

## Shadow 631

### Chapter 631: Amon, The Unknown Ruler

He leaned back in his chair, hearing the droning sounds of different conversations and arguments as the upper echelon tried to make sense of everything while creating countermeasures that protected their houses and nations.

The Valtheron Empire had been here since the late first epoch. They had survived too much and had the longest history of any empire in the world.

However, even they had to decentralize some of their authority by giving the four dukedoms autonomy.

At its core, the empire was actually five kingdoms that had forgotten how to be kingdoms.

"Aetherus..." he couldn't help but mutter that name. Why else would five kingdoms become one, especially when one of them came from another continent to form an empire?

It was because of the one who was backing the Temple, and the countless threats around them.

Damian sighed, turning around to face the old man from House Ravenscroft while the others discussed Ashcroft.

"I never visited to give my condolences... on your grandson's death. How are you holding up, Corbin?"

Corbin chuckled with a sad smile, his hand tightening slightly on the head of his cane.

"Like someone who watched their grandson's killer get away."

Damian smiled lightly, lowering his eyes.

"He was a good kid, that Godric... a shame."

"If you thought so, you would have let him marry that daughter of yours," he replied softly.

The Grand Duke's lips twitched, his gaze dropping low.

"My girl was too strong-willed to just go along with what I wanted. She'd rather do her own thing... sorry about that."

Corbin shook his head slowly.

"It's fine. At least someone had a happy outcome in this."

Damian chuckled softly, though a pang hit his chest.

"I wish that was the case... but she sort of died. I had... no idea too. Pathetic, isn't it?"

Cassian frowned, glaring at his father.

'What was wrong with these two? Why were they discussing this here of all places?'

However, he didn't say anything. These were just fathers grieving, two old friends who had outlived their descendants.

Though Godric was actually Corbin's grandson, Cassian remembered how the old man always came to show him off to his father. That was where they had gotten the idea to get him and Ranar engaged, even though she didn't really like the idea.

"My condolences... must be hard on you. How'd she die?" Corbin asked softly, a pang of sadness in his heart as he thought of the vibrant Ranar.

"Demons... she got ripped apart in the demon wars. Guess it's par for the course for me to lose the women I love to demons. I thought after her mother... I'd never lose anyone else to the bloody war with demons."

He glanced up with a small smile on his face.

"I only found out recently."

Corbin clenched his fist, his knuckles whitening.

"The demon wars are vicious. Godric carried the horrors of those wars with him. I never imagined those horrors would follow him home."

"You don't mean..." Damian narrowed his eyes.

"I'm sure you've heard the news. It was a faceless entity. From the way he moved, he was skilled, except I can't be sure who or what he is. I'm not even sure he's a he... it could be a she or an it. I don't even have a face or a name to hate."

Cassian narrowed his eyes. It seemed the conversations around them had unwittingly stopped and turned toward the two dukes.

He felt irritated. Some of this was personal and shouldn't be leaked. However, these people were the most powerful in the world, so they knew quite a bit.

His eyes flickered.

'Wait... these people are the most powerful in the world and knew quite a bit... no, that's an understatement. They controlled the flow of information.'

Cassian finally understood it now. These two old bastards were scheming. They wanted to make their personal problems everyone's problem.

This whole thing was an act... so they could get information on their tragedies while also putting him on the radar of the world rulers.

'Ahh... so that's why.'

And as Cassian expected, his father glanced at Emperor Kronos.

"I happen to have some idea of this entity's name."

With a voice like a blade, he spoke the name.

"His name... is Amon."

Corbin Ravenscroft narrowed his eyes. Cassian glanced at Aspen next to him, still wearing the same stalwart expression. It seemed these two had told him of their plans.

He sighed.

'Goddess... father, at least keep me in the loop.'

Of course, he would have told him that was a bad idea.

However, it seemed their decision was bearing fruit. The members present took note of the name.

Kadelas narrowed his eyes as the man from the Magic Continent spoke.

"Well, what a horrible coincidence."

As soon as he said that, all eyes turned to him.

"Do you know anything, Great Mage Amitabh?" There was some desperation in Aspen's voice.

There was a moment of silence before the Great Mage finally spoke.

"It's not much... however, it is better than nothing. A few years ago, we caught one of those witches from the Snake Temple and tortured her extensively for information. As you would expect, nothing came from it."

Cassian narrowed his eyes. There was more.

"During that time, she may have unveiled some names that had never been used... the names of demon lords. One of those names... was Amon."

Kronos narrowed his eyes with a hint of dread.

"Are you suggesting... the Demon Continent has gained a new demon lord?"

He stroked his beard, his face drawn tight.

"We can't confirm anything. This is an era where Ashcroft has returned. This Amon might be the least of our troubles... or one of the worst disasters we've ever dealt with... we all know a new name is always a sign of bad things to come."

Cassian bit his lip.

"An enemy we do not know... one we cannot kill."

"Amon, the Unknown Ruler."

Damon didn't know it, but he was at the center of a grand meeting, both as Ashcroft and as Amon.

If he knew, he probably wouldn't be worrying about his little problems.

However, he was now the great enemy of the world.

#### Chapter 632: Two Friends

While the world discussed him, the main character of all this trouble was now the subject of a few rumors as he sat at a small corner table overlooking a large window.

He sighed, taking a sip of his drink.

Matia's eyes flickered as she looked at him downing his seventh glass. He sniffed, clearly feeling the weight of the moment.

"I get it... I'm drinking too much... but we all know I can't go in there sober. Renata hit me up again."

Renata, the violet-haired woman, nodded and poured him another cup of what was obviously the strongest alcohol she could find.

Damon took another glass, then another.

"Dammit, I'm not getting drunk... curse my poison resistance. Screw this, get me some poison instead."

"What are you doing..." A familiar voice called out to him. Damon felt his heart flutter when he heard that voice, a thin smile forming on his lips.

"Ahhh, hey there Leona... what brings you here this fine evening?"

The beast-kin girl had been brought here by Evangeline.

She walked over to a chair and sat down, a thin smile playing at her lips.

"Did you miss me?"

Damon sniffed with an expression of sadness.

"You're truly my bestie... you're the first one to show up in my darkest hours."

Leona gave him a deadpan expression. Clearly, Matia, Renata, and Evangeline had been here the whole time.

Sometimes he was such an unreliable narrator.

"Uh-huh, right... what trouble have you caused this time?"

Damon chuckled evilly, taking another sip of his drink.

"Nothing at all. I didn't even provoke anyone. I've been on my best behavior."

"That's not what I heard..." Leona crossed her arms.

"Who's been lying on my head... it's Eva, right? She's always bad-mouthing me."

Evangeline was left speechless, her eyes narrowing.

"I didn't even say anything to her. What's wrong with you, are you picking a fight?"

Leona narrowed her eyes, certain that Damon had caused trouble.

"I heard it from the crowd. Apparently the prince guy already challenged you. The war games are starting the day after tomorrow and people are already challenging you."

