

Shadow 441

Chapter 441: The Duke's Evil Intentions

The Grand Duke stepped out of the ballroom, a sore expression etched onto his face. His long golden hair, streaked faintly with silver, gleamed under the hallway torches as he walked.

His steps echoed through the corridor. The air was cold.

Ahead, a group of knights stood at attention. Nearby, a few figures were quietly examining the scene—marking signs, measuring remnants of magic, searching for something that no longer lingered.

Cassian walked beside his father, wearing a calm expression, but his gaze was sharp.

As they approached the cordoned section of the hall—the place where it happened—Cassian's eyes drifted toward a single figure that stood out.

A maid. Silent. Still.

He spoke calmly. "Jarvis. Report."

The maid bowed her head.

It was Jarvis, of course. Truth be told, even Cassian didn't know much about Jarvis. The entity had served the Brightwater household for centuries, but what Jarvis truly was—his original form, or even his true name—was a mystery. Jarvis wore many faces. Today, he simply chose a maid's.

But if there was one truth, it was this.

Jarvis was the most loyal servant the Brightwater household had ever known.

She spoke, in a beautiful tone.

"A single knight—Almord Thresh of the Second Rank—discovered an intruder. One of unknown affiliation. Unknown appearance. No traceable energy signature. No identifiable race or objective. We currently have—"

"Enough," the Grand Duke cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"I don't need to hear what you don't know. What have you learned? Where is Almord Thresh?"

Jarvis nodded and gestured.

The knight who had fought Damon earlier stepped forward and knelt. A fresh bruise sat above his right eye. Sweat dotted his brow.

The Grand Duke's voice was quiet.

"What did you see?"

Almord bowed deeper. "As Sir Jarvis said, Your Grace... the entity was faceless. I couldn't tell you if it was male or female. I couldn't judge its height, race, even its presence. It was... like there was a disconnect between my mind and eyes. I was staring directly at it, but I couldn't comprehend anything."

Cassian glanced at his father.

Now this was something new.

Someone had the gall to infiltrate the Grand Duke's personal chambers. That wasn't just daring—it was suicidal.

Almord hesitated, then bit his lip.

"I... used my skill—Blessing of Truth—to try and force a single truth from it. A name."

The Grand Duke's expression twisted into a cold smile.

Jarvis explained calmly. "It is a second-class skill, unique to Almord. It allows him to force a singular truth from a target. However, it can only be used once per person. The greater the target's resistance, the deeper the curse the user suffers."

Cassian narrowed his eyes. "It's not a mind skill?"

Almord shook his head. "No, Your Grace. It doesn't interfere with thought—it imposes truth upon the world. Whether they want to speak or not, it manifests. But I... I suffered a backlash."

The Grand Duke leaned forward slightly.

"What truth did you uncover?"

Almord clenched his gauntleted fists. A sharp metallic click echoed as he forced the words out.

"His name... or at least, the name he gave... is Amon."

The Grand Duke went silent.

His eyes slowly closed.

"...Amon."

Cassian waved the knight away, then followed his father as they entered the private chambers. Once the doors shut behind them, the atmosphere shifted.

Cassian leaned against the wall beside a large portrait of Ranar, the Grand Duke's daughter.

"So... what do you think? Who—or what—was that?"

The Grand Duke shook his head. "I attacked it directly... yet I'm certain it's still alive. Find him."

Cassian gave a short nod. "As you wish."

He paused, then turned to face his father fully.

"With that out of the way... what about Damon? I thought you planned to reveal his existence tonight."

The Grand Duke sighed and walked to the hearth, staring into the cold fireplace.

"I was... but after everything he's endured, I wanted to create a good impression. In his eyes, I am the man who cast aside his mother. What's to stop me from casting aside her children, too?"

He looked at Cassian, his eyes distant.

"That boy... survived the streets of Valerion while protecting his little sister. I expect resentment."

Cassian's expression didn't change, but he saw it clearly now—the guilt in his father's eyes.

"You're afraid," Cassian said bluntly. "Afraid that if you reach out... he'll reject you."

The Grand Duke said nothing.

"You feel guilty," Cassian continued. "That's why."

The old man's gaze drifted toward a portrait of his daughter.

"...Am I that obvious?" he murmured. "Still... is it wrong for me to want them home? Damon and Luna... They're family."

Cassian sighed. "You don't have to tell him. You can want him home without confessing everything."

He stepped closer, voice firm.

"But you can't have it both ways. You can't keep secrets and expect trust."

The Grand Duke chuckled softly. "Yes... I know."

Cassian looked pained for a moment.

"I feel guilty too. I should have stopped you back then. Saying 'I tried' isn't good enough."

A long silence passed between them.

Then Cassian said, "In that case... why not bring Damon here?"

The Grand Duke raised an eyebrow. "You're suggesting I grant him a noble title? Make him a vassal?"

He shook his head. "That's not enough for this greedy old man. My flesh and blood, kneeling and kissing the ring? I wouldn't accept that."

Cassian understood. Becoming a noble vassal would grant Damon status, land, and authority—but not family. He would be subordinate. Not kin. A banner-man, not a son.

"That's not what I'm suggesting," Cassian said.

He paused, then added with a faint smile, "I have a better idea. One that doesn't involve titles... one that doesn't involve forcing anything."

The Grand Duke studied him.

"...Go on."

Cassian looked up at the chandelier. "You want Damon to come home. You want Luna with him. You want them as family."

He turned, eyes sharp.

"Then let's make him family."

The Grand Duke blinked. "You... have an artifact that lets me go back nineteen years and undo everything I did?"

Cassian smirked. "No. I have something better."

He placed a hand over his heart.

"A daughter of my own."

The Grand Duke stiffened. "Evangeline."

Cassian nodded.

"Yes. If Evangeline marries Damon, he becomes family. Whether the world knows he's your grandson or not doesn't matter—he'd be the Duke's son-in-law. Luna would come too, by virtue of blood."

The Grand Duke's eyes widened.

"You want me to marry off my granddaughter to my grandson?!"

Cassian didn't flinch. "It's not unheard of. Noble families often marry cousins. It keeps the bloodline pure. Keeps our techniques within the family."

The old man's hands trembled. The plan was... perfect. But it had one fatal flaw.

"I... I would never force Evangeline. I won't make the same mistake twice..."

Cassian smiled knowingly. His golden eyes flickered.

"Don't worry about Evangeline," he said softly.

"She'll agree. Of that, I am sure."

He placed a hand on his father's shoulder.

"All we have to do... is play matchmaker."

Chapter 442: Reunion To Ruin

They didn't teleport very far.

In fact, they were still within the Grand Duke's estate—back inside Lilith's personal carriage.

It was a luxurious one. The seats were soft, the air inside cool and clean from enchanted vents, and the windows were sealed and tinted with layered privacy spells. Golden lights glowed gently from above, creating an almost serene atmosphere.

The soft ripple of space was barely gone when Damon dropped to his knees.

