

## **Shadow 831**

### Chapter 831: Chain Brand

Damon's eyes flickered when he heard the word brand. He went slightly on guard the moment the branding seal came into view.

His gaze swept over the gate, the overall number of guards stationed there, then returned to the small seal in their hands.

It was a magical artifact.

He activated Appraisal, and sure enough, the system confirmed it as an artifact specifically designed for branding.

However, the brand itself was not as insidious as he had initially imagined.

What it did was simple.

The brand placed at the gate was etched into the soul at least partially. Anyone with halfway decent soul protection could resist it.

Damon had a powerful soul.

What the brand primarily recorded was location. In function, it worked much like Ghost's skill, capable of tracking a target. Of course, with the city's massive population, finding any single individual was far easier said than done.

Another function quickly caught his attention.

It monitored kill count.

'Hmm... is there a reason they'd want to know our kill count?'

There was.

Kill count was an accurate indicator of combat strength, but more importantly—

Mana cores.

'They want to know how many mana cores we earn.'

There were other auxiliary functions, but Damon's attention remained fixed on the branding seal.

It could automatically activate punishments for supposed rule breakers.

Common effects included, Mana bleed when resisting orders. Pain feedback when lying. Paralysis when fleeing designated zones.

Damon saw no reason to refuse the brand.

It was easy to deal with. One or two neutral runes would be enough to suppress it. And if that failed—

There were always more... permanent options.

Cutting off the limb. Removing the branded flesh entirely.

The two guards smiled at Matia with sinister intent.

One of them subtly shifted his grip on his weapon, a crescent-shaped blade. A khopesh, clearly meant as a deterrent if she tried anything.

Matia glanced at Damon, silently waiting for the order to kill them.

Instead, he shook his head once. Calm. And logical.

Not now.

If she wanted to kill them, she could do it later.

Her cold blue eyes returned to the guards.

Damon watched as she lifted her arms and removed her gauntlets, exposing her palms.

'Well... that explains how they knew we were outsiders.'

They didn't have these brands.

The seal was pressed to Matia's wrist.

A faint glow pulsed, and a small chain-shaped mark etched itself into her skin.

"Heheh," one guard sneered.

"Try to tamper with your mark and your soul gets destroyed. And if you survive that, we'll kill you ourselves."

They strode past her, then stopped in front of Lyn and Sithara, eyes narrowing.

"So young, already first class?" the khopesh-wielding guard said mockingly.

"Looks like we've got a couple of geniuses in our presence..."

His smile twisted.

"Good. Geniuses die here. You aren't special."

Sithara trembled slightly at his words. Her fingers clenched, but when she saw Damon and Lazarak standing completely unmoved, her fear steadied and faded.

She extended her palms.

The brand pressed down, glowing as its magic brushed against her soul.

Then Lyn.

He was branded without incident.

Finally, they stopped in front of Lazarak.

The guard looked him up and down with open disgust.

"Hmm... is this a baby or one of those halflings I've heard about?"

He snorted.

"This one's gonna end up eaten in a day."

Lazarak smiled, utterly unbothered.

He had grown slightly since they'd left, but he was still small, too small to be taken seriously.

He raised his hand.

The guard lazily pressed the branding seal against Lazarak's skin.

Nothing happened.

The guard blinked.

He pressed harder.

Still nothing.

He pulled the seal back, staring at Lazarak's unmarked skin.

"What's taking so long?" Lazarak asked, voice light, eyes glinting playfully.

Damon rolled his eyes at the performance.

The khopesh-wielding guard narrowed his eyes.

"What are you doing? Brand him."

"I am," the other guard said, panic creeping into his voice.

"It's not working."

The khopesh-wielder snatched the seal.

"Give me that."

He glared at it, then at Lazarak.

"These brands are made by our great god Seraph Null. They carry his almighty power. How can they not work?"

He pressed the seal against Lazarak's forehead and held it there for several seconds.

Then lifted it.

Nothing.

Sweat beaded along his brow.

He tried again. And again.

Then he stopped, leaning in close to whisper to his partner.

"This is bad... if it doesn't work, we might get taken away..."

He swallowed.

"Look... we might have to kill this one."

The moment the words left his mouth, Lazarak lifted his sleeve quickly.

"Sir! I think there's no need," he said innocently.

"Look, the brand appeared. I'm a slow learner... this happens a lot. No need to resort to violence."

The guards stared.

A faint chain-shaped brand now rested on Lazarak's skin.

They glanced at each other.

"It looks real enough..."

The first guard slapped the other on the back of the head.

"Of course it looks real enough. It is the real deal."

Damon glanced at Lazarak and rolled his eyes.

It was obvious.

Lazarak had created his own brand.

How could the power of Seraph Null, a mere lesser god, affect a minor god?

Without further delay, the guards turned toward Damon.

As they approached, the cold, abyssal look in his dark eyes made them hesitate.

The first guard swallowed hard without realizing it.

He had no idea what was wrong with this one, but he was terrifying.

Damon slowly lifted his hand.

He could bypass the brand later.

Good thing they didn't seem to care about the demon beast or what it carried. Demons didn't exist yet, so they likely assumed it was just a tamed monster.

The brand pressed into Damon's skin with a sharp sizzle.

The moment it touched him, something reached into his soul.

But before it could sink deeper—

His Heart of Shadow released a short, violent pulse.

The crown on his head vibrated.

The mark flickered... then faded slightly.

The guard frowned and pressed the seal down again.

This time, Damon suppressed his mana and shadow energy.

He let it happen.

The brand finally settled, a faint chain glowing weakly on his skin.

The guards nodded in satisfaction and walked away, pocketing the seal.

The mark on Damon's hand already looked unstable, slowly fading.

He turned around.

The branding seal rested in his palm.

A thin smile curved his lips.

"Well... good thing I pickpocketed it."

Chapter 832: Prison City

Yari was a large city with a massive population, most of whom were effectively imprisoned in this world.

By its very nature, Yari was a prison, and Seraph Null, this world's god, was its warden.

Perhaps that was why the entire city was chained down with massive chains, as if sealing away some great, unfathomable evil.

Damon observed the city with open disgust.

Filth caked the streets. Waste pooled in the cracks of the ground. Gutters overflowed with foul liquid that reeked of rot. Beggars lined the roads, horribly emaciated people barely clinging to life. Somewhere nearby, the copper stench of blood hung thick in the air, accompanied by the wet sound of someone bleeding out in a narrow alley.

Lyn walked beside Damon, his voice low.

"Yari is segregated into several parts."

He swallowed before continuing.

"Yari is built in layers, not districts. Each layer exists to isolate behavior and enforce hierarchy. It is made for obedience. Defaulters are eliminated."

Damon glanced at him coolly.

"You know a lot."

