

Shadow 921

Chapter 921: Break The Rules

His body felt heavy. His tongue had started to regenerate, but when he felt it inside his mouth, something was wrong. This was not how a tongue was supposed to feel.

Damon stuck his tongue out of his mouth in hopes of getting a good look at it, or whatever was left of it. He expected to see blood and regenerating flesh.

What he saw was both astounding and terrifying.

His tongue was longer.

No, not just longer.

It was really long. Long enough that it extended slightly farther than a dog's tongue.

When he gazed down, Damon suppressed the raw urge to scream at what he saw.

His tongue, or what should have been a tongue, was now a pale white maggot like thing with a human face and a mouth like a beast filled with serrated teeth. It had its own smaller tongue writhing inside, and small beady dots in place of eyes.

Damon could feel it.

His nerves still controlled it.

This was without a doubt his tongue.

Then his tongue moved with a disgusting crunch.

It spoke in a voice he hated.

Smooth. Calm.

The voice of Damon Grey himself.

The creatures that mimicked human voices were the worst of the worst. He truly hated them and their mind games.

"You're still alive... that's too bad. Here I thought you wanted to die. Can't believe you let a measly little curse stop you."

Damon did not say anything.

He ignored it completely and turned to Seras.

Her own tongue had grown one of its own, but hers was different. It was made of blood and leaked small flickers of fire as it writhed in the air.

He wrinkled his nose at the rotten stench coming from his own mouth.

'Does that mean each person's tongue manifests differently..'

"Ha ha ha how smart..." the rotten tongue laughed, the vile stench growing stronger as it lifted itself closer to his face.

"Smell it yes smell it this is the vile stench of your mouth.."

The tongue rose higher, almost brushing his nose.

"A mouth of a liar and a deceiver... this is the mouth of someone who hurts and—"

Damon sliced off the disgusting tongue with one clean swipe of his blade.

It fell to the ground, twitching.

This was not something new, and he was not interested in hearing a lecture from his own tongue.

He forced his head down and stepped forward, crushing shrubs beneath his boots.

The greenery around them was enormous, making the whole place feel like a labyrinth of plants.

Worse, they could not look up.

With each step they took, the entity in the trees called out to them, urging them to look up.

Damon was unsure how to react or how to retaliate.

Seras was enduring it, just like everyone else, but enduring was not solving anything.

He glanced at her.

She only shook her head slightly, telling him not to engage.

Damon gritted his teeth and continued walking, his face cold with suppressed rage.

They continued walking until sunset.

When the sun was gone, the tree line glowed faintly.

From that dim glow, Damon could make out the vague shapes of something in the trees.

Something that did not seem human.

Something that did not make sense.

The more Damon stared at its vague silhouette, the more its shape began to feel real.

The more real it felt, the more curious he became about its nature.

The more he tried to piece together what it was.

As he did, his eyes slowly began to glaze over.

Thin white lines formed around his dark irises.

More white lines began to appear.

Damon's soul slowly weakened.

His face paled.

He slowly began to hear the voice of his mother beckoning him home for dinner.

It was warm.

Soft.

Gentle.

It gave him the feeling of her warm embrace as she held him close, her body soft and comforting, a reminder that he was loved and wanted.

His eyes slowly began to whiten further.

The shape in the trees cemented more clearly as it whispered.

"Look up."

Damon slowly raised his head toward the faint light above.

Just as his gaze was about to meet whatever was there, his shadow shook violently and rose, spreading upward to blanket his face.

His face paled as realization struck him.

He quickly forced his head down, breaking the line of sight.

He turned around and saw that a few members of the expedition force were missing.

They were gone.

Just like that.

Damon did not know when in their journey they had disappeared.

Only that they had.

A cold dread washed over him, making his thoughts sharper as fear tightened around his chest.

Lana stopped walking, her face pale when she saw Damon's expression.

She slowly turned her head and realized one of the knights was gone.

She remembered he was from the Sunflower Division, a unit different from the one she was part of. They had known each other for quite a while, having served under the same battalion.

Now he was gone.

Her mouth was bound with ropes, but even then she let out a muffled gasp of despair.

Her reaction alerted everyone.

A fog of fear spread through the expedition force.

They shifted into a defensive formation as the creature picked them off one by one.

And as if to add insult to injury, pouring salt into their wounds—

Blood fell from the canopy.

Along with it came organs.

Severed limbs.

And then a piece of human skin fell onto Lana's head, sliding down into her hair and making it sticky.

When she reached up and pulled it down, she saw it was a hand.

There was a small silver wedding ring on it.

She recognized that ring.

It belonged to him.

He would brag about how he had three children and a beautiful wife waiting for him at home.

During the Demon Wars, his greatest fear was dying without leaving them anything behind.

He hated the thought of not being able to see them again.

Even though he hid it well.

Now he was gone.

Taken by the canopy.

She heard mocking laughter in his voice.

"Adelaide is the prettiest girl in my town... I was so lucky to have married her... in fact I beat up every man who tried to woo her until I was the only one left... her hair... you should hear about her hair and her eyes..."

Lana trembled.

That was his voice.

Laughing.

Bragging.

Yet now the Listening Canopy was mocking them, repeating words he had said many times.

She used to hate how he could not stop bragging.

But she liked how happy he sounded when he talked about his family.

Lana kept walking even as more blood rained down on them.

The sounds of human bones being crushed and mangled by something massive echoed through the air.

In the tree line, the faint glowing light cast deep shadows across the ground.

Its vague shape held another person in its hands.

It squeezed.

The body popped like a melon.

Blood poured down.

The sickening stench of fear and human waste mixed with the metallic scent of blood.

Lana wanted to turn around.

She wanted to run.

She was scared.

She was really scared.

She was so scared she could not even remember to be angry.

This was different from fighting demons.

At least demons were something her mind could understand and comprehend.

This was not.

She could not even look at it.

She could not even see it.

"I want to go home... I'm scared..."

Her eyes widened.

Her own voice echoed from the trees.

Her eyes watered as dread crushed her chest.

Her legs buckled and knocked against each other.

"I want to run... where should I run... I'm scared... I don't want to die..."

Her voice echoed again.

But it was not only hers.

The voices of the knights.

The entire expedition force.

"If I die who will take care of my aging mother..."

"I'm going to die like this here in this forest without any honor without any glory..."

"A nobody that's all I am that's all I will ever be no one will remember the name Silas Arcborn because I don't matter my father was right I am nothing my ideals are nothing even if I save a thousand people I will never amount to anything..."

The voices continued.

Until she heard Damon's voice from the canopy.

"So what if I die... it doesn't even matter the most significant thing in life is death... even so... whoever wants to kill me should prepare to join me in hell."

Lana paused.

That was the only voice that stood out to her.

Of all the voices projecting subconscious fear and desperate wishes to survive, he alone did not care.

It was as if hearing that depressing and arrogant voice was a beacon in this illuminated hell.

She was entranced.

She wanted to look up and see what expression he was making when he said that.

But Damon Grey was not up there.

He was in front of her.

His face was cold.

Controlled.

Then at last the voice she had been dreading was heard.

The voice of Seras.

It was calm.

Dull.

"Its all the same it doesn't change... the war never ends the battlefield just changes from one cloud of dust to another sea of blood is there a purpose to this war why am I fighting for something so tedious so hideous... death why do you accompany war...and leave me in solitude."

Damon moved toward her and grabbed her shoulder firmly.

He shook his head once.

Then he reached into his coat and downed a potion.

His tongue regenerated properly this time.

Raw flesh knitting together.

He inhaled once.

"Lets kill this son of a bitch.." he spoke with his own voice, deliberately breaking the rules of the Listening Canopy.

Chapter 922: The Shovel To The Past

The academy was quiet.

This place was usually bustling with activity, yet now it was empty, save for the first year students moving through the halls in small clusters.

Luna came out of the War Halls, glancing at her academy ranking through her pager. She could not help but wince.

She was number one.

