

---

## [033] [Flowers]

---

Idina's hands moved easily, flowing as they chopped the vegetables and mushrooms. A part of her was keenly aware of their freshness, her role as a gatherer also helped her identify the bad spots. She'd toss those into the stew for tonight, no sense in wasting anything.

Mentally she went over the ingredients for the meal, trying to calculate how much would be necessary for four people. She doubled the amount out of habit, and had been almost ready to look for more veggies when she chided herself.

Damon would not come tonight either.

The thought brought a halt to her hands, slowness as she stared at the lush green on the chopping board. Her gaze was locked in place, but her hymn was elsewhere. Three images lay atop each other in stark contrast, Idina was trapped, unable to tear herself from them.

Damon, drenched in rain, looming terrifyingly silent, larger than her doorstep, needing to bend down to step through, his clothes covered in mud.

Damon, sitting on a chair in a tavern, eyes hazy and unfocused, a mug of spirits dangling loosely from his fingers, stinking of alcohol and sweat.

Damon, laying too still on the ground on a pool of blood of green and crimson that mixed in splatters, the stench of iron all around him.

Idina's lips curled, her hymn trembled. Her cheek felt moist, but she quickly dried it with the back of her sleeve. She coughed once and felt the sting of the knife against her finger. The little nick had barely drawn a drop of blood, Idina had moved to just dry it against some cloth to keep working on the meal when she remembered that even minor cuts shouldn't be ignored.

A bit of water, a bit of soap. The cut stung a bit more, she washed it all the same. Damon had mentioned tiny things that could enter the body through the cuts. Unseen, invisible to the eye, weak to soap. Idina forgot the name, but remembered how he'd always pour a little bit of water onto his hands before eating a meal, always scrub a little harder after a long day.

A fourth image intruded, swift, fleeting, almost like a flickering thought. Of a cart and the stars above, of the silent hymn-less giant looming over her like a shadow. Of the feeling of a deep, unbreakable sense of safety.

Shaking her head, the sasin returned to her task.

Though...

Her ears kept twitching, her mind wandering off, turning her focus towards the door, towards the outside. Miss Sybil was outside, she could hear the user's hymn, barely a whisper of reassurance that the house was being watched. But Idina was waiting for someone else.

Han's hymn came in a soft exhausted whisper that had the edges of irritation and none of the patience. Idina greeted him and get back to her work, ears sharpening. Was there sadness in the hymn? Was the anger one of deep hatred? Why would it twist so? The young woman boiled with questions she wanted to ask but restrained her hymn into only mild curiosity.

The blonde sasin just shrugged in response. Nothing serious, but all the more infuriating. The message was simple even if Idina wasn't sure what it meant. Had something happened to Damon then it would have been serious. Then it must be something else...?

It would be best to wait. So she returned her focus to the food, having a little problem using the fancy fire-starter and getting things ready. Soon enough Han came down refreshed and calmer, the man still looked like someone had dragged him through half the city, and the hymn was no different.

Miss Sybil came in once Idina had called out for dinner.

"How has the day gone?" Idina couldn't help but ask the moment she'd served the food. She tried to hide the waver in her hymn but it was impossible to miss Sybil's own sharpening like a teether's fangs in very careful attention of the conversation.

And though the red-headed vulpes tried to hide it, there was an edge of concern in her hymn too.

"Things have been... messy. Lots of messes to clean up." Han spoke, pushing a friendly smile that was not reflected in his hymn.

"Maybe you should get someone with a spine to help you out." Sybil spoke with a snap.

Idina's lips tightened. Her hymn hardened, and it was met by a caustic challenge from Sybil's own. Rather than press on, Idina bowed her head and continued to serve the food. She wasn't a user, these matters were not ones she was meant to participate in. The only reason why she was allowed to stay in their home was because Damon had accepted to bring her along.

Damon who wasn't here.

"I would rather not involve a... representative of the smithing Goddess." Han spoke carefully.

"I serve Janus above all others!" Sybil's words came with a hissing of her hymn, but there was a waver in those words, a hesitation in her eyes and a tremble of her hymn.

Idina grimaced at the feeling of hesitation, because she knew its source; she'd been there when the Goddess Irsi had explained to them why they could not stop Damon. An administrator was not a servant of the Gods. The Gods had been servants of the administrators; it was a rule that had remained a part of their very core to this very day.

