

Shadow 241

Chapter 241 241: Just Us Guys

Damon caught up to his party, swinging over branches and trees with effortless speed. His movements were fluid, his body adjusting naturally to each leap and twist. The omnidirectional gear made traversal seamless, and his parkour skills allowed him to vault over obstacles with ease.

As he landed next to Evangeline, he snatched his bag without a word. She eyed him for a moment, then let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Damon glanced at them all, offering a thin smile. "I've got good news and bad news."

Evangeline gave a small, weary smile. "I'd prefer no news at all."

Damon chuckled. At least the mood wasn't too heavy. He didn't want them overcome with fear.

"The good news is there are no lesser demons—yet. And some of the goblins are dead or injured," he said, adjusting his bag. "The bad news? There are three war trolls, and they already hate us. I imagine we've got a day, at most, before they catch up."

He waved his hand at them, urging them forward. "Let's go. I'll explain on the way."

Reaching into his bag, he pulled out the weathered travel journal, its pages worn with age. He handed it to Sylvia.

"Read as much as you can. This book is important to them, which means they'll do whatever it takes to get it back—and kill us in the process."

Sylvia frowned, flipping through the brittle pages. "It's old... and difficult to read, but I'll try my best to transcribe and make a copy we can use."

Damon nodded. He took a breath, focusing his will, and ordered his shadow to detach discreetly from his body, sending it ahead to scout beyond the range of his perception. The dark form gave a slight nod before slipping away, vanishing into the underbrush.

With that, their march began. The sun inched toward the horizon, casting long shadows as they moved deeper into the forest. They advanced with cautious efficiency, keeping their formation tight and their weapons ready. Every step was calculated—tracks were covered, scents were masked, and false trails were left behind to mislead any pursuers.

Navigating unfamiliar terrain while maintaining these precautions was mentally exhausting. The looming pressure of being hunted by war trolls and goblins weighed heavily on them, each of them feeling the invisible noose tightening around their necks.

Despite the fatigue setting in, Damon made them gather small branches and twigs along the way, collecting materials as they moved. He even managed to take down two wild rabbits with his bow, ensuring they had food for later.

Even then, fear gnawed at their hearts, pushing them forward.

By the time the sun dipped behind the trees, Damon signaled for a stop at a small clearing near a river. The moment he gave the order, his companions collapsed to the ground, exhaustion overtaking them.

Damon glanced at the group, his face weary and streaked with dust, leaves, and the occasional smear of mud. He took a slow sip from his waterskin before speaking.

"I wouldn't advise that. Start building a fire using dry wood. Wet or damp wood will create smoke, and that's as good as telling them where we are. We cook, warm up, then put the fire out once we're done. No lights after that."

Leona groaned, raising her hand lazily. "Err... Damon, why do we have to cook these rabbits? Why not just eat our rations?"

The others murmured in agreement, their exhaustion evident.

Damon sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We need to save the rations. We don't know when we'll get another chance to prepare food. For all we know, we might be running day and night. If we lose those rations, and we don't run into anything edible, we'll be going hungry."

Leona sighed, flopping onto her back. She couldn't argue with that logic.

Nearby, Sylvia shifted awkwardly, her legs twitching as if she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to.

Damon's patience was wearing thin. He eyed her. "What is it now?"

Sylvia hesitated, looking around as if checking for something. Then she shook her head quickly. "No... nothing..."

Damon frowned, watching her closely. Then he noticed her uneasy glances around the area and sighed. He finally understood the problem.

"Alright. Party break. I need to take a piss. Boys on one side, girls on the other. Stay together, and if there's trouble, holler."

Sylvia's expression of relief was immediate. Evangeline also seemed grateful, standing up with the other girls and heading off together.

Matlock got up and followed after them.

Damon raised an eyebrow. "Matlock, where are you going? The boys go the other way."

Matlock froze mid-step, clearly caught off guard. "Ahh... yeah... right." He scratched the back of his head awkwardly. "My... my bad."

Damon sighed, glancing at Xander. "Go with him. I'll set up the fire. We rest for a few hours, then move until sunset."

Xander groaned, stretching. "Very well, then. I'll be his bodyguard. I need to go too."

Matlock paled, shaking his head. "No... I can go alone..."

Damon arched a brow and looked at Xander. "Dude, don't be shy. It's just us guys here. He may look like a degenerate, but he won't pounce on you."

Xander clicked his tongue. "You look far more suspicious than me."

Matlock shook his head frantically. "No, no, please! I want to go alone!"

Damon stroked his chin. "You sure? There might be monsters out there..."

Matlock stiffened, his face paling. Tears welled up in his eyes. "I... I... I..."

Damon sighed. "Fine. You can go behind the trees. Xander and I will look the other way if you're shy. But between the three of us, there's nothing to hide."

Xander rolled his eyes. "You sure made him comfortable."

Matlock wasted no time sprinting behind the trees, carefully peeking out to make sure Damon and Xander weren't looking. He let out a deep sigh of relief before crouching down, still staying close enough not to be left alone.

Chapter 242 242: Advance Or Die

The fire crackled softly, its light pushing back the deep darkness of the forest. Shadows danced across the trees as the warm glow flickered against the slumbering figures of the youth wrapped in their sleeping bags. Their breaths were steady, almost noiseless, blending with the distant cries of nocturnal creatures lurking at the forest's edge.

Underneath a gnarled tree, just beyond the light's reach, a young man sat in the darkness, an old, worn-out book resting in his hands. His sharp eyes occasionally drifted toward his sleeping companions. He was the night's watchman, keeping guard while the others rested.

Damon sighed. He would have preferred to put out the fire after cooking, but the night was cold, and his companions—being nobility—were unused to braving the elements. Letting them suffer would only lead to complaints and lowered morale.

Earlier, they had discussed the possibility of the academy sending a rescue party. But they had long since discarded those hopes. No one would cross the gravity anomaly, nor would they risk venturing near the lair of the dragon Ashergon. Even the Whispering Forest itself was dangerous enough to deter any would-be saviors.

For all intents and purposes, they were on their own.

Still, they were alive, and they had direction. Damon glanced down at his bracelet, which tracked their kills and party contributions. If, by some miracle, this feedback ever reached the academy, it would serve as proof that they had survived.

But for now, they were just lost children... with parents somewhere in the world worrying about them.

"Well... except me. I don't have any parents to worry."

His fingers absently reached for the locket around his neck. It was his mother's. Though she was long gone, his sister still wanted him back. He squeezed the locket gently before opening it. Inside was a small, faded picture—one that had been worn with time but still clear enough to make out. A woman with black hair stood beside two children, both with golden locks. The boy was clearly his mother's brother, while the young girl had a familiar look in her eyes...

His mother, she looked beautiful even as a child.

Damon stared at the image for a long time, lost in thought.

He snapped the locket shut, forcing himself to push aside thoughts that wouldn't help their survival.

His eyes dropped back to the journal, but the more he read, the deeper the sense of dread coiled in his gut. Their next objective—the Duhu Mountains—was a death trap if they didn't follow the rules.

One rule stood out above all. Do not venture into the Duhu Mountains at all.

And if you do.

Do not stray from the path.

He bit his lip. Not like we have a choice...

They were being hunted. Enemies lurked everywhere, and if they wanted to survive, they had to keep moving.

Damon had already sent his shadow to scout ahead, extending his Shadow Perception to monitor their surroundings within a two-kilometer radius. So far, no immediate threats were near, but that wouldn't last, the goblins and troll were nocturnal, they could hunt at night far better than humans.

