

Living Shadow 20

Chapter 20 Ravenous

Damon's breathing was ragged as he sprinted through the outskirts of the academy, his thoughts a chaotic blur. His body moved on instinct, his legs carrying him toward the familiar refuge of the forest—a place he often used as his training ground.

The path to his destination quickly disappeared under his feet as he veered off course, the dense canopy of trees swallowing him whole. The sunlight filtering through the leaves created a patchwork of light and shadow on the forest floor, a sight that might have been serene under any other circumstances.

But to Damon, it was a tormenting labyrinth. His black-and-white vision, heightened by his shadow affinity, overwhelmed him with sensory input. The shadows from the trees were alive, pulsating with strange energy, bombarding him with fragmented images and sensations.

The sheer volume of information crashed over him like a tidal wave.

He stumbled, his knees hitting the ground with a dull thud. A pained grunt escaped his lips as his world spun uncontrollably. His hands trembled as he tried to push himself upright, only to collapse again after a single faltering step.

Crawling to the nearest tree, he slumped against its rough bark, his chest heaving.

"Stop... please, make it stop..."

His voice was barely a whisper, a desperate plea to the shadow that had once been his ally.

But the shadow offered no solace. Where it had once been a loyal extension of his will, it now writhed on the ground like a living thing, its erratic movements reflecting the chaos in Damon's mind.

He clutched his head tightly, his fingers digging into his scalp as he tried to block out the flood of perceptions. The shadows around him whispered, their voices indistinct but maddeningly persistent. Each inanimate shadow seemed to carry its own distinct presence, a cacophony of stimuli that drowned out his thoughts.

Why won't it stop?

Damon's anguish deepened, his body trembling as he fought against the overwhelming sensations.

Then, amidst the chaos, a sound reached him—faint but distinct.

Footsteps.

The steady rhythm of someone approaching echoed in his heightened perception. Though still distant, his shadow-filled vision painted a vivid image of the intruder: Lark Bonaire, running confidently through the forest.

Lark's soul radiated a faint glow that caught Damon's attention, a beacon amidst the shadows. Damon's throat tightened, his hunger surging uncontrollably at the sight of that light. His teeth clenched as he fought the urge, his hands gripping his head even tighter.

"No... no, not again..." he whispered, his voice trembling with dread.

The footsteps grew louder, each step reverberating in Damon's distorted senses. It wasn't long before Lark emerged from the trees, his gaze locking onto Damon's collapsed form.

Damon sat slumped against the tree, his body shuddering as he muttered incoherent pleas. His once-sharp eyes were now clouded with confusion and fear, his shadow twitching erratically at his feet.

Lark's lips curled into a slow, calculated smile as he observed the scene.

"There you are, Grey... I've been looking for you since yesterday," Lark Bonaire's voice rang out, sharp and mocking.

He strode toward Damon confidently, summoning a whip formed of wind magic with a casual flick of his hand.

"You didn't really think you could kick me and just run away, did you?" Lark sneered. "You're so lucky Lord Xander stopped me back then. Heh, heh, heh."

Damon sat slumped against the tree, his head lowered and hands clutching his temples. Shadows flickered erratically around him, twitching like living things. His voice was weak, almost a whisper.

"...You should run... I won't be able to stop it if it reaches 90%."

Lark paused, narrowing his eyes at Damon's muttering. To him, it sounded like defiance, as if Damon were issuing a challenge even in his weakened state.

"For someone as weak as you, Grey, you sure have a big mouth," Lark said, stepping closer.

"After I'm done with you today, you'll never raise your head to your betters again."

Damon raised his head slightly, his expression hollow. His eyes darted briefly to the side where a glowing system panel flickered in his vision.

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 89%]

The warning burned into his mind, yet his voice came out soft and desperate.

"Run away... just go... It's hungry."

Lark's expression turned colder, his irritation mounting.

"Still mouthing off, huh? Today, no one will save you from me!"

He raised his leg and kicked Damon in the side, sending him sprawling onto the forest floor. Damon landed in a heap, dry leaves sticking to his clothes. He didn't even try to dodge, lying still where he fell.

