

## Shadow 751

### Chapter 751: Wake Up

The sun was bright. Damon hated how bright it was, but he knew she'd be here anyway.

He sighed, already worried he would get scolded again.

Walking down the path, he smiled when he saw a figure sitting under a tree. Instantly, he crouched, a mischievous grin forming as he began to sneak up behind her.

The woman sat beneath the tree, her long golden hair catching the sunlight. Her blue eyes mirrored the deep sky—the same hue that burned in the eyes of the young man approaching her.

He was still young, a teenager barely touching adulthood. She sat with a book resting in her lap, her light blue dress flowing over the grass, her long hair spilling around her shoulders.

A small pendant hung delicately at her neck, glinting softly with every movement. Damon's footsteps were light, almost soundless, as he closed in on her. Then, with a grin of pure mischief, he lunged forward.

He covered her eyes with his hands and spoke in a deep, playful tone.

"Guess who it is..."

The woman smiled gently, setting her book aside.

"Hmmm, judging by these baby hands, no calluses, no roughness, it must be someone who hasn't fought many battles yet."

Damon frowned, his lips tightening in mock offense. She wasn't finished.

"Let's see... baby hands, sneaky attitude... ah, I think I know who you are. Are you that little girl from the mills?"

She tilted her head slightly, her voice teasing.

"Or... could you be my son?"

Damon groaned and pulled his hands away from her eyes, pouting.

"Very funny, Mom. You knew it was me."

The woman chuckled softly, her gaze warm and amused.

"My, if it isn't my Damon. You really surprised me there, sweetheart. You got me."

Damon gave her a deadpan look, his bright blue eyes meeting hers.

The two shared little resemblance in features, except for their eyes those deep, brilliant blues were unmistakably the same. It was as if someone had taken her gaze and given it to him, only sharper, more intense.

"Mom, my feelings are hurt. Just tell me you don't love me already. The girl from the mills? That was a low blow, and you know it. I'm going to nag about this for days."

His mother smiled, the sunlight flickering through the leaves above and painting her face with gold as she watched her son complain.

"Ah, fine, you win," she said with a mock sigh. "I'm... well—"

Damon leaned closer, waiting.

"Mom, saying you're sorry won't kill you. Parents do that, you know. Well... except you."

She scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"That's them, not me. You want your mother to apologize when you're the one sneaking around? You almost gave me a heart attack."

Damon burst into laughter.

"So I did get you! Ha!"

His laughter filled the space between them, and her smile softened as she watched him. There was light in her expression, but also a faint, hidden sadness in her eyes.

"Damon," she said softly.

He turned to face her, the laughter fading from his lips. She reached out and brushed her fingers through his hair.

"You've really grown up," she whispered. "I... I can't believe it."

Her eyes shimmered as tears threatened to fall.

"Mom, what's wrong? Did something happen? Did I get into trouble again? I'm sorry. I'll apologize to whoever you want, okay?"

She shook her head, smiling through the tears as they slipped down her cheeks.

"It's just... you're seventeen today. You're almost an adult. I'm happy, but also a little sad. It feels like just yesterday you were learning to walk."

She took his hand, squeezing it gently.

"Your mana was troublesome at first, but you worked harder than anyone. You mastered the sword beyond what your father or I could teach. There's nothing more we can show you."

Damon blinked, confused. He held her hand tighter, as if afraid that letting go would make her disappear. He didn't realize tears had begun to roll down his cheeks too.

"You're still a child, even at seventeen," she said softly. "But I can't let your potential waste away here."

Her gaze locked with his calm, nurturing, filled with love.

"Damon... do you remember what you wanted to become?"

He nodded.

"I want to be a hero. Someone who saves those who can't save themselves. Someone who lives by his code of honor."

She bit her lip, forcing a small smile.

"If you had the chance to learn under a true master, a warrior whose strength had reached the very limit of this world would you take it?"

Damon hesitated, his eyes uncertain.

"I... I want to protect you, Dad, and Luna. I want to be the strongest."

She smiled, brushing a hand across his cheek.

"Is that why you want to be a hero? To protect us?"

Damon nodded.

Her expression darkened with concern.

"If you're protecting us... who will protect you?"

Damon's eyes hardened. He held her hand again, his voice steady.

"That's why I'll become strong."

Her lips curved into a faint smile.

"If you want to be strong, you can't do it here. You'll have to go out there, where the strong truly dwell."

She leaned forward until her forehead rested gently against his.

"No matter how hard I've been on you," she whispered, cupping his face, "I want you to know I love you. No matter what you become, I'll always love you."

Damon smiled faintly.

"Isn't that just because you're my mother? Would be weird if you didn't love your own kid."

She chuckled softly, picking up her book again.

"Come on. Your father and Luna are planning a little party for you. Just the four of us."

Damon rose, brushing the grass from his clothes, and began to follow her.

But as soon as he stood, a cold hand gripped his shoulder. He turned and froze.

His own reflection stood before him, eyes dark as the void, face twisted and weary.

In a voice that seemed to echo from the abyss itself, it screamed.

"Wake up..."

"Damon, let's go," his mother's voice called again.

He turned sharply, but the reflection was gone.

For a moment, he stood there, silent, frowning.

"Ah... I really need to catch a break from all that training."

Chapter 752: Comfort

"Okay, that was weird," Damon muttered under his breath.

"What was weird?" his mother asked, glancing back at him as she walked down toward the village.

Damon hesitated, unsure if he should tell her or not. But eventually, he decided to speak.

"Well... it was weird, but I saw myself."

Ranar narrowed her eyes, her voice thoughtful.

"Is that philosophical, or... not? I'm not clear on what you mean."

Damon shook his head. "No, I mean literally. I saw myself. I looked different. I had long dark hair."

Ranar's eyes drifted to her son's neatly cut hair. "So, you want to grow your hair out? That's fine. I think you'd look cute—well, cuter."

Damon chuckled softly at her quick correction.

"That version of me didn't look quite right," he continued. "My eyes were dark, dark as night. I looked so... tired, I guess."

Ranar stopped walking for a moment, drawing in a slow breath before speaking.

"If you don't want to leave the village, you don't have to. It's okay. You don't need to feel pressured. It doesn't matter whether you become a hero or not."

Damon shook his head, a strange pulse of thought echoing in the back of his mind.

'Wake up, dammit.'

"I... I want to," he said quietly.

His mother nodded, though worry softened her face. She smiled, but it was the kind of smile he knew all too well, the one she forced when she was hurting.

It was the same smile she wore on the day she marched off to war, leaving him and Luna behind.

This smile meant he would never see her again.

"I made tamberly cake, your favorite. Let's celebrate your seventeenth birthday."

Damon followed her home slowly, that strange feeling still lingering in his chest.

