

Shadow 791

Chapter 791: Mother Of Stillbirths

"Awww..." Damon let out a soft yawn as he stretched across the bed. He stood, snapped his fingers lightly, then waited.

Nothing.

He frowned and snapped again.

Still nothing.

He glanced at the side of his bed. No morning tea. For a moment he simply stared, then sighed. All that talk with Lazarak about wanting to be rich had really infected his thoughts. He was rich now. So why was there no tea.

He pushed himself up.

Beside the bed sat a pile of books with human organs pressed into their covers. They glistened faintly in the library's pale light. Once, they had been people. Now they were light reading. Damon had been indulging in it lately. Relaxing, really.

"A nourished mind is the key to a nourished body."

He muttered the phrase as he rose fully, lifting his gaze toward the vast halls of the library. Towering shelves stretched into the dim distance. Every book was a prisoner. Every prisoner was a story.

It had been a few days since the trial of sin ended. Lazarak obtained the key to the next trial, but he insisted Damon rest while he investigated what came next.

Damon had told him his long term plan, should he fail in dying. It felt strange to even say it out loud. But if nothing interfered, he believed he would succeed eventually.

The trial of sin had been brutal. Designed to break him. Yet he had walked away with something real.

He had faced himself, truly faced himself, and survived.

He had broken free from the cage of guilt he had welded around his own heart. Surviving was not wrong. And even if someone believed it was, the world was far too eager to punish him on its own. He did not need to help it.

His long term plan sounded frivolous and self-centered on the surface. But the truth underneath was simple...

Damon wanted security. Something he never had. Riches gave that.

He wanted control. Power gave that.

He wanted a life where he was not crawling through every day like a starving animal.

He had worked hard. Harder than anyone deserved to. But hard work meant nothing. If effort alone created success, then the donkey would own the farm and the oxen would run the enterprise.

Reality was cruel. He knew it better than most.

He hid all of this behind casual jokes, but this was his truth.

He walked between the shelves, returning the books to their places. Each one moaned or begged softly as he slid it back. They had all been alive once. Some evil, some not. What they shared was guilt.

They knew what they had done. And that guilt had eaten them alive when they were trapped in Eidolon.

'This was the trial of sin. And for those who felt no guilt and rejected it, they probably faced the mirror seraph in the trial of truth, where they had to acknowledge their truths.'

Damon let the thought drift through his mind as he surveyed the prison around him.

"Imaginary prison is a fitting name. This place messes with your mind."

He shoved the last book into place. The woman trapped inside begged him to destroy her soul, but after reading her history, Damon felt not even a flicker of sympathy.

He walked on and scanned the shelves for another book. The endings were often the same, but he did not mind. Every life was still a story.

Each trial had a key. This one opened the next. Only two more stood between them and freedom.

Lazarak was a good god. Oddly enough, Damon had been surprised to admit that. The little schemer never told the full truth, only enough to avoid suspicion. It was intentional. Transparent even. But Damon could tell the trickster did not harbor ill will.

That was why Damon shared his long term plan. He had expected disdain, maybe mockery. Instead, Lazarak accepted it without blinking.

'I have not had anyone accept me like this since Lilith Astranova.'

The thought tightened his chest. He wondered where she was. Alive or dead.

He shook his head.

No. She was alive. And if she was dead, he wanted to see her corpse.

"Lilith has to be outside this prison..." he whispered. Or perhaps he should not hope too much.

Either way, he would enjoy the downtime here. A little vacation among sentient books.

He felt a pang of guilt for making his shadow Ghost haul a massive bed from the deepest level up to this one. But comfort was comfort.

Damon cleared his throat and made his way to the place where he had faced the Archivist. He sat in a chair he had also forced Ghost to bring up from the deepest level.

He opened a fresh book as Matia approached, placing a cup of steaming tea beside him. The flames used to boil it came from burning one of the books that had once been a person.

"Ahem. Thank you." He felt a little bad treating her like a maid. She was his knight, after all.

"Where is Renata when you need her..." he muttered. If she were here, she would serve as maid, secretary, assistant, and a dozen other things. The woman was a multitasking monster.

He sipped his tea.

One of the shelves suddenly groaned open. A battered Lazarak tumbled out and landed face-first on the floor. His tiny form was covered in dust, soot, and a translucent slime that dripped from his face.

Damon raised his cup and stared.

"You look like shit. And you smell even worse."

Lazarak wobbled upright and smoothed his hair with a dignified expression that absolutely did not match his state.

"You have no idea what I have been through."

Damon pinched his nose, leaning back as if the smell physically shoved him.

"I would say tell me about it, but I think you need a bath first, little guy."

Lazarak gritted his teeth, marched closer, and rubbed his slime-covered face directly against Damon's cheek.

Damon jerked back.

"What... what did you rub on me..."

Lazarak crossed his arms proudly.

"I do not know. Probably birth fluid. You know, the stuff that comes out when a pregnant woman gives birth. The sticky thing on babies."

Damon closed his eyes. His fingers twitched. He resisted the violent urge to punt the small god across the library.

"And where did you get that?"

Lazarak pointed casually toward the shelf behind him.

"From the mother of stillbirths."

Chapter 792: Give Me Tea

The fourth trial they would face was a complete mystery to them and since Damon had suffered the most during the trial of sin, Lazarak wanted him to take it easy during the next trial.

Damon glanced at him with a calm leisurely expression while sipping his tea, his posture relaxed as if nothing in the world could bother him.

Lazarak slowly walked to the table and attempted to sit. Unfortunately, his toddler body made the adult sized chair hopelessly unsuitable.

His tiny legs dangled in the air, and he slid right off the edge. He stared at the chair with visible irritation before lifting his small hand.

A stack of books floated off the shelves and arranged neatly on the seat. He climbed back up, planted himself on the improvised throne, and cleared his throat.

"Cough cough." He coughed awkwardly at his own actions, waiting for Damon to mock him. Damon did not even look up from his tea.

Lazarak kept his gaze steady.

"I'm afraid the next trial is not suited for me."

Damon raised an eyebrow and lowered his teacup with deliberate slowness.

"You're afraid. Huh. That is a funny way of saying Damon relax and live your best life. I can handle this."

Lazarak straightened his back. His tiny hands folded neatly in his lap. His dark eyes brightened and widened, trying to look dignified even while he sat on a pile of books.

Damon sneered, unimpressed. The god was clearly trying to butter him up and it was pathetic.

