

Shadow 741

Chapter 741: Drink It

A lot of things didn't make sense here. There were too many questions, too many gaps but Damon had a few conjectures.

The first was that this was the past, and somehow, it would affect the future.

The second was that none of this was real, and he was simply trapped inside his own mind after being consumed by the nightmare.

However, seeing Matia standing there before him, Damon had to admit, as painful as it was... this was reality. And the reality of things was simple: everyone was dead.

Then again, his brain was easily able to imagine all of these.

All his friends, save for Matia, were dead.

It was ironic he had been the one who wanted to die, yet he was the one left alive.

Seeing her again made something within his heart ache. This should have been a joyous moment, but instead, Damon could only feel sorrow pressing against the walls of his mind.

Matia stood before him, her figure stalwart and composed, cold as a winter monument.

Her very presence carried a chill that crept into the air, the first true sensation Damon had felt since awakening in this dark prison. Her eyes cold and blue glowed faintly beneath the visor of her helm.

But she wasn't alone.

A step behind her stood Ghost the shadow of what was once an elf, now reduced to a bound wraith under Matia's will.

Damon felt a faint flicker of disappointment. He couldn't summon the lesser demon hidden within his own shadow. That, however, would have to wait.

"Can... you take off your helm?"

Matia slowly nodded. Her helm dissolved into drifting flakes of snow, revealing her face, a breathtaking visage of ethereal beauty. The pale, flawless skin, the eyes like shards of frozen sky, she looked as though a god obsessed with perfection had sculpted her.

"She's quite a sight to behold. How did such a fine creature end up with one like you?" Lazarak's amused tone carried a hint of fascination.

Damon didn't react much.

"I wonder about that too," he muttered.

He had brought out the vial of primordial shadow essence, one of many strange items he had pulled from his shadow storage. But since he had no physical body here, he couldn't actually pick it up.

Still, the essence within glimmered faintly inside its glass prison, as though someone had trapped a living shadow, writhing against the confines of the vial.

Damon could feel it—it was potent, powerful, something that resonated deeply with his very being. If he used it on himself, he had a feeling he could easily restore his physical body.

But that wasn't his intent. Damon would not give up a chance to restore Matia not for himself.

He remembered when she had given him her wings. That day, she became the first person to make him believe that kindness could be genuine.

When she had sacrificed her wings to restore his arm... she hadn't just saved him physically. She had saved him from himself.

'That day, she saved me in more ways than one.'

She had made him a better man, reminded him that being kind wasn't always at a cost.

In the end, Damon was still not a good person. But he wasn't entirely bad either. Perhaps it was this contradiction, this balance of selfishness and selflessness, that made him so infuriating.

Matia's eyes shifted toward the vial of shadow essence. Damon's formless shadows flickered faintly.

"It's yours," he said softly.

Matia nodded and stepped forward, lifting the vial. She examined it closely, her expression still and unreadable. Damon wasn't sure she understood what he wanted her to do.

"It's able to fully restore the personality of a shadow... it's yours," he repeated.

Matia remained silent, her gaze fixed on the vial.

"What a marvelous potion..." Lazarak's shadowed voice slithered from the darkness.

"All of these seem to have been crafted with an impossible precision. Powerful, yet made intentionally weak."

The god of darkness examined the weapons and potions Damon had drawn from his shadow storage.

"You're quite an interesting creature. I never would have pegged someone so ugly for having such a beautiful artistic sense."

If Damon still had teeth, he would have gritted them.

"I'm not ugly. And keep your hands off my stuff. Besides... I didn't make them."

Lazarak chuckled darkly. "I knew it. I knew you'd have an artist's touch."

Damon ignored him, his focus locked solely on Matia as she approached the steps of the altar.

She began to uncork the vial, lifting it toward Damon's hovering, formless heart.

"Stop," Damon ordered sharply.

Her body froze mid-motion.

"Why am I not surprised... you would do this," he said bitterly. "You've always had a tendency to sacrifice yourself."

She had done it for Damon before. She had done it for Sylvia too. He shouldn't have been surprised that she'd try to do it again, to restore him before herself.

He sighed softly, black flames flaring around his shadowed form as his tone softened.

"I didn't want to do this to you, to make you act against your will. I'm sorry, Matia..."

His tone darkened, an edge cutting through the words.

"But I also can't let you ruin your one chance to regain what you've lost, for the likes of me. Not again."

His voice dropped low, final.

"Drink it."

Her hands trembled. She tried to resist, to fight the order, but her body obeyed.

Slowly, she lifted the vial to her lips. The shadow essence within poured down her throat like living darkness.

For a moment, silence. Then Matia dropped to her knees, clutching her head in agony.

Her body convulsed violently as she slammed against the pillars and chains around her, the sound echoing through the chamber.

Lazarak's voice broke the silence, filled with astonished delight.

"What sorcery is this..."

His tone trembled with fascination. Whatever Damon was, whatever mysterious power he commanded, it intrigued the god beyond measure.

But Damon didn't care what Lazarak thought. His gaze never left Matia. His formless shape pulsed, his attention locked on her as she writhed in pain.

Then, slowly, she rose.

Her movements were steady, controlled. Her gaze swept the altar, calm and unreadable.

Damon waited. Watching hopeful .

"Did... did it work?" he asked hesitantly.

Matia's eyes met his. She gave a slow, deliberate nod.

Damon's faint, shadow heart constricted.

"Then why aren't you speaking..." His tone faltered, almost defeated.

Until she finally spoke.

"I didn't feel the need to. If that is your order, then, my lord... I will endeavor to do so."

And with that, Matia knelt before him.

Chapter 742: Born In Darkness Forged In Ruin

This was a little different from what he remembered, but Damon felt a burst of emotions.

"...You... you... you spoke..."

Damon felt a small sense of joy for the first time in quite a while. In his darkest hour, hearing Matia's voice made him hopeful. She had saved him once more.

He felt reinvigorated.

Lazarak merely watched the proceedings without saying anything.

Matia didn't speak further. Her expression didn't seem to change. She wasn't the same girl he had envisioned.

Damon remembered the trembling girl who was more afraid than anyone, yet brave enough to fight despite her fears.

The girl who fought so she could be herself was the one who was lost.

She was the one who became a shadow.

"I... I... You seem... different. You don't seem much different from when you were a shadow..."

He muttered those words as if something was wrong with them.

Matia's expression was taciturn.

"I am not different.... I am a shadow."

She could sense Damon's sadness and disappointment, so she forced herself to speak more than she needed to.

