

## Shadow 711

### Chapter 711: A Letter

Business was booming. In fact, it was better than booming. Damon had now succeeded in planting his agents, or as he liked to call them, his patrons, in different factions and he could gather information from them.

As for the demons beyond the bridge, they had not attacked Damon's little business at all. They simply let him be, which was the order his shadow clone had given them.

The combat zone was growing smaller and smaller with each passing second. Everyone would be arriving here soon.

It was about time Damon started letting people cross.

Just as he reached that train of thought, Renata walked into the tent. His visage, seated on the throne with a calm, almost expressionless face, made Renata pause. She knelt before him.

"My lord, envoys sent by the third princess Abellona of Valtheron have arrived, as you anticipated."

Damon crossed his fingers with a smile.

"A little earlier than I expected for her to make a move," he said.

Renata did not understand how he planned to get out of this predicament. The way it was moving, it looked like he was an obstacle, which meant the other factions would wage war against him to pass.

They could even unite against him.

"Shall I turn them away?" she asked.

Damon shook his head.

"No, that would not do now, would it. Instead I have a better idea. Let them in."

Renata nodded and walked out of the tent.

She returned a few minutes later with a small group of knights. When they came inside, they saw Damon seated on the throne. Their eyes lingered on the tent he was in with suspicions.

Seeing the tent, they relaxed slightly as they made some conjecture.

The knight in front walked up and smiled.

"I have been sent by the third princess. Seeing this spatial tent I can relax easy knowing you are part of the imperial faction."

Damon almost smiled at the thought. This guy was quite bold in his assumptions. Did he really think this tent was given to Damon by Abellona? Of course it was not. He had obtained it by honorable stealing.

He shook his head with disdain.

"I invite you warmly into my abode and you insult me," he whispered.

The knight was confused. When did he insult him? He was just making a candid observation of someone on the same side.

Damon waved his hand.

"Seize him."

The fools did not even put up a fight. Renata used her zero attribute and Matia unleashed a cold blizzard inside the tent, capturing them all.

Damon smiled, looking at them frozen and unconscious.

"Well, that went better than I thought it would."

He turned to Renata.

"Send the letter."

She exited the tent.

Abellona's brows furrowed as she looked at the situation around her. Things were not looking good and the madness of battle had spread like an invisible fog, driving everyone into a frenzy.

She was familiar with the battlefield and was well aware of what this was. This was the same reason why the world could never know peace. It was the need for constant conflict.

Turning her spear, she glanced at a fairy adventurer who had been leading this particular faction.

"You should not have attacked me. You could have stopped this."

He smiled with bloody teeth and broken wings.

"Hehehe. It was too good an opportunity to pass. Assimilating your faction and taking your medallions would have earned us glory."

She closed her eyes.

What a meaningless reason to die.

Turning around, her spear shaft slick with blood, she looked into the horizon.

"I certainly hope the demons are having as much infighting as we are, though I should not be so optimistic."

Just as she was about to turn away, she saw a lone knight running toward her with a letter in hand. His armor was dented in several places but she recognized him as part of the group she had sent to deliver a message to the so called bridge crossing restaurant and perhaps glean information on the owner.

He fell before her feet, passing out as soon as he arrived.

She checked his pulse as her subordinates gathered.

Picking up the letter, she found it to be an invitation.

It was not just addressed to her. It was addressed to the major factions. It was an invitation to convene for a meeting.

The sender of the letter had called them out and had emphasized the demons having built a standing army under the command of Amon and his seventy two demons.

The person who sent it was offering to allow everyone safe passage through the bridge before the demons completed their objective.

"The meeting will be in a day," the letter said.

She raised her head.

He had also left an ultimatum. Should any factions refuse to show up, he would be forced to destroy the last and only bridge to the main island, preventing large numbers of people from crossing it.

"Which would put us all at a disadvantage considering the demons already have a foothold," she muttered to herself.

If they refused to show up and waited it out, the combat zone would shrink in a day or two anyway, forcing them all toward the bridge. If there was no bridge, they would have to fly or swim across, then face a steep climb up to the main island, which would be crawling with demons ready to ambush them.

"This is bad," she whispered.

The final line promised that the sender would act as a neutral party as he called for the unification of the goddess races before the demons completed their preparations.

It was a call to the Great Unification Strategy Meeting.

Anyone who wanted to live would have no choice but to go there, except those who wanted to die.

She glanced at her troops who were still cleaning up the remains of the fallen.

"Gather everyone. Prepare to march. We are heading to the main island."

She glanced at her bloody gauntlet; her crimson eyes glowed.

"It is the prelude to the final battle."

## Chapter 712: She Cheated

Damon smiled as he sat at the center of the bridge on a chair, while Waton nervously watched the proceedings. Wendy sat cross-legged nearby, playing with a squirrel and a raven, completely unbothered by Damon's words or actions.

Matia stood beside him, holding a spear made of ice, her expression cold and watchful.

Renata narrowed her eyes as she glanced at the bridge where a few bodies hung from a noose. Some were beheaded, their heads mounted on pikes—remnants of those who had attacked Damon's establishment, confident in their strength.

They had come rushing here, thinking they could have it all—women, wealth, and most of all, control of the bridge.

They learned the folly of their ways in death. Now their corpses served as a deterrent to any other fools who might try the same.

Damon took a sip from a glass of wine, still wearing the monocle he did not even need.

"Did you spread the rumors that I would allow individuals not affiliated with any faction to pass and reach the main island?"

Renata nodded slowly.

"Yes, I have, my lord. The rumors have been circulated by our network of patrons. The factions will arrive soon. Moving large numbers of people takes time."

She glanced at the paper in her hand.

"However, we should be seeing some of the individuals and small groups soon."

"Good," Damon muttered, knowing those who survived without a faction would either be powerful or extremely lucky to have lived this long.

He could not wait for them to show up so he could charge them.

And sure enough, he sensed two people enter the range of his shadow perception. Both carried fierce, bloody auras. Each step they took had the weight and confidence of warriors who had overcome hell.

Well, no surprise, they had overcome hell. These two were people he was intimately familiar with.

The first was a golden-haired young woman with bright, sun-marked eyes and a sword in her hand. Her armor reflected the light she gave off, making her appear like the sun itself.

The second moved fast and unpredictably, each step leaving sparks of lightning on the ground. Her armor crackled with arcs of electricity, and her beastkin ears twitched as a wide smile spread across her face when a familiar scent reached her nose.

They crossed the distance effortlessly, stopping in front of the bridge. The beastkin girl, Leona, jumped into the air toward Damon with her arms spread wide.

