

Shadow 701

Chapter 701: A Glow In The Snow

There was a radiant light that spread from her body, golden and merciless. It purified and destroyed the demon beast that attacked her.

Evangeline stood slick with blood as her hair glowed with her immolating light. She took a step forward, a fog coming from her breath as she tried to warm herself up.

It was cold. Well, that was no surprise, she was in a snowy region. The world, as far as she could see, was blanketed in fields of white stretching endlessly across the horizon.

Slow, steady snowflakes fell from the heavens, covering her head and armor in white.

It was a little harder to see in the blizzard that was growing stronger, but she had superhuman sight.

Holding her sword in her hand, she radiated light to keep herself warm.

However, this action made her a beacon to anything or anyone in the region.

Still, she was unbothered. She was confident there were not many things here that could harm her.

This was how it felt to be powerful. This was what it meant to walk without fear.

"We're no longer in Lysithara or the Duhu Mountains..."

Evangeline had survived a gauntlet of three dire death zones and had witnessed up close just how powerful the great dragon Ashergon was. She had experienced the peak of fear and existential dread.

Even so, Evangeline was still afraid of death zones. Like anyone else, she rightfully would be. No sane person would ever want to return to those horrible places.

'A place where the laws of nature don't even make sense and anything and everything can kill you...'

She walked through the blizzard, her light drawing creatures close.

The soft sounds of snow being crushed under her boots traveled faintly to her ears. It had only been thirty minutes since she entered the arena, but it seemed she would not get any rest.

She didn't quite see what it was, but something was approaching her. It made very little sound in the snow, whatever it was must have been used to it. This was its territory, after all.

It took her a moment to realize what was coming.

The white background camouflaged its hulking form very well, but she still saw it.

Evangeline could feel its hostility even before she saw it, an ability she had picked up from her predecessor and teacher, Valarie Sunwarden, the last Ascendant of the previous generation.

It was the ability to sense hostility, or rather, the gaze and intent of something. Basically, it allowed her to know if she was being watched, a skill invaluable in a place like Lysithara, and here as well.

It wasn't alone. She closed her eyes, hearing them approach. She could feel their eyes on her.

It came closer, close enough for her to differentiate its white fur from the snow.

It was a bipedal creature. It wasn't some strange or warped thing that radiated unnatural wrongness, like a twisted design born from the perverted nightmare of an evil god.

No. It was actually quite normal, as far as the world was concerned.

It was covered in fur, almost like a monkey, but it stood tall like a man or an orc, over eight feet tall, with wide hands and blue eyes.

It had two tusk-like fangs and charged forward.

Evangeline stayed calm as the creature—a yeti—rushed at her.

It was just a monster. Nothing more.

She raised her sword, unleashing a thin golden slash through the air.

[Radiant Blade.]

The crescent slash traveled swiftly, cutting through the air and striking the yeti's large stomach. The hulking creature was cleaved in half, its upper body falling to the side while its lower body continued to run under muscle memory. But its body soon realized it was already dead.

A small growl escaped its mouth as a gust of coldness left it, as if signaling the departure of its soul.

Evangeline felt a pang of sadness at the stillness of its body.

It almost made her think of Matia's pale expression, her eyes cold as ice and Damon's pain when he had returned with her.

'Is it because it has the same type of attribute as her...?'

Evangeline knew she couldn't lose focus or become melancholic. The objective was to gather medallions, and she had to get ahead of Damon.

Holding her sword, she heard the roars of the other yetis echo out as something jumped down from the air.

Right where she had been standing, she flashed aside in a burst of light. Her next move was a precise stab under its chin, blood flowed as she pulled her sword out, weaving before its legs.

Another yeti waved its hand, ice growing from where she had been standing, skewering its already dead companion.

Evangeline dashed around its next attack, raising her hand as balls of immolating light shot forward, charring the yeti's body as it tried to block with ice.

However, Evangeline only glowed brighter, her light becoming fiercer. The beams passed through the ice, shattering it and killing the yeti instantly.

In the next moment, something burst from the snow behind her and lunged forward, but she raised her hand without looking and punctured its heart with her sword. Blood soaked her hair, sizzling and burning under the heat of her glowing armor.

She glanced at the blood on her sword, the snow cold against the warmth that ghosted over her skin.

More of them were coming.

With a boom in the snow, she rushed forward, sword in hand. Golden light flashed everywhere as the yetis roared in battle. The abominable snowmen turned into smoking corpses, the white snow now soaked with red blood.

Within an hour of entering the arena, Evangeline had slain seventy-two of them, accumulating a sizeable amount of medallions.

She kept her breathing steady, took a deep breath, and cleaned her sword. Turning toward a tree, she pointed her blade and spoke.

"Who are you? Show yourself."

There was nothing there. No one.

Still, her sword remained pointed in that direction.

"I can feel your gaze. Come out."

The light around the area distorted as a young man with horns appeared, his expression cold.

"Brightwater... now I can kill you."

Chapter 702: Light Duel

Evangeline was not acquainted with this person, or better yet, this demon. He had white hair and stood beneath the tree, looking at her with hatred in his eyes.

He had retracted his light to make himself invisible.

"A demon," she whispered.

It would be unwise to let her guard down against one of his kind. Still, she decided to probe him. If she knew about him, she could deduce information and hopefully raise her chances of killing him.

"You know my family name. I didn't realize our greatness had spread all the way to the demon continent."

The young demon walked out slowly, standing before her.

"Yes, the Battle of Dying Suns was hard to forget... You are known to be very flashy. I could see you from a mile away... anyone could."

She lifted her sword, pointing it cautiously, her gaze sharp as she made sure no other demons were hidden in the snow, ready to ambush her.

The Battle of Dying Suns he referred to was a historical event long before she was born, a battle where her grandfather, Damian Brightwater, had slain the demon lord Adramelech.

Her golden eyes narrowed coldly.

"You... are you an Adramelech or related to one?"

He smiled, his horns gleaming as his white hair swayed slightly.

"Good. You caught on... I'm glad you aren't stupid."

Evangeline saw no reason to continue speaking with a demon, but she wanted to catch her breath and read his movements.

The magic orbs around them watched silently, broadcasting the scene to the outside world.

"Is this revenge for the demon lord who was felled in battle?" she asked, her tone carrying a mocking edge.

He shook his head surprisingly.

"On the contrary. Over many centuries, the Brightwaters have been acknowledged as the greatest users of light magic, even more skilled than those of the Sun Continent, and supposedly even the Great Demon Continent."

