

## **Shadow 451**

### Chapter 451: Inis

Standing before the headmaster of Aether Academy put some pressure on Damon—but not much.

He had pressure resistance.

Normally, when those in a higher class unleashed their aura, it would suppress those weaker than them. But Damon had walked through the presence of beings far more terrifying—creatures from higher realms, eldritch horrors, and monsters too old to be named.

Compared to them, this was barely a breeze.

That said, resistance was not immunity. It still worked—it just needed more effort to actually affect him.

The headmaster wasn't the only one in the room. Damon could sense unfamiliar presences. Important ones. People who didn't often show their faces.

In fact... this was the first time Damon was even seeing the headmaster in person.

After he turned in his written report, he and Matia were summoned back—for an oral one.

Matia, however, wasn't speaking.

At all.

That meant all eyes were on Damon. He had become the center of scrutiny.

He shared what he could about the death zones. As for the things he didn't want to share... he brushed them off with the simple excuse: "I was too weak to check."

Naturally, that didn't sit well with the research-obsessed scholars of Aether. One particularly eccentric professor had bashed his desk in fury. Another had nearly leapt out of his seat, practically foaming at the mouth, ready to throttle Damon for "withholding priceless historical data."

The headmaster nodded and turned toward a man seated beside him.

Damon kept his expression calm, but he knew.

That man... he's from the Temple.

'So the report even reached the temple great.'

The man was old, bearded—his white goatee neatly combed. His face remained hidden beneath the shadow of his hood. Damon could feel the man's gaze resting on the pale crown atop his head.

Then, he spoke.

"Your Ascendant Armor... Would you like to sell it?"

Damon almost laughed.

He'd barely returned—and already someone wanted a piece of him.

He didn't need to ask who gave this man the authority to speak. The Temple never asked for anything. If they wanted something... they simply took it.

"I would be honored to contribute to the Temple," Damon said with a pained expression, voice soft and full of false humility.

"I would gladly give my Ascendant Armor for free—as a sign of my dedication to the faith..."

He paused.

"...Alas, I cannot. Unfortunately, the armor is bound to my very soul. It cannot be removed... or traded."

The Templar's eyes narrowed.

Damon kept his face carefully solemn, as though mourning the inability to hand over a priceless relic. Deep down, though, he was irritated. The fact that the Temple even knew about the armor meant their intel ran deeper than he thought.

'Don't tell me they're going to try and kill me for it.'

He wouldn't be surprised if they did.

The headmaster waved his hand.

"There's no need to pursue that matter. The armor is soul-bound. It cannot be transferred. Let us return to the questions at hand..."

Damon nodded slowly, forcing his eyes away from the hooded man who hadn't even introduced himself.

Such disdain... The urge to say something boiled at the back of his throat.

He held it in.

The headmaster's questions took precedence.

"Tell me, Miss Faldren," the headmaster said, now turning toward Matia. "Why has your appearance changed so drastically? And why are you not in your academy uniform?"

Matia stood beside Damon like a silent shadow. She didn't even blink. Her expression unreadable. Her eyes distant.

She gave no response.

Damon had to step in.

"She doesn't talk much... not since she reached her third class."

His voice was strained—just enough to sound emotionally burdened.

"It started with her second class. Her hair changed... her eyes, too. Her third class came with a skill that had a side effect. A flaw. She can't speak anymore. Not like before."

Damon placed a hand over his chest. A single tear threatened his eye.

"I was the party leader. I should have protected her... but I couldn't fight against her own evolution."

A quiet murmur passed among the professors. They had read Damon's report. Honestly... it had been difficult to believe. Even though he downplayed some things, the results were undeniable.

A student-led party had entered three death zones... and returned alive.

Mentally intact. Apparently.

Although the mental evaluation was still pending.

The headmaster coughed and softened his tone.

"It's all right, boy. You've all been through a lot. Her condition is not... unusual. Between first and seventh class, four skills are awarded to us. One of the four may carry a... consequence."

Damon nodded slowly, his expression grave.

The Templar, however, wasn't finished.

"One billion zeni," he said, voice flat. "The Temple will pay it. Up front."

Damon's irritation boiled.

The Temple was as arrogant as always. Tyrannical. Unreasonable. When they wanted something, they didn't take no for an answer. Most who refused them... didn't live long.

The man clenched his fist.

"I am a cleric of the main branch of the Temple. Inis Kaka."

Damon glanced at him.

'A cleric? That's it? Then why the hell is he acting like some high priest?'

Of course—he had backing. Someone higher up wanted the armor. This was just the dog sent to fetch it.

Inis Kaka glared at Damon.

"I'll give you five billion."

Damon's gaze drifted toward Matia. She was also wearing an Ascendant Armor.

They hadn't asked for hers.

'So I'm an easier target. A commoner. They think I'm soft.'

"I already told you. The armor cannot be removed from my soul. Even if I wanted to sell it—"

"Seven billion," Inis interrupted, eyes glinting. "That's more wealth than a lowborn mongrel like you could ever imagine."

The room fell silent.

The professors exchanged looks. This... was going too far.

The headmaster's expression hardened. He didn't speak yet—but the weight in the air grew denser.

Then came the final straw.

"I'll give you one last offer," Inis said coldly. "Sell your Ascendant Armor to the Temple... for ten billion zeni.

Or else."

And before the headmaster could speak—

Damon's voice rang out.

Icy.

Sharp.

Cold as the winters of Norrath.

"Or else what?"

Chapter 452: Using His Own Weapon

Damon did not lose his cool.

Not yet.

Instead, he took a slow step forward and spoke with steady fury.

"How dare you... how dare you represent the Temple and act like a lowly thug. How dare you disregard morality and blaspheme the venerable name of the Temple and our creator, the Goddess..."

The entire room paused.

Even Inis.

It felt like Damon had just stolen his line—his accusation. The cleric had been just about to label Damon the blasphemer, but the little bastard beat him to it... and with flair.

Damon's gaze burned with righteous fire.

"Does the Temple now operate like the underworld? Or is that privilege reserved only for us 'lowborn mongrels'?"

He spat on the floor, eyes brimming with disgust.

"It couldn't... it wouldn't. Not the true Temple. No. It's heretics like you who sneak into the ranks of our great and benevolent Goddess and soil her name. You hide in robes, but you carry the stench of corruption. I, Damon Grey, swear it upon the graves of my late parents—I will not let scum like you disgrace the Temple."

He clenched his fist so tight it trembled.

"I'll spread word of your deeds to the entire Academy. I'll let every student know the kind of filth the Temple now tolerates in its holy halls."

Then, without waiting, he turned to the Headmaster.

"I beseech the Academy, in the name of the Goddess, to stand with me in removing this evil. I ask my fellow students to bear witness—and I ask the professors to record this man's deeds. You've all seen how he's disgraced the Temple... with his vile actions and dishonorable threats."

Inis trembled.

In all his years, no one—not once—had flipped the tables on him like this. He hadn't even had a chance to use his ultimate move: the heresy card.

Because Damon had used it first.

The professors around the room began whispering. Truth be told, none of them liked how overbearing the Temple had become. This was a neutral zone—and yet the Temple always found a way to pressure its will on the Academy.

But most of them were researchers, not fighters. Not one had the spine to say anything out loud.

Until now.

Damon's outburst cracked something loose.

They weren't men of faith. They were men of science.

