

Shadow 381

Chapter 381: New Food

Damon glanced around the area—it was dark. The ground was surprisingly dry. No... actually, that wasn't the surprise.

What caught him off guard was that the darkness wasn't as deep as he expected. Maybe the others couldn't tell, but Damon—who viewed the world through shadows—could sense the difference.

It was simple.

The shadows were more vibrant. The darkness felt fainter.

That could only mean one thing: there was a light source nearby. Maybe even a natural one.

He shook his head. He wasn't sure if his assessment was accurate... or if he was just hungry again.

He poured all the attribute points he'd recently gained into his mana, then sacrificed them to feed his shadow.

His hunger was now manageable.

The others walked slowly into the gloom, Sylvia at the front, acting as the guide—the Seer of the party.

That said, the ones actually leading were none other than Xander and Leona. The two of them were more durable, with tank-like builds. They made up the frontline.

But Damon wasn't paying much attention to the party. His focus was ahead. He had swept his shadow perception at least a kilometer into the dark.

Nothing noteworthy. Sylvia was still the one guiding them properly.

He kept to the back under the pretense of watching for shades that might follow them.

Well... that part was true.

Though he was the one controlling those particular shades, Damon couldn't wait to experiment further.

Any creature or shade they killed still counted under his kill record—which was good. Goddess knows he needed the stat points.

Except for devouring the corpses, he couldn't get the points.

Killing other shades seems to be the exception, though.

Maybe the shades feed on each other when they defeat them.

That's why he got attribute points regardless.

He'd gained a lot from hostile shades they'd encountered, so he had somewhat recovered his lost mana.

Still, it wasn't enough. He had to be careful. If he tried controlling something too powerful—or too numerous—he might run out of shadow energy entirely.

Damon called one of the nearby shades, closed his eyes, and tried something new.

He sent it drifting upwards, focusing on the thin tether connecting him to it. Then he activated his shadow perception through the shade's form—or lack thereof.

Sure enough, he could see. It wasn't as expansive as viewing through his own body, but it gave him a limited 360-degree view.

It couldn't expand... but that was fine.

'I wonder what else I can actually do...'

His footsteps were silent in the dark as he trailed behind Matia, just a small distance from the glowing orb of light Evangeline had created to illuminate the path.

He made just enough noise for the party to know he was following.

He could've gone completely silent if he wanted to—but he didn't want them to worry.

The next thing he wanted to test was simple.

He had the Shadow Storage skill. Could he put a shade—or multiple shades—into the limited space within his shadow?

He called two from the area around him...

Then paused.

'Wait a minute... doesn't using Shadow Storage also consume shadow energy?'

If he wasn't careful, he could drain what little he had left.

"Hmmm," Damon muttered, shaking his head aloud.

Well, no point wasting time. Shades may be weak, but they were useful.

He glanced at his shadow and activated Shadow Control and Shadow Storage. His shadow rippled faintly.

Then slowly, the shade sank inside.

Damon could still feel its tether. It was still "alive," if it could be called that. He felt his shadow energy drain slightly—but that was expected whenever he stored something.

'I wonder how many I can put inside...'

He could still sense the last of his shades. About fifty left. Not much—he'd had hundreds just minutes ago.

Damon called on them and began pouring them into his Shadow Storage, one by one.

Slowly, he started to feel the space becoming full.

'Hmm, that won't do... shadow energy is lost too quickly...'

He sighed, pouring his remaining mana—now back in the low thousands—into replenishing shadow energy.

'There goes the attribute points I gained...'

'Still... if only... hmmm, wait. Ahh. Of course I can try that...'

The shades were important.

Actually—no. They were dispensable.

They were hard-to-notice minions. Easy to control. No real will, no thoughts, no fear. Couldn't be tortured for information. And they could induce fear, drain life force, even cause mental disturbances.

But there were two things he hadn't tried.

First—the nature of the shades themselves.

In bright light, they looked no different from a normal shadow—so much so that most people completely overlooked them.

They could be his eyes.

But that wasn't what he was testing now.

He called out half the shades from his Shadow Storage. The skill couldn't store living beings, but shades weren't exactly alive to begin with.

Damon gave a command—to his shadow and to the shades.

"Turn yourself into my shadow."

To his own shadow, he gave an overlapping order.

The shades floated around him briefly, then with a cold whoosh, sank to his feet, forming multiple dark pools. The shadows merged, folding into each other, layering upon his own until they were indistinguishable from it.

Damon moved his hand. The shadow mirrored him.

He stepped closer to the light source... and sure enough—

They all behaved like one single shadow.

He smiled.

Evangeline, who had created the light, paused. Her footsteps echoed in the silent corridor.

"Damon, are you okay back there?"

He replied calmly, "Yep... no shades here."

She nodded, continued forward, and Sylvia guided them around a turn in the path.

Damon glanced down.

It seemed he didn't need to waste shadow energy putting them in storage after all.

Now came the real test.

What would happen if his shadow devoured shades?

"Devour them," he commanded.

There was a pause.

His shadow stirred... then rippled.

[You have gained +5 Shadow Energy]

[You have gained +5 Shadow Energy]

[You have gained +5 Shadow Energy]

...

Damon's eyes widened.

Chapter 382: Much Needed Scolding

He sucked in a breath of cold air. Did that really just happen? Did he actually just gain shadow energy?

This was not an illusion, nor was he hallucinating from the madness in his life.

This was real—a way to gain shadow energy without devouring people.

"Ahh... ahh..."

Damon felt his heart tighten. A wave of relief and frustration slammed into his chest.

All the days when he... had to kill and devour people, just so he wouldn't turn into a monster.

The fear he had locked deep within—fear that he'd lose control, that he'd devour his friends if the hunger ever won.

He clenched his fists.

All of that... all of that could've been solved by eating shades.

Damon took a deep breath. He shook his head. That wouldn't have changed much—shades were rare.

But still... it made sense. He could devour them for shadow energy.

One, they were souls. And two, they were mostly human—or at least, shadows of intelligent, sapient creatures.

Damon realized he could also use shades for something else. He could use them to increase the counter for his Ascendant Armor.

He'd be closer to ten thousand vanquished foes if he destroyed shades or used them to vanquish enemies.

"I need more shades."

He stopped, glancing back into the darkness behind him. He bit his lip.

Should I really go back? Should he hunt more?

But what about his party? He needed to be here to lead them.

And he couldn't tell them either. Not because he didn't trust them to keep a secret—but once a secret was shared between more than two people, it was hardly a secret anymore.

At least, that's what he'd learned from that wretched Elf... back to back.

As for why he was so secretive—

'Undead control spells, skills, and abilities are taboo by the Temple.'

If he used it openly, he'd be hunted as a necromancer by the Inquisition.

Hell, someone might even call him a lich pretending to be human. Or worse—a demon.

Not even demons would likely approve.

Necromancy, or any dark art that tampered with the souls of the dead—or even their shadows—was frowned upon, reviled.

And Damon understood. If any of his parents had turned into shades, and some schizophrenic kid raised them like puppets... he'd be furious too.

But that wasn't going to stop him. He needed this power.

Still, the shades had many uses. And for now, his shadow hunger was... quiet. He was full—with some to spare.

"Let's rest before we reach the next chamber."

