

## Shadow 591

### Chapter 591: Never Be The Hero

Fear was a primordial emotion, however what Damon was feeling thinking about his first words to the unknown god almost made his heart explode.

It was a good thing the unknown god messed with a bunch of concepts and sealed them away, making them temporarily obsolete.

Like fear.

Damon felt the passage of time again. His body was in good shape. He had even regained his lost arm.

He didn't even notice at first. It seemed the unknown god was benevolent enough to patch him up.

With a deep sigh Damon glanced around the cavern, searching for his arm. After a while he saw it, charred and covered in dried and hardened blood.

Damon wore an impassive expression as the raven and the squirrel arrogantly glanced at the limb as if examining it.

"Caw...caw...lose too many times..."

He glared at the raven.

"Shut up. I haven't lost my limbs that much... only like a few times..."

The squirrel used the opportunity to suck up to Damon by smacking the raven and climbing up his body, stopping on his shoulder.

"He only lost his limbs like two times."

Damon, irritated, swatted the squirrel away.

"Damn rodent, whose side are you on."

He squatted down. The arm was useless now anyway, he already had another one. The reason he was looking for it was because of the piece of gear attached to it.

The omnidirectional gear. Removing it carefully, he strapped it onto his new arm.

"There. Good as new..."

He would have to find time to repair it, and luckily for him he was in the nest of crystal spiders, the monsters that produced the threads used in its wires.

Damon walked around and collected the toughest webs he could find.

With that done he glanced up at the massive crystal platform in the ceiling.

"Right... Abellona of Valtheron is still here..."

Damon was unsure what to do with the princess. She was still unconscious and he also had a contract with her, one where she had agreed to pay him five billion zeni.

"What should I do with her..."

While Damon was contemplating that, the sound of something walking into the cavern caught his attention. His body tensed instinctively as he caught its presence through his shadow perception.

Sharp claws and fangs. A body of scales.

A lesser demon... specifically the one Ashcroft had been riding when he first came here.

Damon prepared himself, expecting it to attack, but it did no such thing. It only glanced at him before slowly walking forward.

It stopped in front of Damon with no hostility in its eyes.

There was a glimmer of intelligence in its gaze. This was not killing intent or vengeance. It was only the silent acknowledgment of a loyal subordinate awaiting orders.

Damon's eyes flickered, swirling like the abyss, and he whispered.

"Demon Dominate."

As soon as the words left his lips, he felt a connection form between him and the lesser demon. In that moment, it could not resist his will.

To test the limits of his domination, he gave a cruel command.

"Die..."

There was a tone in his voice that was cold, domineering, and inhumane, far beyond what Damon would normally display.

The lesser demon did not hesitate. It raised its claws and reached toward its own skull with the intent to rip itself apart.

Damon's eyes widened. He stopped himself immediately.

"Stop!!"

The lesser demon froze. Damon gasped, shaken.

"...what... what the hell was that..."

In his heart of shadows he felt something stir... a seed that drove him toward depravity.

"Is... this Ashcroft's seed of depravity..."

Damon had underestimated what the system meant when it said there was a possibility of demonization.

"I'm turning... into a demon..."

No. Not yet. He was still human for all intents and purposes. But what if he found more of Ashcroft's fragments? What if his resentment and darkness fed the seed?

Damon raised his head with a sigh.

"Ahhh... it's starting to make sense now... Mugu became a demon too... the possibility that I will exist... no, it's almost certain..."

Damon laughed, because it was all he could do.

"What more will I sacrifice for power... What is a demon anyway... how much will that change me..."

That said and done, Damon knew he would have to figure things out on his own. For now, he would have to say goodbye to Abellona of Valtheron.

He reached into his shadow storage and pulled out her spatial ring.

"I didn't take your chastity because... ermmm... I just didn't... but I'm taking your spatial ring and all your other stuff..."

Thinking of all the wealth inside, Damon coughed and winced in mock pain, even though he wasn't actually injured.

"Cough... cough... this will cover my medical bills..."

He held his head dramatically, even though there was no one to witness his ridiculous justification for theft.

"I also need it for mental reparations... for attempted rape on a minor... She's lucky I'm not suing... or telling my grandfather..."

Damon nodded to himself.

Yes, if she ever tried to pull something, he'd drag her down with him.

Then there was also the matter of the five billion zeni.

Damon wasn't sure how she would react to everything, and honestly he preferred she not know anything about what happened between him and Ashcroft. The last thing he wanted was to be dragged into the politics of the imperial capital.

"Not when I don't have strong enough political backing... and matters related to Ashcroft are troublesome..."

For now the best option was clear. He would fake his death.

"This would be a tragic scene where young and handsome Damian... who saved the princess and stole her heart..."

Squeal. Squeal. Caw. Caw.

His pets were not impressed with that last part.

"Shut up. That's how it's going to go down."

At least it was in the stories his mother used to tell him and his sister.

He could almost hear them scoff in disgust.

Coughing to hide his embarrassment, Damon continued.

"Sadly, he slew Ashcroft and died too... the arm is proof..."

The raven cawed at him, almost asking how he intended to get his five billion zeni, knowing Damon would never let money go.

"Relax, fools, this is only temporary. I just don't want her accusing me of touching her or dragging me into politics... If she doesn't reveal anything, fine. If she does... there is no such person as Damian..."

He was mostly worried she would be petty.

Squeal. The squirrel asked a silent question.

"What about my face? That's fine... I usually wear a hood in public places anyway, and I can just use my armor helm... and if she sees me I can just deny, deny, deny..."

The two animals weren't convinced, but they seemed unconcerned. Damon always had a plan, and if he didn't, he'd figure one out.

"We can get the money at a later date through anonymous sources. She signed an oath scroll. She has to pay up..."

The piece of human garbage with no regard for a lady's feelings went about tampering with the battlefield, the lesser demon and his two pets serving as assistants.

#### Chapter 592: A Demon

After a few minutes of tireless work, Damon finally finished crafting the ideal battlefield for mutual destruction. He left his severed arm in a convenient location, staged just right to show he had fought with everything he had.

The scene told the story clearly: Ashcroft had been trying to kill Abellona while she was unconscious, but Damon had protected both her and the crystal platform above.

That was why he was dead. He died for her.

Damon almost shed a tear at how heroic he looked in his own masterpiece.

"She better build a statue in my honor... and think about me all the time."

After setting the stage for his grand death, he left Abellona with one of his high-quality blankets from the system, along with some of his clothes for her to wear.

Well... because he had taken her ring.

Of course, he had done that earlier before he even fought Ashcroft.

"She's probably going to figure out I took her ring... but leaving her to doubt whether I'm alive or dead sounds like a good way to get her brain working."

He wanted to laugh. The thought of the princess walking—or rather, in her case, flying—into the capital wearing a strange man’s clothes was simply too entertaining.

Life was a tragedy when seen up close, but from a distance, life was a comedy.

