

Shadow 331

Chapter 331: The Not So Dead

Damon wasn't sure what to expect when he opened the door—maybe some sealed chamber, a hidden crypt, or a forgotten shrine.

Well, he wasn't wrong.

The room was filled with countless chains, each one etched with runes that glimmered faintly in the dim light. They hung from the ceiling and snaked toward the center of the room, like tendrils drawn to a heart. As Damon stepped forward, ghostly lights flickered to life—an eerie glow that painted the room in hues of cold blue and green. The walls were carved with symbols, patterns that spiraled like ancient veins, pulsing with dormant magic.

It all led to the center.

There, a grotesque magic circle had been formed—its lines drawn with precision and malice, surrounding a malformed corpse impaled by thick, thorned roots. Damon felt his skin crawl at the sight. The body twitched, twisted, and pulsed unnaturally. Its shape—abominable. A husk of something once human, now mutated beyond recognition. It reminded him of the rotfolk... or worse, something torn from the nightmares of Lysithara's ancient past.

He winced, turning his gaze away in disgust. That's when his eyes landed on a dusty table near the wall—littered with old tools and books, the covers frayed and pages curled from time's decay.

Sylvia approached silently, her eyes locked onto the chains.

Evangeline took a step forward, switching places with Xander and raising her sword slightly—ready to use her magic or purge skill at a moment's notice. Matia slipped in behind them, her steps careful and silent.

"What is that..." Leona muttered, recoiling in disgust.

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. "What are those?"

She pointed toward strange scribbles that lined the walls—jagged, overlapping the runes, scrawled in erratic spirals and lines. Some looked as though they'd been carved using bone or nails, others daubed in dried blood and... flesh. Long since dried, they looked no different from ink. In other places, the walls were blackened—burned, as if seared by something unbearably hot.

Damon stepped closer, squinting. His voice came low. "It says... Akasha. Akasha. Akasha..."

Sylvia reached out slowly, brushing her fingers against one of the markings. "Who is Akasha... or what is Akasha?"

Before anyone could answer, a soft voice responded—clear and gentle, yet strangely empty.

"That's a good question..."

All of them spun toward the direction of the voice—blades and spells at the ready. Damon instinctively glanced at the exit. His eyes narrowed as they returned to the root-bound corpse at the center.

Silence.

Then the voice spoke again, distant yet disturbingly calm.

"Armor of Pale Crown... Shattered Ice... Dawnglass... Stormwake... Bound Colossus... and Crescent Seer. This takes me back. So that's why I woke up..."

Damon hesitated. He wasn't sure whether to respond. For all he knew, acknowledging it might give the horror power over them. So he turned to Sylvia.

She gave him a small nod.

Damon exhaled, stepping forward with quiet tension in his chest.

"Who are you...?"

The voice paused. "Who am I...? Hmmm. That's an interesting question. People used to recognize me just by hearing my voice. Lysithara... has really fallen. We used to believe we were the greatest. A city of wonder. A hub of learning that would never die."

Sylvia's voice was low. "Are you... someone from the First Epoch?"

Quiet.

"...First Epoch. Is that what we are now? History. Dust. I suppose... that's fitting."

She paused, as if trying to recall something lost to time.

"My name... I had forgotten it. But seeing Dawnglass... brought it back."

The voice turned melancholic. Tired. Laced with something almost human.

"I am Valarie. Sunwarden of Lysithara... or at least, I was. You children... you wear the Ascendant Armors. Hmmm. I can't remember... what was I...? Ahh, forget it."

Evangeline's eyes narrowed. "You were one of the six... the champions."

Silence again, longer this time. Then the voice returned.

"I was one of the fools who believed Mugu... made the mistakes that led to our downfall."

Damon tensed at the name. Mugu again. The system had mentioned that name—twice. Then the lady in the mist. This... Mugu had to be important.

Xander gripped his spear tightly. "If you were one of the six, then why are you here? Why is the city like this... if it was so great?"

But Damon shook his head. That wasn't the most important question.

No. The real question was—

"How do we leave this city?"

His words grounded them. The silence that followed was heavier.

Valarie didn't move. Her corpse remained impaled, still twitching slightly with each breath.

"By walking through the gates. Isn't that obvious?"

"We can't." Leona's voice cracked slightly.

Valarie responded quickly.

"Why not? The gates of Lysithara are open to all... our city is paradise."

Damon finally saw it—despite her clarity, she wasn't entirely there. Maybe she had retained some of her mind... but much of it was long gone.

"Lysithara is destroyed. We came through the Whispering Forest. We can't go back."

"Whispering Forest? Hmm... Ah. The white gate... it was destroyed by Ittorath... and Ythar..."

She didn't seem familiar with the name but seemed to have connected the dots.

Damon gritted his teeth. Her words jumped from one idea to the next. Names, places, histories he didn't recognize.

"I don't know who those are. We just want to know if there's a waypoint—somewhere we can use to leave."

The others were silent, watching.

"Oh! You should have said so. Silly me, rambling about visitors... If you don't want to take a gate, just use a waypoint or a teleportation gate. They're scattered all over Lysithara—you couldn't miss them."

Damon sighed in relief.

"Where?" Leona asked, stepping forward.

Valarie paused again. "Hmm... I don't live in this district. But... there should be one nearby. Just a few blocks away. It's next to a fountain."

That was it. Progress. Damon nodded to the others. They were almost free. Just one last answer.

But then Valarie spoke again.

"If you want... I can show you the way. I know Lysithara quite well, you see..."

Another pause.

"All you have to do... is free me from this."

Chapter 332: Ahh What Beautiful Lips

Damon nodded, a gentle smile on his face as he glanced at Sylvia, who nodded back in turn.

The strange voice echoing from the rotten corpse urged them with a plea soaked in desperation—"Free me..."

"Sure, why not..." Damon smiled faintly. "Just give us a minute..."

He began to back away slowly, the others instinctively following his lead as they inched toward the door.

Valarie's voice suddenly echoed, eerie and almost childlike in tone.

"Ahhh, you guys are going to the door... wait—wait! It's not what you think..."

Damon sneered as his hand reached the door's surface.

"Do we look stupid to you? No one seals something with magical chains without a reason."

Valarie gasped in disbelief. "Wait! I didn't mean free me from the chains—I was talking about freeing what's left of me... from the rot... wait—wait..."

Damon didn't even pause. He began pushing the great door close.

"I'll teach you runecraft! I'll... I'll show you the path! Please—don't leave me here..."

The doors shut. Her voice echoed one last time, distant, drowned in grief.

"Please... don't leave me... to the rot. I just... I just can't hold on anymore..."

A shadow lingered on the floor beside her, unmoving—then shifted. Outside the door, Damon, who had just left his shadow behind, sighed and stepped back inside.

Sylvia walked in behind him, her expression unreadable. At the very least, they needed to confirm her sincerity.

"You... you came back..."

Damon looked at her—or what remained of her. A rotting, malformed corpse bound in hundreds of glimmering chains, her presence steeped in sorrow.