And this boy had just given them the perfect opportunity to speak their minds without drawing direct fire.

Murmurs of agreement slowly built around the room.

The Headmaster smiled faintly and turned to Inis, his voice laced with ice.

"This is not the Temple. This is Aether Academy. And my students... are not for sale."

His eyes narrowed.

"You may have forgotten yourself, but this institution is neutral ground—an institute for training talents from every nation and creed. Not a place for power-hungry clerics to throw around zeni like weapons."

Inis swallowed thickly, sweat forming on his brow. He glanced once at Damon.

He would never forget this boy.

This no-name mongrel.

He took a deep breath and bowed stiffly.

"My apologies... I lost myself for a moment. My actions have... disgraced the Temple."

The Headmaster's glare only deepened.

"It has. And I will be sure your superiors hear every word of it."

Inis nearly coughed blood. The room may as well have been a battlefield. He had failed—utterly—to claim the most "accessible" Ascendant Armor, and now he'd been publicly humiliated.

The Headmaster never wanted him here in the first place. The Temple had forced their way in on grounds that it "concerned a death zone."

Now? He had no reason to stay.

"You may leave," the Headmaster said coldly.

Inis offered a strained smile, but his eyes never left Damon—those eyes were full of venom.

"Very well... but remember—even neutrality has its expiration date."

He turned to Damon.

"Damon Grey... I will remember you."

Damon smiled, a cold gleam in his eye as he met the threat head-on.

"Likewise. The feeling is mutual. I hope we meet again someday..."

'So I can kill you,' he finished inwardly.

Without another word, the cleric from the Temple left.

He came in proud.

He left in disgrace.

The Headmaster looked at Damon again... and sighed internally.

This boy needs a mental evaluation. He's definitely crazy.

With Inis gone, the professors visibly relaxed.

They asked Damon a few more questions, which he answered with bored politeness. It was exhausting, but they had stood by him in the confrontation, so he gave them that much respect.

Aether Academy had a reputation—one they lived by. Protective of its students. Resilient in the face of external pressure.

And more importantly... not afraid to bite back.

The Headmaster cleared his throat.

"Ahem. That will be all for today. The War Games aren't far off. After this, you'll be added back into the official rankings. The current highest-ranked student is Miss Faldren, based on total points..."

He paused.

"...But since she failed her oral report, you still hold the number one position."

He chuckled.

"The War Games will include warriors from around the world—many from other prestigious academies. It's bound to be a fascinating spectacle. I certainly hope you'll participate... on behalf of Aether Academy."

Damon smirked.

"Actually... I'd love to. But... I was planning to participate as a mercenary for any noble house. You know... money's tight."

The Headmaster's eye twitched.

He hadn't expected that.

Among the professors, one stood up. Professor Emeralda walked over to the Headmaster and whispered something into his ear.

He nodded.

"The top student gets a monetary prize, of course. We're not stingy with zeni."

Damon cleared his throat dramatically.

"Say no more. I had already been planning to turn down those shameless nobles trying to turn me into a sellsword. Aether Academy forever!"

Professor Emeralda sighed, rubbing her temple.

This pain in the ass was her student.

'Thank the stars he'll be a second-year when we resume. He'll be someone else's problem.'

She made a decision then and there: she would not be teaching second-years next term. No way.

'I only want to see fresh faces. No more Damons. One is already too many...'

Damon grinned.

"If that's all, then we'll be taking our leave—"

"Hold on," the Headmaster raised a hand.

"You still have to take a physical examination. Nothing serious—just the same tests you took when you first enrolled. Mana aptitude, combat response, the usual."

He stood.

"We'll use the arena. It has all the equipment we need in one place."

The other professors also stood—clearly intrigued.

Damon blinked.

The arena? But that was a public space... Why not use one of the private spaces?

Then it clicked.

'Those bastards are using me to show off.'

Chapter 453: Do I Know You

The arena was massive—one of the few places in the Academy Damon had never set foot in before.

It wasn't just a training ground. It was an entire facility equipped with all manner of advanced artifacts: devices for measuring stats and mana aptitude, automata for simulated combat, and small dueling rings—rings that, if he remembered correctly, could combine into a massive coliseum-sized stage.

The place gave off the air of an ancient colosseum, yet its design was modern and refined. Still, the resemblance was close enough that Damon couldn't help but feel like a gladiator walking into a public spectacle.

Following behind the Headmaster after finishing his oral report, Damon was now on his way to undergo his stats evaluation. Apparently, the mental health department wanted to use some kind of machine on him as well—just to be safe, they'd said.

Naturally, being escorted by the Headmaster—and trailed by over a dozen professors—drew attention. A lot of attention.

By the time they approached the arena gates, Damon already had a trail of curious students following behind him like he was some rare magical beast on parade.

The arena was already packed—students everywhere were training in anticipation of the upcoming War Games. Everyone wanted a shot at glory.

And as expected, the whispers began.

"This guy's unbelievable... just got back to the Academy and he's already causing trouble."

"I hope the Headmaster brought him here to beat him to death ."

"Come on, he can't be that bad. He's kinda handsome..."

"Hey, Sisali, don't let the pretty face fool you!"

"More importantly, why the hell is a commoner wearing a crown?"

"He's still a lunatic, no matter what."

Damon wore the same plastered smile he always used in public. His infamy was still burning hot, it seemed. He was still trending.

He almost shot a look at the naive girl defending him. How dare she go against the trend?

"Huh. Can't a guy just have haters?"

The Headmaster caught the look, shaking his head slightly. He could tell Damon was secretly pleased that some students had good things to say about him.

'I suppose he's at that age...' the Headmaster mused.

Inside the arena, academy staff had already set everything up. Damon nearly sighed—it reminded him of his first quarter-semester evaluation.

Except back then, there wasn't such a massive crowd.

He stepped forward, the weight of all the stares settling on his back.

The Headmaster brushed his beard thoughtfully as he addressed the group.

"We'll be testing you both on various factors. Mana levels may seem secondary, but they still matter—particularly for mage-type classes. The real focus, however, will be your combat aptitude."

Damon nodded once, his eyes flicking to Matia, who stood beside him still in her black armor, refusing to wear the academy uniform.

At this point, the professors had long given up trying to persuade her otherwise. The semester was on break anyway—there was no need to force compliance.

Damon glanced at her figure... though really, it wasn't like her old uniform would fit her anymore.

She had... grown.

Erm... significantly.

The Headmaster spoke again, drawing him back.

"Now then, we'll start with mana levels—"

His words were cut off as a familiar redhead arrived.

"My apologies for being tardy," Lilith Astranova announced, walking forward with a stack of documents in hand.

"I've brought the files, Headmaster."

She handed them over, and the Headmaster nodded, passing them off to one of the waiting professors.

Damon glanced at her and gave a thin, guilty smile—the kind that said, I probably caused more trouble, didn't I?

Lilith sighed. She could already imagine what he'd done—especially after seeing that cleric from the Temple storm off earlier, muttering curses under his breath.

Then her expression stiffened. She sensed a familiar, irritating presence approaching.

Footsteps echoed.

"Astranova... my, you're here too?" a sweet voice rang out. "What's the commotion?"

Lilith's eyebrow twitched. As if she believed that nonsense. Renata Malcrist was definitely here just to stir things up.

'She wants to show off her new class,' Lilith thought, rolling her eyes.