Evangeline stayed on guard.

"No surprise there. It's in our name. We are the greatest. No one compares."

She frowned coldly.

"Isn't that why the deceased demon lord Adramelech, the previous inheritor of that title, assassinated my grandmother? A shame he died when he went up against an actual master of light magic."

This was Evangeline's attempt to taunt the demon in front of her.

'Ahh come on, Eva, do better. Summon your inner Damon and anger him...'

She tried to motivate herself into provoking him. If she was right and he was an Adramelech, that meant he was a powerful light magic user, and their battles were fast. Losing your cool was a quick way to die.

'What would Damon say...?'

She tried to imagine him scoffing with disdain.

"I once asked my grandfather about that. He said, in no uncertain words, how weak and slow the last demon lord Adramelech was. If anything, to summarize, he said he was nothing... but... a... bum."

She said the last part slowly, just to emphasize her point. She had been there when Damon was giving Leona lessons on—what did he call it again—rage baiting.

From the demon's expression, it had worked.

"Die."

His expression twisted as a sword without a blade appeared in his hand. The hilt glowed with his magic as a blade of light formed, humming in the cold air. His eyes glowed faintly red as he shot toward Evangeline.

Their powerful swords met white and gold light illuminated everything, washing away the blizzard in a brilliant flare. The ground beneath their feet melted, revealing the brown earth beneath the snow.

Evangeline twisted her body slightly, deflecting his blade from her neck with the side of her sword.

"Tsk..." she clicked her tongue, realizing she had failed to cut off his head.

She swung again, her sword slicing through the air as balls of light magic seared and tore the air around his head apart.

He ducked and swung with his fist, trying to punch her after being caught off guard by his own anger.

Evangeline met his strike with her gauntlet, the force pushing her back slightly from the strength of the demon before her.

She kicked forward, swinging down and kicking him into a tree. The impact shattered it, snow and cold winds bursting outward.

He gritted his teeth as Evangeline dashed forward with a boom. Before she could reach him, he waved his hand, the light around them distorted and faded as he blended into it, becoming nearly invisible to the naked eye.

Evangeline paused, trying to adjust to the sudden change. She felt something slicing through the air and lowered her head just in time, the edges of her long hair being cut slightly by his invisible blade.

She flipped backward in the snow, dodging his vicious combo.

Raising her hand, she blasted waves of light magic to give herself breathing room.

She blocked a blade aimed for her neck, barely seeing it at the last moment. The force sent her flying into a tree.

Catching herself, she narrowed her eyes, focusing on the source of his killing intent.

"I can see your footprints in the snow..." she muttered.

She heard flapping sounds as he lifted off into the air. As soon as he did, she sliced upward with [Radiant Blade].

He must have dodged, but that was fine, she had confirmed his position.

Taking a step forward, she jumped into the air. Feeling his gaze on her, she darted down at the last moment, blocking where she predicted his sword would strike. She countered with a backhanded punch from her gauntlet.

He crashed into the snow, reappearing with blood dripping from his nose.

He stood up with a fierce grin, ready to attack again when—

A one-eyed bat flew toward him out of nowhere and whispered something into his ear.

He glanced at Evangeline, then gritted his teeth.

"You got lucky this time... I'll kill you next time."

Waving his hand, he turned invisible and flew away into the air.

Evangeline felt his gaze vanish.

Letting out a sigh of relief, she bit her lip.

"No, you got lucky."

Chapter 703: Bury Me

With the demon gone, Evangeline sighed softly, her breath misting in the cold air as she held her sword. The blizzard howled against her armor, the icy winds biting at her ears and pushing loose strands of hair across her face. Still, she pressed forward through the snow without hesitation.

Each battle left her more dissatisfied, not with her performance, but with the number of medallions she had gathered.

For all her effort, it felt like she was trudging endlessly through this frozen world, her every step watched by the silent eyes of the storm itself.

Sliding down a steep slope, she found herself gazing upon the vast landscape below. Beyond the snow-covered ridge stretched a valley crawling with monsters and demon beasts scattered in every direction.

She sighed in frustration, not because she thought she couldn't defeat them, but because it would take far too long to cross that distance and hunt them all down.

"It's not like I have the same destructive power as the great dragon Ashergon," she muttered, her voice nearly lost to the wind.

"Able to destroy entire regions with a single breath."

Even so, giving up wasn't an option. This was a competition, and knowing who she was up against, she doubted her rival would play fair.

"I need to think outside the box," she whispered, her tone dry.

"Think like an edgy, psychotic killer with no morals whatsoever."

The words came out half-jokingly, yet there was a trace of sincerity behind them. She wished Damon were here to hear that line,

if only so he could argue about what counted as "psychotic."

He certainly wasn't. At least he would say so.

"How do I kill everything downhill within a short time?" she murmured, her golden eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

Then her lips curved into a thin smile. She turned to glance back at the mountains, at the thick blankets of snow clinging to their peaks. The plan came to her like a flash of light.

A short while later, Evangeline disappeared into the blizzard. When she returned, the preparations were complete.

Standing alone amidst the swirling snow, she raised her hands. A golden glow flared to life between her palms, growing brighter and brighter as she poured her magic into it.

The light spread through the storm, radiant and blinding, piercing the clouds above and washing the world below in gold.

It was beautiful, too beautiful. And that beauty drew everything to her.

From far across the icy plains, monsters and demon beasts turned toward the glow, compelled by the golden radiance. They began to converge on her location, howling and screeching through the storm.

Evangeline stood perfectly still, the snow rising around her boots as she waited.

She counted the echoes, dozens, then hundreds. When the ground itself began to tremble, she knew enough had gathered.

She knelt, thrusting her sword into the frozen ground.

Then the mountains behind her groaned. The earth cracked with a deep, resonant rumble. A roar followed, not of a beast, but of violent natural forces, as the white peaks came alive. The snow broke loose, folding down like a massive, devouring wave.

The avalanche descended with unstoppable force.

The horde of monsters shrieked and scattered, but how fast could they run compared to the speed of the mountain itself? The wall of snow and ice swallowed everything in its path.

Evangeline didn't move. Her Duskglass armor shimmered with faint light as she braced herself, gripping her sword to anchor her body to the ground. The whiteness engulfed her.

Then came silence.

When the last echoes of the avalanche faded, the world was still again, pure and cold.

From beneath the thick layer of snow, a faint glow emerged. A golden gauntlet broke through the surface, followed by a snow-covered figure dragging herself free. Evangeline exhaled, shaking off the frost clinging to her armor.

