

## Shadow 291

### Chapter 291: Doom Stole It

The house was falling apart... with the Beldam dead, the power that once kept the Whispering Forest from creeping in was weakening with every passing day. It wouldn't be long before the forest swallowed what remained.

Lucky for Damon, he wouldn't be staying that long.

He tossed a few more magic crystals into his shadow, solving its insatiable hunger with his [Sacrifice] skill. It also helped boost his mana. The Beldam had quite a few magic crystals—but also a number of magical artifacts. Cursed ones, in her case. His heart ached as his shadow consumed them.

But he had to endure. So what if he could've sold those artifacts for millions of zeni? His shadow needed to eat.

So he sacrificed them all, keeping only the ones his party had deemed safe for use... and a handful of magic crystals. But even those were rare. He was going to need more soon.

He opened his system panel:

[HP: 585/585]

[Mana: 13,457/13,457]

[Strength: 834]

[Agility: 657]

[Speed: 1185]

[Endurance: 565]

[Class: Death Dealer]

[Shadow: 900]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 9]

[Condition: Shadow is full]

[Attributes: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour]  
[Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze]

[Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn] [Omen Of Dread] [Dealer's Hand] [Bloodletting] [Shadow  
Movement] [Shadow]

[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv1] [Survival Lv3] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv3] [Bartering Lv2]  
[Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv2]

[Trap Lv2] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv2] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv1] [Mana Control Lv1] [Magic  
Bullet Lv1]

[Pain Resistance Lv2] [Mental Contamination Resistance Lv2]

[Locked]

Damon smiled faintly. He had grown in some areas. His [Deception] had leveled up. So had [Pain Resistance]. The [Mental Contamination Resistance] likely came from the horrors he'd seen in that cursed forest.

He bit his lip.

'If I see some of those things with [Shadow Perception]... they can passively kill me. Which means my most useful navigation skill is now off limits...'

It pained him to make the decision, but he had no choice. They could all die if he slipped up.

As the saying went: If you gaze into the abyss, it gazes back at you.

So it was better not to look.

Shutting off [Shadow Perception] dulled his view of the world. What was once a kaleidoscope of images, lights, shadows, and hidden forms... now reduced to his single, humble vision. He almost felt disoriented.

He always had it on—fully or partially. Now, without it, he felt blind. As if some part of his awareness had been ripped away.

"How ironic... I couldn't even process all that information when I first got the skill..."

Speaking of skills—he had a new one.

Its name was simple. Straightforward. Damon stepped on a shadow, and like slipping beneath water, his body slowly disappeared into the darkness. He moved through the shadows as if gliding through liquid, and slowly, he emerged again.

With a sigh, he stared at his palms.

"The [Shadow Movement] skill lets me enter shadows physically... but this new one changes everything."

He took a step forward—and with that single step, his body unraveled into shadow. His human form collapsed into a dark mass. His very essence lost shape.

He fell to his knees, clutching his chest.

"Huhuhu... what the hell..."

He had become formless—a living, intangible shadow. His body no longer existed, and his mind wasn't used to such an alien state.

It made his thoughts swim in a terrible wrongness. A sickening feeling of being too hollow.

That was the skill—[Shadow].

He stood slowly, dusting off his clothes with a breathless groan.

"This would be useful in a fight if I can transform mid-battle... but it'd be hindered by bright light or sudden flashes."

A faint smile crept onto his lips as he looked down at his hand.

"Still... I can already see its potential."

He glanced at the hovering system panel.

The skill description caught his eye—dragging his attention away from the flickering shadows and giving him something to ponder once more.

[Shadow]

[Description]

Magic is built in one's heart and imagination, with countless attributes tied to the three main sources of energy. Among these three, magic is the most free—born of dreams, shaped by will.

Anyone was free to create and be whatever they wished. Of the three, mana was abundant and the easiest to wield.

But on this vile day, Doom denied the children of Aetherus their birthright. No longer could they shape the world as they pleased. Doom bound all to a single attribute, caging creativity and shackling the spirit.

Doom had denied them the gift of choice.

Yet magic always finds a way. And so did the witches—favored by the Unknown God—who cheated Doom's decree.

[Effect]

You are a Shadow, born between light and darkness. Take on an ethereal form, untouchable and intangible.

[Type] Active

[Cooldown] 0 secs

The words carved themselves into his thoughts.

The description wasn't just technical—it was telling... revealing something that felt unbelievable.

"There are three main sources of energy," he muttered to himself, voice low and uncertain. "Mana's just... one of them?"

'What are the other two...?' the thought buzzed through his head like a gnat he couldn't swat.

But no—that wasn't what he should be focusing on right now.

His eyes narrowed. His breath caught.

The real revelation—the one that made his heart thud against his ribs—was far more mind-shaking.

Magic... wasn't always restricted to one attribute.

People used to wield multiple attributes—fire, water, space, light, shadow, and more—all at once. Not just one element handed to them like a collar around the neck... but true freedom. True creativity. They shaped the world with dreams and will alone.

His gaze traced the phrase again.

"But on this vile day... Doom..."

Of course he knew who Doom was. Everyone did.

The Goddess of Doom—the one who created their very world. Worshiped by all. Praised. Loved. Feared.

But why would she do this?

Why would the goddess bind the people of Aetherus? Why would she rob them of something so natural... so right?

'This is her world... why would she cripple it?'

Damon's fingers curled into trembling fists as something boiled deep inside his chest—hot, bitter frustration rising like bile in his throat.

Shadow... his attribute.

Rare. Obscure. Non-destructive. And until now, he'd always seen it as a burden—an unfortunate draw in the divine lottery.

But now?

Now it felt like a shackle.

"You're telling me... I could've had a choice? I would've had a choice..." His voice cracked as he hissed the words out loud. "Doom took our right—our right to freely use all magic attributes..."

For the first time in his life, Damon felt it.

A weight—cold and suffocating—coiling around his neck.

Something rightfully his had been stolen.

And the thief? She was too powerful. Too distant.

It didn't matter whether he knew or not—she had taken it all the same.

His eyes fell to the final passage.

Magic always finds a way. And so did the witches—favored by the Unknown God—who cheated Doom's decree.

Witches.

They knew. They had found a way to slip through the cracks, to spit in Doom's face and do the impossible. They were bound by her law.... But still cheated it.

Damon clenched his fist tight—nails digging into flesh.

He didn't want another attribute just for power.

He wanted it because it was his choice.

He wanted to defy—even if it was in the smallest way... even if he was just an ant staring up at the stars.

He wanted to take back his right to choose.

Even if it meant standing against the goddess herself.... The goddess of fate...

Chapter 292: Ascendant Armor

Damon stood in front of the others... all of them dressed in armor. These weren't ordinary armors—no, these were the ones the Beldam had once kept like decorations, proudly displayed in her lair, untouched by dust or decay. Oddly enough, unlike the other artifacts they had uncovered—most of which were cursed or rotten with dark magic—these were different.

These were pure. Untainted. Almost reverent in design.

Each armor was a set, complete with a weapon... save one.

That one... was called Pale Crown.

It came with nothing—no blade, no spear, no staff. Just the armor alone.

For the past few days, they'd contemplated, argued, and tested who would wear what. And after much trial, they decided. The armors at first looked dead—dull, lusterless, like tomb relics drained of soul. But the moment they were worn... they responded. Awakened. Shifting and morphing to mirror the magic attribute of their new bearer.

His eyes fell on Sylvia.

