

## Shadow 421

### Chapter 421: Signs Of Trying Times

Jeï sucked in a small puff of air from his pipe. Even with the sun still out, the winter chill was not far away.

Leaning back against the tree, he scratched his scruffy beard, waiting patiently for prey.

"Oi, Chief... think anyone's gonna come today?"

He glanced at the speaker—a fire moth man with a small, jittery face.

Jeï sneered. "Adventurers are all about making money and forging their legend. Who else would head toward the Badlands?"

"The ruins and dungeons in this region are close to a death zone. So they've got some nice trinkets," the fire moth man grinned, swinging his sword lazily.

"Hehe... and if some of them pass by here, we'll be here to take their stuff."

Raising his head to the trees, he called out, "Ain't that right, boys?"

"Ahhh yeah."

"Bring it on—hahah!"

Came the responses of several men hidden high among the branches.

The chief smoked his pipe. Jei was quite satisfied with the growth of his little bandit crew. As former adventurers, they'd needed a way to make ends meet. These were trying times after all—everyone was just trying to survive.

"We better be careful before the Brightwater Knights come sniffing around again..."

That name brought a flicker of fear—but laughter soon followed.

"Don't worry, Chief. This place is disputed territory. The Brightwater Knights hate the Astranova's. And with the Kingdom of Anarchy just across the other side, and the Path of Kings passing right through, they don't have time for small fry like us."

Jei chuckled. "Then let's make some money, boys. The ladies are already missing us."

But as the conversation continued, the low toll of bells echoed in the distance—one of the traps had been sprung.

"Take your places, boys..."

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Deep in the forest, Sylvia lifted her boot off a thin wire.

"Interesting... I've never seen an alarm trap in person before. Do bandits normally set this up?"

Damon sighed with exasperation. "If you knew it was an alarm, why did you trigger it?"

She smiled playfully. "I was curious, is all. Besides, we can ask them for directions. I'm sure they won't say no to a nice elven beauty like me."

Damon sighed. She was teasing him again.

"Don't you think so, Damon? Am I not beautiful?"

He glanced at the others, who clearly didn't want to get involved.

"Yes, Sylvia. You're very beautiful."

She walked closer, her lips curling with mischief.

"Then would you say I'm the most beautiful woman you know?"

Damon just pointed ahead. "The bandits are amassing over there. Bet they think they're clever, using such low-tier tactics..."

Sylvia pouted.

It had been a week since they left Lysithara. After crossing the ancient gates, they hadn't stopped once—eager to leave that cursed city behind. Anything in their way, they either killed or ignored.

After running for a week, they were exhausted. But finally, they'd returned to civilization.

Bandits. The first sign of it.

A terrible sign of insecurity and fractured order... but still, a sign.

Damon hated bandits.

He had a long-standing history with them, especially during his escape from his village to the capital. The caravan he joined was attacked several times.

His impression of bandits couldn't be worse.

He knew how they operated—and what they did to their victims.

Still... today wasn't their lucky day.

His party members seemed elated to see signs of the outside world again. After months in hell, even danger was a welcome return to normalcy.

They walked unhurried toward the treeline, where the bandits lay hidden.

Their armor was slick with dried blood. Their faces covered in grime. From a distance, they looked travel-worn—like survivors on their last legs.

Damon brushed off his armor. Now that the Keeper of False Truths was dead, his armor had changed—turned dark, reflecting his attribute.

Instead of turning to mist, he could now phase parts of his body into intangible shadow. It was a small improvement. He no longer had to shift his whole body to dodge attacks.

Leona and Sylvia, especially, seemed eager to encounter the bandits. Leona just wanted to fight. Sylvia? She was curious.

"She probably sees those bandits as some kind of experiment..." Evangeline muttered, echoing Damon's own thoughts.

He glanced at her. She seemed anxious—the closer they got to safety, the more distant her gaze.

"You don't look too happy to be back..."

Evangeline shook her head. "Why would you think that? I'm happy to be out of a death zone. It's just... I..."

She trailed off.

Damon sighed. "Are you embarrassed because the first thing we ran into after reaching your duchy was bandits?"

She glared at him, golden eyes narrowing.

"Are you insinuating my family's lands are lawless?"

Damon shrugged. "Your words, not mine..."

She clicked her tongue.

"This land doesn't technically belong to us. It's been disputed with House Astranova for years. And it borders the Kingdom of Anarchy. The Anarchy Mountains can't be crossed easily—thanks to the dragon that lives there. Not to mention the road that leads to Lysithara and the Whispering Forest."

Damon exhaled. "No need to get defensive, Eva. I was just teasing you."

She scrunched her face. "I know that... still..."

Her eyes fell on the locket around his neck.

She had every reason to be uneasy.

"I planted these trees and paved this road. Leave all your things behind," came a rough, gravelly voice.

Another voice chimed in. "And the women, Chief! Don't forget the women!"

"Right—and the women, too..."

At this point, Sylvia and Leona were on the verge of clapping from excitement.

This was their first real encounter with bandits.

If these bandits had been stronger, this would not be funny. But they weren't.

Damon clenched and unclenched his fist.

"So... this is what it's like. Being powerful. Deciding who lives and who dies..."

He smiled, glancing at the trees.

"I could get used to this."

Evangeline sighed. Xander looked unimpressed.

Leona shared Sylvia's energy.

"But this road isn't even paved," Sylvia said, her voice light and innocent. "You guys did a horrible job. And these trees are really old. Clearly, you didn't plant them. Are you lying to us?"

The fire moth bandit glanced at the Chief.

"We should really change our opening lines after this..."

The Chief scowled. "Attack—!"

But before they could even move—

Leona dashed forward. Her armored fist collided with the nearest bandit's head—

CRACK!

His skull exploded like a melon, blood splashing in an arc.

Leona paused. Lightning danced along her gauntlets.

She stared at her hand in stunned silence.

She had ended a man with a casual punch.

That... was the difference in power.

Matia stepped from the shadows of the trees.

What followed—

Was carnage.

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Damon sighed as he watched the slaughter unfold. For once, even he was surprised.

His friends were killing the bandits as if they weren't even people — treating them the same way they'd treat monsters.

"This is their first time killing people..."

How were they okay with that? Damon remembered the struggle, the weight of taking a life for the first time. But these ones... were they truly unbothered?

Or had the Ruined City scarred them that deeply? So deeply that they no longer saw the bandits as human?

It seemed he wasn't the only one twisted by the darkness they'd faced.

Now in their minds... holding back against any enemy was no different from death.

"The mental health quartermasters are going to have their hands full with us..."

And then there was Matia. She had killed most of them, and with each fresh corpse, Damon heard the same chime in his ears.

[You have slain bandit olyuon]

[You have slain bandit alwatr]

[You have slain bandit wing sleep]

You have slain bandit...]

As his shadow, anything she killed was credited to him. Every soul she reaped, every life she ended — counted for him.

The bandits, realizing their mistake far too late, tried to flee in panic — but it was already over. No one showed mercy.

From beginning to end, Damon simply stood there. Watching.

Limbs flew, organs torn, screams of despair.

And the stench of men shitting themselves. He watched

Until—

"Please have mercy..."

"Spare us... please..."

Groans of the defeated reached him. The bandit chief and some of his remaining men, the so-called 'first class,' were still alive — but not for long.

They'd never stood a chance.

This was the reality of power. Damon's group was simply too fast, too well-equipped, and too experienced. It was like watching a squad of fully armed, blood-hardened knights mow down a group of sick children carrying sticks.

A massacre.

He watched as Matia's blade danced again — more death, more chimes.

Then the unexpected happened.

The bandit chief, battered and bleeding, staggered toward Damon. Not to fight. But to beg.

He collapsed to his knees, head bowed in fear.

"Please... have mercy... spare my life... I'll give you anything."

The forest grew quiet. The others slowed, watching Damon. Even Matia waited, wordless, for his will.

Right or wrong. Good or evil. She would obey.

And Damon — bloodstained, his crown gleaming faintly like some tyrant judge — stood above the kneeling man.

The bandit chief trembled.

"Your Majesty... have mercy... please spare me..."

Damon looked at him without a flicker of emotion.

"What about the rest of your men? I can only spare one. But if you choose to die here today, the rest may live."

The bandit leader's eyes widened. He trembled harder.

"My King... I choose to live. Please... spare me..."

Damon frowned. He wasn't really a king.

