

Shadow 231

Chapter 231: Hush Hush Die

The death throes of the first two goblins made the third one hesitate.

It had been trailing behind them, clutching a melee weapon despite its comrades wielding ranged ones. Cautious. Calculating. But when it saw them butchered in mere seconds, its instinct kicked in—

Run.

The goblin spun on its heel, ready to flee.

It never got the chance.

Leona, who had been lurking in the undergrowth, sprang out. With a fierce battle cry, she swung her broadsword, the flat side smashing into the goblin's chest—

CRACK!

Lightning surged through the steel, electricity rippling across its flesh. The goblin's body seized, its limbs jerking violently as the crackling energy cooked its nerves. A gurgled yelp died in its throat, its red skin scorching from the inside out.

Damon moved in, wasting no time.

TWANG! TWANG!

Two arrows pierced the goblin's kneecaps, slamming it to the ground. It collapsed, its body still twitching, its breath ragged and uneven.

But it was still alive.

Damon's once cold, inhuman eyes faded back into their usual dark abyss, the effects of Remorseless vanishing. He let out a slow breath, his gaze shifting to the Red Cap goblin they had just captured.

"We've killed two. Now we can use this one for information."

Leona nodded, stepping forward. Xander walked up beside them, arms crossed.

"And I imagine you can speak goblin?" he asked, arching a brow.

Damon shook his head.

"No. But I can speak the universal language of extreme violence."

Before anyone could react, he drove his boot into the goblin's skull.

CRACK!

The creature shrieked, its pain-maddened eyes bulging—or at least, it tried to shriek. Because Damon followed up with another brutal kick, shattering its jaw with a sickening snap.

Leona winced at the sound.

Damon crouched, pressing the edge of his dagger to its throat.

"I'll be the one doing the talking."

The goblin's eyes blazed with fury, but it wasn't stupid. It knew it was a hostage now.

It spat out a series of guttural, ragged syllables—

"Kererkkekr... ahhh... keker... free...!"

Damon tilted his head. He didn't understand a single word except for one.

"Free."

He nodded at the goblin, his expression mockingly sincere.

"Oh, you want us to let you go?" he asked, his voice eerily calm.

The goblin narrowed its eyes, wary, but hope flickered in its gaze.

Damon's smile widened.

And then—

He stomped down on the arrow lodged in its knee.

The goblin convulsed, a strangled scream clawing at its ruined throat—only for Damon to drive his fist into its diaphragm, cutting off its breath entirely.

The creature gasped, choking on agony.

Damon leaned in, his voice a whisper of pure malice.

"Didn't I say I'd do the talking?" His dagger pressed deeper against its skin. "Don't try to negotiate with me."

Xander stood to the side, watching with a disgusted expression.

Not because of the goblin.

But because Damon hadn't even asked a single question yet.

Xander turned away, leaving Damon and Leona behind.

He didn't like it, and neither did Leona, but they both trusted that Damon had his reasons.

Xander's gaze drifted to the bloodied corpses of the two slain goblins. If more of them came searching, hiding the bodies would be a problem.

"How does he plan to get rid of them?"

Damon had claimed he'd take care of it, but Xander didn't want to imagine what that entailed. He shook his head, refusing to delve into Damon Grey's twisted mind. Instead, he turned his focus to Sylvia and Evangeline, who were working on Matlock's wounds.

The fairy boy had taken too much damage, his delicate wings shredded. There was no chance he'd be flying anytime soon.

Behind him, Xander could hear the muffled screams of their captive goblin. He refused to look. Instead, he planted himself beside Sylvia and Evangeline, standing guard.

If anyone could put a stop to Damon's antics, it would be one of them. His bet was on Evangeline. She had a habit of scolding Damon like a mother, though it usually ended in an argument. These days, Damon just tolerated it with an annoyed scowl.

The two healers continued their work until Matlock was stable enough to stand.

Xander glanced at him—

A delicate-looking kid.

With vibrant green hair, short locks framing his soft face, and large brown eyes, Matlock looked more fragile than most girls. He was small, thin, completely lacking muscle. The kind of person you'd expect to shatter under pressure.

Matlock lifted his gaze to Xander, his expression still pale and uncertain.

"Th...thank you for saving me, sir..."

Xander scowled.

'Sir? We're in the same class...'

Matlock, seemingly unaware of the reaction, looked around—his eyes darting from Damon's ongoing brutality to their unfamiliar surroundings.

"Whe...where are we...?"

Sylvia shot a glance at Damon, who now had the goblin on its hands and knees, begging for mercy, while he demonstrated to Leona how to "properly" torture a goblin.

"That's what we need to find out."

She exchanged looks with Evangeline, who nodded before stepping in—grabbing Damon's wrist just before he could lop off the goblin's ear.

Sylvia let out a quiet breath of relief.

Evangeline began berating Damon for his "excessive cruelty," while Damon merely rolled his eyes.

Sylvia walked up to them, arms crossed.

"Did you learn anything?"

Damon glanced at Evangeline before flashing a smug grin.

"I learned a lot, actually."

He cleared his throat, then mimicked a garbled, exaggerated goblin dialect.

"Jejejekek kerekek teyetete jejere."

Then, seeing their deadpan expressions, he shrugged.

"That's what he said."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes.

Damon smirked. "Hey, goblin's a hard language to grasp."

Then his smirk widened.

"Apparently, he has a mate and kids... and his village has a thousand Red Cap goblins."

Xander raised a brow. "A thousand? That's still a village?"

"Yeah, news to me too." Damon stretched his arms. "Oh, and get this—" he continued with a knowing grin, "they have communal marriages. Everyone just... shares."

Evangeline's eyebrow twitched.

Sylvia narrowed her eyes.

He's dodging something.

More than that—he was trying to lighten the mood.

She didn't like where this was going.

Xander, leaning on his spear, smiled dryly.

"Did you learn anything else?"

Damon shrugged.

"Hey, I don't speak goblin. I did my best."

Xander sneered. "I thought you spoke the universal language of extreme violence? All talk."

Damon's smirk didn't waver.

"Oh, I speak it. I never said he'd understand it."

Then, his tone shifted.

"But I did manage to learn one thing."

Silence.

Damon's grin thinned.

"We're trapped here."

Sylvia felt her breath catch in her throat.

Damon continued, his voice casual but his words sharp.

"And so are they."

His gaze flickered to the goblin, then back to them.

"Death is in all directions."

Then, he turned to Sylvia.

"You can talk to animals, right?"

Sylvia hesitated, then nodded.

Damon's smirk returned.

"Good. Ask him what 'Hush Hush Die' means."

Chapter 232: We're All Gonna Die

Sylvia communicated with the half-dead goblin, her face paling with each response.

The creature's voice was hoarse and grating, its words broken and guttural, but the message was clear enough.

As it spoke, it gestured toward the violet light on the distant horizon.

The glow had spread from the south to the north, blanketing the entire region—except for the western sky, which was an ominous shade of gray. There, bleak-looking mountains loomed in the distance.

Slightly off to the south, another mountain stood, isolated. Even from here, Damon felt an unnatural sense of dread just looking at it.

Sylvia took a deep breath, her expression ashen.

"Hush Hush refers to whispers..." she murmured.

She hesitated before continuing.

"The reason he likened it to death... is because right behind us, beyond those dwarf mountains and ridges... lies the Whispering Forest."

Damon's jaw tightened.

He exhaled slowly.

"So we're still in Soltheon... that's good."

Xander, who had remained quiet until now, paled.

