

Shadow 281

Chapter 281 Unknowable Horror / Strange Place

Sylvia was horrified—more than that, she was at a complete loss for what to do. Only moments ago, Damon had been standing there, vigilant as ever, leading their party through this cursed land.

Then, in an instant, he had convulsed, blood pouring from his body as if something had torn into his very essence.

The others had all frozen in shock, but now Damon lay motionless in a pool of his own blood. Worse still, before collapsing, he had pointed into the distance and managed to choke out a single, desperate command—run.

But run where? The panic clouded their thoughts. Had he meant for them to flee toward the direction he pointed or away from it?

They didn't have to wait long for the answer.

A bloodcurdling screech echoed through the forest, a sound so unnatural and ear-splitting that their very souls recoiled.

Then, in the far distance, the trees began to fall—toppling one after another, giving way to some monstrous force that was rushing toward them with terrifying speed.

Evangeline gritted her teeth. She had no choice but to stop healing Damon—they had to move, now.

She threw a glance at Xander, careful not to say his name in this forsaken forest.

"Grab him—now!" she ordered before shifting her gaze to Leona. "Carry the axe!"

Without wasting another second, she turned and bolted, leading the desperate escape.

Xander slung the unconscious Damon over his back, his movements hurried but steady.

Leona gripped Damon's axe tightly, her hands trembling as raw emotions surged through her—fear, desperation, and something else. Something that fueled her, making her stronger. With the power of her first-class advancement, she felt an unnatural surge in her speed.

They ran faster than any normal human should have been able to, covering vast distances in mere moments. But behind them, the monstrous presence loomed ever closer.

The earth trembled beneath their feet. The thunderous crash of falling trees and the deep, rumbling quakes drowned out even the forest's eerie whispers.

Terror gripped their hearts.

Something was hunting them.

And it was closing in fast.

Evangeline turned to Sylvia, her voice urgent. "Number three... what do we do? Which direction do we go?"

Sylvia's expression was eerily calm, though her face had gone pale, and blood trickled from her nose—the price she had paid for the knowledge granted by her skill.

The book in her hands glowed faintly, showing her a path forward. She had no idea where it led, only that it was their only chance to survive.

"Left... we need to go left," she whispered.

Evangeline nodded, gripping her rapier tightly. A soft light radiated from her body, her resolve firm. Damon was unconscious—he had kept them alive so far, and now it was up to her to carry them forward.

As she sprinted ahead, she leaped over a massive branch, only for a grotesque arm to lunge from the shadows, reaching for her. Without hesitation, she swung her sword, her light magic slicing through the limb.

"Stay close! We have to reach that place!" Sylvia called, running right behind her.

Xander surged forward, his expression grim, while Matia hovered beside him, her wings fluttering, hands clutching sharp icicles.

A piercing screech tore through the air, even closer than before.

Leona let out a pained cry as she stumbled, rolling onto her back, her ears bleeding.

"Le.... Number five!" Matia grabbed her arm, hoisting her up. She barely stopped herself from saying Leona's name.

The beast-kin girl regained her balance, panting. Of all of them, she had the most sensitive ears—four in total, both human and beast—making the monstrous sound unbearable.

Ahead, twisted, malformed creatures emerged from the mist. Their elongated arms dragged against the earth, their gaping, bleeding mouths curled into laughter.

Sylvia's grip on her book tightened. Her voice was sharp. "They're in the same rank as us—blast them with magic!"

There was no hesitation. As terrifying as the creatures were, they unleashed a barrage of spells—light, storm, ice, and pure gravity. Magic erupted against the horrors, making them shriek in agony.

The party didn't slow down, pushing past as the creatures reeled. One raised its head to give chase—then stopped.

It sensed something.

Their original pursuer.

The malformed thing turned, and in the instant it locked eyes with the abyssal force that hunted them, its grotesque head bloated, its body convulsed—

And then it exploded in a rain of flesh and blood.

The true monster did not stop. Raising its dark, hulking head, it peered over the mist and rushed forward, vanishing into the direction they had fled.

They ran until they reached the shelter of massive, ancient trees—trunks wider than houses, roots twisting deep into the ground.

Without hesitation Sylvia led them inside one of the roots.

She clamped a hand over her mouth, barely daring to breathe.

They huddled beneath the thick roots of the ancient tree, trying to blend into the shadows.

Then—

A massive, hairy foot slammed into the earth. The sheer weight of it made the ground sink.

Xander trembled, cold sweat beading down his face.

The aura of the creature was suffocating—dense, ancient, and incomprehensible. It held no immediate killing intent, yet its malice was so deep, so twisted, that Matia felt as if she would go insane if she dared look upon its face.

Their hearts pounded violently in their chests. Slowly, they inched deeper into the tangled roots, pressing themselves into the darkness.

The ground beneath them was damp, covered in layers of mist and rotting leaves. Something slithered beneath their feet, but even that was nothing compared to the terror looming above them.

A strange, guttural sound rumbled from the beast.

"Hmhhruu..."

Then, from above, slimy, writhing tentacles slithered downward, probing into the roots, reaching.

Searching.

Sylvia's breath caught in her throat as one of the tendrils moved toward her. Every nerve in her body screamed at her to move, to run, to get away—

She wasn't the only one.

The others, just as terrified, slowly edged deeper into the roots, their retreat silent but frantic.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. She was certain the creature could hear it.

The tentacles slithered further.

Then—

She couldn't take it anymore.

She turned and fled.

The others followed. Panic overtook them as they scrambled backward, their feet slipping on the damp earth. They tripped over one another, desperate to escape, their breathing ragged and filled with terror.

Then—

The ground vanished beneath them.

They fell.

Darkness swallowed them whole, the wind roaring past their ears as they plummeted.

Then—impact.

They hit the ground hard. Groaning, they opened their eyes—

And found themselves staring in shock at a sight they never expected.

Perhaps more shocking than what they expected to find inside the cursed and twisted Whispering Forest...

It was a complete subversion of expectations. Perhaps if it had been some grotesque interior of a living titan—walls made of organs, a floor of thick pulsing tissue—they wouldn't have been so caught off guard.

But what they saw before them... was a warm hearth.

The heat that came from the gentle flames was pleasant. The place resembled the wooden interior of a cozy cottage, utterly at odds with the suffocating dread they'd just escaped.

There were furnishings—nice ones. A beautiful sets of armor and weapons rested neatly to the side, glowing softly with runes etched in intricate patterns.

The room was finely decorated, with elegant wooden tables, carved chairs, and woven rugs.

Far in the distance stood a massive furnace—so large it could've been its own room. Its vault-like doors gleamed darkly in the firelight.

It was the only object that didn't match the aesthetic of the rest of the residence. That... and the strange cauldron beside it, filled with boiling, glowing green contents.

Old tomes lined the shelves. Vials of potions stood on racks. It looked more like the workshop of an eccentric alchemist than a shelter buried under the roots of an ancient forest.

For a moment, there was only silence.

The terrified group of teenagers slowly stood up, their bodies trembling. Eyes darted around the room, each of them still gripped by the lingering fear from their flight through the nightmarish woods.

They looked to each other—suspicion clear in their expressions.

Evangeline's grip tightened around her sword, the rapier humming faintly with light magic as she took a cautious step forward.

In a normal situation, she might have called out to whomever owned this strange underground dwelling.

But this... this wasn't a normal situation. Not after everything she'd seen. Not after what they had run from.

She turned to the others, raising a hand to silently signal them—stay sharp.

Her sword trembled slightly in her hand as she advanced across the room, passing advent doors and edging closer toward the glowing hearth. Her light footsteps made barely a sound against the wooden floor.

She glanced back at her party. Damon was still unconscious—his bloodied body motionless but breathing. His shadow on the ground twisted unnaturally, writhing in slow, spasmodic pulses, as though experiencing some silent torment beyond comprehension.

Her gaze shifted to the large rug beneath him—thick, soft, made from the fur of some unknown beast.

She turned to Sylvia.

"Is... this the safe place your skill showed you...?"

Sylvia bit her lip.

"My skill showed we had a chance here... It never said we'd be safe."

Her voice was low, uncertain. "It would be unwise to make my own interpretations..."

She paused, her eyes flicking to Damon's unmoving form.

"At least, that's what Number One told me."

She purposefully didn't use his name. Only his number.

In the Whispering Forest, names were dangerous. Names gave power. So Damon had made the decision—he'd assigned them each a number.

Number One was Damon.

Number Two: Evangeline.

Number Three: Sylvia herself.

Number Four: Xander.

Number Five: Leona.

Number Six: Matia.

Those were the names they would use in this cursed forest. No titles. No classes. No real names. Only numbers. It was a measure of safety—an attempt to keep the forest from knowing them.