Sithara nodded from behind them, her expression faintly sad.

"Our father gathered information on it. When... before he was tracked down and sent to Eidolon."

That was news to Damon. He had assumed their father had always been imprisoned there. Instead, he had been caught and then thrown into that hell.

Lyn raised his hand and counted on his fingers.

"The Outer Ring, also called the Grinding Gate, has massive walls. Always open, but watched by countless eyes."

He paused, frowning slightly.

"Entry requires branding. The brand is not just identification. It is a magical limiter. Most newcomers never leave this ring."

He continued after a breath.

"It functions as markets, slums, recruitment pits for the gladiator arena, mana core exchange, public punishments, and more. I am not sure of everything."

"You mean prostitution," Damon said, glancing toward a naked woman sitting in a second floor window, casually smoking from a pipe.

Lyn's face flushed slightly before he nodded.

Lazarak chuckled at the boy's embarrassed reaction.

"It is a given. In a place like this, prostitution was one of the earliest systems mortals invented during hardship. It was effective. One party gives service, the other pays."

Damon closed his eyes as they continued walking.

"That is disgusting."

Lazarak gazed around him calmly.

"This place is filled with the poor and the desperate, all hoping for a miracle. It is a perfect breeding ground for religion."

"I imagine the Grinding Gate is not the only place with rules," Damon said.

Sithara continued where her brother left off.

"The Lower City comes next. Also called the Chained Districts. It is separated by barrier walls that shift daily. Each district specializes in a function. Labor, Crafting, Training and Extraction."

She stepped around a dark stain on the ground and passed through a drifting cloud of smoke that smelled unmistakably of a corpse.

"People are not allowed to live where they work. The barriers lower at fixed intervals to allow workers from the Grinding Gate in and out. This is also where the Chained Knights are trained, and where the gladiator arena is located."

She lifted her hand slightly.

"Movement requires chain clearance. Which is done through branding."

Her fingers brushed the brand on her wrist.

"The chains here are heavier. Longer and invisible. People do not ask why anymore. They have forgotten what freedom tastes like. Generations have been born as prisoners, so they mistake the bondage for life itself."

She pointed farther into the city.

"That is the Middle Tier. The Branded Elite. This is where the original races live. The natural denizens of this realm."

"Nobles, Officers and Overseers," she continued. "They have better housing. Cleaner streets. Still chained, but decoratively. They carry them with pride as a symbol of their god, Seraph Null."

"Their chains are enchanted," Lazarak added, his expression darkening. "They enhance strength, suppress rebellion, and enforce obedience."

Damon gave him a sideways glance.

"What."

Lazarak shrugged lightly.

"I happen to know Seraph Null on a personal level."

Lyn's eyes sparked with awe at that statement.

"There are also outsiders there," he added quickly. "Those with great power are invited to live among the chained. It gives people hope. They believe those outsiders are free."

He hesitated.

"They are the most loyal."

This was where Damon's cult would quietly grow. Despair thrived behind comfort. He already had plans.

His gaze shifted toward the distant tower.

'Come to think of it, Lysithara also had a high tower at its center. Was that inspired by this place?'

Sithara continued, unaware of his thoughts.

"The High Bastions. The Wardens' Domain. Completely restricted. Only chain bearers of rank may enter. Seraph Null's influence bleeds strongest there. The king of the natives lives there, and almost no outsiders are allowed."

Lazarak smiled faintly as she reached the last part.

"The Black Spire. No windows are visible or doors. The heart of Yari. Where chains are forged. Where brands are written into souls. Where Seraph Null resides, or manifests."

He raised his hand slowly, pointing toward it.

"The spire is not a building. It is an anchor. A divine nail pinning this world in place. The gate of our escape is there, as well as the elixir you seek."

He turned to Damon.

"If we want to leave, we must go through that."

Damon crossed his arms, completely unbothered by the looming threat of the tower.

"I will leave if I want. As long as there is a road to follow, I dare to walk it."

He paused suddenly.

His stomach growled.

At the same time, his mana dipped sharply, siphoned away in a slow, bleeding pulse.

"Hmm."

He crouched and pressed his fingers to the ground.

"I see. This is how the city maintains order."

He looked back toward the Black Spire.

"We are at the center of a mana anomaly. The cause is the spire itself. It absorbs mana and induces hunger. Outsiders cannot absorb ambient mana here, so we are forced to rely on mana cores to survive."

A thin smile spread across his face.

"How insidious."

He stared at the tower.

"Hunger is a horrible thing."

"And such a beautiful weapon for control."

Chapter 833: Broker

His admiration for Seraph Null's cruelty aside, they still needed a place to rest and a base of operations.

"Normally, if this were Aetherus, an inn would suffice."

Still, he turned his head, scanning the streets. There had to be some place offering lodging. His stomach grumbled softly.

Then a louder rumble followed.

He paused. That one was not his.

He turned slightly and caught Sithara raising her eyebrows, eyes wide in embarrassment.

Her face reddened until it was almost crimson.

"I... I..." She lowered her head, muttering, "Just... hungry..."

Damon smiled faintly.

"Suppose the neatest place to gather information would be a tavern."

Lazarak nodded in agreement.

"Let us ask the locals here for directions."

Damon shook his head.

"They would eat you alive in a place like this. We already have eyes on us. The idea is to—"

He reached out suddenly, shadows surging from the walls, grabbing a man from a nearby alley by the neck and slamming him against the wall.

"And ask them for directions."

Damon turned to the man and released his Omen of Dread.

The man's legs went weak. Before he could even scream, he soiled himself.

Damon grimaced briefly, then reshaped the shadows around the man into jagged spikes that hovered inches from his skin.

"Which way to the nicest place I can get a meal. Lie and you die."

The man gulped.

He had not even done anything yet. He had merely been following them, like everyone else. At most, he would have demanded mana cores for directions or robbed them if they were weak.

Business as usual.

Who knew he had provoked a fiend.

With trembling fingers, he pointed.

"That way. Several turns to the left. The Nude Virgin is the place."

Damon nodded.

The shadows pulled inward with a sickening crunch, devouring flesh and blood alike.

A low system chime echoed.

[You have slain Kiea]

His hunger eased slightly.

"I already told you. If you lie, you die."

Damon turned his head to the other side.

A second man, hidden within the shadows, was dragged forward as the darkness solidified around him like a shroud, hauling him toward Damon.

"You have the same condition. Lie and you die."

Damon sang the words lightly.

The man broke instantly, spilling everything he knew without hesitation. When he finished, Damon tossed him aside, letting him collapse onto the street.

Sithara followed close behind Damon. Then she reached out and held his hand.

Damon frowned down at her, but she did not seem bothered in the slightest.

"How did you know the first guy was lying?"

Damon knew, of course. He had lived that life.