"And what of your men?"

The man waved a desperate hand.

"I barely know these people. They're evil. They forced me to lead them!"

From the wreckage nearby, the Fire Moth — who had tried to fly away but had his wings sheared by Matia — gasped and shouted hoarsely.

"Chief...!"

Voices rose in betrayal. The surviving bandits called out his name, cursed him. Their pleas fell on deaf ears.

Tears filled the Fire Moth's eyes as Matia's icy gaze settled on him.

Damon nodded.

"Very well. You may leave."

He glanced at Matia, choosing his words carefully.

"Kill the rest if you want."

Even his phrasing mattered — a command, even accidental, was law to Matia.

As his shadow, she could not disobey.

The bandit chief scuttled into the woods, scraping across the ground to flee.

"You bastard! Please, don't kill us!"

Leona watched him go, disgust writ plain across her face.

"A leader who abandons his own men..."

Damon looked at her.

"You're free to go if you want."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Didn't you say you'd let him go?"

"I did."

He smiled coldly.

"I never said you would."

Leona grinned wide — then vanished in a flash of lightning.

Damon crouched down in front of the Fire Moth, voice low.

"Fleos... seems Jei has betrayed you."

The wounded bandit trembled violently.

"H-How do you know my name?"

Damon smiled, eyes glinting.

"I know everyone's names... Including yours, Fleos Salp. Fire Moth Attribute. Fire Class Mage. Skill: Mana Density. Common Class. You're Failed Adventurer."

Fleos shook, unable to comprehend how this blood-soaked stranger knew so much.

"Are... are you... a demon?"

Damon's smile deepened.

"No. Just a man."

His [Appraisal] skill was finally showing its worth. The gap in strength between them made it far more effective — and Fleos, mentally broken and beaten, offered no resistance.

"Now then... where's the closest city?"

The interrogation began — brief, thorough, efficient.

Not long after, Leona returned, casually tossing the severed head of the bandit leader at Damon's feet.

Evangeline approached.

Damon glanced her way.

"Are you here to condemn our actions?"

Evangeline shook her head slowly.

"Only a hypocrite would condemn justice."

She looked at the corpses, her voice steady.

"These people are murderers. Rapists. Should we let them live, they'd pillage again, steal again... commit atrocities again. The dawn has come for them."

With a radiant flash, her light magic ignited Fleos' body.

He didn't even scream.

A pile of ash.

It was brutal — but to Evangeline, it was justice. Her ideals had evolved, but they had not changed.

She still believed.

Damon turned back to the others.

"We're not far from Gladstone. There's a river nearby — we can wash this filth off before heading to the city. From there, we'll take a teleportation gate to the duchy capital. We go back to the academy."

Evangeline bit her lip, her heart pounding at the words.

Sylvia smiled softly.

"I've always wanted to see Lumos... the City of Radiant Water."

Xander chuckled faintly.

"Looks like Evangeline will be our host."

Damon, still not comfortable with the idea of nobility or being treated like a guest, forced a smile.

He didn't think nobles would welcome him a lowly commoner.

A moment later, Evangeline mirrored him — the same forced smile.

Sylvia noticed their expressions.

Her eyes flicked to Evangeline.

'Something is definitely fishy with her...'

Chapter 422: Ice Bath [bonus Chapter]

The river was serene and quiet. Leaving the forest had been a welcome change of pace.

They'd finally made it back to the Golden Road—an old trade route long used by civilization, where monster activity was minimal. The open plains, the distant hills, even the warmth of sunlight were a far cry from the suffocating woods and haunted peaks that still clung to the scent of blood and ash.

No more Duhu mountains or Whispering forest.

Still, they couldn't walk into the city of Gladstone looking like blood-soaked vagrants. Thus, the need for a bath.

Damon reached into his shadow storage. He pulled out a bundle of miscellaneous items—soap, towels, and even perfumes.

He narrowed his eyes.

'Would've preferred more weapons or charms... but I guess this junk has its uses.'

Despite being classified as miscellaneous in the system, some of the items pulsed faintly with lingering magic. Not strong enough to be considered enchanted—just subtle, but clearly quality. He handed the girls anything he thought might help.

They stared as he kept pulling things out, one after the other.

Evangeline blinked.

"Hey... erm... not to be that woman... but... how in the goddess' name do you have all this stuff?"

Damon rolled his eyes.

"Well, girl, I found them. I literally just picked them up."

He gave her a look.

"If you don't want to use them, fine. I'll take them back."

Evangeline forced a smile.

"No—actually I was just joking. Don't mind me..."

Sylvia and Leona nodded quickly behind her. As long as they got clean, they didn't care how he got the stuff.

They snatched them up without hesitation.

Then Leona frowned, just realizing something.

"Hey... there's only one river. And ahm... two men and four women."

Damon placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Of course. We're all going together—as a party."

Leona's face flushed red. She turned to Xander in alarm.

"Ermm... Damon, that doesn't sound like a good idea..."

Damon turned to Sylvia. Her face was redder than usual, lips parted as she tried to speak. He continued with a straight face, letting them believe the worst.

Evangeline gritted her teeth.

"So you add pervert to the list as well. What an impressive track record... you have no shame."

Xander sighed deeply.

"Indeed. I knew he was a mongrel long before he tried to exploit young girls. Now I'm more certain."

Damon looked at them both, then gestured at Evangeline with a lazy grin.

"Evangeline will get naked too, you know..."

Xander's lips twitched violently. The image must've flashed in his head—his face turned crimson.

"You bastard..."

Evangeline couldn't take it anymore. She slugged Damon hard in the head.

He staggered, gasping.

"Wh-what was that for?! I was just teasing..."

Her face was flushed as she crossed her arms over her chest. Damon stared at her, exasperated.

She shouted, "Stop having fantasies about my body!"

Damon muttered under his breath, rubbing his head.

"He was the one having fantasies... yet I got pummeled."

He stood up, eyes catching Matia who remained silent by his side. He hesitated for a breath, then spoke carefully.

"Use your ice to split the river... if you want."

He phrased it like a suggestion—not a command. He had to. Any words directed at her could be taken as an order. She nodded and silently walked toward the river.

Raising her hand, a great wall of ice surged up, cleanly dividing the river. The frost on the ice was thick, nearly opaque. No one could see the other side now.

Leona groaned.

"First time back to safety and I get welcomed by an ice bath right before winter..."

Sylvia pouted, glaring at Damon.

"As if it wasn't cold enough already... I didn't even mind if we took turns..."

Damon raised a hand.

"That's enough. Boys on one side, ladies on the other."

Xander sneered.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't peek."

Damon would have laughed.

If he wanted to peek, he didn't even need to move. With shadow perception, he could see everything in black and white.

That is, unless he was the kind of degenerate who insisted on seeing nudity in full vivid color.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm a gentleman. I would never do that."

He leaned close to Evangeline, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I'll keep an eye out for you-know-who. The beast in him might awaken today..."

Before Evangeline could react, Xander smacked Damon into the river with the butt of his spear. The splash was enormous.

Laughter erupted from the group.

Damon surfaced with a smile.

The girls began moving to the other side, but Matia remained rooted in place, staring silently at Damon.

Leona frowned. Matia had never spoken, and none of them dared to ask. Whatever horrors tied her to Damon, they didn't want to know. It was easier to believe the simple lie:

Matia was alive, and she was here. That was enough.

"Hey, are you coming? That's the men's side," Leona called.

Matia gave her a brief glance but didn't move.

Damon's eyes dulled.

"You should go with them... if you want."

Matia, his shadow, slowly shook her head.

Xander, already shirtless, looked over at her.

"Hey, this is the men's side. You can't be here, staring at us—"

She tilted her head, confused. The concept seemed alien to her.

She wasn't trying to intrude. She was merely watching over her master. And he had said she could... if she wanted to.

Her eyes found Damon again.

He bit his lip, looked away. That was enough for her.

Matia reached up with pale hands, slowly removing her helmet. Her black hair fell like silk, framing the porcelain face beneath.

Damon froze.

It was like she was reminding him—I'm still me.

But all he saw was the girl he killed. His shadow. Bound to him forever.

Her face held no expression. Seeing him look away, she turned and slowly began walking toward the women's side, even though every step felt like resistance.

Her armor dissolved into streams of shadow, curling away from her skin. Beneath it was a flawless, fragile beauty. A fairy reborn in death.

