

## Shadow 601

Chapter 601: Ishana

Those were very ominous words, however her somber tone made Damon quiet. What did she mean when she said she had killed her mother?

Lilith hardly ever talked about her mother. In fact, this was the first time she had ever mentioned her. She had spoken of her father a few times, but when it came to her mother, there had only ever been silence.

She took pride in her family name and never once had she shown any reason to doubt the Astranova legacy.

Lilith Astranova.

"Did your mother die at childbirth?"

Lilith took a deep breath, her gaze shifting to the strange biome around them as the once-bright sunset dimmed into a dark world. The heavenly bodies above spun unnaturally fast. Stars shifted, and the twin moons rose high into the sky, their movement unnervingly visible to the eye.

It was as if the slowed time of this place had finally aligned itself with the world beyond the white barrier.

She opened her mouth a few times but ended up closing it again, her lips trembling with hesitation.

Damon glanced at Matia, who slowly sank back into his shadow, leaving him alone with Lilith.

He was about to say something when he noticed a soft ripple across the white barrier in the distance. His eyes narrowed, ready to move, when Lilith finally took a deep breath and spoke.

"No. I killed her.... I don't mean at birth. I..."

Lilith exhaled slowly, her expression tightening. She began to walk forward, tilting her head slightly toward him.

"This will take a while, so let's talk as we move."

Damon narrowed his eyes, sighing softly.

He nodded. If they stopped to talk, they might miss their objectives, and he knew time was important.

With a wave of his hand, he risked the possibility of being spotted. From his shadow, a large lesser demon emerged. Its massive form towered before them, yet its presence was entirely subdued under the power of his [Demon Dominate].

Lilith glanced at it with wariness, but Damon only gave her a faint smile.

"Don't worry. I'll just kill anyone who sees us."

She narrowed her eyes. "Wouldn't it be better to not be seen?"

He chuckled softly. She was right, but if they wanted time, this was the only way.

The lesser demon lowered itself slightly at his command. Damon pulled her up in front of him, settling her carefully before wrapping an arm loosely around her waist. The faint scent of gardenia filled his senses—something he had long since come to associate with Lilith Astranova.

That fragrance had become linked to safety, trust, and, more than anything else, companionship.

As the demon began to stride through the darkened forest, crushing shrubs and low monsters beneath its scaled limbs, Lilith finally spoke again.

"A few hours after I was born... my mother, who had endured a difficult labor, wanted to hold me."

Damon held her silently as the lesser demon moved through the night. Moonlight slipped between the trees, glimmering faintly against its scales.

"The midwives said the air split open like glass, and when it closed... my mother's head was gone."

Damon's eyes flickered. He hadn't expected such a brutal truth.

Lilith leaned back against him slightly, his arm firm around her waist.

"You see, my mother was not particularly powerful. In fact, she was just a young noblewoman my father had met a few years before. For whatever reason, he had a fondness for her...."

Her voice trembled, but she continued.

"I suppose you could say she was naive. She only realized her husband was a duke after the fact. But she was pure-hearted, if nothing else."

She bit her lip.

"That was why she was so weak. She barely reached the first class."

Lilith closed her eyes for a moment, trying to imagine her mother's face. The features were blurred, yet she tried to picture what the woman would have looked like in that final moment.

"My red hair... I got it from her. She was breathtakingly beautiful. How else could her naive charms have worked on a duke?"

She shook her head faintly, smiling with a touch of sadness as Damon's arms tightened around her. The demon lumbered over a fallen tree, carrying them forward.

"As you can imagine, my father was heartbroken. What should have been a joyous day became a nightmare."

Damon pressed his lips together. He expected her to say her father resented her, that he had treated her coldly.

But Lilith's words surprised him.

"My father was in grief, yes... but his grief did not overcome his love for his newborn daughter."

The wind brushed her face as she turned her head slightly, her crimson hair glinting in the moonlight.

"If he was resentful, he did a good job hiding it."

Her body trembled slightly, as if she wanted to push away the emotions boiling inside.

"However, I know he was. He had to be. After all... he couldn't even bring himself to give me the common courtesy of a name."

Damon could understand. For a man to lose his wife in what could only be described as a freak accident—no matter how he tried to hide it, resentment would inevitably take root.

"My father showered me with love and affection. He gave me jewels, wealth, and all the material things anyone could want. I had the best teachers, the best servants...."

She paused as the wind howled around them, the lesser demon picking up speed across an open flatland. Small monsters were trampled beneath its claws as if they were nothing.

"What he didn't give me was his time. I can count the number of times we had dinner together, or when he spoke to me in person."

Her lips trembled.

"It's like... when he sees me in person, he doesn't actually see me. So he always keeps it short. But when he calls or writes... he has so much to say. So much to ask."

A single tear slid down her cheek.

"When I'm speaking to him through a pager, it's like I'm actually talking to my father. But in person... I'm just with a grieving husband who can't forget his wife."

Lilith shook her head with a soft sigh.

"But this isn't really about him, anyway. When he wasn't there, I had someone... someone who was like my mother."

She glanced at Damon.

"When I wasn't given the courtesy of a name, she gave me one. She thought of the most venerated one she could."

Her lips curved faintly, her eyes softening.

"My nanny, Ishana. She gave me the name Lilith."

Lilith bit her lip, her voice trembling as she revealed the rest.

"She was my father's most trusted servant, having spent years as his maid."

Then she said something that shocked Damon.

"Lilith... the name Lilith is actually a demon's name. She named me after a queen of demons."

"What."

#### Chapter 602: Titular Demon Lords

Damon did not know what to make of Lilith Astranova's words. How was her name connected to demons? And if her name truly belonged to one of them... why would her father ever allow it?

The name Lilith did not particularly stand out in the world of Aetherus. It was unique in the sense that no one else bore it, but otherwise, it seemed ordinary. Nothing about it suggested the heavy weight she now placed upon it.

"Does the name Adramelech ring any bells?" Lilith asked quietly.

Damon's eyes narrowed. He nodded slowly, recognizing it instantly—the name of a great demon lord, enemies. Sworn enemies of House Brightwater.

"Yeah... the demon lord Adramelech of the previous generation was the one who killed Rachel Brightwater... before he was slain by the Grand Duke in the year 4899," he muttered. His tone was measured, but the memories of the histories he'd studied flooded back.

That had been one of the more recent demon wars. Adramelech and his bloodline had borne dominion over the sun itself—an attribute that had made them feared across the continents.

They targeted households of the goddess races who wielded light, and House Brightwater had been among their victims.

The Grand Duke personally struck the demon lord down in the Battle of Dying Suns in 4903, one of the few occasions in history when a seventh-class demon lord had been killed.

The cost, however, had been catastrophic. Millions dead, and an entire stretch of continent scarred beyond recovery, left in perpetual immolating sunlight.

To this day, that place was known as the Sunfields—a cursed land where standing beneath the eternal blaze meant instant death.

"Yes," Damon murmured, almost to himself. "The old man was... powerful."

Lilith nodded faintly. Her eyes glimmered in the faint moonlight.

"What about Beelzebub?"

Another name, another shadow of dread. Damon's face darkened.

She continued without pause, her tone chillingly steady. "Malacoda. Baal. Asmodeus. Agares. Paimon. Focalor."

Damon's frown deepened, his voice sharpening. "These are all the names of demon lords—the rulers of the Demon Continent."

"Exactly," Lilith whispered.

Damon's expression hardened.

"They aren't always the same being. These names are... inherited. A title granted when a demon ascends to the seventh class and earns the right to rule. Adramelech was one example—when the last one fell, a new demon rose and took the name."

Lilith bit her lips, drawing in a shaky breath.

"These names—the system itself—was introduced during Ashcroft's era. He decided which demons would bear which names, and he created a catalogue of power... a registry of rulers."

She closed her eyes, letting the wind whip across her face.

