

Shadow 431

Chapter 431: From Victim To Villain

Death was an awkward topic of conversation. It always had been.

People preferred silence over sharing the weight of their trauma—especially with strangers. Unless there was some degree of trust or familiarity, no one wanted to talk about loss.

And pressing for details?

That could come off as rude... and painfully insensitive.

Especially when it involved someone's mother.

Damon kept his face impassive, expression locked in neutral stillness. He hoped the topic would fade with his single-word answer.

He didn't mind answering questions—but being dissected for answers...?

That hit too close to home.

It dragged up the worst parts of his childhood.

Still... the Grand Duke's expression remained heavy.

Unmoving.

Damon felt the powerful weight of that gaze again, then heard the next question, softer—almost hesitant.

"H...how did she die?"

Evangeline stiffened. Her complexion paled.

She recognized that look on Damon's face. He wore it when he was just about out of patience.

"She died in the Demon Wars..."

The words left his mouth flat, cold.

Before the Grand Duke could respond again, Evangeline stood abruptly. It was as if she didn't know what to say, so she blurted out the first thing that crossed her mind.

"Ermh... Damon has been living in Valerion with his sister ever since... ermh... he enrolled in the academy. And he's ranked first among the first-years..."

Cassian sighed quietly and raised his wine glass.

"I'm sorry for your loss..."

Across the table, the Duchess—Annalise—watched her daughter. She caught the subtle gestures Evangeline made, caught the unease in her movements.

Even though she was the host's wife, she was little more than a spectator now. The discussion had turned—gone down a path that none of the men at the table wanted to explain.

Still... she noticed the strangeness. The Grand Duke had left his wing of the palace.

A man who hadn't so much as acknowledged his duties in nearly twenty years.

And it wasn't for Evangeline.

His eyes... never once strayed from that boy.

Any other person might have felt offended.

Or wounded.

But even Evangeline looked unsettled.

'Is my family keeping something from me?'

The Duchess leaned back, eyes narrowing faintly.

'Who is this boy? There's no way he's just a commoner. Not with that etiquette. Not with that presence. And definitely not with my father-in-law's attention on him...'

She didn't ask. She knew she wouldn't get answers here. Not from them.

"What is going on right now?"

Cassian took another sip and placed the glass down lightly.

"I've been quite curious about your travels. Evangeline hinted at a few things, but to me... it's almost miraculous. A group of children surviving the Duhu Mountains, crossing the Whispering Forest, and enduring the horrors of Lysithara."

The Grand Duke glanced at him. Cassian offered a small smile, the kind that didn't reach his eyes.

'We have time, Father. No need to rush. We already know all we need to know.'

And just like that—Cassian took hold of the conversation again.

His gaze shifted toward Sylvia, who had been quiet this whole time... though her eyes had occasionally flicked toward Damon, betraying her thoughts.

She wore a pristine white dress—elven in design—with small woven flowers tucked into her hair.

"I heard this all began because you crossed the perpetrator behind the dark spirit incident at the academy," Cassian said, his voice casual but sharp.

"The White Ruler had been displeased that a commoner dragged his daughter into trouble..."

Sylvia straightened in her seat, lips parting.

"That's not—"

Damon cut her off before she could continue.

So that's what this is about.

"Doubtful," Damon said flatly. "Why would the White Ruler be displeased? If anything, I'm surprised you're not displeased with him, Your Grace."

His eyes flicked toward Sylvia for a heartbeat—an apology in his gaze—then back to Cassian.

"The primary target in that incident was always Lady Moonveil. The rest of us risked life and limb to save her. Should the Elf King not be grateful? He has no reason to condemn us. And moreover..."

Damon's voice remained smooth, but his tone grew more cutting.

"...we can't be certain the summoner of the dark spirit wasn't targeting her again. The rest of us may have simply been collateral damage. In fact, you, Your Grace, nearly lost Lady Brightwater due to her friendship with Lady Moonveil..."

He placed his glass down slowly, deliberately.

"Shouldn't you be displeased by the White Ruler?"

He paused, letting his words settle.

"Or do elves repay kindness with malice?"

The air went still.

A bold move. Perhaps reckless.

But necessary.

Nobles were not known for reason. Royalty even less. A commoner had no room for error—not when so many eyes were watching for blood.

Sylvia bowed her head, rising from her seat.

"I sincerely apologize for any trouble my father has caused. We elves... are not ungrateful."

She closed her eyes, voice composed.

"I will speak with him personally to clear any misunderstandings. And I would like to formally thank my companions for protecting me. Especially Damon—who saved my life, time and again."

Cassian looked at Damon again.

There was... respect in his eyes.

Damon had turned the narrative.

In only a few sentences, he made the White Ruler look ungrateful—perhaps even petty. A dangerous man had just been politically cornered, all without even stepping into the room.

And Sylvia—daughter of that same ruler—had publicly thanked a commoner and chastised her own kin.

Cassian smiled faintly, glass raised.

A commoner huh ...? No. This boy is dangerous.

'I was too focused on the name "Noctis Grey" during the meeting to handle the White Ruler myself. But with a few words... he turned the entire table. From victim to villain.... I I would love to see your expression now, Kadelas.'

'It would be more interesting if he dared to say that to his face.'

Across the table, the Grand Duke studied Damon quietly.

He had noticed the boy biting his lip.

Not out of pride.

Out of guilt.

Even now, Damon was hurting—for using Sylvia like that.

It cost her very little. A bit of face, perhaps. A bit of standing.

But nothing more.

Still, his affection for her was clear.

The Grand Duke narrowed his eyes.

He didn't like that.

Especially not with Kadelas Moonveil—the White Ruler—as her father.

"You have quite the way with words," the Grand Duke said softly.

Then he turned to Sylvia.

"But since Lady Moonveil has confirmed it, I can testify that your words are correct."

He gestured gently.

"You may sit down, child. There's no need to worry. Now... why don't you share how you survived, with this old man?"

Xander immediately sat straighter, seizing the chance to lighten the mood.

"We found ourselves stranded near the edge of Ashergon's territory. A mana anomaly blocked the only safe route. One direction led to the dragon's nest... the other through the Duhu Mountains and the Whispering Forest."

He paused, fingers clenching slightly as the fear rose in his memory.

Leona picked up the thread.

"We didn't have the luxury of waiting for help," she said. "We were trapped. And the demon army was moving through the region."

Cassian's eyes narrowed.

This was going to be quite the tale.

Chapter 432: Irrefutable Evidence

Damon remained relatively quiet ever since they began recounting their journey—how they had crossed not just one but three danger zones.

Each more dire than the last.

Well, at least Lysithara had places where weaker creatures could hide. But the truth was obvious. Had they not reached First Class by the time they entered the Whispering Forest, they would've died.

If they hadn't crossed the Duhu Mountains when they did, they would've been caught by demons... or turned to ash by Ashergon.

Damon wasn't the only one who stayed silent.

Matia sat beside him in a flowing black dress that matched her long, ink-dark hair. Taciturn as ever, she hadn't spoken a word—barely touched her food.

Come to think of it, Damon had noticed something odd.

Ever since she became a Shadow... she didn't need to eat.

By now, everyone at the table was fully absorbed in the story—noble or not.

They listened as Damon's party told how they were hunted by redcap goblins and war trolls, how they crossed the cursed peaks of the Duhu Mountains.

