

Living Shadow 23

Chapter 23 Uncertain Ally

Damon stared out through the window, his thoughts a storm of uncertainty. He considered returning to the forest where he had killed Lark Bonaire, but the idea quickly soured in his mind.

"If I go back, I'll just make more mistakes... leave more evidence."

His brooch's absence gnawed at him, but it wasn't incriminating evidence by itself. There was no clear link between him and the gruesome death. Everything about Lark Bonaire's demise pointed to a monster—a creature with claws and power far beyond Damon's own.

"As long as I stick to that story, I'm fine," he muttered under his breath.

"In fact, I just need to act like I know nothing at all. I never saw Lark Bonaire or anyone else."

In the world beyond these walls, nobles wouldn't need hard evidence to act against him. As a lowly commoner, they could have him arrested, tortured for answers, or worse, with only a shred of suspicion. But here, within the bounds of Aether Academy, things were different.

The academy was more than just a school; it was a fortress of neutrality.

Damon clenched his fists, drawing some comfort from his unique status. As a student of Aether Academy, he was granted a form of diplomatic immunity. No noble, no matter how powerful, could

touch him without the academy's consent. This sanctuary extended to all students, regardless of their origins, because Aether Academy was a melting pot of cultures and nations, drawing youths from every corner of the world of Aetherus.

The academy was nestled within Soltheon, the War Continent, specifically in the empire of Valtheron. Its proximity to Valerion, the imperial capital, lent it an air of prestige. Located on neutral ground known as Athor's Sanctuary, Aether Academy stood as a beacon of unity amid a fractured world.

Here, young warriors trained to combat the demonic scourge that plagued the land. Although the current ceasefire provided a fragile reprieve, the academy's purpose was clear: to prepare its students for the endless war that could reignite at any moment.

Damon exhaled deeply, the tension in his chest easing slightly.

As long as he remained a student, his status as a commoner mattered little within the academy's meritocratic system—at least on the surface. He knew segregation lingered in subtler forms. Nobles still found ways to exert their influence, but Aether Academy offered a rare opportunity where talent could overshadow bloodline.

'Although segregation still exists,' he thought grimly.

Graduating from Aether Academy wasn't just an achievement—it was a gateway to greatness.

For commoners and nobles alike, graduating meant access to unparalleled opportunities. Positions of power, influence, and unimaginable wealth awaited those who completed their training. Even the

empire's elites aspired to graduate, and the academy welcomed all who showed the talent and resolve to survive its rigorous trials.

It was a brutal proving ground where not everyone made it to the end. Students often died during their training, but those who endured left their mark on the world, their names etched into history.

Damon's resolve hardened as he thought about what graduation would mean for him.

The scholarship funds the academy provided were a lifeline, but it was more than just money keeping him here.

"If I make it to graduation, every door of opportunity will open for me. I just have to survive."

For Damon, survival wasn't just about staying alive. It was about playing the game, making the right moves, and ensuring that his past stayed buried—along with Lark Bonaire.

Damon clenched his fists, his heart pounding with a mix of fear and defiance.

"The academy wouldn't want Lark's death to become public knowledge—not yet. It would compromise their independence... their image."

He spoke aloud to steady his thoughts.

"Which means they won't make it public right away."

Even if the academy decided to address the matter, they would spin it into a narrative that wouldn't tarnish their reputation. Damon's mind raced, analyzing every possible angle. Lark's powerful family, the temple's potential involvement, the political ramifications—he lacked crucial information, and it gnawed at him.

He gritted his teeth, frustration bubbling beneath the surface.

"For now, I just need to lay low. No need to change my routine."

Damon made up his mind. He'd feign ignorance if the matter of his brooch came up, brushing it off as an innocent loss. He took a deep breath, attempting to steady the turmoil within him.

'I don't regret it,' he thought fiercely.

'Lark Bonaire deserved what he got. He oppressed me, mocked me, treated me like I was less than dirt.'

His teeth clenched so tightly that he tasted blood.

"This is justice," he muttered, his voice trembling with both conviction and doubt.

"I only destroyed my oppressor."

He raised his head, steeling himself.

"My shadow will need more if I'm going to survive. I need power... and I can't get it through normal means."

The thought of Luna crossed his mind, her image rekindling his resolve.

'Even if not for myself, I have to do this for her.'

He walked to the window, staring into the darkness.

"I must stay ahead of them at all times," he whispered.

The brooch's disappearance still loomed over him, but his fear was slowly being replaced by an icy resolve. He would do whatever it took to survive in this merciless world.

His thoughts shifted to the upcoming mid-semester evaluation, a trial that loomed like an executioner's blade.

"If I don't make the top ten, I'll be expelled. That bastard Professor Kael Blackthorn will make sure of it." Damon's fists tightened.

"I can't let that happen. I need to figure out where my shadow's next meal will come from... and find a long-term solution to feed it."

"I need to be ready."

The clock was ticking, and Damon knew the academy's investigation might uncover something eventually. Still, he had time—time he'd use wisely.

"I'll use this system and my shadow to the fullest," he vowed, glancing at the dark figure at his side.

The shadow responded, nodding its head in silent applause before giving him a thumbs-up.

Damon's lips twisted into a grim smile.

"You're not exactly my ally, are you? But you're not my enemy, either. So help me. Help me become stronger. Help me seize my fate. Help me devour to gain strength."

The shadow swirled around him in a silent, sinister affirmation.

Damon stood silently in his dorm room, the suffocating fear replaced by cold, unyielding resolve.

The night deepened, but Damon didn't rest.

He sat at his desk, pulling out a stack of books and opening them in the dim light. His eyes scanned the pages hungrily.

"Knowledge is one of the keys to open the door of power," he murmured, his voice low and determined.

With that, Damon began to read, immersing himself in the darkness of the night and the knowledge of the world, preparing himself for the trials ahead.