"I grew up on streets like this. I know how lowlives act. After all, I was one."

Sithara smiled up at him.

"I don't think you're a lowlife. You're our king."

Damon smiled and shook his head, saying nothing.

"Great, I'm a king without a kingdom." he finally added.

The tavern called the Nude Virgin stood on a busy street. It was cleaner than the areas they had passed through, but only marginally so.

As soon as Damon entered, eyes turned toward him. Everyone pretended not to stare.

His expensive armor was a dead giveaway, but both he and Matia carried enough menace to discourage sudden greed.

He scanned the room before his gaze settled on a lone man sitting in a corner.

Damon took a seat across from him. Sithara and her brother followed, sitting beside him, with Lazarak taking a seat shortly after.

Damon gestured to one of the servers, a large man missing an arm.

"A drink for my friend here."

The man sitting alone smiled.

"What do you want, friend?"

Damon's expression remained calm.

"What's your going rate?"

The man shrugged.

"Depends. What are you asking?"

Lyn and Sithara did not understand what was happening. Lazarak, however, had some idea.

This man was an information broker.

How Damon knew was unclear even to Lazarak.

"For now," Damon said, "tell me how the guards operate."

"Heheh."

The man took a sip of the drink the server brought.

Lyn followed suit, took a taste of the alcohol, and nearly choked from the bitter burn.

Sithara reached for her drink, but Damon quietly took it away. After a moment of hesitation, he reached into his shadow storage and pulled out a cup of tamberly juice, setting it in front of her.

She pouted visibly.

"That'll be three rank three cores," the man said. "Nothing much, since you're new in town."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"Three rank one cores. You'll take it. This is public knowledge."

"Two rank, two cores," the man countered.

Damon crossed his arms.

"One rank, one core. Shall I go lower?"

The man smiled.

"You drive a hard bargain, friend."

He leaned closer, lowering his voice. The smell of burned herbs lingered on his breath.

"The power hierarchy of Yari is complicated. But broken down, it's simple."

Damon nodded slowly.

"Go ahead."

The man opened his palms expectantly.

Damon glanced at Sithara. She reached into her pouch and handed over a rank one core.

The man smiled, voice low.

"The Chain knights are above the gate guards. Elite guards with fanatical devotion, Chosen for loyalty, not talent."

He covered his mouth slightly.

"The Archivists are the record keepers. Espionage. Information gathering. They record sins, crimes, defiance levels. They decide punishments after the fact. Bastards are the eyes and ears of Yari."

His voice dropped further.

"You never see them. But they see you."

The broker looked more afraid of them than anything else. Damon glanced briefly at his brand. That was likely how they gathered information.

"Next are the Wardens. High enforcers with semi divine authority. They live in the deepest layers. The king of the chained people is one of them."

He swallowed.

"And lastly, Seraph Null himself. Ruler of the realm. Resident of the Black Spire."

Damon nodded.

He slowly pulled out a rank three core. It was large, glowing softly with dense energy.

"Tell me something interesting, and I'll make it worth your while."

His smile sharpened.

"If it's boring, you die."

He leaned forward slightly.

"Do you accept?"

Chapter 834: Cult

Buying information was key in dealing with lawless places where power and authority didn't interfere, only acting to contain the lawlessness.

Crime was an institution of its own, Damon learned that in his early days in Valtheron.

Put simply, this was how the knights of Valtheron acted. They kept order where they needed to, but they didn't give a damn about the darker areas of Valerion.

That was why local gangs created their own laws but made sure not to step on some toes.

The Valtheron Empire functioned the same way, so Damon understood how places like this operated, the unspoken rules of engagement.

All of that for one rank three core was quite a steal.

Cores were valuable here. These people didn't have a concept of currency. Maybe banking hadn't been invented yet. This was, after all, the zero epoch. The world was still young.

"Hehehe... this is the place," the thin information broker said, slowing his steps as he led Damon and his party into a secluded corner of the Grinding Gate.

Damon stopped beside him, his gaze dropping to the manhole at their feet. He nodded once, then looked back up at the broker with a faint smile.

"And no one but you knows this place?"

"Yes... only me," the broker replied quickly, rubbing his hands together.

"It's unlivable. A monster burrowed through the ground and made a nest here. The Chainbearers won't deal with it, so it was forgotten. Anyone who can afford to leaves the Grinding Gate."

Damon tilted his head slightly. The explanation fits too well to be a lie.

"So this place was abandoned," he murmured.

"Good."

He lifted his hand casually and brought it down.

The broker crumpled before he could even gasp, his body hitting the ground with a dull thud.

"Now no one knows."

Damon glanced at Lazarak, a thin smile tugging at his lips.

"Any update on the seal?"

Lazarak smiled playfully, turning the branding seal over in his hands as if it were a toy.

"I already cracked it and made it mine. Seraph Null could never compare to me in magic, or anything, really."

He walked toward Lyn and Sithara, his expression softening slightly as he raised the seal.

With a single, deliberate press, he overlaid their original brands.

The old markings faded instantly, replaced by dark chain sigils identical in form but wholly different in essence. The power within them was no longer Seraph Null's.

It was Lazarak's.

As the brands settled, Lazarak's aura swelled faintly, rippling outward before stabilizing.

He smiled.

"This is also a good way to gain followers."

He turned back to the broker and slapped him awake.

The man jolted violently, scrambling backward on instinct, but Damon's hand closed around his collar, hauling him upright.

"Calm down," Damon said evenly. "We want to invite you into something great."

The broker froze, trembling slightly under Damon's gaze.

Without breaking eye contact, Damon reached into his shadow storage and produced a rank four mana core.

The moment the broker saw it, his breathing steadied.

His instincts screamed profit.

Damon gestured to the fading brand on the man's neck. Lazarak stepped in and pressed the altered seal down.

A sharp sizzle echoed as the new mark burned itself into place.

Damon cleared his throat and gestured toward Lazarak.

"This is the great god of darkness, Lazarak. He has come to save the lost souls of this land from the vile and wicked Seraph Null. You have been chosen as one of his guided."

The broker stopped breathing for a moment.

He looked at Lazarak, then shakily touched his neck where the old brand had vanished.

"A... god?"

"Yes," Damon whispered slowly, almost insidiously.

"One higher-ranked than Seraph Null."

His gaze swept over the man's emaciated frame, jutting bones, hollow eyes, a body worn down by survival.

"We extend to you an offer to join us in worship and expand the gospel."

The man hesitated.

The brand was gone, but the incentive still wavered.

Damon continued calmly.

"You will never go hungry again. You will no longer fear the Wardens who watch your every move. We give you freedom under the great god Lazarak."

Lazarak blinked, momentarily taken aback by Damon's words, then said nothing. If he wanted to regain his power, this was how it began.

The man's eyes trembled.

"And if I say no?"