"I wished to change, from someone weak to my ideal self... and this is my ideal. I spent years fighting in the darkness alone."

Damon felt a sting in his heart. She must have been afraid, surrounded by darkness and horrors.

"I was afraid, but I was more afraid of staying the same. I was a fairy born in darkness and forged in ruin... I am your shadow."

Her words didn't make Damon feel any better.

"I'm sorry... for failing to save you. I'm sorry for turning you into this. You didn't ask for this. This was a choice that I made."

The tone of his voice was low. Matia suddenly felt a pang in her heart. She knew what Damon sounded like when he was ashamed.

She was his shame. His shadow.

Having regained all her feelings, her memories, and the ability to connect her thoughts beyond instincts and fragmented recollections, Matia wanted to speak her part. To tell him what she had been unable to all this time, all the time he had been eaten away by guilt.

"It was my choice. It was my choice to be your shadow."

Damon saw it, what he hadn't seen on her face this whole time. Emotions. Her eyes flickered.

Matia pressed her hand on her chest. Her heart was beating. It was beating again.

She was alive. She really was alive. Her memories that had seemed dull and disconnected were flooding back, illuminating her.

"I was asked. I was given a choice: peace or return as your shadow. I chose to be your shadow. I chose to fight. So please... accept me as I am."

Matia's voice was aggrieved. She lowered her head.

"Let me be your sword."

She lowered her head as her formless, icy weapon reshaped into a sword, which she laid down before him.

"I am merely a woman, and I cannot change that. But I swear I will be better than a thousand men. I swear to follow you to the highest heavens and to the deepest abyss."

Her hands trembled. Damon saw it, the face of the young girl from that day, the one who had told him she wanted to be herself.

Damon felt his heart constricting.

"And if I want to kill a god..."

"I will fight a god," Matia replied calmly.

"And if I want to destroy the world?"

"The world shall be no more," she answered.

"If I wanted to burn cities and kill innocents?"

"No one is innocent. Cities shall burn," she spoke coldly.

"What if I didn't want you as my shadow?"

"Then I shall insist on following you till the end," she replied without hesitation.

"Matia... I want you to be free," Damon whispered softly.

"I want the freedom to be chained to you," Matia replied without hesitation.

"Bravo, bravo. That was beautiful. I was so moved. Such loyalty... I was in tears," Lazarak's voice echoed as he interrupted them.

Damon glanced at Lazarak's direction, then sighed.

"I'm not winning this, am I..."

Matia didn't say anything. She merely equipped her helm and picked up her sword coldly.

A sword needed no words, and a knight wouldn't speak unless addressed.

Besides, not speaking was a habit she had picked up from fighting in that dark hellhole for years.

There was no need to speak. Her actions would speak for her.

"You really don't mind obeying orders? I mean, I would hate that."

Matia's eyes flickered.

Then she spoke one last time.

"I'd hate if you took orders. Keep charting your path. I will follow as your silent shadow. I will show my wretch of a father just how much more inferior his king is."

Damon laughed, though his laughter hid a trace of sadness. This was not what he expected. This was not what he had envisioned.

That would be interesting if Damon didn't actually die.

"Now then... Lazarak, shall we proceed with the plan?"

Damon spoke, his voice echoing.

Lazarak was silent for a moment.

"Plan? What plan? I wouldn't call something like that a plan, but suppose it's a start."

He gazed at Matia's form, encased in armor.

"Erm... between the both of us, is it really okay to send such a delicate lady up there? I mean, some of those guys aren't exactly the most pleasant to be around."

Matia's eyes turned chilling. Was Lazarak looking down on her because she was a woman? Feeling her cold gaze, the darkness made the sound of a throat clearing.

"Ahem... my bad, my bad. You're a strong, independent woman."

Damon wasn't buying it, but he never planned to send Matia up there.

"There's no need for you to worry. She won't be going up there. I would."

Lazarak was silent for a moment, then glanced at Damon's disembodied heart, chuckling.

"Oh yeah? And how do you intend to do that? By removing your soul from your non-existent body and getting a new one?"

Damon was silent, but if he had a body, he would be smiling.

"More or less."

Chapter 743: Repose

He had lost so much, his friends, his sanity, and now his physical body.

What little he had left, he was afraid to lose. Damon was inherently a selfish person, a man who believed it was better to die than live through the pain of watching loved ones die instead.

It was a twisted, fatalist mindset, yet this same mindset had been the driving force that allowed Damon to endure.

He believed that his own death would lead to his sister's demise. For that reason, he endured. For that reason, he could still endure.

Life is forged through misery and pain, and strength can only be found by persevering through its trials.

Eventually, one day, you shall die, and all that would mean nothing.

This was the driving force, and now he was close, close to his long-sought, rightful exit.

No man or outcome could stop his hand.

By finding the cure for his sister, Damon's struggles would finally come to an end.

However, overcoming this hurdle was the first step.

Damon's shadows flickered wildly as he began to use a skill he had not called upon in a long time.

His own astral form began to break free from his disembodied remains.

Damon had three things that contributed to a good possession.

The first was his crown, which allowed him to dominate and possess the minds of his targets when he defeated them.

The second was his Soul Conduit skill, which allowed him to puppeteer the soul to a degree.

Finally, the most risky one, Astral Projection, which allowed him to remove his own soul from his body.

Damon normally didn't use the third one, relying instead on a combination of the first two. However, he was heavily suppressed within this prison, and for that reason, he had to use everything he had to possess a new, temporary vessel.

The vessel he chose was Ghost, a shadow.

Ghost wouldn't resist his will, and since he was Damon's shadow, he would work just fine.

Besides, if he was destroyed, Damon could live with that.

It wasn't like he saw any irreplaceable value in Ghost's continued existence. He was just a useful pawn and nothing more.

The shadow knelt before the flickering shadowy flames as Damon forced his soul out of his body through Astral Projection.

He instantly felt a chill wind touch his very core, as if that cold wind wanted to snuff out the fire of his life, extinguishing his will.

Damon endured as his form hovered in front of Ghost, threads made from the Soul Conduit skill connecting him to his formless remains, invisible to the naked eye.

Lazarak watched with keen interest.

"Hmmm... I'm surprised. I would expect no less from you."

Damon thought Lazarak was impressed with his skill, but the god was about to disappoint him.

"You actually imagined yourself as a handsome, strapping young man with long black hair."

Damon would have gritted his teeth if he still had them, or at least mimicked the expression with his soul.