Evangeline looked up, as if she could peer past the wooden ceiling and see the cursed trees above—the shifting mist, the tangled branches... and the horror that had chased them here.

Even after advancing to First Class, they had run. Their new power didn't make them warriors. It only meant they could run faster.

Not fight.

Not against that.

At least not against something more than a rank above them.

Leona looked at Damon worriedly as Xander laid him down on the rug.

Evangeline and Sylvia squatted next to him, placing their hands on his body. Golden and white light began to flow through him, searching for wounds unseen to the eye.

"Cough... cough..." Evangeline suddenly coughed, holding her nose as blood dripped from it.

Sylvia halted, her eyes widening in alarm. The others rushed toward Evangeline, but she raised a hand to stop them.

"I'm fine... it's just my skill..." she gasped.

"Damon's under some kind of mental contamination. It's a curse of sorts. My Purge skill can cure him, but I'll have to suffer some aftereffects..."

Xander bit his lip before nodding. This was necessary. They needed Damon up and moving.

Sylvia gritted her teeth. "My power is useless against this... In that case, I'll heal you while you purify him."

Evangeline nodded, and the golden light spread further across Damon's body.

Slowly, the color returned to his pale face, but Evangeline's body trembled. She clenched her teeth as the side of her arm, just under her wrist, began to blacken from the backlash of her skill. The pain seared through her, but she endured it until she could bear no more.

With a sharp gasp, she collapsed to the side, drenched in sweat.

"I'm sorry... cough... cough... I've reached my limit..."

Sylvia bit her lip, then looked at Damon.

"It's fine. Rest. You've gotten the worst of it out. We can heal him with time. Recover first—you are our party's support, especially under these circumstances."

Evangeline nodded weakly and sat beside the still-unmoving Damon.

Leona, who had been on guard, gripping the gaunt axe tightly, finally voiced the question weighing on their minds.

"Where... are we, anyway?"

Before the others could respond, a distant cackling laughter pierced the air. It was high-pitched yet deep, an eerie shriek that sent shivers down their spines.

"Hheeeeeeeehhhjeheeeeeeehee..."

The laughter echoed closer, creeping toward the room they occupied. It was only then that they noticed a window they hadn't seen before. Through the warped glass, a shadow loomed—hunched, with a long, grotesque nose.

They snapped to attention, gripping their weapons, their bodies tensed for battle.

Then... silence.

The laughter had vanished completely, replaced by the crackling of the warm hearth. The flickering flames cast twisting shadows across the walls, stretching unnervingly.

Slowly, from the inside, one of the doors creaked open.

Every head turned toward it, weapons raised, breath held.

But what they saw shocked them.

A woman stood in the doorway—a stunning figure with long black hair neatly tied in a bun. She wore a simple yet elegant long gown with an apron, and in her delicate hands, she held a broom. Everything about her exuded the warmth of a gentle housewife—or perhaps, a loving mother.

She blinked at them, her expression one of mild surprise. Then, she smiled—a warm, disarming, and kind smile.

"My, my... I have guests." Her voice was gentle, soothing in a way that felt almost surreal in the eerie setting.

She tilted her head slightly, her smile never faltering. "Hello, children."

Chapter 282 bonus : Strange Woman

The sight of the horror they were expecting was not there. All that stood before them was a harmless-looking, beautiful woman.

Her presence seemed so at odds with the terror they had just escaped, her features soft, and her expression gentle, almost serene.

She looked at them with a warm smile, her voice flowing like honey, "What brings children into this horrible place...?"

Evangeline's hand gripped her sword tighter, the tip of her blade pointing directly at the woman, her stance firm.

The others quickly followed suit, weapons drawn in a protective stance. Leona and Sylvia stood especially close to Damon, ensuring he was shielded from any potential threat.

"What... who are you?" Evangeline demanded, her voice steady but sharp, disbelief flashing in her eyes.

The woman blinked, clearly puzzled by Evangeline's reaction. She raised a delicate finger to her lips in a gesture of surprise, as if taken aback by the tension in the air.

"Oh my word, where are my manners?" she mused softly, her tone almost playful. "I haven't seen people in such a long time..."

Her demeanor shifted then, straightening like an old noble. With slow, graceful movements, she placed a hand over her chest and made a small, elegant bow.

"My name is Bel. It's nice to meet you," she said, her voice calm and warm, as though welcoming them into her home.

Evangeline narrowed her gaze, glancing at Sylvia. The elf girl nodded, whispering as she looked at the book that was invisible to all but her.

"She's telling the truth..." Sylvia's voice was faint, her words carrying the weight of a revelation.

Evangeline nodded, her eyes still fixed on the woman. She could see the faint dullness in Sylvia's eyes, a sure sign that the elf was paying the price for the information she had extracted from the book.

Despite the price, Sylvia was still standing, and that was enough for now.

Still keeping her sword pointed at the woman, Evangeline hesitated. She wasn't sure what to make of this sudden turn of events, and just as she was about to speak, the woman's gaze fell on Damon, still unconscious on the ground.

"He's hurt... let me help him..." The woman's tone was soft, almost motherly.

Without waiting for any kind of approval, the woman discarded her broom and moved toward Damon, walking past Evangeline's sword as if she wasn't even concerned with the weapon's threat.

It caught them all off guard—no one expected her to be so fearless.

Evangeline reacted instinctively, trying to stop her.

"Wait!"

But it was too late. The woman placed her hands on Damon's forehead, a gentle touch that seemed to emit some sort of calming energy.

Leona, who had been standing vigilant, her hand still gripping her gaunt axe, exploded with anger. She shoved the woman away, brandishing her sword.

"Get away from my friend!"

Electric sparks danced in Leona's eyes as her body tensed, ready for a fight. The woman—who had introduced herself as Bel—sat back in surprise, her hands raised in surrender as the group surrounded her, weapons drawn.

"There's no need to be cautious," Bel said, her voice still calm. "I mean you no harm."

She glanced at the vials of potions scattered around the room. "I'm an expert in dealing with herbs... I can cure him."

The group, still on edge, exchanged wary glances, but Bel's gentle smile didn't waver. She then looked at each of them, noting their haggard and frightened expressions.

"You children seem lost and afraid... don't worry, you're safe here. The forest has no power here."

Their eyes lingered on her, the words hanging in the air, but the tension didn't fully dissipate. Matia bit her lip, unsure of what to do. Damon was still unconscious, and with his condition, they were at a loss without his guidance.

Xander's voice was cold, filled with suspicion.

"How can we trust someone we met in the heart of the Whispering Forest...?"

Bel nodded slowly, acknowledging the concern.

"That would be most unwise. However..." She tilted her head slightly, her gaze unwavering.

"If you slay me, children, would that not make you worse than the monsters? I'm just a woman who lives in the woods. You came to my house... I just want to help."

Evangeline's teeth clenched as she fought with her moral compass. She understood what Bel meant—it was true that they were the intruders. Still, she wasn't sure if she could trust someone they knew nothing about. Her hand tightened on her sword as her mind raced.

'What would Damon do if it were him?' she thought, her eyes drifting toward Damon.

His shadow writhed with unseen agony, his body convulsing with an internal torment she couldn't understand. They couldn't just leave him like this, not with the horrors lurking outside, nor could they risk traveling with him in such a state.

She looked at the others—Sylvia, who was still trying to hold herself together despite the price she was paying for the information from the book; Leona, whose eyes flashed with uncertainty; and Xander, who still seemed hesitant to put down his weapon.

Sylvia was suffering too. Her sight was deteriorating, and though she hadn't said a word, it was clear the effects were starting to take their toll.

While Her flesh was rotting from the inside out, and the pain was evident in every labored breath she took.

With a deep breath, Evangeline slowly lowered her sword.

"One suspicious movement, and we'll... we'll kill you," she warned, her voice steady, though her gaze remained wary.

Bel smiled, unfazed by the threat.

"As long as you let me help him, you can do whatever you want," she replied, her tone calm.

"I can't abide seeing a child suffer..." She smiled softly, her eyes warm. "It's against my nature."

Leona's eyes glimmered with caution, but she turned her attention back to Damon. She glanced over at Xander, who still held his spear close, ready for a fight if necessary.

"You look like a big, strong boy. Help move your friend while I make some medicine," Bel suggested, her smile never faltering.

She then glanced at Evangeline and Sylvia. "Why don't you two help me make the potions? But I need to know what attacked him, or rather what contaminated his mind..."

Sylvia, her vision fading and blurred, nodded despite her discomfort.

"We got attacked by a giant entity... we didn't see it, only its feet and some tentacles... but it was terrifying..."

Bel raised her hand, stopping Sylvia from speaking further.

"That's enough. Don't say anymore," she instructed, her tone gentle but firm. "I know what you mean."