How they entered the Whispering Forest.

And when the tale reached the moment they were trapped in the Beldam's Nest, one of the maids gasped aloud.

She quickly clasped her hand over her mouth. But no one reprimanded her—not even the Duke.

Everyone else was too stunned.

The Duchess, Annalise, sat motionless, her eyes drawn toward the other end of the table—toward Damon.

A mere boy, and yet...

He had killed a Rank Four monster, using nothing but cunning and wit.

And he had done it just days after reaching First Class.

Even the famed Seras Blade couldn't compare to that level of achievement so soon.

After that, he had led his party into the ruined city of Lysithara... faced horrors. Triumphed.

He was the embodiment of the phrase.

Trauma creates triumph.

Of course, not every part of their journey was shared.

They left out Sylvia's possession.

There was no mention of the Unknown God, or Mugu, or Ashcroft.

But they spoke at length about Valarie.

Her wisdom. Her kindness.

Damon clenched his fist beneath the table, remembering her final words to him.

She had asked him to create something beautiful.

By the time they reached the end of their tale—the Riddle of the Keeper of False Truths—it was already late into the night.

From beginning to end, Damon had barely spoken.

He let his companions speak. Trusted them to carry the narrative.

And they did.

They never downplayed his contributions. If anything... they may have exaggerated a little.

At one point, they claimed he never once despaired.

That he was an indomitable spirit of sheer will.

But Damon had broken. Again and again.

Even now, he was just fragments—held together by willpower... and the enchantments of the Pale Crown Armor.

Silence followed as the story ended.

Then—

Softly. Faintly.

The sound of tear drops.

A maid had begun to cry. She couldn't hold it back any longer.

What these children had gone through...

What they had survived...

It was terrifying.

The Grand Duke wore a solemn expression.

"You have all experienced so much," he said quietly. "Too much... for ones so young."

Cassian nodded, his eyes distant.

"I can't attribute your survival to luck alone," he said. "Your skill played a part. But you were lucky as well..."

Annalise nodded slowly beside him.

"Most expeditions into death zones end in death," she said. "That's why we call them that. For unequipped students to survive... is a miracle."

Cassian sighed.

"I still remember my first expedition," he murmured.

"It wasn't even a death zone. Just beyond the Golden Road... and the entire group was wiped out. I was the only survivor. Death zones are far more dire."

He turned to glance at his father.

"I believe we should let them rest. It's been a long and taxing journey."

The Grand Duke nodded, agreeing silently.

Then he looked at them all.

"Your exploits were legendary," he said. "A ball will be held the day after tomorrow. I will ensure the world knows what you've accomplished."

He paused. His gaze rested on Damon.

"I swear it... on the name of Grand Duke Damien Brightwater."

Damon's fingers twitched.

The Grand Duke's next words came with a faint, almost warm smile.

"I believe your valor deserves a reward. Having accomplished so much..."

His golden eyes didn't leave Damon's.

"If there is something you want... ask this old man."

Damon bit his lip.

'If he hadn't just said his name... I might've asked for something—wealth, a title, a cure for magic circuit cancer...'

But something stopped him.

More than fatigue.

He wanted to ask a question.

"Does the name—"

The Grand Duke turned his head, attentive. But Damon caught himself.

His hand instinctively went to the pendant hidden beneath his clothes.

His mother's.

He wanted to ask about the name Rachel.

Whether the Grand Duke knew her.

Whether the locket—originally hers—meant something.

But something told him... not now.

"No... it's nothing," Damon said at last. "I merely wanted to thank you for your hospitality."

Still—he needed a reaction.

He needed a reason to dig deeper.

To snoop around.

To confirm the whispering suspicion clawing at the back of his mind.

'If he is... then what are his intentions for me?'

'If he's not... then he's just an old man, glad I brought his granddaughter home.'

Paranoia was one of the few things that had kept Damon alive.

He didn't want to consider what his instincts were telling him.

But neither did he want to be anyone's pawn.

The tale of the Grand Duke's supposedly dead daughter... hit a little too close to home.

If Lilith hadn't told me... it wouldn't matter. But now...

He smiled at the Grand Duke—one last time.

"The tamberly cakes were delicious," he said lightly. "I hadn't had anything this good since my mother, Ranar, was alive."

There.

A direct line.

And the Grand Duke flinched. Just barely.

"You're welcome," he replied. "I'd be happy to share them with you again."

His golden eyes remained calm. Too calm.

Damon recognized it. That look.

The look of a man telling a lie. He wore the same expression, too, when he was lying.

'Now I have to know.'

As they left the room and returned to their quarters, Damon's jaw was clenched.

'I have to contact Lilith. First thing tomorrow.'

'I need her political maneuvering to get out of here...'

'I have a feeling... the old man's not going to let me leave easily.'

He walked through the long halls, flanked by maids.

'But first... I need to confirm what I already know to be true.'

'I need irrefutable evidence.'

Chapter 433: Morning Tea

The gentle breeze of the morning brushed past his face, carrying the lingering scent of breakfast.

The fragrance of tea hung thick in the air—aromatic, but not overwhelming.

Pleasant.

A wide balcony overlooked the courtyard training ground below, where armored knights clashed in drills under the rising sun.

Despite the steel ringing and orders being shouted, this place—this pavilion set on green grass, ringed with flowers—felt untouched by the chaos beneath.

Damon sat calmly, a teacup in hand, his eyes fixed on the chessboard before him.

The board wasn't standard. Each piece was a carved figure: dragons, elves, fae, centaurs... even demons.

Every piece had its own unique movement set.

And while Damon was holding his own... he was losing.

His opponent was simply too good.

The Grand Duke smiled faintly. Damon had put up an impressive fight for someone so young.

Truth be told, he could've ended the game from the very beginning—but he wanted it to last a little longer.

"It's your move, boy."

Damon nodded and set down his cup.

This was the third day he'd spent in the Brightwater Estate.

And each morning, without fail, he shared breakfast with the Grand Duke. Just the two of them.

By this point, Damon was almost certain.

He just needed one single piece of proof.

To get it, he'd need to sneak into the Duke's wing of the palace—one that few were allowed to enter.

But that was fine.

He had a plan.

There was a ball tonight. The Grand Duke would attend, which meant he wouldn't be in his wing.

And unlike him... I can be in two places at once.

He smiled and made his move, capturing two of the Grand Duke's pieces with a subtle flourish.

The old man was good. Too good.

"Tell me, Damon... what do you think wins wars?"

Damon wore a thoughtful expression, though his mind was already far elsewhere.

The Grand Duke loved to talk politics at breakfast—every day, without fail.

Ordinarily, Damon might've been out of his depth.

But thanks to Lilith, who drilled it into his head for their future ambitions, he was more than prepared.

"War can be won by many factors... just as many can cause losses."

The Grand Duke nodded slowly, sipping his tea.

"Have you heard of the Battle of Halrem Pass? It was quite recent."

Damon looked up at him.

"I wouldn't call something that happened almost ten years ago recent," he replied.

"But yes, I'm aware of the disastrous losses the goddess races suffered there."

The Grand Duke made another move—shattering six of Damon's pieces in a single sweep.

"Why do you think that battle was lost? It was the first battle of the most recent Demon Wars, yet we began with defeat."

