

## Living Shadow 36

### Chapter 36 Hunted

"Screw off," Damon muttered, his voice barely audible over the rowdy ambiance of the tavern.

The clinking of mugs, boisterous laughter, and myriad scents of ale, roasted meat, and other food assaulted his senses.

Leona Valefier, undeterred, stared at him with an unsettling intensity.

"I insist. You have to fight me. Now."

Damon bit his lip. He had no desire to become a casualty of her whims. If the academy's weakest student went up against Leona Valefier, ranked number four, he'd be meeting the goddess long before his time.

'Looks like I need to explain this to her before I end up on a healer's table... or worse.' Damon sighed, rubbing his temple.

"I'm the weakest person in the academy," he said bluntly.

"Not just today, but in the academy's history. If we fought, I'd lose. No doubt about it. So, you can leave now."

Leona shook her head, unconvinced.

"I knew you'd say that."

Damon scowled under the hood of his cloak.

'Knew I'd say what? Is this girl insane, or is she just looking for an excuse to beat me half to death? I knew her sunshine-girl act was too good to be true.'

His instincts screamed at him to leave, but he took a deep breath, trying to calm his rising unease.

"Why would you think that? I already told you—I'm the weakest."

Leona smirked.

"Hmph, I thought so too... but you gave yourself away."

Damon's eyes narrowed.

"How? What in the name of the goddess are you talking about?"

Leona puffed out her chest proudly.

"I had my suspicions, but Evangeline confirmed them."

'Evangeline Brightwater... I knew she'd cause me problems,' Damon thought bitterly.

Leona continued,

"Remember the day Evangeline and Sylvia were fighting? Evangeline accidentally shot stray light magic at you, and you dodged them all without even looking. Earlier, that same day, the professor pressured you with his aura, and you didn't even flinch."

Damon glanced at his shadow, cursing inwardly. That had all been its doing.

"That doesn't prove anything," he said firmly. "It was all just a fluke."

Leona tilted her head, unconvinced.

"I have more clues."

She leaned closer, her expression suddenly smug.

"You eat a lot."

Damon blinked, utterly baffled.

"What? What does my eating have to do with anything?"

Leona grinned knowingly.

"No need to be modest. My father told me you can tell the strength of a real warrior by how much they eat. Weaklings can't eat much because eating is proof of one's energy."

Damon stared at her, more confused than ever.

'Is she an idiot? No, this has to be some strange culture from Lothria, the wild continent. The beast-kin have bizarre traditions like this.'

"That still doesn't prove anything," he retorted.

"Oh, it does," she said with absolute certainty.

"But Evangeline corroborated my beliefs."

Finally, Damon felt they were getting somewhere. He leaned back in his seat, smirking faintly.

"Really now?"

Leona nodded, her eyes sparkling.

"Remember the day Evangeline asked you to be her partner? After that, I followed her. I didn't get to talk to her because she ran into Sylvia, but I heard everything she said."

Damon's patience was wearing thin.

"Just get to the point already."

Leona pouted at his tone but pressed on.

"Ugh, fine. She said you beat her in a fight. She also said you're really strong but humble and that you don't like the spotlight."

She paused for dramatic effect, then added,

"Sylvia mentioned seeing you training alone in the forest. Evangeline said it's because you only care about mastering your skills, not the academy's rankings."

Damon froze, his mind racing.

'Sylvia saw me training in the woods? Was it the day I killed Lark Bonaire and acquired the [5x] skill? If so, I was too close to being caught...'

He glanced at Leona, who was now practically glowing with battle intent.

'I've been getting a lot of attention lately... that's not good. I need to stay out of the spotlight. But if the top students think I'm strong and come after me, it'll be a huge problem.'

Leona leaned forward, her voice filled with excitement. "So? Will you fight me or not?"

He was in a dilemma.

'Should I let myself get beaten and humiliated? No. Absolutely not. I refuse to be debased by nobles if I can help it.'

His thoughts churned furiously as he considered his options.

'But first, I need to get rid of this girl... she's going to be in my way.'

Lost in thought, Damon didn't respond immediately, and Leona misinterpreted his silence as confirmation of her accusations.

"So, when do we fight?" she asked, her tone eager.

"Never," Damon snapped, turning his head to the window to avoid further confrontation.

He gazed out at the night sky, but his attention wasn't on the stars. From his vantage point, he could keep an eye on the restaurant across the street, where Marcus and his group had been. When his eyes landed on them, his heart sank.

They weren't alone.

His face turned pale beneath the shadow of his hood as he spotted the unmistakable figure of the Student Council President, Lilith Astranova. Marcus and his friends had been caught.

'First years aren't allowed outside the academy grounds... and of all people, they get caught by her!'

To make matters worse, Lilith's sharp gaze shifted toward the tavern. Damon's blood ran cold.

'She's coming here next!'

Damon stood abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floorboards.

"Hey, where are you going?" Leona asked, confused by his sudden movement.

He clicked his tongue in frustration. Leaving her behind was tempting, but he couldn't take the risk. She might blurt something out, especially to someone as cunning and perceptive as Lilith.

Without thinking, Damon grabbed Leona's hand.

"Come on. We're leaving."

"Huh? Wait, why?" she asked, startled by his urgency.

"Shut up and follow me," he hissed, pulling her toward the back of the tavern.

"We're being hunted by the Student Council President."

Leona stumbled after him, barely able to process his words.

Meanwhile, Lilith was already stepping through the tavern's entrance, her piercing eyes scanning the room. Damon's heart pounded as he realized their window of escape was rapidly closing.

'Damn it... how am I going to get out of here now?'

The situation was spiraling out of control. As a probationary student, Damon couldn't afford another infraction. If he got caught outside the academy grounds, his punishment would be severe.

And now, with Leona in tow, his chances of slipping away unnoticed were even slimmer.