

Shadow 221

Chapter 221: Authority

Lilith twisted her body mid-air, narrowly avoiding the massive meteor of black flames that came crashing down. Her feet dug into the cracked earth as the impact sent shockwaves through the battlefield. The air around her resisted her movements, the sheer force of her speed creating sonic booms that echoed like distant thunder.

Yet, despite her agility, Lilith knew she wasn't a melee combatant. Every dodge, every movement—none of it came from technique, only from the overwhelming power she possessed. And even then, it wasn't enough.

Her opponent was an entire rank above her. A true monster.

As if to prove the gap in their strength, Ignath raised its hands skyward. A suffocating pressure filled the air as the sky blackened, churning with an unholy energy. Then, it began to rain.

Black fire.

Lilith clicked her tongue, thrusting her hand forward.

[Vector Repulsion]

A massive barrier formed, twisting space itself to repel anything it touched. The flames turned and curled, their trajectory forcibly altered. But something was wrong.

Ignath's fire didn't behave like normal vectors.

It leaked through.

A devastating blast erupted, streaking toward the battalion of knights locked in battle with the spirits.

Lilith reacted instantly, vanishing and reappearing between them. She redirected the attack with a desperate flick of her wrist, but the force was still enough to hurl her back, carving a deep crater into the earth where she landed.

She coughed, the taste of blood in her mouth.

Above her, Ignath's laughter rang through the scorched air.

"You are strong, but protecting those weaker than you only limits you."

Lilith wiped her mouth, teleporting back into position. Her hands moved in rapid succession, magic seals forming at her fingertips.

Then, she raised her palm.

Space twisted violently, forming a singularity of crushing force. She smirked.

"Don't you know?" Her voice was cold, almost amused. "Gravity is merely a curvature in space."

Ignath roared, its body bursting with unchecked flames. A wave of black fire exploded outward, consuming everything in its path. The earth melted, turning to ashen sludge. The trees disintegrated to dust. The very air seemed to scream, warping under the raw heat.

"Hahaha!" Ignath's voice boomed. "So what? You can't use any wide-area attacks without killing your own allies in the process!"

Lilith frowned.

He was right. She had no qualms about sacrificing them, but if they all died here—in her presence—it would tarnish her reputation. Their victory against their first real opponent couldn't be a pyrrhic one.

This battle wasn't just Damon's. It was theirs.

She bit her lip as Ignath's flames sent her hurtling backward once more, the impact creating another sonic boom. Clouds of dust rose around her as she skidded to a stop, surrounded by a thin red film of protective energy.

Even so, she had taken a few scrapes.

"This would be so much easier if I had some backup..." she muttered, dusting herself off.

She couldn't fight freely while protecting an entire battalion. Ser Galahad was on her level, but weaker, and he was already struggling with his own opponents.

Her gaze shifted toward Ignath's massive projection. It remained untouched, looming over the battlefield like a god of destruction.

Her fingers curled into a tight fist.

If I want to kill it, I suppose a little collateral damage is fine...

She was ready to cut loose. To end this.

Then, she heard footsteps.

Slow. Unhurried.

A voice followed, smooth and familiar.

"Ahh, there you are, Astranova..."

Lilith's expression darkened. That voice.

She turned slowly, her smile cold.

Violet eyes met hers, gleaming with amusement.

Renata Malcrist.

Lilith's lips curled.

She really couldn't stand this woman.

Renata glanced at the towering dark spirit, unimpressed.

"Did your boy toy dump you?" she mused, tilting her head with mock sympathy.

"Huh, what a shame. Every time I see you, there's always trouble in paradise. I heard he left you for an older woman... imagine losing to some hag."

Lilith's cold smile didn't waver as she turned back to face Ignath.

"Listening to gossip, Renata? I wonder what compelled the academy to let such a violent creature off house arrest."

Renata had been confined for weeks after their last fight at Athor's Sanctuary. Unlike Lilith, who had only received a mere week of punishment, Renata had been locked away behind closed doors—until now.

Her violet gaze flicked to Ignath, utterly dismissive.

"There's a really cute boy I want to bully," she said flatly. "And it seems you're in my way."

Lilith sneered. Renata didn't care about Damon. But the thought of her being anywhere near him made Lilith's blood boil.

"Has anyone ever told you not to touch things that aren't yours?"

Renata cracked her knuckles.

"He's not yours either."

Ignath's inhuman eyes flickered, its blazing form darkening ominously.

"The both of you... are going to ignore me, the great Rashi Ignath... to fight over a boy that is about to die?"

Renata rolled her eyes.

"Only speak when you're spoken to. Our girl talk is far more important than whatever you have going on here."

That was it.

Never in its many millennia had Ignath been insulted so brazenly. A great dark spirit—disregarded like a mere nuisance by children.

Without warning, a pillar of black flames erupted toward them.

Renata smirked, raising her hand.

[Zero Out.]

Numbers flickered across the raging inferno, shifting rapidly until they reached a single digit.

Zero.

The flames vanished into nothingness—rendered powerless by Renata's magic. The Attribute Zero.

The instant the attack was neutralized, Lilith struck.

A sphere of spatial destruction formed in her palm, twisting and tearing at reality itself.

She hurled it.

It struck Ignath's side, the space around it shattering. The dark spirit howled in agony as half its body was erased.

It recoiled, preparing to unleash a cataclysmic blast—

But before it could act, a freezing sensation crept over its core.

"Zero Out."

Renata's cold voice rang from behind.

Ignath's defenses crumbled to nothing.

Snarling, it lashed out, a whip of black fire cracking through the air—

Renata was flung backward, crashing through the trees.

But Ignath barely had a moment to register its victory.

Where was the other one?

A terrible chill crawled up its molten spine.

It looked up.

Lilith hovered above, hands clasped around a ball of absolute nothingness.

Not darkness. Not void. Nothing.

Her face was pale. Her body trembled. But her emerald eyes burned with ruthless determination.

"Die."

She unleashed it.

Ignath ceased to exist.

There was no explosion, no destruction—just erasure.

As the remnants of its consciousness faded, its final thought was one of horrified recognition.

'Ahh... the authority of a...'

Gone.

That part of Ignath would never return. It had never been.

Lilith collapsed to the ground with a dull thud. Her body convulsed, lungs gasping for breath.

Her trembling hand reached out—toward the building where Damon was.

Her vision blurred.

Her lips parted.

But no words came.

Chapter 222: Birth Of Ignath

The air was dark. This place—her homeland—was supposed to be serene, beautiful. The towering spires of magicwood and stone should have shimmered under the twin moons. The air should have been crisp

and pure. The elven guards should have stood tall, clad in silver armor, their emblems gleaming with pride. But they did not.

They were grotesque. Their once-elegant forms were now twisted abominations, monstrous shapes that would make even demons recoil in horror. Their faces were warped, their bodies wreathed in corruption—defiled, cursed beyond recognition. And the world around her was wrong. The rivers did not flow with crystal-clear water but pulsed with blood. The castle walls were not built of stone but stitched from human skin. The ground itself was alive, shifting beneath her feet, hundreds of unblinking eyes embedded in its flesh.

Sylvia staggered, conjuring a pale light in her trembling hands. But in this unnatural darkness, it was weak—dying before her very eyes. Her breath hitched. Her mother and father were not here. Only apparitions. Ghosts that lingered to haunt her.

Then—Laughter. A low, fractured sound, crawling up her spine like a parasite.

"Hehehejj... hejrr... jejejejr... hahaha... ha..."

Sylvia's knees nearly buckled. Her heart pounded. She was tired. She was afraid.

She ran. Past the vast castle doors. She pushed through, desperate for escape, sprinting toward what should have been the royal gardens—

But when she opened her eyes—

There were no gardens.