"Don't act smart with me. You help us, we help you. That's all."

Valarie paused. Her voice was calm this time. Too calm.

"Very well. I am agreeable. However... you must honor your word. My condition is simple. I promise to show you to a waypoint—or a teleportation gate. In return, you will fulfill one term."

Damon nodded. They were also desperate—but they couldn't afford to show it.

"What are your conditions?"

The others waited in tense silence, letting Damon speak on their behalf.

Valarie's voice was somber.

"Take what's left of me. Bury it in the cemetery of Dawnbreak Hollow... or in the heart of Lysithara, where my comrades rest. Those of them who were lucky enough... to find rest."

Damon scoffed, a mocking expression twisting his features.

"As if we'd be so dumb. I have a better proposition—you act as our guide while we're here. You teach us runecraft. You will hide nothing. When we find a way out, then we'll bury you. Take it or leave it."

Valarie was quiet for a long moment.

"You won't even let a dead woman rest... have I not suffered enough?" Her voice lowered to a whisper.

"Very well, then. You have a deal. I will honor my word. I swear it upon the Six Ascendants of Lysithara. I, Valarie, will keep my promise. However, should I fade before completing this promise... you will bury me—or at least take me to the heart of the city."

Damon nodded. He had to be thorough. No tricks.

"One more thing... I want you to answer my questions with only 'yes' or 'no.'"

He glanced at Sylvia, who already had her Journey Book ready—it had truth-detection ability as long as Sylvia was willing to risk it.

Valarie didn't hesitate. "I have no reason to lie to children... but very well, then."

Damon met Sylvia's gaze to ensure she was ready.

"Do you plan to do us harm?"

"No."

Sylvia nodded.

"Do you have any intention of betraying us?"

"No."

"Are you using any form of self-suggestion or mind techniques to avoid telling the truth?"

"No."

Damon continued to ask more questions—methodical, calculated. He left no gaps, no room for vague intentions. In the end, he confirmed it: Valarie had no combat ability left. No hidden powers. Just lingering sorrow.

Evangeline stepped forward, her voice gentle.

"How do we free you?"

Valarie released a long, unnatural sigh.

"You don't. My body is already gone... at least most of it. Just take the part untouched by rot."

Damon frowned, his tone skeptical.

"And which part would that be?"

Valarie's voice almost sounded... amused.

"Isn't that obvious? How else have I been talking to you? My mouth, obviously..."

Damon blinked, confused, his eyes reluctantly scanning the corpse—eyes he'd purposefully avoided using to examine her grotesque form. But then he saw it—clear as day.

Beautiful lips. Untouched. Immaculate. Resting atop the rot as though placed by a sculptor's hand.

"Well... what are you waiting for? Use something to move me off this rot..."

The lips spoke. They moved independently from the corpse. The mouth of Valarie continued to speak even though it was clearly disconnected from anything living.

They all stared at each other, speechless at the sight.

After weeks in the Death Zone, they had grown somewhat accustomed to strange things—but this... this was new.

"So..." Leona finally broke the silence. "Who's gonna touch that?"

Damon turned to Xander with a deadpan stare.

"It's obvious, isn't it? The person with the longest weapon. Good thing you brought a spear, aye Xander?"

Xander's eyes widened, pointing at himself. "Me?! What about you?!"

A dry chuckle echoed from Valarie's lips.

"Hahaha... you children are so amusing. Don't fret—if my malformed corpse bothers you, then burn it. Use the lamps. Set the body ablaze. Burn the roots of that wretch, Ythar, along with it."

She paused—waiting. Almost expectant.

"My lips still retain a lingering effect from when I wore the armor of Duskglass. It grants resistance to rot..."

Damon's eyes narrowed. Understanding clicked into place.

The Ascendants' armors... that must be it. They granted resistance—maybe even immunity—to rot. That would explain why the six champions of Lysithara survived and fought the rot.

But then the question clawed at his mind.

Why did Valarie fall? How did she lose her armor? How did she become this hideous parody of life—dead, yet still lingering?

While Damon pondered the nature of the armors, Evangeline reached up. Without hesitation, she plucked one of the ghostly flames from the wall and tossed it onto Valarie's corpse.

The blue-green fire ignited instantly, spreading like a phantom tide. It burned away the roots and flesh entwined in rot.

A ghastly screech erupted, shaking the walls—the rot screamed as if it felt the pain.

The flames surged... then faded. Only ash remained.

And from the smoldering pile... a single pair of feminine lips remained.

The lips smiled.

"I rejoice... to hear your miserable scream, vile outsider..."

Then the lips stretched slightly, as if looking at them all.

"Well... shall we depart, my young successors?"

Damon glanced sideways at Leona.

"Erm... I'm not touching that. Who's carrying... her... it... I mean, the lips?"

He looked at their faces. Every one of them averted their eyes. Leona even whistled awkwardly.

Damon bit his lip.

He was the party leader.

He had no choice.

This wasn't what he signed up for—but then again, nothing in Lysithara ever was.'

Chapter 333: A Desire To Be Needed

Being party leader was a glorious job. You got all the limelight, all the glory. The more fame the party gained, the more you benefited.

At least, that was the story—how it went in the tales and fables.

Truth be told, it was a shitty job.

You had to organize the party... keep a bunch of wayward lunatics with extreme individuality together as a cohesive force. If the party rose, you rose. If it fell, you fell too. And sometimes, it came with really shitty chores.

What chores, you ask?

Well... hmmm.

Perhaps the shitty job of carrying a living pair of lips.

And that wasn't even a figure of speech. Damon was literally—truly—carrying a pair of living lips. The lips of a woman long dead... after goddess knows how many centuries.

Damon had done a lot of things. Once, he'd bitten off the eyes of a war troll. He'd even hugged a hideous beldam.

But this... this took the cake.

The lips were small and delicate, perched on his shoulder. However there was no body, absolutely no physical form.

She had no tongue in her mouth, if anything her mouth was see through, in the sense that you could peer through it like a peep hole.

Valarie's lips should have been beautiful—if her body wasn't long gone.

Now it was just creepy.

Damon smiled bitterly. It almost reminded him of the first time he caught a toad in his village.

Completely starved, he barely roasted it before he and his sister forced it down their throats.

The thought of his village shoved the revulsion away—replacing it with a different kind of bile. The desire to slaughter them all. Even after all these years, Damon couldn't bring himself to forgive... or forget.

The insults, the pain..the isolation, the betrayal. Forgiveness was not something he had in him.

He closed his eyes, grounding himself in the dire reality. He wouldn't get the chance for revenge if he died in Lysithara.

Right now, he had the power to kill them—all of them.

A shame, though. He was thousands of miles away, trapped in a death zone.

If not blood would flow.

"Why such a grim look... I can feel your killing intent from all the way here..."

The lips—Valarie Sunwarden's lips—spoke from his shoulder.

They twisted slightly, as if annoyed.

"Don't tell me you're disgusted by what's left of me. I'll have you know, I was one of the most beautiful women in Lysithara. Not to mention your predecessor..."