Closing the journal, he shifted his gaze to his system screen. The level-up requirement made his stomach twist.

[Level Up Requirement:]

[War Troll Consumed [0/1]

Damon exhaled sharply. War trolls were monsters—three meters tall, regenerative, and resistant to magic. They could wipe out an entire party alone. And he needed to consume one to level up?

"Ridiculous," he muttered, shaking his head.

He had a feeling the system wanted him dead this time, there was no doubt about it.

He flipped to the map at the back of the journal. They had to stay on the trail no matter what. Wandering off in the Duhu Mountains was a death wish. And beyond that lay the Whispering Forest, where there were no rules—only death.

'We won't survive unless we reach First-Class Advancement.'

Technically, everyone in the group had already reached the threshold for advancement. All they needed was an opportunity—or a real battle—to push them over the edge.

By obtaining a class their paths would be fixed and their power would grow, only then would they have a fighting chance.

"If I were suicidal, I'd charge at a war troll and try to advance mid-fight," he mused darkly.

The problem? That was more likely to get him killed than anything else.

Damon stared into the fire, deep in thought, when he felt it—a low tremor beneath his hands.

His head snapped up. The sky to the east pulsed with a faint violet light.

The gravity anomaly moved again.

His brows furrowed as realization struck. He quickly unfurled a map, scanning the shifting territories. A sharp inhale left his lips.

The anomaly was shrinking in a semi-circle.

If they didn't reach the Duhu Mountains in two days, they'd be trapped—forced to cross near the dragon's nest.

He bit back a curse, glancing at the others. They had slept enough. Just as he raised his hand to wake them, the air shifted—a violent, hot gust rushing down from the mountains.

Then came the sound.

A deep, ear-splitting roar.

The dragon's roar.

The trees shuddered, and the sleeping figures shot awake, pale-faced and trembling.

Matlock held his delicate ear covering them and holding back a scream..

Sylvia clutched her arms, staring in horror toward the ruined mountains to the southwest.

"Wh... what was that?"

Damon's eyes narrowed.

"Ashergon."

The dragon was waking up.

"Pack up. Now."

His Shadow Perception flared outward. Four goblin scouts were creeping toward them from the northeast, unaware of how close they were.

"We need to move. We have company."

Damon shouldered his pack, shoving the others forward as they packed up their stuff.

They ran.

As the sun began to rise, casting dim orange light over the horizon, Damon's voice cut through the cold morning air.

"Run. Run until midday. Then we stop for water and rest.

We reach that mountain by noon tomorrow—or we die."

Chapter 243 243: The Long March

Leona huffed, forcing air from her lungs. She knew she had to keep her breath steady if she wanted to keep up with their relentless march. Even so, she felt her lungs burning, her legs itching with strain. She had been using magic to enhance her body, but even with that, they had been running since before sunrise. The terrain was rough, the forest riddled with rocky slopes and uneven ground.

The faint morning breeze brushed against her skin, but noon had never felt farther away. She tightened her grip on her supply bag, adjusting the weight on her back as she vaulted over a shrub.

"Faster... the first wave of goblins is catching up to us," Damon's cold voice cut through the sound of their hurried footsteps.

He led them at a relentless pace, carrying an extra supply bag over his shoulder. His gaze flicked toward the sky, where Matlock, the fairy, hovered just above the tree line. Though his wings had recovered, he dared not fly too high—predators lurked in the skies.

Damon drew his bow, nocking an arrow in a single, fluid motion.

"Matlock, get back down here—we've got a swarm of air wasps incoming."

Matlock dove, his delicate form weaving through the branches until he floated beside Damon. Sweat beaded on Damon's forehead as he kept his stride, his breathing controlled but strained.

"How far are the goblins?" he asked between breaths.

Matlock nodded, his lips pursed, voice as androgynous as ever.

"They got caught up in the wild bear cave, just as you planned. Leaving behind a false scent worked—they were slowed down, but..."

Damon cut him off. "Judging by the dying roars, the trolls must have killed the bear. Which means they're back on our trail."

Matlock nodded grimly.

Damon's gaze snapped to Sylvia as he vaulted past a tree stump. "Sylvia, have you charted our route?"

The elf girl huffed, sweat beading on her forehead. "Based on the map you made of the region, we can't avoid the monsters ahead. We could run past the murky quicksand, but the sand crawlers might attack us. Other routes are feasible, but risky."

Damon shook his head. "No. We take the sand crawlers. We'll move through the trees—it's safer. Any other route would take too long, and we risk the trolls catching up. It's better for goblins to catch up—we can kill them."

He turned to Leona, who was running slightly behind, keeping pace with Xander. A heavy sword was strapped to her back along with her supply bag.

"Did you pick up any scents in the wind?"

She gave a breathy, confident smirk. "Nothing much—just the stench of dirty goblins. Their scouts are close. They've been through here before, so they know how to navigate the obstacles and monsters."

Damon nodded. Without hesitation, he fired his omnidirectional gear into a tree, pulling himself up in a swift motion. Perching on a thick branch, he took a deep breath, holding his side as his chest rose and fell heavily.

"Evangeline, Xander, take point. We've got monsters incoming. Matlock, fall back with Sylvia. Leona—protect them."

Damon swung into the trees, his voice cutting through the dense canopy.

"It's an Earth Boar! Don't fight it—our goal is to evade!"

His command was sharp, practiced.

"Use the usual tactics. Ready—contact in twelve seconds."

"Got it!" the others answered in unison.

Damon nodded, launching himself over the treetops with precise, fluid movements. As he spun through the air, he drew his bow, eyes locking onto a seemingly unremarkable boulder on the forest floor. But he knew better.

The arrow he pulled from his quiver was hollow-tipped. As he nocked it, the wind howled past him, and his Dead Eye skill activated—his target marked instantly.

He released the arrow. It whistled sharply through the air before striking true.

A monstrous growl erupted from below. The "boulder" had never been a rock—it was the Earth Boar itself, a beast over four meters tall, its thick hide camouflaged to blend into the terrain. The arrow had buried itself into its eye, and now it thrashed in agony.

Damon remained calm even as he plummeted toward the ground.

Before he could land, Xander burst from the treeline, spear in hand, gravity magic pulsing around him. Without hesitation, he slammed the weapon into the boar's head, the impact so powerful it lifted part of the beast's massive body off the ground.

In that instant, two more arrows shot into its remaining eye, followed by an ice blast slamming into its nose, freezing part of its snout.

The boar's enraged roar shook the trees.

Then—

A heavy sword carved into its side, forcing its enormous body downward, toppling several trees in the process.

Damon landed on a thick branch, already assessing their next move.

"Hurry! Keep moving while it's disoriented!" His voice was firm, urgent. "I'll leave the goblins' scent here—once it recovers, it'll slow them down."

Leona's sword crackled with electricity, her eyes flashing with battle hunger. "We can kill it!"

Damon shook his head. "No. It's not that damaged, and we need to conserve our strength. This is an endurance run. We have to reach the Duhu Mountains before noon tomorrow. Keep moving—now hurry!"

Evangeline grabbed Leona's wrist, pulling the battle-thirsty beastkin forward. As Damon leaped down, he casually dropped a goblin's severed ear near the blinded, enraged Earth Boar.

A cold smile tugged at his lips as he watched birds scatter from the distant trees.

The goblin scouts were close.