Damon smiled.

"Then we kill you."

The man smiled instantly.

"All hail our great god Lazarak."

And just like that, the cult was born.

Its first follower was claimed, carrot and stick in equal measure.

Lazarak beamed, excitement rippling through him as his aura swelled again, faint but growing.

Damon nodded.

"Good. Come with us. You'll act in our stead from now on."

He turned to Lazarak with a slight frown.

"I doubt one seal will be enough to brand millions."

Lazarak laughed, almost bouncing on his feet.

"Don't worry. With help from Lyn and Sithara, I can mass-produce them."

"Us?" Lyn asked, startled. "I mean... we'd be glad to help."

The broker wiped cold sweat from his brow.

What kind of trouble had he gotten himself into?

His eyes drifted to the gleaming rank four core.

With this, he could eat well for a year. Maybe even buy his way into the Inner City.

And they had handed it to him without hesitation.

'Who are these people?'

Each of them felt dangerous and powerful

They descended into the darkness, moving deeper beneath the city.

A low growl echoed through the tunnel.

The broker stiffened, his hair standing on end.

"The monster... it's here..."

"What rotten luck," he muttered.

"What good fortune," Damon replied from ahead.

"So this is the monster that lurks here."

He snapped his fingers.

"Matia. Kill it."

The broker barely had time to react.

Cold flooded the air.

Then blood splattered across the stone.

His eyes widened as they adjusted to the darkness.

The monster that had haunted the underground for years lay dead.

Just like that.

He swallowed hard.

"Who... who are these people?"

Chapter 835: New Order In The Cracks

As the old saying goes, if you can't beat them, join them.

Damon understood that at the moment he could not take Seraph Null in terms of faith not with the amount of time and followers available to him.

So instead, he would take something else.

The foundation of his plan was simple.

He would take governance.

It took a great deal to rule a city, but you could never control every part of it. There were things you had to abandon not because you wanted to, but because you had no choice.

Like most rulers, Seraph Null abandoned the shadows.

The criminal underworld.

Where there was poverty and hardship, despair, fear, and helplessness bred two things. One was crime.

The other was religion.

What better breeding ground than the Grinding Gate?

And that was exactly what Damon was cultivating.

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A man walked through the night beneath a low hood, his steps light and deliberate. When he slipped into an alley corner, he stopped.

He was so thoroughly blended with the darkness that he was almost invisible, as if the shadows recognized him, as if the night itself acknowledged his presence.

Another man emerged from the opposite end of the alley.

Unlike the first, he made no effort to hide. Even in the darkness, his outline remained visible.

He leaned against the same wall, the distant cries of nocturnal creatures echoing faintly around them.

"Are the rumors true?" the second man asked, his voice steady despite the setting. "Is there really a way to bypass the brands?"

The man in the shadows was silent for a moment.

"That depends," he replied at last. "Are you interested?"

The second man scoffed, a flicker of disdain crossing his face.

"As if that's possible. And even if it is, you'd provoke the Archivists. I wouldn't want to be in their sights, now or ever."

"Heheh."

The man in the shadows chuckled softly.

"Yet here you are," he said. "Looking for little old me to verify your information."

The second man clicked his tongue, rubbing his hands together to ward off the bone-chilling desert cold.

"Fine," he muttered. "I'm interested. The guys up north want laxer surveillance for their operations. Smuggling food and mana cores. You know the usual."

The first man inclined his head slightly.

"Say no more. With our network and power, they can do whatever they want. Of course," he added calmly, "you'll give me a bit of information in return."

He paused.

"The location of the Black Crows' leader."

The second man hesitated, jaw tightening, then slowly nodded.

"Not that you'll do much with it. Even knowing where he is, I'd advise staying the hell away. He's not the most powerful man in the Grinding Gate for no reason."

The man in the shadows shrugged.

"I'll take my chances."

He produced a branding seal.

The moment it appeared, the second man stiffened, eyes widening.

"That's... a branding seal," he said slowly. "The Chainbearers have been cracking down hard. One went missing a few days ago. Word is they found it on some no-name thief in the Gray Chain sector."

"Heheh."

The first man laughed, the sound thick with smug satisfaction.

"Let's just say you have nothing to worry about. This one belongs to my organization. Everything's been arranged."

He stepped forward and pressed the seal into place.

The second man gasped sharply as the heat bit into his skin.

"Take this to the ones who sent you," the first man said calmly. "With it, you can remove your brands. The new ones are fakes, prepared by our god of darkness and our great lord of shadows."

He tilted his head slightly, a thin, almost predatory smile forming.

"Keeping this is dangerous. But if you join us, you get food, mana cores, and protection."

As the rebranding completed, the second man glanced down at his wrist.

The old brand was gone.

A new power pulsed beneath his skin.

'They really do have a god...'

The man in the shadows chuckled and pressed the branding seal into his hand.

"Keep it. There's plenty more where that came from. Work with us, and you'll be part of the new rulers of Yari."

Cold sweat trickled down the second man's temple.

"And if I refuse?"

The first man took a single step back.

The shadows behind him stirred.

A figure formed entirely black, featureless, its eyes cold and empty. It surged forward and seized the second man by the throat.

"I—I'll join!" he gasped.

The shadow vanished instantly.

He collapsed to the ground, coughing violently, clutching his neck.

When he finally stood, hands trembling, he pulled a folded piece of paper from his coat and handed it over.

"That's the Black Crows' base. All their strongest fighters are there. Your guy's strong, sure, but that's a lot of veterans. They could've moved deeper into the city, but they chose to stay here."

He swallowed.

"Better to be the head of a snake than the tail of a dragon."

The first man nodded, pulling his hood lower.

"Good. That makes it worth our time."

He glanced back at the second man.

"I'm telling you this for old times' sake. Don't cross the cult."

"You'll die terribly."

He turned away.

"That brand doubles as a communicator. You'll receive directives through it. Good luck."

Within seconds, he was gone, swallowed by the night.

The remaining man stared down at the brand in his hand, unaware of the deep, inky shadows pooling at his feet.

His heart thundered in his chest.

It was an open secret in the Grinding Gate now.

A new organization was moving.

At first, people thought it was just another criminal group. No one cared, except the gang bosses and crime families.

Then those families changed overnight.

Only the best hiders remained.

And the Black Crows.

Most disturbing of all was that the Chainbearers and even the Archivists knew nothing.

Everything happened in silence.

In shadow.

As if masters of darkness had arrived and begun to claim the city.

"At least there's more food going around," he muttered.

Then a voice echoed inside his head.

"Gatel Ambrose... behold. I am god."

His eyes widened.

The brand burned faintly as the words settled into his mind.

Chapter 836: Finesse

In a luxurious underground chamber directly beneath the city, Damon sat cross-legged atop thick carpets, holding a man's heart in one hand. His expression was irritated, brow faintly furrowed.

