

Shadow 581

Chapter 581: I'm Sorry, But I'll Still Take The Money

"Well, that explains a lot."

Damon glanced down at what lay beneath them. No, this explained too much. He had a feeling it might be like this, but since he had no personal experience with dungeons, he thought he was just being paranoid.

His voice came out in a low whisper that made his skin crawl.

Down in the boss room, there wasn't a single boss monster. No... there was one, but it was surrounded by hundreds, maybe even thousands, of crystal spiders. They crawled across the walls, littered the floor, and hung from the ceiling in suspended webs.

Damon and Abellona crouched on a large crystal formation on the cavern ceiling.

The spiders had not noticed them yet—thankfully, their immense size made it difficult for them to climb this high.

The smallest spiders were easily ten feet tall. The moderately grown ones reached twenty. And the largest of them all—the queen spider—was a massive sixty feet. Her swollen body pulsed as she birthed eggs, hatching them at a terrifying pace.

If that were the only issue, it would have been bad enough. But Damon's skin prickled when he realized the queen's rank.

A Rank Four monster.

Damon almost smiled. He knew Ashcroft wasn't far. The demon lord would follow their trail to this very room.

The moment Ashcroft stepped inside, he would be facing thousands of these monsters.

Damon covered his mouth, forcing himself not to laugh.

"Hehehe, no, I can't laugh yet... I gotta hold it in."

Though truthfully, Damon wouldn't be surprised if the weakened Ashcroft still slaughtered them all. No—Ashcroft would kill them all. There was no doubt about that.

He had only a handful of demons left, and while he could use Mind Dominate on these creatures, it would be far easier for him to destroy them outright. Even weakened, Ashcroft was still a monster in human form....or rather goblin form.

"And when he's done... he'll face me."

All Damon had to do now was wait—and hope the spiders didn't find them first.

Taking no chances, he drew out the Dealer's Hand and knelt by the edge of the crystal platform. He carefully carved a rune into the surface.

Silence.

This one would mute any sound they made. Then, he layered another rune beside it.

Conceal.

Once the runes were complete, he walked around to each one, feeding mana into the carvings until they glowed faintly and dimmed again. Their hiding place blurred slightly, less noticeable even under the spiders' watchful eyes.

By the time he finished, Abellona was sitting with her knees pulled up, holding her head with a grimace.

Damon returned to her side and pulled a bottle of water from his shadow. She accepted it slowly, her face flushed.

After drinking, she tapped the ground beside her, gesturing for him to sit.

Damon hesitated, then sat down. He never would have expected to be here like this—beside the third princess of Valtheron.

"Life really takes a man places."

Abellona forced a small smile.

"Not just men. Women too. I never imagined I'd be tied to a stranger like this..."

Damon chuckled lightly.

"You're the one who did the tying. I was just passing by."

She let out a sharp gasp of air, half a laugh, half a sigh.

"You broke into my tent and saw me naked. How exactly does one just pass by someone else's tent?"

Damon bit his lips.

"I was there for personal reasons. Don't mind me. And I was sort of the victim. Seeing someone nude can be a scarring event."

"How will you ever recover," she sneered.

Damon pressed a hand to his chest.

"I might have to explain it all to the mental health quartermaster. Every detail of this event. Including how you looked."

She reached out and pinched his arm, then smiled.

"Ahh, I see. That would be terrible for my reputation. But at least I could take you down with me..."

She leaned her head against her knees, her red eyes watching him as though trying to memorize his face. Slowly, she reached into her spatial ring and pulled out a small, ornate key.

Damon frowned.

"You had the key to the chains this whole time... didn't you?"

Abellona's lips curved into a knowing smile.

"I did. But the condition for unlocking it has only just been met."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"You aren't in a safe location yet."

She nodded, her ruby gaze softening.

"I'm not. But... I've come to trust you. The condition for unlocking it was trust."

With a soft click, the shackles binding them fell away.

Abellona looked at him.

"Now you can let me die."

Damon closed his eyes, his voice low.

"I'm sorry."

She tilted her head.

"For what?"

He didn't answer.

Abellona smiled faintly.

"Is it for sneaking into my camp and seeing me naked?"

He shook his head.

"Then is it for kissing me over and over again?"

He shook his head again.

She thought for a moment, smiling softly.

"Ohh... then it's for financially exploiting me for five billion zeni."

Damon shook his head once more, embarrassed. Not about the money—he was still going to take that—but embarrassed nonetheless.

"No. I'll take the money. But no."

She sighed. So he was going to take her money. Then what was he sorry for?

"You're not a retard..."

Damon almost blushed as he said it. Apologizing wasn't his style, and the words made him feel like dying inside.

Abellona's eyes widened before she giggled softly.

"That was... ridiculous. I forgot about that. Besides, I already got even. But since you apologized, I should too."

Her gaze softened.

"I'm sorry, Damian."

Damon clenched his fist, then rested a hand on her shoulder.

"I've always hated nobles. I lumped you in with them. It's a bad habit of mine."

Abellona felt her body heat up. Her breathing grew heavy, the rose curse blooming wider across her skin. Her heart pounded wildly—not just from the curse, but from his words.

"I promise you'll make it out of this alive. I'll kill Ashcroft... even if I have to die trying."

His words shook her deeply, moving something in her beyond the curse's influence. Her willpower, already stretched thin, finally reached its limit.

Her body trembled, pupils dilated, lips quivering.

With a soft breath, she whispered.

"I'm sorry for this...you made me lose control..."

Before Damon could react, she pushed him down, ripping off her blue dress and all its straps with a single motion.

Suddenly, he found himself pinned beneath a naked woman, her flushed face inches from his, her lips trembling, her eyes filled with a burning, seductive light.

Chapter 582: Don't Get It Twisted

Dear mother, it's me, your son... life's been going great lately... it's had its ups and downs, but I'm doing great....

Luna is great too.... You're probably wondering why I'm monologuing to myself, pretending this is some letter that can reach the afterlife.

It's just... I have found myself in some difficulty... you could even say it's been hard on me... or better yet... I'm getting hard.

There was a soft pause in his mind, then he continued.

'I'm contemplating whether to let this continue or stop it... not that I have a chance of resisting.'

"The truth is... I'm about to be violated and violently ravaged. But don't worry, I'll try my best to make you a grandchild... might as well make the best of it."

Damon frowned, Abellona's lips kissing his neck as rough as a beast that had not fed her whole life. She was a virgin too, yet she pushed herself onto him with desperate hunger.

"But why am I monologuing.."

He glanced up, dazed, at the naked Abellona. In all that madness, he heard a disgusted voice echoing in his head.

"You took off your crown, fool. You're going crazy...."

Damon looked to the side as Abellona began ripping off his clothes... and there it was. His crown, lying on the floor.

"When did I take it off...."

That explained why he was monologuing like a madman. He had lost the one thing that kept him sane.

Damon didn't even get a chance to reach for it before Abellona planted a kiss on his mouth, her tongue pressing against his own.

He reached out his hand, straining to grab the crown, but Abellona pinned him down like a nail hammered into wood. His armor was ripped apart, piece by piece, as she clawed for his lower half.