"Not all the names were ever used. Some never made it to the public. Those names... were guarded by the priestesses of the Snake Temple, with Paimon overseeing them all. They memorized them, carried them in their hearts. Should a new demon lord appear, one would be chosen from the forgotten list."

"Names like Lilith, Amon, Astaroth...."

Her voice dropped to a near whisper, though Damon caught every word.

"Lilith... was one of those names. A name that never reached the world."

The lesser demon slowed its gait as the terrain grew jagged, the shadows stretching across the rocks. Lilith leaned lightly against Damon, her voice trembling as if every word cost her strength.

"My nanny, Ishana, was the one who gave me the name. She was from the Demon Continent."

Damon stilled, his breath caught in his throat. Her silence afterward was enough to confirm it.

"How does a demon end up working for House Astranova—one of the four Grand Dukedoms?" he asked in a low voice.

Lilith's shoulders lifted weakly. "I don't know. Ishana had been with my father since he was a child. She served him long before I was born... so he was attached to her as well."

Her spine shivered as though icy fingers had grazed her skin.

"Her death... was the only time I ever saw him shaken."

Damon's eyes narrowed.

"So he knew. If she had the ability to alter her appearance, it would explain how she survived among humans. Demonkin aren't entirely unlike the goddess races, after all... just marked differently."

Lilith's gaze lifted skyward as the lesser demon picked up speed again, leaping over boulders with ease.

"He knew. Or maybe he just pretended not to know. Perhaps it was an act they both kept up, each playing the fool."

Damon clenched his jaw. That would make sense. If the Duke acknowledged the truth openly, he'd be branded a traitor to the Empire, excommunicated by the Temple, and hunted as one who harbored demons.

But secrets, no matter how carefully buried, always surfaced. The Temple's reach was vast, and their eyes never stayed closed forever.

Lilith's voice broke into his thoughts.

"You're not far from the truth."

Damon's arms tightened protectively around her waist. "...I didn't say anything."

"You didn't need to." Her tone hardened, laced with venom.

"This is why I hate the Temple. It's not about justice. It's not about honor. It's just petty revenge."

Her fury rippled in the air, thick enough that even the lesser demon faltered, halting as if something monstrous had passed over them.

Damon felt his own shadow ripple, as if bracing against an invisible force.

Lilith's back burned with a faint heat, her body trembling with the weight of her endless wrath.

"We're close," she whispered.

Damon lowered her carefully to the ground, though he knew she didn't need his help.

She inhaled deeply, her eyes burning with grief and rage.

"My mother died before I ever knew her. Not even the portraits could make her real to me. When I try to picture her, the face I see is always Ishana's... because she was the one who raised me. She was the one who gave me love. She was the one who gave me my name."

Her hands trembled, her aura flaring violently as her murderous intent poured out unchecked.

"It was on this very land that the Temple's mongrels murdered my mother. And by the forgotten name of the Unknown God, they will pay."

Chapter 603: Fictional God

"Ishana, Isha, Isha... tell me a story."

The soft voice of a young girl echoed as her red hair spilled across her delicate shoulders. Her dress was woven from the finest material, and her emerald eyes carried the sweet innocence of childhood.

A soft sigh escaped the dark-haired woman sitting beside her. She wore the classic black and white uniform of a maid, her expression gentle as the girl leaned her full weight against her, trying to shake her into compliance. The woman did not budge.

Glancing down at the girl, she sighed again.

"Very well, my lady. You win. I will tell you a story. You can stop nagging me now."

She pinched the little girl's nose, smiling softly.

"That is very unladylike. I taught you better than that."

The young girl smiled, pleased to have won her attention.

Ishana shook her head.

"You just do not listen to me anymore. I suppose you are about that age now."

"Isha, come on. Tell me."

"Very well, Lady Lilith. Just one story, and only because we are on the road."

Lilith smiled as the carriage rolled along, surrounded by a column of knights serving as her guards. She crossed her arms and leaned her head against Ishana's shoulder.

"Good. I deserve some much-needed recreation, especially after meeting those dull old men in the Holy Empire. They can suck the life out of—ouch."

Before she could finish, Ishana pinched her again.

"Language, Lady Lilith."

Lilith groaned, rubbing her hand where she had been pinched.

Ishana looked at her with a gentle smile.

"Once, there was a great and mighty dragon that lived in the deepest corners of a dark abyss. It had no name and no intelligence."

"No, I do not want that one," Lilith interrupted quickly. "Tell me about the god of dreams, the one whose name no one knows."

Ishana smiled faintly.

"You have heard that one so many times already."

"Please, Isha, one more time," Lilith begged, her expression so sweet and pitiful that Ishana's eyes softened. She knew her little lady would one day become a beauty capable of toppling kingdoms.

"It seems I am once again a victim of your charms," Ishana sighed.

Lilith hugged her tightly.

"That is why I love you so much."

Ishana smiled and shook her head helplessly.

"Once upon a time, there was a weeping angel. He did not weep because he was sad. His tears were born of anger.

Whenever he raged, tears would fall from his eyes. He saw the suffering of all creatures, both great and small. In his heart, he wished to end all the hate, the suffering, and the resentment. So he became the god of dreams."

Lilith listened intently, even though she already knew this story by heart.

"He knew everyone's name, and so he knew everyone's dreams. But not all dreams are beautiful. Free will gives birth to nightmares as well. He saw a world full of pain and tried to heal it, but the world turned on him. They called him a villain and blamed all their misfortunes on him."

Ishana's voice softened as if she were picturing the god himself.

"Even after giving them choice, they scorned him. So he raged. He raged at their suffering and at his own weakness. At last, he turned his back on the world. He went to a place where no one could find him, elusive and forgotten."

She leaned closer to Lilith, whispering.

"For all those who call to him, he hears. If you cry out and offer him your purest feelings, he will answer."

Lilith whispered along, repeating the parts she knew.

"People call to him when they are at their lowest, when they are filled with resentment. The god of the downtrodden answers, giving them his boon. He needs no faith, only choice."

Before Lilith could speak louder, Ishana pressed a finger to her lips.

"Not so loud, dear. It is a secret, remember?"

Lilith giggled.

"Right. But Isha, he is just a fictional god you made up."

Ishana nodded, her smile faint, though her eyes betrayed a deeper truth.

"That is true."

Lilith tilted her head.

"If he were real, we would pray to him instead. He sounds too nice."

Ishana quickly covered her mouth, alarmed.

"Never say that aloud again. That is blasphemy against the goddess."

Lilith nodded obediently. She had been raised to know the temple tolerated no faith but the worship of the goddess of doom.

"Those people are insufferable," Lilith muttered.

"All they want is power. They act as if they are the voice of the goddess, but they only commit evil in her name."

Ishana looked at her with both pride and worry. Her lady was growing. She was forming her own opinions. One day she would grow into a powerful woman, and until then Ishana would gladly protect her, watching her become who she was meant to be.

"You know, even if he was real, we could not worship the god of dreams."

Lilith narrowed her eyes as if angered by the idea.

"Why not?"

Ishana smiled, pinching her cheek.

"Because he cares nothing for worship. Would it not defeat the purpose to give faith to a god who asks for none?"

Lilith frowned.

"Everyone wants something. You taught me that, Isha. Even gods want something. If he wants nothing, is that not suspicious?"

Ishana rubbed her head gently, smiling.

"Good. You remember my lessons. Clever girl."

She sighed quietly, debating whether Lilith was old enough to hear the darker truths. Wrath was not a virtue. Wrath was sin. Even so, she spoke honestly.

"He is not entirely good. Those who bring him their resentment often have their wishes granted. But wishes born of poison will only give more poison. You may destroy your enemies, but what about yourself? He grants wishes, but they come with the same poison you gave."

Lilith's eyes gleamed with curiosity.

"And if you called him with love and hope?"

"Perhaps he would return them. Who knows?"

