

Shadow 261

Chapter 261 261: Thunder....

Sylvia's dirt- and soot-covered face bore the streaks of dried tears, but her eyes remained sharp, unwavering. Her broken arm had mostly healed, as had the others' wounds, but the cost of that healing left her drained. Even so, exhaustion wasn't what kept her standing. It was grief, frustration, and rage.

She was furious that Damon had stayed behind to hold off a war troll while they retreated. The mere thought of it made her blood boil. But she had no choice but to trust him. He had told her to have faith. So she would.

Behind her, the only path forward was a narrow, rickety rope bridge swaying over a deep chasm. Below, there was nothing but darkness, an abyss stretching down the mountain's side. The wind howled through the ravine, rattling the fragile ropes. Crossing was risky—but cutting it off would trap Damon on the other side? That was unthinkable.

Sylvia clutched her bow tightly, standing firm. She would wait. No matter the odds.

A deep, guttural roar echoed in the distance. The war troll was approaching.

The others prepared themselves for battle. Leona clenched her fists at her sides, her entire body trembling—not with fear, but with barely restrained fury. The killing intent radiating off her was thick enough to choke the air itself. She wasn't just ready to fight; she was ready to kill.

Evangeline took her place at the front, assuming leadership in Damon's absence. Normally, Sylvia handled that role, her vast knowledge and ability to provide support fire making her an ideal battlefield commander. But for now, she remained at the back, her sharp eyes scanning the terrain.

The war troll emerged from the darkness, its massive form illuminated by the pale moonlight. It exhaled heavily, mist rising from its nostrils. There were no trees in the barren mountain pass—only scattered boulders and the cold, open night.

Sylvia bit her lip, her expression like that of a vengeful widow. She didn't see the other war troll. She didn't see Damon. He must still be fighting.

The troll stepped forward, gripping its crude club in both hands. Its voice was slow, guttural.

"Me think you goddess-race run across bridge... cut rope."

Sylvia's eyes darkened. That wasn't an option. They would not abandon Damon.

She closed her eyes, and in that brief moment, a vision surged into her mind—a forest in flames, an inferno swallowing the trees. She felt the heat on her skin, saw the black smoke billowing toward the heavens. She saw it all in the pages of a book.

When she opened her eyes, all hesitation was gone. Only cold, murderous resolve remained.

Raising her bow, she drew an arrow, her voice as steady as the steel tip aimed at the troll's heart.

"I can see the future. You don't live to see the sunrise."

Sylvia's bow pulsed with the full glow of her lunar magic, the energy coalescing into a spiraling arrow of radiant light. With a sharp twang, she loosed it, the streak of white slicing through the night like a falling star.

The war troll didn't even react.

The arrow struck its left side and detonated with a deafening crack. Flesh and bone ruptured as the explosion ripped through its torso, sending a rain of warm blood and shredded organs across the battlefield.

The creature gasped, staggering to its knees. The others watched in stunned silence, their eyes wide in disbelief.

Matlock exhaled, relief washing over him. "It's dead..."

But the young fairy couldn't have been more wrong.

The war troll groaned, its hulking frame shifting as it forced itself upright. A wet, sickening sound filled the air as it reached down, scooping up its own spilled entrails and shoving them back into its open gut. Muscles twitched, flesh mended—the gaping wound sealing itself as its body regenerated.

Its brown eyes locked onto them, dark and unyielding.

"Me no die easy..."

With a bellowing roar, it raised its massive club and charged straight for Sylvia.

Evangeline's grip tightened around her rapier, her teeth grinding. She wouldn't let it reach her.

With a battle cry, her sword ignited in radiant energy, her entire body glowing as she lunged forward. The troll snarled and lifted a hand to shield its eyes from her blinding light, but it didn't stop. It closed the distance, ignoring the searing pain as her blade slashed into its thick hide, its flesh regenerating almost instantly.

It swung its club downward, aiming to crush her.

A thunderous boom shook the air as a bolt of lightning slammed into its side, followed by the sharp sting of steel piercing its ribs. The troll grunted, glancing down to see Leona at its flank, her greatsword buried deep in its gut. Her body crackled with raw electricity, her golden eyes burning with fury.

"Where's my friend, you bastard?! How dare you hurt him?!"

Her emotions surged, and with them, so did her power. Lightning and wind spiraled around her, the air itself trembling under her rage.

The sky grew darker.

The troll snarled and swiped at her with a massive palm, sending her hurtling through the air. She slammed into a boulder with a painful crack, her sword still lodged in its torso.

It reached down, gripping the blade, but before it could rip it free, a hail of lunar arrows rained down from above, slamming into its head. Ice exploded across its shoulders as Matlock soared overhead, unleashing a freezing blast.

The troll growled, more annoyed than hurt, but before it could react, Xander slid beneath its legs.

Instead of stabbing, he infused gravity into his spear and slammed it down exactly on Leona's greatsword pushing it further inside the trolls body.

Leona, groaning, forced herself to stand, dust and blood covering her frame. A slow, wicked grin spread across her lips.

"You're not so scary, ugly troll..."

Electricity crackled from her palm, the charge growing, pulsing.

"My sword's made of walkway steel. Great conductor."

Evangeline's eyes widened. She turned to the others.

"Take cover—Xander, barrier!"

The bolt surged from Leona's palm, striking the troll square in the chest.

But she wasn't finished.

They were in the mountains. The storm above had been gathering for awhile. And she was furious.

She didn't have enough mana? Fine.

She'd call upon the storm itself.

Lifting her arm to the heavens, she let her fury fuel her power. The sky blackened, thunder rumbling deep in the clouds. The heavens answered her rage, a mighty pillar of lightning crashing down in a blinding flash.

The ground beneath her cracked.

Her skin seared.

Her body glowed red with the intensity of the raw energy flowing through her.

And then—she redirected it.

Her palm pointed at the hilt of the greatsword still lodged in the war troll's gut.

The troll's eyes widened in horror. Gone was its confidence.

"Oh... oooh oo—"

The world turned white.

A boom shattered the silence, the mountain trembling from the sheer force. The war troll's screams mixed with Leona's furious roar, their echoes swallowed by the storm.

As the light faded, Leona collapsed to her knees. Her vision blurred. Her body refused to move.

A ancient whisper echoed in her mind.

[Heart of Glass, Bringer of Storms... you are known to the storms.]

[You have awakened the unique class: Storm Bringer.]

Storm Bringer

"Your heart is pure, unfitting for one known to the storms..."

[Class Skill – Wrath]

Your strength surges with your emotions—let the world know you as thunder.

[Your fable begins.]

Her eyes fluttered shut. It was over.

But then—

A cough.

The thick smoke cleared, revealing a monstrous silhouette.

The war troll still stood.

Its club trembled in its grip, its body swaying, but its wounds were closing.

Leona's lips parted, a single word barely forming.

Her vision darkened.

And then, everything went black.

Chapter 262 262: Dawn Seeker

The scent of blood and dirt was a stark contrast to the memory flashing through Leona's mind as she fell unconscious...