When they caught up, they'd be greeted by an angry, wounded Earth Boar. A beast of its rank would recover quickly—and then it would rampage.

Damon exhaled and leaped from his branch. Midair, he took a sip from his water pouch, activating his [5x] Skill the moment its cooldown wore off. The effect surged through his body, enhancing his endurance fivefold.

The moment his feet hit the ground, he took off at full speed, catching up to the others.

"Keep moving! We rest at noon! We're almost there—just another half-hour!" He pointed toward a massive tree canopy in the distance. "We can make it there—it's secluded enough to hide us while we recover!"

They pushed forward, morale barely holding.

They were being hunted.

But Damon would make sure they survived.

Chapter 244 244: Soft Sand

The sounds of heavy, labored breaths filled the air as a group of exhausted youths lay sprawled beneath the dense canopy of an ancient tree, gasping for air. Sweat beaded on their foreheads, their damp hair clinging to their skin. Every muscle in their bodies burned from hours of relentless running, evading both the monsters in their path and the goblins and war trolls that pursued them.

Sylvia coughed, choking on the water she was drinking. Damon, sitting beside her, reached out and gently rubbed her back.

"Slowly... take it easy. We still have some time."

She nodded weakly, tilting her head back to rest against the cool ground, her gaze drifting toward the shifting shadows of the towering trees. Around her, the entire group radiated exhaustion and tension. None of them spoke, but their expressions revealed the weight of their situation—this chase had no end in sight.

Xander, leaning against his supply bag, finally broke the silence.

"How long do we have to rest?"

Damon took a slow sip from his water pouch, his throat parched, his side aching. His body was screaming at him—his muscles felt like they were on fire.

"Not long." He exhaled.

"We could stay longer, but if we do, we'll run into the goblin scouts near the sand crawlers. That would mean fighting on the treetops. One mistake, and we fall straight into quicksand—and get devoured."

He leaned back against the tree, closing his eyes, trying to catch even a moment of rest.

"Running isn't a solution either," he admitted. "We'll burn out before we reach the mountains."

Leona clenched her fist, her broad sword resting beside her. Her beastkin blood burned with frustration.

"Then let's risk it. Let's kill them."

Damon opened one eye, watching her carefully. She was tired of running—so tired that she had momentarily forgotten how outmatched they were.

"Yes," he agreed. "We fight. At least enough to get rid of the scouts."

But before they could even strategize, the ground trembled. A deep, rolling quake spread through the forest, sending dry leaves and dust cascading down from the trees. Then came the roar.

A deafening, guttural bellow tore through the air, freezing every last one of them in place. The sheer force of the sound rattled their bones, sending a primal fear slithering down their spines.

Damon lifted his gaze toward the sky, silent for a long moment.

"...Guess we're getting close to Ashergon's nest," he muttered. "Rest while you can. We leave in an hour. Sleep if possible."

Evangeline, her combat uniform fluttering in the wind, turned to him, eyes heavy with exhaustion.

"What are our odds against the trolls?" she asked, voice quiet.

Damon shrugged, completely unbothered.

"Five percent. And that's if they couldn't regenerate."

The others paled.

"With half of us dead," he continued, "the rest of us would be too injured to escape. Our survival odds would drop even lower."

A heavy silence settled over them.

Damon closed his eyes. "Don't think too much about it. Just rest."

He leaned against the tree and let himself drift off, while his shadow stood guard. The distant sounds of the forest—chirping insects, rustling leaves—felt almost like a lullaby.

Sylvia sat down beside him, using her bag as a makeshift pillow.

"You seem used to this," she whispered.

Damon nodded, his voice quieter than before.

"Yeah... been running my whole life."

He let his eyes slip shut, allowing exhaustion to take over for now. The sun was still high, and in the distance, the low, guttural echoes of a dragon's roar rumbled through the trees.

Long gone was the little boy who could only run and hide with his sister.

He bit his lip, suppressing the memory clawing its way to the surface. His expression turned cold.

'I'm going to kill them.'

Rest was brief—or at least it felt that way to Damon's party. The urge to collapse onto the hard forest floor and sleep a little longer was strong, but not as strong as the knowledge that doing so could mean being slaughtered in their sleep by the monsters lurking in the shadows.

So, despite their aching limbs and exhaustion, they were back on the move.

This time, however, they didn't run. Instead, they walked, the afternoon sun filtering through the thick canopy above. The deeper they traveled, the more humid the air became, and soon, strange noises could be heard beneath their feet. The once solid earth was turning into thick mud, their boots sinking slightly with each step.

Damon's sharp gaze flickered forward.

"We've reached the sand crawlers' territory," he announced. "From here on, walking on the ground isn't an option. We need to climb the trees."

He turned to glance at his companions. They were visibly worn, some already collapsing onto the damp earth, stretching their limbs in an attempt to ease their burning muscles. He sighed.

"Our pace is better than I expected," he admitted. "If we keep this up, we'll reach the Duhu Mountains by tomorrow morning. We can rest there and set out again at noon."

A collective sigh of relief passed through the group. Finally, a chance to rest.

Damon, however, wasn't as optimistic. His gaze remained fixed on the distant peaks of the Duhu Mountains. He wasn't letting them rest there out of kindness—it was simply a necessity. The mountains

were far more dangerous than the forest, and he needed time to explain the rules of survival before they went any further.

Sylvia was watching him. He could feel her sharp gaze lingering on him—she had already figured it out.

But rest was fleeting. Before long, Damon signaled for them to start climbing.

They had to be silent. The sand crawlers were burrowed beneath them, lurking beneath the quicksand. One misstep, one loud noise, and something would rise from the depths to drag them under.

Damon grabbed a sturdy branch, pulling himself up with practiced ease. He reached down to help Evangeline until she was secure, then continued climbing. One by one, the rest followed. Their mud-caked boots made it harder, but they pushed through.

As they climbed higher, they broke past the thick canopy, emerging above the treeline. Damon paused, scanning the next tree over. They couldn't risk making a mistake now.

Turning to the others, he raised a single finger to his lips.

"Shush."

They nodded in silent understanding.

Without hesitation, Damon leaped to the next tree, securing a rope from his supply bag. He waved for them to follow. One by one, they swung across, their movements swift but controlled. Each crossing was a risk—but compared to fighting in the quicksand, it was the safer choice.

Once they reached solid ground again, the group barely had time to catch their breath before Damon spoke.

"Let's go—"

Then he stopped. His cold smile deepened as he shook his head.

"No... they're coming this way." His eyes gleamed. "We can pick them off with magic and ranged weapons. It's time to show them that we aren't powerless prey. We can fight back."

The others exchanged glances. There was no hesitation—only a deep, burning desire in their eyes.

They had long since stopped doubting Damon.

This wasn't just survival anymore.

This was payback.

Chapter 245: The Ambush

The forest was eerily quiet, save for the distant chittering of unseen critters and the occasional tremors shaking the earth. Each time Ashergon roared, the heavens seemed to quiver in response, sending ripples through the ground and rattling the trees.

The Red Cap Goblins were already accustomed to the unnatural disturbances. This hunt had dragged on far longer than they had anticipated, and frustration burned in their weary limbs. They were hunting members of the Goddess Race—a hunt that should have ended long ago. Yet their prey had not only evaded capture but had also managed to kill their mage, slaughter several of their kin, and grievously wound others.

Hatred burned in their eyes, but even that rage couldn't mask their exhaustion.