"What do you want, Renata?" she muttered flatly.

The violet-haired girl ignored the jab, breezing past Lilith with a polite smile and stopping just before the Headmaster to offer a flawless, courteous bow.

Lilith sighed. Annoying as ever.

"Wow, Headmaster! What's all this?" Renata asked with fake awe.

"What could be so interesting that even our elusive Headmaster makes an appearance?"

The Headmaster gave a genial smile. Ah, the energy of youth...

"Damon Grey and Matia Faldren have returned," he replied. "We're simply running a little aptitude test."

Renata's eyes sparkled with mischief when she spotted Damon. She strolled closer, waving.

"Hi there, Damon. Did you miss me? I'm sure you're tired of that scheming bore you're always with..."

Lilith gritted her teeth.

Damon tilted his head slightly.

"Miss... do I know you?"

Silence.

The crowd went dead quiet.

Damon's expression remained blank—genuinely confused.

It was like he had no idea who she was.

"Wait—he doesn't know her?"

"Guess she's not as famous as she thinks."

"No, I think he's just so out of touch with reality he forgot what the beautiful girls in our school even look like..."

"I see, so it's the trauma of surviving three death zones..."

"Then why is she acting like they were close? Yikes."

Renata's lips twitched as the murmurs grew louder.

And then—

"Pfft—!" Lilith couldn't hold it in. She laughed, covering her mouth, but the mockery in her eyes was vicious.

Renata's face turned red. Her teeth clenched.

The Headmaster cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Damon. Please proceed."

Damon gave a polite nod, glancing at Matia. He'd let her go first. She had advanced to third class, after all—he was curious how much her mana levels had grown.

In terms of quality, hers should exceed his. But in terms of volume, he likely still held the lead.

Matia stepped forward with the same cold indifference as always, placing her hand on the crystal surface of the mana reader.

A faint glow appeared... then frost spread across the machine.

The academy staff monitoring the readout gasped.

"Mana... eleven thousand?!"

The Headmaster stroked his beard, nodding with satisfaction.

"Not bad at all. I expected less, considering she's a knight-type."

He turned his gaze to Damon.

"Well, boy... let's see yours."

Damon nodded and stepped up to the device, placing his hand over it.

Now came the question.

Should I hold back?

Or show them everything?

Chapter 454: Sir... I Think This Reader's Broken

Damon had always had low mana.

Which was fine—his class didn't actually need a lot of it. Still, it was funny how things had changed. These days, he gained mana so easily that he often found himself on the verge of saying:

"Damn, I have too much mana."

Well... he did lose it quite easily too, so he didn't say that.

Now that he was stronger, weaker enemies barely gave him any stat points, but he still remembered the last time he'd tested his mana.

Thirty.

Just thirty.

'The academy's weakest... right, that was my moniker.'

Now? He had a lot.

The real question was—should he show them everything? Or boost it with [5x] and drop a nuke of a number just to mess with them?

He weighed the options. Show off and shock everyone... or hold back and avoid unnecessary attention?

'But... I already stand out,' Damon thought, half-smirking. 'I'll get in trouble whether I reveal my power or not...'

Besides, hiding his true strength wasn't really his style. It wasn't like he'd be showing off all his skills. And even if he did... well, his enemies would only get to see them once before their deaths.

Then he glanced at his status window.

[Mana: 23,567/23,567]

He'd been keeping it at that level for a while now—sustaining his hunger by dumping points into shadow. Which, naturally, meant he'd been killing a lot.

He almost multiplied it by five right then and there... but shook his head.

This much is fine. No need to show off...

Until—

"Yeah, I remember. His mana is poor."

"Right? He had 30 before. Two rank-ups later, I'd say he's got, what—maybe three thousand?"

Someone snorted. "He's just a brute with his fists. I bet he'll have 2,000 at most."

Damon's lips twitched.

This bastards done did it now.

Lilith smiled, glancing sideways at Renata.

"How much do you think he has?"

Renata shrugged casually. "Not too much. Maybe around the same as Matia Faldren. So I'd say... 8,000 at most."

Lilith sneered. "I say he has at least ten times that."

Renata scoffed, her gaze sharpening. "Is that right?"

Lilith's smile didn't waver. "I trust my intuition. If you doubt me, why not make it interesting? If I lose, I'll do one thing you ask of me. Anything. If you lose, you'll do the same. Or cough up 90 million zeni."

Renata tilted her head, smiling back—but there was calculation behind her eyes.

"Okay... not interested."

Lilith's eyes narrowed. She nearly bit her lip. Renata Malcris wasn't stupid. Pushing her any further might make her suspicious.

Damon heard all of it. He looked over, his smile thin and dangerous.

"Miss Violet Hair... are you scared of our president? That gutless, cowardly nature is exactly why you're number two."

Renata flinched—he'd struck a nerve.

She scoffed. "I thought you didn't know me. How do you know I'm number two?"

Damon chuckled darkly.

"I sensed the deep stench of defeat."

A wave of murmurs passed through the crowd.

Renata had never felt so cornered. Her jaw tightened.

"Fine. I'll bet. Make it one hundred million. Whoever gets closest to his exact mana level wins."

Lilith smiled, her eyes glittering with amusement. Damon's status window was visible to her—this was a rigged game, obviously.

"Alright. Closest to the real number wins. You first."

Renata hesitated. Her gut told her this was absurd. But if she aimed too low and Damon had more... she'd lose by default.

She gritted her teeth.

"Thirty thousand."

The crowd jeered.

"No way!"

"She's joking, right?"

"Relax. She's just putting on a show—she knows that's impossible."

Renata's hands trembled, but she kept her head high. Lilith had mentioned 'ten times higher' earlier. That meant it had to be high.

"So... it must be high," she whispered to herself.

Lilith smiled. "My bet is... 117,835."

Dead silence.

The professors blinked.

"The student council president is in a joking mood today," one said lightly.

"Ah, to be young again," another laughed.

"If he has that much mana, I'll shave my head," a third added.

"You're already bald," someone muttered.

The bald professor smiled. "Exactly. Because it's impossible."

No one dared say anything else.

Because that number—117,835—was beyond absurd for his rank.

Damon smirked.

He had shown Lilith his actual mana earlier. She just multiplied it by five.

He stepped forward and placed his hand on the reader. Then, with a quiet breath, he activated [5x].

The air shifted. Shadows flickered unnaturally. His own shadow expanded, stretching across the polished arena floor. The atmosphere twisted. Distorted.

A wave of mana exploded outward.

The mana reader blackened, coated in unnatural shadow.

Gasps erupted.

The academy staff leaned in, checking the numbers—then glanced back at the Headmaster in disbelief.

"Sir... I think this reader's broken..."

A professor rushed forward, eyes twitching.

"This reader's definitely broken. Get another one."

The Headmaster nodded. A second reader was quickly brought out and connected.

"Try again," he said calmly.

Damon placed his hand on the new reader.

Same result.

The numbers appeared.

A professor gasped. "Impossible... 117,835."

Renata's eyes widened. Her knees wobbled.

She turned toward Lilith, who gave her a calm, smug smile.

She had just lost a hundred million zeni... or worse.

"No way... that's not possible... this was rigged from the start."

She couldn't breathe. Her gut twisted. The number didn't make sense. No second-class student had that much. Not even prodigies born into noble clans.

Lilith smirked.

