

Shadow 391

Chapter 391: A Clue To Die For

As soon as Nemoriel uttered those final words, his body began to crack.

Veins of light tore through the corrupted flesh of the ancient librarian. His form, towering and grotesque, started to disintegrate before their eyes. He opened his mouth, and a desperate gasp escaped.

"Huh... my task... it's... is this my final task? Am I finally free... to die...?"

Tears streamed down his rotten, patchworked face. Even as his body turned to radiant fragments, Nemoriel did not vanish just yet.

He had more to say—and the more he spoke, the faster the end would come.

"It is here... in this world... hidden by the goddess... the Ninth Pillar. The Pillar of Conflict. Bellum... It is the first of many. The Unknown God has traversed countless worlds to find them. He will obtain them. He will reveal the lie of the True Gods... and the True Demon Kings..."

He cast a final glance at the ancient murals on the walls, their faded symbols now beginning to glow.

"My time has come... There isn't much time..."

"What lie?" Sylvia asked, her voice taut with urgency.

"The lie of perfection... when Discordia exists... The lie of perfection... when the One True Unknown God exists... He is both..." Nemoriel's voice cracked with reverence and horror. "They all signed the No Absolutes Accord after the war... but he is... the Arbiter..."

His body gave way further, collapsing into motes of soft, dying light.

"The... the Snake Temple... You must find the place where the God of the Abyss blessed his priestess..."

Damon stood frozen as the chains binding the librarian began to fade, vanishing like morning mist.

Nemoriel raised his gaze one last time, staring at the murals—at memories too old for words.

"Years ago, someone named Ashcroft came here. I told him all I could... and he left... swearing to spread the truths he'd learned... He sealed me here... forced me to finish my task, even as my mind deteriorated..."

He turned his gaze to them, the glimmer of purpose lighting up what remained of his expression.

"You must seek the truth of the Zero Epoch... Wake the lesser gods... The drums of war will soon beat once more..."

Then, faintly, a smile—gentle, sad—settled on his disfigured face as he looked to Valarie.

"Goodbye... Lady Valarie... I hope the times had been kinder to you..."

His body shrank into a glowing mass of light. Sparks scattered in every direction. The oppressive power in his domain began to fade, just like the Beldam after she died.

Damon had so many questions. Was this truly Nemoriel's final task—to tell him all this? Then why did it only raise more?

More than that... Ashcroft had been here.

The one who always left behind clues. The one whose footsteps echoed in every shadow they uncovered.

And Nemoriel mentioned the place where the God of the Abyss blessed his priestess...

'Lilith...' Damon thought of her—his senior, the woman with the burning emerald eyes and the haunting grace.

She was the priestess of the Unknown God...

If they found where she had received her stigmata... they would have another piece of this tangled puzzle.

But even now, Damon could feel it—the Unknown God had all the pieces in his hand. And somewhere, out there, Doom would make her move. She had kept him at bay this long.

As the final glimmers of Nemoriel's soul faded into silence...

Valarie's disembodied lips floated quietly in the air, suspended above broken chains and cracked stone.

Then—

A figure appeared in the mist, standing where Nemoriel had vanished.

He gave off no aura. No warmth. No hostility.

And yet, every instinct in Damon screamed.

A dreadful chill sunk into the marrow of their bones.

He stood there, silent—like a ghost, born of sorrow and ashes. The mist clung to him, refusing to part.

Then he spoke. A single, husky whisper carried by the air.

"...Nemo..."

Damon shuddered.

He remembered that presence—the weight of it. The oppressive dread. The nameless terror.

This was him.

The former City Lord of Lysithara.

The one creature they had never wanted to encounter.

The Keeper of False Truths.

Valarie felt the dread grip the hearts of Damon and the others, but she knew—Vathren had not come for them.

He had come to say farewell to his fallen disciple.

Somewhere deep within her heart... a memory stirred. A child, covered in mud, had once clung to the robe of a tall man cloaked in mist—begging to become his apprentice.

Vathren had refused.

But Nemoriel had persisted.

He had become a student to a reluctant teacher. In time... Vathren had come to love him like a son.

Even corrupted, the city lord must have felt the moment Nemoriel died. And he must have celebrated, too—for the long-awaited liberation of the one who had suffered most.

Where a corpse should have remained, there was only a book.

A final remnant of a student who had endured many millennia of corruption.

The same as the rest of his city.

"Nemoriel never doubted you, did he?" Valarie's voice echoed in the stillness.

"Always believed... even when everyone else gave up hope. Is that why you were so desperate for the Ascendant Armors?"

Vathren—no, the Keeper of False Truths—lowered his head.

A single white teardrop slipped from the mist. It struck the floor with a quiet plop.

"I... I wanted to save him, too... Mugu lied again. He didn't pay any price. Because he was the one who let the Unknown God in..."

The Keeper's voice was heavy. Hollow.

"He was his prophet... Still, I chose to hope. Because... while He is a Unknown..."

His words trembled.

"...He is also a god...."

Damon's eyes widened.

His heart raced.

He heard the word—Unknown. But the Keeper hadn't meant it in title—he meant it literally.

Why not an unknown, but he said a unknown.

And that was impossible.

The word was forbidden. The goddess herself had made it so.

Damon made a single, terrible conjecture.

'He's a True Demon King... and a True God... at the same time...'

But how could that be?

How could one being be both the peak of divinity ... and the pinnacle of depravity?

The One True Demon God.

That was the true meaning behind "Unknown God."

If that were the case, then he was also... their lie.

It was so obvious... the imperfection... was....

It was senseless—madness—but the moment Damon had that thought—

A warm sensation spread across his lips.

He looked down.

Blood.

Blood was pooling beneath him, soaking through his clothes. His legs trembled. Then collapsed.

"Ahhh... wha—?"

His body hit the stone floor with a dull thud.

Before his confusion could register—before a single breath could escape—

A system chime echoed in his ears.

[You have died.]

That was it.

Damon died.

Chapter 392: Dreaming The Nightmare Of The Unknown God

Death was the natural end of all life. All mortals die. It was the ultimate finality.

It came for kings and beggars alike.

It was equal to all—absolute.

No matter how long you lived—a day, a century, a millennium, or even an eon—so long as you were mortal, you would fall into the embrace of death.

Just as we are not asked when we are born, we are not asked when we will die.

All exist within the circle of life and death.

We are all fated to die.

Doom was a goddess of fate—she was also the goddess of death.

If she wanted anyone—or anything—to end, then it would be the end of their fate.

But the Unknown God... he was different. He was the god of the circle itself.

The beginning and the end.

The god of choice, who believed fate belonged not to deities... but to those who chose.

Damon was born in the world of Aetherus...

He was a creature molded by the hands of Doom herself.

She held dominion over his soul—

At least, until Damon made a choice.

He called to the Unknown God.

With a prayer. With a heart full of burning resentment.

He had spoken words only that god would hear.

And the god answered.

He was given a choice—

The same one he was given now.

System Reinitialization Complete

[Do you wish to proceed?]

[Y/N]

When Damon had first received the system, he had been given an option.

Did he wish to proceed?

The Unknown God was cruel...

But he was also benevolent.

A god of duality.

He believed in choice.

And that belief had changed everything.

Damon's eyes slowly fluttered open...

Tears streamed down his cheeks, unbidden, uncontrollable.