She sank into the water in silence.

Chapter 423: Assertive

Damon floated silently on the water, letting the current ease the weight from his limbs. He'd already scrubbed his body clean, letting the filth of the road drift away downstream. But the blood clotted in his hair—dried, hardened, and stubborn—refused to wash out so easily.

He sighed, reaching for a comb he'd gotten as an item drop. Tugging at the matted strands, he winced.

It was no use. His shoulder-length hair just wouldn't return to normal.

"Do I have to cut it off?" he muttered to himself, the thought heavy.

He let himself soak deeper into the river, hoping the water would soften the strands enough. Xander had already left; it was just him now. Taking his sweet time, as always.

Then he felt the ripple.

A soft plop in the water.

He didn't even turn.

"Sylvia, stop sneaking around. I can see you."

He wasn't looking in her direction, but he didn't need to. Shadow perception was active all around him. After leaving Lysithara, he no longer bothered restraining his senses.

Still, she was already close. He'd kept his awareness spread specifically to avoid peeking into the girls' side of the river.

Sighing, he summoned the lower part of his armor from the shadows, letting it wrap his form beneath the surface of the water.

"This is the men's side," he said flatly.

She smiled, voice teasing.

"I know. I heard you were having trouble with your hair."

Damon let out a breath. This girl was getting bolder every day.

"From who?" he asked, exasperated.

She pushed her hair behind her ear, that sly smirk never fading.

"I'm a seer, remember?"

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She was wearing the awakened shell form of her armor—a light fabric that now clung to her curves, soaked and translucent in places.

"HmMMMMM." Damon groaned.

"Why are my affairs always made difficult? What a wicked woman..."

He looked away, deliberately. He heard the soft slosh of water as she waded closer.

She reached out and touched his hair.

"Stay still. Let me help you wash it."

Damon didn't argue. It was already awkward enough. Besides, his mind wasn't on her—it was on Matia. His shadow.

Was there a way to undo it? And if there was... would that mean she'd die?

His jaw tightened. He clenched his fist under the water.

"Why don't you take off that crown?" Sylvia asked gently.

Damon reached up, fingers brushing against the cold metal resting on his head.

Right. The crown.

It was more than a symbol. It was the key to Lysithara, and a core piece of the Pale Crown armor.

This wasn't just ceremonial wear. This crown housed the archives of Lysithara's lost technology and knowledge. An enchantment within it even kept Damon sane.

Knowledge enough to turn kingdoms on each other. The legacy of the Path of Kings. A gift—and a curse—from the Keeper of False Truths.

Yet even now, Damon didn't have full access. His rank was too low.

The crown also let him interface with Lysithara's systems. Control its magic. Direct its defenses.

But right now?

Right now it was just a burden he had to carry.

"It feeds my god complex," Damon said with a weak smile.

Sylvia shook her head. That was just like him—always hiding the truth behind a grin.

Quietly, she helped him scrub away the dried blood.

"All done."

Damon gave a curt nod. Then, without a word, he dove into the river, his body fading into shadows as he vanished beneath the surface and out of sight.

Sylvia sighed, following after him.

Damon emerged and equipped his armor, staring at his reflection in the river's glassy surface.

But the water froze—solid and clear like polished mirror.

He turned.

Matia stood behind him, silent as always, her hand still raised from casting the spell.

"Erm... thanks," he said.

She said nothing.

In the reflection, he saw himself. A young man with dark, shoulder-length hair, deep black eyes, and flawless skin. Calling him handsome would've been an understatement.

Yet his eyes... they were tired. Hollow.

The crown on his head gave him an air of regality, made him look wise—older than he was. It matched his matte-black armor perfectly. He looked like a warrior king. Or a fallen one.

He stood up, avoiding Sylvia's gaze.

She was getting more and more assertive lately. It was obvious he couldn't play dumb anymore.

But he also couldn't allow anything to happen. Not like this.

It wasn't like what he had with Astranova. That had never needed words. Their shared madness—those impossible dreams—was more than enough.

But with Sylvia, things were different.

She was someone's daughter. A girl kept on a tight leash. And her father? He was dangerous. Overprotective.

"I can't allow anything..." he muttered.

His shadow returned, rippling beside him after devouring the nearby bandits. Nothing useful from them. No drops. No loot.

He stared at it.

"What do you think? Should I take on all of Moon Glades in the name of love?"

The shadow shrugged.

Knowing Damon, he would never bow. Never back down. He was stupid that way.

But somehow... that stupid resolve had kept him alive.

So what if her father could kill him with a single slap?

He shook his head.

"I should avoid that... for Luna. I don't want her caught up in any trouble."

He wasn't worried the Elf King would kill him. Damon wouldn't stay dead anyway.

Or rather he wouldn't not die.

Still, no need to invite disaster.

He made his way back to the others.

Xander glanced at him.

"You should remove that crown."

Damon blinked.

Xander's voice held no malice—only concern.

"We're going into town. A crown is a symbol of royalty. Even nobles don't wear one lightly. If a commoner is seen with it..."

He trailed off, but the meaning was clear.

Damon had a feeling if some noble tried to order him to remove it, he'd end up removing the noble's head instead.

Evangeline nodded nervously. "Right. We're no longer in a death zone. It's for your own good."

The others agreed. Their voices layered with worry as they tried to reason with him.

Leona stepped up, offering a compromise.

"You can wear it in battle when you need it... but, uhm, maybe take it off for now..."

Damon sighed.

"I can't."

Evangeline stepped forward, her voice low as she bowed her head.

"I'm begging you. Please..."

He stared at her, startled.

It wasn't about ego. It had never been.

"I want to take it off," Damon said quietly. "I really do. But I can't."

He bit his lips.

"If I take off the Pale Crown... I'll go mad."

Chapter 424: Gladstone

Evangeline blinked in surprise, her eyes widening at the firm expression on Damon's face. There was no trace of jest, no flicker of irony in his gaze. Just sheer, cold truth.

"Yo... you aren't... you're serious..."

Damon gave a slow nod, exhaling quietly.

"It can't be helped. Sadly, regardless of whose ego would be bruised, I can't take it off... I have to wear this. Always."

He rolled his shoulders with a faint shrug, then smirked faintly.

"On the upside, it actually feels quite comfy. I mean, sometimes I don't even remember it's on my head."

Evangeline glanced at the others, her worry deepening. This was going to be a problem. A commoner wearing a crown in the open? Nobles would never accept it—even if wearing it was the difference between sanity and madness. Let alone life or death.

Why should they care about the condition of a mere commoner?

Xander let out a long sigh, folding his arms.

"This is troublesome... Damon's not someone who'll just shut up and take it. Heads will fly if he gets pissed off, that I'm sure of."

Sylvia brought a hand to her chin, thoughtful.

"I was going to suggest using your armor's Sovereign Mantle form, but... that'd only make the crown more ostentatious."

Leona nodded hurriedly behind her. "Wait—what if we just gave him a hood? Or... tied a headband over his head?"

Xander nodded in agreement.

"It might work, but he can't wear a headband forever. Especially if we have to meet someone in upper nobility..."

Matia stood a few steps behind Damon, silent as always. Whether she chose silence or simply couldn't speak, he still wasn't sure. But the glow in her eyes said more than words ever could.

She was ready for violence.

Damon rubbed the side of his jaw thoughtfully.

"I've still got that one black fabric I used to use as a blindfold. I can wrap it around the Pale Crown so no one notices... Temporary fix. I'll buy a proper hood when we get to town."

He grinned at them, eyes glinting.

"Good thing those bandits had some change on them."

Xander shook his head, groaning.

"You do realize we don't actually need that money? Evangeline's the duchess of this region. Once she meets whoever's in charge of Gladstone, we can just use a teleportation gate to Lumos."

Damon raised an eyebrow. "And what does that have to do with leaving money behind?"

Evangeline sighed, anxiety beginning to coil in her gut as the walls of her homeland grew nearer.

"Your greed for material wealth is going to get you in trouble one of these days..."

Damon turned to the road ahead, the wind brushing through his hair as he looked out toward the horizon. The road was long, the city gates visible in the far distance.

"Well, come on then. Let's go."

He pulled out a length of black cloth, wrapping it firmly around the Pale Crown. It looked like a thick, tattered headband now, though the uneven bulges hinted at something hidden beneath.

