

Shadow 841

Chapter 841: Vor'thal Abyss Devourers

Damon felt his head throb as his shadow energy slowly recovered. He sat still, shoulders slightly hunched, watching the amorphous blob roll across the floor. Its body rippled and folded in on itself as jagged teeth spread wide, crunching down on what had once been its cocoon.

The sound was wet and unpleasant. The creature was not even the size of an adult cat, barely half that but its appetite was disturbingly ravenous.

He lifted a hand and pressed it against his temple, fingers digging in as irritation crept through him. His mana reserves were in shambles. Even after absorbing seven rank three mana cores, the recovery had been insignificant.

With a quiet click of his tongue, Damon pulled out a mana crystal he had taken from Aetherus. He crushed it in his palm, instinctively trying to draw the mana into himself.

The energy vanished.

It was ripped away before it could even brush against his heart, seized by the world itself and denied to him outright.

Damon froze for a moment, then let out a slow, controlled breath through his nose. The amount of mana he recovered was laughable, barely enough to register at least by his standards.

As soon as the creature finished devouring the last fragments of its shell, it turned toward him. Even without eyes or a fixed shape, Damon knew—knew—that it was looking at him. It sat there for a brief second, its body quivering slightly, then began to crawl toward him.

Slowly. Deliberately.

When it reached his feet, it opened its massive maw and snapped forward, trying to bite down.

Damon didn't move.

"If you bite me, I'll make sure you regret it."

His voice was calm, cold, utterly devoid of emotion. Even this newly formed thing, this blob forged into his shadow, understood the meaning behind those words.

It froze.

The maw remained open, trembling slightly, but it did not close.

It did not want to mess around and find out.

Damon bent down and picked it up with both hands. Its body felt dense despite its size, faintly warm, and as he turned it slightly, he noticed thin strands of black fur beginning to form along its surface. The sight made him pause.

Cute.

That was new.

This was the first time a shadow had even considered trying to eat him.

Matia didn't count, she had been his friend before her death. Ghost had been an enemy before becoming a shadow, and even then, obedience had come naturally.

This one was different.

Damon lifted it closer to his face, studying it as it wriggled weakly in his grip.

"You are quite interesting," he muttered. "Hmm... I wonder what I should call you."

The danger the creature posed didn't concern him. If he couldn't control it, he would simply devour it.

He glanced at it again as it opened its mouth wide, stretching as if yawning.

"Maw..." Damon said slowly. "Yes."

He nodded once. "Maw is your name. A real glutton."

As soon as the name left his lips, Lazarak wiped the blood from beneath his nose and walked toward him, his steps uneven but steady.

"Now comes the next part," Lazarak said. "Feeding this thing to maturity. Then getting it to birth minions."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Right.

What was this thing, really?

Now he could finally know. When he had asked Lazarak before, the god had mentioned that four of them had once entered the world and nearly destroyed it. Only this one remained.

Damon opened his system panel and glanced at the shadow tab. A new addition was visible.

He hesitated.

Instead of opening it immediately, his gaze shifted, and he opened Matia's tab instead.

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[Shadow: Ruined Fairy]

"A fallen fairy's final grace now walks behind you, silent and bound."

Once a beautiful fairy of a frozen land, now a powerful shadow.

[Rank: Three]

[Class: Dancing Fairy]

"Oh, little fairy, dance upon the strings. Sway to the whims of your master, a fleeting waltz between beauty and death."

Skill – [Lethal Grace]

Your movements are fluid and deadly, turning every attack into a flawless dance of death.

[Class: Dark Fairy]

"You rise in darkness."

Skill – [Wings of Ruin]

Your blade freezes wounds, making them slow to heal. Each strike leaves an icy scar that saps vitality, hindering recovery and spreading a chilling curse. The more you dance, the deeper the frost sinks, making each injury a lasting mark of your deadly elegance.

[Ruined Fairy]

There is beauty in ruin. Share this beauty with the world.

[Ruin's End]

Rarely does one receive three blessings in succession. A certain god watched her dance in the darkness and bestowed a boon.

From the wings you gained from your lost kin, a chilling winter spreads around you. All shall fall to Ruin's End.

[Minions: 1]

[Soul Bound Armament]

[Armor of Shattered Ice]

[Description]

This armor carries a faint aura of home, invoking melancholy in a god who can never return. Still, home waits, loyal in its yearning.

The bearer of this armor holds the same unyielding loyalty, even if it is unrewarded.

[Enchantments]

Frost Arsenal – Generates ethereal weapons of soul-infused ice at will, freezing flesh and soul.

Mimic Slash – Copies enemy weapon techniques after observing them once.

Frozen Timestep – Slows perception of time when switching weapons or after landing a critical hit.

Flake of Cold Eternity – Summons a frozen double to fight alongside her briefly.

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Matia was still a menace even now that she had regained her personality. Damon's gaze drifted to the corner of the chamber, where the female knight stood motionless in the shadows, posture rigid, presence cold.

'I get that she looks cool and all,' he thought, irritation flickering through him, 'but the least she could do is have a conversation every now and again.'

He grimaced.

'We have chairs here, damn it.'

Still, he let it go. As an aura farmer, he knew it would be rude to disturb someone's aura.

With that aside, Damon turned to the second tab.

His second shadow.

This panel was different from Matia's.

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[Shadow: Maw]

All demons obsess over the abyss. The true demon kings are no different. I just want my silence.

Race: Vor'Thal (Growth Variant)

Classification: Hive Entity – Abyssal Devourer

Rank: Unclassified (Extinction-Class Potential)

State: Larval / Bound

[Description]

A remnant of an almost extinct extra-cosmic species created by a certain True Demon King for the purpose of consuming the Abyss itself. The great demons long for the abyss, but the abyss longs for silence.

Vor'Thal is a self-evolving predatory race entity designed to consume, analyze, and adapt to all forms of existence. That true demon longed for the mysteries of the abyss. His creations failed and became part of the countless horrors within it.

[Abilities]

[Negation]

The devour race's extinction-class design grants resistance to conceptual and divine laws affecting its base nature.

[Vor'Thal is protected by the authority of the Demon King ***** REDACTED. Maw is now protected by the authority of an unknown god.]

[Skills]

[Abyssal Consumption]

Devours matter, energy, mana, shadow, and conceptual residue to fuel growth and evolution.

[Adaptive Evolution]

Instantly develops biological, metaphysical, or conceptual traits in response to sustained stimuli or threats designed on its Feeding habits.

[Hive Genesis] (Sealed)

Capable of producing subordinate organisms once sufficient mass and authority are achieved.

[Extinction Directive] (Suppressed)

Original prime directive to consume reality overwritten by shadow binding.

[Shadow Subordination]

Absolute loyalty enforced. Vor'Thal cannot act against its creator's will.

Rank Limit

Extinction Rank

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It had been a long time since Damon had seen a system panel that interested him this much.

More than anything else, his attention locked onto a single word.

Extinction.

He had never heard of a rank beyond the original nine of his world. He knew higher ranks existed, but never their names.

"What's... the extinction rank?" Damon asked.

Lazarak, who had been watching him stare at nothing, narrowed his eyes.

"Extinction rank," he repeated. "That's not a rank I recognize. Probably one of the nine transcendent ranks."

Damon's eyes flickered.

"Nine transcendent ranks?"

Lazarak sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Something I learned from my brother. All ranks are divided into two groups, the nine mortal ranks and the nine transcendent ones."

Damon silently counted them. The first through seventh class advancements. The hidden thresholds beyond.

His gaze dropped to the small blob wriggling in his hand.

"This little blob has the potential to reach extinction rank."

Lazarak inhaled deeply.

"Then this thing is the most dangerous existence in the world," he said quietly, "on potential alone."

He paused, realization dawning. "You know what it actually is."