Damon quickly stood from his chair and dodged what would have been something barreling toward him at subsonic speed while wearing heavy armor. His heart bled as he watched his favorite chair explode from the impact.

Leona did not mind that he dodged her hug, she turned and grabbed him all the same.

"Hahah! You're here! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

Damon wore a deadpan expression as tears almost welled up in his eyes. His hands trembled.

"I got that chair from an antique shop after ripping off the owner. It really matched my aesthetic... I can't believe it's gone."

Leona forced a smile, realizing she had gotten a little too excited.

"Erm... sorry about your chair, Damon. Don't worry, I'll buy you a new one."

He glared at her until she added, "It'll be super expensive, of course."

Damon cleared his throat with a smile.

"Well, you should have led with that. I was about to smack you. So... how expensive are we talking here? I don't want one of those mass-produced ones."

Evangeline sighed, shaking her head. "Why are you so materialistic? It's just a dumb chair. Deal with it."

Damon's eyes twitched as he glared at her with a scoff.

"You can never be happy for me, can you? Enemy of progress. You come to my place of business only to drag me down."

She rolled her eyes, not taking him seriously. She was not in the mood for his antics.

"It's a public bridge on a battlefield, not your place of business. We're here to cross and hopefully get a read on the enemy's movements."

Evangeline turned her head toward the side where she saw a large sign etched with runes.

"Huh... come on, why are you like this? You turned a profit even here. I should have known it would be you opening a shady restaurant in the middle of a battlefield."

Damon waved his hand dismissively. "Well, it's fine. At least I didn't cheat to get my medallions. I earned them honestly."

Evangeline looked around at his whole setup, the corpses, the ominous atmosphere. Nothing here was honest.

Wait, was he implying she cheated? She earned her medallions through hard fights, not by robbing people.

"I didn't cheat! That's what you're doing!" she shot back.

Damon raised his hand to stop her. "Well, fine. I don't care. Since you're here, if you want to cross, pay up. Pay the bridge tax."

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't you mean toll? Bridges don't get taxed."

Damon smiled darkly. "I make the rules here."

Evangeline sighed. She did not want to argue any further.

"Fine. How many medallions am I giving you? That's what you want, right?"

It was not worth it. She would just give him a few medallions to make him stop bothering her.

Damon tapped his chin with a thoughtful expression.

"Well, I normally charge eighty percent of your overall medallions, but you're my friend, so I'll be considerate."

Evangeline almost screamed when she heard the first part, but since he said he would be considerate, she held her tongue.

Then Damon smiled and raised his hand toward Leona. "No toll for friends."

Evangeline let out a sigh of relief, until he pointed at her, his tone sharp and accusing.

"But cheaters pay ninety percent. Pay up."

Evangeline gasped and tried to defend herself.

"I—I didn't cheat! Ask Leona, she was with me the whole time!"

Damon glanced at Leona, clearing his throat. "Honest friends get no tax."

Leona glared at him.

"You think I'd side with injustice? You all know me better than that."

Evangeline smiled, reassured. Right, Leona was a good person.

Leona closed her eyes, sighed, and said,

"She totally cheated. She used an avalanche. She even tried to bury me under the snow to take out the witness."

Damon shook his head with disgust.

"I knew it. You've let me down, Evangeline. Your mother would be so disappointed in you when she hears this."

Evangeline almost popped a vein.

Chapter 713: Gathering

Taking jabs at Evangeline was a good way to pass the time. He'd come so far from outright telling her to screw off.

However, good times didn't last long. They couldn't really spend the whole time together when the final battle was already here.

A day had passed since Evangeline and Leona had arrived, and Damon was taking it easy with his current party.

Leona glanced at Waton, who was talking with Wendy, a small frown forming on her face.

"I hate to be that girl, but I'm sort of surprised he's still alive."

Damon leaned back on his chair with a small smile.

"Yeah... why?"

She shook her head lightly.

"It's just you aren't a very friendly person, especially to rich snobs."

Damon chuckled, looking at her.

"Well, turns out we have a lot more in common than I thought. And rich snobs are people too."

Leona narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"Huh... that's weird. You hate nobles and rub your poverty in our faces every chance you get."

He felt a pang of annoyance at her words. Rub his poverty in their faces? When did he ever do that? He was—

"You did," Leona broke his train of thought. "You'd say, 'I don't expect rich people to understand,' or something along those lines."

Damon sighed, shaking his head with a small click of his tongue.

"Ahrgh, hmph, so what... besides, well, it doesn't matter. I wouldn't expect a brat like you to understand your elders."

"We're the same age, and I'm smarter than you give me credit for. I'm not that naive."

She lowered her head as memories came flashing through her mind.

"At least not anymore."

Damon didn't say anything. Leona narrowed her eyes.

"Everyone's so obsessed with entering the World Dungeon as if that guarantees fame, fortune, and power. But power is never easy to obtain. This World Dungeon—we have no idea what world we would be cast into or what horrors lurk there."

Leona's eyes flickered slightly, seeing Damon's smile fade.

"Can we even overcome its trials? I mean, we lost Matia in Lysithara, even if none of us want to admit it... maybe ermh... sorry."

Damon sighed. He understood. He wasn't stupid. He had been thinking about it, and he understood it was an unspoken agreement in their party not to talk about Matia's change, even if no one knew the actual circumstances behind it.

It was an unspoken fact that she was not the same person, something fundamental about her was lacking, not as a warrior... but as a person.

"Leona... it's fine. You shouldn't worry about that. It's going to be alright."

He didn't make any guarantee. Leona heard a small wave of uncertainty in his voice.

She smiled softly.

"In the absence of the desirable, let the available be the desirable."

This was their party motto and had been what pushed them forward.

Hearing those words, Damon bit his lips.

"Hey... what if the control we think we have of our lives is—"

Roooooom!

The sound of a large battle horn echoed in the air, cutting Damon's voice off before he could speak.

On the horizon, the sounds of marching echoed out. A large number of people in armor of different varieties marched forward behind them.

Damon remained seated as he watched the factions approaching, his expression narrowing.

"I didn't think they'd put aside their differences and march together."

It was quite a sight—different factions working together.

Abellona's Imperial Faction was composed of knights, nobles, and adventurers from the Empire.

The second faction was led by Emilia Highgon, Xander Ravenscroft, and Yuka von Penrose, someone Damon had not seen in quite a while.

The last time he met Yuka was in the streets of Valerion when Damon had beaten up some of those Imperial Academy students.

After them was the Academy Faction, comprised of Aether Academy, Eldorian Academy, and whoever else joined them.

The prodigy Magnus was leading them, along with Ishara Fang from the War Academy and Natch Wuta from Aether Academy.