"Ahhh... ahh"

He flicked his wrist and tossed the heart toward Lazarak with an annoyed scowl.

"I still don't get it. I can't stand this shit. How is modifying a soul so hard?"

The exasperation in his voice almost made Lazarak laugh. Instead, he merely smiled.

"It takes a great deal of finesse to modify a soul," Lazarak replied calmly. "I assume you weren't the one who modified Matia's soul."

Damon leaned back, letting himself sink into the soft carpets beneath him.

"No," he said flatly. "I had help from a true god. No wonder she's so perfect."

Lazarak glanced at Matia.

She subconsciously lowered her head, clearly flustered despite trying not to show it.

"What about Ghost?" Lazarak asked, curiosity flickering in his eyes.

Damon exhaled slowly, rubbing his temple as a dull headache crept in.

"My arm got ripped off, so Matia created him. As for the conditions..." He paused, annoyed. "Apparently she just did it. Said it 'came to her.'"

Matia bowed her head slightly.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I really can't recreate those conditions as I am now. Perhaps if I reached the fourth or fifth class..."

Hearing her voice, Damon shook his head.

"It's fine," he said firmly. "No need to trouble yourself over it."

Lazarak turned away, his attention shifting to Lyn and Sithara as they carefully etched glowing magic seals around the massive cocoon taken from Eidolon.

"What are you doing with that thing anyway?" Damon asked, glancing toward it. "You made us haul it all the way from Eidolon's lowest depths."

He had a point.

As far as Damon knew, the thing was a calamity waiting to happen, a creature-race that devoured endlessly and birthed offspring in response, forming hive-minded swarms whose forms depended on what they consumed. A species with a history of nearly destroying everything before the lesser gods intervened.

Lazarak sighed deeply, a heavy frown forming.

"I'm trying to hatch it."

Damon raised an eyebrow, wincing slightly.

"And I'm the crazy one."

Lazarak shook his head.

"That's not the crazy part."

He met Damon's gaze directly.

"The crazy part is figuring out how to turn this thing into your shadow. Otherwise, even if we hatch it, we can't control it. Taming such a monstrosity is impossible."

Damon's eyes narrowed.

"So that's why you took it," he said slowly. "You thought I could turn it into a shadow. That explains your sudden interest in my ability to create them."

He crossed his arms, exhaling.

"How far back did you plan this? Or was it a spur-of-the-moment decision?"

Lazarak's voice lowered.

"At the rate you're progressing, we'll be ready in a decade or two. That's acceptable."

Damon crossed his arms tighter, faintly offended.

"I'll have you know that for me it's been less than two years since I got this attribute. I grew three ranks in a few months. Just because I haven't mastered it yet doesn't mean I'm slow, these things take years."

Lazarak nodded.

"Yes, no doubt you're a prodigy. But it's not enough with the dangers we're facing."

He placed a small hand over his chest still trapped in the form of a five-year-old.

"That's why I'll help you. Create your most powerful shadow. You had help from a god before, why not now?"

Damon stood, his attention fixing on the cocoon wrapped in shimmering seals.

"You're serious..."

Lazarak nodded.

"Yes. We need numbers. Even though we've taken a significant portion of the Grinding Gate, they're still too weak to matter in the larger picture."

His tone hardened.

"And Seraph Null is only the first of our enemies. If we leave this world, my brother is one of the ones we will face, far worse than this."

His gaze drifted toward a small lake at the far corner of their base.

"I would prefer not to rely on whatever I can call upon from the Lake of Tears," he said quietly. "But I admit, it's a useful trump card when cornered."

He bit his lip.

"We need every weapon. Every scheme. Every plot. I'm willing to stop at nothing."

"Except actually killing people yourself," Damon cut in with a snide grin.

Lazarak smiled.

"That's why I have you."

Damon crossed his arms again.

"Feeding that thing will be a pain. Not to mention hatching it. And it'll be annoying if it takes decades to grow."

Lazarak waved a hand dismissively.

"Leave the small details to me. And from the looks of it, one of our people has just placed a brand."

Damon smiled.

"Quick, play the prerecorded message."

"Way ahead of you," Lazarak replied, laughing as he felt the surge of new followers.

Moments later, a man was teleported into the hidden base from somewhere within the city. The instant he appeared, he dropped to one knee before Damon.

"My lord. The mission is complete. This is the location of the Black Crow leader."

Damon accepted the paper, opening it casually.

"Good," he said. "With this, we can eliminate any loose ends and solidify our foundation in the Grinding Gate."

Lazarak crossed his arms, studying him.

"You're surprisingly effective at this. I can't believe we made this much progress in just a few days and you never even left this place."

Damon glanced at the information broker, the only person who knew their base's location.

It had been easy.

Between the man, Ghost, and Damon's shadow, he never needed to move himself. Possessing Ghost handled the dirty work. After that, it was simply killing some, coercing others, bribing a few with mana cores, and making promises.

"I see," Damon muttered. "That Black Crow should've taken my offer."

His smile sharpened.

"Guess I'll have to kill him now."

He stretched his shoulders slightly.

"I haven't left this place in a while. Might be good to stretch."

He glanced at Matia, who immediately stepped forward.

Then Damon smiled at the information broker.

"Lead the way."

Chapter 837: Black Crow Base

The Black Crow leader was a very superstitious man, and why wouldn't he be. His whole life had been surrounded by omens.

When his palm itched, he gained money.

When a black cat passed by, someone died.

When a black bird appeared, his fortune doubled.

Many, many signs like these had guided him, leading him to become the most successful man in the Yari outskirts.

Three hundred years ago, when he had been cast into this world by a lesser god, he thought he was finished. Being sent to this particular world dungeon was a death sentence. Yet he had managed to work his way around it.

At least he wasn't sent to a truly terrible place like the imaginary prison, Eidolon.

Those trapped there were the worst of the worst, beings dangerous enough to disrupt the world order itself.

That said, his luck had taken a turn for the worse in recent months. He had nearly been killed, until he ran into a raven with pitch-black feathers and, of course, a very fast red squirrel.

He took the two as a great omen, and sure enough, his fortune not only recovered, it doubled.

With this newfound luck, he took initiative. Longtime rivals disappeared, deals were settled in blood, and his position in the Grinding Gate was solidified.

He smiled as the smell of good food filled the air. Bright lights reflected off polished stone, soft cushions cradling his weight as he leaned back comfortably. Around him, his subordinates drank heavily, laughed loudly, and danced with beautiful women.

At the center of the revelry lay the severed head of a massive desert monster they had hunted.

Its eyes had been gouged out and placed before a large black raven, which pecked at them leisurely. Beside it sat a red squirrel, clutching a fleshy blob that unmistakably resembled a testicle, gnawing at it with delight.