Damon nodded slowly. "A race created by a certain True Demon King. They were designed to eat even reality itself, meant to consume the abyss. They failed."

He dropped Maw onto the ground, watching it wobble and roll aimlessly.

"This race is called Vor'Thal. Abyss Devourers."

He glanced down at it.

"I'm calling this one Maw. And like I expected, it's completely useless for now."

Lazarak crossed his arms as Maw slowly rolled toward him, its maw opening wide, clearly eager to eat him.

"Yes," Lazarak said dryly. "So we feed it."

Damon nodded. "It has abilities, but all the useful ones are sealed."

Lazarak bent down and picked Maw up just before it lunged, holding it at arm's length.

"Hmmm. I'd love to experiment with it," he said. "Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

Damon rolled his eyes. "Fine. I need to find a way to recover my mana anyway. I'll head to the inner city and track down my friends. We'll stay in touch through the brands."

He stood and walked toward the shadows as Lazarak playfully shifted his hands, keeping them out of Maw's snapping reach.

Damon stopped and turned his head.

"Maw. Obey Lazarak while I'm gone. And I forbid you from eating any ally."

Maw froze, its mouth hanging open.

Lazarak slowly placed his hand inside its maw.

Despite its frantic attempts to bite down, its body refused to obey.

Chapter 842: A Hopefully Ideal

The chained district was the next part of the city, but living here was expensive. You had to pay just to exist. That was, of course, if you were not a native.

Reaching it was the easy part. Damon merely paid a sum of five rank three mana cores at the gate. This section of the city was cleaner, more organized, and far more densely populated.

Tall houses rose on both sides of the streets, their large windows polished and intact. Chained Knights patrolled in full armor, their steps measured and synchronized. Civilians in armor moved between stalls and workshops, and the labor market here was bustling with activity. Beneath it all, Damon caught the faint but unmistakable scent of blood lingering in the air.

He let his shadow perception spread wider. Thin streams of people flowed in a single direction, their movements purposeful, converging toward what looked like a gladiatorial arena.

Taking a step forward, Damon dissolved into shadow and reappeared beneath a lamppost near the crowd. His form emerged quietly, clinging to the darkness at its base.

Standing behind the gathered people, he crossed his arms and observed.

He knew the city had a gladiatorial culture. There were places to train gladiators even in the Grinding Gate far out in the outer city.

Damon had acquired a map of Yari, and he understood just how massive the city truly was. Even now, he had yet to personally encounter anyone from his original group. Still, he knew he was not the only survivor. Reports had surfaced of demon-like figures appearing within the city. That alone was a good sign. Demonkin did not exist in this era.

He followed the flow of people, paying his way inside with mana cores. Everything here required payment. No wonder most people preferred to remain in the Grinding Gate.

The interior of the coliseum was massive. Segregated seating rose in tiers, reinforced by enormous pillars at each corner holding the structure aloft.

At the center was an open area surrounded by chained Knights wielding gleaming weapons. Damon's gaze lingered there. The presence was heavy.

That area was restricted.

"What the hell are they protecting," he muttered.

"Not what. Who."

Damon turned his head.

Beside him stood a man with fairy wings. A fairy. A brand was burned into the side of his neck. He had a round pot belly, a thin mustache, and a bow slung over his shoulder with a quiver of arrows resting at his hip.

A fairy archer.

The man inclined his head slightly in greeting.

"You seem new here. Just arrived from outside the district, aye."

Damon did not want to show weakness, but he nodded anyway. He crossed his arms tighter across his chest and leaned back slightly.

"Yeah. I came from far, far away."

The man smiled softly, then laughed under his breath.

"I see. Welcome to hell. It's not so bad if you know how to walk through it, or if you have the power that even hell doesn't bother you."

Damon exhaled slowly.

"Even heaven is hell if you are weak. And hell can be heaven if you have power."

"Hahaha. Well said, friend. Well said." The fairy gestured toward the guarded area Damon had been watching. "They have power. That's why they live in heaven even while standing in hell. Those are nobles from the more exclusive part of the city. As you can see, they're protected."

He paused, wings twitching.

"Extra protection today because of the Evangel."

"The what," Damon asked, lifting his head.

The fairy's wings flickered faintly.

"A radiant defender called the Evangel. Like a ray of sunlight, she descends, kills the evils, and vanishes."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

This was the first he had heard of it. And he had spies in this district.

His surprise did not go unnoticed.

"Well, no surprise you haven't heard of her," the fairy continued casually. "She's nothing but a myth. The people here probably made her up. It's not rare for superstition to fill the hearts of the hopeless. Can you believe that, Poppycarp."

He leaned forward slightly, a wistful smile tugging at his lips.

"A savior who brings light, heals the injured, and fights for justice. Justice is for the strong. It's not something given to the weak."

Damon's eyes hardened.

In his mind, he could almost picture a certain golden-haired girl arguing with him about justice, only for him to dismantle her ideals piece by piece.

"Eva," he muttered under his breath.

Surely she would not be that stupid. Did she not understand that if she became too much of a nuisance, she would be hunted down and crushed by Seraph Null himself.

She would not stand a chance against someone at the seventh class advancement.

Damon knew she understood that. Evangeline had been born into nobility, the princess of one of the most powerful houses in the world. Their grandfather was an old monster at the seventh class. In a world where he did not exist to protect them, was she seriously trying to challenge something of that level.

'Where did she learn to be so defiant,' he thought bitterly. The kettle calling the pot black.

He turned back to the fairy, a frown forming, unease creeping into his chest. It had to be her. She had to be alive.

"Where do I find this Evangel?"

The fairy chuckled.

"You want to find the light, Evangel. Hah hah hah. Why do you think so many people came here."

Damon frowned, confusion flashing across his face.

"She's a myth," the fairy continued, "but word is she swore to kill the VIPs here today. And as a keeper of her word, she's supposed to appear."

He glanced around the packed coliseum.

"Everyone wants to see her in person. To know if the rumors are true or just another hopeless hoax."

Damon slowly raised his gaze toward the arena. His senses brushed against hidden arrays, suppression magic, and layered killing formations woven into the structure.

"It's a trap," he muttered.

The fairy nodded, his smile thinning.

"Of course it is. If she comes, she proves herself a hero, a keeper of promises. If she doesn't, the chained Knights continue claiming she was never real. Just a legend. And the people who believed in her begin to doubt."

There was sadness in his voice when he finished speaking.

Damon asked one final question.

"Are you a believer?"

The fairy smiled gently.

"Even hell needs a little light. Even the broken want to be healed."

At that moment, a brilliant ray of light erupted into the coliseum.

The entire arena was illuminated, washed in gold.

An aura Damon recognized instantly surged outward. In the center of the arena stood a woman clad in gleaming armor traced with golden highlights. Its surface reflected light like polished glass.

The ascendant armor known as Duskglass.

And the golden ascendant who wore it.

"Eva."

Chapter 843: Alone

That armor of hers was inherited from Valarie Sunwarden, the last Ascendant of Lysithara. It was a symbol of resilience, of a spirit unbroken even by rot and the cruel passage of time.

Valarie was everything Damon once believed a hero should be. A radiant light. A wise teacher. He had not forgotten her, nor the words she had spoken to him long ago.

Her view on life and hardship had been like the sun itself. Even if the sun went down, it would always rise again.

'Life is a turbulent ocean with small islands of joy. Finding them is part of living.'

Damon bit his lip as he watched Evangeline standing in that armor, carrying those noble ideals on her shoulders.

Valarie would be proud. He knew she would.

But—

"Is she an idiot..."

It was obvious this was a trap. One she was not meant to walk out of alive.

Damon clenched his fist, then relaxed it, then clenched it again. He was low on mana, for the first time in a long while.

