

## Shadow 821

Chapter 821: Weak Links

It was all good except for one problem.

The first was simple. Damon had his shadow storage and therefore had a few hundred mana cores inside, which would last him a while. More importantly, he possessed a massive mana pool.

His mana levels were absurd to consider, so he wasn't worried about himself.

His gaze turned to Lazarak. He was a god, mysterious and powerful. Damon wasn't even worried about the toddler-looking bastard. If Lazarak couldn't figure something out, then nothing would.

Damon's main concern wasn't even Matia. She could absorb mana cores. He just had to give her some or let her hunt monsters.

No. The real issue here was Lyn and Sithara.

The two children did not have the ability to absorb mana cores because they had not yet reached the first class advancement.

Even with an abundance of mana cores, they would likely die a slow and agonizing death.

He could feel Lazarak's gaze on him. The god must have reached the same conclusion.

The children would die.

And what would kill them wouldn't be a monster, not a blade, not a god.

It would be the environment.

Damon bit his lip. This was one of the most basic lessons he had learned long ago.

When on an expedition, the thing you feared most wasn't the enemy. It was the world itself.

"Ahh, I really don't have much luck with mana anomalies, do I."

Turning away, he closed his eyes. He had a few recovery potions and healing potions. They could restore some mana, but it was temporary.

They wouldn't last the duration of the journey.

Then there was also the lesser demon. It would need mana cores as well.

Damon scratched his head, feeling the faint ache of a new demon horn growing where he had ripped the last one off.

'Oh right. That too.'

He would have to add filing down his newly growing horn to his routine every now and then.

Great. Just great.

It would be nice if it didn't feel like pulling out his own tendons every time.

"How long before they reach the first class advancement."

He asked Lazarak while the children watched silently, already aware of how dangerous their situation was.

Lazarak frowned and shrugged.

"I do not know. Most of the time the first class is a psychological and philosophical awakening. It is different for everybody. Though sometimes, one awakening within a shared group may induce others."

That was different from what Damon knew, but Lazarak had lived far longer.

He knew more.

"Then can we induce it?"

Lazarak placed a hand on his chin.

"We cannot turn back now, and going forward is uncertain. We can try, but the results are up to them. From the looks of it, their class will not be mediocre, given the strength of their beliefs."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"In that case, what we need to do is put them in life-threatening situations."

Lazarak winced, glancing at Damon sideways.

"I really hate how your mind jumps straight to the cruelest option."

Damon crossed his arms as the desert heat pressed down on him.

Before he could respond, Lyn spoke.

"It's also the most logical option. It meets all survival criteria. We are the weak link in this group. If we can't contribute, then the least we can do is not hold the party back."

"How thoughtful for one so young." Lazarak smiled.

His gaze shifted to Sithara, who was drawing something on the back of the lesser demon while muttering to herself.

"By calculating the degree of mana consumption, by wind resistance..."

She was already working ahead of them, putting thought into action.

Damon glanced at Lazarak, who was the most magically knowledgeable one present.

"Don't you have any spell or method?"

Lazarak smiled faintly, seeing Damon's concern.

"Don't worry. It will turn out fine. I hope."

Damon frowned. He had no idea what the bastard was hiding, and Lazarak clearly had no intention of telling him.

"Fine. Keep your secrets."

He had secrets of his own.

And speaking of secrets, hadn't he received a new item from the system earlier. A charm.

Knowing the unknown god, it was probably something he needed.

The unknown god had a habit of doing that.

Though his level-up requirements this time were concerning.

Level Up Requirements:

Chained [0/10]

Ten of the chained people.

Damon sighed.

He really hated how the system always seemed to know what awaited him.

Opening his system window, he glanced at his updated stats.

[HP: 24995/24995]

[Mana: 55,567/55,567]

[Strength: 31124]

[Agility: 23157]

[Speed: 33985]

[Endurance: 34210]

[Class: Usurper]

[Shadow: 1900]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 19]

[Condition: Shadow Is Full]

[Attributes: Umbral, Domination Fragment]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour] [Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn] [Omen Of Dread] [Dealer's Hand] [Bloodletting] [Shadow Movement] [Shadow] [Faceless] [Danger Sense] [Shadow Storage] [Wave Walk] [Shadow Clone] [Blitz] [Flash Step] [Air Walk] [Appraisal] [Iron Bones] [Astral Projection] [Accel] [Terror Engine] [Vengeance] [Soul Tongue] [Eyes of Veracity] [Shadow Stride] [Soul Conduit] [Heart of Shadow] [Demon Dominate] [Shadow Seizer]

[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv7] [Survival Lv10] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv3] [Bartering Lv2] [Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv5] [Trap Lv5] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv5] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv5] [Mana Control Lv7] [Magic Gatling Lv5] [Pain Resistance Lv6] [Mental Contamination Resistance Lv5] [Disintegration Resistance Lv3] [Sniper Lv5] [Rune Magic Lv3] [Insanity Lv4] [Fate Manipulation Resistance Lv2] [Ravenous LvMax] [Poison Resistance Lv6] [Elemental Resistance Lv3] [Petrification Resistance Lv5] [Magic Resistance Lv5] [Curse Resistance Lv2] [Pressure Resistance Lv2] [Corruption Resistance Lv5] [Aura Farming Lv4] [Charisma Lv9] [Tyranny Lv3] [Ragebaiting Lv5]

[Items:]

[Pale Crown Armor] [Broken Bonds] [Deep Quiver] [Silver Blades] [Staff of Carnage] [Sword of Nicolas] [Furnace of Frost] [Helm of Balero] [Womb of Healing] [Charms] [Potions] [Miscellaneous Items]

[Quest:]

[Path to Conflict] [Nightmare of Lazarak]

His newest skill was Shadow Seizer. A shame he hadn't been able to use it yet.

But what truly caught his attention was the new item.

Womb of Healing.

It was supposed to be a charm, but instead it was categorized as a normal item.

Whenever he obtained charms, they usually had their own section.

"That's odd."

He opened the item details.

Perhaps this could help Lyn and Sithara.

[Womb of Healing]

Chapter 822: Relic Of His Greatest Failure

[Womb of Healing]

[Description]

What is born should be nurtured, loved, and cared for. How far had he fallen from the moment he failed to accept her existence. The existence of this impure entity had been what caused the Weeping Star to fall and rise as the Unknown God.

With blood on his hands and rage in his heart, he had been certain he had destroyed his unborn child.

By some miracle or curse, she had endured. Surviving in her dead mother's womb, years later she had stood before the Unknown God hoping for love, only to be met with disgust.

The God of the Abyss wanted nothing of this beautiful angel and cast her away with his sword.

[Effects]

This wondrous charm is a giver of life, able to birth an offspring with the blood of both parents while being nurtured by the blood of one, shattering once its duty is complete.

[Type: Charm]

This was the strangest item Damon had ever received from the system. Well one of them.

It was a charm, yet it wasn't categorized as one.

What it did was simple. It required blood samples from two parents to create a child, and for one parent to continue nurturing that child until birth. That was all it did.

'It's a damn glorified womb,' Damon thought.

Well, that was its name.

As for its description, Damon was slightly surprised. The Unknown God had tried to eliminate his own offspring.

