

Shadow 861

Chapter 861: The Malcrist

"Everything you value is a handle someone else can grab."

She muttered it while sitting on his thighs. Her body felt soft and warm, but in a way that was different from Lilith, or even Sylvia.

Damon bit his lip.

'Perish the thought.'

Was this woman deliberately challenging his willpower. Because if she was, this was an obvious attempt.

"Can you get off me."

Renata smiled faintly and instead wiggled her hips.

"What. Feeling—"

"No. You're just heavy," he cut her off before she could finish. The world really did seem determined to test his restraint today.

Renata did not move. Instead, she rested her head against his shoulder. Of course, she was not heavy. Even if she were, Damon had enough strength to tear a building from the ground. Her weight was meaningless.

She leaned closer, her chest pressing into him, her lips near his ear as she whispered.

"Would you allow this if it was Lilith Astranova."

Damon kept his expression deadpan.

"Fair enough. Continue."

The faster she talked, the faster he could escape this awkward situation. It would be even worse if Evangeline walked in and saw him pinned beneath Renata like this.

Renata fell silent for a moment.

"Everything you value is a handle someone else can grab."

Her expression shifted. Gone was the teasing smile, replaced by the serious look she wore when she was all business.

"This was a belief. No, a philosophy. My family has followed it for thousands of years."

Philosophy mattered. A person's worldview shaped their path, their class, even their fate. It was one of many factors, alongside birth, luck, bloodlines, and ambition.

But when an entire family was molded by a single philosophy, the results were far more extreme.

In theory, it was possible to artificially influence one's class that way. In practice, it was rare.

In Renata's case, it was indoctrination.

"My family was a small demon clan loyal to the Demon Lord of Domination, Ashcroft. We were not great. We were hardly noteworthy. In the footnotes of history, we didn't even deserve a mention."

Her voice was calm, almost flat.

Damon could not sense much emotion in it, as if she were reciting facts rather than memories.

"When Ashcroft fell in Soltheon, my ancestors were there. When the invincible Demon Lord of Domination fell, the world descended into chaos. Even the demon continent and its seventy-two demon lords scrambled for power. The invasion collapsed, and the world burned."

Her head shifted slightly against his shoulder, as if she did not want him to see her face.

"No one had time to organize anything. No one kept track of which demon clans survived. Clans fell as easily as leaves in autumn."

He could hear her breathing now. Slow. Controlled. Her chest rising and falling against him.

"No one knew how to move forward in a world without a king. Without order. Different factions tried to rise. The empire was among them, claiming land. The temple grew as well, using fear to fuel religion."

She placed a hand flat against his chest.

"That was when my ancestors settled. They made a name for themselves hunting demons, so no one realized they were demons themselves. They allied with the empire. Demons among humans. Disgraceful, yes. But to us, the goddess races were puny. Small things standing in the way of conquest."

She turned slightly, her face now angled toward his.

Damon wished she would stop moving. Sitting on him was already bad enough.

"Ashcroft made demons feel superior," she continued. "A newer race exploited and dehumanized. Their hatred was justified. He gave them pride. A superiority complex. And why not. Demons were inherently more powerful."

Her gaze softened.

"When he fell, so did their purpose. They were lost. My ancestors were lost. Until..."

Damon placed a hand on her slim waist, steadying her.

"The prophecy."

She nodded, resting her hand on his shoulder.

"That gave them hope. And it put fear into the hearts of the goddess races. The demon who had nearly ruled them all would return. That fear was despair."

Her voice lowered.

"That is why my ancestors stayed in Soltheon. They believed Ashcroft would rise again where he had fallen. Everything they did was an expression of loyalty."

Damon pulled her a little closer, not out of affection, but to keep the conversation quiet.

"All I hear is ancient history," he said softly. "What does this have to do with you."

She shifted her weight, pressing down on his legs as she turned more fully toward him.

"This is my family's history," she said quietly. "And the reason for my suffering. Our suffering."

Her violet eyes lowered.

"Years passed. We became a small, quiet noble house. Not the weakest. Not the strongest. Just average. But hiding in a land that hated demons was never easy."

She clenched her fingers lightly against his armor.

"To survive, we adapted. But not so much that we forgot who we were."

She bit her lip.

"I was raised to be proud of being a demon above all else. We were no longer a new species created by the first demon lord. No longer a minority to be hunted and exploited. Ashcroft showed us our power."

She placed a hand over her heart, pride clear in her posture.

"I, Renata Malcrist, am a demon. And I am proud of being a demon."

Damon felt something twist in his chest.

Being even partially demon had always been his shame. He had refused to let his horns grow. Seeing her pride made his fingers twitch toward his head out of habit.

"It's easier for female demons," she said quietly. "We don't grow horns. For males, it's harder."

She bit her lip again.

"To survive, we had to subtract what we could live without. That's where those words came from."

Her voice softened.

"Everything you value is a handle someone else can grab. Value nothing, Renata, and you will never feel pain when you lose anything."

She exhaled slowly.

"That was my parents' most vital lesson."

Chapter 862: I Can Explain

When she had been young, Renata was forced to be more mature than her age would suggest. Her family was always on high alert.

Damon frowned as he looked at her. If he allowed himself to miss important details just because a seductive woman was sitting on his body, then he would be a fool.

At first glance, the setup looked sexualized on purpose, and that was correct, but not for titillation.

Renata sitting on Damon's thighs was not about desire. It was about control through vulnerability.

She was not trying to sleep with him. She was testing something far more dangerous.

'Can I be close to you without being used?'

Her physical closeness contrasted sharply with her emotional restraint. She pressed her body against him while keeping her emotions at arm's length, and that dissonance was exactly who she was.

This line was the thesis of her existence, its single summary.

"Everything you value is a handle someone else can grab."

That was not cynicism. That was survival doctrine. Entirely different from his own.

Renata was not cold because she lacked feeling. She was cold because she had been taught that feeling was a liability.

And the most chilling part was that she did not seem to resent her parents for it.

She understood them.

Damon claimed to value nothing. Renata had actually tried to.

And the cost showed.

He had to admit he always sensed something was off about her, but he had never paid her too much attention. In his heart, he figured that if she ever acted against him, he could always bring her down with Demon Dominate.

"I was raised to be efficient. I was taught we existed to serve Lord Ashcroft, and that he would bring our salvation."

She sighed softly, her chest rising and falling as if she was carefully regulating her breath.

"Nothing was mine, so I was not allowed to have anything in my name. Sometimes my parents intentionally bought me something, waited until I learned to treasure it, and then they took it away."

Her lips curved into a faint, sad smile. Her violet eyes dulled, stripped of their usual confidence.