She had regained use of her book again, and for whatever reason, the cost of prying information from it this time wasn't as steep. Just a two-day headache. Though, even so, she had been bedridden, wrapped in fevered silence, twitching beneath cold sheets.

A price was still a price.

But that was how they learned the names of these armors.

Damon glanced toward Xander—his body now swallowed by gleaming silver-gray heavy armor. It gave the already towering boy an almost monstrous silhouette, shoulders like bastions, footsteps like anvils. The weapon that came with it was a massive spear, thick and unbending, already pulsing with gravitational weight that bent the dirt around its head. It didn't stay rigid for long either—it shifted, adapting to his gravity-aligned magic.

That set was called Armor of the Bound Colossus.

Its enchantment—Weightbreaker: Amplifies spear strikes with gravitational force, turning every swing into a shockwave.

Each of these was no ordinary relic. Sylvia's book had shown them—these were Ascendant Armors. Only six in existence. No replicas. No duplicates.

Damon nearly scoffed under his breath.

The Beldam... she must've suffered to collect them, dragging them out from the ruins of Lysithara... only for them to kill her and claim the prize.

He turned his gaze back to Sylvia.

She now wore a much lighter set—closer to robes than armor. A breastplate hugged her torso, thin pauldrons over her shoulders, and flowing cloth ran down her sides. It was elegant. Subtle. Dangerous. This was one of the three forms every armor could take.

The first form—Awakened Form—more fabric than metal. Nimble and reactive.

The second—Ascendant Mantle—a balanced blend of cloth and steel. Still mobile. Still light.

The final—Sovereign's Mantle—a full suit of heavy armor from crown to toe. That was the form Xander now bore.

Of course he did.

He was the group's tank.

"...Sylvia," Damon muttered, "you never told us everything before you passed out."

She nodded, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "I told you most of it... didn't I?" Her voice was hoarse, but steady. "The armors were forged for six of Lysithara's mightiest champions. Made to fight the Rot. Each one has a soul core—it aligns with your magic. And each one holds four enchantments..."

Her eyes flicked across the group. They listened. Quiet. Armored.

She continued.

"There's more. A trial. A counter. If you vanquish ten thousand foes... the armor binds to your soul. Forever."

Damon frowned. "You mean... until something kills us."

She gave a shallow nod. "The first armor... the one you've got... is armor of Pale Crown."

Damon sighed. He already knew his was called Pale Crown—the only armor that didn't come with a weapon. Just like the others, it held four enchantments... but like them, he could only use one.

Soul Veil – Allows the user to phase through solid objects for short moments.

Basically, something he could already do with his shadow skills—except this time, he didn't need to slip into shadowform. This... he could do in his physical body.

Sylvia's armor was different—Armor of the Crescent Seer.

The enchantment she could tap into:

Lunar Echo – Arrows fired during the full moon double in number and damage.

Coincidence or not, the weapons it came with—a bow, a quiver, and two short swords—were exactly what Sylvia always used.

'Yeah, no, I'm not buying this... this is not a coincidence.'

All of them had gotten weapons that matched them.

Sylvia's armor was silvery white, delicate and elegant, with crescent motifs lining the edges. It clung to her form like moonlight, complimenting her white hair and grey eyes with a grace that felt less forged and more... destined. It was ceremonial, draped in white fabrics that swayed when she moved.

Evangeline had received the Armor of Duskglass.

Her enchantment:

Refraction Halo – Light bends around her body, granting evasion boosts and illusionary afterimages.

She looked beautiful—sleek and radiant, like sunlight caught in crystal. Even in the dimmest corner of the chamber, her form glowed faintly. Silver and gold traced her helm, and her new rapier shimmered with stored light magic. She stood quietly, listening to Sylvia, her eyes flickering calmly across the others.

Leona wore Armor of Stormwake—and unlike the rest, she had jumped straight into its third form: full plate. Heavy. Intimidating. A greatsword hung across her back.

The armor was jagged, like storm clouds beaten into steel. Sparks crackled around her shoulders even when she stood still, like the armor was breathing with thunder.

Her enchantment:

Flashstep Edge – Can teleport short distances during sword swings, leaving a trail of thunder.

Then came the most unusual of the group.

Matia's Armor of Shattered Ice.

At first glance, it seemed to have no weapons. But that was wrong. The armor itself was the weapon. All she had to do was think, and a weapon would form in her hand, forged from soul-infused ice.

A flowing set of icy-blue armor that never kept one shape—always shifting, refusing to stay fixed. She stayed locked inside its third form, silent and motionless. Heavy and stalwart. A sentinel of frost.

Her enchantment:

Frost Arsenal – Can generate ethereal weapons made of soul-infused ice at will.

Each armor held four enchantments. But they could only access one.

They were too weak. They hadn't passed the trial.

The trial to slay ten thousand.

Sylvia's gaze moved toward Damon. He hadn't said a word since she began speaking. Just stood there, armored like a fallen king reborn. The second form of Pale Crown suited him far too well.

It was regal—full-body plating veiled in cloaks of smoke that constantly shifted with his movements. No helmet. Just that crown... a pale, ashen ring of light like a dying halo, hidden in his messy hair.

She smiled, gently.

"That used to belong to the former Lord of Lysithara," she said softly. "The one who became the Keeper of False Truths..."

Chapter 293: A Thousand Miles

Damon didn't bother with any long morale-building speeches... their conditions had changed.

The Beldam's house was a death trap—but amid the danger, they had gained a fortuitous encounter.

Now they were enjoying the spoils. Preparations were done for their next travel.

They had better weapons, upgraded gear, food...

Well, except Damon. He was still lugging around the wyvern's fangs, the giant axe, and his old bow and arrows.

The previous lord of Lysithara apparently hadn't needed any weapons with his armor, but Damon wasn't that lucky. Wearing Pale Crown wasn't enough. He needed a weapon.

"This would be more convenient if I had my dealer's hand..." he muttered.

Too bad the skill rejected every weapon he tried to link to it.

He took a deep breath, gazing at the pale white sphere in his hand.

It wasn't just a ball—it was a mana core. To be precise...

A 15cm wide core from the Beldam.

A rank four monster.

Therefore, this was a rank four core.

Its market value? Easily several hundred million zeni. And he was holding it casually in his hand like it wasn't enough to buy half a small city.

It pulsed with dim light, its surface veined with pale runes.

"This... I could buy my sister and I a new life with this," he whispered.

But he shook his head. He couldn't sell it now—not here, not yet.

More importantly, low-level monsters would chase them just for a chance to consume it and grow stronger.

And it wasn't just monsters who could gain power from a mana core—humans could too.

Those who had reached their first class advancement could absorb it, refining their bodies and mana circuits. Laying the foundation for their second class advancement.

He held it with both hands. After the Beldam burned to ash, this was all that remained.

"If she left a corpse, I could've devoured that... maybe gain some attribute points, maybe even a skill..."

He frowned. No—he couldn't get greedy. He had already gotten too much from the ordeal.

The voices were growing louder—the whispering. Faint, eerie. The Beldam's power was fading.

'It won't be long before this whole place comes down...'

He turned to the others.

"Okay, who gets to use the mana core?"

Xander raised a brow, lounging in the awakened shell version of the Bound Colossus.

A minimalist armor light fabric layered with small heart-guard and shoulder plates.

"Are you still bragging about that?" he asked, deadpan.

Damon gave him a flat stare.

"I don't see you slaying a rank four monster in one strike. Even the legendary Seras Blade hadn't achieved something that phenomenal on her first advancement."

Leona rolled her eyes.

"So you are bragging."

He nodded with a smirk.