"Your tactics have failed. I will not do it. Figure it out yourself."

Lazarak sighed with a wounded expression.

"And so I suffer."

He lifted his hand again. Darkness gathered around his fingers and rose like smoke, swirling until it formed small floating shapes.

"The trial we are about to face is the trial of creation. The warden is the Mother of Stillbirths."

Lazarak paused with a frown before releasing another soft sigh.

"She is the mother of all babies who did not get to live. The stillborn who never had the chance to hate life or become ungrateful for the gift of it."

He clasped his small hands together, his voice gentle.

"Being born is the greatest act of creation. Those who did not get that chance are missing out on too much."

Damon did not move. His expression remained flat. As someone who despised the concept of being born without consent and resented that life was forced upon him, he had no sympathy.

"Well this trial must be easy. Just tell them they are not missing out on much. In life we have poverty, starvation, prostitution, plagues, war, natural disasters. Did I mention poverty? And more poverty. You are born and you work until you die. There is nothing special about it."

Lazarak rolled his eyes. Their worldviews were oceans apart.

"But what about what they miss? Love, happiness, peace, adventure, dreams."

"I will stop you there and your hipster nonsense." Damon raised a hand to silence him. "Love, happiness, peace, adventure, dreams. Are you sure you and I live in the same world?"

He stared at Lazarak with disdain.

"This is Aetherus. Peace is never an option and war is eternal. Strength rules. Violence is the question. Love and happiness are fleeting. They do not last. And when they do, the ending is betrayal or tragedy. A noblewoman gets bored, thinks with her loins, and convinces some idiot commoner that love means anything. The result is destroyed families and villages."

He shook his head at the memory of his parents, those two fools who believed in love.

"Love only happens between equals. When it does not, everything collapses."

Lazarak bit his lip, watching Damon demolish his hopeful ideals.

"Dreams. What dreams? If you are a dreamer, keep sleeping. Reality is a nightmare."

He touched his chin, thinking.

"Then adventure. That is the single most foolish decision a person can make. Do not explore the unknown. The best adventure is staying home where it is safe. The outside world is full of monsters and horrors."

He glared at Lazarak.

"So no. I think they are better off."

Lazarak lowered his head. His nature was inherently optimistic. He saw beauty in everything and refused to kill even when it meant saving his own life. Hearing Damon speak like this hurt him, not because it surprised him, but because it reflected just how bleak Damon's world view truly was.

"If you focus only on the thorns of a rose, you will never appreciate its beauty."

He smiled gently, hoping to give his pessimistic friend some hope.

"Have you ever been in love, Damon?"

Damon raised an eyebrow and took another thoughtful sip of tea.

"No. Not really."

Lazarak smiled softly.

"So there is not a lady you fancy?"

Damon hesitated for a moment. A lady he fancied. The first person that came to mind was someone he refused to think about. He shifted in his seat.

Because he was unsure if she was dead or alive.

"Hmmm. A lady I fancy.... I fancy. What brought this on."

Lazarak smiled at the obvious deflection.

"You seem to have a negative impression of love. Why so scared of it."

Damon rolled his eyes.

"I am not scared of love. And more importantly, you wanted help with the next trial."

Lazarak noticed the quick pivot.

"You are not very popular with the ladies, are you?"

Damon gave him a deadpan stare.

"You do not want to go down that rabbit hole with me."

Lazarak hesitated. The Mother of Stillbirths was important, but so was the tea. He lifted his cup and took a slow sip.

"Well then consider me a rabbit hunter."

Damon sighed and shook his head. Memories crawled back.

"Ahhh." He released a long breath. "I have never been popular with the ladies."

Lazarak nodded sympathetically.

"No surprise. Only a mother could love you."

Damon waved that off with another tired sigh.

"I only know a few city toppling beauties fighting over me. I only kissed a few princesses. It is no big deal. I am certain other men have achieved more."

Lazarak froze mid laugh, stunned.

He turned toward Matia.

"I am going to need more tea."

Chapter 793: Stillborn

"Wow. Just wow. You have quite an interesting life. Why die when you have not even gotten lucky."

Lazarak asked with a small smile, swinging his tiny legs as he cradled his teacup with both hands.

Damon shrugged and took another sip of tea. He had already told Lazarak about his past escapades and the trouble they caused him. His expression remained calm, almost bored.

"That elf king Kadelas sounds like a real sourpuss."

"Oh he is," Damon replied without hesitation.

Still, what Kadelas Moonveil thought of him meant nothing. Damon leaned back slightly, relaxed.

"I am a man with nothing to my name and nothing to lose. He is a king with everything to lose."

Lazarak frowned and set down his cup.

"I am not sure if that is optimism or nihilism."

Damon tapped the rim of his cup and looked at the toddler god.

"It is both actually."

Lazarak sighed, realizing how much time they had wasted on Damon's chaotic love life.

"What do you, I mean we, intend to do about the Mother of Stillbirths."

Damon leaned back again, grabbed a tamberly flavored cookie, and bit into it without concern. He chewed slowly as if the matter had nothing to do with him.

"Suppose we have to kill it, don't we?"

He crossed his arms and gave Lazarak a look that clearly asked for details. Lazarak stared back with a face that said obviously and now I'll try to explain how.

"Do not give me that look. I do not know either. You have not told me enough to draw a conclusion." Damon complained.

Lazarak lifted his gaze toward the ceiling and sighed.

"You know I used magic to try to change the world order. So the goddess punished me and the world by restricting everyone to one magic type and removing true names."

Damon frowned, raising his tea once more.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Another sigh from Lazarak, deep and dramatic.

"Oh nothing. I just wanted to reminisce about the past. While telling you the stillborn can use magic freely because they do not have attributes. But I do not expect a god hating shadow like you to listen to a god's warnings."

Damon clicked his tongue and set down his cup.

"Damn show off. Ruining all our lives is not a flex. That was your fault. What kind of magic were you even using to rebel."

Lazarak lifted his tiny shoulders in a shrug.

"Cannot remember. It was so long ago and it does not matter anymore."

Damon leaned back again.

"Would have been easier if you did not make a vow renouncing murder. You can solve most of your problems by killing them."

Lazarak chuckled bitterly.

"It would be a sad sight to see so many problems die unsolved."

He swung his small legs back and forth in a childlike rhythm.

"The trial of creation is based on the nature of the Mother of Stillbirths. You would be surrounded by whatever she can birth, and they would physically try to stop us from leaving."

Damon lifted an eyebrow.