The landscape before her was a grave of white mounds and broken beasts. Hundreds of monsters lay buried beneath the snow.

She smiled faintly. "All that's left is to pick up the medallions."

And so, the proud swordswoman abandoned the long, arduous method of battle, if only for a while and became a gatherer.

By the time she reached the foot of the mountain and the edge of the snowfields, her spatial ring overflowed with medallions. She smiled in quiet triumph, her golden eyes reflecting the scattered light.

"How much I've changed," she whispered. "I'd never have thought to use the terrain to bring such devastation."

Her smile faded slightly.

"I was lucky. The plan was reckless. Even with my precautions, I could've easily been buried too."

Her boots pressed into the snow as the white slowly gave way to patches of green grass. The storm eased, and she found herself descending into a valley where the snow met the earth.

A faint rustle broke the silence behind her.

Evangeline turned sharply, sword in hand. The snow shifted and then, with a loud puff, something burst out from beneath it.

"Ouch... my head. It's so cold..."

Evangeline froze mid-swing, lowering her blade in shock.

The voice was familiar and so was the face. A young beastkin girl, clad in crackling lightning-touched armor, stood before her. A massive greatsword was strapped to her back.

Leona brushed snow from her hair, her golden eyes locking onto Evangeline's with mild annoyance.

"Were you trying to bury me or something?" she asked flatly.

"I saw the light and came to find you... I almost died, you know."

Evangeline blinked, guilt washing over her. Maybe she hadn't thought that plan all the way through. There were enemies everywhere, yes but also a few unfortunate allies.

"Ah... sorry about that, Leona," she said awkwardly.

"Didn't realize you'd get caught up in it."

Leona crossed her arms, her ears flicking irritably.

"Sorry? No, no sorry isn't enough. I'm taking your lunch and dinner. For a week."

Evangeline couldn't help but smile at her tone.

"You can have my lunch for a month if you like."

Leona's ears perked up in surprise. "Really? But what about you? You can't just starve yourself, no that won't do."

"It's fine," Evangeline replied calmly.

"If I run out, we can always raid that wretch who's been hoarding food in his shadow."

Leona's lips twitched, immediately catching on.

"You mean Damon."

The two shared a brief laugh at the thought of pestering him.

"Speaking of Damon," Leona said, "where are Matia, Sylvia, and Xander? He'd probably say you cheated."

Her words tumbled out quickly, as usual. Evangeline didn't mind, Leona's free spirit was part of her charm.

Before she could answer, a deep voice echoed through the air, the unmistakable tone of Emperor Kronos, announcing a bounty on the head of Amon.

Leona's smile faded.

"Hmm... something tells me we'll be meeting this Amon guy sooner than we'd like."

Evangeline bit her lip, golden eyes glinting in the quiet valley.

"I'd prefer not to meet him at all," she murmured.

Chapter 704: A Start

Everyone had their own destinies. We all had different paths in life. Our lives start at unequal points and end at different points. How far you go is decided by yourself and the circumstances that shape your immediate environment.

No matter how great you think you are, you are nothing but a product of your environment and therefore subject to its consequences.

"Amon... Amon..." His breath was heavy as he repeated the name like a chant.

Anger, grief, and humiliation raged within him, pushing him forward as he thundered through the savanna-like terrain scattered with trees, brown grass, and shrubs.

How far could he run if he didn't carry his hatred on his back?

Xander was raised on the principles of a proper noble, steadfast and honorable. It was this rigid and unchanging mentality that had driven him all his life; never once had Xander broken his beliefs.

What doesn't bend will surely break, and Xander was perhaps already broken, driven by his pursuits.

Revenge was driven by grief.

He continued across the region even though he knew Amon might have already moved away from that direction. Still, he ran forward to face his great enemy.

Raising his spear, he smashed it into the head of a monster that had risen from the grass.

It dodged the first strike, but he didn't even mind. The creature crashed into a barrier he had created behind it.

With a second thrust of his spear, he brought down the full weight of the Armor of Bound Colossus on its body, shattering its flesh and scattering blood all around.

Xander was undeterred. Turning around, he bit his lip. He wasn't getting anywhere, and that made him so frustrated with everything.

The light that had been a beacon leading him to Amon was long gone now.

Even if he reached there, could he beat Amon? Gritting his teeth, he took a step when a stern voice echoed behind him from the trees.

"Aren't you going to take the medallion from killing that monster?"

Xander paused. The calm tone came almost out of nowhere. He hadn't sensed her or even felt her gaze on him. She was a pro.

If she had ambushed him a moment earlier, he might have been caught by surprise.

A bit of a surprise, because Xander was a tank; a single attack wouldn't take him down.

Still, he turned his head toward the single tree in the open savanna, the closest one to him. Seated on one of its branches was a familiar young woman with dark hair and ringlet curls.

She carried a staff in her hand, a sign she was a mage-type.

Xander knew this young woman, how could he not? He was a noble of Valtheron, just like she was. But more importantly, she was the Student Council President of the Imperial Academy.

This was Emilia Highgon.

"What do you want?" Xander called out coldly, though such rudeness was unusual and unbecoming of him.

Emilia smiled, glancing at him with a soft expression.

"Hmm, I didn't expect such a response. Are all students of Aether Academy rude, or is it just you and that Damon Grey fella?"

Xander frowned. Why was he hearing Damon's name now anyway?

"What is your business with me? If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get."

Emilia scoffed, the smile still worn on her exquisite face.

"I outrank you both as a fighter and as a student. I'm also older than you. Do you really think you stand a chance against me?"

Xander squeezed his spear. Of course he was aware of that. He was in the second class advancement, while Emilia was in the third. If anything, she was more powerful, more experienced.

She could easily fight above her rank.

But Xander didn't care about that. So what if she was experienced? So what if she could fight above her rank? He had the perseverance and grit of someone who had crawled through hell and battled a thousand horrors.

Xander had overcome actual hell by walking through three death zones. He didn't fear anything, not even those in the seventh class. The worst any of them could do was kill him, and he had seen and felt things far worse than death.

"Do you want to put that to the test, Lady Highgon?"

Emilia was pleasantly surprised by his reaction.

"How does Lilith Astranova keep you trouble children of Aether in check? You're all so violent."

Xander didn't want to turn his back to her, or he would have left. Still, Emilia didn't seem to care. She jumped down from the tree, landing lightly on the grass.

"Lord Ravenscroft, where are you off to in such a hurry, if you don't mind me asking?"

