

Shadow 941

Chapter 941: Holyman

Damon stood on the ship deck with Seras as they exchanged greetings with the ship's captain. The man wore a calm expression, hands folded neatly behind his back, sea wind tugging at the edges of his coat.

Seras nodded once. The man lowered his head with a reverent look, almost bowing from the waist.

"It's a pleasure to meet the legendary hero Seras Blade."

He glanced at Damon, eyes steady for a breath, then suddenly fell to his knees. The impact thudded against the wooden deck.

"Please give me your holy blessing, your Excellency."

Damon was a bit taken aback. His brows lifted, lips parting slightly, until he remembered he was actually a religious figure.

He didn't know what this was, but he was loving it.

Slowly, he stepped forward. He placed a hand on the captain's head, fingers spreading with deliberate weight, adopting a solemn expression as though carved from marble.

"You are blessed, my son. The goddess is watching us..."

The captain closed his eyes in prayer, shoulders trembling faintly.

Seras rolled her eyes, folding her arms tightly across her chest. The world was truly a sick place. A man like Damon was holy.

"Every day we stray further from god," she muttered under her breath at the sight.

Damon looked at the ship and the people on it. Each of the sailors was waiting to get Damon's blessing, some already removing hats, others kneeling before he even called them.

Seras sneered in disgust. She knew those who traveled the seas were more superstitious than most. Even so, taking blessings from Damon. What had the world come to?

One by one they came to Damon. He touched their head, fingers pressing firmly, muttering something under his lips before extending his hand for them to kiss the ring.

There wasn't a ring last time she checked.

Yet now there were five gleaming rings on his fingers, even his thumb was not spared. Gold, silver, black iron, each set with a different stone that caught the dying sunlight.

"You are blessed."

Seras sighed, shaking her head at this farce.

The captain took off his hat, clutching it to his chest before asking in a slow voice.

"Your holiness, what is the fate of our ship on this voyage to the demon continent?"

That was a no brainer. Of course it was going to be dangerous. They were traveling through several danger zones, and to avoid anyone spotting them they would be avoiding the normal sea routes and trade routes.

Damon placed his hand upwards, palm open to the sky as if weighing invisible stars.

"Let me divine our fate."

He tapped his fingers a few times as if calculating the heavenly way. Seras narrowed her eyes. She didn't know him to have a divination based ability, so she was sure this was bullshit.

Damon frowned, his face getting darker and darker. He drew his brows together, jaw tightening, then slowly shook his head.

"Terrible things. Terrible things will happen. I see terrible storms."

The captain's face paled. A sailor dropped the rope he was holding.

"Your holiness, how do we avoid this?"

Damon paused. How do we avoid this?

He didn't know. He was talking out of his ass. Of course he didn't know the future. He had been devouring enemies left and right, but he didn't get a new skill since he left the war games. It was like the unknown god had a grudge against him.

And he was saying all this because he knew his Deathless skill would send horrible trials his way.

He lowered his hand slowly, eyes half lidded.

"The way... the way is simple. We must push forward and persevere. The goddess is with us and will test our faith."

He raised his hand toward the crew, fingers spreading dramatically.

"Let us pray..."

Everyone closed their eyes as Damon began, voice deep and theatrical.

"Mother lady in heaven, I worship you. I exalt your name..."

Seras' eyes twitched. The ship floated freely without anyone guiding it because Damon wanted to show off. The wheel stood unattended, creaking softly as the current nudged them.

After a few minutes of obvious waste of time, he concluded the prayer with a flourish.

"I cover us all with the blood of our enemies."

Yeah, and her sword could do the same.

The captain hurriedly gave Damon his cabin, bowing repeatedly, and provided unnecessarily special treatment. Apparently religious men were more valued than war heroes who actually protect lives.

Seras got a slightly bigger cabin than the others. Some even shared a cabin. Renata shared one with Wendy.

And so their voyage began, with none the wiser of anything aloof.

On the ship, a young knight sat along the side of the deck down below, boots dangling close to the black waters. He absentmindedly traced circles along the railing.

Something moved beneath him.

A shape broke the surface just enough to poke its head up and look at the ship. Two pale eyes blinked once before it sank back into the water without a ripple.

In the evening, after a long nap, Damon came out as the ship moved up and down the black water, navigating past bones that jutted from the sea like the ribs of a fallen god.

He saw Seras on the deck looking at the horizon, hair fluttering behind her.

"You know, if there was a ship, why didn't we just sneak through the usual route instead of the evil forest?"

She crossed her arms, shifting her weight to one leg.

"I thought I explained this already. Why are you still complaining? I told you there are spies everywhere. Do you think there aren't information networks that keep an eye on every illegal route? This was the safest option."

Damon looked at the deep black water as the fresh sea breeze hit him, pushing his hair back.

"Hah, you're right. I guess it's not so bad. I can always add overcame the evil forest as part of my resume."

She smiled, shaking her head slightly.

"You are a very amusing person."

There was a bright radiance seeing her smile, making Damon temporarily dazed. His eyes locked on her without him realizing.

"And you're very pretty when you smile. You should do that more."

