

## Shadow 411

### Chapter 411: Ruin Knight

The Ruin Knight—a creature shrouded in white frost, its body veiled beneath layers of cursed ice—emerged from the haze. It was a powerful Rank Three monster, and though Damon had battled worse, few had annoyed him like this one.

Its form was hidden in that relentless frost, and its nascent domain hadn't yet matured, but it was still dangerously close to breaking into Rank Four... or so Damon suspected. He couldn't be sure.

'Could be a powerful ability.'

Only those chilling blue eyes were visible, glowing like twin moons in the mist. Just approaching it caused the body to seize up with frostbite—even for Damon, whose body was built with elemental and magical resistances.

And it never came alone.

Its minions—soldiers of ice—always followed, hollow-eyed warriors that clanked and screeched across the broken terrain like rusted instruments in a dying orchestra.

Damon had slain plenty of ice-attribute monsters, both humanoid and grotesque. But the Ruin Knight?

It was the most irritating of them all.

It was swift, erratic, and unpredictable. Its attacks left freezing wounds that refused to close, and even reaching it was a trial, thanks to that accursed frozen mist it carried like a shroud.

He only knew its name thanks to his Appraisal skill:

[Ruin ????]

The question marks mocked him—a reminder that the he couldn't provide a complete appraisal.

He was still lower ranked.

So he simply named it "Ruin Knight."

Damon's jaw clenched tight.

'Every damn time... every goddamn time I wait for Matia... this creature finds me first.'

It wasn't just stronger. It wasn't just faster. It didn't just bring a crowd of minions. No.

"The son of a bitch can fly too..." Damon muttered.

His grudge against the Ruin Knight was personal.

It wasn't about the countless times it impaled him with those jagged spears of ice. It wasn't the endless chase, the repeated fights.

No—what truly hurt was what happened after Damon, in a rare bout of civility, tried to build a home.

After harvesting monster drops, after clawing back a sliver of sanity, he had set up a quaint little cottage amidst the ruins.

Just because he was mad didn't mean he couldn't be civilized.

And then... the Ruin Knight came.

"The goddamn door was open—but no, you broke my goddamn window..."

He jabbed a finger at the misty figure in rage, standing amidst the rot-covered lands.

"I thought we had something special, my sworn nemesis! But you just had to hurt my feelings... That window was special to me... you could've just used the damn door—it was open!"

The Ruin Knight's icy blue gaze stared blankly at the ranting madman.

Then it moved.

The mist thickened, swirling in anticipation. Before Damon could unleash his fury, the knight conjured a thick shield of ice.

It knew what was coming next.

A blast of black flame engulfed the battlefield, melting a portion of the ice.

Damon's laughter echoed through the heat and haze, twisted and gleeful.

"You're not bad," he said, voice like cracked iron. "Fine, I'll recruit you as my minion... no need to feel honored..."

From the depths of his breastplate, Valarie watched with her usual calm.

He wouldn't win easily. That much was certain.

And, as usual, she witnessed their brutal clash stretch on for hours.

The ground shattered. Blood scattered in arcs. Broken shadows rose and fell like phantoms dancing to a silent dirge.

Eventually, Damon clicked his tongue.

"I'll let you off this time... See you tomorrow... that's when I'll actually kill you..."

His body twisted into a swirling black silhouette. He skated across the corrupted ground, a smear of darkness vanishing into the distance.

The Ruin Knight gave chase, wings of ice expanding behind it as it soared after him, unleashing icy roars and frozen magic in a relentless storm.

They passed countless monsters locked in their own struggles. Damon used the chaos to slip away.

He reappeared some distance away, limping.

His skin was marked with frozen blue lines—too cold to bleed, too cursed to heal. A gaping hole marred his gut. One arm had turned solid with frost, and the side of his jaw was deathly blue. His hair, tangled and stiff, clung together with blood and frost, giving it the texture of frozen seaweed.

He looked like the ghost of a drowned king. His ashen crown on his head

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, he muttered, "Just so you know, I didn't run away—it was a draw... but I mostly won..."

Valarie remained silent. She assumed he was talking to the phantoms that plagued his broken mind.

"Valarie... Valarie, I didn't lose, right?"

Her soul flickered. He was talking to her after all.

She had believed he was addressing his hallucinations again.

"Hmmm... I see. That creature always seems to find you. Your luck with it must be quite high..."

She studied him quietly. 'How many foes left until the Soul Counter is full...?'

He narrowed his eyes, squinting toward the horizon.

"Lemme see... hmm, not much. Just ten left."

Valarie felt a surge of hope ripple through her incorporeal form.

Ten more.

Only ten more foes to slay, and he would complete the armor's Soul Counter. With that, he could finally unlock the Crown of Silence enchantment—the one thing that could return his sanity.

Once that happened, she could finally make him leave this cursed place.

And finally... accept the truth.

That Matia was gone.

It was hard convincing a madman that his friend was dead. But a sane man—he could be reasoned with. Even if the truth shattered him... it was better than this endless limbo.

He was still young. He had time. He had a future.

He just needed someone to remind him.

Valarie had prepared her words, even if they'd cut him deep.

After that, they would find their way out. She already had a plan. An escape route.

Damon grinned, a small giggle rising from his cracked lips.

"I can get nine more today... then, for my final enemy..."

His eyes gleamed with determination.

"I will slay the Ruin Knight."

Valarie sighed.

'Why does he always make things so difficult...?'

But it was fine. He had been setting traps. Studying the knight's patterns, its strengths, its abilities.

He had prepared for this day.

Especially with Ravenous—his shadow hunger—to help bridge the gap between them.

"It's not like he would actually die," she muttered softly.

What was the worst that could happen?

And if he refused to leave...

Then she would drag him out by force.

Chapter 412: All Things Unwhispered

Damon squeezed the Whisper Coin in his hand.

Within the span of a single day, it could only send one message.

But he had so much to say... so many people to whisper to.

He wanted to tell Lilith he was alright. He wanted to ask Luna how she was doing. He wanted to remind Iris not to push herself too much.

He was worried about Sylvia. He wanted to know if Evangeline was still fine.

He wanted to ask if Leona had a full belly.

He wanted to ask if Xander was dead.

But all those messages could not be sent. He could not whisper to any of them.

Because every day, without fail, he only whispered to Matia.

He would ask her to meet him in the same place. By the Bone Tree.

He did not risk skipping the daily message.

What if... what if the day he didn't send it was the one day she could actually hear it?

What then?

That was why he never sent anything else.

Today, as always, he waited by the Bone Tree... in the twisted lands where even trees had become bone and bore fruits of flesh.

He was mad—yes, he knew that. But he was also afraid of sanity. Because sanity meant giving up hope that Matia was alive.

"So why shouldn't I be insane? If I can still hope."

How vile. The world must be, for sanity to mean accepting despair.

The tree was silent. In Damon's eyes, the original creatures that had once called it home had long since been slain by his hand.

Their remains had been devoured—absorbed into him—granting him the [Air Walk] skill.

Remembering the vile creatures did nothing to his mood.