He had dreamt.

A nightmare.

The nightmare of the Unknown God.

These tears... they weren't his.

And yet, he couldn't remember the dream.

It slipped away like most dreams—vanished into oblivion.

Only the echo of pain remained in his chest.

And by the time his vision adjusted to the dim light... even that was gone.

His lungs sucked in air.

His corpse... now warm.

He could feel it—

His heartbeat.

His memories returning like fragments of broken glass.

And there, before his eyes—

A floating panel.

'Yes,' he willed.

[Welcome back to the Living, Shadow System Individual: Death Dealer]

[Your shadow is alive.]

Damon stared.

There was a warm weight on his chest, but he was too weak to move.

Too weak to care.

This... this was what he had seen the first time.

But what came next was different.

[Welcome back, Death Dealer. Your soul has stabilized.]

[Time elapsed: 31 days, 6 hours, 17 minutes.]

[Restoration Status: Complete.]

Damon opened his mouth as if to gasp—

But no sound came.

He simply lay there, eyes wide, watching the panel flicker.

[You have died...]

That line.

It cut through the fog.

Everything clicked.

He had learned secrets.

Terrible secrets.

The first was the truth of the Unknown God.

The second—

The lie of the gods.

And for that...

He had died.

But the system panel wasn't finished.

[You have evoked the ire of the True Gods, the True Demon Kings, the True Dragons.]

[Authority: Law Maker has been used to protect you.]

[Notice]

[Failed]

[Failed]

[Failed]

Damon's heart pounded as the failures flooded the screen—

One after the other, hundreds, thousands, millions, blurring past.

[The Unknown God is displeased.]

[Authority: Karma Maker has been used.]

[Your fate has been...]

[You have been written out by the God of Inspiration.]

[Plot Manipulation Resistance has been used]

[Failed...]

[True Dragon ***** has devoured you]

[Failed]

[Failed...]

[True demon..... has...]

On and on.

Time itself seemed to stop.

The gods wanted him gone.

Truly gone.

[You have been destroyed by the God of Cosmos.]

[Authority: Dream Maker has been used.]

[You are dreaming—the nightmare—of the Unknown God.]

[Authority: No Absolutes has been used.]

[Successful...]

[Your fate has been concealed.]

[You have been bestowed the skill: Fate Manipulation Resistance.]

[Failed]

[Notice: Individual Death Dealer does not meet skill requirements.]

[Authority: Creation Maker has been used.]

[Mastery Created: Fate Manipulation Resistance Lv.1]

[Authority: Life and Death Maker has been used.]

[Individual: Death Dealer has been resurrected.]

[Memories of Individual: Death Dealer have been sealed. Increase Fate Manipulation Mastery to unlock.]

Damon's pupils dilated.

He stared in horror.

These were thirty-one days' worth of System messages.

The true gods.

The true demons.

The true dragons.

All of them wanted him dead.

And the Unknown God...

He had fought them all.

All to keep Damon alive.

[Notice: System Mechanic Item has been unlocked.]

[You have one item.]

[Do you wish to use it?]

[Y/N]

Damon blinked.

His heart swelled with dread.

He couldn't remember what he had figured out—

And he didn't want to.

His death had been too sudden.

Too final.

Too complete.

'Yes.'

[Item: Message Scroll]

A small scroll appeared—pure white.

The moment it manifested, it fused into the system panel.

[Message]

[You died knowing the truth. But truth comes with a price.

You are resurrected.

Your fate is now concealed in the eyes of the gods.

You are erased.

You now belong to the Abyss.

Your next death shall be final.

The Unknown God watches with gleaming interest...

All has fallen according to plan.]

Damon's breath hitched.

He had thought his death was because he learned the secret.

He had believed the Unknown God had fought tooth and nail to defy the True beings...

But no.

'This was all part of his plan...'

The True beings

All of them had tried to bury the truth.

Damon froze.

He couldn't recall what the secret was...

It was just—gone.

His eyes widened.

Everything was going according to someone's plan.

This...

This was what it felt like to be part of a god's design.

Damon couldn't even feel resentment.

Because in exchange for his memory, he had been given something else—a direction, a purpose, a clue that might save his sister—

A gift.

A single truth—

One that still burned in his soul:

The knowledge that would allow him to save his sister.

That was his reward.

For dying.

For being obliterated before he even had the chance to be afraid.

He whispered, voice dry and rasping—

"The place where I can find the cure..."

And in that single breath, the nightmare began again.

Chapter 393: 31 days

Damon didn't get a chance to check his system panel—or even discover the new mechanic, or the mastery of fate manipulation resistance.

What he noticed first was the weight on his chest.

It was white.

No—he was staring at white hair, strands of snow-like hair floating gently as a pair of soft breaths rose and fell against his skin.

A beautiful young woman.

An elf.

Her ears were long, regal, pointed like crescent moons. Her face, though delicate, carried shadows under her eyes—dark circles born not of sleep, but grief. Fatigue. She had waited long. Too long.

Damon tried to move his hand, but—

He tilted his head slightly, wincing, and found his right hand was firmly buried in the bosom of another girl—this one bearing the distinctive ears of a beast-kin. Her long black hair had streaks of white, and her face bore streaks of dried blood.

Her armor reeked of death—blood caked in layers, the aftermath of slaughter still lingering thick in the air.

Damon tried to pry his hand free, or at least will his body to move. But it was stiff, rigid. Cold, even.

Dying could do that to you.

But dying millions of times... being erased from existence... torn through the cosmic whirlpool of godly authority and divine laws...?

Stiff limbs were the least of his problems.

The fact that he was breathing at all was miracle enough.

His awkward, shaky movements didn't go unnoticed.

The elf girl—Sylvia—stirred first. Her head had been resting over his chest, and it rose ever so slightly as if she had been listening intently for the rhythm of his heart.

And when she heard it—that steady, miraculous beat—she froze, then slowly lifted her head.

Tears welled in her already-tired eyes.

When Damon looked back at her—confused, blinking slowly like he'd just returned from the bottom of the abyss—Sylvia let out a small, sharp gasp.

She moved instantly.

Just as Leona stirred from her half-sleep, Sylvia dived toward Damon—letting out a sound that was part sob, part relief—as tears spilled freely from her eyes, soaking his face with warmth and salt and emotion too heavy for words.

Leona trembled beside them, one hand gripping his arm, the other wiping her face as her own tears refused to stop falling.

She seemed almost like a crying child.

Damon's body was still half-numb, but he managed to lift one hand slowly, gently running it through Sylvia's hair—trying to soothe her, or perhaps remind himself this wasn't some cruel dream.

He heard it then—the rush of footsteps. The door slammed open.

Xander came through first, sword still bloody, face pale.

Behind him came Matia and Evangeline—Evangeline carrying Valarie on her shoulder.

Their bodies were stained, blood-soaked, their hair a mess of battle and dread.

And all of them—every last one of them—stopped in their tracks.

They stared at him.

The impossible.

The unthinkable.

"Damon..."

Xander's voice cracked from the relief.

Then they all swarmed him.

Damon couldn't remember every word that was said—everything blurred around the edges. But he remembered their faces.

He remembered their tears.

The relief. The joy.

They had stayed.

Thirty-one days.