Damon sneered. Her words dragged him back. He would survive. Killing them was just one of the reasons.

In the end, those people were merely side characters in his life.

"You aren't so beautiful now, are you? Come to think of it, what are you, anyway? Are you an undead?"

Valarie's lips pressed together—surprisingly expressive even without a face.

"Boy, it seems you have no respect for women... or your elders..."

Evangeline scoffed, walking up the stairwell.

"She's only known you for a few minutes and she can already tell..."

Damon ignored Evangeline's words, he would not bicker with her today.

Leona sighed, coming to his defense. Although to a third party observer it may not have seemed that way.

"Come on, Evangeline. He's a better person now. The old him might've stepped on her a few times for good measure..."

Matia, armored head to toe at the rear, grunted. "Huh. He would."

Xander sneered with mild irritation. "He would've done worse. You don't know him like we do."

Matia remained quite she didn't know him as well as they did. However she could paint a picture.

Valarie's lips were silent, as if staring at Damon.

'Ahh... why do I always get the troubled children among my students? Everyone else's are always so good and obedient...'

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. "Why do I feel like you're including the rest of us in that complaint?"

Damon smiled. Of course, she was.

Valarie scoffed, even as a pair of lips.

"You look like you'd help him commit a crime."

Sylvia's eyes widened. She looked away from Damon.

"We should've left her to rot..."

Damon walked out of the stairwell. It was still morning.

They hadn't spent much time underground—just enough to free Valarie and grab a few books under her instruction.

He looked around the broken cathedral. The statue of the goddess loomed behind them, the mark of the Unknown God etched into the wall behind her.

Xander muttered as he stared at it.

"Heresy..."

Damon said nothing.

Faith in the Unknown God was considered heresy, even though some places—like Vuldren—openly embraced it.

Valarie was quiet for a moment.

"Yes, it is. But it wasn't always..."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about...?"

Damon and the others waited in silence, listening.

"I... I don't remember. But... faith in the Unseen Sovereign... it gave us choice... When Mugu spoke of it, he mentioned free magic. Magic without attributes. The elders... ahhh... my head..."

The lips groaned, pained—trying to recall something long buried.

Damon frowned. "You don't have a head. You're a pair of lips."

Valarie was quiet for a while before speaking softly.

"I suppose so... More reason for me to rest."

Sylvia glanced at Damon, clearly asking for his permission. Sylvia Moonveil always thirsted for knowledge. That's who she was.

Maybe that's why she kept using that vile book—despite the pain, despite the price.

Damon wanted to know, too.

That same burning question lingered in his mind.

Sylvia's voice broke the silence, eyes focused on the lips.

"Who is Mugu?"

Valarie was silent—as if pulling the memory from some deep, dark crypt.

"Mugu was a young man... from the Doom Continent. He became Valcara's apprentice. Eventually, he learned from all of us. Driven by a single-minded desire that would later... break him."

She paused. The words seemed painful.

"His drive became resentment. With no one to turn his blade on, he turned it to the heavens.

And the heavens responded.

That... was the beginning of the end....the prelude to the unknown god.."

Chapter 334: Zero Epoch Truth Seekers

Damon swallowed hard... Valarie seemed to know... this mugu was actually someone who had led to the unknown god's presence... in their world.

The pair of lips opened, but no words came...

"Hmm... why... I..."

Valarie stopped. "Hmm... it seems I can't remember..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. "Are you catfishing us? Baiting us with bits and pieces? This better not be a trick..."

Valarie's lips, on his shoulder, remained close.

"No... it's not. I have been sealed for so long, and I am technically just a discarnate... soul..."

The lips were all she was. However, as if glancing at Sylvia, she continued.

"Mugu was young and ambitious. Eager even... However, what broke him was time... Perhaps it's better to say the world moved on without him. His reason for living became pointless... he became unneeded... forgotten.*"

Damon narrowed his eyes. He became unneeded... Damon knew what it was like—to need to be needed, to believe you were important to someone.

After all, he was that way as well. He wanted to be needed by his sister, Luna. He wanted to be her hero. He wanted...

It was the only reason he lived... for her.

Did Mugu have such a reason? Some reason to be needed...?

Sylvia looked at Damon. He probably didn't know the face he was making...

Valarie seemed to be observing him as well.

"Your expression... it almost reminds me of him. Driven. Stubborn. I hope you share a different fate... That stubbornness was something he shared with the City Lord..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. He was wearing the Ascendant Armor that had belonged to the City Lord—Pale Crown.

The pair of lips smiled.

"Well, worry not... it's not likely for you to end up like Mugu. Youths from the Doom Continent have always been troublemakers..."

Leona furrowed her brow.

"You keep talking about this Doom Continent, but there is no Doom Continent..."

Damon nodded, agreeing with Leona. However, he already knew the answer.

Valarie's lips opened and closed.

"Did one of the nine continents get destroyed? Isn't there a rule against blowing up continents...?"

Evangeline looked at the pair of lips on Damon's shoulder with a deadpan expression.

'Yet she remembers that...'

Sylvia shook her head... she decided to explain to Valarie, who had been dead for many centuries and was still technically dead.

"There are nine continents, which are... Soltheon, the War Continent... which we are on right now..."

Damon sighed. "Let's get moving. I feel like this might take all day..."

Valarie agreed. However, she seemed more interested in what Sylvia had to say.

Damon decided to interfere to save time.

"On the west would be Solarion, the Sun Continent... to the east would be Lorvas."

Matia, who had been quiet, spoke up.

"Up north would be Norrath, the Frost Continent. My homeland..."

They walked towards the cathedral doors.

They proceeded to give her a rundown of the rest of the continents: Lothria, the Wild Continent to the south. Floating above the sea with countless floating landmasses was Vuldren, the Sky Continent in the northeast—the home of magic and innovation.

Aerona, the Magic Continent, in the southeast.

Far to the southwest was the eighth continent, Tyrvelia—the Voyage Continent... which was now technically a large archipelago.

Valarie listened until the last part.

"Then Centros—the Doom Continent, at the very center of the world..."

Sylvia shook her head.

"That was in the past. The name of the continent has changed. It's now called the Demon Continent—a name given to it, supposedly, by the Demon Lord Ashcroft."

Valarie's lips pressed together.

"Ashcroft? Who's that? What gave him the authority to rename a continent named by the old deities of our world... and aren't demons a myth...?"

Xander narrowed his eyes, hoisting his spear over his shoulder.

"The only deity is the Goddess... and now the Unknown God..."

Damon raised his head at her words. Demons were a myth...

He pushed the cathedral door warily, as if expecting something to attack them the moment they stepped out.

Still, Sylvia's burning curiosity surpassed the dread of what may be lurking on the streets of Lysithara.

"Demons are real. Why did you say they were myths...?"

Valarie's lips were quiet on Damon's shoulder, as if taking in the ruins that were once her home—the city that was foremost in greatness, knowledge, magic, science, innovation... now just despair.

"We failed..." she seemed to be muttering to herself.

