will wither and collapse the body from within, resulting in death.

Effects:

Fever of Desire: Body temperature rises uncontrollably, leading to weakness, delirium, and uncontrollable impulses.

Crimson Thorns: Resisting relief worsens the condition, accelerating decay of life force.

Bloom of Desire: Only through the surrender of purity may the curse be broken.

—

Damon didn't even know what to say. No wonder Abellona had been so touchy with him—she couldn't help it. She was already suffering from the first stage of the curse.

'Why the hell would Ashcroft use this particular curse?'

At the same time, he could understand why she didn't tell him about it. She was vulnerable at the moment, and he was a threat to her purity... though in this case, she was the threat to his.

'Yeah, I see where this is going, and it's not going to end that way...'

Damon closed his eyes. Abellona's head wobbled softly against his side. He felt a sudden wave of disgust—not at the helpless Abellona, but at how vicious the curse was. This type of curse didn't give you a choice, or rather, it did.

It was either fall for its whims or die.

Ashcroft must have known exactly which path this prideful woman would choose. It wasn't about her purity for the Demon Lord of Domination. No—it was about killing Damon. If Damon did nothing, Abellona would die. However, if he acted, he would make an enemy of her. Without their seamless cooperation, Ashcroft would have an easier time killing them.

After all, all things considered, Ashcroft was getting weaker by the minute.

Abellona's breathing grew heavier, her chest rising and falling as she let out a soft sound that Damon could only describe as a moan.

He couldn't do anything about it until the hour when it bloomed. That was when her life and death would be decided.

Damon frowned.

Yeah, that would absolutely not work.

As someone who had lived his whole life for his sister, Damon could commit any crime, but he drew the line at this.

"If we don't do anything about that curse, you'll die..."

Abellona bit her lips. Her feverishly red face carried her struggle against the curse.

"I...I... rather...I choose death. If it comes down to it...I will die..."

Damon didn't even glance at her. His expression remained calm as he analyzed what to do.

"What about me... I'll die with you too..."

Abellona buried her face in his chest, letting out a soft giggle Damon didn't think he'd ever hear from her.

He knew she was struggling. Her soft flesh pressing against his own was not exactly unappealing, and he would be crazy to say he hadn't thought about it.

But that was it—only the thought, and nothing more.

'My will is as strong as iron, dammit.'

Abellona finally calmed herself. She took out a small dagger from her spatial ring, moving it to her waist and strapping it to her belt.

"If it comes to it...I'll slit my throat..."

Damon glanced at her resolve, feeling his body regain some strength.

"While I'm supposedly a threat, you shouldn't be the one worried. The real danger here is you. Let's not forget—you're a whole rank stronger than me. What happens if you pounce on me?"

Abellona was quiet for a moment. Right... that was a possibility. She had been too busy drooling over this man in her delirium to consider that she could easily overpower him.

That was correct. She was the threat.

"Don't even give me the 'I'll take responsibility and marry you' crap. I'm a pure gentleman."

Damon wasn't lying. Sure, he had messed around with Attina Margan and had his way with a few women back in the day, but he had never really gone further.

Right now, he was just trying to act nonchalant.

Abellona shook her head, her long black hair scattering loosely across her face.

"That...that won't happen..."

Damon crossed his arms with a disdainful expression.

"You wanna die with my life along for the ride? Fine. I don't mind double suicide. But I can't abide being defiled and not tying the knot afterwards..."

He didn't actually care—he was just trying to get her mind off the curse. It seemed the more time she had to herself, the more the curse grew. He needed to shift her mood.

Abellona gasped a little in utter shock. Was this man serious right now?

Biting her lips, she whispered, "If I don't die, I promise I will do whatever it takes to marry you."

She glared at him with a bit of distant apprehension.

"As long as you aren't from one of the Four Grand Dukedoms... if you were, it would be troublesome..."

She gazed at him with a soft smile.

"If I live, I'll make it work... so, can I take off my clothes?"

With a simple gesture she began reaching for her chest, trying to pull down her garments, when Damon reached out and grabbed her much smaller hand, at least in comparison to his own.

"Snap out of it."

Abellona looked down at her partially visible cleavage. Her face turned an even deeper shade of red from embarrassment. Quickly, she turned around, ruffling her clothes back into place to cover her chest.