"I see why you're in prison."

Ignoring Lazarak, he focused on Ghost, who was kneeling on the ground. Matia silently watched without a word, though Damon noticed a flicker of worry in her eyes.

He placed his soul's hand on the forehead of the shadow, and with a soft flash of twisting darkness, he began to force himself into the shadow's body.

Ghost's body went still for a moment, then moved.

Damon raised his hand. It felt different, slightly heavy, but still comfortable enough.

This body was much weaker than his own, yet Damon could sense its strengths. The arm strength was decent since this vessel had once been an archer.

"I can make use of his skill set."

He stood up, carefully getting acclimated with the body, hopping around and using the shadow's skills.

Lazarak sighed softly in the darkness.

"What an insidious and evil ability. No wonder you're imprisoned here. Something this vile is too much."

He paused, almost weary, before continuing.

"Though what makes it terrifying is your lack of hesitation to use it."

Damon tilted Ghost's head with a thin smile. This body was made purely of shadows, solidified to mimic flesh.

"Yes, I like it that way. I hesitated once, and I regretted it. I won't make that mistake again."

He glanced at Lazarak with a cold, evil smile.

Reaching down, he picked up the bow he had drawn from his shadow storage. Raising it, he aimed in Lazarak's general direction. Matia unsheathed her sword, ready to strike if he made a move.

"You see, I've heard your whole peace-loving thing or whatever. I can tell, Lazarak... you're a noble god. I've had some experience with noble people. I've run into quite a few of them, and let's just say it's never been a pleasant experience for me."

Damon's eyes narrowed on the darkness.

"Your noble aspirations are well-meaning, but noble aspirations won't help us here. I do not trust you, but I also do not doubt you. That's a first for me, I admit."

The bow quivered as mana poured into the arrow, Damon preparing to use one of its enhancements.

"Make it clear, what are your intentions?"

Lazarak was silent, then laughed. The god of darkness and serenity laughed.

"Ahhh, that's so funny. You sound just like my brother. But fine, you're right. However, I already told you my intentions."

Damon saw the darkness move.

"Peace is my nature, my friend, but peace can often be the cause of war. By my nature, I am the child of doom and the brother of war."

Lazarak gazed at him.

"When I see you, I see death—its seeker and its bringer. That is why I know you will help me. Of that, I have faith."

Damon narrowed his eyes as the darkness began to take a more solid form.

"You hate it too. You hate life, and you hate war."

"I am Lazarak, god of darkness, peace, serenity, and repose."

His voice was calm and gentle.

"I offer you repose. That is the reward for aiding me. I ask you to be my friend, O tired one who seeks rest."

"Peace is my nature," Lazarak said, his voice echoing like a lullaby sung from the bottom of a grave.

"All things yearn for me in the end, the child, the tyrant, the god. Even you. You fight, you bleed, but what you seek is not victory... it is rest. I am that rest."

Damon frowned, lowering his hands.

"I am cursed with life. How will you bring repose to one such as I?"

The darkness spread, condensing into a single long spear.

It was death.

Chapter 744: Peace And Death

It was a black spear. This spear was quite unique in its design because both sides of the long shaft had a sharp tip.

The body of the spear gleamed and almost felt organic, yet there was a strange wrongness to this weapon, and at the same time, a familiar rightness.

It felt divine, like an absolute truth many would be forced to face. He felt the inevitability of its nature.

Damon knew this sensation all too well. This was death, straight up.

It was death given physical form.

"What... what is this..." Damon whispered.

Lazarak seemed to chuckle, yet his tone was anything but happy.

"That is Mutuwa... death. It is a spear made from a single strand of the goddess's hair and imbued with my essence... my repose."

Lazarak glanced at Damon.

"This is what you have been looking for, hasn't it? This is it. This is what death looks like."

Damon was silent. He had a feeling this was something that could truly kill him. Even deathless might not save him from this spear.

"Take it. It's yours now. I give you death."

Lazarak whispered softly to Damon as he reached out, tempted by the offer.

Then, full-on paranoia, as always, struck him. Damon glanced at the god of darkness.

"If you had such a weapon, why are you imprisoned here? Why not use it yourself?"

Lazarak moved, and a whooshing sound echoed through the void.

He didn't give Damon a response, so Damon questioned him further.

"You say you are a god of peace, yet you also embody death. Death is found everywhere, in wars, yet you reject war."

Lazarak laughed at Damon's suspicion.

"I am a god of peace and repose, not death. Similar, but not the same. Death has many forms. I embody a peaceful death and the rest that comes after. Like I said, I placed my essence when I forged this spear."

Damon was still suspicious of Lazarak.

"A weapon like this must have drawbacks."

"I never said it didn't. You can only use it once before it vanishes. The goddess wouldn't allow its continued existence here. After all, it is just a strand of hair," Lazarak replied nonchalantly, as if Damon's paranoid questioning was something he expected.

"This can kill anything but a true god."

Damon crossed his arms, now acclimated to his ghost body.

"How did you even come across a strand of the goddess's hair?"

That was a pretty valid question. The goddess's hair wasn't something that would just be lying around.

"I found it lying around," Lazarak answered calmly.

Damon did not believe him.

"What? I'm not being dishonest. I found it lying around. Did you forget I was the first to be created?"

Lazarak's tone was unusually reminiscent.

"Before there was light, there was darkness."

"Before there was war, there was peace."

"Before there was Aetherus, there was Lazarak."

"I came first, and for that reason, I happened to be there when she created everything else. I just so happened to pick up a strand of her hair that fell."

Lazarak continued as if picking up the goddess's hair was no big deal, unaware that he had left Damon dumbfounded.

"I mean, I kept it around as a keepsake for a few thousand years... well, until I was imprisoned here, which may or may not have been the reason I made a weapon out of it."

Matia slowly took off her helm. She had been quiet until now, piecing everything together from their conversation.

"Apologies for speaking out of turn. Aren't you a god of peace though? Doesn't that go against your nature?" she asked, her tone calm.

Lazarak glanced at the shadow who was now free to speak.

"How would you know light exists if there was no darkness? How can you know war if there was never peace? Wars are fought to protect peace."

"Therefore, peace can also wage wars."

Lazarak scoffed coldly, though there was a deep sadness in his tone.

"I am, after all, the creation of the goddess of doom. I was the original that didn't meet her expectations. That was why she created Aetherus, because I failed to be."

"I am a child who failed his mother. A shame."

Damon suddenly understood Lazarak a bit more. He also understood what it felt like to not meet the expectations of one's parent.

