

Shadow 361

Chapter 361: Possible Alternative

Killing one of the monsters in the deep was easy—or as easy as killing an aquatic nightmare at the first class advancement could ever be.

Slaying this particular abomination had only been possible through a mix of experience, desperation, and synergy. Weeks of clashing with horrors, of running, of bleeding and surviving together, had forged their team into something lethal.

Each member of the party knew their role by heart. They moved like gears in a well-oiled machine, compensating for each other's weaknesses with strength honed by necessity.

Now, the creature lay dead and unmoving. Damon didn't know its name. He hadn't delivered the killing blow.

He could have asked Sylvia to divine its identity, but she was conserving her strength—to find them a way out.

It would be a waste to endanger their seer over something as petty as a monster's name.

At least this grotesque thing would serve a purpose.

It looked like a nightmare stitched together from the water's darkest depths—a monstrous fish with a mouth full of sword-like teeth. Its many white eyes gleamed wetly from a disturbingly human face, twisted and wrinkled like that of an ancient man. The body was slick, glistening with slime instead of scales.

Damon's eyes drifted down to the creature's belly—there, grotesquely pressed into its flesh, were the vague shapes of human legs. Fused. Warped. Crushed into the body like broken bones into dough. A vile reminder that this beast was once human.

The others stood around it in a heavy silence.

He exhaled, turning to face them. Each wore light armor, as if careful not to burden the unstable island of wreckage beneath their feet.

"We have to hurry and get it cut up and roasted before nightfall."

They nodded slowly. From what he'd learned from Evangeline, nightfall still meant danger even in this underground caravan.

No light was allowed after dark—not even here, beneath the city. Something out there did not permit it.

Damon remembered the last time. The light. The rift. Those things that came crawling toward the light like moths to a pyre.

Even underground, light was forbidden.

Which meant when night came, the cold would follow.

The air was already damp, clinging to their clothes and hair like mold. But at night, it would turn bone-chilling.

Evangeline had told him what happened during the two days he'd been unconscious. They had huddled together, with him sandwiched between them like a dead weight.

Her face had turned beet red when she admitted it.

As for Xander—he had braved the cold, choosing to "act the gentleman."

Damon almost clicked his tongue. Idiot. But now that he was awake, there was no way he could just wedge himself between the girls.

And he'd rather freeze to death than huddle with Xander.

So, they needed an alternative.

First-class or not, they had survived. But if they didn't find a way to keep warm, they might not survive the next nights to follow.

His eyes drifted back to the carcass.

If this thing was warm-blooded... then gutting it and crawling inside was technically an option. Disgusting. Reeking. But it might keep them alive.

He could already imagine the revolting stench.

That was an emergency option—a last resort.

They weren't that desperate.

Not yet.

He glanced at Sylvia standing beside him.

"Hey. Is this thing warm-blooded?"

She nodded with a visible shudder, her expression twisted in revulsion.

"Think of something better..."

He blinked, glancing at the elf girl—at the streaks of soot and blood on her pale, beautiful face, her armor clinging tightly to her form, stained and torn in places.

"I didn't even tell you why I asked..."

"You didn't need to... I thought of it two days ago," Sylvia replied dryly.

'No wonder she didn't use her skill to check.'

He sighed, a thin smile playing on his lips.

"You wanted to sleep inside a dead monster..."

She looked at him calmly, her hair sticking to her face from the humidity. "No. We considered putting you there."

Damon looked away, a distant, hollow smile stretching across his face.

Turns out... sleeping between a warm huddle of beautiful girls wasn't the first option.

He would've been buried in the guts of a hideous abomination.

He frowned. "Wait... who stopped the idea? Was it you? Leona? Matia, maybe?"

He was sure only one of those three would've volunteered to make such a sacrifice. It wasn't exactly considered proper for a man to share warmth with women in close quarters.

Sylvia shook her head. "Evangeline hated the idea. She insisted. I didn't really mind anyway."

Damon's gaze shifted toward Evangeline, who stood a little farther away, ever-vigilant.

That girl had actually refused to let them stuff him into a monster's belly?

How much had she changed after awakening?

He narrowed his eyes.

And Sylvia just casually admitted that she wouldn't have minded doing it?

'Where the hell is my reserved, bashful classmate?'

Sylvia must have felt his gaze because she stiffened suddenly, realization dawning on her.

Her pale skin flushed crimson beneath the damp strands of her white hair.

"I-I... only if your life was in danger..."

Damon nodded slowly, letting his gaze linger on her a moment longer. He couldn't help but remember the details he'd seen in her file.

"Huh... I'm really starting to act my age, aren't I..."

His muttering didn't escape Sylvia's ears.

She tilted her head. "Hmm? Did you say something?"

He shook his head lightly, smile thin and tired.

"It's nothing. Just talking to myself, is all."

Sylvia nodded and brushed some wet strands away from her eyes. The damp air was getting to all of them.

Damon lifted his head. Time to get back to work.

He couldn't tell what time of day it was down here. But Sylvia could divine something that simple.

"Sylvia. How many hours before sunset?"

She raised her hand, and a large tome appeared in the air before her. Her skill shimmered to life, light flickering off the pages.

"We have exactly three hours until sunset... Is that enough time?"

He shook his head grimly.

"No amount of time will ever be enough in this cursed place."

He clapped his hands, drawing the others' attention.

"Alright. Break into two groups. Scavenge for anything useful in this ruin. The rest of you—on butchering duty."

They were racing the clock now.

Nightfall was coming.

Chapter 362: Lean On Me

The place was dark. Wet. The ground was uneven. Then again, this wasn't exactly ground—just a massive pile of wreckage that had fused together over time to form a drifting island.

For that reason, everything on it was tightly packed, pressed together so snugly it gave off the illusion of stability. But Damon knew better.

It was all a lie.

Moving one piece—shifting anything that wasn't meant to be moved—could send the entire island crumbling down into the monster-infested waters below.

He saw many things that had once belonged to a vibrant, thriving city. Wood, metal, stone... random debris. Road signs, wheels, shattered swords, splintered shields, rusted armor—all jumbled into one chaotic ruin.

Too many wrecks. Too many memories drowned and broken.

His shadow perception picked up too much. Shapes. Movement. Echoes. And deep pools of water, snaking through the wreckage like hidden veins—leading to the abyss.

A place far too dangerous to navigate.

One misstep and they'd fall in.

No more air. No more light.

Damon wouldn't suffocate, not with [Water Celebration]. He could breathe underwater just fine. But the rest of the party? Dead in minutes.

Hell, he'd die too if the ruins buried him. One wrong move and it'd all be over.

He chuckled softly at the absurdity of it all. He'd been the one who forced them to dive into the cursed green waters to escape the Keeper of False Truths.

Ironically, the same monstrous sentinels meant to keep them out of this forsaken place had tried to flee from him.

Now here they were.

He stood on the highest point of the wreckage, staring up at the ceiling high above. It was faintly illuminated by old, forgotten runes and crumbling murals etched into ancient stone.

