

Shadow 401

Chapter 401: Money Making Mechanic

Ascending the spiral tower had been surprisingly easy... at least for now.

There were monsters here, of course—Damon hadn't sensed any yet, but he wasn't naïve.

This place reeked of danger.

A massive void spiraled in the center of the structure, chaotic time rifts swirling around it like broken glass caught in a storm. Each rift shimmered with unstable energy—if you fell into one, you might never come back the same.

Valarie had casually dismissed the risk.

Apparently, the worst case scenario was a time displacement of seven to ten years. If you were unlucky enough to fall in, you'd get spat out at the bottom.

That... was the real problem.

The lowest level of the spiral tower was a living nightmare. A crumbled graveyard of the city, soaked in the blood of centuries lost and forgotten.

Countless monsters roamed down there, locked in endless combat—fighting each other, fighting each corrupted, and sometimes fighting remnants of Ittorath's minions that had somehow survived daybreak.

Damon felt a chill crawl up his spine just thinking about it.

It wasn't the corruption that terrified him—it was the land itself. Everything about that place tried to kill you.

If you fell you would face corruption.

Becoming one corroded by rot.

A cesspool of ruin and hatred, where strong and weak battled until even time gave up.

Matia clutched her shoulder at the mention of corruption, her voice brittle.

"I would rather die..."

Damon gave her a wry smile.

"I would rather not end up there at all..."

Leona lifted her hand toward the crackling firelight, her lips parting in a playful smile.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm glad we can finally have some light and heat at night."

Sylvia looked up, her eyes reflecting the vast emptiness of the shattered sky above them—framed by the jagged husk of the tower.

"The spires and towers can have light, remember..."

Xander bit into some roasted meat, chasing it down with a steaming cup of water.

He groaned with contentment.

"Beats being cold... I can stand the dark, but the cold gets to me—especially in armor."

Valarie smirked from where she lay sprawled on a thick fur coat Sylvia had stitched together from some unfortunate beast.

The disembodied pair of lips laying nearby seemed to have something to say as always.

"No need to be impressed, you bumpkins. If the city's core functions weren't sealed, you'd be amazed... Lysithara has the most advanced facilities in the world."

Damon sneered, wringing out a bloodstained rag he'd used to clean his hair.

"Yeah, maybe like a gazillion years ago. I'll have you know, Valtheron—our home country—has railways in the city."

Valarie paused at that, then sighed dramatically.

"That's not a big deal. You do realize the first rail was developed here in Lysithara, right? Airships too—although their assembly was done on the Sky Continent.

In fact, we were developing automaton carriages... Yes, kids, you heard it here first—no horses or magic beasts pulling your carriage."

Sylvia scoffed, tossing a twig into the fire as she came to Damon's defense.

"Don't act like you all came up with that yourselves. Didn't the visitors help you out with that?"

Valarie's lips twisted into a pout, biting into themselves with exaggerated betrayal.

"So much for girl power. She betrayed me... for a man. Teenagers."

That broke the group into laughter.

Banter flew. Insults and teases were exchanged like daggers dulled by affection. Despite the gloom looming around them, they refused to let it settle in.

They spoke of the future. What they would do after they left this cursed city.

Damon, predictably, was planning to sell everything he'd scavenged from Lysithara—for cold, hard cash.

Xander didn't miss the opportunity to jab at him.

He teased Damon for his shameless love of wealth, and Damon, as always, bore it with a grin.

Eventually, they began to settle down for the night.

Damon took first watch.

Seated alone, the crackling fire casting dancing shadows across his face, he pulled up the system's interface. A new tab had appeared.

[Potions]

Curious, Damon tapped it open.

[Basic Healing Potion] x3

[Mirror Water Potion] x1

He smirked and continued to scroll. A few items had been filed under Miscellaneous.

[Blanket] x1

[Pure Water] x2

Damon deadpanned, but a part of him was undeniably eager. He selected the first entry.

[Basic Healing Potion]

[Type:] Consumable – Healing

[Description:]

A simple red liquid stored in a dull glass vial. It lacks scent, taste, or warmth — yet it binds torn flesh and calms burning nerves as if remembering what the body should be.

No one remembers who first created it, only that it works.

For now.

[Effect:]

Gradually restores a moderate amount of health. Leaves behind a faint warmth in the chest. Overuse may dull the potion's effect.

Damon reached into the shadows, retrieving one of the vials.

He blinked.

'Dull glass vial, my ass...'

The container was elegant, shaped like it belonged in a noble's collection—definitely expensive-looking.

'Someone better tell the unknown god what dull means.'

He wondered if the vials alone could fetch a price. No, better yet—what if he could sell the potions and the vials? That was easy money.

He popped the top and drank. The liquid tasted like... nothing. Cool, like spring water.

Then, just as the system described, he felt the warmth bloom in his chest. Wounds began to knit together slowly. His smile widened.

"Heheeh I can't wait to get back... this is a nice money-making mechanic... I'll be rich."

And if this was the basic version...

'Advanced... Great... maybe even Legendary? Could I even get a cure for Luna?'

The thought was a ray of hope.

'Like that's going to happen...'

Still, he was eager as he clicked on the next entry. One he didn't recognize.

[Mirror Water Potion]

[Type:] Consumable

[Description:]

A vial of fluid so clear, it reflects more than just your face. Those who drink it see time — of others, of themselves, of something deeper beneath the surface.

Be careful not to look too long.

[Effect:]

Grants limited precognition for a few seconds in combat. Slight foresight of enemy moves. After use, leaves the user disoriented for a short duration.

Damon couldn't help the wild grin stretching across his face.

"Rich. I'll be rich..."

Combat potions like these? Rare. Expensive. Priceless.

"Hehehe... what more can I get?"

But then he paused.

If his system could give him anything, didn't that also mean it could give him cursed items?

'Yeah... that's a possibility.'

He took a deep breath, muttering a quiet prayer to whatever god might be listening. No cursed loot, please.

He was careful not to pray to the goddess, god forbid she killed him again.

Next up was Miscellaneous.

[Blanket]

[Type:] Misc

[Description:]

Better not do anything erotic under these sheets.

[Effect:]

It's a blanket

Damon stared.

A completely flat expression.

'Am I getting sex ed from a god?'

I'm definitely doing something erotic if I get the chance.

He didn't even have a girlfriend, but—

'I wonder if Lilith woul—'

He stopped himself there, sighing. He moved to the next item.

[Pure Water]

[Type:] Consumable

[Description:]

Fresh drinking water is better than gold.

[Effect:]

A very refreshing drink.

He reached into the shadows again and pulled out a plastic bottle labeled Pure Water with a sticker that read:

Licensed and Patented. Better than anything a certain goddess has.

His expression turned to stone.

Was the system mocking him... or the goddess?

He took a sip—

His eyes widened.

It was incredible. Cold, crisp, clean. He finished the whole bottle in one go.

"Damn... that was some good water..."

He licked his lips.

"I'm gonna be rich... I should start a business. Yes. A business."

"Hmmm really... can you hire me then?"

The voice was soft, teasing. Damon's heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

He snapped his head around—

Sylvia stood beside him, smiling.

Chapter 402: Trouble In His Future

Damon blinked.

He wondered how much of that she had heard. A quiet sigh almost slipped past his lips—his disuse of shadow perception had left him vulnerable, open to surprises he normally would have sensed a mile away.

