

Shadow 211

Chapter 211: Silent Library

The library was cold and silent in the dead of night.

It had been two days since his conversation with Lilith at the student council office, and Damon could feel his irritation bubbling over.

He balled his fists, feeling the tension in his body mount. With a sharp exhale, he slammed his knuckles against the wall. A faint crack spread across the surface. He ignored the mild pain, his frustration drowning out everything else.

"Why am I letting this bother me so much...?"

It was Sylvia.

She was getting worse with each passing day.

At first, she had just been withdrawn. Then, she started shutting people out completely. She brooded constantly, barely spoke unless necessary, and when she did, she was either curt or outright dismissive. She avoided company, preferring to sit alone.

She was starting to remind him of himself.

And it was annoying.

"Is this how I treat people...?"

He hadn't even realized it—hadn't noticed just how unbearable it was—until Leona pointed it out. She knew him better than anyone, after all. She was the one who had forced her way past his walls, the one who refused to let him push her away.

Damon had tried to fix it. He really had. But he didn't even know how he had hurt Sylvia in the first place.

Evangeline had long since given up trying to talk to him about it. She barely mentioned Sylvia anymore, as if she had already accepted that nothing could be done. Not that it mattered—Sylvia didn't talk to Evangeline either. She barely acknowledged anyone.

All she did was sit alone, reading, even when her friends were around.

It was like the world around her didn't exist.

"Worst of all... she's becoming me."

Damon clenched his fists again, his frustration mounting. He stalked down the dimly lit halls, his steps barely making a sound.

He was looking for Sylvia.

He had gone to her room first—nothing. She wasn't there. No trace of her. Just stacks of books, neatly arranged as if she had left them behind on purpose.

Lately, he had developed the bad habit of sneaking into Sylvia's room at night. She never reacted to his presence. Never looked up. Never acknowledged him.

She would just sit there, reading.

At first, he had tried talking. Tried to get her to open up.

She never answered.

Eventually, he stopped talking too. And they just sat there, in silence, reading together.

Tonight, when he went to her room, she was gone.

That was why he had snuck out of the dorms without anyone noticing.

He was sure she would be here.

The only problem was that the library was massive.

She usually stuck to the outer sections, but as time passed, she started reading books from deeper inside. It was almost like she had an obsession with reading everything.

Damon exhaled and closed his eyes, spreading his shadow perception through the library. The darkness slithered through the aisles, stretching as far as the barriers would allow. Some areas were protected by magic, preventing his shadows from reaching them.

He sensed nothing.

No movement.

No living shadows.

He sighed, glancing down at his own shadow.

"Go find her. If you see her, report back immediately."

His shadow gave him a crisp, military-style salute before gliding away, vanishing into the pale glow of the library's dim magic lanterns.

Today was an odd day.

The library was quiet—too quiet.

By now, he should have sensed at least one or two people in different sections, even with the curfew in place. But tonight, there was nothing. It was almost as if he had stepped into another realm altogether.

The feeling unsettled him. It reminded him of the way the world seemed to vanish whenever Lilith used her void magic to isolate space.

Damon scratched the back of his head, trying to shake off the unease creeping over him. His skin prickled, a deep discomfort settling in his bones. His shadow slithered through the halls at high speed, darting between shelves, its perception feeding him a vision of every corner it passed.

He walked in the opposite direction.

He could have called out Sylvia's name, but with the academy's new curfew, that would have been reckless. If a patrol professor caught him sneaking around at this hour, he'd be in trouble. He had already almost run into Professor Kael on the way here.

"If he had caught me, it would've been annoying."

He moved carefully, staying in the shadows where possible.

Then—he stopped.

A faint sound rippled through his shadow's perception, reaching him from the far edges of the library.

Damon turned sharply, shifting his shadow to the side, and caught a glimpse of white hair disappearing around a corner between the shelves.

"Sylvia."

Without hesitation, he dashed forward, vaulting over desks and tables as he crossed the open space of the library.

His instincts urged him to send his shadow ahead, but at the last second, he stopped himself.

He couldn't let Sylvia see his shadow moving on its own.

Grinding his teeth, he called it back. His shadow slipped through the aisles and reattached itself to him just as he reached the shelves where Sylvia had disappeared.

He slowed his pace slightly, spreading his perception out fully, searching for any trace of her.

Nothing.

The eerie silence of the library pressed in on him.

He was certain he had seen her.

Just as he was about to move forward, he caught another flicker of white in his peripheral vision.

He snapped his head toward it.

"Sylvia, wait—!"

He took a sharp turn, running after her—

Flash.

A sudden burst of blinding white light engulfed the entire library.

His vision exploded with brightness, erasing every shadow, erasing his shadow—

Damon barely had time to process what was happening before a searing heat bloomed in his gut.

Then—

The unmistakable sensation of liquid spilling from his body.

Blood.

His own.

Before he could react, something hard slammed into his head. His neck jolted back, his balance broke—

His body collapsed to the ground.

Blood pooled beneath him.

His consciousness slipped.

As the suffocating white light grew, a figure remained.

A white figure, holding a glowing white orb—one that greedily absorbed the blood seeping from the ground.

Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the light vanished—

Taking the figure with it.

Damon lay unmoving in a crimson pool, his body limp, breath shallow.

The library was silent once more.

Then—

His shadow stirred.

It circled around him, moving anxiously, writhing as if in distress.

And then, without hesitation—

It fled, gliding swiftly through the darkened halls, searching for help.

Chapter 212: A Fine Blade

In a large room filled with luxurious furnishings, the windows were wide open, allowing the faint glow of the twin moons to spill in. Their pale light cast long shadows across the dormitory, illuminating the figure of a young woman with long, flowing red hair.

She paced back and forth, her emerald-green eyes filled with unease, her fingers unconsciously fidgeting.

Dressed in the official uniform of Aether Academy, she wore several brooches pinned to her chest—symbols of her high status as the student council president.

Lilith moved restlessly, her gaze flickering toward the door every few seconds, as if expecting someone to walk in at any moment.

But the night remained silent.

Until—

A shadow glided through the open window.

It took the form of a young man, though it was in visible distress. The way it twisted and writhed set her nerves on edge.

Seeing this, Lilith gritted her teeth. She did something highly unladylike—she leaped through the window.

The ground was three stories below, but before she could touch it, a whirlpool of magical energy spiraled beneath her feet. Space twisted, swallowing her in an instant—

And when she reappeared, she was already sprinting across the academy grounds.

The shadow followed, gliding anxiously around her before attaching itself to her form. She didn't hesitate.

Taking a single step forward, space folded.

The world around her blurred—her mana drained at an alarming rate, but she ignored it.

She had no time to care.

When the distortion settled, she was standing in front of the grand doors of the library.

Without wasting a second, she teleported inside.

The shadow at her feet detached, gesturing for her to follow.

She ran.

And then—

She froze.

Her breath hitched.

There, lying in a pool of his own blood, was a young man with dark hair. His academy uniform was soaked in crimson, his body eerily still.

Lilith's face went pale. Her legs felt weak. A sickening twist wrenched at her heart.

"No—"

She dashed forward, falling to her knees beside him.

"Damon... Damon, wake up!"

