

Shadow 911

Chapter 911: Did You Know

Seras pulled the reins of the nocturnal stag, stopping her actions on the narrow forest path trapped between a few giant trees. It made everyone stop.

Damon raised his head from behind Renata.

"What, why did you stop? We need to move."

Seras glanced in front of her. There was a serious expression on her face as she took out her tachi, raising it high in front of her.

"Show yourself," she bellowed as the sounds of trees rustling behind them grew.

Damon did not sense anything. There was no one there. Nothing was there. It was just the forest.

Then something moved.

When he blinked again, there was something there, or someone. He saw Seras's hands tighten on her tachi. Whatever this thing was, its power was overwhelming.

It was terrifying.

There in front of them stood a lone entity. It was white. This was because it was made of bones. There was a round, blood red orb in its stomach, or where its stomach would be. A phylactery. This was all Damon needed to know. This was a...

"Lich."

From the overwhelming aura, Damon felt his very hands shake from its deep and terrifying aura.

"A grand lich," Seras said, sensing its aura in the seventh class advancement. This was even higher ranked than she was.

It wore a robe and carried a staff that was clearly a high level magical artifact.

This was an intelligent entity.

"Dammit," Damon cursed. They had not even gone too far into the forest yet. Why were they meeting an ancient horror?

The longer this lich lived, or could this even be called living, the more experienced and powerful it was.

"May I ask who you are, old one?" Seras spoke with her guard up. She did not want this to end in a fight, because it would mean the end of the expedition. Everyone here would die except her, but even she would be hard pressed to win or even survive.

"Who am I... I am not someone you would know. I would say my name, though it would be of little significance."

Seras bit her lips. He wanted her to say her name first. She slightly moved her mana and put herself on guard against curses.

She briefly contemplated using the holy relic from the temple, but that was a final use weapon in case she had to fight a demon lord.

"I am Seras Blade. I am the leader of this expedition unit, and we only wish for safe passage."

The lich did not move.

"You have disturbed the peace of this forest, Seras Blade. The forest is angry and demands retribution," he spoke in a deep and aged voice, yet it was still firm and showed no weakness.

"The forest is alive. It does not know peace. Am I not part of it as well? Why would it want retribution? This is simply the natural way of things," she responded.

The lich paused. That was a logical thought. The forest was in fact an ecosystem, and everything that existed within it was part of its ecosystem. Life and death happened here, and even man was part of the forest as long as they lived there.

"I see you are a person of knowledge, Seras Blade. Very well then. I shall give you all a chance to pass. In exchange, you must tell me knowledge that I do not know."

Seras frowned as the lich spoke. It continued.

"The knowledge must interest me, and it must not contain falsehoods. In exchange, I will also allow you to ask me three questions."

"What happens if the knowledge does not interest you?" Damon asked from behind Renata.

The lich glanced at him. His gaze seemed to linger on Damon, as if trying to see through him.

"You are touched by many things. Many terrible things. You will not live long."

It stomped its staff in the ground as a wave of black magical energy spread and forced all the creatures hunting them away.

"If that is so, then you shall perish," the lich answered.

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

He really hated riddles and monsters that used them. It was the same in Lysithara when they had run into the Keeper of False Truths.

Seras nodded slowly.

"Very well then. We accept your terms."

She glanced at Damon, then nodded.

She dismounted her stag and walked back to him. He dismounted and joined her. The other squad leaders and Renata joined as well, as did Wendy. Damon considered summoning Matia. He shook his head, stopping the thought. She was his trump card. He would only summon her when he was absolutely out of options to save his life.

Seras glanced at them.

"We can buy time with this. I doubt he would want to wait too long, so in the meantime let us gather what eccentric knowledge we have and see what impresses him."

Damon held his chin.

"Normal knowledge would not be much use for something like that. We can try magic, but he would probably be disinterested in any spell we know. We could try history, but judging from his outfit, I would say he lived from the first epoch, so he has probably seen it all."

Seras crossed her arms.

"Alright then. Let us see what we have. Renata, you gather input from everyone, and we will read through and see what is best."

Renata nodded and left. The squad leaders did too.

A few minutes later, they returned with all sorts of knowledge from complex magic, history, and even pointless trivia. After much thought...

None of them seemed useful.

Seras sighed as the evening sun was setting. She walked up to the lich.

"Knowledge is vast, and we do not know what will interest you. I ask that you give us until dawn to give you our answers."

The lich had not moved for hours and remained standing there.

"Very well then. I shall wait. I have lived many years. A night is but a moment in my undeath."

Seras let out a sigh as they set up camp. No monsters approached, even though she could sense them watching. That was good. The lich was a deterrent against any attacks.

For the whole night, Seras, Damon, and Renata tried to figure something out to no avail. The results were insignificant.

At dawn, Seras went to face the lich. The expedition unit was packed and ready to go, having rested the night on eggshells.

She took out a scroll and handed it to him.

It was old and worn, the exact kind of scroll that was hard to decipher. It was priceless, and Seras had found it in a dungeon after slaying a dragon.

"This is a fragment of a scroll left by the great sage Athor in the second epoch. It contains knowledge of a ritual to resurrect the dead."

The lich glanced at it, then tossed it back at Seras's feet like it was garbage.

"Yes, Athor. The boy. He came to me years ago with the full edition of my scrolls. Why would I want knowledge that I had authored years ago?"

Seras's hands trembled. What kind of terrible luck was this, to find the author of a fragment of the scroll she had kept all these years? He referred to the great sage Athor as a boy. Of course he would know the spell. He was a lich.

Nothing she could think of on the fly would impress the lich. She held her tachi. It seemed it was down to the last option. Combat.

Crunch.

Damon stepped on some branches and came in between them.

He took out a chair from his shadow and placed it between them. His face was calm as he sat down. In his heart, he was screaming and cursing himself, but he remained calm due to his skill, Remorseless, which was keeping him steady in this moment of crisis.

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"Ahhhhh. The age of gods ended too quickly. A shame you did not get to experience it. How young you must be. You missed out on conversing with gods that walked among us."

Seras forced a calm expression. The lich would not allow lies. If Damon lied, they would lose, and therefore face the worst case scenario.

"I imagine you have," the lich spoke calmly.

Damon nodded slowly, his expression wistful.

"I have. I even killed a god. The knowledge I know might be something you have never heard of."

He said might, because saying might was technically not a lie.

The lich glanced at this bold man who seemed more like a boy. Surely a boy would not be at the fourth class advancement.

"Then share. What is it that you 'might' know that I do not?"

It repeated the word might.

Damon stayed calm. Honestly, he was winging it here.

"Did you know that the Unknown God actually predated his own existence?"

Damon said calmly, leaning back and even pulling out a table from his shadow storage along with an expensive bottle of wine.

He snapped his fingers as Renata reluctantly stepped forward and poured him a glass. He lifted the cup to his mouth, then waved his hand dismissively at the lich, who did not seem affected by his words. Inside his heart, he was cursing how much knowledge the lich had.

"Fine, fine. That is boring. You do not want to know it. Forget it."

"Wait," the lich said with a calm voice.

"What do you mean, predated his existence?"

Damon tried to suppress his smile but failed. He took a sip of his wine.

He could not help it, but he had to do it.

"Ahhh, so ignorant of the omniverse around you."

The lich took a step forward, curious about what Damon knew. Damon had a feeling that if he did not give an interesting enough explanation, the lich would disembowel him.

Chapter 912: Amadeus

The lich seemed intrigued. That was all Seras could think as she saw how its hollow gaze remained fixed on Damon.