He stood there in the final form of his Pale Crown Armor—its [Sovereign Mantle] form.

But even this heavy armor did little against the cold.

His opponent could freeze him inside it.

He held his sword and waited. Either for Matia... or for the Ruined Knight.

Slowly, he felt the temperature drop. The air grew frigid. The frost seeped through steel.

Damon turned—slowly.

His face hidden within his helm, his grip on the blade tightened. He reinforced his armor with [Shadow Armor], letting dark, writhing shadows wrap around the Ashen Plate until it became a silhouette of dread.

Then it appeared.

Three meters tall—an entity cloaked in frozen mist. Wings coiled around its waist. Tentacles twisted behind its back. Its form, hidden by the frost, was indistinct—merely a silhouette—but Damon had seen enough to know: whatever it was beneath that veil... it was hideous. Twisted. Corrupted.

It always kept its form shrouded... as if afraid to show the world the ugliness it carried.

Yet despite the terror of its presence, its cold blue eyes remained—haunting, beautiful, and filled with killing intent.

Today, Damon would slay this creature.

For a moment, there was silence. As if the world itself paused to let them size one another up.

Damon had already slain its minions. All of them. It stood alone now.

The still air cracked with the weight of the ice—then Damon moved.

His sword ignited in ashborn flame. Agony surged through his body, but he ignored it. Pain was an old companion.

The enchanted sword twisted and melted beneath the wrath of the flames, but he didn't care. Another magic artifact burned? Fine. He swung down.

[Dark Blade].

A massive arc of shadow and flame slashed across the frozen field.

The Ruined Knight roared.

It raised a monstrous sword of its own, and its grotesque tentacles—dozens—grew weapons of ice in an instant, colliding with Damon's attack.

He boosted his strength with [5x] and the impact sent him flying, the earth beneath them rupturing from the force. Cold, astral winds screamed as a crater tore open around them.

But Damon wasn't finished.

He crashed down hard—spitting blood, bones creaking—yet he reached into the shadows and pulled out the [Staff of Carnage].

Weeks. Weeks of mana had been poured into it.

Enough power to destroy a city.

He laughed. A jagged, mad cackle as he unleashed its wrath.

A massive black sphere of destruction consumed everything.

He hurled vials of healing potions into his mouth mid-air, even as the world around him shattered. Ice, flesh, and earth tore apart like wet paper.

He hit the ground, hard. The impact rolled him across the crater. His body was held together by [Iron Bone], otherwise he'd have come apart.

Cracked armor pierced his own flesh. One of his lungs had ruptured.

Still, he grinned.

Still, he stood.

He patched his broken armor with more shadow. Blood dried against frost-stained steel. The Sovereign Mantle creaked and oozed.

The Staff of Carnage had served its purpose.

Damon had chosen an area-of-effect spell for one reason—precision didn't work on this enemy.

It dodged too well.

So he'd destroyed everything. There'd be nothing left to dodge.

And for a moment—he believed it worked.

The dust settled.

Then he saw it.

A dome of ice. Still intact. Hundreds of layered shields had formed atop it.

Damon almost gasped as the ice shattered and the mist returned—uncoiling like a serpent.

The Ruined Knight stepped forward again.

Its figure was still three meters tall—but something had changed.

One of its glowing eyes was gone.

It was wounded.

Not dead.

Still not dead.

Damon's jaw clenched.

He could cross ranks. Yes. He could fight far above his level.

But as the ranks increased, so too did the gap in power.

Rank three monsters already gave him hell.

This one?

This one should have died.

But it didn't.

Outlier. A cursed outlier among monsters.

He gritted his teeth.

There was only one way to win against a monster like this—

Become a monster himself.

"Fine then... be like that."

Damon let the shadow drain through him—consuming what was left of his already dwindling energy.

Then the familiar chime echoed in his mind.

[Shadow Hunger: 90%]

The shadow howled around him. Coiling. Writhing.

Covering his battered form like a second skin.

All of his stats surged—speed, strength, endurance—everything skyrocketed.

A dreadful pressure spread from his soul.

His figure transformed.

Monstrous armored plates twisted into place, his aura becoming thick with death and Shadows.

Damon had taken on a monstrous form.

[Ravenous].

And now... the real battle would begin.

Chapter 413: A Master Of Denial

Once he made a promise to Matia.

He did not want to acknowledge that promise...

Or the truth... so he denied it.

Even now, because the truth was cruel, it broke even the strongest man.

Level up requirement

[Frost Attribute Corrupted Souls – 99/100]

That was all Damon needed now.

He had slain countless corrupted creatures—so many that he'd nearly become corrupted himself.

It wasn't like he had sought out frost-type monsters on purpose. This region just teemed with them.

All kinds, actually; many monsters of different varieties lived and fought in this hellish land.

The worst of them all was the Ruin Knight.

Well, at least with those of the third rank.

Its minions were nothing but "ice soliders." Damon had never actually seen the thing's full form, but judging from its minions alone... he assumed it was a knight.

The biggest problem?

The area around it—perpetually frozen. Just getting near the bastard chilled your bones.

Damon had fought creatures ranging from Rank 3 to Rank 6. He hadn't won against anything above Rank 3 yet, but he always made sure they remembered him.

Winning wasn't always the same as killing. He had killed a Rank 5 once—technically.

He'd snatched the kill.

The battle was between a Rank 5 and a Rank 6. Damon didn't wait. Before the Rank 6 could land the killing blow, he struck.

The dying Rank 5 fell... and he got the final drop.

That's how he got the Staff of Carnage.

His reward?

Getting ripped in half by the furious Rank 6.

But... he was Deathless.

He couldn't die.

So he suffered. Days passed in agony. And then... he stood up again.

Today, he fought one of the strongest Rank 3s he had ever faced.

He activated Ravenous, letting it boost his power, then launched forward with a sonic boom—his body cloaked in shadow, crashing into the foggy, frozen form of the Ruin Knight.

As he got close, frost spread over his blackened form, but he was resistant.

He ignited himself in the flames of Ashborn—which didn't look like fire at all, but more like flickering shadows.

His body now burned hot and cold.

Their blades collided—one melting and burning, the other coated in mist and ice.

The ground exploded beneath them from the force.

Damon's sword shattered.

Destroyed.

He didn't waste time grieving the loss. It was only another blade used as a conduit for Ashborn.

He left himself open deliberately.

The Ruin Knight's blade slashed—tore into his shoulder, ripping through flesh and armor, stopping at the bone.

"Hehe... my bones are as tough as steel..."

His voice came out cold and beastly through the maw of his Ravenous form.

He raised his claws, aiming for the creature's chest.

It tried to dodge. Damon grabbed its hands.

"Hahaha... I got you..."

"As long as I don't let go—you won't dodge like you always do..."

The flickering blue eye within the mist narrowed.

Suddenly, the tentacles on its back shot out, slicing through Damon's shadow, cutting skin, blood spraying as his HP dropped hard.

He didn't care.

He struck back—Magic Gatling bursting from his free hand, blasting away at the Ruin Knight while keeping its arm pinned.