Seras brushed her hair away, revealing her exquisite neck, a soft smile tugging at her lips.

"You've really taken to the habit of talking to me casually. Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

Damon glanced at her. She had a passive aura that made people uncomfortable, a pressure that coiled around the chest.

He didn't even feel it.

If anything, the more untouchable she acted, the more he provoked her.

"No, not really. You don't scare me one bit. I think you're cute when you're angry."

Seras touched her face slowly, fingers tracing her cheek as if confirming it existed.

"I'm cute... that's a first. I've never been called that. Even my own father told me I was unsightly and that was alright because I was a blade. I'm not supposed to be liked or beautiful."

Chapter 942: Blood Of What

Damon crossed his arms, looking at the sky where the sun bled into the sea.

"If I had a daughter, I'd tell her how cute she was every day. You know babies are born ultra ugly. It's not just humans, even animals."

Seras blinked slowly.

Damon raised his hand, counting with his fingers.

"They have growth stages before they reach maximum cuteness. The first is the ugly at birth stage when they're red and don't have any fur or cute traits. Now that's the stage only a mother could love, but we all pretend they're the most beautiful thing in life. We lie to ourselves."

Seras' lips twitched awkwardly.

"Erm... okay..."

"Then the actual cute phase when they're small and start making cute sounds. They have some chubby fat and maybe fur in case of animals."

He smiled faintly as if picturing it.

"Then they reach the talking stage where they are learning and are super cute. Now this is the ultra cute phase. After here it's downhill for most people. You either become beautiful or you're ugly."

"Well, things went south pretty fast," she said, then paused, pointing at her face. "Wait. Where do I stand in all this?"

Damon grimaced at her dramatically, squinting as if evaluating a rare artifact, then smirked.

"You're one of the lucky ones. You're ultra beautiful, so you must have been cute."

Seras touched her face again, this time slower, as if committing the shape of it to memory.

"I'm ultra beautiful..."

It was as if she didn't believe him.

Damon was a bit taken aback. Did no one ever compliment her looks, or was it one of those scenarios where women were being hypocritical, where they hate when the guys they can't stand compliment them but won't mind when the thin handsome guy compliments them?

Yes, it had to be the latter.

He silently thanked his mother for his good looks.

Though that wasn't really the case.

The truth was no one actually called Seras an ultra beautiful woman, even if she was beautiful enough to topple cities with just her looks.

Honestly, it was hard to notice a woman's beauty when she was busy ripping out your organs and covered in blood.

Beauty wasn't what people worried about when they were dying. Even a siren was beautiful, but sailors tried to avoid them.

Damon glanced at the sea, taking a deep breath.

"You seem to like the sea," Seras asked with a strange expression as the last light of the distant sun shimmered, barely touching the water.

He tilted his head, looking at the ominous dark waters.

"I hear the ocean is terrifying. Now that I see it, I can't help but be entranced."

Seras stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder, her grip firm.

"I'm sorry for everything you're about to experience. I hope you can keep that attitude."

Damon frowned, raising an eyebrow. What was with her? Since when did she get so paranoid? He had experienced the evil forest and the whispering forest. He had crossed Lysithara.

Those were great danger zones. No one spoke of the ocean like that. Why was she making a big deal out of it?

It was just a little water, is all.

Seras saw he was unconvinced. She could only pray for him not to become aquaphobic. It would be real bad if he was that traumatized.

Well, that's the spirit.

The sun set quietly as the world suddenly went dark. The true nature of the ocean was revealed.

Darkness as far as the eye could see.

Well, that didn't affect Damon. He could see in the dark.

He sneered into the abyss.

And along with his sneer came a horror filled scream from the ship.

His hair stood on end.

Somewhere on the ship a man was covered in blood, screaming.

The scream tore through the hull, raw and broken.

Seras and Damon reacted at the same time. Damon's expression snapped from irritation to focus. They rushed below deck, boots hammering against the wooden stairs as the ship swayed violently beneath them.

The screaming grew louder.

Damon didn't hesitate. He kicked down the door.

The wood splintered inward with a deafening crack.

When they stepped inside, the stench hit them first.

Copper.

Heavy and very thick.

A man was on the floor, covered in blood from head to toe. His hair was soaked, face smeared red, clothes drenched. His expression was stunned as he looked up at them in shock, like a child caught in a nightmare.

The entire wooden room was painted red.

The walls.

The floorboards.

All the bunks were covered.

Blood dripped from the edge of the upper beds in slow, sticky threads.

Damon stepped forward, boots splashing into the pooling crimson. He crouched slightly, staring at the man kneeling in blood.

"Are you alright? What happened here?" he asked with a roar, his voice filling the room.

The man was quiet.

His lips trembled. Tears spilled from his eyes, cutting thin, clean lines through the blood on his cheeks.

Seras frowned, stepping carefully, her boots leaving dark impressions in the slick floor. She crouched slightly and dipped two fingers into the thick blood, rubbing it between her fingers.

"This isn't your blood."

The man shook his head slowly, shoulders quaking.

Damon scanned the room.

No bodies.

No limbs.

No signs of struggle beyond the blood itself.