Damon glanced at her with a soft sigh.

She tilted her head a little, a soft glistening tear forming in her eye from embarrassment.

"Don't look...you rogue..."

Damon shrugged, reminding her,

"What's the big deal? Nothing I haven't seen before. I mea—"

Before he could finish his crude words, her barely recovered wing slapped him across the face.

"Ouch," he muttered nonchalantly.

Abellona didn't have the face to look at him. She just crossed her arms over her body, facing the other way.

There was a small moment of awkward silence that stretched far too long.

"So...what's this 'can't marry someone from the Grand Duchies' business?"

Abellona must have been desperate for any topic that didn't concern her body or chastity, because she jumped at the question with a simple response.

"It's not allowed, and there is no precedent. Since the empire was formed, the imperial family and the grand duchies have honored some old arrangements between them."

Chapter 577: The Wicked Prophet

This was news to him. Damon had no idea such a rule even existed, let alone that it was still being enforced.

Though, for all the years the Valtheron Empire had stood, there had truly never been a marriage between the imperial family and any of the grand duchies.

The question was why.

Luckily for him, he had Abellona of Valtheron right here. If anyone would know, it was the third princess—especially since she was vulnerable now.

"Why would it be... what agreement?"

Abellona hugged her arms around her body. Despite how hot she felt, her breath was dry. Even so, she forced herself to speak, trying to distract herself from the smooth sound of Damon's voice in her ears.

"The empire was formed near the end of the First Epoch... so you could say it's as old as the temple. But in the past two hundred thousand years, it has taken on different forms. The dynasties have changed..."

She paused, closing her eyes as her voice dropped into a whisper.

"This is the seventh dynasty. Over the years, different members of my family have killed each other for the right to rule. Every few thousand years we end up with too many people and too many branch families..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. He had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"So you guys cull your own numbers. And sometimes it's not the main branch that ends up winning. When a side branch takes the throne, they gain the right to create a new dynasty..."

Abellona blinked, somewhat impressed. His conclusion was correct.

"Yes. You see, the first empress of the empire willed this at the end of the First Epoch. She believed dynasties had a lifespan, and when one dynasty's time ended, the empire itself would fall..."

Damon raised his brows. Nothing lasted forever—even empires collapsed.

Abellona gasped slightly, holding her head as the fever worsened.

"Her plan was to make sure we replaced each other. When one dynasty fell into complacency, another would rise. The trick was that the replacing dynasty had to come from the same bloodline."

She chuckled lightly.

"She was a deceptive woman. But somehow her scheme worked. Here we are, even after two whole epochs. We survived the Age of Ashcroft in the second epoch, and now we're in the third. We might even survive the end of this one too."

Damon narrowed his eyes. This history lesson was nice, but how did it connect to the grand duchies?

Abellona turned to face him. Her hand reached out to brush his long hair aside, fingers brushing his cheek.

"I know what you're thinking. I was getting there..."

Realizing what she was doing, she pulled her hand back with a frown, having regained her faculties.

"Sorry about that..."

Biting her lip, she continued after her short apology.

"The grand duchies are autonomous regions within the empire. They have the right to their own laws. They enjoy such power because, unlike everything else, they were never conquered by House Valtheron. They joined the empire of their own accord, and their power is comparable to ours... the imperial family's."

Damon nodded. He already knew this part.

Abellona smiled faintly, though the fever tinted it with something more seductive.

"They created a rule when the empire was first formed. To maintain their autonomy, under no circumstances was the bloodline of any dukedom to mix with the imperial family."

Damon narrowed his eyes. That was overboard. But it made sense—it preserved their autonomy, among other reasons.

"But they can intermarry among themselves. So basically, they isolated the imperial family. Politics is really shitty..."

Abellona nodded, her head wobbling slightly as if she were drunk.

"Yes. It was how they dealt with outsiders. After all, the imperial family were not locals of Soltheon. They were defeated foes from the Doom Continent."

Damon froze. That wasn't news to him. House Valtheron originated from the Demon Continent—back then called the Doom Continent, Centros.

If that was true, it made sense. The Doom Continent was the birthplace of Mugu, and Damon recalled Mugu had an old blood-feud with Valtheron's ruler.

Abellona's breath quickened, her red eyes straining on Damon as her voice lowered.