His skill—Vengeance—activated. As long as he struck the one who'd hurt him within three seconds, he recovered a portion of HP proportional to theirs.

But Damon wasn't done.

He slammed into the freezing, monstrous figure of the three-meter-tall knight.

The cold killing intent sank into his body like poisoned needles.

An elbow smashed into his back. Even in his Ravenous form, Damon coughed up frozen blood.

His armor dented—cracked beneath the weight of the shadows and frost.

His wounds refused to heal.

A freezing debuff had latched onto him.

And worse—Ravenous drained his health passively. His shadow was always hungry.

He didn't have the time to use Sacrifice—he couldn't properly feed his shadow while mid-combat. That meant balancing offense with survival.

Still, he clung to the slippery foe.

Its form was hidden by mist, but Damon felt its twisted, corrupted shadow—inhuman and alive.

It tried to escape, wings spreading—but Damon expected that. He dug his claws into them.

The creature groaned—its first sound.

Its cold body was encased in thick armor. The breastplates were large. Its waist was narrow.

But none of that mattered in the heat of battle.

Damon bit into its side.

His shadow fangs froze and shattered from the armor's cold.

Frost poured into his mouth.

But new fangs formed, thicker, heavier.

He bit down again.

Blood—cold and corrupted—spilled into his mouth as the icy armor cracked.

Beneath it, the flesh was rotten. Twisted. Disgusting.

But Damon didn't hesitate.

They thrashed across the corrupted ground like wild beasts.

The Ruin Knight—pinned on its back—fought to break free. It widened its mist. The cold intensified, freezing Damon's body as it stabbed and tore into him.

The frozen earth cracked, shattered, then froze again.

Damon released bursts of Ashborn, black heat pulsing outward, trying to manage the balance of burning shadow energy and sacrificing more.

He reached into his inventory.

Pulled out Broken Bonds—the sword with Disintegration.

He stabbed it into the Ruin Knight's wings.

Its crystalline wings trembled—the pain causing its mist to fade slightly.

In that flicker of clarity, Damon noticed a familiar curve etched on its armor.

He raised the sword again, eyes wild, and plunged toward its heart.

It tried to parry.

He bashed its head with his knee, cracking its helm—then yanked the sword toward its chest.

His teeth clenched.

That design ... it looked too much like the armor of Shattered Ice.

Too familiar.

Many Mist Knights had once served the original bearer of that design.

This was just another one.

Another one of those bastards—still not dead after thousands of years of corruption.

But...

"What if it was... Matia..."

That one thought made the ravenous shadow pause.

He tried to pull the blade back—

But the Ruin Knight shoved itself further into it—impaling itself deeper.

Its mist began to disperse.

Its shattered helm revealed a face.

Damon's eyes shook.

His heart plummeted.

This was the truth.

Even corrupted, traces of her tarnished beauty remained.

The light in her eyes... dimmed.

"Matia..." he whispered.

The corrupted fairy... regained a flicker of herself.

"...Yo... you found me..."

Chapter 414: Cruelty Of The Truth

Valarie was quiet. For all her age and wisdom, she did not know what to say—or even if she should speak at all.

So she stayed silent.

She was certain that, in his madness, Damon had denied the true nature of the Ruined Knight. It was a defense mechanism, one his mind had crafted to shield what was left of his fractured sanity.

In life, the most believable lie was always the one you told yourself—the one you forced your soul to embrace. Not because you didn't seek the truth... but because the truth was simply too painful to endure.

The truth is a steel horse—unyielding, inevitable. But why must this steel horse crush everything beneath its hooves?

Why can we not be spared, just once, with a kinder lie?

If the truth were purely noble, then why did it bring with it such sorrow?

That sorrow pressed on Damon's chest, heavy and merciless. He wanted to scream—he wanted to shatter—but instead, he gave the world nothing more than a tearful smile.

A cold notification flashed before him as the soul counter finally filled.

[You have vanquished: 10,000 / 10,000 Souls]

[You are bound to the Pale Crown.]

[You have unlocked:]

[Cloak of Ruin – Passively enhances soul damage dealt and gradually restores soul damage received.

Empty Throne – Dominate the mind of a single weakened enemy, turning them into a puppet—or even possess their bodies.

Crown of Silence – Keeps the user's mind immune to insanity and mental domination.]

The enchantments of the Armor of the Pale Crown were fully unsealed. The crown on Damon's head grew, expanding in slow, clicking movements that whispered like the rustling of a grave wind.

He felt it instantly—his mind, once churning in chaos, now subdued under the effect of the Crown of Silence. The madness that had plagued him for so long began to dim, like a nightmare chased away by morning light.

But at this moment, Damon would have rather embraced insanity. If only madness would allow him to believe what stood before him was a hallucination, a cruel mirage.

But life was never that kind to one such as him. And now, all he could do was hold on to the brutal truth his mind had desperately tried to erase.

For if insanity was a lie that brought fleeting hope, then sanity was the cruel truth that carried only despair.

A single teardrop slid down his cheek and touched the shattered helm of Matia.

She smiled at him—her face hideous from rot, her features barely recognizable beneath the corruption—but he held her close all the same.

"I'm sorry, Damon... I tried to hold on. I tried... but even with Matlock's wings... I was too weak... I co...couldn't beat the corruption..."

He shook his head, trembling.

Her voice came out weak, breathless, barely above a whisper. He had seen it before—those consumed by corruption regaining their sanity in their final moments, or triggered by something deeper, something that reminded them of who they once were.

"No... no... please..."

Her hand—cold as death—touched his cheek. Damon poured his mana into his shadow just to feel her, just to anchor himself in this moment, to stop it from slipping through his fingers like smoke.

He turned back, completely human.

But reality could not be rewritten, no matter how cruel it was.

She smiled again, gazing up at him as he held her trembling form in his arms.

"You kept your promise... you came for me..."

Tears fell from one of her eyes. From the other, blood streamed silently.

She had once asked him to promise—to kill her if she ever fell to corruption.

Perhaps that was why, even in his insanity, he had always retreated when the Ruined Knight appeared.

Not merely because she was strong... but because he couldn't bear to kill his friend.

Even if it was the only way to save her.

Damon gasped—not from pain, not from the wounds torn across his body—but from the anguish that pierced his heart like ice.

He could feel her blood slipping away... her life draining, her glow fading into a grey void.

"I just wanted to save..."

Matia gave him one final smile.

"I was saved the moment I saw you..."

Those were the final words of Matia Faldren—the once fair fairy who had lived a hard life, and died as herself.

As her eyes dimmed and her soul slipped away, a soft chime rang in Damon's ears.

[You have slain: Ruined Fairy]

[You have leveled up]

[You have been bestowed a Shadow]

The moment those words echoed, Damon felt his body weaken. Shadow energy drained rapidly, his strength fading. He collapsed to his knees, breath ragged.

From his shadow, inky tendrils rose like living smoke. They reached toward Matia's corpse—and began to consume it.

"No..."

Damon raised his hand, reaching for his shadow.

"What are you doing... no..."

At the very least, she should have been allowed a body to be mourned. Why must that be taken from him too?