Xander was already irritated enough, so he barked out, "I'm going to kill Amon."

He turned around and began to walk away, ready to defend against any attacks from her.

Emilia took a step, then began to walk beside him.

"I didn't take you as someone who wanted the bounty on his head... or is this about Godric Ravenscroft?"

He paused, standing still for a moment. Emilia didn't say anything, she knew she had touched a nerve.

"Are you seriously rushing to your death? Think about it, Xander Ravenscroft. This was someone—or something—that killed your brother in his own chambers, under everyone's nose. Mind you, your brother was a war veteran. He died with little resistance."

Xander squeezed his fists as her words hit him like a hammer.

"Duke Ravenscroft didn't succeed in killing him. What chance do you stand? If I wanted to stop you, you wouldn't even get past me. How will you kill Amon alone?"

He gritted his teeth, his blue eyes shaking with anger.

"So what? So what! I still have to avenge my brother and kill the fiend!"

Emilia smiled faintly, touching her chest.

"Valid... so I'll help you."

He raised his head in surprise.

Her smile faded.

"We are heading for a world dungeon. This is the trial. I feel like Amon is the greatest and most powerful obstacle. We can't win if he leads the demons. We need to ally together, all of us."

She reached out her hand.

"Xander Ravenscroft, let's join forces... to kill this great enemy."

He glanced at her hand and took it slowly, looking into her eyes.

"You won't succeed in killing Amon," he said. "But suppose this is a start."

Chapter 705: White Flower

It was different for everyone else, but for Lilith, she was afraid. It was strange to associate the word afraid with Lilith Astranova.

Nevertheless, the closer they came to reaching the world dungeon, the more fear she felt in her heart.

Or perhaps it wasn't fear. Perhaps it was unease. This unease came from one thing and that was Damon.

Lilith should have been happy to see him in such a good and playful mood. He smiled more, he laughed more, and he was all around just... nice.

That was the problem. It was Damon. Not to say he couldn't be happy or smile, but she felt uneasy exactly because it was Damon.

She knew, in his heart of hearts, what he desired the most, above money, companionship, or even strength.

At his core, he wants to die. She clenched her fists. This was Damon's strongest desire. She had really thought she could be a reason for him to live, but apparently, she was not. So Lilith had to find a way.

For now, Damon was alive because he wanted to live long enough to find his sister a cure. But the moment he did, he would die.

He simply believed he had no more reason to live. His sister would be cared for by his grandfather, who would have to watch helplessly as his grandson died.

His goals, ambitions, or promises, none of those mattered, because those weren't really Damon's. Those had been Lilith's.

A desire to destroy the temple, to build an organization, or whatever else... even solving the mysteries of the gods.

Damon didn't truly care about any of it.

'He'd once told me Valarie Sunwarden asked him to create something beautiful... then why does he think his death would be something beautiful?'

She knew he didn't truly think that. She just understood that he saw himself as something ugly.

Depression was a difficult thing to understand. People who were depressed yet surrounded by loved ones almost always wore the brightest smiles and laughed the loudest.

"I have no mouth, and I must scream." Damon had told her that was how he felt when Matia died right before his eyes.

He had stifled his pain, always going defiant yet so quiet. Always putting up a strong front to hide a very frail and weak man.

A honey badger.

That was how he always described himself, willing to fight everyone but losing every battle.

"What do I do... now..."

She squatted down, looking for something she had noticed earlier.

His Deathless skill was powerful, but when he was finally ready to truly die, what was to say Damon wouldn't find a way to end his miserable existence?

Lilith Astranova was at a loss. Still, she wandered toward her objective, something she had sensed moving in the ground.

She stopped, the stigmata on her back buzzing slightly. Her green eyes narrowed, her palm pressing against the earth.

There was a spark behind her as the magical orbs broadcasting her to the outside exploded, and pieces of the hovering magical device fell to the ground.

"Hmmm... what just happened?"

She hadn't been the one who did that. Something else had destroyed the device.

Whatever it was, it was flowing right under her feet, traveling through the earth, mountains, and rivers, spreading slowly.

Brushing her hand over the ground, she slowly began to dig, pushing her fingers into the soil and ripping out the earth and roots, tossing them aside with a simple gesture.

A few feet into the hole, she saw something, a pattern, a mark of sorts. She waved her hand, moving any leftover dirt and sand, teleporting them away.

In the ground, there was a large circular array with the pattern of a bleeding heart, a mark she knew well.

The symbol of the Goddess of Doom. Or at least, it felt that way. Lilith paused, glancing at it, then made sure no one was there and no new broadcast was active before punching the ground. The earth shattered. Dust rose as it caved in with little to no resistance.

Lilith's eyes widened slightly when she saw what was beneath the arena.

It was a symbol, a mark that she herself carried on her back. It was the symbol of the Unknown God.

It carried a strange aura, one that was here and there, far and near, right yet wrong, divine yet demonic, god and demon.

The symbol of the Unknown God, the unseen sovereign was carrying out his unseen hand right under their noses.

But why?

She glanced at the flow of energy. Whatever this was, it wasn't the formless and unreadable divine authority of a god. If anything, this was actually simple and mundane in a sense.

This was just magic. Mana was flowing all around in a complex magical circle, one she could not even fully comprehend.

All she knew was that it was using the dragon veins in the earth to power itself.

The ley lines were used as magic circuits, all heading and connecting to the very center of all this, the gate to the world dungeon.

But that wasn't the end of it. This magic was also absorbing energy from the blood of whoever had fallen, making it saturated and bigger than before.

"It's... trying to use us as fodder for whatever this is. When we reach a certain number, this magic will be activated."

She crossed her arms over her chest, looking at the mark.

"What I don't get is, why would you let me see this? Surely you accounted for my presence."

Lilith Astranova had no idea what the Unknown God was planning, but she knew that her being here, at this time and in this place was all part of his schemes.

The Unknown God was cunning and powerful. How could the god of the abyss let some mortal he gave his stigmata to thwart his plan?

Lilith being here was the plan. Still, she turned around to leave. When she did, her leg caught on a vine, a root of one of the buried trees, she stumbled and almost fell. Luckily, she caught herself with her palms.

She felt a warm sensation on her hands. Looking down, she noticed blood pouring from her palms. A small glowing stone had actually cut her.

The blood landed on the mark with a soft squish, and the mark grew brighter.

Lilith bit her lip, feeling irritated.

She'd been had.

Still, she paused, biting her lip again as she decided to make the best of it.