He coughed—hard—blood hitting the velvet floor. Lilith rushed forward, catching him before he could collapse entirely.

"Damon!" she hissed, panic cutting through her voice.

He took a ragged breath and wiped his lips with his sleeve, leaning back on the seat and holding his head with one trembling hand.

"That damn old man did a number on me..." he muttered through gritted teeth.

Lilith bit her lip. She reached into her pocket space and pulled out an expensive-looking potion, one that glowed faintly in her hand.

She tried to open it, but he weakly waved her off.

"That won't work... It's soul damage. A small part of my soul got sliced—more than seven hundred times."

Her grip tightened around the bottle.

"You were too reckless."

The carriage lurched slightly as it sped off the road—likely headed back toward the outer edge of the estate.

Lilith sat beside him, her fingers clenched. "Maybe it doesn't mean much to you, but I was worried about you."

Damon raised his head. He felt like his consciousness was tilting on the edge of collapse, but she was right there—warm, real, alive. He wasn't trying to be dismissive.

She squeezed his hand.

"We made a deal, remember?" Her voice was low. "We'd walk the road to ruin... together."

He sighed and accepted the potion from her hand.

Uncorking it, he drank the thick, golden liquid. It slid down his throat, warmth spreading through his body. The blood on his lips faded, the fatigue in his limbs dulled.

But the ache in his soul didn't leave.

He was still hurt.

He didn't have any more soul-repairing potions left. He'd used the last of them after that hellish battle with Matia in the ruins of Lysithara.

Lilith smiled, but there was no warmth in it.

Damon exhaled.

"I come back and you emotionally blackmail me..."

She shook her head.

"Sorry about that..."

She leaned closer, her voice trembling just a little.

"But it wasn't all a lie... For a whole month, I thought you were dead. I didn't even know what to do. I didn't want to grieve because that would mean accepting it. Accepting that you were gone."

She clenched her fist.

"So I just kept thinking—if you came back, what would I say? What would I do?"

She laughed, but it sounded more like a sigh.

"And now that I'm looking at you, I couldn't say any of it. All I could do was... put on that pathetic act."

Damon looked at her. Her usually perfect composure cracked by emotion, her red hair half-shadowing her face.

He suddenly felt a pang of guilt.

"I did..." he said slowly.

She turned to him, eyes wide.

"...Die," he finished. "I was dead. For a whole month."

He smiled bitterly.

"Which, now that I say it, sounds completely insane... But it happened. I pissed off the goddess. And every other entity on her level. Just by figuring something out I shouldn't have."

Lilith's eyes widened.

"I dreamt the nightmare of the Unknown God... I don't remember the dream itself, but I still feel it. The sadness. The tears. The rage."

His voice trembled slightly. His eyes shimmered, but it didn't feel like those were his tears.

"While I was dead, he fought them. All of them. To bring me back."

He looked at her.

"I should be grateful. I would be... if it hadn't all been part of his plan."

Lilith didn't speak. She watched him closely.

"All that time... dying, surviving a death zone, everything... it gave me perspective. It made me think about things I never let myself feel before. And I thought about..."

His eyes met hers.

"...You."

Her breath hitched.

"You... thought of me?" she whispered.

Damon nodded.

"When I first realized I was alive again, the first thing I wanted to do was tell you. I needed you to know I wasn't gone."

He reached out and gently took her hand.

"I realize now that pretending to be indifferent doesn't mean anything. There aren't many things I want to live for... I still believe in the Unknown God's ideal. Of never wanting to be born....."

He squeezed her hand.

"But while I am here... I want to create something beautiful."

He took a shaky breath.

"All these things made me realize how I feel about... everything... and... how I feel about you—"

Lilith leaned forward, her eyes flickering.

Then her lips met his.

It was gentle—brief—but it silenced him instantly.

He blinked, stunned.

"What... was that for?"

She smiled.

"That was the prize for winning the duel. A kiss from me, remember?"

Damon blinked again.

"No, that was their prize if they won. My prize was 30 million zeni."

Lilith grinned slyly.

"Well, then. Consider this a reward for falling in love with your beautiful senior."

Damon stared at her.

"Wait—what are you talking about? Back up a second—falling?"

He groaned, rubbing his forehead.

"You didn't let me finish. I wasn't confessing. I was trying to say... thank you. For helping me. For always being there. I appreciate you... even if I don't say it."

Lilith froze.

Her entire body tensed. Her face reddened instantly.

She had misunderstood.

Damon leaned in, his expression smug.

"Senior... how long have you had feelings for me?" he whispered teasingly.

"You haven't seen me in months and already jumped to conclusions? Is that why you implied we were in a relationship earlier?"

He ignored the pain surging in his chest from his damaged soul—just to tease her a little more.

"Well, it's a good thing this cleared the misunderstanding."

Lilith's face turned redder than he'd ever seen it.

She realized—he had just turned the tables on her.

And she'd walked right into it.

Damon leaned back, a rare, satisfied smile on his lips. His heart was still pounding from what he'd said.

He was glad she kissed him. Otherwise, he might've said something really embarrassing.

At least now he knew how she felt.

Lilith didn't even look at him. She realized she'd been completely played.

But she missed this side of him, too.

Still... she wanted to throw a sarcastic jab, maybe reclaim a little of her dignity—but when she turned her head—

Damon was already asleep.

His head resting on her shoulder.

His breathing calm.

She gently placed a hand over his chest, feeling his heartbeat under her palm.

She exhaled softly.

"...He's alive."

Her lips curled into a faint smile. They were safe.

And when they returned to safety... there was so much more they needed to say.

To each other.

Chapter 443: Blast Away

Damon woke up. His head throbbed, but he felt significantly better. He held his head.

"Ahhhh..."

He felt the metal of the Pale Crown on his head. He looked around him. He was in a room.

It was quite big—not as big as the one he had slept in at the Duke's palace. That was probably the biggest room he'd ever sleep in...

But this place wasn't small either.

He spread his shadow perception. He seemed to be at a hotel.

That was just a fancy name for an expensive inn.

He got up, glancing out the window.

It seemed he was in a city, but not one he was familiar with...

He turned to the door, waiting for her to open it and come in...

Naturally, her was referring to Lilith... he had sensed her coming up a flight of stairs...

The door clicked open...

She walked in with the same calm, confident elegance she always had.

"You're awake. That's good..."

She closed the door behind her before he could speak.

"We are in Mitar. It's not far from Lumos. Since we were leaving, I didn't think it wise to use the teleportation gate in Lumos..."

Damon nodded, agreeing with her.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Teleportation gates are usually heavily guarded..."

She smiled softly.

"Now that you're awake... we need to keep moving. We can use the teleportation gate here, but first I need to pick up some extra luggage..."

Damon nodded, walking into a door that led to a bath.

It didn't take him long to clean up. When he was done, he found clothes on the bed, which he changed into. He couldn't leave behind the hood the Grand Duke had given him, so he wore that over his head, hiding the crown.

