

Shadow 201

Chapter 201 Summoning

Damon tried to resist, but the person pinning him to the wall was just too strong.

He hadn't even sensed the attack coming—she had teleported straight to him.

"Lilith, what do you think you're doing? Let go," he growled.

She only pressed him harder against the wall, her grip unyielding.

"Why did you do it, you psychopath?" she spat, her voice cold.

Damon gritted his teeth and tried to push her off, but she was stronger. He had no idea what she was on about.

"Since when did you give a damn about Sylvia?" he shot back.

Lilith suddenly pulled him away from the wall, only to let him fall. Before he could react, she straddled him, her expression unreadable.

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't do anything reckless," she said, her tone sharp.

Damon narrowed his eyes as her weight pinned him down.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Lilith's emerald eyes flickered as she studied him.

"You're not lying to me, are you?"

Damon shook his head. "I can't lie about something I don't even know about."

She sighed, then suddenly buried her fist into his gut.

The impact knocked the wind out of him.

"Cough—cough—Ahh, what was that for?!" he gasped, struggling to breathe.

Lilith shook her head, her expression indifferent.

"Nothing. That was just for calling an old hag prettier than me." She leaned back slightly, folding her arms. "Now that we've addressed that, we have a problem."

Damon sat up, still catching his breath.

"You did that just because you were holding a grudge, didn't you?"

She bit her lip slightly. "A little, yes. But this isn't a joke."

Damon frowned, glancing toward the stairs. He couldn't follow Sylvia now.

"Hmph. I'll deal with that later," he muttered before turning back to Lilith. "What's the problem now?"

Lilith's expression darkened. She turned on her heel and started walking.

"It's better if I show you."

Damon followed without another word.

Despite the late hour, they made their way past the dorms, moving past the fountain and between a few detached buildings. Eventually, they reached an elevator. Lilith stepped inside, and he followed.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked as the elevator descended.

She didn't answer immediately. When the doors opened, she led him into what looked like an abandoned courtyard.

Finally, she stopped near a bench and gestured at the ground.

"We're here," she said, her voice serious.

Damon followed her gaze.

"The scene of the crime."

Damon looked at the courtyard, barely illuminated by the moonlight. The grass and flowers were well-trimmed, carefully maintained—exactly what one would expect from the academy. But something felt off. The air carried the scent of leaves, and beneath it, a faint trace of burning smoke lingered.

His gaze swept further, landing behind a partially melted bench. That was when he saw it—a charred, badly burned person.

His eyes widened.

"What... happened here?"

Lilith's expression remained cold.

"Self-conflagration... or so it appears."

He turned to her sharply.

"What are you talking about?"

She sighed, stepping closer to the burned body. With a casual wave of her hand, she gestured toward the unmoving figure.

"An hour ago, I found this person here—half-burned but still alive."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"And you thought I did it, didn't you?"

Lilith nodded without hesitation.

His gaze shifted back to the victim, who was barely breathing, unconscious, the ground around them melted from extreme heat.

"This is the second case," she continued. "The last person didn't have a single burn mark—only signs of mana depletion and... other things."

Damon looked up. "Other things?"

She met his gaze.

"He also had spiritual exhaustion."

Damon glanced at the burned student again, watching their shallow breaths.

"So?"

Lilith sighed, rubbing her temples.

"I didn't suspect you because I was certain," she admitted.

"I suspected you because you have a motive. The academy is already investigating this, and with the nobles invited here, security is tight. One wrong move and they'll come for your head."

She crouched beside the burned student, carefully brushing away some of the ash. Behind the blackened skin, Damon finally recognized the victim—Matawan, a freshman. A fairy.

Damon scoffed.

"I take it you have a good reason for dragging me into this. Otherwise, this would just be a waste of time."

Ignoring him, Lilith pulled out a small vial and tilted it to Matawan's lips. As the liquid seeped in, his burns began healing—slowly, but noticeably.

Damon wasn't done.

"If it were me, he'd be dead. And devoured," he said bluntly. "Besides, I'm not desperate enough to attack an unsuspecting victim... but something tells me that's not why I'm a suspect."

Lilith smiled faintly.

"Of course not. I already told you not to feed on academy students. This is different."

She stood up, dusting off her hands.

"Upon investigation, the academy found traces of spirit magic at the scene....of the last victim"

Damon shrugged.

"What does that have to do with me? I have no affinity for spirits."

She nodded.

"Spirit summoning doesn't necessarily require an affinity. Affinity is only needed to channel a summoned spirit's power. But the act of summoning itself?" She gave him a pointed look.

"Anyone can attempt it—if they have the right materials."

Damon's eyes narrowed. He was starting to see where this was going.

"You think I was trying to summon a spirit? A dark one, no less?" He scoffed. "Do you think I'm insane?"

Lilith's expression didn't waver.

"A madman who would kill his classmates... Isn't that exactly what you are?" she said, voice calm.

"The only difference is—I'm biased. I'd keep you out of trouble." She sighed.

"But I did think, for a moment, that you went behind my back and did something reckless. Summoning a dark spirit wouldn't be that shocking for you."

Damon didn't feel offended, but he still clicked his tongue at her.

"You didn't actually suspect me. And even if you did, you didn't need to slam me into a wall." His gaze sharpened.

"You're just pissed about Lady Margan, aren't you?"

Lilith's lips curled into a cold smile.

"If you knew I'd be angry, you shouldn't have said it."

Damon sighed. Women were such trouble.

Not wanting to deal with Lilith's glare any longer, he shifted his focus elsewhere—specifically, his shadow.

Something was off.

His shadow had taken an unusual interest in the unconscious student.

Damon frowned.

"You can't eat him."

His shadow recoiled, clearly appalled by the accusation.

"Don't give me that reaction. You totally would," Damon muttered.

The shadow threw up its hands in exaggerated surrender—then, it pointed at the burned corpse.

Damon's frown deepened.

He crouched down, watching as his shadow gestured back and forth.

Lilith frowned curious.

"What is it saying."

His eyes widened.

"He... He says my blood was used for this summoning."

Chapter 202 Spirit Vessel

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"Still acting like you have nothing to do with this... Damon."

Damon sighed. She was being petty, and they both knew it.

"We are in a crisis. This is no time to be hung up on something I did."

She rolled her eyes but seemed to let go of whatever grudge she held—at least for now.

"If I didn't know better," she continued, "I'd think you were trying to summon a dark spirit. Hoping to break off a fragment of its soul to level up."

Damon glanced at his shadow. It had its hands on its hips, as if agreeing with Lilith. He clicked his tongue in irritation.

"Take that back. You do know better."

Lilith snickered.

"I wish I didn't. That way, I'd have a good excuse to be mad at you."

Damon's eye twitched.

"So you do know your excuse is petty."

She shrugged, unconcerned.

"Why else would I be looking for legitimacy?" Then her tone shifted, more thoughtful.

"If you were trying to summon a dark spirit... which one would it be?"

He gave a lazy shrug, considering the hypothetical.

"If I were going to—just hypothetically—and don't even think about using this as an excuse to punch me..."