The Headmaster chuckled, his voice rich with amusement.

"117,835 mana... That's unheard of—for someone still in the second class."

He looked at Damon, eyebrows raised. "Boy... are you secretly a mage-type?"

Damon shrugged. "No. I mean, I'm not that good with spells. They take too long to cast, anyway."

The professors stared at him like he had three heads.

"Do you know what that kind of mana means?" one asked.

"Yes, I have a lot" Damon said blandly.

They all exchanged looks.

Then smiled. Sinisterly.

"We can use this... to disgrace those arrogant fools from the Eldorian Academy of Magic!"

Damon sighed.

They were already plotting to use him to show off to their rivals.

The Headmaster raised his hand.

"Now, let's test your combat aptitude."

He grinned.

"After all... mana means nothing if you can't win a battle."

Chapter 455: New Models

It was pretty obvious they had played Renata.

"Yeah, I guess the student council president knew his mana levels were crazy..."

"I feel bad for Renata. She just got scammed out of a hundred million zeni... how's she even going to pay that?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's obvious she won't. The president doesn't need the money—she just wants to humiliate Renata. She'll probably just make her do something tough..."

Renata gritted her teeth. Her ego had overridden her reason. She knew it was a trap—felt it in her bones—but she couldn't back down. Not after months of pressuring Lilith, not after spending so long trying to dig up whatever secrets the girl was hiding. She'd found nothing. Only suspicions.

And now?

'It all changed when that bastard Damon Grey came back... I am going to make him pay...'

Meanwhile, Damon casually ignored Renata as the next phase of this little performance began. He doubted anything they threw at him would be particularly difficult. Even the professors—especially the third-class ones—would fall to him if he went all out. The only people who might actually pose a threat were those monsters hidden among the faculty—fourth class or above.

Still, they had to make it interesting.

He highly doubted they'd disappoint him by sending anything too weak.

Then he looked ahead—expression deadpan.

The Headmaster stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"These are combat automatons. I'm sure you're familiar with them since you faced weaker models during your mid-semester evaluation."

He gestured toward the four looming constructs.

"These, however... these are far more advanced. Each is powered by several rank-four monster cores and reinforced with magic seals and high-quality magisite. We estimate their combat power to be about rank three—at most—but we haven't properly tested them."

Professor Emeraldalda nodded, her voice clipped.

"We developed them in collaboration with the Eldorian Magic Academy in Areona. The designs come from the magic continent. They're resistant to magic—and thanks to the magisite embedded in them, they absorb magical energy as well."

Damon glanced at the metallic warriors with a thin, unreadable smile.

"So basically, you bought prototypes meant to render my massive mana pool obsolete. The magsite will drain my spells, and their innate resistance means my magical attacks won't do much anyway..."

Emeralda smiled, her green hair swaying faintly.

"That's right."

Damon nodded slowly.

'They want to see me go all out with my skills and spells...'

"Fair enough. But why are there four of them... at once?"

Lilith held her chin, her green eyes half-lidded.

"The academy wants combat data. It's a field test—for both you and the machines. They evaluate your performance while also gauging the automata's efficiency. A win-win for them."

Renata sneered.

"It's obvious. That's why they're humanoid—built like adventuring parties. Still, the production cost is too high for actual wartime deployment. If they prove powerful enough to justify the investment, they'll market them... and make back the research money."

The Headmaster smiled, clearly pleased.

His students were sharp. Naturally, that was the idea. These were the improved models.

"Yeah, I remember those back in the mid-semester evaluation," someone muttered from the crowd.  
"They almost killed us."

"Before or after that bastard Damon tried to burn us alive in the Evil Forest?"

"Damn, you first-years really have it rough..."

"You have no idea."

"Come on, guys, he's not that bad—"

The boys sneered at the girl defending him.

Damon stared at the automata. There were four of them—each one a towering construct, roughly three meters tall. They stood like an adventuring party, each with a distinct role.

A tank stood in front, shield raised. Fully armored—his body was technically all armor. There was likely nothing inside but fragile mana circuits, reinforced runes, and maybe a few expensive inner components.

To his left, a swordsman. Slightly slimmer, but no less powerful.

Behind them, an archer—quiver bristling with massive arrows that looked more like spears than projectiles.

'If that hits me... I'm dead,' Damon thought.

...Well, not dead. Horribly injured? Sure. But he'd survive. He was, after all, a death seeker who was also deathless.

The fourth automaton was the mage. Tallest of them all, its frame pulsed with embedded mana cores, its hands gripping a massive staff. It radiated dangerous magical capability.

Damon turned toward the Headmaster.

"What weapons are allowed?"

"Anything, as long as you don't use magic artifacts."

He nodded, glancing briefly at Matia—who, by now, was no longer the center of attention. She stood silently, arms folded, eyes blank.

Damon's gaze dipped briefly to her figure—not that her uniform would've fit her anymore.

Still he had to admire how cool she looked in armor.

"What about her? Is she fighting?"

The Headmaster chuckled.

"No need. She's in the third class advancement. We don't have anything here that could push her. Besides, these are meant for you."

Damon scoffed.

"A little unfair, but fine. You're the ones about to lose four expensive machines..."

An academy staff handed him a sword. It was standard issue—well-made, but plain. No runes, no magic circuits, no enchantments.

Damon spun it once in his palm.

"Fine. Let's start with something basic..."

Without warning, he launched a magic Gatling burst from his palm—a dense barrage of magic bullets that roared toward the automata.

The tank raised its shield. The bullets slammed into it—absorbed instantly by the magisite embedded across its plating.

The crowd roared.

"At last! That bastard's reign is coming to an end!"

"Beat him senseless! I lost so many points when he burned down the Evil Forest!"

"Ha! Look at him! All that mana is useless now!"

The archer fired. Damon ducked beneath the arrow's path—the projectile slammed into the arena, sending up a shockwave of dust and shattered stone.

He didn't have time to breathe.

The tank charged, shield first.

The swordsman flanked.

The mage raised its staff, lightning crackling from its runes.

Damon spun into the air, dodging the lightning bolt by a hair. He landed hard, his sword clashing with the automaton swordsman's blade. The impact sent tremors through the arena floor. Cracks webbed across the stone beneath their feet.

He gritted his teeth at the shock in his palms.

"Not bad, Headmaster... not bad at all..."

Emeralda chuckled from the sidelines.

"Still acting arrogant, I see."

Damon smiled back.

"If mana gets absorbed... shouldn't I use something a little different—but far more destructive?"

The sword in his hand trembled.

Then—it ignited.

Pitch black flames surged up the blade, twisting unnaturally as if warping the very air around it. The heat intensified. The arena lights dimmed. Shadows twisted unnaturally at his feet.

Damon winced.

The pain was sharp—but he forced it down, face twitching in silent agony.

And then, with a sweeping slash—

A black wave surged forward, crackling with flame and shadows

Ashborn.

Chapter 456: Long Term Plan

The sword Damon held had already begun to melt—but he swung it anyway.

In a single motion, he sliced the swordsman automaton clean in half.

The weapon shattered mid-swing, reduced to slag and steam, but Damon caught the broken blade of the automaton itself mid-air. It was half-destroyed and crude in design, but its sheer size—nearly as large as him—made it usable.

He stepped back instinctively as the remaining automata retreated, whirring and twitching. Their internal logic systems scrambled to analyze the violent destruction of their companion.