"A little, yes. But I was actually asking—which one of us should refine their body with this core?"

Evangeline exhaled slowly, brushing a few strands of golden hair behind her ear.

"You made the kill. Use the core."

Sylvia nodded. "That's how it is in most parties."

Damon sighed. That was true. But...

"I want to," he admitted. "However, it would be unwise—especially where we are. The best option is empowering the one with the most utility."

Matia stepped forward, having shed the Sovereign Mantle form of Shattered Ice.

Her figure now revealed, black hair braided down her back. Her wings, hidden beneath the light armor plates that shimmered with frost.

"Isn't that you?" she asked. "You can see far ahead. Your shadow can scout. Your information is crucial."

Leona nodded, the sparks from her full Stormwake armor giving her the look of a walking thunderstorm.

"You're also the strongest among us."

Sylvia silently agreed, holding a thick tome. Her grey eyes glanced at him beneath white bangs.

"And a sound strategist."

Evangeline snorted. "You mean scheming and conniving..."

Damon brushed his hair aside, the cold ash of the Pale Crown brushing his fingertips.

He couldn't tell them, those abilities of his were no longer safe to use.

"You guys are so sweet. You shouldn't have. You'll make me blush... You guys suck too, might I add."

Matia turned to the others.

"I almost thought he'd let it go..."

Leona didn't even flinch.

"I had no doubt he'd be rude."

Damon raised the core in one hand, tossing it lazily through the air—then flicked it toward Evangeline.

"While you all make strong arguments... the most useful here is Evangeline. Her Purge skill gives us all an edge."

He closed his eyes, as if visualizing something rotting, vile, and cursed.

"Lysithara is a city consumed by rot and corruption—like most ancient ruins. This isn't some low-level dungeon. We're walking into hell."

He clenched his fist.

"We could encounter relics, monsters, or fragments of beings that can taint us... her power is the only safety net. After all, when I was mentally contaminated... I would've died if not for her."

Evangeline looked at him, unsure. "But this is your kill..."

He nodded. "I know. This is my thanks for saving my life."

Xander snapped his fingers. "That's right! We did save him. Why did we forget that...?"

Evangeline sighed, voice low.

"Because we went through three days of him rubbing his victory in our faces..."

Leona smiled dryly.

"The bastard made me wish I'd let the Beldam eat me. Anything to avoid another day of that smug grin."

Damon couldn't help but smirk. They'd been through hell together.

This was his way of easing the mood—his way of leading. As party leader, it was his job to keep morale high... to make them believe hope still existed, even if it didn't.

'I can't make them face their fears all the time... sometimes, I have to act like those fears don't exist.'

He clapped his hands.

"Alright, people. Get some sleep. We leave at first light tomorrow. Might be the last night you sleep for a week or two—depending on how long it takes us to cross the forest, the Silent Marsh, and whatever hell we meet in between."

Matia stretched out, lying on a rug.

"I thought you said it was close."

Damon smiled—busted.

"Distance is all in your head. The journey of a thousand miles isn't that far..."

"This is no time for a figure of speech..."

He smiled coldly.

"It's not. It's literally a thousand miles away."

Evangeline twitched. Her eye, her brow, her soul.

"A thousand miles... in hell... before we even reach Lysithara."

"This bastard..."

Chapter 294: Now, Its Your Turn

The forest was filled with whispers, just as it had been days ago before they all fell into the Beldam's house. There was a faint fog drifting through the forest, and towering trees loomed like sentinels. The flora was as deadly as they remembered.

Worst of all, this forest still hid monsters and horrors alike.

However, this time, the odds were different. They were no longer a group of tired teenagers—they were now a heavily armed and well-equipped party wearing high-level magical gear.

With enough supplies and well-rested bodies—more than that—they had a sure direction, a map, and a clear path ahead.

The tree that had once been the Beldam's house was slowly being consumed by the whispers. As the last of the Beldam's power faded, the tree changed, regaining that eerie sensation—like a living creature watching them.

Damon took a deep breath, his body covered in Pale Crown. The armor was in its Ascendant form, a light armor now refined and sleek. The ashen crown hovered like a halo above his head... When he heard the whispers, it was as if they were trying to gnaw at his mind, numbing him... but he knew they didn't. It was merely the armor protecting him.

He exhaled slowly, resolving himself. The task at hand would be grave.

'I'll make sure we all make it to Lysithara... safe and alive.'

A thousand miles wasn't very far. If a normal human were to move without rest, it would take roughly thirteen days to complete the journey. However, that wasn't taking into account that humans needed to sleep.

If rest and stops were taken into consideration, it would take weeks.

But none of them were normal humans anymore. They were all at their first-class advancement—they could cross kilometers in moments if needed.

They were also all unique class holders, with a class only they possessed.

Damon had given two weeks as an estimate. Not because they needed rest, but because of the terrain... and the monsters they'd have to face to reach their destination.

After this, they would not be resting any time soon.

"Alright, boys and girls, time to go. Remember the rules—if it looks killable, we kill it. If not, run like hell."

Matia, clad in Shattered Ice, remained in the Sovereign Mantle form—heavy armor cloaked in an icy aura. Her figure was completely hidden behind its helm.

"How do we know what's killable?" she asked dryly.

Damon smiled, finding her words amusing. "Because we'll be alive."

Leona chuckled, shaking her head inside her own heavy armor, her frame hugged tightly by the storm-forged metals.

"That's a great way of saying you don't know..."

Evangeline held her rapier, light stored within its core. Her body was encased in the Ascendant form of Duskglass—a light armor of silver sheen with golden inlays. Her helm caught the dim fog-light like a mirrored moon.

"Let's go already..."

Damon nodded as the group took formation. Xander and Leona moved to the front—the group's heavy vanguard.

Evangeline followed just behind in her lighter armor, acting as support.

Damon kept close behind her, alongside Sylvia. At the very back, Matia marched in heavy armor. She was versatile, capable of wielding any weapon, but her main purpose was guarding Sylvia—their seer, magic archer, and primary healer—against sneak attacks

Damon, as the party's leader, stayed close to Sylvia for a reason. Any intel she provided would be vital for quick decisions. Evangeline acted as their secondary healer.

Their movement through the forest was quiet, deliberate. All they had to rely on were the map and Sylvia's insight. Damon couldn't risk sending his shadow ahead—if it was destroyed, it could kill him. Likewise, he couldn't use shadow perception without risking detection from something powerful.

They advanced in silence, slow and steady, until they reached a narrow path surrounded by jagged trees. Sylvia glanced toward Damon.

"We need to stop..."

He raised his hand, signaling the group.

"Stop..."

Xander halted, his heavy spear in hand as he eyed the twisted forms ahead.

"These are smaller than the trees in the forest..."

Leona nodded, her voice low beneath the whispers. Her face vanished beneath the helm of her Stormwake armor.

"They also don't have leaves."

Sylvia nodded, activating her skill to appraise them.

"Wraithwood Stalkers. Humanoid creatures... animated by the forest."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes. "Like undead?"

Sylvia shook her head and opened the weathered journal.

"There's a passage here in the old travel journal."

"Once a tribe of forest dwellers. When the Rot spread to the woods, they became obsessed with the forest. Eventually, they were enthralled by the rot-filled land. Even in death, they remained animated by its power. Masked like trees... glowing eyes... flesh of hollow wood and bark. They seek to offer living souls to the forest."

Damon's eyes narrowed. "Weakness... and rank."

Sylvia's gaze stayed on the page. "They're weak to light and fire—it disrupts their bond to the forest."

She raised her head.

