

## Shadow 621

### Chapter 621: A Rival

Renata passed him the ring, her fingers glowing faintly as she used her magic to turn its seal to zero.

Damon held the ring in his hand, weighing it, feeling its faint hum of power before peering into its contents.

There were many things inside—magic artifacts glimmering faintly, crystals pulsing with sealed energy, documents carefully folded away, stacks of zeni... lots of zeni. And then, oddly personal things: her clothes, trinkets, and even unmentionables she obviously didn't want anyone snooping through.

But none of that interested Damon. His gaze sharpened the instant he found what he had been looking for. A large tent, folded neatly inside the spatial pocket.

He smiled lightly, satisfaction flashing in his eyes. Yes—this was his goal, Abellona's magic tent. The very thing that had made him go green with envy when he first laid eyes on it.

'I knew it. I knew it would be in her spatial ring...'

Perhaps someone needed to remind this bastard that he had just stolen from the Valtheron Empire's third princess, Abellona of Destruction. That was not something to be celebrating. But thieves didn't care about such things. They cared only for whether they got what they wanted—and Damon had.

"Good job, Renata. Good job. This is why I kept advocating to keep you alive."

Renata's lips curved happily, her chest swelling with pride.

"I am grateful, my lord."

Lilith sneered at the sight of her fawning expression and Damon's shameless satisfaction.

"You're the one who wanted her dead. Do you have a selective memory or something?"

Renata frowned, her face tightening with disgust.

"Shut up. After trying to kill me, you shouldn't be talking."

Lilith's mouth fell open, scandalized.

"Wha... what... that's not what happened! Aren't you misremembering a little too much? I was the one who saved you—"

Damon reached for Renata's hands, his face softening with a sad expression, as though her words struck his heart.

"Thank you, Renata. She would have tried to gaslight me into thinking I was going to kill you... but I would never."

Renata nodded softly, leaning toward him with an almost reverent gaze.

"It's alright, my lord. I'm here for you."

Lilith's lips quivered. The two of them were truly insufferable. This was exactly how Damon became the moment he gained even a little support—dramatic, impossible to reason with, wrapped in his own twisted sincerity.

"Right... you're the type of person to let power change them."

Damon raised his hand slightly, eyes half-lidded in mock solemnity.

"Money too. I let money and power change me."

Lilith sighed, dragging a hand down her face. At least it was always lively when he was around.

"Speaking of money and power... there's a preliminary ball today. For the young elites of the empire—mostly stars from different academies and nobles."

Renata gave a thin smile, nodding slightly.

"This is a reoccurring event. It has been going on for the past week. Not all the participants will attend, but it is a good place to scope out the competition... and make new connections."

Damon sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead as though a headache had just bloomed.

"I hate networking. Well, no surprise. I am a loner without many friends. If I'm ever a social butterfly, it means I have ulterior motives."

Lilith's lips curved knowingly.

"It's a good thing you have ulterior motives. You aren't in top shape, so why not acquaint yourself with your enemies..."

She twirled a lock of her hair slowly around her finger, her expression softening into a seductive smile.

"Maybe even spend a nice evening with a beautiful lady to get your mind off things. Like a date..."

Damon glanced at her, his smirk widening. Her expression made it obvious what she was insinuating. He understood perfectly well.

"You don't mean... ahh, I see. I understand. You're right—we really haven't spent that much time together."

Lilith's smile bloomed. Her heart gave a faint flutter—until the bastard continued.

"Renata, this would be a great night for us to know each other better."

Lilith didn't give him time to finish. She launched herself onto the bed, hands wrapping around his throat, strangling him with a furious snarl.

"I know you did it on purpose! You've finally ragebaited me!"

"Ha... he!—wait! You didn't make it clear enough! I can't read minds!" Damon gasped, trying to pry her hands off.

Lilith's face was flushed red, her cheeks puffed out in rage.

"This should be clear enough. Is this clear enough?!"

Renata wasn't about to let Lilith have her way. She dove between them, spreading her arms wide to shield Damon, her eyes blazing with defiance.

"Can't you take your rejection with some decency? He doesn't want you anymore. Beat it."

Lilith's eyes narrowed dangerously, cold fury flashing in them.

Damon peeked his head out from behind Renata's shoulder, wheezing.

"I didn't say that. I'm suicidal, not insane... at this particular moment."

Renata, however, wasn't letting it go.

"Don't patronize her, my lord. I will happily go with you. In fact, I insist."

Damon froze.

"Ahh... wait, what?"

"Ohhh, I see now. She had ulterior motives too..."

Yes—Renata's words carried their own scheme. It wasn't detrimental to Damon, but it was a deliberate attempt to undermine Lilith.

This was no longer just an argument. It was a competition, and the prize was Damon himself.

"My lord knows how much trouble you'll cause if he goes with you. Your status is a problem, being a duchess and all..."

Lilith sneered, her lips curling with venom.

"Admit it—you've always wanted to get your hands on him. Shameless, slutty demon."

Renata and Lilith bickered fiercely, tugging Damon between them—pulled left and right, from one bosom to another. He wasn't complaining; either side had a very soft destination. Why would he have qualms with it?

Their argument was escalating, voices rising, when suddenly a soft set of footsteps approached. A deep shadow fell across Damon's figure, silencing the chaos.

He looked up.

Matia stood at the edge of the bed, her presence cold and imposing. Through the visor of her helm, her icy blue eyes glowed faintly, like two shards of frost burning in the dark.

Then, in a rare act of free will, she reached up and removed her helm. Her long black hair spilled free, contrasting against her pale skin, her features as delicate and lifeless as a porcelain doll—yet breathtaking in their beauty.

She pointed at Damon. Then at herself.

Damon stilled, caught not by her beauty, but by the fact that she—his shadow—had expressed a desire. She didn't need to speak. She was his shadow; he would always understand her, even without words. And Damon understood.

He leaned back slightly, chuckling under his breath.

"You want me to go with you..."

There was a small, genuine smile on Damon's face. His eyes, focused solely on her, softened in a way Renata had never seen directed at her. Seeing that look, they both realized this was for the best.

"Alright then."

He rose from the bed, his movements smooth, and bowed with a noble flourish.

"Lady Matia Faldren... will you be mine for the evening?"

She nodded once, taking his hand. Damon raised it to his lips, kissing lightly, a gesture true and sincere.

Her expression shifted as she turned her face toward Renata and Lilith. For the first time, she smiled.

The two women glanced at each other, a sudden realization dawning on them both at the same time...

She was also a rival.

## Chapter 622: I Won't Let Anything Slide

The evening sun came quite soon. Damon found himself dressed for a noble gathering... except he wasn't wearing some expensive, lavish clothes.

On the contrary, he found himself wearing armor.

With the war games only days away it was a given that a lot of people would be wearing armor, eager to show off their battle attires, each more ostentatious than practical, especially for the nobility who thought everything was just an opportunity to show off wealth and prestige.

However, Damon would have preferred to wear anything but armor... but he had to match his company.

Matia was refusing to wear a dress. Or rather, she didn't want to take off her Ascendant Armor.