"I don't mind the blood... but in return, you also have to do something for me. I want to make a little deal with you, a question I want to ask... no, a promise."

She didn't receive a response, but she knew he was listening.

"I want Damon to live till the very end. In exchange... I'll do whatever it takes to help you find the Ninth Pillar."

A flower slowly grew from the ground, a white Gardenia

Chapter 706: Quest Act Two

"Ahhrrgg," he let out a soft groan, laying on a large sofa in a massive tent fitted with chandeliers.

Damon had been busy... doing a whole lot of nothing all this time—or rather, he had been getting some much-needed rest and recuperation.

The first day of the war games had come to an end, which meant that Damon had gone twenty-four hours while protecting Waton.

The prince was still alive, and Damon was horribly injured.

Glancing at his system panel, he waited for the last few seconds that would mark the announcement of his quest coming to an end.

[Quest]

[Dominators Burden]

[Completed]

Damon smiled as he waited for the reward. His expression had been pale, but Damon felt more energized than ever. At last, after such a long wait, he would be able to restore Matia's complete personality.

A few seconds passed, then nothing. Nothing happened. He didn't get his reward.

He frowned as he noticed a new prompt pop up.

[Quest]

[Act Two]

[Feast of Shadows]

You have hungered for days. Now I present you a feast. Feed and be filled with the bounties of the flesh and soul.

Devour six goddess races and one demon.

[Reward: Level Up]

Damon's eyes twitched. What about his initial reward? Why wasn't he getting it? Damon bit his lip, then sighed.

Well, no matter. He could more or less guess why.

It was a chain quest, so maybe he would get all the rewards at the end when he had completed every objective.

He sighed again.

At least this quest was easier than the last, though also quite troublesome. Damon had initially not liked the idea of killing and cannibalizing people when he first got the system, but now he was used to it.

'I just have to devour six people to pass, which should be easy since I have my shadow clone loose. Devouring a demon won't be difficult either.'

He paused, his brows furrowing.

Right, speaking of which, his soul was still damaged. He had tried a few things, but why had he assumed he couldn't fix the soul backlash he was suffering from by devouring other people?

He had devoured a demon, but... hmm, he was feeling a little better now that he thought about it.

Though it was a negligible difference, it was minuscule enough for him to miss it before.

"It works though."

What did that mean for Damon? Didn't that mean if he hunted and devoured many souls and fed his shadow the good old-fashioned way, his soul would heal?

Was this not encouraging him to commit a massacre? He was acutely aware that his system had been driving him to be an enemy of the goddess races since the beginning.

He glanced at his shadow at his feet, his companion that had gained a will of its own. It was quieter these days. It wasn't as lively or bustling as it was before.

It hardly did anything unless it needed to, unlike in the past when it was so animated.

Damon glanced at it, feeling as though his shadow was looking back at him.

"These days I'm the one who's being more expressive."

It was almost like his shadow was more reserved and quiet, keeping to itself.

Almost like how Damon had been before, while Damon was now more like his shadow, expressive and doing what he pleased. He smiled more, interacted with people more.

It was like his shadow was keeping the parts of him he didn't want active at the moment.

"In the end, it's just... me."

Why was he only spotting this difference now? And how mundane had he grown to think having a living shadow was? He had adapted to this strangeness until it became his norm.

His gaze lowered with a chilling calm.

'Well, it wouldn't matter soon anyway. The cure, I'll get it soon. The elixir. When I do, I will have completed my goals.'

It would be a fitting end to this tall tale.

Shaking his head, he couldn't let his guard down yet. Damon glanced at his shadow, and slowly, a figure began to rise from it.

A woman with dark hair and armor that covered her from head to toe. Her armor radiated a chilling cold that spread like winter around her. Her blue eyes glowed faintly from behind the visor.

Damon glanced at her, and the first thing he said was,

"I'm afraid I have bad news."

The woman in armor didn't move, but he could tell she was listening to him, even without a reaction.

He sighed.

"I... I just checked the rankings. It seems you're dead last."

Matia didn't really say anything. Then again, she wasn't very vocal these days, and even if she was, she probably wouldn't have cared. But Damon wasn't done, he had some complaints.

Slapping his knees, he groaned.

"Can you believe it? Eva is number one! Somehow she found a way to cheat. And I know what you want to say—but how, you don't have any proof, this is a wild accusation."

He raised his hand, feeling his head throb in pain, but he wasn't done.

"Ohh, I have evidence alright."

Matia didn't even move. She just looked at him as he ranted on and on about how Evangeline was cheating, even with clearly no evidence.

"She's colluding against me, I tell you! If she wins, she's going to gloat in my face till the day I die. We have to stop her."

Matia nodded slowly. It was sort of her job to agree with him.

Besides, she actually liked this side of him. She had a feeling Evangeline might run into some Damon troubles pretty soon.

After he was done ranting, he clapped his hands.

"Ahem, ahem..." He cleared his throat.

"Wendy... come inside."

A woman entered. When she did, her gaze stopped at Matia, then she squinted her eyes.

Damon cleared his throat again.

"Ohh, this is Wendy. She'll be working with you. Wendy, this is Matia, she's my friend."

Matia's mouth opened under her helm as if she wanted to say something to correct Damon and clarify her position as a knight, but she was slow to say those words.

Then, the flap of wings echoed out.

"Caw, caw."

A raven cried out, landing on Damon's shoulder.

"Found Renata. Caw, caw."

Damon spread his shadow perception, sure enough, Renata was right outside the tent.

He smiled... evilly.

Chapter 707: Eighty Percent

It was all he needed. As of right now, Damon had accumulated quite a bit of firepower.

The Wendigo, Wendy, was a powerhouse who was practically immortal against normal people, so long as they met the condition of her immortality.

Next was his shadow, Matia, who was a fairy with both the strength and skill to overpower most opponents.

Last but not the least was the one person he had been waiting for, Renata Malcrist, the demon kin disguised as a human.

With her zero attribute, she was a force to be reckoned with, but what he really needed was her brain. Renata was a master of administration and organization.

Most importantly, she did whatever he wanted without question.

'I love me a yes woman.'

She glanced at the chart she had prepared at his behest and outlined a plan for Damon's taxation policy, which honestly speaking, was just a fancier way of saying he was robbing his peers.

"Your plan might... erm... it will meet serious resistance. I would suggest capturing some people and using them as an example to deter and discourage resistance."

Damon stroked his chin. Yes, that was a good idea.

Renata continued, "It would also prevent us from wasting manpower and fighting needless battles."