These two creatures were the source of the Black Crows' good fortune these past few months.

They had an uncanny sense for danger, able to predict disasters before they fell.

It was as if they had a history of orbiting a living trouble magnet.

"You two stick with me," the Black Crow leader said, lifting his cup slightly. "And you'll live a good life."

The raven raised its beak, feathers ruffling as it let out an arrogant caw, preening under the attention.

Yes, this was the life.

Sure, the city was shit, but it was still a hundred times better than hanging around that fiend, Damon Grey.

This was the life.

Still, Croft's intuition began to tingle.

The raven turned its head toward the squirrel.

"Caw caw."

Perhaps it was time to leave.

The squirrel glanced back, cheeks stuffed with meat, its small body stiffening in irritation. Its beady eyes narrowed as it stared at the raven.

Leave? Why would they leave?

This life was good. Servants, offerings, comfort.

Better than great.

"Squeal squeal squeal."

It fired back a string of sharp, indignant squeals, clearly insulting the wretched raven for even suggesting a return to street life.

While they argued, the leader of the Black Crows raised his hand. The music cut off abruptly, laughter dying down as the room went quiet.

"We have come very far," he began, his voice carrying easily. "We have achieved so much."

"Yeahhh!"

"Hail the boss!"

"Boss, you're so great!"

"Our Black Crow is unstoppable!"

Cheers erupted, and he smiled, basking in their devotion.

"However," he continued, his expression turning serious, "it seems a new force is moving beneath our shadows. I have received intel that their leader is looking for me and has given us, the great Black Crow, orders to join them."

The room fell silent.

"You know what I say?" He leaned forward slightly. "I say nay."

"Nay! Nay!" they shouted in agreement, raising their drinks.

"I have leaked our location to them," he declared. "If they dare come, let them face me."

The mood turned jubilant again, except for the raven and the squirrel. Their argument halted as they stared at each other.

A single thought surfaced in both their minds.

Wait... isn't this how that fiend, Damon Grey, operates?

Before either could act, a cold chill swept through the chamber. Fires flickered violently, then went out. Snow began to fall inside the large hall, settling on stone where it should not exist.

The walls fogged over. Breath turned visible.

Only the central flames remained, casting long shadows as weapons were drawn. Illumination magic flared, bathing the room in harsh light.

And in the very center of the hall—

Two figures stood motionless.

One was a man clad in dark armor, long black hair flowing down his back. A crown rested above his head like a twisted halo. A step behind him stood a knight in full plated armor made of dark metal, fractured with lines like shattered ice.

She was a woman.

Her wings were formed of frost, spreading biting cold through the room, an icy greatsword held loosely in her grasp.

The cold was so intense that every breath fogged.

The Black Crow boss felt his confidence waver.

They were powerful, but how powerful could they truly be?

They were still third class. He had several fighters of that rank. The only beings he truly feared were the King of Yari and those fourth-class monsters capable of shattering mountains.

He leaned back slightly, glancing at the raven and squirrel.

As long as he had them, he would be fine.

Before the thought fully formed, the raven and squirrel shot forward in a blur, landing on the armored man's shoulders. They cried out desperately, their sounds almost like accusations and grievances being poured into his ears.

The man glanced at them from the corner of his eye, lips curling into a sneer.

"You little wretches," he said coldly. "You seem to be living it up while I was trapped in the deepest layer of Eidolon."

The first words offended him.

The second shattered him.

Eidolon.

The Black Crow leader felt his legs go weak.

This wasn't some run-of-the-mill thug.

This was a great evil from the imaginary prison.

"I—I surrender!" he cried, collapsing to his knees. "Spare me!"

His subordinates stared in disbelief as their boss fell, trembling, before the intruders.

Chapter 838: New Evil

Damon frowned. This was no fun. His brows pulled together slightly as irritation settled in his expression.

He had come here personally for blood and carnage. He wanted fresh meat something to work with for his practice on soul manipulation... or rather, wasn't transmutation the better term now, considering he was actively rewriting what a soul was?

That thought lingered as his eyes shifted to his shoulders, where the raven and the squirrel were shamelessly clinging to him, feathers and fur brushing his armor as they loudly badmouthed one another.

Damon's frown deepened.

"That's enough, you two. I don't have time for this..."

The raven ruffled its feathers sharply while the squirrel's tail lashed once. They shot each other vicious glares before reluctantly pulling back, their bodies stiff with barely restrained hostility.

Then, with surprising newfound unity, they both turned toward the boss of the Black Crows kneeling on the floor.

Without a moment of hesitation, or even a flicker of remembrance for past kindness, they began to loudly badmouth him, calling for Damon to slay the dragon, or in this case, the local snake that had been corrupting the pond, killing the fish, starving the people, and openly committing crimes against humanity.

Damon sighed, a slow breath leaving him as irritation crept into his eyes. He glanced down at the Black Crow boss, his gaze heavy.

"Bakin... or as you call yourself now, Black Crow."

He spoke the man's real name, the one he had abandoned more than three hundred years ago.

The boss flinched.

His subordinates stood frozen, staring at their leader kneeling in front of a stranger. The boss himself was on the verge of pissing himself. Every instinct he had honed over centuries screamed at him that if he angered this man, he would die like a dog, or worse.

One of his lieutenants clenched his jaw and stepped forward, fists trembling.

"Get up, boss. We can take them... there are just two people."

The room was bitterly cold. Frost crept along the stone walls and floor thanks to the snow and ice radiating from the woman knight. Even so, sweat beaded down the Black Crow's head, dripping from his chin. His legs shook beneath him, barely able to hold his weight.

Damon seemed amused.

He turned his head slightly and glanced at the lieutenant, a soft smile forming at the corner of his mouth.

"You don't seem to have much of a survival instinct," Damon said calmly. "If you did, I'd say it's on the same level as a basic rock."

The lieutenant sneered, rage twisting his face.

"Just because the boss is superstitious doesn't mean the rest of us are!"

He charged.

His curved blade tore through the air as his third-class strength erupted, sonic booms detonating from his movements. The shockwave sent tables of food flying, dishes shattering as he crossed the distance almost instantly.

That was how it looked, from the eyes of a weakling.

To Damon, he was just... slow.

Too slow to matter.

Within that instant, Damon casually scratched the side of his head, briefly considering the most gruesome way to kill him. Then he smiled. As the blade descended, Damon reached out, timing it perfectly.

He didn't even bother blocking.

His hand, cloaked in dense shadow energy, plunged straight through the man's chest.

The lieutenant froze mid-strike. His body trembled violently, muscles locking as his eyes shook with pain and terror.

Damon's cold eyes met his. He hadn't moved a single step.