What Leona said next made everyone speechless.

"You have got to teach me how to do that. Nobody's tried to challenge me yet. I mean that's so boring."

Damon's eyes widened before he broke into loud laughter.

"Yes, yes! I knew you would be on my side, I never doubted you."

Evangeline sneered.

"That's not what it looked like a few seconds ago."

Damon didn't pay her any mind. Not caring that Leona was an unwed lady, he grabbed her into a bear hug, lifting her off her feet.

Putting her down, he cleared his throat.

"It ain't much... but since you want to learn, I suppose I can teach you. It's just a little something I picked up in my travels. It's something of a lost art."

Leona's eyes flickered with excitement, eager to hear what he had to say.

Renata took out a notepad, Matia's eyes flickered, her expression impassive.

Evangeline wasn't having any of it. Her expression was full of helplessness and a hint of disdain.

Damon had a profoundly distant look on his face.

"The art of Ragebaiting... is a complex art. I shudder at the thought of putting such power in the hands of one so young, so reckless... but it must be passed on."

Evangeline felt a headache coming.

"I think I'll be needing a drink... I can't stay sober for this."

And thus, with Renata documenting and Leona excited to be a menace to everyone's mental state, Damon went into an hour-long rant on the delicate art of ragebaiting, its complexities, and the deep philosophy of inciting anger in people even if they were more powerful.

In fact, it was encouraged. This was an orthodox school of thought to provoke those who were stronger, even if your actions had real consequences and could do irreparable damage to you. At least you got the gratification of inciting anger.

Leona was so happy to learn this, praising Damon up and down for being a good friend and teaching her his profound techniques.

Evangeline glanced at the glass of wine in her hand. With a disgusted expression, she put it down.

The alcohol had to be the reason she sat through this nonsense... no, she blamed herself for letting it get this far.

"What... what is wrong with you... are you trying to get her killed?"

Damon sneered, giving Evangeline the stink eye.

"Of course Madam Justice won't understand... you are astray... find the light."

Evangeline was stunned into speechlessness.

"My attribute is light and my second class is Dawnbringer... if anything, you're the problem. How... who even... when... ahhh forget it. Go ahead and die for all I care."

Damon tapped Leona's shoulder.

"You know, I'm thinking of pulling off a big one with Sylvia's father in the war games. He has to kill me or cough up blood... or I can't live with myself."

Renata raised her hand from where she had been taking notes.

"Ermh... my lord, from the looks of it, you might very well die... I'm not sure that's a good idea."

Evangeline's lips twitched. "Exactly... and why are you calling him 'my lord'?"

Renata tilted her head like that was a strange question.

Damon shook his head mockingly.

"Eva, this is why you can never provide the comfort of a lady. At your core... you're a brute. Can't you just support my dreams? Why can't you believe in me?"

She rolled her eyes at his sudden words.

"I believe you're going to get yourself killed. This has to be the single greatest waste of your intellect... and mine... and the fact that I am still talking means there's something fundamentally wrong with me."

Leona nodded her head.

"You were right... she really is mentally unstable. It must have been that trip to Lysithara, she never recovered..."

Evangeline's hands trembled as she felt anger rising in her chest.

"I'm going to murder the both of you...."

Damon smiled, patting Leona's head.

"Good job... congratulations on your first ragebait. I told you she was an easy target."

Leona pressed her hand on her chest.

"I feel so... so gratified... this is a wonderful feeling."

Evangeline trembled. Grabbing the bottle of alcohol, she chugged it down.

"I can't stay sober around these two."

As soon as she sat down, the sounds of footsteps echoed as a young man wearing fine noble garments walked in. His brown hair was well-kept, his features handsome, yet there were heavy bags under his eyes.

Evangeline put down the wine glass. She whispered to Damon and Leona.

"Don't mention anything about his brother's death... he's going through a tough time. If you must... say something nice. Especially you, Damon."

He never got along with Xander. Damon crossed his chest.

"I promise I will be the nicest I've ever been to him."

Xander walked toward them with calm, steady strides.

As soon as he approached, Damon glanced at him with a thin smile.

"Hey there Xander... I heard your brother... died. That's rough. Have a drink."

Evangeline glared at him.

"Damon!!"

He looked surprised.

"What... wha... this is the nicest I've been to him... I didn't even say his brother was a bum..."

Chapter 633: The Only One I Can Tell

Evangeline felt so helpless sometimes. She didn't know what was going through Damon's mind. For the life of her, she could not understand why he was being so insensitive.

On the other hand, Leona's nose twitched as she picked up a strange scent from Damon's mood, one she couldn't quite place.

It was almost like anger, sadness, and maybe even guilt, but she couldn't get a clear enough read to be sure.

Leona smiled faintly at Xander.

"I'm sorry about your brother..."

Xander nodded, his gaze falling on Damon.

"Hmmm, that's actually the nicest thing I expected to come out of your mouth."

The brown-haired young man smiled as he settled into his chair.

"You've really bettered yourself as a human being."

He sat down at the table across from Damon. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes carried a subtle weight.

"I'll take you up on that offer. A drink sounds nice."

Evangeline glared at Damon, standing up quickly. She felt like she had a responsibility to apologize on his behalf, after all this trash was her relative.

"I deeply apologize for his thoughtless words. I offer my condolences on behalf of both of us and House Brightwater."

She found a way to slip the family name along with theirs without giving anything away.

Damon's gaze remained locked on Xander. He must have seemed pristine to others, but Damon could feel something different about him. Something had changed. There was a difference in Xander that Damon didn't quite like.

It was almost as if you had been drinking from a clear spring, and one day you returned to find someone had poured a few drops of poison into the waters, tainting its purity.

"You look better than I thought you would."

Damon poured Xander a drink as he spoke.

Xander let a slow smile creep up his lips.

"Never thought the day would come that you'd pour me a drink... you really are being nice."

Damon narrowed his gaze, then put the bottle down with deliberate care.

It was ironic. Before he killed Xander's brother, Godric, he had talked with him and even shared a drink. Shared a drink with the man who had killed his mother and father and made his life a mess.

Damon had wished Godric was the man he imagined in his head, unrepentant and remorseless. He had wanted to see a man laughing at the thought of killing his parents.

But what he had found instead was a man broken by his own sins, a man who refused to move on with his life, forever struck, standing in that moment, reliving his crime.

Damon understood what it meant to carry the shame of one's sins. He himself carried the shame of killing Carmen Vale, yet still looked into the man's daughter's eyes as if he were her savior.

He carried the shame of failing to lead his friends to safety, resulting in Matia's death, because he had made up his mind that she was expendable. Now she lingered as his shadow, as if to remind him of his sins.

That was why Damon could not hate Godric, but neither could he forgive him.

'I bet letting him live would have been something beautiful.'

His promise to Valarie Sunwarden rang in his mind.

Yes, forgiveness was something beautiful, but Damon was a small man. He was not strong enough to forgive.

Xander sipped the drink, the burning sensation trailing down his throat.