Damon glanced down at the board.

Couldn't this old man hold back a little? I'm only seventeen...

"The official story was that the demon army had more high-ranked fighters on the battlefield."

The Grand Duke leaned forward, interested.

"But you have a different opinion."

Damon nodded.

"Yes... Halrem is a pass that leads to the sea between Soltheon and Centros. The demons secured their logistics line. Meanwhile, the goddess races ignored supply lines in favor of firepower."

He looked back at the board. "In war... logistics always wins."

The Grand Duke smiled, clearly pleased.

"You have a sound strategic mind. Where were youngsters like you when the war started?"

Damon smiled back, but this time... it was sharp.

"Probably in my mother's arms... before she got dragged into the war. I would imagine the loss at Halrem was the reason the demon army made it so far inland."

The Grand Duke faltered, just briefly. Damon didn't miss it.

He used that moment to go on the offensive, shifting the game in his favor and aiming for the jugular.

Naturally, he had been snooping around.

He'd tried using astral projection to reach the Grand Duke's private wing, but ultimately gave up the idea.

Still, he'd learned enough.

For instance, the Grand Duke kept a portrait of his late daughter in his room.

"That was a nice move," the old man admitted.

Damon smiled faintly. "Thank you, Your Grace."

He remained cautious. The old man didn't exude hostility—but if this chess game was any clue, then he was more than capable of toying with people.

Damon had seen many faces wear masks in his life.

Being betrayed by blood was nothing new.

He had long stopped expecting anything from those who shared his bloodline.

More importantly...

'How do I politely get out of here?'

Down below, Evangeline had entered the courtyard. She and Leona looked to be preparing for a sparring match.

Damon leaned forward with a smirk.

"That looks intriguing. Mind if I test my mantle against the famed knights of the Brightwater Duchy?"

The Grand Duke nodded. "By all means... however, you should wear this."

With a motion of his hand, he pulled something from his spatial ring.

It was a hooded outfit—black with golden embroidery, tailored and elegant.

Damon took it, unfolding the fabric. It shimmered slightly in the morning light.

The texture. The aura.

"Karfe..." he whispered.

A magical thread. Durable. Able to change color to match any outfit.

And very, very expensive.

'How many million zeni is this worth on the market...?'

The Grand Duke's gaze fell on the crown atop Damon's head.

"That crown may cause some trouble. But if you wear a hood of such quality, few will notice. Think of it as a small gift."

'Several million zeni is a small gift.'

Damon nodded, accepting the hood. It shifted in color to match his current clothes.

He pulled it over his head and observed himself through his shadow.

The crown still gleamed faintly beneath... but at least it was hidden now.

The Grand Duke smiled. "You may wear that to the ball tonight. The press will be in attendance... as well as every noble in the region."

Damon nodded quietly.

"There's no need to worry. Even after you leave, if someone causes trouble over the crown on your head... you need only inform me."

It was almost a touching gesture.

Almost.

If he wasn't already drowning in suspicion.

"Thank you, Your Grace... I'll keep that in mind."

Damon stood and turned toward the balcony's edge.

Then, without hesitation, he jumped down.

Wind rushed past him as he landed near the training knights.

'Let's hope Lilith got my message.'

Chapter 434: Damon The Ascendant

The wealthy truly lived the good life—beautiful clothes, lavish residences, and more than that, they had people to serve them.

Perhaps those who had only known the mundane, peasant life didn't realize it, but the moment you feel what it's like to have someone serve you... you can never go back.

Maybe that was why certain people treated restaurant staff so poorly. Or why nobles and officials in high places walked around like the world owed them everything.

They told the common man that there was virtue in poverty, that being rich was immoral, corrupt.

But Damon would have liked to give all of that nonsense a proud, two-handed middle finger.

Being rich was worlds apart from being poor.

Where else could you see such lavish décor, wear such expensive clothes, eat such wonderful food—and most of all—be flanked by beautiful maids and protected by knights who looked like they could wrestle dragons?

If you were born into power, your word was law.

A shame, really... that he had been born a dirty commoner. Just another one of the ninety-nine percent who weren't lucky enough to come from noble blood.

And yet, still had to live under the whims of those who were.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't rise. That didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy the festivities.

The Grand Duke had set up a grand ball—though naturally, he hadn't announced he'd attend personally.

After all, he'd been a shut-in for nineteen years. If the nobles of Valtheron knew he'd be here, there would be airships and teleportation spells flying in from every corner of the empire just to meet him.

Still, even without him, all the regional nobles under the Brightwater banner had already arrived.

From the balcony where Damon stood, he saw opulent carriages rolling in, each one marked by unique house crests.

There were press carriages too, equipped with magical artifacts capable of capturing still images.

Naturally, the rumors of Damon's party returning had spread quickly. And of course, many had become wildly exaggerated.

Still, Damon wasn't allowed into the main hall just yet.

It wasn't because he was a commoner...

'Or wait... it could be.'

But he doubted it. More likely, it was because he had been asked to wait for the Grand Duke to arrive before entering.

While he waited, a table full of snacks stood nearby. Maids flitted about with eager smiles. But Damon didn't touch anything.

He wasn't waiting to enter the ballroom.

He was waiting for the Grand Duke to leave his quarters.

"After all... if he stays there, how can I sneak in?"

It wasn't long before Damon sensed it—a subdued, massive presence drawing near.

Along with the sound of orderly footsteps—knights, most likely.

Damon turned.

There he was.

Golden hair streaked with silver. A regal white outfit embossed in gold.

Damon, by contrast, was the opposite.

He wore black, silver embroidery threading through his cloak. The crown on his head hidden beneath his enchanted hood.

There was some similarity in design between their outfits.

'Looks like the old man's trying to send a message...'

Damon glanced once more at the balcony.

'Looks like Lilith won't be able to make it on time after all... guess I'll just have to hope for the best.'

Naturally, he followed behind the Grand Duke as the knights at the door stood aside and saluted.

The doors opened.

He could hear the voice of the announcer ringing through the grand ballroom:

"His Excellency, the Grand Duke Damien Brightwater, Sun of the Empire."

Surprisingly brief. Damon had expected something far more drawn out as an act of sycophancy.

He shouldn't have celebrated so soon.

Because it was his turn next.

As he followed the Grand Duke into the ballroom, hundreds of gazes turned silently toward him.

The announcer's voice echoed again, now louder and more dramatic:

"By his side... a hero of the Empire. A legend in the making. One of valor—a man who carries the indomitable spirit of the Valtheron Empire. He who single-handedly slew a rank four monster only days after reaching the First Class..."

"A prodigy who led his party through not one, not two, but three Death Zones... truths say he has conquered the Path of Kings and earned himself the noble title of Ascendant..."

"We are pleased to welcome an honored guest of the Grand Duke...

Damon the Ascendant."

Damon froze.

If the Grand Duke hadn't kept walking, he might have tripped over his own feet.

He hadn't even noticed they'd already reached the center of the ballroom.

Flashes of magical image-capturing artifacts lit up around him.

Next to him, the Grand Duke stood with that same, calm smile.

And nobles stared. Dozens. Hundreds.

Murmurs began to spread like fire.

"I heard he reached Second Class only months after his First—and he's not far from Third."

"My sources say he faced Ashergon and lived..."