Even using Xander's gravity magic hadn't helped them float out. His omnidirectional gear couldn't latch onto the walls—too strong, too slick, too damn old.

"These folks in Lysithara's past really deserve a bloody pat on the back for building such a durable city," he muttered.

He wasn't even frustrated anymore.

Escape was still the goal. He hadn't given up. Not yet.

His fingers brushed against his mother's locket resting around his neck, beside the pendant he got from Back-to-Back.

"Luna... I promise," he whispered, voice low, steady, "I will live... long enough to save you..."

His sister still needed him. And no matter how exhausted he was—no matter how much he hated life—he would suffer more for her sake.

There had to be a way to cure Magic Circuit Cancer.

If no modern method existed, then maybe... just maybe, the ancients of Lysithara had a way.

He closed his eyes.

And if not... a world dungeon would have to do. Flora had mentioned an elixir—hidden within a world dungeon—that could save her.

"Not yet," he whispered. "I'm not done yet..."

He leapt down from where he stood.

The area below was bathed in golden light—Evangeline's magic, spreading in all directions. She glanced at him as he landed beside her, her expression weary. Her illumination held back the dark.

"What should we be looking for anyway?" she asked, voice quiet.

Damon didn't know. Not really. He only knew they had to find something—anything—that could be used.

"Anything that looks useful," he said. "Most importantly, wood."

Matia, the third member of their scavenger group—named so by Damon himself—glanced over. The others were still back there, hacking at monsters, harvesting anything they could for food.

"Are you planning to build a raft?" she asked.

Damon turned toward her. He'd debated between bringing her or Leona. But Matia was too versatile to leave behind. Her arsenal was vast—she could create nearly any weapon she wished. Ice constructs, too.

In the end, Matia had insisted on coming.

"A raft'll fall apart too easily in this place," he replied.

Evangeline nodded, pushing aside her damp, golden hair.

"The monsters will tear it apart before we even get far... or worse, let us get far, then rip it apart."

Damon nodded again. He'd thought of that too. Even now, he could feel the eyes on them—monsters lurking in the water, waiting for the right moment.

Matia's braid swayed as she stepped forward, peering into the black surface of the water. The place was suffocating—claustrophobic—even more so for a fairy like her, used to flying free through open skies.

"How do you plan to get us out, then?" she asked. "And what's the wood for, anyway?"

Damon smiled, giving a nonchalant shrug.

"Isn't it obvious? To build a raft."

They both blinked at him.

"...Didn't you just say a raft wouldn't work?"

Damon nodded.

"A raft won't help us escape."

Evangeline sighed, exchanging a tired look with Matia.

"You don't have a plan at all, do you?"

Damon picked up a soaked piece of wood. He had no idea what it had once been—part of a house, a carriage, maybe a building—but even after thousands of years, it remained in decent condition.

"We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

Evangeline didn't answer. Her hand clenched into a fist. She opened her mouth to speak, hesitated, then stayed silent.

Matia turned, walking deeper into the wreckage, carefully pulling apart anything that looked like usable wood or metal.

Damon moved in another direction, eyes scanning the debris for anything helpful.

Evangeline sighed again, watching her magic shimmer in the dark. She glanced back at the boy. Damon... he was still moving forward.

He never broke.

She envied that strength. She was starting to understand why he always seemed so bleak. She'd overheard what he told Matia in the cathedral. Out there, in the world—people who had suffered more than her still kept walking.

She remembered what he'd once said to her, back in the academy.

"The weak ask for justice. The strong create it."

She bit her lip.

'I want to be strong... I want more power... I want all of us to survive...'

Finally, she opened her mouth. Her voice was soft. Stuttering. Scared.

"Y...yo...you can lean on me. I...I will support you..."

Damon paused, one hand gripping a large shield half-buried in the wreckage. He looked at her with a tired smile.

"Why are you telling me this now? Haven't you been acting like the vice party leader this whole time?"

Evangeline gave a small smile.

"Didn't that role originally belong to Sylvia...?"

Damon grinned faintly.

"Shut up and get to work, human torch. I didn't just bring you here to be a nightlight—put those huge muscles to use."

Evangeline smiled—until the end of that sentence registered.

Her smile faded. "Huge... muscles...?"

She blinked, looking down at her arms.

They weren't huge.

She barely had any.

"...The bastard."

Chapter 363: Eva

Teasing Evangeline was fun. Seeing her expression change had become one of the things Damon had come to like.

Originally, they would always butt heads in the academy.

Evangeline had her own ideals, while Damon was a pessimist who shot them down at every opportunity.

Now, after months trapped in a death zone, he missed those calm days at the academy—when they could just be students, not hardened survivors.

Well, that was true for them. Even back in the academy, Damon was trying to survive, always thinking of survival, always scheming where his shadow's next meal would come from.

He was always caught between hunger and starvation, all while evading anyone who might discover his dark secrets.

Damon couldn't help but miss those days.

Back then, being investigated by the Student Council President, Lilith Astranova, had been terrifying.

But right now? He couldn't help but miss her...

Was she worried about him? Was she going to nag him again for being a temperamental... and suicidal junior?

He still had a promise to keep.

They were going to take on the world together.

He needed to live... just to keep her company in their insane scheme.

'She must be lonely without me...'

That brought a thin smile to his face.

Lilith was the image of perfection. She always got everything right. She almost seemed superhuman.

But he knew she was just human.

She got lonely too. She had fears just like him.

She carried the burden of being the Priestess of the Unknown God. Just by existing, she was the nemesis of the Temple of Doom.

'If she fails... she'll die a horrible death.'

He clenched his fists.

He could not allow that to happen. He would not die here alone...

'If we're dying—let's die together, striking fear in the hearts of our enemies...'

He wasn't about to give up. He refused to die quietly in the Path of Kings.

This ancient ruin had once forged kings and heroes.

He would not die here... even if it now lay in ruins.

Forgiving wasn't his style. Neither was forgetting.

He hadn't forgotten how he got here. And after thinking about it for weeks, he finally knew who the Dark Spirit Summoner was.

He just had to eliminate his bias and look at things objectively.

It wouldn't break his heart to kill him.

Assuming Lilith hadn't already done it herself.

He shook his head.

No... she wouldn't.

She would wait for him to return.

He glanced at his academy-issued baraclete. It was still counting his points. As long as he wore it—she would know he was still alive.

Damon smiled coldly.

'She's probably setting the building blocks of her plans... gathering potential members for whatever insane organization she's trying to create...'

'I'll grow stronger... I'll reach the Second Class Advancement before I leave...'

If someone had heard him say that, they would've thought he was insane. Reaching the second class only weeks after achieving the first?

It was madness.

However... there was precedent.

Seras Blade had speedrun her advancement and reached her high rank without having to live for centuries.

There were also Class Advancement potions, rare artifacts, and lost magics that could raise one's class. Of course, many of those came with consequences.

A safer route would be to enter a World Dungeon—where time flowed differently and laws were more lax—to raise one's rank.

Or, if a god willed it, they could elevate someone's rank with no strings attached.

