

Shadow 311

Chapter 311: Old Monster

Lilith once again found herself walking toward yet another noble meeting—because of Damon. Even in his absence, even without his meddling hands cooking up some new scheme, he still found a way to cover the heavens with a single palm. A commoner, and yet somehow, nobles were being forced to move, to react, all because of him.

She stopped in front of the towering grand doors, their engraved surface humming faintly with old enchantments. Slowly, she pulled one open and stepped through. By the time she entered, the two official representatives of the academy were already seated.

The meeting room was vast and silent, the air laced with a faint tension. Several massive crystals stood embedded into the walls—arcane constructs designed for long-distance visual communication, their surfaces still dormant, waiting for activation. The floor gleamed under the chandeliers' soft light, polished to a pristine finish. Classy decorations lined the room: ancient tapestries, gold-framed portraits, and sculptures so lifelike they almost seemed to breathe.

No surprise there. Some of the people they were about to speak with held enough influence that even stepping out of their private domains caused ripples across the political sphere.

She walked toward the two academy representatives. The first was the headmaster, who had only recently returned. Even now, seated calmly, there was something heavy about his presence—a subdued pressure that bent the air around him as if the world itself leaned toward his will.

Lilith recognized that sensation. The weight of someone who stood high on the class advancement hierarchy. His rank surpassed her own, of that there was no doubt.

She bowed slightly in greeting.

The headmaster returned her nod with a composed expression. He appeared middle-aged with a long, well-kept beard and lines of age on his face, though she knew he was centuries old—his vitality preserved by rank, magic, and whatever other secrets the upper class wielded.

Beside him sat Marabel Defontee, an old woman clad in ceremonial mage robes. She too had presence—her aura sharp and refined. She was Fourth Class, one full tier above Lilith.

The old woman offered a quiet nod of acknowledgment.

"Well then," Marabel began, her voice calm and clear, "shall we begin? I apologize for putting you in this position, but... among all the students and faculty, you're the best suited for this meeting."

Lilith returned the nod, though her expression was unreadable. "Is it because I'm the student council president... or because I know Damon Grey quite well?"

The headmaster let out a long, quiet sigh. "Both. He's the only one from a common background in that group. I suspect some of the lords we'll be speaking with today will be quite... curious about him."

"I see..." she said, eyes narrowing. "The others are all known to them—nobles, heirs, names that carry weight. But Damon isn't. So you expect their anger, or their suspicion, to shift onto him. And you want me to manage that fallout."

The headmaster met her gaze. For a moment, something passed between them—acknowledgment, and perhaps even guilt.

"I don't like that," she muttered.

"There's no need for anger," the headmaster said gently. "No harm will come to him. I am still sworn to protect all our students. But... I have a feeling a certain sly someone may take an interest in him."

Lilith frowned. There was something about the way he said it, something she didn't like.

"Who are you talking about?"

The headmaster closed his eyes. "What a small world we live in..."

Lilith's fingers twitched. Rage slowly simmered in her chest, subtle but rising. She glanced toward Marabel.

The old woman met her eyes and let out a sigh.

"Don't look at me like that, dear. I don't know what he's scheming either. But we'll be dealing with a rather troublesome collection of individuals..."

She hesitated, her tone softening. "Damon is a good... he's a... he's a good student."

Lilith's eye twitched. That hesitation hadn't gone unnoticed.

'She was about to say good boy... but stopped herself.'

Even calling him a good student felt like a stretch. Damon Grey, chaos in human form, was anything but ordinary—and now, his shadow stretched into this room too.

Lilith sighed, steadying her breath as she stood in the center of the quiet chamber. She understood her task well enough—keep her guard up, represent the academy, and, if she was lucky, maybe even find a way to turn Damon's chaotic presence into an advantage. Or at the very least, she hoped these powerful nobles wouldn't care enough about some no-name commoner to press the issue.

She frowned. Why would any of them care about him?

The headmaster smiled faintly at her question, but said nothing more.

This old man is too sly for his own good, she thought, watching him with narrowed eyes.

She mentally reviewed the figures involved in today's meeting—every one of them a titan in their own right.

First, there was the father of Leona—a chieftain from the Wild Continent. He was known across nations as the Incarnation of Destruction. His name was Leon, often called the Roaring Gale. A being of pure force and wrath.

Then came Duke Ravenscroft, a high noble from Valtheron. A Duke was always trouble, but worse yet—he was close. Too close for comfort. Lilith had met him only a few times, back when she still accompanied her father to diplomatic gatherings. She remembered him as a quiet but stalwart man, the type whose silence held more weight than most people's words.

Next was a high noble of Norrath, second only to the Crown of Winterhaven. He was Matlock's father, a cold, calculating man whose name was feared in the northern courts. His presence here meant serious eyes were being turned on the academy.

But the one exerting the most pressure—by far—was the Elf King of the Verdant Continent. Sylvia Moonveil's father.

Kadelas Moonveil, The White Ruler.

He was an ancient sovereign whose affection for his daughter bordered on obsession.

Sylvia was his only child, and Lilith knew without a doubt—he would watch the world burn to keep her safe. That he hadn't already declared war was, frankly, a miracle.

'Did his wife find a way to pacify him...?'

From what Lilith's intelligence networks reported, there was only one person he ever truly listened to—his wife. Sylvia's mother. She was his queen, his oracle, and the only one capable of calming the storm that was Kadelas.

The academy had been under immense pressure ever since the incident with Sylvia's possession by a dark spirit, and now... with this? The noose had only tightened.

And then there was the final piece of the puzzle.

Duke Brightwater.

Lilith had met him once, and that single encounter was enough. Everything about the man screamed danger. He was the type who walked through war, not just unscathed, but unchanged. Unbothered. Terrifying in that cold, effortless way.

He reminded her of Damon.

Cassian Brightwater—The Golden Death.

He wore the nickname like a crown, and she feared him for good reason.

She swallowed hard, a pit settling in her stomach.

'I really hope Damon took my warning about Evangeline seriously...'

Because if he got too close to her—even as friends—death would no longer be a distant threat. It would be a certainty.

She took a deep breath, letting the tension coil through her chest.

'Why do I feel like he's not going to care...?'

And then, as if summoned by her thoughts, the room dimmed. The great crystals shimmered to life, their dormant runes now glowing with brilliant azure light. Slowly, the projections formed—faces, regal and grim, flickering into clarity. One by one, the most influential beings in the world of Aetherus appeared before her.

And Lilith stood alone, ready or not, as their eyes turned to her.

Chapter 312: No Name Target

The room suddenly felt heavier, as if the very air had thickened with power. Even though none of them were physically present, their sheer will and presence leaked through the visual communication crystals, pressing down like invisible mountains.

Lilith clenched her fist. This is going to be troublesome...

"Ahhh, this is some good tea... You should try some."

She blinked, glancing to her side. The headmaster, somewhere along the line, had produced a full tea set, complete with steam rising from a porcelain cup.

When did he...?

She gave up trying to understand. Why would I ever expect an old monster like him to be comprehensible?

Across the crystal array, Kadelas Moonveil's icy gaze cut through the silence. The Elf King looked utterly unimpressed, his patience threadbare. His long white hair shimmered faintly with magic as his anger surged.

"That's enough. You've wasted our time long enough. No more stalling. I want an explanation. Where is my daughter?"

Lilith remained silent. This wasn't her place to speak—yet. Not until she was addressed.

The headmaster simply stroked his beard with maddening calm.

"Your daughter? Ahhh, you must mean sweet Sylvia. Why, of course..."

The magic around Kadelas pulsed, his fury barely restrained. The crystal trembled faintly from his leaking power.

The headmaster offered a polite, almost amused smile.

"Careful not to break your communication crystal. These things are quite fragile..."

