

Shadow 301

Chapter 301: A Righteous Lie

Damon did not know how long they all stood there unmoving. He didn't even know if his perception of time still existed, or even if he was still himself. All he knew was his heart didn't even feel like it was pounding.

It was only after Sylvia stood up, looking around—her face still covered in blood—that she frowned a bit, as if she didn't realize what was happening. She stood up, confused, her brow raised.

"Emm... is there any reason why you guys aren't moving?"

Sylvia's confused expression and her words seemed to pull them back to reality. It was almost as if their sense of fear finally returned.

Their legs gave out, trembling with beads of sweat... their faces were almost lifeless...

Damon forced down the fear, his head buzzing. He looked at Sylvia, who was covered in blood, but she looked alright. She wasn't even hurt. She had used her fingers to carve the words she was saying into the monolith...

But now her fingers looked fine. Her head—which she had bashed into the monolith—was unhurt, only covered in blood. But she didn't even seem to notice.

Damon looked at her, his body wouldn't stop trembling. From the terror...

"Y...y... are you okay?"

Sylvia looked at him with an expression of confusion.

"I should be asking you that... you guys don't... I mean, you guys are... you look like you've seen a living nightmare."

Damon looked at her, his eyes widened with fear and shock...

'She... she doesn't remember...'

He knew Sylvia well enough. True, she was picking up some of his less-than-savory habits, but even then, he could tell if she was lying... Right now she was just confused why they all looked so horrified.

Leona looked at her...

"You... I... yo... we... are covered in blood..."

Sylvia blinked. "What are you talki—"

She paused, her eyes wide. Her armor's awakened shell—her Ascendant armor—was matted with blood, its fabrics slick with red...

She did not understand where the blood came from.

"This... when..."

Evangeline looked at her.

"It... the blood is yours..."

Sylvia looked horrified, her hands suddenly trembling. She didn't remember anything. She couldn't. The last thing she remembered was reading the last line on the monolith...

The line that had called the goddess of doom... the goddess of the abyss... When she read that part, everything had gone black...

Now here she was, supposedly covered in her own blood. Her friends looked like they'd seen something horrible—something terrifying beyond what words could define...

While she was covered in blood—her blood—yet she remained unharmed. If anything, she felt better than ever...

Damon stood up, his hands trembling. He bit his lips to suppress the shaking. Even his Remorseless skill didn't dare kick in...

That was how horrible, it had been.

He placed his hands on her face...

"Are you okay..."

She nodded slowly...

"I... I am fine... I don't know..."

She couldn't be sure... Hearing her say those words, Damon nodded. He held his trembling hands. The others were all on their butts... fear in their eyes...

He took a deep breath, slowly sitting down on the ground...

For a few minutes, there was silence.

Leona slowly spoke... not addressing anyone in particular.

"Wh... what was that..."

Damon bit his lips. He was hoping no one brought it up... he didn't even want to think about it.

But sometimes it was best to share one's fears. He couldn't deny them that relief...

Matia lowered her head into her knees.

"I don't know... it... it felt like I was looking at the end... not like dying... just... the end..."

She bit her lips, her eyes wide... "It was looking at me..."

Evangeline gritted her teeth. "It wasn't attacking us... I just couldn't even imagine doing anything... I didn't even dare feel fear..."

She pulled her golden hair. "Why... why did something like that have to be here... why, why..."

Xander looked at the sky... "It felt like a god... but not... it felt good, benevolent, right? But so evil... so wrong..."

Sylvia lowered her head...

"I was possessed, wasn't I... by it..."

The others were all quiet... Xander bit his lips...

"Thi... this is something the temple would know how to handle best..."

Sylvia paled. The others all lowered their heads...

Involving the temple was the worst possible outcome...

Damon sucked in a breath of cold air... the kind that bit at his lungs and sent a shiver down his spine. What they had seen here today was more than enough for the temple to want them dead a million times over... and Sylvia... her getting possessed? That alone would be enough for the High Clerics to brand her as an abomination.

Even if she was born into power—even if she stood at the summit of noble bloodlines—the temple wouldn't hesitate.

They'd send assassins in the dark. The kind who didn't miss.

Damon stood up, his legs barely cooperating. He had to protect her. Somehow. He forced a laugh, dry and hollow, scraping past his throat like sandpaper.

"A god... yeah right. As if a god would possess Sylvia," he muttered, shaking his head with exaggerated disbelief.

"I can't believe you guys didn't realize it when it was so obvious..."

They all turned to him, eyes wide, clinging to the hope in his words, desperate for a reason—any reason—that would make what they saw easier to swallow.

"That wasn't a god," Damon continued, his tone sharpening with each word, "It was the same horror that attacked me earlier... if I had to guess, it's because Sylvia has spirit affinity. That's why it managed to get to her."

Their expressions shifted—less shock, more realization. Still frightened, but now clinging to reason like a lifeline.

"Spirit affinity makes her vulnerable to possession," he said slowly, eyes fixed on the broken monolith smeared with dried blood. "Especially if her heart is full of doubt..."

He pointed to the ruined stone monolith, his hand trembling slightly.

"Sylvia's heart must've cracked the moment she saw the monolith referring to the goddess with such... blasphemy. That doubt—it must've opened a gap inside her... the horror used that gap to slip in and take control."

He clenched his jaw as he finished spinning the lie.

"If I had to guess... it used her to carve those words into the stone. But it didn't kill us, so it left. Possessing Sylvia must've cost it something....or we weren't killing..."

The silence that followed was heavy, but not empty.

Their shoulders dropped. The terror in their eyes softened into a cautious understanding. If it wasn't divine, then maybe it was just something that could be fought... avoided... even defeated.

Xander let out a shaky breath, head lowered. Dark rings hung under his eyes like bruises from a nightmare that refused to fade. A tear slipped quietly down his cheek.

"It... it was just a trick... thank the goddess..."

Damon nodded slowly, his face unreadable. But deep down, he knew what he'd said was a lie.

That thing hadn't just been a trick. Sylvia hadn't been possessed by some random spirit. No, she'd been used—controlled by a divine artifact. One capable of channeling a god's will, even if only briefly.

True she wasn't possessed by a god...but she still carried out his divine will.

He turned his gaze to the monolith, the words etched in blood still flowing faintly on stone.

'I was right,' he thought. 'The unknown god has plans for Sylvia... but why? What isn't she telling us... what did she do to be given such a vile gift?'

Chapter 302: Not Ignorance

Whatever lingering fear had existed began to fade... they had been dealing with an incomprehensible entity—but if it was something they could understand, something they could grasp, then the fear was no longer unimaginable.

Fear was an ancient emotion, and the oldest kind of fear... was the fear of the unknown. But if it was known... then that fear lost its edge.

Damon had eased that fear. Even as he carried the horror in his own heart—a silent burden only he would carry.

He felt as if the ashen crown on his head grew heavier.

Truly... heavy was the head that wore the crown. Those responsible for the lives of others... were bound to the heaviest of burdens.

That was, of course, assuming they cared enough... about those they led.

He knew the truth—most of the nobility in his world... to put it in lighter words—were scum.

'To think a mere street urchin like me has the noble duty of leading blue bloods.'

Nevertheless... he soon found himself standing before the monolith. The words were written with Sylvia's blood. She was uninjured. Unhurt. Her fear had come slowly, gradually—only settling in after the others explained what had happened.