Lilith smirked mischievously.

"But hate works better, does it not? I cannot kill my enemies with love."

Ishana opened her mouth to scold her when suddenly the carriage lurched violently, flipping onto its side. She threw her arms around Lilith, cradling her against her chest as wood splintered and wheels cracked.

"We are under attack."

"Protect Lady Astranova!"

Even in the chaos, she could hear the knights shouting.

Chapter 604: First Taste Of Weakness

Ishana was not about to stay down when Lilith was in danger. Pulling the young girl in her arms she kicked down the carriage door.

Coming out to find chaos.... the smell of blood heavy in the air.. magical attacks flying everywhere.

The earth was upended and mud and dust mixed with blood.

Lilith's hands trembled however Ishana clutched her hand tightly pulling her down just in time to avoid a stray attack.

The knights were engaged in a battle with men draped in black robes some of them in armor.

Ishana didn't need to even think too much she could identify their technique just from watching.

This was the Temple's death squad.

This group of people were sent with one mission kill and die.

They were not expected to return from the moment they were deployed they would not stop until they had fulfilled their objectives.

"They're here to kill...."

They didn't come alone; she saw a few Templars.

Ishana watched as the forest was leveled in the chaos of battle the knights were losing ground dying in the ambush..

Taking a deep breath she pulled Lilith who was quiet as a mouse.... towards the trees. Her hands signaled to a knight who was already trained for this situation. With a sword in his hand he impaled one of the men in black...

Jumping off his dragon horse he kicked away one of them nodding at Ishana as the horse sped towards her....

Ishana knew that this would be the last time she saw these men.... they had stayed to die....

"Shields.... defensive formation...."

They rushed breaking their already chaotic formation just so they could create a safe opening for Lilith.

Ishana pressed her head down holding the reins and Lilith who gritted her teeth knowing she was helpless and powerless to do anything.

This was Lilith Astranova's first taste of helplessness.. this was the moment she gained awareness of her own weakness and how little she mattered in the world.

Her status did not mean anything to men who did not fear death.

The dragon horse galloped into the dark woods straying for the safety of the golden roads....

"After them.... kill the girl if you must.... we need the woman alive.. if not bring her head as well."

Ishana kicked at the forest urging it to gallop past the trees and head deeper into woods....

The knights threw their own bodies against the enemies their armors breaking their tower shields forced to endure the more powerful foes.

Ishana gritted her teeth.

They had to make it into the Valtheron border before the enemies caught up....

"Hold on tight Lilith.... hold on...."

She called out to Lilith who had just watched her knights get slaughtered right before her eyes each of them staying back to protect her.

Her emerald eyes locked onto those black figures that slayed her knights with a dazed and pained expression.

"If we cross from here we can make it close enough to use the signal artifact.... we can summon your grandmother the duchess to help.... hold on...."

Her words were mostly lost in the wind but Lilith understood what she was trying to say.. if they made it to Valtheron she could use an artifact that sent her coordinates to her grandmother.

With her power she could teleport such a vast distance and save Lilith.

Arrows were shot through the forest aimed at them the hunters far away but still using magical arrows.

Ishana gritted her teeth urging the dragon horse to take winding paths through the trees, its hooves smashing trees.

She kept her mind focused on the path ahead as a silver arrow followed her path using homing magic to track and follow her.

Waving her hand she destroyed the arrows with her magic.... the explosion blowing up several trees....

However it wasn't over.

"Isha...." Lilith called out.... the silver shrapnel from the arrow glowed and flooded Ishana and Lilith becoming new arrows.

She gritted her teeth.

"Its a skill...."

There was no time to dodge so she hugged Lilith tight letting the arrows hit her to protect the girl.

Her defensive magic slowed the arrows however the last barrier she had behind her shattered with an arrow stabbing her.

She made no sounds even so Lilith still sensed the impact on her flesh.

"Isha..!" She called out.

"Hold on my lady, I'm fine...."

Ishana felt the land begin to rise up into a hill and the side allowed her to see a distant white light that cut through the horizon....

"The white barrier...."

Gritting her teeth it had been worth it as long as they got close enough to the white barrier they would be within empire's territory allowing the magical artifact to send a signal.

However time wasn't on their side. The temple's people came faster surrounding them as they ran from tree top to tree top like shades.

Ishana forced the horse to gallop even more the wind brushing past her.

"Eliminate the heretics and bring that demon back alive...."

A shaded figure commanded his eyes cold as he held a spear in his hand watching Ishana and Lilith riding up the long highlands.

"Killing the girl is fine.... as long as we bring the demon alive or even dead we can isolate the duke...."

Raising the spear in his hand it gleamed softly.

"He would never denounce his daughter and we can use the demon hiding in his household to weaken his power...."

The man gritted his teeth.

"How dare you go against the will of the high Templar now your daughter will be ours.... and we get to spin the narrative...."

If he accepts then his daughter becomes a victim of the evil demon woman.... and if he refuses his daughter becomes a heretic brainwashed by a demon.

Luckily the temple intervened and saved her....

That could be by killing her or using that as an excuse to take her to the holy city and using brainwashing, magic and indoctrination.

Ishana knew how they operated this possibility flashed through her mind.

"Yah yah...." she urged the horse forward.

Before Ishana could make another sound she heard a boom in the air in that instant she turned the horse barely, however it was too slow a sharp projectile smashed its body exploding the powerful beast in a fog of blood tossing Ishana and Lilith into the ground.

Gritting her teeth Ishana knew she had to save Lilith so she gave them confirmation of what they already knew.

If it came down to it she would play the villain and die for her lady.

Bat-like wings spread from her back and she grabbed Lilith soaring into the air.... the silver arrow on her back causing her pain.

Then she laughed. Soaring into the air in the direction of the white barrier.

"Ahahahah.... you caught me, humans.... now I shall take this lady as my hostage and destroy her...."

Lilith watched stunned from both pain and disbelief.

"Isha...." she whispered, seeing her in pain.

Ishana gritted her teeth all she could do with damaged wings was glide.

Gliding was not flying.... It was a steady fall.

Chapter 605: Believe

Ishana's wings failed her after gliding only a few kilometers. She held Lilith tightly in her arms as they crashed into the forest canopy, branches breaking, leaves scraping against their skin.

The sound of splintering wood followed them until they finally hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Dirt and leaves clung to their bodies. Ishana forced herself up immediately, ignoring the pain coursing through her body, and checked on the girl in her arms.

Lilith was dizzy and pale, her emerald eyes glassy, but alive. Relief washed over Ishana's face for just a moment.

Lilith blinked, her small lips trembling. Tears welled in her eyes as she whimpered.

"Isha... Isha..."

Ishana bit her lip and lowered her head.

Her wings were bent and bleeding, their membranes torn, one of the bones jutting out grotesquely. Her expression carried emotions far too heavy for the young girl to understand. In her mind she already knew the truth.

No one would ever accept a demon.

That was the way of the goddess races. She had long prepared herself to hear words of fear or hatred from Lilith.

Instead, what came was nothing but worry.

"Isha, you're hurt... Isha..." Lilith's voice cracked, her small hands shaking as she reached out.

Ishana's hands trembled. Her face was pale, cheeks scraped raw, blood running down her skin. She could barely hold herself upright.

"Y... you... are you not afraid of me?" her voice faltered.

But Lilith's tear-filled eyes ignored the question. She only repeated herself, louder and more desperate than before.

"Isha, you're hurt! You're bleeding!"

Her tiny hands pressed against the large, bat-like wings of her guardian, trying to cover the wounds, trying to stop the blood as if sheer will could make it end.

Ishana's pale face broke. The child's sincerity shattered her defenses, and tears spilled freely down her bloodied cheeks.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I'm sorry..."

Her arms wrapped around Lilith in a desperate embrace. She apologized because she was a demon.

She apologized because she had hidden it. But more than anything, Ishana apologized because she could not protect Lilith, because she was powerless in this moment.