If she tore off his garments completely, it would be troublesome.

"What are you doing reaching for your crown? Just dismiss the armor and summon it again, the crown will follow...."

Damon almost facepalmed, quickly following the phantom of his own insanity. He dismissed his armor—only to realize it was a mistake. The armor had been the only thing between Abellona and his body.

He got his crown back along with his sanity, but now he was buck naked.

Before she could do anything more, Damon kicked her back, forcing space between them, and his body was once again covered by his armor in its Ascendant form.

He had never used this form because he worried she could track him down by it. That was why she had stripped him so easily before. But now... now his chest rose and fell heavily as he raised his hand.

Abellona stood before him, completely naked, her face flushed, her pupils dilated.

"A... are you scared of a woman's body? Don't be scared... let's do it....make love..."

She slid her hand across her breast, her soft white peaks glowing faintly under the dungeon's dim light. Her tone dripped with seduction.

"Or are you not man enough to make a woman of me...."

Damon gulped slightly, his eyes betraying him as they trailed over her nipples, her curves, the forbidden fruit laid bare before him.

'I'm stronger than this, dammit'

He fixed his gaze on the black rose on her neck—it was now fully in bloom. If it began to wilt she would die.

She walked closer, every step exposing more of herself, daring him.

"Are you scared... or are you not man enough... to take me? You look like a real man, but all I see is a boy... or do you want to prove me wrong."

Damon's ego was massive. It had always been one of his weaknesses.

So he didn't step back.

He drew in a deep breath. He couldn't overpower her anyway, and if he did nothing, she would die.

"Sorry I pride myself on having no pride."

"A real man... I don't need a woman to tell me what a real man is. I don't know if a real man would, or wouldn't... but I think it's pathetic and completely beneath me to deflower a lady who has no control of her faculties."

Damon gritted his teeth, smiling arrogantly.

"However... don't think I'll forget these words. Maybe not today... but I will make you eat those words when you are completely sane. That is a promise."

Abellona, of course, wasn't listening. Her body moved on its own, driven by the curse.

Damon reached into his shadow storage and pulled out a white vial. It wasn't a healing potion. It was something else.

'Damn unknown god is really several steps ahead.'

He didn't care that she pinned him down again. He popped the vial open.

"You want to mess around? Fine...."

He poured the contents into his mouth and shoved Abellona to the ground. Her hair spilled around her like a dark veil as Damon grabbed her breast and pinned her.

Seeing him seemingly give in, Abellona opened her arms with a soft, lustful smile. It nearly made him swallow the potion prematurely.

He pressed his lips against hers, forcing the potion into her mouth.

When she felt the liquid enter, she resisted, trying to spit it out. Damon growled and returned the earlier favor, forcing his tongue against hers.

She still refused to swallow. Damon's eyes widened.

'What the hell, woman... swallow it...'

She wouldn't. And so they were locked in a tongue-based tug of war.

Her nails dug into his skin, her thighs wrapping around him, pulling him closer into the heat of her bare flesh. Damon's face burned red, his control hanging by threads, but he persisted. This potion was one of a kind.

They rolled across the crystal floor, their clash cracking its surface. The runes Damon had carved earlier kept them hidden from the spiders below, but the sound was dangerous.

Finally, he slammed his hand on her diaphragm repeatedly until her body reflexively swallowed the potion.

Damon tore his lips from hers with a gasp. Abellona's body stilled as the potion took effect.

He panted, reaching into his shadow storage. He pulled out a blanket and draped it over her trembling, naked form.

He took her hand, slipping off her spatial ring. He tried to open it, but a magic seal stopped him.

"I can't take out a dress for her like this..."

He shoved the ring into his shadow storage instead and pulled out his own spare clothes, laying them beside her.

For an instant, he thought about helping her dress but sighed and let her be. She would wake up soon.

"It's a good thing I had 'Don't Get It Twisted.'"

That was the potion's name.

It was something he had gotten in Lysithara after slaying a monster. It could undo any debuff... but only when administered mouth to mouth.

The unknown god's humor was cruel.

[Don't Get It Twisted]

Type: Consumable – Cursed

Description:

I've done it. I actually managed to hide right under Minerva's nose. Not in Aetherus, mind you, but in the heartland of her divine domain. I'm hidden in plain sight, using the very name she had erased.

Don't get it twisted. I just felt like bragging.

[Effect:]

Undo a debuff of any kind when it has reached its worst. Don't get it twisted, it can only be done mouth to mouth. It may also have some side effects.

Damon had been shocked the first time he read it. The unknown god was terrifying, but his humor was twisted.

He exhaled, relieved that it had worked.

As for the side effects... not his problem.

This was why he had waited until the curse fully bloomed.

Damon was about to rise when a massive crash echoed through the dungeon.

Ashcroft had finally sprung his trap.

Chapter 583: Hour Of Weakness

Damon crawled to the edge of the crystal platform, looking down at the sight below him.

At the vast entrance of the cavern was a small swarm of demons, mostly lesser demons, as well as two Goristro holding massive axes.

However, what made Damon narrow his eyes was a goblin sitting on the back of a lesser demon. His body was small and covered from head to toe in blood. Parts of his flesh were missing as if they had been cut off.

From the looks of it he was on his last legs. However, even then he sat up straight as if the pain meant nothing to him. He gave off a formidable aura that was both arrogant and domineering.

Naturally, this was Ashcroft.

As soon as Ashcroft made his entrance, the massive swarm of spiders didn't even hesitate. They charged forward with the intent to defend their nest and their queen mother.

Ashcroft casually waved his hand as the lesser demons and Goristro roared without a hint of fear against the overwhelming odds they were facing.

It was just a few lesser demons, maybe a dozen, with the support of the Goristro. Most of Ashcroft's forces had been decimated. They had died facing Abellona's knights, losing him most of his Balors save one, which was later killed.

His lesser demons and Goristro were also killed.

Ashcroft didn't have much time. Damon was sure Ashcroft knew he was here, and he also knew Damon would not run from him.

This was Ashcroft's final obstacle. In a sense it was fair—Ashcroft had an army of demons to do his bidding, so Damon using monsters was fine.

Then again, there was no fair in life or in war, and life was war, so expecting fair was a crude joke.

Ashcroft laughed, his voice echoing in the air.

"Usurper... hide, hide all you want... but I am the dominator. Like many before you, you will be dominated."

Damon narrowed his eyes, the shadows around him deepening as the battle below raged on. The dungeon rumbled, rocks fell from the ceiling, and corpses of both demons and spiders grew.

The demons were fewer, however they fought more intensely, more fiercely. With each spider they felled, a shadow grew in Damon's heart.

With it came doubt. Would he be able to kill Ashcroft? For the first time, he doubted if he could defeat Ashcroft in the same rank.

This was a monster. Even with time against him, he was just too strong.

The spiders charged forward, shooting webs of sharp crystal wires, killing the demons. When one fell ten took its place, and when ten fell a hundred stood where it had been.

The demons were fierce, but the spiders had the numbers. And no matter how fierce the spirit, the body would not be able to keep up.