Four hours had passed since then.

He didn't look at her, even though she stood beside him—staring at the strange inscription, written in a language they could all read, yet none of them could write.

This language didn't just speak to the mind... it touched the soul. Damon could understand it... but he knew, somehow, he could never write it.

"Weeping Star..." she muttered, her voice low. "What do you think this is about...? It gives me a feeling of tragedy... and the inevitability of fate..."

Damon looked again at the words... written in her blood, yet this was not her handwriting. It was too perfect. Too beautiful. Not something a mortal could have written.

He turned the question back to her. "What do you think it means...?"

Sylvia paused. "I think... it's a poem. It's sad too. I don't understand all of it though..."

He nodded, trying to make sense of it himself.

"Tell me what you think."

She nodded slowly, shaking her head as if uncertain. "I can try..."

"...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."

She paused again. Her grey eyes met his darker ones.

"It must be tragic... being the Weeping Star. It was devoured by the god who gave names..."

Damon nodded. "I actually think... the god who gave names is the Weeping Star. I mean... if the Weeping Star came first, then who gave it that name? Wouldn't it make more sense if the god who gave names was first... and named himself?"

Sylvia held her chin thoughtfully. "Then... why would he devour his own light? Maybe... the Weeping Star wasn't even an entity. Maybe it was a phenomenon..."

Damon shrugged. Nothing really made sense when it came to gods...

His eyes moved to the next line.

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

Damon didn't need to guess who it was—he and Sylvia had the same thought. The god whose name was now gone.

"This line is probably talking about the unknown god, isn't it...?"

Damon nodded. "I don't think the Weeping Star and the god who gave names are different. They're probably just titles for the same being... the unknown god."

She continued reading in a small whisper, voice barely above breath.

"...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."

Damon narrowed his eyes. The goddess took it...

He knew—she was the one who had taken away the freedom to use all magic. She had bound every soul to only one attribute.

'Was that... because of the unknown god?'

Sylvia didn't know what he was thinking. She spoke slowly, her eyes low.

"The other monolith called the goddess a bride... but never finished the thought. But here, the unknown god calls her bride... and says her veil was never white. It was... woven from false fates."

He narrowed his gaze.

"So... what are you saying? The goddess defied him? Refused her fate as his bride...?"

Sylvia nodded. He lowered his voice, a whisper.

"You trying to tell me the unknown god is throwing a temper tantrum because he got rejected?"

Sylvia shook her head. "I... I don't know. But... he hated his name."

She read the next line.

The god who blessed names hated his own...

"If he hated his name," she muttered, "then maybe he let doom take it. Made himself an unknown god..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. "That would make sense... I was almost under the impression the goddess was stronger..."

Sylvia shook her head. "I find that doubtful. I think... when you reach their level, the concept of strength becomes irrelevant. Just another idea they've already surpassed..."

Then came the final line. The one that confirmed the most important speculation:

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

"If the goddess defied him, then why is she called the Goddess of the Abyss? Why is their tale tragic?"

Damon shook his head slowly. "I don't know... but I do know this: when the Temple of Doom finds out what we've seen, said, or even thought here... we'll be victims of a tragic story too."

Sylvia bit her lip. She knew it. She knew the name of the unknown god—not just his title, but his actual name...

She bit her lip harder.

"To know his name is to let him in... What happens if someone in our world actually knows his name?"

Damon shook his head. "I don't know... they'd probably let him in."

He didn't say anything more. He only hoped Sylvia didn't actually have the name of a god living in her head.

The only name permitted was that of the Goddess of Doom—and even that was only spoken aloud by High Clerics during the largest of ceremonies.

He turned around, holding her hand. Ignoring anymore dangerous thoughts. His silence was leadership, not ignorance.

He did not wish to end up like Ashcroft.

"All our speculations are wrong. We saw nothing. We were never here."

He said it loud enough for the others to hear.

"Let's get out of here. This shrine gives me the creeps..."

They left silently... almost eager to.

But Damon's shadow remained behind. Slowly, it began to devour the corpses—one after another—until every faceless corpse was swallowed into it.

It stopped in front of the monolith... for an instant, as if it hesitated. As if it... resigned itself.

Then it slithered after Damon, leaving the shrine's territory.

Moments later, the sound of leaves being crushed underfoot echoed faintly.

From one side of the shrine... a creature stepped out.

White-skinned. Bipedal. Its body smooth, surface unmarred. Fingers long and pale. Its face—or lack of one—was blank. No eyes. No features.

It approached the monolith with fear. With reverence. It bowed slightly, then bent forward—fingers gliding toward Sylvia's spilled blood still clinging to the cold stone.

It brought the blood to its face, touching it to where lips should have been...

And slowly... the blood formed lips. Delicate. Feminine. Lips similar to Sylvia's.

It smiled.

Then the blood faded. The lips vanished.

It stood, looking in the direction Damon and his party had gone.

And followed.

Slowly... it followed.

Chapter 303: Danger Sense

Damon had long since stopped contemplating what they had seen and heard... he had chosen to ignore it.

Focusing on their current problems was far more important than trying to make sense of something as far and distant as gods. He already had enough mortal problems—he didn't need to add divine ones to the list.

He walked, the giant axe slung casually in his hand. Two days had passed. Two days without rest.

Though honestly, it had been six since they left the Beldam's residence. So close to a week with no real sleep. They had come across horror after horror, fought battle after battle... yet they were still alive.

There were a few reasons for that.

The first was their strength—each of them possessed a unique class. The second was Sylvia's skill. The third would be the Beldam's map.

But the most important one... was luck.

That was all it was. They were still alive simply because they were lucky.

Other than that, Sylvia's skill had changed somehow. Damon could feel it.

It was subtle—but it was like the elf girl could now use it more freely.

Almost as if she no longer had to pay a price for the knowledge she gleaned from it.

He narrowed his eyes, frowning faintly.

'Did she pay in advance... when she was possessed...?'

Damon couldn't tell. The nature of Sylvia's skill was still a mystery.

He sighed.

Things were still fine. There was no need to go digging for more trouble.

He continued on, walking at the center of the formation.

Speaking of skills... he had gained a few of his own.

He'd sent his shadow to devour the nameless, faceless corpses of the dead knights. It had returned with some shadow energy—but it was negligible, almost insignificant.

'They've been dead for too long... that's why I didn't get much...'

He'd also gained some stat points—but the numbers were pitiful. Sometimes, he got none at all.

However, it hadn't been a fruitless endeavor.

He had gained two new skills.

[Skill: Faceless]

[Description:]

The face is a lie. The name is a leash. The soul is a chain. Those who wore none could not be bound—neither by fate, nor memory, nor death.

The Face Stealers did not kill to feed. They devoured to erase. And now, that curse has become part of you.

Your presence is like mist in the wind—felt, but never grasped.

You are no one.

You are everyone.

You are forgotten before you are even seen.

They will look... and forget.

They will hunt... and find nothing.

[Effect:]

Distorts the world's perception of the user—erasing sight, magic, voice, and presence. Even unique abilities leave no trace.

But the longer it remains active, the more it distorts the user's own sense of self.

[Type:] Active

[Cooldown:] 0 seconds

It was an active skill. Its power would grant Damon the ability to distort his appearance—not in the physical sense, but in perception.

