

Living Shadow 153

Chapter 153 Fraud

"Huh... I see. So this is the outcome."

A gloomy young man stood in front of the large notice board, his dark eyes scanning the names with an almost detached expression.

"After everything I did..."

His gaze landed on his name.

Damon Grey.

There it was, right at the top of the rankings. Number one.

It was undeniable now—his dominance over the mid-semester evaluation had been absolute. No one could dispute his victory. No one could claim it was luck. Yet, despite this, Damon didn't smile. There was no rush of joy, no satisfaction. Just a quiet weight lifting off his shoulders. He had secured his place at the academy. No more probationary status. No more risk of expulsion.

He had risked everything for this one chance, pushing himself beyond his limits. But life was funny that way—just when he thought he had cleared a major obstacle, a thousand more loomed ahead.

He scanned the rest of the rankings. Apart from him, the overall positions hadn't shifted much. The top students had merely moved down by one rank to make room for him at the summit. The gap between him and the others was staggering.

Damon sighed, pulling himself away from the board and tuning back into the murmurs of the bustling hallway.

"That monster... is number one now."

"I heard the trees in the forest he burned are already growing back."

"I heard he got Professor Kael reprimanded by the headmaster."

"Even the professors can't stop him now..."

"Someone should challenge him for the top spot."

"Are you insane? I don't want to die!"

The whispers surrounded him, but Damon didn't even spare them a glance. A month and a half had passed since he first arrived at the academy. At the start, he had suffered setback after setback, scorned and belittled by both students and faculty alike. But now, after six grueling weeks, he was number one—and an object of fear.

He had crushed those who had once mocked him. He had killed Marcus, the arrogant fool who set him up at the beginning. He had silenced his professors with sheer results.

Damon had made a choice back then—not to cower, not to submit. He had refused to accept grievances forced upon him, even if it meant blood on his hands.

But his immediate problems hadn't disappeared. If anything, they had multiplied. He needed money. He needed power. And more than anything—he needed souls and flesh to feed his shadow.

Because whatever insane scheme Lilith Astranova was planning for him, he needed to survive it.

As he turned away, the first-years crowding around the rankings quickly scattered, clearing a path in terrified silence. No one dared to make a sound. It was as if they were all holding their breath, waiting for a monster to pass by.

And that in itself was a problem.

Because Damon was a fraud.

Yes, he had won the mid-semester evaluation. Yes, he had crushed the top students. But it was all because of his shadow's hunger. That power boost had been the deciding factor. Without it, he was still weak. Even now, despite his recent advancements, he was only Level 3.

'The moment one of them gets close to my actual strength, all this fear will turn into fury.'

Which meant that from now on, Damon had to play the role of the apex predator. No one—absolutely no one—could be allowed to question his power. Not the students, not the professors, not even the academy itself. If they did, if even a single crack formed in the fear that protected him, he would be swarmed with challenges, forced into duels, and become a target for serious harassment.

So, he walked with purpose, his usual gloomy expression never faltering.

'Give me a break.'

As if things weren't bad enough, he had heard rumors that the parents of the students he had killed would be arriving soon.

Which meant it was time to put his plan into motion.

There were so many ways things could go wrong. No plan was foolproof. But he had no choice.

Stepping outside, the evening sun bathed him in golden light. The last time he stood before the rankings, he had been filled with resentment, despair, and a burning desire to prove himself. Now, despite being at the top, he felt worse.

Damon slowly raised his head, looking toward the horizon.

Beyond the trees and the forest ahead lay the Evil Forest—a cursed, dangerous region, part of which he had set ablaze.

And yet, there was no lingering cloud of ash in the distance. No visible scars of destruction. It all looked... normal.

For a moment, he considered going to inspect it. But then he shook his head.

No need to provoke the academy further.

Especially after Kael took the fall.

He walked down the paved path, the sun dipping below the horizon, casting long shadows across the academy grounds. His mind was occupied with the conversation he had with Lilith Astranova earlier that morning. He had suggested infiltrating the temple, joining them and tearing them apart from the inside, but she had shot down the idea without hesitation—she had already considered it herself. Still, they had agreed to remain on this path, at least for now.

"All this trouble, and for what..." he muttered under his breath.

As he approached the academy gate, he noticed a blonde girl standing by a tree, her golden eyes marked by the radiance of the sun. She was staring at him coldly, her expression unreadable yet brimming with restrained emotion.

He knew her instantly.

"Evangeline..." he called, tilting his head. "What got you so riled up?"

She stepped toward him slowly, her movements controlled, deliberate. He grinned, trying to ease the tension.

"Don't tell me you're salty about being number two? That level of petty is expected from someone like me, but never you, Madam Justice."

Evangeline stopped directly in front of him, and before he could react—

CRACK

A fist smashed into his face, sending him staggering back. A sharp chill ran down his spine as he registered the pain.

She hadn't used light magic.

No glow, no warning—his shadow perception hadn't picked up a thing.

Before he could even process it, she grabbed him, pulled him forward, and delivered a crushing blow to his gut. His body jerked, and then—BAM—another punch to the face, knocking him flat on the ground.

"ARGH! Ouch!"

Damon groaned, his back hitting the dirt. He wasn't even mad yet—just surprised.

'Since when did she get this physically buff...?'

He struggled to lift himself, only to be met with Evangeline's piercing gaze.

Despite the pain, he smirked, his eye already starting to bruise.

"Hey, it was a fair evaluation... aren't you breaking some rule here?"

She bit her lip, her body trembling with frustration.

"I don't care about that, you bastard!"

Damon blinked, rubbing his sore jaw. He had been on the verge of fleeing, wanting no part in this fight.

"Huh... then why the hell are you messing me up?"

She gritted her teeth.

"You didn't even dodge," she accused, eyes narrowing.

"So you do feel guilty... Good. At least you still have a conscience."

Damon remained silent, suppressing his growing anger.

'No, I just couldn't react fast enough.'

Evangeline stepped forward, towering over him.

"Listen up, you bastard... You hurt Sylvia."

Damon raised an eyebrow annoyed.

"Sylvia? Then why the hell are you the one messing me up? Bitch, aren't you doing too much?"

She clenched her teeth in fury, then suddenly straddled him, using her weight to pin him down. He felt the pressure of her body against his, the heat of her anger almost tangible.

Her face moved inches from his, her golden eyes burning with fury.

"You will apologize," she growled, her voice low and dangerous.

"And until she goes back to her usual self... I'll be here to ruin you."

Damon could feel her soft body pressing against him, even though his mind was more occupied with the lingering pain.

"Okay, sure, you win," he sighed. "Can you get off me now?"