Damon didn't care about shortcuts.

He would do it with grit, pain, and the hardest method—battling monsters.

He'd break through.

And luckily for him, he had the Mastery Mechanic... and the System.

He was already stronger than his party members—even though they were monsters themselves.

They could grow stronger.

And so could he.

"What are you smiling like that for?"

Evangeline's voice cut through his thoughts as she pulled a large pile of scrap metal they had scavenged from the floating wreckage.

Damon chuckled with a hint of dark amusement.

"They say the greatest tragedies, when viewed from a distance, are nothing but great comedies..."

Evangeline raised an eyebrow.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Damon raised his head, staring up at the bleak ceiling above with a resolved smile.

"I'm saying—in danger, there's opportunity. We can reach Second Class Advancement soon... Valerie already said so. This place isn't just despair—it's an opportunity, Eva."

He smiled at her.

"With every adversity we overcome, we are resurrected stronger than before. Why fear death... when we've already resurrected stronger?"

Evangeline looked at him like he was crazy.

What the hell was he talking about? They only had one lifeline. If they failed, they were dead for good.

She also noticed something else.

"...Why are you calling me Eva?"

Damon shrugged, a flicker of insanity in his eyes.

"It's your nickname. Evangeline is such a mouthful."

Evangeline sighed with a tired expression. She didn't even care anymore.

She turned her gaze back to the pile of scraps. Matia was pushing the larger heap from behind.

"Do you need help back there?"

Matia, who was silently struggling behind them over the uneven wreckage, shook her head wordlessly.

Evangeline sighed again.

"...We can get stronger, right? Let's do it. These badlands... they've taught me to hate weakness."

"I hate weakness too."

Damon continued walking, navigating the debris with his haul of useless-looking scraps.

He never told them why they needed so many broken, powerless artifacts.

Sure, they'd found some magical items—scrolls, trinkets—but they had long lost their power in the ancient ruins.

Most were just wood and metal scraps.

She shook her head and followed him, dragging her own pile of scraps.

She wanted to ask him why he didn't just store the junk in his shadow like he usually did...

But then—just as they neared the camp—Damon suddenly stopped.

He stood frozen, staring into the distance, eyes wide.

Evangeline glanced toward where their friends were supposed to be.

Before she could say anything—

The wind shifted.

Her hair whipped into her face, obstructing her vision.

Then came a boom.

The shockwave of Damon's sudden dash blasted past her as he sprinted toward the camp with desperate urgency.

Chapter 364: A Soul Of Strength

Damon could hardly stop himself from rushing towards his other party members, this land was dangerous and teeming with horrible monstrosities.

He had been anxious to divide the party, even if it was more efficient.

Damon understood the dangers.

However, now on his return, he had chosen to spread his shadow perception to check on them.

He gritted his teeth, crossing the distance in mere moments. He skidded to a halt right next to Sylvia and Leona, who were kneeling—covered in blood.

Their anxious eyes were locked on something. Damon followed their gaze and froze.

A pair of human lips.

Damon gasped, the white light created by Sylvia's lunar magic illuminated the scene.

White light banished, the darkness away.

The pair of lips—Valarie Sunwarden—spoke weakly.

"Ahh, hello there boy... it's been a while..."

Damon forced a smile. Walking slowly towards her.

"Welcome back, Valarie..."

The pair of lips that was the totality of Valarie Sunwarden's body smiled up at him, fragile and soft.

He walked up to her and gently took her from Sylvia's arms.

Damon had only known this discarnate pair of lips for a short time, but Valarie Sunwarden had won their trust with her charismatic and disarming personality.

Even as a pair of lips that had long since lost her body to rot, she still remained.

Acting as their guide and teacher in exchange for a simple promise—to bury her in a cemetery. Or at the heart of the city.

The many centuries did not dull her will. Valarie remained true to her nature.

A warrior, a champion.

Damon gritted his teeth. Valarie Sunwarden was one of the few mentor figures in his life that had no malice towards him.

Just like Carmen Vale, she had a wisdom and a philosophy that showed her strength of character.

"Why do you look so sad, boy... I'm already dead, and we all know the dead can't die... twice..."

Her voice was weak, almost as if she was forcing herself to stay awake.

"I'm glad you children made it out alive... cough cough..."

She coughed, even though she had no body... it must have been a reflex from when she was still alive.

"The others filled me in on the situation... I'm sorry, my students. It seems I am not allowed to tell you the answer to the riddle..."

She paused, her lips growing duller in color. Valarie had her suspicions, however she didn't know what was safe to tell.

"That was not Vathren's power... he was suffering from it... all this time I never knew... corruption is a horrible curse... while the Ascendant armors gave us resistance, we are not immune..."

She opened her mouth slowly.

"For anyone who becomes corrupt, the greatest kindness would be killing them. Freeing them from the misery..."

She pressed her lips together for a long moment.

"I wish I could do the same for Vathren... but I cannot. All I can do is help you children survive..."

As she spoke, Evangeline and Matia slowed down, the wind pushing away some of the wreckage. They held their weapons anxiously—until they saw Damon holding the lips of Valarie Sunwarden.

"Valarie," Evangeline called out, quickly kneeling beside Damon.

She was the successor of Valarie's armor. Perhaps it was better to say she was Valarie's truest student, even more than the others.

Valarie smiled.

"I'm glad to see you too, Evangeline... I hope the boy wasn't causing you too much trouble..."

Evangeline shook her head, a tearful glint in her eyes.

"No... we're fine..."

Valarie smiled lightly.

"I wouldn't call your situation fine, if you ask me... cough... but what do I know, I'm just a dead pair of lips..."

The others forced a smile at her attempt to lighten the mood. This ancient Ascendant always had a sense of humor.

She was someone who always looked on the bright side—and if there was none, she would find it.

'Small island of joy...' Damon thought, recalling her philosophy.

"Valarie..." Sylvia called out with an expression of worry on her face.

"Are you okay..."

Valarie smiled weakly.

"I'm... Hmmm, I can see the expression on your face. Fine, I won't exaggerate my condition..."

Sylvia glanced at her intensely, making a soft sound.

Damon glanced at her with a thin smile.

"Sylvia is right, you derelict... old hag. You aren't doing so hot, are you..."

Valarie sighed.

"I'm on my deathbed, and you still can't act the part of a gentleman..."

Damon's brows furrowed, but he adhered to their usual routine.

"You're already dead though... you can't have a deathbed... so ehmm... live."

His words sounded like a desperate prayer. An emotion he would not normally reveal.

Valarie smiled. She wanted to ease their worries.

"Hmm... I'm already dead, remember? You children will have to bury me and perform my last rites... but until then, I'll still stick around."

They all looked at her with expressions of relief.

Xander bit his lips. He had originally thought of her as a creepy mentor—he was cautious of her after everything they had learned.

But the most paranoid member of their party—their party leader Damon—seemed to have eased his guard around her.

'She's helped us a lot too...'

He glanced at the others. They all wore worried expressions. Was he wearing the same expression too?

