

## Living Shadow 141

### Chapter 141 My Possibilities

Damon fell to his knees, coughing violently from the thick, choking smoke that filled the air. His chest heaved, desperately trying to pull in what little oxygen he could find. He hadn't felt the effects before—his shadow had consumed all his focus, battling Xander and vying for control of his body.

Half the time, Damon had been locked in a mental struggle with his insidious shadow. His shadow was almost ravenous, its hunger a constant threat to his sanity.

He'd known the risks from the start. Without the power granted by Shadow Hunger, he wouldn't have lasted long in the evaluation. It had been a gamble—a dangerous one. But luck, or perhaps sheer will, had turned things in his favor. Xander's final, desperate attempt to rise had given Damon just enough clarity to seize control, eliminating Xander from the evaluation before the shadow could kill him outright.

The shadow's methods had been cruel, dragging Xander's defeat into a slow, agonizing process. It hadn't just been about winning; it had been about making sure Xander couldn't escape its grasp.

Damon coughed again, his movements sluggish as he crawled toward the stream. Rubble and debris littered the water, making it impossible to simply dive in and swim to safety. But that didn't matter.

He considered using his safety bracelet to teleport out. It would be the easy way—but Damon hesitated. He didn't trust Kael Blackthorne not to use it as an excuse to fail him after everything he had done.

"No way I'm taking any chances now," he muttered hoarsely.

Shrugging off his jacket, Damon transferred his quiver of arrows to his waist. He leaned over the edge of the stream, scooping up water and pouring it over his face and chest. The cool sensation was a brief relief from the suffocating heat, but it wasn't enough.

His head swam from the smoke, and without a second thought, he plunged his head into the water. The sensation was immediate—calming and grounding. His [Water Celebration] skill kicked in, ensuring he could hold his breath indefinitely without fear of drowning.

"Too bad I can't swim through all this rubble," he muttered, pulling his head back out.

The heat was becoming unbearable. Thinking quickly, Damon soaked his jacket in the water, wringing it out just enough before wrapping it around his head, covering his face completely. With his shadow perception and heightened spatial awareness, he didn't need his eyes to see.

The burning forest was a maze of falling trees, shifting debris, and thick smoke. The fire distorted the shadows, making them flicker and waver, but Damon could see where they widened—those were his pathways, his escape routes.

"It's all or nothing," he growled, steeling himself.

Xander had destroyed his planned escape route, leaving Damon to forge his own way through the inferno. But so what? He'd walk through hell itself if it meant victory.

Wrapping his jacket tightly, Damon started to run, trusting the shadows to guide him. His shadow itself was useless now—too consumed by its own hunger to provide any aid. Activating his [5x Speed] skill again, Damon surged forward, ignoring the protests of his battered, aching body.

The flames danced all around him, scorching the air and blistering his skin, but he didn't slow. He dove through a gap where the blaze thinned, landing on the other side just as a tree came crashing down.

He skidded to a halt, his instincts kicking in. Firing his omnidirectional gear, he latched onto a burning tree and swung over the flames, the heat licking at his legs.

The goal was clear: reach the side of the stream untouched by rubble. Each leap and swing carried him closer, though not without cost. Burns seared his skin, and his muscles screamed in protest. But Damon pressed on, clearing obstacle after obstacle until finally, he reached his destination.

Without hesitation, he dove into the stream, the dark, cool waters swallowing him whole. Above, the forest continued to burn, trees crashing down in a chaotic symphony of destruction. But Damon was gone, disappearing into the depths as the world above him burned.

Back on the other side of the forest, far from the inferno, the tension in the air was palpable.

Kael narrowed his eyes, his gaze shifting to where Professor Emeralda tended to Xander's wounds. Her magic attribute made her uniquely compatible with healing spells, and with the assistance of a few more healers, Xander was recovering quickly. His face had already begun to heal from the burns.

Professor Emeralda glanced at the screen displaying the remnants of the battlefield, her expression twisted with anger and worry.

"The evaluation is over... so why hasn't he teleported out yet?" she demanded, her voice sharp.

Kael held up the magic artifact in his hands, his expression grim.

"The receivers were destroyed by the fire. We can't communicate with him, let alone forcefully initiate his teleportation."

Chrome stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I suppose he's worried we'll use this as an excuse to fail him. So, he's coming here on his own."

Emeralda bit her lip, anxiety etched across her face. "He's mad! He'll die before he makes it here..."

Kael's jaw tightened.

"Let's hope he doesn't," he murmured.

As Emeralda continued to observe the screen, something peculiar caught her attention.

"Did... did he just cover his entire face? How does he expect to see like that?"

Before she could finish her thought, Xander scoffed from where he rested, his voice laced with disdain.

"That wretch doesn't need eyes to see. He has another way of looking at the world."

Emeralda turned to him sharply.

"You shouldn't be talking. You need to rest. And don't act like you're blameless in all of this!"

Their attention was drawn back to the screen as Damon began navigating through the flames. His movements were precise, almost methodical, and for a moment, it seemed like he might actually make it. But then, just as things were looking promising, he plunged into a rushing stream.

Time ticked by—one minute, two, three, eight—and there was no sign of him.

The professors exchanged uneasy glances, and the students' murmurs grew louder, fear creeping into their voices.

"Is... is he dead? Did he drown?" one student asked, his tone trembling.

Before he could say another word, Leona smacked him across the head.

"He's not dead. He's fine," she snapped.

Her words were firm, but her expression betrayed her worry. Unlike the others, who seemed relieved at the thought of Damon's absence, Leona wasn't afraid of him. She knew what he was capable of, but she also understood him in ways the others didn't. Damon wasn't someone who admitted his true feelings—not to anyone.

In one night, he had done the impossible: helped destroy the great automata, betrayed a friend, manipulated the entire class, brutalized a peer, and set the forest ablaze. He had taught those who once looked down on him to fear him.

And just when everyone thought he was gone for good, a ripple appeared in the river before them.

Damon emerged from the water, his injuries severe but his eyes cold and resolute.

The professors froze. Emeraldalda hesitated, biting her lip as she debated whether to approach him. Despite everything he had done to Xander, she couldn't ignore the state he was in. She took a tentative step toward him, but Damon walked past her without a word, his steps heavy and deliberate as he stopped in front of Kael.

His body trembled, the shadows around him darker and twitching erratically. With the flames behind him, he cut a menacing figure.

"Someone like me should never have been allowed to cross the gates of the glorious Aether Academy, yet here I am." he began, his voice low and gravelly.

Kael stiffened, recognizing those words. He had said them to Damon once, and now, the boy stood before him, keeping his promise to respond.

Damon raised his head, his pitch-black eyes locking onto Kael's.

"You were right, Professor. I am someone lowly."

He paused, the weight of his words hanging in the air.

"With all due respect, you were right about that. But you have no right to tell me I wouldn't amount to anything."

His voice grew colder, each word cutting like a blade.

"I am a failure. I am a traitor who betrayed everything I could have stood for. I have no pride. But I didn't need you to tell me that. I may be a failure, but I'm self-aware...."

The students and professors were silent, his voice carrying through the clearing.

"Who the hell are you to decide my possibilities? Who the hell are you to tell me what I can and can't achieve? That's where you were wrong."

Damon's lips curled into a bitter smile.

"And with all due respect, Professor... screw you."

His final words were quiet yet laced with venom. Damon turned on his heel and walked away, his battered frame disappearing into the night.

No one tried to stop him.

All eyes turned to Kael, who stood rooted in place, his expression unreadable. He didn't move. He didn't speak. And he offered no response.