She pressed her head against his chest, desperate to hear his pulse—

Thump-thump.

It was there—weak but steady.

Her hands scrambled for a healing potion. She pulled a vial from her uniform with trembling fingers, but in her frantic state, she accidentally crushed it.

The shimmering liquid spilled over his lips.

Ignoring the blood soaking her uniform, she lifted his head onto her lap, watching with bated breath as his wounds began to close.

Then—

He gasped, his body jolting upright.

Lilith let out a sigh of relief.

And before she could stop herself—

She hugged him.

"Agh—ouch! That hurts! You're crushing me!"

She immediately pulled away, her face flushed with embarrassment.

Then, her expression twisted into anger.

"You... you fool! You ungrateful, crazy bastard!"

Damon blinked at her in shock.

He had never expected Lilith Astranova lose her composure like this.

A grin tugged at his lips.

"Heh... You should see your face right now."

She stiffened.

Her fingers twitched.

Then, her eyes turned cold.

"Didn't I tell you not to leave my side?" she said icily.

Damon stretched, feeling a lingering sting in his side and a dull ache in his head. His gaze shifted downward.

"As we thought... they took my blood."

Lilith bit her lip. Her emerald eyes narrowed.

He was too calm.

"Your plan worked," she admitted, her voice low.

Then, her hands clenched into fists.

"But that was too reckless."

Lilith stared at the pool of blood, her expression unreadable.

"I told you they would target you," she muttered. "And yet, you still insisted on letting it happen. I was more worried that you'd get yourself killed..."

Damon smirked.

"I didn't," he said casually, though his pale face told a different story.

"I guess that wasn't Sylvia after all. I let my guard down."

He glanced at the bloodstained floor before shaking his head.

"But everything went well... It would've been better if they had taken me instead. That way, we could've used the magic artifact I swallowed to track my location."

Lilith let out a long sigh, rubbing her temples.

"You really don't listen to me..." she murmured. "How did I even let you convince me that this was a feasible plan?"

Damon smiled, but there was no humor in his dark eyes.

"It worked," he said simply. "I acted as bait, and they took the bite."

His fingers traced over the dried blood on his uniform, his voice calm despite the near-fatal encounter.

"I drank the potion, so it should be in my blood now. The next time they attempt the summoning, they'll be certain it'll work. But instead of meeting their objective, the spirit will go on a small rampage."

He leaned back against the chair, exhaling slowly.

"And when the academy is forced to intervene, we'll use the chaos to seize the soul fragment."

His smirk widened despite his weakened state.

"It's a foolproof plan."

Lilith pushed her red hair back, crossing her arms.

"It's a reckless plan," she corrected. "The potion might not even work—it's experimental."

Damon nodded, massaging his temples as he sat down. His head throbbed, and his limbs still felt sluggish.

She observed him for a moment before speaking.

"...Do you need another potion?"

He shook his head.

"No. It's a waste of money."

Another deep sigh escaped him.

"Whoever it was... they knew about my shadow perception. They also knew exactly how to bypass it. They used light—or rather, an artifact—to banish all shadows, including mine." His voice dropped slightly. "That means they had knowledge of my abilities."

Lilith frowned, bringing a hand to her chin.

"Sylvia Moonveil isn't strong enough to knock you out like that," she said. "We've already confirmed that it was a professor... Someone at the third-class advancement or higher."

Damon's smirk faded.

A dark, killing intent flickered in his eyes.

"If I find them..." His voice turned cold. "I'll kill them."

Lilith's gaze met his, her expression unreadable once more.

"You mean I will kill them."

Damon chuckled.

Right. He wasn't even at first-class advancement yet. His opponent was likely far stronger. He was still weak.

And that was exactly why he was taking such risks.

But that was fine.

Because he had a weapon—a powerful blade named Lilith Astranova.

And he was going to leverage her power to level up as much as possible.

He stood up, stretching slightly.

"I have your power at my disposal," he said with a knowing smirk. "So I'll take full advantage of that."

Lilith nodded, her emerald eyes glinting.

"And I have yours."

Chapter 213: Her Past

Damon trudged under the sun, his shadow trailing behind him. Despite being stabbed, he hadn't given up on searching for Sylvia. He had sent the raven, Croft, to look for her while he stayed with Lilith, making plans for the potential fallout of the dark spirit summoning.

The academy grounds were bustling with students as he made his way to the main building, where he was obviously late for class. He had taken two more healing potions, but healing potions didn't restore lost blood—that was what recovery potions were for. His body still felt sluggish, but he pushed forward, ignoring the dull ache in his limbs.

Reaching the classroom, he walked in just as the professor was making their exit.

His gaze scanned the room before locking onto Evangeline, who was seated with Leona and Xander.

Her golden hair was tied in a ponytail, and as always, she looked breathtaking. But the moment she felt a shadow looming over her, she raised her head, her sun-kissed golden eyes turning ice-cold.

"What do you want, Damon?" she asked, her voice laced with irritation.

A pang of annoyance flickered through him. He and Evangeline bickered so much that Professor Emeraldal had started joking that they were like siblings.

"I don't have time for your bullshit, Evangeline. Where is Sylvia?"

She twisted her lips in mild irritation.

"I don't know. Go jump into a lagoon."

He sneered. If she was hoping he'd drown in that lagoon, she was about to be disappointed. He had the Water Celebration skill—he couldn't drown even if he wanted to.

"I'll have to disappoint you," he muttered dryly.

Instead of waiting for an invitation, he moved around to where she was sitting, nudged her inside with his waist, and sat down beside her.

"Wha—what the hell was that for?!" she sputtered, eyes blazing with outrage.

Damon shook his head.

"I have some questions."

She scoffed.

"I don't have answers."

Damon was about to retort when Leona chuckled.

"You two are so cute together," she teased. "Like an old married couple."

Xander frowned.

Damon shot Leona a deadpan look.

"Shut up, Leona. Why can't you ever wish for me to find good things?"

Leona only smiled, while Evangeline looked utterly appalled. Her wide eyes flared with rage.

"Are you implying that I'm not good enough for you?"

Damon sighed, rubbing his temples. He was too tired for this. He glanced at her calmly.

"Evangeline, normally, I'd say I wouldn't be caught dead with you as my spouse, but I'm trying to remake myself as a person, so I'll be a gentleman."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes.

"You're failing... and you still said it."

"Pfft... haha..." Leona couldn't hold back her laughter. She had seen that coming from a mile away.

Both Damon and Evangeline turned to glare at her, while Xander sighed.

Brushing off the irritation, Damon turned back to Evangeline.

"Look, I wanted to ask you something—how much do you know about Sylvia Moonveil?"

Evangeline furrowed her brows.

"Huh? What? Why are you asking me that?"

She glared at him suspiciously.

"What the hell are you on?"

Damon sighed. She had misunderstood.

"It's not what you think. I was just curious about her, that's all."

Evangeline's sharp eyes scanned him up and down with clear disdain.

"If you want to know about her past, ask her yourself."

She slammed the table and got up.

Damon clenched his jaw, his irritation rising. Before she could walk away, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down into her seat.

"Let me go, Damon!" she snapped.

He gritted his teeth.

"Calm down... it's important. I wanted to know if Sylvia had an affinity for spirits."