"How would they do that?"

Lazarak gave him a flat look.

"The usual way. Killing us, maiming us, all of that."

"How original." Damon scoffed.

"So it should not be hard. We just kill our way out."

Lazarak raised a hand quickly to stop him from getting carried away.

"If only it were that easy. She gives birth to a lot of still babies."

"How much is a lot?" Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Honestly it is not that much. She only gives birth to one every second."

Damon sneered with a thin smile.

"Sixty seconds. So we just need to kill her within the time limit."

Lazarak shook a finger slowly.

"Not quite my friend. I mean she has been giving birth every sixty seconds."

Damon froze. If that was true, then the situation had shifted dramatically.

"How long did you say you were imprisoned here?"

Lazarak shrugged casually.

"Cannot remember. I lost count after two thousand years. At least several thousand more passed."

Damon nodded slowly as he did the math.

"Okay. Okay. I think you are on your own for this one."

Lazarak clasped his hands. "Do you know why the stillborn can still use multiple attributes of magic despite not being born."

Damon frowned and leaned in slightly without realizing it. Then he paused.

"Are you trying to bait me with some interesting lore?"

The toddler god nodded with pride.

"Yes. Yes I am. And you will love this one. My working theory is that the law the goddess used to bind us to a single attribute only affects those who were born. A stillborn is a failed birth."

Damon smiled at the thought of the goddess's power failing.

"So the Goddess of Doom cannot do anything about this loophole."

Lazarak shook his head.

"No that is not it. I think she created this loophole intentionally. It is not like we can exploit it."

Damon's shoulders sagged slightly.

"My disappointment is immeasurable and my day is ruined."

Lazarak looked at him with disdain.

"She is a true god. What did you expect? Though I think she has a soft spot for women who lost their children at birth. Maybe."

"That is useful to me how." Damon asked, shrugging.

Lazarak blinked and bit his lip, then smiled.

"It is not. I just think you dislike my creator a bit too much."

Damon smiled faintly at the toddler god defending his goddess. It was the same feeling you get when a stranger insults a family member even if the stranger is right.

"You are the one trying to summon some eldritch entity to deal with her."

Lazarak hopped down from the chair and followed Damon as he walked through the library halls.

"Where are you going? The next trial is that way."

Damon did not turn around.

"You said there were many. I am going to pick up something that works great for mass murder."

Chapter 794: Cute Baby

This place was dreary and dull, and standing here almost reminded Damon of the ruined city of Lysithara. The atmosphere felt muted, dull and grey or maybe just deeply dark.

His ears picked up faint sounds of crying in the distance, thin and overlapping as if many infants were wailing at the same time.

He stood in what appeared to be a courtyard fountain. The grass around it was dull and brown, bent and dried without a hint of vitality left in it.

Damon glanced around. At his side, Matia held her great war mace, the spikes of it shaped from solid ice.

Lazarak, in the form of a toddler, stood near Damon's leg with a calm expression.

If not for the crying babies, this place would have been quiet with very little noise.

He took a small step, then another. The ground crackled faintly under his boot.

"Let's go." He called to Lazarak, who nodded and followed with tiny careful steps.

They slowly walked toward the dark shadow of the buildings that rose into towers forming the grand castle.

"This isn't what I expected." Damon whispered softly, lowering his voice without quite knowing why.

Lazarak did not seem all that bothered by the atmosphere, even though the air felt deeply eerie and unsettling.

"Well that is because the wounded souls have not begun moving."

Damon paused and turned his head slowly, raising one eyebrow at Lazarak.

"What do you mean by wounded souls."

Lazarak scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"Oh those guys. Those are the prisoners of this floor. They do not have physical bodies since they exist as mere souls. Each of them has long since become wrapped in one way or the other."

"I really hate how you do not tell me these things."

Lazarak scratched his cheeks with the same awkward expression.

"I forgot to mention the imprisoned souls."

Damon exhaled sharply and stepped into the castle. He did not see anything yet. The halls were empty and the wails of babies were getting more distant.

He stopped in his tracks. The wails were getting more distant again.

That was not a sign of safety. If anything, that meant something was getting closer. Back when he had traveled with his party across the Duhu Mountains, one of the rules had been that if a sound seemed far away it was close, and if it sounded close then it was actually far away.

A small crunching sound echoed as Matia raised a shield of frost around herself as if anticipating an attack.

She glanced at him sharply, clearly reaching the same conclusion.

Lazarak did not fully understand what they were thinking or why their tension was rising. He sensed danger, but he still could not resist speaking.

"What why are you two looking at each other. Are you flirting when we are in danger."

Damon felt a strong temptation to kick the toddler god into the nearest wall, but falling for that kind of ragebait was something a lesser man would do. Besides, Lazarak was trying to lighten the mood.

It was a trick Damon used himself, treating dangerous and existential horrors as if they were small trifles.

For the most part it worked. Damon did not feel as on edge anymore. He pushed open the large chamber door and stepped inside. As he did, deafening wailing sounds flooded the air.

He lifted his head slightly. In the chamber ahead stood a baby, a baby-like creature easily nine feet tall. It had dull grey skin like ash. Its arms were short with only palms attached directly to its shoulders. Its legs were the same, only feet stuck to its malformed body without knees or proper limbs.

Most babies were ugly bundles of joy. Damon believed babies were born ugly, then grew into toddlers who were the ultimate form of cuteness. The wait between ugly and adorable was probably why parents tolerated the reddish, wrinkled thing they brought into the world.

He was not going to say the silent part aloud. Maybe some other time.

The thought drifted through his mind to distract him from the mutilated creature before him.

The stillborn giant did not seem to notice them. It grabbed what appeared to be someone's soul and pressed it into its toothless mouth, sucking on it.

The soul withered. Its shape flickered helplessly, fading in and out of existence until the stillborn finally let go.

It made strange giggling and wailing sounds, disturbingly similar to a normal baby, then continued its grotesque routine.

Damon dropped into a crouch behind a large pillar and pulled Lazarak into his arms. The tiny toddler god squeezed himself onto Damon's lap, trying to stay hidden.

"What did I just watch?" Damon whispered with a sour expression.

Lazarak leaned back to avoid being spotted by the rampaging baby that was grabbing discarnate souls left and right just so it could suck them and release them again.

"Oh I forgot to mention they suck the souls of prisoners here but release them at the last moment so they can repeat the process again."

Damon watched through the flickering reflections in the polished stone.