His currently available mana was only about twice that of a normal person. He also lacked mana cores and crystals. He had left what little he could spare behind for Lazarak, to feed Maw.

The crowd erupted into cheers the moment she appeared.

Flowers were thrown. Voices cried out her name. People screamed themselves hoarse even as the brands on their bodies burned, punishing them for defiance.

Damon's eyes widened slightly as he watched people cheer through pain. The fairy beside him stood up, wings trembling as he shouted in support.

For a brief moment, Damon was shaken.

This was the idea of a hero.

People loved heroes. They cheered for heroes. They believed in heroes.

This was not the path Damon had ever walked.

Ever since he devoured Ashcroft the Dominator, Damon had not walked the path of a hero. No, even before that. Since he had taken the Crown of Lysithara from Vathren, he had walked the path of a ruler.

Evangeline had found her own path. She had chosen the path of a hero.

Perhaps it had been inevitable that she would walk this painful road.

And heroes always faced great evils.

She was standing before one now.

This trap was not just meant to kill her physically.

It was meant to kill the idea of her.

So Damon did the only thing he could.

He leaned back slightly and watched.

"She better have an escape path..."

He slowly reached into his shadow storage. A staff slid into his hand, and a broken sword drifted into the air beside him, hovering quietly.

At the center of the arena, bathed in soft light, Evangeline turned toward the chained Knights.

Her sword ignited with radiant brilliance.

"Surrender yourself to the authority of the great god Seraph Null," a deep voice boomed from a knight clad in black third-class armor, "and you shall die a merciful death."

Evangeline's face was hidden behind her helm. Her armor had assumed its sovereign mantle form, light refracting along its surface.

"The only god I acknowledge is the Goddess of Doom," she replied evenly. "I bow to no lesser gods."

"Yayyyyyy!"

The crowd erupted again, voices rising in praise.

Damon felt like an outsider in that moment. A stranger watching a world he did not belong to.

He was the only one here who knew her personally.

To them, she was a symbol.

To him, she was just Eva.

The same Eva he had argued with endlessly. The same Eva he loved teasing. The same Eva—

Her sword came down.

Radiant arcs of light tore through the air as she clashed with the knight. Blinding flashes filled the arena as she impaled him, light eviscerating his body from within.

Damon crossed his arms, brow furrowing.

'You're not conserving mana, Eva.'

She exploded forward again, light bursting outward in all directions. Swordlight shredded defenses, and in a breath of brilliance she breached the protected zone. Wards shattered as she cut through them, and with a single swing she cleaved the skull of a fat man wearing a toga, a chain still hanging from his wrist.

She stood over the corpse, breathing heavily, as the crowd roared.

She had come.

She had slain one of the inner branded elite.

"I came," she said coldly. "As promised. I dare."

Her voice was so cold it reminded Damon painfully of himself.

She stood beneath the blazing desert sun, duskglass armor reflecting fire and gold.

Evangeline raised her sword.

"Warriors of Aetherus," she called out, "those who have come into this nightmare with me."

Her voice was strong, but Damon heard the desperation beneath it.

"I call upon you. These people are mortals. They bleed like mortals. They die like mortals. Rise with me. In freedom... or in death."

The crowd cheered.

But no one moved.

Cheering was easier than defiance. And even if they wanted to rise, their brands would not allow it. The atmosphere itself crushed dissent.

The thunder of boots echoed as swarms of chained Knights poured in from all sides.

Killing formations activated. Arrays twisted the air. A barrier slammed shut over the arena.

At the top, a man in light robes stepped forward. His aura was deep, oppressive, unmistakable.

Fourth class advancement.

He walked with a parasol in hand, casual and unhurried. As he advanced, the entire arena fell silent, his presence alone making people tremble.

Damon frowned, unmoving.

"Now this is troublesome..."

Evangeline tightened her grip on her sword as the arrays pressed down on her, layering debuffs over her body. Her resistance held, but not without strain.

She was alone.

And now a monster of the fourth class stood before her.

She glanced upward. The space above was sealed tight.

The crowd of warriors only watched.

She bit her lip, resolve unbroken.

The man smiled.

"Did you truly believe these fools would rebel?" he said softly. "It is not the body that is chained. It is the heart. These people dare not defy. Their fate is obedience."

His aura crushed down harder.

"Surrender and die swiftly," he continued. "Die with the dignity of a hero."

His parasol shifted slightly.

"Yours will be a cautionary tale."

Evangeline inhaled deeply. The fire in her eyes did not waver.

Then, from the crowd, a figure clad in dark armor raised his hand lazily.

"Scuse me," he said, voice carrying easily. "The entertainment here is top-notch. Can I get a snack?"

Evangeline's eyes widened.

She knew that voice.

Her head snapped toward the crowd.

A man stood there in dark armor, a halo-like crown resting above his helm as he gazed at her.

"Hmm. No snacks," he continued thoughtfully. "Bummer. Guess I'll have to kill you all."

She smiled beneath her helm.

"Damon," she muttered.

Chapter 844: Reunion

It was a familiar arrogance. Honestly, he had always been that way. She could not remember a single day when Damon Grey had been humble. That particular virtue had always been lost on him.

He always had been, and always would be, defiant.

Evangeline had never truly known what drove him. She dared not claim she understood even now. Perhaps even Damon himself did not have a clear answer. It was simply his way of life.

But she could say one thing with certainty.

She understood him.

She understood him, and that was why she smiled.

They were in a terrible situation. Surrounded, outnumbered and trapped. And yet Damon remained casually arrogant, disturbingly unchanged. His attitude was exactly the same as it had always been.

She did not want him to change.

This was Damon Grey after all.

Why would he fear overwhelming odds. Why would he bow when the world pressed down on him. Submission had never been a language he spoke.

The crowd watched as Damon casually walked forward, staff resting in one hand. His gait was unhurried, confident, as if the small army of chained knights and the fourth class presence meant nothing to him. The man was likely a Warden from the Black Tower.

Yet Damon did not seem to care in the slightest.

The Warden smiled beneath his parasol.

"So you have come to die with this so called hero."

Damon shook his head and glanced toward Evangeline, a smile hidden beneath his helm.

"No, not really. Honestly, I keep telling her the whole justice ideal is shit, but oh well. She never listens."

Evangeline wanted to roll her eyes.

Damon was not finished. He was probably wearing that cold, amused smile he always did. She knew he disliked her ideals. They had argued over philosophy more times than she could count.

Damon chuckled softly.

"If I can't change her, then I'll just change the world."

Evangeline blinked.

He could not change her, so he would change the world.

"Hah. Hahaha."

The Warden laughed loudly. The desert wind carried dust around him as he wiped a trail of tears from the corner of his eye. He found the entire situation amusing.

"I did not realize you rabble had learned to joke."

Damon shrugged and laughed as well.

"Laugh. It is funny. You are not the first person to laugh at my words. Most of them shut their mouths later. Or died. You will be joining them soon."

The Warden stopped smiling.

His expression turned cold.

"Kill them."

The sound of footsteps thundered across the arena as hundreds of chained knights charged forward, shaking the ground beneath them.

Damon glanced at his free hand.

"One thing I missed about having a body is..."

He raised his hand.

Black flames erupted from the ground in towering pillars. Screams tore through the air as the chained knights experienced the flames born from despair and passion of the elves for the first time in their lives. Flames born from the dark spirit Rashi Ignath.

"How easily I can take lives."

The air filled with burning flesh and drifting ash. Screams faded into choking silence as the flames devoured everything in their path.

There was a brief stillness after the destruction.

Even without his full mana reserves, Damon still possessed shadow energy. It would have to suffice.

Evangeline smiled.

Radiant light burst from her body, spreading outward in all directions. She surged forward, but not toward the remaining knights. She moved toward Damon.