As for Damon himself, he was sipping wine and acting as if he were not staring down an eccentric old monster of an evil magical path.

"Come, come... sit. Tell me about yourself," Damon said, making everyone in the expedition force go pale with fright as they gauged the lich's reaction.

The lich paused, then slowly moved to where Damon was.

Damon was about to summon a chair from his shadow storage when the lich waved his hand, and a chair made of bones appeared behind him.

From where he was sitting, Damon could feel the aura. Still, he had met someone who was worthy.

"What did you mean by 'predated his existence'?" the lich asked softly, his ancient voice low, almost a whisper.

Damon swirled his wine glass, then glanced at the lich.

"Have you heard of a paradox?"

"Yes. It is a simple concept. A contradictory statement of opposing natures that is both true. There are at least ten definitions of what a paradox is."

"You have asked me two questions now," the lich answered calmly.

Damon froze. He blinked in confusion.

"Wait, that doesn't apply—" he stopped himself. The lich had said he would answer three questions. Damon hadn't realized the old monster would answer them first, and without specifying that he was doing so.

"Touché, friend. Touché," Damon replied, feeling Seras's angry glare on him. Honestly, it wasn't his fault. This lich was cheating.

The lich's gaze remained fixed on him.

Damon knew he couldn't continue buying time anymore, but he really didn't want to talk about the Unknown God in front of so many people if he had a choice.

"The Unknown God is said to have existed before the moment of his birth. He existed in both extremities of time. Apparently, he only became active quite recently, at least compared to when gods like Doom ruled."

There was silence from the lich.

"Interesting... interesting indeed to think... no, that should be a small feat for the Unknown God."

He glanced at Damon with a cold aura of the dead.

"Your words seem to suggest you have knowledge of a time before even the goddess."

Damon paused for a moment. His eyes were fixed on the glass in his hand, but really he was looking at the reflection of Seras's blade in it. She gave him a subtle nod, which made Damon want to bite his lips.

"Perhaps... what I know is frighteningly little. Still, knowledge should be shared. I'm sure you think so too, friend."

"Amadeus of the West," the lich replied sternly. "I am Amadeus."

Amadeus.

Damon didn't really know the name. It must have belonged to someone noteworthy. As for how Damon knew that, well, that was easy.

Side characters didn't go naming themselves after a direction. That was a sign of a great expert.

While Damon was ignorant of Amadeus, Seras had heard the name.

"You... you are Amadeus the God Seeker..."

"A great mage from the First Epoch who was said to have walked the Path of Kings. Amadeus sought the knowledge to become a god. He named himself after the West to symbolize the setting sun, a representation of the dusk of gods. He lamented, and to this day seeks the way to transcend the limits of the world."

Damon understood why she was saying all this. She was telling him while acting surprised, and honestly, he appreciated the trouble she went through.

"I am merely a forgotten name," Amadeus said. "I'm surprised I am still remembered."

Damon sipped his drink.

"I see you walked the Path of Kings. It's not every day I see someone who experienced Lysithara and all its beauty."

"I am not surprised you would appreciate its elegance. After all, the armor you are wearing is from Lysithara," the lich said, his gaze resting on Damon's Ascendant armor.

Damon touched his armor, putting down his glass.

"Oh, this old thing... it's nothing. Personally, I'm curious as to which Ascendant you studied under."

The lich didn't mind the small talk. It was rare for him to meet anyone who knew Lysithara. Damon was an exception, and worthy of his respect.

"I learned from Valarie Sunwarden. You wouldn't be familiar with her."

"I see. What a small world... She was my teacher too. Did she have that know-it-all attitude back when she was teaching you?" Damon asked. Having met someone who was acquainted with Valarie, he was genuinely happy to see someone who remembered her at all.

The lich sighed, shaking his body or bones, in this case.

"Yes. She had a tendency to teach in the most inopportune times. She wouldn't stop until you got it. She especially hated it when her students lost to the students of other Ascendants. She'd encourage us to pull childish pranks on them to get even."

Suddenly, the lich didn't feel like such a terrifying creature, just an old man reminiscing about his youth.

"Of course, we won more than we lost. However, whenever we lost, it was always against that no-good scumbag, Mugu..."

Damon paused when he heard the name of the Wicked Prophet, the one who had caused it all.

Seras Blade froze. Her gaze, seen through the reflection, urged Damon to probe him more. Knowledge about the Wicked Prophet was far too scarce.

"Hm... Mugu. I see. So you knew him."

The lich seemed irritated, his aura rising.

"We were in the same class. He was just a boy from the Demon Continent, nursing a grudge and hoping to return home to meet his—"

The lich paused. Slowly, his aura stilled. He must have realized Damon was probing him.

"Touché, friend. Touché," he repeated Damon's own words.

The morning sun forced its way past the dark canopy of trees overhead, shining on them both.

Everyone tensed up, thinking the lich would react, he didn't. Amadeus was quiet.

"Now my turn to answer," he said. "Tell me what you know."

Damon crossed his arms, glancing at everyone behind him, the expedition force.

"This is blasphemous, and I'll have you know that just possessing this knowledge can be grounds for heresy and execution. Personally, I'm safe. I am, after all, the Holy Child."

His gaze remained on the lich. They both knew he wasn't speaking to the lich. He was speaking to the expedition force.

His words translated into one thing: share what you hear here at your own peril. I am highly valued. I am untouchable. You aren't.

Basically, he was telling them to keep it secret.

One of the mages shook. Her desire for knowledge was great; consequently, so was her fear for her life. Still, she took out an oath scroll.

"I sign this scroll and swear secrecy to the events of today."

She signed it in her blood, then passed the scroll to the next person. Soon, everyone had signed.

Seras took the scroll and signed, not because she needed to, but because she had to if she wanted to keep her soldiers' morale high.

When the scroll reached Damon, he didn't sign. Instead, he tossed it into his shadow storage.

He was the one telling the secret. He didn't need to sign.

"Now then, where was I... ah, yes. The goddess wasn't always a god. If anything, she was just like you. Well, not like you, since you're undead. I mean she was human. A mortal."

"She was born. With a mother and a father, I imagine."

When Damon said that, he heard members of the expedition force gasp in shock.

"My goodness..."

"Goddess have mercy..."

"Oh, have mercy on my soul..."

"It's heresy..."

These were the whispers, and this was why Damon hadn't said it before they'd signed. To them, it was unbelievable. For a goddess they weren't even sure existed to be flawed.

Religious people were flawed like that, always trying to defend an all-powerful god when that god didn't need their defense. The goddess probably didn't care. Still, these people would ravage and kill in her name. Notwithstanding the fact that she was a goddess of doom and war.

The lich didn't care for their reaction. Instead, he shifted in his seat, leaning forward.

Damon crossed his arms.

"In the beginning, the omniverse where we all exist was ruled by amoral entities called the Old Gods, or the Old Ones. They were older than concepts like love or kindness. They ruled the world until a select few rebelled. The ones who did somehow became gods and defeated the Old Ones."

"This includes the goddess."

"How... how did they become gods?" the lich asked aggressively, seeing hope in his pursuit.

"I do not know," Damon spoke calmly.

"Perhaps the Outsiders know," he added.

"They don't. I asked them," the lich, Amadeus, replied.

Damon lifted his head slightly.

He asked them. Of course he did. Amadeus had been here since the First Epoch. The Outsiders were active then as well. Maybe this was an opportunity to know more about them.

"They don't know," Damon said, "or they refused to tell you."

Amadeus gritted his teeth, the bones grinding against one another on his fleshless face.

"They refused me... keeping their secrets. In their eyes, I saw disdain for us of the lower Realm. Oh, curse the goddess for creating me in a world such as this..."

