

Shadow 931

Chapter 931: Across And Above

The wind was still. A faint fog covered the vines and beneath them was a drop that promised only death.

Damon didn't want to know what lurked below. When he had once poked his head over the edge he saw vague silhouettes, shapes that felt inhumane. Since then he had learned to stay silent and keep walking.

Seras stood at the very front holding a map, or rather the route Amadeus the lich had carved out for them.

It had been two weeks since they entered this place. The slow creeping thought that they might never return spread among them like rot.

As if that wasn't bad enough, high above the fog the distant silhouette of a dragon still patrolled the skies. Rexagon was searching for them. Searching for Damon.

His legs felt heavier with every moment of unease. Here fear had weight. Gravity thickened around them like invisible chains.

Renata hadn't said it out loud, but Damon could tell their supplies were running low. There was still no sign of escape from this cursed maze.

He brushed sweat from his neck and watched a soldier ahead carry an unconscious comrade.

That was how they had survived these two weeks. Those consumed by fear were knocked unconscious and carried. Even so fatigue was catching up to them. Superhuman or not, they still carried human limits. And not all of them were human. The expedition was a reminding mix of races, each dragging their own weakness forward.

Damon spread his shadow perception further down the foggy path. Nothing. He exhaled heavily, his gaze drifting to Kael who quietly sipped from a bottle of water.

At least no one had died. All they had to do was find the path and leave.

Seras raised her hand and gestured ahead. Damon followed her line of sight and understood instantly.

Relief loosened something in his chest. The pressure of gravity eased. His lungs felt lighter, his posture straightened without him noticing.

Ahead the vines opened into a new route. Hundreds of smaller vines braided together along a massive central one that stretched into the fog. At the end of that path rested a giant skull the size of a mountain. Beyond it lay a landmass littered with white bones and ancient corpses.

The Bone Hallows.

Seras nodded once and stepped forward onto the massive vine. The others followed her lead, faces worn and hollow.

Damon glanced back toward the Orchard of Regrets and saw the distant flutter of Rexagon's wings. Two weeks had passed and the dragon still hunted.

Was he that angry? That patient? Or simply unwilling to let Damon live?

He turned away.

He'll never see me again once I reach the other side.

A scream shattered the silence.

One of the soldiers carrying an unconscious comrade slipped as panic surged through him. His body lurched downward toward the fog.

Kael reacted instantly, diving and grabbing him by the arm. For a brief moment they hung suspended between life and oblivion.

Then the weight came.

Fear doubled. Gravity answered.

The unconscious man woke in terror, and the sudden spike crushed them both. Kael's arm bent at a wrong angle with a sickening crack as the two plummeted into the mist below.

Their screams echoed long after they vanished.

Here screams lingered. They stretched through the fog for hours, refusing to die even after the person had.

And that scream was exactly what Rexagon had been waiting for.

The dragon had known he couldn't find them easily within the Hanging Paths. So he waited. Sooner or later one of them would fall. They were mice after all. Failure was inevitable.

A thunderous rumble rolled across the sky.

"Rwaaggh... hahahaha little mice."

His voice shook the heavens. Vast wings spread, stirring violent winds through the fog.

"I have found you. Now you die."

Seras didn't wait for him to descend. The moment she sensed his presence she abandoned the rule of silence.

"Run. We need to reach the giant skull," she shouted.

The Bone Hallows were their only chance. Among the endless white remains they might hide from the dragon's sight.

But terror spread faster than their feet.

Rexagon's mountain sized form loomed through the fog, and simply seeing him was enough. Fear pressed down on their backs. The Hanging Paths responded instantly.

A female knight's breathing grew ragged. Panic flooded her veins. Gravity thickened around her body until her armor creaked.

Then she burst into a cloud of blood.

Her fear had risen faster than her body could endure.

"Stay calm. It is not over yet," Seras shouted, her voice cutting through the chaos. "Remember who you are. We are the goddess races. We are chosen."

Her eyes burned with desperate conviction.

"Goddess races feel no fear."

The soldiers roared back, forcing courage into their bones. The oppressive weight lessened just enough.

They ran.

Damon didn't waste time. While Seras rallied morale he sprinted forward, the giant skull growing closer with every heartbeat.

Seras suddenly leapt, clearing several meters in the air. She landed in front of Damon, blocking his path.

"Come on. We need to buy time so the others can escape that dragon," she said, voice fierce.

Damon slowed, staring at her like she had lost her mind.

"We? Who is we?"

He tried to melt into the shadows and flee, but Seras grabbed his wrist and yanked him back.

Her eyes were sharp as she pulled a sword from her storage box.

"We as in me and you. Stay alive and I'll give you a kiss."

Damon glanced from her to the approaching dragon, whose wings churned astral winds through the sky.

"No. No thanks. I choose life. Beautiful lips come and go but my life is—"

She dragged him onto a branching vine as a pillar of destruction tore through the path they had stood on moments before.

The vines themselves rose from the fog, lashing toward the dragon in retaliation.

Damon crashed onto the branch, rolling before catching his footing.

"You owe me a lot more than a kiss after this," he muttered.

Then he reached into his shadow and drew out a giant sword.

Chapter 932: The Fang Taker

[Sword of Nicholas]

[Type: Weapon]

[Description]

Nicholas was quite a small man. However, what he lacked in stature, he made up for in spirit. Where bigger men stood, Nicholas stood longer. Where greater men fell, Nicholas still stood. There was no one who looked down on Nicholas... until the dragon Ashergon flew the skies. His fangs were swords and his claws were spears, and none could stop Ashergon.

The small Nicholas volunteered to face the mighty Ashergon. To make up for his small stature, he forged a massive and bulky sword.

When he came face to face with Ashergon, he became a pile of ash not even worth remembering, leaving behind a massive sword no one would ever recall.

[Effect]

By some measure he must have been resentful. The sword's aesthetic is not displeasing. It might seem small against a colossal, however it is imbued with the power to slay colossal beings, allowing it to grow bigger, lighter, and sharper.

This was the shadow Damon pulled from his shadow storage.

The Sword of Nicholas.

Nicholas had been nothing but a small pebble before Ashergon, reduced to ash in an instant. Yet who else could claim to have faced such a dragon? Damon did not know Nicholas, but the facts did not change. Even in death, his sword remained.

The original blade might not have been the same. This one was clearly forged by the unknown god. Still, it carried a domineering spirit.

It was the spirit of a man who could only look up at mountains and dare to overcome them. A man who never thought himself small.

The overwhelming aura of Rexagon pressed down from the sky. His widened wings seemed to cover the heavens, fog swallowing the sunlight until no shadows remained except Damon's, writhing unnaturally beneath his feet.

Seras stood her ground. Armor resembling a silver valkyrie sealed around her body, plates locking into place with quiet metallic sighs. In her hands rested a sword like glass, its hollow core slowly filling with blood that pulsed like a heartbeat.

"I am the lord of the carrion skies," Rexagon roared.

His voice fell like a hammer, shaking the Hanging Paths as his breath blasted through the forest.

"All that ends beneath the earth must bow before me."

The vines trembled violently. Fruits from the Orchard of Regret snapped free and crashed downward as the dragon's wrath turned against the Evil Forest itself.

"I am the one who feeds on all that is nurtured. I am the earth. I am Rexagon."

From those thunderous words Damon understood why dragons were arrogant. Rexagon's maw glowed red, then shifted into an impossible blue. What poured from his mouth defied reason.

Like a waterfall, it erupted from his maw.

Where it touched the vines, it passed through them with immolating heat that baked the very air, the surface beneath Damon's boots blistering and cracking.

"Blue lava," Damon muttered, his grip tightening on Nicholas' sword.

Toxic fumes followed, spreading through the suffocating stillness. Vines shriveled and died as giant house sized fruits plummeted toward Damon and Seras.