The best Damon could do was convince her to use the awakened shell form of her armor, which was actually a light outfit that looked regal, made of shining fabric and small metal plates to protect her vitals.

She opted not to use her helm, seeing how Damon was already at his wits' end with her.

So she decided to finally let the world see that beautiful face of hers.

One more thing stood out: the giant sword made of ice she had crafted and carried on her back.

"You do realize you don't need to do that, right? Your Ascendant weapon is malleable.."

She didn't show much of an expression, only glancing at him like a porcelain doll, then she gestured lightly across her chest.

Damon sighed, shaking his head.

"Fine, whatever, do as you please... though between the both of us, I don't really need protection.."

He bit his lips with a soft sigh. His worries about Matia had not been laid to rest... not fully. It seemed with each passing day she was acting more and more like her old self.

Otherwise, why would she want to assert herself so much?

And that was why Damon was wearing his Ascendant Armor. It was so he could match with Matia. Damon used the armor's Ascendant form, however this time he equipped his helm, making his crown look like part of it. Still not satisfied.

He used the shadow armor skill and modified how his armor looked to avoid any chance of meeting Abellona of Valtheron and getting recognized.

While she had only seen his armor in the awakened shell form and had no idea what the Ascendant form and Sovereign Mantle forms looked like, he wanted to be cautious.

She was a sly woman. As for his helm, he merely opted to dismiss it altogether after staring at himself in the mirror for a while.

Only his crown remained. He equipped the hood his grandfather had given him.

Giving himself an air of mystery, this was a good opportunity to ride on his Ascendant reputation.

He walked out to find a carriage with Renata's family crest on it. The violet-haired young woman was already waiting for him.

Damon got in, followed by Matia, giving Renata, who bowed, a curt nod.

As soon as he sat down, he noticed a raven and a squirrel sitting comfortably in the carriage as if waiting for him.

He sneered, looking at them.

"I haven't seen you two in a while. What do you want.."

The squirrel and raven glanced at each other, then at him, before putting on their most fawning expressions while stealthily climbing onto Damon's shoulders.

He sighed, feeling irritated. He knew these two. They were trash, and he was worried about what they might do with so many nobles around.

"Listen very carefully, you two... I do not condone theft..."

He glared at them with indignation.

"Especially if I'm not involved... so... take what you can... and bring it to me. Don't worry, these people are rich young heirs, they can afford to lose a few trinkets.."

He cleared his throat.

"Of course, if you get caught... I don't know you..."

The two squealed and cawed respectively. Renata watched them with a shocked expression.

This was clearly not their first time...

"My lord, how can I be of help to you.."

Damon smiled at her, glancing at her dress which draped all the way to the floor, her high heels, her hair tied into a bun, and her luscious lipstick that all added to her allure.

"Just keep an eye out while looking pretty.."

She nodded her head, then forced a smile.

"My lord, wouldn't that end up antagonizing all of these young elites.."

Damon sighed, feeling a bit sad.

"It's a small price to pay... I'm teaching them to value their stuff. This world is a dangerous place... lots of petty thieves around here... why can't we get rich off their stupidity... Renata, we need every dime for our plans..."

He narrowed his eyes.

"Or do you think you're better than us all..."

Feeling peer pressured more than anything, she quickly shook her head.

"Of course not, my lord... I would never doubt you..."

He nodded, smiling internally to himself.

'Damn this Renata is such a pushover..'

"Good. Work hard, Renata.."

With that, Damon's pets dived into the darkness of his hood and hid there, waiting for him to take them inside the venue so they could do some real damage.

Matia remained quiet throughout. She wasn't really the talkative kind anyway... though Damon almost missed when she had been, the meek, fearful girl who relied on him.

He glanced at her pale hands that seemed almost like a corpse's. Reaching for them, he slowly gave her hand a squeeze, her cold skin carrying only the warmth that came from his own.

She was far from that girl now. Now she was a shadow who was born from a warrior woman who had experienced years of hell all by her lonesome.

A wonder she didn't want to talk. Maybe she had gotten used to not having anyone to talk to, so she had lost her voice. Or maybe, as a shadow... she simply couldn't talk.

Damon bit his lips, muttering a soft apology.

"Sorry..."

When he said those words, her fingers gently squeezed his own. Even though she didn't say anything, in her own way she conveyed it to him.

I am here.

Even if Damon didn't understand that... or maybe he did, but just wasn't sure if it was hope or delusion.

With those thoughts, the carriage crossed a grand arch, reaching a vast castle where the gathering would be held. Sure enough, Damon could see many people eager to show off.

"Huh, with my temperament I hope no one pisses me off... because I won't let anything slide.."

He wasn't in danger of crossing a powerful noble. No... Damon was the danger.

Chapter 623: Allergic

What a horrible human being who goes to a public gathering and expects to get into trouble. It was like he was hoping someone provoked him.

This was someone who just wanted to create a scene but still act like he didn't start it.

He didn't want smoke, he wanted an inferno.

Damon moved towards the grand entrance while arching his shoulders slightly, his presence deliberate and confident.

As he approached, he noticed rows of knights guarding the entrance. The early darkness of the evening was dispelled by glowing lights.

He noticed magic artifacts for capturing pictures in the hands of journalists scattered all around.

Each was taking note of those who arrived, their notepads ready for the next big scoop in the newspaper.

The capital was in a festive atmosphere, and some young nobles wanted to be featured in the papers, so quite a few of them were getting interviewed.

Damon was approached by several of these journalists himself, but Renata happened to scare them off before they could be a bother.

Using the opportunity, he slipped away into the building.

His eyes were welcomed by the pristine sight of large banners flying along the walls and flags hanging proudly.

The floor was made of marble, and at the very center, the same crest was designed into the stone.

Large chandeliers hung high above, lighting the ceiling. Stairs at short intervals led to VIP seating, each carrying the banners of a few great houses.

This was a simple sight, but even here there were ranks. No, actually, this place of all places had the most hierarchy.

Maybe it might have seemed the same to a commoner, but among nobles the hierarchy was strict. This was the distribution of land, wealth, and power.

The greater the gap in nobility, the more vast the differences in authority. A low-ranking noble might as well be considered a slightly less appalling commoner by a high noble.

It was not unusual for children of low-ranking nobility to be servants of high-ranking nobles, often as ladies-in-waiting or knights.

This was not a form of humiliation, but rather a sound and logical step to rise into power. It was an opportunity to climb higher, to gain support, or to be seen associated with a high noble household.

In this world there was rich, and then there was RICH. This was the divide.

And of course, this didn't stop all of them from looking down on commoners.

Like him. That said, Damon wasn't one to take things lying down.

Naturally, he came prepared.

With a flower in each arm, they were a sight to behold. The hall was bustling with the low drone of people talking, young nobles interacting with each other in a complex atmosphere driven by subtle power hierarchies.

It started with one person, then two, and soon almost everyone present had noticed them.

There were soft murmurs and whispers, all people enamored by the sight of the two beautiful women. One was a violet-haired woman with her hair tied in a bun, wearing a long dress that highlighted her curves.

