

Shadow 371

Chapter 371: Calm Veil

A week had passed, and Damon was completely normal. There was no significant change—he and Sylvia spoke to each other like nothing had happened.

He had ordered the party to thin out the monsters in the water, hunting them relentlessly until the water around them was stained red with blood.

His expression hadn't shifted much; he still wore the same neutral face, sometimes even cracking jokes.

Other than that, they did a few things.

Valarie taught them rune magic whenever she was awake—when she wasn't, she was stuffed into Damon's pouch like luggage.

They trained and honed their skills with sparring matches—mostly Damon and Evangeline.

Evangeline taught him everything she could, and he absorbed her family's sword techniques like a sponge.

He even created a technique that was the complete opposite of hers. Or rather, it mirrored her radiant blade style, but with a different attribute—Shadow.

For her radiant blade, he created Dark Blade, which delivered nearly the same effect, albeit shrouded in shadow magic.

She couldn't deny it—she was jealous. He was a freakish prodigy with the sword.

She fought him every day, pushing herself harder just to keep up.

Today was no different.

Evangeline felt her Radiant Sword clash against a blade of shadows. She shifted back, swinging her sword in a wide arc.

Damon stepped forward, lifting his weapon in a rising slash—a wave of shadows flew toward the high ceiling of the wrecked dome above them.

A deafening bang echoed—but the ceiling held firm, no real damage done.

Evangeline smiled—his blade had lost its dark edge since he'd unleashed it into the slash.

"Got you..."

She lunged forward, thrusting straight for him.

Damon moved with a thin smile.

"I saw that coming." Her blade skidded off the flat side of his sword.

She immediately followed with a sharp jab—Damon blocked, their faces just inches apart.

"That's time, guys... it's a tie," Sylvia's voice called out from the side, where the others had been watching.

Damon and Evangeline looked like they wanted to keep going, but they both knew better. If they fought for real, they risked sinking the tiny island of wreckage beneath their feet.

He exhaled slowly, lowering his blade. "Thanks for the lesson... I got stronger. My technique's getting sharper."

Evangeline shook her head, gripping her sword tighter. "I got stronger too. You're really a freak with the sword..."

Damon scratched the back of his head awkwardly and walked over to the others.

Matia handed him a bowl shaped from ice, filled with water.

"Thanks, Matia."

She gave a small nod, standing silently behind him.

Damon drank slowly while the others chatted. Then, without a word, he wandered a fair distance away.

He stopped in front of a small raft fitted with a makeshift sail.

Beside it was a large, rune-reinforced box—inscribed with symbols Valarie had taught them to carve.

His fist clenched.

"Your plan will work... don't worry..."

He turned and found Sylvia beside him.

She gave a slow nod as he sighed.

"We can't be certain now, can we..."

He glanced sideways at her.

"How are you holding up? I mean... with the constant dark spirit attacks."

Sylvia smiled faintly. This week hadn't exactly been easy. They'd been under constant siege by dark spirits. The longer they stayed in this place, the more frequently the spirits appeared.

Worse—the monsters in the water were growing restless. Sooner or later, they'd launch a full assault and sink the island of wreckage they were clinging to.

"I should say the same to you... They target you just as much as me..." Her words drew a slight smile from him.

He also had spirit affinity—though in his case, it came from a skill.

The battles were getting fiercer each night. It wouldn't be long before this floating ruin was swallowed whole by the flooded ruins.

"I've mapped out the layers over the week with my skill... but things can change. I've divined the outcome... if we stay, this island will sink..."

Her words made him nod grimly.

"We did our best with what we had."

His eyes drifted toward the stretched monster skin near the box.

His water-based skills would play a huge part in the escape.

Speaking of skills... he had a new one.

Fighting and devouring had sharpened him. He had poured most of his earned points into various stats. Most importantly, he'd kept his Shadow Energy full—especially since gaining his newest mastery.

He opened his system panel.

[HP: 695/695]

[Mana: 4,499/4,499]

[Strength: 1034]

[Agility: 957]

[Speed: 1485]

[Endurance: 910]

[Class: Death Dealer]

[Shadow: 1000]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 10]

[Condition: Shadow Is Full]

[Attributes: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour]
[Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn] [Omen Of Dread] [Dealer's
Hand] [Bloodletting] [Shadow Movement] [Shadow] [Faceless] [Danger Sense] [Wave Walk]

[Mastery:]

[Etiquette Lv3] [Swordsmanship Lv3] [Survival Lv4] [Persuasion Lv2] [Deception Lv3] [Bartering Lv2]
[Theft Lv3] [Archery Lv2] [Trap Lv3] [Alchemy Lv1] [Dagger Arts Lv2] [Cooking Lv2] [Basic Magic Lv2]
[Mana Control Lv2] [Magic Gatling Lv1] [Pain Resistance Lv3] [Mental Contamination resistance Lv2]
[Disintegration resistance Lv1] [Sniper Lv1] [Rune Magic Lv1] [Insanity Lv1]

[Locked]

He was level 10 now. His stats had spiked after countless battles. He'd slain dozens of monsters. Unfortunately, he didn't gain many new skills—it seemed the system favored mastery, or maybe he was just unlucky.

Still, he was far stronger now. Some of his stats had skyrocketed.

His mana pool, though... was lower than ever. He needed to find something with an immense mana reserve to devour—magic crystals or high-grade mana cores. Regular ones weren't cutting it anymore.

And worst of all—he had to keep his Shadow Energy full.

Especially after unlocking that new mastery.

"...Insanity."

How is 'Insanity' even something I can learn or use...

He didn't know how to weaponize insanity. Frankly, he didn't want to find out.

That's why he'd been sacrificing so much mana to keep his shadow well-fed.

As long as the shadow was fed—his sanity stayed intact.

He touched his forehead, frowning. He also had a hunch that the crown on his armor—the one made of ashen metal—was helping stabilize his mind.

If that thing grew any further... he'd be in serious trouble.

He just knew it.

Chapter 372: Ripped To Shred

Dawn had come—not that Damon would know. It was perpetual dark around here.

However, Evangeline had taken it upon herself to light up the whole place every morning at dawn.

So, they had some degree of normalcy.

He never thought he would appreciate the little things like light, but darkness had taught him to love it.

Time really flew by in that endless darkness. They had grown weary—more so than before. The island of wreckage had also taken damage from the constant monster attacks.

It would fall apart soon. Some parts were already drifting away; the foundation was a mess.

For that reason, they would be leaving.

After a week in these underground ruins, they had grown used to the damp air.

Damon was sure he would soon receive a mastery that gave him resistance to cold.

Either way, it was time to go. He had already memorized all the possible safe routes.

Sylvia had created a meticulous map that charted their path to safety.

His water-based skills would play a big part in their escape.

The most recent one was:

[Skill: Wave Walk]

[Description:]

Inspired by the graceful stride of sea spirits and water-dancers from the Oceanic Temple of Theris, Wave Walk was once a divine rite reserved for emissaries of the deep. Now adapted for battle and travel alike, it allows the user to treat even the wildest oceans as steady ground.