His heart was in turmoil, struggling against something he couldn't name. It felt as if his mind was being pulled in two directions, his conscious self refusing to acknowledge what his unconscious tried to scream.

He walked beside his mother like a ghost drifting through a dream. The villagers greeted them kindly as they passed, smiles warm and familiar. But every face Damon saw filled him with an inexplicable revulsion, a heat rising from deep within, a strange and bitter rage.

It made no sense. These were people he had known all his life. They'd treated him kindly, laughed with him, trusted him. He'd never hated anyone before. He was mischievous at times, yes, but at his core he was good.

So why, when he looked at them, did he feel this... hatred? This deep resentment he couldn't understand?

Shame settled in his chest like a heavy stone.

He followed his mother home, watching the way her hair danced in the soft breeze. He couldn't take his eyes off her, afraid that if he blinked, she would disappear. Seventeen years had passed since his birth, and still he felt like he hadn't spent enough time with her.

When they reached their home, the warm scent of tamberly cake filled the air. He could hear his father and sister inside, more accurately, Luna lecturing their father about the proper way to use kitchen utensils.

His mother smiled faintly at the sound, but it was followed by a quiet sigh.

"Damon," she said softly, "I can tell you're not alright."

"I... I..." Damon tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. His mouth opened, yet nothing followed.

Ranar sighed, placing her hands on her hips.

"I suppose you've already figured this out by now, but... I'm actually a noble. My father is a Grand Duke. I doubt you'd have guessed that much."

She stepped closer to him, her gaze steady. He was taller than her now, but in that moment he still felt like a child standing before his mother.

"You've grown into a man," she said. "I should be happy about that. But I hate that it means you'll leave me one day."

Her voice broke. Tears fell freely now, splattering against the dirt. She reached for his hands, squeezing them tightly, the kind of touch no illusion could ever fake.

"When I left my father, I didn't understand this feeling. But now I do. No parent wants to see their child grow up and go. Yet we have to accept it, no matter how much it hurts."

Her tears darkened the earth beneath her feet.

"I wanted to send you to my father because I knew he'd never reject you. He wouldn't reject me either. But I'm ashamed to face him."

Ranar's eyes softened as she met her son's.

"No matter what happens, Damon, you can always come back to me. You can always rely on your mother. I'll always be on your side. I'll never be ashamed of you."

Something inside Damon cracked. His heart throbbed with emotion he couldn't control, tears slipping down his face before he even noticed.

"I... I kill people," he whispered, voice trembling. "And I eat them. Some of them are innocent. I burn villages and justify it in my head as necessary. How can I not be ashamed?"

Ranar's breath hitched, but she shook her head, her words breaking through the sob in her throat.

"I don't care. I'm not ashamed. I still love you."

"I've killed before, and I'll kill again. I hurt people. I don't even know why anymore. I'm lost, Mom. I'm so tired."

"Then persevere," she said, her voice cracking under the weight of her tears.

Damon's shoulders shook. His tears weren't weakness, they were humanity resurfacing through the cracks of a hardened soul.

"I want to stay here with you, Mom," he whispered.

She shook her head, crying openly now.

"But I am dying," he said quietly, the truth sinking in. He knew this place wasn't real. Every second he lingered here, he was dying more in the real world.

"Go," she whispered, though her voice trembled with pain. "Go."

Even as an illusion, born of strange power, her love outshone any magic that could have created her.

"Leave, Damon. Please. Go."

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly one last time. Then, with shaking hands, he drew a dagger and plunged it into his own heart.

His mother screamed, catching him as he fell. Blood soaked her hands as she tried to heal him, her magic flaring wildly, desperation burning in her eyes.

Her tears fell onto his chest, mingling with the blood that pooled beneath him.

It was a face that countless mothers must have worn through history, the face of a parent watching their child die.

Damon's vision blurred, his breathing slowing.

"I'll see ...You soon ..." he whispered one final wish.

This was a beautiful dream, he thought as the darkness closed in.

When his eyes opened again, he was no longer in the village. Thick, twisted roots coiled around him, merging with his flesh.

And on the branches above, something waited.

A strange entity sat perched on the golden boughs, watching him in silence.

Chapter 753: Reality And Illusion

Damon slowly tore himself free from the vines that had pierced his flesh. Each pull left shallow wounds that stung as sap and shadow mixed along his skin.

He gasped softly, clutching his chest, his heart constricted in pain, the image of his mother's final expression burning in his mind.

He could still feel her anguish. Even knowing she wasn't real just an illusion didn't make it any easier. It had been the most beautiful illusion he'd ever known.

Above him, golden roots pulsed faintly as the tree freed his body.

Damon's eyes lifted to the wide lake spread before him. He didn't even remember crossing it, nor how he'd been taken into the tree's depths. Only that he had been in danger, and somehow his own mind had pulled him from the dream.

But the gaze was still there.

The entity perched among the crimson branches watched him silently. It had long fur and a vaguely human form, though its outline was blurred, as if backlit by a blinding light that hid its features.

Damon couldn't see its face, only the faint gleam of its eyes beneath the canopy.

They glowed faintly, like dying stars behind a dark veil.

"The prisoners of the Deep are worse than I've heard," the creature murmured.

Damon's gaze remained locked on it, his breathing steadying as his heartbeat slowed.

"May I ask you a question?" the creature asked softly.

Damon's thoughts were still scattered, half of him lingering in the echo of his mother's voice. Still, he answered.

"Go ahead. On one condition, you tell me something helpful in return."

The creature shifted slightly, its outline rippling like water before nodding.

"Very well. So be it."

It paused, then spoke again. "Why didn't you kill her? You knew she was a dream. Yet you chose to kill yourself instead."

Damon lowered his head.

"Even if she was born from my mind, that was still my mother," he said quietly. "And I would die a million deaths for her."

The branches rustled softly, as though the tree itself sighed. The creature's presence seemed to rustle with the leaves, reading his heart, his philosophy, his conviction.

"You didn't ask to be born," the entity continued. "It was her decision. She brought you into a world of suffering. Surely you must hate her most of all. Is that why you killed yourself, so she could watch her own child die?"

Damon gave a faint, tired smile and shook his head.

"I didn't ask to be born. But I was blessed to have her. That alone makes it worth it. I can't choose how I came into this world... but I can choose how I exist in it."

Silence settled again. The crimson leaves drifted down from above, landing softly on the still surface of the lake.

Damon waited, but the creature didn't speak further.

"Now it's my turn," Damon said quietly. "How do I undo the mechanism that locks the chains of the prisoners in the Deepest layer?"

The entity tilted its head, its glowing eyes narrowing.

"You already have," it replied after a pause.

"There is no key here. The way of passing is death. This is the Fifth Lock — the Lock of Self."