'Guess he's not a demon for nothing.'

Though there was more to it than that, why did he want to kill his own unborn child?

Reasonably speaking, the unknown god was not an evil being, at least not entirely.

Damon imagined he would cherish his child, so why did that cause his fall and rise as the unknown god? Damon had seen a description that said the unknown god could not forgive his kin for what he had done.

Was his child's death at his hands what he had done but couldn't forgive his kin for?

"With rage in his heart, huh?" Damon wondered if he was consumed by rage. He was the god of wrath, after all.

He reached into his shadow storage and pulled it out.

It was a strange-looking artifact.

A glass capsule filled with a transparent fluid. Small. Just large enough to fit a human baby.

"I won't be using this anywhere."

He put it back, seeing that it was useless for their current predicament.

Damon sighed, a faint edge of disappointment slipping through.

He looked into the distance, then back at Lyn and Sithara.

"Lazarak, should we have them fight monsters."

The toddler god crossed his arms.

"I would rather not, but these two aren't helpless. They have their own combat styles. If they truly believe they might die, it could help."

Damon nodded slowly.

"You two get off the lesser demon. From now on, you walk."

Lyn and Sithara glanced at each other, then dismounted without protest.

"Let's go."

They followed Damon, but he paused.

He didn't know where to find monsters suitable for their level.

He glanced at his shadow.

"Go look for something for them to fight. It'd be great if it could kill them slowly."

His shadow snapped a sharp military salute and slid across the sand dunes, vanishing into the distance.

Damon turned back to Lyn and Sithara, his expression cold.

"Listen up. You're going to fight for your lives. If you fail, you die. Lazarak and I will not save you."

They looked at each other, fear flashing briefly, then nodded.

"We can do this."

Damon nodded and continued walking, the shifting sand making each step heavy as it slid beneath his boots.

Minutes passed under the scorching sun.

Matia held back her mana completely, allowing the heat to press down without mercy.

During that time, Damon asked them about their abilities and magic.

And honestly, he had to admit they were impressive.

Both possessed spatial magic attributes, but with a variation that allowed them to indirectly manipulate aspects within that space.

That alone was a sign of genius.

Damon hadn't even realized spatial magic could be used like that.

He glanced at his own hand.

'Then what is my umbral attribute truly capable of?'

Clearly, it did more than control shadows.

"I'm not using magic to its full potential."

Ashcroft had said something similar.

After thinking it through, Damon began considering possibilities.

When the Face Stealer Fuska copied his attribute, it could control solid shadows.

But there had to be more.

There was always more.

After a long silence, Damon turned to the one expert present.

"Hey, Lazarak. Do you know about umbral magic?"

Lazarak raised a brow with a sneer.

"Asking me if I know umbral magic is like asking me if I know what water looks like. I'm a god of darkness. Of course I know about branching attributes."

Damon's eyes lit up.

The god scoffed.

"So you're heaven's chosen son and you got the Umbral attribute. No need to rub it in my face."

Damon smirked, feeling relieved.

"So you know what it can do, other than controlling shadows."

Lazarak blinked.

"Wait. You actually don't know how to use your attribute properly."

He clasped his hands behind his back, smiling wickedly.

"So at last, you turn to a god for help. Typical mortal, always seeking divine intervention."

Damon smiled tightly, feeling a vein throb in his temple.

"You really want to be buried in sand."

Lazarak cleared his throat and glanced at the desert beneath his feet.

"Well, I won't stoop to your level."

He looked back at Damon, expression serious now.

"The Umbral attribute is power itself. It governs the secondary energy in your body. The same one that kept you alive when only your heart remained."

Damon's eyes sharpened.

"The shadow attribute is merely a watered-down expression of the true horror of Umbral."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what it does or not?"

Lazarak raised a hand in surrender.

"Souls. It can modify souls. It also allows you to open and close beings within a secondary world of shadow that you create."

He paused.

"I assumed you'd realize that naturally once you tried to form a domain."

Damon stared.

"Wait. Is that it."

Lazarak crossed his arms.

"What more do you want? Creating worlds already falls within the domain of gods."

Damon's eyes widened.

"The domain of gods."

Chapter 823: Old Habits Die Hard

"Wait... wait... why haven't I discovered that since then?" Damon asked, looking down at the toddler god who surprisingly actually had knowledge of his attribute.

'I'm never going to underestimate gods again.' He thought with a wistful expression.

Lazarak shrugged with annoyance. His ego was stroked by Damon, and he was pleased his knowledge was being useful.

He was really starting to get depressed with how knowledgeable Damon was about so many things he didn't get a chance to shine.

"It's not my fault you're a bum. You got handed all that and you've been using a battle axe to cut vegetables."

He had to flex as hard as he could while he had the chance.

Damon gritted his teeth.

"It's more complicated than that. Humans have a lot of organs in their bodies. Some work without us even knowing how they work, just that they do."

Lazarak rolled his eyes, finally having gained an advantage over Damon and his high and mighty ego.

"Don't try to sound smart with me."

Damon sighed, shaking his head as beads of sweat rolled down his face.

Lyn and Sithara glanced at each other but said nothing. It was better to save their strength.

Lazarak glanced at Damon with a serious expression.

"Besides, it's not like you could have used the attribute even if you wanted to. There is a fundamental clash between you and your own attribute."

Damon frowned at Lazarak's sudden seriousness.

"What are you talking about?"

Lazarak halted his footsteps, dust rising slightly as he pointed at Damon.

"You're the weak link to your own power. The Umbral attribute can modify souls beyond just controlling shadows, but creating, or rather rewriting, is where it excels."

He closed his eyes for a moment, then shook his head.

"At your core you are a drifter. You don't really think you belong anywhere, so you never put down roots."

Lazarak raised his head slightly. The hot sun seemed to be devoured by the darkness of his robes.

"Your refusal to settle, rule, or define space has limited you."

Damon's philosophy didn't align with that. He believed strength came from suffering and that people were born to die. Defiance was better than a life of surrender.

How could he put down roots when everything was temporary. That was why he took what he wanted, never building anything real with people or places.

"That's your problem," Lazarak said, his deep dark eyes fixed on Damon. "You take. You don't build. And that is restraining your power."

Damon sighed, wiping sweat from his brow.

"So what am I supposed to build? I can't do that. My first class was Death Dealer, a merchant in blood and a dealer in death. I can't change who I am at the drop of a hat."

He bit his lip.

"My second class was Death Seeker. Everything I survived and endured, my wish at its core was self destructive. My third class is Usurper. That symbolizes my desire to take and give nothing."

He scoffed, more annoyed than anything.

"For now I can work on interacting with souls and modifying them. I still have a few shades. Let's see what comes of it. As for creating a world of shadows with my attribute, that sounds busted and all, but I doubt I'll be able to create anything substantial with my limited power."

There was no need to rush things. Even Lilith Astranova didn't fully understand her attribute and stigmata. The most she used were a few spells and class skills.

The one that left the deepest impression on him was the ability she used to create a space between her palm and eyeballs so she could spy on him.

Lazarak gazed into the distance.

"Don't you think you were given such a wondrous gift for a reason. You hold the power of death and creation in your hands."

