

Shadow 611

Chapter 611: You Put Your Faith In Me

There was a dull sound, heavy and final, like something had fallen from the heavens. Perhaps because something had—or in this case, someone.

Renata's body struck the ground, her breath leaving her lungs in a sharp gasp. Pain flared through her arms, her back, her very bones. She had been high in the sky when the command came, and though she had fallen willingly, her body had not been spared the punishment.

Fall.

It had not been her will. Not entirely. That voice had reached into her being, pulling strings deeper than flesh or thought. This was not mere mental domination—it was her very demon blood obeying. For Renata Malcris was not simply human. She was demon kin, and to one who bore the mantle of domination, her nature bent instinctively.

She tried to push herself upright, breath ragged, arms trembling as she forced her body into a sitting position. That was when the sharp whistle in the air caught her attention.

Her head lifted—just in time to see the broken edge of a sword stop before her eyes. A jagged half-blade, its aura thick with malice, radiating the cold certainty of something that had tasted thousands of lives. The weapon hung there, a silent promise of death. Her death.

The sound of footsteps followed, echoing with steady weight across the jagged stones. Out of the void came Lilith Astranova, emerald eyes sharp, and beside her walked Damon Grey, his presence darker than the steel aimed at Renata's life.

Lilith's lips moved—she said something—but Renata hardly heard her.

Her gaze was fixed upon Damon, drinking in every subtle shift, every faint gesture of his hand, every line of his posture. Her heart pounded as if her soul itself was trying to burn his image into memory.

Lilith broke the silence, her tone edged with impatience.

"I see no reason to kill her. Renata is useful."

Damon did not immediately lower his blade. His voice was calm, detached, carrying the weight of a simple truth.

"Yeah? And you want us to trust a demon kin? That's an uncontrollable variable—better off dead."

Lilith bit her lip, torn. He wasn't wrong. But she couldn't quite bring herself to accept it. Rivalry or not, she did not want to end Renata Malcrist's life. She remembered their clashes, their competitions, and the strange moments where, despite annoyance, she had leaned on her.

The incident with the dark spirit had proven it—Renata was someone she could rely on when the stakes were dire.

"Your mercurial violence is one of the reasons people find it difficult to deal with you," she muttered under her breath.

Damon sighed, his shoulders easing with mock nonchalance.

"There I thought it was one of my charms."

But his expression shifted as his eyes fell upon Renata. Something about her look—wide, dazed, almost fanatical—made him hesitate.

Her lips trembled, and then a whisper escaped her.

"Lord Ashcroft... you have finally returned."

Damon froze. He shot Lilith a glance; she only shrugged, her brow furrowed.

For a heartbeat, he wondered if Demon Dominate had broken her mind. But no, this was something else.

He leaned into it.

Renata's tear-filled eyes glistened as her voice grew steadier.

"My glorious king, you have finally returned..."

Her words faltered at his silence, doubt creeping into her tone.

"Yo... you are Lord Ashcroft, aren't you?"

Damon's mind turned quickly. Ashcroft was arrogant—as he recalled—then hesitation would not do. He raised his hand with dismissive authority, his voice heavy with disdainful grandeur.

"It is I."

Lilith almost gasped. His tone had changed entirely. Where Damon Grey's usual voice carried dry wit and cold bluntness, this voice dripped arrogance, as though the sky itself hung only because he willed it so.

Renata's eyes widened, and she forced herself from her broken stance into a kneel, bowing her head low before him.

"My lord, you humble me with your eminent presence."

Damon looked down at her with a carefully crafted air of detached superiority.

"Enough with the pointless drivel."

Lilith's expression flattened. Wasn't he just about to kill her? What was he even doing?

She stepped closer, whispering sharply.

"We can't be sure she's not acting. Be careful—"

"Silence. Speak only when spoken to."

His voice cracked like a whip.

Lilith gasped, stunned by his domineering tone, while Renata nodded eagerly. This, after all, was exactly as Lord Ashcroft should act. None were his equal.

Lilith's hand twitched—this bastard gains a taste of power and suddenly his personality warps entirely.

Damon, sensing her glare, coughed and waved lazily.

"Ahem... you have permission to speak."

Lilith clenched her fists, restraining herself from planting one firmly into his face.

"Nothing, great Lord Ashcroft," she said through gritted teeth. "I was merely wondering what you intend to do with Renata Malcrist, since we cannot determine her loyalty."

Damon's gaze fell on Renata, his lips curling in a faint sneer.

"Right. Guess I'll just kill her then."

Renata's face paled, but she did not flee. Her voice quivered, yet her words rang with conviction.

"My lord, I do not question your wisdom regarding my worth. I am but a pawn to serve your greatness..."

Her head lifted slowly, violet eyes burning with desperate resolve.

"However, surely even one as lowly as me is more useful alive than dead. I possess many skills and talents which I will gladly lay before you. I will sign the most diabolical oath scroll, bind my soul to your will. Please—use me as the pawn I am."

Damon chuckled darkly.

"That's the most eloquent way I've ever heard someone beg for their life. Suppose that's one of your so-called skills?"

Lilith's brow furrowed. She had said before that Renata was a master of administration, a woman who had raised her territory single-handedly. If anyone could beg with eloquence, it was her.

Damon exhaled slowly.

"Fine."

He lifted his hand, power swirling in his voice.

"Demon Dominate."

Renata's body slackened, her eyes dulling as the spell sank into her very core.

"Is everything you said true?"

"Yes, my lord. I would never lie to you."

"Are you under any form of mental protection to bypass Demon Dominate?"

"I am not, my lord."

Damon continued, probing with question after question, paranoia driving him until he was satisfied. Finally, he released her. Renata remained kneeling, waiting, her breath trembling.

Damon sighed.

"From this day forth, you put your faith in me."

Renata's expression brightened instantly, joy spilling over her face. She rose with eagerness, her eyes flickering toward Lilith. A question burned in her mind until it spilled free.

"My lord... if I may be bold, what role does this woman play in your grand plans for world domination?"

Damon almost choked.

World domination? Who gave her that idea?

He forced a smile, turning to Lilith.

"Why, isn't it obvious? This one is my concubine."

Lilith's hand twitched again—and this time she didn't resist. Her palm smacked the back of his head.

Looking at Renata, she corrected coldly.

"Isn't it obvious? I am his consort."

Renata's heart burned hotly at those words, a sudden sting twisting deep within her chest.

Why was she so close to Lord Ashcroft?

Chapter 612: If You Kill Mine, I Will Kill Yours

She really hated it. This life she was living, this cage she was forced to endure.

How could she have been so complicit all these years, accepting it like it was normal? No, this had been her normal, the life of a caged bird.

A bird who had never spread her wings and soared would not know the wonders of the sky. A caged bird who had lived in a cage would think that was all the world had to offer, never asking for more.

But then what if that caged little bird soared? What if it touched the clouds, felt the winds of freedom, and had the gift of choice far from its fate in the cage?