Only horror.

A battlefield stretched before her. Thousands of elves, locked in a desperate, bloody war against hordes of demons. The trees burned, their sacred leaves reduced to cinders. The land was drenched in blood, a crimson sea swallowing the dying. The elves fought with everything they had. When their weapons shattered, they ripped their own bones free to use as swords. When their shields failed, they offered their own flesh in desperation.

It was not enough.

And at the center of the carnage, towering over all—

A demon.

A tall, armored demon, its horns piercing the sky, its presence alone enough to command the battlefield. Cloaked in absolute darkness, it stood upon a symbol carved into the ground. An emblem of four wings and an abyssal eye.

It radiated a divine aura—yet also something entirely unholy.

It was both good and evil. Pure and tainted. Right and wrong.

A God—yet a Demon.

The symbol of the Unknown God.

Sylvia watched, frozen in horror, as her people—her kin—fell by the thousands. Yet not a single one retreated.

Her lips parted in a whisper—

"Is this Iorvas...?"

It had to be. The Verdant Continent. The armor the elves wore was slightly different, but she recognized the trees. This was her homeland.

In the distance, she could see the sea. And at the shores of Iorvas—

Her people were dying to keep this demon out.

The armored demon raised his hand.

[Mind Dominate]

The air twisted, thick with unseen force. The elves froze, their bodies stiffening as if gripped by an unbreakable will. He lowered his hand, his voice carrying the weight of absolute command.

"Kill your brethren."

Without hesitation, the dominated elves turned their blades on their own kin. Sylvia watched in horror—this was no simple battle. It was a massacre, an ancient nightmare playing out before her. The demon stood mere inches away, yet he did not acknowledge her presence. Instead, he whispered—so faint, she barely caught it.

"I must find it... the Pillar... It has to be here. I must bring an end to this senseless conflict."

He raised his hand again.

"Wind Dominate."

The wind obeyed, twisting into razor-sharp gales. Blades of air sliced through the battlefield, severing limbs, tearing through flesh. Thousands fell in an instant.

Sylvia trembled. Her breath shuddered as she witnessed the horror unfold. Among the mounds of the dead, a single elf—barely clinging to life—lifted a bloodied hand toward the demon standing over the glowing symbol.

His body was ruined, his lower half missing, yet his voice—though weak—carried the weight of a dying prayer.

"The Goddess has forsaken us... To Ashcroft's power, my kin have died by the millions... Our home... is in ruins... I do not seek peace... but I pray... to whatever god will listen..."

Blood bubbled in his throat, choking his words. He never finished his prayer.

Yet at that moment—

The symbol of the Unknown God responded.

Its four wings ignited, pulsing with divine and profane energy. The battlefield itself shuddered. The rage, sorrow, and unyielding love of the fallen elves condensed—a storm of their grief and resentment swirling together.

The flames of war roared to life.

From this chaos, a will was born. A flame that was neither natural nor ordinary. A black fire, dark as shadows, yet alive. It carried the anguish of the fallen, the passion of the living, and the hatred for their enemy.

And by the authority of the Unknown God—

A spirit was born.

Rashi Ignath.

Its name was etched into existence—Rashi, meaning Loss, and Ignath, meaning Flame.

The moment it opened its dark, ember-like eyes, it locked onto the demon standing amidst the carnage. Ashcroft.

The demon merely chuckled.

"The Unknown God has graced the elves... However, it seems a fierce battle awaits me."

He stretched his arms, his voice laced with amusement.

"I was just getting bored."

Sylvia watched in awe and terror as their battle reshaped the world.

All around them, the trees burned to ash. The land blackened, and the flames of Ignath—fueled by the suffering of countless souls—never faded. They burned eternally, marking the place that would one day be called the Ashen Forest.

She did not know how the battle ended.

All she saw was Ignath, standing amidst the ruins, gazing at her from the distance. His thin smile sent a chill down her spine.

"Do not resist... Give me your vessel... Ashcroft will return soon..."

She staggered back, fear gripping her heart. Before she could hit the ground, something wrapped around her waist.

It was cool to the touch, like a human's arm—

A shadow.

When she turned, she saw it staring at her.

The shape was familiar. Too familiar.

She recognized it, this was Damon's shadow.

She pushed away, her body frozen between two forces.

The shadow was eerily gentle, its form shifting like mist. It raised a hand, as if silently asking for trust.

Ignath's voice cut through the air.

"Do not trust the shadow of the one who has betrayed you... Come with me. Give me your vessel, and I will protect your homeland... Do not let the passion of your ancestors be for nothing."

Chapter 223: Lied To Again

Damon rolled out of the way, his body casting no shadow.

He didn't notice its absence. His focus was locked on Sylvia.

His heart was cold, filled with a resolve that burned stronger than fear. He glanced around—his party was injured, their bodies covered in scrapes and wounds that should have been lethal. But Evangeline had managed to heal them, their secondary healer doing everything in her power to keep them standing.

Damon hadn't used a single skill since the battle began.

The one skill he didn't use was Shadow Armor—a skill Sylvia didn't know about. And neither would Ignath, who was possessing her.

Outside, the battlefield rumbled. Deafening booms echoed through the air as Lilith clashed with Ignath's projection.

A torrent of flames surged toward him. He rolled, dodging by inches.

'Lilith is fine... she's strong...'

He couldn't afford to worry about her now.

He rushed Sylvia, determination in his every step. More flames erupted, but before they could reach him, Xander leaped in between, his spear flashing.

Gravity magic surged.

The flames were pushed aside, the air around them warping under Xander's power. He planted his spear and grinned.

"You're getting weaker, spirit..."

Lightning crackled.

Leona unleashed a ball of lightning magic, the flash blinding for a moment—just long enough. Evangeline moved.

She struck from behind, her blade slicing Sylvia's arm.

Her face twisted with guilt.

Evangeline hesitated for half a second before stepping back, barely avoiding a flame blast.

Damon charged.

He slammed into Sylvia's body.

She reacted instantly, grabbing him by the collar and slamming him into the ground with a force that cracked the stone beneath him. Before he could recover, she raised her foot—ready to crush his skull.

Damon twisted at the last second.

His leg swept her feet, throwing her off balance. In an instant, he pinned her down.

"Guys, little help here—"

Before they could respond, Sylvia roared.

A dark torrent of fire erupted from her body. Damon rolled just in time, barely escaping the scorching heat.

A hand clamped around his throat.

Sylvia lifted him off the ground.

Damon gritted his teeth and drove his dagger into her shoulder.

She barely flinched. Instead, she looked at the blade... and smiled.

"Paralyzing poisons don't work on me, fool."

She raised her hand.

Flames ignited.

But just before she could unleash the fire—

She stopped.

Her head snapped toward the battlefield outside.

For a brief second, Ignath's will faltered.

He felt it—a piece of himself, erased from existence.

Forever.

His voice was filled with disbelief.

"What...? That was... How? Impossible... A human was granted the authority of—"

Before Ignath could react, Damon roared and slammed his forehead against Sylvia's.

A thunderous crack echoed as the impact rattled through her skull. Ignath howled in frustration, his grip on Sylvia's body wavering for the first time. One of her eyes flickered—the lifeless darkness receding—and in its place, a familiar grey luster returned.

The first thing Sylvia noticed was Damon—bloody, battered, and barely standing. Yet, despite his wounds, despite the pain carved into his expression, he was still fighting.

And worse—he was holding back.

Damon noticed the shift. Sylvia's waking up... but she still can't take her body back.

His hand reached into his jacket.

This was the perfect time to use the magic artifact. But if he failed... if he mistimed it... he could damage her mind.

