

---

## [029] [The Dragon's Tail]

---

Damon woke up feeling like someone had beaten the shit out of him thrice over and then tossed him out a fourth-story balcony. Only to have a go at him all over again. His first instinct was to try and stand, but his body had told him otherwise.

And so he was left laying on a bed he couldn't recognize, in a room he had no recollection of.

There was not much panic to be had, the bed was a size too small, his naked feet dangling over at the edge, and his arms reaching over to either end of the cloth mattress. The window was open, a nice cool breeze streaming through, and his mind trying to gain focus. The throbbing beat of his heart was not helping any as it kept hammering against the inside of his skull.

Untangling himself from the bedsheets, he minimally dressed and walked over to the kitchen. There he found the owner of the house, or at least he suspected she was the owner. From behind the first thing he noticed were the pair of long white ears peeking from over her short silver hair. But as his gaze trailed down the supple curve of her spine, he fixated on her plump ample hips.

She was wearing little more than glorified cotton shorts.

"Someone's at the door."

Damon froze mid-step, gazing at the entrance and frowning.

"We know you're in there!"

The voice was unmistakable. Sybil.

"Shit."

"Should I tell them to go?" The hagsier woman whose name he'd yet to remember asked, quirking a curious brow at him over her slender shoulder.

"Doubt it'd work."

[...]

System 'heads-up':

Sybil EM-tag has entered detection range.

Distance: 260 meters

[...]

“But you can certainly try.”

A part of him wished he could just tell the vulpes outside the house to just buzz off through the power of his mental powers. Alas, he had no hymn nor could he detect it. So he was effectively deaf to the whole layer of nuance and pseudo-telepathic speech the locals kept throwing around like no one's business.

On the plus side, it also meant everyone else was entirely blind to his thoughts.

He quickly returned to the bedroom, picking up his stuff and quickly dressing up. He didn't miss a beat and approached the window. Sharpening his hearing as best he could against the throbbing migraine, he could barely catch the sound of buzzing somewhere above. A drone? Must mean they're more serious this time.

There was knocking on the front door.

And that was his cue.

Exiting through the window was a simple affair considering it was at street level. Damon made sure to check in every direction, confirming he was not yet within anyone's line of sight. He kept following the wall, skipping some of the buckets and gardening tools while trying to keep himself.

There was the noise of clattering inside the house.

Damon hurried faster, and right as he was about to pass the corner...

“He's here!” He could only flinch and glance at Sybil's head as she'd been poking her head out the window. “Don't you dare!”

Too late.

He was already sprinting, his boots hammering against the hard ground.

“We're trying to protect you!”

And he didn't want any of it.

Not that he bothered to answer, Damon was more concerned with the drone currently in hot pursuit. The thing was flying high above, it was maybe about the size of a soccer

ball, with a trio of blades keeping it afloat. There did not seem to be any intent for it to get close, only keep overwatch.

Which was troublesome, since it might as well be a beacon over his head giving away his position. It took away every advantage his lack of a hymn held.

The minimap floated at the edge of his peripheral vision, Sybil was already in hot pursuit, and there were several other dots moving in his general direction. The streets were too straight and organized to give him a chance to get lost between the houses, and without the pounding migraine, Sybil would still be gaining on him.

Those damnable pressurized pneumatic prosthetic legs and...

He growled, taking a sharp turn right, nearly knocking over a pedestrian dragging some boxes on some sort of small cart. The stranger screamed slightly, jumping away and reaching for the knife on his belt. But Damon had long passed him and kept sprinting with everything he had even as his stomach roiled and his head fought against the hangover.

All the while, the drone kept flying overhead, definitely outside his throwing range.

Several dots on the minimap were moving to intercept. Where to go? How to avoid them? The adrenaline was giving him clarity. Sybil had brought friends, it seemed. Damon changed directions, moving straight towards the nearest building. It was two stories tall, the roof slightly slanted. A perfect target for him to work his way up.

Lower gravity and stronger muscles meant he could easily get up, and from there began navigating the city not by its streets but through its rooftops. His pursuers were looking for ways to block him off, and leaving the road entirely was the best chance to just skip that risk.

A quick check on the map.