The massive vine beneath them began to melt.

Rexagon's rage turned toward them, his colossal horn lowering to ram straight through their perch. Seras moved first. She swung her sword, blood spilling from her nose as a red arc tore through the air, carrying the screams and voices of a thousand warriors locked in endless battle.

Rexagon opened his maw. A white barrier shimmered into existence, swallowing the first strike. His claw followed, sweeping the second aside with a heaven shaking screech.

"War... you think you can overcome Rexagon with war?" he roared.

His claw slammed down, ripping the giant vine from one side with Damon and Seras still clinging to it.

Blue lava surged after them.

Damon rolled, boots scraping burning bark as the molten wave chased him. He dove beneath the collapsing vine as it tilted sideways, then kicked against empty air with Airwalk, stepping upward and hauling himself back onto the unstable surface.

"I was born from the screams of war," Rexagon roared. "I was bathed in blood, baked beneath the fires of the earth. I am Rexagon, and I do not fear that which carries the carrion scent."

His wings swept once.

An astral storm exploded outward. Damon nearly lost his footing as the gale tore at his flesh, thin lines opening across his skin. Blood streamed freely as he lurched forward and grabbed Seras' thigh, anchoring himself while the storm threatened to cast him into the abyss.

Seras shifted her stance and shielded him without hesitation, her gaze drifting to the last expedition members disappearing into the Bone Hallows.

She exhaled softly.

They had made it.

Now only escape remained.

The vine beneath them snapped, smaller interwoven branches tearing apart as its weight collapsed. Damon slid along the burning surface, palms scraping against sizzling bark while toxic smoke clawed into his lungs and turned his vision red.

Seras met his eyes and gave a small nod.

Run.

Before the gesture finished Damon vanished, already sprinting across the crumbling path.

Rexagon's roar shattered the fog.

"Return, vile wretch. Face me."

Flames followed, thick with the scent of decay.

Seras launched upward with a sonic boom, blade carving toward the scales around Rexagon's neck. Steel met scale with a deafening clash. She felt the sword bite slightly, felt resistance like striking a mountain, but it was enough to draw fury.

Rexagon snapped his head sideways, sending her tumbling between two massive scales.

Seras was powerful, but not invincible. She could contend with a seventh class opponent, yet killing one was another matter entirely. Rexagon could do just that. Even weakened, he remained beyond her reach.

So she chose the only thing she could offer.

Time.

She stabbed her sword into his scale and climbed, shockwaves bursting with each pull as Rexagon's body heated and ignited into roaring flames. She leapt onto his head just as the giant skull of the Bone Hallows loomed closer through the smoke.

Damon must have escaped.

She gritted her teeth as a massive claw descended toward her, shadow swallowing her entirely. If it struck, the damage would be catastrophic.

Then something moved through the smoke.

A figure burst forward.

A giant sword swung with reckless force.

Nicholas' blade glowed.

The strike collided with Rexagon's maw with a thunderous crack. A massive fang tore free, spinning through the air as Damon seized it mid fall, using its weight and momentum to hurl himself toward the giant skull below.

"Remember me, Rexagon," Damon shouted, voice raw and defiant. "I am Damon, son of Kadelas Moonveil of the Moon Glades."

Seras understood the lie instantly. She kicked off Rexagon's head and dove toward the skull, slipping through the hollow eye socket just as dragonfire engulfed the ancient bone.

Rexagon's roar trembled with rage.

"Moon Glades... Moon Glades. You will pay, Damon son of Kadelas. And so will your people."

Chapter 933: Bone Hallows

Damon crashed into the skull's interior, his back slamming against something jagged as the impact forced a broken cough from his throat and blood spilled past his lips. He rolled and scraped further inside, fingers dragging across ancient bone as Seras jumped in behind him from another hollow socket. What followed them were molten lava and raging flames pouring through the openings, illuminating the ancient skull in flickering orange light that danced across its weathered surface.

He forced himself upright just as the sound of a massive claw struck the skull, Rexagon trying to rip the ancient bones apart. The strike sent cracks racing along the surface and debris scattering down around them, his claws skinning in and grinding against the bone, yet not enough to destroy the ancient remains.

Seras grabbed Damon's arm and pulled him as they ran further into the skull, boots echoing hollowly along the curved interior. Damon staggered slightly as the world shook again, and when he glanced back he saw Rexagon's giant eye peeking into the skull, burning with unrestrained rage.

Damon didn't stop. He turned a corner deeper within the skull and found members of the expedition force hidden inside a cavity that he could only imagine was the nape of whatever colossal creature this had once been.

His strength left him.

He collapsed onto his knees, wiping blood from the side of his mouth before suddenly laughing as he pulled out a giant fang he had torn from Rexagon's own maw.

He hugged the fang tightly, arms straining around its immense weight. It was larger than a long spear and wider than four whole cows.

"Hahaha hahaha.." Damon laughed, breathless and giddy. He had truly underestimated the effectiveness of the Sword of Nicholas on giant entities. Who would have thought it could actually break Rexagon's fang? Damon had poured everything into strength, yet even then the sword had felt alive, as if it carried its own will guiding the strike.

Everyone watched Damon in shock. Seeing him squeezing the fang, or at least attempting to, was surreal.

"Yo.. you broke Rexagon's fang.." Renata muttered. Hearing those words sounded unbelievable to anyone present, yet seeing was believing and their eyes did not deceive them. That truly was a fang from Rexagon.

While everyone remained stunned, Seras felt something colder settle in her chest. It was not the fang that shocked her. It was the lie.

Damon had claimed he was from the Moon Glades and the son of Kadelas Moonveil, the elf king known as the White Ruler.

That was absolutely diabolical. The reason was simple. If Rexagon could not find Damon, he would turn his wrath toward Damon's supposed homeland and unleash devastation upon it.

Normally that homeland would be the Valtheron Empire where Damon was actually from, except now Rexagon believed Damon was the son of Kadelas.

'I should remember not to provoke this guy.' She bit her lips. 'He's a very dangerous man.'

For all they knew Rexagon might cross the continent and descend upon the eastern lands where the elves lived, seeking the Moon Glades to burn them to the ground. Or at least attempt to. Kadelas was no slouch.

Either way, it would not kill Kadelas or destroy the Moon Glades, but it would become a massive nuisance.

Everyone had already surrounded Damon, singing his praises, when Seras stepped forward, grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him aside.

"Are you crazy..." The more she thought about it, the crazier it sounded.

Damon shook his head with indignation.

"Of course not. I'm actually insane..." he corrected. Crazy was for normal people. He had gone mad long ago.

Seras took a deep breath and dragged him further away where no one could see.

"Do you realize you just put a target on the Moon Glades in a time of war? No less, they are a crucial ally for the empire in this demon war."

Damon raised his hand to stop her.

"I just saved you from serious injury and instead of a thank you I get a lecture..."

He raised his hand again, pointing at her as he stepped closer without hesitation.

"And by the way, don't you owe me something for my troubles..."

Taking another step closer to her, he ignored how terrifying her aura was or who she was for that matter.

"I believe you owe me a little something something... or are you going back on your word.."

Seras inhaled slowly, his arrogant face making her hesitate. She had not forgotten. She was just a little shy, that was all.

She awkwardly pushed her hair to the side, lowered her head slightly, and pressed a quick kiss against Damon.

Then she pushed him back, unintentionally sending him flying. Damon barely processed what happened before he hit the ground and slowly raised his hand.

"That.. erh.. doesn't count.."

She turned around immediately.

"Let's go. We need to sneak out of the Bone Hallows before Rexagon spots us."

She started walking with Damon following behind while rubbing his head.

"Speaking of which, how are we gonna get to the demon continent? I mean, the Bone Hallows is by the sea. We need a boat, except if you can fly us over the sea.."

Seras nodded.

