

Living Shadow 144

Chapter 144 Leverage

The warmth of the sun streamed through the window of a lavish, immaculately decorated dorm room. Everything about the space screamed wealth and luxury, the kind of place only the ultra-rich could afford.

On the grand bed lay a young man with dark hair, half his body draped in the covers as he slept peacefully. His physique was pristine, without a single scar to mar his lean, well-toned muscles. His face, though not strikingly handsome, carried a charm that many would consider appealing.

He stirred gently in his sleep, his peaceful demeanor shattered as a jolt of realization caused him to wake abruptly.

His dark eyes widened as he took in the unfamiliar room. The faint, delicate fragrance in the air triggered a sense of familiarity, though the room itself did not. The architecture was recognizable—he lived in the same building, after all. But this room was far superior to his in every way, from the décor to the furnishings. This was none other than the War Halls.

Surprise mingled with suspicion as he sat up, scanning his surroundings. His arms were unbound, his movements unrestricted. There were no chains, no magical seals to hinder him.

Spreading his shadow perception, he scoured the space for any threats. None were present. His eyes darted around, taking note of every detail—until he noticed something unusual.

He didn't see his shadow.

"Where is it... that damn..."

His gaze snapped toward the corridor leading to what he knew was a large bath. There it was—his shadow—leaning against the wall by the door. Its form, an inky silhouette with no tangible substance, appeared to be sulking.

If ever a shadow could convey emotion, this one did so perfectly. It stood with crossed arms, its posture akin to that of a child denied its favorite toy.

Damon's expression darkened as irritation flared within him. The last time he had dealt with this thing, it had almost driven him to kill Xander Ravenscroft. Worse still, it had acted on its own attacking Lilith Astranova, a decision Damon hadn't sanctioned.

"Get over here, you bastard," he growled through gritted teeth.

The shadow hesitated, throwing a balled fist toward the direction of the bath as if muttering inaudible curses. Then, begrudgingly, it slid across the room to his side, where it belonged.

Damon glared at it coldly, his patience already worn thin.

The shadow crossed its arms again, its stance screaming, What are you looking at?

Damon sighed, forcing himself to let go of his irritation. The facts remained: he wasn't chained, he wasn't being dragged to Valerion for a trial and execution, and he wasn't dead. Instead, he was in what was clearly a woman's dorm room.

Questions flooded his mind, and his shadow seemed to have the answers.

"Alright, start talking," he demanded.

The shadow shrugged, rolling its fingers around its head in exaggerated motions.

Damon narrowed his eyes, understanding the gesture all too well. It was mocking him. The wretch was essentially saying, Are you crazy? I'm a shadow. I don't have a voice. How can I talk?

He clenched his fists, his voice dropping into a dangerous growl. "You know what I meant."

The shadow nodded, though its posture suggested it was just as annoyed with him as he was with it.

Over the next few moments, the shadow conveyed its observations through gestures and movements. Damon pieced together the events, his own conjectures filling in the gaps. By the end of it, a sense of unease settled over him.

He wasn't in immediate danger—his wounds had healed completely—but he was in an entirely new mess. His secret was out, or at least part of it. Lilith Astranova had figured out what he was. She knew he had killed and cannibalized seven students. Worse, she knew about Carmen Vale—a death Damon regretted more than any other.

And yet, she hadn't reported him. That much was obvious; otherwise, he wouldn't be in her room.

"She has leverage over me," he muttered to himself.

Not only had she defeated him, but she had captured him as well. Damon sighed, leaning back against the bedframe.

"I let my guard down."

It was all a series of unfortunate events. He had operated under the assumption that Lilith was still under house arrest. But clearly, she had been released long enough to plot against him. She must have remained indoors, waiting for him to lower his defenses before striking.

And strike she did. Now, Damon was left to navigate the aftermath.

He had prepared himself for the worst. A convincing argument to pin it all on Marcus, an elaborate escape plan to become a fugitive, perhaps fleeing to another country or continent with his sister. Damon had imagined countless scenarios, all of them grim. Yet, never did he imagine that he'd simply wake up in a bed.

The sheer normalcy of this outcome was unnerving, almost more terrifying than the alternatives. His instincts screamed at him to stay on guard.

The real question lingered in his mind—what did Lilith Astranova want? Why hadn't she reported him? What was her endgame? These thoughts gnawed at him as his shadow quietly filled him in on the situation, confirming that he was, in fact, still alive and in her custody.

Relief and terror warred within him. He didn't know whether to feel grateful for this reprieve or dread whatever fate awaited him. The only certainty was that Lilith herself held the answers, and as if summoned by his thoughts, the sound of footsteps echoed down the corridor.

The door swung open, and a figure stepped inside. Damon's breath caught. A beautiful woman with fiery red hair walked into the room, her wet hair clinging to her skin. She didn't so much as glance toward the bed where he lay, her demeanor calm, almost indifferent.

But it wasn't her composed attitude that startled him—it was what she was wearing.

Or rather, what she wasn't wearing.

A towel. That was all.

Damon blinked, his gaze fixating involuntarily, his mind momentarily scrambling. The sight of Lilith Astranova in nothing but a towel was something he hadn't prepared for in any of his imagined scenarios.

As if sensing the weight of his gaze, her sharp, emerald eyes narrowed. Slowly, deliberately, she turned her head to look in his direction.

Damon gulped, a lump forming in his throat. Her gaze dropped to meet his, and for a moment, silence hung in the air, heavy with tension.

Then her eyes flicked downward, toward herself. Her expression shifted ever so slightly, a mix of realization and something unreadable crossing her face.