In her head, the dorm kitchen remained pristine as always, kept immaculate by the academy's maids. The scent of freshly prepared food filled the air, and by the stove stood a young boy in an academy uniform, his expression gloomy.

It was a recent memory—her and Damon sneaking around the war halls after hours, seeking a midnight snack. Well, the snack was for her, though she had made Damon cook an entire course meal. Some days, he was unusually hungry and ended up eating just as much as she did.

"Bestie, what are you making?" she had asked, leaning over the counter with a grin.

Damon turned his head, his face shadowed with irritation.

"I get paid to cook for you, Leona. Call me 'bestie' again, and I'll make your food salty."

She pouted, puffing her cheeks.

"You're so gloomy and negative. No wonder I'm your only friend."

Damon sneered.

"I don't have friends. We aren't friends either."

Leona bit her lip before her playful smile returned.

"I'll give you ten thousand zeni to say I'm your bestie."

Damon's frown faded, and a sly smirk played on his lips.

"You're the best, Bestie."

Leona shook her head, the memory of softer days pulling her deeper into unconsciousness. In her mind, she whispered a small apology...

'I'm sorry... I couldn't kill it, Damon...'

Evangeline's eyes gazed at the battlefield where Leona had unleashed her devastating lightning attack. The war troll stood in the center, its skin now charred and blackened in patches, its breath labored.

Matlock gritted his teeth. "It survived Leona's attack..."

Xander lowered his barrier and rushed to Leona's side, kneeling as he checked her condition. His eyes widened in shock.

"S-She... she reached her first class advancement..."

The revelation stunned the others. It was a great achievement—under normal circumstances, they would have celebrated. But right now, it was meaningless. Leona was unconscious, completely drained, unable to fight.

Xander's gaze shifted back to the war troll, which was now glaring at them with a dark, murderous expression. The sheer pressure of its presence made it feel even more terrifying than before.

"We can't beat that thing as we are... we'll just die..."

Sylvia stepped forward, tossing her bow aside. Her hands reached for her waist, drawing the twin short blades strapped there. Her grip tightened, her knuckles turning white.

"Fine by me... advance or die."

That's what Damon would have said if he were here. She wondered if he was still alive.

Leona had shown them the way. She had brought this war troll to its knees with her attack.

"Let's see how many more attacks it can heal from."

Evangeline's eyes widened as she looked at Sylvia. Her friend was usually reserved, but she had changed after meeting Damon. In fact, all of them had. That arrogant, stubborn, blunt person had forced them to see themselves for what they truly were.

"Then what am I... w-who am I...?"

She gripped her sword tightly. Something inside her told her that this battle would give her the answers she needed.

Sylvia already knew what she wanted—it was plain to see. She would go for it, no hesitation. Leona was pure of heart, always doing as she pleased. Xander was steadfast and unshakable, a wall against any storm.

Evangeline's gaze shifted to Matlock. She didn't know much about the fairy, even though they were classmates. But even he had changed. The fear that once lingered in his eyes was gone, replaced by pure will. He moved through the sky like a snowflake, dancing between life and death.

But what about her?

'What about me...?'

The battlefield thundered as Sylvia roared, her twin blades flashing in the dim light. She lunged at the war troll, her body a silver streak in the night. The impact sent her flying, her body slamming into the dirt. Injured but unbroken, she dragged herself to her feet.

Xander stood firm, using his body as a shield, taking blow after crushing blow. Matlock soared above, weaving through the air, drawing the troll's attention away from the unconscious Leona.

The battle raged on.

Evangeline saw an opening and lunged, aiming for the troll's head. But she wasn't fast enough. A stray attack slammed into her, sending her hurtling through the air. Blood splattered as she crashed onto the battlefield, gasping for breath.

What about her? What did she want? She had believed in justice her whole life. But Damon...

Damon Grey...

She pushed herself up, raising her sword, roaring as she charged forward.

The war troll caught Xander mid-motion and smashed him into the ground. His body should have been shattered beyond repair, but he stood up, bloodied and battered, his spear still in hand.

Evangeline struck at its arm, slicing through flesh. The troll howled. It raised its massive fist to crush her, but Matlock's ice surged up, freezing its joints in place.

In that moment, Evangeline understood. Damon... he was someone who did as he pleased, a man driven by a broken will that saw only darkness. He had called her justice weak, a product of blind elitism.

Evangeline unleashed a wave of light magic, illuminating the battlefield. The troll's blood painted the earth.

"What were the exact words he used...?"

She shook her head. Here she was, fighting for her life, yet all she could think about was one of her countless arguments with Damon.

"Who have you ever helped? You speak of justice, but only the weak cling to that idea. The strong create justice and force it onto the weak."

It was just another one of his cynical beliefs.

"You are like justice, Evangeline. Blinded by your radiance. Justice is blind and powerful—that's why it only punishes the weak while the strong escape it. You are like justice... blinded by your radiance."

Her breath caught. Her body froze.

The war troll swung.

Xander's eyes widened. "Evangeline, watch out—!"

He lunged, tackling her out of the way, shielding her behind a boulder.

Evangeline's expression was distant.

"You've lived in the lap of luxury. Who have you ever helped?"

She muttered under her breath. Not his exact words... but the meaning was there. The doubt. The truth she had ignored.

"If I am wrong, then what is justice...?"

She shook her head.

"I was wrong... I have been wrong... I want justice, but what is justice?"

The battlefield blurred. The world shifted.

Then—

A voice. Ancient. Warm. Inviting, yet distant.

[You are blinded by your radiance... lost in the dark despite your blinding light.... Seek the light of true justice...amid your false radiance.]

[You have awakened the Unique Class: Dawn Seeker.]

[Class: Dawn Seeker]

"Your light is blinding, leaving you in the dark. Despite your radiance, it blinds you to the truth."

[Skill – Purge]

"Absorbs the impurities your light has denied and cleanses this world with your rotting flesh."

Evangeline felt it—her body shifting, evolving. Her strength surged. Her mana sharpened, growing dense and overwhelming. Clarity washed over her like dawn breaking through the night.

A blinding glow erupted from her.

Slowly, she stood.

Light surged through her veins, illuminating her entire being.

She turned toward the war troll, eyes burning with newfound understanding.

Then, with a burst of radiance, she charged.

Chapter 263: Unbreakable

Xander was in great pain. His body ached, and he was bleeding. Time and time again, he used his body as a shield to block the massive hand of the war troll from crushing his friends. He had originally created a thin layer of gravity around himself, making his body denser to withstand the blows and avoid instant death. But that barrier was too thin—it shattered easily.

It was then that Xander came to a realization. When that barrier broke, and he was sent flying, he thought he would die. His life flashed before his eyes... but death never came.

Xander accepted a lot of things in that moment. Looking back now, he had changed.

He used to avoid commoners, thinking they were inferior... dishonorable. But nobles weren't that great either. The so-called blue bloods were just as bad—some even worse. He had been surrounded by people who were utterly deplorable.

His thoughts wavered as the troll tossed him around like a rag doll. Yet his body didn't break—it was changing. He caught a glimpse of Evangeline standing behind a boulder, her eyes distant, as if she too was experiencing an awakening of her own.