He needed a reaction. He needed her conscious, aware—otherwise, even if he banished Ignath, he could send her into a coma.

He raised his hand.

"Sylvia! Are you awake? Give me a sign!"

Her grey eye flickered, but Ignath snarled and lunged.

Damon barely reacted before a hand seized his throat, lifting him into the air.

His vision blurred as his skull cracked against her knee. But he grit his teeth, blocking as many strikes as he could.

Xander rushed in—spear flashing.

But Ignath grabbed him mid-air, spun him, and hurled him into Leona and Evangeline—sending them crashing through stone like ragdolls.

Sylvia watched it happen.

Something inside her snapped.

Anger. Pain. Regret.

The emotions surged, feeding the darkness that held her captive.

Ignath grinned.

The more she despaired, the stronger his hold became.

Black flames erupted, forming a barrier around her and Damon—trapping them both.

Then, Sylvia spoke.

Her voice was shaking, but filled with a quiet, simmering fury.

"Shut up... shut up... You don't get to act like you care now."

Her fists trembled as she glared at him.

"Don't do this to me. Don't pretend you care when you don't. I... I don't want to hurt you..."

Damon, covered in blood, smiled.

"Ahh... So you were in there after all."

Silence fell.

One of her eyes glistened with tears. The other remained cold and dark.

Damon exhaled.

"I knew you were angry about being betrayed... Even a Saint wouldn't forgive that. And Sylvia—"

His gaze hardened.

"You're not a Saint."

Flames roared to life—a reflex of her pain—surging toward him.

Damon didn't move.

Just before the fire touched him...

Sylvia willed them to stop.

Ignath gasped.

"W-What are you doing?"

Damon's bloodied grin widened.

'I knew it... she has some control now.'

Ignath lashed out, sending another inferno to consume Damon—but the flames never reached him. They exploded around him, scorching the ground instead.

Sylvia was stopping him.

With nothing but her will.

Ignath roared in fury, charging with his fists clenched. His strikes landed—blow after blow, sending blood splattering as he pummeled Damon.

But Damon didn't fight back.

He stood there, taking it all.

Whether Ignath was screaming... or Sylvia was screaming through him, he couldn't tell.

Blood dripped from Damon's mouth.

Sylvia's voice cracked.

"Why...?"

Damon smiled through the pain.

"I don't know."

A tear slid from her one lucid eye.

"Why...?"

Damon coughed up blood.

His voice was hoarse.

"I'm used to being a traitor. I'm used to being betrayed."

His lips curled in a bitter smile.

"The first to betray me were my parents... They promised they would return, but they never did."

The second were my own relatives—they turned their backs on me without hesitation.

The third came from the very place I called home... The village I trusted cast me aside.

Then, even the goddess betrayed me... The Goddess of Fate, who threw obstacle after obstacle in my way, as if my suffering was just part of some grand design."

His eyes darkened.

"I've been betrayed my entire life. Every time I let my guard down, every time I dared to hope... it happened again.

So I stopped.

I shut myself away.

I told myself there was no point in reaching out—because in the end, all that waited was betrayal.

But then you came along, Sylvia.

I met you. I met Leona. You saved me."

His grip on his blade tightened.

His voice grew colder.

"So now... Let me save you too."

Damon extended his hand.

Behind his back, his other hand gripped a hidden blade.

In her mental scape, Sylvia stood between Ignath and Damon's shadow—who held out his hand.

She hesitated.

One promised her power—the power to change, to never be weak again.

The other... had already betrayed her before.

He was a liar. A deceiver. He would hurt her again.

She hesitated for a moment.

And yet—

She reached out.

Damon smiled.

And pulled her into his arms.

As she collapsed against him, his blade flashed.

A glass-like dagger, inscribed with ancient runes, buried itself in her back.

Sylvia's eyes widened.

The sharp burn spread through her spine, through her veins—

Her breath hitched as she met his gaze.

The warmth vanished.

His eyes were cold.

Her lips parted.

"Liar..."

The dagger glowed.

A ball of flaming darkness ripped itself from her body, screaming as it was expelled.

Ignath shrieked.

Before the spirit could fully escape—

Damon's shadow moved.

It rose like an inky tide, twisting, writhing—

Then devoured the fragment of Ignath whole.

—

[You have slain a Lesser Fragment of Rashi Ignath.]

[You have gained 40 attribute points]

[You have acquired the skill Spirit Affinity.]

[You have leveled up.]

[You have gained 50 attributes points]

[You have awakened the skill Ashborn.]

Chapter 224: Show You The World

The flames died down, revealing Sylvia held in Damon's arms. Her head was lowered, strands of her hair falling over her face, obscuring her expression. The building around them was in shambles, sunlight piercing through the gaping holes in the walls where destruction had torn through. The ground beneath them was cracked, some parts melted into a warped, glass-like surface, while others had hardened into a thick, charred sludge. The aftermath of battle was evident in every ruined inch of the space.

Evangeline rushed forward, throwing her arms around Sylvia, her voice trembling with relief.

"I'm so happy you're alright..."

Sylvia merely nodded, her movements slow, distant. Her friends gathered around her, their faces a mixture of exhaustion and concern, but she kept her head lowered, silent. Her hands trembled at her sides.

Xander limped over, his wounds still fresh. Leona let out a sigh of relief.

"That was close... Welcome back."

Sylvia bit her lip, her voice low but steady.

"Can you leave... I want to be alone for a moment."

They understood. She had been possessed—her body twisted and controlled by a dark spirit, forced to fight against them. She had hurt her own friends, been turned into something monstrous, used as a vessel for carnage and destruction. How could she possibly be alright?

Evangeline hesitated before speaking.

"Sylvia, I—"

"Please just go... Please..."

Her voice cracked into a scream, raw with emotion.

Evangeline flinched but didn't argue. Damon's gaze lingered on Sylvia before giving a slow nod. One by one, they turned away—Evangeline, Leona, and Xander—leaving her kneeling on the ground, alone with Damon.

Sylvia hugged her knees, pressing her forehead against them. She sensed his presence behind her, unwavering, unmoving.

"Leave..."

Damon, his body caked in blood, remained silent.

"When have you ever known me to do what someone else says?"

She gritted her teeth.

"Go. Please... Just go."

He stepped closer, ignoring her plea, then sat beside her.

"No."

Sylvia squeezed her arms around herself, biting her lip to hold back the wave of emotions threatening to consume her.

"Why do you always do this to me..."

Damon shrugged.

"Don't know. We both know I don't have all the answers."

He glanced at her, her face still hidden against her knees.

"You... You can cry if you want to. After everything that happened, you've earned that right."

She didn't respond. He could understand why. The reason she had ended up in this situation in the first place was because of him—because he had called her a sheltered princess, because she had wanted to prove him wrong. She wouldn't want to cry in front of him, to let him see her break.

He sighed.

"Crying doesn't mean you're weak... but it's fine if you don't want me to see your tears."

He shifted slightly, lowering his voice.

"You can cry into my chest. That way, I won't see your tears."

He slowly raised his head, pulling her into his bloodied chest. Sylvia didn't resist. As she rested her head against him, he gently stroked her hair, his touch light, almost hesitant. She was quiet—at least, it seemed that way—but then he felt it. Warm tears, mingling with his blood, soaking into his torn shirt.

He didn't say anything. He only held her, offering the kind of solace that silence could bring. His grip was careful, softer than it ever was with anyone else. He let her cry, let her grieve in the only way she knew how.

They stayed like that for what felt like an eternity, but in truth, it was only half an hour before Sylvia finally spoke.

"My... I was never allowed to come to the academy." Her voice was low, almost as if she was speaking to herself.

