

Shadow 271

Chapter 271 271: Alive And Accounted For

Waking the others didn't take long. Damon unceremoniously slapped them awake, including the girls. Xander wasn't so lucky—he was jolted awake with a kick.

Damon looked at them. "Quit sleeping. We need to cross the bridge."

They all stared at him with a variety of expressions. Leona sniffled, choking down her tears before leaping up and tackling him.

"I... I knew you wouldn't die!"

Damon, who was forced to the ground, felt his injuries ache as the massive axe he had been carrying fell with a clang. Even then, he smiled lightly. "I'm not so easy to kill... Now get off before you break something."

Leona nodded. This was quite a Damon way to react. At least he wasn't rude today.

"You must have missed us far more than you let on," she teased.

He sighed, pinching her cheek. "I decide to be a better person, and you give me attitude?"

Leona smiled, hugging him again before whispering, "I'm glad you came back."

He nodded slowly, whispering back, "Me too."

Evangeline sat quietly, her expression stern, but he could tell she was relieved to see him. Still, he decided he didn't like this mature, peaceful version of her. He wanted problems, always.

"What's with you? Why are you suddenly acting mature all of a sudden? Did that troll hit you on the head or something?"

When he said that, she slowly turned to Sylvia. Damon followed her gaze to the elf girl, who wore a calm expression, her eyes focused on him—or rather, in his direction. Then, slowly, she smiled.

"I've been waiting for you," she said softly. "I'm glad I didn't have to wait long."

Damon blinked. That was not the reaction he had been expecting. "That was weird."

Even so, he nodded. He was the reason, after all, the one who told her to have faith in him.

Evangeline looked between them, her gaze lingering on Sylvia as if she wanted to say something but chose not to.

"I'm glad you won too, Damon," she said at last.

Xander watched the whole exchange, his body still coated in dried blood.

"You awakened your first class too... Figures. Why else would you want to fight a war troll?"

Damon nodded, his expression calm. "Yeah, so did all of you. But we can talk about our classes after we cross the bridge."

He stood up, taking on the role of party leader, and gazed at the other five.

"All party members are alive and accounted for—a little beat up, but alive."

Xander rolled his eyes. "I'd say we're more like half-dead than a little beat up."

The others nodded in agreement, murmuring their exhaustion. Damon smirked.

"Good. Then that means you're also half alive."

He stretched, cracking his neck.

"With our classes awakened, I can safely say our zero percent chance of surviving the Whispering Forest is now at least as high as... three percent."

Evangeline blinked. "Wait, didn't you say we had a higher chance last time?"

Damon chuckled. "I lied. Obviously. I didn't even think we'd make it past the Duhu Mountains. But you know what they say—when there's a will, there's a way. And we found a way."

He paused, glancing at them. "To potentially certain death."

"Or worse," Sylvia added.

He snapped his fingers at her. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Sylvia. That really puts things into perspective."

She nodded slowly. The others sighed. At this point, they had grown somewhat used to the fear of the unknown.

Damon looked at them seriously.

"I won't bore you with any pointless speeches. The goal is simple cross the bridge. When we do, we cut it off to escape any potential pursuit from the demon army or Ashergon's minions."

He pointed at the rickety rope bridge ahead.

"Once we cross, we can rest for a day or two before we brave the dangers of the Whispering Forest. During this time, we'll share the details of our classes so we know what skills and abilities we have in our deck."

The party looked ahead at the precarious bridge and then back at each other. Damon exhaled, gripping his axe tightly.

The others nodded. This would also give them the opportunity to recover any supplies they had lost—some to the devil monkeys, while the rest had been used up.

They needed to rest. They were tired, broken both physically and mentally. There wasn't even time to rejoice at having survived certain death. They had to keep moving, keep running, keep surviving. But looking back, they had made progress.

"We have a little time," Damon said, glancing at Sylvia and Evangeline.

"You two, drink the last of our healing and mana potions. Heal yourselves."

He then looked at the others.

"Once they're recovered, they'll heal the rest of us. Our job is to make sure the healers stay safe at all costs. They're our lifeline, especially since we won't have any potions left after this."

They all nodded as Evangeline and Sylvia went to work, channeling their magic to mend wounds and restore vitality.

Damon sighed. He wanted to use his class skill, but it kept failing. Last night, he had been too exhausted to attempt it. Now, he simply watched as the others were treated. Sylvia approached him, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder before pressing her forehead lightly against him in an embrace.

"I... I'm so happy you didn't die."

He nodded, feeling her breath against him as he observed the others quietly eating their rations.

Sylvia placed her hand over one of his lingering wounds, a soft glow emanating from her palm as his injuries slowly began to mend. She remained by his side, her eyes never leaving him.

"We all got to rest when we fell unconscious. But you... you haven't slept at all, have you?"

Damon sighed. "If you're going to lecture me, save it. Evangeline's going to give me one when she's done brooding."

Sylvia chuckled softly. "She's probably mad at me for knocking her out mid-battle."

"Wait, what?"

She placed a finger against his lips. "Shhh. I'll explain later."

Before he could protest further, she gently guided his head down, pulling it to rest against her lap. He tensed, attempting to sit up, but she refused to let him.

"We'll be here for two hours, right?" she murmured.

"So why not use my thighs as a pillow? Get some sleep. That way, when we reach the other side, you'll be prepared for whatever comes next."

Damon hesitated for only a moment before conceding.

His head rested against her soft thighs, and the exhaustion he had been ignoring began to creep up on him. Slowly, the tension in his body melted away. His eyelids grew heavy, and before he knew it, he was asleep.

Chapter 272 272: People Of The Mist

Damon took a deep breath. The others probably didn't realize how dire their situation was about to become. With limited rations and supplies, they would have to survive off whatever the land provided.

Which would have been fine—if they weren't about to walk into a Death Zone. The land ahead could be twisted and corrupted.

The food would be inedible, at least for those who had yet to reach their first class advancement.

Now that they had, they could do a lot of things they couldn't before.

Absorbing energy from the mana cores of dead monsters to enhance their bodies and magical prowess... using skills...

Well, that wasn't new to Damon. The system already allowed him to do that. What mattered now was that they were stronger.

"Our odds are higher now..."

He took a deep breath. They had to cross the bridge in front of them.

The bridge before his eyes was an old, rickety rope bridge with some missing planks. The ropes were thick but frayed, and runes were inscribed along them and the wooden planks, emitting a faint magical glow. He couldn't clearly see the other side due to a strange mist, and the worst part was the rumbling from the deep chasm below.

He looked down, peering into the darkness. Even with eyes that could see in absolute darkness, he couldn't make out the bottom. However, with the benefit of his awakening, he could faintly see shapes moving far below—drifting like clouds in the abyss.

"Better not get their attention..."

Whatever was down there was far beyond the rank of their small party.

He turned around, the massive axe he had taken from the war troll secured on his back.