Worse, she did not earn it.

The fact of the matter was her elder brother had more or less threatened everyone during the entrance exam, so Luna was now number one with very little effort.

As for the professors, they just let it slide, especially after the aptitude test.

Luna Grey was a prodigy with magic. Her mana levels were the highest in her year, as well as her overall potential. If a monster like her older brother had not already broken the scale, she would be even more distinguished.

With each step she took down the corridor, she could feel other people's gazes lingering on her.

"Thats her right... the sister..."

Of course that was what they called her.

The sister.

She was the little sister of the troublemaker Damon Grey.

Luna had done some digging, and sure enough her brother had it hard when he first came to the academy.

Why, you might ask?

Because he does not put his head down for anyone.

He got into more fights than anyone in recorded academy history.

His blood had soaked through nearly every hall, and the healers knew him as the arrogant, cold faced boy who refused to stay down.

Luna could easily imagine that.

He was always like that.

That said, Damon turned things around and grew stronger faster than anyone. Coupled with his ruthless personality, he soon became an object of fear among the students.

He burned down the Evil Forest exam site.

He defeated Rashi Ignath.

He returned from Lysithara and allegedly defeated Ashcroft.

Damon was a shining beacon among the goddess races' youth. Every person his age across every continent already knew his name just as much as Seras Blade herself.

Luna was as proud as she was annoyed.

Why, you ask?

Because she had no friends.

No one dared to be friends with Damon Grey's little sister, lest he go crazy and beat them up.

Or worse.

Most students did not dare talk to her. She was, after all, also the precious granddaughter of the Grand Duke.

Her grandfather was another problem entirely.

He was just as bad as her brother.

He did not threaten just students. He swore to raze the academy if anything happened to her.

It had been a whole incident.

"That damn old geezer and that bully Damon..."

Luna could have come up with more creative insults, but she refrained.

This was her dear brother after all.

She would hold back on the more vulgar vocabulary.

Luna did grow up in the streets of Valtheron. It would be unusual if she did not pick up the vile language of the alleys and gutters.

A more common insult would be ***** and shove it ***** dirty ***** ***** ***** ***** mother*****
***** ***er *****

She shook her head firmly.

Her mother would be disappointed if she knew what Luna actually knew.

Luna trudged toward the library.

Walking inside, she crossed the quiet halls and slipped into a large hidden room that had a bold sign nailed to its door.

She winced slightly as the smell of ink and old parchment assaulted her senses.

Luna sighed as she looked into the room.

A young woman with a haggard face was rifling through stacks of papers. She had pasted whatever she could onto a board. Old newspapers. Research documents. Academy investigation records. Books on monsters and their biology.

The walls were nearly covered.

Luna shook her head.

"Iris please tell me you got some sleep.." she grumbled, placing her hands on her waist.

"Sleep I don't need sleep I need answers." the pink haired girl pulled at her jagged hair to stay awake, deep black bags under her eyes. Her face was pale as she downed her last recovery potion without hesitation.

Luna rolled her eyes and entered the room fully, closing the door behind her.

"How many days have you been here you need a bath and a reality check..."

Iris ignored her, her face cold as she took a deep breath through her nose.

"I know I know I'm not wrong look hear me out you know what Damon used to say... we live in a magical world and everything is possible... trust your intuition its the difference between life and death."

Iris argued, deliberately using Damon's name, knowing Luna would not object if it involved her brother.

Luna sighed.

All of this had started shortly after they arrived at the academy. They were having a tour when one of the second year students showed them a place where someone called Marcus Fayjoy had apparently conducted some evil ritual.

That was when they found claw marks.

And Iris became obsessed.

"Look look at this.." she pointed at an image taken with a magical tool. Iris tapped it repeatedly, as if forcing Luna to focus harder.

"This was the same type of claw marks from the place my father was supposed killed his corpse was never found and so were the cases in the academy."

She turned to Luna with an anxious expression, eyes wide and desperate.

Luna nodded slowly.

"Yes and Lilith was investigating all of those in the academy they were linked to Marcus Fayjoy and his forbidden magic your father's case was a monster which was also reported killed."

Luna stated the facts evenly.

Iris shook her head, opening a textbook to a page displaying a monster claw imprint.

"This is the monster they said killed my father but the claw marks are different... look I know all this is connected somehow I just... I just know it..."

Her voice cracked slightly.

She placed a hand on Luna's shoulder, gripping tightly.

"Please I just need you to believe me... please..."

Luna glanced around the room.

Iris had gone through the trouble of gathering all those case files from the academy using whatever means were necessary.

Lilith was busy with something else, and with the war against demons approaching, they had used her clout as Student Council President to access restricted records.

That should have been difficult for first years.

If not impossible.

All they had to say was Damon Grey.

Whoever stood in their way did not want that trouble.

That was how they gained access to this room and all this information.

Luna sighed deeply.

She reached down and picked up a file.

"This file here states that there is a possibility that Marcus Fayjoy is alive if we can find him and clues about him we can solve the mystery of your father's death..."

Iris' eyes widened instantly.

She jumped forward and hugged Luna tightly.

"Luna I love you I love you." she screamed excitedly, nearly knocking over a stack of documents.

Luna raised a hand to stop her enthusiasm.

"First let's focus on reaching the first class..."

The two girls began digging into a past they never should have disturbed.

Marcus would not help them.

Because he, much like Iris' father, was dead.

And his remains had long ago been consumed by Damon's hungry shadow.

Chapter 923: Breaking The Equilibrium.

Damon didn't know what Iris and Luna were doing.

He did not know a ghost of his past was waking.

Truth was a steel horse, and no matter how long you tried to keep a shield of lies raised, the truth would gallop forward with its steel hooves and break those lies apart.

Except today wasn't that day, and the secrets he had buried would remain buried.

For now.

No one would know.

Because all those who would tell were dead.

Damon's hand decayed.

His left eye was gone.

He only had one hand. The other he covered in shadows where a bloody stump should have been.

The night was dark and full of horrors.

This one was a bringer of light.

Where there was light, it could be seen.

And all who saw it were taken by it.

Damon did the only reasonable thing.

He wrapped the glowing tree line in darkness and shadows.

Darkness was similar to shadow, so he used its power. He invoked Darkness Dominate along with his shadow control to smother the tree line and the vague form of the horror within it.

And when he did—

They launched their attacks.

The forest was pitch black, but no one dared to illuminate it.

No one wanted to see what was hiding in that darkness.

The entity in the canopy responded.

It reacted instantly.

It raised whatever appendages it had and ripped open the darkness and shadows.

The shadows resisted.

They struggled.

They held.

But wherever the light touched—

There was death.

"Don't look into the canopy when its bright.." Kael screamed as his hands created a mass of darkness to swallow the incoming radiance.

Seras waved her hand, slicing through the air with her tachi, cutting apart invisible threats as sparks scattered from her blade.

Damon was sent flying.

A thin hand that looked like that of an emaciated old woman reached toward him through the torn veil of shadows.

He twisted midair, barely missing its grasp.

Even then, his arm was turned into blood mist.

The fog of his own blood rushed into his nose and mouth, making him choke as metallic vapor replaced the air in his lungs.

The trees rustled and shook violently.

This was the hardest part for him.

Because Damon could see in the darkness.

He could see through the shadows.

The vague form of something cloaked in fractured light and shadow hopped from one tree to another, moving unnaturally fast, trying to reach him.

Seras stood between it and him.

Damon's knights locked shields together and formed a defensive perimeter around him while the mages cast spells blindly, blasting the tree line in violent arcs of mana.

The creature in the canopy acted again.

The shadows were ripped apart like fabric under claws.

Light shone down.

Radiant.

Holy.

A knight screamed to his mage comrade.

"Hition move away... look away.."

It was too late.

Hition turned around.

His eyes slowly turned white.

Then he mouthed—

"Sorry.."

His skin was stripped bare from his flesh and thrown toward his comrade, slapping wetly against his chest.

