

## Shadow 811

### Chapter 811: All His Prisoners

All said and done, Lazarak actually found a way to carry the cocoon with him. He had a soft smile on his face as he hummed, swaying side to side with each step.

As for the cocoon itself, Lazarak had strapped it to the back of the lesser demon Damon had been using as a mount.

Much to Damon's dismay.

This was one lucky lesser demon. It was part of the original group Ashcroft had ordered to kill Damon and Abellona. But after Damon devoured Ashcroft and became the dominator, he seized the creature's will. Since then it had hidden inside his shadow.

Whenever Damon wanted to flex and intimidate, he rode the lesser demon to cast a more fearsome image.

Now it was just carrying luggage for Lazarak. God or not, it was still luggage.

"Hm hm hum hum..." Lazarak hummed a small happy tune.

Damon shot him a sideways glance, a small frown tugging at his face, but said nothing.

Their triumph over the trials was not without consequence. The prisoners who dwelled in the Garden of Hunger sensed that Eidolon was breached and saw it as a chance to escape but the keys to every trial were in Damon's hands.

That and Root Ore kept them in.

Their final stop before leaving mattered more than anything else. This was what would allow Lazarak to overcome the goddess.

The Lake of Tears.

Damon found himself standing before the shimmering waters once more, expression cold.

Last time he appraised it, it almost dragged him in.

Even now he could hear it whispering countless voices, countless hungers, endless desires threading through the air. He wondered what became of the lake in the future. Was it destroyed with Lazarak... or did it remain?

"We're here. Now what?" Damon asked calmly.

"You're not planning to put that on the back of my lesser demon, are you?"

Lazarak placed a hand on his chin, considering.

"I wish I could. Sadly, I'll have to find another way."

He raised his hand. A small sphere of darkness formed and swelled, slowly engulfing the pond-sized lake of tears.

The ground beneath the water vanished. The tree whose roots once drank from the lake vanished with it.

Lazarak dropped to his knees, clutching his head. Damon stepped in quickly, grabbing him by the shoulder before he could collapse face-first.

"Heheh... I knew I still had it in me..." Lazarak whispered.

"It was no big deal... I am a god, after all."

Damon glanced at his pale face, worry flickering across his eyes.

"Yeah. Sure you are."

Lazarak gave a weak smile.

"Now carry me. I can't feel my legs... or any part of my body, for that matter."

Damon sighed at the toddler-sized god.

He picked him up one-handed like a small sack and threw a look at the lesser demon.

"Let's go."

As he started forward, he paused something caught at the edge of his perception. An entity now sat where the tree once stood.

"Aren't you leaving, Root Ore?" Damon asked.

The creature didn't rise. He only stared toward the Garden of Hunger.

"I will not. I must keep those within this place... here."

He turned slowly toward Damon.

"Close the door on your way out."

Damon exhaled sharply, then extended his shadow perception. The passage to the next part of the prison should've been where the tree once stood. And after a brief search, he found it.

They moved through the mirror labyrinth where Damon had fought the mirror seraph. He had wisely returned its body here after using it.

As for its trump card, a feather of Seraph Null currently in Lazarak's possession perhaps it would matter later.

Next came the library, where every book was a prisoner. The Archivist was nowhere to be found. Dead or gone, it didn't matter, he wasn't here.

After that, they reached the ruined castle where they had fought the Mother of Stillbirths. Then they arrived at the final stretch of the prison. In the wreckage of the goddess statue, the Hollow Saint stood unmoving, shoulders slumped like a man whose faith had been carved out.

Damon didn't speak. He didn't spare him a glance. He walked toward the final door.

Then the saint spoke.

"Verily, you will face him if you continue upon this path."

He turned slowly, voice hollow.

"This is his realm... and we are all his prisoners. Everyone from the outside who has come here has never left. You will not return to Aetherus alive."

Damon hoisted Lazarak higher on his shoulder, then smiled.

"They said the same thing about Eidolon. And here I am, about to walk out that door. If I want to leave. No one will stop me."

His eyes narrowed to cold slits.

"Especially not some lesser god."

He didn't wait for the saint's response. Nothing the man said would change his mind. Damon reached for the sealed door, and the stone groaned as it opened.

The saint closed his eyes and whispered a prayer.

"Then I wish you a thousand swift victories... and I pray you do not falter before the Seraph... as so many have before you..."

Sunlight washed over Damon's skin as he breathed in the cold air. He was about to free Matia from his shadow when—

A crushing weight slammed down on him. Pressure flooded from every direction. His mana flow locked; he could sense ambient mana but couldn't draw it in.

The pressure surged. A cold ringing cut through his skull, followed by the sensation of the very world trying to crush and expel him.

Lazarak fared no better. He let out a weak groan and passed out, body going stiff.

Damon grit his teeth as his body struggled to adapt. Inch by inch, he pushed himself upright through the invisible weight.

He looked back at the silver doors standing alone in the grassy plain.

Then he looked down at the unconscious Lazarak and slapped him across the face without hesitation.

"Wake up."

Chapter 812: New Outcome

The familiar-looking sky. She had seen this already. Twice was too many and once was not enough.

The bitter taste of blood was still on her tongue, and the lingering sounds of battle clung to her mind. A vast darkness fighting an angel. Screams, shattering light, the sensation that the world itself was about to break.

Twice was too much, yet she had endured that horrible ordeal more than once.

She found herself standing in a forest. It was noon, sunlight pouring through the leaves.

Right about now, she should have heard the voice.

"You are dreaming the Nightmare of Lazarak."

"Overcome from this Nightmare and receive the boon of the fourth class."

That was what everyone heard when they ended up here after being consumed by nightmares.

Everything was just a dream, a dream more vivid than real life.

Lilith knew all this. There were no mysteries left for her here. She had stood in this exact moment four times now.

And each time she had failed at the same miserable point, the hurdle she could not overcome.

She slowly dropped to her knees. Right about now, a fruit would fall from the trees and land on her head.

In the last three cycles she had caught it, having learned her lesson after being struck the first time.

She waited with a resigned expression. The fruit falling was inevitable. It was part of the events time had established. Nothing would be changed. Nothing could be challenged.

Time was absolute. No matter how many times you fought it, you could not push past its tide.

She reached out.

But her hand closed on nothing. Her emerald eyes shimmered.

"Hmm." A soft sound escaped her. Did she miss the timing?

Her eyes narrowed as she lifted her gaze to the branches. Her pupils trembled.

"The tree..." she whispered.

The tree had no fruit. Only bright green leaves. Not a single fruit in sight. She turned her gaze to the rest of the trees. None of them had fruit.