"Flying spells are easy to learn. Anyone can learn them. It's just no one bothers because they're also easy to disrupt."

She paused slightly, taking in the dull grey atmosphere around her.

"We have airships now, although I wouldn't advise using them to get to the demon continent. Air defence magic has come a long way. We can't get in without being seen and shot down."

"So we're going through the sea then," Damon answered.

"That still doesn't answer my question. Or wait, it does. Is there a boat? No, in this case we're taking a ship. There's a ship waiting for us, isn't there.."

Seras nodded slowly as they walked back toward the expedition force who were still admiring Damon's dragon fang.

"Yes, there is.."

Damon nodded, then his face scrunched up in anger.

"If they were giving us a ship then why did we have to go through the evil forest.."

He was right. Why not sneak through safer lands or towns, or even uncharted but less hostile areas?

Seras shook her head.

"Because you and I are too high profile. The enemy wants to know our location at all times. The demon races' spy networks are actually quite complex, as you've seen with the priest. We don't know who is a spy or who isn't anymore. Following the unknown god isn't about race anymore. It's an ideology... and there's also the fact that some of the goddess races' continents openly worship the unknown god."

She turned around to face him, armor gleaming faintly.

"We can't trust anybody or even ourselves.."

Damon nodded slowly. That made sense.

Seras smiled coolly.

"As far as the world is concerned, you and I are in the Aether Academy having a special secret one on one training to prepare you for the battlefield, which means the enemy thinks we are still there."

Damon smirked, glancing around at the deathly landscape and the distant sounds of dragon wings and occasional flames flashing outside.

"Well, it's definitely not a picnic."

Seras rejoined the expedition force with Damon. She did not need to give orders. After weeks on cursed vines, everyone collapsed to rest, exhaustion overtaking them within the shelter of the skull.

Damon received praise and eagerly recounted how he had overcome Rexagon and broken its fang. He was further hailed as a hero. Of course, Damon being Damon did not forget to emphasize how he saved Seras's life and painted her like a princess in a fairy tale.

Every time he said something outrageous, the expedition force glanced at Seras, yet she never corrected him or refuted his words, allowing the tale to grow larger.

Naturally, one telling became another until their expedition force now carried an unbelievable story where Damon broke Rexagon's fang and even saved Seras.

He stood his ground and, with a lady in one hand and a sword in the other, cut off the dragon's fang.

That was not what happened.

Seras could hear soldiers arguing nearby.

"You bastard, I saw it with my own eyes. He was a real hero. She was in his left hand and his sword in his right.."

"You're mad. I saw it. She was in his right hand and his sword in his left. You think an honorable gentleman like our vice commander would mistreat a lady by holding her in his left hand..."

The argument was ridiculous since no one had actually seen anything.

Seras shook her head.

Damon, on the other hand, enjoyed the hero's treatment, the reverent gaze of the expedition force, and the careful attention he received while the healer worked on his wounds.

He felt heroic. Life really took a man places. If he was not in the Bone Hallows, he would have been excitedly enjoying this moment even more.

"Right, speaking of which, what kind of bones are these anyway?" he asked no one in particular.

Seras answered calmly.

"These are the bones of the enemies of the wicked prophet, all relics of an ancient battle all the way from the demon continent to here in Soltheon."

Her voice dropped into a quiet whisper.

"Have you heard of the graveyard of gods."

Chapter 934: Overwhelming But Defeated

Graveyard of gods. From what Damon knew, it was a death zone in the demon continent with countless ancient bones, some more alive than dead, and those who were dead corrupting the world and all those around it with their lingering power.

If the evil forest was a dangerous death zone, then the graveyard of gods was the mother of death zones. It was said that even those in the seventh class advancement stood the risk of being killed there.

As a death zone, not even Lysithara came close to it.

Damon narrowed his eyes. Seras smiled, chuckling softly.

"Ahh so you don't know everything. That's good. Here I thought you had all the answers."

He could tell she was teasing him, especially since the incident with the lich Amadeus.

"Hmph." He sneered, crossing his arms.

"I know only the things that I know. Life is a journey. We must strive to keep learning, for only when we acknowledge we are ignorant can we truly search for knowledge. The greatest act of ignorance is denying one's ignorance."

Seras didn't even know what to say. She raised an eyebrow.

"Did you just quote the Book of Athor?"

Damon blinked, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What are you talking about?" he responded coolly.

"Hope you didn't forget I was a student of Aether Academy too. It's the quote in the Book of Athor. Ahh, you are absolutely shameless... If I didn't know, I'd think you were dropping profound wisdom.."

Damon scoffed at her words.

"Did the words impact you or not? So what if they aren't original."

Seras sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Fine. You win.."

She sat down on the white bone ground and leaned against a giant bone fragment. It must have been part of the spine of whatever creature this was.

"The temple collected some records when they first formed and as you know they survived a lot of things to make it here as a world class power. Nevertheless, our focus isn't on their history."

Seras crossed her legs, sitting in a lotus position.

"You already know of the wicked prophet, right? Legends have it he fought some unknown and terrifying enemies in an ancient war. When the war ended, what was left was a battlefield of ancient corpses whose fierce will refused to fade even in death." She paused, then whispered, "That was how the god grave came to be."

Damon glanced at the large skull they were in and the vast and deep shadows inside it. He thought for a moment and wondered if his shadow could devour this corpse. He instinctively glanced at his shadow and it slowly began to shake its head.

These things were dead, but something about them was still alive, something hungry to continue. If he devoured them he would succeed, no doubt, but he would also carry along the weight of something he shouldn't, and perhaps he would be the one who was lost.

When he got to that point, he suddenly thought of something.

The Lost. They were a race of entities in the demon continent who could steal shadows.

Were they born in the graveyard of gods?

Damon quickly opened his system panel and checked the skill category.

[Skill: Shadow Control]

[Description:]

"The lost abound, hunger in their souls as they steal shadows, replacing their stolen forms with the essence of those they take. Those whose shadows vanish become like them—lost, wandering, forever chasing what was stolen. In their absence, the shadows once lost now bend to your will, shaped by desire, lingering and intangible, as though they were never meant to be seen."

[Effect:]

The user can control intangible shadows—those not bound to physical form—manipulating them with will and essence. Masterless shadows now bend to your command, a force under your control.

[Type:]

Active.

[Cooldown:]

10 seconds.

Seras didn't know what he was looking at. She merely continued.

"The ancient battle crossed the sea all the way from the demon continent, passing by the sea and permanently changing it. Finally, it stopped here on the shores of the war continent. This is how the Bone Hallows were formed."

Damon nodded. He couldn't imagine it. A battlefield stretching all the way from the demon continent, crossing the sea and even reaching here in Soltheon. How many entities died? What kind of abominations were they facing? How terrible must the outsiders be to wield such power?

He had seen firsthand how the outsiders had been able to turn Lysithara into a ruin. There was the outsider Ythar, whose corpse created a dense fog that would eventually become the Whispering Forest.

There was Ittorath, who was sealed in a spatial rift with the twin moons as catalysts, leaving only one moon in the sky of Lysithara.

This solemn, deathly air in the Bone Hallows only made Damon realize a terrible truth. The outsiders were far more terrifying than he ever gave them credit for. Far more cunning. Far more knowledgeable.

'How am I supposed to kill entities like these?'

Seras placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You should get some rest. We'll be moving out in a few hours.."

Damon nodded slowly, but he couldn't help asking,

"How do we even begin to fight things like this.." he muttered.

Seras stopped. She didn't say anything for a moment, then she smiled.

"I had the same thought too... when I was a little girl... except in my case it wasn't terrifying entities, though looking back now that's how they felt..."

Damon glanced at her slightly. Seras smiled with a distant look in her eyes.

"When I was a young girl I was faced with someone in the first class advancement.."

"Hmm, but they're weak.." Damon replied.

