

MY LIVING SHADOW SYSTEM DEVOURS TO MAKE ME STRONGER

Chapter 3 The Viscous Entity

The forest grew darker as the last rays of sunlight faded, but Damon kept running, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he scanned the shadows for somewhere to hide. Behind him, angry voices echoed through the trees, each shout tinged with malice.

He could hear Marcus, urging the others on with vicious excitement, and worst of all, Lark's enraged voice, still raw from the blow Damon had delivered to his crotch.

'If they catch me... I'm dead.'

Damon pushed himself further into the dense woods, stumbling over a protruding root and crashing face-first into the dirt. His bones ached, his eyes still stinging from earlier tears, and his palms, raw from the relentless training, burned as he struggled back to his feet. His entire body was battered and bruised, a reminder of the beating he had already taken, but he knew stopping was not an option.

If he had one talent, it was running away. And if that was all he had, then he was going to give it everything he had left.

With a deep, shaky breath, he ducked low under the branches and kept running, his vision blurred as exhaustion set in. He paused briefly, leaning against a tree to catch his breath.

"I lost them... phew."

He let out a relieved sigh, but as the adrenaline faded, the pain surged back, making him wince.

He straightened, ready to sneak his way back and maybe find a healer. But just then, an icicle whizzed past his face, grazing his cheek. Startled, he looked up to see Marcus and the others closing in.

"Found him... Quick, after him!"

Marcus's voice cut through the forest, and Damon didn't bother looking back; he bolted deeper into the shadows.

"Don't lose sight of him... He's good at hiding!" one of them shouted.

"Grey, stop running, or you'll only make this worse for yourself!"

Damon's mind buzzed with fear, but he knew there was no turning back. If they were going to catch him, he'd make them work for it. He tore through the trees, every step bringing him closer to the ominous boundary that marked the edge of the academy's protection.

One of the boys hesitated, eyeing the edge of the forest.

"He's running towards the barrier..."

Marcus's face twisted in frustration.

"Grey, stop now, and I won't kill you... But if you run outside the barrier, the first monster you meet will!"

Damon's heart pounded even harder, knowing the danger of crossing that line. The barrier kept countless deadly creatures at bay, monsters that the academy's students only faced under close supervision. And yet, he'd rather take his chances with the unknown than face whatever fate Marcus and his gang had in store.

Ducking under a branch, he sprinted forward, unaware of just how close he was to the barrier until he saw the faint distortion in the air. For a split second, he slowed down, but Lark's furious voice echoed from behind, reminding him of the beating that awaited him if he stopped.

Without a second thought, Damon plunged through the barrier.

He stumbled, feeling as if he'd passed through a wall of icy water, but quickly regained his footing and ran. Behind him, the boys skidded to a halt at the barrier, hesitating—until Lark, filled with unrestrained rage, charged through with a roar.

"Damon! You're dead!"

"Idiot!" Marcus cursed, but his pride refused to let Damon escape.

With a growl, he followed, prompting the others to fall in line.

Damon's pulse raced as he heard them still pursuing him, his lungs burning as he struggled to keep going. He could only vaguely recall stories about this part of the forest, where only the professors dared tread, but fear pushed him forward, his legs moving out of sheer instinct.

But his strength was fading, and soon he stumbled to a halt, barely avoiding a steep drop. Before him was a deep ravine, about fourteen meters down, a river churning in the darkness below. He turned, desperate, but his pursuers were already upon him.

"Bastard... I'm going to kill you!"

Lark's voice rang out before his fist slammed into Damon's face, knocking him to the ground and dangerously close to the edge of the ditch.

Damon barely had time to brace as Lark followed with a series of kicks, each one brutal and unrestrained. A blast of wind magic cut through the air, sending sharp pain through his skin as he felt blood trickle down his face.

He coughed, tasting blood, his head spinning as Lark's relentless assault left him breathless.

"That's enough, Lark,"

Marcus finally called out, his voice cold and impatient.

Lark, panting with fury, stepped back. Marcus approached Damon, who was lying on the ground, barely conscious, his vision swimming. Marcus grabbed a fistful of Damon's hair, lifting his head just enough to meet his gaze.

"Beg, Grey," Marcus sneered, his lips twisting into a cruel smile.

"Beg, and it will all be over."

Damon's vision was blurred with blood, but he managed a defiant smile, blood staining his teeth.

"Go... fuck yourself."

Marcus's face darkened with rage.

"Beat him until he begs," he snarled.

