

## **Shadow 251**

### Chapter 251: Horrible Skill

The hand crept in, fingers twisting unnaturally as it slithered across the tent floor, reaching for the first unsuspecting victim.

Sylvia.

Its grotesque, elongated fingers wrapped around her ankle.

Her eyes snapped open—just in time to feel herself being yanked into the darkness.

A bloodcurdling scream tore from her throat.

"EVANGELINE! LIGHT!"

Damon's roar cut through the night. His body surged forward on instinct, fingers locking around Sylvia's arms as she was ripped from the tent.

They tumbled out past the dead campfire, dragged along by an unseen force.

Evangeline reacted instantly. A burst of blinding light erupted from her hands, swallowing the entire clearing in a radiant glow.

The others jolted awake, eyes wild with confusion.

Xander lunged, catching Damon's waist. His gravity magic flared, making them heavier in an attempt to stop the pull—but it didn't work.

Matlock bit his lip, flinging a wave of ice at the darkness. It should have hit something. But there was nothing there—only the grotesque hand stretching into the void of the woods, dragging Sylvia away.

And the laughter.

Soft, childlike giggles floated through the trees.

Leona's fists clenched. She knew the rule: If you see something, no you didn't.

But rules be damned.

She saw it.

And it was attacking them.

Her grip tightened around her greatsword as she took a deep breath.

Electricity surged down her blade, and she unleashed a violent arc of lightning at the arm. The glow of her magic crackled against Evangeline's magic light, merging into something even brighter.

Sylvia kicked and thrashed, fighting to free herself.

Leona leaped forward, bringing her sword down in a powerful swing—

It passed right through.

The blade slammed into the dirt, sending sparks flying.

Her heart stopped.

"I—I can't hit it..." Her voice was barely a whisper.

Damon's teeth clenched. His grip on Sylvia tightened.

This was the worst outcome—something they couldn't touch.

Even with magic.

Matlock sent another sheet of ice toward the hand. It shattered uselessly against the air.

And the voice in the dark sang.

"Jejejeje... hahaha... come with me, little elf... come with me... give me your organs... give me your skin..."

Mocking. Taunting.

Evangeline gritted her teeth. Light flared violently around her as she raised her rapier.

No hesitation.

"Radiant Blade."

The weapon hummed.

She slashed—

And the spectral arm severed.

Like a hot knife through butter.

Sylvia kicked off the dismembered limb and scrambled into Damon's arms, eyes locked on the darkness.

For a moment—just a moment—the forest was silent.

Damon's gaze flicked to Evangeline. His mind raced. 'Her power... it's different. Her class—'

A shriek tore through the night.

Pain.

Agony.

"MY ARM! MY ARM! YOU TOOK MY ARM!"

Then—laughter.

Twisted. Deranged.

"JEJEJE... I WILL TAKE ALL YOUR ORGANS!"

The air turned suffocating.

All around them, more arms rose from the woods.

Hundreds.

Too many.

Dark, writhing limbs emerged from the trees, their grotesque fingers reaching—

And at the top of each palm...

Mouths.

Wide, grinning mouths with needle-like teeth.

And above them—

A single, bloodshot eye.

Watching.

"I see you..."

"You see me..."

"I'M COMING IN."

The rules were broken.

They had acknowledged it.

And now, the horror in the mountains wanted blood.

Damon gritted his teeth, his exhaustion morphing into something colder. He was tired. Tired of being treated like prey in these cursed mountains, tired of running, tired of barely surviving. His lowly existence gnawed at him, filling him with frustration, but what could he do except run, hide, and pray that he lived to see another day?

"Evangeline, create a barrier! Your magic is affecting it!"

Evangeline's body was already glowing, her radiant aura rising higher and higher, like a sun in the darkness. She was changing, ascending. She was reaching her first class. Her transformation was accelerating, but her face was pale, exhausted.

"I can't hold for too long..." she whispered.

He nodded grimly. She didn't have the mana to sustain the incoming attacks for long. Still, she raised her hands, and a luminous barrier of light magic flared around them.

The hands struck the barrier.

Sizzling burns and cracks spread across its surface as the monstrous limbs slammed against it over and over again, trying to break through.

Sylvia bit her lip, fingers tightening around her bow. A blinding glow of lunar magic coiled around the weapon, her expression dark with anger. She aimed towards where the creature should be, deep within the forest, and let the arrow fly.

Like a meteor, it shot forward, tearing through the trees, the sheer force shaking the ground as it thundered toward its target—

The spirit slapped it away.

Effortlessly.

"Jejeje... your power lacks purification... let me eat you... let me consume you..."

The glow of Evangeline's magic finally revealed the horror that Damon had already seen.

Unlike the others, Damon had always been cursed with the ability to see in the darkness of this forsaken place. He had seen the eyes watching them before, and now, under the light, the others finally saw it too.

A monstrous being.

A grotesque mass of arms, an endless tangle of limbs, as if an entire graveyard of bodies had been fused into a single entity. Pale, grey flesh stretched unnaturally over its form, and embedded in its body—

Eyes.

So many eyes.

The others recoiled, horror twisting their features.

Damon tore his gaze away, forcing himself to act.

"Xander, support Evangeline! We need to rebuild the fire and shut the tent!"

Xander quickly moved to Evangeline's side, his gravity magic steadying her. The fire was easy to reignite—they piled on more wood, and soon, flames roared brightly against the darkness.

But Evangeline's glow was fading. Her breathing was weak, her body unsteady.

"Get in the tent! Now!" Damon ordered, ushering the others inside.

They scrambled in without hesitation.

"Evangeline, now!"

She slowly backed away toward the tent, keeping her light blazing as long as she could. At the very last moment, she collapsed inside, and Damon zipped the tent shut.

Outside, the creature roared.

The ground shook as it slammed its massive limbs around them.

"Let me in... let me in... jejeje... let me in!"

But it couldn't.

Even a being like that had to follow the rules of the mountain. It circled them, its endless hands twitching and clawing at the earth.

Damon exhaled sharply, turning his gaze to Evangeline. She lay motionless against him, her body radiating warmth. But as he touched her, his eyes narrowed.

Something was wrong.

Dark patches spread along her neck, swollen and black, as if her body was infected... but it wasn't. Her skin shimmered with a faint golden glow, as if purging the corruption on its own.

Damon's grip tightened.

'Did she absorb the impurities into her body... and then purify them internally?'

His stomach twisted.

If that was going to be her first-class skill—

Then it was going to kill her.

Chapter 252: Through The Night

Sleep was a luxury—one granted only to the blessed and the lucky.

Damon's party was neither.

They wanted to sleep. They needed to sleep. But they did not dare to. Their exhaustion was so absolute that their eyelids felt like lead, yet the horrors of the night ensured they remained awake.

Most of the night had passed before the strange creature attacked, but even after the battle, sitting inside their tent, waiting for dawn, felt like an eternity.

Damon sat by the tent's zipper, holding Evangeline in his arms. His grip on her was firm, protective. He had to ensure the zipper remained closed, that no thing from the darkness opened it.

And they had tried.

More than just the one before—others had come, scratching, whispering, clawing at their tent, trying to drag them away. Each evil spirit that passed by left them with a promise. A promise of something far worse.

Like frightened children, they huddled together, praying for dawn.

Evangeline's body recovered slowly, her light working tirelessly to cleanse the dark patches that had marred her skin. Damon watched as the corruption faded under her glow.

Yes. This was it.

Her First-Class skill was taking shape. And if it was this powerful already, how strong would it be when fully awakened?

Damon exhaled shakily, fingers brushing against his dagger. The weapon was cold, but the hunger in his shadow was burning.

A gnawing desire rose within him—a violent need to leave the tent, to step into the darkness, and slaughter whatever creatures lurked out there.

Even if it meant dying.

His head pounded, a high-pitched ringing filling his ears. His aura was shifting, changing.

'This is my First-Class awakening...'

It was close. So close he could taste the power creeping into his bones.

Then, finally—

Dawn came.

Even then, they waited. They remained inside the tent until the sun was high in the sky, until its light was bright and unforgiving.

Only then did they step outside.

They scanned the area, their movements wary, tense. But there was nothing. No trace of the creatures from the night before. They had vanished.

But none of them dared to look into the treeline. None of them broke the unwritten rule.

They stayed on the path.

Damon exhaled sharply. They survived.