They had stayed with his body, fighting, surviving, hoping—believing—that maybe... just maybe... this wasn't the end.

Xander tried so hard not to cry. He kept his face tilted toward the ceiling, eyes hidden behind his hand. But the soft plip of falling tears onto the floor betrayed him.

Matia and Evangeline crushed him in a hug that nearly shattered his ribs.

Leona and Sylvia refused to let go.

And for the first time in a long while...

Damon realized—

He had never been alone.

Not for a second.

He may not have been a perfect person.

But he was loved.

And that... that made all the suffering worth it.

It took time for everyone to settle. Damon was still a little listless, soul not fully synced, thoughts still adrift.

Dying for a month could do that to a man.

When the haze finally lifted, he began to recognize his surroundings.

They were in a room—a large one. Ornate. The kind nobles would keep for guests they respected.

He was on a bed. Large. Comfortable. The sheets had the scent of old magic.

The room itself was carved with runes—temperature regulation, air purification, silent warding. Quality-of-life runes, nothing offensive.

There were remnants of ruined luxury—ancient Lysitharan technology long since broken: a dead screen, a broken light panel, a cracked timekeeper that still flickered the current hour.

This place was no dungeon... it wasn't hell either.

It was a mansion. They had found him sanctuary in this very hell.

He flexed his fingers slowly.

Everyone watched him, ready to help. Ready to hold him if he fell.

Leona was already gone, rushing to prepare food—so much food. Normally, Damon cooked for her. Now she was repaying him with everything she had.

He smiled faintly.

"Thank you..."

Leona nodded through a snuffle, pressing her sleeve to her face.

Damon had questions. A lot of them.

What happened after he died?

Why didn't they bury him?

How did they survive the Keeper of False Truths?

Did they find the exit from Lysithara? The teleportation gate?

What about the City Road, the path through the ruin gate?

His mind was full of holes. Puzzles waiting for pieces.

'I mean... I literally died.'

He glanced toward the window, hesitant.

Unless...

Unless they didn't know.

But that was unlikely. Maybe.

He had seen something. Or was close to it. The flaw of the world. No... not the world. The Omniverse.

He had come close to the truth.

And then—he died.

Before he could ask anything, Evangeline stepped forward.

She handed him a small, ornate locket.

It felt... familiar.

His fingers curled around it.

His mother's locket.

"You... dropped this. When you fell in the Forbidden Library..." her voice was soft, barely above a whisper.

Damon nodded slowly, fingers closing around it as he slipped it back around his neck.

"Luna would be mad if I lost Mom's locket..."

Evangeline smiled faintly, her expression warm despite the tears that still rimmed her eyes.

He looked at all of them. His chest tightened. The burning question finally left his lips.

"Wha... what actually happened?"

Silence.

They looked at each other. Then at him.

Sylvia bit her lips, her shoulders trembling.

Evangeline lowered her gaze.

"You died."

Damon felt his heart thump, loud and clear in his chest.

Chapter 394: The Last Stretch

"Or at least we thought you did..."

The next part of Evangeline's words struck Damon with a sensation that left him suspended between confusion and relief.

They didn't think I had died?

But he had died. Thoroughly, unmistakably. He couldn't have been more dead if he tried. Not just dead—obliterated. On the brink of being erased from existence itself.

What changed their minds?

If it was fear of him rising as undead that held them back from burial, they could've simply cremated him and been done with it. Yet they hadn't. And Evangeline continued to speak.

"We had initially assumed the Keeper was the one who killed you... so in a fit of rage, we tried to kill him... but as you can imagine, we lost..."

Leona bit her lower lip, her expression tightening. Humans—so often driven by emotion—seldom considered odds when grief clouded their minds.

"The Keeper let us go... he just left. He had someone to mourn, so he let us mourn our own fallen..."

Damon nodded slowly. That would make sense. When the Keeper of False Truths had reappeared, he hadn't come to confront them. He had come to mourn Nemoriel in his final moments.

All according to the Unknown God's scheme.

Nemoriel's purpose had never been to fight, but to deliver messages... clues.

The writings on the walls, the name of the pillar of conflict—those had been the true signs. And even one clue had been enough to kill him.

"...Why didn't you bury me?"

Xander clenched his fists tightly.

"We had been sure you were dead... accepting it took a while. We had to let go. I carried your cold corpse with my own hands..."

None of the girls had been able to bring themselves to touch Damon's body. They'd stood frozen, as if burying him meant acknowledging the unbearable.

So Xander had stepped forward. He'd forced himself to be strong.

Valarie had tried to speak to him then. Told him to get a grip.

Matia's voice came, her cheeks streaked with dried blood and pain carved into her features.

"We did think you were dead. But you weren't. Sylvia insisted you were alive..."

Evangeline bit her lips, her eyes flickering with guilt.

"Honestly, at the time, there was no basis for it. We actually thought she had gone insane from the grief..."

Damon glanced at Sylvia. A small smile tugged at his lips.

She awkwardly rubbed the back of her neck.

"I may have threatened to kill everyone if they didn't listen..."

Valarie chuckled dryly.

"Which only convinced us she had gone mad... I mean, it was two days after. From the blood you lost to your cold corpse—there was no way you would be alive. All biological functions had ceased. Even your shadow wasn't moving..."

Damon nodded slowly. An accurate assessment...

Leona pressed her lips together.

"We made it out of the Forbidden Library... Sylvia was unconscious at that point. But I heard it. I heard... a heartbeat."

Evangeline exhaled, arms crossed tightly against her chest.

"We also suspected Leona was being pulled under by grief... But then Sylvia woke up. This time, she was a little calmer..."

Xander scratched the back of his head, as if the memory still embarrassed him.

"She explained to us she had a vision... of you leading us out of Lysithara on a dark night..."

He paused.

"Honestly, more than anything—we wanted to believe. Against all odds, we needed to believe you were still alive."

Matia looked at Damon with quiet intensity.

"And then it happened. Your shadow moved..."

Sylvia spoke, her eyes fixed on him.

"We had been in a hurry to bury you... because we didn't want your corpse defiled. Or turned into an undead..." Her voice cracked.

"So... my wanting to keep you was selfish. Honestly, a small part of me didn't care if you did become undead, as long as I could see you... but I also knew that wouldn't really be you."

She placed a trembling hand over her eyes as tears began to stream down.

"I'm... I'm sorry..."

Damon said nothing. He merely stepped forward and gently stroked her head, his touch warm despite the cold silence around them.

So they hadn't known. That was... good. Because it would be impossible to explain that he had been killed by the hands of the goddess. Or that he had been dragged back by the Unknown God, provoking every true being in existence, nearly getting erased from reality. That he had died, been devoured, recreated, hidden in a dream—while the Unknown God fought off divine entities.

Then brought him back.

He almost felt like a character from some ancient myth. At least he wasn't as unlucky as the Demon Lord of Domination—Ashcroft—who had been slain in the temple of the goddess, where her power was strongest.

Damon, in contrast, had died in a place where the Unknown God was glorified. So he had a better chance.

Still... hadn't the Unknown God also ordained Ashcroft's return?

He remained silent as they began to recount the past 31 days.

They had discovered a teleportation gate—but it was useless without the City Lord's key. So they turned their attention to a waypoint. They'd found one—guarded by a fifth-class monster. And gave up.

