

Shadow 321

Chapter 321: Ancient Battle

Lysithara had been a ruin to begin with—its sky bleak even in the day... the sunlight had seemed dull, filtered through a haze of gloom, and the shattered city was almost solemn in its ruined beauty... alive only with distant monsters and the skeletal wreckage of a forgotten age, its towering spires standing as gravestones beneath the black crack in the sky, that fractured wound casting everything beneath it into shadow.

But now—under the darkness of nightfall—the city was at war with itself.

Evangeline's light had drawn something out... something that existed within the black rift... and in response, the ancient denizens of Lysithara—the cursed, the malformed, the dead and the defiled—rose from the stones, clawed from the gutters and walls and collapsed cathedrals.

Some had once been human... others had never been anything close.

They rose to fight—fueled by vengeance, hatred, or the memory of duty—against the horrors from the blackness of the rift.

The moment Damon landed on the cracked, dust-covered street outside the broken window... he was swallowed by the maelstrom.

The sky screamed with battle. The earth shook with every clash of the titans. The heavens themselves quaked under the fury of those powerful enough to tear through continents. The air was aflame with destruction—molten rocks and blazing meteors were being wrenched from the sky by sheer force of will.

And Damon—he was in the center of it.

A warzone.

The creatures around him were weaker, yes, but it was no less chaotic. Flares of sickening color lit up the ruins as malformed horrors fought pitch-black beasts—some like hounds made of liquid night, others like crawling masses of teeth and bone.

At his feet, his own shadow began to swirl... darker... thicker...

He didn't notice how cold it had gotten.

He ducked low, rolling beneath the legs of a four-meter skeleton wielding a chunk of stone as a mace.

Evangeline was beside him—he barely registered her presence before raising his hand to beckon the others.

When a chunk of a nearby house—wall, roof, everything—was hurled like debris into the sky, straight in their direction.

Xander rolled forward, diving out of the way just as it slammed past.

Damon grabbed Sylvia's hand, dragging her into a narrow alley that seemed less choked with carnage. As they passed one of the pitch-black creatures from the rift, it turned its featureless face—if it even had a face—toward his shadow... then toward Evangeline.

There was a pulse in its form, a swirl in its void-like eyes...

It ignored its current opponent entirely, and reached for her with one of its long, twisted limbs—its fingers like tendrils of dripping ink.

Damon swung his sword, and it felt like slicing through a thick pool of stagnant water. No resistance. No impact. But it recoiled.

He shoved Evangeline deeper into the alley.

The creature tried to follow—but the malformed rotfolk it had been fighting wasn't about to let it escape. The two crashed again, vanishing behind a collapsing building.

And then the realization struck Damon cold.

It was just as he feared—they were after Evangeline. She had acted as the beacon. He didn't even need to ask why.

They hadn't appeared during the day—no, it was probably one of this cursed city's eldritch laws. They sought light... and Evangeline, with her illuminating magic, had become their lighthouse.

That meant things didn't look good for their party.

Evangeline's magic was light itself... and without light, she was fighting with one hand tied behind her back. Sylvia's moonlight magic was just as glaring. Leona? She was a walking Incarnation of the storm—and storms didn't come without lightning.

Which meant the only ones who could truly fight at full power under this cursed night... were him, Xander, and Matia.

Half their strength would be bound by the rules of this damned city.

And the black tide was still coming.

Something smashed through the buildings, crashing down from the heavens above—its form grotesque, twisted, its blood a void-like blackness that oozed and stained the air. It was a creature of the rift... something far higher in rank than anything they'd faced. It was injured, half-dead even, yet it still turned its eyes toward Evangeline.

Damon gritted his teeth.

"Sylvia... use your skill. Lead us to safety..."

It was a gamble. A brutal one. He had no idea what toll it would take on Sylvia, but he couldn't—he wouldn't—leave Evangeline to die. He couldn't abandon her... even if her death, or the horrors that might follow, could end this madness.

Sylvia was already moving.

"Left—now," she snapped, her voice slicing through the canopy of violence above them.

The dying void creature—its chest caved in, its spine snapped—slit its own arm in final defiance, releasing a twisted essence that birthed five six-meter tall humanoid creatures with four arms. The moment the creatures emerged, its parent dissipated into darkness.

Those monsters came after them immediately.

Damon's party, small and compact, were all at the first-class advancement—they could slip between most monsters with relative ease. Under Sylvia's guidance, they sprinted, weaving through the chaos of the battlefield. But these new creatures—offspring of that higher void being—were fast. Faster than expected. Though weaker than their origin, they were still far beyond what most could handle.

They carved through the monsters in their way, their black forms violent, single-minded, each one fixated on Evangeline.

Damon clenched his teeth, thinking, Anything... anything I can do...

At his feet, his shadow swelled unnaturally.

A giant blade dropped from the sky. He barely dodged it—throwing himself into a dive and shoving Leona out of harm's way. His lip split as he hit the ground. But he didn't care. His mind was on fire. His shadow—it was acting strange. No, it was reacting strange.

He bit down, a wild thought forming.

"Sylvia... where are we going?" he called out.

Her face was pale, blood dripping from her nose, eyes strained as she peered into countless futures. She was going blind again—paying the price. But this time she'd learned from last mistakes. She was only sacrificing one eye.

"There's... a cathedral," she said, barely holding her voice steady. "It's protected... the magic there will keep us safe. Hurry!"

Damon nodded grimly. "Go. I'll buy you time."

He clenched his fists. "Do you still have that orb? The one we took from the Beldam's nest—the one that absorbs magic?"

Sylvia pulled it from her pouch and threw it to him.

He caught it, then without pause, tossed it to Evangeline. "Charge this. With your magic."

She didn't hesitate—pouring her light into the orb. When she tossed it back, there was no question in her eyes—just urgency.

"What are you—"

He caught it, grinning through the blood on his lips. "Lead them to safety. I'll catch up."

Her eyes widened. "No...Damon "

But it was too late. His body dissolved into shadows, disappearing like smoke on the wind.

Evangeline stood frozen—until a flare of light ignited on the rooftop above, catching the attention of one of the twisted beasts. It turned from her, lured by the decoy. It was already wounded, torn apart by Lysithara's native horrors.

She bit her lip, her breath caught in her throat, and shoved Sylvia and Leona forward.

"Move!" she shouted, pushing them into motion.

A single tear rolled down her cheek as she turned and ran.

Up above, on the shattered rooftop, Damon took a slow, deep breath.

He was the fastest. And there was still that one skill... the one he'd never used. But maybe—just maybe—it would work.

He raised the orb in his hand, now gleaming with Evangeline's magic, and pointed it at the advancing creature.

"Shadow Control..." he whispered, the air trembling around him. "The skill that allows me to command all Masterless shadows..."

Chapter 322: Self Sacrifice [updated]

Shadow Control was the skill that allowed Damon to command intangible shadows, moving them freely with massive consumption of shadow energy. But more than that... it could command masterless shadows—phantoms that had no bodies, no anchor to the world.

He wanted to try something.

These creatures... they made his shadow react. He wanted to see if he could control one of them—use Shadow Control to bend it to his will.