"They say he slew a rank four Beldam in her nest... with a single strike."

A woman's voice floated from the crowd.

"What does he even look like? I heard no one's ever seen his face—he always wears a hood."

"That's because he's covered in scars. From fighting the great dragon Ashergon."

"It's all exaggerated... I mean, I heard he's a commoner..."

"I heard it was Lord Ravenscroft who led the party. He was just too humble to take the credit."

"A commoner could never..."

Damon heard it all—rumors, praise, doubt, credit redirected to his friends.

Some said Xander led the party. Some Evangeline. Some claimed he just tagged along.

But what made Damon pause wasn't the gossip.

It was how the announcer had not used his full name.

'The Grand Duke doesn't want the name Grey out...'

And Damon understood why.

Still, none of that mattered now.

Because he had finally gotten the Grand Duke to leave his quarters.

The old man thought he was watching Damon...

But the truth was—Damon was watching him.

In Damon's room, a shadow slipped beneath the door.

It stretched, shifted, rose... taking his form.

He now wore the Shadow Armor.

Activating the Faceless skill, his appearance remained the same—yet no one could recognize him.

Anyone who looked at this clone would not be able to connect him to Damon.

He had used the Shadow Clone skill.

This was his double.

'I can be in two places at once, old man...'

It was time to confirm the truth.

Chapter 435: May I Have This Dance

[Skill: Shadow Clone]

[Description:]

Fuska the Face-Stealer was the weakest of his kind — a creature without pride or power. He watched as his kin perished to creatures far beneath them in form, yet far above in will and wit. Mankind, with no claws or wings, still flew and killed with tools and cunning. Fuska learned their ways. He took their faces, their knowledge, their strength — and became their mirror. Not just a monster, but a shadow of man... made strong through imitation.

[Effect:]

Creates a temporary avatar of yourself, formed from shadow energy. You may choose how much shadow energy to invest; the clone's power, speed, and durability scale accordingly, up to a maximum of 90% of your current stats. The clone mimics all your abilities, but vanishes when its energy is spent. Only one clone can exist at a time.

[Type:]

Active

[Cooldown:]

24hr

This was the skill Damon was using now.

His shadow clone wasn't a perfect reproduction of him—just an extension. It could only scale up to ninety percent of his actual strength, assuming he invested that much shadow energy into it.

It had access to his Shadow Storage, though it could only equip items his main body wasn't currently using—except for the Pale Crown Armor. That one was different. While the armor couldn't exist in two places at once, its enchantments still worked through the clone.

There were limits. Dangers. If the clone was destroyed, Damon's soul would suffer backlash.

And if it simply ran out of shadow energy, it would dissolve on its own—and afterward, he wouldn't be able to summon another one for a full day.

The clone didn't gain stat boosts from combat, and anything it ate was just converted into shadow. But Damon had a theory the clone could still gain new skills.

This particular clone was created with just ten percent of his overall shadow energy—meaning it was only ten percent as powerful.

Still, what annoyed him wasn't the power gap.

It was seeing from two perspectives at once.

He was used to it—Shadow Perception had long since conditioned his mind to track multiple views—but now, there were two entirely separate inputs. And one of them was weak.

So in the main ballroom, Damon deactivated his Shadow Perception.

Surrounded by nobles fawning over the Grand Duke, he was largely ignored.

Still, the Grand Duke's open attention on him was enough to make the more observant nobles take notice.

To them, he wasn't just a mysterious guest.

He was a gateway to the Grand Duke.

Fortunately, Damon didn't have to say much. Just polite greetings. That made it easier to focus on his clone—far away, deep inside the Duke's private wing.

The clone moved like a drifting shadow, burning shadow energy with every step.

That was fine. Damon didn't want it to last. He wanted it to dissolve once its mission was done.

It moved through the halls, quiet and smooth—until it reached a corridor with posted knights.

"Tch..." Damon clicked his tongue through the clone.

No way he could sneak past them.

He looked toward the window. Then jumped.

Activating Parkour, he launched onto a nearby gargoyle, then fired his Omnidirectional Gear, anchoring to a ledge on the far side of the castle.

The arc of the swing was steep—too much momentum. He was going to hit hard.

But he didn't flinch.

Just before impact, he shifted into pure shadow, slipping cleanly through the outer stone and falling into the hallway beyond.

He exhaled quietly.

Footsteps.

A knight rushed over.

Damon's clone slid under a table, its shadow deepening unnaturally beneath the table.

Another knight followed.

"Is something wrong?"

The first one paused, hand resting on his sword. "...No. I must've imagined it."

They turned away, never noticing the unnatural pool of darkness tucked under the table.

The clone continued forward.

It had entered the Duke's wing.

Now it just had to avoid being sensed by the Duke himself.

In the ballroom—

Damon finally spotted his friends.

Naturally, they were surrounded too.

Evangeline and Xander, both nobles of Valtheron, were encircled by minor lords and curious nobles.

Sylvia, on the other hand, was being swarmed by young noblemen, each one confident in their charm and looks—each one asking for a dance.

"Do these fools not know she's the daughter of the White Ruler? Or do they just not care?"

Leona, predictably, had migrated toward the food. Anyone who interrupted her got a look so cold it could stop a troll in its tracks.

As for Matia, who now known to the shadows—she stood unmoving in her black dress, still as a statue. Some tried to approach, but her presence was like a thousand-year-old glacier.

Damon finally managed to slip free from the Grand Duke's circle.

He glanced at Evangeline, offering her a polite nod.

Then turned toward Sylvia—just in time to catch the glare in her eyes.

She ignored the men around her and started walking toward him.

Every eye in the room shifted to her.

Damon sighed inwardly.

All I wanted was for her to pretend to talk to me so I could focus on my clone...

But it seemed Sylvia had her own plans.

"I've never been to a Soltheon-style ball," she said, standing elegantly beside him.

Damon really didn't feel like talking—but how could he ignore the elven beauty in a flowing white dress? Her white hair was styled elegantly, accentuating her ears. Her heels made her just a little taller than usual.

His eyes drifted—just briefly.

He subconsciously recalled her measurements

"She's definitely grown past those..."

"What?" Sylvia asked, blinking. "Grown past what?"

Damon cleared his throat. "I meant... aren't balls in the Verdant Continent the same?"

She nodded, giving him a subtle, pointed smile.

"They're similar... although, in the Verdant Continent, the gentleman would be the one to ask the lady for a dance."

He got the hint.

And the glances from the other nobles didn't help—particularly from the noblewomen who were very aware of his status as a "commoner" and gave him wide berth.

But the noble young men?

They were practically boiling with envy.

Damon sighed.

He'd wanted to focus on his clone. But what better way to keep the Duke's attention fixed here, than to be seen dancing with the daughter of the Elf King Kadelas?

He stepped back with a slight bow.

Then extended his hand.

"May I have this dance... my beautiful princess?"

Sylvia's face turned scarlet.

The "beautiful" part wasn't necessary—but it seemed Damon was determined to pull the heartstrings of this fair maiden.

Chapter 436: Gardenias

Damon's clone bit his lip as he came to a halt in front of the Grand Duke's quarters. The door before him had a complex lock, the kind that screamed nobility and too much money.

He was starting to seriously hate how securely rich people locked their rooms.