"You did not think to tell me that earlier." He whispered softly, keeping his voice low.

Lazarak peeked again at the baby as it grabbed a few more hovering souls.

"Now you know what are you, I mean we, going to do."

Damon gritted his teeth.

"You want to leave me with the work."

Lazarak put on an unbearably cute expression, his eyes glittering.

"I'm a toddler." He whispered back.

Damon had enough.

"No you are not you bastard. You are ancient. You are the first person to exist. Stop being lazy."

Lazarak raised his hand to stop Damon, but Damon did not pause.

"I will have you know renouncing murder is not an excuse for sloth."

"Erm Damon." Lazarak tried to speak as he looked past Damon's shoulder.

Damon continued berating him until he froze, sensing a faint pressure behind him.

"There is something behind me isn't there."

Lazarak nodded while keeping his eyes fixed on the faint discarnate soul rising behind Damon.

Damon reached out to destroy it with his sword, but the soul moved faster and released a sharp screech that echoed through the chamber, drawing the giant infant's attention.

The stillborn turned toward them with a baby's giggle. Damon felt a surge of pure evil. Not evil in the sense of malice or corruption. This was something worse. It was the capricious ignorance of a creature that did not know the difference between right and wrong.

It was not the devil. It was worse.

It was a baby.

Chapter 795: Dangerous Innocence

Human nature was learned. Man did not have it at birth and could not acquire it except through fellowship, and it decayed in isolation.

The sensibilities anyone had were not their own, they were things learned over the course of life.

Your perception of good and evil was never yours. It belonged to your environment, to the religion you followed and wholeheartedly believed to be true, yet had been indoctrinated into you from the beginning.

In this world there were no absolute goods or absolute evils. There were no Absolutes.

Laws were transient.

For a baby, none of these things mattered. If something looked good and the baby recognized it as good then, like a beast, it acted on instinct and ate it.

If something looked like a toy, then it was a toy, even if it happened to be a colony of insects fighting for survival.

Well, sadly, human cruelty was innate.

Damon jumped aside as the giant malformed infant charged toward him like a rampaging bull. Its thunderous footsteps boomed through the chamber as it slammed headfirst into the pillar Damon had been hiding behind. The stone cracked and dust rained down.

"How does it even run with those stubby legs." Damon asked irritably, holding Lazarak across his arms like a sack of flour.

"Hold me gently you bastard I'm a god." Lazarak screamed, clearly offended by the display of disrespect.

"Shut up or I'm tossing you to that giant malformed baby."

Damon dodged a spray of debris while cradling Lazarak tighter. He rolled across the floor, sliding on his knees until he came to a halt facing the direction of the giant baby.

He frowned as the baby stared at him with an innocent giggle. Damon had never been so unnerved by innocence. Something inside him finally understood how insects and small household pets felt when newborn children first entered the world.

"I mean it could be worse at least he's not using magic." Lazarak muttered loudly.

Damon's eye twitched. He squeezed the toddler god a bit too tightly.

"Thank you for jinxing us. It is not as if I am not trying hard enough to get myself killed."

And sure enough, the stillborn raised its hand to its nose. Its face shifted into an expression of simple, empty innocence.

It sneezed.

A deafening boom followed as fire, water and wind merged into a violent, insidious spell.

This magic had no runes. It had no chants. No seals. It simply happened. There was no law to it, no study behind it. Just a raw destructive outburst of mana.

The explosion rocked the entire chamber. Dust and soot flooded the air as fragments of stone shot across the room.

A soft giggle, filled with the innocence of a baby, echoed faintly through the haze. Damon frowned. He had held back earlier to observe what this creature could do, but someone else beat him to the attack.

The baby rocked its massive body and looked toward the armored woman standing before it.

Black drool slipped from its mouth. It stared at Matia with curiosity. She tightened her grip on her spiked mace, lifting it with all her strength.

With a sound like tearing cloth, she swung. The mace struck the stillborn's raised hand. The stubby hand ripped free from its malformed body.

Since it had no true arms, the hand was the only thing to sever.

The stillborn baby stared at its missing hand in pure confusion. Then it began to wail, blood spraying from the wound in a thick fountain.

Uncharacteristic of a normal infant, it wailed harder and lunged at Matia. She raised her shield and absorbed the impact. The creature's palm pressed against the shield and was instantly impaled by ice spikes she had conjured. Thin veils of frost crept down the creature's body.

Its movements slowed. Its massive form swayed as though being lulled into sleep. Matia was freezing it gently, steadily, without hesitation.

As ice spread down its torso, the creature trembled. Its eyes flashed.

"Ahhhhnjjjggggg."

It cried out as its body began to glow red. Flames engulfed its form. It lifted its remaining hand to smash Matia, but she leapt aside. Her mace warped into a massive greatsword.

She planted her foot on a nearby pillar, pivoted, and launched herself upward.

The stillborn opened its mouth and unleashed a torrent of fire like a dragon's breath.

Matia spread her wings and glided above the flames. Her sword gleamed with sharp cold light as she descended.

In midair, ice met fire. The chamber shook with the sound of thunder.

Using her weight, she dove toward the ground. A faint boom rippled through the air as her blade cleaved straight down. The shining edge sliced through flesh. Blood erupted in a crimson fountain.

"Ahhh gargr."

The stillborn's head toppled from its shoulders. Black tears streamed from its eyes. Its large body remained standing for a breath, then slowly collapsed to the ground.

Blood rained down on Matia. She remained still, letting the droplets slide from her armor.

Damon clapped approvingly.

"Good. Beautiful. You get extra points for aura farming while you were at it."

Matia did not respond. She simply flicked her sword to rid it of blood.

Damon clapped again.

"I will be adding that to my aura farming techniques if you do not mind."

While Damon praised Matia, Lazarak walked toward the fallen stillborn with a sad expression. He knelt beside the creature's head, looking into the wide eyes that would remain open in death unless someone closed them.

"I'm sorry you never got to live a full life little one. I am certain out there, somewhere, there is a mother who wished you had lived. A mother who prayed you would be born so she could hold you, nurse you, and watch you grow."

He slowly lifted his hand and closed the creature's eyes.

"Rest now little one."

Damon watched him and sighed heavily.

"You do realize we are here to kill them en mass right."

Lazarak shook his head gently.

"Not quite. We are here to kill the mother of stillbirths."

Chapter 796: Brothers Name

"Do you have any children, Damon."