Across the arena, gasps erupted.

"Wha... what was that?! He just split it apart!"

"Were those... flames? Or shadows?!"

"What kind of spell was that?!"

The Headmaster's eyes narrowed.

'Ashborn...' he thought.

He remembered the detail buried in Damon's incident report—that he could use the flames of the dark spirit Rashi Ignath.

"Ashborn... The flames that belonged to the dark spirit Ignath... You somehow managed to obtain his power—even without a spirit contract..."

The professors surrounding him stirred, exchanging wary glances.

They had read Damon's report, but even now, they had grossly underestimated its implications.

Emeralda bit her lower lip.

"His report said he could only access a limited portion of that power... and that his output was far weaker than Ignath's. Dependent on his current rank."

Another professor nodded, tense.

"Those within his rank could resist it. Those of higher rank should be able to endure it... at least theoretically. But this... this isn't matching any of our expectations..."

And while they analyzed and whispered, Damon stood there relieved—quietly thankful that he had included just enough about Ashborn in his official report.

Enough to validate it as a registered unique skill. Enough that neither the Temple nor the Empire could accuse him outright of consorting with a dark spirit.

He drove the broken automaton sword forward again, channeling the Ashborn flames through the metallic husk. The energy exploded—flooding the arena.

The tank automaton lifted its shield, but it was no use. The shadow-black flames coiled and roared, melting through the tower shield like paper.

Damon roared, his body straining under the agony.

The flames didn't just burn flesh—they burned soul.

Shadow energy writhed within him, screaming as it was consumed. His muscles spasmed, his chest heaving, but he pushed forward. The molten blade tore through the shield—then cleaved through the automaton itself.

The tank fell in half, its melted cores fizzling with dying sparks.

Damon staggered back, groaning.

This hurt far more now that he wasn't insane.

But this... this was his style of combat.

Ashborn flames were absurdly powerful. But they had a flaw—when dispersed, their power diminished. Burning scattered air particles didn't yield explosive results.

So Damon had adjusted. He funneled his mana and shadow energy into his weapon, compressing the flame through the blade itself—concentrating its destructive power into a hot, surgical slash. More cutting power. More devastation.

But the price?

Every sword melted.

'I've lost too many good weapons like this...' he thought bitterly.

Still, the job wasn't finished.

The archer and mage automata remained—but he didn't even bother engaging them individually.

Instead, Damon raised his hand.

Black flames burst forth again, this time washing over the entire arena. A suffocating wave that didn't let up. For a full half-minute, the flames raged without mercy.

The floor cracked.

Stone groaned.

Runes flickered violently before vanishing entirely.

When the inferno died down, Damon almost collapsed. Pain hammered into his bones. But his [Pain Resistance] barely kept him standing.

He took a deep breath.

Then looked at what remained.

...Scraps.

Melted metal. Bent cores. Scorched circuitry. All that remained of the automata.

'These were allegedly rank three...' Damon thought. 'But their reaction speed, their movement—they were barely rank two.'

They had no instincts. No combat judgment. Just reactive algorithms, and even those were slow.

'If they were any smarter, they wouldn't have stood there waiting to be melted.'

They had mana—but no substance. No technique.

"A complete waste of money."

The crowd had fallen silent.

"Unbelievable... his power is... unbelievable."

"I thought his attribute was shadow?"

"That has to be forbidden magic..."

"Should we report this?! I don't wanna be an accomplice or something—"

"Don't be ridiculous. If it was black magic, the Headmaster would've detained him."

"Still... didn't he say it's Ignath's power? The Ignath?!"

Damon remained still. Letting them talk.

Let them witness. Let them see.

He wanted it known that he could use Ashborn. Hiding it would only draw suspicion. But if the academy could test it and log the data, it would validate him—make it clear he wasn't summoning a forbidden spirit. Just using a registered skill.

'The elves are going to have a field day with this...' he thought grimly.

Especially the Elf King—Kadelas Moonveil.

He'd claim Damon seduced and manipulated his daughter, stabbed her, and got her possessed. That he plotted to obtain the Ashborn flames by collaborating with the dark spirit summoner.

'Yeah I can see that happening...'

But Damon had a counter.

A simple one:

The summoner's head.

He already knew where the man was. And once the sun set...

He would kill him.

The Headmaster stared down at the molten wreckage of his prototype machines.

"It seems the circuits are destroyed," he muttered. "We've lost a lot of data... let's hope we can retrieve something from those melted husks."

Damon exhaled.

"Apologies, Headmaster. But they were... sort of weak. I expected more of a challenge."

The Headmaster smiled, brushing soot from his robe.

"Suppose we should give you a better one..." He turned his gaze slowly to Renata.

"Don't you agree, Miss Malcrist?"

Renata blinked. He wasn't serious... was he?

He wanted her to fight Damon? After he helped Lilith scam her out of a hundred million zeni?

He did realize she was pretty mad at Damon, right?

Renata saw Damon's smug grin and her rage boiled to the surface.

She stepped forward.

"Despite how cute you are. You're not a very likable person, you know," she said, cracking her knuckles.

"Must be a talent—getting on everyone's shit list."

Damon scoffed.

"I just think everyone's too petty. I'm an honest-to-goodness guy. I'm just misunderstood."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "No... no, you're not."

Renata jumped.

In a blink, she crossed several meters—landing in the center of the arena. The floor cracked beneath her boots.

She grinned wide, fists curled.

"I'm going to make you call me mommy after this."

Damon raised one hand lazily.

"Sorry. I'm not feeling horny today. Maybe you can prostitute yourself to me another day!"

What followed was a storm of magic bullets—fired without restraint.

But the moment they reached Renata, they vanished—dissolving into faint violet sparks that danced around her, then flickered into nothing.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

'Right... I remember now.'

Renata Malcrist had an unusual attribute.

Her attribute was—

Zero.

Chapter 457: Mage Killer

Damon had heard rumors of Renata's magic attribute. It wasn't elemental like fire, water, or even his own. No—it was one of those rare, conceptual types.

Renata Malcrist was very powerful.

Her attribute allowed her to reduce anything to zero. In simple terms, she could lower the value of something—anything—until it hit absolute zero.

And that's exactly what had happened to Damon's magic bullets. Before they ever reached her, their value had started to decline, getting weaker, fading... until they were nothing.

If each magic bullet had a power value of 10, she made sure it reached zero before impact.

Damon clenched his jaw. He hated to admit it...

But her attribute was overpowered.

How were standard attributes supposed to compare? Even with his own upgraded version—Umbral, a superior form of the Shadow attribute courtesy of the Unknown God—it still felt weak next to hers.

'And even then... it doesn't compare to Void,' Damon thought bitterly. That belonged to Lilith Astranova. Not only could she control space, she claimed to influence other phenomena too.

As for Renata—he didn't even know her full class history. Her first, second, third class? A mystery.

Still, Damon could feel it—she was stronger. Her power was somewhere in the realm of Ruin Fairy-class threat.

He glanced at Matia who was just watching him lazily.

He wanted to cry... save me damn it.

Back when he'd fought Matia, he'd needed everything: strategy, magic artifacts... even the Staff of Carnage and its devastating area effect. He had to go ravenous to survive.

And the only reason he won... was because he was completely insane.

Right now?

No ravenous.

No magic artifacts.

No Ascendant Armor.

No madness to lean on.

There was no way he was beating her.