Xander couldn't help but linger on Evangeline. He bit his lips again.

Damon took a deep breath.

"You should rest and recover... I'll figure something out..."

Valarie smiled. She was quite fond of this young boy—he was an exceptional leader with a powerful will.

'I wish I had known him back when I was still alive... I would have loved to teach him everything I know...'

But even in death, it wasn't too late for that. She smiled, looking at them—even though she was just a pair of lips.

"I'm weak, so I can't stay awake for long... it will take some time for me to recover... but for the time I am awake..."

She forced a smile.

"I'll teach you the basics of rune magic."

Valarie had a strong belief.

'no matter how broken, a soul of strength and purpose can still mentor, still love, and still protect.'

Chapter 365: A Way To Cheat

Damon and the others didn't have much time before sunset, so they built a fire and began roasting the flesh of the monster they had caught from the water.

The rest of its body was left scattered among the pile of scraps they had salvaged from the wreckage.

They would have to put out the fire the moment night fell, leaving them in the cold, damp darkness of the island.

Because what came after dark... was far worse than the chill.

Damon held a piece of the meat, sinking his teeth into it with a large bite. His stomach growled, rumbling with a hunger that had become a constant companion—a hunger this kind of flesh couldn't satisfy.

Not really.

That hunger stemmed from the fact he only kept his shadow barely fed.

He had long since learned how to manage the aggression that came with that hunger. To keep it under control. To keep himself under control.

The meat was dry, bland, and flavorless. It was barely food at all. They had no salt, no seasoning, nothing to make it taste like anything besides scorched flesh and regret.

He wasn't even sure if it was meat or fish.

The creature they'd slain had once been human—centuries, maybe thousands of years ago—but whatever it used to be, it was now something else entirely. Something aquatic. Twisted. Corrupted.

Another breed born of rot and corruption .

'If I leave this place, I'm filling my shadow storage with anything and everything even remotely useful.'

Too bad he hadn't gotten that opportunity. He'd only acquired the skill shortly before arriving here.

The fire crackled faintly, barely holding on against the dampness in the air. The island of wreckage was soaked in moisture—nothing truly dried here, not even their spirits.

Damon had already sent his shadow to scout the perimeter, searching the edges in case any monsters dared to climb from the cursed waters and cross into their miserable patch of safety.

They all turned their eyes to Valarie, waiting.

Waiting for her to explain—or rather, teach—them about Runecraft. Rune magic.

Valarie, who existed now only as a pair of lips, smiled faintly.

"I wanted to ask you... what is magic..."

Sylvia answered first, nodding slowly.

"Magic is the science and art of shaping the world through the use of mana. Magic dwells in all things... each person channels mana in their heart and is bound by a single magic attribute..."

She continued, calmly explaining the fundamentals of how magic worked.

Valarie sighed.

"That's enough. You have a good understanding—but magic has fallen in the epoch since my time."

Her voice carried a scoff.

"Then again, I was born in an era only a few thousand years before everyone got restricted to a single attribute."

Her lips pressed together for a moment.

"The Zero Epoch had the best, most free definition of magic..."

"Magic is in everything. That part, you got right, Sylvia. And the part about one's heart is also correct. However... you must understand this if you wish to use rune magic."

She grinned faintly.

"Rune magic is a way to cheat the system."

Damon's eyes widened in surprise.

"Does that mean we can use multiple attributes...?"

Valarie's smile lingered. He sounded... hopeful.

"No. You'll still have only one attribute. You can't change that. But with rune magic, you can bypass parts of the system. Perhaps that's why it was once called witchcraft... witches have a higher affinity for it."

Her tone turned thoughtful. They also had an affinity for all types of magic too.

"But anyone can use it."

She cleared her throat—even though she didn't technically have one. She was, after all, still just a disembodied pair of lips.

"I'm teaching you about magic because you need to rework your entire mindset. Now... where was I."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes slightly, focusing.

"The world is shaped by five basic elements—water, fire, earth, and air. But the one thing that binds them... is spirit. The fifth element."

Leona tilted her head, confused.

"Ehmm... I'm confused. Is that like spirit magic? The kind that summons spirits?"

Valarie's smile deepened at her question.

"No. Each element has its own nature. Spirit is what connects—what allows variations and fusions of the basic elements to form more complex ones. Spirit allows you to create spells. Put simply... spirit is desire. It gives things direction."

Sylvia nodded in understanding.

"I see. That's why... all things that have spirit can create magic. We all have spirit, which is also our will—our hearts, our desires... Without our desires—without our spirits giving things direction—mana can't form into spells."

Xander narrowed his eyes. Ever the model student, he raised his hand.

"What about mana anomalies and magical disasters? There was no will in those, so... no spirit? How do you explain that?"

Valarie smiled, amused by the skepticism on their faces.

"All things have spirit. Rocks, wind, mountains, the land... even the world itself. The solar system. The galaxy. The universe. The multiverse. The omniverse... It is this will that forms those so-called disasters."

Damon nodded faintly, something clicking in his mind.

Yes... the world did have a will. How else could the world call out to them when they awakened their classes? It always said: Your fable has begun.

"I see... so that's how it is..." Matia muttered.

"So spirit is the element of will."

Valarie's smile softened. Seeing them learn brought her a strange sense of joy.

"Exactly. Spirit is the element of will."

Damon's understanding of magic was beginning to deepen. As Valarie spoke, he suddenly heard a soft chime in his head.

[Mastery: Basic Magic +9]

He smiled faintly. His grasp on the basics was improving.

"What about the other elements?" he asked. "You say they're part of the foundation of all magic attributes..."

Valarie's lips paused, as if savoring the next revelation.

"They are part of it, yes—but there are exceptions. Things that exist outside the basic structure. For example... the Void attribute. Or Nothingness. These exist beyond the system of four elements..... in a sense that are tied solely to spirit."

Her voice dipped into mystery.

"But we'll get back to that later."

Damon nodded, listening closely.

"Each element plays a role. Earth is the element of balance. Air, the element of freedom. Fire is passion... life itself. Water is change. And Spirit—Spirit is will, binding them all together."

"Then the question is," she said, her voice sharpening with meaning, "what is rune magic—and how is it different from the magic you've all been taught?"

She smiled again.

"Rune magic was created by the Unknown God. It is something freely given—a system that doesn't care about your magic potential. It's a form of magic anyone can use..."

Her voice grew darker.

"It breaks the absolute systems..."

She let the silence stretch.

"If you dare to learn—"

Chapter 366: World Of Runes

The Unknown God.

A name steeped in heresy—at least, to anyone born in Soltheon.

They had all grown up with the same teachings.

The Goddess of Doom equals good.

The Unknown God equals evil.

Religious doctrine wasn't just belief—it was life. It shaped their daily rituals, their values, their judgment. And that's what made it one of the hardest chains to break.

Religion in any society was merely one instrument of control. Religion was the opium of the masses.

A structure designed to maintain order, giving hope and meaning even to something as meaningless as life.

For most of them, skepticism came naturally. But Damon? He was different. His parents had died too early for him to form a solid faith.

