

Shadow 851

Chapter 851: A Wisp

It was not without precedent for the chained knights to act with such tyranny and disregard for the lives of those who were branded, and so, as Damon had predicted,

like some wicked prophet, his words came to pass.

By the dawn and its glorious light, thousands of chained knights were deployed to the Grinding Gate with a simple order: kill until they remember how to fear.

And they did. There were no heroes to save these people and no god to answer their prayers.

Lazarak heard their boots as they trampled the ground above his head. Soon, he heard the screams of women and children, houses getting ripped out of their foundations, rubble burying thousands.

Yet he could not do anything. He was a weak god in strength, and now he knew it in his heart as well.

Weak in heart.

He was complicit. Lazarak had defied the goddess because he hated having to watch the flames of war spread and destroy everything. Peace was always the first thing that war took, then it took lives, homes, dreams, and aspirations.

When it did, he would always fall to his knees before a statue of his creator, the goddess of doom, the mother of inevitability, and beg her to end this misery. But why would the author of such despair bring an end to it?

It was by her will that war spread. It was her hand that drove fate and her power that brought death.

Why would she care... but now, hearing those screams, feeling this helplessness, like many fools he sought a god not because they were kind, but because he, like the mortals, wanted a psychological safety net.

It was what faith was anyway... believing even without justifiable evidence, even in outright proof.

But there was no statue of the goddess here, and even if there was, he had renounced her.

So Lazarak turned to the one place that seemed divine.

There, at the corner of this underground space where they had made their base of operations, Lazarak's gaze fell on a pool of water and its countless whispers.

The Lake of Tears. It was this lake that had been born from his emotions, and its wondrous powers were a mystery even he had not solved.

And so this god walked up to the lake and fell to his knees.

If there was no god to pray to, he would beg the omniverse itself.

So he prayed as the screams echoed above him, as blood dyed the ground, as women were victimized by the cruel acts of man.

Homes were gone, screams were soaked in blood, and while others suffered, others laughed as they dehumanized their victims.

Simply because their leaders had ordered it and they were doing it in the name of god... so a massacre becomes holy, and we forget humanity in the name of god.

Lazarak prayed, but he didn't know what he was asking for. His hands shook, and the more they did, the more his intent traveled through the pond... it was evident even his dark thoughts he kept hidden were pulled out.

After all, an optimist was still a person, and people couldn't always hope for the best.

All his wishes and all his prayers entered the pool and traveled to the metaverse, where all thought and minds existed—past, present, future. All those thoughts formed a single subconscious wish.

"This world is sick... destroy it all..."

All of Lazarak's hopeful prayers of salvation were twisted by his own helplessness and the screams of those who had died with hearts filled with resentment.

This single prayer brushed many entities, from gods to demons, true dragons, mindless Devourers, abyssal horrors, even the dreams of the common man... yet no entity truly wished to bring an end to all things.

This prayer would go unanswered by anyone... perhaps like the countless wishes and aspirations in the metaverse, it would continue to wander, unfound and unanswered. After all, if a drop of water is poured into the ocean, it becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the sea.

Still, in this realm of the mind... something saw this unrealized and subconscious intent, and this deep swirling abyss picked it up.

Perhaps it had only been a moment since Lazarak's wish was twisted, or perhaps it had been countless eons, time losing meaning in the metaverse. What mattered was that Lazarak's wish was found.

The abyss... had a name, but it hated its name. Still, it had to find the source of this wish, because it had something it sought, but more than that, this subconscious mass of darkness wanted to find Lazarak.

And so it created countless little wisps from its body to find the source. Each wisp went its own way. Some of them were destroyed. Some of them gained a will of their own over countless years. Some of them were just empty thoughts. Some of them were beautiful and hopeful dreams. Some were happy emotions. Some of them were fragments of its memories. And some were horrible nightmares.

Among these nightmares was an insignificant wisp. It was so small that it could not even be seen by the naked eye. This wisp gained its own name.

Its name was Ittorath. Like many wisps, it failed to find the source of the wish, and after countless years it grew and left the metaverse and entered the physical world... but Ittorath was a nightmare that carried some of the Unknown God's sentimentality, so it left behind a wisp of itself to find the source of the wish.

And today it did.

As Lazarak prayed with his eyes closed, a small wisp born from the wisp of a nightmare slowly flew out of the Lake of Tears and faded.

As it did, memories of the world entered its head.

Ittorath trembled as he thought in rage.

"Damn ascendants... how dare they seal away my true body..."

He flew away unseen.

"First I need a way out of here... after that... I'll destroy them..."

Chapter 852: Shockwave

Damon did not know what was unleashed, or the fact that a part of Ittorath had snuck in with them into the world, or maybe this was all part of the Unknown God's overarching plan.

The fact of the matter was, his plan had come to fruition.

According to the report Damon received, a total of ten million people had been killed, with a few million more heavily injured. About seven million were homeless, and another sixteen million were internally displaced.

This was a staggering amount of casualties.

Many were dead, and Damon, who was all the way in the inner city, did not see a single corpse. Only a statistical report. All those deaths reduced to numbers on a page.

He didn't see the corpses. He didn't hear their screams or how they begged. He was in his nice home as he received a report.

When he was a boy, he hated nobles, but frankly speaking, he was acting the exact same way they did.

Though Damon saw this as a means to an end. Freedom had to be fought for.

From where he stood, he couldn't even see the ashes and smoke rising in the sky because the city was far too large and this was all the way in the outer region.

But two things had been gained here.

One, the most obvious. The hatred of the people in the Grinding Gate had spread, and with that hatred came a cause for defiance. He had proven to them that any one of them could be the victim.

And with that, hopelessness had spread. When hopelessness spread, people usually sought out hope. They created faiths. They prayed to gods.

To that end, Damon's religion was spreading.

He gave them a choice. An alternative. A vision of freedom from their oppression. A way to fight back.

Right now, Lazarak was gaining followers at an alarming rate throughout the city. Hatred for the chained knights and the god Seraph Null was spreading beneath the currents of all this chaos.

More than that...

Damon smiled, crossing his arms together.

His new shadow maw was eating well.

He had an abundance of corpses left after the slaughter at the Grinding Gate.

Keeping corpses around was a great way to spread sickness and plagues, so the cult Damon had created offered the people help in getting rid of them. Those corpses were fed to Maw, growing the Vor'Thal into a form closer to its adult state.

He took a deep breath.

"If gods are flawed, faith is false, and hope creates monsters... then what remains."

Damon asked himself.

Then the answer was simple. It was obvious.

"It was choice."

It all led back to choice.

If gods were flawed, it was up to man to create his own paradise.

We are made by our choices, and those choices shape our world. We do not need gods to make choices for us.

This was a belief held by the Unknown God.

Choice was.

And if we truly were the ones making the choice, then we could not blame god.

"Damon, what are you waiting for, let's go."

Evangeline's voice came from the door. She didn't know what Damon had been doing, only that he was wasting their time.

"Come on, let's go. We found Leona, right."

Damon nodded slowly and followed Evangeline outside.