Weeks passed. They searched, carried Damon's corpse, enduring the stench of death, the toll on their minds, the burden of hope.

They were besieged by monsters. Creatures that only grew more cunning with each encounter, as if someone—or something—was orchestrating their suffering.

Eventually, they found another waypoint, guarded by a weaker monster. They tricked it, bypassed it, and used the waypoint.

Only to discover the city's waypoints didn't connect to the outside world.

Every effort, every escape route, led back to Lysithara.

More cunning attacks followed. So they found the mansion. Fortified it. And made it their base.

Leona had insisted on a mansion—because Damon would have wanted one.

In the days that followed, they cleared out weaker monsters. They hunted the source of the cunning that stalked them.

Again and again.

But it never stopped.

Damon clenched his fists.

They've been through so much... all while dragging my lifeless body along.

He could barely imagine the weight of it. The emotional strain. The hopelessness.

"I didn't die..."

He finally whispered.

Lifting his head slowly.

"Let's get out of this city... we walk right out the gates..."

Most of the distance had already been covered while he was unconscious.

This—this was the final stretch of their journey.

Chapter 395: Message For Lilith

Damon decided to stand up—but after being dead for a month, his legs gave out beneath him and he collapsed with a thud onto the wooden floor.

The sound startled the others, prompting a chorus of concerned gasps as they rushed to his side, trying to force him back into bed despite his protests.

In the end, Damon was issued a firm command: rest and resuscitation for two days, no exceptions.

Evangeline was not taking no for an answer.

With his entire party being unreasonably pushy, he had little choice. For whatever reason, the place had been under constant siege by low-level monsters. They were stretched thin—defending the perimeter while also scavenging for resources.

Well, their last academy-issued supply bag was in Damon's shadow storage, after all.

As the thought crossed his mind, his gaze drifted to the familiar bracelet on his wrist. It had been silent for a month... With his vitals flatlining for that long, had the academy assumed he was dead?

More pressingly—Lilith Astranova. Was she worried?

No. He could already imagine it. His picturesque senior wouldn't panic, not outwardly. She'd smile, composed and cold as ever... but he could guess at the thoughts behind those green eyes.

He forced himself upright again, grimacing from the soreness that clung to every muscle. Reaching into the swirling shadows beside him, he pulled out his collapsible bow—the one he had gotten from Anvil.

He couldn't help but think of the old smith. And that wretch Carls.

'I hope they're doing well.'

Damon spread his shadow perception. Like a wave, it flowed across the room, a quiet pulse of his awareness—making sure neither Leona nor Sylvia heard him move.

Both of them were fast asleep, curled up at his side.

They must have stayed up for days, hoping he'd wake up...

Damon didn't stray far—if he did, he had a feeling Evangeline would explode.

Instead, he crept toward the window. A quiet breath. Then he leapt out, climbing up the wall and onto the roof. His body felt like it had been trampled by an army.

He stood atop a small, bloodstained section of the rooftop, the cool breeze ruffling his hair as he looked into the distance.

He couldn't see the creature with his eyes—it was too far—but his shadow perception could.

Hidden in a shattered building far from the mansion, a grotesque presence lingered.

Damon sat down, his legs throbbing with numbness, but what he was doing was too important to wait. He clutched four arrows in his hand, pricked his fingertip, and used his blood to etch a simple rune onto each one.

The moment he poured mana into the markings, they pulsed faintly.

His breath hitched. His mana... it had changed.

It wasn't just restored—it had grown. Overflowing. Something was different now.

He stood again, rolling his shoulders, stretching his aching limbs. With his bow in hand, he took a stance, locking onto the target.

Damon's eyes snapped open.

He loosed the arrow.

It soared across the twilight sky, his skill Dead Eye activating—creating a glowing beam guiding the projectile with perfect precision. His mastery Sniper had taken over, calculating arc, wind, and gravity.

The arrow struck true—embedding deep into the creature's hideous eye, right between the sockets.

A familiar chime echoed in his ears.

[You have slain Home Crawler]

His gaze shifted down to his bracelet. The academy points ticked up, just a little.

'That should be enough... she'll know I'm still alive.'

"Now, one more just to be sure—"

But the quiet was broken.

A sharp movement inside the house—then Sylvia's head popped up from the open window, her hair a tangled mess and her expression thunderous.

"What do you think you're doing? Get back inside now."

Damon blinked. Then groaned.

Her voice brooked no argument.

With a long sigh, he inhaled the evening air... then leapt down. His Parkour skill cushioned the impact, letting him tumble back into the room with practiced ease.

The moment he landed, Leona and Sylvia pounced—verbally.

He got thoroughly chewed out. They left nothing out. He could only slump, offering sheepish nods as he was shoved back into bed.

Apparently, to make extra sure he didn't sneak off again... they decided to sleep with him.

Each girl clung to one of his hands like prison shackles.

He tried to argue it was inappropriate, but Sylvia had a full essay prepared—and unfortunately, it was very persuasive.

Ermm... he lost.

Not long after, he found himself nestled between two beautiful women. If their parents knew... he would be dead. No doubt about it.

Still, he had bigger issues gnawing at the back of his mind.

"I hope Lilith got my message..."

He could feel his shadow stretching quietly along the room's corners... 'good, it had survived too.'

But it was weak. Almost lethargic.

Damon exhaled, then mentally opened his system panel.

[HP: 695/695]

[Mana: 16,499/16,499]

[Strength: 1034]

[Agility: 957]

[Speed: 1485]

[Endurance: 910]

[Class: Death Dealer]

[Shadow: 1000]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 10]

[Condition: Shadow Is Full]

[Attributes: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour]
[Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn] [Omen Of Dread] [Dealer's
Hand] [Bloodletting] [Shadow Movement] [Shadow] [Faceless] [Danger Sense] [Shadow Storage] [Wave
Walk]

[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv3] [Survival Lv5] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv3] [Bartering Lv2]
[Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv2] [Trap Lv3] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv2] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv2]
[Mana Control Lv2] [Magic Gatling Lv1] [Pain Resistance Lv3] [Mental Contamination Resistance Lv3]
[Disintegration Resistance Lv1] [Sniper Lv1] [Rune Magic Lv1] [Insanity Lv2] [Fate Manipulation
Resistance Lv1]

[Items:]

[Pale Crown Armor] [Broken Bonds] [Deep Quiver] [Silver Blades] [Miscellaneous Items]

[Locked:]

Damon stared at the panel in stunned silence.

His mana hadn't just increased—it had exploded. He had barely anything left when he died... but now?

He'd heard rumors—whispers—that a near-death experience could spark growth in mana. But this wasn't a spark.

This was a detonation.

The rest of his stats were unchanged. But his shadow energy was full again—a small mercy. A fresh start. He'd need it when the hunger returned.

No new skills—but several masteries had grown. Survival was now Level 5. Fair. He'd survived getting killed by gods.

His Mental Contamination Resistance had also risen—somehow.

More troubling... was his Insanity mastery. It had grown.

That was not a good sign.

Then there was the new one. Fate Manipulation Resistance.

A reward, perhaps. A gift... or a curse. This was the mastery that had kept him alive.

'I have resistance to fate-altering powers, huh...'

He had no idea how it would affect his life.

Finally, he looked to the completely new system mechanic.

The one unlocked by the unknown god.

Just so he could send Damon a message.

