

## Living Shadow 31

### Chapter 31 Less Than Human

Lilith Astranova left Damon at his training ground, her thoughts churning as she walked away. She hadn't come to suspect him initially; her original purpose was to reprimand him for using academy equipment without proper authorization. Yet, the moment he saw her, his reaction gave her pause.

He was cautious, deliberate. Too deliberate.

She smiled faintly, her mind replaying their encounter.

"Damon Grey, the academy's weakest student. The boy who received a golden ticket from Seras Blade herself," she murmured.

His name had circulated among the faculty and student body. In the beginning, the professors had placed high expectations on him, believing the ticket symbolized hidden potential. But by the quarter-semester evaluations, those expectations had waned. Damon's mana pool was pitiful, his combat skills unimpressive, and his overall abilities underwhelming.

"There were simply no redeeming qualities," Lilith mused, her voice tinged with curiosity.

Until today, she had never met him in person. And to her surprise, he wasn't what she expected.

'Someone that weak shouldn't even be able to kill a fly, let alone someone like Lark Bonaire,' she thought, her steps slowing.

'Unless... he has a special ability.'

The idea struck her suddenly. An ability that allowed someone to transform into a monster—an anomaly, but not impossible.

"No," she shook her head, dispelling the thought for now. "It doesn't fit. But he is suspicious."

At the start of their interaction, Damon had radiated guilt. She had almost believed she'd cornered her culprit. But midway through their conversation, something changed. His demeanor shifted—his eyes became cold, calculated.

'Was the guilt I saw at first fake? Some kind of act? Or... was I wrong about him altogether?'

The inconsistency gnawed at her. If he had continued to show guilt, she might have pressed further and exposed him. But his abrupt composure had thrown her off balance, leaving her unsure.

Lilith exhaled sharply, annoyance creeping into her tone.

"Hmph. How frustrating. I can't rely on just one lead. I'll have to keep a close eye on him."

She glanced at the pager in her hand and frowned.

"I should've gotten his pager number. No matter. I'll collect it when he comes to file the paperwork... assuming he does." She smirked to herself.

"Damon Grey, I'm certain there's more to you than meets the eye."

Her steps quickened as she headed back to the site of Lark Bonaire's death. The academy investigators had concluded it was a monster attack, a convenient explanation that tied up loose ends neatly.

Lilith chuckled softly, a hint of mockery in her voice.

"Their conclusion is too easy, too perfect. But well-played, mystery man. For now, you've won this round."

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Back at the training grounds, Damon watched Lilith leave, his cold gaze locked onto her retreating form. As the sound of her footsteps faded, he sank to the floor, his eyes falling to the shadow cast at his feet.

His shadow, unnervingly still, gazed back at him with the same penetrating intensity.

"Yes, I know I messed up in the beginning," Damon muttered, his voice low.

"I shouldn't have lost my cool like that."

The shadow crossed its arms, a silent reprimand.

"But I've learned something from this," Damon continued, his tone hardening.

"If I keep feeling guilty, I'll lose. I can't think of those I kill as people—just prey. If I don't, I won't survive. And I can't afford to lose." He clenched his fists, his voice breaking with quiet determination.

"If I die... no one will be there to care for my sister. If I have to become remorseless to survive, then so be it. I have no more tears left to cry for those who hurt me."

He glanced at his shadow, as if seeking its approval.

"It's only fair that I killed Lark. He tried to kill me first, and even after I survived, he came after me again. My enemies... they're less than human."

His shadow remained motionless, its expression unreadable. It did not offer the customary thumbs-up of approval, and Damon felt a pang of unease. He knew why. The shadow saw through his facade. It recognized the fear he was trying to suppress—the doubt gnawing at the edges of his resolve.

For a long moment, they stared at each other, an unspoken tension hanging in the air. Damon's dark eyes hardened, refusing to waver, even as the shadow seemed to silently challenge him.

As the sun dipped below the horizon and darkness cloaked the training grounds, Damon stood. The time for action had come.

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Back in his room at the war halls, Damon carefully placed the practice bow and arrows he had brought earlier onto his bed. He examined the arrows critically, noting their blunt tips.

"These won't work for what I have planned," he murmured. His mind drifted to Athor's Sanctuary.

"I'll have to find proper tools there. But..."

The thought of spending even a single zeni made his chest tighten. Money was precious, and he loathed parting with it. But survival demanded sacrifice.

"This bow won't do either," he added, casting a disdainful glance at the weapon.

"I can't take anything from the academy armory. Their equipment is too well-secured."

Reluctantly, Damon opened his desk drawer and retrieved a short, weathered dagger. Holding it in his hand, memories from his past surged to the surface.

The dagger was a relic of his days on the streets of the capital, a so-called "reward" for running errands for a smuggling ring that trafficked in magic crystals and ore. It was a cruel token of survival—a tool that had seen more bloodshed than a boy his age should have endured.

But even back then he had never taken a life... well until now.

He gripped it tightly, his knuckles whitening.

"This will have to do," he muttered, slipping it into his jacket.

Turning to his shadow, he whispered,

"Okay, buddy. This is up to you now. The others don't live in the war halls, but Marcus does. Whether it's because he's an outstanding student or his family's wealth, he's still here. Find him. When he's ready to sneak out with his group to Athor's Sanctuary, we'll follow."

His shadow gave a silent thumbs-up, its form detaching from his own and gliding effortlessly across the floor.

"Try not to get caught," Damon added softly as it vanished through the door.

Alone once more, Damon exhaled heavily, the weight of his situation pressing down on him. His shadow's hunger was growing, and it was nearing a dangerous threshold. If he couldn't find a way to feed it human flesh by the day after tomorrow, it would transform into a ravenous creature. And if he failed to sate its hunger after that, his health would begin to deteriorate until he eventually succumbed to death.

"I will survive this," he swore under his breath. "I'm not going to die. Not yet."

He spent the next few hours preparing, sharpening his resolve and steeling himself for what lay ahead. When his shadow failed to return, unease began to creep in. Just as he was about to leave in search of it, the shadow slipped through the window, waving its hand urgently.

Damon's heart pounded.

"So, what did you find?"

The shadow gestured for him to follow, pressing a finger to its lips to signal silence.

Damon nodded, his pulse quickening. Carefully, he opened the door to his dorm and stepped into the dimly lit hallway. His shadow led the way, its movements fluid and silent, guiding him down a flight of stairs. Damon's every step was cautious, his ears straining for any sound of the headmaid.

At the bottom floor, Damon froze as his eyes landed on Marcus. The boy was sneaking out of the dorm, oblivious to the predator lurking in the shadows.

A cold smile spread across Damon's lips.

"Got you."