Damon took off first, running lightly across the ground, his movements generating soft astral winds that stirred dust and loose petals. Whatever awaited in the city... he'd deal with it when it came.

He clutched a coin in his palm, whispering something faint into its cold surface, eyes closed. He didn't know if the person he sent it to could hear—there was no reply—but he whispered all the same.

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Gladstone.

A frontier city nestled close to the treacherous Anarchy Mountains, its borders brushing against the Astranova dukedom and disputed territories. It was the last real outpost before the roads turned toward the ruins of Lysithara.

And those lands... had a legacy soaked in death. They were haunted, cursed, filled with legends of adventurers who vanished without a trace.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"How the hell did Ashcroft pull it off? Did he fight the Keeper? And win?"

He shuddered. Ashcroft went to Lysithara and left.

He also fought the founder of the academy as well.

"If he really battled Athor and killed him... damn, that guy's legend has to be exaggerated."

Still, he wasn't trying to fight Ashcroft. At least not anytime soon.

So instead, he let himself enjoy the view as the walls of Gladstone came into full sight. There was some traffic by the gate, but nothing alarming. The gates stood open, wide and welcoming.

Knights stood vigilant, but unbothered. Their presence alone was deterrent enough—no one would cause trouble here unless they were truly suicidal.

Damon and his party stepped in with the crowd. Adventurers, merchants, peasants—people of all sorts flowed into the city. No one asked for documents.

Evangeline passed through the gate unnoticed.

Damon watched with curiosity. He had expected someone to recognize her, but of course... why would low-ranking gate guards know the face of a princess they'd never seen?

Especially in a crowd this size.

"The ruler of this land must be doing a good job," Damon murmured, taking in the city.

Children played in the streets, their laughter bright and uninhibited. They were well-fed, well-dressed. That alone said everything. Carriages moved smoothly on well-paved roads. Order was kept without fear.

"I gotta hand it to your father, Evangeline... he's quite the competent ruler."

She bit her lip.

"Did you think he wasn't?"

Damon smirked, placing a pitying palm on her shoulder.

"I imagine all nobles as the fat kind. Or the horny kind. Or both."

She slapped his hand away, cheeks puffed with frustration. She was already anxious, and his attitude wasn't helping.

"We're going to meet the one assigned to this region. A commander in the Golden Army."

Damon tilted his head slightly.

"A military man? Not a fat noble? No wonder this place is packed with troops."

Sylvia chimed in, interested. "Yes... They have several garrisons in the region. This is actually a fort city."

Damon exhaled, his eyes still roaming the buildings.

"Ahh, boy. I'd love to rule my own city someday... I'd double—no, triple the taxes. I'll be the rich, fat type of noble."

Leona giggled, her voice playful. "You'd be so squishy with a pot belly."

"Hehehe," Damon laughed. "I'd honor the noble traditions—steal people's wives and daughters for the night."

Evangeline finally had enough. He'd been whispering most of that right into her ear.

She shoved him away just in time to narrowly avoid a carriage thundering past.

"You are definitely not making it out of this duchy alive with that attitude..."

Before they could start bickering like children, Sylvia suddenly pointed to the side.

"Damon, look, look! A tavern! I wanna go in. Please? Let's go!"

She was practically bouncing on her toes, excitement bubbling like a child's.

Damon sighed, dragging a hand down his face.

"Sure... whatever."

He glanced one more time at the busy street, then followed Sylvia's lead.

He only hoped this tavern trip wouldn't turn into another incident.

Chapter 425: The Expected Incident

Damon sighed.

That was his third sigh... in the last two minutes.

He leaned his head back against the moldy stone wall of the detention cell, staring blankly at the flickering torchlight above. Chains clinked softly as he adjusted his position, the scent of old straw and dried blood hanging in the air like rot.

"I knew it... I just knew it..." he muttered under his breath. "My luck's always been damnable. But this..."

He groaned aloud, his voice echoing across the cell block as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Ahhh..."

Another sigh. Fourth one now.

Evangeline's eye twitched from across the holding cell on the opposite side. Her hands were clenched into fists, knuckles white as she stared at him through the iron bars separating the men from the women.

"If there wasn't a bar between us," she hissed through clenched teeth, "I'd kill him."

Damon raised his head slowly, eyes locking onto hers with theatrical offense.

"You know... I've been arrested several times," he said with a nonchalant shrug, voice echoing lazily.

"But somehow, I was always let go. So technically, I've never had a criminal record. I mean, sure, I've smuggled, stolen, maybe committed a few crimes I won't name in the light of day..."

He inhaled deeply, rubbing a hand down his face.

"But I never thought I'd go down because of you!"

His finger shot out, accusatory, aiming straight at Evangeline.

She gasped, eyes wide. "Because of me?! You—! You're the one who ripped a guy's arms off!"

Xander groaned, running a hand down his face as he leaned against the damp wall, the stale taste of cheap ale still lingering in his mouth.

"Can we not do this here, guys? Please?"

But it was too late. The two of them turned simultaneously to shout over him.

"He started it!"

"She started it!"

Leona watched with a flat, unamused expression, her arms crossed as she leaned back against the bars.

"I feel like you two might be the most immature members of our party... and that's saying something. Coming from me."

Sylvia, completely undisturbed, clapped her hands with excitement.

"That was so exciting! This is only my second-ever tavern fight!"

Evangeline turned to her with a look of pure disbelief.

"You've... been fighting in taverns?"

Sylvia blinked innocently, then glanced at Damon.

"Erhm... Damon took me on a date once and, uh... we started a tavern fight."

Every head turned to stare at Damon, who was sitting cross-legged in the men's cell, opposite the girls.

Leona's eyes narrowed, her pout forming immediately. "You took her to a tavern without me..."

Evangeline, meanwhile, was trembling with rage.

"You piece of human garbage... You took her on a date... and chose a tavern?! How low can you fall?!"

Damon chuckled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head.

Apparently, not low enough. He remembered clearly making Sylvia eat bugger goblin meat until she threw up, among other tragedies. It had been her first date ever.

"Ahhh... good times."

Evangeline reached for the bars, trying in vain to cast a spell, but the magic-inhibiting shackles nullified everything. Even her skills cost mana—she couldn't so much as conjure a spark.

"If we get out of here," she hissed, "make peace with our Creator, the Goddess... because I'm ending you."

Damon stood up with a stretch.

"Relax, guys. This isn't my first time dealing with the law. At most, we'll get a slap on the wrist and someone'll pay our bail..."

The room fell silent as they all stared at him, unimpressed.

Sylvia slowly raised her hand.

"Actually, fearless leader... we obliterated a tavern. And the surrounding buildings. Caused massive property damage. Beat up and brutally humiliated local adventurers and patrons in the bar... By my calculations, we'd be going away for a very long time."

Xander sighed as she spoke, covering his face again.

---

How it started...

It had begun the moment they stepped into the tavern. Sylvia, overly eager from her noble confinement, had romanticized the idea of taverns since she was a child.

Naturally, the first thing she did was kick open the door and yell, "Bar keep! Serve us your finest ale!"

Damon grinned with pride from the side. She learned from the best.

They stuck out like royal peacocks in a coop full of roosters. Their armor—high quality, well-kept, expensive—screamed wealth and power. In a city like Gladstone, that made them targets.

Especially for greedy adventurers.

To make things worse, most of their party was composed of beautiful women... and then there were Damon and Xander—easy on the eyes in their own right.

Naturally, they drew gazes. Some greedy, some envious... and some, depraved.

But having survived the Whispering Forest, the Duhu Mountains, and Lysithara itself—Damon's party had long since developed reflexes for danger. They felt the stares even before they saw them.

They had been the subjects of many horrors' gaze, subconsciously. They hated being watched maliciously.

And beneath their smiles, every one of them was ready to fight.

The final straw came with the ale.

Evangeline had taken one sip, expecting something passable, maybe even refined. Instead, she spat it back into the cup.

"What is this? It's like drinking urine!"

"You know what piss tastes like.... Noted."

Damon laughed heartily.

Sylvia, meanwhile, was enjoying the novelty of it all—until one of the watching adventurers muttered too loudly.

"Looks like this one doesn't have a palate. No wonder she's built like a slut... Which old man did you screw to get that fancy armor?"

Evangeline's eyes sharpened dangerously.

Damon placed a hand on hers, forcing a calm smile.

"Ignore them. Don't want to start anything. Words can't hurt anyone..."