If Damon's father were alive, he wondered how disappointed he would be in how dishonorable and vile he had become.

"So... you're basically throwing a temper tantrum. Here I thought it was because you wanted to save everyone."

Damon smiled. Lazarak wasn't as benevolent as he had thought. He was just like all of them, flawed.

But in his own way, he wanted to achieve his selfish goals.

"If we do this, the future you create might still not be peaceful. Do you still want to go ahead with your plans?"

Lazarak was silent. Then he spoke in a calm, assured voice.

"My brother once told me, 'Life must burn to know it lives.'"

"but tell me.... can it truly live if it burns?"

His tone was somber.

"I want to thank you for showing me my wishes were not selfless. I want peace. I'm not fighting for everyone's peace alone. I am also fighting for mine."

The darkness speared all around them.

"This frustration that I feel is also mine. This sadness is also mine. I want peace, and I know I must win it. I call you, Damon Grey... help me achieve my goal."

Damon glanced at him. Lazarak's darkness molded itself into an arm several meters long, reaching out to Damon.

"Let us bring the age of the gods to an end."

Damon hesitated for a moment, then took the arm of darkness.

"From now, we'll do things my way. My way is going to be bloody, and you might not like it."

"I'll try my best to hold back my distaste. You do the things only you can, and I will do what I can."

Damon smiled, nodding as he picked up the spear.

"Then we have a deal."

"Let this day be remembered as the start of a beautiful friendship," Lazarak whispered.

History was made when the gods of peace met with the shadow steeped in blood, seeking its own end.

Peace perished when it was mistaken for death.

Chapter 745: No Chamber

Lazarak's words were not enough for Damon to trust him, but he had stopped being paranoid.

For now, there were still questions Damon had not asked and some he had not thought of, but for the moment, he just wanted to get those nasty chains off his body, or what was left of it.

A small shadow slied through the darkness of a narrow stairwell. Small grating sounds echoed all around him. Still, he moved with caution, careful not to spread his senses lest something attack him.

This body didn't have shadow perception.

Lazarak had told him not to worry too much, as all creatures in this realm had to submit to its law, which kept their strength at a limited rank. For this place, the rank limit was the fourth-class advancement, with the sole exception of Seraph Null, who was the god of this world and could fight at his full power here.

That was not a good sign for Damon. He stood no chance against something at the seventh-class advancement. Lazarak had told him the weakest threshold for being a god was the seventh class.

Which meant anything that didn't have at least that rank couldn't even be considered a god.

The thought made Damon wonder how powerful Lazarak actually was.

He tried to keep his mind from wandering. His objective was to obtain the cure for his sister, but he wasn't getting any closer to his goal.

The narrow stairwell came to an end. Damon continued climbing down.

Yes, he was climbing down to go up. This prison was just one of the unusual places Damon had been, despite Lazarak being in the deepest levels.

They actually had to climb down to reach the upper levels.

That part had confused Damon at first, but he seemed to have gotten the hang of it.

'If that's their best trap, then I'm not impressed.'

He found himself in a wide, open field of bottomless darkness when the stairs ended. There was supposed to be some pathway here or a chamber, anything. Yet all Damon saw was endless darkness and the far edges of walls on every side, as if someone had poured liquid night into the chamber.

On the opposite side, there was a dark passage leading to a similar stairwell as the one he had come from.

He materialized from the shadows with a frown on his face.

"Me and my big mouth." This was instant karma. He had just been gloating about how the stairwell trap was too simple, and now this.

He glanced at the wide chasm. It was more than a kilometer wide.

Which wasn't much really. He could easily jump it. Damon turned to give himself a running start, then stopped at the last minute.

"No... that's too easy. They want me to jump."

That was true. A kilometer-wide jump would be nothing for Damon or any prisoner in the deepest part of Eidolon.

"Why would they make it so obvious..."

Damon bit his lips or rather, the lips of the shadow he was possessing. This would have been easier in his own body; he could have just used the air walk skill. Even then, he'd be stupid to risk it.

Honestly, looking at this chasm reminded him of something. A memory he really didn't want to recall. A few months ago, when his party had crossed the Duhu Mountains, they had to cross a bridge hanging over a chasm.

This one gave him the same feeling he felt looking down that bridge, only many times worse.

"No... they wouldn't... no one is that diabolical."

He really hoped it wasn't what he was imagining. Damon really wanted a scapegoat to go first.

He sighed and sat down cross-legged at the stairwell exit, staring at the other side.

"If only I had a guide or a journey book... where is Sylvia when you need her..."

He felt sad at the thought, holding his head and biting his lips.

"Right... she's dead..."

Damon's hands trembled, feeling his heart far in the deepest layers of the prison, where his true form was beating with twisted pain.

"No... I can't make conclusions. If they're dead, I want to see their remains."

He stood up, clenching his fists.

"Hope is a sweet poison. We get drunk on its taste as it slowly kills us. Abandon hope and abandon inevitable pain, you will be disappointed."

Damon whispered those words to himself.

Picking up a small rock, he turned to the walls and carved:

"Ye who exit, abandon hope... but deny despair."

He took a deep breath, shaky, his hands holding firmly to his father's broken sword, his dealer's hand.

First, he picked up a larger piece of rock.

With all his might, he threw it to the other side, and surprisingly, it flew across the darkness of the passage without issue. Damon heard the sound of it landing and hitting the stairs there.

He glanced at the darkness below him, raising his head to find a similar darkness above.

Closing his eyes, he muttered a prayer, more out of habit than faith.

"Hail the goddess of doom, bringer of death and mother of the circle of inevitability. Let my end come only after I have obtained that which I seek."

Damon would have prayed to the Unknown God, but he was giving that bastard the cold shoulder.

Then again, praying to Doom was habit, not faith.

He didn't know which of them was good for him, but he did know all gods were selfish. After all, they had mortal hearts, and therefore mortal flaws.

Damon held a bow in his hand and waited about an hour. After making sure everything seemed calm and nothing in the darkness moved, he decided it was time to go.

Emerging from the shadows with a running start, he jumped toward the other side, a sonic boom following him. He took off at the last possible moment, streaking through the air like a bullet.

The darkness swirled below his feet as he soared toward the other side. Then—

The space began to stretch. Damon's eyes widened as the distance between the two sides expanded endlessly.

If he wasn't in a body of solid shadow, he would have paled. But that was only the beginning of his troubles. From the darkness, fast as bolts of lightning, black holes shot out with circular maws, each mouth wider than a wyvern's wings.