"Good? What's good about being in uncharted lands? The Whispering Forest is a death zone—just like the Evil Forest."

Damon nodded. He already knew their situation was bad—which was precisely why he needed them all to stay calm.

Even so, his fists clenched.

Evangeline bit her lip, her gaze shifting toward the violet light on the horizon.

"What about that direction? If we can't go west, why not east? Or south? Or north?"

Sylvia shook her head.

"There's a mana anomaly in that direction. It's created a gravity zone that has engulfed the entire region. Anyone who approaches gets crushed by the ambient gravity attribute magic."

A heavy silence followed.

This wasn't unheard of.

When mana lingered too long in a place, it could either form dungeons or create anomalous zones, where magic ran wild.

This was one of those zones—a mana anomaly.

They could manifest with any attribute—sometimes all at once—and were often compared to storms at sea.

Only worse.

The worst of them were spatial storms, which could tear reality apart.

Gravity anomalies were almost as bad.

Damon sighed.

"That explains the tremors in the ground..."

Leona, who had been listening intently, crouched down.

"What about the demon army?"

Sylvia turned back to the goblin, speaking softly.

The creature trembled at the mention of the army.

"They originally camped near the anomaly," Sylvia translated, "but it started shrinking—moving in their direction. So now they're attacking it, hoping to break through."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"That doesn't make sense."

If their goal was simply to escape, why not head southwest?

Avoiding the Whispering Forest was logical—but the southwest was a different matter.

Sylvia must have had the same thought. She turned back to the goblin and gestured, pointing southwest.

The goblin froze.

Then—

It shook its head violently, trembling as if she had touched upon some unspeakable taboo.

"Jeekkekekekekeke!"

It choked on its own fear, its breathing turning ragged.

Then, in a panicked frenzy, it gestured wildly toward the southwestern mountain.

Sylvia's face grew steadily paler.

The goblin rasped out words in its broken, grating language.

Damon managed to pick out a few:

"Winged one... ash... death, death..."

Then a phrase that sounded like:

"Many, many army... hot, hot..."

Each fragmented sentence only made his gut sink deeper.

Sylvia inhaled sharply, then exhaled, steadying herself before speaking.

"We're near the nest of Ashergon."

Damon's breath hitched.

Ashergon.

The name alone carried a weight of dread—a dragon whose presence alone could spell absolute devastation.

Sylvia continued, her voice laced with tension.

"Near its nest lies a ruin—one crawling with drakes and wyverns that serve it. Approaching it means death."

She hesitated, then delivered the final blow.

"The demon army tried passing through. Of their three thousand troops... they lost 2,645.

In just seven minutes.

And the dragon hadn't even appeared."

Xander sucked in a sharp breath.

A cold silence settled over the group.

Sylvia pressed on, her voice subdued.

"The scouts stationed here haven't reported back to the main force yet. They were sent into the Whispering Forest... to search for a safe exit. Or at least... somewhere that doesn't mean certain death."

Damon's fists clenched.

There was no safe exit. Not yet.

Sylvia wasn't finished.

"On the outskirts of the forest, the scouts found a ruined city."

A flicker of hope?

"They claim this city may have a waypoint—one that could be used for teleportation out of this region."

Damon's head snapped toward Evangeline.

"We're not far from Brightwater Dukedom—assuming we can get past the Whispering Forest and everything around it."

Evangeline nodded, though her expression remained grim.

"If it's a city, then it has to be an ancient ruin... I've heard of it before.

The one called the 'Path of Kings.'"

Matlock swallowed hard, gripping his head as panic settled in.

"What—what do we do now?! If the demon army learns about this place, we'll be hunted down!"

His breath grew ragged.

"We need to run—run far away—"

Damon exhaled through gritted teeth.

"Run where?"

His voice was flat. Cold.

"We're surrounded by death. There is no hope."

A heavy silence followed.

Then, his fingers curled into a tight fist.

If they were first-class advancements, maybe—just maybe—there would be a sliver of a chance.

Even then... death would still be almost certain.

His frustration boiled over.

He turned and kicked the goblin.

The creature squealed weakly, too broken to fight or flee.

Sylvia reached out, gripping Damon's wrist.

"Their group was nearly wiped out in the Whispering Forest before they found the city... Right now, there are only twenty-seven Red Cap goblins left."

Her voice dropped further.

"And they're led by three war trolls."

Damon's stomach twisted.

War trolls.

Monsters nearly as bad as lesser demons.

They weren't just stronger than normal trolls—they were war incarnate.

A single one could wipe out an entire party of first-class advancement adventurers.

But what made them truly terrifying wasn't their brute strength.

It was their intelligence.

Their cruelty.

Their obsession with the hunt.

Once a war troll picked up a trail, it would not stop—not until every last target was dead.

The blood drained from everyone's faces.

Matlock collapsed to his knees, trembling.

Tears streaked down his face as he clutched his head.

"We're all gonna die... We're all gonna die..."

Chapter 233: One Option

There was nothing wrong with Matlock's reaction. If anything, it was completely justified. The harsh reality of their situation was undeniable—death was certain. There was no hope, no margin for escape. They were six in number, stranded in an uncharted zone, surrounded on all sides by forces far beyond their ability to resist.

To one side lay a dead zone filled with ancient and eldritch horrors. In another direction loomed the nest of Ashergon, a dragon known for leveling entire cities, guarded by an army of powerful subordinates. The third path was blocked by a mana anomaly, a gravity wall that crushed all who approached it. And as if fate wished to mock them further, the last possible route was infested with an advancing army of demons, boxed in with them.

There was no escape.

Perhaps it would be better to make their peace with the goddess and accept the inevitable.

Damon watched them in silence.

Matlock was already sobbing uncontrollably, tears running down his face. The sight of it irritated Damon. A small part of him felt the urge to silence the delicate boy, to end his pathetic crying right then and there. But he dismissed the thought. Unlike him, Matlock hadn't spent his life in dire situations. He wasn't used to having the world constantly try to kill him.

Damon drew his dagger, its cold steel glinting in the sun light.

The half-dead goblin sneered at their fear, jeering weakly through its pain.

Damon walked over and kicked it violently, forcing it to the ground.

"If the demon army catches us, Xander and I might at least get a quick, merciful death—ripped apart and slaughtered."

His gaze shifted to the three girls.

"But the three of you... you won't be so lucky."

The air grew eerily still.

"I imagine you'd become playthings for whatever creatures got their hands on you. If you're fortunate, you might end up as a demon kin's toy instead of some mindless beast's."

The girls trembled. Their faces went pale.

Damon continued, his voice void of emotion.

"A quick and dignified death would be a distant dream. You'd pray for it, but it wouldn't come. Maybe after a few rounds with a troll or a hobgoblin, you'd finally be granted mercy."

Xander narrowed his eyes at Damon's words.

Evangeline bit her lip.

"I... I—we can try negotiating with the demons. I mean, the goddess races have a truce with them at the moment, and most of us here are high nobles..."

Damon smiled. He knew it would come down to this. He didn't even want to consider that option, so he had to make them see things his way.

"You're correct, but... we're all trapped here. So are they. Do you really think they'd care about some captives, even if they have huge tits? Wake up and smell the roses, Evangeline. Your status means nothing here."

Sylvia lowered her head.

"But we can still negotiate..."

Damon nodded.

"We could, but historically—and factually—negotiations only happen between equals. Even in war, no one wants to negotiate until blows are traded."

He walked up to the elven girl, his dark eyes locked onto hers.