Now, he was about to find out what it really did.

Chapter 396: Item Mechanic

[Item]

Item Acquisition: Upon vanquishing foes, the user may claim their essence—either by slaying them to harvest their souls, or by devouring their broken remains to gain gifts. Each prize bears the mark of its origin, feeding power into the twisted gifts bound to your shadow. But beware—some spoils carry curses that linger like whispers in the dark.

Damon sighed.

Once again, the system was giving him vague, overly poetic nonsense. He would've much preferred several pages of clear, concise documentation—something logical, methodical, structured.

But no. The system seemed hell-bent on making him figure everything out the hard way. Trial and error. Cryptic riddles wrapped in ominous prose.

Still, he had some idea of how it worked.

It wasn't even that hard to deduce. This new mechanic clearly allowed him to acquire items—artifacts, scrolls, weapons, tools... maybe even cursed junk. Hopefully not cursed, but knowing the system?

He'd better expect the worst.

I should be careful and check each item properly when I receive it.

Damon's eyes drifted to the next section of the interface: the Item List.

At the top were Pale Crown Armor, Broken Bonds, Deep Quiver, and Silver Blades. The rest were lumped together under a single catch-all label: Miscellaneous Items.

"Even my bow and arrows aren't classified... or my omnidirectional gear."

Odd. The only gear it had properly listed was the deep quiver he'd taken from Back-to-Back. That, and something labeled Silver Blades.

Damon frowned. He didn't recall owning anything called that.

'Unless... it's that damn pendant. The one from Back-to-Back.'

That had to be it. Though he couldn't be sure, it was only a guess at this point.

Curious, he willed the system to show him the details.

[Pale Crown Armor]

[Type] Armor

[Soul Counter] 1325 / 10000

[Description]:

The Ascendants' armors were first forged within the Crystal Palace as symbols of the vast power wielded by the Archons. These armors were not made for war, but for the quiet sacrifice of death without resentment. Their wearers—silent guardians—were tasked with watching over the Weeping Star.

They failed.

The Weeping Star was consumed by wrath and twisted into bitter resentment, birthing the Unknown God.

This pale imitation of their armor stirs something deep within that nameless god—a faint, familiar echo of home.

[Effects]:

Soul Veil – Allows the user to phase through solid objects briefly.

Cloak of Ruin – Passively enhances soul damage dealt, and gradually restores soul damage taken.

Empty Throne – Dominate the mind of a weak willed, turning them into a puppet... or possess their body creating extensions of your ego.

Crown of Silence – Grants immunity to insanity and mental domination.

Damon was... impressed.

This was the first time the system had actually described an item in detail. And what a description.

The Archons. Were they what became of the offspring of the vile thief? Was the Unknown God one of them?

It almost sounded like they'd tried to prevent him from becoming what he was now. But failed.

The enchantments were another matter entirely.

He hadn't hit the ten-thousand soul mark yet, so most were still locked—but they were powerful. Empty Throne in particular intrigued him.

What would it feel like to possess someone...?

Crown of Silence also felt essential. Especially with how often his madness had begun creeping at the edges. Even now, in the corner of his vision, he could see it—Back-to-Back watching him with that smug, eerie grin.

Waiting to mock him. Waiting for him to slip.

'I won't give you that chance...'

He closed his eyes for a moment. The two girls at his side stirred faintly in their sleep, but he froze, careful not to wake them. They were just watching over him. That was all.

He moved on, glancing toward the next item.

[Broken Bonds]

[Type] Weapon

[Description]

From flesh to soul, none shall I leave.

[Effect]

This sword has the ability to disintegrate both the flesh and soul of those cut by its blade.

'Hmmm, suppose that's the description of Alazard's cursed sword.'

[Deep Quiver]

[Type] Tool

[Description]:

A poorly made spatial artifact with a lackluster name.

[Effects]:

Holds more than a normal quiver.

Damon stared at the minimal description with a flat expression.

So much for flair.

The artifact was clearly low-level—just functional. Nothing more.

Then came Silver Blades. He didn't even open the description right away. Instead, he tried summoning them.

To his surprise, it wasn't a weapon that rose from the shadows.

It was a pendant.

The pendant he'd taken from that wretched mentor—Back-to-Back. Even dead, the vile elf haunted him, now as a phantom of his own madness.

Damon narrowed his eyes at the shimmering pendant, then glanced back at the system screen.

[Silver Blades]

[Type] Weapon

[Description]:

Forged in wartime, the Silver Blades are passed from master to apprentice—heirlooms of the Silver Glades. Their power holds symbolic weight and ceremonial meaning.

[Effects]:

Hidden Blade – Can morph into swords.

Demon Slayer – Deals deathly damage to demons and dark entities.

Charm caster – Can be used as a charm, giving other weapons its effect.

He clenched his jaw and glared at the hallucination of Back-to-Back still lounging in his periphery.

'You son of a bitch...'

The figment burst into laughter, collapsing in a heap.

"What? I'm dead. You can't kill me twice. You better keep those blades safe, kid—the Halls of Steel have probably been hunting for them for ages. Congrats! You just made some serious enemies."

Damon clicked his tongue.

This wasn't even Back-to-Back. He was literally talking to himself. So everything back to back said was in fact just Damon's conjecture.

'I really am going insane...'

With a grim look, he shoved the pendant back into his shadow storage.

"No one's gonna know if I never use it..."

Next, he checked the Miscellaneous Items. Most were just junk—books, monster parts, and old gear. Each was listed with short, unceremonious descriptions.

But one entry stood out.

His mother's locket.

[Rachel's Locket]

[Type] Trinket

[Description]:

One of two items crafted from Sunstar—a token of her love for Damien. Passed down to their children. Eventually taken by Ranar, then to her children.

[Effects]:

Not cursed. Just a really durable locket. Try not to lose it.

Damon stared at the panel, deadpan.

Of course it wasn't cursed. He knew that already. It had belonged to his mother, and her mother before her.

Still...

"Who the hell is Damien?" he muttered. "And why does that name sound like a cheap knockoff of my own?"

Chapter 397: Just A Nickname

Three days had passed since Damon miraculously woke up from the dead.

During those three days, their base of operations had been under constant attack by monsters—each assault more refined, more cunning than the last.

Naturally, it became more difficult for them to defend themselves.

It was almost as if the enemy was studying them, adapting, exploiting their combat patterns, finding weaknesses in their party formations.

At least, Damon thought so. He hadn't actually fought. He was just made to rest—undergoing physical therapy while Evangeline and Sylvia insisted on examining his body for any lingering injuries.

That had been Sylvia's idea. Damon tried to argue, of course, but she'd pulled out a whole book filled with legitimate-looking medical records and fake healer's notes justifying why it was necessary.

'Where did she even dig those up.'

Evangeline simply played along. She didn't even want to argue.

Of course, Sylvia may have taken some liberties with him.

Or maybe he took liberties—it was a blur. Using her lap as a pillow definitely felt good.

What didn't feel good was having to constantly worry about ending up on the shit list of some powerful elven king.

Sylvia Moonveil, despite her obvious feelings for him, was a princess—and he was just a commoner.

Damon might've been egotistical, but he was also pragmatic enough to know that playing into Sylvia's feelings wasn't a good idea. Not with his current power.

