

CLEAVER OF SIN

#Chapter 42: Footfall - Read CLEAVER OF SIN Chapter 42: Footfall

Chapter 42: Footfall

Nobles and those of importance were always announced before they stepped into the banquet hall. This was a sign of respect and tradition that had existed for generations.

However, only those from noble households were ever given this honor. Merchants were never announced, after all, all they had was money, and that was something every noble possessed in abundance.

As for individuals outside the noble hierarchy who were still deemed important enough to be announced, they were powerful figures, beings like Lily of the Abyss. After all, in this world, power stood above money, status, and bloodline.

Inside the grand banquet hall, conversations flowed freely as nobles mingled, formed connections, and strengthened alliances.

Every so often, a new name would echo through the hall, prompting some heads to turn in curiosity, while others didn't even bother as they stood above the name that was announced.

And at that moment, the voices of the two butlers stationed at the entrance rang clearly across the vast chamber, cutting through all ambient noise.

"Asher Wargrave, Tenth Sun of the Ducal Wargrave Household has arrived!"

As their brains registered the name, every single voice in the hall fell silent. Not a whisper remained. A pin-drop silence reigned supreme, so heavy it felt like the very air had frozen in reverence, or perhaps shock.

Then a sound came.

It wasn't loud. It was soft, subtle. But somehow, it rang louder than any shout at that moment. It was the sound of a footfall.

Then another.

And another.

Steps that should have gone silent the moment it hit the ground, now echoed like a divine command, drawing every gaze forward as if the will of the world itself demanded attention.

All eyes turned instantly to the entrance.

There, they saw him.

A boy, no older than seventeen, standing tall at six feet three inches, walking with regal composure, as if he were the Emperor of the Zarethorne Empire himself.

His purple hair was perfectly arranged, sitting atop his head like a crown. A flawless hairline framed his forehead, catching and reflecting the light of the hall in mesmerizing patterns. His deep purple eyes, a mirror of his hair, were calmer than any still lake.

A perfectly built, athletic body spoke volumes of his physique without needing words. His presence alone devoured attention like a black hole swallows light. No one could look away. It wasn't just his lineage, they were all staring at him.

Everyone watched, stunned.

They didn't believe their eyes.

They couldn't believe their eyes.

A member of the Duke family.

Not just any member, a Sun.

And not just any Sun, the failed Sun.

The disgrace of the Wargrave.

They all knew who he was. They had all heard about him. Every descendant of the Wargrave family was a genius in their own right. That streak had gone unbroken for generations, until him.

Until Asher.

The youngest heir who had failed his awakening twice.

When Asher underwent his third and final awakening, it wasn't just the Wargrave family who listened in. Nobles, powerhouses, and those of status had tuned in, curious and cautious.

If Asher failed, it would mark the beginning of the Wargrave's slow and subtle decline. Even if it was just a spark, small and seemingly insignificant, no one knew what kind of flame it might ignite in the future.

'Handsome.'

That was the shared thought that echoed through everyone's minds. They had never seen the Tenth Sun before, and certainly not someone so striking.

Even though he was widely known as a failure, few were foolish enough to look down on him openly. He may have awakened on his third attempt, and his future might be limited in the eyes of many, but he was still a Wargrave. He still had monsters of unimaginable strength backing him.

So unless one had equal status, any scorn or disdain was best buried deep within the heart.

In truth, many didn't even care that he had failed his awakening. Thousands failed to awaken every single year. Not everyone was destined for greatness.

As Asher walked into the hall, he could feel their stares drilling into his back like invisible spears. He had expected this. Wherever he went, people would always stare, because he was the son of a Duke.

And now, they stared harder, because he was the failed heir.

He continued walking calmly, eyes subtly scanning the hall as he searched for a place to sit and observe the event.

'The number of chandeliers hanging from the ceiling just to light up one hall is ridiculous,' he thought as his gaze moved upward.

Eventually, Asher found a seat. But before he could sit down, he heard the soft, deliberate sound of footsteps approaching from behind.

He turned his head slightly, only to see a beautiful girl walking toward him, standing at about five feet seven inches, her elegant stride filled with trained grace. She reached him and smiled warmly.

"Enjoying the view, Tenth Sun?" she asked, her tone light and inviting.

Asher's expression remained impassive as he replied calmly, "Isn't it normal to introduce yourself before striking up a conversation?"

"Indeed," she answered, her smile widening. "My name is Darissa Camber, first and only child of Marquis Darian Camber."

'A Marquis, huh?' Asher thought. In terms of noble rank, they sit just below the Emperor and the Dukes.

Although Darissa was the sole heir of her household, Crymora operated under merit rather than gender. Male or female, it made no difference. The world didn't discriminate. Power was the only thing that mattered.

Seeing her smile and properly introduce herself, Asher's expression softened. His impassive face shifted into a slight smile as he responded.

"Asher Wargrave, Tenth child of the Wargrave Household."

Darissa was momentarily surprised to see him smile. She had expected to look at his impassive face all day, after all, it was said that the Wargraves 'never' smiled. As the only heir of a Marquis household, she had studied the Empire in depth, especially the Four Dukes.

Her family didn't side with any particular Duke. Instead, they maintained good relationships with all of them.

As a noble, Darissa had perfect control over her facial expressions. She didn't let her surprise show. She simply smiled back, and the conversation began to flow naturally between them.

Though Asher was considered a failure by many, he still bore the name of Wargrave. More importantly, he couldn't be married off to just anyone due to his family's rigid traditional rules.

Darissa Camber knew this well. And that was why she didn't hesitate to step forward, to make the first move, to be the first connection.

Others soon came to the same realization. In an instant, several nobles began to flock toward Asher, each one eager to make an impression and build a relationship with the Tenth Sun.

Asher could only sigh inwardly as he continued greeting them one by one, hearing name after name.

He knew that once he saw a person's face and heard their name even once, he would never forget them. His brain had a knack for never forgetting anything which always worked against him in moments like these.

Chapter 43: Ducal families

As the Royal Party went on, families continued to arrive one after the other, the hall continued to brim with discussion and laughter.

But Asher noticed something unusual. Within the banquet hall, he hadn't really seen anyone of true importance. Not a single Duke or Marquis. It was strange.

The sons and daughters of the three Dukes had arrived, but none of their family heads were present, just like in the case of Darissa. She stood here, radiant and poised, but her father, the Marquis, was unavailable.

Asher didn't believe the Emperor would host such a grand party just to invite a bunch of children and merchants. It made no sense. Even the children of Barons were here, but the Barons and Baronesses themselves were nowhere to be seen.

Although some adults were within the banquet hall, mingling and sipping wine, Asher guessed they weren't truly high up on the social ladder. Their presence was more like that of chaperones or those on the lower social ladder.

Suddenly, Asher's head rose as his senses tingled. The ceiling above, from which chandeliers hung like frozen stars, was made of literal glass. Asher's figure reflected on the glass when he gazed up, his eyes narrowing.