In his own eyes, he would remain unchanged. But to others... he would become like mist.

They could look at him, but they wouldn't be able to connect what they saw.

Like trying to grasp fog with your hands—close, yet so far away.

However, the skill was dire. Honest. Dangerous.

Damon wasn't sure he wanted to pay its price.

If he used it for extended periods, he risked losing memories—perhaps even forgetting himself entirely.

'I don't need this right now... but when we eventually go up against the Temple... it'll be invaluable.

A perfect skill to keep my identity hidden while letting me use all my signature skills and abilities without reservations...'

He walked on, silent, deep in thought as his shadow stretched behind him.

The entire party was vigilant. Watchful. Tense.

The next skill... the next one had been part of the luck that kept them alive.

It was truly a godsend.

[Skill: Danger Sense]

[Description:]

Bound by honor and duty the knights swore secrecy. As they began this mighty undertaking, they swore to find traces of Ashcroft's return and perhaps that which the visitors had shared with the Lysithara...

Once again the children of Aetherus lust after its promise of power... though they will never reach it... forever they remain oblivious to the dangers.

[Effect:]

Grants the user a heightened awareness of immediate threats. Hostile intent within close range triggers a subtle instinctive reaction... too much can be overwhelming. The dangers everywhere are sensed although just as fickle as the word of the visitors... do not put too much faith in this skill. Some dangers are beyond you.

[Type:]

Passive/Active

[Cooldown:] 0 sec

The skill was incredible... but in the Whispering Forest, it was both a gift and a curse.

A gift—because it allowed him to sense danger.

A curse—because danger was everywhere.

The moment he entered this wretched forest, the skill had become a screaming buzz in the back of his skull—warning him of threats from every direction.

And there were so many directions.

Too many.

Some dangers whispered softly. Others howled. But the worst were the ones that buzzed like an angry hornet behind his eyes.

Fortunately, though it was a passive ability, it could be deactivated.

So Damon used it sparingly—only when he needed to tell if a place was safe, less dangerous, or a complete death trap.

He had forced himself to get used to the noise.

He'd endured it.

Endured the shrieking warnings that pressed against his senses like a thousand invisible daggers.

And honestly, it was that decision—that luck—that had kept them alive.

He thought about the skill's description again...

It mentioned why the knights came to this death zone.

'They came here searching for traces of Ashcroft's return...'

Damon's eyes narrowed slightly.

'So that means... the Demon Lord of Domination is actually real?'

"Of course he was. The monolith was proof enough..."

But it didn't end there.

They were also searching for what the visitors had given Lysithara.

Whatever it was... Damon had a gnawing feeling it was that very thing that had twisted the once-great city.

That had flooded it with rot and corruption.

It wasn't just monsters or decay.

It was design.

Intent.

He could feel it—whatever it was, it had fed their lust for power. Spreading to the rest of the world

It was why the ancient cities of Aetherus now lay in ruins...

Damon was lost in thought—until he felt a buzz.

His danger sense flared.

Mild... yet intense.

A soft vibration just beneath the surface of his skull—like static brushing against bone.

"Curses..."

The voice didn't come from Damon.

It came from Xander—who stood frozen ahead, staring up into the trees.

Damon rushed forward, his boots thudding against the moss-covered ground.

"Damn it! Don't look at her—!"

But it was too late.

Xander had already looked.

So far, they had avoided this vile species of monster.

So far, they'd survived by doing so.

But now... it was too late.

She hung from the tree, suspended by threads that looked like woven flesh.

Her limbs dangled like broken branches, her head tilted to the side at an unnatural angle, hair like dried grass clinging to her face.

This was one of them.

The Hanging Mother.

Slowly she fell... towards the forest floor.

Chapter 304: Hanging Mother

The Hanging Mother was a horror common in the Whispering Forest.

The old travel journal had mentioned them—vague, hurried scrawl between blood-stained pages. It even spoke of their weakness. A cruel irony, really... knowing what to do didn't always mean you'd live long enough to do it.

She was a monster that only reacted when observed.

To that end, it was eerily similar to a horror from Lysithara known as the Weeping Angel.

Once seen, it dropped from the trees.

And once it touched the ground... it killed everyone.

The only chance was to run before that happened.

Unfortunately for Damon and his party... they wouldn't be so lucky this time.

Perhaps their luck had run out.

But Damon wasn't about to let that happen.

He gripped the giant axe tightly, the hilt biting into his palms as the Hanging Mother began to fall—her hair like dried weeds, tangled and lifeless as she descended in silence.

Then she screamed.

A sound that carved through bone.

That ran its cold fingers along his spine and curled around his soul.

Even so—he didn't stop moving.

"Run now..."

The others didn't hesitate.

They'd survived too much to falter now.

They ran—not away from the Hanging Mother, but toward her falling form. Straight past her.

Damon surged forward, his boots digging deep into the mossy earth as he activated the [5x] skill to speed—his body becoming a blur.

His speed was now fivefold what it had been.

He raised the massive axe—not to strike, but to anchor.

He slammed it down with all his force, burying its head into the forest floor just as the rest of his party passed by him like a gust of wind.

He closed his eyes.

He felt her falling.

The Hanging Mother's withered limbs swaying, her form descending directly above the anchored axe.

And then—impact.

She fell onto the axe.

Her feet didn't touch the ground.

The axe groaned.

Its steel cracked.

But it held.

Damon clenched his teeth, arms locked, his muscles burning under her monstrous weight. The blade tilted... the metal shrieked.

But he refused to let it fall over.

Through the mist, his companions vanished, one by one.

As soon as the last of his friends disappeared into the thick fog—the axe shattered.

Perfect timing.

Damon dived into the shadow of a tree, his body vanishing as if plunging into a pool of ink.

[Shadow Movement] activated.

He flowed through the darkness like liquid thought—through the interconnected web of shadows beneath the forest.

The Hanging Mother shrieked, her kill stolen, her hunger unmet.

Damon's body shot out of the shadows right beside a fleeing Evangeline—her armor shimmering faintly, its glow deepening the shadows around her, guiding his escape.

He tumbled out from the darkness, heart pounding like a drum against his ribs.

That had been too close.

He turned to Xander with narrowed eyes.

"You owe me a giant axe. For each day you don't pay... there's a 70% interest rate..."

Xander smiled, relieved—clearly happy to see him alive.

"That's daytime robbery..."

Leona chuckled, lightning sparking softly along her armor as it cracked with residual static.

"That's the usual rate I get. I thought you'd charge him more."

Damon ran after them, a smirk tugging at his lips.

"I was feeling generous..."

They ran—through roots and fog, trees stretching like claws overhead.

Six days they'd survived in this cursed forest. Six days of adapting. Of bleeding. Of escaping death by moments.

Evangeline and Sylvia exchanged a glance, a faint smile passing between them.

Once again, they had dodged death.

As they continued, something shifted.

The whispering—the constant, maddening whispering—began to fade.

Low.

Faint.

Almost... quiet.

Leona's beast-kin ears twitched first.

"I smell water... The whispers are lower here..."

Sylvia's elven ears flicked slightly as she reached for the map secured to her pack.

"We... we're here... We made it. We made it to the Silent Marsh..."

Matia took a long breath, her shoulders sagging with pain and exhaustion.

"We are almost at Lysithara..."

Evangeline's eyes fixed on the marsh—just beyond the mist.