"One day, I got a friend. She was a young human girl."

Renata smiled at the memory.

"She lived completely differently from me. She didn't spend her whole day studying. Her expressions weren't the result of hours of practice. She loved flowers and played in the mud like any mundane child."

Renata envied her, but she also admired her.

The girl who lived in her castle was merely the daughter of a maid. Her mother had died of illness, and her father had been killed by a passing nobleman.

Renata was prudent. She researched her thoroughly. She knew more about the girl's past than the girl herself.

And so the girl was assigned to her service.

Renata had never had a personal maid. She had many servants, but never one assigned solely to her. Even so, she kept the girl at arm's length for months, refusing to get attached.

But demons, despite how cruel they were portrayed in malignant tales, possessed abundant emotion. In Renata's case, time itself became the catalyst for attachment.

This was more than a maid. She was her friend. Her only one.

"Mira, why are you always so happy even when you've lost so much?"

The young maid smiled brightly.

"I can't be sad forever. A smile is worth a million words. You should smile too. You'd look really pretty. Prettier than any girl I know."

Renata chuckled. It was genuine. Real.

She did not value many things, but she loved Mira. Truly.

The next morning, Mira did not come.

Renata left her room to find her. The halls carried a faint stench, metallic and thick.

Blood.

When she turned the corner, her face drained of color.

The image burned itself permanently into her mind.

Mira's corpse was impaled, her eyes frozen wide in terror. Blood soaked her hair, staining it a violent red.

Soft footsteps echoed behind Renata.

"Why," she muttered.

Her father sighed. She could hear the pain in his voice.

"Are you in pain, Renata. If you are, it is because you valued something. A handle that was used to hurt you."

She collapsed to her knees as agony crushed her chest.

This pain. This pain she wanted gone.

She would never do it again. Never value anything again.

Why did they have to kill Mira?

It was her fault.

In her rage, she retaliated against her parents. She wanted to take something from them, but she did not know what they valued.

Her will awakened, and with it, the potential of her attribute.

Zero.

Her magic attribute possessed the power to reduce things to nothing.

But she failed.

They were stronger. No harm came to them. They were her parents, after all.

Damon glanced at her, his expression tightening. That was a horrific thing to endure.

"I just want to prove them wrong," she muttered.

"What happened to them? Your parents."

Renata exhaled and leaned her head against his shoulder, the contact gentle but deliberate.

"They received an imperial summons to face the demon army. They perished in the war, leaving me to inherit the house. Since I was the only one left, I decided to do my own thing."

Damon placed a hand on her waist, adjusting her weight slightly so she was more stable on his lap.

"So you turned your house into a regional economic power."

She nodded slowly.

"I did, but it came with problems. A lot of people suddenly had their eyes on me. Some creeps even tried to marry me just to claim my territory."

Damon sighed.

"And what does that have to do with choosing me instead of Ashcroft."

She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Ashcroft isn't even from my era. My ancestors followed him, and their teachings cost me a great deal. The unknown god believes in mortals making their own choices. I want the right to make mine."

She smiled at him. This time it was genuine. Not seductive. Not calculated.

"I am Renata Malcrist. A demon."

Damon smiled faintly, touching the side of his head where his horns had once been filed down.

"Damon Grey. Still human. For now. But I'd appreciate it if you could teach me how to hide my demon parts."

She glanced at him, then chuckled, leaning closer until their noses nearly touched.

"And what's in it for me. You'll have to do some very personal favors, cutie."

"What the hell is going on here?"

The voice sounded like it crawled straight out of hell.

Damon's hands shot off Renata's waist. This was worse than if Evangeline had caught him in this position.

He lifted his head toward the balcony entrance.

His throat tightened when he saw them.

Sylvia, already radiating murderous intent.

And Lilith Astranova, staring at him with deadpan disgust.

"It's not what it looks like. I can explain."

Chapter 863: Catching Up

"I wanna say this isn't what it looks like, but that sounds like a pointless endeavor."

Damon closed his eyes, his hands still resting on Renata's waist.

He could still feel Sylvia's murderous intent crawling over his skin.

'Huh, why am I getting worked up? I'm single. I don't owe anyone an explanation,' he thought with a frown.

Yet for whatever reason, he felt it was wiser not to voice those thoughts. There was no need to add fuel to the flames.

He shifted his legs slightly, a clear signal for Renata to get off him, but the moment she saw Lilith, she smiled instead.

"Ahh, my lord. It seems our secret affair was discovered. I suppose we should have gone somewhere more private."

Sylvia's murderous intent exploded.

Damon sighed. Renata, what the hell was she doing. Throwing him under the carriage like that.

Thud.

He pushed her off his lap.

That was what she got for making him look bad. No, for making him look worse than he already did.

He stood up and walked toward the two of them.

Lilith wore a weary expression, a faint mixture of disgust, anger, envy, and frustration flickering across her face.

'What's her deal.'

Sylvia, on the other hand, was radiating a cold, lethal glare.

"I want to say I'm glad to see you guys, but the last time I saw you two, the world looked like it was ending and you were trying to kill each other. So what changed."

Sylvia glared at Renata, then bit her lip. When she looked back at Damon, her expression flipped instantly.

She smiled and jumped into his arms, as if she had not been radiating murderous intent just moments ago.

"Heheh."

She giggled softly.

"I missed you so much. You won't believe how worried I was."

Damon lifted a hand and gently stroked her hair.

"Why would you be worried? I'm the last person who'd die in a place like this."

It was obvious to him. Sylvia had deflected his question.

He turned his gaze to Lilith and smiled, but she did not return it. Instead, she stared at him as if lost in thought.

There was no heartfelt reunion. No scolding. No relief.

She looked at him like he might vanish at any moment, caught between joy and pain, anger and heartbreak.

Lilith said nothing to Damon. She walked past him and stopped in front of Renata.

"Hm. So you finally stopped pretending."

Renata scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"I figured you already knew."

Lilith nodded slowly.

"I wondered how long you'd keep making a fool of yourself, but I see you're back to acting like a common slut."

Renata crossed her arms.

"I'm not the one who looks like she's been run through. What's that withered flower supposed to mean? Is that a new aesthetic."

At those words, Lilith subconsciously touched the nameless flower pinned to her hair.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by Damon.

He narrowed his eyes.

Since when did Lilith care about flowers? No, that was a gardenia.

That particular flower bloomed where her nanny had died. Lilith always carried the faint scent of gardenias with her. It was the scent he had always associated with her.

But she had never carried one physically before.

He turned away from Sylvia and pulled several chairs from his shadow storage.

Lilith sat down without a word, her posture stiff, as if she did not know what to say.

