

MY LIVING SHADOW SYSTEM DEVOURS TO MAKE ME STRONGER

Chapter 7 The Ultimatum

Damon froze at the sound of that voice—cold, strict, and unmistakably imperious. His legs felt a little weak as he turned to face the source.

'Arrg... seems my luck runs out here.'

He slowly turned around, meeting the gaze of a man in his thirties. The man had long dark hair and a stern, no-nonsense expression, his pale gray eyes carrying an air of unyielding authority. Dressed in black, he looked every bit as dark and foreboding as his reputation.

This was Professor Kael Blackthorn, the strictest professor in the academy. Damon had a gnawing feeling the man held a particular dislike for him.

Professor Blackthorn specialized in dark magic, which, theoretically, should have made him a good mentor for Damon, whose shadow attribute aligned with it. But the moment Kael learned Damon's mana pool barely reached a paltry thirty, he dismissed him entirely.

Kael's cold gray eyes narrowed, piercing Damon like a dagger.

'This can't be good.'

An ominous feeling settled in Damon's gut, as if whatever awaited him in Blackthorn's office was bound to be unpleasant.

"Follow me, Damon Grey," Professor Kael said, already turning to lead the way.

Damon frowned, trying to find an escape route.

"I have a class right now; maybe I can come later?" he ventured.

Kael didn't even pause.

"I've already spoken to your professor for Elemental Manipulation. You've been excused."

Biting his lip, Damon knew he was out of excuses. Whatever fate awaited him, he had no choice but to follow.

"Ahh, goddess be with me," he muttered under his breath, reluctantly trailing behind.

As they walked, Damon's eyes flitted across the halls. Students greeted Professor Kael with respect, and those who knew his reputation glanced at Damon with pity. Others, recognizing Damon as the academy's outcast, shot him disdainful looks—some even smirking, as if reveling in his misfortune.

He ignored them, knowing they'd never amount to more than spectators in his life. If mocking him gave them a sense of purpose, he thought, then so be it. This was the nature of most mortals, he mused—they needed to see someone worse off to feel better about their own lives.

And, for now, he was their favorite target.

They soon arrived at Professor Kael's office, a grand space lined with shelves packed with books, rare ingredients, and the parts of exotic monsters—likely

collected for research. The furniture was elegant and tasteful, befitting a noble of the Blackthorn family.

Damon didn't have time to appreciate the view; his heart was pounding so hard it might leap out of his chest. He kept his expression calm, though his mind raced, considering every possible excuse and defense he might need. If it came to it, he was even willing to beg.

"Take a seat," Kael commanded, gesturing to a chair in front of the desk as he settled into his own.

Damon nodded and sat down, forcing himself to stay alert despite the comfortable chair. He couldn't afford to let his guard down, not here.

The moment he was seated, Professor Kael tossed a stack of papers onto the desk. The sheets scattered across the table in front of him, each one stamped with his name.

Kael leaned back, his cold eyes fixed on Damon.

"Do you see this, Damon Grey? This is your score... your cumulative scores since you enrolled in the academy."

Damon bit his lip. He didn't need to look; he already knew the scores were abysmal.

Kael continued, voice dripping with disdain.

"Since you enrolled, you've shown no improvement whatsoever. Every test proves your incompetence."

Picking up one of the papers, Kael read from it.

"Mana assessment: student Damon Grey possesses a mana pool of 30. Not just low—record-breaking. You've set a new low in the academy's history. And that's not all. Your physical assessment scores were equally dismal."

Kael clenched his jaw, barely concealing his irritation.

"Let's set aside physical capability for a moment. Not everyone has the strength to contribute to the goddess races through martial might or powerful magic. But let's review your theoretical scores..."

He picked up another paper and scanned it, his expression darkening further.

"You don't even know the basic terms! You're nothing but an ignorant commoner... without a shred of foundational knowledge."

Kael's face reddened slightly as a vein pulsed at his temple. Taking a slow breath, he went on,

"Someone like you should never have been allowed to cross the gates of our glorious Aether Academy. Yet here you are..."

Kael shook his head, disgust evident in his tone.

"The only reason you're here is because of a golden ticket—one you're entirely undeserving of."

Damon kept his head lowered, silent as Kael tore into him. He didn't argue; every word stung with truth.

"When you showed up with a golden ticket, the academy had its doubts. We wondered how someone so lowly could come by such a thing. After investigating, we discovered the source, and it was... surprising, to say the least."

At this, Damon looked up, his curiosity piqued. He'd always wondered about the ticket himself. All he knew was that it had somehow come into his family's possession and was included in the inheritance left for him and his younger sister, Luna.

A golden ticket was as prestigious as it sounded—a literal golden ticket granting the holder admission to Aether Academy, the world's most esteemed institution. Along with it came a scholarship fund of one million zeni each semester.

The ticket, issued only once a year to the best graduating student, served as a recommendation of sorts. If the recipient chose to pass it on, the beneficiary would inherit its privileges, gaining automatic entrance to the academy without any examination.

He raised his head, feeling a flicker of hope. Who would bestow such an invaluable gift on him? What connection could they possibly have with his family?

Kael continued to glare at him.

"It's mind-boggling that someone of such standing would waste the golden ticket on you. Someone like you will never amount to anything."

Damon's fists clenched, his shadow beneath him flickering erratically in response to his rising frustration. But he kept silent, swallowing down his anger.

"You've shown no improvement, failed every evaluation, every test. Your performance in this first quarter is rock-bottom," Kael spat, his voice laced with scorn.

"By the glory of the goddess, I can't fathom why someone as exalted as Seras Blade would give you her golden ticket... only for you to come here and disgrace her name."

At the mention of that name, Damon's breath caught in his throat. His anger evaporated, replaced by a wave of shock that settled heavily in his chest. His eyes widened, filled with disbelief.

"Seras Blade..." he whispered, stunned.