"Trying to modify a soul in a meaningful way is such a pain," Damon said casually. "But crushing one is quite interesting... you have a very weak soul."

A faint gasp slipped from the man's mouth.

Damon pulled his hand back.

There were no external injuries. The lieutenant collapsed onto his back, mouth slightly open, breathing steady.

He was alive.

But his eyes were empty.

His will and personality no longer existed.

All eyes turned back to Damon. Those still standing felt their legs weaken, knees trembling uncontrollably.

"Ahhh..." Damon groaned, lifting a hand to his head. "I failed again... well, it's not as bad as last time. I managed to only target his consciousness, but I could use more finesse."

He looked around at those still holding their weapons.

"Anybody else want to be my test subject?"

Panic erupted.

Weapons clattered to the ground with loud clanks as men turned to flee, but the entire place was sealed in ice. Strange symbols glowed across the walls and floor, runes pulsing faintly as they formed a single word.

Close.

Of course. Runes Matia had added to her magic. No one was leaving.

The smartest choice had already been made.

The Black Crow remained kneeling, pressing his forehead closer to the floor. One by one, the others followed, dropping to their knees.

With everyone kneeling, Black Crow couldn't help but feel a grim satisfaction. After all, they all had one thing in common.

"You are all cowards," Damon said flatly. "You didn't dare go further into Yari. You chose to stay here and act like local tyrants under the rules of the Chainbearers."

Damon slowly walked toward the chair Black Crow had been sitting on earlier, his boots crunching lightly against frost as he sighed.

All of them, the entire gang, or at least those high enough to matter were kneeling before him.

Ahhh, what a bummer. He really wished he had been this powerful before he left Valerion. He would have loved to wipe out the Charkata family back then.

No matter. All in due time.

"Do you wish to be more..." Damon asked as his formless charisma spread across the room, his voice carrying heat and fire.

"You have been beneath the Chainbearers for so long... did you all forget who you are? You are from a higher world. You are children of Aetherus and his brother Lazarak. You are from a world ruled by greater gods."

He let the words sink in before continuing.

"So how is it that you now hide and bow to mere lower-realm scum?"

It was easy to divide people. Easy to manipulate them. Even easier to create hate.

A fast way to spread religion was through hate, that was why Aetherus was chosen and Lazarak wasn't.

Hate and war were fuels.

Damon was going to give these people purpose again.

"Have this lower-realm scum already broken you? Have you disgraced your ancestors?" he demanded. "If you have even the slightest bit of the spirit of those born in war, then you will join me."

He tossed several branding seals across the floor, letting them slide to a stop before the kneeling figures.

"I offer you freedom..." Damon said coldly.

"Or death."

Black Crow felt fire ignite in his heart, but more than that, he wasn't stupid.

He lowered his head even further.

And chose freedom under this new evil.

Chapter 839: Systematic Take Over

Taking over was a lot less stressful than he had expected. Surprisingly, Damon pulled it off.

Now, however, he faced a different problem.

Logistics.

Logistics was a pain, especially when most of his goods were being smuggled through unofficial channels he had quietly created for himself. Channels that slipped beneath the notice of the Chained and bypassed most of Yari entirely.

Damon had once been part of Quick Hand in his youth, and that meant he had plenty of experience with logistics, especially the illegal kind. To that end, he had already established a supply network that appeared to be nothing more than surface-level trade, while in reality it threaded straight through restricted zones and unregulated districts.

What he was smuggling was simple.

Naturally it was the basics and essentials, food, water, mana cores, even potions.

As those goods moved, so did Lazarak's faith.

It spread through the slums alongside carefully crafted propaganda, whispered sermons, symbols etched into walls, quiet gatherings in broken homes.

Reaching unofficially to the ones in the inner city even without any intentional move from Damon.

And what propaganda could be more effective than purist, supremacist and racist hatred disguised as religion?

It was purist because he isolated a single group and elevated them above all others.

It was supremacist because that purity gave them a reason to feel superior.

And it was racist because it required hatred cold, deliberate hatred toward an entire race, branding them as lesser beings.

Was it good?

No.

Was it effective?

Absolutely.

Did it benefit Damon and further his long-term agenda?

Without question.

"Staying on the agenda is our top priority."

Damon leaned back against his throne, one leg crossing over the other as a hooded cult follower knelt before him and delivered his report.

"My lord," the man said, head bowed, voice steady. "We have now occupied most of Grinding Gate and integrated the population into the belief. According to our analysts, the lower-realm scums authorities may soon notice discrepancies mana core shortages, decreased sickness, and abnormal death rates in the area."

He hesitated, then added carefully, "This anomaly may draw attention."

Damon lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug, his expression unbothered.

"Yes, I'm aware. They aren't aware yet. For now, I believe it's time to move toward the inner city."

The man bowed deeply and withdrew.

Damon exhaled slowly as the faint sound of approaching footsteps echoed through the chamber light and uneven.

When he turned, Lazarak stood there.

The god now wore the form of a ten-year-old boy. His hair was disheveled, his skin pale, dark shadows clinging beneath tired eyes.

"At this rate..." Lazarak said quietly, "they'll find out in a few weeks. Maybe days, depending on their competence."

Damon shook his head once.

"No. Three days at most. That's when they notice. But they won't understand the extent of our influence."

He crossed his arms.

"At worst, they'll label it an anomaly and send Chainbearers to crush it. They'll kill an estimated twelve thousand people across various districts of the Grinding Gate."

He paused.

"And we'll let them."

Lazarak pressed his lips together, his small hands clenching at his sides.

"Isn't there another way?" he asked. "Or... can we stop this?"

Damon shook his head again, slower this time.

"No. Not without risking total annihilation. Grinding Gate holds sixteen million people. Anything else risks all of them."

Lazarak drew a shaky breath and closed his eyes.

"Are you asking me to choose between two evils?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Damon replied calmly. "This is my choice. Not yours."

Lazarak lowered his head slightly.

"Yes. But it is also my choice to do nothing," he said quietly. "In that sense, I'm complicit. I want the best outcome but I can't expect to keep my hands clean."

He lifted his gaze, eyes steady now.

"So hear this."

"Do what is necessary for victory. I will share the sin, the shame, and the glory with you. You are not my weapon... and I cannot hide behind your mercy forever."

Damon rested his chin against his hand, fingers tapping once.

"Outrage."

He clasped his hands together.

"I want outrage. I want a fire that can't be smothered. I want them to watch their peers, friends, family, people they suffered beside, die at the hands of the Chained."

His eyes darkened.

"With that, Lazarak, everything falls into place."

He could already see it, the streets soaked in blood, flames licking stone, chaos tearing the city apart.

Damon rose from his throne.

"For centuries, the Chained kept the prisoners obedient, fearful, hopeless," he said. "That balance is gone. Now there's an equal force on the other side."