Sybil had reached the rooftops and was gaining on him. Her legs had the ability to give large jumps, ideal to cover the space between the buildings with ease while Damon was forced to push himself hard with every leap. He silently thanked his longer legs and greater stride, otherwise the others would've definitely caught well before they'd made it this far.

They were approaching his target. The buildings had been slowly gaining height and size, they'd been moving into the commercial district. The relatively smaller houses were shifting in exchange for the larger warehouses and workshops. The number of drones flying about was quickly increasing.

“Damon!”

This time it was very very close, he grimaced, slowed, and checked his surroundings and map to confirm his location. Turning around, he looked at Sybil with a wry smile.

“Hey.”

“Don’t.” Her hood was thrown back, hair a wild red mess. “The Goddess wants to speak with you.”

“I’m sure she does.” He was not ready for that. With a frown, he tried to spot the drone, but it was not stationary, so though he had marked it on his map, he could not find it with his eyes.

“You’ve had your tantrum, you can’t keep this going.”

“You don’t know me that well, then.” He eyed over the edge of the building and to the space down below, whistling a moment at the drop. Slowly, he turned to look back at her, quietly trying to gauge her reaction.

That gave her a moment of pause, cautiously glancing at him. “You’re being targeted. We don’t know who, not yet, but someone’s mobilizing users to hunt for you.”

“Aside from the Goddesses and their goon squads, you mean.” He chuckled.

“Damon, we need you.” Her voice wavered slightly, hazel eyes looking at him with an edge of something that stung. “The Goddesses need you to access the temple under the dragon’s-.”

“I’m sure they do, and there’s probably a pile of grafts for me to pull it off, beat the dragon, all that.” He cut her off, the words pushed his lips downwards. “Still haven’t found anything about the nanomachines have you.”

His question rattled her, she grimaced, not seeing as he took half a step closer to the edge. “Nothing so far.”

“You should probably look into that rather than waste time trying to convince me to fight a fucking dragon.”

The moment passed, her look sterned. “I’m not arguing with you. It’s your purpose. Please come back.”

The words caused his face to freeze, muscles tense against the urge to growl. He pushed himself to smile instead. His gaze locked on to the weapon at her hip, not a sword, but a rod of some kind, quite similar to a police baton that’d been extended.

“That looks new. Is it plan B?”

“I-.” Sybil flinched, looking away and avoiding eye-contact entirely. And just like that, Damon’s thoughts skidded to a halt, nearly tripping entirely. His gaze narrowed on her face, and the uncomfortable look as if she’d swallowed a bitter pill.

“I’m not the answer to this... problem, Sybil. Whatever the Goddess claims. You guys have been doing just fine without me, and will keep being fine.”

Sybil’s expression flattened, eyes narrowing, the beginning of a snarl forming at the edges of her lips. Her hand moved away from her baton, forming into a fist, scowl deepening. “Janus-.”

Damon snapped. “Janus doesn’t exist! It’s just some company name that’s probably turned to dust by now.” He growled. “I’m just an error, a mistake, a machine in the middle of the mountains went crazy enough to spit me out right before it died.” His mouth tasted bitter. “And this fucking world is no different, just one massive mistake. The remains of some sick amusement park. This is nothing more than a sick cosmic prank.”

The silence hung heavy, Damon’s fists clenched into fists. What sense was there in this whole mess?

“You fought the knight’s familiar to save my and Han’s life. Was that a mistake? A prank? Was that why you saved Idina’s life? She’s been praying for you every day, for weeks!”

Sybil might not have brought out her weapon, but her words felt like a physical blow all the same. Her hazel eyes bore into him with painful precision. He felt at a loss for words. “I-.”

“Just go, Damon. Run away.”

Neither of their gazes met, she turned away, and he turned downwards. At the edge of the rooftop, he hesitated, just a second. He dropped on to the nearby ledge, beginning to work his way down. Sybil screamed, a cry of anger and something else, and he pretended not to hear it.

\*\*\*

Not knowing what to do with life was something Damon was well experienced with.

The answer was usually simple: drink. All the problems would get washed away, he’d have a good time, and he’d just forget about it until the day after. At that point he’d just dust himself off, walk over to whatever thing he had to do to get food on the table, and hope the feeling would go away eventually.

But the feeling wasn't going to go away. Because he was not the real Damon. The real Damon lived back on Earth, doing whatever, getting his memories stolen by... what, aliens? Living the big life.