Damon's voice echoed from the darkness.

The party, illuminated by the ball of light Evangeline conjured, paused, glancing in his direction.

The light split off, catching Damon's face in the shadows.

"Hmmm... you want us to stop..." Leona raised an eyebrow.

Damon nodded. "Yes. We need to rest after the battle. The next part may be dangerous..."

He looked toward Sylvia as she activated her skill. She winced—just a little—but he noticed. She'd grown so used to pain that her face rarely shifted.

'She must be really suffering to show that expression...'

He hated that she had to use such a vile skill.

But it was a necessary evil.

"There's a chamber ahead. We can rest there," Sylvia whispered.

"The place after that... is called the Forbidden Library. It's vast. But we shouldn't linger. The moment we get there, we use the windows and get out."

Leona clenched her fists, wearing a bright smile.

"We're finally getting back on track... after being underground for days."

Sylvia frowned, her white hair gleaming in the light.

"I wouldn't get so excited if I were you. We're in the heart of the city now. The Keeper might still be searching for us..."

A cold silence followed. A lingering dread seeped into their hearts.

"Wha... wha... how do we overcome something like that..." Evangeline's voice trembled.

"We face him, obviously," Damon replied coldly.

Matia frowned, glancing at him.

"Did you figure out his game?"

Damon shook his head. "I haven't. But I found a way to delay it."

Xander shifted, spear in hand. "How?"

Damon tilted his head, a thin smile curling his lips.

"By asking nicely. And one other thing..."

Leona narrowed her eyes. "What's the other thing?"

He pointed at his ear. "Cover your ears. He won't force you to play unless you're trying to leave the city."

Evangeline blinked, then stared at him in disbelief.

"That's... the dumbest damn plan I've ever heard. Did you hit your head before the shade fight or after?"

She glared at him, furious. Evangeline did not like this plan one bit.

"And I imagine you plan to risk it yourself... while we flee, right?"

He shrugged. "More or less. But covering my ears won't work... so I gotta make sure I really can't hear him."

Sylvia sighed. "I don't approve at all... It's too dangerous; you're being reckless. I know it's a last resort, but you'll still gamble..."

"I know you won't," he interrupted her.

Evangeline's glare deepened—he'd seen her angry before, but this... this was a new level.

Before he could react, she slammed her fist into his face, sending him flying into a nearby wall. The stone cracked from the impact.

Her voice trembled with rage and frustration.

She launched into a tirade, berating him for risking his life without a single thought for how others felt.

Blood trickled from Damon's nose as he slid down the wall... but somehow, he smiled.

A tired smile.

Not because of the punch—but because for once, he felt like someone genuinely cared.

People who actually cared about him were far too few.

Fewer than ten in the whole world.

The way her golden hair swayed, the way she pointed and ranted—it almost reminded him of his mother.

"That angry expression is almost the same as hers..."

Evangeline planted her hand on her waist.

"Who are you talking about?! Are you even listening to me?!"

She grabbed him by the crevices in his chestplate, lifting him until they were eye level.

"Listen up! When we see the Keeper—we run like hell! Do you understand?!"

Damon smiled. "Sure... as long as you let me go..."

Chapter 383: Can You Keep A Secret

"It really hurts, she's so mean..." Damon's voice echoed with a hint of childish resentment.

"Dear, dear... don't worry, I'll make the pain go away," Sylvia whispered, her tone sweet as she smiled and began to heal him.

A soft white glow emerged in her palm, gently caressing Damon's cheek.

He shot Evangeline the occasional glance, each one deliberate and smug.

She rolled her eyes, while the rest of the party stared at Damon and Sylvia with dumbfounded expressions, clearly stupefied by the scene unraveling before them.

Leona could no longer keep quiet.

Sylvia's healing magic was potent—able to mend cracked ribs and shredded muscles—there was no way Evangeline's punch had actually done any real damage. It was obvious something else was going on here.

Sylvia was clearly using this moment to get close to Damon. Leona didn't want to read too deeply into it... but she couldn't hold her tongue anymore.

"Emmh... can you guys get a room...?"

Sylvia's fingers twitched to a halt, her face turning sharply to the side. But from the red flush creeping up her elf ears, it was clear she'd just realized how it looked.

Damon glanced at her... and promptly burst into laughter.

Clearly, their mischievous party leader was having fun—and Sylvia was today's chosen target.

"What are you talking about, Leona? I'm in serious pain! That orc woman hit me! Sylvia was just being kind and healing me..."

Evangeline gasped, gritting her teeth.

She was stunning—golden hair, sun-marked eyes, and a figure sculpted like a goddess. Calling her a city-toppling beauty wasn't an exaggeration... and yet this bastard had just called her an orc.

"You... you... you better take that back or else..."

Sylvia gave Damon a side glance, her lips curled in a thin smile.

"If she hits you again, I won't heal you. It's best not to anger our secondary healer."

Damon sneered.

"Fine. I'll apologize... to the orcs."

Evangeline didn't even bother responding. All her ladylike grace and noble decorum crumbled in an instant.

She lunged for him.

Sylvia was shoved aside as Evangeline tackled Damon to the ground, straddling him without a shred of elegance.

Poise? Grace? None of that.

Damon might have been a lot of things—but a feminist wasn't one of them.

To him, all parts were fair game in combat. Equal rights, equal fights. He didn't hesitate to shove her back—even in the chest.

"Ahhh... bastard!"

Hmm. Maybe that wasn't a smart move.

Evangeline unleashed a chaotic flurry of slaps, followed by sharp scratches across his face—none of it held the finesse of a trained swordswoman. They were like two kids brawling in a schoolyard.

The rest of the party just watched.

No one moved to help.

After nearly a minute of huffing and puffing, the two combatants froze, both glancing at their teammates—who were barely holding in their laughter.

"What is wrong with you people?! Why aren't you trying to stop us?" Damon snapped.

Matia giggled softly, covering her mouth, while Sylvia clung to Leona, tears forming in her eyes as she struggled to hold back.

Leona lost it, pulling Sylvia down with her as they collapsed in a fit of uncontrolled laughter.

"It's funny because... they said it together!"

Xander removed his helm, letting out a roar of laughter that echoed through the chamber walls.

Damon and Evangeline glanced at each other, then back at the others, their faces etched with indignation.

"You people are horrible... and that's saying something coming from me..." Damon muttered.

Evangeline tapped his shoulder, shaking her head.

"No, don't sell yourself short like that. They're obviously worse... Imagine getting into a fight and your friends don't even try to break it up."

Damon spat to the side with theatrical disgust.

"I know, right? These savages... I've done horrible things, but I should be taking notes from them..."

Their banter was so sincere it only made the others laugh harder.

"It's not funny!" they roared in sync.

Sylvia finally managed to compose herself enough to stand. Honestly, she was a little grateful to Evangeline for causing such a scene—it distracted everyone from her earlier embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. It's just... we kind of agreed not to interfere when you two start bickering. We wanted to see how it would play out..."

Damon was appalled.

"Hey, Eva... these people..."

She nodded, equally mortified.

"Yes, Damon... they have no morals. I thought you were bad, but I owe you an apology..."

Damon shook his head solemnly.

"No. It is I who should apologize... We're the last good people in the world of Aetherus..."