But he was sure, the real banquet was going on above them.

Although he couldn't see or sense anyone above, he didn't think his instincts were wrong. He was absolutely convinced the patriarchs and matriarchs of every noble house, and those of extreme importance, were above them, separated by layers of glass and status.

'Separating the adults from the children,' Asher thought as he sipped the wine in his hand in silence, walking calmly through the hall. He had managed to escape the numerous introductions for now.

After all, the arrival of the children from the three Ducal families had drawn all the attention, making people flock in their direction like bees to nectar.

Asher had read extensively about the three Ducal families during his time in the Wargrave library. All three of them had powerful bloodlines running through their veins, just like the Wargraves.

First was the Ravencroft Ducal family, known for their unique beast-taming abilities. After awakening their bloodline, they were able to summon one beast per major rank they reached in life. Meaning, depending on what Life Rank they ultimately attained, they could summon up to ten beasts throughout their lives.

But that wasn't all. For every beast they summoned, they would randomly and permanently acquire one of that beast's abilities. Even if the beast later died or was sealed off, it didn't matter, its ability remained within the summoner permanently.

They could also tame other beasts and positive Emovirae. However, unlike their natural bloodline summoning that instantly granted them an ability, the same couldn't be said for tamed creatures. Taming did not grant abilities; only bloodline summoning did.

Then came the Silvershade Ducal family, famed for their bone manipulation abilities. They could harden their bones to insane degrees, increasing speed, durability, and physical strength. They could even create bones out of thin air.

It was said that at its peak, their power allowed them to manipulate the bones within their opponents. They were living weapons. Every inch of their bodies could crush, pierce, or tear through many obstacles as if they were paper.

Finally, there was the Stormveil Ducal family, known for their manipulation of blood. Another terrifying bloodline, they were walking weapons too. They didn't need external blood sources; their own blood could be weaponized. And with Astra, they could even create blood from thin air, just like the Silvershades did with bones.

With outrageous control, they could manipulate their enemies, freeze them in place as if time itself had paused, or explode them into blood mist before they could even react.

All descendants of these Ducal families awakened the same ability within their lineage. Since it was a bloodline, inheritance was guaranteed. However, their strength still depended on control, talent, imagination, and application.

Just because a group of people possessed the same ability didn't mean they were on the same level of power.

But none of these families had the same no-marriage rule like the Wargraves did. They could marry into other families, though the Ducal families rarely allowed this, enforcing strict control over their bloodlines. They only considered marriage outside the family when it was to the Prince or Princess of the Empire itself.

As Asher was lost in thought, contemplating the three Ducal families and their terrifying bloodline abilities, a thunderous announcement tore through the air like a blade of authority.

"The Royal twins; Prince Vaelric Lux Vanthelmor and Princess Vaelra Lux Vanthelmor, make their entrance!"

Every gaze turned in the direction the announcement came from, a door. But not the same door through which Asher and the other guests had entered.

The huge golden doors opened widely like the gates of heaven itself, radiant and divine in presence. From it, two beings stepped in with regal bearing and soft, measured steps.

They were the twins of the Royal Family, the ones who had turned seventeen today, the reason why everyone was gathered here in the first place.

Asher observed them silently from the side. They both had chestnut-brown hair and deep brown eyes. Their features were perfect, sculpted almost unnaturally, as they walked forward gracefully.

Everyone else stepped forward to greet the Prince and Princess of the Zarethorne Empire, bowing with practiced etiquette.

But Asher and the children from the Ducal families didn't rush forward. They waited at the side, unhurried.

'So this is them, huh?' Asher thought as he moved casually, blending in with the flow.

The Royal Family, too, was a family of bloodline. They possessed the ability to absorb all sorts of energy and release it back in various forms. A frightening power.

A broken family, through and through. You could punch them with all your might, and they wouldn't even flinch, they would absorb the kinetic force behind the attack instantly.

It was with this ability that they had climbed to the rank of Emperor during the olden days, establishing their rule.

They were walking weapons. Their bodies didn't even need to actively absorb anything. The absorption was passive, like breathing. Yet they could also choose not to absorb if they so wished.

'Good luck catching them off guard with a sneaky attack,' Asher thought as he shook his head faintly, the corner of his mouth twitching.

But he knew their weakness. Although they could absorb and store energy, their energy storage capacity could never be infinite. It had a limit, an upper ceiling that, once reached, rendered them vulnerable.

Their second weakness was weapons. Although they didn't need to block things like punches or shockwaves, attacks from physical blades were different. They had to block or avoid those.

After all, a punch was purely kinetic energy, something absorbable, while a blade caused damage through physical penetration. It wasn't just force. It was a combination of material density, shape, and razor-sharp edges. That kind of damage was different, bypassing their absorption ability.

So in truth, their ability wasn't really omnipotent.

Not by a long shot.

Chapter 44: Dance

Asher continued to stand alone as he watched the party. 'When is a face slapping moment going to happen? Or were all those authors just lying? Although it's understandable, nobles only act high and mighty against commoners,' Asher thought with a sigh, as he really wanted to see a face slapping moment.

"I never thought the Tenth Sun himself would come personally for my birthday party."

Asher heard a voice from behind. He turned, his gaze landing on the figure walking towards him, the Princess of the Zarethorne Empire; Vaelra Lux Vanthelmor.

"Would you have preferred another Sun in attendance or a Moon, Princess Vaelra?" Asher replied with an expressionless face.

Vaelra simply smiled as she spoke, "I do not know any Sun or Moon in particular. Besides, neither of them are my age. Unlike you, who is seventeen like me."

Asher simply nodded, as they continued to talk.

"So, what do you think of the party, Asher, if I'm permitted to call you by name?" Vaelra continued with a smile.

"Of course, you are, your highness," Asher replied, his own smile appearing.

"Please, call me Vaelra," Vaelra simply stated.

Asher simply nodded. "Vaelra, the party is kind of fun. Although I've never been to one to actually know that."

"Is that so...? I personally think it's boring. I'm not into these kinds of things. But my brother wanted it; he sees it as an opportunity to strengthen the bond between the Empire and its people," Vaelra walked gently as she spoke.

The music rose gently as people began to dance to the tunes.

"Aren't you going to ask a lady to a dance, Asher?" Vaelra spoke, as her brown eyes stared into his purple eyes.

She raised her hand, expecting him to take it. Asher smiled, his form lowered as he took her hand gently and kissed the back of her hand as he spoke, "It will be an honour to dance with the Princess of the Zarethorne Empire."

But before Asher could even take a step, someone walked up to him and Vaelra with calm strides.

"Allow me this dance, Princess Vaelra."

The boy bowed with respect, his hand on his chest.

"Maybe another time. I'm already set to dance with the Tenth Sun of the Wargrave," Vaelra declined with easing composure.

As Asher and Vaelra were about to walk away, the boy spoke again.

"Your highness, the Tenth Sun is the failure of the Wargrave family. You can't be seen dancing with him, or it might indirectly affect your own image."

