

The rain battered the crumbling temple, its relentless rhythm echoing through the shattered stone walls. Inside the heart of the ancient ruin, a stone coffin lay half-buried, its weathered surface carved with the scars of time. The faint scent of damp stone and ancient dust filled the air, mingling with a foul tang from the rain, as if the very downpour carried the promise of death.

The cold seeped through his boots, and every breath he took was shaky. A shimmering barrier of magic flickered faintly around the coffin, pulsing with an eerie, otherworldly glow. Embedded deep within the stone, a brilliant sword stood thrust through the ancient material, its blade glowing with an imposing, unnatural light.

Nearby, a small campfire sputtered weakly, the flickering flames casting brief, trembling shadows that seemed to dance in defiance of the cold, damp gloom surrounding him. Two figures sat in near-silence beside the fire, their faces half-concealed in the flickering glow, each lost in their own thoughts.

Before the coffin, a young man stood motionless, his exhausted gaze fixed firmly on the sword, as if it held the weight of a thousand unspoken words.

“Luce...” His fingers traced the edge of the barrier, a trembling expression on his face. “I still see it, you know. That emptiness in your eyes—first when you held the blade to Mother’s throat, then when you unleashed this scourge. Did Father’s adoration for humans disgust you so much?” His voice broke, each word jagged with regret.

He closed his eyes, drawing in slow, steady breaths, letting the crackling fire’s soothing rhythm settle his mind. “Remember when the whole village gathered around a fire on those bitterly cold days? We were just kids back then.” A tight, forced smile flickered across his lips, his voice faltering as memories tugged at him.

“Then a demon showed up. Took everything—everything but my arm and my head,” the red-cloaked man muttered, his face lost in the ruins’ shadows. “You awakened your holy energy, dragged me back from the brink... then helped bolt this metal shell together. Since then, we’ve been cutting down your brother’s creations. One after another.”

He exhaled as the fire crackled. Its warmth barely held back the cold pressing in from the dark.

A single droplet of rain slipped through the broken roof, splashing onto the sizzling meat that cooked over the fire. The moment it touched the surface, a writhing rot bubbled through the flesh, rapidly twisting it into a grotesque mass of decay. The foul smell of corruption spread in the air, adding to the already thick, oppressive atmosphere.

It grew into a heaving mass of flesh, swallowing the bonfire and attaching itself to the earth like a tumor. It pulsed and squelched, its grotesque expansion faltering. A warbling half-scream, half-wail echoed from within—an animal’s suffering, trapped inside. A flood of slimy maggots crawled out from within, spilling across the ground like a writhing carpet.

The man by the fire glanced at the mess and reacted instantly. His mechanical arm shot from beneath his cloak, humming with power. With a flick of his wrist, red flames ignited in his palm. His lip curled in disgust, but he struck without hesitation.

“Get clear,” he said.

The other figure scurried away just as a blaze erupted from his hand, turning the rotting flesh and maggots into ash and cinders in an instant.

“That’s the last of them,” he muttered, crushing the final maggot without hesitation. “Two days west, there’s a settlement. We might get supplies—especially with you in tow. People still whisper your old stories, even now. Aether the Lightbearer isn’t dead yet.”

The man named Aether who stood before the coffin still hadn’t moved. His gaze was locked on the sword, eyes heavy with the weight of past decisions, haunted by more than just fatigue.

“No. We’re heading north, to our homeland. There’s now snow there—untouched by rot. We’ll take whatever we can find up there.”

His words were harsher than intended, their coldness lingering longer than necessary—a sharp contrast to the hero he was meant to be and the ideal he once followed, before the world crumbled around him. He clenched his jaw, his hand lingering near the hilt of the sword, the cold steel offering a rare touch of solidity in a world that had lost its way. Slowly, he lowered his hand and glanced back at the other man.

They locked eyes. The air was thick with memories—battles fought, moments shared, losses too heavy to voice. No words were needed. Their shared history, their struggles, and their broken world filled the space between them. A silent understanding passed between them—one of unwavering resolve, as cold and immovable as the storm raging outside.

The third figure stood silently, watching the flames flicker over the dying embers of the burning remains. Her gaze was distant, as if lost in a place far beyond the reach of the smoldering flesh mound. The fire’s warmth barely cut through the cold, and the smell of charred flesh, mingling with the acrid scent of damp earth, made her stomach churn.