His gaze swept over the group, their torn combat uniforms barely holding together. The material was supposed to be high-quality from the magic continent, but even it had limits.

"Remember the rules—make as little noise as possible until we cross."

He glanced at Matlock—now called Matia after he discovered she was actually a girl.

"Matia, don't try to fly over. We might attract something, or worse, discover some abnormal phenomenon that prevents flight."

His eyes shifted to Xander, who had taken the time to clean off some of the blood while Leoan created a small storm cloud to gather water.

"Use your gravity magic to make us lighter."

Xander nodded.

Damon turned to the others, pulling out a rope and tying it around each of their waists.

"We stay together. The ropes will make sure we can catch each other if someone falls."

He muttered under his breath, "Or we all get pulled down together."

Their faces didn't pale with fear. They had already resolved themselves.

Damon took the first step toward the bridge, leading his party in a single file. Their fate was uncertain, but hesitation would only make things worse.

At first, the mist was faint, almost nonexistent, but the moment Damon placed his foot on the shaky wooden planks, it was as if he had stepped into an entirely different world.

The mist thickened instantly, curling around him like a living thing. However, he could still see in front of him—for now.

The others stepped onto the bridge cautiously. The rope bridge swayed, the old planks creaked, and even those who had reached their first class advancement felt a sense of vertigo creeping in.

Damon shook his head, steadying himself before taking another step. He kept his eyes forward, careful not to look down into the chasm. It wasn't a fear of heights that kept his gaze fixed ahead—it was the unsettling knowledge that something lay within that darkness, waiting.

He hoped for a quiet, uneventful crossing.

Slowly, they made their way across, one careful step at a time. Damon led, gripping the thick ropes on either side to steady himself. It was almost peaceful—until they reached the center of the bridge, where the mist became even denser. Then, the humming started.

It was faint, almost like a whisper carried by the wind, yet it sent a chill through them. The mist itself seemed to shift, forming vague, shifting shapes that might have been illusions—or something far worse.

Leona moved closer to him, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I... I hear singing..."

Damon nodded, his own voice hushed. "Stay sharp. We might have a monster or some unusual phenomenon on our hands."

The others nodded as well, stepping carefully. The mist now covered the floor of the bridge, making it difficult to see where the planks actually were. Damon took a deep breath, testing each step before fully committing, ensuring that the bridge was still beneath them.

As they approached the end of the bridge, the mist coalesced into distinct forms—figures of men and women, ghostly and ethereal. One particular figure—a woman—hovered directly in their path, floating above a section of the bridge where no planks should be. She opened her arms as if welcoming them.

"Come... come to me... let us be together as one..."

Damon hesitated. He couldn't sense any shadows, couldn't tell if she was real or just an illusion.

He recalled reading something in the old travel journal, but the notes had only covered the creatures lurking in the chasm below, not this.... At least the parts that were still legible.

Sylvia, gripping her tome, flipped through glowing pages, wincing as she read something.... This unusual tome was her skill it was invisible to others... but Damon could see it just fine.

"We can walk past them... as long as they do not scream... we should be fine..."

Damon studied her expression, then nodded.

Slowly, he stepped forward. The mist woman reached out to touch him, but her hands passed through his form like vapor. One by one, they moved past her, ignoring her murmured words. The end of the bridge was in sight.

She followed them with a pleading and desperate expression.

Then, the woman's face twisted. Her mist-like form shuddered, and her voice took on an eerie, anguished tone.

"I love you... I love you, but you hurt me... you hurt me... You only want her... but she betrayed you... Why? Why, Mugu? Why? Ahahahahaha!"

The mist let out an ear-piercing scream.

The sound was unbearable, forcing them to their knees, clutching their ears in agony. Damon's eyes widened as the chasm below rumbled, the mist within it beginning to swirl violently.

Then, something moved.

A massive black form, larger than a mountain, began to rise. Its presence alone was suffocating, ancient, and terrifying. Blood dripped from Damon's nose as sheer terror gripped his body. His heart pounded so hard it felt like it would explode.

Panic set in.

Damon staggered to his feet, yanking at the rope that connected them all.

"Come on! Run! We need to get off the bridge!"

He didn't need to say it twice.

They sprinted toward the end, moving as fast as they could. As long as they reached the other side before the creature fully emerged, they had a chance.

But suddenly, the end of the bridge seemed impossibly far away...

Chapter 273 273: Breaking Off Bridges

Damon could feel his heart pounding against his chest as the movements of the creature deep in the chasm sent tremors through the world. The air grew heavy, and as the monstrous entity began to raise its head, the very atmosphere churned.

In that instant, Damon knew—if that thing set its sights upon them, they would die.

There was no time to contemplate its rank or origin. Whatever it was, it was far beyond their capabilities.

All he could do was grab his party and run across the old rope bridge.

However, their escape felt futile. They had originally made it more than halfway across, the exit within sight—but now, the bridge seemed to stretch farther and farther away with every desperate step they took.

A visceral sense of horror gripped Damon. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to think past his terror. His gaze snapped to Xander.

"Use your magic! Make us lighter!"

Xander didn't hesitate. He raised his palms, and magic surged from him in a shimmering circle. Almost instantly, Damon felt his weight reduce under the effects of gravity magic.

But that didn't solve their immediate problem. They still had to get off the bridge before whatever lurked in the chasm fully emerged.

The end was close—yet felt impossibly far.

Damon made his choice. He raised his hand and fired the hook from his omnidirectional gear, locking onto the far end of the bridge. Without hesitation, he pulled them forward with the gear's powerful recoil.

In a flash, they soared across the remaining distance. Just as they reached solid ground, an immense shadow loomed over the bridge.

"Don't look at it!" Damon's voice cut through the madness.

Then, they crashed onto the ground, tumbling outside the bridge's reach.

Their faces were ashen, their noses bleeding from the sheer terror of the aura that had washed over them. Damon forced himself to stand, gasping for breath, his mind reeling from the experience.

When he looked around, everything was... gone.

The mist had cleared. The monstrous entity had vanished. The eerie figures they had seen earlier—nowhere to be found. The other side of the bridge was fully visible, leading into the dense trees of the Duhu Mountains.

The sun shone brightly above.

It was as if everything had been a nightmare.

But Damon knew better. It was all real. The bridge still remained, now faintly glowing with ancient runes.

They had made it to an entirely different biome.

In the distance, just a few kilometers away, the world ahead was dark and gray. A vast forest stretched as far as the eye could see, its shadowy expanse foreboding and endless.

The whispering forest.

Damon stood up. They had to destroy the bridge so no one could follow them.

He stepped closer, unbuckling the gaunt axe he had been carrying. Evangeline rose to her feet, her face pale.

"What... are you doing?"

Damon raised the massive, human-sized axe with one hand.

"I'm cutting the bridge off. We can't let any demons come after us. They also want to reach the ruined city."