The chase had been grueling. The prey they pursued were merciless, leaving behind false trails that led the goblins straight into monster dens or onto the paths of enraged creatures. More had been lost to the monsters of the Forest than to the enemy themselves.

Worst of all, they hadn't even seen their foes.

They only knew one thing—the enemy refused to fight them head-on. That alone fueled the goblins' confidence. Cowards could only run for so long.

One of them sniffed the air, his battered body covered in bruises. Of all the Red Cap Goblins that had set out on this hunt, only a handful remained. The rest had perished in a region that should have been relatively safe.

"Keketetery..."

Their guttural curses carried into the air as they swore vengeance upon the Goddess Race.

The goblins came to a halt before a vast stretch of muddy terrain. Their boots sank slightly into the sludge, the thick muck clinging to their feet. They knew this place well. The sand crawlers lived here.

If the humans had passed through, they would have had to navigate this treacherous ground.

The goblin at the front raised his hand, signaling the others to move forward.

The last time they had crossed this area, they had carefully found footholds, stepping only on solid patches to avoid disturbing the sleeping monsters lurking below.

Their movements were light and precise, each goblin carefully placing his foot only where it was safe. One mistake meant death. A single misstep, and they would be dragged beneath the mud, suffocated, and devoured.

The lead goblin gulped, sweat beading on his red skin. His muscles tensed as he leaped forward, hoping that the next foothold was there—and luck was on his side. His boots landed on solid ground.

He would live to see another day.

He almost let out a sigh of relief—

Until he heard the faint whistling of something cutting through the air.

His instincts screamed at him to move. But before he could react—

A small, precise hole tore through his skull.

His beady eyes widened in shock, his mouth opening soundlessly. A single drop of blood trickled down his forehead before a torrent followed, painting his vision red.

His body swayed.

Then, without a sound—

He collapsed sideways, sinking into the mud.

From the safety of the trees, Damon lowered his bow, a cold smile creeping onto his lips. He had already knocked another arrow.

This was just the beginning.

The cursed ore embedded in the arrowheads would soon begin their true work—

Attracting monsters.

Including the sand crawlers beneath their feet.

Damon's attack was only the beginning.

What followed was a relentless bombardment of magic from his allies hidden in the trees. Each strike carried a unique magical attribute, painting the battlefield in chaos.

Arrows imbued with the power of the moon streaked through the air, cutting through the goblins with lethal precision. From another vantage point, Evangeline unleashed a devastating scatter-shot of light magic, a cascading wave of radiance that forced the goblins to scramble for cover—only to step straight into the quicksand. Their frantic movements sealed their fate, their bodies sinking as they struggled in vain.

Leona raised her hand, a cruel smile stretching across her face as storm clouds crackled overhead.

"Lightning flows well in wetland..."

With a flick of her wrist, a web of electricity descended upon the battlefield.

The goblins trapped in the mud had no way to escape. The instant the lightning struck, their bodies convulsed, smoking as the electricity surged through them. Their agonized cries filled the air, but the onslaught wasn't over.

A blast of ice magic followed, freezing several goblins where they stood.

Matlock exhaled, his earlier dread now absent—there was no longer room for fear. This was a slaughter.

Yet, despite the devastation, the remaining goblins weren't ready to die just yet. The leader snarled, barking orders in their guttural tongue as they took formation. From within their tattered armor, they pulled out crude projectiles and hurled them toward the trees, launching a desperate counterattack.

Damon's eyes flicked to the next tree over.

"Xander, barriers."

Xander nodded. His magic alone wouldn't have been enough to block a full frontal assault, but he didn't need to. His role was simple—create barriers, control the battlefield, and deny the goblins any chance of retreat.

His lips curled into a cold smirk. "What a dishonorable way to fight."

Cowardly tactics, traps, ambushes—this was war. The goblins had been forced into an inescapable kill zone, right in the middle of a deadly crossing, and Damon had trapped them there to die.

The noise of battle did not go unnoticed.

The mud began to quiver.

A low rumble echoed through the swamp, and for the first time, the goblins' faces contorted with true dread.

They turned to flee.

Damon's voice was calm, almost cruel. "Don't let them retreat."

He turned to Evangeline and Leona.

"Xander, cut off their escape."

Xander bit his lip, pushing his magic to its limit. A shimmering barrier materialized in the distance, cutting off the goblins' path to safety. The panicked creatures smashed their weapons against the barrier, clawing at it, screaming in terror.

But it was too late.

The mud beneath them rose and churned.

The first goblin barely had time to scream before a deafening gulp swallowed him whole.

For a brief, horrifying moment—

There was silence.

Every living creature on the battlefield froze, watching in morbid fascination. Then—

Chaos.

The goblins shrieked in blind panic, scattering in all directions, but the sand crawlers were already awake.

The unseen predators dragged them under, one by one, without ever revealing themselves.

Damon knocked another arrow and fired, watching the kill notifications flash before his eyes.

[You have slain Red Cap Goblin.]

[You have slain Red Cap Goblin.]

[Archery Mastery +6]

More and more goblins fell, their numbers dwindling.

But the victory was short-lived.

A distant rumbling grew louder. The earth shook. The trees snapped like twigs.

And then—

A massive shape came crashing through the forest.

A war troll.

It barreled forward, its grotesquely muscular body covered in thick, rock-like skin. With a monstrous leap, it reached the quicksand in an instant, raising a massive club high above its head.

The impact was earth-shattering.

The moment the club struck the ground, a wave of mud exploded in all directions, splattering across the trees. The shockwave was strong enough to silence the entire battlefield.

For the first time, a sand crawler had been killed instantly.

And the war troll... laughed.

Its twisted, yellowed teeth gleamed as it gazed across the quicksand, locking eyes with Damon.

It smiled.

"Haaa... Finally found you, dirty human."

Damon's grip tightened around his bow as his instincts screamed a warning.

There were two more.

This wasn't over.

Chapter 246: Unexpected Casualty

Damon's breath hitched as his gaze locked onto the war troll standing across the quicksand.

Its grotesque, mud-covered body radiated raw power, its thick muscles rippling with every movement. Even at a glance, this was a Rank One monster. A creature of overwhelming brute force, built for destruction.

The last surviving goblin barely hesitated. Its red eyes darted between the troll and the chaos behind it—then, with a frantic yelp, it turned and fled into the forest, disappearing past the towering beasts as if seeking their mercy.

The war troll grinned.

The expression twisted its already hideous features into something even more monstrous.

Damon gritted his teeth. The only thing keeping them from being torn apart was the quicksand.

Evangeline's voice came from his side, tense and uncertain. "What do we do?"

Damon's gaze flicked to the tree branch she perched on, her usual grace replaced by sharp-eyed wariness. They didn't have many options. The situation was dire.

The quicksand churned below, a slow, shifting trap.

Damon clenched his fists. Think.

"Lure them into the quicksand."

Before he could even finish processing his plan, the troll moved.

With effortless strength, it reached to the side, grasping a tree as thick as a boulder. Its massive hands clenched—

CRACK.

The entire tree snapped in half like a twig.

Then it threw it.

Straight at them.

"TAKE COVER—!"

They barely had time to register the warning before the world spun.

A deafening explosion of wood and leaves filled the air.

The massive trunk obliterated everything in its path. Branches snapped like bones, the trees buckled under the impact, and Damon felt his body whipped violently through the air.

Pain lanced through his limbs as he crashed through branches, scraping against the bark. He heard the screams of his friends as they too were sent flying—

Then the world blurred, and he hit the ground hard.