The lips moved. "We failed. That's why demons are real now..."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Lysithara was a place of knowledge. We thought we knew better. After the Goddess took away people's True Names and only allowed people to be born with a single attribute..."

The others narrowed their eyes... that was news to them. They had no idea the Goddess had anything to do with names or attributes.

Xander pulled off his helm.

"What are you on about? People always had a single magic attribute. And what even is a True Name? Names are given to us by our parents at birth..."

Damon sighed. He was also surprised when he first found out that people used to be able to use multiple attributes of magic. But the part about True Names was news to him as well.

Valarie's lips pressed together.

"I can't be sure... it's just speculation... an old wives' tale. We used to be taught, apparently... in the past—the Zero Epoch, or the Epoch of Beginning—people had True Names and multiple attributes. But the Goddess changed it..."

Damon listened quietly as Valarie spoke of some long past...

"Lysithara was founded by sages to seek the truth. The city was created towards the end of the Zero Epoch. By the First Epoch, it was the most advanced place in the world—a hotbed of learning where people from everywhere came... but we got arrogant. The Goddess... she had a reason..."

Her voice seemed frustrated.

"Our hubris brought it all crashing down... we shouldn't have sought it. We shouldn't have opened the doors... and we shouldn't have let them in or even trusted them....we got greed for more..."

"Who?" Damon asked.

"The visitors... Opening the gates to the—"

Before she finished, a bone arrow streaked past Damon's face. He dodged, looking up with a cold gleam in his eyes...

He would have died if not for his Danger Sense skill...

Raising his head, he found a monster—a skeleton holding a bow in its hand, with pieces of fabric still clinging to its rotting frame...

"Undead," Valarie muttered.

Chapter 335: Hunter

There in front of them was a skeleton carrying a bow—dead, but yet still animate.

Perhaps this should have been a frightening concept. However, Aetherus was a magical world, even if this wasn't Lysithara—a ruined city.

Undead were not that unusual... the undead could rise on their own, or as a result of magic from a caster who used black arts, or even from mana seeping out of a dungeon.

These animate corpses were of different ranks—a skeleton, sadly, was at the lowest level.

Damon glanced at it coldly, the world slowing down beneath the beholder's gaze...

He didn't sense its shadow. Then again, he hadn't been using Shadow Perception ever since he almost had his brain fried in the Whispering Forest.

Even so, he didn't sense a living shadow from it. He had encountered a lot of strange shadows, but this felt more like the shadow of an object than that of a person.

It had no life...

He raised his hand, shooting a magic bullet—a ball of shadow energy that went straight through the skull, bringing the skeleton down with a clang.

This was Magic Bullet at Level 2, with suppressed sound.

"That's an impressive variation of the common Magic Blast spell... not bad..."

The lips smiled. "If you add runic magic to it... it would be stronger..."

Damon narrowed his eyes as a few more skeletons began emerging from the alleys and side streets between broken buildings.

Sylvia frowned, her bow ready to fire.

"It seems we're surrounded..."

Evangeline nodded, her armor glowing with light. She was the natural bane of all things impure.

"They are mostly rankless. I see a few large ones in the First Class..."

Valarie spoke, her voice almost sad.

"These are the people who didn't get consumed by rot while alive... They died on these streets. Now they wander in death. Try not to cause a commotion. Lysithara had many warriors—some of them died as well..."

She paused. " Don't underestimate them. One skeleton is nothing—but hundreds can drag down even a knight."

Damon could easily see how bad it could get. Some of these were just civilians, low-level city guards, or pages...

They weren't a threat, but if a powerful knight was now an undead, then they would be at least Rank 2 and above.

Leona covered herself with the Sovereign Mantle form of the Armor of Stormwake.

"I sense something looking at us..."

Matia, who was also in heavy armor, formed a mace and two hovering ice shields.

"From which direction?"

Leona shook her head. "I don't know. Just a feeling."

Damon glanced at Sylvia, hoping for a divination or some revelation.

She shook her head.

"My skill isn't responding. I could ask... but I don't know what price it would demand...or if I'll be willing to pay it."

He took a deep breath as the skeletons grew in number, yet didn't attack. It was almost as if they were a coordinated force... with a leader.

"That would be bad..."

"Do you see that, boy?" Valarie's lips on his shoulder whispered. "Can you tell me what's wrong here...?"

He nodded. Valarie was acting a little too much like a teacher. Maybe it was a habit from when she was alive.

"They are organized. Low-level undead don't have this type of intelligence..."

"And?" she asked, as if waiting for something else.

Damon frowned, giving it more thought.

"They are being led by something. However, whatever it is isn't confident it can take us. Or... it's gauging our strength. Either way, we can be sure—it's very intelligent."

The lips smiled, pressing together. "You get 9.5 out of 10... but there's more. Right now, you are all being hunted—which means you have a target on your backs..."

Evangeline held her rapier, her face covered by her helm.

"So what do we do...?"

They all looked at Damon. Valarie's lips on his shoulder offered no response.

So he answered. "We kill the hunter."

Xander, who looked like a menacing tyrant in his armor, held his spear.

"Shouldn't be too difficult... find the strongest and ugliest undead... and kill it....again."

The skeletons continued to gather until the rooftops were filled—then, like a tide, they charged at the party.

Xander raised his spear, swinging in a wide arc. The skeletons falling from the roofs shattered like a tide of broken bones, crashing down like rain.

Leona swung her greatsword, teleporting to the center of the tide, with Matia shattering them with her ice mace.

Her Ascendant weapon was the most versatile.

She jumped into the air as if to take flight—but remembered she had lost her wings. Instead, she rolled on the ground, giving a skeleton an uppercut that shattered its dusty old skull into powder.

Evangeline moved with phantoms of light trailing her—an effect of her armor.

She was like a glowing beam of destruction, leaving shattered bones in her wake.

Damon shot his omnidirectional gear to the roof, grabbing Sylvia by the waist. He landed with feline grace.

Raising his hand, he began firing off magic bullets while Sylvia tried scanning for the strongest of the skeletons.

The others rampaged through like a storm of destruction. On his shoulders, Valarie's lips watched, speaking with a degree of interest.

"You children are quite powerful—already at the peak of the First Class. With some guidance, you'll soon reach the Second."

Damon didn't pay her much mind—he was shooting magic bullets, but the skeletons kept climbing the roof.

Sylvia didn't seem like she would budge, so he had to act as her guard.

He needed something with more reach, but he wasn't willing to use Ashborn just yet.

He opened his palm, sending mana to the tips of all five fingers—and activated the Magic Bullet spell.

The magic bullets shot from his fingers in a fast and uncontrolled spray.

Valarie let out a breath, watching him try to improve his spell.

"You're doing it wrong... If you want to control mana with that much propulsion... rotate each round. Don't treat them as individual attacks—but as one whole..."

Damon paused, biting his lip.

He decided to give what Valarie said a try... he spun each bullet and tried to envision them as a single form.

Closing his eyes... he unleashed a barrage.