Evangeline paused, doubt flickering in her golden, sun-marked eyes as they met his, which were as dark as the night.

"Why do you want to know that?"

He looked to the side, jaw tightening.

"It's... important."

She took a deep breath, her expression turning even colder.

"You won't tell me, and yet you want me to reveal deeply personal information about my best friend—without a reason—to the guy who hurt her, no less?"

Damon clenched his fists, his frustration mounting, but he suppressed it. He didn't have time for this—he needed to know.

"Look, I promise—it's life and death. Just tell me."

Evangeline scoffed, her gaze cutting into him like a blade.

"That's not your concern. Should've thought about that before you stabbed her in the back... Maybe you should consider, for once, that you aren't some tragic protagonist of a dark fantasy."

Her voice dripped with venom.

"You're just some rude, obnoxious jerk... a hypocrite and a liar."

She clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms.

"I mean, we were just trying to be friends with you."

Damon remained quiet, his fists trembling at his sides.

Leona wanted to interfere, but seeing his expression, she knew whatever was coming next wouldn't be good.

She raised her hand, but it was Xander who spoke first.

"Ahh... Evangeline, maybe you shouldn't—"

"Mind your business."

Damon chuckled—cold, distant.

"Rude? Obnoxious?" His voice was ice. "Yeah, you've got me all figured out... hehe... a tragic protagonist?"

His gaze darkened. How dare she say that? She hadn't lived through even half the shit he had.

"I'm a hypocrite? Yeah, maybe I am... but you know what, Evangeline?" His eyes narrowed. "It takes one to know one."

The room fell silent.

"You didn't give a damn about me. None of you did. Not until you thought I was strong. Not until you lost to me. And then, suddenly, you forced yourself into my life—even when I made it pretty damn clear I didn't want anyone there.

"It's obvious—not because I'm the most pleasant person to be around..." His lips curled into a smirk. "But because it's convenient for you."

Evangeline stiffened, her golden eyes widening.

Damon laughed—cold, humorless.

"Heh... You always like to talk big about justice... but that's all you do—talk. You're weak. A weak person asks for justice... a stronger one creates it." His voice was razor-sharp. "Tell me, Evangeline—who have you ever helped?"

Silence.

His gaze swept across the class.

"How many starving commoners have you walked past? How many dying people have you ignored?" He let the words hang in the air before finishing with a sneer. "I bet the answer is zero. You don't want justice. After all, you're in the top one percent—a product of the system."

Evangeline's face paled.

Leona tensed, about to step in, but Xander raised a hand, stopping her.

"I am a tragic protagonist." Damon's voice was filled with quiet fury. "Because I'm not part of that top one percent. I don't have a golden spoon in my mouth. I don't have the luxury of playing fair. I have to play dirty to survive." His eyes bore into her, unwavering.

"So don't you dare paint me pitch black... when you aren't so white yourself."

Evangeline's hands trembled, her entire world shaking under his words.

Damon took a step forward, placing a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Now... tell me if she has a spirit affinity or—"

Before he could finish, Leona's beastkin ears twitched, standing on end. Her fur bristled.

Then—

RUMBLE.

A deafening bang echoed through the academy.

The ground shook. The walls groaned.

Damon barely had time to react before the tremors sent him crashing into Evangeline.

He pushed himself up, his breath ragged. In the distance, a colossal aura pulsed—dark, malevolent, endless.

His blood ran cold.

He gritted his teeth.

"...It's begun."

His eyes sharpened.

"I don't have time to look for Sylvia anymore."

Chapter 214: Sheltered

The ground trembled under the terrible tremors, a vast magical energy spreading across the academy grounds. Astral winds howled as the energy converged in a single direction, compressing into a burning entity—or at least, that's what it looked like to Damon.

But this fire was different. It wasn't red or orange. Instead, it was made of ghostly writhing shadows, flickering with an eerie purple glow. The flames rose high into the sky, writhing as if in agony, its form shifting and collapsing inward before violently expanding outward. Then, like a celestial explosion, its body shattered, breaking apart into meteors of burning darkness that rained down upon the earth.

Each fragment carried a terrifying aura, and as they struck the ground, they morphed—some taking the shapes of monstrous beasts wreathed in dark flames, others forming humanoid figures with blazing eyes. The larger they were, the more overwhelming their presence became. At the center of them all stood the largest, radiating power equivalent to a Fourth-Class advancement. Damon clenched his jaw. He had only sensed something similar once before—when he stood in the presence of Marabell Defonté.

Pushing himself off the ground, he realized he had landed on top of Evangeline. He barely spared her a glance as he lifted his hand from her chest and got to his feet. There was no time for embarrassment—she didn't seem to notice either, her golden eyes fixed on the nightmare unfolding before them.

The other students were frozen, terror gripping them.

"W-What is that...?"

"Are we under attack?"

"Is that a Shadow...?"

"It has to be the demons! The demons are attacking the academy!"

A fairy girl with short blue hair pointed at the entity with horror in her voice.

"I-It's... the Dark Spirit—Rashi Ignath..."

At the mention of the name, panic spread like wildfire.

"R-Rashi Ignath?! The spirit that nearly destroyed the capital in the past?!"

A wave of despair crashed over the students, their fear palpable.

"We're all going to die..."

"The professors will stop this! They have to!"

Damon narrowed his eyes.

No. The professors weren't the reason this spirit was here.

The potion had worked.

Rashi Ignath had been summoned, but instead of a single, unstoppable force, it had been broken into smaller, more manageable fragments. That was the plan he had made with Lilith Astranova. The academy could handle these scattered pieces, especially with the noble families' military forces present.

The potion's secondary effect ensured that the spirit would be banished within twenty-four hours. It would weaken over time, depleting itself the more it fought, unable to regenerate.

Damon reached into his pocket, his Remorseless skill sharpening his focus. He felt the small, glass-like dagger tucked in his clothes.

Now, all he needed to do was find the host vessel—cut out a fragment of the spirit.

His eyes darkened.

He no longer had time to look for Sylvia. He could only hope she was safe amidst this chaos.

Turning on his heel, he sprinted toward the door. But before he could leave, a hand grabbed his wrist.

"Wait!"

He stopped, glancing back at Evangeline. She was holding onto him, her face tense with anxiety.

"Where are you going?"

His gaze turned cold. He had no time for this. His plan was already in motion—the Dark Spirit's soul fragment was within reach.

"Let go. I don't have time for this," he said flatly, shaking her off.

But she grabbed him again, more desperately this time.

"Wait, please! It's about Sylvia!"

Damon froze.

Her?

He turned, his expression darkening. "This better be good."

Evangeline bit her lip, hesitating before nodding.

"You were right about me... but I need your help. Please," she whispered.

"You asked if Sylvia had a spirit affinity. I can't reveal her secrets without her permission... but now it's life and death. I'm worried about her."

Her voice trembled, her lips pale. "We need to find Sylvia."

Damon's jaw tightened. "What do you think I was trying to do?"

Leona's beastkin ears twitched. "We need to go—this is bad. If we stay anywhere close, we'll die for sure."

Xander, who had been watching the chaos in the distance, nodded, his face pale.

The students around them had the same idea, fleeing toward the exits, desperate to put as much distance between themselves and the monstrous spirits now rampaging through the academy.