Damon groaned, his head throbbing as warm blood trickled down his face. He pushed himself up, his vision spinning.

Matlock, relatively unscathed, was already pulling Xander to safety behind a tree where Evangeline and Sylvia huddled for cover.

Damon turned sharply, spotting Leona gasping for breath, struggling to rise.

He didn't need to see the war troll.

His shadow perception told him everything.

It was moving.

Damon felt the creature raise its arm, preparing to hurl another attack—at Leona.

Shit.

Without hesitation, Damon dived forward, tackling her.

The boom of impact roared behind them, shockwaves blasting through the air. His combat uniform flapped violently in the wind, debris slicing past him.

He grabbed Leona by the waist, yanking her down the slope with him.

Mud clung to their bodies as they slid, the thick, damp earth absorbing some of the force—just as the troll hurled another tree.

CRASH!

The trunk slammed into the slope above them, shattering on impact. Splinters and chunks of wood rained down, narrowly missing them.

Damon remained dead still.

His face was pressed uncomfortably close against Leona's chest, her rapid heartbeat thrumming in his ears.

He swallowed. Now was not the time to think about that.

His mind raced. Trolls were horrible creatures—explosive power, near-immortal regeneration. A single hit and they were dead.

Damon gritted his teeth, cursing their lack of armor. A single direct blow could shatter bones. Their flexible combat uniforms wouldn't hold up against this kind of force.

From the trees, where the others hid, another tree trunk came flying.

Damon exhaled in relief.

At least there weren't any boulders nearby.

The other two war trolls watched from the edges, their cruel smiles filled with amusement.

They weren't attacking.

They were waiting.

"What do we do?"

Matlock's voice cut through the chaos.

Damon bit his lip. He didn't know.

He didn't have all the answers.

He was just like them—a teenager thrown into hell. He had planned so much, but the trolls were just too strong.

If they tried to run, they'd be cut down before reaching safety.

Think.

Damon forced himself to focus.

What did he know about trolls?

They had to have a weakness—something they could exploit.

His fingers twitched.

A bloody encyclopedia...

That's right—he had one.

His gaze snapped to Sylvia Moonveil.

"Sylvia, I need every troll weakness you know—NOW!"

Sylvia, still tending to Xander's injuries, flinched as another log crashed nearby. She bit her lip, ducking lower beneath the canopy.

Damon shifted slightly, his perception scanning the battlefield.

The first troll stood knee-deep in quicksand, its kin watching intently.

Watching for something.

Damon's eyes narrowed.

Sand crawlers.

The trolls were afraid of the creatures lurking beneath the surface.

Sylvia finally spoke, her voice tight.

"Fire and acid. Lightning. Holy water. Whitewood ash. Deception. Decapitation. Destroying their hearts. Magic—if they don't have resistance."

Damon exhaled slowly.

That was it.

He was going to kill the lumbering brute.

He just needed to make sure he didn't get hit.

Damon's dark eyes locked onto Leona.

She still looked furious—humiliated. The beastkin girl despised being hunted.

He leaned in close, whispering his plan.

Her face paled.

Her golden irises widened as she gritted her teeth, shaking her head.

He pressed his forehead against hers, his voice firm.

"Do it."

Leona's eyes glimmered, her lips trembling. From the canopy above, she let out a small, broken whisper.

"I don't want you to die..."

Damon clenched his fists. "I won't."

He tore a piece of paper from his supply bag, scrawling something on it, then tossed it toward the others.

Sylvia caught it, eyes flickering across the contents.

Her expression darkened.

She passed it to Evangeline.

Then to Xander.

Matlock's delicate hands shook as he read it.

Damon ignored them.

His fingers raised—

Counting down.

Three.

Two.

One.

He shot out from cover.

The war troll laughed.

One of its kin reached over, snapping a branch from a nearby tree, tossing it across the quicksand.

Damon was right in the middle.

The troll hurled it.

[5x Agility.]

Damon dodged.

His Parkour skill kicked in—he twisted midair, rolling at an impossible angle. His feet barely brushed the ground before he lunged into the creature's line of sight.

The war troll's eyes snapped onto him.

And that was its last mistake.

From behind him—

Sylvia and Evangeline emerged—

And unleashed a blinding flash of light.

The world exploded into brilliance.

The troll's eyes dilated—completely blinded.

And in that moment—Leona struck.

Every ounce of mana pooled into one attack.

A massive bolt of lightning cracked into the wetlands.

The charge shredded the air, grounding itself through the waterlogged terrain.

The troll shuddered violently.

It dropped its club, muscles spasming—but it wasn't enough to kill a creature with regeneration.

But it didn't need to be.

Because it wasn't alone.

The sand crawlers below sensed its weakness.

And they struck.

From beneath the quicksand, monstrous jaws erupted, latching onto the helpless, stunned troll.

It roared in terror, thrashing.

One of its arms ripped a crawler off—

But there were too many.

It was being dragged down.

The other war trolls, still blind, could only hear its anguished screams.

It struggled.

It fought.

But it was too late.

Slowly, it was consumed—pulled to its death.

Damon didn't wait.

He turned, racing back toward his team.

"RUN—NOW!"

They didn't hesitate.

As they vanished into the woods, the surviving war trolls let out mournful, enraged howls.

They had lost a kin.

Chapter 247: He Was Scary

The group ran through the dense forest, fear clawing at their backs, pushing them past exhaustion. The night stretched endlessly above them, their bodies slick with dried blood and grime. Damon led the way, his spatial awareness and night vision cutting through the darkness, but his stomach churned with hunger. He bit his lip, feeling the loss of his dwindling supply of magic crystals.

Sending his shadow beyond its normal range consumed his shadow energy at an alarming rate, but he had no choice—he had to scout ahead. His hunger gnawed at him, his shadow reserves now at fifty percent. That meant he had exactly fifty shadow energy left.

He had burned through seven hundred just escaping. Now, only half remained. The lack of energy granted him a slight boost in stats, but he knew the closer he got to starving, the harder it would be to stay sane.

Damon suddenly skidded to a halt, leaning against a thick tree, his breath ragged. "Let's stop for the night..."

They had been running for the entire day, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the war trolls. They had reached their estimated resting point far ahead of schedule—Duhu Mountains loomed just ahead, a few hours before dawn.

The group collapsed in exhaustion. Their combat uniforms, usually self-mending, were torn and frayed beyond repair. They had only been out here for less than five days, but their bodies had already reached their limits—physically and mentally. Their mana pools were nearly dry from constant use, their muscles ached, and yet, their auras had grown sharper, hardened by battle. Even Matlock, once the weakest among them, now carried the cold presence of a warrior who had conquered fear.

They lacked the energy to set up camp, lying on the damp ground, too weary to care about the mud and leaves clinging to them.

Xander let out a weak, breathy laugh, staring at the night sky with disbelief.

"Hah... we actually did it... we actually killed a war troll... hahaha..." His own words sounded surreal to him.

Damon sat against the tree, head low, teeth clenched.

"You call that killing a war troll?" His voice was laced with bitter amusement.

"We got lucky. All we did was run... and let the sand crawlers finish it."

Xander exhaled, his breath visible against the cold air.

"Yeah... I guess you're right. All we've done is run. But what else can we do? We're weak."

Evangeline lowered her head, her body trembling. Whether from the cold or from something deeper, she wasn't sure.

"...We shouldn't fight," she murmured. "Okay?"

Damon took a deep breath, calming himself.