After them came the elves, and fairies or as Damon liked to call them, the "racist faction"—which was led by Velora Nyxfall, the dark elf from the Silver Glades.

The last was the Loose Alliance, made up of wanderers, adventurers, and people who didn't fit in with the more posh groups. Their leader was an adventurer Damon didn't know until now, referred to simply as "the Representative."

This was the loose gathering of people who had now joined together to come here and face off against the demons beyond the bridge.

Their overall number was still higher than Damon expected. There were at least seven thousand people left even after all the fighting.

'I knew they outnumbered the demons I have, and it's not even close...'

Even with the demon beasts, it would be a little hard to wipe out this many people.

Luckily, Damon—or rather Amon—had been ready.

That said, some faces were still missing, like Lilith and Sylvia.

He knew Lilith was on the main island doing goddess knows what, and Sylvia, while still alive, was elusive, with few sightings of her.

However, she seemed to be tracking Lilith.

"Which means she'll be heading to the main island as well."

As this large group approached him, Damon was unfazed, even with the crushing weight of an actual army pressing down on him.

His expression remained unchanged. His reasons were simple. He had planted his patrons in each group, and he could break any of them with a snap of his fingers. He had the forced obedience of hundreds of people.

One mistake, and this whole alliance of loose sand would break into a chaotic free-for-all. Regardless of whether it was demons or goddess races who won, Damon would win.

It was safe to say he was the most powerful person within this World Dungeon, dominating everything from the shadows.

The leaders of these factions stepped forward to reach the front of the bridge.

Each of these people would be negotiating with him right here. On the surface, everything seemed calm, but underneath was a web of interconnected personal relationships, friendships, and enmity that formed the undercurrent of everything.

Among said relationships was Damon's unwitting association with the third princess, Abellona of Valtheron.

And she was staring straight at him, her crimson eyes narrowed.

Leona narrowed her eyes.

"What did you do to her?"

Damon shrugged, waving his hand and whispering.

"It's nothing much. She just owes me money."

Chapter 714: I Nominate Myself

Abellona's eyes remained fixed on the bastard, his calm and confident expression, that same arrogant look.

This was definitely him, the man she had been looking for all this time... Damian.

Or actually, Damon Grey.

It was frustrating to think about, but while she had bared her heart out to him, the bastard had actually lied to her.

He didn't even have the decency to tell her his real name. Then again, what could she expect from a man who had left her alone in a dungeon.

'I was actually worried about this wretch...'

Abellona squeezed her fist, the metal of her gauntlet scraping together.

Was she the reason he was wearing a hood and covering his face? At least he wasn't completely heartless.

Abellona held back her emotions. Whatever it was would have to wait until the threat was neutralized.

She glanced at the hundreds of magical orbs floating all around, capturing the moment from every angle.

Walking forward, she left behind her followers, approaching the host.

Damon, who was seated in a chair.

She wasn't the only one. The other factions sent out their representatives as well. There was hardly any time to spare, since the combat zone was shrinking and closing faster and faster.

Their footsteps left faint sounds on the ground as they reached Damon, stopping not far from him.

He raised his hand, and his shadow spread, growing wider until it stopped in front of them.

From this inky darkness, chairs rose and a large table formed, fitted with porcelain sets and cups neatly arranged.

There was a small gasp of surprise from a few of the people present.

Ishara Fang from the War Academy was slightly taken aback, but she quickly regained her composure.

Xander didn't seem surprised at all. His eyes had deep, dark circles, and his gaze was cold. He had been in Damon's party before, so he knew a lot about the guy.

Emilia Highgon glanced at the chair in front of her and walked forward to take a seat. Xander didn't need an invitation, he sat down immediately.

The others took this as their cue to sit. Soon, the seats were filled with representatives from the factions.

Emilia Highgon smiled, looking at Damon. It had only been a few months since she last saw him, but he had changed so much. He was now in the third class advancement.

Xander glanced at Damon, who sat at the head of the table with a calm smile. He was familiar with that smile, it was the one Damon wore when he had everything under his control and everyone was playing into his hands.

His gaze moved to Evangeline, who was seated next to Damon. He felt a small pang of bitterness in his heart but closed his eyes and pushed it down.

Leona was also there, already eating the snacks a woman in a rare-to-find piyon dress was serving.

Xander was unfamiliar with this woman, he'd never seen her before but he could tell she was strong, without a doubt.

Behind Damon stood Matia, serving as his knight, and Renata Malcrist, their senior from the academy, acting as Damon's secretary.

Xander saw no sign of Lilith Astranova or Sylvia, but he was sure they would be fine.

He was slightly worried about Sylvia, but she was far from weak or helpless. Underestimating her was a quick way to die a horrible death.

The last person in Damon's group was actually Prince Waton. Xander narrowed his eyes in surprise.

'Why is he still alive?'

He was sure Damon would have found a way to end the prince's life, yet somehow, against all odds, the prince was here, standing among those who would reach the final battlefield of the war games.

Was it fate, random chance, or perhaps part of Damon's machinations?

Damon let out a soft breath.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming. I am pleased that you answered my summons."

There was a frown on everyone's faces when he spoke softly and amicably. The leader of the loose faction, the so-called Representative, frowned.

"You didn't give us much of a choice. You have spies in every group. We haven't the time or resources to weed them out, especially with the combat zone shrinking."

Emilia Highgon scoffed, her ringlet curls swaying slightly.

"Our biggest worry should be the demon forces accumulating on the other side, and the stubborn refusal to put aside our differences."

She glanced at Damon with a smile, showing her approval.

"You managed to gather everyone here, the one place that would best facilitate an attack."

Abellona didn't say anything until this point. Her gaze was solely on Damon as the broadcast orbs spread live footage to the world.

Velora Nyxfall touched the pommel of his dagger.

"Then what are we waiting for? Why are we beating around the bush? We have less than half a day... are we or are we not working together?"

Abellona closed her eyes, then opened them again.

"Working together is not the issue. The issue remains, can we forgive all the hostility built since we began and march as one? And if we do, can we trust each other?"

Evangeline crossed her arms over her chest.

"Apologies, Princess, but trust is a moot point at the moment. Whether we can or cannot doesn't change the fact that we have to advance on the dungeon gate before the combat zone consumes us."

The representative of the loose faction clenched his teeth.

"We would be facing a grueling force of several demons waiting in ambush. They are strong but don't have the numbers to fight us. It's still within the means of our victory."

Abellona watched Damon as he wore a calm expression.

"Then you must be confident you can defeat Amon, the unknown ruler who leads them. They have one ruler, organized and centralized, while we are here arguing, confident in numbers we have already whittled away."

Her words made Ishara Fang smile.