"A world in a cage," Damon added.

The lich froze.

"Wha... what do you mean..."

Chapter 913: Education

With how much of the world the lich knew, Damon was certain he would know the world was sealed. This was something Damon had heard in his travels. At one point in time, the goddess had sealed away the world.

It was most likely as a result of Lazarak's rebellion in the Zero Epoch. It was not about keeping them trapped in it. It was to keep the Unknown God out.

Which was pointless, or perhaps of too little effect. The Unknown God was doing whatever he pleased, and so far, from what Damon could glean, he was gaining the upper hand.

If Damon had to choose who was more terrifying, then the answer would without a doubt be the Unknown God.

Nevertheless, he could not be certain, since the goddess had not really made any moves yet.

The lich's hollow gaze made Damon close his eyes, not because he wanted to. In fact, he had to. It was the cold, icy presence in its hollow sockets that exerted a strain on him.

"I'm surprised such information would allude you, Amadeus, especially one as learned as you."

Amadeus planted his staff on the ground, placing his hands on the table.

"Knowledge is a vast and bottomless sea. The more you know, the more you understand the vastness of your ignorance. Therefore, only a fool would believe he has reached the end of knowledge, or a god."

Damon nodded. That was an interesting philosophy. Was this what drove him to ask them questions?

"This world is sealed off and broken in a way. A long time ago, a god defied the goddess in his first rebellion. She stripped the world of free magic, casting all who existed here within a law that only allowed them to use a single attribute of magic. The next is a bit vague, as I do not know what it means. From what I have learned, she also took away the true names of all who dwelled within this realm."

When Damon said that, even Seras shifted. She had not known this at all. It was like he was an encyclopedia of ancient secrets.

She clenched her sword. These were dangerous secrets, ones that would warrant the execution of the entire expedition force if they ever leaked to the public.

She could see the looks of horror on their faces. However, that was not a problem. They had all signed the oath scroll. If they broke the oath, they would die, assuming they could even break it.

Paths signed under one's free will were very powerful.

Amadeus was focused on Damon's words as he continued explaining.

"There was also a restriction that prevented us from reaching the realm beyond the seventh class and ascending to the higher realm. In the Zero Epoch, the lesser gods took the role of suppressing us, so no one ever reached the seventh class before Lazarak's rebellion. After his rebellion, no one could reach the eighth class because the goddess sealed the world."

Amadeus listened carefully.

"I see. If the goddess wants to keep something out, in this case the Unknown God, then it must mean there is something of value here in this world. Surely it cannot be us."

Damon took a sip of his drink. As expected of an old monster, the damned lich had deduced the existence of the Pillar.

"I believe I have satisfied your thirst for knowledge. You must honor your word."

Amadeus's aura rose slightly, causing the world to darken. Damon was unmoved. He remained calm.

"Hahaha. Of course. I will. This is merely an exchange between friends. Perhaps I should tell you what you will encounter next in the Evil Forest. The terrain is treacherous and full of horrors."

Damon considered dismissing him until a voice in his mind reminded him that in this death zone, knowledge was the difference between life and death. Even if the lich knew about the Pillar, he would not be able to find it anyway. And if he did have any clue, Damon would benefit from knowing.

He glanced at Renata, who gave him a subtle nod. She had been standing by his side the whole time, refilling his glass, a mildly worried expression on her face.

It was hard to tell for people who did not know her. Damon was not one of those people. He was close enough to have figured her out through her body language.

"Very well then. Why don't you go first," he responded.

The lich nodded slowly. His hollow sockets took on a purple glow, then he spoke.

"In no specific order, the forest does not remain the same. It changes. It grows. It dies. It exists in a constant cycle. From your path, I imagine you wish to take the route to the sea."

Seras nodded slowly behind Damon.

"We do."

The lich, Amadeus, waved his hand as a projection appeared.

"Within the next hundred steps, you will enter the Hungry Ground."

He glanced at Seras, seeing her frown.

The Hungry Ground was another name for a region of the inner forest where the black soil began to suck out vitality.

He glanced at Seras again.

"You know the rules of the Black Roots."

Her expression was calm as she recalled from memory.

The earth is pitch black and soft like wet ash. Footprints sink deeper than they should. The ground feels warm, like living flesh, almost like touching a living person.

The rule was simple.

The longer you stay still, the more the ground wants you, and the quicker you die.

From last time, the Black Roots slowly wrapped around ankles when people rested, so you needed to remain mobile at all times.

The roots fed on vitality and mana, inducing a weakening effect.

Victims felt intense hunger and exhaustion before being dragged under, the soil pulling like quicksand.

Her hands shook at the thought of what happened next.

Those swallowed did not die immediately. They were kept alive as nutrient nodes, half buried, still conscious for days, months, or even years.

Their screams traveled through the roots and lured others.

The trick to survive was simple.

Never sit directly on the ground. Floating magic drained stamina faster here, making it ill advised.

Corpses had to be burned immediately, or they would root and become undead or Black Root monsters.

Seras experienced this as a third year student in the academy. It felt so long ago, but the dread and scars never healed.

She nodded at Damon. The more information he could get, the better their chances.

He closed his eyes.

"It's called the Pillar of Conflict."

Chapter 914: Tell Me About The Man

When Damon said that, there was a silence, as if even the Evil Forest itself had been stilled by his words.

"Bellum. The ninth pillar." That was all Damon said.

There was a small moment of silence, as if trying to take the words in.

"The ninth pillar," Amadeus repeated, intrigued.

"Yes, the ninth. I once overheard one of the outsiders, the Blind Old Daoist, speak about it. The ninth. That was all I heard."

"What is this pillar, and yes, I see it must have been the reason beings from a higher plane would want to come here, to our world."

Damon could feel his inquisitive gaze.

"The Pillar of Conflict is the fundamental culmination of the very concept of conflict. This pillar was entrusted to the goddess of doom. She created this whole world for the sole purpose of protecting it, which now that I think about it means that we do not really matter from where she is standing."

"A fundamental concept of conflict," Amadeus repeated slowly.

"Tell me more," he added, while Seras was still trying to wrap her head around everything.

The members of the expedition force had wisely backed away. Even they did not want to hear too much. The more secrets you knew, the worse off you were. It was better to be safe than sorry.

Respecting their decision, Renata waved her hand and created a dome with her zero attribute, where no sound could pass through.

Amadeus was getting excited. The knowledge he had gleaned today was far more than he had hoped for.

"Tell me. Tell me more," he asked Damon excitedly, as if a veil had been lifted.

"What do you have to offer."

Amadeus paused, then took out a box.

"This is a magical box. It is a single use item I obtained in a world dungeon. From what I have discovered, it will create a single object you need, and that is all it can do. It is priceless, even if you do not know its value."

Damon glanced at the box and realized he could not appraise it.

"Hmm. You want me to gamble," he hesitated.

"I will take your staff, and from now on you must answer any questions I have truthfully. You also must do me, or whoever I designate, no harm."

"Do we have a deal," Damon asked calmly.

Amadeus glanced at his staff. It was his treasure.

"The staff stays, but everything else is acceptable."

Damon reached his hand out.

"Deal."

"Now then, what do you know about the pillar," Amadeus asked eagerly.

Damon crossed his arms slowly.

"You mean pillars. There are twelve from what I know, each of them part of the foundation of all things. These are."

"Pillar of Beginning, Genesis, from which all things, including the primordial gods, were formed. Do not ask about the primordial gods. I do not know who or what they are," he cut off Amadeus before he could even ask.

"Ahem."

He cleared his throat.