Lazarak asked the question while the two of them walked down the long halls of the castle. His steps were light, almost hesitant, as if he feared disturbing the cold air.

Damon scoffed. He shoved his hands into each other and kept walking.

"If I had children at the age of seventeen, who would be raising who?"

Lazarak stopped in his tracks. His head tilted as he studied Damon, then a slow smile spread across his face.

"You are so young. With the way you are acting I thought you had lived several hundred years. Seventeen and already at the third class, impressive is an understatement."

Damon barely reacted. His expression stayed flat, unreadable.

"Are you one of those people who look down on others for being young? If you are, then I will have you know I have lived enough in my life to last me a hundred years."

Lazarak stayed silent for a moment. His eyes lowered, then he shook his head.

"No, not really. I just think young people should be full of dreams and ambitions. Having something you look forward to."

Damon walked forward without acknowledging him further. He stepped past the frozen corpse of another stillborn. The distant sound of battle echoed through the halls ahead as Matia carved a path through the castle. Every step was covered in a thin sheet of ice, an aftermath of her power.

"I do have something to look forward to. Even if you think it is depressing."

Lazarak lowered his head slightly while staring into the wide open mouth of a stillborn frozen in ice, its last silent scream captured forever by Matia's cold.

"What is your mother like?"

Damon frowned. That was the last question he expected from Lazarak. He hated talking about her, but if he had to answer in a single sentence:

"She was the best. And also possibly the only person I can say I truly feared."

Lazarak smiled softly. Damon did not like admitting fear, and Lazarak could tell.

"Why."

Damon closed one eye and smiled.

"She used to whoop my ass if I misbehaved. Gentle parenting only came after a dose of tough love."

He thought back to her gently consoling him after she had beaten him for causing trouble.

How she smelled. How she felt. The sense of safety when he was with her.

No one forgets their mother.

The maternal instinct that raises and protects.

Lazarak rubbed his fingers together as the cold air bit at his skin. The blood soaked ice glistened around them.

"I am a bit envious. I did not really have a parent in the traditional sense. I was after all created, not born."

Damon glanced at a wall of ice where a floating discarnate soul hung suspended, frozen by Matia's power. Even souls did not escape her.

"Isn't the goddess your mother? I mean she created you, so..."

Lazarak sighed and scratched the back of his head.

"Yes and no. Think of it this way. If you made a clay figure and gave it life, that does not make it your child. It is just something you created. If it breaks or you find it substandard or not to your liking, you can just discard it or destroy it."

He slowed his steps. His voice softened.

"That is what I am. Just a clay figure."

Damon did not know what to say. He did not share Lazarak's troubles or insecurities, yet he understood this god in more ways than he expected.

More than anything, Lazarak was like Damon in his tragic loneliness. Only Lazarak's isolation was far worse.

'How does he still want to be kind even after all that? I could not be that selfless.'

To Lazarak, kindness was not about survival. It was about something deeper than self-preservation.

Damon still had nothing comforting to offer, but something came to mind.

"You have a sibling, right. I have a sister."

He paused, turning slightly toward Lazarak with a sigh.

"I have been looking after her since the day our parents died. I wanted to be a good person for her. Not because I was actually good, but because I wanted her to see me as such. While I may be painted black in reality, in her mind I wanted to be the knight in shiny armor who did no wrong."

Damon knew that desire was selfish, but protecting his sister was everything. It was the only way of life that mattered.

Lazarak smiled softly at the mention of Damon's sister.

"You must really love each other very much."

Damon raised his head, staring at the corpse of a stillborn impaled on an icicle near the ceiling.

"I just realized I never really told my sister that."

His voice fell to a quiet sadness.

"I do not remember ever telling her I loved her. I mean, it is just one of those things that are implied. To me love is a verb. It is an action. So I may have difficulties saying it when I really mean it."

Lazarak's soft smile warmed again. The gloom around him seemed to lift.

"You two siblings sound so close."

Damon closed his eyes. He saw the image of a white haired girl smiling at him.

"Hmmm. We are, I suppose. That is just normal sibling relationships, is it not. Sometimes we disagree, we tease each other, but we are always on the same side. I could not imagine not being on the same side."

Lazarak's dark eyes lowered. The smile remained but with a shadow beneath it.

"Being born is truly the greatest act of creation. Being born with a family is even better. How I envy mortals who have so much but see so little."

"I do not know what it feels like to be missed."

"If I disappeared, no one would grieve or remember, They would simply forget."

Damon sensed Lazarak's mood shift.

They stepped into a chamber filled with absolute carnage. Matia had left devastation in her wake. Damon felt each kill flicker through his mind as she wiped out scores of stillborns.

"You have a sibling, right."

Lazarak smiled faintly.

"Yes, I do. I have a little brother. He was created shortly after me."

Damon hesitated. Tact was not his strong suit, but he knew Lazarak's brother was the one who imprisoned him here under the goddess's will.

"What is your brother's name?"

Lazarak paused. A soft, fond smile touched his lips.

"My brother's name is Aetherus."

Chapter 797: The World

Aetherus. What an arrogant name. He was so arrogant he named himself after the world.

Damon decided to voice his thoughts.

"He really named himself after the world. Your brother is a very humble person."

Lazarak paused and looked at Damon as he stepped over the frozen corpse of a stillborn. He could hear the underlying sarcasm in Damon's voice.

"I think you misunderstood something. He is not named after the world. The world is him. This planet is not called the world of Aetherus because it belongs to Aetherus. This planet is Aetherus."

Damon stopped walking. His expression froze. This was the first he'd heard of this.

Aetherus was a name everyone knew. How could they not when it was the name of the very world they lived on.

He turned fully toward Lazarak.

"When you say this world is Aetherus, you are talking about the earth we walk on. The grass. The trees. The air we breathe. Or is this some figure of speech."

Lazarak shook his head slowly. His calm attitude contrasted the weight of the information he was revealing.

"Before there was light, there was darkness. Before there was war, there was peace. Before there was Aetherus, there was Lazarak."

He walked forward with a steady rhythm, his fingers lightly brushing the icy wall.

"I was the darkness before the world had light. The foundation that made the world. Aetherus is the first light of this world. He is the world personified."

He hesitated as if debating whether he should continue. Damon had been generous with his own truths, so Lazarak chose to do the same.

"Did you know that in the past strange gods existed. Old and ancient. They existed long before Doom was born. Long before she created me or my brother."

His gaze grew distant, as though he was looking far beyond the current age.