The Warden remained calm, parasol resting on his shoulder. The crowd cheered for Evangeline, but still no one dared to move.

It was evident now.

The crowd was the real villain.

Not because they were evil.

But because they were weak.

Weakness was a sin. The original sin.

They believed, yet chose not to act. The crowd was a whole, but also individuals, and those individuals were weak in both heart and body.

They cheered while being punished because it cost them nothing.

They loved her while letting her die.

They wanted salvation without cost.

That was not something Damon hated anymore. He was not childish enough for that. Perhaps once he would have been resentful. Not now.

That was the thing about justice.

People loved to cheer for it. In the face of injustice, they were vocal, but they took no action. Because it did not affect them.

It was easy to critique. Hard to act. That was why evil often went unpunished because good meaning people were weak and complicit.

How could Damon believe in justice when strength alone could enforce or silence it.

Justice, after all, was an ideal of the strong.

Radiant light reflected in his eyes.

Unwavering. Unshaken.

She did not doubt. She did not waver. She was not afraid.

She had come carrying her ideals in her heart.

Evangeline's justice was backed by her strength.

Damon was blinded by its beauty.

'You've come a long way, Eva.'

She stood before him, armor slick with blood. Even amid chaos and death, she seemed to be smiling at him.

Damon chuckled softly, black flames burning around him as her light shone amid his dark embers.

For a moment, it felt like the world had stopped.

Two hearts. Two kin. United in an ancient world.

Evangeline reached him, arms wide.

Time seemed to slow.

Her hand curled into a fist.

Then she punched him as hard as she could.

Damon's head snapped to the side, reflexively retaliating with a punch of his own.

Her head jerked back.

The sudden exchange confused even the charging knights. Were they allies. Enemies.

Evangeline smiled beneath her helm.

"You damn crazy bastard. I was looking everywhere for you. I thought you were dead."

Her voice was cold, equal parts relief and irritation.

"What the hell. Is that how you greet me. Most people hug, you know."

She spat blood to the side.

"What kind of scum hits a woman."

"The kind that knows his rights," Damon shot back. "I respect women too much not to retaliate."

The Warden stared, bewildered.

A knight leaned toward him.

"Sir, should we attack or..."

The Warden sighed, irritation seeping into his expression.

"How dare you ignore me."

Damon glanced at him half-heartedly.

"Is this clown still here. I swear you attract the worst type of men."

Evangeline pouted slightly.

"No I don't."

Chapter 845: Shamed

As a Warden, he was an object of fear among the prisoners of the city. He had been granted divine authority by the great god Seraph Null himself. His word was law. His presence alone was punishment.

Never in his life had anyone looked down on him.

His strength rested at the fourth class advancement. He was a calamity wearing human flesh.

So why did this man dare to insult him?

It was both insane and audacious.

At first it had been amusing. A stray insect buzzing too loudly. But now that amusement curdled into something darker. He wanted this man to suffer before he died.

How else would he reclaim his dignity as a higher being, a chosen by the great god Seraph null.

He raised his hand, a cold smile forming as he activated the brand. He could already imagine Damon collapsing to the ground, screaming as divine authority crushed his nerves.

"Kneel before me," he commanded calmly, his voice even with arrogance as if he was regarding an insect.

Nothing happened.

Damon did not move. He only watched, eyes calm, almost curious, as if observing a child throwing a tantrum.

He tilted his head slightly, there was a mocking edge in his tone.

"Was something supposed to happen?"

The Warden's eyes narrowed. His question was humiliating.

"You... how dare you remove your brand."

Damon blinked once, genuinely confused.

"Are you asking why we would want to remove an instrument of control over our lives," he said casually.
"You aren't very bright, are you?"

Again he was insulted.

The arrogance in his voice made the Warden's expression tighten. His aura flared outward, crushing the air and making it heavy enough to suffocate.

Damon raised his head, unfazed. This level of aura couldn't do anything to him, even if his opponent was in the fourth class advancement.

"Your brands are not absolute. There are many ways to overcome them."

His words echoed through the arena.

This was not just defiance. It was a message. To the people he wanted them to witness this moment.

Options existed. Fear was not the only path.

Those who were clever would search for those options. Those who were not would still spread the idea. Either way, the seed was planted.

The rumors would only advance Damon's plans.

His cult would grow.

Of course, this would alert the Wardens, but that no longer mattered. The Archivist would have learned of it within hours regardless.

"Die, ingrate."

The Warden snapped his parasol shut.

The air exploded.

Blades of compressed wind tore outward in every direction, sweeping across the arena in a chaotic storm. Flesh was shredded. Bodies were flung apart. Blood painted the stands as screams were swallowed by the roaring gale.

Damon's eyes sharpened.

He grabbed Evangeline with one arm, pulling her close as she planted her sword into the ground. Radiant light surged from her armor as she braced herself, blocking the slicing wind.

Her gaze was cold and focused.

That was the power of a fourth class advancement. Casual destruction. Wind alone, yet shaped into a slaughter.

"I see," Damon muttered, voice nearly drowned by the storm. "No wonder they claim divine authority."

This Warden was strong. Near the peak of the fourth class. Damon could kill him, but it would take time. Time he did not have. More Wardens would arrive. Perhaps even Seraph Null himself.

The dust formed a violent maelstrom, but Damon could still see the Warden standing calmly at its center, parasol in hand, staring at them with disdain.

Damon sneered.

"That only works on weaklings."

He slid his hand to Evangeline's waist and shouted into her ear.

"Eva, let go. We have to get out of here."

She did not argue. She already understood.

She yanked her sword from the earth, and together they let the wind seize them, hurling their bodies upward as the storm carried them hundreds of meters into the air.

The Warden glared up at them.

"Do you really think you can escape?"

He shifted his parasol slightly.

The wind changed.

Blades began rotating in opposite directions, the air grinding in on itself. It felt like being trapped inside a colossal butcher's mill.

Damon's danger sense screamed. His hair stood on end as he pulled Evangeline closer, teeth clenched.

'No way.'

This was a domain.

Not a completed one, but the beginning of it. An idea given form.

He knew the feeling. He had experienced the Mirror Seraph's domain before.

This one was crude, unfinished, but still terrifying.

Damon met the Warden's gaze through the swirling brown wind.

His voice was cold.

"Don't you know. Fire goes great with wind."

He raised his staff.

The Staff of Carnage ignited.

A massive explosion of black flames erupted at the heart of the tornado. Shockwaves tore outward, destabilizing the storm as fire consumed the wind itself. The tornado fractured, scattering burning bodies across rooftops, streets, shops, and alleys.

Barriers shattered. Wards collapsed.

The colosseum cracked open.

The storm transformed into a fire tornado, black flames screaming as they devoured everything inside. The wind howled, drowning out the cries of the dying.

The Warden halted the storm.

Charred remains of chained knights littered the ground.

He had killed his own men.

Not by choice, but because that wretch had twisted his attack against him.

His fists trembled.

Rage. Humiliation.

He had been insulted. Overpowered. Escaped.

By someone a whole rank below him.

His hands shook as he stared at the destruction. Even his own body bore burns. Even he had been touched.

"Find them," he snarled. "Find them now. I want them dead."

Orders rang out as the once pristine Warden stood scorched and disgraced within the trap he had built.

He glanced upward, biting his lip.

The barrier was gone.

Broken by his own power and that man's flames.

"Aaaah."

With a scream of fury, he launched himself into the sky, racing toward the direction they had fallen.

He would find them.

He would kill them.

Chapter 846: Collateral Damage

Damon landed on a roof, the force of his impact shattering tiles and wooden supports alike, the structure screaming under his weight as it finally gave way. The roof collapsed inward, dragging both him and Evangeline straight down into the house below.