She explained her thoughts. Damon nodded slowly, while Waton felt his skin crawl. He had a bad feeling about this.

Wasn't this making an enemy of everyone, people who should be their allies?

Damon cleared his throat, sitting on the large throne in the center of the tent.

"Thank you, Renata. You have done well."

She smiled lightly at the praise she received. Now that Lilith Astranova wasn't here, she had to make her mark and earn herself a spot.

His voice was calm. Though he was injured, his charm and charisma were still present.

Renata asked the one question she hadn't before.

"What rate would you be taxing, my lord?"

Damon sighed softly, looking up at the golden chandeliers.

"I am a reasonable man... I don't want to make things difficult for anyone..."

Renata had a bad feeling. Whenever he spoke like that, he would do something diabolical.

'He must be planning to tax people at a 30% rate.'

Damon crossed his arms, leaning back in the chair.

"I'll be taxing them at a modest 80% rate. It's not much, I know, but I can't be heartless. I have to give love to my subjects."

Watson felt his lips twitch, his hand trembling.

His subjects? What subjects? This guy was a commoner, and he was robbing people while shamelessly calling them his subjects.

Renata forced a smile, sweat beading on her forehead.

Eighty percent. He might as well be taking all their hard-earned medallions. Taxation? He should just come out and admit to robbing them.

"Eighty percent, my lord?"

He nodded with a gentle, benevolent smile on his face.

"I know, I understand, I'm too kind. What can I say? I am a man of the people. Everyone knows me, I am humble, without an ounce of pride."

She bit her lips helplessly. That was a very roundabout way to say he was shameless.

"Of course, my lord. Why don't we begin immediately?"

Well, there was no stopping him now. Might as well go with the flow.

Damon stood up and left the tent, with Matia following silently behind him.

When he went out, he found Wendy sitting by a rock with her arms crossed over her knees, looking at the sky with a bleak expression.

She noticed him looking at her, then shot him a hateful glare. Damon didn't mind the hate, it was pretty valid.

Standing up, she walked over to him. Damon glanced at her.

"Turn into your Wendigo form. I need a mount."

She glared at him with disdain.

"I not a horse."

Damon sighed.

"I already told you it's 'I am not a horse.' Try again."

She corrected herself, learning from his words, but still didn't obey. Taming her was a pain.

"Fine, so be it. I don't mind walking, but... if I walk, it might affect my chances of reproduction, and we don't want that now, do we?"

She glared at him. This trick wouldn't work again. She had evolved past such threats; she was not a fool.

"No, you lie.... Liar," she corrected herself.

Damon raised his hand in the air.

"Fine, so be it. Someone's never going to be a mother ever again... all because you doubted a well-wisher."

Her expression remained the same, maintaining her glare until she bit her lips, knowing she couldn't risk it. Her bones juttred and cracked, turning her human form into a large Wendigo.

Her piercing red eyes glared at Damon as a smile bloomed on his face. Once again, he had reminded her who was in charge.

He could have just climbed her back, but Damon felt the need to cause some more trouble.

"Lower yourself."

She tilted her large snout, jagged fangs bared at him.

He smiled, coughing lightly.

"I'm injured."

Snapping her fangs, she lowered herself and let him mount her.

He reached his hand down to Renata, pulling her up behind him.

"Alright, we're headed to the first bridge and occupying it. Matia, you fly above us."

She nodded, her icy wings spreading behind her as she soared into the air.

Watson glanced around awkwardly at Damon, pointing at himself.

"Wait, what about me?"

Damon facepalmed, shaking his head.

"You're a fae. You have wings. You can fly, can't you?"

Watson nodded slowly.

"Erhm... I can, but what if someone shoots me down? Wouldn't it be better to ride with you? Wendy's back is quite large..."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

Was this guy trying to ruin Damon's aura farming? Why would he ride with some guy?

"Don't worry. Matia will protect you. If you get shot down, I'll give you an expensive funeral."

Biting his lips, Watson spread his wings, groaning as he mumbled, "That's not very convincing. I'm a prince, dammit."

Damon shook his head, tugging on the Wendigo's antlers.

"Let's go."

Chapter 708: Bridge Crossing Monetization Restaurant That Serves My Personal Interest

The sounds of heavy breathing echoed out. He was unsure if it was his own breath or if he had stolen someone else's, but the fear in his heart was still there. His body still had blood, and his heart was still beating.

He was sure he was still alive. He was still breathing.

He held his sickle in one hand and his battle axe in the other, blood still slick on it.

A few days had passed since the war games had begun, and at first, it was good, everything was easy, easier than expected. All they had to do was hunt demon beasts and monsters. But after the first day, things took a turn for the worse.

The demon beasts began to migrate, and everyone followed their migration patterns. Soon, they all began to disappear.

Thousands of hot-blooded warriors gathered toward the center, where prey was scarce, a few demon beasts here and there, then monsters became scarce.

It wasn't long before competition grew. Everyone wanted those medallions, no matter what they had to do.

Just like that, people began to fight among themselves. If you had medallions, people would attack you to obtain them.

This soon brought another difficulty. Some people were simply too powerful. They could wipe out entire parties alone. Against such opponents, weaker ones could only join forces.

And just like that, the chaos increased. One death led to two, and soon factions were formed, nobles teamed with nobles, adventurers trusted only adventurers.

Small conflicts escalated into larger ones, and soon massive factions came into existence, each fighting for dominance beyond mere medallions.

It was almost as if an unseen hand was controlling everything, manipulating everyone.

His faction had just been wiped out by a red-haired woman wearing a white flower in her hair. He still remembered her green eyes as she slaughtered everyone.

More than a hundred adventurers, all dead.

He fled with their medallions, every single one, while she killed the rest.

"So that's Lilith Astranova... what a monster."

That was two days ago. He'd been running ever since.

He arrived at what he'd heard was the last bridge. Beyond the bridge, demons had already reached the central island, which was massive. His plan was to go into hiding there with the medallions.

"I just need to cross the bridge."

It was this thought that drove him here, the belief that if he crossed the bridge, he'd find safety and a head start over everyone else.

When he reached within viewing distance of the bridge, he paused. A large wooden sign stood there, carved beautifully in elegant penmanship.

It read:

No Combat Zone.

By Order.

Terms and Conditions Apply.

He stopped, confusion flashing across his face.

By order? Order of who? And what terms and conditions? A no combat zone? He didn't remember this being in the rules.