"Who's fighting?" he muttered. "I was just stating a fact."

Damon forced his aching body up, reaching for his supply bag with sluggish hands. He pulled out a small pack of dry wood, his fingers trembling from exhaustion. Digging into the damp earth with his bare hands, he carved out a small pit and stacked the wood within it.

For a moment, he hesitated. His jaw clenched, as if bracing himself for the inevitable pain. Then, with a sharp breath, he unleashed a small black flame— The Ashborn skill.

The moment the fire left his fingertips, agony coursed through him like a thousand searing needles piercing his skin. It was always like this—like burning alive from the inside out. His breath hitched as the tiny black flame flickered, shifting from its ominous hue to a dull red, then catching onto the wood. Within seconds, the campfire crackled to life, casting weak light against the surrounding trees.

He exhaled, grounding himself through the pain.

"We sleep here tonight," he muttered. "Tomorrow, we reach the base of the mountain."

The others nodded, dragging their weary bodies closer to the fire, their expressions hollow with exhaustion. They sat in silence, the only sound being the crackling wood and the soft rustle of leaves in the cold night air.

Damon didn't even have the strength to maintain morale. He simply stared at the flames, lost in thought.

Leona sat beside him, her presence warm against his side. Matlock settled next to them, the androgynous fairy unusually quiet. As the group unwrapped their rations and began to eat, the silence stretched between them, thick and oppressive.

Then, Matlock's voice broke the stillness.

"...Are we going to die?"

The words hung in the air like a noose.

Leona's golden eyes flickered toward him, cold and sharp.

"Maybe you... but none of us have a reason to die."

Damon reached out, stroking her head gently, his fingers brushing against her beastkin ears.

"Easy, Leona," he murmured.

She bit her lip, taking a deep breath before nodding. "Sorry. The stress is just getting to me."

He nodded, his gaze fixed on the flickering flames. "Let's get some sleep. We have to keep moving tomorrow."

One by one, the others settled in. Sylvia leaned against her supply bag, using it as a makeshift pillow. She clutched an old, weathered travel journal, flipping through its pages despite the dim light.

Damon, however, didn't join them. Instead, he rose to his feet and walked a little further away, settling against the base of a tree. His gaze lifted toward the twin moons hanging in the dark sky. He sighed, closing his eyes.

Soft footsteps approached.

He didn't need to open his eyes to know who it was.

"What do you want, Matlock?"

The footsteps halted. Then, after a brief pause, the fairy continued forward, hesitantly sitting beside him.

Damon smirked faintly, eyes still closed. "Sneaking around like that... Are you some sort of dark fairy?"

Matlock's eyes widened, shaking his head quickly. "Ah—n-no! I'm an ice attribute fairy!"

Damon snickered. The fairy was amusing, at least.

Leaning back against the tree, he sighed as his stomach let out a low growl. Hunger gnawed at him, but he ignored it.

"You're braver than I thought," he admitted. "I underestimated you."

Matlock bit his lip. Was Damon... complimenting him? He felt heat rise to his cheeks. This was the same Damon who was cold, arrogant, and tyrannical—who spoke to professors however he pleased, as if their authority meant nothing. And yet, he wasn't just cold and scary. He was... something else.

"...You aren't as scary as I thought," Matlock whispered.

Damon scoffed weakly. "You thought I was scary?"

Matlock nodded hesitantly. He had plenty of reasons to. Everyone did.

Damon let out a dry chuckle. Pulling out a small ration, he broke it in half and handed a piece to Matlock. The young fairy hesitated before taking it, nibbling on the edge.

"Do you think we're going to die?" Matlock asked again, voice quieter this time.

Damon shook his head. "It's my philosophy to not die. Even if you kill me, I'm not dying."

Matlock lowered his head, taking another bite before handing Damon his water bag.

For an unknown amount of time, the two of them sat there, talking.

Despite the exhaustion, despite the looming dread, Damon found himself occasionally lightening the mood, tossing in dry remarks that made Matlock smile—genuine, bright, even under these circumstances.

And for the first time in days, the weight of their fear felt just a little lighter.

Chapter 248: No I Didn't

The sun was rising, its lilac beams piercing through the dense trees, casting faint, eerie light over the landscape. The morning fog hung thick at the mountain's base, curling around the gnarled roots and jagged rocks like a living thing. The sky above was dull and colorless, as if this region itself rejected the dawn.

The base of the mountain was within reach.

Damon stopped, his gaze fixed on the steep incline ahead. The trees grew twisted as they stretched toward the sky, their branches like skeletal fingers clawing at the heavens.

Xander, using his spear as a walking stick, frowned. "Why did we stop? The mountain is right there. We don't have time to waste."

Damon didn't respond immediately. Dark bags sat under his eyes—he knew better than to rush forward blindly. He shook his head.

"We need to find the mountain path... and follow it."

Leona narrowed her golden eyes. "Sticking to a fixed path while we're being hunted isn't exactly a wise choice. It's suicidal."

Damon exhaled, glancing toward Sylvia. The white-haired elf sighed, biting her lip.

"It's not a wise choice," she admitted. "But we have no choice in the matter. Staying on the mountain path is the difference between life and death."

She pulled a large sheet of paper from her pack and unfolded it. It was a map—a well-drawn chart of the mountain, its winding paths etched in ink. But something about it was... unsettling.

The details were precise, but only along the marked trails. The rest of the mountain was blank, featureless. A void.

Some paths were slashed through with thick ink, accompanied by crude skull symbols. Warnings.

Leona scoffed, crossing her arms. "Well, that's not ominous at all."

Damon shook his head. "It gets worse."

He knelt, motioning for the others to gather around.

"Listen up. I'm about to tell you the rules of the Duhu Mountains—at least, according to the travel journal."

The journal contained many warnings about the mountain's dangers, cryptic messages left behind by past travelers—most of whom never returned. One passage, in particular, stood out.

"Speak ill not of the mountains, for the mountains have ears. Take not from the mountains, for the mountains claim back.

Stray not from the path, and answer no calls.

For all you see and hear, deny them entry to this mortal realm."

Damon didn't understand it all, but he knew enough. He had memorized the rules. He had seen the warnings.

Matlock swallowed hard, his expression uneasy. "What are the rules? And from how solemn you look... we're going to break some of them, aren't we?"

Damon was silent. Violating the rules could mean death—or worse. He remained quiet because that was a very real possibility.

"I won't repeat myself... so listen well. This could be the difference between life and death."

Evangeline nodded grimly. "Or worse."

Damon met her gaze. "Or worse."

He took another breath before speaking. "The first and most important rule is simple—never venture into the Duhu Mountains."

Xander frowned, his fists clenched tight. "We're already violating rule one. I don't like this at all."

Sylvia nodded, stepping closer to Damon. "This is the second most important rule—never stray from the mountain paths."

Damon continued. "If you hear something—no, you didn't. If you hear something next to you, you didn't."

He glanced at them, noting the growing unease on their faces.

"If you see something—no, you didn't. If you hear your name being called—no, you didn't. If you see a deer that looks a little... off—no, you didn't. If you hear footsteps behind you—no, you didn't. If something whispers, 'Let me in'—no, it didn't."

The group was silent now, their expressions pale.

"Leave no trace—what you bring in, you take out. Never disrespect sacred sites or old burial grounds. If something feels wrong, trust your gut and leave. The weather can change fast—fog rolls in thick, and sudden storms can trap you. Some say strange lights appear in the sky or deep in the woods—don't follow them.