"I was always kept behind high castle walls, never allowed to do anything on my own. I felt like a bird in a golden cage... No, I was a bird in a golden cage."

Damon remained silent, listening as she continued.

"I wanted to be free. I wanted to see and touch and feel everything. That's why I read so many books—I wanted to know it all, experience it all. More than anything, I hated how everyone treated me like I was fragile, like I was above them. I just wanted to be normal."

She shifted slightly against his chest, and he felt her fingers tremble.

"I always had a spirit affinity... but I always attracted the worst ones. When I was finally brought to the academy, it wasn't because I was given freedom. It was just a bigger cage. But... I accepted it. Because at least here, no one knew me. No one treated me like I was special."

She inhaled sharply, her body tense.

"And then I met you."

Damon's hand stilled against her hair.

"You didn't care about my identity. You didn't care about someone else's rules. You just... saw me. Just Sylvia. And you treated me the same way you treated everyone else."

She lifted her head slightly, glancing up at him through damp lashes.

"I... I really liked that about you. There were so many things about you that made me curious."

Her lips trembled, and she bit down on them, as if trying to hold something back.

"So it hurt when you said that to me. Anything but that... I didn't want to be some sheltered princess in your eyes."

She fell silent for a moment before adding, almost hesitantly, "I know it probably sounds dumb to you, but—"

Damon sighed, cutting her off.

"It's not." His voice was firm. "I don't think you're dumb. Even if you were sheltered..."

She blinked up at him, waiting.

He smirked slightly. "I think it's good that you were sheltered. That just means I get to wow you with all the mundane things I've seen."

He reached out, cupping her face in his bloodstained hands.

"Sylvia... Let me show you the world. Just stick with me, and I'll take you beyond your golden cage."

Then, he stood, brushing the dust from his tattered clothes, and held out a hand to her.

"I can't promise it'll be good or decent. I can't promise you'll be happy or that you'll like it. But..." His dark eyes met hers, unwavering.

"I can promise that I'll be there, all the way to the end. That way, you won't get lost. And if you do... I'll find you."

Sylvia's gray eyes sparkled, the last remnants of her tears clinging to her lashes. Her heart pounded in her chest as she gazed at the boy before her, the boy who had torn through her carefully built walls without even trying.

She smiled lightly, lifting her hand to take his.

"You're going to hurt me."

Damon nodded without hesitation. "I will."

"You'll lie to me."

He tilted his head. "Definitely."

She swallowed, her grip tightening slightly. "You're going to keep things from me."

"Too many to count."

Her lips parted as she whispered, "You'll treat me like I'm the only girl in the world."

He smirked. "Doubtful."

Her eyes searched his, the swirling abyss of darkness that hid countless secrets.

"You'll abandon me."

His smirk faded. He shook his head. "Never."

Sylvia let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. A tear slipped from her eye, but this time, she didn't wipe it away.

"Okay..." She smiled—a small, vulnerable thing, but real. "I'll risk it all."

She tightened her grip on his hand.

"Show me all the flavors of life—the good and the bad. And I'll stick by you... even if you're irredeemable."

And on that day, the heart of a young elven princess was stolen—stolen by a shadow who had promised her a world that was never his to give.

Chapter 225: Unanswered Questions

Damon held Sylvia's hand as he led her out of the building. She followed him, their figures starkly contrasting— a bloodied black-haired human boy with eyes as dark as the night, holding the delicate hand of an elven girl with white hair and piercing gray eyes. Despite their differences, they made for a striking sight, as if their disparities only served to make them stand out more.

As they stepped outside, Damon's gaze fell upon the knights. They stood amid ash and ruin, their armor battered, their bodies weary as they attempted to salvage what little remained of their fallen comrades. But there was nothing left—Ignath's flames had erased them completely. No bodies to bury, no remains to return home. Only the echoes of death and destruction lingered.

And yet, they had fought for his cause. They had risked everything. It felt wrong to let their sacrifice go unrecognized.

Damon walked toward the knights, Sylvia's hand still in his grasp. Their helmeted faces were unreadable, but he could feel their silent, expectant gazes upon him. He stopped before a half-melted sword, its wielder long turned to ash. The crest of the House of Margan was still visible on its ruined blade.

He lifted it high into the air and roared,

"Victory!"

The knights, silent at first, erupted into cheers, their remaining swords raised high.

Damon released Sylvia's hand and declared,

"Let this day be remembered as the day the Knights of the Deep vanquished the great dark spirit, Rashi Ignath!"

A resounding cheer tore through the knights, their voices shaking the very air. Healers from the academy rushed to their aid, tending to the wounded. The battle had left minimal casualties within the academy itself—the brunt of the losses had been borne by the knights, along with a handful of professors who had joined the fray.

Damon's gaze swept across the battlefield, searching for Lilith. He finally spotted her sitting in the shade, supporting a badly injured Renata Malcrist.

The sword slipped from his grasp. His body felt heavy, his vision swaying from blood loss.

He barely acknowledged the approaching healers, merely handing Sylvia over to them before turning on unsteady feet toward Lilith.

She was leaning against a tree, her expression weary but calm. Renata sat beside her, an arm encased in a cast, wincing from the pain.

Damon ignored Renata completely and focused on Lilith. His chest tightened at the sight of her pale face.

"Hey... are you okay?" he asked.

Lilith offered a tired smile. "As okay as I could be. You, on the other hand... don't look so hot."

He chuckled despite himself. "Well, that's better than how I would've looked if Ignath had gotten me with his flames."

Lilith smirked.

A groan interrupted them. "Arrgh... you lovebirds are just gonna ignore me after I fought the hardest?" Renata complained, looking thoroughly annoyed.

Damon turned his cold glare on her.

She blinked, confused. "Huh? What's with that look? Are you still holding a grudge? Come on, my bad—I thought you were a weak loser."

His glare didn't waver.

She grinned. "What? You're mad? Didn't I suffer enough from house arrest? No one likes a petty man, that's so uncute."

Damon's stare remained unchanged, though his mind churned. So, now that he'd proven his strength, she no longer cared about her past grudges? She was pragmatic, he'd give her that. It was just another example of how the world worked—people only valued you based on power or importance. At the very least, Renata was blunt about it.

Yet, something about her felt off. A strangeness in her shadow. He couldn't quite place it.

Before he could dwell on it further, Renata yanked him down, forcing him to sit between her and Lilith.

She tilted her head, examining him. "Hmm... I don't know what it is about you, but there's something I like."

She leaned in closer, staring into his dark, lightless eyes. "Maybe it's your eyes..."

Before she could get any closer, Lilith scowled, grabbed Damon, and pulled him toward her, his face landing against her ample chest.

"Don't touch," Lilith snapped, glaring at Renata. "You horny creature. I see it now... you have a latent sluttiness. Don't spread it to my junior."

With a flick of her wrist, she teleported both of them away.

The world spun, and before Damon could process it, they reappeared not far from the war halls. Lilith trembled slightly, exhaustion evident in the way her body swayed.

She began to fall.

Damon caught her.

She smiled. "Did you get it...?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I did. I leveled up some more."

She gave a weak nod, her body still heavy with exhaustion. Despite his own injuries, he lifted her into his arms with ease, carrying her as he walked.

"We won this time," he murmured. "Everything went according to plan... I guess we owe that mysterious potion maker for the elixir."

Lilith remained silent for a moment, resting against him. Then, in a quiet voice, she asked, "A few people died... do you regret it now?"

Damon shook his head. "Not this time. I gained more than I lost. For a gamble with less than an eighty percent chance of success... it was an acceptable outcome."

Lilith rested her head against his chest as they neared the dormitory.

"I suppose so. We were dealing with a dark spirit... and the academy is still standing."

She lifted her gaze, locking eyes with him. "But we aren't done yet."