After seeing what it saw and knowing what it knew, how could it ever want to return to the cage and be complicit in its own suffering?

The world outside wasn't in her books. It was there, on the outside, just beyond her windows, through her doors.

Never... never again would she accept anything that was not a choice born from her own free will.

She would deny any love that damned her to a cage.

The first step to freedom was always making the choice to be free.

Her long white hair draped down around her, her grey eyes staring out through the windows.

She was still young, especially so for an elf. However, surprisingly, she wore a dress that could only be called a white maternity dress. It was like she was trying to subtly tell the world...

"I'm pregnant..."

It wasn't an overt clue, but it wasn't subtle either.

The room was brightly lit, with bright lights that illuminated every corner, leaving no room for shadows.

She hated how bright it was. However, she made no effort to take down the lights.

In her mind, it was consideration for the servants taking care of her.

The gaze of the maids lingered on her. Each of them was sworn into secrecy, as if Sylvia had done something completely unacceptable.

In their minds, their princess was pregnant, even though she wasn't actually married.

How much shame would this bring to her parents and the Moon Glades?

The elf king, Kadelas Moonveil, would be seeing Sylvia today.

Sylvia didn't really think too much of it. She watched the city of Valerion through the window with a calm expression.

The war games would soon start, and the Valtheron capital was welcoming guests from all around the world.

This would be a great time for Valtheron to show off their national might. Probably why they were having a Victory Day celebration, where champions and heroes of the empire would join a military parade or procession with the emperor and the grand dukes.

This was just to show off their power... to other nations present for the war games.

Sylvia's train of thought was cut off by the sound of footsteps.

Normally, it would have been discourteous not to acknowledge the people who had entered the room, but Sylvia wasn't really in the mood to look at them.

She heard the familiar footsteps of her father as he walked into the room. Along with his own were the lighter footsteps of her mother.

Even then, Sylvia did not look at them. Her father paused, glancing at her before walking to a sofa in the room and sitting down, his white hair giving him an imposing presence.

Sylvia's mother, Daphne Moonveil, sighed with a frown on her beautiful face, her hands subtly shaking as she slowly took a seat.

Her daughter didn't seem to acknowledge their presence, so she spoke first.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself..."

Daphne's voice was cold yet calm as she addressed Sylvia.

"You can't even look us in the eye after what you've done..."

Sylvia closed her eyes slowly, a thin smile forming on her lips.

"The view here is nice. I was merely appreciating it. Valerion is a beautiful place, a melting pot of so many races. The diversity is beautiful..."

Daphne closed her eyes, choking down the pain in her heart.

"What happened... has happened. You made a mistake, Sylvia. I can understand that... you are young and naive. You were tricked..."

Sylvia listened to her mother's words with a calm expression. Her heart held no emotions of weakness, only certainty in what she desired, in what she wanted.

Daphne continued.

"We've come to a decision... if you denounce that boy... if you confess to him forcing himself on you... we can sweep this under the rug..."

Sylvia sighed, feeling a headache.

"When I was a child, I used to think you were a wise and benevolent person, mother... but now all I see is a scheming woman who wishes to manipulate her own daughter. I see how small you are from where I stand..."

Daphne narrowed her eyes, feeling a bitter taste in her mouth.

"That's enough, Sylvia. Do not speak to your mother like that..." Kadelas finally spoke, seeing Daphne lose control of the situation.

Sylvia turned around with a soft bow.

"My apologies... but I was speaking the truth. Let's be honest, you don't want me to actually confess to anything... it's a tactic in manipulation. Surprisingly, one Damon uses often himself... yes, I've been on the receiving end of this..."

Sylvia smiled as she spoke Damon's name, not minding her parents knowing he was manipulative.

"The idea is to lay out an option that your subject would find unacceptable. Then, when they refuse, you present an alternative which seems better to the target..."

She shook her head with a thin smile.

"Your actual objective is the second alternative, right..."

Kadelas sighed, holding his head. He stood up, walking to Sylvia, his white ornamental cape flowing behind him.

"Sylvia... the test came back, and what I feared has come to pass. However, I cannot let you keep that child growing in your body..."

Sylvia almost let out a sigh of relief. It seemed her tampering with the test had worked. It would have been annoying if they found out she wasn't actually pregnant.

Her gaze was cold. Moving her hand to her abdomen, she shook her head furiously, then whispered.

"No..."

Kadelas was not in a good mood. Turning his head away from his only child, he muttered.

"We are not giving you a choice..."

Sylvia took a step back, opening the window and climbing onto it.

The wind fluttered her dress. Her parents watched her with wide eyes.

She spoke with a bitter tone in her voice.

"Losing a child must be painful... I can't imagine that..."

She called forth her Ascendant weapon, its blade moving to her own neck.

"If you kill mine... I will kill yours..."

Daphne and Kadelas froze at her blatant threat. If they aborted her pregnancy, she would kill herself.

Kadelas could easily stop her... but he couldn't always watch her.

Before he could say anything, the door opened.

An elf came in with a deep frown.

He glanced at Sylvia before handing the king a letter. Kadelas reflexively opened it while his eyes were on his daughter.

Reading the words, he frowned.

Daphne glanced at him, already knowing what he was going to say due to her powers as an oracle.

"Godric Ravenscroft is dead."

Chapter 613: Bring Something Sweet

Some things couldn't wait, and some things were long overdue. The day was long and bright, but no matter how much you wanted the light to stay and the sun to shine, it would set. Slowly, the sun would fall, giving way to twilight, where shadows spread and grew, giving way to the darkness of the night.

The night was dark and full of horrors. Why else would humans build cities with bright lights? It was because they did not want to be left in that darkness.

However, the darkness could be beautiful. It could be relieving. It was a good place to hide. It was calming, and it was soothing.

In the dark, no one would know. The light did not reach here, so it could be forgotten.

No, it would be like it never happened.

The room had the stench of alcohol that lingered so deeply you would think it was a filthy bar. Bottles littered the floor of the room, which for all intents and purposes was actually grand and luxurious, with lavish décor on the walls, beautiful furniture, and expensive flooring.

Yet this room was dark. The master of this room gulped down another bottle of alcohol.

Pain was a constant companion. But in his case, it wasn't only pain. No, it was pain mingled with shame.

He was a noble, and a noble could not look so pathetic. But this was his penance.

"Pain and the shame... keep it all inside."

He muttered these words to himself, bowing his head onto the table.

Godric Ravenscroft was a man who lived by the ideals of a noble. Perhaps that was why he had let the results of his own actions break him.

His face was covered with an unkempt beard. Everyone had tried talking sense into him when he had returned from the demon wars and shut himself away.

They really thought the demon wars and its horrors had been what drove him to hide himself in his room.

No. Godric was running from something he could not escape. He was running from his own guilt, and the fact that he had to run was his shame.

"Wh... why did I do it... why..."

His actions had been impulsive. He was full of regrets. On that day when he had found his supposedly dead fiancée on the battlefield with another man, he should have wished her well, a happy continuation to her life.

