

## Shadow 351

### Chapter 351: Former People

The sun peered through the sky, its golden light reflecting off the deep pools of blood that stained the broken streets.

The city was as bleak and solemn as ever... the rift in the sky shifting lazily like a living cloud, casting its vast, unnatural shadow over parts of the crumbling metropolis.

It was quite early in the morning—though apparently, not too early for a slaughter.

The blood remained stagnant... thick, clotted, congealing amid the scattered corpses. These weren't human.

They were scaled creatures, grotesque things with tusks jutting from twisted faces. Multiple eyes blinked erratically across their warped skulls, and they clutched crude, rotting weapons that smelled of decay and salt.

These creatures, as Damon had come to learn, were called Ground Crawlers.

They were once citizens of Lysithara—humans consumed by rot and corruption, their flesh twisted by the decay of the city until they became these shambling aquatic beasts.

These particular ones had emerged from beneath the city, from the flooded ruins and sewer pools that crisscrossed the urban decay. They came in packs—always in packs.

A shame for them, really... they weren't the only monsters lurking in this place.

The group they had attacked were monstrous in their own right—monsters forged by suffering, not born of it.

Damon's party didn't take kindly to such a rude awakening so early in the day.

So, in return, they painted the streets red.

Even outnumbered by foes of equal rank and size, they had carved through them without mercy. Not a single crawler was left breathing—not a single one was allowed to crawl away.

Damon didn't see anything wrong with it.

But from where Valarie rested on his shoulder—as a pair of lips—she couldn't help but notice the bloodlust. These teenagers had seen hell... and in that hell, they had become demons.

Not in the literal sense—more figuratively. And even then... perhaps the real demons should be running from them.

Not that Valarie had ever seen a demon herself. Back when she was alive, they didn't really exist yet. She had heard the visitors mention some of them were demons, but she'd never met any.

Her world had been one of rot... and of time, cruel and slow and silent.

She'd only come to learn of this current world from these children now trapped in this ruined ancient city. Caught in a nightmare that may never end.

Damon sighed, raising his wrist—his academy-issued bracelet glowed faintly, displaying an obscene number of points accumulated from all the monsters they'd slain. The evaluation exam should have ended long ago... but here they were, still trapped in the death zone.

He sighed again.

At least the bracelet was still counting.

He had lost an arm recently—thankfully not the one wearing the bracelet.

That said, he did lose his omnidirectional gear.

He would've left it, but Leona had gone looking for his arm... and brought it back, mangled as it was.

Thanks to that, he was able to attach the gear to his new limb.

A limb that came from Matia's sacrifice—her wings.

He glanced at the wingless fairy, covered in shattered ice. The armor was of crystalline ice. Her hand was buried in the gut of a dead crawler. She pulled free its mana core with a calm, almost mechanical expression, then dropped it into her pouch.

They would share the spoils later.

Absorbing the cores would help refine their bodies... empower their souls.

That said, they had taken in quite a lot. Their bodies were bursting with raw energy. They were nearing saturation.

After all, a body could only hold so much power.

"A job well done, my dear students..." came the voice of Valarie Sunwarden.

And as much as Damon hated to remind himself, she was just a pair of lips on his shoulder.

He'd only known her for a day, yet in that time, he'd come to respect her. He didn't know why. Maybe it was the charisma of an ascendant champion... or maybe it was something else.

Maybe it was because Valarie Sunwarden understood pain. She understood misery.

Even after everything she had endured in life—and the torment she now bore in death—she still managed to smile.

How could Damon not admire her?

Her philosophy was like sunlight. Present. Warm. But the sun did not stay forever. It gave way to night... always.

He hadn't forgotten what she told him.

She didn't deny his bleak outlook on life—she acknowledged it. And in doing so, she promised that even in darkness, there could still be good things.

"Life is a turbulent ocean with small islands of joy. Finding those islands is living..."

For whatever reason, he couldn't forget those words.

He couldn't help but compare them to the epitaph that had shaped his life—the complete opposite in tone and meaning.

"You haven't taught us anything yet... and you call us your students?" Damon decided to retort.

Valarie gasped dramatically—well, as much as a pair of lips could. She would have clutched her chest if she still had one.

"How dare you...! I've taught you plenty. In one day, no less!"

Sylvia sighed as she wiped blood from her armor.

"You said you'd teach us runecraft. You didn't teach us anything..."

The others nodded in agreement. Leona, though, seemed unconcerned.

"I don't really care. I hate homework..."

Damon sighed. She didn't understand the benefits, so he dumbed it down for her.

"We're in an ancient ruin. So, you aren't home," he muttered, walking up to her and cupping her blood-soaked cheeks. "Learning runes means you get stronger. No rune means... not strong."

Leona's eyes sparked with interest.

Until she caught the condescending tone.

He was treating her like a child. Then again, he often treated her that way—not that she minded all that much.

"You didn't have to treat me like I'm brain dead, you know."

Damon smiled, then turned his gaze to Evangeline.

"How are our rations looking?"

Her eye twitched, clear impatience in her expression.

"I don't know—maybe you and Leona shouldn't have eaten them all?"

Damon glanced at Leona, then coughed awkwardly.

His eyes fell to the mutilated bodies of the Ground Crawlers.

"...Why not eat them?"

The others all winced.

The reason was obvious.

These things... used to be people.

Chapter 352: Acceptance

Damon could understand the moral dilemma. However, hunger didn't understand morality. He knew that all too well. A hungry person would eat anything edible. His life on the streets and his constant need to feed his shadow with human flesh were reminders of that cruel truth.

Once, in a distant past, these creatures might have been human. They must have had lives to live—loved ones even. But now, they were just monsters born from rot. They had no humanity left. They didn't even look human anymore.

He could understand the problem they were all facing.

It was sick. Twisted. But it was necessary for their survival.

He had made the same choice when he first got his shadow—feed it human flesh or die in pain and starvation.

He hadn't made that choice willingly. He had hesitated, unsure.

Lucky or unlucky for him, his shadow could take over when it was ravenous. It would search for prey on its own.

Damon didn't consider these creatures human. If they were truly human, then why didn't devouring their corpses ever satisfy the hunger of his shadow?

He could feel its hunger growing again. He was barely keeping it at bay. Wasting his power by suppressing it with his Sacrifice Skill. Worse, his mana crystals had long since been exhausted.

There was a heavy silence since he last spoke.

"These were once people. We can't eat them."

Xander's voice was slow and steady. He might have eaten them if he didn't know they were running out of rations. Eating monsters had been the easiest path—they'd been doing it since the Whispering Forest. But now... it felt different.

Perhaps it was Valarie's words that changed something in him. She had told them these monsters were once human.

Damon sighed. The others still weren't acting, it was a difficult thing to accept.