“I can’t... I can’t get used to it,” her voice was soft, barely audible over the crackling of the fire. She inhaled sharply, her eyes flicking over to Aether and the red-cloaked man. “All this... death. It’s so different from the world I remember.” Her fingers clenched around the hem of her cloak, the golden aura still flickering faintly around her like a thin shield against the darkness.

“...I haven’t known you two for long,” she began, her voice trembling, barely above a whisper. She stared at her hands, twisting in the fabric of her cloak as if seeking something to steady herself. “But ever since I joined your service, Aether... I’ve felt like I finally belong somewhere. Like there’s a purpose to this... all of this.” Her gaze lifted to meet his, the weight of her words settling heavily between them. “Please, I need you to protect me. I know... I know I’m supposed to be your shield—but I don’t know how much longer I can keep going like this.” Tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill over.

Aether didn't speak at first. Instead, he took a step forward, wrapping his arms around her in a gentle embrace. His presence was a quiet strength, as steady as the earth beneath them. "Gwenevere," he murmured, his voice thick with sincerity, "you are my saint. My protector. I will guard you for as long as I breathe. Forever."

He pulled back just slightly, his hands resting on her shoulders, giving her a soft, reassuring look. "I'll always protect you. No matter what." His gaze softened for a moment, a fleeting tenderness crossing his face, before he gave her one last comforting squeeze.

Turning away, he walked back toward the coffin, his heart heavy with the weight of her plea.

Aether grasped the hilt of the sword, his fingers tightening around the cold metal. A slow, rhythmic pulse echoed from the coffin, as if something inside refused to die. His fingers brushed the void-cold blade, feeling the weight of their choice—their burden—to seal his own brother away. The rhythmic pulse from the coffin felt almost like mockery, as if Luce was laughing at his reluctant role as his jailer, even in this state of entrapment.

He turned and tossed a glowing, crackling crystal toward the red-cloaked man.

"Is your core properly fueled?"

He caught the crystal, rolling it once between his fingers before slotting it into his core. A brief flash—his systems whirred back to life. "Efficient," he murmured. "Let's move before I burn through another one."

"Let's go. I have a plan."

Aether reached for his companions, their cold hands trembling as they rose to their feet. His grip tightened briefly, offering some semblance of reassurance, before they cloaked themselves and stepped into the unrelenting, rotting rain.

The sky above was thick with dark clouds, the air heavy with decay. They trudged through the soggy, fetid earth, each step sinking into the muck of a land long forgotten by time. Decayed trees, their trunks gnarled and twisted like the souls of the damned, lined their path. Mutated bodies lay scattered like broken dolls—pale, bloated corpses distorted in grotesque shapes, some still wearing the remnants of their once-human features. Pools of dark, viscous blood marked the ground, the stench of death overwhelming.

As the rain morphed into cold, biting snow, the air grew frigid, and a strange stillness began to settle over them. It was a silence born of despair, as if the land itself held its breath.

At last, they arrived at the edge of a vast crater, jagged edges rising from the earth like the broken teeth of some forgotten beast. The sight of it stopped them in their tracks, and Aether's gaze fell, heavy with memories.

"This is where I fell from Arcadia, isn't it?" His voice broke through the cold, the words tinged with an almost wistful sorrow. He stepped forward, his boots crunching softly against the frozen earth, but his eyes never left the crater. "I remember the distant cries... the yells of the villagers as I first opened my eyes. That was after Father entrusted me with something powerful... He reincarnated me into this small boy's body... and sent me down to the human

realm. My fall through heaven was... painful. I remember how the light burned as I descended."

His hand subconsciously drifted to his chest, as if feeling something not visible—an invisible weight that seemed to anchor him in this place.

"The people up there," he continued, his voice softening, "they seemed kind... Their faces full of hope, but... I can't help but feel... that they were too naive. Too trusting. Too soon. They believed the gods would save them. But they didn't realize that even gods can fall."

Aether's gaze hardened as he looked down into the dark pit below. The winds howled through the desolate land, but he stood unwavering, as though something in the depths called to him.

"I will save them," he said quietly. "I will save those who can still be saved. And I will make sure they never end up in places like this."

He paused, looking at his companions. His expression was unreadable, but there was a quiet determination in his eyes.

"Let's advance. The village should be just ahead."