He glanced at the group.

"If I remember correctly, one redcap goblin escaped. Where do you think he ran off to?"

Evangeline hesitated before nodding. "But if you cut it off, that would mean no going back."

Damon didn't answer. Instead, Leona did, her gaze fixed on the distant Duhu Mountains.

"There was nowhere to go back to, to begin with. We can only move forward."

Sylvia sat hugging her legs. "Do it. Destroy the bridge."

Xander sighed at the exchange. "At least we'll travel safer knowing we don't have anyone or anything hunting us."

Matia eyed the bridge skeptically. "For an old bridge, it's tougher than it looks."

Damon approached cautiously, lifting the axe high. As he brought it down onto the frayed ropes, a small spark flared at the point of impact.

In that instant, the world shifted. The mist returned. The ghostly figures drifted in the haze, and the monstrous entity in the chasm slowly began to rise once more.

It lasted only a moment, but Damon recoiled, staggering back and dropping the axe with a groan. He collapsed to his knees, coughing up blood, his breath weak and ragged.

The bridge was part of another world.

"Damon! What happened?"

The others surrounded him as he struggled to breathe. He raised a trembling finger toward the bridge.

Sylvia and Evangeline worked quickly, their magic flowing through him. After a few minutes, Damon was more or less recovered. He spat out some blood and clicked his tongue.

"Well, that ended up being a disaster."

Sylvia, her eyes fixed on an unseen book—a skill of hers—nodded grimly.

"The bridge is ancient. It was built as part of a trial to reach the Path of Kings. But like many things in this land, it has become twisted. Its magic can't be destroyed by physical contact. Magic won't work either—it's resistant to most spells."

Damon frowned. He couldn't rest easy with that bridge still standing. Something, or someone, could still follow.

He stood up and walked toward the bridge again. Evangeline scowled.

"What are you doing? Didn't you hear what she said?"

He nodded sheepishly. "I did."

He raised his hand, closing his eyes as if bracing for intense pain—because he was.

Then, opening them once more, he whispered,

"She said physical contact won't work. Magic won't work. So I'll use something that is neither."

A black ember-like shadow flickered in his palm. In an instant, it surged forward, erupting into a pillar of black fire. The dark flames soared, engulfing the rope bridge's edges.

Damon gritted his teeth, his face contorting in agony as the Ashborn skill consumed his shadow energy and mana. He fell to his knees, experiencing the searing pain of burning alive—tenfold.

Sylvia rushed to his side, pressing a hand against his chest, her expression tense with concern.

The others watched in silence as the black flames writhed like living shadows, consuming the enchanted ropes and planks.

The runes on the bridge flared before burning away. The ropes frayed, the bindings unraveled, and with a final, crackling snap, the bridge—an ancient construct that had stood for thousands of years—collapsed into the abyss.

The two sides of the chasm were now forever separated.

Chapter 274: Dealers Hand

The bridge was destroyed, leaving the party to rest easy for the first time since they had been stranded in these lands. They could finally rest before continuing their journey.

Damon grabbed a supply bag and, without saying another word, unceremoniously tossed it to the ground and fell onto it. He knew his party would have questions for him. He would have to give them answers when he woke up—or at least come up with a convincing lie.

He didn't know how long he would sleep, so he activated the Sacrifice skill, turning some of his mana stats into shadow energy.

"If I don't find a monster to devour... I'll keep getting weaker," he muttered.

He was in a fight against time. Either he let his shadow grow hungry and gained power, or he sacrificed that power to stay sane.

Evangeline walked up to him, glancing at him lying on the sleeping bag despite the sun still being high.

"Ca...can we talk?" she asked hesitantly.

He closed his eyes.

"No... not right now. You guys rest. We can talk later when everyone is rested. There's no need to stand guard."

Evangeline bit her lip, her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Isn't that a bit risky?"

Damon sighed, resting on the supply bag like a pillow.

"It's not, when I'll have an eye out... You guys just sleep."

Evangeline nodded, trusting in his words—even though he was actually closing his eyes to sleep instead.

Damon, on the other hand, didn't need to tell her that his shadow was alive and could act as a scout or even an eye. It would begin its patrol when the last of the party members went to sleep.

However, Evangeline wasn't convinced. She sat by his side, leaning on her supply bag.

Damon sighed. "Go keep an eye out," he ordered his shadow.

The dark form slithered away, circling around. It stopped in front of Evangeline and waved its hand at her.

Evangeline instinctively raised her hand to her sword, taken aback for a moment.

Damon's shadow shifted back due to her reaction.

He raised his hand and lightly smacked her arm. "Relax."

She stood up abruptly. "How can I relax when your shadow just moved on its own?"

Her reaction and the movement of the shadow caught the group's attention, and they all looked at Damon as if expecting an explanation. Sylvia, however, narrowed her eyes slightly, waiting for him to speak.

Damon sighed.

"You guys really don't want to rest, do you?" He sat up.

"There's no need to worry. My shadow wasn't hijacked by some ancient horror or an unknowable monster."

He paused, glancing at them.

"This is merely one of the effects of my first-class skill... Or did you guys forget my attribute is shadow? So this isn't really strange."

He lay back down. "We can talk about our classes after we rest."

Evangeline sighed with relief. That was right—they were in their first class, and some unique classes came with unusual skills. Damon just got one. It wasn't like he was a heretic or something.

'He'd never make a deal with some horror,' she reassured herself.

Xander looked at Damon's shadow as it cracked around the group, greeting each of them with a friendly wave.

His face winced. "This thing is creepy... I suppose it's to be expected from someone like you."

Matia knelt by the shadow with Leona.

"Hey, Leona, is it just me, or is this thing kind of cute?"

Leona nodded, her ears perking up and down.

"I know, look at him. He's like a nice, friendly version of Damon... So this is where all his personality went."

Damon, who was lying down, clicked his tongue. "I heard that."

"I wanted you to," Leona teased.

"What can it do? Can it attack?" Evangeline asked, somewhat wary.

With his eyes closed, Damon tossed around. "It's just like you to be violent."

She scowled, ready to start an argument, but Xander interfered.

"Right, everybody rest. We could start moving at any time."

Evangeline's eyebrows twitched, but she nodded. She lay right next to Damon, her head on her supply bag.

Despite everything, the only person who remained quiet was Sylvia. She merely looked at Damon and whispered low to herself.

"Liar."

How could she not know he was lying about his class skill? She knew he had the ability to make his shadow move away from him even before they reached the first class. She had seen him without a shadow in the academy...

She knew Damon to be someone who kept his secrets close to his chest. She could already imagine what lie he would tell them about his class skill, as well as whatever explanation he would give about the flames that obviously originated from the dark spirit, Ignath.

His shadow went a fair distance from them.

The others all lay down despite the sun, while Leona followed the shadow around, curious and making conversation, even though it only replied with gestures.

