

Living Shadow 152

Chapter 152 Them

"What are they talking about...?"

Xander's soft whisper was barely audible as he leaned slightly toward Leona, who had her eyes closed, her beastkin ears twitching as she strained to pick up the conversation happening across the dining hall.

Damon hadn't been seen since yesterday, and now, when he finally resurfaced, he was seated with none other than Lilith Astranova—the student council president. Naturally, curiosity ran rampant, especially when Leona had immediately speculated that Damon might be in trouble for setting the Evil Forest ablaze.

At first, Xander had dismissed her nosiness, trying to play the role of a noble knight, upholding honor and all that nonsense. But the moment she started eavesdropping, his curiosity got the better of him. Who would have thought their self-righteous, princely classmate was just as desperate to get the scoop?

"Hmm... she said something about cooking for him," Leona murmured, her brows furrowing in confusion.

Xander blinked. "Cooking for him? Are you serious? What the hell is going on right now?"

He turned to Evangeline, who sat there, arms crossed, her expression fierce as she stared daggers in Damon's direction.

"What do you think?" he asked, his voice skeptical. "Leona must've heard wrong."

Evangeline stole a quick glance at Sylvia, who was absently pushing her food around with her fork, completely lost in thought.

Biting her lip, she huffed.

"I really don't care right now. So what if he gets in trouble with the student council president? It's his fault."

Leona, however, remained focused on her eavesdropping efforts, despite how difficult it was with the entire dining hall buzzing with whispers. Damon's sudden reappearance with the student council president had the first-years on edge, and speculation ran wild.

"I don't think he's in trouble..." Leona muttered, tilting her head. "He's still wearing his usual gloomy expression."

Xander sneered. "You mean his edgelord expression?"

Leona smacked his arm, making him wince.

"Didn't you lose to him?"

Xander scoffed. "We all did... and I would have won—"

"Sounds like a sore loser to me." Leona smirked. "You might be an even bigger sore loser than Damon."

She turned to Sylvia. "Isn't that right?"

Sylvia, who had been in her own world, slowly blinked as she realized Leona was addressing her.

"Hmm? Ah... yes. Sorry, did you say something?"

Evangeline's expression grew colder. "We were talking about how Damon is a sore loser."

Sylvia paused for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah... he is."

If Damon was losing, he never accepted it quietly. Especially against Xander. He always pulled something ridiculous, whether it was flipping the entire game set or coming up with some convoluted excuse to avoid admitting defeat. Even in a simple card game, he had knocked over the deck and claimed it was an accident.

He was a sore loser... but she had always found it amusing. Seeing him sulk or pout over a loss had been strangely endearing. A childish side of him he probably didn't even realize he showed.

A small, thin smile tugged at her lips.

But just as quickly, it faded. Her expression darkened as her gaze drifted toward Damon, seated with Lilith Astranova.

'I wonder what trouble he's gotten into now... will he even tell me about it?'

She glanced at the book beside her. She had taken it out of habit, intending to share it with Damon like she always did.

But now... she wasn't sure if he even wanted to associate with someone like her anymore. A sheltered princess. Maybe he found her annoying.

Now that she thought about it... he did express his annoyance often.

Although... it wasn't just with her. It was with all of them.

Even then... he still hung around them.

Her eyes flickered toward his usual seat, a spot that now remained empty. She bit her lip.

While Xander and Leona remained oblivious, Evangeline noticed.

Of course she did. How could she not notice the look on her friend's face?

She clenched her fist under the table.

"That's it... I'm gonna kill him."

Evangeline's glare did not go unnoticed.

Damon could feel the weight of her angry gaze on him, sharp and unrelenting. Sylvia, too, kept stealing glances in his direction, though hers carried less fury and more uncertainty.

'What's their problem...'

Although he was more concerned about Evangeline's glare.

'Is she still sour about the evaluation...?'

He sighed. He had bigger things to worry about. He'd deal with whatever came next later.

When he stabbed Sylvia, he had done so under the assumption that she would eventually forgive him. Her personality had been taken into account—she was not the type to hold grudges forever. And he needed her. Her vast library of knowledge was invaluable, making it crucial to stay in her good graces, at least in the long run.

'Even though I did sort of betray her...'

Lilith smiled at him, her green eyes gleaming with amusement.

"Your friends are really interesting."

Damon was about to shoot back with a They're not my friends, but he stopped himself.

It felt immature to keep repeating the same thing.

"...Yeah, I guess they are."

Lilith's smile widened slightly, though it carried a knowing edge.

"Although, I don't appreciate eavesdropping."

She flicked her fingers subtly, weaving a spell that cut off the surrounding noise, isolating them from the rest of the dining hall.

Still unsatisfied, she stood from her chair across from him and sat down right beside him.

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Lilith shook her head, leaning in slightly.

"It's nothing. I just find the whispering annoying. Now we can talk freely."

Damon exhaled in mild irritation but didn't push her away.

"Fine. Then what's the first move? One slip-up, and we die."

Lilith nodded, her demeanor turning serious.

"For now, let's refer to our great enemy as 'Them' or use some kind of code. We have some resistance against divination, but who knows what They are capable of?"

Damon took a slow bite of his food, chewing carefully before putting his fork down.

"Where do we start first...?" He let out a bitter chuckle. "Not to sound like I'm whining, but we're not going to last long at this rate."

Lilith smirked.

"You are whining."

Damon shot her a glare, but she ignored it.

"We start by building up funds—clean money that can't be traced. We need a base of operations, tangible power, personal power. We need to stay under the radar. Only after securing these things can we begin recruiting."

Damon sighed, leaning back slightly.

"That's assuming we even find recruits who'd be suicidal enough to join us."

Lilith's smile took on a cold edge.

"We will." She tapped the table lightly with her nails. "You don't reach the top of the world without making enemies... and They have too many."

Damon ran a hand through his hair.

"So we really are going to die after all..." He exhaled, staring at the ceiling before shaking his head. "But since we're not dead yet... wouldn't it be better to join Them instead?"

Lilith's expression shifted, intrigued.

"Think about it," Damon continued. "We can't destroy a force that big from the outside. But what if we joined them? Got close enough to learn how they operate? It'd be easier to dismantle them from within."

Lilith paused, considering his words carefully.

"...That's actually a really good idea," she murmured. A slow, calculating smile crept onto her lips.

"Join them, huh?"