"Why did you scream?" Damon demanded, grabbing the man by the collar and hauling him upright.

The man could only cry.

A grown man crying.

Damon didn't even know what to call this. It was too unnerving. The room felt wrong. Too quiet. Too empty for this much blood.

"What?" Damon snapped. "Whose blood is this? It's not yours. You don't look injured."

The man gulped, Adam's apple bobbing violently. His teeth chattered as he tried to form words.

Finally, he managed to speak.

He whispered something under his breath.

Damon and Seras couldn't hear him.

Damon's patience snapped.

He seized the man's face with one hand, fingers digging into his cheeks, and dragged him closer until their foreheads nearly touched.

"Speak clearly."

The man repeated himself.

This time Damon heard it.

His blood ran cold.

Seras turned to him sharply.

"What? What did he say?"

Damon's lips quivered.

His eyes slowly widened.

"He said..." Damon swallowed.

"It's... period blood."

Chapter 943: Blood Mary

Sob. Sob.

There were soft whimpers on the deck as a knight sat hugging his sword, knuckles white around the hilt, a towel draped over his back like a defeated cloak. Everyone surrounded him in a circle, boots forming a rough ring against the wooden planks.

The sea wind howled softly beyond them.

Damon sat in front of him on a barrel, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. Lights from illumination runes carved into the mast and railings cast a pale blue glow across the deck, making every face look ghostly.

He placed his hand firmly on the man's shoulder.

"It's alright. You're in a safe place. Tell us what happened."

The man lifted his head slowly and looked at the bleak and dark starless sky above. It stretched endlessly, hollow and empty. It was like a reflection of his heart.

"The goddess has abandoned me..." sniff sniff, tears fell from his eyes, horrible broken tears that refused to stop.

"I remember it like it was thirty minutes ago."

Seras crossed her arms tightly over her chest.

"It was thirty minutes ago."

Damon shot her a sharp glare and muttered under his breath.

"Can't you see he's suffering?"

She sighed, brushing hair from her face. Why were they making a big deal out of this? It wasn't even that bad.

Damon pulled out a handkerchief and gently pressed it into the man's shaking hands.

The man whispered a mournful, "Thank you."

"I was alone polishing and cleaning my gear. Then I heard it. A sound at the door. I thought it was my assigned roommate coming back from above deck."

He paused, swallowing hard as the circle of men leaned in.

"It came floating... like a peach with tentacles. It had the voice of a woman and before I could react it split open and bathed me in... blood."

"Ahh!" someone gasped.

"By the goddess..." another man cried.

"That's horrible," someone whispered.

"How terrible. What suffering did he endure," another man added gravely.

"That's not a big deal... it's not like it was acid," Lana said flatly, arms hanging loosely at her sides, clearly not understanding their hysteria.

"Wait. How did you draw the conclusion that it was... you know... menstrual blood?" Renata asked slowly, crouching slightly to meet his eye level.

The man shook violently.

"It said so... it told me," he whispered.

Several of the men trembled.

Seras sighed softly.

'I see. That confirms one thing.'

"That we have a horrible monster aboard," Damon interrupted dramatically, rising to his feet.

"No. That you are all morons," Seras snapped. She uncrossed her arms and stepped forward. "I can't believe you are all freaking out over something so trivial. It's not like a little blood will kill you. You can't get pregnant from period blood, so how about you tuck in your male egos and go kill that thing."

Damon cleared his throat awkwardly, scratching his cheek.

"You... don't know what it's like being on the other side of a period. The pain of being a victim of a mood swinging lover. You become the villain for just existing. I could go on."

A man with a long beard and a tough face slowly raised his hand. He was one of the older sailors, broad shouldered and scarred.

"My... my wife beats me every time it's that time of the month... I used to try fighting back... I never won..."
Tears streamed down his face, disappearing into his beard.

Damon immediately stepped forward and placed both hands on his shoulders.

"Be strong, king. She can't hurt you here."

"I'm sorry," the man choked. "She'd say nothing is wrong but I know something is. I just wish she'd tell me. When she says nothing I think nothing is wrong and I get a beating..."

He wept openly, falling to his knees.

"I try to protect the kids. Be a good father... it's never easy."

The men began to give their input one by one.

Damon nodded solemnly. Even Lilith Astranova was scary on her period.

"She wants space.

You give space.

'Why are you ignoring me?'"

He gestured dramatically.

"She wants attention.

You give attention.

'Why are you hovering?'"

The circle of men nodded in shared trauma.

"The sentence 'It's fine.'

It is not fine."

One man stared into the void as if he had seen the deepest abyss.

"You will hear a story about something that happened ten years ago.

You will be responsible for it."

A collective murmur of pain spread.

"She might say, 'I hate everyone.'

You nod.

You are also everyone."

The bearded sailor covered his face.

"You will be asked, 'If I turned into a worm would you still love me?'

This is not optional."

"There is no correct answer for that," Damon declared gravely. "I just roll over and die."

Seras and Lana watched them with deep frowns.

"Hmmm. So we're dealing with a bewitching type monster. The sea has a lot of them," Seras muttered, glancing toward the dark waves.