Damon stepped closer and gently lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"Hey. What's on your mind? You're not pissed about Renata, are you."

She forced a small smile.

"No. I'm not. I'm just travel weary. That's all. How have you been."

Damon's expression did not change, but he knew something was wrong. Deeply wrong.

It was as if someone had stripped the confidence from the proud Lilith Astranova piece by piece, leaving her spirit dulled.

Lilith saw his look.

She thought she was fine. She truly did. She thought she had the advantage in this timeline.

Things had changed more drastically than before, but not enough.

She could still see that bleak look in his eyes.

Maybe it was because she had failed to steal the elixir of pseudo immortality from the Black Tower.

Maybe it was because, in all her past incarnations, she had fought Damon, hoping to stop him from choosing his own oblivion.

Seeing him now, all that failure and frustration surged back at once.

She wanted to clutch her head and scream.

It was unbearable.

Only she remembered.

Worse still, with every passing moment, her memories of previous regressions blurred together.

She was no longer certain which details were real.

"You seem like you've been causing trouble for someone," she said softly.

She tried to sound strong, as she always did, but she just wanted to break down and cry.

Damon smiled at her.

For a brief moment, she saw that same smile again. The one he wore while laughing, drenched in his own blood.

"Care for some tea. You can tell me all about your journey and why you were trying to kill each other."

He changed the subject decisively.

He pulled out a teapot and began pouring hot tea into a matching set.

Renata glanced at the fragrant steam.

"It looks like you have almost everything in there."

Damon chuckled.

"I've killed a lot of people. Some of them drop interesting loot. Like this teapot that automatically produces hot tea."

He raised a hand at Sylvia, who was about to speak.

"Don't ask me how it works. I don't know."

He lifted the teapot slightly, showing the faint runic system etched into it.

"Probably made by the unknown god, judging by the craftsmanship."

"I wonder if the tea is infinite," Sylvia said.

Damon shrugged.

"Who knows. I never checked."

Sylvia smiled and nodded.

"You know what else I'm wondering."

"What."

He realized too late.

Her tone turned cold.

"What you were doing with this bitch in the dead of night."

He sighed.

He really should not have asked.

'She was such a sweet girl. What happened?'

Chapter 864: Wisp In The Metaverse

By the special grace of the goddess in her infinite mercy, Damon managed to get out of that situation.

Somehow.

Now he found himself in a strategy meeting. Or, more accurately, a conference-style gathering held by members of the goddess races.

Naturally, it was to discuss the nature of their plans. Damon would have been more cautious, but he was certain Seraph Null already knew about them. He simply wanted them gathered in one place so they could begin their rebellion and he could crush them all at once.

After all, the one with absolute power also possessed absolute confidence.

For that reason, Damon was fine with keeping their trump card hidden from the lesser god.

As for that trump card, Lazarak had been regaining his power far faster than expected, thanks to the cult spreading his faith.

The people in the room included Damon's party and students from Aether Academy. Lilith, Renata, Natch Wuta, and a few others were present. Then there were representatives from the Eldorian Magic Academy of the Magic Continent. Others from surviving academies had also arrived, including the beastkin girl Ishara Fang, several elves, and various figures Damon barely recognized.

It was a full house.

So many familiar faces.

And so many missing ones.

Abellona cleared her throat, her red eyes scanning the large hall. Those seated here were the most powerful and influential members of the current resistance.

"Thank you for coming, everyone. We have many items on today's agenda, and these matters may very well determine whether we live or die."

She turned her head slightly, and projection magic flared to life, images forming in the air above the table.

Damon raised an eyebrow. That was impressive. He had not even known they had someone capable of projection magic at that level.

He glanced toward the young knight maintaining the spell. She was short, with neatly cut blonde hair, her posture rigid as she focused.

Abellona waved her hand, and the images shifted.

"This is the nightmare of Lazarak. I'm sure everyone here heard the voice when they first awakened in this world's dungeon, along with its promised rewards."

Everyone murmured their agreement. It had been an enticing offer, one most of them would never have reached under normal circumstances.

Abellona clenched her fist.

"The reward was a fourth class advancement. A promise that whoever survived would reach it."

She bit her lip. As the leader of this conference and princess of the empire, she knew exactly who was making that promise.

And she did not like it.

This was heresy. The temple would cause trouble for them. And this time, it was not just one offender. It was her, and the children of the most powerful figures in the world. Harming them on that pretext would mean making an enemy of the entire world.

Evangeline crossed her arms.

"The unknown god. Worshipped by the demon races."

Damon crossed his arms as well.

"Technically, even they don't actually worship him. But yes. It's him. Though personally, I didn't receive such a promise. As the last one to enter that hell, I was mostly unconscious when it happened."

Emilia Highgon bit her finger nervously.

"We don't really have a choice about accepting the rewards or not. What is the temple going to do? Expect us to kill ourselves. That's not possible. I'd rather we focus on our current problems. There's no certainty we'll even survive long enough to enjoy such a reward."

Sylvia nodded slowly, her fingers resting against the cover of her book.

"Then maybe we should ask the real questions. Where are we, and how do we go back home? Alive, preferably."

Xander crossed his arms as he sat beside Emilia.

"Those black things. Do you remember them from the ruins of Lysithara."

The question was directed at his party.

"Yes," Damon replied, his expression serious.

Evangeline narrowed her eyes.

"The black entities that emerged from the rift in Lysithara whenever they sensed light."

The room fell silent.

Most of them barely knew what Lysithara truly was. The Path of Kings was an ancient ruin, a death zone. No one survived it.

Except Damon and his party.

More recently.

"The minions of Ittorath," Sylvia added.

As she said the name, an odd sensation crawled up her spine, as if something distant had briefly turned its gaze toward her. She shook her head. Just intuition. He wasn't here.

"Ittorath?" Abellona asked, voicing the confusion of many.

Damon sighed, rubbing his temple as a familiar headache began to form.

"Ittorath is an outsider from beyond the heavens. In the First Epoch, he fought the Ascendants and was sealed away by Valarie and Valcara."

He leaned back in his chair. As the one with the knowledge, he continued.

"Ittorath is a nightmare. Not figuratively. Literally. He was someone's dream that gained physical form and developed its own will in a place called the metaverse. Those black things are nightmares."

The room was deathly quiet.

Sylvia continued in his stead.

"In theory, every one of us has created a nightmare in the metaverse at some point in our lives through bad dreams. But since we hardly matter in the grand scheme of things, our nightmares become no more than harmless wisps."

Ishara Fang finally spoke, her face pale.

"Then whose nightmare was this Ittorath, if he was so powerful."

