

Living Shadow 28

Chapter 28 Lilith Astranova

Damon didn't head straight into the library. Instead, he made a detour to the infirmary to have his injuries treated. It was a routine he had grown accustomed to, something he carried out almost mechanically. The healers worked quickly, their magic mending the bruises and cuts Marcus and his group had left on him.

Once patched up, Damon returned to the library. He immersed himself in a few books, letting their words distract him from the day's frustrations. Eventually, he trudged off to his classes.

The rest of the day was dominated by combat training, leaving little opportunity to speak with Evangeline Brightwater. Not that he wanted to.

The hours passed quickly, but Damon's mood soured with each passing moment. Every glance at Marcus and his lackeys stoked the anger burning in his chest. His hands trembled, not from fear, but from the dark desire creeping into his thoughts.

'I've already killed Lark,' he thought grimly. 'Might as well finish off the whole group.'

It was a dog-eat-dog world, and Damon had long accepted that as the truth. The strong preyed on the weak, and if he didn't fight back, he would be devoured.

He clenched his fists, his nails biting into his palms. Their deaths wouldn't bother him. If anything, he'd lose sleep worrying about getting caught, not over the loss of their lives. That's how deep his anger ran.

Once classes were over, Damon made himself scarce, slipping away before Evangeline could try speaking to him again. He had no patience for her noble politeness today.

He arrived at the War Halls early, long before the other students. His room awaited, filled with books he still needed to finish. Socializing was out of the question; he was an outcast, a lone shadow among a sea of faces that either ignored or despised him.

Closing the door behind him, Damon sat down with one of the texts, his mind drifting between the words on the page and the events of the day.

'Hopefully tomorrow won't be like today,' he thought. He didn't believe it, but the faint hope was enough to keep him going.

He buried himself in his reading, pushing the anger down into the depths of his mind. If he was lucky, it would all fade away by morning.

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Somewhere in the forest on the outskirts of the academy, a red-haired young woman with striking emerald-green eyes walked through the thick darkness. Her presence radiated authority, and her curvaceous figure only enhanced her beauty, though it was the sharp intensity of her gaze that truly defined her.

She was Lilith Astranova, the student council president. Despite being only a second-year student, she had risen to the prestigious role through sheer power and competence. Her exceptional skill and tenacity set her apart, earning her respect and fear in equal measure.

Tonight, she had taken on an unusual task. A student, Lark Bonaire, had been reported missing by his friends. After investigating, she was convinced this wasn't just a case of someone sneaking off to party in Athor's Sanctuary, the town nearest to the academy.

Her inquiries had brought her here, deep into the forest. The academy had launched a discreet search, but Lilith, driven by her sharp instincts and an unshakable curiosity, decided to conduct her own investigation.

The canopy of leaves above blocked most of the moonlight, casting the forest in almost impenetrable darkness. Lilith stopped for a moment and looked up.

"The second moon is already out... How quickly the days pass," she murmured to herself.

Her mind replayed the last sighting of Lark Bonaire—a fleeting glimpse behind a building near the academy. From there, she had pieced together clues leading her to the woods. Yet, the search was proving tedious, and her patience was beginning to wear thin.

Just as she was about to turn back, her keen eyes caught something unusual—a deep claw mark etched into the bark of a tree. She approached it cautiously, tracing the grooves with her fingers.

"What kind of creature made this?" she wondered aloud.

The marks didn't match anything she was familiar with. Lilith pressed onward, following faint traces of disturbance in the foliage until the rotten tang of blood reached her nose. It was faint but unmistakable.

Reaching into the folds of her uniform, she retrieved a small crystal. Pressing her palm against it, she channeled her magic, causing it to emit a bright, fluorescent glow that banished the darkness around her.

The illuminated scene made her emerald eyes widen in shock. A nearby tree was splintered as if something massive had been hurled into it. Bloodstained fragments of the academy uniform were scattered across the ground. She traced her gaze further, noting broken branches and scraps of torn fabric caught in the undergrowth.

"This uniform... It must belong to Lark Bonaire," she deduced.

Lilith followed the trail of destruction. Crushed shrubs and snapped branches led her deeper into the forest until she spotted something snagged on a low-hanging branch—a pager. She plucked it carefully and examined it.

"An academy-issued pager," she noted, turning it over in her hands.

"Lark Bonaire was attacked here. Judging by the direction of the trail, the assailant likely came from beyond the barrier."

Crossing the academy's protective barrier was no trivial matter, yet the trail ended abruptly as soon as she passed its boundary. Lilith scoured the area for further clues, but there was nothing—no more blood, no tracks, only silence.

"Lark Bonaire was killed," she concluded grimly, gripping the pager tightly.

"His body... taken by something beyond the barrier."

Her thoughts darkened as she examined the invisible boundary separating the academy from the dangerous wilds beyond.

"But how did something breach the barrier unnoticed? Could this have been the work of a demon?" she mused, before shaking her head.

"No... the academy's wards would have detected a demon immediately. And these claw marks—"

She glanced back at the tree.

"—they don't match any demonic or monster species I know."

Returning to where she first found the claw marks, Lilith bent down, meticulously studying the footprints left in the disturbed earth. She spotted Lark Bonaire's distinct shoe prints, alongside larger,

inhuman tracks. However, her sharp eyes caught something peculiar—a second set of human footprints, nearly obscured by the chaos.

"Someone else was here," she muttered, narrowing her eyes.

She retraced the trail from a new perspective, trying to piece together what had happened. Suddenly, the monster's tracks seemed to morph into human footprints.

"They weren't two separate beings," she realized, her breath catching. "A human turned into a monster..."

Lilith replayed the sequence in her mind.

"Lark came here, following someone. That person transformed into a monster and attacked him. Afterward, they tried to make it look like they disappeared beyond the barrier, but... no, that's not right. They wanted us to think it was a monster from beyond the barrier. Clever..."

Her gaze lingered on the spot where the transformation had occurred.

"If it weren't for this mistake, I might have been fooled," she admitted, smiling faintly.

"Whoever you are, mystery man... you're smart. But not smart enough.... You should have tried being more meticulous."

With a wave of her hand, she erased the footprints, ensuring no one else would discover what she had uncovered.

She searched the area one last time for any additional clues but found none. Satisfied, Lilith straightened up and pulled her pager from her jacket.

Pressing it to her ear, she spoke with a calm, authoritative tone.

"Good evening. This is Student Council President Lilith Astranova. I've located traces of Lark Bonaire. Unfortunately, it appears he was killed—mauled by a monster that breached the barrier. I'll await your team's arrival for further investigation."

Ending the call, she slipped the pager back into her pocket, her emerald eyes glinting with determination.

"Fine then," she murmured, gazing into the forest's depths. "I'll find you myself... mystery man."