Its voice was husky, carrying an age-old loneliness. "You must awaken through sacrifice to pass. I am a prisoner here, as you were, but I am also this lock's warden. I am Root Ore."

Damon listened silently, his expression unreadable.

"We are all prisoners in Eidolon," the creature said. "And none of us can ever truly leave."

As it spoke, the air trembled. Damon heard it, the heavy fall of chains. The branches shuddered as massive links of metal slipped away from the tree's trunk, crashing into the dark waters below.

The chains that had once bound Damon and Lazarak, the chains that held them deep within the lowest realm were gone.

The first lock on their prison had been broken.

Damon felt something stir within him, a sweet release. His soul felt lighter, his strength flowing back like returning breath.

He glanced up through the falling leaves.

"If this is the fifth level, and you called it Self, then there must be four more above it each with their own key, their own trial."

"Yes," the entity said, its voice echoing like wind through the branches.

"But finding them... that is up to you."

Damon's expression didn't change. He had one more question.

"How do I reach the next level?"

The creature was quiet for a long moment, then answered simply, "The tree is the gateway."

Damon looked at it, confused. "The tree?"

"All you need do is touch it," the warden replied.

Damon's eyes were calm now. He'd endured ordeal after ordeal, and he had finally succeeded, freed himself, and broken the chains.

Still, one thought lingered.

"Is this what the old woman in the garden meant," he asked, "when she said, wake the one who slumbers?"

Root Ore tilted its head slightly. "I do not know. Each prisoner here follows its own design. I would not trust the words of any who dwell in this place."

Damon nodded. He turned slowly, walking back the way he'd come, his steps quiet and measured.

His heart was calm and heavy, but still. The ordeal had been grueling, yet strangely, he felt peace. That brief moment with her illusion or not had been worth everything.

Without his crown's protection, he had seen something true about himself.

He paused mid-step, then looked back toward the tree.

"Tell me," he said, his voice low. "Was she real?"

The entity perched above him was silent for a long while.

"I do not know," it said at last. "This place is deeply tied to the Metaverse. The roots of this tree reach into depths even I cannot fathom."

Its voice softened. "The mind is powerful. Reality and illusion are often the same thing separated only by belief. She is whatever you believe she is."

Damon smiled faintly, his expression calm. He nodded once to the warden to the prisoner who called itself Root Ore, guardian of the Fifth Door.

Then he turned, and walked toward the garden hunger.

Chapter 754: Birds Of Feather Scam Together

"Its good to be back in my body for a change."

Damon's voice echoed through the darkness.

"You do not have a body," Lazarak replied calmly.

"Tsk." Damon made the faint click of a tongue. He was, after all, just a disembodied heart suspended in shadows.

"I believe this is karma. I once teased a teacher of mine for being a disembodied pair of lips. Now I think I understand how she felt."

Matia stood near the shifting shadows, her posture steady as she observed the two. At her feet was Ghost, who refused to take a solid form. His trembling outline hugged the ground like a frightened animal.

Damon had returned seven days after leaving. That was how long he had been gone. He had succeeded in removing the chains. Both he and Lazarak were no longer bound to this particular floor of the prison. The issue was that Damon could not leave without a physical body.

Lazarak, on the other hand, did not seem interested in leaving at all.

Damon's form flickered as the shadows around him opened like dark flames licking the air.

"It's as I thought. I cannot absorb any mana from the air."

"No surprise there. You are an alien to this world. Naturally it will reject you," Lazarak said with an all knowing look.

Damon's shadows twisted irritably. "What do you mean."

Lazarak's darkness rose and fell like smoke freed from a lid. He moved with greater ease now that the chains no longer held him.

"Did I not mention this before. While we are in a lower realm connected to Aetherus, we are still not natives. Therefore this world has no reason to grant us its blessing or protection."

Damon understood immediately.

"So we are like an infection. The body attempts to fight us off. Hold on. Does that mean the world would actively try to kill us."

Lazarak gave a soft chuckle.

"Will it. Oh no. It already is. Besides, it is a good thing we share the same source origin as this world or the restrictions would be far worse. Think about it. Everyone in this realm is limited to a certain rank. Put simply, we are only as powerful as the strongest native who has grown here."

Lazarak's shadows lifted and dropped in something close to a shrug.

"It is a universal law. No one escapes it."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Was this the reason the outsiders had never destroyed Aetherus. First Valarie had said they discarded their true bodies and used new vessels here. Their power had been heavily restricted the moment they entered.

"What about a true god." Damon asked.

Lazarak fell silent. When he finally spoke, his voice carried a bitter edge.

"They make the laws."

Damon believed him, yet he could not help doubting. They may have created the laws, but even gods seemed to follow rules. Not because they could not break them, but because order only existed if they pretended to respect it.

In Damon's mind, it was like nobles creating tax policies. They ignored those policies when convenient. Yet common people obeyed every rule or faced punishment backed by overwhelming force.

"There is no rule or law in this world that is not backed by the threat of overwhelming violence."

"In the end violence answers most things. Even order stands on its foundation."

Damon let out a faint sigh, or the closest sound a heart could make to one. He would need to consider several methods to counter this drawback. For now, his goal was finding a way out and rebuilding a physical form.

"Now then. With the chains gone, what is next. The prisoners on the fourth level should not be as powerful, right."

Lazarak's form stirred, the darkness drawing together.

"We are in the seventh floor. The sixth contains the murmur worms. They are imprisoned here but they also act as wardens. The fifth floor holds those vile horrors and its warden is Root Ore."

He muttered to himself as if recalling old memories.

"I am not entirely sure, but I think the next one is called the Trial of Truth. That floor is guarded by an entity that serves Seraph Null. It is called the Mirror Seraph."

Damon felt a cold knot form in his chest. Truth had never been a friend to him. Damon was a liar and a thief. Truth felt like poison.

"Can we, by any chance, force our way out of these trials?"

Lazarak scoffed as if Damon had asked the most idiotic question in existence.

"These trials are designed to be impossible to bypass. This is a prison, Damon, not your mother's backyard. You cannot simply come and go."

Damon was quiet. "How long have you been waiting to use that one."

The darkness slowly shaped itself into a vague form and shrugged.

"A few thousand years. Having someone to speak to is a delight."

Damon made a dry, heart shaped sigh.

"So you are the one taking this trial, right."

Lazarak twitched. His darkness scattered at the edges.

"You want a god to do your dirty work. Shame on you. I am a god."

Matia, who had been silent the entire time, finally spoke.

"What happens when you fail to pass."

Lazarak paused, then waved the darkness dismissively.

"Oh nothing much. You will only lose your soul and personality forever. Casual inconveniences like that."

Matia nodded. Her expression remained calm and unreadable.