"This is getting tiring..."

He was getting tired of wearing the hood over the crown.

Opening the door, he found Lilith sitting by a table with some of the hotel staff setting the table.

Damon sat down, pulling the hood down.

Lilith bit her lips a bit but didn't say anything.

'She's probably still thinking about yesterday evening.'

"No I'm not," she spoke.

Damon raised an eyebrow. 'Did I say that out loud?' he thought.

"No, you didn't. I took an educated guess. Now eat. We don't have time."

He sighed at her. She was being unreasonable.

It didn't take long for him to clear the food.

Now he found himself back in the carriage with Lilith, who was avoiding looking at him...

He glanced at her.

"I didn't know you were the type to get awkward..."

She glanced at him.

"Do you know if I waved my hand I could create a thin slice in space sharper than a sword... I could accidentally cut off heads with that..."

Damon sighed. No need to tease her more.

"Ohh yeah, too bad it can't cut..."

He paused, feeling her chilling glare.

It was better for him to be quiet today.

After passing several streets, they stopped at another hotel...

Damon came down from the carriage.

"You left your luggage at another hotel on the opposite side of town..."

Lilith shrugged.

"I couldn't take this particular luggage to the ball, now could I..."

Damon followed her into the hotel, past the reception, and into an elevator going to an upper floor.

They stopped in front of a room.

She gestured for him to take the lead...

Damon shrugged, not thinking too much of it...

And opened the door...

When he opened the door—

He froze... then ducked down as fast as he could.

His action of opening the door had been followed by a ball of pink flames slamming into the wall behind him.

Damon looked at where the flames had come from...

There was a pink-haired girl with her hand outstretched... before he could say anything, a white-haired girl jumped from behind the door with a chair in her hand...

He raised his hand, catching the chair...

Damon didn't even know how to react...

Before the pink-haired girl, Iris, could blast him again, he pulled down his hood...

The two girls froze—Luna, the white-haired girl trying to slam him with hotel property.

His sister.

And Iris, who was blasting flames—his apprentice.

When they saw his face, their eyes widened.

"Damon..."

Luna let the chair go and jumped into her brother's arms...

Luna looked stronger—color had returned to her cheeks, and though she was still slim, her silver hair no longer hung dull and lifeless

Damon was surprised—shocked even. Last time he saw Luna, she had been in a medical bed at the healing institute...

Iris rushed to him but stopped in front of him...

Damon glanced at his sister—

Who was already sobbing at this point...

"Hey there, Luna..."

He gently stroked her head... after not seeing his sister for months, that was all he could afford to say. He couldn't say any more...

He had been gone for that long, and somehow... she was here, out of the hospital...

He glanced at Iris standing there. He felt a pang of guilt when he saw how happy she was to see him...

He raised one hand, reaching out to her and pulling her into a hug...

The two girls hugged the person they had not seen in months...

He hadn't realized how empty he'd been until this very moment — holding his sister in his arms, feeling her warmth, hearing her sob his name... it stitched something in him back together.

Lilith stood there with a smile...

At least her surprise worked...

After a few minutes, they let Damon go...

Damon felt a weight in his heart lift. Seeing the two of them—looking after these two girls was his responsibility, and in his absence, Lilith had taken care of them...

Luna looked healthier than before. She was out of the healing institute.

And Iris... she looked much stronger than she was before. Her mastery over her powers had grown... she had grown...

"Big brother... I'm—I'm so happy you're back..."

Damon smiled. He decided to lighten the mood.

"Foolish brats, did you think I wouldn't..."

The two of them smiled...

Damon pinched their cheeks...

"Actually, I almost didn't... you wanna know why..."

They both shook their heads.

"Uhu..."

Damon shook their cheeks.

"Because the both of you almost killed me... whose bright idea was it to blast the first person to open the door..."

Lilith glanced away awkwardly.

Iris glanced at Luna, who glanced at Lilith.

"Erm... actually, before Lilith left, she said... we could be in danger so be careful. She called us this morning and said..."

Iris clenched her fist, continuing.

"She said we might be in danger the moment that door opens... blast away and don't hold back."

Damon's eyes twitched...

No wonder she let him open the door first...

"You really take petty to a whole new level..."

Chapter 444: New Type Of Bullying

With the chaos gone, a raven swooped down from one of the curtains, landing on his shoulder.

He glanced at the raven.

"It's been too long, Croft."

The raven that had become his pet—thanks to Sylvia mediating between them—was still here after all these months.

Despite the fact the raven had started out as an enemy, now he was a trusted companion.

One who was strangely obsessed with eating eyeballs...

"Caw... caw demon... evil... back, back..."

Damon sighed.

"Call me a demon again and I'll have me some fried bird."

The raven cawed aggressively but said no more...

Lilith grabbed a suitcase. Waving her hand, she made it disappear.

She glanced at Damon before gesturing to him.

It wasn't long before they were in a carriage again...

The capital was quite far from Mitra. Damon didn't like the idea of a carriage ride, so Lilith offered to pay for an airship.

"Why can't we just use the teleportation gate?"

She shook her head.

"The same reason we didn't use it in Lumos. Let's at least leave the Brightwater sphere of influence..."

Damon nodded.

"Then why not go toward Astranova territory?"

She smiled, looking out the window.

"Because they would expect us to do that if we were actually being followed. There's also the fact that direction is a bit lawless after we pass Gladstone..."

He sighed. That was true. He had run into bandits—and that was also the direction of Lysithara and the Anarchy Mountains.

If they ran into bandits, he would kill them...

It was better to avoid them altogether. He didn't like the idea of spilling blood so close to his sister... and Iris.

Though in the case of Iris, he would eventually have to teach her.

If she still wanted her revenge, that is...

"You've gotten awfully quiet..."

He glanced at Luna.

She shook her head.

"I'm just giving you two some space... isn't that right, Iris?"

Iris looked away.

"Don't bring me into this..."

He chuckled.

"You've gotten better, Luna... Flora must have worked some serious magic for you to get better like this."

Luna nodded. The healer Flora had helped her a lot, but...

"She did, but Lilith was the one who paid for the research materials that were used to make my medication..."

He glanced at Lilith... she shrugged.

"It wasn't really a big deal... I knew a guy."

Damon glanced at Luna.

"Is that true?"

She shook her head.

"No. No, I'm pretty sure she's lying... my treatment cost a fortune."

Lilith sighed.

"Ouch... I didn't know bluntness ran in the family."

Luna bowed her head.

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't let you sell yourself short—especially since you sold most of your assets and lost all your savings to pay for my medication..."

Damon raised his eyebrows... Magic Circuit Cancer had no conventional cure. It cost millions of zeni just to keep the person alive.

Lilith was a rich heiress, but she wasn't someone who would rely on her family's wealth. She had built up her wealth all so she could have enough to destroy the Temple.