Xander was a noble. He had expectations to live up to, especially now. His older brother had returned from the demon wars as a shell of his former self, leaving Xander with an even greater burden.

"I have to be exceptional. I have to be an exemplary noble..."

The image of his father's steadfast back appeared in his mind. His father would not run from a war troll. He would not lose to a commoner like Damon Grey.

Xander raised his spear with a roar, charging at the war troll. His blade slashed through the air as he dodged its massive fists, striking its belly with a powerful thrust. Sylvia followed in his wake, her blade glowing with a white radiance, her movements almost unnatural—like a woman possessed.

Matlock darted around the battlefield like a snowflake caught in the wind, graceful and untouchable. The troll roared in frustration, swiping at him as if shooing away an annoying fly, but the young fairy remained just out of reach.

Xander's eyes snapped to Sylvia. The troll's massive arm swung toward her blind spot—if that blow landed, she would die. Without thinking, he rushed forward, conjuring barriers of gravity magic. He braced himself between her and the club, the force of impact hitting him like a runaway carriage. The barriers shattered like fine glass, his magic crumbling in an instant. He gritted his teeth as blood trickled down his lips.

"I won't lose... I will be strong... I will be unshakable... I will live by honor... I won't lose..."

The force sent him skidding backward, but Sylvia used the opportunity. She rolled past the troll and slashed at its back, her blade cutting deep. The monster roared in agony as an ethereal glow surrounded her. Something was awakening within her. A spectral book began to take shape by her side, but Xander—already on his knees—barely noticed.

The war troll's eyes locked onto him, ignoring the others. It had smacked him down again and again, yet he refused to die. His body was battered, bloodied, but he still stood.

With a guttural snarl, the troll advanced, each step shaking the earth. Xander tried to push himself up, but another devastating strike sent him crashing into the dirt. Blood sprayed from his wounds as the club struck him over and over.

The troll growled, frustrated. "Me see how much pain human can take..."

Xander's vision blurred. His body was screaming, yet he forced himself to stand.

Matlock, hovering above, eyes wide with horror, unleashed a flurry of ice spells. Sylvia slashed at the troll's body, stabbing and cutting it, yet it ignored them both, choosing to regenerate so it could finish Xander first.

Matlock turned desperately toward Evangeline. She stood off to the side, lost in a trance, her expression unreadable.

"Evangeline! Evangeline! What are you doing?! You have to help Xander!"

But she didn't react. It was as if she existed in another world.

He turned to Sylvia instead. "Sylvia! Use your healing magic! Heal him!"

She didn't respond. Instead, her eyes remained locked on the illusory book forming around her. A strange calm settled over her as she whispered,

"He will live to see the dawn..."

Matlock's heart pounded. What did she mean? Was she refusing to heal Xander? Even as he stood there, bleeding out?

The troll roared in frustration, striking Xander again and again. Blood splattered the battlefield as Xander staggered. His cold, determined gaze locked onto the creature's club. That was its weapon. He crossed his arms as another strike sent him sliding backward.

"I vow to stand until I take your weapon."

As he uttered those words, something shifted. The club cracked as it struck him. Xander, bleeding and exhausted, gritted his teeth.

"I'm not Damon Grey. I can't be sneaky or play tricks. I fight the way Xander Ravenscroft does—head-on. I stand until I break. It may seem pathetic to you... but this is who I am."

The troll snarled, lifting its club for one final, crushing blow.

"Die! Die! Die!"

The club came down with all its might—only to shatter into countless splinters.

Xander remained standing. Blood dripped from his wounds, his breath ragged, but he had not fallen. A grin stretched across his face. "Heh... I won."

The war troll's eyes widened in disbelief.

Then, in the distance, an ancient voice echoed in Xander's mind.

[You are surrounded by the glitter of false gold. Lies and deceit are everywhere. Beware.]

[You have awakened the unique class: Oathkeeper.]

[Class: Oathkeeper]

"Honor-bound and steadfast, yet surrounded by jackals and lies."

Skill – [The Vow]

"Your will is as unyielding as your word—once committed, neither you nor your body will break."

Xander collapsed to his knees. His body overflowed with newfound power, yet he had lost too much blood. Darkness threatened to pull him under.

Then, he saw her. Evangeline, her body shining with blinding light, fully awakened as she charged toward the war troll.

He smiled weakly. "I managed to buy her some time...heh..we'll win."

As the battle raged on, his vision darkened. A final whisper echoed in his ears.

[Your fable has begun.]

Chapter 264: The Ultimate Secret, The Ultimate Name...

Matlock's body ached, torn and battered. He bit his lip, holding onto the remains of his combat uniform pressed against his chest. Beneath the dirty bandages wrapped tightly around him, his wounds throbbed, but oddly enough, most of the blood coating his body wasn't his own.

He was filthy, slick with dried crimson, yet of the entire group, he was the least injured. It wasn't because he had run from battle—he had fought just as fiercely as the others—but he had danced through the chaos, weaving between enemies like a lethal specter, striking with precision and vanishing before they could retaliate.

Matlock's gaze drifted to Xander, who lay unconscious, his body battered beyond recognition. He had taken blow after blow, shielding them with his own flesh. Nearby, Leona was also unconscious—she had been the one to deal the initial damage with her lightning, weakening the war troll just enough for them to stand a chance.

Without her, they would have been dead already. Both of them had reached First-Class advancement, but their newfound power was useless now that they lay unmoving on the battlefield. Their only hope rested on Evangeline.

She had advanced as well, stepping into the First-Class, gaining a class of her own. Matlock didn't know what kind of power she had awakened, but it was their last chance to defeat the hulking war troll before them.

With a blinding flash of light, the air rippled as Evangeline surged forward. Her fist, wreathed in golden radiance, slammed toward the troll with a roar. The beast raised its massive arm to meet her strike head-on. Their fists collided, and the very ground beneath them caved in from the force. The wind howled, kicking up debris, but Evangeline did not budge. Her golden eyes burned with unwavering determination.

The troll snarled, raising its other arm to swat her away. Before it could strike, Sylvia appeared at its side, an ethereal, illusionary book floating in front of her.

With a silent resolve, she slashed at the creature. The troll reacted, lifting its leg to kick her, but Sylvia simply glanced at the book. Then, she sidestepped, her movements effortless, almost as if she had foreseen the attack. Her bloodshot eyes gleamed with something terrifying.

"Die."

Matlock watched the two girls, his heart pounding. They moved without hesitation, without doubt, as if they had already seen the end of this battle. Their confidence was absolute.

"I can be like them... I can be strong... I'm not scared..."

Like a snowflake caught in a storm, Matlock's wings fluttered, carrying him into the heart of battle. The ground trembled beneath them, the air thick with raw power. He could feel Evangeline's overwhelming aura, and as if answering her presence, Sylvia's own energy surged, rising to match her intensity.

Something shifted.

Sylvia's illusionary book solidified, its once-blank pages filling with unseen text. The moment her eyes scanned its contents, she fell into a trance. The war troll noticed the shift, its primal instincts screaming at it to act, but instead of attacking, it leapt back several paces, taking a moment to regenerate. It watched Evangeline warily, the golden glow of her body crackling with unrestrained magical energy.