"Good. Then who better to overcome the trial than a noble and honest god. My master is a sly, no good wretch who cannot be honest to save his life."

She looked at Lazarak with cold certainty.

"You will intervene, will you not, your holiness."

Damon felt a sharp sting in his core. She was telling the truth, yes, but she did not have to say it so directly. It hurt. How could she be so cruel to him.

Lazarak's darkness shifted toward Damon as if giving him a look.

"She really does say it as it is. How terrible do you need to be for your own subordinate to call you out."

"Ptui." Damon mimicked the sound of spitting.

"How dare you backbite me, Lazarak. I will have you know I am an honest person. People love me. I am not greedy. I never steal. And above all else I do not scam or gamble. I only kill people sometimes, but that is in self defense."

Lazarak stared. His silence was thick with disgust and disbelief.

He turned to Matia, shaking his head with pity.

"Do not worry, sweet winter child. This god will answer. I will protect you from this vile creature. As a god, it is my duty to step forward."

Matia did not move, but something cunning flickered in her eyes.

"Great. Lead the way."

Lazarak froze.

"Hold on. Something is not right. You tricked..."

Matia tilted her head innocently.

Lazarak clicked his tongue.

"Birds of a feather scam together."

Chapter 755: Lazarak's Transformation

"How dare you... are you against honesty now... huh... some god."

Damon was appalled. His shadows tightened as he flickered forward, shadows curling around him in defense of Matia.

Lazarak sighed. The darkness around him quivered like a living thing.

"I already agreed. I will have you two know I am a nice god. Some gods have cursed people for less."

From the look on his face, Damon suspected Lazarak was about to act. That was fine.

He had conserved enough power by not ripping his chains apart with brute force....

"How do you intend to leave here anyway? Your form is mostly darkness, right?" Damon asked, curiosity slipping into his voice as he studied Lazarak's shifting silhouette.

"This is what I actually look like. This darkness is my true form, though I have other forms."

The darkness that had been hovering loosely around him began to solidify. It thickened into a swirling cyclone, its edges rippling like torn cloth caught in a storm.

"Hahaha. Tremble mortals at the true form of a god. Be amazed by my glorious divinity, my immaculate perfection."

Lazarak's voice boomed across the chamber, heavy enough to make the walls tremble. The cyclone condensed rapidly, shrinking and refining into something vaguely human.

"Hahaha. I am the great and wise Lazarak, god of darkness, peace, and serenity."

When the cyclone finally faded, Damon froze. He was gobsmacked, no gobsmacked was too weak. He was god smacked.

Standing before him was a beautiful figure with pale skin and long dark hair that spilled onto the ground like ink. Their clothes were woven from pure darkness that moved subtly, as if breathing. Their eyes held the color of a night sky, dark but not lifeless.

He... he was... Damon could not stop the thought from surfacing.

Yes. That was the best word.

Cute.

Why was a god cute? Beautiful might have fit. Ethereal, majestic, divine. But cute? And yet... with Lazarak... cute was somehow correct.

"Ermh... you..." Damon started, unable to finish.

"Yes, I know. Immaculate and all powerful. Transcendent. I am great."

Damon sneered, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Yeah. Greatly small. Or maybe magnificently tiny."

Lazarak scoffed, flicking his hair with disdain.

"My friend, I can see the green of jealousy in your shadows. I understand not everyone can be a god. It must be painful to be so ugly, so flawed. Could never be me."

Damon chuckled, his tone playful and dripping with mockery.

"I think you fell a little short."

Lazarak paused. Something was wrong. Did Damon not see how immaculate he was? How divinely proportioned? His perfect brows furrowed.

"What are you..."

Damon's shadows flickered in amusement.

"Take a good look at yourself. Matia, pass him my mirror."

Matia quietly lifted a large mirror from the pile of things Damon had tossed from his shadow storage. She angled it toward Lazarak.

The god froze. His eyes widened. His reflection stared back at him.

He was adorable.

No. Worse. He was a child. A tiny three-year-old toddler with soft puffy cheeks, sparkling eyes, and tiny hands. He looked like he was about to cry for his mommy.

"Wh... what is this... no. It cannot be. It cannot be..."

Damon burst into laughter. It rolled across the chamber until even the shadows seemed to shake with it.

Matia watched silently, though her eyes softened. Lazarak looked like he might actually cry, but he tried desperately to maintain whatever dignity remained to him.

"Ahem. Ahem. This was my plan... it seems time has made me a little weaker than usual."

Damon wiped imaginary tears of laughter from his flickering form and sneered.

"You look adorable, Your Godliness. I am so impressed. Will you bring down your divine baby tears, or should I rock you to sleep?"

"I get your point," Lazarak muttered, voice small and deeply offended.

"Or maybe I can have Matia awaken her maternal instincts. Do not worry, we are not heartless. We would be happy to adopt you."

Damon teased, finally gaining ground on the god who had called him ugly repeatedly.

"I said I get it." Lazarak flailed his tiny hands in frustration. "Let us proceed already. We do not have all the time in the world."

Damon scoffed, ignoring him now that the revenge was sweet. He turned his attention to something he had been blotting out since he first arrived.

The cocoon in the corner. Its chains were no longer intact.

"What is that thing anyway?"

He looked to Lazarak, who would surely know.

Lazarak's expression tightened, worry flickering in his eyes.

"I would not mess with that if I were you. That thing is no good, I tell you."

Damon's shadows stirred restlessly. His disembodied heart throbbed with a strange longing, a need to know.

"Ignorance is not bliss. I will risk it."

Lazarak placed his small hand behind his back like a wise sage, despite looking like a pretentious toddler.

Matia's lips twitched. The god looked painfully adorable.

"There are many horrible things in the universe, lurking beyond up in the stars." Lazarak gazed upward, as if seeing something no one else could.

"Many horrors hide beyond the veil. Pray they do not find this world."

Damon stayed quiet. He did not know how to tell Lazarak that it was already far too late. By the first epoch, the world had long been known to outsiders.

"Correct me if I am wrong, but is your whole plan not about calling forth something from the great beyond to fight the goddess? You sound kind of hypocritical."

"Ahem. Ahem." Lazarak straightened.

"Do you want to know what this is or not? I see a lot of attitude."

Damon would have rolled his eyes if he had any.

"My bad. Go ahead, oh wise god. I remain slightly less arrogant."

Lazarak smiled, pleased.

"This is one of four creatures that fell from the heavens in a meteor when the world was young. At first, we did not see them as a threat, only slightly gluttonous life forms."

He paused, as if remembering something far away and unpleasant.

"All they saw, they consumed. They fed endlessly until they produced spawn of whatever material they had eaten. Soulless at first, part of a hive mind. But with time, some gained souls. They threatened to devour everything."

He crossed his small arms.