"It was the advent of the Demons, the first Demon Lord, who set himself against us. He brought death and destruction. He killed the king at the time, leaving a widow queen and her children alive..."

Abellona rested her head on Damon's chest without hesitation, but he immediately pushed her back.

She rubbed her forehead with an apologetic look.

"That was his mistake—because she then did the unthinkable."

She slammed her head into the stone floor. Again. And again. Each impact cracked the dungeon floor, blood trailing down her temple as she viciously forced herself back to sanity.

Finally, she stopped. Her eyes refocused, and she stood shakily.

Damon glanced at her. His wounds had healed completely. His lower and upper halves had fused back together, whole once more. Even his armor had regenerated, though calling it armor was generous. It was little more than light metal with scraps of fabric, offering minimal defense.

And yet he still wore that crown. The battles hadn't forced him to remove it, which left Abellona wondering about his true identity.

"You've healed, and I'm in somewhat decent condition. We should move. The Goristro aren't far behind..."

She didn't need to tell him how well those particular demons could navigate labyrinths and dungeons.

Damon was still dazed from the lesson. It put so much into perspective. One thing was clear—history written in books and history that actually happened were not the same. Most of what survived was a controlled narrative.

Still, he had one question.

"The first Demon Lord... do you know his name?"

Abellona's eyes narrowed weakly. Seeing his expression, her legs faltered. Her heart twisted, and dark desires clawed at her chest. She turned away, red-faced, not wanting the curse to grow stronger.

"Never mention his name. It's forbidden... and forgotten. Rightfully so..."

Her steps echoed faintly as she moved forward, her voice carrying down the dungeon corridor.

"However... if you must know... his name is..."

She paused. The words seemed to chill the air.

"Mugu the Wicked Prophet."

Chapter 578: The Prey

The first demon in the world of Aetherus was Mugu. Well, that wasn't even a surprise, but at the same time Damon had thought Mugu would retain his humanity.

But it seemed he was the one who drove the goddess races of the Doom Continent into depravity, turning them into demons.

"Well that confirms that."

Demons were not a foreign species but natives that had been turned.

However, Damon also remembered Valarie saying something about demons being outsiders, or rather that some outsiders were demons.

The very first demon to exist didn't come from Aetherus, though the first demon in Aetherus was in fact Mugu.

Outsider Aetherus demons existed, and they were very powerful beings. Take the True Beings for example—some of them were called True Gods while others were called True Demon Kings, or True Demons for short.

If these boundlessly powerful demons existed, then how could more demons not exist?

Hell, the Unknown God was a bonafide demon himself.

Except he managed to be the impossible anomaly that was both a True God and a True Demon.

Thus his forgotten title: Demon God... which here in Aetherus was just called the Unknown God.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

He wondered if the Unknown God fit in with the other True Beings, or if he was an outcast—neither god nor demon, a being made of discord, perfectly imperfect.

After everything he knew so far, it was evident the Unknown God was not on their side.

'If he was, he wouldn't be calling them liars.'

The vast mysteries and complexities of the gods were distant from mortals, and mortals should not touch upon the mysteries of gods.

Though digging up these mysteries was a hobby of his. Knowing was always better than not knowing.

They continued walking through the labyrinth-like layers of the dungeon. Damon had never been in a dungeon, so to some extent he had expected to have monsters at every turn swarming them—but apparently not.

Since they had left their hiding place, they had not run into many monsters. Only about three crystal spiders on three separate occasions.

It was just hours of navigating through a labyrinth of caves and caverns. Some parts looked so tight that Damon felt claustrophobic.

There must have been people out there who enjoyed cave diving, but Damon could never...

And that was considering he could turn into a shadow and even teleport, so he should have no fear of getting trapped or buried in rubble.

These small claustrophobic pathways often led to larger caverns, which were filled with large jutting crystals.

Damon squeezed himself through another one, even though he could have easily turned into a shadow.

Behind him he heard soft moans and deep breaths as Abellona struggled with a body that was becoming all too sensitive to more physical urges.

"Are you okay..." Having reached a new cavern, he reached out to help pull her out.

"No... don't touch me... please... don't..."

Her face was feverish red. Damon sighed, pulling his hand back as she struggled to get through.

When she did, he took out a bottle of water from his shadow storage—something he had gotten from the system as part of miscellaneous item drops.