He took a sip from his mug. Bitter.

Then came the second voice, bolder.

"Heh... Rush Claw... think he'd let me borrow that elven bitch for a night if I ask real nicely?"

He licked his lips, chuckling.

"Those hips... look real nice."

They roared with laughter.

Sylvia blinked, still unsure if this was part of the tavern charm. But Damon's smile had already disappeared.

He rose slowly, crossing the floor.

Without a word, without warning, he grabbed the laughing adventurer by the shoulder—

And ripped his arm clean off.

Blood sprayed in a wide arc across the wooden wall.

The tavern went silent. For half a second.

Then chaos exploded.

Matia summoned a mace from solid ice, the sound of cracking frost filling the air. Xander stood with a groan, bracing himself. Chairs shattered. Tables were flipped. Screams followed, and the building came down by the time it was over.

---

Back in the present, Damon cleared his throat, face blank as he looked at the iron bars of the knight's holding facility.

"...And that's how we were arrested."

The cell smelled of mold and wet hay. The magic inhibitors were starting to chafe against his wrists.

"Depending on who we know, we might be lucky. The law here's unequal—Evangeline's the duchess, after all. With crimes like ours, we won't be seeing a low-level magistrate..."

He raised his eyes to meet the others.

"No. We'll be meeting a big wing. The Commander of the Fort."

As if summoned by his words, the heavy iron doors creaked open.

Five knights entered the holding area, armored and grim-faced. Their swords glinted under torchlight.

"Come with us," one barked. "The commander wants to see you. You'll regret causing trouble in the Brightwater Duchy."

Chains rattled. Shackles tightened. The group was pulled to their feet and led out in a tight line toward a prison carriage waiting outside the hall.

Damon glanced sidelong at Evangeline, a crooked smile twitching at the edge of his lips.

"Well..." he muttered, "this should be interesting."

"What a nice homecoming, Eva."

Chapter 426: Relaxed Too Soon

The carriage ride was brief. Damon sat slouched beside a visibly fuming Evangeline, the silence between them tense and crackling.

"Your home is quite beautiful, my lady..." Damon muttered with a grin, shifting slightly to face her.

"I expected them to rough us up a bit before we met the commander..."

She clenched her jaw, the veins in her temple twitching. "Shut up, Damon. Stop picking on me."

Sylvia glanced between them, sensing the powder keg about to ignite. The shackles around their wrists may have inhibited magic, but they did nothing to dull physical strength—and Evangeline's temper was always one sharp word away from snapping.

"Hmmm..." Sylvia mused aloud, breaking the tension.

"When you said we needed bail... who exactly was supposed to come bail us out? I mean, none of us even have pagers... and the knights didn't give us any to call..."

Damon smiled to himself, eyes half-lidded. He didn't bother to explain. He had been using the Whisper Coin to contact Lilith every dawn, keeping her updated on their travels. It could only be used once per day, but if he'd waited till morning, she would've made her way to Gladstone without question. It was, after all, an important city to House Brightwater... and even more so, the ideal place to welcome the Lady of House Astranova.

He hadn't noticed it before, but now that he thought about it... Lilith never really interacted much with Evangeline.

'Hmmm. And she just happened to know Evangeline's aunt wasn't dead...'

He leaned his head onto Evangeline's shoulder. She turned to glare at him—but instead of pushing him away, she clicked her tongue and let it slide.

Sylvia's eyes twitched, the faint spark of something sharp and possessive flickering across her face. Evangeline felt the glare but refused to acknowledge it.

The knights rode outside the carriage, confident and relaxed. Maybe overconfident.

It wasn't long before they reached the city lord's residence. This was where the commander was stationed—where he lived. A fortress more than a castle.

Damon hopped down first, boots thudding against the polished stone. Rows of knights in golden armor flanked them, heavily armed. Their gear gleamed beneath the morning sun, and their presence radiated pressure.

Their strength wasn't for show. Most of them were already in Second Class advancement.

Damon muttered under his breath,

"Great... I advance and now second class are cabbage on the roadside."

He wasn't exaggerating. This city had Third Class elites... and if he wasn't wrong, the commander himself was at least Fourth Class—maybe even Fifth. After all, this was a grand duchy.

And this wasn't even the capital.

Their shackles were unlatched and dropped at their feet. The knights said nothing.

It was a quiet dare: Run, if you think you can.

Damon didn't appreciate the pride gleaming in their eyes. That smug, self-assured certainty that they were part of something greater than themselves. The kind of collective ego that made institutions dangerous.

'Breaking in here would be hell... I could probably get in... but I'm definitely not getting out alive.'

Still, they were led forward, passing through the grand entrance. The knights inside stood motionless like statues, armor woven with hidden runes and walls with magic tech.

"Magic-tech," Damon muttered under his breath looking at the walls and doors.

Their boots fell in rhythm over a long crimson carpet. Ornate halls stretched in every direction, velvet banners lining the walls, golden sconces glowing with enchanted light. The deeper they went, the more imposing the air became—until finally, they stopped before a towering set of double doors.

Two knights stepped forward and pushed the doors open.

A grand hall greeted them. Massive stairs rose up toward an elevated platform crowned by an extravagant throne. Sunlight poured in through a stained-glass window behind it, cascading over the gold and red like a divine spotlight.

No one sat on the throne.

Instead, a large flag hung behind it—House Brightwater's crest: a rising sun casting shadows over a river. The air felt heavy, like the hall itself had been crafted to make all who entered feel small.

Damon's gaze dropped to the base of the stairs.

A man stood there.

Golden armor clung to him like royalty, not a single piece out of place. His presence pulsed like a calm storm—powerful, composed, commanding. Damon recognized the feeling.

A Domain.

But whether it was Fourth Class or Fifth... he couldn't tell. It was too refined. Too silent. This was someone powerful enough to command not just people—but the atmosphere around him.

Silver hair. Gleaming. Skin fair. Eyes a piercing blue that shimmered like crystal under light.

A Lumerian... one of the Lightborn. A race born with illumination-based traits.

The man stepped forward and slowly bowed his head.

"It has been many years, Lady Brightwater. Forgive my negligence in not welcoming you at the city gates."

Damon blinked. Wait... what?

He reevaluated everything. For this man to piece everything together in mere hours... the Brightwater intelligence network must've been terrifying.

Evangeline, now visibly awkward, nodded.

"It has been a while, Commander Varran Dawnclad." She lowered her head slightly. "I... apologize for the commotion we caused."

"No, please, my lady." Varran's voice was polite, smooth as silk.

"If anyone should apologize, it's me. We only realized who you were after one of our less intelligent knights so outrageously tossed you and your companions into a holding cell..."

He cleared his throat, eyes flickering toward Evangeline.

"We refrained from sending a formal carriage to avoid unsavory rumors from spreading. Ahem."

Damon looked around the hall, smiling faintly. So this ended well after all.

Varran's gaze turned toward the others, his expression still composed.

He met Xander's stare.

"It has been many moons, Lord Ravenscroft."

Xander gave a short nod. "Likewise. I hope you've been well, Commander."

Varran turned to Sylvia. "I believe this is our first meeting, Princess of the Moon Glades. It is an honor."

Sylvia dipped into a graceful bow, responding like she had stepped out of a storybook.

He greeted Leona next, then his eyes fell on Matia—still silent behind Damon.

She said nothing, only offered a small nod.

Varran's gaze lingered on her a moment longer, then shifted to Damon.

There it was. That narrow gaze. Damon could already feel the scrutiny.

He forced a polite smile.

Here came the disdain—the dismissal of a nameless commoner with no background.

"You must be the illustrious, Damon Grey. I've heard... quite a few things about you."

Damon blinked. Wait what?

"You... know me, sir?" he asked, unsure whether to be flattered or alarmed.

Varran nodded, a faint gleam in his eyes.

"Yes. You've been a subject of discussion in certain circles. Word of your defeat of the dark spirit Rashi Ignath has spread. And you apparently burned down a portion of the Evil Forest as well."

He stepped closer, arms crossed.

"You have quite the reputation among academy youths. Apparently, many want to test their blades against yours in the coming War Games..."

Damon blinked again.

'Huh... since when did I become a celebrity?'

He straightened his back. "I understand. It was a pleasure to meet you, Commander Varran Dawnclad."