Lilith's breath tightened. This wasn't how it should be. The trees always had fruit. Now they didn't.

Her hand slowly rose to the small flower in her hair.

A gardenia with six petals. But of the six, four had turned dull grey and lifeless, leaving only two.

This flower was her hope and her despair.

Its origins were simple. It had come from the Unknown God. Seeing how easily he had given her this flower, she should have been far more wary of his boons.

But even if she had known what would become of her, she would have taken it.

The flower had one power. While it wasn't a weapon, it was vast and filled with mysteries Lilith couldn't comprehend.

It carried her back to a moment in time, a fixed point, while allowing her alone to keep the memories of everything that had happened.

But it was despair too, because time was merciless and the omniverse cruel. People's fates could not be changed by her choices.

More than anything, Lilith had wished for something simple. She had wanted to save Damon from dying, because she alone understood he would stop at nothing to die.

The first time, she failed. So she used the flower and returned to the moment she first entered the Nightmare.

With all she learned, with every mystery solved, she believed she could change his fate.

How dare she be so ambitious. He died again.

The second time, she told Damon everything, believing with all her heart she could save him.

And when all was said and done, he had only used her. Betrayed her. With her knowledge of the future, he created the very sequence of events that led to his death.

The fourth time, she tried alone. She wasn't naive enough anymore to believe her words could save him.

But it changed nothing. Damon still died, impaled on a black spear with a thin smile on his lips.

She couldn't stop him with words or with force.

That was her despair. How could you save someone who did not want to be saved?

The Unknown God believed fate was just our choices.

She bit her lip. "In the end I could not defy his fate because he made his choice. Living, struggling, surviving was his choice. And so was dying."

Her voice cracked slightly. No one was there to hear it.

Lilith noticed something fundamental about the nameless flower.

With each cycle, the world changed more visibly.

The first time, the trees had been heavy with hundreds of fruits.

Now they were barren.

"The world changes with every regression. The differences are minute but..." She pulled the flower from her hair.

"This flower isn't regressing me. It's trying to create a different outcome."

But the process was slow. Lilith's actions were a factor. Everyone else's actions were a factor. Everything was connected, and the slow flap of a butterfly's wings could create a tornado far away.

Even so, it could not change the outcome fast enough. With only two petals left, the shift would come too late.

She hugged her knees. For the first time since making that promise with Damon, she felt truly lost and alone.

Lilith wanted to cry. She couldn't. She hated to admit it, but she was scared.

But she also couldn't give up.

Overcoming the enemy was simple.

Overcoming Damon was difficult.

"I need to go find him... and stop him..."

She rose to her feet, then stopped.

Wasn't this exactly what she did every single time, believing she could stop him?

"No." She shook her head slowly.

"Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is madness."

She stared at the flower in her hand.

"I've been looking at this wrong the whole time. First I need to know what this flower actually is."

Knowledge was the key to victory. And the only person who would know was...

She bit her lip hard.

How loathsome.

Chapter 813: River

Lazarak was still feeling sore about the whole thing even after three whole days, how could he not be.

"This is aggravated assault against a minor ... "

He scratched his cheeks with both hands, fingers dragging down his face dramatically as he kept glancing at Damon, who was trying his best to ignore him by focusing on the road ahead.

"You hit me, I'm a baby .."

Damon glanced at the toddler-sized god with a frown, his eyelid twitching, then he grimaced.

"Lazarak by the goddess if you don't shut up... I will beat your ass..."

Lazarak bared his tiny teeth and scoffed, puffing out his chest like an offended sparrow.

"You have no respect for a god. I am a god .."

"Shut up..." Damon bellowed, pressing two fingers to his temple as a headache throbbed behind his eyes.

Three days. Lazarak did not stop whining about being slapped by Damon for three days.

When they had left the imaginary prison Eidolon, the world had immediately unleashed its pressure on them. More so on Lazarak, who was actually a god with vast amounts of power. well, barely any power now, but the fact remained. In the eyes of the world he was a bigger threat due to his rank being higher.

There was also the fact Lazarak could unleash his full power due to being a god something no one else here could do.

For that reason he was the biggest threat and suffered the worst of the suppression.

It took some getting used to, but Damon and Lazarak had adapted to these harsh conditions. What they couldn't adapt to, however, was Lazarak's constant nagging. When the pressure had first crushed him, he had lost consciousness, prompting Damon to slap him.

"Where are we heading anyway." Damon asked. They had set off without a destination, nothing, just an endless trek in a new land.

At least it was normal to a certain extent. The sky was blue and the trees bore fruits, though everything here seemed different from their own world yet similar at the same time.

"Hmmm. Our goal is to escape this world. For that reason we should be heading towards its center we'll find an exit there."

Damon narrowed his eyes. All this wasn't the same thing Lazarak had said before, but he couldn't be bothered. As he walked through the trees, he got a strange sense of—

"Deja vu," Lazarak muttered with a pause.

Damon frowned, turning to him...

"Can you read minds?" he asked the god.

Lazarak shook his head slightly, his small face scrunching up.

"No, not at all. Except maybe if I use insidious magic like soul search... but Damon—"

He squinted his eyes, scanning the forest, his tiny fingers curling as if feeling the air itself.

"Is it just me or have we been here before..."

Damon spread his shadow perception all around them to look for anomalies, invisible tendrils of black slipping across the grass and undergrowth but there was nothing to be found. Just animals and other small critters, no humans at all.

There was no sign of any dangerous magic to induce such an effect.

He sighed.

"Yeah but oddly enough I've been feeling weird since I met you ..."

Lazarak rolled his eyes at Damon's words, tossing his head back.

"Well, suppose it could be nothing. For now, let's find a settlement and decide what to do moving forward."

Damon nodded slowly, walking forward. The sound of footsteps behind him came from the lesser demon carrying Lazarak's luggage with them.

"When we find a settlement then what? They might attack us, you know."

Lazarak paused slightly, shaking his head with exaggerated disappointment.

"You always imagine the worst, my friend."

Hours passed as they traveled through the world. Those hours changed into days, and the journey was getting dull... there was no danger to them. Monsters existed on the way, yes, but those monsters were smart enough to avoid Damon's party.

It was not worth the risk to face such a formidable group. Or so Damon had thought. But it turns out Lazarak just didn't want a fight, so he passively had an aura that made weaker monsters refuse to attack him.

Damon should have been happy with no monster attacks, but that only made their journey dull.

He was feeling lethargic from the fatigue of having experienced no life-threatening attacks.

So with shoulders slumped he walked, until he heard small splashing sounds in the distance...

Damon turned his head, then spread his shadow perception. With his next step he had already teleported through the shadows, vanishing into them like smoke pulled by wind.

