

Living Shadow 43

Chapter 43 Kindness Is Reciprocal

Damon Grey was a jaded young man, his life shaped by a series of harsh lessons that had made him bitter and distrustful. Kindness was not something he encountered often, and when it came, it felt alien—a massive cause for suspicion.

As the hunter, Carmen, roasted the deer thighs over a modest fire, Damon's sharp eyes scrutinized every movement he made. The man was a puzzle, too trusting, too open. Damon had learned to survive by questioning everything, and Carmen's easy manner only heightened his caution.

The hunter spoke about his life, filling the silence with tales of hunting trips, his family, and his youthful adventures. Damon didn't respond, but he listened, his gaze flicking between the fire, the man's hands, and his surroundings. The only sound he made was the faint rustle of his clothes as he shifted uncomfortably.

Carmen, sensing the boy's wary nature, ensured his every action was visible. He even exaggerated his movements as he prepared the meat, smiling occasionally, though Damon's expression remained guarded.

Meanwhile, Damon's shadow writhed like a living entity, reacting to his hunger. Its erratic behavior unnerved him, and his thoughts grew heavier, dulled by the persistent ache of starvation and the primal instincts clawing at his mind. His focus wavered between the man's words and the tantalizing scent of roasting meat.

When one of the thighs was ready, Carmen pulled it from the fire, smiling as he extended it toward Damon.

Damon's eyes lingered on the offering, but his gaze quickly shifted to Carmen's face, his suspicion as clear as the hunger in his dull, predatory stare.

Carmen chuckled, realizing the boy's hesitation.

"Ah, of course." He took a bite of the meat himself, chewed, and swallowed.

"See? Nothing to worry about."

Only then did Damon snatch the meat, his hands trembling slightly. He tore into it with feral desperation, each bite fueling his weakened body but doing little to sate the insatiable hunger gnawing at him.

Carmen sat a short distance away, observing Damon with a calm, thoughtful expression. His gaze drifted to the shadow writhing unnaturally around the boy.

"That's quite a shadow you've got there," he remarked, his tone casual but curious. "Is that your magic attribute?"

Damon didn't answer, too focused on devouring the meat, though his shoulders tensed at the question.

Unfazed by the silence, Carmen continued.

"Mine's fire. People in town always say it doesn't suit me—too gentle, they claim."

He laughed lightly.

"But I wasn't always like this. Used to have a temper like a wildfire when I was younger."

Before Damon could react, Carmen's demeanor shifted in an instant. The hunter's eyes sharpened as he grabbed an arrow from his quiver and lunged toward Damon.

Damon's instincts screamed, but he was too slow, caught off guard as the arrow shot past him. He froze, waiting for pain, but none came. Instead, there was a soft thunk behind him.

Turning his head cautiously, he saw the arrow embedded in the trunk of the tree just inches above his shoulder, pinning the lifeless body of a thin, black snake.

Carmen let out a relieved sigh.

"Close one. Death mamba."

Damon's eyes widened. He knew of the snake—a creature of nightmares. Its venom was legendary, said to kill within minutes. The hunter had risked his life, unhesitatingly striking to save him.

Damon stared at the older man, confusion and frustration swirling in his chest.

"Why... why did you save me? I don't understand."

Carmen looked genuinely puzzled.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Why did you give me your food? You don't even know me! Why?" Damon's voice cracked, rising in intensity as his confusion gave way to anger.

Carmen's expression softened.

"Why do I need a reason to show kindness? Isn't that what separates us from monsters and beasts? That is just human."

Damon felt his breath hitch. The words struck something deep within him, something he wasn't ready to confront.

"No, it's not," Damon said, his voice trembling with emotion.

"It's not human! That's bullshit! Being human is looking after number one—that's yourself!"

Carmen frowned, shaking his head.

"No, it's not, kid. I don't know where you learned that, but if we all only cared about ourselves, we'd be no better than monsters."

He sat down beside Damon, the firelight casting warm shadows across his weathered face.

"Let me tell you something, from one human to another: a little kindness goes a long way. Kindness is reciprocal. What we sow is what we reap."

Damon's mind churned, the man's words clashing violently with the truths he'd known all his life. If Carmen was right, then everything Damon believed about the world was a lie.

Tears of frustration welled in his eyes as he whispered, "Weren't you afraid to die?"

The hunter Carmen smiled warmly at the boy's skeptical words, his face illuminated by the soft glow of the fire.

"I have a daughter," he began, his voice carrying a gentle sincerity.

"She's just about your age—a little younger, actually. She dreams of entering the academy next year. When I saw you, all I could think was... what if it were her, alone like this? Shouldn't she get a little help?" He paused, gazing at the crackling flames.

"I hope the kindness I show to others can someday find its way to her."

Damon narrowed his eyes at him, the skepticism in his stare as sharp as ever.

"That's far-fetched," he muttered.

Carmen chuckled lightly.

"Yes, it is. But I can hope, can't I?" He glanced at Damon, his smile never faltering.

"You know, kid, I used to be a noble."

Damon's expression shifted at those words, his eyes narrowing further, this time with a hint of hostility.

Carmen noticed it instantly.

"Ah, you don't seem to like nobles much. That's fair," he admitted, his tone understanding.

"I don't like them either—especially now that I'm a fallen noble."

"You're a fallen noble?" Damon echoed, his voice tinged with mild curiosity.

"That must be hard. Your kind gets worse treatment than commoners, and commoners don't like you either."

Carmen smiled again, this time with a faint trace of bitterness.

"Yes, it was hard at first. But I got past it. People were kind."

"No, they're not," Damon shot back, his voice quiet but firm.

Carmen shook his head slightly, his gaze steady.

"Let me tell you something, kiddo. Kindness is reciprocal. If you show someone kindness, they'll show it back to you. But if you go in looking for the worst in people, that's all you'll ever see."

Damon didn't reply immediately, his focus returning to the meat in his hands. He gnawed the last pieces off the bone, his hunger still gnawing at him, though something about Carmen's words made his heart feel just a little calmer.

Finally, he spoke, his voice subdued.

"I've seen the worst in people... ever since the day my parents died. The neighbors and relatives who seemed so kind—after they were gone, I saw their true colors."

Carmen's expression softened, and he glanced at Damon carefully. It seemed the boy was beginning to open up to him.

"My parents died in the Demon Wars,"

Damon continued, his words tinged with bitterness and sadness. He tightened his grip on the bone in his hand, the memories resurfacing with painful clarity.