"This is the final obstacle..."

Damon nodded slowly... but he knew better.

More obstacles would come.

This forest never gave anything easily.

Yes—Lysithara was just beyond the marsh. Behind a wall of trees, concealed by mist and madness.

But this place... this place might be worse than all that came before.

He turned to the group, voice low.

"We can't talk past this point... In this marsh, even a whisper can mean death."

He narrowed his eyes at the silent fog ahead.

"Make no noise..."

Or you'll become part of the silence."

Damon gave all of them a small lecture on the dos and don'ts of the Silent Marsh. He had already covered it back in the Beldam's Nest, but he went over it again.

They all listened solemnly—no one seemed eager to go in anyway.

Damon nodded, activating Danger Sense as he approached the final part of the forest. The moment the skill kicked in, he felt it—a buzz just as intense as what he'd felt in the Whispering Forest. Danger was everywhere.

He scowled, eyes narrowing as he shut the skill off.

As he looked at the marsh ahead, it was... silent. The mist here wasn't as thick as the forest's, but that didn't make it safer.

Large plants with broad, waxy leaves sprawled out across the ground, hiding the terrain. A few thin, skeletal trees jutted from the waters like broken spires. Stagnant pools stretched far into the distance, dark and slow-moving, choked with moss and reeds. Glowing patches of grass and wet moss clung to the land in uneven clusters, casting an eerie light that flickered like dying fireflies.

The marsh was silent—deathly so. He couldn't tell which part was land, which part was shallow water... and he sure as hell couldn't tell what horrors might be hiding in between. All he had was the rule carved into his memory, passed down from those who'd barely escaped this place.

Once you step onto the Silent Marsh... never make noise.

And never... never, ever look back. No matter what you hear.

Chapter 305: Don't Think Of It

The ground in the Silent Marsh was sticky and muddy... the air was bleak and dark, and mist covered most of it...

The moss glowed in some parts, and the air was humid—so much so it irritated the nose. Perhaps that was why Leona found this silent place almost as intolerable as the Whispering Forest...

Her nose felt irritated...she felt the mist irritate her nostrils with every breath she took.

She pressed her hand to it. She made no noise. Honestly, none of them did.

In the Silent Marsh, noise could mean death... luckily, they had taken a potion from the Beldam's Nest that allowed telepathy—temporarily.

Leona felt lighter knowing she could still communicate with the others in this soundless world.

Moving through the marsh wasn't easy, so she shifted her armor into its first form—turning it into a lighter fit, more fabric than plate, covering only her vitals.

Even with telepathy, they remained silent in the marsh...

Damon leapt from one patch of glowing moss to another, holding the fang of the wyvern in his arm like a sword.

Leona couldn't help but think about how rigid he was when using a sword—it was like he was obsessed with following the formal route.

She couldn't even afford a sigh, lest she make any noise... the Silent Marsh wasn't too big. They should leave this cursed place in a short time.

...Until then, silence would reign supreme—for all their sakes.

Or so she thought.

Until she heard a footstep behind her—something emerged from the water. There was a deafening splash, or rather, it seemed deafening, due to the deep silence.

Leona suddenly felt a strong compulsion to turn her head and look at what was behind her.

Her head slowly began to turn.

"Don't look back..."

Sylvia's voice echoed in their heads. Leona's gaze remained forward, sweat beading down her temple.

'It's a Nameless One... don't look at it. Don't think of it. Don't acknowledge it... and most of all, don't speak of it. I'll be cutting off communications—just to be safe...'

Damon stepped forward onto another glowing patch of moss, nodding silently, never looking back. He agreed with Sylvia's decision.

Leona took a deep breath. 'Don't think of it...'

That would be difficult. Especially since she could feel its gaze... and its breath on the back of her neck...

She suddenly found herself thinking about everything she knew of them...

No one knew what they looked like. They had no known weakness—save one: do not see them. If you do... you will be lost.

She tried not to think. But the more she fought it, the more it crept in.

And then... from behind, she felt something slowly touch her hair, lifting a few strands... she felt it sniff her hair, letting out a warm, damp breath on her nape.

Her face paled. She almost jerked around on reflex—but stopped herself, continued walking...

"Think of something else... think of something else..."

But that was getting harder with every second. The more she tried not to think of it... the more she did.

She gritted her teeth, too afraid to make a sound...

She wanted to gulp—but feared it would make a noise. Her eyes shut tight. Something touched her head—as if it were climbing her shoulders...

It was.

Because she suddenly felt weight on her shoulder. And when she glanced down—

She saw what appeared to be legs, dangling—as if something was seated on her shoulder.

She closed her eyes, resisting the urge to use magic and eviscerate everything in the vicinity.

Instead, she focused on Damon—he was in the lead. She forced herself forward, hopping from one patch of moss to the next, step by step...

Not daring to even glance at her reflection in the thick, murky waters of the marsh.

She passed the others, and the weight vanished from her shoulders. A sigh escaped her lips—relief, pure and raw.

Then she heard it. A familiar voice

A gentle, masculine voice from behind her.

'Leona... you can always tell how strong someone is by how much they eat...'

Her father's voice.

She nearly turned—nearly snapped her neck back—but caught herself. Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she moved to stand beside Damon.

She closed her eyes.

Think of something else... just think of something else.

The tension in her body began to ease. Slowly, deliberately, she allowed herself to drift—somewhere distant, some corner of memory she could lose herself in.

And then, just as her nerves began to untangle, the irritation in her nose returned with a vengeance.

A gust of breath slipped out.

She sneezed.

It was a small thing—barely even a sound in any normal place.

But in the Silent Marsh...

It was a bang.

Damon's eyes snapped open, wide with horror.

Leona's blood turned cold as she clutched her nose, her expression frozen.

She couldn't have stopped it.

And then—

A rustle.

From the thickets of the marsh, something emerged. A black blur, fast—unnatural.

It burst through the plants.

A hulking shape, its skin pitch black, stretched and veined. Its wide mouth hung open without sound, a shriveled circle where eyes should've been. No eyes—just torn skin and folds. A hunched frame dragged itself upright as it turned toward Leona.

Every nerve screamed.

Run.

She bit her lip, hands tightening around the hilt of her Ascendant Sword. She stepped forward.

If this was her end—so be it. Her friends would live.

The thing darted forward.

Fast. Too fast. Faster than anything she could dodge.

She raised her blade anyway.

But just before it reached her—

Damon.

He grabbed her. One hand over her mouth and nose, muffling her breath. The other sealed his own face, locking them both in silence.

The creature stopped.

Inches away.

Silent.

Breathing heavy. But not from its lungs.

It loomed, soundless, head twitching unnaturally. Its skin stretched as it leaned close, too close.

Leona stared at Damon.

And in her eyes—apology.

He shook his head.

Still.

Unmoving.

Chapter 306: Old Haunt

Damon didn't even dare breathe. Neither did he look at the creature in front of them. He shut his mouth and pinched his nose closed, his other hand gently doing the same for Leona.

He could feel her trembling, even though she remained completely still. The others had frozen too—motionless, not even a twitch. Each one of them kept a hand over their mouth and nose, holding in their breath.

The creature made no sound. Its maw hung open, revealing a long, grotesque tongue that slid out—slowly reaching for Damon. It slithered across his face in a deliberate, testing motion. The thing had no eyes—completely blind to the world around it.