"Put out the campfire," he ordered, glancing at the others. "Pack everything. Leave nothing behind—who knows what might follow if we do."

As the others rushed to break camp, Damon took a few steps away—

A shadow flickered from above.

It latched onto him, merging seamlessly with his body.

Damon let out a breath of relief. "You're back early."

He had sent his shadow to keep an eye on the war trolls chasing them. But something was wrong.

The shadow twisted, pulsing erratically.

Damon crouched down, his brows furrowing.

"Shit."

The news couldn't be worse.

The war trolls had gone insane.

They had risked traveling through the night—provoking horrors—all to close the distance on Damon's party.

Damon clenched his jaw. His shadow estimated the trolls were about three kilometers away. And they were gaining fast.

Their hunger for flesh was insatiable.

"Hurry," Damon barked. "We need to move. Now."

The others were already rushing. He didn't need to tell them twice. They grabbed their bags, their hands trembling as the forest around them rustled.

Something else was watching.

Some thing.

They didn't stop. Didn't look.

They had grown used to the grotesque creatures that watched them from the dark.

So long as they pretended not to see them, they could keep moving.

Damon unrolled the map, his eyes narrowing.

They had two paths—

The less dangerous route: a winding mountain trail that would take two days to cross.

The risky route: a nightmare of a path, treacherous and deadly—but if they took it, they could be gone in half a day.

Damon's grip tightened. The decision was already being forced on them.

If they stayed on the path—they would die.

If they took the shortcut—they would die.

"Death if we stay... death if we leave..."

As they hiked and jogged through the mountain, eating rations on the way, Damon approached Sylvia and explained his thoughts to her.

She listened, but her lips pressed into a thin line. She understood what he was saying, but...

"I don't know everything," she admitted, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I can't be of much help. I can't see the future... I can only give counsel."

She bit her lip, frustration burning in her chest. If her mother were here, she could have used divination, some kind of oracle power to reveal the safest path forward. Her mother had always supported her father that way, guiding him with knowledge beyond the present.

And yet she—Sylvia—was useless.

She couldn't help Damon. She couldn't help their party in any way the others hadn't already covered.

'If only I could see through time... If only I had all the knowledge at my fingertips...'

Damon didn't blame her. It was just a hunch, after all.

His stomach growled in protest, and his frustration only grew. All this running... He could feel his shadow's hunger gnawing at him, urging him to give in.

Half of him wanted to.

If he let the hunger consume him, if he became a ravenous shadow, he could slaughter the war trolls.  
Tear them apart. Rip them to shreds.

But there was a problem.

His shadow had a preference—it preferred humans to trolls.

If he let it take over... it wouldn't just hunt them.

It would hunt his friends.

He gritted his teeth, shoving the thought down as he ran.

Yet no matter how much he tried to focus, the bloodlust remained.

I want to kill them.

I want to kill them all.

The war trolls.

The ones who had wronged him.

He was tired of running. Tired of nursing grudges.

It was payback time.

But reason pulled him back from the edge, and so he ran.

Then—

The ground shook.

A deep, guttural roar thundered through the mountains.

The war trolls had caught up.

These creatures were fast—faster than their size should have allowed. And they were cruel.

They didn't just want to kill.

They wanted revenge.

From behind, a booming voice thundered—

"Run, hu-man, run! We catch goddess races, we kill!"

A second troll, even more crazed, charged forward, snarling—

"Kill all men—play with women—eat! Eat them!"

Damon's expression twisted in fury. His fists clenched, his teeth grinding together as he looked down the mountain path.

And then—

He saw it.

One of the trolls.

A hulking beast of muscle and filth, holding a massive axe in its hands.

It grinned—a sinister, cruel smile.

"Found you, dirty human."

Damon didn't need to tell the others to run faster.

They were already running for their lives.

The war trolls were here for blood.

Chapter 253: Death Here And There

The war trolls were Rank One monsters—but even among their rank, they were the kind that could singlehandedly wipe out an entire party of adventurers at the same level.

This was a well-documented fact.

The Adventurer's Guild explicitly warned against encountering war trolls without proper preparation. If one entered a dungeon or a region infested with them, it was advisable to bring at least three full parties, all with ample experience and a solid battle strategy.

Unless, of course, you happened to be a battle prodigy.

Or a suicidal fool.

Sylvia now understood exactly why these creatures were so feared.

The trolls rushed up the mountain path, their massive bodies moving with terrifying speed. They roared with rage and twisted excitement, their thunderous footsteps shaking the very ground beneath them.

And they were closing in.

She felt the world around her darken. A deep dread settled in her chest.

Could they even survive this?

She wished she had the power to see their odds, to know the outcome before it happened. But one look at Damon's cold expression, the way his eyes locked onto the approaching trolls, and she knew—

He had come to the same conclusion.

This was the end of their group.

Two war trolls.

Against a party of students.

Not even a full party of seven—just six of them.

And none of them had reached First-Class yet.

Matlock's wings fluttered frantically as he hovered just above the ground, speeding along the winding mountain path. He kept up with the others, but his frantic glances behind them told her all she needed to know—they weren't fast enough.

They had been lucky not to run into any of the horrors lurking within the Duhu Mountains. It was as if the forest spirits themselves were waiting, watching from the trees, urging them not to stray from the path—not to step into their domain—

Because the war trolls would be their problem.

From behind, Damon felt it.

The chilling murderous intent radiating from the trolls.

It made his blood run cold.

The air around them felt heavy, almost suffocating.

At that moment, he was reminded of something—

The sheer helplessness he had felt when he was being chased by the Evil Forest Wendigo.

He gritted his teeth.

His Remorseless skill screamed in his mind, whispering an undeniable truth—

If he fought these trolls head-on, he would die.

It wasn't long before they reached a winding pass. Matlock soared up onto a nearby rock, reaching down to help Sylvia. Leona jumped up on her own, Xander and Evangeline right behind her.

Damon didn't need any help.

He scaled the rock and pressed forward—

Then froze.

A sound—

The whistling of wind.

A massive shadow loomed over them.

His instincts screamed—

"GET DOWN!"

Damon lunged, pushing the others to the ground just as a massive boulder shot past them.

It slammed into the trees, crashing into the forest below with an earth-shattering impact.

Damon pushed himself up, yanking Leona—who was the closest—back to her feet. Then he ran.

But it was pointless.

The trolls had already caught up.

One of them—a hulking beast of muscle and filth—raised its massive axe.

Damon could feel it.

He spun around, raising his fingers —

**BANG! BANG!**

The air rang with the deafening roar of magic bullets, smoke trailing in their wake as they slammed into the troll's thick hide.

It barely flinched.

Leona snarled, raising her sword and slamming it into the ground—

[Thunder!]

Arcs of lightning surged forward, crackling across the earth—

But it barely phased them.

The trolls' bodies resisted it effortlessly, smoke rising from their singed flesh as if it was nothing more than an irritation.

Then—

The second troll ignored the attacks completely.

With dark glee, it dashed past them, straight for—

Sylvia.

She loosed arrow after arrow, but the massive beast didn't slow down.

Damon gritted his teeth.

The shadows around him surged, wrapping around his body like armor. He rushed forward, dagger in hand, and—

SLASH!

He sliced into the troll's kneecap—

Dark blood pooled, but—

It healed instantly.

The wound closed before his eyes.

The troll turned, eyes burning with pure hatred.

It raised its massive hand to swat him like an insect—

Damon moved, firing his omnidirectional gear, yanking himself to the side—

But not fast enough.

The troll's thumb barely grazed him—

And it sent him flying.

He felt his Shadow Armor absorb some of the impact—

But his organs felt like they had shattered.

The wind was knocked from his lungs as he was slammed into a tree.

Pain exploded through his body.

Blood pooled from his forehead, dripping into his eyes as he lifted his head—

And took in the scene before him.

Their odds were low.

No.

They were worse than low.

That wasn't even a proper hit.

And yet—

He was already on the verge of death.

And that was after using Shadow Armor.

He gritted his teeth. There was nowhere to run. Fighting trolls in the open was suicide...

His gaze flicked to Sylvia, who was slowly backing away as the troll advanced toward her.

Damon clenched his jaw, the taste of blood thick in his mouth. His side throbbed, but he forced himself to stand.

"Evangeline—light!"