He was going to, until he found out the man was nothing but a commoner.

"My prejudice as a noble was what drove me... I..."

Godric could act like he had done it for her father and his own, but that wasn't true. It was just the ego of a noble, the superiority of being a noble.

When he tried to drag her away, he wasn't even trying to force her to be with him. He just wanted her to return to her noble life.

He could never imagine in his wildest dreams why she would want to live as a lowly commoner.

On that day, he had caused her and her husband to die, as well as their whole squadron. No one knew he did it. No one was alive to tell, except maybe the one survivor.

Linga Felt...

Godric took a deep swig from his alcohol bottle.

He didn't even send anyone to kill Linga. He had been too afraid that would leave a trail.

'I was such a fool. Of course her father would know she was still alive.'

Her father was a grand duke. He must have been the one to fake her death. As for Godric's family, his grandfather had known. The old Duke Brightwater had contacted him through a crystal, and they had spoken at length.

Godric only found out after the war was over.

His eyes were listless from all the drinking. He was still in decent shape due to having been in the third class, but Godric made no progress all these years. It was as if he was still stuck in that moment.

'If House Brightwater finds out, it will cause a blood war... many people are going to die... because of me... for me...'

If House Brightwater knew, they would demand Godric's head. Obviously, either out of familial bonds or pride, House Ravenscroft would not hand Godric over.

These two titans of the empire, which had been on good terms, would start a war, driving the empire into civil war.

Godric could not allow that. But he also couldn't come clean. So he would carry this secret forever, carrying its burden alone.

Knock. Knock.

There was a soft knock on his door. He didn't even look to know who it was. A younger man walked in with a stalwart expression on his face.

He personally pushed a trolley of food. Godric glanced at his younger brother, Xander Ravenscroft.

"You didn't need to do this..."

Xander was quiet. Even now, he couldn't understand his brother.

Godric saw that look in his eyes—the look of anguish. His younger brother had always looked up to him. He was sad because Godric was failing to meet his expectations.

He really wanted to make conversation, ask his brother how he was doing, how he was faring after surviving a death zone. But Godric was afraid.

He was afraid that if he started speaking after so long, he would break down and tell his brother everything. He would force Xander to carry the burden that had plagued him for years.

His brother set down the food and sat with him.

"Shall we eat, brother?" Xander spoke slowly.

Godric didn't react much. Putting down his bottle, he ate with Xander.

When they were done, Xander cleared the table.

Godric bit his lips. Xander had grown... maybe he could share this with his brother.

"You've grown up Xander." How was he only seeing this now.

"Come back with dessert... maybe we can talk afterwards... bring something sweet... it's bitter."

Xander's eyes flickered. Finally, he had gotten through to his brother. He walked out of the room, leaving Godric behind closed doors.

Godric glanced at the moonlight outside.

"Maybe I can finally be set free..."

"Yes, you will..." a voice spoke coldly behind him.

Godric turned around to find a faceless entity standing in the shadows of his room.

"You will be free from life."

Chapter 614: A Chat With A Faceless Entity

Its form was like the darkness itself, yet no matter how much Godric tried, he could not make out what it was. He was unsure if it was male or female, unsure of its face, unsure of its shape.

All he knew was that it had spoken to him, and it was here. A bipedal figure, a presence that stood out even against the suffocating shadows.

He sighed lightly. He was a veteran of the demon wars; he had seen horrors summoned and unleashed on the battlefield.

Monstrous demons, abominations born from summoning magic gone awry, tearing through both ally and foe without distinction.

This entity had spoken. So, it was man.

That alone was enough for Godric to judge.

He picked up the bottle of alcohol, bringing it to his lips and trying to gulp it down.

However, it was empty. He turned the bottle upside down as if to confirm the fact, then sighed again, shoulders slumping with the weight of tired resignation.

"An assassin... huh... haven't gotten one of those in a while..."

He glanced at the faceless entity standing in the darkness, its presence looming but calm.

"At least not in the citadel that is my family's seat of power... no one is that brazen..."

The faceless entity remained silent at first, then it moved—not to kill Godric, not with the swiftness of an assassin's blade. Its calmness was unsettling. This was not the enemy it had pictured when it came here.

He was too calm. Too confident. Or was it disregard?

The entity's decision was strange. It picked up a bottle and two glasses from a shelf, stepping past scattered bottles on the floor. Without a word, it placed the bottle in front of Godric and then sat opposite him.

Godric glanced at the bottle with a faint smile.

"Soltheon 5560. Excellent choice. I see you are a creature with a refined palate."

Acting as the host in his own chamber, Godric poured the wine into both glasses. He lifted one, swirling it with an amused smile.

The faceless entity picked up the other glass, savoring the fragrance of the fine wine. Even though he had come to kill Godric, it seemed both assassin and target had misplaced priorities.

Still, Godric could not help but be moved by this confidence that bordered on arrogance.

He raised his head, staring at the moonlight streaming through the tall windows into the room.

"You know, if I made a loud sound you would be dead in seconds..."

His gaze was calm, almost romanticizing the atmosphere. He wasn't wrong.

Damon knew well that the last time he had used Faceless and his shadow clone, his own grandfather, the Grand Duke, had been able to strike and destroy him in less than a second from another section of the castle.

Why would the Grand Duke of House Ravenscroft fail to do so as well? He was very capable of it.

The residence of a Grand Duke was like the maw of a dragon—one might enter, but never leave.

"Why haven't you... "

Damon sat there as the faceless entity, his presence bending perception itself. His calmness impressed Godric.

"It's never too late to do so..." Godric replied, taking a sip of his drink, his body reeking of alcohol.

"No, it is.... I can kill you faster than you can call for help. Or rather, faster than your help can arrive."

Godric's expression did not change. His eyes were calm and hollow.

Damon had seen that look before, and he understood it. He had seen that same emptiness in his own eyes.

"Are you not afraid to die..."

Godric's expression shifted suddenly, as if he had just realized he was staring at a kindred spirit.

"I was... for a time... but now I am more afraid of life and its tribulations." The entity spoke.

Damon's words made Godric's eyes glimmer faintly with emotion.

He whispered under his breath to the faceless entity.

"I'm so tired... of life's tribulations... and its trials. Should living not be a happy affair... and then you realize... most of it is just suffocating... hardship... with moments of true joy being fleeting. You're crushed under the weight of expectation the world has placed on you."

Damon took a heavy gulp of wine, the fragrance spreading across the air.

Godric lifted his glass again as if he were sharing a drink with a friend, rather than death itself.

"It's easy to tell a nameless, faceless person your problems... you must have kept them in your heart for so long..."

Those words made Godric chuckle lightly.

"I suppose it does...."

Damon exhaled deeply, his breath carrying the faint scent of wine.

"Someone once told me life was a turbulent ocean with small islands of joy. I do not doubt her words, for she was very wise... however, finding those islands is quite difficult. Most often, we are trapped in that turbulent sea, just trying to stay afloat."