Her expression softened, filled with a kind of understanding that only a mother could express.

"You children are lucky... you survived. Not many could make that claim."

She ushered them to her work table, moving with surprising speed for someone so composed, quickly mixing herbs and potions as best as she could.

Sylvia, though her vision was failing, could still tell that none of the concoctions were harmful. Everything seemed medicinal—nothing out of place.

The woman worked swiftly, crafting a potion and then moving toward Damon, who lay still on the couch near the hearth. Bel held the potion in her hands, ready to administer it.

Leona raised her sword again, her eyes narrowing. "Don't come any closer," she warned, still skeptical.

Bel smiled warmly, unfazed.

"You're quite a cautious young lady, aren't you?" she remarked, almost as if she appreciated Leona's care. "I suppose that's good."

With a sigh, she raised the potion to Leona.

"Here, feed it to him. He should get better."

Leona, hesitant but desperate to help Damon, took the potion from Bel. She turned to Damon, carefully prying his mouth open and slowly pouring the contents inside.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Then, Damon's body let out a relieved gasp as his shadow, which had been writhing in torment, slowly stopped. His body relaxed, returning to normal.

The group watched in silence, their expressions slowly shifting from tension to deep relief. The weight that had been pressing down on them lifted, and for the first time in what felt like forever, they were allowed to breathe.

Leona eased, looking down at Damon with a small, relieved smile.

The woman, Bel, smiled gently, her eyes soft with relief. She glanced at the group, her gaze lingering on Sylvia and Evangeline.

"I have some healing potions. You two need healing the most."

Her eyes softened as she took in the exhausted group.

"You all do. How about a warm bath, a change of clothes, and then we can have dinner?"

Her smile was genuine, full of care.

"I'd like to know how children as young as you ended up in the Whispering Forest..."

They looked at her with lingering unease, unsure whether to trust her completely. But when she spoke again, her voice offered something they hadn't dared hope for in this forest of horrors.

"Maybe I can guide you back home."

Those words, simple and full of promise, gave them something they hadn't dared to feel in a long time—hope.

Chapter 283: Kind Host

Evangeline let the warm water cascade over her body, letting it wash away the lingering pain, the fear, and the trauma of their journey through the Whispering Forest.

She sank deeper into the bath, sighing as the tension in her shoulders began to melt. The tub was wide, almost luxurious, and the warm scent of herbs clung faintly to the air.

Bel had allowed them to use her bath without hesitation—despite their initial wariness, the mysterious woman in the woods had done nothing to harm them. If anything, she had shown them kindness.

She had offered them warmth, clothes, healing... and, perhaps most important of all, a sense of safety.

'We have no reason to doubt her,' Evangeline told herself. And yet, she couldn't ignore the quiet voice in the back of her mind.

This was still the Whispering Forest.

Damon had warned them time and time again. Trust nothing. Not the shadows, not the silence... not even the kindness of strangers.

'Damon wouldn't trust this...' she thought, biting her lip.

But Damon was unconscious, unable to lead, unable to offer his insight or guidance. And despite her instincts, despite every ounce of her learned caution, she couldn't deny the truth—this woman had helped them. She had returned home to find a group of armed, ragged strangers in her cottage, and yet, instead of fear or fury, she saw their wounds and offered them a place to rest.

"What reason do we really have to doubt her...?"

She rose from the bath, the towel wrapping around her curves as her wet hair clung to her shoulders and back.

The scent of soap and herbs followed her as she stepped out, finding a clean dress neatly folded and left for her. Her sword and supply bag were untouched, right where she had left them. That alone told her something.

She got dressed slowly. The dress was soft and comfortable, far better than the ragged remnants of her combat gear. Glancing at her old torn clothes lying on the chair, she felt her face heat up. Just the thought of being seen in something so tattered made her cheeks flush.

Strapping her sword at her side, she stepped into the hallway.

The voices of her friends carried through the wooden walls—familiar, lighter now, more at ease than they'd been in days.

They were talking with Bel, and that caution she once heard in their voices had begun to wane.

She followed the sound and stepped into the room. Her breath caught for a moment.

Bel stood near the dining table, smiling warmly as if welcoming a daughter home.

"You're finally out," she said kindly. "Come, come, let's have dinner."

Evangeline's eyes widened.

She hadn't expected this.

The table was filled with food—steaming platters, baked loaves, vibrant fruits, savory meats, and pots of rich stew. It smelled divine, the aroma alone enough to make her stomach growl. After days of cold rations and near-starvation, it was like looking at a banquet laid out by royalty.

"I didn't think I would be having guests," Bel chuckled softly, brushing her apron down. "I hope you don't mind this meager spread..."

Meager? Evangeline blinked. They were all from noble families, accustomed to lavish meals... and yet even they could not deny it—this was extravagant.

Leona stared wide-eyed at the feast before her. Her restraint broke, and with a growl of hunger, she reached across the table and grabbed a huge piece of steak, stuffing it into her mouth before anyone could stop her.

Everyone froze.

They watched, unsure of what would happen—would she choke? Collapse? Transform?

Leona paused, her body unmoving. Then slowly, she muttered through a full mouth,

"Jmmm... Delicious..." Her hand immediately reached out for more.

Bel's smile remained unshaken. She took a seat at the head of the table.

"Well, dig in. There's more where that came from."

Evangeline looked toward Sylvia, who gave a quiet nod before lifting a spoon and tasting her food. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Hmmm... It's delicious."

That was all it took.

Like a dam breaking, everyone began eating. There was no hesitation now—forks clinked, spoons scraped, and laughter began to replace silence. It was their first proper meal in what felt like ages, and they devoured it with the unspoken desperation of survivors who had nearly lost hope.

And through it all, Bel watched them—her eyes kind, her smile unwavering. There was something maternal in the way she looked at them. Not pity. Not interest. Something softer. Warmer.

Like a mother looking at her lost children finally coming home.

By the time the plates were emptied, Leona had eaten enough for seven. The others slumped back in their chairs, full and content, some even smiling for the first time in days.

When their dinner was done... she gave them dessert and made them some tea. They now sat by the hearth—its orange glow flickering across the old wooden walls—where Damon lay unmoving, his breath gentle.

He was dressed in fresh, crisp black tunics that Bel had prepared for him... his face at peace, as if asleep.

Matia was the first to speak.

"You said you know how to get us back home..."

Bel glanced at her, nodding slowly.

"I may be of assistance... however, as you know, the Whispering Forest is a dangerous place..."

She took a sip of her tea, her smile still gentle, almost motherly.

"This area is surrounded by danger at every turn... the Duhu Mountains are close. Then there's Ashergon's Nest..."

She set her teacup down carefully.

"That would leave passing through the forest. However... going too deep into it is a death sentence. That would make the only option cutting across it—and reaching the ancient city of Lysithara."

They all nodded slowly... Evangeline clenched her fist.

"That was our goal..."

Bel nodded again, her tone even.

"That is a dangerous undertaking. However... if you pass through Lysithara, you can reach a more stable region. From there, eventually... you'll reach areas ruled by the goddess races."

Their eyes lit with hope at her words—small sparks of light in a dark room.

Bel looked up at them, her expression softening.

"The forest is dangerous... but Lysithara isn't exactly safe either. Most of its ancient residents—those who survived—are now twisted... monstrous things."

She leaned back slightly, her gaze distant.

"The worst of them... is their City Lord."

Sylvia's eyes, now partially blind and appearing almost milky in color, remained fixed on Bel. Even like that, her curiosity never dulled.

Bel nodded once more, her smile still plastered across her face... but there was a shadow behind her eyes. A quiet dread.

"Pray you never encounter him... for you will never pass his riddle. Pray you never fight him... for you may never defeat him. He will remain... until his questions are answered."

She stared into the flames of the hearth.

"He is no longer man. No longer king. Now... he is a creature. A thing. Called the Keeper."

She let the name hang in the air.

"The Keeper of False Truths..."

The fire crackled softly—but none of them moved. Their faces had paled at her words... even saying that name seemed to make the air heavier.

Sylvia bit her lip, her voice trembling slightly—curiosity overtaking caution.

"Wh... what is the riddle...?"

Bel's smile didn't fade. Slowly... she shook her head.

"I do not know. All those who met him met a most grim fate... far worse than death, for most..."

A heavy silence settled over the room... none dared break it.

After a moment, Bel stood, brushing the folds of her apron down.

"Well... would you look at the time," she said softly. "I suppose it's bedtime, children. Boys in one room, girls in the other. Erm... you..."

She paused, her eyes landing on Evangeline.

"Ahh... right. I never asked your names."

They all paused. Evangeline nodded slowly.

"Of course. How rude of us. I am... Number Two."

She proceeded to introduce the others with their assigned numbers—never once revealing their real names.