She nodded slowly. The first class was weak. It was the first step to a long path to power. Right now she could kill a first class entity with just a single gesture or even her aura alone.

"They are to you, who is in the fourth class advancement. They're probably less than ants in the ground."

She placed her hand on her chest.

"To me, a child, that person seemed greater than the heavens. They could break through walls, move at impossible speeds... I stood no chance. I was just an unawakened child."

There was a faint glimmer in her eyes.

"I was certain I would die because there was no one to save me. I did the only thing I could. I fought tooth and nail, bloodied and battered, with my life hanging on a thread. I realized somewhere in my frenzy to live I had won. I had achieved something unprecedented."

Damon listened quietly. He had heard of this. This was just the beginning of her legend, the girl who slew someone in the first class when she still reeked of her mother's milk.

"Yeah, that's a weakling. These are beings that are transcendent.." he replied, shooting down her logic.

Just because she beat one ant didn't really matter. That person was insignificant. He wasn't even worth mentioning in the footnotes of her legend.

"Is it? I think it's the same." Seras smiled, her expression serene. He had never seen her smile like this. This was the gentlest expression he had ever seen on her face. Her eyes that usually carried battlefield rage were calm. He saw himself reflected in them, his expression full of doubt.

"I thought that person was unstoppable, but he wasn't. He was insignificant before strength. Now I am powerful, he is even less than an ant... maybe he seemed powerful to me because I was weak. He seemed greater than life itself, but he wasn't. These creatures are no different. They are not larger than life. To someone with more power than them, they are nothing, not even worth remembering."

Her gaze never left him.

"I am not afraid to face someone or something that seems large or more powerful. If I must, I will fight. And when I fight, I will win. Because I am Seras Blade, and I fear no giants."

Damon was moved by her words, her temperament. She was right. These outsiders seemed so vast and powerful, but who was the one laying dead here? It was them. Who was a relic of the past? They fought the wicked prophet and lost. Why should he fear defeated lovers? They seemed vast in his world, but in the grand scheme of things they were nothing, just pawns in the unknown god's schemes. They didn't even matter. They weren't even players.

"I was wrong," Damon thought, looking at Seras's fading figure as she walked away from him.

"I forgot something important after getting surprise attacked by Ittorath."

It was something important.

"These guys aren't invincible. They lost to someone born in my world. They're even weaker than Ashcroft, who I've defeated.."

"I'm not trapped in this world with them. They're trapped in here with me.."

"I can still deal with this. I can still trap even the unknown god."

And he only needed to find one thing to pull this off.

Lazarak's Lake of Tears.

Chapter 935: Bone Ridge

The primary goal of finding the Pillar of Conflict had not changed at all. If anything, Damon was more pressed to find it than ever, except he knew nothing of how to find the pillar or what it looked like, only that he had to.

For that reason Damon was sure even the unknown god didn't know where the Pillar of Conflict was in this world, only that it was here.

The world had nine continents. If he were the goddess of doom, which continent would he hide it on?

Of all the continents only one was called the war continent, but Damon doubted the goddess of doom would be so obvious in her hiding place, so he ruled out Soltheon where he lived. The next would be the doom continent, or as it was called, the demon continent, Centros, the continent at the very center of the world.

This was where the demon race lived and was the starting point of everything. However, the demon races had been there for many years, so he doubted the unknown god hadn't already scoured it all.

The next that came to mind was the wild continent. This was the birthplace of Leona and had predominantly beastkin living there with dense jungles. Lothria, this continent in the south, had many ancient ruins and its jungles were hardly mapped out. It would be a great hiding place.

Even so Damon ruled it out.

Then the Verdant Continent where the elves dwelled had to be the one, but after thinking about the high and mighty attitude of the elves he ruled out Iorvas.

He clicked his tongue while Lilith leaned back on her chair. She spoke in a smooth voice,

"Iorvas is known for its mystical forests and ancient elven cities, though other races also live within its dense forests and plains. The elves are dominant in terms of leadership, but the continent is home to many nature based races who share a common reverence for the natural world and the Goddess. I don't see them being warlike, so it's less likely than the wild continent."

Damon nodded slowly, striking it from the map.

"There's no point guessing like this. We have probable cause for doubt, but if I was to pick one I'd say it was here in Soltheon or maybe Vuldren." His words were uncertain.

Lilith tapped the stone table lightly. The room had giant statues of unusual looking humanoid entities. It was a large chamber with a high ceiling and a feeling much like a mausoleum for the dead. Perhaps that was what it was. After all, this place was called the Tomb of Lesser Gods.

This was close to the center of the hidden tomb.

"Actually, what if she did? I mean we don't know anything about the goddess save for what we read in dubious old texts written by some long dead men who sneak their opinions into them and indoctrinate the foolish masses who take their word as law."

"Hmm, so basically we should keep our options open," Damon added nonchalantly.

Lilith smiled. It was good that he agreed with her so easily.

"Alright then that brings us to the problem of the unknown god." Damon sat down on a stone chair opposite her.

"And what about unknown.." Lilith asked, her brows furrowed.

"How do we deal with him?" Damon asked slowly.

"That sounds more like a statement than a question. You have something in mind, don't you.." Lilith answered. That much she was sure of.

Damon smiled calmly, waving his hand.

"Ohh goodness yes yes I do..."

"So what is it.." Lilith asked.

He kept his gaze on her for a moment, his expression cool.

She blinked, remembering she had the stigmata of the unknown god on her back.

"Hmm that is a valid reason for concern. It's fine if you don't tell me."

Damon shook his head slightly.

"No it's fine. I always work under the assumption the unknown knows my next plan, which is fine. It wouldn't matter if he knows. But for now I also want to work under the assumption that he doesn't."

Lilith tilted her head slightly.

"So what you're saying is if he knows so what, but you don't want him to know, right."

"Right." Damon answered slowly.

"The goddess ruled here but she got one upped by the unknown god. If that could be done to her, why not the unknown god... think about it, what really brought the unknown god here.."

Lilith thought for a moment before she slowly answered,

"It was Lazarak using his Lake of Tears."

Damon smiled slowly.

"Exactly. That Lake of Tears was a game changer because it could bypass the goddess and contact external entities. How it actually works is lost to me. Lazarak never used it when I knew him, or not that I know of. However, outside the nightmare he did use it, and that led to everything."

Lilith understood his logic, but she had one pressing question.

"Yeah that's good and all, but what are you going to do with the Lake of Tears and where is it? You don't even know that."

Damon chuckled slowly.

"It's right here in this tomb. I know it is because I know Lazarak. Of all the places he would hide the Lake of Tears, he would hide it in here."

Damon stopped talking for a moment, remembering the optimistic god who could not take a life.

"I know it's here. He would keep it here in the burial chamber."

Lilith sighed, taking a deep breath.

"Ooh how troublesome. We can't get to the burial chamber thanks to the monster guarding the door. We can't exactly call someone in here to slay it either."

Over the past months they had made a lot of progress conquering the Tomb of Lazarak. After traveling and fighting in it for a while Lilith couldn't help but remark its nature was that of a dungeon.

Most of the raids that caused terrible advances were the work of the orcs who swore loyalty to Damon as well as the human knights who had been defeated by them.

However, they didn't really make it that far until Maw showed up with his brood of shadow drones conquering chamber after chamber. Now all that was left was the final chamber, which was the burial chamber.

The guardian of the gate was in the sixth class advancement, so they couldn't go through it or even take it down.

Although Damon believed what was inside was worse.

"Who do you intend to call upon when you get to the Lake of Tears."

Damon shook his head slightly.

"I have no idea. I'll cross that bridge when I get there, but it'll probably be the goddess. You know, fight fire with fire.."

Lilith didn't say anything. She glanced at him.

"What's going on with your main body in the Bone Hallows."

Damon frowned, holding his head.

"Nothing good."