The commander nodded slowly. "I have already informed the Duke. He is expecting all of you. I have prepared a place for you to rest for the night—you may take the teleportation gate to Lumos tomorrow."

Damon nodded.

That was fine. While the others went to meet the Grand Duke, he'd just catch a ride to Valerion. Nothing dramatic.

"Sir," Damon added with a small bow, "if I may trouble you, while my companions go to meet His Excellency... I'd like to request teleportation to Valerion."

Varran's lips curled into a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"That simply won't do."

Damon blinked.

"After all..." the commander continued, gaze sharp, voice low. "The Duke is most eager to speak with you."

He turned, voice echoing down the golden hall.

"All of you."

Damon felt it then—that familiar twinge in his gut. That little whisper that had saved his life countless times.

Something about this isn't right.

And just like that, the good mood vanished.

'I relaxed too soon.'

#### Chapter 427: A Father Before A Distant Ruler

In a dim little room adorned with tall windows and ornate, gilded furnishings, a regal man sat behind an imposing desk of polished blackwood.

Golden eyes, sharp and unreadable, stared forward—calm, calculating, cold. His hair, shimmering like sunlight on steel, flowed back behind his shoulders. Every inch of him radiated wealth, status, and power. The fabric of his garments shimmered faintly in the light, clearly of the highest quality.

He sat in silence, unmoving, his gaze fixed on the projection hovering above his table—a holographic image of a kneeling man encased in radiant gold armor.

Though his expression remained composed, an almost conflicted shadow passed behind his eyes.

This man was Cassian Brightwater—The Golden Death.

A name the demons themselves had given him.

Not a title earned through ceremony, but one forged in the deepest infernos of war. He was feared. Revered. And for good reason.

Now, he simply listened as Commander Varran Dawnclad reported in a tone stripped of anything but formal gravity. The presence of Sylvia in the report only added pressure. Her father had already been placing immense strain on Valtheron and the Academy.

Cassian took a deep breath and cut through the report with a quiet, personal question.

"Is my daughter alright?"

In the projection, Varran raised his head slightly, his expression firm.

"Yes, Your Grace. She seems to be doing fine. Somehow... all of them are alright. I have yet to inquire about the details of their journey, however. They seem sharp. Like freshly drawn swords."

His golden eyes narrowed slightly.

"Interestingly... all of them have reached the Second Class—save for Lord Valdren... or perhaps I should say Lady Faldren, who has attained the Third Class."

Cassian gave a slow nod.

"I see. It's quite like that damned fairy... forcing his daughter to dress as a man to preserve his delusion of a male heir."

Varran, still kneeling in projection, dipped his head respectfully, the glow of his armor faint.

"It appears they came from the direction of Lysithara. How they survived that ruin... is still unknown."

Cassian said nothing at first. He was curious—but more than that, he was simply relieved. It could have been worse.

"Thank you for your report, Commander."

Those simple words nearly made Varran stumble in place. He saluted immediately, fist pressed to his chest.

Just as he was about to end the transmission, Cassian paused.

"...Damon."

His eyes flicked up toward the projection again.

"What about Damon? Is... he alright?"

Varran hesitated, confused. Why would His Grace ask about a commoner?

But after a brief moment, he recalled the boy. Damon Grey. Talented. Dangerous. Strange. He had potential—and potential was dangerous. Perhaps Cassian meant to recruit him. Why else would the Grand Duke care?

"He did try to avoid coming to the duchy. Meeting Your Grace is an honor far above any commoner's station... but as per your orders, we'll ensure he reaches Lumos tomorrow."

Cassian nodded. "Very well, then."

Varran bowed. "We are at the beginning of a new era... or the end of one. Seras' Blade may have sparked it, but it seems the age of prodigies is returning. War is upon us. I can feel it."

Cassian's voice was soft. Resolved.

"...Let it come."

With that, the projection vanished.

The duke exhaled slowly, leaning back in his chair. The room was silent—until a faint shift echoed from one of the corners.

Cassian didn't look up.

"...Jarvis. Bring me the documents."

A tall man in black stepped out from the shadows and placed a stack of parchment on the desk without a word.

Cassian stood, tucking the papers under his arm. He moved through the towering palace halls with practiced ease, the silence of the corridors broken only by his footsteps.

He arrived at a wing with few servants. Few dared enter here. He pushed open a heavy oak door, stepping inside.

The room was dark.

A single figure stood at the window.

He had golden hair, streaked with silver. His eyes, also gold, shimmered faintly with a distant sorrow. His beard was long, unkempt, and his aura... it was ancient. Deep. A presence that once shook kingdoms, now faded—but not forgotten.

The figure did not turn.

His voice came hoarse and bitter.

"...Have you come again, vile crow?"

Cassian sighed.

"That's not a very nice way to speak to your only son."

The Grand Duke didn't move.

"What else can I say to someone who only ever brings vile omens and terrible news..."

Cassian's gaze drifted to a portrait on the wall.

A young woman with golden hair, smiling.

"If it makes you feel any better... I'm grieving too."

The old man scoffed.

"You think you can imagine the pain of a man who's lost his daughter? My little girl's been dead for nearly a decade... and I only just find out..."

Cassian said nothing.

'Then you shouldn't have kicked her out,' he thought—but held his tongue.

His father didn't need more reasons to retreat deeper into solitude.

"You haven't left the duchy in the nineteen years since she left. You didn't even know she was gone..."

The Grand Duke's eyes glowed. His aura flared—then exploded.

With a wild swing of his arm, the walls cracked and shattered.

"You think I don't know that!?"

His voice broke.

"I thought... I thought if she married that commoner and suffered some hardship... she'd come back. She'd beg her father for forgiveness. I would've been hard on her, yes—but I would've forgiven her..."

His shoulders trembled.

"And now you tell me she's dead..."

The silence weighed heavily.

"If I hadn't driven her away... she would never have gone to war... she never would've died..."

Cassian's expression was tight. His voice quiet.

"Evangeline is coming home. While your daughter is gone... at least your grandchildren are still here."

He set the documents on a table—one of the few things that hadn't shattered from the outburst.

"You might want to read this."

The Grand Duke's brows furrowed.

Grandchildren?

But he only had one.

Before he could say a word, Cassian turned and walked away. His voice lingered in the air.

"You might want to make yourself presentable... when they come home tomorrow."

Silence returned.

The old duke slowly stepped forward, picking up the documents with trembling hands.

And as he read them—line by line, truth by truth—something within him broke.

The Golden Sun of the Valtheron—once a monster of war, a king among lords—fell to his knees in silence.

And for the first time in years...

He wept.

Chapter 428: Lumos

As surely as the sun will rise—

It wasn't just a saying. It was a fact. The sun always rose, and today, it rose again.

Its golden light bathed Damon in warm radiance. It was comforting. A fleeting touch of normalcy in a life that rarely knew peace.

Yet he hadn't slept well. His mind had been restless. Tense. His instincts buzzed, whispering warnings with no form.

He wasn't in immediate danger.

But by the time he saw it coming... it would be too late.

Being paranoid wasn't just habit—it was survival.

And that alone, was what made Damon... Damon.

He reached for the Whisper Coin, fingers brushing its surface with familiarity. He had intended to buy a pager—something to finally connect him to Lilith in real time—but as always, he lacked the funds.

Sure, he had rare resources that would fetch absurd prices in the right hands... but he doubted Commander Varran would let him out of his sight, let alone out of the city.

'These Brightwater knights are overzealous as hell... don't they ever get tired?'

He cleared his throat, flipping the coin gently in his palm. Then he began his message aloud.

"Hey, it's me again... yes, I know what you're thinking. 'Why won't he just get a pager now that he's back in a city?'"

He paused, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I might be in trouble."

He leaned on the windowsill, holding the coin to the morning light.

"Remember that one story you told me? The one where you warned me not to get too close to you-know-who...? Yeah... well, I might've gotten closer. And now her father wants to meet me."

He gave a slow sigh.

"I smell a trap."

The courtyard below bustled with life. But none of it eased his nerves.

"I'll let you know if I need rescuing. Don't come here... not yet."

He gently set the coin down.

If things did go wrong, there was only one option: run. Straight toward Astranova territory. Maybe—just maybe—Lilith would hide him.

He could almost hear her voice echo in his head.

"Whatever you do, don't do anything stupid—and keep your ego in check... are you listening, Damon?"

A small smile tugged at his lips.

"...I hate to admit it but—I really miss her."