Even someone as bitter and depressing as Damon was still managing to make the most of it.

At least... until it all came crashing down again.

"Cough... cough... arggh... ermm..."

Abellona’s faint moans echoed through the cavern.

Damon wasn’t quite finished yet, but time had run out. He ushered the lesser demon and his two familiars out of the cavern, leaving the space that had become Ashcroft’s grave.

He would be long gone before Abellona woke. With that certainty in mind, Damon decided it was time to check his spoils.

The first thing he noticed was his aura. It felt deeper, more vast—like he was standing at the edge of something.

"I’m at the cusp of third-class advancement..."

The only reason he hadn’t advanced was because he hadn’t yet resolved his path. His philosophy was incomplete, his intent unclear.

"I could force it... but..."

There was no reason to. Whether he rushed or not, he would reach third class in weeks, perhaps months. There was no need to stumble.

He opened his system panel, examining the stats he had scattered with ruthless pragmatism to secure victory over Ashcroft.

"Damn... I've become quite the monster."

[HP: 14995/14995]

[Mana: 23,567/23,567]

[Strength: 16124]

[Agility: 9157]

[Speed: 17985]

[Endurance: 15410]

[Class: Death Seeker]

[Shadow: 1600]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 16]

[Condition: Shadow Is Full]

[Attributes: Umbral, Domination Fragment]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour] [Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn] [Omen Of Dread] [Dealer's Hand] [Bloodletting] [Shadow Movement] [Shadow] [Faceless] [Danger Sense] [Shadow Storage] [Wave Walk] [Shadow Clone] [Blitz] [Flash Step] [Air Walk] [Appraisal] [Iron Bones] [Astral Projection] [Accel] [Terror Engine] [Vengeance] [Soul Tongue] [Eyes of Veracity] [Shadow Stride] [Soul Conduit] [Heart of Shadow] [Demon Dominate]

[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv7] [Survival Lv10] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv3] [Bartering Lv2] [Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv5] [Trap Lv5] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv5] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv5] [Mana Control Lv7] [Magic Gatling Lv5] [Pain Resistance Lv6] [Mental Contamination Resistance Lv5] [Disintegration Resistance Lv3] [Sniper Lv5] [Rune Magic Lv3] [Insanity Lv4] [Fate Manipulation Resistance Lv2] [Ravenous LvMax] [Poison Resistance Lv6] [Elemental Resistance Lv3] [Petrification Resistance Lv5] [Magic Resistance Lv5] [Curse Resistance Lv2] [Pressure Resistance Lv2] [Corruption Resistance Lv5] [Aura Farming Lv4] [Charisma Lv9] [Tyranny Lv3] [Ragebaiting Lv4]

[Items:]

[Pale Crown Armor] [Broken Bonds] [Deep Quiver] [Silver Blades] [Staff of Carnage] [Sword of Nicolas] [Furnace of Frost] [Helm of Balero] [Charms] [Potions] [Miscellaneous Items]

[Quest:]

[Path to Conflict]

This was all his power now. All of it—the fruit of his suffering. Yes, the system had helped him, but only by forcing him to bleed for every ounce of strength he earned.

"I'm the strongest in my class..I'm ... all but invincible. I suppose I am the Ashcroft of my generation."

A small smile tugged at his lips. How much stronger would he become if he devoured all of Ashcroft's fragments?

He glanced at the skill he had gained from leveling up. It wasn't the true prize—that was the attribute of Domination—but it was the tool he could use now.

[Skill: Demon Dominate

[Description:]

A demon is not cruel because it lacks kindness, nor hateful because it cannot love.

Demons are creatures of overflowing emotions, those who have drowned within their own myriad of desires.

Any who bear a name, when consumed by depravity, become demons—and the truest of demons are the true demon kings who have fallen from grace, enduring damnation with the sole purpose of surpassing their great enemies.

A heart swollen with resentment against those who did not see, who did not understand.

A demon is one who resists, who endures, who shatters and yet continues even in broken —for even depravity cannot extinguish the fire that burns within.

They bewitch with beautiful promises, yet deliver only cruel outcomes.

[Effect:]

Grants the authority to dominate demons. If the wielder's will surpasses theirs, demons—whether feral or intelligent—must yield. Demon kin and higher demons resist more fiercely, but in time, even they shall kneel beneath the power of the Dominator.

[Cooldown:]

0 seconds

Damon had asked what a demon was. The unknown god had answered.

A demon was one whose heart endured, even when shattered.

A heart that carried too many emotions, even twisted and broken.

The god had made demons sound beautiful. But Damon had not been deceived—beauty did not hide horror.

A demon was simply a broken person who refused to conform to the world, who rejected it when it failed to match their vision.

A demon was one who destroyed because the world had no place for them.

Was that not what Mugu was? Was that not Ashcroft? Was that not Damon himself?

All of them were people who refused to accept. People who refused to yield. Their feelings twisted them into something cruel.

The True Demon Kings were the same. And so was the unknown god.

"What cruel outcome will he bring about..."

Damon did not know.

But he knew this much:

A demon endures.

And as he walked out of the deep underground world, every step carried more resistance, more resentment. Until one day...

He, too, would become—

Chapter 593: The End

There was pain in every corner of her body, but alongside it lingered a faint feeling of euphoria.

However, that wasn't the first thing she sensed. The very first thing Abellona noticed was the faint scent of sweat, her own, mixed with the scent of a man clinging stubbornly to her skin.

The scent of that man... Damian.

She slowly opened her eyes, fully aware of what had happened. There was no need for doubts, no room for hesitation.

Abellona was alive. She glanced down at her own body. Her breasts carried a faint, almost imperceptible swelling, likely because a man she barely knew had squeezed and touched them. That was why his scent still lingered.

Looking further down, her naked skin bore faint bruises but nothing serious. She squeezed her legs together as if to preserve her modesty, only to realize there was no one around.

Her last memory rose from the broken chaos of her mind—his body pinning her down, his lips against hers as she pulled him closer, her legs crossing around his waist while her body opened to receive him.

There was no need to speak, no need for words. Her disheveled appearance, the faint pain radiating through her body, and the undeniable fact that she was still alive were proof enough.

"I have been made a woman." She whispered with a reddened face.

When those words slipped from her lips, Abellona was unsure of what she should feel. All of it... had been necessary to save her life.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself not to dawdle. Her gaze fell to her finger, searching for her spatial ring. For the first time, she noticed it was gone.

Only then did she realize she had been draped in a soft blanket. Her eyes moved again, and she found not her own clothes, but garments left behind for her—his clothes.

Male clothes.

She bit her lip. There was nothing more to hide. He had already touched her most intimate places. Still, she refused to bare herself further. At the very least, she had to appear modest.

In a daze, she pulled on the clothing. It clung too tightly at her chest but hung loosely elsewhere. Slowly, she walked to the edge of the platform, her heart pounding. She was alive, the cavern was silent... Did that mean Ashcroft had found them? Did that mean the man who had deflowered her was still alive?