Before Kadelas could retort, another voice cut in—low and gravelly.

"Calm yourself, King of Elves. Sylvia is not the only one missing. Leona is gone as well. It would behoove us to hear the academy out before pointing fingers."

Leon. The Roaring Gale. His dark hair hung like a black mane over his shoulders, and despite the calm in his voice, there was power behind it—restrained, but unmistakable.

Kadelas took a long breath. He knew it. Fury would gain him nothing here.

"Very well then..." he said tightly.

Lilith studied the beastkin chieftain. He was measured and controlled—far more thoughtful than his daughter, who let her heart steer her more than her head. Then again, Lilith couldn't be sure if that was truly the case or just surface-level perception.

Faldren of Winterhaven looked on, his expression carved from ice.

"If Matlock dies, it is of no consequence. However... I would still prefer he did not."

Cassian Brightwater turned his golden eyes on Faldren with unveiled contempt.

"What kind of parent says that about their own child? Is Matlock not your only son?"

Faldren offered no response, the silence damning in its own right.

Until now, Duke Ravenscroft had been silent, observing the storm from behind folded hands. But at last, the stalwart Aspen Ravenscroft spoke.

"Let us proceed. The longer we waste time here, the greater the danger to our children."

The headmaster gave a slow, respectful nod, his expression finally turning serious.

"Very well then..."

Marabel slowly stood, a small stack of documents clutched in her hands. Her voice was gentle but carried the weight of authority.

"If you would excuse this old lady... ahem," she cleared her throat softly, "as of the start of the semester evaluation, the Academy had intended to train the first-years by giving them real-world experience. An open-world scenario that was meant to last a week. Danger—and even death—was a real possibility, though this particular case strayed far beyond expectations."

She glanced around the room, her expression tight with concern.

"We had planned to teleport the students to various locations across the region. However, a mishap occurred—and the party consisting of Damon Grey, Sylvia Moonveil, Leona Valefier, Evangeline Brightwater, Xander Ravenscroft, and Matlock Faldren... all disappeared."

Cassian's voice cut in sharply, laced with suspicion.

"A mishap... or sabotage?"

Marabel nodded grimly.

"We suspect sabotage."

Lilith felt her heart pound against her ribs. This is where things are going to spiral.

Kadelas narrowed his eyes, voice sharp.

"Could someone be targeting my daughter?"

Leon exhaled with quiet frustration.

"All our children are of high nobility. It could be any of them." He paused, then added, "Though... I've never heard of House Grey."

Marabel nodded. "There isn't one. He's a commoner."

Cassian muttered under his breath, eyes narrowing.

"Grey... a commoner?"

He looked up. "Where is he from?"

Marabel opened her mouth, but Kadelas interrupted with rising anger.

"I don't care where he's from. I want to know who did this. Who was the target?"

The headmaster stroked his beard, his expression unreadable.

"Yes... by all means, it should have been one of your children. You have many enemies—both within and beyond your borders. But this time... that's not the case."

Cassian frowned, his voice laced with disbelief.

"You're telling me the commoner was the target? Someone wanted him dead, and our children were just caught in the crossfire?"

Lilith's chest tightened. Cassian Brightwater—cold and calculating—had drawn his conclusion with terrifying speed.

"Yes," the headmaster said softly. "Someone wanted him dead."

Kadelas clenched his fists, power rippling through the crystal projection.

"You're telling me a lowly commoner was meant to die, and my daughter was dragged into it as collateral damage? Do you know how absurd that sounds?!"

The headmaster only smiled, calm as ever.

Lilith's eyes narrowed. The old monster was sending all of this toward Damon—laying the weight of it at his feet.

Then Aspen Ravenscroft asked the one question that finally mattered.

"Who did it—and why?"

Lilith decided it was time to speak. Her voice cut through the tension.

"A dark spirit summoner."

All eyes turned to her.

"Sylvia Moonveil was possessed by a dark spirit. The summoner had planned to use her body as a vessel to extract its power."

She paused, glancing at the headmaster briefly.

"The spirit in question... was the great spirit Rashi Ignath."

Cassian stared at her, clearly unimpressed.

"I don't see how that's relevant. Or how she even survived."

Lilith nodded.

"It is relevant. She survived because Damon Grey rescued her."

Aspen stroked his chin, his voice calm and thoughtful.

"Must be quite the commoner, if he managed to defeat a dark spirit... Ignath, no less."

The headmaster nodded, casting a look toward Cassian Brightwater.

"Yes, he is. After all, he received a golden ticket from Seras herself... and rose to the top of his class through sheer grit."

Cassian's eyes narrowed, skeptical.

"I see. So, he's connected to that woman."

The headmaster shook his head with a smile.

"No. They've never met. The ticket was something she gave to his parents—his father, Noctis Grey, and his—"

"I don't care who his parents are," Cassian snapped, cutting him off mid-sentence. His hands trembled slightly.

"Enough. Why are we discussing this no-name commoner when we should be getting answers and finding a way to save our wards?"

That final word silenced the room.

The others slowly nodded in agreement. Lilith blinked, momentarily confused by how quickly Cassian had driven the topic away from Damon Grey.

'What... just happened?'

But there was no time to think. The nobles launched accusation after accusation, their voices rising and clashing like swords. The headmaster deflected each with calm precision. Eventually, it was agreed that the missing students were trapped in a death zone—one of the many within the region—but which one remained undetermined.

After hours of tense discussion, the meeting finally adjourned.

Cassian's crystal was the first to flicker out.

He sat alone, his golden eyes cold as the pale light of twin moons bathed his room in silver. The polished opulence of his chair reflected his status—imposing and absolute.

"Jarvis."

A shadow knelt behind him, silent and obedient.

"I want everything. Every detail on the student named Damon Grey."

The shadow disappeared.

Cassian turned to the window, voice a low murmur.

"Damon Grey..."

Chapter 313: House Hunting In The Apocalypse

The city was bleak—its ruined beauty stubbornly endured even amidst the desolation.

A once-great civilization, now reduced to broken architecture and despair.

Shattered spires pierced the sky like jagged bones, their splintered remains stretching upward toward a heavens ripped open by a massive black tear that floated ominously, casting an endless shadow across everything below.

The buildings, twisted and crumbling, leaned like corpses refusing to fall. Abominations crawled through the streets—misshapen horrors of varying sizes, some barely human, others the stuff of nightmares.

Far in the distance, colossal creatures moved without concern, their sheer size rendering all lesser beings beneath them insignificant.

Winged monstrosities soared overhead, occasionally diving to snatch prey from the ground before disappearing into the high towers where they nested.

And among the ruins, mechanical constructs—ancient and hulking—stood as rusted sentinels of a bygone age, humming faintly, speaking to the silence in voices of static and ancient code.

And yet, towering above it all, dominating the desolate skyline, stood a massive crystalline spire.

Its base vanished into the earth, its peak stretching so far upward it seemed to pierce the sky itself. Cracks webbed across its surface, glowing faintly like old scars. It was distant—so very distant—yet its sheer size made it feel oppressively near.

Damon took a deep breath, letting the thick air fill his lungs as he gazed at the ruined landscape bathed in grey daylight.

"Take it in, guys," he said with a small smile.

"You're standing in the heart of greatness... this was once the place where all legends were forged."

"I'd rather be anywhere else right now..." Evangeline muttered, crossing her arms, clearly unimpressed by Damon's attempt to romanticize the ruin.

Her eyes scanned the looming city with a quiet unease.

How could she not be worried? They were stranded in a place infested with monsters, forced to navigate a dead city in search of a functioning waypoint—or worse, cross all the way to the opposite side of the ruins.

Sylvia folded her arms under her cloak, her expression calm but sharp.

"A waypoint in this mess won't be easy to find," she murmured.