"Do you know what happens when we trade blows with them?"

She nodded slowly, biting her lip.

Damon looked at her coldly.

"Say it."

Her voice was barely a whisper.

"We... we get killed."

He smirked, lifting her chin.

"We get killed," he repeated, his voice ringing out louder this time.

Xander bit his lip. He looked at Matlock, who was trembling as Damon spoke.

"We still have other options..."

Damon nodded.

"No, we have only one. But fine, let's explore the next option."

"The next option is right there."

He pointed toward the distant mountains—the nest of the dragon Ashergon. Even from here, the sheer aura of death that radiated from it sent shivers down his spine.

"Our next option is quite good, actually. Personally, I'd prefer a fiery death. Or maybe getting ripped to pieces by fangs and claws. At least that way, you keep your dignity."

Damon walked up to Xander, his gaze cold and unwavering.

"We would never make it past the army of drakes and wyverns that killed most of the demon army. But go ahead. Be my guest."

Xander gritted his teeth. His fists clenched. Then, with a growl, he shoved Damon back, his hands trembling.

"All you're doing is telling us how badly we'll die. You're not actually doing anything!"

Damon ignored him. He turned his attention to Matlock, who was still shivering on the ground.

Reaching down, he grabbed the boy by the collar and lifted him up with ease.

"You will definitely die with that attitude. But don't worry—after we return, I'll make you a nice grave and give the academy a decent report."

Matlock trembled, snot dripping from his nose.

"H-How can you say that...? D-Do you have a way out?"

Damon smiled. This Matlock fellow was quite useful—he had asked the question Damon wanted them all to ask.

This was a simple psychological trick. If you wanted people to do something, you first suggested something worse. Then, you offered an alternative that seemed much more agreeable—even if it was still terrible. And they would accept, believing they had made the better choice.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Matlock's eyes widened. He wasn't the only one surprised by Damon's words.

Leona, who had been silent until now, finally spoke up.

"You have a way out?"

Damon nodded. He had thought through all the options.

The option of surrendering to the demon army was too risky. He was a commoner with no status, so even in the slim chance the demons agreed, a nobody like him wouldn't be important enough for political negotiations. And besides, what he said was technically true—the demons would just kill them.

The second option was the dragon's nest. And honestly, why would they march straight into the lair of a dragon known to destroy cities on a whim? Even if they tried, they would never reach it before the drakes and wyverns tore them apart. At least it would be swift.

That left only one option—the unknown.

Damon turned toward Leona and then toward the dark expanse of the Whispering Forest. Even from here, he could feel the cold sensation of dread creeping in. A fate worse than death awaited them there.

But in the unknown, there was life.

"Yes, I do."

He pointed toward the Whispering Forest.

"We walk the unknown. We take on the Whispering Forest. We brave the Path of Kings."

Chapter 234: Burdens Of Leadership

There was a deep silence after Damon spoke.

The Whispering Forest.

Of all the options before them, it was the worst. If they went there, death would be a mercy. They could be turned into one of the horrors that lurked in its depths—cursed, or worse. And yes, something worse could happen to them. Ancient ruins were horrible places.

Matlock shook his head, tears dripping down his face.

"We can't... we just can't..."

Damon punched him straight in the face.

Matlock let out a delicate yelp as he crumpled to the floor, clutching his nose in shock.

"Our odds are slim," Damon said, his voice cold. "But anywhere else is absolute death. We don't stand a chance—a group of weak students."

He gritted his teeth. His dark eyes burned with something unreadable.

"Our odds are less than three percent." He chuckled bitterly.

"I never gamble unless I have more than an eighty percent chance of success. However, this time, I'll just play the hand I've been dealt. Maybe this is new to you guys, but this is just my life."

His gaze swept over them, unyielding.

"You're afraid? Fine. Don't know what to do? Also fine. You're losing hope, lacking faith? Then put your faith—not in the goddess, or some other god—put your faith in me. And I'll walk you through hell."

The shadows around him deepened, stretching unnaturally across the ground. His presence grew heavier, suffocating.

"I won't ask for much. Just put your lives in my hands... and follow me to almost certain death."

Xander clenched his fists.

"You want us to place our lives in your hands with no guarantee?"

Leona sighed. Damon looked done talking. He wouldn't indulge Xander in an argument.

"Fine. I'll place my life in your hands."

Sylvia smiled thinly. There was more to this situation than the others realized. This was sabotage. Someone wanted Damon dead, and they had all been caught in the crossfire. Or maybe... maybe she was the target. It could be any of them.

"My life is yours," she said. "Do with it as you please."

There was a weight to her words that the others didn't seem to catch.

Evangeline let out a deep sigh.

"I don't know what to do... I can't act on anything. All I can do is put my faith somewhere else. I choose to put it in you. I will follow you... to the abyss."

Xander gripped his spear tightly.

"I would have wished for better options," he muttered. "But if I'm going into a forest of death... I'd rather do it next to the man who burned one to the ground."

Damon nodded. He had a powerful party now—all of them close to their first class advancement. He would be counting on that. But there was still one more person to consider.

Matlock.

For all intents and purposes, Damon would have preferred to leave the young fairy to die. Dead weight. Baggage. But he didn't have that luxury. If Matlock was going to survive, he would need to be useful.

"Matlock... make your choice."

The young fairy trembled.

"I don't wanna."

Damon nodded, as if accepting his answer.

"Then we'll leave you to die."

Matlock's breath hitched. He shook his head desperately. "No, please don't—"

"Then make yourself useful."

Damon turned away, not waiting for an answer. Matlock never made a choice, never gave Damon his life. And if that was the case, it wasn't Damon's responsibility to keep it safe.

His grip tightened on the dagger as he turned to Sylvia.

"We need more information about the road to the ruined ancient city."

Sylvia nodded and approached the goblin.

The next quarter-hour was grueling.

Damon worked. Sylvia threw up. Seven times.

By the end of it, they had extracted all they could. The information wasn't much—only a general direction and an overwhelming fear of the Whispering Forest.

The city was no haven. It was hell. But in that hell, there was hope of salvation.

And worse—far worse—was what they learned from the redcap goblin's terrified ramblings.

The demon army had apparently awakened Ashergon from his slumber.

The dragon was not known for his patience.

Damon raised his dagger and drove it into the goblin's eye.

The redcap's body convulsed. Warm blood flooded over its red skin, seeping onto Damon's fingers. Its breath hitched once, then all light left its eyes.

A system prompt flashed before him.

[You have slain Redcap Goblin.]

Damon turned to face his party.

They were staring at him.

And in that moment, his position as leader became undisputed.

Leadership was not a crown of gold. It was a burden. It was fear, horror, and the weight of every decision about to be unleashed.

"We need to cross the Mountains and reach the Whispering Forest," he said. "Once we're there, we'll find the way to the ruined city."

Xander nodded, his fist clenched. "How do we do that?"

Damon had already thought of a way.

"Redcap goblins are a smart group. There's always a shaman or an intellectual among them. Not to mention, they're part of a military force with a strict hierarchy."

Leona blinked. "What does that have to do with our situation?"

Sylvia held her chin. "He means they would have a map or written records we can steal."

Damon nodded. "Or someone we can kidnap."

Matlock's face paled. "Did you guys forget about the three war trolls? And the fact that the goblins outnumber us?"

Damon's expression didn't change. "That's why we need a plan. And luckily for us... I have one."

Xander swung his spear over his shoulders.

"Please tell me your plan doesn't involve kidnapping a goblin."