Damon gritted his teeth as his momentum died.

"Damn it..."

He twisted his body as he fell toward the worms. At the last moment, he turned into a shadow, evading the first one as he fell into the darkness that was their nest, or their prison.

Chapter 746: Murmur Worms

Damon thought this was the end for his shadow, but he was not about to give up. Twisting his body, he pulled an arrow using his dealer's hand and willed it to float. He stepped on it as he tried to fly on the metal of his sword.

But a large maw came rushing toward him, choking the air as it smashed him down into the darkness. Pain tore through his body, and the shock almost separated his astral form from his body.

He tried to regain control, but his body plummeted into the depths surrounded by large black worms. Damon's astral projection saw larger chains flickering as they held the worms bound to the darkness.

He closed his eyes as the shadows consumed him.

Then—

"Thud."

His broken body hit the ground. Pain racked through him as his astral form shot out into the open, a chill touching his soul.

Before he could regain his bearings, he heard a chuckle.

"That ended better than I expected."

This voice was familiar. Damon turned slightly, finding the familiar darkness where Lazarak's form filled the space.

Matia was standing beside his throbbing, disembodied heart, her expression unreadable.

Damon glanced down to find, ghost's body he had been possessing damaged and in shambles. His arm was twisted at an unnatural angle, his ribs were exposed, and one eye was closed as black shadows bled from his wounds.

He had fallen all the way from the upper floor back to where he had originally started. His astral form returned to his heart, hovering over flickering shadow-like flames.

"Ajhrq, that was a disaster..."

He spread his shadow perception toward Lazarak.

"Why didn't you warn me?"

Lazarak was almost unable to speak through his muffled laughter.

"You seemed so confident. I didn't want to burst your bubble. Besides, I believed in you. Honestly, you should be proud, it's not every day a god says he believes in someone."

Damon scoffed as Matia picked up a few potions from the pile Lazarak had been studying and began feeding them to the ghost.

The poor shadow was still unconscious, unaware of the horrible things waiting for him.

"Now what? Are you giving up?" Lazarak asked, already expecting Damon's answer.

"Not on your life. The first attempt was just a test."

Damon didn't want Lazarak to have another laugh at his expense, especially after that ego-stroking.

"Besides, this was all part of my plan."

Lazarak wasn't about to let a chance for amusement slip away in this dull prison.

"Really now? Falling and looking confused must have been part of your plan. Speaking of which, what was up there anyway?"

Damon would have bitten his lip, but the flicker of the flames gave enough of an answer.

"Nothing much, just some little earthworms. Next time I'll take some salt with me."

Lazarak's darkness rolled with soft whooshing sounds, then he spoke.

"Hmm, worms, huh? I see... black ones with circular maws? Ah, I see Murmur Worms. Yeah, those nasty things have a bad habit of eating regions to ruin. They especially hate when something flies over them."

His tone turned serious.

"You must have the devil's luck to have survived that encounter."

Damon sneered at his words.

"I happen to pray to the goddess. In case you didn't notice, I'm a devout believer."

Lazarak scoffed with disdain.

"Yeah, sure. That's why you're imprisoned in Eidolon. Must be tough love."

Damon clicked his tongue. He was the farthest thing from a beloved devotee of the goddess. In truth, he was closer to her enemy.

Lazarak cleared his throat, though Damon wasn't sure the formless darkness even had one.

"From what I know, they have habitats in places with lost souls, evil spirits, and some inhumane horrors."

Matia turned to him, her gaze cold.

"Horror? Do you mean those abominable entities that are sick parodies of life?"

"Oh, so you've seen some of them? Hmm, you two are truly wretched creatures."

"Those particular types of creatures are natives of this world, but most are born from twisted memories and imagination. They dwell and grow in places that have a thin rift to the realm where the mind resides."

Damon's shadow flickered.

"Do you mean the Metaverse?"

Lazarak chuckled lightly.

"You're quite a knowledgeable creature. You must have vast experience. Yes, that's what it's called, the Metaverse. Though I pray none of us ever see the horrors that dwell there. If the ones in our world are already this bad, imagine how much worse the horrors born in the minds of gods and alien worlds must be."

Damon could almost feel an intense longing in Lazarak's voice, there was no fear in it.

If what Lazarak said was true, it explained a lot about the Duhu Mountains. Or rather, it confirmed it. He even had a skill that had mentioned something similar.

Before he could dwell on the thought, Ghost woke up. He stood shakily and glanced toward Damon's heart, hovering with its crown in flickering shadows.

There was a trace of fear in the shadow's eyes, but Damon wasn't bothered.

"Come, Ghost. We're trying again. This time, we go with my second plan."

Ghost knelt as Damon possessed him once more. He turned to Lazarak, suspicion in his tone.

"Ahhhj, you dastardly bastard. You knew, dammit! You said earlier... you weren't even referring to the worms. You were talking about the damn horrors."

"What? No, I didn't," Lazarak defended himself.

Damon gave him a deadpan look and repeated what he said word for word:

"Erm... between the both of us, is it really okay to send such a delicate lady up there? I mean, some of those guys aren't exactly the most pleasant to be around."

Damon glared at him. "That's what you said."

Lazarak cleared his throat, guilt creeping into his voice.

"Don't worry. It's not that bad. Some of them aren't as horrible as they could be. Besides, you're not a delicate young lady, your ugliness might even scare them."

"I believe in you ..."

Damon bit his lip as he turned into a shadow, slipping out of the room.

No wonder Lazarak had asked if he was sure about sending a lady up there.

It was freaking haunted.

Chapter 747: Other Side

The darkness was calm and still. Damon had once again found himself right where he started or right where he ended, depending on how you looked at it.

After about two hours of studying the darkness, Damon had more or less figured out how to pass. It was tempting to try and jump over it, but there was another way.

He poked his head through the exit, gazing into the shadows and the shallow forms of the Murmur Worms. Either that or his imagination was playing tricks on him.

Damon glanced at the sides of the walls.

"Suppose I have no choice then."

There was only one way he could think of to move along the edges of the wall until he reached the other side.

Taking out two daggers, he stabbed them along the edge and began to climb. He paused, glancing down at the darkness as he imagined a Murmur Worm shooting out to grab him. The urge to gulp almost reached his throat as he remembered how that unfortunate wyvern had been utterly ripped to pieces by one of their kind.

Damon stabbed the dagger into the wall. The smooth surface was surprisingly harder than before. His dagger created a small spray of sparks and a clicking noise that echoed out.