After that, the two of them proceeded to berate everyone while the rest of the party continued laughing.

For the next few hours, they all just... played around, forgetting the looming threat that surrounded them. As if they weren't deep in the heart of a death zone.

They lived in the moment, laughing in the face of possible death. Every second could be their last—and they knew it.

Damon sat quietly later, a small smile on his face.

This could be it. Tomorrow, they'd either find hope... or death.

He took a deep breath.

They had originally stopped to rest—but ended up staying there for the night.

They ate. They laughed. Once, they were just a bunch of students.

Now... they were warriors.

Comrades forged in the nightmares of these Badlands.

Damon stood up, his fist clenched in quiet resolve. He needed the Shades more than ever now. He needed to capture as many as possible.

He had to.

"Hm? Where are you going...?" Matia asked, a piece of dried jerky paused near her soft pink lips.

He offered her a casual smile.

"I just wanted to take a walk, that's all..."

Matia stood quickly, grabbing her weapon.

"I'll come with. It's dangerous here..."

He shook his head.

"Ahh, no. It's fine..."

He didn't want anyone seeing what he was doing anyway.

She glanced at him, nodding slowly.

"If you don't want me to follow, I'll respect your will. But this place is dangerous... so I hope you'd at least let me shadow you."

The others were watching now. If he went alone, they'd definitely worry.

Matia said she'd respect his will—but she didn't exactly look happy about it.

Damon sighed before the others could chime in.

"Fine, Matia. You can come... as my shadow. Happy?"

She smiled, equipping her helm with a quick motion.

"I'd like that."

As they walked together into the shadowed corridor—the way their party had originally come—Damon glanced over at her.

"Can you keep a secret...?"

Chapter 384: Shadow Slaves

Matia didn't know what secret Damon was talking about, but she felt a strange bubble swell in her chest when he said—yes, implying—that he would tell her a secret.

She followed behind him, unable to see anything in the darkness. Not even a glimmer. She had forgotten to ask Sylvia or Evangeline to cast the nightlight spell on her. A simple thing, and yet now it felt like a crucial mistake.

Still, she felt reluctant to go back.

Her eyes were that of a fairy at the first class advancement—surely she could handle a little darkness.

Damon didn't seem to mind the shadows at all. He moved effortlessly, like the dark was a second home.

After a few minutes, Matia's vision adjusted—more or less. She couldn't make out the finer details, but that was fine.

She didn't need detail to slay her foes.

'I'll just rely on my sixth sense...'

Luckily, that was one of the things Valarie had drilled into them—never rely on your eyes alone.

Speaking of Valarie, Damon had left the disembodied pair of human lips with Evangeline. She had been asleep, so it wouldn't have mattered even if he had brought her.

But now Matia realized it was just the two of them.

She trailed behind him, mimicking the way her father used to walk behind the King of Winterhaven—cold, stalwart, one hand always resting on the hilt of his sword, ready to strike at any moment.

Damon didn't really know what Matia was thinking. Honestly, he blamed it on that goddamn armor—ever since she got it, she'd become colder. Harder. Sharper.

She had always been strong-willed, especially when she decided to embrace who she truly was. But these days, she was just a bit too stalwart.

He almost missed when she was visibly afraid—too terrified to even move.

'I knew she had a fire in her when she blew the chest off that goblin mage...'

Matia Faldren was no weakling. Now, she was a powerhouse.

Damon was certain he'd win if they ever fought, but it wouldn't be easy. Not even close.

If anything, he'd be hard-pressed to land a hit. She was a graceful killer. Lethal in motion.

Then again, that was her first class skill—lethal grace.

Come to think of it... when was the last time he saw an attack actually hit her?

He walked down the silent chamber, Matia following soundlessly despite the weight of her armor.

Soon enough, they reached their destination. The place where Damon had once fought the shades with his party—or rather, escaped from them.

He could feel the chill in the air, the residue of their presence still lingering. He spread his shadow perception across the ruins. There weren't many in the area, but that was fine.

He wasn't here to run.

He was here to enslave them.

These lost souls of the dead would serve him better than left here to rot and haunt.

Damon sighed quietly.

These people... they must have been the former residents of Lysithara, back when the city was still vibrant. Still alive.

Now it was a ruin. A crypt. A living mausoleum for the dead.

Perhaps the ones that became shades were the lucky ones.

Some had become rotfolk. Others had twisted into even more corrupted things.

The city was lost.

And their lord... was a horror beyond words.

"Matia..." Damon whispered.

"Yes," she answered calmly.

He turned to look at her. She might not have been able to see him clearly, but he could see her—perfectly.

"What you see here stays between us. No matter what."

She nodded without hesitation.

"Understood. You have my word."

Damon nodded, turning back around. He extended his perception again—shades, hidden in the walls and ceilings, entered his senses.

He raised his hand, the shadows pooling in his palm.

"Obey me," he commanded.

The shades stopped in their hiding, falling under his will. One by one, he called them forth, feeling his shadow energy drain with each one.

Matia drew her ascendant weapon, letting it form into a sword. Her eyes darted to the rising shades, warily watching them.

Damon raised a hand, halting her. The shades slithered into place, forming shadows at his feet like loyal hounds.

She watched them with wide eyes.

Damon sighed.

"As you can see, I can control shades. Well... shadows, actually."

Matia nodded, masking her surprise, though her hand still gripped the hilt of her sword.

She had one burning question. And oddly, it wasn't even about the shades.

"Why didn't you tell the others... do you not trust them?"

If he didn't trust them, she would have to reevaluate her place among them.

Damon shook his head. "I do trust them."

She removed her helm, letting it dissolve into drifting snowflakes.

"Then why didn't you tell them?"

He smiled faintly.

"I do. But trust and burden aren't the same thing."

He glanced at the shades still rising from the ruins, black silhouettes rising like smoke.

"Knowledge is a burden. I didn't want to give them that weight. If they knew, they'd have to lie. They'd have to carry that burden for me."

Matia sheathed her sword with a soft hiss.

"Very well then. I shall guard this secret with my life."

He blinked, then laughed.

"Wow—it's not that deep. You really need to relax."

Matia looked awkward, literally trying to relax her shoulders and arms. Damon chuckled again.

The shades continued to rise, one after the other, from the buildings and crevices around them.

It was quite the sight.

Almost like.

A dark lord and his most loyal knight.

Damon called shade after shade until he had nearly a hundred under his control. As he bonded with the hundredth, something entered his perception.

He froze.

His connection recoiled. He pulled back his shadow perception instantly.

Then he crouched, grabbing Matia and pulling her down with him.

Below, at the base of the slanted ruins, dark water shimmered faintly.

Something humanoid was walking across its surface.

His danger sense went wild.

The creature stopped.

And slowly... ever so slowly...

It looked up.

Chapter 385: Chase

The creature's gaze drifted upward, scanning past the slanted, geometrically disabled ruins that loomed like the broken bones of a forgotten civilization. Damon instinctively pulled his head back before their eyes could meet.

He tugged Matia's arm gently, slowly edging them both away from the ledge.

The fear he felt—real, [remorseless]—held his body still, not in paralysis, but in controlled calm. A calm born from survival instinct.

What he saw down there wasn't just a monster—it was a horrible monster.