But she would not stop. Not while Lilith still breathed.

"Come, my lady. We have to go."

She forced the young girl onto her feet, pulling her along. Her back bled heavily from the arrow still lodged deep, but she ran. Lilith gritted her teeth, her heart burning with helplessness as she watched the woman she loved suffer so greatly.

The demon-kin woman dragged her faster and faster, whispering between ragged breaths.

"We're almost there... we're almost there..."

Even though Ishana knew it was a lie, she forced hope into her voice. They would not make it. Even if they did, survival was not guaranteed. The truth clawed at her heart, but she refused to let despair take the girl beside her.

Her hands trembled. Tears fell against the earth as she prayed in her heart.

"Oh God, please hear me... don't let her die here... please, please..."

In her darkest moment, Ishana—who had long lost faith—could only beg.

Lilith overheard the desperate prayer. Her small heart clenched. Fear for her own life was nothing compared to the pain of losing Ishana. Her lips quivered, her voice cold with the bitterness of a child's raw hatred.

"Why are you praying, Isha? The goddess isn't going to listen. She's deaf... and blind. If she wasn't, why would she let her followers do this to you?"

Her voice shook, her green eyes burning.

"I hate them. I hate them all."

Ishana froze. Her blood left a trail behind her, her lips trembling. She groaned and forced her wings open again despite the agony tearing through her body.

With one last push, she lifted Lilith back into her arms and soared into the sky. Her wings wobbled, membranes ripping further with every beat. She could not truly fly. She could only glide a little farther.

She looked down at the tearful girl in her arms and smiled faintly, her pale face streaked with blood.

"I may not make it."

Her words were brutal honesty. Even saying "may" was a kindness, for she already knew she would not survive this.

"No! No, Isha! No!" Lilith's desperate voice cut through the air.

"Listen to me. I have kept many things from you. So let me tell you a little, before I—"

"No! I don't want to hear that now! Tell me later, when we get home! I don't want to listen!"

Lilith's cries shook. She was smart enough to know these would be Ishana's last words. She would not allow them to be spoken.

Ishana's arms tightened around her.

"You still need me. But I need you more. How can I leave you?"

Lilith's lips quivered, but before she could speak, Ishana's weak voice pleaded.

"I just want to tell you a little story. Please, will you listen?"

Her face grew paler, her wounds bleeding faster, but her eyes softened. Lilith, tears streaming down her cheeks, nodded silently. Ishana's blood soaked into her dress, warm and heavy.

"There was once a girl who was raised in a temple far away, on the demon continent. That temple had one duty. It was a place to remember names... names of demon lords."

Ishana's voice trembled as she looked at Lilith.

"Some names became known. Some were never used."

Her vision blurred, but she pushed on.

"We were tasked with remembering them, so that if a new ruler arose with no throne, we could bring him before the unknown god. There he would be given a name. Names like Adramelech, Paimon..."

Her voice faded for a moment, but Lilith's gaze never wavered. She listened with all her heart.

"Some names were great, yet never spoken. Amon... Astaroth... and Lilith."

The girl's eyes widened at the sound of her own name.

Ishana bit her lip.

"I left that temple years ago, but my heart lingered. When you were born, I gave you the name Lilith. To me, it was the name of someone strong, a queen who carved her own path, no matter what the world demanded."

Her voice cracked, her wings trembling.

"Can you do that for me? Live. Carve your own path."

Lilith nodded tearfully, clutching her guardian tightly as they began to fall lower, Ishana's wings shredding further.

"I can. I will. So Isha, don't die."

Ishana smiled faintly, choking back tears.

"Do you remember all the stories of the god I told you?"

Lilith nodded.

Ishana took a deep breath as they landed clumsily, her knees nearly buckling. She forced her bloody hands forward, pointing at the faint outline of a temple in the distance.

"The unknown god is enigmatic. I know it is pathetic of me to seek divine favor after I abandoned my duty as a priestess. But..."

She placed a trembling kiss on Lilith's forehead.

"If you go to that temple and call upon the unseen sovereign, the god of dreams will answer. Run."

Lilith's eyes widened in shock.

"Run and hide, behind the god of the abyss."

When the girl shook her head, Ishana whispered a small lie.

"Do you remember the stories? If you pray to him, he will listen. He will help you."

Tears blurred Lilith's vision, but Ishana pressed on.

"If you hurry, I can hold them off. But only if you hurry."

Her hands shook violently as she looked away, hiding her tears.

"I am counting on you, Lilith. This is the only way we both survive."

"I won't leave you!"

Ishana's trembling hand reached for the arrow still embedded in her back. With a pained groan, she pulled it free and raised it toward her chest.

"If you do not go, I will end myself here. Please... believe me."

Lilith's heart broke, but she believed. She always believed Ishana.

"I believe... I believe..."

Her small feet carried her into the woods. Ishana collapsed, her vision swimming, but her lips curled into a faint smile.

If Lilith made it to the temple, she could hide.

Until then, Ishana would buy her time.

She stood, blood dripping from her wings, and waited with cold, killing intent for the hunters who drew near.

Chapter 606: Hear Me

With her hands trembling and her face pale from blood loss, Ishana felt her head grow heavy. She gritted her teeth, clutching the silver arrow tightly in her bloodied hand.

Memories of her life began to flash before her eyes.

In her mind she saw herself leaving the demon continent, setting foot in Soltheon for the first time. It was there she had crossed blades with a young adventurer—and lost. By the terms of their duel, she became his maid. That man had been Lilith's father.

Her breathing was ragged, shallow, each breath a painful effort. Yet the vitality of the demon kin, strengthened even more after gaining a class, kept her clinging to life.

The sounds of the hunters drew closer, but her mind was calm, her heart strangely still.

She thought of the Snake Temple, once so beautiful. They had all been raised there on tales of the Unknown God. Whether those stories were true or the imaginings of dreamers remained uncertain. But Ishana remembered how, whenever her eyes fell upon the symbol of the Unknown God carved behind the statue of the goddess, she always felt an ache of loneliness radiating from it.

'Was the god behind it lonely?' she often wondered. 'If so... then he must be sad. Loneliness cries louder than any prayer.'

Perhaps that was the true reason she left the temple—not out of rebellion, but because she could not bear to keep witnessing the loneliness of the god she served.

"I don't want my Lilith to be lonely," Ishana whispered, her lips pale as bone, her voice faint. "I pray she finds companionship..."

Her head swayed as her body weakened, strands of her dark hair falling limply over her face. Forcing herself to raise her eyes, she saw the vague silhouettes of temple ruins ahead—and the dark-robed figures moving swiftly toward her.

No, the temple was far. She was just lethargic.

One of them, perched upon the branch of a tree, paused. His cold gaze fixed on her battered figure. Ishana's legs gave out, and she collapsed to her knees, clutching the blood-slick arrow until it nearly slipped from her grip.

Seeing their focus turn to her, Ishana exhaled and closed her eyes for a moment.

The man in black smiled thinly.

"Demon... surrender. Where is the girl?"

Ishana gave a dry laugh, blood dribbling from her lips.

"Ohhh... the girl? I ate her. She was quite scrumptious."

The man wasn't fooled. He knew demon kin did not eat humans—that was propaganda to keep the masses ignorant and fearful of the demon continent. His expression remained flat.

"Ahh, a shame."

He raised his hand and gestured for the others to advance.

"We will enjoy making you squeal, filthy sow."

Ishana's eyes narrowed. She did not flinch as they approached. Instead, she pressed the arrow into her arm. Her lips moved as she began to chant in a low voice.

The air around them grew heavy. The trees themselves shivered, branches swaying as if recoiling from her words.

From the wound on her arm, her blood began to coil and twist, forming a symbol across her skin. It was a pair of wings with a swirling darkness at the center, shaped like an eye, with two crossed swords behind it. The mark pulsed with an aura both holy and abominable.