For any normal person the act was just too savage.

"Right, I understand what you're saying. I'd rather eat anything else. But we don't have the food to fight our way out of this city. We have to eat what we have..."

He grabbed at the ground crawlers. "Remember our party motto—we have to use anything we can."

Evangeline held her sword, head lowered. She acknowledged the logic behind it but humans were more than just logic.

"I know, but..."

He sighed again, he couldn't help but feel slightly irritable.

"But nothing. I didn't want to tell you this back in the Whispering Forest, but most of those monsters we encountered must have once been people too. We can't let that stop us now."

They had eaten some of those monsters, they had done it before.. maybe unaware but still.

There was another silence. Then Valarie spoke, her lips on Damon's shoulder.

"He's right. But these aren't human anymore. I know it's difficult now that you know, but your lives are far more important..."

The pair of lips curled into a gentle smile, sharing her wisdom.

"Tell you what—I have a suggestion. Are you open to it?"

Evangeline looked at Valarie, who still rested on Damon's shoulder.

"What do you suggest? You... knew the people once..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. People? Was she seriously calling these monsters people? Was she blind?

He bit his lip. He couldn't get carried away now. Eating another human left a scar on his heart. If he could do it to a real person, why couldn't they do the same to monsters?

Valarie smiled softly, her lips illuminated in the morning light.

"You don't have to eat them. My suggestion is just to take enough for you to eat..."

Sylvia frowned, clearly suspicious.

"Didn't you say we didn't have to eat them?"

Damon sensed there was a plan behind this. Was she going to convince them to accept it. Or would she side with them instead and give them false hope.

He couldn't be sure just yet.

Valarie's lips parted again.

"Yes, you don't have to. My suggestion is to take enough to last you as food—just in case. On the off chance you don't find anything else for sustenance, you can substitute. If you find something better, get rid of it. If not... you'll have something. Emergency rations."

Damon finally saw her trick. She wasn't making them accept it—she was convincing them they could find another monster that hadn't once been human.

Though deep down, he doubted it. Lysithara was a ruined city. Every monster here was once a person.

He nodded. "She's right. You know if we leave without food, we'll die. We can't do without rations. You don't have to eat it—we just take some, just in case."

The others all looked at him, nodding reluctantly.

Damon sighed. Being a leader was difficult. Sometimes even he had to compromise. He had to remind himself not to let emotions carry him away.

This was a moral dilemma his party had never faced before.

They went about cutting the flesh, draining the remaining blood, and soaking it in water created by Leona's magic. Then they smoked it. They worked quickly and efficiently—they'd done this too many times not to be.

Valarie remained silent on Damon's shoulder as they butchered the ground crawlers.

"...Are you sad?" Damon asked softly.

"No... I'm just nostalgic, that's all. If their flesh could help you all survive, then I'm sure the people they used to be would've been happy. If anything, I should be grateful to you all."

Damon glanced at her.

"For what?"

She paused, as if recalling something distant and terrible. Her lips, expressive even in their limited form, trembled slightly.

"You put them out of their misery. It must have been hard... turning into a monster. I hope they all find peace... in death."

Damon took a deep breath.

"I hope so too."

The others gathered around, packed and ready to go.

He glanced again at Valarie.

"Let's go. You promised to help us find a waypoint."

Valarie smiled.

"Come. There's one not too far from here. You'll soon be home, my dear students..."

Chapter 353: The Metaverse

The sun hadn't risen for long. The ancient city was still bleak, wrapped in a dull grey light, but the horrors of the night were gone. In their place, faint shadows moved—fluttering silently into the ruins like forgotten whispers.

Damon's sense of unease grew.

The city itself was changing.

He was beginning to see military equipment—barricades, magic artillery emplacements, reinforced lines.

However, they weren't facing the outer walls. Instead, every barrel and turret was pointed toward the core of the city. It was as if all that firepower was there not to protect—but to contain. As if they were desperately trying to keep something in.

His gaze settled on the distant crystal tower deep in the city's heart. It pierced the skyline like a blade aimed at the gods, reaching so high it looked as if it would pierce the heavens themselves. The city had many tall spires... but none could compare.

"What the hell even is that thing?"

He couldn't help but mutter, his thoughts trailing off as he stared in awe.

"It's the beginning of our doom."

Valarie's voice came from his shoulder. The pair of human lips pressed together, speaking just loud enough for them to hear.

"It's a beacon... or an antenna, if you will. It was the first step to opening the gate to the Metaverse."

Damon jumped over a broken wall, his boots kicking dust from a cracked pillar covered in some unusual-looking moss. He was careful not to touch it.

He extended a hand, helping Sylvia over the obstacle—even though she didn't really need help.

"What's the Metaverse..." Sylvia asked softly, glancing at his shoulder. Damon could almost feel the warmth of her body with how close she was standing.

He shifted slightly, putting some distance between them. His action made Sylvia bite her lip a little, though he didn't seem to notice.

Valarie was quiet for a moment. Damon wouldn't have been surprised if the disembodied pair of lips said she didn't remember.

"The Metaverse is a place where all minds and consciousness exist. All things that have awareness... have a part of themselves in the Metaverse."

Damon frowned. His interest was piqued.

Valarie continued, her tone laced with dread.

"It's a horrible place. Some creatures live there permanently... but even they dread it. The minds of man and god... dreams, nightmares, imagination—all of it made real. The collective consciousness of all things in the Omniverse... or so the Visitors said."

Evangeline sighed. Why was the world sounding more dangerous with each passing truth? In this place, she felt like some things were best not known at all.

Damon looked toward Valarie.

"Let me guess. That's where all the monsters came from... or at least what caused the corruption?"

Valarie was silent for a moment—apprehension lingering like a shadow.

"No... I don't remember. But the Outsiders used a massive gateway to the Metaverse to enter. They came into our world by passing some unknown law... so they didn't have a physical vessel... they..or rather some of them bought the corruption, from the metaverse."

Sylvia walked with slow steps. She paused, turning her head slightly.

"They possessed or found vessels, didn't they..."

She was far too familiar with what entities without physical form did to claim new ones.

Valarie's lips opened. "How did you know..."

Evangeline glanced at her. Sylvia had once been possessed by the dark spirit, Rashi Ignath.

Xander held his spear at the ready, eyes narrowed as he peered into the shadows of a nearby building. His expression was grim—ready to strike the moment anything stirred.

"So they didn't have physical bodies... these so-called Visitors or Outsiders were spiritual entities then?"

Valarie's lips twisted into a sad curve.

"No... they weren't. They had physical bodies in their own world. They discarded them to come to ours..."

Leona raised a brow, her armor gleaming under the weak light of the rising sun.

"Why? Where are they from? Is it a World Dungeon?"