Bel's lips twitched slightly at that, her smile amused but polite. She nodded slowly.

"I see... what unusual names you have. Very well then. Good night."

She turned slowly and began walking toward one of the adjacent rooms, the sound of her steps soft against the creaking wood...

Chapter 284: Suspicious Host

Sylvia wasn't stupid. Sheltered, yes—her life had always been wrapped in silk and whispers—but stupid? No, not in the slightest.

It was fine if she'd been fooled by Damon. It was alright if he had lied to her, if he had deceived her. She could live with that.

But she would not be made a fool of by someone else. Not again. Not so easily.

That's why she didn't sleep. Not a wink. Her eyes remained closed, yes—but her mind was alert. Waiting. Watching.

She didn't even know what time it was—truth be told, it was nearly impossible to tell in the Whispering Forest. Sure, she could've used her skill, but... it wasn't worth it. Not this time. Not after the last revelation.

She was already losing her sight.

Slowly, she lifted her head from the soft pillow, her breath calm but her body tense. Her neck turned slightly—just enough to glance at the bed beside hers.

Evangeline was already up, sword in hand. Of course she was.

On the beds next to theirs, Leona and Matia stirred, neither asleep. They met Sylvia's gaze.

No words were exchanged. None were needed. They all understood.

As if they'd ever trust the kindness offered in the heart of the Whispering Forest. Not without reason.

If Damon were conscious, he'd be just as paranoid. Probably more.

They rose carefully from their beds, still wearing the simple pajamas Bel had given them, weapons in hand. Their footsteps were silent—ghostlike—as they moved.

Evangeline took the lead, rapier gleaming faintly under the fire light on the walls.

Behind her, Matia moved beside Sylvia, holding her hand gently—because Sylvia was only partially blind now. She had used her power again... just to ask the book a small question.

A harmless one, really: What clues exist about Bel?

But even that had cost her something. The price was rising.

She didn't want to push her luck. Not again.

At the rear, Leona moved silently, her stance ready for a fight.

They crept out into the hallway. The door next to theirs was where Xander and Damon were resting.

Evangeline stepped up, hand raised to knock—

—but the door opened before her knuckles touched wood.

Xander stood there, his spear already in hand. Damon was unconscious on his back, and the great axe hovered beside them under his control.

His gaze narrowed at the girls.

"I don't like this," he muttered. "Snooping around is... dishonorable. Especially after the hospitality we've been shown."

Sylvia turned her head toward him. Her eyes, now milky and dull, glimmered with disdain. She sneered, her words sharp, something Damon himself might've said.

"You know what's honorable? Not dying in our sleep."

Leona raised a brow. "That... that was the most Da- number one.... thing I've ever heard anyone else say."

She stopped herself from saying his name.

Sylvia gave a short nod. "Thank you. I was trying to be a jerk."

Matia crouched slightly, wings low, expression uneasy.

"Do we really have time for this? Let's either find something creepy... or get out of here."

Evangeline waved her hand forward, and the group moved again—Sylvia giving directions, still guiding them despite her impaired vision.

The house that had once felt warm was different now. Cold. Wrong. At night, the silence was oppressive.

Xander followed behind, Damon still on his back as they moved deeper into the hallway.

Then Sylvia stopped. Her voice came out low, thoughtful.

"Don't you think it's unusual? For someone living alone to have this many rooms?"

Leona narrowed her eyes. "Whatever it is... we'll find it behind that door."

Evangeline took point, squatting in front of the door. She twisted the knob—

"It's locked," she whispered.

Leona looked at Damon's unconscious form.

"Where's Da— I mean, Number One—when you need him..." She caught herself just in time.

A sigh of relief passed through the group. Matia still smacked her arm.

"Ow! Sorry..."

She blinked. "Anyone know how to pick a lock?"

Evangeline shook her head. "No. But I do know how to break one."

Without hesitation, she slammed her heel into the lock. It cracked and shattered under the force of her first-class advancement strength.

"My grandfather always said—'Better to ask forgiveness than permission.'"

Leona muttered, "Funny... Number One says the same thing. I see why you two get along so well."

Evangeline smirked. Could she and Damon's endless bickering actually be called "getting along"?

She pushed the door open—and what she saw made her breath catch. Her chest tightened.

The others froze behind her.

"Is... is that what I think it is...?"

No one answered.

The room was large, lit by the soft flicker of candlelight. Shadows clung to the edges, the darkness thicker in some corners.

At the center of the back wall—

A symbol.

Massive.

Carved into the stone.

Two white wings. Two black wings. A spiraling abyss at the center. An eye that didn't blink.

A symbol known to demons and heretics alike.

The mark of the Unknown God.

Sylvia bit her lip. Even partially blind, she could see it. And considering her own book bore that same symbol, she couldn't allow them to jump to conclusions.

"Let's... search for clues," she said quietly. "Worship of the Unknown God might be heresy here in Soltheon... but on other continents, it's not considered a grave sin."

Xander frowned. "How can you say that?"

"I'm not supporting heresy. I'm stating a fact," she replied coolly. "Why don't we check the closets?"

Leona stepped forward and opened one. Her face went pale.

Inside—

Bones.

Neatly arranged. Small.

Children. Teenagers. Not yet adults.

Matia's wings curled tightly around herself. "W-what is this...?"

Xander slammed the closet shut, his teeth gritted.

Evangeline opened another small door nearby. Inside—

Broken toys.

Children's clothes. Personal belongings.

"I take it these definitely aren't hers..."

Sylvia approached a table. There were books—open books—and she couldn't read the script, so she called on her skill again. Just a short summary. Nothing more.

She merely asked it for a small translation. Especially since she couldn't see.

Pain shot through her skull like a blade. She gasped softly, as words scrawled across her mind:

Oblivion Potion... Charm Potions... Love Potions... Soul Residue... Obedience Serum... Memory Root.

Her face twisted in discomfort.

This was very wrong.

Leona raised her voice, standing next to a mirror she'd found behind a drape. "Hey. Guys. Over here."

They gathered around. The mirror looked ordinary—until Evangeline stepped in front of it.

Her reflection... wasn't now.

It was her. Years ago. A girl. Dressed in a simple gown, eyes wide and crying. Weak.

One by one, the others saw their younger selves too.

But Damon—his reflection made their breath catch.

A blue-eyed boy in rags. Skin carved with lacerations. A noose tight around his neck. His eyes—lifeless.

Sylvia's reflection was of a girl dressed in finery... sitting inside a beautiful room lined with golden bars. A cage.

Evangeline whispered, "W-what is this place...?"

Her chest tightened. She turned fast, voice sharp—

"We need to go. Now."

They nodded—

—but froze.

At the door stood Bel.

Her smile was there, but it no longer felt kind. It didn't reach her eyes.

It was eerie. Wrong.

They brandished their weapons. Their expressions hardened—ready to fight, to flee.

Evangeline's voice dropped cold as ice.

"Who are you...? What are you...?"

Bel's smile never wavered. Her tone was soft.

"Me...?" she said gently.

"I am... a witch."

Chapter 285: Innocent Until Proven Guilty

The words that came out of her mouth instantly made them all tense up. A witch. That was always a grey area—witches could be good or evil depending on countless circumstances.

However, what mattered now was whether she meant them harm.

She slowly walked in, her steps soft, almost hesitant, before she sighed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, lowering her head with deliberate slowness.

"I did not mean to hide this from you..."

Still, they remained in a battle-ready stance, weapons and magic at the ready.

"Please do not be wary... I can explain everything," she continued, her voice trembling slightly, "so long as you give me a chance to."

Evangeline gave Sylvia a side glance. She had expected Bel to attack them the moment her identity was revealed—but the woman did no such thing. She didn't even raise her hands.

Instead, Bel slowly bowed her head, her guard completely down.

"If you wish to kill me or do me harm... that is fine. I only ask that you hear my side first."

Evangeline bit her lip. She was at a loss. If she didn't listen to this woman, would that make her cruel? Tyrannical? Her class—Dawnseeker—was all about seeking justice, not judgment.

Xander took a slow step forward, still carrying the sleeping Damon on his back.

"We will listen to your side," he said calmly, though his gaze remained cautious. "How do you intend to explain all this?"

Bel nodded slowly, her smile faint but sincere.

"Thank you..." she murmured, barely audible.

"I don't often get a chance... most persecute me before I can speak."

She glanced around the room, her expression distant, almost melancholic.

"I can understand your doubt... This forest is an evil place. I should know—I had a hard time surviving its horrors when I first came here."

"Then why are you here?" Sylvia asked sharply. Though blinded by the side effect of her skill, she tried to look at her—at least tried to aim her face in Bel's direction.

Bel nodded, her lips curling into a sad smile.

"I was exiled..." she said softly.