"From existence, the Pillar of Reality, Aeternis, took shape, solidifying the fabric of the cosmos. As reality crystallized, the Pillar of Time, Chronis, was born, allowing the past, present, and future to flow. The emergence of time gave birth to the Pillar of the Soul, Anima, as life awakened and flourished. From souls arose the Pillar of Emotion, Empyros, carrying desire, will, and the seeds of change. With emotion came the thirst for understanding, leading to the birth of the Pillar of Knowledge, Noesis."

Seras watched him explain, intrigued by his knowledge. She had always thought he was just a crazy person, but now, seeing this knowledgeable side of him, she could not help but feel slightly entranced.

"Yet knowledge begets contradiction, and from it emerged the Pillar of Chaos, Pandemion, the force of boundless unpredictability. Chaos, however, could not exist unchecked, and so the Pillar of Order, Kosmos, manifested to bring structure and law. The clash of order and chaos birthed the Pillar of Conflict, Bellum, the driving force behind evolution, struggle, and growth."

He paused, then added, "That is the pillar the goddess holds, and the one in this world. It is the reason this world is always at war. We are all imprisoned, affected by its madness and its nature. Conflict eternal."

Taking a sip of his drink, he cleared his throat and continued, recalling what the Unnoticed Singularity had told him about the pillars.

"From conflict arose the Pillar of Ascension, Apotheon, embodying the will to rise, transcend, and surpass all limits. But all things, no matter how great, must one day return to nothingness, and thus the Pillar of Void, Nihilos, came into being. Even the void must one day reach its conclusion, giving way to renewal, and so the Pillar of End, Nemesis, emerged, ensuring that every cycle would one day close."

He stopped, seeing even the lich's jaw slacken from the information he had received.

Damon could have said more, like how the gods fought a war, and how obtaining the pillars was a crucial part of the Unknown God's plan for the omniverse as a whole.

Now Damon focused on why he had gone out of his way to reveal something so vast. In life, if you wanted something, you had to give something as well. He learned that as a street child. That was why he left so many crumbs for the lich to follow. He knew that in the end, someone who willingly turned into a lich would not forsake a chance to learn something new.

He glanced at the lich.

"Now it is my turn."

Damon's eyes were serious. There was a cold focus in them.

"Tell me. Tell me everything you know about the man known as Mugu, the Wicked Prophet."

Renata paused. Of course, that had been Damon's goal, to learn everything he could about Mugu.

Amadeus paused.

"I do not know much. At least, I do not know anything you would deem useful. Nevertheless, I will tell you what I know."

Chapter 915: Driven By Love

From his memory, Amadeus tried to remember what Mugu had been like when he first met him all those years ago.

"There was a youth from the Demon Continent. I remember him well. His gaze was filled with a strange conviction." He paused slightly, as if recalling what Mugu had looked like.

"Yes, he was the student of the woman who would become the Ascendant that wore the armor of Crescent Seer. At the time, there was no such thing."

Damon listened carefully. From what he already knew, the Ascendant armor was a result of Mugu and Vathren meeting the Unknown God, through which they gained knowledge of the armor. With that knowledge, Lysithara created five of those armors in order to resist the corruption and rot spread by the outsiders.

This was before all that. Before the motivation for Mugu to do all that he did.

"Before he became her student, he was not a particularly talented young man. He was unyielding in his ambition. All he wanted was strength, as if someone or something was chasing him."

The lich touched his staff gently, lost in memories.

"His peers did not really like him very much. Mugu was an antisocial person, although I suppose it was not by choice." Amadeus could picture him in his mind's eye, training long after the halls had gone empty, again and again and again.

"Why was that," Damon asked, being an antisocial person himself.

Amadeus paused, as if he did not want Damon to ask that.

"Mugu did not have the time for that, or at least he believed he did not. When others socialized, as it is in man's nature, he would train. When we were given a task, Mugu would push himself far beyond the goal."

Damon could see it now. A peerless prodigy who could achieve anything.

"Must have been hard competing with a genius."

Amadeus shook his head.

"On the contrary, Mugu was not a genius, as history has led everyone to believe. He was not a born prodigy like Ashcroft. If anything, he was average, or perhaps slightly above so."

Seras narrowed her eyes. Average. An average man could never achieve what Mugu had done. He had single handedly changed the world forever.

"How did an average man achieve all that. Creating the demon race. Seizing the Doom Continent."

The lich leaned back, his head low. If he had eyes in his sockets, then Damon would have seen a hint of melancholy.

"That was what made him terrifying. He achieved all that with mediocre talent. Mugu was not the smartest. He certainly was not the fastest or the strongest. Mugu was someone who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals. And that made him a monster. His drive. His conviction."

The bony hands of the lich trembled, as if he was reliving some memory.

"Everyone works hard. We would train until we bled. Mugu trained until he was half dead. If we were asked to run a hundred miles, Mugu would run ten thousand. When we rested, he trained. When we read a page, he crammed a hundred."

The lich shook his head slowly.

"Even if he was average, he worked more than anyone else. Even when everyone felt resentful, we still respected the result. He pushed everyone around him to go beyond their limits. It was like an infection."

From his tone, it was almost as if the lich was happy.

"It was then that he caught the eye of Valcara and became her personal apprentice. It was not because she wanted to take him on. It was simply because Mugu refused to give up. He was everywhere she was, full of sincerity. In the end, she was moved."

Damon frowned.

Wait. Something was wrong. If Mugu was so great, why did she not want him as her apprentice. He figured Mugu would not have to beg.

The lich saw his expression and understood his question.

"Valcara was a seer and had a premonition. If she took Mugu as her apprentice, she would meet an ill fate. That was why she rejected him, or at least that was what I heard from Valarie."

Damon nodded slowly. He remembered the woman in the mist on the bridge leading to the Whispering Forest.

"So he used and betrayed her."

The lich shook his head.

"No. Valcara changed him. Under her tutelage, he became more open with others, and soon enough he was popular. Those of us who shared the same academic path with him soon learned his story and the reason for his drive. He would not shut up about it. It was the one time he looked happy. But that happiness was a trap."

"What was the reason," Seras asked softly.

The lich was quiet for a moment, then answered.

"He was in love."

Damon almost spilled the wine when he heard that. In love. That was his drive. His motive. How did that lead to him wanting to help the Unknown God.

The lich glanced at Damon briefly.

"Love is a powerful emotion. It is a harbinger of ruin. It is this love that ruined Mugu. It was also this love that broke Valcara. This love would ruin the world. Love is terrifying," Amadeus whispered, his staff shaking slightly.

Damon's eyes narrowed. Was this lich afraid of love.

"Why," Renata finally spoke.

"Is not love supposed to be beautiful. Something that brings people together. No one is alone when they have love, even if it is a little scary." She spoke while glancing at Damon.

The lich shook his head.

"I suppose. Nevertheless, its beauty is ephemeral. Its consequences ruinous. Mugu's drive was simple. Far in his homeland of Valtheron."

"Valtheron," Seras repeated. Was not Mugu from the Demon Continent, Centros. Why was he a person from Valtheron here in the War Continent, Soltheon.

"Valtheron used to be a small kingdom in the Demon Continent," Damon spoke to clear her confusion.

"You should study more," he added.

"Mugu had a childhood sweetheart. Personally, I have never met her. From the way he described her, you would imagine her to be a goddess in this world. His love was not one sided, and they had promised to be together forever. A promise Mugu would stop at nothing to complete."

Damon had a feeling this was about to take a bad turn. It already had.