"I never really got a chance to talk to my brother... you know, learn what had been bothering him."

Damon frowned, his brows tightening. Why was Xander telling him this? Why him of all people?

Evangeline recognized Xander's desire to speak and discreetly pulled Leona by the hand as she stood. Renata followed, leaving with Matia as well.

For now, it was just the two young men who had never gotten along with each other, yet always seemed to find themselves fighting on the same side, sharing their burdens like brothers.

Damon poured him another drink. The two of them were left alone in Evangeline's VIP section of the grand hall.

"Every day I would say, I'll talk to him. I figured maybe it was because I had never fought a war, never faced the horrors. But the truth is, I was just a coward."

He struck the table with his glass, the sharp sound ringing in the silence.

Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself.

Damon didn't say anything. Once again, he was trapped in the familiar situation of hearing the grief of the victim of his own acts.

Months ago it had been Iris, crying her heart out over her father's death at his hands, unbeknownst to her that he was the murderer. Now it was Xander.

Xander sighed, the alcohol on his breath carrying a faint fragrance.

"After what happened to us, I returned home. You know, I hate to admit it, but you inspired me. Your devil-may-care attitude had some effect on me. When I stood before my brother, I thought... if you were in my place, you'd say what was on your mind. Face it, no matter what."

This was how Xander Ravenscroft saw Damon Grey, as someone who always pressed forward.

Damon, on the other hand, kept his expression passive. His face was hidden beneath his hood. Xander only imagined his expression was calm and unreadable.

He was wrong. Damon's expression was twisted, his lips pressed tightly between his teeth.

"I never got a chance to talk to my brother. I was robbed of a chance to talk to him. All I was allowed was the chance to see his corpse disappear before my eyes."

Damon swallowed his feelings, forcing his breath to remain steady.

Why? Why him? Why was Xander pouring his heart out to him?

'Why are you doing this to me...'

Then his tone grew cold.

"Why are you telling me this? Why do you think I would care?"

Damon couldn't help but slam the table.

"Why should I give a damn about the death of some noble I don't even know!"

His chest heaved as his breath grew heavy. He didn't even know why he felt so frustrated. Why... why did Xander have that expression on his face? Why was he looking at him like that?

With... with... trust.

Xander's eyes were calm as he muttered softly.

"Because... you're the only one I can tell."

His words made Damon fall back into his seat, his legs suddenly feeling heavy for some reason.

#### Chapter 634: Xander's Wish

Damon was quiet... he was just quiet. He took the alcohol bottle and chugged it down, but it wasn't enough. He reached into his shadow and pulled out another bottle, the glass glinting dully in the dim light.

Xander bit his lips, his hands tightening into fists.

"I don't know who else I can tell... Should I have told my father, who had lost his eldest son... should I have confided in my mother... or maybe my younger sister who knows nothing of the world... I... I just don't know..."

Tears streamed down from one of his eyes, which he hurriedly wiped away. A man should not be shedding tears his brother had taught him that, but speaking to Damon had made him unwittingly more emotional.

There was a soft gasp from Damon as he forced all the air out of his lungs, his chest heaving.

"Fine. I can't make any promises though... I don't want to be here and I don't want to listen to this... to you..."

Xander chuckled softly, shaking his head.

"I know that... maybe that's why you're the right person to listen."

"I feel so small... I felt so defeated and overwhelmed by my opponent... I was there standing in front of my brother's killer but I couldn't do anything... I was useless..."

He smacked the table with his palm, the wood rattling under his force.

"I want to kill him."

Damon narrowed his eyes, his heart unable to stay calm.

"Who..."

Xander's eyes grew cold, his aura flaring and evolving into something far more complex than before.

"That faceless entity... Amon."

Damon was confused. Who the hell was Amon? He never gave a name to his persona.

"What...?"

Xander calmed down slightly, perhaps realizing he needed to explain.

"House Ravenscroft is powerful, and being powerful means we know people in high places. This Amon... this wasn't the first time he appeared."

Damon frowned. Right. That wasn't his first time using a shadow clone. The last time was at...

"Lumos. In the chambers of the Grand Duke. That was his first appearance. We were there that day. It was on that day his name was pried out by the skill of one of the knights there."

Damon listened to Xander calmly. That made sense. He recalled meeting a knight that day who had a strange skill that caused the target to answer questions without resistance.

At the time, Damon had only said part of his name.

Damon... Amon... that was where Amon came from. He had just removed part of his name. Though in truth it was because Damon's shadow clone hadn't spoken his full name aloud.

"And the Grand Duke told you this... this person's name..."

Xander nodded. He didn't tell him directly, but he had heard it from his own grandfather.

"Yes, that's his name... Amon. We don't have much information on him yet, but slowly, eventually, we'll unveil his mysteries."

Damon reached for his head and pulled off his hood. He wanted to look Xander in the eyes when he spoke to him. His long black hair fell to his sides like a river of darkness, and the crown resting on his head made him seem like a young king.

His dark eyes peered into Xander.

"Why are you telling me this, Xander..."

Xander clenched his fists, his eyes filled with resolve.

"I need your help... I need you to help me kill Amon."

Damon's heart shuddered in his chest.

What kind of cruel joke is this? What is the meaning of this... was this a god's cruel joke, was this his choice or the random cruelty of fate? Why me of all people...

"No." His words were cold, his resolve steadfast.

He would not play into the cruel hand of fate. He was not going to be a pawn of whatever twisted story this was.

"Why are you asking me... why should avenging your brother concern me... I... Look, what happened to your brother was a tragedy... You have my condolences."

Xander clenched his fists tighter.

"I don't want condolences. I want revenge. I need you. Please help me..."

Damon's hands trembled. To Xander, it must have looked like anger, but that wasn't why his expression was so contorted.

"Your family is powerful. You have wealth and armies at your bidding... you are the heir to all that power. Why should the help of one commoner matter to you in your quest for vengeance?"

Xander suddenly stood up, tears gleaming in his eyes with frustration and helplessness. His aura flared violently as he threw the table to the wall, splintering wood against stone.

"Because none of those people is Damon Grey!!! None of them are... you..."

He collapsed to his knees with a thud.

"I'll give up everything... my dignity, my pride... I will give up more."

He bowed his head, letting go of his noble pride and ideals.

"No one can help me kill Amon except you. I know that in my heart..."

"Get up, Xander..."

"No... I won't. I have already forsaken my pride. I will give anything... so help me..."

Damon's heart pounded wildly in his chest.

"No... I won't..."

Xander smacked his head on the ground with a dull crack.

"I will not get up until you do... I will work with a demon if I thought it would help me avenge my brother... You are the only devil that I know. This is the oath that I have made..."

Damon didn't know what to do. He was lost... truly lost. Xander had always been someone who refused to accept losing to Damon, obstinate in his ideals, but now he was discarding them all.

His were the eyes of a man who would see the world burn. This was not the Xander Ravenscroft Damon once knew.

Xander was an oath keeper. That was his class, and his vows were something he never broke.