Sybil's room was still trashed, the user had explicitly prohibited Idina from touching or cleaning it.

"Tell me what Damon is up to."

"Sybil..."

Her gaze narrowed. "One of the smith priests stumbled on to a trap within the struts and it nearly killed him. The knights found out there had been dozens more that had been disabled." Sybil's voice grew icy. "You wouldn't happen to know who would dare put a worker of the priesthood in such peril, would you?"

Han raised his hands. "You will not like the answer."

"Try me."

Sybil's fingers pressed against the surface of the table, knuckles turning white, her hymn vibrating with an unspoken anger.

"It's related to the people that attacked Idina. We are looking for who sent them."

"The knights can do that, hand them over."

Now it was Han's turn to scowl. "The knights answer to more than just the Goddesses, if this comes from somewhere important like one of the guilds, then..."

"This was likely well deserved revenge."

Idina flinched, pulling her hymn back and lowering her head. Her gaze flickered to the door, but she restrained herself. She closed her eyes, trying to draw strength. What else was there for her to do?

"The attackers were too well prepared, the-."

"I was there during the trial of her father. She was deemed a participant in the murder of at least a dozen users! The only reason she wasn't banished as well was that-."

"Stop." Idina blinked, finding her hands had fallen to the table with a bang, the chair clattering behind her, her hymn lashing out. "He saved my life. Twice." She had to fight back the tremble in her voice, there was a fire inside her chest, it burned so hot.

Sybil's hymn exploded, her face contorting into an even deeper scowl. "He is a coward."

"NO!" Idina roared, glaring. "You-."

"You want to hit me, don't you?"

The words brought the image to Idina's mind, and it struck her harder than any attack would. Icy water through her veins. The anger was gone in a flash and she paled, taking half a step back, horrified. "No, I-."

"If you think so highly of him, do it." Sybil's anger pushed, and she stepped towards Idina, the hymn a loud shriek of cold anger. "I'm sure Damon would love to see that happen, he wasn't exactly hiding how much he hated the edicts, those of peace in particular."

"Sybil-."

"No, let her prove her words." The woman waved at her companion, sneering as she leaned closer to Idina. Her eyes bore into the gatherer like a teether's fangs, leaning down on her. "You could have warned the users, run away from the village, you could have done a thousand things to stop your father. But you were a coward. You were a coward even when Damon saved your life, you stuck to him for safety. Guess what? He's not here, he abandoned you. Because he is a coward too, it's easier for him to-."

SLAP

Idina stood stock still, eyes wide, all color drained from her face, body trembling as the chill gripped at her bones so hard they might just shatter like glass, her heart hammering against her ears with a thundering step.

She...

She'd hit Sybil.

Her hand stung, like someone had lit it aflame. The user's cheek had the red mark upon its skin.

All present stood still. All hymns frozen in complete shock.

Han was the first to move, he was behind Sybil in a flash. "RUN!"

Idina did not need to be told twice, she scrambled for the door as the fight broke out behind her. Hymns clashed and furniture was overturned, Sybil screamed even as Han tried to pin her down to little avail. Idina could feel the user's hymn rushing towards her as she slammed the heavy door shut behind her.

The thud was hard, Sybil hammered at it.

"FREAK!" A singular scream that was followed by a second louder thud. "LET ME GO!"

Idina's heart was too loud for her to hear much, she just kept pressing against the door, fighting to keep it locked with everything she had. Every part of her screamed that she had to curl into a ball and stay there forever, her chest hurt and every part of her was trembling, numbness slowly taking away the sting upon the palm of her hand.

And every time the scene replayed within her mind, the icy grip in her heart got tighter.

She hurt someone. She hurt a user.

It shouldn't have happened, it shouldn't be possible. She wasn't a user, she... the edict was still clawing at her like a ravenous monster trying to tear her to shreds with its claws. It shouldn't be possible, how!? The question burned within her, and she all but screamed it out if she had the breath for it.

A soft knock at the door snapped her out of her desperate gasping and white-knuckled grip on the knob.

"She's gone."