His danger sense helped, sure... but it was no real substitute.

Sylvia's smile was gentle, unwavering. Her eyes never strayed from his as she lowered herself slowly beside him.

Damon tried not to shift uncomfortably. There was something different about her tonight. Or was it just him? Did she... look prettier somehow?

His thoughts betrayed him.

He thought of the blanket...

Bit his lips...

'No. Absolutely not.'

Sylvia's gaze never faltered, locked on him with eerie intensity.

"I guess I should go straight to the point... you know, don't you?"

Damon forced a wry smile, trying to deflect.

"What do I know...?"

She looked up at him. Her expression—almost cold. A chill smile curved her lips as his danger sense gave a soft whisper at the edge of his awareness.

"Huh... fine, be like that," she said, her tone cold, yet her smile never left.

"I never get what I want. The Moon Glades are quite beautiful... but even being the princess there, I can hardly say I know the place."

Damon almost sighed in relief at the shift in topic. At least she wasn't talking about feelings. Or romance. Or anything dangerous like that.

As he had told himself many times before, he couldn't understand these childish crushes. Not because he didn't feel them... but because emotionally, he was stunted. Part of him—maybe the most important part—had simply stopped growing. That disconnect between his actions and his intentions, it showed more often than he liked.

Still, Sylvia continued.

"Someone once told me... if I want something, I should take it by force. I don't need to ask permission."

She turned and met his eyes directly.

"Today was a good opportunity. Too bad you didn't take it."

Damon had no idea what she was talking about, but a shiver crept down his spine.

"Sylvia, I—"

"Damon," she interrupted, her voice firm but quiet, "I actually came here to apologize in advance. For anything I do in the future. I hope you can forgive me. Just know... I'll do what I must. Because I intend to claim what I long for."

He suppressed the urge to gulp. Her aura shifted—subtle, but impossible to miss. He recognized the resonance of a second-class advancement.

"And what is it that you want?"

Sylvia didn't look away. She didn't blink.

"I wanted two things. Knowledge—I've already obtained that. The second still eludes me... though it's so close."

She slowly raised her hand and brushed her fingers against his cheek.

"I can even touch it... yet apparently, I can't have it. Because the world and society say so. Isn't that... ludicrous?"

Damon chuckled awkwardly.

"Ohhh huh...hu... I see."

She smiled again. A shade of red colored her face, but it didn't look like an innocent blush.

"I'll get it. I will have what I want. That's why I'm apologizing. My methods... may cause you some trouble. But you'll forgive me, right?"

Damon couldn't help it anymore. He gulped.

"Ermh... yes... sure. As long as you stop creeping me out..."

Sylvia smiled, radiant as ever.

"Okay. I'll hold you to that promise. Don't forget these words... Anyway, you wanted to ask me about the Silver Glades?"

Damon blinked.

"How did you...?"

She gently pushed her white hair aside, the silken strands parting to reveal her elven ears catching the moonlight.

"I'm a seer. And I had a vision."

Damon had only wanted to change the topic—her presence was freaking him out, and that was saying something coming from him.

'I haven't gotten chills like this since that one time Lilith messed me up...'

Women could be terrifying. Sylvia Moonveil might just be the most dangerous of them all.

'Goddess help me... help us all...'

Damon even risked praying to the goddess.

He braved another question. "What do you know about it?"

Sylvia smiled.

"Nothing... but I know everything. Remember, I'm a seer."

He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Yeah, but your skill is dangerous. Evangeline learned her lesson and only uses it when necessary. You just... do whatever, don't you?"

She tilted her head, then leaned it softly on his shoulder.

"Are you... concerned?"

He gave her a deadpan look.

"It'd be weird if I wasn't."

She wrapped both hands around his arm.

"You're really sweet. You act like you don't care... but you do. A lot. Don't you?"

He scoffed, turning his face slightly.

"Tsk. Are you going to tell me about the Silver Glades or not?"

She nodded. He could feel her warmth through the cold night air.

"The Silver Glades is a land of warriors. It borders my home—the Moon Glades. Unlike the other elven kingdoms, it's a nation ruled by strength. The title of ruler passes from master to apprentice."

Her fingers idly played with a lock of her hair.

"The current ruler is old. All his apprentices died in the Demon War. His last one disappeared—assumed dead... so technically, he has no successor. Unless... that apprentice is still alive. Or if he had another."

Despite her casual tone, her words carried weight.

"Despite being neighbors, like most countries in this world, we've fought more than a few battles. Now that I think about it... it probably has something to do with the Pillar."

"That's enough." Damon cut in, his voice sharper than before. "I get the picture. Let's not talk about that. Or any Pillars."

He caught the sly smile tugging at her lips.

"As you wish. I thought you'd let me ramble on and on..."

She gave him a knowing look.

"You should be careful during the upcoming War Games. Don't get carried away... warriors from all over the world will show up for a chance to prove their mantle and enter the World Dungeon in Valerion."

The moonlight made her white hair shimmer as she smiled again.

"The whole world will be watching..."

Damon didn't know what she meant by that. But he had a sinking feeling that if he asked, she'd only answer with something cryptic.

This girl was becoming more mysterious with each passing day.

"Assuming we actually get out of here alive..."

Sylvia exhaled, her cold breath fogging slightly in the night air.

"I should go. It seems Evangeline wants to talk to you too..."

As she walked back toward the firelight, he noticed the faintest pout on her face.

Evangeline approached quietly from the other side, where she had been watching the ruined city below.

Damon sighed.

Today must be bother Damon day...

'God forbid a man wants to brood in peace'

Chapter 403: Knowledge In The Dark

"Tsk. At least be happy people actually talk to you..."

The voice came from Damon's side again—Back-to-Back.

Damon didn't react. It wasn't actually back-to-back. Just another figment of his unraveling mind.

His insanity was at Level 2 now. He used to ignore these hallucinations. Now? He talked back to them. Argued. Fought. Fully aware it was all in his head.

"Screw off," he muttered.

Evangeline approached, biting her lips as she looked at him.

'Seriously, Evangeline... what do you want?'

Damon wondered, but didn't say it aloud.

"He's grown. Wasn't this the girl he used to tell to screw off?" came Carmen Vale's voice, off to the side, sitting on nothing, sipping tea from a cup that probably didn't exist.

Or at least, Damon hoped it was tea.

He sighed and ignored the second phantom of his madness.

"Eva... what's on your mind?"

Evangeline nodded, rubbing her palms together—a small habit reacting to the bite of the cold night air.

She'd been quite far from the fire, sharing first watch with Damon.

"Are you cold?"

He asked again. She shook her head slowly and sat down beside him.

Back-to-Back sighed.

"She's quite beautiful, isn't she? Hmm. I can see why Xander was so smitten with her... too bad you stole his girl. So much for being brothers in arms. With a friend like you, who needs enemies..."

"Shut up," Damon muttered.

Evangeline blinked, startled. "Hmmm? What—I... I didn't say anything..."

Damon forced a smile. "It's fine. Wasn't talking to you. You were saying...?"

Evangeline glanced at him, worry rising behind her eyes.

"I haven't said anything yet..."

Damon could see the anxiety written on her face. He had died and come back. Her concern wasn't misplaced.