"Oh, and they're the killable type..."

Damon grinned, pulling free the Wyvern's Fangs.

"Just what I wanted to hear."

The others drew their weapons—tools forged from their ascendant armors. It was more accurate to call them Ascendant Weapons.

The murderous aura they radiated caused the Wraithwood Stalkers, once hidden as trees, to react immediately.

The forest twisted with movement. Withered trunks bent and shifted. From branches and bark, humanoid shapes formed—grotesque wooden figures with glowing eyes. Some crouched high in trees, massive like warped stumps, while others clung to bark like malformed limbs.

The first one rose—it stood two meters tall, wide as a trunk, its eyes a glowing, hollow green. Human-like wrinkles etched into its barken face.

It raised a hand and opened its jagged mouth—emitting a low, warbling shriek.

Damon scoffed. "Let's get ourselves some first-rank mana cores..."

Xander surged forward, spear gripped tight. With a powerful swing, he sent one of the Wraithwood Stalkers flying.

He cracked his knuckles.

"I've about had it with monsters trying to kill us... Now... it's our turn."

Chapter 295: Wood Land Creatures

Xander's frustration was shared by the whole party. They had been running all this time—afraid, cautious, haunted by the thought that everything could kill them.

But now... now they could fight back.

The feeling was liberating. To finally push back instead of retreat... to strike instead of survive. All their gear, all the mental torture, the endless horror—they finally had the strength to kill.

Damon sighed. These things wouldn't help him meet his level-up requirements, but at least he was cutting something down.

'Maybe if I devoured them... I could get some skills out of it.'

He charged forward, falling into position just behind Leona and Evangeline in the center of the formation.

"Stay in formation..."

Xander raised his armored hand, pulsing with heavy gravity, and brought it down with a thunderous crash on a Wraithwood Stalker. Bark exploded. His face twisted in barely restrained rage.

Leona's body crackled—her armor erupting in a blast of lightning as a Wraithwood Stalker lunged at her from behind. She raised her sword, and in a flash, her figure vanished—reappearing in mid-swing just ahead of the creature.

Damon raised an eyebrow.

'Right. Stormwake armor... enchantments let her teleport while swinging.'

Her blade carved through the wooden husk, lightning trailing in arcs behind her. The creature's body split in half, cauterized by the searing current.

He watched her move—relentless, untouchable.

'She's become a monster with that armor and weapon...'

"How the hell's anyone supposed to fight someone constantly radiating that much lightning...?"

And that wasn't even her full power. Her attribute was Storm—meaning she could manipulate rain, snow, wind, and ice if she wanted. She was that damn powerful.

A sharp crack came from behind.

Damon didn't even turn.

He simply raised the Wyvern's Fangs in a backward guard, blocking the gnarled wooden claws of a Wraithwood Stalker aiming for his back. A moment later, a spear of ice punched through its chest.

He glanced over his shoulder.

Matia stood at the rear, already forming a new spear—her Shattered Ice armor pulsing with magical energy.

'That armor of hers is really busted...'

The ability to create any weapon—and wield each as if it were one of the Ascendant Weapons. It wasn't just versatility. It was overwhelming force.

'I bet the funds that should've gone into giving me a weapon went to that thing...'

Unlikely. The Ancient Lord of Lysithara simply hadn't needed a weapon. So Damon had inherited an armor that came without one.

He turned fully, facing a small cluster of Wraithwood Stalkers slithering from the treeline, eyes glowing, limbs creaking.

His hand tightened around the hilt of the Wyvern's Fangs.

The party didn't seem to be struggling with the Wraithwood Stalkers at all. That gave Damon the freedom to stop worrying about them—and focus on testing his new powers.

Holding both Wyvern Fangs felt off. The jagged, curved bones weren't designed for dual wielding. He returned the one in his left hand to his back and kept the other, gripping it in a firm single-handed hold.

It was as long as a proper sword, and just as sharp.

But it felt foreign.

His usual fighting style—fluid, unpredictable—was gone. Now, he moved stiffly, like a student imitating sword forms. His stance was rigid. His swings, overly precise.

He could almost hear his father's voice nagging him about the importance of the basics.

No trickery, no cheap shots. No daggers slipping between ribs or sliding under a chin.

These monsters didn't have vital spots like humans. No soft throats. No lungs to collapse.

They were walking wooden nightmares.

He needed a better weapon. But all he had was this oversized fang.

And a handful of fundamentals.

"Guess I'll have to make it work... learn through battle, fail, bleed, try again..."

He smirked. The Stalkers looked slow now, their movements dulled beneath the weight of his murderous aura.

Remorseless kept his mind calm, his logic clear.

He shut out the violence his allies were unleashing around him.

Evangeline's magic flashed in the air. She had already left a graveyard of splintered corpses behind her—but she was clearly holding back. Giving the others space to vent.

Damon exhaled.

He didn't want to rely on skills—not yet. He wanted to learn the sword. Earn it.

He opened his eyes—then, betrayed his resolve.

Omen of Dread flared to life.

'Yeah, right... I am giving it my all.'

He couldn't afford to die here. He had no talent for the sword. Not yet. But he was going to make it work... he had to.

The aura of fear exploded outward. The Wraithwood Stalkers faltered—their wooden faces twisted, human-like eyes wrinkling as if flinching.

He smiled.

Spinning the Wyvern Fang in his hand, he gripped it like a dagger instead of a sword and dashed forward.

One of the Stalkers broke free of the aura and swung.

Damon barely dodged. Instinct flared—Beholder's Gaze activated, slowing time for a fraction. He struck for what he assumed was its torso. The fang cut clean through.

Green ichor spilled across the roots. The creature wheezed, as if trying to breathe—then collapsed, its eyes dimming.

[You have slain: Wraithwood Stalker]

He smiled. This—this was what first-class advancement was supposed to feel like. Rank-one monsters... nothing more than fodder.

But the others didn't care. They charged recklessly—driven by compulsion to guard the forest, to feed it with souls.

One surged at him—its fist drove straight through his chest.

Only... there was no impact.

His body dissolved into black mist. Untouched.

He grinned, staring down at the Pale Crown armor.

It had let the attack phase right through him.

Raising his bone weapon, he swung wide—hooked a Wraithwood by the neck and slammed it into another. Another leapt from the trees above, a crude wooden spear in hand.

Too fast to dodge. Too late—

He smirked.

His form flickered—turned to shadow, becoming formless. The Stalker looked confused. Too slow. Damon materialized behind it, plunging his blade through its skull before it could react.

"These two abilities together... they're insane."

He touched his temple, wincing. Using Shadow Form was disorienting—being without a body was difficult to comprehend. He needed practice.

If he could craft a technique around it...

He'd be almost impossible to stop.

"How does it feel," he asked softly, "to fight something you can't touch...?"

The remaining Stalkers stared at him, fear glowing in their wooden sockets. As if rallying courage, they turned to one another—then charged.

Damon raised his hand, took a deep breath.

"...Do you know how quickly wood burns?"

Pain surged through him as Ashborn awakened. Black fire coiled up his arm. His pain resistance was high—he could use this once. Maybe twice.

The flames exploded outward—an inferno of darkness.

[You have slain: Wraithwood Stalker]

[You have gained 5 attribute points]

[You have slain: Wraithwood Stalker]

[You have gained 5 attribute points]

...

The notifications kept flooding in.

He smiled—ignoring the pain, welcoming the fire.

Until it stopped.

And he realized—something was wrong.

He looked down at the ash with an expression of horror.

"...Where... the hell are my mana cores?"