Leave offerings at certain places. Don't sleep in the open."

Damon continued listing off rule after rule, each one more unsettling than the last.

He gave examples from the journal:

"Do not look into the tree lines—if you do, you may make eye contact with something. If something sounds close, it's far away. If it sounds far away, it's right next to you. Do not answer when something calls you—it wants to get in. Do not sleep in the open—sleep in a tent, and if you wake up in the open, leave immediately. Never speak ill of the mountains—they will retaliate. Always keep the fire lit."

Damon's voice grew grimmer.

"Under no circumstances must you take anything from the mountains—not even a rock. Something will follow. Leave nothing behind, except in sacred sites—make an offering, or risk angering something. If a path seems to be looping, it probably is. Turn back. If you think it's bad in the day, it gets worse at night. Leave the mountains before dark if you can."

The more rules he explained, with Sylvia's quiet support, the more terrified they became. And this was just the Duhu Mountains. How bad was the Whispering Forest going to be?

Damon didn't give them time to process their dread.

"We have a few days' worth of supplies. It should be enough to cross the mountains. Once we get to the pass leading to the Whispering Forest, there's an old bridge. We can destroy it once we cross, trapping all our problems on this side of the mountains."

Evangeline took a deep, resigned breath. "Trapping us on that side with unknown horrors..."

Damon nodded, his fist tightening. "With no path of retreat. Only forward—or death."

Leona stepped ahead, sword in hand. "Forward is death."

Damon followed after her, his steps heavy.

As they walked along the base of the mountain, searching for the old path shown on the map, an unnatural dread filled the air. It was thick, cloying, suffocating. The fear of the war trolls behind them paled in comparison to what was to come.

Matlock suddenly fluttered ahead, his fairy wings beating rapidly. His eyes widened.

"I found the mountain path! I found it! Damon, I found it!"

Damon exhaled, nodding solemnly. He glanced behind them at the forest, then ahead at the towering peaks. Off to the side, the violet glow of the gravity anomaly was closing in on the area. By his calculations, it would consume this region in about a day.

They had made it just in time.

He took a deep breath.

"Let's go. Stay together—no matter what."

Chapter 249: Nice Calm Mountain

The Duhu Mountain path was quiet in the daytime, save for the occasional sounds of forest critters. For the first half of their journey, the group remained unusually silent, expecting to encounter something horrible, something terrifying. But instead, the mountain forest was... normal.

In fact, it was more than normal—it was serene. The early morning fog had lifted, revealing a peaceful landscape bathed in soft daylight. The path was clear, the air crisp, and everything felt almost too perfect.

The group adhered strictly to the many rules Damon had laid out. They didn't look into the tree lines. They didn't whistle or sing. They stayed on the path, never once straying.

"This... this isn't as scary as I thought..."

Matlock's voice broke the silence after nearly two hours of trekking through the mountain.

Damon winced. He wasn't a superstitious person, but something about Matlock's words sent a chill down his spine.

"Thanks a lot for the jinx, Matlock..."

Matlock blinked, confused. "What did I do?"

Leona shot a glance at the androgynous fairy. "How about shutting your mouth? This place gives me the—"

"Don't speak ill of the mountains."

Sylvia cut her off before she could finish. Her voice was calm, but her grip on her bag had tightened.

Evangeline exhaled. Everyone was on edge.

"How long before we cross the mountains?"

Xander suddenly stopped, his expression tensing as if he'd heard something. Without thinking, he began to turn around—

Rustle.

Damon moved without hesitation, picking up a rock and hurling it at Xander before he could fully turn his head. The stone smacked against his shoulder, making him flinch.

"No, you didn't."

Damon's voice was low but firm.

Instantly, the group tensed. Their breathing grew shallow.

Something was watching them. Or was it just in their heads?

There were many strange rules in these mountains, but the worst of them all was simple:

If something chases you—do not run.

Cold sweat dripped down Leona's forehead as her beastkin ears twitched. She could hear it now—rustling in the woods around them.

Slowly, her head lifted. Her instincts screamed at her to not look, but her body disobeyed.

And the moment she did—she regretted it.

By a tree, standing motionless and staring at them, was a pale, bipedal figure.

It gave off no presence. No sound.

As if it wasn't truly there.

Its skin was stretched thin, almost translucent, its arms unnaturally long. Its head was tilted slightly to the side, and its eyes—

Its eyes were upside down.

And then there was its mouth.

A perpetual, unnerving smile, stretching far too wide across its entire face.

It made eye contact with her.

Leona's breath caught in her throat. Every nerve in her body screamed to run, to scream, to do something. But she did nothing.

She bit her lip, fists clenched so tight her nails dug into her palms.

A gentle tug at her hand snapped her out of it.

Damon was beside her, his expression calm, but sweat beaded at his temple.

He smiled—an easy, natural smile, like nothing was wrong.

"No, you didn't."

Right.

The rule was simple.

If you saw something—

No, you didn't.

Do not acknowledge anything you see in the mountains.

Leona nodded, her face pale as she gripped Damon's hand tightly. She barely registered Matlock stepping closer until she felt the fairy's trembling fingers wrap around Damon's other hand.

Damon glanced down at Matlock's hand—softer than even Leona's. His brows furrowed.

"What is it now...?"

Matlock's face was ashen, his entire body quivering, dark hair trembling. His wide eyes watered as he whispered in a shaking voice:

"No, I didn't..."

Damon didn't want to look. He shouldn't look. But his instincts betrayed him. His gaze shifted toward the treeline, and there—standing among the twisted branches—was a creature.

It was imp-like, with malformed limbs, its arms too long, its legs thick like logs. Pitch-black skin stretched over its frame, making it blend into the shadows. Its eyes, in stark contrast, were milky white, unblinking. It wore a thatched covering over its torso and clutched a whip in one hand.

Damon swallowed thickly and turned his head away immediately.

A small, desperate tug at his combat uniform made him stiffen. Sylvia was gripping his sleeve, her hands trembling as she forced herself to stare at the ground.

Xander was pale, his body rigid, while Evangeline had silently pressed closer to Damon's side.

One by one, Damon realized—they were all surrounding him.

"Sh... should we fight?" Xander's voice was barely audible, betraying his unease.

Damon exhaled slowly, forcing a wry smile.

"Fight? What are we fighting?" His voice was steady, but his teeth clenched as he forced the next words out. "There's no one here but us."

He could see the way the girls paled, but they all nodded. They had to.

The rules were clear: Do not acknowledge anything you see in the mountains.

But then—their situation took a turn for the worse.

The black-skinned entity giggled. A sickly, childlike sound. Then—it cried. Wailing like an infant.

The whip in its hand cracked against the ground, and in the next instant, it ran toward them.

Matlock's entire body trembled as he gripped Damon's arm, his nails digging in.

Then—Xander moved.

He turned, his body shifting as if to bolt.

No!

Damon reacted instantly, grabbing Xander's collar and yanking him back before he could take another step.

The worst rule of all—the one they could never break.

If something chases you in the Duhu Mountains—do not run.

Running meant one thing.

It meant you were prey.

Xander paled, his breath coming in short gasps.

The creature—just a few feet away—laughed through its sobbing wails. Its mouth opened, showing a row of jagged, uneven teeth. It held its mat and whip in one hand and cracked it against the ground again.

The sound reverberated through the group, but no one reacted.

No one ran.

No one looked at it.

Damon could feel its breath, close enough that it sent a chill down his spine.