Somehow, her expression warmed his heart.

"I wonder why I didn't focus on these two when Sylvia was here..." Carmen mused, sipping his imaginary tea with a smug smile.

"You were too busy undressing her in your mind. There was no room for us..."

Damon lifted his hand to call forth Ashborn, then stopped.

Right. They weren't real.

Evangeline caught the gesture, her gaze locking onto his. Without a word, he reached into his shadow storage. His fingers brushed through the darkness and pulled out a blanket—soft and warm, woven from finer materials than most would afford.

He offered it to her.

"Here. It's cold."

Evangeline's smile lit her face. She opened the blanket and gently draped it over them both, snuggling closer to share the warmth.

"You're cold too."

Damon glanced down at the blanket now covering his legs.

"Don't do anything erotic, you bastard. Her father and grandfather will destroy you. Hey—just remember the story. What does she even want?"

He shot a glare at Back-to-Back, who casually gestured to Damon's shadow.

'Mind your business...' That one, he kept to himself.

Evangeline's gaze drifted to Damon's neck, where his mother's locket lay.

"I... I wanted to ask you something... erm, your... mo—village. What was it like...?"

Damon tilted his head back. He could already hear Back-to-Back whispering that something was off, but not without slipping in some insult first.

"Why?"

She looked away. "Erm, you told Matia about... your past. I mean, you don't have to tell me anything..."

Damon sighed. There wasn't any real reason not to. So... he told her.

He spoke about his village—not the parts he hated, not the pain—but the fragments of joy. The laughter. The warm days when his parents were still alive.

Evangeline opened up too. She spoke of her father. She didn't mention much about her grandfather—the way she avoided the subject made it clear that part of her life was strained.

Somehow, the topic shifted to Valtheron.

Evangeline laughed at Damon's casual, borderline disrespectful commentary about some of the empire's most powerful nobles.

"I don't know... you don't get called Abellona of Destruction for being a peaceful person."

Evangeline sighed. "The Valtheron imperial princess is a powerhouse. She's only a few years older than us..."

Damon chuckled. "Have you ever seen her face? I mean, she's supposedly always wearing a veil..."

"She must be really ugly..."

Evangeline elbowed him sharply.

"You'd definitely get executed. No doubt. She wears a veil because she's beautiful. The Jewel of the Empire."

Damon sneered. "Or it's shame. Hey, you can't know—you've never seen her face."

Evangeline couldn't argue with that logic.

She huffed, arms crossing as they sat there beneath the blanket, the cold air unable to reach them.

Back-to-Back yawned.

"Alright, we've indulged her enough. Are you actually an idiot, or did you get dropped on your head as a baby? It's obvious what's going on here..."

Carmen nodded at the hallucination of Back-to-Back.

"She was gathering information... seems Sylvia wasn't the only one that learned from his no-good methods..."

Back-to-Back gestured toward Damon's shadow.

"Imagine the audacity to use his own tricks against him..."

"Damon, you little shit... I raised you better than this. Don't let her go. You know you're curious..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. Insanity aside... they were right.

'I see... so this is the power of Insanity Mastery. Each mastery actually has an effect on me. I just never noticed... because I was already strong. For Swordsmanship, the effect was techniques—like Dark Blade. For Insanity... it's different.'

Carmen tilted his head at Back-to-Back.

"What's this fool doing?"

"Wasting time, that's what."

Evangeline started to stand—or tried to.

Damon reached out and pulled her gently into his arms.

She fell against him, cheeks flushed as he leaned closer.

Her face reddened deeper, her head shifting slightly.

"Erhmm... not here..."

Damon didn't stop. His face was so close their noses nearly touched.

"Eva... did you get what you wanted? This whole thing... was because you wanted information on... my mother, didn't you?"

Evangeline blinked. Her eyes widened. She bit her lip.

He continued, softly, "My mother's locket's been with you this past month. And you opened it. Curious, Evangeline..."

Her gaze met his.

"I... I was just curious..."

Damon grinned, then placed a playful kiss on her cheek.

"Hehehe. What are you so freaked out about? Jeez, I was just teasing..."

Evangeline touched her cheek, then glared, punching him in the gut before storming off.

Back-to-Back leaned in close to Damon's face.

"What is wrong with you? Are you an idiot? She knows something. Hell, she might even know about your mother... you idiot..."

Damon nodded.

"That's fine. If she doesn't want to tell me now, it's probably because she thinks she's protecting me..."

He glanced at Back-to-Back.

"I'm sorry I'm not the same person you raised... why would I risk hurting someone I care about for knowledge that might not even serve me? Mom is dead... I don't have to know everything about her life."

Carmen smiled gently.

"But we have a clue. A very glaring clue. Just don't let your thoughts spiral too far..."

Damon turned toward the ruined city.

"We'll be home soon."

Chapter 404: Separation

"Something is wrong..."

Back-to-Back had said that for the seventh time in the hours since they continued their climb up the spiral tower.

Damon cleaned the blood off his sword as he downed a recovery potion.

This particular potion helped an individual recover from wounds, fatigue, lost mana, endurance—and all that sort of thing.

He wasn't stingy. He gave the ones he got to his party.

Good thing he could.

They had been under constant monster attacks. The potions and drops he looted were surprisingly useful, though some were outright cursed or just plain useless... so he fed those to his shadow instead, boosting its power.

He only kept what he thought was worth keeping.

Like the recovery potions.

[Recovery Potion]

[Type] Consumable

[Description]

Return to your persistent state and be cleansed of the demons of pain, blood, and fatigue.

[Effects]

This potion allows for quick recovery, healing wounds, restoring mana, and endurance.

Damon frowned, clearly annoyed with the phantom of Back-to-Back.

"I'm telling you, something is off..."

Damon sighed. "Fine... you're the part of my insanity that represents my paranoia and rational thinking. What's the problem?"

Back-to-Back glared.

"I'm you. I don't know. Why else would I be nagging in my own head?"

Damon exhaled again, wiping more blood from his blade. "Right. I can't see the future. Guess I'll just proceed with caution. Thanks for nothing..."

He understood how his insanity worked—it was disturbingly simple.

The two phantoms he saw were pieces of him.

Back-to-Back represented Damon's paranoia, self-loathing, and critical thinking. Snarky and cruel. Which made sense—Back-to-Back had practically raised him on the brutal streets of Valerion, sharpening the already bitter child into someone colder, meaner, and smarter.

Out there, it was a dog-eat-dog world. No dignity. No honor. Just survival.

Then there was Carmen Vale—one of the few who had shown him kindness.

No surprise that the kind hunter's way of life had shaped Damon's philosophy to some degree.

Damon still lived with the guilt of killing him.

So Carmen appeared as a calm, slightly amused observer. A manifestation of rationality, maybe past guidance, maybe guilt. Rarely did he speak cruelly—but when he did, it cut deeper than anything Back-to-Back ever said.

Together, they formed a Greek chorus of madness—mocking, guiding, and breaking him all at once.

His mind was a horrible place.

"Let's go," Damon called to his party.

Everyone looked exhausted—even with the recovery potions.

In the meantime, he hadn't gotten a new skill. He pushed the thought aside.

They continued their ascent through the ruined skeletal frame of the tower.

Then—the attacks stopped.

Those constant swarms of specialized low-level monsters were gone.