Evangeline's hands shook, her breath uneven. Then, she did something Damon didn't expect.

She bowed her head to him.

"Please," she whispered. "I need your help... Sylvia might be in danger."

Damon's heart drummed against his ribs, a relentless beat that even Remorseless couldn't completely dull. His emotions were muted, yet the weight of the possibilities pressed down on him, suffocating.

No—he could already see the outcome.

"She has spirit affinity, doesn't she...? It must be quite high. Maybe the highest..."

Evangeline bit her lip but didn't answer. Bound by her promise to Sylvia, she couldn't betray her confidence. But her silence spoke louder than words.

"Sylvia is from Iorvas... as you know, it has the most spirits of any of the nine continents."

She paused, letting him piece it together himself.

And he did.

Born in Iorvas. A massive amount of spirit affinity. She must have attracted spirits—drawn them to her side, loved by them in ways ordinary people couldn't understand.

But how spirits expressed affection varied wildly. Some were kind, like people. Others played pranks. Some were outright violent, their love destructive. And, most of all, spirits were easily offended.

Capricious. Volatile. Like children with no concept of right or wrong.

If she had that much affinity, it made sense why she was sent to Aether Academy. The academy's barriers—and its proximity to the Evil Forest—kept most spirits away. It was a safe haven for her.

"She must have been kept sheltered... in a place where spirits couldn't reach..."

Damon's thoughts came to a screeching halt.

Sheltered.

His stomach twisted as realization sank in. That was Sylvia's sore spot.

That was what he had said to hurt her.

She hadn't been sad or angry because he stabbed her. No, what truly hurt her was when he called her a sheltered princess.

And if it really had cut that deeply...

Then she would have a gap in her heart. A vulnerability.

A weakness that could make her susceptible to spirit possession.

By a Dark Spirit, no less.

And it was all his fault.

Chapter 215: No Regrets Yet

Damon took a deep breath, steadying his mind. There was no room for hesitation.

He walked up to Leona.

"I know I'm asking too much, but I need your help."

She smirked. "If you bow your head to me, I'll break it."

A chuckle followed. "Do you even need to ask? I mean, it's only a dark spirit with the power to destroy an entire city... no biggie."

Damon allowed a faint smile. Leona was a good person—where had she been all his life? If he had met someone like her earlier, maybe he wouldn't have been so mistrusting.

He turned to Xander, his pride catching in his throat. Asking Xander Ravenscroft for a favor...

It left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Pride? What pride? He took pride in having none.

Still, he stood in front of the other boy.

"I... I need your... help."

Xander's eyes widened, not with fear, but with shock.

"You what...?"

Damon glanced at Evangeline. She had lowered her head slightly, a silent plea.

If he were the one in danger, Sylvia would help him too... right?

He exhaled sharply.

Then, slowly, he lowered his head.

"Please... I need your help. Help me save Sylvia."

Xander's breath hitched.

"You... you..."

He was at a loss for words.

This was Damon Grey. The same Damon who claimed he had no pride but was so arrogant that no one—absolutely no one—could stop him from saying or doing what he wanted.

And yet, here he was, lowering his head.

Not for himself.

For someone else.

Xander trembled.

"Don't insult me, Damon Grey." His voice was firm. "Do you think a scion of the Ravenscroft household would abandon a friend?"

Damon slowly raised his head. He whispered, "Hmm... thank you."

Xander nodded. "Let's go. We have a friend to save."

Then, he glanced at Damon. "Well? What's the plan?"

Damon was surprised. Xander was actually letting him take the lead.

He nodded, his eyes turning cold.

"Our primary objective is to find Sylvia. If my guess is right... she's currently the vessel for that."

He pointed at the rampaging dark spirit in the distance—the massive form and its broken fragments wreaking havoc.

Xander narrowed his eyes.

"And should I ask how you know all that?"

Damon frowned, but before tension could build, Leona stepped in.

"That's not important right now. We need to save Sylvia. Damon, come up with something—something underhanded and unusual—and let's get her back."

Xander sighed, grumbling, "That's assuming he doesn't have a hidden agenda."

Evangeline moved closer to Damon.

"I... I will take responsibility for any fallout," she said firmly. "So you don't need to trust Damon. Trust me instead."

Damon looked at Leona.

"First course of action: split up. Keep your pagers close."

He turned to Xander and Evangeline.

"You two take Leona to Sylvia's dorm. Find her clothes—or something with her scent. Leona, use that beastkin nose of yours to track her down."

Xander and Evangeline nodded.

"No matter what, make sure you deliver Leona there safely. Take the west hall route—after that, jump out the window onto the roof of the Blue Gallery. Stop by there and gear up."

Leona tilted her head. "Should I bring you any weapons?"

He shook his head, "I have enough weapons on hand."

Xander gritted his teeth. "We're taking academy property without permission. That's stealing."

Evangeline lowered her head. Then, something changed in her eyes.

"We're saving our friend's life." Her voice was sharp. "I don't give a damn about the rules right now."

Damon nodded, standing up.

Xander scrunched his face.

"And you? Where are you going?"

Damon turned away.

"To find Sylvia."

He walked toward the window. The halls were too congested with students making a run for it, their screams echoing in the chaos. Their fear wasn't lost on him, but it was inevitable—they would have to fight for their lives.

He glanced outside.

In the distance, the second-year students and seniors had already engaged the enemy. They had battle experience and wouldn't run from something like this.

Apparently, after the first-year end-of-semester evaluation, all students who survived it became hardened by battle. It was the first exam after the entrance trials—one that carried the risk of mortality.

Without hesitation, he leaped out the window, firing his omnidirectional gear. The wires shot from his wrist, anchoring him as he swung through the air.

He landed smoothly, rolling forward before pulling out his pager.

Immediately, he called up Lilith Astranova.

Her calm voice came through.

"The plan worked. We messed up the summoning."

He bit his lip. "Where are you?"

A pause.

"I'm right behind you."

His body tensed, he was caught off guard it was like she suddenly appeared out of thin air.

'Teleportation.' He thought mildly irritated

He turned sharply at the voice behind him, spotting the red-haired young woman standing there, her expression unreadable.

The distant battlefield roared with chaos—flashes of magic, the clash of weapons, and the cries of students and professors rang through the air. The ground trembled under the sheer force of battle.

Lilith's gaze swept over the unfolding carnage.

"We ruined the summoners' plans. They can't use the spirit's power properly like this. We've limited it—shattered its form into many smaller parts. But even in fragments, it's still powerful."

She studied him, watching his unwavering stance amidst the chaos.

"We need to find the host vessel and extract the soul fragment. Do you know who it is?"

His fists clenched, his eyes betraying a flicker of pain.

"I know who the host is..."

She held his gaze.

"It's Sylvia Moonveil."

Her eyes widened slightly, her brow twitching.

"Well... our situation just went from bad to worse."

She turned slightly. "Sylvia Moonveil has a special background."

Damon bit his lip, his shadows flickering—his emotions barely restrained.

Lilith watched him closely. "Your plan is coming to fruition... do you regret it?"

He raised his head, his eyes cold with resolve.

"I don't regret it yet... If I save Sylvia, I won't have anything to regret."