Lilith had already curled her fist. He caught her wrist before she could act on it.

He continued.

"I would try summoning the lowest one I could find."

She shook her head.

"That confirms you aren't the one attempting a summon. The first thing you need is a name—whether it's a demon, god, spirit, or even a person. If you don't, you just end up pulling whatever has an affinity to you. And the closest match that meets the requirements will answer the call."

She glanced at him.

"Unless... you do know, and you're just playing me."

Damon scoffed.

"I'm appalled. So little trust in little old me?"

Lilith smiled coldly.

"If you didn't do it, then who did? Your blood was used."

He shook his head.

"I don't know. My blood isn't exactly hard to come by. I bleed all over the place. Anyone could've scooped up some dirt with my blood in it—where I train, in the infirmary, even the halls. Hell, the healers have plenty from patching me up. I leave blood trails everywhere. Just cleaning it up should be enough to keep it from being misused..."

Damon glanced at the student, who was now mostly healed but still unconscious. His spiritual reserves were depleted, meaning he wouldn't be waking up anytime soon. The burn marks on the ground caught Damon's attention. They were familiar.

He had seen them before.

Yes... on the night Rein Ambridge died.

"I know who it is..."

Lilith's eyes grew colder.

"Who?"

Damon sifted through the most crucial facts, piecing them together.

"It's the person who saw me kill Tobias. The next person I killed was Rein Ambridge—but Rein didn't have any burn marks. He was already unconscious when I found him, yet the area around him was scorched. I originally thought it was because he had a fire attribute, that he had fired off a few spells before collapsing... but I was wrong."

He let out a dry chuckle.

"I knew something was off."

Lilith sighed. This hidden figure was becoming more and more troublesome with each passing day.

"Alright, we at least have a suspect, even if we don't know their identity. Now we need to find out which spirit they're summoning. Depending on the type... this could become a national crisis."

Damon nodded. If it was a low-level dark spirit, it would still be dangerous, but manageable. If it was a high-level dark spirit, it would be a serious problem. But if it was a great dark spirit... it would be a disaster.

"What type uses fire?" he asked.

Lilith shook her head.

"Quite a few... we can't be sure. The real question is—which one do you have an affinity for?"

Damon shrugged.

"I don't have a spirit affinity."

She nodded.

"True, but you do have an affinity for the dark."

Damon glanced at her. She seemed to know more than he did.

"You have an idea of what kind of spirit they're trying to summon?"

"No... but whatever it is, we have to stop them."

Damon nodded, skeptical.

"We don't know how much of my blood they got, but it must not be enough for their summon."

Lilith shook her head.

"No. It's enough. The real issue is finding a proper vessel for the spirit. Why else would they use unsuspecting students?"

Damon exhaled.

"Then what do all these students have in common? The first was Rein Ambridge—he had a fire attribute. Who was the second?"

Lilith frowned.

"It was Cliff. He had an earth attribute—he was a gnome from Midshire."

Damon turned to the unconscious student lying before them.

"And him? A fairy. His attribute is wood."

Lilith pulled out her pager.

"So far, there's no obvious common factor between them, except that they're all first-years and male. The first was human. The second, a gnome. The third, a fairy..."

Damon's chest tightened.

His blood being used made him either the prime suspect—or the prime victim—in the academy's inevitable investigation. If they figured it out... that would be a problem.

Lilith brought her pager to her ear and reported the incident. She kept the details vague, revealing only what was necessary.

Once she finished, she glanced at Damon. His worry had only deepened the more he thought about the situation.

"Don't worry," she said. "Even if the academy discovers your blood was used as an ingredient, they won't suspect you—at least, not yet. For now, we need to focus on the academy and noble conference tomorrow."

Damon nodded. She was right.

He still had to make sure the conference went his way—that all his crimes were pinned on the dead Marcus Fayjoy. He had to ensure the Fayjoy family representatives handled the situation exactly as he wanted.

As for the person trying to summon the dark spirit...

He would deal with them when they finally showed their ugly head.

'I need more power...'

A thought crossed his mind.

Could he exploit the chaos to level up?

In this life, nothing came free.

No risk, no reward.

Chapter 203 Blood For Blood

The academy's investigation team arrived with several healers and high-level recovery potions, quickly restoring some of the student's depleted spirit reserves.

Contrary to Damon's expectations, they didn't even suspect him—not of being involved, nor of his blood being used in the summoning ritual. He and Lilith were only asked a few cursory questions. It seemed the academy already had an idea of what was happening or at least a lead, which meant the possibility of him being accused was off the table for now.

Professor Chrome had come along with the investigation team, wearing a worried expression. The hearty old man reassured Damon with a firm pat on the shoulder, like a kind grandfather easing a child's fears. Damon let out a sigh of relief. He hadn't realized his worries were so obvious that even his professors had taken notice.

As he walked down the academy's long corridors with Lilith, the golden light of morning did little to banish the doubts and concerns lingering in his mind. His problems always seemed to multiply. Just yesterday, his biggest concern had been Sylvia, and now he had to worry about some mastermind using his blood to summon a dark spirit.

He had done some research on the subject. The reason someone would need a vessel for a dark spirit was likely because they themselves lacked spirit affinity and couldn't channel that power directly. Instead, they would enslave a vessel to control the spirit—or worse, extract the spirit's power from the host and harness it for themselves. If done correctly, this method could allow them to gain new abilities, including the magic attributes possessed by the spirit.

Damon followed Lilith down the hallway until they reached a grand doorway. Without hesitation, she pushed it open and stepped inside. The moment she entered, he sensed it—nothing. It was as if the shadows inside the room had been completely suppressed until he crossed the threshold himself.

Barrier magic. His gaze shifted toward the runes on the door.

The room was massive, constructed without windows, as if to prevent anything from escaping. The air inside was unnaturally cool, a result of an artifact infused with air-conditioning magic. At the center of the room stood a large, round table, its ornate surface embedded with hundreds of glowing runes and a few magic crystals underneath. A large display hovered in the center, casting an eerie glow over the gathering. The atmosphere in the room was heavy with formality.

Seated around the grand table were four professors, along with an elderly woman who exuded an ethereal presence. Damon immediately recognized her—Marabell Defontée, an emeritus of the academy. Though she was no longer an active instructor, she was one of the academy's most senior members and had reached the fourth class advancement. He didn't know her magic attribute or the specific classes she had taught, as she only instructed second-years and above, but he had heard of her reputation.

The four professors, however, were much more familiar to him.

Professor Chrome, the kind old man with space attribute magic.

Professor Emerald, the green-haired instructor who clearly despised him—especially since he had beaten Xander—but still showed reluctant care for him as her student.

Professor Tunpick, the beastkin whose wild, powerful aura made it clear he was no ordinary academic.

And lastly, Kael Blackthorne.

Damon had thought he was suspended, yet here he was, his dark and foreboding presence just as oppressive as ever. The man glanced at him and Lilith, his sharp gaze unreadable.

Lilith was the first to speak. "Greetings to the members of the academy senate."

Damon frowned but followed her lead, offering a small bow.