'Hmm. My gut's telling me something's off...'

"No, not your gut. Just me." Back-to-Back sneered.

Damon glanced at his shoulder, where a disembodied pair of lips hovered, glaring at a strange tear in space-time.

"Valarie, what's on your mind?"

She smiled faintly.

"Something's up there. I feel a powerful aura."

Damon sighed. "I see. So that's why..."

"What do we do?" Sylvia asked, tense.

Valarie scoffed. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Think of it as a parting gift. I've got power to spare. Just... make sure I get a good burial, okay?"

Damon didn't know how to feel. Valarie had been dead for a long time. This was just her discarnate soul possessing her lips.

Evangeline nodded slowly. "Let's go, then..."

"We... we're finally at the point where we can leave."

Damon could tell she was trying to be strong.

He glanced at Matia beside him. Then Sylvia.

All of them knew they'd have to part ways with Valarie Sunwarden eventually.

They had always known.

Still...

"Why does it still hurt..." Carmen's voice whispered from his side.

"Should you really be thinking about that right now?"

Damon bit his lip.

This was getting annoying—but the voice was right.

He glanced at the towering pillars holding the spiral structure aloft... the deep darkness below... the crackling rifts in space itself yawning open—one misstep and it was certain death.

The vast distance of Lysithara. His battered party. Bloodstained, dented armor. Grime smeared on faces. Expressions etched with weariness.

Their journey had brought them to the end. This was it.

Crack.

Damon heard a fracture echo beneath them—his danger sense screamed.

It felt like the heavens had shifted; the space felt wrong, the air cold... dread. He felt dread.

He yanked Evangeline backward as the ground beneath her cracked open. The party scattered as the floor gave way, a spatial rift forming where it collapsed.

They weaved between falling rubble and shattering earth, jumping to safety before each part of the ground fell.

Xander moved, shattering rocks with his armored fist; Leona ran close by his side, sparks flying around her sword.

Evangeline, like a mirage of light, frantically dodged.

Damon grabbed Sylvia and Matia, activating his omnidirectional gear—wires shot upward, and he pulled them with him.

A formless creature reached out from the top of the tower—its translucent arm manifesting through the rift.

Damon slammed into the floor above, rolling with both girls and Valarie in tow.

He looked up.

The creature retracted its arm—it hadn't even attacked them.

It hadn't even noticed them.

Damon exhaled.

They'd ended up one floor above. He peered through the rift—Xander, Leona, and Evangeline were still safe below.

Fortunately.

"What now?" Matia called, crouching down and yelling through the rift.

"There's another route if you go around," Sylvia replied. "We're close to the top. Let's meet there."

Valarie's voice echoed from his shoulder. "I'll deal with the monster up top. So you kids don't worry. Just meet us at the next floor..."

Damon clenched his jaw.

"Let's regroup on the floor beneath the last. Whoever gets there first, wait for the others."

He bit his lip—frustrated. The spatial rift between them made it impossible for Xander to float the others up using gravity magic, or for Damon and the rest to climb back down.

Back-to-Back grinned beside him.

"And the fellowship has been split..."

He leaned in closer.

"That's never a good sign."

Chapter 405: Closest To His Heart

Making it to the top was easy—uneventful, really—but the chill in Damon's spine only got worse.

"I can see why you're anxious. That thing is quite strong..."

Damon glanced at Valarie, who hovered in front of him like a wisp.

"You... can take that thing, right?"

Valarie turned to him, his hollow gaze drifting toward the final floor of the spiral tower. The others had yet to arrive. It was just him, Matia, and Sylvia.

"I can," she said simply.

Damon clenched his fist. "How are you still able to fight? And if you could, why not just take yourself to Dawn Break Hollow?"

Valarie smiled faintly.

"I was sealed, remember? Even now, I'm just a discarnate soul. I can use remnants of my power... by burning what's left of me."

Sylvia bit her lip until blood reached her tongue.

"Then you'll be... burning your soul now too..."

Valarie scoffed. The disembodied lips curled into a grin.

"I'm already dead. All I want now is a good place to rest. If what's left of me can help you all... then I will be honored to help."

Matia stepped forward, removing her helm. She stood in front of Valarie, her mouth parting slightly, yet no words came.

The silence made Valarie's smile widen.

"Don't worry. As long as I don't overdo it, I can last a little longer—just long enough for you to bury me. The waypoint can get you to Dawn Break Hollow, so consider it a nice stop before your departure."

Damon nodded, taking a deep breath.

"We'll wait for the others..."

Valarie floated around like a flickering wisp.

"I'll take care of the monster above before they arrive... should be a decent surprise."

Damon raised his hand to stop her, but Valarie vanished—a streak of dancing light ascending the tower.

Moments later, the sounds of battle rang out above—bestial growls, the roar of magic. Damon noticed a shimmering golden light bloom across the ceiling. Valarie had cast a barrier to keep them safe.

Still, Damon felt a rising unease.

"And that's all you can do..." came the mocking voice of Back-to-Back again, slithering into his mind.

Damon ignored it, eyes fixed on the floor above. The only sounds were the crackles of the spatial rift and the haunting echo from the abyss below—the kind of hole that would swallow even hope.

The group stood in anxious silence. No indicators. No warning.

Damon's skin prickled.

His danger sense flared—and the moment it did, he spun—but something grabbed his mouth. Sharp pain stabbed into his cheek. He narrowly dodged, avoiding a lethal hit, but blood flowed.

Then chaos.

Sylvia's head was smashed against the wall. Matia was kicked across the chamber like a ragdoll.

Mana surged. A blade—an artifact—flashed with power, slashing Matia as she rolled perilously close to the edge of the pit.

Damon tried to scream her name—Matia!—but he couldn't.

He couldn't scream.

He couldn't because—

Because Damon no longer had a mouth.

It was gone.

Stolen.

He tried to scream, but his mind floundered.

No scream came.

Not even a gasp.

Just the throbbing of this violation, the raw terror of being made less than whole.

Rage consumed him. He unleashed Ashborn in a mad fury. The dark flames burned his mind, a torment worse than dying, as shadow energy and mana bled from his very soul.

But the flames were pulled away—devoured by another artifact.

He didn't even have time to be surprised; it was too fast.

This was an ambush. A well-planned strike by an enemy that knew how they fought.

Damon staggered. His vision blurred.

Sylvia stood, blood soaking her snow-white hair.

She struck at the attacker—but the enemy unrolled a white scroll. Its runes flared, and her mana was drained in an instant.

Damon teleported—his blade slicing out—but the enemy anticipated his movement. Still, Damon shifted again, slicing its side with a sharp rip of steel.

It groaned.

And the sound that came out—

Was his own voice.

Then he saw its face.

The creature was white, bipedal. Its body was smooth, unblemished—its fingers long and pale. Its face, or lack thereof, was blank.

Except now... it had something it didn't before.

A mouth.

His mouth.

This thing—it was...

A Face Stealer.

Damon's body grew heavy. He shook his head, trying to fight the influence of whatever curse or mental assault it had placed on him.

This creature wasn't just terrifying. It was intelligent.

It used human tools. It wielded artifacts. It fought strategically.

He didn't wait. He couldn't. He was bleeding out—but so was the creature. Damon had used the Bloodletting skill—its wounds would not stop bleeding.