"It was given to me for a reason," Damon replied. "Though I highly doubt it was benevolent."

This was a boon from the Unknown God. How could it be all good when the god who gave it was not?

Just as Lazarak was about to speak, a shadow came darting back to Damon's feet. Its inky form reattached itself to him and began to gesture.

Damon nodded, then smiled thinly.

'Ah, I see. How interesting. That should do.'

He turned to Lyn and Sithara, their clothes soaked through, faces flushed red from the heat.

"Good news, guys. I found your target, and you're lucky. It should do."

Damon raised his hand and pointed toward the distance.

"You're going to follow my shadow and fight something over those dunes."

He pointed at dunes so far away Sithara could barely see them. The heat distorted the distance.

Though they were close to their first class advancement and already at the peak of ordinary humans, the distance still looked overwhelming.

Damon, on the other hand, had no such problem. He could see it clearly. He could accurately shoot the wings off a flying dragonfly from that range without killing it.

He reached into his shadow storage and pulled out several potions.

"Healing and recovery potions. Win and you live. Fail, and Lazarak and I will be too far away to help you."

That was a lie. At this range, Damon and Lazarak could reach them instantly, but neither said anything.

Lazarak frowned and raised his hand, forming armor of darkness around the children.

"One lethal hit. That's all this armor can block."

The two children nodded, their expressions resolute.

Damon hesitated for a fraction of a second, then tossed them two daggers.

"For close range combat. A magic user who gets pulled into melee is a dead one. Avoid that at all cost."

After several more harsh instructions and mixed signals, Damon and Lazarak watched the children march toward their possible deaths, following the shadow across the dunes.

Matia watched them from behind silently.

"Is this what having children is like, Damon." Lazarak asked.

Damon shook his head.

"I'll never know. I don't intend to have any."

Lazarak glanced at him.

"It's okay to show you care. No one's going to think you're weak."

Damon closed his eyes.

"Old habits die hard."

Chapter 824: Third Party

How casually he had pointed in that direction, as if the distance could be crossed with a single step, but the dunes that had been their destination were at least seventeen kilometers away.

Seventeen kilometers.

That was how far they had to travel to reach the dunes the shadow was leading them toward.

Lyn didn't have it in him to worry about the oddity of someone possessing a living, moving shadow that could act independently of its host body.

The magic and science behind it were insane, to say the least. Thinking about it further, how did Damon's body even react to light if he didn't have a shadow.

Shadows were a natural obstruction of light. That was how they were formed. Yet without one, in broad daylight, Damon was a strange sight.

Lyn had witnessed it. Damon simply didn't cast a shadow once his original one left.

But—

'Why didn't a new one form when the original left.' He thought his analytic nature was taking over for a moment.

By all means Damon was still there, so why not.

'Does light not notice he exists, or is his existence tied more to his shadow?' The thoughts were a defensive mechanism to prevent his mind from being overwhelmed by the fear and stress of the unknown enemy they would be facing.

Lyn shook his head, feeling the hot burning sun on his face

This wasn't the time to analyze Damon. He'd be better off focusing on the battle ahead.

The desert sun burned even through the armor of pure darkness wrapped around his body.

"Sithara, stay close. We're approaching something." He muttered loud enough for his sister to hear.

She nodded, keeping her aura restrained. The shadow they followed slowed, then gestured, pointing over the crest of a sand dune.

They were atop a sand dune.

Lyn dropped to the ground immediately, signaling for his sister to do the same. She followed, the scorching sand biting into her arms as they crawled forward together.

Slowly, they peeked over the dune.

In the shade below lay a creature half buried in sand. Its body was brown, blending almost perfectly with the desert, spikes protruding from its hide.

It was large and furry, which made no sense for the climate. It should have been lean, sparse in fur to combat the heat, but it wasn't.

A long tail curled behind it like a scorpion's, and its arms were disturbingly human in shape. Its face looked like crushed stone pressed together, a black mouth splitting it open, mandibles like an insect's trapped where teeth should be.

Lyn observed it carefully, eyes narrowing as he analyzed its structure.

"What is that," Sithara whispered, unfamiliar with this type of creature.

There were countless monsters in the world. New ones spawned every day. Most were documented based on frequency and habitat.

This one was likely native to the region, but Lyn and Sithara weren't. They didn't belong to this world.

Still.

"It's a sand spitter," Lyn replied, piecing together its identity from rumor and scattered hearsay.

The source wasn't fully reliable, but it fit.

"What's our offensive strategy," she asked quietly.

Lyn glanced at Damon's shadow, which seemed to be watching them with a broad, almost mocking expression.

"It's first class. With our defensive capabilities, we should be able to kill it if we act with caution."

She shifted slightly, the heat rising from the sand pressing against her face.

"But we can't ignore how vulnerable we are. A rank one monster can rip us apart. Their strength isn't proportional to their mass, and it likely has abilities we can't account for."

Lyn closed his eyes briefly, then reopened them, watching the sand spitter roll lazily in the heat.

"We also can't delay. The longer we stay, the faster we lose mana."

Sithara bit her lip, anxiety tightening her chest.

Those who hadn't reached first class weren't meant to fight first class monsters. Even survival usually required a full party, and that didn't guarantee victory.

At least, that was what she knew.

If she knew Damon had slain a war troll in direct combat before awakening, she would have had to rethink everything.

Then again, he was an entirely different kind of monster.

"Let's observe first. Find its weaknesses, then attack, a day or two should do." Sithara whispered.

"No," Lyn replied quietly. "We plan our offensive and strike before time runs out. We have limited time and limited resources."

He turned to her, hands red from the scorching sand, hot wind whipping his hair as grains stung his skin.

"The longer we wait, the less mana we have. The less mana we have, the weaker we are. The weaker we are, the sooner we die."

He wasn't wrong.

Under normal circumstances, observation would be the smarter option.

But not here.

Time was against them.

"I still don't agree," Sithara whispered.

Damon and Lazarak were too far away to help them. Even assuming Damon would help at all.

Lyn pressed his lips together.

"We can't be a liability. We have to advance."

She hesitated, then exhaled.

"Fine. Then let's ask a third party."

They both turned, expressions serious, eyes fixed on the shadow beside them.

"Mr. Shadow," Sithara whispered. "Should we advance or observe?"

The shadow paused.

This was Damon Grey's shadow. Damon was known to be patient, calculating but also—

No. That wasn't true.

The shadow raised one hand dismissively.

Even without sound, the meaning was clear.

"You little brats are afraid of that tiny weakling."

They glanced at each other, confirming they'd understood the same thing.

The shadow patted its chest, posturing proudly despite having no form.

The message was unmistakable.

"Attack."

Lyn smiled, satisfied.

Sithara sighed, resignation crossing her face.

"Fine. We attack. But we still need a strategy that doesn't get us killed. I would've preferred more time, but a vote has been passed, and the reasoning is... sound. I agree."

With that, the two of them crouched lower in the sand, beginning to map out their plan beneath the burning desert sun.

## Chapter 825: Sixteen Percent

Damon crossed his arms, watching them from a sand dune, a bow and arrow held awkwardly in both hands.

He wasn't worried, he just wanted to hold his bow in his hand.

