

## Living Shadow 38

### Chapter 38 Ditching

Damon took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling as he steadied his thoughts. Leona was still beside him, her presence both unsettling and an irritation.

"Five thousand zeni," he muttered flatly, breaking the silence.

Leona blinked in confusion. "What?"

"That cloak cost me five thousand zeni," Damon clarified, glaring at her. "Pay up."

Her golden ears twitched as she looked around awkwardly.

"I... I don't have any money on me..."

Damon's glare intensified, his cold expression cutting through her excuse like a blade.

"But don't worry!" she added quickly, her voice brimming with nervous energy.

"I'll pay back what I owe when we get to the academy."

His eyes narrowed, calculating.

"Fine. But there's a 70% interest rate for every day you don't pay up."

Leona nodded earnestly, as though the outrageous terms were entirely reasonable.

"Okay, deal. A warrior must always pay their debts."

Damon suppressed a smile, his lips twitching slightly as he looked away.

'That was some easy money. Nobles are so gullible.'

But his amusement was short-lived as his gaze shifted toward the street.

'That's assuming she even pays. Either way, I need to ditch her fast and hope Lilith Astranova doesn't catch us.'

He glanced back at Leona, only to find her staring at him with wide, sparkling eyes, her admiration practically shining through. The golden hue of her irises glimmered in the moonlight, making her awestruck expression even more pronounced.

"You're really amazing!" she exclaimed, her voice filled with genuine wonder.

"I can't believe a first-year escaped the Student Council President! I didn't even think it was possible to outmaneuver someone at a third-class advancement. I mean, you're incredible!"

Damon froze. He'd never been praised like this before, and he didn't know how to respond. If she had insulted him for using underhanded tactics, he wouldn't have cared. But this... this was unexpectedly nice.

"I'm not that—" he began awkwardly, scratching the back of his head.

"I mean, it's not really anything noteworthy... It was just running away."

Leona shook her head vehemently.

"No, it wasn't! It was a battle tactic, a genius strategy to outmaneuver a stronger opponent. This must be the Art of War my father always talked about. You have such a great mastery of it!"

'Art of War?' Damon thought, raising an eyebrow. He had no idea what she was talking about, but he chalked it up to some beastkin tradition.

"That's enough," he said sharply, cutting her off. "I need to think."

Leona obediently fell silent, her golden eyes still fixed on him with an expectant look.

Damon didn't actually need to think. He just wanted to check his system stats. Pulling up his interface, he quickly scanned the numbers.

'Shadow hunger's growing... but I can hold out until tomorrow. Hopefully.'

His [5x] skill was still on cooldown, much to his annoyance. Once it refreshed, he could transfer the buff to his speed stat and leave Leona behind in the middle of town. It wasn't the most honorable plan, but honor wasn't a luxury he could afford right now.

'Today's mission was a bust. I didn't do anything productive. If anything, I just wasted shadow energy.'

The original plan had been simple: find someone from Marcus's group, hunt them down, and feed them to his shadow. Or, at the very least, acquire a decent weapon from the black market. But none of that had happened.

'And now the Student Council is on high alert. I don't know how far Lilith Astranova is, but she must be pissed about losing two first-years who haven't even reached their first class advancement.'

The thought made his blood boil. He clenched his fists, suppressing the urge to punch the nearby wall in frustration. Every step forward felt like two steps back.

Leona tilted her head, noticing his tense posture.

"Damon?" she asked hesitantly, her voice soft.

He ignored her, his mind still racing.

'I'll fix this. I just need to play it smart. No more screw-ups.'

Damon still had Carl's contact memorized, but he doubted the crook's usefulness. Trusting him was completely out of the question.

'Being a former thief myself, I know there's no honor among thieves.'

He pushed the thought aside.

'I'll call him some other day.'

While Damon mulled over his options, he was acutely aware that the Student Council was closing in on every first-year in town. Most of them had already been caught. Escaping the town would be difficult, but Damon wasn't one to give up so easily. He had a plan—though it wasn't exactly noble.

Leona would be sacrificed for his escape.

And to ensure she held no grudges, Damon would make it seem like getting caught was entirely her fault—if she got caught.

His skill cooldown timer had finally reset. Turning to the beastkin girl beside him, he addressed her in a calm but commanding tone.

"Okay, listen up. I imagine the Student Council has the gates covered, so we need a solid escape plan. I'm not going to coddle you, so you'll have to keep up no matter what. Walking out isn't an option, but..."

His dark eyes glanced at her briefly, betraying no emotion.

"If we get separated, there are carriages leaving town. The Student Council doesn't have the authority to check them. Just ask the merchant really nicely."

Inwardly, Damon smirked.

'Assuming those stingy merchants actually let you board... Once we hit the crowd, I'm giving her the slip. With [5x] set to speed, I'll be long gone before she even realizes it. If she gets caught, there'll be no proof I was ever in town.'

He gave her a kind smile, though his thoughts were anything but.

'Let this be a lesson, stupid noble girl. Trust no one.'

Standing up, he prepared to move.

"Alright, on the count of three, we run into the crowd. Try to keep up."

Leona's golden eyes sharpened, her focus intensifying. "Understood."

Damon smiled faintly as he activated [5x]. "Three."

Without warning, he bolted into the bustling crowd, his figure vanishing like smoke. Leona, caught off guard but quick on her feet, rushed after him. Though their academy uniforms made them stand out, Damon moved like a shadow.

A former pickpocket, he wove through the sea of people effortlessly, slipping between tight spaces, ducking under carts, and crawling through narrow gaps. Every movement was calculated, every step precise.

Leona, on the other hand, struggled. Though fast, she lacked Damon's finesse and understanding of crowds. Each person in her path became an obstacle, and her attempts to push past them only drew more attention. Angry shouts and glares followed her as she inadvertently caused people to stumble, further congesting the streets.

Realizing she was causing a commotion, Leona changed tactics. With a leap, she climbed onto a nearby rooftop, thinking she could track Damon from above. But by the time she reached the roof, Damon was already long gone.

From her vantage point, she could see the chaotic streets below, filled with merchants, townsfolk, and scattered members of the Student Council searching for wayward first-years like her.

Looking out at the vast, bustling town, she couldn't help but feel admiration.

'He's really amazing,' she thought, her awe growing even more.

Her misunderstanding of Damon's abilities deepened, solidifying him in her mind as a strategic genius far beyond her comprehension.