

Living Shadow 135

Chapter 135 The Ant And The Giant

In the year 456 of the Doom Calendar, Emperor Rasnet of Valtheron ordered the burning of the Evil Forest, a decision that divided his imperial cabinet. The forest, infamous for its dangers and perceived economic value, was set aflame during the summer. While the outer regions burned with little resistance, the flames failed to penetrate the inner sanctum of the forest.

This was only the beginning of a cascade of disasters. Toxic smoke from the burning flora condensed into acid rain, devastating crops and triggering a food shortage. Monsters from the forest's edges, displaced by the inferno, swarmed into nearby human settlements. The immense death and destruction summoned the ancient dark spirit Rashi Ignath, whose rampage cost thousands of lives before it was subdued.

Adding insult to injury, the scorched regions of the forest regenerated within days, now teeming with fire-attributed flora, as if mocking the empire's efforts. The Evil Forest once again whispered its timeless challenge "Come if you dare."

—Signed, Imperial Scholar Caiem van Wladimir

Damon smiled faintly as he watched the inferno consume the forest around him. The Valtheron Empire's historical misstep had ironically paved the way for his plan. If not for the fire-attributed flora introduced after the forest's rebirth, such a blaze would've been impossible.

As for the potential fallout? Damon wasn't concerned. The barrier surrounding the forest ensured the flames—and the consequences—remained contained. Valtheron, a powerful empire, had long since developed methods to manage the forest's volatile nature, learning from their ancestors' mistakes.

The knowledge Damon relied on came from second-year study material, something he had covered early thanks to Marcus' schemes. For someone like Xander, a noble, such stories should have been common knowledge.

'The Valtheron imperial family wouldn't let such a blunder enter the public record unless they had a way to spin it to their advantage,' Damon mused.

'The fact that it's in a textbook at all means it's part of their propaganda machine.'

It was their way of showing the world they now had ways to contain the forest.....

He shook his head at the thought, while Xander stood in stunned silence, his gaze fixed on the sea of red flames devouring the darkness around them. Explosions echoed through the forest as fire spread in all directions, creating a fiery ring that boxed them in. The oppressive heat and glowing embers painted the night in chaos.

Xander turned to Damon, his expression one of disbelief and growing anger.

"You madman... you did all this just to win?"

Damon's calm demeanor didn't waver, even as the heat became oppressive.

Xander's voice rose. "How? When? Why?"

Damon sighed, his tone almost bored.

"I was here long before the exam. That answers your how and when." He paused, his shadow flickering erratically behind him.

"As for why?" He smirked. "Let's just say I had more reasons to win than any of you."

The flames crept closer, casting their faces in stark relief, one expression calm and unreadable, the other filled with fury and disbelief.

Why else would he risk life and limb? Everything depended on the mid-semester evaluation. If he gave up now, if he threw his hands in the air and surrendered, it would all be over. Expulsion loomed over him like a guillotine.

And expulsion would ruin everything.

Damon had risked everything to get into the academy. He'd clawed, fought, and schemed his way to this moment. He wasn't going to let it all fall apart.

'And I can't let another noble have the last laugh over me,' he thought bitterly, a particular face flashing through his mind—the cold, disdainful expression of Kael Blackthorne.

Xander lowered his sword slightly, a flicker of hesitation crossing his face.

"You... You've really gone mad." He shook his head as if trying to make sense of it all.

"And Sylvia? What about Sylvia? She trusted you, Damon."

Damon felt a sharp twist in his chest at the mention of her name. Even with his Remorseless skill dulling his emotions, her name still stung. He sighed, forcing himself to speak calmly.

"I did it for her own good," he said, his voice measured. "Sylvia isn't the type of person who would turn on her allies. I saved her from that pain."

Xander's teeth ground audibly as he glared at Damon.

"So that's your excuse?" he spat. Then he scoffed. "Thank you."

"For what?" Damon asked, his tone almost mocking.

Xander raised his sword again, his grip tightening.

"For being the same deplorable scum I thought you were."

Damon chuckled, raising his daggers in response.

"Coming from the man who attacked me unannounced," he retorted.

Damon wasn't worried about Xander. Under normal circumstances, he might have fled, knowing the fight was unwinnable. But today was different. Today, the odds were in his favor.

His Shadow Hunger was high, boosting his stats significantly. In this state, he was at his strongest, though his sanity frayed at the edges. Not that it mattered. Who needed reason when brute strength could crush any opponent?

He gritted his teeth, memories of his past with Xander flashing through his mind like a storm.

All the times he'd been disregarded. All the times he wasn't even worth acknowledging. And the time he'd been called an insect.

But now, he had power.

An insect couldn't overcome a giant, true. But a hungry shadow could topple one.

"This isn't the magic artillery, Xander," Damon said, his voice low and venomous.

"This time, I'll show you. I'll show you that you're the insect—by breaking every bone in your body. After today, you'll never forget me."

Xander's eyes narrowed as he met Damon's glare. There was a cold menace in Damon's gaze, as if Xander embodied every grudge, every slight Damon had ever suffered.

But Xander wasn't without his own grudges. He despised commoners.

And his hatred wasn't baseless—it had roots. He had reasons to feel scorned.

How dare this man, this mongrel, vilify him, when Damon was the one who had stabbed a friend in the back without honor or remorse?

"Fine by me," Xander growled, stepping forward, sword raised.

"I wanted to fight you anyway. You want my bones? I'll crush yours instead and put you in your place, you honorless, arrogant mongrel!"