The other was like a doll, dressed like a warrior with a large sword strapped to her back that added to her aesthetic.

These two beautiful flowers both had their arms locked with a man in armor that seemed mysterious. His face was hidden under his hood, and the lights seemed to dim in his presence.

"He's here... it's him, the Ascendant."

Murmurs began to spread among the young nobles, especially those who had an interest in the rising star known as the Ascendant.

"So that's Damon Grey... the commoner who supposedly overcame three death zones by scurrying around like a rat."

Another noble next to him sneered, jealousy dripping from his tone.

"His reputation is bloated among the commoners. He must have been riding the efforts of the nobles in his party."

"Pffttff." A noble with a large headwear laughed, confident in his shallow assessment.

"Rumors say he even bested an orc war band in combat and saved a small caravan."

"Hmph." Someone sneered, shaking his head.

"My report said two hundred knights were present, though they sadly died. How can he shamelessly claim credit? Disgusting."

"Perhaps there might be truth to his legend, or maybe it's just Aether Academy propaganda."

Damon sighed under his hood.

"Damned tough crowd... isn't this supposed to be the part where they bootlick me, or have we not gotten to that part yet?"

His words were only loud enough for Renata to hear, so she was the only one to give him a reply.

"Shall I kill them, my lord? These fools are unworthy to even be counted in a single page of your legend, even as defeated foes."

He chuckled, shaking his head.

"There's no need. I was worried there wasn't going to be drama... thank goodness it's not a boring evening."

Renata smiled. It seemed he expected this after all.

He looked around. The balcony overlooking the ground floor was where all the VIPs sat, the highest-ranked nobles.

The biggest way for him to slap their faces would be to go up there, but at the moment he couldn't... not without Lilith, who attached the right noble ranking.

'It's not like I can tell those House Brightwater knights I'm the Grand Duke's grandson...'

He looked up and noticed a female figure with golden hair smiling at him. Her sun-marked eyes gleamed like they had just found hope after being alone for such a long time.

Next to her was an ostentatiously dressed young man who wore a golden crown studded with several gems.

His chest proudly bore the emblem of the imperial family, as if he was afraid no one would know he was a prince.

He was obviously pestering the beautiful golden-haired girl.

As soon as she locked eyes with Damon, it was like she saw hope—or rather a way to get rid of something annoying.

So, disregarding the ambiance, she called out to him.

"Damon... over here. Hold on, I'll meet you."

If her noble upbringing had allowed it, she would have jumped down from the balcony.

She easily made her way down the stairs, her dress fluttering as she practically ran toward Damon in front of everyone's eyes.

To his shock, she jumped into his arms and hugged him.

"I missed you so much..." she said aloud for all to hear.

Damon hugged her too, whispering into her ear.

"Alright, you two-faced snake, what do you want? I smell ulterior motives. Why are you dragging me into whatever the hell this is?"

She broke free from the hug, smiling.

"I'll be relying on you, okay? I know you don't mind the trouble."

He gave her a deadpan expression, muttering.

"Eva... when did you become such a horrible human being?"

"I learned that from you. Turns out we have more in common than I thought."

"I hate you for this," he whispered.

She gave him a deadpan expression of her own.

"Then why are you smiling? You're clearly enjoying the drama. It's like you're allergic to peace."

"Shhhshhh, let me do my thing."

Chapter 624: You Are ...

"Don't shush me you bastard... I haven't seen you in almost a month and it seems you still haven't grown as a human being."

Evangeline leaned in and whispered in his ear.

She was clearly bickering with him again as they always did, however, to the eyes of a third party it seemed as if the lady of House Brightwater had jumped into a man's arms and was whispering into his ear.

Maybe these jealous bastards didn't know that he was her cousin... ohh wait, they didn't know.

However, Evangeline knew it and so did Damon. They just didn't know the other knew. At this point it was more of a refusal to communicate than anything.

Damon did like keeping his secrets after all.

As for Evangeline... she had always been close to Damon, more as someone she constantly got into fights with and always lectured, but they were still really close.

Finding out he was her cousin just made her feel all the more close to him. This was someone she could be herself around. There was no need to put on an act or wear a fake smile or feel grateful even if he did something for her.

In fact, troubling him should be par for the course.

Damon's breathing seemed a bit off, so Evangeline narrowed her eyes. Before she could say more, her gaze fell on his face hidden under the hood. His body language was still the same as before, but there was a subtle difference.

"Hey... are you hurt?" she whispered, causing Damon to pause. His face under the hood was a little pale. No matter how well he tried to act like he was alright, he was in fact in some degree of pain.

"Wha... what are you on about... woman... wait, fine, fine, you got me... seeing your face really puts me in a state of agony... where did you go off dressing like a sweet lady?"

Evangeline's expression didn't change, her golden eyes still calm as ever.

"Hey... you know sometimes I wish you'd get run over by a carriage."

Damon chuckled softly.

"You're saying your intrusive thoughts aloud."

She shook her head with a sigh, strands of golden hair slipping past her cheek.

"But I don't actually want you to die or anything, even if you piss me off."

Damon raised his hand, wagging a finger at her.

"I'll stop you there. What is this? Why are you ruining our usual dynamic... are you sick or dying? Why are you being nicer?"

Evangeline's brows twitched, then she smiled lightly.

"Right, I might be a little sick... but not as sick as you are. You're definitely not feeling alright."

Damon's heart began to pound. Was his condition that obvious? He was standing on his own two feet, but his head was killing him.

Evangeline shook her head, lowering her voice.

"It's fine... you did the same thing in Lysithara. You know you don't have to hide things from me. Of all people, I'm someone you can lean on even if nobody else... after all we are... fa..."

She caught herself before she stupidly said family.

"Friends. We're friends, really good friends."

Damon glanced at her with a sneer as she stumbled on her words.

'This stupid girl actually found out... she knows.'

'What should I do... should I just tell her I know, or just play stupid?'

Of course she knew. How could she not figure it out? Come to think of it, no wonder she was so on edge when they arrived in Lumos.

'She found out before even I did... look at this girl, she's growing into a real liar.'

He glanced at her as she tried to awkwardly deflect. He decided to just play along. It seemed she was the one member of the family who just wasn't a good enough liar.

Placing a hand on her head, he smiled faintly.

"Stay as pure and innocent as you are, okay? Keep being a good girl."

Her golden eyes went cold, seeing the condescending expression on his face as he publicly placed a hand on her head like she was a child.

"You really want to die, don't you?"

He smiled, placing his hand on his chest.

"Yeah I do. But my condition isn't that bad really. You wanted me to mess with some people for you, I gladly will. In fact, I insist."

She raised her hand, pushing his hand away before holding it tightly.

"I didn't ask you to mess with anyone. And your hands are shaking... are you really going to be alright? Maybe we should find a place to sit..."

Renata, who had been quiet until now, finally spoke after seeing how Damon had more or less told Evangeline he was not feeling well.

"My lord, perhaps it would be wise to consider her offer. Not because you need rest of course, but simply because it is beneath you to associate with common rabble."

Evangeline raised an eyebrow, her gaze snapping toward Renata.