As she looked down, her senses caught it immediately: an acrid scent, overwhelming and thick, the stench of blood and death.

The scent of a battlefield.

From where she stood, she saw nothing but ruin. There were no corpses, no trace of the demons or monsters that had once filled this place. All that remained were shattered remnants. The most striking was what appeared to be ground zero of a destructive force so powerful its lingering aura made her knees tremble.

Her hands shook as a terrible possibility clawed its way into her mind.

Spreading her wings, she descended in a glide. Her trembling fingers touched the earth as she lowered herself to her knees. And there she found it.

A single arm.

Her throat tightened, making it difficult to swallow. Her eyes burned red with tears she could not hold back.

It was evident.

"That arrogant bastard... you arrogant bastard... you can't... you can't do this to me..."

He had slain Ashcroft... but he had perished with the fragment of the Demon Lord of Domination. That arrogant man had sacrificed everything to protect her, and now he was gone.

"Come back! You can't die... you have to take responsibility... you have to..."

Abellona hugged the severed arm, tears streaming down her face. This wasn't the first time she had mourned a death, but why did this one cut her so deeply?

If he had lived... she would have caused him trouble, but she would have lived with him. She would have kept her promise. She would have wanted the moment they shared to turn into something more.

Why did she only bring death to those around her?

Her chest tightened with grief. She reached for a crystal shard, raising it to her throat, the weight of her indignation, loss, and yearning pressing down on her heart.

As the sharp edge touched her skin, she froze.

"Huh... wait... where is my spatial ring?"

If it had been destroyed, she would have sensed it. But it wasn't destroyed. She simply couldn't sense it.

"Then... he might... still be alive."

Her thoughts turned to him—a materialistic penny pincher who would risk his life for money. And she still owed him five billion.

"He's alive... I know it... damn you bastard..."

Abellona's lips trembled, curling into a smile even as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"You foul, deplorable scum... I hate you... I hate you so much..."

Her laughter mingled with her sobs as she clutched the arm tightly to her chest. The proud princess of the empire swore she would find Damon.

Meanwhile, at the edge of Ashcroft's barrier, Damon stepped free. With the Demon Lord of Domination dead and his powers flowing into him, it almost felt as though he had originally set it all up.

The barrier itself bent to his will. After some thought, he attempted to send the lesser demon into his shadow. To his surprise, it worked. But the creature consumed an immense amount of space within his shadow storage.

With that done, Damon crossed the threshold. The moment he stepped outside, his aura spilled into the open world.

He walked away leisurely, melting into shadow.

Far away in the city of Lumos, the Grand Duke narrowed his eyes. A faint tremor shook the hall. Beside him, Duke Cassian's expression darkened.

"What was that?"

The Grand Duke inhaled sharply, his face heavy with realization.

"Ashcroft."

In the capital of Valtheron, a figure jolted upright on his throne.

In the Holy Empire, a man with golden hair stirred in a coffin, opening his radiant golden eyes.

Across the world, from the coldest peaks to the hottest deserts, all those of great power felt it.

On the demon continent, a woman with batlike wings, dressed as a humble nun, stepped from a temple with a soft smile.

"The Dominator..."

"Ahh, you have returned, Demon Lord of Domination. Some will not welcome your return."

"I suppose war is upon us once more."

"Mosbeck... begin preparations.... To welcome the Dominator."

And deep within a place bound by countless rattling chains, a gathering of strange entities, some human and some not, all sealed in ancient bonds, stirred restlessly.

The most dangerous among them had a single thought.

"The end has begun..."

#### Chapter 594: Honest Work

The world moves even if man wants stagnation. Change was an inevitable process. As life moves on, change must follow.

Having crossed so many milestones, Damon was a result of change—a product of it.

He walked through the land, passing by carriages with an air of mystery about him, his body covered from head to toe in armor, walking down the road to the city gates as if to say he owned everything.

The wind fluttered his cape as the sun kissed his dark armor.

A raven perched on his shoulder, adding to his mystique.

By his side, just a step behind, was an equally mysterious woman in heavy armor.

Her helm covered her face, but her blue eyes glowed faintly through the visor. Where she passed, a cold winter seemed to follow, and the clouds she summoned above created a gloom that only made the rays of sunlight bolster their overwhelming aura.

No words were needed. Even though they walked on foot, all the carriages and even battle-hardened adventurers parted ways to let them pass.

All eyes were on them, filled with awe.

Damon smiled under his helm.

Yes. This was good. This was great. The Sun-Kissed Technique was a perfect aura farming technique. Add to that his cape and Matia's presence as his assist, and he was looking as amazing as possible.

'It was a good thing she came out.... This would look even better if I had a nice dragon horse and a few shadows to act as my guards.'

Alas, beggars couldn't be choosers.

Damon had arrived like he owned the place. This was not how he usually operated—he preferred to remain low-key—but being low-key was boring, and right now he was really trying to show off.

How else was he supposed to build his hero persona?

After some thought these past few days, Damon realized that while he had inherited Ashcroft's power, he had also inherited all of that demon's enemies. Naturally, if he didn't adapt, he would no longer have a place among the goddess races.

To that end, Damon began thinking.

After a while, he came up with a solution. He just had to not be the Dominator. He had to be the hero out to slay this evil demon lord.

And how was he supposed to do that? Well, it wasn't like he could be in two places at once.

Oh wait. He could. He could be in two places at once. For that reason, Damon decided to be a demon lord... as a side hustle.

It wasn't much, but it was honest work.

As for his main body? Well, who else would work so hard to stop the evil demon if not the kind and benevolent Damon Grey?

"However... there's also the problem of being too kind."

The truth was, if there was a hero who was all good, Damon would hate him, because he would just assume he was a hypocrite and liar.

So Damon had to just be himself—not good, not completely evil—while he leveraged noble politics and influence to build himself up as a powerful ruler and hero.

'In the shadows, my shadow clone will do all the things I can't, while acting secretive. With time, his secrets will be exposed, and the top echelon will begin to suspect he's Ashcroft.'

It wasn't that Damon didn't think he could be careful—it was just that he knew it was only a matter of time before the world learned the Dominator had returned.

"I can't win if I can't play it safe."

Damon was a pragmatic person. He already knew this was a chessboard, and right now he was both player and pawn, because the god who set it up had placed everything on that board—including the players.

"If I played only the hero, I'd die. If I played only the villain, I'd die. But if I played both... then no matter who won, I'd live."

He chuckled evilly.

'If I play both villain and hero... I would win regardless of who does.'

Abellona must have already reached the capital by now and reported her findings and experiences to the emperor. She must have reported Damon's death as the mysterious man, while secretly searching for him.

"Yeah, that's what she'll do..."

It was only conjecture, but Damon felt it was a fair assumption based on the time he'd spent with her.

He easily passed through the city walls. The guards at the gate stood straighter when he passed, and breathed sighs of relief when he was gone.

