

Living Shadow 113

Chapter 113 Burn It All

Marcus met up with Rein Ambridge at a pavilion just before class. To Rein, it was supposed to be a casual meeting between friends. The sun filtered through the wooden beams of the pavilion, casting long shadows across the stone floor.

Rein stepped into the pavilion, his fiery red hair catching the light, his expression warm. He froze when he saw Marcus, a haggard young man with unkempt blue hair and deep bags under his eyes.

"Marcus..." Rein's voice was cautious, concerned.

Marcus's jaw tightened, his face a mask of suspicion. His fingers gripped the sound stone in his pocket.

"Take a seat, Rein," he said tersely.

Rein hesitated but sat across from Marcus, brushing his bangs out of his eyes. His gaze softened, trying to assess his friend's strange demeanor.

Marcus exhaled sharply, his mind racing. He wanted to talk about old times, to cling to the hope that Rein was still the same. But as he opened his mouth to speak, his gaze flickered to the ground—and froze.

Rein's shadow, stretched long by the morning sun, rippled unnaturally. Marcus's heart skipped a beat. The shadow seemed to move independently, its edges curling as though it were waving at him.

A cold dread washed over Marcus. His lips trembled as his eyes widened in horror.

"Ahhh! Heathen!" Marcus screamed.

Without thinking, he threw himself off the chair, rolling onto the grass. Rein shot to his feet, stunned.

"Marcus, what's wrong?"

But Marcus wasn't listening. He scrambled to his feet and bolted, his panicked screams echoing through the courtyard.

"Stay away from me!"

Rein blinked, unsure whether to chase or be alarmed. He took a step forward.

"Marcus, wait!"

When Rein began to follow, Marcus's panic grew tenfold. To him, Rein's pursuit was proof of his monstrous nature.

"Get away, demon!" Marcus shouted, running even faster.

Rein stopped, dumbfounded. His hand hovered in the air as if reaching for his fleeing friend.

"What the hell..." he murmured, watching Marcus vanish into the distance.

Rein's brow furrowed, his concern deepening. He had heard rumors about Marcus's fragile mental state, especially after the deaths of Lark and Isaac. The academy had always been dangerous, but lately, the deaths had become disturbingly frequent. And then there was Tobias—Rein clenched his fist at the memory of their most recent loss.

"Marcus must be in shock," Rein muttered.

The academy's investigations into the deaths were slow, and the families of the deceased had yet to be informed. Tobias's mother, Rein had heard, was traveling from the Voyage Islands to demand answers.

Unbeknownst to Rein, Damon had been watching the entire scene unfold from the shadows—literally. His shadow, which he had attached to Rein, had been the cause of Marcus's paranoia. With a faint smirk, Damon retracted the shadow, letting it slink away unnoticed and return to Marcus.

From that point forward, Damon's shadow followed Marcus like a sinister specter, appearing whenever Marcus met with one of his friends. Each time Marcus saw the unnatural movement behind them, his paranoia deepened.

Damon lay back on his bed, staring at the ceiling. His lips curved into a faint smile as he replayed the events in his mind.

It had been a small effort, really, but the results were gratifying. Marcus was spiraling further into doubt and fear, his trust in his friends slowly eroding.

All of that led up to the past two days.

Damon lay on his bed, the ceiling above him a blank canvas for his schemes. A sigh escaped his lips as he pieced together his plans in his mind.

He had been planning to kill Rein Ambridge, but he decided to hold off—for now. Patience was a virtue he could afford, especially with the mid-semester evaluation just a week and half away.

Damon wasn't reckless. The string of deaths had not gone unnoticed. He knew the academy's administration would eventually act, and while their investigations hadn't yet gained traction, it was only a matter of time.

"They're just professors now," Damon thought with a smirk, "but even they'll clue in eventually."

He was counting on it.

The murders of a single friend group were bound to raise eyebrows, prompting deeper scrutiny. That scrutiny would lead directly to Marcus. Damon had ensured that by donning Marcus's uniform when he killed Tobias and leaving evidence behind—a sloppy, deliberate mistake.

The plan was sinister and precise.

He would frame Marcus as a heretic worshiper of the Unknown God of the demons. Damon would manipulate Marcus into writing incriminating confessions, drawing sigils, and leaving accounts of how he had killed his friends in the name of this deity.

'All while making the fool think he's writing holy scriptures'

"The noble families will come here seeking answers for the deaths of their children," Damon murmured to himself, smiling, "and poor Marcus will be too dead to defend himself."

When they searched Marcus's room, they would find the incriminating evidence. The Fayjoy family, not wanting to be associated with heresy, would try to handle the matter discreetly.

"This means they'll compensate the other families for my killing spree," Damon thought, his grin widening.

The noble families would likely agree to avoid involving the temple and the inquisition. No one wanted the holy order poking around their affairs, especially those residing in Soltheon.

The academy would cooperate as well, desperate to salvage its reputation. Having a heretic under their roof would be catastrophic. Damon planned to walk away clean, his crimes buried under layers of deception and noble politics.

Biting his lip, Damon considered the aftermath. Once his revenge was complete, where would he find people to feed his shadow? Preying on innocent people without necessity didn't sit well with him anymore. Criminals were the next logical target, but most of them ran in gangs.

He shook his head, dismissing the thought for now.

The mid-semester evaluation was his priority. It would take place in the Evil Forest, and Damon had a plan to rig the results in his favor.

"But to do that, I'll have to cross the barrier," Damon muttered.

The memory of the Wendigo he'd seen beyond the barrier's edge sent a shiver down his spine. Who knew what other horrors lurked out there?

The Evil Forest was infamous for its danger, a hell of ancient ruins and dead zones that could swallow even seasoned adventurers whole.

"Whatever's out there has to be worse," Damon said to himself, steeling his nerves.

He didn't have the means to set elaborate traps, but he could map out the exam site and exploit the rules he'd glimpsed in the student council office. A conventional approach wouldn't work—Tobias had nearly killed him in a direct confrontation.

"I'll need to think outside the box," Damon mused.

A risky idea crossed his mind.

"If I let my shadow hunger grow high enough, I might get a stat boost..."

The thought was tempting, but he knew the dangers. The hunger could make him lose control, turning him into a ravenous beast, which would defeat his objective of taking down all the first years.

His lips curled into a grin.

"Fine, then," Damon said, his voice a low whisper. "I'll just burn the forest to the ground."