It was strange crossing his arms while gripping a bow and arrow at the same time. He almost looked... anxious.

Lazarak chuckled, sitting casually atop the hot sand dune.

"You're more worried than I thought."

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"What class do you think they'll awaken to?"

Lazarak knew Damon was deflecting, avoiding showing how much he cared.

He really didn't want to admit the two children grew on him. Though it had been a very short time.

"A class is heavily dependent on one's life philosophy and identity," Lazarak replied calmly. "In the early days, there was no such thing as classes. Only nine mortal ranks. But after my rebellion, things changed."

Damon narrowed his eyes, turning his head toward Lazarak. He really shouldn't stop underestimating this toddler-looking god; he was, in fact, the real deal.

"Hm."

Lazarak spoke casually, as if discussing trivial history.

"Ranks had different names back then. As you can see, that's no longer the case. Who knows what else my creator changed."

Damon winced at Lazarak's nonchalant attitude toward permanently altering the structure of reality itself. or at least being the reason the rules of the world were altered.

'How much of a grasp did he have on the magic system?'

"What did you do?"

Lazarak looked up at the sky, his expression somber.

"I suppose you could say I made my creator notice me. I wonder how much she took in return... certainly more than just attributes."

Damon sighed. He didn't like it when old wounds were reopened. So he asked no further questions.

"They're approaching the sand spitter."

He knew the monster's name through his appraisal skill. Even from this distance, he could see clearly.

And sure enough, Lyn and Sithara were closing in on the sand spitter.

They had only observed it briefly before committing to an attack.

"This must be Lyn's decision," Lazarak muttered. "He must've realized wasting time would do no good. Still... Sithara's idea was safer."

Lazarak watched as the children crept closer to the monster, which lay still, pretending to sleep, baiting them.

"It's intelligent," Damon said. "These creatures often are. Though I disagree with you. Sithara's plan only appears safer. It drains resources, and we can't predict how circumstances might change when they're already on the clock."

Damon tightened his grip on the bow, eyes fixed on the distance.

"Acting fast or waiting doesn't reduce the monster's strength," he said quietly. "Only theirs."

Lazarak sighed at Damon's words.

"You're a god," Damon continued. "You have the privilege of patience. We're human. We only have moments. Our lives are too short not to take risks."

Lazarak paused, then glanced at Damon.

"If your lives are so short... then maybe you should try living yours."

Damon sneered as the sand spitter suddenly lashed out at the children and the battle began.

"This isn't about me."

A cloud of sand erupted as the creature swiped with its human-like arms. Lyn felt a scorching wind brush past his face.

Too close.

He stepped back instantly, warping distance with spatial magic.

"Sithara, now!"

He called out, and his sister raised her hand, forming a spatial barrier between him and the monster. Her control was intricate, precise.

Sweat poured down her face.

For a moment, it worked.

Then the sand spitter opened its mouth.

Its fur bristled violently, and a torrent of compressed sand blasted forth like a high-pressure jet.

Too fast.

The attack ripped through the spatial barrier, shattering it like glass.

Sithara watched in horror as the world slowed, death rushing toward her.

It was too strong. Against a first-class monster, running would have been the wisest choice.

But at the last moment, the ground beneath her folded inward as Lyn warped space again.

She reacted instantly, thrusting her hand downward. Sand peeled away from the ground, rising into countless grains as she manipulated space indirectly to control the dust.

The dust cloud enveloped the sand spitter.

The creature stared at her with cold contempt, as if offended by the attempt.

"It's fur," Lyn realized. "The fur protects it from sand, not heat."

Still, not enough.

He could feel it. If they killed this thing, they would finally cross the precipice into first class.

"It's not enough," he whispered. "We need wind."

But not too much.

The space was open. Closing it would amplify the effect but that would trap them as well. Their only insurance was Lazarak's darkness armor, which could block a single lethal blow.

Sithara continued hurling sand and dust, but the more sand she threw, the harder it became to track the monster's movements.

Lyn ducked as another sand blast tore through the air, obliterating a dune behind him.

Warm blood spilled down his side.

It hadn't even touched him directly, barely grazed him, yet the damage was already severe.

He coughed, dust choking his lungs, as he prepared his final spell.

He lifted his head to signal his sister—

But the sand spitter leapt.

It slammed into Sithara midair.

Her darkness armor shattered instantly, undeniably a lethal hit.

She crashed into the sand, coughing blood, her head and mouth stained red.

"Sithara!" Lyn shouted through the dust.

Their plan was broken.

She forced her head up, shaking weakly as she met his gaze.

"You have to finish this," she said, smiling through blood. "I trust you."

The sand spitter advanced slowly, confident, knowing the battle was over.

Lyn moved.

He sealed the space, slowing the airflow, freezing the dust in suspended stillness.

Then he teleported to his sister's side and pulled her into his arms.

He swallowed hard.

"The probability of survival is minimal," he said quietly. "But if we advance... we can theoretically withstand it. Estimated success rate, sixteen point five percent."

His mana was dangerously low.

She smiled faintly as he held her close.

"Let's risk it," she whispered. "Together."

She snapped her fingers.

A single spark ignited the suspended dust—

And the desert exploded.

Chapter 826: Ontological

Damon teleported into the cloud of dust that had exploded, his form cutting through the lingering sand as it scraped against his armor. He scanned through the haze, his eyes quickly finding the bodies of the two unconscious siblings.

They were holding onto each other tightly, arms wrapped as if afraid to let go even in sleep, their breathing faint but steady.

He crouched beside them at once and checked them carefully, his hands hovering over their chests and limbs.

They were healing.

His gaze shifted to the empty vials scattered across the sand nearby.

"They accounted for the damage to their bodies and took the healing potions beforehand."

That had been Lyn's decision, made before Sithara had set off the explosion.

Lazarak stood a short distance away, staring at the dead and broken remains of the sand spitter. Its fur had ignited completely, blackened and burned away, the creature unable to withstand the violent expulsion and torn apart by it.

"A dust expulsion..." Lazarak muttered, lowering his gaze slightly.

"That was a stroke of genius. They used the suspended dust and still air to ignite an expulsion with the sand spitter at the center."

Damon exhaled slowly as he walked toward the corpse of the creature they had killed. He stopped beside it, then reached down and plunged his hand into its abdomen, tearing out its monster core with raw force. Blood and ash spilled onto the sand as he pulled it free.

He glanced back at the two children.

"They did it."

Lazarak nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful.

"A successful awakening. They made it seem easy. Some people go their entire lives without ever achieving such a feat."

Damon crossed his arms.

"Talent plays a large role. And they have it in spades."

He turned his head slightly, eyes scanning the horizon.

"Let's go. That expulsion was loud, and we don't know what heard the noise."

Lazarak nodded and raised his hand. Darkness rose from the ground, wrapping around the siblings gently before lifting them up and mounting them onto the back of the lesser demon.

Damon nodded once, then turned eastward and began to sprint forward. A sharp boom echoed behind him as he vanished, leaving behind a faint afterimage. Lazarak followed atop the demon, while Matia paused briefly to look around before dashing after them.

Hot winds battered them as they crossed the vast sand dunes, their passage leaving behind fading footprints that were quickly swallowed by the shifting desert.