Chapter 216: Third Class Skill

Lilith smiled at his words. He wouldn't regret it unless he failed to save Sylvia. Perhaps he had forgotten that this wasn't entirely his fault.

She nodded. "Do you know who Sylvia Moonveil actually is?"

Damon, running by her side with a bow and a quiver of arrows, glanced at her. He loosed an arrow tipped with cursed ore into the sky, striking down a small piece of the dark spirit, Rashi Ignath. The fragment, shaped like a hawk, exploded into dark particles.

"If you know something, say something."

Lilith waved her hand, space twisting violently as she cut down a swarm of dark spirits.

"Moonveil is a common family name where Sylvia is from, but how it's written distinguishes the highborn from the commoners and nobility from royalty. Despite sounding the same, they're written differently."

Damon pulled a new arrow from his quiver—this one heavier, with a large, razor-sharp tip. It was from Back-to-Back's quiver, which he had claimed after killing the elf.

"So what, she's a noble?"

Lilith teleported to avoid a blast of black fire from a spirit.

"No, she's not. Sylvia Moonveil is royalty. She's the only daughter of the Elf King, Caldera Moonveil."

Damon paused mid-step. Caldera—that was a terrifying name to hear. He was one of the most powerful rulers in the Verdant Continent, both strong and wise. It was said he had a great oracle who could see the future or something along those lines.

"Are you saying the elves will find trouble with the academy over this?"

Lilith nodded, taking a deep breath as the last of the small spirits faded.

"The great oracle of the Verdant Continent happens to be his wife... and also Sylvia's mother."

Damon's face scrunched up until he remembered something—Lilith had mentioned they couldn't be divined due to their connection with the Unknown God.

"So what does that have to do with us? The academy can settle this themselves."

She shook her head. "Not quite."

Glancing at him, she noticed sweat trickling down his forehead.

"While we can't be divined, normal investigation can still find us. And if I remember correctly, a spirit can't possess someone unless they have a gap in their heart."

She pushed her red hair aside.

"I'm pretty sure everyone saw when you stabbed Sylvia and betrayed her trust. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that you are the reason she has a gap in her heart."

Damon's eyes narrowed. He understood what she was implying. If anything happened to Sylvia, the Moonveil family would retaliate. Against him. As an academy student, he had diplomatic immunity, but the blade of an elven assassin wouldn't care about that.

He clenched his fist.

"That would be a lot of trouble. However, wouldn't they be more focused on the summoner instead of little old me?"

She glanced at the sky as if spotting something in the distance.

"Don't worry. If it comes to that, I can hide you as a fugitive until you're strong enough to face them openly. And I'm sure the academy won't just hand you over."

Damon followed her gaze, spotting a bird soaring through the air. He instinctively knocked an arrow, ready to fire, until he recognized the creature—it was the same raven that had always followed him. The intelligent bird was capable of carrying out complex tasks.

He had sent it on one such task—to find Sylvia. And now, it had returned.

This was the raven called Ravenscroft.

Or Croft for short.

"Caw! Caw! Sylvia! Caw!"

Croft cried out from the sky before landing on Damon's shoulder. He let go of his bow, catching the raven.

"You found her? Where is she?"

They couldn't exactly track her down in all this chaos. The entire academy was under attack by the dark spirit, Rashi Ignath. Even now, the ground trembled violently where the more powerful fragments of the great spirit clashed with professors, while countless lesser pieces swarmed the battlefield.

"Caw! Caw! Sylvia! Caw!"

Croft, perched on Damon's shoulder, fluffed his feathers and pointed in a specific direction, as if telling Damon that was where Sylvia was.

Damon took a deep breath. He had already sent the other three to Sylvia's dorm to retrieve an article of her clothing so Leona could use her beastkin nose to track her down—but it seemed that wouldn't be necessary.

By now, they should have been gathering weapons from the nearest armory, so he could still call them if needed.

He picked up his pager and contacted Leona, quickly giving her instructions on where to meet.

His eyes followed the direction Croft had pointed toward. The area ahead was in complete chaos, with dark spirits appearing all over the place. Faint humanoid figures loomed in the distance, radiating terrible auras of destruction.

Some of them were already engaged in battle against senior students or professors. The situation, for now, seemed under control—at least no one had died yet.

But Sylvia was in that direction, struggling for control over her body against the dark spirit.

Damon inhaled deeply, steadying himself. "Can you handle the big ones?"

Lilith smirked, her expression brimming with confidence.

"Who do you think you're talking to? I am the Priestess of the Void. Do you really think a few measly spirits can stop me?"

She raised her hand to her waist.

"Allow me to give you a demonstration. This is my third-class skill—[Void Scythe]."

The moment she spoke, a massive scythe materialized in her grasp. It appeared almost illusory, like a distortion of space itself.

Without hesitation, she hurled it forward.

The scythe spun in a circular arc, tearing through space wherever it passed, leaving behind jagged voids in reality itself.

It moved with unnatural speed, slicing through the battlefield before striking one of the faint humanoid spirits in the distance.

The creature was sucked in—its body crushed and devoured as though it had been swallowed by a black hole.

Damon unknowingly gasped. This was a great and terrible display of power.

Chapter 217: Man Of The People

Damon took deep breaths, sweat beading on his forehead as he gripped his dagger tightly, staring at the building ahead.

It was an old, abandoned structure—one that felt disturbingly familiar. Of course, how could he forget?

This was the same place he had killed Marcus Fayjoy.

"Ahhh, you've got to be kidding me..."

The dark spirit summoner had a twisted sense of humor. He had chosen this exact spot to summon the spirit and had used Sylvia as a vessel.

But Damon didn't have time for rueful thoughts. Not now.

Before him, a massive swarm of dark spirits gathered, a sea of writhing nightmares. At the center of it all stood the terrifying projection of Ignath, its oppressive gaze locked onto him and Lilith.

But it did not move.

The spirits came in all shapes and forms—some like beasts, others like twisted humanoids, and some... indescribable horrors straight out of nightmares.

A grotesque mass of countless blinking eyes embedded in a single, massive eyeball. A writhing, black-flamed entity covered in slithering tentacles. A hulking abomination dripping with malice.

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"How do you suggest we get past all that? There are too many of them... and that big one is going to be trouble."

Damon bit his lip, then gave a thin smile. "Way ahead of you."

He pulled out his pager.

"I didn't spend the past three weeks making out with Lady Margan for nothing..."

Lilith frowned, glaring at him.

He smirked at her. "Don't worry, I'm still a virgin. If I was going to sleep with Tobias's mother, I'd only do it if he were alive to feel the pain of knowing I nailed his mom. Otherwise, there's no point."

Lilith's expression turned ice-cold. "I take it back. I won't forgive you for what you said back then."

Damon sighed.

After all the trouble he went through with Lady Margan—the sheer number of times he had to escape her room so she wouldn't defile him... The widow certainly wanted him, and he intended to use that to his advantage. Why else would he have wasted his time with her?

He dialed her number on his pager, requesting immediate deployment of her knights. And, of course, he subtly made it sound like he would pay her a visit afterward.

After ending the call, he glanced up to find Lilith still glaring at him.

"Man whore."

Damon sighed. "Now we have backup. Her knights can mop up the little ones... you handle that big one."