"Is that person a royal?" Damon overheard one whisper.

He smiled under his helm, paying them no mind.

He walked toward the center of the city, adventurers and commoners watching in hushed whispers.

He stopped in front of a statue, looking up at it.

"All this is good and all... but that's not the most important thing."

Yes, the underlying question remained far more important than anything.

"How do I rage bait Sylvia's father during the war games?"

Behind him, Matia silently listened to his mutterings. The world was at a turning point, but all he could think about was something so small-minded and petty.

He glanced back at her this time, directly addressing her.

"More importantly, what should I wear? I need to look my best when I meet him."

Damon flapped his cape dramatically.

"Hmm, my armor is fine... but I'll need you to create wind at just the right moment when we're on that stage, okay?"

Matia gave no reaction to Damon's words. She understood her place as his shadow and was fine with it. In fact, there was nothing she wanted more. If Damon could have seen under her helm, he would have seen the small smile on her face.

He held his chin, dismissing his helm, letting the wind blow through his hair.

"I need to master a delicate balance of rage baiting and aura farming. It might be tough... but the end goal should be getting the elf king to attack me. Or maybe even making it seem like he's picking on a helpless young talent..."

A woman's irritated voice cut him off.

"Aren't you trying to get with his daughter? Why not just be a responsible person?"

Damon was too lost in his schemes to listen, muttering.

"Hmmm, I do... I am responsible. But he started this. This is me settling a grudge... this is between men, you wouldn't understand, Lilith..."

He paused.

Wait.

Lilith?

He tilted his head to find a red-haired woman with piercing green eyes staring coldly at him.

She smiled, but it was cold.

"Your first words better be 'I'm sorry' and 'thank you.'"

Damon nodded. Ah, yes. He had ditched her. A few soft words would put her in a good mood. Maybe even a simple compliment.

He smiled, shaking his head. He was a Death Seeker.

"We both know my ego could never..."

A soft explosion followed, carrying the irritation of a young woman.

Chapter 595: Landmine

There was no need for her to be so difficult. He came here, didn't he? Why was she even angry?

"I truly can't understand women..."

Lilith sighed, glancing at him where he sat across from her in the carriage.

"I'm not even angry that you didn't keep your promise to stay in touch..."

"I lost my pager," Damon replied.

Lilith frowned, then spoke through gritted teeth.

"You gave it to some orcs..."

Damon smiled. Right. She had his pager. Lilith reached into her cleavage and pulled out a device—specifically, Damon's pager.

His eyes narrowed, but Lilith didn't even look at him.

"One word about my cleavage, and I will continue to hold a grudge..."

Damon nodded slowly.

"Yeah... probably would be a bad idea to ask why you decided to put my pager in your cleavage. I've been curious though... do women have a secret pocket in there? ...Just asking for a friend..."

Lilith gasped, holding back a desire to facepalm.

"You really don't give a damn, do you?"

Damon smiled teasingly.

"It's fine. You'll forgive me... you always do..."

She smiled, shaking her head.

"Good to know I'm the problem..."

Leaning back on the carriage seat, she narrowed her eyes.

"What have you been up to, anyway? Don't you dare tell me you fought a dragon... or the second coming of Ashcroft..."

Damon was quiet for a moment, recalling how Ashcroft had killed him twice before he'd even managed to win—and even then, barely.

"You would not believe how close to home your words are..."

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"You really fought a dragon? Must have been some battle... seeing how close to third class you are..."

Damon gave her a look that said try again.

Lilith frowned, her beautiful brows creasing. Her eyes widened, the soft glow of sunlight reflecting the shock in her green gaze.

"You fought..."

"Yes."

"How?"

"I have no idea."

"And you won?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

The exchange was so clipped—question, answer, question, answer—that if they hadn't known each other so well, neither might have understood what the other was saying.

Damon let out a deep breath.

"Ooh, and get this... I also had a conversation with the Unknown God. But it wasn't really that big of a deal..."

Lilith glanced at him. He was clearly bragging about talking to the Unknown God.

"Big deal. I'm his priestess."

She shook her head, not letting him distract her.

"Tell me everything."

Damon smiled, touching his throat.

"I'm a little parched. How about buying a drink first?"

She glared at him.

"Damon!"

He raised his hand, realizing he had subconsciously rage-baited her.

"Sorry about that... bad habit I picked up."

He sighed, his expression turning serious.

"We can talk later. But the short of it is... I'm the Dominator now. I didn't just steal... no, I usurped Ashcroft's power."

Lilith couldn't help but gulp slightly. She understood what that meant.

"That means... you are now..."

Damon nodded with a soft smile.

"The greatest enemy of the goddess races."

A long silence followed as Lilith tried to process the implications. Should Damon go into hiding? Should their plans shift? Biting her lips, she glanced at him.

"Who else knows of this?"

"Just you. Who else would know? ...Well, maybe Matia, but she's my shadow, so she doesn't count."

Lilith bit her lips, troubled.

"If this gets out..."

"I know..."

Damon moved his hand, gently lifting her chin.

"Don't worry. For now... we can talk later."

Lilith nodded slowly, moving closer to his seat and leaning her head against his shoulder.

Damon glanced at her.

"Aren't you suspicious of me?"

Lilith's eyes widened as if the thought had never even crossed her mind.

"Suspicious? Of what?"

Damon leaned his head slightly against hers.

"That maybe... I've been taken over by Ashcroft."

Lilith smiled, chuckling lightly as the carriage rolled down the road.

"Why would I be? You are you. All I need is a single look... no matter how perfect an imitation, I'll always be able to tell you apart."

Damon felt the tension in his chest ease. He had worried, just slightly, that she might be suspicious—but even then, he had chosen to tell her the truth.

Her arms curled around his own, her nose brushing against him with a faint sniff. Her brows furrowed.

He tilted his head curiously.

"Right. What about my orcs?"

Her frown didn't ease.

"They're all settled in. I used an Oath Scroll to swear them into secrecy. Any attempt to reveal what they know would cause them to die."

After a pause, she raised her head with the same frown, as if confirming something.

"I gave them a place to settle and began training them into a proper army. However... I've kept them busy by having them expand our influence in the Tomb of Lazarak."

She squeezed his arm hard, making him wince from the pain.

"So far they've made steady progress. But reaching the next chamber is troublesome."

Damon nodded. He had foreseen that possibility. The likelihood of the orcs conquering the tomb was slim.

"Wait. What about that fourth-rank monster?"

Lilith's frown deepened, though for a different reason.

"It's still there. Their exploration is still contained within our sphere of influence... and the chamber ahead of it."

He nodded with understanding, inhaling her fragrance with a soft breath. He couldn't help but compare it to Abellona's.

Lilith continued, now visibly irritated.

"As for our plan to create a guild—the leprechaun has made steady progress. We've caused some degree of chaos in the capital's potion market."

Damon could feel her nails digging into his flesh now. Something was definitely not right with her. She was making it obvious, except his danger sense screamed at him not to ask.