While he may say the name of the goddess or mutter prayers, he was not faithful. It was just a force of habit.

He was a heretic. An enemy of the temple.

Not by choice—but he was in too deep now. There was no going back.

The same couldn't be said for the others.

Xander eyed Valarie with a skeptical frown. His blue eyes narrowed as he stared at her disembodied lips.

"Isn't this the kind of thing that got the last age wiped out...? I mean, your city is literally a ruin right now..."

Even Leona's beast-like ears twitched with unease. The girl who usually didn't think twice now looked anxious.

"This sounds like heresy... the temple might—"

"It's not." Sylvia cut her off—too quickly, too defensive.

The others turned to her.

Sylvia looked at Damon, then at the rest of them.

"Rune magic may supposedly have come from the Unknown God—"

"Not supposedly," Valarie interrupted with a calm, amused smile. "It did come from him."

Sylvia bit her lip.

"I know that... but it's not heresy..."

Matia glanced at Damon. The guy was too quiet, brows furrowed.

'Wonder how she's gonna spin this one...' he thought.

But Matia couldn't guess what was on his mind. He just gave off this vibe like he wouldn't care either way.

Sylvia turned to Evangeline, who still wore a skeptical look.

"If it's heresy, then why does the temple use rune craft? Think about it. Seventy percent of all magic artifacts use rune technology. It's everywhere—even in our daily lives."

She stood up, firm.

"Our pagers, our carriages—everything has runes etched into them to function."

She turned to Damon.

"The temple uses all of these. They're one of the biggest supporters of relic recovery—helping kingdoms and the Adventurers' Guild find, study, and reverse-engineer them."

Damon nodded, his grin widening.

"She's right. Pagers—the ones we use for calls and other functions—they aren't original inventions. They were salvaged from lost relics. Rune tech lies at the heart of them."

He stood, resting a hand on Sylvia's shoulder.

"Newspaper printing. Waypoints. Teleportation gates. Even the new visual streaming system they're planning to unveil for the next War Games. All of it—rune-based."

Xander clenched his fists. The logic made sense. That wasn't the issue.

"But... then the temple knows the origin of this magic. And they're still trying to revive it?"

Damon's smile turned razor-thin, irritation flashing behind his eyes.

"Xander Ravenscroft... are you accusing the temple of ignorance? Should I report you to the Knights Templar? Or perhaps the Inquisition...?"

He stepped forward, smirking.

"Are you insinuating that the faith is clueless...?"

Xander's eyes went wide.

"No! Of course not! I was just making a point—don't twist my words!"

Damon scoffed. "That's what I thought."

Xander glared.

Evangeline drew in a deep breath, her fists clenched.

"Will I grow stronger?"

Valarie's smile remained calm.

"Yes. You will grow stronger."

Evangeline nodded slowly.

"Then I'll learn."

Xander gasped. But he didn't argue. So be it, then.

Sylvia smiled at her acceptance. She wasn't about to pass this up either.

She had stopped caring about heresy the moment she gained her new class—when she learned the Unknown God's name.

He had promised her something.

She turned to Leona.

"Well, what about you?"

Leona shrugged, unfazed.

"Sounds like fun. Getting stronger is always good. And if the temple uses it, why can't we?"

Damon sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"Leona... I hope you realize—you can't share what you learn here. You can't tell anyone that rune magic originated from the Unknown God."

She puffed her cheeks, ears twitching.

"Stop treating me like I'm stupid. Of course I won't tell anyone."

Next came Matia. Damon's gaze rested on her. She barely spoke these days, becoming more withdrawn, more hardened.

'Don't tell me she's turning into an ice beauty...'

Quite literally—her element was ice.

"Well? What about you, Matia?"

She shrugged, her black hair pulled into a tight bun.

"I'll learn. This place demands strength... and I have too much to prove."

Damon looked at Valarie.

"Everyone's in—except Xander."

Xander stood, pointing accusingly.

"Hey! I never said I wasn't going to learn. I was just raising doubts!"

Damon sneered, annoyance flickering on his face.

"Sure didn't sound like that. Make up your damn mind already. You're like a teenage girl—your feelings are all over the place."

The actual teenage girls glared at him.

"Keep your opinion to yourself."

Valarie watched them bicker. Damon made no effort to defuse the situation—instead, he poured oil into the fire. The argument spiraled. Everyone was yelling at everyone.

She just smiled faintly.

Then—just like that—her mind was pulled backward. A memory stirred.

'Valacara... Vathren... Vulcan...'

Names of her fellow Ascendant Champions. All gone now.

Vathren was still alive... but he might as well be dead.

"Valarie... Valarie..."

Damon's voice reached her.

Her mouth parted slightly, pulled from her trance.

"...What is it, boy?"

He frowned. There was a flicker of concern in his glare.

"Ooh, thought you fell asleep. You still haven't taught us rune magic yet..."

Valarie smiled. She could feel the worry buried beneath his words.

"I'm not that old. I'm only a few thousand years old."

Damon grinned.

"That still sounds pretty damn old to me."

She chuckled.

"Well then... let's talk about runes."

Chapter 367: Neutral Rune

The nature of rune magic was similar to normal magic, with some differences, as Valarie explained.

Damon let the fire die down. The air was damp, heavy with moisture, and soon enough, night would fall.

Evangeline and Sylvia moved around the clearing, casting the nightlight spell on everyone—except Damon, who could already see in the dark.

Even Sylvia's self-made night vision spell was unnecessary for him.

He had once considered using that spell in battle. His version, enhanced by his shadow attribute, could cause temporary blindness—an edge in close combat.

But it wasn't practical. His battles were far too fast-paced for spells that needed time to cast.

He shook off the minor distractions. Valarie waited patiently, her ghostly lips laying on the ground until everyone had adjusted to the light.

"Rune magic was created by the Unknown God, as I already mentioned earlier. However," she paused, her voice soft and serious, "I didn't tell you that without reason."

Damon gave a quiet nod, eyes drifting toward her lips as the temperature dipped slightly, the chill seeping into the air.

"The Unknown God is... the god of names, right?" Sylvia asked hesitantly.

"He's the god who named everything..."

Valarie's lips pursed.

"Yes. He is the god who blessed names. But he is also the god of many things—wrath, despair, dreams, void, death, life, nothingness, law, time, reality... karma, imperfections... and all else."

Leona rested her cheek on her hand, blinking in surprise.

"Wow, that's a lot... And here I thought the Goddess's domain was already massive..."

Valarie sighed faintly. The pale lips seemed to carry a weariness—a deep knowing.

"That's not even all of his domain," she said softly. "But that's not the lesson we're learning tonight."

She gave them a moment before continuing.

"Rune magic is the art of invoking the name of something through a written inscription to draw out its power. Names have power..."

Each rune symbolized a primordial force or idea: fire, silence, binding, growth, motion, fear. On their own, they conveyed simple commands—but in combination, they could form complex effects.

"Think of them like a magical programming language."

Sylvia tilted her head, confused.

