

## Living Shadow 176

### Chapter 176 Growth Period

Back-to-Back looked at Damon with a thin smile, though unease twisted in his gut.

The boy's eyes were cold—too cold. Was this even the same reckless young man he once knew?

"So," Back-to-Back said, keeping his tone light, "you want to settle accounts, but you've got someone else fighting your battles for you. Seems like someone finally tamed you."

Damon narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't get tamed."

Back-to-Back smirked. There it was—a reaction. The little runt he knew was still in there somewhere.

"Could've fooled me." He tilted his head. "But fine. Prove it."

Damon let out a soft chuckle.

"Enough with the manipulation. You're going to spout some nonsense, try to bait me into fighting you one-on-one, then look for a chance to take me hostage and escape."

Back-to-Back chuckled, shaking his head.

"What's your mistress called?"

Damon's expression didn't change. "Her name is Lilith Astranova. And she's not my mistress."

Back-to-Back's smirk faltered.

Astranova?

Who wouldn't know that name? The Astranova family was a ducal house—powerful beyond measure. But why would a noble of that level have anything to do with some lowborn like Damon?

He'd figure that out after he escaped.

"In that case," Back-to-Back spread his arms mockingly, "come get your payback like a man."

Damon watched him coldly.

"Pride leads to death. I learned that from you. But I do have dignity—so fine. Let's fight."

Back-to-Back suppressed a smile, glancing at Lilith.

Strange...

She wasn't interfering. Did she not realize he was looking for a chance to escape?

Damon pulled out his dagger, glancing at Lilith before speaking.

But his words weren't what Back-to-Back expected.

"Pin him down more."

Lilith casually waved her hand, and the crushing weight of space tightened around Back-to-Back's body.

"What the—"

Damon stepped closer, dagger in hand.

"You little—"

"Relax," Damon said flatly. "I'll make good on my word. I already knew you'd try something, so I was content sending you to the goddess with little grievances."

Then he raised his dagger and stabbed Back-to-Back.

The blade released venom from its hilt, and he didn't stop.

Again.

And again.

Each stab was in a non-lethal area, but the poison spread like wildfire.

Back-to-Back rasped, his vision blurring.

"This... you're using the concoctions... you learned... from that bitch Gubi..."

Damon ignored him and continued slicing tendons and nerves.

"Stay still. I need you to bleed out a bit."

Lilith watched the brutalization unfold, her expression unreadable. She knew bits and pieces about Damon's history with the elf, but witnessing his cruelty firsthand was something else entirely.

Back-to-Back coughed, blood spilling from his lips. "You... aren't fighting... fair..."

Damon's face remained emotionless.

He didn't react.

Didn't hesitate.

Didn't give Back-to-Back a single opening to manipulate him.

"There. That should be enough." He stepped back, wiping the blood from his hands. "Now I just need to wait until you're half-dead, and then we can fight."

Back-to-Back let out a strangled growl, trying to struggle.

Damon easily disarmed him, yanking his daggers away and tossing them to Lilith. That left Back-to-Back with only his bow and quiver—both useless against his restraints.

Damon stood over him, reeking of blood.

"Before you say this is unfair... life isn't fair. You make do with what you get." He smirked, tilting his head mockingly.

"Your words, not mine. Oh, and by the way—I am playing fair."

He gestured toward himself.

"You're in First Class Advancement. I'm not even close. This is as fair as it gets."

His shadow stirred beneath him.

"Go look for the magic crystals," he commanded.

Then he glanced at Lilith.

"I'll take the ones with low purity to boost my power. That should be fine with you, right?"

Lilith's emerald eyes drifted to Back-to-Back, watching as the poisons slowly took their toll.

"Hmm... I suppose so. You can have the lesser ones." She tapped her chin.

"Although, I'm more surprised you don't suffer any side effects from absorbing that many magic crystals. Most people can only absorb mana cores from monsters after the First advancement, and even those in First Class Advancement have a finite limit."

Damon turned around, his shadow pointing eagerly toward a crate nearby.

He didn't particularly care for Lilith's analysis at the moment. He had other matters to attend to.

With a swift motion, he stabbed his dagger into the crate and pried the wooden top open, revealing a stash of mid-level magic crystals. They weren't the highest purity, but they would do.

Without hesitation, he flipped the crate toward his shadow.

It devoured them instantly.

A familiar notification flashed before his eyes.

[You have gained +946 mana.]

A surge of heat exploded through his body as the influx of mana coursed through his veins, rushing into his magic circuits. His heart swelled with power, and the sheer overload sent waves of darkness rippling outward.

He staggered, falling to his knees with a groan.

Lilith watched with mild concern, but her expression remained composed.

Back-to-Back, however, convulsed in shock. He could feel Damon's power rising, his own strength dwindling in comparison.

But Damon wasn't done.

He pushed open another crate of magic crystals, their glow illuminating his face. Without hesitation, his shadow surged forward, devouring them all.

More power.

More mana.

More fuel.

[You have gained +999 mana.]

[You have gained +2452 mana.]

[You have gained...]

[You have gained...]

Damon gasped, his breath ragged as he struggled to steady himself.

He reached for another crate.

Then another.

His shadows devoured them whole, swallowing millions of zeni worth of magic crystals without a second thought. The vast fortune meant nothing to him. Not now.

All that mattered was power.

By the time he stopped, his body was overflowing with mana.

Far more than he could control.

Shadows swirled around him, his presence growing heavier—tangible in its sheer intensity. The shadows at his feet deepened, distorting the air around him like a living abyss.

His heart was full.

Damon glanced at the empty crates. Normally, he might have lamented the loss of wealth, but now?

Now, the only thing he cared about was Back-to-Back.

It was time to end this.

He opened his system panel, ready to distribute his attribute points and study his newly acquired skill.

Because the next time he moved—

Back-to-Back would die.