"This Amon guy seems tough, but how much more powerful can he be compared to us?"

Damon chuckled, then laughed, looking at the proceedings.

"Powerful enough to matter. More than that, I wouldn't be confident in our numbers at the moment, not when Amon has taken control of an army of demon beasts."

There was a pause as they all looked at him. Damon smiled.

"Now your numbers don't matter, do they? They have traps and have secured the path to the dungeon gate. I surmise they want to trap us here and let the combat zone do their dirty work."

Everyone was suddenly quiet.

If the combat zone shrank and they didn't make it past the bridge, they would be killed by the mana anomaly.

Damon smiled, leaning back on his chair, his crown gleaming, his voice filled with calm authority.

"Nominate a leader for the goddess races' invasion of the island."

He glanced at them all.

"We must pick someone who has what it takes to lead this expedition. All our lives hinge on the choices we make here."

The representative of the loose faction looked at everyone present, biting his lips.

"I nominate myself."

Chapter 715: A Small Meeting

It was a given. In fact, he had been sure this would be how it would turn out, and it had.

Everyone was nominating themselves. Damon offered each faction a single vote, and everyone voted for themselves.

He stood up with a sigh.

"You all can't be serious, can you? We have less than half a day to cross the bridge, and you still would rather argue and fight than work together and march across that bridge as a united force."

Closing his eyes, he glanced at Abellona of Valtheron.

"I nominate Abellona of Valtheron as the leader of this alliance."

He glanced at them.

"Now she has two votes, higher than anyone here."

Emilia Highgon sighed, looking at the princess.

"I'm surprised you didn't nominate yourself for the position. The leader of this alliance can more effectively claim credit for the defeat of Amon."

She glanced at the representative of the loose faction with a thin smile.

"Isn't that why you nominated yourself? Because you want the glory of having led the group that felled this supposed avatar of calamity?"

Damon narrowed his eyes. He could see the issue now. His shadow clone, Amon, was too elusive and mysterious. While he provoked fear, he didn't have a sufficient enough reputation for these hot-blooded youths to think of him as more than just a boogeyman made from Goddess Race propaganda.

The representative of the loose faction smiled.

"So what? The reward is more than enough for us to all share. That's billions of zeni, wealth like that, and I would even face the great dragon Ashergon."

Evangeline scrunched up her face in disdain, her hand clenched.

"Then you know nothing of Ashergon. If you did, you would not even dream of facing him, just like you know nothing of Amon."

He glanced at her with a sneer.

Damon looked around.

"Then we are in agreement to honor the vote?"

"All those in favor, say aye."

Emilia Highgon glanced at Xander, nodding her head.

"If it defeats the demon threat, so be it."

She raised her hand. "Aye."

The dark elf from the Silver Glade, Velora Nyxfall, raised his hand.

"We don't have much in the way of choice, do we? I am also in favor."

"Aye."

One by one, they all reached an agreement with little time to spare.

The representative of the loose faction balled his fist, then raised his hand reluctantly.

"Aye. However, I want first crack at this Amon fella."

Damon glanced at him.

"Godspeed, friend."

Godspeed to his grave. This guy would no doubt die when faced with Amon.

Damon cleared his throat, smiling.

"Now that we have decided on the leader of our little band, it's time to talk about the important matter of tax."

There were expressions of confusion on their faces as Renata and Wendy went around passing papers to them.

Damon continued, "Based on the overall size of this group—seven thousand strong—and your total medallion count, you owe me the amount written on those documents."

Ishara Fang narrowed her eyes, looking at Damon.

"You can't be serious. We just agreed to work together, attack as one."

Damon raised his palms, stopping her.

"We? Who is we? You agreed to work together. I was merely a middleman in all this, and moreover, I work alone."

Xander sighed, knowing they were going to pay Damon one way or the other.

Velora Nyxfall narrowed his eyes.

"Why should we pay such an exorbitant sum of medallions?"

Damon turned his hand slightly, gesturing toward the bridge.

"Because I was the one who invested the most in our victory. I took the difficult job of protecting the bridge from demons and prevented its destruction. I'm sure you're aware the demons destroyed the others."

He smiled at them.

"I gave up my chance to earn medallions. Should I not be compensated for my contribution?"

Abellona crossed her arms, looking at the horizon. The combat zone was shrinking.

"Let me guess. If we don't agree, you'll destroy the bridge?"

"He's bluffing," Magnus spoke coldly.

Damon chuckled with a thin smile.

"That's the beauty of it. You can't be sure. I may or may not destroy our only path to survival and our only certainty of victory. You stand to lose too much. Do you really want to risk it?"

Velora's hands trembled, his gaze cold.

"Y... you're mad. You have to be."

Evangeline closed her eyes, knowing he absolutely would do that.

"He'll do it... but we don't have to risk it. Are we really going to call him out on his bluff or threat? We can't be sure."

Xander glared at Damon.

"Just give it to him. We can obtain more if we kill the demons. For now, we can give in to his demands."

Abellona glared at him, her personal resentment toward him flaring up.

"It doesn't matter if we give it to him now. After all, when the demon threat is over, most of us will go back to being enemies. This many people can't enter a world dungeon anyway."

Damon sneered at her coldly.

"She's right. We are all temporary allies. When Amon is vanquished, your own factions will turn on you to obtain more medallions. Who do you think the primary target is going to be?"

He pointed at his chest with a smile.

"That would be me. The guy with the halo that says 'kill me' and get a guaranteed chance to win fame and glory, or a horrible death in some Goddess-forsaken lower world."

"Hmm. Fine. We'll take you up on your offer on one more condition. We want you to share all the information you have on the demons. You have information, don't you?" Magnus asked after making his demand.

"Of course, of course. That was a given. I love my customers; I always give a bonus."

Abellona clapped her hands together to get everyone's attention.

"Very well then. I believe we can now discuss more important matters. Shall we begin the redistribution of troops and a strategy for our offensive?"

Chapter 716: Fallen Angel

The next few hours were spent planning an assault on the demons. A small reconnaissance force was allowed to cross the bridge.

Led by Velora Nyxfall, an assassin whose reputation for vanishing into shadows was well known, the scouts would be the eyes meant to avoid any traps that might await them beyond the veil of mist covering the demon side.

Abellona sat nearby, though her rest was a light and restless one. She occasionally shot Damon sidelong glances but said nothing.

There were hundreds of magical orbs hovering in the air, their faint blue light flickering like stars, recording and broadcasting every moment to the entire world.

She couldn't risk letting her emotions slip, she still had to act out her role as a princess, even when her heart was heavy with unspoken grievance.