He snuck into the crevice between two bones. A wet sticky fluid covered his face, but Damon wasn't worried about the disgusting substance that smelled like a rotten corpse.

His gaze was fixed on the ashen sky above him while he remained unmoving. A vast shadow was moving in the air, the world shaking with each flap of its wings.

Damon wanted to curse, but he heard that even his cursing might be heard by this dragon.

Of course it was a dragon. It was none other than Rexagon.

Even now Rexagon had not given up hunting Damon. The humiliation was still fresh in its heart.

However Rexagon didn't land on this cursed land. He remained in the sky. It wasn't that he didn't want to. It was that he couldn't. Every time he tried, the ancient bones rose to fight him.

Damon waited for the coast to clear. When Rexagon's shadow vanished over the horizon he let out a sigh of relief.

Then he slowly crawled out, his face covered in the stench of a corpse. He wasn't the only one. From the crevices and shadows of the bones, members of the expedition force began to emerge one by one.

Seras rolled out from under a pile of human sized bones.

"That dragon sure is persistent," she muttered, glaring at Damon slightly.

Damon was too fatigued to care. Apparently there were areas in the Bone Hallows where sleep was not allowed. If you slept there you would never wake up.

They learned that the hard way, and since those places couldn't be identified they opted not to sleep at all.

"How long before we reach the sea."

Seras lifted her hand to her face as if gauging the distance.

"Hmm I'd say we aren't that far from it. We just need to make it over that bone ridge, although in this case we have to go inside it if we want to avoid Rexagon."

Damon felt deflated by her words.

"Let me guess there's something inside those bones."

Seras smiled slowly.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Chapter 936: Bone To Pick

The Bone Hallows were silent, other than the occasional bottomless pit hidden beneath piles of bones. This place was not completely quiet. It had a thin noise that carried the groans of the dead and the sounds of bones being shot into the air by some unknown force before clattering back down in restless cascades.

There were also treasures to be found here, although they did not touch any they discovered.

The reason was simple. Seras did not want to risk provoking something they should not or stirring ancient curses buried beneath the skeletal wasteland.

Even Damon, who was greedy, did not risk it. He was sure if he did he would end up taking something cursed. Of that he was certain.

The way to the Bone Ridge was not difficult. They hid beneath the shadow of a giant femur bone while Rexagon's occasional roars filled the open sky, the sound rolling across the wasteland like thunder.

Damon was slightly exhausted, especially after days without sleep, but the fourth class advancement made him a powerhouse. Sleep was inconsequential to him. It was just a habit he had developed since birth. With his current body his lifespan was easily above a thousand years old, and even without his skill he could remove his soul from his body, though he would not be that stupid.

If that was the case, why would he risk his more than thousand year lifespan and come to this cursed place?

He really wished he could live the good life. He could have a steady and peaceful existence with wealth and food, lots of food. He would never go hungry.

'Maybe I should run away. I could find a nice place and change my identity,' he thought languidly to himself. It was a sweet thought. Doubtful if he could achieve it. Peace was an illusion in a world of war. In this world strength was everything.

One person could lay waste to an army. A dragon could level your town. A dungeon could spew monster hordes. A noble could snatch your wife and the gods did not care.

All this and so much more were reasons.

Damon felt the air change. Or rather, there was a large space about seven kilometers wide with absolutely no large bones covering the area above their heads, only small scattered fragments littering the ground.

It was as if this area was the last stretch before something horrible.

Though that was not why Seras stopped. She stopped because their real trouble was the dragon flying above. If Rexagon saw them it would be a disaster.

She turned around and nodded slowly, her voice low and controlled.

"We are going to have to cross in smaller groups. I will go first and secure the entrance of the Bone Ridge. If there is anything there I will kill it, then signal for you to come. Break away into smaller groups and follow."

That was Seras' order. Damon had a bad feeling about this.

He peeked upward to check on Rexagon and, disturbingly enough, the dragon was still there, a massive silhouette drifting across the dead sky.

Damon moved toward Seras, catching her wrist and pulling her aside.

"Wait. Wait. Do not be reckless. Let me come with you first," he whispered.

Seras was taken aback. He really wanted to risk his life with her and test the unknown. She was about to be disappointed.

"If you go first nothing is going to happen and then everyone will go, but when it is my turn Rexagon will conveniently find me. I am not taking that risk."

Seras gave him a deadpan expression. Her heart had fluttered at his initial words. Hearing the rest made it sink with quiet disappointment.

She scoffed.

"You are coming, so make sure you cover the rear and stop being so paranoid."

Seras dashed forward, her figure blurring as she navigated the open stretch. The seven kilometer distance was short to someone of her power. It took a little less than three seconds even though she was not going full speed so she would not alert Rexagon.

The moment she reached the giant Bone Ridge the first thing she saw was an inscription carved into a massive skull embedded within the ridge. She did not read it. She did not have time.

Something leapt from the shadows. Seras had already expected it. Her blade flashed, her tachi whispering through the air as she cut them down in precise, silent strikes.

She made sure to produce as little noise as possible. Sliding her tachi back into its sheath, she stepped to the edge of the ridge and waved them forward.

Damon saw the signal and glanced at Renata.

"You go first. Take Lana's group with you."

Renata nodded, then paused, narrowing her eyes.

"Wait. Are you using me to test the waters?"

Damon placed a hand dramatically over his chest.

"Renata, I care about you. I want you to be safe. That is why I am going out of my way to make sure you reach safety first and all I get is suspicion."

Her expression did not change.

"Ugh. Forget it. I will go."

Damon watched Renata gather Lana's party and slip across the open stretch. Rexagon in the sky was no longer flying in their direction.

Even so Damon remained cautious. He turned to Wendy, who stood with a raven and a squirrel perched on her shoulders.

"Wendy, I leave this to you. Take three parties and cross."

She glared at him, his face far too close to hers.

"I am not dying childless."

Damon nodded solemnly, still holding his chest.

"I will make sure you leave something behind."

"Are you cursing me to die?" she grumbled.

"No, goodness no. I need you to live. Good luck, Wendy."

"Caw caw, liar liar," the raven cawed from her shoulder.

Damon grabbed its neck.

"Shut up or I will cook you, croft."

The squirrel covered its mouth, holding back mocking squeals at the raven's suffering. Damon glared at it and it immediately straightened.

Wendy brushed his hand away and led her squads across. A minute later she reached the other side.

Next was Silas, who crossed successfully, then Kael, then several more squads until Damon was the only one left.

He peeked through the bones toward the sky. Damon wanted to be absolutely sure, so he waited another thirty minutes.

Then he moved. Well, as safe as one could be in a death zone.

He paused and muttered a small prayer.

"Goddess, it is me. Please allow me to cross without incident."

He pressed a hand to his chest, feeling his faint heartbeat.

"Deathless, allow your little brother to pass in peace. I promise not to take you for granted anymore."

With that he felt slightly convinced of his safety. His danger sense was fully active, waiting for the slightest disturbance.

Damon melted into shadow and slipped forward, keeping his focus locked on the ridge.

A small shadow glided across the wasteland until Damon reached the center. The moment he did, his danger sense exploded.

Before he could react a massive crash rocked the ground. Bones scattered violently into the air before raining back down.

Damon's shadow lay half buried. Through it he realized he was trapped between two enormous claws.

Rexagon had landed.

Damon felt like fleeing. Goddess knew he almost tried. But the gap between the two sides, less than three kilometers, might as well have been the distance between heaven and hell.

This was Damon's hell.

He stared toward heaven where safety waited. Seras crouched behind a rib, watching him with an apologetic expression.

He wanted to cry, but even a breath felt dangerous.

Rexagon had not landed because he saw Damon. His wings burned from constant flight and there was no resting place closer than this.

"Rarawgg," Rexagon yawned, heat spilling from his maw.