"My lord...? Since when did you two get so close?"

Damon smiled, shrugging lightly as if it were nothing.

"Mehh, it's a long story. No need to bore you with it."

She narrowed her eyes, shaking her head slowly.

"It's fine, I have time. What is up with you anyway? Do you have some weird pheromone that attracts women, or are you just a lecher who's always surrounded by them?"

Damon rolled his eyes at her.

"You're here too, and I only count like... two. Who, just so you know, are just friends."

He elbowed her slightly, teasingly.

"Except if someone here is jealous and has a litt—"

"If you complete that sentence, I will blast you with magic..." she cut him off with a thin smile on her face.

Their words were hushed so no one else really heard what they were saying.

However, Evangeline's expression and occasional smile made it clear she was very comfortable around Damon, especially since she even allowed him to touch her head, elbow her slightly, or lift her chin.

This level of proximity was something that made many of the young nobles go green with envy.

Especially since Evangeline was known as an aloof woman who didn't really pay people much mind.

Someone gritted their teeth as Evangeline stood beside Damon. His footsteps were light, a wine glass now in his hand.

With a crown on his head... this was naturally the prince Evangeline had ignored the moment she saw Damon.

He walked up to them, confident in his status.

"You must be the Ascendant I've heard so much about."

He spoke as if Damon should feel honored to be addressed by him.

Damon glanced at him, taking note of the imperial emblem brooch and the crown.

"You are..."

The crowd went silent.

Chapter 625: Prince Wagon

Was this ignorance or just vanity... It had to be ignorance, right? Who in their right mind would not recognize a prince of the empire.

Especially if that person was a citizen of said empire... and even if he didn't, wasn't the crown on his head a good enough sign that this was the prince.

The prince's expression hardened, his fingers trembling slightly.

"I see you are a commoner... you uneducated lot must not know very much."

He gave them a look of utter disdain.

"I shall grace you with an introduction. No need to feel honored."

Damon wore a sneer under his hood. He was not impressed in the slightest.

"Ahem..." the young prince cleared his throat.

"I am Waton of Valtheron, fourth prince of the great Valtheron Empire."

His expression was arrogant as he said that, expecting Damon to grovel.

"Hmmm, I see. Never heard of you... and I know everyone worth knowing. You must not be particularly strong... your grace."

His words caused the crowd of nobles to suck in a breath of cold air. He may, no, he definitely just called the fourth prince a nobody not worth knowing right to his face.

Adding your grace at the end did not make it any better. Damon wasn't even trying to hide his disdain.

Watson's face went red with fury, especially seeing the way Evangeline was looking at him while standing next to Damon.

His tone dropped low.

"You stand before a prince of the empire, commoner... yet you do not kneel. That is tantamount to lèse-majesté."

He glanced at Damon with a smug expression, waiting for him to fearfully fall to his knees. However, the word kneel merely made a deep coldness rise from Damon's heart.

Inside his heart of shadow, a small seed of blackness stirred, carrying with it all the arrogance of the Demon Lord of Domination.

How could this lowly prince expect him to kneel...

Damon smiled calmly.

"I stood before Grand Duke Brightwater and I did not kneel. You must think you are greater than a Grand Duke if you expect me to kneel."

Watson narrowed his eyes, speaking slowly.

"Kneel before me, peasant. I command it."

Damon smiled under his hood. This place was packed with young nobles. The security detail was hardly above their ranks... nothing beyond the third class.

"I would bow, but I hear groveling is already in oversupply tonight."

Watson's fist trembled. Never in his life had someone of lower rank refused his orders. He was used to commanding people to obey.

"Are you refusing an imperial command?"

Damon smiled coldly, looking down on Watson.

"Apologize, prince... what's your name again? Ahhh yes, Wagon."

That was not his name, but Damon knew that.

"You claim to give an imperial command, but it seems you've overstepped your authority a bit. The only person in the empire who can give an imperial command is the emperor."

Damon's tone turned vicious.

"Are you plotting treason and attempting to usurp the imperial throne by blatantly usurping the emperor's authority?"

He was just getting started. He pointed at the crowd of noble young lords and ladies.

"Are these people your accomplices? Is this gathering actually a place for you to collude against the crown... and conspire to seize power, betraying your father and dishonoring your ancestors?"

The crowd quickly put distance between themselves and the accusations.

"I have no idea what's happening."

"We came alone..."

"Goodness, treason? I would never..."

Damon smiled at the speechless Waton of Valtheron.

Treason was a serious crime, but Damon didn't have the clout to report it... until he said,

"I will be sure to report this to Grand Duke Brightwater. With Evangeline here as my witness."

Damon took out his pager.

"It's a good thing I have his personal contact info."

He didn't have his personal contact info, but they didn't know that.

For all they knew, Damon and the Grand Duke were very close. After all, the Grand Duke appeared for the first time in almost two decades just so he could be in the newspaper with Damon.

This was basically Damon declaring: you can't touch me, I have a powerful backer. And it didn't matter if he was a prince. His backer was a Grand Duke. Even the emperor would show him deferential treatment.

Watson found himself stunned into silence. The first law of palace politics was simple: if you do not have enough political clout and influence, do not meddle with the four dukedoms.

However, whoever secured the support of the four dukedoms would, without a doubt, have a path paved to the throne.

This evening was his opportunity to impress Evangeline Brightwater. This was his chance to get a leg up against his siblings who were more powerful than he was.

There was a bead of sweat dripping down his forehead.

Who was this person anyway... a mere commoner?

Damon walked towards the prince then whispered,

"I see... you must be the court jester. The crown suits you."

The prince didn't know what to do, so he could only fall back on his title.

"I am a prince of the empire... I will not be insulted by a mere commoner."

He pointed at Damon.

"Seize him. I want his head on a pike and hanging from a wall."

Damon smiled calmly, his face hidden under the hood.

"Hmm, I didn't think you'd take that option, but fine..."

He was about to pull out his trump card when Evangeline stepped forward. She stood firmly in front of Damon.

"Your Highness, I've seen enough. While Damon might be a commoner, he is still under the protection of House Brightwater. Unless you want to antagonize all of House Brightwater, I would suggest you stay your hand."

Watson didn't seem convinced, his face still contorted in anger.

"You don't represent the will of the Duke, princess."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes with a thin smile.

"Actually... I do."

She pulled out a golden seal with the Brightwater crest engraved in it.

"My actions are a direct representation of House Brightwater."

Damon smiled seeing that, so he became more emboldened.

"I think she means... screw off, you little princeling."

Evangeline glared at him. He shrugged.

"What? I have clout."

Watson's hands trembled. There was nothing he could do. He really wanted this bastard dead.

Until... an idea struck him. He pulled out his glove.

"I challenge you on the stage of the War Games."

Damon smiled. This was what he was hoping for.

"I ac—"

"Announcing Princess Abellona, third princess of Valtheron, has arrived."

Damon's face paled.

"Ohh shit...."

Chapter 626: Goddess Why

If you go looking for trouble... then trouble would follow you. Humans always craved drama, perhaps that was why man was described as warlike.