And when Sylvia thought no one was looking, she slowly moved her sleeping bag next to Damon, watching as he breathed steady and low, almost as if he were dead.

She was curious where he had learned to sleep so silently... it was almost as if he was wary that something would get him in his sleep.

Or maybe he wasn't even sleeping. She suppressed the urge to touch his face.

Slowly closing her eyes.

Well, she was right—Damon wasn't actually asleep. Not just yet. He spread his shadow perception and sensed Sylvia next to him and Evangeline on the other side.

However, he paid them no mind. He was actually looking at his class and skill.

[Class: Death Dealer]

"You are a merchant in blood and a dealer in death. Your presence heralds demise, and your hands deliver the final price."

[Skill – Dealer's Hand]

"You may permanently mark a weapon as your Dealer's Hand. This weapon grows sharper with your bond and stronger with every life it claims. Each soul taken feeds its edge, tempering it into a blade of death. It will never dull, never break—so long as you live. Only in death will it lose its edge."

His skill actually had nothing to do with shadows. It was a skill that allowed him to bind a weapon to himself.

Except the only problem was, he had tried with his daggers and they failed. As for the reason... he could tell it was because he didn't have a strong enough emotional attachment to the daggers.

He had tried with objects. The only one that seemed like it would work was his mother's locket.

A shame it wasn't a weapon. In the end, after mulling it over, Damon couldn't think of any weapons that would work as a Dealer's Hand...

Save one...

"I'll have to get it... If... I... No... when I make it back home ..."

Yes...he would have to return....to his village....

Chapter 275: A Little White Lie

By the time Damon woke up, the evening sun was already dipping below the horizon. He didn't feel particularly rested. When he glanced down, he found Sylvia nestled in his arms, sound asleep. The others looked just as exhausted, their bodies heavy with lingering fatigue.

Leona mumbled in her sleep, leaning against Matia. "Damon... make something tasty..."

She must have been hungrier than she let on, trying to be considerate of their dwindling supplies.

Carefully, he shifted Sylvia away, making sure not to wake her. She stirred slightly but remained asleep. He got to his feet and rummaged through his supply bag, pulling out a dried piece of jerky.

He sighed. "This is all we have left, huh?" he muttered, taking a bite.

Sitting down, he gazed at the evening sky, watching as his shadow returned to him. In his hands was a weathered old book, its pages heavily worn from time. He read in silence, the minutes stretching on, until a deep rumble vibrated through the ground.

Damon's gaze lifted from the book. He knew what would come next.

And just as expected—

A deafening roar split through the air. The force of it sent the wind howling through the distant trees, making his hair whip back.

He winced, gripping his ears against the overwhelming sound.

The others jolted awake, rolling out of their sleep with pained expressions, their hands clutching their ears. Slowly, the roar faded, leaving only the eerie quiet of the evening in its wake.

Damon, unfazed, sat there with a bored expression. He had heard the dragon's roar many times before—although not quite this loud.

Glancing at the others, he remarked dryly,

"Great, you're all awake. I must commend your audacity to sleep in such a dangerous place..."

Leona, still groggy, twisted her lips into a pout. "You're the one who told us to rest..."

Damon nodded. "And you've rested. Now it's time to talk... about our plan moving forward."

The others exchanged looks before slowly nodding.

"We've made it past the demon army and put some distance between us and the dangers of the Duhu Mountains... but we've only jumped from the pan into the fire," Damon said.

Leona clutched her stomach. "All these analogies are making me hungry..."

Xander crossed his arms. "You didn't seem too bothered by our meager rations when we were being hunted by war trolls."

She scowled at him. "Sorry, I was too busy trying not to die."

Evangeline waved a hand dismissively.

"Leona's gluttony aside... we're not exactly safe. We're too close to the Whispering Forest. But before we march toward our imminent demise, why don't we address the mammoth in the room?"

Damon rolled his eyes. "How about we address why you're talking like my nonexistent grandfather?"

She smirked. "I was actually talking like mine. If you want to meet him, I'd be happy to introduce you—of course, I'll be brutally honest about your deplorable personality."

Damon scoffed, muttering, "Takes one to know one..."

Sylvia sighed, stepping between them. "Let's not do this, guys. I know we're all excited to be alive, but we need to focus."

She looked at Damon. "We have questions. And I can see you trying to rile Evangeline up, which means you don't want to talk."

Damon frowned. "You really think the worst of me, don't you? Fine."

Sylvia sighed, already exhausted. "Please don't try to emotionally blackmail me. We need to be honest with each other, so let's share the details of our classes and skills—including weaknesses."

Xander let out a low whistle, grinning as he glanced at Damon.

"Some of us here—not naming any names—have trust issues. Especially when it comes to, cough cough, weaknesses. Not pointing fingers or anything, cough cough, Damon."

Damon's eye twitched. They really thought they had him all figured out.

"I wasn't going to hide anything, so I'll go first."

Leona narrowed her eyes playfully. "Pretty suspicious that you want to share the details of your class first... I smell an underhanded scheme."

Damon sighed. "This is what I get for being a good person. Fine, I won't tell."

Matia, her wings fluttering, paused. "Wait... how do we know he didn't just bait us so he'd have an excuse not to tell?"

Evangeline nodded in agreement. "You might be new, but it seems you've got him figured out. Good job."

Damon stared at them with a deadpan expression.

"I really hate that everyone just assumes I'm going to lie and manipulate you all for my own ends while keeping my class skills secret..."

"You will," they all echoed in unison.

Damon sighed. "My class is called Death Dealer—Merchant in Blood, Dealer in Death."

The group fell silent as he hesitated, tension settling over his features.

"My class skill is called Ashborn..." He bit his lip as if reluctant to speak.

"It allows me to manipulate dark powers by stealing the abilities of the first dark entity I defeat... for a price. And there are consequences."

The group stared at him with intense expressions, waiting for him to continue. Damon hesitated, as if debating whether to reveal the full truth.

"The stronger the dark entity I defeat, the more severe the consequences. Naturally, the first dark spirit I defeated was Ignath... so the skill manifested before my awakening.... Come from him..."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. She half-believed him when he mentioned Ignath, guilt creeping into her expression. She didn't want to think Damon would lie about something this serious... even though she knew he wasn't telling the whole truth.

Damon noted her reaction. He wasn't telling any truths—only lies. As if he'd ever trust them with his actual class skill.

Truthfully, there was no point in revealing it since he couldn't even use it. The skill he'd rely on most was Ashborn, and this explanation would justify why he could suddenly wield the power of a dark spirit without being suspected of heresy... or accused of making a contract with an evil entity.

He had also chosen his words carefully to guilt-trip Sylvia. Now, she wouldn't pry too much. As for his shadow, she didn't suspect it—yet. He'd have to come up with a convincing lie for that one day.

Sylvia met his gaze. "What's the price?"