Now she had lost it all just to save his sister... No, his sister wasn't saved—she knew that. But she had given Luna a chance to be able to leave her hospital bed...

Lilith sighed.

"I didn't do anything. Luna can't use mana safely and she still needs to constantly drink the potion customized to her physique... Worse, with each day she gains resistance to its effects..."

She bit her lips.

"I... I'm sorry... I couldn't find... a way."

Luna shook her head.

"No. No, you saved me... I'm grateful..."

"You've done enough," Damon whispered.

"No. You've done plenty. Thank you."

He held his sister's head down in a bow, lowering his own head too.

"No words could repay what you've done..."

Lilith frowned a bit.

Iris also bowed her head.

"Erm... for training me too, and looking out for me..."

Lilith sighed, closing her eyes.

"Can you three stop picking on me now...? You're making me uncomfortable..."

Luna smiled, raising her head.

"Damon, with how much she's covered for you, just saying you're grateful is just shameless..."

He tilted his head.

Luna smiled, giggling a bit...

"Yes... I have the perfect solution... Why don't you... marry her and pay for the rest of your life?"

Damon slapped her head.

"You make me sound like a prisoner..."

Luna scratched her head with a teasing smile...

"Don't worry, Lilith. My big brother can be groomed to be the perfect husband. Sure, he's a bit edgy, he's also not very honest... but he can cook... he can learn to clean... oh, and he's easy on the eyes. Don't believe me? Let's take off his creepy hood..."

Before Damon could say anything, Luna pulled down his hood.

"See? He's still in good condition..."

Luna didn't even look at his face. She was too busy marketing her older brother to Lilith...

She almost reminded Damon of a pimp on the streets of Valerion...

Lilith giggled, seeing Damon's deadpan expression.

"I actually like his new look. The long hair is quite... charming."

Luna glanced at him...

"Ahhh, that's right. He grew his hair out... he used to be a short-haired edgy loner. Now he's a long-haired edgy loner... He's all yours if you pay now..."

Damon pinched her cheek.

"So you are trying to sell me..."

Iris scoffed.

"He wouldn't fetch a good price anywhere else... That long hair just increased his market value."

At this point, Lilith couldn't hold back her laughter. After spending months with these two, it seemed she had won them over to her side. At least she knew now—if she needed backup against Damon, the girls had her back.

Damon twirled his hair with his fingers.

"Right, my hair is kind of long now... I should cut it off..."

There was suddenly a silence in the carriage...

Lilith clenched her fist.

"Absolutely not..."

Luna gave him a deadpan expression.

"I would never forgive anyone who touches that beautiful hair that makes you look hot and mysterious..."

Damon moved away a bit.

"You guys are creeping me out..."

"Iris... what do you think?"

She glared at him.

"If you are going to cut it, might as well make yourself bald. After all, you insist on terrorizing the world with your ugliness..."

Damon felt like crying... Never had he been violated like this...

Getting picked on by girls was far more painful than being punched by a group of guys...

Their laughter died down as the carriage approached the airship port, the hum of engines audible in the distance.

Chapter 445: Oath

Damon could not emphasize enough how much better being rich was compared to being poor.

And a step above being rich—was having power. The ability to influence others around you.

It was quite convenient, after all.

Money and power were the reasons he now had an entire suite aboard an airship flying thousands of meters in the air, with gentle clouds drifting past.

Damon watched the sky from an open balcony on the airship.

This particular model had a slick modern design, reinforced with sleek metal frames. Its body was long and vertical—vastly different from the older airship models that looked like seafaring vessels with sails.

Come to think of it, he had seen the ruined hulls of these same 'modern' models buried in Lysithara...

Lysithara had too many secrets tucked away in its ancient ruins.

'Doesn't that mean these models are actually old?'

He wouldn't be wrong. Most modern magic-tech was, in fact, scavenged from ruins—reverse-engineered in the Magic Continent before being made public.

Either that or they came from the sealed dungeons and reverse engineered in labs of the various magic-tech nations...

The demons had something similar too.

The fact that he could marvel at this now was thanks to one person—Lilith Astranova. A woman who possessed both the wealth and the power to make it happen.

'Must be great being related to a Duke.'

He felt bitter at the thought of his own family...

The burning pain of watching his sister wither away and starve in their forgotten little village. The despair of a child who saw kind adults morph into violent, vile creatures...

And the children they once played with—now treating them like pests, with the cruel capriciousness only a child could deliver.

"I guess my revenge will soon begin... it was long overdue anyway..."

"You're barely back and you're already plotting..."

Lilith's voice came from behind him, her crimson hair drifting in the wind.

Damon glanced at her, his own hair fluttering alongside hers in the breeze.

"Well, I can't help it... seems my next level-up requirement demands I walk a warpath..."

She nodded, leaning against the railing beside him.

"Who should we kill first?"

Damon smiled faintly.

"We?"

She pushed her hair aside, her green eyes focused.

"Yes... we. We're in this together, after all."

He chuckled. It was comforting to know he had someone by his side.

"What's your level-up requirement?" she asked.

Damon gave it a moment's thought before summoning his system panel, letting it float in front of her.

He could let her see it if he wanted to. That must've been a privilege granted to her due to her Stigmata—one given by the Unknown God.

She glanced at the panel while he stayed silent. She smiled slightly.

Seeing how far they had come, she knew Damon wouldn't have shown her willingly before.

She tapped the interface curiously. Something caught her attention—the icon labeled Ruined Fairy.

"What's a Ruined Fairy?" she asked.

Damon furrowed his brows.

'Right... should probably let her out now.'

From his shadow, a figure emerged. A stalwart presence, covered from head to toe in full-body armor.

Lilith instinctively stepped back a little.

Damon didn't even glance at the armored figure.

"Don't worry about her... you can trust her. Not that she could betray me even if she wanted to..."

His tone dropped, steeped in a quiet, somber weight.

Lilith looked again at the armored figure, uneasy.

"Who... what is this?"

She quickly glanced back at the system description for Ruined Fairy.

Damon leaned against the railing once more as clouds drifted peacefully around them.

"Guess it's not that obvious, now that her hair is no longer green... and she's not dressed like a boy."

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"This is Matlock Faldren—the first-year fairy... I suppose he was a 'she.'"

Damon gave no response.

"How did he—she—become like this?" Lilith asked, curiosity seeping into her voice.

"I killed her. And she became my shadow."

Lilith stepped past his floating system panel, waving her hand in front of Matia's face.

"Can she understand me?"

Damon narrowed his gaze.

"What do you think? Of course she can. Her personality's... a bit subdued, but it's still there. I reckon she's still herself."

"Or so I hope..." he muttered the last part under his breath, unsure of even his own words.

All he could do now was believe.

"I see... she's in the third rank."

Lilith locked eyes with Matia and caught a flicker of something behind the blue stare directed at Damon.

"I don't think you need to worry... she's definitely capable of independent thought.

Those are the eyes of a creature with will."

She shifted her gaze back to the system panel, not wanting to dwell on Matia for now.

