

Living Shadow 133

Chapter 133 Every Man For Himself

Damon took a deep breath, suppressing the bitter taste of regret that threatened to rise. He hadn't meant for things to go this far. His original plan was to simply smash Sylvia's bracelet, but his shadow—the darker part of himself—had overridden his intention, guiding his blade instead.

The cruel words he'd spoken to her had been deliberate. They weren't born of malice but necessity. If she'd resisted or fought back, her healing magic would've made things infinitely more difficult, especially since he hadn't prepared any poison to ensure her defeat. Still, the sting in his chest lingered, a sour reminder of what he'd done.

He pushed the feeling aside and turned his gaze to the others.

Evangeline stumbled back, her light sword trembling in her hands, its radiant glow flickering unsteadily.

'Damon... what have you done?' she whispered, her voice trembling, barely audible against the crushing silence.

Her teeth clenched as anger replaced her initial shock. "Why? What is wrong with you?"

Damon raised his hands in mock surrender, his tone calm, almost dismissive.

"Calm down. Hear me out."

Before he could explain, a group of other students appeared at the crest of the hill. They had evidently dealt with the automata stationed there and were now ascending, drawn by the tension above. They stopped in their tracks, their eyes locking on the scene.

Damon raised his voice, addressing everyone at once.

"The exam has a single objective. But let's not fool ourselves—it's an objective that not all of us can meet. There's only one way to pass, and that's to gather 3,000 points. As you can see, there are no automata left and no more crystals to be found."

The students exchanged uneasy glances, the reality of his words settling in.

He narrowed his eyes and gestured to the desolate battlefield around them.

"Look around. The crystals had a finite number of points, and the top scorers are the only ones who'll make it out of here. If we don't act now, none of us will. You've all worked hard to get here, but this is where survival kicks in."

Evangeline stepped forward, her blade steady now as her eyes burned with defiance.

"We've fought side by side all this time, Damon. If we tear each other apart now, what was the point of everything we've done together?"

The murmurs of agreement among the group grew louder, their unity shaken but not broken.

Damon's lips curved into a cold smile.

'I can't beat her influence outright,' he thought, watching Evangeline rally the others. 'Then I'll just have to take her title and break it down.'

Evangeline took another step closer, her voice steady but fierce.

"The automata was designed to test our cooperation. Don't you see? Turning on each other plays right into their hands. There's always another solution."

Damon's eyes locked onto hers, his voice sharp and unyielding.

"Lies. You think just because you're stronger than most of these people that they'll blindly follow you? You insult their intelligence."

He clenched his fists, his composure beginning to crack.

"Teamwork only works when there's trust. And let's face it—we don't trust each other. This test isn't about cooperation. It's about knowing when to cut your losses."

The group hesitated, their resolve faltering under the weight of Damon's words.

Xander stepped forward, his sword drawn and anger written across his face.

"You cunning snake. You're just trying to manipulate us into fighting each other."

Damon's eye twitched, irritation bubbling beneath the surface.

'This guy is getting on my last nerve.'

He exhaled slowly, his tone measured but biting.

"You think I'm manipulating you? Fine. But can you say the same for everyone else here? How do you know they won't strike first when your back is turned?"

The tension in the air thickened, the students glancing warily at one another. Doubt spread like wildfire, threatening to unravel the fragile camaraderie they'd built. Damon's gaze swept across them, his dark smile returning as he planted the seeds of chaos.

Damon's words slithered through the group like venom, sowing seeds of doubt and mistrust. The camaraderie Sylvia had fostered at the start, encouraging them to work together against the automata, now seemed pointless. The harsh reality Damon presented was undeniable everyone wanted to pass, and there weren't enough points for everyone.

He stood at the center of the growing tension, his voice cold and unrelenting.

"The world isn't fair. The only rule here is to win. If you want to hold onto some naïve sense of honor, go ahead. Just don't expect it to save you."

His finger pointed at the students who had stayed back, fighting the weaker automata.

"You'll always be at the bottom of the rankings. Do you know why? Because you don't have the guts to fight for the top spot."

He turned his attention to Evangeline, his voice dripping with mockery.

"And you," he said, pointing at her, "the top student. Do you care about them? No. You've been hogging the points from the start. Let's see if any of you even have half the points she does."

The tension thickened as Damon raised his voice, addressing the entire group.

"I'm not saying kill anyone. I'm saying let's have a free-for-all. May the best students win."

The group wavered, the bonds of trust they had built now fragile.

Leona tightened her grip on her mace, stepping into a defensive stance. Her eyes darted suspiciously at everyone around her, distrust and fear overtaking her reason.

Faram hesitated, glancing between the others. His instincts screamed self-preservation, but he wasn't sure who to side with.

Damon's sharp eyes caught their uncertainty. He raised his hand, summoning a magic bullet, and fired it at one of the weaker students. The student's bracelet shattered, and he disappeared in a burst of sparks.

That was all it took.

Leona roared, swinging her mace at those near her. Faram, now completely overcome by doubt, unleashed earth spikes in every direction, targeting anyone who got too close.

Natch gritted his teeth, his voice lost in the chaos. "What are you doing? Stop this madness!"

But his cries were drowned out by the deafening cacophony of violence.

Evangeline raised her light sword, her voice rising above the fray.

"Stop! Wait! Let's think about this!"

Her plea was ignored as the group descended further into chaos.

Desperate, Evangeline deactivated her magic. The radiant light illuminating the battlefield vanished, plunging the area into shadowy darkness. But the absence of light didn't stop the fighting. Explosions of magic lit up the gloom in flashes of violent brilliance, and the sounds of clashing weapons and cries of pain filled the air.

With no other choice, she reignited her magic, flooding the battlefield with light once more.

When the glow returned, Xander's eyes darted to where Damon had been standing moments before. The spot was empty. Damon Grey had vanished into the forest, leaving behind only chaos.

Xander clenched his jaw, fury burning in his eyes. "That honorless, spineless mongrel..."

He tightened his grip on his weapon, glancing at the destruction Damon had caused. He could feel it in his gut—this wasn't over. Damon Grey was just getting started. And someone would have to stop him.