His hand pointed toward one of the humanoid void-born, its eyeless face locked on the orb of light Damon was holding.

He willed it to stop—pushed with everything he had.

It didn't even flinch.

The curse burned in his arm, and he fired his omnidirectional gear, the line latching onto a shattered rooftop. He pulled himself out of the creature's reach just as it lunged.

"Well... it was worth a try," he muttered, a self mocking grin cutting across his face.

The attempt had failed. But that had only been his secondary objective.

His real goal had been to draw attention away from Evangeline—give them the time they needed to make it to the cathedral.

He had the most mobility. It made sense. It was the only thing he could do.

Landing on the roof with a thud, Damon took a slow, deep breath. The world trembled around him—the ground split, monsters roared below, but his heart was calm. Unshaking.

Remorseless made him.

Calm enough to realize—

What he was doing... this was completely against his character.

He jumped down, turning into a shadow before he hit the ground, diving into a pool of darkness just as a massive pillar of destruction came roaring from the battle raging in the sky.

He quickly shifted back into his human form, the orb's light disrupting his shadow.

'What is wrong with me... since when did I start caring about someone else but myself...'

The creature from the rift chased the small light as Damon swung through broken buildings, using his omnidirectional gear and his Parkour skill.

This wasn't who he was. Damon Grey was spiteful, jaded, and bitter—he only cared about his sister.

Then why... why was he here, risking his life for anyone else?

He bit his lips, hard.

Was it because he was the party leader?

He shook his head.

Was it because he wanted to be kind...?

A massive black wave slammed into the rooftop as he rolled, barely avoiding it. His back hit a chimney—it shattered, sending him crashing through the window of a nearby building.

Damon raised his head, feeling his vision swim. His Danger Sense screamed. He felt the direction it was coming from and dove out of the window, using Shadow Movement to evade a horde of giant rats tearing into one of the void creatures.

Then why was he doing this?

He bit his lip again until he tasted blood.

He didn't understand anymore.

All he knew was—he didn't want his friends to die.

Was this the kindness Carmen Vale had spoken of? The man who had told him kindness was reciprocal...?

But was he even going to receive anything of equivalent value for his actions?

He pulled himself into the air, mist swirling around his body as the armor of Pale Crown activated, just as a giant sword severed the hand of one of the void creatures chasing him.

The Astral Winds from the monsters' battle pulled at him, threatening to scatter him like ash.

"If I die... will anyone actually take care of my sister...?"

He opened his eyes wide.

All around him—he could feel it.

The shadows he had called with Shadow Control...

He wasn't just running around without a plan.

He was gathering. A massive tide of intangible shadows surged behind him, moving like a living storm as he avoided the creatures from the rift, while the native monsters of Lysithara fought them.

He held that small light—the orb—like a beacon in a world of horror.

Something brushed against him—he tried to move, but his right arm stiffened.

The curse from the Mist Knight sword —it hadn't fully healed.

He took a deep breath, turning into mist at the last moment—but not fast enough. His body was lacerated all over, even his armor shredded.

He groaned, sent crashing into the ground in a rain of blood. Even so—he gritted his teeth.

Yes... there was someone who would... Lilith...

"But can I even trust anyone... to save Luna...?"

He bit his lips harder.

He wanted to be needed.

He needed to be needed by Luna.

That was why he let himself live so long—no matter how bad it got for both of them.

He had long since given up the delusion of being a hero.

So he wanted to be her hero. Even if he was a monster in other people's eyes.

He had lived for her.

"AHHHHH!!"

He roared, his heart swelling with emotions too fierce to contain. The tide of shadows behind him rose up like a monstrous wave, drowning the streets in darkness.

Not now... he wasn't dying now...

What was he even thinking?

He pulled out the orb, and the surrounding shadows formed around it, smothering its light. Quickly, he tied the orb to an arrow, its glow sealed under layers of shadow.

He pulled out his collapsible bow, nocked the arrow, feeling his shadow energy running dry.

He fired into the sky where the real horrors battled—and then dispelled the shadows.

The light erupted—bright and unmistakable.

The monsters sensed the magic—and turned their attention toward it.

Damon fired his omnidirectional gear at a building and swung toward the cathedral.

The battle raged behind him. He was so close—he could see the anxious faces of his party standing by the ruined door, holding it open for him.

He smiled faintly.

But just as he neared the front steps, something caught the wires of his gear—pulling him violently to the ground. He landed hard, groaning, his head slick with blood.

He staggered to his feet, legs broken—but he dived into a shadow to dodge a black claw swinging for his throat.

He moved through the darkness, emerging at the shadow's end and sprinting...limping toward the cathedral doors.

A small creature—like a blackness-born wolf—lunged at him.

Sylvia raised her bow, magic gathering—

Damon shook his head desperately.

If she used magic now, it would draw all of them straight to her.

He swung his sword at the wolf, leaping over a shattered angel statue as it smashed into it, snarling and reaching with blood-stained fangs.

Just as he reached the threshold, it sank its teeth into his arm—trying to drag him away from the cathedral's warded protection.

Damon gritted his teeth—let go of his sword—and with his good arm, plunged a dagger straight into the creature's eye.

It shrieked—but it didn't relent.

Xander and the others charged forward, attacking from every direction.

Matia fired a blast of ice before even closing the distance—but the nightmare spawn was relentless.

It ripped Damon's right arm clean off.

Blood fountained from the wound—Damon's eyes twisted with rage.

He didn't fall.

He got up.

He jumped—straight into the creature's face—eyes burning with resentment—and drove his sword into its skull with everything he had left.

A soft chime echoed in his mind:

[You have slain Lesser Nightmare Spawn.]

Leona rushed forward, grabbing Damon just as more creatures came charging.

She hoisted him over her shoulders, sprinting back toward the cathedral doors.

Xander smashed the ground with his spear, blasting a wall of shattered stone and dust behind them as cover.

They fell back into the cathedral—its ancient runes glowing to life—as they slammed the doors shut with a deafening bang, sealing themselves inside.

Outside, the nightmare raged.

Inside, Damon knelt, holding his sword with his one remaining hand.

Blood pooled beneath him, from where his right arm had once been.

Chapter 323 - Bleeding [re]

Sylvia bit her lips, watching Damon's bleeding arm—or rather, the stump of ripped bone where his arm had once been.

She rushed to his side, pressing her hand over the bleeding wound. Damon let go of his sword and placed a hand on her arm.

"Don't..." he muttered, his voice strained, his teeth gritted as he looked at Evangeline. "If you guys use your magic, you'll give our location away..."

Matia gritted her teeth. "You're bleeding—you won't last like that."

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't care... I just need—"

"No," Damon said, his voice hoarse. "If you heal me, the light will summon them here... and we all die..."

Evangeline lowered her head, feeling so pathetic, so weak, so foolish. She hated how she couldn't do anything...

Leona clenched her fist. "If we opened the door, we could get your arm. We can reattach it with magic... We still have some low-level healing potions left from the Beldam's Nest."

Damon sighed. "My arm got ripped off because I couldn't move it in time... the curse from that sword was already taking my arm away..."