[Effect:]

Grants the ability to walk, run, or stand on any body of water as if it were solid ground. User is unaffected by waves, currents, or surface tension for the duration.

[Type:]

Active

[Cooldown:]

0 seconds

He had no idea where this Theris was, but he figured it would be somewhere on the Voyage Continent. After all, he had once met a Galahad of the Deep.

Damon shook his head, pulling himself away from thoughts of the knight who followed Lady Margan.

The skill was simple: the ability to walk on water as if it were solid ground. There were no hidden effects.

Xander was already standing on a large raft, illuminated by a few makeshift torches coated in some strange oils.

There was a strange collection of sacks—some filled with liquid, others with parts of monster carcasses.

Damon sighed. Some of the monsters had been processed for this...

"Alright, everyone get ready to go... Evangeline, kill the lights."

She nodded slowly, and the entire place was consumed by darkness once more.

Silence followed. For several minutes, it was as if no one was on the island of wreckage.

And then, a small sound on the monster-infested waters. A large object rippled across the surface. Slowly, it began to float away into the void.

Below, monsters hidden beneath the water stirred. They began to swim—slowly and silently—toward the object.

As it floated further from the island, their numbers increased.

On the raft, heat signatures spread—light bloomed as the torches were lit with warm fire.

More monsters followed.

Then, without hesitation, a horrifying abomination surged up from the deep—its skin dark and slick, its fangs like nightmares. It crashed down on the raft.

There was barely any resistance.

Blood mingled with strange oils as the raft shattered into dozens of pieces. Flesh was torn, shredded into raw chunks.

The water's surface went into a frenzy as each monster rushed to claim a piece.

At that moment, drifting oil touched one of the remaining burning scraps of wood.

The fire spread.

Soon, the entire surface was burning.

The monsters continued their frenzy.

A shame, really—they didn't get any human flesh.

Damon and his party were long gone...

At the time they had released the raft...

Damon and his group had rushed to the center of the island under the cover of darkness.

There, in the center, was a large box reinforced with runes. It had been sealed airtight and was just large enough to carry five people.

Sylvia looked at Damon.

"Ahh... you..."

He shook his head.

"Hurry. Not now."

She nodded, entering the box along with the others.

Damon had initially tried putting them in shadow storage, but he couldn't store living people—so he had to change plans.

As soon as they were inside, the heavy box began to float, thanks to Xander's gravity magic cast from within.

Leona was using her storm magic to generate breathable air.

Damon spread his shadow, pulling out a monster corpse—or at least something that resembled one.

It was a costume—stitched together from monster parts, shaped to resemble something half-dead.

Valarie had taught them how to carve concealment runes onto monster-skin disguises, and this one was good to go.

A wire tied the box to the decoy. Damon wore it—it was slightly heavy, but with his first-class advancement, it was no problem.

He glanced at one of the holes in the wreckage, peering into the cold, black water.

It was dark. It was freezing. And he wasn't wearing armor—only the Ashen Crown from his set.

He was definitely going to feel the chill.

Damon extended his shadow perception into the depths. His eyes adjusted—he could see clearly in the dark.

Best of all, he still had the Water Celebration skill.

After all this time, it was finally useful again.

It allowed him to breathe underwater.

That was its only function, so he had to be cautious. There were other factors in the water.

He couldn't fight underwater. Even something weaker than him on land could kill him here.

But the goal wasn't to fight.

It was to escape.

He could have just used Wave Walk and dashed across the surface—but it was too noticeable. Most of the monsters were watching the surface. He'd be overwhelmed in seconds.

The safest route was actually the most dangerous: inside the water.

Deeper down, where the strongest monsters dwelled—but also where there were fewer of them.

As soon as he heard the sound of their bait being destroyed, he silently sank into the depths—pulling the box behind him.

The cold chill stabbed into his spine as he plunged into the wreckage-filled water.

Chapter 373: Deep Tides

Damon sank further down into the wreckage, the box floating behind him.

Pulling it into the water with him was a little harder than he expected, the buoyancy of the wood resisting his grip. He let himself sink, careful to avoid the twisted shrapnel jutting out around him. The water was murky in this part—rust, decay, and time had turned it into a thick, brown-green soup.

As he descended, his eyes caught glimpses of skeletons caught between shattered beams and collapsed walls—silent, brittle reminders of those who had died here. He wondered briefly how they'd met their end before quickly forcing the thought away. He didn't have time to get lost in the past.

His friends were inside the box. He needed to make sure they lived—to get them to breathable air. That cramped space must be suffocating... claustrophobic.

Damon felt the strain ripple through his muscles as he pushed his body to navigate narrow openings, weaving past twisted metal and sunken debris. One wrong move and the entire wreck could collapse on top of him.

But after what felt like endless seconds, he finally broke free of the submerged ruin.

He stopped in place like a fish hiding in a cave. Quiet. Still. Then he extended his shadow perception outward through the water—not too far, just enough to sense his surroundings without alerting anything else.

Then he moved, his body still disguised beneath the grotesque costume of monster body parts. His gaze couldn't help but flicker upward.

The monsters above were still in a frenzy, drawn toward the surface.

Too bad. He had used their chaos to escape.

He pulled the box gently through the open water, resisting the urge to rush. Every move was calculated, slow, cautious. The water around him opened wider, yet it was no less dangerous. Beneath him lay the fragments of a once-great city—buildings, personal effects, shattered pieces of history, art, and lost technology.

He moved deeper into the ruins, the box tethered to his omnidirectional gear with thin wires. Damon remained vigilant, his shadow perception reaching only a few meters in every direction. The water weighed down on him—his body heavy and sluggish.

Somehow, he could still breathe. His lungs processed oxygen as if he were above water. It was the underwater effects of [water celebration], quietly doing its work.

He must've looked bizarre—some small, stitched-together creature hauling a massive wooden box through the deep.

Damon pressed on, his body heat already adapted to the chill of the depths. His heartbeat steady under the effects of Remorseless.

He crept closer to a massive sunken structure, careful not to attract attention. As he swam past a large, open crevice, his danger sense suddenly tingled.

Without thinking, Damon turned to shadow, slipping free just as a monstrous jaw burst out from the darkness below.

The creature had lunged at him—something massive, something ancient—but it missed by a hair.

Its presence was suffocating, so vast and overwhelming that Damon instinctively knew: it was far beyond his rank.

The beast retreated into the hole it had come from, and Damon was thrown aside by the turbulent current caused by its movement. The box followed, tumbling through the water alongside him.

Damon bit his lip as the current suddenly changed again.

His eyes widened.

Ahead was a swirling underwater spatial rift—a spiraling vortex of distortion pulling in debris and water alike. Anything caught in its pull was crushed, devoured, and transported to some unknown place.

Gritting his teeth, Damon reached out, fingers stretching desperately until they latched onto a piece of broken wreckage—wedged tightly, unmoving.

He groaned, muscles screaming as the current tried to rip him and the box away. He tugged with all he had, praying the wires holding the box wouldn't snap.