His muscles were peeled from bone.

What remained standing was a thin, meaty skeleton with organs still fresh and beating, as if the body had not yet realized it was dead.

Damon gritted his teeth as memories flooded back.

He ignored the agony of his missing eye.

As the raid battle continued deeper into the night, he staggered to the side as a body was thrown toward him.

Damon reached out and caught the man instinctively.

The vile stench of blood filled the air.

The man's eyes were frozen in horror as the light faded from them.

Damon looked down.

His organs were slipping from his corpse.

Or half of what should have been his corpse.

Blood soaked Damon's boots, reaching all the way to his knees.

It was horrible.

This was horrible.

These were people's lives.

The shadows above him were torn open again as his mana and shadow energy were forcibly absorbed by the entity.

Damon could feel the two energies in his heart straining.

They pushed against the wall of shadow energy separating them.

They had grown stronger.

If they touched—

He would explode and die in a massive detonation of demonic and divine energy.

He gritted his teeth as he rolled beside the injured and mangled body of a knight who had fallen protecting him.

His shield was shattered beside him.

He was whispering something.

When Damon lowered himself, his ears caught the broken words.

He was repeatedly whispering—

Run my lord we will hold the line.

Damon paused.

His jaw clenched.

He was the one who insisted they fight this thing instead of enduring.

He was arrogant.

This was the Evil Forest.

There were many monsters like it.

If they fought every one they encountered—

They would all die before reaching the sea.

Their mission was not to conquer.

It was to endure.

To survive.

To reach the Demon Continent without alerting the Demon Kings.

"I... I.." Damon placed his remaining hand on his chest. "..I will stop this..."

They had already begun the battle.

Running was no longer an option.

There was only one path forward.

Damon had to make a sacrifice.

In this moment, he could not help but remember the system description for the skill Sacrifice, which allowed him to permanently trade his stats for shadow energy.

"The Children of Aetherus gave all they possessed and even what they could not to enigmatic Visitors from beyond their world. They sought knowledge, power, and truths hidden from their mortal grasp. Yet, no matter how much they surrendered, it was never enough. Their once-thriving world was left barren and broken, their sacrifices devoured, leaving them with nothing but despair and unfulfilled longing.

This cursed legacy lingers still, feeding on the ambitions of those desperate enough to give everything for a fleeting taste of the unattainable."

The unattainable.

That was what Damon was going to use against this thing.

He had achieved the unattainable in his own heart.

He possessed both demonic energy and divine energy.

Damon had these powers.

He just did not dare use them.

If he broke the equilibrium in his heart, he would be in grave danger.

If his divine energy weakened, his transformation into a demon would continue.

If it grew too strong, his heart would be destroyed by his own divine spark.

You could either be a god or a demon.

Not both.

Except—

If you were the Unknown God.

Damon reached inward and touched his divine spark.

'I can't pray to those true gods... but I will call on you Lazarak if you are here help me..'

He channeled his divine energy together with his mana and shadow energy.

The shadows he used to cover the canopy suddenly changed.

They flared violently.

An overwhelming divine aura flooded the Evil Forest.

The world of darkness bowed.

To the presence of a god.

Chapter 924: Seras Plan

Divine energy.

This was the specific type of energy that came from Gods. It was born in the nature of Divinity and could be used alongside other forms of power.

There was no precedent for any entity being able to use both without consequences, with the sole exception of the Unknown God.

Damon watched the shadows darken, becoming deeper and more powerful. Wherever they spread, the light was consumed.

He could feel every pore in his body filling with that overwhelming power.

It threatened to consume him.

His feet rose from the ground, and he began hovering several meters in the air.

Seras saw what he was doing and gritted her teeth as blood rushed down his nose.

She leapt onto the shadows, sliding upward along a rising tendril and swinging her sword.

There was a cry of pain.

The creature in the canopy screamed, its voice inhumane—a grating sound that made the ears ache and throb.

The shadows moved according to Damon's will, turning into massive spikes that tore through the canopy of the forest. The large ancient trees groaned as they were ripped out of the ground by enormous tendrils of shadow.

Everyone felt the forest tilt.

An all consuming darkness appeared, dragging trees upward as razor sharp spikes ravaged the area.

Blood as black as ink poured from the torn canopy, followed by the creature's screech.

It was in agony.

But not nearly as much as Damon.

He could feel his Seed of Depravity unleashing demonic energy to take over the space left by his expended divine energy.

With each pulse of his heart, pain racked through his body as if his heart were being crushed and ripped open again and again.

Damon gritted his teeth.

His one remaining uncovered eye dilated from the intense pain.

"Arghhh—"

He pulled the uprooted trees high into the sky above the canopy and brought them crashing down, crushing several kilometers of the Listening Canopy.

The ground rumbled violently as something massive and unidentified slammed into the earth.

The moment it fell, the world seemed to shift under a new law.

It screamed as it tried to flee, having lost its canopy of trees.

Damon did not give it that chance.

The shadows formed a dense orb around it, sealing it inside.

The moment it was trapped, it pierced a hole through the orb from within.

Damon coughed blood.

He gritted his teeth.

That was fine.

He had already created the opening he needed.

The instant the creature cracked his orb of shadows, it formed a gap large enough for a tachi to fly through.

The blade shot inward.

The orb of shadows concealed its true form from sight, but when the blade emerged—

It was slick with blood.

The orb went still.

Silence followed.

Blood gushed into the forest's black soil as Damon collapsed backward.

Before he hit the ground, someone stepped out of his shadow and caught him.

Her eyes were as cold as ice.

She helped him to his feet without a single change in her expression.

"Thanks Matia..."

She nodded once, then frowned slightly.

"You should have summoned me earlier." she complained flatly.

Damon smiled weakly with only one eye and one arm left.

"Hehehe... you're my trump card I can't just summon you..."

He gasped, feeling woozy as his body trembled.

He could feel his head beginning to sprout a demon horn.

Matia raised a wall of ice around him.

Without hesitation, she grabbed the forming horn and ripped it off.

Blood spurted violently, spraying across her face.

She did not react.

She poured potions over his head as the wound slowly closed and his body began to heal.

She shook him slightly.

There was no response.

Her heart nearly stopped.

Slowly, she lowered her head to his chest, listening for his heartbeat.

She pressed her ear against him.

After a tense moment—

She exhaled in relief.

He was alive.

She did not need to panic.

Although his body was healing, it was also being damaged at the same time.

It was an internal issue in his heart.

She could still feel him subconsciously using shadow energy.

That was a relief.

If he had stopped—

He would be dead.

"Looking after you is a full time job..." she muttered calmly, glancing at the thick wall of ice surrounding them.

She lowered the barrier and took a steady breath as Renata and Wendy rushed to his side.

Renata took over his treatment while Wendy and Matia stood guard with weapons drawn.

The surviving knights quickly formed a defensive perimeter as the attendants hurriedly set up a tent.

Seras looked around.

She had already disposed of the creature's corpse.

None of the men who had fallen here today knew what it truly looked like.

It was better that way.

Safer.

Even in death, it could still affect someone with just its corpse.

Seras tightened her grip on her tachi.

It had been dangerous to bring this many people into the Evil Forest.

With how lethal this place was, it was a wonder they had made it this far with so many still alive.

This was just one creature.

Many more like it existed.

It was not even among the worst.

And then there was Damon Grey.

He was the reason they had stayed to fight.

Honestly, fighting had not been the best idea.

At this rate, they would be exhausted before reaching the sea.

Seras spread her senses outward.

This was called Magic Sense.

It was similar to Shadow Perception, except this technique used the ambient mana in the air to create a sixth sense.

It was an ability typically developed by those who had reached Fourth Class advancement.

Some trained deliberately for it.

Some awakened it naturally.

Many did not bother.

It overwhelmed the mind with information.

Only a madman would keep it active at all times.

It was unwieldy.

Seras had trained it well, but she only used it when necessary.

So did most high ranking fighters.