Damon sighed.

Seriously, Leona? Why would she jump to such a simple-minded conclusion?

A World Dungeon was a minor realm still technically connected to theirs. Most importantly, the creatures within were typically weaker—capped at fourth or fifth class advancement. And besides that, there was a law that prevented those above a certain rank in their world from entering World Dungeons.

The Outsiders, on the other hand, were different. They were powerful. So powerful they seemed like gods.

"Hahaha, you're so adorable..." Valarie laughed at Leona's words.

"A World Dungeon, huh...? As far as they're concerned, we might be the World Dungeon. They come from a higher realm. They live among the gods. They possess ranks that have surpassed the limits of this world. A type seven civilization.. or so they liked to call it."

The entire party paused—even Matia, who had been walking quietly at the rear in her full plate armor. She dismissed her helm with a stunned expression.

"There's a rank after the seventh class advancement...?"

Valarie sighed. A memory stirred—when Mugu had returned to Lysithara. He'd brought strange knowledge back with him. They shouldn't have lusted after it.

"Of course there was a rank after the seventh class... It's just that the seventh class is the limit of this world. Entities above it can't stay—and we can't leave either..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. A flicker of something passed through them. This was all new to him. He hadn't even known there was a rank beyond the seventh. And now she was saying they couldn't leave?

"What are you saying..."

The pair of lips on his shoulder sighed.

"I'm saying... when someone reaches the seventh class advancement, they should be able to sense a higher plane. But we can't. The reason is simple."

She paused, her lips—her entire physical existence now—seemed to gaze at the sky.

"This world of ours is a cage... Behind the skyline lies the bars of that prison. It keeps everything out... and keeps us in."

She smiled faintly, though it held a bitterness that felt centuries old.

"By the end of the Zero Epoch, the Goddess sealed this world away."

"How dare mere mortals like us... dare to imagine a world the Goddess doesn't want us to see?"

Valarie let out a low, hollow sigh. Even after many millennia, she still felt the sting of that betrayal. From their own creator no less. Why would she stifle them.

"That was why... when Mugu told us about Akasha, we all strived toward it. For knowledge. But more than that... because we wanted the one thing the Goddess didn't give us—choice."

Chapter 354: Where The Rain Never Ends

Choice. What was choice? How would one define it?

It was an option. A right to free judgment. A right to decide.

In the end, choice was merely a decision.

However, in this world—or any world—you didn't always get a choice. And that was why choice was a gift.

Choice was simply fate.

Because fate was merely choices that were beyond you. Fate was just a collection of decisions that led to a predestined outcome, born from collective results.

Fate, after all, was just a collection of choices beyond one's control—a chain of decisions leading to outcomes that had long been set in motion.

Or perhaps.

Fate was nothing more than the culmination of choices that were beyond your control. A web of decisions—some yours, most not—that spiraled into a predestined outcome shaped by the will of countless others.

Valarie sighed.

"At least, that's what Mugu was spouting..."

Damon's eyebrow twitched.

He felt a mild desire to stomp on the pair of lips resting on his shoulder.

She had just been telling them something important, and the next thing they knew, she didn't remember a thing. It was like she had a selective memory that only kicked in when it was convenient for her.

And for whatever reason, she started spouting nonsense about choice when Damon had tried reminding her of what she was talking about just a few seconds ago.

"You're like an old woman who can't remember what she's talking about—by the goddess, I will throw you off my shoulder and stomp on you..."

Valarie's lips widened. "You... you—how dare you! I am not an old woman! I'm only thousands of years old! I'm not that old! In fact, I know a very beautiful woman who's older and still unmarried... I'm not old!"

Damon sneered with disdain at her aggravated voice. She was getting really defensive. Looks like he touched a sore spot.

"Oh really? Who—Granny?"

She pressed her lips together in frustration.

"I've heard of someone older. She's four billion years old, as old as the current Omniverse—or so I've heard... and she's still just... unwed. Hah."

Her cover sounded weak at the end, almost as if she found the whole thing unbelievable herself.

Damon was skeptical. Where had she even heard of a woman who was four billion years old and still unmarried? She also mentioned how the woman was the same age as the Omniverse itself, but... he didn't think too hard on that.

"So, a gazillion-year-old spinster? Are you sure she's actually beautiful? Bet no man wants her ancient ass."

Valarie's lips pressed together awkwardly, almost as if afraid of something.

"Ermm... I wouldn't say that if I were you..."

Damon scoffed. "Why? Is she a toad?"

Valarie's voice was quiet, whispering.

"If she was a toad, I wouldn't be warning you. It... it's the Minerva. The goddess... of doom..."

Damon instantly froze.

He almost felt as if he had brushed sides with death.

Wasn't she their world's creator?

And wasn't there a tale about her obliterating the legendary demon lord Ashcroft for speaking a taboo in her temple?

'What if this was the taboo...?'

He felt a chill crawl up his spine.

He did not want to end up as the main character of a cosmic tragedy.

Wait—wasn't she also the bride of the Unknown God?

Nothing was adding up.

"Pfft... hahaha... you're so cute. The goddess doesn't care about something like that. I mean, she is four billion years old—according to the Visitors."

Damon leaned in, whispering the tale of Ashcroft into her ear—or rather, where her ear would have been, if she wasn't just a pair of lips.

Valarie paused.

"Ahem... on second thought, never mind..."

He sighed, feeling the air grow heavier the farther they went into the city.

There were no remains here—only remnants of broken weapons and what could only be described as mold-covered, ancient bloodstains.

Valarie had grown quiet.

"What, cat got your tongue?"

He stopped himself.

Valarie didn't have a tongue—despite being a pair of lips, she still talked.

She smiled.

"It's nothing... I just remember... pools of blood here so deep... the bodies of knights... and the fishy smell of blood making me dizzy... the screams, the cries, the fear... I hated it... but I was powerless to do anything about it..."

Her smile seemed forced. Wider than usual.

Even as just a pair of lips, Damon had learned to read her expressions.

"It was around that time we learned the technology we used to open the Metaverse Gate had long since been spread across the world. I mean... we knew that. But we got arrogant, thinking they couldn't replicate it on the Magic Continent."

Damon felt her sadness.

"They did... and spread it, right?"

Her smile faltered slightly. Her voice dropped low.

"No... they didn't. Not alone. They worked together... by the time we learned of our folly... they were also suffering from the consequences..."

Damon listened.

It seemed like another one of her lost memories had been triggered.

"At first, the Visitors brought knowledge—and many good things. But by the time the other continents let them in... they showed their true colors. Well... some of them weren't pure evil, but they still had their own agendas."

She paused.

"Do you see that window over there...?"

Damon nodded, looking at a shattered building—one that must have once been grand, reinforced with military architecture and runes to support its structure.