Damon closed his eyes, anguish twisting his face. Slowly, he turned around.

"Give... me time to think on it..."

Xander refused to get up.

Damon bit his lips.

"Please..."

Hearing that soft whisper, Xander finally stood, his eyes closing as if sealing away his pain.

"Tomorrow then... tomorrow."

He left with steady steps, his face betraying none of the conflict within.

As soon as he left, Damon pulled up his hood once more and fell back into his seat, holding his head with both hands.

He was lost... he didn't know what the right choice was.

Right now, more than ever, he needed someone to confide in. This was a burden too heavy to bear alone.

Chapter 635: Move

Evangeline didn't come into the VIP section, neither did Renata, Leona, or Matia. For whatever reason, they stayed out of it. Xander must have said something, or they chose to wisely stay away.

Damon felt his mood growing increasingly foul with each moment he thought about what had happened.

He had always seen Xander as someone he needed to suppress, someone he needed to bring to his knees. But now, Xander kneeling in front of him just left a bitter taste in his mouth.

That was not the same confident young noble who always seemed so put together. This was just a man tainted by the poison of vengeance and the madness of hate.

In the end, could he even call himself a decent enough human being anymore?

Killing Xander's brother was one thing, but keeping Xander in a manipulative lie in the name of vengeance while acting as his trusted ally was something else entirely.

The door opened and a maid stepped in, bowing her head.

"My apologies for the intrusion, sir. I have been ordered to inform you the banquet has begun. All guests are already in attendance."

Damon raised his head slowly.

"Hmmm."

He stood up, feeling a light-headedness from his lingering wounds. The damage to his soul was still there, though he had simply powered through due to his high tolerance for pain.

He was accustomed to pain, some more than others.

Abellona was a great host. She had arranged a large private room with long tables, the seating assigned based on what Damon could only imagine was a measure of one's personal power or at the very least, how the public perceived their power levels.

Naturally, there was one large table at the center where Abellona sat at the head herself.

Those who were granted seats at this table were truly the cream of the crop, those who would hold the fate of the goddess races in the future.

Their champions.

Damon could see a few names on the tables, each seat already taken by someone.

"Hmmm," he muttered softly, noting his name was at the center table right next to Abellona.

He would be seated on her right, and from his side, the seating for the other members of his party had been arranged.

Everyone was seated already. He spotted the familiar white hair of Sylvia Moonveil. When she noticed him, she flashed him a gentle smile.

A young elf with white hair seated across from her frowned, glaring at Damon.

He wasn't the only one. All who were present were staring at this latecomer who was to be seated beside the princess.

Damon could hear soft murmurs, as well as intentionally released auras from different people, all in a bid to show off their powers.

However, no one caused a ruckus. There was a somewhat solemn air to the banquet.

Abellona smiled as the maid led Damon to his seat. The familiar fragrance of Abellona of Valtheron reached his nose. Across from him, Renata gave him a nod as he sat next to her.

He didn't say anything to the host. His mind was preoccupied with his own issues. All he gave her was a curt nod.

"How arrogant, to disregard your nation's princess. I have heard the Ascendant was a commoner, I just didn't realize he was an uneducated one as well."

The voice came from a seat not too far from him, near the other end of the table, where a young man sat in the familiar uniform of the Royal Academy here in Valtheron.

Damon sighed, feeling more irritated.

This young man was dark-haired with green eyes. A small set of scales ran across his hand, making it evident he was dragon kin.

In times like this Damon would have said something, but he was not in the mood to indulge a fool.

Xander, who was sitting not far from Damon, narrowed his eyes but said nothing. However, Leona didn't keep quiet.

If Damon had replied, she wouldn't have needed to.

"For someone in the third class advancement yet still at the farthest end of the table, that speaks volumes. Then again, empty vessels make the loudest noise."

The young man's lips twitched.

"You..."

Abellona raised her hand and stood up. She smiled lightly.

"I believe there's been some misunderstanding here. The seating arrangements are by no means a measure of a warrior's strength. Only the battlefield, and the fire of your will, can determine that. Not arbitrary seating arrangement. I apologize if I created the wrong impression."

The elf sitting across from Sylvia, clearly a noble of the Moon Glades, smirked and spoke to Abellona.

"Really now? Doesn't look like that to me."

Abellona's smile didn't falter, her gaze steady and giving him no openings to exploit.

"I suppose the representative of the Moon Glades would have a keen eye for things, but as I said before, this is a misunderstanding. Do you not think so, representative of the Silver Glades?"

Her eyes turned to another elf seated next to him. He carried a bow and a quiver of arrows. Even though this was a formal gathering, his belt carried several daggers. The crest of the Silver Glades was pinned proudly on his chest.

He let out a low sigh.

"I suppose he is free to have any opinion he wants. The only thing I can agree on is the battlefield being the only place where strength can be accurately judged."

Abellona smiled. His agreement made the young man from the Moon Glades frown, but he said nothing, his gaze instead fixed on Sylvia, who was evidently looking at Damon.

It was clear to everyone present, because she was staring only at him. The expression of the young elf contorted, his small lack of control over his face making everyone's eyes turn toward Sylvia.

However, she didn't seem to care. All she saw was Damon.

"Ahem, ahem." The young elf cleared his throat.

She didn't react. Instead, a small smile formed on her lips as she glanced at the object of her affection.

He couldn't have that. He could not allow rumors of any kind.

"Princess..." he whispered, but not quietly enough for everyone else to ignore.

Sylvia sighed, closing her eyes.

"I heard you the first time."

She stood up from her seat. All eyes turned to the beautiful elven princess all except Damon, who seemed lost in thought.

Then she turned to Abellona.

"If that is the case and seating doesn't matter, I see no reason why we can't sit with whoever we want.... Unless they actually do."

Abellona's eyes twitched. She didn't know why Sylvia was opposing her.

"They don't."

Sylvia smiled, her eyes cold.

"Good then. I'll be changing mine."

Without another word, she rose from her seat and pulled it along with her until she was right next to Damon. She gazed at Matia, who had been seated beside him.

Then, with eyes like ice, she spoke.

"Move."

Chapter 636: A Friend Would

This was a delicate and subtle political atmosphere. Abellona was telling the truth; she had not set up the seating as a way to rank anyone based on their strength or reputation.

She had done so based on factions. Her motivations had been purely political, setting up the seats in a way that allowed her to affect the political relationship between others.

Why else would she have seated the Royal Academy representatives so far away from Damon and his friend, as well as Lilith Astranova who was still absent for some reason?

Some of the representatives hadn't appeared, opting to stay hidden, but they had still sent someone to keep an eye on things.

This was a purely political move on her part, though perhaps with some personal reasons as well. By bringing Damon so close her excuse was that he was a hero of the Empire.

There was nothing wrong with him sitting next to the princess.

However, the elf princess had completely turned everything on its head.

What was even wrong with her? Why would she be so bold and blatant?