If he gave himself an inch, he'd end up wanting a mile. Eventually, he wouldn't be able to hold himself back...

That was why he'd drawn a line between them.

If he played dense long enough...

Ehm... actually, nothing would come of it. Sylvia wasn't a weak-willed person. Eventually, she'd get what she wanted—no matter what.

He sighed, staring at his reflection in the mirror.

Teenage angst aside...

They were in real trouble. So Damon, as the party leader—and the guy who hadn't fought a single battle in the past three days since waking up—had finally decided.

They needed to leave. The teleportation gates weren't working, and the waypoints only led in circles around the cursed city.

It would be better to leave through the city gates.

He stretched his limbs. After sparring with Evangeline and Leona over the past few days, he was back to peak condition.

He could tell they were holding back—but that was fine. He wasn't looking for a serious fight, just a way to get his blood moving again.

What was weird, though, was Matia acting as his bodyguard.

'I'm not helpless, guys. Come on...'

Damon stepped out of the room, clad in the pale crown armor. In his hand, he carried Alazard's cursed sword—though now that he knew its name, he might as well call it Broken Bonds.

He closed his eyes, recalling its description.

'Flesh and soul... none shall I leave.'

Tyrannical.

It only had one effect—but that was enough.

He walked through the halls. The scent of blood from outside clung to the air, following behind him, along with Matia's silent footsteps. She trailed him, clad in her icy armor, ever the quiet sentinel.

'I'd appreciate it if she made conversation'

He soon made it to the mansion's grand entrance. The entire place had been fortified with heavy wooden and metallic barricades. He could see runes, painstakingly carved, etched into them like a last desperate prayer.

In the center courtyard, the rest of the party waited.

Xander stood in front, holding his spear and a tower shield—Goddess knows where he found it. It was massive, inscribed with more runes and soaked with near-irremovable bloodstains. Clearly, that shield hadn't just blocked attacks—it had ended things.

'I'd hate to be on the receiving end of that thing.'

The others were all clad in armor. There wasn't much difference in their appearances, but their auras were sharper—far more refined than before. They must've fought a hellish number of monsters during the thirty-one days he'd been dead.

He felt left behind.

They were all close to their second class advancement.

No doubt about it.

'What a group of monsters...'

If any of them punched an ordinary person, they'd probably pop like a blood balloon.

Evangeline stepped forward, her armor lined with golden inlays. She carried her sword in hand.

"Are you sure you don't need a few more days to rest? We aren't in a hurry..."

Damon smirked. Seeing her worried was strangely amusing—but they didn't have the luxury to wait. If they kept defending, they'd eventually be overwhelmed.

"I'm fine. And in fighting condition. Geez, stop acting like my mother..."

Evangeline bit her lip. She didn't argue like she usually would. She just sighed.

"If you say so..."

That subdued response caught him off guard.

She was worried.

He stepped up, gently lifting her chin.

"Eva, it's okay. I promise I'm fine. Trust me..."

Her golden eyes locked with his darker ones.

"Hmm." She nodded quietly.

He glanced past her. Sylvia's eyes were on them, watching. Unmoving.

Damon looked around at the others.

"Ermm... okay, guys. Let's go."

"We're heading for the gate. It's still a ways off, but we'll be out of this cursed city soon enough."

From inside his pouch, a familiar pair of lips floated out.

"Isn't that a bit rude to say about someone's home...?"

Valarie landed on his shoulder. Damon sneered and took the first step into the ruined city.

The vile stench of blood struck his nose—but there were no corpses. His party, or maybe scavengers, had already cleaned them up.

'Bummer'

The ground was soaked in blood so deeply he couldn't even see the pavement.

'What the hell had they been doing this past month...?'

For this much blood to have dried, they must've killed hundreds of horrors—again and again.

"Huh..."

Damon took a deep breath, the stench of rot filling his lungs. He stepped forward, leading the party into the ruined city.

At some point, Sylvia came to walk beside him. She kept stealing glances at him, as if she wanted to say something.

"What is it, Sylvia?"

She shook her head, her face cool and expressionless.

"It's nothing."

He sighed.

'Sure doesn't look like nothing...'

Glancing at her, he asked again.

"Tell me."

She bit her lip.

"I just think you're being unfair."

"How so?"

She twirled her hair around her fingers.

"You... call everyone by their names—but you gave Evangeline a nickname."

Damon blinked.

Was she... jealous?

A small headache started to form.

Chapter 398: A Monster Of Will

Damon was quiet for a moment.

He needed to give Sylvia a simple answer... but the way she was looking at him—

'Ahh, what a pain...'

He forced a smile.

"Erhm, actually, there is a very logical reason for me calling her Eva. It's quite obvious—her name is such a mouthful... saying Evangeline was a pain, so I just call her Eva..."

Sylvia glanced at him with a deadpan expression.

Then she nodded.

"Sylvia is a mouthful too..."

Damon sighed, gaze falling to his shoulder—where a pair of human lips were perched. Valarie. She was smiling with a knowing expression.

The goddamn old hag looked like she was enjoying herself.

Damon felt the urge to curse.

"...Hmm, wait a minute..."

He smiled at Sylvia, as if struck by inspiration.

"Sylvia, tell you what—let's come up with a cute nickname for you. I'm sure Valarie would love to help out. Right, Valarie?"

The pair of disembodied lips twitched.

"Don't get me involved. I'm just minding my business here..."

She pressed her lips together, muttering,

"Wretched womanizer."

Damon was close enough to hear the whisper—and it made him feel incredibly aggrieved. This really wasn't his fault.

'Fine, you settle this.'

He grabbed the pair of lips and placed them on Sylvia's shoulder.

"Ehmr... Valarie will help come up with a cute nickname."

He didn't even give Sylvia a chance to respond. His form blurred into shadow and glided to the front beside Xander.

Sylvia pouted slightly, lips tightening. She glanced at Valarie—who somehow seemed to be looking at her, even without eyes.

"...What?"

Valarie smirked.

"It's nothing. I just think the wearers of the Armor of Crescent Seer aren't very blessed when it comes to romance..."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Valarie's lips pressed together. Her voice dropped, quiet and slow.

"Valcara had the same problem. Love is quite painful, you know..."

Sylvia tensed. Valcara. That was the teacher of Mugu... and she had fallen for him too. It hadn't ended well.

She remembered—the first time she had seen Valcara was on the bridge leading into the Whispering Forest. The lady in the mist.

Or rather... what remained of her. Even in death, she was still sad.

Sylvia had an inkling of how she felt. Damon had, more or less, rejected her. Played the oblivious role. Blamed her actions on a dark spirit... acting like he had no idea.

"Why does it hurt so much..."

She couldn't help but whisper the words.

Hearing this, Valarie was silent.

"Valcara said those exact same words to me once... and my answer still remains the same..."

She paused.

"I... I don't know."

She sighed, watching Sylvia's downcast expression.

"For Valcara... she couldn't have won. Mugu loved someone else. At first, I thought he was in love wi—"

"He is. I mean... I think so." Sylvia cut her off.

She clenched her fists.

"I know this is pathetic, but I... I think he's in love with Lilith Astranova. I see the way she looks at him, and the way they look at each other, and..."

She raised her head, her expression torn.

"I really want to hate her... but I can't. But I can't bring myself to like her either..."