The members of the senate acknowledged them with slight nods. Lilith and Damon took their positions behind their respective professors. Damon stood slightly to the side, not far from Chrome and Emeraldalda, watching the gathering with a quiet intensity.

Emeraldalda glanced at Damon, a thin smile playing on her lips before she leaned in slightly and whispered,

"I heard you beat up an entire group of first-years from the Imperial Academy..."

She covered her mouth with her hand as if hiding her amusement. "Good job."

Damon blinked, momentarily caught off guard. He knew the Aether Academy and the Imperial Academy had a deep-seated rivalry, but even so, hearing someone as gentle as Emeraldalda encourage such violence was unexpected.

"Erm... thank you," he muttered awkwardly.

Kael, standing nearby, shot Emeraldalda a cold look. "Do not encourage his behavior," he said sharply, then begrudgingly glanced at Damon. "However, putting lowlifes who would oppress an old woman in their place is acceptable."

Chrome chuckled but said nothing, though his amusement was clear.

Before the discussion could continue, the elderly woman at the head of the table—Marabell Defontée—cleared her throat, immediately commanding the room's attention.

"Ahem... that is enough, everyone. While the lad did a good job, we have far more pressing matters at hand."

The atmosphere in the room shifted instantly. The idle conversations and lighthearted remarks faded, replaced by the weight of serious discussion.

Marabell's voice carried the authority of someone used to commanding scholars and warriors alike. "We have already discussed everything, and all evidence has been gathered. The reason we are here is to negotiate and create alternative options—to keep everything within the academy's walls."

Chrome stroked his beard, nodding. "That is... under the assumption that the nobles don't do anything reckless and end up blowing this whole matter open. The academy wants this kept hidden, restricted to only the invited parties."

Kael's sharp eyes narrowed. "As a noble myself, I can say with certainty that no noble would willingly involve the temple unless they were truly desperate. They have too much to lose—especially after what we uncovered."

Emeralda shook her head. "Except... these people lost their wards. They have reason enough to be desperate."

A heavy silence settled over the room.

Damon could feel the tension rising, his stomach twisting into knots. His heart felt heavy. This was the moment of truth. If all went according to plan, he would walk out a free man. If it didn't... the gallows awaited him.

He had thought through every possibility, calculated every angle. He had to win.

Just as he was considering all the ways this could go wrong, the doors swung open.

Lady Margan stepped in, her expression weary yet unwavering. Behind her, an entourage of knights and servants followed, their movements precise and controlled. Among them were several well-dressed nobles, their gazes cold and unyielding.

She stepped forward, her voice ringing through the chamber.

"Let us begin... I want justice for my son, even if I must shed blood to obtain it."

Damon's heart grew colder as his Remorseless skill activated, suppressing his fear and letting cold logic take control.

Chapter 204 Raised Well

The air was thick with tension after Lady Margan's words. The professors sat in their designated seats, their expressions solemn, while across from them, the nobles occupied the other side of the circular table.

Among them was an elderly man dressed in fine blue robes, his neatly trimmed goatee giving him an air of formality. He gripped a black walking stick, though it seemed more for appearance than necessity. His sharp, piercing eyes carried a hint of lechery, making Damon uneasy.

'Didn't realize his old man was a literal old man,' Damon thought dryly.

This was Flick Fayjoy, Marcus's father and the head of the Fayjoy family. Marcus was far from his youngest son—Flick had many children, some still in their infancy. His reputation was sordid; he had acquired numerous wives and mistresses through both legitimate and illegitimate means. Worse still, rumors spoke of him fathering illegitimate children with maids and commoners he had forced himself upon. Damon didn't need to know him personally to see what kind of man he was.

His suspicion was confirmed by the way Flick's eyes occasionally flickered toward Lilith's chest.

'What a pig... no wonder Marcus turned out the way he did.'

Next was a young man with striking red hair, dressed in light armor with a longsword at his waist. He had the demeanor of a warrior, though his expression remained calm and composed.

Reinhardt Ambridge—older brother of Rein Ambridge. If he was anything like his sibling, then they likely shared the same magic attribute. Damon made a mental note of it.

Beside him sat a woman in a yellow gown adorned with floral patterns. Heavy makeup covered her face, as though she were trying to flaunt her wealth.

Media Bonaire.

She was the representative of the Bonaire family. More importantly, she was the paternal aunt of Lark—one of the nobles Damon had killed.

Next was a middle-aged man with thick sideburns and a burly, muscular build. His tailored outfit barely contained his frame, and Damon had the distinct feeling that one wrong move might cause his clothes to tear.

Fallan Tatarstan.

The father of Malcolm Tatarstan. Like his son, he carried the presence of a warrior, one used to solving matters with brute force.

A short distance from him sat a woman with pale skin, her presence carrying the faint scent of flowers. She possessed elf-like ears—a telltale trait of the fae.

The head of the Garnier household.

Despite her delicate features, she was Malcolm Garnier's biological mother. Yet, she bore little resemblance to him.

And finally, there was Lady Margan.

Unlike the others, she had already reached her own conclusions. Damon could tell from the unwavering determination in her eyes.

All these people were gathered for one reason.

Because he had killed—and devoured—their children.

But in his defense, they had been his oppressors first. He had sworn never to show mercy. Every debt would be repaid in full.

Yet, before he could act on those convictions, he had to survive this trial.

The nobles sat stiffly in the conference room, their knights and servants waiting just outside the doors. But they weren't concerned. Aether Academy wouldn't harm them—not directly, at least. And even if the academy did want them dead, escape was a fool's dream.

Lady Margan's eyes lingered on Flick Fayjoy, her expression betraying a deep-seated grudge. It was their first time meeting, yet she already looked at him as if she had known him for years.

Damon remained impassive.

'She probably already found enough evidence to tie everything to Marcus...'

He was certain.

The moment she had all the proof she needed, she would explode.

As for him, all he had to do was react accordingly.

Greetings were not exchanged.

These people had come seeking retribution—or, at the very least, something beneficial to ease the sting of their losses.

Kael rose to his feet. As a professor from a well-recognized noble family, he carried both authority and credibility. Having him speak first was the most logical choice.

He cleared his throat.

"As of the evening of the 15th day of Hektos, the remains—or lack thereof—of the student Lark Bonaire were discovered in the forest within Aether Academy grounds. Alongside them, we found claw marks belonging to what was initially believed to be a monster."

He waved his hand, activating a display in the center of the table.

A projection flickered to life—deep claw marks gouged into the earth, stained with blood.

The nobles watched intently, their expressions unreadable, while the professors remained composed. They had already seen this evidence before.

"After extensive investigation, we determined that these claw marks did not belong to any known monster," Kael continued. "At first, we suspected a breach in the academy's barrier... however, that was not the case either."

The display shifted, revealing a sequence of images and records as Kael detailed the chain of events—the tragic deaths that had unfolded, one by one, claiming nearly all of Marcus Fayjoy's companions.

The only one unaffected among them was Xander Ravenscroft.