Funny, considering she once dragged him to her bedchambers and threatened him.

He got dressed. The clothes they'd given him were of exceptional quality, but the Pale Crown remained. Wrapped tightly in black fabric, it made his outfit look... strange. Odd. But no one said a word—not even during breakfast with Commander Varran.

His friends understood why he wore it.

And oddly enough, Varran didn't ask.

Still, Damon wasn't the only one uneasy.

Evangeline kept fidgeting. Subtle, nervous tics. She only ever did that when something really bothered her.

The only one more unusual was Matia, who refused to sit, refused to remove her armor, and stood directly behind Damon—silent, unmoving.

Even Varran had insisted she relax.

She didn't—until Damon, with a quiet glance and a calm suggestion, urged her to take a seat.

That was enough.

Enough for Varran to know who truly called the shots.

—

After breakfast, an escort of knights—clad in full ceremonial armor—led them to the teleportation gate at the city's heart.

This would be Damon's first time using it.

He'd used Waypoints before, but this? This was something else entirely. Larger. Better. Capable of far longer distances.

The shift came like a snap.

Suddenly, the world twisted—light bent, and the very air changed.

And then, they were somewhere else.

When Damon looked out the carriage window, he saw a new city.

Lumos.

It was massive—and buzzing with anticipation.

What caught his eye wasn't the city itself—but the knights.

They waited in rows. Dozens of them. Ceremonial armor gleamed under the sun. A procession had formed. The streets were lined with people—cheering, tossing petals, waving flags.

He glanced at Evangeline.

"...Erm. Your people are, uh, quite high-key. How lively..."

She inhaled deeply, steadying herself.

"We... this isn't the norm."

Sylvia rested a hand on her chin, smiling brightly.

"Soltheon has such fascinating customs. I didn't expect your return to be this grand. It feels festive!"

Damon grinned.

"Wish I was a princess too. Wouldn't mind making an entire city stop just because I came home."

Xander rolled his eyes. "No need to be jealous. You'd look hideous in a dress."

Damon scoffed, arms folded. "Stop staring at my chest, you animal."

Leona laughed at the banter.

"I think Damon would make a nice princess. We could talk about girl stuff together."

Damon glanced sideways. "What girl stuff, you tomboy?"

Thud.

Her fist met his gut. The usual.

Their antics—childish as they were—made the tension bearable.

No need to be too paranoid.

He was only meeting one of the most powerful men in the Empire. No big deal.

As the carriage rolled deeper into the city, Damon saw commoners throwing flower petals, some cheering, others merely watching in awe. Canals carved through the city like veins—glittering with rune light. Aquatic creatures darted beneath the surface.

He leaned closer to the glass.

"...Barrier magic?"

He recognized the patterns. Runecraft. Valerie had taught him well. Even if the magic here was different, the principles held.

It was... beautiful.

Eventually, the shadow of the Palace entered his perception.

Evangeline's unease intensified.

So did his.

Finally, the carriage halted before a grand entrance.

Damon stepped out first.

White towers rose high into the sky. Towering banners danced in the wind. Rows of knights stood rigid with raised flags. A line of maids bowed low as the party stepped forward.

The central path led straight to the castle doors.

A butler stepped forward, head bowed, and without a word, turned to lead them.

Damon took a long breath... then followed.

No one spoke.

The silence in the palace halls was heavy—a stillness that felt like judgment.

Servants bowed as they passed. Then, at the foot of the great stairs... they saw them.

A tall, poised man with golden hair and piercing golden eyes.

Duke Cassian Brightwater.

And beside him, a woman with long, platinum-blond hair and soft, steely gray eyes.

The Duchess.

Evangeline's mother.

The woman smiled—but maintained perfect composure. Regal, refined.

Damon stepped forward and bowed slightly, curtsying with the elegance expected of nobility.

"I am Damon Grey. First-year student of Aether Academy."

He had no title. So he used the only name that might carry weight.

The others followed, greeting the Duke in turn—except Evangeline. His daughter. She stood still, anxious, unsure.

Her mother finally stepped forward and embraced her tightly, unable to restrain herself any longer.

The Duke's gaze—cold and unreadable—lingered on Damon.

"Welcome to Lumos," Cassian said, his voice low and unwavering. "I hope it is to your liking."

He let the words hang... before smiling faintly.

"I would love to hear about your travels. Perhaps..." His gaze sharpened.

"We could start with the story behind that crown, hidden beneath the fabric you're wearing."

Chapter 429: Grand Duke

Damon didn't even get a chance to respond to the Duke before Evangeline stepped in.

"Father... we are very tired. I'm sure we can regale you with our adventures after we've rested..."

Duke Cassian's golden eyes flicked to her. She was clearly anxious, her voice composed but tight.

He gave a small nod.

"Very well then... Jarvis, show them to their quarters."

The butler bowed in reply. Several maids fell in line behind him without a word.

Damon glanced sideways at Evangeline.

She was hiding something.

'What's she hiding...?'

He considered sending his shadow to investigate, but quickly dismissed the thought. This place was teeming with powerhouses. Too many unknowns. He didn't even dare extend his shadow perception.

He tried using Appraisal—

Only to be met with rows of question marks.

They're all ranked higher than me... great.

But the worst part?

It was the butler, Jarvis.

There was no aura, no hostility—

And yet Damon instinctively felt it.

A dangerous man.

'Ducal households are no joke... No wonder no one wants to cross them.'

—

Not long after, Damon found himself in a massive room—alone. It was luxurious, absurdly so, with towering glass windows, velvet drapes, and polished wood furniture that looked older than most kingdoms. Six maids were stationed nearby. A pair of knights too.

He was free to move.

But it still felt like a cage.

Every direction he looked made escape feel impossible.

Every hallway—another trap.

He needed intel.

Despite the risks, he sent out a shade—keeping it low, thin, and subtle. Something small. Just enough to breathe.

It slithered along the floor, slipping into the cracks of the stone, under doors, through the crevices of the castle.

He followed its senses, watching, listening.

The shade slid beneath the hem of a maid's dress—just in time to hear a conversation.

"Annette, who do you think that young man is?" a younger maid whispered. "He got an entire wing to himself... not just any wing that wing."

The older one sighed. "Shut up before you get yourself in trouble. One displeased lord and your head will fly."

"But Annette... he's really handsome..."

Damon, watching through the shadow, almost felt flattered.

Annette stopped in her tracks, casting a stern glance over her shoulder.

"Ishka... You're still new here. If I were you, I'd shut my mouth and keep my head out of the clouds."

Ishka pouted slightly. "Right. I understand... I'm sorry."

Annette sighed, finally relaxing after leaving the wing.

"He's almost as imposing as His Grace..."

That made Ishka giggle.

"I thought so too... They look great together. Eye candy..."

Annette slapped the back of her head. "Shut up, you idiot. We've got prep work for the ball. Stop gossiping before someone overhears."

Damon's brow rose.

A ball...?

His shadow shifted away from the maids, gliding along the lavish corridor and slipping under door after door.

But after a while... he got lost.

The palace looked the same from every direction. Elegant, yes—but frustratingly identical.

Eventually, he found himself near a more secluded section of the estate.

It was in the same wing as he was; he could tell by how close the shade was.

There, he hit something unexpected.

A barrier.

"Huh... runes."

They weren't meant to block people.

But they stopped specters.

Detection-based enchantments.

"Guess I'll call it a day."

He retreated. The shade glided back, slipping under guards' noses, occasionally hitching rides in the shadows of a moving maid.

He'd seen enough.

His friends weren't anywhere nearby.

They'd been sent to another wing—far from his.

"Am I getting... special treatment?"

He didn't know if it was discrimination or something else. But what struck him most was how the maids and knights in his wing walked like they were stepping through a lion's den.

Like he was the lion....or maybe someone else was.

And that constant feeling of being watched—

He lay down on the bed, eyes on the ceiling.

'Ducal households really are something else... we only just arrived, and they're already planning a ball.'

He thought about Lilith.

If he ever got dragged into one of these noble events, it would've been because she forced him to.

Still—

'Maybe this is a good opportunity... If I can make some connections in noble society, I might get closer to the temple's power. Influence is key.'

Brightwater would likely only invite nobles from their region—vassals and lords under their banner.

And as a guest of the Duke, Damon would be shown some level of respect.

Hopefully, it's not one of those 'invite the commoner to humiliate him' kind of deals...