He didn't think—he simply acted. Grief overwhelmed reason.

The shadows coiled into a sphere, dense and pulsing. He clawed at it, begged at it, but nothing he did made a difference.

And then it was gone.

He dropped to the ground, weak and drained in every way—mind, body, and spirit hollowed out.

Another chime whispered in his ear.

[You have gained: Shadow – Ruined Fairy]

His eyes flickered open. And then, he saw her.

A towering figure stood before him—covered in black armor, face hidden beneath a helm. Only the deep, icy blue light of her eyes glowed beneath the visor.

She stood over him like a sentinel of death.

Damon trembled.

He didn't need a system message to tell him who she was. He could feel it—the bond, deep and primal, anchored in the very core of his soul.

That was the truth about shadows.

A shadow was nothing more than a pale reflection of its caster.

A slave. Obedient. Bound.

His friend was gone—and now she wasn't even allowed to rest.

How cruel.

He didn't raise his head. He couldn't.

If her death had broken him, then this—this—was something far worse.

The armored figure knelt slowly before him.

That single motion undid everything inside him.

She was now bound to his will.

A shadow... that could only follow.

Damon heard a scream of anguish; it was only later that he realized it was his own voice.

Chapter 415: Dual Attribute

He was tired.

It wasn't just his body—it was his heart. He was tired of enduring. Of life. Of all of it.

He was tired of losing. Of weeping. Of grief that never stopped returning.

Damon sat there for what could've been minutes or hours—he couldn't tell anymore. His gaze was hollow, distant. No thoughts stirred in his mind. He was tired of thinking, too.

At some point, Valarie had started speaking to him. He didn't even remember when. But he was tired of listening as well.

His mind remained blank... until the figure kneeling before him slowly rose.

Through the gaps in her visor, he saw the faint glow of her icy blue eyes.

Then, with measured grace, she reached for her helm—and removed it.

That single act, so simple and yet so intentional, stirred something in Damon. A flicker of hope lit in his dull eyes.

What he saw beneath the helm was a face like no other.

Pale as porcelain, untouched by time. Delicate, haunting. Her deep blue eyes carried no emotion—just the quiet stillness of ancient, frozen lakes. Her features were refined and striking, like a statue carved by the gods themselves.

She looked like Matia.

But Matia had been a girl the last time he saw her. A teenager, still wrapped in youthful innocence.

The woman standing before him now... was no longer a girl.

The realization twisted his heart.

How many years had she waited? How long had she suffered alone?

She waved her hand, conjuring a disc of frost—a mirror of pure ice—and studied her reflection.

Damon saw it then, just for a heartbeat: the faintest flicker on her otherwise emotionless face. Surprise. Maybe awe. Maybe something softer.

It was almost as if she found herself beautiful—and was startled by that fact.

Her fingers drifted across her face, then moved across her body, down to her back—as if searching for something.

Damon watched her silently, wondering if she was looking for the grotesque tentacles that once grew from her corrupted form.

She seemed relieved when she found nothing.

His gaze never left her. His heart remained heavy, his soul somber.

Then, she turned around.

Wings of glistening ice unfolded from her back. She flapped them once, sending a chilling breeze across the air, before folding them back with quiet elegance.

She seemed intrigued by her form—perhaps even... captivated. Even as Damon stared at her with sorrow, she observed herself as if rediscovering her own existence.

And in that moment, she almost smiled.

Her fingers reached up again. Slowly, deliberately, she placed the helm back upon her head. Her long, raven-black hair danced weightlessly—though there was no wind.

That simple act—her choosing to don the helm of her own will, even as his shadow—sparked something deep in Damon. Something fragile. Something alive.

Hope.

His hand trembled slightly as he opened his system panel.

A new icon glimmered softly on the side. It bore the visage of her face—her face. Or was it even fair to call her Matia anymore?

Still, he opened it.

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[Once, she was a beautiful fairy from a frozen land—denied the freedom to simply be.

She wore only the mask she was given, never the face she truly owned.

Until she met a wretched shadow.

He saw what lay beneath the lies, and accepted it.

In return, she gave him her faith... and her wings.

She followed him, a wingless fairy in a world that did not welcome her.

And when she vanished into darkness, she searched for him—through timeless darkness, across many ages.

She fought horrors beyond number. She endured even as her flesh withered and her bones rotted.

The monsters could not take her.

But the corruption did.

Still, she pressed on—fighting with wings not her own, the last gift of a fallen kin.

But time... time always wins.

She became a Ruined Fairy.

And even then, she waited—waited for the shadow and the promise he made.]

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Reading the words made his chest ache, a quiet storm of grief and revelation twisting inside him.

So she had fallen here long ago.

She had fought, and fought... but even she had eventually succumbed to the corruption. Just like he almost had—when battling Ittorath's spawn. Only his mastery corruption resistance had kept him from breaking.

Those wings on her back... they weren't hers.

They must've belonged to her twin brother, Matlock.

Damon understood now—why her father had resented her. She was meant to give up her wings for her brother. But he had given his to her.

It was a gift of love. A defiance of fate.

Damon could understand that kind of bond. Between siblings. He would die for his sister without hesitation.

He paused.

'Would I live for her...?'

Even now, when every breath felt like agony... he had to live.

As tired as he was—he had to.

His hand moved to the main panel and opened her full entry.

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[Shadow: Ruined Fairy]

A fallen fairy's final grace now walks behind you—silent and bound.

Once a beautiful fairy of a frozen land, now reborn as a powerful shadow.

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[Attribute]: Frost / Shadow

[Rank]: Three

[Class: Dancing Fairy]

"Oh, little fairy, dance upon the strings.

Sway to the whims of your master—a fleeting waltz between beauty and death."

Skill – [Lethal Grace]

Your movements are fluid and fatal, turning every strike into a perfect step of a deadly dance.

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[Class: Dark Fairy]

"You rise in darkness."

Skill – [Wings of Ruin]

Your blade freezes the soul. Each cut leaves an icy scar that lingers, slowing healing and draining vitality.

The longer you dance, the deeper the frost carves into your enemies, marking them with a curse of ruin.

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[Class: Ruined Fairy]

"There is beauty in ruin.

Share this beauty with the world."

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[Ruin's End]

Rarely does one gain three in a row—but a certain god watched your dance in darkness... and granted you a boon.

From the wings of your lost kin, a chilling winter now spreads around you.

All shall fall to Ruin's End.

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[Minions: 0]

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[Soul Bound Armament]

[Armor of Shattered Ice]

[Description:]

This armor carries the faint aura of home, invoking a feeling of melancholy in a god that can never return.

Still, home waits—loyal as his yearning.

The bearer of this armor holds the same unyielding loyalty, even if it is often unrewarded.

[Enchantment]

[Frost Arsenal:] Generate ethereal weapons made of soul-infused ice at will, freezing flesh and soul.

[Mimic Slash:] Copies enemy weapon techniques after observing them once.

[Frozen Timestep:] Slows the perception of time when switching weapons or landing a critical hit.