A few hours passed as they crossed a great distance through the savage terrain. The farther they traveled, the harsher the heat became, the drier the air grew, and the more mana they lost with each step.

The two siblings began to stir, Sithara first, then Lyn.

Damon lifted his gaze toward the sky. Darkness was approaching, and it would be wiser to camp and continue during the day.

While he could see in the dark, that did not change the fact that the most dangerous monsters were nocturnal.

He chose a location where the surrounding dunes formed natural cover and brought them to a halt.

As night fully settled, the scorching heat of the day vanished, replaced by a cold, dry wind. The temperature dropped sharply, bone chilling in its intensity, and Damon felt his fatigue amplify noticeably.

His mana was draining slightly more than usual, but his mana pool was simply too vast for it to matter much.

They had passed. They had reached the first class. And on their first attempt, no less.

Damon decided a feast was in order.

He retrieved the ingredients from his shadow storage and laid them out. Seeing so much food before him made his thoughts drift to Leona. Was she alive? If she was, had she eaten. He hoped she had not gone hungry.

He shook his head firmly and focused on preparing the meal.

....

What woke her was the smell of something delicious.

Sithara's stomach grumbled softly as her consciousness returned.

Her head felt light as she slowly raised it, her eyes opening a moment later. Warm light flooded her vision, coming from chandeliers that hung above.

It was the familiar tent, the same one that had awed her before, crafted from magic she still did not fully understand.

She turned her gaze to her brother, who shifted slightly in his sleep.

Her hands felt stiff, but at the same time stronger.

Her gaze moved forward.

The figure in front of her was the same young man. Long black hair, deep dark eyes, his aura subdued. He wore light fabric with soft armor protecting his vitals, but most striking of all was the crown above his head.

It hovered like a halo, giving him a regal presence. More than that, it felt as if he dominated the space around him, shadows growing deeper and heavier in his presence.

Yet Sithara found herself drawn to his eyes.

They looked weary. Tired.

He was watching her.

Now that she had awakened, she no longer felt scared of him.

Now she understood.

He was terrifying.

It was like staring at a beast wearing human form, one with a mana pool so deep she could not even begin to imagine its limits.

"Hungry?" he asked quietly, his voice cold, though a faint shred of care slipped through.

Sithara did not bother pretending otherwise. She nodded slowly.

He nodded in return and arranged several plates and cutlery in front of her, serving a variety of dishes. Some were familiar, others she had never seen before, but all of them looked good.

She glanced toward her brother, who was still asleep.

Come to think of it, the toddler looking god Lazarak was not here, nor was the beautiful lady knight. It was just the two of them.

"Lazarak is outside doing goddess knows what, or maybe she doesn't," Damon said calmly.

"As for Matia, she's watching the perimeter with Ghost."

Sithara nodded, not questioning how he knew. For all she knew, he could read minds.

"Eat," Damon whispered as he sat across from her. "There's more than enough for your brother too."

Sithara looked at him briefly, then took a small bite of the food.

The moment it entered her mouth, her expression changed.

Damon recognized it immediately. It reminded him of Leona.

Within moments, she reached out and grabbed another dish, this time a cake covered in cream.

"Hmm wo... mmm, so delicious," she said, unable to stop herself from talking with her mouth full.

The sight made her look like a small chipmunk.

Damon chuckled quietly, holding back his laughter. He took a napkin and gently wiped the cream from her face.

She paused for a moment, then smiled and continued eating. She no longer seemed to find him frightening.

Lifting her head, she gazed at him again.

Then asked hesitantly,

"Mister... um... you cook really well... how old are you?"

Damon raised an eyebrow.

Chapter 827: Pettiness

"How old am I...?" Damon was slightly taken aback by her sudden question.

After a moment of thought, he replied,

"Hmmm... there is at least a two-hundred-thousand-year gap between my birth and yours."

Sithara's eyes widened, taking what he had said completely out of context.

Two hundred thousand years was inconceivable. No mortal could live that long. Even those who somehow reached the seventh class advancement did not possess lifespans anywhere near that vast.

"Amazing..." she muttered under her breath.

Damon didn't say anything further.

Technically, he wasn't lying. There were at least three different eras between them. Sithara had been born in the Zero Epoch, while Damon had been born in the Third Epoch.

Even though he was still seventeen, he could truthfully say there was an enormous gap between them.

That was the thing about truth, leave out a small detail, and it could become more deceptive than a lie.

It was part of the reason Damon didn't put much faith in his skill Eye of Veracity.

Truth was far too easy to twist.

Sithara, however, seemed almost excited by the answer. She leaned forward and began bombarding him with questions. At that point, Damon didn't really mind. He answered whatever she asked.

His life was interesting.

He even casually flexed how he had once been killed by the Goddess of Doom, only to shrug it off by waking up a month later as if it were an inconvenience.

Sithara was completely impressed.

Which was par for the course, it wasn't exactly difficult to impress a child.

It wasn't long before Lyn woke up. He seemed disoriented at first, blinking slowly as he regained his bearings. The moment clarity returned, he immediately checked on his sister, scanning her body for injuries.

When he confirmed she was fine, he let out a long sigh of relief.

Not long after, he joined in eating the food Damon had prepared.

As they ate, Damon reached into his shadow storage and pulled out the mana core of the sand spitter, placing it carefully in front of them.

It was a smooth, golden-brown orb that shimmered faintly, pulsing with contained power.

"This is the mana core of the sand spitter," Damon said evenly.

"I figured you'd want to have the core of the first monster you killed after reaching the first class."

The two of them stared at it.

Then, like the children they were, they jumped to their feet and began dancing excitedly, singing a little song Damon didn't recognize.

Damon raised his hand, casually forcing them to sit back down, though there was a faint, beaming smile on his face.

"Now that you've advanced, I'm sure you know what to do with this, right?"

Lyn nodded slowly.

"Yes. We're aware that those who awaken gain the ability to refine their bodies using mana cores, permanently adding to their strength."

Damon nodded as well.

The two children began explaining what they knew, and to his mild disappointment, they knew quite a lot already. He wouldn't get the chance to teach them much, but that was fine.

Lazarak entered the tent with a wide grin.

"Congratulations. This calls for a celebration."

His gaze then dropped to the food Damon had prepared.

"How could you?" Lazarak said dramatically.

"I can't believe you started without me..."

Damon rolled his eyes.

"Go to sleep. We're going to be on the road for the next few days at least, and there will be no resting."

The joy of awakening instantly dimmed under Damon's totalitarian tone. Without protest, they logically chose survival, washing up and heading to bed.

Dawn was going to be harsh.

At least they had warm beds.

.....

Damon lay on a soft cushion, his eyes open, staring at the tent ceiling.

The closer they got to Yari, the more anxious he felt.

'Everyone is still alive,' he thought.

'They have to be.'

He had been afraid to hope.

But he refused to despair.

.....

It was a good place.

More importantly, she was lucky to have found it, a small, quiet cottage tucked away from the chaos.

The last thing Sylvia remembered was a brutal battle with Lilith Astranova, just before the giant nightmare consumed them all.

Honestly, Sylvia was the one person who knew they wouldn't die, as long as they avoided damage from anything outside the nightmare's black body.