"You've grown powerful... very much so. There are two entirely new mechanics in your system now—Item and Mastery. Each looks promising..."

Damon let her talk. His eyes remained distant as she scrolled through the panel.

He had shown it to her because letting her see these things made explaining what he discovered in Lysithara far easier.

After browsing through most of the skills and items, her finger finally stopped at the level-up requirement.

"Hmm... I see. That's quite the level-up requirement."

Damon nodded.

"Yes, it's quite fitting, don't you think? After all, I spent months in a death zone, fighting for my life... all because of him."

His smile twisted into something cold—his dark eyes carrying a sharp, murderous gleam.

"Every time I came close to giving up, I held on—just so I could repay every single one of those who wronged me."

He laughed—cold and low.

"I want to thank the Unknown God for giving me the chance to do it... in this manner."

Lilith glanced again at the system panel.

"Hmm. So... you know who it is, then?"

Damon had figured that out a long time ago. He had been waiting—hungry—to kill him.

"Yes. I do."

She nodded, reading over the level-up requirement once more.

LEVEL-UP REQUIREMENT:

Academy Dark Spirit Summoner Souls [0/1]

That was what Damon needed to reach the next level.

That was who he needed to kill.

But he was just the first.

The start of a long, bloody list of people who were going to die.

"And by the forgotten name of the unknown god... they will know death.

Chapter 446: Unrelenting

The road to the academy was surprisingly smooth. Damon had expected some kind of incident—knowing his luck—but nothing happened.

Now that he was far from the Grand Duke, he could finally allow himself to relax.

He thought about Leona, Sylvia, Evangeline, and Xander... Leaving abruptly without talking to them wasn't his best moment, but he had too much to think about at the time...

More than that, he had been eager to leave. After all, it would be suspicious if he suddenly started coughing up blood.

He could have let those nobles hit him and acted like that was the reason, but he couldn't let those weak, inexperienced fools touch him. That would be an insult to anyone who had actually put in the effort to obtain their power.

"As if I would let fools who probably relied on expensive potions to rank up..."

They had some training, but that was about it. Even goblins had more coordination than them.

The airship had been traveling for two days... The world of Aetherus was a big place. Soltheon was huge.

But that wasn't the only reason why a flying vessel would take so long...

The truth was, it had to take safe air routes—free from monsters or natural anomalies.

If they passed by the wrong air route and happened to run into a flying monster too powerful to kill, they would all die.

While Damon wasn't in a death zone anymore, the world itself was not an ally. Everything and anything was trying to kill you.

If there was anything that was progressive, it was sharing what he had learned with Lilith.

He hadn't hidden anything from her. He told her everything... he talked about the pillars—and more importantly, the one in their world: Bellum, the Pillar of Conflict.

He also mentioned the true beings, as well as things he had not yet figured out.

Like the No Absolutes Accord and Akasha. For now, Lilith had decided they should look for the temple where she got her stigmata and try looking for clues on the lesser gods—but more importantly, a cure for Luna.

Naturally, she made her own theories and conjectures. Of course, she hadn't been slacking either...

She'd been eyeing people she would potentially recruit, looking for ways to earn funds while staying under the radar...

Though somewhere along the line, she broke off into complaints about Renata Malcrist.

Speaking of Renata, Damon suddenly recalled he had some grudges against her.

However, he was willing to wave it off because she had helped them when... they were fighting Rashi Ignath.

That said, Lilith had given him a deadpan expression, as if dealing with Renata would be easy.

As he had heard from Lilith.

"That woman has reached the third class..."

Hmm... Damon had to admit it—Renata Malcrist was powerful. At second class, she could hold her own against Lilith, who was in the third class. Now that they were in the same class, it was obvious she only got more difficult to deal with...

He looked out at the evening sun... He was really enjoying standing there and overlooking the drifting clouds.

While Renata was powerful, Lilith was also close to reaching the fourth class...

Which was actually a turning point. A fourth-class entity was no joke.

With someone like Lilith, even if she couldn't kill something at the fifth class, she would still be able to hold her own.

"I need to get stronger too..."

It wasn't about surviving. It was about thriving.

That said, Lilith had toyed with the idea of recruiting Renata Malcrist... probably why Damon had the violet-haired girl in his thoughts so much.

But Lilith had shut it down herself.

While Renata was strong, the real reason Lilith wanted her was because apparently, she was an administrative monster.

Controlling funds, paperwork, negotiations, logistics, and all that nonsense was her forte.

After all, Renata Malcrist was the sole owner of the Malcrist territory.

Even with no parents, she had made her house function—even as a child.

Damon walked back into the airship. He had seen land and clouds beginning to give way—they would soon land in Valerion.

'Even if we wanted to recruit her, she wouldn't join anyone foolish enough to challenge the Temple...'

And even if she joined—how would they ensure her loyalty to the cause?

Damon and Lilith were trapped, because the Temple was their enemy simply by virtue of their power—and the Unknown god who had given it to them.

Well, he was sure Lilith hated them all the same, with or without the Unknown God...

"And I'm sure many people do... Renata is just not one of them..."

After all, you don't rise to the top without a few enemies...

The Temple had millions. The question was how to convince those millions that it was worth fighting this giant.

The world needs a rallying point... an icon, a face of their nonexistent organization. Someone who seemed powerful and could perform the miracles. Most of all—they must be notoriously difficult to kill.

"Where the hell are we supposed to find someone like that..."

Damon didn't really have any luggage, so by the time the three girls opened his door—already ready to go after the airship had landed...

He was already by the door. He pulled his hood up.

Luna and Iris were arguing about something nonsensical while trying to get Lilith's input.

He ignored the girls, letting them do their own thing...

Damon was plotting something worse than treason.

He was plotting blasphemy.

Yet strangely enough, his heart was calm... It was a given—he would not die.

It was simple. He was one of the wretched main characters of this era. He was not allowed to die so early in the game...

This was the epoch that would decide if the Unknown God would obtain Bellum—the Pillar of Conflict.

The fate of their world was literally in the balance... maybe even their whole universe...

The God of the Abyss was watching.

He was waiting... He will obtain his prize.

Chapter 447: No Payment For A Hero

Damon had spent the last two days at Iris' house. It was quite painful—sleeping and living in a place that held so many memories of her father, especially since he was the one who killed the kind hunter.

That was why, when he finally left, he felt a weight leave his chest.

Luna and Iris remained there. That had been Lilith's base of operations for the months that he was gone.

But the truth was... she had just been looking after Iris and Luna.

The two days they had spent, he introduced her to his sister and Iris—so they were already familiar with Matia.

Damon had been updated on the situation by Lilith. The academy wanted him and the others in his party back...

Naturally, he would be writing a report—along with Matia, who was seated right next to him, still wearing her armor.

He groaned. After surviving three death zones, now he had to write a report?

From the looks of it, he'd be writing Matia's too.