"But Lysithara was built with many. If any still work, the safest bet is to head toward the old gate on the other side."

Xander exhaled and dropped onto a broken statue base, running a hand through his hair.

"Assuming we survive long enough to get there..."

Matia turned toward Damon, her expression stern.

"What's the plan?"

Damon coughed, glancing around as if he could improvise one from the shattered cityscape alone.

"The plan? Of course..."

Leona raised a brow, her greatsword resting lazily on her shoulder.

"You don't have a plan, do you? You didn't even think we'd make it this far."

"Pfft... don't be ridiculous, Leona. You're always jumping to conclusions," Damon shot back with a grin. "I have a plan."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes.

"Then let's hear it."

Damon's grip tightened slightly on the cursed sword slung across his back—the one he'd earned after slaying the Mist Knight.

Devouring the creature had granted him a fragment of its skill. Swordsmanship Lv2. That alone gave him a little more confidence than he probably deserved.

He grinned.

"First, we secure shelter. Something defensible. Then we map out the immediate region, locate a waypoint, and teleport out of here. Flawless plan, if I do say so myself."

Sylvia chuckled, shaking her head.

"I can already see the many, many ways we die horribly."

Damon waved a hand.

"Don't be so grim. Death might be the better fate here."

Leona stared up at the sky, the shadow of the black rift drifting lazily in the distance.

She smiled.

"We actually did it. We made it to Lysithara. Honestly, this feels like a dream... maybe it is a dream. Someone punch me."

Bang.

Before she could even finish her sentence, Damon's fist connected squarely with her jaw. The smack echoed briefly in the open square.

Everyone stared at him, stunned.

He shrugged.

"What? She asked for it."

Xander looked at him in open disgust.

"What kind of man punches a woman?"

Damon chuckled.

"The kind that respects her wishes."

Leona groaned and rubbed her face, standing back up with a crooked smile.

"Huh. I'm not dreaming... was hoping this was just a bad nightmare. But I guess it's real."

Damon looked over at Evangeline, his smirk softening into something more sincere.

"I think the poor thing's delusional. Thought she could escape without us, didn't she?"

Evangeline sighed, brushing a lock of hair from her face.

"I know we're all feeling good about surviving, but we need to move. This place... gives me the creeps."

Xander leaned on his spear, scanning the distance with narrowed eyes.

"Which part, exactly? This whole place feels like Damon's twisted imagination come to life."

Damon's grin widened.

"If I made this, I'd have trapped you here alone."

Sylvia exhaled and adjusted the strap on her bag.

"Let's just go. I'm not eager to stay out here in the open..."

Damon nodded, gazing out over the vast ruins. Despite the destruction, many structures remained surprisingly intact. The houses, though weathered, still stood—some even looked livable.

"Did I ever tell you guys I dreamed of living in a mansion?" he asked, voice laced with a strange sort of longing.

Evangeline glanced at him calmly.

"No... not that I remember."

He lifted the cursed sword he'd claimed from the Mist Knight, its dark edge still humming with residual energy.

"Well, I did. One of the perks of living on the street is seeing and hating those who live in beautiful houses..."

Leona looked at him, one brow raised.

"That's sad—and kinda dark... no wonder you turned out so edgy."

She smashed her gauntlet-covered fist together, sparks of lightning dancing between her knuckles.

"Let's go get you a mansion, then."

Her teasing tone reached him loud and clear. Damon couldn't help but remember how she'd forced her way into his life—insisting on being his friend even when he wanted nothing to do with anyone.

And now here she was, seriously ready to risk her life to fulfill some childish dream of his. Honestly, even a run-down house would've been enough... just a place to rest.

Sylvia gave a soft smile.

"Let's get one with a shower... ehm—not because I stink or anything. I just prefer a shower."

Evangeline nodded with a trace of warmth. "I concur."

Matia raised her hand, eyes gleaming.

"I want a fireplace. This city looks like it'd get cold at night."

Damon smiled and turned toward Xander, who had been unusually quiet. The young man sighed, slinging his spear over his shoulder.

"If there's a powerful monster in there and we die... I'll haunt you guys. It better have a courtyard for training."

The others chuckled lightly. Damon, now clad in the battered armor of Pale Crown, lifted the cursed sword high, its cracked edge reflecting the bleak daylight.

"Alright, let's go house hunting... in a post-apocalyptic city crawling with monsters way out of our league—"

"And rot," Sylvia added, brushing dust from her light armor.

Chapter 314: Strange Face, From A Familiar Place

The city had once been paved and beautiful... or at least, it must have been. Now, the streets were cracked and uneven, worn down by time and ruin. Towering houses lined the road, their shattered windows casting glints of broken glass across the dusty pavement.

The sun hung high over the outskirts of the bleak city, casting long shadows over Lysithara's forgotten remains.

Damon could hear the distant shuffling of monsters moving through the streets, just out of sight—watching. Low-level beasts, no different than his own party in rank... scavengers, clinging to survival in the ruins of a once-great city.

These creatures weren't attacking yet. That was good—for them. Because had they tried, they'd already be dead.

Damon's party had faced far worse than stragglers like these. To them monsters like these, weren't the hunters. They were prey.

Still, that didn't mean they wouldn't attack. For now, they chose to observe. Waiting. Watching.

Leona, her hand resting on her sword's hilt, glanced at the cracked remains of a window.

"Should we just kill them?" she asked, her tone calm but cold.

Damon shook his head, rubbing his shoulder with an irritated expression.

"No... it's not worth wasting our strength."

Sylvia walked ahead, bow in hand, her expression tired but collected.

"At this point, we should be used to being watched by monsters. At least here we have the power to kill them if we want to."

Matia nodded in agreement.

"The monsters we dealt with before were way worse... the kind that could kill you just by being seen."

Evangeline didn't want to remember the things they'd encountered in the Whispering Forest.

"Or drive you insane... just by being near them," she muttered, glancing at Damon as he scratched absently at his shoulder.

"I'm not even sure we're still sane," she added. "Why else would we be looking for a mansion in a ruined city?"

Xander sighed, hoisting his spear over his shoulder.

"That was my point exactly. But we're already here—might as well get that mansion."

Damon flinched slightly as a small sting pricked at his shoulder.

"It matters now, doesn't it?" he muttered under his breath.

Silence followed. Not because there was nothing left to say—but because the city seemed to demand it. Every step felt like it echoed too loudly. They didn't want to draw attention.

"What do you think actually caused this city to fall?" Sylvia finally asked, her voice cutting through the heavy silence.

Damon looked up at the ruins around them.

"Who knows. Hubris, maybe... Lysithara was the heart of the ancient world. Civilization's center. It was where knowledge converged. Even now—who knows how many thousands of years later—it's still mentioned in books."

The group fell quiet. The light-hearted tone they'd started with had long since faded. The weight of history—of death—pressed down on them.

"Do you think we'll make it back home... I mean..." Leona's voice was soft, almost afraid to ask. It was the question they'd all avoided since stepping foot in the final stretch of their journey.

Damon nodded. He wanted to tell them he didn't know. That he didn't have all the answers. That he was just like them—just another student caught in something far beyond his depth. But he couldn't say that. He couldn't afford to show weakness—not here, not now.

"Yes, we will. We'll find a waypoint and teleport out—or maybe even a gate. This city's massive. It has to have one."

Evangeline clenched her fist.

"And if we don't?"

"Then we cross to the other side of the city," Damon replied without hesitation, eyes sharp. "Kill everything in our way and get out. Home's just one wall away."

He gave them a small smile, tired but resolute.

"We made it this far, didn't we? We'll be fine."

A rasping voice echoed out from the shadows, just past the broken stone archway up ahead.

"Ahhh... don't be so sure about that, boy."