"So we destroyed them. All except this one. The only one that had not hatched. We debated its fate. My brother decided to take it."

He shrugged.

"Honestly, I thought he destroyed it. You can imagine my surprise when it was tossed in here with me."

Damon's shadows stilled.

"Basically, you do not know what they are."

"Pretty much."

Chapter 756: A Hope For The Future

The next trial was truth. Damon was counting on Lazarak to pass this one. After a handful of preparations, they set off.

Lazarak remained in the form of a toddler, puffing himself up and acting pretentious in a desperate attempt to save face.

Ghost came next, his body possessed by Damon's astral form.

For protection, Damon kept Matia close. She was far stronger than Ghost, and frankly he needed her beside him far more than he needed her guarding his true body in the deeper level.

They climbed the familiar stairs and reached the floor with the murmur worms.

Lazarak walked with soft, short steps, his tiny legs carrying him to the edge of the worm-infested chasm. The darkness below pulsed faintly.

Damon folded his arms, curious about how Lazarak intended to cross. He remembered almost becoming worm food here. Luckily for him, he was not someone who died easily.

Lazarak put on a thoughtful expression, as if he were completely in control. Darkness swelled around him.

Minutes passed.

Then Lazarak turned to Damon with a frown.

"Well what are you waiting for? Do not dilly dally."

Damon squinted.

"Huh? What, me? What about you? You stood there aura farming for twelve whole minutes. I thought you had a plan."

Lazarak scoffed, his baby face puffing aggressively.

"This wretch. Can you not see I am an infant? Besides, I am conserving power for when I clear the fourth door. It is called planning."

Damon felt his jaw tighten. The urge to pick Lazarak up and toss him straight into the chasm almost possessed him.

Before he could act on the intrusive thought, Matia stepped forward. She raised her hand. A cold chill spread from her fingers and rolled down her arm. Ice crept outward from her feet, growing in crystalline branches that stretched across the chasm. The frost thickened, hardened, and formed a solid bridge of gleaming ice.

She glanced over her shoulder at them, eyes glowing faintly behind the visor.

Damon looked at Lazarak who immediately cleared his throat.

"Of course this is as I planned. Ahem. Ahem. I must allow others an opportunity to shine."

Damon scoffed. Truly deplorable.

"Is this how other people feel about me..."

Matia did not react to either of them.

"I remember years ago when we crossed the Duhu Mountains," she said softly. "You asked me not to fly over the bridge. I did not understand why, but I learned soon enough."

She turned slightly toward him.

"We could cross safely on a bridge but never by flying over the chasm."

Damon nodded slowly and raised his hand.

"Actually that was a few months ago, but good thinking. Do not forget to destroy it after we cross."

Without a word, she walked onto the bridge. Damon and Lazarak followed, trudging over the slick crystalline surface as cold air rose beneath it.

They crossed without incident. Damon had been half expecting something to attack them, but the path remained eerily calm.

The darkness of the passage ahead loomed. Unlike before, there was no hostile entity waiting in the shadows.

"Keep your wits about you. We are about to enter the Garden of Hunger," Damon warned.

They stepped through the archway into the vast, warped garden. Screams, laughter, and countless twisted emotions echoed from the souls trapped there.

Matia formed a sword of ice in her hand. A shield followed, blooming from frost like a growing flower.

She lifted her chin slightly, observing the grotesque landscape. Flowers made of human organs pulsed gently in the cold air. Grass made of tangled hair and ripped scalps swayed unnaturally.

Damon could not see her face, but she seemed unmoved.

"What do you think of these flowers?" he asked. When he first arrived, the old woman here had asked him the same question.

Matia rarely spoke unless necessary, but as his shadow she never ignored him.

"It smells like after a battle," she murmured. "Everyone is dead or too injured to bury the bodies. The air turns sickening... wounds rot... plagues spread... and death follows."

Her voice was soft, almost distant, as if recalling something she had truly witnessed. Damon wondered if she had lived through a place like that.

He opened his mouth to ask, but she tilted her head first.

"In the darkness of Lysithara's depths, before my corruption, I fell into a world like that. An illusion."

Damon bit his lip.

"How did you break free?"

Matia stared into the abyss beneath their feet, gripping her sword.

"I do not remember. Only that I did."

"Sorry," he muttered, lowering his head.

Lazarak glanced at her then asked.

"This Lysithara place sounds horrible. My goodness, I had no idea such a vile place existed. Which continent would that be on?"

Lazarak looked horrified, his tiny body stiff.

Damon snorted.

"It is a ruined city in Soltheon. Though you have never heard of it, since it does not exist yet."

He glanced at the god, who looked very much like an offended toddler.

"And you will most likely never see it."

Lazarak winced and stuck out his tongue.

"Just because I called you ugly does not mean you should curse me. I have lived thousands of years. I will probably live forever."

Damon rolled his eyes and kept walking.

"Lysithara will become the greatest city in Aetherus. Home to all who seek knowledge. Legend says all who wish to become kings and heroes must first overcome Lysithara."

Lazarak listened with interest, tiny hands clasped behind his back.

"This was because of its learning structure," Damon continued. "It taught anyone willing to learn, and many who studied there became heroes and kings. Legends in their own right."

He imagined Lysithara in its prime. He had never seen it with his own eyes. Only its broken, monster infested ruins. A home for abominations.

"It will have tall spires that reach the sky. Beautiful paved roads. Delicious food. Legendary knights and mages. Its rulers will be wise, and its technology revolutionary. This is the path of kings."

Lazarak smiled, clearly enchanted by the vision.

"A lot has changed since I was imprisoned here. The path of kings... I would love to see it one day."

Damon's smile softened as he thought of Valarie Sunwarden. In this era she probably hadn't even been born yet.

"Me too."

Chapter 757: Weeping For Tomorrow

Nothing uneventful ever happened in Damon's life. If something was uneventful, it was a sign that something horrible was about to happen.

That was why he finally relaxed only after they had survived the treacherous trial and the strange, almost eldritch horrors inside the Garden of Hunger. After four long days, they finally reached the clear lake.

It should have been easy to get here, but they had been trapped by a boglike creature and forced to flee through a maze of bones. Trial after trial had blocked their path until at last the lake stretched before them.

Its waters were still and almost perfectly clear, reflecting a bleak dark sky. Damon hesitated to even call it a sky. A night sky had some familiarity to it. This one did not. It was stranger, empty in a way that made the lake feel like a mirror into something that should not exist.

He had looked at it before, but now that he focused again, he realized he had missed something.

A memory stirred and he heard his mother's voice.

"It's the heart that sees, not the eyes."

His words drifted across the lake and reached Lazarak, who smiled softly and turned his attention to the water.

"Wise words. We will need them for the Trial of Truth."