After a short while, they arrived at the outskirts of a broken, dilapidated village. Once vibrant homes now stood as crumbling shells, ravaged by time and neglect. The red-cloaked man moved forward, his steps slow and deliberate, adjusting his glasses as he surveyed the decimated scene.

"The old merchant's house," he murmured, pointing to a collapsed structure in the distance. "The elder's house... Your family's house..." His voice faltered for a moment, and then he stopped in front of a medium-sized house, its roof sagging under years of decay. "...And this one..." He paused, his voice lowering to a near whisper. "I'm home."

He stepped forward and pushed open the rotting door, the hinges creaking in protest. Inside, the air was thick with dust and the weight of forgotten memories. The walls were cracked, the floorboards warped and unstable beneath his feet. It was as if the house had long since surrendered to its inevitable demise, its former life now reduced to a shadow of its former self.

He walked toward a table in the far corner of the room and sank onto a creaking stool, a faint, almost melancholic smile tugging at his lips. "Next to me would sit my sister... Across from us, my father, with my mother beside him. After his hunting trips, we'd gather around one big pot of stew, sometimes with a little treat on the side—maybe a loaf of warm bread or some fruit. Those were the simple days... Before..." His voice faltered, the smile fading. "Before he didn't return from one of his trips." He paused, his brow furrowing in the painful recollection.

After a long moment, he pushed himself to his feet and made his way toward the narrow staircase. The boards groaned under his weight, threatening to give way, and more than once he had to steady himself to avoid falling through. He reached the top, where a room

awaited—small, suffocatingly familiar, but now in ruins. He stood silently for a moment, as if the room itself was a ghost, before he stepped in.

“This was where my sister and I slept,” he said softly, his eyes lingering on the remnants of the bed. “She snored so loudly... sounded like an earthquake sometimes. But it was... comforting. It felt like home.”

He bent down, inspecting the space beneath the bed. His fingers brushed the dusty floorboards, and then he stopped, his heart skipping a beat. “...They never found this?”

His hand shook as he pulled out a worn piece of paper, edges tattered with age. On it, a simple drawing of a family of four was sketched with clumsy childlike strokes. “I drew this... A few months before the incident.” A small note was scribbled on the back, faded and barely legible. He held it in his hands, the weight of it heavier than anything physical in that moment.

“What a beautiful drawing, my little artist! I’ll make sure to bring you something special from my next hunting trip—something delicious, just for you. Be good for your mother while I’m gone, and remember to help your sister. I’ll be back before you know it, and we’ll share another pot of stew together.

Love you three more than anything,

- Dad”

“...But he never came back. He never brought me anything special to eat—only silence filled our home. We survived on the kindness of the villagers, but it was never the same.” His voice wavered, his fingers tightening into fists. “Father... I miss you...”

He exhaled shakily and rose to his feet, leaving the drawing behind. As he stepped toward the stairs...

“Merlin...”

The voice sent a chill through his spine, every hair on his body standing on end. His breath hitched. He turned, his eyes locking onto a half-closed door at the end of the hall.

Slowly, cautiously, he moved toward it. The wooden floor groaned beneath his steps.

He reached out—his fingers trembling—and gently pushed the door open.

On the large bed sat two figures—no, a single form twisted from what had once been two. The mass of flesh pulsed faintly, its surface shifting in unnatural waves. Yet, amidst the grotesque fusion, faint traces of humanity remained.

Two frail arms clung tightly to the smaller figure, holding it as though cradling a cherished memory. The smaller form’s eyes were closed, lips slightly parted, as if caught in an endless, dreamless sleep.

The larger figure—what little was left of it—retained only half a face. Yet, impossibly, it smiled. A warm, familiar smile.

“Welcome... home... dear...”

His breath hitched.

He stood frozen in the doorway, eyes wide, as if the world had tilted on its axis. Though he had no heart, the very core of him trembled, an emptiness inside vibrating with an emotion far too foreign to comprehend.

A shaky sigh escaped him, barely more than a whisper. “...Mother?”

His hands twitched as he stepped forward.

From the writhing mass, a skeletal hand burst forth—long, gnarled fingers stretching toward the red-cloaked man. Toward Merlin.

A faint chime echoed in his ear. [DANGER]—the glowing blue text flashed across his glasses. Instinct kicked in. He threw himself aside, just as the outstretched hand twisted, its flesh warping into a gaping, jagged maw that snapped shut where he had stood.