Lazarak didn't even have time to react, so he cursed Damon under his breath for just leaving him, and followed with the lesser demon running after them, nearly tripping over roots as it tried to keep up.

Damon found himself at the edge of a river. He stood behind a tree, hand resting lightly on its trunk as he looked at the source of the splashing sounds...

It was a massive crocodile with deep black scales and jagged serrated teeth. It was easily fifteen meters tall...

The massive form slashed in the river, trying its best to chase after a small raft, creating high waves with its massive form.

Its tail slashed at the water, trying to capsize the makeshift raft...

Damon frowned. On the raft were two children, a boy and a girl who were using magic to shield the raft in a barrier.

Their magic was impressive. It was simple yet had the same amount of power a complex spell did. For all intents and purposes they were holding out just fine.

Though it was a temporary outcome, they would most likely suffer a terrible fate if they did not make it to the riverbank on time.

The boy grabbed a mana core and crushed it, his hands trembling slightly as he began to mutter something under his breath.

Damon would have wanted to observe more, but Lazarak came charging in out of nowhere. He jumped off the ground and onto the back of the crocodile, tiny feet slamming down with surprising weight.

With a single punch he raised a massive wave from the impact, jolting the beast as it cried out in pain...

He glanced at Damon...

"What are you waiting for? Hurry, stop it..."

Damon glanced at the beast and sighed. With a single step he appeared onto the water, standing on the surface of the river. With slow, steady steps he raised his sword and slashed. A crescent slash cleaved through the monster as blood rained down, its innards dying the river surface red as its corpse floated.

The children watched without an ounce of fear only a baffled and impressed look was plastered across their faces.

"Did you see that, Sithara," the boy muttered...

#### Chapter 814: Two Children

Terror and fear should have been the emotions that flashed through their eyes at seeing something so terrifying, but what Damon saw instead was a deep curiosity and interest in what he had just done.

The girl looked at Damon while speaking to her brother.

"Lyn, you're right, it's magic..." her voice was calm as the raft drifted along the river, the current rocking it gently.

Damon narrowed his eyes, standing on the surface of the water as if it were solid ground. His gaze remained fixed on the children as he gave them a quick appraisal.

For all intents and purposes these two were just children. The girl was ten and her brother was thirteen. They were children.

Damon wasn't that much older than them when it came to age, being only seventeen, but with what he had lived through he might as well have been an old monster.

He wasn't as paranoid as he used to be, but he was still cautious of them.

He slowly walked toward the raft.

Then he stopped in front of it. With a small kick of his leg he pushed it toward the riverbank, causing them to fall flat on their faces from the sudden movement.

There was a small thud as wet mud splashed against the side of the raft and soaked their clothes.

The boy, Lyn, stood up quickly, shaking himself off before helping the girl to her feet.

Damon turned into a shadow and flowed across the water, reforming on the riverbank ahead of them.

The two children watched him with a sudden degree of apprehension now etched on their faces. After all, they would be wise to be cautious of strangers.

"Stay behind me, Sithara," the boy whispered to his sister.

She nodded and began to move her mana quietly, her fingers trembling as she tried to shape a spell.

As Damon approached them, Lazarak suddenly jumped into the air and landed between them with a soft smile, his tiny feet sinking slightly into the mud.

"My goodness, children. Actual innocent children. I haven't run into a child in thousands of years."

Lazarak seemed genuinely excited to see the two of them, his tone light and almost cheerful. His words made the children relax just a bit.

"You just saw a bunch of children not long ago. Thousands of them," Damon muttered, referring to the Mother of Stillbirths and her brood of stillborns.

The children glanced at each other, then looked down at the tiny toddler speaking to them as if they weren't older than him, at least physically.

"A talking baby..." the girl muttered.

Lazarak's lips twitched.

"I'm a god, dammit."

Damon sneered.

"Yeah. God dammit..."

Lazarak slapped his knees, considering that was the limit of his height.

"Stop making puns. This is hardly the time. We need to spread my magnificence and gain followers."

Damon rolled his eyes as Lazarak cleared his throat and straightened his posture, putting on a godly act.

His aura rose gently, a wave of darkness seeping from the ground and curling around his small form.

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

He paused, waiting for them to recognize the name.

The two of them glanced at each other, then turned back to Lazarak.

"Never heard of you..."

Lazarak's aura deflated instantly. His face went pale, his small hands trembling at his sides.

"Wh... what... I... I am... no... I mean..." he stammered.

"You haven't heard of me? Surely you've heard of my greatness. God of peace and darkness. Brother of Aetherus..."

The two seemed confused until he mentioned Aetherus.

"Oh, Aetherus. Yeah, we've heard of him. We're from Aetherus after all, god of light," Lyn replied. "But we don't think he has a brother."

The girl, Sithara, bit her lip and looked at Lazarak.

"You shouldn't claim to be a god's brother. You'll get in trouble."

Damon glanced at the two of them. It was obvious they were siblings. The boy had short, glossy dark hair and green eyes. His build wasn't very prominent, but his eyes carried a spark of deep curiosity.

Even from where he stood Damon could tell the boy was calculating risks, weighing possibilities of escape.

As for the girl, she had the same dark glossy hair, though hers was longer and tied into a braid behind her. Her eyes were a softer green, similar yet different from her brother's, as if she already knew most answers and simply wanted to confirm them.

She had strong intuition.

Their clothes were patched and soaked from the river.

Damon didn't have time to waste with them.

"Who are you, brats, and where are you from."

Lazarak was still distraught over not being recognized, but Damon didn't want to waste time on that.

"My name is Lyn, and this is my sister Sithara," the boy answered calmly.

Then he slowly bowed, his sister following after him.

"Thank you for saving us. We are grateful."

Damon didn't respond. He simply asked the next question.

"Where are you from, and how did you end up here."

The two looked at each other.

"We are from a place on Aetherus called Aeron. Our father did something that offended the lesser gods, so we were all punished by being sent here, like many others."

Damon glanced at Lazarak, who shrugged. That much was true. Lazarak had mentioned this place was a prison. Damon hadn't been able to use Eye of Veracity before since he didn't have his own body, but now that he could, he had no reservations.

"And where is your father now," he asked slowly.

The boy hesitated, then bit his lip.

"He's gone. Our father is dead. He died when the chained people came."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"Chained people."

Lazarak nodded, answering his doubts.

"The Chained are the natives of this realm. They are more or less the same races as in Aetherus, though they act as wardens and trap outsiders. In a broader sense, a Chained refers to those who worship Seraph Null and follow his creed."

Damon nodded slowly.