Finally—snap!

He broke free, swept upward by a rising current.

Damon gasped. Or at least, tried to. He was still underwater. He didn't understand how the skill worked, or why he could breathe—but he could.

The ache in his body began to fade.

He drifted beside a moss-covered wreck, his senses sharp.

He recognized this place. Sylvia had drawn a map of the underwater ruins—meticulously detailed.

This area was dangerous. Not just because of monsters, but because of other, more arcane threats—carnivorous flora, unstable spatial rifts, and time anomalies that twisted the laws of nature.

Now came the hard part—getting to the deeper section and locating the hole Sylvia had marked as the exit to the surface.

Damon knocked slowly on the box.

He waited.

Seconds passed.

A knock came from inside.

A signal—they were still alive. The box was intact. No leaks.

If there had been any, Matia was supposed to freeze the damage shut with her ice magic.

He took a deep breath.

And then plunged downward, fast as he could.

This part was the most dangerous—home to beasts that even carefully crafted basic concealment runes couldn't fool.

So the only plan was to rush.

As he sank, he knocked twice on the box. Xander understood the signal and activated his gravity magic.

The box grew heavy. Gravity pulled them faster.

The pressure increased rapidly. Cracks appeared along the box's surface, the ancient wood groaning as the magic reinforcing it began to fail.

Seconds passed.

But they were so close—

Then the world shifted.

Something opened its eyes.

Golden. Ancient. Massive.

Fins larger than a cathedral unfurled slowly in the darkness.

Damon froze as fangs the size of towers parted, sucking in water like a vortex. The creature was so massive—so fast—he hadn't even noticed it until now.

He kicked the box, signaling Xander—hurry!

The creature wasn't in a rush.

It moved with the slow, terrible confidence of something that had never once been prey.

'Shit... shit... shit...'

Its eyes blinked, staring at the box... and at Damon in his monster disguise.

Damon turned into a shadow again, slipping free from the costume. He kicked the discarded suit upward—bait.

The creature's gaze shifted, distracted for just a moment.

Damon fired his gear, the grappling wires shooting toward a cluster of broken walls and pillars where a half-crumbled stairway led up through the ruins.

The creature turned back—but Damon was already gone, slipping upward, dragging the box with him.

He breached the surface, air exploding into his lungs.

With a gasp, he hurled the box onto the base of the staircase, the stone etched with glowing, unfamiliar runes.

He collapsed beside it, panting.

"Gwar... gawer..."

A strange noise echoed above him—deep in the shadows.

Water dripped from the ceiling, plinking into the silence.

This... was just the beginning.

Chapter 374: Drowned Corridor

Damon didn't have time to contemplate the dread of what he'd seen beneath the water. All he knew was—they were out of that part.

Now came the next, just as perilous. If they were unlucky, they'd end up as food in the belly of some horror—or worse—cursed, or better yet, corrupted by rot.

The sounds in the distance were unnerving, horrifying even—but after what he had witnessed beneath the surface, Damon would take his chances with whatever roamed above.

A loud crack shattered the moment—the box beside him caved in, exploding into splinters of damp wood.

Leona rolled out, sword already drawn, wearing the awakened shell form of her armor—a light tunic threaded with metal and glowing lines of power.

The others scrambled out one by one, weapons clutched tightly in hand, breathing heavy and erratic.

Xander tore what remained of the box apart with a grunt, emerging with a shortened version of his spear gripped in his hand, his eyes sweeping their surroundings like a hawk hunting prey.

Sylvia's eyes flicked toward Damon, her gaze softening. He was soaked from head to toe, clothes clinging to his body, hair matted and wet. After nearly three months without cutting it, it now fell past his shoulders—giving him an almost ethereal, otherworldly appearance under the dim light.

Concern etched into her face as she stepped toward him. She squatted beside where he lay, breathing hard.

"Are you okay..."

Damon glanced up at her with a tired smile.

"Just need to catch my breath..."

She nodded, but the worry didn't leave her eyes.

Leona and Matia moved with trained precision, taking point and scanning the terrain for danger. The air was thick—smothering—and aside from the distant snarls of monsters echoing through the ruined structure, all else was swallowed in darkness.

There were light sources—but faint. Crystals, shaped like bulbs, embedded into walls and ceilings. Their glow was dim, barely enough to light their faces.

Evangeline narrowed her eyes.

"There's light in this place... does that mean the light doesn't attract the creatures in the rift?"

Xander turned his head slowly, gaze serious and suspicious.

"I'm surprised they still work after so many thousands of years... this is rune technology, right? It should've faded..."

Damon pushed himself upright, dirt and decay clinging to his wet clothes as his palms slapped the stone floor.

"Runes don't last that long—not the ones drawn on simple parchment. But advanced ones... they can last centuries, maybe more."

Xander's expression shifted. He couldn't hold it in anymore. The doubt had festered too long.

"What kind of freak are you..."

Damon raised an eyebrow.

"Excuse me?"

"You're excused... but I've got questions. And I'm sorry if this isn't the time, but too many things about your powers don't make sense."

The girls turned, eyes narrowing at Xander. He wasn't wrong. Damon had never explained.

Damon waved a hand, brushing his hair back.

"So what? I don't owe you an explanation. Why are you getting up in my business?"

Evangeline's gaze shifted to the familiar locket hanging from Damon's neck. There were questions behind her stare too, ones she hadn't voiced.

She didn't think much about it then, but the more she saw it...

"That's enough, you two," she said, trying to cool the tension.

Xander scoffed and clicked his tongue, turning away with a harsh glare.

Damon didn't let up. He waved his hand again, summoning shadows that slithered to him from every corner. With precise control, he activated Shadow Storage, pulling his sword from the murky veil.

Evangeline narrowed her eyes and whispered.

"I have questions too... but fine. Keep your secrets. Just know—your story doesn't add up. Some of your spells... they're not even shadow-based. Like the ability to breathe underwater?"

Evangeline gripped his arm as he tried to walk past.

"Well, not that I care—keep your secrets. But... at least don't treat us like we're all idiots."

Damon ignored her, sword in hand, already moving.

"Let's get moving. There's bound to be something here. The faster we reach the surface... the faster we get the hell out of this cursed place."

They nodded in agreement, falling into silent formation behind him.

Sylvia's gaze lingered. Her expression was unreadable—anxious, yet quietly resolved.

Her fingers hovered over her chest, heart pounding as she stared at Damon's back.

Her eyes flickered with a newfound resolve.

Damon didn't stop for anything else. He didn't care. He just wanted to get out of this place. Whatever entity had been inside the water hadn't followed—and that was the only thing he was grateful for.

"I... I have to live... I have to end it..." he muttered to himself with a thin, broken smile.

A quiet witness to the madness trailing behind him. Waiting. Watching. Whispering. He wasn't far from the edge.

He stepped forward, climbing a long flight of stone stairs, their cracks soaked in decay and dampness. The smell was unbearable—rot, fear, and despair lingering like smoke in the air. The silence was pierced only by the distant moans of unseen misery.