Lana began listing possibilities quietly. Seras shook her head.

"Well whatever it is has Damon ensnared too..."

"It's not mind attacks," Renata chimed in, pointing at the crown resting on Damon's head.

"He's immune to those," she added confidently.

"What we're dealing with is a monster that can ensnare without affecting the mind or soul. That narrows our list. From the blood I... oooh."

Lana paused mid sentence, taken aback by the soft sound Seras made.

That was not a good sign.

"What? What is it, commander?"

"It's a creature that can affect the pheromones. It squirts blood from its body. I've only heard unsightly rumors and based on his description... it's what I think it is."

Renata narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Well Damon isn't resistant to pheromone changes. I'm pretty sure he'd eventually build up a resistance depending on how much he's exposed to it. Might take a while."

"So what? They're all gonna act like idiots?" Wendy chimed lazily, leaning against the railing and looking at Damon with mild concern.

"Something like that. Though I would hardly call that the worst part."

Wendy straightened slightly.

"What could be worse than this?"

Seras bit her lip, hesitating.

"The blood is part of its ability. When you're touched it gives strange effects on the body. Some would say it really teaches you to respect your mother. Those who smell the blood get the pheromone into their system which causes this reaction."

Lana blinked.

"Wow. I didn't think ladies were that bad. Hmm. Looks like I have a lot to learn."

"What monster is it?" Wendy pressed.

Seras lowered her voice.

"It's the Bloody Mary."

Renata's mouth fell open.

"Wait. Isn't that the monster that can..."

"Yes. Yes it is," Seras cut her off quickly.

"They aren't gonna like that," Renata whispered.

Then she glanced at Seras.

"Should we... tell them?"

Seras shook her head firmly.

"There's no need to add to their burdens. Ignorance is bliss. What they don't know can't hurt them."

They searched the whole ship for the whole night. Lantern light and illumination runes flickered across every corridor, every storage hold, every coil of rope. Boots pounded across planks. Doors were thrown open. Cargo was shifted.

No creature was found.

There was also no further attack.

Seras didn't say anything. She and the ladies simply observed, sharp eyes tracking every movement, every nervous twitch. They waited for more signs, more numbers, more backup.

They had Damon summon Matia from his shadow where she had been all this time.

The air around Damon's feet darkened, frost creeping outward in delicate patterns before Matia stepped out silently. Her pale blue hair shimmered faintly under the rune lights, expression blank as always.

They told her what was going on, other than what she observed from the shadows.

Renata had rarely seen the frost fairy's expression change.

This was one of those times.

The last time had been when she had confronted her father.

Matia's gaze slowly shifted toward Damon.

She insisted on staying by Damon's side ever since.

It was for his own protection.

Everyone convened on the deck to talk about the issues. The sea breeze hit the sails, magic shimmering from the runes carved into the masts, keeping the vessel steady over dark waters.

"We haven't found anything so far. Did it leave?" the captain asked, voice tight.

The man from the night before spat to the side.

This was the tenth time he'd done so in the last two minutes.

Damon glanced at him briefly before shrugging.

"I doubt that. It's probably in the sea. We could try diving to find it, though I wouldn't advise it."

Seras' eyes shifted to the man who had been covered in blood the day before.

He spat again.

His face was pale.

Sweat clung to his brow.

Damon shook his head, about to comment, when the man suddenly bolted toward the edge of the ship.

He dropped to his knees and began to throw up his breakfast over the railing.

The retching was violent.

His fingers gripped the wood so hard his knuckles turned white.

Damon winced.

"Poor guy. He must still be disgusted from the incident of last night."

Seras sighed, shaking her head slowly.

"No. That's not it."

Damon raised a brow.

"It's because he's pregnant."

Damon glanced at her and smiled lightly.

"Ahh. Nice one. I didn't know you had a sense of humor."

Her expression didn't change.

Not even slightly.

The wind passed between them in silence.

Damon's smile slowly faded.

His face paled.

"...What?"

Chapter 944: Virgin Birth

It was a parasite, as far as Seras could remember. It acted like a human baby in its mother's womb. However, when it finished growing, it would burst out through the stomach after forcing its victim to experience the full trials of pregnancy.

The monster that emerged would gain the combat powers of its victim, and the Blood Mary would continue hunting down more men to expand its swarm.

That was part of the reason it was called a Blood Mary.

It only planted the parasite in men.

Time was of the essence for the unfortunate knight now in its grip.

Damon had seen and heard many appalling things in his lifetime, but this... this had to be high on the list of horrors.

"What do you mean he's pregnant? He's a man..." His voice sounded stiff and slow, like the words were struggling to leave his throat.

Seras didn't move an inch from where she stood. She merely placed a hand on her sword's hilt, thumb pressing lightly against the guard.

"He's been infected with the Blood Mary seed. Its power is called the virgin birth. It plants its seed on you without any form of... you know."

She didn't say the last part. She didn't need to.

Damon exhaled sharply.

"I think that was the most relieving thing I've heard all day," he muttered.

Imagine if it wasn't a virgin birth.

For a brief, terrible second he pictured a man pinned beneath a monster and getting—

"Oh goddess."