She wore a beautiful dress, her golden hair glittering in the sun. She was every bit the noble woman.

Damon seemed a bit absent-minded, so Evangeline nudged him with her elbow.

"What's got you so down."

He lifted his head.

Down? He wasn't.

"Do I look down."

She nodded, a gentle smile on her face.

"You kind of do. I haven't seen you this brooding since our days in the academy."

Damon pinched the bridge of his nose. Those were awkward times.

He sighed.

"Eva... if you had to be put in a position where you could save a million people, but it led to the deaths of a hundred, what would you do?"

She was quiet for a moment.

She shook her head.

"I don't know. People aren't statistics. What makes the lives of a million people more important than the hundred. It's not a sacrifice if you kill a hundred people against their will."

He bit his lip.

"So what do you do then?"

She shook her head.

"Justice is a difficult thing to carry out, and I am just human. I don't know. But I would want to save everyone I can."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Then will you allow death to fall dispassionately on rich and poor alike, unaffected by race or creed."

She shook her head.

"You're talking about genocide."

She looked down at her hand.

"Justice is important to me, but justice without humanity is cruel."

"If I have to give an answer, I would say I am human, and therefore I will make the humane choice."

Damon clenched his fist at her answer.

She had said she would make a choice.

There was always a choice. It was always about choice.

Damon had pondered the concept of choice so many times, hoping that if he did, he would understand the Unknown God's ideals and philosophy. But the more he learned about choice, the more complex it seemed.

Perhaps that was why the Unknown God was so difficult to understand. After all, he was the god of choice.

Evangeline didn't say anything more as they walked to where Leona had been seen, and sure enough, this place definitely belonged to Leona.

There was a sign at the door.

Leona's place. Do not enter unless you want to get a beating.

Damon glanced at Evangeline. She glanced back.

"At least we know it's not a trap."

He knocked slowly. As soon as he did, the door opened with a harsh pull, and someone jumped into his arms.

"I knew it, I knew it. I smelled you... hehehe."

Leona's excited voice echoed as she crushed him in a hug.

Damon hugged her back.

"Yeah, I missed you too, bestie. In fact, I suffered a lot."

He glanced at Evangeline, putting on mock pain.

"I was even sexually harassed by Evangeline in a public place, and the people just watched her take advantage of me."

Leona slapped a hand over her mouth.

"No she didn't. She finally showed her true colors."

Evangeline closed her eyes, barely holding back her anger.

'I'll kill these two...'

Chapter 853: Names And Memories

"Wow, you've been through a lot."

Leona muttered, looking at Damon.

He nodded slowly. Leona sighed, shaking her head.

"No wonder this city suddenly felt more chaotic these past days after you came here."

Damon narrowed his eyes, then rolled them, annoyed.

"What are you insinuating, I'm a troublemaker."

She nodded.

"Yes, yes, you are."

He hugged her, then let go. Still, he was curious about Leona's situation. She was living in a nice house, she seemed to have a lot of furniture, and the smell of good food lingered in the air, which was a good sign. Leona was a bit of a foodie after all.

Though she had a tendency to make other people cook for her.

"So what's your story?" Evangeline asked.

"I mean, you've been here a while, right."

Leona nodded slowly.

"Yeah, I guess I was first dropped off in one of those slave fighting coliseums. Some guys tried to get handsy with me, so I ripped off their arms. I met a familiar face there, so we decided to break free from the slave fighting arena and killed the guy who claimed to own us. It was a whole thing."

Damon nodded. That did sound like Leona.

She crossed her arms, annoyed.

"I mean, I didn't mind being a slave or fighting all day. What I couldn't stand was the fact that those bastards didn't feed us. I was so pissed off I popped the head of that guy."

Her teeth grated audibly.

"After we destroyed the place, the chained knights were sent in to enforce order, so I used rune magic to give them the slip. After that we fell into the pleasure district, and some guy tried to sell us for some meat. After that we destroyed the pleasure district."

She crossed her arms over her chest, her ascendant armor letting out a few sparks as Damon watched with a flat expression.

"After that, we retreated back to the Grinding Gate."

She paused when she said that. Her expression became somber.

"We didn't really know where to go. The women we freed from a life of commercial sex decided to follow us, though they didn't really stop. It was sort of the only life they knew."

She squeezed her cup, lowering her head.

"I really didn't have a plan or anything. I thought if we found you, you'd figure things out like you always did. Leading people is hard. You have to worry about everything, and when someone following you dies, it really hurts and makes you feel so helpless."

Damon reached out and patted her head, rubbing her beastkin ears slightly.

"Don't let it get to you. So what happened next."

Leona nodded, shaking her head slowly.

"When we got to the Grinding Gate, the people there were surprisingly nice to us. They helped us get acclimated, gave us a place to stay, and well, we shared our food with them."

She smiled softly.

"We found a whole community of people who were really nice. They were kind and gave us free stuff."

Damon's expression turned suspicious. As far as he knew, the Grinding Gate didn't have a single good person, much less a helpful one. Yet here Leona was, telling him otherwise.

This reminded him of what Carmen Vale once said to him.

If you look for monsters in people, that's all you'll ever see.

Leona was a pure girl with pure intentions. Perhaps that was why she only attracted the good in others. Even human scum like Damon was moved to kindness by her. That was why she was his best friend. She didn't give him much of a choice.

Leona gritted her teeth.

"Everyone was so kind to us, but now most of them are dead."

She lowered her head.

"Even the children."

Damon raised his head, his expression tightening.

"When did this happen? Did you get attacked?"

Leona shook her head slowly, wiping off a tear.

"No. We moved to the inner city. I thought if we came here we could find you, and we kept searching. But just yesterday the chained knights slaughtered a few million people in the Grinding Gate."

Damon paused, his face still like calm water.

Yesterday.

Wasn't that a part of his plan? He knew the chained knights would do that. It was what he called collateral damage.

She lowered her gaze, dazed.

"Mrs. Slytack and her children, the old greedy butcher, One-Eyed Pete who's always drunk, Grandpa Broker who only likes mana cores. All of them are dead."

Damon took a deep breath as Leona listed off the people who had helped her in the past. He didn't want to hear it.

To him, their deaths were statistics. Cogs in a plan that would inevitably lead to all out war.

This was a necessary evil.

"Leona, I'm sorry about your friends."

Damon reached out and touched her head, slowly stroking her hair.

She sniffed like a child who had found comfort, then began to cry, hugging Damon tightly as she wailed.

He continued stroking her head.

"It's okay. It'll be alright."

In the end, Damon wondered what really bothered him more. Was it the fact that millions had died, or that his friend was hurt by it.

The answer was plain to see.

After the Trial of Sin, Damon didn't need to take guilt that wasn't his. Everyone made their own choices. He didn't kill these people. The chained knights did.

If he had slaughtered them himself, he would gladly accept it as his sin.

If anything, his only crime here was being complicit, and that was the sin of sloth.

"Don't worry, Leona. I promise their deaths will not be in vain. We'll destroy this twisted city together."

She nodded, leaning her head against his chest, crying silently.

Evangeline closed her eyes, looking out through the window without saying anything.