He squatted low, inspecting the lock—trying to find a way to pick it without burning too much shadow energy.

While his clone was busy with that—

His main body was now at the center of attention.

One hand wrapped around Sylvia's waist as they waltzed across the dance floor. The two of them made for quite the sight—an elegant elven lady in white and a hooded figure shrouded in black.

The ballroom grew silent.

All eyes were on them.

Damon bit his lip again—carefully avoiding stepping on Sylvia's heels. The last person he danced with was his sister... and that was years ago.

But even more importantly—

"Crap..." he muttered.

Someone had spotted his shadow clone in the Duke's wing.

"Halt! Identify yourself! This is the Grand Duke's private wing—you are not permitted to be here!"

The knight's voice rang out, sharp and authoritative.

He couldn't make out the figure clearly, not with the shadows twisting unnaturally around him. Still, his hand moved to his sword.

It didn't feel like a thief—too bold. Besides, this wasn't even the path to the treasury.

A drunk noble? Maybe. That had happened before.

His Grace will likely make an example out of another idiot, the knight thought grimly.

That was—until the figure straightened up.

What he saw then made the breath catch in his lungs. Fear gripped his chest. His limbs felt suddenly heavy.

There was no face. He couldn't tell if this was a man or a woman—young or old—tall or short.

It was as if the world itself refused to describe the entity before him.

"...What are you...?"

Damon smiled from beneath his hood.

Good. Faceless was working exactly as intended.

The knight was under the effects of Omen of Dread.

Still, Damon's clone was only at 10% power, and this knight... was of a similar rank.

Luckily, the Terror Engine skill made the knights fear empower Damon.

"...Identify yourself..."

The knight's tone sharpened.

"The Word commands you—state your name."

Damon froze.

His mouth... began to move on its own.

"This is a class skill..."

His lips parted involuntarily.

Back in the ballroom, his real body stammered—barely whispering out the first syllable of his name—

"Da..."

He bit his lower lip hard. Blood welled up.

This wasn't a mental skill.

The knight's skill was trying to force the truth out of him. But Damon didn't resist it head-on.

Instead, he twisted it.

He smiled.

"Amon," he said.

The curse triggered instantly.

The knight doubled over, coughing blood violently.

Damon's eyes narrowed. "Knew it. Curse-type skill. If I resist, he suffers backlash."

He surged forward with [5x] active—fist cocked.

The knight responded fast, sword drawn—he wasn't a rookie. He'd trained under the Brightwater banner and had survived battlefields.

Their blades clashed—Damon forming a short blade along his gauntlet of his shadow armor.

Even so, he was pushed back.

'If this was my main body, I wouldn't have budged an inch...'

Still, no excuses. He had to move.

Thankfully, the knight hadn't called for backup.

He slammed into him again, crashing the knight down onto the floor with a sharp thud.

'I've seen this worn-out script play out too many times. I'm not going to be anyone's political pawn. And I'm not getting betrayed a second time.'

He drove his elbow down on the knight's helmet with force.

'If they didn't have ulterior motives, why keep hiding the truth?'

Water surged up from the knight's palm—forming into a thin blade. Water attribute.

Damon's eyes sharpened.

He dodged.

Time slowed—Beholder's Gaze activating automatically.

He flipped along the wall and kicked the knight straight through the ornate door, shattering it with a heavy tremor.

He tumbled inside, shadows slipping in behind him.

'The Grand Duke definitely heard that...'

The room was luxurious but cold, shadows pooling at every edge. His clone's energy was dropping fast.

And then—he saw it.

A portrait.

A young woman with golden hair. That same smile he remembered.

Only younger. A glint of mischief behind the eyes.

'Hey there, mom...'

That was it. The final proof. The confirmation he'd been seeking—yet already knew deep down.

The Grand Duke's supposedly dead daughter, the woman who married a commoner... was his mother.

And the fool she married?

That was his father.

The so-called fools he'd disdained in his mind all this time... were his own parents.

The vast world of Aetherus had just gotten a whole lot smaller.

He didn't know what to feel.

Should he have been happy? He and his sister weren't alone.

Should he have felt resentment? That no one came to save them when they suffered?

Should he curse his mother's noble blood—the very thing that had brought Luna and him so much pain?

'I... feel... sick...'

Footsteps were rushing down the corridor.

His clone began breaking down—fading into particles of blackness and shadow.

I... I...

He didn't want to hope. Not for kinship. Not again.

He wanted clean, sharp truths. Enemy or ally. Friend or foe. Black or white.

But the world wasn't like that.

It was gray.

He let out a quiet, bitter laugh.

In the ballroom—

Damon and Sylvia had come to a stop.

The crowd applauded softly at the end of their dance.

The Grand Duke clapped as well.

But then—he stopped.

His golden eyes went cold.

He was staring toward the direction of his quarters.

Damon's eyes narrowed.

A moment later, he felt it.

A sharp pain.

Blood welled at the corner of his nose.

Just before the shadow clone dissolved—it had been struck.

Not once.

But 736 times.

All in a fraction of a second.

Golden light.

What had been left of his dissolving clone, was torn apart.

The backlash hit Damon like a hammer. His legs went weak.

The Grand Duke's gaze hadn't moved.

Damon staggered—body tilting.

He was going to fall.

And then—

He felt someone catch him.

The scent of gardenias... strands of fiery red hair.

He knew this scent.

"Lilith..."

Her emerald eyes met his, calming and bright.

She smiled.

"You shouldn't drink and dance," she whispered. "You'll get woozy, Damon..."

Chapter 437: Someone I Have My Eyes On

Her green eyes, her scent, her soft touch—yet behind all that beauty was the deep, psychotic look she always hid behind a veil of calm.

How could he not notice?

How could he ever not?

Even suffering minor backlash from the remnants of his shadow clone being shredded before it could safely dissolve, not even the sickness spreading through his soul dulled his senses toward her.

He saw it—the faint shimmer in her eyes. A tear that didn't fall.

Her gaze said exactly what his did.

I've missed you.

Damon smiled faintly.

Her eyes also told him: Don't go dying on me. We have work to do.

That thought alone was enough to empower him. Their hands were already interlocked before either of them realized it.

Lilith had to suppress the urge to crush him in a hug.

She was probably thinking the exact same thing he was.

'Why are you always getting into trouble...'

His expression remained hidden beneath his hood.

'Drama just loves me.'

The Grand Duke, who'd frozen just a moment earlier, turned to face her.

"Ahh... You are the granddaughter of the old witch Astranova. You've inherited her scheming eyes."

Lilith bowed gracefully.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. While I have visited this estate many times, I have not yet had the honor of meeting you."

Behind the Grand Duke, his son Cassian barely suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

'Probably because he's been a shut-in for nineteen years.'

Still, his gaze lingered on their joined hands.

"Lady Astranova, I believe there's no need to hold Damon's hand anymore. He stumbled, yes, but I'm sure he's recovered by now."

Lilith glanced sideways at Damon.

'Why are you always getting involved with dangerous people?'

Cassian was one of the few individuals she actually dreaded meeting. And for good reason—the man was a devil. His father wasn't much better.

She smiled sweetly, her tone light, but her meaning unmistakable.

"I'd love to, but I can't take the risk of him stumbling again. What if he gets hurt?"

Plainly put—he's mine. And she said it with all the politeness of a well-raised noblewoman.