Then he turned to the children. Without hesitation, he grabbed the boy by the neck and lifted him off the ground, his grip firm and his expression cold.

"Why did you lie? Your father isn't dead, is he."

The little girl screamed and tried to blast Damon with magic, but a single glance from him made her legs freeze. An overwhelming aura of fear consumed her entire body.

Lazarak raised his hand, darkness spreading around them all.

"Now now, my friend. Calm down..."

Chapter 815: A Book

Lazarak's words brought Damon's actions to a halt.

Honestly, Damon had never really had it in him to give children a special place in his heart just because they were children.

If anything, he had grown up with the cruel ideology of the streets of Valerion.

To him there wasn't much of a difference. He wasn't being cruel to them, but he also wouldn't allow them to lie to him.

In the end, Damon realized that in a way he was becoming exactly what had shaped him.

The thought made him pause.

He released his grip and let the boy fall to the ground. Lyn hit the dirt hard, immediately clutching his throat as he began to cough violently, his breaths sharp and uneven.

His sister rushed to him, kneeling at his side and gripping his shoulders tightly. Her eyes never left Damon's dark silhouette, deep apprehension etched into her face.

Lazarak smiled at them, stepping forward slightly.

"Sorry about my friend," he said lightly. "He has some issues. Don't worry, he's working on them. And when you get to know him, he's actually a good guy. Trust me."

They didn't respond at first.

Lazarak crouched down, his small form lowering to their level. His expression softened further.

"It's okay," he said gently, placing a hand on each of their heads. His voice carried a strange warmth, one that felt ancient and sincere. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

The two children relaxed slightly under Lazarak's gentle touch. After a moment, the girl bit her lip.

Her gaze flicked cautiously toward Damon before she spoke.

"...We got separated from our father before we came to this world. We heard rumors that he was one of the more dangerous prisoners and was sent to the imaginary prison. So we wanted to rescue him."

Damon glanced at Lazarak with a frown. Lazarak returned the look briefly, then turned his attention back to the children.

"Oh," he said slowly. "I see. What's your father's name."

"Ilyth," the girl answered almost eagerly, as if clinging to hope. "Our father's name is Ilyth."

Lazarak wasn't familiar with the name.

However—

Damon placed a hand on his chin. Yes. He had heard that name. Or rather, he had found the man. Or what was left of him.

"Ilyth Nova," Damon muttered.

The moment the name left his mouth, Lyn's eyes lit up.

"Yes. That's him," he said urgently. "Have you seen him? Please tell us."

Damon frowned. He had seen that name in the records of the sins of a man in the Trial of Sin.

"Ilyth the Insightful."

When Damon spoke those words, Lazarak froze.

He knew that pattern of naming. He knew exactly what it meant.

It meant their father was gone. Reduced to a book made of human flesh, condemned to suffer forever.

"His sins are many," Damon continued evenly. "He was known to have propagated dangerous magic and ideology, leading to the deaths of many, among other sins."

"That's not true," Lyn shouted suddenly, his voice shaking with anger.

"Our father was a scholar. He taught people magic. He shared his knowledge freely. He didn't hoard it like the lesser gods. He believed the future should be shaped by the will of men, by our own reasoning and power."

Sithara bit her lip, standing close to her brother.

"Our father wanted to change this world and banish ignorance," she said quietly. "He wanted to create a place where anyone could learn. A place for all those who wanted to make the world a little better."

Damon's expression remained calm and unreadable, but something stirred faintly in his chest.

Those words came from children who still believed in their father with absolute faith.

He hesitated.

Lazarak smiled at them.

"Your father sounds like an amazing man," he said softly. "I would have loved to meet him."

Sithara nodded, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes.

"He is," she whispered.

She bowed deeply toward Damon.

"Please. Take us to him."

Her brother bowed as well, desperation written clearly across his face.

Damon exhaled slowly.

Even he felt this was too cruel.

Seeing the two siblings like this almost reminded him of his own childhood. Of his sister.

Luna.

He missed her.

That said, Damon couldn't help them the way they wanted.

"I can't do that," he replied quietly.

At his words, the two sank lower to the ground.

But Damon didn't change his mind.

Lyn stood up, fists clenched.

"If you won't help us, then we'll go there ourselves and find him."

Damon shook his head.

"You'd never make it to Eidolon alive. And even if, by some miracle, you did... you wouldn't find your father there."

He bit his lip.

He hated this.

He had taken some books from the Trial of Sin. Some that looked interesting. He hadn't finished reading them.

One of them was titled Ilyth the Insightful.

That book was their father's tortured form.

The two stared at him.

"We still have to try," Lyn said stubbornly. "We already planned and calculated every outcome. We have magic tools. We gathered mana cores."

Lazarak had already figured it out but hesitated, unsure whether he should step between Damon and the children.

Damon shook his head again.

"The first and most important part of any plan is accepting that it can fail. Horribly," he said calmly. "You will not survive. That is a fact. However, fate has other plans. And while this may be painful, you have the right to know."

He reached into his shadow storage.

Before the children could speak, he pulled out a book made of human flesh.

A small, broken gasp escaped from it.

"In Eidolon's third level, there is a place called the Trial of Sin," Damon said evenly. "This is a record of your father's life and his sins. But more than that... this is all that remains of his tortured form."

The siblings froze, their faces stiff and pale.

Damon handed it to them anyway. There was no point dragging this out or giving them false hope. He wanted to believe they could handle it.

Lyn's hands shook too much to take it.

Sithara reached out instead.

The title was written in blood. Her father's blood.

Ilyth the Insightful.

The faint gasping came from within the pages.

She touched the book. The flesh and skin felt familiar. Even the scent was the same.

"Father..." she whispered.

She raised her head slowly to look at Damon.

"May... may we read it."

Damon nodded.

"It's yours," he said quietly. "Do as you please with it."

#### Chapter 816: Too Early And Too Late

The two siblings sat close together, holding the gasping book between them. The familiar scent of their father lingered on the fleshbound pages as they read. The book was made from his skin, bound by his suffering, and within it his trapped soul breathed in shallow, broken gasps.

His life was recorded in detail, each page heavier than the last. The two siblings held back their tears as they turned the pages, their fingers trembling, their shoulders growing stiff with every line.

Until they reached the final passage.

"Ilyth the Insightful was blinded by his own intellect, the folly of a man who gazed too long at the sun. His wishes may have come from a place of well meaning intent, but his actions sowed devastation..."

Lyn and Sithara continued reading until they reached the final quote.

"I failed to create it for my children."

The moment they read those words, tears spilled freely from their eyes. Their composure shattered. The two siblings clutched the book tighter as their cries broke into the night, raw and unrestrained.