"How you so strong?" The troll's guttural voice rumbled across the battlefield. "Me kill many First-Class... none strong like you..."

Evangeline didn't answer. Her gaze remained locked onto the war troll, her senses fully attuned to the power swelling within Sylvia. If she had reached First-Class advancement, then she could be the key. Together, they could end this fight.

Sylvia's eyes glowed white as she focused on the book before her. A distant whisper echoed in her mind.

[Careful what you wish to know, White Seer... The new gods guard their secrets more closely than the unknowable old ones. Pray you never uncover them...]

The voice broke off, glitching, before speaking again, this time as if revealing a great secret.

[...The Unseen Sovereign seeks to reveal their Lie...]

[You have awakened the unique class: White Seer.]

[Class: White Seer]

"You seek knowledge unbound by time, glimpsing the future—and dreading what you see... Do you dare to know?"

Skill – [Altair's Journey Book]

A copy of the unknown god's tome of infinite knowledge, ever-growing with each vision. But with every truth revealed, a part of you is lost... You have glimpsed a horrible truth. Speak not of His name... Speak not of His name... Speak not of His name... This book carries the omniscience of a true god... the infinite knowledge of a true demon king... You hold all in your hands..... for a price.

Sylvia stood frozen, a strange sense of dread washing over her—yet there was also an eerie serenity. She saw the name... She tried to read it in her mind, but she could not comprehend it. She could not think it. She opened her mouth, but no sound came. It was impossible to speak it.

In her mind, she thought of Damon. Slowly, she whispered, the book showed her images of him.... making her an offer.

[Do you wish to reject boundless knowledge?]

"I accept."

The voice of the world paused before repeating,

[Do you wish to reject boundless pain?]

"I accept."

[Do you wish to reject the ire of the gods?]

"I accept."

A deep silence followed—then the voice returned, almost resigned.

[His influence deepens within Doom's World...]

[Your fable begins, White Seer.]

Sylvia did not understand what had happened, but the first thing the book showed her was... Damon. It had offered her Damon. It had shown her Damon. It promised her Damon—if she was willing to make sacrifices. It had offered her boundless knowledge as long as she was willing to pay the price.

Those were the two things she desired, the former she didn't even know she wanted until recently.

If this book contained the answers to every question imaginable, then she needed nothing else. She only had to give it something of equal value in return.

She raised her head. She had seen how the troll would die. That was her initial question: how to kill this creature that kept regenerating despite their meager strength.

The war troll was catching its breath. Sylvia walked up to Evangeline, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Matlock will kill the troll. Even if you fight, it will die by his hand."

"Save your strength...we'll need it.."

Evangeline remained in a battle-ready stance, her body bleeding from earlier injuries. She frowned at Sylvia in horror. Did she expect Matlock to fight that thing alone? He would die.

She pushed Sylvia's hand away. "No, I—"

Before she could finish, Sylvia raised her blade and struck Evangeline's forehead with the hilt, knocking her out cold.

The war troll looked at Sylvia in confusion, its grotesque face contorted in surprise. Matlock gasped.

"Wh-what are you doing?! She was our strongest fighter!"

Sylvia ignored him and turned to the troll. "You will die soon. A shame it won't be by my hand."

She then turned to Matlock. "Forgive me, Matlock. But if you don't fight and advance now, you will die the moment we reach the other side."

Matlock's eyes widened as the troll turned toward him, smiling coldly. This was going to be an easy battle. It would eat him, regain vitality, and then kill the others.

Matlock gritted his teeth. Sylvia had gone mad—that was the only explanation. Why else would she act so strangely?

But Sylvia did not care what he was thinking. She merely looked at the book as her eyes bled. She forced a pained smile and whispered the words Damon had once told her.

"Have faith, Matia."

Matlock's breath caught in his throat. His hands clenched into fists, ice forming at his fingertips. There was no going back now.

Might as well fight.

Like a snowflake in the wind, he would dance to death. But first he would freeze the world over.

Chapter 265 265: Just Me

Matlock could hear the blood dripping from Sylvia's eyes. When he turned his head, she was on the ground, collapsed. He didn't understand what she had just done... why she had taken out Evangeline... why she had knocked out their strongest fighter when the enemy still had fight left in them.

She had said Matlock would die if they crossed the bridge. But wouldn't he die anyway if he fought an angry war troll, even if it looked exhausted?

Matlock had said he wasn't afraid, but now, left alone against the war troll, he felt his nerves tighten. The others were all unconscious behind him. He had to fight.

"No more running away... Matia." Matlock muttered those soft words to himself as the war troll finished catching its breath.

"Hehehehe, all goddess race lose fight. Just you... tiny fairy..."

Matlock took a deep breath, his wings fluttering behind him.

"This isn't Winter Haven anymore... I can..."

Matlock flew at the war troll, its massive fist raised to punch him. Its body was slower than before, likely from the toll of repeatedly regenerating after taking damage.

Matlock dipped low, weaving past the incoming fist. As he did, he unleashed a torrent of ice onto the troll's chest. The beast staggered back, reaching for him, but like an agile dragonfly, he severed over its hands—so close he almost felt its fingers graze his body. He soared higher and unleashed another blast of ice. Shards shot toward the troll, shattering as they struck its thick skin.

The war troll frowned, annoyed, fresh blood mixing with melted ice on its arm.

"Me not die. Me heal... until me eat you."

Matlock took another deep breath. He was tired. His wings ached. He was afraid. He was hungry, wet, bleeding—and worst of all, he smelled horrible. The last part was, oddly, the most unbearable.

He glanced at his torn combat uniform—unisex, practical, and now ruined.

He would have preferred to die in something else.

'Am I going to die here...?' His gaze flickered to his unconscious companions in the distance. They had done their part.

"But how do I kill something that can regenerate...?"

His mind steadied. The war troll reached down, grabbing massive rocks and hurling them at him. Matlock danced through the air, drifting like a snowflake as he evaded the incoming projectiles.

Then, something changed.

A sinister glint shone in the war troll's eyes. It wasn't just reacting to him—it was moving away.

A cold realization settled over Matlock.

He had been trying to lure the troll away from his unconscious party members. But the creature had only been pretending to focus on him. It wanted to get to them.

Matlock gritted his teeth. No hesitation.

He charged down, aiming straight for the war troll, who was now barreling toward the motionless Sylvia.

Matlock roared in his faint androgynous voice, shooting toward the war troll with his body weight firm in the sky. The war troll smiled coldly, turning around to grab Matlock, who had given up safety to protect the others. It reached out.

"I catch you, fairy."

The war troll's massive hands stretched forward, grasping at Matlock. He tried to drift away, but it was too late—the troll's thick fingers brushed against his wings, yanking him downward and slamming him toward a boulder far at the cliff's edge.

The troll had tricked him, forcing him to face it or lose a friend. Matlock felt the crack of his delicate wings, the sharp snap of bones, and the warm rush of blood covering his head.

'Hehe... Sylvia... you placed your faith in the wrong person... Now... we'll all die because of me...'