His scalp tingled. He had just set sail on the seas for the first time in his life and he was already being traumatized.

"I thought the mother of stillbirths was bad enough. It seems some sick god's imagination is being played out here. Who the hell even comes up with these things?"

He dragged a hand down his face.

Whoever it was needed serious help.

He wondered briefly if gods had a mental health quartermaster.

"Ho... how long does he have?" Damon asked, forcing himself to look at the trembling knight again.

Lana chimed in from the side, brushing through some books with hurried fingers.

"A pregnancy takes nine months for most races, so I imagine he has somewhere between nine hours to nine days. It depends on how well the parasite is growing."

The sailors stared at the infected man with horrified expressions. The knight leaned forward suddenly and vomited onto the already blood soaked floor.

Damon pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Can we cut it out of him?"

Renata shook her head slowly.

"We could if we had a healer on the level of Evangeline or Sylvia. Evangeline would be better since she can destroy it with purification. Our expedition force healers are mostly combat healers who specialize in demon activity and battlefield wounds."

Seras nodded.

"If we provoke it, he'll just die of a stomach implosion."

Damon's expression darkened further. His gaze drifted toward the dark water beyond the hull as if the sea itself were listening.

"What if we kill the Blood Mary?"

Seras touched her temple with a tired expression.

"Assuming we can find the Blood Mary. Since we can't find her, that option isn't good enough."

Lana bit her lip, then turned to the captain.

"This ship has cloaking runes and warding runes."

The captain nodded slowly.

"Yes. The best rune experts had them carved. It's a marvel of the empire's technology."

Seras' eyes sharpened.

"Then how did it get on the ship if it has warding runes?"

The captain paused.

His eyes widened.

That's right.

How did none of them think of that?

Was it the effect of the pheromones from the Blood Mary clouding their judgment?

"How did it get on board without raising alarms?" the captain muttered. "The runes should have automatically stopped it."

Seras glanced at the first mate of the ship.

"Activate the runes now. Better safe than sorry."

The first mate scrambled to comply, barking orders. Sailors rushed to the rune pillars embedded along the deck, hands pressing against carved sigils.

Damon still didn't feel safe.

He stepped back, then vanished in a blur, appearing at the top of the mast in a single motion. Wind lashed against him as he looked down over the entire vessel.

The ship did have concealing runes.

Reasonably speaking, the runes should have helped them avoid being seen by monsters in the sea.

But they were not foolproof.

They reduced the chances of being spotted.

They did not erase them.

A faint shimmer began to rise around the ship as the warding runes activated fully, forming a translucent barrier that hummed faintly in the night air.

Damon jumped down from the mast, landing beside Seras with a heavy thud that rattled the boards.

"The runes seem to be alright."

His gaze focused on the shimmering barrier covering the ship.

"That should stop anything from getting in. We already checked. There's nothing else on the ship, so we should be safer."

Safer.

Not safe.

He turned to the infected man, who was now sitting upright against the wall, squeezing his nose as if he didn't like the smell around him. Sweat poured down his face. His hands trembled against his stomach.

"We'll keep you under observation for now."

The man forced himself to salute.

"Yes... sir..."

But Damon could see the bleak expression on his face.

And beneath the man's palm, just for a second, something shifted under the skin of his abdomen.

A few hours passed, and the man who had been sprayed and infected by the Blood Mary was acting normally.

Or as normal as a pregnant woman would.

He refused to eat anything that wasn't bitter. The ship's supply of limes and lemons was redirected entirely to him. It was one of the things needed to prevent scurvy, but they had enough for now, so it didn't matter.

He sat hunched on a crate near the infirmary corner they had arranged for him, chewing through slices of lemon with a vacant expression, juice running down his chin. Every so often he would clutch his stomach and breathe slowly through his nose.

Damon watched him for a while.

His shadow perception spread across all corners of the ship, slipping into cracks between planks, curling around the mast, brushing past crew and companions alike as they moved around going about their activities.

They couldn't all just stay huddled together.

The ship had to be navigated.

They had to avoid the giant bones in the sea, the jagged remains of ancient creatures that jutted from the water like spears. One wrong turn and they could fall into treacherous waters, get lost, or drift off course entirely.

And just like that, the sun set.

Light bled away, giving way to night.

When night fell, Damon went into high alert.

Most monsters were nocturnal and preferred to hunt at night.

The Blood Mary was no different.

Seras took command without hesitation. She placed the patrol and night watch groups into units, ensuring each team had at least three women to protect the men.

Though they weren't enough women to cover everyone comfortably.

The night was quiet, save for the occasional flicker of the barrier in the dark. It was translucent, barely visible unless it shimmered under strain, though Damon could still see it clearly.

He stood on the deck beside the captain.

The old man's weathered hands gripped the wheel as he steered steadily, eyes forward, jaw tight.

Above them, someone stood in the mast's crow's nest on lookout.

Patrols moved in steady rotations across the deck.

It was almost morning.

No attack.

Damon let out a long sigh of relief, shoulders lowering slightly.

'Thank goodness. Whatever it is is gone.'