He didn't even know if it had seen them yet... but he had seen it. Its body, its form, its dreadful silhouette standing in the dark.

It resembled too many things they had already encountered in Lysithara.

And it felt wrong.

Tall. Gaunt. Drenched in waterlogged robes that clung like seaweed—cold, decaying kelp. Its limbs were elongated, too long, arms dangling well past its knees. Its fingers were jointed wrong, the way a broken marionette's hands might be.

Its face... hidden. Concealed behind a cracked ceremonial mask, fused to its skull with age and black rot.

It dripped black water constantly. The liquid sizzled and hissed upon touching anything.

Damon didn't dare meet its gaze. He didn't want to.

But he was certain... it was still staring up toward them.

And worst of all—this wasn't even a monster they could hope to fight. This was a being in the realm of true horror... the realm of nightmares... the realm of monsters like the Beldam.

A creature with the power to impose its will on the world itself, shaping a small area to its nature.

A Rank Four Monster. A creature with a domain.

Damon knew it.

Matia hadn't moved. Not an inch. Her expression was calm, but her iris trembled—a tiny quake betraying how shaken she truly was.

Damon began moving. Slowly. Quietly. Back into the darkness, pulling Matia with him, step by careful step.

Then it came.

"Ahhh... I see you..."

Its voice was a chorus of drowned whispers. A multitude of voices, all whispering the same words in perfect, horrific unison.

Damon didn't hesitate. He didn't wait for an invitation.

He unleashed the shades hiding in his shadow.

"Slow it down," he whispered.

That was all he said. That was all he needed to say. The shades scattered, becoming his eyes.

He and Matia bolted into the darkness.

And through the vision of his shades, Damon saw—red eyes, glowing beneath the wet hood.

The black water around the creature rose unnaturally, spiraling beneath its feet into a pillar, lifting it upward.

Damon's teeth clenched as he ran faster. He left more shades behind, scattered and watching.

They were his alarm. His early warning. His window into the gap between death and escape.

Thunderous footsteps echoed behind him. A dreadful rhythm. A heartbeat of doom.

They reached the others—just in time.

The party was packed and ready. Tension hung thick in the air.

Evangeline touched Matia's forehead, casting a spell.

A soft glow spread over Matia's eyes—Nightlight. Her vision shifted into the dark spectrum.

Damon noticed a pair of lips resting on Evangeline's shoulder—Valarie had woken up at some point.

No time to celebrate.

Sylvia stood at the front of the tunnel leading deeper. Her posture sharp. Eyes scanning.

"Come on! Hurry—we don't have time!" she barked.

Damon followed. Leona took the lead, sword drawn, lightning dancing along her armor.

"It's after us," she hissed. "I can hear the whispers even here..."

Damon ran beside her.

"I don't know what it is—but it's rank four."

Valarie, still perched on Evangeline's shoulder, gave a dry smirk.

"Trapped together like this... Looks like your luck just ran out."

"Not helping!" Evangeline shouted, ducking under a shattered statue.

"How'd you know we were in trouble?" Damon called out.

Sylvia glanced back at him, voice grim.

"I had a vision... of our deaths."

He climbed over a ledge, offering a hand to the others as the sound of rushing water grew louder... vast and monstrous.

His shades were dying one by one.

"It's a Drowned Saint..." she muttered.

Sylvia spoke louder now, her voice carrying over the sound of water.

"They're worse than monsters."

Valarie nodded slowly. "Used to be human. Comrades, even. They tried to save the city... and performed some terrible ritual. I don't have all the details—"

"I do," Sylvia growled.

"Once, they were beloved high priestesses in Lysithara. When doom loomed, they turned to forbidden rites—invoked the old gods through the metaverse. It failed. It always fails."

Her voice grew heavy.

"The old gods were amoral even then... even now most of them are unknowable, indifferent. They was cursed. Transformed. Half-human, half-forgotten."

" Drowned Saints. Forever walking the surface of black waters. They can't be killed. Only escaped."

She took a deep breath.

"At least... not by us."

Then the voice returned.

"Hehehehe... I see you..."

Damon's jaw clenched. He sent more shades. They vanished the moment they neared the creature.

"If it's Rank Four, then that water must be part of its domain..." Xander murmured, eyes gleaming with cold focus.

"How do we escape it?" someone asked.

Valarie's lips curled slightly. A memory stirred in her eyes.

"Just keep running... until you see the light."

Damon pushed his perception outward. Shadow spilled into the tunnels.

Then—he saw it.

A glow.

Not magic. Not flame.

Moonlight.

And behind them—riding a rising surge of water—the Drowned Saint wasn't even running. It was gliding. Riding its own flood, as if it already knew the outcome.

"Confident bastard," Damon hissed.

"I see it!" Leona shouted, pointing. "The light!"

The whole party surged forward.

But the Drowned Saint moved. The vast gap was nothing.

It leapt. One single step—and the distance between it and Evangeline vanished.

Too fast.

That was all Damon could think. His heart froze as its hand reached for Evangeline.

Valarie's voice whispered playfully.

"Sorry. Not today."

From the disembodied lips came a surge of white light—crackling through time itself.

The world slowed—but only for the Saint.

It was like it had entered a different timeline altogether.

This was the power unique to the seventh class.

The lips smiled faintly.

And Damon and the others crossed into the light.

"Stop."

Her voice froze them. The weight behind her words left no room for doubts.

"There's no need to run anymore."

They turned.

The Drowned Saint stood at the edge of the moonlight. The pale rays revealed the rotted face beneath the hood—blackened flesh, sealed beneath the mask.

But it didn't step forward.

It looked down at the ground—paved in white, polished stone, carved like a palace floor.

It turned away. And slowly, it faded back into the receding current.

"It won't step into another monster's domain," Sylvia said quietly. "It doesn't want to risk battling another Rank Four."

The water withdrew with it.

Damon, overwhelmed, hugged Evangeline before he could stop himself. Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn't speak.

He pulled away quickly. her face flushed. Embarrassed.

Damon avoided looking at her.

He'd been afraid. Afraid she would die.

He understood now—the horror of a Rank Four. They were like demi gods to them. And they were nothing before that power.

But that brought a new question.

"What do you mean we're in another Rank Four's domain?" he asked slowly.

Valarie's lips pressed together.

Her voice was calm. Cold.

"Welcome to the Forbidden Library."

Chapter 386: Just Yam Head

Valarie's words aside, Damon looked around with an awed expression.

They were in a library—a library so vast he couldn't even see the bottom floors. There were only books stretching in all directions, vanishing into the distance as far as the eye could see.

They were standing on one of the upper levels, and yet somehow, despite having just been underground mere seconds ago, they'd arrived here. It didn't make sense. It was as if the very rules of space had been distorted, warped, and perverted. Even his perception felt... wrong somehow.

A faint mist lingered in the corners, just beneath the edges of towering bookshelves.

He stepped closer to the arched windows, gazing out at the moonlight.

Outside was the vast, ruined city of Lysithara in all its broken majesty. In the sky flew monstrous shapes—unspeakable horrors drifting like shadows across the stars. And on the ground, twisted forms of nightmare wandered through the ruins, their outlines visible under the pale luminescence.