Damon was the best person to get through to Leona. If he couldn't comfort her, no one could.

After a few minutes, Damon wiped her tears and smiled.

"Hey, speaking of that, you said you met a familiar face. Who was it."

Anything to change the topic.

She lifted her head, her ears twitching.

"Oh, it's..."

Bang.

The door slammed open.

Damon didn't turn around. His skin crawled. He knew that gaze.

'I know that shadow.'

He turned around in horror.

"It's you."

Chapter 854: You

Ahhh yes, destiny. It was inevitable. In fact, personally Damon believed the world really loved giving him the middle finger.

In this case, it was quite literal.

He stood up from his chair without turning around. The gaze on him was still as intense as he remembered.

Yes, the first time he felt this gaze was when he had faced the quick claws of death and barely escaped.

He turned around to face her, the living threat to his chastity.

His eyes were deadpan, calm, almost resigned to his fate.

"It's been too long." He spoke calmly, while Evangeline gave him a disgusted look as if she were staring at human garbage.

At the door stood a beautiful woman with copper skin, her midriff bare due to her choice of clothes. She had dark eyes and long dark hair, with two small antlers growing from her head.

A bone blade rested on her back. Her cold eyes never left Damon, who was slowly inching toward the nearest window.

Her lips curled into an annoyed smile.

"I see you."

Damon crossed his arms.

"Wendy. It's been too long."

Of course it was Wendy. Which other woman would look at him like she wanted to eat him alive.

Wendy was the name he had given her. He just hadn't expected her to become a literal person.

For context, Wendy was a monster. She had once been an evil spirit, a wendigo. However, the unknown god wanted to use her for his plan, so he made her into a person, which honestly might have been another way to terrorize Damon.

The fact of the matter was that Damon had killed Wendy's asexually produced offspring back when she was a monster. Killing him was her secondary goal. Her primary goal, all thanks to Waton of Valtheron, was to reproduce with Damon and regain her children.

Damon would have killed her before it got to that point, but she was sort of unkillable due to her unique skill set.

When Evangeline saw her, she gave Damon a disgusted look. She knew.

She shook her head.

"Pervert."

Damon gritted his teeth.

"I'm the victim."

Wendy had been quiet. Then she closed her eyes with a sigh.

"He asked me to kneel and call him daddy."

She spoke clearly, without hesitation.

Evangeline's mouth opened and closed, but she was at a loss for words. She had called him a pervert, but she was just being rude before. She didn't—

"Ahhh... you beast."

Wendy saw what was going on. After so many months around people, she had a full grasp of speech and social norms now. That was why she knew kneeling and calling Damon daddy was not normal.

"He even promised to have babies with me, but not the type to take responsibility."

She had seen enough in the pleasure district. All those big sisters there had told her how men were scum and only wanted one thing. They told her to trap the bastard.

Leona blinked, scratching her head.

"Ohh, Wendy, you're back. And look, I found Damon. Well, he found me, but it's the same."

Her innocent, cute voice made Damon take a deep breath.

"Leona, how could you. I can't believe you set me up. You should have told me the familiar face was Wendy. Ahh, this is a trap. You left that out on purpose. Who taught you to be such a bad girl."

She smiled, sticking out her tongue.

"Heheh, sorry about that. You didn't ask, and I sort of promised Wendy I'd help her."

Wendy slowly approached him, her footsteps light.

"You really thought you could play me forever."

Damon scoffed.

Wait a minute. This was Wendy. He had her eating out of the palm of his hand before. He had this. So what if she became more worldly and gained some experience.

He sighed.

"Well, so be it. You want to mess around with me, fine. But I'll have you know, if I'm not in an emotionally good place, I can't reproduce."

She gave him a deadpan expression.

"That's not how it works. You're not fooling me."

Cold sweat beaded down Damon's head.

"Wait, wait, I—I—"

He had no words, so he blurted out.

"I'm pregnant. You can't touch me. You'll hurt the baby."

Wendy paused. Evangeline's eyes widened. Leona snickered.

Wendy pointed at him.

"You're a man."

Damon lowered his head.

"I have a secret. I—I am a transvestite."

Evangeline shook her head on behalf of all trans people, silently hoping the goddess would strike this bastard down.

Wendy looked confused.

"What's a transvestite?"

Damon smiled.

"Ahhh, I knew it. Big words confuse her."

He closed his eyes.

"It means if I get touched by a woman trying to make babies before I'm emotionally ready, I'll wither away and die."

Her eyes widened.

"It's a rare case."

She trembled.

"That's horrible. I didn't know humans had such a terrible affliction."

Evangeline covered her face. Every day, he sank lower as a human being.

Leona didn't even know what to say, watching Damon fool the inexperienced Wendy again.

He sat back down in his chair.

"I've been seeing healers, but my condition hasn't been getting better. Apparently it's because I walk too much. If I had a mount, I could be fixed in, say, a few decades to a hundred years."

Wendy placed a hand over her mouth.

"I see. How horrible."

Then she grabbed him.

"You really expect me to believe that. I met a few trans people in the pleasure district. It's not an affliction."

Damon smiled softly.

"Heheh, busted."

She crossed her arms.

"I wasn't even going for that. We can have sex some other day."

Damon placed a hand over his mouth.

"When did you become so bold and shameless? Ahh, you bad girl."

She glared at him, eyes cold.

"Don't condescend me."

She closed her eyes.

"I want to ask about Waton. I never got to say goodbye before he passed. He was my first friend, after all."

Damon's face softened.

"He was happy he got to know you."

She nodded.

"I understand."

Turning to Leona, she spoke.

"Right. And I found Xander Ravenscroft."

Chapter 855: Gravity

Finding Xander wasn't difficult. He lived in a tower like a legit tower. That bastard was living it up as the leader of a mercenary group.

Damon wasn't too eager to find Xander, but he did go anyway. Mostly because he was in an awkward position and Wendy was pressuring him, so he just wanted to leave that house.

Besides, the quicker he could get his party together, the better. Maybe he could even find Sylvia.

Honestly speaking, this was going to be much harder without Sylvia Moonveil.

If she had been the one he found first, then it was evident her power would be useful in tracking down the others. Having a seer would be nice.

Then there was also Renata Malcrist. She had a useful skill set as well, but more importantly, he wondered where the Valtheron princess Abellona was. With her, he could rally everyone due to her status.

He took a deep breath.

Lilith Astranova was still a no-show as well. While he wasn't too showy, he was surprised she hadn't tracked him down yet.

'Is she in trouble,' he thought, with a hint of worry.

No, that couldn't be it. She was fine, this was Lilith Astranova, after all.

Besides, he couldn't really die happily without entrusting his sister's cure to her anyway.

When he thought that, he suddenly felt the world freeze as a flash of chaotic memories entered his mind.

He held his head slightly, feeling dizzy.

"Well, that was weird," he muttered. He could have sworn he'd been here before, but the last time he came, he was here with Sylvia and Lilith, who were throwing each other killer glares.

'Was that all in my head?'

He looked up at the tower and the tall walls that surrounded it. This area of the city was quite exclusive, as expected of Xander. He really knew how to live it up.