Now, it was charred and ruined.

"Hmm. I see it."

"I was standing right there when I received the news that the Voyage Continent had been freed from its drought. Rain had come..."

Damon didn't think she was about to share good news.

"It wasn't good news, was it..."

He recalled the description of his skill Water Celebration.

It had hinted at how this tale ended.

"Yes. It wasn't. The rain came—after years of drought—but it never stopped. It rained until the continent was little more than an archipelago..."

"Turns out it was all because of an outsider."

Damon recalled the end of that tragedy.

"They drowned... under the weight of their own celebration."

She smiled faintly.

"Lysithara was where it all began. But the Doom Continent... was the worst hit. That place will be filled with monsters for many, many years to come..."

Damon narrowed his eyes. That place was now known as the Demon Continent.

It was the most dangerous region in the world.

Only the strong survive on the Demon Continent.

It truly earned the name Ashcroft had given it.

Then again... Doom Continent wasn't exactly an auspicious name either.

Chapter 355: The Obvious Answer

The trek through the city continued, the sun rising higher and higher until it reached noon. Yet it didn't feel like they had traveled very far—and there were reasons for that.

Well, many factors, actually. The terrain of the ruined city was more dangerous than even the gutter they'd crawled through before.

Compared to what they were facing now, the city outskirts were paradise.

Strange anomalies, dangerous fauna, unusual voices, and lingering, broken spaces with chaotic rifts.

They just had to be careful; as long as they persevered, they would return home eventually.

The strength of the monsters kept rising. Huge titans moved between buildings—some horrifying, some just plain malicious—so they had to navigate through territory infested with weaker creatures instead.

It was a massive detour... one that could hardly be called uneventful. The closest waypoint wasn't far, but factoring in the dangers ahead?

It was going to take some time. And the battles they fought were getting more dire by the hour.

They absorbed more mana cores, and some excess was fed to Damon's shadow, boosting his mana.

He'd learned something new about the nature of mana cores.

If he fed them directly to his shadow, it would be added to his mana pool.

But if he absorbed them into his body, his physical vessel would be refined... and his soul, or rather, his shadow, would grow stronger.

He would hear the familiar notification:

Your shadow grows stronger...

He sighed. He still didn't know everything about the system. It was still so damn mysterious.

That gnawing sense of unease kept growing stronger the deeper they went into the city.

So far, they'd only fought minor monsters—but still, the feeling wouldn't go away.

He had other worries, too. His new level-up requirement.

[Level Up Requirements]

Fuska Soul Consumed [0/1]

That was what he needed to reach Level Eleven. Getting to Level Ten had already been brutal—he'd barely managed it after killing ten Mist Knights, thanks only to Thren entralling the others.

But this... this was different. He had no idea what a "Fuska" was. But he was almost sure it wasn't just a type of monster. No... it could be a monster.

However, something told him it was a name.

A name of someone... or something.

Which meant the system wasn't giving him a choice. It was telling him he would encounter this Fuska—sooner rather than later.

He clenched his fist, gauntlets slick with blood.

"So be it," he muttered. Let whatever—or whoever—it was come. He'd end them.

A soft clang of armor pulled him from his thoughts as Matia sat beside him.

She removed her helm, revealing long hair braided neatly behind her head.

"We're almost at the waypoint. All we have to do is cross that bridge..."

She pointed at a pedestrian bridge, now in ruins. It was broken. Below, green water flowed toward some unknown part of the city.

He didn't need to use Shadow Perception to know the water was infested with monsters.

He sighed, eyes trailing to the sky—where a colossal creature flew lazily overhead, its wings so massive they cast a shadow big enough to blanket entire buildings.

"Yes... but I just feel weird... it just feels..."

"Too easy," Matia interrupted.

She had the same feeling Damon did. Leaving the city was starting to look way too easy.

"Do you think it's the Keeper? Do you think he'll stop us from leaving until we play his game?"

Damon frowned. "I'm not... su—"

"Keeper? Do you mean Vathren? I suppose he did get corrupted... He calls himself the Keeper of False Truths."

Matia nodded solemnly. "Mm. The former City Lord. No one leaves Lysithara without playing his game. Fail... and you die.... Or worse."

Valarie's lips twitched slightly.

"Hm. I see. What's the game?"

Damon nodded and began explaining the rules.

The Keeper asks you to play. These are 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.

Valarie listened silently as Damon explained.

The First Question...

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

The Second Question...

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

Valarie scoffed.

"What a simple game... It's quite easy."

Damon tilted his head. Was she serious? The first question was tricky but manageable.

But the second?

"That one doesn't even have an answer. How is that simple?"

Valarie smiled, amused. "It's quite obvious... Vathren always lost at simple, uncomplicated games. He had a tendency to overthink simple things."

But her smile faltered.

This... wasn't like Vathren.

Damon glanced at Matia, annoyed. "I don't want to sound insensitive, but... can you just tell us the answer?"

Valarie sighed. She didn't understand why they didn't see it. It was obvious.

"The second question simply doesn't have an answer. It's an impossible question. Something unstoppable meeting something immovable—both are absolutes. It's a paradox. A paradox can't be solved."

Sylvia, drenched in monster blood, walked over.

"A paradox is a self-contradictory statement," she said, "which can only be true if it's false, and false if it's true."

Valarie took on the tone of a teacher—guiding children through their first lesson.

"The question is a paradox. Not the game. If you restrict yourself to only the second question, you've already lost..."

They all looked at her, still clearly not getting it.

She sighed again.

"It's very simple once you get it. The second question doesn't have an answer, so you simply have to..."

She froze.

The delicate lips trembled. Her whole soul quivered.

"Arrrghhhh!!"

She screamed in agony as a wave of white mist poured from her mouth, collapsing into a deep black fog.

She glowed faintly before falling limp from Damon's shoulder.

"Argh... ru... run... he's... co...ming..."

Chapter 356: The Right To Lose

Damon had been feeling a vague sense of unease before—but now, his danger sense was going wild. A maddening buzz screamed through his skull as the skill went berserk. He fell to his knees, clutching his head, shaking from the overwhelming sensation.

He shut it off. Forcefully.

The others didn't have a danger sense skill. But they had something just as primal—instinct. The kind forged in the fires of survival. And that instinct screamed at them now—warning them that death was imminent...

Or that something far, far worse than death was drawing near.

Damon's mind flickered with the image of that poor soul—the man who had turned part tree. He had failed to answer a question... and met a fate so vile Damon still felt the bile rise in his throat.

He staggered back to his feet.

The mist—the same one that had poured from the lips that once belonged to Valerie Sunwarden—was spreading. Fast.

It had been black at first.

Now it was turning a pale, sickly white.

Damon's hands trembled as he looked up to the sky.