Lazarak looked at the still surface.

"Often we rely on our eyes, but they never show enough. The heart is what sees. It feels and understands even when we cannot."

Damon understood only part of that. A nostalgic expression flickered in Lazarak's eyes, something ancient and heavy. Damon could not begin to understand a god who had lived longer than the world itself.

"You have seen many seasons. Are you not tired?" Damon asked quietly. For him, life had always been about enduring.

"The most significant thing you can do in life is die." He spoke the words softly.

Lazarak chuckled and kept his gaze on the lake.

"You are a depressing creature. Life is not something you endure. It is something you enjoy. Enjoy it while you can, because the dead cannot."

Damon crossed his arms. His dark body did not reflect on the water. His form was shadows made into flesh. Even so, he could not agree with Lazarak.

"This coming from someone who was left to rot at the bottom of a prison. You are certainly living it up."

Lazarak rolled his eyes and folded his tiny hands behind his back.

"I enjoy whatever moments I can. You should try that instead of constantly looking for reasons to die."

Damon heard the warning in his tone. Lazarak was trying to pull him away from the thoughts Damon always drifted toward.

"Life is a tragedy when viewed up close. At a distance it is nothing but a comedy."

Damon glanced down at the small body of the toddler who was the god of darkness.

"Do you know what that means?" he asked.

Lazarak smiled again, still watching the lake. For a moment it felt like only the two of them existed, with Matia silent behind them like a patient shadow.

"Yes. It means you should try to find happiness. The things you think are painful are small trifles if you live into tomorrow. Pain does not last forever."

Damon closed his eyes. What an optimistic way to see the world. That was the difference between him and Lazarak. Lazarak saw the bright side of things. He never forgot to hope. Hope was all they really had.

'Tomorrow was never promised. Today was never enough. Yesterday was already gone. Tomorrow was only a hope.'

"Pain does not last forever, but its scars remain. Those are eternal." Damon opened his eyes again.

"Happiness never lasts. All you keep is a faint memory of how it tasted. Memories fade. All of them eventually fade."

Lazarak finally looked at him. Matia bowed her head silently, listening.

"I will tell you what those words mean to me."

Damon's eyes softened.

"They remind me that nothing matters. Nothing is truly important. That is why life is a tragedy. Everything you have will be lost. Even so, I hold on. My sister, my apprentice, my friends. They are all fleeting things I will eventually lose. And even knowing that, I laugh. That is the comedy."

As Damon spoke, Lazarak felt something tighten in his chest. His eyes filled. Tears slipped down his cheeks and dropped into the lake with soft plops.

Damon stared in confusion. He did not understand. Why was he crying. Why would this god of peace, the same one destined to bring forth the ultimate destroyer, begin to weep.

"Why do you weep, Lazarak?"

Lazarak touched his wet cheeks. His fingertips trembled as he looked at the tears on his hands.

"Because I am sad."

He was a god, but he was not emotionless. His heart was as deep and fragile as any mortal's.

"Why are you sad?" Damon asked, his voice low.

Lazarak tried to smile as more tears fell into the lake.

"I am sad because I see a lost soul crying for my help. I am weeping because I am helpless to do anything for him."

Damon watched him in stunned silence.

"I am sad because I cannot take away pain. I am sad because all I can do is weep." Lazarak's voice shook. "I wish someone would help. I pray for someone who can save them. I pray."

He stepped forward and knelt in the lake. His tears fell faster, each drop spreading a soft blackness laced with silver light. The darkness rippled outward, radiant and divine.

Damon stood frozen. He had not said anything sad. He had only spoken a truth he had accepted long ago. Yet Lazarak knelt before him, clutching his small hands against his chest, weeping for Damon.

Damon hesitated and slowly reached out. Before he could touch the tiny god, Lazarak's tears began to change the lake. The water responded to him, drawn to his sorrow. What began as scattered drops became a steady flow.

Something was being changed at its core.

Each tear carried sorrow, yet each one glowed, carrying hope with it.

This was the difference between a god and a demon.

Hope and despair.

A god was born to create and give hope.

A demon's nature was desire.

Damon watched the lake shrink. Water that was not part of Lazarak's tears evaporated or dissolved into nothing. The lake continued to collapse until only a pond remained beneath the golden trunk of the great tree. Its red canopy cast a dark cover over the transformed water.

This was Lazarak's lake of tears.

The Lake of Tears.

Chapter 758: Lake Of Tears

Damon could not think of anything else when he saw this place. The only name that formed in his mind was simple.

Lake of tears.

That was its name, and that was all Damon could imagine this lake being called.

It was a beautiful sight, quiet and overwhelming in a way that pulled at something deep inside him.

He found himself taking a few slow steps forward, almost hypnotized by the soft glow rising off its surface.

The waters that originally rested here were born from the trial of Self. In this place Damon had stepped into an illusion that felt like a dream. He had seen his dead mother there.

He had spent his seventeenth birthday with her, a day he would have otherwise spent alone. Here he had cried real tears that carried the longing of a child who wanted his mother back. Here also were the tears of a mother who did not want to part with her child.

Even now, the memory pressed against his chest like a hand squeezing his heart.

Damon did not know how many had cried here before him, or how many had wandered into the illusion and been taken by it forever.

Yet even knowing that uncertainty, he saw something more. A god had wept here, and his tears had swallowed the lake.

Damon glanced at Lazarak. The small god forced himself to stop crying, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve. His tiny shoulders shook as he tried to steady his breathing.

"You..." Damon began, taking a careful step toward him, but it was clear Lazarak was as lost as he was.

Damon let out a slow breath and studied the tiny figure. Seeing that Lazarak had no answer, he turned to Matia. She nodded, tightening her grip on her sword as she watched the lake with sharp, guarded focus.

Together they moved forward, their feet brushing through the soft grass, every step deliberate.

Except for Lazarak. He walked ahead with a strangely casual expression, almost as if something familiar whispered to him from across the water.

He reached the edge and stopped. A soft cluster of tiny wisps drifted upward from the lake, glowing silver as they swirled lazily around him. Lazarak leaned over and stared at his reflection.

What he saw was not his small form. It was a mass of darkness, steady and still, gentle in nature. A darkness that brought the night because the day was too hot.

This was Lazarak's true form.

His eyes widened. His breath hitched softly as he stared, transfixed.

Damon stepped beside him. Even while in Ghost's body, he expected to see the shadowy figure of Ghost. Instead he saw a boy.

A boy marked with scars across his body. Black tears streamed from his rage-filled face. In his chest was a heart filled with countless colors, each one blending into the center and turning black where they met. Behind him were threads. A vague, mysterious entity held those threads tightly, gripping each string as though it were adjusting or defending him.