Yet Abellona's thoughts didn't mean anything for the young woman who had already made up her mind. Sylvia would see the world burn for her desires.

At this point, it didn't even matter if Damon wanted her or not. He did, whether he wanted it or not.

Her words pulled Damon out of his reverie. He glanced at Sylvia standing behind him, holding a chair.

His gaze shifted to Matia, who wore an impassive expression. She wasn't against moving, not really. It was just that...

She only took orders from Damon, and Sylvia's words sounded too much like a command for her liking.

If Damon wanted it, she would move. With her doll-like expression, she glanced at him.

All eyes were on him.

'What the hell... I can't deal with this right now...'

He nodded at Matia.

"Do as you please."

She nodded and stood up. However, it wasn't because Sylvia had asked. It was simply because this was what she had wanted to do.

Now, she had been given free rein to act however she liked.

The first thing she did, the sound of ice spreading around her body echoed out as her porcelain-like figure became covered in armor. Her beautiful face was now hidden beneath a visor.

With that simple act, she moved behind Damon.

Sylvia muttered a soft apology as she sat down beside him.

"Erm... sorry for the trouble, Matia."

She settled into her seat, her lips curving into a small smile. With the young elf from the Moonveil shocked by her boldness, Sylvia leaned forward, boldly slipping her hand into Damon's.

That was the last straw. The elf stood up, slamming the table.

"You dare bewitch the princess?"

Damon sighed, hearing the sound of Matia shaping a weapon of ice behind him.

His gaze fell on Sylvia's hand clutching his own.

Closing his eyes, he felt troubled. Not by this, of course, he couldn't care less how this affected the reputation of the White Ruler.

That man had once ordered his death. Damon had not forgotten that grudge.

Abellona watched him with narrowed eyes, as if she wanted to peer beneath his hood. Things were quickly getting out of her control.

'Why is everything becoming so chaotic...'

She stood, taking a deep breath, and tapped her glass with a utensil.

"Ladies and gentlemen... it seems I have unintentionally caused a misunderstanding. I seem to have created the impression seating was based on your strength. For that, I apologize."

Her voice was calm, her composure returning. Then she suddenly remembered, Sylvia Moonveil was rumored to be having an affair with the young ascendant, and the Moonveils had even sent assassins after him.

How could she forget that? She was really losing her touch, closing herself off and thinking about some man she barely knew.

"It seems we may need to follow the bold example of Princess Moonveil. We should not let arbitrary seating affect us as of now. We should follow her example and shuffle our seats."

Abellona moved from her seat, heading to the empty chair across from Damon which had been reserved for Lilith.

With the princess making a move, everyone had to give her face. Thus, one by one, they began moving seats, each finding new places based on factions, relationships, or other considerations.

Well, with the exception of Damon. He didn't feel like moving, and Sylvia's grip on his hand was so tight he thought his bones might break.

Abellona cleared her throat to get Sylvia's attention. Reluctantly, Sylvia let go of Damon's hand.

Damon raised his head slightly to find Abellona's crimson eyes glaring daggers at him.

He rolled his eyes under his hood.

'What'd I do this time...'

Clinking her glass again, Abellona recaptured everyone's attention. This time the seating had changed completely, determined by power blocs, friendships, and rivalries.

It was no longer under her control. She could feel Sylvia Moonveil's gaze lingering on her. There was a thin smile on Sylvia's face, one Abellona recognized instantly.

It was a smile that said, I am the one in control.

A small hint of dread crept up her spine as she met the gray eyes of Sylvia Moonveil.

This girl was dangerous in ways Abellona did not yet understand.

'Was her action part of some deeper plan... or was it just random...'

The seed of paranoia grew within her heart.

Still, she didn't let it distract her from her duty. She raised her glass with a practiced smile as trolleys of food rolled into the hall, servants arranging the feast across the tables.

The banquet hadn't even begun, yet she already had a headache. This was supposed to be a time to interrogate Damon Grey, but from the looks of it, she would not get that chance.

And thus the feast began. Sylvia had gotten what she wanted. She was seated beside Damon. For the first time in a while, it almost felt like it was just the two of them.

Though she had offended several people, and her parents would no doubt be displeased with her.

Sylvia had broken her agreement with them, she had promised not to speak with Damon. But she could tell something was bothering him.

'I'll deal with the aftermath later...'

As everyone ate, Sylvia only nibbled lightly at her food.

"What's on your mind?" she whispered.

Damon hadn't touched the food, only sipping from his drink.

"Do I look like something is wrong, or is this something a seer would know?"

She shook her head, her eyes soft.

"No... something a friend would."

Chapter 637: If You Speak Again, I'll Kill You

He couldn't help but smile at her words.

"Should you be talking to me right now... you don't want to get on your old man's bad side."

Sylvia smiled faintly at his words.

"After what I did, I think I already got on his bad side, though my mother might be the real nuisance."

Damon felt a bit bad hearing that.

"Sorry... for coming between you and your parents."

Sylvia took a deep breath, whispering softly.

"It's fine... I'm glad I did. I couldn't be who they wanted me to be... because I want to be who I want to be."

The two of them spoke only loud enough for themselves. Damon soon noticed Sylvia had carved a small rune under the table to dampen the sound of their voices.

Even in this hall, at this table, it felt like it was just the two of them.

That was enough for Sylvia... at least for now.

"You... aren't going to tell me about it, are you?" Sylvia muttered softly, a small pang in her heart.

He let out a deep breath.

"We both know I'm not big on sharing... don't worry, it's no big deal. I'll sleep it off and act out what I already intend to. It's just..."

"One of those moments where you feel bad but still know it's not going to change anything," Sylvia cut him off, knowing him well enough.

Damon blinked, then chuckled, picking up his glass and clicking it against her own.

"You know me quite well."

She nodded, biting her lip.

"Well, you did stab me in the back to win an exam even though we were on the same side... then felt bad about it. Even though... you would have totally done it again if you had a chance."

Damon chuckled awkwardly and cleared his throat.

"That was forever ago... I was young."

"That was a few months ago, and well, you aren't as bad as before." Sylvia chuckled, lifting her face with a soft smile.

"Who knew you would hold a grudge... now that I think about it, that's the reason your father hates me."

Sylvia shook her head lightly.

"That's only part of the reason. He has other reasons, which, looking at them, just seem so petty... and banal."

"Well, that makes both of us. I happen to have a little something for him."

Damon smiled faintly, thinking of the heads of the elves he had stored in his shadow.

Now that he thought about it, killing them while he was a rank below had been an insane feat. But after devouring Ashcroft, Damon was far more powerful than he had ever been.

Right now he was the strongest version of himself. He did not even doubt his own power, and he had been working on improving his swordsmanship and magic.

He was close to a breakthrough in his magic Gatling spell.

"Whatever it is, he would hate it."

Their soft conversation ignored everyone at the table. It was evident Damon wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, so Sylvia made sure no one could be a bother.

Thus the need for the rune. However, there was still the nuisance of the young elf glaring at them.

Damon raised his head and looked at him.