His shout was all the signal she needed. A brilliant flash exploded in the air, flooding the area with blinding radiance. The others wasted no time, moving toward Damon. This was one of their party's escape tactics—blind the enemy and make a run for it.

Except this time, they had no idea where to run.

Which direction was safe? None. The path was blocked by trolls, and the forest... might be worse.

As they bolted, one of the trolls lashed out, its massive foot slamming into Xander's back.

Damon's expression paled as Xander was launched through the air, blood spraying from his mouth. He dreaded looking at his friend, certain that he was already dead.

"Cough... cough..."

To his shock, Xander merely coughed and staggered to his feet, glaring at the troll with fury.

"Where do we go?" he demanded.

Damon didn't have time to process the absurdity of Xander surviving that hit. He bit his lip, seized Matlock's arm, and pushed the young fairy toward the trees.

"Into the forest! Now! Hurry!"

Evangeline hesitated. She stared at the dark woods ahead. On the surface, it looked like an ordinary forest... but she could feel it. Something vile lurked within, unseen and watching.

Her lips trembled. "We—"

"Go! Now!" Damon snapped.

The trolls were already closing in. As the group rushed into the forest, their footing gave way—they tumbled down a steep slope, rolling through dead leaves and brambles. When they finally hit the ground, the air felt... different.

Dark.

The illusion of a normal forest shattered in an instant. Unseen eyes bore into them from every direction.

High above, atop the slope, the war trolls snarled in frustration.

The smaller one grunted. "Tusk... we follow goddess race into dark forest?"

The larger troll—Tusk—shook his head. "No... they take shortcut. Appear on other side. We go there. Follow path. Wait."

A simple plan, but a deadly one.

Damon knew their only chance was to cut through the forest. If they followed the mountain's winding path, the trolls would catch them for sure. But if they took the shortcut through the woods...

They'd save time.

Or die before they ever made it out.

If they didn't appear on the other side by nightfall, the trolls wouldn't even need to kill them. The horrors of the forest would take care of that.

And if they did make it out...

The trolls would be waiting.

Chapter 254 254: Is This The End.....

The sound of blood dripping onto the forest floor was the only noise in the deafening silence of the mountain woods.

Not even the chirping of insects or the rustling of leaves—just pure, suffocating stillness.

That, more than anything, was the most ominous sign.

Even so, they kept moving. Blood clung to their skin, dried in places and still fresh in others. Sylvia tried to heal Damon, but he brushed her off, his expression cold and unreadable. She didn't press further.

The others were treated for their injuries, yet the strangest thing was Xander—who had taken a direct hit from a war troll. By all logic, he should have been dead, or at the very least severely injured. But when Sylvia examined him, there wasn't a single bruise. No swelling. No internal bleeding.

It didn't make sense.

Damon staggered forward, his fingers clenched into fists, his body soaked in blood—some his, some not.

Sylvia was scared.

She had been for a while now.

They all were.

By their sides, they could hear the sounds of breathing. And whispers. The voices always seemed distant, yet they knew better.

Whatever was whispering... was far closer than it sounded.

This forest was a horrible place.

Sylvia gritted her teeth. "Let me heal you, please. At this rate, you'll collapse from blood loss—"

Her words were cut off by a loud growl.

Damon's stomach.

It echoed unnaturally through the trees, swallowed by the eerie silence only to return, stretched and distorted, as if the forest itself was mocking him.

The others tensed, gripping their weapons tighter.

They were all afraid. And tired.

For the past three hours, they had been moving deeper into what felt like their inevitable deaths.

Evangeline rummaged through what little remained of their rations, pulling out the last piece of preserved food she had. Quietly, she walked up to Damon, her movements cautious.

She held the food out to him. "Here. You should eat."

Damon's gaze lifted.

For a moment, he didn't look at the food.

He looked at her.

Not at her face, but lower—where her heart was.

Then, his eyes flickered toward Sylvia.

The hair on the back of Evangeline's neck stood up.

Damon's lips parted slightly, and a low whisper left them.

"So hungry... I just want to eat..."

Evangeline bit her lip.

He didn't take the food.

Instead, he turned away and kept walking, leading them forward as if nothing had happened.

She forced herself to swallow the unease building in her chest.

"We... we can eat something once we leave the Duhu Mountains," she said, as if saying it would make it real.

"You said it yourself. We just need to reach the Whispering Forest. Then find the ruined city."

She bit her lip, lowering her head.

"We can survive... right?"

Damon didn't answer.

He just kept walking.

The others exchanged uneasy glances, unsure if he was lost in despair or simply too drained to speak.

Then, for the briefest moment, something changed.

His eyes flickered with clarity.

His jaw clenched, and his voice, low and steady, cut through the silence.

"I'm not dying. And neither are you. We need to leave this forest before the sun sets."

The conviction in his words sent a shiver through them.

Their despair lifted, if only slightly.

They nodded, pressing forward.

And as they walked, the voices in the forest grew louder.

More breathing.

More whispers.

More unseen eyes watching them from the darkness.

Damon took a deep breath.

He was hungry.

He just wanted to eat.

His shadow wanted flesh.

He wanted human flesh...

But he couldn't let his shadow take over.

He had been using the Sacrifice skill extensively, and after sending his shadow to scout ahead, he had burned through more than 2,000 mana points just to sustain it. Now, he had no choice but to conserve every last bit of mana for what was coming.

Thus, he was hungry.

This hunger had its advantages—it kept his strength higher than usual. But at the same time, it chipped away at his sanity. He was already at his mental limit.

His wilder side whispered to him.

Turn back. Kill the war trolls. Let your shadow consume. Become ravenous. Kill everyone. You can survive on your own... alone... you always have.

Damon clenched his jaw, forcing the thoughts out of his mind.

They pressed on, their weary bodies trudging through the cursed woods. The creatures of the forest never outright attacked them, but they toyed with them.

Once, at noon, something unseen grabbed Sylvia's hair and yanked her backward. When they turned to look, they found nothing but a dismembered, floating leg, swaying unnaturally in the air before vanishing.

Another time, something had joined their group.

It had taken on the exact likeness of one of them and walked alongside them for miles.

No one said a word.

No one acknowledged it.

And after a while... it simply disappeared.

Their faces had been pale ever since.

Now, with the sun inching closer to the horizon, they could finally see the path ahead—their way out of the forest.

They only needed to leave the woods.

Just a few more steps.

Then—

"Jekejekekrk... Jejejjr... Hehehhekekek..."

A chorus of laughter. Sick. Twisted.

Mocking.

The creatures of the woods had no intention of letting them leave.

No one who entered the forest ever left alive.

Damon sighed, a bitter taste of despair on his tongue.

They had been so close...

He thought they could escape before nightfall.

His lips curled into a self-deprecating smile.

What horrible creatures will come to end our pathetic lives?

From the trees, something began to fall.

Black fur, drifting gently to the ground.

As it fell, the dim sunlight in the forest seemed to fade, as if the very presence of this entity darkened the world around it.

Then the fur birthed flesh.

Bones twisted, sinew snapped into place, and grotesque bodies began to form.

Not just one.

Many.

They were beasts—covered in black fur, but with human hands. Their grotesque figures resembled oversized baboons, their long fingers curling unnaturally, their breath wheezing in the silence.

The ground was littered with them.

Lifeless. Unmoving.

Damon and the others stood frozen, their faces drained of all color, their legs heavy with paralyzing fear.

Then, from the trees, something else fell.

Ethereal forms—spirits, ghostly and weightless, descending from the canopy above.

Ghostly monkey-like souls.

Each spirit sank into one of the lifeless bodies on the ground.

And then—

The paralyzing fear vanished.

But before they could move—

The corpses twitched.

Then convulsed.

Then stood up.

The air was filled with noises—jeering, cackling, shrieking.

The beasts grinned, revealing rows of dagger-like teeth. Some stood on all fours, others hunched over on two legs. Their elongated snouts curled in unsettling smiles. Their fingers—long, human-like, unnatural—twitched in excitement.

Damon exhaled slowly.

His head lowered.

He had read about these creatures in the old travel journal.

Devil Monkeys.

They had long hands, sharper fangs, and a sickening, near-human intelligence.

He lifted his gaze toward the sun.

It was sinking behind the trees, its light dying.

And with it, his hope.

Is this the end...?