Lark's lips curled into a cruel grin.

"Oh, now you're pathetic. Let's make this lesson stick."

He followed up with another kick, this one driving into Damon's stomach. The force made Damon cough, but he remained limp, his body barely reacting.

"You dare to kick me in the groin—me, Lark Bonaire?" Lark spat, his voice rising with rage.

"After I threw you into that ravine, you should've stayed dead! But no, you came back, insulted me in front of Lord Xander, and now you think you're someone? You deserve to die!"

With a sadistic laugh, he raised his whip and brought it down on Damon's back. The wind magic sliced through Damon's shirt, leaving thin lines of blood on his skin.

Damon's eyes grew colder, his body trembling—not from the pain of Lark's strikes but from the overwhelming flood of sensory information assaulting him. His head pounded as shadows whispered incoherently around him, drowning out everything else.

His voice was barely audible as he muttered, "I'm so... tired... I'm so hungry..."

And then, it happened.

[Ding]

The sound echoed in Damon's mind, cutting through the chaos.

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 90%]

[Shadow has become ravenous.]

[All stats are drastically amplified.]

A sudden surge of power coursed through him, and his shadow twisted violently, wrapping around his body like a living entity. Damon's form disappeared as the shadow consumed him entirely, reshaping his body into a monstrous figure.

His hands elongated into razor-sharp claws, his mouth filled with jagged teeth, and his eyes vanished, replaced by the void of pure darkness. He stood, a hulking shadowy creature radiating an aura of malevolent hunger.

The transformation was instantaneous.

Lark took a step back, his bravado melting into wide-eyed terror as he stared at the abomination before him.

"G-Grey... Wh-what's happening?" he stammered, his voice trembling.

The shadow-creature tilted its head, emitting a low, guttural growl that resonated through the forest. Its movements were erratic yet deliberate, exuding raw, predatory power.

Driven by instinct, Lark lashed out with his wind magic, sending a slicing gust toward the creature. But the attack dissipated against its form, utterly ineffective.

The shadow struck back, its clawed hand darting out and grabbing Lark's arm. With a sickening crunch, it crushed the bones in his wrist.

"ARRGH!"

Lark's scream echoed through the forest as he crumpled in pain, his right arm hanging mangled at his side.

The shadow released him, letting his body drop, but its dark form trembled with sadistic laughter at his agony. Lark, realizing his attacks were futile, scrambled to flee, activating wind magic to propel himself away.

But the shadow was faster.

With an inhuman speed, it darted between the trees and appeared above him. A clawed hand slammed Lark's face into the ground, dragging him across the forest floor. His face scraped against rocks and roots, leaving him bloodied and broken.

He tried to scream, but the shadow pressed him down, cutting off his voice. Then, with terrifying strength, it lifted him and hurled him into a tree. The force splintered the trunk, leaving Lark gasping in a pool of his own blood.

"Y-You... monster..." Lark croaked, trying to crawl away. "I'll... report this... to the Inquisition... I swear on the Bonaire name..."

The shadow stepped closer, its claws carving through nearby trees as it advanced.

"I... am... hungryyyy," it whispered, the voice guttural and alien.

Lark froze, his bravado evaporating into pure terror.

"G-Grey... Please... don't do this," he begged, his voice cracking. "I'm a noble... I'll pay you—millions of zeni! Spare me! I-I swear, I'll never bother you again!"

The shadow didn't respond. Its void-like maw opened wide, jagged teeth glinting before it clamped down on him. Lark's screams were cut off as the shadow devoured him whole, leaving no trace behind.

For a moment, the forest was silent.

Then the shadows receded, melting away from Damon's form. He collapsed to his knees, trembling as he regained control of his body.

[You have slain Lark Bonaire.]

[You have received 5 attribute points.]

[You have acquired the skill 5x.]

[Your shadow is full.]

Damon's breath caught in his throat as the notifications faded. Tears streamed down his face, and his voice cracked with anguish.

"Ah... ahhh... what...ahhh..."