He smiled bitterly. "I would've lost it anyway."

For a moment, there was silence. As much as they hated it, they had to agree with his logic.

Xander walked up to him, opening his bag and pulling out a roll of bandages. "We need to stop the bleeding... you've lost too much blood..."

Sylvia touched his armor. Parts of it were dented from the strain of battle, but the Ascendant armors all had a special quirk: self-regeneration. They could mend themselves, but it would take time.

"Take off the armor... you're bleeding inside too... you have several broken ribs, your legs are a mess, your—" she bit her lips. "You're a wreck..."

"We need to—" Evangeline started, but Damon cut her off.

"Don't... think... just patch me up without magic... I'll be fine... I'm used to things like this..."

Matia looked at him. He had lost an arm, was covered in blood, was losing more with each moment, yet he was 'used to it'. He was just their age...

'What kind of life did he live to be used to being half-dead?' she wondered.

Sylvia and Evangeline acted as medics, while Leona helped remove the armor and clean the blood. Xander washed the bandages. Matia just stood there, staring at him, feeling helpless.

Once they finished, Damon was covered in blood-soaked bandages. The stump was wrapped tight to stop the bleeding.

His expression barely changed, as if he hadn't just lost something as vital as his right arm.

Matia bit her lips.

'That's his sword arm... he was a swordsman...' she thought.

' He had a talent for it... he also used a bow... he wouldn't be able to anymore... he used twin daggers too... and now he'd lose that.'

The air was solemn. Damon's face was pale, woozy from the blood loss.

Yet he smiled, sitting there with his body wrapped in bloody cloth.

"You guys get some sleep... you can use magic at first light, when all this horror is over..."

Sylvia lowered her head, refusing to move.

He propped his one hand under her chin, lifting her face gently.

"You've gone blind in one eye, haven't you...? It'll take a few days to get back to normal..."

"Get some rest..."

She bit her lips. "I should be telling you that..."

He nodded, sitting down, his back resting against the broken wall. The world outside seemed to shake with the violence of the battle raging on. Sylvia sat beside him.

"This will go on all night... until dawn, when the Rift Dwellers return to the rift... Only then will the monsters resident in this city go back to normal..."

Damon nodded, feeling the bitter phantom pain where his arm had once been.

Why was he even feeling pain in something that wasn't there anymore?

"You don't have to worry. I'll be fine... We haven't rested at all for about a week... I know we're in First Class, but even we have limits..."

Sylvia bit her lips. "How can I rest when..."

"The battle won't reach here. This place is safe..." he reassured.

She shook her head. "I don't care about that... You expect us to just go to sleep when you're in pain...?"

Damon sighed. "Fine. How about we pass the time instead..."

The others all sat in the darkness. With their limited vision, the ruined cathedral was a broken shadow of the temple it once was.

Outside, the battle between the two sides created booming roars and flashes of unnatural light.

The goddess's statue still stood, defiant amidst the decay. The Goddess of Doom—unchanging in a world that crumbled around her.

Evangeline's head was lowered, her shoulders trembling. Damon sighed, wondering if she was blaming herself.

"Hhu... why the dull mood? This isn't the first time we've suffered. Why is it so somber now..."

He coughed, blood leaking from his lips.

Evangeline's head snapped up instinctively, wanting to rush to heal him.

Damon raised his lone hand. "I'm fine..."

Leona glared at him. "You shouldn't even be talking in your condition..." she snapped, her voice trembling slightly.

He smiled wearily. "Fine... who goes first? Tell us a story..."

Evangeline lowered her head. "My... father used to tell me a story... No one really knows it... I guess it's something of a family folktale..."

"It's about a rabbit and a jackal..."

Damon raised his brows. He was familiar with that one. The others didn't seem to know it.

"Wait—is it the one where the rabbit tricks the jackal into chasing the setting sun, hoping to catch a spark to start a fire?"

Evangeline blinked in surprise. "Yes, but... how did you—"

Damon scoffed to hide the pain from his side. Blood oozed down his torso.

"Family folktale. My mom wouldn't shut up about it... It's part of a whole series. I know every one—songs included."

Evangeline's eyes widened. She called out more stories, and Damon knew every single one.

The others watched them bicker with faint smiles, forgetting the nightmare clawing at the cathedral walls.

For the rest of the night, Damon lifted the party's mood. For that short moment, they forgot their fear.

And slowly, a few hours before dawn, when the titanic battle outside began to die down, one by one—the others fell asleep, their eyes finally closing.

Chapter 324: Wings Of Frost

With the others asleep, Damon gritted his teeth. He made no sound... almost having long since grown used to being covered in his own blood.

He leaned by the wall, pulling at the bandage to inspect his wounds. Sylvia and Evangeline had used the last of their healing potions on him.

The wounds clung sticky to the fabric as he peeled it back with a calm, almost mechanical expression.

"Well, that's gonna leave a mark..." he muttered, staring at the raw gashes.

And here he was, almost celebrating how the system had gotten rid of all his scars when he first got it...

Damon sighed. He didn't bother trying to get up — that would be pointless. His whole body ached, but Pain Resistance at Level 3 was helpful, at least.

He had been planning to use the Ashborn skill to cauterize the wounds — he just needed to make sure the others stayed asleep.

He was sure they had reached their limits.

Opening his palm, he prepared to activate the skill, bracing himself for the surge of agony.

"You're really good at this..." Matia's voice drifted from beside him.

She had shed part of her armor, wearing only the awakened shell of her shattered ice armor, her fairy wings fluttering lightly behind her in the dusty air.

"Ahhh, Matia... hehe, you caught me..." Damon said with a wry grin.

She sat down next to him in the crumbling cathedral, kicking up a small puff of dust.

"You're really good at getting people to do what you want... really good at lying too... How did you keep your voice from quaking in pain?" she asked, lowering her head.

Damon leaned his head against the pillar, his bloodied body giving off a faint, fishy smell.

"What are you on about..." he muttered.

She shook her head, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"I never really knew what to make of you... the guy always eating alone in the cafeteria. You always forced your way into the nobles' section — like you just wanted to get into a fight."

He chuckled weakly. "But I had a golden ticket — the academy rules said I could be there..."

She shook her head more firmly this time.

"But you didn't need to. I always thought you were violent... and a little bit scary, after you burned down the Evil Forest..."

Damon sighed. "I was just trying to win... Guess I was a little desperate."

"No. You were insane," she muttered.

He smiled faintly, blood staining his teeth.

After everything that had happened... being trapped here... she still didn't understand him.

"I told you about my past... my home..." she said, waving her hand awkwardly.

"So I... I want to know yours. If you want to tell me, of course... I'm not prying."

Damon closed his eyes. His past — there was a lot of it, for a mere sixteen years.

"There really isn't much to tell..." he started slowly.

"My parents died early, so I lived on the streets of Valerion. I used to run errands for a smuggling ring. Sometimes I didn't shut my mouth, so the boss or the higher-ranking members would teach me a lesson..."

He chuckled darkly. "Well... not that I learned. Sometimes I starved. Sometimes worse."

His eyes narrowed, memories gnawing at him.