That was why, even when the world descended into hell and everyone fought desperately for their lives, she ignored them and focused solely on fighting Lilith Astranova.

And even with careful, meticulous planning...

She was losing.

The thought frustrated her deeply.

Losing to Lilith Astranova felt inevitable. No one believed she would win, not even Sylvia herself.

She clicked her tongue, gazing at the floating book in front of her.

Just like everyone else, Sylvia was here too. She had been heavily injured by Lilith Astranova, and when the nightmare consumed them, she heard the same announcement as everyone else.

They were inside the nightmare of Lazarak.

And just like everyone who was conscious enough to hear it, there was a promised reward.

Whoever survived until the end of the nightmare would gain the fourth class.

Her gaze lingered on the symbol engraved on the book.

'What are you planning, \*', she thought.

Even thinking the unknown god's forgotten name was forbidden.

Yet Sylvia alone was allowed to remember it.

She had been entrusted with his forbidden tome and its infinite knowledge.

That was why she knew exactly who would come knocking on her door after months of waiting.

She glanced at the runes carved into the altar, the potions she had prepared long ago.

A familiar sense of déjà vu washed over her.

And right on cue—

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Sylvia smiled faintly, her white hair gleaming in the dim light of her witch-like cottage.

Before she could respond, the door was violently pushed open.

A woman with red hair and emerald-green eyes stepped inside.

The moment the door opened, the runes ignited, firing sharp, glowing white arrows toward her.

However, the woman simply raised her hand. A barrier she had prepared beforehand shimmered into existence, obliterating the arrows on contact.

Sylvia didn't even move.

"After experiencing this four different times," she said calmly,

"I suppose you would expect it. Good thing I added that."

Before Lilith could react, a bucket dropped from above.

It struck her square on the head.

Monster dung spilled everywhere.

Sylvia smiled.

"That, made her very happy."

It was some Damon-level pettiness.

Chapter 828: Too Many Losing Heroines

At different points in her previous attempts, she always found a way to Sylvia's cottage. However, every single time, they fought.

It was a given.

She slowly reached up and pulled the bucket off her face. The thick stench of monster dung clung to her skin and hair, dripping down in heavy clumps. Her fingers paused for half a second as she lowered the bucket, then her eyes lifted.

A cold glare slid toward Sylvia.

"May I use your bath?"

That was the first thing she said.

Sylvia merely gestured with two fingers toward the back of the cottage, not even looking particularly surprised.

"It would be terrible if you kept stinking up my cottage."

Lilith said nothing more. She turned and walked past Sylvia, boots squelching faintly against the wooden floor as she disappeared into the bathing room.

Some time later, she emerged with wet hair clinging to her neck and shoulders, droplets trailing down her collarbone. She wore a clean set of clothes now, though the tension in her posture had not eased.

"You're awfully relaxed," Lilith said, her gaze sharp as it dragged across Sylvia.

She wanted to beat her. Violently. The urge coiled tight in her chest. But the white-haired elf was possibly the only ally she could rely on.

Sylvia turned her head slowly. Her grey eyes settled on Lilith, unblinking.

"I could say the same about you."

She tilted her head slightly, a thin smile forming.

"Don't you think it's rude to barge into someone's home uninvited?"

Lilith didn't rise to the provocation this time. She was tired. Tired of arguing. Tired of fighting. Tired of repeating this same exchange across several incarnations of the world.

At one point in every regression, no matter how she tried to change things, she and Sylvia always fought.

"I suppose covering a guest in monster dung is an elf tradition," Lilith replied flatly.

Sylvia turned away and strode toward a small hearth. Soft white flames flickered within it, casting pale light across her face as she rested a hand on the mantle.

"Why are you here, Lilith Astranova?" she asked calmly.

"Earlier than expected, no less."

Lilith's gaze drifted to the floating book hovering beside Sylvia. Contempt flickered briefly across her face.

"Don't act like you don't know," she said.

"Aren't you supposed to be a seer?"

Sylvia's fingers curled slightly, irritation flickering beneath her composed exterior. She did not turn around.

"And since when did seers become all-knowing?" she replied.

"You want something from me. Out with it."

Lilith hesitated.

She didn't want to show how desperate she was, but Sylvia might be the only one who could help her.

Slowly, she reached up and touched the flower nestled in her hair, her fingers brushing the petals with something close to anxiety.

"I want to know what this is," she said quietly.

"And what it really does."

Sylvia raised her head slightly. Her white hair shifted over her shoulders as she turned just enough to see Lilith clearly.

It was obvious the flower had been used multiple times. The petals were dim. Four of them had lost their glow entirely.

"Hmmm," Sylvia hummed.

"Here I thought it was just a creepy fashion choice."

Lilith's expression did not change.

Of course Sylvia would not help her willingly. Once, she had considered the meek elf girl a minor inconvenience.

Who would have thought she would flip the switch and go completely insane.

No one would have accounted for that variable.

'She's like a whole new person.'

"Sorry," Sylvia continued lightly,

"But no. I think I'd rather see you squirm."

Lilith's hand curled into a fist at her side.

"Damon is going to die."

The words landed heavily.

Sylvia froze. Her posture stiffened, and for a brief moment her composure cracked. Her expression faltered.

"Y—you're lying," she said, her voice tightening.

"He has the Deathless skill. He can't die."

Lilith shook her head slowly.

"He found a way," she said.

"Or he will. Deathless only works on the prerequisite that Damon wants to die."

She inhaled deeply.

"You already know this. I've been using this nameless flower to come back again and again. But I can't use it forever. And even if I could, I can't control all the variables."

"And the most uncontrollable variable," Sylvia said quietly,

"is Damon."

"Yes," Lilith nodded.

Silence settled between them.

Sylvia's thoughts churned.

She hated Lilith Astranova, but not because Lilith had harmed her.

In truth, Lilith had done nothing to her.

She had simply been jealous.

Sylvia lacked nothing as a woman. Yet Lilith could effortlessly draw Damon away. He trusted her more. Confided in her more.

And Sylvia had loved him the longest. Even before she realized it herself.

If Damon ever had to choose between them, she knew she would lose.

Her hands curled into fists, her fair skin flushing red.

"I really can't stand you," she muttered.

"I can never understand what's so great about you."

Lilith said nothing. She was the one who needed help.

"Please," Lilith said at last, bowing her head.

The act of submission twisted something sharp in Sylvia's chest. It felt like losing again, even when her opponent was literally groveling.

"I really hate you," Sylvia said coldly, crossing her arms. Her face tightened, yet it only made her appear more striking.

Time had stripped away her naivety and childishness, leaving behind only a beautiful woman sharpened by experience.

"I know it sounds small to hate you for such a shallow reason," Sylvia continued, her voice trembling despite herself,

"but I do. I really do. I can't see what's so great about you."

Her eyes glistened faintly as she struggled to keep her composure.

"Then why you?" she whispered.

"I know that if he ever had to choose only one, I would be the losing heroine."

Lilith lifted her head slowly. Exhaustion was carved into her expression.

"Honestly," she said quietly,

"I don't know why either."

"I'm not prettier than you. Right now I can't even say I'm smarter. I'm not wealthier. For all intents and purposes, I couldn't tell you why."

