

Living Shadow 114

Chapter 114 Into The Badlands

A small carriage emerged from the shadows near the academy's walls, its wheels creaking softly against the uneven ground. Hidden beneath a canopy of trees in the dim moonlight, a young man with shifty blue eyes and brown hair leapt down, his long cloak billowing as he landed. He patted the horses gently, their restless movements quieted by his touch.

"Where is he..." he muttered under his breath, scanning the dark surroundings.

Before he could say another word, a calm voice spoke from behind him.

"Did you bring everything?"

The man jolted in alarm, clutching his chest as his heart raced.

"Goddess, Damon! Don't do that!" he exclaimed, his voice barely above a whisper. "You almost gave me a heart attack. Goddess forbid, I thought it was one of your professors sneaking up on me."

Damon stepped closer, his expression as unreadable as ever. His blindfolded eyes, hidden from view, gave him an otherworldly air. To Carls, the blue-eyed youth, Damon looked different—more tired, perhaps even haunted.

"You okay?" Carls asked hesitantly, tilting his head. "You look... ah, different."

Damon's lips tightened as he glanced away.

"It's nothing," he replied, his tone flat. "Just a little hungry is all."

Carls raised a skeptical brow but didn't press further.

"Don't they feed you in the academy?" he asked, attempting a lighter tone.

"I heard students there eat like nobles—the fat kind. Boy, that'd be a dream for street rats like us, eating like kings."

His awkward laugh faded when Damon didn't respond. He glanced at his companion, his gaze lingering on Damon's pale features.

"Well, you already look the part of a handsome noble... a little gloomy, though."

"That's enough, Carls," Damon interrupted sharply. "Help me move everything closer to the waterway."

Carls hesitated, his unease deepening as he turned to the carriage laden with barrels and crates.

"I know it's none of my business," he began cautiously, "but what the hell are you planning with this much dragon's breath? I'd think you were trying to burn the academy to the ground. And what's all that other stuff for?"

Damon's impassive gaze remained fixed on him.

"You're right. It's none of your business."

Carls sighed, shaking his head with a weary smile. Damon's cold demeanor was nothing new, but it still grated on his nerves.

Without another word, the two began unloading the supplies. Carls couldn't help but wonder how Damon planned to get all these barrels and tools past the academy's barriers. As an outsider, Carls couldn't step foot beyond the perimeter without the magical protections rejecting—or outright attacking—him.

Only students and faculty registered could enter past the barrier.

'Not like we can just waltz through the front gate with all this suspicious stuff,' Carls thought, glancing at Damon.

But Carls didn't voice his doubts. Damon was paying him well, and he wasn't foolish enough to poke at the hornet's nest of his dangerous friend's psyche. He'd seen what Damon was capable of—and the remnants of those who crossed him.

Four hours later, Damon had hauled the last of the supplies through the academy's hidden waterways. Carls leaned against the carriage, watching Damon's retreating figure with a mix of pity and dread.

"Goddess save whoever he's using all that on," Carls muttered under his breath.

Without further delay, he slipped back into the shadows, eager to avoid any guards or academy staff who might stumble upon him. Whatever Damon was planning, Carls wanted no part of it.

Damon was sweating buckets as he finished arranging the materials. His shadow's hunger had reached a dangerous 77%, but he had no choice—he needed the stat boost it provided for what lay ahead.

Over the past four hours, he had painstakingly gathered everything he bought through Carls' connections: incendiary materials, fire crystals, bamboo, and barrels of dragon's breath, a highly flammable liquid gas. It was all part of his plan. As for where he got the money, especially since he was nearly broke?

He took a large down payment from Leona, enough to make him feel like shedding tears of blood over the expense. But it was necessary. The next phase of his plan was even more grueling.

Mapping the exam site beyond the barrier would be the easy part. Then came the hardest task setting up the explosives and dragon's breath in strategic, hidden locations. He would create makeshift pipelines using bamboo, placing them in areas difficult to detect.

"Arson is so much work these days," Damon muttered under his breath.

And he had to do it all tonight—before returning in time to kill Rein Ambridge.

With a determined look, Damon ventured beyond the barrier.

Crossing the barrier was deceptively simple, though it didn't ease his unease. His path took him past the ravine where he had once been left to die and where the entity that fused with his shadow had revealed itself.

The memory clawed at his mind, filling him with dread and deepening his resolve to kill Marcus and his friends.

As he moved cautiously, his tension peaked when he reached a small river—the true border of the academy's protection. If he crossed it, he would enter the Evil Forest, leaving the safety of the barrier behind.

Damon spread his shadow's perception to its full two-kilometer radius, drinking in every detail. But the sheer volume of sensory information overwhelmed him, and he quickly pulled it back. The kaleidoscope of fragmented images was more distracting than useful.

Taking a deep breath, he removed his blindfold and tucked it into his pocket. Armed with a small digger, a shovel, and the weapons concealed beneath his uniform, Damon pressed forward.

He stepped carefully across the river, using a few stones to avoid making noise. The moment his feet touched the opposite shore, the air shifted.

It grew colder, and an oppressive, sinister magic energy weighed on him. The trees loomed taller, their gnarled branches stretching like skeletal fingers. Shadows lengthened unnaturally, and Damon felt a chill crawl up his spine.

Every fiber of his being screamed at him to turn back. His instincts, sharper than ever, warned him he was in real danger.

Grinding his teeth, Damon forced the fear down, silently cursing the fact that his Remorseless skill wasn't activating.

He narrowed his eyes, fists clenching tightly.

'This is the only way,' he told himself.

And so, with resolve burning in his heart, Damon stepped into the darkness of the woods, knowing he had to risk it all if he wanted to win.