Naturally, it wasn't just a simple academy report. It had immense value to the society at large—any information from a death zone was priceless.

It could be the difference between life and death—or even the catalyst for progress in magical research.

He was sure the professors and academy researchers were already red-eyed with greed for what he might have learned.

But Damon was no fool. Organizations like the Temple would also be watching.

Depending on what he'd learned, he could be silenced... or taken under their care...

Or forced to sign an oath scroll to keep his silence.

Damon was already feeling irritated. He'd even been sent an itinerary. Apparently, he would have to go through some therapy too...

The carriage whooshed down the road to the academy.

Lilith flipped a paper. "The second semester ended a week ago. However, due to the vast amount of points you've all accumulated, you have sufficient credit to pass... but you will still be writing makeup exams—both of you. Or an equivalent."

Damon groaned. "Is that right... Did you tell the Headmaster what I said?"

Lilith sighed. Damon was Damon. If he didn't do something arrogant, he wouldn't be himself.

"Yes. I told him. Turns out, it wasn't a big deal..."

Damon smiled. It seemed his offer had been accepted.

When he heard he was being forced to write a report and take makeup exams, Damon sent Lilith with a letter to the Headmaster, and in no uncertain terms told him he would not be writing a report.

He gave the Headmaster a choice—either the report or the exams. Naturally, if he wrote a report on the three death zones, it would count as his exam.

Therefore, acting as a replacement.

If they made him take the exams, he wouldn't be giving them any report—making them lose out on whatever knowledge he may have gained.

Furthermore, he would convince his party to do the same.

He even had Matia sign a similar letter to show his resolve.

Of course, to share what they might be missing out on, he wrote down some random theories Valerie talked about around the campfire.

Lilith sighed again. She remembered some professors holding their heads and drinking painkiller potions, apparently lamenting how the troublemaker had returned.

In the end, Lilith had to give him props for his boldness. The academy was, after all, an educational and research institute. Their primary goal was to advance the goddess races.

It cost them nothing—only letting a troublesome student get his way.

"Professor Emeraldalda says you shouldn't tell the others about this. Just you and Matia."

Damon smiled at Lilith.

"Ohhh... now that they said it, I'll definitely tell them about it."

Lilith shook her head. That was the professors' problem.

"The War Games are coming up, so most students are still in the academy. They want to train for a chance to enter a world dungeon... and gain world renown."

Damon didn't really pay it much mind.

"And get this—you're famous now. You're all over the news. The papers with you and the Grand Duke are quite popular... Naturally, with the War Games coming and other academies competing with ours, the academy's propaganda machine is fully active..."

He sighed, glad he was wearing a hood when his picture was taken with the Grand Duke.

"Let me guess... They want to show off their legendary students who survived a death zone, further proving just how much better Aether Academy is than any institution in the world... right?"

Lilith smiled softly. That was only the beginning. The academy was naturally going to put its best students in the War Games, with the purpose of getting as many slots as possible.

"Basically, you're the academy's poster boy. You have the right background too... nameless commoner leads a party of nobles and inherits the legacy of the Ascendants of Lysithara... You also get the added tag of 'Made in Aether Academy' attached to your fame..."

He rolled his eyes.

"As if these people didn't try to expel me a few months ago... now they want to use me for fame..."

She shrugged her arms, her gaze focused on the silent Matia, who was actually Damon's shadow.

"It's a cruel world we live in... people only care about your worth..."

"You should worry about explaining her story, since she won't talk and you won't try to order her to."

Damon glanced at Matia.

Yeah, she had a lot to explain—like why she looked a few years older, why she was a woman and not a man, why she wasn't talking, why she was obsessed with hiding under her armor... or why her hair and eyes were a different color from when she left...

Damon felt a small headache coming on.

"I'm not gonna do your homework, you know..."

Her cold blue eyes lingered on him. She shook her head...

Damon had wanted to say something when he sensed some shadows by the academy gates. They were most likely not granted entrance—after all, the academy was diplomatically neutral ground.

Still, he saw their flags...

These were the flags of the Moon Glades.

He narrowed his eyes...

"Elves..."

Chapter 448: Racist, Supremacist Assholes

The elves carried flags marked with a crescent moon beneath a tree with massive roots... Damon didn't need to think too hard—even though this was his first time seeing it.

He could more or less guess these elves were from the Moon Glades. And from the look of it, they were here for one of two things: him... or Sylvia.

Maybe both.

Most likely Sylvia, however. From what he'd heard from Duke Cassian, Damon was pretty certain Sylvia's father wanted someone to blame—and he had decided Damon would be the scapegoat.

'Ungrateful son of a bitch...'

Damon didn't mind cursing the White Ruler out.

However, at the same time—while Damon had saved his daughter—further investigation could also attribute her possession to him.

Naturally, while Damon hadn't summoned the dark spirit, he had in fact been the reason it was able to get into Sylvia's body.

After all, a spirit cannot possess someone whose heart doesn't have a gap to exploit... and Damon had been Sylvia's Achilles' heel.

When he stabbed her in the back... that was her first true taste of betrayal.

How much anguish had he caused the naïve elven princess, who had never known such treachery?

He hadn't thought it was a big deal at the time, but Sylvia didn't—couldn't—and wouldn't forget it.

Come to think of it... did she have feelings for him back then?

Damon winced. He was, erm, quite the problematic character back then. While he had changed... he had to question Sylvia's taste in men.

'I guess she's into contrarians... people who refuse to engage with the world...'

Still, her feelings would bring a lot of issues. Same with Lilith—except Lilith was human. But that wasn't the issue.

Her being a noble was the main problem.

More importantly.

The issue was all races were racist, and the elves were the one most supremacist assholes in existence—even worse than fairies in some cases

Matia seemed particularly ready for aggressive behavior. Her eyes glowed under the visor... right, Matia was a fairy too.

If he remembered correctly, her father was also an asshole.

She was still seated silently next to him in the carriage. Having a shadow in the third class was reassuring, at least.

Damon didn't interact with people much, so it wasn't obvious, but fairies like Matia were the worst. Elves came right after—so it was obvious her father was a piece of shit too.

Arrgh, just thinking about those two made his blood boil.

It seemed these elves were waiting for someone.

They wore light armor with clear cavalry presence—ready to chase anyone who tried to flee. Damon sensed shadows in the trees—obviously rangers or assassins.

'They better not be here for me...'

Lilith narrowed her eyes, glancing at him and Matia seated beside each other.

"It seems they're still here..."

He twitched his eyebrows.

"You knew? What are they here for?"

Lilith sighed. She was starting to get annoyed too.

"The official story is—they're here for their princess. Unofficially..."

Damon continued for her.

"They're here to potentially start something... right?"

Lilith nodded.

"Yes. But don't worry—they can't do anything to you. After all, the academy is a diplomatic neutral zone. That's why no noble can bring their servants inside. Only students and academy staff are allowed. Not even the rulers of Valtheron break that rule..."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"And if I don't make it into the academy... they can kill me and claim it was a misunderstanding, right?"