"Many years have passed since my brother told me this. It was a time when we were close. When we truly had each other."

Damon could hear the sadness in Lazarak's voice. It threaded through every word.

Lazarak continued, ignoring the distant crashing of Matia's battle with the stillborns.

"There were once ancient entities that existed before concepts even took shape. For every concept, there was an old one who represented it. Each one a personification of an idea. Even idea itself."

Damon understood what he meant. The old gods. The ones the true gods had destroyed to claim dominion. He stayed quiet. He wanted Lazarak's version of the story, not the filtered one from the living shadow system.

"They were perfect in a way you and I cannot understand. Perhaps because perfection is not something mortals or anyone was meant to comprehend. All things must be flawed. Perhaps perfection itself was their greatest flaw."

Damon thought of the unknown god, the imperfect god who was both god and demon. His memories flickered and died the moment he reached that train of thought. It was the thought that had killed him once, and even now some part of him feared reclaiming it, or rather he couldn't.

The lie of the true gods.

Lazarak did not notice Damon's inner struggle.

"They were cruel and tyrannical because they were older than concepts like kindness. Each varied in nature, but all had a single truth. Their flawed perfection."

A contradiction. Yet contradictions were common when dealing with gods. They operated under rules no mortal could grasp.

"However, each was fundamentally important. They were not symbols of concepts. They were the concepts themselves."

Lazarak's voice dropped to a faint whisper.

"The old god of death was death personified. The god of time was time. The god of imagination was imagination given form."

A cold silence followed. Only the echoes of faroff fighting filled the chamber.

"When the god of death was killed, the concept of death ceased to exist. No one could die. When time was destroyed, time itself no longer flowed. When the god of imagination was eviscerated, no one could imagine anything. They were fundamental to the omniverse. They were not just monsters or amoral entities. They were what kept order."

He could almost hear his brother's voice as he spoke. The memory softened his tone.

"Gods are integral to order. But gods that could be killed were no true gods. That is why the true gods won. From the ruins of everything, they created the omniverse anew."

Damon still did not see how this connected to Aetherus. Dead concepts, collapsing realities. What did that have to do with Lazarak's brother?

Until he remembered something. Something spoken by Nemoriel the day he died in Lysithara. The same question the unknown god had asked.

"What happens when a god dies." Damon muttered to himself.

Lazarak mistook it for a question.

"The world dies with them."

A chill crept up Damon's spine.

Lazarak lowered his head.

"The old ones may not rule anymore, but gods like me and Aetherus exist. We are minor gods. Each world has a minor god who personifies the world and protects it."

His voice became small.

"So in a sense we are like those old gods. The only difference is that we were given understanding and a heart. Much like mortals. The lesser gods in this world play similar roles but on a smaller scale. Each represents a concept. Rain, trees, earth, fire. Each is important. When they die, their power returns to Aetherus until a new one is born to carry their mantle."

He glanced at Damon with a small smile.

"Divinity has a hierarchy. And we are part of its rules."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Then what about you? If Aetherus is the god of this world, what role do you play?"

Lazarak bit his lip.

"I am the failsafe. The pawn in case my brother dies. The extra that came first but failed to become the world. A minor god in name only."

He smiled gently.

"The expendable one if one of us must die."

Damon looked away.

"What happens if your brother dies first?"

Chapter 798: Dear To Defy

"Why would I want my brother to die?"

Lazarak answered immediately, as though the question itself wounded him.

"I am not saying you want him to die. I am asking what happens if he does."

Damon replied with a calm expression, stepping over a fractured ice sheet where Matia's cold magic had frozen another stillborn midreach.

Lazarak hesitated as they approached the distant echoes of battle. The air was colder here, carrying the sharp bite of Matia's frost.

"If my brother was to die then nothing would happen. His authorities would simply be transferred to me. But if I was already dead then the world would die."

He bit his lip, the very thought leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. His steps slowed as though the idea itself weighed him down.

"You have a sibling, do you not. I do not imagine you would want your sister to die."

Damon pictured his younger sister's face. Pale white hair and grey eyes. The smile she tried to wear when she was happy.

"I would die for her."

Lazarak smiled softly at that.

"I would die for my brother too. Even if we have our differences."

They walked until the bleak sunlight touched their faces. They stepped onto a round balcony overlooking a wide plaza. Damon approached the railing, watching Matia below. Ice mist swirled around her as towering piles of frozen corpses formed. She moved like a dancing fairy, each graceful step reaping another life. Flashes of different elemental spells burst around her in deadly harmony.

Damon merely observed. Matia was powerful, and swarm battles were where she shined. She was strongest when she had no allies nearby, free to unleash her ruinous winter. Freezing the world into the cold silence of ruin's end.

"What is your brother like?" Damon asked as he watched Matia's lethal elegance.

Lazarak smiled faintly, looking down at his hands.

"He is truly amazing. Aetherus is charismatic. He inspires others simply by existing."

There was a faint pang of envy in his tone. A small shadow in his voice that Damon understood all too well.

Damon had lived his whole life with a tiny mana pool while his sister had been born overflowing with magical talent. She was brilliant, blessed with natural pools of mana. And though Damon excelled in his own ways, he still knew the sting of ugly envy.

That was why he understood Lazarak.

"We are different. While I represent darkness, peace, serenity, and repose, my brother is the opposite. Aetherus is light to my darkness. He is war and conflict to my peace and serenity. He is the god of life and struggle, while I am repose. Complete opposites."

Lazarak's gaze softened with an old ache.

"Having an overachiever sibling is difficult. People compare you. They wonder why you are inferior."

He looked toward the distant plaza where Matia's ice spread like a frozen tapestry.

"Our philosophies are opposite as well. He believes conflict brings progress. But I know conflict breeds extinction."

He tilted his head slightly with a faint, selfmocking smile.

"No wonder everyone chooses to follow his way."

Then he shook his head and looked at Damon again.

"My brother and I used to be the only two. We got along well. But we grew apart. That happens to everyone. It is inevitable. He followed his nature. And I... I follow mine."

The sadness in his voice sat heavy between them.

"I just hope he knows it is alright to set down his sword. To stop struggling. I want him to understand that conflict does not need to be eternal. It is alright to live without fighting. Peace is boring. And boring is fine."

Damon watched him closely.

Was this why Lazarak refused to kill? Was it his nature as a god? Or was it something he forced upon himself. Was he trying to live up to his role as peace. Or trying to prove he had worth beyond the purpose he failed to fulfill.