He felt the sticky drag of its tongue trail across his skin, thick with vile-smelling mucus that burned his senses.

Still, he didn't move.

His lungs tightened, screaming for release as the air within begged to be let out.

Even his shadow stood still—as though it were lifeless.

But he couldn't risk it. If they breathed... if they made even the faintest sound, the creature would drag them into the suffocating silence of the marsh.

Damon's heart had gone cold. He prayed the telepathy potion hadn't worn off yet...

With his eyes tightly shut, he reached out with his mind— Matia...

For a moment, she didn't move. His heart sank. If the potion had worn off, she wouldn't know what to do.

But then... ice shimmered.

Matia's ascendant armor fractured with a quiet glimmer, and slow streams of cold air began to seep out around them—dropping their body heat signatures to match the marsh's frigid surroundings.

The creature lifted its head, confused. Its tongue curled back in. It sniffed, or whatever the blind thing used in place of scent.

It slithered forward, brushing its grotesque form against Evangeline, then slowly turned away... fading into the fog like it was never there at all.

Damon's hands shook as he slowly released Leona's mouth.

The others moved too, their faces pale with dread.

Damon let out a silent sigh of relief.

Leona looked at him and mouthed, "I'm sorry..."

He shook his head. It wasn't her fault. No one could be blamed—not here.

At least they survived.

He stood, reaching for a vial of the Beldam telepathy potion and took a quick sip before passing it to Leona. She drank and passed it around until the last of them had taken their share.

Their minds connected.

Be careful... we're almost across the Silent Marsh... This is the last stretch. If we get careless... we'll die.

No one responded through the link. They all just nodded in grim silence.

Damon exhaled again, finally soothing his burning lungs. The wretched smell of the slime on his face made him gag. He crouched low into the marsh, dipping his hands into the murky water.

He began to wash his face slowly, careful not to make a sound. The others watched in silence, too shaken to move.

Then his hand dipped into the water again—then froze.

His eyes widened in horror.

He hadn't seen them.

How... how could he have missed it?

Right next to him, just inches away, was a vast, motionless creature submerged in the water. Its reptilian eyes stared directly at him—unblinking. Its scales were the same color as the swamp, perfectly camouflaged. Its fangs were as large as his hands.

It didn't move. It didn't need to.

It was watching.

He paled and began to slowly back away, heart pounding in his ears. Its eyes still locked on him.

Daring the risk, he extended his shadow perception outward—despite knowing the danger.

And then he saw them.

His breath caught.

All around them—beneath the marsh's surface—the same type of creature waited in silence. Dozens... maybe more. Watching. Waiting. Ready to drag them into the mire.

They had been there the entire time.

Stalking them like prey.

Even they didn't dare to make noise in the marsh.

Damon backed away, gripping the Wyvern's Fang tightly in his trembling hands.

They had been this close to death... all this time.

He glanced at the patches of glowing moss dotting the swamp floor.

Those... those were the only things keeping them alive.

He took a deep breath... silent, he moved to the next bright patch of moss...

The others followed, leaving the area with silent dread, weapons brandished—ready to fight for their lives at any time.

They moved through the moss without any issues, the creatures hidden beneath staring at them... hoping... praying they'd fall into the murky water.

Damon made sure they didn't—combining different spells from each of them. The most useful were Sylvia and Evangeline's use of light and foresight. Next came Matia's ability to freeze water and allow them to pass unharmed.

With the murky water frozen solid, they walked over it without issue.

They could already see the end of the slimy marsh in sight—soon... all their troubles would end.

But Damon knew better than to let his guard down. The closer one was to their goal, the more reckless they became.

Even so, he could feel his party becoming elated with the thought of finally leaving this silent hell...

Damon bit his lips... the edge of the marsh was right there. The vast tree line ahead—hiding what would be Lysithara.

Yet he couldn't relax... not until he heard a voice that should never have been in the Silent Marsh.

"It's just like you to expect the worst in everything..."

Damon froze—his legs almost gave out when he heard that voice in front of him.

It was a voice he thought he would never hear again.

His lungs stalled, his legs trembled—almost giving out beneath him.

No...

That voice... it was impossible.

It couldn't be...

He shouldn't have.

After all... he had killed and devoured the man himself...

It was him.

Exactly as he remembered.

Every detail.

Right in front of his eyes stood a man holding an old hunting bow with a gentle smile on his face... he looked just like Damon remembered...

His eyes widened—betraying emotions he thought he had long since buried...

The name came to his mind... but his lips did not dare utter it.

This was one of the only people who had ever shown him kindness.

Carmen Vale...

Chapter 307: Mire Of Self-Doubt

They say the dead never die...

Damon never believed that. After all, all who died never returned—at least as far as he knew. That was why even seeing Carmen Vale right in front of him... despite the shock of it all, like seeing an old haunt...

He still knew this wasn't real. It was just an illusion conjured by the marsh. It wanted to breed doubt in his heart... it wanted him to make noise... to break the silence of the marsh with its ghost.

Why else would it bring out the memory of the kind hunter?

His beard and face still looked the same as Damon remembered. The old man still just as well-built, wearing the same worn hunting gear from that day... the day they met... the day Damon killed him.

Damon lowered his head...

Carmen smiled. "Why can't you look at me, little fella... are you feeling guilty...?"

Damon bit his lips and continued walking forward... surrounded by glowing moss... his party right behind him. They didn't seem to see the kind hunter.

"I suppose you won't... after all, you don't have a conscience... how could you? You killed someone who only showed you kindness..."

Carmen's smile faded. He stepped in front of Damon.

"No surprise you would awaken a class as vile as Death Dealer... a merchant in blood... a dealer in death... it's all you know how to do—take."

Damon paused, his body refusing to move. His party behind him stopped as well, waiting... watching.

Sylvia sent him a telepathic message.

"Is something wrong..."

He shook his head, walking around Carmen.

The hunter smiled. "My poor daughter... she was orphaned for no reason... simply because I decided to help you... a strange kid in the woods..."

Damon bit down harder... the taste of blood on his lips.

He knew it was all in his head. Even so... he wanted to defend himself... but no words came.

'I... I was... I was just trying to survive...'

He thought the words—but no sound came from his lips.

"You did, didn't you?" Carmen said coldly. "By killing someone who had never done you harm... I wasn't even indifferent to your pain like the others... I was trying to help you..."

Damon nodded slowly.

"I know... I know... I... I didn't..."

"You didn't what?" Carmen spat, his voice suddenly sharp—harsh in a way the real Carmen never was.

"Didn't mean to kill me? You did. You knew from the moment you got that power—it demanded human souls and flesh. And what did you do? You trapped yourself in denial. You were complacent. You were weak. And I had to pay the price..."

He paused.

"No... Iris had to pay the price. You took her father away from her..."

"How do you even look her in the eye and lie..."

Damon trembled. Even with the tactical precision of the Remorseless skill, his emotions surged, unable to be suppressed.

He walked across the moss, his face pale and his steps heavy.

"Did you think taking her under your wing would make up for it? You pushed her down the path of an avenger—gave her a long list of enemies to kill—but you forgot to include yourself... her so-called teacher..."

Damon's heart went cold. Carmen...

He gritted his teeth.

Carmen looked past him, to Damon's party.

"You must be hungry again, you cannibal..."

He gestured behind Damon.