He heard a familiar chime.

[Mastery: Magic Bullet > Magic Gatling]

Valarie's lips opened in surprise—as if she did not expect him to grasp it.

Chapter 336: Sniper

Valarie's surprise was warranted. She had given him a tip to improve his spell, but she didn't really think he would get it right on the first try...

The pair of lips that was technically all that remained of her body was slightly taken aback; however, she quickly regained her composure. She was an elder in Lysithara—she had seen many geniuses in her lifetime. Why should one surprise her, even now in death?

Damon smiled thinly. The mastery mechanic was proving to be more powerful than he expected; its benefits were now tangible.

'I need to add more spells to my arsenal.'

With his new magic bullets forming a gatling, he could no longer focus on suppressing the sound of the shots—but it didn't matter. He was tearing down skeletons like wheat before a scythe.

[You have slain undead]

[You have slain undead]

...

The system chimes continued as his mana slowly drained. Roof tiles shattered. He didn't focus on precise aim—even with his Dead Eye skill giving him laser-point precision.

However, the more he slew, the more the skeletons began to appear... from buildings, from dark alleys...

And just as Valarie had predicted, they began to get overwhelmed. It was inevitable—an enemy with vast numbers and no will of its own. A single-minded desire to end the living.

They could smash and crush as much as they wanted... Eventually, they would lose in a battle of attrition. Simply put—the dead do not tire. Neither do they fear.

Leona was the first to get swamped. She was in the center of a horde of skeletons... hacking and slashing away, lightning sparking from her greatsword. A shame skeletons were poor conductors of electricity.

They disregarded the fear of being electrocuted that a living entity might have had and swarmed her—covering her from head to toe in a heap of bones before she could teleport away.

Leona roared, unleashing a cloud of destruction. Bones were flung in all directions as she appeared from under the heap, lightning arcing through her armor in glowing white tendrils.

She retreated several steps, moving closer to Xander—who was surrounded by skeletons, holding them off with makeshift barricades of gravity magic.

She stood behind him.

"Hey, act as a meat shield... you can take abuse, right?"

She wasn't wrong. He was the most durable of the party, able to take far more damage and walk away the least hurt. His armor bulked his already monstrous defense like a living titan.

Xander punched a skeleton's chest clean off.

His face hidden under his helm, he muttered,

"You could've asked nicely. I swear, if that mongrel Damon gets everyone to call me meatshield, I'll bury him alive..."

Despite his grumbling, he shielded Leona with his body as she began charging mana for a massive storm.

"Don't waste your mana..."

Damon's voice rang from the rooftop where he stood, picking off skeletons with his magic gatling.

Magic bullets sprayed from his fingertips like a stream of death.

Leona bit her lip but obeyed. He turned his gaze to Matia

Matia weaved between skeletons. Even amid such a massive swarm, not one laid a finger on her. She moved with lethal grace, switching her Ascendant weapon between various forms.

It wasn't a surprise. Her skill was literally called Lethal Grace. She carried herself with a deadly finesse. Even in heavy armor, she remained fluid and untouchable, avoiding every incoming strike.

Damon surveyed the battlefield, biting his lip. He considered using Shadow Sense—but the memory of that mental backlash was still fresh. He had to be careful. He had no idea what lurked in Lysithara's shadows.

Especially with the lingering presence of the Visitors... who might've been the reason their world had fallen.

The pair of lips that belonged to Valarie pressed together before she spoke.

"Hmmm. This tactic seems familiar..."

Damon glanced over. "What are you on about?"

The lips pressed again—delicate, beautiful even in death.

"I'm saying I remember who has such an ability... If I'm not wrong, this should be the skill Grave Call. A knight in Lysithara had a class skill that allowed it. It was his second class skill... he apparently found the skill scroll in a dungeon."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Class advancement didn't always give top-tier skills. One only got four skills—given. The rest were empty skill slots, to be filled by scrolls or experience.... The first class was always certain to get a skill but the others were randomized.

However only four skills could be given.... The rest were not.

If Valarie knew this person, who they used to be... then he certainly hoped it wasn't a Rank 3 monster. Otherwise, they'd need to run for their lives.

Suddenly, Damon sensed a tingle on his skin. His Danger Sense skill picked up a threat. He turned sharply, eyes locking on a distant broken building—one of the high towers. An archer stood by a window...

The creature was undead... but still had remnants of flesh. Emaciated, sunken eyes, clad in a helmet and wielding an enchanted bow and arrows.

Damon didn't hesitate—he fired a magic bullet in that direction. But it couldn't reach. Its range dissipated before impact.

Valarie's lips opened in mild surprise. "Well... things aren't looking good for you. That's a sniper. Take cover."

Before she could finish, an arrow streaked toward Damon. He instinctively drew his sword to block it.

"Dodge, fool!"

Valarie's voice cut in sharply, and Damon obeyed—ducking low as the arrow exploded overhead, shaking the rooftop.

The sniper knocked another arrow—this time, aiming for Sylvia.

"Arrows that take long to fire are supercharged. Dodge those. And he's using runic magic."

Damon bit his lip, eyes flicking toward Sylvia. "Please tell me you're done..."

She looked back at him. "Twenty seconds left if I want a clue without paying a heavy price... Buy me more time."

Damon groaned, raising his sword. "This woman will be the death of me..."

He stepped in front of Sylvia, bracing himself for the next shot.

"Who the hell even invented these damn arrows...?"

Valarie coughed lightly. "Ahem. Sorry about that... it—it was me."

Damon seriously considered tossing the pair of lips into the swarm of undead.

He had to hold off enemies from both sides, protect Sylvia, and deal with a lunatic dead sniper.

She smiled.

"You shouldn't worry... This is a learning opportunity. It's not every day someone gets the legendary Valarie Sunwarden as a teacher. Might as well teach you a rune or two..."

He pulled out his bow, aiming carefully.

"Even your ego is legendary..."

Chapter 337: Shoot Out

The air was solemn.

Damon felt the world slow down—not because of a skill, but the cold realization that he was the target of a sniper. Worse, he couldn't move.

'This is going to be a long twenty seconds.'

He sent his shadow toward the direction of the building. It would deal with the aftermath.

Damon needed to bulk up his defense.

He activated the Sovereign Mantle form of the Armor of the Pale Crown.

In an instant, the regal ashen armor shifted—its form thickening, becoming heavier. He was encased in dull, grey metal. He could feel the soul core of the armor vibrating. His face was covered by a faceless helm, yet somehow... he could still see. It was as if he were peering through shadows.

The crown on his head rose, hovering above him. It twisted, adding more coils to its form, and floated behind him like a dark, ominous halo.

He took a deep breath... raised his bow... and knocked an arrow.

Another breath. Calm. Steady. He focused on his target, trying to recall everything Back-to-Back had taught him about shooting at long range.

He could almost hear the elf's voice behind him...

Telling him to steady his breath...

A red beam highlighted the path of his arrow, a result of Dead Eye.

He would have used Bloodletting, but it was useless. This opponent didn't have blood.