It smiled with his mouth while Damon stood, jawless—skin stretched tight where his lips should be.

He unleashed his shades—weak, but enough to distract—

But it only smiled, as if expecting it.

"I've been watching, human," it said, voice dripping with smug certainty.

It pulled out an orb. A flash of blinding light banished the shades.

"I've been learning your methods."

Then came a flash of ice. A jagged shard shot from the floor, impaling its legs. Matia groaned—her body drenched in blood.

The Face Stealer winced—but before Matia could move, it raised its hand, commanding shadows—Damon's attribute —using Damon's mouth to do it.

It could also imitate the attributes of its victims.

The darkness clawed at Matia, wrapping around her bleeding frame—then hurled her into the void.

Damon fired his omnidirectional gear, latching onto Matia—he was pulled toward her, grabbing her hand just as the gravitational pull of a spatial rift seized her legs.

The Face Stealer grinned using Damon's stolen lips, staggering toward Sylvia.

"I need a face... I need her face... I need to heal..."

The voice echoed—his voice.

Sylvia was bleeding. Unconscious. Helpless.

Valarie was still battling the monster above.

The rest of the party was nowhere in sight.

Damon held onto Matia, her hand slipping in his grip. The void below howled like a hungry god. His body ached. His consciousness flickered.

This was the worst ambush they'd ever faced.

Matia's hand slipped further.

The hole exhaled with force—Damon's bones groaned as he held on.

And the Face Stealer was nearing Sylvia, hungering for her face.

Then a voice whispered in his mind.

Back-to-Back. Close. Too close.

"Let her go... you can only save one."

Damon's bloodied hand tightened around Matia's.

Another voice echoed. Cold. Inevitable.

"Let her go..."

Damon closed his eyes.

Matia or Sylvia.

He could only save one.

Choose.

Chapter 406: I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream

The options were laid bare before him. The choice was clear—it was obvious.

The face stealer limped toward Sylvia. She was unconscious, groaning softly as if struggling to wake, blood pouring from her torn body.

Damon held onto Matia by the edge of the ledge. Her armored hand was slippery with blood, his grip barely keeping her from being pulled down into the void.

'Sylvia... wake up...'

He wanted to yell, to scream at the top of his lungs, to call out for Valarie—still fighting the monster above, unaware of the chaos down here.

But he couldn't.

He had no mouth. His mouth had been stolen.

He had to hold Matia with both hands as the gravitational pull of the rift below threatened to rip her away. The strain burned through his shoulder. He was weakened, poisoned by whatever the face stealer had done.

The white, bipedal creature moved with slow purpose, Damon's own stolen mouth twisted into a grin.

"Ahh... finally. After all these months... I've finally caught you, white elf..."

It spoke with Damon's voice, mockingly gentle, as it neared Sylvia—her eyes fluttering weakly between unconsciousness and pain.

"Let her go, boy..."

"You can't save them both."

"Can I? Can I have to?" Damon screamed these words in his mind, but he knew the cruel truth: he couldn't.

It wasn't possible to pull Matia up, and still save Sylvia from the face stealer.

He would never make it on time if he stayed to help. Matia, the face stealer, would kill Sylvia and then finish off both offspring at its leisure.

"Let the girl go.. "

He shook his head violently; he wanted to scream, but he had no mouth.

Despair settled in his heart as his mind buzzed with options and alternatives.

"If you hold on they will both die.."

Carmen's voice echoed inside Damon's skull. Tears welled in his eyes. He didn't want to—he couldn't.

No. No.

But he had no mouth to cry that word.

He looked down at Matia—the fairy who had given up her wings to save him.

If she still had them, she could've flown out. But she didn't. She had sacrificed them... for him.

She stared into the abyss below.

"Le... let me go, Damon..."

Hearing her say those words only deepened his despair; he shook his head desperately.

Tears spilled freely down his face. He shook his head violently, as if that alone could defy the world.

"Let go..."

Beside him, the phantom of Back-to-Back loomed—glaring at Sylvia with panic and urgency.

"Hurry, hurry! Let one go. Let Matia go... you'll never pull her up in time!"

The rift's pull grew stronger, ripping at Damon's arms.

Tears mixed with his blood.

The face stealer reached Sylvia, just in time for her to open her eyes—only to have her head smashed back into the stone. The floor cracked. She groaned.

It pinned her down, gripping her bloodied face, fingers pressing.

Stealing her eyes.

Suddenly, the creature had gray eyes.

Sylvia wailed, kicking weakly as she tried to push the creature off.

Damon could hear her scream; his grip slipped slightly.

"Damon... let go... you have to save Sylvia!"

Matia could hear her. She saw Damon's eyes. She tried to pull herself up—but it was no use. The rift had her now.

"Stop wasting time!" Carmen snapped again. "You can't be in two places at once! The others won't make it in time!"

The face stealer tore Sylvia's nose off next.

She screamed, barely able to breathe through her blood-choked mouth.

Matia gazed up at Damon, her vision blurry with blood.

"Please... let me go, Dam... Damon..."

He shook his head, staring at Sylvia. Matia jerked her body, trying to make the decision easier for him—trying to fall.

She bit her lip, tears falling.

"I'm sorry..."

Damon heard Sylvia scream again—then fade.

He closed his eyes. His Remorseless skill had been screaming at him for a while now.

He lowered his forehead to the cold ground... and let go.

Her hand slipped from his grasp.

He tried to scream. He tried to call her name.

But he had no mouth.

All his rage—all his sorrow—collapsed into a single, focused madness.

And he charged the face stealer.

Sylvia thrashed, trying to fight back, but the creature's strength overwhelmed her.

Damon's fist slammed into its face.

Blood sprayed—he didn't know if it was his or the creature's.

He tried to scream. To roar.

But there was only silence. His tears burned as they fell. His fists clawed and crushed the face stealer. It fought back, stabbing and bludgeoning him.

But Damon didn't feel it.

All he heard was the madness inside:

Kill. Kill. Kill.

There was no finesse now. No swordplay. No tactics. No magic.

Only rage.

Only aura.

His power surged—flames pouring from his broken form.

Even Ashborn's agony was meaningless now.

His fists were shrouded in black fire, encased in cracked shadow-armor, as he pummeled the ground.

Blood soaked everything.

The more he raged, the more of his shadow energy burned away.

The ground splintered beneath them. His tears mixed with blood.

He strangled the face stealer. It thrashed. A magic artifact pierced him.

It pulled free, staggering back.

Damon reached into his shadow storage.

Pulled a potion.

He had no mouth—so he poured the liquid into his nose.

The potion spilled down his throat.

Precognition.

What followed was pure carnage.

A system chime echoed in his mind.

He didn't care.

His Hunger spiked—his stats flaring.

The face stealer lunged.

Damon moved faster.

Grabbed its arm. Slammed it into the ground.

Then tore it off.

He jammed his hand into its stolen mouth.

And pulled.

The creature struggled.

It was in vain.

With both hands, Damon ripped its upper and lower jaw apart. Bone cracked. Flesh split. Blood gushed out in torrents.

The creature shrieked in his stolen voice until there was nothing left but shredded remains.

A final chime.

[You have slain: Fuska, the Face Stealer]

[You have leveled up]

[You have awakened the skill: Shadow Clone]

Chapter 407 Death Seeker

There was a distant, dazed expression on the face of the dark-haired young man. His raven-black eyes stared blankly into the void.