Damon froze when he heard the strange voice. He instantly drew his weapon, and the party shifted into a battle-ready formation, eyes scanning their surroundings with quiet tension.

His gaze swept across the area. They were on the outskirts of the city—old, crumbling houses with shattered windows stood like gravestones around them. Withered trees reached skeletal branches into the sky, a broken fountain sat dry in the center, surrounded by collapsed market stalls. It was a wreckage of what once might've been a thriving place.

"Over here..." the voice called again, strained with pain. "I'm right here..."

Damon turned in the direction of the sound but saw only a tree. His danger sense was active—sharp and instinctual—but oddly enough, there was no warning, no pulse of incoming threat... at least not from that direction.

He tilted his head slightly—and what he saw made his stomach twist.

There was someone, or at least something that once resembled a person—its body half-fused with the thick roots of the tree. It hung grotesquely from the bark, flesh torn and half-eaten, skin decayed and sloughing away. Bones jutted from open wounds, organs hung loosely, tangled like ropes. The limbs were stretched and unnatural, grotesque in shape.

"Turn back... turn back..." the creature rasped. "He is here... he will find you... turn back... but please—kill me... free me from this torment..."

Damon raised his sword, voice steady.

"Who are you... what are you?"

The voice that came back was hollow, like wind through a tomb.

"W...who... am I...? I don't... remember..."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes. She'd noticed something tucked within the bark-infused fabric of the creature's chest—an emblem, partially swallowed by the tree.

"You're... part of the Imperial Knights... are you from Valtheron?"

The man groaned, trying to lift his head. As he did, skin tore from bark with a sickening rip. A tear fell from one lifeless eye.

"Valtheron... I... I am from Valtheron... ahh... please... kill me... kill me... make it stop... please..."

The rest of the party stood in uneasy silence.

He was from Valtheron. Just like them.

And yet he had ended up like this—a cursed existence, suspended between death and life, pain without end.

Damon looked at the roots coiled beneath the tree. They pulsed faintly, feeding the poor soul. Keeping him alive. Just enough to keep suffering.

Sylvia took a step forward, but Damon quickly grabbed her wrist, pulling her back with a firm grip.

"Careful. We can't trust anything here... remember the Beldam?"

She nodded silently, then opened her skill. She wanted to confirm if the man spoke the truth—she was sure Damon had more questions, and he'd want answers.

"I'll free you from this torment," Damon said, lowering his blade slightly. "But first... a few questions."

The man began to silently weep.

"T-Thank you... thank you..."

Damon's voice remained calm, steady.

"Don't thank me yet."

"You're from Valtheron... so that means you must've been part of the expedition unit—sent here under a clandestine mission..."

The man's eyes trembled, pain flickering in the dull glow of his half-rotted sockets.

"I... I don't remember... I..."

Damon's expression darkened.

"Who did this to you?"

The man shivered violently. Even in his twisted state, fear bloomed in his chest. Damon could feel it—it wasn't just terror... it was dread. The kind that settled into your soul. The kind that made men go mad.

He took in a deep, raspy breath. For a moment, the world fell into a deep, deathly quiet.

Then, in a whisper as frail as cracked glass—

"The Keeper of False Truths..."

Chapter 315: Unwinnable Game

The Keeper of False Truths...

Saying that name aloud made the air feel heavier. Damon felt a subtle shift in the armor of Pale Crown—it reacted, ever so slightly, to the mention of that cursed title.

This wasn't the first time he had heard it. The Beldam was the first to mention it... She had claimed he was the city lord of Lysithara, before rot and corruption had swallowed the city whole—twisting its citizens into nightmares and mockeries of flesh.

The one who had once worn the Pale Crown armor... had fallen just like the others. And in his fall, he became the Keeper of False Truths.

Damon was certain now—he still lurked within Lysithara's ruined walls. Even in his corruption, the city lord lamented his once-glorious kingdom.

"Why did the Keeper of False Truths do this to you...?" Sylvia's voice cut through the silence.

Though fear lingered in her eyes, curiosity burned brighter. She needed to know—perhaps more than she feared the answer.

The man—no, the thing—merged with the tree gave a twisted, hoarse laugh. There were tears in his eyes, tears and madness.

His laughter boomed with despair, the kind that echoed from some pit of torment no sane mind could endure.

"Heh... ha... hahah... why did... why didn't I just choose death...? Why—why did I answer... why did I choose to answer... ahhhh! Why?! Why! I—I just want to die... please... kill me..."

His arms tore from the bark with a sickening rip—flesh half-decayed and fused to wood gave way, revealing blood and rotted bone. They all watched, frozen in quiet horror. He had once been human. Like them.

"I will free you," Damon said softly, stepping forward, sword held still. "I will kill you. But only if you answer my questions."

The creature stilled. His eyes, wet with blood and tears, flickered with a fleeting clarity.

"I... want to go home..." he whispered. "I want to go home... Why did I join... why did I become a knight...? Why... why did I fight their wars... why did I seek glory...?"

His voice broke.

"Hahaha... glory is a lie... glory is a lie..."

He clutched his head, trembling.

"The Imperial Family... Ashcroft... why did they send us to search for Ashcroft...? He's not even real... why did my comrades have to face that horror...?"

His words dissolved into broken sobs and wild, meaningless sounds. He thrashed, body writhing and screaming in madness—his form neither man nor tree, covered in decay, dripping with blood and sap. For how many decades had he been like this? How many years of torment?

Even the silence felt sick.

Damon stood still. Calm. He did not flinch, and neither did the others. They had all seen too much. They had grown numb to horror.

Sylvia stepped closer, a trace of pity in her eyes. Even Damon—despite all he had endured—couldn't help but silently lament the pain this soul had suffered.

Time passed. Minutes, maybe. His body finally slumped, mouth agape, silent. The bark and flesh of his grotesque form slick with blood.

Then... he raised his head.

"I remember..."

His voice was hoarse, but clear.

"I remember... we didn't find anything related to Ashcroft's return. He had been here—in the distant past—but he would not return. Not here."

His eyes dimmed. A bitter chuckle escaped him.

"We found some clues... fragments of why Lysithara had fallen."

He swallowed, or tried to, his whole form shaking.

"Many of us were lost. Only a handful remained. We wanted to leave the city... through the Black Gate on the other side."

A tear fell, mixing with blood on his cheek.

"We thought we could leave... until he came from the mist..."

"The Keeper of False Truths."

He closed his eyes, blood dripping from his chin.

"He didn't attack us. No... he only asked us... to play a game."

A tremor went through the tree. Through him.

"Moromer... refused," he groaned. "His refusal... was against the rules."

He opened his eyes, wide and broken.

"So he died."

Damon's heart thundered in his chest.

He lowered his head, a soft, bitter chuckle escaping his blood-caked lips.

"He... would not allow those who entered his city uncorrupted... to leave without playing his game... without answering the riddle that torments him."

His head slowly tilted back, eyes staring blankly into the bleak, grey sky above—like he was seeking something that was no longer there.

"Those who failed the questions... were damned."

Xander swallowed hard. The sound of his gulp echoed too loud in the hollow silence.

The man turned to them—his rotted face half-consumed by bark, his chest rising with labored effort. One eye stared with human grief, the other clouded with rot.

"It's too late for you now..." he rasped. "You cannot leave... not without playing his game. But beware..."

His voice cracked with finality.

"His riddle has no answer... you are damned... as well."

Damon clenched his fists, veins pressing tight beneath his skin. That did not bode well. Not at all.

The man's gaze turned sharp—piercing, almost desperate.

"If he finds you... when he finds you—he will find you—you must not play. Choose death. Die."

Their faces turned pale, blood draining from them like retreating tides. Even Damon couldn't hide the tremor of dread creeping through him.