Vaelra instantly paused and turned, her smile gone as she replied, "Ryan Silvershade, are you telling me who to dance with at my own party?" Her tone dropped the more she spoke.

'I know I wished for a face-slapping moment, but for it to turn out this way is really... unexpected,' Asher thought as he watched in amusement.

"I'm not, your highness. I'm merely stating the facts. A genius such as yourself can't be with a failure who only awakened on his third awakening despite the blood that runs through his veins," Ryan replied, his black eyes meeting the Princess's brown eyes.

But before Vaelra could even speak, Asher replied, "Aren't you the son of a Duke?"

Ryan's eyes turned to Asher as he replied, "I am."

"Then tell me, why are you so desperate for attention at this moment?" Asher spoke, his purple gaze fixed on the boy before him.

"The Princess can't just be se—" before Ryan could even finish, Asher cut him off.

"Are you the Emperor, that you can order around the Princess?"

But before Ryan could reply, a voice came from the side, "It seems some idiot sees my sister as a path to power."

It was the Prince; Vaelric Lux Vanthelmor.

Ryan instantly frowned. He had only wanted to dance with the Princess first, then build connections. He didn't want some no-name dancing with her.

"Ryan Silvershade, I will be having a word with the Duke about this," Vaelric spoke as he arrived. His gaze shifted to Asher, then to his sister.

"Let's go, Asher," Vaelra spoke, her smile returning as they stepped onto the dance floor.

Asher didn't know how to dance, but he could from the original Asher's memories. He simply followed the memories and the Princess's movements and mastered it on the fly.

"I'm sorry for such a sight," Vaelra spoke as she moved.

"I never thought I would hear a Princess apologise," Asher spoke calmly as they both moved to the rhythm of the tune being played.

"And I never thought a Wargrave could dance or smile," Vaelra replied with a chuckle.

"Just because the Wargraves are only known for their battle prowess doesn't mean we aren't good at any other thing," Asher replied in a calm tone.

Vaelra's gaze shifted to Ryan as she spoke, "You seemed ready to fight him for me despite knowing you would lose," her tone teasing.

"I was never going to fight for you, Vaelra. Besides, who said I would lose?" Asher stated calmly as he spun the Princess around, his hand interlocked with hers.

"I never thought I would hear the day someone would say they wouldn't fight for me," Vaelra simply replied, the smile on her face ever present.

She wasn't angry at Asher's words. After all, why should Asher fight for someone he just met? Even if she was the Princess of the Empire, even she wasn't that naive.

Asher simply smiled and didn't reply. He simply stated the truth. He had no need to fight over a woman barely a week after his transmigration.

"Why do you think you wouldn't lose? Ryan has been training since he was five. I do not think you can match up," Vaelra continued to speak.

"Let's just say, despite my third awakening, I remain a Wargrave, Vaelra," Asher replied, having no time to list what made him confident.

The tune came to an end, and they both came to a halt as they stopped dancing. "It was a nice interaction. I hope we meet again. Of course, that is if you survive your True Awakening," Vaelra spoke as she walked away, moving to interact with other nobles.

Asher simply shook his head. He headed towards the door, ready to call it a day. Since no face slapping really happened, he had no reason to be here. Lyra, who had her gaze

fixed at the door waiting for her Young Master, instantly called the coachman the moment she saw Asher.

The carriage arrived at the front. Stepping in, Asher simply left, having no intention of remaining here. Two days were wasted without training. He had better things to do.

Chapter 45: Bet-1

Before Asher's carriage could even roll away, a figure instantly appeared in front of it, making the coachman halt the carriage abruptly.

Before the figure could even utter a word, he was instantly surrounded by the five guards and Lyra, all of whom had already drawn their weapons and stood in a battle-ready stance, prepared for combat without hesitation.

The figure they surrounded was wearing a butler's uniform. They assumed he might be a servant of the palace, perhaps a real butler. But at the end of the day, that was still a huge might. There was a chance he could be an enemy in disguise, and none of them were willing to take such a risk lightly.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Lyra's voice rang out. The soft, gentle voice she reserved for Asher was nowhere to be found. Her tone was ice-cold, matching her sharp and unreadable expression.

She recognized the butler. After all, her eyes had been fixed on the entrance of the banquet hall from the moment Asher stepped into it. She knew the figure before them was one of the two butlers who had been announcing nobles and people of importance as they arrived at the banquet hall.

But Lyra couldn't care less about that fact at the moment. Recognition meant nothing in a place where betrayal could lurk behind familiar faces.

The butler simply bowed, his right hand pressed to his chest and his left hand placed respectfully behind his waist. He spoke with formal grace and calm respect.

"Pardon my intrusion, Knights of Wargrave, but the Emperor demands the Tenth Sun's presence."

At the mention of the Emperor, Lyra and the Knights instantly frowned. After all, the man presided over the entire Empire. To disobey his orders would be nothing short of treason.

Still, Lyra didn't budge. She remained unmoved as she replied coldly, "Without a Royal Order, we aren't obligated to do anything. At the count of three, if you are still blocking our path, you will be seen as an assassin."

At Lyra's words, the knights readied themselves again. Although they were still within the Royal Palace, and the Royal Knights were supposed to be responsible for this ground, they didn't trust anyone beyond their circle.

"One," Lyra started counting.

"Two."

"No need to cause a scene at the Royal Party, Lyra," Asher's voice came calmly from the carriage as he stepped out with composed strides.

"Tenth Sun, we can't be sure he was actually sent by the Emperor himself," one of the Knights immediately spoke, his figure materializing beside Asher just in case an arrow were to shoot out of nowhere. The knight's instincts had been sharpened by years of service.

"Lead the way," Asher simply said to the butler, paying no attention to the surrounding tension.

Turning to Lyra and the Knights, he spoke once more. "You've done well for the day. I will be back." With those words, he walked back toward the banquet hall with steady steps.

A few minutes earlier.

Above the grand banquet hall where the Royal Party was being held, various beings stood silently, gazing down at those who drank, conversed, and laughed below them.

Asher's instincts had been right all along. The main Royal Party was indeed being held above the crowd. In this elevated place, nobles of all ranks gathered in silent splendor, discussing matters of power and legacy. From Barons to Dukes, even the Emperor himself was present, his aura commanding.

Outside of the noble class, no one else had access to this floor. This particular gathering was exclusively reserved for the nobility, under the direct orders of the Emperor himself.

"Your son has good senses." Emperor Zolthemir Lux Vanthelmor remarked as his eyes locked with Asher's through the enchanted glass that separated the upper floor from the lower.

From below, no one could see anything above. But from above, they could see everything below, every motion, every word, every shift in expression.

Duke Azeron Wargrave didn't reply. He simply stood there, gazing down silently at Asher with an expressionless face that betrayed no emotion.

At that moment, although all nobles of the Empire were gathered on the upper floor, they did not stand as one group. After the formal greetings had been exchanged and pleasantries shared, the nobles naturally separated into smaller factions.