Damon nodded slowly, biting his lip. "One of the consequences of using stolen power... is that I experience the pain of burning alive—tenfold—every time I use it."

The others paled. Sylvia's face twisted in horror.

She dreaded to think of Damon suffering like that.

Her hands clenched. Her face went pale.

"This... th-this is all my fault..."

Chapter 276: Interact With

Damon felt a horrible sting in his chest when he saw Sylvia's expression. While it was true he got the Ashborn skill after defeating Ignath in the process of saving her, he would have gotten the skill anyway because fighting a dark spirit was part of his level-up requirements.

He approached her, placing a hand on her chin.

"It's not your fault... this is just the nature of my power... besides, I can choose not to use it."

She bit her lip, lowering her head, but from the looks of it, she wasn't convinced. In Sylvia's heart, it must have seemed like Damon had given up himself to save her, even though that really wasn't the case.

'Geeze, Sylvia, you're starting to make me feel bad...'

His guilty thoughts aside, Damon had done what he did more out of self-preservation than anything.

The origins of these flames were tied to a powerful dark spirit, and summoning, contracting, or associating with one was heresy—a matter relegated to the temple or the imperial knights, sometimes both.

However, if it was a first-class skill, then that had nothing to do with the dark spirit. That meant Damon was safe... it was a loophole of sorts.

He wasn't lying to them just for the heck of it.

He sighed. "Now then, who's next? I'd rather not go deeper into my skill..."

Evangeline bit her lip. "I... I have a similar skill too..."

Leona grabbed her. "So you experience tenfold the pain of burning alive too?"

Evangeline shook her head, holding the side of her arms.

"My class is called Dawn Seeker. It's as Damon said before... I am blinded by my radiance. My skill is called... Purge. I can purify the world with my rotting flesh."

Xander raised an eyebrow. "Rotting how...?"

She gritted her teeth.

"My skill allows me to purify anything, but I have to absorb part of it into my body and purify it. If I absorb too much, my flesh starts to rot... until my false light destroys it all."

The others all looked at her with different expressions. This was truly a horrible skill—to have to watch one's own flesh rot in order to perform purification.

However, while the others were weighing the horrible con, Damon was weighing the pros and how useful they would be.

Her skill was powerful, giving her light, purifying, and decursing effects. Her power would be useful against dark magic, undead, corruption, and virtually anything impure.

'What an asset... she may be the most useful person here.'

Evangeline held her sword hilt with a look of resolve.

"If that is what it takes, so be it. Let me rot, but I will no longer turn a blind eye like before. I will no longer overlook the harsh truths..."

She glanced at Damon. "You showed me that."

Damon shrugged with a nonchalant expression. "Better not do something crazy and say I was the one who inspired you..."

She smiled, nodding her head. "I'll do something worse."

Damon sighed. 'She used to be such a good girl... what changed?'

He turned his sights to the others.

"Who's going next? If you have a dangerous skill, say so."

The others shrugged, but his gaze stopped at Sylvia. She bit her lip.

"I have a potentially dangerous one too..."

He nodded. "Okay... do share."

"My class is White Seer. Just like these two, it's a unique class, although I don't understand why we're all taking having a unique class for granted..."

Damon sighed, closing his eyes. "Get to the point, Sylvia."

She sighed, pushing her hair aside at his rude remark. That was such a Damon thing to do.

"My skill is called... my skill is called..."

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. It was as if she was struggling to say them out loud. She gazed downward, taking a deep breath.

"My skill is called Sylvia's Journey Book..." She paused, almost as if to hide her relief.

"This journey book answers any questions I ask, so long as I pay the price. The more valuable the information, the higher the price. Some answers are so steep that I'd die before hearing them... so I have to be careful what I ask."

Damon looked at her. Right in front of her, invisible to the others, was a massive tome. Red and black gems adorned its cover, and the title read:

***** Journey Book.

Damon could see what was on the book with his dark eyes, but he couldn't see its name. However, he was certain the name on it was definitely not Sylvia's. Simply because the book had a unique aura—or rather, it had no aura at all.

Yes, it was a confusing concept and didn't make sense. But how could one make sense of a god? Especially the Unknown God...

'No wonder she had been acting weird.'

He looked at her as she explained her skill to the others—its strengths and weaknesses. The book itself had no weakness. The only weak link was Sylvia herself.

The book had apparently shown her parts of the future, but for a price. It had taken two years of her lifespan.

The others watched her as she explained.

"That's why I knocked you out, Evangeline. Because we needed your power for what was to come. The book also showed me that Matlock... I mean, Matia, would die if she didn't fight the War Troll."

She looked at Evangeline, bowing her head slightly.

"Sorry for knocking you out. You wouldn't have believed me then..."

Evangeline nodded her head worriedly but remained slightly skeptical of Sylvia's new power.

Damon merely watched as she continued explaining her abilities to them.

'Her ability is dangerous. She could divine and know anything. However, she can't know about me and Lilith unless the Unknown God allows it.'

He paused, looking at his shadow.

'Which begs the question... what does the Unknown God want with Sylvia? Why give her such a powerful skill? Or... was it an object? If she wasn't allowed to use it freely...'

'No. Was her skill the book, or was her skill the ability to see and interact with the book?'

That had to be it.

The book wasn't hers. What she was given was merely the ability to interact with it.

The book... still belongs to the Unknown God.

Chapter 277 277: Fire And Death

The next to explain their class and skill was Xander. He glanced at the group with a somewhat sore expression.

"It seems all of us gained a unique class... That's quite unbelievable for an entire party. None of us even got a rare class; all are unique..."

Damon nodded. That was almost unheard of—for an entire group to obtain unique classes, especially such powerful ones.

Evangeline and Sylvia seemed particularly strong, so much so that their abilities needed to be restricted by supposed weaknesses or flaws.

"What's your class?" Damon asked.

Xander looked at him before nodding slowly.

"My class is Oathkeeper. As for what the will of the world had to say about me: 'You are surrounded by jackals and lies...'"

"I think you're the jackal" Damon muttered.

"And you're the liar around me." Xander refuted.

He clenched his fist.

"My skill is called The Vow. My will is as unyielding as my word... It basically means I am virtually unbreakable when it comes to physical damage, but it has limits. If I run out of mana, I will be vulnerable. The more hits I take, the more mana I lose."

Damon listened attentively, noting down all of Xander's weaknesses, analyzing what his skill did and did not cover.

He turned his head to Leona. "Alright, Leona, what's your class? If it's 'Foodie,' I'm feeding you to whatever is in that chasm."

Leona smiled, pushing her hair aside.

"My class is called Storm Bringer. Apparently, I am someone pure of heart. My skill is called Wrath—it increases my power the stronger my emotions become. Any emotion, really, but anger works best... That's pretty much it."

Damon nodded, rubbing his chin as he tried to analyze her skill and class. She leaned in closer.

"So... when do we eat?"