Damon gritted his teeth.

"So while I've been slaving away in prison, he was living like a king."

He really wanted to mess that guy up.

'Good thing I'm taking his firstborn,' jealousy was an ugly green thing.

Damon approached the gate with his entourage, which was just three women. Three beautiful women.

Evangeline, with her long golden hair and golden eyes, was a sight to behold, breathtaking.

Leona's dark hair and beastkin ears twitched. Her golden eyes and playful smile made her look approachable, her beauty warm in presence.

Then there was Wendy, with her long dark locks, bone sword, copper skin, and bare midriff that betrayed a wild side to this beauty.

The knights outside were instantly on guard.

"Halt." They crossed their spears together.

"You are approaching the Iron Guild. State your business."

Damon glanced at them. Second-class advancement, and he was making them act as sentinels.

"Iron Guild... what a shitty name," Damon sneered arrogantly.

Evangeline sighed. He was looking for a fight, she just knew it.

"Damon, don't. Just don't."

He grimaced, face full of disgust.

"What? What, can't I have an opinion now? What an authoritarian and totalitarian act of oppression, hoping to coerce the common man with violence. I will not stand for such injustice."

The knights glanced at each other with a sigh. Remarkably, they didn't lose their tempers.

"Sir, we only asked you to state your business."

Damon paused. They didn't get angry. How was he supposed to make things difficult for Xander Ravenscroft if even his henchmen were so cultured and well-mannered?

"You dare ask about my business? My business is my business," his arrogant scream, reminiscent of a Karen, echoed out.

Evangeline sighed, shaking her head. This guy just wanted to make things difficult for Xander. She wondered if she should stop him, but after a moment's thought, she looked at Leona, then Wendy, who were staying out of it.

"Ahh, whatever. I don't want to get involved this time. Let this bastard do whatever."

The knights frowned.

"Sir, we apologize if we offended you, but this is merely a routine question."

"Ahh, a routine question. Don't you know who I am? Don't you recognize me? Go call your boss. He dares not educate people of my greatness."

The two guards had about enough. If this guy didn't seem strong enough to cause a scene, they would have thrown him out already.

"And who might you be, sir?"

Damon gasped, full of false rage. His face even grew red.

"You—you dare insult me. You dare try to humiliate me. Fine, fine."

He reached into his shadow storage and pulled out a charm.

This was called [Voice of the Silent].

This charm had one simple ability, it was loud. This was one of the charms Damon didn't think he'd ever use, but oh well. If it was to embarrass Xander Ravenscroft, so be it. How dare that bastard act high and mighty. How dare he start an organization before Damon did.

How dare he live in wealth while Damon struggled in poverty.

'It's not fair... that pretty boy gets the good stuff.'

He brought the charm to his mouth and yelled.

"Xander Ravenscroft, get your ass out here. Roll while you're at it."

Damon underestimated the power of the charm, because this thing managed to echo through every corner of the city. His very distinctive voice was heard all over the city.

Renata heard his voice, her face breaking into a smile.

"My lord... you're here."

In a red room with weapons adorning every wall, Abellona scoffed.

"It seems that wretch has finally arrived."

It was good to know he was finally here.

In another corner of the city, Kashi the demon necromancer was checking on his skeletons. His hair stood on end when he heard that voice.

He knew that dreadful voice very well.

"Damon Grey..."

On a building overlooking the black tower, two women stood. One had white hair and was an elf with an exquisite face. The other was a red-haired human woman with emerald eyes. A flower rested in her hair, two petals fresh, the rest withered.

Sylvia the elf smiled.

"It seems Damon is here. Did he make such a bold announcement in the last timeline?"

Lilith shook her head, her expression cold.

"No. I was with him, so I made him calm down enough to not cause trouble. Besides, he had his hands full with the both of us."

Sylvia glanced at a floating book in front of her, frowning.

"We don't have much time. We have to get that elixir quickly."

Lilith looked at the tower with a frown.

"Easier said than done. Not with Seraph Null watching us."

Sylvia nodded, a thin smile forming.

"Ordinarily, yes. But he has his work cut out for him dealing with Damon."

Lilith, who had experienced this before, knew what Seraph Null was planning.

"He wants to gather all dissent in one place. All those who oppose him together. After that, he'll act to crush everything at once. That's his end goal, and that's why he's letting Damon's cult do as they want."

Sylvia smiled, a sinister expression on her beautiful face.

"And if we steal the Elixir of Pseudo Immortality, we change the timeline for everything. The butterfly effect will be quite a sight to behold."

Lilith frowned, taking a deep breath.

"I wouldn't get too excited if I were you. Our goal is to stop a suicidal bastard, and one thing my previous attempts showed me was that Damon is a far better fighter than me. So I can't stop him with force."

Sylvia smiled, tilting her head.

"You couldn't stop him with love either, heheheh."

She laughed, not at Damon's death, but at Lilith's failings.

"Let's go. We have a tower to overcome," Lilith said coldly.

"It will be a real shame if we fail," Sylvia replied.

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Meanwhile, back at the Iron Guild's base, as soon as Damon bellowed, he looked awkwardly at the guards. The magic of the charm made it hard to pinpoint where the sound came from, but Xander heard his name, so he knew it was at his gates.

Damon glanced at the guards.

"Ahem, ahem... ca-can we talk about this?"

Their patience was at its limit.

"Seize them."

Evangeline frowned.

"Them? What did we do? You mean him."

Before the angry guards could act, someone came running in full armor, followed by many knights and a familiar-looking woman by his side.

When he saw Damon, his helm vanished as a smile grew on his face.

"Hahaha! Damon, you're alive."

He opened his arms to give Damon a bear hug.

Damon's face scrunched up in disgust as he died in the hug.

"Xander Ravenscroft..." mind you, these were the first words he said to a friend he hadn't seen in months, in a strange land where they could die at any time.

"You really have the audacity to show off before this father. I see the fit, Xander. I know you are rich..."

Xander Ravenscroft looked down at his Ascendant armor—the Armor of the Bound Colossus.

"Th-this is what I normally wear, though..."

It was true. This was just Xander's normal outfit.

Still, Damon needed a reason to be a hater.

"Are you rubbing your money in my face because I'm poor?"

He really wanted trouble, and Xander was used to it.

He turned to Evangeline for help.

"Do you mind?"

She walked over with a sigh, grabbing Damon's hands.

"You are not poor. Stop causing trouble. Why do you always try to embarrass me wherever we go?"

Damon glared at him.

"You scum. You hide behind a woman."

Xander ignored him and looked at Leona, smiling.

"I missed you guys so much. Let's go inside and talk."

Damon was pulled along, realizing with horror that Xander had built up resistance to rage-baiting.

Chapter 856: High And Gone

Evangeline sighed, feeling a headache coming on. Between her and Damon, she was technically a few months older, so she was the older one. If they had grown up together, she would probably have been put in the position where she had to be the example.

Their grandfather would probably say something along the lines of keep Damon out of trouble.

Though it wasn't a matter of keeping Damon out of trouble. Damon was the trouble.