Damon remained silent.

"The dark spirit is gone, but Ignath isn't actually dead," she continued.

"We've made a terrible enemy today. And more than that... the summoner is still out there. We know next to nothing about them, while they seem to know plenty about us."

Damon exhaled slowly. "We have no suspects—at least none we both agree on. But I still think it's Kael. I don't have definitive proof yet, though. For now... all we can do is wait. And I'll keep getting stronger."

Lilith gave a thin smile. "And when you reach your first class advancement... we can start recruiting like-minded allies to our cause."

Damon's gaze drifted downward, to the long, stretched shadow cast by his form.

"Until then..." he muttered, watching the darkness shift. "My living shadow will devour—to make me stronger."

As the sun set, a silent thought passed through his heart.

'The world won't accept a monster like me. So I'll give them a reason to fear.'

His shadow stretched unnaturally in the fading light, twisting, shifting—growing.

Chapter 226: More To Come

He yawned, feeling somewhat tired. His body didn't ache—not when he was sleeping on a luxurious bed.

Even after a week, the room still felt unfamiliar. The bed was wide but low, the carpets were beautiful, and the interior design was cozy.

The chandelier hung low from the ceiling, giving off a soft light and casting deep shadows across the room.

Just the way he liked it.

He stretched, walking over to the wide curtains and slowly shifting them aside.

White clouds drifted past the window, vast and endless. In the distance, a reptilian creature soared through the sky. At least it wasn't a wyvern. He just wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

His fingers brushed against the locket around his neck. A gift from his sister—an heirloom from their mother. She had made him promise to bring it back.

A thin smile tugged at his lips. It was Luna's way of telling him to come back safely.

"Not that she didn't chew me out and give me a billion lectures about being reckless..."

With how much she worried, one would think she was his mother instead of his little sister.

And she had good reason.

This was Damon's final semester evaluation—held outside the academy. Dangerous. Lethal. Death was a very real possibility, in fact it was common place.

That was why he was on an airship, traveling for over a week. The journey through the sky was mostly safe along charted airways with air patrols. But they had encountered a few airborne monsters, and for a time, things had gotten dangerous.

"Wyverns had attacked the ship, followed by a pack of black death screeches and even an enraged roc."

However if Damon had to say then the most dangerous would be flying a few hundred kilometers past a dragon's nest.

Fortunately, the professors had handled it.

Still, he hated the idea of sleeping with his curtains open. What if something out there saw him while he slept?

The thought made him shudder from dread.

The world of Aetherus was just too dangerous, from monsters, to ancient horrors absolutely anything goes in this wretched world, a shame he was too weak to even flee from some of them.

During this week, he had been busy. More importantly, he had gained 90 attribute points, which he poured entirely into his HP. He didn't know why, but a nagging premonition told him he would need as much health as possible.

Beyond that, he had acquired two new skills—each worse than the last.

And when he said worse, he meant for himself, not necessarily his enemies. Both were dangerous, but they had the potential to be powerful weapons.

The first skill:

[Skill: Spirit Affinity]

[Description:]

"You are known to the spirits—whether as a friend or a foe is yet to be seen."

[Effect:]

The user possesses a natural connection to spiritual entities, allowing them to sense, communicate with, and attract spirits more easily. Friendly spirits may offer guidance, minor protection, or assistance in battle. However, unstable or malevolent spirits may also be drawn to the user, causing havoc or inflicting pain. Beware.

[Type:] Passive.

[Cooldown:] 0 seconds.

At first glance, Spirit Affinity should have been a good thing. But it also meant he could attract malevolent spirits. If he wasn't careful, one could possess him.

He couldn't help but think of Sylvia—she had the same problem. However, she could also see spirits with her Spirit Sight.

That was Damon's new problem.

It turned out that being known to spirits didn't mean he could see them. He needed a separate ability for that.

Worse, the skill was passive. He couldn't turn it off.

But even that wasn't nearly as terrifying as the next one.

[Skill: Ashborn]

[Description:]

"Born from the despair and hatred of the countless elves who perished in the Verdant Continent during the demon lord Ashcroft's conquest, Ashborn is a curse and a legacy—an unrelenting pyre fueled by sorrow and vengeance. It grants dominion over Ignath's soul flames, fire that sears with fury and freezes with grief, a reflection of the dark spirit's eternal lament."

[Effect:]

The user may summon and command soul-burning flames that consume both body and spirit, their heat reducing all to ashes while their cold paralyzes with despair. However, wielding such wrath comes at a cost—the user must endure tenfold the agony of being burned alive as the flames feed upon both mana and shadow energy. Only those who can bear suffering may claim their power.

[Type:] Active.

[Cooldown:] 0 seconds.

It was the most straightforward skill description the system had ever given him.

The power was insane. The price was worse.

When he first obtained it, he and Lilith decided to experiment. Worst decision of his life.

He still shuddered from the memory.

Ashborn granted him control over the immolating flames, and while the cost in mana and shadow energy was high, it was a fair trade for such destructive power.

The real issue was the pain.

The sensation of burning alive—multiplied tenfold.

The moment he activated it, Damon nearly lost consciousness. His body and soul remained unharmed, yet the sheer agony almost killed him from shock. Burning alive was already one of the worst ways to die, and he had experienced ten times that.

When he activated it, reality shattered. Invisible flames licked at his bones, peeling away layers of his soul like molten razors. His nerves screamed, his body convulsing as though his blood had turned to magma. He had felt pain before—but this? This was suffering incarnate.

When he woke up, drenched in cold sweat, the fear still lingered.

On the upside, the power was overwhelming. A terrible trump card.

Lilith warned him against using Ashborn again. Though the flames didn't physically burn him, the mental shock alone could be fatal. Most people who burned to death didn't die from the fire itself—they died from the pain.

Damon sighed. The next thing he checked was his level-up requirements. For some reason, they were oddly specific.

[Level-up Requirements]

Red Cap Goblins consumed [0/5]

He groaned.

"Great. Only the most violent species of goblins in the world."

Chapter 227: Prelude To Disaster

Red Cap Goblins weren't exactly rare or hard to find. In fact, anyone who had fought in the Demon Wars would have encountered them at some point. These goblins were predominantly found in the demon continent, Centros.

However, due to the wars, they had been transported to other continents as low-level soldiers, and that was when the world truly understood how dangerous they were. Unlike other goblins, Red Caps were war-hungry, bloodthirsty, and far more violent.

It wasn't their red skin that earned them the title of Blood Goblins—it was their savage nature. Some old tales even claimed that they had originally been green like other goblins, but their insatiable bloodlust had stained them crimson over generations, dyed by the blood of their enemies.

Damon clenched his fist.

Naturally, that was just a myth. And even if it were true, so what? He had Lilith Astranova on his side. As if a few goblins would be a problem.

So, a day after the whole dark spirit incident, he and Lilith set out to find them.

Too bad the Empire had other ideas.

Apparently, they didn't want any traces of the Demon Wars anywhere near the capital. So, Red Cap Goblins? Completely eradicated.

That forced Damon and Lilith to search far beyond the usual borders, but in the end, they gave up. If they truly wanted to find Red Caps, they would have to travel farther than the academy would allow.

And before they could even consider that, they were both summoned back for the end-of-semester evaluation.

That was how Damon ended up on an airship, drifting through the sky.

The only upside? He was far away from the academy, meaning that—if he was lucky—he might run into some Red Caps along the way.

He bit his lip.

"I don't need luck... I'll find them."

He didn't doubt it for a second.

The system was cruel. It would never ask him to find something unless it intended to throw it in his path soon enough. The dark spirit had been proof of that.

And now, the goblins.