She slowly reached for one of the books nearby and picked it up, her fingers brushing gently over its worn cover. She sighed.

"I love children. That has always been... I've always dreamt of being a mother. Sadly, I am barren. So to cure my predicament... I became an alchemist."

Xander narrowed his eyes. Behind him, Damon stirred slightly. He felt lighter on his back.

"What does that have to do with you being here?" he asked.

"I studied for years," she continued, "but no potion worked. Eventually, I gave up on natural birth. War was always perpetual in this world, and I traveled all around it. I saw the precious lives of children wasted, forgotten..."

"So you turned to dark arts," Evangeline accused, her eyes narrowing.

Bel quickly shook her head.

"Goodness no..." she paused, steadying her breath. "I became a healer. I joined the Temple, hoping to stop the wars, but—"

"The Temple glorifies war," Sylvia interrupted, her voice colder now.

Bel nodded solemnly. "Yes, they do. So I found a new faith—in the Unknown God. At least there, I did not have to wage war, kill, or bring suffering to children."

"I quit the Temple and became a head matron for an orphanage I founded."

She looked at them, her eyes glistening.

"It was only then I learned just how horrible war was on children. So I took to raising them the right way. However... the Temple didn't like my philosophies."

She smiled again—but it was the smile of a mother who had lost everything.

"Nor did they like that I was spreading them. And so... on one dark night, they came into my home and slaughtered my children."

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

"They called them demon spawn... heretics."

She clutched her head, her voice trembling.

"It should have been me... It should have been me..."

Sylvia bit her lip. It sounded horrible—but the Temple had done worse.

"Somehow... I alone survived. I was left to bury my children... but they didn't even give me that chance. So I took their remains as I was hunted and labeled a witch. I eventually ended up here... in the Whispering Forest."

Leona looked at her, her voice soft and confused.

"Then why didn't you bury them... after all these years?"

Bel sniffled, her nose red.

"I couldn't. This land is cursed. I couldn't allow them to become undead... or worse. I just wanted them to rest."

Matia looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"Why didn't you cremate them?"

Sylvia shook her head slowly.

"Faith in the Unknown God does not accept cremation as a burial rite. Even in the Temple of the Goddess... it's not always acceptable."

"I was happy seeing you all," Bel said softly. "I... I've been so lonely over the years..."

Evangeline bit her lip again. If all that was true... then they had truly wronged her—dug up her past, opened old wounds.

Her voice came out weaker than she expected.

"Then... what about the mirror?"

Bel let out a bitter scoff.

"A cursed artifact I found in the forest... It sometimes shows me images of my children. I don't really know what else it does, so I covered it."

"What about the books on memory root and mind potions?" Sylvia asked sharply.

Bel looked toward Damon, whose eyes flickered—as though he were waking.

"I used them to make cures for mental contamination... like the one I gave your friend."

They all went quiet, a deep sense of shame washing over them.

This woman had helped them. Fed them. Given them a safe place to rest in this cursed forest... and this was how they repaid her.

For a few long moments, no one spoke.

Bel gently wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

"If there's anything else you want to ask... please do. And if you still wish to condemn me... you are free to do so."

She stepped forward, walking slowly toward Evangeline.

"As those who worship the Goddess... if you wish to kill me, I won't fault you. And if you wish to leave—I wouldn't stop you. Although I wouldn't advise it."

Evangeline bit her lip, her heart twisting in her chest.

"I... I... we... this..."

"We apologize for any trouble we may have caused you..." a weak voice suddenly spoke from Xander's back.

Damon's dark eyes were open now, staring straight at Bel.

He slowly pushed himself off Xander's back, wobbling with every step as he approached—half-staggering, barely conscious.

"I apologize... on behalf of my friends..." he mumbled.

He placed a hand on his head, clearly dizzy.

"Allow me to apologize... my name is..."

Before he could finish, Damon's eyes slowly fluttered shut—and he fell forward, straight toward Bel.

The beautiful, dark-haired woman quickly caught him, cradling the boy against her chest, gently nestling his head against her.

The others rushed over with anxious expressions, but Damon was already unconscious—his ear resting softly over her heart.

Chapter 286: The Mirror Sees All

Guilt was a horrible feeling—it gnawed at one's heart, left a bitter taste in the mouth, and for days after, they couldn't bring themselves to suspect Bel anymore.

She had helped them more than they could ever repay.

During those two days, Evangeline had tried her best to purify Damon from the mental contamination, and while she worked, Bel also offered her aid, providing some of her potions.

During that time, Damon had stirred several times... until two days ago, when he finally regained full consciousness.

To celebrate his recovery, Bel suggested having a feast. She'd asked Damon for a list of his favorite dishes.

Sylvia had half expected Damon to say something rude—or at least something Damon would usually say.

But instead, he'd given her a list of actual favorites. Sylvia had taken notes.

His favorite dish of all... was Tamberry cake.

So Bel had made him some.

When he took a bite of the cake, a single teardrop slipped from his hazy, dark eyes.

The sight of tears in the eyes of the normally cold Damon had stunned the others.

Sylvia still remembered what he had said that night—

"The last time I had Tamberry this delicious was when my mother was still alive..."

And then, somehow, Bel had hugged him and consoled him. Much to the group's surprise, her behavior was... strangely gentle. His reaction wasn't what they were used to. But what they found even more odd was the fact that Damon—of all people—had opened up.

At the time, it hadn't felt too strange. Just... a side of Damon they'd yet to see. His vulnerable side.

Sylvia had always known that part of him existed, hidden behind his usual edgy coldness and that defiant, arrogant personality.

Still, seeing it up close was... unusual.

She bit her lip, the fresh scent of honey and cinnamon hanging in the air.

Except now, that sweet, homey aroma made her want to retch.

These past few days had been... off. With each passing day, Damon had started acting strangely.

Sylvia wasn't sure anymore if he was pretending or not.

She blinked, her newly restored vision clear as day, eyes fully focused on Damon—who took another bite of the Tamberry cake in front of him.

He smiled at Bel.

"Mother, can I have more?"

Sylvia felt her heart sink each time Damon uttered those words.

That... that was what unsettled her. Damon had started calling Bel mother.

It began as a joke, shared over dessert by the hearth. But then... Bel insisted.

And Damon accepted.

Leona ate quietly, the liveliness of nights past now replaced by the solemn clatter of utensils.

Evangeline bit her lip, her eyes drifting toward Sylvia with a silent nod before she spoke.

"Erhm... Bel... when... do we leave? I mean... you said you knew a safe way back home..."

Bel didn't respond at first. Her smile remained gentle, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

SLAM.

Damon's hands crashed down on the table.

"What is wrong with you?" he snapped. "Why do you want to leave so badly? Are you blind to the dangers of the Whispering Forest? We can't leave. No, we have to stay."

Evangeline's eyes widened with a flicker of fear. How could she not be terrified when Damon—who had been their leader all this time—was now speaking the opposite of what he would normally say?

Bel gently stroked his head.

"It's fine, my dear child. Mother knows best. Mother will protect you... I swear."

Then her eyes turned to Evangeline. She smiled kindly.

"Don't worry. Let the dangers pass, my children."

Leona had been silent up to this point, but now, the fork in her hand melted from the surge of electricity coursing through her.

"We are not your children..."

Xander narrowed his eyes, his appetite for Bel's masterfully cooked food now completely gone.

"When do we leave?"

Matia nodded, her fairy wings carefully concealed in her body.

"You have to tell us. We can't just stay here forever."

Bel smiled softly, eyes lowered as she muttered in a barely audible voice,

"Forever? No... you won't stay that long..."

Evangeline frowned. "Come again?"

Damon stood up, glaring at her.

"That's rude."

Evangeline snapped back. "Why are you defending her? I didn't even say anything rude!"

His face contorted with anger. But before he could say more, Bel raised her hand, interrupting them with a calm yet ominous reply:

"Soon... but not yet."

Evangeline bit her lip again. This was getting under her skin.

Sylvia watched it all with a detached gaze, her mind spinning for a plan. This—this was how things had been going for them lately.

And from the look of it, not well.

Too many things were off. Suspicious.

Sylvia remembered once hearing Bel's voice crack—she had claimed to have a bad cold.

She'd noticed, too, how Bel made no sound when she walked. Bel had said it was due to years of training.

She'd felt how cold Bel's skin was when they'd been cooking together in the kitchen. She'd brushed it off back then...

Until she noticed the skin on Bel's neck.

It was... peeling away.

That had been the final straw.

Now, with her sight fully restored, Sylvia decided it was time. She would use her First-Class Skill to ask the question burning in her mind. But she knew the cost...

Each question she asked came with a price: her life. At least when related to Bel.

Or at least, a part of it. This was proof she was a powerful entity...far beyond them.