He quickly turned his head downward. Nothing. The darkness remained still. He let out a small sigh of relief.

Looking at the daggers, it seemed the wall was too hard after the initial stab, which meant Damon would have to climb along its sides even with no purchase, clinging to virtually nothing.

Or at least, it would have been difficult if not for his dealer's hand.

It floated beneath his feet, giving him leverage to stand on one leg while his hands and the other leg pressed against the wall.

Damon didn't know if ghost could sweat, but if this had been his own body, he would have broken out in a cold sweat.

Slowly and silently, he began to move along the edge of the smooth wall. It was slow and arduous, but Damon persevered, reaching the first corner. Turning back, he leaned his back against the angle and held himself between the two sides.

Then he glanced at the passageway, he was halfway there.

He almost laughed at how easy it seemed or rather, how annoyingly difficult it actually was.

Taking a breath, he continued to the other side, slowly reaching the next angle. He was now sideways to the far end of the chasm. The worms didn't even seem to sense him or they simply didn't care.

Carefully, he inched toward the passage.

Damon edged closer until his hands reached the entrance. All he needed to do was pull his body up.

With a stretch of his muscles, he pulled himself toward the passage, until something grabbed his hand.

Damon hung at the edge as he saw a long, grey arm with thin, bony fingers and long hair wrap around his wrist. He felt its immense strength as it squeezed tightly. Tilting his body, he placed one leg on the edge of the passage, but another hand of similar length grabbed his face.

Damon felt his skin crawl, or a sensation close to it when he looked at what was holding him.

He saw a long, grey entity with a thin, stretched face that reached down to its chest. Its eyes were inverted and placed wrongly on its face, its mouth stitched shut with white thread. The creature's chest was bony and thin, but its belly bulged outward grotesquely, round and swollen like a pregnant woman's.

It stood eight feet tall, towering over Damon. Even with its hand gripping his face, he felt no warmth, no vitality, nothing. It was simply there.

"Hehehehehh... hehe... hehe."

It laughed as Damon hung over the edge.

He was slightly shaken by the suddenness of the encounter, but he was no stranger to horrors like this.

The creature reacted almost instantly, as if waiting for Damon to see it before acting. Then it pushed him down with its hand.

Damon felt gravity pulling him toward the worm-infested chasm, but at the last moment he raised his leg up with the falling motion and hooked his legs around its neck.

"Fall with me, bastard."

"Ehhehhhhhhhhhh!"

The creature let out a piercing shriek that echoed throughout the chamber as it flailed violently, trying to escape Damon's grasp.

Raising the rest of his body, Damon headbutted the hideous face of the entity. Without hesitation, he pushed his thumbs into its foul, inverted eyes.

He rolled off its body and landed hard on the ground as it flailed around in pain.

At last, he had landed on the other side of the chamber.

Damon grabbed his dealer's hand and stabbed it into the creature's round stomach, cutting to the side as a putrid smell burst forth, followed by a thick green sludge and the piercing cry of an infant.

Faces poured from its stomach, each one screaming and crying in grotesque agony.

The visceral stench of rot, birth, and death filled the air. Damon felt a chill spread across his arm as small white maggots began crawling out of it.

He didn't even change his expression. Grabbing its head, he stomped down with his foot, crushing the infant faces beneath him without hesitation, squashing them like insects.

This was terrifying, but not something new.

"Those who have walked through hell fear no devils."

Damon's cold voice echoed out, causing the creature to shudder in fear. He twisted its head.

"I don't know from whose twisted mind you were born, or if you're all that's left of some broken soul..."

He glared at it, then with a single kick, slammed it into the darkness below.

"Die."

The entity fell into the deep abyss. Before it could reach the bottom, a giant maw opened and consumed it whole.

Damon took one last glance, then turned to face the darkness ahead.

In the distance, he could hear giggles and the countless eyes of unseen entities watching him.

Chapter 748: Garden Of Hunger

The laughter from the darkness did not deter Damon, nor did the bone-chilling fear that threatened to engulf him, freezing his limbs in place.

Damon was not even in his own body. This was Ghost's body. It might have been weaker, but it was still the body of a shadow, and Ghost was no weakling.

Originally, Ghost had been an elite assassin in the service of the Elf King, Kadelas Moonveil.

That was, until Damon killed him and turned him into a shadow.

Damon trudged through the dark passage as creatures slithered around him. He could see some of them lurking close; after all, what kind of shadow could not see in the dark?

An unusual imp-like creature peeked from the exit of the passageway, its face covered in warts and its skin rough like a toad's.

Damon's footsteps did not falter. He did his best to ignore any creature that did not attack him. That was a rule he remembered from the Duhu Mountains: if you see something, no you didn't.

He glanced at his arm, which had been crawling with maggots earlier but was now fine after killing the creatures before.

He walked past the imp-like creature as it whispered in a sweet, childish voice.

"Daddy, carry me."

He didn't glance at it, stepping into the open with his dealer's hand tingling in his grasp.

Lifting his gaze, he saw a dark sky stretching endlessly above. He seemed to be standing in a garden, or something resembling one.

The road beneath him was paved with cobblestone, the kind found in old castles. Plants lined the sides, but there were no roses or lilies, only grotesque and unnatural flowers.

A cluster of them was made of human eyes, arranged into petal-like formations. Each flower had at least three eyeballs staring in different directions.

That wasn't the only horror. The grass or what appeared to be grass was actually the bleeding scalps of people fused into the earth. Strands of colored hair formed a grass carpet while blood trickled down the cobblestone path.

To one side were pink flowers drooping with petals made of human tongues.

That was only half of it. This was a twisted garden where human body parts had become flora dull and grotesque, yet strangely colorful.

The place was wide, and distant wails echoed faintly, as though the bodies of the original donors were still being harvested.

Damon wanted to cover his nose against the vile stench of blood and rot, but his shoulders felt heavy. He rubbed one shoulder, feeling fatigue seep into him.

"Ahhh, Ghost's body really gets tired quickly."

He looked at the flowers again, wondering which direction to go next.

When he turned around, a hunched old woman was staring at him. Her withered face was stretched tight, and her mouth was lined with thin, serrated teeth. Her arms were long, nearly touching the ground.

Damon ignored her, focusing on the flowers as a chill crept down his spine. His grip on his dagger tightened. The old woman moved slowly, crouching beside the flowers.

Then—

In a voice that sounded far away, she asked,

"Do you like my flowers, youngster?"