"One day, a waste of a prince from the royal family saw her and took a liking to her. She was forcibly taken from Mugu and made to be his bride. Mugu fought back. In the end, what could he do against the royal crown. In order to save his life, she agreed to the marriage with a promise from Mugu that he would return to save her."

The lich paused slightly. Even he seemed sad.

"That was his drive for getting stronger. His drive for everything. It was his love. He left the continent and sought out Lysithara. He followed the perilous paths and even crossed the Duhu Mountains alone until he arrived."

Amadeus held his staff with both hands now, slowly shaking his head.

"At the time, we all cheered him on. We never knew his refusal to give up would lead to ruin."

It was a long time ago. Even now, Amadeus still remembered Mugu.

"It was sad, really. Mugu loved this girl, and in Lysithara his own teacher had fallen in love with him. That was Valcara's damnation. Those feelings would be what led to her ruin."

Damon blinked. All of this was interconnected. This was why Mugu hated the rulers of Valtheron so much. They took his lover because he was weak. How much rage must he have carried. Enough for a common man to change the world.

"What happened next. How did he do all this."

Amadeus shook his head.

"I do not know. All I know is he grew stronger very fast and left Lysithara seeking further strength. He was gone for years."

His hollow gaze was filled with purple light.

"When next I saw him, he was broken. He was darker and more broken than before. He was angry too, yet more than anything Mugu was lost. Still, his drive now pushed toward a new goal."

Mugu carried many scars. His eyes were dark. There was pain he could not hide. The person who had seemed unstoppable was now just a broken shell filled with anger.

"He began to speak of the metaverse and knowledge in defiance of the goddess," the lich muttered, recalling how powerful Mugu was when he returned to Lysithara.

The peak of what a mortal could achieve. Seventh class advancement.

"Valcara could see he was lost. Even so, driven by her feelings, she still stood by him," Amadeus' tone was low.

"Valarie, Vathren, Vulcan, all her friends tried to convince her to give up on Mugu."

"I remember she had told Valarie, if you one day fall for your student, then you will know that I will gladly die for him." The lich seemed to sigh even without lungs.

"I do not remember much. All I know is Valcara and Mugu convinced them. They sold the idea, and from that idea the outsiders came into our world."

"And that was just the beginning of the end for Lysithara and the First Epoch."

Damon was about to say something when the lich raised his head.

"That is all I know about Mugu."

Damon nodded softly until the lich raised his head to the sky.

"There was something else. Words he spoke that I cannot seem to forget. On the day I met him after his return to Lysithara, I heard him say."

Amadeus paused until the words that came out of his mouth made Damon's blood run cold.

"We are not asked to be born; we are forced to exist. Today was a horrible day; tomorrow will be worse. In the end, it will all come to pass. All things fade. Memories perish with time, the greatest destroyer."

Damon felt his heart go cold.

These words were the Unknown God's philosophy.

And the philosophy that had shaped Damon's life.

Chapter 916: Rivalries

These words had been the prime motivators of Damon's philosophy, his life. It was these words that had tied him to the Unknown God.

He had known that the words he found written in the stone under the roots of the ancient tree had to have been written by someone.

What Damon wanted to know was this. Was it fate, or random chance, or perhaps the machinations of the Unknown God.

All Damon could think about was the cruel realization that choice was an illusion and the Unknown God was a god of fate. All things were driven by fate, even the idea of choice.

Amadeus did not say any more. He had said all that needed to be said. This was all he could say about Mugu, as for how he became the Wicked Prophet and the first demon.

"Mugu lured the world and Lysithara with the goal of achieving Akasha."

He did not know more than that. Amadeus had left Lysithara when the outsiders first appeared. He wanted to test his horizons and grow as much as Mugu had. During that time, he shared some of the knowledge of summoning and assisted in summoning outsiders all across the world.

This had been a mistake because the moment enough of them had arrived and they had gained physical vessels, they showed their true colors.

Their relationship with the outsiders was complicated. These were higher ranked entities, but they were not a monolith. The outsiders had many varieties. Some seemed alien and wrong. Some seemed divine. Some seemed demonic. Some carried strange artifacts and dressed weirdly.

They did not get along with each other, and some of them were enemies long before coming here.

What they could agree on was one thing, and that was their objective.

"At the time, I did not know what it was," Amadeus added one last time to Damon, standing up from his bone chair as it vanished.

"Of all things, what I cannot seem to forget was their disdain. They looked down on everyone and everything except Mugu. For whatever reason, he was not viewed with as much disdain. It was almost as if they viewed him as an equal. Why would they not. After all, he was the Prophet of the Unknown God."

Seras and Damon glanced at each other as the lich walked away into the canopy of trees. With each step, he faded slightly, as if he were worn and tired.

His voice echoed through the evil forest.

"The knowledge you have shared with me is interesting. I pray we never meet again."

On the table, he left the box for Damon along with some pieces of parchment.

Damon took the box, inspecting it while his heart filled with thoughts of Mugu.

"I wonder what his life was like."

As soon as he said that, the box reacted to the subconscious wish he had muttered. It shattered, turned into black ash, and then liquefied into a tattoo on Damon's wrist.

He was taken aback by how fast it had happened.

"Ah, damn it. That was not what I wanted to wish for."

He understood it was not a magical wish. If it were, Amadeus would have just used it to wish for infinite knowledge. He might even have achieved Akasha.

Absolute knowledge of all kinds of magic.

Seras flipped through the parchment he had left.

"It is a map and a rough outline of the dangers and monsters in the area."

Renata helped her flip through more of them. Her face paled slightly.

"This does not make our journey easier. It only means we know our likelihood of death."

Damon's ears perked up when he heard death. He removed his gaze from the small tattoo on his wrist. It was not doing anything anyway.

His gaze crossed to the rest of the large trees.

"We need to get going then."

Seras nodded slowly, knowing they were in for a lot of trouble.

"I will share this with those who have an affinity for this type of work. It should also be useful for our scouts, although I might have to prevent any further scouting. Better to keep the expedition force together."

He nodded at her slowly. That was a valid line of reasoning. Seras had experience with these things. If anyone could take an expedition force in and out of the evil forest, it was her.

Half an hour later, they were ready to set out.

Everyone was on a nocturnal stag, and Damon had been given a new one. They were slightly freaked out by the lich but were still grateful they did not have to fight it.

He could feel their admiring eyes and hear their words, calling him a very learned man.

Damon did not mind the praise as long as they kept what they learned secret.

As for the condition he set on the oath scroll.

Should the person in the scroll intend to reveal the secret, then their heart would explode and their soul would die, as long as they had memories or records of the events of that day.

The loophole was simple. Die or erase your memories of that day.

Damon reached the Hungry Ground first. It was a dark patch of soil that seemed just the same as the rest of the forest, yet there were strange black roots growing upward from the trees. It was hard to notice them due to how the forest was always filled with strange plants.

This could be lethal to weaker people, but at the third class and above it was an inconvenience at most. Small injuries, rashes, or hallucinations depending on the variety. In extreme cases, instant death.

You could never be too safe with places like this.

With Deathless acting to kill him and nothing happening so far, Damon was careful.

Seras caught up, and her nocturnal stag moved past him. As soon as it stepped on the ground, the earth wobbled as if it were semi liquid like water.

The earth was pitch black and soft like wet ash.

Damon stepped off his stag and touched the ground. Footprints sank deeper than they should. The ground felt warm, like living flesh. He wondered if it would bleed if he cut it.

Damon took a deep breath. It was safe, as safe as could be in the evil forest, and mounted his stag, following the exact path as everyone.

As soon as it took three steps into the area, the whole stag and Damon were pulled into the soil.