Sylvia's gaze flicked briefly toward Lilith.

"If I had to guess, Ittorath was a nightmare born from the unknown god. An insignificant one, perhaps, but still a dream from his tortured mind."

The room inhaled sharply.

That thought alone was terrifying.

"Goddess protect us," someone whispered.

"And that brings us to the main issue," Lilith said slowly. "The black giant that consumed us was also a nightmare. As you all remember, it too was brought by the unknown god. In fact, he came personally, possessing the priestess of the Snake Temple."

Silence followed.

They all remembered that presence. It had been more than dread. Their hearts hadn't even felt fear.

Fear was too loud.

They had not wanted him to notice them.

Abellona sighed.

"All of this leaves us with more questions. However, we can safely assume we are inside the body of that giant nightmare. As for this world, it likely fused with the dungeon gate."

She leaned forward, resting her hands on the table.

"Now the question is whose nightmare are we dreaming. And more importantly, who is this Lazarak."

Damon raised his hand.

"Oh. Right. I forgot to mention."

He smiled faintly.

"Lazarak is a friend of mine."

All eyes turned to him.

Chapter 865: Odds And Allies

Damon reached for the fruit on the table. There was a plum-looking tamberly among them. He took a bite, juice spilling down the corner of his mouth.

"Personally, I love tamberly cakes, but I don't particularly care for the fruit. Still, it's nice to know this world has some of our local produce."

He acted as if he hadn't just casually dropped a bombshell on the entire meeting.

Abellona's eyes twitched.

"This isn't about your taste in pastries or fruit. You just said you knew who Lazarak was."

Damon raised his head, looking around the room as he swallowed the tamberly.

"Yeah. We went to jail together."

Lilith sighed. She already knew all of this, having lived through several regressions, but this particular conversation was new.

In her previous attempts, Damon had been far colder, less inclined to joke or deflect.

Even so, this was no excuse to hope.

Evangeline sighed as well. He was putting her through this again.

Xander closed his eyes, resigned, while Leona burst out laughing from where she sat beside Damon.

"What is that even supposed to mean?" Abellona asked, exasperation seeping into her voice.

Damon smiled faintly.

"I mean we were in Eidolon together. Bottom-most floor. You know. As great evils or whatever."

The room, once full of murmurs, fell silent.

Everyone knew what Eidolon represented. They had heard the stories. They knew that even Seraph Null did not step foot there.

Eidolon was a prison for both its inmates and its wardens, a place where calamities that could ruin the world were sealed away. And the more dangerous the being, the deeper they were buried.

Damon was already a menace. That much they knew. He had single-handedly faced and defeated Amon the Unknown Ruler, who many suspected was the return of Ashcroft the Dominator.

But surely, even he wasn't that dangerous.

"Wait," Leona asked suddenly, laughter fading. "Then who's Lazarak?"

Damon took another bite of the tamberly.

"He's a god."

Silence.

A heavy, expectant silence, as if everyone was waiting for Damon to continue.

"I won't say more than that," he added. "Don't bother asking. All you need to know is that I have things under control, and any information on Lazarak is on a need-to-know basis."

He tossed the remains of the half-eaten fruit aside.

"And you don't need to know."

The adventurer from the war games glared at him. It seemed he had survived the ordeal.

"Why should we trust you when you won't share information with us? You're hiding things. Scheming, as always. Tell us the truth."

Damon scoffed.

"You can't handle the truth." He jerked his thumb toward the door.

"The door is that way. Good luck surviving on your own."

The man frowned, his third-class advancement aura rippling outward.

Slam.

Damon slammed his hand on the table and stood.

"Lazarak is the least of our problems. In case you haven't figured it out, that bastard unknown god has his hands all over this. And maybe you didn't realize it, but he's not just going to let you reach fourth-class advancement."

He swept his gaze across the room.

"Victory is an endless nightmare, and defeat is the moment of waking."

He winced slightly.

"That's not some fancy quote. It's probably a riddle. He loves those."

"So what I'm saying is, unless we figure out what that means, we might as well be dead, even if we somehow beat Seraph Null."

The adventurer stood up angrily.

"You won't tell us everything, yet you expect us to magically find the answer? In my line of work, information is the difference between life and death."

"Exactly why I can't just give it to you," Damon replied coldly. "Anyone here could be a spy. I'm not saying you are, but what if one of us is compromised? Is it worth risking everyone's life just so you can hear a bedtime story?"

Abellona sighed, raising her hand.

"That's enough. Very well, Damon. What can you share without compromising us?"

Damon nodded slowly and sat back down.

"From what I know, this world imposes a rank cap. Nothing above fourth class, which is good, since none of us have reached that yet. However, we still have the problem of mana. We can't absorb ambient mana here."

He decisively steered the conversation away from Lazarak.

If Seraph Null had spies, they would already be alert.

The adventurer continued to glare.

"For a commoner, you're very arrogant."

"Have I ever been humble?"

Abellona slammed her hand down.

"Staying on the agenda is our top priority."

She clenched her fist "That includes you, Damon."

He leaned back, conceding.

"Now then," Abellona continued, "let's talk resources and numbers."

"The way things stand, we don't have the manpower or supplies to defeat the Chained Knights. And Seraph Null is far beyond our league."

Evangeline crossed her arms.

"Then we'll just have to make do."

Damon nodded slowly.

"Yes. And they outnumber us a thousand to one. I don't imagine any of you can fight a thousand opponents of comparable strength."

Silence followed.

Then Sylvia glanced at Lilith, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

They both knew what Damon was implying.

Sylvia raised her hand, her white hair flowing despite the still air.

"We can recruit unlikely allies. Those who share the same predicament as us."

Damon tilted his head, already knowing what she meant, but his reputation demanded resistance.

"Huh? We've already found everyone. At least, everyone still alive."

Murmurs of agreement followed.

Sylvia sighed. He really wanted her to say it.

"Not everyone," she said carefully. "Have you forgotten... them?"

Abellona frowned. She had known where this was going from the start, but suggesting it outright would have been political suicide.

Damon's eyes widened in exaggerated disgust.

"You don't mean—"

Sylvia nodded.

"We have to ally with the demons."

Damon raised his hand.

"Never!"

He stood abruptly.

"I would rather we all die at the hands of the Chained than ally with demons, even for a second. So what if their power increases our chances by thirty percent? I'd rather we risk everything and die gruesome deaths."

He even made sure to emphasize the benefit.

Sylvia resisted the urge to sigh. Instead, she played along.

"Ah, but then we'll all fail," she said, doing her best not to roll her eyes.

Damon was already fuming.