The answer was already burning inside him.

The flames had consumed more than the enemy.

Chapter 296: The Difference Between

A few minutes had passed, with Damon silently lamenting the destruction of the mana cores. Ashborn was both flame and shadow... the shadow devoured flesh, but the flame? The flame obliterated the first-rank mana cores inside the Wraithwood Stalkers.

A shame there were no more left to kill—he'd gotten carried away and burned them all at once.

Using Ashborn was dangerous, but it was a powerful trump card. And with his new mastery in Pain Resistance, he'd wanted to see just how much agony he could endure. Even at level 3, the resistance barely dulled it.

Any more, and he risked mental burnout. He'd have to avoid using it too often... unless he wanted his mind to snap.

He paused, breathing out. Mental anguish. He wasn't feeling it—not really. Not even after enduring ten times the pain of burning alive. His gaze dropped to the Pale Crown armor hugging his body. Passive. Light. Calming.

It helped relive the anguish in his mind.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown... Pale Crown was designed for the lord of Lysithara—enchancements forged into the armor meant to ease the crushing weight of leadership.

He sighed. He'd have to explain to Evangeline why he didn't have any mana cores.

"She's so going to nag..."

And then he'd have to explain to Sylvia why he was using Ashborn when it wasn't even necessary.

Another sigh. Turning around, he saw the others had finished off the Wraithwood Stalkers—and from the looks of it, they'd carefully extracted the cores.

His lips twisted. He was going to return empty-handed.

He straightened his shoulders, adopting the posture of a party leader, and strode forward slowly.

"Good job, everyone. We've all grown... Now, as discussed, half of the mana cores will be used for the group, the other half to empower Evangeline."

The others nodded. Damon exhaled quietly, almost relieved. Maybe they hadn't noticed he hadn't added a single crystal to the pile.

Leona tilted her head. "Where's yours?"

'Damn it, Leona. She always notices...'

He coughed, looking away. "Ahem... as I was saying, we will continue our march to the—"

Evangeline cut him off, frowning. "Yeah. I almost didn't notice."

Xander sighed, rubbing his temples. "Don't tell me you're hoarding them for yourself..."

Damon gave a deadpan nod. "That's exactly what I'm doing."

Evangeline held out her hand, voice flat. "Well, give them. This was your idea, remember?"

Damon placed his hands together slowly. "Ahem... in terms of mana cores... we have no mana cores."

Matia let out a quiet sigh, already seeing where this was headed. She sat next to Leona, resting her chin on one hand.

Evangeline narrowed her eyes. "Who is 'we'?"

Sylvia groaned. "He used Ashborn and ended up destroying the mana cores—along with the corpses. I watched the whole thing. And worst of all, our fearless leader here was using that extremely dangerous skill without rhyme or reason..."

She walked up to him, arms on her waist. "Am I right?"

Damon muttered, "I think you're a bigger stalker than the Wraithwood Stalkers..."

"I heard that."

"I wanted you too."

Evangeline sighed, brushing back her hair. "Let's just get going."

Damon nodded, clapping his hands. "Great! We can divide the mana cores and be on our way—"

Evangeline raised an eyebrow. "We... means us. Not the guy who destroyed the mana cores. These were the weakest monsters here."

Damon blinked, realization dawning on him.

"No way... you guys aren't still sour about me gloating after saving all our lives from the Beldam?"

Xander snickered. "You killed a rank four monster with a single hit... surely you don't need a few measly rank one mana cores."

Damon glanced at Leona. She looked away awkwardly.

"You did say that..." she muttered.

He clicked his tongue. "Fine..."

Sylvia couldn't help but smile at his childish expression. This... this was the most relaxed they'd been in a while. It felt like a day back at the academy. Maybe, if they survived this hell, those days might return.

She stood up and handed Damon a single mana core with a small smile. "Here. Have one. We're not stingy."

Damon grinned. "I have no pride, I'll take it. In fact—"

"You pride yourself on having no pride. We know."

They all said it at once—except for Matia, who blinked, clearly hearing it for the first time.

Damon smiled, crushing the mana core in his hand. Its magic surged through his body. Warmth spread through his mana circuit, his heart beat stronger, and his mana felt... purer.

[Your shadow grows stronger...]

Damon blinked. This was the first time he was hearing this kind of message from the system—"Your shadow grows stronger." His shadow energy didn't increase. No stat gains, no numbers. Just that phrase. It didn't make sense... unless it wasn't talking about energy at all.

'Was it referring to my soul...?'

He paused, closing his eyes briefly as he focused inward. His mana felt smoother, more refined. Its flow was cleaner, faster. His body felt more grounded, more... whole.

A pleasant surprise.

Without hesitation, he picked up another mana core and crushed it, watching as the crystalline energy shimmered up and into his hand, flowing into his circuits like molten silk. His party didn't stop him. They'd only been teasing earlier anyway. He grabbed another. And another.

By the fourth core, he noticed it—a small but noticeable shift. Not in his stats, but in quality.

His muscles didn't bulk up, but they felt denser. His body didn't grow faster, but it moved with more precision. His soul—or whatever that shadow part of him was—felt... tougher. More defined. Even his sight sharpened. The world had more edges now.

He stared at his hand, curling and uncurling his fingers slowly.

'So this is the difference... this is why first class advancement are monsters compared to others. The ability to absorb mana cores doesn't just boost stats. It refines you.'

His eyes flicked to Evangeline. Her aura had become weightier, more forceful. She'd taken in the rank four core, and the others had agreed to give her extra on top of that. It made sense—she was becoming a proper first class.

And Damon?

He grinned darkly to himself.

'I'm going to have to squeeze her for every last one of those cores...'

His eyes drifted to the treetops. The Whispering forest was still crawling with monsters. That meant opportunity.

"We need to gather as many cores as possible before we reach Lysithara," he muttered.

His hand clenched tighter.

'That place... it's where my next step lies.'

He didn't know how, but the Pale Crown Armor was proof. Its weight... its voice in the back of his mind... it all pointed to something waiting in Lysithara.

And now, the system had confirmed it.

[Level Up Requirement: Mist Knight Souls Consumed — 0/10]

He was certain, killing even one of them wouldn't be easy.....

"Lysithara"

Chapter 297: Human Torche

Their journey continued through the forest, formation tight and disciplined. With Sylvia's skills guiding them, they avoided most of the powerful monsters and charted out a path... one that was relatively safe—well, it would be more accurate to say "relatively dangerous."

The beldam's map had been built around her routines. The hideous witch had marked out the areas with monsters she considered a threat... and those she didn't.

Which was helpful—except the beldam was a rank four monster. So what she considered "non-threatening" could very well be the death of them.

Damon had used his shadow to devour the corpses of fallen monsters, quietly stealing attribute points. He did so in secret, none the wiser.

They encountered a few monsters of the first rank, but made short work of them, collecting their mana cores. There were moments they had to hide—from lurking horrors that prowled through the thick mist—but those moments were rare.

Although the constant skirmishes were beginning to wear down even their armor, surprisingly... the armor could mend itself.

Their day in the Whispering Forest was drawing to a close. The sun was setting—well, not that they could actually see it. The forest had no sky, just a high canopy of gnarled limbs and creeping mist. But judging by how dim it had become, the mist thickening at their feet... light would soon die out completely.

And with it would come the moonless night—along with whatever horrors lurked in the dark.

There would be no rest tonight.

Which was fine. Damon wasn't about to make them stop anyway. What would be the point? Camping would only leave them vulnerable—to monsters... or worse.