Tears streamed down Matlock's face. He did not understand why Sylvia did what she did, but it had been an act of trust. He leaned his head against the cold, jagged boulder, his tears mixing with blood as the wind from the deep chasm below howled through the mountains.

The war troll walked toward him, its slow, dark grin widening with malicious delight.

'I tried to fight... for the first time in my life, I tried to do something other than be afraid... but all I can ever do is obey...'

He coughed, blood flecking his lips. "All I can do is dance tragically to someone's tune..."

With the last of his strength, he raised his trembling hand toward the sky, blood dripping from his fingertips as he attempted to summon his magic.

"That's fine by me... I don't mind being stuck as someone's shadow... Whether it's my home, my father, or my twin brother... I've lived in their shadow my whole life, afraid..."

Matlock clenched his fist, forming a single icicle, bitter and full of spite. "Just once, I want to be me. Let me be myself, even if I am only a shadow. Even as a shadow that only knows how to follow and obey... I want to be me... even if I become nothing but a snowflake—beautiful but short-lived."

He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to stand. The ice vibrated, jagged and lethal, his magic twisting into a deadly final act. The war troll's eyes widened, sensing danger, as Matlock unleashed the ice toward its chest. The troll, seeing the attack coming, raised its massive fist to shield itself.

The expected pain never came.

Confused, the troll glanced down, but Matlock was gone. Only bloodstains remained where he had been. The next instant, a sharp pain tore through its legs. It groaned as its tendons were severed, and as it attempted to turn, its own weight betrayed it. It collapsed at the edge of the cliff, its balance lost.

Its eyes widened in shock.

"How...?"

The ground crumbled beneath it. The troll plummeted into the abyss, its scream echoing through the mountains. The last thing it saw was Matlock's cold, bloodstained eyes and his broken wings as it disappeared into the darkness.

Matlock fell to his knees, his torn clothes fluttering in the wind, his breath ragged and heavy. Then, a gentle, ancient voice echoed in his mind.

[Snowflakes are born in the heavens, dancing gracefully in the wind as they drift toward their graves on earth. They melt upon arrival, leaving the world in awe of their fleeting beauty...]

[You have awakened the unique class: Dancing Fairy.]

[Class: Dancing Fairy]

[Oh, little fairy, dance upon the strings. Sway to the whims of your master, a fleeting waltz between beauty and death... Your demise is at hand. What form will you take in death?]

[Skill – Lethal Grace]

[Your movements are fluid and deadly, turning every attack into a flawless dance of death.]

[Your Fable has begun.]

These were the last words Matlock heard as he lay beside the cliff, the cold wind brushing against his delicate skin.

"I want to be... me... Not Matlock... I will be me..."

He closed his eyes.

"No longer Matlock... no longer afraid... Just me."

Chapter 266 266: Familiar Reactions

The sound of metal being dragged across the ground echoed through the night. A young man, battered and looking half-dead, walked down the mountain pass with a pained expression. Yet, the pain did not

come from the many gruesome wounds covering his body—it came from the deep-seated agony caused by the Ashborn skill, the unbearable torment of tenfold the pain of burning alive.

Moonlight streamed down the path, illuminating the horrors lurking in the mountain's shadows. He spread his shadow perception, indifferent to their presence. They did not approach. Perhaps they, too, sensed the madness hidden in his vacant gaze. Or perhaps the horrors at the edge of the Duhu Mountains were not as hostile as those deeper inside. Either way, Damon passed in relative peace, dragging the massive axe of the dead war troll behind him.

It wasn't long before he reached the bridge where his friends were supposed to be. The absence of battle sounds left him with three possibilities. The first they had crossed the bridge and cut it off, leaving him behind. The second they had somehow managed to kill the war troll. The last... the worst—that they had all perished, and another war troll awaited him.

The latter troubled him not because he feared the fight but because he didn't want them to die. A small, buried part of him craved to test his newfound power against another formidable foe. He suppressed that thought as he arrived at the mountain pass. The scent of blood was heavy, the silence unsettling. His vacant gaze swept over the sight before him—his friends, unmoving, covered in blood, with no sign of the war troll.

For the first time in a long while, he felt an emotion more dreadful than the aftereffects of Ashborn's agonizing flames.

He raised his head, shadow perception spreading. His heart sank—until he noticed the faint mist of breath from Evangeline. She was alive. Checking the others, he confirmed they all were.

A breath escaped him. His body wavered, knees hitting the ground. Whether it was from his broken bones, his many wounds, or simply the relief of knowing they had survived, he did not know. He dragged

the troll's massive axe—about the size of a human—and let it fall with a clang before turning his gaze toward the old, rickety bridge.

"How did the war trolls and goblins get past the first time...?"

The bridge didn't look sturdy, but if it could support the weight of war trolls, then it should hold. The real question was what ordeal awaited beyond it. The forest just a few kilometers ahead hid horrors yet unknown.

Shaking the thought aside, Damon leaned down to check on Leona. She was unconscious but very much alive. Something was different. She had reached her first class advancement. He lifted his head, scanning the others.

'They all have...'

He brushed her hair aside with a deep feeling of relief... Leona was alive. One by one, he checked on the others. Evangeline was next; she was also alive, only lightly injured.

"She must have healed herself..."

Next, he moved toward Sylvia. As he approached, his shadow stretched unnaturally, rolling around her, its presence darkening. It stopped over her arm, where she lay in a pool of her own blood, as if clutching something. The shadow hesitated, as if sensing something unseen.

[Ding... Ding...]

The system panel chimed, making Damon frown. He couldn't sense anything unusual, but his shadow remained fixated on Sylvia. Kneeling down, he gently touched her, noting the blood around her eyes. She twitched slightly, her body instinctively reacting, though she remained unconscious. Damon narrowed his eyes at his shadow, his voice low and demanding.

"What are you doing... tell me now."

The shadow recoiled slightly, then shook its head as if dismissing his concern.

Damon didn't believe it. The system had reacted strangely—there was something here. "Tell me..."

His shadow merely gestured, a silent indication that there was nothing to worry about.

He sighed in frustration. He wouldn't get answers today, but he would press his shadow later. However, if his shadow had taken such an interest in Sylvia, it couldn't be ignored. Damon paused, recalling a similar incident—when his shadow had interacted with Lilith Astranova.

"Is this... related to the Unknown God?"

If Sylvia had been touched by a god, she would bear a stigmata. A thought surfaced in his mind, making him hesitate for only a moment. He needed to check. Whispering a quiet apology, he lifted the tattered

fabric of her clothing just enough to examine her bare back. Shadow energy surged through his fingertips as he searched for a divine mark... but he found nothing.

He exhaled, relief mixing with uncertainty. "False alarm... or something I don't understand yet."

Carefully, he placed Sylvia beside the others and moved on to Xander. His friend was still alive, though covered in blood. After confirming his condition, Damon clicked his tongue and dragged Xander forward, unceremoniously tossing him near the unconscious girls.

"Sleep on your own time," he muttered before turning toward the cliff's edge.

The traces of battle were clear—Matlock had sent the war troll plummeting to its death. Damon peered down into the abyss below.

"That's a long fall... It's definitely dead. Or food for whatever horrors dwell down there."