Lilith followed his gaze and narrowed her eyes.

"That thing is the strongest projection... and it's close to its host vessel. It'll be stronger than all the others."

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail.

"I have no idea where your confidence in me comes from, but I'll try my best. If I fail, well, we both die."

Damon sneered. "You don't look like someone marching to her death."

She chuckled. "Never said I intend to die today. My enemies are still out there."

Then she turned, her sharp gaze shifting. "Your friends are here. And Lady Margan's knights aren't here yet."

Damon had already sensed their shadows. He didn't need her to tell him that.

Evangeline stood at the front, clad in light armor with white plating and gold accents. She held a thin rapier in her hand, its polished blade gleaming under the chaotic glow of the battlefield.

Beside her, Xander was covered head to toe in heavy armor, a massive tower shield strapped to his back. To Damon's surprise, he wasn't carrying his usual sword. Instead, he wielded a large spear, its wide point measuring at least seventeen centimeters across. For close-range combat, two short swords hung at his hips.

And last but not least was Leona. She wore a silver chest plate—though Damon wasn't sure what material it was actually made from. Large gauntlets covered her arms, and her legs were protected by metal boots that reached up to her knees. She carried no weapons, only those gauntlets.

Damon could already guess what she was thinking. She hadn't come to raise a weapon—she was here to save a friend, not kill them.

He sighed. Naïve thinking. But if she weren't so naïve, she never would've endured his cold treatment of her when she first forced her way into his life.

The three of them approached, sweat beading on their foreheads.

Evangeline nodded at Lilith in greeting, and Lilith acknowledged her with a curt nod in return.

"You found where Sylvia is?"

Damon jerked his head toward the abandoned building behind him.

Evangeline studied the structure, eyes narrowing at the swarm of dark spirits guarding it. Then, to his surprise, she said, "It's less than I expected."

Damon frowned. "Yeah... now that you mention it. Ignath probably doesn't want to draw too much attention to Sylvia's location."

"Did you get any backup?"

Leona shook her head. "Everything is too chaotic. The professors have their hands full, and all the senior members of the academy—like the headmaster—are gone... for some reason."

Damon already knew that. Why else would the summoner be acting so brazen?

Xander scanned the area. "We need help. The nobles who came to the academy only care about their own safety. They won't help even if we ask, and if they do, it'll be one lengthy negotiation."

Damon smirked. "Don't worry. They're already here."

He turned toward the distance, where a force of knights charged forward, banners of House Margan flying high. Their heavy armor glinted in the sunlight, their powerful steeds thundering across the ground as they stormed toward the battlefield.

Xander blinked in surprise. "H-How did you get House Margan to help?"

Damon smiled.

'By giving their lady the impression that I'd sleep with her.'

He chuckled. "I'm a man of the people. Why wouldn't they come to my aid?"

Lilith shot him a glare.

The others, on the other hand, gave him skeptical looks.

Damon? A man of the people? He was the farthest thing from it.

Chapter 218: The Will Of Men

Galahad and his knights stopped in front of Damon.

The knight narrowed his eyes at him, clear traces of disdain evident in his gaze. This was the no-good wretch who was wooing their lady—a woman old enough to be his mother. Did this young man have no shame?

Galahad had heard the whispers about Damon's reputation at the academy. A troublemaker, a scoundrel, a nuisance. And yet, for whatever reason, their lady had suddenly found herself infatuated with him.

It made no sense.

And now, in the middle of a crisis, she had ordered them to leave her side—just because of one call from a boy the age of her son. How could Galahad not feel irked?

Still, he was a knight of the Deep. He had to obey.

"I have come to aid you, as per my lady's will."

Damon smirked, noting Galahad's expression.

"Thanks for coming, Sir Galahad. It is an honor to have you by my side."

He was trying to change—trying to be a better person. And since these knights were about to risk their lives for him, the least he could do was be polite.

Lilith glanced at him.

"What's the plan?"

The others turned to look at him as well, waiting for his answer.

Damon shifted his gaze to the battlefield. The knights and the massive swarm of dark spirits were evenly matched—both in numbers and rank. The only real problem was the big one.

"Make sure my party gets inside no matter what."

He glanced at his companions.

Their faces were set with resolve. Conviction.

"The plan is simple."

He exhaled.

"Charge."

With that, Damon dashed forward, sprinting straight into the swarm of spirits.

Evangeline didn't hesitate—she followed right after him.

Galahad winced. He had half a mind to let the bastard die.

But...

Lilith Astranova was with him.

And with her there, the likelihood of Damon dying was lower than all of them.

Galahad let out a sharp breath and raised his sword.

"Knights of the Deep—charge!"

He kicked his steed forward. The ground thundered as his knights followed, galloping into what could only be a dire battle.

Damon didn't care if the knights of House Margan died.

Though, if they were going to die, he'd prefer they die serving a purpose.

That said, he hadn't sent them in blindly.

The odds were in their favor.

His shadow perception had already spread into the building.

He had found Sylvia.

She was standing there—her shadow flickering, tainted. Her usual bright presence had been drowned in something dark, something spiteful.

Yet, at the same time, there was something else.

A deep resentment.

A burning passion.

A strange duality.

But more than that...

It was terrifying.

It was pushing Sylvia's body to its limits, forcing it to adapt to its overwhelming power.

Right now, she was stronger than all of them.

In every aspect.

She was bordering on a first-class advancement. No—her power was already at that level.

But Damon felt no fear.

[Remorseless] only showed him what he needed to do to win.

And he would do whatever was necessary.

He raised his daggers in a cross before him.

The roar of the spirits echoed through the battlefield, their bodies wreathed in black flames that flickered like living shadows. The thunderous charge of the knights clashed against the oncoming horde, shaking the ground beneath their feet.

Behind him, he could feel his friends—all carrying the same desperation, the same resolve. They had come to save Sylvia, no matter the odds.

And then, the two forces met.

Chaos erupted.

Spirits dissipated into nothingness with shrill, soul-tearing wails, while knights screamed in agony as they were engulfed by the cursed flames of Ignath.

"Shields up! Now! Defensive formation!"

Galahad's voice cut through the carnage as he rallied his knights, trying to hold the line against the relentless spirits.

Damon's expression hardened.

Xander and the girls paled at the sight before them.

These flames—they weren't just fire.

They were hot enough to melt enchanted armor and powerful artifacts. Hot enough to incinerate a man, leaving neither ash nor bone.

Yet, at the same time, they were so cold they felt like ice.

These cursed flames could burn not just the body, but the soul itself.

The flames of Rashi Ignath.

Fear spread like a thick fog among the knights. Even with all their experience, they shuddered.

And this was only the beginning.

Damon had known this would happen.

That was why he had them charge.

They had no stakes in this battle.

If he had given them time to think—time to hesitate—many would have turned and fled.

"So I can only force them to fight or die... they have no choice."

Yes, the odds were on their side.

But only if they didn't run.

Now, surrounded by spirits, there was no way back. The only way was forward.

Galahad looked at Damon.

Even in the chaos, the young man's expression remained calm.

Unshaken.

"Did... did he plan this?"

Galahad knew all too well—retreating in the middle of battle was far harder than stories made it seem.