He sat in silence, the bleeding figure of a white-haired elf cradled in his arms.

Occasionally, a low chuckle escaped his lips, one that carried no joy—only the hollow sound of a mind teetering on the edge. It was the kind of laughter that made the air cold, as if the world itself could sense the despair he couldn't hide.

Fuska the Face Stealer was dead. Damon had killed him—devoured him.

He had gained the skill Blitz.

But the price... was Matia.

His friend was dead. Gone. She had fallen into the hole, and no matter how much he screamed inside, there was no bringing her back.

All her dreams... her laughter... the tiny things she valued... all of it, gone.

Because of him.

All because of me...

"You were the one who let her die," Carmen's voice echoed from the void beside him.

"Just the same way you let me die."

"You killed her."

Damon didn't flinch. He only laughed. Sylvia still lay unmoving in his arms. He had forced his body to give her a basic healing potion, but that was all. That was all he could do. His body refused to move now. His soul even more so.

They say the height of joy is tears... and the height of sorrow is laughter.

Perhaps that was why he couldn't stop laughing.

Or maybe... maybe it was because with every second that passed...

His sanity kept crumbling.

"What's he even waiting for?" Back-to-Back's snide voice echoed within the hollow chambers of his mind.

"I always knew you didn't deserve to live... your birth was a mistake. Hopefully your death will fix it."

Damon remained there, still and broken, his armor soaked in blood and failure.

He could already sense the shadows of his party approaching. Valarie had defeated the monster above. The way out was open.

They were finally able to go home...

A pair of human lips descended from the sky—light flickering weakly around them, as if trying to shield themselves from the weight of the bloodied spiral tower.

"Whe... where is Matia..." the words barely carried.

And just like that, Damon felt something inside him tear.

He smiled.

Raised his head.

"I... I killed her... hehehe... it was me... I was the one who killed her..."

Valarie watched Damon force himself to his feet, gently setting Sylvia aside like something fragile—something he might never see again.

"After everything... I still let her die..."

He walked to the edge of the crumbling platform, staring into the abyss that spun endlessly below. The countless rifts in space and time pulsed like the breaths of a dying world.

"It was right here... I let her die... do you know why?"

Valarie hovered close, her light tense and trembling. She wanted to say something—anything to tell him it wasn't his fault. But she remained silent, afraid of what might come next.

"When we first entered this cursed land, I made every one of my friends swear themselves to my cause. In exchange, I swore I'd keep them alive."

He sank to his knees.

"Back then, I barely knew Matia. She wasn't part of our inner circle. Just a classmate... another terrified student, like all of us. I never forced her to make a promise... and I never made one to her."

He tilted his bloodied face to Valarie.

"Do you know why?"

She bit her lip. 'Don't say it... please don't say it...'

"I planned to sacrifice her if necessary," he whispered.

"That's the truth. She was supposed to be expendable. Someone I shouldn't have cared about."

His voice was steel wrapped in sorrow.

"But somehow... we got close. Somewhere along the line, she became someone I trusted. Someone I would've died for. And as if fate was mocking me for my original thoughts... it put me in a position where I had to choose."

Valarie's lips moved—offering the wisdom of an ascendant who had walked the world for centuries.

But Damon couldn't hear her.

All he could hear was the jeering madness clawing at his sanity.

"Are you really blaming fate now?" Back-to-Back sneered. "Have you forgotten what the unknown god said? Fate... is nothing more than a series of choices."

Carmen laughed. "This was your choice. Your leadership. Take responsibility."

"...How?" Damon muttered weakly.

Carmen glanced at the rift below.

"Isn't it obvious? Atone."

Back-to-Back cackled. "Yes. If she's alive—bring her back. If she's dead? Hehe... either way, you don't deserve to live."

Damon stood, a dark smile bleeding across his face as the chime rang.

[Mastery: Insanity Level 3]

"Right... I can still save her."

Valarie was speaking, but she stopped abruptly.

His party had finally arrived, their faces horrified as they saw what was left of Damon.

Before anyone could react—Damon laughed.

"I'm going to save Matia. Or die trying."

And then—he jumped.

Valarie screamed his name as she launched after him, her golden light splitting in two. One piece soared back, protecting the party. The other—descended like a meteor—after the boy who had stopped caring about his life.

The glowing lips that remained heard the others scream his name, but they couldn't answer.

Down in the void, Damon's expression was unreadable, a shard of Valarie's light pressed against his chest, shielding him from the devouring chaos.

And as he fell, he heard it—the voice.

A familiar one. Deep. Cold. Eternal.

[Once a dealer in death... now you seek it.]

[You have awakened the Unique Class: Death Seeker]

[Class Skill: Deathless — You are rejected from this desire.]

[Your Fable Grows.]

The world whispered as his body crashed into the depths below.

Bones shattered. Organs ruptured.

Blood pooled around him like spilled ink.

But Valarie's gentle light kept him whole—barely.

The pain meant nothing now.

He raised his head, breath ragged, gaze filled with iron and madness.

And what he saw around him...

Was a nightmare.

A tree made of bone reached toward a sky of screaming mouths. The ground pulsed like flesh.

Chapter 408: Ten Thousands Foes To Sanity

Something bled into his body—through the ground, into his lungs.

It felt repulsive, vile and wrong.

His soul intuitively rejected it.

He felt his Ascendant Armor thrum, a low vibration rising in defiance, a warning, a defense.

There was a blackness in the air. Faint, but insidious. He could feel it—spreading into him, tainting his blood, his flesh... his soul.

The sensation slithered through him like venom, coiling and twisting, threatening to reshape him into something monstrous. But the soul core within his armor pulsed—cleansing, resisting, burning away the corruption from within.

"Corruption..."

Valarie's voice came from his chest—thin, strained. A single upper lip still stuck to his bleeding frame.

She sounded as if she'd torn herself in twain just to stay tethered to him.

Damon, however, only cradled his head and smiled maniacally, wide eyes locked on the hellscape surrounding them.

Monsters and horrors clashed in every direction—an unending storm of violence and agony. Creatures that served Ittorath—nightmares, as Valarie had once named them—tore into one another with feverish hatred.

The rift had vomited them into this realm, and they were making war upon all things, even themselves. The air was thick with their screams. The ground itself festered with corruption.

If Matia had fallen here... there was no doubt she was dead.

And still, Damon smiled.

His gaze drifted lazily to the system panel blinking before his vision.

[Rank Up: Class – Death Seeker]

[Class Skill Unlocked: Deathless]

[Class Stat Distribution Applied]

[HP +500]

[Mana +6000]

[Strength +1300]

[Agility +1200]

[Speed +3000]

[Endurance +1500]

[Class: Death Seeker]

"Once you dealt death—now you seek it."

Skill – [Deathless]

The more you desire your own death, the more improbable events happen to prevent it. Death will follow when you least desire it.

Damon lay in his blood, unmoving, feeling his hunger rise like a tide. The world had long since lost its color.

Now monochrome.. and dull.

He lay there smiling, then broke into laughter. There was no meaning to it. No joy. Just laughter—raw, unfiltered madness.

Valarie sighed internally.

'He's gone insane... No matter what, I have to make sure he defeats ten thousand enemies. He must unlock the Crown of Silence enchantment...'