He turned to Matlock, who lay battered but breathing. Damon crouched down, placing his hand on Matlock's chest, feeling for a heartbeat. The rhythm was steady.

"Still alive..."

However, that wasn't the only reason he had checked. His suspicions were confirmed.

"It's as I suspected. Our androgynous friend here is actually a girl."

His gaze lingered on the tight bandages wrapped around her chest, concealing her figure. Damon arched a brow, intrigued.

"How did she even hide all that with just bandages? What's her story..."

He let out a breath before lifting Matlock and placing her beside the others. Then, settling himself next to the massive war axe, he prepared to guard them through the night. Whatever mysteries surrounded Matlock or the strangeness in Sylvia, he would get his answers eventually.

For now, he had one job: ensure his party survived one more night.

His head throbbed with agony, still he remained vigilant...to tired to try anything else.

Not even basic first aid. Chapter 267: Shadow Movement

The morning sun cast a radiant glow, revealing the aftermath of the battle to the world. Damon had no trouble seeing in the dark, so the blood-covered ground, shattered rocks, and torn earth failed to stir any reaction from him.

He sat by the side of his unconscious friends, still gripping the axe that was far too big for him. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion, blood caking his body, yet he remained vigilant.

The night had not been long—most of it was spent fighting. During that time, he had thought about what fate awaited them once they crossed the bridge and reached the Whispering Forest. Looking out toward the distant horizon, Damon saw the path they had taken. The gravity anomaly had already sealed off the region.

He could not guess how long the anomaly would last, sealing off that part of the world. Months? Years? Perhaps it would never fade unless destroyed. For now, he didn't have to worry about the demon army. They were trapped there.

A distant roar shook the ground and rumbled through the air. The pressure increased creating a palpable sense of dread.

"Ashergon..." Damon muttered, recognizing the name of that dreadful dragon. Judging by the intensity of the roar, Ashergon was awake—or at least close to waking up.

"I'd hate to be anywhere near its territory when that happens..."

He could already imagine the dragon somehow finding them and deciding they looked delicious or maybe even flammable.

The night had been short, but Damon had kept himself sane and awake by following a routine. He checked his system panel once more. He had reached a new level, gained two skills, and learned some new knowledge.

He opened the system panel again, the glow reflected in his eyes even though it was actually invisible to everyone else..save for Lilith who was the exception.

[HP: 124/585]

[Mana: 6804/12084]

[Strength: 834]

[Agility: 657]

[Speed: 1185]

[Endurance: 565]

[Class: Death Dealer]

[Shadow: 50]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 50%]

[Shadow Level: 8]

[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] [Dealer's Hand] [Shadow Movement]
[Bloodletting]

[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 power had grown, but his HP alone made it clear he was barely holding on—he had lost too much blood. His stats had received a boost, but on the surface, it didn't seem like much. However, Damon could tell there was a deeper difference. It wasn't just a quantitative change; it was a shift in quality.

If he had one mana point now, it would be equivalent to ten mana points of the version of himself before he obtained his first class.

But the biggest change was his class.

He had received a unique class, one he never thought he would advance into in his lifetime—because he expected someone would have killed him long before he ever reached this point.

After all, he knew himself. He knew his personality and his talents. And he knew the risks he had taken.

Class advancements varied, each one stronger than the last. He didn't know everything about them—the academy only taught them what they needed to know. And now, he had to figure out the rest on his own.

There are seven class advancements from the first class to the seventh. It follows a linear pattern, with each class differing from the last.

The sixth class was also a special case. According to what he had heard, the sixth class was actually three ranks suppressed into one, meaning it had three levels during the ranking change.

One's class might not change at all until the seventh, which was why those two were not counted as separate class advancements despite being full ranks.

He shook his head. He could try to recall everything in one go, but even with the limited information first-years were taught, it was still a lot.

There were different types of classes, ways to move between them, and so much more to consider.

Each class came with a skill slot, but out of the seven advancements, only four granted skills directly. The remaining three required one to acquire skills through dungeons, magical artifacts, or personal learning. Why this was the case, he did not know.

'Ahh, I'm overthinking... again...'

What mattered more was the Unseen Sovereign. The system had mentioned something about the Unseen Sovereign when he awakened. If Damon had to guess, that was the unknown god. As for why he was called that... it was probably just one of his titles. The Goddess of Doom had many titles, all tied to her divine domain.

"So why is he called the Unseen Sovereign...?"

Damon raised his head, staring at the sky, his heart hollow. He didn't know what emotion to feel—joy or dread.

"A god is watching me... a nobody..."

He shook his head. Suppose he wasn't a nobody anymore. Those who reached the first class advancement were awakened, recognized by the world. In the eyes of the world—or even this unknown god—Damon was a Death Dealer.

What a god could possibly want with him, he did not know. Maybe the god was simply bored, but Damon doubted that. This god was cruel, giving him a system that forced him to devour others just to survive.

"Ruthless... evil..." The words came to his mind. But at the same time, the system had granted him power—the power to seize his fate. It threw trials his way, but never something he couldn't overcome. In that sense, the Unseen Sovereign was also... fair.

"Unknowable..." The thought crossed his mind.

Damon recalled the skill description for Shadow Movement. It had spoken of the gods—not a specific one, but it had mentioned them nonetheless.

He looked at the floating panel.

[Shadow Movement]

Chapter 268: The True Gods

[Skill: Shadow Movement]

[Description:]

The old gods were amoral—beings older than the very concepts of right and wrong, good and evil. For mortals who dared to call upon them, the worst fate was for those gods to answer, for their will was unknowable, their actions beyond comprehension. Even when they meant no harm, their mere presence could shatter lives. Their reign should have been eternal, stretching endlessly through the void... until the true gods rose.... From mortals. Boundlessly powerful, these new gods understood mortality and the emotions that came with it. Yet, along with their wisdom, they carried the flaws of mortals within their hearts.

[Effect:]

Allows the user to physically move within shadows, stepping from one patch of darkness to another within a limited range. Movement requires a continuous connection between shadows.

[Type:]

Active

[Cooldown:]

3 sec

Damon took a deep breath. This was startling information. It was terrifying to realize that gods weren't born as gods. They had once been mortals who usurped divine authority from the old ones—beings far older than emotions or even some fundamental concepts. Damon couldn't even comprehend how something could predate concepts themselves.

Worse, these unknowable old ones had been crushed and defeated by the new gods—or rather, the true gods, who were boundless.

Damon recalled hearing a priest reading a gospel, calling the Goddess of Doom a true god. He began making connections.

His theory was simple.

The new gods were of two kinds: the normal gods, who were not as powerful, and the true gods, who were boundless.

He held his chin.

"Which would mean they're all-powerful beyond even concepts... I mean, they defeated the old ones..."

Damon shook his head. Why was he thinking about something far beyond him? This was not something he would be involved in. He frowned.

Then there was the Unknown God, the one who gave him the system.

Where did he stand? Was he a true god or an old one?

Damon shook his head again. The old ones didn't understand mortals, but the Unknown God seemed to have a firm grasp on them. The fact that both he and Lilith received power from him was a good example.