Chapter 866: Anyone's Gamble

His raw hatred for demonkind could be felt in his words and in the crushing heaviness of his aura.

As expected of the one who had slain Amon, the so-called unknown ruler of the demon races. He was a hero of the goddess races. Even if he was a piece of shit, his hatred for demons was genuine. Just knowing that alone earned him approval.

This was how a youth of the goddess races should be a demon hater always .

So what if he was arrogant. He had the strength to justify it. As long as he hated demons, that was enough.

Ishara Fang glanced at him, ears twitching slightly. Velora Nyxfall of the Silver Glades, who had been standing quietly in the shadows, allowed herself a small smile. It was only fitting that the one who carried the Silver Blades despised demons.

After all those blades had been made solely to kill demons, they were passed on as heirlooms for generations for that purpose.

Magnus Trombone stared at Damon, his eyes glistening as emotion welled up.

"Such righteous fury. Such noble hatred for the vile demon race. I apologize, sir. I did not know you were a man of such uncompromising ideals."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the room. Admiration spread quickly, feeding on Damon's presence and the certainty in his voice.

Sylvia sighed.

She still had to push forward with this ridiculous farce. If she were a more intelligent woman, if she had not fallen for the wrong kind of man, she would not be here committing social suicide.

Then again, she had already committed political suicide once when she pretended to be pregnant out of wedlock for Damon's sake. Compared to that, this was nothing.

"The demons possess power," Sylvia said, standing straighter. "Each of them is a powerhouse. They have unique abilities and unconventional strategies."

Damon clenched his teeth.

"Sylvia, I cannot believe a noble elven princess would suggest such a thing. Are you truly willing to betray your ancestors who fought demons for centuries?"

She bit the inside of her lip.

'Do not bring my ancestors into this, you bastard.'

The crowd reacted instantly, cheering him on.

She forced herself to continue.

"Our chances are slim. You said it yourself. The demons increase our odds. Some of you have families. Loved ones waiting for you. You must consider the lesser evil."

Damon crossed his arms, appearing conflicted as he scanned the suddenly silent room.

He closed his eyes.

"Then I choose death."

Lilith's hand trembled.

The image surfaced against her will. Damon laughing arrogantly, bloodied and broken, liberated through death.

Her gaze unfocused as she watched the discussion like an outsider.

There was still one more chance. If she failed, she would still have one more regression left.

'At what point does surviving under Damon become indistinguishable from being ruled by him?'

These people only wanted to survive. And he was playing them with terrifying ease.

Sylvia crossed her arms.

"Then we use them as expendable pawns. Place them in the most dangerous positions while our people remain safe."

Damon paused.

"Hm. Are you suggesting we act without honor?"

"Yeah," someone shouted. "We would rather die. We are honorable goddess races."

Damon raised his hand, silencing the crowd.

"We, who is we." he said slowly, lifting an eyebrow, "there is no honor when dealing with demons."

He turned toward the assembled group.

"Do you not see it? We pretend to ally with them and send them into the most dangerous parts of the battlefield."

His shadows spilled outward, darkening the room.

"We kill two birds with one stone. This will be revenge for my friend, Prince Wagon."

The pressure of his aura suffocated dissent. With nothing but his presence and a simple scheme, he crushed any thought of opposition.

"It is a splendid strategy. Good thing I thought of it."

Sylvia grimaced. At least pretend she contributed.

"Oh. And Sylvia too," Damon added lazily.

He raised his hand.

"All in agreement with using demons as disposable pawns, say aye."

Silence.

Then voices followed.

"Aye."

"Aye."

"I agree."

Xander narrowed his eyes.

"It is dishonorable. However, I will not oppose it."

Damon rolled his eyes.

"Shut up Xander, no one asked you."

He looked around the room.

"Now let us discuss logistics. We will be moving thousands. We need supplies, potions, mana cores, food, weapons, and more."

Abellona, who was supposed to be leading this meeting, found herself completely sidelined.

She closed her eyes.

'I really hate when he does that.'

Lilith, who had already lived through this war once before, raised her hand.

"Your plan is to cause chaos in the outer districts while elite raid squads attack in sets of forty parties to strike the Black Tower."

Damon blinked.

"Ah. Yes. That. How did you know?"

He frowned inwardly.

'Am I that predictable?'

Or was it simply that Lilith knew him too well, including his obsession with chaos.

She shook her head.

"Seraph Null will counter. Casualties will double. Even if by some twist of fate we defeat him, we still lose."

She exhaled slowly.

"It is not worth it. The Elixir of Pseudo Immortality is always guarded by apostles."

She intentionally let the information slip.

Damon noticed instantly as the adventurer's eyes lit up with greed.

"Elixir of Pseudo Immortality?" he asked.

Lilith turned to Damon. Her emerald eyes were cold, every fragment of frustration from watching him choose death burning through her restraint.

"Yes. A legendary elixir crafted by a god. It cures all illness and grants functional immortality."

She smiled faintly.

"It is the treasure of the Black Tower. Seraph Null has guarded it for many years. An artifact like that is one of a kind. Whoever obtains it could sell it for more wealth than any empire possesses."

Damon frowned. Confusion flickered across his face.

What was she doing?

Lilith clenched her teeth.

She was done mourning. Done feeling powerless. If he refused to live, then she would give him a reason to.

Her hand brushed the flower tucked into her hair.

This time, she would win.

"Anyone here can obtain it."

Chapter 867: Falling Out

Damon grabbed her arm in an attempt to stop her as she walked away.

"What the hell was that?"

Lilith did not turn around. She exhaled slowly, pressing her fingers to her temple as a dull ache pulsed behind her eyes.

"What."

Damon frowned, tightening his grip just enough to make his frustration clear.

"Do not play dumb with me. Telling everyone about the elixir. And the fact that you knew its name."

He had never known that detail. He only knew there was an elixir at the heart of the Black Tower, something that could cure his sister.

Lilith turned sharply, brushing his hand away as if it irritated her.

"And what about it? You think a few more people chasing it suddenly makes it unattainable."

Damon studied her face. The exhaustion was unmistakable. The edge of her confidence looked worn thin. His voice softened despite himself.

"Hey. Are you doing all right."

Her lips pressed together. The muscles in her jaw twitched.

"Am I doing all right? I should be asking you that."

The outburst caught him off guard. She inhaled slowly, forcing herself to calm down.

"Great. I am doing great."

She clearly was not.

Damon pulled a chair from his shadow storage and set it beside them.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"I am fine. Leave it be."

He frowned.

"What is your problem?"

She drew in another breath, heat rising in her chest.

"I am fine. I just need a moment to collect myself," she said coldly.