Why use it constantly when it was not even stealthy?

Others could sense when you were using it.

And in places like this, using it recklessly could draw the attention of something far worse.

After spreading her senses carefully, she made sure not to disturb the forest.

If she drew attention, she could be attacked.

After scanning for a while—

She found what she was looking for.

"Hmm displacement flowers..." she muttered, adjusting her hair slightly.

These flowers could displace people to unknown locations without warning.

"I shouldn't think this way it's dangerous and the risks are higher..." she said quietly to herself as a reckless idea began forming.

The idea was simple.

"Why didn't I think to use the displacement flowers as a means of travel if we do we can cut weeks of travel..."

Or—

They could end up lost in a distant region of the forest, far from their goal.

The smell of blood drifted through the open canopy.

A cold breeze sent her hair flowing behind her.

The twin moons illuminated the forest, their pale light reflecting in her eyes as she continued thinking.

Moonlight fell over the corpses of the fallen.

The troops moved silently, not even daring to cheer for fear of angering the forest again.

If they continued like this—

They would die.

Damon was unconscious.

"Yes that would work..." she thought as she walked toward him.

She had a plan.

The farthest region toward the sea was called the Bone Hollows.

It was the last region of the forest closest to the sea.

It was also a death zone.

But it was still classified as part of the Evil Forest.

From what she knew, it was a place filled with countless pits and endless fields of bones.

Each hollow crawled with hordes of monsters and undead.

The displacement flowers did not reach that far.

So she had to settle for the next best option.

"The Hanging Paths."

She was familiar with that place.

It was a region where the trees grew impossibly high, and beneath them there was no visible ground.

Only an endless fall.

Legends said that if you fell there, you would fall to the end of the world.

Flying was not allowed.

Those who tried crashed and died.

The paths were made of vine bridges suspended between towering trunks.

And that was only the beginning.

The Hanging Paths could sense your emotions.

When you felt fear—

"Ahh—" she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Its risky but we get to skip so many dangers I suppose I really owe that lich for the information otherwise I would be going in blind to the next obstacle."

It had been a few years since she had last visited the Hanging Paths.

The last time, she had arrived from the sea, crossing through the Bone Hollows to reach it.

Back then, she had been chasing a demon who fled into that region.

"In the end I never got to kill him... only watch him fall down the paths..."

Chapter 925: War Machine

It was frustrating dealing with displacement flowers. While it was feasible to use them to move from one location to another, most of the places they sent people were death traps. The forest had designed these flowers to teleport intruders into dangerous places.

For the past seven days they had been here, they remained put, refusing to move. Seras wanted them to recover their strength before they continued moving.

More than that, she wanted to mentally prepare them for the Hanging Paths.

For the past few days she had scouts spread out, searching for displacement flowers within a hundred kilometer radius.

Some of them had found the flowers. Some had not returned. And some were better off not returning. They were the unlucky ones who returned corrupted and full of rot, becoming monsters themselves.

She was not shaken. It was only a matter of time before they encountered corruption anyway. She had been optimistic in hoping they would avoid that until they reached the Demon Continent.

It was mentally jarring for the expedition force to have to kill members who had fallen to corruption.

The Evil Forest was a death zone, yet it was mostly a forest. Of all the death zones, it was documented to have the lowest possibility of corruption, a low of about 73.6 percent chance. Which, factually speaking, was considered low.

Although people did not actually get corrupted often, the reason was simple.

You would be dead long before that.

Seras flipped through a page of documents, her fingers tightening on the parchment as she bit her lip.

They had found a displacement flower that would allow them to cross over several regions of the forest and reach the Hanging Paths.

The only issue was the one guarding that path was a... dragon.

Dragons were powerful creatures with great destructive power. Their scales were hard and difficult to damage. They had a deep understanding of magic, powerful regenerative abilities, and robust souls. Add that to their monstrous intelligence and cunning and it became clear why they were the apex of all species.

Dragons had no natural predators, as far as Seras knew.

That was indeed true, though what she knew about dragons was very little.

What she did not know was how ancient dragons were as a race.

The first dragons were the True Dragons, long lived and ancient. These dragons were born at the peak of the primordial omniverse. They were born roughly around the same period as the Old Gods, with only four of them in existence against all the Old Gods who were born from different ideas and concepts. They were naturally outnumbered. Despite having limitless potential, they were not allowed to grow, forcing their strength to remain at an upper limit where they were a nuisance to the Old Ones but not strong enough to overcome them.

This was their equilibrium.

A stalemate.

When other races were born, dragons were already there, or at least the initial four. These four created all other dragons, intentionally or unintentionally. All dragons existed because of them.

The dragons in this world were no different. Perhaps that was why they were not classified as part of the goddess races.

What Seras did know was how capricious and dangerous dragons were, especially if you entered their territory.

The most known dragon in the world was Ashergon, and he had many titles that boasted of his horrible magnificence.

This dragon had laid waste to cities and countries, and the world could only endure.

Seras shook her head slowly as she tried to recall everything she knew of dragons. Whatever it was came in fragments from myth, legend, personal experiences, and hearsay.

Yes, she had experience. She was there during the Battle of the Burning Plains when Ashergon had attacked the demon and goddess race armies in the middle of their battle.

Why...

Because he was having a nap in a mountain two days away from the battlefield, and the noise was annoying.

The world was consumed by flames. The heavens were choked by smog and ash. The wings of the dragon thundered across the sky, and the two warring armies shamefully had to work together to repel him.

There were no victors that day.

"I better be careful if I don't want our little force to be eliminated."

She placed a hand in her hair, fingers dragging through the strands as she exhaled.

"I would prefer not to encounter this dragon personally. The best course of action would be to sneak through his region..."

Of course, that was not to say she could not kill a dragon. She just did not know if she could kill this one. If its rank was too high, it would be a disaster.

She shook her head and stood up, leaving her tent. She crossed through the camp as soldiers saluted, which she responded to with curt nods. Her stride was calm and measured as she walked towards a large tent.

When she opened the flap, she found a squirrel and a raven in the corner. These two creatures did not look like much, but their aura revealed Fourth Class advancement.

Apart from them, there were three women in the tent. A knight in armor made of shattered black ice lingered in the shadows of the tent. A woman with a somewhat wild side held a bone sword loosely over her shoulder. And of course, the last one was none other than a violet haired young woman.

Seras could not help but sneer. After all, the reason they were all here was none other than an unconscious young man lying on a bed in the tent.

She really wanted to lament his popularity with women. Sadly, he was still unconscious after the last battle.

"We'll be moving out in a day. Hopefully he wakes up before then." Seras said with a calm tone, arms folded.

Renata nodded, gently touching Damon's head.

"He'll be awake by then..."

With those words, Seras glanced at him one last time before leaving the tent.

She was certain he would be awake by then.

Her footsteps slowed outside.

"Hmm... am I worried about him..." That was an unusual feeling for her. At most he was entertaining, a means to find amusement. Then why was she feeling this way?

She shook her head.

"I'm overthinking this..."

There was a long road. This road stretched for many thousand kilometers. It was one of the many roads built during the Demon Wars.

When wars were fought, the battle required many steps before the actual fighting. It was not just about finding the enemy, it was about getting there as well. For that reason, logistics was the lifeblood of war.

Actually, logistics was the lifeblood of the economy as well. But it was life and death in war. It was the difference between victory and defeat.

For that reason the roads were built. This allowed soldiers to march while saving just enough strength. It made it easier to bring machines of war and carry supplies.

The ground thundered loudly from the sounds of thousands of footsteps.

From where he stood, there were hundreds of banners from many different noble houses.

As far as the eye could see on this road were countless soldiers marching. Cavalry, infantry, mages. Along with them were carriages and large magic tech constructs of war. Long towers with large crystals containing defensive spell arrays. Automatons. Magic artillery. Cannons. In the sky were airships, metallic monstrosities armed with weapons and carrying soldiers and command structures.

