

Living Shadow 87

Chapter 87 Refined Manners

Damon's fingers tightened slightly around the pager as he raised it to his ear. Anxiety gripped him, though he tried to mask it. The caller was from the Healing Institute in Valerion—a woman whose voice always seemed calm and composed, even when delivering unsettling news.

Healer Floral Estin.

She was a specialist in treating magic circuit cancer, and one of the few people Damon felt genuine gratitude toward. It wasn't a feeling he extended often—almost never—but for her, he made an exception. There were a scant few who had earned that sentiment: Seras Blade, even though he had never met her; Carmen Vale, whose philosophy had subtly influenced his current path; and, of course, Flora Estin.

"Good evening," her soft voice came through the line, steady and professional.

Damon returned the greeting, his voice neutral, masking the turmoil brewing inside him. The call was brief. She updated him on the expenses related to his sister's care—payments he needed to make, transfers to authorize. It wasn't unexpected, but hearing the numbers still made his stomach churn.

When the call ended, Damon leaned back in the wooden chair by the fire, staring at the flickering flames. He had asked for his sister to be transferred to a better ward, one with higher-level care. The cost? Half a million zeni.

He opened his pager and initiated the transfer to the Institute's warback account under Luna Grey's name. As always, Flora Estin would ensure the funds were allocated properly.

When the transaction completed, Damon exhaled heavily and cradled his head in his hands. His chest felt tight, a mixture of relief and frustration flooding his thoughts.

'My luck must be improving. If it weren't for the duel with Xander, I'd have been short.'

The payout from that encounter had kept him afloat, but just barely. He still had a few thousand zeni left, but with the mounting expenses, it was nowhere near enough. He needed more money—soon.

Leaning back in the chair, he closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the tension in his shoulders.

'The problems just keep piling up. There's never enough time...'

He slipped the pager into his pocket, his shadow flitting across the room erratically. Its movements were a reflection of his own restless mind, and he couldn't help but think about the burden it imposed on him.

The shadow's hunger.

As long as that mechanic of his existence persisted, trouble would always follow. And worse, his shadow didn't feed on animals—only people. He had considered monsters, but in this region, the monsters were nearly as strong as someone in their first class advancement or higher.

This was the Evil Forest's territory, after all.

'I'll take my chances with people,' Damon thought grimly, though he wasn't proud of the conclusion.

Deep down, he suspected that even monster flesh wouldn't satisfy the shadow's hunger. It wasn't a physical need—it was instinct, primal and undeniable, like a predator's urge to hunt.

'I'll deal with that later. Right now, I need to focus on regaining my energy. Half my shadow energy reserves are gone... I'll need to replenish them soon.'

Damon sat by the fire, staring into the dancing flames. Shadows bent and stretched around the room, creating intricate patterns that he watched with idle curiosity. It helped keep his mind from wandering to thoughts of his sister. If he let himself dwell on it too much, he might find himself sprinting toward the capital city without a plan.

Time slipped by unnoticed. Hours passed as Damon remained still, his senses attuned to the subtle ways shadows moved and flickered in the firelight.

A soft groan broke the silence, pulling his attention back to the room.

Iris stirred on the sofa, her eyelids fluttering open. She blinked slowly, her gaze unfocused at first as she adjusted to her surroundings.

The first thing Iris noticed was the flickering light of the fireplace she had lit earlier that evening. The room was dim, illuminated only by the dancing flames. Her gaze drifted to the familiar sofa beneath her and the wooden chair in the corner—her father's usual spot after returning from a hunt.

Her eyes widened as she focused on the figure seated in the chair. It wasn't her father.

Instead, it was the strange young man from earlier. He radiated an unsettling aura, his presence heavy with an inexplicable mystique. His short, dark hair framed his face, partially obscured by a black blindfold that seemed more ominous in the dim light. The shadows surrounding him appeared unnaturally dark, almost alive, and perched on the armrest was a raven, its beady eyes fixed on her with an unsettling calmness.

"You're awake," the man said, his voice as composed as his demeanor.

Iris blinked, still trying to process her surroundings. She couldn't fathom how he could see her with that blindfold covering his eyes.

She nodded slowly, her mind racing to recall the events that had led her here. She remembered their duel—the sudden clash, the burst of her flames—and then, nothing.

"I... I lost..." she murmured, the words bitter on her tongue.

Damon nodded, his expression unreadable.

"You did. And as per our agreement, you're now my apprentice."

Iris didn't argue. She simply stared at him, the weight of her defeat still sinking in.

"How did you do that?" she asked, her voice laced with a mix of awe and frustration. "How can you move so fast?"

Damon shook his head, unwilling to divulge the embarrassing truth of his near-blunder.

"I'm not fast... you're just slow."

Iris took a deep breath, wincing as her aching body protested. "Who are you? What's your name? And how do you know my father?"

Damon expected the questions but couldn't afford to be entirely honest.

"My name is Damon Grey," he replied evenly. "As for your father... like I said, I owe him my life."

She nodded, though her doubt lingered. She pressed him with a few more questions, and Damon responded with carefully crafted half-truths, sidestepping anything that might unravel his story.

Growing tired of the interrogation and sensing the conversation edging toward dangerous territory, he decided to shift her focus.

"I've been your guest for three hours," he said with a faint smirk. "Can't I at least get some tea?"

Iris raised an eyebrow. "Actually, you invited yourself in."

Damon chuckled softly. "Good to see you're lively again. But don't forget—you're my apprentice now."

Iris sighed, her reluctance evident. "Fine. Whatever. I'll make some tea."

Damon found her grudging compliance amusing. "Good girl."

She shot him a glare before heading toward the kitchen. "Do you have any preference for tea, Mr. Damon?"

"No. And you can call me Master."

Iris turned to glare at him again, her tone sharp. "Like hell I would. You're not much older than me."

Damon smirked. "Fair enough. Then I suppose Damon will do just fine. Drop the 'Mister,' though."

Iris nodded curtly and busied herself in the kitchen. It wasn't long before she returned with a pot of tea and two cups arranged neatly on a tray. Damon reflexively picked up the pot, pouring tea for both of them. He brought the cup to his lips, savoring the warmth before setting it down.

When he glanced up, Iris was glaring at him, her fists clenched tightly.

"Are you a noble?" she asked, her tone cold and accusatory.

Damon tilted his head, confused. "No, I'm not."

Iris stood abruptly, her eyes narrowing. "Liar."