The walls were cold to the touch, sweating moisture that ran in rhythmic drops like a cruel ticking clock.

The others followed close behind, silent. Leona and Xander should have been leading—the team's heavy hitters—but this time, Damon had taken point. Their leader... and their scout.

His Shadow Perception remained active, scanning every direction. Danger Sense screamed at him constantly in this dead place, surrounded by echoes of death. Every step forward sent a new warning, another omen.

Still, he pushed forward, teeth clenched, blade drawn.

They reached the top. Damon halted.

Before them stood a towering door—an ancient relic, a memory of when the city still lived and breathed with people. He stepped up to the side, where a runic dial waited in silence.

Without hesitation, he placed his fingers on it and entered a password—something Valarie had once told them in passing.

Casual, like everything else she did.

She had given them override access to most systems—she was, after all, one of the rulers of this city.

The massive door creaked open, stone grinding against stone. Damon braced himself, half-expecting another body of water behind the threshold. But it was a false alarm.

A gust of heavy air hit his face. Water sloshed beneath his feet.

He stepped forward, eyes narrowing.

A long corridor stretched out before them, lined with broken pillars and half-submerged ruins.

It was a way forward... maybe even the way to the surface.

But there was a problem.

The corridor was completely flooded—water up to his ankles, then deeper. He couldn't tell how far it went down. Worse still—within the black water, shadows moved. Large, hideous things with too many teeth and eyes that glimmered like wet glass.

Hungry.

Watching.

Waiting.

This was the only way forward.

Chapter 375: Frozen Corridor

Damon smiled at the creatures lurking beneath the water—eyes glinting, their distorted silhouettes already rising toward the surface. They had noticed the group.

What else could he do? He'd long since given up on menacing expressions. It was always the same twisted circle.

Monsters tried to kill them. They fought back, won—or fled. And when they fled, they carried more mental scars than physical ones.

He turned his gaze to Matia.

"Can you freeze this body of water?"

He crouched beside the edge, watching the ripples spiral out into the darkness.

"It's not as fast or as vast the water in the underground area."

Matia frowned. One thing interesting about this girl—she never questioned Damon.

She simply nodded.

"I can with some support... but these monsters can easily shatter any ice I create and attack us..."

Damon nodded, his thin smile unchanged.

"That's fine. As long as we have a solid surface to stand on..."

He gestured toward the side walls—stone and decay-slicked metal lining the corridor's edges.

"If you don't mind, freeze that part too. Create something we can stand on... just incase."

Xander crossed his arms, frowning.

"Hmm. Are you planning for us to run across?"

Damon tilted his head, lips curling.

"Is it that obvious?"

Sylvia activated her skill, summoning the invisible journey book that floated in front of her—its cover serene divine yet demonic.

She asked a question, and a few seconds later, blood burst from her eyes, nose, and ears.

Her expression didn't even flinch. She had grown used to the consequences of asking.

Calmly, she pulled a handkerchief from her bosom and dabbed the blood away with practiced grace.

The others said nothing. For better or worse, they had grown used to Sylvia's foul skill. It was one of the reasons they were still alive after all.

Her ability to divine the unseen had saved them time and time again.

"The creatures inside are small... on the weaker side," she rasped, voice hoarse and papery.

Leona raised an eyebrow.

"How weak is 'on the weaker side'? I see something in there that looks like it's in the third class advancement..."

Sylvia gave a slow, hollow nod.

Evangeline groaned, dragging a hand across her face.

They really needed to see a mental health quartermaster. Did her party really just forget that a third-class monster could level a small town?

A rank two master could slaughter villages. These monsters were no joke.

And yet... she couldn't disagree with them.

The party was still in the first class, but they had slain monsters at the second.

They hadn't defeated anything in the third class yet—but they had survived close encounters.

Fleeing had become second nature. They had even escaped brushes with things far worse than third class. Some of those entities felt downright eldritch—some of them were eldritch.

Evangeline clenched her fist.

"We just need to run fast enough to get to the other side... seems easy enough..."

Leona slapped a palm to her face.

"Famous last words... why do I feel like Damon's getting crazier and we're about to die?"

Damon's eyes flicked sideways, lingering on the reflection in the water. A whisper curled in his ear like breath.

'It's not like that's all of my plan...'

He reached into the shadows beside him—into the loose space where light refused to linger—and pulled out several vials filled with strange, shimmering liquids. Potions, dangerous —or cursed—by the Beldam.

"We never got around to figuring out what these do," he said, almost casually. "So I say... dump them into the water and let the creatures find out."

He turned to Leona.

"You. Draw runes with the Name of Lightning."

"I know," Leona interrupted, flipping her hair back. "I was paying attention when Valarie was teaching us."

Matia's gaze flicked to Leona, suddenly cold.

Leona drew back, frowning.

"What? What did I do? Why are you glaring at me?"

Matia paused—clearly caught off guard—then lowered her head slightly.

"Sorry about that... I..." she glanced at Damon, voice quieter now. "Should I create runes with the Name of Ice?"

Damon nodded. Truthfully, he appreciated that Leona hadn't needed an explanation. That was growth.

Though Matia's sudden hostility was... unexpected.

"Alright," Damon said, rising to his feet, brushing dust off his gloves. "Everyone, get ready."

The others nodded as Matia and Leona began searching for suitable materials to inscribe the runes on.

They settled on smooth, flat rocks scattered near the corridor's edge.

Damon sat down on a broken stone bench, pulling out a few rations. He shared them without a word while the two women worked.

They failed more often than they succeeded. Several attempts fizzled or cracked under the wrong pressure. But after an hour or two, they had created several stones, each etched with a basic rune—lightning and ice.

Then he threw vials of unknown potions into the water.

He didn't wait to observe the effects; he just had a feeling they would be bad.

Damon passed the lightning-inscribed stones around.

No instructions were needed.

They knew what to do.

He held his own rune stone, eyes narrowed. The others mirrored him, arms tense and ready.

Leona's body began to glow—electricity snaking across her limbs, arcing between her fingers.

"Now—"

Damon flung his stone into the water. The others followed suit without hesitation.

The runes hit the surface with a splash, sinking in tandem.

The moment they began to descend, Leona unleashed a flash—a white bolt of lightning erupted from her palms, illuminating the drowned corridor with a searing wave of light.

The runes responded instantly—glowing bright, pulsing like lightning rods. The current snapped to them and spread, diffusing through the water. A violent hum filled the corridor.

Under the surface, monsters twitched—stunned—rippled silhouettes convulsing.

Water exploded upward as the creatures thrashed.

At the same time, Matia raised her hand, summoning spears of jagged ice and launching them. Each one impaled the stones she had marked with the Name of Ice, forcing their magic deeper into the currents.

The water began to freeze from the edges inward—but Matia wasn't done.

From behind her back, she drew the main form of her Ascendant Weapon.

It slithered out like smoke, formless, then coalesced into a crystalline spear. With a silent breath, she hurled it.