The massive crystal tower in the city center glowed with bright, silver light, reflecting the moonlight that bathed the land.

Damon froze mid-thought.

'Moonlight... how is there moonlight...?'

If there was light of any kind, wouldn't that attract the creatures from the rift? Wouldn't it provoke a nightmarish battle that wouldn't end until sunrise?

"How is that possible..." he muttered aloud.

Valarie's lips curved into a smile.

"Impressive, isn't it? This is where we gathered all knowledge since the Zero Epoch... the jewel of Lysithara... the Forbidden Library..."

Damon's eyes flicked toward the disembodied pair of lips on Evangeline's shoulder.

"Ahh... right, that too. But it's mean..."

"The city..." Evangeline finished for him, her gaze joining the others', all fixed on the moonlit ruins below.

"How is the light not summoning the monsters in the rift...?" Damon asked, voice low.

All eyes turned to Valarie.

The pair of lips smiled, though they betrayed something heavier behind them. Perhaps they didn't truly understand what had happened in the past either.

"Isn't having the moon in the sky normal...?"

Damon shook his head. The longer he stared at the sky, the more things seemed off. Only one moon... that was strange. Aetherus had two moons.

'Why is there only one...?' He shook the thought from his mind.

Leona clenched her fists, ears twitching sharply atop her head.

"No, that's not it. I thought light made the rift monsters come out..."

Valarie sighed, despite being only a pair of lips.

Xander gripped his spear tightly, as if expecting something awful to emerge from the sky at any moment.

"I don't understand the rules of this strange city..."

Valarie smiled again.

"You don't have to..."

She pressed her lips together as though pondering deeply.

"You remember how I told you we were seeking Akasha, right? And that we opened the door to the Metaverse at Mugu's behest?"

Sylvia nodded with an unimpressed expression—more irritated than anything else.

"You didn't explain anything about Akasha..."

Valarie giggled lightly, a teasing lilt in her voice.

"Right, my bad... but suppose I should explain. I've mentioned some of the names of the Outsiders to you, haven't I?"

Damon nodded. He could recall her mentioning only two names.

Leona's hand shot up, her beastkin ears perking eagerly.

"Yes! You said Ittorath and Yam Head—"

Damon facepalmed. She got the first name right... and completely butchered the second.

Sylvia exhaled loudly and gave her a glance.

"Ythar. Not Yam Head, Leona..."

"Pfttt... hahaha! That's quite a fitting name! Ythar was quite the Yam Head..." Valarie laughed.

Xander glanced up at the sky once more.

"You still haven't explained why the moonlight isn't attracting the rift creatures."

Valarie, still just a pair of lips, turned her unseen gaze toward the broken city.

"Ittorath and Ythar are the only two visitors you've met... right?"

Matia's eyes narrowed behind her visor, suspicion flickering.

"If we met them, we'd be dead. They're supposedly beyond the Class Advancement system."

Valarie sighed again.

"They are. At least, their true bodies are. But in this world, they only have false forms, bound to the limitations here—the Seventh Class Advancement. Even so, they were stronger than us... they understood the systems and power far better."

Damon frowned.

"Wait. Are you saying even when suppressed to the same level... they were still stronger than you guys?"

Valarie, now perched on Evangeline's shoulder, twitched slightly.

She hated to admit it, but...

"More or less. They are beyond the Nine Mortal Ranks..." she paused, then added, "It's like a master spellcaster who returns to the past with all his memories. Even if he's in the same body as everyone else, he'll destroy them on an even field."

Evangeline bit her lip.

"So basically... they had more experience. Then... how did you defeat them?"

Valarie's smile turned somber.

"With the help of other outsider beings... like the former Old God Unseen Singularity, the Blind Old Daoist... and a few others..."

"So you had a chance," Damon muttered, though more to himself.

He still had questions—like the "Nine Mortal Ranks." He guessed that referred to the First through Seventh Class Advancements. As for why they called it "nine," maybe it was because the Sixth Class was split into three stages, adding two more?

"That still doesn't explain the moonlight," Xander interjected, sticking to the core mystery.

Valarie scoffed softly.

"Actually, it does..."

She turned slightly, her voice lowering.

"You told me you passed through the forest to reach this city. That forest wasn't like that originally. It only became that way after Vathren killed Ythar. The entire Whispering Forest is Ythar's corpse. The mist? That's the lingering remnant of Vathren's power, suppressing Ythar's resentful soul..."

She smiled—malice glinting in her tone.

"Vathren obtained the power to kill an Outsider all by himself... and the secrets of the Ascendant Armor from the Unknown God. That was his secret... heheh... I remember now. That was his lie..."

Damon's eyes widened. Didn't the knowledge of the armor come from the visitors? No... no, this made more sense. The Unknown God... he was also an Outsider.

Knowledge of the armor came from the crystal palace, but the unknown god was also born there, the progeny of the vile thief.

Damon recalled that much from the system.

Valarie giggled, voice trembling slightly.

"As for that rift in the sky... that's just Ittorath. Trapped in a rift after Valcara and I defeated him. She imprisoned him with the second moon... and I bound him to my attribute—the Sun. He's always searching for the moment when both attributes align... when there is light in the night."

Her voice turned wild, filled with a madness born of rage and grief.

"We also cursed the sky to never have an eclipse..."

Her lips quivered, the sound caught between laughter and weeping.

"Ahahah... Vathren gave everything—became a monster—for this. And we still lost."

Her voice cracked.

"Damn you, Mugu... Damn you. Was all this worth it? You could have just accepted it... Damn you... damn you..."

Damon watched in silence, lips pressed tightly together, as Valarie—a disembodied mouth—cursed the name of Mugu, trembling with old, bitter sorrow.

Chapter 387: Not My Problem

The others all lowered their heads, seeing Valarie express so much rage and sorrow.

Ever since they met her, she had always been on the cheerful and playful side. She was like the sun—bright, radiant, full of energy.

Then again, that was her attribute.

But now... something had changed. Either more of her memories had returned, or perhaps the ancient Ascendant had chosen to reveal them.

Damon had learned a lot.

The Whispering Forest—a literal death zone—was nothing more than the corpse of one of the Outsiders.

It was vast, twisted, and filled with countless horrors that now called the titanic corpse their home.

If that was the case, then what about the Duhu Mountains and all the monsters that dwelled there?

Damon shook his head. He recalled the skill description that mentioned Mugu passing by the Duhu Mountains for the first time.

'Which meant the Duhu Mountains are older than the Whispering Forest...'

The skill in question had read:

[Omen of Dread]

[Description]

These vile mountains were old and ancient, leaking a small gap into the Metaverse. When Mugu came upon these mountains, he was paralyzed by the fear of the vile spirits that hid within the trees. Those who tread too close find themselves ensnared by the same terror, their bodies frozen as unseen horrors creep ever closer.

[Effect]

Unleashes an aura of overwhelming dread, paralyzing enemies weaker than the user and instilling hesitation in those who fear him.

[Type]

Active

[Cooldown]

3 seconds

Which begged the question—when Lysithara was first created, did they know the Duhu Mountains had a hole to the Metaverse? Was it intentional?

The Metaverse seemed to be the passage or doorway that allowed entities from a higher realm to enter this world.

At least able to bypass the goddess.