Damon smiled. "Fine. I won't tell you."

Xander groaned. "I feel like I'm going to regret this..." His eyes flicked to the corpses. "And what about these? You said you had a way to get rid of them."

Damon nodded, glancing at the three goblin carcasses.

"You guys go. I'll handle the bodies and throw off any hunting parties."

He pointed forward. "There's a huge tree a kilometer and a half in that direction. Wait four minutes for me to catch up."

Evangeline nodded.

Sylvia looked at him with a mix of curiosity and concern.

Leona didn't need to look—she trusted him. She grabbed Matlock, pulling him along as the others followed.

Their shadows stretched out as they moved away.

Damon turned to his own.

"Devour them."

His shadow surged.

It rose like ink spreading across the ground, swallowing the goblin corpses whole. He felt a familiar system prompt flicker in his mind.

[You have gained 5 attribute points.]

[You have gained 5 attribute points.]

[You have gained 5 attribute points.]

Damon exhaled slowly.

His shadow perception flickered.

More redcap goblins. Moving in his direction.

His fingers curled into fists.

"We just need to survive," he murmured. "I need to survive."

For a moment, the weight of it all pressed down on him. He let himself feel it. The unease. The exhaustion.

But only for a moment.

Because no one else would see it.

That was the burden of leadership.

Chapter 235: Respect Given

Damon rejoined the group about three minutes later than he had agreed to. By the time he arrived, the anxiety in his party had spiked.

He dived down from a tree, landing smoothly after using the omnidirectional gear to swing his way across. His boots hit the ground with barely a sound as he straightened, glancing at them.

"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

Evangeline scowled. "I would prefer no news."

Xander sighed, crossing his arms. He couldn't blame her, but in this case, it was better to know.

"What did you find? And did you get rid of the corpses?"

Damon nodded. "Taken care of. That's the good news."

"And the bad?" Xander asked warily.

Damon opened his palm. "They have our scent. Or rather, the scent of the three ladies here and Matlock."

The three girls exchanged glances, confused.

"Hand it over," Damon said.

Evangeline frowned. "Hand what over?"

Damon sighed. "The perfume you're hiding on your person. And any cosmetics."

Evangeline looked away awkwardly. "You took all our stuff when we were packing."

Damon narrowed his eyes. "So you're saying I have to reach into your bosoms and take them myself? Because I will."

That got a reaction.

The three girls stiffened before reluctantly pulling out small bottles of perfume and a few cosmetic items. Damon raised an eyebrow as he took them.

"Huh. You guys actually had some. I was just guessing..." He weighed the number of items in his hands and smirked. "And it's way more than I thought."

Leona blinked. "You... you mean you didn't know?"

Damon shook his head, pocketing the items.

Xander watched the exchange with an exhausted sigh. "Now that you have them, what's your plan?"

Damon held up one of the vials. "These have a strong scent. The monsters tracking us have even stronger noses. I want to overwhelm them."

"First, we need to find a river to wash our scent off." His gaze flicked toward the girls. "If we don't find a body of water, we'll have to settle for a mud bath."

They winced in unison.

Sylvia clutched her hair in horror, already imagining how terrible her white locks would look covered in mud.

Xander nudged her with his elbow. "Relax. He's just joking. There's a small stream not far from here."

Damon nodded. "Then let's go. We wash up and grab some supplies."

Leona arched an eyebrow. "Supplies from where? Our bags? Matlock lost his."

Damon was already aware. The goblins would likely use that to track them.

"I know," he said. "That's why we need to hurry. We don't have time to waste."

The stream was the same place Damon had tossed Xander to wake him up. Its water flowed clean and free, though Damon would have preferred they fill up their supplies, they already had enough.

"If I had enough poison, I'd contaminate the whole thing," he muttered.

If he did, their enemies wouldn't have water to drink, and if they did, they'd suffer horribly. But for now, he focused on the task at hand.

He quickly demonstrated how to wash off their scent, making sure they did it thoroughly. Meanwhile, he and Xander gathered thick mud from the riverbank. Xander had no idea what Damon intended to do with it, but he followed along regardless.

By the time the girls finished washing, they returned to find Damon and Xander covered in mud, while Matlock stood off to the side, looking less than amused.

Evangeline narrowed her eyes at the sight. "What are you doing? This isn't the time for pottery."

Damon sneered. "You're just jealous. It's a nice clay pot."

Sylvia chuckled. She could tell he was keeping the mood light, but she was curious, too. "Why are you making pots... with clay?"

Damon glanced at her and decided to explain. "I spotted some hornets not far from here. A lot of them."

Leona gripped her sword. "And that has to do with this... how?"

Damon didn't answer immediately. Instead, he added, "Not just that. There are also sandbox trees nearby. We're in luck."

Leona frowned. "I wouldn't call our situation lucky. If anything, it's dire."

Sylvia, however, was already piecing it together. "Sandbox trees are poisonous. Their fruits explode, releasing shrapnel that moves at 150 miles per hour. If it gets in your eyes, it causes blindness."

Evangeline crossed her arms. "So what? He's going to use that as a bomb?"

She wasn't convinced, but she was starting to understand his line of thinking.

"Still doesn't explain the clay pots. And why did you creepily mention hornets?"

Damon ignored her—or at least he tried to. "I'll save the rude remarks for later. I don't like being scolded by Goldie here."

Evangeline scoffed. "Don't give me weird nicknames."

Xander sighed as he helped pat down a clay pot. "This is the same madman who burned down part of the Evil Forest. Whatever he's planning, it won't be honorable."

Damon sneered. "Honorable is surviving."

He snapped his fingers at Evangeline. "Use your light magic to bake the pots. Oh, and if you break them, I'll smack you."

Evangeline rolled her eyes. "What kind of lowlife hits a woman?"

"Get to it and stop nagging."

She huffed but did as he asked, channeling her magic into the clay. The heat baked the pots until they hardened. Their shapes were a little malformed, but they were solid enough, with one small opening that could be easily sealed.

Damon grinned wickedly.

Leona's lips twitched. "Erm... correct me if I'm wrong, but you don't actually plan to trap hornets inside the pots and throw them at the enemy, right?"

The others turned to him, waiting for an answer.

Damon shook his head. "Of course not, fool. I'd never disrespect my enemies like that."

They barely had time to breathe before he added, "I intend to throw the sandbox fruit with the hornet-filled clay pots."

The party stared at him.

Ruthless. Maniacal.

As if the hornets weren't bad enough.

Chapter 236: New Mechanic

Xander heaved, blood running down the side of his head as he sprinted through the forest, chased by a small group of redcap goblins. These goblins were as tall as adult men, with elongated limbs, sinewy muscles, and crimson skin. They wore their signature leather armor and pursued him with savage determination. However, what made things truly dangerous was the goblin mage hurling fireballs and debuff spells at him from behind.

Gritting his teeth, he dodged another incoming fireball.

"Damn you, Damon...!"

He ran as fast as he could, using his spear and floating barriers of gravity magic to shield himself. The goblins, however, were faster, their magically enhanced limbs allowing them to leap with inhuman agility.

Xander dashed toward a familiar patch of shrubs. The moment he crossed it, he intentionally slowed down, skidding across the ground. To any observer, it would appear as though he had just tripped—but he knew better.

The goblins, hot on his heels, charged straight past the shrubs at full speed.

Then, it happened.

The leading goblin was abruptly sliced apart, its body separating into clean, precise pieces. The others skidded to a halt in shock as nearly invisible wires shimmered in the air, slicing through anything that passed through them.