"What's his problem... who even is he?"

Sylvia wore a tired expression.

"Something annoying. That's Sars. He's a noble from the Moonglades and also its most brilliant prodigy. As you can imagine, he's here to keep an eye on me."

She smiled mischievously at Damon.

"Oh right... and that clown is supposed to kill you."

Damon felt it was a bit harsh to refer to someone as a clown. This was the harshest appraisal he had ever heard from the usually reserved Sylvia.

"Erm... that seems a bit harsh. Why the hate on the poor clown?"

Sylvia leaned back in her chair with a soft sigh.

"I don't know... he's just been getting on my nerves. Following me around like a lost puppy. I mean, I don't want to be harsh... but he is kind of annoying."

Damon nodded but asked no more. It seemed Sylvia had her own troubles too. Of course she did.

Biting her lip, she glanced at Damon.

"I'm... sorry. I couldn't make you feel... better. I guess talking to me didn't make you feel any different. I just dumped my problems on you again."

Damon sighed and moved his hand to Sylvia's head, rubbing her gently.

"You did great. I actually feel... amazing."

"This whole place is suffocating right now... you made it bearable. I... I think I need some air."

Sylvia lowered her head, biting her lip.

Right... she wasn't someone he would tell. If Lilith Astranova had been the one he was talking to... then.

Damon stood up from his seat. Sylvia wanted to speak, but after opening her mouth, she said nothing.

As soon as Damon stood up, Abellona's eyes flickered to him, ignoring all the people trying to speak to her.

However, before she could say anything, Damon spoke.

"Excuse me... I think I need some air."

His words weren't enough to dissuade her. However, the one who spoke was the young elf, Sars.

"Who gave you permission to leave? Do you think you can come and go however you please? How dare you ignore me?"

Damon was unsure who this clown was actually talking to. Were those words meant for Sylvia or for him?

Clearly, this fool was getting tipsy.

Still, Damon really wasn't in the mood. He walked toward the balcony door, carrying a calm, steady air around him despite the elf's anger.

His lack of response was a humiliating disregard for Sars.

And one thing was universal about nobles: they could not tolerate what they perceived as an insult.

Sars walked toward Damon with anger twisting his features.

"You dare walk away from me, you coward! Face me like a man, and take responsibility for your actions!"

His words caused Damon, who was about to reach the door, to stop.

Then he slowly turned his head. There was a brief silence... and then a suffocating wave of terror washed over the entire banquet hall. From the darkness of his soul, an icy murderous intent flowed through the air.

With a voice that seemed to come from the abyss, Damon spoke.

"If you speak again... I'll kill you."

Sars froze instantly. He couldn't breathe. His heart and lungs refused to work.

Damon walked out without another word. Sars couldn't even speak. He just stood there, frozen.

It was only after Damon left that he finally moved. His eyes widened, his heart was beating again.

Then, from behind him, he heard a soft, pearly laughter.

When he looked back, he saw Sylvia giggling softly.

In that singular moment, Sars had never felt more humiliated. He had never been made to feel so small, so belittled.

His hands trembled as rage overtook him.

"Damon... Greyyyyyy!!!"

Chapter 638: I Know Too Much

He let out a warm puff of air from his lungs. Time really flew by so quickly. It was already starting to get colder.

Winter was here... except Damon didn't have his usual winter worries.

At this time of the year, he would have been thinking of ways to survive the winter with his sister gathering wood for fires, stocking whatever food he could find or steal, collecting fabrics to wear, all while avoiding members of the underworld who would seek to trouble the two siblings.

Except now, it was different. It was almost as if winter was here to make him suffer, though this time the anguish came from his heart and perhaps from the lingering damage to his soul.

His situation had changed. He no longer worried about those things. He was well dressed, a roof over his head was a small matter, and he didn't need to fear being attacked by miscreants.

Right now, at this very moment, he was standing in one of the most exalted places in the empire.

This was a place only the rich and powerful could stand, overlooking the grand lights of the Valtheron capital city.

Then why did he feel so disturbed?

He sat on the balcony railings. It was quite the fall from here, and Damon wasn't even supposed to be up this high. He just didn't want anyone to follow him, so he had teleported himself here.

His only company was a bottle of alcohol.

He sighed again.

"Whatever it is you want to tell that bottle, do share..."

He heard a soft voice behind him, the wind carrying with it the faint scent of gardenias.

He chuckled softly.

"You're late... or maybe it would be better to say you missed the banquet..."

A red-haired young woman walked up to him. She wore a long dress with a slit along with a corset. Her neck was adorned with a necklace made with an emerald-like gem that matched her green eyes. Her long hair was styled beautifully, shimmering faintly under the lights.

"Hmmm, I wouldn't say I missed it since it's still ongoing. These things usually last the whole night."

Damon took a deep breath, sucking in the night air.

Lilith leaned on the railings beside him, her emerald eyes narrowing with curiosity.

"What's got you so down? There's a room full of young nobles for you to harass, but yet here you are sulking alone. You didn't even try to steal their trinkets and blame it on whoever annoys you the most."

Damon closed his eyes.

"Well yeah... I don't feel like it."

She took a single step forward, then jumped up to sit on the railing next to him. Together they looked out over the city, fireworks blooming above the lights of a celebratory night.

"Is it Godric Ravenscroft..." she whispered.

Damon didn't say anything. He only grabbed the bottle and tried to bring it to his mouth, but failed as Lilith snatched it from his hand instead.

She raised it to her lips and drank, her boldness catching his eye. His gaze flickered as he watched her do something so unlady-like.

"No talking means no drinking."

Damon narrowed his eyes at her.

She smiled slyly.

"I wonder how much I can drink in one night... oh, and by the way, you're free to take advantage of me if I'm drunk."

Damon's eyes narrowed further.

"Is that a threat?"

She giggled, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Only if you don't talk to me. So tell me. I have all the answers... at least I hope I do."

Damon scoffed, nudging her lightly with his elbow.

"That is the least reliable thing I've ever heard."

Her eyes softened as she glanced at him.

"Hmmm, we won't know until you tell me. Or we can just linger here together and drink the night away, accomplishing nothing."

Damon turned away from her. Having her here was what he wanted anyway. Who else could he trust more than Lilith?

"I've been thinking over my life's choices... my most recent choice actually... you know."

She narrowed her eyes, then shook her head with a smile.

"What about your life's choice? You're doing what every other person is doing. Living."

"It's not that..." Damon whispered.

He glanced at the bottle in her hand, taking it back from her and taking a sip.

"Do you remember when I first let my shadow take over... and lost control?"

She nodded slowly. How could she forget that?

"Yes... you killed Lark Bonaire and left your footprint, which I found. Then you proceeded to kill the rest of his friend group while I tried to figure out who was doing it, or rather prove that you were the one."

She took the bottle and drank from it, her eyes half-lidded.

"Good times... what about it?"

Damon leaned on his arms, staring into the night sky.