Damon watched in silence.

He didn't know why he felt unsettled by the sight.

He had planned to read the book himself at some point. He had taken others like it. To him, the suffering of the condemned had been little more than fleeting curiosities, passing pages in his own long march toward death.

Yet watching these two children cry over what remained of their father stirred something faint and unwelcome in his chest.

Lazarak shifted uncomfortably. He had always been kind, and he disliked seeing children cry.

He gestured toward Damon.

Damon exhaled slowly, already understanding.

"Well," he said quietly, "this is as good a time as any to set up camp."

They didn't need one. Damon and Lazarak had traveled for days without rest. They had the strength to endure weeks, even months, of endless walking.

This was a consideration. For the children.

The thought made Lazarak smile faintly.

It didn't take long for Damon to get a fire going. He didn't summon a tent. He simply built the fire beneath the open sky. He summoned Matia from his shadow, along with Ghost, posting them silently along the perimeter.

The night sky was bleak, empty of stars. The only light came from the fire before them. Behind them, the river flowed with a soft, constant murmur, its cold presence felt whenever they stepped away from the flames.

Silence followed.

Lazarak remained close to the children, offering quiet reassurances. Eventually, their crying faded into shallow breaths and sniffles.

The silence that followed was heavy.

Damon understood their despair. They had carried so much hope, and now all that remained of their father was a gasping book crying out in endless agony.

He was dead more than he was alive.

They were smart enough to know that. Or at least Damon hoped they were.

Smoke rose from the skewers near the fire. The remains of the crocodile monster crackled softly as it cooked. Its mana core rested within Damon's shadow storage. He had devoured the rest earlier, hoping for a skill or something useful.

He hadn't devoured much lately. He actively couldn't without a physical body.

And besides, he was going to die soon anyway.

What use were skills to a dead man.

The soft crackle of the flames and their dull red glow made Damon sigh.

"What do you intend to do now?"

The question lingered.

For a moment, neither child answered. Sithara's shoulders trembled faintly when he spoke.

"We... don't know..."

Damon looked at the way they clutched the book.

"You know your father is dead," he said quietly. "Holding that book won't bring him back. You'll only make him suffer more."

Lazarak shook his head at Damon, but Damon didn't soften his words. Not for them.

He knew what being an orphan was like. He knew what it meant to lose everything.

"Whether your father was a good man or not doesn't matter," Damon continued. "What matters is that he was good to you."

Sithara slowly raised her head, her eyes red and swollen.

"You can't bring back the dead," Damon said. "But you can live on. Your father lived. You are proof of that. I don't know what he wanted to achieve, but I do know what he achieved."

He gestured to them.

"He achieved you."

He wasn't sure where the words came from. Perhaps for Iris. Perhaps for Luna or perhaps for himself.

Orphans had the most reason to quit.

But he wouldn't let them.

It was almost ironic. He was already tapping out himself.

"Lysithara..." Lyn whispered.

The sound froze Damon.

"What."

Sithara raised her head, lips quivering.

"He wanted to find Lysithara," she said softly. "A place where knowledge is shared. Where we can strive to reach our full potential. A place of learning, culture, and acceptance. Where we can all be together, regardless of race or gods."

Damon's hands trembled slightly, though his expression remained calm.

Lazarak glanced at him. Damon had mentioned Lysithara before. The birthplace of his teacher. Or something like that.

"Did... did he find it," Damon asked.

Lyn shook his head.

"No. Lysithara isn't a real place. It was something our father made up. He combined our names. Lyn and Sithara. Lysithara."

Damon lowered his head.

He didn't know how to feel.

When he came from, Lysithara had existed. It had fallen, reduced to ancient ruins. He had never known its golden age. Only its corpse.

'Born too late to experience Lysithara. Lived too early to see it exist.'

What a paradox.

Lazarak watched quietly. His intuition as a god stirred. Something about this moment felt important.

Perhaps even historical.

Damon looked up and smiled at the children.

It was a sad smile. A genuine one.

"Our imagination has no limits," he said softly, "until we try to imagine a new color. The only thing without limits is the number of human desires. We are born with desire, and we die with them."

He pointed at them.

"Those who do not test their limits will never know their potential. If Lysithara does not exist, then you simply need to create it."

The children stared at him, hollow expressions slowly shifting.

"How," Sithara asked quietly. "We're just children."

Damon shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "That is your legacy. You can give up, and the dream you shared with your father can die. Or you can carve your mark into history. Etch your names where even gods have failed."

He echoed the same words Valarie Sunwarden had once told him before she died.

"Create something beautiful."

The siblings looked at each other, their eyes burning as Damon's image etched itself into their minds.

"Create something beautiful."

#### Chapter 817: Builders

These words had traveled back in time with Damon, carried from the final moments of Valarie Sunwarden before her death.

He was never certain if she had been the original source of them, or if she herself had heard them from someone else, from somewhere long forgotten.

What mattered was that they endured.

And now, spoken again, they had changed something within these children.

Damon was giving advice he refused to use himself.

It was almost laughable, like that one friend who had never dated yet always had the best relationship advice.

Don't cling to the dead.

Don't let despair end you.

Interesting words, coming from someone doing the exact opposite.

Creating meaning forward.

He had lost that.

All while fully intending to die.

Damon knew the right answer. He simply did not believe it applied to him.

Lazarak watched quietly, a soft smile resting on his small face. He understood his role in moments like this.

Gods did not create legacies.

They observed them forming.

He placed a hand over his chest, watching the mortals do what mortals did best.

They lived.

They dreamed.

Lazarak couldn't help but recall something his brother had once told him.

"Gods shape systems. Humans shape meaning."

His gaze drifted to the orange glow of the flames.

'Was that why he became so distant.' he thought of his brother.

Still, the god observed. By all accounts, all three of them were nothing more than children. Their combined time in this world barely reached a century, yet they carried immeasurable possibility.

Lyn bit his lip, looking at Damon. His eyes flickered with a spark of resolve, his glossy dark hair catching the firelight.

"Can we really do something like that."

Damon did not answer immediately. He turned his gaze toward the darkness beyond the fire, where the night swallowed everything whole.

He saw something there.

"You can't see it from here," Damon said quietly, "but there is a hatchling in a tree."

He turned back to them.

"When a hatchling is born, it is bald and weak. It has no feathers. But if it lives long enough, one day it falls from the nest and soars into the open sky."

Sithara tightened her grip on the book, the remains of her father. His pain and gasps still echoed faintly from within.

"Can we hold a funeral for our father," she asked, her voice steady despite the tears still clinging to her lashes.

Damon nodded slowly.