He studied Damon's dark, unreadable eyes as the boy suddenly leapt onto the steed of a charging knight with catlike reflexes.

Then—

He raised his voice above the battlefield.

"Brave knights of the Deep! We are surrounded—do not despair! Victory is at hand! As long as my party makes it inside, we can destroy the vessel!"

His voice rang clear and strong.

He lifted his blade higher.

"Let history remember this day! Let it be known as the day the Knights of the Deep vanquished the great spirit that has destroyed countless warriors!"

The knights turned, their eyes locking onto him.

He pointed his dagger forward, standing atop the steed that reared beneath him.

"Charge forward, spirit slayers! Charge forward, heroes!"

And like moths drawn to a flame, the knights roared in answer.

Their fear forgotten, their courage ignited.

Swords clashed. Shields rose. Their battle cries thundered.

Galahad watched in stunned silence.

His blood boiled with the fury of battle, invigorated.

His eyes locked onto Damon—

The boy whose gaze was darker than the abyss itself.

"What a—he's a... he's a..."

Chapter 219: Conduit

The battlefield was chaos.

Screams filled the air—horrible, agonized sounds Damon never thought a human body could make. The sickening snap of bones, the crackle of flesh burning in cursed flames.

Yet, those cries of despair were drowned out by the roars of rage—the furious battle cries of knights who watched their comrades fall to the spirits.

Even so, they fought.

They fought with the right morale.

Men had died for foolish reasons before. Many had been lured to their deaths by fleeting promises—glory, honor, immortality in name.

Damon had used that here.

He had promised to immortalize them as heroes.

And they had rushed to their deaths for him.

How easily men die for intangible promises.

Damon leapt off the steed just as it was engulfed in black flames, the knight atop it vanishing in the cursed inferno.

The ground trembled beneath him as warriors clashed—some among them wielding power beyond normal human limits.

Xander gritted his teeth as Damon yanked him down just in time, pulling him back up before sprinting toward the entrance of the abandoned building.

"Come on! Stay close—we have to get inside!"

Evangeline and Leona ran beside them, their faces streaked with soot and dust, their bodies marred by cuts and bruises from shattered earth—evidence of the violent clashes between knights and the dark spirits.

The area ahead was untouched by the chaos of battle.

Yet, despite its deceptive stillness, it was the most dangerous part of the battlefield.

This was where the strongest manifestation of Rashi Ignath stood—guarding the doors like an executioner waiting for its prey.

Leona bit her lip as she followed Damon, her body trembling at the sheer presence of the entity before them. Its aura was suffocating, a force so overwhelming it dwarfed everything else around it.

She could feel death staring back at her.

She could already see her end—her body reduced to nothing, not even a corpse, just ash scattered into the wind.

And yet, despite her fear, she pressed forward.

Damon, who led the way, did not hesitate.

He did not slow.

He showed no fear.

Leona forced a wry smile, her intuition about him proving to be correct. He was reckless, ruthless, cold, and brooding, but beneath it all, he was worth trusting.

He was worth following.

And so, she ran beside him, leaving the chaos behind.

The dark spirit raised its humanoid hand, black flames igniting like writhing shadows. In an instant, it conjured a massive sphere of fire—dense, compressed, a boulder of dark destruction.

With a flick of its hand, it hurled the infernal mass toward them.

Evangeline clenched her sword, her hands trembling as she channeled her magic, readying herself to intercept the attack.

Damon remained impassive, his expression unreadable—as if he had foreseen this exact moment.

"Brace yourselves!" he called out.

Before the fireball could reach them, a red-haired young woman materialized in front of them, teleporting into their path with flawless precision.

With a mere raise of her hand, space distorted, the very air bending around her presence.

The fireball vanished—then reappeared, right in front of the dark spirit's face.

It detonated.

The spirit staggered back, momentarily disoriented.

Lilith Astranova turned to glance at them.

Xander clenched his fists, cursing under his breath.

He had forgotten.

Amid the chaos, all eyes had been on Damon—his commanding presence, his unwavering certainty—but they had overlooked the strongest asset in their group.

Their trump card.

The student council president.

Damon barely spared her a glance as he rushed past.

"Don't die," Lilith whispered, her voice barely audible over the distant roars of battle.

Damon smirked.

"Right back at you."

And with that, he disappeared into the building.

Lilith turned back to the dark spirit, her expression serious.

She could sense its power.

It was at the peak of the fourth class advancement—almost at the fifth. Worse, this fragment was dangerously close to the main source. It held an overwhelming amount of Ignath's will.

The spirit smirked.

"You have a peculiar aura..." Its gaze shifted to Damon's retreating figure, its voice dripping with confidence and eerie intelligence.

"Ahhh... it was his blood that drew me here. The conduit to my summoning... a shame he has no spirit affinity. He would have made a perfect vessel."

Lilith's eyes sharpened.

"You can speak?"

The dark flames of its body flickered, its form shifting like living shadows. It almost looked amused.

"I am an intelligent lifeform, after all," it said smoothly. "I can express myself... though I only recently learned your language."

Lilith didn't respond, her gaze flicking back toward the building.

Ignath smiled.

"No need to worry. I will kill him and his party soon enough. Even in my broken state, I am still a great spirit."

Its burning gaze locked onto her.

"As for you, touched by the divine... I shall feast upon your soul."

Lilith's expression darkened.

She didn't want Damon to worry about her. She needed to make this fight look easier than it was.

Still, she could win.

Even if she didn't like her odds.

The spirit was ancient. It was one whole rank above her.

And worst of all...

That fire.

That cursed fire.

Her grip tightened.

"You want my soul?" she said coldly. "Come and take it."

The ground trembled.

The sky dimmed, colors fading as darkness swallowed the daylight.

And then, they clashed.

Inside the building—

Damon crossed the threshold just as an explosion shook the ground behind him.

The abandoned structure had changed.

The last time he was here, it had been different.

Now, it felt... corrupted.

And at the center of it all—

Sylvia.

She knelt on the floor, long hair veiling her face, glowing magical lines coiling around her body like chains. The power within them pulsed unnaturally, as if flowing against her will.

Evangeline's breath caught in her throat.

"Sylvia..." she whispered.

Damon's heart twisted with pain.

Slowly, Sylvia lifted her head.

Her once-gray eyes were now pitch black.

Her head tilted unnaturally to the side.

Then, she raised her hand.

"Die."

A pillar of black fire erupted toward them.

Chapter 220: Weakness

The towering pillars of black flames surged toward Evangeline. Damon lunged, shoving her aside as the searing inferno annihilated the walls behind them.

Sylvia's face twisted into a grotesque grin, a hollow mockery of her usual gentle expression. She barely seemed to register the flames licking her own body, standing unscathed within the infernal blaze. But Damon knew—it wasn't Sylvia. It was the dark spirit controlling her.

Those blackened, empty eyes locked onto him with cruel amusement.

"Ahhh, so you're the Damon that's always on her mind..." the spirit sneered, its voice an eerie blend of Sylvia's soft tones and something far more sinister.

"My, my, my... You're quite a cruel lad, aren't you? Hurting the feelings of such a young and sheltered girl—when all she wanted was to understand the world. She was merely... curious about you."