"Honestly, I should have died. But there was this elf..." he said, voice trailing.

Matia's eyes sharpened.

"He freed you, then?"

Damon shook his head, a bitter smile playing on his lips.

"No... he didn't free me. If anything, he exploited and manipulated me. Everything he told me was a lie."

A long silence. Damon pressed a hand against his face, a realization dawning slowly.

"Come to think of it... he told me I had no talent for the sword..." He let out a hollow laugh.

"That's probably another lie, huh?"

Matia looked at him seriously.

"But you're stellar with the sword."

Damon sighed. "Took me all this time to realize that... But you know... I hated him.

And now... I can't be so sure anymore."

Matia clenched her fists, thinking of her own father.

She hated him too — had prayed for his death every single day of her life.

Damon smiled faintly.

"But now that he's dead... all I can think about are the times he saved me. Even if it was twisted and toxic... he was still someone I wanted to prove myself to."

Matia understood him now. Deeply.

She, too, had always wanted to prove that being a woman did not make her weak.

Damon leaned back.

"He taught me a lot... about surviving the streets... about people... how their minds work... Even if he was scum."

Matia watched him carefully.

"What about your father? What was he like?"

Damon met her gaze. "My father was someone I loved. Respected. Looked up to..."

He hesitated, pain flickering in his eyes.

"I would be ashamed to look at him now... because I grew up to hate people like him."

The others, supposedly asleep, listened silently in the background, holding their breath.

Matia frowned, confused.

"Why?"

Damon exhaled heavily.

"My father was stalwart. Steadfast. He had principles he never abandoned. I hated people like that... because they reminded me too much of him... while I became the exact opposite. Dishonorable. I would forsake any principle... How could I ever look him in the eyes again?"

He lowered his head, as if weighed down by the ghost of his dead father.

"I would steal. I would lie. I would do anything to survive. Push comes to shove... I was human garbage, without an ounce of nobility left."

He bit his lip, trembling slightly.

"How could I not hate people like that... when I had failed to become one myself?"

His voice cracked slightly.

"Maybe that's why it was so easy to believe I had no talent for the sword... because a sword was one of the few things that reminded me of him. Maybe... the only thing I learned from him."

Matia's wings fluttered gently in the cold, musty air.

"Do you... like the sword?" she asked softly.

Damon scoffed.

"I like what it does to my enemies... My father said a sword was a noble weapon... but the truth is — like all weapons — it's just a tool for killing. There is no nobility in violence. Or war."

Matia shook her head firmly.

"That's not what I saw today. A sword can be used to protect people. Your father... he would have been proud of you today. You risked your life to save all of us."

Damon chuckled, a rare, fragile smile tugging at his blood-streaked lips.

Matia sat up straighter, determination burning in her eyes. She knelt by his side, wings gleaming in the darkness.

"So let me give you a miracle..." she whispered.

She placed her hand over the stump of his right arm — where it had once been.

"Let me give you my wings."

Her wings spread wide, frozen for a moment — then began to crack, shards of ice and frost falling like frozen glass around them.

Damon's eyes widened in horror as her wings shattered.

"Wait... huj—"

But it was too late.

Matia's wings fell from her back, shattering completely — sacrificing her ability to ever fly again.

Chapter 325: Bonds Forged In Fear

The act of sacrificing a fairy's wings — this was something unique to fairy kind.

Not even the fae, who prided themselves as being superior to fairies, could do so.

It was something a fairy could only do once in their lifetime: the act of giving away their wings in exchange for one miracle.

It was an act of ultimate selflessness and sacrifice, where the fairy, of their own free will, would grant that miracle to someone.

The price was dire.

They would lose their wings forever, never again able to soar through the skies.

They would become like any ground-bound creature... they would lose the blessing that defined them.

Fairy kind would naturally recoil from them.

They would be outcasts among their own people.

And for a fairy who gave up their wings, there was one added downside — they would suffer one ill fate.

It could be anything... though many deemed it mere superstition.

Even so, Matia's miracle was real.

She had sacrificed her wings... for Damon.

She had given him her miracle.

Her wings shattered like glass, the fragments rising up into the air.

The others, who had been pretending to sleep, all turned their heads to witness the sight.

Like voiceless snowflakes, the fragments danced around Damon, touching his body, seeping through every pore.

Where his arm had once been ripped off, a new arm was growing, covered in frost.

His wounds began to vanish, carried away by a chilling wind and swirling flakes.

He felt the pain fade away.

The lightheadedness disappeared.

Matia smiled weakly and collapsed to the side.

Damon, moving on instinct, reached out with his new arm, catching her before she could touch the ground — his arm strong, whole, and free from the curse.

A soft chime rang out.

[You have received the Blessing of the Fairy.]

[All depleted stats have been restored.]

[You have gained Mastery: Disintegration Resistance.]

Matia smiled faintly in his arms.

The others rushed to his side.

He looked at Matia...

He didn't ask why.

He simply looked at her — and whispered something he hadn't said in a very long time:

"Thank you."

In his heart, he had every reason to feel grateful for Matia's sacrifice.

He had doubted his choice.

But even in death, Carmen Vale had been right:

If you see the worst in people, that's all you'll ever see.

Kindness was reciprocal.

He had risked it all — and in return, he had not only been freed from Alazard's cursed blade, which would have eventually taken his arm — he had been given something more.

A second chance.

Evangeline looked at him — he expected her to say something... but she didn't.

She simply spread her arms and pulled him into a hug.

Sylvia followed, and soon, he and Matia were covered in a group hug.

The party of teenagers smiled and laughed, having survived yet another ordeal.

The world outside had gone silent.

The battles had come to a stop.

Dawn was still far off.

Evangeline looked at Matia.

"Thank you," she said softly.

The wingless fairy blinked, looking at her with a confused expression.

"Why are you thanking me...?"

Evangeline hesitated, then looked down.

"Right... I should be apologizing. My incompetence is the reason—"

Matia raised her hand sharply.

"Stop. Don't say it."

She shook her head firmly.

"I made my choice. We're a party. We're meant to support each other... covering for each other when we fail."

Matia's eyes drifted toward Damon, who was flexing his new arm a short distance away.

"Damon's been carrying us all as party leader. He's shown just how noble he can be... even if he doesn't think so.

He might not be the best person around... but I still have faith in him.

I choose to have faith in him.

Even if he isn't the most righteous, I will follow him.

One day, I'm sure he will change this world... forever."

Evangeline stared at her.

This was the highest praise she had ever heard for Damon.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked quietly.

Matia shrugged, a small, almost mischievous smile tugging at her lips.

"I'm not."

Evangeline turned her gaze toward Damon.

He was someone who had won the position of party leader despite being a commoner — even Xander, who had once been his rival, had acknowledged him.

She walked up to Damon, a small smile creeping onto her face.

"I suppose it took a miracle to heal that curse," she said.

Damon nodded.

"Not surprised your power didn't work... considering it wasn't a curse," he replied coolly.

He lifted the sword — Alazard's sword, the cause of his suffering — into view.

"This sword doesn't curse.

Its ability is disintegration.

That's why you couldn't purify my wound."

He looked at her, his voice steady.

