

Living Shadow 18

Chapter 18 The Pain Of Starvation

Damon stood frozen in place as students moved past him, their chatter blending into a dull hum. His breath hitched, and his pupils dilated, the black of his eyes expanding unnaturally as if they sought to consume all light.

A long trail of drool leaked from his parted lips, unnoticed as his gaze locked onto the crowd. In his monochromatic world, the vibrant glow of their souls was unbearable—radiant, tantalizing, and beckoning him to devour them.

Beneath his feet, his shadow began to writhe unnaturally, tendrils of darkness curling and coiling like smoke, inching toward the ground around him. It reacted violently, a predator denied its prey, its erratic movements mirroring Damon's own inner turmoil.

He took a slow, deliberate step forward, his hand reaching out toward a nearby student. The glow radiating from their chest was irresistible, pulling him forward like a moth to a flame. His eyes darkened further, and a predatory glint appeared in his gaze.

Inches from touching the student, Damon froze. A surge of clarity hit him like a splash of cold water.

"Ahhh!"

He collapsed to his knees, clutching his stomach as if trying to contain the ravenous hunger clawing at his insides.

A few passing students stopped, glancing at him with concerned expressions. The weight of their stares was enough to jolt him into action. He forced himself to his feet and bolted, his steps unsteady as he fled the plaza.

Behind a detached building, Damon finally stopped, leaning heavily against the wall as he caught his breath. His chest heaved, his heart pounding in his ears.

His shadow, normally mischievous and animated, had changed. It twitched erratically, its movements weak yet feral, as though gathering its strength for a desperate attack. Damon collapsed onto the ground, his legs giving out beneath him.

He raised his head weakly, his body trembling with a mix of fear and exhaustion. Despite the terror gnawing at his mind, his thoughts felt unnervingly calm and cold.

'I know what it wants,' he realized, his gut twisting in revulsion.

His shadow wasn't satisfied with scraps or ordinary sustenance. It craved souls—vital, powerful souls from beings like humans, elves, beastkin, and other races with potent life forces.

"Arrghhh..."

A guttural groan escaped his lips as a wave of hunger-induced pain wracked his body. Time blurred as he sat there, clutching his sides, his breaths shallow and uneven. Occasionally, his vision would black out, plunging him into brief moments of unconsciousness.

He glanced at his pager, using it to record the durations of his blackouts. It wasn't much, but it gave him some semblance of control over his spiraling state.

His enhanced senses only made things worse. Through his shadow, he could perceive the movement of people and objects by the way they disrupted the light and darkness around them.

The constant influx of sensory data was overwhelming, and each time he lost focus, it felt as though his consciousness expanded to encompass all the shadows around him.

It was disorienting. Painful. Maddening.

Hours passed, and by the time he emerged from his stupor, it was already lunchtime. He hadn't attended a single class, but the chatter of students and the unmistakable mention of "lunch" and "cafeteria" reached his ears, pulled in by his heightened hearing.

"Food... Fooood..."

The word slipped from his lips in a low, groggy mutter. He staggered to his feet, his movements sluggish and jerky, like a reanimated corpse.

He joined the flow of students heading to the cafeteria, blending into the crowd as best he could. His head hung low, his mind clouded by hunger so intense it bordered on madness.

"Hungryyyy... foood..."

He muttered under his breath, his voice hoarse and strained. The sun bore down on him as he walked, every sensation heightened to an unbearable degree. The warmth of the light, the sound of footsteps, the faint rustle of leaves—it all pressed against his senses like an unrelenting tide.

Yet none of it mattered. His mind was consumed by one thought, one driving need. Hunger.

In this bizarre state, Damon arrived at the cafeteria, a lavish and bustling space packed with students, each seated at their respective tables. The academy cafeteria was distinctly segregated.

On the first floor, long communal tables were designated for commoners and under privileged students. The second floor featured more exclusive round tables, reserved for the wealthy and middle-level nobility.