Damon's eyes drifted to the flower tucked into her hair. The unease it stirred finally pushed him to act. He appraised it.

The appraisal skill really was useful.

"So," he said quietly, "how many times did you do it?"

Her eyes flickered. She bit her lip.

"You appraised the flower, didn't you?"

He did not deny it.

"Judging by how angry you look, I am guessing things did not work out for us in your previous attempts."

She let out a hollow chuckle.

"No. Everything went great. But do you know what the problem was."

She raised her hand and pointed straight at him.

"You. You were the problem. The first time was a disaster. The second was no better. The third was an improvement. The fourth was almost perfect. But in every single one of them."

Her finger trembled.

"You were the issue."

Damon crossed his arms, brow furrowing.

"My plans worked well enough. I cannot account for every variable. That is war."

"Hah," she laughed bitterly.

"How arrogant. You still do not see it. You were the reason we are still trapped in this hellhole."

She clenched her hands together, fingers digging into her palms.

"I do not understand it. Help me understand it."

Her voice cracked with confusion and anguish. Damon stayed silent, watching her unravel.

She looked at him, teeth clenched.

"I do not understand this obsession with killing yourself. Why? Why do you glorify death? Death is not defiance. It is a coward's exit. The living are the ones who need closure. You just disappear mid sentence. Wishes, dreams, ambitions. Gone."

Her legs gave out. She dropped to her knees.

Then her voice changed.

Flat, cold and controlled yet she continued.

"You know what hurts more than watching you die. Realizing that my words will never be enough to stop you."

"I will never be enough."

She lifted her head slowly.

"And for that, I will never forgive you for betraying our promise."

Damon did not respond. He turned away, unable to meet her gaze.

He had so many things he wanted to say.

All of them collapsed into one word.

"Sorry."

She scoffed softly.

"Haha."

She stood.

"Fine. Do as you please. But know this. I am dropping the gauntlet. This time I will not lose. You will live whether you like it or not. This hell you want to escape. You are not going anywhere. I swear it by the forgotten name of the unknown god."

Her oath completed. The stigmata on her back flared with dim, ominous light.

Damon slowly turned his head. He did not want to look at her. He did not want to see a Lilith who stood against him.

Their relationship had always been built on trust. Understanding. She had always been at his side, hero or villain.

Now she was opposing him outright.

"We all make choices in this world," he whispered. "I made mine. I only hoped you would respect it."

She glared at him, fury burning in her eyes.

"I cannot. Not when you are so wrong."

He finally faced her fully. The loneliness settled in.

"Yes," he admitted silently. He felt very lonely.

"You will not win, Lilith. It is hard to play a game when the outcome is decided by your opponent."

He crossed his arms.

"Is that why you revealed the elixir? If I die, I would entrust it to you. I know you would carry out my will even if you hated me for it."

He raised his hand slightly.

"I do not even need the elixir. It is useless to a dead man. I only need to make sure you get it."

She smiled coldly.

"I will not."

He chuckled softly, looking at her with something almost tender.

"You will. You will not let Luna die. You love that girl as much as I do."

He stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"Does this not remind you of the old days? When we played cat and mouse around each other. The rules are the same. The result too. My life is on the line again."

He leaned in, brushed a kiss against her cheek.

"Well then. Good night. We have a long day ahead. I will be counting down to the day I die."

His tone was casual now, almost light, as if the truth had freed him.

Lilith bit down until she tasted blood.

"I really did not want to do this to you, Damon," she said quietly.

"But you forced my hand."

Chapter 868: A Man Who Must Leave

What did she even mean by forcing her hand? Damon would find out eventually.

Lilith Astranova was not the type of woman who gave up. She had lost to him four times, but not because she lacked a way to stop him. It was because doing so would have been cruel. Because it would have denied Damon the right to choose.

Now she had been pushed past that line.

He could hate her for it if he wanted.

He could only hate her if he was alive.

The first four times, she truly believed she could change his mind. She felt like a foolish woman who thought she could fix a man who was already too far gone. Maybe she could have, given time, but he was not giving her that option.

Her heart tightened painfully. She did not care about his defiance. She did not care about his pride or his grand ideals.

She just wanted him to live. Dammit.

As long as he survived to the very end.

Then again, what was the difference between surviving and living.

Damon had never really learned how to live. He had always been surviving. From his village, to the slums of Valtheron, to the halls of the academy. Everywhere he went, it was as if the world itself was trying to kill him.

What made it cruel was that she understood him perfectly.

Everything he said translated to one thing.

I regret your pain, but I will not stop.

That was what sorry meant.

Soft footsteps echoed behind her.

Lilith turned, her eyes cold and sharp.

"Sylvia," she whispered.

The white haired elf smiled faintly.

"Hmmm. I always thought I would be the one to sabotage you. I did not expect you to do it yourself. Wonderful work, by the way."

Lilith crossed her arms, returning the smile thinly.

"I would not be so happy if I were you. We are moving forward with plan B."

Sylvia winced, closing her eyes briefly.

"I was hoping we would not have to use such a tasteless option."

Lilith's gaze did not waver.

"Well, it has come to this, has it not. We have no choice."

Sylvia's expression grew serious. This plan was cruel. Damon would live, yes, but what would come after. What would he be forced to endure?

"Lilith," Sylvia said quietly, "you realize that if we do this, death will follow him everywhere."

Lilith clenched her teeth.

"I know that. But death follows everyone. Is that not life? A constant chase by invisible hands until it finally catches us."

Sylvia lowered her head, her voice weakening.

"Yes, but for him it will be constant. Closer than for most. Ever present. It will twist his heart. I do not know if I can."

"I did not want this either," Lilith cut in. "But Damon chose this. It was his choice. And now we are making ours. We either do nothing and let him die, or we make him live."

Sylvia hesitated, then inhaled slowly.

"If you do nothing, Sylvia, he will die. He will be lost forever, beyond your reach. As for the consequences, I will bear them. Even if he hates me for it."

Sylvia bit her lip, then sighed.

"Very well. Then we share the burden. Half the responsibility. Half of Damon's hatred."

And so their scheme began.

Damon was wrong about one thing. Not all the cards were in his hands.

In a magical world, anything was possible. And it was unwise to underestimate people willing to go to any lengths to achieve their goals.

Perhaps he had grown arrogant.

He had underestimated how terrifying Lilith Astranova could be.

That mistake would undo him.

When the dust settled, no one would be victorious. Only the broken would remain.

The world was not a romantic fantasy. Bonds shattered as easily as they formed.

...

Damon had no idea what Lilith and Sylvia were plotting. He only knew that he felt overwhelmed.