She snatched what would be her fifteenth bottle of water, drinking it without any of the elegance of a noble princess.

Gasping for breath, she poured it on her red face, the cool water pushing down the heat she was feeling.

Wearing an expression that seemed desperate and maddening at the same time, she clawed at the ground.

If she could cry right now she would, but she still retained enough of her faculties to avoid debasing herself further.

She reached for her garments, taking off the last piece of her armor, leaving only her dress—which was ripped in so many places.

Damon frowned, taking up his guard.

"You... are still in control, right?"

She nodded, wobbling her head.

"Ye... yes... ahhh... I... I was just a little hot..."

Damon spread his shadow perception with a frown. It seemed they would have company soon.

"Are you in a good enough state to fight..."

Abellona stood up, half her right thigh visible from her ripped dress. She glanced at him with her deep red eyes.

"This is nothing," she whispered through bated breaths.

Damon didn't even know what to say. Who was she kidding? The black rose mark on her neck was growing, and soon enough it would be in bloom.

'If I don't do anything by then we both die...'

He almost smirked at the irony of it all.

Damon glanced at the distant corner of the cavern, where he heard grunting sounds and the thunder of hooves stomping through the dungeon.

He sighed. This was why they had been taking the smaller passages—to avoid the Goristro from finding them so quickly.

While these demons were good at traveling in labyrinths, they didn't have a small enough stature to fit into narrow spaces.

"Ashcroft must be pressed for time if he let himself split from them..."

Abellona was on her knees, pulling at her own hair as if she was hoping to tug at her brain.

Even haggard and distraught, it did nothing to diminish her beauty.

He bit his lips, urging his body to resist any foolish impulses.

"I'm not the one cursed, dammit..."

The walls of the cavern shattered as three Goristro burst out.

They grunted as they charged at Damon. He was about to charge at them to protect Abellona when he felt the wind burst around him, a sonic boom echoing out.

Damon froze as Abellona charged past him. She wasn't even carrying a weapon in her hand. All she did was raise her hands like they were claws.

There was a red shimmer in her hand, and then Damon watched as she grabbed the demons that were clearly in the same rank as her.

The first didn't even get a chance to move before she ripped its head off, blood spraying into the air with a grunt that sounded like a dying cow.

The second and third didn't fare any better.

Damon could only watch as this beautiful black-haired woman bathed in blood, smiling maniacally, leaving him with the realization...

He was prey.

Chapter 579: Tracking

Damon was quiet. He was almost afraid of making a sound. Getting killed or tortured did not scare him... no, not at all. But finding out that you could be raped by a beautiful older woman was actually terrifying.

The question was how long Abellona would stay sane.

And hopefully, if she did pounce on him, he'd still be intact long enough to figure things out.

Damon cautiously walked up to her, reaching into his shadow storage.

"Here, have some water. Cool off a bit."

She slowly took the water, glancing at him with those ruby red eyes of hers. Damon instinctively backed away. He felt like a mouse getting the stare of a cat... except this cat was pent up with all sorts of carnal desires inflicted by a curse from a demon.

Abellona smiled softly.

"Why are you backing away... I'm not scary. It's my first time, so be gentle with me, okay?"

Damon's gaze moved to the pool of blood at her feet and the unfortunate Goristro that she had ripped apart.

He raised his finger, pointing at her.

"Better keep your cool. If you touch me, you'll have to marry me."

Abellona's smile widened.

He subconsciously edged back.

"My bride price is going to be sky high."

Abellona moved closer to him, her breath hot and unsteady.

"Men don't have a bride price silly."

So close... Damon felt his back hit the wall. He didn't want to provoke her into more violence, but she leaned against him, her breasts pressing onto his chest as she whispered into his ear.

"That's fine... let's skip the ceremony and go straight to the nuptial night..."

Damon felt a wave of heat course through his body as her seductive voice rang in his ears. His mind was telling him no, but his body was screaming yes.

Damon bit his lips.

'My will is like iron, damnit... no weapon fashioned against me shall prosper.'

He moved his head back and slammed it into her forehead.

Her head jerked back as she staggered, falling onto her rear like a stumbling drunk. She held her head with a grimace, shaking it.

Damon glared at her.

"Are you back to your senses, or do I have to give you more?"

She raised her head with a wince.