Damon remained silent in shadow form.

He knew it. He had warned Seras. Deathless was out to kill him. What crime had he committed other than being a deplorable human and committing a few crimes here and there?

'I knew it. This is justice... justice for wiping out my village,' he thought, memories of collateral casualties surfacing.

He paused.

'No. No. I cannot think that way.'

Rexagon slowly lowered his head to rest.

But as his nostrils flared he caught a wretched scent buried beneath decay.

His eyes glowed.

"I smell you," Rexagon's voice echoed.

"The smell of death and treachery."

Damon did not move. Rexagon sniffed through the bone piles. If Damon were in human form he would already be dead. But how was a shadow being smelled?

Rexagon's claws swept outward, sending bones and Damon's shadow flying.

Midair Damon expanded his perception and teleported, reappearing beside Seras' blade as Rexagon raged behind them. Of course he did not forget to be Damon.

He left a message.

When the bones settled, one skull remained with a crude inscription carved into it.

The words read.

I am your father today and tomorrow.

Signed Damon.

"RAWWWWWWW!" Rexagon roared into the heavens.

Chapter 937: Why Do You Defy

Once again he had made it out with his life intact, which was good for him. The ground still trembled under Rexagon's rage, distant shockwaves rolling through the earth like a dying heartbeat, but what did that have to do with Damon? He had already escaped.

He glanced up to find Seras pressing her fingers against her forehead, eyes closed as if fending off a headache.

"You really are a trouble magnet."

Damon felt aggrieved. He had told her this would happen. She just had not believed him. He opened his mouth to argue, then thought better of it.

Seras exhaled through her nose, then turned sharply to the others hiding among the bones. She swept her gaze over each of them, ensuring they were steady, then flicked her wrist in a silent command.

"Move. Keep your wits about you. We have no clue what is inside this place."

Everyone nodded. Hands tightened around weapons. Shoulders straightened. Their earlier terror had sharpened into caution.

Damon took a slow breath and followed behind her, boots crunching softly against splintered fragments of bone. His gaze drifted along the pale walls, and then caught on something carved into the curve of a massive rib.

Why do you defy?

The words were written in runic script, Soul Tongue. The language understood by all.

Which meant it had not been written by a native of this world.

Damon slowed, then stopped entirely. He reached out and brushed his fingers across the grooves. The bone was cold.

There was a faint yet powerful aura in the carving, like the afterimage of lightning. As if something transcendent had etched the question there. A trace of formless will lingered, pressing against his senses.

He lowered his head.

'Why do I defy.'

He repeated the question inwardly as he resumed walking, boots stepping over a skull half-buried in the cavern floor.

'Why do I defy.'

It was an interesting question. He had not thought about it recently. He defied because he had no choice.

But was that truly it?

He folded his arms across his chest as they descended deeper into the bone ridge. Pale light from the entrance barely reached this far. Shadows thickened. The air grew heavier.

Lazarak defied for peace.

Mugu defied for love.

Ashcroft defied for domination.

Defiance.

What did it mean to defy?

Lazarak had once told him to defy himself.

Was that it? To go against not gods, but yourself?

Damon's jaw tightened slightly.

Lazarak had also told him that everyone carried a god within.

The god inside is bigger than the giant we face.

Then why did he defy?

He stepped down from a tilted skull, boots scraping bone.

"Some defy for love. Some defy for hate. Some for vengeance. Some defy for their dreams. I defy for defiance's sake. I stand where I know I will fall. There is no other reason. Defiance is the means and the end. I shall spit in the face of god as I am damned. Even in defeat I will rot in hell with those who dared to overcome impossible odds."

His fingers curled slightly as he walked.

That was his answer.

His defiance did not need a reason beyond the fact that he chose it.

The moment that thought settled, the bone ridge trembled.

A low vibration ran through the cavern walls. Dust trickled down from above. The carved words began to glow faintly, pale light seeping from within the grooves. New letters etched themselves into the bone as if written by an invisible blade.

Damon lifted his head slowly.

A voice echoed out, distant yet intimate, as if spoken directly into their skulls.

"Which god do you serve?"

Seras stopped instantly. Her tachi slid into her hand in a single smooth motion, the blade angled low as her eyes swept the darkness. Her stance widened, weight shifting to the balls of her feet.

She saw no one.

She was slightly taken aback by the question, but only slightly.

"Who are you? Show yourself."

Silence lingered for a breath too long.

Then the voice returned.

"Forgive my rudeness. Unfortunately, I cannot show myself. I am imprisoned in a place here and not here."

Seras did not lower her blade. Her grip tightened instead.

There were many dangers in this world. Some could not be killed, only sealed. Her gaze flicked to the glowing script, then to the hollow darkness between the ribs. She would not be surprised if this entity sought some gullible fool to free it.

"Who are you?" she repeated, voice colder now.

The voice paused.

"First answer my question. Which god do you serve?"

Damon narrowed his eyes. He let his shadow perception spread outward, brushing against the glowing words. Beneath their light he felt pressure, subtle but immense. Something vast testing the edges of their presence.

Seras did not know why it wanted to know. The voice did not sound malicious.

That made her more cautious.

That was how they enticed people.

"We are worshippers of the goddess of doom," she replied evenly.

"Ohh, I see. So you are of Doom's faith. I am relieved. Though we do not share the same faith, we are still worshippers of god."

Seras frowned slightly but did not respond.

The voice continued, almost warmly.

"I am Morticai the Pure. I am the servant of a true god from beyond your realm."

Damon's eyes sharpened.

From beyond your realm.

An outsider.

He stepped slightly forward, chin lifting.

"Which god do you serve?"

There was a brief silence.

Then Morticai spoke in a calm, reverent tone.

"Though you may not know my god's glorious name, I shall speak it so you may be of the light. I am the lowly servant of the true god Obamion god of souls, emotions, and will."

"Obamion," Seras repeated.

The moment the name left her lips, her tongue felt heavy.

Her breath caught.

Her soul trembled as if struck by an unseen hammer. A ripple passed through her body. Her fingers twitched around the hilt of her tachi.

Then she felt it.

Something far away.

Something vast.

It had heard.

Her head turned slowly, as if pulled by invisible threads. For a single, suffocating moment she felt exposed, laid bare beneath an immeasurable gaze. No armor. No secrets. No defenses.

She could not move.

Her knees buckled.

The presence vanished as suddenly as it had come.

Seras dropped to her knees, one hand slamming against the bone floor to steady herself. Sweat dripped from her brow. Her breathing turned uneven.

Damon stepped toward her instinctively, eyes narrowing.

"My god has sensed you call his name. Fear not, he means you no harm. I am envious of your fortune. To be in the sights of the god of souls even for a moment is a great honor," Morticai spoke with reverence.

Damon sensed nothing.

He saw no gaze. Felt no presence.

All he saw was Seras kneeling, trembling, struck down by a name alone.

Chapter 938: Venom From A Cage

Damon gulped, throat tightening as he swallowed his fear. He had just been about to say the name of Obamion aloud.

His fingers twitched at his side.

He knew the names of a few true beings. Of them all, the most terrifying was the Unknown God. Other than him, Damon also knew the name of Muses, the god of inspiration. He had seen that name when he died. The System had spoken it then, cold and indifferent.

He had never dared to say it aloud.

Now more than ever, he was glad he had not.

Then there was Minerva, Goddess of Doom. It felt wrong to take a god's name lightly, but this was her world. He had spoken her name more than once.

These gods did not seem to hide their names. Only the Unknown God's name had been lost, erased by Doom herself. Or perhaps lost because even he hated it.

There was a poem about that.

Damon forced his thoughts back to the present and stepped forward, boots grinding bone dust.

"What are your intentions with us?"

His blunt tone made the others tense. Fear lingered in the air like a foul odor. How could it not? Seras had been forced to her knees by repeating a name Damon had nearly spoken without thinking.