The thought had barely settled when he felt it.

A wave of strange energy rolled across the deck.

It hit him like a silent shockwave.

His shadow perception was banished instantly, cut off as though severed by an unseen blade.

Damon's eyes snapped wide.

He reacted immediately.

Just as he was about to take a step and teleport below deck, something exploded out of the water.

Right before his eyes, it ignored the active barrier completely and landed on the deck with a wet, heavy crash.

The barrier did not flare.

It did not resist.

The creature opened and began spraying thick, viscous blood onto the unsuspecting patrol before they could even react.

The blood came in a violent arc.

It splashed across the men's faces and torsos.

They screamed.

With a slick splash, the creature dropped back into the black waters.

Gone.

Damon teleported instantly to the edge of the ship, boots skidding slightly as he stopped himself from falling overboard. He stared into the dark water below, eyes narrowing.

Nothing.

Just endless black.

He bit his lip and risked sending his shadow perception into the dark waters.

All he sensed were countless bones of ancient entities resting on the ocean floor. Massive ribs, skulls larger than houses, each carrying a faint aura that refused to fade even in death.

No living presence.

No movement.

Dammit.

Damon gritted his teeth.

"Damn it," he repeated, fists clenching at his sides.

He turned around.

The patrol group was on their knees, covered in blood.

Oddly enough, the women in the group were untouched.

Not a single drop had landed on them.

The men were drenched.

Damon moved his hand to his nose, instinctively trying to shield himself from the pheromones thickening the air.

It would hardly help.

The metallic scent clung to everything.

Chapter 945: Birth

The fourth day on the sea was not as calm as the ones earlier.

They were welcomed at dawn by the violent movement of a strange swarm rising from the water, dozens of entities clawing their way toward the deck, each of them trying to come aboard.

Their bodies resembled amphibians. Thick, slimy flesh covered in warts. Humanoid in shape, long arms ending in webbed claws. Their mouths split too wide across their faces, revealing rows of blunt, grinding teeth.

They were resistant to magic.

The best course of action to kill them was physical force.

Steel.

Blunt trauma.

Decapitation.

Damon cleaned his sword as the last of them were tossed overboard. The corpses hit the water with heavy splashes, sinking into the deep blue below.

Blood slicked the ship.

It pooled between the planks, mixed with seawater, and ran in thin streams toward the scuppers.

Damon's face was splattered red. His expression was cold.

"How do they keep getting through the barrier?"

He turned sharply and walked up to Seras. The sun hung high in the sky, glinting off his blade as he lowered it to his side.

"What the hell is going on? Was the sea this dangerous?"

Seras shook her head slowly, wiping her sword clean with a cloth before sheathing it.

"We already left the Bone Sea and cut our way out of any danger zones. While this is a dangerous uncharted part of the sea, it's not a death zone. We are in the Narrow Sea between the Bone and Fog Sea, so the monsters shouldn't be this aggressive."

Her explanation was something he already knew.

Their voyage to the demon continent was not very long. At the speed the ship was moving, even accounting for detours around danger, they should arrive in about three weeks, perhaps a little more.

The Bone Sea stretched from the demon continent to the Bone Hallows in the evil forest. Across from it, several seas met, some relatively safe.

The Fog Sea was the closest to the Bone Sea from their position.

Between those two was the Narrow Sea.

It was called that because it was a small gap where the two seas refused to meet. The waters there were relatively normal, with only a few abominations crossing through from either side.

After making it here, they should have been safer.

The idea was to keep moving in the Narrow Sea for as long as possible until they reached the convergence point of the two greater seas. Then they would brave the death zone one last time before reaching the demon continent.

There were other routes.

But this was the most secretive one.

No sane person would take this route.

That was precisely why they were taking it.

The mission to steal the Ouroboros Coil was not an easy one.

Seras closed her eyes briefly, replaying the last four days in her mind.

"There's something interfering with the barrier."

Damon nodded slowly.

He had reached the same conclusion after four days of relentless Bloody Mary attacks.

"Is it the Bloody Mary?" he asked softly.

"No. I thought it was too, but that monster is not high ranked enough to do that. Neither does it have the mastery over magic required."

She pointed subtly toward the bloody and floating carcasses drifting in the deep blue sea. The water was deep enough now to almost seem black.

"Those made me realize something. On this ship, something is letting them in. Whenever the Bloody Mary attacked, there was something that subtly affected the barrier. These creatures were the same."

"Hm."

Damon narrowed his eyes, glancing toward the faint shimmer of the protective runes.

"Yeah, I thought so too. So are we dealing with a monster or..."

"No. It's an object. A cursed one, if I'm not mistaken," Seras muttered, lowering her voice so only he could hear.

"Where would we find that... ahh, I see."

His expression shifted.

They had come from the evil forest.

Past the Bone Hallows.

Too many treasures capable of making even a disciplined man red eyed with greed lay buried there.

If someone took one...

That was why the rule existed.

Take nothing from the forest.

Because the forest follows you.

"When do you think someone took something?" Damon asked quietly.

Seras glanced at him sideways.

"I thought you took it. I mean, only you would be that crazy."