As the professor spoke, the projections began revealing damning pieces of evidence. First, the strange and erratic shifts in Marcus Fayjoy's behavior. Then, the written accounts found in his own room—journals filled with ramblings about his supposed divine mission, his conversations with God, and his belief that he was an apostle sent to "save" his friends by purging them.

The final, chilling entry in his journal declared his own ascension:

I am the Great Apostle.

The tension in the room thickened.

The nobles' expressions shifted subtly as the pieces fell into place. They were drawing their own conclusions—not because the academy was accusing Marcus, but because the sheer weight of the evidence left no room for doubt.

The most noticeable reaction came from Flick Fayjoy.

His face darkened, his fists clenching as the damning proof against his son continued to mount.

Kael hadn't even reached the final details yet—Marcus's death and the condition in which the evidence was found—when Flick finally snapped.

He surged to his feet, slamming the table with enough force to rattle the crystal and documents upon it.

"Preposterous!" he roared. "My son would never—I raised him well!"

A sharp, biting voice cut through his outburst.

"Which one of your sons?"

Lady Margan stood, her finger leveled at him, her gaze filled with contempt.

"One of the too many to count?"

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"You dare?!"

Flick Fayjoy barked, his voice sharp with outrage. "Who are you to throw insults at my son?!"

Lady Margan's glare was filled with unrestrained fury.

"I am the mother of a dead son," she spat. "Unlike you, who has more bastard children than you can count, I had but one. His death is an irreplaceable loss!"

She pointed a finger at him, her expression filled with mockery.

"Not that someone like you would understand!"

It wasn't long before any semblance of decorum crumbled, and they began hurling insults at one another.

Fallan Tatarstan's fists clenched, his aura surging with restrained aggression as he glowered at Flick.

Media Bonaire shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her expression tight as she observed the growing hostility in the room.

Lady Garnier, on the other hand, simply sighed—but her tightly clenched fists betrayed her true emotions.

"What a ruckus we are causing..." she muttered.

And then—

The temperature in the room plummeted.

A single voice, frail yet absolute, echoed through the air like the crack of a whip.

"Enough."

The moment the old woman spoke, an overwhelming pressure descended upon the chamber. It was suffocating.

Damon felt his head buzz as the sheer might of a Fourth-Class Advancement bore down on them. His thoughts slowed, his breath hitched, and despite his skill Remorseless being active, a cold dread crept into his very bones.

The frail-looking old woman sat there, her presence utterly dwarfing everyone else in the room.

Marabell Defontee.

The moment she released her aura, the nobles—who had been seconds away from tearing into one another—froze.

Her aged eyes swept across the room, slow and deliberate.

"That is enough bickering," she said, her tone flat but carrying an unmistakable weight of authority. "I am certain we can settle this without acting like juveniles."

No one dared to speak.

Marabell continued, her voice measured.

"We shall hear from each of the noble representatives before drawing a proper conclusion on this matter. Each person shall be given a turn to speak, and we shall conduct ourselves in an organized manner."

She turned her gaze to Flick Fayjoy.

"You may begin, Lord Fayjoy."

Flick hesitated. It was clear that, for all his arrogance, even he knew better than to test Marabell's patience. After a brief pause, he gave a slow nod.

Damon couldn't help but be impressed.

The head of this gathering had made herself known. First, she unleashed her aura to silence the room and establish control. Then, she framed the discussion in a way that forced them to participate without devolving into chaos.

Masterful.

Flick Fayjoy, now noticeably subdued, straightened his posture. His usual lecherous gaze, which had been lingering on Lilith Astranova's ample figure just moments before, was gone.

Damon sneered.

'The moment things got serious, this pig stopped ogling women. Maybe I should send him to join his son in death.'

Flick exhaled slowly, then glanced at Lady Margan before speaking.

"My son, Marcus, was raised to be an upright noble—one of both sound mind and unquestionable character," he stated firmly. "He would never do what you accuse him of—"

"I imagine he takes after you," Lady Margan interjected coldly.

"Lady Margan, please."

Marabell Defontee's voice sliced through the air like a blade.

Margan fell silent, though her expression remained defiant.

Flick nodded, taking a measured breath before continuing.

"While I admit that I am not the best of men..."

Damon's sneer deepened.

'Not the best of men? You're not even a man, you swine.'

Flick went on, his voice taking on an oddly somber tone.

"...I am still a father. And I love all my children. That is why I have always tried to give them the best I could."

Damon narrowed his eyes, analyzing him carefully.

"Marcus, if you were unaware, is my son. He is not my oldest, and his mother was not a noblewoman."

Damon's lips parted slightly in surprise.

Marcus... was the son of a commoner?

The same Marcus who went out of his way to pick fights with every commoner he met?

Flick exhaled, shaking his head. "He was... talented. So I gave him special care. And I can say—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that my son would never turn on his friends."

Damon bit his lip.

There was... something in his voice.

A pang of sorrow.

For the first time, Flick Fayjoy did not sound like a one-dimensional, perverted noble. He sounded like a father who had lost his son. A talented son.

Damon wondered.

Did he truly care for Marcus?

Or was this just another act?

Fallan Tatarstan sighed, rubbing his temples as the tension in the room thickened.

"I've heard enough," he muttered. His voice, though calm, carried the weight of authority.

"We are all parents here. We have all lost our wards under uncertain circumstances... but before we start pointing fingers, why don't we first confirm how Marcus Fayjoy disappeared?"

A moment of silence followed his words.

Then—

Kael Blackthorne stood up.

It was time to continue his report.

From what they had gathered, Marcus should be dead. But the real problem was that they couldn't be sure.

The area where he had vanished was riddled with strange markings—some carved into stone, others smeared across the ground. Signs of a struggle were evident, and, more importantly, there was blood. Blood that belonged to Marcus Fayjoy.

But the way it was arranged...

It looked like a ritual.

A ritual that made no sense.

To the untrained eye, it would seem like a crude attempt at black magic. But to those who truly understood such things, it was... wrong.

As if some amateur, with no knowledge of how dark magic actually worked, had designed it to look like a ritual.

Then again, the Academy itself knew little about dark magic. Such knowledge was forbidden by the Temple's laws.

Any records came only from ancient ruins. And even those were dangerous—taboo.

Especially since this ritual bore marks of a strange god.

Kael exhaled. His voice was measured, careful.

"As of now, we are uncertain if Marcus Fayjoy is alive or dead. However—"

He paused, scanning the room.

"—we did locate the ritual ground where he performed his sacrifices."

Damon's gaze flicked toward Lilith Astranova.

'Did she hide the rest of the evidence...?'

It was possible.

His original plan had been to pin Marcus as the culprit. But the only loose end was if they confirmed Marcus was dead. By leaving the details vague, Lilith had created a scenario where the nobles would assume Marcus had either succeeded in his ritual... or escaped.

Smart.

Kael waved his hand, and the display behind him changed.

Projected on the screen were the very same runes and marks found at the site. Damon recognized them immediately. He had instructed Marcus to draw some of them, but in his madness, the noble had started sketching randomly.

A chaotic mess.

Kael continued, his voice even.