They crashed through the ceiling in a cloud of splintered wood and stone. Dust and rubble covered them completely as the floor buckled beneath their fall. Damon rolled as he hit, absorbing the impact through instinct alone.

He shook the debris off his shoulders, pushed himself up through the settling dust, and immediately reached for Evangeline, gripping her hand firmly.

Without hesitation, he dragged her forward and vaulted through the wide window at the far end of the room, glass exploding outward as they plunged from the top floor into the alley below.

They landed with a dull, bone-jarring thud.

Damon didn't pause. He pushed forward, boots scraping stone as he pulled Evangeline with him, running deeper into the alley as debris continued to rain down behind them.

She wrenched her hand back, stumbling a step.

"Why are we running, we can take them."

Damon twisted around mid-stride, staring at her like she'd lost all sense, his eyes sharp and incredulous.

"Huh, take them? Maybe you forgot, Eva... I just saved your ass."

She bit her lip hard, frustration and doubt flickering across her face.

"You could have killed him."

Damon shrugged, his expression flat even as he scanned their surroundings.

"Yes... and then what?"

He closed his eyes briefly as a faint buzzing vibration rolled through the air, low and constant, felt more than heard. His jaw tightened.

They were coming.

"Did you plan your escape?"

Evangeline looked away, her shoulders stiffening beneath her armor.

"I... was going to wing it..."

Damon drew in a slow, controlled breath, forcing calm into his chest before exhaling.

"Okay. Just stay close and try to keep up."

The moment the words left his mouth, the alley ahead and every building lining it was split apart by an invisible blade. Stone and steel were cleaved as if made of paper. Tall buildings caved inward, collapsing with thunderous roars as screams echoed and a wall of dust surged into the air.

Damon ran straight toward the collapsing buildings.

He leapt into a falling window frame as the structure tilted, grabbing onto shattered stone as pillars and support beams crashed down around him. Chunks of masonry tore past his body.

Damon didn't hesitate he knew this was the best path. Visibility was destroyed, chaos absolute. No one would consciously chase prey into falling buildings.

Evangeline followed, dust and rubble slamming against her armor as she twisted and ducked through collapsing gaps, narrowly avoiding beams that shattered just behind her.

Damon jumped onto a fractured ledge and burst through another wall, stone exploding outward just as another massive slash of wind ripped the building apart behind them. Entire sections tore free as crowds screamed below, people scattering as buildings fell around them.

He slid down broken stone and debris, landing hard before vaulting into another alley as knights shouted behind them, arrows and magic screaming through the air.

Evangeline turned mid-run, launching a ball of magic that detonated among the pursuing knights. She winced as she jumped forward, barely clearing the crushed corpse of a child pinned beneath rubble. Her jaw clenched, her expression grim beneath her helm.

Damon didn't stop.

He didn't slow.

He didn't let himself feel anything.

He had no reason to feel guilt, he was not the one killing them.

His gaze lifted toward the sky, locking onto the warden floating above, parasol held loosely in one hand.

The warden glared down at him, face twisted with fury, then screamed.

"I can see you. Surrender, and I will give you a merciful death."

The hatred and humiliation in his voice were unmistakable. Damon merely glared back, then raised his hand and waved mockingly.

The gesture snapped something in the man.

The warden's eyes twisted as he thrust his hand downward. Pillars of wind erupted from the streets. Tornadoes formed as buildings were ripped from their foundations, homes, labor camps, everything in their path lifted screaming into the air.

Damon grabbed Evangeline's hand as she slowed, reaching toward a woman buried beneath rubble.

He yanked her back violently.

"Come on, we have to keep moving. If you stay there she'll get caught in the attack."

The wind expanded outward, then compressed.

The woman's body exploded with the rubble, blood spraying across Evangeline's faceplate.

Her eyes went cold.

The warden's arrogant voice echoed through the destruction.

"Die you insects."

"These people have no regard even for the love of their own people." she muttered.

Damon knew how she felt. But it had been her choice to come here without a plan. She hadn't killed them, but she could still be said to be the cause.

Evangeline knew that too.

He glanced around at the devastation, the screams, the bodies.

'He's done enough damage. Time for me to get out of here.'

"Eva, do they know your face?"

She shook her head, helm still hiding her features.

"No. I'm not stupid."

He nodded once.

"Good."

Turning his head, Damon raised his hand and poured what little mana he had left into his spell.

Swords, black as shadow, appeared in the air.

They screamed forward toward the warden at terrifying speed, sonic booms ripping through the sky in their wake.

The warden raised his hand and formed a wind barrier with a third-class skill. The swords detonated on impact, explosions ripping through the air, shattering visibility and blasting him backward several meters.

When he regained control and looked again—

They were gone.

His gaze constricted coldly. The district lay in ruins, people fleeing in every direction. His men on the ground saw nothing.

He would have tracked them easily—

If they had brands.

With a furious scream, he hurled compressed spheres of wind into the streets, homes lifting and crashing down chaotically.

Damon's dark hair whipped violently in the storm. He thought they had been discovered but he didn't look up. Acting like a terrified civilian, he fell with Evangeline in his arms.

They rolled deliberately, then stayed still for several minutes as if stunned by the destruction. Damon pressed her down, shielding her as her armor shifted, its awakened shell dimming and disguising itself beneath torn brown fabric he had picked up along the way.

She glared up at him.

"How long are you going to stay on top of me?"

Damon sneered quietly.

"I'm the one who feels violated."

Sensing the coast was clear, he pulled her up and merged them into a stream of fleeing people, all flowing toward a direction that seemed safe.

Damon spread his shadow perception, frowning as he sensed the cause of the delay.

A blockade.

Chained Knights stood ahead, checking brands. Anyone even slightly suspicious was cut down where they stood.

He pulled Evangeline close, arm draped protectively over her shoulders, playing the part of a frightened couple.

"Do you have a brand?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head.

"I'd never get that abhorrent thing on my person."

The moment she whispered it, Damon reached into his shadow storage and pulled out a branding seal. Her eyes widened.

"You... you stole a branding seal."

Damon smiled coldly.

"Not quite."

He pulled her wrist closer and pressed the seal down, dark light flickering briefly.

"This is a Damon original. I just need you to show them this."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You falsified a brand. What have you been up to all this time?"

Damon leaned closer, whispering.

"Nothing much. Just imprisoned in Eidolon."

Her eyes widened—

He pinched her arm sharply.

Silence.

They were surrounded by sweating, terrified people as they approached the checkpoint. Those with chains were waved through. Those without—

Blood soaked the ground.

"Names and brands."

Before Damon could speak, Evangeline stepped forward.

"Angel. And this is my husband, Damon."

She raised her wrist, her voice trembling just enough.

Damon's eyes flickered. He remained silent.

The chained knight sensed something off and released a pulse of aura. Evangeline reacted a fraction too slow, Damon yanked her back, forcing them both to stumble and cower.

The knights laughed loudly.

"Hahaha..."

Damon pulled her forward to keep moving—

"Wait. A minute."

Damon froze.

If they were discovered, he'd have to kill them all and that would bring the warden back.

The knight turned.

"If you're really husband and wife... prove it."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

'Prove it... how?'

Evangeline didn't hesitate. She turned and kissed him.

Damon froze for a heartbeat, then kissed her back.

The knight frowned, suspicion draining from his gaze.

"Tsk."

He waved them through.

Evangeline exhaled shakily as Damon pulled her along, her face faintly red. Damon's face remained calm, unreadable.

Soon they left the chaos behind.

They passed through a narrow road. Damon released her hand and pushed open a tavern door. He walked straight to the bar and met the tavern keeper's gaze.

"Ahhh, it's such a hot day today."

The keeper set a cup down, but Damon flipped it upside down.

"I'll have something hot now... and something cool for later."

The keeper lowered his jug.