"How do we avoid him...?" Damon asked, his voice low.

The man's voice was fragile now—fading, like a candle in a storm.

"He is inevitable... If you see him within the city... do not listen to his words. That may buy you time. But... that won't work when you try to leave. He will not allow it... not until you answer."

Sylvia bit her lip, drawing blood. "What is his riddle?" she asked, her voice trembling despite herself.

The man's decayed lungs wheezed, struggling.

"It's a game... with simple rules. Two questions... only two..."

He swallowed a mouthful of blood.

"The Keeper... asks you to play. These are the rules:

—You must play the game.

—Refuse... and you die.

—Fail to pass... and you are damned.

—You must answer both questions correctly.

—You may not delay the game indefinitely.

—Pass... and you receive a reward. Safe passage through Lysithara.

—You may play as an individual... or as a group.

—You get only one lifeline. Fail again, and it's the end.

—The answer to the first question must not be the same as the second.

— You must pass the second question."

He looked at them with hollow eyes, red tears running down his wooden cheek.

"The First Question..."

"I can only exist when I am not. I am always true and always false. What am I?"

His body shuddered—roots cracking beneath him.

"The Second Question..."

"What happens when an unstoppable force... meets an immovable object?"

His head dropped, as though the weight of the words alone had broken him.

"Now... the game begins..."

Damon's jaw clenched as he turned toward Sylvia. She was already looking at him, her white hair catching the dull light, her fingers trembling. She had come to the same conclusion.

The others were silent—staring at one another, confused, pale. They hadn't grasped the nature of what had just been spoken.

This game was deceptive.

The first question—there was hope in it. An answer could be found... perhaps something philosophical, or paradoxical. But the second...

Damon's breath caught in his chest.

The second question had no answer. It was the very definition of paradox. It was the trap.

"This isn't a game anyone can win..." he muttered under his breath.

Chapter 316: Never Forget A Name

Pain spread through Damon's body, his arm felt numb and stiff. Even so, he endured the pain just long enough to summon Ashborn...

The shadow-like flames licked up from his hand, writhing as if alive. They surged forth and engulfed the figure before him—a man who had become more tree than flesh, long lost to the rot. The flames clung to him, seeping into bark and bone, freeing him from his eternal torment in a blaze of silent mercy.

Damon had wanted to ask more questions, but the man's mind had strayed too far after revealing the Keeper's hopeless game. He'd rambled—senseless words spilled from cracked lips, muttering fragments of a poem... a song known in Valtheron.

The melody was soaked in homesickness. It bled from his voice—low, shaking, and deeply familiar. A feeling they all shared, having been trapped for so long in this nightmare... in this ruined city.

But his voice was soon lost, devoured by the cackling flames that feasted on both body and soul.

A small sigh escaped Damon's lips as the man's voice faded...

"Take me home... to a place... I belong..."

Take me home... to a place steel was made...

Take me home to the hearth... of the sword...

Take me home to the land..."

He never finished the last line. Just as the final word died in his throat, Damon heard the familiar soft chime in his head.

[You have slain: Damned Knight Melos]

[You have gained: 50 Attribute Points]

[You have gained Mastery: Swordsmanship +50]

Damon lowered his head.

He was no stranger to suffering—but this... this was twisted. Crueler than the mundane tortures he had seen while running with the gangs in Valerion.

Evangeline lowered her gaze, her eyes reflecting the flickering flames.

"Take me home... to the place I belong...

Take me home... to the land of knight...

Take me to the high skies..."

The others turned toward her, silent. Xander opened his mouth and joined her softly.

"Take me to where rivers never end...

Take me to the..."

Their voices were fragile, low, but one by one, they all joined in—an unspoken memorial for the knight who had been lost to the rot.

Damon looked up at the bleak, grey sky. His voice came as a whisper.

"Take me to the place I will lay my bone, part of the blessed dust... where steel finds rest..."

It wasn't a national anthem. Not something official. Just a song. A song everyone in Valtheron seemed to know.

"Here and now..." Damon's voice was quiet.

The others stood in still silence, watching the last embers as Ashborn finished its work—turning both man and tree to ash.

"Lysithara isn't the most welcoming place... but he can rest," Damon muttered. "Here and now belongs to us. Our fate is rot or death..."

Xander nodded. "A shame we didn't know his name... when we return, we could've at least given his family or any relative closure..."

Damon could already think of a dozen reasons why that was a bad idea. He wasn't sentimental enough to ignore what had brought the knight here in the first place.

The man was on a secret mission, likely sent by the Imperial family. It was better not to know who he really was... even so—

Damon now knew his name.

Melos.

The system had revealed it to him, as it always did.

Not surprising. The system had come from the Unknown God—and that god was said to be the one who blessed names.

A god who knew the name of every being and thing.

'Then what about me... why do I know the names of everyone I kill...'

Was this his curse? Was he damned to remember them all?

Even now, Damon hadn't forgotten a single name the system had whispered into his ear...

He didn't know what purpose the Unknown God had in the world of Aetherus—but deep in his gut, Damon had a feeling that here in Lysithara...

He'd find some answers.

The Unknown God had been setting up different pieces on his board... Lilith was a piece—she bore the god's stigmata. Damon was another, with his unusual shadow and a system that demanded souls. Then there was Sylvia's journey book—a tool belonging to the Unknown God.

He turned to his friends.

"Let's go... it's almost dark. Let's get to that mansion... I don't want to find out what this city looks like at night..."

The others all silently nodded.

They walked for a few minutes. The entire journey was uneventful—no creature attacked them. Maybe it was because they were still in the outskirts, or maybe it was because they were actively avoiding confrontation with the monsters.

Still, the signs of past battles were everywhere.

They passed through remnants of older times—traces of ruins, forgotten belongings, and corpses from different eras. Most had turned to bone, brittle and dry. Others crumbled into pieces at the slightest touch.

The city felt like a hollow monument. A bleak, ruined beauty.

Not far ahead, they found a mansion.

It wasn't particularly large—more of a big house than a true mansion. But Damon seemed satisfied.

The others, born into blue-blooded families with wealth and lineage, saw it as a modest residence. Nothing special. But none of them wanted to spoil Damon's small joy. In the middle of this apocalyptic wasteland, even a house like this felt like a miracle.

They stood at the front gate of the so-called mansion. Calling it "ruined" would've been unfair—it was in relatively good condition. A large yard stretched before them, guarded by a wide, barred gate.

Damon smiled, cursed sword in one hand, the other resting over his shoulder.

Evangeline looked at his shoulder with a hint of worry.

"We found a nice mansion... this place looks absolutely safe... in fact, I don't even sense any danger..."

"This is different. The best place to be... oh, there's no monsters in there at all..."

As soon as he said that, a large tentacle burst out of one of the mansion windows with a shriek that echoed like metal scraping stone.

He coughed slightly, eyes flicking to their deadpan expressions.

"Well, who needs a mansion anyway... I like that run-down house more..."

Sylvia smiled faintly, her journey book floating in front of her, pages shifting on their own.

"That is called a Lesser Metaverse Worm... it's only at the first rank..."

Damon stared at them, his face a perfect picture of indignation.

"I hate when pests get in my house... let's kill it..."

Chapter 317: Slow Acting Consequences

Knowing the monster they were about to face was in the same rank as them gave them some confidence... they could hardly think of a monster within the same rank they couldn't kill.

Even so, they had learned caution from their days in the Whispering Forest. Most monsters in death zones were not like typical monsters—they were eldritch.

Some rules might not even apply to them... one mistake could mean death.

Luckily, they had a seer in the group.

Sylvia had already gotten a map of the mansion and had determined there was only one monster.

Leona poked at the copy Sylvia had created using a magic quill they had gotten from the Beldam's Nest.