Damon bit his lip, visibly aggrieved.

"I'm greedy and a little crazy. Okay, crazy. But even I know not to be that greedy. In fact, I used to operate on the philosophy of eighty percent chance."

"Really now. What changed?" she asked, deadpan.

Damon looked up at the sky and sighed.

"Life happened. I realized sometimes you just have to risk it all. It's a leap of faith. Not in gods. In yourself."

Seras studied his face for a moment, then exhaled slowly.

"Guess you really aren't the one who brought something cursed onto the ship."

"Well, that was a whole lot of nothing," she muttered with a resigned expression.

Damon chuckled faintly, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension.

"Who do you think it is? I suspect it was taken when our guard was down. On the beach, before we boarded the ship."

Seras' gaze shifted to the crew moving about the deck. Sailors scrubbing blood. Others repairing minor damage. Some avoiding eye contact.

Her eyes sharpened.

"So an inspection is in order."

She rested her hand on the hilt of her sword.

"And an interrogation."

Damon sat on a barrel, watching the knight with the swollen belly.

The man stood rigid despite his condition. One hand pressed against his stomach while the other held a bowl. He spat into it, wiped his mouth, then forced himself upright.

"Vice Commander, sir."

He saluted, struggling to maintain the decorum of a trained knight.

The sight of his distended abdomen made Damon deeply uncomfortable.

He waved a hand.

"Take a seat."

The knight lowered himself onto an opposing barrel. As he did, something worm like shifted beneath the skin of his stomach.

It slid from left to right.

The man groaned in pain.

His face paled as his stomach visibly swelled another inch. Blood began to drip from his nose. His breathing turned shallow.

Damon's expression did not change.

"Now then. I have some questions for you. I expect you to answer honestly."

It did not matter whether the man intended to lie.

Damon activated his skill.

Skill: Eyes of Veracity

Description:

Once wielded by the truthseers of the White Tribunal, this ocular skill reveals deception, illusions, and hidden motives with unerring precision.

Effect:

You see the truth from the lies, though truth can be vague.

Type:

Active

Cooldown:

0 seconds

His vision sharpened subtly. A faint distortion hovered around falsehoods, like heat haze above desert sand.

He began with standard verification.

"What is your name?"

The man answered.

"Where are you from?"

Another answer.

"What is your race?"

"Your division and knight order."

Each answer rang true.

The questions might seem unnecessary, even uncomfortable, but Damon was confirming the man's identity. Ensuring he was not an infiltrating entity wearing a borrowed face.

Satisfied, Damon leaned forward slightly.

"Did you carry any artifacts or objects before we boarded this ship?"

The knight shook his head.

"No, my lord, I did not."

True.

"Are you under any kind of control? Have you experienced missing memories or blackouts?"

"Not that I know of."

True again.

"Do you have vague premonitions or a feeling of not being yourself?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I am, after all, carrying a monster parasite in my body."

That too was true.

Damon watched the faint shimmer in his vision remain steady.

Then he asked one final question.

"Are you afraid?"

The knight met his eyes.

"No. I am not."

There was no hesitation in his voice.

But Damon saw it.

A flicker.

A distortion.

Lie.

Damon said nothing.

The man rose and moved aside, clutching his stomach.

One by one, the crew and knights were interrogated with the same sequence of questions. The sun drifted slowly toward the horizon as Damon continued.

Faces blurred together.

Answers repeated.

Truth.

Truth.

Truth.

Until he reached a young knight.

He remembered this one.

Set.

The man sat down, posture stiff.

Damon was about to begin.

Then a scream tore through the deck.

One of the infected men collapsed to his knees.

"Agrghh... agrghh..."

He clutched his stomach as clear fluid began to drip down his legs, soaking into the wooden planks.

Like a pregnant woman whose water had broken.

"Aghhh!"

He fell onto his back.

Everyone rushed toward him.

Something bulged violently beneath his abdomen.

His skin began to discolor.

Rot spread outward from the center like ink bleeding through paper.

"Quick! Suppress it! Don't let it tear through his skin!" someone shouted.

Knights forced him down.

A healer lunged forward, pressing both hands against the man's stomach. A circular shield of condensed energy formed, pushing downward in an attempt to contain the swelling mass.

The man's mouth opened.

Blood sprayed out.

His body convulsed as something inside him fed.

You could hear it.

Wet tearing.

Bones cracking.

Organs being crushed and consumed while he still lived.

The healer screamed in effort, veins standing out in his neck.

Then the lower abdomen ruptured.

A violent explosion of blood and tissue burst outward.

The healer was drenched instantly.

The infected knight went still.

His eyes remained open.

Frozen in horror.

In agony.

The healers stumbled back.

From the shredded cavity, something began to crawl out.

Slowly and deliberately.

A long, slick limb emerged first, pale and glistening, bending wrong at the joints.

Then another.

It dragged itself free inch by inch, coated in blood and fragments of what had once been a man.

Chapter 946: Child

There was a chilling silence as something crawled out. Everyone stood frozen, watching the malformed entity squat there over the remains of what had once been a knight.

The air was thick with fear and the lingering, overwhelming stench of blood.