"Purification is a form of destruction. So is disintegration — breaking things down.

You can't fight destruction with destruction."

Evangeline smiled faintly at his explanation.

He was back to normal.

But her smile dimmed when she looked at the cathedral doors.

"What do we do next?" she asked.

Honestly... he didn't know.

He felt restored, thanks to Matia's miracle.

Even so, the others were all exhausted.

He looked around at the cold, broken cathedral.

Dawn was still a long way off.

"We take the day off," he said finally.

"Plan our route.

The more eager we are for success, the more damned we'll be.

The city nights are cold — and we can't make a fire."

He clenched his fist tightly.

"We can't afford to sleep at night.

So we won't.

We sleep during the day... and move when we can.

It might take months... but we'll leave Lysithara.

And we'll return home."

He placed his sword in front of him, driving it lightly into the ground.

Evangeline smiled and placed her sword next to his.

Xander scoffed but stepped forward, resting his spear next.

"This is childish," he muttered under his breath.

Leona grinned and raised her greatsword, adding it to the pile.

Sylvia hopped closer, holding her bow, and did the same.

They all looked at Matia.

The wingless fairy smiled gently, forming a sword from pure ice — and placed it with them.

Together, they spoke the party's motto:

"In the absence of the desirable, let the available be the desirable."

Chapter 326: The Place Beneath

The sun rose from the horizon into the bleak grey sky of Lysithara. As its light climbed higher, the last of the creatures from the rift disappeared... like a cloud of black fog dissipating into the wind...

These nightmares left behind no corpses... it was almost as their names suggested... illusions born from some endless nightmare, meant only to bring horror upon the world.

Damon quietly listened as the last echoes of battle faded... the horrors of Lysithara slowly retreating back to where they belonged... as if the dire need to battle the creatures had itself been nothing but an illusion.

The city returned to its ruined silence... but this time, it carried more scars than before.

Sylvia sighed, relief washing over her.

"We survived yet another ordeal..."

Damon nodded, his brows furrowed.

"I think it's almost sad... no, it is sad... yet beautiful..."

Sylvia tilted her head as the rays of sunlight washed over the ruined cathedral.

"How so?"

He shook his head, a somber look crossing his face.

"It's just... some of these creatures had once called Lysithara home before the rot. It's beautiful because, even now—corrupted and broken—they rose to protect it..."

Sylvia nodded quietly.

"And the sadness... is it because they're always fighting? Always trapped in war?"

He chuckled sadly.

"Yeah... but it's not just them... it's our whole world. Everywhere, every day... we are always at war. Why is that? Why can't our world have peace?"

Sylvia nodded, her gaze heavy.

"That's actually blasphemy... but since it's just the two of us, I can share something."

Damon raised an eyebrow, sensing she knew something he didn't.

Sylvia smiled faintly, guessing his thoughts.

"It's nothing so grand... just hypotheses from some great minds."

She leaned against the crumbling wall.

"You're not the first to come to that conclusion. Some scholars came to the same thought... our world, it's not normal. Other worlds exist, and they have wars too, but not like ours. We're always at war..."

She looked at him seriously. Even now, they were at war among themselves, not to mention with the demon races—their greatest enemies. Without demons, they would simply tear each other apart instead.

"This is considered blasphemous. The Temple executed anyone who thought or wrote about such things..."

Damon scoffed with disdain. He already saw that coming.

Sylvia sighed.

"Who knows... maybe it's because we worship a goddess of doom. Maybe our world is always moving towards self-destruction. War is part of doom, after all..."

She turned her gaze to the statue in the cathedral. Her brow furrowed.

"Hmm... I didn't know the goddess was ever depicted with four wings..."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"She isn't..."

Sylvia crossed the threshold of the ruined cathedral, walking toward the altar at the center where the statue stood.

Damon frowned and followed her. Their actions didn't go unnoticed—Evangeline raised a brow, setting her sword down, while Xander, leaning by a broken pillar, raised his head slightly. Leona and Matia, mid-arm wrestling match, froze and glanced over.

One by one, they all followed Sylvia and Damon to the altar.

Sylvia stopped in front of it, her eyes lifting to the massive statue of the goddess of doom.

Unlike a mere temple, this was a cathedral—an ancient and sacred place.

The statue depicted a woman in a veil, standing proud, her features hidden behind the cloth. She held a sword in one hand, and even as a statue, an imposing will radiated from her—one that spoke not only of doom but something more... something eternal.

Damon had seen many statues of the goddess, but this one felt almost alive.

Still, that wasn't what caught his eye.

Behind the statue, on the cathedral wall, was a hidden mark. From the entrance, it appeared as though the goddess had four wings—but it was merely an illusion created by the placement of the mark.

The mark depicted an abyss, with two swords and four wings... it radiated a feeling of good and evil, purity and depravity, all at once. It was right—but it was also wrong.

Damon recognized the feeling immediately. He had felt the same way when he saw the mark on Lilith.

This... this was the mark of the Unknown God.

Sylvia stared at it, part of the wall shattered, but the mark remained untouched.

Xander's hand trembled.

"What... is this blasphemous place... how..."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"This was a cathedral built to worship the goddess... and yet here, there's a mark of the Unknown God..."

His mind raced. How had they even found this place?

He glanced at Sylvia slightly. Of course... it was Sylvia who had led them here, seeking safety—but Sylvia herself had been led here by the Unknown Journey Book.

Damon realized it now...

It wasn't ancient magic left behind by the people of Lysithara that kept the rift creatures away...

It was because this place carried the divine authority of both the Goddess of Doom and the Unknown God.

For a long moment, silence hung heavy in the cathedral.

Sylvia took a deep breath.

"How is this possible... why is there a mark of the Unknown God—worshiped by demons—here, in a cathedral of the goddess?"

The others said nothing, unease written on their faces.

Damon sighed.

"Probably because... the people of Lysithara once gave faith to both."

He walked up to the altar, noticing a dusty old book resting on it.

He blew away the thick layer of dust.

The others tensed behind him.

Evangeline bit her lip.

"Should you really touch that thing..."

He sighed, placing a hand on the book.

"Do you want to find out the truth or not?"

He turned the fragile pages carefully, eyes narrowing as he read aloud:

"I pray for a time when Doom meets the Abyss. I pray... may the will of the unseen Sovereign be complete. May all suffering come to an end... Signed, Mugu."

He read the last part with a degree of surprise. It wasn't the first time he had heard that name...

Before he could say anything, the entire cathedral began to vibrate—stone groaning as the altar shifted backward, opening a narrow dark stairwell that led deep beneath the earth.

Damon looked back at the others. They stared at him, expressions torn between fear and determination.

Leona bit her lip, voice low.

"Now what?"

Chapter 327: Will Carry It All

Damon wasn't sure how to react... he had read it to show them not to be blinded by religious doctrines created by mortals, to not limit themselves.

He had read it aloud for that purpose... he had been surprised to find the name Mugu, but he didn't even have time to be surprised when the hidden passage revealed itself.

Matia held her ascendant weapon as if expecting something to crawl out of the darkness of the stairwell and attack them.

The others all looked around cautiously, weapons drawn... ready to fight.