But sometimes we wanted peace... there was only so much smoke we could want... especially if we felt like we had wronged someone. Or maybe... stolen their really expensive spatial ring and abandoned them in a dungeon completely nude.

Damon went quiet... however, he wasn't the only one. It was as if everyone had been forced to hold their breaths for a moment.

He turned his eyes in that direction... the direction everyone was looking... and for a moment, it was as if the world had lost all color.

There was a woman walking into the venue. Her shoes were high, judging by the soft clicking sounds they made, but that was just the beginning. She wore a pale golden dress with long white sleeves, and a veil that covered her hair and half her face, leaving the world to solely gaze at her alluring crimson eyes.

The veil was light and transparent, as if she was only giving a glimpse of her beauty while refusing to reveal the whole thing. Her lips looked red beneath the veil, creating a desire to steal a kiss from her... even if she was unattainable.

She was adorned with light jewels and gems that only added to her beauty.

This woman was Abellona of Valtheron. Words did not do her justice. Spending all day describing her beauty would be pointless. No words would ever be enough.

Damon knew that much. He had seen all of her, inside and out.

And because he had, he knew it was better not to get involved with this dangerous woman.

He came here to have a slightly chaotic evening... not to court death. No, actually he didn't mind courting death—courting Abellona was just more annoying.

'Why is she here... she hasn't shown up in any of these gatherings for the past half a month...'

He had gotten that information from Renata, so he was sure she would not come. But what could he expect.

"Dammit, my shitty luck. Of course she showed up when I did."

He paused, taking another look at her. His eyes couldn't help but stop at her hips and long legs for a moment.

'She's kinda hot though... like... hmm... wow...'

He made sure to keep that thought to himself.

Damon figured this was the perfect time to escape. He was wearing a hood, but this was Abellona of Valtheron—she would recognize him if he wasn't careful.

Naturally, as the bootlickers moved to introduce themselves like stars to the moon, Damon was going against the tide, eager to escape.

"It's the third princess... Princess, do you remember? I am Viscount Fina Elebmern!"

"Princess, welcome, it's an honor to see you again."

"That's the third princess. She looks more beautiful than I heard."

He would have turned into a shadow, but she already knew he had that ability, so he avoided doing anything that would give him away and get her attention.

"Please don't see me... please don't see..."

"Ooh goddess, if I make it out... I will be a devout believer. Please... forgive my past transgressions... I was wrong."

Damon had never been so desperate. So he fell back on his old habits of praying to the goddess, even if he was sort of a heretic now.

He slowly began to walk away, giving Matia the mental instruction to make sure he didn't stand out. She remained still with a small nod of her head.

She was his shadow, though she didn't really know what he did... but she had a few ideas.

He took slow, steady steps, pushing away from the people moving toward her until he could almost see one of the grand doors leading outside.

"I made it... made it! Goddammit, I'm free..."

He almost teared up at his good luck.

"Thank you goddess, you are amazing..."

He began muttering thanks to the Goddess of Doom. This was really his day... his situation couldn't get worse.

"How dare you try to leave..."

Damon heard a wretched voice call out, loud enough to get the whole hall's attention.

His body shivered slightly... he gritted his teeth.

'Damn it, goddess, I knew it. I knew I should have prayed to the Unknown God. This is why I quit worshipping...'

Damon didn't stop walking.

"I am speaking to you, commoner... how dare you turn your back on me."

The guards at the door crossed their spears, blocking Damon's path to the exit.

He sighed. There was no escaping this... he really was going to face Abellona now.

Damon turned around slowly, trying to make his build bigger than before, using shadow armor to increase his proportions without anyone noticing.

The prince turned to Abellona, then smiled.

"Dear sister... would you mind being a witness? Being a warrior yourself, and a member of the imperial family..."

She narrowed her brows, her gaze still on Evangeline. Then she smiled without looking in Damon's direction, though her ears caught the sound of his footsteps approaching.

"Greetings, Lady Brightwater... it's been too long. The hunting festival, I believe."

Evangeline nodded with a practiced smile.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Princess."

Damon stood behind Evangeline, which actually caught her by surprise. Damon was not the type of person to stand behind anyone if he could help it.

'What's up with him...'

Evangeline sighed, feeling the need to introduce Damon fall upon her since she had the appropriate rank and status. Especially since Abellona was staring at him as if she wanted to punch a hole through him with her eyes.

"This is the Ascendant Demon Grey."

Damon gave a curt nod to the princess without saying anything.

Which was rude, but this was Damon, so Evangeline could only sigh.

Renata gave a simple greeting, while Matia just nodded without a word.

With that out of the way, Waton glared at Damon, thinking he had gotten a backer with Abellona present.

"I challenge you to a duel during the War Games... what say you?"

Damon nodded his head in acceptance, hoping to get it over with.

Waton narrowed his eyes.

"Speak up. Are you afraid? You need to verbally confirm your acceptance."

Damon gritted his teeth... right, that was a thing.

"Cat got your tongue? If you're scared, just kneel and I'll show mercy..."

Evangeline glanced at Damon with a frown. What was wrong with him?

Damon was already feeling victimized, while Abellona's eyes narrowed suspiciously with each passing second.

"Ahem... ahem..." he cleared his throat.

"I accept..." he spoke in a deep and husky voice unlike his own.

Waton narrowed his eyes, feeling Damon was mocking him.

"What happened to your voice? Why are you talking like that?"

Damon took an even deeper tone.

"This is what I've always sounded like... what do you mean..."

Evangeline glanced at him. Was he trying to humiliate the prince even more?

She grabbed him.

"Excuse us, Your Highness... he's already accepted. That should be enough. See you in the War Games."

Damon turned around while Evangeline pulled him along.

"Stop..." Abellona called out.

Then her eyes narrowed angrily.

"Take off... your hood."

Damon bit his lips.

'Goddess, why... why...'

Chapter 627: Your Voice Gave You Away

Abellona did not seem like she would let him go unless she confirmed her suspicions, and Damon really didn't want to get involved with her.

'I won't return her spatial ring... finders keepers dammit...'

That ring and the objects inside were worth millions of zeni, and it was his prize for getting assaulted by her.

'It's compensation.'

However, the truth of the matter was despite her cold expression she really didn't care about the ring. He could keep it for all she cared. She simply wanted to confirm he was alive and well.

Maybe cause some minor troubles for him, but that was fair after what he put her through.

Evangeline averted her eyes, feeling irritated before Damon could do anything outrageous. She knew his temper very well.

"Excuse me... I don't think that's appropriate..."

That was Evangeline's response to the princess. Renata softened, standing in front of the princess.

"I also agree, princess. Don't you think you're being too tyrannical... my lord wishes to remain anonymous. He's a man who cares little for fame..."

Damon cleared his throat, seeing them come to his defense.

Actually, he didn't mind fame if it came with a large amount of money. But Abellona was not asking because she had an interest in the Ascendant. It was because of what he did.

He gestured to Renata, who came closer, and then he whispered in her ear, which she nodded at.

"Princess... my lord doesn't mind taking off his hood. However, perhaps you can bear with him today..."