And so, they closed in again, fists ready.

The other boys joined in, laughing cruelly as they tossed Damon around like a ragdoll, ignoring his pained groans. Lark, the worst of them all, stomped hard on Damon's leg, and a sickening crunch echoed through the night as the bone broke.

Damon screamed, his voice lost under their mocking laughter.

After a few more minutes of brutal kicks and punches, Marcus finally raised a hand to call them off. But Lark didn't stop, his eyes blazing with fury as he pressed his foot down harder.

Marcus stepped between them, shoving Lark back.

"Enough, Lark!" he snapped.

Marcus crouched down, gripping Damon by the hair and forcing his bloodied face up to look at him.

"You know, Grey, I really don't like you,"

Marcus sneered, his voice low.

"But what I hate most is your attitude... someone as weak as you should know to bow their head. But not you. You walk through the halls like you own the place. You talk to your betters and look them right in the eye... no respect at all."

With a sudden, violent motion, Marcus slammed Damon's head into the ground. Damon groaned in agony, blood streaking down his face as Marcus stood and looked him over, his mouth twisting in disgust.

Damon struggled to sit up, swaying as he looked around at Marcus, Lark, Isaac, and the others, his vision blurring from the pain. With a defiant glare, he spat out a bloody tooth and rasped,

"You bastards... go to hell."

Marcus's expression darkened, ready to strike again, but Lark beat him to it. With a flick of his hand, he blasted Damon with a gust of wind magic, sending him hurtling backward into a dark, shadowed ravine below.

Marcus's eyes widened in horror.

"What... what have you done? You just killed him!"

He rushed to the edge, peering down into the darkness for any sign of Damon, but the ditch was too deep, the shadows swallowing everything. Panic set in as he clenched his jaw, gripping his head.

"Damn it... we need to leave now. If anyone asks, we were never here."

Lark was still trembling with rage, but the other boys scrambled back, fear gripping them. Marcus glanced over his shoulder, his voice urgent.

"Let's go! Now!"

Leaving Damon to his fate, they disappeared into the night.

The ditch wasn't that deep, but Damon's body rolled painfully down a rocky slope. He hit the bottom with a sickening splat and a series of painful crunches as his ribs bore the impact. He groaned, his vision spinning as he struggled to stay conscious. Looking up, he could barely make out the moon through the branches above, casting a dim, haunting glow.

He could hear their voices fading as the other boys fled, abandoning him.

'Wait... no... don't leave me here... wait... stop,' he thought desperately, but he couldn't even choke out the words, his throat filled with blood, his voice too weak to scream.

As silence settled over the ditch, an eerie sound stirred the air, something shifting in the darkness nearby. Damon's heart pounded faster, fear slicing through the fog of his pain.

He was outside the barrier; monsters sometimes lurked here. Though he hadn't gone far, he knew he was vulnerable.

His eyes widened in terror as he strained to see, the moonlight barely illuminating the pit. In the shadows, something moved—a viscous, inky blackness shifting slowly toward him, almost blending with the darkness around it. The creature was formless, a mass like black slime that crept closer with a horrifying, unnatural grace.

Damon trembled, a primal fear overtaking him as the formless being slithered closer. He tried to scream, tried to call for help, but only a faint, choked sound escaped his lips.

'No... please... no... someone... please...'

The creature loomed over him, silent and menacing. His thoughts screamed for mercy, yet no sound escaped as it inched closer, his entire body locked in terror.

The moon cast a ghostly light, and his heart thundered as the creature halted directly above him. Without warning, it sank down into his shadow, merging with the darkness beneath him. A surge of agony tore through his body as the entity seeped deeper into his form, but he was too weak to cry out.

He could feel it burrowing into his very essence, a writhing blackness settling into his soul. Tears spilled from his eyes as he lay helpless.

'Is... is this really how I'm going to die... in a ditch...'

The pain was overwhelming, his mind fading as he clung to his last thoughts.

"I'm... sorry... Luna..."

He finally managed a faint, pain-laced whisper.

The creature seeped deeper, its presence merging with his own until his consciousness began to blur, sinking into darkness. As the last trace of the creature entered his shadow, an overwhelming exhaustion overtook him.

Yet, in that final moment, an oath sparked to life in his mind, fueled by a burning hatred and resentment.

'If... I had a second chance... I swear... I'll make them pay.'

As his last spark of awareness flickered out, he heard a strange, metallic chime.

[Ding]

[System initialization has begun.]