He smiled faintly at Godric, though whether the smile was real or just something Godric's weary mind painted on the faceless figure, he could not tell.

"Though killing you will bring me to the dry shores of joy... if only temporarily..."

Damon slowly stood from his seat.

"I really hate when my enemies have depth. Not just one-dimensional characters I can hate..."

Godric smiled, reaching toward the sword that hung on the wall.

"I apologize for being a bother..."

Damon shook his head. He knew full well the moment he clashed with Godric, the entire castle—especially those old monsters among the higher ranks—would know instantly.

Godric narrowed his eyes as the sword flew into his hand.

"I never caught your name..."

The faceless entity chuckled.

"I am your sins, catching up to you."

As soon as he said this, Godric's eyes trembled. His form faltered, shaken, and that single opening was all Damon needed.

He raised his hand. Godric took a defensive stance. But what happened next was unexpected.

From a shadow behind Godric, sharp claws emerged, slashing across his back. The guttural growls of a lesser demon followed, its barbed tail piercing through his chest, impaling his heart.

Godric staggered forward as alarms blared throughout the castle, the demon's presence sending the wards into frenzy.

He fell, blood spilling across the floor as the lesser demon loomed over him, its mouth stained crimson.

"Death by the hands of a lesser demon... how fitting for you..."

Godric gasped, coughing blood that dripped down his chin.

"Yes... it is quite fitting..."

The sound of footsteps rushed down the hall, voices drawing closer.

'Sorry, Xander... let's talk some other time...'

Those were the final words of Godric Ravenscroft.

Damon dismissed the lesser demon, its form fading back into his shadow. Reaching forward, he pulled Godric's heart free, holding the still-bleeding organ in his hand as the doors slammed open.

Xander froze in horror, his hands trembling as knights filled the chamber behind him.

His gaze fell on the open, lifeless eyes of his brother.

It was as if time had stopped for him, that moment stretched forever.

"Brother..."

As if to add insult to injury, Godric's body began to dissolve at the faceless entity's feet.

Devoured by its dark power.

"How dare you kill a warrior like my brother...!!!"

Xander's scream was hoarse and choked with grief.

He charged forward as armor materialized across his body, a spear manifesting in his grip. His helm formed, covering his tear-stricken face as his rage consumed him.

Chapter 615: Only Possibility

There had never been a doubt in his mind. It went without saying, nothing could be more certain. He had accepted this certainty as fact, and he was happy with it. This was his way of life.

Xander was the second son of the powerful Ravenscroft household. His was a clan of warriors. Many noble houses were like that, after all—this was a might-makes-right world, and Doom was their goddess.

He had been sure his brother would be the head of the family when the time came. How could he ever doubt that?

Godric was talented, strong, and kind. He had the makings of a leader. He was flawless, a man of honor.

Xander had always looked up to him as his ideal... the ideal, one everyone should strive to be.

This noble knight.

How could he accept this... how could he accept this outcome?

His brother was dead. Xander's heart was bathed with grief and rage—both feelings so overpowering they swallowed him whole.

Godric had been strong... until the demon wars ended. He had returned a war hero, but Godric had changed. He kept to himself, shutting away, letting himself grow dull and rusty, wasting away. Even so, Xander still looked up to the man he had been.

But he had still seen it... how Godric pushed all his duties onto him, as if grooming his successor.

His brother's eyes had seemed so tired... as if he was waving life goodbye.

Xander hated that look so much. But oddly enough, he had seen that same look on one other person... the helpless withdrawal from the desire to live. He had seen it in the dark and hate-filled eyes of Damon Grey.

The only difference, if any, between Godric and Damon was that Damon hated everyone enough to live. He lived not because he particularly liked living, but as a way to spit in the face of all who wanted him gone.

Perhaps that was why Xander didn't like Damon... but at the same time, that was why he treasured him.

With a heart swelling with hate, his spear thrust toward the entity with a sonic boom.

"How dare you dishonorably kill my brother with a sneak attack..!"

How else had Godric died? How could Godric not muster any resistance? From the blood spatter, Xander instantly deduced his brother had been attacked from behind.

His footsteps rumbled like thunder, shattering the floor beneath the immense weight of his magical power. Gravity pressed on everything around them until the walls behind the faceless enemy cracked and shattered.

The entity punched forward, blocking the spear with a massive echo that created astral winds.

Xander felt its immense physical strength pressing against him, forcing him back.

Damon sighed. There was no need for this farce. He was already dead anyway. Other than Xander, Damon could feel several powerful auras surrounding him. Each of them was like a noose around his neck—if they willed it, he would be destroyed in an instant, without a shred of his body left behind.

This was the power of those in the high-class advancement. At least, against one as weak as he currently was.

Why were the Grand Duke and the Duke allowing this? What did they hope to achieve? It would have been easier to try and capture him—or even kill him outright.

No... all those things were open possibilities. They were certain he would die. They just wanted to make sure Xander killed him.

'How ruthless and pragmatic... one son dies, and they are already grooming the second one...'

This was noble society. It wasn't that they didn't care for Godric... they simply knew how to control their emotions.

Damon tried to teleport, but nothing happened. The space was sealed. He was trapped here.

Xander roared, charging at Damon, gravity swirling and wrapping around him.

Damon bit his lip slightly, parrying the spear before kicking Xander square in the chest. The young man's eyes widened in shock.

His surprise was not unexpected. However, Xander truly didn't know who he was fighting. Damon did. He had fought Xander many times and knew all of his techniques... even the Lysithara techniques he was now using.

Damon had not yet attacked him, however. This was the barest consideration he would show to his party member, classmate, and friend.

'They can never make me like you, Xander Ravenscroft.'

This time, Damon did not speak those words aloud.

He had understood this was inevitable since the day he found out Godric had killed his parents. If he killed Xander's brother, he would be the enemy.

Revenge was a sick cycle. One death led to another, spiraling endlessly.

'Still, I'm sorry... this is the last apology. From now on... I will treat you as a great enemy. One who will dance to my tunes...'

He reached for Xander's throat, cutting through his defenses. Xander moved sharply, bringing his elbow around, but Damon knew him too well. Using his overwhelming physical advantage, Damon weaved under the strike and slammed his fist beneath Xander's chin.

Then he laughed softly—a tune that seemed like a demon's laughter.

"Is that all... you're weak... you waste my time.."

Xander roared, trying to tackle him. Xander was an upright person. Even his fighting style was like that.

He raised his hand, and knights charged in, a swarm rushing in unison.

Damon leapt backward, out of the broken wall—more a collapsed section than a window. His gaze remained locked on Xander, his hand still clutching the heart.

Xander roared, giving chase. Watching that monster hold his brother's heart was unacceptable. His aura flared, pushing him higher than ever before.

He crashed into Damon mid-air, unleashing a flurry of punches across his face. They plummeted into the courtyard with a thunderous crash.