So instead of asking directly who or what Bel was, she asked:

How do I expose her?

She accepted the price—her skill would be temporarily sealed. She wouldn't be able to use the book again for some time.

But the book had answered.

"Look at her reflection in a mirror."

That struck her as odd.

Bel didn't own any mirrors... except for one hidden away. And that one was cursed.

Luckily, Sylvia had bought a small mirror for herself. Back when this entire ordeal had started, Damon had told the girls to ditch their makeup—but girls being girls, some had still bought small items, including the hand mirror Sylvia now kept hidden under the table.

Carefully, she slid it out, angling it low beneath the table, tilting it just right...

Right toward Bel.

And what she saw—

Nearly made her drop the mirror.

Chapter 287: Beautiful Skin

The mirror showed her something vile... something she did not wish to see... it unveiled the hideous truth before her eyes.

Under the table, from the angle she tilted it, Sylvia stared into the mirror—at Bel's reflection. But the beautiful black-haired woman... was gone.

What stared back at her was something else.

Sylvia looked upon pulsing, pale skin stretched over a twisted frame. Horrible, chalk-white hair was scattered across a half-bald scalp, her head unevenly shaped and grotesque. Her face—gaunt, with sagging wrinkles—was riddled with warts. A long, thin chin jutted downward from a sunken face. Her teeth were tiny, brown, and rotting... maggots squirmed between her gums.

She was hunched, draped in tattered clothes, the sleeves of her gown loose like shed skin. Her eyes—pitch black—held eerie, irregular brown irises that glowed faintly in the dim light.

Sylvia's breath caught in her throat.

The name rose in her mind unbidden.

"Bel... her name was Bel... she's... she's a beldam..."

How? How could Sylvia not have seen it before? How could she not have known what a beldam was?

Bel had claimed she was a witch. And when Sylvia asked her book, it had confirmed that she was telling the truth. But witches and beldams... they weren't the same.

All witches were beautiful—glamorous, ethereal. Supposedly kind priestesses of the forest.

But beldams... were something else entirely.

They were the nightmares children feared. A beldam was still a witch, yes—but one of ancient malice. A predator that fed not on power, but on innocence.

'She preys on children...'

Sylvia's heart thundered in her chest as she racked her memory for everything she had ever learned about Beldams.

They lured children in with warmth and false kindness. They gave love, attention, comfort—until the child's guard fell. And then...

They would fatten them. Feed them. Nurture them.

And then devour them.

Their souls were twisted, consumed for dark arts... bound and trapped in eternal suffering.

"Never to find peace..."

The mirror trembled in Sylvia's hand.

'She won't act yet... not until she's revealed... she's still gaining our trust...'

Sylvia glanced at Damon, her lips twitching as a knot of dread formed in her gut. He seemed calm... almost trusting toward the Beldam.

No... that didn't make sense.

Damon was too cautious. He never trusted easily.

There had to be an explanation.

Sylvia bit her lip, mind racing, combing through the events, until it struck her.

When they first entered the Beldam's home... Damon had been unconscious.

In their panic... Evangeline... she had said his name. Just once.

Sylvia clenched her fist.

"She wasn't present... she didn't hear his name... and even if she did... it shouldn't have worked on him..."

But then it all clicked into place.

This place... this house... it wasn't part of the Whispering Forest anymore.

It was the Beldam's domain.

'If she can establish her own area of influence... then...'

Sylvia's blood ran cold. Sweat dripped down her face.

'She's in the fourth class...'

Her legs nearly gave out beneath her.

If that was true... then there was no hope of defeating her.

They had to escape... into the forest.

"Sylvia...? Sylvia..."

Damon's voice snapped her back. She looked up, blinking, her face pale as she struggled to keep calm.

"Y-Yes...?"

Damon frowned, concern flickering in his eyes, though there was a distant haze behind them.

"You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost..."

Bel smiled gently at Damon... but beneath Sylvia's hidden mirror, the Beldam's true form smiled back—a hideous grin, full of maggots.

And then... she looked down. Right at where Sylvia hid the mirror under the table.

A knowing glance.

"Maybe she did... perhaps she saw something she shouldn't have..."

Sylvia's heart pounded, her veins running cold.

'She knows...'

Evangeline sighed loudly beside her, oblivious to the danger Sylvia had uncovered. She was annoyed, but unaware—unaware that the six teenagers in the room, including herself, were now seated with a Beldam.

"This is about when we leave... I want to go to the ruined City. As party leader, you should prioritize our mission. You said to put your faith in me..."

Sylvia barely heard her. The Beldam's eyes never left her. A crawling, suffocating dread coiled around her chest, tighter and tighter. She could barely breathe.

Damon's voice cut through again, sharp with frustration.

"I know what I said. I said put your faith in me..."

Sylvia's fist clenched. Her elf ears twitched slightly. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to meet the Beldam's.

She still wore the skin of a beautiful woman.

'I'm the only one who knows... I have to...'

The Beldam smiled again, warm and maternal—on the surface. She turned her attention to Damon, who had now shifted his gaze to Evangeline.

"Ahh, my dear child... you never quite told mother your name..."

The sound of clattering utensils stopped instantly.

Everyone froze.

Damon had set that rule himself: never speak your name in the Whispering Forest.

He looked at her—at Bel—his expression unreadable, yet faintly... warped.

"Of course, mother..."

He placed a hand on his chest, smiling softly.

"My name is Damon."

A hush fell across the room.

The Beldam glanced sideways at Sylvia.

"What about your friends...?"

The others turned toward Sylvia, finally sensing the danger. Leona shot up, slamming her hand against the table.

"You can't do that!"

But Damon stood, his voice low and cold as he glared at her.

"Sit down. It's rude not to share our names after so long. Mother told us her name... we can trust her."

He turned toward Sylvia, who stared at him, stricken with horror.

"Trust me."

Xander flinched as Damon pointed at him.

"The ugly one is Xander. The fairy girl is Matia..."

He gestured at Evangeline, whose mouth had gone dry.

"The golden-haired one—Evangeline."

His eyes fell on Leona... then Sylvia.

"Argh..."

There was hesitation.

But then...

"Those two are Leona and Sylvia."

The Beldam's smile widened. It was gentle. Warm. But Sylvia saw through it now.

It was the grin of a predator.

"I see. Thank you, Damon. You are a good boy... you've made mother very happy..."

Damon smiled... not like himself. It was soft. Innocent. Wrong.

"Thank you, mother... you're so... kind..."

Bel stood from her seat. Her body moved silently as she turned.

"I suppose we should all go to bed now. I have some work to do. You children should rest."

She drifted away, her steps soundless.

Her shadow—on the wall—twisted and warped. The shadow of a hideous hag.

The others sat pale and stunned as Damon followed her, his smile unwavering... devoted.

Sylvia watched him go, her body frozen in lingering fear.

'She's going to make preparations...'

'If I can prove she's a monster... Damon will come to his senses.'

'We have to escape tonight.'

She clenched her fist, her jaw tight with resolve.

"We'll take our chances with the horrors of the forest outside..."

Chapter 288: Escape To Hell

The sound of the door clicking shut made Sylvia's heart finally ease.

Damon stood outside slowly. He turned to the others. "Let's get to bed..."

Sylvia nodded her head while the others all looked at Damon without saying anything. Leona opened her mouth to say something but... Sylvia shook her head.

She looked at Damon.

"Let's go to sleep."

He nodded slowly...

As they walked past the dining hall, by the hearth, Sylvia subtly picked up a paper and a quill when no one was looking. She tucked it under her arm and walked quietly in the middle of her friends.

Carefully, she scribbled something and shoved it into Xander's hand. He frowned a bit but wordlessly squeezed it into his arm, holding it tight without even reading its contents. He wasn't stupid—if she was handing him a hidden note, then clearly, she couldn't speak out loud.

Damon and Xander stopped outside the room that belonged to the two boys. Damon looked at Sylvia.

"Good night..."

He unlocked the door with a tired yawn. Sylvia nodded slowly at Xander, who nodded back.

The girls walked in silence to their room just down the hall—the next door over.

Evangeline led, slowly opening the door. It made a creaking sound, a detail she alone seemed to register. She stood by the frame, waiting until all three girls entered. Then she slowly glanced at the dim hallway one last time before gently shutting the door.

Turning around, she found the others standing still, watching her.

She looked at them in silence for a few seconds. Then she whispered,

"I... I'm not the only one who's noticed something weird..."

Matia bit her lips.

"Weird is an understatement. Bel... she's becoming more eerie. Every day."

Leona's beastkin ears drooped low.

"Damon... he's... he's acting weird. Not quite like Damon..."

Her voice wavered.

Sylvia's hands trembled at her sides. She bit her lips hard.

"Bel... Bel... she's a... Beldam..."