Xander turned back, his eyes scanning the trap Damon had set.

"How vicious..." he muttered.

The goblin mage, more cautious than its kin, immediately halted the others. Its sharp, glowing eyes flickered with intelligence as it surveyed the area, searching for more traps.

Xander couldn't allow that. He needed to drag the mage into the killing zone—whatever twisted scheme Damon had devised. He didn't like it, but he had a role to play.

Raising his spear, he let out a mocking laugh.

"Hahaha! Catch me if you can, you lowlife worms!"

The goblins snarled in anger, but the mage held them back, scanning for danger.

Xander scoffed and glared at it. "Stupid mage wannabe! Can't even read, can't even cast properly. Ugly, too! And dumb!"

The insults were simple, but they hit their mark. The goblin mage's eyes burned with fury as it let out a guttural roar and lunged after him.

Xander turned on his heels and sprinted, his heart pounding.

Behind him, the remaining goblins exchanged glances, then shrugged before charging after him, murderous intent gleaming in their eyes.

As Xander ran, a shadow stirred behind him. It spread like ink, slithering across the forest floor toward the fallen goblin corpse.

The body were devoured—vanishing into the abyssal darkness—before the entity zipped forward, following after them.

It wasn't long before Xander reached a small clearing in the woods, the goblins still in pursuit. As soon as he arrived, he began slowing down, preparing for battle.

The moment the goblins entered the clearing, two arrows shot out from the treeline, piercing through one of them instantly. Before the others could react, a deafening bang echoed across the forest—immediately followed by the head of a goblin exploding as a magic bullet struck it dead-on.

Damon casually blew away the smoke from his fingertip, glancing toward the treetops where birds scattered from the loud sound.

'That should attract more of them here,' he thought.

The biggest flaw of the magic bullet spell was its noise. It was far too loud, but it was undeniably effective. Since he had already fired one, he might as well keep going.

Without hesitation, he leapt from his perch in the trees, dropping directly onto a redcap goblin. The creature reacted swiftly, dodging to the side and slashing at him with a rusted blade. Damon rolled out of the way, his dagger flashing in response as their weapons clashed. The impact forced both of them to stagger, their weapons momentarily knocked off balance.

The goblin lunged again, but the moment it moved, Damon's [Beholder's Gaze] activated, slowing time in his perception. In that brief window, he raised his finger and fired another magic bullet. The goblin barely managed to dodge, retaliating with a powerful kick to his gut.

Damon coughed, stumbling back as the goblin pounced on him. He caught its arms, the two locked in a struggle. The goblin was strong—too strong. It was slowly overpowering him.

Without hesitation, he activated [5x], increasing his strength fivefold.

The goblin's eyes widened in shock as Damon suddenly pushed it off him. Before it could recover, he seized its head and slammed it down onto his knee with brutal force.

The creature groaned in pain, dazed. That brief moment gave Damon a chance to glance at the battlefield.

Leona had already cornered and was about to kill another goblin. Meanwhile, Xander, Sylvia, Matlock, and Evangeline had teamed up against the goblin mage.

Damon tightened his grip on the goblin's head—and twisted.

Crack!

[You have slain Redcap Goblin.]

He exhaled, glancing at his status. He needed one more kill to reach level 7. As for consuming the corpses... that could wait until no one was looking.

His true target was the goblin mage.

[Remorseless] was active, analyzing the creature. Unlike the others, this one was far stronger—it had at least reached its first-class advancement. That was fine. It was still a mage type, which meant its physical strength was lacking.

Even so, his party was struggling against it. He had to kill it before more goblins arrived, so he could spring his real trap.

His gaze flicked to Leona, who was still engaged in combat with a goblin.

"I need to level up..."

He nocked an arrow, his [Dead Eye] skill locking onto his target.

The arrow flew past Leona with pinpoint accuracy, embedding itself directly into the goblin's eye. The creature let out a dying groan before collapsing.

Leona huffed, barely glancing at him before turning to help with the goblin mage.

Damon, however, heard a familiar chime.

[You have slain Redcap Goblin.]

[You have leveled up.]

[You have gained 60 attribute points.]

He paused, waiting. Every time he leveled up, he unlocked a new skill.

Then, the system continued.

[You have reached an Inflection Point. You have unlocked a new system mechanic.]

[You have unlocked System Mechanic: Mastery.]

[Analyzing your Mastery...]

Damon's eyes narrowed. He didn't have time to explore new mechanics right now. If it was a skill, he could use it immediately—but if not, it would have to wait.

Turning away from the notifications, he set his sights on the goblin mage, the sounds of battle thundering around him.

Chapter 237: Tooth

Damon would have liked to explore the new system mechanic, but there was no time. He wanted to activate any new powers he had gained, but unlike skills, this wasn't something that directly affected his body—it was a change to the system panel as a whole. That meant whatever benefits it provided wouldn't be immediately useful in battle.

He pushed the thought aside, raising his hand and unleashing several magic bullets toward the goblin mage.

The goblin reacted swiftly, waving its staff to conjure a translucent barrier.

Damon clicked his tongue in frustration. "Smart," he muttered. Magic bullets weren't effective against barriers.

As if it wasn't troublesome enough that this thing was a redcap, it just had to be a magic caster on top of that.

Flames rose behind the goblin mage, the glow reflecting in its frantic eyes as it scanned the battlefield, realizing its allies were already dead.

Damon sneered. "You may have reached first-rank, but a low-level mage without much in their spell arsenal is still weak. Not to mention, my party is close to their own first-class advancement. We're more than capable of killing a rank-one monster."

The goblin snarled in defiance, raising its staff before slamming it into the ground. Three orbs of fire shot forth.

Xander immediately moved in front of the team, his spear crackling with gravitational magic as a few floating barriers formed around him. The flames struck, but his defenses held firm.

Damon's voice rang out. "Leona! Close the distance—he's a magic type, he can't handle melee combat!"

Leona was already on the move. Her heavy sword crackled with arcs of lightning, the energy snapping through the air as she charged. The wind caught her combat uniform, making it billow around her. Her golden eyes gleamed, her beast-kin ears twisting slightly as she adjusted her focus.

She swung her sword.

[Thunder]

A deafening shockwave erupted from her blade, sending a pulse of sound crashing toward the goblin mage.

The goblin hastily erected another barrier, its magic barely holding as the force cracked the ground beneath its feet. It sneered triumphantly, thinking it had successfully countered the attack.

Leona wasn't done.

She leapt high into the air, raising her hand as mana surged into her palm, coalescing into a swirling vortex of storm clouds.

[Storm Call]

A furious downpour of lightning descended upon the goblin mage, hammering against its barrier. The creature's expression shifted from confidence to horror as cracks splintered across its magical defense.

Leona landed with a heavy thud, gripping her greatsword tightly before bringing it down in a devastating overhead swing.

CRASH!

The barrier shattered.

The goblin mage swung its staff in retaliation, striking Leona's shoulder with a concussive blast of mana.

She staggered, gritting her teeth as pain flared through her body.

Before the goblin could retreat, Xander lunged forward. His spear thrust with pinpoint accuracy, gravity magic enhancing his strike as a concentrated blast shot toward the goblin's chest.

The attack should have blown its torso apart—

But at the last second, the goblin twisted, sacrificing its left arm instead.

Blood splattered the ground as the limb was torn away, yet the goblin endured the pain, its teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

With its remaining arm, it launched a desperate blast of magic at both Xander and Leona. The explosion sent them tumbling back, crashing into the trees.