'The goddess probably had mercy on me,' she thought despairingly as she looked at his face.

He was such a temperamental guy. One moment he was cold and pragmatic, the next he was chaotic and playful.

She didn't know which one she liked best, but she was certain it was some sort of mental defense he'd picked up to fit in with people. Initially, he had been a very cold and paranoid person. He still was, but now he was almost playful when he did things that could only be called twisted.

'Well, at least he's happy... or at least doing a good job of pretending to be.'

She didn't think Damon was ever truly happy, and if he was... not for long. His happiness was short and brief.

He crossed his arms with a glare.

"Wow... aren't you ashamed of yourself? A ventilated room... in a desert... while the rest of us were scraping by trying to stay alive, you were here living like a king," Damon sneered mockingly.

Xander didn't even pay him any mind as he glanced at the woman by his side.

"Right. Evangeline, Leona, I'm sure you're both familiar with Lady Highgon."

He gestured to the lady beside him—a beautiful woman Damon knew all too well. The student council president of the Capital's famous Royal Academy, which, while still not on the level of Aether Academy, was very competitive.

She nodded in greeting.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Lady Brightwater and Lady Val—"

"Just Leona is fine," Leona cut her off, though she wasn't trying to be rude.

Evangeline nodded in agreement.

"You can call me by my first name as well. There's no need for formalities here."

She nodded, turning to Damon.

"Then you may call me by my name as well. It's a pleasure to meet you too, Damon."

Damon picked up his glass, finding an opportunity.

"No gonna call me Lord Grey because I'm a commoner, aye..."

Evangeline really wanted to smack him. Didn't they all just agree to use first names?

"My apologies. I mean no disrespect to the Damon Grey, slayer of demons, prodigy of Aether, the Ascendant himself."

Damon cleared his throat. Ah, he just remembered why he liked Lady Highgon, she knew how to butter a guy up.

He glanced at Xander.

"See this, Xander? You can learn some manners from a real noblewoman."

He cleared his throat.

"This is why I always advocate for peaceful relationships between our two academies."

Emilia's face hardened as she tried to understand why anyone would be this shameless.

"...You've beaten up more of our students than any Aether Academy student," she added coolly.

Damon nodded.

"Ahhh, what fond memories. I've always been a man of the people, that's why they love me."

"You broke their bones, sir," she added with a grimace.

"They became better men thanks to my training. But enough of my contributions to your institution..."

Evangeline had never felt happier that her relationship with him was still secret. This way, she wouldn't feel too embarrassed.

Xander sighed, closing his eyes.

"Anyway... enough of that. For one, I'm glad you're alive. Most of you girls... Damon is a cockroach. I figured he'd crawl out eventually."

Evangeline and Leona smiled.

"Yeah, happy to see you too. I didn't realize you were the head of this mercenary group. Then again, I had my own troubles. It couldn't have been easy for the Black Tower to allow an outsider to create their own mercenary force."

Xander sighed again.

"Yes, it was not easy. We're still under a lot of scrutiny. However, it was easy to find a way past these brands. This magic is ancient and, by our standards, outdated. Not to mention, anyone with a basic understanding of runes can remove it—though I kept mine for the purpose of blending in."

Damon glanced at Emilia, then back at Xander.

"So how long have you two been engaged?"

He asked, looking at the rings on their fingers. It was an out-of-pocket question, and Damon didn't have the patience to wait for a better time.

Honestly, as far as he remembered, Xander had always had a crush on Evangeline. Personally, Damon never really understood the concept of having a crush or even falling in love. While he was surrounded by beautiful women, he wasn't really in any relationships.

Yet Xander beat him to it.

Xander looked at Damon. There was a darkness in his blue eyes that Damon recognized all too well, and his answer made Damon's heart sink.

"My family's heir is dead. As you can see, as the current male heir, I must carry on my family's bloodline. And so, to that end... I was the one who proposed to Lady Highgon."

Damon's eyes turned cold. He really wanted to say something, but he couldn't. Xander was still young, seventeen. While it wasn't unusual for a seventeen-year-old to marry and have children in this world, Xander's reason for doing so was quite twisted.

And it was also because of Damon.

The two of them had a secret agreement. In order to help Xander get revenge for his brother, who was killed by Amon, Xander would give Damon his firstborn child for a period until the child reached adulthood.

Damon had initially asked for this because he was hoping Xander would refuse and give up his pointless quest for revenge.

But he had actually agreed.

Naturally, this cruel joke had a punchline, and the punchline was that Amon, the man who killed Xander's brother, was actually Damon himself, who had wanted revenge for his parents' deaths at the hands of Xander's brother.

Underneath the currents, it was all just so simple.

"Congratulations," Evangeline and Leona said together.

Wendy was quiet, but she seemed to smile at the idea of more children being born.

Damon scoffed.

"I see... here I thought you'd be hung up on our Eva forever."

Someone had to ruin the mood, and he decided to be that someone.

Emilia raised her brows, looking at Evangeline, who frowned.

Xander didn't say anything.

Evangeline sighed, took a deep breath, then—with all her strength—tossed Damon out the window.

"Asshole." she muttered.

Xander scoffed, then burst out laughing, clearing the awkward air.

Chapter 857: The Woman Who Suffered

Damon eventually made his way back to the room, which had been a conference room Xander and Emilia used to brief officer-level mercenaries.

He didn't really know how to feel.

Was Xander this eager to have a child because he felt Damon would be more serious about helping him get revenge and killing Amon?

Or was it because he had genuine feelings for Emilia Highgon?

They talked for a few hours in the conference room, agreeing to exchange resources in tracking down people from their world. It was actually not that difficult.

Damon heard from Xander that Abellona of Valtheron had more or less already gathered adventurers and students from their world together.

Of all the outsiders, she had the most numbers on her side.

Suppose being the princess of the most powerful empire of their time would do that, not to mention she was an accomplished military officer with many accolades to her name.

Abellona of Destruction.

Damon sighed, sipping hot tea as he gazed at the cold desert night ahead. The desert was hot during the day but cold at night.

Oddly enough, what had been a scorching hell during the day became a cold, dark world at night.

And these dark nights had the brightest stars Damon had ever seen.

He heard soft footsteps behind him as Xander walked up to the balcony he was standing on.

They didn't say anything to each other for quite some time, until Xander sighed and spoke.

"I've never been poor in my life. I didn't understand what starving meant... until I came here."

Damon glanced down at the city.

"Yeah... I figured as much. Hungry is punishing, and for whatever reason, the lesser god who rules this city has mastered its use."

Xander crossed his arms, taking a deep breath.

"Yes, he has. This place... this past... makes me think, while our world is bad, at least it is us goddess races that rule it. This ancient dream has only taught me one thing..."

His eyes turned cold.

"The gods are cruel."

He balled his fist.

"And to think there are many of them... with so much power. In the end—" his voice softened, "—I wonder how they came to an end."

Damon looked at the stars, his expression bleak, touched by anguish or loss.

"Empires fall. Why not gods? Nothing lasts forever. Time is a prison, and all who live within its control will reach their limits while it endures. The old gods lost to the true gods and became another part of the long river of time."