The bleak sunlight framed Lazarak's figure as he stepped forward. Damon saw something in him. Something quietly tragic.

The god of darkness stood with a soft smile, and Damon felt a heaviness in his chest. He could almost see the future where Lazarak was dead. Not slain in battle, but forgotten. A god erased from hearts and memory.

Damon's heart ached at the thought. He could feel Lazarak's fear. Not fear of pain. Not fear of destruction.

Fear of being forgotten.

A god only truly dies when the world forgets them.

'Lazarak, you are... I understand you.'

Damon thought as he watched him in the pale light.

Lazarak was a tragic god.

Peace in a world of war. Created first but not chosen. Lonely at his root because the only person he had, his brother, left him behind.

His self-doubt grew into a quiet, poisonous form of self-hate.

'That is why he calls himself a clay figure. Because in his heart he believes he is expendable.'

He wanted to be remembered but believed he was not worth remembering.

This was the core of his sorrow. His defining fear. The heart of his tragedy.

To a mortal, death is a wound. To a god, death is oblivion.

Lazarak feared fading from memory. Being replaced, discarded and erased forgotten by all.

And still he chose kindness.

Damon clenched his fist.

Lazarak was kind. Genuinely kind.

But he saw that kindness as a weakness.

Proof he was unworthy. Proof he had failed to become the world. Proof he was not enough.

He valued life because he had never been born.

He cherished family because he never had one.

He admired mortals because they could choose who they became.

He rebelled because he wanted an identity beyond the role forced upon him.

Damon's heart stung.

"If you continue down this path you will die and be forgotten."

He spoke the truth quietly, no judgment in his voice.

Lazarak already knew. Damon could see that in his eyes.

Even then, Lazarak lifted his chin with a soft resolve.

"I would rather be forgotten for kindness than remembered for cruelty."

Damon felt his throat tighten.

He knew that by the end of this... if he survived... he might watch a friend die again.

The thought alone brought a single tear to his eye.

Lazarak smiled at Damon.

"Dear to defy.... I dare."

Chapter 799: Sonar

Damon watched Matia kill and kill until the entire plaza was nothing but shattered sheets of ice and frozen blood.

The broken remains of the stillborn littered every inch of stone, their bodies piled so high they nearly reached the balcony where Damon stood.

Matia had slain hundreds. If Damon's true body were here, he would have devoured the remains without hesitation. Too bad he could not. His shadow had taken the shape of the formless flames that guarded his heart, and those flames found nothing here worth consuming.

Not that he could move them here anyway.

He was no closer to reconstructing his body. Nothing Matia left behind appealed to his shadow, and even if it had, he would have needed far more.

The sun was sinking lower, bleeding its cold light across the ruined plaza, yet the stillborn kept coming. More than before. Far more.

Matia did not stop. Frost poured from her wings in waves, each gust freezing the swarming horde. But she was not limitless.

Damon could see the slight, subtle falters in her movements. Her mana was immense but not infinite. If this continued, exhaustion would swallow her, and then the tide would bury her in sheer numbers.

"This is not going how I expected. The mother of stillbirths is not showing up." Damon felt his shoulders tighten. Anxiety prickled at the back of his skull.

Lazarak sat calmly on the balcony rail, legs dangling and swinging lightly through the air as if he were resting at a lakeside rather than a battlefield of corpses.

"A sound strategy. Not facing a dangerous opponent is safer."

Damon groaned as a dull headache throbbed behind his eyes.

"I thought she would show herself. What kind of mother just sits back and watches her offspring die."

Lazarak raised his hands and began shaping magic seals in the air. Damon watched closely. The magic was unfamiliar to him. The symbols were older, more primitive, carved with intention that modern mages did not comprehend.

"Then we find her," Lazarak said.

He pushed off the railing with a graceful hop. Dust slid off the ancient stone. He lifted his hands like wings.

A soft pulse of mana rippled out from him. The wave hummed gently, slipping through walls and stone like a whisper.

Damon flinched at the strange resonance. "What did you just do?"

Lazarak smiled in that calm, unhurried way of his.

"I may not be someone who takes life, but I am a grandmaster of magic. I call this spell sonar."

He snapped his fingers. "It uses waves to map everything it touches. And you know what also has waves."

Damon answered slowly, unsure. "Mana."

"Exactly."

Damon followed the concept enough to appreciate its usefulness. "So you found her then."

"Deep beneath the castle," Lazarak replied. "But the tunnels are full of stillborn and discarnate souls. The lowest levels crawl with shades. Nasty entities."

"How many shades." Damon leaned forward slightly, a strange interest flickering in his eyes.

Lazarak hesitated. Damon's eagerness did not match common sense, but he answered anyway.

"Many."

"How many is many."

Lazarak closed his eyes, his expression tightening as he stretched his senses downward.

"A few thousand. And several thousand discarnate souls of other types."

Damon took a long, steady breath. A stillborn collapsed below, frozen solid. Another slammed into a wall and shattered into glittering fragments.

"I was worried we would need an army to break through."

"It would be great if we had one," Lazarak said softly. "Sadly we must make do."

Damon smiled, his expression sharpening. The wings of the mirror seraph unfurled behind him, glittering coldly. "Will an army of shades do?"

Lazarak narrowed his eyes. "You have an army of... wait. You can control shades."

Damon could. Under the right conditions. With shadow energy. With his soul conduit skill. And if he abandoned the mirror seraph's body, operating as a soulless was easier. Shades followed shadows like him. Still, the time limit was merciless.

He did not have enough shadow energy to sustain it.

"Five minutes," Damon said calmly, that was the most he was willing to risk with the shadow control skill and soul conduit.

"That is how long I can hold them. You cannot kill her, but you can subdue her long enough for Matia to land the killing blow."

Beyond that time, his soul's shadow energy would run dry. And with thousands of shades, five minutes was already pushing it.

There was also the staff of carnage. Damon's silent trump card. If necessary, he could wipe out everything in one obliterating strike. A weapon made for massacre, a tool of mass murder.

He crossed his arms. "How do we get past everything to reach the tunnels under the castle."

Lazarak's smile softened in a confident, secretive way. "Leave that to me. Did I ever tell you I dabble in a little spatial magic."

Damon stepped toward the edge of the balcony, glancing down at Matia as she tore her sword from a stillborn. One of the ice-blades protruded from her opposite side, cutting through another monster like cold scythes. The storm around her raged, flurries of ice and blood swirling in a deadly dance.

