

## Living Shadow 79

### Chapter 79 Carmen's Influence

It wasn't long before Damon stood at the edge of the forest, his presence cloaked in the shadows of the towering trees. Though his eyes remained closed, he didn't need them to perceive the bustling town that lay ahead. His Shadow Perception extended outward, covering an entire two-kilometer radius.

Through this invisible network of shadows, he could sense the town's activity. The shadows of humans, elves, beast kin, dwarves, fae, noble spirits, and countless other races moved like a vivid kaleidoscope of motion and form. Athor's Sanctuary was a melting pot of life, a bustling hub of diversity, and the sheer amount of information flooding his senses made his head throb.

Despite the discomfort, Damon endured it. This was a test of his abilities.

After a few minutes, a familiar shadow flickered into focus—a young man with brown hair and blue eyes, someone Damon could only describe as shady: Carls. He was the one Damon had been waiting for.

'He'll be here soon,' Damon thought, pulling his senses back to a manageable ten-meter radius.

His hand brushed against his academy uniform, and he frowned.

"I can't go into town dressed like this..."

The uniform was far too conspicuous, especially with the student council's enforcers always on the lookout for wayward first-years. Carls was bringing him a cloak and a new blindfold, necessities if he wanted to move unnoticed.

Damon opened his eyes, his gaze drifting to a distant hill bathed in pale moonlight. His expression twisted into something resembling a smile, though it lacked warmth.

On that hill lay the grave of a man who had once shown him kindness—kindness Damon had repaid with a claw to the heart.

'Kindness is reciprocal... That's what he believed,' Damon thought bitterly.

The weight of his actions pressed against him, a constant reminder of the choices he had made. He was fully aware of his hypocrisy. He had killed an innocent man, and soon, he planned to take another innocent life.

He bit his lip, his fists clenching at his sides.

'Truth be told, I'm no different from the people I despise. I'm just a hypocrite.'

His dark eyes lingered on the hill, but he didn't dare approach it. The memories were too raw, the guilt too sharp.

'I've made my choice,' he reminded himself. 'I chose survival, no matter the cost. Morality be damned.'

Even so, a small part of him—the part he tried so hard to bury—wished Carmen Vale had been right about him. That small voice of conscience whispered faintly, reminding him of the man he could never aspire to be.

But Damon silenced it. He couldn't afford such weakness, not now.

Turning his back on the hill, he waited for Carls, the weight of his decisions heavy on his shoulders as he stared into the darkness ahead.

The soft rustling of footsteps on grass broke Damon out of his reverie. He turned to find a familiar figure stepping out from the shadows—Carls, the self-proclaimed information broker.

Carls grinned, tossing a carefully wrapped bundle onto the ground.

"I couldn't reach you for two days. I was sure you'd bitten the dust."

Damon's expression remained neutral. It wasn't surprising. Death was hardly an anomaly at Aether Academy.

"What gave you that impression?" Damon asked, his tone flat.

Carls chuckled, brushing his hair back.

"I suppose you're not that easy to kill after all. Well, no matter. Anvil finished your stuff, and he's eager to show you what he's done."

Damon nodded, kneeling to pick up the cloak from the bundle. He dusted it off meticulously, inspecting every inch of the fabric. With a flick of his wrist, he shook it out, causing a smaller black piece of cloth to fall to the ground.

Carls sighed.

"You're always so cautious. Relax! I swear I didn't tamper with anything—no traps, no flay powder, nothing. You're my best client; can't afford to lose you."

Ignoring him, Damon slipped on the cloak, wincing slightly as his sore muscles protested the movement. He bent to pick up the smaller black fabric, turning it over in his hands before glancing at Carls.

"Let's go," he said curtly.

Carls shrugged, eyeing the fabric in Damon's hands. "Sure, but... what's that for?"

Without a word, Damon unfolded the cloth and wrapped it around his eyes, covering his vision entirely.

"This," Damon said, his voice steady, "is what it's for."

Carls frowned, baffled. "Uh... how exactly do you plan to see with a blindfold on?"

Damon didn't dignify the question with a response. Instead, he simply turned and began walking, his movements fluid and confident despite the darkness over his eyes.

Carls hesitated, watching him for a moment before hurrying to catch up.

"You're full of surprises, you know that?"

The town of Athor's Sanctuary came into view as they emerged from the forest. Even at night, it buzzed with life. The streets were alive with activity, vendors calling out to passersby, and the mingling of countless voices creating a constant hum of noise.

The town's unique position near Aether Academy made it a diplomatic neutral zone. Though it technically fell under the jurisdiction of the Valtheron Empire, no single nation's laws applied here. International law governed the area, enforced by the academy and an alliance of nations. This status made Athor's Sanctuary a haven for many, its streets teeming with people from all walks of life.

Damon walked with his hood drawn low, his blindfold adding another layer of anonymity. Yet, despite the covering over his eyes, he navigated the bustling streets with ease. His Shadow Perception was active, allowing him to sense every movement around him. Each shadow was unique—some darker, denser, and more powerful than others.

It was this ability that made him pause. His attention shifted to a shadow near a wall, where something caught his interest. A poster.

Damon extended his perception, and as the details of the poster became clear, his heart sank.

Carls stopped beside him, his face a mix of anger and sadness.

"So, you knew the old man, huh? Figures. He was a nice guy... not a single person in town who didn't like him."

Damon clenched his jaw, his eyes hidden behind the blindfold as he stared at the poster through his shadows. It bore Carmen Vale's name and details of his supposed attack by a monster. There was even a bounty for information about the creature.

Feigning ignorance, Damon whispered, "Wh... what happened to him?"

Carls sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"Word is he was attacked while camping out in the woods. Monster got him. Killed him and dragged him off... or maybe he's still alive somewhere. Doesn't matter—everyone in town's already accepted he's dead."

Carls' voice grew heavy with emotion.

"He was a good man, that old geezer. That's why the whole town's out for revenge. When we find that monster, it's going to pay."

Damon's fists clenched at his sides, his stomach twisting in guilt. He hadn't expected Carmen Vale to be so beloved. The old man's kindness had extended far beyond what Damon had realized.

'Does being kind really inspire this much loyalty?' Damon thought, his head bowing slightly.

He couldn't let anyone know the truth. The kind hunter hadn't been killed by a monster. Damon had taken his life, and now he was trapped in the web of his own actions.

Carls exhaled deeply, breaking the silence.

"Well, whatever. The authorities are on it. Your academy's student council president even volunteered to help. Word is she might know something about the monster."

Damon froze. His face went pale beneath the blindfold.

"Lilith Astranova..." he whispered, his voice barely audible.

If Lilith was involved, it meant danger was much closer than he had anticipated. If she found out the truth...

Damon bit his lip, his mind racing. He was running out of options, and if he was exposed, there would be nowhere to hide.