

Living Shadow 138

Chapter 138 Underestimated

The students teleported out of the inferno with bitterness etched on their faces. Some had tears in their eyes, while others felt a fleeting sense of relief. They were out of the burning forest, away from the brutal, chaotic free-for-all that had pushed them to their limits.

They appeared beyond the river, far from the blazing forest. The professors stood waiting with solemn expressions, their presence heavy with unspoken judgment. Gathered alongside them were the students who had already been eliminated, but all eyes were fixated on one thing—the floating screens that displayed the unfolding chaos within the forest.

In one corner, Professor Emeraldal moved between the students, checking for injuries. Fortunately, the safety bracelets had done their job. Most were unharmed, save for a few scrapes and bruises.

Kael Blackthorne narrowed his eyes, his expression a mixture of disbelief and anger.

"He actually did it... he set the forest ablaze," he muttered, his voice sharp with frustration.

He wasn't the only one shocked.

Professor Alfred chuckled bitterly, shaking his head.

"We underestimated him after the quarter-semester evaluation... Judging him by how much mana he had—that was short-sighted. But this? The cunning, the ruthlessness... How did he even set this all up?"

Professor Chrome stroked his beard, a knowing smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"It's not how. It's when."

Alfred's eyes widened. "You don't mean... No way. He wouldn't have survived that."

Kael's gaze darkened as realization dawned on him.

"I see no other explanation. He must have set it up before the barrier was expanded—when the forest was still crawling with monsters."

The professors' discussion wasn't as quiet as they thought, and fragments of their conversation reached the nearby students.

"No way... He's insane."

"How is he even still alive?"

"The monsters should've killed him!"

But the professors weren't concerned with the murmurs of disbelief. Their focus remained on the bigger picture.

"What do we do about the evaluation?" Alfred asked, glancing at Kael.

"Should we call it off? Those two already have enough points to pass. If we end it now, it would still be fair."

Kael gritted his teeth.

"The rules are clear anything goes as long as no magical artifacts are used. The exam lasts until midnight—unless all students are eliminated except one."

He shot a glance at the floating screen, his irritation evident.

"I designed this exam... Naturally, I'll take responsibility for this mess. I'll explain the situation to the headmaster myself."

Chrome sighed, his gaze lingering on the forest inferno.

"You certainly have a lot of explaining to do. You set this exam up to eliminate him... but he might be the one eliminating you."

Kael sighed heavily. "If that's the case, so be it."

Chrome shook his head, chuckling softly.

"I knew that boy would do something unexpected the moment I heard his philosophy. If he wins against Ravenscroft's boy, the first-year rankings will change. He'll be the new number one."

The corners of his lips twitched upward in amusement.

"Can you imagine it? A commoner as the top student. Not just any commoner—the one who started dead last. And all because of one crazy stunt."

Kael's gaze hardened as he stared at the screen displaying Damon and Xander locked in fierce combat.

"If he wins..."

Professor Emeraldalda approached them, her face a mask of worry.

"Why haven't you stopped this already? This has gone too far. You know the safety bracelets aren't perfect. These are just first-years—they're not ready for life-and-death trials."

Kael knew she had a point. The safety bracelets, while effective, weren't foolproof. They could teleport a student to safety if they received a mortal wound or surrendered. But the bracelets had blind spots. For instance, suffocation from smoke wouldn't trigger an immediate teleport. A student could stop moving for several minutes before the bracelet responded.

There were other flaws too. Magical artifacts, though disallowed, could interfere with the bracelets. Worse still, cumulative damage—multiple smaller wounds—could potentially kill a student before the bracelet activated.

But even knowing all this, Kael's eyes didn't waver from the floating screen.

"The evaluation is not over."

Sylvia looked down with a somewhat forlorn expression, her heart heavy as if burdened by a weight too great to bear. She had tried her best to understand Damon, to uncover all the mysteries surrounding him. More than that, she genuinely saw him as her friend. He was her friend.

Or at least, she thought so.

She had believed Damon enjoyed their time together, but now, the gnawing doubt in her chest whispered otherwise. What if it had all been one-sided? What if he had merely tolerated her company rather than cherished it?

Her mind drifted to the countless hours they spent together—talking about books, passionately debating the works of different scholars, dissecting historical events, or marveling at the properties of rare herbs and plants. Those moments had been precious to her, a meeting of minds that she thought was mutual.

She had believed she knew him. She did know him—or at least, she thought she did.

"It's just... I never really understood him," she muttered softly, her voice tinged with regret.

"Knowledge isn't the same as wisdom. I'm still just a greenhouse flower—a sheltered princess."

Her lips trembled as she bit down on them, trying to suppress the tears threatening to escape. She had come all the way to Soltheon, joined the academy, and fought to carve out a life of her own—all to escape the suffocating label of "sheltered princess." She had yearned for freedom, for a chance to breathe the outside air and see the world beyond her cloistered upbringing.

But now, to hear her own friend—someone she trusted—utter the very words she had worked so hard to escape... it stung deeper than any blade could.

And yet, the doubt clawing at her heart whispered an even crueler possibility. Had her lack of experience hurt him instead?

'Was I the only one who actually enjoyed our time together?'

Damon's betrayal wasn't just physical. When he stabbed her, he hadn't only left a gaping wound in her gut—he had pierced her heart as well. Sylvia had once been full of righteous conviction in her pursuits, confident that her intentions were pure. But now, all that remained in her chest was doubt, an aching emptiness where her certainty used to be.

'Was I just being self-righteous this whole time?'

Her gaze drifted to the screen in front of her, where Damon and Xander faced off. Damon's face was twisted in rage, his movements sharp and unrelenting.

Around her, faint whispers from the gathered students reached her ears. Most were cheering for Xander to win, their voices rising with fervor. But a few among them watched Damon with flickers of fear in their eyes, unease creeping into their expressions as they observed the dark-haired boy on the screen.

Damon moved with terrifying precision, his first strike snapping Xander's arm as if it were a twig. The brutal display sent a hush over the crowd, and Sylvia's heart sank further.

That was only the beginning. The brutality had just begun.