## Chapter 255: Accept Your Pain

The mountains had many horrors—from the monstrous terrain to vile spirits and malevolent monsters. Most of these creatures adhered to the rules of the mountains, staying hidden in the day. However, there were exceptions.

Invisible to all but ever-present in the tree line, these vile monkeys were cruel and sinister, perfectly camouflaged within the dense canopy. They were sadistic, reveling in the torment of their prey, breaking them apart in both body and spirit. Now, it was clear why the warnings spoke of never looking into the tree line.

To whomever may come across my warnings, pray you never encounter these vile apes.

This was the passage recorded in the travel journal about the devil monkeys—one of the few Damon could read. That was why their group's despair was warranted. Damon merely looked at the many devil monkeys with a tired expression. He was exhausted from running, from the fear, the dread, and most pathetic of all—the weakness.

He was too tired. He was so hungry...

He tightened his grip around his daggers, his friends pressing their backs against each other in a defensive circle.

"What do we do, Damon...?"

An androgynous voice whispered to him, but all he could think was—

'So hungry... so angry... I just want to eat...'

His shadow stirred, an abyssal hunger seething within. The cold weight of his dagger rested in his palm as the devil monkeys surrounded them, their twisted grins illuminated by the last dying light of the sun.

Xander clenched his fists, gripping his spear tightly as he kept his eyes locked on the jeering horrors.

"They're trying to trap us until the sun sets. We have to fight our way out..."

He glanced at Damon, whose expression remained eerily cold and dull under the effects of his shadow hunger and the merciless grip of his Remorseless skill.

Evangeline didn't hesitate any longer. If they didn't act now and the sun set, they would be trapped in this cursed forest forever. Raising her sword high, she unleashed a beam of light at the nearest devil monkey. It dodged effortlessly.

Then all hell broke loose.

The ghastly monkeys erupted from the trees, their shrill, mocking laughter echoing through the forest as the group retaliated with magic and steel. Sylvia drew her twin blades, abandoning her bow—there was no point in using arrows when the enemy was this close.

Xander charged forward, spear raised, aiming to impale one of the creatures. His strike passed right through as if he were stabbing thin air.

The monkeys jeered, raising their human-like hands.

"Ahhajam...ahahkkekeke!"

Then they attacked.

They swarmed Xander, claws sinking into his ribs, jagged teeth tearing into his shoulder. He shoved them back, blood seeping from his wounds, but he remained standing. The others weren't faring as well. Sylvia was already injured, her arm broken.

Leona swore under her breath, lightning arcing from her fingertips. The bolts crackled and struck true—only to pass through the devil apes harmlessly. Not even Sylvia's lunar magic had any effect. Only Evangeline's radiant light seemed to harm them.

Matlock hovered above the chaos, surrounded by a storm of ice. He weaved through the air with an elegance akin to a snowflake drifting from the heavens, slicing at the creatures with an ice knife in hand. Yet, despite his skill, his strikes left no mark. They were too many. He was caught mid-air, dragged down into a mass of fangs and fur.

Damon wasn't faring any better.

He was already on the ground, caked in his own blood as a devil monkey clawed at his face. He barely felt it anymore. His expression was cold, tired.

'Is this it...? So I die here...'

The thought almost amused him. He had lived quite the life. The blood on his forehead stirred old, ghastly memories—the children in his village throwing rocks at him and his orphaned sister when they begged for food.

That village of traitors still thrived, even after what they did.

After everything his family had done for them...

The memories came in flashes, filling his dying will with something far darker than fear—hatred.

His enemies were out there. The traitors were out there, living their best lives while he suffered.

Pain? What pain hadn't he endured?

Death? He had given up on life long ago.

If that was the case...

Then why not use Ashborn and burn it all down? If it killed him, so what?

His blood-soaked eyes met the devil monkey's sinister grin. It was enjoying his torment.

Damon whispered a single word.

"Die."

A black flame erupted from his body—deep as the void, searing with an immolating heat and a soul-chilling coldness. It rose like a living shadow, consuming the apes around him.

They didn't even have time to scream before they crumbled into drifting ash.

Damon's body convulsed. The agony was indescribable—tenfold the pain of being burned alive. His mind reeled, his nerves screamed. Yet, amidst it all, he smiled.

A deep, cold smile.

Then the prompts came.

[You have slain a Devil Monkey.]

[You have slain a Devil Monkey.]

[You have slain a Devil Monkey.]

....

[You have gained 10 Attribute Points.]

[You have gained 10 Attribute Points.]

[You have gained 10 Attribute Points.]

....

[You have acquired the skill: Omen of Dread]

[Mastery: Pain Resistance +9]

[Mastery: Pain Resistance +9]

[Mastery: Pain Resistance +9]

Damon stood, ignoring the flood of notifications. His body was shutting down, his mind spiraling from the sheer mental shock of burning alive. He knew this would kill him.

Even so...

He raised his hand.

"Die."

His mana and shadow energy drained instantly. He activated Sacrifice, throwing 700 points into shadow to sustain Ashborn.

The black flames scattered like a vengeful storm, leaving behind a trail of smoldering destruction. The devil monkeys shrieked, their bodies turning to cinders, while the survivors fled into the trees.

Damon trembled. He wanted to scream in agony, but his voice refused to obey. His face twisted in a grimace, contorted by pain.

He lifted his hands once more, even as his friends watched in horror.

"Arhhggggg!"

The flames surged into the trees, burning with a darkness indistinguishable from shadows. They devoured everything—searing and freezing at once, leaving nothing but blackened ruins in their wake.

His body convulsed. His mind could not withstand the shock of enduring the sensation of burning alive—even though, physically, he suffered no wounds.

He would soon die from the shock, but so what as long as he delivered death. So what if he died. His body convulsed weakly as death came.

Then—

[Mastery: Pain Resistance +9]

[Mastery: Pain Resistance +9]

....

[Acquired Mastery: Pain Resistance Lv.1]

The overwhelming, mind-breaking agony dulled. He slowly straightened, dark eyes hollow—something within him had burned away with those flames.

He gazed at the ashen remains of the forest.

Then, without a word, he turned and walked away.

His friends watched him go, but it was as if he wasn't entirely there anymore.

Chapter 256: Following Death

Slowly, he walked out of the woods, his expression distant, as if he wasn't all there. His body trembled, yet his face remained as stoic as a doll's. Blood covered his entire body, but he moved like a man who had lost touch with his own flesh.

The others followed in silent horror, their gazes fixed on the destruction he had left behind. The charred remains of the devil monkeys were nothing but ash, drifting on the dying breeze of the forest.

They staggered after him, each burdened by their own injuries, eager to leave the nightmare of the cursed woods behind. And just as the sun began to dip beneath the horizon, casting the sky into the hues of twilight, they stepped onto the mountain path—Damon in the lead.

Yet, as he stood there, staring ahead, none of them could bring themselves to speak. There were so many questions—so much fear and uncertainty—but the dread that hung over them overshadowed all else.

Damon did not move. He just stood there, still as stone, his vacant eyes devoid of the stubborn will that usually burned within him. Gone was his cold gloominess, his sharp-edged sarcasm, his teasing smirks. There was only emptiness now, a hollow abyss where his presence had once been.

Sylvia's gaze fell on him, a sharp pang of recognition striking her heart. She knew what those flames were. She had been possessed by the very spirit that had birthed them.

Her fingers curled into a trembling fist.

'Did... did Damon take my place?'

A deep fear lodged itself in her throat. If Ignath had taken Damon's body, if that cursed spirit had claimed him the way it had nearly consumed her... then she would rather burn with him than lose him to the dark.

And so, despite her broken arm, despite the agony lacing her every breath, she staggered forward.

"Give him back..." she whispered, her voice barely above a breath, yet filled with desperate conviction.

Damon tilted his head slightly, as if finally noticing her presence. His vacant eyes met hers—and for a fleeting moment, a trace of clarity flickered within them. And when that clarity came, Sylvia saw it—the pain. The deep, wretched agony buried within him.

"They're coming..."

His voice was soft, distant, almost dreamlike. His trembling hand lifted, pointing towards the road ahead.

"This is the end of the mountain path. If you run now, you can reach the bridge. If you make it there, you'll be safe... but if the smaller troll catches up, you'll have to fight it."

His expression twisted, his jaw tightening as a flicker of humanity surfaced within his hollow eyes.