Flying magical beasts accompanied them.

Damon sat in the shade watching all this, or rather Damon sat under a tree watching all this. By his side was a woman wearing a white hood. From her figure, she was without a doubt a beauty.

She was his company here today.

"The empire is really moving full swing. Looks like they really intend to invade the Demon Continent." Lilith spoke in a calm, clear voice as her gaze followed the marching army.

"You'd think after failing every invasion of the Demon Continent they'd give up by now. I really have to admire their persistence." she added, almost mocking.

Damon enjoyed the gentle breeze under the tree, eyes half closed.

"I wouldn't be surprised. They are, after all, very proud people. That, and the temple has a problem with demons. They wouldn't stop their invasion anytime soon..."

Lilith sat down next to him, leaning her head against the tree, her shoulder brushing his.

"That so... except the demons were the ones who declared war this time. This might look awe inspiring, but trust me when I tell you this, our high ups are shaking in their boots. They are uncertain about the future as we are. Even the temple can't guarantee anything. The goddess is silent... or has she ever spoken to them before..."

Damon closed his eyes, trying to enjoy the peace. His shadow clone rested here while his main body remained unconscious. For the first time in a while, his attention was split.

"The goddess probably sees this world as just some safe box to keep her stuff. Us being here isn't really that important to her. Thinking we have any value to her is self righteous and delusional, but..." he paused, a faint smile forming

"I'm fine with that. We don't have to be important to a god when we can be important to ourselves and each other."

Lilith smiled at him, shaking her head.

"That's some growth there... you deserve a reward."

She leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. Then she stood up. Taking out a key, she inserted it into the tree, and a door formed in the bark as it slowly opened.

"Let's go... we have work to do. If the Temple wants to attack the Snake Temple, why not do the same to them..."

Chapter 926: World Became His Home

When it came to dragons, the most known was Ashergon. No dragon compared in sheer tyranny. It flew from its lair across the world and wreaked havoc wherever it wished.

Cities, institutions... no place was truly safe.

Dragons were powerful, and their power was recorded in many tales. Every knight's greatest aspiration was to slay a dragon... until they actually saw one.

Any idea of dragons born from legend proved, in reality, to be many times worse.

Flames and ash. Death and blood. A horror that dwarfed mountains.

Seras explained her plan and strategy within the small war tent, with the exception of Damon who was still unconscious.

After waiting for a while longer, he still wasn't awake, so she decided it was better to simply drag him along as he was.

There were pale expressions on the faces of those who had actually seen a dragon before. Knowing it was a deadly mission, this was how she could tell the naïve ones apart. Those who had never seen a dragon seemed almost excited.

She closed her eyes briefly.

How sad... this may be the final mistake they make.

There were many dragon-like creatures that shared similar bloodlines.

There were wyverns — powerful, but hardly a threat to a well trained army. There were drakes — dangerous, but still something a party of well trained and equipped adventurers could handle. Averagely, you would need a raid party, but still a group of adventurers.

There were also wyrms, amphitheres, and all those subcategories.

No... none of them compared to four legs and wings coming in different shapes.

A dragon.

Seras gave everyone time to prepare, leaving her alone with Renata.

"Well, why aren't you leaving..." Seras asked slowly, her gaze shifting toward her.

Renata shook her head, her violet hair gleaming softly in the dim light of the tent.

"I wanted to talk. I hope you don't mind..."

Seras took a seat slowly, leaning back into the chair with controlled ease.

"Not at all. I do not mind at all... what do you wish to talk about?" Her tone sounded slightly formal, different from how she spoke to Damon.

Renata bowed slightly, returning the courtesy. She did not want to be rude to a literal hero.

"How did you identify the area as a place a dragon dwelled..." It was the obvious question. The scouts had only described the place and given details. The one who drew that conclusion was Seras.

Seras smiled faintly, slowly shaking her head.

"It's a hunch... although there are signs if you know them..." She pushed her hair to the side and leaned back, stretching her back as she spoke.

"The most telling was the stillness of the forest in that area while still maintaining a degree of life. The Evil Forest didn't encroach too much there..." Her expression darkened slightly.

"Which makes me worried we might be encountering a terrible type of dragon..."

Renata's heart sank. A bead of sweat almost rolled down her temple.

"Yo... you mean like Ashergon..." she asked carefully.

Seras paused, holding her chin in thought.

"Like Ashergon... there is no dragon like Ashergon. Although there are some that come close. Then again, that is just a personal opinion of mine... who knows, there might be others who are more terrible..."

Renata took a deep breath, shaking her head slightly as if rejecting the thought.

"You do know of other dragons... old ones." She wanted to list some off the top of her head but feared the dragon nearby might hear its own name.

"You act as if Ashergon is young. It's an old dragon, supposedly active since the early days of the Path of Kings..." Seras' gaze lingered on Renata, as if quietly scrutinizing her.

"You know, there is an interesting legend about Ashergon and Ashcroft. Do you know it?"

Renata felt uncomfortable, as if one mistake would expose that she was a demon.

"All dragons are proud. They have every right to be..." she began, her voice soft, as though afraid to disturb the memory itself.

"One day, many years ago in the Second Epoch, Ashcroft the Dominator sought a mount. He searched the breadth of the world, across kingdoms and ruins, yet found none worthy to bear his shadow..."

She paused, her gaze drifting as if watching ghosts move across the tent walls.

"Then he heard whispers of a dragon that had claimed the Everlasting Peaks of the Demon Continent as its throne. A creature whose wings eclipsed cities, whose fangs were longer than spears. Its voice was thunder, and before it even mountains seemed to bow... yet it bowed to no one."

This was the tale as she knew it, carried through rumor and song. Whether truth or exaggeration, she could not say.

"So Ashcroft journeyed to the Everlasting Peaks, climbing through storms and silence until he reached the snow crowned summit where mortal hands brushed the heavens. The sky above was endless black, scattered with cold stars... and in those lonely heights, Ashergon made its home."

The Everlasting Peak stood as the tallest point in the Demon Continent and the world. Treacherous, unforgiving. She had never seen it, yet even imagining it felt like standing before an abyss.

"To reach it was already a legend," she whispered. "To challenge what slept upon it... was madness."

"Upon his arrival, Ashcroft stood before the dragon and demanded it bow. He spoke not as a supplicant, but as a ruler. Become my mount, he said. Carry my will across the skies."

Seras listened in silence, the crackling fire filling the spaces between Renata's words.

"And Ashergon answered..."

Renata's voice lowered, taking on a distant echo.

'I bow to no God, and neither to a mere demon. I shall not kiss the earth nor be wielded as a tool. You will die... or I will be ash.'

"The heavens trembled with that refusal."

It was said their battle lasted a single night. One night that burned itself into history.

"Ash and flame devoured the darkness. The dragon's breath melted the frozen crown of the mountain, and the Everlasting Peaks roared like a newborn volcano. Rivers of fire fell into the valleys below, turning silence into ruin."

She swallowed softly before continuing.

"In the end, Ashcroft could not bend the dragon's will. Ashergon spread its vast wings and left the Demon Continent in fury, carrying with it the memory of humiliation... and the scent of the one who dared command it."

Renata's fingers curled slightly as she spoke the final lines.

"But Ashcroft did not descend empty handed. He returned from the mountain victorious in his own way. In his grasp were scales torn from Ashergon's flesh, and a vial filled with dragon blood."

She paused, voice barely above a breath.

"And deeper still, he carried something unseen. Dragon poison, seeded within his heart."

"Even after Ashcroft's death, Ashergon never returned to the Everlasting Peaks. The mountain remained... but its king was gone."

Her gaze lifted slowly.

"And so the world became its sky."

Seras' gaze remained on the fire, its reflection dancing in her eyes.

"According to Damon's reports, Ashergon is now living past the Duhu Mountains. Let's hope he didn't decide to relocate to the Evil Forest..."

Renata nodded slowly.