"Then he is a true god, then..." he narrowed his eyes.

"If so, then why does it seem like the Goddess and the Unknown God don't get along?"

There was too little he knew, and even if he did find out, it was probably better not to. Who knew what horrors he might unlock with forbidden knowledge? And yet... he was curious.

He sighed. He had been so focused on the power of the gods and their origins that he had forgotten the skill's actual ability. Shadow Movement was simple enough to use. It consumed shadow energy, but its function was straightforward: it allowed him to physically sink into shadows and move through them as if they were a pool of water.

He couldn't teleport through them, but as long as two shadows were connected, he could move between them.

He sighed again. The world of gods was so far removed yet so terrifying.

"The gods were mortals once..." If that was true, did it not mean they were imperfect?"

It was as if the Unknown God was trying to imply that very thing.

Damon's face paled, his heart pounding. He wasn't a person of faith, and he was defiant, but even someone like him felt that even thinking such a thing—that the gods weren't perfect—was a grave taboo.

He shook his head, taking a deep breath, his eyes wide.

'Is... is that what the Unknown God wants to show me? That... the gods aren't perfect? That they carry the flaws of mortals in their hearts...?'

This was the most blasphemous thought he had ever formed.

He took another deep breath and opened the next skill.

[Skill: Bloodletting]

[Description:]

For centuries, troll-kind were persecuted by the goddess-faithful, enslaved and abused for no fault of their own—simply for their hulking nature and vast vitality. Their resentment festered until Mugu offered them an alternative—a new god to swear their faith to, serving what would later become demon-kind. Eventually, they came to revile the cruel goddess races and the suffering they endured under the faith of the goddess.

[Effect:]

Inflicts deep, lingering wounds that bleed excessively, sapping the target's stamina and weakening their endurance over time. The more they bleed, the slower their movements become. If the target possesses regeneration, Bloodletting disrupts the healing process, making wounds take longer to close.

[Type:]

Active

[Cooldown:]

10 sec

The skill itself wasn't bad—an active ability that inflicted a bleeding effect, forcing enemies to weaken over time while even slowing their healing.

But what really caught Damon's eye was the name.

Mugu.

This was the second time the system had mentioned that name, and Damon couldn't shake the feeling that Mugu was important. He had been present at the founding of the demon race... which meant the goddess race's claims and propaganda were correct. The demons were not originally created by the goddess.

'Are they an alien race...?'

He shook his head. No, that was doubtful. The demon race was definitely a native race to their world. The text had said, what would later become demon-kind.

Yes. That was it. Demon-kind hadn't always existed as a separate race—they had been born, or rather, mutated, from one or more of the existing goddess races.

That would explain why the goddess races hated them so much... It could also be the reason the war began.

He placed a hand on his chin, deep in thought.

The war was ancient—so ancient that no one even remembered how it had started.

And this Mugu... he must have played a crucial role in the rise of the demons.

Mugu. The Unknown God.

What was the connection?

"Mugu... and what would later become the demon race..." Damon muttered, his expression darkening.

He needed to share this with Lilith Astranova.

'What have we gotten involved in...? This... is bigger than both of us...'

Chapter 269: Matia

Contemplating the existence of gods and the secrets of the divine seemed to reinvigorate him. His heart hadn't stopped pounding since he learned that the gods were once mortals, carrying emotions and feelings much like humans.

'The gods are imperfect...'

He thought about it but didn't dare to mutter the words aloud. This was madness. How could the gods not be perfect? They were gods.

As he wrestled with these thoughts, his narrowed eyes drifted to the unconscious Matlock, who stirred slightly in her sleep.

Yes, her.

Matlock was a girl, so continuing to think of her as male felt redundant. If anything, he was more curious as to why she was dressed as a boy. Frankly speaking, he wanted answers.

It was a good thing the odds were still in his favor—she remained unconscious.

Then, Matlock's eyes fluttered open.

Her body ached, her head felt unbearably heavy, but her eyes snapped wide as she took in her surroundings. Black hair drifted in the wind as she shook her head, looking from side to side as if expecting to be attacked.

The only thing she heard was Damon's cold voice.

"Welcome back to the waking world, sleepyhead."

Matlock raised her head, finding a boy perched on a large boulder, a giant axe resting against his shoulder. The sun loomed behind him, casting long shadows over them all. She squinted, trying to resist the light. That was when she noticed the dried blood on his torn combat uniform.

His expression was calm.

"You didn't die. Good for you..." Damon said, tilting his head slightly. "I was pretty sure you wouldn't last long... Matlock."

Matlock bit her lip. She had been the weakest among them. The fact that she was still alive was nothing short of a miracle.

Damon's sharp gaze settled on her.

"You're an interesting girl... or are you just a weird crossdresser?"

Matlock's eyes widened. Her gaze immediately dropped to her ripped combat uniform. The badges underneath were now exposed.

Her expression hardened.

"Yo... you know...?"

Damon studied her for a moment, his face unreadable. Matlock was beautiful and delicate too delicate.

"You made it obvious. Fairies are usually good-looking, but I know a few ugly ones."

He couldn't help but think of the old fairy, Makia—the one he had killed and devoured. That old bastard had been quite ugly for a fairy.

Matlock bit her lip again, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Now that you know I'm just a woman... are you going to kick me out of the party for my lie...?"

Damon raised an eyebrow, amused by the question.

"Right. That makes sense. This is why you didn't have a party when the exam started."

He rested his chin on his hand, mulling over his thoughts.

"...Even a loner like me has friends who put up with me. If I remember correctly, you had friends too."

His eyes darkened slightly as he recalled.

"Weren't you part of a clique? Yeah... I remember now. You were in the same group as that guy, Falz. You guys even created a club together."

He snapped his fingers as if trying to recall something specific.

"Yeah, it was about knights or something... What was it called again? The Tower Shields?"

Matlock lowered her head, eyes wide. Their club wasn't popular, yet Damon knew about it.

"How...?"

He smiled coldly.

"I make it a point to learn as much as I can about my environment. Force of habit. Don't think anything of it."

She raised her head, her hair flying in the wind, and muttered under her breath.

"Or you're just a stalker..."

Damon scoffed.

"I heard that. Not scared of me now, are we?"

Matlock bit her lip. She wouldn't exactly say he wasn't scary, but... not as much as before.

He smirked at her silence.

"Your friends were all boys. They kicked you out of the clique when they found out you were actually a girl. They must have felt betrayed... leaving you without a party, which made the professor ask my party to take you in as an extra."

Damon chuckled.

"You must have thought you got lucky, getting added to the strongest party. But you weren't. We ended up being teleported to a death zone."

Matlock gritted her teeth.

"What do you want already? Get to the point! If you're going to abandon me to die... just say it. I'm tired of being treated like I don't matter. So what if I'm a girl...?"

Damon clapped his hands slowly, a mocking grin on his face.

"How brave. My fairy friend, you've changed. I expected you to be trembling in fear, not standing there with such boldness. Does it have to do with your class advancement?"

He jumped off the boulder, landing with ease, his expression turning cold. The massive axe on his back made him look even more terrifying.