The creature hunched over on its back. By comparison it was about the size of a human child around the age of five or six. Its head was bald with a few strands of hair sticking to it. The bones of its spine were visible beneath its thin skin, and its eyes were inverted, facing the wrong way.

For such a monster the odd thing was its mouth. It was supposed to be serrated with monstrous teeth, yet instead it was toothless like a newborn baby.

What it lacked in teeth it made up for with long thin claws that glinted under the dim light.

Damon didn't wait for it to attack. His hands snapped forward and black flames erupted across the entire area.

However the creature skittered across the wooden deck with unnatural speed, its limbs twisting as it evaded the flames. Part of the ship's planks exploded apart from Damon's attack.

Ash spread through the air as the ship's runes flickered violently, struggling against Damon's power. He clicked his tongue and immediately forced his power back, clenching his fist and suppressing the flames before he accidentally turned the ship to ash.

This whole vessel was as fragile as a house of cards to him. Its defenses were largely built on the outside, leaving the interior comparatively fragile against someone of his power.

The creature suddenly darted forward.

It climbed toward a knight who stepped forward and raised his fist to punch it, clearly seeing it as nothing more than a weak and slightly ugly creature.

He was wrong.

The monster lazily flicked its claw.

A cruel slice flashed through the air.

The knight's nose was cut clean off his face.

He groaned in shock, stumbling backward while clutching his face. Before he could recover the creature lunged again, its claws digging into his throat. Blood spilled out as he staggered.

A blast of magic struck the creature from the side and sent it flying across the deck.

"Careful! It's in the third class advancement!" Lana screamed, having instantly recognized its power.

It was the same rank as the person it had just come out of.

That was not a good sign.

It meant that after gestating inside a host, the creature inherited the rank of the person it killed.

The creature slowly lifted its head from the deck and pointed its claw at the mage who had just blasted it.

Lana's eyes widened.

"No way..."

Yes way.

What she was seeing was the insane ability of this creature. It didn't only take the rank of its host.

It also stole their skills.

"Soul Lance..."

This was the skill of the knight who had died. A lance of destruction capable of ignoring any defense as long as it struck directly.

The mage reacted instantly. He blasted a ball of magic beneath his feet and used the recoil to launch himself sideways. He was no amateur either. He was a battle hardened veteran who had seen many horrors.

"He can only use that once a day!" someone shouted.

The skill had a cooldown limit.

Just as they were thinking that, the creature raised its hand again.

To their horror it used the same skill a second time.

Before the attack could fire, Seras moved.

Her body blurred.

She raised her tachi and drove it straight down.

The blade stabbed through the creature's head and into the wooden deck beneath it, pinning the monster in place. With a brutal twist she crushed its spine.

Seras exhaled slowly, letting out a soft annoyed breath.

However something suddenly wriggled inside the creature's body.

Its stomach bulged.

A worm burst out of the corpse.

Black flames instantly engulfed it.

Only then did the creature finally die.

Damon let out a small cough as the vile stench of the creature's carcass filled the deck. The smell of rot and blood clung to the air like a suffocating fog.

For a moment no one spoke.

A heavy silence settled over the deck as a sense of pure dread filled the air.

"It's only been four days. There shouldn't have been a birth yet," Damon muttered to himself, his eyes narrowing as he felt the air suddenly turn colder.

"You're telling me that thing was a premature birth... how strong will it be if it wasn't," he added quietly.

Even so, the people on the ship were far from ordinary. Many of them possessed superhuman hearing. Damon had not even tried to hide his words.

Those who carried parasites in their stomachs visibly trembled.

They would be next.

Their deaths were not far away. At any moment one of them could be ripped open and another monster would emerge from their bodies.

Damon walked slowly toward the knight's corpse.

The lower half of the man's body had been torn open. Blood soaked the wooden planks, and organs were smeared across the deck. His face remained frozen in a mask of fear and horror.

This was how he died.

He must have been a veteran of many wars. A soldier who had survived countless ordeals.

Now he lay here dead.

Damon couldn't help but remember how he himself had once lamented the nature of war when he died.

'I wonder which battlefield I would be laid to rest on... and if I would even have an intact corpse.'

The thought passed through his mind quietly.

But the dead were dead.

What mattered now were the living.

Even so, the living still needed closure.

Damon slowly turned his head toward the captain.

"Prepare some wood. We should give him a funeral."

They couldn't just toss his corpse overboard, not with their current morale. And the smell of blood and organs would only attract more monsters from the sea.

They would have to burn the body.

Giving him a funeral was also for the soldiers here. If they knew their bodies would be respected after death, they would be slightly less unwilling to face it.

Even though they were a well-trained group, it was still important to remember they were people too.

Soon smoke and ash rose into the air from the ship.

Damon didn't use Ashborn to burn the body. He simply lit a normal fire.

Everyone remained silent.

Some offered soft prayers to their gods. Others simply stood there quietly with lowered heads.

The flames crackled as the body slowly turned to ash.

After a while Damon raised his head.

"We are about two weeks or so away from the demon continent... and we will not make it that far unless one of you comes clean."