"Right... and the reason I stayed... should Damon wake up, can you keep it from him that we may face a dragon. It's just that he's—"

"Being a little paranoid lately." Seras cut her off.

"Yes." Renata replied softly.

Seras smiled faintly.

"Good call... we should inform the others..."

Chapter 927: Gravewing

When he finally came to, they were moving. The first thing he saw was the great canopy of the Evil Forest and its towering trees. Sunlight occasionally pierced through the leaves, brushing against his eyes in soft, fractured beams.

Damon immediately noticed he was on a stretcher. Without much thought, he sat up, the stretcher rocking unevenly over the hilly forest terrain. He wondered how he had not fallen off with how many slopes and dips they had crossed.

The forest flora seemed more sparse here, and some parts of the ground were rocky, broken by patches of exposed stone.

His action of sitting up caught Renata's attention. She had been right next to his stretcher as four knights carried him.

Damon glanced at her when she smiled.

"Ohhh, you're awake. That's good... can you move?"

Her words sounded normal enough, but what Damon could not quite place was why she was whispering instead of speaking normally.

He paused, glancing around his surroundings. He did not feel any odd sense of danger other than the usual oppressive presence the Evil Forest gave off.

Damon was smart enough not to speak until he had ascertained everything. What conditions would cause Renata to whisper?

She smiled again, shaking her head slowly.

"Its nothing big. There isn't a horror nearby. We just decided it would be better to keep our voices down while we move..."

Damon remained slightly suspicious. Nevertheless, it was of no major consequence. He was healed up, and the pain in his heart was gone... for now. He had no complaints since he did not die.

'Ha ha ha... hehe... heh... hehe hehe haha. Damn, deathless. You thought you could kill me with a ticking time bomb in my heart?'

He laughed inwardly at his survival, relieved he had not been exposed as a demon... or partial demon. Everything was still normal — as normal as things could be inside the Evil Forest.

A small grumble escaped his stomach.

The sound echoed through the silent forest, causing several people nearby to flinch slightly while ducking their heads as if expecting something terrible to happen.

Damon narrowed his eyes with suspicion.

"Wait a minute... something ain't right."

From the front, Seras waved her hand, urging everyone to keep moving.

Wendy, who had moved back toward him, shook her head.

"Anyone ever told you how paranoid you are?" she whispered.

"Yes... a lot actually. Apparently it's delusional paranoia."

He crossed his arms before stepping off the stretcher and placing both feet on the ground.

"So we are dealing with something. I reckon it's a horror that forces us to whisper, right? Well, I get it. These types of creatures are simple. As long as you follow their rules, you'd be fine... in fact, it's advised not to engage."

This was his experience speaking, and he wanted Wendy to hear it.

The copper skinned young woman rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her voluptuous chest.

"Yeah right. That's why you engaged the previous one. I don't really care if you die, but if I don't have my children back before you do... you better not dream of a peaceful afterlife."

Damon gritted his teeth and quickly covered her mouth.

"Shush—shush... we agreed to keep what happened between us quiet. And it's not my fault... I tried my best. Stop making things difficult for me. Besides, it was a one time thing. You caught me at a bad time..."

Wendy pushed his arm away, glaring at him.

"You better keep your word or else... the world will know what happened in your room that night."

"You can't just blackmail me..." Damon muttered.

"I just did." she replied calmly.

Frustrated, Damon kicked a rock half buried in the soil.

The first thing he felt was the ground tremble slightly but the rock did not budge. What followed was a sharp, throbbing pain in his foot.

Everyone paused, turning toward him.

Damon shrugged, hopping slightly while holding his foot.

"What?"

For a moment, nothing happened.

Silence.

Then Seras let out a slow breath of relief. She walked up to him, grabbed his ear, and tugged.

"Stop making noise."

She released him and walked back to the front, waving for them to move again.

The expedition force resumed marching.

Then...

The sand beneath their feet began to shift.

It rose and fell in slow, steady rhythms. The next instant, the trees began to tremble, and the hills around this part of the forest started shedding hardened rocks that tumbled down their slopes.

Heavy sounds rumbled, growing louder, almost as if the earth itself was breathing beneath their feet.

Seras froze.

No one moved.

Faces went pale, everyone except Damon, who was still trying to grasp what was happening.

In that moment, he felt his scalp tingle intensely as dread washed over him.

The trees began to rise.

The ground cracked and caved in as dust surged into the air. People stumbled, losing their footing. Then a distant hill shifted slightly, sand cascading down its surface as a golden light appeared...

Except the light blinked.

It closed.

Then opened again.

It was at that moment Damon realized it was a colossal eye looking at them.

Gazing into it, he felt as if he had experienced the passage of time itself, dragged into an ancient past that did not belong to mortals.

The eye closed.

Then the hills around them began to move.

"Run!" Seras screamed, her composure shattering as she ushered them toward a hill surrounded by blooming flowers.

"Hurry! We need to reach the displacement flowers!"

The creature raised its head from the earth, clouds of dust and sand billowing outward. Rocks fell like rain. Trees across kilometers were uprooted as a massive crater formed beneath its rising body.

Something like a small mountain lifted into the sky — though that was only how it seemed. In reality, it was terrifyingly fast.

Its breath alone created violent gusts of wind that sent trees, rocks, and debris flying with a casual exhale.

It gazed down before fully rising, its attention settling on Seras, the most powerful among them.

And when she saw its scales... its wings... its vast, ancient body—

Seras froze.

Her lips trembled as she whispered the name of the dragon.

"Rexagon... the Gravewing."

Chapter 928: Here A Potion

It was like a small mountain had risen from the ground, the forest they had been standing on was now towering over them.

The body of this dragon was covered in trees and scales that seemed to be half fused to the earth. There were cracks. There was a carrion aura of decay around this dragon along with the fresh scent of the earth, trees, and nature. This dragon, the sun cast his shadow far behind it, the large wings covering the forest behind it in large and distant shadows.

There was a droning sound in the air louder than thunder, the seismic tremors shaking Damon's feet beneath him.

Gravewing. That was what he heard Seras say.

One of its wings seemed torn as if mountainous fangs and claws had ripped them apart, leaving them ragged and torn.

The expedition force ran as fast as their legs could carry them, dashing away with superhuman speed. Could they outrun a mountain?

Dung... rumble... rumble.

The world shook as a giant claw covered the entire area where they were running to, the entire area with the displacement flowers.

Damon paused as a carrion scent rose into the sky. His legs felt weak as his heart stopped itself. He could feel himself trying to breathe, but no air entered his lungs. Dread coursed through his veins and a coldness spread around him, his face pale, his hands shaking out of his control.

His danger sense exploded, his scalp tingling, his eardrums bleeding.

He turned slightly as Seras paused, slowly looking in the direction of the colossal head.

She took out a box from her spatial ring, her face serious.

"I greet the great one Rexagon..." Seras spoke as her aura rose to cover the entire expedition force from the overwhelming aura of dread the dragon was releasing.

Only then did Damon feel a sense of relief as the weight reduced.

Only now did Damon realize he was covered in cold sweat.

He was in the fourth class advancement, even then he felt so small before this living mountain.

The dragon opened its maw, a bright glow of destruction illuminated its maw like the sun. From where he stood Damon felt as if the sun was above his head.

"Who dares enter the dominion of Rexagon, who dare cross the lord of the carrion skies."

The voice filled the heavens as large carrion birds rose from trees on his giant scales. They flew into the skies where his head and two horns touched the clouds, making Damon feel even smaller.

Seras spoke, her voice echoing slowly. Seeing his ruptured wings, he was still in a sitting position although she was able to see he was injured.

"We beg your forgiveness great one, we were merely passing by, if you can forgive our transgressions."

"Silence, you have disturbed my rest little mouse..." his roar made the clouds part away.

His head moved down slowly, making Seras' grip on the box tighten.

Damon trembled slightly until his Remorseless skill kicked in. He let out a deep breath.

Seras was terrible at negotiating with dragons... didn't she know his life was in danger.