There was no point.

He fired his arrow before the undead archer fired his.

The arrow soared through the air, reaching the tower window.

The undead archer merely swatted it aside with his hand.

Valarie let out something like a sigh—if it could be called that. She no longer had a body, only a mouth.

"The arrows lose momentum before they reach him. He'll just catch them..."

Damon gritted his teeth as another arrow thundered through the air.

This time, the archer wasn't being subtle.

Sonic booms cracked the silence. He couldn't dodge—if he did, Sylvia would be hit.

He raised his sword just in time.

The impact came with a boom. The air shuddered. Damon was pushed back slightly as the arrow shattered into shrapnel. Fragments clanged against his armor like angry hail.

The pain was dulled by his armor.

He swung his sword aside and raised a hand.

A barrage of black flames erupted, engulfing the skeletons attempting to climb the roof.

Agony surged through him. Burning agony—no, ten times the agony of burning alive.

He coughed, suppressing a groan.

Even with pain resistance, tenfold, self-immolation was a torment no one should have to endure.

But he stood.

He knocked another arrow, eyes burning with fury beneath his faceless helm.

He aimed.

Valarie finally spoke.

"Madness is trying the same thing over and over again..."

She paused.

"Try using a rune... of acceleration."

Damon's jaw clenched.

"And that would be?"

She responded quickly. "Draw a rune that looks like drifting wind..."

She puckered her lips and shaped one in front of him with magical light.

Damon gave a quick nod as the undead archer prepared another shot.

"How do I draw it?"

She smiled, a mocking edge in her voice. "My apologies, I forgot you're ignorant."

"Create a projection of the rune in your mind. Then let mana flow from your circuits. I'll send the image into your mind..."

Damon didn't resist.

He didn't trust her—but he was desperate. And pissed.

He felt the mark etch itself into his mind. He followed her guidance, eyes closed, allowing her to guide his hand.

Slowly, at the tip of his bow, a rune began to form—black, born of his shadow attribute mana.

It radiated speed. It seemed as if the world had been touched by his power and he had brushed some invisible law.

At that moment, Sylvia groaned.

Her eyes glowed. "I found him. Let's go!"

Damon didn't move.

He was still aiming. The sniper was still aiming. They locked eyes—one living face covered in helm, the other hollow and dead.

The sniper's bow glowed. Runes circled it like a halo.

Valarie sensed the tension. "Whoever hits... wins."

Sylvia sensed Damon's focus and drew her Ascendant Weapon. Twin blades shimmered in her hands as she tore through skeletons trying to climb up. She kicked down a chain, sending a mace-wielding undead crashing to the ground.

Damon zoned in on the sniper. He steadied the rune, ensuring its formation was perfect.

"Steady..." Valarie whispered.

His eyes caught the creak of the bow.

The undead had notched an arrow, ready to fire.

"Now—" she began, as if giving a signal.

But the archer fired first.

Two black streaks shot through the air like bolts of wrath.

A booming flash erupted from both ends. They crossed paths midair.

The undead almost smiled—certain of Damon's death.

But Damon didn't flinch.

The moment before impact, he activated the enchantment of the Pale Crown Armor—his body turning to mist.

The arrow passed through harmlessly, slamming into the rooftop behind him, collapsing the old building on its side.

The undead marksman had no such trick.

The black rune-tipped arrow shattered its skull.

It collapsed.

A chime echoed in his mind.

[You have slain: Undead Marksman]

His shadow devoured the corpse where it had been hidden.

[You have gained 10 attribute points]

[Mastery – Sniper Lv. 1]

[Mastery - Runecraft Lv1]

The building crumbled. The undead on the ground rushed forward.

Damon jumped down, landing beside Sylvia.

He kicked an undead aside and deactivated the Sovereign Mantle, returning to the much lighter Ascendant Form.

Undead swarmed them from every angle.

"Retreat now! We need to regroup—now!"

He turned, sprinting toward a narrow alleyway, hoping to bottleneck their pursuers.

The others followed. Xander and Matia covered the rear, weapons flashing as they held off the horde.

He looked to Sylvia.

"Did you find the hunter?"

She nodded, her eyes scanning the Journey Book.

"Yes. It's in a... pastry shop. About two kilometers from here."

Valarie giggled.

The disembodied voice of the city's former resident was amused.

"You kids are taking me to Zaci's Sweets? Oh, how sweet of you..."

She smirked—just a pair of lips now.

"Well, then. Let me show you a shortcut..."

Chapter 338: Grave Call

Damon was in the lead, sword in hand, taking down every opponent with a single swing of its blade.

The sword had the ability to induce disintegration on its target—body and soul. Damon himself had once been on the receiving end of its power.

As for why his soul didn't break apart... he could take a guess. It was the armor of Pale Crown. It must have protected his soul with its power.

They still didn't know what the ascendant armors were fully capable of, but they would find out eventually ... they had smashed hundreds of skeletons. Slowly, with each victory, they came closer to vanquishing ten thousand foes.

"Left..."

Valarie's voice called out from his shoulders. Damon glanced at the pair of lips... that was all that remained of a once great champion...

Damon jumped through a window—what was left of a ruined house. The house had no roof, bleak sunlight spilling from above. The ground was littered with broken bricks, fragments of walls, and mold.

Shrubs and dry grass grew through the once polished floors...

The others followed in after him. Xander grabbed a piece of the wreckage and threw it in the direction they came, crushing a few undead in the process.

Damon glanced at Sylvia.

"What are we dealing with... here..."

Valarie's lips opened, interrupting. "He was once known as Thren, a young knight in Lysithara..."

Damon nodded, glancing at Sylvia, who seemed to agree with her...

He didn't ask Sylvia any further. Her skill was dangerous, and besides, Valarie seemed to know—or have known—him when he was alive.

She continued, "I don't know what he had become due to the rot, but he uses tactics like this. It's his skill, as I mentioned earlier... it's called Grave Call..."

Damon ran up the side of a broken wall, flipped, and jumped out a window, kicking an undead spearman in the chest mid-air.

He narrowed his eyes, looking out from where he landed. He saw more and more undead... and worse, their commotion was growing louder. More types of creatures would be attracted by the noise...

"Sylvia, what are we dealing with..."

The elf girl fired a few arrows at the skeletons, her armor glowing faintly as its enchantment activated.

"He's a rank two Mist Knight..."

"Jump."

Damon sighed, following Valarie's instruction as he leapt into a hole. He'd killed one Mist Knight before and almost lost an arm. Now he had to fight another one... and worse, he had to kill ten to level up...

The others landed beside him on the ground floor.

"Seal it off... now."

Valarie's voice was hurried. Xander raised both hands, using gravity to lift nearby wreckage and slam it over the entrance, sealing the way and burying a few skeletons behind it.

"Hurry, take the basement..."

The basement in question was half-collapsed, mold-ridden and filled with a few rotting corpses...

Sylvia narrowed her eyes, suspicious.

"I can't help but think you're leading us astray..."

Valarie's lips opened in surprise. "Why is that..."