That enchantment... the same one Vathren had used to remain sane after his city was reduced to rot and memories.

Valarie remembered it well. It was the only reason Vathren hadn't gone completely mad.

Before she could speak further, something noticed Damon.

One of the creatures from the swarm of horrors—towering, tusked, and hovering inches off the ground. A massive eye sat embedded in its stomach, unblinking and vile. Its presence twisted the very air around it. Its aura unmistakable—this was a second-Class entity.

Damon looked at it.

And did nothing.

Valarie's lips glowed faintly with golden light... and then dimmed. She had nothing left.

"Move, Damon. Now..." she urged, voice hoarse.

He didn't move. The creature kicked him.

His body flew like a ragdoll, hitting a rot-covered rock with a splatter.

The corruption tried to seep into him again, hungry to claim him.

He rose slowly, hunched over, eyes empty—until they locked onto the phantom vision of Back-to-Back.

It spoke to him, cold and resolute.

"You can die... but only after you've found Matia. So fight back, you bastard..."

Damon didn't charge. He simply stared at the creature and smiled.

Then... his shadow spread.

[Shadow Hunger – 90%]

[Your shadow is ravenous.]

[All stats have been significantly boosted.]

The ink-dark tendrils of his shadow wrapped around his broken form, encasing it in jagged, monstrous shell. Long claws, serrated and wicked. A mouth lined with black fangs too sharp to be human.

The Ravenous Shadow had taken over.

A thunderous boom echoed across the battlefield as it moved—faster than sound—and in a single, savage blow, shattered the Second-class creature into wet, twitching pieces.

The Ravenous Shadow growled—starving. Eyes darted, desperate for sustenance.

It found Valarie.

She had fallen, unmoving. Still just a lip—yet the last vestige of a human Ascendant. The Shadow lunged at her, claws stretched out.

She didn't flinch.

She couldn't.

She had spent too much of herself—split her soul, sacrificed too much.

But before the creature could touch her—

A claw plunged into its chest.

Damon had taken control.

Inside his own Ravenous shell, he laughed. A bitter, maddened cackle.

"The audacity... You wretch... How dare you try to control me..."

The claw sank deeper into his own torso.

"How dare you... A mere shadow—pale beneath the radiance of day..."

Pain tore through him, soul-deep. The agony of rending one's own essence.

But Damon didn't stop.

"I don't even care... Obey me—or we both die."

He didn't wait for an answer.

He tore himself apart.

Inside the screaming shadow, two minds clashed—one human, insane, one hunger.

Ripped at his own limbs. Thrashed and writhed, a beast wrestling its own shadow. There was no finesse—only savagery. The kind born from madness. The kind that made the soul scream.

"AHHRGHHH—!"

The shadow shrieked.

Shadow energy bled dry. Damon's HP plummeted. His vision swam red.

And then... it submitted.

[You have conquered remnants of Ashcroft's Shadow. The elusive shadow is now yours.]

[Mastery: Ravenous – LvMax]

His torn body began to mend. Shadow energy crawled back into him like a swarm of worms. The jagged mouth still remained, but shadow armor layered over him, making him appear more man than beast.

He lifted Valarie's lip gently, placing her inside the curve of his breastplate.

A voice rasped out from the black.

"Boy... what are you...?"

Damon spoke—not as himself, not entirely. His voice came from the Ravenous form now—dark, husky, distorted like a demon wearing human skin.

He looked like a man made of shadow.

Valarie watched as he turned toward the horde of monsters still locked in battle.

"If you go there... you'll die..." she whispered.

She hesitated.

"Some of those monsters... they're beyond your rank..."

All she heard was a chuckle.

Then a boom of laughter that rolled like thunder, alien and cold.

And Damon charged into the chaos—his form a blur of darkness, indistinguishable from the nightmares around him.

And thus... the madness began.

Chapter 409: Whisper From The Heart

Death had made its home here. Ruin was merely its echo.

The whole place reeked of death and ruin. The vile stench of rot seeped into the lungs of whoever dared breathe the corrupt air.

Time itself had been twisted here—perverted beyond reason.

The cacophony of battle never ceased. The more nightmares fell, the thicker the corruption grew. These creatures didn't leave behind corpses. They became rot. Pure rot. Their deaths were just another poison spilled into the land.

But this... this was no nightmare.

It was one of the horrors of Lysithara.

A massive, titanic corpse—so enormous it could have leveled a city with a mere swipe of its claw—now lay broken, its rotting blood pouring out like endless rivers, its once-dreaded aura dimming.

"Hahaha..."

The laugh was deranged, rising from atop the creature's mountainous skull, nestled between its shattered horns.

A table sat there. A long, elegant table.

Surrounded by seats.

Pristine chairs. Fine porcelain cups. Perfect alignment. It made for a jeering, surreal sight—an absurd banquet atop a rotting titan's skull in the middle of a hellscape. But it was real. It existed. Somehow, in this ruined plane, the table stood firm.

Each of the cups shimmered faintly, filled with what might've once passed for beverages. But Valarie knew better. The colors, the scent—each cup was brimming with poison. The combined venom of dozens—no, hundreds—of monstrous species. It was enough to dissolve a man's soul through his tongue.

And at the head of that table sat a man.

A dark-haired young man, his long hair disheveled and matted with dried blood. Upon his brow rested an ashen crown, cracked and leaking faint embers of madness. His laughter echoed—hollow and unchained.

It was the only thing keeping him anchored. And even then, barely.

He was insane.

Completely and utterly lost.

Valarie watched silently. His armor, once proud and polished, was dented and blood-caked. Every inch screamed suffering. He had fought the beast for three days—ripped, torn, mauled—but refused to fall. Again and again he should have died. But he didn't. Improbable events shielded him. Coincidence bent over backward. Even fate recoiled.

He pointed to the chairs—empty, all of them. There was no one else at the table. But he still raised his voice.

"Gentlemen, we have done it!" Damon announced, lifting his hand with theatrical flair. "We are close... to ten thousand foes slain!"

He lifted a finger as if to hush some invisible celebration.

"Now now, no need to get excited. We haven't found Matia yet. And that goddamn Ruin knight keeps hunting us..."

His eyes narrowed.

"What, kill it?" he mocked, turning to one of the empty chairs. "Look at this fool... We already tried that. It's slippery. Rank three, maybe, but too damn fast. Nothing connects. And the wounds it leaves us with... we've spent our fair share of healing potions."

He slammed his hand on the table, cups trembling.

"You dare suggest we're cowards?" he roared, voice cracking. "Didn't we stare down that rank six abomination? Hah? We faced it! We spat in its face and lived!"

He sat back with a sudden jump, brushing aside the blood-matted locks that clung to his face. He reached for a cup, took a sip, and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Ahhh... good stuff."

Because everything else tastes like blood.

Valarie felt a tight knot of pain coil in her soul.

Everything he said was true.

He had defied her—ignored her pleas—and gone after a rank six monstrosity. It was then Valarie understood what Deathless truly meant. It wasn't bravado. It wasn't madness. Or rather, it was—and it was that madness that kept him alive.

It was a curse wrapped in the skin of a gift.

[Skill: Deathless]

The more you desire your own death, the more improbable events happen to prevent it. Death will follow when you least desire it.