"What's a programming language?"

Valarie paused, realizing the concept was foreign to them. Her voice came out thoughtful.

"...I see." She sighed again, then explained the concept—relaying ideas and systems the outsiders had brought to their world.

By the time she was done, they seemed to understand... mostly.

"Now then," she continued, tone sharpening, "let's not get sidetracked. When creating a rune, you must have a strong intent and the will to shape the world."

She gave them a moment to absorb her words.

"For that reason, rune magic is built upon the same elemental foundation as normal magic, with one addition—mind. Though, mind is technically still an extension of the fifth element: spirit."

The group watched her, eyes focused.

She went on to explain the strengths and weaknesses of rune magic.

The difficulty was high. In the beginning, runes had to be carved into objects or written on scrolls. But at the advanced level—

—you could write them in the air itself.

Each rune was unique. Dangerous.

One wrong symbol, one incorrect amount of mana, and the results could be catastrophic.

At higher levels, you could even form complex sentences, full structures of meaning and command—syntax, Valarie called it.

With the right strings, you could manipulate the world.

Having laid down the theory, she instructed them to begin memorizing the basic letters.

Rune magic could be expressed in any language—what mattered wasn't the language itself, but the intent behind the rune. The name of fire was different in every tongue, yet the meaning, the essence, was always the same.

Damon couldn't help but remember the time he had used rune magic—with her help. Turns out that spell had been far more advanced than he'd realized. It would take years of study to reach that level on his own.

"Now then... I've told you the limitations," Valarie murmured.

A faint glow shimmered around her. A rune appeared, hovering before them.

She spoke its name.

"Ignis."

Flames burst from the rune's center—brief and bright—before she casually snuffed it out.

"Whoa... that was impressive," Leona whispered.

Damon didn't seem too impressed.

"Isn't your attribute solar... or light?" he asked flatly.

Valarie's smile curled with amusement.

"Yes. It is."

He sighed, unimpressed.

"Then that's just normal magic."

Valarie scoffed. She had expected him to say that.

"Yes and no. I can use light magic—but I cannot conjure fire directly. Now pay attention."

Her tone turned serious.

"I can create elements closer to my base attribute. But for an element like ice, which is its opposite, I would need to carve a rune and let the world fill it."

Damon listened intently as she continued.

To use a rune of an attribute far removed from your own, you had to carve the rune and let the world provide the magic. The world itself responded.

"This is a restriction placed on us—those of us bound to a single attribute."

"Is there another way to break it...? To use runes with opposite attributes?" Evangeline's voice was low, cautious.

Valarie let out a slow breath. She was only a pair of lips now, but her knowledge was undiminished.

"Yes. There is a way."

Her tone was resolute.

"Create a rune with no attribute of its own. Fill it with raw mana. Then transfer that mana to the rune you want to activate... we call them neutral runes. "

The earth beneath her shimmered. Despite having no physical body, the lips summoned power.

Two runes formed on the ground.

Mana surged into the first rune—then flowed into the second.

She whispered:

"Tenebris."

Darkness bled from the rune.

"This is the opposite of my attribute. But with this roundabout method—I can cheat the rules of this world. Runes can be invoked... so long as you possess the intent."

Her smile turned sly—tinged with defiance.

"When there is a will... there is a way."

She spoke coldly now.

"Who needed the Goddess's permission—when man could carve their own path to the heavens?"

Chapter 368: Bold Feelings

Other than Valarie's lingering resentment towards the goddess, she still taught them the basics of rune magic. In fact, she had given them a demonstration, making them inscribe a rune using the name of their attribute.

Evangeline's rune was Light—which she activated too carelessly, nearly causing a disaster before Valarie quickly dispelled it.

Sylvia inscribed Lunar, and hers too flared brightly before it was extinguished for safety.

The others all tried their hands at their own runes.

It was only the very basics—Valarie taught them how to write their attribute name in rune script, then left them with what she called homework.

If you could even call where they were a "home"...

It was an underground, floating pile of wreckage drifting above monster-infested waters. Their shelter groaned with every current, rusting metal and broken slabs of old buildings bound together into a makeshift fortress.

When they'd first found Valarie's prison, she had asked them to retrieve a few books.

Most of their bags had been washed away when they fell into the cursed green waters—but luckily Damon had saved the books, storing them in his shadow storage.

Lucky. Those were the only things that made it. Along with anything in his bag.

Their homework: memorize the 26 basic rune letters, and learn how to combine them into words.

Damon sighed, steam rising from his lips. It was freezing. Everyone was exhausted. But he had managed to find a way to combat the cold.

Simple, really.

He crushed some weak-looking rocks into a fine powder, then gathered metals from nearby scrap.

Using Ashborn, he superheated them—until even ancient, corrosion-resistant alloys glowed as though on the verge of melting.

His hands were still trembling from the backlash of channeling the flames.

But he didn't complain.

Once the metal was blistering hot, he poured the powdered rocks—damp sand and dust, as he called them—over the surface, causing them to hiss and sizzle violently.

Then he piled monster hide over the top, letting the thick leather trap the heat.

Finally, he threw a thick blanket, scavenged from the Beldam's nest, over the entire construct.

Heat.

Warmth.

In this cursed dampness, it felt like a miracle.

He let Sylvia and the other girls use it, knowing they'd need it more than he did.

Meanwhile, he walked to the edge of the wreckage, sitting quietly in the shadow of a collapsed pillar, opening a book on rune theory.

Xander, of course, knew better than to ask Damon to help him set up a place to sleep—but Damon had still left him a corner. It wasn't warm, but it was enough to stave off the cold.

Leona didn't seem thrilled about Damon keeping his distance.

But he reminded them—someone needed to stay up to keep watch.

Which, naturally, spiraled into an argument with Evangeline.

Eventually, a compromise was reached: two people would remain awake at a time, rotating every few hours.

Damon didn't mind.

That's why he found himself sitting beside Sylvia now, staring into the inky dark, monster-infested waters.

She had insisted on going first.

And anyone who saw the determined look on her face knew she wouldn't take no for an answer. Even Leona, who clearly wanted the night watch with Damon, had to give up.

Damon flipped the page of his book with a sharp flick of his finger, eyes narrowed in concentration.

Or at least he pretended to be focused.

Sylvia was plastered to him.

Not merely sitting close—her entire body leaned into his. There was so little space between them, even his breath felt constricted.

'This girl...'

His expression was stoic.

His mind was anything but.

He'd already read the same page seven times.

He memorized the damn book.

But Sylvia was making that impossible. Each moment she inched closer. Each second, her warmth pressed tighter against him.

'She's doing this on purpose.'

He knew it. And being Damon... he reacted in the only way he knew how.

"What are you doing?"

There was silence.

Sylvia's voice broke the silence, her soft breath brushing against his neck. The faint nightlight spell she had cast gave her night vision.

"Studying.."

She had removed most of the metal plates from her armor, her thin undershirt clinging to her in the damp air.

'What is wrong with me...' Damon thought.

She smiled sweetly, lifting her head to look at him.