"I mean you no harm," Morticai replied smoothly. "I simply sensed the mark I placed upon a defeated enemy react. It was but a moment of curiosity."

Damon's eyes narrowed.

Mark.

He glanced at the glowing script carved into the colossal bones around them.

"What mark?"

Seras rose slowly to her feet beside him, though her face was still pale. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and steadied her breathing.

"There is a group of entities who refuse to obey," Morticai continued. "When I encountered them in the past, I would ask why they chose to defy the gods."

A faint pause.

"They would always resist. Never giving me a proper answer."

Damon's gaze drifted along the cavern walls, up the curving spine that arched overhead like a cathedral of death.

"Did you kill this entity?"

Silence.

Then the light along the bones brightened, the temperature seeming to drop.

"Yes. Yes, I did. This was one of those lowly creatures who failed to be born without a monster core. They removed their mana core and lost their nature as a monster, the fate they were born with. Then they masqueraded as one of the blessed races who did not possess a monster core to begin with. They dared to change the nature of their souls and go against god."

The disdain in his voice was palpable.

Damon subconsciously glanced at Wendy.

Her fingers curled slightly into her sleeves. Her face paled.

She had once been a monster. The Unknown God had removed her core. That act had made her something else. Not fully human. Not fully beast. Something between.

A silence stretched thin.

Mortikai cleared his throat lightly.

"Forgive me. I simply dislike such entities more than common monsters who accept their place in the omniverse. One's soul and nature must not be changed. Especially not if they are lowly monsters."

Damon's jaw tightened.

"Is that your opinion," he asked evenly, "or your god's?"

"My god cares not for such trivialities," Mortikai replied instantly. "It is we Puritans who do what must be done."

A faint sigh echoed through the cavern.

"I am unfortunately sealed within a prison by a certain vile demon, so I cannot act personally."

Damon's eyes sharpened.

A vile demon.

Was he speaking of Mugu?

He needed confirmation.

He stepped forward slightly, lowering his voice and lacing it with contempt.

"Are you referring to that evil wretch? The one who calls himself the Wicked Prophet? The scum who turned against the goddess. The man known as Mugu."

He made sure the hatred in his tone was convincing.

"I see you are familiar with his name," Morticai said coldly. "Yes. He is the one. The traitor. To think some of us once found him agreeable. In the end, what can you expect from a lower realm wretch."

Damon kept his expression neutral, though his thoughts sharpened.

That confirmed it.

An outsider.

The same disdain. The same superiority Ittorath had shown. No matter how calm or courteous they appeared, they were invaders with their own purposes.

Seras inhaled slowly and straightened fully, though a faint tremor still lingered in her fingers.

"In that case," she said evenly, "you have no business with us. We shall be on our way."

The light pulsed once.

"Indeed. I wish you a safe journey. Though the path ahead seems dire for your cohort. I imagine you do not wish to face an undead in the seventh class of advancement."

Several members of the expedition stiffened. One man swallowed audibly.

Even so, Seras did not waver.

An undead, even one of the seventh class, was preferable to Rexagon, who still raged outside.

"We are on a quest that will change our world forever," she said, lifting her chin. "If we must sacrifice our lives for the greater good of our people, then so be it."

The light gathered together, condensing.

"How noble. Your goddess must be pleased to have such devoted followers."

The glow stretched outward, distorting the air before them.

"You seem to be headed toward the sea. Allow me to assist."

The world warped. Bone and darkness peeled away like a curtain, revealing the distant shimmer of the ocean.

"You may pass. This is all I can manage with what remains of me here."

Seras hesitated. Her eyes flicked to Damon.

He extended his senses cautiously.

He felt no immediate malice.

He gave a slight nod.

Even so, they tested it. One of the mages marked a stone with magic and tossed it through. Nothing happened. No explosion. No distortion.

One by one, they stepped through.

Until only Damon and Wendy remained.

Wendy moved toward the portal.

The light flickered.

It trembled.

"Wait. What... you are a—"

Damon did not wait for the sentence to finish.

He shoved Wendy forward with one hand and leapt after her, dragging her fully through as the scent of salt and rot filled his lungs.

Behind them, Morticai's voice twisted, no longer smooth.

"Filthy beast masquerading as a woman. I curse you. You dare. So it was you. You were the one I sensed."

The portal snapped shut like a slammed door.

Damon pulled Wendy back instinctively, placing himself slightly in front of her as the final echoes reached them.

"I curse you all. I curse you."

The sea wind howled. The bone ridge was gone.

Seras stared at the empty air where the portal had been, confusion etched across her face.

A curse.

She frowned faintly.

"Hm."

Damon let out a slow breath.

Too bad for Morticai.

Sealed and powerless, all he could do was spit venom from a cage.

Chapter 939: A Small Chat

The air was filthy, heavy with the stench of death it had carried for countless years. It clung to the lungs, settled on the tongue. Even so, beneath that rot, there was a faint scent of the ocean. Its waters shimmered black beneath a dim horizon, the faint light of the sea bleeding into a thin fog that crawled across the surface like something alive.

Crunch.

Damon's boot came down on brittle bone.

The beach was littered with skeletons. Some still wore fragments of armor etched with symbols he recognized. Others bore relics from eras long forgotten. Rusted blades, shattered staffs, cracked amulets. Corpses from different ages lay together in silent communion, unified in death.

This was the final inevitability of all life.

One day even he would be nothing more than white bone bleaching beneath a dead sky.

Weapons and trinkets lay scattered everywhere. Many could sell for a fortune, even in their ruined state. Ancient steel still held value. Enchanted jewelry still whispered with dormant power.

Yet no one bent to take anything.

The rule was simple. Do not take from the forest, or the forest will follow you.

And these bones... these remains... they could be cursed.

Better to leave the dead to their silence.

Damon lifted his gaze toward the horizon, listening to the slow rhythm of the waves. The sound was almost gentle.

Footsteps approached.

He glanced sideways. Seras stood beside him, her hair dancing in the wind, dark strands brushing against her cheek as she studied the sea.

"The sea... it's so calm," Damon whispered, as if speaking too loudly would shatter the illusion.

"Yes," Seras replied quietly, though her eyes remained sharp. "It looks that way from the safety of land. I wouldn't be so happy to see it from a ship. The sea is a very dangerous place. Vile things. Horrors that do not need light lie beneath those waves."

Her words struck like cold water.

Damon exhaled slowly, lowering his head.

"You could have let me have this moment. Just this small moment of peace before it all becomes hell. But no... you enjoy my misery."

Seras gave him a flat look and folded her arms.

"On the contrary, I just saved your life. Imagine staring at that ocean and thinking it's beautiful or serene. It's black."

Damon blinked and looked again.

The water truly was black. Not dark blue. Not deep indigo. Black. It swallowed light.

"Hmm," he muttered. "That is a valid point. It's supposed to be blue, right? I've never seen one before."

Seras nodded faintly.

"It is supposed to be. But even blue oceans turn black in certain regions. At least it's not red."

She paused, then added matter-of-factly, "In our world there are many seas. The Fog Sea. The Blood Sea. The Bone Sea. The Sea of the Dead. The Lost Sea—"

"Why are you suddenly listing all the worst places in existence?" Damon asked, his tone flattening as he dragged a hand down his face.

"I was making a point."

"When is our ship arriving?" he cut in. "You don't expect us to swim through that, do you?"

Seras' lips thinned.

"Not in the slightest. I hate the ocean."

Damon turned to her, genuinely surprised.

"You hate it?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "And by the end of our little voyage, you will too."

He didn't know how to respond to that.

Instead, he walked a few steps away and sat down atop a skull the size of a boulder, its hollow sockets facing the sea as if even in death it watched the horizon. He rested his elbows on his knees and stared at the dark water as the sun began to sink.

He inhaled deeply.