It was beautiful and hideous. Benevolent and malevolent. An imperfection etched in blood.

When the Templar saw it, his face went pale.

"She's one of the witches of the Snake Temple! Kill her now!"

Before they could move, the world itself seemed to shift. The natural laws bent and cracked as if something greater had replaced them. In that instant, the dominion of the Unknown God descended, twisting reality itself.

Ishana screamed, blood pouring from her nose, eyes, and mouth. The cost of invoking divine power was absolute. For a mere mortal to dare borrow the might of a god—this was the price.

The Templars understood as well as she did. She would not live through this. Death would claim her within moments. Yet she still raised her hand.

"Die!"

Her body surged forward, no hesitation, for she had only seconds left.

Her mind flashed back to her years in the Snake Temple. The forbidden ritual they had all been taught. It was not a curse, nor a gift. It was a grace—the final rite of a priestess. A ritual to enter the Unknown God's dominion, to touch his power, at the cost of their lives.

The Templar death squad moved to shield their masters, fanatical and fearless. But Ishana's trembling hand traced a final motion through the air, and her blood ignited.

A silver light tore from her body. She felt her soul pouring out with it, life draining away in a torrent. Space itself split open and stitched back together in the same breath.

The death squad froze mid-charge. No wounds marred their bodies, yet their faces twisted in terror. Those who had been trained to embrace death without hesitation now trembled, struck with a primal fear they could not understand.

Then, without warning, they collapsed.

No blades touched them. No wound could be seen. Yet their lives were gone. The forest floor was painted red as their blood poured freely from within, raining down as if reality itself had bled them dry.

The remaining Templars stared in horror. A silence deeper than death settled. For a moment, they were reminded of their own insignificance before the unknown.

Their leader's hands trembled as he lifted them, whispering a prayer to the goddess to steel himself.

"Doom protect us..."

He forced his voice to steady.

"After the girl. Find her. This one is already gone. Bring the girl back alive."

None dared to touch Ishana's body. Even in death, it was too terrifying. They moved around her, leaving her broken figure behind. The corpses of the demon witch would serve as proof enough.

As they faded into the forest in pursuit of Lilith, Ishana's hands twitched. Her blood-soaked body quivered against the earth.

Her eyes opened once more, vision clouded, blood streaming across her face. With all the strength she had left, she raised a trembling hand to the darkening sky.

"Hear me ..... Unseen Sovereign... Hear me..please"

Chapter 607: A Prayer To The Abyss

Lilith ran through the forest as the sun began its descent, the sky darkening above her until the world was swallowed in shadow. The dim light made every root, every stone, a hidden snare waiting to drag her down.

She stumbled—her foot catching on a root—and her small body was flung forward, rolling through dry leaves and brittle dirt. Her palms scraped, her arms bled, her cheeks were smeared with soil and blood. She hardly noticed.

The tatters of her dress hung like broken wings, shredded by the clutching branches of the forest.

All she could think of was Isha.

As long as she reached the temple, Ishana would be saved.

Lilith never doubted her. What kind of child would not believe her mother? Even if she was old enough to think better, she placed her faith not in the goddess of Doom—but in Ishana. And Ishana, in turn, had faith in the god of the temple.

Lilith did not care what she had heard whispered of this god. She did not care that he was worshiped by the demons, or that goddess races called him unknown and dangerous.

She cared only for one thing—that those hunters chasing them would die before they could take Ishana.

The trees fell behind her as her blurred eyes wept freely. The sounds of pursuit grew louder—shouts, steel, the tramp of boots through the undergrowth.

"Isha... Isha!" Lilith cried as she burst into a jagged clearing.

The night was alive with the howls of monsters. From the darkness, shapes emerged—half-men, half-wolves—lycans.

These beasts noticed the aggressive Templars.

Blades clashed, throats were torn, the earth shuddered beneath their struggle.

Gritting her teeth, Lilith used the chaos as cover. She darted toward the steep, stone-strewn hill Ishana had shown her.

She saw no temple there, only cruel rocks that bit into her bare feet until they bled. Still she ran. Still she climbed. The lycans would not approach this place—if anything, they shied from it, as though the hill itself exuded dread.

Her trail was a line of crimson footprints. Her lungs burned. Her legs shook. And then, she felt it—a ripple in the air, like a curtain torn open. Raising her head, she found herself before a stairway of stone, ascending into the night sky.

At its peak stood an open temple.

The stars gleamed brighter here, bathing the temple's threshold in a pale light. Shadows clung to its walls, ancient, dark and forgotten.

At its entrance, two statues stood.

The first was the veiled goddess of Doom, her hand gripping a sword that pointed accusingly toward the second figure. That second statue—a woman hewn from stone, serene, radiant—seemed to glow faintly on her own, as though the stars adored her.

Lilith froze, staring. To look upon the veiled goddess was to feel dread, a suffocating weight of inevitability. But to look upon the other woman was to see salvation itself.

Shaking her head.

No time. No time for awe.

She forced her battered body up the long stairway, each step setting her wounds aflame, until at last she collapsed into the temple's hollow interior.

The air was heavy, sacred, oppressive. Murals lined the walls, but she could not see them in the dark. Statues stood silent, shadows of distant divinity. And at the temple's heart—an altar. Behind it stretched the massive symbol: four wings encircling an abyssal eye.

To one side stood the goddess of Doom. To the other, the unknown woman.

Lilith staggered forward and slammed into the altar, her breath ragged, her hands trembling.

"What do I do... Isha...?"

Closing her eyes, she fought to calm her shaking. Tracing her fingers across the altar's surface, she felt the grooves of ancient words. She squinted, unable to see in the dark, yet her hand formed the letters.

Hail. That was the first word.

"Hail... unknown... the Unknown God."

Her voice rang in the emptiness. She put every shred of faith she had into those words. But nothing happened.

Her eyes widened. Her heart sank. Despair dug its claws into her. Ishana... had lied?

Her gaze shifted to the veiled goddess. She understood now. If she knelt to the goddess, the templars might spare her, might drag her away alive, saved by their fanatical faith.

"Isha... is this what you wanted? For me to live under her shadow? Why...?"

Tears streaked down her dirt-smeared cheeks as heavy footsteps echoed from outside.

A man's voice rang through the temple:

"The demon woman is dead. Do not resist, Lady Astranova. You will be taken to the Holy City for re-education."

Lilith's eyes snapped toward the doorway.

'Dead?'

Her lips trembled. "Dead...? Isha... is dead?"

The templar stepped into the faint light, smiling cruelly. "The witch is dead. The goddess is merciful."

Something broke inside Lilith. Her green eyes darkened, filled with despair.

"Merciful? You killed Isha... and call it mercy?"

Her voice cracked with rage. Hatred—raw, burning—swelled in her chest. Resentment drowned her innocence, filling her heart until nothing else remained.

"If this is mercy, I don't want it. I denounce the goddess who took my Isha."

Before the templar could react, Lilith climbed onto the altar. He sneered—there was nowhere for her to go, nowhere to run.

But then she did the unthinkable. She slammed her head against the altar.

Her blood spilled across its surface, and she pressed her weak body down against the stone. Only the burning hatred in her eyes remained.

"I offer myself... as a sacrifice to the Unknown God. I pray for the most horrible calamity to fall upon them... and upon their temple."

Her blood seeped into the altar's grooves. At first, nothing. The templar's lip curled.

"Heretic."

But then—her blood was drawn inward. The symbol of the Unknown God began to glow.

Lilith's body weakened, her eyes fluttering. She was becoming the offering, her resentment and hatred calling into the abyss.

Far away, where Ishana lay broken in the forest, blood pooling beneath her, her trembling hand still reached for the sky. Her lips parted weakly, her last breath spilling forth in prayer.

"Hear me... see me... I beg you... please..."

Her voice cracked with desperation.

