

Living Shadow 52

Chapter 52 Friends

Damon watched Leona fumble with the pots and pans, his usual gloomy expression unchanging. The clattering and scraping noises grated on his nerves.

'She's making too much noise,' he thought, irritation bubbling just beneath the surface.

"That's... enough. Go sit down. I'll take care of this mess," he said, his tone firm but measured.

Leona looked around awkwardly, her beastkin ears twitching slightly in response to his voice. She hesitated but obeyed, hopping onto one of the high stools and watching Damon with curious eyes.

Damon moved swiftly, cleaning up the chaos she had created. Pots and pans were stacked, the burned remains of her failed attempt disposed of. It took a few minutes, but he managed to restore a semblance of order, leaving the rest for the maids to handle in the morning.

'The maids aren't going to like this,' he thought grimly, but he brushed the concern aside. There were bigger issues on his mind.

Gathering ingredients, Damon began sorting through vegetables, spices, and cuts of meat, selecting what he thought would be simple and quick to prepare.

"No veggies!" Leona suddenly declared, springing up from her stool.

Damon's glare was sharp enough to freeze her in her tracks. However, the realization that she was paying him softened his resolve.

"Fine," he muttered, setting the vegetables aside. "Sit down and don't make any noise."

Leona seemed indignant for a moment, her golden eyes narrowing slightly. Yet, she remembered her earlier loss to Damon and grudgingly complied. Strength meant everything in the world of beastkin, and Damon had already proven his dominance. She sat back down, pouting like a child denied her favorite treat.

Damon ignored her, focusing on preparing the meal. He pushed away the vegetables and focused solely on the meat. His movements were precise, methodical, and efficient. As the meat began to sizzle, a mouthwatering aroma filled the air.

But then Damon froze.

The scent of cooking meat flooded his senses, and his heart started to race. Unbidden, the memories of the forest where he had killed Carmen Vale earlier that day surged to the forefront of his mind. The metallic tang of blood, the sight of lifeless eyes staring up at him, and the sickening crunch of flesh and bone echoed vividly in his thoughts.

Damon's chest tightened. His breathing grew ragged, each inhale deeper and more labored than the last. The scent of fragrant meat, so innocuous and inviting, was now an unbearable reminder of his actions.

His [Remorseless] skill, a passive safeguard against guilt, remained dormant. It required pressure, stress, tension, or the heat of battle to activate—and he was not in any of those situations. Left without its protective numbness, Damon was alone with the weight of his feelings.

His hand trembled slightly as he gripped the spatula. The sizzling pan before him blurred, replaced by flashes of red and shadows of the forest. His breaths came in short, uneven bursts, and his heart pounded wildly in his chest.

"Hey, are you okay? You look off," Leona's voice cut through the haze in Damon's mind like a splash of cold water.

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment to steady himself.

"I'm fine," he said curtly, glancing at her golden eyes, which gleamed with concern.

"Do you want condiments with this?" he asked, trying to shift the focus.

She smiled brightly, her beastkin ears perking up.

"Yes!"

Damon sighed and continued cooking. It took some time, but he finally finished preparing the meal. He arranged the food neatly on the table, stepping back as Leona eagerly began to eat. However, after her first bite, she paused and looked up at him.

"Eat," she said firmly.

Damon shook his head. "Not hungry."

Leona frowned. "Our agreement was that you cook and we eat."

Damon exhaled heavily, not in the mood for her antics. Wordlessly, he picked up a thin slice of meat and took a bite. The flavor was rich and fragrant, but it made him want to choke. Memories of the earlier bloodshed still clung to him, even as he forced the food down.

Leona seemed satisfied, attacking the food with gusto, but Damon remained quiet, his thoughts consuming him.

Your journey continues on empire

She paused mid-meal and glanced at him again. "Ehm... are you okay?"

Damon raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

Leona shoved another piece of meat into her mouth, chewing slowly as she studied him.

"You look different from this morning. Different from yesterday too... Now you look, hmmm... I think you look..." She paused, wrinkling her nose.

"You smell like death."

Damon's expression darkened, his eyes narrowing coldly.

'I smell like death? Is this some beastkin nonsense? Or... did Carmen's blood get on me?' He mentally reviewed every detail of the earlier incident, certain he had avoided any blood splatter.

The tension in his chest caused his [Remorseless] skill to activate. Instantly, his mind cleared, his guilt vanished, and his emotions dulled.

"Do you mean I smell like blood?" he asked, his voice now calm but icy.

Leona frowned, shaking her head.

"No, it's not blood. The scent of death around you just increased. It's in your eyes... cold, like a sword. You're different from before, but I can't tell how."

She leaned in, sniffing the air near him. "Did you get stronger?"

Damon sighed inwardly.

'So, it's nothing. Just the ramblings of a beastkin. Or... could she smell the changes in my emotions caused by [Remorseless]? In his books Valderrama did prove that beastkin, animals, and some monsters could detect emotions.'

As his thoughts churned, Leona continued to look at him intently, as though trying to peer into his very soul.

"Eat," he said, his tone dismissive.

"You owe me money for the food. Let's say... three thousand zenì."

Leona nodded without hesitation.

"Okay, no problem. I'll pay."

She tilted her head and smiled softly.

"You shouldn't be so gloomy, you know. As your friend, I worry."

Damon almost recoiled at her words, caught off guard.

"My friend? Since when did you and I become friends?"

"Since yesterday," Leona said, her smile widening.

Damon shook his head.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but you and I are not friends."

Her golden eyes flickered, briefly revealing her hurt feelings. Yet, she quickly composed herself.

"No. We eat together, we defeated a powerful enemy together, and we dueled each other. That makes us friends."

Damon sighed heavily. There was no reasoning with this overly sentimental beastkin.

The first time they ate together had been pure coincidence—there was no other comfortable seat available. They hadn't defeated a "powerful enemy" together; they had merely been running from the student council president. And as for their duel? That was just her attacking him in a fit of excitement earlier today. None of that constituted friendship in his eyes.

He stood abruptly, his patience wearing thin.

"Listen here, Leona Valefier. I don't know how things work in the wild continent of Lothria or how beastkin become friends, but wake up and smell the roses. This is Soltheon, and I'm human. Where I stand, you and I are not friends—we're barely acquaintances."

Leona lowered her head slightly, his harsh words visibly stinging.

"That's fine," she said softly, though her tone held quiet determination.

"Because the best of friends start off as strangers."

Damon rolled his eyes and turned toward the door, uninterested in her idealistic notions.

"You can send the payment whenever. If it's late, you'll owe me interest."

Without waiting for a response, he walked out of the kitchen, leaving Leona to her thoughts.

Leona sat there, feeling bitter but not dissuaded. She muttered under her breath

"We are friends."