Abellona wasn't the only one looking at him. Xander's gaze kept cutting toward Damon too, sharp and filled with something that made Damon's temples ache.

The combat zone shimmered faintly in the distance, the glowing border shrinking as the army advanced.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

He was certain Lilith had already made it to the main island. His shadow clone had seen her there, darting through the ruins like a phantom, but he'd lost sight of her the moment she teleported away.

'What's she up to anyway.'

Then there was Sylvia. The thought of her made him sigh. He was still worried.

Damon stood to the side, watching the seven-thousand-strong army march. The rhythmic stomps of boots and the metallic clatter of armor echoed across the bridge.

The air trembled with energy, banners fluttered like tongues of fire in the rising wind. The entire formation had been organized and restructured by Abellona herself, though Renata's contribution couldn't be overlooked. Somehow, Renata had achieved the impossible, turning what was once a chaotic, disordered mass of soldiers into a unified, disciplined force that moved as one.

Abellona had even mentioned recruiting Renata, though the latter had shut her down instantly.

Damon remained by the side of the bridge, arms crossed, watching the army march past him. He wasn't assigned any role. No command or soldiers.

No supplies. No resources. Nothing. His task was brutally simple, kill as many demons as possible when the time came.

He wouldn't be joining the early offensive either.

His excuse had been that he hadn't seen Sylvia Moonveil, and he intended to look for her.

"She has to be on the island, right? She was following Lilith."

That uncertainty was reason enough for him to wait while everyone else marched to battle. The magic orbs still hovered around him, capturing his cold, detached expression for the world to see.

But that wasn't the only reason. Damon was still injured, and he preferred to wait until his shadow clone had devoured enough lives for his soul to recover. Only then would he enter the battlefield with his full strength.

One by one, everyone left. They had gone off to fight, leaving only Matia by his side. Waton had also stayed, apparently deciding to stick with Damon for now. Across the lines, he could see the prince on the other side of the bridge answering questions from Wendy, who also hadn't joined the front.

Leona had wanted to remain as well, but Evangeline had dragged her away by the ear, forcing the young beastkin girl to join the fray despite her protests.

'Most of these people will die by my hand... how lucky...'

The thought lingered bitterly as the sound of footsteps approached from behind.

Each stride pressed deep into the soft earth, the crunch of crushed dirt echoing faintly beneath the hum of marching troops.

Damon didn't even turn.

"Xander..."

The brown-haired young man gritted his teeth, voice cutting through the drone of the distant army.

"Damon... you haven't forgotten, have you...?"

Damon turned his head slightly, his eyes flicking toward the floating orbs still recording them.

"You wouldn't want to talk right now, would you..."

Xander's eyes darted to the orbs. Without hesitation, a surge of gravity pulsed from his body, slamming tens of them into the ground with thunderous force. The orbs cracked and shattered, leaving small craters smoking around them.

The backlash hit instantly—Xander's medallions diminished, his body briefly flickered with a curse mark from breaking the orbs, but he didn't seem to care.

He walked up beside Damon, crossing his arms.

"Now we can talk."

Damon sighed, closing his eyes as he felt a familiar pang in his chest, the ache of something he thought he'd buried already.

"What do you want, Xander... You just destroyed public property, you know..."

Xander glared, his expression carved in stone.

"This isn't the time for your jokes, Damon. Our deal. We had a contract. Why aren't you acting?"

Damon's tone remained calm, his eyes half-lidded.

"Revenge isn't something you rush, Xander. It's a dish best served cold. Haven't you heard the saying... for a noble man, even ten years isn't too late for vengeance?"

Xander's fist clenched, his knuckles whitening.

"Why wait when my enemy is within reach? Uphold your vow."

His aura flared violently, distorting the air around them.

"I summon you to fulfill your oath!"

Damon's eyes darkened. The shadow beneath his feet deepened, spreading outward like spilled ink. His smile was cold, sharp, and yet there was a faint sorrow behind it.

"Fulfill yours, Xander. My help was conditional. You haven't met the terms yet. I asked for something before you could earn my aid... Xander, you haven't given it to me."

He turned his head slightly, his voice lowering, smooth and cutting.

"You want revenge? Then you must be willing to pay its price. Keep your oath and I'll keep mine."

"Don't make demands, while giving nothing in return."

The ground beneath Xander cracked, fine lines of energy running through it as his aura flared once again.

The air trembled, humming with the vibration of his fury. He was close, so close to breaking the barrier between second and third class. His hatred burned so fiercely it was almost tangible, a physical pressure pressing down on everything around him.

And then—just as suddenly—it vanished.

"Fine. So be it." His voice was cold, restrained, but full of venom.

"Until then, you will still fight Amon, will you not?"

Damon nodded slightly, watching as Xander's energy stabilized. He had done it. He had broken through. His desire for revenge had pushed him beyond his limits.

But as Damon watched, he couldn't help feeling something heavy settle in his chest. There was a sinister change in Xander, something dark that clung to his soul now.

It was almost tragic, like watching an angel fall from the heavens, plunging into filth until its radiant white wings turned black and its once beautiful form became hideous.

Damon sighed softly.

"I will... I will fight Amon. But Xander..."

He smiled faintly cold, composed, but there was a flicker of sadness in his eyes.

"I hope you're proud of what you've become. As the artist behind your downfall... I can't help but feel a touch of melancholy."

Xander didn't understand his words. Was Damon referring to his descent into hatred, or to their deal? It didn't matter to him. His revenge was all that did.

But Damon knew Xander would misunderstand, that he wouldn't see the truth behind the words. The artist behind his downfall wasn't poetic symbolism. It was literal. Damon was the one who had killed Xander's brother.

Xander turned and walked away, his face set, his aura sharp like the edge of a blade. He joined the marching army without another word.

His departure, however, had consequences.

Not for his revenge, but for Damon.

Because Xander had destroyed the one thing protecting him.

"Run... where will you run now?"

The voice was cold, cutting through the air like frost. Damon sighed quietly.

Xander had destroyed the broadcast orbs, and with them gone, there was nothing keeping Abellona from approaching.

She stepped forward, her presence heavy, her crimson eyes narrowed with restrained anger.

"You have some serious explaining to do," she said, her tone dangerously calm.

"And for both our sakes, I hope it's good."

Damon closed his eyes, resigned to his fate.

"Ah... I was wondering when you'd stop pretending to be patient."

Chapter 717: Off-putting

"So I'm pretending now.. that's laughable coming from you.."

Damon didn't even know how to react to her words. Under normal circumstances, he would've laughed it off with one of his antics, but as the marching army crossed the bridge, his unease grew. His skin prickled, and his instincts flashed warnings through his mind, something dreadful was coming.

"You're really an omen of bad things to come.."