"What is your head made of? It's like I got hit by a metal ball..."

Damon sighed with relief at her words. It seemed she had regained some sanity.

He almost felt disappointed. Looked like he wouldn't get ravaged today.

He walked up to her, adjusting her dress over her shoulder, covering her bare skin.

She nodded but was too ashamed to say anything. At that moment, he noticed the curse on her neck was now looking like a rose about to bloom.

"It's almost time..." he muttered uneasily.

He was about to speak when Abellona tugged at his arm. He glanced down to see her gesturing at something.

Following her finger, he saw the pool of blood from the Goristro she had just killed. Damon noticed something shimmering in the blood. Looking closer, he realized they seemed to be runes. The glow spread to the rest of the blood, including the stains on Abellona's body.

He could intuitively tell what type of magic this was.

"Tracking magic..."

This was the type of spell used to keep a mark on someone. Ashcroft hadn't just split from the Goristro—he had sent them out knowing they would die. This was his goal, to use their blood to mark where Damon and Abellona were.

Damon turned to the feverishly red Abellona, who was staring at his side profile with a dazed expression.

He bit his lips, looking at her blood-soaked body.

"Strip."

Abellona didn't waste any time or question him. She moved her hand to slide her dress off.

Damon stopped her with an irritated expression.

"Not here. There's a creek a few caverns away. We need to get there and wash you off."

Abellona, realizing what she had just done under the influence of the curse, looked down, wishing she could just die.

Ashcroft had done too much to her. If he had just killed her, it would have been better than this curse. She could have endured a curse of rot, or one that turned her into an animal, or even one that caused agony. But this... this was too much.

Though could a curse be considered a curse if it didn't utterly make one miserable? How could it be a curse if it didn't make one suffer? Just like happiness was subjective—what could make you happy wouldn't move another person.

So too was a curse. What was debilitating to her might be nothing to someone else.

As a chaste princess, this was devastating. But if a common prostitute had been cursed with this, she might not have even noticed the difference, nor would it have bothered her.

Abellona cursed Ashcroft in her heart, knowing it would change nothing.

Damon dragged her through the winding tunnels and past caverns, using his shadow perception to navigate the dungeon. He moved closer and closer to the creek he had sensed in this underground world.

What made it easier was the lack of monsters in this dungeon. While they moved, Damon knew Ashcroft was not far. He would be tracking the blood on Abellona's body. After all, she was a moving target.

The amount of time they could spend at the creek was limited.

It would be better if they could lure Ashcroft away...

No. That wouldn't do. Damon needed to do two things at once: save Abellona from the curse before it bloomed, and face Ashcroft to kill the bastard.

But there was only one of him, and he couldn't win alone. Ashcroft had the power to command demons, and he was strong—stronger.

"He's a proper ruler with minions."

Damon had none of that. He had already sent Ghost with the orcs.

He didn't have a minion... or rather, a shadow.

"Matia... I need you..." he called out to his shadow, though he was unsure if she could hear him.

Finally, he spotted the creek. Water glistened with the blue light of the crystals. He pulled Abellona along, her body too weak to resist, letting herself be dragged.

Without hesitation, he tossed her into the water. However, she was still holding his hand and pulled him in with her with a loud splash.

Chapter 580: Chastity Belt

The cold splash of water on his body was one thing, but what truly distracted him from his end goal was Abellona. Her soaked clothes clung tightly to her body as she held onto him, pulling him closer.

Damon bit his lips.

'Oh goddess, you are testing me... I am a weak, weak man.'

She was literally trying to push herself on him, but Damon persevered. Not out of virtue, but simply because he wanted to.

"Stay still."

Abellona smiled and stayed still. The creek wasn't deep, which was a relief. The water reached only to their waists.

Damon dunked her into the water a few times, holding her head down just long enough before pulling it back out. He let his mind drift, ensuring her body was thoroughly soaked before he lifted her head again.

Abellona gasped, short of breath, water dripping down her face. Her eyes cleared slightly, some of her senses returning.

"Are... are you trying to drown me?"

Damon smiled lightly.

"No, but I'll need you to change out of those..."

Abellona glanced at her ripped clothes. Why hadn't she thought to get out of them sooner? You would think she would have realized after they had been torn, but instead, this man had been given a feast for his eyes, staring at her supple curves.