He understood that Lilith was right. But being right did not make her correct.

Life and death were natural laws. People should have the right to end their existence when they chose.

There was nothing left for him here.

"I just need that elixir."

He muttered as he slipped through the shadows, moving past patrolling chained knights with practiced ease. He headed back toward the Grinding Gate.

The number of knights had noticeably decreased. Most had been pulled away, leaving only the bare minimum behind.

"Seraph Null is preparing for war," he muttered.

When he reached the Grinding Gate district, the stench hit him immediately.

Burnt embers. Rot. Blood. Decay.

It reeked like a refugee camp.

Corpses lay scattered across the streets, recently dead. Starvation, most likely. People with open wounds staggered around, feverish and hollow eyed. Others were collecting bodies, stacking them into wagons.

He overheard them discussing disposal duties.

Those corpses would be fed to his shadow maw.

This was the aftermath of the chained knights' slaughter. Even after the incident, people continued to die. The wounded succumbed. The healthy grew sick. Hunger claimed the rest.

And his shadows benefited from the fresh dead.

Much of this was his fault.

"How can someone who brings this kind of misery into the world be worth keeping alive," he muttered. "You are wrong, Lilith."

His fist clenched.

"Some men contribute to the world by leaving it."

He was one of them. He knew that. At the very least, he was honest with himself.

Damon slipped into a hidden passage, bypassing the magical seals placed by Lyn and Sithara. He moved deeper until he entered the chamber.

Glowing eyes opened in the darkness, watching him.

He felt their gaze linger.

They did not feel hostile, so he continued forward.

As soon as he stepped fully inside, a young girl's voice echoed softly.

"You are back."

Damon raised an eyebrow. He had been careful. Silent even.

Sithara looked directly at the shadows where he was concealed.

He stepped out, his form solidifying.

"Hm. How did you sense me."

Chapter 869: Products

She smiled at him, then lifted her hand and pointed toward the floating skull.

"I didn't—he... ehm. It did."

Damon followed the motion of her finger.

The thing hovering in the air was unmistakably a human skull, bleached white and cracked with age. Pale light burned within its empty eye sockets, the glow subtly shifting as if it were looking back at him.

Damon's gaze lingered on it for a moment before he spoke.

"And what's that supposed to be?"

Before she could reply, footsteps echoed from behind the corner.

"Oh, you're back."

Lyn stepped into view, his smile wide and unrestrained.

"We've been waiting for you."

He closed the distance quickly, enthusiasm bleeding into his movements.

"Come on, we have so much to show you. You won't believe what we've been up to—oh, and you should see Maw."

Lyn seized Damon by the arm and started pulling him forward while Sithara pressed lightly at his back, urging him along. Damon let himself be dragged, allowing the momentum to carry him deeper into the underground chamber.

As they moved inside, a sharp screech sliced through the air above them.

Damon's steps slowed. He tilted his head up.

Strange cocoons clung to the ceiling, suspended in clusters. Thick, viscous fluid seeped from their surfaces, dripping slowly to the stone below. There were fewer than ten.

His mouth twisted.

"What the hell happened while I was gone."

Lyn followed his gaze, smiling as if the sight were reassuring.

"Yeah, the newborns aren't ready yet. We only have a few hundred so far. They're not that strong—simple drone sentinels at best."

Damon barely registered the explanation. He felt it instead: a faint, crawling sense of connection, like threads tugging at the edges of his awareness.

They guided him farther in until the passage opened into a wider chamber.

The first thing Damon noticed was movement.

A familiar shape circled Matia as she stood calmly at the center of the room.

Maw.

It lunged at her without warning.

Matia shifted her stance and casually smashed it aside with a barrier, the impact echoing through the chamber.

Damon recognized it instantly, despite the changes.

Maw was larger now. Still an amorphous mass, but several new mouths opened and closed across its body, flexing as if testing their purpose. The creature seemed uncertain, constantly reshaping itself.

Damon lifted his gaze.

Dozens of floating skulls and drifting shades hovered throughout the chamber.

But what truly caught his attention were the knights.

Armored figures stood in rigid formation, perfectly still, like statues carved from steel.

Damon felt it then, life.

A faint connection tugged at him, familiar and unsettling. Yet there was no sense of self within them.

Only instinct.

"Hm."

The sound slipped out unconsciously.

"Those are the second type of drones," Sithara said quietly. "Humanoid models. We had Maw intentionally shape them to resemble humans, only on the outside. Under those helmets, they are anything but."

Lyn crossed his arms, clearly pleased.

"We've been experimenting. We made a significant breakthrough. Maw is an excellent specimen. These drones are the same ones you saw in the cocoons. They're the weakest combat type Maw can produce, but they're born quickly, low quality corpses are enough."

Damon watched Lyn speak, his cadence measured, his confidence practiced, like a seasoned researcher from a magical institution.

Then again, Lyn was one of the founders of Lysithara. Or would be in the future.

Sithara stepped closer and pulled out a neatly written report, holding it out with both hands. Her eyes lingered on Damon's face, searching.

He hesitated, confused for a moment.

Then it clicked.

Iris used to look like this.

Whenever she wanted praise but would never ask for it.

That girl had been all sharp edges and fire. Sithara was the opposite.

Damon reached out and placed a hand gently on her head.

"Good job, Sithara. I'm proud of you."

Her face brightened instantly.

Prodigy or not, she was still a child.

"As you can see," Lyn continued, "we tested their combat capabilities. They're around first class advancement, slightly weaker individually. But their hive mind allows coordination, which makes them far more dangerous."

Damon stepped closer to the knights. They appeared to be wearing silver plate armor and wielding swords.

He reached out and tapped one.

The sound was wrong.

The armor wasn't separate.

"They're like bugs," Lyn said, quill scratching across parchment, "except instead of an exoskeleton, they possess a biological carapace resembling magical metal."

"Try hitting one," Lyn gestured.

Damon didn't hesitate.

He raised his hand and struck casually.

The drone was sent flying, slamming into the wall with enough force to crack stone. Red fluid splattered across the surface.

Slowly, unnaturally, it stood back up.

Damon frowned.

That strike had weight. Enough to kill a first class combatant outright.

Lyn's smile widened.

"They adapt to damage. The initial models had blue blood and poor durability. After Matia destroyed them repeatedly, the hive learned. Maw created improved versions. The blood color was changed so they could blend in with real people."

Damon flipped through the report.

The original models were grotesque, barely humanoid. The newer versions were refined, efficient, and disturbingly convincing.

Matia approached him and gave a slight nod. She said nothing.

Damon returned it with a small smile.