He was strong, sure—but defeating Renata? Not happening.

Their stats weren't even close.

But still—that didn't mean he couldn't put up a fight. Just because he couldn't use ravenous in public didn't mean he was weak without it.

And he wasn't about to back down now.

Had he ever?

'Still... I don't have to win. I'm good at evading...'

Renata raised a brow, glancing at the fading violet sparks around her.

"Maybe you don't know this... but I suppose I should make it clear and tell you my class."

She smiled.

"It's called Mage Killer. It's a mage-type class. Basically, I'm a mage... who kills mages."

She shrugged casually.

"I have no idea why, but apparently I'm the bane of all magic users. [Zero]—my passive—reduces the value of any attack."

She crossed her arms like it was already over.

"My second class is called [Delete]. It didn't come with a skill, so I bought a barrier skill—lets me create and control barriers."

A smirk curled on her lips. She wasn't just explaining—she was mocking him.

"My third class came with a skill, though. It's called [Canceler]. The skill I received is [Negative]. What does it do?" She tilted her head coyly. "Well... you'll find out soon."

Lilith scoffed, placing a palm on her cheek.

"Her skill lets her mark you—then it starts draining your mana or any energy you have. When your mana runs out... it starts leeching your life force."

She scoffed.

"Stop acting mysterious..."

She gave Damon a look.

"It can drain any energy."

Damon froze slightly. That changed everything.

If she could drain any energy—she could even drain shadow energy. If that happened, his Ravenous form would trigger.

He could control what he did in Ravenous now... but he couldn't stop himself from transforming into it.

"Carp..." he muttered under his breath.

Still, he plastered on a smile.

"Senior Renata... erm... you look very beautiful in that outfit..."

"No way... is he buttering her up?"

"Ahh, yeah. I remember now. Damon Grey has no honor."

"Shameless wretche."

Someone raised a hand, whispering, "Don't be stupid. It's Damon. He's definitely planning something."

Renata glanced down at her attire.

"You mean... my academy uniform?"

Damon smiled brighter.

"You pull it off wonderfully. No wonder you're the prettiest girl in the academy."

Renata's smile faltered. Was he flattering her? Was he expecting her to go easy on him?

How cute.

Until he continued—

"Second to Lilith, of course... wait, no, sorry, my bad—also Sylvia."

Renata's temple twitched. He wasn't done.

"You're also behind Evangeline. And... well, Leona's kind of hot too."

He grinned. "Don't worry, you're still good-looking. I mean... your looks are kind of like Xander's."

Someone from the crowd whispered, "Wait... isn't Xander a boy?"

Renata's hands trembled.

He'd just compared her to a man.

Her aura surged, pressure radiating off her skin like waves of lead. Damon staggered slightly under the weight—his lungs compressed.

How...?

"If you're wondering how," Renata said, smiling wickedly, "it's simple. I turned your resistance to gravity... to zero."

Damon straightened, coughing slightly.

"Impressive loophole. But enough yapping—"

He hurled a blast of black flame.

The arena ignited—but he wasn't aiming to hit her. He was buying time. Recovery time. He'd stalled just long enough for his Ashborn skills backlash to fade.

Renata activated her second skill, her barrier flickering into view.

He watched the flames weaken in real time—diminishing until their strength evaporated entirely.

He expected that. Overpowering her was pointless—it would cost more energy than the damage he could deliver.

'That barrier of hers... just too broken.'

But he had other ways.

He slid under his own flame, his body morphing into shadow. A swift, darting wisp of darkness.

Renata might be a mage killer... but she was still a mage. If he could overwhelm her in close combat—

He reformed just in front of her, fist wreathed in compressed black flame.

He struck the barrier.

The barrier resisted—but he felt it weakening. His momentum slowed as its value was reduced to zero... but he surged forward anyway.

Her eyes widened.

He smiled. She was open.

He clenched his fist for the follow-up—

But Renata smirked back.

She swung.

Their fists collided in an explosion of air and shadow.

Damon was thrown backward, skidding across the stone tiles.

What?!

Her strength—her physical strength—wasn't just unexpected. It was absurd.

He stared at her in disbelief.

Her class... was a mage-type.

There was no way she should've hit that hard.

He had killed the Beldam herself, and even she didn't hit like this.

At least not pyshically.

Renata twirled her finger in the air.

"Tag. You're it."

Damon felt a jolt.

A mark settled on him—sickly and invisible. His mana began to leak. His shadow energy too.

Slow. Steady. Relentless.

"Carp..."

Chapter 458: Let's Call It A Draw

Damon had to admit—things weren't looking good for him.

Sure, technically, he could win against Renata... if he went all out, used every skill, every trick in the book. But with so many people watching, he couldn't just unleash everything. Not now. Not here.

He wasn't the only cross-ranker on the field.

Renata was just as dangerous.

After all, she'd fought Lilith—and that was when she'd been an entire rank lower. She'd lost, sure... but surviving that fight had said enough about her power.

But what really unsettled him was her physical strength. Damon had once kicked a Rank 4 Beldam straight into dragon fire. Sure, she'd been caught off-guard—but her entire build was tailored for magical combat, not physical brawling.

Renata, on the other hand?

She met his punch head-on. With her own fist.

He understood now why she was called "the mage who kills mages."

Still, his attack hadn't been pointless—her hand was visibly red. She'd taken damage. That confirmed it. Even if she was some demon with absurd physique stats, she was still a mage type.

So how was Damon the one sent flying?

It was simple.

She hadn't matched his physicality—she'd reduced the value of his punch. That's what her Zero attribute did. It diminished everything. By the time his fist made contact, the strength behind it had already been drained.

And hers hadn't.

Her blows retained their full weight.

That was the terrifying reality of her power.

And now—since she'd touched him—he could feel it. A mark. His energy, especially his shadow energy, was leaking away. Dropping closer and closer... to zero.

His mana wasn't the problem—he had plenty to spare—but [5x] wouldn't last forever.

This girl... he could see now why she was Lilith's rival.

Damon smirked and glanced toward the headmaster.

He knew the old man was a Seventh-Class entity but Damon was Damon.

"Hey, old man," he called, "aren't you just salty I destroyed your expensive toys so easily?"

The headmaster just smiled.

At that moment, Renata unleashed a violent wave of energy. Damon transformed into shadow, slipping past it—but he felt the bite of cold in the air.

He narrowed his eyes. "You can even reduce temperature to zero..."

Renata's cold grin returned. "Eyes on me, buddy."

He had no sword. Fighting without a real weapon was limiting. Just as he thought that, a glint of magic caught his attention—an icy sword flew toward him.

Damon ducked and snatched it by the hilt.

He glanced toward the crowd—Matia stood there, having conjured the weapon for him. A gesture to support him, recognizing he was outmatched, or maybe she just acting on intuition.

His other weapons were artifacts, and thus forbidden in this evaluation. But this? This was just ice.

Renata raised a brow.

"Is that supposed to help? Also, isn't this cheating?" She folded her arms. "You're really popular with the ladies, huh..."

Damon ignored her. He held the sword, feeling the chill of Matia's magic lingering inside it.

Ashborn would melt this thing in seconds—good thing he didn't plan to use it.

He smiled faintly. "I figured you out, Renata. I know your weakness."

Renata raised a hand.

Space itself split as she waved, like a slash of invisible force slicing through the sky.