The being had four wings that wrapped around him. It looked malicious, yet those wings shielded Damon from the hostile void swirling behind him.

The wings formed a canopy overhead, protective and suffocating all at once.

It seemed to be looking right at him.

Damon's eyes widened. He sucked in a breath, unable to tear his gaze away.

Matia stood on his other side. When she peered into the water, she did not see her reflection either. She saw a single snowflake drifting in a dark blizzard.

The wind clawed at it again and again, trying to break it apart. Yet the snowflake glowed brighter as it spun through the frozen ruins, dancing stubbornly against the storm.

The three of them stayed silent, staring at the lake that had formed from Lazarak's tears. The air felt heavier around them. This was more than a lake.

"What have you wrought, god of darkness..."

The voice echoed from the golden tree. The strange entity that called itself Root Ore watched them with wary, tight movements, as if preparing to flee or attack.

Lazarak smiled as if something had clicked inside him, soft and bitter. His small hands lowered to his sides. His smile trembled with melancholy.

"I have been answered. Not by any entity, but by the omniverse itself. I hear its voice, and I see the will of all things giving me a path forward."

His tone was gentle. Damon stared, a furrow forming between his brows. He did not understand what this meant, or why Lazarak called this the answer. But he knew he had to find out.

He looked at Matia.

"Protect my astral form."

Matia shifted her stance and nodded once.

Damon's soul pushed free from Ghost's vessel, slipping out like smoke escaping a cracked jar. Damon rose into the air, weightless. His astral form was dark, almost entirely shadow.

The cold air pressed against him, sharp and biting, but he pushed himself forward anyway.

As soon as he fully separated, he dropped to one knee. A ringing sound buzzed through his mind. The vibration crept across his soul like a thousand tiny needles digging into it.

He had heard this kind of whisper once before. Instead the Whispering forest. But this was far more overwhelming. Even so, the lake seemed to shield him from the worst of the noise, soft ripples of calm pushing the agony back.

The whispers came from beneath the surface of the water.

Many voices, all different, speaking in languages he had never heard. His Soul Tongue skill let him understand every one of them.

Damon knew he did not need to do this, but inside Ghost's body he could not use all of his abilities. In his astral form, he could.

But this skill was dangerous. One he rarely dared to use. He clenched his jaw, tightening his fingers in the air as if bracing himself.

He had to know what the Lake of Tears truly was.

[Appraisal.]

The skill activated. Damon felt the system respond, cold and absolute.

[Lake of Tears]

Chapter 759: Angel Of The Stars

[Lake of tears]

[Description]

In the beginning the old ones ruled, ancient and amoral.

In their service was a beautiful angel who carried out their every will, an obedient servant of capricious overlords who did not and could not understand right and wrong.

The angel did everything he was ordered and never defied them until he was commanded to turn on his beloved.

O great and unfathomable old ones, today an angel has rebelled.

The first to rebel against the old ones was the angel of the stars, full of dedication and pure love. He turned his blade on his creators, the amoral old gods.

Years later he became Luminous Astraeus, the god of the stars, cosmos and infinity.

The first true god. The first spark of the war that consumed the old ones.

The star that guided the defiant mortals who would become the true beings.

Laughably, when he had ultimate power was also the moment of his greatest helplessness, as he watched his wife get consumed by the mass of power that represented the god who did not yet exist.

When the abyss returned what remained of her, it offered back only the unborn child she carried.

She herself remained lost forever in the deep, held captive within the gaze of the unknown god.

In the eyes of his child he saw what his offspring would become, the one who would lead to the birth of the unknown god.

The unknown god would come from his bloodline.

Luminous also tried to defy this fate.

Surely as the sun has risen he failed, when the vile thief stole his greatest treasure.

Defiance will always come at a cost, and what is protected will be destroyed in its fury.

Even after eons of silence.

Luminous endures and waits until today, for the day the abyss spits out his beloved.

His tears sinking into the abyss, searching for her.

[Effect]

This lake holds the same emotions as Luminous. For those who defy the absolute and tire of their cruelty, the omniverse is always listening.

Dive into tears and reach the deep metaverse.

Damon felt his soul make a cracking sound as his astral forms eyes began to leak a black teardrop. His soul flickered in and out of existence. Pain rippled through him in cold waves. He wanted to close his eyes but could not. He was trapped staring at the lake of tears, watching himself die slowly.

Then someone touched his astral form. A light pull. A careful tug that pushed his ghostly shape backward.

Damon felt himself break free and without hesitation he dived back into Ghost's body, taking control of it instantly.

He fell to his knees. His breath escaped in shaky bursts as he coughed, holding his head with both hands. His vision spun and blurred. His eyelids felt like they weighed a hundred pounds.

It felt like it would last forever, but eventually the spinning stopped.

Damon remained still for a moment, then eased himself into a lotus position, crossing his legs and steadying his breathing. He shook his head lightly.

"Ahh, that almost killed me prematurely."

Lazarak's small form stared at him with a deep frown.

"Are you crazy? You almost died."

Damon chuckled. Seeing Matia's stiff, worried posture, he folded his arms across his chest.

"Actually it was necessary. I wanted to know what this thing was."

Lazarak gave him a disgusted look, then sighed and dragged his tiny chubby hands down his face.

"You did not need to. The will of the omniverse already spoke to me. I heard the voice."

He sounded exasperated, frustrated that Damon never cared about his own safety.

Matia relaxed slightly now that Damon seemed stable.

Damon rolled his eyes with a thin smile.

"Oh yeah? What did you learn? I learned some deep and ancient secrets, even the name of an actual true god. What about you? Did you learn that? Huh, huh?"

Lazarak raised his little hand to argue, then paused.

"Well, n.. no, but I learned about the lake and what it does. So that is something."

He gestured to Damon with his small toddler body.

"You first. What did you learn."

Damon lay on his back, staring up at the bleak sky. The sky shifted faintly, as if it was not truly a sky.

"I learned that defiance comes at a price."

His voice was low.

"You lose more than you win. What you seek to protect ends up destroyed in the end."

Lazarak frowned and repeated softly what Damon had just seen.

"Defiance will always come at a cost, and what is protected will be destroyed in its fury."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"So you heard something similar."

Lazarak sighed and sat beside Damon. His small form rested against the ground as he glanced toward Root Ore, who stood silently watching the lake with fear hidden in its unknown face.

"Yes. The voice of the omniverse. It is as if it is telling me my actions will be pointless, even after giving me the tool to defy."

He looked at Damon with a soft, almost fragile smile.

"This is the lake of tears. If you wanted to know about it, you could have just asked. There is a type of paranoia called delusional paranoia, you know. I would have told you, my friend."

Damon kept quiet and let Lazarak talk. Trusting people had never been Damon's way.

Lazarak took a steady breath, his hands pressing gently into the ground.