A Goristro roared as it was surprised and pinned down by crystal spiders. One of them pulled its head into the ceiling, the other ripping it apart.

Blood soaked the dungeon floor.

Damon watched as Ashcroft observed his minions being slain. He didn't even look worried or anxious.

Biting his lips, Damon took a deep breath.

"I've gotten complacent... of course I can't win... when have I ever fought a battle I could win? Having grown stronger, I have forgotten what being the weakest is like..."

Damon stood up, unafraid that Ashcroft would spot him.

"I didn't fight because I could win. I fought because I didn't want to just accept it..."

That was the problem. He was fighting like someone who always had power, who always succeeded. But at his core he was just a master of defeat.

"I'm not a winner. I'm a survivor."

That was what he had done wrong.

He was trying to fight Ashcroft as a winner, not as someone who survived tooth and nail.

There was a soft smile on his face as the last of the demons was cut down, save for the lesser demon Ashcroft was sitting on.

Ashcroft slowly, unhurried, got off the lesser demon. This time it didn't charge in like its kin. Instead it left the cavern.

The demon lord of domination watched as the massive swarm of spiders charged toward him, almost like a crystal flood.

He raised his hand. An entire section of the spiders ceased to exist. All that fell was shattered remains, legs, mandibles, chitin, heads and half-wreathed monster corpses.

This was the power of Ashcroft. Still, the demon lord coughed up blood. Even so, he didn't halt, he didn't slow down. He smiled.

"Flame Dominate."

Pillars of fire rose around the spiders as the smell of roasted bugs spread with clouds of smoke.

Fire spread as Damon watched from the crystal on the ceiling. The spiders had seemed like an unstoppable army, a calamity that could reduce cities to nothing.

But faced with Ashcroft, all they could do was shatter, break, and die. Right before his eyes, the thousands of spiders marched to their deaths as blood soaked the dungeon floor, corpses filling everywhere.

Ashcroft remained where he was, without moving a single spot, until the corpses had formed tall towers of half-destroyed remains.

It was difficult to find any intact corpse. Some were burned, some were frozen, some died in ways Damon could not quite explain, and he watched all this knowing he would face this monster next.

Ashcroft was untouched, but the more he fought, the more spiders fell, the more his aura diminished, his body breaking apart.

Finally, the demon lord of domination walked forward, with no spider left to hinder him.

Even as his body bled, he carried the same unstoppable, domineering aura.

He finally stopped in front of the giant spider queen. It was the last of its kind left alive. Its many giant eyes carried the anguish of a mother that had watched her children get destroyed by a monster.

Ashcroft raised his destroyed, frail-looking hand.

"I would give you a swift death but I am too weakened... still, allow me to honor you with a spell created by the unknown god himself..."

The spider was not reactive. It was already on the offensive, this powerful rank four monster already raising its massive frontal legs to strike.

Ashcroft's hand began to glow.

"Tinder to spark, ember to glow,

In this place, let fire grow.

With a breath, let flames flow,

Consume all—Inferno."

With an immolating wave of heat, flames consumed the giant crystal spider, its body turning to ash.

Ashcroft's body rotted even more. Still, he slowly turned around with an anguished smile.

"Have you finally decided to face me..."

His gaze was on a figure looking down on him as he stood atop the tallest mountain of spider corpses. His armor was something Ashcroft recognized, especially now, seeing it in its sovereign mantle form.

"The armor of Pale Crown... as expected of the usurper... you inherited Valthren's armor."

Ashcroft continued speaking.

"The last wielder was someone I didn't quite kill... will you fare any better?"

The figure in dark armor finally spoke.

"Time to find out."

Chapter 584: A Common Day

A handsome elf carrying a bow watched a commotion a few meters from him on the more insecure parts of the streets of Valerion.

He leaned on a counter holding a wooden mug of some alcoholic beverage.

Next to him was a one-eyed beastkin man. Their eyes were on a small boy with dark hair and icy blue eyes as he stood off against three rugged-looking men.

"Hehehe... he's not going to provoke them. No one's that stupid..."

The elf, called Back to Back, smiled.

Taking a sip of his drink, he said, "I bet ten zeni he will."

"You're game," the beastkin replied, knowing the street children of Valerion were always working toward self-preservation.

Before he could say more, the dark-haired boy kicked straight at the groin of one of the men.

Back to Back smiled, already expecting that outcome.

He opened his palm. "Pay up."

The one-eyed beastkin snickered, then passed a coin to the elf, his expression irritated and his pride wounded from misjudging a common street child.

He watched as the rugged men helped the one on his knees up, surrounding the boy.

"They'll have him crying and begging for mercy in minutes..."

The elf chuckled, looking at the sun in the sky.

"Wanna bet?"

The beastkin sneered. "What are the stakes?"

Back to Back glanced at the boy. Even here he could see the coldness in his blue eyes and the tremble in his little fists. He was afraid of course, but that little runt was different.

"I bet he won't cry or beg no matter what they do."

"Ten thousand zeni," the beastkin called out, confident he already won the bet.

Back to Back raised a finger, downing his drink.

"Twenty thousand. And drinks are on you. We'll be here a while."

And just as he had expected, the rugged men ganged up on the little boy, kicking and punching his small form while shouting slurs.

Even as he was kicked down, his body bruised, swollen, and lying against the cracked pavement, he still didn't beg or cry.

He spoke back, insulted, and cursed at them with all the venom in his little heart.

The beastkin narrowed his eyes. He got up, having watched enough, and marched toward the men, placing a hand on the shoulder of one of them to stop them.

"What do you think you're doing, you fucking bastards?"

They glanced at him, but he pointed at the dark-haired boy.

"Use sticks and beat him properly."

The men took his words with a nod. After all, he was stronger.

This was the harsh slums of Valerion. No one was coming to save some street child. It was already a mercy that little thieves like him didn't get lynched.

The beastkin went back and took another drink next to the elf.

The sounds of sticks hammering against the little boy echoed out. Soon the sticks broke and more were used. By the time the sun had set there was a pile of bloody sticks.

The boy was kept conscious just so he would beg, but he never did. His swollen body lay in a pool of his own blood.

The three men were on their rears, heaving and sweating.

Back to Back stood up, looking at the setting sun.

He walked up to the barely conscious boy—Damon.

Throwing him on his shoulders, he smiled at the beastkin, who with gritted teeth took out a pouch of coins.

Tossing it to Back to Back, the elf smiled as he took his pay.

"Oh, cover my tab. I drank a bit since I knew you were paying."

The beastkin narrowed his eyes.

"What the hell is wrong with that thing you're carrying?"

Back to Back glanced at the boy beaten black and blue on his shoulders.

"Ah, you think he's nuts too? Well, it's a nice introduction to our very own Phantom. He's a pretty nasty kid, so you boys might want to watch what you wear from now on."

He leaned closer.

"It would be a shame if some nut job put flay powder in your clothes."

As soon as he turned a corner carrying the boy, he heard shrieks of pain.

He glanced at the boy on his shoulder.

"When did you put flay powder in their clothes?"

The boy, with half-open swollen eyes, muttered, "Just... now..." He groaned painfully.

