

Living Shadow 47

Chapter 47 Reverting To Old Habits

A young man with brown hair and piercing blue eyes approached a cluster of trees outside Athor's Sanctuary. His simple tunic, patched in several places, gave him the appearance of someone unremarkable—an impression he intended to cultivate.

He scanned his surroundings, clutching a pager in one hand and a bag in the other.

"Hmmm..." he murmured, a faint smile playing on his lips.

"I'm here. Do you mind showing yourself?" he called out, his voice carrying a measured calm.

Silence.

His brows furrowed slightly.

'Is he not here yet?'

"Did you bring the stuff I asked for?"

A voice behind him answered, low and casual.

"You really don't miss a beat, do you?"

Carls turned, his body tensing momentarily.

"Whoa, Phantom..." he said, chuckling as he relaxed.

"Heh, I think I understand how you earned that nickname."

Carls stood before him, a sly grin on his face. The lanky figure's casual demeanor masked a sharpness that Damon knew better than to underestimate. Carls seemed genuinely pleased to see Damon, as if surprised by the quick follow-up after their last meeting.

But it was Carls' perceptive gaze that unnerved Damon the most. He knew something was different about him. Damon's usual gloom had shifted into a colder, almost predatory calm. His dark eyes bore an unsettling focus, his academy uniform showing faint burn marks—a testament to a recent incident.

Carls gestured to the bag he carried. "That's the material from the magic continent for you. I heard this stuff's notoriously expensive."

Damon's eyes locked onto him with an icy glare.

"You'd better not be planning to steal it."

Carls laughed, throwing up his hands.

"I wouldn't dream of it." With a casual toss, he dropped the bag at Damon's feet. "Everything you asked for, right here."

Damon regarded the bag warily. "Open it."

Carls raised an eyebrow, but his smile didn't waver. "Sure, no problem."

He crouched down and unzipped the bag, showing Damon its contents. Then, with an exaggerated flourish, he emptied everything onto the ground before carefully repacking it.

"See? Even touched it with my hands. No funny business. Not like that time someone sprinkled flay powder on someone else's clothes..." Carls smirked knowingly.

Damon's eyes narrowed. The reference wasn't lost on him. Flay powder—a vicious poison that burned skin on contact—had been one of Damon's more infamous tricks. Watching the victim writhe as their skin seared was a memory he didn't particularly regret, though it seemed his reputation preceded him.

"How much do I owe you for the cloak and clothes?" Damon asked curtly, his tone devoid of gratitude.

Carls waved a hand dismissively.

"Nah, it's on the house. Us street rats gotta look out for each other, you know?"

Damon's eyes narrowed further. He didn't buy Carls' act for a second. There was always an angle—some long-term favor or hidden profit.

"I don't like owing favors." Damon tossed a small pouch of zeni toward him, suppressing the pang of irritation at parting with his money.

Carls caught it with a chuckle, shaking his head.

"No need to be so cautious."

Damon ignored the comment, snatching up the bag.

"I'm going over there to change. Don't move."

He disappeared behind the trees, shrugging off his academy uniform with its telltale scorch marks. Slipping into the coarse, common clothes Carls had provided, he draped the cloak over his shoulders. The rough fabric irritated his skin, but the disguise would serve its purpose.

Stuffing his uniform into the bag, Damon glanced toward his shadow.

"Did he do anything unusual while I wasn't looking?"

The shadow, which seemed to shimmer with faint guilt, shook its head.

"Good," Damon muttered. "I suppose there was no need to be so cautious after all."

He stepped out from behind the trees, his face hidden beneath the hood of the cloak. The sun had risen high in the sky, its light casting long shadows through the forest. It was well past lunchtime, and Damon realized he had missed all his morning classes.

No matter. The tools he had gathered would be far more useful than any lecture.

"Let's go," he said coolly, his tone carrying an edge of finality as he moved forward without hesitation.

Carls' blue eyes flickered mischievously.

"So, what do you need? Information, mana stones... weapons?"

Damon shook his head, his dark gaze fixed ahead.

"I'm not made of money. I need raw materials—cheap and functional."

Carls tilted his head curiously.

"Cheap and functional, huh? What exactly are we talking about?"

"Let's start with metal ores," Damon began, his tone clinical.

"I'll need monster innards, fluids from the organs of poisonous monsters... Oh, and glass beakers—we'll have to visit a glassmaker for that."

He rattled off a detailed list, his voice steady. Each item seemed innocuous on its own, but together, they painted a picture of something far more dangerous.

Carls raised an eyebrow, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

"If you don't mind me asking, Phantom... you're not switching career paths to assassin, are you?"
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Damon stopped walking abruptly and turned around. His dark eyes locked onto Carls, sharp and cold.

"If you keep asking questions, you might just find out," Damon said coldly, his voice low.

"And don't call me Phantom. Damon Grey will do just fine."

The chill in Damon's gaze sent a shiver down Carls' spine, and he instinctively raised his hands in mock surrender.

"Alright, alright. No more Phantom."

Damon's narrowed eyes lingered on him for a moment before he turned back toward the path.

"Now, I need funds. Take me to the parts of town where people walk around with plenty of money."

Carls chuckled, his nervousness quickly replaced by amusement.

"As you wish, Damon. I know just the place—rich merchants and traders, all carrying cash. And hey, one of the items you need is in that area too. With your skills, you could snag a few thousand zeni easy."

Damon sighed, running a hand through his hair. He'd thought he'd left pickpocketing behind, but desperate times called for desperate measures. His savings were reserved for his sister's medication, and this was the only way he could gather funds quickly.

'I need to find someone to scam or steal from pretty soon.'

The two of them strolled into town, blending seamlessly into the bustling crowd. Before visiting the shops for Damon's materials, they decided to fall back on old habits—a pickpocket spree in the busiest parts of town.

As former street urchins, Damon and Carls were experts at reading people. They knew exactly who to target: the ones with deep pockets, plenty of cash, but not enough influence to make trouble if their money went missing.

That was the difference between a professional pickpocket and an amateur—knowing who not to steal from.

They selected a few marks, their practiced eyes scanning the crowd for opportunities. Working in tandem, they made short work of five targets, relieving them of five pouches of zeni without arousing suspicion.

To cover their tracks, they staged a diversion. Damon slipped one of the stolen pouches into the bag of an unsuspecting bystander, then gave him a calculated shove. The man's bag spilled open, and the pouch tumbled out just as one of their victims began searching for their missing money.

The chaos was immediate. The crowd turned on the unlucky man, accusing him of theft. He protested vehemently, but it was no use—he was dragged off by the authorities, leaving Damon and Carls to vanish into the commotion with their spoils.

Once they were safely away, Carls broke into a wide grin.

"I can't believe that worked! Your plan was insane, Damon. We got so much!"

Damon couldn't suppress a smile of his own as he inspected their haul.

'I've got some money. Money.'