Han's voice was tired, his hymn was drained and exhausted. Sybil's was nowhere to be heard, and so Idina dared open the pantry door.

"We need to go."

"Is she...?"

"She went to cool her heels." Han reached down, pulling her up to her feet. "It's best if we leave, I think we've pushed things too far."

The only thing she could do was nod. "Go where?"

Han grimaced. "To the last place Damon would want you to be."

---

## [034] [Bloom]

---

“You brought her HERE!?” Damon’s voice echoed around the room like a clap of thunder. “Are you INSANE!?”

Han had brought her to the safe-house they’d requisitioned from the mercenaries that had attempted to kill Idina. The very place the two of them were now using to keep the mercenaries incarcerated.

“She struck Sybil.”

“Oh wow, congr-.” Damon’s words came to a halt, his brow furrowed. “Wait, the edict, she’s... not a user.”

Han nodded slowly. “She is not. And she is not in the best state of mind either.”

Damon grimaced, this did not seem like something he was prepared to help with. Punching bad guys was easy, simple, direct. This? This sounded like a mess he was only going to make worse. His mouth was half open in preparation of proclaiming exactly that when he heard the creak of wood.

Idina stood there, looking into the room with a heavy gaze. Her eyes moved over the four mercenaries currently occupying the opposite corner of the room and then zeroed on to Damon like lasers.

Damon knew that look. It brought memories of a family that was not his, of a life he had not lived, in a place that probably didn’t even exist anymore.

“I will monitor them while you’re gone.”

It wasn’t lost to the human that Han had made his comment with near perfect timing. It was accompanied by a half shove that sent him half tumbling forward. Damon caught himself fast, watching Idina bow her head slightly. “Sir.” She declared in what felt like a forced attempt to break the ice.

“Let’s... go somewhere else.”

Not wanting to make things any more awkward, he quickly marched off towards one of the far rooms in the subterranean apartment that was more like some sort of repurposed maintenance area that had been cleared out decades ago.

The room he came to a stop at was the one that was being used as a kitchen. Small chairs, small table, and some rusted metal cabinets that meant the place had probably been some sort of dresser room.

“I know I am a bother here, sir.”

She was tense, her hands firmly on her back, her head slightly lowered.

“Nope, the bother are the other guys.” Damon didn’t miss a beat. “Look, my concern is that they were literally trying to kill you. If I could dump them into a barrel and roll them down the mountain, I would.”

Idina’s shoulders relaxed marginally, letting out a nervous chuckle. “They are terrified and in awe of you, sir, I doubt they would try anything... at least while you are nearby.”

“Yeah, the problem is that I will not be around all the time.” He replied, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “We’re following the breadcrumbs, kind of, whoever ordered the hit on you took a lot of precautions.”

Idina nodded absently, sitting down and turning her gaze to the floor. “Who... do you think it is?”

“They paid a lot of gold, so it can’t be some nobody.” Damon shrugged. “But I’m not the brains of this operation, Han’s the one that knows how things work around here. I’m more the guy that goes knocking down doors.”

“It would be very easy for you, sir.”

She let out another short laugh, nodding a bit and rubbing her cheek.

“So you hit Sybil.” Yup, that was him being tactful, he had the tact of a truck and the delicacy of a concrete brick to the face. “Want to talk about it?”

“Could you tell me... how it feels?”

“How what feels?”

“... violence.” Her gaze lingered on the sling that hung from his hip.



Well, that's a curve ball if he'd ever heard any. Damon considered the question for a moment. "It feels really good." He finally said, taking the chair next to hers and leaning back. "Sure, it hurts, and that sucks, and it's terrifying all over, but... it feels good. To just grab all your anger and put it into your fist and shove it into someone's face... yeah, it feels pretty damn great."

"You're... afraid? When you fight?"

"Definitely." Damon nodded. "I mean, I could die or get messed up. Who wouldn't be afraid? You guys have this crazy wonderful medicine, but even that doesn't make the feeling just vanish." He chuckled slightly. "Though I guess being afraid also helps."

Idina's eyes widened slightly. "It does?"

"Not being afraid just... Sure, too much fear is bad, it paralyzes you, and... well, too little is also dangerous, it makes you lose all sense of caution. Be brave, not stupid, that kind of thing."