Damon had a sinking feeling that, by the time this was over, he would have seen more than enough Red Caps to last a lifetime.

He glanced at his system panel.

[HP: 150/150] (+90)

[Mana: 14,084/14,084]

[Strength: 134]

[Agility: 57]

[Speed: 100]

[Endurance: 35]

[Class: —]

[Shadow: 600]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 6]

[Condition: Shadow is Full]

[Attributes: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[5x] [Remorseless] [Shadow Perception] [Water Celebration] [Sacrifice] [Shadow Control] [Parkour]
[Shadow Armor] [Beholder's Gaze] [Dead Eye] [Spirit Affinity] [Ashborn]

[Locked]

Damon couldn't help but smile.

He was stronger now.

Not as much as he wanted, but it was still progress.

Keeping himself full with magic crystals had been a smart move, but he had only so many left. Over the past week, he had used a lot of what Lilith had given him. He still had enough for another week and a half, but after the evaluation, he would definitely need to stock up at whatever city they stopped in.

With that thought, he pushed open the door, stepping into a long hallway lined with glass windows.

Beyond them, the sky stretched endlessly, clouds floating lazily past.

Flying was... a new experience.

He had never been on an airship before. Until now, he had only been able to look up at these behemoths in the sky and curse the rich for having the luxury of flight.

"Still scary, though..." he muttered.

Not the flying itself.

The monsters and horrors that lurked in the skies.

That was the scary part.

Damon walked forward, reaching a door. He placed his hand on the scanner, and with a soft beep, it slid open.

As he stepped inside, he was met with Kael's cold gaze.

"You're late."

Damon nodded curtly, barely acknowledging him. His eyes swept across the large battle room, taking in the assembled students—all dressed in their academy-issued combat uniforms, standing in precise battle formations.

They looked like an army.

A disciplined, well-trained force being briefed for war.

He could feel the tension in the air. The quiet anticipation. The barely contained fear.

But more than that—he could feel their resolve.

Damon moved to his position at the front, standing alongside the other top students—his so-called "peers." He didn't bother sparing Kael a response.

After all, he still suspected him.

The dark spirit summoning... it wasn't random. And if anyone had orchestrated it, Kael was at the top of his list.

Kael, for his part, didn't seem to care about Damon's cold indifference. This was just how things were between them.

Kael's swept his gaze across the room, expression unreadable.

'Many of them are going to die.'

His sharp eyes locked onto the assembled students.

"I shall now brief you on your final semester evaluation."

Unlike the mid-semester exam, which had taken place in a controlled environment, this was entirely different.

"This time..." Kael's voice was smooth, almost amused. "I can guarantee—death is a very real possibility."

A murmur ran through the room. Fear spiked.

Damon's fingers twitched at his side.

Kael turned, motioning toward an enormous array of magical seals behind him.

The air hummed with the power of spatial magic, dark sigils pulsing in rhythmic waves. These were not ordinary teleportation runes. They were fueled by dark pillars of Kael's own magic, as well as several large mana cores—most likely taken from powerful Rank Four or Rank Five monsters.

"Behind me is a teleportation array," Kael continued.

"Your task is simple."

He gestured toward the array.

"You will form parties of your choosing and step through the portal. You will be teleported to a random region within a 50-kilometer radius. Your objective is to survive for one week."

Kael raised his hand, and a series of bracelets appeared, hovering in midair.

"Each of you will receive a bracelet. However, this is not for teleportation."

His smirk widened.

"It only acts as a homing beacon."

Meaning, if you were about to die and activated it—all it would do is let them know where your corpse was.

"Whether you live or die... is entirely up to you."

Kael's gaze flickered to Damon, his smirk never fading.

"You are free to burn, destroy, and massacre the area as much as you wish. The bracelets will record your kills and award points to your party accordingly."

Then, with a faint chuckle, he added—

"As for the consequences of failure..."

His voice dropped into something mockingly soft.

"You won't have to worry about your rankings when you're dead."

A heavy silence followed.

Some students turned pale. A few instinctively clenched their fists.

Damon exhaled slowly.

It was about to begin.

Chapter 228: To The Unknown

Once again, a bracelet was issued.

It felt cold against his wrist.

Damon raised his head, noticing that his shadow remained unnaturally still. No flickering movements, no playful distortions—it was as if it had frozen entirely.

Shaking off the uneasy feeling, he turned his focus back to his preparations.

He grabbed a bundle of arrows and shoved them into his quiver. The enchanted artifact absorbed them seamlessly, adjusting to hold even more. Methodically, he continued adding arrow after arrow, ensuring he had enough for what was to come.

Next, he reached for a few vials of healing potions—the academy had issued each student a limited supply. Carefully, he arranged them inside his lesser spatial bag, a magic artifact designed for long trips.

Inside, it already contained military rations, water, and other basic supplies. It could hold an impressive amount of gear yet barely added any weight.

Damon slung his bow over his shoulder. It was wide and crafted from a rare metallic alloy, sturdy yet flexible.

"Don't you usually carry an extra bow?"

Damon stiffened.

He hadn't heard anyone approach.

Turning swiftly, he found himself face-to-face with Sylvia.

The white-haired elven girl stood inches away, her usual composed expression carrying a trace of amusement.

Damon instinctively took a step back.

"Sylvia, why are you sneaking up on me?"

She only smiled at him, her sharp grey eyes gleaming.

"Sneaking? I was just checking up on you."

Her tone was too casual. Too familiar.

She was acting strangely—far too comfortable around him since that night... since he had promised her the world.

"What's up with you?" Damon asked, narrowing his eyes.

Sylvia tilted her head, her long hair swaying slightly.

"Nothing," she murmured, her expression turning soft.

Then, almost hesitantly, she lowered her head as if she had just been betrayed.

"You're not going to be mean to me after making all those promises, are you?"

Damon sighed.

"Aren't you supposed to be reserved? Where's this sudden boldness coming from?"

Her lips twitched ever so slightly.

Damon's gaze sharpened.

"What are you hiding?"

Sylvia cut him off immediately.

"What type of monsters do you think we'll encounter in this region?"

She motioned toward the other students, who were still sorting through their supplies.

"I mean... we're all first-years. I assume the academy won't throw anything too dangerous at us, right?"

Damon recognized the distraction tactic.

But he let it go.

"I'm not worried about the monsters," he muttered, turning back to his supplies.

Sylvia blinked.

"You're not?"

Damon shoved another ration pack into his bag.

"No. I'm more worried about nature."

Sylvia's ears twitched slightly.

"Nature?"

Damon glanced at the others—most of them were still obsessing over weapons, armor, and combat strategies.

"These idiots think the biggest threat is monsters," he muttered, adjusting his bag straps. "But before monsters even get a chance to kill them—nature will."

Sylvia nodded slowly, her sharp mind already piecing it together.

"That makes sense. Bugs. Contaminated water. Lack of food. Harsh weather conditions. Abnormal flora..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Most of us have spent our entire lives in luxury. This won't be some novel adventure where we sit around a campfire after killing monsters."

Damon smirked.

"Smart girl. I'd expect nothing less from the Bookworm Princess."

Sylvia immediately pouted.

"Why do I feel like you keep coming up with mean nicknames for me?"

Damon shrugged, hoisting his bag over his shoulder.

"Right, I should apologize to the worms."

Sylvia scowled.

But she still followed him.

For a moment, she glanced at his free hand.

And for just a second—she had the urge to hold it.

She quickly shook her head, banishing the thought.

"Erm... can you help me with my supply bag?" she asked hesitantly.

"I don't know what I'll actually need."

Damon turned his head slightly.

"Sure. I'd love to—as long as you don't mind me seeing your unmentionables."

Sylvia's face immediately turned beet red.