"Hey, if you can create a map of the mansion, why not the whole city..."

Sylvia sighed... "Thanks, Leona, I'm glad I didn't think of that..."

Leona looked away. "You're being sarcastic, right..."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Obviously... think I didn't try that? I can't pay the price for the map of the city..."

Damon looked at her. "What's the price..."

Sylvia lowered her head a bit... "It's not a short-term price... just my ability to have children in the future. So basically, I'll be barren..."

Damon nodded. That was a horrible price for a map they could probably get from a city library or one of the abandoned shops.

Leona scratched her chin. "Sorry... I asked."

"It's fine... if I don't ask something, it's probably because the price is too steep. Ever since the incident in the forest, this skill has changed. It now tells me some things for free and gives me the details of the price, rather than just taking... basically, I get a choice..."

Damon nodded. "Didn't you get that before..."

She shook her head. "No. Only a vague feeling..."

Evangeline sighed. "That's enough... about that. Before we discuss how to kill whatever is in there... Damon, how has your arm been feeling..."

Damon shrugged. "I only got stabbed by a cursed sword. No big deal... I'm only slowly losing feeling in my arm..."

Evangeline bit her lip. "My purge skill didn't work..."

She had tried to heal him, her skill seemed to work. Sadly all it did was delay the spread of the curse.

The curse was tied to his soul, she didn't have the finesse to reach it without obliterating his soul.

"No, it did. It's not spreading to my body—just my arm. That's a success in my book... worst case, I lose an arm..."

Matia bit her lip, feeling her heart twist. "I'm sorry..."

Damon looked at her, a bit confused.

"Why are you sorry..."

She pulled clenched her fist, a small chill spreading from her armor.

"It's my fault. If I hadn't suggested for you to take the knight's sword, he wouldn't have stabbed you..."

Damon sighed, smacking Matia on the back.

"It's my fault... I said don't be careless but was careless myself. An arm will teach me never to let my guard down even when I think the enemy is dead."

Matia lowered her head. "But still—"

"But nothing," Damon cut her off. He glanced at Sylvia.

"Shall we... kill a worm..."

She nodded. "Its body can phase out of our reality... its heart is stored in silk cocoons in its nest... so unless you destroy the body beyond repair, it won't die... it can teleport, control space..."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes. "Basically a space attribute fighter..."

Xander crossed his arms. "So destroy the heart. Easy enough..."

Damon clenched his fist around the cursed sword... soon he might lose the use of his right arm. The journey here had cost him something after all... no potion could fix him—he had tried. There was also a possibility he could gain a mastery that gave him resistance to curses....but he hadn't gotten any notifications from the system.

'Well, no matter... I'll just have to adapt... when the time comes...'

For now, he still had his arm... He walked up to the mansion gate...

He looked at the bars. The gate was slightly ajar... he held his sword, his party in formation. Slowly, they entered the mansion yard.

This place had once been elegant—now the land was surrounded by ruin. The grass was green, yet uncared for, having grown long and spreading onto the mansion pavement and walls.

The statues were covered in moss with faint, dying runes—most had long since lost their magic.

'Lysithara seems to have a lot of magic runes... the runes are inscribed almost everywhere...'

Which was a contrast from Valtheron of the present day. Having runes was luxurious. Runesmiths and artificers were highly regarded.

In fact, those who awakened the class related to runesmithing were well-regarded... even if it was a common class.

'A shame the knowledge of runes is hard to come by...'

He walked closer to the door... when he reached it, he heard a buzzing sound.

Biometric authentication not recognized...

He heard the voice from a small display on the door.

"What's that..."

Sylvia looked at it with some curiosity.

"A relic of Lysithara... their magic technology was more advanced. It requires a recognized magic signature..."

Damon nodded, realizing he couldn't get in. The owner of the mansion was long dead—getting the right biometric signature was impossible.

"No worries... I have the biometric signature right here..."

He then proceeded to kick down the door of the mansion. With a boom, the door caved in on itself, swinging open.

He scoffed. "What do you know... it wasn't even locked..."

Evangeline sighed. "And it seems the worm also knows we're here..."

Xander looked up into a world of pulsing white silk. A horrible worm-like creature with many tentacles and mouths filled with rounded teeth stared at them. The mansion was bright enough for the outside light to slip through parts of the windows the silk hadn't covered up.

"A little hard to sneak in with that many eyes watching..."

Matia looked up at the ceiling full of cocoons.

"I had a feeling finding the heart wouldn't be easy..."

Chapter 318: The Worms House

Fighting hideous-looking creatures was now a norm for them—but even they had to admit this was one of the uglier ones.

Many tentacles and heads... and a slimy body coated in some strange mucus...

Damon sighed.

"I really don't want to break my house... so burn..."

Black flames erupted from his hand and covered the ceiling of the mansion. The worm groaned, space twisting subtly... as the flames disappeared into some unknown void.

Damon blinked, completely surprised. Ashborn was one of his stronger skills—hell, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it his strongest. Yet some worm, in the same rank, had sent the flames—both hot and cold—into some other space.

His surprise didn't last long before a volley of arrows flew at it.

Sylvia's white arrows—powered from her Ascendant weapon—rained down on the worm.

Her armor was called Crescent Seer. It came with a bow and dual blades—however, not as individual weapons. The bow was collapsible into two blades if needed.

Damon heard the worm shriek as it fired a ball of pulsing silk.

He couldn't help but feel jealous about not having an Ascendant weapon with his armor—but that was fine.

He had a Alazard's-cursed sword.

The mansion broke into a canopy of violence. The worm was spread all over the grand entrance, so the party split up, attacking different parts of it.

Damon held the sword in his hand.

His swordsmanship had grown drastically thanks to Mastery. He could absorb the skills of the enemies he killed—or fought.

He had also imitated the skills of the Mist Knights. Alazard.

He'd gotten the skills of the Valtheron knight who was damned by the Keeper.

Which meant—within his mind and body holding different sword skills—all he needed was the experience to perfect and grow them.

Right now, his swordsmanship was Lv2.

He stood unmoving, tentacles rapidly shooting toward him.

His eyes opened—he swung the sword with deadly finesse. Without moving a single step, he imitated the skills of the Mist Knight.

He created a small area within his sword's reach. Any tentacle that crossed into the invisible circle in his mind was sliced to pieces.

He felt his body heating up—he sent mana into his sword, making it sharper.

The worm shrieked in pain. It was bombarded from every angle.

Evangeline unleashed a purging glow of golden light, illuminating the entire mansion.

Her eyes were focused on Damon.

She clicked her tongue, swinging her rapier at a tentacle.

"I swear, the next time he tells me he has no talent for the sword just to avoid sparring with me... I'll kill him..."

Matia and Sylvia were doing their own part. They had one objective—and that was to find the cocoon hiding the worm's heart and destroy it.

Sylvia was using her skill, while Matia was in charge of protecting her with her arsenal of ever-changing weapons.

Xander was a little farther off, with Leona acting as the vanguard of their offensive.

His spear smashed the heads of the metaverse worm with relative ease.

Gravity around him distorted, causing the ground to tremble.

"This thing kinda reminds me of something..."

Leona teleported with the enchantment of Stormwake, her body unleashing bolts of lightning.

"What..."

He pulverized a head with his armored fist.

"Damon..."

Leona really didn't have a response for that. Was he insinuating Damon was like a worm, or was he trying to say he was resilient and always got back up?

She opened her mouth to ask—but his helm-covered face turned to respond before she even said a word.

"Both. I mean both."

She teleported to the old chandeliers, cutting them down along with a few cocoons.

"I didn't even say anything... yet."

Xander grabbed the chandelier mid-air and smashed it into the face of the worm—or one of its faces.

"You didn't need to."