And saw the horrors in the air... fleeing.

Creatures—some bearing power of the fourth and fifth class advancements, monsters that could level entire cities—were flying away from this place as fast as their wings could carry them.

Even the titanic beasts that lumbered in the distance—beings so massive they shook mountains—had changed course. As if desperate to avoid whatever was approaching.

The earth quivered beneath his feet.

And then came the roars. Screams. Countless abominations crying out in pure terror as they fled. Below, the green waters under the bridge churned violently—boiling, alive.

The monsters that called it home were fleeing too. They weren't just scared—they were desperate.

Damon's eyes rose to the rooftops. Even there, monsters stood frozen. Some he recognized. Others were unnameable.

But one among them—a faceless horror—turned and fled like the rest.

Damon gritted his teeth. His fingers curled around the lips of Valerie and gently slid them into a pouch.

She was unresponsive. Still. But something told him she wasn't truly gone.

No... the Ascendant had not surrendered yet.

Her will still clung to existence.

After all, she had died a long time ago—and yet survived, a discarnate soul sealed within her own dismembered lips.

Xander stood on the far edge of the road, spear braced against the ground. His gaze locked into the mist—unblinking.

His eyes were wide. Too wide.

A look of pure fear. The kind that stretches the eyes open so wide they beg to see—to comprehend—whatever nightmare looms.

Damon sucked in a sharp breath. He felt the activated Remorseless skill and its effects.

He didn't even consider winning.

Because this wasn't a battle they could win.

"What are you doing? Run, fool—!"

His voice cracked through the others like a thunderclap—snapping them from the trance of paralyzing dread.

"Equip your armors! At the awaken shell—move! Light!"

But before they could decide which direction to run... the mist thickened. Choked everything.

Damon didn't dare use Shadow Perception. He knew better. Whatever was coming... would strike him the moment it was sensed.

There was no time for planning.

He didn't even speak. He couldn't.

Because in that instant, his heart clenched violently.

His body seized.

A terror so profound it felt like sleep paralysis flooded his nerves. He could see, feel, and think—but he couldn't move.

Then—

Footsteps.

Slow. Deliberate.

They echoed from deep within the mist, still far, but every step deliberate—patient.

The thing approaching didn't need to hurry.

Because it knew.

There would be no escape.

Running was futile.

"Arrrrgh!" Damon screamed. He forced his limbs to move—his body fighting against the pressure, as if submerged in an ocean of thick, leaden water.

Every movement was agony. His muscles shredded. His bones cracked. Blood gushed from between his clenched teeth.

"ARGHHHHH!" The scream became a roar as his body rebelled—his nerves lit with torment—but he kept moving.

The others couldn't even see him through their fear. Couldn't register his defiance.

He wasn't resisting because he thought he could win.

It was never about winning for Damon.

He always knew what came when you challenged a greater power.

Pain... or death.

Still.

He would never kneel. Not to gods. Not to death. Not to fear.

Not because he believed he could win—

But because if he was going to lose...

He'd do it his way.

Because he must lose on his own terms.

Only on his terms. That was how he would go. A defeated loser but one who chose his exit.

He raised his hand—and unleashed Ashborn.

Black flames exploded outward, burning the mist. He felt every moment of it—a pain ten times worse than being burned alive.

But it cleared his mind.

He turned.

Grabbed Sylvia's arm—then kicked Leona with brutal precision, sending her flying toward the bridge.

The impact knocked the air from both of them.

He didn't pause.

Fired the omnidirectional gear—it locked onto Xander's armor with a solid thunk.

He grabbed Evangeline, slung her over his shoulder, snatched the paralyzed Matia in one hand, and fired the gear again—this time toward where Sylvia and Leona had landed.

The gear yanked him forward, tearing him through the air.

He had to move. If he stayed too long, the pressure alone would kill him.

His heart would burst. His legs would shatter. He knew it.

Still, the footsteps came. Closer. Calm. Unbothered.

Damon felt the wind lash against his skin as he skidded towards the broken bridge.

He let the others go.

They landed hard—bodies shaking, breath ragged.

They looked at him.

No words came.

Their mouths trembled, but no sound followed—as if their tongues had been robbed from them by fear itself.

All they could do was shake.

This fear... this presence...

It was worse than the Whispering Forest.

Damon's defiance shouldn't have mattered. Should've meant nothing.

But he had mastery.

[Mental Contamination Resistance.]

More than that this entity was not trying to kill them, otherwise they would be dead already.

Yet.

But Damon felt it—the pressure climbing again. His heart on the verge of collapse.

The footsteps kept coming.

Closer.

Right beyond the veil of mist.

And still, his companions were bound—trapped in fear. Unable to even crawl.

He feared too.

But he wouldn't let it stop him.

Behind them was the green water—infested, monsters, a path to gods-know-where in the dead city.

A place of monsters and forgotten horrors.

But even they were trying to flee now.

There was no choice.

No escape.

So Damon stood.

His black eyes filled with the fury of an insect that would spit in the face of a god.

He bared his bleeding teeth.

Tied the thin wires of his omnidirectional gear to the powerful armor of each party member.

His fear was raw. Real.

But his will remained unbroken.

He jumped.

Soared over the edge of the pavement—

And pulled them all with him into the green waters below.

The fleeing monsters had created a powerful current.

It grabbed the party, dragging them—tied together—away.

Damon's eyes fluttered.

And just before his consciousness faded, he looked up...

And saw the figure emerging from the mist.

The last thing he remembered was the roar of the current, and the darkness closing in.

And it's calm gaze on him.

Chapter 357: A Place Beneath

The pain racked his body. His head felt heavy. His skin was damp with a sticky sensation—he couldn't tell if it was blood or water.

He didn't know if he was underwater or on solid ground.

His Water Celebration skill did promise he couldn't drown.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. His vision adjusted to the surroundings. It felt like hammers were smashing against his skull, again and again.

The place was unfamiliar. It was dark—or wasn't it? He couldn't be sure, since he could see just as well in darkness. Still, the depth of the shadows confirmed it—this place was dark.

The darkness here was both heavy and oppressive. The kind that made people uneasy.

His eyes drifted upward. A high ceiling stretched above, lined with runes carved into the stone.

He groaned, forcing himself to sit up—

Something smashed into his body. Arms wrapped tightly around him with a soft, muffled sound.

It was warm. Soft. A little damp.

White hair brushed against his cheek—familiar white hair.

Her scent was unmistakable. It wasn't the scent of gardenia like Lilith had, but it still held a beautiful fragrance.

This was Sylvia.

"Ahh... Sylvia..."

"You're okay... you're okay..." Her voice was calm—or at least, she tried to sound calm. But it was low, a whisper, as if she feared that any loud noise might invite danger.