Damon frowned, his grip tightening further. He could not afford to fight every battle. This body lacked endurance and mana, even assuming he could win.

He remained quiet, watching her. The old woman turned her head the other way and it kept turning until it made a full circle, while her body continued tending to the flowers.

She asked again, her voice rasping through the dark.

"Do you like my flowers, youngster?"

Damon stayed silent. Evil spirits were fickle; each had its own rules of engagement. Sometimes, silence could offend them. But acknowledging them could be worse.

Still, this one had already acknowledged him.

Damon looked at the grotesque garden before him. Evil horrors like this were born from twisted minds and tortured souls. Yet the mind was not always all evil sometimes, all it wanted was affirmation.

"It's beautiful," Damon said quietly.

The old woman's face twisted into a smile, her serrated teeth glistening as thin strands of spit dripped from her mouth.

"What makes it beautiful?" she asked again.

Damon glanced at her, half-expecting an attack.

"It's beautiful because they no longer feel pain. Life is painful, yet we hunger for it, illusioned by brief moments of comfort. Death is terrifying, but brief. All pain ends with death. That is why they are beautiful, they are dead."

The old woman stared at him for a long moment.

Then she laughed, a hideous, shrieking sound that echoed like a banshee's wail through the night.

She looked at Damon again, smiling with those jagged teeth.

"Would you like a flower?"

Damon nodded slowly.

"I would love one. However, I do not wish to disturb the garden. A flower is beautiful only because it is cared for. If you pick it for its beauty, it will wither. If you love something, do not touch its beauty with your ugliness."

The old woman clapped her hands and began hopping up and down, giggling wildly. Her frayed white hair bounced as she danced among the flesh-flowers.

Damon felt a weight settle on his shoulder, his neck aching slightly. He rolled it, trying to ease the stiffness, while his eyes stayed fixed on the dancing woman.

Slowly, she raised her withered hands, her pale face lifting toward him. Her eyes were white and blank blind, he realized a bit too late.

She raised three fingers, each thin and twisted like a dead branch.

"Three questions," she said softly. "You may ask me three questions."

Damon narrowed his eyes, keeping his expression calm. This must have been this particular entity's condition. She had acknowledged him, and by answering her questions, he had earned the right to ask his own.

Still, he stayed cautious. These creatures were never to be trusted. But it was better than nothing.

He asked the first question.

"Where am I?"

The old woman smiled, her serrated teeth glinting faintly in the dark.

"You are in the Garden of Hunger."

Chapter 749: Companion

The woman didn't move. The air between them thickened, heavy with the smell of wet copper. Damon could hear something breathing beneath the soil, slow and hungry, as if the garden itself were alive.

"You walk upon the mouths of the starved. Every seed here is a promise unfulfilled. They hungered for warmth, for love, for meaning. I fed them their longing until they bloomed."

Damon didn't lose his calm. Garden of Hunger was that the name of this place?

He nodded slowly, glancing at the flowers. He had answered three of her questions, so she was obliged to answer his own. Still, he had to be cautious with what he asked.

"Where do I find the mechanisms to unlock the chains that bind the prisoners of the deepest section?"

The old woman turned her head slowly and pointed into the deep darkness at the heart of the garden.

"You must go forward, to the center."

Damon paused, his eyes narrowing as he glanced toward the center. He had one more question, but uncertainty gripped him. Anything could happen once he asked it.

Finally, he asked the last question.

"Tell me something helpful to me."

The moment he spoke, the old woman reached out and grabbed Damon's arm. Her neck began to elongate with a sickening stretch as she leaned closer, her serrated mouth opening near his ear.

Her whisper was faint, distant, and cold.

"Wake up... you must wake... the one who slumbers."

Then her neck slowly retracted. She returned to her place beside the flowers, moving as though Damon were no longer there. Without another word, she resumed tending to the flesh-blooming garden.

Damon stood still, confusion flashing in his eyes. Wake up? Wake the one who slumbers? He narrowed his gaze, but the grotesque old woman no longer paid him any mind.

Turning away, Damon began walking deeper into the garden. His neck felt stiff, his shoulders heavy.

The Garden of Hunger stretched endlessly before him. In the distance, he saw a figure in chains, walking backward. Its speech came in reverse, like the sound of time itself being undone.

Damon ignored it and continued along the cobblestone path until he found something blocking the way, a long, pale leg stretched across the road, as though someone had carelessly rested it there.

The leg was covered in white fur, shaped like a human's, and beside it, an arm rested lazily against the wall. Whatever it belonged to seemed invisible, lounging across the path as though it owned it.

Damon didn't react. The scene reminded him faintly of the arm that had grabbed Sylvia back in the Duhu Mountains.

He sighed quietly.

Speaking of... Damon also had spirit affinity. That might have been why he was attracting attention here. But this wasn't his body, this was a vessel belonging to his shadow, Ghost. He shouldn't be drawing spirits this easily.

Besides, his shadow wasn't even truly a person. In a place like this, he should have blended in perfectly.

When Damon reached the leg, he tried to crouch under it, but the limb shifted, lowering itself to block his way. He didn't change expression, simply adjusted and tried to go over it instead. Again, it rose, barring his path.

Damon narrowed his eyes, feeling its gaze on him. The malice radiating from the unseen creature was unmistakable.

He sighed softly.

"Your legs are in the way. If you'd like to keep them, move."

His tone was cold, stripped of emotion.

The unseen creature seemed to hesitate, appraising him. Then, slowly, the leg lifted. Damon gave it a final glance before passing through without incident.

He rolled his neck, feeling the stiffness ache through his shoulders. This was proving to be a mentally taxing journey. Still, he pressed on, hoping he was nearing the center.

After a few minutes, he turned a corner around a wall made of dried organs, and froze.

Two large red eyes stared back at him. The creature's body was nothing but long, black strands of hair, flickering in the unseen wind. It stood like a twisted human figure, its form rippling with unnatural movement.

The moment Damon saw it, his blood or whatever passed for it in this form ran cold.

It stared at him. No words were exchanged. No thought followed. Instinct took over. Damon turned into a shadow and darted away instantly.

"Hehe... heh..."

The laughter came from behind him. The creature followed, walking slowly, yet somehow keeping up with his inhuman speed. Each step it took carried a twisted, unnatural grace.

Damon's instincts screamed. This was different. The danger emanating from this one felt beyond everything else he had encountered so far.

Everyone here was supposed to be suppressed to a certain power level in this realm or so Lazarak had said. But this creature... this one was not bound by that rule.