Sylvia's cold stare narrowed sharply. Her fingers itched toward her blade, hidden in her dress..

She wanted to be the one holding his hand.

Why did Lilith Astranova have to appear now, of all times?

Lilith bowed again.

"Apologies for the intrusion, Your Grace, but I happened to chance upon an invitation stating all nobles in the region were required to attend."

She smiled like an innocent maiden.

"It would've been rude to disregard the will of House Brightwater...since I happened to be in the region."

The Grand Duke almost scoffed.

Of course. The granddaughter of that space-witch wouldn't miss a loophole. She found a perfect excuse to barge in—and now, he couldn't do a thing to stop her.

Not that he was planning to.

Unless... she's here to cause trouble.

He could still faintly hear knights scrambling through his wing. Searching for an intruder that no longer existed.

He'd deal with that later.

Right now, his focus was on the Astranova girl—and why she refused to let go of his grandson's hand.

Cassian stepped forward.

"I see. Well then, we're honored by your presence, Lady Astranova. We were just celebrating the return of Evangeline and her companions."

Lilith felt Damon squeeze her hand tightly.

A silent signal.

He didn't want to be here anymore.

'Good thing I didn't bring Luna and Iris...'

And the reason he wasn't responding directly?

Because he trusted her to handle it.

She also noticed the faint smear of blood under Damon's nose, hastily wiped but not gone.

The Grand Duke moved forward slightly.

"Are you alright, boy? You're bleeding."

Damon didn't lift his head.

"Yes... Happens sometimes. Relapse from an old wound. I'll be fine."

The Grand Duke frowned.

"Call all the healers."

Damon didn't flinch.

But Lilith did.

All the healers?

Something was off. Wasn't that too much.

Damon shook his head.

"It's fine."

His voice was cold—disinterested.

"There's no need to make a big deal out of nothing."

He glanced at Lilith, squeezing her hand again.

She turned toward the Grand Duke, her tone graceful but resolute.

"I have a confession to make, Your Grace... Truthfully, while I was in the region, it was because I had come to welcome Damon back."

She lowered her head, cheeks flushing with a deceptive blush.

"We... have... history. He's someone I—and the Astranova family—have had our eyes on for a very long time. Naturally, he's with me."

Evangeline almost gasped. Did she seriously use her family's name as leverage.

Lilith's expression said one thing. Her words said another.

It was subtle—but deliberate. She implied something but never admitted it.

With her face, she implied they were romantically involved.

With her words, she implied the Astranova family had staked their claim on Damon long before House Brightwater ever noticed him.

But she also never confirmed anything.

Everything was open to interpretation.

Sylvia's eyes could've turned wine to ice with that glare.

Around the ballroom, murmurs rippled out. Some expressions warped with disbelief, others with irritation.

In the Valtheron Empire, the woman with the most suitors was undoubtedly Lilith Astranova. Second place went to Princess Abellona.

How could anyone not be in love with Lilith Astranova?

Graceful. Brilliant. A beauty that could topple cities.

For the young nobles, she was an impossible dream.

And now, she claimed a commoner?

Allegedly.

Naturally, the more hot-headed ones were boiling with indignation.

Having jumped to conclusions.

Lilith bowed before the Grand Duke.

"With your permission, I will escort him to a quiet chamber to rest. It would be regrettable if he collapsed amidst such esteemed company... at least until the toast."

The Grand Duke glanced between Damon and Lilith, then gave a reluctant nod.

"Very well. Be sure to return for the toast."

Lilith nodded once, then slowly pulled Damon with her toward the exit.

The moment they were far enough, she would teleport them out and fabricate some excuse—a sudden emergency, perhaps.

No one would question it. Damon's nosebleed was real enough to serve as evidence.

As they walked hand-in-hand toward the exit—

A mocking voice rang out behind them.

"Lord Ascendant... Leaving so soon?"

Lilith didn't need to turn around.

She already knew.

Just another arrogant noble with too much pride and not enough wisdom.

"I must admit, I was eager to see the famed commoner who earned the Grand Duke's favor. But to see him retreat mid-ball... it's disappointing."

The young man's smirk emboldened others around him.

"Why not show your peers how powerful you really are? We'd love to see a small duel."

Damon glanced at Lilith, letting out a sigh.

Beautiful women are the root of all problems.

Chapter 438: Has Never Known Humility

Lilith glared at the group of young nobles—brainless dolts who believed the world revolved around them.

The only egotistical maniac she had room for in her life was Damon.

There was no space for fools.

At the center stood a long-haired youth, clearly of ember folk heritage, with sharp red hair and piercing green eyes.

"I, Count Garrick Vellorian of House Vellorian, formally challenge Damon the Ascendant to a duel," he declared with disdain, voice echoing across the ballroom.

"If you're as great as I've heard... why don't you show us?"

Damon regarded him coolly. He was already in a foul mood—seeing Lilith had softened it slightly. But now this fool... this fool had chosen the worst possible time to poke the hornets' nest.

Lilith's eyes were already murderous, her mouth opening to unleash verbal devastation—

But Damon raised his hand, stopping her.

If they wanted a show, then fine. He'd give them a spectacle.

Besides, it gave him a chance to gauge the Grand Duke's intentions. An excuse to leave once it was over.

His eyes flicked toward a dark-haired woman in the far corner—Matia. She was still, silent, watching him from the shadows. Without needing a word, she understood. She glanced downward at the tiny shadow waving up at her—then sank into it.

She vanished, returning to Damon.

With that out of the way...

He turned back toward the nobles. The Grand Duke, clearly irritated by their foolishness, said nothing—likely not wanting to interrupt the fervor of "hot-blooded youth."

After all, this was Soltheon, the War Continent. Here, power was law—the only law. Violence wasn't just tolerated—it was encouraged. Sparring during formal gatherings was a tradition.

Damon knew the custom well.

Violence was the most ancient law. Born from order—and order from conflict. It was conflict that gave rise to a desire for strength.

'After all, we are all influenced by the Pillar of Conflict hidden in this world.'

He shook his head slightly, eyes moving over the noble youths. All of them were older than him—some well into their late twenties. By comparison, Damon was still a teenager.

Yet it was hard to tell. After class advancement, age became irrelevant. Time did little to touch the faces of the powerful.

Still, they were bold. Some in the First Class, others in the Second. They saw this as a chance to crush the commoner, to steal the fame he hadn't even asked for.

"I would have liked to avoid this..." Damon began.

One of them sneered. "Is Lord Ascendant scared?"

The ballroom fell into a hush. A murmur rippled through the gathered nobles. Reporters snapped images from magical devices.

Damon smiled under his hood.

"You see, this isn't quite fair... There are nearly ten of you in the Second Class. The rest are First."

Garrick cut in quickly, worried Damon might try to weasel out.

"Heheh. No need to be scared. We'll fight one-on-one."

Damon shook his head, his hood swaying slightly.

"No. That's not what I meant." He raised his voice.

"There aren't nearly enough of you to make a difference. You guys... are kind of weak."

He released Lilith's hand and took a step forward.

"You can all attack together. It'll save time."

Garrick glanced at another noble, both visibly insulted.

He forced a mocking smile. "Aren't you being a bit too arrogant?"

Damon gave a slight shrug.

"The arrogance... is you thinking you stand a chance."