Lilith bit her lips, gritting her teeth, then snapped at him.

"I'm sorry. I tried my best but I can't help it..."

She glared coldly at him, sending a chill down his spine.

"Why do you smell like another woman?"

"...."

Damon was left speechless. Another woman? It had been a few days—he had washed himself clean just to avoid this exact question. He thought he was safe.

He definitely didn't want to talk about what happened between him and Abellona.

So he did what he did best... Horribly this time.

"Whatttt... what woman? You mean Matia?"

If looks could kill, he would be dead. The coldness in her green eyes was the deepest shade he had ever seen.

#### Chapter 596: Grilling

Honestly speaking, or rather in this case honestly not speaking, he did not want to speak about Abellona. It wasn't that he didn't trust Lilith—on the contrary, he did.

That was why he trusted her to be jealous and to hold a grudge, even though it wasn't even his fault.

Of all Damon's female friends, the only ones she tolerated—actually tolerated—were Leona and Matia.

She hated Sylvia. There was no need for her to even say it.

If she knew what happened with Abellona...

'It will be troublesome...'

Damon walked into the main hall of a mansion bearing the crest of the Astranova household.

Lilith herself walked in front of him, silent since she discovered he carried the fragrance of another woman. She was exactly the type of woman to hold a grudge.

As soon as they entered the mansion, they were greeted by maids and servants who served as caretakers of the estate.

Damon cleared his throat, giving them a curt nod.

"This is a pretty modest place for your family..."

Lilith sighed, twisting her lips slightly as she gave him a side glance.

"It's small because we don't live here. I don't think anyone in my family has ever even been here. It's just the type of thing you buy in case you need it... though it's somewhat unreliable."

Damon raised a brow with an inquisitive expression.

"The unreliable part at the end was directed at me, right?"

Lilith said nothing as she continued walking down the hall toward a side door.

"When the owners are away, houses like this often welcome unwanted people. When the nobles who own them find out, they cut off heads..."

Damon sighed, following her to the back of the mansion. This was definitely about him. The "unwanted guest" being Abellona... though Lilith didn't know that.

She glanced at him.

"If you tell me, I promise I'll only be a little mad."

Damon took a deep breath and sighed in resignation.

"I... I've been seeing... messing around with random village girls..."

Lilith gave him a look of disgust, scoffing in disbelief before forcing a harmless smile.

"All right then. Keep your secrets."

She opened a door that led outside to a courtyard, where Damon sensed the familiar presences of two young girls.

One of them held a sword, her pink hair glistening with sweat as she evaded projectiles being fired at her.

Damon blinked with surprise when he saw who was shooting at Iris. It was a white-haired girl with gray eyes and a focused look on her face, sweat dripping from her forehead.

She used no magic in her attack.

There was a subconscious urge to rush over and stop her from exerting herself, but Damon didn't act on it. She looked perfectly fine and intimately familiar with her weapon.

Even so, Damon couldn't help but teleport in front of her. Just as he appeared, she loosed the arrow aimed at Iris... but before it could fly, Damon caught it between his fingers.

"What are you doing, Luna? You shouldn't be pushing yourself so much..."

The girl didn't even register what had happened. The instant she heard her brother's voice, she leapt into his arms before she could even get a good look at his face.

Damon smiled softly at her reaction. He turned his gaze to Iris, who was out of breath.

"If it isn't my workaholic student... you know, you can take it easy sometimes."

Iris planted her sword into the ground, her irritated expression a flimsy mask hiding the happiness she felt at seeing him.

"If it isn't my absentee teacher who's never around... you could take training your apprentice more seriously, you know."

Damon gave her a deadpan look.

"I believe I don't like your tone, young lady. Is that sass I hear coming from you? It better not be..."

Iris sighed, walking up to him.

"I'd never... it's just a little bit of honesty."

Luna nodded in agreement.

"She's right, you know."

Damon clicked his tongue and pinched both their cheeks until they turned red.

"I was busy doing important things. You kids won't understand the adult world."

Luna glanced at Iris.

"I've decided I don't like his condescending attitude."

Iris nodded. They both turned to Lilith for her opinion, but she didn't give them the reaction they expected. Something had clearly darkened her mood.

Seeing her expression, the girls turned their gaze toward the obvious culprit.

"What did you do?"

Damon narrowed his eyes. They had said that together, in perfect unison. Why did they assume he was the bad guy? Sure, he was the reason she was upset, but he hadn't wanted that.

"I'm not even going to ask why you two thought I did it..."

Luna gave Iris a knowing look, speaking as someone who had known Damon her whole life.

"Yeah, he's lying. I can't explain how, but I just know. I'm his sister—he lies to me a lot."

Lilith shook her head.

"He doesn't even spare his sister."

Iris looked Damon up and down like he was a criminal who had committed some unforgivable wrong.

"All right, come clean. What did you do? You can't sink any lower in our eyes."

Damon was at a loss.

"What the hell, that's not fair. I didn't do anything..."

Luna shook her head with disappointment.

"It's fine. I still love you even the way you are."

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"That's why I'll fix you."

Damon took a cautious step back.

"Why did you say that with such a serious expression? Hey girl, you're scaring me."

Iris's hands ignited in flames.

"Are you going to talk or not? What did you do?"

Lilith sighed in the background, playing the helpless victim.

Damon kept signaling for her to help, but she merely smiled, knowing she had the firm support of these two teenage girls.

Luna sniffed him and shook her head.

"Big brother... how could you...?"

Damon whispered awkwardly.

"How could I what...?"

Luna raised her bow, gripping it tightly.

"How could you come back smelling like another woman?"

She glared at Damon.

"Our mother raised us better than this."

Lilith muffled her laughter, watching Damon get cornered.

"Wait... I can explain..."

"Save it, Damon. It's my job to preserve my future sister-in-law's happiness."

"..."

Damon was left speechless. Why was Luna deciding his future? He never said he would marry Lilith Astranova.

Chapter 597: Pervertedly Poetic

"...No words can express how beautiful you are. Your radiance is like the sun. No other woman compares..."

Damon nonchalantly read from a long piece of paper, glancing at Lilith, who was clearly enjoying his misery.

Iris and Luna stood at his side, obviously the authors of these words. Words Damon would never be caught dead saying on his own.

"Go on. Go ahead," Iris whispered impatiently.

Damon sighed and looked back down at the paper.

"All women are second class before your magnificent beauty..."

He stopped, glancing at the two of them.

"This is the seventh time I've said the word 'beauty' on this page alone. Don't you girls have anything more original?"

Luna shrugged after exchanging a look with Iris.

"What? We don't know how to woo a woman. Since you're such an expert, why don't you put Lilith in a good mood yourself?"

Damon gave them a flat look, then glanced briefly at Lilith before turning back to them.

"I prefer action over pointless words."

With a soft sigh, he looked up at the sky, which was already beginning to darken. The full moon would rise in just a few hours.