Damon lay still for a moment. His shadow clone would dissolve soon once all of his shadow energy was depleted.

He just needed to keep this farce going long enough.

But before he could act, he felt an overwhelming aura behind him. A shadow loomed. Heavy footsteps drew close. Then hands grabbed his head, holding it firmly.

The man's voice was cold, grief-stricken.

"Father, this farce has gone on long enough... I have lost a son today... I can bear no more..."

Damon felt his neck being crushed from the back of his head, until his body gave way.

What poured out was not blood, but blackness... a pool of shadows.

The grip released for only a moment.

Damon was a shadow clone. He did not truly have a physical body.

He slid down, grasping Xander even as the man delivered his final judgment.

The man's expression was cold, his gaze unyielding. His eyes said it all.

Death was the only possibility left.

Chapter 616: Revenge Is Bitter Sweet

The feeling of someone in a higher class crushing him was overwhelming, however he knew he could not linger. If his Faceless skill was somehow disabled, Damon would be in serious trouble.

Faceless gave him an air of mystery. He was an unknown, even if he was weak right now, he was still something to be feared. Unknowns were things humans feared, it was a subconscious thing.

"Hahahahaha..."

He laughed in the courtyard while holding Xander with one hand.

The Grand Duke hadn't shown himself yet, however Duke Aspen Ravenscroft was there, standing in front of Damon with all the fury of a father who had lost his son.

No, worse, he was staring at the murderer of his son.

It was one thing to let Xander avenge his brother... he needed that closure more than Aspen himself. He understood how much these two brothers loved each other.

But still, he was their father. How could he have any self-control watching this monster clutch his son's bleeding heart like a trophy, his corpse taken by it?

"You killed my son..." he muttered softly, as if he was forcing himself to accept this new dire reality.

"I've killed many people's sons... yours isn't even that special..."

Damon spoke coldly. This was the best outcome he could hope for. He had to make them kill him.

He knew he was in trouble if Aspen tried to capture him. That would be a disaster. His Shadow Clone skill would be exposed, and it would cause trouble for his main body.

Biting his lips, Damon decided to play into a role he had already considered—or rather, in this case, give subtle clues.

His shadow energy reserves were higher than before thanks to his level up. His pool was deep with a lot to spare, and now he had the Heart of Shadow Skill which made him passively recover shadow energy, so he was in no danger of running out anytime soon.

He pushed Xander aside, noting the calm in Aspen's face.

The entire courtyard was fully lit by large magical lights focused on him, as if he were a performer on a stage. The lights brightened up everywhere, arrows pointed at him, their glow making his skin prickle with deadly intent.

Aspen stood there, Xander between him and Damon.

"Before you die... I wish to know why..."

Damon glanced at Aspen as he moved shadows around himself, trying to burn shadow energy as quickly as possible. The lights had rendered the ability to passively generate shadow energy useless thanks to the absence of deep shadows.

"Why... is that your question? Or are you worried I might crush what's left of his heart..."

He smiled at the heart in his hand, tossing it to Xander.

"There's no need. I ripped it out so you could have something to bury..."

That was more than anything Damon's parents had ever had. They didn't even get their organs buried—only objects they had owned.

"Who are you? Has my family offended you in any way?"

Damon walked around the courtyard as arrows followed him from the balcony, ready to shoot at any moment.

"No... you have not..."

Aspen's hands trembled, trying to stay rational.

"Has someone paid you and offered you a contract to kill my son?"

The faceless entity smiled, shaking its head.

"Not at all... no one paid me for this..."

Aspen's voice rose with a soul-suffocating aura that made it difficult for Damon to breathe. His head felt like hammers were smashing it.

"Then why did you kill my son...!!!"

Damon would have coughed up blood if he could, but it turned out his shadow clone had no blood—it was just that, a shadow.

"Because I can... and I did... there is nothing you can do about it... you can't even kill me..."

As soon as he said those words, the world compressed into a single point. Then, right before Xander's eyes, a small black ball fell to the ground. The gravity exploded inward, space returning to normal.

He glanced at the ball of compressed space. That was all that was left of the faceless entity.

Dead just like that.

Xander looked at a grand balcony where an old man, who looked like his father, stood with eyes closed. Aspen glanced at him as well.

It was the old man who had made a move.

"Anyone who dares provoke House Ravenscroft will perish... let them all bear witness. Justice has been served..."

Xander squeezed his fist as he knelt there holding his brother's heart, tears streaming down his face. The black ball that had once been someone's body compressed to a single point in space with overwhelming power lay there like a little marble.

Then... the ball spoke weakly, as if to spit on all their faces.

Xander felt as if a defiant, arrogant gaze was drilling into him.

"Don't celebrate yet fools... were you not listening to a word I said..."

The whole place went silent. The ball of compressed space spoke.

'Good thing I'm a shadow,' Damon thought as he willed the last dregs of his consciousness in this body to speak.

"I am not dead... I cannot die. You have not killed me, and you never will. He is dead, and there is nothing you can do about it—nothing you can do about me."

Damon was a death seeker, but more than that, he was still angry about his parents.

Godric had done something abominable, but he could not tell the world that. If he did, he would end up causing a war.

Now that he was dead, the world would forget his sins. They would never come to light.

Damon had carried Godric's sins by killing him.

And since this persona of his was meant to be an unstoppable Demon Lord, Damon would play that role well.

"I will leave today because that is what I want... I will let this transgression go... however, do not be misled into thinking that you have killed me..."

Aspen's gaze narrowed with rage, however he didn't make a move, because the aura of the faceless entity had gone bleak. It had faded completely.

Somewhere far away, Damon's true body collapsed, unmoving, blood falling from his mouth, his consciousness gone, his face pale...

As the voices of two women rushed to his aid, even then he had a faint smile on his face.

The taste of revenge was bittersweet, despite who got hurt in the process.

Chapter 617: Soul Damage

The noise was far and distant... but he still heard it. The sounds seemed drowned out, as though muffled by water. No... it felt like he was underwater....

His eyes slowly opened, a dull ache gnawing at the very core of his being.

The moment his eyes opened, the sounds flooded his ears clear as day. Closing them again, he endured the throbbing in his head before slowly sitting up.

He found himself on a large bed in a luxurious room, its white sheets covering him as sunlight poured in through the window, bathing everything in a golden glow.

He narrowed his eyes as they adjusted to the brightness of the room.

"Where am I..."

Damon muttered those words reflexively, not expecting an answer. Yet a reply came.

"We are in the Valtheron capital city, my lord."

The voice came from a violet-haired young woman kneeling by his bed. Her head was lowered, posture rigid, as though waiting for his orders.

He took a deep breath, trying to make sense of the situation. The last thing he remembered was... discussing plans with Lilith Astranova and Renata Malcrist, filling Renata in on their strategy while they contemplated just how much use they could extract from her.

Then...