Back to Back smiled, carrying him like a sack.

"Hey, we won ten zeni. I'll give you half. I'm sure you're grateful. Buy your little sister something nice."

The boy tried to move his body to strangle the elf. He knew the bet was twenty thousand zeni, but Back to Back was giving him only five.

His struggle was nothing. All the elf did was touch his swollen leg, and Damon winced in pain.

"That's gonna swell... but don't worry, I have a potion. Of course, you'll be in debt, but who else but me lends you money? The interest is eighty percent as usual."

Damon's mind was fading into blackness. Still, he muttered his intent.

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

Back to Back stopped, looking at the boy beaten half to death.

"You are one tenacious runt. I'd hate to be forced into a battle of attrition against this little monster."

He moved him from his shoulders into his arms and poured a potion into his mouth.

"You better not grow up to be a killer. That would be a disaster for everyone else."

This was a distant memory.

Back to Back was long dead, killed by Damon's hands. He would not live to see what Damon became.

However, even now, Damon could not help but think of that day. It was not a particularly special day. If anything, it had been fairly common.

He was a master of losing and taking a beating, but he was always left standing at the end.

No matter who it was.

Even if he was faced with the Dominator. Even this demon lord would not break him.

He was afraid, he had always been, but he was also unwilling to admit that before his foe.

All he did was endure, persevere.

And so, knowing that this may be his final battle, he charged forward knowing this might be his final foe.

No... this would be his latest obstacle.

"I will overcome this wall."

With a sound like tens of explosions mixed together, he clashed with Ashcroft.

He had always been like this — terrified, outmatched, but too stubborn to break.

Chapter 585: The One Who Dominates and the One Who Takes

The sovereign mantle form of the Ascendant Armor was the most powerful form of the armor, the form where its true abilities were revealed.

Damon stood cloaked in the overwhelming might of the Ascendant Armor, his strength multiplied by the [5x] skill, his aura flaring in deep shadows that twisted around him like living tendrils.

But the moment he clashed with Ashcroft, the world seemed to spin in a violent circle. His experience told him at once that it was not the world turning, but his body being flung across the cavern with overwhelming force.

His dark armor streaked past mounds of spider corpses, and before he could slam into the far side of the cavern, Ashcroft took a single step. In that instant, the Demon Lord of Domination crossed the entire gap. The goblin's frail, rotting body appeared behind Damon, its little fist striking with the weight of a mountain.

"Ptfffft..." Blood burst from Damon's mouth, spraying against the inside of his helmet.

His organs rattled painfully, his ribs cracked, and his Ascendant Armor dented deeply where Ashcroft's fist had landed.

"I can't react fast enough..."

That was the problem. Ashcroft wasn't letting him counter. He wasn't just power, he was skill, he was experience, he was rhythm. The Demon Lord of Domination was fighting on a level Damon could not match.

'Even though his strength is somewhere between the third and second class...'

If Ashcroft's power had been higher, Damon would already be dead.

Even so, Damon didn't back down. Clenching his dealer's hand, he dove into the shadows, narrowly avoiding a blade of compressed wind that tore past where he had been standing. He landed lightly, regaining his balance, only to feel his body slam into something.

Ashcroft's dying goblin body stood there, smiling.

"I just dominated the wind here. I say you can no longer breathe."

Damon froze as the mana shifted. The air itself vanished, dispersed under Ashcroft's command. His lungs screamed, and already there was no breath left to take.

He gritted his teeth and sank deeper into the shadows, buying himself seconds of air.

Ashcroft's power was domination. Whatever he willed to control, he seized.

Damon had seen him dominate even time itself. There was nothing that could not be bent under his will.

But that was earlier. Now Ashcroft was weakened. Once, he had dominated minds and concepts. Now, he was reduced to dominating something as mundane as wind.

"You're getting weaker..."

Even now, using Wind Dominate strained him. His power was diminishing, his rotting body failing him.

"Why else would you want to punch little old me..."

Damon could see it. His body was his weakness. If there was no air, then moving away would solve nothing. He had to face him head-on.

Damon's chest burned, his lungs tightening, but he did not falter. He teleported through the shadows, appearing right beside Ashcroft.

Ashcroft's response was immediate. He swung an invisible blade of wind, a sword of air honed to perfection.

But Damon was ready. His armor shimmered, body phasing into shadow for a fleeting moment. The blade of wind passed harmlessly through him.

Damon's dealer's hand fell like a guillotine, cutting down at the frail, bleeding goblin.

"Dark Blade."

He poured everything into the strike, a slash of concentrated energy unleashed at point-blank range.

Ashcroft raised his hand, fingers quivering. Damon pressed harder, forcing the power through, but Ashcroft's expression did not change.

"Dominate."

The blade of shadow magic froze in place. Ashcroft's fingers closed around it as if it were nothing more than grass. With a casual gesture, he pushed it aside. The slash tore through spider corpses, carving into the cavern wall, splitting rock like paper.

But Damon did not waste time watching the destruction. His eyes remained fixed on Ashcroft. Every use of his power caused his body to rot further, the goblin shell unable to withstand the strain.

Ashcroft snarled, his face peeling with decay. He waved his hand sharply.

Damon's armor twisted, plates bent and shredded as invisible claws raked across his form. His flesh tore, blood dripping through the gaps of his armor.

He roared, forcing himself to hold Ashcroft's hand down. He refused to step back. This was no duel of swords, this was a contest of endurance, a struggle of who could last the longest.

Damon knew the truth. There was no way to defeat Ashcroft. Only a god, or something abstract and infinite, could end him.

Time itself would take him eventually. But not Damon.

The Demon Lord's eyes glinted, locking on the crown atop Damon's head.

But Damon was not just clashing with brute force. Black flames erupted from his body, licking across Ashcroft's decaying form. The fire ate at goblin flesh, burning both of them where they grappled.

"Hahahahahahaha!"

Ashcroft laughed. His voice was ragged, mocking, but still strong.

"Ashborn... the power of the dark spirit Rashi Ignath. You truly are worthy of the name Usurper."

His eyes flashed red.

"Dominate."

The flames flickered, their hunger fading.

"I was the first to face these flames. Even the original wielder of this power could not harm me. What makes you think you stand a chance?"

Ashcroft's rotting hand gripped Damon's helm, slamming his head into the ground. The armor caved slightly, and Damon's skull rang with pain.

"Look at you. Pathetic. You are weak, so you steal. You take the power of others and wear it like your own. Your armor, another's gift. Your flames, another's power. You don't even use your umbral attribute properly."

He raised the invisible blade of wind and drove it down. Damon twisted desperately. The blade missed his heart but pierced his right lung.

Ashcroft kicked him with his small goblin legs, and Damon crashed into the ground, the impact carving a crater. His organs screamed as blood filled his lungs.

"... I got my power with my own will. I stole nothing. I took everything. You are alive because of Deathless."

Damon's eyes widened.

'How did he know...'

Ashcroft's gaze hardened.

"Don't look so surprised. You're not the only one with a system. Mine may be sealed, but appraisal still works well enough."

Damon tried to crawl, but Ashcroft's foot pressed his head into the stone.