He sighed, placing his hand on her face and pushing her away. "Next."

All eyes turned to Matia. Xander narrowed his eyes.

"Before we go into Matlock's class, aren't we going to talk about why he's actually a girl?"

Matia lowered her head at his words. Damon rolled his eyes.

"Are you blind? She's a girl, so don't refer to her as 'he.' And what does that matter, you misogynist?"

Xander's eyes widened as he pointed at Damon. "You... You... That's not what I meant!"

Damon snickered. "Yeah, right." He turned to the others. "Matia is a girl. Big deal. Moving on."

The others looked at each other and sighed. Sylvia glanced at her book. "I already knew that, though. It's fine with me."

Leona held her stomach with a tired expression. "I'm too hungry to care..."

Evangeline nodded. "We should be more focused on what class she got, not her gender. This is Matia's secret to tell."

Xander sighed. "I suppose so... My apologies."

Matia nodded. "No, it's fine. If you want to know, I'll be happy to share."

Damon rolled his eyes. "Just share your class. We don't have all day."

She nodded, balling her fists.

"My class is called Dancing Fairy. It's a unique class. As for my skill, it's called Lethal Grace. This skill allows me to weaponize every movement into a lethal art while making it difficult for me to get hit. I can weave between enemies while dealing carnage... like a snowflake dancing in the wind."

Damon looked at her. "What a powerful skill... It's more suitable for a melee fighter, someone who uses weapons."

She nodded. "I can use most weapons... It's just that I don't because of my origins. My... father never approved, so I learned in secret."

The group looked at each other awkwardly, sensing old wounds behind her words.

"Erm... It's fine. I mean..." Leona fumbled.

Damon sighed. "That's enough, guys. We ne—"

He paused, turning around and looking far beyond the chasm to the other side, at the mountains in the distance, away from the Duhu Mountain...

The others paused as well. Their breath froze as they gazed at the sky with a deep sense of dread. Sweat fell from their brows, hands and legs trembling... Even so, they were too terrified to even fall to their knees.

Damon felt his heart pounding, blood rushing to his head as he saw what was in the distance, rising into the sky.

A colossal form, so massive it dwarfed mountains. Its flapping wings sent astral winds that shattered trees, creating vast hurricanes. It had reddish, reptilian scales and four legs, its wings growing on its back. Its head bore scaled horns, and its mouth had teeth longer than spears and sharper than swords.

This entity was a dragon.

The great dragon Ashergon.

And he rose into the sky. In the distance behind him, many black clouds surged ominously—but they were not clouds. They were hundreds of wyverns and reptilian creatures, each acting as his minions, their massive forms stretching nearly seventeen meters in length—some even larger.

The dragon ascended, its colossal wings casting a massive shadow that blotted out the evening sun. It soared toward the gravity anomaly where the demon army was trapped.

It raised its massive head, and even from miles away, Damon could hear its thunderous voice.

"I am fire... I... am... death."

From its maw, a crimson glow illuminated its massive fangs. Then, with a roar that shook the heavens, it unleashed a torrent of destruction. A pillar of fire erupted from its mouth, engulfing the entire region covered by the gravity anomaly.

For a moment, silence followed—then a cacophony of destruction. A massive column of fire rose, reaching toward the heavens. From the distance, Damon saw the gravity anomaly twist and churn, breaking apart and collapsing into black spheres of spatial distortion.

The land, the trees—everything within kilometers—was washed away in a fiery cataclysm. Entire forests were reduced to smoldering embers. Even from where his party stood, miles away, a scorching wind blew past, whipping against their skin.

They watched in abject horror as an entire region was turned to ash under the flames of the great dragon, Ashergon. And as quickly as he had come, he turned back to his nest, retreating into the mountains with an ear-piercing, heaven-shaking roar.

The clouds of wyverns scattered, returning to their roosts, while others broke off to scout for any survivors. But could anything survive such might?

Damon's breath caught as he spotted a lone wyvern breaking from the formation, heading in their direction.

Suppressing his fear with the numbing effects of his Remorseless skill, he turned to the others, still trembling.

"Come on, we need to take cover—hide."

He didn't wait for them to process his words before grabbing and shoving them behind a cluster of boulders.

Praying that the patrolling wyvern wouldn't find them.

Chapter 278 278: Weak But Defiant

All they could do was tremble in the aftermath of Ashergon's destructive flames. The world was hot, even where they hid among the boulders.

If that could even be considered a hiding spot. It had happened so quickly—Ashergon rising from his nest and, in an instant, eviscerating the demon army. Surely, the demons must have had powerful fighters, higher-ranked warriors among them. But there was no resistance, only fire and death.

Damon held Sylvia's waist, hugging her as they pressed against a boulder, the others hidden among the rocks. He remained quiet, feeling her breath on his neck and the low tremble of her hands.

Then, in the span of a heartbeat, the distance that had taken them days to cross was breached by the wyvern. It flew toward the chasm, slowing as it reached the other side.

The beast growled in their direction but stopped short, hesitating at the chasm's edge. Its reptilian eyes darted between the abyss and the shattered remnants of the bridge, claws scraping against the stone as it deliberated.

It growled low, its menacing gaze sweeping the scattered rocks where Damon and his party lay hidden. For a few tense moments, it remained still, scrutinizing their cover. Then, just as it turned to leave—

A soft sound echoed from the other side of the chasm.

A small rock had rolled off a boulder where Xander had been hiding, nudged away by his foot.

Evangeline paled.

"Oh no..." she whispered, hand tightening around her sword.

Still hidden in the shadows, Damon raised a hand, signaling against any movement.

The wyvern, however, was now certain something lurked nearby. It raised its wings, glancing at the chasm with what seemed like unease, yet resolved itself to cross. With a powerful flap, it soared over the abyss.

Leona paled when she heard the beat of its massive wings. She could see the wyvern's reflection glinting off the polished steel of Xander's spear.

The beast was a monstrous reptilian, nearly twenty meters long, with a single set of powerful legs and bat-like wings fused to its arms. Its teeth were longer than Leona's sword, and its entire body rippled with muscle.

From where they hid, they could feel the dreadful aura of a third-rank monster. It crossed the chasm effortlessly.

Matia's face was ashen as she imagined how quickly they would die beneath those fangs and claws.

Damon bit his lip, holding Sylvia tightly in his arms as he waited.

"Come on, come on, come on..." he muttered.

The wyvern stretched its talons toward the edge of the chasm, certain its prey was nearby. It could smell them. It swooped down—

And then, like a bolt of black lightning, something shot up from the depths of the chasm. A monstrous blur of blackness.

Before the wyvern could even scream, a gaping, circular maw opened wide and chomped down, consuming the beast.

The impact sent an explosion of blood and shattered flesh raining down.

The remains of the wyvern—chunks of flesh and massive sprays of blood—flew toward Damon and his party, drenching them in warm gore. The sticky sensation clung to their skin, but they were too frozen in fear to react.