"The Academy does not have all the evidence," he admitted.

"Furthermore, we have yet to confirm Marcus Fayjoy's fate. We do not know if he has escaped... or if he is still within the Academy."

A sharp pause.

"But what we can determine... is that the ritual failed. No magic was drawn from it."

The room was silent.

Damon glanced at the nobles.

Media Bonaire, who had been quiet for most of the meeting, was now visibly uncomfortable.

Her hands trembled slightly as she processed the implications.

If the Temple caught wind of this...

If they discovered that her own ward, Lark, might have been victim—or worse, a involved —it could turn into a political disaster.

Kael turned to his fellow professors. Chrome gave him a slow, measured nod.

Then Kael looked back at the room, his next words sending a shockwave through the nobles.

"The Academy is an educational and research institution. Investigating crimes is not our specialty," he said. His gaze swept across the gathered aristocrats.

"That said... we are willing to transfer this investigation to the Temple Inquisition and the Imperial Knight's Order."

Silence.

Then—

"NO!"

The nobles shouted in unison.

Damon barely suppressed a smirk.

Their collective reaction spoke volumes.

Chapter 206 Played

The Temple Inquisition.

A force known to all.

And feared for good reason.

Most of the Inquisition were devoted followers of the Goddess of Doom—or, as they preferred to call themselves, Devotees of Doom.

And indeed, they had brought doom to many.

This branch of the Temple was responsible for heretical investigations and cleansing. They were numerous, like shadows lurking in every corner of the world. Their vast information network operated beyond national laws, bound only by the tenets of their faith.

For all intents and purposes, they were religious fanatics. Zealots who cared nothing for politics.

However—

They weren't the only branch of the Temple.

The Temple was an organization, after all. And like any organization, it needed money and resources to function.

And that was precisely why the nobles in this room were terrified.

If the Temple got involved—

They would stand to lose everything.

Their wealth. Their land. Their reputation.

The Temple might even exploit the situation to seize control.

And worse—

This organization's influence reached far beyond national borders.

Even those who resided on an entirely different continent could still be affected.

Refusal was not an option.

A nation could be excommunicated—cut off from the world.

And what did that mean?

Vuldren.

The Sky Continent in the Past.

It was a perfect example.

Once, it had rejected the Temple's authority. The result?

The Temple and every other nation had been free to wage war against it—with or without cause.

Its people had been enslaved at will.

Trade had ceased entirely—no kingdom loyal to the Temple had been permitted to engage with them.

And worst of all—

They had been branded as enemies of the Goddess.

As heretics.

The Temple had not stopped until many parts Vuldren was reduced to ruins.... Although Vuldren persevered.

Damon was certain this was the real reason no one wanted the Temple anywhere near this investigation.

And that wasn't all.

The Temple itself was corrupt—deeply so. Even the Inquisition was full of bad eggs. In fact, some would argue that all of them were.

The only difference?

These "bad eggs" were all fanatics.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

'Perhaps this is why faith in the Unknown God is spreading so quickly...'

Especially in places like Vuldren, where freedom was valued above even faith.

The Unknown God was an entity unlike the Goddess. He did not demand worship. He did not care for faith.

He was... indifferent to worship only valuing the emotions of the individual.

Lady Margan, who had been one of the most vocal nobles earlier, had fallen silent.

Now, she too was visibly tense.

And no one could blame her.

Kael's suggestion to involve the Temple had changed the entire atmosphere of the meeting.

Even the Academy's leadership did not want the Temple involved.

That was why this meeting was being held in this secluded conference room—behind closed doors, with only a select few members of the Academy Senate present.

The Dean? Not here.

The Head of Departments? Not here.

The Headmaster? Absent.

In fact, Damon had learned from Lilith that they had all left the Academy recently.

As for why?

She hadn't said.

And he hadn't asked.

The tension in the room deepened.

Marabell Defontee observed the nobles' reactions, nodding to herself. Good.

This was exactly what the Academy wanted—for the Temple to stay out of their affairs.

There was no need for those corrupt fanatics wearing the name of the Goddess to meddle here.

However—

An old woman like her wasn't about to let these nobles think they had the upper hand.

She cleared her throat.

"Ahem... We originally summoned you all to inform you of the deaths of your wards. As you can see, while this is indeed a tragedy, deaths are not uncommon within the Aether Academy."

Her tone was measured, controlled—giving them no room for argument.

"The entrance exam itself is a trial. It is not unheard of for students to perish during its course. However—once admitted, first-years are generally not at risk until the end-of-semester evaluation."

She sighed dramatically, as though the burden of their grief weighed on her shoulders.

"This... however, is a greater tragedy. These deaths did not occur during training. That leaves us with a special case—one not recorded in their applications. Nevertheless—what has already happened... has happened."

Her sharp gaze swept across the nobles, watching their anxious expressions.

Then—

She delivered the final blow.

"We will report this to the Imperial Knights... and the Temple Inquisition. We can contact... Aurelius Venn."

The room froze.

Damon blinked.

That name...

He had heard it before—but barely knew anything about the man himself.

He nudged Lilith, whispering.

She leaned close, murmuring back,

"He's a Dragonkin. A Head Inquisitor. Ruthless. Cold. Calculating. A man who believes that all he views as 'unclean' should be burned by divine fire..."

Damon paled.

Right.

He had heard of him.

Aurelius Venn—the Smoldering One.

Rumors claimed he had roasted an entire city in Solarion.

And she wants to call him?

His reaction did not go unnoticed.

And Marabell Defontee immediately seized the advantage.

"In addition," she continued smoothly, "I happen to know Father Dantalion—the Witch-Hunter himself. We fought together in the Demon Wars of the past."

The entire room shifted uncomfortably.

The nobles...

They all knew that name.

Damon clenched his fists.

Father Dantalion...

He was the kind of boogeyman noble children whispered about at night.

A relic of the old wars.

An Inquisitor who had personally hunted entire noble bloodlines for practicing forbidden arts.

A low, audible gulp came from Flick Fayjoy.

Cold sweat trickled down his forehead.

His son was the primary suspect in all this.

No—

With this evidence?

His son was already finished.

"I-I don't think we need to involve the Inquisition in this matter..."

Lady Bonaire's voice broke the silence.

She turned, her face pale, and glanced toward the representative of the Garnier House.

The woman gave a weak nod.

And she was not the only one reconsidering their position.

Lady Margan—the most vocal noble throughout this meeting—finally spoke up, turning to Marabell Defontee.

"Lady Defontee... should we really involve the Temple in something that can be handled... behind closed doors?"

Marabell did not react.

Her expression was impassive.

But Damon saw it.

She had played them.

She had made them forget that even she did not want the Temple involved.

And by making them act more desperate than her—

They had walked straight into her trap.

She gave them a final glance.

"Very well, then," she said lightly. "I accept."

A sigh of relief swept through the room—

Until she continued.

"However... before we proceed—"

Her sharp gaze returned.

"—we must sign an Oath of Silence. Everything that has transpired in this room will remain within this room."

Damon exhaled.

She's already won.

The nobles offered no objections.