He glanced at the Grand Duke.

"I'll give His Grace face and allow you to walk away with your lives.... No need to thank me."

Garrick was too stunned to be angry. Never in his life had he met anyone this blatantly arrogant. There were ten of them in the second class... and Damon made them sound like insects.

The young nobles glanced at one another—and then burst into laughter.

"Lord Ascendant, you ought to put your money where your mouth is. That hood you wear—you must think you're better than everyone here, hiding your face. I'll make you eat it."

Damon sneered beneath the hood.

This talking was getting annoying.

Cassian turned toward his father.

"Are we going to allow this?"

The Grand Duke shook his head calmly.

"It's fine. This is a common tradition. If he didn't want to fight, he'd have said no. Besides..." His voice dipped, amused.

"That egotistical personality that thinks he's the sun in the sky... is just like my grandson."

Cassian sighed. Still, this was the perfect opportunity to measure Damon's strength.

The nobles may have been arrogant, but they weren't slouches. All of them were well-trained.

As the ballroom parted, Garrick approached the Grand Duke with his entourage following.

He knelt before the duke.

"With your permission, Your Grace... we invoke the right of duel in the name of the Goddess of Doom."

Cassian's gaze returned to Damon, who hadn't moved.

The Grand Duke nodded.

"Granted. What are the rules of combat and the prize of victory?"

Lilith smiled softly, then stepped forward.

"It seems I may have unintentionally caused this. So, I would like to offer the prize."

She raised her hand.

"The victor shall receive a kiss from me. The loser... shall pay 30 million zeni. In the case of Count Garrick's group, they will each pay individually."

She continued, "They will fight until unconsciousness or concession. Furthermore, there will be no consequences to the victor—regardless of outcome."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

Of course Lilith would do this. She turned every situation into opportunity.

Who said disaster couldn't become fortune?

He clenched his fist.

He would never—ever—allow her to kiss any of these fools.

Not in any lifetime.

The Grand Duke looked to both sides.

"Do you accept the terms?"

Garrick didn't hesitate. A chance to kiss Lilith Astranova? At this point, even those who weren't part of the challenge originally were now stepping in.

The Grand Duke sighed and waved his hand. A brilliant light surged across the ballroom, conjuring a glowing dueling ring that expanded the available space.

By the time the ring was conjured, fifteen nobles stood on one end—all eager to taste blood or kiss the girl.

They all stepped in.

Damon was the last, standing alone at the opposite side.

His party watched with detached expressions.

Leona glanced at Xander.

"Hey... you don't think he's going to kill them, right?"

Xander shook his head. His voice was loud enough for everyone to hear.

"No. With how irritated he seems... I'd say he'll make them beg to die instead."

That single sentence silenced the entire ballroom.

And then it began—

A colossal surge of mana erupted from Damon's body.

A suffocating killing intent followed, so thick it froze the air in place. Shadows stretched along the floor. The light dimmed. The temperature dropped.

And all of them—all the fifteen —felt it:

They were not facing a boy. They were facing something else.

"Death."

Chapter 439: Gap In Power

Damon had taken many lives—some human, some former humans.

He had killed and killed until, at one point, he stood atop more than ten thousand corpses.

Naturally, he exuded a raw and baleful killing intent.

His mana was dense—oppressively so. It radiated from him in slow waves, crashing down on the room like a tidal force. The air grew heavy. Thick.

Damon took a deep breath, consciously pulling back his aura and the bloodlust roiling beneath his skin.

He had to remind himself—don't kill them.

He sighed.

This was the price of playing along with Lilith Astranova. They'd danced around the illusion of a vaguely defined relationship, and now he had to deal with these fools.

But that was fine.

He'd still get what he wanted.

He'd vent a little.

Across the dueling ring, the fifteen noble youths froze. Damon heard the distinct sound of sweat dripping onto polished marble. Then one of them—only in the First Class—turned with wide eyes... and bolted.

He ran—straight out of the makeshift arena the Grand Duke had conjured.

Perhaps fear had overwhelmed reason. But in doing so, he had disgraced his family. If he had died where he stood, he would've accomplished more than fleeing in disgrace.

From the crowd, came the quiet whispers:

"Lord Bolton has such a cowardly son..."

"With youth like him, we'd lose a war with the demon race..."

"Disgraceful. Before man and goddess alike..."

The weight of those words crushed any other cowards' thoughts of retreat. The nobles who had considered running now gritted their teeth and turned toward Damon.

Even with his pressure withdrawn, they knew. They were facing a monster.

The Grand Duke smiled faintly.

"His mana levels are absurd. For his rank..."

Cassian nodded, stroking his chin. "He's not carrying a sword. Maybe he's a mage-class—that would explain the absurd mana. His other stats should be weaker."

Just then, a group of knights entered, wheeling in racks of weapons.

The noble youths rushed forward, arming themselves—still casting side glances at Damon.

An older noble, a veteran, watched in silence.

"He already won," the man muttered. "They lost the battle of wills before the first strike."

Garrick gripped a spear, humiliated. He returned to his position beside the other nobles and pointed his weapon at Damon.

"Aren't you going to pick a weapon?"

Damon looked over them slowly.

He shook his head. "That's fine. I'll just take one of yours if I need one."

Garrick clenched his jaw. He could feel the stares. He couldn't run now—not like Lord Bolton's son. That would shame his house. His father would kill him.

'I have to win. No matter what.'

He narrowed his eyes at Damon.

"Which one of us do you wish to fight first? You're a mage type, right? You'll need space to cast your spells..."

Damon sighed again, clearly annoyed.

"I don't have the time or patience to fight you one by one. Like I said before—come at me all at once."

A younger noble leaned toward Garrick, whispering, "Lord Garrick... if he wants to be stupid, let him. He'll be humiliated. His strength won't matter. We have numbers."

Garrick understood what he meant. But what if they lost? They'd just become another stepping stone in Damon's legend.

Still, he had started this. He had to see it through.

"Very well. Since you want to play the fool, we will honor your request."

He raised his spear.

"He's a mage-type. Don't be intimidated by his mana. Mana doesn't always win. As long as he doesn't cast, we'll defeat him."

The Grand Duke raised his hand.

A flash of light crossed the dueling ring.

"You may begin."

A noble charged in, sword in hand, wind roaring behind him.

And then... he felt it.

A deep, oppressive dread seeped into his heart.

His body locked up. He was frozen in place as though experiencing sleep paralysis. His limbs wouldn't move.

[Omen of Dread].

Damon appeared before him.

"I commend your bravery. First Class—but still, you dared to attack first."

He grabbed the noble's sword, twisted his arm with a sickening pop, and snapped it, before kicking him backward—into the rest of the group.

Garrick roared and unleashed a volley of flames.

Damon sidestepped effortlessly.

"You're too slow."

He passed Garrick by, not even acknowledging him. The next thing Garrick heard was Lord Poliver screaming.

He spun, thrusting his spear—

—but it went right through Damon.

No resistance. No impact.

His body had turned into shadow.

Garrick's face went pale.

"What... what in the goddess's name...?"

Damon wasn't wearing the full Pale Crown armor—but beneath his hood, the crown itself rested, glowing faintly with powerful enchantments.

He raised his fingers and fired four condensed bolts of mana. Magic Bullets.