Damon sighed. "Because we're going the opposite way from our goal..."

Valarie's lips froze. "Ohhh my goddess... I think I forgot the way... goodness, my apologies... I have a bad memory..."

Damon gritted his teeth, watching as skeletons began to claw at the barricade of wreckage.

"Damn... is this what we get for letting a pair of lips show us the way..."

Xander smiled wryly. "She doesn't even have eyes..."

Valarie chuckled.

"Relax, children. I was just joking... there's a teleportation circle in the basement. That's assuming I got the right house..."

Damon didn't hesitate. He dove into the half-shattered basement, shoving past debris—just as a hulking undead with three arms broke through the wall.

Its body barely resembled a human anymore—more flesh than bone, a hideous, monstrous thing.

The others didn't hesitate either. Matia blanketed it with a wave of ice weapons.

They followed through, and Xander collapsed the passage behind them—the aftershock sinking part of the floor. Damon dropped—no, fell—down with it, covered in rocks and dust.

He got up, dizzy, hearing the clatter of skeletons above the wreckage. He held Leona up.

...Lucky she was wearing her helm.

Avoiding head injury, she was fine. He wasn't so lucky... a mild concussion. He shook it off, grimacing, then checked to make sure everyone else was alright.

He glanced at Xander.

"I think you forgot to bury us alive."

Xander winced. "Sorry. I underestimated these old structures..."

Damon coughed slightly, brushing dust from his face.

He looked around at the collapsed space.

"Valarie, where to next..."

The pair of lips had remained stuck to his shoulder, despite... everything.

She coughed, somehow, even though she had no lungs or anything at all.

"I'm a little dusty. Mind brushing me off..."

Damon looked at the pair of lips.

"I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole..."

"I'm on your shoulder..."

He winced. "I can't help that..."

Valarie's lips curled into a smile. She must've found him amusing.

"Look for a lever—it's by your left..."

Damon looked around, noticing a small lever hidden in the broken wall.

He walked up to it.

"Pull it down, then up... then up... then down..."

Valarie gave the sequence, and he obeyed.

Finally, the ground cracked open, revealing glowing runes.

"Hehe," she smiled. "It still works... I wasn't certain..."

Damon felt the urge to stomp her into the floor. She had risked their lives when she wasn't even sure. Then again, they didn't have many safer options.

Perhaps meeting this discarnate soul, trapped in her own lips, was a stroke of good fortune. He couldn't be sure... but it was better than nothing.

He stepped onto the circle of runes.

"Memorize this rune, children. I'll quiz you on them later..."

They teleported away—Valarie's voice taking on the tone of a teacher.

As the light faded, they found themselves in an old room. Valarie's lips smiled.

"Well, here we are... Zaci's Sweets is right across the street. And more than that... we now have the element of surprise on our side..."

Chapter 339: Twisted Choice

Damon squatted down, peering out the cracked window at the decaying, unassuming building cloaked in mold and shattered in places. Its glass panes, though mostly intact, revealed the broken tables and chairs inside—along with a few skeletons. Ancient fossilized corpses—some human, some beast.

Zaci's Sweets must have been quite a prosperous business in Lysithara's heyday, considering it spanned three floors and was quite large...

He glanced at the window, debating whether to use Shadow Perception. He had come to learn that his spatial awareness wasn't undetectable—some entities could tell when they were being watched. Hell, even his own party had begun developing a nascent ability to sense when something was observing them.

Valarie pursed her lips. The delicate pair of lips rested on his shoulder.

"Hmmm... I suppose this place didn't survive the fall either... We used to come here a lot—Vathren and I—when we were children... well before he became city lord."

Damon steadied his breath, winded from all the running. Evangeline glanced at the lips on his shoulder.

"You knew the city lord since you were children?"

Valarie's lips parted, then closed again, as if dragging back half-forgotten memories.

"Yes... he was my cousin. We... grew up together. Not all of us were originally from Lysithara, though. Being a hotbed of knowledge, a lot of people moved in and out of the city... it was a cultural hub. Things that were found and created in Lysithara spread across the world in no time..."

Damon and the others listened quietly.

"That... soon led to the fall of our world. Even bad things could spread fast."

Leona looked at the lips that seemed to slum slightly, weighed down by what they recalled.

"I'm sorry..."

Valarie's lips twitched. "Why are you sorry? It's not your fault. It was our own hubris..."

She paused, her lips trembling slightly. "I shudder to think that we could've saved our city... if we—or our city lord—had made one cruel decision..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Was she implying there was a way they could've saved Lysithara?

Sylvia's grey eyes flicked toward her. "How?"

Valarie's lips curled into a thin smile.

"I've forgotten many things... but oddly enough, I can't forget that day. It was right over there—on the top VIP floor of Zaci's Sweets."

"We had found a way to save Lysithara. Just... one decision. Everyone knew it."

She sighed—even without a physical body, only her lips remaining.

"Why didn't you?" Xander asked, his eyes barely visible under his helm.

Valarie's voice was tired... as one would expect from a soul sealed for thousands of years.

"My... the city lord... Vathren didn't agree. He was prepared to fight us all if he had to. But we believed in him. We followed his judgment... even if the future looked bleak."

Damon's eyes narrowed. He recalled Alazard, the Mist Knight, regaining a shred of will. Even consumed by rot, he had raged about the city lord's decision.

"Victory demands sacrifice..." he muttered.

"Yes," Valarie whispered.

"What was the sacrifice?" Matia asked. She understood sacrifice—she'd given up her wings to save Damon. Sometimes, sacrifices were necessary.

Valarie pressed her lips together.

"The gate was open. We succeeded first... and we were the first to face the consequences. The battles grew increasingly dire. While the visitors were enemies of our world, not all of them were on one side. We struck deals with some... forging the Ascendant Armors to fight the more twisted ones—the ones that spread rot and corruption..."

She fell silent, as if struggling to recall something she'd wished to keep buried but didn't dare forget. Her voice trembled with pain.

"We found a way. It was a simple sacrifice... We only had to let half of the population die. In truth, we knew it was just slaughter... It was going to be random. Anyone could be chosen. And we would win."

"It was a small sacrifice... to save our home, our glorious city. But Vathren... he refused."

Damon could feel the weight in her voice. That was a difficult choice—kill half the population to save the rest... or let all die fighting for their city.

There was no winning. If they sacrificed half, even if it was random, everyone would've lost someone. But if they fought together... maybe they wouldn't have lost. Maybe.

But they had. Standing now in the ruins of the once-glorious city, the outcome was clear. They lost. And now, most of the people were corrupted—monsters who had once been men.

Valarie was quiet. Then she continued.

"At first, we believed we could win. The Ascendant Armors gave us immunity... forged using the secret techniques of the outsiders, from a place they called the Crystal Palace. We truly thought we could win. We had the magic. The knowledge. More than that... we had the will."

She scoffed, mocking their arrogance.

"We watched our people slowly lose their sanity. Our soldiers began to break... watching comrades turn into monsters. Forced to raise their blades against former friends... We fought enemies within and without."