It shot into the center of the corridor—crashing into the heart of the chaotic waters. The air screamed with a sonic boom as the spear embedded itself, Matia staggering back, face pale from the mana drain.

The effect was immediate.

The spear became the anchor, and ice spread from it like wildfire. In seconds, the drowned corridor became a frozen graveyard.

Massive monsters trapped in the water, shocked by Leona's lightning—now locked in place beneath solid ice.

But it wouldn't last.

"Now—run for the other side!" Damon shouted, drawing his sword.

He dashed forward, boots hammering the slick surface.

The party followed without hesitation—their combined footsteps thundering across the ice.

Behind them, the frozen water groaned.

Cracks splintered beneath their heels as the monsters stirred—struggling to break free.

Prey were in sight.

And the hunt had begun.

Chapter 376: Ice Rush

Honestly, the distance wasn't much. For someone in the first class advancement, they could cross it in mere moments.

But at this very moment... that short distance felt so far away.

It was as if time was moving slower; he felt as if something as abstruse as time was against them.

Damon had taken what little could be useful for the plan. He could sense the shadows under the water—well, actually, under the ice now. They had frozen solid.

Some of them had gone stiff, while others writhed, suffering under the effects of the potions Damon had tossed into the water.

The stronger ones though... they were doing just fine. A little stunned by the lightning, sure—but still able to move.

Slower than normal, weaker, some even drowsy, but still able to move, able to hunt. These abominations were powerful... worst still, something deeper could appear.

Which wasn't good news for Damon's party.

However, it could have been worse. Way worse... At least most of the weaker ones weren't moving upwards to break the ice.

Damon ran as the ice beneath him began to groan and crack all around.

The monsters under the drowned corridor—or now that it was frozen, it was better to call it the Frozen Corridor—were starting to stir.

Damon gritted his teeth.

'Why the hell am I thinking about something so stupid right now?'

One wrong move and his half-baked plan would get them all killed.

The ice in front of him shattered—bursting upwards with a massive splash.

A pulsing, rotting mass of flesh surged out of the water, then sank back down with a greater splash, sending sharp slivers of ice and water everywhere.

It was brief, but Damon felt its aura.

Third rank.

Its skin was like a toad's—bumpy, slick, and covered in strange, wart-like boils. It had large whiskers, like some abominable catfish.

Damon didn't see its whole body—but the thing had just taken a huge chunk of ice out of their path toward the center.

That's fine...

They had alternatives. No need to risk facing that thing head-on.

"To the side, now!" Damon barked—but truthfully, he didn't even need to say it.

They were already sprinting toward the side of the corridor, near the wall.

Matia raised her hand, slowing slightly. With a quick wave, she created a crude slide of ice that reached toward the side wall, where she'd formed jagged ledges.

A shame, though—those things didn't look all that strong.

Xander slapped each party member on the back, casting his spell. Their weights dropped, light as feathers.

As they climbed up—

Damon, with his parkour skill and at the top of his rank, ran straight up the wall like it was flat ground. He flipped and landed on the ice path above with a smooth thud.

But of course, the monsters wouldn't make it easy.

The creature—and a few others—lunged upward. Damon spotted hideous tentacles. Then something with long, needle-like limbs—it looked like a mosquito. Another looked like a bloated blowfish.

'Ranged types... damn it, I'm right again.'

One of them opened its foul mouth. A stream of acidic water blasted out, targeting the section of ice they had just climbed from.

Sylvia ducked, narrowly avoiding a faceful of acid.

The ice beneath her buckled and cracked—shattering into jagged sheets—but she didn't look bothered.

Instead, she drew her bow and fired mid-jump, loosing an arrow straight into the eye of one of the creatures as she landed atop a falling chunk of ice.

Evangeline didn't hesitate.

Deathly beams of light lanced from her hands, slamming into the monsters.

The waters and ice erupted in a canopy of chaos and violence.

Matia was already at work, but not aiming at the monsters—she was freezing the surrounding ice instead, reinforcing it with thick layers of frost.

Damon caught a flash of white lightning as Leona staggered.

She was low on mana. She couldn't waste it recklessly.

He met her eyes and nodded once.

She understood.

Damon leapt from the wall—straight down toward the shattered water below.

But contrary to the monsters' expectations... he didn't land on the ice.

He landed on the water—standing atop it as if it were solid.

Wave Walk.

They rushed toward him, hoping to drag him under.

But Damon didn't sink. He stood firm, like a phantom.

He wasn't there to show off. He was the decoy. The support.

Right above one of the monsters, Leona appeared in a flash of lightning, her armor teleporting her directly into range. She swung—her blade cleaving across the monster's head as blood sprayed in every direction.

But she was falling toward the water—

Damon dashed forward, kicking her midair and sending her flying toward solid ice in the distance.

She landed in a roll and kept running, smiling.

This was the plan. She could only teleport mid-swing, so Damon had to ensure she'd land safely.

Matia leapt from the ice path back toward the center.

Her ascendant weapon was pinned there, the source of the freezing force that kept everything solid. She ran alongside the others, toward the end of the frozen corridor.

She grabbed it without looking.

Damon raised his hand.

"Ashborn."

The black flames erupted like living shadows. Damon screamed inside as his mind suffered the backlash—tenfold the pain of burning alive.

But the monsters screeched louder.

He gritted his teeth through the agony.

Then, shifting into a shadow, Damon dove into the ice—Shadow Movement—gliding swiftly beneath the chaos.

He slipped past the monsters in seconds.

Then—he felt it.

Something roared behind him. The ice exploded—shattered—ripped apart as something colossal rose from the water.

Its presence made his blood freeze.

Damon reformed at the corridor's end, just as his friends scrambled toward the shattered wall and wreckage leading out of the corridor.

He fired his omnidirectional gear up at a wall, catching Evangeline by the waist and pulling her up just as the colossal creature burst from the water, smashing the walls around it.

Damon hung by the wreckage, clutching Evangeline close, staring into the bleak, beady eyes of the abomination.

Chapter 377: Dark Obstacles

The creature watched them as they slowly began their ascent through the narrow but shattered remains of vast walls and floors—tilted, broken, and mangled by a battle far beyond their rank.

It felt as if some unknown entities had decided to toy with the structure the way a child would with a puzzle—mixing, removing, and rejoining pieces however they pleased.

Damon wasn't even sure anymore if he was climbing across a floor, hanging from a ceiling, or scaling a wall.

His gaze remained fixed on the creature, half-expecting some kind of attack. But it did nothing—only sank back into the water.

Even in the depths, he still felt its gaze on him, malice that could not be hidden, and its powerful but subdued aura of higher rank.

He wasn't sure if it had given up or was simply territorial. Either way, he was glad they made it out...

This would be a long climb; falling would mean death in the jaws of whatever that creature was called. The climb was bound to be eventful.

His hold around Evangeline's waist loosened slightly. She leaned her head away, glanced at him for a moment, then looked back down at the water.

She let out a breath of relief, then shifted her eyes back to him.

"You can let go of my hips now..."

Damon gave a crooked smile at her words.

"Sure—happy swimming..."