Barons and Baronesses stood together with a few Viscounts and Viscountesses in one corner.

Counts and Countesses gathered with Marquises and Marchionesses at another side of the hall, discussing matters of trade, territory, and politics.

Dukes and Duchesses stood near the Emperor in another direction, engaging in deeper conversation, likely regarding the Empire's grander interests.

Although they were all nobles and were technically gathered in one place, there was an unmistakable and rigid division in power, status, and influence.

"Who knows... he could just be admiring the glass ceiling from below." Duke Rhydion Silvershade said with a faint smile.

Still, Duke Azeron said nothing. He did not defend Asher, nor did he offer any explanation. He simply took another slow sip from the wine glass in his hand, as though Asher wasn't even his son.

If it hadn't been the Emperor's personal invitation, none of them would have come, not the Dukes, not the Marquises, not even most of the Counts. Perhaps a few Viscounts or Barons would have come in hopes of forming connections and strengthening their households, but the higher nobility rarely mingled without purpose.

As the nobles continued observing their descendants below, the scene began to shift. Ryan had just approached Vaelra, who seemed eager to dance. Smiles appeared on the faces of some of the nobles, some amused, others eager to see how the situation would unfold.

They wanted to see if Asher would react like a typical Wargrave, impulsive, proud, quick to face confrontation without asking questions. But when they saw him refrain from even drawing his weapon, their anticipation quickly turned to disappointment.

They had been expecting a spectacle.

"It seems your son, Asher, knows he isn't on par with Ryan Silvershade and decided to back down," Duchess Syvrein Stormveil commented from the side, her tone almost approving. "It seems your family isn't made up of only brutes after all."

"That was disappointing. I expected the usual arrogance and reckless display of youth." Duke Mauvrek Ravencroft replied as he casually fed and patted a crow that rested eagerly on his lap.

The creature wasn't a summon or a tamed beast. The Ravencrofts simply had a natural affinity with animals; they gravitated toward them instinctively.

They watched as Asher danced with Vaelra. Then, quite suddenly, Duke Rhydion Silvershade spoke. "How about a bet, Azeron?"

Duke Rhydion's gaze turned to Azeron, who still seemed unbothered. Curious gazes turned to him from all corners of the hall, wondering what he was about to propose.

Seeing that Azeron didn't reply, Duke Rhydion continued speaking, a wide grin forming on his lips. "A spar between our sons. As for the stakes, let's say ten percent of our family's yearly earnings."

His words struck like a bomb in the hall. Even nobles who weren't part of the conversation had been listening, and now they turned in surprise.

Ten percent of a Ducal household's annual income amounted to thousands of platinum coins. And Duke Rhydion Silvershade had just placed that down for a simple bet. However, he had the advantage.

Ryan had awakened at fifteen and had received training even before that. The Silvershade family always knew what their children would awaken as, bone manipulators. Unlike the Wargraves, who could not train beforehand because their weapon and elemental affinities awakened randomly with each descendant.

Adding to the fact that Asher had only just awakened, and at seventeen, no less, Duke Azeron stood no real chance of winning this bet. Everyone in the room knew it.

Now, all eyes turned to Duke Azeron.

Would he accept out of pride and lose a fortune?

Or would he cower and refuse, to save a few platinum coins at the cost of his family's name?

Chapter 46: Bet-2

Duke Azeron stood silent. He could feel the weight of everyone's gazes on him, even the Barons were watching, waiting for the Duke's counter.

What would he say? What would he do?

While Azeron maintained an expressionless face, in his mind he was laughing his lungs out. He had no personal issue or longstanding feud with Duke Rhydion Silvershade, but it seemed the man wanted him to suffer some form of loss during this royal party.

'Since he proposed it, let's make a killing this time, shall we?' Azero thought with a hidden smirk, already counting the amount of money he was about to win in his mind.

His thoughts, however, remained buried deep within. On the outside, his face remained completely still, cold, unreadable, and devoid of any emotion.

Just when it seemed like Duke Azero wasn't going to speak, his lips finally parted.

"Fifty percent."

The entire room froze at his words.

Did they just hear that right? Fifty percent? Fifty percent of an entire year's earnings of a Ducal Household?

If Duke Rhydion's words were a grenade, then Duke Azero Wargrave's reply was a nuclear explosion.

Even Emperor Zolthemir Lux Vanthelmor doubted his own ears. Even he, an Emperor, though unimaginably wealthy, would not stake that amount on a mere bet over children's squabbles. But he said nothing. After all, it wasn't his money. He wasn't the one suffering any potential loss. And besides, the party had just turned into something far more interesting than it had started out.

All eyes instantly shifted from Duke Azero to Duke Rhydion like magnets, as if waiting for him to counterbet and raise it to seventy percent.

Duke Rhydion Silvershade's expression didn't change drastically, but a subtle frown could be seen if one looked closely enough. That faint crease on his forehead gave away his irritation.

A Ducal Household always ran on yearly incomes, setting aside whatever profits they made for emergencies. Any noble family losing fifty percent of its yearly income would be financially crippled, whether they were a Duke, an Emperor, or even a Baron.

Although these nobles possessed vast savings, funds that could make their yearly income seem like spare change, those savings were never meant for trivial bets. They were meant for war. After all, no one wages war without money. War was an investment. You begin with wealth, and if you win, you gain more than you risked. But if you lose, everything burns down to ashes.

Which meant: if he lost this bet, a lot of the family's extravagant lifestyle would have to be cut in half, if not more.

But Duke Rhydion couldn't back down now. He had been the one who initiated the bet to pressure Duke Azeron. But now, the tables had turned. The pressure was on him. If he backed down at this point, he would lose face before all the nobles present.

'Wait. Is this a ploy to get the entire bet canceled? So he can save his family from disgrace and still save some platinum coins at the same time?' Duke Rhydion suddenly thought.

His eyes turned sharply to Duke Azeron as his thoughts continued to swirl.

'Even if you are a brute, you're still cunning. But you're still a brute, Azeron.'

At the sides, the Barons and Viscounts felt a mix of awe and resentment. They would need years, possibly decades, just to save the amount of money being casually used for this bet. Yet here the Dukes were, throwing it around like it was a game.

They suddenly felt too poor to even exist in the same room as these people.

"Rhydion, I advise you to make your decision. Asher has already stepped out of the banquet."

Duke Mauvrek Ravencroft said with a relaxed smile, clearly enjoying the unfolding show.

'He was buying time while his son escapes,' he thought, before speaking again.

"Let's do it, then."

At his words, the Emperor instantly acted. Taking out an orb from his space ring, he spoke firmly:

"Stop Asher Wargrave from leaving. Inform him that I require his presence."

Shock rippled through the room as nobles began moving. They started heading down to the floor below. The bet of the century was about to begin.

Present Time.

Asher walked calmly into the banquet hall once more. As he stepped in, his gaze flickered toward the side as he heard the doors opening, the same doors the Royal Twins had entered through earlier.

