

Living Shadow 136

Chapter 136 Blinded By The Light

Far off in another region of the forest, a hill stood not too far from the inferno Damon had sparked. The hill was sparsely populated with trees, the area resembling a messy battlefield illuminated by the radiant orbs of light created by Evangeline. The orbs banished the darkness of the evil forest, bathing the battlefield in an artificial daylight despite the late hour.

Evangeline's sword still glowed with the aura of her light magic. Her forehead was slick with sweat, her breathing labored from the effort it took to keep her magic active. This was supposed to be a free-for-all, a chaotic melee where every student vied for their own victory. But somewhere along the way, the dynamics had shifted. The remaining students—those who had proven their worth in the brutal entrance exam—had set aside their differences to target her.

The number one student.

"Is this part of your plan too, Damon?" she muttered under her breath, her voice tinged with exhaustion and frustration.

The battle had been brief but fierce. Her opponents weren't weaklings; they were the best of the academy's students. Evangeline had held her own against them, her magic and skills carrying her through the onslaught, but even her strength had limits. She glanced down at her bracelet. Despite her efforts, she still didn't have enough points.

"How many people do they actually expect to pass this?" she wondered aloud, frustration evident in her tone.

The academy had designed the evaluation to be ruthlessly unforgiving. To pass, a participant needed 3000 points—a threshold that practically guaranteed only a handful would make it. Points could only be gained by destroying other participants' bracelets, making any form of alliance fleeting at best. The structure of the test wasn't just a measure of strength but also strategy, cunning, and survival.

"Only two, maybe three people will pass at this rate," she thought grimly.

By the time a participant had smashed enough bracelets and accumulated the necessary points, they would have far surpassed the required threshold. The system encouraged absolute domination, and Evangeline realized now that Damon had seen this from the start.

"Since when did he figure this out?" she muttered, her grip tightening on her glowing blade.

While everyone else had focused on the automata and the immediate threats, Damon had been looking at the bigger picture. He had played them all, positioning himself for the ultimate advantage.

Evangeline shook her head, unwilling to believe Damon had done this without reason.

"Sylvia wouldn't have turned on her comrades like this," she murmured, her voice soft but filled with conviction.

The memory of Sylvia's betrayed expression, contrasting sharply with Damon's actions. She bit her lip, the weight of betrayal settling heavily on her shoulders.

"Even so... what he did was horrible," she whispered, anger and sadness mixing in her voice. Her fists clenched, her magic flaring briefly as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

"He has to apologize."

But even as she said it, she knew Damon wasn't the type to regret his actions—not unless there was a deeper reason behind them. And that thought, more than anything, left her conflicted.

She dodged an attack and unleashed a slash imbued with light magic. Her opponent vanished instantly, consumed by her radiant power.

Evangeline sighed, lowering her sword momentarily. She had long since abandoned the idea of reasoning with them.

Damon had shattered the framework of trust completely.

Before she could strike again, something caught her attention—a faint, acrid smell carried by the wind. She turned her gaze upward, noticing black flecks floating gently down from the sky.

She touched one of the specks, feeling its strange warmth.

"Is this..." Her eyes widened in realization. "It's ash."

Her head shot up, scanning the surroundings. In the distance, she noticed a crimson glow creeping through the trees. The red embers scattered across the horizon, closing in fast. The wind carried their fiery advance like a harbinger of doom.

"It's... fire," she whispered, her breath hitching.

Her own light magic had illuminated the battlefield so intensely that she hadn't noticed the encroaching inferno. Now, the entire forest was aflame, and the fire was closing in on the hill where they stood.

Her voice trembled as she turned back to the battlefield. "Stop... all of you! Stop fighting!"

But her cries were drowned out by the cacophony of violence. She scanned the area, searching for familiar faces. Xander was gone—when had he slipped away? Leona, on the other hand, was still fighting with a ferocity that bordered on madness.

"Stop! Please, listen to me! The fire—wait!"

Her pleas fell on deaf ears. In this moment, her position as the number one student meant nothing. She was powerless.

The realization struck her like a physical blow. She felt something shift deep within her, as though a part of her soul had been stripped bare. Her magic faltered, the flow of mana in her body changing subtly yet

profoundly. It wasn't just her body—her very mindset seemed to evolve, adapting to the chaos around her.

Evangeline fell to her knees, trembling.

'I'm so powerless,' she thought, her despair consuming her.

She was blinded by her own light.

But then, her gaze landed on the orbs of light she had created, the very symbols of her strength and control. Slowly, she rose to her feet, her mana trembling with newfound intensity. A wave of determination surged through her.

She raised her hand, and with a single motion, extinguished all the lights around her.

Darkness enveloped the battlefield. The fighting came to a halt as the students, shocked and bewildered, turned their eyes toward the reddened horizon. Even the most foolish among them could see it now—the forest was burning.

Evangeline stood in the gloom, her silhouette framed by the distant flames. A soft hum reverberated through her body, resonating with her very core.

She felt it—this was the call of the first class advancement. She was on the precipice of something greater, separated from it by the thinnest of barriers.

Her heart pounded as she realized the truth. There was no time to dwell on her awakening. The inferno was closing in, and the toxic smoke was already creeping toward them, pooling beneath the barrier dome that protected the academy.

"What's happening?"

"The forest is on fire..."

"What do we do? What about the evaluation?"

"Who cares about that? We need to get out of here!"

The students' panic grew as the smoke thickened, filling the air with a suffocating heaviness. The flora's combustion had released a toxic cloud, and the barrier above them ensured that it would only rise so far before spreading.

Evangeline bit her lip, her mind racing. Then, with a decisive motion, she raised her sword, its radiant glow cutting through the darkness and drawing all eyes to her.

"Listen to me!" she called out, her voice firm and commanding.

"A fire has begun in the forest, as you're all aware. The smoke is toxic, and while we could try to fight the fire with magic, most of us don't have water or ice attributes. After our long battles, our mana reserves are already running low. If we stay, we'll suffocate!"

She paused, her expression grim.

"There's only one thing we can do. We must give up. We must use the safety bracelets and teleport out of here to safety."

"Teleport out? Give up?"

"What is she talking about?"

"She's just trying to hog all the points!"

"These top students think they're better than us!"

Damon's manipulations had poisoned their minds. He had sown seeds of resentment, using their jealousy of the top students to divide them. Evangeline knew this all too well. The academy's hierarchy—its segregated dorms, superior facilities, and exclusive benefits for top students—had fostered this resentment over time.

Evangeline would have been at a loss if not for the clarity she had gained earlier. Standing so close to her class awakening, she saw the world differently. Damon's words echoed in her mind, his philosophy unsettling yet undeniable.

"Justice must be strong to be right."

That was his counter argument to her philosophy. He subtly twisted how she saw justice as something beautiful.

If she wanted to pursue justice, she needed strength—the strength to act, to do what others wouldn't, to make the hard choices. Justice wasn't just blind, it could be cruel.....it was cruel.

Her resolve hardened. She raised her sword, holding it high before plunging it into her chest. Her magic burned as it surged into her heart, pain searing through her body. Yet she stood tall, unwavering.

"We must forfeit the evaluation," she said, her voice steady even as her body began to dissolve into countless sparks of light. "Or else..."

The bracelet activated, teleporting her to safety. She hadn't needed to stab herself; a simple surrender would have sufficed. But she wanted them to see—her resolve, her justice.

She was ruthless to herself as well....

One of the students watched her vanish, then glanced at the encroaching inferno. Tears of frustration welled in his eyes.

"I... I surrender," he muttered.

One by one, they followed suit, each vanishing into sparks of light as they accepted their defeat.