Merlin exhaled sharply, his grip tightening. His gaze lingered on the grotesque form—something once familiar, now irreversibly lost.

“Right... You’re dead. I should’ve known better.” His voice was quiet, edged with something bitter. Then his expression darkened. “That’s all demons do, isn’t it? You take, you corrupt, you destroy... And yet—” He scoffed, the grimace on his face deepening. “I’m not truly human either anymore, huh?”

For just a moment, hesitation flickered in his eyes. But it was gone just as fast.

His mechanical arm hummed to life, veins of molten energy flaring along its length.

“Die, you bastard!”

With a sharp motion, he unleashed hellfire.

A deafening explosion tore through the ruins, consuming the house in a blinding inferno. When the smoke finally cleared, there was nothing left—no walls, no remnants, not even ashes. Every trace of the place he once called home had been erased. The grotesque mass that had once been his mother and sister was gone, obliterated in the fire.

His companions stood in stunned silence, watching as Merlin emerged from the wreckage. His cloak was singed, his mechanical arm still glowing faintly from the heat, but his face was unreadable—hollow, hardened.

He dusted off the lingering debris and exhaled slowly.

“Let’s keep moving,” he muttered, his voice flat. After a long pause, his lips twisted into a humorless smirk. “I need to blow off some steam.”

The words hung in the air for a moment before the landscape shifted around them. The ground beneath their boots seemed to grow heavier with each step, as if the world itself was pressing down on them. The crimson sky bled into the horizon, streaks of red and purple twisting into unnatural patterns, painting the heavens in the blood of forgotten battles. The stench of rot clung to the air, thick and suffocating, creeping into their lungs with every breath. The icy fog scraped at their throats, each inhale feeling like a blade. Beneath their feet, the snow bore the weight of countless fallen warriors and demons, its pure whiteness now stained a deep, sorrowful red, as if the earth itself mourned.

The three glowing figures approached the jagged cliff's edge. Below them, the sheer drop was a plunge into oblivion, an invitation to certain death. A foul gust of wind parted the fog ahead, revealing a grand gothic castle. Its sharp spires clawed at the heavens, casting long, menacing shadows. The aura emanating from it bore down on them, squeezing the air from their lungs.

"...That's the location of the Second Blight. Too close to our home..." A voice cut through the gloom, steady and commanding. Holy light bled from the speaker's form, colliding with the unholy force pressing in. Even surrounded by taint, Aether's pure white hair remained untouched. His emerald green eyes mirrored the vibrant forests that once thrived here, now reduced to shadows by the everlasting winter.

Merlin, cloaked in red, stepped forward, adjusting his glasses with a steady hand. His focus was unwavering as his eyes narrowed, scanning the landscape with hawk-like precision. Every detail fell into place like a puzzle. His glasses flickered to life, streams of cryptic data swirling before him. Words and numbers flashed in the air, visible only to him.

"East wall's holding—barely. Two hundred demons. Six humans. Twelve animals." he exhaled, the sound half static, half sigh. "You want clean, go east. You want a bloodbath? Pick anywhere else."

"Aether, Merlin... Trust me." The final figure stepped forward. Gwenevere's voice was steady and unwavering, like a calm in the storm. A warm mantle unfurled around her, pushing back the biting, eternal frost that smothered the land. A golden aura flared to life around her, banishing the suffocating energy as she clasped their hands tightly.

"Stay close," she said, her tone firm, and with a single step, they became weightless. The abyss below ceased to exist, an unseen force lifting their feet off the ground. The world bent beneath them as if gravity had surrendered its hold. Together, they glided effortlessly through the thick, suffocating air, drawing closer to the castle's entrance.

"Merlin, Gwenevere. This is the fatal mission that will decide humanity's future. Stay alert. Merlin, keep your wits about you. Gwenevere, your power will be our shield."

Aether's eyes began glowing even brighter as they arrived. "And I will be humanity's sword. Luce... Let's end this quickly."

As they stepped into the castle, their fates wove into legend. Their names were destined to echo through time, whispered in the same breath as heroes.

“Forgive me, Father... I failed to stop him. Let Excalibur bind him in the void until the end of time. And let my flame pass to my descendants—until the last demon falls.”

As the world healed, whispers of the next hero already began to circulate: The Slayer of the Third Blight