Lady Margan bit her lip.

Her expression was strained.

And then—

"H-How do you suggest we get compensation... for our losses?"

Damon smirked.

Checkmate.

Chapter 207: Middle Man

The outcome was clear. The nobles didn't want the Temple meddling in their affairs, and neither did the Academy. However, the Academy also didn't want the nobles applying political pressure on them, thus the need to mention the Temple's name. Now that it had served its purpose, the meeting was effectively settled.

The nobles understood—they stood to lose more if they fought this. Thus, they could only grit their teeth and try to make the best of it. Or, in the case of the Fayjoy House, try to minimize their losses. After all, Marcus Fayjoy was the main culprit.

Damon suppressed a smirk. Instead, he wore an expression of feigned surprise—as if this was news to him. Lilith noticed. Her sharp gaze flicked toward him. He was clever. The information revealed today had been shocking. If he had acted too calm, too collected, with no prior knowledge, that would have been suspicious. After all, even she hadn't been told the full details beforehand.

'Damon... your plan worked. Everything went exactly as you imagined...'

She studied him. He had set this all up. After killing Marcus's group, he had used cursed ore to drive Marcus mad—a ruthless stroke of genius. The sheer viciousness of it—killing one's own classmates. Devouring them. It was... inhumane.

She stole another glance at him. How much denial did he go through before making up his mind?

Damon's dark eyes focused on the nobles, all of whom had now turned their attention to Flick Fayjoy. The Fayjoy House stood to lose the most—after all, the evidence pointed directly to Marcus. It was only natural that they would be the ones to pay compensation. The question now was how much they would have to surrender. That, of course, would be left for negotiations, and from the looks of it, Marabell Defontee had no intention of letting them leave until everything was settled.

The old woman glanced at Professor Chrome, who slowly stroked his beard.

"Let us sign the Vow of Silence... we can't risk letting this leak, now can we?"

Chrome waved his hand, and space rippled under the influence of spatial magic. A small, weathered scroll materialized before him, covered in intricate runes and arcane seals. It floated gently toward Marabell Defontee, who took it in her hands.

"All present will agree to an oath of silence. Under no circumstances shall we reveal what transpired here today."

The nobles exchanged cautious glances before nodding solemnly. Flick turned his gaze toward Damon and Lilith, his lips curving into a sly smile.

"I assume the two students you allowed in here will also be sworn to secrecy?"

Kael's lips twitched. He would have preferred to keep students out of this, but Marabell Defontee had already accounted for that.

"Yes, yes, they will... however, I will sign on their behalf," she declared. "Should they violate the oath, the consequences will fall on me."

The nobles' eyes narrowed. Damon was stunned. This old woman would take responsibility for them? What if they had malicious intentions and decided to leak the information?

No—he dismissed the thought. She was too shrewd. There was no way she would risk something like this unless she had a countermeasure.

Media Bonaire narrowed her eyes, her fingers filled with beads of sweat. She was considering the repercussions of potentially violating the terms prescribed by the scroll.

"What kind of effect does this oath scroll prescribe?"

Oath scrolls varied in their punishments. Some imposed death, some drained lifeforce, some inflicted curses—ranging from bad luck to the loss of one's lineage. The most fearsome ones, often found in ancient dungeons and ruins, could be outright terrifying. There were whispers of oaths that cursed an entire bloodline, turning all descendants into monstrous half-man, half-wolf beasts every full moon.

The nobles were right to be cautious. What price would they pay if they broke this vow?

Marabell smiled. "Worry not. It is not a curse that will harm your person."

Reinhardt Ambridge finally spoke. "Then... is it one that affects those we love? Our kin?"

The room fell into tense silence.

She shook her head and unfurled the scroll, allowing all to see the conditions inscribed upon it.

"Whoever violates this oath... shall lose half of their material wealth."

A chill settled over the room.

For nobles, losing wealth was often worse than losing family. Some would rather sacrifice their children than risk financial ruin.

The nobles' expressions varied—some were filled with hesitation, others with silent rage. Damon, however, narrowed his eyes. This oath would not harm Marabell Defontee in any way. She was retired. Her assets had long since been transferred to her descendants. Her son was the current head of the Defontee Household. She had nothing to lose.

Meanwhile, the other nobles were signing on behalf of their entire families.

This old woman... she played them perfectly.

Murmurs spread through the room. After a moment, Lady Margan clenched her jaw. "I need time to make a decision..."

Marabell nodded but turned her gaze to Flick Fayjoy. "We could adjourn... but if we do, we risk this information leaking."

Flick abruptly stood up, slamming his hands against the table.

"I'll sign."

He glared at the other nobles. "What's done is done. I can't trust that none of you will slip up and let the Temple find out. If they intervene, we'll all be finished."

That was all it took.

Reinhardt Ambridge let out a long sigh. "We don't have time for this. I will sign as well."

Marabell Defontee's smile widened. It wasn't long before the rest followed suit—including Lady Margan.

With that, the oath was sealed.

Now, only one matter remained—compensation.

Media Bonaire turned to Marabell Defontee.

"I request that Aether Academy act as mediator in this dispute and ensure that all parties adhere to proper agreement protocols when offering and receiving compensation for our losses."

Marabell's expression softened into a polite smile.

"We would be honored to assume the role of mediator."

And with that, the meeting was adjourned.

Chapter 208: Honey Badger

Damon let out a slow sigh of relief as he walked down the empty paved road, Lilith keeping pace beside him. His heart twisted in his chest, the weight of the day's events pressing down on him. He had finally closed the chapter on his revenge against Marcus and his gang. They had been a satisfying meal for his shadows.

Now, with that settled, his focus could shift to more pressing matters—the person lurking in the shadows, attempting to summon a dark spirit. If he played his cards right, he could exploit the chaos, level up by consuming the dark spirit, and, more importantly, eliminate the summoner. Or perhaps... use them.

"The nobles' conference was adjourned," Lilith's calm voice broke through his thoughts. She glanced at him, her expression unreadable.

"It all went according to your expectations," she mused before chuckling. "For someone who isn't a noble, you sure know how they think."

Damon lifted his gaze to the star-lit sky, where the twin moons hung low, casting a pale glow that did little to lift his mood.

"I despise them," he admitted, voice tinged with bitterness. "But I've had enough encounters with nobles to know how they operate. It would be hard not to."

Lilith smiled slyly.

"Marabell Defontee is a terrifying old woman, isn't she? But I liked how things turned out. No one even questioned the evidence, even though there were some... questionable parts." Her eyes gleamed with curiosity. "Did you do that on purpose?"

Damon sighed. He was exhausted from all the scheming.

"Yes. I wanted them to leave the case inconclusive. They think Marcus is dead, but they also suspect he might be alive. Now, they're taking a wait-and-see approach. I imagine once negotiations are finished, they'll start trying to find him. But you can't find someone who's already dead."

Lilith's smile deepened. He was cruel, but that side of him was almost endearing. She pushed a lock of her red hair aside, observing him. He was filled with doubt, yet still ruthless.

'So full of hesitation... but still so relentless.'