The sasin's silver ears drooped slightly as she turned to stare at the metal wall.

"Was I... brave?" She didn't turn to look at him, though he noticed how she rubbed her thumb against her palm. "I hit Sybil, a user."

Damon swallowed his first reaction and took a second to reconsider. "Did she deserve it?" He suspected the answer, but it felt worth asking the question.

Idina lowered her head, looking at her hand for several long seconds. "Yes."

"Seems to me like you were brave."

The young woman let out the faintest sigh, her shoulders loosening completely, her thumb against her palm slowed and stopped. Slowly, she swallowed, turning to look at Damon with wide eyes that held within them something he couldn't quite read.

He hoped he hadn't fucked up. Talking with Idina had always made him feel like his words carried far more weight than he intended them to. Even now, he could see the way she shifted, as if trying to decipher some impossibly deep meaning to what he'd told her.

Then her hand was on his knee, and something else entirely ran through Damon's mind. She shifted again, now turning to face him, eyelids fluttered. Idina leaned closer, breath catching in a heartbeat of anticipation.

And Damon felt a pit in his stomach, this was serious. It wasn't too late to turn her down. All he had to do would be shift, move, just a little, move, remove her hand from his knee, move away, just move.

Do something.

Anything.

Her lips were soft, there was a lingering taste of sweat on them, she smelled of raspberries. Her long ears caught between his fingers as he'd tried to comb her hair between his fingers.

Idina flinched, pulling away.

"Sorry." He muttered.

"I... I shouldn't have done that... sir."

The moment broke, she flushed, pulling away. She'd nearly stood up when his hand reached out to grab her hand. It was a delicate touch; he felt apprehension at potentially hurting her. Idina froze, breath coming in short and fast, like a rabbit standing before a wolf.

"Sir?"

"Damon." He loosened his grip, but she didn't pull away. "Just... call me Damon."

"I... yes, sir-Damon! Yes. I-uh, I need..." She looked at the door, her fingers remained in his grasp. "I..."

It took only a tug, a tiny slow tug. What was he doing? Damon's brain spun its wheels out of control as he felt how comfortable it was to pull her on to his lap. The part of him currently in control had to fight against several other parts of him. He wanted to tear her clothes off, find out what lay beneath, he wanted to run straight out the door and lock it behind him; he wanted to scream at himself. What was he doing? This was not what he was-.

Idina sat on his lap, looking up at him, her eyes wide and silent, her hands fell on his shoulders, and she pulled herself closer still. The sasin was so light against him, fragile.

"I shouldn't." Why was he talking? He was fucking up. "We shouldn't."

"I... know."

This time they kissed and pulled each other closer. He knew what she felt, how she felt, he knew he did not feel the same. He wasn't sure what he felt at all. Only that Idina between his arms gave him something he couldn't let go of.

There was no urgency or pressure, only the moment, the slow lingering kiss, Idina's arms wrapped around his neck and his own keeping her hips firmly rooted in place. Some corner of Damon wanted to push, but it was just drowned in the sensation. It was the first time he'd felt a kiss that was so full of passion yet devoid of hunger.

The moment passed all too briefly before they pulled away enough to breathe.

Idina's face turned bright red, she turned to look away. Her ear slapped Damon's cheek, and she squeaked in embarrassment, trying to jump away. He didn't let her, pulling her back in without effort, pulling her head against his chest and allowing her to angle herself comfortably.

The young woman leaned into his broad shoulders, closing her eyes, pressing her cheek against his shirt and becoming still.

"Oh."

"What's wrong?" A sudden wave of concern passed through him at the slight distress in her voice.

"N-nothing, I... uh... I'm just... singing. A bit. A little."

Damon ignored the stab in his chest. Guilt? Shame? Regret? Fear? Whatever it was, he pushed it down. Deep down. "And... what does that mean?"

Idina didn't answer, instead, her face became redder. She was practically glowing as her ears wiggled slightly, the metal sheen reflecting the light as the young woman covered her face with her hands and pressed herself against him as if trying to hide herself from sight.

She might even pull it off.

With a sigh, Damon just hugged her closer, leaning down against her hair. This... wasn't what he'd wanted. But the ache inside his chest told him it was definitely something he'd needed.

What did it mean?