Or at least not as much as the rest of them.

He leapt over the flesh-flowers, slipping past them as if gliding through the shadows. When the creature reached the border of its region, it stopped, unwilling to cross.

Damon didn't waste the moment. He dove into a pavilion beside a fountain surrounded by hedges of skinned human flesh.

He exhaled slowly, his breath trembling. His head throbbed with fatigue.

He shook it off and straightened, preparing to leave. As he walked past a reflective glass door, he stopped abruptly.

His body went rigid. No blood ran through this vessel, yet the sensation that seized him felt exactly like his blood turning to ice.

He turned toward the glass.

His reflection looked normal, the shadowed form of his vessel, dark and featureless. But what caught his eye wasn't his reflection.

It was what sat upon his shoulders.

A woman with long black hair covering her face and tattered clothes was perched there, her head bowed low.

Damon's hands trembled as he looked closer. He turned his head slightly to glance at his shoulder, nothing was there.

But in the reflection, she sat still, unmoving.

His jaw tightened.

Ah... that explains the shoulder pain.

He wasn't just being watched.

He was being haunted.

Chapter 750: Lake Center

This was quite the unusual situation for Damon or maybe it wasn't that unusual but being haunted by an evil spirit had never crossed his mind. It wasn't something Damon ever worried about, simply because he had the power to burn the souls of his targets with Ashborn.

However, he was in a dilemma, since he couldn't use Ashborn at the moment.

He twisted his neck slowly, feeling how heavy the woman or whatever it was sitting on his shoulder felt. She was heavy. The weight pressed into his muscles, making his movements sluggish and strained.

Damon glanced at the reflection before him. In a cold, steady voice, he spoke.

"Leave this vessel. It's mine... or else."

Silence lingered for a moment, but it seemed the entity either didn't hear him or didn't care.

Damon sighed softly, clenching his fist with a faint crack.

"Fine then. You choose suffering."

Before the creature could react, a hand burst forth from his glabella and grabbed her by the hair. Damon's astral form slipped into the open, the chill of the world brushing against his bare soul.

No words were exchanged. He drove his knee into her face, the impact echoing through the dark air as he pulled her down to the ground.

"Jissssss..." she hissed, her voice a distorted rasp. She crouched low on all fours, her knees bending inward in unnatural directions.

Damon's astral form mirrored his physical appearance, radiating a cold menace.

Ghost regained control of his body once Damon left it, drawing his bow in one swift motion and loosing several arrows toward the creature.

They pierced through without resistance, passing through her body as though she were an illusion.

Damon wasn't surprised. She was an astral entity, and only attacks that targeted the soul could harm her.

"Evangeline would have a field day with this type of creature," he muttered.

Her power was the most effective against these beings, but she wasn't here. No matter, Damon would improvise.

He raised his hand as his Dealer's Hand flew toward him. He charged at the creature as she leaped into the air. Ghost followed, his form blurring as he rushed to meet her.

She reached out, claws extended to tear into Damon's soul, but at the last second, he retreated into Ghost's body, repossessing it. He knew fighting in his astral form for long was suicidal.

The creature was already mid-jump when Damon caught his Dealer's Hand midair. Its cold blade gleamed faintly as he swung it upward, slicing through the creature's neck in one clean stroke. Her body hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Damon stepped toward her hissing head and drove the blade through it, pinning it to the ground.

He exhaled a slow sigh of relief.

"It's a good thing my Dealer's Hand can interfere with souls... I just wanted you to become visible."

Damon was, after all, a merchant of blood and a dealer in death.

He sighed again, feeling his soul slowly regain warmth within the safety of a physical vessel.

Lifting his hand, he recalled the Dealer's Hand, and it flew obediently back to him.

"I've got to be more careful... these creatures aren't simple."

Damon continued his journey. His body melted into shadow, his small, inky form gliding across the ground as laughter, cries, and screams echoed from all around.

This place was filled with twisted desires. Each entity he encountered was different, chaotic, yet they all shared one trait. They were dangerous.

Hours passed as Damon searched through the dark, getting lost a few times and avoiding creatures whose presence pressed like poison against his senses.

He had come across floating ghostly faces singing an ancient ode. The haunting melody had trapped him for hours before he broke free. It was dangerous, but not the worst encounter.

He'd once found himself at a picnic with a little girl. She had served him food. It was delicious, and he had laughed with her, enjoying every moment. He thought he'd known that girl his whole life or so he believed until he realized the truth.

He was chewing on rotting flesh. The girl's form shifted, revealing a grotesque one-eyed creature.

Damon had driven his blade through her eye to escape that horror. Even so, he had become increasingly vulnerable.

He learned two things. First, he was lucky. Even without his crown and mastery, as well as his resistance to mind-based attacks, he was managing.

Or maybe it wasn't luck. Some faint remnant of his crown and mastery still lingered, influencing his soul even in Ghost's body. That was why he'd survived the traps so far.

But soon, Damon realized something terrifying.

He couldn't recover his mana.

Normally, after using mana, one could passively regenerate it or draw from the ambient energy in the air. Potions, crystals, or mana cores could all restore it as well.

But Damon couldn't do even the most basic, he couldn't absorb the ambient mana, no matter how hard he tried.

'Why is this happening...?'

He had a few theories. Maybe it was because this wasn't his body, but that seemed unlikely. He had possessed Manata, the demon heir, before killing him, and he'd still been able to absorb mana then.

So what was the problem? Was this another effect of being imprisoned here in Eidolon?

"I have to get rid of these chains..." he muttered.

Damon had made progress. At last, he was certain he'd found the mechanism that locked his power away.

He'd reached the center of the Garden of Hunger.

What lay before him was unlike the rest of the grotesque realm. It wasn't monstrous or twisted. A wide, tranquil lake spread before him, calm beneath the void sky.

The water reflected the black heavens above, still and untouched by wind. Even the cries from the rest of the garden seemed distant here.

At the lake's center stood a massive tree. Its leaves were blood red, and its golden trunk shone faintly in the darkness.

Damon stopped at the edge of the water, narrowing his eyes. Beneath the tree, a woman sat reading a book. Her golden hair shimmered faintly, her presence serene.

When she lifted her head, her blue eyes met his.

She smiled, warm and gentle, like a summer day.

"Sweetheart, what is it? Why are you staring at me like that?"

She extended her hand toward him.

"Come... tell me what's bothering you."

Damon froze. His voice broke as he whispered.

"Mom..."