"I hope Earth Damon found a way to solve his problems at least." He looked up at the clear night sky and the countless stars hanging above. One of those stars might even be the Sun. Earth Damon was probably dust by now. "On second thought, fuck him."

There were still people he cared about, or he thought he cared about, even if the memories...

Despite his best attempts to focus on the stars above, his thoughts drifted to the rooftop earlier that day. And Sybil.

"Maybe it'd been a mistake to have gone sober tonight." He muttered to himself, loathing how much his mind kept going into that whole subject that just gnawed at him from inside.

Turning a corner, he spotted movement further down the street.

It was poorly illuminated, most shops had closed at this time, only bars and taverns allowing customers. There was a slow and steady stream of people stumbling out of one such place, most letting out noises of complaint or merriment. Most of them swaggered off and walked in either direction of the street, searching for either a place to stay or to continue their drinking.

None paid much attention to him, though a few did send a weird glance his way.

His gaze was focused on the woman shooing away the remaining patrons. It was a familiar face, after all, one of the subjects that had haunted his conscience for most of the day.

Idina looked tired but determined as she splashed a bucket of water to wash away the stains near the entrance. Damon's first instinct was to lean behind the corner before he could be spotted, just in time to avoid her searching gaze.

What was she doing here? Was this a job she'd picked up? Why did he avoid her?

"I should leave."

The words did not match the actions, his feet remained grounded, watching her clean the entrance of the tavern before going back inside. The windows were closed, shutters fixed in place, it did not take long for the lights to go out and silence to fall on the street.

“You’re not very good at sneaking, sir.”

He nearly screamed, turning around to find Idina standing there, a hand on her hip and a smirk on her lips. He didn’t know what to do, even less what to say. With a grimace, he sheepishly turned away. “I guess not. What are you doing here?”

“I work at the tavern, but I’m currently staying at Miss Sybil’s place. I saw you on my way back.”

“Oh.” His boot scuffed against the ground. “Have you... heard?”

“Could you accompany me for a bit, sir? The city can be dangerous at night.” She raised a hand. “Not all the way of course, just until we get out of the district.”

“You’ve heard.” His words only got a shrug out of her. “You must think I’m the worst.”

“Not really.” A slight shake of her head.

“I mean, I am.”

Idina didn’t answer, turning her eyes up to the sky. “My father was brought to the temple yesterday. His trial will be in three days.” She placed her hands behind her back, her silver ears drooping slightly. “I’m still not sure if I should go and see him one last time before he’s stripped of his grafts, marked, and exiled. I’m still not sure what I’d tell him if I did. Thank him for caring for me? Cursing him for using me? Pity him?”

Damon really didn’t have an answer for her, though it didn’t feel like she was asking him either. They walked in silence, the city dispersing around them as they moved closer to the end of the district.

[...]

System ‘heads-up’:

Over x8 EM-tags have entered detection range simultaneously and are heading in your direction.

Distance: 360 meters

[...]

“Sir?”

She'd barely kept him in the corner of her vision, but had picked up on his tension right away. Her breath hitched as he grabbed her arm and took a sharp turn to the left. His grip on her arm was tightening as he kept glancing at the minimap.

Twelve dots. Users all, none of them from the group that morning.

"Sybil warned me about some people wanting to find me, I think they have."

Idina's eyes widened. "I should-."

"Run."

She met his gaze, nodding solemnly. "I will warn the others."

Damon's grip on her arm tightened instantly. "Don't, they'll..." Lips curling, he couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence. He checked the minimap again. "Just run, straight ahead is the best way to avoid them. Try to be quiet."

With a loud snort, Idina shot him a rueful smirk. "I might be working in a tavern, but I am still a Gatherer, sir."

She quickened her pace, and Damon slowed his own. His hand reached out, unclasping the club from his belt. He turned, watching the dots approach. Would he have to fight? What were his escape options? He'd considered lying in ambush, but considering they had changed course so quickly, it meant they had a spotter or a tracker.

Closer still, his heart began to quicken. Run or fight or wait. Who were they? What was their goal? He saw a figure approaching down the street. The others were on the side-streets, moving fast. The figure was hooded, and met Damon's gaze, freezing merely a dozen meters away.