[Flake of Cold Eternity:] Summon a frozen double to fight briefly alongside her.

---

Damon wasn't surprised.

She had slain ten thousand foes—her armor had bound itself to her soul, just as his had.

But what caught his eye was her attribute.

Two of them.

Frost and... Shadow.

"Why is hers called 'Shadow' and not 'Umbral' like mine...?" he muttered aloud.

There was a difference. There had to be. But what it meant... he didn't know.

Not yet.

Chapter 416: What Comes After Ruin

What was the difference between the Umbral attribute and the Shadow attribute? Wasn't Umbral just a fancy way of saying Shadow... or had his attribute actually been upgraded without him knowing?

That would make sense, actually. Lilith's attribute changed when she came in contact with the Unknown God. So maybe something similar had happened to him?

Then there was Matia—or in this case, the Ruin Fairy. Her very existence was a quiet defiance of the fundamental laws imposed by the Goddess.

Having two attributes was impossible. Against the rules. A violation of Dooms decree.

And yet... here she was, bearing both.

After thinking on it a bit longer, Damon concluded that one of them must be a secondary attribute. A side effect of becoming a Shadow. Since she was technically created by the Unknown God, she probably didn't have to obey the same restrictions—at least not completely. She was no longer a creature of the world. She was a product of the System.

'Can I even say she's truly Matia...?'

Could he return to the party with that bitter look on his face and just say, "I found Matia"?

He couldn't.

He couldn't say it.

He couldn't accept it.

But he couldn't deny it either.

He sighed. He was tired.

From the shadows, Damon retrieved a few vials of advanced healing potions, popping the corks and downing them without hesitation. His wounds mended under the potion's potent effects.

He didn't have many of these left. But using them helped free up space in his shadow storage.

Looking at Matia—no, the Ruin Fairy—he could understand now. Understand why she was so terrifyingly powerful. Those skills of hers were too deadly.

That's why he had started their battle with an explosive magical attack and ended it quickly. If he hadn't, it wouldn't be her corpse on the floor.

It would've been his.

Though whether he could truly die was doubtful... He would have suffered, yes. But death?

No.

He raised his eyes and glanced at her. She hadn't moved a single step. Standing silently in front of him like a statue, as if expecting him to speak.

He didn't.

He wouldn't.

Damon turned instead to his own system panel. It was almost laughable—how far he'd come in such a short time.

---

[HP: 1595/1595]

[Mana: 23,567/23,567]

[Strength: 3004]

[Agility: 2057]

[Speed: 5485]

[Endurance: 3010]

[Class: Death Seeker]

[Shadow: 1200]

[Shadow Hunger: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 12]

[Condition: Shadow is Full]

[Attribute: Umbra]

---

[Skills:]

[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] [Deathless] [Shadow Clone] [Blitz] [Flash Step] [Air Walk] [Appraisal] [Iron Bones] [Astral Projection] [Accel] [Terror Engine] [Vengeance] [Soul Tongue] [Eyes of Veracity]

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[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv3] [Survival Lv5] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv3] [Bartering Lv2] [Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv3] [Trap Lv3] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv3] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv3] [Mana Control Lv4] [Magic Gatling Lv5] [Pain Resistance Lv4] [Mental Contamination Resistance Lv4] [Disintegration Resistance Lv1] [Sniper Lv4] [Rune Magic Lv2] [Insanity Lv4] [Fate Manipulation Resistance Lv1] [Ravenous LvMax] [Poison Resistance Lv 5] [Elemental Resistance Lv1] [Petrification Resistance Lv 2] [Magic Resistance Lv3] [Curse Resistance Lv2] [Pressure Resistance Lv 2] [Corruption Resistance Lv4]

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[Items:]

[Pale Crown Armor] [Broken Bonds] [Deep Quiver] [Silver Blades] [Staff of Carnage] [Sword of Nicolas]  
[Furnace of Frost] [Helm of Balero] [Gravenail]....MORE..... [Charms], [Potions], [Miscellaneous Items]

[Locked:]

---

He stared at the panel with quiet indifference before rising to his feet.

He had accumulated a mountain of things during his time here. Days, weeks—maybe even months—had passed. He no longer kept track. But he had grown powerful. He had potions, charms, monster parts, weapons, strange items... some had been lost. Some fed to his shadow. Some discarded. Many were destroyed in battle.

Each was unique. Some were even cursed.

He could say it now—he was no longer among the helpless. While he couldn't fully dictate his fate... he had carved out power for himself. Enough to slay someone in the third class. Maybe even survive an encounter with a fourth.

Actually, with his Deathless skill, he could survive any class.

But win?

No.

Not against a fourth.

There was a saying: All below the fourth class are ants.

He believed it. He had been crushed by more than a few.

The fourth class lived a thousand years, maybe two thousand. And he was still walking among the ephemeral.

Though his lifespan as someone in the second class was allegedly three hundred years or more.

A shame not many lived that long in the world of Aetherus.

As he walked forward, he heard the quiet echo of steps behind him.

Matia's.

She followed like a shadow.

She was a shadow.

He bit his lip and stopped.

But he said nothing.

All he could do was keep walking.

"Where are you going?" Valarie finally asked, her voice emerging after a long silence.

Damon paused. He looked up into the sky of endless blackness above.

"Home," he said softly. "I'm going home."

The single upper lip of a woman that was Valarie's body lifted in acknowledgment.

She had known her words fell on deaf ears—that was why she stopped speaking before. But now, something had shifted.

He had accepted it.

"Very well then... allow me."

A white light surged, wrapping around both Damon's body and Matia's armored form. The light began to rise, lifting them slowly from the abyss.

They were leaving this corrupted hell—this graveyard of insanity—where trees of bone bore fruits of flesh and bled from open wounds in place of sap.

Where nightmares battled horrors without rest, drenching the land in endless, tainted blood.

Where the air stank of rot and death, and every wound whispered madness.

At last... they were leaving.

Damon closed his eyes.

He was tired.

He just wanted to rest—

"Rumble rumble..."

From the heavens above came a vast, terrifying rumble.

A massive hand of corruption slammed down from the void, swiping them from the rising light and dragging them back into the depths.

You could come... But you would never leave.

Damon fell, his expression unchanging.

He scoffed.

"I knew it wouldn't be that easy..."

Chapter 417: The Last Ascendant

He opened his eyes, wearing the same indifferent expression he had worn when something reached for them.

Damon wasn't fazed. He was just tired—too tired to even feel afraid.

Still Damon was too broken to fight and too sane to scream.

He hadn't yet healed emotionally or mentally. Not enough to feel those things again.

Still, his gaze came back into focus. Ignoring the pain, he scanned the surroundings quickly, searching for Matia... but she was nowhere in sight.

And then—his heart recalled what fear felt like, regardless of how tired he was.

"There's no need to worry."

A familiar voice. Female.

Valarie...

He turned his bleeding head toward the source of the sound.

But instead of a disembodied pair of lips...

He saw her—a beautiful woman with long golden hair and deep blue eyes. Her aura was calm, her armor faintly reminiscent of Evangeline's. She radiated warmth and kindness, yet her form was almost translucent—barely clinging to the physical world.