Her voice was barely audible. A whisper. She looked up, expecting fear, dread—some reaction in their eyes.

She found none.

Evangeline narrowed her brows.

"Figures. No way a nice lady lives in the heart of the Whispering Forest..."

Matia clenched her fist.

"I can't believe we bought her sob story..."

Leona's golden eyes burned with rage.

"That's why Damon was acting weird... she must've done something to him. Or he knows—and he's pretending. He has to be..."

She whispered the last part, almost as if she was praying it were true.

She looked at the others.

"Let's kill her."

Matia raised her hand to stop Leona.

"We can't. We don't know her rank..."

Evangeline looked at Sylvia.

"What's her rank?"

"Fourth class... I'm not sure, but she's surely more powerful than us. It should be a mage class, so she may be weak to close-range and physical attacks... but we'd never get that chance..."

Evangeline's face paled.

Fourth class... a whole three ranks above their meager First Class strength. She could wipe them out as easily as breathing.

Matia's eyes were cold.

"If she's a mage type... a single spell will kill us. Maybe if we—"

"No." Sylvia cut her off with a whisper.

"We won't win... We need to leave her house..."

Evangeline bit her lips.

"What about Damon and Xander?"

"I left Xander a note... we leave at midnight. She should be neck-deep in whatever she's doing by then. Grab your weapons..."

Evangeline took a deep breath. Their bags were already packed—that was the easy part.

"How do we intend to leave?" Leona's ears twitched. "Which way is out?"

Sylvia nodded, recalling something.

"We take the kitchen door. I remember she opened it once—I heard whispers from the forest... It must be the way out."

Matia nodded.

"Okay. We leave at midnight. Head to the kitchen... then run."

Sylvia clutched her bag.

Midnight wasn't far, but for them... it felt like an eternity. When it finally arrived, Evangeline opened the door slowly. The hallway was dim.

She stepped out, rapier in hand. She knew it wouldn't help much against the Beldam—but still, she gripped it tightly. It made her feel safer in the suffocating dread.

At the far end of the hallway, a door creaked open.

Xander stepped out. Damon stood beside him, his expression blank. He walked toward them casually, unbothered by the idea of being caught.

He looked at them with a frown.

"You don't actually have evidence. But I'll take your word for it."

Sylvia let out a sigh of relief. At least he was still himself... She smiled, knowing something had snapped him back.

He turned to the others.

"Hurry. Let's go to the kitchen..."

Their five shadows stretched long beneath the flickering lights as they walked in fearful silence.

Sylvia noted the absence of Damon's shadow.

She smiled faintly. He must've sent it out to scout a path... He's back to normal...

There were no obstacles along the way. The house was quiet. Too quiet. A blessing—it meant the Beldam was still busy. Still unaware.

Damon led them, navigating the halls until they reached the doors to the kitchen.

Seeing the doors, their hearts lightened. Escape was near. The dreadful nest of the Beldam would soon be behind them.

Damon slowly opened the doors and stepped into the kitchen. The others followed—pitch black.

As soon as he entered, he stopped. Turned back.

The others had just stepped inside when his voice cut the silence.

He looked toward the darkness—where a towering shape waited, nearly three meters tall.

"I've brought them, Mother."

Sylvia didn't scream. Her breath didn't even hitch. Her heart simply cracked—clean and quiet.

At that moment, the stove lights flickered on.

And the illusion shattered.

There she stood—no longer wearing the skin of a beautiful woman. She had no need for it now.

The Beldam.

Grotesque. Her true form monstrous. Teeth riddled with maggots.

Her skin sagged like melted wax. Maggots nested in the hollows of her gums. Eyes, milky and deep, blinked sideways like a lizard's.

Her shadow—Damon's missing shadow—slithered across the floor, returning and fusing back with him.

She smiled.

A hideous smile.

Sylvia's heart sank with dread. But even more than that—with betrayal.

Leona's eyes widened, blazing with fury.

"What... what have you done to him, you monster!"

She lunged—tried to scream. But the Beldam merely waved her withered hand.

"Sleep," she shrieked, voice shrill and ancient.

Leona dropped first—crashing onto the floor. The others followed like puppets with cut strings.

As Sylvia hit the wood, her body weak and heavy, she raised her hand toward Damon. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

She whispered his name.

"Damon..."

Then the world went black.

Chapter 289: Toss Her Into The Fire

Evangeline slowly opened her eyes, finding herself sprawled across the cold stone floor... The warm heat of the hearth spread through the room, but her wrist throbbed with a dull, cold pain—something biting into her flesh.

Groggily, she raised her head... her skull pounding with pain. She looked down—her wrist was shackled in a cold black cuff, a chain rattling from it, anchoring her down.

Her eyes flared. She yanked on the chain with all her might, pouring her first-class advancement strength into the pull.

The metal rang out with a sharp clang, but it didn't break. The chain shimmered faintly—runes etched across its length, glowing in response.

"Don't try to escape... you won't."

Her heart sank. She raised her head toward the voice—and her face went pale.

"Da... Damon... why? What did she do to you...?"

Damon turned his head, expression blank. The Beldam stood beside the furnace, her hideous silhouette framed by flickering firelight. She stirred a bubbling pot of green sludge.

"Hehe... Double, double, toil and trouble... fire burn and cauldron bubble! Hehejeje..."

Her laughter echoed like cracked bones in a tomb. Damon barely glanced at her before speaking, loud enough for her to hear.

"Mother opened my eyes to the truth."

He looked around at the others—still unconscious.

"They should hear this too... Mother's almost ready."

Evangeline's face contorted in fear. She yanked at the chains, each pull creating a thunderous clatter.

"Damn it, Damon! Come to your senses! She's going to eat us—please, wake up!"

Her voice rang through the chamber—and though it may have fallen deaf on Damon's ears, the others began to stir.

Leona's eyes snapped open, sweat beading down her forehead.

Xander coughed, tugging at his own shackles. Matia's wings fluttered—but she couldn't fly. She couldn't even feel her magic. Her mana had been sealed.

Sylvia sat quietly, staring at Damon with glassy eyes.

"I... I'm sorry, everyone... I'm sorry, Damon... My plan wasn't good enough... I couldn't anticipate everything... I couldn't be more patient or cunning..."

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'm so useless... even with limitless knowledge in my hands... I'm still so weak..."

Damon looked at her, eyes empty.

"Shut up. Your tears will ruin Mother's soup."

Xander growled, biting his lip, glaring hard at Damon.

"Shut up. Since when did you become so pathetic? The Damon Grey I know is too damn insane to bow to anyone."

Damon's eyes flared. He raised a leg and kicked Xander hard in the chest. Xander flew backward, yanked to a halt by his chain.

"Shut up. Don't act like you know me... you don't."

Leona bit her lip.

"I do know you."

Damon raised his hand—but hesitated.

The Beldam walked over, waxy skin sagging in grotesque folds. Her fingers—long, hideous, and slick—gently stroked Damon's head from behind.

"Good, my child... the preparations are almost done... hehe... Now then... which one should I eat first?"

Her mouth twisted open in a crooked smile—maggots writhing between her yellow teeth. Damon stood beside her, a serene smile on his face.

"Whichever one you want, Mother."

The Beldam's grin widened. Malice oozed from every inch of her.

"In that case... why don't we pick which one will be roasted alive first?"

She cracked her neck—emitting a horrid stench that made them all gag.

She raised a small vial of flickering fire.

"Hehe... This little thing contains flame from the dragon Ashergon... Good thing I gathered some while he rampaged recently..."

Sylvia's eyes widened—recognizing it instantly. Ashergon's flame... The same inferno that had reduced an entire region to ashes.

That explained why she hadn't been home when they'd first come.

The Beldam sauntered over to Evangeline. Her hand slowly crept toward Evangeline's chest—groping without shame.

Evangeline snarled and smacked her hand away. "Don't touch me, you filthy creature—!"

The Beldam's face twisted in rage. She raised her hand to strike—

But Damon moved first. He slapped Evangeline across the face—then followed up with a hard kick to her gut.

"How dare you strike Mother."

The Beldam let out a satisfied purr. "Hehejeje... Good boy..."

She turned her attention elsewhere. "That one's quite fatty... but not good enough..."

Leona's jaw clenched, sparks of lightning flashing in her eyes despite the mana-suppressing shackles.

"What have you done to him..." she spat. "Doesn't matter. When I break out of these... I'll kill you."

The Beldam leaned close, drooling spittle onto Leona's face. She turned next to Sylvia, who simply stared at her, unflinching.

"Yes... this one will do just fine."

She turned toward Damon and snapped her fingers like he was a dog.

"Bring that one to the furnace. She'll be the first."

Damon smiled. "Of course, Mother. She would be honored to be of use to you."