Abellona glanced at him then chuckled coldly. It had to be him. It had to be that wretch. Who else but him would refuse to give the third princess face?

"I have heard tales of your exploits... I would like to get a personal retelling from the main character himself."

Damon cleared his throat.

"I don't like digging up past history."

He quickly brushed off the conversation. Abellona's eyes narrowed. She wore a thin smile on her face, one that he knew to be conniving.

"Ohh really, I insist... tell me about how you conquered three death zones."

Evangeline glanced at her, seeing the thin smile. She glanced at Damon, whispering.

"Hey, did you provoke this woman somehow..."

Damon shook his head, replying just loud enough for Abellona to hear.

"This is my first time meeting her..."

Abellona's expression flickered slightly. Before she could say anything more, Renata bowed slightly.

"Excuse us. My lord is tired and would like to rest..."

With that, Renata turned around. Seeing the opportunity, Damon turned to leave.

"Hold on... there's no rush. If you are tired, as host... it's only right I give you a place to rest. Why not join me..."

As soon as she said that, there was a stream of murmurs from the crowd of onlookers.

Evangeline sighed lightly then cursed. If the princess was inviting their group, she would most likely be extending the invitation to Evangeline, who was the highest ranked noble present.

"Thank you, princess. However, I would humbly decline your offer..."

Abellona's expression didn't change. Glancing at Damon, her lips hidden by her veil, only her alluring eyes looked at him.

"That is well and fine with me. But this invitation was extended to the Ascendant... Damon Grey."

As soon as she said that, there was a small gasp of air from Waton next to her.

"Y... you are inviting the commoner... man... sister... ar... are you sure..."

Her eyes narrowed into a glare causing him to shut up fearfully.

Waton was sure Abellona had never extended such an invitation to anyone before.

At least not a man. She was inviting him to her VIP section of the hall.

No sane man would refuse such an offer, especially from one of the most beautiful women in the empire, with thousands of suitors.

It was basically everyone's ideal woman.

Damon understood if he refused now, the princess would lose face. He would make political enemies by virtue of breaking the heart of everyone's princess.

However, if he accepted, he'd still make enemies, because, well... she had a gazillion men who were in love with her.

But more than that, the Ascendant didn't really have any reason to refuse her.

No sane man... well, except Damon wasn't sane. If anything, he was an insane man.

"I'll have to decline that offer..."

Abellona smiled, walking up to him, then she chuckled lightly.

"Your voice gave you away..."

Damon suppressed the urge to gasp until he realized he didn't really lose his tone of speech. His voice was the same. No, rather he had been a victim of this type of trick before.

Lilith had once pressured him by acting as if she had uncovered the fact that he was murdering and cannibalizing his fellow students. Her goal was to use the mental pressure to make him slip up.

Which at the time he denied. Which come to think of it had been a bit hard to accept, but that wasn't the point. The point was this wouldn't work on him.

"Whatever do you mean..."

Abellona smiled coldly.

"Are you still putting up pretenses?"

Damon smiled coldly under his hood. His body language seemed like someone who was being wrongfully accused.

"Have I offended you in any way, princess? If I have, I hope you can be lenient..."

His politeness made Evangeline look at him as if he was a whole new person. Wasn't he just getting into a verbal argument with the prince?

"I have to get him out of here..." Evangeline bit her lips.

Abellona narrowed her eyes. Her hands trembled slightly.

'Could I have... been wrong... this is his exact build and from the information I got, his attribute is the same...'

She clenched her fist. The only thing she couldn't get was an image of him.

'It's annoying to get information on him with House Brightwater cutting everything off...'

Why else would she struggle to get information on a commoner? The only clue she had was his name and his face. Suddenly she was looking at a man with the same stature, attribute, and his face was hidden. It was too good to be true.

Except this one was a commoner.

'A commoner with a very, very powerful backer who's going above and beyond.'

Abellona wasn't about to let this go. Not if it was him. Well, it had to be him. She was sure.

"I see... I understand. It seems I mistook you for someone..."

Damon almost let out a sigh of relief.

Abellona smiled, glancing at him, her smile enough to make the hearts of the men around her stop.

"I'm hosting a private banquet later in the evening for the main characters of the war games. As one of the chosen of the Aether Academy, I would be honored if you came."

Her crimson eyes glimmered.

"The others from other academies will be attending, including your fellow Ascendants..."

She began to walk away.

"Would it not be a splendid reunion?"

Yes, it would be an explosive keg for talents. Those who would shape the next era.

While the big wings talked in secret, she would be hosting the young champions of the goddess races.

Chapter 628: Daughter Of War

This place was large... the room was white with large crystals and hundreds of magical seals and circuits built into the walls.

This was somewhere in the imperial capital. This was a secure room. A location like this was designed with the sole purpose of extensive high-level communication.

Without the possibility of interception.

This particular one was built in the imperial palace, and being able to come here meant you were upper echelon in the world of Aetherus.

And naturally, a meeting like this was not without reason. A man with golden hair streaked with silver walked down the halls with an imposing air around him. His eyes were steady, yet his golden gaze carried the weight of too many years, giving him the vestige of an ancient relic.

By his side was a man that looked like him, though his aura was different like the harsh glow of a sun still at high noon. His eyes were sharp and cold, like death itself had taken a golden form.

As soon as they reached a grand door, the guards standing watch outside straightened. Or rather, it was better to call them high-ranking officers, each with their own noble titles and ranks. These people were at the sixth class advancement at the minimum.

Yet even they could only act as security detail, with weapons drawn and bodies standing vigilant.

They spotted the two men and nodded. The one who looked in charge bowed deeply to the older man with golden hair.

"Your Grace..."

The older man didn't offer courtesy. He only nodded, walking toward the door with his cape fluttering. None of them took offense, this was a given. After all, he was Damian Brightwater, Golden Sun of the Empire, the Grand Duke who ruled from Lumos.

The man next to him stopped briefly with a frown.

"Where is she..." he asked in a steady voice.

The officer smiled awkwardly, a pang of helplessness crossing his face.

"My apologies, Your Grace. Unfortunately, Lady Blade said it's a waste of manpower and resources to think we are guarding the most powerful beings in the world... especially with our meager power..."

Cassian narrowed his eyes at those words.

"And I assume she's doing something important right now..."

The man awkwardly cleared his throat.

"She says she's going to enjoy the festivities... maybe she'll find a man who doesn't run for the hills in fear when he sees her..."

Cassian's piercing golden eyes bored into him, making this man someone who had already reached the upper echelon of the world's power tremble and feel the need to keep talking.

"I'm not getting any younger... is what she said, I can call her back, I still have her pager..."

"There's no need..." Cassian muttered, feeling a small headache.

This was Seras Blade after all. A prodigy was always eccentric. His own nephew apparently had quite the reputation as well.

Seras always did as she pleased. However, she was also quite the monster. After all, what could be said about someone born with the War Attribute?

Everything that fell under the banner of war was under her attribute... including the horrors of war.

How could a creature like that, one born solely for killing, ever be a reason for life? How could she ever expect to be anything more than a monster?

A sword could never be used to grow crops or make people happy. And Seras was a weapon.