He said that aloud without meaning to. Though the words might've seemed directed at Abellona, he was really speaking about himself. Damon was always involved in things that brought him pain, trauma, and danger.

She scoffed, rolling her eyes, irritation flickering in them.

"I get that a lot... is that a problem..?"

Damon shook his head.

"No, I don't mind it..."

He didn't bother clarifying what he meant. She was here to settle the score with him anyway.

He wondered what she would say next, curiosity pushing down the unease in his chest as he turned to look at her.

Abellona was dressed in red to match her eyes. Bloody gauntlets adorned her hands, her boots hidden beneath her dress, and armor rested where a corset might have been.

Seeing her brought back memories of the dungeon. Damon smiled faintly, realizing he was not immune to a woman's charms, though his face remained calm, betraying nothing of the thoughts lingering behind his eyes.

Abellona narrowed her gaze, noticing the weight of his stare even if it wasn't lustful.

"I should gouge out your eyeballs for your lecherous gaze.."

He smiled softly.

"We meet after what happened, and that's what you have to tell your savior? Or maybe I should call myself a survivor of a difficult ordeal.."

Abellona bit her lip, faint memories flickering, her trying to pin him to the ground.

"What am I supposed to do? Apologize? I think I already suffered enough.."

Damon chuckled, his eyes drifting toward the marching troops.

"Why are you here, princess? You didn't come to reminisce. Are you here out of righteous fury, to punish the vile man from the dungeon?"

Abellona let out a puff of air, uncharacteristic of a princess trained in noble etiquette.

"I wish I was... though I am not particularly angry about that. Sometimes you have to lose something to gain something.."

She glanced at him, her voice quieter.

"It could have been worse, and while losing my chastity wasn't what I intended for myself—"

"Huh? What?" Damon cut her off, blinking. Losing her chastity? What was she even talking about? Damon hadn't touched her. Sure, she'd been under Ashcroft's curse and had gone a bit mad, but he hadn't actually done anything. Maybe he kissed her once or twice, but those were necessary.

'You've got to be kidding me... she's going around thinking I raped her..'

The irony wasn't lost on him. She had been the one pinning him down, but since she had been under the influence, he supposed it could still be considered wrong.

It was strange. Damon had no qualms about killing people, but rape was one line he never crossed.

His eyes widened slightly as Abellona stared back, confusion creasing her brow.

"What... You do intend to take responsibility, do you not? For touching me..?"

Damon raised his head, turning away to avoid her gaze.

Abellona's fingers brushed her abdomen nervously.

"I... I took a test... just to check if I... got pregnant. It's a little early to know, but it seems I'm not with child.."

Damon almost felt his legs give way.

This woman was insane. He hadn't even done anything, and she was already taking pregnancy tests. Why was she suddenly acting so shy?

'I'm the victim here,' he thought bitterly, though it was a gray area at best.

Abellona bit her lip again.

"I... I've been thinking ever since I found out you were alive... and I... I... ermh.."

She fumbled over her words. Damon noticed her legs trembling slightly, a bizarre sight, seeing the infamous Abellona of Destruction stumbling over her speech like a nervous girl. Her face was pale, not from embarrassment but from sheer nervousness.

This was a woman who could decapitate a man with a wave of her spear, and yet here she was, trembling and unsure. She clenched her fists against her dress, unconsciously wiping her sweaty palms on the fabric.

Even Damon found the situation awkward, but his skin was thick enough to handle it.

Abellona took a deep breath.

"I... I decided we should be together..."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

We? Who was "we"? He'd barely even talked to her outside of that dungeon mess. Sure, maybe he'd touched her once or twice, but "we"?

She clenched her fists tighter.

"This is a good opportunity for us. If you take the credit for defeating Ashcroft, you can gain a noble title. I'll advocate for you, even better."

She lifted her head, eyes firm with resolve.

"We can join forces to defeat Amon. If you do, we can skip the formalities, you'll be made a count. You can marry me and become my consort."

Damon just stood there, completely lost. He had expected suspicion, maybe anger, or some attempt to settle debts between them, but this?

'Wait... wait a minute... that's what this is about. She's after my money. She's trying to clear the debt..'

Abellona owed him five billion zeni for saving her. If he married her, that debt would vanish. And if he defeated Amon, he'd be sitting on twenty billion.

'I knew it. She's a schemer. She's after my money..'

She wasn't. But Damon was too much of a miser to think otherwise.

Abellona looked up at him with eyes glistening slightly, tears threatening to fall.

Damon scrunched up his face.

"I'm afraid we can't be official... due to certain reasons.."

Abellona's eyes widened slightly, her heart sinking.

Damon approached her slowly.

"It's not because I don't care about you.."

She raised her head to meet his gaze.

He smiled faintly, every greedy bone in his body, without a word. He took a step and disappeared into the shadows.

This conversation was a little too much for him.

Chapter 718: Mob Army

Her legs felt soft, and her heart tightened into a knot she didn't quite understand. Still, she had to do what needed to be done.

Forcing herself forward, Abellona marched with the troops she was leading, her spear firm in hand. The air around her was thick with tension and iron.

She just couldn't let it go. The way things had ended with Damon ambiguous, uncertain left too many unspoken words lingering in her chest. There was so much she wanted to say, but so little time. That was why she chose to focus on what mattered most.

'Maybe this isn't the time... we can talk after we overcome the world dungeon.'

As she marched into the mist-shrouded main island, the air felt thinner, almost as though she were climbing a mountain.

Abellona did not have fond memories of fighting in mountainous terrain. Troops tired faster, formations faltered, and logistics became a nightmare. Supply lines were impossible to maintain, and any prolonged engagement meant disaster.

Unfortunately, this was not a functioning army. This was a coalition, a collection of adventurers, mercenaries, and desperate souls barely held together by the promise of reaching the dungeon gate. There was no time for proper preparation, no room for error.

The advance reconnaissance group had already secured the area, and the demons had yet to make a move. But Abellona knew better.

Fighting the demons in their fortress was the wrong approach. The objective was not to slay demons but to seize control of the dungeon gate. If Amon, the leader of the demons, had any tactical sense, he would be fortifying that very place.

She halted briefly, her eyes shifting toward Renata, who marched silently a few paces to her right. The violet-haired woman was calm as ever, seemingly untouched by the oppressive bloodlust that filled the air.

Abellona considered running her thoughts by her, but then came the sound.

"Growl..."

Low, guttural growls rippled through the darkness beyond the tree line.

Her eyes narrowed. "Where is the reconnaissance group?"

How could they have let something slip past without alerting the main force?

Then came the rumble. A deep, rolling quake that spread through the forest on all sides.