Her fist clenched, mirroring Sylvia's frustration.

"But I can tell you this," Lilith continued.

"He didn't choose me either."

"When the time came, he didn't choose me. He used me. Then he abandoned me."

Her hands trembled, her eyes cold and hollow.

"When it was all said and done, he would rather choose his own death than live, even for me."

Sylvia had never imagined hearing such words from Lilith Astranova.

This was Lilith. She did not beg. She did not break.

Slowly, Sylvia closed her eyes. Then she raised her hand toward the floating tome beside her.

She extended her other hand toward Lilith.

"The flower," she said.

"Hand it over."

Lilith blinked, surprise flickering across her face at how easily Sylvia agreed.

She did not even try to humiliate her further.

"Well?" Sylvia added.

"We don't have all the time in the world."

Lilith reached up quickly and tried to pull the flower free. Pain tugged sharply at her scalp.

She tried again.

It did not budge.

It was stuck.

Sylvia sighed.

"Figures," she said.

"You can't take it off. No surprise there."

Lilith bit her lip and sat down at the small table across from Sylvia.

"Still, not that I needed to hold it to know what it is," Sylvia muttered, flipping open the book with a frown.

"Where did you get this exactly?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Lilith crossed her arms.

"You're asking where, not who," she said.

"But the answer is obvious. I got it from an altar of the unknown god."

Sylvia nodded slowly.

"Normally this knowledge would cost me something," she said.

"Even with two extra classes and new skills."

"But the one who decides the price," she glanced at the book, "is unknown himself."

Lilith frowned.

"So what you're saying is that he also has a vested interest in keeping Damon alive," she said, "which allows you access to this knowledge more freely."

Sylvia nodded. She placed her hand firmly on the tome.

"What is this flower?"

The book vibrated faintly.

Sylvia almost subconsciously waited for it to demand something. It did not.

Unknown wanted the same thing they did.

Images and words began to weave themselves across the pages.

She read aloud.

"Prototype Nameless Flower."

"His ambitions go beyond one pillar. Reaching for all is inevitable. To that end, he devised a way to interfere in the domains of other gods using nothing but magic and ki."

"What better place to test his prototype than the world of the Goddess of Doom, whose nature binds her as his bride, making her domain the easiest to tamper with."

Sylvia continued reading. The knowledge assumed she understood most of it. She did not dwell on that.

"This flower has the primary effect of changing outcomes."

She glanced at Lilith, who listened intently.

"The Nameless Flower was never named by its creator. It regresses an individual's mind into the past by destroying the fixed universe and recreating it anew, introducing slight modifications to produce different outcomes."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed at the final line.

"Time is linear, simultaneous, and unbreakable."

"We are all imprisoned by time."

Chapter 829: Echoing Words

What a foul man. What a wretched and terrible man.

A man could give up a crown for a moment of genuine and true love.

And when that love was betrayed and that heart was broken, his fury could build empires, for a man who has lost everything is unstoppable because there are no deeper depths left to fall into.

Then why was Damon still so unbridled and mad?

He still had things that were precious. Too much to lose.

Sylvia knew that.

But she also knew that in his mind, he was used to having nothing. And because of that, he became loyal to the one thing that could never betray him.

"Damon's greatest loyalty is to defiance."

What else did he have that could never turn on him but his own rebellion? This was his way of life. Even dying, even death itself, was a form of rebellion. He was spitting in the face of a god.

Lilith knew that.

She had seen it.

He was laughing crazily as he gazed at the heavens, his chest impaled by a black spear. Blood poured freely, yet his laughter only grew louder.

He mocked the heavens for believing his small, meager screams amounted to nothing. He laughed and cried at the same time, because he had defied them.

If she had not loved him, she might have found its macabre beauty breathtaking. Instead, it shattered her heart.

The only sound she remembered was not Lazarak's battle with Seraph Null, but her own scream, raw and broken, drowning out everything else.

"Love cannot override his philosophy," Lilith finally said, her voice low.

He does not cling to love because love can leave.

He does not cling to people because people can die.

He does not cling to gods because gods can lie.

He clings to defiance, because defiance only ends when he ends and even then, he treats death as a final insult.

Sylvia tilted her head slightly, her gaze drifting back to the final line in the book.

"Do you think this is a riddle?" she asked.

"The unknown god seems to have a fondness for riddles, especially when the answers are in plain sight."

Lilith lifted her head as Sylvia read the last line aloud again.

"Time is linear, simultaneous, and unbreakable. We are all imprisoned by time."

Sylvia smiled faintly, clearly pleased with herself.

"It's a funny thing, coming from a god who has authority over time itself."

Lilith frowned, her expression tightening.

"Are you suggesting the last line is a riddle of sorts?"

Sylvia shook her head.

"No. I'm just pointing out something that could be a clue."

She glanced sideways at Lilith.

"Besides, our problem isn't the unknown god. It's Damon."

She pointed at Lilith, her white hair lifting slightly despite the still air.

"Tell me what happens."

Lilith nodded, then hesitated.

"I can't remember every detail," she said.

"Only the major ones. And this flower changes things, so it's linear but unpredictable at the same time."

Sylvia crossed her arms and nodded thoughtfully.

"Hmm. Like how I can sense this world has changed. As time passes, there are those who become slightly aware. Feelings of déjà vu and the like."

Lilith nodded. She was about to speak when Sylvia raised a hand, stopping her.

"In that case, I don't think it will make much of a difference. Just tell me if something unusual happens."

Lilith glared at her.

"This is unusual," she said sharply.

"You and I working together. We're usually at each other's throats."

Sylvia glanced at the flower, its petals wilted and dim.

"This thing is actually a weapon, if you think about it objectively."

Lilith narrowed her eyes, but Sylvia raised a hand again.

"Hear me out. Every time you go back, you create a whole new world and destroy the original. That means this little flower is a mass extinction weapon."

She leaned back slightly in her chair.

"Think about what the final line says."

Lilith slowly repeated the words under her breath.

"Time is linear, simultaneous, and unbreakable. We are all imprisoned by time."

Sylvia nodded.

"This contradicts typical regression. In theory, regression doesn't break time. It only cheats it temporarily. Butterfly effects and all that."

Sylvia Moonveil was a walking encyclopedia. More than that, she was a learned woman who understood rules far better than she understood people.

This was right up her alley.

"The rules are simple," she said calmly.

"And we must know our limitations and play by them."

She raised three fingers.

"Three, for now."

"Lilith is not free."

"Sylvia is not omniscient."

"And finally, Damon is not immortal. These are our limitations."

Lilith took a deep, shaky breath, her fingers brushing the flower in her hair.

"I've been destroying everything all this time."

Sylvia let her sit with that realization for a moment before speaking again.

"We might have to fight Damon," she said evenly.

"But that won't be enough to win. I'll assume you already tried that before."

Lilith closed her eyes.

"He's powerful. Far more than I anticipated. But the real problem is the elixir that can cure Luna. The moment he got his hands on it, he had no reason to go on."

Sylvia stood up abruptly, a frown creasing her face as her armor equipped itself piece by piece.

"That's too bad," she said.

"Then we'll have to steal the elixir before he gets it."