"The Emperor Zolthemir Lux Vanthelmor has arrived. The Dukes Azeron Wargrave, Mauvrek Ravencroft, Syvrein Stormveil have arrived in attendance along with other noble figures."

As the announcement tore through the hall, the music that had been playing ceased instantly. Thoughts paused. Movements halted. Then all eyes turned to the door in collective shock.

Many doubted their own senses. They couldn't help but think: The Emperor has made an entrance?

They would have never guessed that the Emperor himself would attend this party in person.

Everyone instantly bowed in unison, greeting with practiced reverence,

"We greet His Royal Highness, the Emperor."

Emperor Zolthemir Lux Vanthelmor stood with the grace befitting his status. Behind him, the Dukes and other nobles stood silently, radiating an imposing presence that dominated the room.

"I thank you all for accepting my Royal Invitation," Emperor Zolthemir spoke as his voice, calm and commanding, echoed across the hall. "I hope we continue working together to make this Empire great."

"But," he continued after a pause, "at this moment, we are here for my children, my son and my daughter. And to make the party more interesting, we shall be having a spar between the Tenth Sun, Asher Wargrave, and Ryan Silvershade, both of whom appear to be very much interested in my daughter."

At the Emperor's words, eyes immediately turned to Ryan and Asher. Everyone had seen them argue a bit earlier, perhaps over the Princess. And now, it appeared they were about to fight because of it.

"Of course, I will not be using my imperial authority to impose this spar," the Emperor clarified. "This battle was proposed by Duke Rhydion Silvershade and accepted by Duke Azeron Wargrave."

He paused again, allowing the nobles and guests to process what he had just said, making it clear that this was not a forced confrontation under royal command.

"And naturally," he added with a slight smirk, "there are stakes involved. The losing Household shall pay fifty percent of their annual income to the victorious one."

At Emperor Zolthemir's words, many in the room felt weak at the knees. They mentally began calculating the amount of money at stake in this outrageous bet. But the Emperor paid no attention to their reactions.

"This spar will be taking place outside, and I will personally be officiating the match," Emperor Zolthemir concluded.

He then turned and stepped out of the hall. The nobles followed behind him calmly, seemingly unconcerned that the Emperor had made the bet public. After all, only the losing side would suffer immense backlash and humiliation.

Immediately, everyone began scrambling toward the door, racing to secure the best seats for the upcoming duel between two Ducal Households.

'So this was why I was summoned, huh? It seems no noble party ever begins in peace or ends in peace,' Asher thought with a tired sigh as people rushed past him in excitement and disbelief.

'Besides, I didn't even know Father would be coming. And for him to agree to a fifty percent bet... is he that confident in me?' Asher couldn't help but smile faintly at the idea that the Primarch had such faith in his abilities.

Only if Asher knew...

The Primarch had been the one who proposed the fifty percent stake himself, and was simply using his son to make a quick fortune.

Chapter 47: UFO

Asher stepped outside, arriving at a clear, large area behind the castle. Everyone had already gathered around. Some stood on trees as they watched from above in order to catch every moment of the battle. Some stood at the side, some stood at the front.

Asher walked to the front, where Emperor Zolthemir had designated as their battlefield. Ryan was already standing there. As the son of a Duke, who had been raised with discipline since birth, he stood composed and with an air of nobility around him.

A calm schadenfreude smile could be seen on his face, which literally interpreted: "I'm gonna take my time, enjoy this fight and your pain."

Asher didn't return the smile. He simply arrived in front of Ryan with calm strides. He didn't have enough brain capacity to go around caring about or thinking deeply about a guy he had just met a few minutes ago.

Emperor Zolthemir arrived between Asher and Ryan and started speaking.

"This duel will end when one of you gives up or falls unconscious, or when one is about to receive a fatal injury and I step in. No Bloodline abilities, no Astra, this is purely physical."

He paused, allowing Asher and Ryan to absorb and understand his words.

"Remember, this duel involves fifty percent of your household's earnings on the line, so make it interesting. Now draw your weapons," Emperor Zolthemir said with a smile.

Virelass flashed into Asher's hands. It gleamed under the moonlight, its silver reflecting the moon's rays.

Everyone knew the Wargrave family could awaken soul weapons. Their eyes traced every inch and corner of Virelass, trying to see through her and discern her secrets.

'Will he show us the ability the rapier holds?' they all wondered. To them, it seemed like the only way for Asher to win this spar was to rely on the ability of his soul weapon.

But with the Emperor banning the use of Bloodline abilities, Asher had no hope, or so they thought.

In Ryan's hand, his own sword appeared as he stared Asher dead in the eyes.

Seeing both of them ready, the Emperor vanished, his voice sounding like an echo as he disappeared: "Begin."

Without even waiting for a beat, Ryan instantly blurred forward, crossing meters within seconds, his sword already screaming towards Asher's neck.

Asher didn't move. He simply watched the sword approaching his neck. Seeing this, the nobles thought Asher wasn't fast enough to react.

Just as the sword was about to connect, Virelass flashed forward. With a resonating clang, the two blades met.

Ryan frowned. He couldn't believe Asher had kept up. After all, Asher had only just awakened. Even with the Wargrave's physique, it should have been impossible to match his speed.

He moved again, his sword changing targets this time as it sliced toward Asher's chest, threatening to tear it open.

'Weak,' Asher thought. His mind could telegraph everything Ryan did before he even did it, his breath, his muscle contractions, his heartbeat.

Asher sensed it all, his Omni Perception showing everything to him like it was written in a book.

Asher didn't bother blocking this time. He simply sidestepped. His right knee instantly swept upward. With a bam, it detonated against Ryan's ribs.

Pain exploded at the point of impact, but before Ryan could regain his footing, Asher was already there. Virelass floated in the air as if giving up on this useless spar.

Asher's fist connected with Ryan's temple like a battering ram. Ryan felt his consciousness flicker in and out.

He couldn't understand what was happening. One moment he had attacked, and the next, he was being beaten down. His eyes couldn't even follow the speed of Asher's movements.

But Asher didn't wait. He moved without pausing. A sweeping kick to the knees, Ryan buckled and dropped to the ground. He blinked as his sides crashed against the earth.

He opened his eyes just in time to see a fist screaming down from above toward his face. His body reacted on instinct as he instantly threw himself to the side, frantically dodging.

But Asher's fist didn't impact the floor beneath him. His hand froze mid-motion, then instantly changed rhythm as his elbow snapped sideways toward Ryan's gut.

He could read Ryan, he had already seen him dodging before he even moved. Asher had simply adjusted to Ryan's movements.

Ryan's sword instantly flashed as he tried to slice Asher's elbow with its sharp edge and cleave his arm off at once. But in a blur of motion, Asher's body rotated. His torso, waist, and shoulders flowed to the side, his footwork guiding him seamlessly.

His hand shot upward like a launched rocket, tearing through the air as it slammed into Ryan's chin. The sound of impact exploded in everyone's ears as the crack of bone and teeth breaking echoed.