"I could have made better choices back then. I could have just accepted what the system wanted instead of stubbornly denying the inevitability of my starvation."

He glanced at her again.

"I appreciate it... I appreciate that you intentionally didn't bring up the fact that my choice led me to kill Carmen Vale."

A choice which made Iris an orphan.

Lilith sighed, then turned toward him.

"We shouldn't bring up the past. You don't want to reopen old wounds or stay still long enough for them to catch up."

Damon felt frustrated with himself, his grip tightening on the bottle.

"... When I take off my crown... do you know what I see? What I hear?"

Lilith's eyes shifted toward him, quietly waiting.

"I see my shame... the voices in my head remind me of all the things I've done. My own mind knows that at my core I am... I am..."

He sighed, taking another drink.

"I can act like it's okay... but it's not. I can smile and laugh, but I hate how fake those are too..."

He let out a low chuckle.

"You wanna know what kind of man I am? Well, I'll tell you—"

Lilith pressed her hand on his lips, her emerald eyes locking onto his with a piercing glare.

"You want to know what kind of man you are? I'll tell you the kind of man you are."

Her eyes peered deeply into him, unwavering.

"You're the man that I love."

Damon's eyes widened slightly.

There was a squeeze at his chest, his heart stirred.

But she didn't stop there.

"I'll tell you about him... because I know too much."

Chapter 639: Smooth Operator

"Forgiveness sounds so grand and noble. It must be easy for someone who never had to look their parent's killer in the eye."

Lilith shook her head slowly.

"It's not."

"I hate when people who have never experienced any hardship prattle on about their false righteousness, and act like their benevolent ideals make a difference. It doesn't."

Her eyes remained fixed on him, sharp yet soft.

"The one I love isn't some noble and righteous person... but he's not completely heartless either."

Lilith had a small, distant smile on her face, her voice calm and steady.

"He can be a liar and a cheat. He's a murderer too. He's reckless and arrogant, sometimes really vain and greedy as well."

Damon took a sip of his alcohol, his brow twitching.

"Hmmm, I didn't expect this level of harshness. You're really tearing into me."

She smiled faintly, her gaze drifting to the distant city lights glittering against the night sky.

"But I think that's completely fine, because I know even if he failed at being a hero, he also failed to be a villain. He's stuck in the middle. In his heart he wishes he was a good person, but in reality he's a nightmare."

Damon grew still as she spoke, the cold night wind brushing past his hair and chilling his skin.

"That's fine. You know why?"

Her soft whisper made him frown, his grip tightening on his drink.

"Really, why is that?"

She smiled slowly, her tone tender.

"Because that makes you feel human. I don't need you to be the strongest, who has all his feelings in control. I don't need you to have all the answers. It's fine if you're lost. It's fine if you don't know. It's fine if you complain to me."

Damon didn't know what to say to her, so he just kept quiet. The alcohol in his hand suddenly didn't seem as appealing as before.

"I love you."

Her words were soft but loud enough for him to hear clearly.

He didn't respond, so she repeated herself.

"I said I love you."

Damon's lips twitched slightly. Lilith smiled at his reaction, her heart fluttering.

"I also know that he's somewhat emotionally stunted. He doesn't really know how to believe anyone can love him unconditionally. But I do. The same way you love Luna unconditionally, the same way you treasure Iris."

He narrowed his eyes.

"Like a brother then?"

Lilith took a deep breath, her chest rising before she answered.

"No, a little different. Like I want to have a family and lots of children, type of love."

Damon glanced down at his hands, his expression unreadable.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

Lilith shrugged, her gaze softening.

"It's not alright that you have so much self-hate. I just wanted you to know that no matter how much you hate yourself for what you can't change, I will love you more."

He chuckled softly, his expression impassive even as his heart grew still.

"Huh, I see. And is that a reason enough to lie to a friend? Does that excuse my actions? It doesn't."

Lilith gazed at the stars above them.

"Even the gods have hidden a lie, but the world still moves, still remains beautiful. Maybe their lie is hideous, that's why they hid it away."

Damon bit his lip. He could hardly call the world beautiful, It wasn't.

"Knowing is always better than not knowing."

Lilith shook her head.

"It's not. Lies can be kind, and truths can be cruel."

"Xander lives with an ideal of his brother, a noble hero, an icon he adores. But you live with the truth, that he was just a vain fool who killed your parents and was too scared to move on with his life because he knew the truth would catch up to him."

Damon narrowed his eyes, his voice low.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

She stood up, her feet lightly pressing on the balcony railing as she balanced gracefully.

"Truths are cruel and lies are kind. Godric Ravenscroft was a terrible human being and his sins caught up to him. But Xander has done nothing wrong. Your actions have prevented what could have been the most dire civil war in Valtheron's history."

He chuckled with a self-deprecating smile.

"And that makes me just...."

"No. That makes you human. The fact that you don't want to lie to a friend makes you a good friend. But would a good friend not be strong enough to forgive? Not forgiving made you a good son."

She shook her head, her hair swaying lightly in the night wind.

"You could only be one. You've played the role of a son well. Now you must play other roles as well."

Damon chuckled bitterly. This woman.

"You are a deeply deplorable person. But then again, how can someone who could love me be anything less than selfish?"

He stood up, a thin smile tugging at his lips.

"You've only talked in circles, but this feels like seeing a mental health quarter master."

"At least it was free."

With all his strength, he flung the bottle of alcohol into the night sky, the glass spinning before shattering out of sight.

"I've decided. I'll keep being the bad guy. You were wrong about something, though, when you said I can either be a good son or a good friend."

He raised his hand, his voice heavy with resolve.

"I'm neither. But I can be both."

Gritting his teeth, he smiled, a dark glow flickering in his eyes.

"I already decided I was going to be the bad guy. If I went back in time, I would have still done the same thing."

He glanced at her with a thin smile.

"There's no reason why we can't both get what we want."

She narrowed her eyes, her body stiffening slightly.

"What are you planning?"

He raised his hand with a dismissive wave.

"I don't know. I'll figure it out as I go, one step at a time. Starting with the war games."

His seed of depravity grew feeding on his inner darkness...

Yes this was something demonic.

It was these small changes, these tiny acts, that accumulated into depravity.

Lilith smiled faintly, taking a deep breath before letting out a sigh of relief. At least his mood seemed better.

"I figured you would say that. Anything but acknowledge my feelings, huh?"

Damon smiled at her. Before he could say anything, she waved her hand, bringing out three small vials of potion.

"Here. These are Soul Blaze potions, and the reason I was late."

Biting her lips slightly, she hesitated before explaining.

"They have the ability to temporarily nullify any damage to a soul, so you can fight at full power with this three times. But only three, and they only last for a short time."

Damon took the vials carefully, turning them in his hands.

"Where did you get this?"

Lilith crossed her arms with a small frown.

"Well, I spent the whole night begging my grandmother for them, only to give them to a guy who ignores a girl who says 'I love you'."

Damon scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"Ouch, my eye...." He pressed a finger against it. "Hey, help me out. I think something got in my eye."