"I'm studying rune magic, like Valarie told us to."

Damon exhaled sharply, closing his eyes.

"You know damn well that's not what I'm talking about."

She shifted slightly. Whether it was her clothes rustling or his thoughts unraveling, he couldn't tell. Her body was too close.

"Then what are you talking about?" she asked innocently. "Did something happen?"

Damon said nothing. He glanced away. Even in this dim light, she could see the tension in his jaw.

The old him would've blurted it out.

'Your breasts are poking me.' Without hesitation. Without shame.

But...

"It's fine," he muttered.

Sylvia smiled, closing the book in her lap.

She didn't stop there.

She wrapped her arms around him and leaned her head on his chest.

Damon's breath hitched.

Her fingers gently curled into his shirt, her face tilted up just enough for him to see the curve of her lips. That smile...

'Where... have I seen that smile before?'

Then it hit him.

Lilith Astranova.

That devious smile. The kind that promised mischief. The kind that said she was plotting something—and would stop at nothing to get it.

'Why the hell am I thinking of her now? And why is Sylvia smiling like that?'

This wasn't like her. Sylvia wasn't bold. She wasn't seductive.

At least, not before.

'Is she... being controlled?'

Damon subtly activated his shadow perception. He scanned her arms, her body, their surroundings—for any trace of manipulation.

He found none.

"Hey..."

Her voice was soft again. Damon lowered his head to meet her eyes.

"Yeah, what?"

Her arms trembled slightly—he couldn't tell if it was from the cold, or...

"Do you remember..." she started.

Damon looked at her.

"Remember what?"

She pressed tighter against his chest. The warmth from her body spread through him, dulling the chill.

"When we first got lost... there was something I wanted to tell you. You said... I could tell you whenever I was ready."

Damon gave a slight nod. He remembered. Barely. It felt like another lifetime ago.

"Hmm. I haven't forgotten."

Sylvia lifted her head, placing a hand on his cheek. Her face... so close. He could feel her breath, the warmth of her chest against his arm. Her heart was racing.

"Damon..." she whispered.

"Hmm?" he replied, unsure what else to say.

Her eyes locked onto his.

Her voice barely audible.

"What... what do you think of me?"

Chapter 369: Wandering Spirit

The cold bit through the wreckage, but Damon didn't feel it. Not really. Not with Sylvia sitting so close, looking at him like that.

He couldn't figure her out. Not now. Not here. Not with the darkness casting long shadows behind her and that look in her grey eyes...

Still, Damon kept his calm. His voice low, steady.

"Your Sylvia, that's what I think of you..."

Sylvia paused. Her eyes, sharp, nervous, flicked up to meet his. Grey eyes locking onto dark eyes.

Her lips trembled just faintly as she lowered her head.

"That's a very Damon thing to say..."

She bit her lower lip, her breath shaky. As if some invisible weight was pulling her under and she was trying not to drown.

"I mean what do you think of me as..a...."

Damon blinked. He could hear her heartbeat. Fast. Nervous. He could feel the heat of her body so close, warming the chilled air between them.

The strands of her hair clung to her damp skin, and without thinking, he reached out. His fingers brushed them aside gently, tucking them behind her ear.

"Your Sylvia. That is more than enough for me..."

She looked up at him. There was a smile there... but not one of joy. A resigned, thin smile. The fire in her eyes had dulled, if only for a moment.

'Is... he pushing me away...? Am... I?'

Sylvia shook her head once—then moved. She shifted closer, crawling into his lap with quiet determination.

The ground was damp beneath her knees, but she didn't seem to care. Her gaze flicked toward the camp where the others lay asleep.

Her movements were cautious, as if ensuring no one was watching.

Her body trembled—not from cold—but something else entirely.

"I... I... I am... I'll be leaving the academy soon..."

Damon's eyes sharpened.

"What are you talking about? Why...?"

She bit her lip again, her body now fully pressed against his. The closeness brought with it a wave of emotions he wasn't sure how to handle.

"The dark spirit incident... my father wanted me... he wanted me to return... back home..."

Her voice cracked. A tear welled up in the corner of her eye, refusing to fall.

"I was ordered to drop out... I... I didn't sign the paperwork because... I wanted this exam to be my chance to say goodbye... before I returned to my cage..."

Damon's breath caught. So this was what she had been carrying. This was what had darkened her mood on the way here.

"I see. Look how that turned out... We're trapped in a Death Zone."

Sylvia gave a slow nod. Her knees scraped against the earth as she adjusted her weight, her thighs leaning into his.

"I... I wasn't scared when we first got lost here. I... know I shouldn't have felt that way. I shouldn't have felt thrilled. But I did. I'm sorry..."

He shook his head slowly. It made sense now. She didn't want to go back. To her, home wasn't safety. It was a prison.

"I wanted to stay in the academy with Evangeline, Leona, Xander... I wanted to stay with you..."

Her voice softened at the end, barely above a whisper.

"I don't want to go back..."

Damon's eyes stayed on her. Her gaze didn't waver. There was no weakness in her expression. No fear. Just raw resolve.

She hadn't told him because she gave up—no. Quite the opposite.

"Why didn't you tell me then..."

She lowered her head, shoulders tense.

"I... was worried you'd try to take them on... you have a habit of doing whatever you please..."

Damon could only stare. Honestly, it did sound like something he'd do. He wasn't reckless—but he was stubborn.

Actually he was both.

Without a word, he reached forward and lifted her chin.

"Do you remember my promise... to you..."

Sylvia's eyes shimmered.

She nodded. Once.

"Then don't worry. Let me show you the world, Sylvia..."

Her breath caught. Her gaze locked onto his—and didn't leave.

She leaned in. Slowly. Inches turned to breaths. Then—

Soft. Warm. Her lips touched his. Just for a moment. Just enough to steal his breath. His eyes widened.

Then she pulled back. Her face lowered. Her ears—bright red.

"I... I... I... I'm sorry..." she squeaked.

In a flustered blur, she scrambled off him, covering her face and rushing back toward the camp like her life depended on it.

Damon blinked. Stunned. Frozen in place.

Then, his eyes narrowed. His expression twisted into something cold. Deadly.

He stood.

From the shadows, his hand emerged with a dark weapon—Alazard's disintegration sword. Its black edge shimmered like smoke and death..

He didn't say a word as he walked, blade low, killing intent bleeding off him in waves.

Sylvia had just crash-landed into Evangeline's chest, drawing a groan from the half-asleep girl. Evangeline sat up, confused and scowling, ready to chew Sylvia out.

But then she saw him.

Damon. Charging.

Sword drawn. Eyes filled with murderous light.

Sylvia turned her head sharply, sensing something was wrong. Her instincts screamed—and then she saw it. Damon, mid-sprint, sword aimed straight at her.

There was no time to scream.

The sword came down—not at her—but in front of her. The impact cracked the earth.

A breathless gasp echoed across the camp. Everyone bolted upright, weapons raised, hearts pounding.

Then, it appeared.