"Welcome, patron," he whispered, sliding a key across the counter.

Damon took it and stood. Evangeline followed, still trying to process everything.

They slipped through the back door.

Minutes later, they entered an ordinary residence.

Damon slammed the door shut.

Evangeline turned and threw herself into his arms, hugging him tightly.

"I'm so happy you're alive."

Damon wrapped his arms around her, holding her firmly.

"Yeah... me too..."

Chapter 847: Casual Revelation

Evangeline looked out the window with a bleak expression. A small part of the city lay in ruin, jagged and broken, yet even now she could see people moving through the streets, gathering debris, helping one another, continuing on with life.

Life was resilient that way.

This was, after all, a universe created by the Goddess of Doom. The Mother of the Circle of Inevitability was almost cruel in her indifference. She did not weep for destruction, nor did she celebrate survival.

But those born of war were strong.

That was why, despite the deaths, the people simply went on living. They did not have the luxury of stopping. Those who stood still because of death would never be able to truly live.

Evangeline clenched her fist.

The power of a fourth-class advancement... it was even greater than the third class. How casually the warden had lifted and ruined entire buildings. How effortlessly cities could be scarred.

This was power capable of moving mountains.

Evangeline could achieve a similar level of destruction, but it would never be so easy or so casual for her. Every strike would demand focus, sacrifice, control.

But did she even want that?

No.

She did not want to unleash such ruin on civilians, on people who never chose to fight.

She had once thought her third-class Sunwarden had shown her everything she needed to know, but now she realized she still lacked answers. Too many of them.

For now, all she could do was survive.

Because she still was not powerful enough to change the world.

She was still a child of today, far from a legend of tomorrow.

Her gaze shifted inward, toward the dim corner of the house. Damon sat there on a woven mat, legs crossed, back straight, his posture unnervingly calm. Shadows clung to him naturally, as if they recognized him as their own.

Why was she so different from him?

She bit down on her lip, frustration stirring in her chest. Why did everything seem so easy for him, like he could shoulder the world without effort, like even failure wouldn't matter?

She shook her head.

She of all people knew that wasn't true.

Damon had it the hardest. He always had. And he beat himself up more than anyone else ever could. Still, she couldn't help comparing them.

Comparison kills.

Yet people only compare themselves to those close to their level, to those they consider equals. It was a subconscious habit, one everyone shared.

Evangeline's gaze stayed fixed on him, sitting there with his eyes closed.

Damon's brows furrowed slightly.

"If you're thinking about the kiss from earlier, it meant nothing to me, so don't beat yourself up over it."

His casual arrogance instantly annoyed her.

"I wasn't thinking about that. Besides, I'm not a child. It was just a kiss."

Damon opened one eye and smirked.

"Really? Then why was your face so red?" He chuckled softly. "I can't believe you used the chained knights as an excuse to steal a kiss from me. I'm going to tell everyone about this."

A low vibrating hum filled the room.

Evangeline's fingers formed a beam of light, its radiant surface flooding the space with golden illumination.

"We take this to our graves," she threatened, light pointed directly at him.

One wrong word, and she really would blast him.

Damon smiled, eyes still closed.

"Did you lose weight, Eva? I mean, you look a heck of a lot different."

She glanced down at herself, briefly confused.

"No... I don't think so."

Damon opened his eyes fully.

"Oh. Guess it was just my imagination. Could've sworn your breasts shrank."

Bang.

Light exploded, searing the wall behind him, stone blackening and cracking from the impact.

"You really want to die?"

Damon chuckled, waving his hand dismissively as if nothing had happened.

"Relax. I've got food here. We'll get you back in top shape."

He placed a hand over his chest theatrically.

"I wouldn't want our old grandfather thinking I wasn't looking out for you."

Evangeline lowered her hand—then froze.

Her eyes widened. Her breath caught. She snapped her head toward him so fast her hair shifted with the movement.

"Huh... what did you just say?"

Damon raised an eyebrow, confused.

"What? I said you weren't eating well."

She shook her head sharply.

"No. No, after that. What you said about looking out for me."

Damon blinked, expression unchanged.

"I said I wouldn't want our grandfather thinking I didn't look out for you, dumbass."

Her hands began to shake.

Not because of the insult.

Because he said our grandfather.

Not your grandfather.

Her voice came out tight.

"You... you know."

Damon stretched, rolling his shoulders as if easing old tension.

"Know what?"

She gritted her teeth and grabbed his collar, fingers clutching the fabric of his awakened shell armor.

"That... we... are... you know..."

Damon glanced down at her hand, then lightly tapped it.

"Spit it out. Why are you acting mysterious?"

Evangeline bit her lip in frustration. This was a huge deal in her family. A secret so deeply buried even she hadn't been told outright. She'd had to piece it together herself.

She sat down in front of him, golden eyes locked onto his face as cold desert night air drifted through the room.

"That we are related... by blood."

Damon narrowed his eyes, shock flashing across his face.

"We... are related by blood?" His voice stumbled. "I—I... we... how... I can't believe—b-but I'm a commoner..."

Evangeline's confusion deepened.

Wait.

None of this made sense.

Did he really not know?

Or—

"Hahaha!"

Damon suddenly burst out laughing.

"You should've seen your face. Of course we're related. I already figured it out."

He crossed his arms, wearing a cool, infuriating smile.

"It's basically an open secret at this point. Anyone who matters in Valtheron already knows. At least some of them." He ticked them off casually. "The Astranovas. Seras Blade. The Emperor. Oh—and you."

He leaned back slightly.

"You're really cute when you're flustered, you know that?"

Evangeline felt her heart lighten, as if a heavy weight had finally been lifted.

Of course.

If she had figured it out, then Damon definitely would have.

She stepped forward and hugged him tightly.

"Right... what did I expect? You'd already know."

She pulled back, then frowned.

"Then why didn't you say anything? Grandfather and my father would've welcomed you and Luna back home."

Damon shrugged.

"At first, it wasn't a big deal. Mostly, I didn't trust them." He paused. "But after looking into things related to my mother, I figured they weren't so bad. Especially since she wanted us to find the old man."

He crossed his arms again.

"Later, it became political. I'm the son of a commoner father. That would stain the Grand Duke's name. His only daughter, declared dead, suddenly having a son with a nobody."

Damon smirked.

"That's why they tried to get the two of us married."

He turned to her with a sly grin.

"So... wanna get married?"

She scoffed immediately.

"Screw off."

Chapter 848: Final Rebellion

Evangeline leaned her head against Damon's shoulder. The motion was slow, almost hesitant, as if she were testing whether she was allowed to be this close. A quiet thought crossed her mind whether she should have just said yes, even if he'd only been joking.

She bit her lip, her gaze drifting downward to the hand she was holding. Her fingers tightened slightly, then loosened again. She hesitated.

But she didn't really have a choice.

She knew how her friend Sylvia felt about Damon. The elf girl might look harmless on the surface, all smiles and softness, but Evangeline knew better. Sylvia was sharp, possessive in quiet ways, and deeply invested.

Still... right now, with just the two of them like this, Evangeline didn't quite mind.

"Hey..." she finally spoke, her voice low.

"Hmmm?" Damon answered, eyes still closed, feeling the city slowly drain his mana like a parasite gnawing at his reserves.

"Do you think we'll ever go back home?"

Evangeline voiced the worry for the first time. Maybe because it was Damon, she allowed herself to sound uncertain, allowed herself to sound afraid.

"Why not?" Damon replied casually. "I already have a plan. We just need to kill a god and go home through his fancy magical gate."

Evangeline shifted slightly, her hair slipping loose and brushing against his shoulder.

"But what if we just end up in a past version of our world?" she asked quietly. "What if we never wake from this dream?"

Damon frowned, slowly this time.

"A dream?"