"Since you asked for it, Matlock... I will definitely abandon you to die."

Matlock's eyes widened. She wouldn't survive on her own. Not here.

Damon raised the massive axe to his shoulder.

Matlock gritted her teeth. Forward or backward, she was still going to die. She looked at Damon. He was stronger. Too strong. She could tell from his aura alone, he was a killer.

But...

She stood up, her head lowered.

"F... fine by me. Even if you throw me into that chasm... I will crawl out. I promised to live as myself, even if I'm someone else's shadow. So I will fight... and die as myself."

Damon's grin widened at her resolve.

"If I threw you down there, you'd never live."

He raised the axe and slammed it into the ground, crouching down to sit cross-legged.

"But I like this new you. I knew you had a strong will from the moment you blasted that Red Cap Goblin Mage."

Matlock's eyes widened. He wasn't angry that she had hidden her identity?

All her life, being a woman had been her greatest weakness. She was never allowed to be herself. Never. She didn't desire beautiful dresses—she just wanted someone to tell her she was strong just as she was.

Damon glanced at her.

"I don't know what you mean by being someone's shadow... but I do know you are strong, Matlock."

He leaned against the giant axe, his gaze steady as he looked at the young fairy.

"So... what's your story?"

Matlock blinked. Was he... asking for an explanation? Did he actually want to know about her pathetic past?

Her eyes shimmered with an unspoken emotion. A tearful glint.

She sat down beside him.

For the first time... someone was giving her the chance to explain herself without judgment.

She bit her lip, hesitating for only a moment before finally speaking.

"I was born in the frost continent, Norrath... in a small kingdom of predominantly patriarchal warrior fairies—Winterhaven."

Chapter 270: No Longer Matlock

Not too long ago, a kind hunter had sat down with Damon and asked about his past. It may not have seemed like much back then, but telling his story had helped lighten the burden, if only a little.

Now, here he was, doing the same thing for a fairy girl who seemed to have a difficult past.

As the kind hunter had told him in the past, kindness was reciprocal—what you give is what you get.

Matlock's voice was low. He had heard about the Frost Continent; honestly, it was basic geography. The world only had nine, after all. The Frost Continent, Norrath, was the northernmost of them. As for her birthplace, Winterhaven, he wasn't familiar with it.

Her eyes were distant, her fists trembling as she recalled her past.

"My father was from a family that had acted as the king's blade for generations... a position passed down from father to son."

She paused, taking a deep breath as a distant roar shook the heavens. She didn't react much to it. They had heard it a few times now—the sound of the awakening dragon. But at the moment, the memories of her past were more terrifying than its distant horror.

"Sadly, my father had no sons. He married many women, had even more mistresses, and fathered ninety-nine daughters... not a single son."

She lowered her head.

Damon looked at her.

"He couldn't let a woman inherit a legacy created and upheld by men."

Matlock nodded.

"He couldn't. The next king's guard had to be a man from the Faldren house, just like him and his father before him."

Damon could understand that.

She bit her lip. "My father's fortune changed the day my mother became pregnant. At last, he would get his wish—a son to carry his title, the sword of the future king."

She looked at Damon, who wore a calm expression.

"My mother conceived twins... a boy and a girl. My father was filled with joy, and from the moment I was born, I was a shadow, unnoticed under my brother's radiance."

She smiled dryly, pain evident in her expression.

"However, my father's joy was short-lived. My twin brother, Matlock, was a frail person, sickly and unable to carry out any of his duties."

She raised her head to push back the tears.

"So my father turned his rage on my mother. In the end, she couldn't bear it and killed herself right before my eyes. I still remember the way her wings dimmed and she became cold. The blood falling on my face felt so warm..."

She sniffed, her nose turning red.

"Her death was of little consequence to my lord father. He had many more women where she came from. Her value was in her ability to give him a son, and she had failed... and made his son weak."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Matlock being born weak wasn't really his mother's fault.

Matlock lowered her head.

"Even then, my twin brother was still the jewel of his eyes. He tried to train him in the sword, but he was just too weak to fight... or even hold a sword at all."

She sighed, holding a strand of her hair.

"It was then my father had a crazed thought. He could not allow anyone to know that his heir was weak, so as Matlock's twin sister—being identical in some ways—I was forced to dress as him. Despite having lived in his shadow..."

She let out a shaky breath.

"Outside the castle, I was Matlock. Inside, I was just Matia... just a woman."

She looked at Damon as the memories came back.

As Matlock, there were many expectations placed on her. Many sought to duel the heir of the Faldren family—the future blade of the king. But that itself was a problem.

Whenever she picked up any type of weapon, her father would rage, reminding her that a woman had no place wielding a sword. He would flog her until she was left bleeding and unconscious.

However, she was also trapped. If she was challenged outside as Matlock, she could not refuse. And if she lost, her father would break her legs for dragging her brother's good name through the mud.

"You have shamed the family, girl... you will pay with your flesh, blood, and bones."

She was not allowed to be Matia, nor was she allowed to be Matlock. She was just a shadow on the wall. But if she was to be a shadow, she at least wanted to be herself—strong, even if only as something lesser. A part of her wanted to be the king's blade, just to prove that a ruler's blade could still be a woman's.

However, all she did was endure, year after year, too afraid to be either.

Until one day, her brother's illness took a turn for the worse. Desperate to save his son, her father ordered her to sacrifice her fairy wings to save his life. The act of sacrificing one's wings took them away forever, leaving the fairy crippled. In exchange, they could perform one miracle.

She didn't mind doing it—to save her own twin brother. However, when the time came, her brother refused to be saved. He whispered to her in his final moments:

"Matia... I reject your wings. I am broken, but you can still soar. I had a dream, my dear sister. One day, you will be the blade of a powerful ruler. So please... soar for the both of us."

He died with a happy smile. Her brother had always been the only one who saw her as matia.

Their father, however, was enraged. He beat Matia half to death until his own knights stopped him, begging him to see reason. It was not her fault. And should he kill her, there would be no one left to masquerade as the now-dead Matlock.

And so she was spared. Allowed to live, but only as her brother. She would never get the chance to be Matia again.

On that day she was announced dead.

She lived a lie, deceiving everyone she met. And in the end, whenever people found out the truth, they would leave her behind—because she was a woman.

Damon looked at her, his expression calm. He stood up, glancing at the others before looking at the sun at high noon.

"The others have slept enough. Time to wake them up. We need to keep moving before something worse happens to us."

She nodded. He probably didn't care. She chuckled bitterly—why would he? This was the tyrannical Damon Grey.

He turned around, snapping his fingers.

"What are you doing, Matia? If you keep gawking, you won't get a chance to prove them all wrong."

He raised his head at her, his eyes full of untamed defiance.

"Who says a woman can't be great? Some of the most terrifying people in this world are women. Hell, even the Goddess is a woman. And I don't think you get called the Goddess of Doom for being a delicate flower."

She paused looking at him with an almost doubtful expression, before she felt a sense of realization.

Matia's eyes widened, a small, almost invisible tear slipping down her cheek. She clenched her fists, stepping forward.

Following behind Damon as his shadow stretched long beneath the bright sunlight.