Damon looked down... then back at Leona.

"Now we slowly retreat and come up with a plan... with our luck, I won't be surprised if we end up in some hidden dungeon..."

The others nodded, slowly backing away... as they did, the altar behind them began to close. As soon as it shut itself, they all felt relieved.

Damon glanced at Sylvia, whose eyes were focused on the book in his hand... or rather, her single eye—the other was now blind.

"Can I see that..." she opened her palm.

He passed the book to her without question... she opened it, flipping through the pages...

Then looked at him. "It's empty..."

Damon blinked, confused, and snatched the book back.

"No, it's not... I can see what's written... hmm."

He frowned. "It's the same damn thing repeated... on every page..."

Evangeline sighed, holding her temple.

"Don't tell me you're cursed again..."

He looked at her with a deadpan expression.

"Why are you talking to me like you're my mother..."

She sneered... ready to retort.

Leona sighed. "Can you two lovebirds settle down? Your hostile flirting is distracting us from the main problem..."

Damon nodded, glancing at Sylvia. He opted not to argue.

"Use your skill to determine if that place is safe for us to explore... as for the book..."

He looked down at it.

"It's probably enchanted. As for why I can read it... it's probably because I know the words to open it. However, Evangeline, purify me just to be safe."

Sylvia raised her head.

"It's safe... as far as I searched... I can look into the future, just—"

"No." They all cut her off at once.

Xander looked at her with a worried expression.

"As far as dangerous skills go, yours is the worst... the payment it demands is random and almost demonic. It feels like you're playing under the whims of some cruel god..."

Sylvia looked down at the floor of the cathedral. She was playing by the rules of some god who had made her a deal she couldn't refuse... but she had been given a choice.

Damon sighed. Xander was right about that... but he didn't like the idea of Sylvia getting burned at the stake.

If anyone found out her secret, she'd be branded an enemy of the goddess.

"We all have horrible skills... for someone who has faith in the goddess, are you accusing the goddess of fate of giving Sylvia a burden she can't carry?"

Xander could hear the mocking edge in Damon's voice.

He scoffed, crossing his arms. "Glad to see you're still the same mongrel I know."

Matia watched them bicker with a long-suffering sigh, her hand idly resting on the hilt of her weapon.

"Right... I remember now. This is exactly how they were at the academy..."

She half-raised her hand to interrupt—but no one paid her any attention.

Evangeline exhaled sharply, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Guys, that's enough... we're all tired. Let's get some rest."

Damon, already tugging on Xander's hair like a child starting a fight, glanced at her with a mocking smirk. They both stared at her—then at each other—before speaking in perfect sync.

"Who died and made you boss?"

Evangeline gave them a sugary smile... and casually obliterated them with a flash of light magic.

Moments later, they were seated in a rough circle, the scent of scorched cloth lingering in the air.

Sylvia silently patched up some angry red scorch marks on Xander's arm.

Damon, the shameless mongrel he was, had used Xander as a living meatshield without a second thought.

Xander shot him a look of pure betrayal.

"Dishonorable... I knew I couldn't trust you."

Damon just grinned wide, tossing in a few childish jeers like a schoolboy who had gotten away with murder.

Evangeline bit into a piece of dried jerky, her mood visibly souring.

"Let's address our problems. We're running dangerously low on rations. We have about..."

Matia rummaged through the supplies, her brows knitting together.

"Four days' worth," she announced grimly.

Evangeline nodded. "We also have no map of the city. No idea where to find a waypoint or a teleportation gate..."

Her gaze sharpened as she looked directly at Damon—their so-called party leader.

"What are our options?"

Damon's jaw tightened slightly as he leaned back, thinking.

"We've got another issue. Even if we find a gate or a way out, the Keeper won't let us leave. Not before answering his riddle."

Sylvia shifted uneasily, recalling the ominous game.

"The game that can't be won... and a Keeper who controls the city..."

Leona nudged Damon, her eyes wide with worry.

"How do we pass? Why is it unwinnable?"

Damon exhaled slowly, tension gathering in his shoulders.

Sylvia spoke before he could, her voice calm but weary.

"Let's go over the riddles. One has an answer. In fact, it's so obvious it's painful.

The second one doesn't—it's impossible. And that's the answer to the first question."

Leona looked lost, glancing between Sylvia and Damon. The two exchanged a knowing look.

Sylvia crossed her arms and asked the group quietly.

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

The second question dropped into the silence like a stone.

Leona stood up quickly, her hand raised with false confidence.

"Force smashes through the object! The strongest spear always beats the strongest shield!"

Without hesitation, Damon smacked her lightly on the head.

"That answer would definitely get you killed when we meet the Keeper. Just shut up and let me do the thinking... and talking."

Leona pouted, rubbing her head with a soft whimper.

"That's so mean..."

Damon's expression softened a little. He reached out, ruffling her hair in a rare moment of tenderness.

"Don't worry. I'll figure something out."

He smiled at his friend, noting how adorable she looked when she pouted her face.

"You're too stupid to be damned for eternity."

Chapter 328: Horrible Demise

The sound of steel clashing against steel echoed out from a ruined cathedral.

The ground quivered beneath each dull clang, accompanied by the sharp, rhythmic pants of a young man and woman locked in combat.

The young woman was a golden beauty—quite literally.

She moved with the grace of royalty and the force of a tempest, clad in golden-inlaid armor. Her long, flowing hair shimmered like molten metal, matching the glow of her piercing golden eyes. In her hand, a rapier gleamed, darting forward to clash against the blade of her opponent.

The young man facing her was her opposite in every way. His eyes were like lightless abysses, his hair a mess of raven-black strands. He wore regal, muted armor with a dull, ashen crown hovering just above his head like a halo—an eerie echo of nobility.

Damon stepped back with calculated calm, narrowly evading a swift jab from Evangeline. He parried with a subtle twist of his wrist, smirking faintly, then reached forward to grab her wrist mid-motion.

But Evangeline switched hands in an instant, driving her elbow toward his face. Damon dipped his head, dodging cleanly.

She leapt back, boots scraping dust across the cracked stone floor, and drew in a deep breath to steady her rhythm.

She smiled. "You really should have taken up my offer back when I first asked... you'd make a great sparring partner."

Damon scoffed, the memory of her proposition at the academy flashing through his mind—the one he'd casually brushed off.

"And give you the satisfaction of getting what you want... not a chance."

Evangeline raised her sword, the blade suddenly radiating a blinding flash of light.

"Let's see how you do without sight..."

Damon didn't hesitate. He moved forward, blade in hand. Relying on his shadow sense, he didn't need eyes. His body moved through muscle memory, the dark sensing skill guiding his steps.

He met her strike and parried again. She lunged, ramming her shoulder into him, knocking his sword loose.

His hand dropped instinctively to his daggers, aiming them toward her chest—but she simply smiled.

"You lose."

Damon exhaled and came to a stop. Right. This was a swordsmanship lesson, not a kill-or-be-killed fight. He slid his dagger back into place. Evangeline had outmatched him—with the sword, at least.

Applause echoed across the chamber.

The others sat watching from the stone pews of the ruined cathedral.