Abellona's instincts screamed. She didn't need a field report to know, Velora's scouts had been ambushed.

The forest erupted as the ground trembled. From the flanks, a tide of demon beasts burst forth, charging with unrestrained frenzy.

Abellona raised her spear high.

"Battle formation! Maintain formation! Maintain formation!"

The first beast crashed into the flank, its claws tearing through a soldier's neck. Blood sprayed as the flank broke, screams and chaos replacing order in a single heartbeat.

This was not a disciplined army trained to stand firm. It was a ragtag assembly of over seven thousand, bound not by loyalty or command, but by greed and desperation.

And as expected, the moment blood was drawn, the madness of battle took over.

The demon beasts charged with terrifying ferocity. Some breathed fire, others ice; some hurled acidic bile or slashing winds. Every variety of elemental power tore through the ranks, blurring the line between enemy and ally.

The uncoordinated army became its own worst enemy. Friendly spells exploded against their comrades; errant sword swings cut through allies. The rush to reach the front, to claim demon medallions and glory, only fueled the chaos.

It was a massacre of their own making.

From a distant rise, Damon—no, Amon—watched through the eyes of the shadows. He smiled. The pieces were falling exactly where he wanted them.

He had gathered their medallions, held their trust, and let arrogance lead them to ruin.

The army had already resented giving him their medallions, but they believed their sheer numbers would crush the demons easily. That arrogance had blinded them.

And now...

As the flanks faltered, the demon beasts suddenly turned and fled, vanishing into the darkness.

Abellona's eyes narrowed. Demon beasts were intelligent, yes, but not this organized. They never retreated like this unless directed.

Something was wrong.

"After them! Kill them all! Don't let them escape!" roared a scarred adventurer, blood streaming down his face as rage overtook him.

He charged forward into the treeline, and others followed—adventurers, mercenaries, students, reckless fools, ignoring Abellona's orders, abandoning formation for vengeance.

The flank disintegrated completely. Hundreds broke off from the main army, rushing blindly into the forest after their retreating prey.

"Stop! Maintain formation!" one of Abellona's knights shouted, his voice drowned in the storm of magic and screams.

Spells rained across the frontlines, fire and lightning scattering the soldiers further apart.

Evangeline tried to reach the flank, but the mass of panicked troops made it impossible to maneuver. The army's strength in numbers had become its greatest hindrance.

The demons attacked again, from multiple directions this time. Without Velora Nyxfall's reconnaissance team, they had no idea how many enemies were surrounding them.

Abellona gritted her teeth, feeling command slipping away before the battle had even begun.

She spread her wings, her aura igniting as she soared above the chaos.

"Stay in formation!" she roared, her voice shaking the air. But no one listened.

Her eyes darkened. Fine then.

Her spear glowed blood-red as she unleashed a wave of scarlet energy. In an instant, those who had broken formation those too slow to obey, were turned into smoldering corpses.

The battlefield froze. Even the howls of demon beasts paused in the face of her wrath.

Her soldiers trembled as Abellona's glowing eyes swept across them, the promise of death heavy in her voice.

"Stay in formation, and march."

The surviving troops straightened at once, terrified into discipline.

From the shadows, Damon—Amon—watched with quiet satisfaction. Everything was unfolding perfectly.

He hadn't supported Abellona's appointment as commander out of faith. He had done so because she would lose. She was a commander bred for disciplined armies, not a mob of self-serving adventurers.

This outcome was inevitable.

Now the army was divided, and confusion had taken root.

Damon's goal was simple, kill as many as possible before they ever reached the open field leading to the dungeon gate.

And tonight, the chaos he had sown was only just beginning.

#### Chapter 719: Wandering Thoughts

His figure stood before a massive streak of light that seemed to reach the sky. It pulsed faintly with white light.

Damon could feel the faint spatial currents inside it. It was a mystery, and he had been watching it for days. He tried sending his shadow perception inside, but his shadow perception just disappeared. There were no shadows there, and even if there were, he couldn't sense them.

So this is the entrance to a lower world. This lower world was fundamentally a part of the world of Aetherus, but some of them operated on fundamentally different rules, or maybe they were similar.

What mattered was what you could bring back: rare materials, scrolls, knowledge, magic, elixirs, or lost relics.

So much could be gained and with it, fame and fortune.

If you lived to keep them.

'If'

'I wonder where we would be when we die and realize all the things we've been killing ourselves for in this world amount to nothing.'

Wasn't that ironic? You were born into this world against your will, and what you did with your life was your choice. In order to live in some degree of comfort and find moments of fleeting joy, you must suffer a lot more than you enjoy. You must endure a lot more than you rest. And after all you've done, you still die, leaving everything behind.

"Is life really supposed to be fulfilling, or are we here as a punishment from a wicked God?"

All this and that, and you still have to face inequalities. Why weren't you given a choice of your birth? Why was the next person born handsome? Why was the child from the neighboring house born into wealth, yet you were born to parents who cleaned their latrines?

If God were kind, why did he give you this option and not that one? And if he was all-powerful, why didn't he make everyone happy?

These thoughts accumulated in Damon's mind as he watched the world dungeon gate, as if these thoughts weren't his own, as if someone was sharing their opinion through him.

Damon narrowed his eyes as if he were trying to see something, and like a flash, he seemed to see a star bleeding in the white light of the world dungeon gate.

No, the dungeon gate was a Weeping Star. At least, it looked that way.

Damon bit his lips, then he whispered,

"Unknown... God."

It was strange. It felt like he was hearing the contemplations of Unknown himself. Damon knew for a fact that Unknown claimed to be in a constant state of clarity.

This was a God that dwelled in the abyss, and his objective remained as ambiguous and elusive as he was. This was a God transcendent and boundless, all-powerful, and able to ignore something as trifling as death.

Then why are you posing such a question?

"I don't know, and I don't care. Right now, I don't care that I was born... and I don't even care if I die."

He glanced at the white and glowing distortion of the world that was the dungeon gate.

'I've made it here against all odds, and you will fulfill what I was promised. I have come here, and I will obtain my prize.'

He was silent, but he was sure, or maybe unsure that this God could hear his thoughts.

Damon had come so far for his sister, and he was here where the Unknown God had left him, with the belief that he could find a cure for her.

He was unsure what it looked like, but so what?

This was the Unseen Sovereign, and he would not break a promise.

There was a faint ripple in the dungeon gate, but Damon received no response. He only knew that the Unknown God was acting out his intentions.

There were sounds of soft footsteps behind him. Damon didn't turn around; he was still looking at the dungeon gate.

A woman's soft voice echoed out,

"My lord, the offensive has begun. The goddess races are currently engaged in battle against the demon beasts."