No. That wasn't his last memory. Damon recalled something else. He had been at the Ravenscroft citadel, a palace had stalked for weeks. Somehow, he had slipped inside past their defenses, fully aware that going in meant death.

He hadn't cared. It was only his shadow clone.

Holding his head, he pieced together the memories. He had found his target—Godric Ravenscroft. After a short exchange, he killed him, pulling off something that had never been done. At least, not within the stronghold of a dukedom.

"I killed him..." he muttered, his words loud enough for Renata to hear, though he wasn't really speaking to her.

What he had done was equivalent to assassinating an imperial prince inside his own palace, the one place where he should have been safest.

And Damon had done it in the most high-profile way imaginable.

What followed was not delightful. He had run into Xander. That had been the most difficult part of the night—not facing Xander's father or even his grandfather. It was Xander himself. Seeing his usually confident face collapse into despair, watching him stare at his older brother's corpse, watching hatred consume him.

There was a time when Damon would have felt joy at such a sight. Now, it only left a bitter taste in his mouth.

That was why revenge was bittersweet. It had been bitter because of who he hurt in the process. It had been sweet because of who he got to kill.

He pressed a hand against his side, feeling a pain he couldn't quite trace.

Dealing with Xander hadn't caused this pain. No... this came from being killed so thoroughly by an old monster at the seventh class of advancement.

The Grand Duke of House Ravenscroft. Even recalling it now sent a chill down his spine. The last time his own grandfather had destroyed one of his shadow clones, Damon had suffered soul injuries. And that was when the clone had already been half-faded, costing Damon less.

This time had been different. This had been his most powerful clone yet, fully materialized.

His face remained impassive, but inside he could feel the agony of his soul. He had taken a great deal of damage. Damon was weakened.

'Suppose this confirms it... my clones' deaths don't completely absolve my true body...'

He didn't look hurt, but he was. The damage had been dealt by someone in the seventh class, acting with full intent to kill, driven by the rage of losing a family member.

"What is that noise..." he finally muttered, acknowledging the commotion outside.

Renata, who had been waiting for him to speak, quickly responded.

"My lord, it is the street performers..."

He narrowed his eyes, glancing toward the window of the building he was in.

"Street performers..."

Renata nodded, rising to her feet.

"It has been two weeks since you collapsed, my lord. I never imagined you would be ambushed by the vile machinations of the goddess races..."

She bit her lip, anger surging in her voice.

"I detected traces of magic unique to House Ravenscroft... at a high advancement, most likely seventh class. We tried to heal you, but it was to no avail."

Damon's eyes remained calm, though his heart stirred in surprise.

Two weeks. He had been out for two whole weeks.

Then the noise outside...

"The war games are here, aren't they..."

Renata nodded, lifting a neatly arranged stack of papers bound into a folder.

"The war games will begin in four days. As the top student of your year, the academy has automatically enrolled you."

She smiled faintly, glancing at a list of names.

"You have gained quite the fame, my lord. Many fools wish to challenge you, which is to be expected."

Renata clenched her fists tightly.

"As if those lowly rabble are qualified to face your might..."

Damon smiled, finding her words amusing. He opened his mouth to respond, but—

"Cough, cough..." A dry cough escaped him, his chest aching as dizziness washed over him. The world flickered in and out of focus.

He leaned forward, nearly collapsing, when a hand emerged from his shadow. It caught him firmly, guiding him back upright.

Damon glanced at the woman who stepped out of the darkness. Her blue eyes flickered beneath her visor, fixed on him with a look that could only be described as worry.

Matia, or rather, as she was right now, his shadow ruin fairy.

Renata immediately supported him from the other side.

"My lord, are you alright? You must still have lingering trauma..."

Damon closed his eyes with a soft sigh.

"I'm fine." He was not fine.

"This is nothing." It was not nothing—it was definitely something.

"It cannot hinder my power." It was a major hindrance to his power.

The door opened. A woman with flowing red hair stepped inside, letting out a soft sigh that was really just a shallow attempt to hide her worry.

"You aren't in good shape... maybe you should sit out the war games until you get better..."

Damon smiled faintly when he saw Lilith Astranova enter the room.

"We both know I'm not going to do that..."

She sighed with a resigned expression.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

Chapter 618: Incurrible

The war game was a large event, a grand tournament of power, but at its base, it was actually a religious festival.

The origin of the war games was to fight in order to venerate the goddess, however later people modified it to suit their own needs.

One of these people was Athor, the founder of the Aether Academy. He was a sage who thought it would be a good opportunity to have his students compete with the students of other sages.

Which may have been part of the reason the War of the Five Sages was fought, but that wasn't what Damon was thinking about. Even though the war was the cause of intense rivalries between the various academies today, especially the Aether Academy, which even after so many millennia had not lost.

Damon could have tried to ponder about the thousands who died in the war simply because five supposedly wise men had a little contest between their students and had caused some casualties.

Why did that have to involve thousands of others?

"If they were so wise, why fight a war... the one who wins in war is the one who never picks up a sword."

He muttered those words aloud.

"Take your own advice..." the cold voice of Lilith Astranova came from his side where she sat glaring at him.

She didn't really know what he was thinking, but she guessed it was related to the war games.

"Look, I'm certain you aren't in fighting shape or in good enough condition to compete.."

Her gaze stretched out to the window. The streets were packed with people from all sorts of goddess races: humans, beast kin, elves, fairies, dragon kin to name a few.

It was bustling and lively even though this was supposed to be an executive part of the capital city.

Merchants sold war banners, armor, weapons, mounts. They showed off warriors who would compete and the houses they represented.

Some fought mock duels, already eager for the grand event.

Food stalls were everywhere, and flowers and decorations filled the streets with confetti raining from the sky, made of roses and hundreds of flower petals.

The sky was filled with wyvern riders and griffins, accompanied by large airships that hovered slowly in the air.

It was lively outside, a sharp contrast to Damon who was on his deathbed but still stubbornly wanted to compete.

"You'll die before you prove anything."

Damon smiled mischievously.

"Then let me die spectacularly.."

She narrowed her eyes, glaring at him.

"Renata... what do you think... your lord might need another resurrection favor from the unknown god."

Renata bit her lips. Damon had just barely scraped by after surviving an attack from Godwin Ravenscroft... the Singularity.

He was in no condition to fight in the war games after getting attacked by someone in the seventh class.

She was worried.

"My lord... your life is far more valuable than... I... I do not think you would lose to mere mortals but..."

Damon could feel Renata's confidence falter. He sighed, coughing lightly before clearing his throat.

They weren't wrong. The longer he stayed conscious, the more he realized how badly the old man from the Ravenscroft household had wrecked him by killing his shadow clone.

"Do you know what I hate..."

The two women glanced at him, his tone getting soft but serious.

"I hate when someone works hard and gets so powerful... but decides to hide how powerful they are and pretend to be weak."

He clenched his fist as that thought alone was a valid enough reason for him to convince Lilith to let him dive headfirst into what was practically suicide.

