

Living Shadow 172

Chapter 172 Capital City

Valerion was a sprawling city, its tall white walls and towering spires reaching toward the sky. A vast metropolis with wide roads and paved paths, it seamlessly integrated railroads into its design, a testament to its mastery of urban planning. The streets were alive with movement—carriages rolling past, merchants calling out their wares, and pedestrians bustling about their daily lives. It was a city that never truly slept, yet despite its ceaseless activity, its beauty remained undiminished.

However, even this magnificent city had its shadows—its slums.

Damon knew this all too well.

He had lived there.

A rundown house, little more than a shelter from the cold. But most of his days had been spent on the streets.

He knew exactly how cruel Valerion could be.

If you could make it here, you could make it anywhere.

But most people didn't.

This city had no mercy for those who couldn't adapt.

Damon gazed out of the carriage window, his mind drifting.

The last time he had left Valerion, it had been in the dead of night, through the sewers, wearing rags.

Now, he was returning to this mighty city dressed in luxury, adorned with wealth, seated in a carriage as he watched the bustling streets pass by.

Yet... he could hardly call this a return in glory.

His eyes softened as melancholy settled in.

"Why the sour expression?"

Damon sighed at the sound of Lilith's voice.

"It's nothing... It's just... when I came to Valerion the first time, I was looking for salvation," he muttered.
"I wanted to be free from my oppressors... and I wanted to find a reason to keep living."

Lilith narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Did you find that?"

He smiled faintly.

"No. I didn't. I only found new oppressors... and more reasons to wish I had just ended it all." His voice was steady, but there was something distant about it. "Or better yet... that I had never been born."

Lilith sighed, finding his words far too grim—even though he wore a thin smile on his face.

"You're free from oppression now, aren't you?"

Damon shook his head.

"I was free from the day I refused to lower my head and let someone trample on my dignity and self-respect."

His tone was even, but there was a quiet defiance in his words.

"If I was going to kill myself, wouldn't it have been better to live without fearing my own death? I lived as if I was already dead—so I dared to do anything."

Lilith turned her gaze to the bustling city outside.

"Why?"

Damon scoffed.

"What more could they take from me... but my little life?" His voice was cold, but not bitter—just stating a fact. "The worthless life of an orphan with nothing to his name."

Lilith sighed.

"What about your sister?"

Damon leaned his head against the carriage glass, his breath faintly fogging the surface.

"She was the reason I held on," he admitted. "What other reason would I have to persevere?"

Lilith smiled softly.

"She was your excuse... don't make this about her."

Damon chuckled.

"Right. She was my excuse."

His voice dropped slightly, just above a whisper.

"My little life won't be taken without a price."

The carriage rolled past the outer reaches of the city, moving steadily into the inner region of the capital. This was the domain of the posh and super-rich—a place where wealth dictated law, and the powerful moved freely without consequence.

Damon had been here a few times before.

Running errands for Quick Hand.

Or trying to pickpocket some oblivious rich fool—one with little or marginal security, where the consequences weren't too steep.

But in his mind, this place was the most dangerous for street rats.

The guards here could beat a vagrant to death without a second thought.

So Damon had found a way.

He would steal expensive-looking clothes and wear them whenever he came here. That way, the patrols wouldn't brutalize him if they suspected he was just another little thief lurking about.

And for a time... it worked.

Most of the time, he wasn't even there to steal—just delivering coded messages, acting as a disposable pawn for an elf known only as Back to Back.

That wasn't his real name. Just a moniker.

No one knew his real name. Only that he was from Iorvas—the Verdant Continent.

He was called Back to Back because he never missed his shot. He hit his targets back to back, his skills with a bow lethal.

No one knew his class—he never told anyone. But even at the first class advancement, he was already powerful.

Damon scoffed, a small smirk forming as he thought of that wretched elf.

It was a dog-eat-dog world.

The sheer number of times he had been used by Back to Back was insane. And each night after surviving, Damon would swear to kill him.

Yet every time he confronted the elf, the answer was the same:

"There are no eternal friendships... only eternal benefits."

That was the kind of man Back to Back was.

A mercenary who worked for Quick Hand—not out of loyalty, but solely for money.

Damon hated him.

And yet... he had learned a lot from him.

For one, Back to Back was the one who had taught Damon archery.

As for his dagger skills, the elf hadn't trained him, but Damon had picked up a thing or two from observing how he fought.

Damon had already been an introvert—years of trauma had ensured that.

But Back to Back had made it worse.

Their relationship was... strange.

It was hard to tell if they hated each other—or if they simply tolerated each other.

Back to Back had put Damon's life in danger countless times.

Betrayed him even more.

But on a rare few occasions... he had saved him too.

Still, Damon had not forgotten.

And after years of grievance—he would leverage the power of Lilith Astranova to kill Back to Back.

It was ironic, killing one's own mentor.

But it fit perfectly with the elf's own philosophy.

"There are no eternal friendships."

Damon's lips curled into a thin smile, his dark eyes gleaming with chilling intent.

The carriage slowly came to a stop.