He didn't need a name. Her aura alone told him everything.

Valarie Sunwarden.

She smiled softly, her upper lip more corporeal than the rest of her glowing, ghostly form.

"If you're looking for Matia... she sank into your shadow."

Damon glanced downward.

...And felt her there.

Yes. She was fine. Resting.

He slowly laid back down on the corrupted ground. Its filth clung to his long hair like tar.

His body was far from pristine—dirt, soot, grime, dried blood... he was caked in it.

He would need a long bath to even begin cleaning it off.

Still, he remained there, his expression tired... indifferent.

His heart was calm despite the scream buried inside it. Maybe this silence... this numbness... was the only way he could endure the weight pressing against his soul.

Stalwart and unshakable—perhaps it was a new defense mechanism.

"The view down here is quite bleak, isn't it..."

He nodded at Valarie's words, saying nothing. There was something strangely beautiful about the sky... or the lack of one. Those mouths above—gaping, watching—almost looked like constellations in reverse.

"I'm scared of the darkness," Valarie whispered after a pause.

"I hadn't been when I was a child... but after leaving that cathedral, I realized I had become afraid."

Damon didn't respond. He merely listened.

"I had been there for many, many years... eaten away by corruption."

She glanced at him, saw his tired face, and offered him a gentle smile.

"I grew tired too. At first, I endured. Then... I went mad. Then I became sane. I repeated the cycle—again and again—for thousands of years. One day... I just grew tired... and I stopped caring."

Damon blinked slowly, his gaze drawn to the ascendant's figure. To someone who had endured beyond what should be possible.

"I have long outlived my lifespan. But I wasn't alive to begin with. I had long since died. Still, I endured..."

Damon didn't understand. So he asked the only question that mattered.

"...Why?"

She turned to him.

"I do not know. But my time there taught me... I am afraid. Not of darkness. Of loneliness."

That—he understood.

Her loneliness cried loudly, even when it had no voice.

He was a loner too.

But for someone whose attribute was sunlight... that was a strange fear.

He tilted his head at her.

"Lysithara was beautiful," she said suddenly. "We changed the world in more ways than one. We made a place where anyone could learn, in a time when knowledge was hoarded. Only the rich and privileged could access it—but we did something different."

She smiled, bittersweet.

"Everyone was welcomed. Regardless of race, status... we created a panacea."

A long pause.

"But we destroyed that beauty with our greed."

She glanced at Damon, who only listened.

"Can I ask for a final favor... from someone far past her time?"

He nodded slowly.

She smiled gently.

"Can you build something?"

He looked at her, puzzled.

"...What should I build?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know. Build something beautiful."

"...I don't know what beautiful looks like," he said after a moment. "I only recognize ugliness."

She brushed her glowing hair aside with a faint, nostalgic smile.

"Lysithara was beautiful. Build something we'd both think is beautiful."

Damon's dull eyes flickered faintly.

"Something beautiful..."

She reached for his hand and pulled him up to his feet.

"Can... will you do that for me?"

He paused. He knew what she was trying to do.

She was trying to give him hope.

Still, he nodded.

"I will."

She smiled wider.

"Is that a promise, then?"

He nodded again, solemnly.

Even though he still didn't know what that would look like.

"...Yes. I promise."

She looked skyward.

"It's almost here... hold on tight. I'll take you out of here."

From the sky, a brilliant light descended. It plummeted like a comet—but gently. Only when it neared did Damon see its shape.

It was the other half of Valarie's lips.

The final part of her.

He turned to her, alarmed, as her body ignited in radiant light.

"What are you doing... Valarie..."

She smiled, that same gentle, motherly smile.

"If you children leave... I'll be lonely. I don't want that. So with my last light... let me give you a miracle."

Her body glowed brighter, and they began to lift slowly from the filth-ridden ground.

"The time I spent with you all... were the best I've known in many millennia. Don't be sad... my wayward student."

Damon bit his lip. He nodded, and Valarie held his hand tighter.

Her body was only spirit now, but somehow... she felt warm.

Her hand shimmered—and from that light, a sword formed.

A sword of sunlight.

As she rose to face the sky, still holding Damon's hand, he watched her with one tearful eye.

Then... something emerged from the blackness.

A creature—formed from the countless mouths in the void.

"...Who are you...?"

The horror's voice was a chorus of whispers.

But Valarie smiled. Her light cut through the dark. And as her radiance spread, the eternal battle between nightmares and monsters paused—all turned to look upon her.

She raised her blade, glowing like a second sun.

"I am Valarie Sunwarden," she said.

"The last Ascendant."

Chapter 418: The Silent Halls Without War

She waited by the deep black chasm, wearing a calm expression. Her white hair flowed with the wind as the sun's radiant light gently kissed her.

Valarie's lower lip had descended down there—into the Chasm.

The Ascendant.

Their teacher had jumped of her own volition, leaving them with nothing but a final goodbye.

Sylvia didn't raise her head—none of them did. Like the others, she stood silent in bloodied, dented armor. Waiting.

They were all waiting.

Sylvia was waiting for Damon. Even with the ability to see the future, glimpsing him had become more difficult now...

Her second class had made her more powerful, but...

She bit her lip, the taste of blood spreading across her tongue.

They had all grown.

The light wasn't intense at first—it shimmered gently—then became blinding, so much so that daylight itself seemed dim in comparison.

Reflexively, they closed their eyes.

Then came the sound—footsteps.

When the brilliance faded and their sight returned, two figures stood before them.

The first was a young man with dark, long hair matted into dried clumps. His face was streaked with hardened grime, shaped by time and bitter trials.

A crown rested on his head—majestic, yet worn. It lent him a ruined beauty, the aura of a king whose authority could not be washed away by filth.

And yet... the crown also looked like a burden, something that had weighed on him far too long.

Behind him stood a woman clad in full armor. From head to toe, she was encased in steel. A single sword hung at her side, its blade appearing forged from ice itself. Her presence was vast—deeper than any of them had been—stalwart and immovable. Only her piercing ice-blue eyes showed, along with the flowing raven-black hair that spilled from her helm.

Seeing them both, Sylvia's breath hitched.

The young man, Damon, smiled.

A tired smile.

"We're... back."

No other words were needed. Sylvia rushed forward, tears in her eyes—but ironically, Evangeline reached Damon first, embracing him before anyone else could.

Matia, walking behind Damon, almost reached for her sword, but stopped when he glanced at her.

The armored figure behind him remained still, silent, as their party gathered in reunion.

To Damon, everything was still a blur. The time he'd spent there felt surreal—too much, too fast. No words were exchanged—not yet.

Perhaps none needed to be.

They had fought through hell together, witnessed despair, death, and the void itself. No longer students—they were warriors now, scarred and hardened by the spiral tower.

And yet, despite the reunion, Damon's eyes reddened.

They had still lost someone.

He couldn't tell them Matia had died. That the one behind him now was only what remained—resurrected as his eternal shadow.

But his voice couldn't hide the grief.

So he said something else.

"Valarie is gone now..."