"N-Not that! I'll arrange my bag myself! Just help me pick the supplies!"

Damon laughed.

Sylvia scowled even harder, realizing—

She had been played again.

Still smirking, Damon stretched out his hand.

Slowly.

Almost expectantly.

Sylvia hesitated.

Then, finally, she took it.

His fingers curled around hers—firm but gentle.

Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, he murmured—

"I won't ask you to tell me what you're hiding... Tell me whenever you're ready."

Sylvia's grip tightened ever so slightly.

She nodded.

As they approached her supplies, Evangeline and Leona were already there—struggling to pack their own bags.

Damon sighed.

It seemed he had more work to do.

Without hesitation, he began removing all the unnecessary junk from their supplies—lip gloss, perfumes, hair creams, and other useless luxuries.

Much to their horrified protests.

"You don't need this. Or this. Or this."

"Wait—what about my perfume?!"

"Gone."

"Damon! My hair serum—!"

"Useless."

By the time he was done, their bags only contained the essentials—food, potions, and survival gear.

Then, they moved on to Xander.

Unlike the others, he had already finished packing.

Well-prepared.

And ready to go.

Keal stood in front of the teleportation array, watching as other students had already set out in their respective parties. Damon and his group were near the back, waiting for their turn. The line moved slowly, and when they finally reached the front, Kael and a few professors stepped forward to inspect their packs, ensuring they had all the essentials for the evaluation.

Professor Chrome stood next to Alfred and Emeraldal, observing the process. As Damon's party approached, Emeraldal waved them over.

"Hand over your pagers. You won't be needing them for this trip," she instructed, holding out her hand.

The group nodded, handing over their devices, which she placed in a secure box.

"You'll get them back after your evaluation," she assured them.

Professor Alfred then stepped forward, accompanied by a young fairy student that Damon recognized as Matlock. Alfred eyed their party before speaking.

"Your group is supposed to have seven members, but since you're all considered strong among your peers, five should be enough. However, Matlock here doesn't have a party. Hope you don't mind taking him in."

Chrome stroked his beard, nodding. "Hohoho... indeed. That would be the best choice. Besides, you get extra credit for taking him in."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"You don't have to bribe us, professors. You wouldn't accept a refusal even if we gave one... fine, we agree."

Emeralda smiled. She half-expected Damon to refuse with some rude remark, but he had surprised her. Slapping his shoulder, she chuckled.

"My boy, you sure have changed... I think I like the new you."

Damon sighed. "And I think you're making me feel awkward."

With a smirk, she ushered them toward the teleportation array. As they passed Kael, he stood motionless, his expression dark.

As Damon walked past him, Kael whispered, "Try not to die."

Before he could react, Emerald pushed them onto the array, and the magic activated. The space around them warped, and a barrier enclosed them. As the teleportation magic surged, Damon suddenly felt an intense buzz on his wrist. Looking down, he saw his bracelet glowing with an unnatural light.

The glow spread to the runes within the array, causing the ground to tremble beneath them. His body felt lighter, almost weightless. In the distance, he saw the professors' faces pale in horror as they screamed something he couldn't hear.

The runes flared violently, twisting like living veins of energy. A deafening hum rattled through his bones, and the air grew so thick it felt like wading through water.

They rushed toward the array in a panic, trying to shut it down. Kael lunged toward the barrier with a cold expression, but before he could reach them, Damon felt space twist violently around them. The noise was deafening—he couldn't even hear the shouts of his friends.

Then, in an instant, they were yanked into a massive spatial current. Damon gritted his teeth, trying to hold on—but it was too late. They were pulled into the unknown.

Chapter 229 Red Caps

He felt the sensation of blood dripping down his legs. Slowly and weakly, he opened his eyes, finding the world upside down with a stream of red running down the side of his face.

A groan escaped his lips as pain flared through his body. He raised his head, only to find his leg impaled by a jagged branch. The torn flesh throbbed with every heartbeat. Gritting his teeth, he leaned up with a huff, reaching his hand toward the bloody wound. His fingers pressed against the sticky warmth of his own blood before he snapped the branch with a sharp crack. The moment the restraint gave way, he plummeted several meters, landing on the hard ground with a dull thud.

"Arrgh..." he groaned, his breath ragged.

Pain surged through his body, but he forced himself to stand, his leg aching and his body battered. He glanced around, his instincts kicking in as he spread his shadow perception outward. The sensation of darkness slithered across the terrain, mapping out a two-kilometer radius. What he sensed was unfamiliar—a vast forest, its dense trees broken only by patches of rocky terrain.

The presence of fauna flickered at the edge of his perception, yet something far more concerning caught his attention. In the distance, beyond his shadow sense, a violet glow pulsed in the sky, casting an eerie light over the horizon. Brief tremors rumbled beneath his feet, faint but unmistakable. Whatever was causing them was far away—for now.

His perception also picked up something else—his friends were close by, their shadows distinct. Relief barely had time to settle before another discovery sent a chill down his spine. He spotted footprints—massive, humanoid prints with three stubby toes.

His jaw tightened. He had no idea what kind of monster had left those tracks, and he had no desire to find out.

Shaking off the unease, he scanned the area and spotted his supply bag lying on the ground, its contents scattered. Limping toward it, he knelt and rummaged through the mess, pulling out a healing potion. Without hesitation, he downed the liquid in one gulp, feeling the searing burn as it worked its magic. He poured some over his wounds before unsealing a bandage wrap to sterilize and bind his injured leg.

Securing the bag to his back, he tightened his grip on his bow, his quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder.

"Better keep the cursed ore arrows hidden," he muttered. The last thing he needed was to attract monsters with the volatile energy those arrows radiated.

With his shadow perception spread wide, he moved swiftly yet silently, keeping his senses sharp. His gaze flicked to the sun, estimating how much daylight remained. They needed to regroup before nightfall.

He knew nothing about the monsters lurking in this place, but facing them on their home turf at night would be suicide. More importantly, they were lost. This wasn't part of the academy's plans.

His mind replayed the moment before everything went wrong—the bracelet on his wrist had glowed right before the teleportation. This was sabotage. Someone wanted him gone, and his friends had been dragged along as collateral damage.

The summoner.

It had to be the same person who had summoned the dark spirit, Rashi Ignath. He had ruined their plans before, and this was their revenge.

And they had struck at the worst possible time, in the most vicious way.

Now, here he was, lost in an unknown region, surrounded by Goddess knows what kind of horrors.

Damon stepped over a fallen log, his pace quickening as he moved with precision. He halted by a small stream where a brown-haired young man lay motionless, his academy combat uniform dirtied from the fall. A spear rested at his side.

Damon approached, crouching beside him and pressing two fingers to the man's neck. A faint pulse.

A sigh of relief almost escaped him—almost. Realizing he was doing something out of character, he quickly scowled, as if he had just swallowed a toad.

He clicked his tongue.

"Tsk. Still alive."

Without another word, he grabbed Xander, gave him a quick once-over for injuries, and, upon finding none, tossed him into the stream with a loud splash.

The cold water jolted Xander awake, and he flailed, gasping for air.

Damon watched, completely indifferent.

"Sleep on your own time."

Xander quickly scrambled to the bank, his clothes soaked, dripping from head to toe. He coughed and glared at Damon, his lips curling into a mocking smirk.

"Damn you."

Damon smiled, though it lacked any warmth.

"Darn, you survived. I was hoping you wouldn't."

Xander snorted, shaking the water from his hair.

"Not a chance."

Damon turned away, already walking into the dense woods.

"Where are you going?" Xander called out.

Damon didn't bother looking back.

"To find the others. Grab your bag—we're in unfamiliar terrain."