"There's a limit," Lyn continued, his tone more serious now. "High-end models are costly. The better the food Maw receives, the better the result. That means powerful corpses and massive amounts of organic material."

Damon lowered the report and looked around the chamber.

"Then it should be possible to create specialized models. Winged units for the sky. Mining variants. Dragons, wyverns. Ground tanks shaped like drakes. Sea serpents. An army that never tires and never hungers."

Sithara nodded slowly.

"Yes. It's possible. But extremely expensive. We fed Maw millions of corpses during testing."

Damon nodded.

"I see. I assume these drones aren't your best work."

Lyn's grin turned almost boyish.

"I'm glad you asked. Lazarak is in the inner chamber, working with our best creations. I can't wait for you to see them. By my analysis, even you will be impressed."

Damon glanced at Matia.

She nodded once.

If Matia was impressed, then Damon was very interested.

Chapter 870: Shadow Drones

He followed them deeper into another section of the underground chamber, one he didn't recognize. That alone told him everything. This place hadn't existed when he left.

Damon stepped through the threshold and slowed.

The environment changed instantly.

The air felt sterile and clean. The floor was smooth and reflective, polished to the point that faint reflections stared back at him with every step. Strange devices lined the walls, arcane instruments, containment arrays, unfamiliar mechanisms humming softly with restrained power.

But what drew his eyes were the black cocoons.

They were everywhere.

Capsule-like, embedded into the walls and floor, each one pulsing faintly as if something inside was breathing.

For a brief moment, Damon felt like he had walked into an illegal alchemist's laboratory, the kind whispered about in back alleys. A place where immortality was chased through cruelty and bodies were reduced to ingredients.

Ironically, this was a place for inhuman experimentation.

Just not for immortality.

Damon moved forward and spotted a young man in his late teens at most, standing before one of the cocoons. He held a parchment and quill, carefully documenting minute shifts in the structure of the capsule.

The young man turned, smiling easily.

"Welcome back, Damon."

His gaze flicked over Damon's face, lingering for half a second longer than necessary. One eyebrow rose.

"Why are you in such a sour mood, my friend?"

Damon reached up and brushed his cheek absently.

Was he really that easy to read?

"It's a long story."

Sithara suddenly darted past him, nearly bouncing on her feet as she ran up to the young man.

"Show him! Show him the advanced combat drones!"

The young man laughed softly and patted her head.

"Of course. Of course."

He turned and began walking down the length of the lab, gesturing for them to follow.

"While you were gone, we kept ourselves busy. At first, the drones Maw created were meant purely for surveillance, the skull models and the floating shades."

Damon frowned slightly as he walked.

"The shades too, huh."

Lyn nodded.

"They're part of the hive mind as well. We tested whether Maw could replicate shade-like constructs, and it worked. They have slightly more offensive capability than the skull models, but their primary function is still surveillance."

Damon nodded, absorbing the information as they continued until the space opened into a wider chamber.

This one felt different.

Standing in formation were knights, an entire squad, but unlike the earlier models, these wore black armor. Nearby stood cavalry units mounted on equally unnatural horses, their bodies unnervingly still.

And then Damon saw them.

Five massive beasts with wings folded tight against their bodies, far closer to wyverns than anything else.

Lazarak raised a hand and pointed toward the black-armored knights.

"These are third-generation combat units. Unlike the basic models, these possess a limited degree of independent thought."

He crossed his arms, clearly pleased.

"Pretty neat, right?"

Damon raised an eyebrow.

Beneath the armor, he could feel it, shadows. Not metaphorically. Literally. The same essence as Maw, layered and refined.

"How much did these cost?"

Lazarak glanced at Lyn and Sithara. Both smiled.

"You should read the report."

Damon flipped through the parchment, skimming until he reached the resource requirements.

He almost coughed.

"...That many corpses?"

Lyn raised a finger.

"Don't forget the magical ores, mana crystal and mana cores."

Damon's eye twitched.

"These are more expensive than regular knights."

"But their power justifies it," Lazarak replied calmly.

"Try one."

Sithara gestured eagerly.

Damon studied them for a moment. Third class advancement, just like him in this world. Having even a handful of units at that level was no small thing.

He approached one and gave a simple command.

"Step forward."

The knight obeyed instantly.

Then Damon spoke again.

"Destroy me."

Nothing happened.

Sithara shook her head.

"I don't think they're allowed to follow commands like that. Try sparring."

Damon nodded and corrected himself.

"Fight me."

The world blurred.

The next thing Damon knew, he was slammed into a wall.

It was fast, far faster than he had anticipated.

Matia glanced at him.

"This model has already adapted to my combat style. You shouldn't underestimate them."

Damon pushed himself upright. With a flash step, he reappeared beside the drone and drove his palm upward, launching it several meters into the air before it crashed down.

Before he could follow up, it rolled aside and grabbed his legs.

The world spun as he was hurled back into the wall.

Damon smiled.

He melted into the shadows and surged forward, reappearing above it. He drove a punch down with intent—

A shield formed instantly.

The impact sent a shockwave rippling outward.

A blade flashed from behind the shield, slicing the air and severing a few strands of Damon's hair.

He circled, but the shield moved seamlessly to guard its back.

Damon's eyes flicked to the dent in its armor.

It was already repairing itself.

"...Impressive."

And there was an entire squad of them.

"Let's see how you handle fire."

Ashborn flames erupted from Damon's hand—

The drone vanished into the shadows.

It reappeared beneath him.

Damon twisted midair, dodging, then drove his foot down.

"Hmm. I've seen enough."

With a casual motion, he tore the drone's arm clean off and tossed it aside.

They were strong, but Damon was stronger.

Still, this thing would be troublesome.

"This black-armored unit is an infantry variant," Lazarak said evenly. "The one you fought was a tank model."

Sithara nodded.

"There are cavalry, archer, assassin, and mage types." She gestured toward the wyvern-like beasts. "And the most expensive, air units. Creating flying shadow drones is extremely resource-intensive."

"All models retain fragments of independent intelligence," Lazarak added. "Though they remain bound to the hive."

He glanced at Maw, shifting and reshaping nearby.

"Since Maw is a shadow entity, they all inherit that trait. Unfortunately, we've exhausted our materials for now."

He smiled faintly.

"Shadow drones. A fitting name. How does it feel, having your own shadow army?"

Damon crossed his arms.

"...Still too weak to matter."

He paused, then shrugged.

"But it's progress. With a few years—and a few wars—I could build an army. Assuming I live that long."

Lazarak met his gaze, smiling knowingly.

"You will."

Sithara glanced at the damaged model.

"Also, could you not show off? Why did you have to break it? This model is expensive."

Damon awkwardly scratched his head.