'Damn it deathless, I know it's you, I just know it...'

Which meant he had to find a way to survive no matter what.

This was much different from when he had encountered Ashergon. That dragon had just flown into the sky and torched the entire region, leaving ash and death in his wake.

'I am fire. I am death.' That was all it said. Those words still haunted Damon till this day. In his heart a piece of Ashcroft arrogance rose.

'One day I will make that lizard my mount.'

Today wasn't that day. Damon stepped forward. He really couldn't help but lament how every dragon he'd met was an edge lord.

"Great one... I am Damon Grey. It is a pleasure to stand in your magnificent presence. Forgive my lowly handmaiden for her lack of courtesy. Before your immaculate magnificence, truly you are the greatest of all dragons."

Seras glanced at him as she was reduced from commander of the expedition to a lowly handmaiden.

Rexagon was displeased with this little mouse. He opened his mouth to crush him with his spear like fangs, even though those things were definitely bigger than spears, more like little hills of spikes.

"Great one... What has injured you so..." Damon said calmly. His words made the dragon pause, his eyes glowing as he looked at Damon, really looking at him this time.

Then he growled.

"So it is you... I see, I was almost deceived. I see you... I see you. What do you seek from Rexagon."

Its eyes came down to Damon's level, enough for Damon to see his own reflection inside its eyes. When Damon saw his reflection he almost lost his composure. In its eyes Damon did not look like Damon, instead there was a demon standing there with a calm imposing air, an air of domination.

Damon instantly understood who this dragon had confused him for.

'Ashcroft.' Seeing that, Damon instantly knew he couldn't be caught lacking because Ashcroft feared nothing, mere dragon. Why? Because he was Ashcroft the dominator, who else but him could be supremely arrogant.

"Rexagon why are you here injured." Damon instantly figured out Rexagon was injured, it was the most noticeable thing on this dragon.

Rawrrrwhggg.

The dragon roared with rage as if reliving what had angered him. He lowered his giant head to Damon's level, his carrion breath threatening to blow Damon away or decay his flesh.

"Who else shan't treat the carrion king with such dishonor..." Rexagon roared, his words nearly making Damon turn and flee for his life.

'Dammit I wanna go home...' Damon thought.

He certainly hoped it wasn't Ashcroft, but that was impossible. While the wounds looked old and the fact Rexagon was buried in the dirt, it didn't change the fact that the wounds were too fresh, and why hadn't he regenerated.

"I see so it was Ashergon..." It was plain to see due to the large bite marks and claws on his body, even its chest covered in dirt and rough scales bore claw marks.

Its maw glowed with destructive power and it lifted its head into the sky unleashing a torrent of destructive breath that made the sky part way, with spatial rifts forming. The world darkened even though the sun was still in the sky.

Rexagon's anger seemed to make the world tremble. Seras gritted her teeth looking at Damon who remained calm as molten pieces of reality burned off and fell to the ground, causing the expedition force to run and avoid the destructive aftermath.

Damon looked untouched, his hands behind his back. In her eyes he looked so...

'Amazing...' she muttered under her breath, her eyes widening in a daze.

Seras knew a bit of Rexagon from the legends. This dragon was said to have come from the bottom of a mountain. A long time ago two great kingdoms were at war, the battle cries and screams, the blood, all of it was soaked under the mountain. When the mountain moved the dragon appeared carrying the carrion scent of the battlefield. Where he flew his wings brought death, rot spread from his claws.

When the world knew of his name they called him the Gravewing, the dragon who was born from the earth and came with carrion skies.

Rexagon the Gravewing.

In legends it was said that many subjugation forces had been sent to slay dragons like him, none had returned and Rexagon remained.

The world had changed over time and now we exist in times where dragons like this could be repelled or even defeated.

Damon raised his hands slowly.

"I come in peace and I wish for safe passage from your dominion." He finally came to the crux of the problem.

Rexagon paused looking at Damon who he believed to be Ashcroft. His pride as a dragon didn't want him to just let them go, but at the same time he didn't want to face the dominator. It was a delicate situation even for this dragon.

Damon on the other hand was also in a dilemma. He did not have the power to deal with a dragon like this. He could use the Book of Shadows to capture it, that was assuming its shadow was cast in his direction. Too bad its shadow was cast behind it and he could not get there fast enough before he died.

'At least this one was willing to talk unlike Ashergon who just went into violence.'

"Why should I the great Rexagon give you safe passage..."

Damon took a deep breath, he smiled reaching into his shadow storage.

"I bring with me a great gift." He took out a potion and lifted the vial.

"This is my offering for our peaceful passage, I would like to save my strength for when I deal with Ashergon..."

Damon added slowly. The dragon paused looking at the vial, then slowly he shrunk his size to the size of a small hill. His claws reached out and Damon placed the vial down.

"This is the ultimate healing potion, it can cure wounds in an instant." Damon sold the bargain.

By shrinking Rexagon's claws could no longer cover the passage to leave.

He placed his hand on Seras' shoulder while the dragon tried to consume the potion.

"Run."

He bolted.

It was a scam.

Chapter 929: The Great Escape

It was evident there was one thing Rexagon truly needed, and that was something that could heal him. The only problem was Damon didn't have a potion with that high an efficacy, at least one that would work on a dragon. Oddly enough, a high level potion from the system would have worked, but after a while of killing and devouring the system just stopped giving him high quality potions.

Now all he had were low quality ones and the ones he took from the Brightwater family's alchemist stations.

Damon didn't even look back as he dashed in the direction of the displacement flowers. Seras didn't explain her plan to him and she didn't need to, he figured it out.

The wind rushed to his face pushing his hair aside. Damon didn't feel safe enough so he doubled down with his skill [5x], applying it to his speed.

[Skill: 5x]

[Description:]

The warriors of the Sky Continent, Vuldren, embodied freedom and limitless growth, their achievements inspiring the concept of boundless potential reflected in this skill.

[Effect:]

5x amplifies a chosen stat by five times its base value for 5 minutes.

[Type:]

Active.

[Cooldown:] 10 minutes

The wind roared behind him. He had half the mind to turn his head and see if his companions were running after him. Before he could even do that he remembered who had a skill that wanted them dead.

Oh right. That was him.

Damon gritted his teeth and activated [Accel].

[Skill: Accel]

[Description:] My sister moved like the wind — free, untouchable. When she drew her sword, the battle was already over. Speed is everything in combat. Even here in the abyss, I remember her: swift, regal... faster than death itself.

[Effect:] Greatly amplifies movement speed by 10,000% when traversing vast distances. However, you experience 10,000% the exhaustion afterward.

[Type:] Active

[Cooldown:] 12 seconds

A sonic boom rocked the air. From the moment Damon said run to him dashing away like a bolt of lightning less than three seconds had passed.

In that same instant Seras moved. Everyone was already spamming escape based abilities and magical artifacts.

Flashing lights and blurry figures dashed after Damon.

In that same moment the dragon placed the vial in his mouth. This was all happening at the same exact moment.

From the vial fell on his tongue it dissolved, spilling forth the contents inside. The taste of low quality potion touched its mighty tongue.

This wasn't even the excellent low quality for the system... no this was the cheap stuff, the kind sold in street stalls for adventurers who valued money more than their own health.

The taste of substandard mana and impurities touched his large tongue and then nothing. This potion couldn't even heal the tiny natural gaps in his scales much less his great and powerful body.

For a moment, for a split moment, Rexagon didn't even know how to react. He was confused, so confused. It wasn't the idea of the potion that confused him, it was the audacity.

What entity in their right mind would have the gall to play an obvious scam on a dragon?

Rexagon accepting the vial was not stupidity. It's dragon psychology.

Rexagon operates on three instincts.

Pride he, like many dragons, assumes lesser beings would not dare deceive them. To lie to a dragon is to invite extinction. So Rexagon doesn't suspect deception immediately, because doing so would imply mortals are foolish enough to challenge him.