Xander chuckled softly.

"Then what about the true gods?"

Damon was quiet. A mental image of the Unknown God came to mind. If there were an end to endless entities, then that being would be the one.

"Even their sun will set eventually... even if it rises again afterwards."

Damon glanced at the ring on his finger.

"So Emilia Highgon... why did she really agree to marry you?"

Xander scoffed with disdain.

"True love."

"Don't give me that bullshit," Damon replied coldly.

Xander sighed, the faint smile on his face vanishing.

"Emilia Highgon is the granddaughter of Grand Duke Hightower."

Damon frowned. He had heard rumors—hearsay—but no one dared to really say it.

"Right, I remember now. The Hightowers... they're the fourth of the four dukedoms. And from what I heard, the current head of the family is Emilia's father, though it was just a rumor."

Xander shook his head slowly.

"It's not a rumor. He is her father. And her mother happens to be the daughter of the Highgon family."

Damon crossed his arms. Nobles had so much drama, this was one of those stories.

"From what I've heard... Emilia is the bastard child of Lord Hightower. Her mother, the heir of House Highgon, a vassal house, got pregnant with Lord Hightower's child during the week of his wedding to another lady. Her grandfather refused to accept her into the family due to her bastard status, so she had to carry her mother's family name. Is that right?"

Xander narrowed his eyes.

That was Damon Grey for you. He had everything figured out. The bastard was as informed as he remembered.

"Yes. You are correct."

Damon smiled.

"Good. I like being correct. Right now, the Hightowers also have a female heir, her younger sister, from another mother. But Emilia Highgon is an ambitious woman. She wants what's rightfully hers: the Hightower seat and all the authority and power that comes with ruling a large chunk of the Valtheron Empire."

He gestured lightly.

"And to do that... she needs you, the heir of another Grand Duke."

He clapped his hands gently.

"Wow. Wow. What a splendid woman. I think I like her. Naturally, she'll leverage all your connections, including your friendship with Evangeline, who is also the heir of another Grand Duke, Sylvia the elf princess, Leona who is the daughter of the powerful Roaring Gale, and little old me, who has connections and ties to

Lilith Astranova of another Grand Ducal house and, of course, seems to have a shady relationship with the Valtheron princess..."

Xander closed his eyes, seeing how Damon analyzed everything in such a playful and casual manner, as if Emilia were the one using Xander's connections for her own ends.

But Damon smiled like a demon, his voice low, as if it had crawled out of the abyss.

"But she's the one getting played here, isn't she?"

Xander's heart sank when Damon looked at him.

"She doesn't know... you gain a lot from this, don't you?"

Damon looked back at the sky, shaking his head.

"Emilia Highgon was more or less abandoned by her father. She was an unwanted child, and that leaves scars time cannot heal. She must find abandoning one's child to be the cruelest of acts."

He turned to Xander with a sly smile.

"So tell me, Xander..."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"How will she feel when she gives birth to your firstborn child and you end up handing him over to me? She'd be crushed."

He leaned closer.

"And a small part of me wants to see your life go to hell because you obsess over hunting a faceless shadow."

Xander's hands trembled.

"I am unshaken in my resolve," he said stiffly. "You will uphold your end of the bargain, a fair chance to kill Amon."

Damon smiled.

"Of course, a fair chance."

Chapter 858: Closure

The following days were quite something. The cult Damon created spread faster and faster, so fast that Damon wondered if Seraph Null hadn't realized he was losing control.

But after thinking about it for a while, Damon noticed something.

The amount of dissent between the Chained and the Outsiders was growing. It was subtle, especially here in the inner city where everyone was wealthier, but he could see it.

The invisible divide. The whispers and rumors. It started small.

"These outsiders are dirty..."

"They're the reason we aren't getting enough resources ..."

"They're stealing our jobs..."

Small things like that, but those small things were more than enough.

Damon realized something.

The delicate balance that existed here in the inner city, where only the most competent outsiders were allowed, was slowly fraying.

Naturally, he could see hostility building. As for the outsiders, they were already an oppressed group in this world that rejected them. Anything little they had, they fought tooth and nail for.

To that end, when they saw someone like them being abused by the Chained, it left poison in their hearts.

It was so easy.

It was so easy to create hate.

The quickest way to unite people was through shared hatred.

All you needed to do was give them something to hate. Someone to blame.

"All creatures with complex emotions and reason are, most often, emotional beasts. We revert so easily to our simpler nature."

This, like many instances of people showing how small they are, would lead to death. Blood would be shed. It would become an us versus them scenario.

But that was fine.

This was what Damon wanted anyway.

If Seraph Null wanted to accelerate it, Damon would let him.

"You've gotten confident, Seraph Null," Damon muttered, glancing at the black tower at the center of the city.

"You must think that because you are in the seventh class, no one can harm you..."

That was a fact. He was untouchable, because no one, not even those in the seventh class, could actually use their full power in this world.

Though there was one exception.

Lazarak.

"You think you have me trapped... no. It's the opposite."

Even so, Damon reminded himself to be careful. While Seraph Null knew nothing of him, Damon knew too little of the lesser god.

He sighed, leaning back against the balcony railing.

Damon had picked up the habit of staying here for whatever reason, mostly because he liked the view of the city.

He glanced at the tower again. The cure for his sister was there as well. Maybe that was why.

As soon as he got it, he would finally be able to close his eyes to this sick world.

That way, all the things that could happen in the future wouldn't.

But Damon had a grim feeling.

He would fail to die.

His Deathless skill was simply too effective at keeping him alive against his will.

He could try using his third-class skill Dethrone to disable it, but that would only be a temporary solution.

He had noticed how Deathless worked.

The skill was more like probability manipulation, or at least, that was what he thought at first, but it went deeper than that.

This seemingly small passive skill was actually influencing fate.

His fate.

He wondered if the Unknown God had given him this skill as a failsafe, insurance against being killed again by the Goddess of Doom.

Though Damon had a feeling that if she truly wanted him dead, Deathless would not be enough.

"I still have the Fate Manipulation Resistance mastery..."

Damon opened his system panel.

[HP: 24995/24995]

[Mana: 55,567/55,567]

[Strength: 31,124]

[Agility: 23,157]

[Speed: 33,985]

[Endurance: 34,210]

[Class: Usurper]

[Shadow: 1900]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 15%]

[Shadow Level: 19]

[Condition: Shadow Is Fed]

[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] [Shadow Manipulation Lv1]

[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]

"I still have my quest, Nightmare of Lazarak, which I still haven't figured out how to complete..."

He looked at the first quest.

"Right... and Path to Conflict," he muttered.

He sighed.

"Now that it seems so close... do I really want to end it all?"

"Heheheh..."

He chuckled.

"Yes. Yes, I do. And nothing is stopping me."

Damon had a passing thought.

If he died, that would be... off-putting for his sister.

He needed to give her some closure.

After some thought, he took out a pen and paper, summoning a chair and table from his shadow storage.

He needed to write his goodbye message to his sister. It was, after all, what most people who committed suicide did.