He slowed down and decided to approach cautiously. Step by step, he crossed the hill, reaching the large bridge. There, he saw a glowing welcome sign. Upon closer look, it was made with rune magic, the runes were the source of the glow, but that was all they did.

"Hmmm, I've seen this before. Ain't this one of those light runes?"

He looked beyond the sign and saw a table neatly arranged with chairs and cutlery. It looked like an open-air restaurant, with a soft, inviting ambiance. It looked safe, too safe.

There were two women there. One had violet hair and carried what looked like a record book in her hand. The other stood behind her, holding a tray. She had long dark hair and beautiful copper skin.

He gulped. "Did I die? Is this paradise? Has my soul been wandering all this time?"

Slowly, he approached them. As soon as he reached the first table, the women moved toward him.

"Welcome to the Bridge Crossing Monetization Restaurant that serves my personal interest. Bridge Crossing, for short. Would you like a meal?"

He froze, shocked by her words. A restaurant? It was actually a restaurant. Who started a restaurant on a battlefield? People were dying, and someone was living it up.

The second lady walked up to him, her voice slightly rigid.

"This is a no combat zone; therefore, fighting is forbidden. We will happily provide you with service. Do you want to start with a bath and a change of clothes, or would you prefer medicine and food?"

He glanced at his body, scraped and wounded. He trembled. His years as an adventurer told him to run away, but this was the only way to cross the bridge. It was the only bridge.

"...I would like to cross the bridge..."

He spoke politely, because he was smart enough to sense that these women were powerful.

The violet-haired woman smiled.

"Of course. Please read and sign our terms and conditions. Food and medicine come with our services."

She handed him a large pile of papers with small, handwritten text.

He frowned. Reading all of this would be a pain. He quickly skimmed through the first page, everything looked good, reading the rest would be tedious, so he just signed.

It wasn't even magical paper or a contract. Who was going to force him to adhere to it? No one.

As soon as he signed, Renata smiled calmly, her voice cheerful.

"Thank you, patron, for coming to the Bridge Crossing Monetization Restaurant that serves my personal interest. We hope you enjoy your brief stay here."

The man nodded, relaxing slightly, as the other woman with copper skin smiled rigidly and gestured for him to sit while they prepared his bath.

"Would you like some tea while you wait?"

Renata placed down a warm teacup, and he drank it gratefully.

A few seconds later, Wendy returned.

"Your bath is ready in the main tent. I hope you enjoyed your tea."

He nodded, already relaxed from the sudden sense of safety, and followed her, the butcher leading the lamb into the slaughterhouse.

Damon had acquired his first victim.

Chapter 709: Welcome Aboard

Ahhh capitalism, is that not the most beautiful word you've ever heard? A system that maximizes profits for the individual even if the whole must suffer.

Who cares if you hoard wealth and millions starve?

It was all about production and money.

Damon swirled a glass of wine in his hands as his first victim— ahem, ahem— customer was introduced to him.

The man was an adventurer, rough-looking with a few injuries and two weapons on his back: a large axe and a sickle.

Damon cleared his throat. He was wearing soft fabric and a monocle to seal the rich bourgeoisie aura he was cultivating.

The thing about running an honest business was the need for presentation. You had to look the part to gain the trust of the customers.

By his side was Waton, also dressed in soft fabric, looking posh and every bit the prince he was.

Damon stepped forward.

"Welcome, my good man. I hope my staff have been treating you well."

The adventurer glanced at Damon, narrowing his eyes.

"Yo... you're the Ascendant. I recognized your voice."

Damon cleared his throat.

"Of course I am. I hope you enjoy your stay."

The man nodded as Renata and Wendy gestured to lead him toward the bath.

Damon raised his hand.

"Hold on. Have you paid for the complimentary tea?"

The man paused, utterly confused. Paid for the tea? Wait, wasn't that free?

"Sir, you just said it was complimentary."

Damon scrunched his face in disdain.

"The tea may be free, but what about the table, the chair, the cup you used to drink it... but most of all, the ambiance?"

He sighed, shaking his head.

"Did you not read the terms and conditions?"

The man remembered the terms and conditions, but that was like a whole spellbook-sized agreement with small writing. No one would read that.

"Well... I..."

"So you didn't read it. Well, that's too bad."

"Renata, how much is his bill?"

Renata nodded, taking out a piece of paper on which she began to read out all the services he had incurred.

Waitress service.

Air purification.

Gentle and polite words.

Enjoying the ambiance.

Speaking to the proprietor.

Mental relief.

As well as a long list of services he didn't even know he had been given.

All in all, his bill was seven billion zeni.

His face turned pale.

"Seven... sev... billion..."

He looked at Damon with anger rising from his heart.

"Yo... you, you're trying to rob me! I don't have that kind of money. If I had a billion, I would be living a cozy life away from this shithole!"

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"It's fine. I'm not unreasonable. Of course no one carries that much money on them. Good thing you signed the IOU. You can pay it back for the rest of your life or... you can take the package deal."

The man was utterly stunned, his mouth wide open at this scam.

"Package deal?" he muttered, knowing he didn't have the strength to fight his way out of here.

"Yes," Renata smiled. "You can pay in medallions. The conversion rate is favorable towards medallions."

She placed a hand on her chin.

"You would also have to pay an eighty percent tax on your overall medallions and purchases."

She wore such a businesswoman's smile, but he knew she was a snake.

"This is... this is robbery! This is robbery! I'm not paying anything! The world is watching you evil scum! The world is watching!"

He pointed at the broadcast orbs with indignation.

Damon shook his head.

"Sir, you signed our terms and conditions. I'm afraid this is all legal. Since you won't pay, I'm afraid we'll have to use force."

He shook his head sadly.

"A bad patron on the first day of business. Have I been forsaken by the goddess?"

He snapped his finger at the women in the room.

"Jump him."

It was so easy to subdue him he didn't even cause any issues. Soon, they had him on his knees.

Damon smiled.

"We had to use violence, so that gets added to your bill. We'll be taking your medallions, your weapons, and well... all your money. Your interest will be eighty percent for the coming years of your life. In the event of your death, your descendants will be paying."

Renata listed off a few more clauses to the terms and conditions.

The man was already weeping at this point.

Watson shook his head, watching this level of evil take place. Even the most wicked noble wouldn't be this cruel.

Damon shook his head.

"Behold, a grown man weeping."

The man sniffed through his tears.

"At least I get to keep my dignity..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. His dignity? Oh no, that belonged to him too.

He took the bag from Wendy's hands.

"We'll be taking that too. Your pants, put them in the bag."