It was the kind of hesitation he'd seen whenever someone was looking for a fight and took a good look at him. But the fight didn't come, the figure had quickly moved to one of the side-streets, continuing past him as the group of pursuers just moved on ahead.

Damon expected they'd surround him, or perhaps look for some way to attack him from behind, but the dots had not slowed at all, continuing past his location without much if any hesitation. It wasn't until they were nearly out of range that he'd begun to relax and ask himself what was going on. Had he scared them off?

It clicked a moment later, he cursed under his breath.

He wasn't their target.

"Idina."



---

## [030] [Into the Fire]

---

Damon's feet hammered against the stone and dirt as his heart ran like an engine, adrenaline pumping through his veins and bringing the dimly lit world around him into sharp contrast. His brain rushed through every possible question and possibility. Why were these hooded people going after Idina? Wasn't he supposed to be the one being targeted?

He grit his teeth, glancing at the map. Twelve dots, five on the street he was at, seven in the other. All moving in unison, all chasing after Idina.

Club in hand, he pushed aside questions of 'why', and focused on the 'how'.

Twelve tangos, he was outnumbered, and if his spars with Sybil and Han were anything to go by, he did not have good chances in a direct confrontation. Hit and run? He needed to prioritize getting them away from Idina.

A check on the minimap and their dots. Each had a name.

"System, if at any point there's someone behind me within less than two meters of distance, blink the map red." Damon whispered under his breath as he prepared himself, raising his voice to a shout. "Vonani!"

The figure that was near the tail of the pack jolted, turned around, looked his way, and froze in shock. It was clear he'd not heard Damon getting closer, nor expected an attacker at all. Because that split second of hesitation was all it took for the human to swing the club low.

It connected with the knee, something cracked.

Vonani screamed and crumbled, turning into a mess of cloth and limbs as he couldn't keep standing.

Damon didn't stop to finish him off, eyes locked on the next target, the hooded figure nearly stopping to turn and confirm what had just happened to his companion. The club crashed against their lower back. The inertia of the attack nearly sent them flying forwards, crashing against one of the companions and turning them both into a spinning tumbling heap of limbs and cloth.

"ATTACKER!"

The remaining two leapt out of the way, turning to-

To look at the back of Damon as the human had immediately taken a sharp turn into one of the streets leading away from them and towards the second team. His boots smashed against stone and dirt, his focus on the map. The group of five had effectively ground to a halt, not giving chase.

It made sense. It was the most logical choice for them. The fact that they could not sense his hymn meant they couldn't tell if he was going to come back and finish their companions off. Or if he was potentially leading them to an ambush. It gave him a moment of relief and concern. They were trained.

The suspicion was confirmed when the other team had split into two.

Of the seven, four had moved to block his way from being able to reach the other three that were still in hot pursuit of Idina. The reliance on the hymn that made them blind to him also made them far better coordinated. The advantage of surprise was mostly gone now. Most likely, the instant he engaged those four, the three he left behind would very likely follow suit and surround him.

He caught sight of the four figures, weapons raised. Two had knives, one had an ax, the third a sword. The ones with the knives were standing on the rooftop at either side of the street.

Damon had two options.

One, barrel through.

Two, barrel through harder.

A rictus grin grew on his face, he raised the club and charged, roaring at them with all his might, aiming at the guy with the shield and sword. The distance closed, and they tensed, ready to pounce on him. The man with the shield and ax solidified his stance, while the other had taken a step away but raised his blade.

He knew. If he attacked, they would hit him from the back or sides. If he ran, they would hit his back. And to that he said: let them try.

Ten meters to impact, the man with the blucker shield looked at him from under a hood, eyes narrowed, the shield in front, the ax raised in the back.

Damon's steps lengthened, he raised the club over his head. One step, two, three. The third fell firmly into place, the fourth step was mostly for stability, twisting his body to

send the inertia up his legs, through his torso, into his arm. He was too far to hit, too far to actually whack the guy.

But at the perfect distance to throw the heavy wooden club.

He saw the whites in the man's eyes as the club soared like a truck that was falling down a cliff. It hit the buckler, the man looked like he'd tried to deflect it away, failing miserably as he was lifted off his feet and thrown backwards against the wall instead.

Damon was speeding back up as he chased after his weapon. The man that had cushioned the club's fall was hacking and trying to scream but barely able to draw breath, likely broken ribs, the buckler had bent inwards and green blood was pooling around his arm. The ax lay forgotten on the ground.

