

Living Shadow 42

Chapter 42 The Man In The Woods

Damon stepped into the open sun, but his path forward was shrouded in uncertainty. He had no idea where to go, and it was only a matter of time before his shadow consumed him entirely. In its ravenous state, it would devour any unsuspecting soul nearby.

It wasn't the act of eating someone that worried him. It was the consequences.

This was Aether Academy, a place where even the faintest hint of a monster drew the attention of merciless professors. If anything that looked remotely inhuman appeared in broad daylight, it would be killed without hesitation. Questions could wait for the aftermath.

Damon knew he wouldn't survive such an encounter.

The academy, once meant to be a sanctuary for students, now felt like a death trap.

There was only one solution.

'I have to escape outside the academy.'

It was a desperate gamble. If he could make it past the grounds, he could head for the nearby town, Athor's Sanctuary. There, amidst the unsuspecting townsfolk, his shadow could find a meal—helpless and unprepared prey.

The thought twisted his gut with guilt, but it was better than dying here.

Without wasting another second, Damon bolted. His battered body, bruised from Leona's lightning attacks, protested with every step, but he kept moving. His uniform had begun to mend itself, the fabric stitching back together, though it did little to ease his pain.

He sprinted toward the hidden passage—a student escape route rarely used under the watchful eyes of the academy.

When he reached the edge of the tree line, he stopped abruptly.

Fear gnawed at him as he bit his lip, hesitant to move forward. His shadow pulsed beneath him, its chaotic energy feeding his mind disturbing images. The trees' shade was dangerous—it amplified his shadow's senses, overwhelming him with its vast perception of the world.

Damon glared down at the erratic darkness swirling at his feet.

"Hey," he hissed through gritted teeth.

"Don't spread your senses into the shadows under the trees. If you do, we won't find any food to eat."

There was no response. His shadow had spiraled too far into madness. Damon couldn't tell if it even heard him—or if it cared.

As he stepped closer to the shade, the reaction was instant.

The moment his shadow touched the trees' darkness, a sharp, searing pain erupted in his head. Damon stumbled, clutching his temples as he fell to his knees.

"Stop... stop... STOP!" he roared, his voice cracking under the strain.

The shadow flickered, glitching out of existence for a fleeting moment, and then... silence.

Damon collapsed, gasping for breath. Cold sweat drenched his body as he trembled violently. His hands dug into the dirt, and for a brief second, the pain subsided.

Clarity returned, sharp and unforgiving.

His dilated pupils reflected the terror clawing at his soul as he whispered the question that had haunted him all along.

"Am I finally going to d-die...?"

The thought froze him in place, the fear threatening to crush him entirely.

But then his jaw tightened, and his fists clenched.

"No," he growled, his voice trembling with dire determination. "No. Not yet."

Gritting his teeth, Damon forced himself to his feet. His legs wobbled under him, but he refused to give in. Fear might have paralyzed him, but his will to survive burned stronger.

He took a shaky step forward, then another, his mind set on the escape route ahead.

Damon stumbled to his feet, forcing his legs to move as he bolted toward the waterway. His breathing was ragged, and every muscle in his battered body screamed in protest. He couldn't stop—not now. His only chance was to escape the academy before his shadow consumed him or someone else.

The forest loomed ahead, dense and foreboding. He ran off the road, staying close enough to keep sight of it but far enough to remain hidden. The shadows beneath the trees stretched and twisted unnaturally as his own shadow pulsed erratically. Its senses expanded outward, overwhelming him with a flood of disjointed information.

The world around him became a chaotic blur.

Damon tripped, his foot catching on a root. He tumbled forward, crashing to the ground and rolling painfully over uneven earth. Dirt clung to his face, and his uniform was stained with grass and mud, but none of it compared to the pounding in his skull.

He groaned, clutching his head as the kaleidoscope of shadow-born information assaulted his mind. Every tree, every leaf, every insect within the shadow's range fed into his consciousness in unbearable detail.

Crawling weakly to a nearby tree, Damon leaned his back against it, his chest heaving as he tried to steady his breathing.

"Make it stop... please, stop... it hurts," he whispered hoarsely, the words spilling from his lips over and over.

His eyes clenched shut, trying to block out the sensations, but it was futile.

The shadow's perception extended far beyond his physical senses. It was as though his mind traveled through a vast, alien network of darkness.

His shadow wasn't just spreading—it was searching.

For prey.

And it had found something.

Damon could feel the presence approaching, but his focus splintered between the agony of starvation and the torrent of sensory information. He hugged his knees, trembling as he gasped for air.

The target drew closer.

Damon barely registered the sound of approaching footsteps until a calm voice broke through his haze.

"Hmm... an academy student. What brings you out in the woods, young man?"

The shadow recoiled instantly, withdrawing its senses like a startled beast. Damon's breathing steadied just enough for him to look up.

Through his distorted vision, he squinted at the figure before him, his dilated pupils struggling to adjust.

A man stood there—a hunter, by the looks of him. He was older, perhaps in his fifties, with a long, greying beard and a muscular frame. He wore practical hunter's garb and carried a bag of supplies, a bow slung over his shoulder, and a freshly hunted deer carcass.

The man's blue eyes held a kind light, his expression a mixture of worry and curiosity.

Damon remained wary, his body tense despite his exhaustion.

"Who... who are you?" he croaked, his voice barely above a whisper.

As if on cue, his stomach growled loudly, causing Damon to wince and clutch his abdomen.

The hunter's lips curled into a warm smile.

"Ah, you must be hungry, little guy. Hold on, I've got some rations in here."

He dropped his supplies and rummaged through his bag, eventually pulling out a small pouch of dried food. He held it out to Damon, who eyed it suspiciously despite the gnawing hunger in his eyes.

Noticing Damon's hesitation, the hunter chuckled.

"Smart young man, aye? Alright, here."

Without offense, he took a piece from the pouch and ate it himself, chewing with deliberate ease.

Satisfied, Damon snatched the pouch and devoured its contents without restraint. The dry rations were rough and tasteless, but to him, they felt like salvation.

The hunter watched with amusement, leaning back as Damon tore through the food.

"My name's Carmen Vale," he said, his voice warm and steady.

"I'm a hunter around these parts."

Damon finished the last of the rations, but his stomach growled again, louder this time.

His hands pressed against his abdomen as he muttered,

"Hungry..."

Carmen let out a hearty laugh.

"No problem, kid! Good thing I've got this deer."

With practiced ease, Carmen gathered firewood and started a fire. He skinned the deer and sliced off its thighs, rubbing a mix of spices over the meat before setting it over the flames.

"Alright, let's see how much you can eat!" Carmen laughed again, a booming sound that echoed through the forest.

Damon watched cautiously. The hunter moved with an ease and openness that unnerved him. He left his bow and arrows within arm's reach of Damon, his back fully exposed. There was no trace of suspicion or guardedness in Carmen's demeanor, only kindness.

To Damon, this kind of generosity felt alien, even dangerous. He couldn't understand why someone would act this way. And so, even as his body screamed for nourishment, his mind remained on edge, scrutinizing the man before him.