The temple had famously named her Wrath of the Goddess, Wrath of Doom. Names like Daughter of War followed her.

"Only death can be attracted to that thing... or someone suicidal..."

The man didn't disagree with Cassian. However, unlike Cassian, he didn't dare say it out loud about that monster.

She had earned that name.

Seras Blade, the Daughter of War.

Cassian didn't feel at ease knowing that monster was out in the city. Not because he feared her, she was no threat to him. However, she was not the type of creature that made a parent feel at ease knowing she was in the same city as their children.

And Cassian had three children in the city he had to worry about.

His daughter, his niece whom he had never met, and the last was his no-doubt troublemaker of a nephew.

He stopped by the door about to enter and let out a soft sigh.

"Jarvis..."

He called out, looking to the men standing guard.

"Go keep an eye on Seras Blade."

As soon as he said that, one of the men took a step forward. The others gasped, taken by surprise. They had no idea... he had been...

A man with a silver cape trembled.

"Malone... you... aren't Malone..."

Jarvis didn't reply, simply waiting for his orders.

"If she seems irritated... just let her be. There's no need to die a needless death over something so trivial..."

Jarvis nodded his head, then turned around. Before he left, he glanced at the men, who were uneasy, unsure who was who.

"He's in the storage room... alive..."

With that he faded like fog, leaving them in shock at how someone could even subdue someone like Malone without anyone being the wiser.

Cassian didn't pay them any mind. Jarvis was powerful... but Seras Blade was still far more dangerous.

With that done, though his mind was still not at ease, he walked through the door, shutting it behind him as he entered the familiar white room. Doors opened at the other side and more people with deep, powerful auras appeared some as transparent projections, others in person.

He sat down at a long table right next to his father, the Grand Duke, his expression calm, betraying none of the unease he felt at this meeting.

With all major players of the world in attendance... with the exception of the Demon Continent...

This was a continental summit, or something akin to it, except far more clandestine.

There was the sound of footsteps as a man walked in and sat at the head of the table.

As soon as he sat down, space began to expand and the chairs began to move. The ground shifted as the whole room was divided, chairs rising higher, and the center morphed into a map with each chair arranged based on region.

Then finally... the man who was the Emperor of Valtheron spoke.

"I have called this meeting to discuss something we are all aware of. The need for secrecy stems from a need to keep things private, but also to make decisions as states before involving the temple."

His voice was imposing and powerful.

Then he paused, closing his eyes.

"Ashcroft... has returned."

Chapter 629: Absurd Joke

The sitting arrangement was designed in such a way that each person was a representative of their continent and nations.

However, not all could be present. This was not a continental summit after all, it was just a small gathering, a way for them to decide their next step going forward.

The name spoken by the Valtheron emperor made everyone fall silent.

Ashcroft was an ancient name, a name half forgotten by people in the second epoch after the fall of the Wicked Prophet.

The Temple rose as an organization whose sole purpose was eliminating the scourge known as demons.

At the time, the organization was backed by almost every nation in existence, giving it the power and influence needed to carry out such a task as invading the Doom Continent.

However, it was during this time that Ashcroft first appeared, and his rise to power could not be impeded.

It was almost as if he was a direct response to the creation of the Temple, a single overwhelming calamity upon the world.

"The Dominator has returned," the Valtheron emperor repeated these words, his voice calm but carrying the weight of grim reality.

"In times like this we would be most unwise to be caught bickering among ourselves."

"Hmm. Is that not hypocritical...." The voice was calm and imposing, carrying sufficient authority to speak to the Valtheron emperor without fear.

This voice came all the way from the eastern continent beyond the sea. His chair was firmly rooted in a place with the symbol of the moon.

This was Kadelas Moonveil, the White Ruler.

He was, after all, one of the old monsters who could dictate the fate of the world. As one of the most powerful rulers of the Verdant Continent, not inviting him would have been folly.

"What hypocrisy would that be?" Emperor Valtheron replied calmly. He was the host today, and his eyes remained fixed on Kadelas.

"We came to discuss Ashcroft, but neglected to invite the Holy Emperor, or anyone from the Temple."

Kadelas was already in a foul mood to begin with, since the Valtheron emperor had been hindering his people from acting freely within the Valtheron Empire. His sharp gaze grew colder as he leaned forward slightly in his seat.

"Is that not folly... or have you grown fearful of their growing power, especially with the reawakening at hand?"

Emperor Valtheron narrowed his eyes. His fingers drummed lightly against the armrest of his chair, betraying a controlled irritation.

"I have no reason to be afraid. However, the fact that you are here as well is evident that you also do not want the Temple prying if you can help it."

There was a soft sigh from the side. A man holding a walking cane sat next to Aspen Ravenscroft. If Damon was here, he would have recognized him as the old man who destroyed his shadow clone and caused him to go unconscious for half a month.

This was Grand Duke Ravenscroft.

"That's enough of that, gentlemen," he said in a stern but weary voice.

"We all agreed to come here because we understand the Temple has grown too powerful. However, it is also not possible to antagonize them."

He tapped his cane on the ground slowly. The gravity in the room seemed to shift ever so slightly, the air thickening with his presence.

"As the emperor has said, we are in no condition to disagree with each other. It is unwise to bring religion into matters of the state."

Kadelas closed his eyes, his expression unreadable. He too recognized that this was not the right place.

"I suppose so.... In that case, how do you suggest we deal with the new problem?"

The emperor narrowed his eyes with some concern. He didn't know; that was why he had called this meeting. The war games had come at an opportune time. This was their chance to freely discuss it all.

"That depends on whatever decision is made here today."

Cassian glanced at his father, who was just watching with a bored expression. Clearly the old man had no reason to add anything. They already knew his stance.

"Do we have any clue on Ashcroft's location?"

As soon as he said that, soft murmurs broke out among the rulers of the various continents. Some appeared in the form of light constructs since they couldn't make it in person. Yet each of them had no clue.

Cassian sighed.

"So we're all in the dark. All we know is Ashcroft has returned, but not what he looks like or where he is."

The beast-kin chief from the Wild Continent crossed his arms, his dark hair flowing as his aura rose. His presence was oppressive, his beast-like instincts stirred.

Leon was not impressed.

"You called a meeting without having any clue.... No, you wouldn't. Which means you do have a clue. What is it? There's no need to beat around the bush."

Cassian remembered this person as Leon Valefier. He was the father of the beast-kin girl, Leona Valefier.

However, he wasn't wrong. Kronos of Valtheron would not call a meeting just to waste their time on something they already knew.

From his chair, Kronos waved his hand. The seating began to shift, the ground morphing into a vast map.

"About half a month ago Ashcroft returned. However, the region where he supposedly returned is a few hundred kilometers off House Ravenscroft's domain, in an uncharted zone."

As soon as he said that, all eyes fell on Aspen and the old man with the cane. Did they know about this?

"We have confirmed that there's nothing there. This is nothing new."

The voice came from a blue-haired woman seated next to a dark-haired man with bags under his eyes.

They sat just right of the Brightwater household, and to no one's surprise, the crest behind them was the familiar crest of House Astranova.