Lilith scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"Easier said than done. Even Damon had to start a whole war to get his hands on it."

Sylvia smiled faintly as she looked at Lilith.

"Then we'll just take it now, won't we?" she said softly.

"No one can stop me from getting what I want."

She echoed Lilith's own words from the academy, spoken long ago.

She tilted her head and repeated the next part, word for word.

"I'm prepared to take on the world and watch it burn. Are you?"

Lilith was taken aback. Then she laughed, the sound brittle and self-directed.

"When did I become so pathetic?"

She shook her head.

"Ha... ha ha ha..."

She straightened, emerald eyes regaining their familiar confidence.

"There are still two petals left," she said firmly.

"And I'm ending this now."

"I've been ready to burn the world for years."

Sylvia scoffed, turning away from Lilith. Then she smiled.

No rival of hers was allowed to be weak.

"Good," she said.

"Then let's go. I've made preparations."

She walked toward the altar carved with countless runes.

"When it comes to rune magic, no one in my party comes close to me," she added.

"Not even Damon."

She stepped onto the altar, runes igniting beneath her feet.

"Let's go stop that suicidal bastard," Sylvia said quietly.

"He still has a promise to keep."

Chapter 830: Yari

The shadow spread across the hot sand, crawling like a living thing as it devoured the remains of the dead.

Damon's face was slightly pale, but he did not forget to let Lyn and Sithara extract the mana cores.

The two children hurriedly knelt beside the corpses, hands moving with practiced urgency as they pried the glowing cores free and packed them into their bags. Their movements were quick, almost reverent, as if afraid the desert itself might steal the prize if they lingered too long.

Damon glanced back at Matia.

She stood with her sword raised over the rattling form of a skeleton that had crawled up from beneath the sand. Without hesitation, she brought the blade down in a single, clean sweep.

The skull separated from the spine and rolled across the dunes before dissolving. Damon's shadow surged forward, swallowing the remains before they could even hit the ground.

Damon exhaled slowly.

He clenched his palm, then unclenched it, the motion stiff, irritated. His tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth.

"I still haven't gotten any closer to using my attribute to its full extent."

Lazarak turned toward him. His toddler-like form had grown slightly larger after weeks of travel, his presence heavier, more defined, though his expression remained calm.

"You can touch souls now," Lazarak said.

"But instead of modifying them, you break them."

Damon frowned, his shoulders tensing as another wave of mana drained from him. He could feel it leaking away, faster than he liked.

They had been traveling through this desert for weeks. Altogether, Damon had been in this world for three, maybe four months.

During that time, he had captured monsters and used twisted soul experimentation.

It was progress. Dangerous progress, but progress nonetheless.

Apparently, when using shadow energy, he could directly interact with souls and even mold them.

In theory.

In practice, most of the time he crushed them outright.

And when he did manage to modify them, the results were... grotesque. Bodies warped into formless, twitching masses that barely resembled what they once were.

Still, there were benefits.

He could now manifest physical shadows. Harden them. Shape them. But only where shadows already existed.

He had named it Shadow Manipulation.

Mastery Level One.

Other than monsters, the greatest danger they faced was the desert itself. The sand drained mana and life force relentlessly. The heat during the day was suffocating, the cold at night bone-deep and merciless.

And yet, after so long...

They had finally reached it.

Damon slowed and lifted his gaze.

He could see it in the distance.

"So that's Yari..."

Lazarak crossed his arms, staring past the dunes.

Before them rose a behemoth of a city. Even in this cursed desert, its massive brown walls towered over the dunes as if attempting to claw their way toward the sun itself. Weapons lined the battlements, embedded with magical arrays for offense and protection.

Massive chains were draped across the city like restraints on a sealed monster. Each chain was thicker than the city gates themselves.

Armored guards patrolled the walls in constant motion. Below, the gates stood open, allowing fully equipped squadrons to enter and exit, mounted on strange, monstrous beasts. People in varied clothing moved through the gates with carriages, weapons, supplies, and tools.

Barriers separated different sections of the city, rigid and deliberate. Segregation, enforced by magic.

The most striking difference between guards and civilians were the chains.

Every guard wore them. Some around their necks. Others carried them in their hands like weapons.

Damon's gaze drifted past the walls, taking in the brown houses and structures built from an unknown sand-like material. All of them shared large windows.

All except one.

A towering black spire pierced the sky, stretching impossibly high. Just looking at it made Damon's head spin.

And yet, he smiled.

"So that's the place we need to go..."

He stood atop the dune, cloak fluttering slightly, his expression sharp.

Lazarak chuckled softly.

"We've arrived."

Damon resisted the urge to spread his shadow perception over the city. He could already feel powerful auras even from this distance.

"Let's go," Damon said quietly.

"If my friends are alive, they should be here."

Lyn slid down the dune after him, boots skidding through the sand.

"How would you even find them in a city this large?"

Damon didn't slow.

"I don't need to," he replied.

"They'll find me instead."

Sithara hurried after them, her steps light, excitement barely contained.

"Really? What's your plan?"

Damon glanced sideways at Lazarak, a thin smile forming.

"I... well. I'm going to start a cult."

"A cult?" they both echoed, confused.

Damon said nothing more.

That wasn't the full plan anyway.

He couldn't defeat Seraph Null at third class. Lazarak would have to fight him. And for Lazarak to regain his full power faster, he needed followers, Faith and Worship.

After all, he was a god.

Still, Damon saw the problem.

Lazarak could defeat Seraph Null, but not kill him.

If it came to that, Damon might have to use Mutuwa, the spear named after death itself, on Seraph Null.

Which meant Damon would lose his only guaranteed way to die.

His gaze slid toward Lazarak through his peripheral vision.

'Did he plan that?'

It was suspicious. A god of peace giving him a weapon and encouraging suicide.

What if Lazarak had known this outcome? What if he had ensured Damon would be forced to use Mutuwa on someone else?

If that was the case...

Then Lazarak never intended for Damon to kill himself.

As they approached the city gates, Damon felt the guards' attention lock onto them. The soldiers atop the walls shifted, weapons subtly repositioning.

Lazarak sighed.

"I knew entering through the front gate was a bad idea."

Damon remained calm. Worst case, they killed the guards and disappeared inside. The city was large enough to vanish in.

As they reached the crowd, the guards moved toward them.

But they didn't stop at Damon.

They walked straight past him.

Toward Matia.

One of them grinned, eyes glinting with something ugly. He looked almost fae-like, save for the heavy chain looped around his neck.

"Well, well... what do we have here?"

"A woman in armor."

The other laughed.

"Come on, sweetheart. Why don't you come show us a good time?"

Matia didn't react.

She didn't tense and didn't flinch. She simply stood there, sword resting at her side, eyes forward.

Damon sighed.

Those fools were about to get themselves killed.

'Oh well. It's not like we came here with peaceful intentions.'

He was about to intervene when Matia inevitably slaughtered them.

Before he could—

"What are you two idiots doing?"

A cold voice cut through the air.

"If they have no brand, mark them and send them on their way."

The two guards glanced at each other, irritation flashing across their faces. They shot Matia one last glare before reluctantly reaching into their armor and pulling out a small branding seal.