

Living Shadow 147

Chapter 147 One Way Road

The unknown god.

No one truly understood what "unknown" meant in this context. It wasn't that this god governed mysteries or obscurities, but rather that part of his divine domain had been made taboo by the Goddess of Doom within the world of Aetherus.

The tale was as old as the ruins scattered across the land. Before Ashcroft's destruction, the demon lord had reportedly said something blasphemous before the statue of the Goddess of Doom, an act that provoked her wrath. He was erased from existence. After that, it was said that part of the Unknown God's domain became forbidden, its very mention an affront to the divine order.

But Damon wasn't entirely convinced.

It was all speculation to him—stories passed down through generations. Ashcroft was supposed to have been an ancient demon lord from an age long past, and Damon wasn't even certain if he'd ever existed at all.

Some legends claimed that the Unknown God would one day resurrect Ashcroft, bringing him upon the world again. But Damon doubted that, too. He wasn't even sure if the Goddess of Doom, or the gods in general, were real.

He remembered the works of certain scholars from his history lessons on the demon wars. Those writings claimed that the Goddess of Doom had created Aetherus, and for a time, lesser gods managed the world on her behalf. Things only spiraled into chaos when the Unknown God first appeared.

Civilizations collapsed, leaving behind ruins that still stood as silent witnesses to their downfall. Among the goddess's creations, some races had allegedly been corrupted, becoming the very first demons.

And those demons had worshipped the Unknown God.

To Damon, it all sounded like propaganda crafted by the goddess-worshipping races to justify their hatred of demons. History was written by the victors, after all.

Even so, one thing was undeniable—the world of Aetherus was mostly unexplored. Travel between kingdoms and continents was limited to uniquely charted roads, sea routes, airways known as the Golden Roads, or teleportation gateways.

The ancient civilizations had been far more advanced than the present era. If a god had caused their collapse, it might explain a lot.

Or perhaps it was just their own hubris.

Damon's gaze never left Lilith's back. The mark etched into her skin was unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Carved in white and gold ink, it resembled a crest with four wings—two black and two white. At its center was a swirling abyss, an eye blacker than night itself.

Damon shuddered. The mark felt alive, like the abyss was staring back at him, peering into the depths of his soul.

It was intricate, more terrifying than anything he'd seen in books. He felt an almost primal sense of reverence and fear. The symbol seemed to embody ultimate righteousness and ultimate evil at once. It was pure yet tainted, beautiful yet grotesque.

He couldn't tear his eyes away until his shadow coiled protectively around his feet, pulling him back. Cold sweat dripped down his forehead as he forced himself to look away.

Lilith, sensing his unease, slowly adjusted her clothes, allowing the mark to fade from view.

Damon tried to regain his composure, forcing a smirk as he met her gaze.

"That's some nice ink you've got there. How much did it cost? I know a guy in Valerion who can remove ink, you know."

Lilith sighed softly. She recognized his denial. She had been in that same place once—refusing to acknowledge the weight of what the mark meant.

"Maybe," she replied, her tone quiet and distant. "But some marks aren't meant to be removed."

"It's a stigmata—a mark of a god. It's not unique to me. A saint or apostle favored by a god can receive it," Lilith said, her voice calm but laced with an undercurrent of tension.

Her eyes shifted down to Damon's shadow, watching its subtle, unnatural movements.

"It's a branding by a god, nothing more. It doesn't have any inherent power—or at least, none that I've discovered—aside from what influences my attribute.... And fate."

Damon blinked, processing her words, but his confusion only deepened.

"What?"

Lilith sighed, brushing a lock of hair away from her face as her gaze fixed on his shadow again.

"My original magic attribute wasn't void. It was space," she explained, her tone carrying the weight of a painful memory.

"I only received the void attribute on the day of my first class advancement, along with my first class. I imagine your shadow is similar—granted by something... or someone."

Her eyes met his, searching for answers.

"What temple did you find it in? Or was it in the temple of the goddess? Did you come across any strange marks? Did you go to a religious site? Did you find words carved into stone? Were you resentful? Did you say a prayer—or the name of a god?"

Damon raised his hand, stopping her barrage of questions.

"No temples," he said firmly, his voice steady. His shadow's origins weren't rooted in faith or divine intervention, but in something far darker.

He hesitated, a flicker of memory crossing his mind. Years ago, deep in the woods, he had stumbled upon something—a set of nihilistic words carved into a half-buried stone entwined in the roots of an ancient tree. Those words had changed him, shaping his worldview and his life.

His eyes widened slightly as the memory resurfaced, but he quickly narrowed them, dismissing the thought.

"That couldn't be it," he muttered to himself. The stone bore no divine symbols, just a bleak, despairing view of existence.

Damon straightened, meeting Lilith's gaze.

"I don't know about you, but I didn't get my power from a god," he said, his tone resolute.

Lilith's brow furrowed slightly, her curiosity growing.

Damon bit his lip, debating whether to reveal more. Lilith Astranova had just shared one of her greatest secrets, and she already seemed to have a grasp on his own. What harm could there be in full transparency? Besides, he needed allies.

"My shadow didn't come from a god—or any divine being. I don't have faith in any god, even if I occasionally call on the goddess out of habit," he admitted, glancing down at the shifting darkness beneath him.

"My power came from a creature—a dark, viscous entity that fused with my shadow in the Evil Forest."

Lilith shook her head, an uncharacteristic expression of doubt and disbelief crossing her face.

"No, that can't be it," she said firmly.

"When I defeated you, my stigmata reacted to your shadow."

She narrowed her eyes, her voice dropping into an almost dangerous whisper.

"Your shadow... we can ask it directly."

Damon frowned, but the curiosity in him burned just as fiercely. He sighed and knelt down beside her. Depending on the shadow's answer, he might very well be in serious trouble.

Lilith crouched, her breath shaky but filled with hope.

She asked, her voice steady despite the tension in her clenched fists,

"Do you share the same origin as my stigmata and my attribute? Are you from the same god?"

The shadow beneath them shifted, its movements deliberate and measured as though considering the question. For a moment, it was still. Then, slowly, it nodded and gave them a thumbs-up.

Lilith exhaled in visible relief, her shoulders relaxing.

Damon, on the other hand, felt his blood run cold. His face paled as the realization sank in.

It was official. He was royally screwed.