"Oh really?" she smirked. "Why don't you show me, then!"

The arena was sliced in half.

Damon flinched as the wave narrowly missed him—he felt the hair on his head lift from the pressure.

Close.

He poured mana into the ice blade.

It darkened—twisting with his umbral attribute—and he brought it down hard.

Dark Blade.

A wave of energy screamed toward Renata.

She dodged low—some of her hair got caught in the arc. A few strands drifted in the air, severed.

Damon didn't let up.

He slashed again and again, the dark ice sword howling with each swing. But Renata regained control—raising a zero barrier, weakening and erasing every attack.

Every strike failed.

It was humiliating, really.

She was a whole rank ahead of him—and still, he was making her work.

"If he had a proper weapon," she muttered, "he'd be even more annoying."

Her gaze sharpened—she could see it. His energy was draining, yes, but with each attack, he was growing stronger.

She raised her hand.

A strange glowing ring formed in the air—its shape like a twisted Möbius strip.

"I'll just destroy everything."

Damon's expression changed.

She was charging something big.

He took a stance, one foot behind the other, sword ready. The arena cracked under his feet. His uniform whipped in the wind. His mana surged.

And then—

"Oh well. Time's up."

He dropped his stance and walked away with a casual shrug.

The entire arena went still.

Renata blinked. "...What?"

"Not bad, Number Two," he said over his shoulder. "Not bad at all. You put up a good fight. I'll let you take your time digesting everything you've learned from me today."

The crowd was stunned into silence.

Damon wasn't done.

"Since I went easy on you," he added smugly, "we'll call this a draw. Can't have people thinking I have no honor and go around beating women."

He hopped out of the arena, landing next to Lilith like a man who had just granted mercy.

Lilith almost laughed seeing Renata's expression.

The crowd watched him, half in awe, half in disbelief.

They knew he was at a disadvantage.

They knew Renata had been winning.

So why... why did it feel like Damon had won?

"He... he waited until he looked like he was on the offensive, then quit."

"What do you expect from the academy's problem child..."

Damon didn't care about pride.

In fact, he prided himself on having no pride at all.

Matia stepped up beside him, just in case Renata decided to retaliate. Her presence was enough of a deterrent.

Renata's eye twitched. She barely knew this bastard, and yet—he had humiliated her.

"You... you..."

He waved a hand dramatically. "If I used my full power, I might've accidentally killed you. Let's leave it at that."

He turned and began walking away, like a lone hero disappearing into the setting sun.

The crowd was entranced.

Until—

"Where are you going?" the Headmaster called out. "Your evaluation's not over. You still need a mental one."

Damon paused mid-step, then cleared his throat.

"Ahem... right. I was so merciful, I forgot about that..."

"Yeah, right..."

"Isn't this the same guy who stabbed his own friend during the mid-semester evaluation?"

Chapter 459: Act One freewebnovel.com

As surely as the sun will set—

That was not just a figure of speech. The sun always rose, yes—but it would always eventually set.

The saying had weight. Its meaning, though often open to interpretation, was actually simple:

Nothing lasts forever.

You cannot preserve a condition indefinitely.

You cannot wrong someone and expect to get away with it forever.

Just like the old saying—a thief has ninety-nine days, but the hundredth belongs to the owner.

And most often?

That final day was the last for the thief.

The day justice arrived.

Maybe that was what people really meant when they spoke of karma...

Kael didn't know for sure—but he was running.

Sweat beaded from his forehead as he sprinted through the stone corridors of the academy. The moment he heard Damon Grey had returned... he knew.

There was going to be bloodshed.

And not just a little.

More than that—Damon hadn't just come back. He had returned stronger than before.

Kael slammed through the heavy doors beneath the academy's vast library. Even from here... he could feel it.

That baleful, suffocating killing intent.

He burst into the lower chamber, magic pulsing through his body, darkness curling around his limbs—he was ready.

Ready to fight.

Ready to die, if he had to.

He turned the corner—

But there was nothing.

No sound.

No presence.

Not a single trace of the dark spirit summoner he'd been hunting.

Vanished.

Kael bit his lip and moved toward a nearby window. The twin moons cast their light over the academy.

He'd been hoping to capture the summoner tonight—to deliver him to King Kadelas Moonveil. Pin him as the real perpetrator. Take the heat off Damon.

That was the plan.

That was why he'd waited. Why he'd said nothing until now.

Because he had no evidence. Without evidence he would only alert his target.

That was why he waited.

But now—now with Damon back in the academy—the summoner had finally slipped up.

Kael wanted to end it quietly. Cleanly. No scandal for the academy.

But it was too late.

The man had vanished.

"He used spatial magic to escape," Kael muttered, eyes narrowing. "Where did he go...? He can't have gone far..."

—

Elsewhere, near the sealed underground dungeon beneath the academy...

Someone stepped out of thin air, space rippling around him like water disturbed.

He moved silently toward a secluded section of the grounds, pulled out a rusted key, and drew a sharp, splitting gesture in the air.

A tear opened—a dimensional rift that shimmered like a mirror showing a world beyond.

A hidden space.

"So that's why no one could ever find your base of operations..."

The voice was cold. Unforgiving.

Damon sat perched atop a tree branch, a single black raven resting silently on his shoulder.

Below, the man in white robes turned—slowly pulling down his hood.

He looked like a kind, elderly grandfather. The sort of man who smiled gently and handed out sweets to children.

The sort of man Damon had once respected.

Professor Chrome.

"Ahhh Damon, have you come to ask this old man for extra lessons?"

Damon's expression didn't change. Only his voice lowered—like iron cooling into a blade.

"You're confident I won't kill you."

Chrome stroked his beard, unbothered.

"You wouldn't be the first to try. But there's no need for violence when we can be... amicable."

Damon felt something twist in his chest—not fear.

Disgust.

He'd felt this before. Too many times.

Betrayal.

It still stung.

In the academy, Professor Chrome had been one of the few people Damon respected. He was proof that even commoners could rise—an esteemed scholar, a brilliant researcher... a man of intellect who had earned recognition from the imperial court.

And now?

He was just another one.

Damon stepped forward, shadows curling behind him.

"Amicable," he repeated. "After you trapped me in a death zone for months?"

Chrome smiled gently. "Wasn't that good for you? I calculated that, based on your personality, you would survive. It was for your growth, Damon. Adversity is the greatest teacher. Pain molds greatness."

"It has molded you beautifully."

Damon's chuckle was hollow.

He didn't feel anger anymore.

Only disgust.

He reached into the shadow beside him, pulling forth his soul Disintegration weapon.

Broken Bonds.

Its edge shimmered with deadly intent—designed to disintegrate both flesh and spirit.

"I don't blame you, Professor," Damon said quietly. "I blame myself. The truth was right in front of me. But I denied it... because of your mask."

He chuckled. " Then again, I am a master of denial."

He stepped down from the tree, his armor beginning to rise.

"I forgot this world is full of scum."

"Before you die... I just want to know...why."

Chrome sighed.

"Why did I do it?" he echoed. "Are you asking why I summoned the dark spirit, or why I trapped you?"

He flicked his sleeve.

A blackened staff unfolded into his hand.

"If that's your question... then the answer is simple. Akasha."

Damon's eyes narrowed.

Chrome smiled faintly. "Ah, so you do know of it. Good. That means your time in the death zone was not wasted. Now I can extract what you learned... for my research."