Before the goblin could regain its footing, an arrow streaked through the air.

It struck the goblin's shoulder—its tip glowing with lunar energy.

The moment it made contact, moonlight exploded outward, spreading like wildfire. The goblin roared in agony, its body briefly engulfed in the radiant burst.

Just as it tried to recover, several beams of light rained down upon it. The goblin twisted and dodged, barely evading, only for Evangeline to descend from above, her rapier flashing in a precise arc.

Her blade sliced through a small portion of its robe, severing the strap of a hidden pouch. The bag tumbled to the ground.

The goblin reached out, its expression twisted in desperation as it tried to grab the fallen bag. However, before it could, Damon kicked the bag backward toward Sylvia and immediately fired a round of Magic Bullet at the goblin's chest.

The shots hit their mark. The goblin reeled back slightly, coughing, but its body showed little sign of actual damage.

"Tch."

Damon clicked his tongue, irritation flashing across his face. Without hesitation, he reached for his daggers and lunged forward, slashing at the goblin.

The creature swiftly backpedaled, then retaliated with a sharp kick aimed at Damon's midsection.

Damon barely dodged—

And in that instant, the world seemed to slow. His focus sharpened. This was his chance.

He twisted his body and drove his dagger toward the goblin's leg.

The blade pierced flesh.

The goblin shrieked in agony, immediately rolling backward before launching a desperate blast of fire toward Damon.

But Sylvia was already in position.

Before the goblin could fully unleash its attack, arrows whistled through the air, forcing it to raise its staff defensively.

Matlock followed up, trembling but determined. He waved his hand, releasing spikes of ice that spread across the battlefield, freezing the ground beneath the goblin's feet.

The goblin snarled. In a sudden motion, it reached into its robe and flung a hidden blade—

Straight at Matlock.

The fairy gasped as the dagger buried itself in his shoulder. A sharp cry escaped him as he collapsed, clutching at the wound.

The goblin moved to finish him off—

But Evangeline intercepted, her light magic gleaming as she slashed toward it. The goblin barely rolled away in time, retreating toward the trees, its gaze flickering as if waiting for something.

Damon's eyes narrowed.

It's stalling.

"Damn it," he muttered. "We need to end this now. It's buying time for reinforcements!"

The goblin seemed to smirk, and in a blur of movement, it lunged—

Slamming its entire body into Damon, sending him crashing into Evangeline.

The impact knocked the wind out of both of them.

In the same moment, the goblin raised its hand, preparing to throw a dagger at Sylvia, who was still at the back—

A spear came flying.

THUNK!

Xander, bleeding from a head wound, had hurled his weapon with all his strength. The spear struck the goblin's side, pushing it back.

The creature snarled and began chanting, preparing another spell—

Leona came crashing down on it with a dropkick.

CRACK!

"That's for throwing me into the damn trees!" she shouted.

The goblin barely managed to grab her by the throat, choking her before slamming her into the frozen ground.

Leona gasped, struggling as it loomed over her.

Its hand grabbed one of the ice spikes protruding from the battlefield.

It raised the jagged shard, eyes burning with killing intent—ready to slice her throat open.

Matlock, still on the ground, blood pouring from his shoulder, stared in horror.

Trembling. Frozen. Terrified.

But in that moment—

Something changed.

Tears streamed down Matlock's face as he clenched his shaking hand, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. His mana surged, raw and desperate, coalescing into a single, shimmering spike of ice.

It hummed in the air.

Vibrating.

With a choked roar, Matlock threw everything he had left into it—

And fired.

The ice spear tore through the battlefield with a whistling sound—

And struck the goblin square in the chest.

The creature coughed, stunned, its glowing red eyes flickering. Slowly, it looked down at the gaping hole in its torso.

A guttural roar of fury erupted from its throat.

Ignoring Leona, it staggered forward, gripping the ice spike embedded in its chest, its body trembling from sheer willpower.

It refused to die.

With one final burst of strength, the goblin charged at Matlock—

It would not die without taking at least one of them with it.

Matlock scrambled back, his limbs weak, his breath coming in terrified gasps. His fingers clawed at the dirt, trying to push himself away, but his body refused to move fast enough.

The goblin leaped, its remaining arm raised for the kill—

A flash of black.

A clean, ripping sound.

The goblin's head flew from its shoulders.

Blood sprayed in an arc before the body crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

Matlock gasped, staring wide-eyed at the scene before him.

Damon stood there, his dark eyes unreadable, his arm cloaked in armored shadows. A dagger gleamed in his grip, dripping with fresh blood.

A low chime echoed in Damon's mind.

[You have slain Redcap Goblin Tooth.]

Chapter 238: Travel Journal

Damon gasped, lowering himself to check the bleeding, headless corpse of the redcap goblin. He searched its remains but found little of value—just a few weathered scrolls and some insignificant trinkets.

Standing up, he turned to Matlock, who had cast the ice blast that finished off the goblin mage. The young fairy bit his delicate, feminine lips before quickly stepping away from the corpse, his wings fluttering uneasily. Damon gave him a nod before shifting his focus elsewhere.

His eyes scanned the battlefield for the bag the goblin had dropped earlier. He remembered kicking it near Sylvia—and sure enough, it was still there.

His party was in rough shape, but they had healers. Sylvia was the best, her healing magic gentle and efficient, while Evangeline's was more aggressive—almost like purification rather than simple restoration. Sylvia was already tending to Xander, who seemed to be the most injured, alongside Leona. Being front-line fighters, they had taken the worst of the damage. Next would be Damon himself and Evangeline, though she could heal herself if needed. Matlock, lacking a fixed position in the party, had still taken injuries, and Evangeline was already tending to him.

Time was short.

Damon grabbed the bag the redcap goblin—called Tooth—had dropped and quickly unfastened it. Inside, he found several scrolls. He flipped them open one by one, but they were mostly low-grade spell scrolls, cheaply crafted from animal skin. He rifled through the contents with growing impatience until his fingers brushed against something different—a crude, hand-drawn map.

It was difficult to interpret, the ink smudged and lines uneven, but it was still a map.

Next, he pulled out a tattered book that barely held together. Damon flipped it open, but most of the pages were damaged—either torn or too faded to read. Yet, as he skimmed through, his breath nearly caught in his throat.

The handwriting was undoubtedly human. And the first line was a prayer.

"Praise be to the Goddess as we begin this mighty undertaking. We have crossed the Duhu Mountain Range and have now reached the Forest of Whispers. I pray we do not become one of them..."

Damon's grip on the book tightened.

This was a travel journal—one belonging to someone who had ventured into the Whispering Forest. More importantly, it contained mentions of the ruined city and the Path of Kings.

Flipping through the thick volume, he found that most pages were filled with records, though some had been lost to time. Near the very back, there was another map. The ink was faded and some sections were completely illegible, but enough remained to make out a few crucial details.

This book was their hope.

Without hesitation, Damon tucked it into his supply bag and secured it.

Ignoring the pain coursing through his body, Damon reinspected the traps, spreading his shadow perception outward to anticipate where the next wave of enemies might emerge. His gaze drifted toward the mountains in the distance—the Duhu Mountains, as he now knew them to be called. It was time for his party to move.

Their pursuers would inevitably trigger the traps, and when they did, he wouldn't even need to see their faces.

He swung the bag over his shoulder and turned to his party.

"You all have five minutes to catch your breath. Eat if you can, because once we start moving, we won't stop until I say so."