"Hm. What should I start with... what have I never told her? Or what do I need to tell her..."

"Hmmm."

He placed a hand on his chin.

Right.

He had just been lamenting how he'd never told his sister that he loved her. It was always implied, but never said.

"Right... that was it."

So he placed the pen on the paper and wrote.

The first words.

"I love you."

Then he paused.

He felt someone behind him.

A familiar scent.

A familiar shadow.

He had been so distracted that he filtered her out, along with the rest of the noise.

"Which woman are you writing a love letter to?"

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Is it me?"

Damon's eyes twitched.

"Ah... princess," he said slowly. "It's been a while."

Chapter 859: Experienced With Selfishness

There was no one else here, and Damon had no idea when she had actually arrived.

They had been intending to meet Abellona these past few days, so they had tracked her down. However, unlike Xander, she wasn't someone his party members knew on a personal level. She was, after all, the empire's princess.

So in the end, Xander had sent a formal invitation with all of their names on it, intending to invite her to join them, or at least negotiate terms and agreements.

Just that Damon didn't know when she came, much less that she would have him cornered like this.

Her hand on his shoulder was soft, and her scent was familiar.

There was no one on this balcony. Just the two of them.

So she leaned in closer.

"My, a love letter..." she murmured. "I never pegged you as the romantic type."

Damon forced a smile, though it was weary and tired.

He lifted the paper slightly, looking at the two words he'd written.

I love you.

This was meant for his sister.

But Abellona had seen it, and she clearly wasn't leaving anytime soon.

She didn't have a chair to sit on, so she moved to the table instead, sitting close. Too close. Her form blocked his view, forcing him to lift his face slightly to meet her red eyes.

"I don't believe in romance," Damon said quietly. "Or... I didn't. But suppose it exists..."

His voice was low. Calm.

Abellona's gaze never left him.

"After having your way with me, you better believe in romance, Damian."

Damon chuckled faintly.

Right. That name.

The one he'd given her when they were fighting Ashcroft. He hadn't wanted her to find him afterward, especially since he'd groped her in more ways than one and seen parts of her no princess would ever forgive being seen.

She wouldn't let that go.

He would've said something shameless.

But this time, Damon stayed quiet.

Now that he was writing this letter, his death felt more and more real. It wasn't something distant anymore, something theoretical.

It was here.

He could see it.

And that was why he understood.

The cult spreading wasn't the goal anymore, it was collateral momentum.

This mattered.

Damon was no longer accelerating hate because he wanted victory.

He was letting it burn because he wouldn't be here to see the aftermath.

That was colder than ambition.

That was resignation, weaponized.

Behold a man with nothing to lose.

And for some reason, that realization stirred something faint in him.

Melancholy.

Abellona watched him for a while, then sighed.

"You know... after you stole my ring and my dignity, attempted to fake your death, among the long list of things you've done, I thought that if I ever found you, I would do terrible things to you. And you'd probably try to deflect."

She glanced down, her eyes softer now.

"I remember the man who arrogantly faced Ashcroft, the Demon Lord of Domination. The man who feared nothing. He told me many things, some of them lies, but when he was sincere... he moved me."

She clenched her hand slightly.

"He convinced me I could be more than Abellona of Destruction."

Damon smiled faintly.

"I'm glad I could be of help."

Her fist tightened.

"He also made me agree to pay him billions of zeni," she added flatly. "And that man who loves money would never forget to collect."

Damon shook his head.

Right.

She still owed him money.

Oh well.

He wouldn't be needing it where he was going.

She lifted his chin with a finger, forcing his gaze up. Her red eyes met his dark ones.

"I've spent most of my life on the battlefield," she said. "I've seen the faces of soldiers when they stop caring—when the passion dies and the flames in their hearts go out."

Her gaze flicked to the letter.

"Some of them write letters to their loved ones, thinking a piece of paper can absolve them of their selfishness. It doesn't. It never does."

Her face tightened.

"All it becomes is a violent memory of who they were."

She forced her hands to steady, though they trembled.

"You're not the first suicidal person I've met. You won't be the last. But..."

Her voice cracked just slightly.

"Now that it's happening to someone I care for... it hurts a lot more than watching comrades I fought beside waste away and give up."

Damon didn't know how to feel hearing her frustration.

He'd seen that same expression before, on Lilith's face.

"I never really believed in living," Damon said quietly. "We weren't asked to be born. We're products of this world against our will. Some of us just have it worse than others."

He glanced at her.

"And frankly... it gets tiring."

He exhaled slowly.

"If you're here to tell me to live because the world is beautiful or some shit like that, you're wasting your time. My death isn't because I'm afraid to live."

His eyes hardened.

"It's my way of giving the middle finger to the divine. To fate. It might seem pathetic to you, but to me, it's my last scream against the ultimate oppressors."

She bit her lip.

"You're mad."

He shook his head.

"No. I was just never sane."

His mind was made up. Begging wouldn't change it.

So she did the opposite.

"How cowardly," she spat. "So you're afraid of losing, so you tap out. Too scared to finish the game you started, because it looks like you'll lose."

His brow furrowed.

That hit a nerve.

She looked down at him.

"If you die now, you won't escape responsibility. You'll just leave it to lesser hands."

She crossed her arms.

"You run away and leave your troubles to others. How noble. You must be really good at running away."

Damon's gaze hardened.

She'd struck something raw.

Did she really think anyone could win against the Unknown God?

No one could.

That thing wasn't made to lose. It wrote the rules and could change them freely.

This wasn't defeat.

This was defiance.

Abellona stood.

"Now that you're dying, I guess there's no need to pick up where he left off. And here I thought we had a future together."

Her voice turned ice-cold.

"Good luck. I hope you die less painfully—no, on second thought, I hope you suffer a slow and agonizing one."

She turned to leave.

"Oh, wait. I need to take something before I go."

Damon turned—

And she grabbed him.

She kissed him forcefully.

Then pulled away.

"I'm not even with you yet," she said coldly. "But if you live, I'll get even."

She left.

Damon closed his eyes.

A single thought passed through his mind without hesitation.

He squeezed the letter—

And it dissolved into ash.

Chapter 860: She Knows

They both looked worn and haggard as they teleported out of the way of a giant wing, the air around them violently eviscerated.

Thud.

They crashed into a heap of discarded clothing somewhere within the city.

Sylvia groaned as pain shot through her body, but she clenched her jaw and swallowed the sound before it could escape. She refused to give Lilith even the slightest opportunity to sense weakness.

Lilith sat up slowly, pressing the back of her hand against her nose and wiping away the blood that had begun to trail down her face. Her movements were calm despite the impact. A few bruises marred her skin, but none of them managed to diminish her beauty.

"Figures..." she muttered. "We wouldn't be able to steal the elixir."

Of course things would not go their way. It could never be that easy.

They had made it into the Black Tower. They had even reached the floor where the elixir was kept. They simply had not expected Seraph Null to show up personally.

Sylvia ground her teeth together, fists tightening at her sides.

"Let's try again. This time—"

"No," Lilith interrupted, cutting her off mid sentence. "Let's go back. Everyone must have already gathered by now."