He bit his lip.

There were just too many questions.

And if the Unknown God gave the six Ascendants knowledge on how to forge the Ascendant armors... then why was City Lord Vathren now corrupted?

But above all—everything, all of it—seemed to lead back to a single name.

"Mugu..."

Damon was certain—everything was connected to this Mugu person.

He was the one who gave the rulers of Lysithara the idea of searching for Akasha. To do so, they needed access to the Metaverse. And by opening it, they invited the Outsiders in. The Outsiders shared knowledge... but all of them had ulterior motives.

Which, if Damon had to guess, all led back to the so-called Pillar of Conflict.

'If I'm not wrong... everything was for the Pillar of Conflict. The Unknown God wants this pillar, so he designed this elaborate chessboard across three epochs...'

Damon almost chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

One god wanted something—and three, no, four epochs of mortals had to suffer for it.

'Which means... this pillar is something the Goddess of Doom owns. But why does the Unknown God want it...?'

Damon gritted his teeth.

It didn't make sense—but at the same time, it did. Each era had its main characters. The Zero Epoch? Damon had no idea who the key players were. But the First Epoch had Mugu, the six Ascendants, and the Outsiders. The Second Era had Ashcroft, the demons, and the temple.

Sylvia had said Ashcroft—seen through the memory of the dark spirit Rashi Ignath—was looking for this Pillar.

'Then there's this epoch... me and my shadow... Lilith the priestess of the Unknown God... then there's Sylvia, who has his tome...'

'What a fuck fest...'

He couldn't help but curse.

Lilith had been right. The two of them were at the center of a great conflict. This went beyond war—they were caught between two true gods.

The Goddess of Doom—an ancient, boundless being beyond creation.

And worse... the mysterious Unknown God, who was equally powerful—or perhaps even more harrowing.

'I can't forget the strange relationship they share... Minerva... bride of the Unknown God...'

Just thinking that part—not even saying it—made Damon's shadow tremble in dread.

He shook his head. Why was he even thinking like this? He was just a small fry—barely first class.

'But...' his gaze lifted to the drifting rift in the sky, like a crack in the heavens.

That was the body of Ittorath.

'More Outsiders are probably still alive. Ashcroft will also return... I have a feeling—no, I know—this era will be the final showdown...'

Then there was the temple. From what he could surmise, it didn't exist or wasn't as strict in ancient times—at least, not until after the fall of Lysithara.

'Which means... the temple gained power and influence after Lysithara fell...'

Before or during the rise of the demon races, the temple had grown. It was at its peak during the age of Ashcroft.

Damon tried connecting the timelines, tried making sense of it all. But there were just too many holes. And everything about the Zero Epoch was a blank.

After all, even Valarie didn't know much about it. She hadn't even been born then.

He clenched his teeth, thinking of Lilith Astranova.

'Boy do I have a lot to tell her...'

She had been right. The secrets the temple tried so hard to bury were in the death zones and ancient ruins.

And there were still clues Ashcroft had left behind.

Regardless of who won—whether the Goddess of Doom or the Unknown God—the result was bound to be catastrophic.

But Damon shook his head.

I don't care about that. I can't care about that right now...

"My priority is saving my sister..."

And what better place to do that than a library with almost every book ever written in the past three hundred thousand years?

"Damon... Damon, hello?"

Leona waved her hand in front of his face.

She frowned, arms crossed.

"You've been standing there absent-minded for the past seventeen minutes. Let's go already—we're all waiting for you."

Damon turned around, blinking as if snapping out of a daze. He glanced at his party.

He snickered softly.

Who was he kidding?

The most important task... was surviving.

Let the gods play their games.

For now... it wasn't his problem.

"That's future Damon's problem. And I have a feeling he's in for a shitshow."

Chapter 388: Hail Unknown — The Unknown God

They moved deeper into the library, searching for the door—and hopefully, a way out.

Xander moved through the moon-bathed rows of shelves. The library almost reminded him of his older brother.

His brother had spent countless hours in places like this, studying war strategies to use in the demon wars. That is, when he wasn't out on the training grounds.

Xander gritted his teeth. He had seen many horrors while trapped in the ruined city of Lysithara... but he couldn't be sure if they compared to the horrors his brother had witnessed in war.

'When he returned... he was no longer the man I remembered.'

His brother had looked hollow inside, like someone carrying a sin too heavy to confess—haunted, as though he feared someone would discover what he had done.

Xander was no longer a child. He'd seen his fair share of nightmares. Even so... he didn't understand his brother.

That man—once the person Xander admired most—now did nothing but drink and shut himself away.

The wind drifted through the tall, arched windows lining the walls. Xander cast a glance toward them, then looked back at the others.

They were on a very high spire.

"Hey, why aren't we jumping out the window?"

Damon sneered and gave a shrug.

"I don't know, because we don't want to die...?"

Xander narrowed his eyes in irritation.

"I can slow our fall, you know. I was asking why we aren't using my ability to control gravity."

The disembodied lips of Valarie Sunwarden smiled faintly.

"There are a few reasons, if you must ask... the library walls are warded, the internal space is disorganized, there are chaotic time streams in the area, monsters in the air, on the walls, and even more waiting on the way down... among other things."

Damon snickered. "He's too eager to die. How about you defenestrate yourself?"

Xander clicked his tongue. He'd practically invited Damon to pick on him.

He glanced at Evangeline, silently hoping she'd put Damon in his place before things escalated again.

She met Damon's antics with a tired look, resting her hands on her hips.

"That's enough. You're doing too much."

Damon scoffed but listened, walking ahead between Xander and Leona. He had several shades scattered forward, acting as his eyes in the shadows.

Thanks to them, they had avoided direct confrontations with any of the library's monstrous inhabitants.

Still, the place was like so many they'd passed—it was unnerving.

Some of the books were cursed. Others were alive. They had even passed a shelf with actual eyeballs peering at them from the spines.

Apparently, it was always like this.

Damon was starting to understand why the people of Lysithara called it the Forbidden Library.

And yet... Damon would've risked it for a good book. Goddess knows Sylvia already had.

She'd ended up blasted into a wall by a warded shelf.

They'd learned from Valarie that the library was locked—the city's Lord Key was required to access most of the library's restricted knowledge, as well as other city functions.

Damon had to abandon any hopes of finding a cure for his sister here.

The knowledge to cure magic circuit cancer might still exist in this library... but it was out of reach.

Still, it wasn't a wasted trip. The library was filled with ancient tomes, and after so many battles and the passage of time, some of the wards protecting the shelves had broken.

"Which means we could find some nice spell books, skill books, scrolls... heheh."

"Or we could find something cursed and die..." Evangeline said flatly. Damon hadn't realized he was thinking out loud.

He coughed awkwardly.

"Sorry about that. My love for material wealth almost got the best of me."

Evangeline sneered. "At least you know."

Damon nodded, almost taking the hit with grace—until Sylvia spoke, a teasing smile on her lips.

"Actually... cursed books sell for a great price. Especially if you auction them as relics found in the legendary Path of Kings—Lysithara."

Damon's love for money flared.

He couldn't help but say playfully, "I love you, Sylvia. You're the best."

Sylvia's face turned completely red. She lowered her head, flustered—even though she knew he was joking, her heart pounded.