She walked away.

The Beldam stood by the cold furnace. She uncorked the vial. A spark of dragonfire slipped out—landing on a massive pile of magical wood. The flames exploded instantly, licking the walls of the iron furnace.

She chanted, raising her arms to the fire. "Bring her here... hehe..."

Damon pulled Sylvia's chain. Evangeline tried to stop him, biting at his ankle—but he kicked her head away with no hesitation.

"Don't interfere."

He grabbed Sylvia by the hair, dragging her across the floor.

"No—let me go! Damon, please—don't do this!"

She struggled, kicked, fought... His face twisted with anger. He slammed his fist into her gut.

"Shut up. It'll be over soon."

He kept pulling—her nails scraped the floor, leaving bloody trails behind. Her screams tore the air. The others pleaded, begged—Xander roared curses, Leona watched in silence, Matia trembled with resentment.

Evangeline screamed until her voice broke.

But Damon didn't stop.

Sylvia struggled, crying, bleeding—her breath ragged.

The Beldam didn't even turn around. Damon dragged Sylvia right to the edge of the furnace.

"Throw her in," she commanded.

"Sure," Damon said casually—and then, with all his strength, he kicked beldam forward.

Her body jerked caught completely off guard, and her eyes widened as she was sent flying into her inferno.

"You talk too much."

Before the Beldam could even react—Sylvia's bloodied hands slammed the vault door shut. The furnace roared.

The dragon flame surged violently—engulfing the room.

And the Beldam screamed—her shrieks high-pitched and inhuman—as the flames consumed her.

The others could only stare in shocked silence.

Damon turned to Sylvia—who immediately threw herself into his arms.

"I was so scared... I almost thought your plan wouldn't work..."

"I'm glad you did," he whispered, holding her close.

Damon finally let himself relax the tension slowly leaving his body. He held Sylvia tight. She felt warm and alive. He wanted to keep it that way.

A soft system chime echoed in his mind.

[You have slain: Beldam of the Whispering Forest]

[You have leveled up]

[You have gained +80 Attribute Points]

[You have awakened the Skill: Shadow]

Chapter 290: Better Days

[Mastery: Mental Contamination Resistance Lv2]

[Mastery: Deception Lv3]

The system notifications finally faded, and Damon let out a long, shuddering breath. That was a close one... too close.

He had nearly died—again. That thing in the woods... the grotesque, creeping horror with a voice like dead leaves and tentacles. And just when he thought it was over, he woke up slumped over Xander's back, barely conscious, only to realize his friends were standing face-to-face with a woman that was clearly lying.

A suspicious woman, whose heartbeat gave her away.

He'd thrown himself onto her just to listen—and it had confirmed everything. Her pulse was off. Wrong. Not human.

Her skin was too cold...to fake.

She was a Beldam.

And the system had already listed her soul as a requirement.

[Level Up Requirements]

Beldam Souls Consumed: [0/1]

He didn't need to connect the dots. It was already too convenient, too neat. He would've gladly taken the risk of killing an innocent woman if it meant keeping his friends alive.

But this wasn't an ordinary woman.

She was far too powerful.

Damon slowly let go of Sylvia as the others watched, their expressions shifting from uncertainty to pure confusion. Each of them looked ready to say something —but they hesitated, waiting.

He stepped forward calmly, his breath even, his eyes heavy with exhaustion.

Leona was the first to break the silence. She took a deep breath and exhaled like she'd been holding it the whole time.

"I knew it... I knew you wouldn't be taken over so easily..."

Damon smiled faintly. "I was almost taken over... Lucky for me, I have resistance."

He wasn't bluffing. The system had rewarded him with a new mastery—Mental Contamination Resistance. The Mastery Mechanic was incredible, truly. As long as something didn't outright kill him, he could develop resistance to it.

'At this rate, maybe one day I'll have a resistance to everything... Should I start drinking poison next?'

Evangeline slowly stood up, still shackled, her voice raspy and strained from all the screaming earlier.

"Y-You should've clued us in... I was terrified... I thought you wanted to kill Sylvia... I thought she had you..."

"Actually... he did clue us in," came a quiet voice.

Sylvia.

Her voice was low and raw, her fingers bleeding and bent at awkward angles from clawing at the wooden floor. She kept her eyes on the ground as she spoke.

"He did it at the table... The first clue was when he told us to 'have faith.' That was when you and Damon were arguing."

Evangeline turned to face her slowly.

"You knew...?"

Sylvia shook her head with a hollow look. "Not at first. I was terrified too. I thought we lost him. But... he looked at me—and said 'trust me.' He never broke eye contact. It might've sounded like he was defending her, but he was trying to tell us something."

Her eyes flicked toward the house.

"This whole place was under her influence. The walls had ears."

They followed her gaze to the Beldam's house. The power that once radiated from it now flickered weakly—its dark, eerie presence fading slowly with her death.

Damon stepped forward and knelt beside Evangeline, pulling out a blackened iron key he'd pickpocketed from the Beldam just before tossing her into the flames. With a soft click, he unlocked her chains.

"The final clue was risky... but I had to make sure you guys caught on."

Evangeline rubbed her sore wrists as the strength returned to her limbs.

Xander tilted his head, curious. "What was the third clue?"

Evangeline's eyes narrowed, a mix of irritation and understanding dawning.

"He said... the ugly one is Xander."

Matia's eyes lit up. "Of course! If he was under her control, he wouldn't be unnecessarily rude. That's something only Damon would do."

Damon smirked as he moved from one friend to the next, undoing their shackles.

"But," he added, "you guys were too dumb to figure it out."

Leona didn't argue. She simply stood up and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug, her silence louder than any thanks.

"Hey—Leona—I can't breathe—let up a bit!"

She reluctantly let go. Damon smiled at her, chest still heaving.

"Leona didn't believe I was taken over. But I couldn't confirm her suspicions directly... She's too pure to pull off a scheme like this."

Leona scoffed. "Awww, how sweet. That's the nicest way you've ever called me stupid."

He bowed with exaggerated grace. "Thank you. I've been working on my people skills. I'm almost a better person now."

He glanced toward Sylvia—who, despite her exhaustion, was tending to her broken nails, slowly healing herself with trembling hands.

"You've still got a long way to go, you bastard..." Evangeline muttered.

He rolled his eyes, raising his arms in mock defense.

"Ehm. You're welcome... for saving your lives."

Xander looked at Sylvia. "Since when did you know...?"

She nodded, her nails now fully healed. "After dinner. He looked at me—I noticed his shadow. After that, I was sure he was okay... well, I had some doubts, but I took the risk."

Matia blinked. "Wait, wait a minute. So you never actually planned for us to escape this house...?"

Sylvia slowly shook her head.

"Why would I make such a momentously, stupid plan? The whole escape was predicated on failure. I was meant to fail, so Damon could gain her trust."

Evangeline raised an eyebrow. That was a level of deception that fooled even their closest friends...

"Did he tell you his plan? Were you completely sure?" she asked, voice sharp with disbelief.

Sylvia looked away awkwardly, scratching her chin. "Hmmm... no. But—but I had faith... and the power of friendship..."

Evangeline smiled coldly, lifting her fist at her sarcasm.

"I have a strong urge to smack you right now. More than I want to beat the hell out of Damon."

Damon groaned. "All that work and this is how I'm thanked? Shouldn't you all be groveling? Showering me with gratitude for saving your lives?"

Evangeline sighed. At the very least, they could finally breathe. The tension had eased enough that they were back to making jokes—stupid ones, but still they had gotten somewhat used to the horrors.

"So... you were sure your plan would work?" she asked.

Damon looked away, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"I had a zero percent guarantee. But hear me out... I had faith. Don't look so appalled."

Evangeline smiled coldly.

Xander sat there quietly, just glad they were all still alive. Somehow, they'd survived another horror. Barely. They almost didn't make it...

He returned his gaze at Damon, who was currently being throttled by a frustrated Evangeline.

"Now what? We survived, sure. That doesn't change the bigger problem. We still don't know which part of the forest we're in. We've got no solid gear left. Our weapons are practically crumbling."

Damon looked over at him, still held in Evangeline's grip. Her soft skin against his head.

"Actually, all our problems are solved."

Everyone stared at him.

He shrugged. "What? I did say the beldam talked too much. Also, aren't those magic weapons and armor?" He pointed toward the far end of the room.

Their eyes followed. In the dimming light of the house's fading magic, racks of enchanted gear gleamed—enough to outfit all of them twice over.

"We've also got a better map now," Damon added. "And a route to Lysithara. We're not that far from the Whispering City."

He turned slowly, his gaze locking onto the hearth. Reaching into his neck, he pulled out his mother's locket, the soft metallic clink echoing in the silence.

"We're almost there."