"These fools are following you... maybe they should know you're a monster too. The moment you get hungry—they're food."

Damon's hands trembled. He was hungry. But he wouldn't... he wouldn't eat his party.

Never... never...

"I won't... I won't... I have..."

"Not changed. By the time this is over, one of them will die by your hand. That—I promise you."

Damon took a deep breath... his eyes burning.

"I won't... I won't... You aren't even the real Carmen Vale. You're just all my doubts taking shape..."

"Am I"

He looked up, thoughts louder—firmer.

"This part of the marsh is called the Mire of Self-Doubt. You're just my doubts."

Damon raised his head higher.

"I can't make peace with my past, so I continue to move forward. I'm not Carmen Vale, so I can't embody his philosophy—but I can make mine..."

"Kindness is reciprocal... but so is malice..."

He stood taller, eyes sharp. "I carry my shame and my doubt like a mantle... even if they eat away at my flesh. I carry every name I've slain as a shadow in my heart... never forgetting."

Carmen looked at him quietly...

Then vanished—dissolving into mist that spread outward, flowing over the others in his party... each now trapped in their own illusions.

Some more intense than others, but as they reached the end... of the marsh, they all remained themselves—keeping their doubts to themselves, save for one.

Matia's fist remained clenched, the doubts had hammered away at her in the shape of her father... so much she wanted to scream. Even so, she remained —stalwart... unshaken...

As they reached the edge of the marsh... the water changed, darkened, and her father's voice echoed—low, accusing—as she overcame her doubts...

"You will die, Matia, you will lose those wings you didn't give to your brother..."

Matia felt herself falling—without end. Her head bleeding, her vision hazy as she looked up at a bleak, colorless sky... she felt herself being dragged into a timeless darkness...

She saw her corpse... she saw her party mourn... her death... she saw Damon's eyes—dark and lightless... She saw something beyond her death... and her name carved in stone...

She jolted—her head trembling as she ripped herself away from the illusion... her skull throbbing like it had been cracked open... it felt so real...

She bit her lips, hard—blood welled up—as she finally heard a sound she didn't think she'd ever hear again... it was the howling wind... she felt the ground turn solid beneath her boots...

Damon stood in front of them—his fist clenched—he turned around for the first time since they had walked into the silent marsh...

"We made it... we made it across the marsh... we made it... we are just three kilometers away from Lysithara..."

Xander stabbed his spear into the ground, leaning heavily on it...

"We... we actually survived a death zone... we survived the Whispering Woods... we're almost... home..."

The others followed, collapsing to their knees. A week of sleepless nights, hunger, fear, and horrors too painful to name—all crashing down at once.

But they had made it.

They were still alive.

For now.

Chapter 308: The Last Obstacle

The tree line was silent—no rustle of forest critters, no flapping wings, not even the wind. Only the distant howls of horror echoing from beyond the shattered city gates broke the stillness.

The gates had once stood proud, towering more than sixty meters high and just as wide. Silver, etched with countless ancient runes, they had been marvels of craftsmanship. Now, they lay in ruin, shattered into fragmented greatness—as if kicked down by a mighty titan. Their remnants littered the ground like fallen relics of a forgotten age.

The sky overhead was bright, but bleak... a pallid gray that seemed almost too vivid compared to the eternal gloom of the Whispering Forest. Here, ruins of broken man-made constructs sprawled in every direction, silent reminders of a civilization long lost. Despite the epochs and the brutal passage of time, shrines still stood nestled along the inner wall—moss-covered and cracked, but enduring.

The stone walls surrounding the ruin had not collapsed. Carved with symbols, they remained strong, untouched by whatever horror had ravaged the gate.

The air was thick with the scent of dust and death. Damon could feel it—rot, dread, and something older, buried deep within the bones of this place.

All around them lay corpses. Some were so ancient even Damon could not fathom when they'd fallen—nothing left but brittle bones, gnawed clean by scavengers or worse.

Among the skeletal remains were behemoths, their twisted forms broken and scattered.

The more recent dead were easier to identify—their weapons and armor still partially intact, their bones fresh.

"Redcap goblins... a few war trolls... and more than that—lesser demons..." Damon muttered under his breath.

Xander stood beside him, encased in the silver-gray armor of the Bound Colossus.

His heavy spear rested in hand, his massive presence like that of a titan trapped in human flesh. Just standing near him made the air feel heavier, as if gravity itself bowed to his weight.

"No surprise. If they were sent to scout a death zone, the demon army would've deployed more than a single regiment. They must've sent many."

Evangeline nodded. Her duskglass armor shimmered in its Ascendant Form—a perfectly balanced blend of mobility and defense. Golden inlays glowed softly along its surface, casting warm light against the grim backdrop.

"Which is good for us," she said quietly. "Imagine if we had to deal with more of those things. We would've all died..."

Leona, encased in heavy storms forged plate, held her helm in one hand, her sword sparking with tendrils of lightning.

"I'm not so sure about that," she said, a faint smirk tugging her lips. "With our current strength, we can wipe out all of them."

The others didn't argue. Power-wise, they were already at the peak of their First-Class advancements. They'd slain countless horrors without rest. Monster after monster. Beast after beast.

They say those who fight monsters become monsters themselves... and Damon's party had long since crossed that line.

A dreadful force... yet in this place, there were things far more dreadful still.

Matia remained quiet, encased in her Shattered Ice armor. Its Sovereign Mantle form looked lighter than Xander's, but she radiated a suffocating, silent cold. Her very presence was enough to freeze breath in one's lungs.

Damon said nothing. His danger sense was flaring. Every instinct screamed not to cross the broken gates of Lysithara.

But they had to.

Lysithara held a teleportation gate—or perhaps a waypoint. If it still functioned, they could use it to return to safety. Even if it didn't, the far end of the city past its walls was known to be less dangerous. If they could cross, they could reach the outskirts and make it back to Brightwater. The Dukedom was just beyond.

"What do you think killed them?" Leona asked, her voice low.

"I don't know, Leona... but from the look of it, most of them died to weapons. This one here—he has a sword wound..."

"A single strike, too," Sylvia added softly.

She was relieved they could speak each other's names again—but even so, the words felt heavy on her tongue, as if the city itself was listening.

Damon stared at the fallen corpses. Only one remained untouched by scavengers—leaning against the wall, sword at his side, armor still whole though battered.

"We'll find out soon enough, won't we..."

The moment the words left his mouth, the knight stirred.

With a groan of rust and a grinding hiss, the figure stood. His armor was dented and broken, his sword clutched in hand. Red light glowed beneath the visor of his helm. The blade he raised was rusted, etched with runes so ancient and vile that Damon's blood ran cold.

Mist began to rise around the knight—thick, unnatural... deathless.

He spoke, voice low like a distant hiss carried on the wind:

"You shall not pass..."

Damon pulled out the Wyvern's Fang and willed his Ascendant Armor into its second form, regal plates curling up along his limbs, with the ashen crown hovering on his head like a broken halo.

The party readied themselves, silent, focused. The air was thick with dread.

His eyes remained fixed on the knight—the lone sentinel—its ruined helm lifted high

"Sylvia, what's its rank?" Damon asked, voice low.

She smiled faintly.

"Bit late to ask now, but since you did... it's a Rank Two Mist Knight. Heavily injured. Likely the captain of a gate squad... stationed here to guard the ruins until he ran into the demon army regiment."