"Since you girls have had your fun, let's have dinner and then head to bed, all right?"

Iris nodded, feeling tired from her training.

But Luna tightened her grip on Damon's arm.

"Wait... wait! Don't try to brush this off. Which woman's scent did you come back with? I want to know that homewrecker's name."

She waved her arms around dramatically before glancing at Lilith.

"Say something!"

Lilith sighed and rubbed her forehead.

"It's fine. I don't mind."

Luna turned back to Damon with a frown.

"I do. I do mind. Who is it? I just want to know."

Damon noticed the sparkle in her eyes. She wasn't just doing this for Lilith's sake—she wanted gossip. From her expression, Damon knew this was one of those times when she would win.

If he refused, she would pout, tell him to stop being stubborn, and eventually he would cave.

"Hah... fine. I'll talk, but you won't believe me."

Lilith tilted her head, frowning. Iris sat down in a chair, surprisingly interested as well.

Damon bit his lip. Why had he thought a bunch of girls wouldn't be interested in this kind of nonsense?

"It's no big deal. I just met this woman in my travels."

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"And this woman doesn't have a name?"

Damon gritted his teeth.

"I was getting there..."

He cleared his throat, looking at them with an awkward smile.

"This woman happens to be someone really high up in society."

Iris glanced at Lilith. As a grand duchess, how much higher could another woman even be?

"You already have a sugar mommy, and you went ahead and got another one?"

Her muttering made Lilith's face redden slightly, though Iris didn't seem to realize what she had just implied.

"Hmmm," Damon rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't call her my sugar mommy, but she did agree to give me five billion zeni."

Iris rolled her eyes.

"Right. Next you'll say she's the empress or maybe even the princess."

Damon shook his head.

"Of course not. The empress is a married woman. I draw the line at someone's wife."

Lilith sneered, recalling how Damon had been messing around with a widow.

"Right. We should thank the goddess for your morality. You would never be caught with your hands on an old widow."

Damon raised his hand to stop her.

"I never said anything about a widow. Don't put words in my mouth."

"Besides she wasn't that old.." he muttered softly.

Luna lowered her head in a bow to the others.

"I'm sorry my brother is like this. I swear he used to be a good person."

Damon scoffed. This was too easy. He had managed to divert the conversation.

But Luna wasn't letting him escape.

"You're not slick, dear brother. What's the woman's name? Her description, age, and location."

Damon's expression darkened. His sister had become far too sharp at reading him.

"When did you get so sly? You weren't like this before... who corrupted you?"

Lilith raised her hand.

"Don't even look at me. You've been her role model longer than I have."

Iris slammed her hand on the table.

"Enough. Tell us. The anticipation is killing me."

Damon sighed in resignation. There was no way out. If he refused, they wouldn't let him go. If he lied, they would catch him.

"Alright. She's a woman... in terms of looks, I'd say she's similar to Lilith but gives off a more adult feel. You know... she's slightly bigger in some areas, like a fruit that's been ripened for quite a while, but all the other kids can't climb high enough to reach it..."

Damon closed his eyes as he described her, lost in thought. He completely missed the disgusted looks on their faces.

Iris glanced at Luna, who had buried her face in her palms.

"Vocabulary of a pervert..." she muttered.

Damon opened his eyes and cleared his throat.

"She's in the capital... at least I think she is."

Lilith smirked, her irritation faint but present.

"Oh really? And who is this fruit of yours? The one that's too ripe and too far to pick because everyone else can't climb that high?"

Damon bit his lip. Luna was already on the verge of tears.

"I've never heard something so poetically perverted..." she whispered.

Damon groaned. He couldn't win. Not here. Fighting Ashcroft was easier than this. He just wanted the torture to end.

"Alright Lilith, you win. I admit it. You won. Just put me out of my misery..."

He leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

"An upright hero like me has been reduced to a common pervert..."

Lilith smiled, enjoying his surrender. He had a soft spot for the three girls, so letting them win wasn't too much of a loss.

"Alright then. How about we let Damon off if he tells us her name? The fruit, I mean."

Damon looked up, only to find all three of them staring at him, waiting. He felt like some poor husband being interrogated by his wife and her sisters-in-law.

"It's Abellona. Abellona of Valtheron. You know... the third princess of Valtheron."

The three of them exchanged glances, then sighed together.

"This bastard really can't tell the truth to save his own life..."

Lilith stood up, giving up on him. The other two shook their heads in disappointment.

"And to think we were going to forgive you..."

"..."

Damon was left speechless.

"Arrgh... I... I..."

He was telling the truth. He really was. And yet they didn't believe him.

"I'm telling the truth, dammit!"

#### Chapter 598: Full Moon Wanes

He found himself sitting in the courtyard after dinner, waiting for Lilith. Taking a soft sip of his drink, he leaned back on the chair, feeling a bit exhausted with everything that had happened.

Iris and Luna had not believed he had met Abellona, but Lilith did. That was why she was the first to leave. She knew he had not been lying, and after using those two to accomplish her goal, she had let the matter rest.

It had been about three hours since then. After dinner, the two girls had gone to sleep, leaving him and Lilith time to speak about more important matters.

There was much to be done, and Damon had already been a day late. He was supposed to have arrived here at least one day earlier.

Still, Lilith did not really mind. Their destination was only a few kilometers outside the city.

It would take them about a day and a half to do what they wanted, while leaving Luna and Iris behind in the city.

However, Damon would not leave his sister without protection. The shadow that had been created by Matia, Ghost, had been charged with their safety.

Even then, Lilith had expressly forbidden the two girls from leaving the mansion.

"It should be fine having a third-class shadow protecting them."

Damon was somewhat anxious, his fingers tapping softly against his cup.

"It will be fine...." Lilith walked up to him from the door.

She opened a map in front of him, several spots carefully marked.

"I've been spending the month mapping out the region behind the mana anomaly."

Her finger moved across the parchment with a calm expression.

"Based on what I remember—which is a bit vague, since I was out of it when it all happened—the temple should be here."

She pointed at a spot on the map, though her fingers trembled slightly.

Damon narrowed his eyes but opted not to say anything. She would tell him if he asked, but he chose not to.

"That looks like at least half a day's travel."

Lilith nodded, holding her chin as if weighing the time in her mind.

"The mana anomaly is safe to pass when the full moon is out. That is actually just hoping for the best...."

Damon sighed, knowing the drill. With things like this, danger was born from the unpredictable. Relatively safe did not mean safe. And in the world of Aetherus, even safe could mean death or serious injury.

"Let me guess. It's still relatively dangerous and prone to unexpected happenstance."

Lilith took a deep breath and nodded.

"Yes, that's correct. That area has reports of merchants and adventurers who wanted to save time and cut losses, braving the dangers by taking the route during the full moon...."

Damon listened, his gaze trailing toward the symbols she had drawn for monsters.

"Lycanthropes, right? Because of the full moon...."