"Save my Lilith. Save her..."

That was Ishana's prayer to the Unknown God.

"God of wrath and resentment... I have no hatred to offer you. I carry no resentment. Still I call upon the star that weeps, that rages at injustice..."

Tears streamed down her face, mingling with the blood.

"I offer you no pain. No despair. No resentment. I give you... all that I am. I give you my love. My devotion. Give my Lilith life."

Those were Ishana's last words, the final invocation of a priestess of the Snake Temple. Her arm remained lifted toward the heavens, as though she refused to lower it until she was answered.

And in the abyss... something stirred.

A little light fell.

Not the familiar feast of hatred and resentment. But something forgotten. Something long buried. A warmth, small and defiant. Love.

In that abyss, the Unknown God's eye opened—drawn not by rage, but by the flicker of a single light.

Now, the god would make a choice.

Whose prayer would he answer—Lilith's hatred, or Ishana's love?

Chapter 608: Love That Last Forever

This place was here. It existed. It could be perceived, yet at the same time, it was not. It was not here. It was a place that did not exist.

A lone angel sat upon a crimson ground that glittered faintly even in the endless dark. His long silver hair flowed behind him like a river of light, each strand catching the faint glow of the abyss.

The ground beneath him shifted and rumbled, alive, its sheer mass radiating a dreadful power. Slowly, the angel raised his hand and tapped the surface with gentle care.

"Hush now... be good... and sleep."

A deafening rumble answered, a sound so terrible it would have driven any mortal who heard it into madness, or killed them outright. But this god knew the truth: this was no ground.

The endless red plain that stretched farther than mortal eyes could ever see was merely a single scale of a dragon so vast its proportions could never be comprehended. Just this single scale was larger than the entire world of Aetherus.

Yet the unknown god remained unshaken before such overwhelming presence. This was the abyss.

And in that abyss, a single wisp of light drifted toward him. Compared to his immeasurable vastness, it was insignificant, smaller than a spark before a star. Yet the unknown god felt warmth radiating from it, a familiar feeling he had not known for ages.

His heart stirred as he listened. There was no hatred within it, even though the one who prayed had every right to hate. There was no rage, even when she had every reason to feel it.

All that reached him was a single, gentle wish spoken with all of her heart.

But even as he received this offering, another reached him. A sacrifice made with blood, a heart drowning in resentment so deep it shattered innocence and drowned purity. A curse so strong it demanded to be heard.

Both prayers belonged to one soul. Both were bound to Lilith Astranova.

And so the unknown god was faced with a choice: a path of love... or a path of pain.

Ishana had given her love, pure and unwavering, and he was drawn to its light. Yet why should he reject Lilith's sacrifice, offered with her deepest curse and sealed in hatred?

To the unknown god, time meant nothing. He was here yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He listened without end.

And so he made his decision. Both prayers had come from love, in the end. He would merge them into one singular wish. For though the Omniverse scorned him as the most abhorrent, most evil, he was still a god of duality.

The two wishes collided and merged, love and hate, light and darkness. They tore at each other, each refusing to yield, like fire and ice locked in eternal struggle.

The unknown god watched in silence. The outcome of this clash would decide which wish would take form.

Slowly, the light began to wash away the darkness.

The unknown god turned his gaze aside. It seemed the choice was made. Lilith's resentment could not overcome Ishana's love.

But then, the light faltered. It stopped, leaving behind a fragment of darkness that refused to be erased.

The unknown god paused. A slow, knowing smile formed on his lips.

"Hahah... ahahahahaha..." His soft laughter echoed throughout the void. "Very well then... so be it."

"I shall answer both."

Far away, Ishana's body lay broken. Her hand still reached toward the heavens. She did not know if the unknown god could hear her, but this was all she had left—her desperate plea as a priestess who had lived her whole life in something as shallow and fickle as faith.

Gods did not care for mortals. To them, humans were ants. There were billions and trillions of believers, each crying out in vain. Why should one fragile voice stand out among the countless others?

And yet Ishana's hand refused to fall.

In death, she heard a voice.

"Ishana of the Snake Temple... I hear you. I see you, Ishana."

The voice was not cruel, not twisted, not demonic. It was gentle. It was the voice of a god.

Her hands fell at last, her body collapsing, yet her departing soul wept at the sound.

"I will grant your wish, Ishana. The love you have given me... I will give it all to Lilith. Rest, Ishana. In the name of Luminous Astraeus, god of the cosmos, I make you a star in the heavens."

Her fading consciousness heard one last whisper.

"Rest now, Ishana..."

Her soul lifted from her body, rising into the heavens, leaving behind the abyss and its unknown ruler. She ascended into the starry domain of the cosmos, her body dissolving into light.

"Now everyone can admire your beauty..."

Her mortal shell, once marked as demonkin, transformed. The blackened wings of a demon dissolved into nothing, ashamed to cling to her pure soul. Golden blood spilled from her wounds, and where it touched the earth, fields of white flowers bloomed.

Her form became divine, freed from every taint. She could never have been human. She could never be a lowly human. She could only be divine kin.

But she was dead. The first divine kin in the history of Aetherus died before her kind could ever be known. No one would see her splendor. They would only see the beauty of her corpse.

The unknown god had fulfilled part of this wish. Now it was time for the other prayer—the one born of blood and hatred.

The Omniverse called him evil, depraved, insane. A demon god who would kill his own kin. And now this god turned to answer Lilith Astranova's sacrifice.

In the temple, the hunters watched in silence as the altar began to respond. Fear etched their faces as silver light pulsed faintly.

But nothing happened. The girl's body remained still.

"The girl is dead. Heretical gods answer no prayers. Hail the goddess!"

A templar pointed at Lilith's bleeding body.

"Bring her corpse."

The death squad moved to retrieve her. One reached out his hand toward the girl... and vanished.

No sound. No light. No magic. No blood. He simply ceased to exist.

A chill seized the templars as they drew in sharp breaths.

The altar flared at last, silver light flooding outward. The temple dissolved into a white canvas that stretched forever. Only the altar and the girl upon it remained.

And then something stood before her.

The templars could not comprehend what they saw. Long silver hair that reached the ground. A form both man and woman, saint and sinner, radiant and depraved.

It was the most beautiful being they had ever laid eyes on, a vision they longed to carve into their souls forever. Yet at the same time, their hearts recoiled in horror, gripped by disgust so deep it felt as if their very existence rejected what they saw.

Two desires clashed within them—worship and revulsion. Love and hatred. Beauty and abhorrence. Their souls screamed at the contradiction.

And the entity had not even moved. Its gaze rested only on the girl upon the altar.

It spoke, its voice calm, detached.

"You sacrificed yourself to a true demon... and someone prayed to a god. Lilith Astranova... you have failed to summon a demon, because Ishana has called a god. I give you all of her love, all of her wishes. I bless you with the prayer that touched the void."

A mark spread across her back, glowing faintly as power wrapped around her body.

He disappeared, fading away before she could see him.

The voice of the Omniverse whispered into her unconscious mind.

["Oh foolish child... of all you could have wished for, you chose darkness. You sacrificed for death when you could have asked this imperfect god for anything. But a mother paid your price, and this god was moved by her pure love. Even in her death, you will never be an orphan."]

["You have awakened the unique class: Child of the Void."]

["The love this wretched god could not give to the Angel of the Abyss, he will give to you. Lilith Astranova... you are known to the void."]

Lilith's eyes snapped open. Morning light flooded the temple.

Her body was whole. The blood was gone. Her wounds had vanished.

Confused, she raised her hands. She was unbound, unharmed, alone. The templars were gone. No sign of them remained.

She slid from the altar. Her body felt light, unnaturally so, as though the world itself embraced her. With one step, she felt space bend around her, as if the air itself wished to carry her forward.

"Isha... Isha..." she cried, her voice breaking as she vanished, reappearing at the place where she had last seen her.