He turned to the others.

"Keep moving. Switch formation. Number Four, you're behind me. Number Two, support position."

Xander—called Four—nodded, his massive form shifting back in heavy Ascendant armor, metal plates groaning softly.

Damon stepped to the front, leading the formation. He could see in the dark. That was why he was in front. Evangeline stayed close behind, her presence marked by her soft glow and the ever-reliable purge skill.

They moved with discipline. Silent steps. Controlled breaths.

The whispers of the forest grew louder.

The deeper they went, the more alive the forest seemed to become. The mist began to rise slowly from the ground, curling around their boots like skeletal fingers. Damon felt a wrongness crawling along his spine. He couldn't even point out where the feeling came from—it was everywhere. All around them.

He drew the wyvern's fang, fingers tightening on the makeshift hilt.

The others stopped. They felt it too. Of course they did. After all they'd seen, it was impossible not to.

One by one, they quietly reached for their weapons.

The mist drifted in thick sheets now, the forest whispering so intensely Damon's ears began to buzz.

He didn't dare spread his shadow perception—not now. Not when the air itself carried faint, prickling traces of killing intent.

Then it struck.

From the mist, a pale, semi-formed claw shot out and wrapped around Damon's neck, lifting him into the air.

His feet dangled, throat squeezed tightly.

He struggled to breathe, clawing at the limb. His hand flashed as he swung the wyvern's fang in a sharp arc, but the blade passed through it—it was mist, intangible and impossible to strike.

He clenched his teeth, growling.

Magic surged into the weapon. A second swing.

This time, it connected—he felt resistance.

He hit the ground hard, rolling through the cold, damp fog. Coughing. Eyes scanning.

A blast of light tore through the mist from behind him—Evangeline.

Her magic hissed through the air, striking the vague shape in the fog. The mist recoiled.

Then it began to form.

Shape condensed from nothing—sluggish, unnatural. A shapeless mass with glowing red eyes flickering within.

Then it scattered—breaking apart into dozens of fragments.

No... not fragments.

Beasts.

The mist had birthed creatures, each small and hunched with jagged limbs and long, curved fangs. Misshapen, almost feral.

They were about the size of dire wolves.

Damon blinked.

And then realized how insane he must've gone—because something the size of a dire wolf wasn't "small" by any normal standard.

For what it was worth... each of these mist-born things carried the aura of a first-class monster—same rank as them.

And they were everywhere.

Damon raised his hand, considering the use of a magic bullet—but in the Whispering Forest, even a whisper was too loud. He had theorized a faster, quieter variant of the spell... but this wasn't the place for experiments. Not yet. So, up close and personal it was.

"Number Three, what are these?" he asked, eyes narrowing as mist slithered around them like living fog.

Sylvia nodded, her eyes glossing over as the invisible Journey Book revealed its truths to her alone.

"Mist beasts... beasts turned to mist, their forms lost," she whispered. "They're intangible... only harmed by magic. The light of day repels them... They're the lowest of the mist dwellers. Their origin is—"

He slashed at one. "Just tell me a weakness."

Sylvia bit her lip, guarded in the center of the formation by the others. "Light... they're afraid of light."

He looked to Evangeline. "Let there be light."

She gave a nod, rapier in hand. The golden inlays on her duskglass armor pulsed to life, radiating waves of golden brilliance that illuminated the darkness.

The mist beasts—once formless and gliding—shuddered violently as the light hit them. Their bodies cracked like glass, splitting into wisps of fog that faded into the air.

The ones further from the light disintegrated at the edge, but soon reformed in the darkness beyond the reach of her glow—hiding behind trees, lingering just out of sight.

Damon narrowed his eyes, his expression twisting in annoyance.

"Where's the damn mana cores?"

Sylvia sighed. "That's what I was trying to tell you before you rudely interrupted. These are the lowest of the mist. They're not alive. They don't have cores. They don't even have a will... just phantoms of the forest itself."

He clicked his tongue. "So we're wasting our energy on fog..."

Evangeline looked at him, wary. "But won't they keep following us?"

"They will," Damon nodded. "But don't worry. We have our very own walking torch."

He smiled at her with a glint in his eyes. "You've been munching on mana cores like candy... Time to earn your keep, freeloader."

Evangeline's lips twitched. "Wait... you're not seriously going to make me keep this up all night, are you?"

Damon placed a hand over his armored chest, feigning scandal. "I'm aggrieved that you would think so little of me."

She smiled, visibly relieved—only for him to continue. Right he was a jerk not heartless.

"You'll be doing this every night."

All the others turned toward her slowly.

Their eyes glowed with deep, solemn pity.

Chapter 298: Missing Names

Evangeline's eyes were wide, dark circles staining the skin beneath her beautiful golden irises. Her exquisite face was marred with soot and dust, and yet... even then, it did nothing to diminish her beauty. When Damon said he was going to make her walk for those mana cores, he wasn't kidding.

Her head throbbed from the strain of using mana without pause... her legs ached from the unending battles... she hadn't closed her eyes or rested in four days.

That's right—four days.

That's how long they had gone without rest. Four days of fighting, surviving, barely clinging to their sanity. Beyond the mental strain and trauma of battle, they had to endure the presence of things... strange and eldritch... horrors that twisted the world around them.

People were surprisingly... adaptable. Even unimaginable fear and terror—after enough time—just became normal. Maybe that's what made humans terrifying in their own right... or maybe they'd all just gone mad.

The sun had risen, a pale thing above the mist-choked trees. She didn't need to light up the area herself, but the forest remained no less dangerous.

Between the unceasing whispers and that pale sun that couldn't pierce the veil of trees and fog, this place felt like it existed outside the world they once knew.

She glanced at Damon. He had a small smile on his dried lips...

She was certain now—they'd all gone mad. And Damon, who led them without hesitation, was the maddest of them all.

"Now that I think about it... has he ever been sane...?"

Not that she could recall. He always did whatever he pleased. It was stupid in hindsight—someone who refused to conform to things he didn't accept...

Especially back when he was weaker...

She wondered what kind of will and resolve drove a man to such lengths. Or was it because he was sure—so sure—that he wouldn't die? That he couldn't be killed?

She shook her head. That was doubtful.

"Maybe he just didn't care if he died..."

And if that was the case, then her feelings shifted—from admiration... to sadness.

What could've driven a boy her age... to have no regard for his own life?

Her gaze remained on his back. He walked forward like he didn't doubt—not even for a moment—that he would live through this hell. He accepted the horror. He accepted the suffering. But not death. He had accepted pain... but he refused to believe it could kill him.

Her golden eyes narrowed slightly as he came to a halt. He turned to them.

"There's something ahead..."

They all drew their ascendant weapons. Ready for another battle. One of many.

In the past four days, sometimes they ran. Sometimes they fought. Sometimes they bled. And sometimes... they hid. Whispering prayers to whatever god might listen—hoping they would be ignored by whatever nightmare lurked too close.

Damon smiled thinly, his eyes as dark as ever.

Their reactions had become fast. Automatic. Gone were the weak academy students—now, they were something else entirely.

He glanced at the academy-issued bracelet on his wrist. It was still counting points, accumulating like it was still part of a game.

"We aren't under attack... not yet at least..."

He pointed just beyond the fog.

"There's something there... I see runes and rock... I think..."

He couldn't be sure with the mist this thick... but one thing was certain.

He saw statues.

They say fortune favors the bold... but in the Whispering Forest, that saying might very well lead to a horrible demise.... Or worse.

It was for that reason Damon and his party approached with caution—every weapon drawn, every step measured.