Damon, already fantasizing about potential profits, began eyeing every broken shelf. He'd even sent his shades further shadows skimming around the library, looking for weak spots.

So far, they'd found nothing... even after traveling downward for hours.

It was roughly three hours before dawn when Valarie finally said they were close to the library's exit.

The journey had been mostly uneventful, save for the occasional monster that caught sight of them—those didn't last long.

They'd survived by sticking to the lower-class threats, thanks to Damon's scouting. He called his shades back, letting them slither into the shadows and vanish beneath his feet without anyone noticing.

Soon, they arrived at a wide floor.

A plaque read:

History and Theology Wing.

Damon halted.

The open chamber made his skin crawl. Despite his danger sense, he didn't feel any immediate threat.

He scanned the room—and saw it.

A massive, hooded librarian sat slumped on a chair.

Impaled by dozens of swords, wrapped in heavy chains, unmoving. He was massive—easily thirty meters tall. Covered in a cloak, face unseen.

Runes circled the floor around him.

It wasn't the first corpse they'd seen, but something about this one made Damon uneasy.

Valarie made a small noise as she stared at the giant figure.

It looked... as if it were watching something.

When Damon followed the gaze, he saw it too: a mural. It bore the symbol of the Unknown God.

And beneath it, carved words.

Damon found himself reading them aloud.

All hail Unknown —

God of Names, Unmaker of All.

The Dreamer and the Void,

The Birth and the Silence.

Wielder of All Absolutes,

Bringer of Truth, Master of lies

Genesis Alpha — the First Light,

Nemesis Omega — the Last Breath.

He who is the Law, and He who denies it.

He who dreams reality and wakes into nothingness.

The End of Ends, the Origin of Origins.

God of Wrath. God of Resentment.

Praise to the God of the Damned.

Hail the Lord of Choice.

Unseen Sovereign.

The Silent Witness.

Discordia the Imperfect.

Hail the Paradox.

Hail the Abyss.

Hail Unknown, the Unknown God.

As he spoke the final words, a pulse ran through the air—so faint it could've been imagined. And yet...
Damon swore the mural breathed.

"Hail... hail... hail..." a withered voice echoed from behind them.

Chains rattled.

The supposedly dead librarian lifted its head, eyes glowing faintly beneath the hood.

"I offer your souls to the Unknown God..."

Damon's danger sense exploded.

Chapter 389: Nemoriel

The air rippled—space itself seemed to tear as Damon felt the visceral sensation of death...

And just before the absolute sensation of death could reach them—

The chains and the runes on the ground flared, glowing in harsh, ancient light as they yanked the Librarian down like a puppet meeting its strings.

The ground trembled violently.

Damon hadn't even moved. It had been fast—so fast. The air in the forbidden library had only begun to shift after the movement had finished, as if reality lagged behind it.

As if stunned, Damon slowly lowered his head, his gaze falling upon the runes etched into the stone and the iron chains linked to the tens of ancient, cursed swords impaled through the Librarian's grotesque body.

He hadn't seen it before—not with the heavy hood masking its features—but now, as the chains dragged the supposedly dead Librarian lower, his face emerged into the light.

Rotten teeth like thin yellow needles jutted from his mouth, black and brown smudges coating them like decay itself had made a home there. His face was half-rotted, pulsing with blue-black veins. His skull was bald—sections caved inward like wax melted under divine judgment. Thick, green mucus leaked from his chest where the swords still held him in place.

"Ahhh..." he groaned—a long, guttural exhale laced with age-old pain—his voice trembling from the suffocating magic that sealed him.

Damon and his party had survived. They had lived... only because they'd stopped just short of the boundary of his seal.

If they had taken a step further—if they had truly believed he was dead and gone closer...

'Then we would have died...'

If they hadn't paused to read the words scrawled across the walls—if they had dismissed them like the others had—

'We would have never made it out alive.'

Damon could feel it now—its dreadful aura, thick and oppressive like smog in the lungs. It was unmistakable... This was the aura of a monster that had reached the Fourth Class Advancement.

A rank four monster.

This entire section of the library —it was its domain. He could exert control here, bend world itself within this small zone.

That was why the Drowned Saint hadn't followed. It had sensed it too. It didn't want to risk facing this.

But someone—something—had sealed this creature here.

It wasn't a random event. No... it was intentional. A punishment? A prison? Or perhaps a duty... guarding the library. Or maybe it was never guarding the books—but the words on the walls. The murals. The secrets.

The others had gone pale. Their feet shuffled, slowly retreating.

The librarian twitched—slowly pushing himself up, blood seeping from his ruined mouth. As he stood, he began to whisper—his voice distant, almost ritualistic.

A poem. One they had all heard during their time in these vile lands.

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

He continued, whispering in that same monotonous, hollow voice—as if he had spoken these words a thousand times before, each repetition tearing a bit more from his sanity.

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

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

Damon and the others watched in horror, too afraid to interrupt, too uncertain of his limits. Even sealed, Damon's danger sense was still flaring—less violently than before, but present. Always present.

Sylvia backed away, step by trembling step, until her back hit something solid.

She froze. That was supposed to be the way they'd come... it should have been clear.

Slowly, her gaze shifted—and what she saw made her breath catch in her throat.

A bookshelf... no. A thing pretending to be a shelf. Its surface was sticky, made of twisted, jugged human flesh—pale skin stretched over bones, orange bodily fluids oozing between the cracks.

She gritted her teeth, choking back bile, forcing herself to pull away. Her hair and skin peeled from it, strands sticking to the shelf with greasy clumps of human fat.

Evangeline turned, catching the sight just as the librarian continued.

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

She glanced at Xander, then to Leona.

With only a nod, the three unleashed a torrent of magic—gravity, light, lightning—all hurtled at the grotesque bookshelf.

But the magic faded, dissipating into the thick air like stones tossed into the sea.

Damon clenched his jaw. He knew what was coming.

The librarian reached the end of the poem.

"The god who blessed names hated his own..."

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

The wind shifted.

The librarian raised his hand.

And suddenly, Damon and the others were airborne.

Their bodies slammed against the floor with bone-snapping force. Blood splattered. Bones cracked. Damon's head spun—the world flipped.

He groaned, breath stolen from his lungs.

He heard the others cry out in pain.

The chains rattled. The librarian groaned as his hand rose once more.

Reality shattered.

Up was down. Right was left. No direction mattered. The geometry of the library broke apart—bookshelves floating, twisting, multiplying endlessly. There was no gravity, no consistency—only madness.

This... was the horror of a Fourth Class domain.

Even if it couldn't move from its seal, as long as they stood within the space it ruled... they were bound by its laws.

There were two types of Domains. One, forged in a place familiar to the user—unshakable, powerful, personalized. The other, a mobile, temporary construct.

This was the former.

Each domain bore the soul of its creator—its fears, its ideals, its philosophy.

In simple terms, a Domain was a soul given form—a throne built from the caster's mind.

And this one... reeked of madness.

Death hung thick in the air.

"This domain is The Indexium..." the librarian suddenly froze—motion halted, as if time had skipped a beat.

A voice had echoed from an impossible place—from a pair of lips on Evangeline's shoulder.

Valarie Sunwarden's.