Something shimmered just before her. Its body wasn't solid—no. It was fire without smoke, a warped, shifting mirage. A grotesque form. Wrong.

Damon sneered.

"No wonder I didn't sense anything. Dark spirits don't have shadows..."

The thing hissed—a shrill, inhuman screech—as it writhed in the darkness.

Then it vanished.

[You have slain dark spirit wandering Ibliss]

Damon exhaled, his shoulders relaxing slightly. He glanced at Sylvia, then at the others, all still watching with horror.

"I knew something was off... A dark spirit. It was after you... must be a mind type... no wonder you were acting weird..."

Sylvia just stared at him, her face pale.

'Acting weird...?' Her heart sank.

Before she could speak, he turned his back.

"It's fine now. I got rid of it..."

He disappeared into the shadows, his sword melting away with him.

Sylvia sat there, trembling. A bitter ache spread in her chest.

'That wasn't the spirit's doing... those were my real feelings...'

She knew. She knew he was lying. He always told half-truths when he was trying to.....

Tears brimmed at the edge of her vision.

He was letting her down gently.

She forced a smile through the pain. A small, self-deprecating thing.

"Right... I was under its control... I... I'm fine now..."

'Did I just get rejected...?'

Her hands clenched into fists. Her jaw trembled.

'No... I'm not done yet...'

Chapter 370: Insanity

You make my heart beat faster, you'll be by my side till the day I die...

That was what Damon wanted to tell Sylvia.

That was what he wished—what he ached—to tell her.

But could someone like him even deserve her? Could someone who had done the things he's done even dream of being happy?

He could've made the excuse that he was emotionally immature—that he didn't understand what Sylvia meant to him.

But that would've been a lie.

Damon had figured it out. Long before she even realized it herself.

At first, it must've been nothing more than a childish crush. Just a curious glance at the boy who stood so differently from the rest—so distant from her world.

She was curious. Maybe she thought she saw something more beneath the grime and jagged edges of who he was.

He was standoffish. Reckless. A little insane. With no regard for anyone—not even himself.

Yet somewhere along the line, as her feelings deepened...

Damon began to change.

He started to hate the silence of isolation. He began to enjoy the company of others—of friends.

And how could he not notice Sylvia's gaze? How could he not piece together what those soft eyes meant?

But what he never understood... was why him.

'I mean, I'm a commoner... I'm not even a decent human being.'

In all sixteen years of his miserable life, Damon had never known this kind of feeling. It wasn't like what he felt around Lilith—it was something else. Something worse.

'Sylvia... hmmm... what should I do...'

He shook his head and sat still in the shadows. The damp, chilling air clung to his skin like death's touch, and every breath came out in a pale fog against the dark.

Leaning back against the cold wreckage, he took a deep breath.

Sylvia probably didn't mean for that to happen. It wasn't like she told him how she felt.

She only... kissed him.

'Yeah right, you bastard... keep telling yourself that.'

His head snapped toward the voice, but there was no one there. Just him. Just Back to Back—standing over him again. That familiar scowl of irritation on his face.

Damon smiled bitterly. He really was losing his mind...

Back to Back was dead. Damon had killed him with his own hands.

And yet, he stood here again.

Because Sylvia's feelings—her existence—called Damon's entire way of life into question.

Only the Back to Back in his head remained.

'What do I do...'

Back to Back's grin was cold. Hollow.

"She's not in your league—or better yet, you're not in hers. Look at her. She's smart. Beautiful. A princess. She's never known anything dirty in all her life—"

Back to Back sneered, pinching his nose in mock disgust.

"Then there's you..."

At those words, Damon shifted instinctively into the shadows, like a roach avoiding the light—afraid to be seen.

"You're disgusting. A dirty child. Pathetic. A thief. A liar. And worst of all... a murderer. Hahaha..."

A new voice slithered into the air behind him.

"You didn't forget me, did you?"

Damon's hands trembled as his eyes lifted—

Carmen Vale.

His presence froze the blood in his veins.

"You killed because it was necessary. Because you were wronged. But don't forget me, Damon... you dirty murderer."

Damon lowered his head. The weight of it all hung off his neck like a noose.

Back to Back laughed, stepping beside Carmen with a twisted grin.

"She's going to die. They're all going to die. You know why?"

His face leaned in—so close Damon could almost feel the heat of that breathless voice.

"Because of you. Don't forget—they're just collateral damage. Just side casualties in an attempt to kill you..."

Carmen's smile was slow. Cold. Cruel.

Damon didn't want to lift his head anymore.

"Everything's survival to you, right?" he whispered.

"How low must you be—no dignity, no pride. The world doesn't need garbage like you. You only make things worse."

He sat there—silent—as their voices poisoned his thoughts. Whisper after whisper. Dagger after dagger.

Back to Back tilted his head, smirking.

"You're going to drive a wedge between her and Evangeline. You know it, don't you? Sylvia's not the only one..."

He chuckled.

"Heh. Look at you, runt. Quite the little womanizer, aren't you?"

"...Shut up," Damon muttered. His whisper echoed in the stillness, as if even the shadows recoiled from it.

Back to Back sneered.

"Still got a mouth on you. All bark. No bite. You know how this story ends, don't you? Have you ever seen a world where the weak, dirty street urchin ends up with the princess?"

Carmen squatted beside him. His voice was softer now, a venomous whisper in the void.

"Weren't you a victim of that very tale...?"

Her voice slithered into his mind like a curse.

"Your bitch mother should've stayed home. Married someone else. But no... she just had to go off and be a whore."

Damon's hands began to tremble.

He knew. He knew she was a noble—but...

"...But..."

"Think about it," Carmen breathed. "Why did the villagers suddenly turn on you?"

"Because they knew how this tale ends. They didn't want to get involved with your family's bloodline. The quicker you and your sister died, the quicker they could avoid the wrath of a noble."

Back to Back cackled. "They probably tried to hide her identity while your parents were alive—but her manners, her knowledge, everything else... there was no hiding it."

"She should've married safe... but no. She had to chase fairy tales."

"...Maybe that's why she died in the war."

Damon's hands began trembling harder.

"That's why..."

Carmen leaned in, his lips brushing Damon's ear.

"Someone found out..."

"...Someone found out..."

His hands began to claw at the stone wreckage around him—digging, tearing, scraping.

"...It's also your fault..."

He threw his head back, staring at the void.

"My fault.."

Back to Back smiled.

"What are you going to do about it...? Nothing."

Carmen leaned in again.

"That's why you'll never deserve Sylvia. Someone like you doesn't deserve love. Not from anyone."

Back to Back leaned forward, his face obscured by the swirl of shadows as Damon's eyes turned blank—bleak.

"You've lived long enough. There has to be a reason why human garbage like you still exists..."

Damon clenched his fists. His hands trembled. Nails digging into skin.

The two shadows—indistinguishable now from the blackness around him—whispered together as one.

"You didn't start this... but you'll end it..."

Damon's lips moved. A whisper. A vow.

"...I'll end it..."

Chime.

[Mastery: Insanity Lv. 1]