The force of the impact lifted Ryan off the ground briefly, but before his feet could land again, Asher's knuckles blasted against his nose.

Ryan's head jerked backward, his neck following in tandem, before his entire body was dragged by the force and inertia as he rolled backward.

Asher walked toward Ryan with calm strides, his purple eyes unconcerned for the boy struggling to stand.

Ryan felt pain from every part of his body. His nerves sent only signals of torment. He was still just a kid, he couldn't shut them out. His mind and body ached, but he didn't scream. His father was watching.

Yet at the same time, he couldn't believe his eyes. Asher was never supposed to be this strong physically, it was impossible. He couldn't understand how Asher had been so fast that he couldn't keep up with his movements.

'If only I could use Astra... I could augment my movement and attacks. I would have buried him in bones,' his mind raged.

He wanted to use his Bloodline abilities and Astra, but he knew he couldn't simply throw away the Emperor's orders.

His eyes shifted to his father, who looked at him with an expressionless face. He knew, even though the man showed no emotion, that was only because various nobles were gathered here, watching. Otherwise, Rhydion's face would have twisted into a frown.

Ryan's gaze shifted from his father back to the cause of this impossibility before him.

But all his eyes met was a foot crushing down from above like a hammer. It impacted his face with a sickening bam. His head slammed into the ground, and the earth beneath his skull buckled as spiderweb-like cracks spread out.

But Asher wasn't done.

He removed his foot, crimson blood dripping from it. His leg moved as it changed position. It hovered over Ryan's knee like an ominous UFO, then it crashed downward.

Then it came, the sound of bones shattering under pure, unrestrained force. Ryan's leg snapped as the bones turned to dust.

Ryan couldn't bear the pain anymore. A piercing scream tore through his throat.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

His voice tore through the air, slamming into everyone's ears like thunder.

But Asher didn't care. His foot moved like a viper, instantly crushing Ryan's larynx. Instantly, the scream vanished, as if it had never existed.

Asher didn't pause. His foot lifted again. Ryan's eyes widened in horror. Asher was no different than an extremely dangerous Emovira in his eyes. He watched helplessly as the foot crashed down again against his second knee.

But he couldn't scream. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't even give up, he needed his voice for that.

Asher's foot descended yet again as he crushed Ryan's elbows like they were nothing but twigs.

With that, Ryan fell unconscious. He couldn't survive that kind of pain.

Asher stood with a calm gaze as he stared down at the mangled boy called Ryan, who now lay half-dead.

Chapter 48: Literal and Figurative

Originally, Asher would have exchanged attacks with his opponents, trying to gain as much battle experience as possible, if there was any to gain.

But not this time. If there was anything Asher hated, it was stupid people, people who couldn't mind their own business or simply shut their mouths when it was clearly the better option.

He had ignored Ryan, not because he couldn't respond, but simply because he couldn't be bothered. He didn't have the time to argue or fight with someone over a woman he had just met. It wasn't worth his attention.

Asher wasn't someone who allowed his emotions to be manipulated so easily.

Even as they were about to spar, Asher could feel Ryan's gaze and smug smile. He knew exactly what Ryan wanted, to make him scream, to make him beg, and to make him bleed.

So Asher returned the favor, not with a smile or a word, but with his actions. He had no plans to waste his precious time by dragging out the match or allowing Ryan to attack for a while just for show.

He simply ended things from the very beginning, with overwhelming, brutal precision.

He didn't care if people doubted him or speculated about how strong he actually was.

Asher wasn't going to hide his abilities. Though he would naturally conceal a few things as a trump card, he wasn't going to act weak or try to match Ryan evenly just because nobles were watching.

He wasn't here to play that kind of game.

If he had transmigrated into this world as a commoner, that would have been one thing. But he was born as a Wargrave, someone with the backing of monsters, both literal and figurative.

There was no need for him to play the "strong acting weak" role. That wasn't his style.

The entire clearing had descended into absolute silence. Every single conversation had ceased. No whispers, no murmurs, only wide eyes and gaping mouths as everyone stared on in extreme disbelief.

Asher was supposed to be crushed. That was what they expected. But here he was, doing the impossible right in front of their eyes.

He overpowered his opponent with speed, strength, precision, and terrifying efficiency. They watched him flow from one attack to another, like a ceaseless tide.

Even when Ryan dodged or blocked, it was as if Asher had already seen it coming, like he could peer a few seconds into the future and adjust accordingly.

At this moment, only the sound of bones breaking thundered in their eardrums. They heard Ryan scream, but then they saw Asher cut off his screams as easily as he had landed the first blow.

The sounds of bones snapping, crunching, and breaking continued, without pause, without hesitation, without remorse, and without an ounce of mercy.

Many people swallowed hard. Their bodies reacted involuntarily, a jolt of cold fear running down their spines as if they themselves could feel just a fraction of Ryan's pain.

But none moved.

They stood as if frozen in time.

This was the failed heir?

This was the ruined heir?

The disgrace of the Wargrave bloodline?

The dim Sun?

'If he was a failure... then what were they?' they couldn't help but think, the question hammering into their minds.

They watched as Ryan, the son of a Duke, lay half-dead on the ground. Only the faint rise and fall of his chest served as proof that he was still clinging to life.

Asher's hands moved with calculated grace. He pulled out a handkerchief from the pocket of his chest coat, calmly wiped the blood from his hands, and dropped the cloth beside Ryan's broken body.

Without a second glance, he turned and walked away. He didn't wait for the Emperor to declare a winner. He didn't need to. Even the Emperor hadn't moved, just stared at Asher as he approached.

Squish. Squish.

The sound echoed softly from Asher's shoes, soaked in blood, as he walked.

His right hand was gently placed across the left side of his chest. His left arm folded behind his back in an elegant, respectful posture as he greeted,

"I greet His Royal Majesty, the Emperor."

At the sound of his voice, the Emperor smiled. He reached out and patted Asher on the shoulder.

"You've done well," the Emperor said with a nod.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Asher intoned respectfully.

His gaze then turned toward Azeron, who simply stared at him with golden eyes, expressionless as always.

"I hope I was able to please the Primarch," Asher said, bowing once more.

"You did good. You may return, as you had planned," Azeron replied calmly, his voice as devoid of emotion as ever.

Asher nodded, turned without hesitation, and walked past them. Virelass floated behind him, its body humming softly like a lullaby.

Once outside, Asher stepped into the awaiting carriage and left the Royal Palace, this time, without any obstructions.

Duke Rhydion Silvershade appeared beside the unconscious Ryan in a flash. He bent down, scooped up his son's broken body, and vanished just as quickly.

The nobles began leaving one by one, each with their own thoughts swirling in their minds. Some were already itching to gossip about what they had just witnessed, unable to keep such juicy news to themselves for long.

But one thing remained undeniably true: the Silvershade family had suffered immense losses today.

They had shot themselves in the foot.