Lilith shrugged. He was jumping to conclusions.

"There's no saying they'd kill you. Kadelas isn't a fool, you know..."

Damon nodded.

"But he can be tyrannical. The death of one commoner won't have lasting consequences. So basically—I don't matter enough. Tch."

This was, after all, how power worked. Why would anyone give a damn about some little orphan with nothing to his name?

His value was only in his potential. But potential didn't equate to power. Even if he would become powerful in the future... that only mattered if he lived long enough.

It was the reason he avoided Sylvia's feelings.

Now he was doing the same with Lilith...

Except Lilith wasn't as naïve or aggressive as Sylvia, so his worries were less with her.

They say forbidden love is the sweetest because you're not allowed to have it... and Damon had always done what he wasn't allowed to...

Lilith noticed his cold expression.

"I don't know what you're planning... but don't do anything. The Headmaster will smooth things over with the White Ruler... Sylvia will return soon. When she does, they'll have no reason to pressure you."

Damon rolled his eyes.

"I would have felt a little bad killing people from her homeland."

The carriage ground to a halt in front of the academy gates.

"Halt... Please lower your carriage windows..."

Matia's hands formed an ice sword.

Lilith's eyes turned cold. While her current carriage wasn't flying the Astranova crest, it was still flying the academy's crest.

How dare they.

Still, she was a patient woman. Right now, she was representing the academy, and the Headmaster had told her not to escalate anything. She had to be the responsible one—lest Damon take this as a reason to kill them.

He would absolutely do it.

Especially if he knew he would win.

She glanced at him... his expression was cold.

She reached out, pulling his hood over his face to hide it.

Outside the carriage, emboldened by the lack of response, the elven man took it as weakness—or a sign of suspicion.

He banged on the carriage door loudly.

"Open the carriage at once! I command it in the name of His Eminent Majesty Kadelas Moonveil, the White Ruler!"

Damon's eyes turned colder. Matia, at this point, was already ready to kill every single one of them.

Lilith must have seemed slow to react in the elf knight's eyes, because others surrounded the carriage.

The cavalry mounted around them on giant moose.

Then he punched—hard enough for the carriage door to actually break open.

Then they saw the people inside.

Their eyes met the cold, bloodlusted gazes of two women.

But... that was it.

There were just two women inside.

Chapter 449: Catching Damon Grey

The elves frowned... subconsciously, they turned to the highest-ranked person among them—an elf mounted on a massive moose.

Lilith's eyes fell on him, her expression icy.

It seemed they were certain the person they were looking for would be here.

He urged his mount forward, stopping just beside the carriage door.

"Greetings. I am Vice-Captain Elias of the Reaches. We've stopped this carriage under suspicion of transporting illegal contraband. This is part of our cooperation with Aether Academy."

Lilith glanced at him. Well, at least one of them wasn't a complete fool.

Still... who gave him the authority?

She stepped down from the carriage slowly, Matia following behind, her weapon already drawn.

Lilith's eyes flicked to Elias. He was in the third class. Obvious enough. He wasn't the highest-ranked officer the White Ruler had sent.

The real powerhouses wouldn't be allowed near the academy gates. They were likely stationed in Valerion's capital or inside the academy itself—under the Headmaster's watchful eye.

Lilith looked at her broken carriage door.

"I am Student Council President Lilith Astranova. With me is a fellow student. You claim to stop us under suspicion of contraband—but, if I may ask, who gave you the authority to act on such suspicions?"

Her voice was cold, her glare gave him pause.

"T-This is under the formal cooperation between Aether Academy and the Moon Glades. The Headmaster gave us permission to be here..."

He narrowed his eyes. "We insist on searching the carriage. If you've nothing to hide, you shouldn't interfere."

Matia raised her ice sword, fully prepared to fight. But Lilith shook her head. Matia hesitated, then—reluctantly—lowered her weapon. She didn't take orders from Lilith...But after a pause, she glanced at her shadow; then she obeyed.

Lilith smiled faintly.

"We will not permit this. If you try to force your way, then know you will bear the responsibility—and I sincerely hope His Majesty, the White Ruler, is prepared to deal with the consequences."

Elias sneered inwardly. He might have backed off before, but His Majesty had given them the authority to act this way.

This human woman... she had nothing going for her but beauty. And he had to admit, even if it pained him—her beauty was out of this world.... For a mere human.

He drew his sword.

"We've already stopped the carriage. We might as well..."

He waved his hand. His men began to move, surrounding the carriage on all sides.

Lilith stepped to the side, calm and composed, as they began their search.

It was obvious—they weren't looking for contraband.

They were looking for a person.

The White Ruler was looking for a scapegoat... even if his entire reason made no sense.

It wasn't justice. It was a statement: Touch my daughter, and you suffer.

It was a show of power.

Who's going to stop me? The lowly commoner boy who stabbed her?

'According to our intel, he was spotted in a tavern with Her Highness a few months ago...'

Elias had even heard something worse from an info broker in Athor's Sanctuary.

He held her hand. He even carried her...

It looked suspiciously like a date.

A human with the Princess?

One of his men had killed the info broker just for voicing that suspicion.

Of course, that act got them banned from Athor's Sanctuary. But the Valtheron Empire seemed to be turning a blind eye—as long as they didn't cause a ruckus and stayed near the academy.

They also had a confirmed sighting—Damon Grey had entered this very carriage.

If he caught that bastard, his superiors would be very pleased.

'I might even get a chance to meet the King...'

But... he was destined for disappointment.

After searching every nook and cranny of the carriage, there was no sign of anyone.

Just the carriage driver.

And the two women.

His brow twitched. They'd even formed a perimeter... all to capture him alive, prevent his escape.

Lilith's cold glare snapped him back to reality.

"Are you done, Sir Elias? After committing such violations, I hope you're ready to be a scapegoat."

"Your conduct is unbecoming of representatives of the Moon Glade. You forget yourselves."

She stepped forward, walking right up to him.

"This is academy ground. You've assaulted an official carriage bearing the academy's crest. That constitutes a breach of international neutrality. The penalties... are not light."

She paused, then smiled thinly.

"But I'm sure you can pay."

She unleashed her aura. The space twisted. The moose convulsed, its knees buckling as it fell—bringing its rider down to meet her eye to eye.

"I assume, of course, this was done without His Eminent Majesty's knowledge. He would never risk his nation's standing over... what was it? Suspicion of contraband?"

His face paled.

If they had found Damon, that would be one thing. But now that they hadn't...

He had overstepped.

Too confident in his intel.

"I'll inform the Headmaster that the Moon Glade is no longer observing the neutrality pact. I'm sure the Council of Nations would love to hear of it."

She leaned in, voice like frost.

"How a pack of racist elven supremacists assaulted the carriage of two women and forced their way in. That broken door is evidence enough."

He gritted his teeth. His fingers clenched the reins.

