

## Living Shadow 37

### Chapter 37 Bait And Switch

Damon was on edge, his grip firm on Leona's wrist as he pulled her along. He wasn't taking any chances with Lilith Astranova, knowing full well how easily she could extract information.

To his surprise, Leona Valefier didn't resist. The beastkin girl simply followed without complaint, her usual boisterous energy muted.

The rowdy noise of the tavern buzzed around them, but Damon noticed a subtle shift in the atmosphere. The kind of shift that told him someone of note had entered.

'The lowlifes in here are probably debating whether to sell us out to the Student Council.'

Reaching the back door, Damon pushed against it with all his weight, but it didn't budge.

"Huh... crap, it's locked," he muttered, his frustration mounting.

Leona blinked, her expression almost comical in its confusion. "Now what do we do? Are we in trouble?"

Damon shot her a glare, barely holding back the urge to smack some sense into her.

"Did you not read the student handbook? If we get caught by the Student Council out in town way past curfew, we're in a lot of trouble!"

Leona bit her lip, finally looking concerned. "Hmm, that sounds bad."

Damon clenched his teeth, exasperated.

Lilith Astranova was not someone to take lightly. From their brief interaction earlier that day, he could tell she was sharp and calculating. Hiding in the back wasn't an option—she'd find them easily.

Scanning the room, his eyes landed on a small wooden staircase leading upstairs.

"Come on, let's go," he hissed, pulling Leona along before she could protest.

When they reached the top, Damon realized the second floor overlooked the ground floor below. A sinking feeling gripped him as he spotted Lilith entering the tavern. Worse still, as if guided by instinct, her sharp eyes drifted upward—and locked onto them.

Damon's hood concealed his face and uniform, but Leona wasn't so fortunate. Her academy-issued uniform was impossible to miss.

The tavern went quiet for a beat before erupting into laughter and jeers. The patrons, a mix of adventurers and drunkards, found the scene highly entertaining.

"Fifty zeni on the boy and girl!" someone shouted.

"Hahaha! Hammer-hand's not bad, but I bet twenty-five they get caught!"

"A hundred on the pair!" another bellowed.

Lilith's icy smile silenced the room in an instant. Her mere presence commanded respect—or fear.

Damon didn't waste time worrying about the spectators. Dragging Leona further into the upper floor, he darted past a row of rooms, his mind racing.

Lilith sighed audibly from below, as if their attempts at escape were a mild annoyance. To her, running was futile.

Damon knew better than to let panic consume him. He had learned from his earlier mistakes—this time, he would stay calm and outthink Lilith Astranova.

His thoughts turned to everything he'd heard about her. The more he recalled, the colder his blood ran.

Lilith Astranova possessed the void attribute, a rare and terrifying magical affinity. Worse still, she was a prodigy who had already reached her third class advancement.

'As strong as the professors... and she's coming after me.'

Damon gritted his teeth. He needed a plan—and fast.

Leona seemed frozen, her body stiff the moment Lilith Astranova's cold, calculating gaze swept upward toward them.

Damon bit his lip, suppressing a curse.

'Even if she sees our faces, she can't punish us unless we're caught. That means if we escape, it's over. No loose ends...'

But the problem wasn't just escaping; it was escaping her.

From their vantage point on the third floor, Damon saw Lilith leisurely teleport through the tavern. Her movements were deliberate, like a cat toying with cornered prey, and Damon hated being looked down on like this.

Leona, still watching nervously, leaned closer.

"Erhh... what do we do? We can't escape her. Should we fight her?"

Damon's glare could have frozen fire.

"Are you insane?" he hissed.

"Just shut up and follow my lead."

His mind worked overtime. Each second felt like a lifetime as he racked his brain for a solution.

'Think. Think. What do I do?'

Outwardly, his expression remained calm, masking the storm inside, so Leona had no idea what he was planning.

Then, his eyes fell on a mop resting in a bucket of water. An idea sparked.

He grabbed Leona's arm and strode over, pulling the mop out and kicking the bucket over to spill water onto the floor. Without a word, he pushed open a door to one of the rooms, made a mess there too, then stopped and retraced his steps back to another door.

Damon pulled it open, shoving Leona inside a closet, and left the door slightly ajar.

"Stay here and don't make a sound," he ordered in a low voice.

Leona blinked, confused, but nodded. Damon wasted no time. Pulling off his cloak, he muttered a curse under his breath.

'Damn it, this cloak cost me two zeni and a half.'

Ignoring the sting of losing money, he draped the cloak over the mop, shaping it into a crude, hooded figure. The window creaked as he opened it, placing the bait on the ledge.

He paused, signaling with his shadow—a trick he'd left outside the room as a sentry. The moment it zipped back to his feet, Damon knew: Lilith was here.

There was no time to hesitate. Activating his skill, [5x] to [Strength], he hurled the mop-cloak figure through the window with all his might, sending it flying towards the sky.

As soon as he threw it, Damon spun around and dove into the closet where he'd hidden Leona, closing the door behind him. He clamped a hand over her mouth just as Lilith teleported into the room.

For a moment, silence reigned.

From the corner of her vision, Lilith caught sight of the cloaked figure falling into the alley. With the window wide open and no other sign of the fugitives, she assumed they had escaped. Her lips curled into a faint, calculating smile as she teleported out, pursuing the bait.

The instant she was gone, Damon slipped out of the closet, dragging Leona with him. He gripped her tightly, [5x] still activated, and they leapt through the window in the opposite direction. They hit the ground running, darting through the dimly lit streets.

It had been a daring gamble—one small mistake, and Lilith would have caught them.

Leona followed, her chest heaving more from dread than anything. Her mind reeled at what had just happened. Damon, her seemingly ordinary classmate, had managed to fool Lilith Astranova.

And that grip of his—there was no denying it. She'd felt his strength surge when he grabbed her.

'I knew it,' she thought, awestruck. 'He's been hiding his true power all this time.'

Damon, oblivious to her thoughts, grimaced. The sight of his uniform in the moonlight reminded him of the sacrifice he'd just made.

"I just lost money," he muttered bitterly.

Leona didn't hear him.

Turning a corner, Damon's frustration deepened as he spotted members of the Student Council patrolling the streets ahead.

"Tsk... I knew it wouldn't be this easy," he muttered, dragging Leona into the shadows of an alleyway.