"I will tear off that crown. I will dominate your mind. I will plant in you the desire to live, and then you will die. Is that not your wish?"

Ashcroft leaned closer, his voice cold.

"You will be part of something greater. You will be part of Ashcroft."

"My wish...."

"Yes. You can finally rest."

Chapter 586: What Is Broken

His wish. That had been what shaped his second class, the very philosophy that guided him. A desire to end it all.

That was his wish.

"All your final wishes... I will take care of them. Your kin will live in abundance. All you need to do is let me in..."

Damon subconsciously felt his struggle halt. Ashcroft was all powerful. If anyone could save his sister, it would be him.

"Can you cure an incurable disease..."

Ashcroft's eyes slid toward Damon, who was slowly loosening his resistance.

"I am a master of alchemy and all healing. I can cure anything but death."

Hearing those words, Damon's dark eyes flickered.

'Well... this is a good way to go. I tried... I really did... but maybe... just maybe... just once... I wanted to....'

As the thoughts crossed his mind and uncertainty grew within him, his shadow rippled violently. Coldness burst from it, and a fist struck Ashcroft's chin with crushing force.

The Demon Lord of Domination, trapped in a goblin's body, was flung through the cavern, smashing into the corpses of crystal spiders. His jaw shattered, half destroyed.

Since his return, this was the first time Ashcroft had truly been struck.

His eyes narrowed as he glared at the unexpected figure. A woman stood before Damon, clad in familiar Ascendant Armor.

Ashcroft recognized it at once.

The Armor of Shattered Ice. Except now, it was darker, infused with frost and shadow. Her aura was immense, infinitely close to the fourth-class advancement. From her back spread wings of solid ice, and in her hand she held a gleaming sword of frost.

"A fairy... no, a shadow."

She was Damon's shadow. Ashcroft could feel the umbral attribute flowing from her soul, tied directly to her master. The bloodlust and rage directed at him were clear.

Ashcroft smiled. He couldn't help himself.

This was expected of a shadow — such loyalty, such resolve. This was the first entity to stand before him without even a trace of fear.

Having the loyalty of such a shadow only made the Usurper more interesting in his eyes.

There was no point trying to dominate her. Shadows were loyal to one alone.

"Stand down, shadow. I have reached an agreement with your master. Going forward, you will serve me."

Before he could continue, the air froze. A storm of ice burst from the armored woman, engulfing the cavern. The cold bit into the soul itself.

Ashcroft felt his failing body corrode further within the storm.

This was Matia's skill, Ruin's End. From her wings, a winter spread that threatened to consume all.

Ashcroft realized immediately — this shadow would never allow him to claim Damon. She was too deeply bound, too loyal.

"Its one thing after another.... I don't have time for this."

A muffled boom echoed in the frozen storm. Ashcroft clashed with the Ruined Fairy.

Spears and swords of ice rained down from every angle.

"Ice Dominate."

He raised his hand calmly. The spears froze midair, halted by his will. The storm itself slowed, granting him a moment to breathe. But the cold had already frozen the blood on his body, encasing him in a brittle layer of ice. It cracked and peeled away skin as he moved.

Ashcroft lifted his arm, aiming to crush the shadow. She had become an obstacle, and he could not afford her interference.

But she moved swiftly. Her sword dissolved into a spear of ice. As she thrust forward, time itself seemed to slow. Ashcroft saw her strike accelerate beyond reason, aimed at his chest.

This was the enchantment of her Ascendant Armor.

Frozen Timestep – Slows the perception of time when switching between weapons or after landing a critical hit.

There was barely any time to react.

Still, Ashcroft was Ashcroft. His cold smile spread across his ruined face.

"Flesh Dominate."

He dominated his own weak body, forcing his flesh to soften like pliant clay.

Matia's spear pierced straight through as he hollowed out his own chest, leaving a gaping hole. The weapon passed without killing him, the force shaking the cavern.

She did not relent. Her spear dissolved into a shield and axe. She slammed the shield into his tiny goblin body. He dodged, but her axe swung upward immediately after.

He swiped it aside, moving through the storm. Another spear formed, this one kicked with such force it left a sonic boom.

Ashcroft dodged again, but her wings flared, releasing a wave of ice. The blizzard thickened.

He did something unexpected. He turned and rolled in the direction of the spear. As the ice cleared, another Matia appeared — a phantom double formed of frozen mist.

Ashcroft's sword of wind slashed it apart.

"I knew you would use Flake of Cold Eternity."

Flake of Cold Eternity – Can summon a frozen double to fight alongside her briefly.

He knew the fourth enchantment of the Armor of Shattered Ice well. He was an old monster from the Second Epoch.

How could this young shadow's tricks compare to his experience?

His fist struck her cleanly, sending her flying. She crashed near Damon, who had forced his broken body up, his head bleeding heavily. She landed at his feet, her cold blue eyes flickering before going still.

Damon looked down at her. His exhausted gaze hardened, a murderous light flickering within it.

"I wish...die.."

"That is my wish... but I don't need you to do anything for me. I can do it myself."

Blood streaked down his face as he raised his head.

"I can die... but not by your hand. I still have people who want me to live...."

He lowered himself, touching Matia's face gently. Her skin was as cold as a corpse, but she was alive.

His touch lingered, then he sent her back into his shadow.

"Don't worry... I won't die. Just watch. I'll win."

Damon stood as she sank into his shadow.

"You hurt my friend. The deal is off. I'm killing you."

His hand reached for his crown.

"You say all I do is take and have nothing. You are right. I am weak. That's why I take. I devour the strength of others and make it my own."

The shadows rose around him, vast and endless.

"Today, I will devour your strength and make it mine."

"My Living Shadow System will devour your Domination System."

He removed his crown, tossing it aside. The shadows engulfed him, transforming him into a monster of darkness. His voice came out low and husky, as if it echoed from the abyss itself.

"You want to dominate my mind? Come."

"Even you cannot dominate what is already broken."

Chapter 587: Pure Shadow

There was a small part of him that wished he had accepted this offer. Where else would he get the chance for someone to bend his will into wishing he could live?

If he had truly wished to live, then he would have met the condition for Deathless to be rendered obsolete. Or rather, the skill's directive would have changed—from keeping him alive despite his wish to die, to actively sending death his way.

Ashcroft would have dominated his sane mind after removing the crown, forcing him to wish for life.

Alas, that did not come to pass. Damon's desire to kill Ashcroft far outweighed everything else. This single craving consumed him, the only thing that drove his fractured mind forward.

Kill Ashcroft.

Right now, Damon was at his strongest.

He was relentlessly insane, with not a trace of hesitation, weakness, or fear. Most importantly, he had drained his reserves of shadow energy until he went ravenous. All that was left was hunger—the hunger to kill the Demon Lord of Domination.

The cavern shook with a violent quake. Crystals shattered loose from the ceiling, crashing down as shards of rock and crystal broke against the floor. At the heart of the destruction, two monsters clashed.

The first resembled a half-dead goblin. His jaw was disfigured and broken, his skin peeling away. Blood covered his frail, failing body.