For safety, they all equipped the third form of their Ascendant armors—each of them covered from head to toe in thick, heavy plating. It would hinder their movement, slow their escape if things went south... but it might be the only thing that kept them from being killed in a single hit.

At least, Damon hoped so.

Some monsters could tear through even enchanted steel like wet parchment.

The mist ahead of them slowly parted as they advanced. The damp leaves underfoot gave off a soft, wet rustle with every step, muffled but ever-present.

Sylvia narrowed her eyes, her gaze flicking to the worn map in her hand.

"We've arrived... this is one of the forest shrines," she murmured.

Xander glanced up, his gaze sweeping the eerie, hollow space. It was a ruin—abandoned, broken, forgotten. Massive runes had been carved into the rocks. Statues, monoliths, all in pieces, shattered by time or something worse.

The place was exposed to the elements, a circular structure open to the pale sky.

"More like the ruins of one..." he muttered, voice low.

Damon took a slow step forward, eyes scanning every shadow.

"Let's check it out," he said, his tone calm but firm. "This is a sign... we're close to Lysithara. The architecture—definitely that of the ruined city."

Evangeline gave a small nod. Her armor shifted, the heavy plating receding and becoming lighter as it adapted into its second form. The edges of her steel shimmered faintly as her rapier snapped into her grasp.

She turned toward one of the cracked monoliths forming a ring around the clearing.

"Let's enter, then."

Damon nodded in return. His voice was quiet.

"Keep your wits about you..."

He stepped forward, crossing the invisible boundary of the shrine—walking right past the first monolith. The moment he did, he felt the world ripple.

It was subtle, but unmistakable.

A familiar sensation washed over him. The tingling hum of arcane power brushing against his skin... the telltale feeling of crossing a barrier.

What lay before him looked the same—still the shattered shrine, still the broken circle of stone—but now...

Something had changed.

The mist had cleared.

The whispers were gone.

And in their place—silence. A thick, unfamiliar silence that pressed against his ears like a weight. After days of hearing constant voices in the mist, the quiet felt unnatural.

But that wasn't what froze him.

All across the ground, there were traces of battle. Dried blood. Gouges in the stone. Weapons left behind. And corpses... so many corpses.

Some had been ripped apart. Others shattered like glass. Some were little more than withered husks... and a few had already rotted down to skeletal remains.

They wore armor, now dulled and caked in grime. Some wore robes, shredded and stained.

This wasn't a scouting party.

This had been a full force.

And something had killed them all.

Sylvia stepped closer, her voice catching in her throat. Her eyes stopped on a particular figure slumped against one of the monoliths—a corpse still in armor.

Or... what remained of it.

Its helmet had fallen off.

Its head... had no face.

No eyes. No nose. No mouth.

Just smooth, pale skin stretched where a human face should be. Yet somehow... somehow it was still unmistakably human.

A single word left Sylvia's lips, her heart freezing over.

Its fate was obvious.

"...Face Stealer."

Chapter 299: Forest Mission

The Face Stealers...

How could Sylvia not know what these vile creatures were? They weren't exactly commonplace, but they weren't rare either. These faceless horrors plagued all nine continents, pale-skinned and shaped like humans.

She paled, staring at the bodies—once people, now faceless, nameless, stripped of identity.

Her mind echoed with a passage from the old travel journal:

I can no longer remember their names or faces. The forest had taken them—or so we assumed. By the sixth month of the expedition, we had stumbled upon the nest of a group of Face Stealers. These

creatures, normally solitary, had defied expectations. They had formed hordes. Many of us fell—our names and faces taken. The battle was dire. We wiped out most of these vile abominations... save for one. Too weak, we thought, to pose a threat.

We sent a hunting party to finish it. But we've forgotten their names... their faces... slain by the creature.

Loathe as I am to admit it, we lack the resources to pursue vengeance. We cannot even bury our lost. They belong to the forest now. We can only pray the Lady of Death grants them peace. We shall all return to Doom's embrace... though I pray it is not yet our time.

Sylvia felt a flicker of relief. If the journal was accurate, then most—if not all—of the Face Stealers here were dead. At least her friends wouldn't have to face something that could rob them of something as irreplaceable as their identity.

Damon narrowed his eyes. "This place is pretty well preserved. The battle must've been years ago."

Evangeline knelt beside a corpse, eyeing the faded emblem etched into dulled armor and rusted weapons.

"They're from Valtheron. Houses tied to the imperial cabinet..."

Damon's eyes sharpened. "That's obvious. But why would the imperial cabinet—or even the emperor—sanction a clandestine mission into the Whispering Forest?"

He directed the question to Evangeline and Xander—both from powerful grand duchies, their families wielding influence rivaling the imperial throne.

Evangeline shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. The cabinet has more secrets than stars in the sky."

Xander scoffed. "As if they'd tell that to a bunch of teenagers."

Leona stepped closer, her expression tight. "These bodies are old. Might not even be from this era—or at least not recent years."

Matia pulled off her helm, her braid falling over her shoulder. "And it wasn't taught in any history class I know."

Damon sneered, rising from where he'd inspected a corpse. "Why would the imperial propaganda machine ever talk about their failures?"

He dusted his hands off, voice flat. "History class never teaches the truth. Only a set of lies everyone agrees on."

Xander's gaze hardened, his noble pride flaring.

"How dare you blaspheme the Imperial Family?"

Damon met his glare with an icy stare. "Screw the Imperial Family."

Bound by honor, oath, and pride, Xander drew his spear with a sharp whisper of steel.

"You dare... take that back."

Damon didn't even glance his way.

Before blood could spill, Evangeline stepped between them, her sword raised at Xander.

She knew Damon wouldn't back down. His resentment toward the imperial family ran deep—toward all nobles, really. And pushing this now would only end in disaster.

Damon sighed... this was one of the reasons he didn't like Xander. But just like Xander couldn't discard his ideals, neither could Damon let go of his defiant resentment...

Evangeline stood between them.

"We don't have time for this. We aren't in the academy anymore. As for why the imperial cabinet or the imperial family sent this many people to a death zone... that's not our concern right now."

She glanced at Damon. "As party leader, you know that well."

Damon scoffed, feeling slightly irritated.

"Yeah, right..." he muttered, walking over to a corpse and picking up the sword of the nameless knight. It was rusted, brittle... for all intents and purposes, it was a dead weapon.

Damon glanced at the crumbled corpse.

'I wonder if my shadow can eat something this dead... they've been gone for at least a few decades or more.'

He shook the thought off. He would try that later—after they left. He'd send his shadow back... hopefully it would gain a skill, or at least some attribute points.

Sylvia walked past him, raising her hand to the others.

"Hey, come check this out..."

Damon raised his head, discarding the old sword. None of the weapons were any good for him anyway.

He glanced at the others... they had scattered slightly, though he could still tell Xander was sour about his disregard for imperial authority.

He began walking toward Sylvia when Evangeline suddenly grabbed his arm—her golden eyes glaring at him.

"I don't know what your issue is... but sometimes, it's good to know when to bow your head."

Her voice was almost a whisper.

"It's fine because it's us... but anyone else, anywhere else—and what you said would be considered treason. Lèse-majesté."

She took a deep breath, her eyes softening slightly as she looked at Damon with a trace of worry before walking ahead of him.

"You might not care... but this is just Xander's way of looking out for you. Be careful."

Damon sneered. He already knew that. He had always known that.

He smiled faintly. "What can they take from me... just my little life. At least I die as myself—unchanged, unbroken."