Sylvia bit her lip hard. "L-Let me heal you—"

She chose not to ask about the dark, shadow-like flames. But Damon's gaze drifted to her, bloodied, battered, her arm hanging uselessly at her side. He turned away, staring into the distance as if waiting for something—something inevitable.

Then, they all heard it.

The thunderous roars of war trolls echoed through the valley.

Leona's breath hitched. She clenched her fists, panic creeping into her voice.

"Come on, what's wrong?! We have to run—"

Damon didn't respond. He stood there, trembling, his body wracked with the aftereffects of using Ashborn. The shock of experiencing tenfold the pain of burning alive without dying had left him drained, his consciousness barely tethered to reality.

But there was something else too.

Hunger.

Not just from his shadow, but a deeper, more primal hunger. A desire to kill.

Evangeline hesitated, her lips parting—

But Damon cut her off.

"Go now. You have to reach the bridge."

Xander gritted his teeth and stormed forward, grabbing Damon by the collar with a furious glare.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! Why are you talking like you're not coming with us?!"

Evangeline stepped forward as well, desperation lacing her voice.

"Damon, come on! We're close—the bridge is right around the corner! We've left the Duhu Mountains and all its horrors behind! We can make it!"

Damon's gaze flickered, but only for a second. He turned away, his eyes locking onto the forest behind him—the one he had left in flaming ruins. Then, to the horizon where the war trolls approached, massive and merciless.

"I'm going to kill them," he murmured.

His voice was steady. Absolute.

"You guys can go... or take one for yourselves."

Sylvia's breath caught in her throat. Her grip on her broken arm tightened.

"I'm not leaving you behind," she said through clenched teeth. "If you're dying here, then I'll die too."

Leona gave a sharp exhale and smirked. "Hah, well, I was tired of running anyway."

Damon shook his head. "We can't take on two at once... you'll die."

Evangeline raised her sword, her grip white-knuckled.

"Well, that's too bad," she snapped. "I'm staying, you arrogant son of a bitch."

Matlock, his wings fluttering, narrowed his eyes. "I'm not scared. I'm done being afraid."

Damon's empty gaze wavered.

The light flickered.

Slowly, he tilted his head.

"Okay..." He clenched his fist. "Then let's fight. Let's kill them together."

He raised a hand, pointing toward the bridge in the distance. "Get there and wait for the smaller troll. The big one is mine."

Evangeline sucked in a sharp breath. The big one was too strong. Even if it was Damon, even if he had Ashborn—he couldn't take it alone.

"I... I'll help you—"

Damon shook his head.

"Go."

Xander clenched his jaw. He knew that look. Damon wouldn't leave. He wanted this fight. No, he needed it. He had fought against Damon before—he knew just how stubborn he was.

He exhaled sharply, then placed a hand on Evangeline's shoulder.

A frustrated tear welled in her eye. She knew him just as well as Xander did.

"...Let's go," Xander murmured.

Evangeline sniffed, gripping her sword tighter.

Leona turned around, her ears twitching as the wind carried the distant roars of the war trolls. She understood the way of the warrior—she had been raised as one, born and bred for battle. But even so, this was her best friend. She clenched her teeth, her hands curling into trembling fists.

"If you die..." Her voice wavered, but she forced it out. "I'll never forgive you..."

Matlock bit his lip, his wings fluttering anxiously as he hesitated, glancing back at Damon.

"I'll see you on the other side... right?"

Damon didn't respond. He simply stood there, staring vacantly into the distance.

That left Sylvia. Unlike the others, she refused to budge. She didn't need to understand why he was doing this. She didn't want to.

"You... you can win, right?" she whispered, her voice barely holding together.

Damon remained impassive, his body trembling from the lingering pain. For a long moment, there was silence. Then, at last, he spoke.

"I don't know..." His voice was quiet, yet heavy. "I always have a plan... or at least some odds of success. But this time, I don't. I will most likely die... but I still don't want to run. I've run enough for a lifetime."

His hands clenched at his sides.

"I will fight... for this one pathetic life. I will fight for this life that I hate..."

Tears streamed down Sylvia's face as the guttural grunts of the war trolls grew closer.

"I'm not leaving you," she choked out. "I'm not—"

Evangeline and Xander grabbed her before she could lunge toward him.

"Let me go!" she screamed, thrashing violently against their hold. "Please! We can't go! You can't—you're too arrogant and selfish to give your life for someone else! Don't start now! Please, Damon—please—no, no! Let me go!"

Damon exhaled slowly. His shadow stretched long beneath the dimming sun, twisting unnaturally, as if forming a dark abyss around him. A deep aura of dread settled in the air, filling their hearts with an instinctual fear.

He turned to Sylvia, and for the first time since he had left the forest, there was something—something that was Damon Grey—flickering in his eyes.

His lips parted, his voice a mere whisper.

"Put your faith not in any god... have faith in me."

Sylvia froze. Xander and Evangeline loosened their hold, and she collapsed to her knees, biting down on her lip until it bled.

Then, she rose unsteadily to her feet. Without another word, she turned and ran, past Leona and Matlock.

Xander nodded grimly. Evangeline opened her mouth, but no words came.

As she left, she heard Damon's final whisper.

"If I die... tell my sister I'm sorry. I stopped living for her. But just this once, let me follow death... let her give me what I'm owed."

Evangeline ran, her tears glittering in the dying sunlight. She never heard the rest of Damon's words, the ones he murmured under his breath, repeating the old epitaph he had once chanted to himself.

The war trolls' hulking forms thundered forward, shaking the earth with their monstrous weight.

Damon stood his ground. He tightened his grip around his dagger as the shadows at his feet stirred hungrily, coiling around him like living tendrils.

"We are not asked to be born..."

The shadows surged, crawling up his limbs, weaving together into an inky black armor that hardened around his body.

He knelt, his head bowed, his voice a low prayer to the unknown. He finished the epitaph that had shaped his life.

"All things fade..."

Then, he rose, his eyes burning with a dire will. The ground trembled beneath him as the war trolls closed in.

"I offer the unknown god... your souls."

The shadows flared violently in response. The very air around him seemed to shift, thickening with something unnatural—something hungry.

Chapter 257 257: Tusk

The forest was silent—not even the chirping of birds disturbed the stillness. Sunlight filtered through the trees, casting golden beams across the undergrowth, creating a scene of serene beauty. But the young boy standing beneath the ancient tree had no room in his heart to appreciate it.

He wore little more than rags, his frail frame barely covered from the elements. His blue eyes were dull, lifeless, the weight of exhaustion evident in the deep shadows beneath them. In his trembling hands, he held a frayed rope. He tied it to a thick, sturdy branch, securing it with a knot, then stepped onto a log.

The noose hung before him. He reached for it with shaking fingers, slipping it over his head. The rough fibers scratched against his skin, but he paid it no mind. His expression remained empty, his mind already resigned.

A quiet whisper escaped his lips.

"I'm sorry... Luna..."

With that, he moved to kick the log away.

But as he shifted his weight, his foot nudged something—a half-buried stone nestled among the roots of the ancient tree. His eyes flickered down, noticing faint carvings on its surface. Something about the weathered inscription drew him in, held him in place.

His fingers hesitated on the rope.

Then, slowly, he pulled it off his neck.

'It won't be too late to die after I read it...'

He stepped down, his curiosity overriding his despair, and knelt before the stone. His fingers brushed away the dirt and moss, revealing the words etched into its surface. He read them, his lips moving silently, his breath catching in his throat.

Time passed, but he didn't move. His dull blue eyes gradually sharpened, an icy hue overtaking them as something deep inside him shifted. The cold disregard for his life remained—but now, it was accompanied by something else. A stubborn, reckless defiance.

"If I'm going to die anyway... why not live as if I was already dead?"

His fists clenched.

"Until I can save Luna... I will live. I dare to live."

Years passed. His once-icy blue eyes darkened, shadowed by the hardships he had endured. But the reckless defiance that had been born on that day never wavered. It drove him forward, pushed him beyond reason, made him fight even when others called him a fool for refusing to bow his head.

Dead men need not bow.

What did they have to fear? Death?

They were already dead.

And that was why he would not run now.

The ground trembled. The war trolls barreled toward him, their monstrous forms tearing through the forest like harbingers of doom. If they were the hands of the goddess of death, then so be it.

He would join her in her divine realm.

But he would not go alone.

Either he would take them with him—

—Or he would send them there alone.