His smile vanished.

"You don't look too willing to share."

Damon's expression darkened completely.

So that was it.

He had sent them into the death zone not to kill them... but to harvest whatever insight they gained.

Just like the rest of them.

Another fool—another obsessed child of Aetherus chasing the illusion of Akasha.

Damon exhaled slowly. "Thank you, Professor. For reminding me what this world really is. You've hardened my resolve."

Chrome lifted his staff.

"Is the thought of killing me really that hard for you?" he said mockingly. "You've gone soft, Damon. I expected more from a street rat raised in Valerion."

Damon sneered.

"No. You're just the first name on a very long list."

Chrome's gaze shifted around, checking the shadows.

"If you're wondering about Lilith," Damon said, stepping forward, "she's not here. She's just making sure no one interferes... or dies in the crossfire."

Damon's aura surged, his blade gleaming with unspoken wrath.

"Die."

The earth shook.

Walls cracked.

Stone caved in.

And the sky above them rumbled—

—as their battle began.

Chapter 460: Death Of A Truth Seeker

Chrome seemed certain of his ability to escape. But he was greedy too.

He wanted more than survival. He wanted to capture Damon and extract his memories of the Death Zones.

A shame Damon had found out.

Which meant the academy would find out soon enough.

He had just been chased by Kael. The suspicion was already there.

Still, he wasn't worried.

He could escape.

All he had to do was get past the academy's barrier.

Damon Grey would serve his purpose well—and if the boy died? Then Chrome would just use his corpse, his blood, and his organs for research.

His blood was a prime ingredient for summoning creatures of dark affinity... and occasionally, even twisted entities born in light.

'His shadow attribute is definitely not normal...'

Chrome had been watching Damon the whole time.

He waved his hand and teleported into the air—his staff crackling as it unleashed spheres of spatial energy.

Damon's body melted into shadow—partially. That was the effect of his ascendant armor. An enchantment form based on his attribute.

He waved his sword.

Dark Blade.

Chrome flickered, teleporting away just in time.

Magic circles bloomed around him, the old man sneering.

"You young ones rely too much on skills... when magic already has it all."

"That wasn't a skill, it was a sword strike..."

The ground rumbled beneath Damon's feet.

He felt his body slowing—gravity twisting against him. He activated [5x], boosting his speed, and flashed forward.

Chrome hadn't expected that.

He barely raised a barrier before Damon's fist smashed into him, sending the old man flying into a wall.

He rolled across the cracked stone like a rag doll, blood dripping from his mouth and soaking into his white beard before he flickered away, teleporting into the air.

His staff rose again, and he laughed hoarsely.

"That ascendant armor... I will take it from your corpse."

Chunks of ground rose and hovered unnaturally as space tore in zigzag patterns. Dozens of spatial orbs filled the air and launched toward Damon.

He felt the air shred as they came.

He dodged the first, stepping into the air with his [Air Walk] skill, moving two steps up before—

"Explode!" Chrome's voice boomed.

The space erupted in chaotic, violent surges of mana.

But Chrome wasn't finished.

He pulled out a small bell.

Disorienting Bell.

Damon ducked left.

His body veered right.

His vision bent.

He barely managed to turn himself into shadow again, narrowly escaping.

Spatial ripples consumed everything as the orbs tore the sky apart.

When Damon reappeared in human form, Chrome was already behind him.

Damon sensed the danger and swung—

His blade slashed through Chrome's robe, but not his body.

Chrome chuckled. "Ah, that's an artifact too. The design... first epoch, isn't it? A shame. I thought you would've gotten something from the Zero Epoch by now."

Damon snarled and unleashed Ashborn.

Black flames exploded outward, scorching everything. The ground cracked and shattered, the sky lit in shadow fire.

Chrome reappeared, expression grim.

"I truly can't place how you got Ashborn. I summoned the dark spirit Rashi Ignath... yet somehow you wield his flames without a contract..."

Damon engulfed his sword in flame and swung down.

Dark Blade.

Chrome teleported away again, appearing behind him—blood still lingering from the earlier blow.

"But it seems you have... restrictions," Chrome muttered. "Otherwise, you would have used it more freely..."

Damon's next strike cleaved the ground. Dust rose in waves. Chrome raised a glowing barrier—it cracked from the sheer intensity of the heat.

He frowned, tasting more blood.

"This is getting... annoying."

His tone grew colder. "Let's end this."

Damon's eyes narrowed. He'd had enough of Chrome's games.

"Fine."

Chrome floated upward, raising his hand. His white hair flared in the artificial wind.

"You can see through shadows, can't you?"

He tossed an artifact—a white orb—into the sky.

Light burst everywhere, flooding the world in blinding white.

All shadows were banished.

Damon blinked.

Of course. This was how Chrome had ambushed him in the library a few months ago.

He'd used this exact artifact to remove all shadows—and strike unseen.

But Damon chuckled.

"So these are the tricks you used."

He stepped forward. "But shadows will always return. Wherever light and darkness meet... there will be shadow."

Chrome smiled. "Is that so?"

He stabbed his staff into the ground.

All around Damon—clones of Chrome began to appear.

"Illusions?" Damon muttered.

Then one attacked.

His danger sense screamed.

He tilted his head just in time as a beam of magic singed past.

"No... these aren't illusions. They're all illusions... except one. You're using spatial magic. Shifting your real body between clones."

Every Chrome smiled in unison.

Then they laughed.

"That is correct. All of me... and none of me."

Damon gritted his teeth.

Would've worked—if he didn't have danger sense.

He raised his hand without looking and deflected a beam behind him.

But Chrome would run again.

Damon snarled and raised his hand—

Unleashing Ashborn across the ground.

The black flames consumed everything. Before they vanished, he reached into his shadow storage and pulled out the Staff of Carnage.

Ashborn was both flame and shadows...

He had used this technicality to bypass the white light.

He pulled it out of his shadow storage... his hand burning slightly. But he had fire resistance.

It wasn't fully charged with mana—but that wasn't the point.

He'd been charging it with Ashborn.

He slammed it into the ground. The Staff Of Carnage.

The explosion that followed shook the academy to its foundations.

Damon stood amidst the roaring fire.

He could hear Chrome's screams as the flames devoured him.

The barrier Lilith had raised to keep the battle quiet shattered.

He could sense shadows approaching—Kael, students, even faculty.

He didn't care.

Matia emerged from his shadow.

She had been watching.

She walked to Chrome's charred body and kicked him to the ground.

Chrome raised his burned face—looking up at his death.

Matia raised her hands. Ice gathered and reshaped into the form of an execution scaffold—sharp and cold.

More people arrived.

Kael. Professors. Students.

Matia forged a massive greatsword of ice—and handed it to Damon.

He raised the cold ice above Chrome's terrified face.

"Any last words, Professor?"

The old man coughed, black blood spilling from his lips.

"I... I was so close... I could have touched... Akasha..."

Damon's expression didn't change.

Chrome began to crack. He saw death approaching.... The old man did not beg he would find none here.

So he called upon a god. He laughed.

"Hail... Unknown... the Unknown God..."

It didn't matter.

The sword came down.

And Chrome's head was severed.

Gasps echoed.

The professors and students froze in stunned silence.

He had just killed Chrome.

[You have slain Truth Seeker Chrome, the Dark Spirit Summoner.]

[You have leveled up.]