Xander, already healed, leaned back against a tree, sipping from his waterskin.

"And how long do we hike?"

Damon's eyes remained fixed on the looming mountains. They appeared deceptively close, but he knew better. If they were lucky, the journey would take two days. If obstacles arose—and they would—five days at best.

"Until we reach that mountain," he replied flatly. "Save your energy. It's an endurance race. We'll be hunted by at least twenty redcap goblins, three war trolls, and—if our luck is bad, which it will be—a lesser demon or two might track us."

He turned slightly, his gaze shifting southwest.

"Or worse... we might all die by dragon's breath if Ashergon wakes up before we leave."

Evangeline's fingers trembled slightly, while Leona's ears twitched at the mention of the name.

Xander sighed, glancing at Matlock, who had long since stopped crying, having resigned himself to their grim reality.

Sylvia stepped up to Damon, her expression filled with concern as she studied him. His body was covered in bruises and dried blood, his arm swollen from an earlier impact.

"You should sit down. Let me heal you."

Damon gave a small nod, accepting her help. He needed to be in peak condition for what lay ahead.

Sylvia knelt beside him, releasing a gentle stream of lunar-attribute magic. A cool, refreshing sensation washed over his body as the magic worked through his wounds, easing his pain.

As she healed him, Damon pulled out the book he had found earlier.

"I guess we got lucky," he muttered. "That goblin mage had everything we needed—a map and, even better, a travel journal."

Leona glanced at the weathered old tome, her brows furrowing.

"I didn't know goblins were that sophisticated."

Evangeline, who had finished tending to Matlock, walked over and picked up the book. She flipped through its fragile pages, her eyes narrowing.

"I can barely make out anything. It's too faded..." She shot Damon a doubtful look. "The information is too broken. Incomplete knowledge can be more dangerous than knowing nothing—especially where we're going."

Damon nodded. He understood that risk well enough. But even so, this was an edge they couldn't afford to ignore.

"We'll try to learn as much as we can. I'm not saying to trust the book—just use it as a reference point," he said. "Now catch your breath. We move out soon."

The others nodded, falling silent as they mentally prepared for the journey ahead.

Damon sat with them, inspecting their supplies while they rested. Sylvia, having exhausted herself healing him, remained by his side. Without a word, she leaned her head against his shoulder.

Normally, he might've pushed her away—like he would have done before. But this time, he just let her be.

With the few minutes he had left, he turned his attention to the new system mechanic.

He opened the system panel and focused on the newly unlocked section.

[Mastery]

Chapter 239 239: Mastery

[Mastery] was the new system mechanic Damon had unlocked. It was his reward for reaching level 7—replacing the usual level-up skill with something entirely different. He certainly hoped it was worth it.

His last major reward had been Ashborn, a power that allowed him to wield flames capable of devouring both body and soul. It was terrifyingly effective, especially since those consumed by his fire would also be counted as having been devoured by his shadow—or so Lilith had claimed. He hadn't tested it yet, though. The idea of experiencing tenfold the pain of burning alive wasn't exactly appealing.

He scrolled down his system panel, noting the section still marked [Locked]. The [Locked] function was still there, which meant there were more features yet to be unlocked.

"Maybe the [Quest] feature," he mused. "The system has never given me one, so maybe I need to unlock it first."

He refocused on [Mastery], zooming in as more details appeared on the interface.

[Mastery]

The Mastery Mechanic provides organic growth while maintaining balance. It rewards practice, battle experience, and strategy.

"Mastery grows with every action—train, and your hands will remember; fight, and your instincts will sharpen. The more you wield a blade, cast a spell, or craft with passion, the greater your control becomes. Defeating enemies strengthens the skills you use, and overcoming specialists may grant you a glimpse of their expertise. Growth is steady through practice, swift through battle, and endless for those who seek to refine themselves. Every strike, every spell, every lesson—carving your path, shaping your legend."

Damon sighed. The system was being vaguely poetic, as usual, but he had gotten used to its cryptic nature.

From what he could infer, [Mastery] was essentially a way for him to track and develop his abilities. The more he used a skill, the better he became at it. If he fought a swordmaster, he might gain some of their expertise. If he dueled a mage, he could absorb fragments of their knowledge. Training, battle, pain—all of it contributed to his growth.

More importantly, Mastery could evolve, allowing his abilities to transform into stronger, more advanced versions over time.

He scanned his available [Mastery] list.

Before he could go further, a soft voice interrupted his thoughts.

"What are you looking at, Damon?"

Sylvia's voice.

He glanced at her, still leaning against his shoulder, her White hair brushing against his arm.

"Nothing," he muttered, shaking his head.

Pushing himself up, he turned to the others. "Pack up and get moving. I'll get rid of the bodies and catch up."

The group groaned, clearly not having rested enough, but they obeyed.

Damon exhaled, rolling his shoulders. They didn't have a choice. The hunt had already begun.

Damon glanced at Evangeline as he threw her his supply bag.

"Don't wait for me... I'll catch up in at most half a day. Keep heading for the Duhu Mountains."

Evangeline bit her lip but nodded reluctantly.

Sylvia, however, shook her head.

"No. I disagree—I can stay with you."

"Sylvia," he said sternly, shaking his head. "I can move faster alone."

She bit her lip, hesitating, until Leona tapped her shoulder.

"Don't worry. Damon is sneaky—he'll catch up," she reassured her, though there was a hint of worry in her gaze. "Right?"

He nodded.

His party left, occasionally glancing back at him. Damon sighed. He needed to deal with the corpses of the four goblins they had ambushed and ensure their traps worked. By now, every goblin in the area would be on the way.

His shadow stretched outward, spreading like a pool of darkness.

[You have gained 5 Attribute Points.]

[You have gained 5 Attribute Points.]

[You have gained 5 Attribute Points.]

His shadow reached for the goblin mage, swallowing it whole.

[You have gained 15 Attribute Points.]

[Mastery: Basic Magic +6]

The moment the system notification appeared, Damon felt a shift—his understanding of Basic Magic had grown slightly. He blinked, taken aback for a brief second.

His gaze flickered over his stats. That brought his total Attribute Points to 115. He decided to distribute them immediately.

30 points into Endurance. He would need as much stamina as possible.

85 points into Speed. Fighting here was a fool's errand—he needed to be fast enough to escape when necessary.

He opened his system panel. He still had time before the enemy arrived, and he wanted to assess his stats and Mastery.

[HP: 112/150]

[Mana: 14,084/14,084]

[Strength: 134]

[Agility: 57]

[Speed: 185] (+85)

[Endurance: 65] (+30)

[Class: —]

[Shadow: 678]

[Shadow Hunger Level: 2%]

[Shadow Level: 7]

[Condition: Shadow is Full]

[Attribute: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour] [Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn]

[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv1] [Survival Lv3] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv2] [Bartering Lv2]
[Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv2] [Trap Lv2] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv2] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv1]
[Mana Control Lv1] [Magic Bullet Lv1]

[Locked]

His Shadow Energy was at 678, but he was burning through it fast. He needed a permanent solution before it became a problem.

Damon scanned his current Mastery list. Each one was a reflection of his life—his Etiquette was at level 3 because his mother had ingrained it into him. Swordsmanship was only level 1, since he had learned the basics from his father before being forced to survive on his own. Survival was at level 3, and for good reason—he was like a honey badger: tough to kill.

Most of his skills came from the streets, picked up through necessity. Magic Bullet, however, was different. It was a spell he had created himself. It was only level 1 now, but he could already imagine how powerful it would become over time.