Valarie could hear the frustration tangled in her voice. She didn't know who Lilith Astranova was, but she got the picture.

"Instead of beating around the bush, why not just tell him?"

Sylvia's eyes turned red, tears welling up.

"I can't. I want to... but I know how it will end. I'm a Seer, remember? I can see the future..."

She tilted her head, chest tightening as she choked back the tears.

"If I go there right now and tell him how I feel, he's just going to tell me all the reasons why we can't be together. And I can't argue against that. Because if he chooses to be with me regardless... he'll be the one in danger."

Valarie remained quiet as Sylvia whispered,

"Do you know 99.9% of female noble-to-male commoner relationships end in bloodshed? I have a skill that lets me dig up all this information. I wanted to use it to argue against his logic, but... I only dug a grave for myself."

Her sad eyes turned to Valarie.

"In 426 of the Doom Calendar, Lady Meri of House Tatin ran away with her commoner love and got married. They had two children. One year after their second child was born... her family found her.

They threw her husband and first child off a balcony as she watched. Then... they boiled her infant alive.

She killed herself two days later."

Valarie was silent.

The world was still too dark.

Sylvia gave her example after example. Horror after horror.

If Valarie had a stomach, she would have thrown up.

"Things have changed over the years. After the Aether Academy was created, commoners mixed more with nobles. But that didn't really change much. Whole villages can still get destroyed just for earning the ire of a noble. Mixed blood might as well be a curse."

"Male nobles have it easier. They can't marry commoner women, but they're allowed to let their bastard children live—mostly as substitutes, because of how hazardous the demon wars are. They also make good cannon fodder. Or expendable political hostages."

Sylvia wiped her eyes quietly, unnoticed.

"The Peasant Revolution changed a lot. At least now female nobles are allowed to talk to commoner men without them getting castrated or lynched..."

Her voice faltered. Her head lowered.

"So I should be glad I can still talk to him... but I wa—I want more. And I hate that I do..."

Valarie sighed, lips pressed tightly together.

"I hear what you're saying. I understand. But this is the world of Aetherus. A world of conflict and war.

If you want something... it won't be handed to you.

Sylvia, you must take what you want—no matter who gets hurt, or whose pride gets shattered.

Look at Damon. If he really loves that Lilith Astranova, trust me when I say—that boy would burn this world to be with her.

Are you willing to do the same?"

She leaned in closer, her voice a cold whisper.

"Don't be Valcara. Don't make her mistakes.

So what if he belongs to another woman? If you can't have him—then no one should even dream of it.

Do you want to be a weak woman... or do you want a piece of that Damon pie?

If you're powerful enough... why should 'no' matter?"

Sylvia's eyes widened.

"...If I'm powerful enough..."

Valarie smiled faintly.

"Yes. If you have the power and the will to do absolutely anything—who can stop you?

The people from your examples... they ran."

Sylvia looked at Damon. Her fist clenched.

Then her gaze turned slowly to the invisible book floating in front of her.

She did have the means.

She just lacked the will.

"...If I have the will... no one can stop me."

"I don't want to hurt anyone... but if I don't act... I'll lose....."

On that day, Valarie Sunwarden created a terrible monster.

She made Sylvia Moonveil realize—she had all the power.

The power of a god sat in the palm of her hand.

All she needed... was the will to use it.

Sylvia turned and began walking toward Damon.

But before she could reach him—a monstrous growl erupted.

The wall nearby exploded into pieces.

Chapter 399: Juju Grunts

Damon reacted instinctively.

He hadn't spread his shadow perception too far—no doubt avoiding the risk of something sensing him first—but his danger sense was still active, if dulled by the constant danger around them.

At the sound of walls being shattered, Xander's arm had already moved. His shield slammed up, deflecting the wreckage, then sent it hurtling back with a surge of gravity at the creature that had lunged at them.

They had grown used to this sort of chaos in the month Damon had been gone. With his absence, the others had learned to adapt—to rely less on his danger sense, and more on their own instincts.

Damon followed Xander's defensive maneuver, ducking behind him and firing a magic bullet toward the unknown assailant.

He heard a grunt as the bullet struck its target.

Evangeline was already moving, her sword gleaming as it arced forward.

"Radiant Blade—!"

A golden arc of light followed Damon's bullet. However, the creature didn't even attempt to dodge.

With a guttural groan, it took the blow head-on.

It didn't die. But it bled.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Magic resistance..."

The creature had shrugged off both magical attacks—clearly not immune, but tough enough to make spells ineffective. Then he heard it—sounds, subtle but many, crawling and echoing from the buildings and alleys around them.

More were coming.

"We're dealing with more juju creatures," Leona muttered grimly.

Damon glanced sideways at her. It was clear now—his entire party already knew what these were.

"I sure missed a lot being dead all this time," he muttered wryly.

Leona nodded, her blade swinging in a clean arc and cleaving the creature's head clean off.

The monster looked like some warped beast. Jagged skin covered its form, with a circular maw ringed with rows of tiny teeth. Several thin, human-like arms jutted from its torso, sickly and twitching. But its primary limbs were monstrous—thick, powerful, bestial arms that radiated brute force.

"The juju creatures resist magic," Leona explained. "And they're freakishly strong. This one's a juju grunt—not even the worst of the species."

Damon gave a brief nod, then raised his sword. Shadow energy laced across the blade.

"Dark Blade."

The slash mirrored Evangeline's earlier attack, but with shadow instead of light.

He glanced toward Sylvia. "Something tells me that's not all."

Sylvia took over from Leona, drawing closer.

"They aren't many this time," she said, her bow already drawn. "So we can kill them."

Damon held his sword in a firm grip, exhaling a grim sigh.

He hadn't taken down a single one yet, and the others were treating these things casually... but he could feel it. These creatures were first-rank. Normally, he could kill them without even thinking.

'Or are they one of the few exceptions?'

Sylvia's arrows flashed through the air, streaking toward the rooftops. She wasn't aiming to kill—she knew better. Magic wouldn't do much. But her shots were precise enough to slow them down.

"There are three kinds," she continued. "Each worse than the last. These here? Juju grunts. Simple beasts."

She leapt onto a road sign with practiced ease, landing with a graceful crouch.

"The next tier's juju knights. Kinda like mist knights, but not nearly as dreadful. Same magic resistance. And their armor's a nightmare to crack."

"If they're a rank above..." she added, her eyes flicking toward the distance, "we usually run."

Damon nodded, then activated his [5x] skill, surging his physical strength to its peak.

When the first one lunged, he caught its head mid-air—and crushed it in his palm until the skull caved in.

'Bet you didn't know I can boost my base strength by five.'

A low chime echoed in his mind.

[You have slain Juju Grunt.]

He didn't stop. He couldn't risk being seen devouring the corpse, not now.

Sylvia was close, flipping through the air as her bow switched into blades mid-spin. She sliced one of the creature's arms clean off, then impaled it through the chest.

"The last kind is called an apostate," she added. "They're usually rank three—and very dangerous."

From Damon's shoulders, Valerie finally spoke, smiling faintly.

"Back in the day, we called them mage hunters," she said. "The whole group was designed to hunt rogue magic users. At least, that was the official story."

She chuckled softly.

"But the truth? They were created to keep the city's secrets buried."

Damon raised his hand, summoning Ashborn.