He raised a shaky hand to touch her. She was still wet from before. His memories returned in broken flashes—the entire party dragged into the monster-infested depths, all to escape the Keeper of False Truths.

He turned his head.

The others were there, all watching him with anxious expressions.

Leona held his hand. A single tear clung to the corner of her eye.

Her lips quivered, but she didn't say anything. Or rather, she couldn't—she was forcing back the flood of emotion. She covered her mouth to muffle the sound.

He glanced around at their surroundings. It was still dark. They appeared to be underground.

At the center, Evangeline gave off a soft glow—her armor shining with her magic.

She wore it in the Awakened Shell form, more like a guarded tunic than proper armor. It was light, only covering the essentials.

The place looked like a small island of wreckage, jagged remains of walls and buildings scattered around them. Damon could make out the things that had been dragged here, now stuck in the rubble.

The air was damp, filled with the scent of moss and water.

Xander looked at him, visibly relieved to see him conscious.

Matia's face was hidden behind her helm. She was growing more stalwart with each day, but from the way she clenched her fists, he could tell—she was either relieved... or deeply worried.

Sylvia slowly let him go, her grey eyes sweeping over his body.

"Are you feeling better? I... I didn't know what exactly to heal, so I just... I did everything I could. I'm sorry if it wasn't enough..."

Her voice was soft. But come to think of it, he wasn't bleeding. Just sore.

He nodded and tried to stand, legs still sluggish. They felt like lead.

He stumbled—and fell forward.

His face landed squarely on Sylvia's chest plate.

"Sorry..." he muttered, flustered.

Sylvia said nothing. She just held him, her expression filled with worry. And why wouldn't she be? He had just faceplanted into her chest.

She hoped the metal didn't hurt him.

He shook his head.

Once back on his feet, he scanned the area again. His eyes were already accustomed to darkness, but Evangeline's light still lit the area.

Only then did he notice it—faint traces of blood.

He ignored it. It must've been from his previous injuries.

The ceiling above didn't just have runes. There were murals—faint, shattered ones. Part of them led off into the darkness, far beyond Evangeline's reach.

Wherever they were, it was unknown. Submerged, maybe even forgotten.

He sighed. Swimming out would be such a pain.

Still... it seemed he was the only one who had been unconscious.

"Where... are we, exactly..." he muttered, to no one in particular.

Sylvia bit her lip, hesitating.

But it was Evangeline who answered, releasing several floating spheres of light into the gloom.

"We're in some unknown underground part of the city... Most of it is flooded... and we don't know the way out."

Damon sighed. With his luck, he hadn't expected anything good to come from jumping into the green waters without a plan.

But at the time, it had been a desperate choice.

The Keeper of False Truths... he was that much of a monster.

A horror so vile, even other monsters fled from him.

That was the only option left—to escape into the unknown.

At least... the Keeper didn't follow them.

Speaking of the Keeper—

"Valarie..."

His hand shot to his waist. He felt for the pouch—relief hit when he pulled out the small velvet container.

Inside it, a pair of delicate, feminine lips. Valarie Sunwarden's lips—the only part of her that remained after the rot... and her death.

They were still. Unmoving.

"Valarie..." he whispered again, gently.

She offered no response.

The others stared at him.

"What—" Sylvia quickly placed a hand over his mouth, whispering urgently.

"Don't talk too loudly... we might attract something."

Xander seemed tense, backing away. His spear pointed at the dark waters.

Damon narrowed his eyes, gently removing Sylvia's soft hand from his mouth. The elf girl's exquisite face never left his.

"What's going on..." he asked, the dread crawling back into his chest.

Matia, who had been silent all this while, finally spoke.

"You've been out for two days... it's good to have you back. But..."

Xander's gaze shifted to the still waters, his spear at the ready, balanced on uneven wreckage.

"We're trapped. And we're surrounded by monsters..."

Damon looked toward the water. It was dark. Calm. Nothing moved. Not even a ripple.

He didn't trust it.

He closed his eyes and extended his Shadow Perception, letting his senses spread into the gloom beneath the surface.

What he saw made his face pale.

Chapter 358: Circle Of Madness

The water was deep and pitch black. The deep was dark and full of terrors.

From what he saw with his shadow perception, the waters below teemed with monstrous life. Aquatic abominations stirred restlessly—some resembled massive ground crawlers, others were indescribable horrors that looked as if they had slithered straight out from the fevered nightmare of a mad god.

The deeper he sent his shadow perception, the more overwhelming their presence became.

Their auras grew more potent, more ancient, more alien. The water was deceptively calm, hiding its impossible depth like a grave hiding secrets. Below, ruins sprawled in the deep like a drowned city—statues, shattered temples, and fractured towers signs of a sunken mausoleum, a long-forgotten part of Lysithara that now belonged to the abyss.

The cracked remnants of the sunken city gave him chills. He didn't dare extend his shadow perception into certain areas—not out of caution, but out of primal fear. Some darkness was meant to remain untouched.

Still, he pushed on, almost like a man possessed—desperate for even the faintest glimmer of salvation. That's when he encountered it.

His shadow brushed against something vast—immense—anchored deep within the black. It wasn't terrain. It was alive.

It felt wrong.

A shape so enormous it swallowed his senses. As he probed deeper, he realized it wasn't just massive—it was ancient. And aware.

Then... its gargantuan eyes opened.

Damon's breath caught. He ripped his perception back as pain lashed through his skull. He collapsed to his knees, coughing up blood.

"That was close... that was too close..." he gasped, his vision blurring. "It almost saw me... it almost sensed me..."

His chest heaved. His heart thundered in his ribs. His head was spinning. He had almost died just from sensing its existence.

A warm white light washed over him, mending his body. He looked up to see Sylvia beside him, healing him with trembling hands, her lips bleeding from how hard she had been biting them.

He didn't speak.

He just sat there, letting the silence soak in... the quiet dread that lingered.

"Hahaha..." He laughed—a hollow, broken sound that echoed off the rocks around them.

He laughed again, holding his head, a distant smile on his lips as he stared at the dark waters before him.

Even now, he could feel them. Some creatures stirred—lurking just beneath the surface—gentle currents rippling with the twitch of hideous appendages.

Grotesque abominations circled them. Waiting.

Advance into the water and die... stay here and slowly waste away... or go mad.

Whichever came first.

Damon saw the bleak paths laid out before him like a cruel joke. He lowered his head with a tired smile.

His life had always been like this—the stronger he became, the more monstrous the adversaries. As if the universe was laughing, dragging him forward like a pawn dancing on the palm of some sadistic god.

Was this his fate? To suffer?

He sat in silence, the weight of that question burying his thoughts.

Always the loser. Always the prey. Always fighting an uphill war against fate.