He exhaled, his Shadow Perception picking up movement in all directions.

They were coming.

He needed to funnel them into one spot.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the perfumes and cosmetics he had taken from the girls earlier. Walking to the tree line, he set up a makeshift scarecrow, drenching it in perfume before slicing a rope, sending it dangling from the branches.

The scent scattered through the air, spreading over the area.

"That should keep them searching."

By the time they realized there was nothing there, most of them would be gathered in one place—right in time for the hornets and Sandwood fruit to do the rest.

With a final glance around, he raised his hand. His Omnidirectional Gear shot into the trees, propelling him upward. Within seconds, he was gone, leaving no trace behind.

Chapter 240 240: War Trolls

Not long after Damon departed, an organized group of goblins arrived, led by three war trolls. The goblins at the front were scouts and trackers, moving with practiced caution.

The scouts stepped over shrubs, reaching the small clearing, their bones sensitive to even the faintest changes in the air. As soon as they sniffed the air, they recoiled in disgust.

"Kekekeke! Tertetetete... stink... eeeeeiie!"

They screeched in irritation, their gnarled fingers pointing toward the tree line. The strong scent of perfume in the air overwhelmed their sensitive noses.

Some of the scouts turned their attention to the battlefield where their brethren had been slain. Their eyes darted over the bloodstains and battle scars left behind—yet there were no corpses. The bodies had vanished, leaving only the remnants of a struggle.

Realizing something was wrong, they quickly retreated to the three war trolls standing nearby to make their report.

The war trolls were monstrous in size, towering over the goblins at nearly three meters tall. Their explosive muscles bulged beneath their pale brown skin, which was covered in loincloths and crude armor—a battered heart guard and thick shoulder plates barely held together by rusted chains.

Each troll wielded a massive club, except for the one in the center, who gripped a huge battle axe in its enormous hands. Despite their savage appearance, there was intelligence gleaming behind their menacing eyes.

They weren't just brutes.

They were thinking. Calculating.

And now, they were hunting.

The leader of the war trolls stepped into the clearing, his massive frame casting a shadow over the smaller goblins. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air, his sharp senses analyzing the battlefield. His gaze locked onto something dangling from the trees—Damon's scarecrow.

With a powerful leap, he snatched it from the air, bringing it close to his face to inspect it. His thick brow furrowed in confusion before his expression twisted in disgust.

A sickly-sweet wave of perfume and cosmetics assaulted his nostrils.

"Grraaaagh!" he snarled in fury, crushing the scarecrow in his powerful grip.

That single act triggered a devastating chain reaction.

A clay pot hidden inside the scarecrow shattered, releasing a swarm of angry hornets. The first thing the enraged insects saw was the war trolls and goblins.

The goblins shrieked as the swarm attacked without hesitation, their stingers piercing flesh and sending them into a frenzied panic. The trolls, though more resistant, still staggered under the sheer number of venomous stings.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

As the leader yanked the scarecrow's remains, he unintentionally pulled a rope, setting off another trap. Branches cracked and snapped above them, sending down a massive cluster of sandwood fruits.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Each fruit exploded on impact, its seeds blasting outward at 150 mph, ripping into goblin flesh like miniature bullets. Goblins screamed, scrambling for cover, but there was none to be found.

And then the logs fell.

Massive spiked logs, disguised among the trees, swung down like battering rams. Some goblins were crushed instantly, their bodies splattered against the ground. Others were impaled, writhing in agony as blood pooled beneath them.

The war troll leader, Tusk, waved his hand in irritation, swatting at the hornets buzzing around his face. Their stings left deep welts, but his regeneration was already closing them.

The explosions finally subsided, leaving behind a battlefield of wounded, dying, and furious goblins.

But the war trolls weren't as weak as their underlings.

They were enraged.

One of the goblins, in a desperate bid to escape the chaos, sprinted past Tusk. Bad idea.

A massive hand shot out, grabbing the goblin by the torso. The red-skinned creature flailed in terror, his limbs kicking uselessly in the air.

Tusk brought the goblin to his face, his massive fangs bared.

"Tusk angry at you. Stupid. Tusk not happy at all..."

The goblin whimpered, its red skin paling in terror.

Before it could beg for mercy, Tusk squeezed.

CRUNCH.

The goblin's bones shattered, its organs bursting between Tusk's massive fingers like overripe fruit. He let the remains slop onto the ground, irritated.

He scratched his head, deep in thought.

"Tooth smart goblin dead. Lost book he had." His massive brow furrowed in frustration.

"Tusk can't return to demon camp without book. We must find it now."

Another troll, Huge, sniffed the air and grunted.

"Huge no find scent. But see... human footprints."

Tusk's eyes gleamed with hatred.

"Yes... Goddess races here."

His grip tightened on his axe, his thick fingers leaving indentations in the weapon's hilt.

"We must hunt and kill. No matter what."

The third troll, who had remained silent, walked toward the bloodstains left behind.

"Hand... confused." His voice rumbled like a distant avalanche.

"Why no bodies? No dead here. Only blood." His narrowed eyes flicked toward Tusk.

"Think Goddess races eat smart goblin and others?"

Tusk shook his head. "No. Goddess races no eat without fire. No signs of heat."

His gaze swept over the ruins of their forces—the clever traps, the calculated destruction.

"Yes... work of very smart Goddess race person."

He gripped his axe tightly, a flicker of memory flashing through his dark, seething mind.

"Goddess races..."

His rage boiled over.

Tusk threw back his head and roared into the sky, his voice shaking the very trees.

"ENEMIES! WE HUNT! WE KILL! WE NEVER FORGIVE EVIL GODDESS RACE!"

His eyes burned—not just with anger, but with something deeper.

Grief.

A sorrow that had long since hardened into hatred.

Huge, wiping blood from his face, frowned. "What about book? We find, not report to demons?"

Tusk's glare darkened.

WHAM!

He punched Huge in the face, sending the troll staggering back.

"We chase Goddess race. We hunt." His voice was low, growling.

"What demon not know, no hurt demon."

His eyes gleamed cruelly. "We no get punished too."

Huge rubbed his jaw, then slowly grinned.

"We call remaining goblins. We hunt."

The war trolls raised their weapons, a dark, twisted joy gleaming in their eyes. They were ready.

Even as the hornets continued tearing into the surviving red-cap goblins, it did nothing to diminish their excitement.

They were about to begin a hunt.

For Damon.

For his party.

And they wouldn't stop until every last one was dead.

—

Not far away, a shadow moved.

It slipped silently through the trees, darting in the direction Damon and his party had fled.

Perched on a high branch, Damon clicked his tongue.

He had been watching everything through his shadow.

His dark eyes narrowed.

'Tch. A shame I didn't have time to set up fire traps. I would've burned them all.'

Still... his work had been effective.

The traps had killed or crippled most of the goblins. And while the trolls were still alive, at least he'd bought them time.

But now, they had a much bigger problem.

The war trolls were hunting them.

And these weren't just any trolls.

They were veterans of the Demon Wars.

They had a burning hatred for any race that worshiped the Goddess.

And worse?

That damn journal.

Damon's gaze darkened.

The journal they had looted from the Redcap Goblin Mage was important to the trolls.

Which meant it was even more important to the demon army behind them.

'Evangeline has it now...' He exhaled slowly. 'I need to catch up.'

His eyes flicked back toward the trolls.

At best, his traps had bought them a day.

At worst?

He was certain they wouldn't be that lucky.