When she found her, she froze.

Ishana lay still, surrounded by an endless field of white flowers, her body as radiant as a fallen goddess.

Lilith stumbled forward, gasping, tears flooding her eyes. She fell to her knees beside her, clutching Ishana tightly, sobbing against her chest.

The white flowers clung to Lilith's body, leaving upon her the eternal scent of gardenias.

It was as though the world itself wanted her to remember this moment forever.

That scent would follow Lilith Astranova for all her life.

A love that would never fade.

Chapter 609: Demon Of Salvation

This was the life of Lilith Astranova. This was the place where she had gained the favor of the unknown god.

Damon took a step, reaching the top of the temple entrance. When he looked at the other side, he narrowed his eyes as a soft scent of gardenias brushed past his nose.

However, this was not Lilith's scent. No, this came from a field of gardenias that seemed to grow and bloom perpetually on the other side of the temple.

Lilith didn't go into the temple. Instead, she walked to the field of white, descending down the steps at the far end until she reached the flowers that carried the same fragrance as her.

"I know it's a foolish thing to say..."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"What would that be..."

Lilith took a deep breath.

"When I mentioned coming to this temple, I had done so in hopes of making a wish rather than finding actual clues."

Damon had heard her story. She had told him all she knew and what she had pieced together.

Lilith had been fine that day. The Templars had all disappeared. There was no trace of them. When she had used her artifact to call her grandmother, all they found was Ishana's corpse on a bed of white flowers, untainted by any impurity.

The temple had sent well-wishers of course, but the truth was those people were actually there to uncover Ishana's demonic origins.

They had found none. All they found was a beautiful and pure woman.

Lilith still remembered her father's expression when he discovered Ishana was gone. At first, he had been struck with grief, but then his sorrow turned into rage.

In the end, however, he did not aggressively attack the temple, at least not openly. Instead, he severed their influence on his domain almost completely.

That had been his plan all along. After all, what else would provoke the temple into attacking a duke's daughter, even if they had suspected demonic presence around her?

But this was not what Lilith was talking about. Damon understood her well enough.

"You mean your sacrifice... you regret what you asked for..."

Lilith closed her eyes. In the end, the unknown god was still a demon. Why else would he focus on her words rather than what was truly best for her? Or rather, as he would put it, this was her choice.

"No wonder you didn't want to tell me about it... this is your shame... isn't it..."

Damon was someone who knew of tact but was never a decent enough man to use it.

Lilith had told him about this. The least he could do was not say something that made her heart feel like it was being cut into a million pieces.

"Kind of a bit shallow to blame the unknown god, you know..."

Lilith nodded, biting her lips.

"I don't... I wish I could, but I don't..."

She chuckled lightly, though her heart still felt heavy from loss even after all these years.

"I guess this is why the unknown god denounces fate and calls it choice... if we blame fate for everything, that just makes us weak. It's the excuse of those who are content with accepting the outcome. Predestination is not a lie... because you decided the outcome."

Damon's eyes flickered.

"Good. Then stop blaming yourself for praying for the Templars' deaths instead of wishing for Ishana to live..."

His eyes lowered slightly. Having done things he regretted, he knew exactly how she felt.

"What happened has happened. You cannot change it. All you can do is move forward."

Lilith glanced up at the stars with a wistful expression.

"I know... I still can't help but wonder what could have been had I asked for something else..."

Damon glanced at the temple entrance.

"Do you still want to ask..."

She smiled, shaking her head.

"No... it was my choice. I wouldn't be answered anyway... my god has a new favorite punching bag..."

Damon winced when he heard that.

"I thought your power came at a price too. I think you already paid it in full..."

Lilith nodded, feeling a little better.

"And you're paying for yours in installments... the interest rates are looking diabolical..."

Pulling his hand gently, she glanced at his face. With a soft tug, she pulled him into a kiss.

Damon held her in his arms until her lips parted from his own. Her eyes had a gentle glister in them.

"That's... erm... my way of saying thanks..."

He shook his head with a small smile.

"I hope you find more reasons to be grateful in the future..."

She smiled at him warmly.

"I certainly will..."

With a faint blush on her cheeks, she ascended the steps behind him, walking slowly to the top of the temple entrance.

Damon took a deep breath. When she reached the top, he took a single step, teleporting behind her in silence.

Lilith took the lead, entering the temple. As she did, her back began to glow.

It took Damon a moment to realize that it was her stigmata reacting to the temple itself.

"Your back... it's glowing..."

Lilith turned her head, seeing the glow illuminating even through her clothes. The fabric could not conceal its brilliance.

Damon glanced around the temple, searching for the cause of this, but he didn't see anything.

His gaze turned to the statue of a woman standing opposite the goddess of doom.

"Who is she..." Damon asked reflexively.

Lilith shrugged her shoulders.

"Who knows... maybe one of the mysteries we need to solve."

Damon was a curious man. As the old saying went, curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.

The satisfaction of knowing would bring him back.

He crouched at the base of the statue, seeing a few runes etched into the stone.

"Hail Lolth, demon of salvation."

Damon finally understood why she was standing next to the goddess of doom in this temple.

Finding a statue of doom was not difficult. This was the world of Aetherus, and she had been the god who created it.

The unknown god did not have temples that worshiped him. His symbols were usually etched beside the goddess, but never did he have a temple dedicated solely to him.

"Who the hell is this..." Damon muttered.

"That is Lolth, the demon of salvation," Lilith replied.

"I'll stop you there. You don't know either." Damon raised his hand, cutting her off.

Lilith giggled lightly. He had her all figured out, huh.

"Fine, you're right... however, I can make an educated guess..."

She moved toward the temple's interior.

"This is a true demon king..."

Damon narrowed his eyes with a soft sigh.

"I figured that much..."

Stopping in front of the altar, Lilith gently touched it.

"She's the antithesis to the goddess. Think about it. The goddess is the goddess of doom. The opposite of doom would be salvation. One is a goddess, the other a demon."

Damon frowned.

"Wouldn't it make more sense for the goddess to be a goddess of salvation, and the demon to be a demon of doom? I mean... a demon is one who has fallen into depravity."

He muttered softly to himself, almost cautious of the goddess's statue.

"Doom seems pretty depraved to me..."

Lilith didn't really know either. She truly wished she did. Whatever the connection was between them, it was tied to the unknown god.

"Who even built this temple... this is the first time I'm hearing anything of Lolth..."

Damon had a few ideas, judging by its age and those who would know anything about cosmic knowledge.

"It could have been Mugu... but I doubt it. I suppose it's Ashcroft. He would know..."

Lilith glanced at him.

"What about those from other worlds, those who have seen and lived with the gods?"

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Do you mean the outsiders?"

If one of those visitors had created this temple, then it would make sense. Who else would know the name of one of the true demon kings... or why she was even associated with the unknown god?

Doom's association was simple. She was the bride of the unknown god. That was reason enough.

Lolth was new to him.

He sighed, feeling the beginnings of a headache.

Lilith closed her eyes.

"No matter... we can search for more clues. Anything to aid in destroying the temple..."

Damon nodded, until he felt a small flicker in the shadows.

Seeing his expression, Lilith kept her own expression steady and continued talking.

He wasn't sure if he had imagined it, but he felt a shadow come into existence with a glimmer and disappear as quickly as it appeared.

Urging Lilith to keep speaking, he began thinking about who or what could be inside this temple.

Damon's heart remained cold and steady. If there was something ancient here, escaping would be difficult depending on its rank.

With his luck, he could even imagine the temple secretly being the belly of a beast, forcing them to undertake a horrible trial to escape it.

Even so, he had to know who or what was here. The possibility of it being a human was high, and if it was someone who could talk, it would only lead to troublesome enemies.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded at Lilith. With a single wave of her hand, she sealed the temple with her void magic.

Damon threw his broken sword in the direction he had sensed with all his might.