Lilith frowned at the thought, her expression dark. Large creatures, part beast and part man, hulking in form with monstrous intelligence.

She pointed again at the map, her fingers tracing two areas.

"That's their hunting ground. Since they can turn human when the moon is gone, they have only grown in number."

Damon leaned his head against his arms, knowing that was hardly their biggest problem—just one of them.

"If that's the case, they're no different from slightly crazed beastkin.... I deal with Leona on a daily basis. I think we'll be fine."

Lilith sighed softly.

"The region is still an unknown. But more importantly, even after searching and gathering information, no one seems to know about a temple in the area...."

Damon imagined that would be the case.

This was the part of the empire that shared a border with the Holy Empire.

Even though this was monster-infested, uncharted land—part of the evil forest—there was no reason for the temple to ignore a religious site that revered the Unknown God and the Goddess of Doom together.

"At least not so close to their sphere of influence."

"If they knew about it, they would ordinarily destroy it," Lilith replied calmly.

Damon closed his eyes, thinking of the deep, resentful will of the Unknown God.

"Assuming they can...." His words seemed to insinuate the Unknown God would not let them. However, Lilith had a counter argument.

"Why wouldn't they be able to? This is a god who cares little for faith. Why would he care for a temple?"

Damon paused. She was right. The Unknown God cared nothing for mortal worship.

"And if what you told me is to be believed, then maybe we might get a clue in this temple. What better place to make a prayer to him than the place where he answered the first time...."

Damon furrowed his brows at her words.

"What are you... planning to do...."

Lilith bit her lip and shook her head.

"It's nothing... just rambling.... I just... thought... if... he could... forget it...."

Damon frowned. Maybe he should press her for answers, but she seemed oddly unsettled. He could understand why. This was the temple where she had gained her stigmata and the title of the Unknown God's priestess.

This was where the Void Priestess, Lilith Astranova, had begun. To Lilith, this was not some investigation into a dangerous ruin. It was a walk through memory.

A cruel reopening of old wounds. Damon wondered how much she could keep buried inside.

While Lilith was strong, Damon knew she also had a weak side. The best he could do was keep his promise—to be there for her.

The more they spoke, the more uneasy she seemed.

Damon finally stood, his armor clicking into place as it covered his body. He glared up at the sky.

"Let's go. We don't have much time. We need to cross the borderlands before the full moon wanes."

Lilith nodded, folding the large map. With a wave of her hand, it disappeared into her pocket space.

She stepped forward, teleporting out of the building to the city outside, standing atop a roof. She followed Damon as they vanished toward the city gates.

As they disappeared, a small flicker of something imperceptible distorted the air. From it came the soft gasp of a violet-haired young woman.

She fell to her knees, cold sweat running down her face as she stood on the roof, clearly exhausted.

Her eyes trailed after the direction they had vanished.

A smile crept across her beautiful face.

"What are you two up to, Astranova...."

With those words, she erased her presence entirely and followed.

#### Chapter 599: White Barrier

Those who had awakened a class were not the same as the common folk who could barely use proper magic.

They were superhuman, and for a superhuman crossing a large distance was a trifle.

As they grew more powerful, what they did became even more absurd. It was for this reason Damon and Lilith had been able to reach their destination very quickly.

All they did was run across the land until they reached a shimmering distortion in the air that stretched all the way to the sky and for many kilometers in both directions.

It shimmered with a faint white light, creating images and reflections that looked like a Rorschach of countless patterns.

Damon felt an almost bewitching light touch his mind, however it was easily dispelled due to his crown and his power.

"This is the white boundary... crossing it will lead you deeper into a section of the evil forest, however passing it will set you right into the holy empire..."

Damon glanced at the long boundary. This part of the world didn't have a barrier like he expected.

"They didn't create a barrier here because of this, right..."

Lilith shook her head.

"That's not the reason why... this place is open during a full moon. However it only keeps people out, not in..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Then how the hell did they keep the monsters of the evil forest in?

"There is a barrier inside, beyond it..." Lilith muttered.

"The same one that stretches to the academy and across several nations. The reason it's not here is because while this place is uncharted land... its evil forest is actually a few kilometers inland."

Damon nodded with understanding. That made sense.

"I get it now... if you want to reach the holy empire through this route you have to cross several obstacles, among which this is the first..."

Lilith sighed, walking toward the shimmering white veil.

"Yes... you would wonder why merchants even take this route. Cutting cost is only good if you're still alive..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. This place should still be somewhere they could pass, otherwise they would never risk it.

"The temple isn't in the evil forest based on your map."

Lilith nodded as the light passed through her body.

"If it was, I would not have been able to go there years ago..."

Damon followed her, pushing his body against a strange force that seemed to push him back, almost as if telling him don't cross, it's dangerous.

Though the force was also quite aggressive.

When Damon saw what was beyond the white light his eyes flickered.

Right beyond the veil Damon saw a setting evening sun, a forest of trees, critters rushing to find their nests before nightfall.

The wind brushed his face and the warmth of the setting sun felt light against his skin.

However, what caught his eyes was the ground that seemed littered with skulls at every corner, as if the very trees had used their lives as fertilizer.

They had stepped into a new biome.

Lilith glanced at him.

"Don't be fooled by this. It's still nightfall and the moon is still out..."

She crouched down, grabbing a skull, looking at how it caved in and the faint claw marks on it.

"Time or perception of it seems slow here. It's basically a reflection of what was... but it only seems to affect celestial bodies."

Damon glanced at the animals in the forest going about their affairs.

"What about them..."

Lilith put down the skull with a soft crunch.

"They don't know any better. They are not aware of what is beyond their barrier... so they live based on the availability of light... simple prisoners of their perception."

Damon glanced at the shimmering light behind him. He could no longer see or sense the outside world or anything beyond the veil.

"What happens if we get trapped here... becoming lost in this slowed world..."

Lilith took a deep breath, glaring at him.

"Why can't you ever hope for the best. It's like you're begging for us to get into trouble."

Damon cleared his throat, scratching his head awkwardly.

"Sorry about that... it's just... it's me we're talking about. It would be weird if something eventful didn't happen...."

Lilith rolled her eyes. They were in a dangerous place past midnight with monsters hidden everywhere.

"I think it's eventful enough. Anymore would be overkill..."

Damon shrugged with a soft smile on his face, walking after her with a crunch in his step as he crushed the skulls of the dead.

"I take it this is the work of lycans, right..."

Lilith bit her lips, looking irritated.

"Arrhgg I can't believe you... why did you just jinx us. If you hadn't said anything... then we might have passed safely."

Damon glanced at her without a shred of remorse. What did she want? He was a death seeker. Seeking death was his thing... besides it's not like he did it on purpose.

"Hmmm you've been really moody lately..."

Lilith took a deep breath. Did he figure out what was bothering her? Well, it was long overdue that he asked...

The fact that he hadn't was a lot of consideration for her.

Her eyes met Damon's dark eyes as he narrowed them, moving close to her.