The second was mostly his own curiosity. They say curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction brought it back. Dragons were a little different because curiosity couldn't do anything to them.

Rexagon is ancient and injured.

An unknown potion from someone he believes to be Ashcroft is intriguing.

Not hope. But curiosity.

And curiosity is one of the few things powerful enough to override dragon pride.

The last was calculation from centuries of life. Even if the potion is fake, Rexagon loses nothing. He can kill them afterward. This makes accepting the vial a low-risk action.

That logic is very dragon.

He felt something in his heart for a moment, his large claws trembling as the little mice scrambled beneath him. Raising his head he laughed, finding amusement in this action — and as quickly as it came the amusement faded, turning into rage at the realization that a mere mouse had dared to play a trick on him.

Damon was already close to the displacement flowers. It was now the ninth second Rexagon had wasted his time laughing at the thought.

He twisted his head in Damon's direction.

The ground decayed and Damon felt his footing vanish, causing him to fly off the ground rolling and skidding as everyone he had left behind easily passed him.

No one even stopped as a cold gust of air came from behind them and a large and terrifying carve appeared on the ground.

Damon was not about to let himself get caught and crushed by the dragon. He rode the wind from Rexagon's actions and let it lift him. He rolled mid air and touched the ground as the members of the expedition force began to disappear, taken to another location by the displacement flowers.

He pulled his feet to teleport into the shadows when he felt something grab his legs. He looked down to find an ant-like creature with a white bone-like body and wrinkled skin holding his legs, its body protruding from the earth.

Damon looked on in horror as this wretched thing had just hindered him for a split second and that was more than enough for the giant claw of the dragon to descend on him.

He felt as if the world had locked onto him and a giant claw was rising to crush him. Rexagon was angry but for whatever reason he took this personally.

All of a sudden the claw came down. Damon had already accepted he was done for. At this point he was already taking out the pendant he had gotten from the priest and was about to use it and escape to the snake temple when...

A woman's figure came between him and the giant claw. She slapped her sword upward as all sound died, consumed by a terrible sound as if a thousand swords were clashing against each other.

The sound wave sent them both flying back; that was what she wanted. She grabbed Damon as they were sent hurtling through the displacement flowers as they vanished.

Seras cursed.

"You bastard you crazy bastard..."

Damon laughed, feeling bold.

"Ahh don't worry, dragons have the brains of a walnut... not very bright."

As he vanished he heard a system chime.

[Ragebait lvl 9]

Chapter 930: Hanging Paths Below The Orchard Of Regret

His Ragebaiting leveled up. When he appeared again he was in a new region. Before he could even register anything, the world shook.

Far in the distance, many miles away, Rexagon roared and shot flames into the heavens.

"I will find you. I will crush you... even if it's the last thing I do..."

Astral winds brushed against Damon's skin as something that looked like a mountain with wings rose into the sky.

He glanced down at the imp hugging his legs, his expression flattening. A flicker of flame burst from his palm and the creature burned to ashes.

Seras stepped forward and grabbed his collar, giving him a sharp shake.

"Was that last part really necessary?"

Mist swallowed the landscape. Beneath them was a covered void. Trees taller than mountains loomed in the distance, their branches bearing fruits the size of houses. Above those fruits were strange nests where shadows flitted restlessly.

The entire place felt dull and suffocating. The roots of the trees were hidden from sight, while hanging vines the size of drawbridges crisscrossed endlessly through the fog.

"Where are we?" Damon asked, squinting upward as Rexagon's distant shadow swept across the forest while it searched.

Seras lowered her gaze and steadied her breathing.

It was a good thing Rexagon didn't know where the displacement flowers led and was too large to pass through them. Maybe if he turned human, but his pride would never allow it.

She released Damon's collar and exhaled through her teeth.

"Did you really have to add to our woes? You could have just run without kicking his ego," she muttered, frustration bleeding into her voice.

Damon folded his arms while the expedition caught their breath.

"Well excuse me for saving all our lives from a crazy edgy dragon. This is the thanks I get," he replied without an ounce of shame.

Seras pinched the bridge of her nose and took a slow breath.

"Fine. Fine. You're right."

Damon lifted his chin slightly, arms still crossed.

"Yeah I am. Now, to my previous question if you don't mind."

Seras turned and glanced at Renata, who stood covered in dust and soot, finishing her count of the survivors.

Renata brushed ash from her sleeve and nodded.

"It's a miracle we encountered a great dragon and still didn't lose anyone."

Damon rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Oh great Renata. Thanks for jinxing us. Now he'll find us and a few people are going to die."

Renata bit her lip and pouted at him, clearly regretting the comment.

"So where are we anyway?" Damon asked again, his gaze sweeping across the unsettling terrain.

Renata straightened.

"We are in a place called the Hanging Paths."

Damon grimaced.

"I see. A terrible combination. From the name alone I know I'll hate it."

Wendy sat on the ground with her arms wrapped around her legs, staring into the mist.

"I regret following you here."

Damon sneered quietly. That was what she got for blackmailing him. Still, hearing regret from Wendy felt strange. He noticed it but said nothing.

Renata pointed toward the giant fruits swaying above.

"And above us is the Orchard of Regrets. They are two different zones but closely linked. The safer one is the Hanging Paths."

"Orchard of Regrets... I see. That explains Wendy's attitude," Damon muttered.

Seras stepped toward the nearest vine and rested a hand on it, testing its tension.

"We will be crossing through the Hanging Paths. Those who don't know what it is, listen carefully. Talking is dangerous on these vines."

Renata nodded and continued.

"The rule here is simple. The more fear you feel, the more gravity increases."

She spoke slowly, making sure everyone listened.

"Those who hesitate feel heavier. Vines tighten when panic spikes. Some bridges slowly invert while being crossed, so don't trust your spatial awareness. And avoid trying to fly. You'll just die faster."

A silent unease spread through the expedition force.

"Victims are crushed or dropped into the unseen depths. Screams echo upward for hours, which means if you scream as you die our dragon friend will find us sooner," Renata added.

She hesitated.

"No bodies ever hit the ground. At least from what I remember."

Seras raised her hand, drawing everyone's attention.

"The trick is simple. Cross without stopping. No talking. Carrying unconscious people is safer than fearful ones since they can't feel fear."

Damon nodded, accepting the logic. His gaze drifted upward toward the giant fruits.

"Wait. What about the orchard? And if we can't fly, why can the dragon?"

Seras crossed her arms.

"Because it's a dragon. The rules for us don't apply to it. And the orchard is both a blessing and a curse."

Renata pulled a folded parchment from Lana, who rummaged through her bag and handed it over.

"According to the record Amadeus gave us," Renata said, unfolding it.

"The grotesque fruit trees bear red pulsing fruit, or at least most people see them that way. They smell sweet and comforting," she read, her eyes narrowing.

"Make no mistake. The fruit looks different to each person. The bigger they appear, the more regrets the person carries, and the worse the effects of eating them."

Damon stiffened slightly. To him the fruits looked enormous, easily the size of houses.

"The forest feeds on unresolved longing," Renata continued.

"Eating fruit grants powerful healing or buffs, which seems beneficial, but it is hardly worth it."

She swallowed.

"Each bite manifests a regret as a physical wound later, worse than ever before."

Damon silently decided to avoid the fruit.

"Some fruit contains memories of people you loved," Renata added, her gaze lingering on Damon as if offering a personal warning.

"Over time regret turns into corporeal entities. The worse the regret, the more vicious and dangerous they become."

Her fingers tightened around the parchment.

"These entities hunt their originator and anyone nearby. Killing them causes unbearable emotional pain to the originator."

She folded the parchment.

"It says here. Never eat the fruit. If you must, never twice. Burn the orchard when possible, though it is better not to."

Renata handed the parchment back to Lana.

"Those with no regrets suffer least, making them terrifying."

Her voice softened as she lowered her head.

"No one alive lives regret free. We are all victims of regret."