Leona grinned. "You almost had her there..."

Sylvia nodded, her smile subtle. "That was a close match if I've ever seen one. A shame you're only good at defensive swordsmanship. Your attacks leave too many openings."

Xander glanced toward Matia, arms folded.

"He's using those techniques from that Mist Knight... or at least a messy mix of them. Also seems like he's obsessed with following every rule. That's not how he usually fights..."

Matia nodded thoughtfully. "He actually seemed more flexible the moment he lost his sword." She tilted her head.

"You're far too rigid. You focus more on form than anything else—as if obsessed with perfection. Normally, you only care about the end result: killing your opponent. But when you use a sword, suddenly the means matter."

Evangeline crossed her arms, brow furrowed. She had taught him a lot these past few days. It made her feel... oddly pathetic. It took her years to be this good.

"You're really good with a sword. Your basics are perfect, and you learn fast—too fast. Why didn't you take a swordsmanship class at the academy?"

Damon sighed, frustration etched across his face. His swordsmanship had improved, but his mastery hadn't increased.

"I feel like something's missing. I can imitate what I see... but I don't have a technique that's truly mine. I can only be other people..."

He hesitated, biting his lip before speaking further.

"I'm rigid because my father taught me with strict rules. Only by following them perfectly could I become perfect... but—"

"That's not you," Leona interrupted. "You're not perfect. And you'd have had to practice for years to make it that ingrained."

He shook his head.

"No, not really. I only practiced when I felt really frustrated with life... which was a lot, so I guess so..."

Matia rubbed her chin and stood. "I think you're in too much of a rush. Honestly? You're a prodigy with the sword—but don't rush success. It takes a thousand battles to be a master. You've fought a lot, so you know how to kill, but not how to do it with a sword..."

She looked at him seriously.

"One real battle is better than a thousand practice swings."

Evangeline nodded, her tone just as serious. "It'll take time to become a master. Until then, I'll keep teaching you my family's sword style."

Damon nodded, sighing again. Xander gave Evangeline a look.

"Wasn't that technique perfected by Grand Duke Damian Brightwater? Passed down only to direct descendants of the family? Are you sure it's a good idea?"

Evangeline shrugged. "What Grandfather doesn't know won't hurt him."

Damon suddenly didn't like the idea of learning her swordsmanship anymore.

"Erhm... I think—"

Evangeline sneered. "Don't tell me you're scared of a noble... wow, that's real maturity. Finally, he learns fear..."

Damon clicked his tongue. He knew exactly what she was doing—but his mother didn't raise a wimp. Might as well put on a princess dress if he backed down now.

"As if I'd be scared of any noble. Even an old monster at the seventh class advancement who can destroy a continent..."

Evangeline gave him a flat look.

"You didn't have to mention the last part. That was so unnecessary."

He smiled "mama didn't raise a wimp."

Xander seized the moment, his grin sharp. "Yeah, she didn't raise a wimp... she barely raised you at all. Probably why you're so feral."

Damon scoffed, then smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment."

He turned to Sylvia, his voice dry. "Now that your eye's all healed up... when do we set out?"

She nodded, glancing at the crumbled altar and the pristine goddess statue behind it.

"Tomorrow would be good. But first, we should investigate the underground stairwell beneath the altar. We may yet have a fortuitous encounter..."

"Or meet a horrible demise." Damon muttered.

Chapter 329: Man Of Too Many Lies

Five days had passed since they camped out in the ruined cathedral. They had fought off the occasional rotfolk and rested as best they could. During that time, they studied the layout of the city and planned their route through the ruins.

They stayed indoors, waiting for Sylvia to recover, and tried to rid themselves of fatigue. The days were mostly uneventful—Matia showed no signs of suffering after sacrificing her wings. There was always that creeping sensation of being watched, but by now, they had grown used to it.

They hadn't found anything worthwhile.

The cathedral was a safe haven... but they couldn't remain behind its broken walls forever. If they ever wanted to return home, they'd have to venture into the heart of the ruined city.

The only problem was Damon. He was getting hungrier by the day. He had used his sacrifice skill to feed his shadow—at the cost of his overall strength. Every day they stayed hidden, he grew weaker.

But he was hell-bent on going back. Nothing would stop him.

"Should we investigate the altar now...?" Leona's voice was soft, but not without weight.

Damon shook his head. "We're leaving tomorrow anyway. Might as well wait until then. Even if there's some monster hiding there, we'll be packed and ready to flee."

Matia leaned against a cracked pillar. "We've been doing a lot of that lately... fleeing, I mean..."

Evangeline gritted her teeth. "We haven't had a choice. Even at first class, the strongest things we could kill were second class at best."

"We've also been bleeding a lot..." Sylvia said, smiling faintly, her voice distant.

Xander clenched his fist. "We've been losing a lot."

Leona smiled despite everything. "But we've been growing too. Even changed. We got stronger. It was bad, sure, but at least we grew from it... Our situation looks grim, but we'll make it... right, Damon?"

He gave her a slight smile. Leona was being unusually optimistic.

"Well... I can't see the future, but yeah. We will."

Leona's eyes drifted to Sylvia, the group's seer. She wanted her input.

"We'll be fine." Sylvia nodded, then added, "In fact, why don't I give a random reading? And before you guys say anything, it's safer... maybe..."

Damon frowned at her. She caught his expression.

"Erm... it's not what you think. It's just my skill giving random readings—it won't affect me."

He sighed. "Fine. As long as you're safe, I guess."

Sylvia nodded and activated her skill. A book—visible only to Damon—hovered in the air, faintly glowing with shifting runes.

"Let's start with you, Leona..."

She paused, the book drifting in front of Leona for a moment.

"Your life is pure, yet you surround yourself with one who walks with ruin and death... Oh storm-bringer, you will be dragged into darker clouds."

Leona blinked, confused. Her eyes turned to Damon for answers.

"Erm... what does that mean...?"

Damon could make a few guesses. The one who walks with ruin and death—that was probably him. Did that mean he was going to drag Leona into trouble later?

He shrugged. "Don't know. Ask the seer."

She pouted. She could tell he had his theories, but he wasn't saying. She knew him too well. "Fine, don't tell me. Meanie."

Damon sighed and walked up to her, patting her head. "You're so juvenile."

She shrugged. "I'm sixteen."

Damon smiled. "So am I."

Sylvia turned to Evangeline next.

"Let's see... yours says: The prodigal child returns home... showered with love... and given all... Do not worry—you are loved as well. The golden sun merely wishes to make up for lost time."

The others looked to Evangeline. For once, they saw hope in a prophecy.

"Does that mean... we'll be able to go back home?" Leona's voice was barely a whisper.

Something lit behind Evangeline's eyes—just for a moment.

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't know. These words are vague at best. This might mean something completely different."

Damon nodded. "Yeah. 'You are loved as well' sounds like it wasn't even directed at you."

Matia narrowed her eyes, her voice almost desperate. "But it's still a small sign... Try using that on the rest of us. Maybe we can form a puzzle or something. Anything."

Xander nodded. "Try mine next."

Sylvia glanced at the brown-haired boy and read his future.