Across from him loomed a far larger creature, one of writhing shadows. Its claws stretched long and cruel, its body shifted and reshaped itself, fangs snapped hungrily, and a monstrous tail lashed behind it—an addition formed solely to make it more efficient at killing.

The contrast between them was striking. The goblin radiated cold, calm arrogance.

Though pressed for time, he never lost composure, carrying the sly intellect of one who had endured the cruel, relentless passage of centuries.

"Rawrrr... mhahahaha..." The shadow laughed, even as the small goblin hurled its terrifying mass to the ground.

This was a different type of monster—one that did not fear pain, one that did not fear death.

All that drove it was perverted intelligence, gnawing madness, and a single-minded desire to kill. Alongside that desire surged another force: hunger. A hunger to devour, to consume.

Ashcroft felt his arms growing heavy. His aura dropped to a shallow mockery of what it once had been. Even if he won against Damon now, it would take him years to recover. He would need to reclaim more fragments of his former body. He was far past his limits.

The shadow-creature that was Damon's twisted form pounced on him. Ashcroft's invisible sword of wind carved into that mass of darkness, its hardened shadows tougher than magisteel. The blade pierced through its chest, but his opponent only laughed in that monstrous voice.

Ashcroft shifted slightly aside as its massive maw lunged for his shoulder. Like a beast starved, it bit down, but he remained untouched.

With a flick of his hand, he called out,

"Light dominate."

At once, a blinding flash spread through the cavern. The invisible blade of wind in his grasp became a sword of pure searing light, its radiance burning away the shadows.

But at the same time, Ashcroft felt his aura diminish even further. His body slowed, weaker than before.

Without hesitation, he thrust the sword of light at the shadow. Razor-sharp claws rose to block it, but under the harsh glow, its body began to unravel. The darkness dissolved to reveal an arm beneath. Ashcroft dismissed the sword instantly, conjuring another with a snap of light. Faster than his opponent could react, he sliced the arm clean off.

The creature responded by springing forward with its other arm. Using its monstrous bulk as leverage, it kicked Ashcroft back with surprising force.

His breathing was heavy now, the strain showing.

"Light beats shadow. That is a law. Perhaps you'd stand a chance if you had a darkness attribute... no, you still wouldn't. Not against me."

The shadow lunged again, furious, madness driving every strike.

"You still have a human form under all this. Despite your insanity, you are flesh—and flesh can be killed."

Ashcroft grabbed its neck, slamming it down into the ground. His breath came ragged, yet his gaze was calm.

"Why are you even fighting? You haven't touched me once. This is futile. You are futile."

With a wave of his hand, the air itself hurled Damon across the cavern like a ragdoll. His shadowed body slammed into the walls, blood spilling from his form.

"I can't kill you, fine. Then I'll break you until you can't move."

Ashcroft had realized something. This wretch was a living punching bag. His pain tolerance exceeded anything he had ever seen. No—it wasn't tolerance. It was insanity. He feared no pain.

Gripping his foe by the neck, Ashcroft pooled his will, focusing every last ounce of dominance on one thing.

"Mind dominate."

His will speared into Damon's headspace, aiming to crush the shattered psyche. But what he encountered made him pause.

He didn't find a single mind. He found a storm.

A chaotic stream of emotions, thoughts, and desires—self-hate, arrogance, longing, love, hate, anger, spite, guilt, melancholy, and anguish. Each desire burned like a separate star, fighting for control of this one body, dragging it toward oblivion. But above them all, brighter than the rest, was one shared cry.

Kill Ashcroft.

His name rang through that maelstrom like the refrain of a malevolent choir, a symphony with no conductor, a storm with no eye.

Ashcroft could force his way in. He could dominate. But there was nothing to dominate. This was not a mind. It was only madness.

"Hahhehheh..." A husky laugh rattled through broken fangs.

"We told you... you cannot dominate what is broken."

The shadow's body shifted. The form of Damon twisted.

"You invaded our mind. But we saw yours too. Hehehe... you're right. We were using our power wrong."

Ashcroft's gaze sharpened. He did not like the way his opponent spoke now, as though countless voices answered from one mouth.

"Allow us to correct that. This physical vessel is such a hassle..."

Blood that had been spilling moments ago evaporated. The mass of shadows began to reform, pulling tighter. From within, Damon's human shape shifted into something else—a body of pure shadow.

The severed limb regrew instantly, stretching out in black smoke.

"Now... we are shadows. And you... are flesh.....ready for harvesting."

Ashcroft struck first, his fist piercing a gaping hole through the chest of the shadow-being. But inside, there was no flesh. Only endless blackness.

Pure shadow.

Chapter 588: Last Star In The Crystal Palace

The odds had shifted, or rather, they had been just the same since the very beginning.

Ashcroft was fighting against time, and Damon was fighting to buy time. This wasn't a battle Damon was supposed to win. It was an endurance match.

However, Damon sought to flip the narrative. One would rule and one would perish.

His maw opened wide with every intent to consume the goblin in front of him, to devour his rotten flesh and make his power his own.

Ashcroft reached into the air, the blade of light forming into a weapon. No, not a blade but a thin point of pure light that traveled at the speed of light itself.

His shadow perception had already registered the shifts within the darkness, but unlike when Evangeline had attacked him with light magic, this was far faster.

By the time he sensed the flash, his body was already pierced by the searing pain.

The attack ripped past his outer body of shadows and struck his inner shadow form, the hidden vessel within, and for the first time it damaged his soul.

Even so, Damon charged forward with reckless abandon.

Flames roared to life around his shadowed body, then surged outward in a violent wave that incinerated everything before him.

Ashcroft raised his rotting green hands, forcing the earth itself to rise as a shield.

The wall of dirt hardened, then baked under the heat until it turned red and shattered apart with a violent boom, shards spraying through the cavern.

He was experienced enough to know Damon was trying to blind him with the fire and strike from its cover. Ashcroft unleashed a volley of spears of light toward the point where Damon should have been.

Trying to blind Ashcroft was a juvenile tactic, the reckless strategy of a madman.

Yet the goblin's eyes widened. There was no impact. Nothing was there. With every ounce of his fading strength, Ashcroft turned, but he was a fraction too slow.

From the shadows behind him, massive claws burst forth, raking across his chest.

The impact carried a manic laughter with it, a chaotic, broken sound that cracked through the cavern as Ashcroft was flung backward.

"Jehjjsrjrjrrjrnrbegg...." The shadow's laughter was insane, so chaotic that Ashcroft could not even comprehend how such a voice was formed.

The thing had no throat. It was simply a mass of shadows.

"You didn't see that one coming.... You're getting slower..."

The monstrous being kicked the goblin's body like a ball, chasing him immediately on all fours with a sonic boom that echoed through the cavern.

Ashcroft realized it. How could he not? He really was slowing down. Not only physically, but mentally. He was dying again.

His head felt heavy. Pain spread through his body. His blood flowed freely, his organs rotting away. The taste of iron lingered thick in his mouth.

And the usurper had done the unthinkable. He had struck him. For the first time since their battle began, Damon had actually landed a true blow.