Damon turned into a shadow, diving between the tentacles about to overwhelm him with sheer numbers... he was improving, but not yet at the level of the mist knight—he only got a part of his skill...

He turned back into human form, the alien feeling of being a formless shadow disappeared...

"Well, that's fine... I still want to try a few more things..."

He raised his fingers. Now that he was in the first class advancement, he could increase the output of his magic bullets... he had already learned how to make them more muted in noise...

Now he wanted more range and damage...

He unleashed a blast from his fingers...

"No... that won't work. More is more... I have five fingers..."

He opened his palm, spread around his finger phalanges... small balls of shadow mana formed and shot at the tentacles, creating a slash of green blood and flesh...

He narrowed his eyes. "Now... faster."

Slowly, rapid bang sounds began to fill the mansion until they fused into one loud hum... he felt his bones groan... his hand was red...

He stopped with a sigh.

"Almost there..."

"Shjjoosodo..."

The worm didn't like the pain being inflicted on its body. It pulled back its many heads and formed a single mass of folded heads and tentacles... the space which had been filled by its massive body was now clear, only dulled with silk and ruin...

Damon looked at the others... his eyes stopping on Sylvia...

"Did you find the cocoon it hides its heart in?"

She nodded, pointing at the center of the metaverse worm.

"Yes, it's hidden right in all that mass of tentacles..."

Damon nodded... looking at Evangeline.

"Do you mind... giving us some light..."

She muttered bitterly. "I'm not a human light bulb..."

She closed her eyes, gathering her mana for one attack...

He glanced at Leona and Matia.

"Make it rain, Leona..."

She smiled coldly.

"Say less."

Storm clouds filled the room... water began to pour as Leona's mana was absorbed at an alarming rate...

The water was mostly harmless—the worm merely shrugged it off as Xander and Damon trapped it and prevented it from spreading...

Matia raised her hand, creating a spear-shaped weapon... she poured her mana into it... the air went frigid...

"Freeze... over..."

She launched her ice spear at the metaverse worm—right at the center of the writhing mass of heads and tentacles... the water made her magic spread easily, creating a moment of frost. The magic of the worm weakened for a moment as it slowed down.

Which was what Damon wanted... he didn't need to freeze the whole thing—just where the heart was hidden...

He glanced at Evangeline... she opened her eyes—the room was illuminated by a false, fierce, destructive light that sought to purify everything...

"Shhhkjskjsknnsksk..."

The worm hissed as the golden light washed over it... Damon slowly opened his eyes, free from the harsh light... it took him a moment to regain his sight fully...

When he looked at where the worm was, he only saw a mass of scorched tentacles...

Its center was gone—and so was part of the mansion wall, which had a gaping hole...

He glanced at Evangeline, who was on her knees taking deep breaths...

"Woman, you broke my house... we just moved in, dammit..."

Xander sighed, removing his helm.

"Does someone need to remind this lunatic this isn't his house... if anything, I think the worm owns it..."

Chapter 319: House Cleaning

Damon had a fabric tied around his head, holding a broom. Never in a million years did he think he'd be cleaning a mansion... in the middle of a death zone.

The worm was dead, leaving behind only a few twitching tentacles. Once again, Damon opted to get rid of the corpse. But to avoid suspicion, he let them see only part of the truth—how he reduced bodies to ash using Ashborn.

He couldn't exactly show them how he devoured monsters with his shadow.

Afterward, they'd taken a tour of the mansion. Other than some scattered bones and decayed furniture, they didn't find anything.

No monsters.

No ghosts.

And worst of all—no treasure.

That last one hurt Damon the most.

He bit his lip.

"The owners of this mansion must've been poor... Next time, I'll get a castle. A magic castle..."

The more he thought about it, the more pleasant it sounded. Evangeline, who was holding a mop and bucket, sighed as she glanced at him.

"Your love for material things is gonna get us killed before any monster does, isn't it?"

Damon sneered. "I don't expect—"

"—someone rich to get it, I know," she cut in flatly. "You've said that a billion times. You're poor. We get it. But if I find out you're some secret heir to a billion zeni fortune, you'll never hear the end of it."

Damon scoffed, wiping sweat from his brow.

"My father was born into poverty. In fact, he inherited it—just like his father before him."

She tilted her head. "What about your mother, then?"

Damon shrugged. "Who knows? She was probably rich. Had a fancy portrait with her brother or something... I even have it with me. Been carrying it as a good luck charm."

Evangeline glanced around at the dusty ruin they were stuck cleaning. They'd survived goblins, war trolls, eldritch horrors in cursed mountains, nearly been wyvern food, stumbled through haunted forests, and nearly got devoured by a beldam... again and again.

"I think—wait. How long have you been wearing that thing?"

Damon pulled out his mother's locket. "This thing? Umm... since the semester evaluation started."

Evangeline gave a bitter smile. What a coincidence.

"Isn't that also when our luck took a nosedive?"

Damon looked at her... then at the locket.

"Pfft. I guess so. Now that I think about it, my little sister also got an incurable disease after she started wearing this..."

His head lowered slightly, eyes distant.

"Maybe... my mother's heirloom is actually cursed. I should've let it get buried with her..."

The mood suddenly shifted. Evangeline blinked, caught off guard by the weight of his words.

"S-So that thing has a portrait inside? Wow... I'd love to see it. Actually... now that I think about it, my grandfather has a ring made of a similar-looking material."

Damon glanced at her. "Erm... sure, but I can't open it easily. You need a luminous magic attribute to unlock it. If I use mine, it'd take forever."

She raised her hand, summoning a small orb of glowing light.

"Well, you're in luck. I happen to be a walking light bulb."

Damon gave her a long look, then nodded. "Okay."

Evangeline placed her hand over the locket. After a moment, a soft click echoed. Damon opened it slowly.

"Hey, are you guys working or chatting?"

Sylvia walked up to them, covered in dust from scrubbing a far-off corner of the mansion.

Evangeline turned away awkwardly before getting a proper look at the portrait.

"Right, sorry... we were already done."

Damon coughed. "Don't worry, princess. I was just telling this one not to slack off. In fact, I did most of the work. You should've seen her—she wouldn't shut up."

Evangeline shot him a glare, muttering under her breath.

"I regret feeling sorry for him... that jerk..."

The work of cleaning the mansion was about done... Honestly, it was relatively easy, considering they were practically superhuman. With the strength granted by their first-class advancements, they had managed to finish scrubbing the ancient mansion in record time.

Well, everything in Lysithara was ancient—the entire city was a ruin, after all.

They left one wing untouched, only cleaning the parts they intended to use for now.

Leona created rain, so they had water.

The sun was still a few hours from setting, and with the bathhouse finally cleaned, the girls seized the chance for a proper soak—leaving Damon and Xander alone in the grand entrance hall.

For now, they had decided against sleeping in any of the upper rooms. Instead, they'd camp out near the large hearth in the main hall. It was safer that way. They didn't know what horrors might show up at night... or if something—or someone—was already watching them.

So, the two boys began covering up the mansion's exposed openings with wooden barricades.

With that, Damon lit the hearth, even though the sun had yet to set. The temperature had already begun to drop—Lysithara was getting colder.

The hearth seemed to run on magical energy. He tossed in a low-level mana core, and the runes carved into the stone flared faintly with heat.

He couldn't help but marvel at the rune-craft and magitech embedded into it.

There were also heated floors and ceiling panels that allowed precise temperature control. The academy had luxuries like that, sure, but the tech here—despite being ancient—seemed far more advanced.

Soon, the girls returned, hair damp, faces relaxed. Damon and Xander washed up next. They all prepared a simple dinner and settled down.

Tonight's meal was a modest soup made with dried jerky. The sun hadn't even set, but the toll of the past week—endless battles, exhausting travel—had finally caught up to them.

