

Living Shadow 106

Chapter 106 Monsters Of The Evil Forest

Beyond the barrier of the academy lay a region of infamy the Evil Forest.

This forest was not merely a patch of wilderness surrounding the academy. It spanned vast swaths of land across the continent of Soltheon, stretching relentlessly until it met the shores of the Centros Sea. A domain of death, it harbored countless monsters of varying strengths, with their power and danger increasing the deeper one ventured into its shadowed depths.

The Evil Forest was one of the many unexplored regions in the mystical world of Aetherus, brimming with untapped dungeons and ancient ruins. It was a place teeming with peril—and promise.

The forest's monstrous inhabitants bred uncontrollably, often triggering catastrophic monster stampedes when their populations outgrew their territories. These stampedes unleashed hordes of creatures onto the lands of mankind, destroying everything in their path.

To counter this ever-looming threat, the heroes and wise men of the goddess races in ages past came together. With divine guidance, they constructed a massive barrier to confine the Evil Forest. This barrier, powered by multiple nodes scattered across the continent, acted as a bulwark against the encroaching chaos. Among these legendary figures was Athor, the founder of the academy itself, who devoted his life to fortifying one of these critical nodes.

The presence of the barrier was the very reason the academy and the capital city of Valerion stood so close to the forest. The empire's strategy was clear: establish its military at the heart of danger, ready to confront any creatures that breached the barrier. This proximity allowed adventurers, scholars, and soldiers to venture into the forest to cull the monster population, keeping it in check.

It was also a proving ground for senior students of the academy, who honed their skills in outposts and garrisons built to monitor and suppress the forest's influence.

This responsibility wasn't Valerion's alone. Every nation bordering the Evil Forest contributed to its containment, recognizing it as a shared burden—a hideous gift.

Why such a grim name? Because, despite the endless perils, the Evil Forest tempted adventurers and kingdoms alike with its vast riches. Hidden within its depths were treasures beyond imagination: ancient relics, magical mines, rare herbs, monster parts, and enchanted tomes. Dungeons within the forest promised unimaginable rewards for those brave—or foolish—enough to enter.

The deeper one ventured, the greater the rewards, but the price was steep. Millions of lives had been lost to the forest, their dreams of fame and fortune shattered in its unforgiving embrace.

Yet still, the call persisted.

For some, it was the promise of glory. For others, it was the lure of unimaginable wealth. But for all who entered, the forest whispered the same challenge:

Come, if you dare.

Of course, Damon couldn't afford to focus on such thoughts, not while staring at the antlers of the monstrous creature before him. Its thin, bony claws twitched as its crimson eyes glowed with a

menacing light. The hairy, towering form of the wendigo loomed, its jagged fangs glistening with thick, viscous saliva that dripped onto the ground like acid.

Damon instinctively stepped back, moving slowly, his breathing steady but shallow.

'It's still beyond the barrier. It can't reach me.'

He clung to this thought, reassuring himself. If the wendigo could breach the barrier, he would have already been dead. Damon knew his luck had held so far. This wasn't the first time he had been close to the forest's edge or the barrier, but it was the first time he had encountered a monster this close.

The absence of monsters in his previous ventures had puzzled him. At first, he attributed it to the dark, viscous entity that had fused with his shadow and granted him the system.

'Maybe it scared them off,' he thought, recalling how the entity's energy seemed to ripple with a primal dominance.

Other times, he chalked it up to dumb luck. Or perhaps the monsters instinctively avoided the barrier itself. He ran through these possibilities in his mind as he moved toward the tree where he had attached the left brace of his omnidirectional gear.

His dark eyes remained locked on the wendigo.

Reaching the tree, Damon retracted the wires, which zipped back into the braces with a faint click. With his escape route secured, an idea struck him:

'If it can't cross the barrier... doesn't that make it a moving target?'

The thought made him pause. He pulled out his collapsible bow, stringing an arrow tipped with cursed ore. He nocked the arrow, drawing back, but hesitated as a sinking realization hit him.

'The arrows are made of cursed ore... and cursed ore attracts monsters.'

His thoughts spiraled as he pieced it together. Blood. The Evil Forest. Cursed ore. This is a disaster waiting to happen. Monsters attuned to curses—like wendigos, undead, skinwalkers, and face-stealers—would flock to him if he was carrying unprotected cursed ore.

Assuming they were close enough to sense it.

Gritting his teeth, Damon decided against taking the shot.

'No need to increase my misfortune.'

Instead, he kept his eyes locked on the wendigo, his shadow perception extending outward like radar, monitoring the creature's every move.

The wendigo's shadow was strange. It lacked the same reactive energy as human shadows, a muted thing that barely triggered his shadow's hunger. It wasn't worth the risk of hunting, not that he could hunt a wendigo even if he tried.

'Fleeing is the only choice,' he concluded.

He encased the cursed arrows in their shell, erasing any traces of their aura. Keeping his shadow perception stretched to its limits, Damon slowly retreated, never taking his focus off the wendigo.

In a few minutes, he returned to the area where his skirmish had begun, carefully collecting his belongings and ensuring no evidence remained. His eyes scanned the tattered uniform he wore—ripped sleeves, sliced edges. It wasn't his uniform, which gave him some relief.

'Marcus's uniform,' Damon mused with a faint smirk. 'He'll be the one in trouble if the academy investigates.'

Still, Damon wasn't careless. He erased what evidence he could but left subtle traces that only a professional investigator might notice. His days surviving in the capital's backstreets and working with smugglers were proving useful once again.

With everything handled, Damon retracted his shadow perception and walked out of the forest, pulling his blindfold over his eyes as he disappeared into the night.

By the time he reached his room, the perfect crime had been completed in under 15 minutes. Enough time to take a bath and maybe enjoy a midnight snack with Leona.

But first, Damon needed to check his new skill. He hadn't felt its effects, not like [Remorseless]. There was also the strange sensation of his shadow feeding yet not feeling full.

Avoiding detection, he snuck into the war halls. Moving through the laundry basket, he switched the uniforms, slipping back into his own. Satisfied, he returned to his room and brought up the system panel.

[Water Celebration]