He turned to Lazarak, a thin smile cutting across his face, sharp enough to look almost demonic. For a moment, Lazarak thought he saw horns hidden beneath Damon's hair.

"We... we've completed preparations for the creation of your next shadow," Lazarak said, his voice strained as he held back anguish. "I don't know if it will work. If we fail, the cocoon will be destroyed."

"And if we succeed," Damon said flatly, "I gain a powerful shadow."

Lazarak turned away, his steps slow.

"I'm sorry it has to be like this, Lazarak," Damon said behind him.

He almost never apologized.

Yet now, he had.

"It must pain you, to lose believers. As a god, you must feel like you failed them."

Lazarak clenched his fists, then spoke, repeating Damon's words back to him.

"If there is an all-powerful god, then he is cruel. And if he is kind, then he is weak."

He inhaled slowly.

"I am weak. I cannot be anyone's savior. I don't hate that this choice had to be made... I hate that I am weak enough that it had to be."

Damon stepped forward, stopping beside him.

"Yes," he said quietly. "But people often mistake their own evil for an act of god and their success as their own ingenuity. We shouldn't blame gods for everything when our own choices led us here."

He turned away.

His footsteps echoed softly as he vanished into the darkness.

#### Chapter 840: New Shadow

Magic seals crisscrossed the walls and floors, flickering in layered patterns that pulsed like veins beneath skin.

A young boy and girl moved carefully around the formation, recording and inspecting the procedure. Sweat soaked their hair, dark circles carved deep beneath their eyes. Every few moments one of them paused, wiped their face with a trembling hand, then continued without complaint.

Damon had not paid much attention to what Lazarak was doing alongside Lyn and Sithara. Not until now.

Seeing the overwhelming complexity of the magical network, he realized just how far out of his depth he truly was.

Their understanding of magic existed on an entirely different level. Unlike Damon, who learned magic only to kill more efficiently, they used it as a craft, a language, a structure. They knew it for what it was, not just what it could destroy.

At the center of the formation sat a cocoon, warped and layered with glowing seals that shimmered faintly as if breathing.

Lazarak stepped forward. His appearance was that of a handsome ten year old boy, though his disheveled hair and hollow eyes betrayed exhaustion. His dark robes, woven from pure darkness, moved despite the absence of wind.

He stopped in front of the cocoon.

"It took a while," he said quietly. "This is the best we could do. Even with more time, we wouldn't be able to push it further."

He crossed his arms and leaned closer to the cocoon, letting out a tired sigh.

"We used Matia as a blueprint. We also captured a normal fairy to compare the difference between their souls, hoping to recreate the procedure. But we learned too little."

He bit his lip, frustration flickering across his face.

"Every soul is unique. Structurally similar, yes, but worlds apart in execution."

Damon nodded slowly. He did not fully understand, and that was fine.

"So how do we do this," he asked.

Lazarak stepped aside and gestured toward the cocoon.

"Just shove your hand in and unleash all your mana and shadow energy."

Damon frowned slightly. "That's it."

He was also supposed to modify its soul, wasn't he.

"Leave that part to me," Lazarak replied flatly, as if reading his mind. "You're too much of a brute for anything graceful."

Damon sighed and shrugged.

Without hesitation, he placed his palms against the cocoon. His eyes snapped open as he released a colossal surge of mana. Dark streams of shadow energy followed, pouring into the cocoon like ink flooding water.

The seals reacted instantly.

They darkened, turning pitch black as wisps of shadow rose from them. The cocoon began to swell, its surface trembling violently as something inside pushed against its confines, eager to emerge before it was ready.

Lazarak moved quickly, circling to the opposite side of the formation.

"Don't stop," he called out. "Hold it steady."

He knelt and pressed his hand against the seals, muttering an incantation under his breath. Whether it was a spell or something older, Damon did not know. He was too focused.

The cocoon let out a shrill screech.

Damon almost pulled back to cover his ears, but forced himself to endure it, pressing his hands harder against the surface.

Warm liquid ran down his face.

His ears began to bleed. Then his nose. Soon, blood leaked from every opening.

Lazarak fared no better.

Yet neither of them moved.

Minutes dragged on before the resistance suddenly ceased.

Damon was about to relax when he felt it.

A sudden suction force wrapped around his arms.

Something began to drain him.

Violently.

It tore through his mana and shadow energy without restraint. Damon tried to pull away, but his arms would not move.

The cocoon drank him dry.

Shadow energy went first. He did not have much to begin with, and as it vanished his shadow hunger surged violently. The cocoon turned completely black, becoming a solid mass of shadow.

It did not stop.

Damon dropped to his knees as his shadow energy dipped below ten percent. His body warped, transforming into a ravenous entity of pure shadow. Before it could stabilize, his mana began to drain just as mercilessly.

For the first time in a long time, he saw the bottom of his mana reserves.

The cocoon shrank as it consumed everything.

Then his mana hit zero.

Damon collapsed.

With no shadow energy remaining, his body reverted. Pain ripped through him as his health began to drop, system warnings flashing violently.

[Shadow Energy Depleted]

[Shadow Energy Depleted]

He gasped. Hearing that message again sent a chill through him.

Darkness swallowed his vision.

His heart of shadow activated instinctively, absorbing faint traces of shadow energy from the surroundings. He drew a deep, shaking breath and pushed himself upright, staggering.

Now he had a problem.

His heart of shadow could regenerate shadow energy, but mana was different. As an outsider, he could not absorb ambient mana. That restriction was absolute.

The only way to recover was through mana cores.

He turned his head toward the cocoon, which now writhed as the shadows solidified.

"Did it work," Lazarak asked weakly from the floor. Blood streaked his face.

Damon did not answer.

There had been no system notification yet.

Then a soft chime echoed in his mind.

[You have created a shadow.]

Damon's legs nearly gave out.

He felt something tear free from his soul, ripped away and forced into the cocoon to give it life.

A crack echoed through the chamber.

The cocoon shattered, fragments of shadow exploding outward. Damon raised an arm to shield his eyes.

When he looked again, there was nothing left.

Only broken shards of shadow scattered across the floor.

He narrowed his eyes.

There was nothing there.

Crunch. Crunch.

A faint sound broke the silence.

Damon followed it.

Among the fragments, something small moved. He lifted one piece of shadow aside.

Underneath it sat a creature no larger than a cat.

It was round. Featureless. A soft, shifting blob of shadow with no eyes and a wide mouth filled with jagged teeth. It gnawed happily on the cocoon fragments, crunching them with enthusiasm.

Damon stared.

"This," he muttered, "is supposed to be one of the most terrifying things to ever walk our world."

He sighed, already recognizing the type.

A growth variant.

"Well," he said, rubbing his face, "guess I'll just have to terrorize the world with your menacing cuteness."