She gritted her teeth, her face burning, her head throbbing with shame. There was no way she could blame him for looking.

"Can you turn around... or better yet, give me some space?"

Damon shrugged his shoulders.

"In case I turn around and you take off your clothes, just so you know, I will make no effort to resist if you're naked."

Abellona bit her lips and glared at him.

"I'll keep that in mind..."

Damon stepped away, turning into a shadow and reappearing a short distance from her. That was as far as he could teleport with the chains shackling them together.

The sound of rustling fabric was the only noise he heard as she pulled out a new dress from her spatial ring and began changing.

Damon raised his hand without looking at her.

"Don't forget to put on new underwear. Your last ones got ruined, you mig—"

Before he could finish, his danger sense exploded. He slipped into his shadow just as a massive spear pierced through the crystal he had been sitting against.

Damon's hands trembled. That was too close. She had almost impaled his head.

"Rogue..." he heard her mutter.

Well, he wasn't exactly a gentleman. That much was true.

'I was just making a point. Why did she try to kill me?'

He decided it was better to stay quiet.

Abellona tugged at the shackle binding them. Her expression was impassive, but Damon could feel her indignation. She was ready to move on.

When he turned around, she was dressed in a long blue gown. Its design was lined with belts crisscrossing over her figure, making it difficult to remove. It covered her completely, even up to her neck where a black choker sat.

"Is this dress supposed to be your idea of a chastity belt? Because it's useless. You can rip it off with a single move."

She bit her lips and glared at the ground in embarrassment, but this was all she could manage.

"Let's go."

Damon nodded, walking beside her.

"Ashcroft isn't far from here. You wouldn't last long out in the open... so I have an idea."

Abellona's breaths were heavy, sweat beading down her temple.

"It's quite obvious what you want. You want to go to the boss room."

Damon glanced at her, surprised.

"How did you know?"

She swallowed hard, her chest rising and falling heavily.

"You made it obvious. While we were traveling through the narrow tunnels, you kept asking me about powerful monsters... and dungeon layouts."

Her eyes lingered on him as she walked forward. The black rose mark on her neck had begun to bloom, the curse creeping further across her skin.

"For someone with your experience and skills, it's shocking how you've never been in a dungeon."

She closed her eyes, ignoring the throbbing in her head and the painful twist in her heart urging her to just give in and end the torment.

"You want to lure Ashcroft to the boss room and let him fight the dungeon boss. If he wins... no, when he wins... you'll fight him."

Damon nodded. She had seen right through his plan. He had thought he was slick. How did she even have the presence of mind to think clearly while under such a curse?

'I suppose horniness doesn't stop critical thinking... that's about it.'

Abellona's breaths grew heavier. She should have already lost control of her faculties, giving herself to her base desires. The fact that she had held on so long was pure willpower.

"The only weak link in your plan is me. I won't hold long enough... and you can't kill me either."

Damon nodded slowly.

She glanced at the shackle on her wrist, her voice low and trembling.

"If I lose myself now... there's no coming back. When I wake, I'll either no longer be a virgin... or I'll be dead."

Her red eyes softened as she looked at Damon.

"If it comes to that... you can live. But can you do me a favor..."

Damon raised his hand with disdain.

"I'll stop you there. I'm not killing you. Your virginity isn't all it's cracked up to be. You'd still lose it if you got married, so what if you lost it now? This is life or death. If you can't live with losing your precious chastity, then..."

Damon frowned, his senses tingling with apprehension. He looked behind them.

"Let's go. Ashcroft is about to enter my range."

He pulled her hand impatiently.

"I found a hidden passage to the boss room."

He didn't care about her chastity, not really. He just didn't want to see her break apart over something so small compared to her death.

Damon pointed up at a small spiral hole beneath a crystal jutting from the ground. Shadow perception had revealed the hidden tunnel. It was not magically reinforced—this was a naturally formed dungeon. The weak ambient magic made it possible for him to detect it, along with the dim blue light that cast deep shadows.

All these factors worked in his favor.

He dove in first, with Abellona following close behind. After wiggling through several small twisting tunnels, they finally broke out into a wide space. Above them, a massive slanted crystal jutted like an island on the cavern roof.

Below, the boss room stretched out in full view.

What Damon saw made his face pale.

Crystal spiders...