Chapter 917: Hungry Soil

It was quick, violent, and shocking, and the entire expedition force could only watch as the massive stag and its rider were dragged into almost certain death.

Several knights shifted in their saddles, hands reaching instinctively for reins and weapons.

Just as they were about to surge forward to save him, a black shadow slid through the ground like oil and sprang onto Renata's stag. The air rippled, and Damon materialized atop it, his face pale and drawn.

"Phew. That was a close one. I almost died."

Renata stiffened, her fingers tightening on the reins as something wet struck the ground beside her.

Blood.

Damon swayed slightly in the saddle. Strange black roots writhed out from beneath his armor, piercing through torn metal and flesh alike. His face was lacerated, thin cuts tracing down his cheek and jaw, blood running freely. That was why he was pale.

He inhaled sharply through his teeth and pulled out a vial of healing potion. With his other hand he gripped one of the black roots and tore it free. Flesh came with it. He did not hesitate. He ripped out another, and another, strips of his own skin and muscle peeling away as dark sap like ichor dripped to the forest floor.

Even the veterans who had survived countless battlefields stared in disbelief. A few swallowed hard. Those who served House Brightwater forced themselves into motion and rushed to him.

"My lord, are you okay?" a pale faced healer asked, already stepping closer. Her blue eyes were sharp even in the dim forest light. Gray hair spilled from beneath her helm, which she held under one arm as she raised her free hand.

She began channeling healing magic, light gathering faintly around her palm.

Damon lifted a bloodied hand and shook his head.

"It is fine. I can heal my body much faster than you can."

He downed the potion in one smooth motion.

He was not lying. It was not the potion that mattered. He had only taken a low level one.

After nearly dying in that pool in the Holy City, Damon had gained divine energy. Since then, his body had developed a healing factor. It was that factor that had saved his life.

When he had been pulled under, the first two seconds were pure shock. For someone on his level, two seconds was the line between survival and death. The thing beneath the ground had impaled him, but his body had already begun knitting itself together. The pain had jolted him out of shock just long enough to tear himself free and slip through shadow.

"We need to keep moving," Seras ordered, her voice cutting cleanly through the murmurs. She did not slow her stag.

The leader of the knights Damon had purchased straightened in his saddle and raised his hand.

"Knights of the Rising Sun. Change formation. Protect His Excellency with your lives."

That was Silas. At least Damon thought that was his name.

The knights shifted immediately, tightening their formation around him, shields angling outward, eyes scanning the treeline.

"Erhm. You really do not need to do that," Damon muttered, wiping blood from his chin with the back of his hand.

Another stag approached from the rear at a controlled pace. Kael rode it, parchment tucked under one arm, several expedition experts flanking him.

"You should be more careful," the young looking professor said, brows drawn together in visible frustration. He guided his stag closer but kept a careful distance from the hungry soil.

"You realize if you die here, these brave men and women will be executed upon their return."

His tone hardened.

"You are a noble. If you fall first and your knights live, it will be treated as treason. Even if they are innocent."

A knight must die before his lord.

Damon glanced around at the tightened circle of armored bodies.

He understood.

To them, the expedition came second. Protecting Damon came first.

He exhaled slowly and turned his gaze toward the gray haired healer.

"What is your name again?"

She straightened at once.

"I am Lana Summer of the Fourth Radiant Regiment."

Damon studied her for a brief moment, then nodded.

He could not ask them all their names. He had not asked in the beginning because he did not care enough to.

The second reason was colder.

He did not want attachments.

The last person he had grown attached to had died, and he had been powerless to stop it.

When he was a child, Back to Back had once told him that if you do not know someone's name, you feel nothing when they die. They remain just a face in a crowd.

Funny enough, Back to Back had not been his real name.

Even so, killing him had hurt. More than Damon had expected, despite how much he hated that arrogant elf.

"I will remember that," Damon said quietly.

Renata's stag shifted forward again, hooves pressing into the soft dirt.

The rule was simple. The longer you stayed still, the more the ground wanted you.

So they kept moving. Slow, deliberate, never lingering.

Damon remained alert, shoulders tense despite the fading wounds. This was only the beginning. They had kilometers of cursed terrain ahead of them, and beyond that, more cursed regions.

The forest grew darker as they advanced. The trees twisted higher, their branches choking what little light filtered down. Between the trunks, Damon caught glimpses of movement.

Strange apparitions.

When he focused on one, turning his head sharply to catch it fully, it dissolved like smoke.

Each one was fast.

"What are those?" Lana whispered, her grip tightening on her staff.

Damon's eyes narrowed, tracking a flicker to the left before it vanished.

"Evil forest jinn. Or one variation of them. They come in many forms. These ones are observing. Waiting."

Lana's steed kept pace, armor catching brief rays of light that pierced the canopy.

"Waiting for what?" she asked, catching another black flicker at the edge of her vision.

Renata's stag suddenly stumbled.

It dropped to its knees with a heavy thud, breath exploding from its lungs in ragged bursts. Its sides heaved violently as if it had been running for days without rest.

Damon swung down at once, boots sinking slightly into the soft soil. He steadied Renata as she dismounted.

A heartbeat later, Lana's stag buckled as well, legs trembling before collapsing into the hungry ground.

Lana rolled free with disciplined precision and came up on one knee, staff raised, light gathering at its tip.

Damon stepped forward and caught her wrist before she could cast.

"Waiting for us to get tired and weak."

The ground pulsed.

Black roots spread like veins beneath the surface, then shot upward, wrapping around the fallen stags. The animals struggled weakly, then went still as the forest floor drained them.

Damon did not look back.

He stepped forward, forcing his boots through the resisting soil.

"Keep moving," he said, voice calm and cold. "Unless you want to join them."

Chapter 918: Hugging The Right Thighs

There were bones in the sand. Long dead bones. Damon's gaze lingered on a corpse tangled between the trees, black roots spearing through its ribs like grotesque vines claiming a trophy. The flesh had long since rotted away. Rusted weapons and strips of worn leather still clung stubbornly to the skeleton. From the remains of its clothing, he could tell the body had belonged to a man.

A very dead man, from what he could tell it must have been someone from the second epoch based on the design on his weapon.

Not far from it lay a dented helm and a broken bow, its string frayed and worn thin before finally snapping. It was covered in mud its runes faded having lost all of its magical value.

Maybe he could sell it to a collector or something though at this point he was wealthy enough to not care for it.

A deep silence pressed down on them as Damon's boot came down on the skull of some unlucky beast. It cracked under his weight with a dry crunch that sounded far too loud in the stillness.

Everywhere there was evidence of the hungry soil. Its work. Its endless appetite.

The expedition force moved in silence, conserving even the strength required to speak. No one wasted breath on conversation. Only tired, controlled breathing followed them like a rhythm of survival. Every ounce of energy mattered.

This stretch of the forest alone spanned several hundred kilometers.

Damon pulled his boots free from the soft soil with visible effort, the ground clinging stubbornly to him as if reluctant to let go. His lips twisted in disgust. It felt as though the forest resisted him more than the others.

"Hmhm," he groaned, rolling his shoulders as fatigue crept into his limbs faster than usual.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Seras asked in a sharp whisper without slowing her stride.

"Nothing. Just wondering why no one tried to destroy the Evil Forest. This place is miserable and it spreads across the whole continent," he muttered, scanning the trees as he walked.

Seras glanced sideways at him, one brow lowering.

"Someone did. Did you forget the incident that led to the summoning of Rashi Ignath and drained the Empire's treasury?"

Damon's steps slowed. His head dipped.