He reached out and seized Lazarak's arm. "Prepare the spell. I will grab Matia. The moment I touch her, get us out of here."

Black light with a faint golden shimmer gathered in Lazarak's hands. The glow carried a strange, ancient weight, something more than mana alone.

"Leave it to me. Worry only about surviving."

Damon exhaled, spread the glass wings on his back, and dove into the blizzard of frost and blood.

His sword cut through freezing air in a sweeping arc as he descended. He landed amid the storm of ice, stepping across stillborn corpses as they lunged with snapping jaws and clawing limbs.

"Matia. Let's go." He shouted over the howl of the frozen wind.

Her cold eyes turned toward him. An armored fairy stood atop a hill of corpses, every inch of her plated in frozen blood. A phantom duplicate of herself impaled another stillborn with a spear of ice.

She nodded and spread her wings. Damon reached for her.

Her hand, cold as glacier stone, touched his.

Lazarak opened his palm.

A sphere of darkness swallowed them whole.

Chapter 800: Passage

The sensation was nothing like when Lilith teleported him. It was also nothing like slipping through with shadow stride.

Damon's stomach lurched as reality twisted. The world reformed in a single blink, and he found himself holding Lazarak in one arm and Matia by the hand.

They stood in a deep, suffocating corner of the castle. The air was thick and stale, heavy with rot. Hundreds of stillborn crammed the halls, their malformed bodies writhing and twitching.

Above them drifted hundreds of discarnate souls, floating like pale, hollow ghosts, their wails trembling through the stone.

As soon as the trio appeared, the stillborn turned toward them. Infantile screams tore through the corridor as they charged.

Matia reacted instantly. Frost surged from her wings and exploded into rows of icy spikes that tore through the first wave.

Blood froze midair. More stillborn replaced the fallen and slammed themselves against the ice, clawing and pounding to break through.

Damon stayed unnervingly calm despite the chaos pressing against them from every side. He glanced at Lazarak.

"Think you teleported us to the wrong place."

Lazarak did not look up. His hands moved rapidly through hand seals, his movements tense and slightly uneven.

"I know. I am weaker like this. I cannot use my full power, and this magic is different from what I remember. My attributes are restricted."

The explanation did not inspire confidence, though Matia was buying them time. She pushed her mana outward, repairing the cracking ice, then flinging blades of frost outward where the walls bulged. Each burst of ice tore apart clusters of stillborn.

Damon could not help but admire it. He had underestimated frost magic. In tight spaces, it was devastating.

But Matia had already been fighting for hours. Her aura flickered. Her breathing grew tight.

"Lazarak." Damon called out sharply as the ice wall shuddered under a barrage of mixed attributes. Flames roared, lightning cracked, metal magic thickened the walls of the charging infants.

Matia's arms trembled as she reinforced the barrier.

Lazarak finished his final seal. He opened his hands. "Let us go."

The ice shattered behind them. A massive, ugly infant with a skull-like face pushed its bleeding head through the gap.

Damon did not hesitate. He lunged forward, grabbed Matia around the waist, and yanked her toward him. Despite the weight of her armor, she felt light in his arms, like catching a feather mid-fall.

Darkness unfurled from Lazarak's hand and swallowed them whole.

The world twisted again, the air warping like wet cloth. Damon's vision blurred, then snapped back into focus.

They stood in another chamber, larger than the last, more crowded than before. Thousands of stillborn filled the room. Thousands more waited in branching tunnels. It was like diving deeper into the throat of a beast.

Lazarak pointed toward a narrow passage before the stillborn could react.

"Run. The mother of stillbirths is through there."

Damon gritted his teeth and sprinted. The ground shook as giantsized infants hurtled after them, their bodies moving with grotesque speed.

He spread the wings of the mirror seraph. Their cold shine cut through the dust-filled air.

'If only I were in my real body.'

He imagined flames erupting and burning everything with the immolating flames of Ashborn.

But this body was all he had. Powerful, but limited.

One stillborn used metal magic to harden itself, coating its body in steel. Flames roared around its limbs. Wind magic surged beneath it, propelling it upward like a missile. It launched itself straight at Damon.

The combination startled him. Steel for armor and strength. Fire for offense. Wind for movement. A terrifying synergy.

'So this is the potential of having multiple attributes.'

He could not dodge. Not in time.

He kicked off the ground, leaping over several stillborn, and raised his sword. Mana surged down the blade. The weapon shone like polished glass, its edge reflecting the howling light.

"Ahhrrggg..." Damon shouted, forcing strength through his arms.

His sword met steel.

The impact cracked the air. Sparks screamed across his skin and flames splattered his clothes. Damon's strength carried the blade through the creature's skull. The monster split in half, falling behind him in a shower of molten metal and burning fragments.

But Damon lost control of his descent. His wings chipped against the collision, their glass edges shattering slightly. He plummeted directly toward a swarm of reaching hands and gnashing jaws.

A pillar of ice erupted from the side, spearing upward. Damon hit it, pushed off with practiced instinct, and launched himself back into the air.

He looked toward Matia. She tore her fist through a discarnate soul, dissipating it. Three hundred stillborn rushed her from all sides, and she moved through them like a winter sprite given form.

"Thanks for the save," he called out as he shot toward the dark passage.

Matia nodded, raised her foot, and summoned a sheet of ice beneath her. A frozen slide formed instantly. She skated along it like a phantom, slicing through stillborn by the dozens.

Damon lifted his hand, gathering mana. He had saved every scrap he could. This body did not have the reserves he was used to. But he needed a path cleared.

"Lazarak. Hurry. You two get into the passage."

Lazarak ran ahead, putting stillborn to sleep with every gesture. Each creature dropped as if their consciousness had been stolen. Dark tentacles formed behind him, capturing the ones still awake. Chains of darkness wrapped tightly around flailing limbs.

Matia reached the tunnel first. She turned and released a frigid blast. The frost swept down the corridor like a living storm, freezing every stillborn inside and shattering them into glittering snow.

Her breathing was ragged. She stood ready, wings trembling slightly, waiting for Damon.

Damon flew above the battlefield, his expression cold. The stillborn surged beneath him in countless numbers.

"Magical arsenal."

Blades formed in the air around him. Mirrors shaped into swords, their reflective surfaces glinting with lethal light. Hundreds of them plunged downward, piercing the horde in a rain of killing swords.

Screams ripped across the chamber.

Damon dived into the tunnel.

To face the mother of stillbirths.