His tone wasn't dismissive, it was inquisitive. Evangeline knew him well enough to hear the difference.

"Yes," she replied. "This is the nightmare of someone called Lazarak. There was a voice when we came here..." She paused, recalling it clearly. "Victory is an endless nightmare, and defeat is the moment of wake."

She rested her chin on his shoulder, not caring that men and women weren't supposed to be this close. It was cold in the city, and this warmth mattered more than rules.

"There's also a reward," she continued. "Those who survive to the very end will be given the boon of a fourth-class advancement."

Damon turned his head toward her, their noses nearly touching now. His frown deepened.

The Nightmare of Lazarak.

He knew that name. He knew where Lazarak was supposed to be. He also remembered the system message, it had said the same thing.

'Victory is an endless nightmare.'

That phrase... it was the work of the Unknown God. The same being who had dragged them here through a nightmare, who had devoured the dungeon gate itself using the nightmare.

Then this could very well be a—

"Nightmare," Damon muttered.

But what he hadn't heard before was the boon. The promise of rising to the fourth class simply by surviving.

Evangeline had a point.

If this wasn't the past, but a dream, artificially constructed, then...

Damon shook his head.

The clues were there. But when dealing with the Unknown God, even a dream could be reality. This was a god who could fold the entire omniverse if he felt like it.

Is that why he came personally?

He had used the body of that priestess from the snake temple, it had to mean something.

Damon stood up abruptly.

The question was simple.

Was this the past?

Or was it a world deliberately designed by a true god?

"You are dreaming the Nightmare of Lazarak," Damon muttered.

"You are..... not Lazarak is..." He stopped himself, brows furrowing. Think. Lazarak in the real world was dead, he had to be. Damon had found the tomb of the lesser gods Lazarak had created. The Goddess wouldn't give him a second chance to disrupt her order.

So Lazarak must have already been destroyed.

Which meant—

The ones dreaming right now... were all of them.

"How do we wake up," Damon murmured, "from a bad dream?"

Evangeline narrowed her eyes. She could see it now, Damon was deep in thought, far deeper than he let on.

"We can't die here," she whispered. "If we do... I have a feeling we truly die."

He nodded slowly.

"Yes. I'm aware of that. The nuance isn't lost on me." He exhaled. "But at the same time... the Unknown God loves riddles. 'Victory is an endless nightmare.'"

He turned to face her fully.

"Does that mean if we win... we never wake up?"

She furrowed her brows.

"But we also can't choose defeat as the moment of waking," she said slowly, "because if we're defeated... we die."

Her hair fluttered softly in the night wind.

"We're trapped in a paradox. If we win, we lose. If we lose, we die." Her voice hardened slightly. "As expected of the god of the demon race. He really is a sinister being."

Damon took a deep breath and shook his head.

"That's true. But for now, we need to find the others, including the demons." His eyes sharpened. "My guess is they're somewhere in the inner city due to their power. We'll need people like Sylvia, Lilith, Renata... and whatever talents the demons bring."

He clenched his fist.

"If this is the Nightmare of Lazarak," he said coldly, "then so be it. Let me see what horror Lazarak faced in the past."

From his tone, Evangeline could tell, he knew something about Lazarak.

"Who even is this Lazarak anyway?" she asked carefully.

"Lazarak is a minor god of darkness, peace, serenity, and repose," Damon replied. "Though he often leaves out the latter."

He continued calmly.

"He is the first entity that existed in Aetherus, and the older brother of Aetherus."

She opened her mouth to ask, but he raised a hand to stop her.

"Yes. Aetherus is actually a person. Or rather... a god. The planet itself. The god of light, life, and war."

He paced slowly as he spoke.

"For a time, everything was in order. War spread across the world, and lesser gods were worshipped on altars of war. Until Lazarak, the god of peace rebelled."

His voice darkened.

"The rebellion failed. Everything changed. Lazarak was imprisoned in this world for thousands of years, buried in the deepest layers of the imaginary prison—Eidolon."

Damon crossed his arms.

"Eventually, I imagine he escaped. He brought an end to the lesser gods. That marked the end of the Zero Epoch. And in doing so, he introduced the Unknown God to this world."

He sighed.

"Faith in the Unknown God only truly began in the First Epoch, thanks to Mugu the Wicked Prophet. The first demon. He planted the seeds of the demon race, which Ashcroft later cultivated into a powerful empire in the Second Epoch, before the Goddess destroyed him."

He paused, finally.

"I imagine we're at the crossroads of history," Damon said quietly. "Watching—or living—the moment Lazarak's final rebellion begins."

His expression softened, tinged with something like sadness.

"The last act of his tale."

Evangeline bit her lip.

"If only we knew where Lazarak was," she murmured. "We could stop him."

Damon lifted an eyebrow.

"Stop him?" he echoed. "Why would we do that?"

Evangeline raised an eyebrow in return.

"You know where he is."

Damon scratched the back of his head.

"Well... we were sort of cellmates in Eidolon."

Evangeline's eyes widened.

Chapter 849: Branded Elite Layer

Damon was full of surprises. He had mentioned earlier that he was imprisoned in Eidolon, but Evangeline hadn't imagined he was trapped in the deepest layers with a literal god.

Did that mean his threat level was equivalent to a being who had destroyed the very foundations of the world.

The thought alone made her chest tighten.

Naturally, she milked him for every ounce of information she could get out of him, questioning him until her voice grew hoarse and his answers turned shorter.

After a while, she simply lay there on the mat next to him, staring up at the dim ceiling.

"So... now what?" she asked quietly, unsure of anything anymore.

Damon didn't feel the cold desert winds as sharply as she did, but he could feel his mana draining slowly. A dull hunger stirred in his stomach, brought on by the oppressive dryness of the land.

"Now we find the others," he said. "I hate this as much as the next guy, but we pretty much have to work together if we want to survive."

Her brows narrowed slightly.

"With demons, you mean."

"If it comes down to it," Damon replied, eyes half-lidded, "so be it."

Evangeline bit her lip.

Was their situation really that desperate?

As far as she knew, Damon hated demons. He despised them. He hated them relentlessly and killed them whenever he crossed paths with them. And now he was openly willing to work with them.

This was the same man who would rather brave the Whispering Forest than let himself be captured by a demon army. A wise decision, considering that army had later been turned to ash by the draconic flames of the great dragon Ashergon.

Even remembering it sent chills down her spine.

"Will they even agree to that," she asked, "not after you defeated the Unknown Ruler... Amon."

Damon's eyes twisted slightly.

Right. Evangeline didn't know he was Amon, but she wasn't wrong. The demons would hesitate to ally with him. And yet, technically speaking, they would. Damon was powerful enough to defeat the demon most suspected to be Ashcroft.

Evangeline silently listed a few pros and cons in her head, but in the end, they weren't getting anywhere.

Damon eventually stood and set up a small meal.

Calling it small was generous.

At least seventeen dishes appeared, steaming and fragrant, and the two of them ate until the hunger finally subsided.

When Evangeline eventually fell asleep, her breathing slow and steady, Damon quietly stood and walked into the other room.

He pulled out a file Lazarak had once made for him.

Without hesitation, he pressed it against his head, where a small demon horn was beginning to grow. Without mercy or consideration for the pain, he began to file it down. His jaw tightened, fingers trembling slightly, but he didn't stop.

When he finished, he returned the file to his shadow storage and lay back down.

This secret of his head could be told to no one.

.....

The next morning, Damon and Evangeline found themselves heading toward the more elite part of the city.

This was the middle tier. The branded elite. The area partially overlapped with the high bastions where the wardens lived.

Damon gritted his teeth as they paid their way in with mana cores.

Evangeline wore a soft white sundress that reached past her knees, allowing her freedom of movement if they were attacked. Damon wore a light black tunic with a sword resting openly at his side, enough to display his warrior nature.