Lilith didn't see anything, but she was worried, so she leaned closer to help him blow whatever it was out.

"Hold on, let me see."

She moved her lips worriedly, and as soon as she did, he tilted his head slightly, brushing his lips against hers.

He kissed her lips until she felt her face begin to heat up.

Her eyes widened slightly as Damon pulled back, then smiled.

Wrapping his hands around her waist, he glanced at her.

"This banquet is kind of lame. Wanna go on a street food date?"

Her face turned slightly redder, her expression stunned. She nodded absentmindedly, still processing what just happened.

Damon took her hand and jumped down the balcony with her, both of them falling into the shadows.

In that one moment, he suddenly felt ridiculous for letting something like this bother him.

He did not regret killing Godric. He was ready to live with this lie for as long as he needed to.

So what if a faceless avatar of himself was the villain.

You could call it a lie... but Damon called it mercy.

The shadows hid things that should not see the light.

#### Chapter 640: Shadow And War

He found himself walking down the busy streets of Valerion. He moved absentmindedly through the crowded road, the streets heavily decorated with banners and flags. Confetti rained down from airships floating high in the sky.

Children carried toy swords and small banners, laughing as they played together, their excitement clear for the war games tomorrow.

Warriors and adventurers strolled proudly through the streets, weapons gleaming under the sunlight and armor polished to a shine.

Knights patrolled with rigid discipline, security tighter than usual. Each wore their finest armor, their presence a reminder of the grand scale of the upcoming event.

'Hmmm, Valerion really is a beautiful city... how did I not notice its beauty all these years?' Damon thought to himself.

As a child, times of celebration like this had mostly been an opportunity for him to steal.

A sharp throb pierced his head. He rubbed at his temple, remembering his short visit to the academy earlier, where they cleared his name after he had killed Professor Chrome.

Renata had stayed back to act as his public face and build what Damon liked to call a "good positive relationship" with his fellow students.

Lilith was gone. It turned out that getting those potions from her grandmother came with a price doing the old woman's bidding for a day. But Damon knew better. She was just spending the day with her grandmother.

His sister and Iris had shown up in the morning, sweet-talking him into handing over his magic money card before disappearing. Of course, he didn't forget to send his shadow to follow them.

That left Matia, who had received summons from her father but flat-out ignored them.

"At least he didn't overreact." Damon muttered to himself.

Matia had joined Renata, acting as backup while they peacefully spread the good name of Damon Grey among the students of Aether Academy.

That was why Damon was all alone, wandering the streets of Valerion.

It was a strange sight indeed, since he could barely remember the last time he was by himself.

He pulled out his pager.

"Should I call Carls? I haven't talked much with him since I came back from Lysithara."

The last time he had seen the shady-looking young man was shortly after his return, when Carls dropped by to welcome him back.

The pager buzzed lightly in his hand. Damon opened it to see the familiar name of Xander Ravenscroft flashing across the screen. He tossed it back into his pocket.

"Later..."

Xander had sent him an address, a place where they would meet later that night to talk.

Damon sighed, his lips twisting.

"That bastard is getting annoying."

The festive atmosphere meant little to him. He had already roamed these same streets with Lilith the night before, so there wasn't anything new he wanted to do.

He could have picked a fight with someone from the underworld... ermh... just because. But his body was still recovering, and he knew he wasn't in the best condition for that.

"No friends and no one to kill. What am I supposed to do with my life? Someone please try to kill me before boredom does..."

He slumped slightly, dragging his feet along the cobblestone road.

"That's a very lackluster way to live."

Damon froze. A voice spoke behind him, belonging to a presence he hadn't even sensed.

"Shoo... go away. I have money, I just won't give it."

The woman who had spoken let out a soft sigh.

"I don't need your money."

Damon turned his head slowly, suspicion written all over his face.

"Then why are you bothering me? Beat it."

He paused when he saw her. A faint distortion shimmered around the woman, as though she used an artifact to bend public attention away from herself.

She had ashen-grey hair streaked with red, her locks flowing loose in the wind. Her eyes were white so pale they almost looked blind but the light in them betrayed vision sharper than most.

And there was a faint scent clinging to her, one that could not be hidden.

Damon's expression shifted. He almost instantly recognized her. He had done his research.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Wait... you're—"

She smiled, her expression brimming with self-importance.

"Ahh, right. You've heard of me. Of course you have."

Damon narrowed his eyes further, his voice sharp.

"Who the hell are you... and what's with that tacky hairstyle?"

The woman froze. She blinked rapidly, struggling to process his words.

"Huh... wa... wait, what... you... don't... recognize me?"

Damon rolled his eyes, shaking his head. His long hair swayed as he moved.

"No. Oh no... I recognize you. I just didn't want to give you the satisfaction of thinking I gave a damn. No hard feelings."

"Ah... erm..." she opened her mouth and closed it, her hands twitching awkwardly.

"Wha... excuse... I... you know who I am but still say that... fine then, tell me who you think I am."

Damon sighed, a dull headache pressing into his skull. He never imagined she would have such an eccentric personality.

Meeting idols and heroes in real life was such a disappointment.

"Hair like ash with streaks of red. They say the ash and blood of the battlefield clung to her... the peerless prodigy."

He chuckled dryly.

"Though if you ask me... you kind of reek of blood. You stink of the stuff."

He slipped his hands into his pockets and tilted his head casually, a small stride carrying him closer.

"You're Seras Blade."

She glanced around before smiling, then chuckled lightly.

"My, my... I didn't expect to meet you here. When I saw you from afar, I got curious. But you're more arrogant than I thought."

Damon smiled back, giving her a playful bow.

"Guilty as charged. So, to what do I owe the pleasure? I don't have anything to do, so I don't mind the company of a beautiful woman as I roam the streets of Valerion."

She blinked, then pointed to herself in disbelief.

"Do you realize who you're talking to?"

Damon shrugged.

"What, you wanna come or not? Trust me, I'm being pretty polite right now."

Seras smiled, then suddenly burst into laughter.

"Are you crazy? I can kill you with a single swipe of my finger."

Before Damon could react, a breeze brushed against his skin she was standing right in front of him, her finger pressed against his chest. Her white eyes turned icy cold.

"You wanna die?"

Damon smiled, his dark eyes meeting hers without fear.

"I do. As a matter of fact, I would appreciate it if you did."

A suffocating pressure pressed down on him, making his bones feel stiff. Yet he raised his hand slowly and touched her finger, gripping it and holding it firmly.

"I heard you've never got a man. I can see why..."

He tugged at her hand, pulling her along as if dismissing the threat.

"Come on. I know a good street stall. Think of it as a little thanks for the golden ticket."

Her eyes widened as she let herself be pulled into the crowd by the nonchalant young man who showed her no reverence despite her fame.

She smiled faintly, watching him as he led her away.

"You aren't afraid of me, are you?" she muttered.

He didn't look back.

"I've seen worse.... Trust me this world has far uglier women."