Evangeline opened her mouth but said nothing. Her eyes merely flickered with concern.

By now, the others stood before a broken monolith, staring at the words inscribed with a strange mix of reverence and dread. Damon frowned.

'What's with them...?' he looked at the strange language carved into the stone. It looked familiar.

'Come to think of it... isn't this the same language as the system panel?' He had never really paid it any mind—until now.

It was like a fog had lifted. The system panel... it hadn't been written in his native tongue.

These words... they weren't just written. They were translated directly into his soul.

The first part was familiar. Anyone who worshiped the goddess knew them by heart.

It was the last part that gave him pause. A chill swept through him, like he stood on the cusp of uncovering something dreadful.

Sylvia's eyes glazed over, blood dripping from her nose—but Damon was too enticed by the words to even notice.

The monolith read:

Hail Minerva, Goddess of Doom.

Lady of the Inevitable.

Mistress of Final Judgment.

She Who Weighs the Scales.

Bearer of the Black Thread.

The One Who Watches from the End.

Mother of Dread and Silence.

Queen of Shattered Realms.

She Who Writes the Last Law.

Matron of War Unending.

Lady of Death.

The Fate Unyielding.

The Hand Behind the Curtain of Destiny.

Hail the Goddess of the Abyss, Bride of the—

The last line...

It wasn't something he knew. It wasn't just unfamiliar—it was wrong. Distorted. Heavy. Like it didn't belong.

Bride of the—

It broke off there.

The monolith itself had shattered—as if that final phrase was a burden too heavy for even stone to bear.

Damon's eyes drifted to the last line of the writing... it was signed:

Ashcroft.

Chapter 300: Divine Will

The Goddess of Doom had many titles... she was the Goddess of Doom naturally. Her titles were comprised of everything that fell into the broad definition of the word doom—thus, her titles.

She is the living embodiment of doom—its inevitability, its terror, and its authority. Not merely a herald, but Doom personified, encompassing every aspect of the term: fate, judgment, destiny, dread, death, and law. All of it. Everything that could be defined with the word doom.

'Lady of the Inevitable'—that signified her authority over Destiny, absolute and unchanging. One could never defy Destiny... even if they went against Fate.

As 'Mistress of Final Judgment', she passed down the final decree... beyond which, there was nothing.

Damon could think of all her dreadful titles... all the horror of her power... but never had he seen or heard of the title—

Goddess of the Abyss.

Never in his life had anyone referred to Doom as the bride of anything.

He narrowed his eyes.

Was this title saying she was the bride of something? Maybe a concept? Or was it... an entity?

The goddess was often depicted wearing a veil, but her veil seemed more like a widow... not a bride.

He could think of one—bride of Chaos or bride of Destruction—that would still fall under her domain and would still be her title... but if she was the bride of someone... something... then that would be a whole other story.

Damon bit his lip until blood flowed.

That was doubtful. The former had to be it. He just... couldn't confirm it.

Which left the original title:

Goddess of the Abyss.

'The Abyss has to be a word to define what happens when something is destroyed...'

Yes... that had to be it.

This was the Queen of Shattered Realms, after all. The goddess who brings an end to worlds. Every world supposedly had a story about how it would end... and Doom was always the reason for it.

Her authority was absolute... in every world, every reality... stories of doom coming into being always exist. Every world had tales of how the world would end...

This was merely Doom's authority.

Damon wasn't very religious, but his heart still pounded. He felt like if he thought too much, he might touch upon something terrifying... something that would cause him to be erased.

Not killed—erased.

He took a deep breath, forcing his mind to shift focus—locking in on Ashcroft's name... completely ignoring any horror his friends would have been feeling. He could hear their horrified breaths, the way their silence cracked around them...

But he could only focus on the name of the one who had dared to carve these words down.

...The arrogant demon lord from myth, whose existence was always debatable.

The Demon Lord of Domination—Ashcroft.

The one who had almost conquered the known world...

Why had the Demon Lord of Domination carved these words into this stone monolith?

Ashcroft was only born after Lysithara fell. He didn't exist in that era... if anything, he too should've stumbled upon the ruins like they did.

'Then does that mean... he was real?'

Ashcroft had actually existed.

According to legends... he died here. In Soltheon. In the temple of the Goddess, where he had spoken blasphemous words...

Damon also recalled a prophecy left by the Unknown God.

A prophecy that had promised the demons:

"The Dominator shall return."

Till this day, demonkind waits...

...along with any fool who believes the tale.

Waiting for Ashcroft—

—to usher in a new era.

"Arrhgg..."

Damon heard the gasp beside him—sharp, wet, cutting through his thoughts like a blade. It broke him out of his reverie. He turned around, just in time to see Sylvia staring at the invisible journey book... floating in front of her.

Her nose and eyes were bleeding.

She raised a trembling hand, a scream twisting out of her throat—and then her head smashed against the monolith with a sickening crack.

Damon froze.

He wanted to move. He should have moved.

But he... just couldn't.

His body would not obey.

His soul screamed, his instincts roared, but nothing answered.

Behind him, the others were just as still. Every muscle locked, every breath caught in their lungs, as an aura slowly began to bleed out from Sylvia.

The book... visible only to Damon... glowed with the mark of the Unknown God. Its pages flipped with no wind, moved by an invisible power. The weight of that presence suffocated the air.

Sylvia stood up, covered in blood, screaming in agony.

Damon wanted to move.

He grunted, forcing his will to rise, but his body and his will were misaligned—disconnected. None of them dared move.

Even the shadows remained still.

But from his own shadow, Damon felt the swirl of something else—something alive and alien and wrong.

Not evil.

Just... wrong.

Like reality had cracked.

No one made a sound.

For a moment, it was as if the world had relinquished its authority to the book... and Sylvia... she was no longer just Sylvia.

She was a vessel.

A mouthpiece.

A truth.

Slowly, she walked toward an empty monolith nearby. Unlike the others, its surface was smooth—unbroken—untouched. As if it had waited for this.

She raised her fingers.

Then carved.

Her blood became the ink. Her bones snapped under the pressure. Yet she did not scream. She whispered instead... whispering the words she etched into stone.

They all heard her.

Her voice—a tragic sigh of someone recounting a tale long buried—cut through them, soft and haunting.

Her eyes had turned black. Swirling like the abyss itself.

They knew not to look.

And luckily, she wasn't looking their way.

Still, they heard.

They were forced to hear.

"...The Weeping Star came first, and the god who gives names devoured its light. All names that followed were lies."

"...The Weeping Star came first, and the god with no name devoured its light. All names that followed were lies."

"...To speak his name is to invite him in."

"...So the goddess took it, carved it from the hearts of men and cast it into the void."

"...In oblivion, she bound them. In silence, she damned herself."

"...He called her Bride, but the veil she wore was never white—it was woven of false fates."

The god who blessed names hated his own...

Ohh, tragic tale of the abyss and his bride...

She turned.

Slowly.

To face him.

Damon's head dropped instantly—instinct overriding thought.

He could not look into those eyes.

He would not.

His body trembled.

He felt alone.

Truly alone.

Left in a dead, godless universe to face something unimaginable. Something that wasn't even malicious—just unknowable. A thing beyond dread. Beyond horror. A concept that horror itself would flee from.

And then—

It ended.

Just like that.

A sound echoed. Soft. Final.

Sylvia's body collapsed to the forest floor, her breathing faint... but alive.

Still... no one moved.

They all remained frozen.

Mortals, locked in the grip of something ancient and unknowable, their hearts scarred by a fear that would never leave them.

Not ever.