It circled them, shifting erratically, but none of them moved. Sylvia's fingers trembled against his sleeve. Evangeline's hands were clenched so tight her knuckles turned white.

Seconds passed.

Then minutes.

And then—

The creature let out one last giggle.

It stepped back.

And without another sound, it turned and melted back into the woods, vanishing beyond the trees.

Damon exhaled, releasing the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

He started walking again, forcing himself to move. The others followed wordlessly, their footsteps eerily synchronized.

No one spoke for a long while.

Because they all knew—

This was only the beginning.

And the worst was yet to come.

If the Duhu Mountains were this bad in the day...

How much worse would it be at night?

Matlock bit his lip, his delicate features tense. His wings fluttered slightly, a nervous tic.

"I think... I would have preferred to be caught by the demon army..." he muttered.

Damon let out a small, breathless chuckle, trying to lift the mood.

"And considering you look like a pretty girl," he mused, tilting his head toward Matlock, "the goblins would've had a decent toy."

Matlock flinched.

Damon smirked despite the sweat clinging to his forehead. "As long as you can take backshots."

Matlock shuddered violently, lowering his head, his grip tightening on Damon's arm.

The joke fell flat.

No one laughed.

No one had the energy to.

Damon's smirk faded as he raised his head, eyes narrowing.

Far in the distance, the forest beyond the mountains shifted. Birds.

A flock suddenly burst from the treeline, scattering into the sky.

Something was moving.

Damon squinted, scanning the distance.

Then he heard it.

A low, guttural roar.

His stomach dropped.

The war trolls.

They were on the move. Hunting them.

Damon's grip on his bag tightened as he turned to the others.

"Alright." His voice was sharp now, commanding. "Time to start running. Keep your eyes down—and stay on the path."

He didn't wait.

He took off.

The others followed close behind.

They couldn't afford to break the rules.

Not here.

Not in the Duhu Mountains.

Chapter 250: Kind Friendly Mountain Residents

Running from the war trolls while adhering to the many rules of the mountains was exhausting. At times, they were forced to stop and leave offerings at shrines—macabre structures of skulls and bones draped in tattered red fabric. The air around them was thick with the scent of decay and something more—something wrong.

Scattered throughout the mountain paths were cryptic warnings, messages scrawled in a language long forgotten. Yet, the hardest challenge wasn't deciphering these signs.

It was stopping.

Stopping when something noticed them.

They didn't have a full picture of their surroundings, but they could hear. The rustling movements in the trees. The faint, eerie cries in the distance. And worst of all—the voices.

Familiar voices.

Damon clenched his fists as he ran, his breath coming in sharp bursts.

He had heard his mother call his name. Six times.

He had seen his little sister standing in the woods. Five times.

And then—Lilith Astranova.

Bleeding, broken, whispering his name, pleading for his help.

But none of them were real.

The horrors of the Duhu Mountains were ancient things, twisting illusions into cruel invitations. A trick. A game they played, hoping their prey would answer.

If they did... they would be taken.

Damon could feel the others reaching their limits. And then—pushing past them.

Something in the air shifted. His ears rang.

Mana surged through his body, twisting, evolving. Becoming more potent.

But so was his shadow's hunger.

His jaw tightened. He was nearly out of magic crystals. Soon enough, his Sacrifice skill would start pulling from his own mana to sustain it. His hunger.

The sun was setting.

Damon exhaled through his nose, unfolding the map in his hands. If his calculations were correct, they were approaching a shrine—one of the few ritual grounds.

If they made an offering, they could camp there for the night.

His shadow stirred behind him, watching the war trolls in the distance. They had slowed their pursuit, settling into the darkness.

Even they didn't want to provoke the horrors of these mountains at night.

Damon stopped as they reached the ritual ground. A massive, gnarled tree stood before them, its bark twisted, its branches stretched like skeletal fingers. Human skulls hung from its limbs, swaying gently in the wind.

He turned to his party.

"We rest here for the night," he said, his voice firm. "We can't move in the dark safely."

The others collapsed to their knees, gasping for breath. Damon, still steady, walked toward the ritual ground. His steps slowed as his eyes locked onto a figure already waiting for them.

A humanoid creature covered in thick white fur sat cross-legged near the shrine, grinning at them with a mouth that wasn't where it should be.

Its legs were folded—but they were on its head. Its true mouth was embedded in its stomach, hidden beneath tufts of fur.

It giggled. A light, almost cheerful sound.

The others stole wary glances but did not acknowledge it. That was the rule.

This place belonged to it.

Damon walked past, his party trailing behind in cautious silence. After a full day in the Duhu Mountains, they had grown accustomed to the unnatural. The creatures with shrines were different. As long as you left an offering, they granted safe passage.

Matlock spared it a brief look before quickly turning away. The entity twitched, seemingly entertained by something only it could see.

Damon knelt and placed a small piece of his rations before the shrine.

One by one, the others followed, leaving behind whatever they could spare. The offerings didn't need to be extravagant—just something.

Slowly, they backed away.

Only when they were a fair distance from the shrine did they stop.

Dropping their supply bags, they worked wordlessly, setting up a single tent.

The sounds of the mountains were growing louder.

The rustling of unseen things.

The wet, guttural breathing.

The cries of infants, echoing where no children should be.

And—voices.

Voices talking about them.

Malicious whispers.

Different-colored eyes flickered in the darkness beyond the firelight.

But they pretended not to hear. That was the rule.

If you hear something—no, you didn't.

If you see something—no, you didn't.

Yet, the voices persisted, some amused, others hungry.

"Hehehe... my, my, visitors tonight."

"I wonder if they would be tasty..."

"Sylvia, my dear child... I'm your mother. Look at me. Let me in. Let us play together..."

Sylvia's hands trembled. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Don't be sad, Damon. You aren't alone. Come with your mother. You must be tired of this painful life..."

Damon clenched his jaw.

"Hehehe... I need a new bride. My old one died. That golden-haired one would do just fine..."

Evangeline shivered her face ashen.

Matlock shuddered violently.

They ignored it all, forcing their trembling hands to work faster.

The fire was built, its light flickering weakly against the endless void of the trees. As soon as it was stable, they hurried into the tent, zipping it shut.

The space was too small for them to lie down. They sat, knees pressed together, barely able to move.

Outside, the voices grew. The ground shook.

Shadows flitted across the trees, slipping between the gaps of the campfire's glow.

But no one looked. No one acknowledged.

The tent's fabric trembled as a breathy voice rasped just beyond it.

"Come in, children. It's Granny... Granny won't hurt you... I only want your organs. Just a little liver and kidney..."

Two glowing eyes hovered just beyond the tent flap. But it could not enter—unless invited.

Matlock clung to Damon, burying his face in his chest. His delicate hands trembled, his entire body stiff with fear.

Damon leaned his head against Matlock's, feeling the unnatural softness of the fairy's form pressed against him.

His voice was barely a whisper.

"Get some sleep. There's no one outside. It's just the wind."

The others looked at him. Slowly, they nodded. Pale-faced, exhausted, they turned their backs to each other, forming a circle.

Despite the fear—despite the horror whispering just outside—they fell asleep.

As the night stretched on, the creatures lost interest. One by one, their voices faded.

Slowly something let out a low puff of wind.

The fire flickered weakly.

Slowly, the fire burned low... then died out completely.

In the pitch-black silence, the tent zipper slowly—silently—slid open.

A long, deformed hand reached inside.