They struck, knocking out every noble in the First Class. Instantly.

The rest—those in the Second Class—paled.

Garrick gritted his teeth.

"You coward! Fight your peers! Why go after those weaker than you?!"

Damon stood atop the small pile of downed nobles and tilted his head slightly.

"Hmmm... Isn't that obvious? I'm removing the weaklings—so I don't accidentally kill them."

Garrick's hands trembled.

Fear. It was fear.

This guy wasn't human. He was a monster.

Damon slowly approached the nearest Second Class noble. The man swung his sword with both hands.

Damon raised two fingers—and caught the blade between them.

The noble froze. His eyes shook.

"What the—how... how is that possible?! Your hand should have been cut off!"

Damon glanced sideways toward Lilith.

"I would like to clarify something—while you fools were chasing after me like dogs in heat..."

His voice dropped into cold steel.

"Let me be clear, so you don't insult Lady Astranova further. She and I are merely friends. Nothing more."

"I would ask you to refrain from jumping to wild conclusions.

He twisted the sword in his grip, kicked the noble in the chest, and sent him crashing across the dueling ring.

He caught the sword mid-air.

"Your words and actions insult her. So—I shall take an arm from each of you."

He raised the sword.

"This is my mercy."

Before Garrick could respond, all he saw was a black flash.

Then something hit the floor.

It was his spear.

And next to it—

'Are those my clothes....'

"...No... that's... my arm..."

Garrick turned, dazed, toward his shoulder. It was gone.

Blood erupted in a fountain.

"AaaaaAAARGH!"

He collapsed, screaming, as Damon stood before him like a nightmare made flesh.

Chapter 440: Honor Bound To Leave

Leona and Xander moved toward Sylvia, standing beside her with wine glasses in hand.

Leona had a plate to the side—no, not a plate—a tray stacked with food. Seeing someone's arm get sliced off hadn't even made her blink, much less lose her appetite. She took a bite, chewed slowly, then downed her drink.

"Hmm. He's really holding back."

Xander glanced at her. "You shouldn't eat and talk... but yes. He's only cutting off their arms."

Their casual commentary didn't go unnoticed.

But the other nobles were too stunned to speak. Sure, he'd been challenged to a duel. Sure, the terms were fair. But still—he was a commoner. And here he was, calmly dismantling noble sons like weeds.

A disgrace. A scandal. A monster.

A pity they didn't know Damon Grey better. If they did, they'd understand.

He wouldn't have cared either way.

The duel might have spared him legal consequences, but it had earned him enemies. Bad impressions. Resentment.

Still, Damon wasn't done.

Now that he had a weapon in hand, the air changed.

He weaved through spells and steel. Parried a bolt of lightning. Melted into shadows as jagged spikes of earth shot toward him. He moved like liquid, unbothered.

He grabbed a noble and used him as a shield, placing the man's body between himself and a concussive sound attack.

The noble gasped, coughed up blood—lungs nearly ruptured.

Damon cut off both his arms in the next breath.

It wasn't even a fight.

It was a demonstration.

Cassian watched quietly, sipping from his wine glass.

"That technique he used at the start... wasn't that Radiant Blade?"

The Grand Duke chuckled. "Hehe. As expected of my grandson. Such mastery of our family's style..."

Cassian resisted the urge to facepalm. "That's not the point. The point is where did he learn it?"

The Grand Duke shrugged. "Well, either my daughter taught him... or yours did."

Cassian narrowed his eyes, glancing toward Evangeline.

'She wouldn't dare teach him Brightwater techniques. Would she?'

He gave her a long look.

'Or maybe... she figured something out.'

His eyes then drifted to Lilith Astranova.

'You vile old man... don't tell me you're planning to use this as an excuse to keep him here.'

The Grand Duke was smiling faintly, just watching the battle unfold.

"Assuming Evangeline taught him... if she didn't, he'll deny it. Over and over."

Cassian sighed again. Damon's swordplay wasn't just Brightwater style. There was something else. A technique that let him strike in a full circle around himself—fluid and defensive, yet with crushing precision.

"What beautiful swordplay... it can also be offensive as well."

Back on the floor, Damon ducked under an axe swing, parried a hammer, and pivoted smoothly behind his opponent.

They got in each other's way.

No synergy. No teamwork. Just desperate nobles flailing for validation.

He pinned the last armed noble down and cut off his arm, like it was routine.

Blood soaked into the marble floor. Damon stood in the center, a figure bath in blood, eyes hidden beneath the shadow of his hood.

Lord Garrick knelt, still clutching his stump, shock and fear swimming in his eyes. He trembled.

"This... this can't be real. It's not real. It's an illusion. You're not real..."

Damon stared at him. The guy was broken. Shattered. He hadn't fainted, which was impressive. He was still technically conscious.

The sword in Damon's hand began to change—its metal warped, engulfed in the flames of Ashborn.

The heat bent the steel. Shadows danced across its surface.

Damon didn't want to make him suffer. He was tired. He just wanted to leave.

"Forfeit."

Garrick's lips quivered. "I... are... are you... even human?"

Damon crouched. Without a word, he pressed the burning blade into Garrick's open wound.

A wail ripped from his lungs—a jagged, broken scream that echoed like a dying animal.

Ashborn didn't just burn. It scorched souls. It tore flesh and spirit both. The blade hissed against him, a cruel baptism of torment.

Damon stopped—just before the youth passed out.

Then he casually kicked Garrick in the head.

Unconscious.

Done.

The entire ballroom had fallen silent.

Damon turned toward the Grand Duke.

"I am victorious."

The Grand Duke gave a satisfied nod. "The victor is Damon. The defeated shall each pay 30 million zeni."

Still, he never once said the name Grey.

Lilith stepped forward from the crowd, her heels clicking softly against the floor.

She smiled. "Seems I won't be kissing anyone tonight. Thank you for defending my honor. I'm sure no one will jump to conclusions about me again."

Damon nodded, wondering how far ahead she'd planned all this. Had she anticipated this outcome? Or simply adapted as things unfolded?

He turned toward the Grand Duke, voice steady.

"I've created an unsightly scene tonight, Your Grace. I have spoiled the mood of your festivities. It would be rude of me to impose any further. My honor will not allow me to remain."

Lilith bowed beside him, graceful as ever.

"My apologies for the intrusion. A formal apology will follow."

The Grand Duke hadn't expected such swift initiative. But with Damon making it a matter of honor, there was nothing he could say to stop him.

Before he could respond, a ripple of space swallowed them both—Lilith had already teleported them away.

The Grand Duke stared at the empty space they had left behind.

"I didn't expect him to be so... honor bound."

He muttered it just loud enough for others to hear.

It would be unsightly to force him to stay.

Evangeline gave him a long look.

She sighed.

"Honor bound... Damon....he has no idea."

But it was too late. Damon was gone.

He had stolen the night.

He had carved another line into the legend of Damon Grey.

The Grand Duke turned without another word.

"Continue with the festivities... without me."

But everyone in the ballroom knew the truth.

The ball was over.

The press rushed to leave—eager to be the first to spread the tale.

The Grand Duke's steps echoed through the hall. His face was dark. His patience thin.

The Astranova girl had stolen his grandson.

And someone had dared... to break into his quarters.

"Today is just not my day... It won't be yours either, intruder."