A grown man was forced to take off his pants and put them in the bag as he wept. Damon laughed evilly, counting his medallions.

"Hahaha! I'm gonna be rich! Rich, I tell you!"

"Ahahaha!"

Renata applauded him, praising his wisdom and all what not.

Wendy didn't recognize right from wrong, but she was sure whatever this was, they were not the good guys.

Matia didn't have much of an expression. She was practically used to Damon's antics. At least he was happy. Besides, it wasn't like these adventurers were good people anyway.

As the adventurer was crawling away, naked and ashamed before the world, Damon stopped him.

"Wait."

He walked in front of him.

"Excuse me, my good sir. Did you know our organization was recruiting? Well, you're in luck. Working for us comes with all sorts of bonuses and amenities."

"You get food, clothes, and weapons. Most of all, part of your debt is waived for the foreseeable future. You can still earn that soft, cushy life."

He took out a contract.

"All you have to do is sign right here."

The adventurer had no alternatives. He just wanted clothes to wear. He would have done it even if he had to sign a contract with the devil.

"I'll sign, I'll sign..."

Damon smiled.

"Welcome aboard."

Chapter 710: The Kind Owner

"He didn't get this from our side of the family, did he?"

Cassian whispered to his father, the Grand Duke.

The Grand Duke forced a smile on his face, whispering back.

"We've done a lot of diabolical things, but even we haven't gone this far. You could look on the bright side, at least he's one of us."

Cassian forced a smile, whispering.

"Good thing he's not with the war banks, or he might have put the whole world in debt."

Luna didn't know what her uncle and grandfather were whispering about, but she did know her brother had done it again. He had exercised his ultimate talent of pissing people off.

What kind of business model was that? It was pure exploitation. Honestly, when he said he was going to tax people, she imagined he would just block the bridge and force people to pay. But no, her brother was a criminal mastermind and had turned his small party into a whole mafia.

Ahhh. She closed her eyes. She needed a break. The war games had been going on for a few days now, and she had been staying in her own luxury room at the Brightwater Pavilion while she watched everything, including highlights of moments she missed.

She attended and ate dinner with the Grand Duke and spent most of her time with the Duchess Annalise, who pampered her a little too much.

The last time she got such treatment was when her mother was alive, except their mother was a real tough woman.

Her brother got the carrot and stick a lot from her.

When he did something wrong, she'd beat or scold him, then end up cuddling him to sleep while singing him lullabies.

She wondered if her brother missed their mother. Did he think of her, or did he choose to forget her?

"I wish I could see her again... so I can tell her how much better we're doing, so she doesn't worry."

What did it matter? The dead had no worries because they were dead. Their lives had ended, and so had all their wishes and desires.

Her sad expression must have been noticed by Annalise, who slowly stroked Luna's white hair.

"What's on your mind? Are you worried about Damon? Don't worry, he's pretty strong, and from the looks of it, hard to kill. He'll be fine."

Luna bit her lip, nodding, but she added something that had been weighing on her heart.

"I was thinking about death. My father seemed strong, my mother too, but they still died. Death doesn't really care who's strong or weak. It just happens. We just die."

She teared up slightly.

"My brother is scared of a few things, but death isn't one of them. That's why I fear death. I'm scared on his behalf. I don't want him to leave me, and I don't want to leave him."

Her words made Annalise glance at Cassian and the Grand Duke. The two of them sighed, looking at Luna, unsure of what would be best to comfort her.

Iris had been silent the whole time. She smacked Luna on the back of her head.

"Relax. You're overthinking things again. Didn't that guy survive three death zones? Like some competition is going to kill him?"

"He'll come back," she muttered softly. "I know he will."

Luna smiled, nodding.

The three adults let out a sigh of relief.

While Luna wrestled with her fears of death, her brother was busy turning the battlefield into an economy

Inside the arena, things had been progressing for the worse. The battles had become more intense while everyone was fighting.

Damon Grey's name had been rising through the ranks as the combat zone shrank. More and more people were gathering toward the center, having fought many dire battles.

Factions clashed for supremacy. No one wanted to yield to the other.

However, in all this chaos, a certain faction's name spread.

The faction was called Bridge Crossing Monetization Restaurant That Serves My Personal Interest.

It was a mouthful, but rumors spread about the honesty and reliability of the owner. He gave food and weapons to anyone who came asking. He healed the sick and injured and gave out potions of exceptional quality.

All for the low, low price of a few medallions, nothing more. He even allowed payments on a few zeni.

Apparently, his goal was simple— he just wanted to see the brave warriors of the goddess races enter the world dungeon.

He was a good man for all intents and purposes. Anyone who went to the bridge came back singing his praises and calling him a benevolent saint.

Of course, some people were unscrupulous and evil, taking advantage of his kindness, so some of the humble patrons who were moved by his generosity had to use violent means on those individuals.

Of course, the owner was a gentle soul and would never allow anyone to be killed, so they were just tied up under the bridge for all to see.

Apparently, according to intel, he had a few staff, and all those who left and spread the word had only good things to say about him.

Abellona leaned back in her chair, her spear in her hand, armor gleaming.

"And your intel didn't say who this person was?"

The knight bit his lips.

"No one seems to know who the person is, his name or identity. Only that he is a man."

Abellona narrowed her eyes. This smelled like a rat. A familiar, shameless, greedy, money-loving, no-good rat.

But if it was him, he would never give anything away for free or even let people come back to spread the word.

"Hmmm. Something doesn't add up. It's too good to be true."

She twirled her hair, her crimson eyes gleaming as the chatter of the troops outside echoed in the air.

"Send an advance reconnaissance party. I want to know who this person is and if we can secure an alliance with them, or at least safe passage through the bridge."

The man nodded, bowing his head.

"Yes, Your Highness. I shall have a party sent at once."

She glanced at a large map of the combat zone.

"Have the other factions sent any response?"

The man bit his lips.

"We have received responses, but no one is willing to give up their military faction due to mistrust. But mostly..."

"It's racism," Abellona sighed.

"Of course it is. This war game is set up in a way that we can easily turn on each other. This mistrust and a lack of medallions have made us all doubtful of one another. Especially since the demons haven't attacked us, everyone has grown complacent, thinking our numbers intimidate them."

She shook her head.

"What about Damon Grey?"

"He seems to be elusive. We haven't found him, and if he's gathering medallions this fast, it means he's going after those in charge of the factions."

Abellona glanced at him but said nothing.

'Or he's running a shady restaurant and blackmailing his so-called patrons to gain medallions.'