She wondered if he was plotting something else. His expression suggested as much.

"You better not be planning to get involved with that dark spirit nonsense," she tensed, watching him closely.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

How did she know what he was thinking.

"I'm not suicidal... I don't act unless I have at least an 80% chance of winning."

Lilith sneered.

"So you were considering it. You didn't deny it... You're only weighing the odds of success, aren't you?"

Damon sighed. Lilith Astranova was beginning to understand how he thought, perhaps too well. He had already considered the feasibility of stopping the spirit summoning, and the odds weren't in his favor.

"I... we can't stop the person working in the shadows. So why not take advantage of the chaos and claim a piece of the dark spirit for ourselves?"

Lilith narrowed her eyes. He was right, but he wasn't considering—or rather, he was ignoring—the sheer scale of collateral damage a dark spirit could cause.

Before she could voice her thoughts, his dark eyes pierced into hers.

"I am aware of the potential damage. I know the risks," he said, glancing down at his shadow.

"But I want more power. I can act like a honey badger, defiant and reckless. I can be stubborn, idiotic, and refuse to bow my head. But the simple truth doesn't change—I am still weak."

His fingers curled into fists.

"I can beat everyone in my class, but they're weaklings. I could crush all of them, but the moment I step beyond those walls, I'm just a nobody again."

His teeth clenched.

"I'm tired of being a nobody. I'm tired of being the honey badger that only knows how to fight. I'm tired of bristling my fur, acting tough, appearing big—when all I can really do is growl, bleed, and lick my wounds afterward."

His hands trembled, his voice growing cold and low.

"I want to be the one with power for a change. I want to be the one calling the shots. I want to be the one watching others bleed instead. I want—"

Lilith cut him off.

"—to be an oppressor."

Damon looked at her, his eyes swirling with emotion.

"I... I want to be free."

She stepped closer to him.

"You aren't a slave, though," she said softly.

He shook his head.

"We're all slaves to something—love, family, money, honor, ambition, duty... I am a slave to my own pathetic weakness."

Lilith sighed. He didn't even consider his devotion to saving his sister's life as a form of enslavement—only his powerlessness.

'We are all slaves to something, huh...'

He had a point. Everyone wanted something. Humans died with ambitions and unfulfilled wishes—it was just the way of the world.

She smiled at Damon, cupping his face in her hands.

"If we do this... many people could die. Depending on the type of dark spirit that gets summoned, we could be looking at a catastrophe."

She studied him. He had people he cared about now. He had begun forming bonds, growing closer to others. He wasn't as isolated as before.

"If we do this... you will have regrets," she warned.

Damon exhaled slowly.

"I know. Then we can just add it to the long list of failures of the wretched Damon Grey."

Lilith smirked at his words. She was with him on this path to ruin—that was their deal, after all. Damon didn't miss when she said we—she was willing to let a potential disaster unfold just so he could get stronger.

She leaned into his ear, whispering, "I'll be your wings... You be mine too."

Damon's shadows flickered as she stood close to him. Unbeknownst to either of them, the four wings tattooed on Lilith's stigma faintly glowed on her back.

The wind stirred around them. Shadows deepened beneath the pale moonlight. Then a gust swept through the road, carrying dust, leaves... and the acrid scent of something burning.

Damon's nose twitched. The stench of fire and flesh filled the air.

His frown deepened as he spread his shadow perception.

His eyes widened. His face turned pale.

"Someone's burning..."

Chapter 209: File

The Student Council room was brightly lit, the glow of magical lamps reflecting off the polished floor. Knight statues stood outside at attention throughout the area, their presence a constant reminder of the Academy's security.

At the center of the room, a young man sat behind a desk buried under a mountain of documents. A crow perched lazily on the edge of the table, its head tucked under its wing as it dozed.

Damon sighed, brushing his black hair aside. Without sparing a glance, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a pouch. With a practiced motion, he emptied its contents—glittering magic crystals—onto the shadow pooling beneath his chair.

The inky darkness of his shadow rippled, greedily swallowing the crystals. A familiar chime echoed in his mind, a notification from his system. He barely acknowledged it, his eyes locked on the endless paperwork before him.

He groaned.

"Ahhh, this is so annoying... Finding records of students with spirit affinity is like looking for a damn needle in a haystack."

Across from him, Lilith sat with one leg crossed over the other, twirling a strand of red hair between her fingers. She rolled her eyes.

"Don't be such a sourpuss. We've only been at this for three weeks."

Damon let his head drop onto the table with a soft thud.

"Three weeks of nothing. We haven't made any progress. Meanwhile, the summoner's been making more and more attempts to bring forth a dark spirit. Every time, we just end up with another unconscious student who fails to be a proper vessel. Luckily, they only stay passed out for two days at most, and there haven't been any visible injuries."

He lifted his head slightly, dark eyes narrowing.

"But he's getting close. There haven't been any attempts in the last two days..."

Lilith smirked, resting her chin on her hand.

"I wonder... Is that a good thing or a bad thing? We do want the summoning to succeed so we can use that little thing we prepared... but we also don't want it to succeed, because, well... it's a dark spirit."

Her emerald eyes gleamed with amusement.

"My, my... You really should make up your mind about what you want."

Damon turned away, avoiding her gaze.

He couldn't make up his mind.

But if he was being honest with himself... he was leaning toward letting it happen.

Or worse—helping it happen from the shadows.

It had been three weeks since the night of the noble meeting.

And now, on this night, they had found the third victim of a failed dark spirit summoning.

The academy had been informed, but they were determined to keep it under wraps. The last thing they wanted was for the nobles to catch wind of the situation.

Damon sighed, rubbing his temples.

He really didn't have time for this. His end-of-semester evaluation was around the corner, and while his peers were training, he was here—hunting dark spirit summoners in the shadows.

For the most part, Lilith had been helping him refine his mana control, so he no longer leaked energy like before. That was a plus.

The nobles still hadn't left. They were locked in endless negotiations over the Fayjoy family's compensation. From what Lilith had told him, the sum was massive.

Half of him wanted to run over and demand compensation of his own, but it wasn't worth the trouble.

Instead, he focused on keeping his shadow hunger under control. He managed it using the Sacrifice skill, devouring magic crystals to stabilize his condition. But even with his hunger somewhat contained, his finances were in shambles due to his many expenses.

At this rate, he wasn't sure what would break first—his body or his wallet, or better yet Lilith's wallet.

But none of that mattered right now. The most important thing was finding the summoner.

The academy knew someone was performing dark spirit summonings. They just didn't have a suspect. For now, all they could do was extinguish the figurative fires before they spiraled out of control.

Damon exhaled sharply, gripping a small crystal blade in his hand. It was a magic artifact, one that Lilith had somehow convinced the academy to fund and create.

Its purpose was simple—to banish a spirit from a host body without harming the host.

"Are you sure this is gonna work on a dark spirit?" he asked, turning the blade between his fingers.

Lilith smiled.

"Positive. I had the one I gave you modified to cut out a piece of its soul."

She leaned forward, her chest pressing against the table, revealing just enough of her cleavage to make it very clear she was teasing him.