"Erhm..."

He heard a soft groan as blood sprayed.

The blood flickered as it touched the floor. Space itself seemed to ripple, as if it had suddenly remembered that someone was supposed to exist there.

Her soft violet hair glimmered in the dim light that seeped through the temple.

Damon's eyes widened, then narrowed with killing intent.

"Renata... Malcrist."

#### Chapter 610: Escape

She saw too much. That was all Damon could think about. Renata Malcrist was a fellow student of the academy.

Honestly, Damon once held a grudge against her. However, after she had helped them with Rashi Ignath, his hostility toward her was more or less gone.

There had been no need for it.

In terms of power, she was an anomaly—like Damon and Lilith Astranova—capable of crossing ranks and battling foes stronger than her rank should normally allow.

But what she had seen now was far too much for him to even consider letting her walk away.

Renata raised her hand with a calm, confident smirk that couldn't help but appear seductive.

"My my... what's with the sudden hostility? Don't mind me... I was just passing by..."

Her forehead glistened with beads of sweat, a clear sign she had been exerting herself.

"How much did you see..." Lilith asked, even though she already knew the answer.

Renata must have followed her all the way from the academy. Lilith was certain of it.

Renata had been nosy lately, probing at Lilith's secrets, trying to uncover what she was hiding. At first, Lilith chalked it up to Renata's competitive nature and did her best to avoid her.

But now... this was troublesome.

"You used your zero attribute to turn your aura and presence to nothing, didn't you?"

Renata lowered her hand, remaining calm.

"I was right. You are suspicious. Lilith... how does a duchess end up in league with the unknown god?"

Her words were met with a cold reply from Damon.

"Why don't you come here and I'll show you."

She didn't seem impressed in the slightest.

"No. I think I'll just leave...!"

As soon as she said that, she blasted them with her zero magic. Damon had already expected it. Renata was taking the initiative, knowing fully well her life was in danger. The safest option for Damon and Lilith was to silence her for good.

That was troubling, because no one truly knew where she was. Following Lilith had been a spur-of-the-moment decision.

Damon slipped out of the shadows, reappearing behind her with a high kick aimed at her face.

Renata whipped her hand backward.

[Zero Out]

With her attribute, she reduced the speed and momentum of his attack. It wasn't entirely negated—Damon's immense physical strength ensured that—but it was still slowed significantly.

"You grew stronger..." Renata muttered, unable to help herself. She couldn't help but wonder what Lilith Astranova had been feeding her so-called boyfriend for him to grow this powerful. She could sense he was already at the cusp of the third class.

The last time she had seen him, less than a month ago, he had just returned from a death zone, making a name for himself and earning a page in the history books.

"But back then, he had only just reached the second class..."

Her feet left the ground as she flipped, landing on a pillar just in time to avoid a slicing tear through the void.

Gritting her teeth, she rolled out of the way of a flying piece of metal—obviously a sword—that streaked after her like a serpent, twisting and turning through the temple interior with relentless momentum.

Renata waved her hand.

"Zero."

A barrier of zero wrapped around her body. One wrong move here would mean her death.

They truly intended to kill her.

And while she would not die easily, one mistake in this place was fatal.

Sweat dripped down her forehead. Her breathing grew heavy.

"I did not think this through..."

Yet, there were still things she wanted to know, questions burning in her mind. Her gaze fell on the dark-haired figure of Damon Grey.

"How did you do it..."

Damon stepped forward, flames flickering in his hands, flames as black as the deepest shadow.

"How did I do what..."

Lilith nodded to him as they moved to encircle Renata. She must have realized she couldn't escape, not with Lilith's barrier sealing the temple.

The smart choice would be for Renata to take on Lilith, distract her long enough to use that particular zero technique—the Mobius Strip, a loop of energy coiling endlessly around itself. If she struck Lilith's half-hearted barrier with it, the spell would shatter.

But Renata needed time to use it. Time she didn't have.

"Control that lesser demon..."

Damon's heart sank. There was no chance of letting Renata live now.

If word spread that he had been seen on the back of a lesser demon, it would cause endless trouble. The implication would be that he was working with demons.

No one would leap to the conclusion that he was the Dominator, that he had used Demon Dominate on the creature.

Though the effect had long since worn off, demon dominate was active only when in use, yet lesser demons still seemed compelled to obey him even without it.

"It's a simple trick... what's it to you..."

Renata clung to the side of a pillar. Her form seemed lighter than air, her weight and centrifugal force reduced to digits close to zero, but never fully nothing.

"I see. So be it then..."

She leapt down, but before she could land, Lilith teleported mid-air, appearing directly in front of her. Her leg shot upward in a vicious kick.

The movement was too fast. Renata had been focused on Damon, but the true threat was Lilith.

The kick sent her flying, slamming into the ceiling before she fell like a ragdoll. She lessened the impact with her zero magic, but Lilith Astranova was one of the few people capable of piercing her defenses.

"Void magic..." The urge to curse almost slipped out, but it would do her no good.

There was only a split second before she hit the ground and received an even more lethal attack.

Renata reminded herself of one thing.

She was in danger. If she lost here, her life would not be spared. That single thought pushed her into action.

This was life and death.

She did not crash into the ground. Halfway down, Damon heard the sudden sound of flapping. A pair of wings sprouted from Renata's back, spreading wide and giving her lift.

He froze for a moment. Just a moment.

These wings were not the wings of a fairy, nor a harpy, nor any fae or any goddess races.

They were like those of a bat.

Lifting Renata into the air.

It was too shocking, too unexpected. Damon could not help but glance at Lilith, who was equally taken aback, her green eyes fixed on Renata.

"You... you are a demon..."

Renata smiled with cold glee at Lilith's words. Her wings creaked as if stretching for the first time in a long time.

"Now I can fight at my full power..."

Her wings glowed softly, each flap releasing waves of zero magic into the air. Within those waves, if one looked closely, the number zero appeared in countless tiny inscriptions.

The insides of her wings bore the Mobius Strip, one etched into each span.

Renata's confidence radiated from her expression, her smirk that of someone who believed victory was already hers.

"Do you think I need time to use my full power... well, you wouldn't be wrong..."

Blood still poured from her shoulder where Damon had struck her earlier, yet before his eyes, the wound closed.

The bruise on her face from Lilith's kick faded as well.

She could reduce even her injuries to zero, as if they had never existed.

"That has to be cheating..." Damon muttered under his breath.

A powerful conceptual attribute truly was a nuisance.

Renata tore one of the Mobius Strips free from her wing.

With a deadly shift in the air, she hurled it toward them. Damon was shoved out of the way by Lilith, his body dissolving into shadows as he reappeared to the side. Lilith teleported, preparing a counterattack in case the strip collided with her.

But both of them had miscalculated.

Renata's Mobius Strip hadn't been aimed at them from the beginning. It had been set to strike the barrier Lilith had created to trap her inside the temple.

At the root of it, Renata knew she could not win. There was no reason to die here.

They shouldn't have much of a problem with her now that they knew she was a demon. The real danger was not her reporting to the temple, but the possibility of her reporting to the demon continent.

Flapping her wings, she dove toward the exit with a sonic boom, her body breaking the sound barrier as she propelled forward.

Lilith glanced at her, now soaring outside, climbing higher into the night sky.

"What now..." she asked Damon.

He smiled coldly, the expression never reaching his dark eyes.

"Don't worry. She won't escape."

He raised his hand, though it wasn't necessary. His lips curled into a whisper.

"Demon Dominate."

In the sky, Renata faltered. She turned her head back toward Damon as his fierce will crashed into her mind.

She should have resisted. She should have feared. But instead, her violet eyes flickered—and she did nothing.

"Lord Ashcroft..." she whispered, surrendering.

"Fall," Damon commanded.

Like a meteor, her body was embraced by gravity, pulled from the heavens back down toward the earth.