The ground thundered as the war trolls reached him, their massive forms skidding to a halt. The sun had long since vanished beyond the horizon, leaving only the dim glow of the stars above. Their hulking bodies were stained with dried blood—likely from their rampage through the treacherous mountains. The horrors of the Duhu Mountains were not welcoming, even to creatures as formidable as them.

The war troll in front, Tusk, surveyed the scene before him. At the center of what had once been the mountain path stood a figure clad in writhing black armor. It did not resemble traditional plate armor; instead, it moved, living tendrils of shadow rising and shifting unnaturally around its form. The very ground beneath it seemed to merge with the darkness of the armor, making it impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. For a brief moment, Tusk thought it might be one of the ancient evils of the Duhu Mountains—one of the cursed things that lurked in the deep places of the world.

But no.

This thing... it smelled like a human.

A human drenched in blood.

Tusk tightened his grip on the massive battle axe resting on his shoulder. The prints in the dirt told him others had been here... but had left.

His deep, guttural voice rumbled.

"You stay to die, human? Not know your kind so brave."

Beside him, the second troll, Huge, clutched a massive club, his beady yellow eyes scanning the darkness.

"Where other goddess races go?"

The figure did not move. The shadows clung to him like a second skin. Only after a moment did he slowly raise his head.

"I stayed to kill you."

His voice was quiet, cold.

He lifted his gaze fully.

"Do you want to fight me one-on-one... or do both of you wish to die together?"

The trolls exchanged glances—then burst into laughter.

This thing was just a human.

A human child.

No sword. No axe. Not even the signs of a first-class advancement. He wasn't even an adult yet. How could they take this seriously?

Huge snorted, baring his stained teeth. "Tusk, this human buy time for others to escape."

Tusk nodded. That had to be it. But no matter. Killing him would be easy.

The larger of the two trolls stepped forward, resting his axe in the dirt.

"Then me fight you in duel." He glanced at Huge. "You go. Catch other goddess races before they escape."

Huge grinned, his tusks gleaming in the moonlight, before thundering off into the darkness. As he passed, the wind howled in his wake.

BANG.

Tusk slammed his war axe into the earth, placing his massive hands atop the hilt.

"Human wish to duel. Very brave. Human trap, kill Hand—dishonorable. But Tusk give you honorable duel to death. May goddess and unknown god take you."

Damon said nothing.

Tusk took the silence as acceptance of his fate.

What could this human do? He was tired. He reeked of his own blood. He could barely stand. Even at his best, he would not last long. And now? He was nothing more than a lamb to the slaughter.

Tusk was stronger. Bigger. His rank was higher. He had survived years of war, clashing with warriors far greater than this boy. His body could regenerate wounds that would kill lesser creatures, and the monstrous vitality of a war troll meant he could keep fighting for days if needed.

This thing before him?

It was an insult.

Tusk raised his axe lazily. He would end this quickly, then catch up to Huge and slaughter the others.

But then...

The human moved.

It was subtle.

A slow lift of his head.

Tusk, who had been watching him carefully, suddenly felt his gut clench. He couldn't see the human's face—not through all that unnatural shadow. But the moment the boy raised his head, the air itself seemed to die.

An aura of dread poured out from him like an open wound, raw and suffocating. The very wind around them turned sharp and cold, stinging at Tusk's skin. His breath hitched. His hands trembled.

For the first time in decades...

He felt fear.

This...

This feeling... it's the same as when I faced a high-ranking demon...

Tusk roared, forcing himself to move past the instinct to run. He lifted his massive axe high above his head and brought it down in a crushing blow, aiming to split the human in two—

**BOOM.**

The ground exploded beneath the force of the strike, sending a cloud of dust and debris into the air.

Tusk narrowed his eyes, stepping back slightly, waiting for the dust to settle.

And when it did—

His blood ran cold.

The human was still standing.

A crater marked where the axe had landed, but the boy had sidestepped it effortlessly, untouched by the attack. Shadows curled at his feet, writhing like hungry serpents.

Tusk's mind barely had time to register this when—

The human moved.

Faster than his eyes could follow.

A blur of black streaked up the length of his axe—

Damon was already upon him.

Jumping onto the massive weapon, running up its length—

And then—

He launched himself straight for Tusk's face.

With a crack, his heel slammed into the troll's skull in a brutal dropkick.

Chapter 258 258: Omen Of Things To Come

Damon had not just been standing there vacantly while the war trolls approached. His body had been still, but his mind had been racing, his eyes locked onto his system panel as he hurriedly distributed all the attribute points he had accumulated since this hellish nightmare began.

[HP: 253/385] +235

[Mana: 6804/9084]

[Strength: 134]

[Agility: 57]

[Speed: 185]

[Endurance: 65]

[Class: —]

[Shadow: 40]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 60%]

[Shadow Level: 7]

[Condition: Shadow is Hungry]

[Attributes: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour]  
[Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn] [Omen Of Dread]

[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] [Pain Resistance Lv1]

[Locked]

His newest skill—Omen of Dread—was the result of burning the devil monkeys with Ashborn. The cursed flames functioned just like his shadows; anything they consumed was counted as being devoured. That meant their strength, their experiences, their very essence had become his.

[Omen of Dread]

[Description]

These vile mountains were old and ancient, leaking a small gap to the metaverse. When Mugu came upon these mountains, he was paralyzed by the fear of the vile spirits that hid within the trees. Those who tread too close find themselves ensnared by the same terror, their bodies frozen as unseen horrors creep ever closer.

[Effect]

Unleashes an aura of overwhelming dread, paralyzing enemies weaker than the user and instilling hesitation in those who fear him.

[Type]

Active

[Cooldown]

3 seconds

That was how Damon had managed to force the war troll into hesitation before it even swung its axe.

And the moment it did, Beholder's Gaze activated—

Time slowed.

For exactly three seconds, his perception expanded. Every shift of the troll's muscles, the way the air vibrated from the sheer force of its swing—he saw it all.

In that instant, he moved.

Dodging the descending axe by mere inches, he surged forward, using the weapon itself as his path. His feet slammed onto the massive steel surface, sprinting up the length of the war axe like a phantom—

And then—

With all the force he could muster, he launched himself.

His boots crashed into Tusk's face in a devastating dropkick.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then—

ROOOOOAAARRRR!!!

The war troll bellowed, staggering back not from pain, but from sheer humiliation.

A human—a weak human—had not only dodged his attack... but had touched his face.

Tusk's rage erupted. His muscles swelled, his veins bulging beneath his thick hide. The ground beneath him cracked as he slammed his foot down, stabilizing himself.

He raised his glowing red eyes toward Damon.

"You... will regret that."

The war troll's massive hand reached out, thick fingers closing in on Damon, who was shrouded in an armor of writhing shadows. His form blended seamlessly with the night around them, an extension of the darkness itself.

Just as the troll's grasp was about to close around him, Damon fired a thin wire from his palm, anchoring it to the ground and yanking himself downward—dodging the attack by mere inches.

The motion triggered Beholder's Gaze again.

Time slowed.

Damon capitalized on the window, closing the distance with unnatural fluidity. He rolled under the troll's legs, his daggers flashing as he sliced into the Achilles tendons. A spray of blood painted the air as his blades dug deep.

The war troll's left leg buckled.

With a snarl, it swung its massive axe backward, unleashing a powerful astral wind. Damon barely ducked in time, the force whipping past him, shredding the trees behind him like paper.

The 5x skill amplified his speed fivefold, but even so, every move was a near miss.

Seeing an opportunity, he lunged for the second tendon, aiming to sever it completely—

But his daggers weren't enough.

The cut was too shallow. His weapons simply weren't fit for slaying monsters this massive.

"Aargh!"

The troll lashed out with its massive arm, swatting him like a fly. The impact sent Damon hurtling backward, his Shadow Armor absorbing the brunt of the blow. He crashed into the dirt, skidding along the ground, gasping for air.

Shadows rose from the earth and the trees, knitting his armor back together.

His body trembled as he tried to breathe, but his lungs refused to cooperate. Coughing, choking—

Then—

A huge shadow fell from above.

The war troll had leapt into the air.

Move. NOW.

Damon forced his body to roll, barely escaping as the massive troll crashed down, sending a shockwave through the earth. Dust exploded outward, raining over him. Some of it slipped through the gaps in his helm.

