

## Living Shadow 45

### Chapter 45 A Survivor

Damon could still recall every detail of those harrowing days, the weight of his survival pressing down on him. The night he decided to leave was burned into his memory, and for the week leading up to it, he made sure to keep his younger sister, Luna, by his side at all times.

He waited patiently, watching the comings and goings of the village until a traveling merchant caravan arrived. That night, while the village was still and the caravan set up camp, Damon made his move.

He slipped into his house under the cover of darkness, his heart pounding with both fear and resolve. He scavenged anything of value—a small sack of zeni hidden in a cupboard, a few trinkets left untouched by his guardians, and finally, his mother's locket. The locket had been buried beneath a loose floorboard in their old room, hidden away to protect it from greedy hands.

That was Damon's first brush with theft.

The memory was vivid, every sensation seared into his mind. His hands trembled as he dug up the locket, its metal cool against his fingertips. Luna, confused but trusting, clung to him as he gathered their meager belongings. She didn't understand what was happening, but as long as she was with her brother, she felt safe.

In the early hours of the morning, Damon approached the caravan leader, having prepared everything he could. He offered the man all he had, only to be swindled—charged double the fair price for their passage. That was Damon's first encounter with trickery.

The journey to the capital was treacherous. Aetherus was a world where monsters roamed freely, emerging from dungeons scattered across the land. The roads were perilous, and traveling with a caravan offered only a fragile sense of safety.

Damon and Luna came close to death on multiple occasions. Once, a pack of dire wolves attacked their convoy, leaving Damon clutching Luna tightly, prepared to die protecting her. On another occasion, someone in the caravan tried to sell Luna into prostitution, forcing Damon to fight tooth and nail to protect her.

From each trial, Damon learned and adapted. Each betrayal, each struggle, hardened him further. By the time they reached the capital, the naive boy who had once wanted to die beneath an ancient tree was gone, replaced by someone colder, sharper, and far more bitter.

Carmen listened intently to Damon's tale, his expression somber. He could see the boy's pain and the resilience forged through suffering.

"You've been through a lot, kid," Carmen said quietly. "But it got better, didn't it? The tomorrow you sought wasn't worse than yesterday."

Damon's shadow flickered erratically in the firelight as he replied, his voice low and heavy with pain.

"No... it didn't. It got worse."

The capital was no safe haven; it was a different kind of hell. Damon had the papers for his father's residence, a small house in the poor district. But when he tried to claim it, he was met with endless

bureaucracy. He had to deal with the war banks, who demanded proof of ownership now that his father was dead.

To make matters worse, Damon crossed paths with a noble during this time, and the resulting conflict forced him to sell the house for a fraction of its worth just to avoid further trouble.

Yet, Damon was resourceful. Using the tricks he had learned from the caravan, he convinced the bank to sell him another house. During the negotiations, he discovered that his father had made a deposit at the bank. Hoping it was money, Damon cashed it out—only to find a golden ticket for Aether Academy, the prestigious institution for training the gifted.

Though disappointed, Damon kept the ticket, viewing it as his father's final legacy. When he and Luna moved into their new, modest home, Damon made a decision. Luna was the more talented of the two, so he planned for her to use the golden ticket to enroll in the academy.

He also passed on their mother's locket, deeming her the most fitting to carry it.

For a moment, Damon thought their struggles might finally be over. But with no money and no one willing to give him a job, he was left with no choice but to turn to the underworld.

He joined a local gang, starting as a pickpocket before earning a reputation as a dependable errand boy for a smuggling ring. The work was dangerous, but it gave him a means to survive and provide for Luna.

Through countless trials and tribulations, Damon clawed his way toward a semblance of stability. Each hardship left its mark, shaping him into someone who could navigate the cruel realities of their world.

In those few short years, Damon had grown stronger and harder, but his journey had been anything but easy. It was a life defined by struggle and sacrifice, and his bond with his sister, Luna, was his sole anchor to sanity.

Yet even that bond was tested when Luna collapsed, her body succumbing to a rare and devastating affliction: magic circuit cancer.

The diagnosis shattered Damon. He couldn't afford a healer capable of treating such a chronic condition, so he turned to increasingly dangerous jobs within the smuggling ring. The risk escalated, but the coin he earned was never enough.

Desperate and out of options, Damon made the ultimate sacrifice—he used the academy's golden ticket, the one hope for a brighter future, to access the scholarship fund.

The funds allowed him to take Luna to a decent healer, someone he could trust. The decision weighed heavily on him, as it meant relinquishing the chance to escape the squalor of his existence.

But it had saved his sister's life, and that was all that mattered to him.

Now, as he recounted his tale, Damon's voice faltered. His gaze was distant, fixed on his erratic shadow flickering along the ground. Across from him, Carmen listened with an expression of profound sympathy.

"You are strong, Damon... truly strong," Carmen said softly, his tone filled with admiration.

Damon's lips quivered, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I'm sorry..."

Carmen tilted his head, his kind smile unwavering. "There is nothing to be sorry for."

But Damon shook his head, his voice breaking as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry..." His trembling hands balled into fists. "I'm sorry, but... I can't die yet. I can't let myself die. I'm sorry."

Carmen's expression shifted, concern replacing his smile. Damon's tone carried a haunting finality, as if his apology was not meant for the words he had just spoken, but for something darker.

The boy's gaze lifted, meeting Carmen's with an almost pleading look.

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I'm sorry..."

The atmosphere grew heavy, an unnatural weight pressing down on the clearing. Carmen could feel the shift in the air as Damon's shadow began to writhe, rising up unnaturally and wrapping around him like living tendrils.

[Ding]

[Shadow hunger levels: 90%]

[Shadow is ravenous.]

[All stats are drastically amplified.]

Before Carmen's eyes, Damon transformed. His body was consumed by an entity of pure darkness, its form monstrous and terrifying. Long claws extended from where Damon's hands once were, and his mouth was filled with sharp, glinting fangs. The creature's presence was overwhelming, and its malevolent aura sent shivers down Carmen's spine.

Yet, even in this twisted form, the monster spoke, its voice distorted and filled with despair.

"I... I... am sorry..."

Carmen's grip tightened around his bow, his knuckles turning white. He raised the weapon, aiming at the shadowy figure before him. But his hands trembled. Somewhere within that abomination was still the boy who had poured his heart out just moments ago.

"That thing... it's just a child..." Carmen whispered to himself, hesitation creeping into his mind.

It was a hesitation that cost him dearly. In the blink of an eye, the shadowed claws tore into his chest, piercing flesh and bone with devastating force.

Carmen gasped, blood pouring from his mouth as he staggered back, his bow slipping from his grasp. The pain was excruciating, but his gaze remained fixed on Damon—or what Damon had become.

Through the haze of agony, Carmen heard the monster's voice once more, trembling and broken.

"I'm sorry..."

Despite the mortal wound, Carmen's lips curled into a faint smile. Blood dripped down his chin, soaking his beard as his vision blurred.

"You're... strong... kid..." Carmen rasped, his voice barely above a whisper. "You're... a survivor..."

His words hung in the air as his eyes dulled, the light fading from them. Even in death, his face held a gentle smile—a final act of compassion for the boy who had become a monster.