"I... I... We apologize for the inconvenience. As knights, it is our duty to maintain order..."

Lilith sneered, leaning in to whisper—just for him.

"Tell your master... the next time he sends dogs, they won't return. But I'll return their collars, of course."

"And trust me... no one will avenge you."

With that, she stepped back, turned toward the academy gates, and gestured to Matia.

They walked past the barrier—just beyond reach.

Elias lowered his head. After this incident, all consequences fell squarely on his shoulders.

His superiors were going to flay him.

"Damn it..."

He raised his head to look in the direction of the academy barrier, expecting to see only the two women.

Instead, he saw a young man with a hood...

...waving at him, smugly, from behind the barrier.

He gasped, rage bubbling in his throat.

How... how did he—?

Damn it. The intel was correct...

And that bastard Damon Grey wanted them to know it.

He looked down. A piece of paper had been dropped outside the carriage.

He bent to pick it up.

The message scrawled on it in confident, careless handwriting read:

"Remember this as the day you almost caught Damon Grey... you bloody fools."

He almost coughed up blood.

The insult wasn't necessary.

But after today, he had to admit—this was one of the most arrogant sons of bitches he'd ever met.

Worst of all... he didn't even know how he'd done it.

He couldn't help it.

He screamed.

"Damn you, Damon Grey!!!"

Chapter 450: Welcome Back To Aether Academy

"Was the note really necessary?" Lilith sighed.

"I wanted them to know it was me," Damon replied, full of smug confidence. After all, he knew they couldn't do anything to him—not here, not beyond the academy barrier.

The vice-captain's scream of rage had echoed behind them. It was almost reassuring. It reminded Damon of the time he was being hunted by the wendigo in the evil forest... and how the moment he crossed the academy's barrier, he was safe.

He could still feel the frustration boiling in the elves, stuck just on the other side.

"Hey... are you obsessed with making enemies everywhere?"

Damon scoffed. He hadn't done anything. He was the victim here.

"Was I supposed to bow my head, fall to my knees, and beg the elves to let me go? That never works. Begging just makes people step on you. If you're going to get stepped on anyway... might as well have some backbone."

Lilith sighed. That was Damon, through and through.

But this wasn't some back-alley squabble or a few thugs from the underworld. This was a nation's army he'd just humiliated. Did he really think it would be that simple?

Then again... he had gotten away with it.

Naturally, Damon didn't actually vanish into thin air. He'd turned himself into a shadow and slipped into Matia's own. While they searched the carriage, desperately combing every inch, he'd been literally under their noses.

Not that they could have searched the girls without adding sexual harassment to the list of violations Lilith was already compiling in her head.

Damon stepped into the academy for the first time in months.

Nothing had changed.

The campus was alive—students moving briskly, most wearing their combat gear rather than standard uniforms.

"Looks like everyone's preparing for the War Games..." Damon muttered.

His presence shouldn't have drawn attention... but walking beside Lilith Astranova and Matia—covered in her intimidating armor—they were too eye-catching a group for people to focus on one individual.

Still, since they were now safely inside, Damon saw no reason to keep hiding.

He pulled down his hood. He was tired of wearing it. And more importantly, this was a diplomatically free zone. No one could pressure him for showing his face and crown.

Even if some noble tried to stop him, they wouldn't be able to do anything.

In the months Damon had been gone... he had changed. And that change had not gone unnoticed.

"Who... who is that guy?"

"Think he's a prince?"

"Probably an incoming student touring the school?"

"Then that person with the ice sword must be a knight assigned to guard him..."

He almost felt a little insulted. Had he not terrorized this academy enough before?

"I'm such a forgettable guy..."

He didn't pay the murmurs any mind. Not until—

"No way... it's that bastard Damon Grey! He really didn't die?!"

Damon almost smiled.

That voice... hot-headed and loud. Natch Wuta.

The students gasped.

"Are you serious? I saw the news, but I thought it was propaganda!"

"No one survives three death zones..."

"I heard he even killed a rank four monster!"

"Yeah right. That's bullshit. No one's that strong."

Damon didn't say a word. He just kept walking with Lilith, ignoring the growing buzz around them.

'I have fans... they still hate me... ahh I really miss the academy..'

Among the crowd, a young man with green hair bit his lip. His gaze locked onto Damon, a flicker of disbelief in his eyes. Then—hesitating—he pushed through the crowd.

"Please wait... wait!"

Damon paused, glancing at him. Was this his welcome challenge?

He recognized the boy.

Falz.

He gave Matia a brief glance. This guy... had once been one of her friends.

Well—not that he'd recognize her now.

Falz rushed in front of him, arms spread wide, his face filled with anxiety.

"Mat... Matlock! Where is Matlock?! I read the papers—your whole party returned—but there was no mention of Matlock Faldren!"

Damon glanced at Matia. No response. Her posture remained stoic.

He'd hoped she'd react. After all, back when she was crossdressing as a boy, this had been her friend. Well—until he found out she was a girl and they kicked her out.

"Suppose they still don't know her real name..." Damon muttered.

He looked Falz dead in the eyes.

"There is no Matlock Faldren. He died... a long time ago."

Falz's lips trembled. His voice cracked, tears welling.

"I... I... This is all my fault. Why... why did we kick Matlock out? If we hadn't—"

Damon blinked.

He didn't expect this reaction.

He sighed and looked at Matia again.

"There was never a student named Matlock Faldren. But there is a Matia Faldren. And if you're looking for her... she's right here."

The crowd froze.

Damon decided this was the moment. There was no point hiding anymore. The academy would know the truth—Matia wasn't a boy. There was no need for her to wear cross dress to protect an identity she no longer needed.

Her father could go screw himself.

She was too beautiful—and too powerful—to live in anyone’s shadow.

Well, actually, she was living in his shadow, but that wasn’t the point.

Falz turned slowly. His eyes locked on the black-haired, heavily armored knight standing behind Damon.

She was silent.

Still.

The one he remembered had green hair. Brown eyes. Always fidgeting.

This woman?

She radiated cold power. Black hair. Ice-blue eyes.

Only one thing remained the same—their shared ice attribute.

He could feel the chill even here.

Damon nodded to her.

"You can take off your helm if you want."

Lilith said nothing. She watched with crossed arms, as students paused in their training and gathered, watching the return of Damon Grey and the revelation that followed.

Matia stood still for a moment, then lifted her hands.

Snowflakes formed at her fingertips. Her helm dissolved into glimmering frost, revealing the face of a beautiful young woman.

She was cold. Silent. And breathtaking.

But Falz recognized her.

"Matlock..."

He ran forward, arms outstretched—but before he could touch her, she shifted to the side.

He fell flat on his face.

She turned away, calm as ever, and her helm reformed.

Around her feet, ice carved a single phrase into the ground:

Ruin Fairy

Then she stood behind Damon, silent once again.

Falz looked up, tears in his eyes, watching them walk into the building.

And just like that... she was gone.