This woman would be Lilith's grandmother.

"Hahahah..." Damian Brightwater chuckled.

"As expected of the old witch of the Astranova household. Nothing gets past you, does it?"

The woman wasn't actually old-looking. If anything, she looked middle-aged. Then again, none of them looked as old as their actual age would suggest.

"It can't be helped, you ill-tempered brute. After all, my only granddaughter was in the region. I happened to check on her."

Kadelas narrowed his eyes, his expression darkening.

"So this Lilith Astranova bore witness to Ashcroft's return."

The old woman smiled calmly, her posture relaxed.

"Goddess knows my baby would never be caught anywhere close to that horrible creature. She was visiting the White Barrier with a few friends from the academy."

Her tone was calm and nonchalant. Cassian couldn't help but sigh.

'What is it with these old people and their love for their grandchildren? Maybe someone needs to remind her this is a great council of rulers.'

Kronos of Valtheron sighed.

"That's enough. The fact that some of you are aware of the investigation is fine."

His eyes narrowed coldly as his tone turned grave.

"However, my daughter, Third Princess Abellona, bore witness firsthand to Ashcroft's return, along with one other witness who fought him. Someone by the name Damian."

He closed his eyes, not believing what he was about to say to them.

"Apparently, by her account, he managed to defeat Ashcroft... and forced a retreat... alone."

As soon as he said those words, there was a moment of silence.

Then, without foreplanning, everyone broke into laughter.

This was an absurd-sounding joke.

Chapter 630: Simple Calculus

Kronos kept his expression impassive. Seeing the lack of mirth in his tone, Kadelas frowned.

"You're serious..."

He took a deep breath, his pale crimson eyes narrowing with unease.

"I wouldn't have called you all here if I was not. However, I can understand the reaction... those words sound like an uninspired joke."

There was a soft sigh from the man with bags under his eyes. The man was Duke Astranova, his weary face illuminated by the faint magical glow of the council chamber.

"You mean someone actually managed to defeat Ashcroft... forcing him into a retreat?"

Grand Duke Brightwater glanced at everyone present, his imposing frame leaning forward, his eyes hard.

"Over the years we have joined with the Temple and dealt with Ashcroft's fragments, but none of those fragments have any will. However, this was Ashcroft himself."

Narrowing his eyes, his voice deepened.

"Each fragment of Ashcroft contained embers of his fierce will... does that seem like the will of someone who could ever be defeated."

Next to Kadelas, an old elf with a long goatee sighed, the crest of the Halls of Steel gleaming on his robes. His voice was steady and heavy with age.

"The Dominator who has never known defeat... no mortal could overcome him. From the Demon Continent to Soltheon he redefined war. It took the Goddess personally acting to kill him, because Aetherus could not."

There was a long moment of silence, the weight of history pressing down on the chamber.

Then one of the figures made of light representing the Magic Continent spoke. His silhouette was that of a man with antlers, a beard and a long robe, his voice carrying a mystical echo.

"What exactly happened?"

Kronos leaned his chin against his hand, his gaze sweeping across the gathered rulers.

"I was going to let you all talk in circles for a while, but clearly some of us want this meeting to progress."

His sarcasm was sharp, perhaps his way of lashing back after being mocked earlier.

Maybe these people had forgotten, but as leaders of the world they could at least maintain some political decorum. Still, they were all old monsters, eccentric and beyond ordinary etiquette.

As far as the history books were concerned, this meeting never even took place.

He waved his hand lightly and small documents appeared before each member present.

"As I had stated earlier, my daughter, who had been part of an elite military force dedicated to finding, destroying, or otherwise sealing fragments of the Dominator, ran into Ashcroft himself."

Grand Duke Brightwater opened the report, reading through it with a calm expression.

"Hmmm... this is actually plausible. Ashcroft's soul returning into the body of a mere goblin is quite the surprise. However, anyone in the fourth class advancement can easily detach their soul from their body and possess a new host."

The Duchess Astranova smiled faintly, though suspicion lingered in her eyes.

"Yes, however most souls do not last long outside the body, and possession is quite difficult to accomplish."

Cassian had his doubts as well as he read the report, his brow furrowed.

"Why a goblin's body though? I surmise he had to make do with available resources."

Kadelas' eyes were narrowed, his white hair fluttering without any wind inside the enclosed chamber. As one of the few present in person, his pressure weighed heavier than most.

"I see. So that is how it was... he was trapped in a failing body, losing power with each passing second."

The old man from the Halls of Steel next to him stroked his beard slowly, his expression thoughtful.

"That stands to reason. A will like Ashcroft's could never be contained in such a small body."

There was a small moment of murmurs as everyone exchanged their opinions on the matter, filling the room with low voices and speculation.

Cassian dropped the files on the table, his gaze fixing sharply on the emperor.

"Where is he... this Damian, if that even is his name... this unknown man?"

Kronos glanced at the Duke, then at the Grand Duke seated beside him.

"Abellona came to the suspicion that he was a noble of Valtheron. A particularly high-ranked one, based on his mannerisms and mastery over the arts."

His gaze settled firmly on House Brightwater.

"Would you know anything about that?"

The Grand Duke noticed everyone's eyes turn toward him. He crossed his arms and leaned forward, his presence growing heavier.

"What exactly are you implying, Kronos?"

He said the emperor's name without honorifics, without even a trace of fear. This was, after all, Damian Brightwater.

Kronos shook his head. Having ruled for centuries, he remained composed.

"When someone wants to assume a fake name, they always stay close to the familiar. I was merely asking a question. Pay it no mind."

Aspen sighed, shaking his head slowly.

"According to the Third Princess' report, she only woke to the aftermath of the battle. While she had documented this man to be dead, she seems unsure of her assessment."

Kadelas sighed, his expression tightening as though the discussion itself gave him a headache.

"Our only clue to Ashcroft's whereabouts rests on some unknown person who we know next to nothing about, from the words of a young woman who, for all we know, might have been hallucinating under extreme stress or fallen for one of Ashcroft's tricks."

Kronos frowned. Kadelas had made a valid point, but he trusted in Abellona's judgement.

"In that case, how do you all suggest we proceed?"

Cassian glanced at his father, then back at Kronos.

"The only way we know how. Expect the worst and hope that at least a quarter of us are alive to see the end of this."

Duke Astranova sighed, his tired face shadowed by the council's light. Though he looked weary, his posture remained imposing.

"You're all making this more complicated than it has to be. Find the man, and we find the first clue to Ashcroft."

He stood up from his seat, his cane tapping the ground as he rose.

"The Third Princess seems certain of his mortality. We must find him. He will be our clue to Ashcroft."

"This Damian..."

He scanned the reports again.

"The reports say he uses a rare shadow attribute. Rare, but not unheard of. He has dark hair and dark eyes, less uncommon. He's a young swordsman, and a noble. I believe we just narrowed it down."

His gaze fell on Cassian.

"Find he who meets all these criteria, and we have our target. It is a simple calculus."

He slowly sat down again, his eyes cold but steady.

"Do not let the fear of Ashcroft poison your minds."