

Living Shadow 112

Chapter 112 God's Chosen Apostle

Damon remembered that day vividly—the day Marcus truly lost himself to his delusion of divine purpose. It was the day he became utterly convinced that the voice in the stone was the voice of God.

That morning, Damon was seated with his usual companions: Leona Valefier, Xander Ravenscroft, Sylvia, and Evangeline. The cafeteria buzzed with the chatter of students, oblivious to the storm brewing in Marcus's mind.

Marcus stood in a shadowed corner, clutching the so-called sacred stone—a common sandstone crudely carved into a semblance of divinity. His eyes were bloodshot, and dark bags hung beneath them, evidence of a sleepless night spent conversing with his "God."

"I am God's chosen apostle... I will rid the world of evil..." he muttered, his voice low and feverish. The jagged look in his eyes betrayed both fear and resolve.

To Marcus, this was his destiny. He envisioned himself cleansing the ancient ruins, bringing the world of Aetherus into a bright and shining epoch. He gripped the stone tighter, feeling the silence of his God, which he interpreted as preparation.

"Yes, He's gathering energy to destroy the monsters..." Marcus reassured himself.

Despite his self-conviction, fear lingered in his heart. God had assured him the plan would work, and even if it failed, the monster masquerading as Damon Grey wouldn't dare attack him in public.

"I just need to have faith... I am God's chosen apostle."

With those words echoing in his mind, Marcus moved. He broke into a sudden sprint, roaring as he charged toward Damon's table, stone in hand.

Damon, who had orchestrated this entire scenario, allowed himself a faint smile behind his blindfold. He had been waiting for this.

As Marcus reached the table, he slammed the stone against Damon's neck. Damon leaped out of his chair in an exaggerated motion, letting out a guttural groan as he fell to the floor, writhing and clutching his throat.

He made sure to sell the act, rolling on the ground in mock agony. Though embarrassing, it was necessary to further unravel Marcus's fragile psyche.

Marcus froze for a moment before his lips curled into a deranged grin. "Reveal your—"

Before he could finish, Leona's fist smashed into his face, sending him stumbling backward.

"You bastard!" she growled, her eyes blazing with fury. "You dare sneak attack Damon when he's not fully recovered?"

Xander quickly restrained her, grabbing her arm before she could land another blow.

"Calm down, Leona! He didn't actually hurt Damon. Relax."

Meanwhile, Evangeline and Sylvia had rushed to Damon's side, their expressions frantic. Damon, still leaning into the performance, coughed weakly, one hand clutching his chest. He looked at Marcus with an almost pitiful gaze.

And then, just loud enough for Marcus to hear, Damon rasped a single word:

"God..."

Which should have been meaningless to others but to Marcus...

The effect was instantaneous. Marcus, blood dripping from his split lip, stumbled to his feet, clutching the stone like a sacred relic. He broke into a wild laugh, his voice echoing through the cafeteria as he bolted out the door, laughing like a man possessed.

As soon as Marcus disappeared, Damon stopped his act, brushing off Evangeline and Sylvia's attempts to help him. He stood, his usual gloomy expression firmly in place, and dusted himself off.

"I'm fine," he muttered, his tone flat. "I was just surprised, that's all. I told you, I'm fine."

Sylvia frowned but nodded reluctantly. "I get that, but you've been pushing yourself to the brink these past few days. Healing has its limits."

Leona crossed her arms, still glaring at the door Marcus had exited through. "That guy's lucky Xander held me back. Next time—"

"I think I forgot something in my room," Damon interrupted. His voice was calm, almost detached. "I'll be back. No need to wait for me."

Without waiting for a response, Damon turned and walked away. As he moved through the corridors, he reached into his pocket and pulled out another sound stone. A smirk ghosted across his lips.

'Well, that went better than expected.'

Marcus had run out of the dorm, sprinting straight into one of the academy's courtyard gardens. Gasping for breath, he collapsed by the edge of a lone fountain. The quiet bubbling of the water did little to calm the storm raging in his mind.

His trembling hand pulled out the sound stone, the supposed vessel of divine guidance.

"God... God, can you hear me? Lord God... Lord God, please answer your great apostle!"

Silence.

Marcus's breaths quickened, and he tried again, clutching the stone tighter as if that would force an answer.

"Lord God... why aren't you answering?"

Still, there was no response. His heart began to pound, his fear bubbling over into frantic muttering.

"It's over... I'm done for... I provoked the monster. What if it kills me? Oh no, oh no! It must be some ancient creature from a ruin... or a dungeon—no, Goddess forbid, what if it's from a world dungeon?"

The cold reality of his situation sent shivers through him. But just as despair began to take root, a weak, crackling sound emerged from the stone.

"Cough... cough... my dear child... my noble apostle..."

Relief flooded through Marcus. He almost dropped the stone in his rush to bring it closer.

"Lord God! Lord God, you're here! What happened to you? Are you hurt?"

The voice remained silent for a moment before replying, each word punctuated by labored coughs.

"Cough... child, it is as I feared. The fiend has grown stronger. When it was struck, it... cough... redirected the damage into its thralls. I could only manage to weaken it..."

Marcus's lip quivered. Tears threatened to spill as his fear was replaced by a desperate need for reassurance.

"What do I do? I don't want to die, Lord God!"

"Fear not, my apostle. I used the last of my power to grant you divine grace. The monster can no longer harm you. But... cough... we must act swiftly. We must destroy its thralls before it regains its power."

Marcus's tears fell freely now, mixing with the dirt on his face.

"But my friends... my friends..."

The voice grew sterner, the usual calm replaced by a sense of urgency.

"Forgive me, child, but those are no longer your friends. And I can prove it. Go to them—secretly observe their shadows. You will see... cough... their shadows move without the consent of their bodies. Vile creatures have taken their forms."

The voice paused, clearing its throat for dramatic effect.

"They are gone, my child. Their souls must be saved."

Marcus clenched his jaw, his tears turning into quiet sobs.

"Why? Why did this happen to them?"

"Cough... I am weakened now, Marcus, but I have you. My noble apostle. You are destined to be a great hero for the Goddess races. We will save this world together."

Marcus gritted his teeth, wiping his face. A spark of resolve began to shine through his despair.

"What do I do, Lord God? Tell me."

The voice lowered, adopting a tone of quiet calculation.

"You must pretend, my apostle. Pretend they are still your friends. Lure them to sacred sites where my power is strong, and I will purge them."

Marcus nodded, tears still trailing down his cheeks.

"Lord God... I have deep faith in you, especially after seeing you weaken that monster. But these are my friends. Please... let me see for myself. Let me confirm that they are truly gone."

The voice sighed, as though disappointed.

"Very well, Marcus. Go. Look at them and see the truth. Let this be the final goodbye. But... if even after this you still hesitate, I will have no choice but to leave you and find another apostle to save the world."

Marcus's grip tightened around the stone, his knuckles white.

"I understand, Lord God. Thank you... for your divine favor."

With those words, he stood, his legs shaky but filled with purpose. Clutching the stone close, Marcus set off to find his friends, his heart heavy with dread.