She quickly grabbed onto him, uncertain if he might actually let her fall.

"I meant let me down by a wall... oh, forget it—I'll do it myself."

Without another word, she shifted her weight. With a small leap, she gripped a jagged side of the wall—her fist shattered the old stone, carving out a handhold.

She staggered for a moment, nearly slipping—but caught herself.

Damon sneered.

"Would've been much easier if I pulled us up."

Without waiting, the wires of his omnidirectional gear grew taut, pulling him upward until he was side by side with Sylvia, the first to ascend.

Their eyes met briefly, and for a split second, he remembered how she kissed him.

He quickly looked away, gaze tilting skyward.

"How are you guys holding up?" he called.

"What do you think?" Leona muttered.

"It's not like we were trapped in flooded underground ruins for days, then crammed into a box, then forced to run across thin ice—literally. And now we're climbing to goddess knows where..."

Damon sneered. "Great, so you're alright then."

Leona nodded with a relaxed expression. "Yeah, actually, I'm doing pretty great..."

Xander jumped across chunks of broken stone, using his gravity magic to stay light as a feather.

"As long as nothing else happens, we'll be fine."

Everyone stopped.

All eyes slowly turned toward Xander.

Sylvia sighed—a warning, coming from the seer of the group.

"You just jinxed us."

Leona glared at him. "Way to go, Xander."

Damon followed up, expression dry.

"I knew this idiot was going to get us killed. I just didn't think it'd be with his mouth..."

Xander's eyebrow twitched. He turned to Evangeline.

"Tell me you don't believe this nonsense..."

Evangeline sighed.

"If I'm the one who ends up dead or corrupted... bring a flower to my grave."

Damon blinked, perching on a shattered balcony as he pushed himself upward.

"That got dark real quick..."

Sylvia gave him a distant smile.

"If I die... take my corpse somewhere I've never been. Bury me there... maybe your hometown."

Damon winced. Actually he came from a village.

"Okay... that's not creepy at all."

Matia had been quiet all this time, looking deep in thought.

"If I die, I want to die a warrior's death. Fighting... with a sword in my hand. That way... my father won't think I'm pathetic."

She raised her head—expression cold and sharp.

"If I become corrupted... kill me. I'd rather be dead than live like that."

Leona turned to Damon.

"How did we go from teasing Xander about being a jinx... to something this dark?"

Damon opened his mouth to say something—only to pause when Matia spoke again.

"I've seen what happens to creatures that get consumed by the rot. We have Ascendant armor, so we have resistance—but we're not immune..."

She gritted her teeth, emotion flashing across her face—something Damon hadn't seen in her for a long time.

"My people value beauty above all. That's why wingless fairies are shunned. I spent my whole life feeling inadequate. I refuse to feel that way when I die.

Becoming something hideous... monstrous... I'd rather die."

Damon bit his lip. He didn't even know what to say.

"You won't be corrupted..."

Matia's gaze never left his.

He looked down, then back up at the dark-haired fairy—the one who'd sacrificed her wings for him.

"If you become corrupted... I will kill you. I promise."

Matia smiled, nodding.

"I'll hold you to that."

Leona glanced between them, looking disgusted.

"Geez, you guys are so dark and edgy. Seriously... did your brains get fried from everything we've been through?"

Her voice wavered—frustrated and shaking. Then, the tears came.

"No one's going to die... we're going to go home. All of us. We've made it this far..."

She clenched her fists.

"We're gonna make it. We'll all live—we'll all go home."

Damon clenched his own fist. She was right. They had to live.

"Right... forget what I said, Matia. We'll live. We'll go home. And your wish is—"

He stopped.

Everyone was staring—not at him, but behind. Or... above him.

He sighed.

This place was slanted, twisted—nothing would be easy to fight in here.

Damon felt the hairs on his neck rise before his perception even picked them up...

Then he felt it—something entering the range of his shadow perception.

Its form was strange... its shadow even stranger.

Damon slowly turned his face, eyes scanning upward.

Black, human-shaped phantoms were drifting down from above—slow, weightless.

He had seen many things since being trapped in Lysithara. Some strange. Some eldritch.

But these...

These were rare. Not unheard of, but rare.

The dangerous kind.

The unpredictable kind.

Especially hovering over a deep pool of water—with something still lurking below.

Sylvia's face paled. Her whisper barely escaped her lips:

"...Shades."

Chapter 378 Undeath

The world of Aetherus was vast—thus, a world of perpetual war. And where there was war, there would always be death.

Many things were ruined by war. Yet, war did not always bring ruin. Damon—and anyone born in Aetherus—had come to learn that war was also a driver of innovation, technological advancement, and more.

That said, the horrors of war were far more numerous. So hideous were they, that even the luster of the so-called innovations born from war could not conceal them.

Among these horrors... was undeath.

As corpses piled high in a magical world, some refused to stay dead. In their mortal hearts they carried resentment and unfulfilled longing.

They would rise again—undead. Some among them chose this path, performing secret black rituals to attain undeath.

Others were forced. Many forms of undeath existed.

These were called the undead.

Among them were Shades.

Their bodies were like ghosts... but they were not ghosts. Their souls lingered in the world in the form of shadows—black, cold, and wrong.

At times, they resembled nothing more than ordinary shadows, visible only in bright light. What made them visible... also made them vulnerable. Light was their bane.

It weakened their form. Weakened their power.

Damon had recalled everything he could find about Shades.

These creatures were of low intelligence. They were intangible, capable of inducing fear, unleashing mental attacks, and inflicting paralysis. They were immune to several spells—sleep, poison, and others.

They could drain life force as well. Among other abilities.

More than that, they were like fog in the wind—hard to strike, and surprisingly fast.

Normally, this wouldn't have been a problem.

Except...

Damon and the others were hanging, trying to climb through a claustrophobic, geometrically disordered wreckage of buildings—walls, pillars, ceilings, all collapsed in chaotic ruin.

Getting attacked by Shades here could paralyze them or debuff their minds. It wouldn't have been a fatal problem.

Except...

Damon looked down.

The calm water beneath them rippled unnaturally.

He could see the monster beneath the surface. Watching them. Waiting for one of them to fall—paralyzed—so it could feast.

Damon gritted his teeth.

'So that's why it didn't bother chasing us... Not that it could, in such narrow confines.'

But it knew the Shades would try to stop them.

He sighed.

The Shades felt strange in Damon's perception—which was saying something, considering how unusual his perception already was. He saw them as floating mirrors in his mind. Like distorted glass, each one reflecting not light... but presence.

Shadows.

He didn't get to finish that thought.

The Shades let out a soundless shriek.

Damon's head reeled—something hammered his mind like a war mace.

The pale crown resting on his head resisted the blow, alongside the shaky defense of his Lv2 mastery: Mental Contamination Resistance.

His party members gritted their teeth, holding tightly to the jagged walls under the shriek of tens of Shades...

The effect was mind-numbing.

But they resisted.

As if on cue, the monster in the water opened its maw and sucked in a massive volume of the surrounding liquid.