"I know what it is..."

Her grip on his hand tightened. Then he whispered softly.

'You're... on your period, right...'

Lilith's heart instantly dropped coldly, her gaze hardened before she could even fully process his words.

Damon nodded, holding his chin.

"Yeah... that's right... I forgot, it's about that time. You usually snap so easily when it's that time..."

Lilith's face was hidden by her hair as she lowered it, her soft hands trembling. He couldn't see her eyes.

Then in a soft whisper...

".... I'm... not even going to ask how you figured that out..."

He snapped his finger happily.

"Yes I was right... it's actually basic pattern recognition... I figured it out pretty easily... not just yours, I also got a grasp on..."

He paused, seeing how she was visibly trembling. His mouth opened into an O shape, realizing he may have crossed some line.

"You... you're really living up to your class..."

Her tone was low and icy.

"That's it... I'm going to kill you...!!"

Damon braced himself for some payback for the blatant harassment... when

They heard a soft crack as someone stepped on one of the skulls.

Lilith paused, glancing at the source with a battle-ready expression.

Damon gazed at the direction with a frown.

#### Chapter 600: Seen Too Many Times

There, standing behind a tree, was a young girl. She looked to be somewhere around Damon's age, peeking her head cautiously from behind the trunk where she hid in an attempt to avoid Damon and Lilith's gaze.

There was a small tear welling in her eyes, and she looked haggard. Her clothes were torn in several places, and the fabric that still clung together carried smeared patches that revealed how worn and poor she was.

It was just a frightened young girl.

Damon glanced at Lilith, who nodded at him before she cautiously stepped forward. Her movements were measured, careful not to startle the child.

"Hello," she said softly, waving with a thin smile.

The girl's lips quivered. She swallowed, fear trembling in her voice as she whispered, "Hel...jello."

She seemed so harmless... so...

Her head flew off her shoulders. Blood sprayed across Lilith's face. She froze, her eyes wide as she turned sharply toward Damon in shock.

But before she could even form words, the girl's body moved. Her arms had twisted, forming claws, and though her head was gone, her body lashed out subconsciously, attacking with the desperate memory of instinct.

Fur sprouted along her hands. Sharp claws gleamed. And from deep within the forest came the sound of howls—an answer to her death.

[You have slain: Lycan of the Borderlands]

"She's a lycan," Lilith muttered, staring at the corpse as disbelief flickered across her face. She blinked and looked at Damon. "How did you know...?"

Damon only shrugged, watching the lifeless body twitch one final time.

"I didn't."

Lilith's smile twisted awkwardly. "Then why did you cut off her head? She could have easily been a victim of a bandit attack."

Distant howls grew louder. Damon nodded slightly.

"That's true. I thought so too... but while I couldn't trust her, I could trust that something terrible will always happen to me."

Lilith pressed her fingers against her temple.

"That's the most shallow reason to kill a random passerby..."

Damon understood what she meant, but he had found no reason to trust the girl. Everything about her had been too perfect—the condition of her clothes, her expression, even the way she acted. It had all felt rehearsed, as though she had done it many times before. That was why he killed her.

And Lilith... would have noticed it too, if her mind had not been weighed down by something else.

"Well, be that as it may," Damon muttered, his eyes narrowing. "We have company."

The approaching growls grew louder, enough for both of them to hear. From where Damon stood, hulking forms emerged—creatures as large as orcs, their bodies covered in fur.

Their massive snouts, gleaming fangs, and jagged claws made them appear bestial, but it was not those traits that made them terrifying. It was the human parts—the humanoid bodies that looked as though someone had stitched together wolves and men in mockery of nature.

"It's almost like someone decided to dress up as a wolf, but forgot wolves walk on all fours."

Lilith frowned at his words.

"This would be a different story if they were more powerful..."

Damon nodded slowly. "Yes, it would. A shame really. I'm the one with power... and for that reason, I'm the one who decides their life and deaths."

His voice was calm, almost casual. "Kill them."

At his command, his shadow rippled. From it rose the coldness of winter itself, incarnated in the beautiful form of a woman. Her wings resembled those of a fairy, though they shimmered with frozen ice instead of gossamer.

The moment she appeared, her blue eyes glowed through the visor that framed her face.

With a single beat of her wings, the world darkened. Shadows thickened, and a storm of frost swelled outward, casting the forest into a gloom of biting winter.

The first of the lycans charged forward, but their movements grew stiff. Their bodies and souls alike were caught beneath the cruelty of her skill—Ruins End. Their thick coats began to frost over, their growls choked by the weight of the soul biting cold.

Before they could act, the storm erupted. Spears of ice rained down from the sky like the charge of an army of frost knights. Each spear slammed into the earth or pierced flesh, shattering bones and silencing snarls.

"Rawr... awoooohh!"

One lycan's head was crushed beneath an ice spear. Another was impaled where it stood, its body frozen solid before it hit the ground.

The dread in the air was palpable, but the lycans did not flee. Their numbers gave them confidence. This was only one opponent. Surely they could still win.

At the back, a larger lycan snarled, raising a humanoid hand and gesturing. The pack split apart, scattering in different directions.

It was a smart move. Matia's storm had overwhelming force, but her accuracy was poor. She was not aiming—she was drowning them in numbers. To split her attention was their best chance.

Damon sneered, his breath fogging in the frigid air. He stood beside Matia, untouched by the cold. After all, this was his shadow. Her power could never harm him.

His disdain, however, was reserved for the lycans.

"You should have stayed together... well, not that it matters. You'll die either way."

The fairy's weapon shifted, her delicate hand molding ice into a sword. With a single swing, she cleaved four lycans in half before they even reached her.

The storm roared louder. Her slaughter grew more vicious. Growls turned into wails. Blood spilled freely, freezing before it could touch the ground. The forest became a tomb.

By the time the storm dissipated, the world lay blanketed in frost and death. Blood had hardened into crimson crystal, and a mountain of frozen corpses remained as a monument to her power.

Damon smiled faintly, clapping his hands.

"Well done. I suppose creating a shadow had its benefits. I almost didn't notice how close you are to ranking up."

Lilith's eyes narrowed in surprise. This was her first time seeing Matia fight outside the controlled environment of tests and sparring. From her technique to her execution, Matia was a monster—lethal beauty made flesh.

"She's... amazing..." Lilith muttered, unable to stop the words.

Damon cleared his throat, ordering his shadow to slither through the battlefield.

The corpses were swallowed one by one into the darkness. A shame he hadn't received any skills.

He walked toward a nearby tree, his eyes fixed on the distance ahead.

"Now that we've dealt with that... are you ready to talk about what's bothering you?"

Lilith's eyes flickered as she lowered her head. She sighed softly, then forced herself to smile.

"I suppose I can share tales of my childhood with you..."

Her eyes lifted to meet his own.

"Where should I start?"

Her smile turned faint. Her voice grew quiet.

"I killed my mother."