One by one, they drifted into sleep... leaving Damon's shadow as their silent sentinel.

The city outside darkened further. The last remnants of sunlight faded beyond the shattered skyline of Lysithara. No lamps, no torches, no magical glowstones. Just pitch-black ruin.

No light came from anywhere...

Except for a single crack in one of the old, dust-smudged windows—through which the faint glow of their fire cast a thin, wavering line across the floor.

And that small flicker of warmth... was seen.

Something rushed toward the mansion.

Its form was grotesque—lurching, fast, unnatural.

It slammed a bony, mottled hand against the glass.

Its wide, glistening eyes focused on the group inside.

Then it raised its hand again.

And slammed harder.

Chapter 320: Lamp Snatcher

The creature was skinny... plated... with grey skin stretched tightly over a hunched frame. Its back was bony, almost skeletal, and its long hands—thin and gnarled—twitched as it raised one slowly.

With a sharp crack, it shattered the glass slightly.

Most notable was its long, black tongue... slithering like a snake's, dripping with dark saliva.

It reached through the broken pane and began lifting the wooden barricades one by one, pushing them aside with unsettling patience. Then it paused—its gaze drifting toward the night sky, where the rift lingered in the distance, indistinguishable from the dark canvas above.

It seemed... anxious.

Without a sound, it leapt inside the ruined mansion. Its eyes locked on the soft flames of the hearth... and the sleeping figures curled beside it.

It approached them slowly—movements quiet, measured... like a predator. Closer, step by silent step, it crept.

Then... as soon as it was within reach...

Its tongue stretched out—

"Don't you think it's rude to sneak in uninvited?"

Sylvia's gentle voice cut through the silence, calm yet sharp.

It froze.

The others burst into motion. Whatever sleep they feigned, it ended in a flash.

Xander struck first—an uppercut straight to the jaw.

"As if we would sleep in a mansion in the middle of a death zone..."

Leoan unleashed a bolt of lightning. Before it even touched the floor, a white arc surged through the creature's body.

Matia followed up with a giant hammer, conjured with a shout—she brought it down in a thundering blow, smashing the creature into the polished floor.

Damon moved last, pinning it to the ground with his sword.

The thing shrank back, trembling violently. Its black tongue writhed as it reached... not for them—but for the fire.

It stretched toward the hearth, as if the flame was some ancient, hated enemy.

They hadn't been so stupid as to actually sleep. Each of them had remained alert to some degree. They knew the dangers of the night more than most. They had seen what horror slept beneath its silence.

Light was always the nemesis of nocturnal terrors.

Damon stepped forward.

Before he could act—its long tongue lashed out again.

And smothered the hearth.

The fire died instantly.

The creature slumped, body twitching... and for a moment—it almost looked relieved.

Damon frowned.

He was the only one who could see clearly in the darkness now.

"Were you trying to take out the light...? Too bad... Evangeline, light up."

Evangeline sighed, annoyed.

Her duskglass armor flared to life—glowing with a bright, golden light.

"You forgot to say please..."

Damon sneered.

"I also forgot to give a damn."

Sylvia flipped through her skill, journey book. Her eyes narrowed as the entry came up.

"Hmm... it's called a Lamp Snatcher... it says—and I quote:

'Corrupted and broken, many of Lysithara's citizens became hideous monsters. Among them, some retained fragments of humanity.

A shame... the Lamp Snatcher retained none. Only fear. Fear so pure it twisted into instinct.

They seek to extinguish any light that reaches the sky... in fear of what it may call... of what might see it.

Only the spires were ever safe to illuminate. Darkness became safety.

So they kill light.

They snatch it away. Every. Single. Night."

Damon turned to Evangeline—her armor still shining, casting rays that reached the ceiling.

Suddenly... he had a very bad feeling.

"Evangeline... kill the lights."

The ground rumbled.

He felt the mansion tremble.

"Evangeline—now!"

She didn't need to be told twice.

Damon ran toward the barricade and ripped it off with brute force. He stepped to the window, staring into the endless night.

His vision, unaffected by the dark, adjusted instantly.

And his face paled.

At the sight of what hovered in the sky...

From the black rift that loomed eternally above Lysithara—like the sky itself had been shattered, like the heavens were just a jagged shard of broken glass—something had begun to spill through.

A fragment of a broken heaven, moving... breathing... rupturing.

It wasn't just darkness.

No, when Damon looked closer, it became clear. It was a sea—a tide made not of darkness...something worse, of monsters. Hundreds... no, thousands of them. Crawling. Slithering. Flying. Each one different, yet unified by a single trait:

Their bodies were black. So black they made shadows look pale.

Ink incarnate. Living voids.

And they were coming.

Though they were still far, Damon could make out their forms—some humanoid, others alien and unnatural. Towering ones with spindly limbs and wings made of bone... serpent-like ones that swam through the air... twisted horrors that looked like they'd crawled out of the mind of a dying god.

Then the rift shook.

Not from the monsters.

But from something... worse.

A colossal hand reached down—massive, thick-fingered, and clad in fractured lightlessness. It pushed against the boundaries of the world, fingers clawing for entry.

But the rift was too small.

For now.

All around them, the city began to stir.

Lysithara... dead for centuries... moved.

From alleys, rooftops, graves, and shattered buildings, the corrupted remains of its ancient inhabitants rose again. Some barely skeletons, others wrapped in spectral armor, others bearing the sigils of forgotten houses and fallen orders. Their eyes glowed with rage—not at the living, but at the thing that dared invade their ruins.

They rose not to kill the intruders.

They rose to make war.

Giants shook off centuries of dust.

Colossi dragged broken limbs across collapsed bridges.

All of them... answering the call.

A tide of darkness was descending, and the broken city answered.

Damon could only watch. He felt small—so small.

He couldn't move.

His body refused to answer.

He stood frozen watching the endless sky, a single man before a battle of forgotten gods and monsters.

And then...

Evangeline appeared beside him.

He hadn't even noticed her move.

The others were there too.

"Wh... what is that...?" she whispered.

Her voice snapped Damon back into himself. His eyes widened—he looked to the Lamp Snatcher, which now scurried away in sheer terror.

It had been trying to escape the light.

Avoid the flame.

That was why they snatched the lamps.

To smother the glow that would draw attention to Lysithara.

They were never predators.

They were just... afraid.

And they had been right to be.

They were too close to the rift. The hearth's fire, Evangeline's glowing armor—it had all acted like a beacon. A signal flare to the things beyond the void.

They had called it here.

Damon's grip tightened around his sword.

The Lamp Snatcher vanished into the ruins.

The city rumbled. And in the distance, battle began. Titanic. Deafening.

A war between the broken rotten dead and the abyss-born horrors had ignited.

"Come on—we need to go..."

Damon's voice pulled them all back to reality. No more awe. No more fear.

Remorseless dulled his fear...slightly.

Just survival.

They grabbed their packs.

Damon looked once more at the sky—no longer dark. It was now lit by alien stars. Something... some entity had wiped away the bleakness with a single attack. A clear sign.

A warning...a warning of things to come.

His Pale Crown armor pulsed—its soul core burning with purpose.

It wanted to fight. It was calling him to battle.

He ignored it.

He wasn't suicidal.

The others felt it too—the hum, the whisper, the pull of their enchanted gear, yearning to clash against the impossible.

But they all knew the truth:

Fighting meant death.

Sylvia gritted her teeth. "They're heading here. We need to move."

Damon took the lead, eyes sharp.

"We need to get out of here. No one uses flashing or glowing-type magics."

His voice was steady but hard—gritted with urgency.

"That'd be like painting a target on our backs."

He paused.

"In fact... no magic at all."

Then he leapt out the window—

—and landed right in the middle of hell.