"What's the point of having power if you can't abuse it... I gained my power doing horrible things you don't even want to imagine... I have killed many people to get it... this power is mine and mine alone. I alone decide what to do with it."

His power had come from killing and cannibalism on people just like him. Damon had struggled to accept this horrible price. The unknown god was a sick god, for even putting Damon, a sixteen-year-old, through all that.

What made it even worse was the fact that his system could have been feeding on anything else, but the unknown god just chose that.

Power must come at a price, and that was his price.

"A lot of people have wanted me dead over the years... I am here, and they are dead..."

He glanced at Lilith with the same gaze he had whenever he set his mind on something.

It was the one expression she hated, especially when it was dangerous for him, but that stubbornly defiant expression that said I will jump into hell even knowing I will turn to ash was what had made her so smitten with him.

The look of the man who would go down carrying his ideals on his back, even if there was an easier option.

That was what she....

"I hate you..." she smiled, knowing she meant the exact opposite, but telling him that would only make him more reckless.

'The possibility I end up as a widow in a distant future is very open...'

That thought crossed her mind before she shook it off.

Renata stood there wearing a flabbergasted expression before she slowly smiled, nodding her head.

"Yes... I see my lord... this must be part of your plans... yes... you let yourself get injured by Godwin Ravenscroft... so you can give those young goddess race talents a handicap... your goal must be the world dungeon, but it's beneath you to bully the weak."

Damon sneered, looking at her turn him into some eminent manipulator.

"That's definitely not what happened..." he shot her down before she accidentally built some unnecessary image of him.

The last time he had this kind of misunderstanding he had to deal with Leona.

Renata smiled seductively.

"There's no need to be humble my lord... I shall try my best to work... towards your plans for the world dungeon..."

She glanced at Lilith.

"You were planning to get in to obtain a cure for Luna Grey..."

Damon paused.

"Right, that was the original reason I was fighting in this war game... totally forgot about that.."

Lilith's eyes twitched.

"You were being this adamant even after forgetting... your main goal.."

He scratched his head awkwardly. If he didn't participate, Lilith would have stopped at nothing to find Luna the cure.

"What... I didn't forget... I really didn't.."

She closed her eyes then sighed.

"You're incorrigible."

Chapter 619: Expensive Entrance

"With my participation settled, I need to be updated on the impact of my actions on the world at large."

Damon's voice carried a reserved tone, his dark eyes shifting toward Matia, who stood silently in the corner, her expression unreadable.

Renata adjusted the papers in her hand, her brows furrowed with focus.

"The Ravenscroft family are still mourning the loss of Godric Ravenscroft... however, they have not let that stop them from going about their activities."

She flipped briskly through the documents, selecting a stack and placing them before Damon. He picked them up with a casual glance while she continued her explanation.

"Godric Ravenscroft was buried a day after the incident—or rather, his heart was buried. All investigations have led to a dead end regarding the faceless entity... however, they've surmised he is a demon."

Damon's eyes narrowed as he skimmed the autopsy report. Jagged gashes across Godric's heart, inflicted by the tail of a lesser demon, painted a clear picture. Every detail aligned with the act being carried out by something inhuman.

"I imagine they've taken up hostilities against the demons..." Damon muttered.

Lilith, who had been leaning against the wall, shook her head and cast him a sidelong glance.

"Not quite. The demon continent has denied any involvement, and surprisingly, the empire and temple are... quiet. For now, they're calling the faceless entity an unknown element."

Damon flipped to another page, a thin smile curving his lips.

"They can't confirm if it was or wasn't a demon... however, a demon would have the most motivation to do so. And the presence of that lesser demon seals it all."

Lilith exhaled a long breath, relief softening her features.

"At least no one connected it to you, which is good for us..." She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, steadying herself before continuing.

"The Ravenscroft family are in the capital—it seems they'll be receiving guests here."

Renata closed her folder with suspicion flickering in her eyes.

"I don't imagine that's the only reason... this particular war game is different from the previous ones. Too many big shots are coming in person."

Damon pressed his fingers against his temple, feigning deep thought though his head throbbed with an ache.

"They probably want to discuss something behind closed doors. This war game just gave them the perfect excuse..."

"The temple, the empire, the elves, beast kin... too many people are attending. Including the headmasters of various academies," Lilith listed, her tone grim.

Damon's gaze slid down the page until it halted on a name. His lips curled.

"Hmmm... Seras Blade is coming too."

Renata's eyes narrowed. The name struck her unease. Seras Blade, a prodigy whose rank towered above Damon's, belonged among dignitaries. Yet hearing it aloud stirred a knot in her chest.

"Well, no matter," Damon dismissed with a soft wave of his hand, his tone light as though he cared little for the woman's presence.

"What about Xander... how's he holding up?" he asked suddenly.

Lilith closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose as if fighting off a headache.

"You, of all people, shouldn't be asking that—after killing his brother."

Damon chuckled under his breath.

"It's basic human decency to ask about the deceased."

He pushed himself up, ignoring the lingering ache in his head.

"Be that as it may... we have far more important matters to discuss." His gaze swept across the three women before him.

"How can I make the most over-the-top, grandiose entrance possible?"

Lilith groaned audibly, rubbing her temple. Of course—that was Damon. He could ignore every enemy and every consequence, yet obsess over how to make a dramatic appearance.

Renata, however, didn't hesitate. She whipped out a pen, her hand moving in quick, calculated strokes across the paper. After barely a minute, she tore the sheet free and presented it to Damon with a bright, expectant smile.

"It's short notice, so I made a rough outline for your entrance on the tournament stage. We need something that matches your majesty."

Damon scanned the paper, a grin spreading across his face.

"Yes, yes... this will do."

Renata straightened, satisfied by his approval. Lilith stepped forward, snatched the paper, and skimmed it. Her eyes twitched almost immediately.

"You... you... the budget for your entrance alone is seven million zeni..." Her glare swept over them both like a storm.

"We don't have that kind of money to splurge!"

Renata scoffed, tilting her chin upward with disdain.

"Please. Don't look down on me. I'll cover the budget. My lord, leave it to me."

Damon nodded approvingly, secretly pleased he wouldn't spend a dime.

"No, you're not," Lilith snapped, crossing her arms. "At least tone down the expenses."

Frustrated but unwilling to back down, she grabbed the paper and quickly began scribbling her own adjustments. After a few moments, she thrust it back toward Damon.

"How about this?"

Damon glanced at the revision, nodding slowly, a sly smirk tugging at his lips.

"Hmmm... I like it. I'll piss off a lot of people without even saying a word."

Lilith sighed with relief. She had expected to argue with him endlessly to avoid something utterly extravagant.

"Alright then... get some rest."

Damon sank onto the bed, stretching out as though every ounce of rest was precious.

"Right, I totally forgot... can any of you open a sealed spatial ring with your conceptual attributes?"

Lilith exchanged a glance with Renata. The latter smirked triumphantly.

"Of course, my lord. There's nothing I won't do for you."