Where was the fairness in that? Where was his choice?

His lips curled into a bitter smile as he raised his head.

He remembered what Valarie once said Mugu had told her.

Fate wasn't some cosmic force that man needed to defy—it was a construct, born from a collection of choices. Some his. Most not.

Damon laughed softly—his dread unraveling into a quiet madness.

But what did Mugu know? He was mortal. Unless... he heard it from the Unknown God.

Damon lowered his head again, biting his own smiling lips, dark eyes dimmed with fatigue. He was tired. So tired of the struggle. Of the meaningless battle to simply exist.

"Then whose choice was it that I'm here...?"

He muttered to himself, smiling bitterly. His chest ached, his heart twisted. He wanted—deeply, desperately—to give up. To finally stop. To let it all go.

But he remembered.

A lot of people made choices that led to his pain. His suffering. His exile.

Some of them were dead.

"Haha... but some of them are alive... they're living their best lives... while I..."

His rage ignited—boiling from somewhere deep, coiled around his heart like a viper. They probably thought he was dead.

Well, joke's on them.

He was still here. Still crawling through hell. Living off nothing but hate, rage, spite, and pure stubborn resentment.

"It's their choices..." he laughed again—madness curling his lips. "Hahahanaja..."

Yes. They were still alive. His old village—the ones who had abandoned and betrayed him.

The Quick Hand, who had made him a fall to a life of crime... everything. And more than any of them—the wretched dark spirit summoner who had thrown him into this damned land to rot.

He clenched his jaw, eyes wet with tears that would never fall. He refused to let them.

They wanted him to die. They wanted him to suffer. They wanted him to break.

Fine.

He would suffer. He would break.

But he would live. And he would kill them all.

His spite roared louder than the dread that choked the air, stronger than the horror that danced in the water, deeper than the madness that nipped at his mind.

No—he welcomed the madness. It fueled him now.

He would live not out of vengeance, not out of pride—no, he would live so he could kill them with his own two hands.

He rose to his feet.

The others had been silent through it all.

Sylvia remained by his side, unwavering. Leona watched with worry, her hands twitching toward her great sword.

Evangeline bit her lip, visibly anxious. Xander had clenched his fists—and when Damon stood, so did he.

They knew he wouldn't give up.

Matia stood behind him like a silent shadow. Her face hidden behind her helm. Her voice was quiet—cold like frost.

"...What do we do?"

Damon clenched his fists, eyes narrowing as he looked into the darkness.

Some monsters had begun swimming closer to the small island of wreckage they stood on. Shadows circled like vultures beneath the waves.

The green water rippled. Evangeline's light magic revealed colossal shapes stirring beneath the calm. Their auras barely restrained.

Damon took a deep breath.

"Our situation's gotten worse," he muttered, brushing his wet hair back. "Well... that's fine. Nothing new."

The others stood, one by one. Weapons drawn. Faces grim.

"It seems this city wants us dead," he said, voice cold.

Damon smiled then—fierce and unyielding—his eyes flickering with defiance.

"That's too bad... the feeling is mutual."

He turned to them, raising his hand as the shadows surged around him—violent, wild, and alive.

"...Let's kill 'em all."

Chapter 359: Monsters Of Starvation

Water was truly something to be feared—it gave life, but it took it just as easily. Slowly, inevitably, it broke down and corroded... everything. Even this wreckage must have once been a vibrant city. Now, it was merely a forgotten ruin, half-submerged in water.

Or perhaps most of it was submerged. The part they were standing on, deep in this bleak underground portion of the city, was merely the tip of the iceberg.

A flooded and dark ruin was already dangerous enough. Escaping from such a place was a hazard in itself, filled with unknown wreckage, unstable currents, and drowned pathways.

However, that wasn't even the main obstacle.

Most of the city's ancient residents had long since fallen to corruption—becoming hideous abominations that now called these dark, flooded ruins their home.

There were too many of them. Escape wasn't just dangerous—it was futile.

The only thing keeping Damon and his party alive was the small island of wreckage they'd found themselves stranded on. It was the only thing the monsters wouldn't tread on.

But even that wasn't a guarantee. Some of these creatures could walk on dry land... they just hadn't. Not yet. Like the many predators lurking in the depths, they had opted to observe.

Watching from the water.

Waiting for them to snap.

Damon sat there, watching them back. He had told his party to kill them all earlier—but that would be impossible with their current strength.

Some of these monsters were already at the Second Advancement.

And the ones deeper... were stronger.

None of them had any aquatic battle prowess. While Damon could breathe underwater, he wasn't exactly handy down there.

Water pressure, cold, disorientation... all of it still affected him. And unlike land, water didn't forgive mistakes.

He had no plan. No reliable way out.

He had tested something, though. He'd learned that noise didn't really provoke the monsters—so that was a plus. At least for now.

He glanced at Evangeline, noting the absence of their supply bags.

"We don't have any rations... do we?"

Evangeline, sitting on what appeared to be a broken pillar, stared bleakly at the water. Her golden eyes flickered in the murk.

"How long can someone in the First-Class Advancement last without food?"

Sylvia knew he was talking to her. She took everything into account—mana usage, body fat, metabolism—before giving a rough estimate.

"A normal human without a class might last one, maybe two months, with adequate water," she said. "But strength and mobility would start declining in a matter of days to a week."

She raised her head with a tired sigh.

"A person in the First Class is stronger, so they can last six months by my estimate... but they'll lose their fighting power in about a month."

She turned her gaze to Leona. The Beastkin girl, still clad in her armor, stood silent. The damp air had left them perpetually soaked.

"Some of us have faster metabolisms," Sylvia added, "so we won't last long... without food."

Damon understood—she was talking about Leona. Beastkin were built differently. Her constitution demanded more energy, more intake.

"How long...?" Xander asked, hoisting his spear, his grip firm despite the tension.

"With her physique... a few days. At most."

Leona smiled, a hollow, almost bleak amusement on her lips.

"Guess my appetite finally became the end of me..."

Matia clenched her fists. Wet hair stuck to her skin, clinging like a shroud.

"I could've scouted ahead... if I could still fly..."

Alas, her wings had been sacrificed—burned away to heal Damon's lost arm and free him from the disintegration enchantment placed on Alazard's cursed sword.

Damon sighed, his fist clenched.

"That's not a viable option anymore... we need to secure food."

He stood up, voice steady.

"On the upside... we didn't lose everything. We still have one supply bag."

The others looked at him, confused. They hadn't seen any supply bag. Come to think of it, he wasn't carrying one when they'd set out two days ago.

Damon raised his hand. The shadows stirred.

From the dark folds of his shadow, he pulled out a pristine bag—clean, dry, and intact.

He looked at them, voice calm.

