

## Living Shadow 39

### Chapter 39 Moment Of Hesitation

Lilith Astranova stood in silence, holding the cloak in her hands. The faint scent of the streets clung to the fabric, and she couldn't help but admire the simplicity of the ruse. To think a mere first-year had managed to fool her with such an elementary trick—a bait-and-switch maneuver. She had fallen for it, momentarily blinded by her confidence.

Her sharp eyes scanned the cloak once more. She hadn't seen his face, but she didn't need to. His build was unmistakable, and more importantly, she remembered who had been with him.

"Leona Valefier," she murmured to herself.

The beastkin girl had been hard to miss. As a promising first-year, Leona was naturally someone the academy kept a close eye on, so Lilith's recognition of her wasn't surprising. But what intrigued her was the boy—his audacity and cunning.

Lilith's thoughts lingered on the brief exchange of events. As soon as she realized the trap, she had teleported back to the top floor of the tavern, the origin of their bait. But by then, they were long gone.

She chuckled softly, her voice echoing faintly in the quiet room.

'Such cunning... It has to be him.'

The name came to her lips like a revelation.

"Damon Grey."

Earlier today, she hadn't been entirely sure what to make of him, but now there was no doubt in her mind. He was clever—dangerously so. Using such a trick to escape her was both bold and ingenious.

Lilith moved to the window, her sharp gaze cutting through the night. The bustling streets below seemed insignificant compared to the thrill of the hunt. A cold smile played on her lips, her emerald eyes glinting with intrigue.

"Now you're even more interesting," she whispered, a mix of amusement and anticipation in her tone.

She leaned against the windowsill, her mind racing with thoughts of her next move.

'You won this round, Damon Grey, but let's see how far your wit carries you. I'll find you... and when I do, we'll see just how clever you really are.'

Damon exhaled deeply, relief washing over him now that he was finally rid of Leona. He felt no guilt about ditching her—in fact, he considered her a burden. The whole escape had gone as he planned. Knowing full well that she couldn't navigate crowds the way he could, he had used them as cover, slipping away with ease.

'Let's hope she gets out of here without getting caught by the student council,' he thought, though it was more for convenience than genuine concern.

He made his way to the city gate, and as expected, the student council members were stationed there, intercepting any first-years trying to flee back to the academy. Damon let out a quiet sigh, glancing down at his exposed uniform. Without his cloak, he stood out, but that didn't faze him.

He crouched in the shadows, watching the gate closely. A carriage arrived, its wheels creaking under the weight of goods.

Damon smirked.

'Perfect.'

Sliding beneath the carriage, he grasped the undercarriage with practiced precision, clinging to the frame as it slowly passed through the checkpoint. His heart pounded, but he remained still, every muscle taut. Once the carriage cleared the gate and gained some distance, he let go, tumbling to the ground and rolling to absorb the impact.

Damon dusted himself off and smiled faintly.

'My days in a smuggling ring still come in handy'

"Good thing carriages from Athor's Sanctuary are always heading to the capital," he muttered, relieved to be out.

If he followed the carriage, it would lead him to Valerion, the capital city. A flicker of temptation crossed his mind—if he went there, he could see his younger sister, Luna. But he shook his head, dispelling the thought.

'I can't afford distractions. I need the money for her treatment.'

Pushing the thought aside, Damon turned and began walking back toward the academy. His stomach growled audibly, reminding him of a more immediate problem. Glancing at his shadow, he frowned.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"I didn't find anyone for you to feed on. Marcus and his group got caught by Lilith Astranova..."

The shadow rippled, its form vibrating and gesturing dismissively, as if telling him it wasn't a big deal. It mimicked a cheer-up gesture, making Damon chuckle faintly.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll figure something out. I've got a day before you get ravenous."

The two walked in silence, Damon accompanied only by his restless shadow. Crossing the academy walls using the same hidden passage as before, he let out a tired sigh. That's when he noticed movement near the trees.

A figure staggered beyond the shadows, collapsing to the ground. Damon narrowed his eyes, his sharp vision piercing the darkness. The scent of alcohol hit him, confirming what he suspected—it was a drunk second-year student. The boy was completely unconscious, his breathing heavy and uneven.

"What a boon," Damon muttered under his breath.

"I was just looking for someone to feed my shadow, and I run into this guy."

The shadow quivered erratically at the sight of potential prey, its form glitching in anticipation. Damon's dark eyes glinted as he approached the boy, pulling out a dagger from his uniform. His movements were slow and deliberate, the blade gleaming faintly in the dim moonlight.

He stood over the boy, raising the dagger. But just as he prepared to strike, he froze. His hand trembled, and sweat beaded on his brow.

'He's someone's son... someone's brother... Am I really going to kill someone who's done nothing to me?'

The thought struck him hard, his heart pounding in his chest. His shadow pulsed erratically, urging him forward, but Damon stayed his hand. The boy's face was peaceful in his drunken slumber, and Damon's resolve faltered.

His stomach growled again, the hunger gnawing at him. The shadow writhed impatiently, but Damon's mind was a whirlwind of doubt and conflict.

'Why?' he thought. 'Why can't I do it? He's never wronged me... so why?'

Before he could resolve his inner turmoil, a voice called out, breaking the silence.

"Arthur! Arthur, where are you?"

Damon ducked back into the shadows, crouching low. A group of second-year students emerged, searching for their friend.

"Hey, over there! Found him!" one of them called out.

"Heh, looks like Mr. Lightweight got drunk again," another joked.

"Come on, let's pack him up. We can tease him tomorrow," the first student said, helping Arthur to his feet.

Damon watched silently as they carried their friend away, his presence concealed in the darkness. He clenched his fists, frustration boiling inside him.

'Second-years... I wouldn't stand a chance against them anyway.'

Once they were gone, Damon punched a nearby tree, his knuckles stinging from the impact.

"Damn it... why did I hesitate?!" he growled, his voice low and angry.

He forced himself to take a deep breath, steadying his nerves. Tonight had been a failure—no prey, no progress. His stomach growled again, the hunger biting at him like a relentless predator. With gritted teeth, Damon slipped back into the academy. Sneaking into his dorm was easy, but as he collapsed onto his bed, the weight of his failure bore down on him.

His hunger remained, gnawing at him relentlessly, and his mind swirled with regrets.