A cruel skill. If Damon ever wished to live again... that's when death would come. Without warning. Without mercy.

He wasn't allowed to live.

But he was also not allowed to die.

She watched him gesture at his shadow, draped along the edge of the table like an old cloak. He smirked and took another gulp of the poison.

Valarie no longer feared for him taking poison. She had learned much in her time with him.

He had something called Mastery—an unnatural ability that let him gain resistance and abilities through experience. Pain, poison, fire—it was all just training.

The table. The cups. They were all products of his "system." It gave him weapons, tools, items, skills, and knowledge. But even with all that power, he had a habit of destroying rare artifacts just to feed them to his shadow—because he lacked storage.

His shadow.

The most unique thing about him.

He could feed it anything—corpses, relics, enchanted gear—and it would digest them, granting him more power. More stats. More skills.

In the time she had traveled with him, she had learned more than in all her weeks traveling with his party.

They had changed too.

"Sylvia... she did everything she could to empower them..."

Damon suddenly stood, draining the rest of the poison-filled cups as if they were spring water. He moved with reckless ease.

Poison resistance. One of many he'd gained through self-inflicted agony.

She had seen him offer his body to venomous creatures—just to build immunity. Just to get stronger.

Now he took out a coin.

A small, worn artifact—The Whisper Coin.

He held it to his lips. And in a quiet, almost gentle tone that betrayed none of his madness, he whispered

"Matia... I'll be waiting by the bone tree. Yesterday. So please... give me a sign. I'm still searching. I'll never stop."

The coin vanished.

He reached for a sword forged of blue steel and slung it over his shoulder. The table vanished into shadows behind him.

Valarie drifted into the hollow of his breastplate.

"A few more," she murmured, her voice as thin as smoke, "Just a few more vanquished foes... and maybe... maybe he'll regain his sanity."

She paused.

"And finally leave this place."

But Damon said nothing.

He just walked toward the horizon—toward the battlefield of nightmares—where monsters tore each other apart.

His laughter echoed again.

And thus, the madness continued.

Chapter 410: Whisper Coin

Damon's sword flashed—blood flowed like ink from a torn page as he passed through a cluster of monsters, emerging by the jagged edge of a broken wall.

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the ravaged lands, ignoring the endless symphony of violence echoing all around him.

The sounds of death and despair were enough to make anyone mad and the corruption could reduce anyone into monstrous remnants of themselves.

He held his chin with mock seriousness and gave a slow nod.

"Yes, yes... I'm lost."

Valarie sighed from inside his breastplate, her voice laced with dry exasperation.

That was quite obvious, especially since he lost himself in his own frenzy.

"It seems you ended up three days ago instead of yesterday. By that logic, you should try finding a way to tomorrow."

Damon nodded thoughtfully. Even with a fractured mind, there was twisted reason beneath the madness.

His insanity had its own power. At level two, it granted him resistance to mind attacks—after all, you can't shatter what's already broken. At level three, he could passively induce fear. At level four, his mere presence could unravel the sanity of others.

Making the sane go mad, it was as if they were bedeviled.

Not that the corrupted were even sane to begin with.

Clicking his tongue, Damon strolled casually toward a battle between a monster and a nightmare. He didn't even slow. One lazy swipe of his sword—and a bloom of dark fire erupted, engulfing the nightmare. It crumbled into rot, leaving nothing behind.

Then he turned to the monster.

Grabbing it by its horns.

The beast thrashed, but its will faltered the moment Damon's eyes met its own. Fear sank its claws into the creature's mind—an effect of his active skill, Omen of Dread. And the more fear it felt, the stronger Damon became—Terror Engine devoured dread like fuel.

The synergy was perfect.

He narrowed his eyes.

"Have we met before...? Ahh, whatever. I've killed a lot of your kind."

The monster's sinewy legs trembled as his dark gaze pierced it.

"Anyway, I was asking for directions. You know the way to three days from now? Bit embarrassing to admit but... I got lost."

Valarie observed the bizarre exchange as if it were normal. At this point, it was. Damon possessed a skill called Soul Tongue, allowing him to speak and understand all languages—monstrous or otherwise.

The creature raised a long, needle-thin arm and pointed.

Damon nodded appreciatively, then casually flung it to the side.

"Alright, let's go."

The monster scrambled away—one of the few to survive an encounter with Damon. It didn't hesitate. It wouldn't just leave this area—it decided then and there to migrate fifty years into the past when things were still safer.

It was a monster, not insane. As long as it was far away from that madman it would live to see another day.

Valarie, hidden within his breastplate, had come to accept it: Damon was a monster. Even more so than his friends on the surface, who had clawed their way to second-class advancement on spite, sheer will... and a little help from Sylvia.

Time here was... unkind.

Damon had said he was traveling to yesterday. It wasn't a mistake. Just as one could walk between places, one could move through moments. But time, despite its twists, was absolute in cruelty—die in one moment, and you're dead in all of them. Go back all you like; death remains.

That was why Damon was so desperate to find Matia.

Even in madness, he'd experimented—tested monsters, reality, and time itself—for loopholes. Anything to save her... if she'd fallen.

Eventually, Damon reached the Bone Tree.

He clenched his fists beneath its twisted, towering branches.

His power had grown.

To gain resistance, he had tortured himself—diving into fire, submerging in ice water, burying himself beneath stone, enduring lightning strikes, time warps, and aging storms.

Each ordeal carved new strengths into him. Fire, water, ice, wind, lightning—he endured them all until they fused into Elemental Resistance.

He'd gathered many others—resistance to corruption, to poison, to curses. The scars from Fuska the Facestealer's ambush had taught him well.

He retrieved the artifact—Whispercoin. A day had passed... he could use it again.

[Whispercoin]

Type: Charm

Description: A symbol of undying love—a whisper between two separated souls, carried even across silence.

Effect: Once per day, allows the holder to whisper a message into it. The message is heard in the ear of a specific person, no matter the distance. It cannot lie. The speaker's true intent always comes through.

It wasn't his most powerful artifact—but it was the one he cherished most.

He had earned it by seducing and slaying a siren. After devouring her remains, this was the artifact left behind.

Every day since, Damon had whispered to Matia—hoping, praying, that she might hear him. If he couldn't find her... maybe she'd find him.

He stood beneath the Bone Tree—the closest thing he had to a landmark in this distorted world. He never wandered too far. Time was too unstable. Matia could have fallen here years ago—or years in the future.

He'd wait. To the end of time if needed.

He sat against the bone-white trunk.

"Valarie... how much time has passed for the others?"

A rare flicker of clarity in his voice. And, as always, Valarie answered softly.

"It's only been a month. Your friends... they still wait for your return."

And he smiled.

Still waiting for Matia.

Until the ground split with the roar of shattering frost.

A jagged wall of ice erupted, carving the land in two.

Damon gritted his teeth.

"You goddamn bastard... you came again."

His old nemesis—the Ruin Knight. A rank-three monster wielding the power of frost and death.

Its minions—hollow knights sculpted from ice—charged forward.

Damon raised a hand, releasing a flurry of magic bullets. They tore through the soldiers.

[You have slain: Ruin Soldier]

His gaze met his foe—a figure shrouded in swirling frost, its true form cloaked in mist... only those deep, glowing blue eyes visible through the haze.