His eyes narrowed.

'A flaw... I don't need vision holes. I can see just fine through the shadows.'

Remorseless revealed the weakness in his logic. He commanded Shadow Armor to morph, sealing the gaps, making the armor sleeker, smoother.

Then he adjusted. His gauntlets formed sharp claws, the fists now studded with spikes.

His daggers... were too short. Useless against an enemy of this size.

But Shadow Armor could only form armor. It couldn't create separate weapons.

His gaze flicked to his shadow-forged gauntlets. What if... the weapon was part of the armor?

The thought took root in his mind.

The war troll swung its axe in a wide arc, impossibly fast for its size.

Damon dove into the treeline, his expression twisting in pain from the lingering exhaustion of Ashborn.

He had no time to recover.

He had to adapt.

As the troll prepared for another swing, Damon willed his shadows to extend over his fists.

They shifted. Grew. Twisted.

A new form took shape.

The shadows morphed into a wide blade, seamlessly fusing into his gauntlets.

The war troll's axe roared through the air, a whirlwind of destruction.

At the last moment, Damon slid underneath the swing, the air howling around him.

Then—

His shadow blade cleaved through the troll's massive foot.

A deep gash was left in its wake, red blood spilling onto the ground.

Damon flipped onto his knees, immediately dodging as the troll's axe followed, slamming into the earth with a thunderous crash.

A crater formed where he had just stood.

The sheer killing intent rolling off the war troll was suffocating.

Damon exhaled, staring at the shadow blade now fused to his gauntlet.

His eyes turned cold beneath his armor.

'My daggers aren't enough. And this thing can regenerate from any wound.'

His fingers tightened.

'It can outlast me in a battle of attrition. If I use Ashborn, I might pass out before it burns to death. I need time to recover.'

His gaze flicked toward the troll's eyes.

A decision crystallized in his mind.

"Fine... I'll take those first."

Chapter 259 259: The Hand Given

Damon stared down the war troll, watching as its massive body regenerated from minor wounds. In contrast, he was still drenched in blood—his own. He had originally been on the brink of collapse, with only a sliver of life remaining, but after using his attribute points, he had forced his body to adapt, expanding his health points and pushing his limits beyond what they once were.

His body trembled, aching from the abuse it had suffered, yet something deep within him was changing. He could feel it. A clarity washed over him, sharper than ever before. His strength refined itself. His speed honed to perfection. His endurance became something more than just survival—it became power.

This was an evolution.

He was breaking free from the realm of weakness and stepping into the domain of the strong.

If he survived this battle... he would reach the first-class advancement.

Assuming, he thought grimly, I don't die first.

The war troll barreled toward him, its immense axe carving through the landscape like a force of nature. Trees snapped like twigs, toppling over in rapid succession, sending clouds of dust into the air.

Damon took the opportunity. He lunged forward, slicing his dagger at the war troll's stomach.

The blade met flesh—

But it was pointless.

The wound barely registered, sealing itself almost instantly, leaving behind nothing more than a shallow scratch.

Damon didn't hesitate. He rolled to the side as the troll's massive foot came crashing down, shaking the very ground beneath him.

His mind moved faster than his battered body. He leapt onto its arm just as the war troll slapped at its own skin, trying to crush him like an insect.

But Damon moved with the grace of a predator. His Parkour skill activated, his feline-like reflexes allowing him to weave through the attacks.

With a swift motion, he flipped and landed on the war troll's face.

The troll's lips curled into a wicked grin.

It opened its maw wide—jagged teeth snapping at him like a bear trap—

Damon twisted mid-air, curling his body as the troll's teeth clamped down just inches away from his legs.

For a split second, the war troll looked amused.

Then Damon drove his dagger straight into its eye.

"ARRRHHH... MY EYE!"

The troll roared in agony, stumbling back, massive hands clawing at its own face in a desperate attempt to dislodge the blade.

But it was buried too deep.

And its fingers—too massive, too clumsy—couldn't pry it free.

Damon had no time to savor his small victory. The troll's flailing sent him flying. He slammed into the ground, his body skidding across the dirt before tumbling to a stop. His shadow armor cracked from the impact, the living darkness writhing as it struggled to mend itself.

A sharp, metallic taste filled his mouth.

He coughed—blood spilling from his lips.

But he laughed.

A broken, rasping sound.

"Hah... ha... ha..."

He staggered to his feet, feeling his ribs shift painfully under his flesh.

The war troll, still clawing at its ruined eye, finally stopped its futile attempts.

Its solution?

It simply let it regenerate, the dagger still buried inside, leaving it blind in one eye but very much alive.

Its remaining eye locked onto Damon.

"DIE, TINY HUMAN!"

The troll charged.

Damon had no time to dodge.

The sheer force of the troll's massive body colliding with him sent him hurtling like a ragdoll across the battlefield. His shadow armor barely held together, the black tendrils desperately trying to knit themselves back into shape.

His grip on his remaining dagger slipped.

He hit the ground hard, his body bouncing before coming to a rough stop.

Pain flared through him, but he could not afford to stay down.

He rolled to the side, forcing himself up—

And as he did, his Pale Blood Veins skill flared to life beneath his cracked armor.

His cold, lifeless eyes stared ahead, bloodshot and soaked in crimson.

Even in his battered state, his gaze burned with defiance.

And with murderous intent.

The war troll reached out to grab him, its massive fingers closing in like a cage of death.

Damon dodged, twisting away with desperate agility. His hand shot into the shadows of his armor, pulling free two arrows with hollow tips.

The cold mountain air around him seemed to shudder. He could feel the spirits of the land react to the presence of the arrows. These weren't ordinary weapons—these were cursed ore arrows.

Without hesitation, he stabbed both arrows into the war troll's wrist vein.

The beast barely flinched, its pain tolerance too immense to care about something as small as an arrow wound.

But Damon wasn't done.

He pivoted sharply—breaking the arrow tips inside the troll's flesh.

A guttural growl rumbled from the beast's throat, but before it could react, Damon rolled beneath its massive legs, maneuvering himself up onto its broad, mountainous back.

The war troll snarled, then fell backward, attempting to crush him under its sheer weight.

Damon leapt off at the last second, landing on solid ground just as the creature slammed down with a thunderous impact.

Its back was exposed.

Damon didn't waste a second—

He pulled out an entire quiver's worth of cursed ore arrows and plunged them into its gut.

One after another.

Then—he broke them off inside its flesh.

The war troll groaned in pain, a deep, horrible sound that shook the air. Blood poured from the wounds, dark and sluggish.

It swiped wildly, catching Damon mid-air with the force of a landslide.

The impact sent him flying.

He crashed into the dirt, rolling violently before skidding to a stop. His armor of shadows cracked and writhed, the black tendrils struggling to mend themselves.

The war troll grunted as it pushed itself up, its massive body trembling slightly.

Then, for the first time—it looked down at its wounds.

And realized something was wrong.

The wounds weren't healing.

Its single remaining eye widened in horror.

"Me... not heal...?"

Damon coughed, a spray of dark red leaving his lips as he forced himself to his feet. His vision blurred, his body screaming in agony.

"You can't heal from cursed ore..." His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. "Even if your kind is resistant to the poison, the curse lingers..."

The war troll snarled.

It gripped its massive axe in one hand now, its stance shifting.

It no longer saw him as prey.

It saw him as a threat.

Damon grinned beneath his cracked armor.

Then—he unleashed it.

Omen of Dread.

A crushing, oppressive aura filled the battlefield. A chill ran through the air, sinking into the bones of everything alive.

The war troll froze.

Its one functioning eye dilated, its massive frame locking up for the slightest moment.

And that moment—

Was all Damon needed.

He charged.

The troll swung its massive left hand in panic—Damon leapt onto it, using its own movement to propel himself upward. He climbed with reckless speed, dagger in one hand, and in the other—

Another cursed ore arrow.

As he reached its face, he lunged, aiming to plunge the arrow into its skull—

But the war troll reacted.

It let go of its axe—

And caught him.

Its massive hand wrapped around his body, crushing him with terrifying force.

Damon gasped in agony.

The pressure caved in his shadow armor, his ribs creaking under the force.

"Arghhh...!"

But he didn't struggle.

Instead—he drove the arrow into the gap between its fingers, forcing its grip to loosen slightly.

And then—he lunged forward.

His arms couldn't reach its eye.