"Yes. You may."

Lyn clenched his fist.

"Can we take his ashes afterward. His body is no more, so we can only cremate what's left."

Lazarak glanced at Damon, who had no intention of stopping them.

"Where do you intend to take his ashes," Lazarak asked gently. "You cannot keep them forever. He must return to the earth."

Sithara nodded, her eyes red as she squeezed the book closer.

"We know. We've decided to bury him in Lysithara."

Damon smiled softly.

So they had decided.

"Lysithara does not exist," he said.

The two siblings reached for each other's hands, gripping tightly.

"It will," they said together. "When we create it. Then we will bury our father."

Fire burned in their eyes. Their voices carried iron resolve.

"We will create something beautiful. The greatest place in the world."

"In Lysithara, it won't matter if you're poor or rich, noble or peasant, human or elf, short or tall, talented or talentless," Sithara continued. "There will be a place for everyone. To learn and to grow."

"A path to forging your own legend," Damon finished quietly. "A legend of tomorrow."

Perhaps no one could know what would grow into a legend capable of changing the world for epochs.

But Damon knew this much.

The greatest of oaks had once been saplings.

And before that, they were ideas and intents.

He passed them the cooked meat from the crocodile monster, urging them to eat. Tomorrow, they would cremate their father.

Later, the two children slept peacefully, exhaustion finally claiming them.

Lazarak sat beside Damon, watching over them.

"Once again," Lazarak said softly, "I am reminded that you have quite a way with words, my friend. I am most impressed."

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"Not quite. I just wanted them to move on. There is no need to burden them with naive thoughts of vengeance."

"They could have been pushed toward hatred," Lazarak said thoughtfully.

"They would hate everyone," Damon replied. "The world. The gods. It's exhausting, hating like that. Never forgiving. Never forgetting. Nursing every grudge into resentment."

He crossed his arms.

"They'd be worse off."

Lazarak glanced at him.

"Thank you."

Damon frowned slightly.

"For what."

"For changing their fates," Lazarak said, smiling softly. "For giving them a new purpose."

"This world has too many destroyers," Damon replied. "We need builders. And believers."

Lazarak nodded.

They spoke quietly until the glow of morning crept over the horizon. As the sun rose, Damon glanced at the sleeping children and lifted his hand. Shadows surged upward, forming a dense veil that blocked the sunlight from waking them.

He wanted to prepare the funeral site.

Damon carved a tombstone in the same style as Valarie Sunwarden's, working alongside Lazarak to arrange everything. Before they finished, the children woke despite the shadows.

It must have been a strange sight. Towering darkness holding back the sun.

The dawn felt hollow in their eyes, yet it was beautiful. Warm and Gentle.

They placed their father's remains, the book, upon the stone. Lazarak sang a low dirge, his voice carrying sorrow older than worlds.

Damon ignited a torch with a flick of his finger and handed it to Lyn.

The boy stepped forward and placed it against his father's remains. The black flames burned gently, leaving behind only ash.

Standing there, Damon felt an unsettling familiarity.

This place looked too much like the cemetery of Lysithara.

Dawnbreak Hollow.

The thought made him smile faintly.

The children packed the ashes into a magical jar created by both Damon and Lazarak. Damon shaped its body, while Lazarak wove the magic and finer details.

And with that, they sealed their father's remains.

Not as an ending.

But as a beginning.

Chapter 818: Yari The Chained City

With that done, Damon and Lazarak had to complete their journey.

As for the children, Lyn and Sithara, Damon was unsure what to do with them. Taking them along was fine, but would they survive. Leaving them behind was also not a good enough choice for the same reason.

'Now what..' he thought, turning to Lazarak.

Lazarak shrugged, then clasped his hands together with sudden enthusiasm.

"We're going on a great adventure to change the world. Do you children want to come along."

Lyn glanced at Sithara, then the boy smiled, his grip tightening slightly around her hand.

"Will we get to create Lysithara?"

Damon shrugged casually, though his shoulders were tense.

"That's up to you. Lazarak is going against the goddess. I'm looking for a cure for an incurable illness. And you two are trying to create something beautiful. Should be an interesting adventure."

Sithara was no longer afraid of Damon. She shifted her weight, curiosity replacing her earlier caution.

"Ahm, where do you plan to go?"

Damon paused, suddenly feeling embarrassed. His gaze drifted away.

He had no idea. Lazarak did not know this world either.

So he improvised.

"To wherever I can find the cure."

"So you intend to go to Yari, the chained city."

Damon glanced at Lazarak, then back at the children.

"Yes. We do. But just a quick question. You guys know about Yari, right."

Lyn nodded slowly, his face paling as he swallowed.

"It's the largest city in the world. That place is hell."

Sithara agreed with her brother, her jaw tightening as she hugged her arms.

"It's ruled by the chained people. Lots of people gather there. You can fight for your freedom and become one of the chained, or you can live as a prisoner."

Lyn's eyes flickered, his voice lowering.

"Legend has it whoever manages to enter the central towers will obtain a legendary elixir."

Lazarak smiled coldly, his gaze lifting upward as if staring at an invisible tower rising into the sky.

"Those who enter can also leave this world and return to Aetherus, am I right."

Lyn nodded.

"Yeah, but that's a myth. I mean, the whole elixir is a myth too. Frankly speaking, I've theorized the whole idea of the elixir and gateways is just a way for Yari to gather everyone who can reach the center."

Sithara smiled, eager to add to her brother's reasoning.

"They stand to gain too much from this. Think about it. They recruit powerful talents, increase their own power, and gain foolish slaves who work tirelessly for an imaginary goal."

Damon chuckled quietly. These kids were really smart. No surprise.

"There is no smoke without fire. If there is a chance, then that is where we will go."

Sithara glanced at her brother, concern flashing across her face, but Lyn had more to say.

"That tower is a holy site dedicated to a god known as Seraph Null. A lesser god feared even in Aetherus."

Lazarak shrugged, a sneer tugging at his lips.

"Let me guess. Seraph Null is the right hand of Aetherus and rules this world like a despot."

Sithara hugged herself tighter.

"I've heard they have thousands of troops. And in the tower, the ruler of this world, Seraph Null, can descend and bring forth calamities that can reshape the world."

Damon did not look shaken. Seraph Null was in the seventh class advancement. Big deal.

"So what. He can shape the world and destroy continents. My grandfather can blow up a whole continent if he feels like it. He's not special."

Sithara looked hopeful.

"Really. Then can you call your grandfather, mister."

Damon cleared his throat.

"Ahem. He hasn't been born yet."

Lyn edged closer to Sithara and whispered into her ear.