"You're Nemoriel... aren't you..."

The corrupted librarian gasped, the sound wet and trembling. Something ancient flickered in his ruined eyes—recognition... pain.

He collapsed to his knees.

"That voice... Lady Valarie... you... you persist even now..."

Valarie's lips pressed together in the air.

"You are Nemoriel, Vathren's student... boy, what has become of you..."

The ancient librarian went still.

Damon and the others forced their bodies to move. Sylvia seized the moment to heal them—her hands glowing faintly, flickering like a candle against a storm.

Nemoriel remained on his knees, broken.

"I saw... too much..." he whispered. "I learned too much... I gazed into the eyes of a god... I gazed into the abyss... ahhhh... ahhh..."

His voice cracked, weak and brittle, like dry leaves breaking underfoot. He trembled—not from rage, but from terror. He was too afraid to scream. What if his scream called it back...

Valarie's voice hovered now, drifting from Evangeline's shoulder into the air.

"Nemoriel, you were with Vathren when he and Mugu conducted the ritual... to call the unknown god. You were there the day Vathren received knowledge of the Ascendant Armors..."

"Please... I need you to tell me..."

"What did you two give the unknown god? What did Vathren ask for... why did he become corrupted...?"

Nemoriel shook—tremors wracking his body.

Damon had never seen a horror tremble like that.

Still, the words fell from his lips.

"Master... Master... he... failed... he failed, he failed, he failed..."

Chapter 390: A God's Game

The corrupted librarian, Nemoriel, remained on his knees as if reliving a harrowing memory, his hulking form trembling beneath the weight of something ancient and dreadful.

"It was during the siege.... we were losing, even with the help of some of the visitors... we stood no chance. Worst of all... we knew the truth... these allies of ours did not have our best interest at heart..."

His voice—low, pained—broke through the thick silence like the groan of a dying colossus. Each word dragged through his throat as if barbed, his tone steeped in suffering.

"It was then Mugu offered a way to Master. He claimed he felt guilty for what had happened... what was happening... he wanted to atone..."

Nemoriel's face remained as disgusting as ever—bloated with rot and centuries of decay—but his voice carried a grief they could not ignore.

Corrupted for thousands of years... and still he persisted.

Now that Damon thought about it, the ancient residents of Lysithara must have truly loved this city. That was why—even corrupted—they still rose to fight Ittorath and his minions whenever they appeared from the rift, still clinging to their broken vows.

"Master couldn't blame him. We had all been greedy for the Akasha and what it represented. The goddess... she had a reason. She simply taken away everyone's true names and modified the ranking system... all so she could stop the Unknown God from gaining influence in this world..."

Valarie's lips pressed together. She had been corrupted too. But unlike Nemoriel, she had done something unthinkable—cut off the part of her that had been tainted, which, in her case, was most of her physical body. Only her lips remained... a disembodied, floating mouth.

It was all that was left of her.

Yet, seeing Nemoriel... she realized she wasn't the only one who had fought against the rot that came from the Metaverse and the outsiders who had brought it.

"What... what did Mugu make you do...?" she asked quietly.

The others all watched in silent horror as the thirty-meter-tall librarian began to weep in agony, black tears oozing from the sockets of his ruined face, as though fulfilling some great and final purpose.

"We helped him with a ritual... that sent our minds into the Metaverse. Since the Unknown God could not enter our tiny realm without destroying it..."

'The Metaverse...' Damon's mind spun.

There, they had conversed with the Unknown God.

Each of them had received something... in return for something else. Equivalent exchange.

"Master received the knowledge of the Ascendant Armors... and the power that would guarantee that as long as he remained in Lysithara, he would never be vanquished by an outsider....."

Nemoriel paused, trembling.

"But he did not have enough to make an equivalent exchange... for those boons."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed. She already suspected what would come next. The Unknown God... was not simply benevolent. He was cruel as well.

"He gave you options. A choice..." she muttered, half-afraid the corrupted librarian would lash out.

"Ahh... yessss..." Nemoriel hissed, voice threadbare.

"He offered for us to play a game... in which he would ask questions with obvious answers. If we won, he would grant us what we wanted."

Valarie's expression darkened. She could already see how they had lost. And yet, she still needed to know... how Vathren had gotten that knowledge. Why he had lied, told them it came from the outsiders and not a god.

"What questions..." she breathed.

Nemoriel rasped and held his head, the chains wrapped around him rattling with the motion.

"It was a simple question... 'What happens when a god dies?'"

"We pondered for what felt like eternity. And finally, we gave our answer. 'A god cannot die.'"

He clutched his skull tighter, his form convulsing.

"We failed... the answer was simple. 'When a god dies, the world dies with them.' He wasn't asking if a god could die. He was asking what comes after. We expected a trick... so he used simplicity..."

Damon's heart twisted.

'The Unknown God... he's a horror...'

Nemoriel's chains rattled once more. The dozens of rusted swords embedded in his monstrous body ached less than the memories did.

"Then he asked us the second question... 'What happens when a true god dies?'"

Damon tensed. He could already see the answer forming, logical, cruel in its scope.

"If a normal god's death causes the death of the world... then a true god's death would be the end of the omniverse. Existence itself would cease. The Metaverse, the Multiverse, all dimensions... all of it dies too."

He voiced it aloud.

Nemoriel turned his gaze on him, nodding.

"That was our answer as well... but we were wrong."

His voice became hollow, dead.

"The answer was simple... death is a mortal concept. True gods do not die. All concepts are mortal before a true god. Thus... we failed again..."

Xander drew in a sharp breath, fear forming on his lips. The whole game had been a deception—establishing a pattern, only to shatter it with truth.

And yet... they couldn't argue with the logic. It was divine logic.

"Yet... you returned with the knowledge, didn't you?" Evangeline whispered, her tone faint, as though afraid her words would provoke something.

Nemoriel cast his gaze down, hiding his hideous face behind the curtain of his own shame.

"We did. He gave us more than we asked for. Each of us received a boon... and a bane."

"What was the bane...?" Valarie asked, almost desperately.

"Time..."

The word came out like a curse.

"We were cursed with time. If we found the Pillar of Conflict before the time limit... we would be free. If we failed... we would be corrupted. Our minds... corroded by endless time. Until we fulfilled a series of tasks..."

Leona clenched the side of her hand, eyes flashing.

"So you were enslaved... even with a choice. Why did you agree to play his game?"

Nemoriel lifted his broken eyes to her, and in that gaze was a madness forged by eons.

"We were desperate."

He said it without shame, without defiance. Just truth.

"Still... even now I know it was a fair bargain. We cannot in good faith say we were swindled. He gave a choice. I accept that..."

Damon narrowed his eyes, stepping closer.

"What did he give you?"

Nemoriel smiled, and for a moment the grotesque stretching of his lips revealed a maw full of jagged, needle-like teeth.

"Our wishes... Master wished to save this world... to undo the events we had caused. I wished for knowledge. Mugu... he was resentful of the ruler of Valtheron..."

He paused.

"We all got our wishes..."

Their eyes widened.

'Valtheron...? Isn't that our homeland...?'

His gaze lingered on Evangeline, and something unspoken passed between them. Her eyes flickered, filled with dread.

They all got their wishes.

"And we all paid the price."