Leona's beastkin ears drooped. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"We know... she told us..."

Damon nodded, forcing the same tired, broken smile.

He walked past them all, his gaze settling on the waypoint they had been defending. It bore the signs of relentless battle.

It seemed they had protected it all this time, warding off the monsters of the spiral tower.

There was no time to waste.

He lifted the only thing left of her—Valarie's lips, the final remnant of the last Ascendant.

"Let's... perform her final rites."

It was the least they could do for their teacher.

They followed behind him without question as he activated the waypoint—its runes glowing softly as it whisked them away.

To Dawnbreak Hollow.

The final resting place of Valarie Sunwarden.

The ancient cemetery greeted them with a strange silence. Damon had expected hordes of undead—but found none.

Instead, the air was clean. The grounds untouched by ruin. The cemetery stood pristine, untouched by Lysithara's corruption.

Sacred. Peaceful. As if this place existed outside time.

They stepped quietly. Each grave bore names—nobles and commoners alike. In death, there was no distinction.

All were equal beneath the earth.

Nearby stood a stone building—an old temple. Damon spread his shadow perception but found nothing. Just stillness... and unused tombstones.

No one spoke.

Damon and Xander entered the temple, retrieving a tombstone and laying it before Sylvia—her penmanship the best among them.

Evangeline brought a white cloth. Though already clean, she purified it again with her skill.

Leona found a coffin adorned with golden inlays and the symbol of the sun.

It suited her. The sun had always been her attribute.

Matia summoned a shovel of ice and began digging. They chose a spot atop a hill, where sunlight poured through the leaves of a great tree. If Valarie ever grew tired of the sun, they hoped the shade might comfort her.

Sylvia began to hum a soft hymn as she wrote upon the stone, wrapping the remains in pure white cloth.

One by one, they placed a flower over her before sealing the coffin.

Damon was the first to cover her with soil.

He said nothing—he didn't need to.

He only whispered:

"I will build something we both think is beautiful..."

Evangeline followed. He couldn't hear what she said, but he saw the tear slip down her cheek.

Sylvia offered a prayer and smiled gently. "Thank you."

Leona said nothing. Her lips trembled, her ears flat. The beastkin girl didn't accept loss easily... but she bowed her head.

That was enough.

Xander stood tall in his armor. His dirt struck the coffin with quiet reverence. He muttered something Damon didn't catch.

And then... to Damon's surprise, Matia stepped forward. For the first time, she removed her helm.

The others looked at her—this ruin fairy, silent and unreadable. Her face was beautiful, cold and sharp as ice.

She didn't speak.

Instead, after placing her handful of dirt, she froze the coffin.

A quiet finality.

The funeral ended in silence. They buried her, then departed for the gates of the ruined city.

Behind them stood a single grand tombstone, etched with simple, solemn words:

Here lies Valarie Sunwarden, the last Ascendant.

A teacher, a sage, a warrior... May she find entrance into the Silent Halls, in a place where war and strife cannot reach.

Those words shimmered faintly in the dying ember of the sun.

Chapter 419: Full Circle

Using the waypoint in Dawn Break Hollow, they teleported to the last one—the waypoint by the city gates.

These gates were different from the ones they had entered through. While that entrance had been left in ruins—shattered and broken from the ancient, titanic battle between the City Lord and Ythar—this one was still pristine, in a sense.

But like most parts of the city, it was crawling with monsters.

Wordlessly, they snuck under the towering statue of the goddess.

The statue was massive, depicting the goddess wearing a veil that concealed her face—more like a widow mourning loss than a joyful bride. In her arms, she held a mask, marked with the small, twisted symbol of the Unknown God.

It almost seemed like this goddess was weeping.

Damon shook his head, forcing the stray thoughts from his mind.

His gaze shifted to the gates.

There, two stone knights stood guard.

He might have believed they were simply statues if they didn't emit that overwhelming pressure—the faint hum of a domain.

They were colossal... easily seventy meters tall.

"Hmmm... fourth class advancement..." Damon muttered.

Sylvia shook her head slowly.

"No... those are in the fifth class."

Damon narrowed his eyes in confusion. Noticing it, Sylvia decided to explain, not just for him—but for everyone.

"It's a common misconception," she began, "about fourth class advancement..."

Evangeline tilted her head, looking through her peripheral vision at the stone titans.

Sylvia exhaled lightly. "Fourth class doesn't grant a domain. What it does is empower the soul. The goal of the fourth class is to build a domain—only after building one can you reach the fifth class. And then, the next step... is making your domain mobile."

Damon's eyes widened slightly. Had he misunderstood the entire process?

It made sense now. The Beldam and Nemoriel... both had domains—but theirs were fixed. The Beldam's was her house. Nemoriel's... the forbidden library. Within those spaces, they held absolute power.

"So that's why the Drowned Saint didn't follow us into Nemoriel's library..." Xander muttered.

Evangeline nodded. "It didn't have a domain. And entering his would mean facing something at the peak of its rank."

Leona sighed. "This class advancement system is so complicated..."

Damon nodded in agreement. "So fourth class is to build a domain. Fifth is making it mobile... or at least letting its power move with you."

Evangeline lowered her head.

"I wonder why Valarie never taught us this..."

Leona bit her lip at the mention of the last Ascendant.

"She only gave us what we needed," Damon said quietly. "That was how she always taught. No more, no less."

He looked at the open gates, then up at the darkened sky and the massive rift drifting above the city.

"We need to leave this place."

Xander gripped his spear tightly and looked at Matia, who hadn't spoken a single word since arriving. She simply followed Damon, silent always.

"What do we do?" he asked.

Leona nodded in agreement. "With our current power... there's no way we're getting past those things."

Damon's gaze sharpened. He looked up at the rift again.

"And we don't have to," he said quietly. "We'll borrow a knife."

He glanced at Evangeline and Sylvia.

"Do you two remember our first night here...? Let's make our last the same."

The two girls stared at each other, their expressions paling.

He couldn't be serious... He was serious.

That was exactly what Damon planned—to throw the city into chaos.

Evangeline took a deep breath... then gave a small laugh at his madness.

"Good to have you back, you crazy bastard."

With that, she and Sylvia stepped into the open. Some of the monsters noticed them—eyes glowing, claws twitching—but before they could react...

Two radiant lights exploded from the two girls.

The glow expanded in all directions, rising into the sky—toward the rift like a beacon.

Some monsters tried to stop them, lunging forward...

But it was too late.

The light reached the rift.

The sky rumbled.

Blackness began to spill from its surface—not like a waterfall, but like an open wound bleeding endless horrors. Countless nightmares poured out from the sky, unleashed by Ittorath, drawn to the light, desperate to escape their prison in the heavens.

Damon felt the colossal pressure of Ittorath's presence, and with it came that feeling he thought he'd forgotten.

Dread.

The ancient horrors of Lysithara stirred. Even broken and corrupted, they remembered their enemy.

Roars echoed across the ruined city.

Even the two stone knights stirred—lifting their massive heads toward the blackened sky, radiating killing intent.

"Run!"