"I think this guy is crazy. Remember, those who grow to the limits of humanity are often madmen."

Damon gritted his teeth.

"I can hear you. And the third class advancement is not the limit of humanity. There are whole other ranks."

Lyn shook his head as if Damon were the insane one.

"No. The highest humans achieve, or rather any goddess races achieve, is the fourth class. Only those close to the gods can do that."

Damon scoffed, disgust clear on his face. The zero epoch truly was a trash era.

"Hate to burst your bubble, kid, but there are ranks even higher than the seventh class. Humans in other worlds have done so and reached them. In the world I came from, the strongest rule at the seventh class, and they did all that without a single lesser god."

Prodigies like his uncle Cassain existed. Seras Blade too. Lilith Astranova. Damon himself.

Sithara glanced at Lazarak, who was obviously a god.

"So you didn't get this power from him."

Damon shook his head.

"No. My power is mine and mine alone, because I was the one who suffered for it."

"So no god helped you even a little." Lyn asked with skepticism.

Damon did get a system from the unknown god, and it was part of the reason he was powerful, but.

"No. I didn't get help from any god."

Which was honest, since the unknown god was technically a demon.

Lazarak smiled at their exchange.

"Well then, shall we. Which way to Yari."

Lyn glanced at Damon and Lazarak.

"We're really headed to Yari."

Damon nodded, dark glee flashing in his eyes as he glanced at the long fabric-wrapped spear on the lesser demon's back.

"Yes. We're going to kill some people and crush a god."

Lyn's eyes widened.

"We don't have the numbers for that."

Damon chuckled softly.

"Don't worry. If everyone is going there, then it means I should have some friends there. I may not look it, but I'm very popular."

He began to walk, footsteps steady and confident.

"Ehrrm, wait. Wait." Sithara called out.

Damon waved his hand dismissively.

"Relax. I can't be killed by normal means. We shall be victorious. You have me, don't you."

"No, not that. You're going the wrong way."

Damon paused, feeling his aura falter slightly.

"Ahem." He cleared his throat.

"Which way was it again?"

Lyn pointed toward the sun.

"East."

Lazarak clapped both hands over his mouth, shoulders shaking as he tried to suppress his laughter, much to Damon's chagrin.

#### Chapter 819: Are You A King

Two days had passed since they began traveling together, and as they walked the plants became more and more sparse. The sun grew hotter, beating down without mercy, and the soil became loose and sandy beneath their feet.

The air was dry, and breathing it in brought dust along with every breath, coating the throat and lungs.

Damon turned around to look at the two sweaty children. Their faces were red, skin flushed and sticky from heat and exertion, their expressions strained as they tried to keep up with Damon and Lazarak's pace.

That was considering they were actually sitting on the back of the lesser demon.

"Do you want to stop and rest?"

Lyn gasped for breath, shoulders heaving as he clutched the demon's hide.

"Yes, please." His whole body felt sore, muscles screaming. He was not even sure if he still had his legs or arms anymore. His back ached badly, and he hated that it was not yet nightfall. Even if it was, he was not sure they would stop and rest.

"Well, that's too bad. We still have to travel a few hundred kilometers. We'll rest at nightfall." Damon smiled faintly, as if he was not basically torturing them.

Lazarak sighed, shaking his head as he floated lazily beside them.

"How about an hour's rest before we continue. We can't have our guide dying from exhaustion."

Damon shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure, whatever. Though I thought you'd stand up for yourself."

Sithara bit her lips, avoiding Damon's gaze.

"No. You're scary."

Damon bit his lips in response.

"Go ahead and hurt my feelings some more, why don't you."

Still, he was not doing this to exhaust them. It was simply safer to keep moving. He only allowed rest when they absolutely needed it.

He looked toward the horizon, eyes narrowing.

"We seem to be approaching a desert region. Let's rest at the edge of the river and set out at dawn. Does that work for you guys."

The two siblings looked at each other, eyes tired, faces dusty and slick with sweat.

"You get an ice bath and a cool tent too."

Sithara glanced at her brother.

"I suppose we can power through."

With that, they continued their journey. The ground grew hotter beneath them, sand rising into fine dust with every step, clinging to clothes and skin.

Damon willed his armor to change forms, shifting into a lighter protective version. Heavy plates dissolved into lighter metals and soft fabrics better suited for the heat.

Lyn and Sithara watched the transformation with deep interest, eyes following every movement of the armor as if afraid to blink.

After three more hours, they spotted large dunes in the distance. The world ahead turned into endless shades of brown and gold, heat shimmering across the horizon.

Damon glanced back at them.

"We can rest here till dawn."

Lyn fell off the lesser demon the moment it stopped, hitting the ground with a dull thud before crawling weakly toward the shade of what appeared to be a large cactus.

Sithara climbed down more slowly and collapsed beside her brother, sitting next to him as she caught her breath.

Lazarak shook his head with pity.

"You do realize you worked them too far. They are slightly close to a class awakening, but they are still unawakened. And they are children."

Damon closed his eyes briefly, then reached into his shadow storage and pulled out two small vials of potion.

These were recovery potions, and frankly speaking, he did not have many of them.

"Here. Drink these." He tossed them onto the sand in front of the siblings.

The two glanced at each other, then at the potions. Slowly, they picked them up, examining them with fascination.

"Interesting compound combination. It must use agents that keep the efficacy high while minimizing side effects." Lyn theorized just from sight alone.

Sithara nodded, carefully opening the refined vial, its contents shimmering faintly.

"This scent smells like white moringa and some ingredients I don't quite know. I would love to—"

"Shut up and drink it already." Damon cut them off sharply.

They glanced at each other awkwardly, then quickly downed the contents. Warmth spread through their bodies, aching muscles relaxing, fatigue vanishing as mana flowed back into them.

It was a complete reset.

"Amazing." They muttered almost in unison.

Damon ignored them and raised his hand, pulling out Abellona's magical tent from his shadow storage. After that, he summoned Matia from the shadows.

The moment she emerged, the hot desert air met a cold winter chill.

The combination made the atmosphere slightly comfortable. Not too hot. Not too cold.

Her sudden appearance made the two children stand up cautiously, eyes fixed on the armored woman who stepped forth trailing frost and shadow.

"Relax. That's Matia. She's that wretch's knight." Lazarak spoke while lying on the ground in a relaxed tone.

Sithara nodded slowly, looking at the armored woman whose presence brought winter with her.

"She's beautiful." She muttered softly.

Damon smiled faintly when he heard her praise Matia, even though she had not seen her face, only her armored form.

Matia did not react.

Damon gestured toward the tent.

"Come on in."

The two children followed him inside. At most, they expected the interior to match the outside size.