Emperor Zolthemir and the rest of the Dukes had already vanished from the viewing arena, reappearing within the room they were previously in.

"Azeron, are you sure that Asher kid failed his awakening?" Duke Mauvrek Ravencroft asked as he sat down gently. A bird flew in from the window and landed on his head like it was nesting, but Mauvrek didn't react. It seemed completely normal to him.

"Indeed. It seems you fooled Rhydion into suffering these losses," Duchess Syvrein Stormveil intoned.

"Let's be clear. Nobody was fooled into anything," Emperor Zolthemir said, his voice even. "Rhydion was the one who proposed the bet himself. The damage is already done."

"But I have to say, your son is a monster,"

Zolthemir added, nodding thoughtfully. "His hand-to-hand combat techniques are flawless. If his fists are that good, I wonder how terrifying his sword skills must be."

Still, Azeron said nothing. He simply sat in silence, but his mind was elsewhere, counting platinum coins.

'I should probably return and tell Zarek,' he thought, already planning how he would brag about this moment later.

"Don't you have anything to say, Azeron?"

Mauvrek asked, lifting the bird from his head and gently petting it. "I'm sure Rhydion is already rushing home to get his son healed."

Azeron's golden gaze turned lazily to Mauvrek.

"There's nothing to say. This much is expected of all Wargraves."

"Sigh... What did I even expect from you?"

Mauvrek said with a helpless sigh.

"Who would've thought your son's confidence during his conversation with the Princess wasn't unfounded?" Duchess Syvrein said with a soft smile. "He simply didn't know her well enough to fight her, as he had claimed."

She generally approved of men who didn't think with the equipment between their legs, which was why she found herself liking Asher more and more.

"You really made a killing this time," Zolthemir said with a chuckle. "When do you plan to collect the coins?"

Azeron seemed to pause in thought for a moment before replying monotonously,

"Today. I don't have time to be moving around tomorrow."

The rest of them nodded. As Dukes and people of great power, their schedules were packed beyond belief.

And so, their conversation continued without Duke Rhydion Silvershade, who at that very moment was rushing desperately to the Silvershade estate, trying to save his son's life.

Chapter 49: Dangerous World

Asher sat silently in his carriage as it rolled forward under the moonlight, wrapped in the blanket of the night. At this time, Lyra wasn't with him inside the carriage; she sat on her own horse, riding just beside the moving vehicle.

Asher sat with his eyes closed. The window beside him was also shut as he remained deep in thought. He could still feel his boots soaked with the heavy, iron-rich smell of blood. With every part of his body enhanced, especially his senses, the scent slammed into his nostrils like a tidal wave.

He felt nauseous. He felt like vomiting, as though he could literally taste the blood on his tongue. But Asher didn't dare throw up; he clenched his jaw and forced everything back in.

Asher couldn't be blamed. Prior to his transmigration, when he was still Ethan, he had never been in a single fight, not even a minor scuffle involving a thrown fist.

So naturally, Asher hardly ever saw blood. Even when he did, it was either from a minor bruise or a small cut that produced a mere drop and nothing more.

But this, this was different. The only reason he hadn't vomited at this point was due to the two day long massacre of weak beasts that had crossed his path during this journey to the capital. Their blood had stained him repeatedly. Slowly but surely, he had gotten used to its sight and stench.

'I wonder what it would feel like to kill a person,'

Asher thought, his mind drifting as he stared blankly ahead. He knew that sooner or later, he would have to fight someone to the death.

Asher was sure, even a split-second hesitation on his part could lead to decapitation. But he wouldn't hesitate. He didn't plan to. And he knew that this gut-twisting sensation, this nauseating discomfort, would pass eventually.

It was only a matter of time. He would adapt. He had to.

Besides, that wasn't the only thing bothering him.

Something else made his brows furrow at that very moment. His gaze shifted to the system notification floating before him.

[Detecting Mind Invasion, Mind Shield Activated]

[Memory Manipulation Detected, Mind Shield Activated]

His purple eyes stared at the system panel in silence. When Asher had first received this notification, he had been stunned, shocked into speechlessness.

But at the same time, it made sense. This was a noble gathering, after all. People who smiled at your face while simultaneously stabbing you from behind.

If the system hadn't warned him, if it had just quietly protected his mind, he would have been unaware and completely oblivious.

The first system notification had appeared the very moment Asher dropped his handkerchief beside the unconscious Ryan. This meant that whoever had tried to interfere with his mind had waited until the spar ended to make their move.

Earlier, during the royal party itself, no one had bothered trying to read Asher's memory. They had all deemed him unimportant. But after witnessing the spar, their curiosity had ignited, they had wanted to uncover what secrets he was hiding.

The second system notification came at the exact moment the Emperor, Zolthemir Lux Vanthelmor, touched Asher's shoulder while smiling and congratulating him.

It had been such a casual gesture, such a normal action, that without the system's alert, Asher wouldn't have suspected anything.

'Could it be a coincidence?' Asher wondered, placing two fingers under his chin in thought.

He didn't want to label the Emperor as someone who had tried to manipulate his memory right there in front of four Dukes.

But at the same time, Asher wouldn't put it past him. This was an Emperor who had probably been scheming since birth, perhaps even from within his mother's womb.

Besides, anyone who possessed the ability to manipulate memories wouldn't go around announcing it to the world. They would be killed instantly, if only to ensure that certain secrets and vulnerabilities remained hidden.

Asher's face darkened as another unsettling thought entered his mind.

'If Emperor Zolthemir is truly behind the memory manipulation... then how much of Father's mind has he tampered with?'

The idea alone made Asher's stomach churn. And it wouldn't just be Duke Azeron's mind.

What about the other Dukes? The other nobles? The Royal Knights? The number of potential victims grew with every second Asher spent thinking about it.

But at the same time, there was no way nobles at the level of Dukes wouldn't have some means of defending their minds, whether through artifacts, or unique abilities.

Especially beings of their caliber. Even the slightest tampering should instantly alert them.

But that was now, when they were already powerful. What about when they were younger?

When they were Asher's age, weak, inexperienced, and vulnerable? Back then, they could have easily fallen prey to such manipulation. But also, during that time, Zolthemir himself might not have developed his ability to such a high level.

Asher's frown deepened.

'Emperor Zolthemir... A dangerous man. I must also be wary of others with psychic abilities. Just because only two people tried to invade my mind doesn't mean only two people possess the ability.'

His mind drifted to Vaelra Lux Vanthelmor and her twin brother, Vaelric Lux Vanthelmor. As prince and princess of the Empire, manipulation and scheming had to be like oxygen to them.

'Could one, or both, of them have inherited the Emperor's memory manipulation ability?'

Asher closed his eyes again.

'The noble circle is truly dangerous. I have to tread carefully,' he thought, the intensity in his expression sharpening.

The Emperor's ability to manipulate memories proved something vital to Asher, something he couldn't afford to forget:

Just because someone hailed from a particular bloodline or lineage didn't mean they couldn't awaken a unique, personal ability outside their heritage. Power in this world wasn't always bound by ancestry. Sometimes, it was random... or fated.