Damon nodded slowly. He was still playing the role of Amon, and the demons were still following his orders.

The young woman was the mysterious demon kin from the Snake Temple, but till now, Damon had not gotten a handle on her personality. She hardly spoke, except when she needed to.

"I see... and Bakemon?"

She bowed her head lower, her hood covering her face. Damon had given her the role of his adjutant so she could relay the orders he gave and report them, though she never left his side.

"Bakemon Baal is leading and organizing the demon beasts. As per your plan, the goddess races will lose their numbers. By all estimates, it should take them three days to battle their way here."

Three days. Damon didn't have that kind of patience. He was getting tired of all this.

Why else did he have to rush the offensive? The goddess races were really taking their sweet time.

"Midnight tomorrow. I want their military offensive on the meadow by midnight."

She nodded her head, not questioning his orders. It would have been better for them to hold off and let the enemy starve and exhaust themselves, but Damon was mentally exhausted from using the Faceless skill for days on end.

Even though it didn't affect him the same way it would his main body, his mind was still strained, and his head was starting to ache. Moreover, he wanted to complete his quest as soon as possible.

He had to return Matia back to the way she was before, even if he couldn't bring her back to exactly how she was.

As the young demon kin priestess left, Damon glanced at the flickering dungeon gate.

He gave his own answer.

"I have regrets, and I can't right my wrongs. But I tried, and I am tired of trying. I couldn't frown, so I forced a smile and told myself that I was happy. But I know that's a lie... I'm just tired, and I just want to rest."

He glanced at the shifting light and smiled.

"I told Valarie I would create something beautiful. What could be more beautiful than a world without the likes of me? Before I go, I want to do something right."

He closed his eyes, feeling them grow cold, his nose slightly stiffening.

"That is why I don't care... because the dead have no more worries, only rest."

"If there is paradise, I know I am undeserving to walk through its gates."

## Chapter 720: Retribution

The forest burned under the blazing sun, smoke rising high. Craters were formed, and what had once been a lush ecosystem was consumed by the devastation of war.

Screams and the clashing of steel, accompanied by the whizzing of magical attacks through the air, were drowned only by the sonic booms of the deadly spells that followed.

How much more morbid could war be, when a small conflict that could have been nothing more than children having a scuffle in a forest had produced such devastation?

Dismembered bodies littered the ground. Some were charred remains, some were cut to pieces, others were crushed by immense force. It was as if a sick and deranged child with a vividly visceral imagination had created a picture of death, each demise more grotesquely unique than the last.

More than the screams and devastation was the stench. Death smelled like human waste. It smelled like an abattoir where lives were butchered, only many times worse.

The burnt scent of flesh and wood, and the acid smoke rising into the air, clung to the lungs like poison.

"If people knew war looked like this, would they still want to fight?"

Evangeline reined forward, her face covered in slick mud and blood. Her hair was disheveled, tangled with falling ash, and her armor was blackened with gore.

The battle was reaching its climax. They were victorious. The enemy had retreated to their fortress, and the path to the meadow was open.

Her hand felt heavy. She didn't know how to feel about this until she heard a soft sound beneath the massive carcass of a demon beast that resembled a monstrous cow with six horns and large fangs.

Evangeline slowly approached it. Her duty was not just to be a slayer, she was also a healer, and it was up to her to save those who still clung to life despite all this.

She turned around to the other side where the sound was coming from, and there a large man lay, one of the horns having impaled his armor. Blood had spilled until it dried. His face was pale, his lips dry and cracked.

He was whispering something as he stared into the ash-covered sky.

Evangeline squatted down, leaning close enough to hear what he was saying.

"Mommy..."

That was all he whispered. This man, who looked like he had fought countless battles and endured all the hardships of life, was calling for his mother.

Evangeline lowered her hand over his chest to heal him. Her golden light once again reached out to another lost soul.

This was not the first person to call out to his mother on the battlefield, and he would not be the last.

She heard soft footsteps behind her and sensed the faint presence of Abellona of Valtheron.

The princess behind her was silent for a moment before speaking softly.

"In their last moments, people show who they really are. In the final glimmer of their life, they call out to the first person who ever made them feel safe."

"For most it's their mother."

She glanced at Evangeline, who was healing the man, though he was already a lost cause.

"They were warriors in life, but in death, we are merely children who call out to our mothers to save us."

Evangeline tried—she really tried—but even with her radiance, the man lost the light in his eyes and stopped calling out to his mother. His will had died.

"Now he has returned to the Goddess of Doom," Abellona whispered, having been through this many times before.

Evangeline bit her lip, her heart heavy with grief.

"Is this just..."

"No. It is war," Abellona replied.

"Do not ask for justice here. You will find none. Justice cannot be found in the chaos of battle, only in the order that comes after."

Evangeline clenched her fist.

"When dawn comes, it doesn't erase the horrors of the night. It only shows how much we've failed."

Abellona didn't really understand what Evangeline meant. She didn't know much about this young woman, save for several official meetings over the years.

"Is that a bad thing? Dawn might come late, but it always comes. Sometimes justice is late, but never its retribution. That always comes."

"Retribution..." Evangeline whispered softly.

Abellona took a deep breath.

"We have reached the fort, and as expected, it was their supply line. However, for some odd reason, they have chosen not to defend it."

This part confused Abellona deeply.

Why didn't the demons keep the fort? The coalition force was focused on the dungeon gate and wasn't exactly disciplined. Without holding the fort, they couldn't advance without fearing a demon attack from the rear, forcing them to attempt a siege.

"It would have weakened us even if we managed to take it eventually."

"Then why did they give it up?" Abellona was more confused than before.

All her logic told her that keeping the fort would have been the wiser move. It would have taken at least a few days to capture.

"Why?"

Evangeline clenched her fist, looking around, her eyes scanning for Leona, who had been separated from her.

"They're luring us to the meadow. Their leader is saying he doesn't need cheap tricks or a battle of attrition to defeat us."

Abellona nodded, her crimson eyes narrowing as the ashen air filled her lungs.

"The question is, should we answer? It could be a trap."

Evangeline picked up her sword, standing up from beside the dead man. All his goals and wishes had ended here. The magical orbs around them were still watching and broadcasting this horrific sight. They had won, but at what cost?

Would it really continue like this, for them, for this world? Ruins after every battle, and the hubris of men denying that their world was already a post-apocalyptic ruin.

"I... I'm scared," Evangeline whispered.

"I've been scared, but I'm more afraid of doing nothing about it, like I always have. There is no justice on the battlefield."

"Thus, I will bring the dawn."

A bright glow spread from her body, illuminating the path ahead.