Right. Emperor Rashnet had tried to burn it down. The forest responded by summoning Ignath. The aftermath had scarred the land and marked the current age with the first confirmed manifestation of the ancient dark spirit Ignath.

"That skipped my mind. I think it was second year material."

"Yes," Kael added, adjusting the grip on his staff as he walked. "There were earlier records of minor manifestations. They were considered unreliable and dismissed. After the incident, imperial scholars intensified research into dark spirits, especially Ignath, until the Temple declared the topic forbidden."

Damon shot Kael Blackthorne a flat look.

"Professor. I am already inside a cursed forest. I do not need a lecture. I better receive excellent grades after this terrible expedition."

"You will receive full credits," Kael replied with restrained patience.

Damon suddenly stopped mid step.

His boot sank deeper than before.

"Did you see that?"

Seras halted instantly, hand tightening on her weapon. Her eyes swept the surrounding trees.

"What? I did not see anything."

Damon jerked his foot free as thin black roots snapped upward, narrowly missing his ankle. Dirt sprayed outward.

"Hmm. Must have been the wind."

He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

"I worry too much. It is not like some entity made of roots would spawn behind me and try to grab me."

The expedition force slowly stared at him.

A large shadow swallowed his silhouette.

Damon exhaled.

"I just had to say it."

He dropped and rolled without looking back. In the same motion, he thrust a hand behind him and unleashed a roaring torrent of flames. Fire surged outward in a violent wave, heat blistering and yet carrying that unnatural, soul chilling coldness within it.

A heavy impact followed.

Massive roots rose up to shield the creature, glowing red like heated metal as they absorbed the blast.

Seras moved the instant Damon cleared the space. Her blade carved downward in a thin, precise arc. The air split. The trees behind the creature were severed cleanly along with the towering root mass itself.

Blood red sap spilled from the wound as the monster collapsed with a thunderous crash.

"Phew." Damon straightened, dusting dirt from his coat.

"That was close. Just one. I thought we would be dealing with a swarm. I guess I was paranoid. We will clear this place easily. The hungry soil is not that bad as long as you keep moving."

Lana, now unofficially acting as his personal healer, instinctively lifted her hand as if to silence him. She froze halfway and slowly lowered it, remembering her position.

The soil trembled.

Its surface rippled and churned as if something vast beneath it had shifted in irritation.

Seras blinked once.

Then she smacked the back of Damon's head.

"What is wrong with you? Why would you say that? You believe in jinxes more than anyone."

Damon covered his mouth.

Right. He did.

'I see. It is Deathless, is it not? Well played. Well played.'

He looked at Seras.

"I did not mean to. It slipped out."

Kael stepped forward, staff sliding fully into his grasp.

"There are theories suggesting the Evil Forest functions as a collective organism. It may perceive intent or speech. I did not expect it to be capable of emotional response."

Renata looked at Wendy, who balanced a raven and a squirrel calmly on her shoulders.

They glanced at one another before speaking in perfect unison.

"Congratulations, Damon. You have successfully ragebaited an entire forest."

A system chime rang in his ears.

[Rage bait +30]

[Rage bait +40]

[Rage bait +20]

[Rage bait +100]

[Rage bait +250]

[Ragebaiting lvl 7] +4

His skill rose four levels instantly.

He had not even tried.

After weeks of deliberate provocation, this was when it worked. When his life was genuinely in danger.

Seras drew her tachi fully, magical energy coursing along the blade.

"Battle formations. Keep moving. Circular rotation. Do not keep your feet in one place."

The expedition force shifted immediately, boots grinding against unstable soil.

The ground around them exploded outward. From ruptured earth, thick sludge rose. From within the sludge, roots twisted and shaped themselves into humanoid forms, coated in mud.

Each bore a distinct human face.

Faces of those devoured by the hungry soil.

Damon felt irritation flare.

He turned toward the tense soldiers.

"Stand strong. They may look intimidating, but do not waver. These are relics from previous eras who failed to overcome this miserable forest. Cut them down."

The soldiers straightened, weapons tightening in their grips.

Yet the aura around the root incarnations swelled. Their eyes burned red. Weapons lifted higher.

Seras slowly turned her head toward Damon.

Damon cleared his throat.

"I did not do that intentionally."

"Silence."

The forest erupted in blinding flashes of magic as both sides unleashed volleys.

Damon casually brushed a ball of flame aside with a flick of his wrist, dispersing it midair.

"They can use magic. I thought they relied purely on brute strength."

The root incarnations paused.

One stepped forward. Its robes marked it as a fallen mage. Mud dripped from its skeletal fingers as it released a soul tearing scream and lunged directly at Damon.

Logically, it should have kept its distance.

Its eyes said it did not care.

In undeath, it wanted only him.

Damon shifted his stance and sidestepped at the last moment. Wendy's bone sword flashed upward, cleaving the creature cleanly from the air. Its body twitched violently before sinking back into the soil.

"Radiant Knights, defensive formation. Protect Lord Damon," Silas commanded as shields locked around him.

Damon frowned at the protective wall.

He was not used to this.

Without warning, he surged forward through an opening and unleashed a spiraling torrent of flames, incinerating several root warriors at once.

The quicker they died, the better.

But more rose.

They climbed over each other, merging into a writhing mound of roots, stampeding forward in a chaotic wave. All of them surged toward Damon.

He paused briefly, staring at the swelling mass as fire reflected in his eyes.

Then he glanced at Seras.

She looked back at him.

He gave her a soft, shameless smile.

In the next instant, he teleported directly beside her, abandoning the center line.

He made what he considered the most logical decision available.

His gaze flicked downward briefly.

Then he wrapped both arms firmly around her thick thighs, holding tight without hesitation.

There was no time for words.

The swarm crashed forward, magic exploding through the air, roots splintering, steel ringing against hardened wood.

Seras cursed under her breath as the tide bore down on them.

From the strength of Damon's grip, she understood immediately.

He had absolutely no intention of letting go.

Chapter 919: Displace

Seras kicked him off her thighs with a controlled swing of her legs, the motion graceful yet powerful, which sent Damon flying backward into a tree.

His back slammed against the trunk with a heavy thud, bark splintering and leaves shaking loose from the impact.

She took a deep breath, chest rising slowly as she watched the broken piles of roots on the ground, each of them destroyed in so many places. The red sap in their bodies, resembling blood, dyed the ground and streaked across her boots and clothes.

Damon stood up with a sigh of relief, rubbing the back of his head as bits of bark fell from his shoulders.

"Man that was close you really came in a clutch..I knew my master plan of luring them away from everyone would work.."

He spoke this loud enough for everyone to hear, straightening his coat and brushing dust from it, even though he had not actually planned this at all. This was just a lucky outcome.

Seras shot him a glare.

On the other side, members of the expedition were looking at him with expressions of awe and wonder, their earlier fear now replaced with admiration.

"Amazing so that was his plan."

"I heard Damon Grey was a tactical genius as well."

"No surprise he is the grandson of the Golden Sun."

"He's so brave he risked his life for us what a selfless person.."

Renata closed her eyes in resignation.

If they thought that was his goal, then they were dead wrong.

He had only been thinking of himself.

That said, she was impressed. Damon really was a master of weaving a story. Look how quickly he created a narrative and let others fill in the gaps for him.

Seras looked around at the expedition force, then down at the black roots still coiled across her feet. She lifted one leg and yanked it free with force, sap stretching before snapping.

"Lets go now.." she ordered as the tired expedition force continued to move.

The forest had thrown everything it had in this area at them, and Seras had slaughtered it.