Damon's party sprinted toward the gates as chaos erupted across the city. The heavens cracked with flame and thunder, and the earth split as the two ancient enemies clashed once again.

But the nightmares weren't chasing Lysithara's monsters. They were chasing the light—chasing Sylvia and Evangeline.

Even so, Lysithara's horrors stood in their way, defending their territory from the invaders from above.

Damon grabbed Sylvia's hand and jumped over the leg of a towering behemoth, narrowly avoiding its crushing stomp.

This was the plan. Let chaos reign. Let the ancient war resume.

In the confusion, they would escape.

The stone knights would have to decide—crush the tiny intruders at their feet, or fight the ancient nightmares tearing through their city.

The answer was obvious.

The party moved swiftly, dodging explosions, avoiding collapsing buildings, navigating the carnage until they reached the shadow of the gates.

Almost there.

Almost free.

But then... mist began to rise.

Everything stopped.

The sky, the earth, the horrors—they all froze.

Damon and his party, so close to the gate, came to a halt.

A single figure stood in the mist.

And silence fell over the battlefield.

No one dared to move. No beast growled. No nightmare screeched.

The figure spoke.

"Let us play a game."

It was him.

The corrupted lord of Lysithara.

The one who had once been Vathren.

The noblest of the Ascendants.

The strongest.

The keeper of false truths.

He had found them.

The last obstacle.

The one who played an unwinnable game.

A game with no answer.

Chapter 420: Legends Of Tomorrow

Damon stopped right in front of the Keeper of False Truths.

The ancient battlefield fell into complete silence—as if the world itself held its breath. All eyes, mortal and monstrous, turned to them. Even the rift above, which had once poured nightmares endlessly, slowed. An eye peered through, wide and pulsing—but Damon noticed something strange.

Hesitation.

Even Ittorath, bound in his sky-born prison, seemed uncertain at the sight of the one who stood before Damon now.

But Damon... didn't care about the Keeper's game.

He wasn't here to play for amusement or for riddles. He stood, unflinching, before the once-great and wise ruler of Lysithara—a man who had ruled the land that forged kings and legends, who had once been the shining example of what a ruler should be.

A man now swallowed by corruption, but still...

Something noble lingered.

"Valarie is gone now..." Damon said softly, not to provoke but to honor. His voice held the quiet weight of grief, of love, and of fury held back only by iron will.

"She was lonely... afraid of the dark..."

His tone remained calm, though he didn't know if it was to stop the tears from rising... or to smother the rage that threatened to boil through his soul.

The Keeper of False Truths closed his eyes. A pause. A moment. And then he nodded.

"Now she can rest... the last Ascendant."

At those words, the shadow Damon carried in his chest seemed to lift—if only a little. Even corrupted, this man's will still endured. Twisted, yes, but not broken. He had paused his eternal game for Valarie's sake.

Damon drew in a breath.

"Then let us play..." he said, speaking the words instead of the Keeper.

The corrupted lord of Lysithara lifted his gaze slowly, the mist curling around his shoulders. A thin smile etched his withered face.

"Perhaps... I too may find rest today. If you can answer my questions, and free me from my curse..."

His voice echoed—calm, ancient, distant. And then came the rules:

—You must play the game.

—Refuse... and you die.

—Fail to pass... and you are damned.

—You must answer both questions correctly.

—You may not delay the game indefinitely.

—Pass... and you receive a reward. Safe passage through Lysithara.

—You may play as an individual... or as a group.

—You get only one lifeline. Fail again, and it's the end.

—The answer to the first question must not be the same as the second.

—You must pass the second question.

The Keeper raised his arm, mist sweeping behind him, the colossal gate casting a long silhouette. His eyes shimmered faintly, not with malice, but something else—hope.

"Now... the game begins."

He spoke the first question:

"I can only exist when I am not. I am always true and always false. What am I?"

Mist swelled at his feet, wrapping his form in vapor.

Then came the second:

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

The battlefield tensed. Every nightmare, every corrupted soul... watched in complete silence.

Damon turned to the others. He bit his lip for a moment, then nodded.

"We'll play as a group."

The Keeper tilted his head, eyes narrowing.

"Do you all agree to put your lives in his hand?"

No words were spoken—but none were needed. Their expressions held everything. Calm. Confidence.

Faith.

The Keeper stared at them for a long, haunting moment... and then smiled faintly.

"I've seen that look before... once, long ago."

Damon gave a subtle nod to Sylvia, and she stepped forward beside him.

"The first question..." Damon said aloud, his voice steady.

"A paradox."

Sylvia echoed softly, "A paradox only exists when it does not. It is both true and false. A contradiction that is real."

The Keeper exhaled—mist curling upward like a sigh. He nodded slowly.

"You are correct."

The second question lingered like a blade over their heads.

"What happens," the Keeper asked again, "when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?"

Damon gave no answer.

He simply turned.

"Let's go," he said to the others.

Without hesitation, they followed him—walking calmly toward the gate.

The Keeper's smile vanished. His form flickered as he moved like smoke, blocking the archway.

"You have not answered my second question. You cannot leave."

Damon tilted his head, feigning confusion.

"But I just did. The answer... is to pass."

The Keeper's form trembled. A sound—like cracking glass—echoed in the air. He looked down at himself, bewildered.

"But... how?"

Damon looked him in the eye.

"That question has no answer. Both forces are absolute. It's a paradox—just like the first."

"But your rule said only one thing clearly... 'You must pass the second question.' It never said the question must be answered. So the answer... is to pass."

For a moment, silence reigned.

Then the Keeper laughed.

A deep, echoing, broken laugh that cracked through the city like thunder.

"Such... a simple answer..."

He sank to his knees as his body began to unravel—flaking into dust, mist, and memory.

"The Unknown God... is a cruel god... such a simple answer... then why..."

His voice grew faint.

And then he turned to them.

"You have freed me... as promised, I grant you safe passage through Lysithara."

He glanced at Damon, "And to you, the inheritor of my burden, I bestow this..."

Reaching toward Damon's crown—his crown, once.

As his finger brushed it, a soft system chime echoed.

[You have gained: Key of Lysithara]

The Keeper looked at Damon with something close to pride.

"You carry a heavy burden... In a world of endless conflict, he will never relent. He will obtain Bellum, and all the Pillars. We... we can only ensure that Aetherus does not die..."

He raised his head toward the sky.

"The barrier will soon break... Mugu's chains won't hold them forever... Aetherus will wake... this is the beginning of the end..."

His form scattered into mist.

"This is a world without heroes... but we still fight for it. I pray you do not share my ruinous fate..."

And with that, the man who had once been Vathren, Lord of Lysithara, finally found rest.

Damon didn't look back.

He walked forward, leading his party through the ancient gates. Behind them lay a city of nightmares and legends. Before them—an uncertain path, but one of their own making.

As they passed through the arch, the mist swallowed them whole.

They carried with them the scars of a ruined city.

But also... the strength forged from walking the Path of Kings.

They had walked the road of the ancients.

Now, it was time to forge their own legacy—

The Legends of Tomorrow.