But the pinnacle of luxury lay on the third floor, an area enclosed by transparent glass walls. This elite section required scanning one's pager to access. From outside, students could see the opulence within, a deliberate display of privilege reserved for upper nobility and elite students. Entry here required either status, an abundance of academy privileges, or both.

Damon, however, had neither status nor favor among the elite. Yet he still ate there, every day, defiantly claiming his place among the nobles. His justification? A golden ticket—an academy privilege that granted him access to this hallowed ground. This boldness earned him scorn and bullying from the upper class, but Damon didn't care.

Even in his current hunger-driven haze, his stubbornness endured. Without hesitation, he approached the glass doors, a small, bitter smirk tugging at his lips as the thought of smug nobles flitted through his mind.

A hungry man was also an angry man, and Damon was both.

Pulling out his pager, he swiped it against the sensor, the doors opening with a mechanical hum. He stepped through, ignoring the disdainful stares that burned into his back.

Ordinarily, he would head to the counter and serve himself, but today, he lacked the energy. His legs felt like lead, his mind fogged by starvation. Collapsing into a chair, Damon reached under the table and pressed a small button, summoning a maid.

The woman approached promptly, her steps hesitant as she noticed his trembling form. He didn't even look up at her, keeping his head low as his body quaked under the strain of his hunger.

"Food," he growled, his voice low and feral.

The maid bowed quickly, a flicker of fear crossing her face at the raw, primal edge in his tone.

"What would you like to eat?" she asked cautiously.

"Food. Now."

"Yes—yes, right away."

She hurried off, returning moments later with a service trolley laden with dishes. Damon didn't wait for her to finish setting the plates. As soon as they hit the table, he began devouring the food, shoveling it into his mouth with wild abandon.

"More," he demanded between bites. "More... more."

The maid yelped, nodding frantically. "Yes... right away!"

She rushed back and forth, bringing more and more food to Damon's table. But no matter how much she provided, it was never enough. Damon ate like a ravenous beast, his table manners nonexistent, food spilling onto the table and floor.

His frenzied behavior quickly drew the attention of the other students, most of whom were nobles.

"What a beast."

"Who let such a savage creature in here?"

"Disgusting."

"....."

The murmurs grew louder, but Damon ignored them. He didn't care what they thought. As long as they didn't touch him, he would let it go.

From her table, Leona Valefier watched with sparkling eyes. The beastkin had a substantial pile of food before her, but her interest was wholly focused on Damon.

The more Damon ate, the more despair filled him. No matter how much he consumed, the gnawing hunger remained, a void that nothing could fill. Frustration built within him, bubbling over into raw rage.

With a guttural grunt, Damon suddenly stood and, with a surge of monstrous strength, hurled the table several meters across the room. It crashed into the counter, shattering glass and scattering food everywhere.

The cafeteria fell silent, the other students staring in shock at the display of raw power.

Damon's eyes glowed with a mad frenzy as he glared at the room, his breathing ragged. Every person in his line of sight appeared as prey, glowing with an unbearable light.

'Food... food... there's food everywhere...'

He swallowed hard, fighting the primal urge threatening to overtake him. Forcing himself to turn away, he bolted from the cafeteria, running blindly through the academy until he reached a deserted hallway.

He staggered to a stop, leaning heavily against the wall.

"Hungryyyy... so hungryyyy,"

he muttered, his voice barely audible.

As he stumbled forward, his shoulder collided with someone.

"Get the hell out of my way!" he snapped, shoving the person with enough force to send them crashing into the wall.

When Damon looked up, his eyes widened. Standing before him was a blinding source of light, brighter than any soul he had ever seen.

His stomach twisted painfully, his mind clouding. He had no control now. The hunger consumed him entirely, and he lunged forward, his instincts fully taking over.

Evangeline Brightwater froze in her tracks, the radiant light around her intensifying with an almost blinding fury.

Her piercing gaze locked onto him, a mixture of anger and indignation flickering across her elegant features.

"How dare you?"