They had just witnessed something far worse than the wyvern.

A creature that had devoured a third-rank monster as effortlessly as swallowing air.

They remained in their hiding spot, quiet like mice, as the sun slowly dipped below the horizon. The blood caking their skin and clothes began to dry, forming a brittle layer over them. Only then did they allow themselves to move, pushing away the hardened crust like shedding a cocoon.

Damon stepped out from behind a boulder, his face still covered in blood. His eyes scanned the gruesome scene before him—what remained of the wyvern lay in scattered pieces. A severed head, half a torso, and a lone wing lay among pools of thick, slowly hardening blood.

The others followed cautiously, unwilling to go anywhere near the chasm.

In just one day, they had learned the true meaning of dread. Their previous excitement over reaching their first class advancement now seemed laughable.

Their egos had no time to inflate; Aetherus had crushed them before they could even dream of arrogance.

Leona gritted her teeth, her hair matted with dried blood. "We... we..."

"We have food." Damon cut her off. "We were worried about our exhausted rations. Now, we have more than enough."

He kicked the massive head of the dead wyvern, his jaw clenched.

He couldn't let them despair now. Maybe this was their first time feeling weak, but he was used to it. Accepting death was one thing—but rolling over and dying was another.

"We need to keep moving soon."

Xander gripped his spear. "What's the point? We... we're all going to die anyway..."

Damon nodded. "You're right. But even so, I'm not giving up. Not yet."

His gaze darkened, his resolve solidifying.

"You only live once... that's the biggest lie ever told... We all die. That's just how the world works. But you can only die once. You live every single day. And while you're alive, every moment is a struggle. Just breathing is a struggle—if you don't do it, you suffocate and die. You need to eat to live, or you starve and die. How is this any different?"

He clenched his fist, his voice steady.

"This is just another struggle. Ancient horrors, forbidden lands, death zones—all they can offer is one thing: a mundane death. Whether it's today or tomorrow, death will come. Until then, we struggle."

His words were just as much for himself as for his party. Slowly, their eyes began to regain their luster, the fog of fear lifting.

He chuckled coldly. "We never decided on a party motto, right? Now's as good a time as any. The options don't favor us. That's fine."

The others looked at him as he turned towards the distant Whispering Forest. Taking a deep breath, he spoke their motto:

"IN THE ABSENCE OF THE DESIRABLE, LET THE AVAILABLE BE THE DESIRABLE."

He clenched his fist, and the shadows around him stirred.

"Our desirable is the Whispering Forest... and the Ruined City. Come what may, we will survive by taking whatever path is available. We kill everything in our way—or we die fighting."

The others sucked in a breath of cold air, their auras flaring. One by one, they stepped forward, their weapons drawn.

Either to victory—or to certain death.

Chapter 279: Short Tale

Damon was scared but functional, rational yet emotional, burdened but unwilling to collapse. This was just who Damon Grey was. He had always been like this—come hell or high water, he always survived.

Even when no one thought he would...

This was no different. His defiant personality wasn't just against people; it was against the world.

He helped his friends build a fire right by the chasm. He had already anticipated that the creature within did not allow flight over the chasm; however, it would not attack those by the side.

The wyvern flesh was lean, even though it was only in chunks. They roasted it over a low fire and ate as much as they could.

Damon was short on weapons, so he cut out two of the wyvern's sword-like teeth and filed them down, creating two makeshift blades. He wrapped bandages around them to form comfortable handles while the others ate in silence.

Xander looked at him. "Why are you doing that? Don't you already have the axe you got from killing the war troll?"

Damon nodded. "I do, but... I'm not used to using axes, and it's too big. Good for huge and slow enemies, but too unwieldy. These are good—they can strike and harm even big monsters."

Matia lowered her head. "We'll be encountering them soon, won't we? Big monsters..."

Sylvia nodded, looking at the travel journal they had found on the goblin mage.

"Yes. According to this, we'll be meeting things a lot worse than just being big."

Evangeline took a slow bite of the wyvern's meat.

"The academy already knows we're missing by now. They may think we are dead... or worse."

Damon shook his head, glancing at his academy-issued bracelet.

"Doubt it. We have these bracelets, and while you guys weren't paying attention, they have been counting our points. So far, we have... a lot. As long as these bracelets aren't destroyed, they will know we are still alive."

Leona grabbed a huge chunk, stuffing it into her mouth, her expression resigned.

"So what if they know? No one is getting past Ashergon's nest. That dragon would never allow anyone powerful enough to save us to pass through its territory, and anyone it allows to pass will be too weak to save us."

Damon slowly filed away at the side of the heavy tooth. "Then we save ourselves."

Leona nodded, eating in silence.

"What's the Whispering Forest like?"

Matia glanced at Sylvia. Sylvia looked back at her and nodded.

"There's a passage here about it. Do you want to hear it?"

Damon sighed. This was not going to be something uplifting.

Sylvia was quiet for a moment, the fire crackling. Then she began reading aloud:

"From the trees to the earth, this forest is aware. Perpetually, it whispers names, wishes, and dreams. All these are things that fade... The forest desires to know your name—deny it. The forest wishes to be known—ignore it.

To those who dare step beneath the boughs of the Whispering Woods, hear this and heed it well: This is no mere forest. It is hunger. It is patience. It is watching. You may enter with your own name, your own face, and your own thoughts—but if you are not careful, you will leave with none of them.

The forest demands silence, yet it hungers for liveliness. Be careful which you give it.

The longer you linger, the more it learns."

Sylvia paused, frowning as she tried her best to recall everything she had learned about the forest.

"That's what the book says about the forest... The more you linger, the more it learns. There's also a small catalog of monsters. If you want, I can—"

"No thanks, I'll pass for now," Matia replied with a revolted expression, she did not want to know anymore than she had too.

Sylvia nodded. "Fine. In that case, why don't I share knowledge of our final destination? The ruined city—the Path of Kings. The city once called Lysithara."

The others all turned to face her. She smiled.

Long ago, perhaps an epoch ago, when the world did not yet know of demonkind, there was a city of sages, scholars, and mystics. This city was renowned, and its lords were wise.

Sylvia paused, glancing at the others when Damon stopped filing the wyvern's fangs to listen.

"Many kings and great men were trained in this city until it became a saying that one could not become a king without having learned in Lysithara. That was why it came to be known as the Path of Kings."

"The city prospered... for a time. But they soon became lost, consumed by the same obsession as all others in the world, caught in a grand race to achieve it... on the behest of the visitors. They became lost, and the city was broken and twisted by what was beyond them all."

Leona raised an eyebrow. "Wait, is that it? That doesn't even make sense."

Sylvia sighed, closing the old book in her hand. "Sorry, that's all the travel journal says. The other pages are too torn or outright missing, so I can't make sense of it."

They nodded. Xander looked at the fire.