"Do you want to know how much it cost?"

Damon quickly averted his eyes, pretending to focus on the magic artifact instead.

"No. If I hear the price, the dirty poor miser in me might have a heart attack."

He picked up another document and moved it to the side.

"We can rule out Arthur Peddrake. He has no spirit affinity."

Lilith nodded.

"The number of second-year students with spirit affinity is low..."

"Which means they might be targeting a first-year."

For the past three weeks, they had been searching for students with an affinity for spirits. They had compiled a list, but getting solid proof was difficult—especially since it required stealing students' personal files.

Damon opened the next file. His eyes narrowed.

Name: Sylvia Moonveil

Race: Elf

Age: 16

Gender: Female

He flipped through the pages, skimming over her personal data.

Height, weight, measurements—standard details she probably wouldn't have wanted him snooping through.

But then... he noticed something odd.

Sylvia's academy file was strange.

Several fields were marked with question marks. The academy hadn't recorded much about her past. Her file wasn't just incomplete—it was marked CONFIDENTIAL, stamped with the headmaster's personal seal.

Damon's brows furrowed.

He didn't need to dig into her personal history. All he needed was to check whether she had a spirit affinity.

But after the last three weeks of Sylvia acting strangely, he couldn't help but be curious.

And yet, her file gave him no answers—only more questions.

Why was her file so heavily restricted?

He checked the profiles of Evangeline, Xander, and Leona. None of them were marked confidential. Their backgrounds were fully documented.

Only Sylvia's file was a mystery.

He tapped his fingers against the desk, deep in thought.

Lilith's voice pulled him back to reality.

"What are you doing?"

Damon shook his head, closing the file.

"Nothing. It's just... Sylvia's file is weird."

Chapter 210: Stalker Profiling

Lilith glanced at Damon as he flipped through Sylvia's file again, her lips curling into a mocking smile.

"You really can't handle rejection, can you? So now you've stooped to stalking your crush?"

Damon nearly choked on his own spit.

"Wha—what?! I—I'm just concerned about her! I just find it weird that her file is so different!"

Lilith sneered.

"And I imagine you just happened to memorize her three sizes and weight while you were investigating?"

Damon coughed, looking away.

"Ahem, I—you—I happen to have a photographic memory! So if I happen to know that her sizes are—"

Lilith rolled her eyes.

"Oh? Then what are they?"

Damon smirked.

"You couldn't get that info out of me with torture."

She tapped a finger on her chin, feigning thought.

"Fifty thousand zeni."

Without hesitation, Damon exhaled.

"B88-W58-H85."

Lilith's grin widened.

"You really have no shame."

Damon leaned back in his chair, completely unbothered.

"Shame doesn't put food on the table"

she sneered. "you are a closet pervert..."

"I am a pervert—pervertedly obsessed with money."

She picked up a book, flipping through the pages.

"You have so many vices for someone so young..."

Damon ignored her, picking up Evangeline's profile instead.

"She has so many talents... too bad she can't see past her own ego."

Lilith glanced at him, tilting her head.

"Evangeline Brightwater is a high noble. Having an ego is natural."

Damon shook his head.

"That's not it. She doesn't even realize she has an ego. She just expects everyone to play by her elitist rules—without even meaning to. She talks about justice, but she does nothing to change the status quo."

Lilith chuckled softly. She could tell he wasn't just criticizing Evangeline.

He was concerned.

"You're worried about her."

Damon scoffed, shaking his head.

"I can't afford to worry about other people... It's just—if she continues like this, blinded by her own radiance, she'll only end up suffering."

Lilith flipped to the next page, her eyes narrowing.

"Hmm... hey, come look at this."

Damon glanced at the weathered old book she was reading. He sighed, standing up, his clothes slightly wrinkled from sitting too long.

He stepped behind her, close enough to catch the faint scent of gardenia —the natural fragrance she always carried. The warmth of her body radiated against him, and his shadow twitched slightly at the proximity.

"What is it?" He asked feeling somewhat weary of the long hours.

"Take a look at this. I've been going over all recorded accounts of spirit summoning, and I found this old book, written by an imperial scholar—Caiem van Wladimir, in 458. It documents the dark spirit Rashi Ignath."

Damon's face scrunched up.

Lilith continued, flipping through the brittle pages.

"It says that Rashi Ignath controls flames—dark flames that are both as hot as passion and as cold as resentment... it says and I quote... " it shall scorch thy soul." Furthermore..."

She held up the book. It seemed to be a scholarly work that debunked myths and legends.

"It also says that Ignath was born when Ashcroft invaded the Verdant Continent."

Damon sighed, leaning back.

"Yeah, except that's just a myth. Ashcroft isn't even supposed to exist. This whole book is useless—it debunks itself."

She nodded.

"Yes, but—if you cross-reference it with this—" she tapped another book, "—you can actually glean something important. But that's not what I'm trying to show you."

She pointed back at Wladimir's account.

"He wrote that the dark spirit didn't just appear in the Evil Forest. It possessed a vessel—a person—to carry out its power. The longer it had, the more it acclimated to the host, eventually creating a projection of itself to fight while it hid in the vessel. Until, finally, the host was completely taken over."

Damon's expression darkened as he looked at the old sketches of what the dark spirit was supposed to look like.

"So, according to this, if they had stopped the vessel before full possession, they could've prevented the tragedy..."

Lilith nodded grimly.

"And that means we just identified the dark spirit being summoned."

Damon sighed. "That doesn't really help us, though, does it?"

She shook her head. "It does. The book also states that this spirit cannot possess someone unless there's a gap in their heart—an emotional wound, doubt, desire... something it can exploit."

Damon's eyes widened slightly as realization hit him.

"So you're saying... the reason the other vessels failed wasn't just because they were weak. They also didn't have a big enough hole in their heart."

He held his chin in thought.

"When I was a kid, back to back used to tell me—if you let goosebumps appear on your skin, you open yourself to possession."

Lilith nodded. "A lot of emotions make your hair stand on end. But fear is one of the strongest. That's why most of the attacks happened at night—to scare the targets."

Damon nodded slowly.

"As the attacks continued, the summoner collected more data and refined their methods. Repetition is the mother of learning. But..." His brow furrowed. "The attacks stopped two days ago."

Lilith closed the book.

"That means one of two things—they're preparing for something... or they ran out of a crucial ingredient."

Damon looked at her sharply, he was curious. "Which ingredient?"

Lilith turned her gaze back to him, her cold smile sending a chill down his spine.

"Your blood."

Damon blinked.

"That's right... I haven't gotten into any fights or deadly training lately. The summoner must've run out of the blood they scooped up from the ground last time."

Lilith stood up from her chair, her voice quiet but firm.

"That—and they've found a vessel that meets all the requirements. A hole in their heart, and a lot of spirit affinity."

She smiled coldly, her fingers clenched.

"Which means they'll be making their move soon. And we still have no suspects. Just speculation."

She turned to him, her fists clenched, her eyes weary but determined.

"You're going to be a target. So no matter what—don't leave my sight."