In the dim light it was impossible to determine what grafts he had, but Damon suspected he had... none?

His focus turned to the man with the sword and the one with daggers. The sword-wielder was too stunned to move, the other was not. The second figure leapt down, blades flashing to cut at Damon, there was not enough time to get fancy, and he was not fast enough to dodge. So he did the only thing he could.

With a second shout, he spun and swung a closed fist at the figure.

The blades sank through his clothes and bit into his flesh. Damon clenched his teeth and pushed. The swing threw the figure into a tumbling roll, and that was good enough. It bought him exactly the amount of time he needed to pick up the club with his uninjured hand and go back into a run.

He'd barely stopped to fight and the distance with Idina had grown too much. With a groan he ran harder, ignoring the screams from behind him. They were giving chase, and he didn't have an easy immediate solution. If he hammered the remaining three would the others move to keep chasing after Idina?

His main advantages were strength and stamina. How could he draw this out?

A pang of burning pain shot up his left arm, the knife was still sticking in it, but now it felt as if he'd just dunked the cut into alcohol. He wanted to slow down, remove it, maybe even put some improvised bandaging. But with the second group in hot pursuit he didn't have many options. Damon grit his teeth and pushed to keep himself at a dead sprint, he had to reach the three pursuers that were still chasing after Idina.

They were slowing down, slightly, ever so slightly, but they were slowing. So was Idina, but Damon was catching up, and that was what mattered. Twist right, take left, go

straight. The houses were growing further apart as they were moving further and further away from the commercial district. Where were the guards? Why was no one sounding alarms?

Problems for later.

The dots had stopped and quickly moved out of the road. Damon had little doubt they'd been informed he was coming, and there were at least five abled fighters hot on his heels. Had they changed priorities and seen him as too much of a threat to ignore?

Good enough.

Idina was getting further and further away. No dots chasing.

Damon came to a halt, the trio were waiting for him just ahead. The five behind were about to catch up. Slowly, he breathed, the burning in his arm was crawling slowly up to his shoulder. Some kind of poison? That was not good. With a grimace he tore the knife off and used it to pull a chunk of cape off.

They were looking at him.

They'd come to a complete halt, the trio emerged from the sides of the street.

"This does not concern you."

The one to speak had been the taller of the trio. Something about the way he moved felt heavy. Damon frowned, a pang of irritation, tying the piece of cape around his forearm. Hopefully it would stem the bleeding.

Seven hooded figures.

"You cannot take us all on."

"Maybe." He focused on the taller figure, a quick glance to the minimap to confirm the information. He pointed at the figure with his club. "Tsakani." The club swung to point to the one to his right. "Miyela." He worked his way down the list of names. "Zalo. Mixo. Fanisa. Nonisa. And... Vurgo. Vurga?" There was a slight smile. "Did I get the pronunciation right?"

One by one, they'd been startled, stiffening and raising their weapons defensively, suddenly losing some of the certainty they'd held. "How do you know our names?" The one to speak was Zulo, shuffling a step further away, voice coming out in a slow growl.

“I will make this simple.” Damon picked up his club, bouncing it against his shoulder, focusing on Tsanaki. “Tell me why you’re going after my friend, and I won’t break all your limbs.”

The man tensed, raising his sword. “You’re not leaving here alive.”

“Last chance, Tsanaki.”

They didn’t wait for him to act, three of them ran at Damon, three others moved to try and encircle him. Tsanaki remained behind, watching him intently. Damon should have moved away, to put his back to a wall and start fending them off as they came. Instead, he picked the guy furthest to his right and lunged at him, taking the poisoned knife with his left hand and throwing it with little care to actually aim.

The guy trying to close in on his flank backpedaled in a rush, seeming to recognize the threat the blade posed. That gave Damon the room he needed to swing in a wide arc at Vurga. She was quick, and did not bother to block, ducking under the swing and closing in with her sword.

It was a move Sybil had used against him countless times during sparring. His immediate reaction was to raise his leg tightly against his body and kick forward. It caught the woman squarely in the chest. Eyes bulged and ribs creaked under the sole of his boot. Back in Earth, the kick would have knocked her flat on her ass. On this planet with lower gravity, she was sent tumbling back a couple meters.