Leona's face was hidden beneath her helm, but the disbelief in her voice was sharp.

"You're telling me one knight squad wiped them out?"

Sylvia shook her head. "Not a squad—just this knight. The rest were Mist Soldiers. This one nearly wiped out the entire regiment on his own....several actually."

Xander shifted, the earth groaning underfoot as gravity warped around his armor-clad form. His spear gleamed with quiet menace.

"So he's at least as strong as we are... maybe stronger. And it's just one knight."

Leona cracked her metal-clad knuckles, her gauntlets sparking with lightning.

"These are the ones that shift into mist during attacks, right?"

Sylvia nodded grimly. "Exactly. But this one's different. It's carrying a cursed item. Forged from cursed ore, laced with runes older than our current knowledge. A clean hit might not kill you instantly, but it'll rot you slow... start with your soul."

Evangeline raised her rapier, duskglass armor faintly shimmering in the light. Her eyes were cold.

"My purge skill can counter the curse."

Sylvia nodded but added, "It could—but only if you're skilled enough to touch the soul directly. You aren't there yet, not yet."

Damon gave a low chuckle, dark amusement flashing in his eyes.

"So we can kill it, but one hit from that sword and we're screwed. Makes you wonder what the hell they were trying to hide in Lysithara."

He raised the Wyvern's Fang, the jagged blade pulsing with his mana, and pointed it straight at the Mist Knight.

"Allow me to put you out of your misery."

Without another word, he charged. The impact of their weapons colliding echoed like thunder across the ruined field, sending shockwaves through the mist.

This was it.

Their last obstacle to Lysithara.

Chapter 309: Alazard

Damon's strength surged fivefold the instant his skill activated. The moment his blade met the Mist Knight's, he felt it—Wyvern's Fang cracked slightly against the steel of that cursed sword. The sheer

force of the clash sent him skidding backward, boots dragging against bone and dust. But he wasn't fazed.

He gritted his teeth, gripping the hilt tighter.

'So I can match someone in the second class advancement... at least in raw strength.'

He timed his retreat perfectly—just in time for Xander's spear and Leona's blade to follow up behind him, both aimed straight at the Mist Knight.

The knight raised his sword with cold precision, deflecting Xander's spear—and in that same moment, his form shifted into a thin, ghostly vapor. Leona's strike passed right through him.

Damon lifted two fingers sharply. With a silent snap, he fired a volley of magic bullets. Where thunder should have cracked, there was only a dull thud against the knight's armor. No sound. No recoil. Just resistance.

This was the improved magic bullets.

The knight turned toward him.

He leapt—clearing several meters in a single bound—and brought his sword down with a monstrous swing.

"Matia!" Damon shouted, firing the omnidirectional gear toward her.

She caught the wires with practiced ease and yanked him back just in time, his body skimming the ground as the knight's sword tore through where he had just stood.

Matia didn't stop. Ice coalesced around her fingers, forming a spear, and she launched it at the Mist Knight.

Then Evangeline moved, her body a blur of white and gold. She leapt, rapier aimed straight for the visor.

The knight twisted. His hilt came up like a steel wall, parrying her thrust. Then, flowing like water, he dodged the next volley—Sylvia's arrows slicing the air, missing their mark.

Damon's eyes tracked the knight as he weaved through them—steel in hand, shifting effortlessly between mist and masterful swordsmanship. His grip on the Wyvern's Fang tightened.

He could feel the weight of the blade. The history etched into its edge.

'What beautiful swordsmanship...'

His eyes slid shut for a moment. He'd wanted to learn swordplay. Not for elegance or style—but because daggers... daggers were useless against monsters like this. Against knights that couldn't bleed.

"I need a sword," he whispered.

"I can kill it," Sylvia said behind him, taking a deep breath. "But I need time... Buy me that time."

Damon nodded.

He charged.

Eyes narrowed, watching everything. How the knight stood. How he held his sword. How his feet shifted, how his shoulders turned. The rhythm of his stance. The calm weight of experience.

The best way to learn... was to imitate.

And more than that—what made this worth the risk... was the knight's ability to turn to mist.

Damon could turn into shadow. He could become mist too.

This was a chance. A rare one.

He shifted his stance, mirroring the knight. Around him, his party struggled—overwhelmed by the knight's skill.

He reached for Leona, grabbed her by the ankle mid-dodge, and hurled her at Xander.

For a heartbeat, his eyes locked onto the knight again—drawn not to the sword this time, but the ashen helm.

The knight started back looking at Damon's ashen crown on his head. Those red eyes beneath the visor...

They flickered.

Like he was in pain.

The knight paused. Then, from beneath the helm, a hoarse voice rasped

"My lord... why are you unwilling to sacrifice anything...? There can be no victory... without sacrifice..."

Damon's jaw clenched.

He wasn't the Lord of Lysithara.

But the armor he wore—had belonged to that man. That title. That cause.

And maybe... just maybe, that's why—even corrupted by rot and rage—this ancient knight had remembered something. Regained a sliver of who he once was.

But all Damon could feel was fury. And sorrow.

The knight roared, charging him with renewed wrath.

Even in rage, his swordsmanship didn't falter.

Damon raised The Wyvern's Fang and met him head-on.

He copied everything. Every movement. Every angle. Where he saw improvisation, he adjusted. He adapted. He learned. Strike for strike.

The knight drove him back—but Damon's eyes stayed calm. Focused.

Steel rang against bone—dirt echoed beneath their feet—as the two warriors clashed.

One fighting with fury.

The other fighting to learn.

With every blow exchanged... Damon's hand felt numb. Even so, he quietly absorbed the knight's techniques and footwork. It was a style that was flexible, yet guarded—designed to draw a circle around the wielder.

Everything within that circle... was within reach of their sword. And from any direction, they could strike, as long as the opponent remained within range.

Damon felt like he was close to grasping it.

Just then, the knight did something he hadn't done before—he raised his leg and kicked Damon square in the chest. Damon barely had time to raise the battered Wyvern's Fang. The bone shattered from the blow, already weakened from the previous clashes.

He coughed up blood, body flung backward like a ragdoll.

The knight raised his sword, ready to end it—only for Matia to intercept, conjuring a blade of her own. She blocked the strike but dropped to her knees under its weight.

The knight's eyes flickered.

"It's just like you... to protect him, even when he refused to lose anything to save Lysitharaaaa..."

Matia gritted her teeth, straining under the crushing force of the blade.

"I don't know..... what you're talking about."

Behind them, Sylvia was chanting—her voice low, urgent—magic circles pulsing around her feet, glowing with moonlight. And then, in a flash, she unleashed the spell.

Damon surged forward, shadows at his feet, pushing Matia out of the way just as a brilliant white beam fired toward the knight.

He tried to shift into mist, but it was too late.

The light struck him head-on, knocking him to his knees. His armor turned red-hot, glowing from the impact. Steam hissed from every joint as the radiant light melted through him. When it faded... the knight remained kneeling, unmoving—blood seeping through the cracks in his armor. The red glow in his visor dimmed.

Damon exhaled slowly, cradling Matia.

His danger sense faded.

The knight was dead.

Matia removed her helm, her voice breathless.

"We won..."

The others looked on, relief flooding their expressions.

Sylvia collapsed to her knees—the spell had drained everything from her.