There was a knock at the door. "Not to interrupt your chorus, but they want to talk."

“Wait, really?” Damon had stood up in one fluid motion, Idina let out a shriek but he’d easily held her in place. “What hap-?” He paused, blinked, then looked down at Idina as he lowered her. “Oh.”

They’d heard her hymn. They probably suspected Idina meant more to him than they’d initially suspected. And... he didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Most likely.” Han acknowledged with a half-nod.

Damon tried to ignore how Idina seemed to swell at the comment.

“Let’s just go.” He glanced at Idina. “And you stay here.”

“Yes, sir, Damon-sir Damon.”

“Just... just wait, ok?”

He tried not to sound nervous or pushy, and was certain he’d failed both, not that anything seemed capable of putting a dent on the blush she was fighting against. Damon also may or may not have had to struggle against an eased smile, but he wasn’t paying much attention to that, focusing more on what lay ahead.

Because he definitely did not want to figure out what had just happened or what it meant.

The mercenaries were exactly how they’d left them, sitting on the floor, and chained with enough metal it took them considerable effort to raise their arms. Han had confirmed none had the sort of grafts that could enhance physical capabilities, but Damon wasn’t taking chances.

The leader, Tsanaki, had shifted positions and was not in front of the others. The woman who’d given them information in exchange for the guy being captured alive was directly behind him. Both of them were looking at Damon with something that was certainly different from an hour ago.

If Damon had any kind of hope, he’d have said it was an edge of respect. But he was not a betting man.

“We... did not tell you everything we knew.”

“Shocker.”

He dragged the metal chair from the edge of the room to directly in front of the captives. It was the sort of power move he enjoyed because there was no one else around that could handle the weight of the thing so easily.

“You were saying?”

“We... prefer having insurance.”

“I’m sure you do.” Damon kept his smile tight.

Tsanaki squirmed, lowering his gaze and staring at the chair for several long seconds. “If you follow the lead we gave you, and you are lucky, you would eventually find out that the client who had hired us was someone from the Incuuri.”

“You’re going to need more than words to back that claim.” Han quickly declared, scowling.

“Who’re the Incuuri?”

“Their family is a big name all over the continent, merchants for the most part. They have a minor branch in Sky Bridge, and it is the wealthiest group here.” Han stroked his beard thoughtfully, keeping his gaze on the mercenaries. “Well?”

Tsanaki swallowed. “We have a recording, but...” He glanced at the others, then went quiet. Damon noticed how Han twitched, then grimaced.

“Well?”

“They have what they say they do, but they want a chance to escape the Order since they’ll be put to death otherwise.” The man stroked his beard in thought, though the look in his eyes was cold.

Damon’s brows creased, lips thinning. “Let’s put a pin on that. What does the Incuuri being involved mean for us?”

“It means you need to talk to the Goddess.”

Talk to the Goddess? No way in hell. The last thing he needed was going back to the temple. But he wasn’t about to shoot down Han without at least knowing what was going on.

“Explain.”

“The Incuuri practically runs the merchant guild. The recording connects one servant to these mercenaries, but if we made the claim, the Incuuri would just shrug it off and throw the guy to the metaphorical dragon. They hold too much power to be touched without more solid proof.”

Damon nodded slowly, hating every word. “I’m placing bets they run a market on ‘second-hand-axons’.”

Han’s expression soured. “That seems to be the tie, I cannot fathom any other reason they would attack Idina. She is a loose end, nothing else.”

“If they’re half as influential you say they are... it’s going to be tough.”

“That’s why I said you should talk to the Goddess.” Han pressed, glaring at Damon. “At least Irsi will listen to you. She need-.”

“She’s going to insist I have to kill a dragon.” His hackles rose, but he kept his tone cool and controlled. “I’m not dumb enough to think I can just go there and boss them around.”

The man bit his lip, brows furrowing deeply and letting out a severe grunt as he shook his head. “Then let us try to find out the truth first. But if we fail, we go to the temple. We cannot let this situation slip from our grasp.”

Damon was half-way through his nod when he paused. “Wait, what do you mean ‘if we fail’? Do you have a plan?”

“Yes, we only need to enter their household.” Han laughed. “And they will let us walk in right through the front gate.”