Xander grumbled under his breath but followed, his boots squelching against the damp earth. Damon moved with purpose, leaving behind almost no tracks. Xander, on the other hand, stomped through the underbrush with far less grace.

"Where are you leading us?" Xander asked, his frustration growing. "And where the hell are we?"

Damon sighed, his patience thinning.

"To find the others. And I have no idea."

Xander frowned. Damon wasn't the type to act without reason. But the uncertainty of their situation made his heart pound.

"How are you so calm right now?"

Damon raised a brow, noting Xander's uneasy posture—the slight tension in his shoulders, the way his fingers twitched near his weapon. He was trying to hide it, but Damon could see through him.

"How are you not?"

Xander clenched his fists. He had seen monster footprints, claw marks deep in the bark of trees. Worse, Damon had dried blood on him. Yet, instead of worrying about himself, he seemed in a hurry to find the others.

"This area has monsters. What do we do?"

Damon barely gave it a thought.

"We fight or we die." His tone was casual, as if stating a simple fact. "But for now, we regroup and weigh our options."

Then, suddenly, his eyes sharpened. He raised a hand.

"We found the girls."

In the distance, three figures emerged from the treeline—Leona, Sylvia, and Evangeline.

Leona carried a massive sword, resting it casually over her shoulder. Sylvia had her bow in hand, and Evangeline's rapier was soaked in blood.

Damon immediately noticed the tension in their movements. But more than that—he noticed the blood on their weapons.

Xander exhaled, relieved. "Glad you guys are okay."

The girls nodded, though their expressions were grim.

"We're fine. No one was hurt," Leona assured. "But we did..."

Damon cut her off. "Run into some monsters."

Sylvia nodded. "Yeah."

Damon's gaze darkened. "What kind?"

Evangeline gripped her sword, her voice steady but cold.

"Goblins. Red Cap Goblins."

Damon cursed under his breath. He already knew where this was going.

Leona stepped forward, tossing an ornate horn onto the ground between them. It was blackened, adorned with bat wings and a sword insignia, flanked by two curved horns.

Damon's fists clenched.

The insignia of the Demon Army.

They were scouts.

Chapter 230: Clash

The Demon Army wasn't composed of just demons. At the top were the Demon Kin, beings who looked no different from humans but possessed superior intelligence and power. Below them were the monstrous demons, grotesque creatures of terrifying might. And at the very bottom were the tamed monsters, beasts enslaved by the Demon Army to do their bidding.

The Red Cap Goblins that the girls had encountered were merely scouts. Even so, Damon studied the three of them carefully. Not a single scratch.

His eyes narrowed. "How many did you meet? And why are you uninjured?"

Leona raised a hand. "Just one."

She glanced at Sylvia, who nodded in confirmation.

"The three of us woke up relatively close to each other," Sylvia explained. "Leona has a good nose, so she found us... and also picked up the stench of goblins."

Evangeline gripped the hilt of her bloodstained rapier. "We didn't expect to find a Red Cap. It was alone, so we ambushed it while it was off guard. It never got a chance to scream."

Xander clenched his jaw. "This is bad. Goblins move in groups, and worse... if the Demon Army is nearby, even a fraction of their force is too much."

Damon nodded, his mind already calculating.

"Which means we need to get as far away as possible. If this was just a scouting force, they probably don't know the area well either. But..." his voice turned cold, "we can't just run around like headless chickens. We're blind too. Enemies could be anywhere."

Sylvia furrowed her brows, recalling a crucial detail.

"According to our Demon Strategy class, a scouting force for the Demon Army usually numbers less than a hundred. They move in small cells, each several kilometers apart from the main force. Each group consists of monsters—low-tier creatures led by a commander, who is usually stronger. These squads also have at least three to five sub-commanders of the same species, as well as..."

Damon's fists clenched. "A Lesser Demon."

Silence fell over the group. Their faces paled.

A Lesser Demon was no ordinary foe. Unlike mere beasts, it possessed inhuman intelligence and terrifying combat prowess—hardened skin like armor, claws that could rip through steel, and the cunning of a seasoned warrior.

Damon exhaled sharply. "We need to move. If you left a body behind, it's only a matter of time before they track us. As of now, we assume we're being hunted."

The others nodded, gripping their weapons tightly.

Leona suddenly looked around. "Wait... what about Matlock?"

Damon's eyes narrowed. He hadn't forgotten the young fairy. In fact, through his Shadow Perception, he could already sense him.

Flying at breakneck speed.

And three Red Cap Goblins were chasing him.

Damon extended a hand toward the forest. "He's coming from that direction. And he's bringing trouble."

Xander gritted his teeth, tightening his grip on his spear.

Damon turned to the group, his voice firm. "We have two options. We retreat and pray for his well-being... or we stay and engage the enemy."

They exchanged glances. No hesitation.

Leona stepped forward, determination burning in her eyes. "I'm not abandoning anyone. We fight."

The others nodded, weapons drawn.

Damon smirked. "Good. Matlock's wings will be useful for scouting the area and mapping the terrain. He's an asset."

He unsheathed his dagger, the blade glinting under the dim light.

"Besides..." he muttered under his breath, eyes narrowing.

'Red Caps are exactly what I need to level up...'

Matlock wouldn't last much longer.

The time it would take him to reach them was too brief—too short for any elaborate ambush. Damon would have loved to string up wires from his Omnidirectional Gear, forcing the goblins to run into a web of death, but there was simply no time. Instead, they did the next best thing.

They took their positions. Weapons ready. Eyes sharp.

Matlock's flight was erratic, his movements sloppy from blood loss. His back and wings were stained crimson, and as he twisted mid-air, he unleashed a desperate blast of ice magic, freezing the branches behind him. His shoulder throbbed, an arrow lodged deep in the muscle—the price of recklessly flying over the treetops without cover.

The frozen trees shattered under his spell, but it wasn't enough.

"Jejejeje... heheh... kekekekeke!"

The grating laughter of the Red Cap Goblins sent a chill through his bones.

He was going to die.

"Why is this happening...? We shouldn't be fighting monsters like this..."

An arrow whizzed past his head, slamming into a tree trunk. Below, three towering Red Cap Goblins emerged from the undergrowth.

Red-skinned. Ugly. Twisted.

They weren't like the usual mindless creatures. Their brown eyes gleamed with a twisted, human-like intelligence—calculated, cruel, and dripping with bloodlust.

Their weapons were crude but deadly—a cheap dagger, a rusted sword, and a bow lined with arrows made of wood and jagged obsidian. Even in their patchwork leather armor, they exuded a robust, brutal aura.

Matlock's body felt heavier. His vision blurred.

Poison.

His wings faltered, his magic fizzling at his fingertips. And then—

He plummeted.

"No... not like this...!"

His body slammed into the earth, tumbling ungracefully across the dirt. He tried to push himself up, but his limbs refused to obey. His blood soaked the ground, pooling beneath him.

All he could do was roll onto his back, gaze up at the sky, and see his killers approach.

He saw death.

One of the goblins grinned, its jagged teeth bared as it raised its blade.

Matlock bit his lip, a single tear streaming down his cheek.

"What a pathetic way to die... killed by goblins."

His fingers twitched. His breath came in short, shallow gasps. He closed his eyes, bracing for the pain—

For the dull ache of death.

But it never came.

Instead—

SHLICK!

Steel met flesh.

A wet gurgle. A choking gasp. A body collapsing.

Matlock's eyes snapped open—and all he saw was Damon Grey.

Cold. Ruthless. Expressionless.

Damon's dagger was buried deep in the goblin's throat. Dark, viscous blood spilled onto the earth as the creature twitched and clawed at its severed windpipe, struggling to scream.

But there was no time to scream.

Because what came next was brutal.