Lilith sighed again, her gaze lingering on Renata.

"You change so fast... I had no idea you had such a fawning side. Always thought you were just a little slutty."

Renata's hand trembled, her eyes twitching with barely contained fury, but she forced herself to remain composed in Damon's presence. To her, Damon was Ashcroft reborn, and she would not tarnish her devotion.

"I will do anything for my lord."

Damon, blissfully unaware of the tension crackling between the two women, chose not to pry.

"Can you raise a barrier?" he asked Lilith instead.

She flicked her wrist, and a faint shimmer of magic sealed the room off in an instant.

From his shadow storage, Damon retrieved a small golden ring etched with faint runes and a familiar crest. The instant their eyes fell upon it, both Renata and Lilith stiffened.

"Where did you get a ring from the imperial family?" Renata asked before she could stop herself.

Damon waved his hand dismissively.

"Oh, this old thing? It's nothing. I got it from a random woman I met in the woods."

He left out one crucial detail—that the woman had been the princess of Valtheron. And they stood in the very capital of Valtheron.

At that same moment, not far from them, deep within the Valtheron Imperial Palace, Abellona felt the magic of her ring stir.

Chapter 620: You're Here

The heart longs for what the heart longs for.

Surely of all things fickle the heart must be the most fickle—wildly unrestrained, a storm with no master. It denies logic, mocks reason, and pursues what will almost certainly end in pain.

Even then, there is an ephemeral beauty to what the heart desires. Fleeting though it may be—mere moments in its long life of endlessly beating within one's chest—those moments can last forever, echoing long after their passing.

What was this feeling called?

That feeling you're describing is love, but not the tame, neatly defined kind. It is restless, unreasonable, a pull so consuming it borders on self-destruction. The heart chases it knowing the risk, yet still it leaps—because in those fleeting instants of connection, the world itself feels eternal.

This was what her heart was asking, and the response came from her brain.

There was folly in her thoughts... and a childlike naïveté she was not supposed to allow.

This was wrong. Life wasn't a storybook for young noble ladies, where the euphoria of love blooms from a single glance or a brief encounter.

All she knew was his name. All she had was his image burned into her mind.

That was it... and yet, after only a handful of days, here she was—her heart and mind constantly preoccupied with him.

"I don't even know for certain if he's alive."

For all she knew, he could be a liar. No—she knew that for certain. He was a liar and a cheat, without a shred of decency.

But also so noble. So brave. And... and...

'I can fix him...'

Maybe she should consider that if he needed fixing, he was not someone worth falling for. Certainly not someone like her.

However, the Valtheron princess did not care.

She raised her head from her pillow, sunlight streaming through tall windows. Her crimson eyes were dazed, heavy with thoughts she could not banish. Her lips curved into a faint smile, directed at the other side of the bed.

Upon a pillow lay a long cylindrical container, its surface glass framed in metal, lined with glowing runes and reinforced by preservation seals. Inside was...

A human arm. Perfectly preserved, unmarred, without a trace of injury.

Her crimson gaze lingered on it, an expression caught somewhere between grief and yearning.

If Damon had been here, he would have grimaced—not because the princess of Valtheron had a strange fetish for keeping a man's arm in her bed, but because the arm was his own.

On every level, Abellona knew her attachment was wrong. Yet she kept it. Not for any strange desire, but because she had needed it—for a locator spell. A way to track Damon.

She had failed. Even with the might of her position, even after pouring her influence and power into a grand locator spell, Damon remained untraceable. His existence slipped through her fingers like smoke.

That was why she kept the arm, why she preserved it.

"I'll get rid of it when I find him..."

She rose, the silk of her white sleeping wear clinging to her figure, accentuating the allure that made her the empire's jewel. Her dark hair tumbled freely, her beauty unguarded yet devastating.

Countless men dreamt of her—countless vied for her favor. And yet here she was, tormented by thoughts of a no-good wretch who had tricked her into signing away five billion zeni, taken her body as though she were nothing, and stolen her most precious possession.

Her spatial ring.

Not just any ring, but one etched with her imperial seal. A symbol of power. A symbol of rule. Whoever carried it could wield her authority as if it were their own. If it were known to be stolen, heads would fall simply for wearing it.

But Abellona had not reported it missing.

To carry that ring was to carry the authority of a princess.

She was not worried Damon would use it. She feared he would not.

"Where are you, Damian... you are still alive, aren't you..."

Her sharp ears picked up the sound of footsteps approaching her chamber door. The palace halls were vast, the walls thick, but to Abellona poised at the cusp of the fourth class such distance was nothing.

Quickly, she sat upright, heat rushing to her cheeks. Her expression hardened to ice as she scolded herself for wasting her time, for letting her heart linger on a man who likely wanted nothing to do with her.

She was a princess—her duties weighed mountains, and yet she drifted like a lovesick child.

Rising fully, she found herself drained, her mind hazy, until her gaze lifted skyward.

Through the tall windows she saw them—massive vessels drifting across the horizon.

"The war games are about to begin... many warriors will come from all around the world... fighting for wealth, honor, fame, glory... and the favor of beautiful women..."

Her steps carried her forward, brisk and certain, her bare feet gliding over polished marble. She pushed open the balcony doors and stepped outside, the grandeur of her balcony unfolding before her pillars carved with ancient sigils, fountains spilling crystal waters, beds of flowers blooming in radiant hues.

The fresh air struck her face, sending her dark hair flying back. She inhaled deeply, her crimson eyes scanning the endless skies.

"Will you fight as well..." she murmured.

The war games would draw countless warriors, noble and commoner alike. Death was not just a possibility—it was expected. Their prize: the rights to enter the world dungeon.

But the rules were strict. No participant older than forty. None higher than the third class.

He seemed so young, far younger than she was. Sixteen, perhaps seventeen... twenty at the most. She could not be sure.

"Princess, forgive the intrusion," a maid's voice called softly. "Will you also be declining to attend today's preliminary gathering?"

Abellona closed her eyes, irritation gnawing at her. She did not have the heart for such things.

Turning sharply, her crimson eyes burned cold as they locked onto the maid.

"I will not be attending anything but the grand parade and war games tournaments. Do not bother me wi—"

Her words froze, her eyes widening. A familiar pulse struck her senses, an aura she knew intimately. Her spatial ring.

The maid lowered her head quickly, taking the silence for dismissal.

"Understood, Princess. I'll make sure you aren't disturbed."

"Ehm... I change my mind."

The maid paused, startled.

Abellona's lips curved into a slow smile, radiant as sunlight spilling across her pale skin.

"Bring me the most beautiful dresses... I want to steal the heart of all that see me."

The maid's eyes widened, her breath catching. Under the golden light, the princess's beauty seemed otherworldly, divine. Her heart pounded as though she were witnessing a vision of art come alive.

Abellona didn't notice, or didn't care. She only smiled, crimson eyes gleaming with intent.

"You're in Valtheron, aren't you, Damian."