A group of juju grunts leapt toward him.

The black flames erupted like shadows, consuming them all. The pain that followed was sharp—his body trembled as the fire ate into him, burning like real fire rather than magic.

He gritted his teeth.

"Thanks a lot for creating a group this deadly... You deserve a real pat on the back."

Valerie smiled wider. "Thank you. I did my best."

Damon ignored her.

[You have slain Juju Grunt.]

[You have gained 5 attribute points.]

[You have slain Juju Grunts.]

[You have gained 5 attribute points.]

[You have acquired an item.]

He smiled. This was what he was hoping for.

The system always rewarded him when he devoured the corpses—especially the ones he had slain himself.

Most of the time it gave attribute points. Sometimes, it granted skills. Occasionally, even mastery. But he always gained something.

Ashborn consumed both flesh and soul. In a way, he was feeding on them—though not always the same way.

When he burned shades, he didn't gain shadow energy. Only attribute points. Unlike traditional devouring, burning didn't add to his overall pool—it merely restored what he had spent.

No sacrifice skill needed.

Damon stepped back slightly, noticing something else. The juju grunts were focusing on him. Not Sylvia. Not Xander. Just him.

It felt like they were testing him.

Each one attacked from a different angle—above, below, the sides—never repeating the same tactic.

So Damon kept killing.

He shifted through every weapon and skill he had—short-range, long-range, swordsmanship, daggers, magic bullets, and more.

The fight lasted roughly fifteen minutes. By the end of it, he had the workout he didn't know he needed.

Once the last grunt dropped, they moved away from the area, continuing their journey out of Lysithara.

Damon's armor was slick with blood. The vile stench of gore clung to him like rot. Worst of all, the close combat had left blood soaking into his hair—which had been growing longer the past few months.

Now, it stuck to his scalp in thick, bloody strands.

'Ahhh... this is going to be a pain to wash.'

Still, his mood was high.

He had obtained three new items from the battle.

His mastery had grown.

And he had earned more attribute points from devouring the corpses.

Chapter 400: Time To Say Goodbye

Their journey had been nothing short of eventful—an entire day spent fighting monsters and sneaking past the ones they couldn't afford to engage.

The sun was close to setting, casting long shadows across the ruins. Damon exhaled, the red sheen of blood on his sword catching the crimson hue of the dying light.

He stood atop the corpse of a monster—an ugly creature with eyes in its mouth. Hideous, malformed. A shame Matia had landed the killing blow. The beast had been guarding a waypoint, but for some reason, it had chosen to attack them instead.

Which worked out. They were going to use the waypoint anyway.

Damon turned and walked toward the others. He could feel Evangeline and Sylvia glancing at him.

He needed healing—his wounds were deep and pulsing—but he didn't ask. Both girls could heal, though Sylvia had a stronger affinity for it. Evangeline's magic was built more for purification. She hadn't used that skill today, not yet.

Purge. The first class skill that allowed her to remove corruption and send a portion of it into her own body. Dangerous. Costly.

"Do you need healing... you look injured..."

Damon shook his head.

He was injured, badly even. But he didn't want their help. Not yet.

'I want to test out that item.'

There was something in their expressions—both of them. Sylvia's eyes carried something unspoken, but Damon already knew what was on her mind.

As for Evangeline, she had been glancing at him with a hesitant expression all day. He couldn't guess what she wanted to say.

Now wasn't the time for either of those conversations.

Besides, he had another option now. A new way to heal. He needed to test its effectiveness.

The new item acquisition mechanic.

"Let's go..."

The others nodded and stood. Damon didn't want to wait to find camp—his hair was stiff with dried blood. He reeked. No doubt everyone was eager to clean up.

He approached the waypoint. It hovered in front of them, a small monolith embedded with glowing gems that pulsed softly as it floated in place.

Damon reached out and placed his palm against the surface. As he did, a soft swirl of light blossomed from the contact—like a tiny nebula unfolding before them. Icons appeared, celestial symbols that shifted until they formed the image of Lysithara.

The city was mapped out in brilliant detail—except for the places he had never been, which remained dim and obscured.

One icon blinked—a known waypoint. Then several more.

Valarie's voice came from his shoulder, her lips disembodied yet somehow untouched by the blood and grime that coated the rest of him. Even the crevices of his armor were caked in gore, his once-pristine gear dented and scarred.

"Select the farthest active waypoint. It's closest to the city gates..."

Damon nodded toward the clean, floating lips. Even now, she sounded regal. The sword in his hand—Broke Bonds—was battered. It had taken a lot of punishment today. He hated the idea of losing such a fine weapon.

Still, he tapped the farthest waypoint.

The world shifted. He remained standing before a waypoint—but it wasn't the same one.

They had arrived.

The party turned and looked up.

The sight before them stole their breath—a massive tower, impossibly tall, looming ahead. From afar, it had looked distant. Now it felt close. But it wasn't. Its size simply defied distance.

They stared in awe.

Thud.

The shockwave launched them briefly off their feet. A giant's step, taken miles away, yet powerful enough to collapse the ground beneath them from sheer force.

A behemoth. Somewhere out there, a monster too vast to comprehend moved through the world, unaware or uncaring of their presence.

A shadow eclipsed the sky.

A massive, three-headed reptile—snake-like and wingless—drifted above the clouds. Space tore open in its wake, reality fracturing as the beast slithered through the air. The cracks sealed slowly behind it, as if the world were desperate to stitch itself whole again.

They stood amidst spiraling ruins. Below was blackness—a chaotic spiral of space and time. Damon felt an instinctive, bone-deep dread. A fall into that abyss would never end.

He looked up.

The wreckage climbed like a wall. A windowless tower, gutted and skeletal. Old motifs and crumbling pillars told of a forgotten age. Ahead, beyond the wreck, a vast tear in space stretched across the city—an entire section obliterated, replaced by a void.

Sylvia pointed upward.

"We have to go up. We can't cross the rift. But there's another waypoint further above. If we use that one, we'll reach the other side..."

Damon nodded, eyes tracing the gaping void beneath them. It was centered in the ruined tower.

Valarie's lips moved.

"This is the Spiral Tower," she said. "A defensive structure. The hole below leads beneath the Crystal Tower. That's where... or rather where Mugu imprisoned some outsiders. Even some of our allies..."

Valarie scoffed, "As for that rift that splits the city—that was a sword strike from the Blind Old Daoist."

She smiled. "But there's good news. Dawn Break Hollow isn't far from here. We're at the very heart of the city now—maybe even past it. You kids kept your promise."

Sylvia pointed upward again.

Leona bit her lip, her gaze lingering on Valarie's disembodied lips. Her expression was pained, wistful.

Were they really going to say goodbye?

Damon felt a pang in his chest. They had all grown used to Valarie—her calm presence, her wisdom, her sarcastic grace. She was someone they respected deeply... someone they might even admit to loving.

Saying goodbye to the last of the Ascendants hurt more than he'd expected.

"I guess this is goodbye then..." Sylvia muttered, tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes.

Valarie smiled.

"It doesn't have to be. Let me see you kids off. I'm sure I can still make it to the gate,"

she laughed softly. "With you trouble magnets, I can't rest in peace without making sure."

She glanced at Damon.

"Especially with him in the lead."

Damon smiled, a tear gleaming in his eye.

"Damn old hag."