"Angry shadows descend... The noble knight's dark deeds become known. He had murdered night and day... He is disgusted by his own reflection... His dark deeds will be embraced by hungry shadows... Death is his final resting place... You will be his silent avenger... forced to forever hunt a faceless enemy... Hope you never see its face..."

Xander narrowed his brows. "I don't get it. The first part doesn't even seem to be about me..."

Leona tapped her chin. "How does someone even murder night and day?"

Damon sighed. "Figure of speech. Don't take it literally."

Matia looked at Xander. He was the most upright of them all. "What dark deeds...? That part wasn't about you. And who's he supposed to be?"

Evangeline shook her head. "It doesn't matter. What matters is—our chances of surviving are still high."

Matia turned to Sylvia again, eyes sharp.

"What about me?"

Sylvia closed her eyes.

"The wingless fairy will rise again... The one who has been lost will return..."

Matia's eyes widened, her expression glowing with renewed hope.

"Does that mean I'll get my wings back?"

Sylvia raised her hand to stop her. "I don't know. Remember, we can't take these literally..."

Damon felt a sting in his chest. She had given up her wings for him. She never acted like it mattered much—but it had to. It had to hurt, losing something so vital to her life.

Sylvia looked tired now.

"You're next, Damon. Do you want one?"

He nodded slowly. "Sure... What's mine?"

She looked at the book floating in front of her.

"I offer a gentle warning... a caution. Beware—your peril has only begun. That, I guarantee.

The truth is a steel horse... Your lies will be broken. Your truths will be revealed. And when they do... you will be betrayed by one you cherish."

Damon felt his heart sink.

His lies were one too many.

Chapter 330: Hidden Door

Damon stood by the dark stairwell beneath the altar, clad in his Ascendant armor. He debated equipping the Sovereign Mantle form—but ultimately left it in the standard Light Ascendant shell. The ashen crown hovered like a halo on his head, casting a faint spectral gleam.

It was morning—the day they planned to leave the cathedral.

The others were gathered behind him, weapons drawn and silent. Xander stood next to him, completely encased in the imposing armor of the Bound Colossus, its Sovereign Mantle active.

The stairwell exhaled a faint dusty scent. The air hung heavy—like a tomb sealed for centuries.

Damon frowned, glancing at Xander.

"Meatshield, you go first..."

Xander narrowed his eyes, conjuring a floating barrier of gravity magic, for added protection. Though he doubted it would do much.

"I think you mean Frontline fighter..."

Damon clicked his tongue, slightly irritated.

"Just go ahead."

Xander gave a short nod, gripping his spear with both hands. He eyed the weapon—it would be nearly useless in such tight quarters. He'd have to rely on his fists instead. That was fine. His armor's gauntlets were built like siege hammers.

His punches were backed by gravity.

Damon followed him, choosing to go before Leona. For some reason, the thought of letting her go first didn't sit right with him.

The girls moved in after. Leona took the lead among them, followed closely by Evangeline and Sylvia, with Matia bringing up the rear.

Xander's footsteps echoed softly into the dark, then his voice rose.

"I can't see a thing... Evangeline, shine a light—or use that night vision spell Sylvia made."

Damon blinked. He hadn't even realized how dark it had gotten. He could see just fine. His eyes were built for this—darkness made no difference.

The same couldn't be said about his friends.

The spell Xander referred to was a product of necessity—Sylvia's solution to their biggest issue in Lysithara. They couldn't risk using light at night, which meant they couldn't see. The spell fixed that by enchanting the eyes with temporary night vision. Only those with luminescent magic could cast it.

When Damon tried, he ended up blinding people due to his shadow attribute.

The spell was called Night Light.

Evangeline stepped beside him, placing a palm gently over his eyes, casting the spell.

Sylvia moved through the group doing the same. She glanced at Damon afterward, her lips curled.

"Do you need a nightlight... or...?"

Damon cut her off, he could see just fine.

"My eyes are fine. I can see even better than I do in the day."

Xander clicked his tongue.

"If that's the case, why am I in front?"

"Because you're a meatshield," Damon muttered.

Evangeline lightly smacked his arm.

"Okay, fine, fine. It's because your skill is most useful against physical attacks—and your body can take the abuse."

Xander sighed and continued down the stairwell.

"What do you think's down there...?"

Damon shrugged.

"Something the cathedral wanted to keep hidden. No one just builds a secret basement under an altar..."

He rubbed his chin, lips twitching with ideas.

"Maybe some ancient ritual site... or... maybe it's a treasure vault. I'd be so rich. I could kiss all my money problems goodbye."

Evangeline scoffed, puncturing his fantasy.

"With your luck, we're walking into the nest of some abominable creatures. Maybe giant rats... or an Arachnee who wants to use you to breed, then kill you—lay eggs in your mouth..."

Damon glared at her.

"Woman, can't you be optimistic once in your life? I'm usually the one bringing the gloom... but fine. Two can play that game. Maybe it's a den of huge, ugly orcs—get this, all male."

He sneered with mockery in his eyes.

"Hope they haven't seen a woman in a century..."

Evangeline's glare sharpened.

"Finish that thought, and by the Goddess, you will die."

Sylvia sighed as the two kept bickering. Damon's gaze drifted around.

'I'm not scared or anything... I'm just a better man these days...'

The girls glared at him.

"What days?"

Damon wisely chose silence.

They continued on quietly, footsteps tapping the old stone. Despite the creeping dark, none of them seemed overly anxious—they took things in stride.

"Should I blast the walls?" Leona whispered, her voice low.

"Yeah, go ahead and bury us down here..." Damon muttered in response.

Leona bit her lip.

"Meanie..."

Silence settled in again... until, finally, a faint light appeared at the bottom.

Damon shifted into shadow, gliding ahead of the others. He reformed near the base of the stairwell, clutching his head as he pushed away the alien sensation of shifting.

He shook it off and narrowed his eyes.

They'd reached what looked like a narrow lobby. There was a skeleton in cracked armor resting against the far wall, one hand stretched toward the center of the room—clutching something.

Two pale lamps flickered with ghostly flame, their glow illuminating deeply etched runes in the floor. A massive door stood at the back, silver runes crawling across its surface like chains. It radiated an oppressive aura—as if it had spent an eternity keeping something inside.

Damon stepped toward the skeleton, kneeling beside it. The armor was ancient, corroded. A guard, maybe?

He slowly pried its fingers apart. In its shattered palms rested a round object, covered in interlocking runes. The moment he took it, the skeleton crumbled into white dust—its existence extinguished, its duty fulfilled.

Sylvia stepped up beside him, eyes narrowed.

"This is a key... to the door."

Damon nodded slowly.

"A key... I'm not sure we should be opening that door..."

Sylvia opened her journey book, activating her skill. Her face tightened.

"I don't know what's inside. But I also don't want to pay the price to find out."

Damon stood, the weight of the decision hanging in his chest.

"...We open it."

With a breath of hesitation, he placed the object into a carved groove on the door.

A soft click echoed through the chamber. The runes pulsed. The door groaned...

And then, slowly... it began to open.

Revealing what lay sealed inside.