Salt, Rot and a light Fog.

Silence.

He let himself enjoy it.

The quiet did not last.

Soft footsteps approached again.

Damon did not turn this time.

"What do you want?" he muttered. "Whatever it is, the answer is no."

Wendy lowered herself onto the skull beside him, leaving a careful space between them.

"I didn't even say anything," she replied coolly. "And I don't want anything."

They sat in silence. The scent of the sea mingled with the ancient carrion stench of the beach. Wind tugged at her pale hair. His coat shifted with each gust.

After a while she spoke.

"Why didn't you leave me behind when that Morticai was talking to us?"

Her voice was quieter than usual. Almost uncertain.

Damon paused. Then he leaned back on his hands and tilted his head slightly.

"Why would I leave you behind?"

Wendy glanced down at the bone sword resting across her lap. Her fingers tightened around its hilt.

"I'm your enemy... aren't I? I tried to kill you once."

Damon let out a low breath.

"You tried to kill me three times," he corrected. "Twice in the Evil Forest. Once during the War Games. And so what?"

His voice carried into the wind, indifferent.

She swallowed.

"Then why did you save me?"

Her grip loosened slightly.

"If I died... no one would know what happened that night. I mean..."

Damon looked out at the horizon again.

"I think that's an open secret at this point. Besides, what's done is done. There's no need to worry about small things."

It had been his choice.

No one forced him.

"Forget it," he added, waving a hand dismissively. He did not want to revisit that memory.

"Sorry," Wendy said.

"For what?"

"For forcing you," she murmured. "I'll stop."

Damon finally turned his head to look at her, studying her expression carefully.

"And what about your goal?" he asked. "Isn't your entire obsession about having children?"

She stared ahead at the black sea.

"It's been three hundred and twenty years since I was born," she said slowly. "Most of that time I was alone. Very few memories were worth keeping. The most significant one... was wanting to kill you."

A faint, humorless smile touched her lips.

"It's kind of sad. The most important thing I achieved in my life was trying to kill you."

Damon raised a brow, surprised by the tone in her voice.

"What about your children?"

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She shook her head.

"I wouldn't go that far. They were more like biological copies. Some monsters can reproduce that way. It doesn't mean anything."

"Then why did you do it?"

She smiled faintly.

"Who knows? I was probably just lonely."

Wendy stood, brushing sand and bone dust from her clothes. The wind caught her hair again, and for a moment she looked less like a monster and more like something fragile.

"I won't try to force myself on you again," she said. "After that... I think we're even."

She hesitated.

"I forgive you."

Damon frowned.

"You forgive me? I don't understand."

She looked down at him and shook her head.

"Yeah. I figured you wouldn't. You're too immature to understand forgiveness. It's hard to let go. It's difficult to forgive. It's easy to hate. Easy to want revenge. Even if I got everything I wanted, I wouldn't be happy. I'm setting myself free."

"Forgiveness..." Damon muttered.

The word felt foreign in his mouth.

"You should learn to let go too," she said softly.

He pushed himself upright, fingers digging into his hair.

"Doesn't it hurt? Don't you want revenge? To hurt me back? To make me pay?"

"Not anymore," Wendy replied. "I still think you'll get your just deserts. But it won't be from me. Damon... an eye for an eye is a never-ending cycle. I would rather create something beautiful."

"Beauty is ephemeral," Damon said quietly.

"Because we keep destroying it," Wendy answered.

For a moment the two of them simply stared at each other.

Then Damon laughed.

A sharp, disbelieving sound.

"When did you suddenly become so wise?"

"I've always been," she said. "You just never noticed. I've learned a lot. And I hope to learn more."

She gave him a long look.

"So take care of me in the coming years, okay?"

Damon lay back abruptly on the massive skull, staring up at the darkening sky.

He did not understand her.

He thought he did. He had reduced her to something simple. Predictable. But now she spoke like this, and it unsettled him.

He hated when forgiveness was brought up.

It insulted his way of life. His philosophy.

If forgiveness was so noble, what about the village he had slaughtered down to the last man, woman, and child over a grudge that had lasted nearly a decade?

What about them?

What about Xander's brother, whom he had killed even after seeing regret in the man's eyes?

What about everyone in Quickhand who had wronged him and paid with their lives?

What about Xander himself, still chasing revenge?

Forgiveness was for saints.

And Damon was not one.

Now he finally understood why Wendy had been given her class. Her skills. At her core she was pure in a way he could never be.

If she had not possessed those abilities, she would have died by his hand long ago.

Xander Ravenscroft was now engaged. Soon he would marry. Soon he would have a child.

Damon's eyes darkened.

He would take that child for eighteen years.

"Ah... this is ridiculous," he muttered. "I can't be shaken by her."

If he did not know better, he would think this was some elaborate scheme.

But he did know better.

Just as he lay there wrestling with his thoughts, he felt it.

A shadow moving across the sea.

He pushed himself upright.

Far on the horizon, something cut through the black water. A large white sail rose and fell with the buoyancy of the waves. The mast stood tall, and faint magical runes shimmered along the hull, glowing softly against the darkness.

From the top, flags fluttered.

Figures moved across its deck.

The ship.

He was not the only one who saw it.

Members of the expedition rose from where they had been resting, moving toward the shore. Relief flickered across exhausted faces. Some clenched their fists. Others exhaled shakily.

They would have cheered.

If they were not still afraid of what might hear them.

They had survived a month in the Evil Forest. They had endured horrors most would never speak of.

Damon rose to his feet slowly, brushing bone dust from his coat.

The ship drew closer.

He lifted his chin, staring at it with quiet intensity.

"I survived the Evil Forest."

Single file, they began to make their way up the ship's narrow boarding plank, boots thudding softly against aged wood. The sea wind tugged at cloaks and hair, carrying the stench of salt and rot from the shore behind them.

As he stepped forward with the others, something shimmered in the sand off to the side.

He slowed.

No one was watching.

He turned his head slightly, eyes narrowing.

Half buried in the dark grains lay a golden ornament. At its center was a ruby gem shaped like an open eye, polished and gleaming as if time itself had refused to touch it. Ancient runes circled its frame, thin and precise, untouched by corrosion. It did not belong on a beach littered with bones.

Something like that would fetch a high price.

Especially if word spread that it came from the Evil Forest.

He glanced toward the others. Their backs were turned, attention fixed on the ship.

Slowly, almost unconsciously, he stepped out of line and crouched. His fingers hovered inches above the ornament.

You must not take from the forest.

Or the forest will follow you.

His jaw tightened.

He withdrew his hand as if burned.

Without another look, he stood and returned to the line, boots grinding the sand as he followed the others toward the ship.

When he finally stepped onto the deck, he reached into the satchel at his side for his waterskin. His fingers brushed against something cold.

Metal.

He frowned and looked inside.

The same golden ornament rested at the bottom of his bag.

His breath stilled.

The ruby eye stared back at him.

For a long moment he did not move. Then, very carefully, he lowered the flap and closed the bag.

If it was there... then it must be fate.

That was the only explanation he allowed himself.

He straightened and walked deeper onto the ship, his pace calm, measured, as though nothing had happened.

From the side of the deck, Lana watched him approach. She narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Hey, Set, are you alright? You have sand in your grasp."

Her smile was small but curious.

He paused and glanced down.

Sand clung to his palm.

His brow furrowed.

He did not remember touching the sand.

"Hm."

He brushed it off slowly, grains scattering across the deck.

"Haha, we are on a beach. No surprise there. Thanks for the heads up. We would not want to bring anything cursed onto the ship."

Lana gave a soft laugh and returned to her duties.

Set moved toward the rank and file, merging with the others as ropes were cast off and sails unfurled.

Inside his satchel, the golden ornament pulsed faintly.

Beneath the deck.

Beneath the sea.

Something watched as the ship set sail.