"You guys were reluctant to take the meat from the ground crawlers after finding out they were human once... so we left some behind. I stuffed what I could into my bag."

He paused, raising his hand again as the shadows receded.

"My bag didn't have much space, since I took some of the unidentified potions and poisons from the Beldam's nest..."

They stared at him, surprised. Damon was full of surprises.

"What kind of spell... is that?" Evangeline asked.

Damon didn't answer truthfully.

"It's just another self-created spell," he said casually. "Like my ability to turn into a shadow... and a few of my other abilities. It's an exclusive shadow-based spell."

He hated lying to them—but he couldn't tell them about the system. About the uniqueness that allowed him to gain a bizarre amount of skills by devouring enemies and leveling up.

The fewer people who knew his secret, the better.

Let them think it was a spell unique to his attribute. That was safer.

He opened the bag and pulled out a wrap of preserved meat—still clean, still edible.

Two days ago, they would've recoiled at the idea of eating something that used to be human. Now... now they were starving.

He didn't need to say anything.

They took the food without complaint. Passed it to Leona first—her condition was the worst. Then it went around the group.

Damon watched them, face calm.

They didn't care anymore. This was meat. It didn't matter if it used to be someone.

Hunger... it brought out the monsters in men.

He should know. He had been a monster of starvation once.

Matia shaped ice into a bowl. Leona summoned a small cloud and filled it with clean water.

They drank in silence.

As they ate, Damon spoke.

"I only have enough for three days... Within those three days, we have to find an alternative."

Chapter 360: Victims Of Hunger

Man was a beast. No matter how advanced he became, he was still a beast. And a beast with many desires—that was man.

Among those desires was the hunger for food. Or was it a craving? In the end, it didn't matter. Man would do anything for food.

Food decided who survived and who didn't. For that desire—no, that craving—man would face beasts much bigger, faster, and stronger than himself.

For the right to feast on their flesh. For nourishment.

Damon understood. Hunger was a torment. Starvation—a waking nightmare. The feeling of his body cannibalizing itself, burning fat, draining strength, replacing it all with nausea.

Some pain could never be forgotten or forgiven.

He could almost smell it again—the reeking stench of the cells he was locked in as a child. Each time he defied the boss of Quick Hand, a new punishment would be devised.

And of all those cruel punishments, the one he feared the most... was starvation.

Even then, he refused to admit it. An obstinate child to the bitter end.

How ironic. He was fated to starvation.

His own shadow craved flesh and souls. And when they refused to feed it, they both suffered. They both starved.

It was as if fate never wanted him to forget. Reminding him constantly of his filthy beginnings as a street child.

Starvation would follow him, always.

From his village to the streets of Valerion, he had been a victim of hunger.

A weak and helpless victim of starvation.

But the circumstances had changed. Drastically.

He was still fighting an uphill battle—yes. But Damon had grown. He was stronger. Not just physically... but mentally.

His hunger had taught him to devour his oppressors. Make them part of his power.

Devour them without remorse.

Why ration the scraps they had... when they were surrounded by food?

He grinned. A sinister thing stretching across his face as he gazed at the grotesque monsters lurking beneath the water's surface.

Those creatures wanted to eat them.

The feeling was mutual.

Damon and his party were stranded on a makeshift island of wreckage, surrounded on all sides by water.

The only thing keeping predator and prey apart was terrain.

No matter how Damon turned it over in his head—they wouldn't last long on their remaining rations.

If that was the case, the answer was simple.

They would hunt their hunters.

These creatures were enormous. Hideous. Grotesque. There was no promise their flesh would taste good. But it didn't matter. They had enough meat to feed them.

Damon's eyes flicked to Xander, who gripped his spear tightly. The boy's blue eyes burned with cold resolve.

Evangeline raised her hand, conjuring a radiant light that washed the area in a golden glow.

The green waters sparkled ominously. Vast shapes moved beneath the surface—shifting shadows, some of them utterly horrific. They weren't looking for something that tasted good.

Just something easy to catch.

Damon stepped forward to the edge of their island of rubble.

Dozens of gleaming eyes glared up at him. Eyes filled with pure, unrestrained murderous intent.

He could feel it—hatred sharp enough to cut flesh. But it didn't matter. The others were in position.

Damon opened his eyes and unleashed the [Omen of Dread] skill.

A wave of paralyzing terror poured into the water.

His aura, dark and foreboding, washed over the beasts like poison. The weaker ones froze instantly, their minds drowning in fear. The stronger ones grew sluggish, wary.

The skill was most effective against those weaker than him—and among these monsters, plenty were.

He pointed swiftly at one that had drifted too close to the wreckage.

"That one. Leona, now..."

Lightning sparked violently around Leona's armor, arcing in halos of white power. She raised her hand—and brought it down like judgment.

A blinding bolt slammed into the water, exploding in a column of roaring energy.

The shockwave sent massive pillars of water splashing in every direction. The creature struck twitched, shrieked, and rose from the water, flailing as electricity tore through it.

Matia's hand moved with chilling grace—she conjured a spear of ice and launched it into the churning water.

The moment it struck, a creeping cold spread across the green surface. Ice bloomed out like spiderwebs, freezing the thrashing creature in place.

"Xander—do your thing."

Xander dashed forward with silent determination. His spear gleamed, then flew straight into the creature's massive fin.

Boom.

The spear hit with a sickening crack, pinning the beast as the ice web shattered around it.

Blood gushed from the wound. The monster howled.

Raising his hand, Xander summoned his gravity magic. The spear twisted in midair and dragged the beast upwards—its limp body flailing, dangling over the island.

"Sylvia—now. Evangeline, cover her."

Sylvia drew her bow and fired arrow after arrow into the pinned creature. Each shot sank deep into its twitching body.

Its thrashing slowed.

Damon activated his Magic Gatling spell—but he didn't aim for the monster. He and Evangeline turned their sights on the water below.

Blood was already spreading.

The other creatures had gone into a frenzy.

Perfect.

Damon's hands erupted with spinning barrels of magic, unleashing a wild torrent of magic bullets into the water. Evangeline followed with searing explosions of light, blowing the water apart with each detonation.

The walls around them were soaked as spray blasted everywhere. Her magic lit the submerged chaos—revealing a swarm of frenzied monsters moving just beneath the surface.

Xander clenched his fist and pulled the impaled monster downward, slamming it hard onto a metal slab among the wreckage. Blood splattered across the wreckage, flowing back into the water in slow, crimson streams.

By the time it hit the platform, it had stopped moving—killed by their combined assault.

Damon and Evangeline landed softly beside it, eyes still locked on the water's surface.

Just in case something dared to follow.

They waited... then regrouped with the others.

Damon exhaled slowly.

"That went better than I expected."

He looked at the still form of the beast.

"Now we have food."