Damon's danger sense buzzed.

The creature slammed its grotesque jaws shut and unleashed a pressurized stream of water straight upward—

Damon didn't even need to speak.

Xander dropped down, floating with the aid of gravity.

His armor shifted, taking its Sovereign Mantle form, fully encasing him—becoming a living shield.

The water stream tore through rocks, shredded the remnants of buildings—

Xander's barriers shattered under the force of the blast.

He reinforced his body with gravity, bracing for impact, but the supercharged stream met him with a deafening bang.

His body was blasted upward, blood streaming from the seams of his helm—

But he roared, fighting against the current, enduring it because of his First Class Skill:

The Vow.

Your will is as unyielding as your word—once committed, neither you nor your body will break.

He wasn't going to break. Not here. Not now.

Floating upward, blood staining his teeth beneath the helm, Xander smiled.

"You won't get past me..."

Damon clenched his fists. Xander had survived an attack from a monster of Third Class. Damon couldn't help but reevaluate just how durable Xander Ravenscroft truly was.

He wanted to help.

But the Shades had made their move.

Evangeline's hand glowed, charged with light magic, illuminating the entire area.

Honestly, that was all she could do...

If she and the others went all-out offensively, they risked bringing the entire structure down—burying themselves alive.

Damon raised his hand, ignoring the searing pain in his skull, and unleashed Ashborn.

Black flames rose like living shadows—consuming the Shades ahead of him in waves of soundless screams.

Matia lifted her hand and sent out a wave of ice, but the sheets passed harmlessly through the intangible creatures.

The surviving Shades vanished into the walls...

And then, the system chimes rang out.

[You have slain Shade of the Forbidden Library.]

[You have gained 5 Attribute Points.]

[You have slain Shade of the Forbidden Library.]

[You have gained 5 Attribute Points.]

[You have slain Shade of the Forbidden Library.]

[You have gained 5 Attribute Points.]

[You have slain Shades of the Forbidden Library.]

But more were coming.

From the walls around them, the Shades returned—pulling at their legs, their arms—trying to toss them into the deep below.

These vile phantoms... hated the living.

And beneath them, the monster in the water grew more relentless—blasting stream after stream of water upward in fury.

Damon couldn't unleash Ashborn again—not because of the pain, but because the flames devoured the little oxygen in the air.

He gritted his teeth.

"What do I do, dammit...?"

They were running low on time. On air. And now, more Shades were closing in...

Then it hit him.

He'd forgotten.

He hadn't tried it since the last time, since that failure when he used it on the rift creatures.

Spreading his Shadow Perception, Damon searched for the nearest Shade lurking inside the walls.

He raised his hand, uncertain.

And gave a command.

"...Stop."

He whispered it.

A low breath.

And then—all at once—the Shades that had been hidden inside the walls... froze.

And turned their heads to look at him.

Chapter 379: Dominion

Another name for shades was shadows. These entities, by their very nature, were nothing more than wandering remnants, echoes steeped in resentment—hatred birthed from the lives they once lived and the pain they carried into death.

Damon merely took a chance. It was a small gamble.

Their situation had become dire. The broken, claustrophobic wreckage of collapsed buildings left little room for brute force—too much power could bring the whole place crashing down on them. They needed precision. Not destruction.

The shades hated them. Not just hated—resented. Their twisted souls envied the living, cursed them with every claw and whisper. They wanted them dead.

That was why Damon used the skill.

[Skill: Shadow Control]

[Description:]

"The lost abound, hunger in their souls as they steal shadows, replacing their stolen forms with the essence of those they take. Those whose shadows vanish become like them—lost, wandering, forever chasing what was stolen. In their absence, the shadows once lost now bend to your will, shaped by desire, lingering and intangible, as though they were never meant to be seen."

[Effect:]

The user can control intangible shadows—those not bound to physical form—manipulating them with will and essence. Masterless shadows now bend to your command, a force under your control.

[Type:]

Active

[Cooldown:]

10 seconds

He glanced at the shade he had just commanded. Its clawed hand froze mid-swing, inches from Sylvia's legs.

The others turned toward him, their hollow gazes suddenly aware.

And then—they screamed.

A frenzy erupted. Dozens of shades surged toward Damon like a tide of vengeance.

He launched himself across the corridor, feet tapping from one shattered wall to the next. His fingers twitched to activate the skill again, but—

'Crap... I forgot. Ten seconds cooldown...'

Right. Ten seconds. The cooldown wasn't an issue when dealing with inanimate shadows—those were effortless, like breathing—but these things were different.

They had intent, resistance. Weak, but it was still there. They had little intelligence; however, they were still born of strong emotions, emotions that even death could not erase.

Still, the first shade remained under his will, and he could feel it—its submission.

Like a faint tether anchored to his soul.

'Deal with them...' he commanded silently.

The shade moved.

It leapt into the mob of its brethren and was torn apart in seconds, shredded into formless wisps.

Damon felt the moment it was erased; it met oblivion. He could sense what little desire remained of its hollow will.

Losing a shade did not recover the shadow energy he had expended; that energy was lost for good, along with the shade under his control.

Sylvia released a barrage of white moon light—arrows like streaks of divine fury that barely held them back.

"What is going on? They're getting more aggressive—!"

Damon grit his teeth. Nine seconds... ten.

He didn't hesitate. He expanded his shadow perception outward like a pulse, flooding the terrain with awareness. Every shape. Every flicker. Every phantom limb hidden behind walls and ceilings—he saw it all.

Underground... deep. Shadows in the walls. In the ceilings. Countless... horrid... waiting.

His eyes widened.

'Two kilometers? Wait... this is further—'

His range had grown. His perception had expanded beyond its old limit.

He didn't have time to be amazed.

It was obvious. Every time he absorbed mana cores, his shadow deepened—richer, denser. This wasn't about quantity—it was quality.

That's what class advancement did. That's why a first class could decimate dozens who hadn't advanced.

Same for a second class versus a first.

The gap only grew wider with increasing rank and class; the chasm would only widen.

The thoughts flashed through his mind like sparks in a storm.

Still... he hesitated.

Shadow Control had its limits. He had once moved a tide of inanimate shadows—but this... these were souls, beings of twisted intent.

Could he handle this many?

If he failed—if he lost control—he wouldn't just run out of energy. He would become one of them. A ravenous, uncontrollable thing driven by hunger and madness.

He might gain an army. That was the upside.

But he'd become the predator.

The corridor around them, fractured and misaligned like a cracked bone, would become their grave if he kept thinking.

Above them—shades crawling.

Below—black water hiding monsters.

As if summoned by the cruel hand of fate, the abomination beneath them continued shooting jets of pressurized water straight up, like a serpent trying to swat flies.

Xander roared, placing himself in its path, his armor splintering but holding.

Leona and Matia retaliated—ice and lightning, barely flickering under their low mana.

Sylvia and Evangeline fought back-to-back with him, their radiant flashes burning back the dark.

Damon spun past a shade—grabbed it with his hand.