Damon looked down at the broken Wyvern's Fang, now nothing but splinters of bone.

"Great... I lost another weapon."

Matia glanced at the knight's sword, still impaled into the stone. She smiled faintly.

"You can always use his."

Damon nodded, stepping toward the unmoving knight who still refused to fall.

Heat radiated from the armor as he reached for the sword.

His fingers brushed against the knight's hand—when suddenly, the visor blazed red.

The knight moved.

In one final burst, he swung, the cursed blade aiming straight for Damon's chest. Damon dodged—but not fast enough. The blade grazed past his armor, pinning his shoulder to the ground.

Gritting his teeth, Damon thrust the broken Wyvern's Fang upward, driving it through the gap in the knight's chest plate.

Black blood seeped from the visor. The knight chuckled.

"You wouldn't sacrifice anything, my lord... Victory demands sacrifice... Your choice doomed us all... You must sacrifice. That... is the burden of the crown..."

The knight collapsed, his cursed blade still lodged in Damon.

As the body turned cold, Damon felt a burning pain in his chest. His shadow trembled violently.

[You have slain Mist Knight Alazard.]

Sylvia and Evangeline rushed toward him, spells ready, trying to heal him as he groaned—blood staining his armor.

Leona's eyes narrowed. "Are you okay?"

Damon stood slowly, the pain already fading from his body.

"I'm fine... I think."

He looked down at the knight's sword... and picked it up. The blade glowed faintly in his grasp.

"Let's go... Lysithara awaits."

He staggered toward the gates—ruined, but still standing.

He paused at the massive arch, taking a long breath. His party followed silently behind.

They passed beneath the mighty archway, into lands that had once forged kings...heroes and now bore only ruin.

Before them... lay a new hell.

The ruins of Lysithara did not welcome.

A bleak sky stretched above them, and what greeted them was no sanctuary—but a city filled with horrors.

Damon's voice was quiet, but steady.

"We made it to Lysithara..."

Chapter 310: Lilith Gets, No Free Time

The sunlight was gentle, casting a golden hue over the courtyard as the breeze rustled the trees, sending a few leaves drifting through the air like forgotten memories. It would've been serene—peaceful, even—if not for the occasional blasts of magic cutting through the stillness and the rhythmic sound of deep, exhausted breaths echoing from the training ground.

Lilith stood nearby, arms folded, her expression unreadably calm. This had become a part of her daily routine—watching the pink-haired girl train with single-minded focus.

Iris was relentless, devotedly following the rigorous regimen Damon had left behind for her before he disappeared for his end-of-semester evaluation.

Which, as it turned out, had gone disastrously wrong.

Damon and his party were now missing, vanished without a trace.

Normally, the academy would've feared the worst. But the enchanted bracelets they were all issued were still active, and stranger still, their party's point tally continued to climb at an absurd rate with each passing day.

Proof they were alive.

Frustratingly, however, the academy had been unable to trace their location. After exhausting their own efforts, they'd petitioned the Temple for a diviner—only to be met with failure once more.

Lilith sighed just as a raven swooped down beside her, landing gracefully on the outstretched arm of the third girl present. She was pale, with soft white hair and sharp grey eyes. Her expression lit up at the raven's arrival as she downed the contents of a small potion bottle in her other hand.

"Welcome back, Croft," she said softly, smiling at the bird. "Did you happen to find news of my brother?"

The raven gave a shake of its head—timidly, almost apologetically.

Luna chuckled lightly. "It's fine. Damon will come back. He always does."

Iris, her chest rising and falling as she paused from her training, wiped sweat from her brow and turned toward her.

"You say that with so much certainty."

Luna tilted her head, brushing strands of hair behind her ear. "Of course I do. He's not that easy to kill. Although... sometimes the trouble he finds himself in is completely his own fault."

"How so?" Iris asked, frowning.

Lilith smirked. "Because he's an egotistical maniac who doesn't know when to bow his damn head, even when he's completely outmatched."

Luna nodded, almost cheerfully. "Exactly what I wanted to say—but, you know, less cruel. Also, hey! How dare you say mean things about my brother before I did."

Iris let out a small, tired sigh. "So what? There's nothing wrong with having dignity. Self-respect shouldn't only exist when you're strong."

She looked at them both, her tone growing firm. "If you only have an ego when you have the strength to back it, isn't that just cowardice? But having pride when you're weak? That's something I can actually respect."

Lilith and Luna glanced at each other... and then burst out laughing.

"She's just like my brother," Luna said through her giggles. "Birds of a feather really do flock together."

Lilith grinned. "I suppose you're not his apprentice for nothing. But—" she paused, her tone softening, "sometimes, knowing when to lower your head is the wiser path. I just hope Damon learns that someday."

Luna nodded slowly. "He's not a very likable person... but I like him."

Iris scoffed playfully. "Isn't that just because you're his sister?"

Luna gave a light smile. "Fair enough."

Lilith smiled at the sight before her—Luna, finally free from the Healing Institute. Not because she was cured, but because her condition had stabilized. The cost of that stability? Everything Damon had left behind. All twelve million zeni.

An average family in a prosperous empire like Valtheron could survive on about seventy-two thousand zeni a year, covering all their expenses. Luna's medical bills were enough to bankrupt a noble household, yet her brother never once wavered.

'Magic circuit cancer is a chronic illness...'

Lilith had contributed as well. She'd spent a few million on experimental potions, cutting-edge drugs, and had even commissioned a custom-made elixir specifically tailored to Luna's unique physiology. One vial cost several hundred thousand zeni, and Luna had to take them regularly, like clockwork. As for the formula? Lilith had invested close to fifty million just to secure it.

All the funds she had saved to prepare for potential war with the Temple were now gone.

'With that much money, I could've raised an army... Guess I'll have to make Damon pay me back... assuming he's still alive.'

Her plans against the Temple were already in motion. Slowly but surely, she was closing in on the identity of the dark spirit summoner—she could feel the web tightening. Soon, they would be within her grasp.

And then there was her political strategy—seizing control of a small kingdom bordering the empire. A bold move, but calculated. She wanted Damon's input. His twisted perspective, his unpredictable genius... they were partners in crime, after all.

Her thoughts drifted as the two girls continued chatting nearby. There was so much on her plate now...

Thanks to Damon and his missing party, the academy had been thrown into political disarray. Damon might've been a no-name commoner, but the rest of his group? High nobles, each with influence and power.

Their sudden disappearance—with no official explanation—had sparked outrage.

The academy had prepared for this, of course. Every student had signed a waiver acknowledging the possibility of death before the semester exams. But Damon's group had vanished before the exams began.

A legal grey area that the noble families were quick to exploit.

'This is so troublesome.'

She stood up.

Luna and Iris paused their conversation to look her way.

"Where are you going?" Luna asked.

Lilith turned with a small smile, her long red hair catching the wind as it fluttered behind her.

"Maybe you two forgot," she said lightly, "but I'm the student council president. Which means I have meetings to attend."

Luna narrowed her eyes slightly. "Is it about my brother?"

Lilith nodded. "Who else would cause me this much trouble?"

Iris opened her mouth to speak, but Lilith cut her off before she could even try.

"Yes, yes, I'll tell you what it's about—so long as you promise to keep it a secret."

And before either of them could respond, she vanished in a flicker of light, teleporting away and leaving the two younger girls behind.