Asher sighed. He could choose to warn his father... or he could stay silent. But he wasn't sure how it would all pan out. Though he guessed that noble households, like the Dukes and perhaps even Emperors of other Empires, would have some form of protection against mind attacks, that was just speculation.

He could warn Duke Azeron, but who knew how the Duke would respond? For all Asher knew, his father and the others might already be under the Emperor's influence.

'This world is dangerous. I wonder how dangerous the Emovirae are,' Asher mused, a chill running down his spine.

He shook his head, choosing to set everything aside for now. His mind and senses shifted back to the blood on his clothes and the soles of his boots. Yet this time, that gut-twisting sensation had disappeared.

He no longer felt nauseous. He felt... perfectly fine.

A small smile appeared on his lips. He hadn't expected to adapt this quickly.

By the time Asher arrived at the inn, the night had already deepened. After a long bath and a warm supper, he jumped onto the bed and collapsed into it.

Though a part of his mind still reasoned that Ryan's father might send assassins after him, Asher felt no fear. With Duke Azeron here, Ryan's father would be powerless to act.

So Asher allowed himself to drift off into sleep. After all, tomorrow marked the beginning of their journey back to the Wargrave estate.

'What a dangerous world,' he thought.

That was Asher's final thought before he slipped into the depths of dreamland.

Chapter 50: Untouched

In a chamber designed with extreme opulence, exquisite paintings hung on the walls, and golden lanterns were spread out, illuminating the room with a warm, majestic glow.

Within the room, a figure stood facing the window, gazing out at the world before him. He was draped in white and black robes interwoven with golden accents. His cape billowed gently behind him as he stood with a small, thoughtful smile on his face.

Emperor Zolthemir Lux Vanthelmor.

His mind was on Asher. He couldn't quite understand what the boy had done, how he had so effortlessly dismantled Ryan Silvershade without breaking a sweat.

'I shouldn't have imposed that rule that limited the spar to physical combat only,' Zolthemir thought with a hint of regret.

He had established that rule to protect Asher, whom he had believed to be weaker than Ryan. After all, if Ryan had been allowed to use his bone manipulation abilities, who knew what kind of damage he could have caused to the Tenth Sun?

'I could have gained insight and valuable information about his abilities,' Zolthemir mused, the smile never leaving his lips.

'He even resisted my Memory Manipulation ability... Does that mean he has awakened some kind of mind protection ability and just doesn't realize it?' Zolthemir was lost in contemplation.

Someone who possessed a mind protection ability would have known the moment their mind was being intruded upon. They would have reacted, even if subtly. Their eyes would have darted around to find the source, their muscles would have tensed, ready for a fight.

But Zolthemir had seen none of these signs in Asher. The boy didn't even flinch. He spoke and walked away with calm strides and steady eyes, completely unaffected.

'Is it the ability of that soul weapon of his, the rapier?' Zolthemir wondered. It seemed like a plausible explanation. He could remember the rapier floating silently behind the boy as he walked past him.

'Besides, in the Wargrave Household, there are records of soul weapons possessing mind protective abilities... Just like them...' Zolthemir thought, his ever-present smile sharpening ever so slightly.

'Although I didn't use the full extent of my ability, just to keep it hidden from the Dukes,' Zolthemir reflected calmly.

He hadn't unleashed the full power of his Memory Manipulation ability on Asher due to the presence of the Dukes and other nobles.

Maintaining the secrecy of such a rare and dangerous skill was more important than a brief probe into the boy's mind. He didn't believe Asher, or his weapon, at their current levels, could possibly resist him if he truly tried.

Although his ability was called Memory Manipulation, it allowed him more than just altering memories. He could also read them.

After all, one must read a memory before they can manipulate it.

He could choose to read and then simply not tamper with it. That had been his plan, to scan Asher's mind quietly, then decide his next course of action on a later date.

But his ability had a notable limitation, it required physical contact. That was why he had placed his hand on Asher's shoulder.

'Did Azeron's tenth son really awaken only a week ago? If so, how is he already this strong? And if he didn't, and instead awakened at fifteen on his first try, why would the Wargraves hide it? If they had planned to keep it secret, Azeron would never have allowed Asher to win. He wouldn't have accepted Rhydion's bet in the first place...' Zolthemir's thoughts spiraled.

Based on the information his spies had reported from within the Wargrave Household, Asher Wargrave had awakened recently, something that now seemed more suspicious than ever.

'Have the Wargraves finally started using their brains?' Zolthemir scoffed inwardly.

'I should adjust my plans, but I'll need to tread carefully. I don't have to worry about Azeron, he doesn't care about politics, only his spear. But his first son... Malrik Wargrave is a problem.'

Malrik was ridiculously talented, to the point that no one had ever witnessed the full extent of his abilities. Because if they had... they'd already be dead. His only supposed weakness was his love for his siblings, but that wasn't a weakness at all. They were a family of monsters.

What truly set Malrik apart wasn't just his strength. It was his mind. He could think, deeply, strategically, coldly. He could act on impulse when needed, but remain calculated and docile when the moment demanded it.

Zolthemir recalled the time he had kidnapped Malrik's personal butler, attempting to extract information from his memories. But before his people could even reach the secure destination, Malrik was already there, waiting.

As if he had planned the entire thing. As if he had seen it all coming.

Although Malrik was younger than Azeron, it had been speculated repeatedly that he had already surpassed his father in terms of power.

Of course, many dismissed this as absurd. Azeron was monstrously strong, ridiculously so, and to surpass him, one had to be a god among men.

Even Zolthemir didn't believe the rumor and had tossed it aside as nonsense. But whatever schemes he threw at Malrik, the boy responded with terrifying precision, not just defending, but counterattacking in brutal fashion. He wiped out everyone involved, down to their families, their friends, and even their allies.

Malrik was ruthless in every sense of the word.

Sometimes, Zolthemir wondered if Malrik even loved his siblings, considering the kind of merciless behavior he displayed. He remembered clearly the time Malrik wiped out an entire Count noble household, because the Count had looked at the Fifth Moon with suggestive eyes and an inappropriate smile.

Zolthemir had suffered immense losses under Malrik's hand in his efforts to discover the young man's weaknesses, to find some kind of hold over him... anything, really.

But in the end, neither of them could move directly against the other. One was the Emperor. The other was already set to be the next Primarch. They couldn't just clash in the open, not yet.

'Sigh... This Wargrave family keeps giving me a headache every new day, How many monsters can a single bloodline possibly produce?'

Zolthemir thought with a sigh.

He had once entertained the theory that Malrik had awakened an ability that allowed him to see the future, but it remained just a theory. And besides, the future was ever-changing.

In terms of political power and raw combat strength, Malrik stood untouched. Nobles didn't even dare blink in his direction. Even the Dukes exercised caution around him, because no one knew what truly lay behind that unnerving smile of his.