"The lake of tears. Lazarak's lake of tears is born from the hopes and prayers of a god. This wondrous lake has the mysterious power to allow its user to reach into the metaverse, the realm where all minds meet, and from it call upon whomever or whatever they wish. Not even the true gods interfere with its power because it exists within rules they will not break."

Lazarak's smile returned, sad and hopeful.

"I have it, Damon. The key. I have what I wanted. A way to call upon something out there to save this world from its self destructive path."

Damon wanted to ask why Lazarak looked so sad if he believed he had found the answer.

"Still," Lazarak whispered, "I was given a warning."

"Defiance will always come at a cost, and what is protected will be destroyed in its fury."

He looked at Damon again.

"The future is uncertain, but even the will of the omniverse does not seem to believe that I will succeed."

Damon did not like the hopelessness in the small god's voice.

So he made a choice.

He sat up and drew in a breath.

"Let me tell you a story. This is what I have learned."

He lifted his gaze toward the strange sky.

"Once there was an angel."

Chapter 760: Defy Yourself

The omniverse at the beginning was not ruled by gods like Doom.

For a long time it was ruled by strange eldritch and amoral entities. These entities were powerful and transcendent. They were the rulers of everything.

Life, death, space, time, freedom, imagination, entropy.

Each of them controlled a concept far removed from the imagination of mortals.

In their service was a loyal angel of the stars who carried out their every whim even if those whims were cruel, malicious, chaotic or completely incomprehensible.

Damon told Lazarak this story. From the outside they looked unusual. A small toddler god sat listening stiffly to a story told by a shadow crouched beside him. The strange lake behind them rippled in the quiet as though leaning closer.

It was not a happy story. There was no happy ending to Luminous Astraesus. His defiance did not change anything. His wife was still lost. Maybe it was not the old gods that took her, but she was still taken nonetheless.

When Damon reached the end of the story he paused. He lowered his head slightly, his dark form shifting and dimming as he considered whether he should change the ending.

He really wanted to tell Lazarak that Luminous found his love again. That he saw her. That they lived happily ever after.

His fingers flexed as though reaching for a lie he knew he should not speak.

But Damon refused to lie to Lazarak.

"Luminous still waits till this day for what is lost."

The words left him softly, as though the despair weighed down his voice.

He looked at Lazarak from the corner of his eye, observing the god's small trembling hands resting on his knees.

"Hey, Lazarak. We are friends, right."

Lazarak forced a gentle smile on his chubby face. His little shoulders rose and fell with a shaky breath.

"I have been saying that from the beginning."

Damon lifted his gaze toward the false sky above them. The surface flickered like a painted ceiling that refused to stay still.

"I do not think winning or losing is what defiance is about. It is not about succeeding or seeking glory. The very action of going against everything even when you have no power and no means of winning is the reward and that is enough for me."

He curled his hands into fists and raised them toward the sky as though daring the heavens to strike him.

"I remain pathetically unchanged because I believe changing is the end of the person I recognize as myself. Defy and laugh knowing it is better than laying down, bowing your head and accepting everything."

His voice hardened. He remembered the moment he begged. His fingers tightened until they shook.

"I will never beg again. I will always remain the first fool to raise his head and die."

His village was gone and all the people he hated were dead.

He placed his hand against his chest as though anchoring himself.

"Luminous Astraeus is truly amazing. I wonder if all the true gods had the same defiance even if everything was lost in the end."

Lazarak's mood shifted. A glimmer of light touched his expression and he sat up straighter.

"I think you are wrong about something. Luminous story has not come to an end. He is still waiting for his beloved. His defiance has not ended."

He pushed himself to his feet. His legs wobbled, but he steadied himself with a determined laugh.

"It is easy to defy outside forces. All you need to do is stand up and say no. Damon, the greatest defiance is to defy yourself."

He looked at Damon with sincere eyes.

"Change is not always bad. Sometimes when we open ourselves to new things we create possibilities that never existed before. One day I believe you will commit the ultimate defiance when you defy yourself."

Damon scoffed, though curiosity glimmered beneath the sound.

"I wonder what that would look like."

Lazarak smiled at him gently and the lake behind him glowed faintly at his back.

"Remember, Damon. Defy yourself."

"One day you will defy yourself."

He waved his small hand and turned toward the tree. His tiny footsteps made soft crunches against the ground.

"Come. We still have to face the trial of truth."

Damon watched the toddler god walking with even determined steps. Lazarak looked sure of himself now, but Damon could see the lingering shadow of doubt in the god's aura. Even this god had fears.

The more Damon learned, the more flawed the gods appeared.

He never imagined a true god, absolute in every way, could be helpless about anything. But even these boundless entities were limited by their own hearts.

So much had been put into place before the Unknown God was born. The vile thief had been the one whose bloodline the Unknown God came from. This thief had stolen from everyone.

And according to the lake, he had stolen the daughter of Luminous Astraesus, god of the stars.

That alone explained the hatred the true gods held for him. No one liked a thief. Not even gods.

More than that, the abyss, which was synonymous with the Unknown God, had devoured the wife of Luminous but spat out the child in her womb. That child was eventually taken by the vile thief which led to the birth of the Unknown God.

No one had been able to stop his birth. Even Luminous had tried and failed.

Damon pieced together the vague clues. Everything began to fall into place.

The more he understood the lore, the more his thoughts drifted to the Unknown God himself. This was the entity who plotted Damon's death at the hands of the goddess, then fought every true being to save Damon.

All for a plan Damon did not understand.

Damon felt one simple realization settle in his chest like a cold stone.

The Unknown God was terrifying beyond measure.

And if there was one thing Damon learned from the lake of tears, it was that even true gods could not do anything about the Unknown God.

One thought came to his mind.

'There are no absolutes before the Unknown god.'

A soft laugh left Damon's lips, quiet but sharp.

"Heheheheh... I already knew that. He cannot do anything to me when I am dead."

That was his ultimate form of defiance.

Lazarak had his lake of tears and its ability to open the metaverse. Damon had something simpler and far more brutal. The option of simply dying.

"Unlike Lazarak and all his noble intentions, I am not trying to save the world."

He followed the small god to the tree. Lazarak stopped and turned to him with an outstretched hand.

"Are you ready."

Damon looked at Root Ore with a cold expression.

"Watch the lake. If anything happens to it I will burn you alive and devour what remains."

Root Ore flinched but nodded quickly.

It couldn't help but be afraid now... after all the prisoners of the Deep were worse than it imagined.

Damon reached out and took Matia's hand. Her grip was steady. Then he grabbed Lazarak's tiny fingers, warm and trembling with excitement.

"Let us go."

A sound like shattering glass cut through the air around them. Light fractured. Space trembled.

All three disappeared.