“One down.”

His words came along a cry of pain, something had drawn a cut down his back. Fire spread under his skin, and Damon spun, swinging the club to force his attackers to jump back or meet a swift end. The fire was spreading through his back now, and the one from his arm had reached his shoulder.

No time to scream, he lunged to the side and out of the reach of two other attackers. They reacted in a snap, turning on a dime and slashing in his direction. Now it was Damon’s turn to backpedal.

His map blinked angry red, warning of someone directly behind him.

And he did not bother to even look over his shoulder, he jumped at the attackers in front of him. The one with the ax found his attack being bluntly deflected by Damon’s bad arm. The surprise was short lived, the club smashed against his head.

With a sickening crunch and a spray of emerald blood, the attacker fell.

“Two.”

His left arm was not responding as it should have. It burned and the muscles were lethargic. Was it from the wound or the poison? His back felt like he was laying on top of hot coals. Had he been slashed by the guy he hadn't looked at?

The death of the second companion gave them pause. Wide eyes, but not running away, not stepping back.

They acted in unison, two groups of two, one to the right, one to the left. They circled to attack, Damon knew the instant he faced one, he'd be giving his back to the other. But neither group mattered to him, the tall one had barely moved and was keeping his distance.

So the human engaged neither group and sprinted at the man.

The expression Tsanaki showed was mild surprise, followed by a grin.

Pain bloomed on Damon's right flank. Something had hit him right under the ribs. It didn't stop him, he kept running, and Tsanaki's smugness turned into panic. He raised the blade and quickly dodged the swing, taking a swipe at Damon's arm.

The cut was shallow, more fire, more pain, Damon's mind screamed, and he roared, dropping the club and jumping at the man. Fists clenched, his first punch caught the leader of the troupe squarely on the shoulder, the second hand reached out and grasped the sword-wielding hand by the wrist.

With a squeeze, bones creaked, and Tsanaki screamed.

Damon didn't stop, the free hand rained punches. Chest, arm, ribs, stomach. One, two, three, five. Each one made the man's scream lose wind, the sword clattered to the ground and Damon hammered home two more blows to the man's face until he was screaming no more.

“Three.”

He dropped Tsanaki, stomping on his ankle and snapping it like a twig. No shout came, barely a grunt. The man was barely moving, curling into a ball and trembling uncontrollably.

Damon's body was on fire, barely able to feel his limbs. With gritted teeth, he glared at the remaining four. He raised his fists, red blood dripping to the stone bellow. He wasn't sure how much of it was his own, red and green mixed, the dimness of the night obscuring the colors. A lot probably.

“Come.”

They hesitated.

He didn't.

With a roar he dove to the closest target. He raised a buckler to protect himself. Damon gripped the arm with the shield and yanked. The man screamed as he was thrown in the direction of the other two. Barely a toss they'd be forced to side-step, Damon's focus was the man he'd just isolated from the rest.

A short sword of some kind, he thrust at Damon's chest. With little recourse, Damon swung his left fist to slap it away. Steel met flesh and dug deep. But he did not feel a thing, his body was aflame. With a stomp he crushed the man's foot, and with a swing from his right elbow, the man's neck cracked viscerally.

“Four.”

He grabbed the blade that was still lodged into his arm and pulled it out in a spray of crimson blood. Nothing, he wasn't feeling anything at all except the burning sensation that ran rampant across his body.

With a wild swing of his arm, he threw the blade at the closest enemy.

Much to the surprise of everyone involved, the blade bit into the man's right arm and pierced through their biceps. The scream was immediate, clutching his arm and dropping his weapons, green blood pouring forth.

“... Five?”

Damon, breathing hard, glanced at the remaining two.

This time they didn't hesitate.

They ran.

He should probably follow after them.

The fact his feet did not move from the spot probably meant he was not going to be able to, however. The fire was losing some of its sting, in its wake it left a growing numbness. Damon's focus was wavering, his body swaying slightly.

A part of his brain recognized he was in trouble. He should stem the bleeding, seek help.

The rest of him wasn't responding.

The only noise in his ears was his heavy breathing, the dripping sound of blood, and the constant slowing beat of his heart.

He heard a dim buzzing sound that grew louder and louder.

Damon didn't realize he blacked out.