

Living Shadow 21

Chapter 21 Erasing The Evidence

The forest was eerily silent, the stillness pressing on Damon like a weight. His breaths came in shallow gasps as he glanced around, willing himself to calm down. The situation was dire—if he were implicated in the death of Lark Bonaire, his life at the academy, and possibly beyond, would be over.

The academy prided itself on being neutral ground, where students enjoyed a degree of diplomatic immunity. Its own rules superseded external laws. But Lark wasn't just any student—he was a noble. A simple fight would've been excused, but this was different. Damon hadn't just killed him; he had consumed him in an act that would be deemed both inhumane and monstrous. The very thought sent a shiver down his spine.

Tears that had spilled moments ago dried instantly as cold reality settled in. The temple inquisition. The rumors Damon had heard about their methods made his stomach churn.

"If I get caught... It's all over," he whispered to himself, biting down on his lip until the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

His mind raced, consumed by fear and the desperate need to cover his tracks. The guilt of killing Lark was shoved aside, replaced by a primal survival instinct. He began formulating a plan, forcing himself to think logically.

The scene was littered with evidence: claw marks on the trees, blood stains, a broken tree trunk, torn fabric, and Lark's pager lying on the ground. Damon took deep breaths, his hands trembling as he assessed everything.

"No mistakes," he reminded himself, knowing that any slip-up could spell doom.

He decided against heading directly to the academy. Instead, he moved toward the barrier at the edge of the forest, breaking a few branches along the way to simulate the chaotic retreat of a monster. He carefully placed strips of Lark's torn clothing on shrubs and hung the pager on a snapped branch. Each step was deliberate, leaving no trace of his involvement.

Circling around, Damon crossed the barrier into the wilderness beyond. He made his way to a nearby river, its cool water sending a shiver through his body as he waded in, letting the current wash over him.

"No scent, no tracks," he thought, emerging soaked and chilled but resolute.

Back within the safety of the academy's barrier, Damon headed toward the secluded forest where he often trained. Here, he was meticulous, leaving no tracks or signs of his passage. Arriving at the clearing, he hung his academy uniform on the weapons rack.

The enchanted fabric, damaged by Lark's wind whip, was already mending itself, a testament to its craftsmanship from the magic continent of Aeronia. That, at least, was one less thing to worry about.

But the gnawing anxiety wouldn't leave him. He didn't know how long it would take before someone noticed Lark's absence. He clenched his fists, his knuckles turning white. Turning to a training dummy, he let out a guttural yell, punching it with all his might.

"Why? Why did this have to happen to me?" His voice cracked with anguish.

As sunlight filtered through the canopy, Damon's shadow stretched long on the ground. It twitched, shifting unnaturally. He froze, his breath catching as he noticed it scratch its head in what seemed like an apologetic gesture.

"Go away!" he shouted, his voice filled with raw emotion.

The shadow flinched, retreating behind a training dummy. From its hiding spot, it peeked out cautiously, almost like a child afraid of scolding. Damon glared at it, his body trembling with a mixture of anger, fear, and helplessness.

For now, the forest was silent once more, but Damon knew the reprieve wouldn't last.

Damon collapsed onto his rear, his chest heaving as he fought to suppress the fear threatening to overwhelm him. He clenched his fists, forcing himself to think rationally.

"I didn't leave any traces. I should be fine. I just need to act dumb if anyone asks... Lark probably didn't tell anyone he was coming after me, or Marcus and his group would've been with him. No one else knew he was here but me."

Despite his efforts to stay calm, the fear gnawed at him, creeping in every time he let his guard down. He couldn't risk returning to the academy in broad daylight—someone might spot him, and suspicion would follow. The scene he'd left behind pointed to a monster attack, but the nagging thought of being suspected kept him frozen.

"I need to distract myself," Damon muttered, but the thought of training felt impossible in his current state. Instead, he opted for the next best thing—checking his system panel. With a flicker of thought, the translucent screen appeared before him, displaying his stats.

He scanned the familiar numbers, his heart steadying as his mind focused on something tangible.

[HP: 50/50]

[Mana: 30/30]

[Strength: 9]

[Agility: 12]

[Speed: 25]

[Endurance: 10]

[Class: —]

[Shadow: 100]

[Shadow Hunger Levels: 0%]

[Shadow Level: 1]

[Condition: Shadow is Full]

[Attributes: Umbra]

[Skills:]

[5x]

[Locked]

His stats hadn't changed much, except for a few notable differences. His shadow energy had returned to full, resting at 100%, and the hunger level was now 0%. Damon grimaced, recalling the moment his shadow had devoured Lark Bonaire. His theory seemed correct—his shadow fed on intelligent creatures.

He tapped on the Shadow Level tab, revealing a sub-menu.

[Shadow Level: 1]

Your Shadow Level reflects your control and power over your shadow. You can level up by feeding it and completing specific challenges or quests, which grant stat points to enhance HP, mana, and other attributes.

Level-up Requirements

Souls Consumed: [1/3]

Damon stared coldly at the words. The requirement for leveling up was clear: souls. He had gained one from killing Lark Bonaire. His chest tightened, but before guilt could take hold, something else caught his attention.

At the top of the screen, a small icon blinked—a number five with a plus sign. Damon focused on it, revealing another menu.

[Attribute Points]

Attribute points are gained by feeding the shadow or completing quests. These points can be distributed to empower any specific stat.

Available Points: 5

His eyes gleamed. "So I can use this to increase any stat?" he murmured. He thought for a moment, then decided.

"All points to mana."

The instant he confirmed his choice, his mana stat shifted.

[Mana: 35/35] +5

A wave of warmth washed over him as the new mana coursed through his body. Damon gasped, feeling the energy surge.

"It actually worked... My mana really grew. I can feel it."

For a fleeting moment, his fear and worries vanished, replaced by the euphoria of growth. Damon had spent years trying to grow stronger through training, but the results had always been incremental at best. Now, he had gained power in an instant.

"And all I had to do was kill one person..." he whispered, a smile creeping across his face. The rush of power eclipsed the moral weight of what he'd done.

Lost in his exhilaration, he didn't notice his shadow until it returned to its place beneath his feet. It shifted unnaturally, its edges darkening, as if mirroring his smile. But as Damon continued to grin, the shadow seemed to frown, its form twisting with an almost worried expression.

Damon's eyes flickered down, his smile faltering. Narrowing his gaze, he muttered,

"The system isn't all good... but it rewards me for my actions." He paused.

"Speaking of rewards, I also got a skill."

He focused on the skills tab, and the moment the information materialized, his breath caught. His eyes widened in disbelief as he read the description, the words sending a shiver down his spine.