It should have been intangible. Yet somehow he could touch it. Only with his bare hands, though.

"Since when did I start to hesitate..." he muttered, eyes narrowing.

"I'll deal with it."

He raised his hand.

"Obey me."

His shadow energy bled from him like a wound torn open.

He felt the hunger rise.

Not metaphorical hunger. Primal.

His stomach growled as his vision dimmed. Colors drained from the world—reds, greens, blues—all bled out until only black and white remained.

Monochrome.

He saw the glow inside Sylvia and Evangeline.

It wasn't light. It was taste.

He wanted to devour them.

"No..." he gasped, and sacrificed a thousand mana points—permanently—to his shadow.

It wasn't enough.

He poured more.

And more.

And more.

His mana bled away like a severed artery.

Finally, the drain began to slow.

Mana [789 / 890]

He staggered.

'I didn't even try to take all of them... just the ones near me...'

His head throbbed like it was being crushed between anvils, reformed, then crushed again.

Damon lifted his gaze—cold, empty.

But he understood now.

This was the true power of Shadow Control.

It wasn't just manipulation.

It was dominion.

He looked down at the water... at the beast stirring... and then at Xander, bloodied and floating, shielding them all.

He made a single command.

"Kill it."

And the shades moved.

A black cloud of death, their forms carrying Damon's murderous intent—hungry shadows unleashed upon a monster of flesh and rage.

Chapter 380: Chaotic Passage

Evangeline had no idea what was happening. In all the chaos, the entire party had been doing their best—but out of nowhere, the sea of shades doubled in number. It was almost as if the abominable wraiths had become more aggressive than before.

She felt a murderous intent so thick it nearly suffocated her.

All she could do was brace herself, preparing to go all out.

Her skill—Purge—flared to life as she readied to destroy as many of them as she could.

But to her surprise, the murderous intent wasn't aimed at her... or anyone in her party.

No. The shades dove downward—towards the water—with claws bared, every movement screaming with a savage desire to rip through anything in their path.

Leona stumbled, lethargic from how low her mana had gotten.

"Xander, look out..." Her voice was barely audible over the din of battle echoing through the slanted wreckage.

Xander turned—his eyes widened, his face paling at the sight of so many shades. But then... they passed him harmlessly, rushing by with a chilling wind trailing behind them.

A cold breath on his neck. But not a single scratch.

"Come on, let's go... now!"

From the very top of the narrow chamber, Damon's voice cut through, calling out as he waved a hand to them.

Xander's gaze dropped to the water, where the massive creature had begun to churn and swell again, preparing to release another devastating stream.

But then—its attention shifted. It saw the shades barreling toward it and hesitated.

Xander acted. He amplified his gravity magic—or rather, reduced it.

His body lifted, rising fast, floating up through the crumbling chamber. As he reached Leona and Matia, he extended a blood-streaked hand.

They grabbed on instantly, and with a grunt of effort, he pulled them up with him.

Blood dripped from his armor. His jaw was clenched tight. His head spun slightly from blood loss, but he was otherwise unbroken.

His skill—The Vow!—was just that strong. He could endure most physical attacks without permanent damage.

As long as they were physical... he wouldn't break—unless his will did. And so long as his will remained intact... he could still fight.

'I can still fight... I can still fight...'

His eyes locked onto Damon, who was already climbing higher, scaling twisted beams like a shadow.

They had a strange friendship... one they'd both deny until death took them. Their ideals were night and day—but Xander had been wrong about Damon.

'He says he has no pride, no honor...'

Xander floated upward, fist clenched, zero gravity guiding him in controlled movement.

'Then why do you hold to your word like it's sacred...? Why does your pride scream louder than anyone else's...? I can't hate you for that... I can't...'

Despite how different Damon seemed, Xander could see it now—he was someone who bore an unshakeable principle in his heart.

'He claims to pride himself on having no pride... Isn't that the most prideful thing of all?'

The irony was lost on no one—least of all Xander.

But still... Damon pushed forward. Against all odds. Against reason.

How could Xander not respect that? How could he not admire such perseverance?

Damon reached out from a ledge, extending his hand just as a shade blew past him like smoke.

Xander met his gaze and understood. With one final heave, he tossed Leona upward.

She kicked off the wall and snatched Damon's hand, pulled to safety.

Matia gave Xander a single nod. Nothing needed to be said.

He launched her next, and Damon caught her as well, pulling her in with little effort.

Xander clicked his tongue.

'I'm totally not jealous of his popularity with the ladies...'

With a flick of his wrist, Damon fired his omnidirectional gear—thin wires latching onto Xander's armor and yanking him upward.

"What's going on..." Evangeline asked, turning to Sylvia for answers.

The white-haired elf looked back with an unreadable expression and shrugged.

"I don't know."

She glanced sideways at Damon, her smile razor-thin.

"Any theories, Damon?"

Damon didn't need to be a seer to know she'd figured it out—that somehow, he'd taken control of the shades.

He met her gaze with a frown.

"Beats me. You're the seer. You tell me."

She scoffed, clearly displeased, but unwilling to speak further. She didn't have his full trust yet. That was fine.

She would earn it... eventually.

But Damon had no time for her games—not now. Not with his mind fraying under the weight of tethered souls.

The shades he had taken command of were caught in a brutal war—fighting above against wild, untamed shades, and below against the abominable creatures.

And they were losing.

Each time one of his controlled shades fell, Damon felt it—a tether breaking. A beacon snuffed out. Only darkness remained.

"Come on. We need to use the chaos to get out of here."

Sylvia was already healing Xander, though she didn't really need to. He was stable.

"Xander, give us a boost here..."

Xander placed his hands on them, reducing their weight one by one.

"I don't have infinite mana. We've gotta be smart."

Damon raised his hand and began climbing, leaping upward from handhold to handhold.

"Stay close. Kill everything that's not us."

That was the only instruction he could give. Only he could tell which shades were allies in the chaotic maelstrom of ghosts around them.

Most of the shades were still hostile.

He couldn't waste any more shadow energy controlling the rest.

To those still bound to his will—he gave one final command:

'Protect us... with your lives.'

Whether or not these lost phantoms truly lived, he didn't know. But he prayed they understood.

Far below, his allies were being cut down. But they'd been enough of a distraction—to buy the party time.

Their climb continued, the battlefield a drifting maelstrom of ghost and death.

Damon's vision swam. He felt weaker. More drained.

The entire area was chaos. Shade against shade... then against shade again. So much noise. So much death.

And yet... something was changing.

They began to notice—some shades were shielding them.

One shade caught Evangeline before she could fall.

Another intercepted a deadly blow aimed at Sylvia.

By the time they finally reached the top...

Their minds were scarred. Their armor scratched and dented. Faces streaked with blood and exhaustion.

Damon stood at the edge of the broken chamber, glancing down into the wreckage beneath them.

He had only a few shades left.

Most were gone.

"Let's go," he ordered, his voice cold.

The few remaining shades drifted after him, hidden, silent, and obedient.

Their forms shadows on the walls.

He didn't look back. Not once.