Damon's jaw tightened. He already knew that. He didn't need to be reminded. But knowing didn't make it any easier. The spirit's words slithered through his mind, taunting him, clawing at something raw inside his chest. He forced himself to focus, but even as Remorseless whispered logic into his thoughts, his emotions refused to be silenced.

The spirit—Rashi Ignath—smirked through Sylvia's lips.

"So tell me, hero, have you come to play the gallant savior? Or have you come to lead your little party to their deaths?"

Damon's grip tightened around his daggers.

"I'm here for Sylvia," he said, voice low and steady. "And I'll be taking her back. No matter what."

Ignath's gaze flicked over the others—Xander, Leona, Evangeline. A group of mere children, none of whom had even reached their first class advancement. Against it, they were nothing.

A dual-voiced shriek erupted from Sylvia's throat, splitting the air with unnatural resonance.

Xander charged, spear in hand, a snarl on his lips.

"Aaghh!" He swung, gravity magic surging through the weapon, amplifying its weight. The blow should have been devastating—yet Ignath raised Sylvia's delicate wrist, blocking it effortlessly. The spear barely left a scratch, only causing faint cracks to splinter along her arm.

"Is that all?" Ignath laughed.

Then, with a flick of Sylvia's fingers, a maelstrom of dark flames erupted from her body, racing toward Xander with lethal intent.

His eyes widened in horror.

But before the flames could reach him, Damon's omnidirectional wires shot out, embedding themselves in Xander's shoulder. With a sharp pull, Damon yanked him free, tossing him toward the wall just as the fire scorched the space he had been standing in.

"Be careful," Damon warned, landing in a crouch. "Her flames can't be blocked—not with our meager power."

Evangeline nodded quickly, steadying herself. "I'll handle long-range combat and support!"

Leona stepped forward, gauntlets crackling with energy. She clenched her fists, summoning thick storm clouds overhead.

"[Storm Call.]"

The air crackled, and bolts of lightning snaked down, striking Sylvia's body in a devastating cascade of electricity. The entire battlefield trembled as the raw power of the storm engulfed her.

Damon's breath caught.

"Sylvia—!"

A scream ripped through the air. But then—

A hand shot out from the storm.

Delicate fingers wrapped around Damon's throat.

"Hehehe... I caught you, little mouse."

Sylvia's—no, Ignath's—grip was crushing. Damon reacted instantly, slashing his dagger across her arm, but she caught the blade effortlessly in her palm. Before she could immolate him with dark fire, Leona rushed in, driving her electrified fist into Sylvia's ribs.

"Let him go, you wretch!"

The impact forced Ignath back, her grip loosening just enough for Leona to yank Damon free.

Damon hit the ground hard, coughing as he rolled to his feet. He barely had time to react before another surge of black fire erupted toward them. They dove apart, narrowly avoiding being reduced to ashes.

His skin stung—tiny cuts from debris, heat blistering against his arms. He looked toward Leona, who was practically radiating energy.

Wait—was she getting stronger mid-battle?

No... She had always been strong. It was just that her aura was growing, adapting as the fight went on.

She glanced at him, her expression firm. "Damon, don't get carried away. I need you to be ruthless, not sentimental."

He clicked his tongue, frustrated with himself. Of course, Remorseless had already calculated that Sylvia wasn't actually in pain—but for that brief moment, the risk had been there. And that was enough for his emotions to momentarily override his skill.

No more hesitation.

Damon readjusted his grip on his daggers, his stance shifting.

Time to end this.

Damon pushed himself up, blood trickling down his arm. His breath was ragged, his body aching from burns and lacerations, but he forced himself to stand tall.

"Fine," he muttered, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I said I'd do whatever it takes... and I will."

His eyes swept over his team. They were battered but still standing. They had to end this.

"New plan—we take her from all sides. There's only one of her and four of us." His voice was sharp, commanding. "Attack together and retreat together."

Sylvia—no, Ignath—sneered, the twisted grin stretching Sylvia's delicate face into something monstrous.

"That's your plan? Ridiculous..." The spirit's voice dripped with disdain. "The red-haired one outside may not be faring well, but at least her tactics are mildly acceptable."

Damon didn't wait for more taunts. He dashed forward, his team following in perfect sync.

Evangeline was the first to act, conjuring a blinding flash of light that flooded the battlefield. The entire building was bathed in brilliance, forcing Ignath to flinch, Sylvia's stolen body recoiling from the sudden radiance.

Sylvia's palm lifted instinctively, shielding her eyes. It was the opening they needed.

Damon struck first, his dagger slicing through the air. Ignath barely managed to dodge, twisting Sylvia's body unnaturally as flames coiled around her clenched fist. But before she could retaliate, Leona's gauntlet came crashing in.

Ignath staggered back just in time to evade the strike—only for Xander's spear to sweep her legs out from under her. Sylvia's knees buckled. She was falling.

But she never hit the ground.

Some unnatural force kept her upright, her back refusing to touch the floor. Before she could recover, Evangeline's fist slammed down onto her forehead, sending her crashing into the stone with a sickening crack.

Damon rolled back, catching his breath as he watched Sylvia's possessed form tremble.

Then, for a brief second, something changed.

A strangled gasp escaped Sylvia's lips. Her body convulsed, her face contorted in agony.

A dark, phantom-like apparition flickered over her features. Shadowy flames poured from her mouth, writhing and shrieking as if something inside was trying to escape.

Then—her eyes.

One of her dark irises flickered, shifting back to its usual soft gray.

Damon's heart clenched.

"Sylvia—!"

He lunged forward, hand outstretched, reaching for the trump card he had been holding onto—

But the moment was lost.

Black flames erupted in a violent, circular explosion, consuming her once more. The sheer force of it sent Damon flying back. He shot out the omnidirectional wires in a desperate attempt to stabilize himself, but the shockwave crashed against him like a tidal wave of destruction.

His body hit the ground hard, his skin torn in several places. His uniform was scorched, patches of burnt fabric barely clinging to his frame. The acrid scent of seared flesh filled the air, the pain digging deep into his nerves.

He must have looked horrifying—a charred, bloodied mess.

Yet still, he chuckled.

Ignath straightened, Sylvia's body shuddering as the spirit fully reclaimed control. Her eyes darkened once more, any trace of Sylvia buried beneath the entity possessing her.

Damon smirked despite the pain.

"You can't use your true power, can you?" His voice was hoarse but laced with confidence.

"Even at the first class, that vessel isn't fireproof. Otherwise, you wouldn't be resorting to physical attacks against us."

Ignath's expression twisted into something murderous.

Damon pressed on, voice sharp as a blade.

"Your power is too tyrannical—and Sylvia isn't at first class yet. You can't use your flames freely, can you? Not unless you want to burn your precious vessel to ash."

Ignath's rage was palpable.

Damon was right. Unless the spirit fully assimilated Sylvia's body—completely erasing her—he couldn't unleash his full power without destroying her in the process.

The realization only made Ignath's hatred burn hotter.

"You think that matters?" The spirit's voice curled into something venomous. "The red-haired one outside will die soon enough. And when she does..."

Ignath's lips twisted into a cruel smirk.

"My projection will come here and kill you."

He raised his dagger.

"I just have to kill you before that happens."