The sorrow in her voice reached their wary hearts. Once, they had treated her like just a strange pair of lips—an oddity in an ancient ruin. But she had been a person. Just like them.

"Soon... they fell into despair. We shouldn't have welcomed the visitors —or believed them. But not all of them were evil. Still, our people wanted someone to blame. Someone to pay for their losses... for the fall of their home."

Damon bit his lip. He could tell where this was heading.

"They pointed their fingers at Vathren. Soon, their blades. But he was too powerful. He loved this city more than anyone... He couldn't bring himself to accept what had happened. So he went mad..."

"...Mugu—that wretch—tricked him."

Damon's hands clenched. This Mugu again... that name kept surfacing, as if he had singlehandedly changed the course of the world. Why...?

She sighed.

"He disappeared for a time.. after he returned. He was... something else. We were stripped of our Ascendant Armors... and I don't know what became of us after. But Vathren... he sealed me under that cathedral. Unwilling to kill me. Even corrupted..."

There was a low agony in her voice.

"Chained... the rot spread into my form. And killed me. It was slow... agonizing. I resisted for a years... but without the armor... even my will succumbed."

Damon bit his lip. Her tale was bitter. Miserable. Lysithara was in ruins now... how did she feel, knowing all she fought for had crumbled?

They were quiet.

Then Valarie's lips curled into a smile as of the pain was nothing to her.

"Don't worry... My successors, the ones who inherited the Ascendant Armors... I will make sure you don't end up like us."

She paused. Her voice turned cold.

"Let's start by killing... that corrupted abomination that still thinks it's a knight of Lysithara."

Chapter 340: Finally Knight Worth Respecting

Valarie's tale had ended, and Damon opted for them to make a plan of attack. Luckily, the Mist Knight controlling the undead was just a rank two monster.

If it had been rank three... they would've had to flee.

A rank three monster was as powerful as Lilith able to tear down buildings with relative ease. Then again a rank two monster could do just that.... Or worse.

After a few minutes, they had come up with a plan. It could hardly be called that—it was reckless, dangerous... but it was all they had.

The idea was simple: split the party. A dire move, yes, but not without logic. Each member was strong in their own right, and if Valarie was to be believed, this particular Mist Knight relied more on his summoned undead than swordplay.

That didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. If anything he might be even more insidious.

The plan: keep his summons away from him. That was Xander's job—the group's tank—and with him would go the two most offensively capable girls.

Matia, with her vast arsenal of enchanted weapons.

Leona, wielder of the storm itself.

Their role was clear—hold the undead at bay, stop them from interfering... while Damon, Evangeline, and Sylvia went for the kill.

This formation wasn't chosen at random.

Sylvia was knowledge incarnate—a seer with the power to charge up devastating spells.

Evangeline was the bane of the undead, her purge skill and golden light a scourge to the cursed. Not to mention she was a swift and deadly swordswoman.

And Damon... Damon was Damon. Did anything more need to be said?

He took a deep breath. He didn't like the idea of splitting the group even for a moment. But they weren't going far.

Valarie had explained that Mist Knights were once noble knights of Lysithara. When the city lord became the Keeper of False Truths, they fell—corrupted not just by rot and madness, but by twisted ideals. Not all had turned. But those who did became mist-bound horrors.

Damon sighed. The city lord, Vathren, was still alive. Corrupted, yes—but not slain.

Perhaps that was why the armor Damon inherited still remained dull, ashen... fog-like. Not the shadows it should have become.

'It's not like I can kill such a powerful horror anyway...'

He turned, nodding at his companions.

"You three... be careful."

Then, to lighten the mood, he glanced at Xander, covered head to toe in heavy armor.

"You girls don't hesitate to use Xander as a meatshield, alright?"

Matia sighed, nodding. Leona grinned, slapping Xander's back.

"I won't even feel guilty."

Damon smirked. "Remember—stay hidden until we draw attention."

Xander let out a sigh. "You're turning into a nagging old woman. Fine, we'll stay hidden until he calls his minions."

Valarie's lips curled into a smile. "What beautiful camaraderie... this reminds me of when we almost fell up the Abyss under Vuldren."

Leona blinked, confused. "Don't you mean fell down?"

Valarie's human lips quirked. "No, I mean up. Nasty place. Never go there."

Damon sighed. He didn't remember hearing about any abyss under the Sky Continent, but then again... he didn't know much.

"Let's go."

He turned himself into shadow and dove into the darkness.

He ignored the disorienting pull, the feeling of his shadow energy being drained. Hunger clawed at him constantly these days. He and Leona were half the reason their rations never lasted...

He emerged in the shadow beneath a table—inside Zaci's Sweet Shop. The enemy was on the third floor.

The shop resembled a restaurant more than a store. And it was one—if the only menu was sweets and baked goods. A runic screen flickered above the counter, displaying prices and specials. How the runes still worked, he had no idea.

"It draws on ambient mana," Valarie whispered from his shoulder. "They're self-sustaining runes. Mostly used in formations and seals."

Damon tilted his head. Valarie's lips were still perched there, slightly translucent. It almost surprised him—he couldn't bring anyone into shadows even if he tried. And he had tried. With Leona. With Sylvia. It never worked.

'Is it because she's dead...?'

Valarie sighed softly. "I suppose the Outsiders didn't bring all bad things. They did teach us Runecraft... and improved our technology."

"Shh..." Damon pressed a finger to his lips.

Valarie scoffed. "Don't shush me, boy. I'm a teacher. You can't shush your teacher."

Crouching down, Damon picked up a shard of shattered glass and tilted it just right—catching the pale light of the sun and bouncing it toward the next building.

The signal was given. Coast was clear.

He narrowed his eyes, spreading his shadow perception through the building despite the risk. If something sensed him...

He opened his eyes. Empty. No movement. He didn't dare probe the top floor.

"Why is it empty...? No guards... even outside?"

Valarie sneered. "Take a guess."

Damon's expression hardened.

"He doesn't want to give away his location. If I had to guess... he sees through the eyes of his undead."

Valarie's smile widened. "Yes, I know. You're going to call it cowardly—"

"Cowardly?" Damon looked at her like she was a roach.

"Why would I think it's cowardly? I pride myself on having no pride. I respect his genius. Finally, a knight with some backbone."

"..."

Valarie was left speechless. Her lips formed a stunned 'O'.

She had expected a man of principle. Someone noble—after all, he was leading a party of warriors that practically radiated honor.

She was wrong.

While she recovered from the whiplash of Damon's personality, the others snuck in—even those in heavy armor had used the awakened shell form of their gear. Apparently, stealth wasn't off the table.

Xander must've overheard.

He glanced at Valarie's lips on Damon's shoulder and muttered, "Thousands of years of experience... wasted.... She still couldn't see through this Mongrel."

Damon sneered, waving his hand dismissively.

"Alright, you three. Make sure nothing comes up from below."

His tone dropped, sharper now.

"While the rest of us make sure that Mist Knight... never comes down."