So instead—

He used his face.

With a snarl, he removed his shadow helm, revealing his bloodied, battered face—

And bit down onto the troll's remaining eye.

The taste of blood and flesh filled his mouth, the thick, slimy texture making him want to retch—

But he bit down harder.

The troll screamed.

"RAHHHRHHH—!"

It yanked him away—

But too late.

The eye was ripped from its socket, still clenched between Damon's teeth.

A bloody tendril of nerve and flesh snapped, the sickening taste of raw gore spreading on his tongue.

The war troll shrieked, stumbling backward in blind agony.

Its massive hands clawed at its ruined face, red blood streaming down its cheeks.

Damon hit the ground hard, his body barely responding anymore.

His armor of shadows lay shattered, his limbs trembling, blood seeping from every wound.

He could feel it—

Death's embrace.

His vision darkened.

His breath was weak.

He was dying.

...No.

Not yet.

With a snarl, he forced his broken arm forward, dragging himself through the dirt—

Toward the battle axe the war troll had dropped.

His cold, bloodshot eyes burned with one final, unyielding will.

He would not die.

Not until his enemy was dead first.

This was the hand he was dealt.

And this—

Would be the hand he dealt back.

This was his hand. And he would deal it back—brutal, final, and merciless.

Chapter 260 260: Death Dealer

Damon's whole life had been one long, painful journey. Crawling in a pool of his own blood just to stay alive was nothing new to him. It had happened far too many times, and each time, he had gritted his teeth, refusing to die. He lived just so his sister could have a chance.

But this time was different.

As he dragged himself through his own blood toward the fallen axe, there was no thought of survival—only the overwhelming desire to kill the war troll. Every inch of his broken body ached for nothing else.

The troll thundered blindly, its massive feet crushing the earth, sniffing at the air. Blood dripped from its ruined eye socket, pooling around its nose. It paused, flaring its nostrils, snot and blood mixing as it searched for him. Its ears twitched, listening intently for the human's movements. Surely, the human had reached his limit by now.

It smiled, its tusks glistening.

"Human... will eat you. Rip you to pieces... crush with jaw..."

Damon took a slow, silent breath. The troll turned its head slightly, catching his scent in the air.

"Got human..." it rumbled, before leaping toward him, the ground shaking beneath its massive weight.

Damon forced his broken body to move. He rolled at the last second, his shadow-wreathed armor writhing around him as he crashed against a boulder, fresh blood smearing across its surface. His breath was weak, his vision blurring.

Lying there, his eyes drifted upward, toward the night sky. The stars shimmered, constellations burning brightly in the heavens. The twin moons hung above him, one of them was called Luna. A name shared by the an unknown and unworshiped moon goddess—A dear friend of the goddess of doom.

But to Damon, that name meant something else.

"Luna..." he whispered, his lips barely moving.

His sister's name.

His shadow twisted erratically around him—a warning. His energy was nearly depleted.

"Goodbye, Luna..."

That was his final whisper into the night.

The war troll caught the faint murmur, its ears twitching at the sound. But Damon had expected that. As the monster barreled toward him, fist raised to crush him into the dirt, he closed his eyes—

And sacrificed his stats.

A flood of mana poured into his shadow, igniting them like an infernal blaze.

Agony.

The pain was beyond description, searing through every nerve in his body. It was like being burned alive ten times over. His mind screamed, his body convulsed, but he held on. Black flames erupted from his hands, consuming the war troll in an all-devouring inferno.

The beast howled in agony, its flesh blistering and peeling away. It tried to regenerate, but the fire scorched both its body and soul, severing its ability to heal.

Damon forced himself upright, his eyes burning with shadowed fire. He barely registered the system notification flashing in his mind.

[Mastery: Pain Resistance +3]

It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

All that mattered was the troll's death.

"Let's burn... together..."

He lunged, grabbing onto its neck as the beast thrashed violently. Flames engulfed them both, the immolating heat clashing with freezing darkness. The war troll tried to shake him off, but Damon clung tighter, his grip unyielding. His body was breaking apart, his mana and shadow draining at a terrifying rate.

If he kept using Ashborn... he would die.

But that didn't matter.

"Die... DIE... LET'S ALL DIE TOGETHER!"

His voice was a maddened roar, echoing through the night like the shriek of a vengeful specter.

The troll crashed into trees, smashing through the ground, its charred flesh cracking and splitting. Its muscles were exposed, its remaining eye burnt to nothing. It finally collapsed, its body twitching as it struggled to regenerate. Its breath came in weak, rasping gasps.

Damon lay motionless on the ground. Blood and shadow coated his broken body. His vision darkened.

Then—he coughed.

Consciousness returned in a slow, agonizing wave. He forced himself to move, staggering toward the massive troll's axe. His fingers barely curled around the handle before his strength failed him, sending him back to the ground.

And then, a whisper.

Not from the system.

Something else.

Something far more ancient.

[Merchant in blood... Dealer in death... Your life is drenched in carnage. Your defiance has reached the heavens. Your resentment had been heard by the Unknown God.]

[You have awakened the unique class: Death Dealer.]

[Class skill Dealers Hand: Give back life's cruel hand ....with death.]

[Your fable begins.]

The voice faded, and with it, a rush of power surged through his broken body. System notifications flared before his exhausted eyes.

[Rank Up... Class: Death Dealer.]

[Class Skill: Dealer's Hand unlocked.]

[Class stat distribution applied.]

[HP +200]

[Mana +4000]

[Strength +700]

[Agility +600]

[Speed +1000]

[Endurance +500]

[You are now known to the world. The Unseen Sovereign watches you, Death Dealer.]

Damon didn't have time to process it. The moment his HP replenished, strength flooded his body.

His exhaustion vanished.

His vision sharpened.

He felt like he was about to explode with power.

But there was only one thing he wanted.

He lifted his gaze toward the dying war troll.

And smiled.

Damon reached for the massive battle axe, gripping it with a single hand despite his battered body. The weight felt insignificant in his grasp as he dragged it across the blood-soaked ground, the grinding noise echoing through the battlefield. The war troll, broken and burned beyond recognition, could hear death approaching but lacked the strength to resist. Damon limped forward, his body trembling, his eyelids heavy as if the weight of the world pressed down on him.

The troll slowly lifted its ruined head, its charred face contorted in pain. Its tusks, once a symbol of might, were cracked and blackened. Yet, instead of fear, there was a calm acceptance in its movements. It raised its neck, offering itself to fate.

"Goddess... no care about ugly trolls... Tusk pray. Unknown god... take my soul..."

A single tear slipped down its ruined face, vanishing into the mess of blood and burnt flesh. Damon stopped in front of it, his grip tightening on the axe. The goddess of doom had forsaken this creature race. It sought peace, not salvation. He could grant it that.

Lifting the axe high, its blade gleaming beneath the moonlight, he met the troll's gaze one final time.

"I offer your soul to the Unknown God."

The troll smiled—an eerie, almost grateful expression—as its head was severed in a single, clean stroke. Blood erupted from the stump, a crimson geyser marking the end of its suffering.

[You have slain Tusk the War Troll.]

[You have leveled up.]

[You have gained 70 attribute points.]

[You have awakened the skill: Shadow Movement.]

Damon exhaled slowly, glancing at his shadow as it twisted unnaturally. The darkness responded to his call, creeping toward the fallen troll's corpse, consuming it whole.

[You have gained 10 attribute points.]

[You have acquired the skill: Bloodletting.]

Kneeling, Damon tilted his head back, staring at the twin moons above. His body screamed in agony, but he had no time to rest. His friends—if they were still alive—might need him. He forced himself to his feet, staggering toward their last known position.

Then, laughter.

Low, cruel, and echoing from the darkness of the forest. Something else lurked nearby, watching. Amused.

Damon halted, his grip tightening around the axe as black flames erupted from his palm, darkening the night with the cold fire of Ashborn. His voice was razor-sharp, laced with exhaustion but unwavering.

"If you don't want to burn... I suggest you leave."

Silence followed. A long pause, as if the creature was weighing its options. Then, its presence faded, retreating into the darkness.

Damon exhaled, lowering his hand. Turning away, he gathered what remained of his weapons, adjusting the massive axe on his shoulder. His shadow armor flickered, unraveling to reveal his broken body and the tattered remains of his combat uniform beneath.

With slow, pained steps, he pressed forward.