Ashcroft hated to admit it, but the possibility of losing now existed.

'I have to think of a fail safe...'

As his body was hurled through the air, blood spraying with every rotation, Ashcroft smiled faintly, almost impressed with Damon.

'...you've put up a good fight...'

Yet before he could hit the ground, Damon, in his monstrous shadow form, pulled out a staff.

"Ooojjhhj... I'm just getting started.... Kaboooom..."

Ashcroft's eyes widened as the head of the staff unleashed a black sphere of destruction. He watched it expand, point blank, right beside his face.

There was no defense at this distance. Nothing he could do would be fast enough to stop it. If he had been at his full power, if he had all his skills intact, this would have been trivial to avoid. But there was no point in what ifs.

This would be his death. Again.

The explosion engulfed them both. Damon had willingly thrown himself into its range, a suicidal shadow that sought only destruction. His ferocity reminded Ashcroft of an extremist suicide bomber, one with no regard for his own life.

And Damon was still only a child. The thought sparked a rush of rage within Ashcroft's decaying heart.

He felt insulted by the sheer perpetuity of conflict. If Damon killed him here, how many more wars would the child wage?

How many battles would be fueled by one who had no regard for life, even his own?

The impact burned his flesh, shattered his organs, and hurled him across the dungeon. He crashed into the far end of the cavern, his ruined body pierced by jagged shards of crystal.

A dull ache spread across what remained of him. His lungs were almost entirely gone. His ears buzzed, filled with the sound of phantom memories.

The deafening gunfire of soldiers taking cover. The metallic rattle of ammunition in the heat of battle.

"Ahhh..." Ashcroft realized something. He was disoriented, caught in old memories.

"I've taken serious damage... I need a medic... I'm out of ammo..."

It was the roar of the shadow that snapped him back to reality. That insane, guttural howl cut through his delusion.

Ashcroft blinked, vision swimming. He looked down at his body. Half of him was impaled on a sharp crystal shard. One of his arms dangled loosely, barely attached.

His body was upside down, which was why he saw Damon approaching him on all fours, a murderous glint in his eyes.

"Hahahah..." Ashcroft chuckled softly.

What was this? This was the closest he had come to death since he had been born into the world of Aetherus. His first death, when he fought Doom, did not count. He had died before he even realized it.

This was different.

"You... this is the first time anyone in this world has been able to injure me so severely..."

He punched at the crystal, forcing it deeper through his flesh as he dragged his body free.

"You remind me of my past life... The irony isn't lost on me... I killed many child soldiers once...helpless insurgents who barely knew war."

Ashcroft muttered the words to himself, his voice cracked and broken.

"To think... I may die at the hands of a child..."

The shadow jumped above, claws raised. It did not care for the goblin's words.

The claws slashed downward, freezing midair.

Ashcroft raised his trembling hand. His broken voice whispered.

"Forgive me..."

The monstrous shadow froze in place, suspended as if the world itself obeyed his will.

"But I promised all children like you... I would end all conflict..."

Ashcroft's aura erupted, a final burst of terrible, corroded light.

"Forbidden skill... [Last Star in the Crystal Palace]."

His body rotted further, collapsing from within.

"I will destroy the Ninth Pillar... I will erase all conflict... with this star's last light..."

Chapter 589: Soul Calibration

One day, I woke up to find the Crystal Palace empty. I traveled through its vast halls, but there was no one there. The Ascendant Knights who guarded me were gone.

My older sister was not there. My brother was not there. None of my siblings were.

It was silent. The halls that once carried a grace envied by the divine now seemed bleak and hollow.

Alone in these halls, I called out for my mother, but there was no response. I went to the throne room and called out for my father, but again, silence answered me.

I was alone, so I searched for my grandfather. Surely that vile thief would have the answers. My wings fluttered as I flew across the vast sky, reaching corners of the Crystal Palace few could ever visit, where fewer still would dare. I called out to my grandfather.

Again, I was alone.

Surely this must have been some terrible joke my family had decided to play on me. I knew my grandmother had a soft spot and would be the easiest to falter, so I cried out for her.

But all I heard was silence. No one was there. I was all alone.

When I looked into the sky, I saw only a bleak heaven consumed by darkness, with a single star shining its fragile light.

That star was me. And I was in the abyss. My nightmare had become reality. I was the last star shining its faint, lonely light.

The last star in the Crystal Palace.

This was the dream Ashcroft had when he obtained this particular skill. But in truth, it wasn't even a skill. It was a spell. A spell born from the nightmare of the unknown god—a nightmare that had become reality.

It was the expression of a lonely god who longed for home but, for reasons Ashcroft could not understand, chose not to return. Just like Ashcroft, that god was driven by a single-minded goal.

The spell had one singular effect: it was the last light of a dying star. It allowed the user to erupt with one moment of radiance so bright it dwarfed everything that came before.

But it was also a sorrowful spell, because all the other stars were gone, and you were left alone. When your last light faded, only darkness remained.

That was why Ashcroft had to make this strike count. This was all the light he could summon. This was everything he had left. This was nothing new to him.

"Every person was a star. Every man, every woman. We could all shine, though some had brighter light than others. But when you are alone against the abyss, even your small light shines brightly."

His body was torn apart as a white light, like a star, flared into existence between him and Damon's maddened shadow form.

From the eyes of an observer, Ashcroft would seem like a benevolent saint whose light summoned forth a miracle to banish an evil creature of shadow. He would represent hope, justice, and self-sacrifice, while Damon embodied despair, rage, gluttony, and all the sins of the abyss.

But the world was never that simple. Beauty did not make something benevolent, and darkness had the right to exist as well.

As the white ball of light grew, spreading across the cavern, the shadow roared with fury, refusing to retreat even an inch. Damon raised his massive claws and pressed them into the burning light of the star.

Ashcroft's eyes glazed, blood pouring from his cracked and failing body.

"There is no point in resisting... this is all of me... this is the star that glows even in the abyss... this is my domination..."

He raised his hand, forcing his last strength forward.

"Star Dominate!"

Damon was driven back, his shadow form breaking apart faster than it could recover.

"Your domination..." Damon spoke in a husky, broken voice.

"A star that glows in the abyss... hehehe... a star in the abyss has already been devoured by darkness."

"I will devour yours too."

His body of shadows shattered and warped, collapsing into a pool of spreading darkness. It spread like smoke, a black tide pushing against the white light.

Ashcroft's radiance burned it away with blistering heat, but the shadows continued to expand.

The demon lord glowed brighter, seeing the futility of Damon's struggle.

"Your struggle is pointless. You will fade."

Damon had no teeth, no mouth, only the shifting mass of shadows. His rage, his spite, his madness—none of it was enough before this consuming light.

"If I am not enough... I will devour and make their strength my own."

Ashcroft, now nothing but light as his goblin body was destroyed, answered calmly.

"But you cannot devour me."

The mass of darkness laughed.

"Who said I was talking about you? I was talking about the hundreds of crystal spiders you so conveniently killed."

Ashcroft's eyes widened. He had overlooked it. They were surrounded by corpses, and Damon's nature was simple: he devoured corpses.

Like a tide of inky darkness....