"Who do you think the visitors were? I mean, the city was supposedly prosperous until they came... on the behest of the visitors, they became consumed by the same obsession..." He frowned, his brows furrowing.

"What do you think was beyond them?"

The others all paused—his words had merit. Damon glanced at the fire with a distant expression.

"Knowledge... Knowledge was beyond them. It was what they sought. After all, it was a city of sages and scholars—what more could they want than knowledge? The visitors must have offered them some type of knowledge... and a means to obtain it."

Evangeline nodded, holding her chin with a solemn look in her golden eyes.

"That's a good theory... but it could also be power. Power corrupts. The power they wanted must have twisted them all."

Damon nodded his head slowly.

"Knowledge is power."

Chapter 280: See No Evil

A group of six teenagers trudged forward under the morning sun, their clothes tattered and patched as best they could with their limited resources. Their faces were finally clean, free from the grime, soot, and blood that had covered them just days before.

They had rested by the chasm for a few days, using that time to recover, plan, and prepare for the journey ahead. What remained of the wyvern had been turned into dried rations—a rare delicacy under normal circumstances, but for them, it was simply survival. Flavor meant little when every meal could be their last.

Now, they stood before the Whispering Forest, a vast expanse of twisted trees so dense that sunlight failed to penetrate its canopy.

A world of grey surrounded them, the towering trees looming like ancient sentinels, their gnarled trunks hiding whatever horrors lurked within. From deep inside the forest, whispers drifted toward them—men and women, children and elders, the dead and the living—murmuring in countless voices, their words indistinct yet filled with an eerie presence.

Damon turned to the others, his voice kept low, never rising above the whispers.

"Let's go. Stay close, and remember everything we've discussed. This isn't the Duhu Mountains. The rules may help, but the creatures here might not care for them."

The others nodded in silence. No words were needed. Damon gripped his giant axe tightly, the two wyvern fangs strapped to his back like swords. He exhaled slowly, muttering a soft prayer.

"Glory be to the Goddess of Doom... Guide our path and save us from a most dastardly fate."

With that, he took a single step forward.

The world shifted.

The moment he crossed the threshold, he felt an unsettling change. The air grew thick, pressing against his skin like an unseen force.

The colors around him dulled, draining into an eerie monotone. Before him stretched the same twisted trees, but now they loomed impossibly tall, as though he had stepped into a different realm altogether.

He turned back—only to find the path behind them gone. The clearing where they had stood was no more. In its place lay an endless forest.

Taking a deep breath, Damon silently thanked himself for the precaution he had taken earlier—tying all of them together with a single rope so they wouldn't be separated.

"This is the Whispering Forest..." Leona murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Damon nodded, adjusting his grip on his axe.

"Don't speak above the whispers. Don't say your name or anyone else's. From now on, we refer to each other by numbers."

The others exchanged wary glances before nodding in agreement. They pressed forward in silence, their senses on high alert.

This was the Whispering Forest—ancient, cursed, and teeming with monsters. Here, the land itself was an enemy.

But just like the Duhu Mountains, the forest had its own set of rules. Or rather, its monsters had weaknesses. The old travel journal had outlined some of them—a guide to surviving the horrors within.

However, judging by the state of the book, Damon suspected that its original author had not survived long enough to finish it. Each page bore a different handwriting, a testament to the many travelers who had perished within the forest, leaving behind only fragments of knowledge.

Some had even left their bloodstains on its pages.

But their suffering would not be in vain. Their lessons, their many deaths and failures—they would be the foothold that Damon and his party would use to stay alive.

And so, they moved forward, into the depths of the unknown, armed with nothing but their will to survive.

The first hour in the Whispering Forest was not entirely uneventful. Though nothing attacked them, the oppressive air of the woods made even silence feel ominous. Then again, the Duhu Mountains had seemed safe for a time before true horror revealed itself.

They navigated the treacherous flora carefully, avoiding the deadly plants detailed in the travel journal. As they walked, they forced themselves to ignore the whispers—hundreds of voices, speaking in hushed tones, weaving together in an endless, mind-numbing murmur. They had to resist making sense of the words, for understanding them meant succumbing to the madness of the forest.

They had also occasionally caught glimpses of silhouettes in the distance, however no harm came to them.

Even so, the first sign of their inevitable struggle began to surface.

Leona suddenly faltered, her breath hitching as her knees buckled. A crimson trickle seeped from her ears. She clutched her head, groaning softly, never raising her voice above a whisper.

"Ahhh..."

Evangeline immediately knelt beside her, concern etched across her face. She placed her palms against Leona's temples, channeling a soft, golden light that seeped into her flesh, mending the unseen damage.

"Are you—"

"Don't say her name," Damon cut in sharply, his voice barely above the whispers.

Evangeline snapped her mouth shut and nodded in understanding.

Damon turned away, scanning their surroundings. They had no landmarks to guide them.

The map they carried was useless if they couldn't determine their own location. Frustration gnawed at him, but he exhaled slowly, forcing himself to think.

If nothing else, he could use his shadow perception to create a mental map, charting their course through spatial awareness alone.

Closing his eyes, he expanded his senses, allowing his awareness to flow outward like inky tendrils. The forest was dim, the shadows long and shifting, making it an ideal terrain for his abilities.

His own shadow quivered beneath him, a silent warning, but he pressed forward.

As his perception slithered through the darkness, it brushed against the trees—massive, gnarled things with twisted limbs.

It traced the contours of boulders, dipping into crevices where unseen creatures lurked. He pushed farther, threading past shattered tree trunks and stagnant mist, his senses tingling as he skirted around lurking monsters.

And then—

Something opened its eyes.

A grotesque form, barely distinguishable from the surrounding darkness, turned its gaze toward him. It saw him.

It smiled.

A slow, creeping grin filled with something ancient, something wrong. An overwhelming sense of dread crashed into Damon like a tidal wave, his heart pounding violently against his ribs.

His shadow screamed.

The pain was immediate and unbearable. A razor-sharp agony lanced through his mind, as though his very thoughts were being shredded.

Blood erupted from his mouth, cascading down his chin in thick rivulets. His ears, his nose, even his eyes began to bleed, crimson soaking his clothes as he convulsed violently.

He collapsed to his knees, fingers clawing at the ground, his consciousness flickering like a dying flame.

"Ahhhhhh—" His scream shattered the fragile silence, rising above the ceaseless whispers.

His friends rushed to his side, panic-stricken, their voices urgent yet hushed. Sylvia and Evangeline grabbed hold of him, their hands glowing as they tried to heal the damage.

But he knew.

It was coming.

He forced his trembling arm to lift, his bloodstained fingers pointing in the direction of that monstrous thing lurking in the dark.

With a choking gasp, he forced the words from his failing lungs.

"Run... r-run..."

The taste of iron filled his mouth as his body went still.

Darkness swallowed him whole.