They were very wrong.

The inside was massive, almost palace-like. Hanging chandeliers illuminated sofas, drapes, carpets, and weapons displayed as decor. At the center stood a large chair resembling a throne, and nearby a fireplace seamlessly blended into the luxurious interior.

Lazarak glanced around, impressed by the magic used to make it, but far more annoyed by something else.

"You had this tent the whole time, and we've been sleeping under the open sky."

Damon cleared his throat.

Lazarak clenched his fists.

"We got bitten by bugs, had to make smoky fires, and the ground was really hard."

"Ahem. You didn't ask, and I didn't bother." Damon replied awkwardly.

Lazarak glared at him, veins bulging.

"You did this to anger me, didn't you. I know you did. I can see you holding back a smug smile. You suffered just so you could anger me."

Damon turned to the awed children.

"Are you guys hungry? Let's eat."

He pulled out smoked meat and non-alcoholic drinks.

"Let's eat before dinner."

They sat down together, Damon and Lazarak taking seats while Matia stood near the tent entrance, guarding them from within. Outside, Ghost acted as a lookout.

Lyn and Sithara ate slowly, occasionally glancing at Damon. Sithara nudged her brother, who nudged her back.

Damon sighed.

"What is it now?"

Lyn pressed his lips together, forcing Sithara to speak instead.

She glanced up at Damon's head, where a crown sat like a halo.

"I... we were just curious." Her eyes lingered there.

"Are you a king?"

Chapter 820: Chosen

"A king..." Damon muttered softly. That was laughable. Someone like him was no king.

He reached up and touched the crown resting above his head, fingers brushing its cold, smooth surface.

This was the crown of some truly great.

The Keeper of False Truths.

"No. I'm a usurper. I've defeated great kings and taken what was theirs... yet I remain destitute, with nothing of my own."

That was true in the end. The one who defeated the ruler of Lysithara was Damon, the one who overcame his riddles. It was also Damon who faced the strongest: Ashcroft, the Demon King of Domination.

From the ruler of Lysithara, he had taken armor and crown. From Ashcroft, he had taken his very shadow and his attribute.

"I am a sovereign without a kingdom."

Lyn glanced at Sithara, then slowly lowered his head.

"Did your kingdom get destroyed?"

Damon smiled faintly and shook his head.

"No. I didn't have one to begin with. I am a usurper, after all. I take, I don't build. The people I took from had followers who believed in them... but I don't have that. Those who followed me were usually desperate fools I manipulated and cornered into fighting for my goals."

He looked away, voice quieter.

"Those people were great. They inspired others I stole. No one would choose to follow me."

Sithara crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Then create one."

Damon blinked.

"You can create something beautiful too, can't you?" she continued. "You might not have a whole kingdom... but you have a lot for someone who claims to have nothing."

Damon raised a brow.

"I don't have nothing. I have the stuff I took."

Sithara shook her head sharply and pointed toward Matia standing guard at the tent entrance.

"You have a loyal knight who's followed you this far. You have some baby-looking god." She looked back at Damon. "And you told us to create something beautiful. You can do the same."

She placed a hand on her chest.

"We're going to create Lysithara. But Lysithara doesn't have a king to lead it." She straightened, voice steady. "I formally appoint you as our king."

Damon was taken aback.

Lyn stood up too, a bit of innocence still clinging to his face.

"All hail the king of Lysithara."

Damon's eyes widened. Lysithara had never had a king. Those who ruled it were always called city lords, never kings.

Lazarak stood up, playing along, his tone theatrical.

"All hail the king."

Matia, standing by the exit, inclined her head slightly. Beneath her helm, she seemed to smile.

"All hail the king of Lysithara."

And just like that, Damon became king of a place that did not yet exist. This time, he had not taken it. He had not deceived or cheated anyone.

He had been chosen.

Someone had made the choice to pull Damon into their dream.

Sithara smiled brightly at him.

"Now we are the Kingdom of Lysithara."

Damon scoffed, shaking his head.

"Enough of your make-believe. Eat, take a bath, and sleep. We'll be traveling the desert tomorrow."

He stood and left the tent.

A small smile lingered on his face.

"Damn brats..."

.....

When morning came, Damon pulled the tent back into his shadow storage. He had planned to wake them at the crack of dawn, but guilt tugged at him. Letting children travel so long without rest sat poorly with him.

So he let them sleep until they woke naturally a few hours later, almost noon.

It was technically still morning, but the desert winds were already hot.

Damon sighed as they mounted the lesser demon. Matia walked beside them, her aura radiating cold as small snowflakes drifted from her armor, cooling the air around them.

Which was weird, she didn't usually do that.

"Hey, Sithara. How long until we get to Yari?" Damon called out.

She lifted her head and pulled out a large scroll, actually a star chart she had created before sleeping.

"We're nine days away by my estimate. However, Lyn theorized additional factors that can increase or reduce our travel rate."

She glanced up from the map.

"Do you want me to name those factors?"

Damon shook his head.

He didn't really care. Whatever it was, he was sure they could handle it.

"Let's just go."

Lazarak stood on a small rock, looking out over the desert with a wary smile.

"What are our odds in this place? Do you think we'll run into any of your friends here?"

Damon shook his head.

"I doubt it. Though I have my hopes up for Yari."

A few hours passed. Damon began sweating inside his ascendant armor. He reached into his shadow, pulled out a bottle of water, and downed it in one go.

He glanced at his shadow with irritation.

"Hey. Is this heat bothering you as much as it is me?"

The shadow shook itself slightly, as if mocking him for even asking.

"Yeah. I figured."

Matia's aura began radiating less cold. She had been doing it passively before or so he thought, but now the heat was overwhelming even for her.

Or was it.

Damon felt the world distort slightly. His lips cracked and dried, and an invisible pressure pressed down on him. He hadn't noticed it earlier due to his immense mana, but now he did.

"Is it just me, or am I passively losing mana?"

Lazarak, who had formed a parasol of darkness overhead, stumbled slightly, sweat running down his face.

"It's not just you."

He looked at his hands.

"This desert is a mana anomaly. Instead of a chaotic mana storm, it absorbs mana directly from the body."

"Hahaha..." Damon laughed despondently.

That was bad. Very bad. They couldn't recover lost mana in this world.

"And what happens when we completely run out of mana?"

Lyn, seated on the lesser demon, looked up, face pale.

"Mana is an internal system tied to our life force. If all of it is depleted and the desert continues to drain..." He swallowed. "I imagine we die slow, agonizing deaths."

Damon groaned.

"We need mana cores."

His eyes hardened.

"We have to hunt monsters... or die."