They looked almost like one of the wealthy couples who inhabited this district.

Damon lifted his head slightly, surveying the surroundings.

This layer of the city was better than he had imagined. It wasn't segregated. Branded citizens and chained people lived together. The houses were larger, well kept, and beautiful. The roads were paved, and there wasn't a single beggar in sight.

Evangeline's expression didn't change.

"I've been trying to get in here for a while," she said. "I never managed to save the amount needed."

The amount she meant was seven hundred rank three mana cores.

"That can't be true," Damon replied. "Couldn't you hunt outside the desert?"

She nodded slowly.

"I did. But every time I came into the city with that amount, I ended up giving it away to people who looked like they'd die without any mana. So I never have enough when I reach this place. It's a vicious cycle."

Damon gave her a deadpan expression.

She couldn't be serious.

Her problem was giving her mana cores away.

He paused.

"Hey... it can't be because of what I said before, could it?"

She glanced at him in surprise.

"What. Did you say something."

Damon smiled softly and shook his head.

He had once told her how many people she passed by who were poor and dying without helping them. It seemed that lesson had lodged itself deeper than he intended.

He sighed.

"You're so dumb."

She elbowed him lightly in the side.

"Well, it's a good thing I have you to pay for me, isn't it." She smiled slyly and leaned closer, whispering into his ear. "What's family for?"

Damon scoffed.

"So blood ties are now a reason to scam me. I'll have you know I charge an eighty percent interest rate."

She rolled her eyes.

"Great. I'll take the 'looking after me is now your responsibility' discount. And how about I pay you... nothing."

He winced slightly.

This was on him. He was the one who chose to reveal they were family.

"I've only been in this family for a few hours and I'm already starting to regret it."

"If you're looking for a way out, I'm sorry," she said sweetly. "But you're in till death."

"Sounds like a cult," Damon replied, waving his hand over her head and gently pushing a loose strand of hair back.

She glanced up at him, her golden eyes meeting his, a soft smile forming.

"Ptuiiii." Someone spat nearby. "Get a goddamn room."

A man walked past them with a disgusted expression, his face twisted with jealousy at the sight of the young couple.

"All these goddamn couples showing off everywhere."

Evangeline's face reddened.

"We... we aren't a couple," she tried to call out, but her voice faded as Damon burst into laughter.

She gritted her teeth.

"Come on," she said sharply. "Let's go. We still have to find our friends."

Chapter 850: Elixir Of Pseudo Immortality

The space was white, endless, with pillars rising from a ground too far below to see. A solemn, holy atmosphere weighed heavily on the air, pressing down on all who entered and instilling an unspoken reverence.

At the center of the countless pillars floated a sphere, encircled by golden rings. Within it, a luminous liquid churned slowly, spinning in measured cycles as if obeying an unseen will.

A man walked into the white expanse.

His heart was heavy, though his expression remained calm. A parasol rested in his hand, its handle adorned with a thin chain that jingled softly with each step. The sound echoed faintly, swallowed by the vastness.

He stopped atop a pillar near the center of the chamber, not far from the floating sphere of gold.

The Elixir of Pseudo Immortality.

His gaze lingered on it. He had seen it before, though never without feeling a quiet dread.

It was said the elixir had been refined by the god Aetherus himself, distilled from the blood of all the lesser gods. Those who drank it gained a form of pseudo immortality.

But greed had followed its creation. Even the lesser gods had coveted it, and so it was entrusted to Seraph Null. It was ordered to be guarded here, alongside the blasphemous god Lazarak, who was imprisoned in the deepest layers of Eidolon, never to see the light of day.

Half of the elixir had already been consumed by Aetherus.

If the god lived, so too did the world. Any means to keep him alive were justified, even layering immortality upon an already timeless being.

Yet were minor world gods truly immortal.

Even planets died. Stars endured for billions of years, yet they too eventually faded.

The elixir did not extend lifespan. It granted the state of being virtually unkillable.

'If so, then why is it called pseudo immortality.'

The answer was obvious.

Even this creation of Aetherus, the god of life, was imperfect.

The moment the thought surfaced, he stiffened. Blasphemy. His chest tightened as he shut his eyes and whispered a prayer for forgiveness.

He was already wrong. He was already here to be punished. Yet he had still dared to think such thoughts.

With a soft thud, he dropped to his knees upon the pillar.

Before him sat the Apostles. Wardens like himself. Ones who should have been his equals. He should have been seated among them, elevated, respected.

Instead, he knelt.

"I stand before the Apostles, humbled by my failures," he said, voice steady despite the weight bearing down on him.

"You have failed, Wind."

The cold voice belonged to the Apostle of Fire. Flames licked along his form, restrained but ever present.

"Your actions have insulted all Wardens and besmirched the great name of our lord and master, Seraph Null."

He bit down on his lip. The Apostle of Fire had never liked him. This was his chance to tear him down.

Still, he swallowed his anger.

"I am ashamed."

A wet sound echoed as water pooled and shifted.

The Apostle of Water sneered, her form rippling.

"You are ashamed. You should be. You left this place full of boasts about dealing with that Evangel, yet even with superior numbers and advantage, you were bested by an unknown nobody."

The kneeling man lowered his head, shoulders tensing.

That person was no nobody.

Arrogant, powerful, and able to back it up. Worse still, he had a way of influencing others, bending them without force.

Grains of sand trickled down the pillar where the Apostle of Earth stood. His voice was firm, unmoving.

"Rumors of your loss are spreading. Our grip on the branded weakens. They now know hope. They see that we are flawed."

The words struck deeper than any blade.

He had no excuse. No justification.

That man had slipped through his grasp. If only he had another chance, if only he had been given more time.

"Enough."

The chamber brightened as the Apostle of Light spoke. His form radiated white brilliance, composed entirely of living light.

"Your actions leveled several districts. Thousands were killed, including chained knights we invested heavily in."

The light pulsed, vibrating with restrained authority.

"Times have changed. More and more powerful beings are being imprisoned in our world. Those deemed too dangerous are cast into Eidolon, but those left here still grow in number. Their combined strength now exceeds what our raw might can crush without effort."

The Apostle of Darkness shifted beside him, his voice a low growl.

"They are ants."

"Those ants outnumber us a thousand to one."

Water sloshed outward as the Apostle of Water spoke again, her tone unusually gentle.

"We cannot allow doubt in our supremacy. If we do, we lose our way of life."

The Apostle of Earth leaned back slightly, arms crossed.

"And yet we still have the great god Seraph Null. With him behind us, their numbers mean nothing."

Laughter echoed among the Apostles.

All but one.

The Apostle of Wind remained kneeling.

"What if they have a god of their own."

The laughter died instantly.

"You already know," he continued quietly. "Lazarak is imprisoned here. And we have lost contact with the Arch Archivist."

Silence followed.

"No one can escape Eidolon," the Apostle of Fire said sharply. "It is impossible. Not even the sinful god Lazarak."

The Apostle of Water hesitated, her form rippling.

"We have already sent a scouting unit to investigate Eidolon. Though I doubt they will even be able to enter."

"Then it is a pointless endeavor," the Apostle of Earth said flatly.

The Apostle of Light glowed softly before speaking again.

"There has been unusual movement within the city. Branded citizens are not merely dying. They are disappearing. Most notably within the Grinding Gate."

"Hm. A new movement," said the Apostle of Chains, his body bound in clinking metal. "Defiance will be punished."

"Send in the knights," he continued. "Cull their numbers."

The others nodded in agreement, their expressions unchanging as they silently condemned millions to death.

"For now," the Apostle of Light concluded, "the Archivist will continue investigating."

Finally, their attention returned to the kneeling figure.

"Now," the Apostle of Fire said, flames flaring slightly, "your punishment."