Sylvia turned her head and glared toward the distant silhouette of the Black Tower before letting out a breath and nodding reluctantly. Seraph Null would be alert now, and so would his Chained Knights.

"So now what," she asked, her voice measured as she studied Lilith's expression. "Are we joining back up with Damon?"

Lilith nodded slowly, strands of her red hair lifting and swaying in the wind.

"We are. By now I'm pretty sure he's already written that depressing suicide note."

Sylvia pushed herself to her feet, brushing her white hair back over her shoulder.

"Are we going to try taking him out of it?"

"It's pointless. If it didn't work then, it won't work now," Lilith replied as she turned and began walking away.

Sylvia hesitated for a moment, glancing at the book floating quietly in front of her, then followed.

They were lucky. With their combined skills they were powerful, but against an entity in the seventh class all they could do was flee.

Sylvia was worried about Damon, but beneath that worry was a faint, unsettling eagerness to see him again.

Without realizing it, she brushed her hair again, fingers smoothing it as if it would somehow make a difference.

Her gaze drifted back to the book.

"How much of a butterfly effect have we created this time," she asked quietly.

She felt a small portion of her elven lifespan get shaved away, a familiar sensation that made her chest tighten, and then the answer appeared.

"Hmm. You're really being generous these days," she muttered.

...

His depressing mood aside, Abellona's words had struck a chord.

Damon felt slightly lighter, though the weight in his chest never truly left. Still, he realized he could not die and leave the problem for someone else. Not yet, at least.

Her words aside, things had been improving. Faces he recognized arrived day by day, and those who knew others quietly spread the word.

Naturally, Xander lived in the most elite district of the city, so not everyone could gather there. Only the most privileged could reach that area. Damon had yet to appear there himself, though Yuka von Penrose had, as usual, been following Emilia Highgon closely.

Using Yuka as an envoy, they arranged a meeting point in a more accessible section of the city.

They used cues and fragments of history that only those familiar with the Third Epoch would understand.

The War of the Five Sages, easily recognized by academy students, adventurers, and scholars alike. The Peasant Revolution that changed the global order. Even the more recent Demon Wars.

To the Chained Knights who intercepted the messages, it made little sense. To those in the know, it was unmistakable.

With Damon's and Abellona's combined networks, gathering everyone was easy. Naturally, Abellona was the one issuing the call, her influence far exceeding Damon's.

On the second day, Renata arrived.

As expected, she wasted no time. With practiced efficiency, she reorganized the chaotic mass into structured divisions with clear roles.

Those with healing and utility skills were assigned as medics. Mage based fighters formed a battalion. Tanks were positioned for defense. Assassin classes were designated for espionage. Those with administrative abilities were pulled aside and given logistical responsibilities.

Everyone became a piece of the plan.

That said, there was still something they were not using, and so Renata came to Damon about it.

She stood behind his chair, hands folded loosely behind her back.

The night was unnaturally quiet, as if the city itself sensed the chaos waiting just beyond the horizon.

"This place was so peaceful before we came," Damon muttered, his gaze fixed on the city lights.

Renata did not agree.

"It was and still is a hotbed of apartheid and dehumanization rooted in racist and tribalist beliefs. I wouldn't call that peaceful."

Damon exhaled slowly.

"What would you call peaceful, Renata. To me, peace is a status quo. The same mundane routines carried out by the same faces every day, the same hustle and bustle. The people of this world see that as peace, even if they exploit people from ours. That is their status quo."

She sighed, the sound heavy.

"Then they will reap what they sow."

Damon felt the cold rage beneath her words, the faint killing intent she failed to fully hide. She must have suffered deeply.

"And what will they reap," Damon asked quietly. "A city drowning in war. Thousands dying. It hardly matters. War is always like this."

He let out a soft chuckle.

"I find it ironic. Children of the world of Aetherus. We truly live up to our name as children of war. We've made war so mundane that it's routine. I have a feeling that once we leave this place, we'll find ourselves dragged into another demon war."

Renata lifted her gaze slightly, studying him.

"Is that because of Prince Waton's death. That alone can hardly be cause for war. If anything, the goddess races hold more advantage during the war games."

Damon shook his head.

"That's not the reason. I just feel it. From the moment we return, everything we know will begin rushing toward its inevitable climax."

She watched him in silence for a moment, noting the weight in his expression.

"Is that why you've been so weary?"

Damon crossed his arms.

"I think the word you're looking for is depressed."

"It would be wrong to say that to my lord," Renata replied, lowering her head slightly.

"But I'm not your lord, am I. You already knew that," Damon said. "What I don't understand is why. Are you waiting so you can kill me when the chance presents itself."

Renata did not react. Of course she knew he was not Ashcroft. She had figured that out long ago. Though they were similar, the differences were clear to her.

"No. Why would I betray you," she answered calmly, as if she had been expecting the question.

Damon leaned back in his chair.

"You're missing your chance, you know. Or are you worried I would expose you as a demon in our midst."

Renata's expression did not change.

"If you did that, you would be in far more danger than I would. I could easily level the same accusation against you. I could make it worse by claiming you killed the original Damon Grey and replaced him. Lord Ashcroft."

Damon chuckled.

Damn this woman. She really had him figured out.

"Then why haven't you," he asked. "I'm not Ashcroft. If anything, I'm a usurper who stole his power."

Renata paused. She had not expected him to reveal that so openly, but it seemed he had already figured her out as well.

"As far as I know, Ashcroft is a story. The demon lord of domination is an icon worshipped by demons, but he is an evil I do not truly know. You, however, are an evil I recognize. I've known you longer. You are fathomable to me."

She smiled, her tone softening.

"Damon Grey. A human turning into a demon. I know where you came from and how you came to be. I understand you, at least to a degree. I learn something new every day. You like tamberly. You love your sister. You care deeply for your friends and hate showing it. Your closest friend is Leona. Your love interest is Lilith Astranova, though you struggle to understand those feelings beyond base desire."

She paused, taking a slow breath.

"You are also related to Grand Duke Brightwater, which makes you the last person anyone would suspect of being a demon."

Damon was impressed. She knew far more than he had expected.

"So now what," he asked.

Renata inhaled deeply.

"Nothing. I already made my choice when I chose you. It doesn't matter whether you're Ashcroft or not. My choice was the follower, the dominator. The prophecy never said it had to be Ashcroft. That was merely interpretation."

She leaned closer, her lips near his ear.

"Besides, you're sort of a cutie. I don't mind."

Damon turned to face her, expression flat.

"You know I can kill you where you stand and accuse you of being a demon."

"Sure you can," she replied lightly. "But as you can see, I'm still alive. And you wouldn't do that to such a beautiful senior."

Damon chuckled.

"You've been holding back on teasing this whole time, haven't you."

She flashed the familiar seductive smile.

"It's my guilty pleasure."

He looked at her.

"So what's your story, then. You know mine. I'm curious how a demon managed to live under the noses of the goddess races and even become part of an old noble house."

She shrugged, leaning back before casually sitting on his things.

"It's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it."