

Living Shadow 128

Chapter 128 Against All Odds

The young man's group was in bad shape. Their combat uniforms were slashed and torn, and their original party of seven had been reduced to just three battered survivors.

Damon's sharp eyes took in the injuries. Those look like sword wounds...

Natch, the least injured of the three, was trying to steady himself as he leaned against a rock. Damon wasn't sure what had attacked them, so he expanded his shadow perception to its full two-kilometer range. His senses swept through the area, but he didn't detect anything significant. No signs of large threats, no lurking automata, not even the faint presence of their inanimate shadows.

"Were they attacked by other students?" Sylvia muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Damon's gaze shifted to her.

"Unlikely. The sword wounds look like they came from someone much taller."

Sylvia nodded, her face tense.

Evangeline glanced between Sylvia and the injured group.

"We should help them," she said, her voice filled with concern.

Damon's eyes narrowed. "Are you forgetting this is an evaluation? Those guys are our competitors."

Sylvia bit her lip, torn between her empathy and the harsh reality of their situation.

"You're right... but we could get information about what did this."

Damon sighed, his frustration bubbling beneath the surface.

'We could also just threaten them for information... these girls are so naïve.'

He turned away, a wave of lightheadedness washing over him as his hunger gnawed at his mind.

"Do as you please," he muttered, walking toward the wall of the cave.

Leaning his back against the cold stone, Damon glanced at his shadow flickering nearby.

'I have to end this before midnight... or better yet, a few hours after sunset.'

He moved further away, creating some distance as Sylvia and Evangeline began tending to Natch and his group. Pulling out a sound stone, Damon activated it and sent a message to Marcus, giving him a set of precise instructions.

'I better have him drop out of the exam soon...'

His gaze drifted back to Sylvia and Evangeline. They worked diligently, their expressions soft with concern as they patched up the injured students. Damon bit his lip, a pang of something uncomfortably close to guilt stirring within him.

'These girls... and even Xander, for whatever reason, decided to team up with me. For a while, I actually enjoyed their company... though I hate admitting it.'

Each of them had their quirks and unique personalities, adding color to what had been a solitary existence for Damon. But in the end, none of it truly mattered. If passing the evaluation required sacrificing this budding camaraderie, then so be it. He'd consider their friendship a small price to pay for victory.

Damon approached the group, feeling a sour mix of hunger and irritation.

Natch Wuta, now mostly healed, stood tall with his broad-shouldered frame, a buzz cut framing his sharp amber eyes. The red-haired boy noticed Damon approaching and immediately sneered, clicking his tongue.

"The hell are you looking at?"

Damon was too drained to entertain the provocation. If this had been back when he first experienced the shadow hunger gnawing at him, he might have let Natch have it in a burst of frustration. But now, he simply ignored the insult and turned to Sylvia.

"What did you get?"

Before she could answer, Natch stepped closer, his voice rising.

"Don't ignore me, you bastard. I'm talking to you!"

Damon sighed, his patience wearing thin. Now it was clear—Natch wasn't just rude; he wanted a fight. And it couldn't have been worse timing for him. The shadow hunger within Damon wasn't just weakening him; it was also amplifying his strength, fueling his growing agitation.

Sylvia quickly stepped between them, holding up a hand to stop Natch.

"I healed you, and this is how you show your gratitude?"

Natch scratched the back of his head, mumbling,

"Argh... sorry. I didn't mean any offense to you. It's just..." His glare shifted back to Damon.

"This guy gives commoners like me a bad rep."

Damon steadied himself against a nearby rock, feeling the lightheadedness deepen.

'Right. This guy was a commoner, too.'

Natch continued, his glare hardening.

"He comes in with a golden ticket and makes life harder for the rest of us. He's just giving nobles more reasons to look down on people like me."

Damon's face remained blank, though his fists clenched at his sides.

'Too hungry to argue... should I just punch him?'

Xander stood off to the side, watching with a smirk as if the whole scene were pure entertainment.

Natch's voice rose, his anger boiling over.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Mooching off the goodwill of top students? You've got no pride!"

Damon tilted his head, his tone flat and dismissive.

"I pride myself on having no pride."

Natch blinked, momentarily thrown off by the response. His confusion quickly turned to fury.

"Are you people blind?" he barked, gesturing at Damon.

"This guy is the weakest of us all! He's at the bottom of the rankings and is literally wearing a probationary student's brooch!"

Xander chuckled. "Finally, someone other than me said it."

Damon ignored the escalating insults, biting back the rising anger as the shadow hunger gnawed at his restraint. I need to conserve my energy, or I might not make it to nightfall.

Leona clenched her fists. "Hey, Number Six—"

Before she could finish, Damon's leg shot out in a blur of motion, a lightning-fast kick landing squarely on Natch's crotch. The red-haired boy's eyes bulged, and he crumpled to the ground with a strangled gasp.

His two remaining companions rushed to his side, panic on their faces.

Sylvia's eyes widened in shock. "Wha... what...?"

Damon brushed the dust off his hands, his voice calm but firm. "He was talking too much. It's annoying."

'At least I saved my energy.'

He turned to Sylvia, ignoring the groans from Natch on the ground. "What did you find out from them?"

Sylvia hesitated, glancing at Natch, who was still writhing in pain. "Do... do I need to heal that?"

Damon grabbed her arm, pulling her aside. "No. It's better if you don't."

He led her back to the others, keeping his focus sharp despite the growing haze of hunger clouding his thoughts.

Sylvia and Evangeline quickly explained what they had learned from Natch's group. Apparently, all the normal crystal points in the forest—10,000 in total—had already been found. Most of the automata had also been destroyed. The only points left were tied to the elusive golden crystal, guarded by a powerful automaton and its minions.

Sylvia pointed in the direction of the jagged hill where the crystal was rumored to be. Damon recognized it immediately. It wasn't far from a stream that twisted through the forest—a place he remembered all too well. Dire wolves had once made their den there, and Damon had narrowly escaped death in that area more than once.

He grimaced at the memory, but his mind quickly shifted to the bigger picture.

'If there were only 10,000 points to begin with... this really puts things into perspective.'

Kael Blackthorne had designed this exam to ensure his failure. Damon was sure of it now.

'The points system will eventually force everyone into a brutal free-for-all. In the end, only the top five will pass. No room for me in that ranking... not when everyone else is fighting for their merit.'

His jaw tightened as he stared toward the distant hill. 'If Kael wants me to fail, I'll just have to prove him wrong. No matter what it takes.'