Shadows spread, consuming the remains of every crystal spider and turning them into strength.

[You have gained +67,835 attribute points]

Damon poured them into his stats, boosting his strength, speed, endurance, even his failing vitality. His body surged with stolen might.

No—with the might his living shadow had devoured, he would devour the Dominator himself.

Like a sea of corruption overwhelming beauty, the darkness spread through the cavern, leaving only the star at the center resisting.

It looked eerily like the nightmare of the unknown god—one star shining in endless blackness. That feeling of overwhelming loneliness gripped Ashcroft's fading heart.

Damon's consciousness dispersed across the shadows, threatening to consume itself in madness. Yet the light of Ashcroft became his guide. The pain anchored him, holding his humanity together.

Then, as his fragmented self pressed against the light, Damon spoke.

"I am weak. I cannot be strong like you. I walk with a heart full of defeat... but I am still here. It is because I am weak that I will devour those who are strong and make their strength my own."

Ashcroft struggled to hold the light. He was out of time. His soul began to fade, his body gone, with no escape except into the darkness around him.

And the darkness spoke.

"I will devour your domination... and make it my own."

"You are now a part of me."

The darkness consumed the light.

And then Damon heard the chime.

[You have slain fragment of Ashcroft the Dominator]

[Quest Complete]

[Appraisal: Glorious]

[You have leveled up]

[You have awakened the skill: Demon Dominate]

Damon's body began to reform, but that was only the beginning of the system's chimes.

[Soul recalibration has begun]

Chapter 590: Live In All

As his body began to take back its human form, he clutched his own head, a soft laughter echoing in the air.

"Heheheheheh... I won... hehehe... I actually won..."

Before he could say any more, soul-tearing agony came from his core.

"Arggggghhh..." he screamed in pain. A crushing sound rang within his head, not just his mind but deeper, in his very soul. His shadow stretched across the cavern.

Pain tore through his consciousness. His soul was broken and ground to dust, then reformed, then broken again. He thrashed across the ground in agony.

After what felt like an eternity, the pain stopped. Damon gasped for breath, rising to his knees. Before he could gather himself, he felt something flying toward him. Without even looking, he reached out and grabbed it.

It was a squirrel and a raven that had appeared out of nowhere.

Without hesitation, he seized what they carried. It was a crown, a crown as dark as shadows, darker than before, as if it swallowed all light around it.

Without speaking, Damon placed the crown on his head. He felt its power suppress his fractured mind.

"Good job..."

The two animals almost seemed visibly relieved that he would wear the crown of his own accord. Damon freed them as the system chime continued.

[Soul recalibration complete]

[You have usurped the boon of Ashcroft]

[You have usurped a fragment of the Domination attribute]

[You have broken the laws of Minerva, Goddess of Doom]

[Mastery Fate Manipulation Resistance Lv2]

[Your mastery has leveled up]

[Charisma Lv. 9]

[All combat masteries have leveled up]

[[You have acquired Ashcroft's Seed of Depravity...]

[The Seed of Depravity grows within your soul.]

[Possibility of demonization exists.]

Damon felt something spreading within his chest, driving his emotions toward all the things he hated, all the pain he had endured, all he wished to destroy.

And just as briefly as it began, it stopped.

Then another chime came.

[You have received a Quest]

[Do you wish to accept?]

[Y/N]

Damon thought for a moment, then whispered.

"Yes."

[Quest: Path to Conflict]

War is perpetual in every world. In every heart, conflict has shaped the direction of many things and created many outcomes.

All conflict is the product of the Ninth Pillar and part of the balance that holds all things together.

For this balance, the world of Aetherus has suffered Minerva's cruelty for too long. Its people have been denied the choice between peace and conflict.

I offer you a chance to right this wrong and liberate your world from the tyranny of an indifferent goddess.

[Find the location of the Pillar of Conflict]

Rewards: ???????

Damon stared at the system panel with a deadpan expression, then scoffed.

"Yeah right, that is what this is. Between the both of us, we both know you have your own agenda. Why else would Ashcroft want to do his own thing..."

He did not expect a response. Perhaps that was why the next moment was so shocking.

The system panel glitched. It flickered in and out before displaying a swirling darkness.

There was a soft chime.

[Authority: Boundary Maker is in use]

Ashcroft had already sealed this area in order to trap Damon and Abellona, but in this moment Damon felt that everything was sealed beyond a boundary he could not comprehend.

Time itself was trapped within this boundary. Life was trapped. Nothing made sense because even nothing was trapped, along with sense itself.

This was the power of a god, a true god.

Damon did not feel fear, because even fear had been sealed within this boundary. Still, he spoke, and his voice came out because sound was not sealed.

This was his first real conversation with perhaps the most powerful entity in existence. He had to make it count.

"I want to say something rude... but then I realized you sealed away insults too."

The system panel did not reply.

Then came a cracking voice, filtered by the system so that Damon's mortal ears could hear without dying or worse.

Damon wanted to ask something, but questions too seemed sealed away. It was evident the unknown god already knew what he wanted to ask. He was not here to listen—he was here to be heard.

"If gods exist, why do they allow suffering? If they are all-powerful, then they must be malevolent. If they are benevolent, then they must not be all-powerful."

The voice reached Damon's ears, and the will behind the words made his ears bleed.

"I desire to create a utopia. One without suffering. One without the cruelty of gods."

The unknown god paused.

"That is my wish. That is my intent."

And then, with a voice that faded like a dream:

"I call you to join me, as I have called others before you. Let us create a utopia. One where war and pain are silent, and only everlasting peace remains."

Damon listened silently as the unknown god spoke of his intent.

"Why would you want that..." He didn't ask as a question but rather a statement, and the unknown god allowed this loophole.

The unknown god replied.

"Because I alone feel the pain of all those who resent, all those who rage, all the downtrodden. Even you. When you eventually die, like all things do, I will live life in your shoes. I will experience your anguish, your pain, your love, your resentment."

Damon was shaken by these words. What did he mean? Did he truly experience everyone's life, all their memories, all their suffering? Every moment, somewhere, someone was dying—and he lived through that? How much anguish was that? Damon could not even imagine it.

"A... are you in pain..."

"No. I am in a perpetual state of understanding. And I see the world from where you stand."

Damon narrowed his eyes. He truly could not imagine it. If he were in such a state, living through everyone's pain, through every tragedy, he would hate everything.

"Why do you not..." Damon began, knowing his thoughts were already laid bare before the unknown god.

The system panel flickered with resentment so deep it threatened to destroy Damon's soul.

"I do."

Then, without warning, the system panel vanished. The world returned to normal before Damon's eyes, his ears dripping blood.

He fell to his knees.

A feeling of uncertainty gripped his heart when faced with the unknown god.

Once again, he was lost. Was this god a friend or a foe?

Damon remained still for an unknown amount of time. Then, finally, thoughts began to move in his head.

If he was an enemy, then there was no winning. At the end of this path only certain defeat awaited.

Damon forced himself up.

"Even so... I'll still go. The Pillar of Conflict... fine. I'll find it. And next time... I'll be the one doing the talking. And you'll listen."