As they walked, Damon suddenly felt as if they had crossed an invisible boundary, like stepping through a thin membrane in the air. He paused for half a second, scanning the surroundings carefully, but he did not seem

to find anything unusual. Seras was still walking ahead without hesitation, so he figured he was just being paranoid.

She was the right thigh to hug.

Damon glanced at her thick thighs again and could not help but smile faintly.

"I can feel you objectify me... stop or die.." Seras said without looking back, cutting through a shrub with a clean, horizontal slash that made the forest feel thick and dense around them.

Damon placed his hand on his chest in mock offense.

"What nonsense I wasn't objectifying you.. I just thought you looked pretty from behind..." he laughed, not minding in the slightest that Seras still had her blade drawn.

"I've killed men for less.." Seras said, irritation seeping into her tone.

"Explains why you're single... no one wants to mingle....." Damon's smile deepened as he strode up beside her, hands casually behind his back.

Seras clenched her fist tightly, knuckles whitening, then slowly released it and sighed.

"Thats not true..." she muttered under her breath.

Damon rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Keep telling yourself that if I die here there not gonna be any man who would want to objectify you.. if anything you should be honored and appreciate me appreciating your back side... I might be the only man who wants you..."

Seras suddenly paused mid step and slowly drew out her tachi.

The faint metallic whisper of steel sliding free echoed between the trees.

Damon felt his scalp tingle from her reaction.

Then she smiled.

"Alright then... I admit... so be it... if thats the case why dont you take care of me from now on... I dont like a wishy washy man I want someone who can look me in the eye... so from now on I'll be in your care..."

Damon froze, his face filling with confusion as he blinked twice.

"Wait wait something ain't right... what's that supposed to mean.."

Seras smiled lightly, her eyes narrowing just a little.

"It means I accept your formal proposal to me of course if you were a wishy washy man and were just toying with my feelings I'll have to kill you to save face.."

She leaned closer to him, the cold edge of her tachi pressing lightly against his armor near his collarbone.

"You're not are you.."

Damon closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. He looked her up and down slowly and thought.

'If I say no there is a small chance I will suffer some fatal injury or death if I nod my head I'll be messing around with a woman my mothers age..'

He raised his hand stiffly to offer a handshake.

"Sounds like a win win to me... I'll be in your care.."

She frowned at the wording, then chuckled quietly. This sounded like a good way to kill time, so she did not really mind, not that she had prospects anyway.

"Well then take care of me.." Seras said slowly, her voice cold and stripped of emotion.

Damon placed his hand on his chest again.

"Actually take care of me instead..."

Before he could say anything else, he heard a sound.

"Actually take care of me instead."

Something repeated it from the trees.

Damon was about to raise his head to look when Seras' hand snapped onto the back of his head and forced it down.

"Don't look.." she muttered under her breath.

"Don't look.. ahahhhah.." something laughed in the trees.

"Keep your heads down... now.." Seras screamed to the expedition force.

Not everyone was so lucky.

Someone slowly raised their head.

It was a young man with a scar on his neck. He was in the third class so he could not have been that young, but he still looked young nonetheless.

His brown eyes widened as if he had seen something in the trees where the voice came from.

His pupils turned white.

Chapter 920: Look up

Then from the edges of his eyes, blood began to seep and run down his cheeks.

He stood there frozen, staring upward, as if he had just laid eyes on something his mind could not comprehend.

The soft soil below their feet was the first to flee.

Even a region of the Evil Forest was scared of whatever was speaking in the trees, and so the soil withdrew along with the black roots, retracting violently underground.

What changed was the texture of the black earth.

It was now as hard and steady as Damon remembered from normal ground.

Only now he felt dread.

Damon saw Seras slowly turn around and begin forming hand signs. She gestured to the expedition force and then to Damon next to her. She made a sign that would have made any person refuse the order.

Still, they all knew this was the only way.

She moved her hand to her mouth.

Without hesitation, she pulled out her own tongue and cut it off.

The severed tongue fell to the ground.

At the exact same moment, her voice echoed from the trees.

"Everyone ready your weapons and attack the entities in the trees.."

It was terrifying.

They were all looking directly at Seras.

She had not spoken a single word.

Her mouth was full of blood.

Yet her voice was coming from the trees.

The trees, and whatever was perched within them, had been using her voice.

If she had not acted fast, they would have been taken just like the first person.

Damon bit his lip hard.

It seemed they had somehow reached the Listening Canopy faster than they had thought.

Or maybe it was the canopy that came to them.

This was a region of the Evil Forest they had been poised to enter, but that would not have been for at least another three days of traveling.

Seras' tongue bled heavily as she glanced at him.

Damon sighed internally.

He had to do it too.

The Listening Canopy definitely had his voice now.

He waved his hand, and the shadow around him materialized into a thin knife. Without hesitation, he pulled out his tongue and cut it off.

Blood filled his mouth, rushing down his throat and along his chin and neck.

The taste was fishy and metallic.

Damon was not shaken.

His expression remained calm as if he had not just mutilated himself.

The rules of this place were simple according to Amadeus' records.

Once the canopy knew your name, your tongue was your greatest enemy.

If you did not cut it off, it would grow green and begin to rot the more the forest spoke in your voice.

Do not look into the trees.

Something horrible was sitting there.

When you saw it, it would break your mind and your soul would shatter.

In some cases, it would steal something from you.

Companions hear orders or cries that never happened. Some follow them into the woods and are never found.

More importantly, this was the part most similar to the Whispering Forest.

It must not know your name.

If it did, it would command you to look up, and with each call it would weaken your will until you finally did.

Renata had not been speaking, so the Listening Canopy did not know her voice. She did not cut off her tongue. Instead, she took out a rope and bound her mouth as tightly as possible. She did the same for Wendy, who kept her eyes firmly downcast.

Some members of the expedition did not take chances. They cut off their tongues without hesitation.

It was safer that way.

The smell of blood filled the air thick and heavy.

Damon saw a faint light shining down when he heard a voice urging him to look up.

It was the voice of Seras asking him for help.

He was not stupid.

She was right next to him.

He nudged her with his elbow slightly.

Seras looked at him from the corner of her eye and gave him a small head sign that meant endure it.

Damon glanced back at the path they had taken and saw strangely formed trees behind them.

He looked down and noticed strange flowers growing around their roots.

The flowers seemed to radiate faint spatial power.

He narrowed his eyes.

That was where they had passed.

Were those displacement flowers.

He appraised them carefully.

They were.

This was a type of flower in the Evil Forest that teleported and displaced people from one location to another using its spatial characteristics.

'I see... we skipped a few days of traveling without even meaning to..'

"Damon quick look up.." Seras screamed urgently.

His neck tensed.

He almost lifted his head.

Then he stopped himself.

"Dammit that was convincing almost fell for it.."

Damon took a deep breath of cold air and started walking again from the trees. Sera's soft voice tried to get him to look up.

""Don't you want to know about your mother? If you look up, I can tell you. I'll show you." The voice in the trees spoke in a gentle tone that belied anything that had ever come out of that woman's mouth.

Seras would never be that gentle with anyone, he was sure about that. She was as cold as steel and as swift and unrelenting as death. As if that madwoman would be gentle...

"She wouldn't, right? Damon thought, the blood on his chin drying up.

He glanced at her walking slowly by his side with venom in her eyes. Yes, definitely, she would never be that soft-spoken. That was a woman raised in war for you.

She glanced at him, then gestured aggressively for him to keep walking. Her glare told him so.

If you let yourself get ensnared I will beat you to a pulp ..

Damon bit his lips. He would've said something if he had a tongue.

Plop.

Someone fell to their knees, their face white. The Listening Canopy had taken them.

He felt his hair stand on end.