He sat up.

Shadows shifted.

He sensed movement—maids approaching. Multiple footsteps.

Then a knock.

He turned his head.

The door opened.

A small army of maids entered, their arms stacked with fine clothing. Outfits of every color and style imaginable.

One of them bowed.

"His Excellency, the Duke, has invited you to dine with the family. We are here to assist you in getting dressed."

She lifted her head, voice clear and practiced.

"I am Annette. I will be the maid serving you henceforth."

Damon blinked.

"...Okay."

And that was all it took.

As soon as he said it, they began.

It was overwhelming. He tried to protest, but when he did, they looked at him like he'd sentenced them to death.

He couldn't bring himself to argue again.

In the end, they dressed him like a noble—refined and princely. They tried to remove the cloth covering the Pale Crown, but he refused, even when they pleaded.

So they compromised.

They gave him an outfit with a regal hood—just enough to cover the crown, yet still look proper.

When it was over, he barely recognized himself.

Annette led the way out.

The moment they left his wing, she visibly relaxed—as though a weight had been lifted from her back.

Strange... the feeling of being watched was gone.

—

They arrived in a grand room.

Ornate carvings, stained-glass windows, and a long, polished dining table flanked with gold-trimmed chairs.

Only one person sat there.

Evangeline.

She wore a peach dress. Elegant. Her hair was tied to the side with a golden accessory. For a moment, Damon forgot she was the same girl who had always bickering with him.

He smiled and walked over, giving a mock bow.

"My lady, you look absolutely beautiful today."

She gave him a look.

This guy really had guts.

She stood and curtsied in return.

"Thank you, Lord Grey..."

Then she leaned toward him and whispered through a clenched smile—

"Not now, you bastard..."

Damon smirked, amused, as a maid guided him to a seat—

at the far end of the table, beside a large, empty throne-like chair.

He noticed Evangeline fidgeting.

So much for trying to lighten the mood...

Soon, the others began to arrive—Xander, Sylvia, Leona, Matia.

Then came the Duke and Duchess.

The Duke took his place at the head of the table, the Duchess beside him. Evangeline sat at his right hand.

The table remained untouched.

They were clearly waiting for someone.

And then—

A presence entered.

The room shifted.

Everyone stood—including the Duke himself.

Damon, caught off guard, was a second too slow. But he rose anyway.

The Grand Duke had arrived.

He walked with quiet authority, golden hair slicked back, eyes sharp. An old monster dressed in nobility.

He stopped beside Damon, giving him a brief glance.

Then he sat.

Right next to Damon.

The only person sitting beside him.

Damon sat down slowly after.

'Ahhh. I knew I had a bad feeling...'

Chapter 430: Nostalgia

Damon had experienced a lot for someone so young. Sixteen—wait, no... actually, he was seventeen now.

Not that it mattered.

What mattered was that he'd already lived through more than most people ever would. Years of trauma stacked atop each other like corpses in a pit, festering, warping, and crushing what was once a clear mind. He had endured.

But slowly, surely... he had broken.

The only thing keeping his sanity intact was a single crown that rested upon his head.

And looking at his situation now—

That same crown felt like the reason his head would fly.

Damon sat stiffly beside arguably the most powerful man in the empire. Or at the very least, one of them.

The Grand Duke.

A being who had reached the Seventh Class—a realm of advancement where even kings walked lightly. That kind of power was no longer made for fighting battles. No. It existed as a threat—a deterrent. The sort of force that sat still and unbothered, because if it moved, entire nations would fall.

Damon had seen such beings before—monsters and men alike.

He remembered Ashergon, the dragon.

How it had incinerated a whole region with a single breath.

He lifted a fork and took a quiet bite of food.

'Why am I even thinking about that right now...?'

He forced himself to not steal glances at the Grand Duke. But he could feel it.

That gaze.

That weight.

The old man's sizing me up...

His stomach turned, not from fear—but from the sheer tension. Not even the fragrant sweetness of tamberly cake could settle him. And it smelled just like how his mom used to make it.

'Damn it... of all things, why that?'

He kept his head lowered—not out of disrespect, but discipline.

Damon might be a commoner, but he knew etiquette. He'd been trained.

The maids had taken the fabric he used to conceal the Pale Crown and insisted on dressing him in something more fitting—a noble's attire, with a hood to obscure the artifact.

But the crown still glimmered.

It always did.

Hard to hide something cursed with such radiance.

The Grand Duke finally lifted his wine glass.

Dinner was over.

Now came dessert.

The scent of tamberly cakes filled the air as the maids began clearing the table and rolling out plates of extravagance—layered fruit tortes, honey-glazed pastries, frosted confections and—

Damon didn't even want to look.

It was too much.

But then the silence broke.

A silence that had lasted since the Grand Duke arrived and sat at Damon's side.

His voice, low and deliberate, cut through the room like a blade.

"What would you like for dessert... is there anything you would prefer?"

He was looking at Damon. Only Damon.

Evangeline froze—so tense she looked like her dress was sewn from needles. She fidgeted in place, eyes wide.

Everyone turned toward Damon.

Xander especially looked like he'd just seen a ghost. His eyes locked on Damon in disbelief.

The Grand Duke—this relic, this walking fortress of power—hadn't spoken to anyone outside his family in nearly two decades.

Even the Emperor had been refused once.

Xander had heard the story from his grandfather. The Emperor sent a summons, and the Grand Duke responded with a simple, legendary phrase:

"Screw off."

And now, this man was asking Damon what dessert he preferred?

Xander didn't know what Damon had done, but—

'Damon, you bastard... what did you do...?'

If this went south, Xander swore he'd fall to his knees and beg for Damon's life.

Meanwhile, Damon remained still, only slightly narrowing his brow.

He didn't sense any hostility from the Grand Duke... but that absence of hostility made his nerves scream louder.

So much so, his Remorseless skill activated on its own—

a passive trigger for when his mind perceived battle.

His thoughts calmed. His breathing leveled. His smile returned.

"I have a fondness for tamberly cakes, Your Grace..."

The Grand Duke chuckled, a slow, amused sound.

He reached out with his hand—ignoring the maid who rushed forward, pale with fear.

He raised his hand, stopping her.

The gesture alone nearly made her faint.

He served a slice onto Damon's plate—then another for himself.

Damon's heart remained steady. His mind clear.

He picked up his fork and took a bite.

Soft. Sweet. Delicious.

His eyes widened ever so slightly.

It was real.

The last time I tasted this...

It brought him back. A place of warmth and bitter memory.

Home.

A woman with golden locks.

No...

The last time he'd eaten tamberly cake—

He was in the nest of a vile beldam.

Still, the expression on his face didn't escape the Grand Duke.

"Do you like it?"

Damon lifted his head. Voice calm.

"It's delicious. The taste is nostalgic. The flavor is... reminiscent of home. The last time I had tamberly—"

The Grand Duke leaned in slightly.

"I see. When was the last time?"

Damon glanced at Evangeline.

She shook her head lightly—warning him. Begging him not to do anything reckless.

Still, Damon didn't like being cornered.

Didn't like being pried into.

He decided to steer the conversation himself.

"The last time I had tamberry cake was in the nest of a Rank Four Beldam... right before I tossed her into dragon flames."

Leona sighed and smirked. Damon's eyes slid her way. She knew he was under pressure—intense scrutiny—and he needed backup.

She chuckled.

"I was certain we would all die in that place..."

They changed the topic.

The Grand Duke shifted slightly, his gaze flicking toward Cassian, who sat across from him.

Cassian let out a slow sigh.

'You were too aggressive, Father... You'll scare him off...'

He sipped his wine and offered a thin smile, then glanced at the Grand Duke again.

'Nineteen years as a shut-in and now you suddenly want my help...'

But he understood. He truly did.

So he softened the tension, pivoting the topic gently.

"Ah, yes. My father absolutely adores tamberly cakes. I think he's the only one in our entire family who still does."

Damon noticed the shift—subtle but calculated.

'Hmph. I'd expect no less from a noble trained in court politics... they really know how to steer the tone.'

He nodded once, lifting his own glass.

"My mother used to make tamberly cakes. Quite like this, actually. That was where the nostalgia came from."

The Grand Duke's hand trembled slightly.

"Y-your mother... Tell me, what was she like?"

Damon's expression darkened.

His response was a single, quiet word.

"...Dead."